

## JOHN PICKARD – A STROUD LIFE, 1808-1841

By Philip Walmsley

The report of the Children's Employment Commission of 1833 is a useful source for information about the local woollen industry, giving evidence and information contributed by a variety of local people.<sup>1</sup>

In March, 1833, Lord Ashley had introduced a bill to reduce the hours of work of those under eighteen years in textile mills, and it at once attracted both widespread support and opposition. A month later the House of Commons decided by 1 vote to set up a Royal Commission to report more generally on child labour in industry. Assistant commissioners were appointed to examine conditions in each of four regions, and in this capacity Leonard Horner and Stephen Woolriche came to Gloucestershire.

Of the twenty-nine witnesses who gave evidence, most came forward for obvious reasons. Twelve were woollen-cloth manufacturers, one a mill book-keeper, eight workers or ex-workers in the industry, and seven of the remaining eight were notables of the district, including three clergy, whose attendance resulted from the requirement of the Central Board of the Commission that information should be sought about the morals as well as the physical circumstances of the factory children.<sup>2</sup>

The other witness was John Pickard, plumber, and his presence requires some explanation.

He had been born on April 7, 1808, the son of a labourer Francis Pickard, whose address was given as the *Swan Inn*, Stroud, and was baptised in Stroud parish church on April 10, 1814, three days after his sixth birthday. The delay between birth and baptism was by no means uncommon in the parish at that time, the incumbent being an absentee, with the parish being tended by a curate, at that time the redoubtable Rev. John Williams. Pickard's marriage to Ann Ayers took place at the parish church on October 29, 1829, and their son Francis was baptised there on January 1, 1831.

By 1830 the older Francis Pickard was a publican, keeping the *Weavers' Arms* in Meeting Street, Stroud, a street named after the Independent meeting-house known first as the Old Meeting, and later as the Old Chapel. The street's present name is Chapel Street. It is situated on Stroud Hill, an area still known as 'top of town' and then inhabited largely by those who worked in the cloth industry. John Pickard's occupation at this time was given

both as plumber and house-painter.<sup>3</sup>



The corner of Chapel (meeting) Street and Acre Street c. 1900

The early eighteen-thirties were eventful years in Stroud. Nowhere in the county was there greater support for the Reform Bill, particularly after December 12, 1831, when the minister in charge of the bill, Lord John Russell, announced that Stroud was one of the ten places which were being added to the list of proposed two-member boroughs. When the Reform Act was eventually passed in June, 1832, Stroud duly gained its two MPs, and the first election took place in the following December.

In this election John Pickard qualified for the franchise as a ten-pound ratepayer, as he had apparently now taken over the *Weavers' Arms* from his father.<sup>4</sup>

In their first parliamentary election Stroud voters had a limited choice, the candidates being three Liberals of broadly similar views. Pickard voted for W.H. Hyett and G.P. Scrope, the latter having campaigned on the platform that he would support more radical policies than either of his opponents. Nevertheless, he was not elected, and Stroud's first MPs were Hyett of Painswick House and David Ricardo of Gatcombe Park.

The Reform Bill had not been the only subject of political excitement in Stroud at that time. In 1832, at meetings at Birt's Room near the Cross at the top of the High Street, a paid advocate of slavery in the British colonies had provoked the town's numerous abolitionists, and in 1833 there followed many local petitions in favour of the Emancipation Bill. Other petitions were sent to Stroud's MP, W.H. Hyett, urging him to press the Secretary for War and Colonies to introduce the necessary bill.

The last signature on one of these petitions was that of John Pickard.<sup>5</sup>

He was clearly an active reformer, indeed the secretary of the Stroud Political Union. Nationally, the political unions had been the engine which had secured the Reform Act, but in Stroud it was the local Reform Association which had led the campaign, a body consisting of professional men and woollen manufacturers. Nevertheless, alongside it were the political unions, of which the members were working-class.<sup>6</sup>

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GLoucester — continued.

Deposition of William Boughton, manager in a pin manufactory . . . . . 4

James Hall, pin manufacturer . . . . . 4

William Brimmell, rope-maker . . . . . 4

STROUD.

REPORT of Messrs. HORNER and WOOLRICH.

Deposition of William Henry Stanton, manufacturer of woollen cloth . . . . . 2

Nathaniel Samuel Marling, manufacturer of woollen cloth . . . . . 2

Peter Hawker, solicitor and clerk to the acting magistrates of Whitminster . . . . . 2

John William Partridge, woollen manufacturer and dyer . . . . . 2

Henry Burgh esq., acting magistrate . . . . . 2

Rev. John Burder, minister of the independent chapel . . . . . 2

Donald Maclean, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

Thomas Jones, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

Rev. Dr. Williams, curate . . . . . 2

William Clutterbuck Chambers, churchwarden . . . . . 2

Obadiah Paul Washen, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

William Hunt, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

Nathaniel Jones, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

Edward Barnard, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

John Pickard, plumber . . . . . 11

George Chapman, an operative clothworker . . . . . 10

Daniel Watts, an operative clothworker . . . . . 10

Rev. Jeremiah Smith, curate of King's Stanley . . . . . 2

Robert Stephens Davis, woollen manufacturer . . . . . 2

Charles Hooper, cloth manufacturer . . . . . 2

Joseph Franklin, a wool-spinner, sent by Henry Burgh esq. . . . . 2

John Freilerick Lewis, cloth manufacturer . . . . . 27

James Miles, late an operative clothworker, sent by Henry Burgh esq. . . . . 28

John Webster, late an operative clothworker, sent by the Rev. Jeremiah Smith . . . . . 2

Henry Lewis, wool-spinner, sent by Mr. Newman, clerk to the magistrates . . . . . 10

Thomas Shipway, clothdresser, sent by Mr. Newman, clerk to the magistrates . . . . . 2

William Lewis, engineer, sent by Mr. Newman, clerk to the magistrates . . . . . 20

James Creed, an operative, sent by Mr. Partridge, clothier . . . . . 2

John Allen, wool-spinner, sent by Mr. Partridge, clothier . . . . . 21

Thomas Parsons, book-keeper to Messrs. Joseph Partridge and Co. of Bowhridge . . . . . 2

ULEY, DURLEY, and WOTTON UNDERWOOD.

REPORT of Messrs. HORNER and WOOLRICH . . . . . 2

Factory Commission

On the 8 March, 1833, the receipt of a petition against the Disturbances (Ireland) Bill from the Chairman and Secretary of the Stroudwater Political Union was noted in the Commons Journals. The Bill at issue had been introduced after a period of disorder in Ireland and enabled martial law to be introduced into disturbed districts.<sup>7</sup>

This petition was followed on the 2 April by a petition in favour of the Factory Bill from 'the Inhabitants of the Manufacturing District of Gloucestershire'

It ran as follows:

*The humble petition of the Inhabitants of the Manufacturing District of Gloucester*

*Sheweth,*

*That in consequence of the great number of hours*

*people work in this extensive district many deserving characters have been thrown out of employ, and reduced to the greatest distress and misery.*

*And your petitioners are perfectly satisfied that if a limited time (say ten hours per day) be fixed for labour it would be highly beneficial, inasmuch as three persons would be employed where there are only two now.*

*And your petitioners are very much grieved when they reflect upon the way in which a petition has been got up against the factory Bill.*

*Your humble petitioners therefore do beseech your honourable house to pass the Factory Bill with as much speed as possible.*<sup>8</sup>

The wording of the petition reflects the well-publicised aspirations of the current Ten-Hour movement of the northern textile areas rather than the terms of the bill, which applied only to those under eighteen years of age. The petition against the Factory Bill to which the petitioners objected was 'A Petition of Woollen Manufacturers of the county of Gloucester....praying that the (Factories Regulation Bill) may not pass into law', which had been laid before the House of Commons on March 15.<sup>9</sup>

Pickard sent a copy of the petition in favour of the bill with a covering letter to the assistant commissioners, explaining that it dealt with working hours, not with cruelty to children in the mills. His comment on the latter was, 'I am informed there is (such cruelty), but I cannot say it is, as I never witnessed it myself, not being connected in any way with the manufacturing business'.

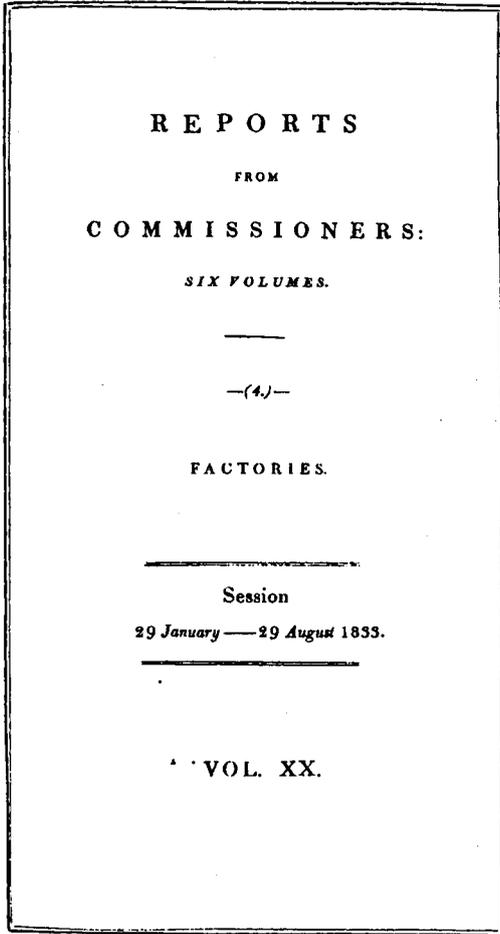
The assistant commissioners had been instructed to examine those responsible for submitting petitions concerning the Factory Bill, so they met Pickard. However, it is clear that they were already disposed to dismiss the petition because of what they had heard from other witnesses, who had told them that there had been no publicity for it when it was in the process of completion. They interrogated Pickard closely on the way in which the signatures of the petition had been obtained, and his answers only confirmed their opinion that the petition did not represent the views of the local workers.

He replied that he had prepared it after a meeting at the *Weavers' Arms*. He could not remember the names of all those then present, and of the four names he mentioned only two, a millwright and a weaver, were connected with the cloth industry.

Afterwards, copies of the petition had been

distributed round the district for signing by local people, and the names copied by Pickard from these sheets on to parchment for despatch to Westminster. It had not been sent to one of the local MPs for presentation, as was the usual practice, but to the London radical, Joseph Hume, MP for Finsbury.

As a result the commissioners refused to accept that the petition was representative of 'the Inhabitants of the Manufacturing district of



1833.

Gloucestershire', declining to ask Pickard to produce witnesses, and asking others, though not the manufacturers, to find workpeople to give evidence to them.

We may well be more sympathetic than the commissioners were to the position in which John Pickard found himself. In the absence of effective trades unions, and at a time when there certainly occurred victimisation of employees who expressed views disliked by the manufacturers, those prepared to organise a petition seeking limited hours in the local industry had by necessity to come from outside it.<sup>10</sup>

The following years saw less fevered political activity in Stroud, the main excitement arising from two parliamentary elections in 1835 and 1837. From May 1835 one of Stroud's MPs was

Lord John Russell, at the time Home Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons.

During these years Pickard remained landlord of the *Weavers' Arms* and probably pursued his other trades. Two further children were born to him and his wife. Jane Penelope was baptised at Stroud parish church on January 13, 1836 and John Russell on April 16, 1837. Pickard's choice of name for his son suggests that he continued to support Stroud's Liberal MPs. However, unhappily, both children died young, Jane being buried on May 3, 1836, and John on April 1, 1839.<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1830s, the dominant feature of Stroud life was the harsh depression, which descended on the local woollen manufacture from 1837 onwards, coinciding with a general slump in British industry. Unemployment grew, particularly among handloom weavers, as power-looms made an increasing appearance in the local mills.

The distress accompanied the application to this district of the New Poor Law of 1834, replacing parish administration by that of a Poor Law Union, consisting of fifteen parishes. A Board of Guardians of the Poor was set up in 1836, and proceeded to build a workhouse on Stroud Hill to accommodate the poor of the district. This was opened in 1838. In each parish the tasks of dealing with those seeking poor relief and collecting the poor-rate rested on the parish overseer, often aided by assistant overseers. John Pickard became an assistant overseer, and was thus deeply involved with those suffering the acute distress of the time. About this time, he gave up managing his public house, and moved to the house next door.<sup>12</sup>

Because of the general distress, 1839 saw the rise of the Chartist movement, a movement which affected in some degree every industrial area. In Stroud it made its mark in a series of meetings which were in fact demonstrations in favour of the People's Charter – the travelling speaker Henry Vincent's speech on the bowling-green behind the *Green Dragon* in King Street on March 9, the Good Friday meeting on Rodborough Hill, and the Whit Tuesday meeting on Selsley Common. Given Pickard's role in the Stroud Political Union one might have expected his emergence as a leader of the movement, but his name is not mentioned in any of the reports of Chartist activity, possibly because his poor law employers would have taken an unfavourable view of political involvement.

In March, 1841, his wife died, and was buried at Stroud parish church on March 30. He had now lost his wife and two of his children, and was doing a job which was often detestable to him. His

wife's death seems to have been the event which finally unhinged him, and on October 6 he hanged himself in the attic of his house.<sup>13</sup>

J.G. Ball, the coroner, held an inquest on his death the same evening at the *Swan Inn*. Liberally inclined, he was at pains to encourage the jury to find a verdict that Pickard had been of unsound mind when he killed himself.<sup>14</sup>

Three witnesses were called. The first two were Pickard's neighbour, and successor as keeper of the *Weavers' Arms*, and his housekeeper, who had also nursed his wife during her last illness, and who described his intense depression since her death – 'I don't know that I ever saw a man so bereaved of his senses as he was at her death'.

The third witness was William Hopson, listed as a 'gentleman' in a contemporary directory. He was a local property owner, and it seems possible that Pickard had worked for him as a rent-collector. He was also a leading Stroud Dissenter, a trustee of the John Street Baptist chapel, and involved in the political issues taken up by the local Dissenters including opposition to colonial slavery, church rates and the Corn Law. In 1836, he had become one of the first poor law guardians. From his evidence, it seems that he had become a kind of patron to the family. Pickard was in his debt for a limited sum, and had explained to him how badly he felt about extracting the poor rate from near-destitute families. Indeed, there had been occasions when Pickard said that he had paid the poor rate himself.

At the end of the inquest, the jury took little time before returning a unanimous verdict that Pickard had taken his life while 'in a state of temporary insanity'.

But that was not the end of the matter. Although Pickard was to be buried in Stroud churchyard, there was some reluctance on the part of the clergy to read the burial service over him. The incumbent at Stroud, the Rev. Matthew Blagden Hale, duly acted at the funeral on October 10, but published a statement afterwards explaining why he had done so.

This caused offence to at least one local person, and there exists in the County Record Office a broadsheet headed **SUICIDE AND THE CLERGY OF STROUD !!!** and signed 'An Old Fashioned Churchman' denouncing the clergy for their apparent unwillingness to accept the verdict of the coroner's jury, ascribing this reluctance to 'the dictates of a Puseyite conscience'.<sup>15</sup>

So died John Pickard, the evidence at whose inquest showed the local regard in which he was held. His death was also noted more widely, for the

Chartist organ, the *Northern Star* of October 23, 1839, published in Leeds, printed the following brief item in its columns:

*Stroud.* – On Wednesday, October 6, Mr. John Pickard, rate-gatherer, put an end to his existence by suspending himself to a beam in the attic, by means of his handkerchief, in which was placed a small wire to strengthen it: he was much esteemed by all who knew him.<sup>16</sup>

It is usually impossible to trace the lives, with the interests and ideals, of ordinary people of long ago. It so happens that John Pickard is an exception, and for that reason the details of his existence seem well worth recording.

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### References

#### Abbreviations

GC	Gloucestershire Collection in Gloucester Library
GJ	<i>Gloucester Journal</i>
GRO	Gloucestershire Record Office
JHC	<i>Journals of the House of Commons</i>
Rep. Fac. Com.	<i>First Report of the Central Board of H.M. Commissioners Appointed to Collect Information in the Manufacturing Districts, as to the Employment of Children in Factories: Western District, H.C. 450, B.12 (1833), xx.</i>
SPB	<i>The Poll Book at the First Election of Two Members to serve in Parliament for the Borough of Stroud, December 11th and 12th, 1832.</i>
SPR	Stroud Parish Registers

- 1 *First Report of the Central Board of H.M. Commissioners Appointed to Collect Information in the Manufacturing Districts, as to the Employment of Children in Factories: Western District, H.C. B.1 (1833), xx. 29-51.*
- 2 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 3 *Pigot and Co's National Commercial Directory of Gloucestershire, 1830, 160; SPB 1832, 24; SPR, Jan 1, 1831.*
- 4 SPB 1832, 24. GC HC3.1.
- 5 P.H. Fisher, *Notes and Recollections of Stroud*, 2nd. Ed. 1891, 20. GC RX.293.8.
- 6 *Rep. Fac. Com.*, 42; GJ February 19, March 19, April 16, October 15, 1831, June 9, August 25, 1832.
- 7 JHC vol.88 1833, 151.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 249.; *Rep. Fac. Com.*, 41.
- 9 JHC vol.88 1833, 196.
- 10 *Rep. Fac. Com.*, 41-43, 29.
- 11 SPR
- 12 GJ, October 16, 1841.
- 13 SPR; GJ, October 16, 1841.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 GRO D4693.14 48-9.
- 16 *Northern Star* iv 205 October 23, 1841.