

The National Agricultural Labourers' Union in Gloucestershire—Part 1

by Nigel Scotland

Unlike their contemporaries in other trades and occupations, agricultural labourers took to trade unionism fairly late on. One reason for this may well have been the memory of the failure of some of the early attempts to form agricultural trade unions such as that at the village of Tolpiddle in Dorset in 1833 and other similar societies which emerged in the 1860s. It was not until the later months of 1871 and the spring of 1872 that substantial numbers of farm labourers including those of Gloucestershire began to show a real enthusiasm for trade union organisation.

The most influential agricultural union organisation in the county during these years proved to be the National Agricultural Labourers Union. Early in the Spring of 1872, a group of farm workers near Leamington persuaded one of their fellows, Joseph Arch (1828—1919) who was a champion hedgecutter and a Methodist local preacher to organise a union for them.

By the early Summer of that year so many scattered local unions had sprung up in the Midlands and South of England that some sort of umbrella organisation was vital to co-ordinate action and protest. On 19 May Arch's Warwickshire union called a conference of delegates representing twenty-six counties, the result of which was the formation of the 'National Agricultural Labourers' Union' with its headquarters in Leamington. By the end of 1873 the new union had over 1,000 branches and a membership of 71,830. In addition the movement also established its own newspaper, the *Labourers' Union Chronicle* which was soon selling 30,000 copies an issue.¹

Another union, the 'North Herefordshire and South Shropshire Agricultural Labourers' Improvement Society', was organised and led by Thomas Strange,² a Primitive Methodist School teacher from Adforton, and achieved a membership of 30,000 in six counties. Strange's³ union affectionately known as the 'Herefordshire Hind' established a number of branches in North West Gloucestershire.⁴

A much larger cluster of village-based agricultural unions sprang to life under the inspiration of William Yeats,⁵ a mechanic who came from Stroud but moved to Oxford Street in the City of Gloucester in the summer of 1872. Although most of Yeats' efforts were centred in villages close to the east of the city he later began to expand his interests into the north western part of the county as well as south eastwards to take in a number of villages in the Stroud area.⁶ Yeats' organisation maintained its own independence until May 1873 when it was formally amalgamated with Arch's National. In the following summer however Mr Rice, the treasurer of Upleadon branch, and Mr Haines of Tewkesbury protested to the N.A.L.U. Office at Leamington at Yeats' mismanagement of the district funds. A dispute followed which resulted in the closing down of the Gloucester district in November 1873. Most of the

branches were then joined to the neighbouring districts. Yeats' break with the National was in many ways an unfortunate one for after that time he never again achieved the same support from the Gloucestershire farm labourers. He was a tireless worker and a good administrator as well as being a lively speaker who could capture the men's attention. He also had the ear of the *Gloucester Journal* who printed many of his letters and frequently sent reporters who gave good coverage of his meetings.⁷



Joseph Arch (1826—1919) President of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, M.P. for North West Norfolk, Primitive Methodist Local Preacher.

Apart from the one of two branches established by Thomas Strange almost all the other village unions in Gloucestershire appear to have been affiliated with Arch's National organisation. Two districts soon began to emerge, the short-lived Gloucester district centring on the city led to William Ebenezer Yeats and an East Gloucester district grouped around Cirencester led first by Henry Gwilliam, a pork butcher from Dollar Street of that town and later by Henry Hemming. Hemming (b.1830) was a tea dealer and Primitive Methodist local preacher from the village of Little Barrington. What was later styled the Cirencester district first emerged in the Fairford area as the 'East Gloucestershire Agricultural Labourers' Union'. Its General Secretary was Mr H. C. Newton who together with Mr Richards, a photographer from Fairford, established a branch at Cirencester in June 1872. Other branches were soon established at Eastleach, Southrop, Fyfield, Quennington, Netherton, Hatherop, Coln St. Aldwyns, Lechlade and Kelmscote. By the late Autumn of 1872 all

of these had affiliated with the National to form the Cirencester district with Henry Gwilliam as its new secretary.⁸

The National Union was organised on a three tier system of Conference, district and local branch. The majority of those who held office as district chairmen, secretaries and treasurers were trades people or representatives of the lower middle class rather than being labourers. Yeats, the Gloucester district secretary, was a mechanic and Joseph Lenthall, the district treasurer, was a shop-keeper with an outfitter's business in the High Street, Cheltenham. In the Cirencester district, the treasurer was William Clark, the landlord of the Bell Inn. He was succeeded in 1875 by Dr. Samuel Onley, a Cheltenham physician. In addition neither of the two Cirencester district secretaries Gwilliam and Hemming were labourers. The reason why so few labourers became district officials in the Gloucestershire agricultural trade unions appears to have been their lack of education. There were several occasions where it was reported in the press that local branches had been unable to find branch officials who could read or write. At one of the early union meetings at Horcutt, near Fairford, the Chairman stated that the newly elected Committee would have to be re-chosen because 'some of those previously selected did not fit the qualifications (ability to read, write and trustworthiness)'⁹.

At branch level the leadership of Gloucestershire agricultural unionism was much more in the hands of men who were labourers. Only seven out of eighty-five branch officials identified from the union and local newspapers were non bona fide labourers. This suggests that Gloucestershire agricultural unionism was a largely 'grass roots' movement.

Leading Personalities

A number of prominent personalities entered into the struggles of Gloucestershire agricultural trade unionism. Among their number were John Charles Ellicott (1819—1905) who was Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol from 1863—97, the Hon. T. H. Sotherton Estcourt of Tetbury (1801—76) successively M.P. for Devizes and then for North Wiltshire and Colonel Sir Robert Nigel Kingscote (1830—1908) who represented the Liberals for the Western division of Gloucestershire from 1852 for thirty-seven years.

Ellicott, who was a man of evangelical sympathies, soon became aware of the emergence of agricultural trade unionism in his diocese through articles in the Gloucestershire press and reports from his clergy which indicated that a number of dissenters were among the local leadership. Whilst having strong feelings from the agricultural workers it was obviously important that he should remain in good relationship with the county's landowners on whose tithe payments his diocese was still dependent. In July, Ellicott was invited to be present and to give a short speech at the Annual Gloucestershire Agricultural dinner. His speech produced the most celebrated 'faux pas' of all clerical abrasiveness towards the movement. Referring to the delegates whom the union head office sent into the county the Bishop advised farmers that 'if the village horsepond stands invitingly near, not by any means to put these men into it'.¹¹ The implication was clearly taken by the audience who evidently enjoyed the moment as a gentle encouragement to do the reverse! Ellicott became dubbed as 'the horsepond bishop' from

union platforms across the nation for years to come. He was denounced as the man of peace who had advocated a course of violence. A Gloucestershire working man who had heard that the Bishop was one of a number of scholars engaged in the revision of the New Testament wrote to the *Gloucester Journal*. He wondered how the Bishop would be revising 'that magnificent discourse known as the sermon on the Mount'. Perhaps he would settle for 'Cursed are the merciful for they shall not receive mercy' and 'cursed are the peacemakers and co.'¹² The Bishop was evidently a sensitive individual and much regretted what he had said at the dinner. By way of attempting to make amends he invited William Yeats and a small delegation of labourers to his palace in order to hear their grievances out.¹³

Gloucestershire agricultural trade unionism did find one or two prominent supporters from among the wealthier middle-class families of the region. One of the most active of these was William Gibson Ward (d. 1883) a retired businessman 'thirsting for the blood of the farmers'. Ward was a fierce opponent of the clergy whom he denounced for standing on the sidelines and failing to come to the aid of the labourer. Even the Bishop of Gloucester didn't escape the venom of Ward's tongue. Ward put down the Bishop's suggestion 'to throw agitators into the village horsepond' to the fact that 'his head had been shaken in a railway accident'.¹⁴ Ward held the post of treasurer of a number of village unions including Taynton and Old Gore branches in Gloucestershire. In addition he became one of three trustees of Arch's union and also a member of the National Executive Committee on which he served until 1875.

A number of other individuals of station lent their support to National Union activities among them Mr H. G. Tuke, a Cheltenham barrister, who on one occasion presided at a public meeting organised by the union and held in Cheltenham Town Hall¹⁵ and Mr Thomas Harper (d. 1883), editor of the *Cheltenham Free Press*, who spoke on behalf of the union locally on a number of



John Charles Ellicott (1819—1905), Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol 1863—97. Ellicott described the unions as 'iniquitous' combinations and became the subject of union abuse.

occasions and achieved something of a reputation for 'cursing the men of the broadcloth'. Dr. Samuel Onley (1838—77), the second treasurer of the Cirencester district, was a respected local physician with a practice in Cheltenham.

Union Objectives

The National Union objectives of universal male suffrage, increased wages, shorter hours, better conditions, improved habitations with allotment land and providing assistance to suitable labourers to migrate and emigrate all stand out clearly in their Gloucestershire public meetings and activities. When significant gatherings were organised in the larger towns and villages such as Gloucester, Cheltenham, Cirencester or Winchcombe, there were always speeches in favour of some of these concerns often followed by resolutions proposed by sympathetic local dignitaries.

The franchise issue was often heralded from union platforms in the county in these early years. For example, at a public meeting in Gloucester, President Joseph Arch defended the agricultural labourers' right to the vote despite their 'alleged ignorance'.¹⁶ This was 'no sufficient reason for refusing him the franchise.'

One of the major aims of Arch's National Campaign was to assist suitable labourers to migrate and emigrate to better situations. Emigration was also frequently encouraged at union meetings in Gloucestershire and on occasional special 'emigration lectures were organised.'

The most active emigration agent in Gloucestershire was William Ebenezer Yeats who was secretary of the Gloucester district of the union and who worked from his house in 2 Oxford Street, Gloucester. Speaking at a union meeting in the city in the autumn of 1872 Yeats urged on the labourers 'the great benefits of emigration'. He stated that he had received a letter from the Queensland Government asking his assistance to obtain 3,000 men and went on to say that 'while men could obtain 3s 6d to 4s a day he would never sanction their working for farmers at 20d or 2s.'¹⁷

Some of the emigration schemes which were organised in conjunction with the N.A.L.U. in Gloucestershire had a happy outcome but others ended in disaster the most notable being William Yeats' Brazilian party. Thirty of those in the group had died and owing to adverse conditions the rest had transferred to another colony. A number of Gloucestershire emigrants made no attempt to settle in Brazil and sought instead to return home by the first available means. The hostile *Gloucestershire Mercury* was quick to lay Yeats' scheme bare and as a result he was forced to abandon his plans to arrange another party of Gloucestershire emigrants to Brazil.¹⁸ Overall the number of men who left the country under the auspices of union emigration schemes was not great in comparison with those leaving other areas of England.¹⁹

Another objective of the union which was frequently fought for was a stake in the soil for the labourer. In July 1874 the *Union Chronicle* printed a full length front page article entitled: 'THE COMMONS OF ENGLAND BEGLONGED TO THE PEASANTRY AND WERE STOLEN BY THE LANDLORDS'. Arch himself attended the 1875 annual conference of the Cirencester district and in his speech he expressed his opinion that 'it would be the object of the union as soon as possible to devise means to obtain plots of land in every district to be cultivated by the members of the union.'²⁰

Generally speaking however pleas for allotment land were not heard at Gloucestershire agricultural trade union meetings in the way that they were in other areas of the country such as parts of East Anglia for example.²¹ The most likely explanation for this would seem to be that 'Gloucestershire was well provided for in terms of allotments and cottage gardens, and so most farm workers in the county were able to provide themselves with some or all the vegetables and fruit needed by their families, and many seem to have kept pigs and chickens.'²²

The National Union achievements in Gloucestershire

In Gloucestershire, as reference to Table 1 at the end of this article shows, the National Union grew steadily in its branch membership reaching a peak of 3,000 in the autumn and winter of 1874. At the end of the Summer a huge gathering took place in the market place at Cirencester when, according to the *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, about 3,000 people assembled to hear an address by President Joseph Arch. Great opposition to the meeting had apparently been organised by 'Blockheads' (Students of the Agricultural College) who did what they could to disrupt Arch's speech on several occasions. Arch was equal to the moment and ended his speech with a millennial crescendo which was met with 'loud and prolonged applause.'²³

The Summer of 1875 marks the close of the first period in the history of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. The Spring of this year witnessed the country-wide membership highpoint of 86,214 in thirty-eight districts and 1,368 branches. Although this held to 55,000 in 1876 British agriculture started to enter a depression from the bad harvest of 1875 onwards. The same year also witnessed a major division in the Executive between Matthew Vincent, the owner of the Union's newspaper and Gibson Ward on the one hand and Arch and his General Secretary, Henry Taylor, on the other. The dispute was occasioned by a decision to form a land company and buy land on which to settle the labourers. Vincent was very strongly behind this policy and Arch and Taylor had great difficulty in checking his initiative. A bitter dispute broke out in the union which ended in the secession of Vincent and his followers.

Gloucestershire reflected a number of the characteristics exhibited by the National Union in other counties where it was active. There was certainly a quasi-religious motivating spirit generated by dissenting groups and by the Primitive Methodists in particular.²⁴ It is perhaps significant that Cirencester which became the focal point of Gloucestershire agricultural unionism in the early years was also the focus of a strong Primitive Methodist circuit. In fact every Gloucestershire village of the Cirencester Primitive Methodist circuit had established a union branch by 1874. In a number of these branches it has been possible to identify branch personnel as active members and local preachers.²⁵ The impact of Primitive Methodism on the West Gloucestershire unions is harder to assess as Primitive records for that part of the county are less well preserved.

The *Labourers' Union Chronicle* reported that union branch meetings were held in several Primitive Methodist Chapels in the Cirencester area.²⁶ In December 1873 the Quarterly Meeting of the Primitive

Methodist Circuit resolved: 'That we sanction the holding of meetings by the National Agricultural Society in our chapels at Chedworth and Duntisbourne provided they be conducted with decorum'.²⁷ Some of these chapel based meetings had a distinctively religious ethos. For example at the first branch meeting at Chedworth Chapel there was hymn signing and 'a good attendance' was reported with over 200 persons being present'.²⁸

A number of Gloucestershire district officials were at the forefront in union-organised Sunday worship services and Primitive Methodist style camp meetings were held. The union paper gave the following account of one such meeting at Down Ampney in July 1874:

A Camp meeting was held at Down Ampney on Sunday last, about 150 persons being present. Mr T. Edwards of Cirencester preached a powerful sermon which was well received. Messrs. H. Simpson and H. Gwilliam also addressed the meeting. At the close 17s 6d was collected for the lock-out. In the evening the same speakers addressed a meeting at South Cerney. From two to three hundred persons were present. At the close 8s were collected. After paying 5s 6d for bills and hire of trap we sent £1 to the N.A.L.U.

With such close links between branch and district officials and dissenting churches, it was perhaps not surprising that there was tension between the union and the clergy of the established church. 29 Gloucestershire clergy, like the majority of their contemporaries elsewhere in the country, showed themselves for the most part to be either hostile or at best apathetic to the labourers' side in the dispute.

Two prominent clerical critics of the union were the Revd. R. Wedgewood, Rector of Dumbleton³⁰ and the Revd. Merick Holme of Marston Vicarage near Fairford.³¹ There were, however, one or two clergy who were favourable to the union cause. Among those

mentioned in the union paper were the Reverend W. T. Testran who appeared at a Lechlade branch meeting and 'assured the men of his sympathies'.³² and the incumbents of Bourton-on-the-Water³³ and Wyck Rissington.³⁴

The Gloucestershire agricultural union branches also encountered a good deal of hostility from local farmers. For example, the *Gloucester Journal* gave coverage of two union meetings at Berkeley at which local farmers expressed their vocal opposition and bribed agitators with a pint of ale to create a disturbance.³⁵ At Northleach, despite a strike of several weeks in the Spring of 1874, the farmers stood firm in their opposition to the men's demands.³⁶ At Gotherington the branch secretary refused to leave the union and he and his wife were evicted from their cottage.³⁷

Hostility of this sort on the part of the farmers clearly helped to crush the resolve and determination of the men in a number of areas. In addition the generally low level of education meant that making the men aware of the issues was often a tedious and slow process. It also made it difficult for the men to find suitable district and branch officials from among their number.

Yet despite these difficulties the spring of the year 1875 saw agricultural trade unionism still in a comparatively strong position. The National had survived with most of its major branches and the best of its membership intact. In Gloucestershire although the situation in the area around the Cathedral city had been somewhat weakened by Yeats' irresponsible behaviour and eventual departure, the overall position was healthy. In Joseph Lenthall, Henry Gwilliam, James Winter and Henry Hemming the county had leadership of considerable quality and ability. Under their guidance the National Union had staged and co-ordinated a peaceable, ordered and yet effective protest of which the 'highest' in the county had taken note and even in some cases loaned their support.

TABLE 1 — Membership figures for the N.A.L.U. in Gloucestershire

DATE	DISTRICT	Membership	Source
Date	District	Figure	Figure
November 1872	East Gloucester	c.360	* <i>Cheltenham Free Press</i> 20 June 1874
11 January 1873	Gloucester (Yeats)	700	<i>Gloucester Journal</i> 25 January 1873
11 October 1873	Gloucester (Yeats)	1,500	<i>Cheltenham Express</i> 11 October 1873
13 June 1873	Cirencester	2,800	<i>L.U.C.</i> 13 June 1874
5 September 1874	Cirencester	3,000	<i>L.U.C.</i> 5 September 1874
16 January 1875	Cirencester	2,500	<i>L.U.C.</i> 16 January 1875

NOTES

In August 1874 Yeats' Gloucester Union joined the Cirencester District

In July 1875 Matthew Vincent's rival 'National Farm Labourers' Movement was formed.

*In speech in 1874 Hemming reported that when he had first become Secretary of the East Gloucester District the income was about £12 per month. The figure of 320 has been computed by working on the basis of 2d per week subscription.

Notes

- Horn, P.L.R., *Joseph Arch* (Roundwood Press, 1971) p.222 Pelling H., in *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Penguin 1963) p.81 puts the figure at 100,000 but in the absence of primary source evidence this seems to be excessively high.
- Hereford Times* 18 March 1871.
- Strange was the son of a North Wiltshire farm worker and one of seven children. As a youngster he said 'I told God that if ever I lived to be a man I would do all I could to benefit my fellow man' See *Gloucester Journal* 13 April 1872.
- This information is contained in a letter from Henry Taylor to the *Stroud Journal* 1 November 1873.
- Stroud Journal* 13 April 1872 prints a letter from Yeats in which he expressed his sympathy with the 'Midland Agricultural Union' and expresses his concern that married men in the Stroud area are earning only 8/-, 9/- and 10/- per week. Yeats' radical views were fairly well known in Stroud. See for example *Stroud Journal* 9 March 1872 his interruptions at a Conservative Party lecture on 'Capital and Labour.' Yeats is spelt variously including 'Yates' in the Gloucester City electors lists, "Yeates" in some of the Trades Directories and newspaper reports. In a personal letter written by him to the Hon. T. H. S. Estcourt, Yeates signs himself 'Yeats'. This latter spelling has therefore been preferred throughout this chapter.
- See *Stroud Journal* 13 July, 7 & 31 August 1872 for meetings at Nailsworth, Dursley, Stroud and Wotton under Edge. *Stroud Journal* 5 October 1872 reports the meetings at Stroud and Berkeley.
- See for example *Gloucester Journal* 17 August 1872, *Stroud Journal* 1 November 1873.

- 8 See *Wilts. and Gloucestershire Standard* 31 August, 7 September 1872, *Stroud Journal* 7 September 1872.
- 9 *Gloucester Journal* 20 April 1872.
- 10 This figure represents only those who were reported as branch officials during the years 1872-75.
- 11 *Gloucester Journal* 3 August 1872.
- 12 *Ibid.* 10 August 1872.
- 13 *Gloucester Journal* 5 October 1872.
- 14 *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 5 September 1872.
- 15 *Cheltenham Express* 24 May 1873.
- 16 *Gloucester Journal* 25 January 1873.
- 17 *Ibid.* 5 October 1872.
- 18 P.L.R. Horn demonstrates that Yeats' emigration activities proved to be his total undoing. *Stroud Journal* 1 March, 1873 published letters from dissatisfied Brazilian emigrants.
- 19 Millar, C. *Op.Cit.* p.215.
- 20 *Labourers' Union chronicle* 16 January 1875.
- 21 See Scotland N.A.D., *Methodism and the Revolt of the Field* (Alan Sutton, 1980).
- 22 Miller C., *Farmwork and Farm Workers in Victorian Gloucestershire* (unpublished PhD thesis, Bristol University, 1980) p.194.
- 23 *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 5 September 1874.
- 24 For example a similar characteristic was observable in Oxfordshire and parts of East Anglia. For Oxfordshire see Horn, P.L.R., 'Methodism and Agricultural Trade Unionism in Oxfordshire' *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* Vol. XXXVII Part 3 October 1969. For East Anglia see Scotland, N.A.D., *Op.Cit.* Chapter 7.
- 25 *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 24 April 1875. Cirencester Cir. P1. 1879 October – December D3931 1/1/38. G.C.A. *English Labourers' Chronicle* 16 August 1879.
- 26 See *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 4 April 1874, 13 March 1875 and 3 July 1875.
- 27 *Cirencester Primitive Methodist Quarterly Meeting Minute Book 1865 — 1881* Minute 8 December 1873.
- 28 *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 4 April 1874.
- 29 For general clerical abuse of the movement see for example Selley, E., *Village Trade Unions in Two Centuries* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1919), p.55. For clerical abuse of the movement in Norfolk see Scotland, N.A.D., 'Rural War in Later Victorian Norfolk' *Norfolk Archaeology* Vol. XXXVIII Part 1 pp. 82 – 87.
- 30 *Gloucester Journal* 1 March 1873.
- 31 Merick Holme to Estcourt 2 September 1872 G.C.A. MS D1571 X165.
- 32 *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 2 January 1875.
- 33 *Ibid.* 2 January 1875.
- 34 *Ibid.* 28 May 1875.
- 35 *Gloucester Journal* 7 September 1872 and 28 September 1872.
- 36 *Labourers' Union Chronicle* 18 April 1874.
- 37 *Ibid.* 10 October 1874.