Résumé: What Happened at Tolpuddle?

The period up to 1834 had been affected by both the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions. In addition, there was mass migration from the countryside to the growing towns and cities and there was still a fear in the Establishment that Britain would undergo a revolution similar to the French Revolution, which was still strong in people's memories.

In these conditions early trade unions or combinations were formed. They were faced with repression from the Government in the form of the Combination Acts. When the Combination Acts were repealed in 1824 the result was a huge surge in trade union activity and industrial unrest.

In rural areas, the formation of trade unions or combinations was difficult and a response to the new machinery introduced by landowners was the 'Swing Riots' which swept across Southern England. 'Swing' affected Dorset and there were incidents around Tolpuddle which the Martyrs would have been aware of.

In addition to the growth of unrest in agricultural areas, there was also the growth of Methodism which was spreading across the country and which was particularly strong in inner cities and remote rural areas.

The men in Tolpuddle were already marked out as troublemakers for the establishment of a small Methodist Chapel in 1819.

Aware of government spies and repression from the landowners, the agricultural workers took to meeting in the open, often under the sycamore tree on the village green in Tolpuddle.

This nascent trade union, contrary to public belief, was not a totally 'underground' nor secret affair.

In 1832, George Loveless led a deputation asking the masters/employers for a wage increase to ten shillings per week. The farmers agreed and the vicar of Tolpuddle, Dr

Thomas Warren stood as witness to the deal.

The masters reneged and Warren denied that he had made a promise to call on God to help the masters keep their word. The result was that the masters reduced the wages to seven shillings per week, and shortly afterwards told the agricultural workers that the wages would be further reduced to six shillings per week.

Even with relief from the Poor Law, this was scarcely enough to live on.

George Loveless, a Methodist lay preacher (more on that later) was in contact with activists from Robert Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU)and as a result a branch was formed in Tolpuddle – such was the need for secrecy that all new members were required to take an oath.

We know that two delegates from the GNCTU came to Tolpuddle in October 1833 and addressed a meeting.

Squire Frampton was desperate; he wrote to the Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, warning him of the spread of trade unionism and complained that meetings were difficult for him to spy on.

Melbourne was under pressure to reintroduce the Combination Acts and suggested that Frampton, also a magistrate, use a law (introduced to prevent naval mutinies) that forbade the taking of secret oaths.

Frampton had established a network of informers, two of whom, Edward Legg and John Lock, were initiated into the Tolpuddle Friendly Society on 9 December 1833.

By February 1834, Frampton had the evidence he needed and on 21 February Frampton set up placards threatening to punish with seven years transportation, any man who should join the union.

On 24 February George Loveless, James Loveless, James Brine, Thomas Standfield, John Standfield and James Hammett were arrested by the parish constable and marched to Dorchester.

Edward Legg gave evidence against them and made clear in almost masonic circumstances that he and John Lock had taken an oath binding them to the Friendly Society and that they had sworn to keep this oath secret.

There is little doubt that the trial in Dorchester was rigged, and all six men were sentenced to seven years transportation on 19 March 1834.

Almost immediately, the sentences created a huge public uproar. Newspapers from across the spectrum added to the clamour.

The Morning Herald, a supporter of the opposition Tories, stated:

'A verdict which shows rather the treachery than the energy of the law by throwing the noose of an Act of Parliament over the heads of sleeping men'.

The Times, a Whig paper, stated on 1 April 1834:

'The crime which called for a punishment was not proved; the crime brought home to the prisoners did not justify the sentence'.

The Standard, a Tory paper, stated on 28 March 1834:

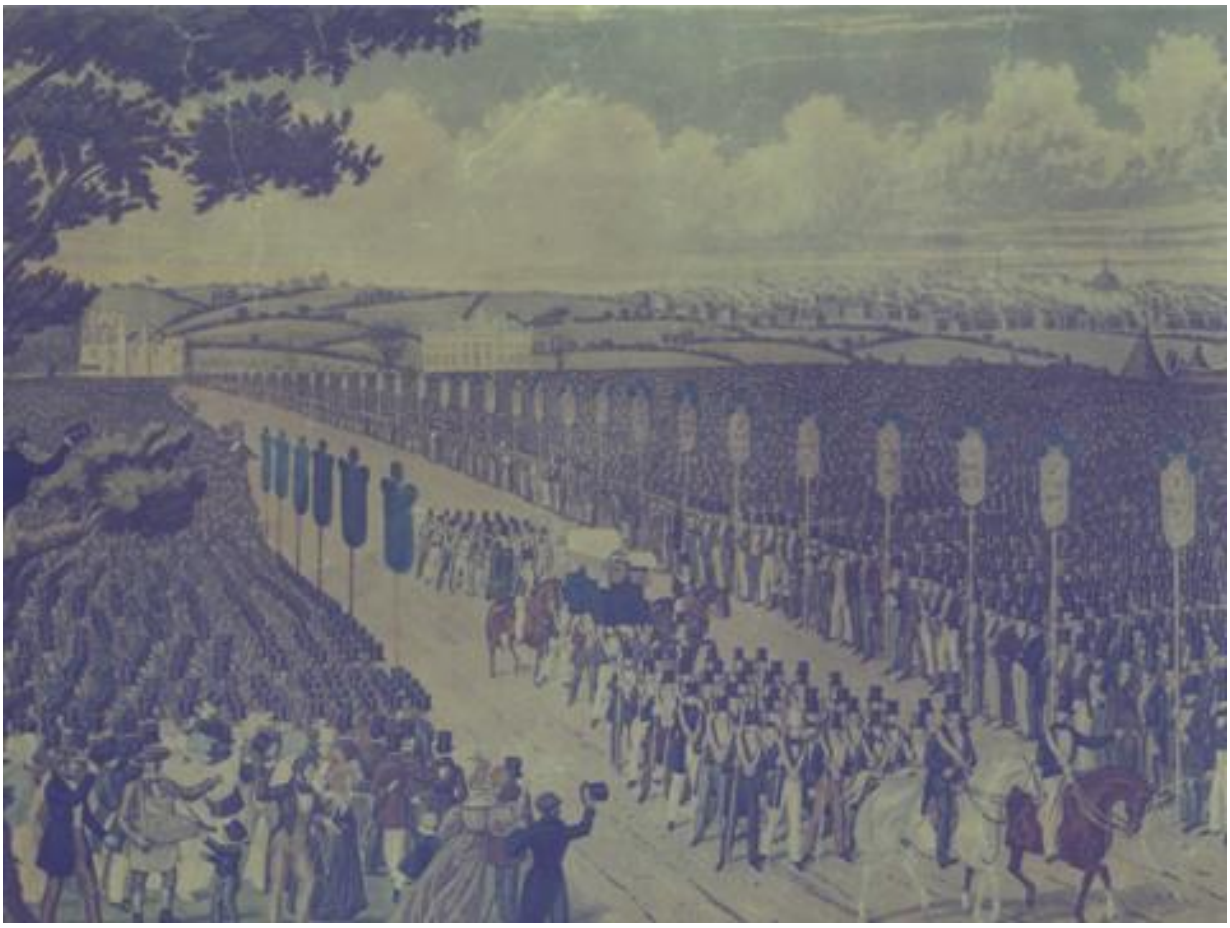
'Let those who have sinned in ignorance have the benefit of that ignorance, let the 6 poor Dorsetshire fellows be restored to their cottages'.

And for balance, *The Morning Post,* A Whig paper, stated on 29 March 1834:

'The Dorchester conspirators were, we admit, as little dangerous as it is possible for conspirators to be. The Trade Unions are, we have no doubt, the most dangerous institutions that were ever permitted to take root, under the shelter of the law, in any country.'

As news of the verdict spread The GNCTU organised a march on Easter Monday, 21 April 1834, from Copenhagen Fields in London. The authorities tried to prevent people assembling but the land at Copenhagen Fields was outside the jurisdiction of the London Magistrates. Perhaps this was another sign of a government living in fear of a workers' revolution.

Certainly London was turned into a military camp: the Lifeguards, Household troops, detachments of the 12th and 17th Lancers, two troops of the second dragoons, eight battalions of infantry, 29 pieces of ordnance and cannon and more than 5000 special constables were made ready to deal with any insurrection.



The GNCTU was determined that the march would be peaceful and thousands marched in silence as crowds cheered them on.

The procession's principal aim was to deliver a petition, which Lord Melbourne refused to accept due to the large numbers accompanying it.

The Times reported:

> *'The utmost decorum prevailed. The spectacle was most striking as it bore so strong a semblance of military array, discipline and good order.'*

About 35,000 people marched from King's Cross to Whitehall, to the Elephant and Castle, and on to Kennington Common.

The *Weekly Tree Sun* on 27 April 1834 painted the same picture:

> *'As they proceeded there was dead silence and nothing was heard but the tramping of feet. Persons of intelligence who witnessed the long, black, silent*

and unbroken stream of human beings … acclaimed, 'This is not a common procession of petitions, but a national movement.'

In Dorchester Prison, George Loveless fell ill and he was separated from the other five men who were taken to Portsmouth to await transportation. They arrived in Australia, after a voyage lasting 111 days, on 17 August; but were held on board until 4 September.

Loveless, having recovered, was transported but not to Sydney. He ended up in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) where arrived on the 4th September.

The six men were put to work on farms, whilst in Britain a campaign to free them continued.

The Whig Government fell in 1834 and was replaced with a Tory administration. This was replaced by another Whig government in April 1835 and it was this government which sought to restore justice.

The new Home Secretary, Lord John Russell, announced conditional pardons for the men in June 1835. These were kept a secret from the six men in Australia.

The other campaigner was Thomas Wakley, an MP and a medical man who had launched *the Lancet*. Within days of his arrival at Westminster he had tabled 16 petitions from different areas: Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent, Staffordshire and Lancashire.

On 27 May 1835 he tabled a motion which stated that, '*if the Dorchester unionists were not pardoned and brought home, the working classes could expect no protection under the law as they had no vote and they were not represented in Parliament where the laws were made.'*

Even the great Reform Act had not given labourers the vote!

In 1836, Lord John Russell persuaded a previously reluctant King William IV to grant the 6 a full pardon.

Notice of the pardons was received in Australia on 31 August 1836 but still the men were not told. Those in Australia only learnt of their pardons through a letter from George Loveless in Van Diemen's Land to his nephew John who had discovered his uncle's whereabouts. George Loveless advised the others to arrange their passages

back to Britain in January 1837, shortly before he sailed for home. However, four of the men had to wait until September 1837 before they left for England.

James Hammett, the fifth man, was missing as he was serving a sentence for assault in the Windsor Penal Settlement, 30 miles from Sydney. He did not leave Australia until August 1839.

Back in England

George Loveless arrived home in June 1837. There was no fanfare and no reaction in the papers, possibly because the King was dying. (In fact, King William died the week after).

George returned to Tolpuddle and relative obscurity. Four of the Martyrs sailed into Plymouth on 17 March 1838. They enjoyed a public welcome at the Mechanic's Institute and returned to their families in Tolpuddle.

Soon after the trial and transportation of the Martyrs, the official London Dorchester Committee was formed in August 1834. It had two purposes: to continue agitation for the release of the men and to offer '*profound moral and financial support for the wives and children'.*

On 25 April 1836 the London Dorchester Committee organised an official welcome home in London. The route was the same as for the Copenhagen Fields Rally the year before but in reverse. About 6,000 people turned out to witness the five men riding in an open carriage from Kennington Common to White Conduit House where a public dinner attended by over a 1,000 people was held. The guest of honour was Thomas Wakley, the dinner cost 2s 6d a head and was followed by a concert.

At the dinner, Wakley announced the launching of the Dorchester Labourers' Farm Tribute, which was a plan to raise money to buy a farm for the Tolpuddle men. As a result, payment of a substantial deposit of £640 was made on leaseholds for seven years on two farms in Essex.

The Martyrs in Essex

By August 1838, George and James Loveless and their families and James Brine were settled '*at the 80 acre New House Farm in the village of Greensted.'*

In 1808, New House Farm had been described as:

> *'A compact and very desirable freehold estate beautifully situate in the parish of Greensted, on the verge of the Common, One Mile from Chipping Hill, Two from Ongar, Five from Epping, Twelve from Rumford, Fourteen from Chelmsford, and Bishop Stortford and only Twenty-one from London, in the most salubrious and luxuriant District of the County of Essex.'*
> *'Comprising of Eighty Acres, Three Roods and Thirty Seven Perches (be the same more or less) of remarkably rich meadow, arable and wood land; abounding with fine Marle, lying completely in a ring fence and subdivided into convenient enclosures. With a large Farm House, farmyard, Barn, Stabling, Out Buildings, A Good Garden and Orchard'.*

The other farm leased was smaller, Fenners Farm at Tilegate Green, Higher Laver, where Thomas Standfield, his son, John Standfield and Thomas's wife and six children went to live.

James Hammett lived at New House Farm for a few months after his return in 1839 but then returned to Tolpuddle to become a builder's labourer.

Although we still don't know a great deal about the men's lives on the farms, it is clear that they were now farmers rather than labourers. Two of the men, James Loveless and Thomas Standfield, were unable to attend a benefit night at the Victoria Theatre in October 1839 *'as they were being employed in arranging matters at their farm in Essex'.* (There was much applause when this was read out.)

At the same concert, George Loveless was described as '*a thin pale looking individual, who has evidently not yet recovered from the base and brutal treatment to which the Whigs subjected him…'* (Cleves Penny Gazette, 19 October 1839).

We do know that the rector of Greensted parish church, Philip Ray, was opposed to the Martyrs settling in the village. He preached several sermons condemning them and wrote to the Chelmsford magistrates and the Lord Lieutenant of Essex complaining of Chartists descending on his parish from all over Essex and Hertfordshire.

In the Morning Post of 17 December 1839, an article was published criticising the leasing of the farms.

> '*The representative of the landlord was a little surprised …..as he considered the actual rent quite as much as the farm was worth.'*
>
> *'The new settlers at Grinsted [sic] and High Laver had not long been established among the hitherto quiet and well conducted population of these parishes before they began to agitate, and to agitate in a manner and with a degree of success which showed but too plainly that their mission of mischief had not been entrusted to unpractised or unskilful hands.'*

The paper, clearly anti-Whig, goes on to say that a Chartist Association was formed at Greensted and frequent meetings were held, generally on Sunday mornings. These meetings were at first held in the farm house (New House Farm) but before long they were so large that they had to be held in an adjoining field.

There was clearly some concern about the influence of the men in Essex. On 28 December 1839 The Morning Post published a letter from an anonymous Conservative magistrate for the County of Essex, who wrote:

> *'It is also true that these firebrands, the dreaded Dorchester Labourers, are four poor ignorant creatures, who literally do not even know how to plough the land they occupy.*
>
> *And…it is also true (and let me tell them they are marked men) That if these half dozen ignorant democrats (nether Essex men nor true agriculturalists are they) should attempt to disturb the peace of the county, they would be put down, not by the military force as at Newport, not by an armed gendarmerie of rural police but by the good sense and strong arm of the TRUE agricultural yeomen and labourers of Essex.'*

We also know that on 20 June 1839 James Brine married Elizabeth Standfield at Greensted Church and that the service was conducted by Philip Ray, the rector. James was 26 and Elizabeth 21 and the witnesses were John Standfield, Joseph Brine, Charity Standfield and Susan Standfield.

Much of the next five years is conjecture but we do know that the men were not happy. Henry Brine, nephew of James Brine, who went to Canada in 1855,

confirmed that the men took some form of oath by which they promised to keep the story of the past a secret even from their younger children.

The men and their families emigrated to Canada in two groups in 1844 and 1846. Why they chose Canada is not clear. In the middle of the 19th Century Canada was clamouring for immigrants and newspapers were filled with adverts extolling the praises of the New World. Between 1815 and 1850, approximately 800,000 people from Britain emigrated to Canada. Some parishes even offered financial assistance from the Poor Law rate.

The men wanted to bring up their families in peace, and perhaps this offered them the chance of a fresh start.

George Loveless, James Loveless and James Brine were the first to leave and we know that George's four year old daughter Gina died during the crossing and was buried at sea.

The Standfields, Thomas and John, followed in 1846.

The families settled around London in Ontario, between Lake Huron to the North East and Lake Erie to the South.

The London area was growing rapidly at the time and the population in 1840 was 1,716, not counting a garrison of British troops.

George and Elizabeth did not stay long at their first farm in Canada; they paid £150 for 100 acres. However, they did build a log cabin there. In 1851, they moved nearer to London and their son, Robert at Siloam.

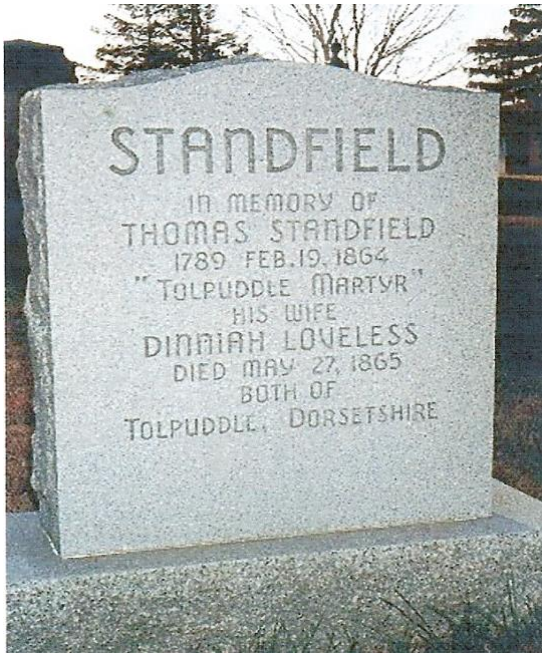
They did become the backbone of the Methodist community in the area. George Loveless and Becky built a house at Siloam near London, and George helped to build the Methodist church there. George served as the church's first lay preacher and apparently travelled the local countryside on horseback to preach in outlying areas.

Elizabeth died in 1868 and George in 1874.

James Loveless did not buy land in Canada but instead became the sexton of the North Street Methodist in London Township. He died in 1873.

John Standfield ran a store in Bryanstown, a small village just north of London. In 1874, he moved to East London and opened The Dominion Hotel. He was the first post master in Bryanstown from 1 July 1863 to 12 May 1874. He was made a Justice of the Peace in 1871 and Deputy Reeve of London East in 1877. He also started Bryanstown Choir. After his first wife, Sarah, died he remarried and had a third daughter, Emily. He died in 1898.

James and Elizabeth Brine farmed in a village called Clinton, north of London. They had 11 children, four born in England and eleven in Canada. The Brines moved from Clinton to St. Mary's, closer to London where James built a log house which is still standing. James died in 1902 and Elizabeth in 1906.



Thomas Standfield was 56 in 1846, the eldest of the men. He and his wife Dinniah (George Loveless's sister) had five children, the eldest being John. They stayed with the Brines in Clinton. Thomas died in 1864 and Dinniah in 1865. They are buried in Siloam cemetery.

James Hammett, born in 1811, was the only one of the six men who never wrote about his experiences. He was imprisoned in 1829 for allegedly stealing some pieces of iron. After a brief stay at New House Farm he returned to Tolpuddle to work as a builder's labourer.

In 1875, the Agricultural Labourers Union honoured James before 200 people in a tent in Briantspuddle and they gave him an illuminated testimonial, a purse of gold sovereigns and a gold watch.

James married three times and had eight children. He died in the Dorchester Workhouse on 21 December 1891.

There is some evidence to suggest that James Hammett was not present when the original oath was taken, but, rather that he took the blame for his brother John, whose wife was pregnant at the time of the arrest.

George and Elizabeth Loveless are buried side by side in Siloam cemetery beneath a headstone which bears the inscription:

> '*These are they which came out of great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.'*