

Labourers' Friends' Society Membership Button

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A simple button, unearthed by a Merriott resident that provides a fascinating link with the politics of 1830s Britain when there was considerable unrest in the



countryside with the anger of the working class directed against the introduction of labour-displacing threshing machines, low wages, high prices, the tithe system etc, the ensuing riots resulting in rick burning, machine breaking, robbery and so on. Rioters who were caught and convicted of such acts faced severe punishment - imprisonment, transportation and even execution. Against this background, the do-gooders of the day considered that the formation of a Labourers' Friends' Society would be the answer to encourage labourers to, well, *behave* themselves. When there was a proposal to form a branch of the society in Calne, Wiltshire, the local newspaper carried an item that suggested such a Society



'affords the cottager the means of profitably employing all his spare time - it keeps him out of harms way, withdrawing him from the ale-house and bad company - enables him to train up his children in early habits of industry and morality - it gives him a property in the soil, and a stake in the country, so that in the hour of peril it is in his interest to protect, rather than destroy property, - it attaches him to his native land, and teaches him to respect the laws - it binds up his interests with those of his landlord and master, and identifies him with the great body politic - it prevents the necessity of his always going to the worst and dearest market for the common necessaries of life - his profits are so much found gain, as they are the result of profitably employing that time which be otherwise lost or mis-spent - more produce is drawn from the soil, and consequently, more capital is put in circulation - the labourer will be enabled to purchase more of our manufactures, and he will generally be relieved from a degrading dependence on parochial aid.'

That a button bearing the Society logo and title should turn up in Merriott suggests a branch must have been established in the locality and, if so, then a reasonable conclusion must be that, even with such biased objectives, it was effective and whatever discontent there might have been was kept in check. There were no Merriott Martyrs, unlike over the county border in Tolpuddle, Dorset where, in 1834, farm labourers attempted to set their own agenda and paid a heavy price for their pains: <http://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/>