

William Osmond - Unsung Hero

(Much of what we know about William Osmond comes from 'One from the Plough – The Life and Times of George Mitchell 1826-1901', by Brendon Owen, from newspaper articles of the time and from political and historical reflection since.)

William Osmond is certainly a man of whom Milborne Wick and Milborne Port can be proud. Born in February 1818 to Charles (an agricultural labourer and shepherd) and Martha, Osmond lived in Charlton Horethorne and, at the age of 56, had been working at Milborne Wick for the same farmer as a labourer and shepherd for 20 years, earning between 8s and 10s per week, including Sundays (shepherds in some other parts of the country were paid up to 19s per week with better working conditions). He paid 1s per week for a tied cottage, 1 ton of coal and a patch of potato ground worth about £1 per year. He benefitted from the county custom of the time of being paid 6d for every twin lamb at the end of the season and having the right to sell surplus lambs.

His employer was Charles Bugg, a well-to-do farmer of 500 acres, employing 17 men and 6 boys in Milborne Wick in 1871. He lived with his wife Christian and daughters Fanny, Rose and Emily, together with a governess and domestic servant.

Osmond was a good and caring worker who often, during the lambing season, would work five or six weeks in the fields without going home to his bed. However, his diligence and dedication to his work was not going to be enough to prevent Bugg from seeking to punish him for being willing to stand up for himself and others...

In 1872, the National Agricultural Workers' Union was formed by Joseph Arch to represent farm workers in Great Britain. It aimed to limit working time to a nine and a half hour day, and to achieve a minimum wage of 16 shillings a week. Predictably, Charles Bugg warned his workers of the evils of the union. Undeterred, William Osmond was inspired by George Mitchell, Somerset leader of the Union and became a member. He was involved in organising other agricultural labourers in the area and attended protest meetings.

Bugg was furious at what he saw as Osmond's treachery and had Osmond arrested in March 1873, three months after the sale of the last surplus of lambs from the previous season; he was charged with the theft of a large number of lambs and taken five miles away to a lock-up where he was imprisoned for two days and nights. The magistrate committed Osmond to stand trial at the Taunton Quarter Sessions. Bail was set high but Osmond's new union friends came to his aid and put up the money in an act of solidarity; they also paid for his barrister. The case revolved around the custom of the right of the shepherd to sell the surplus lambs and the jury was split ten in favour of an acquittal and two, both farmers, against. At the time only a unanimous verdict could be accepted so the jury was locked up until agreement could be reached. The influence of the farmers prevailed and Osmond was found guilty and sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour.

The following day, a very similar trial took place in the same court but because the defendant was not a union man, he was unanimously acquitted...

At the end of his sentence, Osmond's friends were at the prison gates to greet him and present him with a purse of sovereigns valued at £20, worth almost two and a half thousand

pounds in today's money, 'a testimonial to his innocence and fidelity to the Union, to which cause he had become a martyr.'

A irony was that friends and relatives immediately noticed that Osmond looked much healthier upon his release, having enjoyed a superior diet and gained weight during his imprisonment. The enemies of the Union had done him a favour by giving him a rest from the starving slavery of farm labour and promoting him to 'indoor employment' with better food!

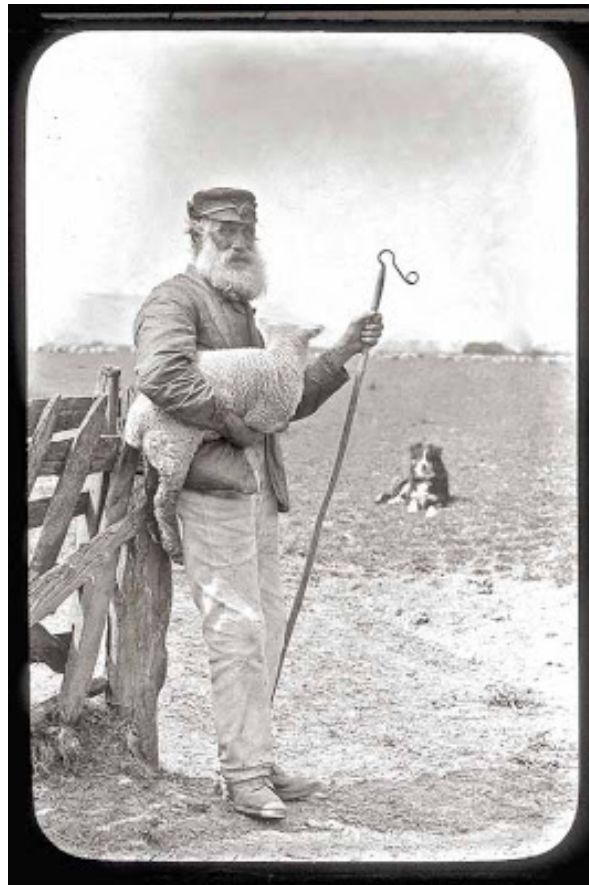
And there was more to come in the way of victory... On the following Saturday night, a torch-lit procession took place in Milborne Port; Osmond rode at the front accompanied by a brass band and some 2,000 people thronged the narrow streets in support. There was a heavy police presence but no hint of trouble.

As for Bugg, it was said that he scarcely ever held up his head after Osmond's imprisonment and he died soon afterwards, on 27th January 1874, of what was believed to be sheer remorse.

Henry Snell (British socialist politician and campaigner, 1865-1944) sums up the significance of Osmond's sacrifice in his 1936 'Men, Movements and Myself':

Another abiding memory concerns the tireless industry of these agricultural workers. I doubt whether men and women ever worked harder, and I do not believe that necessary and honourable toil was ever more inadequately rewarded. They had no recreation beyond a perhaps weekly and half-ashamed visit to the public house, or an occasional social event at one of the local chapels.

If the position of the agricultural labourer today is an improvement upon that prevailing fifty years ago, it is in no small degree due to the organisation started by Joseph Arch. The farm labourer today enjoys the full rights of British citizenship; he can take part in the local or national government of his country; he is, in so far as he is organised, a part of the labour movement; his social status has been raised; he is entitled to receive compensation for accidents; he has the consoling assurance of the old-age pension; he enjoys some little improvement in housing and sanitation, medical treatment, and sick pay for himself, though not for his wife and children.



A shepherd from the period.



Agricultural workers of Milborne St Andrew, Dorset

