

ALC/D/005

Northampton Mercury 6th February 1830.

*Agricultural distress in Buckinghamshire:
Extracts of letters from Duke of Buckingham and
Chandos addressed to the Clerk of the Peace for
the County of Buckingham.*

The Duke of Buckingham, as Lord Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire, has published the subjoined important letter, addressed to the 'Magistrates of the county, upon the glaring evils which result from the system of paying for the labour of the poor out of the Poor's book'.

Stowe, January 8th 1830.

Extract of a letter from the Duke of Buckingham, and Chandos addressed to the Clerk of the peace for the county of Buckingham, and directed to be read by him, to the Magistrates assembled in Quarter Sessions.

"Had I been able to have attended the Sessions, it was my intention to have called the attention of the Magistracy to the state of the poor within this county. I have paid, as it was my duty to do, much attention to the subject; and I regret to be obliged to say, that the system upon which, generally sneaking, the relief of the poor is conducted throughout this county, with of course local exceptions, is such as is calculated neither to relieve the pauper, to execute the law, nor to do justice to any class of the King's subjects affected by the charge of the poor. I am fully aware that times are awful, and the difficulties extraordinarily great that are to be contended with, but the duty of meeting them becomes only thereby more imperious upon us, on whom the law devolves that charge. The Magistrates are perfectly aware that almost generally throughout the parishes, the labour of the poor man is paid, for out of the poor's book, or in other terms, out of the fund raised for the relief of those, who by age and sickness are rendered incapable of providing for themselves. It might be enough for me to say, that this disposal of a tax levied on the land is illegal; but if it were not so, it is unjust to the labourer, for he gets underpaid for his day's work, and to the owner of the land, for he is thus obliged to pay the labour on the farmer's ground. The only person who benefits by it is the farmer, who gets the labour upon his farm done at a reduced rate of wages, and then pleads to his landlord in a claim of reduction of his rent, the very increase in the parochial rates which he himself has created, and from which he himself has derived the advantage. The poor man gets demoralized, for he sees in the land only a source of diminished wages for the same Quantity of labour, which was before paid for by higher, or he considers it as bound to furnish him a provision, whether he labours for it or not. The landowner's receipts are diminished not from any disastrous pressure of the times, but because the farmer derives an illegal advantage from a 'disastrous system; in the meanwhile retail prices of all commodities, remain either totally unchanged, or very little altered in proportion to the prices at which the farmer sells his produce, and the pauper cannot purchase his food or raiment, except at prices perfectly inadequate to the wages he receives for the labour which he gives; the difference is therefore paid out of the poor's rates, and thus the farmer keeps up the retail prices against himself. To such an absurd pitch of determination have some parishes come to destroy their own interests, that they actually have refused the means offered to them to employ

their poor, and have preferred paying their paupers for doing nothing, to the employing them in useful and beneficial labour.

As an instance of this, I offered the parish of Buckingham land, on which it might of employed it's poor; but the parish refused the offer, and as I am informed, above fifty wretched, people are daily shut up to prevent them from working, and receive a pittance just calculated to prevent them from starving. Thus the occupiers of land are enabled to obtain the labour or the remainder at a low rate, because the parish can always afford them the labour of their extra porters at a price below the fair rate of labour in the country. Before I went abroad, I had, in several villages upon my estates, let portions of land to the poor; whereby I had hoped to restore habits of honest industry, and diminished, in the proportion of the profits of that land, the burdens of the poor's - rates on the parishes. Upon my return home, I have almost invariably found that the land was thrown up by the poor, as soon as they found that the profits of its culture were to be set off against the relief which they claimed from the parishes, and equally invariably have the farmers acquiesced in placing these people upon the same weekly scale of relief, upon which they had been placed prior to the means being afforded to the paupers of earning their subsistence by their labour. A more efficient proof cannot be given, that the farmers knew and felt that the continued dead weight of the pauper relief system, was not, eventually to be paid by themselves.

To these evils, of which I have only given the slightest sketch, the law as it now stands is adequate to afford the remedy, and it becomes the duty of the Magistracy to execute it. We have long refused in our respective parishes to sign the books, [or authorise the levy of rates, where the labour has been paid in 'the manner which I have stated. The farmers have set us at [defiance, and notwithstanding the absence of the Magistrates' signature, the books are handed down from Overseer to Overseer, and rates are thus continued to be illegally levied upon the parishes. My advice to the Magistrates is, to take legal opinions whether they cannot punish by some legal process, the parish officers, who shall thus persevere in misappropriating the parochial money; and any advice to the owners and occupiers of the land, in parishes where this practice is adopted is, to appeal against the rate so levied; but the duty of the Magistrates is, if possible, to punish the Overseer. I would recommend in every case in which it can be adopted, the application of the workhouse system; perhaps the only change in the law which I would wish to see, might be, that the system should be rendered general and obligatory instead of being as it is now, voluntary and partial. Let the labouring poor receive the full wages for the labour which they perform; if parochial relief be demanded, let it be found only in parochial workhouses, in exchange for labour. The means of employing the poor may there easily be found. Straw-plaiting, knitting, and spinning, for instance, will afford resources, and others similar will easily present themselves. Small cast-iron mills are cheap, and easily set up. But above all, let land, where it is possible, be procured, and upon it let the poor be put to labour. The Magistrates will soon find that the demand for relief will rapidly diminish, when it is found that it will be given only in exchange for work. Of course I do not touch the relief that necessarily must be given to the

aged, the sick, the impotent; but even to them I should wish to see the workhouse system extended, consistently with the charity and humanity which we necessarily owe them. At present it is shocking to observe, that in many cases, the labourer now looks as a resource to enable him to pass his winter comfortably, either in the commission of some trifling trespass which entitles him to a residence in the goal, or to marriage by which he throws himself upon the parish, where he receives in the shape of parochial relief, a bonus upon idleness. To persons thus marrying the magistrates are bound to refuse parochial relief. A man cannot entitle himself to the advantages of a law passed in the phraseology of the times, for the relief of the poor and impotent, who, without the means of maintaining himself, adds a young wife to his poverty, and a family of children to his embarrassments. I earnestly recommend to the Magistrates, to take the superintendance of the levy and expenditure of the poor's rates into their own hands, as in law they are entitled and even called upon in law to do. They are no longer, as they used to be, supported in these duties by the occupiers of land. Many causes foreign to the object of this letter, have conduced to bring about this change. The Magistrates must act energetically and systematically for themselves, in behalf of their poor neighbours, as well as of the body in society which the Magistrates represent. If they do not, the change now working will complete itself, and the country will consist of a demoralize peasantry, attached like serfs to the land and underpaid for their labour, and a body of farmers empoverished by the empoverished state of their landlords.

I cannot do better than recommend in the strongest manner to the Magistrates to come to some resolutions during these Sessions, declaratory of their intention to enforce the existing law in the spirit, if I may presume so far, of this letter; to print those resolutions, and circulate them amongst the parishes, through the means of the Petty Sessions; to pledge themselves to act upon them, and upon no other system; and to appoint an adjourned General Quarter Sessions, when the Magistrates will pledge themselves to make a report of the state of the poor within their respective districts, and the manner in which they propose for the future to execute the duty of the management. You will be pleased to read this letter to the Magistrates on the first day of their meeting. I need not say, that feeling myself thus called to press my opinions upon their notice, I shall feel it equally my duty to be at their orders, and to assist them, in any manner in which they think I can be of use to check this growing and great evil.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,
BUCKINGHAM & CHANDOS,
Lieutenant and Custos Rotulorum,
To Thomas Tindal, Esq., Clerk of the Peace, &c.
&c."