

## ***The Act is all humbug, no good***

### **Judith Ellis**

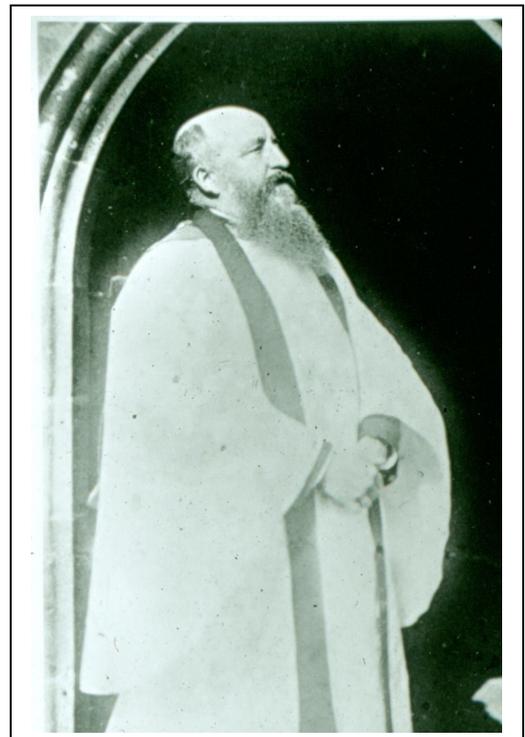
*Amongst the papers revealed by the recataloguing of the Exton Archives in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office were some nineteenth century plans and correspondence about allotments in Campden, which led to a research study of the topic. The full story will be told at the April meeting of Chipping Campden History Society, but this is one incident in the history.*

In 1887, Campden, like the rest of the countryside, was in the grip of agricultural depression and dissatisfaction amongst agricultural workers with the established order. In 1872 Joseph Arch, the charismatic leader of the National Agricultural Workers Union had come to Campden to speak and although Campden men had not been heavily involved in the union subsequently they had become more politically aware. At the 1885 election, following the previous year's Parliamentary Reform Act, Arch was elected as an MP, the first agricultural worker to enter Parliament. In the same election, A. B. Winterbotham was elected for East Gloucestershire, and 'for a short time thereafter Campden (to the dismay of many) came to deserve the reputation of being "the most radical place in Gloucestershire".'<sup>i</sup> There was a religious as well as political divide locally and nationally, with the Anglican establishment supporting the Conservatives and non-conformists supporting the Liberals.

Arch and Winterbotham were strongly in support of the provision of allotments, an issue taken up by Gladstone and his short-lived Liberal Government, but it was the Conservative Government of Lord Salisbury that passed the 1887 Allotment and Small Holdings Act which empowered Rural Sanitary Authorities to compulsorily acquire land for allotments and to let them to local people at a reasonable rent.<sup>ii</sup> Immediately some Campden residents saw the opportunity to improve their situation. On October 27<sup>th</sup> 1887 a petition signed by 31 inhabitants of Campden was presented to the Shipston Union Rural Sanitary Authority, asking for allotments. The Authority appointed a small committee, consisting of the Chairman (the Rev. C. E. Hornby), the Vice- Chairman (Mr Timothy Smith) and one of the members for the Campden parish (Mr George Haines) to hold an enquiry at Campden to ascertain the circumstances of the case and report to the Authority.<sup>iii</sup>

The inquiry was held in Campden Town Hall but the result was predetermined, according to letters found in the Exton Archives. The Chairman, Rev Charles Hornby, who was Vicar of Ebrington, wrote to Col. Noel, the Gainsborough family member who was resident in Campden, on 4 November 1887: '..... Meanwhile I have heard today that two of the applicants who were 30 in number are "felons". That sounds promising!'

The 'felons' to whom he referred were probably Walter Radband and John James. In 1880 these two, with John Farman, were found guilty of committing an indecent assault on Ellen Hooper, a servant in Campden. James and Farman pleaded guilty, Radband pleaded not guilty; but the case was proved against him. The Bench sentenced them to three months hard labour at Gloucester. In 1883 Radband, an agricultural labourer, married Fanny Ladbrook and by 1887 they had two children. Walter Radband headed the list of petitioners and was one of the most vociferous speakers at the inquiry, along with John James.



On 5<sup>th</sup> November Revd. Hornby wrote in more detail:

Dear Col. Noel

*... I have myself considerable doubts whether this allotment application from Campden is [illegible] be granted. .... If we find on closer enquiry that the applicants are mainly, if not entirely, the 'loafers' of the place .... I believe that the correspondent or secretary or whatever he wants to be called whom the applicants appoint is one of the two 'felons' whom I mentioned in my letter yesterday. It cannot surely be the intention of the framers of this act that the benefits of the act should be expanded to such .... yet as I read the act I think it will be a very troublesome and difficult thing to exclude them. The only protecting clause in this direction is Clause 6 (c) ....*

*I yesterday received a request from Mr Lewis the dissenting minister at Campden to postpone our enquiry about allotments for a day as the liberal association has for some time fixed and has had bills printed to call an important meeting on that day. This is not an unreasonable request .... I have acceded to it. Mr Lewis' reason for making it was that so many of the allotment applicants would also wish to attend the liberal (radical!) association meeting.*

*You as an ardent Home Ruler will be pleased to know that the Campden liberal association is supported by such worthy men as I think the applicants to be including the two felons.*

*Charles E Hornby.*

This ironic comment sums up the underlying politics to the request for more allotments. The inquiry meeting went ahead, presented with a statement by Mr. James Haines, the rate collector, showing that there were 253 allotments in the parish provided by the Earl of Gainsborough, 23 by the Oddfellows and 84 by other landowners. The meeting was reported in detail in the Evesham Journal:

'The main contention among the working classes present was that the rent of the present allotments was much too high. They also complained as to the small size and insufficient number of the lots..... Mr Radband said that if the Authority took action it would be of great benefit to the working men of the parish. There were plenty of men who had hard work to get a bit of firing and who went without food all day sometimes. If they had an allotment at a fair rent he thought the working men would hold a little higher position than they did now.'

Philip Merriman then took up the argument, with a point probably calculated to appeal to the members of the inquiry, saying, 'I think if some people get bigger allotments it will keep a good many paupers off the parish, sir (Hear, hear)'. Philip Merriman was one of the five agricultural labourers who were featured with a photograph (see) in the Evesham Journal in an article about their walk to London to mow the fields of Kensington. Henry Newman also spoke at the meeting.

'A man remarked that they must start by having fresh men in the House of Commons. They would, he said, never get any land until they did, unless it was a bit down in the churchyard, and that they would have to pay dearly for.' Rev. Hornby, the Chairman, reiterated his point that 'It would be very wrong for an Act of Parliament to give an Authority compulsory powers to take land from the owners at the expense of the ratepayers, until all other means had been tried first and failed... the Sanitary Authority would not take action under the Act until the owners of land in the place had refused to grant allotments.' At the end 'Mr Radband then proposed a vote of thanks, seconded by Mr Merriman.'iv



The travelling mowers l-r: Fred Bennett, Philip Merriman, 'Long Tom' Bennett, Robert Hands, Henry Newman.

The inquiry members made a formal report to the Rural Sanitary Authority who decided to take no further action. Revd. Hornby's informal letter to Col. Noel was a little more frank:

11 Nov 1887

Dear Col Noel

Our allotment enquiry meeting at Campden took us an hour.

The practical outcome of it is that the Sanitary Authority have not any grounds to at present to take any further steps in the matter according to the opinion of myself and my co-magistrates.....

I think it was pretty evident that the labourers who were present had come under the impression that the new allotment act meant that they had only to come to ask the SA to give them allotments and then that they were bound to have them, and also pretty much at what rent they themselves thought fair. When I explained to them that the SA was the last thing to come to, after they had tried all other voluntary arrangements and failed there was a groan and one man exclaimed 'oh then we shall never get any'. Another, 'the act is all humbug, no good, we cannot have a fresh one'. While a third shouted 'we shall do no good till we get another government'. However, this was all byplay of which we took no notice. When I asked them whether they had anything they wished to say to show cause why the Sanitary Authority should take action, while those who had got land wanted more, and those who hadn't wanted to have some, the great grievance seemed to be that the allotment grounds were, as they maintained, let at an exorbitant rent. £3.12.0 - £4 and even to £5 per acre being named as the prices that were paid. ....

I am not favourably impressed by the appearance of the labourers who appears and I question very much whether they were at all representative of the better class and I took it upon myself to tell them to their faces that the act was not intended to throw law into the hands of idle, drunken, loafing men who would always think [illegible] labour, but that it was meant to benefit those who were already showing that they were doing their best to help themselves. I don't suppose some of them liked this but they took it without open grumbling.

Following the refusal by the Sanitary Authority to take action until landowners had been approached, the men presented a petition on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, again headed by Walter Radband, to the agent for the Earl of Gainsborough:

'We the labourers of Campden do humbly ask your Lordship to well consider this petition for we assure you that the greater part of the working class are out of employ the greater part of the year & we believe that if we had allotments to the extent of one acre at a fair agricultural rent & a field near at home it would be a benefit to us as now there are from 30 to 40 men in our small town that have not any regular employment & to look forward to this winter with no employ & only the small crop we get off the small allotments we now hold under your Lordship is a very hard case for working men with families. This petition is signed by 45 working men who are really in want of these allotments & who would do their best to keep them in proper order.'

The Earl of Gainsborough's response is not to be found in the Exton papers, but it seems likely that it was not favourable. Two years later the Liberal MP for the area, Arthur Winterbotham, purchased land in Campden which he let as allotments, provoking another round of newspaper correspondence and reports of political meetings, the Conservatives deriding his scheme and the Liberals maintaining that he was there for the working man. The 1887 Allotments Act was generally resisted by local authorities and revision was required to strengthen the conditions. However, it was not until 1907 that an Act was passed that imposed further duties on local councils to ensure the provision of allotments, taking the main responsibility away from local landowners.

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i CADHAS. *Campden: A New History* 2005. p.201

ii Sanitary districts were established in England and Wales in 1875. The districts were of two types, based on existing structures: urban sanitary districts in towns with existing local government bodies, and rural sanitary districts in the remaining rural areas of poor law unions. Each district was governed by a sanitary authority and was responsible for various public health matters such as providing clean drinking water, sewers, street cleaning and clearing slum housing.

iii Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office (LLRO) DE3214/8921

iv Evesham Journal 12.11.1887