

## THOMAS BEDLER AND CHARTISM

The Chartist Movement was the first mass movement driven by the working classes probably since the Peasants Revolt of 1381 led in Essex by Thomas Baker of Fobbing who held land designated 'Pokattescroft or Bakerescroft' although by the time of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tithe map, this was now known as Whitehall Six-Acres.

As history informs us, the villagers of Fobbing, led by Thomas Baker, a local landowner, told John Brampton, sent to collect the Poll-Tax, that they would give him nothing and he was forced to leave the village empty handed. Robert Belknap, Chief Justice of Common Pleas, was sent to investigate the incident and to punish the offenders. On 2 June, he was attacked at Brentwood. By this time the violent discontent had spread, and the counties of Essex and Kent, there led by Walter (Wat) Tyler, were in full revolt. Soon people moved on London in an armed uprising. For his role in the uprising, Thomas Baker was hanged, drawn, and quartered on 4 July 1381 at Chelmsford.

### London Working Men's Association.

In June 1836, William Lovett, Henry Hetherington, John Cleave, Henry Vincent, John Roebuck and James Watson formed the London Working Men's Association (LMWA). This came about through the failure of the 1832 Reform Act to extend the vote beyond those owning property. Although it only ever had a few hundred members, the LMWA became a very influential organisation. At one meeting in 1838, two of the leaders, William Lovett and Francis Place drew up a Charter of political demands:

- A vote for every man twenty-one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for a crime.
- The secret ballot to protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
- No property qualification for Members of Parliament in order to allow the constituencies to return the man of their choice.
- Payment of Members, enabling tradesmen, working men, or other persons of modest means to leave or interrupt their livelihood to attend to the interests of the nation.
- Equal constituencies, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing less populous constituencies to have as much or more weight than larger ones.
- Annual Parliamentary elections, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since no purse could buy a constituency under a system of universal manhood suffrage in each twelve-month period."

In June 1839, the Chartists petition was presented to the House of Commons with over 1.25 million signatures which represented nearly 20% of the total English population of the time. It was rejected by Parliament. The provoked unrest which was swiftly crushed by the authorities.

A second petition was presented in May 1842, signed by over three million people, but again it was rejected and arrests followed.

In April 1848, a third and final petition was presented. A mass meeting on Kensington Common in south London was organised by the Chartist movement, the most influential of the leaders was Feargus O'Connor, Editor of 'The Northern Star' a weekly newspaper that promoted the Chartist cause.

Feargus O'Connor was known to have connections with radical groups which advocated reform by any means, including violence. The authorities feared disruption and military forces were on standby to deal with any unrest. The third petition was also rejected but the anticipated unrest did not happen.

Despite the Chartist leader's attempt to keep the movement alive, within a few years it was no longer a driving force for reform. However, the Chartist legacy was strong. By the 1850's Members of Parliament accepted that further reform was inevitable and further reform Acts were passed in 1867 and 1884.

By the end of the First World War, five of the Chartists' six demands had been achieved, only the stipulation that Parliamentary elections be held annually was unfulfilled.

### THOMAS BEDLER

Thomas Bedler was born in Nevendon and Baptised in the local church on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1789. His parents, Thomas Bedler and Martha Lea had married in St. Peter's Church Nevendon on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1783. They were both from the parish but were also illiterate. Thomas became the instigator of the Chartist movement in the local area.

The family had moved to Rawreth and it is possible that when they did so, the surname changed to Bedlow. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1809, Thomas Bedlow married Mary Cox. Thomas was able to sign his name and one can assume that what education he had, he put to effective use politically in the 1830's. The family appeared relatively poor as indicated in the 1851 Census by the fact of Thomas and his brother William being Agricultural Labourers and another brother James, being a 'scavenger.'

Thomas appears to have developed into a local 'character' as mentioned in Philip Benton's 'History of the Rochford Hundreds' that in Bedlow's garden by the Three Wantz Road, there was a board inscribed 'Thomas Bedlow, Hop, Dog and Cattle' and he goes on to say that he was also celebrated for his cure of Dropsy, Ague and Rheumatism, but it was not his skill with cures which makes him of special interest.

In 1831 Rawreth had a population of 321 but by 1851 this had risen to over four hundred, indicative of the fact that the village populations of Essex were growing in the nineteenth century and the number of farm labourers was also increasing. Pressures from the economic difficulty during the 1830's and 1840's with severe depression, hit the country, and this, together with the lack of benefit, and the legislation of 1834, which altered the form of Poor Relief, showed a decisive hardening of attitudes towards the emerging working class.

The Poor Law Amendment Act showed that poverty was viewed from above as resulting from idleness; the notion of structural unemployment was alien to the minds of the ruling class. In the mid 1830's, a power at local level altered somewhat, and the local elite no longer had responsibility for looking after the poor, the sick, orphans and widows, and those who had fallen on hard times.

The distant Board of Guardians, now acquired the right to make decisions about the poor in villages such as Rawreth. Indeed, at this time there had been widespread dissatisfaction in the district, from a variety of cases, and incendiarism occurred in Basildon on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1830. Most of the income for the relief of poverty in Rawreth came from the large farms in the area, such as Hall Farm, Great Fanton Farm, Beeches Farm, Trynders Farm, Chichester Hall, Gooses Farm as well as Battlesbridge Mill and the Carpenters Arms Public House.

The Rector, as part of his Tithe 'owned' over thirty properties in the village, but he paid a poor rate on the value of the Rectory only. Typical of the poor men of Rawreth in the 1830's were Thomas Bedlow and his brother William. They both lived in small cottages with gardens and both paid poor rates at 2s. (10p) whenever the rate was levied.

By 1837 most of the rates which were collected, were paid over to the Board of Guardians, but lesser amounts were still used locally; indeed it cost Rawreth 7s. (35p) to lay out a 'stranger' who died at the Carpenters Arms, but this was an exception to the rule for outdoor relief for which a man could apply when he was temporarily out of work.

By 1838 the new Poor Law was awakening apolitical consciousness in many working class people and it was at this time that working men started to demand the franchise which they saw as a pre-requisite to the creation of a more equitable society. Agitation for the points of the Charter took place in many parts of the country with the aim of the Chartists to political strength to change society socially and economically in the interest of the working class.



On the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 1837, Thomas Bedlow held a meeting at the Carpenter's Arms to petition Parliament for the Abolition of the New Poor Law and for universal suffrage. This was followed in July 1837 by another meeting of the working classes which again took place there. The purpose of this meeting was to form an association of working men.

Working Men's Associations had been springing up in various parts of the more urbanised areas of Essex and, as William Bedlow, the Secretary of the Rawreth Working Men's Association reported, they were not the first association in Essex, but they were the first related to farming in the county to organise themselves.

As Arthur Brown says in his "Chartism in Essex", except in Rawreth and Wickford, no farm woman was ever recorded as a speaker or officer at a Chartist meeting.

Thomas Bedlow told the meeting that the way to achieve a better life was by obtaining universal suffrage. He called on the agricultural labourers gathered at the meeting to "awaken from their sleep and to take note that the interests of the working class had diverged from the interests of the Masters."

He had a well-developed political consciousness and although he saw the interests of the working men were not represented in Parliament, he thought that moral pressure would be sufficient to achieve natural rights of free men. By the end of 1838, Working Men's Associations had organised meetings and rallies in the more industrially developed areas. Bedlow organised similar meetings in the rural areas of South East Essex, such as those at Wickford and Rayleigh, where he would be able to generalise the grievances of the working man of Rawreth.

Although Rawreth Working Men's Association kept going for a time, it did not produce a programme which could sustain it. Chartism failed in Rawreth as it failed elsewhere in the countryside, and in that vital second period of Chartism, of 1842, Rawreth did not take effective steps to achieve the demands of the working man.

The grievances deriving from the new Poor Law were not so deeply felt and no doubt, the ruling class were consciously appeasing Bedlow when in 1841, 11s.6d. (57.5p) was granted for the maintenance of the James Bedlow family, when relief of this type was rarely given.

But what of the man after his initial enthusiasm for the rights of free men? Bedlow quarrelled with the Rev. White, and he left the Church of England, joining the Peculiar People, probably at Daws Heath in Thundersley. The teachings of this sect appealed to Bedlow because they were saying at a religious level, what he had attempted to articulate at a political level. He turned inward, finding satisfaction as a member of the sect which advocated the work of the individual and which was according to his ideal of a non-hierarchically structured society.

He seemed unaware that society itself would change over time and the demands which he and other farm labourers had made in the 1830's, would be given as a right, and the ruling class learned to respond to the voice of the emerging working class; his articulation that the owners of the means of production, lived at the expense of labour, failed, as it failed elsewhere in the country, to trigger the revolution of the proletariat.

Thomas Bedlow was a rare type; he, unlike most of his fellows, had developed a political consciousness and was attempting to call the ruling class to assess the position of the working class, fairly, before the ruling class had a chance to adjust itself to the new society which was evolving.

Thomas Bedlow died aged 82 years, registered at Rochford in 1868. He was buried at St. Nicholas Church Rawreth on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1868.

#### **A timeline of the Poor Law acts in the middle part of the nineteenth century were:**

**1831** Passing of the **Vestries Act (Houdbouses Act)**, which allowed parishes to adopt a procedure for the management of the parish, particularly in relation to poor relief, based on a vestry elected from the ratepayers.

**1834** **Report of the Royal Commission** published in March.

Poor Law Amendment Act received Royal Assent on August 14<sup>th</sup>.

Poor Law Commissioners sworn in on 23<sup>rd</sup> August.

**1835** **Abingdon** in Berkshire declared as first new Poor Law Union on January 1<sup>st</sup> – its new workhouse received its first inmates in November of the same year. The earliest known use of the term workhouse is from 1631, in an account by the mayor of Abingdon reporting that "we have erected within our borough a workhouse to set poorer people to work".

**1842** The Outdoor Labour Test Order, issued by the PLC in April, allowed relief (at least half of which was to be in food, clothing etc.) to be given to able-bodied male paupers satisfying a Labour Test.

**1844** A further Poor Law Amendment Act, improved numerous details of the 1834 Act. One of its most significant changes was a revision of the Bastardy Laws whereby mothers were granted the civil right of claim against punitive fathers, regardless of whether she was in receipt of poor relief.

The Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order issued by the PLC in December, prohibited all outdoor relief to able-bodied men and women apart from exceptional circumstance.

**1845** An Act for the amendment and better Administration of the Laws relating to the relief of the poor in Scotland, proposed keeping poor relief in Scotland primarily at the parish level. Parishes, particularly in urban areas, could unite and build poorhouses for the old and infirm.

Andover Workhouse Scandal – conditions were so bad that inmates were revealed to be fighting over scraps of rotten meat left on bones they were crushing.

**1846** An Act granted settlement after five years' residence in a parish.

Start of annual government grant of £30,000 towards salaried of teachers in pauper schools.

**1847** Poor Law Board replaced by Poor Law Commission.

**1852** The Poor Law Board's Outdoor Relief Regulation Orders in August and December, broadened the conditions under which outdoor relief could be provided.

**1858** Workhouse Visiting Society founded by Louisa Twining.

**1861** Another **Industrial Schools Act**, defined the classes of children who could be placed in an industrial School: Under Fourteens found begging; Under Fourteens wandering, and not having any home or visible means of subsistence, or frequenting the company of reputed thieves; Under twelves committing an offence punishable by imprisonment; Under fourteens whose parent claims he is unable to control him, and is prepared to pay for the child to be detained in an Industrial School.

**1864** **The Houseless Poor Act**, made it obligatory for Metropolitan Boards of Guardians to provide Casual Wards for "destitute wayfarers, wanderers and foundlings."

**1865** **The Union Chargeability Act**, based on each parish's contribution to the union's funds on its rateable value not how many paupers it had. The Union also became the area of settlement and the period of residency required for the irremovability, was reduced to one year. The Lancet exposed the terrible conditions that existed in many London workhouse infirmaries.

**1866** A further **Industrial Schools Act**, required that children on remand for charges punishable by committal to an industrial school, be kept in workhouses rather than prisons.

**1867** **The Metropolitan Poor Act**, set up a Common Poor Fund to finance the construction and operation of new fever hospitals and asylums for London's poor. It also gave the local Government Board powers to abolish the Local Act status of many of London's parishes and to reorganise and dissolve unions.

The **Metropolitan Asylums Board** was set up to take over the provision of care for paupers with infectious diseases such as smallpox or who were classed as "harmless imbeciles."

**1869** Abolition of Gilbert's Unions still in existence.

**1870** **The Education Act**, introduced compulsory elementary education administered by local School Boards. The Metropolitan Asylums Board North-Western Fever Hospital opened in Hampstead, becoming England's first State Hospital.

**1871** **The Local Government Board** replaced the Poor Law Board.

**An article published in "Norfolk Tales, Myths and More" in January 2018 on "Illness Remedies in Folklore!" Says:**

*"There is hardly a substance known to man that has not been tried as a medicine, nor any disease for which faith-healers have failed to prescribe."*

Even way back in Saxon days physicians recommended an ointment made of goat's gall and honey for cancer, and if that failed, they suggested incinerating a dog's skull and powdering the patient's skin with the ashes. For the 'half-dead disease', a stroke, inhaling the smoke of a burning pine-tree was supposed to be very efficacious.

In East Anglia people suffering from ague, a form of malaria characterised by fits of shivering, used to call on the 'Quake doctors'. If the doctor couldn't charm away the fever with a magic wand, the patient was required to wear shoes lined with tansy leaves, or take pills made of compressed spider's webs before breakfast. A locally famous Essex 'Quake doctor' in the 19th century was Thomas Bedloe of Rawreth. A sign outside his cottage said, "Thomas Bedloe, hog, dog and cattle doctor. Immediate relief and perfect cure for persons in the Dropsy, also eating cancer"

**St. Peters Church Rawreth**



**Norman Bambridge  
Basildon Borough Heritage Society  
August 2021.**