

Working Class Perceptions: Aspects of the Experience of Working Class Life in Victorian Leicester

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This paper considers appraisals of working-class life in Victorian Leicester made by working men. The detailed observations and opinions of Robert Bindley, Daniel Merrick and Tom Barclay formed a crucial part of the investigation. Bindley was a framework knitter and a leading figure in the 'Hose, Shirt and Drawer Union' of hosiery workers, as well as in the anti-frame rent movement in Leicester during the mid-Victorian era, who recorded his views in a pamphlet entitled, *The History of the Struggle for the Abolition of Frame Rents and Charges*, in 1875¹. Barclay was the son of Irish immigrants, living in perhaps the most deprived of social circumstances, but who became a self-educated socialist and a leading light in Leicester society — with all social classes — though he remained poor all his life. He was born in 1852 and wrote his autobiography, *Memoirs and Medleys: The Autobiography of a Bottle-Washer*, in 1933, shortly before he died². Much of what he wrote related to the mid-Victorian period. Merrick was born in 1827 and died in 1888. He began life as a framework knitter and for nearly thirty years was involved in local trades unionism, particularly as leading spokesman for the 'Sock and Top Union' of hosiery operatives. He became a member of the first Board of Arbitration in Leicester, the first working man on the Town Council, a member of the first School Board in the town, President of the Leicester Co-operative Society, Chairman of the Leicester Trades Council and President of the Trades Union Congress, held in Leicester, in 1877. He was self-taught and described as an 'ideal leader of his class — well-respected by both masters and men'³. Merrick's views were recorded in his 'narrative' of working-class life entitled, *The Warp of Life*,⁴ published in 1876, as well as in the press.

The paper will be divided into two main sections, each dealing with the central issues raised by these major commentators. The opinions and observations of other local working-class spokesmen, derived mainly from press reports and parliamentary papers, will be examined in order to present a more detailed picture.

Robert Bindley's observations focused on the inherent problems in Leicester's hosiery industry and the effects these had on operatives' behaviour. He drew particular attention to the iniquitous frame renting system which was prevalent in the trade, and to the way in which this kept the workers in a state of poverty⁵. He related how there were far more frames available than work for them, and how, despite this situation, the renting charges were always levied by the masters — even during particularly slack times and even during an operative's illness. He referred to the practice of masters deducting charges and rents first before paying wages and how, often, the charges exceeded the wages. As far as Bindley was concerned, the spreading of work amongst as many frames as possible, especially in depressed times, ensured that the hosiers or middlemen received their profit at the same time as it perpetuated the framework knitters' poverty. The surplus of frames and men had

not arisen accidentally, Bindley implied. Rather, it had been consciously devised by the masters, since the rent and charges were the 'most lucrative part of the business'. Bindley pointed explicitly to the indifference of the manufacturers towards the operatives' economic plight, making it clear that middlemen undertook practical dealings with the men. The middlemen too, evidently, cared 'nothing' for what was given to the workmen, though they expected 'perfect work in return'⁶.

Bindley drew particular attention to Sam Odams as one of the worst employers in Leicester, who abused the frame rent system to the full⁷. Apparently, Odams went so far as to lend money to hard-up workers, from Monday mornings onwards, encouraging them to spend their idle hours drinking. Consequently, Odams' operatives were eternally in debt to him, hence totally manipulated by, and completely dependent on him. Bindley dismissed suggestions that Odams' system of money-lending was a benevolent measure of helping families with economic problems, asserting that Odams used it as a means of 'checking' the quantity of work when he did not want it done — when trade was slow especially. If work was plentiful, Bindley contended, Odams would not 'open the bank', even when asked to do so by the operatives, requiring the work to be completed and hence, the operatives kept in 'good habits'. William Riddington, a framework knitter with Odams, had made a similar appraisal of the hosier to Bindley, when giving evidence to the Truck Commission in 1871, adding that Odams would not have lent the money to operatives if he had thought they 'were going to take it home to their wives', or do 'good' with it⁸. Riddington also advised the Commission that Odams charged the full frame rent even during an operative's sickness. Bindley asserted that the frame rent was the 'greatest grievance' with which hosiery operatives had to contend, yet he acknowledged that the men endured the system mainly because, despite all its faults, it did guarantee their independence:

They are not bound to any slavish system except paying these charges⁹.

The slavish system presumably referred to factory employment, yet Bindley was prepared to admit that factory conditions were generally good in Leicester, operatives working shorter hours and receiving 'fairer' treatment. He confessed that most operatives on the putting-out system, however, were somewhat set in their ways and consequently 'very loath' to change¹⁰.

Asked by the Truck Commission in 1871, why operatives had not gone on strike in order to have frame rents abolished, Bindley advised that 'a general strike is more than we dare attempt'¹¹. He felt that there would be such strong 'opposition' that the operatives would 'not be able to conquer it'. He contented that striking, in any event, was a very infrequent occurrence in the industry, the odd, 'isolated case' against some 'unprincipled' manufacturer, who wanted his work 'cheaper than the rest', being the norm. Even though Bindley acknowledged the large measure of public support for the operatives' cause in 1871, evidenced by two petitions, signed by numerous operatives and other local inhabitants, including some hosiers, he nevertheless still regarded striking as 'too formidable a question'¹². Bindley pointed out that operatives' 'fears' of offending their masters, losing their work, and other hosiers refusing to employ them, were major considerations which would most likely undermine efforts to consolidate collective action against hosiers. Indeed, such fears were cited by Bindley as the main reasons why operatives generally were reluctant even to give evidence to the 1871 Commission, through which Parliamentary abolition of frame rents was being sought.

One final important facet of Bindley's argument was that the inherent problems in the hosiery putting-out system, particularly the short-time employment and the frame rent, were the fundamental causes of any perceived 'irregular' behaviour on the part of

operatives. He argued that the stockings were 'toiling' under a system which placed the interests of the masters and workmen in 'such an inverted position' that:

the former were rewarded for creating in the latter habits of indolence and drunkenness¹³.

Bindley clearly blamed the apparent 'bad' habits of the workers, their laziness and even their drinking, on the employers. He went further and asserted that the operatives' idleness was in fact more apparent than real. Hence, he described how men would turn up for work on Monday morning only to be told that they could not be 'waited on' till the masters had been to the warehouse:

After that the men might be seen lounging about, and people who did not know the circumstances of the case were very apt to denounce them as idle stockings¹⁴.

The image Bindley clearly wished to foster was that of a responsible, hard-working, independent workforce, suffering the disabling effects of a problematic industrial organisation at the hands of unscrupulous, uncaring employers. The operatives' irregular working, indolence, poverty, even their drinking, were consequently regarded by Bindley as the enforced effects of their system of employment and the moral indifference of their employers. The moral failure, therefore, was that of the bosses', not the workers'.

Much of what Bindley argued was not original, for working-class criticism of the hosiery outwork system of employment, and the plight it caused the operatives, had a long pedigree in Leicester. In the 1840's, for instance, Thomas Cooper, the Leicester Chartist leader, had referred to the 'crippling effects' of the system on the stockings' existence.¹⁵ He described how each man had to pay a whole week's frame rent, even though he had 'only half a week's work', and how the 'pittance' that he earned would only 'secure a scant share of the meanest food'. Hence, Cooper concluded, the 'poor' knitter was 'worn down', easily distinguishable a hundred miles from Leicester', by his 'peculiar air of misery and dejection'.

The Royal Commission investigating the condition of the framework knitters in 1844-5, had heard extensive evidence from Leicester operatives concerning the abuses of the putting-out system. The frame rent was considered a particularly repressive measure in view of the long spells of unemployment with which the operatives were faced as a consequence of the seasonal nature of the industry. Thomas Toone, for instance, a worker in the glove trade, described how he was often unemployed for 'as much as five or six weeks together', when he never earned a 'farthing' but was expected to pay rent.¹⁶ Similarly, Thomas Smith advised that in the eleven years he had worked in the hosiery trade in Leicester, he had never been fully employed for a whole year.¹⁷ John Hill, likewise, stated that it was 'not many weeks that we work with a clear run', and that there was little alternative work for framework knitters¹⁸.

Nevertheless, perhaps hoping to promote an image of responsible, self-helping workforce, Thomas Winters, the leading spokesman for the glove hands, told the Commission that many operatives had been prepared to 'walk a mile from their homes' in order to find work in the larger workshops in the town.¹⁹ The image was enhanced by Josiah Johnson, a straight-down hose maker, who referred to the arduously long hours the operatives were expected to work — when work was available — which produced such a 'weakness of mind and body' that they were 'inclined' to rest rather than 'amuse' themselves²⁰. Likewise, William Jones asserted that the hands were often expected to produce more than was comfortable and consequently they had no time for 'exercise and recreation to keep their health and so on'²¹.

Certain spokesmen also explained to the Commission how their irregular working hours

were essentially a consequence of the putting-out system insofar as they were unable to start work till the middlemen had distributed the raw materials. Thomas Smith, for instance, referred to the practice whereby the journeymen had frequently to 'wait a day or even two' in a week as a result of the 'undertaker' not having brought the materials from the warehouse.²² The burden of responsibility for the men's enforced idleness is squarely placed on the shoulders of the middlemen and manufacturers.

The indifference of the manufacturers to the operatives' economic plight was made explicit by Thomas Winters in his evidence to the 1854-5 Select Committee investigating the stoppage of wages in the hosiery trade.²³ He went on to state that the hosiers were the least capable of 'practically knowing the difficulties' under which their employees laboured — 'of any other class' that he knew — since they had 'no connection' with their operatives; the putting-out system operated through middlemen. George Buckby, however, another leading working-class spokesman giving evidence to the Select Committee, expressed the view that the employers' ignorance was an excuse used by them to protect their own economic positions, a conscious means of keeping earnings low and profits high, whilst giving the misleading impression that they were unaware of what was happening. To support his argument, he produced what he regarded to be 'extensive evidence' relating to the decreasing earnings of the framework knitters²⁴.

That the hosiery manufacturers were not fulfilling their moral obligation to treat workers fairly was a theme broached in the local press by Thomas Winters in 1846²⁵. He demanded that hosiers relinquish a 'portion of their profits' in order to enhance the social conditions of their operatives. Interestingly, his outcry was met with hostility from many framework knitters, who responded by distributing handbills in the town, denouncing Winters' action:

We think he has had experience enough to convince him that creating a bad feeling between the employers and the workmen is injurious to the latter, being the weaker party²⁶.

The fatalistic sense of powerlessness which emerges from the operatives' statement is symptomatic of the 'fears' experienced by workers to which Bindley had referred in 1871. This feeling of powerlessness, coupled with the operatives' strong sense of independence, which Bindley had also identified, were doubtless important factors in explaining the somewhat chequered career of the anti-frame rent movement and the implicit failure of the hosiery union to sustain a collective initiative to enforce the abolition of frame rents in mid-Victorian Leicester. Hence, in 1872, for instance, there was a certain indifference demonstrated by the operatives towards the union's efforts to consolidate worker action against employers, such that even though strike activity occurred and employers appeared to have given way on the issue of the frame rents, the union failed to ensure the enforcement of the employers' decision²⁷. Bindley noted how ultimately the union's efforts to enforce the abolition of frame rents itself had proved ineffectual. Abolition was not finally achieved till 1874 and then by Parliamentary Act²⁸.

Research by recent local historians has drawn attention to the inherent structural problems in the Leicester hosiery union in the Victorian period. Patterson, for instance, has noted how the union had struggled prior to 1850, remaining small and fragmented, 'repeatedly being formed and then collapsing again'²⁹. Head, in similar vein, has referred to the way framework knitters, working at home or in workshops, seemed to 'regard themselves as employees of a different industry to their fellows in other branches';³⁰ there was evidently little sense of solidarity or common purpose amongst them. Gurnham has argued similarly that the hosiery union in mid-Victorian Leicester consisted of several small 'craft unions', 'interested only in their own craft affairs'³¹. Wells has contended that this

situation undermined efforts to create a united front to employers and that it was largely responsible for the failure of the attempt to form a United Framework Knitters' Society in 1866.³² Finally, Lancaster has demonstrated how this differentiation was reinforced by the emergence and 'institutionalisation' of complex wage structures, peculiar to each branch of the hosiery trade, which became 'fixed and embodied' in the various wage agreements negotiated by the individual unions³³.

Interestingly, whilst it has proved impossible to discover any significant observations made by working-class spokesmen in the emergent footwear industry, research by Hogg has indicated that the boot and shoe workers' representative body, the Amalgamated Society of Cordwainers, was similarly weak³⁴. Hogg has argued that the union felt powerless to oppose the introduction of machinery, advising its members who could not obtain handwork to accept factory work instead. Disputes seem to have been highly localised, between particular employers and their operatives, overall consolidated action again proving to be problematic³⁵. Research by Head has drawn attention to the essentially dispersed outwork structure of the footwear industry — along similar lines to hosiery — and this offers a possible explanation for the union's inability to co-ordinate effective collective action³⁶.

Finally, in the Elastic-web Weavers' Union, which represented the other main body of industrial workers in mid-Victorian Leicester, and which had entertained a measure of success in co-ordinating its members in the strike of 1874, the union's Secretary, Mr. Abbott, admitted that a final compromise had had to be sought with the employers since many operatives had 'unofficially broken the ranks' and returned to work³⁷. As a consequence of the 'relative failure' of their action, Mr. Cockersole, another spokesman for the union, considered that the union was 'shattered'³⁸. Evidently, then, the union representing the operatives of the factory-centred elastic-web industry also encountered problems in consolidating collective worker action against employers.

From the evidence given here, therefore, the representative bodies of Leicester's three main groups of industrial workers seemed to have struggled in the mid-Victorian period. Nevertheless, despite the failure of the hosiery union to mobilise a sustained collective initiative over the frame rent issue, the matter quite clearly remained a constant source of acrimony between masters and men, as working-class evidence to the Commissions which investigated the problem in 1844-5, 1854-5 and 1871 indicates. Asked by the Truck Commission in 1871 whether the complaint about frame rents was 'general', a framework knitter, William Riddington, accordingly replied that it was the 'general cry'³⁹. Daniel Merrick, a leading working-class spokesman giving evidence to the same Commission, agreed, adding that the problem of frame rents was made acute by the continual short-time working in the industry: how, in a good year, there would be no more than eight months work, with less than six months in a 'bad one'⁴⁰.

T.P. Bailey, a leading figure in the 'Hose, Shirt and Drawer Union', presiding over an 'enthusiastic gathering' of framework knitters in the Gladstone Hall in March 1871, made an important assertion, similar to Bindley's, regarding the adverse effects of the outwork system on operatives' behaviour⁴¹. He contended that so long as the frame rents and charges were 'legal deductions', then workers in the industry would be 'prevented from becoming respectable members of society'. The argument was supported at the meeting by a Mr. James Merrick, who went on to describe the 'deathly looks and miserable habitations' of framework knitters, attributing their acute poverty to the 'viciousness' of the system under which they worked⁴². Other speakers at the meeting were likewise reported as referring to the generally 'demoralising' effects of the frame rent system.⁴³

Certain important conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. Firstly, Bindley, and

those spokesmen writing in the 1870's described an industrial organisation which bore much resemblance to that portrayed by working-class commentators in the 1840s and 1850s: an organisation based on outwork methods of production and subject to frame rents and ancillary charges as well as to severe seasonal fluctuations. Secondly, working-class spokesmen like Bindley characterized the operatives as responsible, hard-working, independent men, bearing the full weight of the adverse effects of this industrial system at the hands of morally indifferent masters. The frame rent was singled out as the major grievance of this mode of employment, particularly in view of the acute underemployment in the hosiery industry. It was the frame rent which the operatives wished to see removed yet felt powerless to achieve by themselves. Hence, the positive image of the operatives, as presented by working-class leaders, in contrast with their negative view of the employers, doubtless served as a useful ideological device for persuading the Royal Commissions, through which Parliamentary abolition of frame rent was ultimately sought, of the soundness of their cause. This positive image of the men was enhanced by the view promoted by Bindley and others that the frame renting system tended to demoralise the operatives: it made it difficult for them to become respectable; it was the cause of their irregular working, their indolence, their poverty, even their drinking. Yet, at the same time, it was a mode of employment which spokesmen like Bindley felt guaranteed the men's independence, and this they evidently appeared reluctant to lose.

One of the fundamental points raised by Bindley and others was the association between work, poverty and working-class behaviour such as drinking. The theme was developed by Tom Barclay, who, in his autobiography, described in vivid detail, his own, personal experience of a particular type of culture generated by poverty⁴⁴. This section will focus on certain major aspects of that culture as Barclay and others perceived them.

Barclay begins by recounting the environmental poverty of his family endured in mid-Victorian Leicester. He refers to the 'one-doored', 'one chamber-windowed', two roomed, rented 'crib' in which they lived — eighteen feet square, with no carpets, no mats, no wall-paper; a 'typical slum' in a 'typical court'. The door and window were seldom opened and the 'muck hole' and the 'unflushed privies' were less than six feet away. He recalls the 'dimness and squalor and foul smells', the 'horror' of the bugs, lice and black-beetles⁴⁵.

Intra-urban migration was a constant feature of Barclay's childhood and adolescence, and he vividly recollects the many moves his family made from one slum to another in the heart of what he considered to be one of the most deprived areas in mid-Victorian Leicester — around Burley's Lane, Abbey Street and Woodboy Street. He recounts how the family continually suffered sharing the one bedroom and how the children — 'poor, cooped-up, vermin infested brats' — were left to fend for themselves whilst their parents went out to work⁴⁶. Barclay refers to the basic problem of trying to be clean and decent in a house on 'whose only floor' were 'spilled out' bags of 'dusty rags and putrescent bones'⁴⁷ — his father was a rag-and-bone man. He recalls how his mother had neither the time nor means to 'boil our rags of shirts and sheets' — there was no 'dolly-tub' or 'dolly-pegs' to wash clothes properly⁴⁸. Hunger was also a constant problem and Barclay highlights the point quite dramatically by describing how he often put his tongue into the baby's mouth, 'to be sucked in lieu of 'titty', to stop her cries'⁴⁹.

Turning his attention to the cultural behaviour of the poor amongst whom he grew up, Barclay refers to the central role played by drink. He describes his earliest experiences of drinking in the 1860s, recalling the attraction that drink possessed, despite the perpetual drunkenness of his own father. Drinking — and smoking too — was considered to be 'manly':

No danger; everybody drinks, and talks about drink, and looks for drink, and boasts

about drink⁵⁰.

For Barclay, drink was an integral part of growing up, interdependent with music, dancing and courtship. Children were evidently socialised into drinking as a fundamental part of normative behaviour and Barclay describes how he and other children would accompany their parents to the 'Free and Easy' and hear 'Old Mother Gum' sung, and 'It's Naughty, but Nice'⁵¹. Drinking, however, was essentially a masculine pursuit, undertaken often in conjunction with other activities: referring to a typical male 'night out', Barclay describes the men as 'lapped in the Elysium of ale and skittles and cards'⁵². Drinking is presented by Barclay as an understandable, even necessary, antidote to the horrors of everyday life — working men 'drowning their sorrows' in order to forget their hard labour, their insecurities and their poverty⁵³. Hence, referring to his father's excessive drinking, Barclay asked, somewhat fatalistically:

What else could you do but drink, when you had the chance⁵⁴?

Daniel Merrick, too, sympathised with the heavy drinking of his fellow class members, as a means of forgetting the wretched conditions under which they worked and lived⁵⁵. He made an interesting, explicit connection between male drinking and early marriage. He narrates how 'William', as an adolescent, drank and courted in public houses⁵⁶. He proposed marriage when he was drunk and spent most of his wedding day inebriated. His drunken behaviour continued throughout his early married life:

The attractions of the tap-room are stronger than home pleasures to him⁵⁷.

As far as Merrick was concerned, William was too young to cope with the responsibility of marriage, and heavy drinking acted as an antidote to the pressures. William's problems worsened when a child was born and the financial insecurities of short-time working ensued: he would be employed for a maximum of eight months a year and the rest of the time there would be nothing to do, other than walk the streets, together with other unemployed men, all of them dressed in 'ragged clothing'. William's response — and that of the others too — was to drink heavily. Merrick recounts how William's heavy drinking persisted following his wife's death, when the responsibility of having to look after his children, by himself, proved too much to bear. His children had to 'drag him out' of the public house every night, drunk. The children lived a wretched existence, in squalor, misery, and perpetually hungry. Eventually, Merrick concludes, drink killed William — he was found drowned in a pool of water, whilst his children sat waiting at home for his return⁵⁸. Children were socialised into such a world — both Barclay and Merrick make the point clear — and thus the pattern of a hard and rough way of life was perpetuated. It was a way of life firmly rooted in poverty and insecurity and one which drink made bearable.

Barclay explicitly refers to the way poverty hampered the pursuit of rational recreations of any description. He recalls how there were no toys, 'picture books' or pets for him to enjoy as a child. He even associated his lack of inclination to 'enjoy fresh air' with his environmental poverty⁵⁹. Fighting, however, according to Barclay, was a predominant pastime amongst the poor, and he recalls how he personally encountered many racist attacks as a member of Leicester's Irish community. He vividly recollects how he would be greeted by hostile 'Sassenachs':

Hurroo Mick! Ye Awrish Paddywack. Arrah, bad luck to the ships that brought ye over⁶⁰.

Barclay goes on to describe how the verbal abuse usually turned into physical violence, both youngsters and adults being involved. Fighting was not confined to racist attacks, however, and Barclay relates how generally, in working-class areas, 'street fought street, district district', and without the slightest cause, he hastens to add⁶¹. Fighting was evidently valued for its own sake, as a legitimate form of recreational activity. In Barclay's opinion,

there was a great deal of admiration shown by the poor towards the notable bare-fist fighters of the day and he recalls the particular excitement shown in his neighbourhood over the 'great fight' between Sayers and Heenan⁶².

Merrick also made reference to the importance fighting played in working-class life, how it was 'manly' and how a youth who refused to fight would be labelled a 'dunghill bird'⁶³. Merrick presents an interesting portrayal of the roughest lads in the poor districts, recalling the practice of having nicknames — 'Jim Crow', 'Dick Turpin', 'Chunkum' being some examples⁶⁴. Reputation accompanied nickname — 'Jim Crow' was typical: he enjoyed causing disturbances and using coarse language. Such boys were 'vicious' and their behaviour 'contaminating'. They would eventually become involved in criminal activity, for which there was evidently much admiration amongst the poor. Barclay looked upon the 'unruly' and 'disobedient' behaviour of rough youths as a natural part of growing up:

Isn't it natural for youth to be venturesome and to seek adventure⁶⁵?

For Barclay, precociousness, prurience, shamelessness, even nastiness, together with 'smartness' and forwardness were part and parcel of the process of traditional working-class socialisation⁶⁶.

Leaving home early was, for Barclay, also part of this process. He demonstrates how it was encouraged as a consequence of being sent out to work at an early age⁶⁷. He recalls his first job, how, as a young child, he went to work in 'all weathers' in order to supplement the family income. He describes how he was persistently scolded by his employer, often quite violently, yet he worked seventy hours a week for 1/6d, 'turning the wheel at Browett's rope-walk'. He went on to undertake a variety of unskilled jobs: as a yarn winder for cardigan-jacket weavers in Curzon Street, working till ten every evening; later, as a boot finisher's sweater, an osier-rod peeler and as a rotary hand's helper in the hosiery trade — all hard work, long hours and poorly paid⁶⁸.

For Barclay, poverty, and the necessity of sending children out to work at an early age, made formal education an impractical, unlikely event. He draws attention to the general level of indifference demonstrated by the poor towards formal schooling and, recounting his own experiences at a local Sunday school for boys and girls, he recalls how 'courting' was considered far more important than the education they received — the 'drama' of sex was 'rehearsed'⁶⁹. Barclay also relates how reading the 'cheap trash' that was available, particularly the 'exciting', daring deeds of heroes like 'Spring-heeled Jack, The Terror of London', was preferable to more serious literature, for those poor who could read⁷⁰.

Like Barclay, Thomas Cooper, writing in the 1840s, had considered working-class indifference to education to be largely a function of poverty. He made the point explicit when referring to a group of some hungry stockingers who had stated to him:

What the hell do we care about reading, if we can get nought to eat⁷¹.

Daniel Merrick similarly referred to the 'promising abilities' of many working-class children which could not be developed through proper schooling because parents could not afford to let their children attend school⁷².

Another feature of the way of life of the poor, to which Barclay drew attention, was their indifference to religious worship. He recalls how religious sentiment was easily interrupted by the pursuit of more present-time oriented gratifications:

We are no christians tonight, we, but Bacchanals⁷³.

Local working-class evidence given to the Royal Commission in 1844-5 had referred to poverty as a major reason for the 'almost total disregard' of church attendance by working-class people. Thomas Revil, for instance, noted how he felt 'ashamed' to go to church — he was 'so forced down'⁷⁴. A more critical and angry tone is discernible in the opinion of one Leicester stockinger who, in the 1840s, had expressed little regard for religion on the

grounds that the perpetuation of poverty and misery amongst the working classes had to be seen as incontrovertible proof of the non-existence of a god:

Talk no more about thy Goddle Mighty! There isn't one. If there was one, He wouldn't let us suffer as we do⁷⁵.

The association between poverty and religious alienation was still being made by working-class commentators in March 1867, when a large meeting of 'ordinary people' was convened in order to discuss the issue of non-attendance at religious worship. The observations of Mr. Warner, a framework knitter, and Mr. Lythall, an elastic-web weaver, are particularly important⁷⁶. Mr. Warner asked how poorly clothed working people could 'approach the temple of God', when they saw the 'silken line drawn', the 'crimson cushion and the silks and satins' which made it appear more like a 'theatre' than a 'sanctuary for the worship of God'. He referred to the increasing consciousness of poverty and the accompanying sense of shame which overcame the poor as they entered such places. Mr. Lythall went further and asserted that church ministers were not really interested in the lower classes in any event, since they 'would pass the doors' of the poor in order to visit the wealthy people, 'where the wine was brought out'. The loud cheers of support given to both spokesmen by the working-class assembly perhaps reflect the degree to which their views were shared by many of their fellow class members⁷⁷. Interestingly, the sense of inferiority felt by the poor, to which both Warner and Lythall implicitly drew attention, was also noted by Tom Barclay in his assertion that:

The mere working-class man must be precise and faultless in speech and writing or he's turned down by everybody who is anybody as an uneducated ignoramus⁷⁸.

An indifference towards concerted political activity was another facet of the culture of the poor as Barclay described it⁷⁹. It implied a fatalistic view of life: that life was how it was and very little could be done to change it. Barclay noted how luck, superstition and the momentary thrill were far more important to the poor than any consolidated class action aimed at social amelioration. Other working-class observations seem to support Barclay's perception. George Wray, for instance, a local Chartist leader, had written to the *Northern Star* in 1849 concerning the persistent indifference shown by the Leicester working classes towards Chartist political ambitions:

There are hundreds of young men in Leicester who pretend to be Chartists...but as soon as they got employment, they totaly forgot their political duties⁸⁰.

Henry Green, another Chartist leader locally, used the term 'mushroom Chartists' to refer to the great number of apathetic supporters who joined the movement only when their social and economic situation was acutely desperate and who left as soon as it slightly improved⁸¹.

Working-class indifference also appears to have undermined the progress of the Owenite Socialists in Leicester. Whilst very little can be discovered about the group, press reports indicate that a George Fleming had attempted to organise workers into a 'Social Institution' in order to promote Owenite principles⁸²; Robert Owen evidently gave several lectures and attended open discussion classes in the Institution. Yet Thomas Cooper noted how the meetings were not well-attended, so much so that the formal organisation soon fell into decay⁸³. Harrison has concluded that 'Owenite co-operation' failed to capture the imagination of more than a 'handful of thoughtful artisans'⁸⁴.

In addition, Thomas Winters and Robert Bindley had both drawn attention to the fatalistic sense of powerlessness which the Leicester framework knitters felt over the issue of frame rents throughout the period⁸⁵. This feeling of powerlessness was doubtless an important factor in explaining the somewhat chequered career of the anti-frame rent movement and the implicit failure of the hosiery union to sustain a collective initiative to

enforce the abolition of frame rents in mid-Victorian Leicester⁸⁶.

Finally, evidence drawn from press reports demonstrates the political indifference of the lower classes towards the issue of parliamentary reform: Reform Association meetings, addressed by working-class spokesmen like Markham and Merrick, and whose objective was to secure the vote for the working man, appear to have had very little support from the lower classes; one spokesman explicitly referred to the 'apathy' shown by the working classes generally towards the movement and its aims⁸⁷.

Nevertheless, on the positive side, the sense of common humanity amongst the poor was ever apparent: both Barclay and Merrick drew attention continually to the acts of common kindness displayed even amongst the most wretched of the lower classes. Merrick, for instance, asserts:

The poor, out of their limited means, often show more practical sympathy to their poor neighbours than those who possess great riches⁸⁸.

Even 'Bill Crabtree', Merrick points out, with his fatalistic attachment to drink as a panacea for all worldly woes, could demonstrate a caring, human manner, regretful of his inconsiderate and intemperate behaviour⁸⁹.

Women, particularly, played a crucial role in the preservation of this common humanity amongst the poor, as both Barclay and Merrick demonstrate. Unlike their drunken menfolk, women are portrayed by Barclay as strong characters, responsible for a family's survival from one week to the next. Referring to his own mother, he recounts how she would worry and scheme in order to pay the next week's 'shop' and rent⁹⁰. Credit was an essential part of the survival plan and Barclay noted how his mother would have to pay the credit received from the grocer's shop at the corner each Saturday, otherwise no further credit would be given and they would go hungry 'all next week'⁹¹. Barclay describes his mother as a self-sacrificing, caring woman who 'did all that was possible' for her family and neighbours; even 'poverty was accepted' by her 'with the patience of Job'⁹².

A similar view is presented by Daniel Merrick. William's mother, for instance, is described as a 'caring' woman with 'cheering words' and a 'gentle touch', always pleased to do her utmost for family and neighbours. She was never complaining but always hopeful, using whatever meagre means she possessed to their best effect⁹³. Referring to the wife of Bill Crabtree, a drunken Leicester stockinger, Merrick portrays, in vivid detail, the lengths to which a desperate mother might have to go in order to look after her family⁹⁴. Her husband's habitual drunkenness persistently deprived her of the means to feed and clothe her children properly and it was only by taking money out of his pockets, whilst he was in a drunken stupor, that she was able to pay off the account at the corner shop; and even then, the children had little more than a small loaf and a 'pennyworth of milk' for their Sunday meal. Merrick also highlights the mother's strength of character in his description of the confrontation between her and her husband following one of his drinking bouts: Crabtree came downstairs, looking 'very pitiable', red-eyed and ill-tempered, urgently in need of a 'hair of the dog', a 'reviver'; Crabtree, however, was met with such a stern look on his wife's face that he feared asking her for the money lest she 'reprove' him severely.

Pawning formed a crucial part of the survival strategy adopted by poor wives, as both Barclay and Merrick point out. Merrick gives a particularly interesting illustration of this with his reference to the advice given by William's mother to her newly-wed daughter-in-law, who was somewhat troubled by her husband's persistent drunkenness and perplexed over what to do to make ends meet. William's mother advised his wife in a manner which indicated more than a hint of experience:

Oh, you'll hev to get used to that, I've 'ad a good share o trouble in my time. I tell yer what yo' mun do, tek yer frock to pawn an' if that ain't enough yer must get

summat else⁹⁵.

Merrick concludes the episode by narrating how William's wife did not like the idea of 'pledging', but her hand was forced, and henceforth, she resolved to pawn accordingly. Pawning clearly epitomised the hand to mouth existence of the poor; in essential respects, therefore, it was symptomatic of a strong present-time orientation.

Certain characteristics of the life-style of Leicester's mid-Victorian poor, drawn from the observations of local working-class spokesmen like Tom Barclay, have been considered in this section. Feelings of resignation, fatalism, inferiority and powerlessness are discernible. Lack of effective participation in rational recreation, education, religion and political activity, a preference for thrills and excitement, epitomized by drinking and fighting, and a strong present-time orientation, are also evident. At the same time, the common humanity displayed by the poor and the positive role played in the community by wives and mothers have also been noted.

These characteristics bear a certain resemblance to some of the traits identified by proponents of the culture of poverty thesis such as Lewis⁹⁶. For Lewis, the culture of poverty represents a response by the poor to their socio-economic position. Its characteristics are 'guides to action' which are 'internalised' by the poor and transmitted from one generation to the next. As part of this socialisation process, argues Lewis, the poor become fatalistically resigned to their situation, and, consequently, unable to take full advantage of those changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime. Hence, the culture of poverty is perpetuated as an accepted way of life amongst the poor. The tenor of Lewis' argument finds expression in Tom Barclay's autobiography, and in one particularly revealing paragraph Barclay indicates how the life-style, into which he and other poor children were socialised in mid-Victorian Leicester, was accepted quite passively:

We had no other life, no other sensations and feelings. This was life, and we knew no other to contrast it with⁹⁷.

This paper has aimed at presenting a range of working-class perceptions of, and attitudes towards, aspects of working-class life, though focusing on three main sources. All three major commentators drew attention to the adverse effects of poverty on working-class behaviour. For Bindley, the mode of employment in the hosiery industry, with its iniquitous frame renting system and chronic underemployment, kept the operatives in a perpetual state of poverty and rendered it difficult for them to become respectable citizens; it was regarded as the cause of the workers' indolence and drinking. Anxious to persuade the Royal Commissions investigating abuses in the hosiery trade in the period, of the soundness of their complaints, working-class leaders like Bindley fostered an image of the operatives as fundamentally responsible, hard-working, independent men, bearing the full brunt of the injurious aspects of their industry at the hands of uncaring, unscrupulous employers.

For Barclay, the experience of poverty was associated with a particular type of culture, central to which was the search for thrills and excitement, epitomized by drinking and fighting, lack of effective participation in rational recreation, education, religion and political activity, and, in which, feelings of resignation, fatalism, inferiority and powerlessness, together with a strong present-time orientation, predominated. This culture of poverty represented, in Barclay's view, a natural response by the poor to their socio-economic situation; drinking, therefore, was presented as an understandable, even necessary, antidote to the hardships of everyday existence. According to Barclay, children were socialised into this culture and it consequently became passively accepted as a way of life, from which it was difficult to escape.

Merrick, too, was sympathetically aware of the way poverty could break the spirits of the workers and deprive them of moral energy. He, also, therefore, could make excuses for working-class behaviour like drinking, regarding it as a function of poverty. However, whilst Bindley and Barclay had drawn attention to a fatalistic view of life held by the lower classes — Bindley noted how hosiery operatives felt powerless to achieve the abolition of frame rents by themselves, and Barclay referred to the way the poor generally seemed resigned to their lot and unable to improve it — Merrick presented a more positive and optimistic outlook. Regarding poverty as only the ‘cause of half the ills that flesh is heir to’⁹⁸, Merrick asserted that it was both possible for, and imperative that, the working classes improve their situation. Poverty itself, Merrick contended, could serve as an impetus for moral strength and determination, by means of which social improvement could be realised. His critical view of working-class life accordingly differentiated between those who attempted to lead improved lives and those who did not; the latter he criticised for their complicity in the perpetuation of their deprivation.

Improvement, for working-class reformers like Merrick, necessitated sobriety, thrift, industriousness, honesty, religious virtue, education and, most importantly, collective moral strength and self-help. This collectivist ideal aimed at the social advance of the working class as a whole, and was geared ultimately towards a fundamental restructuring of society along more egalitarian lines. Respectability, accordingly, was associated with a strong commitment to working-class independence, dignity and deference to no one, implying a certain resentment of middle-class patronage and interference.

Notes

1. R. Bindley, *The History of the Struggle for the Abolition of Frame Rents and Charges*, (Leicester, 1875). Bindley gave evidence to the 1871 Truck Commission, which, *inter alia*, investigated the issue of frame rents. His evidence is contained in this pamphlet
2. T. Barclay, *Memoirs and Medleys: The Autobiography of a Bottle-Washer*, (Leicester, 1934)
3. W.G. Jones, a framework knitter himself, gives a summary of Merrick’s life in his *Leicester Stockingers, 1680-1890*, (Leicester, 1890)
4. D. Merrick, *The Warp of Life*, (Leicester, 1876)
5. See chapter one of my thesis, footnote thirteen, for a brief description of the charges involved [M.Phil. Leicester, 1988]
6. R. Bindley, *op.cit.*, pp.3, 14-16, 22
7. *Ibid.*, pp.18-20. Bindley had worked for Odams as a framework knitter
8. Riddington’s evidence is cited in Bindley, *Ibid.*, pp.23-5
9. *Ibid.*, p.21
10. *Ibid.*, p.15
11. *Ibid.*, p.21
12. *Ibid.*, pp.21, 413
13. *Ibid.*, p.3
14. *Ibid.*
15. T. Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1872) pp.140-2
16. *R.C.F.K.*, 1845, q.2525
17. *Ibid.*, q.2524
18. *Ibid.*, q.2128
19. *Ibid.*, q.2135
20. *Ibid.*, q.1499
21. *Ibid.*, q.1289
22. *Ibid.*, q.1825
23. *R.S.W.*, 1855, q.4840
24. *Ibid.*, qq.1693, 1719
25. *Leicester Journal (henceforth L.J.)*, 31.7.1846
26. *Ibid.*, 7.8.1846
27. Cited in R. Gurnham, *A History of the Trade Union Movement in the Hosiery and Knitwear Industry*,

- 1776-1976, (Leicester, 1976), p.30. The anti-frame rent movement was overtly significant in petitioning Parliament to abolish frame rents in 1844, 1854 and 1871, when Royal Commissions were appointed to investigate the issue. In between these years, the movement appears to have been particularly quiet, however
28. The Hosiery Manufacture Act (Wages) of 1874 dealt with the abolition of frame rents. Cited in *Victoria County History (V.C.H.), Leicestershire* volume 3, p.16
 29. A. Temple Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, (Leicester, 1954), p.381
 30. P. Head, 'Industrial Organisation in Leicester', Leicester University Ph.D., 1960, p.353
 31. R. Gurnham, *op.cit.*, p.26
 32. F.A. Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry: Its History and Organisation*, (Newton Abbot, 1972), p.169
 33. W. Lancaster, 'Radicalism to Socialism: the Leicester Working Class', Leicester University Ph.D., 1982, pp.48-9
 34. V.W. Hogg, 'Footwear Manufacture in Leicester', *V.C.H. op.cit.*, volume 4, pp.321-2
 35. *Ibid.* See the report of the Leicester Shoemakers' meeting in *Leicester Chronicle*, (henceforth *L.C.*), in 16.4.1859, which considered the possibility of resisting the introduction of machinery; also, the scant details of the strike of some footwear operatives reported in *L.C.*, 10.5.1873
 36. P. Head, *op.cit.*, has described an industrial organisation very similar to the hosiery trade
 37. Reported in *L.ŷ.* 12.9.1874
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. Cited in R. Bindley, *op.cit.*, pp.23-5
 40. *Ibid.*, pp.25-8
 41. *Ibid.*, p.41
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. The notion of a 'culture of poverty' was introduced in the late 1950s by Oscar Lewis, an American anthropologist, based on his research on the urban poor in Mexico and Puerto Rico: O. Lewis, *Five Families*, (New York, 1959); *The Children of Sanchez*, (New York, 1961); *La Vida*, (New York, 1966)
 45. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, p.3
 46. *Ibid.*, pp.3-4, 9
 47. *Ibid.*, p.7
 48. *Ibid.*, p.10
 49. *Ibid.*, pp.9-10
 50. *Ibid.*, p.25
 51. *Ibid.*, p.17
 52. *Ibid.*, p.10
 53. *Ibid.*, pp.11, 56
 54. *Ibid.*, p.11
 55. D. Merrick, *op.cit.*, pp.15-18
 56. *Ibid.*, pp.24-9
 57. *Ibid.*, p.27
 58. *Ibid.*, pp.30-8
 59. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, pp.3, 19
 60. *Ibid.*, p.5
 61. *Ibid.*
 62. *Ibid.*, p.4
 63. D. Merrick, *op.cit.*, p.10
 64. *Ibid.*, pp.10-12
 65. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, p.16
 66. *Ibid.*, p.40
 67. *Ibid.*, p.38
 68. *Ibid.*, p.25
 69. *Ibid.*, pp.22-3
 70. *Ibid.*, p.20
 71. T. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.172
 72. D. Merrick, *op.cit.*, p.6
 73. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, p.10
 74. R.C.F.K., 1845, qq.718-20. Also the evidence of J. Squire and E. Allen, qq.380-3, 555
 75. Cited in T. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.173
 76. Reported in the *L.C.*, 9.3.1867

77. *Ibid.*
78. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, p.35
79. *Ibid.*, pp.59, 62
80. *The Northern Star*, 3.3.1849
81. *Ibid.*, 11.11.1848
82. *The Leicestershire Mercury*, 18.4.1840
83. T. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.173
84. J.F.C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester', in A. Briggs (ed.) *Chartist Studies*, (London, 1959), p.127
85. See the discussion of this in the previous section of this article
86. *Ibid.*
87. *L.C.*, 17.3.1860; also *L.ȝ.*, 9.12.1859. Cf; also, *L.C.*, 18.2.1865 and 24.3.1866.
88. D. Merrick, *op.cit.*, p.43
89. *Ibid.*, pp.15-17
90. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, p.10
91. *Ibid.*
92. *Ibid.*, p.24
93. D. Merrick, *op.cit.*, pp.8-9
94. *Ibid.*, pp.16-18
95. *Ibid.*, p.30
96. O. Lewis, *op.cit.* For Lewis, the concept of the culture of poverty has relevance and application to societies in the developing stages of industrialisation. See also: W.B. Miller, 'Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency', in M.E. Wolfgang, L. Savitz and N. Johnston (eds.), *The Sociology of Crime and Delinquency*, New York, 1962; W.B. Miller, 'The Elimination of the American Lower Class as National Policy: a Critique of the Ideology of the Poverty Movement of the 1960s', in D.P. Moynihan (ed.), *On Understanding Poverty*, New York, 1968. Cf. also M. Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1963.
97. T. Barclay, *op.cit.*, p.9
98. D. Merrick, *The Warp of Life, op.cit.* p.6