

Working-Class Respectability in Leicester c.1845-80

by Barry Haynes

This paper examines a range of local working-class perceptions and attitudes in order to determine the extent to which an ethic of respectability was a formative influence on the development of working-class consciousness and ideology in Leicester in the period c. 1845 to 1880. The conclusion is reached that respectability was an increasingly important element in working-class thought in Leicester in the period. At the same time it was an ethic with a distinctively working-class formulation, essentially collectivistic in orientation and committed to working-class independence and deferring to no one. The paper also raises important questions for future investigations.

This paper continues and develops a theme raised in the conclusion to an article published in the 1989 volume of *Transactions*.¹ It concerns the issue of working-class respectability. Contemporary historians have argued that the period 1845-80 witnessed an increasing acceptance by the English working class of a middle-class ethic of respectability, with its emphasis on the values of individualism, sobriety, industry, diligence, thrift, education and religion.² Debate has been waged over the actual nature of working-class respectability, and the extent to which it conformed to the middle-class model.³ The aim of this paper is to analyse a range of local working-class perceptions and attitudes, drawn from the period, and which focused on the issue of respectability, in order to determine both its essential characteristics and its importance as an ideological force shaping working-class consciousness in Leicester between 1845-80.

It seems clear that certain local working-class spokesmen felt a distinct sense of frustration with the behaviour and attitudes of many of their fellow class members in the period. One particularly critical view of local working-class life was presented by Daniel Merrick, in his moral narrative, *The Warp of Life*.⁴ Merrick wrote the book in 1876, at a time when he was arguably the leading working-class spokesman in Leicester.⁵ At the heart of the book is Merrick's differentiation between morally respectable and immorally disreputable types of behaviour. He exemplifies the distinction with reference to two

1. J. B. Haynes, 'Working-class perceptions: aspects of the experience of working-class life in Victorian Leicester', *TLAHS*, 63 (1989), pp.71-84
2. See T. R. Tholfsen, *Working-class radicalism in mid-Victorian England*. London, 1976; C.O. Reid, 'Middle-class values and working-class culture in nineteenth-century Sheffield'. Sheffield University: unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1976; N. Kirk, *The growth of working-class reformism in mid-Victorian England*. London, 1985; F. M. L. Thompson, *The rise of respectable society*. London: Fontana, 1988
3. See G. Crossick, 'The labour aristocracy and its values: a study of mid-Victorian Kentish London', *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1976), pp. 301-28; J. F. C. Harrison, *The common people*. London: Fontana, 1984
4. D. Merrick, *The warp of life*. Leicester: C. Merrick, 1876
5. For a short biography of Merrick, see Haynes 1989, as n.1, p.71

fictional, stereotypical hosiery operatives, Samuel Wright and Bill Crabtree.⁶ Wright is described as a knowledge-seeking Methodist, an industrious, thrifty man, regularly at work on Monday mornings when the workshop opened. He was contented, as was his hard-working wife; she was typical of those married women, Merrick states, whose homes were 'pictures of happiness', and whose children were well cared for. Crabtree, on the other hand, lived in a 'house not a home', and his wife preferred him out, for when he was in, it was like 'hell upon earth'. He drank heavily and was violent, and his wife had to 'drag' him out of public houses before the money was all spent, or steal from him while he was asleep in a drunken stupor. The children were ill-fed, ill-clothed and uneducated. Crabtree, Merrick asserts, was typical of the 'ignorant', disreputable members of his class, amongst whom he also included the dog-fanciers, prize-fighters, runners and gamblers. The moral character of such people, for Merrick, was at a standstill; they added to their misery and deprivation through lack of moral fibre. Wright, on the other hand, was typical of the intelligent, respectable members of his class: those who sought real social and moral improvement.

For Merrick, then, it was possible for the lower classes to become moral and respectable, to be self-improving and to lead reformed lives. He drew attention to the many working-class people who 'have passed through all the various grades of wretchedness and vice and who are now honest and industrious, having put aside the sin which easily beset them'.⁷ In order to check those 'evils which men and women have the power to remove', and hence, to lead respectable lives, Merrick proclaims that certain moral imperatives had to be learnt and accordingly applied to everyday existence. Sobriety and the virtues of honesty, thrift, industriousness and perseverance were held to be indispensable to both happiness and improvement. In addition, Merrick affirms the necessity of being 'guided by God's spirit and truth', since this 'adds grace and dignity to manhood and brightens the darkest prospect'.⁸ The pursuit of knowledge was also deemed to be of paramount importance by Merrick. Interestingly, at a meeting of working men in the Town Hall in December 1870, prior to the School Board elections, at which he was a candidate, Merrick announced his whole-hearted support for compulsory attendance.⁹ He acknowledged the hardship which the measure might cause the working class but he argued that it would be light compared to the advantages that would accrue to their children.

Finally, Merrick declares a firm belief in the moral virtue of self-help. The point is made explicit in his 'Presidential Address' to the Trades Union Congress held in Leicester in 1877, with the assertion that men and women are 'morally the healthiest and strongest' when left to 'stand upon their own feet', whilst those who 'lean upon others are feeble and sickly'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he acknowledges elsewhere that self-help was not an easy accomplishment, particularly on account of the 'baneful effects' of poverty.¹¹ He recognised that poverty could break the spirits of the workers, depriving them of 'moral energy, courage and independence', undermining their 'feelings of manliness and self-respect'. At the same time, however, he asserts that poverty could serve the working man

6. Merrick 1876, as n.4, pp.14-18, 23, 34

7. Merrick 1876, as n.4, p.17

8. Merrick 1876, as n.4, pp.3, 44

9. *Leicester Chronicle* [hereafter *LC*], 31 December 1870

10. D. Merrick, 'Presidential address' to the Trades Union Congress in Leicester, *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 18 September 1877.

11. Cited in J. T. Stephen, *Social redemption or the fifty years' story of the Leicester Co-operative Society Limited 1860-1910*, p.115. Leicester: Cooperative Printing Society, 1911

in a more positive way, as an impetus for social action. 'Poverty made us think and we usually expressed our thoughts in the workshops ... as we sat by the fire having our tea'.¹² What emerged from their discussions, as far as Merrick was concerned, was an affirmation of the moral responsibility working men had to help one another.

The active and responsible duties of life freely exercised and carried out by us, makes us acquainted with social problems and prepares us for greater work and effort for ourselves and on behalf of others.¹³

For Merrick, then, moral strength was ultimately achieved through working-class cooperation and collective action. The underlying assumption was that working men were better able to effect improvements when working together than when acting individually and separately. Merrick asserts, 'By combination we could very materially improve our social position'.¹⁴ In Merrick's view, there was clearly no contradiction between self-help and working-class cooperation, for self-help was not associated by him with an individualism *per se*, that is, with Smilesian notions of getting on in the world. Rather, self-help assumed a collective nature and as such was aimed at the improvement of the working class as a whole. Merrick consequently regarded the institutional development of working-class collective self-help as of paramount importance. He supported the growth of working-class mutual improvement societies and friendly benefit clubs, and urged the expansion of the local cooperative movement, the aim of which, as far as he was concerned, was not to make profits, but to 'sell the essentials of home consumption at the lowest possible prices'.¹⁵ Merrick also advocated the growth of local trades unionism, regarding trades unions as 'good institutions' for working men, affording them protection against unscrupulous employers.¹⁶ He held that Arbitration Boards were the best means of settling industrial disputes and of ensuring better relations between employers and employees. At the same time, however, he did uphold the right of workers to picket and strike if this proved to be the only way of obtaining justice over pay and conditions. He consequently impelled working men to pressure for the revision of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1871.¹⁷

Whilst Merrick appeared to accept the inevitability of the laws of political economy, affirming that the principle of supply and demand had an 'important bearing' upon wages, it is clear that he ultimately espoused the creation of a more egalitarian structure of society.¹⁸ This involved not only the placing of all classes on an 'equal position before the law', but also the 'more equitable distribution of wealth'. He also firmly adhered to republican ideals and asserted that 'eventually the abolition of the monarchy would come'.¹⁹ For Merrick, then, it was imperative that working men cooperate to achieve fundamental change in the structure of society. He recognised the significance of political power to this goal and hence he stressed the need 'to have working men directly represented in the House of Commons by men of their own class'.²⁰ Working-class independence was clearly, in Merrick's view, of the utmost importance. He accordingly

12. Stephen, as n.11

13. Stephen, as n.11

14. Stephen, as n.11

15. Stephen, as n.11

16. Stephen, as n.11

17. *LC*, as n.9, 31 January 1874. Merrick had already taken a trades union deputation to the borough M.P.s on this subject in 1872: *LC*, 7 December 1872

18. *LC*, as n.9, 3 August 1872

19. *LC*, as n.18

20. *LC*, as n.18

identified with the Chartists, acknowledging the soundness of their 'universal feeling' that, so long as the working classes 'were kept in a state of political bondage, they would be simply the tools of the classes of society above them in social status'.²¹

Thus, whilst Merrick seemed to adopt many of the tenets of middle-class thinking, notably the ethic of respectability and the ideal of self-help, his world view also contained an admixture of extremely radical thought. Hence, respectability, for Merrick, was associated not simply with sobriety, thrift, industriousness and religious virtue: it also involved a strong commitment to working-class independence, dignity and deference to no one.²² At the same time, Merrick's ideal of self-help was essentially collectivist and aimed at the social improvement of the working class as a whole through united action. Merrick's ultimate aim was a fundamental restructuring of society along more egalitarian lines.

Merrick was not alone in recognising the need to improve the behaviour of working men. Working-class evidence to the *Royal Commission appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the Framework Knitters* in 1844-45, for instance, noted the moral indifference of hosiery operatives to their work and their preference for pursuing recreations such as drinking. William Jones, a framework-knitter, was particularly condemnatory with his assertion that 'both the glove hands and the stockings in Leicester have become very immoral indeed'.²³ He drew attention to the operatives' practice of spending part of the week in the public house, drinking, followed by arduous working the rest of the week, 'till they about kill themselves', in order to complete their orders.

Samuel Foxon, another framework-knitter, writing in the *Leicester Journal* in 1857, made a similar observation. He referred to the way conscientious workers were asked by reckless ones, 'What's the use of straining yourself to death from Monday morning till Saturday night?'²⁴ He criticised the irresponsible manner of the reckless for putting pleasure first and work second; they are described as 'meaning to have all the pleasure they can, as long as they are able'. Foxon relates how the thoughtless worker would 'skip off work' and play cards in the fields below the Willow Bridge; how, in the afternoon, he 'lounged about a bit', and how, at night, he went to the 'Tom and Jerry' and 'hed some ale and a pipe o' backer'. Foxon also drew attention to the ritual of heavy drinking on Saturdays and Sundays practised by the reckless, and to the adverse effect this had on their attitude to work; by Monday, concludes Foxon, the reckless would proclaim that they were in 'no yumer for work today'.

Recreations such as drinking were attacked not only for their association with irresponsible working attitudes and behaviour, however. Other spokesmen criticised such activity on the grounds that it generally undermined efforts aimed at working-class social improvement. Tom Barclay, for instance, lamented the way fellow members of his class seemed more 'absorbed by trivialities' than intent on bettering their lot in life.²⁵ Barclay highlights the point with reference to local Labour Clubs, arguing that these did 'precious little for the cause of labour'.²⁶ Yet the blame for this failure, according to Barclay, rested with the participants, not the founders: the former were evidently interested only in 'beer and skittles', whilst the latter had had 'high hopes' for something

21. Merrick 1876, as n.4, pp.18-19

22. Cf. Harrison 1984, as n.3, p.303

23. 'Report of the Commissioner appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the Framework Knitters', 1845. *Parliamentary Papers*, XIV, q.289

24. S. Foxon, 'Essay on Sunday amusements', *Leicester Journal* [hereafter *LJ*], 4 September 1857

25. T. Barclay, *Memoirs and medleys: the autobiography of a bottle-washer*, p.59. Leicester: Edgar Backus, 1934

26. Barclay, *Memoirs*, as n. 24, pp.62-3

better. An announcement in the *Leicester Chronicle* made by the Committee of the Leicester Working Men's Club in 1867 seems to indicate that Barclay's observation had more than a grain of truth in it.²⁷ Implying criticism of the way the men behaved, the Committee proclaimed that it 'would be glad to see the Monday and Saturday evenings conducted so as to lead to a more refined and elevated standard of morals'.²⁸ The overall aim of the Club's founders had been to promote mutual self-help, thrift and rational recreation. Newspapers and periodicals were provided and singing, music, French, contemplation and discussion classes were held; gambling and betting were prohibited. Drink was not provided initially but, as a consequence of the men's persistent demands, beer was made available both at lunch-time and in the evening.

Joseph Ward, a member of the local Independent Oddfellows, was particularly critical of the drinking that went on in local friendly societies. In a letter to the *Leicester Chronicle* in 1871, he drew attention to many cases of young men who had become confirmed drinkers as a result of their involvement with friendly society activity.²⁹ He also argued how those with provident habits were dissuaded from attending meetings on account of their disapproval of the drinking that occurred during them, drinking that often culminated in drunkenness. Ward maintained that the providential aspects of friendly society activity were continually being threatened by the 'social element', since the latter 'induces a man to spend a comparatively large sum, in order to save a trifle for his wife and family'.³⁰ So firmly did Ward and other members of his lodge believe that the use of drinking places as meeting rooms for friendly society activity was counter-productive to providence, that they moved to a drink-free environment. Ward asserted that membership and attendance had improved following the move, since, ultimately, Oddfellowship, he contended, attracted men as a result of its 'excellent record and absolute security', and not as a consequence of the allurements of drink.

Other working-class commentators advocated complete abstinence from drink in the period. Thomas Cooper had administered an early 'teetotal pledge' to several hundred local Chartists in the 1840s, and whilst he acknowledged that many soon relented, many evidently persevered.³¹ James Walton, a framework-knitter, who addressed a Temperance Society experience meeting in 1850, told of the beneficial effects that had resulted from his abstention: how his family had become contented and had a greater sense of purpose in life; how they were building up a decent home and generally living a more moral existence.³² Thomas Irving White, the leading spokesman of the Leicester Working Men's Temperance League, also affirmed the need for total abstinence on the grounds that it was essential for the moral and social improvement of the working class.³³

Not all working-class commentators, however, regarded total abstinence from drink as necessary. For these, drinking in moderation was quite acceptable. Tom Barclay, for instance, did not consider drink and improvement to be essentially mutually exclusive, when he recalled how his educational studies 'did not prevent me from having a few drinks of beer and whisky, and from singing in pubs and at "Free and Easies"', songs silly

27. *LC*, as n.9, 4 May 1867

28. *LC*, as n.27

29. *LC*, as n.9, 29 July 1871; cited in L. Perkins, 'Drink and temperance in Leicester 1830-70', pp.15-16. Victorian Studies, Leicester University: unpublished M.A. dissertation, 1986

30. *LC*, as n.29

31. T. Cooper, *The life of Thomas Cooper by himself*, p.165. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882

32. *LC*, as n.9, 29 July 1871

33. *Leicestershire Mercury*, 13 September 1851

and humorous'.³⁴ A similar view was put forward by another commentator, who contended that drinking did not undermine the providential aspects of friendly society activity.³⁵ He asserted that the social element, which traditionally involved drinking, was the main attraction of friendly societies, and that this complemented the providential side. 'The song and toast goes gaily round ... and business habits ... engrafted into the minds of young men, who probably would not have had any other opportunity'.³⁶ Three working-class spokesmen announced publicly that they were opposed to prohibition of Sunday drinking when the issue became the subject of an intense local debate in 1855.³⁷ Buckley asserted that Temperance accusations of Sunday drunkenness by working men were exaggerated: a 'libel on the peaceable and moral bearing' of the Leicester working classes. Bonner attacked Sunday closing on the grounds that it was a form of class legislation: the rich, he argued, would not be affected by the measure, since they could drink in their own homes. Markham, the former Chartist leader, affirmed his belief that moral suasion, rather than legal compulsion, was more suitable for a 'Liberal, nonconformist town like Leicester'.

Whilst spokesmen like Markham supported Sunday League proposals to provide rational recreations on Sunday, as counter-attractions to drinking and other considered frivolous amusements, other working men, as several prize essays written by them indicate, advocated a staunchly Sabbatarian view.³⁸ Samuel Foxon, for instance, criticised working-class indifference to sabbath-keeping, noting how, for many, 'It never matters where they go and what they do on Sundays; anywhere as comes next, hit or miss, luck's all!'³⁹ He acknowledged that poverty often prevented him from attending Sunday worship: his and his wife's decent clothing evidently 'went up the spout', pawned to make ends meet, and he felt they could not go in the 'garb' they had left. Nevertheless, he maintains, this did not prevent him from having a respectful regard for Sunday. 'I always stops in home all day. I read the tracts that the lady brings'.⁴⁰ The prize essays written by working-class Sabbatarians like Foxon recognised that the 'frivolous amusements and sensual pleasures' of the working class were a 'terrible waste of life'. The sentiment was shared by working-class Sunday Leaguers and by other spokesmen more generally concerned about the social improvement of their class in the period. Commentators like William Smeeton and Harry Davis, for instance, emphasised the importance of rational, 'wholesome' pastimes, such as the library, museum and education generally, for the amelioration of the working class.⁴¹ Interestingly, Smeeton argued the case for a shorter working week so that working men could take full advantage of such rational pursuits. He pointed out how 'excessive hours of labour' caused 'so great a strain upon the powers of the body', that the mind was unable to 'perform what may be required of it'; long working hours were accordingly adjudged to be inimical to improvement by Smeeton.

Tom Barclay also urged the working class to pursue rational recreations, particularly education. Recalling his own passion for 'everything written about anything', he points out his failure to understand 'how most people seemed to be indifferent; the disposition

34. Barclay 1934, as n.25, p.43

35. Anonymous, *LC*, as n.9, 29 July 1871

36. *LC*, as n.35

37. *LC*, as n.9, 24 February, 3 March, 10 March 1855

38. Cited in F.T. Mott, *Sunday duties*. Leicester: 1857

39. Foxon 1857, as n.24

40. Foxon 1857, as n.24

41. W. Smeeton and H. J. Davis, *The necessity of early closing to self-culture: two prize essays*. Leicester: 1855

to learn is absent in them'.⁴² Later, in a more critical tone, Barclay states, 'What I couldn't pardon was the contempt I found expressed for books and learning'.⁴³ For Barclay, learning was meant to 'better life', to 'increase and extend' it. George Robson, who enjoyed many 'naturalistic rambles' with Barclay in Charnwood Forest in the period, proclaimed his enthusiasm for education and healthy, outdoor, rational pursuits for the working man, in a poem entitled, *The Twentieth Walk-Out of the All Saints' Open Discussion Class*.⁴⁴ He recommended the study of nature as the 'cheapest and best way' for the working man to 'obtain real enjoyment and happiness'.

T. P. Bailey, the second working-class representative standing for election to the 1871 Leicester School Board, along with Merrick, was also a firm believer in the value of education for the working class. Addressing a meeting of working men at the Town Hall in December 1870, Bailey asserted that 'knowledge was power' and hence, the main reason for working-class powerlessness was their lack of education.⁴⁵ He, like Merrick, consequently announced his unequivocal support for compulsory, non-sectarian education. In a later address, to the Leicester School Board, Bailey drew attention to the plight of working people who could not afford school fees, even though they wanted their children to attend school.⁴⁶ He accordingly argued that the fees of such children be remitted from the rates.

A variety of working men, then, appear to have supported Merrick's call for the moral and social improvement of the working class. To what extent did working-class spokesmen share Merrick's view that this improvement was best achieved collectively? Harrison has argued that Owenite cooperation had 'failed to capture the imagination of more than a handful of thoughtful artisans' in Leicester prior to 1850.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the principle of working-class cooperation was kept alive, and indeed developed dramatically in the mid-Victorian era. George Buckby, an active working-class leader in the town in the 1850s, for instance, was a keen advocate of workers' cooperative production, essentially as a remedy for framework knitters' economic and social grievances.⁴⁸

Real local development of cooperative ideals, however, began in 1860 with the establishment of the Leicester Industrial Cooperative Society. A group of five elastic-web weavers, together with Mr J. Woodford, a glove worker, were instrumental in this achievement.⁴⁹ Each man 'put down threepence' to the credit of his 'share account', thereby forming a 'society on cooperative principles'. One of the weavers, Mr Norton, who had 'received more educational advantages' than the others, became the acknowledged leader of the group - its 'guide and philosopher'. Under his auspices, the Society's objectives were described as 'the social and intellectual advancement of its members and of all classes of working men'.⁵⁰ Mr S. Wilford, one of the early members, recalled how the 'good news' of the Society was spread amongst the working class.

42. Barclay 1934, as n.25, p.33

43. Barclay 1934, as n.25, p.56

44. G. Robson, *The twentieth walk-out of the All Saints' Open Discussion Class*. Leicester: 1870

45. *LC*, as n.9, 31 December 1870

46. *LJ*, as n.24, 23 June 1871

47. J. F. C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester', in *Chartist Studies*, ed. A. Briggs, p.127. London, 1959

48. *LC*, as n.9, 8 January 1848

49. Cited in Stephen 1911, as n.11, pp.24-7

50. Stephen 1911, as n.11, p.36

We went out two by two in various districts at night, and called at the homes of the workers where we could explain what we were doing to husband and wife, and extend a hearty welcome to them if they would join the movement.⁵¹

Pin-pointing one particularly important aspect of working-class collective self-help which operated through the Society, another leading figure in the movement, Mr Stock, recalled 'hundreds of most touching and pathetic incidents', when 'death, illness or sudden distress' had 'overtaken' members or their families and a 'little money' was urgently needed, and how 'no man or woman connected with the Society has ever been sent away empty'.⁵² The Society appears to have made a conscious effort to attract the poorer sections of the working class: the conditions of membership formulated in the 1860s, for instance, refer to the availability of an instalment facility for paying the minimum £2 share requirement.⁵³ Such a measure, it was felt, would 'suit the more humble class of working men'. Whilst the 1875 membership figure of about six thousand gives no indication as to occupational composition, J. Thompson Stephen, the Society's historian, writing in 1911, suggests that it encompassed a wide spectrum of working-class people, including both the better-off, skilled category of worker as well as the poorer, unskilled type.⁵⁴

In addition to these developments, George Newell, another working-class advocate of the cooperative principle, recounts the enthusiasm shown by a small association of stockings for a cooperative production venture they had started in 1867.⁵⁵ Profits evidently remained small and in 1875 the enterprise was taken over by the local hosiery operatives' union. A group of elastic-web weavers also appear to have been attracted to the idea of cooperative production, and whilst specific details of their undertaking are difficult to trace, it is evident that they inaugurated the Cooperative Manufacturing Society of Leicester, as a producers' association making webs for the local shoe trade in the late 1860s.⁵⁶

Working-class support for friendly society activity was also much in evidence in the period: by 1874 the Ancient Order of Foresters reported having thirty-nine courts and nearly three thousand members; the Nottingham Oddfellows, fourteen lodges and about a thousand members; the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows, nearly four thousand members; and the Grand United Order of Oddfellows, seventeen lodges and seven hundred members.⁵⁷ Several secretaries of friendly societies held in drink-free establishments, however, reported declining membership in 1874.⁵⁸ The secretary of the Sir Thomas White Society, for instance, was typical in citing members' disapproval of the move to a drink-free club as the main reason for the 'minutely thin attendance' at ensuing meetings.

Mid-Victorian Leicester also witnessed increasing working-class enthusiasm for trade union activity. George Newell, along with Daniel Merrick, determined to make the Top and Sock branch of hosiery operatives better organised and hence, more effective.⁵⁹

51. Stephen 1911, as n.11, p.29

52. Stephen 1911, as n.11, pp.112-13

53. Stephen 1911, as n.11, p.36

54. Stephen 1911, as n.11, *passim*

55. Cited in T. Blandford and G. Newell, *A history of the Leicester Cooperative Hosiery Manufacturing Society Limited*, pp.11, 22. Leicester, 1898

56. Cited in B. Jones, *Cooperative production*, p.381. Oxford, 1894

57. *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 22 June 1874

58. *Leicester Daily Mercury*, as n.57

59. Cited in the Webb Trade Union Collection, London School of Economics and Political Science, Section A, pp.120-6

Sound leadership and regular subscriptions, males paying sixpence a week, women and boys fourpence, were considered essential to this goal. The leaders of the Hose, Shirt and Drawer branch expressed a similar determination and by the early 1860s members were paying threepence a week subscription.⁶⁰ A number of smaller branch unions representing hosiery workers also appear to have been established in the 1860s along similar lines, though details relating to their development are not much in evidence.⁶¹

T. P. Bailey regarded trade unions as essential for working-class improvement, asserting that 'labour needed protection', and that it was working men themselves who had to determine 'what form that protection should take'.⁶² He, along with other working-class spokesmen addressing a meeting of men in the Temperance Hall in June 1869, contended that trade unions were 'misrepresented', that they had been 'judged by their defects', very little being said of their 'benefits'.⁶³ They affirmed that trade unions were 'right in principle' and that consequently, they 'should be free from all disabilities'. It was imperative, they concluded, that working men be protected by trade unions, for, otherwise, they were completely 'at the mercy of the capitalist'.

Bailey was in favour of setting up one large hosiery union to cover all operatives in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.⁶⁴ He argued that an 'amalgamation' would be a 'better insurance society than isolated trade societies', since it would command greater bargaining power with employers, and hence, be more likely to 'realize a larger sum of money for their labour'. Along with Merrick, he was instrumental in the establishment in 1872 of the Leicester and Leicestershire Framework Knitters' Union, an amalgamated body representing the interests of local hose, shirt, drawer, top and sock workers.⁶⁵ This formed the basis of a more extensive, local, working-class, mutual-support organisation, the Leicester Trades Council, created in 1872, again under the auspices of Bailey and Merrick, and aimed at defending and enhancing the rights of all local workers.⁶⁶

Bailey, like Merrick, saw strike activity as a last resort for resolving industrial grievances, preferring more peaceable means such as negotiation and arbitration as the best ways of settling disputes.⁶⁷ Whilst press reports indicate that many of the advances gained by workers in the period were achieved through negotiation, it is also evident that operatives were not averse to striking if this was considered the only effective way of securing their objectives. Hosiery workers at Corah's, for instance, went on strike in 1856, demanding a reversal of their employer's decision to reduce wages by 1s.6d per dozen.⁶⁸ The same year saw the glove hands generally go on strike for a wage rise.⁶⁹ It was reported that, as a consequence of their action, some leading manufacturers had 'fallen in with their proposed terms'. Perhaps encouraged by their success, glove hands struck again in 1857, this time 'resisting a reduction in the price of their labour'.⁷⁰ 1858

60. Webb Trade Union Collection, as n.59, pp.132-141

61. Webb Trade Union Collection, as n.60

62. *LC*, as n.9, 1 May 1869

63. *LC*, as n.9, 5 June 1869

64. *LC*, as n.9, 1 May 1869

65. Cited in R. Gurnham, *A history of the trade union movement in the hosiery & knitwear industry, 1776-1976*, p.26. Leicester, 1976

66. Cited in W. H. Fraser, 'Trades Councils in England and Scotland 1858-97', p.570. Sussex University: unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1967

67. *LC*, as n.9, 1 May 1869

68. *LJ*, as n.24, 22 February 1856

69. *LC*, as n.9, 10 May 1856

70. *LC*, as n.9, 11 April 1857

witnessed industrial action by wrought and straight-down and sock hands, seeking wage increases, the striking hands evidently being 'supported by a levy of those in work'.⁷¹ On 4th December 1858 it was stated in the press that 'all manufacturers' had subsequently agreed to the men's demands.⁷²

Industrial action by factory-based elastic-web workers was particularly evident in the period. Web-weavers at Hodges and Son, for instance, went on strike in June 1864 over the issue of apprentices.⁷³ The men's leaders maintained that the firm was not complying with the trade regulation which stipulated that only one apprentice was to be employed for every six looms in operation. They argued that too many apprentices were being engaged for 'reduced periods', then taken on as fully-fledged operatives at 'reduced wages', thereby 'injuring the men who have learned their trade'. They demanded that all trained men over twenty-one be paid the full wages and the apprentice ruling adhered to. The strike continued into July, eventually collapsing when the firm began taking on other workmen to fill the jobs vacated by the strikers.

The dispute remained unresolved, however, a particularly acute outburst of strike action occurring in June 1874.⁷⁴ The episode is noteworthy, not only for the insight it affords regarding the attitudes of the men's leaders, but also as evidence of increasing mutual support and cooperation amongst workers from different trades. Replying to criticism of their industrial action in the press, Mr Abbott, a leading spokesman for the local Elastic-Web Weavers' Association, the operatives' representative body, referred to the 'hostility' demonstrated by the manufacturers towards attempts at negotiation and arbitration.⁷⁵ Abbott contended that, faced with such animosity, strike action seemed the only line of conduct likely to achieve a redress of the men's grievances. Mr Edmunds, another of the men's leaders, agreed, affirming that it was imperative that the union establish working conditions and rates of pay to which all employers would be forced to subscribe.⁷⁶ He also identified the union's role as one of promoting 'unity amongst all our fellow workmen', in order to enhance their whole position vis-a-vis negotiations with employers'. Mr Day, the Chairman at a meeting of the strikers a few days later, confidently declared that this sense of unity was much in evidence. 'A consolidated effort is resolved by all, to keep up the struggle'.⁷⁷ This spirit of cooperation, however, appears to have emanated not only from the strikers themselves, but also from other groups of workers. Abbott, for instance, referred to the 'very close cooperation' between the weavers' union and the local Rivetters and Finishers Amalgamated Society, commending the way the footwear operatives had made the web-weavers' cause their own by giving them their 'whole-hearted support'.⁷⁸ In addition, Mr J. Sharp, the Secretary of the Leicester Trades Council, publicly proclaimed the Council's intention of assisting the weavers with 'all the moral and pecuniary means' at its disposal.⁷⁹

Whilst acknowledging that the union was ultimately forced to reach a 'compromise' with the employers, since the protraction of the dispute had led to increasing impecuniosity amongst the strikers, many of them consequently being driven back to work,⁸⁰ Abbott remained optimistic about what he considered to be a growing

71. *LC*, as n.9, 9 and 23 October, 27 November 1858

72. *LC*, as n.9, 4 December 1858

73. *LC*, as n.9, 18 June, 2 July, 6 August 1864

74. *LC*, as n.9, 27 June 1874

75. *LC*, as n.9, 17 October 1874

76. *LC*, as n.9, 27 June 1874

77. *LC*, as n.9, 4 July 1874

78. *LC*, as n.9, 27 June 1874

79. *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 13 June 1874

80. *LC*, as n.9, 25 July 1874; *LJ*, as n.24, 12 September 1874

determination on the part of the working class to effect improvements to their lives through collective action. For Abbott, this increasing spirit of cooperation was clearly associated with an upsurge in working-class consciousness. 'The time was coming when working men would bring their influence to bear, politically as well as morally and socially'.⁸¹

What evidence supports Abbott's suggestion that local working men were becoming more politically conscious in the period? Support for Chartist ideals was certainly maintained in the 1850s and 1860s by working-class spokesmen like John Markham.⁸² This radicalism led in 1868 to the establishment of the Working Men's Reform Association, where it was resolved that the 'only way' the working class would make themselves felt as a 'power' was by 'organising themselves', and, thenceforth, by working collectively for the 'removal of all unjust and class-made laws'.⁸³ In 1871 the organisation changed its name to the Leicester Democratic Association and at its inaugural meeting, Mr S. Payne, the Chairman, addressing an 'enthusiastic audience of about two hundred and fifty men', asserted the need to effect an 'extensive scheme' for the political mobilization of Leicester's working class, in order to achieve their objectives; cries of 'Hear! Hear!' followed and the motion received overwhelming support.⁸⁴ Later, at a 'well-attended' meeting of the Association in January 1872, Payne identified what those objectives would be, by proclaiming that it was in the interests of the working class to pursue 'republican principles'.⁸⁵ Mr Hill, another leading spokesman for the Association, then defined what these principles entailed: the repeal of primogeniture and entail legislation and the 'forcible sale of all land'; the repeal of the game laws; the creation of equal electoral districts; universal suffrage; secret ballot; payment of MPs; triennial Parliaments; direct rather than indirect taxation; the establishment of a national poor rate; the disestablishment and disendowment of all state churches; the abolition of all royal grants and sinecures; the dissolution of the House of Lords; the setting up of a republican form of government.⁸⁶ Whole-hearted support for these proposals was reported to have been given by all those attendant at the meeting, and it was agreed, henceforth, to call the organisation, the Leicester Republican Association.

Working men in mid-Victorian Leicester, then, maintained the Chartist tradition and established an independent political organisation with clearly defined, politically radical objectives. It sought to mobilise the collective will of the working class in order to attain these objectives. One particularly important manifestation of working-class collective will which emerged in Leicester in 1869 was the Anti-Vaccination Movement.⁸⁷ Its leading spokesman was J. T. Biggs, a local engineer, who, in his book, *Sanitation Versus Vaccination*, condemned vaccination as 'blood polluting quackery'.⁸⁸ He argued that penal compulsion in a matter affecting the 'tenderest and deepest feelings' of parents was to be looked upon as a 'poll tax' of an 'even more obnoxious character' than that which occasioned the uprising of 1381, since

81. *LC*, as n.9, 27 June 1874

82. *LC*, as n.9, 11 October 1851, 18 December 1858, 17 March 1860, 25 February 1865

83. *LC*, as n.9, 12 December 1868

84. *LC*, as n.9, 4 March 1871

85. *LC*, as n.9, 13 January 1872

86. *LC*, as n.85

87. S. M. Fraser, 'Leicester and smallpox: the Leicester method', *Medical History*, 24 (1980), pp.329 ff., has argued that the movement was essentially working-class. See also D. L. Ross, 'Leicester and the anti-vaccination movement, 1853-89', *TLAHS*, 43 (1967), pp.35-44

88. J. T. Biggs, *Sanitation versus vaccination*, p.79. Leicester, 1912

its effect was not only to be felt in every household and in every family, but a risky surgical operation was super-added, and ordained by law to be inflicted upon all children born into the world.⁸⁹

More and more working-class parents evidently refused to submit their children to vaccination, particularly following the smallpox epidemic in 1871-2, when over three thousand cases, including 385 deaths, were reported, and it was recognised that many of these had previously been vaccinated.⁹⁰ At a meeting held by the movement in 1873, the large audience was urged 'not to vote for any man, either for local or imperial offices, who did not go in for anti-vaccination'.⁹¹ Increasing numbers of people were prosecuted and it seems clear that working-class parents were readily prepared to go to prison rather than have their children vaccinated.⁹² In 1876 it was reported that over 15,000 mainly working-class people cheered Charles Eagle and Frank Palmer as they returned home after having spent ten days in gaol for disobeying the vaccination law.⁹³

Progressively throughout the period 1845-80 in Leicester, then, working-class commentators of various kinds agreed with Merrick that collective working-class action was fundamental to the social improvement of their class. This perception of social advance had a long pedigree, going back to the views expressed by local Chartists like Thomas Cooper.⁹⁴ Like Merrick, then, other working-class spokesmen encouraged the growth of collective, self-help institutions such as friendly societies, the cooperative movement and trade unions. Support for independent working-class political organisation, aimed at achieving radical objectives, was also in evidence in the period. By implication, it seems likely that such spokesmen shared Merrick's emphasis on the need to uphold working-class independence, dignity and deference to no one. Henry Lee was particularly explicit on the point, affirming, in response to a lecture given by the Unitarian minister, the Rev. J. Page Hopps, a certain resentment towards middle-class patronage and interference:

The fact is, some of us are sick and tired of being patronised and lectured by those so much above us, and of being taught economy and Christian graces by those who live in different places and on higher levels.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Respectability clearly represented an increasingly important element in the development of working-class consciousness in Leicester between 1845 and 1880. It was essentially a collectivist, rather than a middle-class individualistic, concept, and was accordingly associated with a strong commitment to working-class independence. For radical spokesmen like Merrick and local republicans, this commitment was geared ultimately towards a fundamental re-structuring of society along more egalitarian lines. Crossick's view that respectability was essentially structured by a specific working-class situation and hence reformed in a distinctively working-class formulation would accordingly appear to be relevant to Leicester in the period.⁹⁶ Harrison's assertion that working-class

89. Biggs 1912, as n.88

90. Biggs 1912, as n.88, p.85

91. *LC*, as n.9, 5 April 1873

92. Biggs 1912, as n.88, *passim*

93. *LC*, as n.9, 7 May 1876

94. Cooper 1882, as n.31, pp.133-231

95. *LC*, as n.9, 23 February 1878

96. Crossick 1976, as n.3, p.302

leaders regarded their culture as having ‘some values in common with the middle classes’, but as ‘essentially something quite separate’, also seems appropriate.⁹⁷ Marxist critics of the so-called working-class reformism of this period have maintained that working-class respectables sought to adopt a radical-rational, bourgeois culture, involving complete acquiescence to middle-class hegemony. Particular attention has been drawn to the central role played in this process by growing divisions within the working class and to the emergence of a labour aristocracy.⁹⁸ More recently Patrick Joyce has emphasised the part played by paternalism and deference.⁹⁹ As Lancaster has demonstrated, however, Leicester in the period 1845–80 was particularly ill-suited to these historical interpretations.¹⁰⁰ In the first place, there was no detectable stratum corresponding to a labour aristocracy. Secondly, whilst paternalistic interventions were regularly attempted by Leicester’s manufacturing class, because local industry was largely dispersed on a system of outwork, direct factory paternalism was ineffectual, and in any event, most paternalistic efforts were carried out by specific agencies aimed at the moral uplift of the working class. Lancaster is correct in his demonstration of the tenacity of Leicester’s artisan, workshop-based culture against middle-class paternalism in the period. ‘Traditions and cultural patterns which can roughly be described as “artisan” flourished unhindered in this period’.¹⁰¹ In a previous article in *Transactions*, attention was drawn to these traditions and cultural patterns as they emerge from the views of leading, local, working-class commentators like Tom Barclay, Robert Bindley and Daniel Merrick.¹⁰²

Important questions remain unanswered in this paper and clearly warrant further investigation. Firstly, Leicester appeared to produce a large cohort of working-class respectables in the period: why was this so?; why Leicester? Secondly, the issue of gender: what part did women play in the respectability, or lack of it, of the working class in this period? This question too requires full investigation, though my earlier article in the *Transactions* has touched on some important points.¹⁰³ Finally, there is the issue of the relationship between working-class attitudes and actual behaviour: was there a gulf between what working-class leaders and spokesmen believed and said and what the mass of working people actually did? A more subtle probing of the gulf is warranted, since the gap between the ‘serious’ and the ‘popular’ is an important historical issue which still remains unproven.

Personal details

Barry Haynes B.A.(Sheffield), M.Phil.(Leicester)
 Research Associate, Urban History Centre, Leicester University
 Tutor, Modern Social History, Adult Education Department, Leicester University

97. Harrison 1984, as n.3, p.303

98. See Kirk 1985, as n.3, chapter 1, for a discussion of the major issues in this debate

99. P. Joyce, *Work, society and politics: the culture of the factory in later Victorian England*. London: Methuen, 1982

100. B. Lancaster, *Radicalism, cooperation and socialism: Leicester working-class politics, 1860-1906*. chapter 3. Leicester: University Press, 1987

101. Lancaster 1987, as n.100, p.48

102. Haynes 1989, as n.1

103. Haynes 1989, as n.1