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RADICALISM TO SOCIALISM:
THE LEICESTER WORKING CLASS 1860-1906

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Many colleagues and friends have cheerfully put up with my Leicester obsession for the last three years, provided helpful criticism, advice, and encouragement. Professor Royden Harrison, Dr. Tony Mason and students of the Centre for the Study of Social History provided an intellectual home; while Mr. J.L. Halstead of Sheffield University and an honorary member of the Centre discussed much of this thesis with me and provided many useful comments. Dr. F. Reid has been a helpful and enthusiastic supervisor. Mrs. D. Hewitt has typed this work without complaint at my often illegible handwriting. Needless to say any faults or inaccuracies are entirely my responsibility.

SUMMARY

This study surveys the social, economic and political development of the Leicester working class between 1860 and 1906. Special attention is given to hosiery and footwear workers who collectively represented over 60% of the industrial workforce in 1891. It is argued that as these two trades were still based on an outwork system well into the last quarter of the century, working practices and cultural activities of the workforce still manifested many aspects of an artisanal milieu. Furthermore, the inefficiency of capitalist control endemic to the outwork system assisted in retaining a strong element of independence in working class political activity. Thus Leicester working class Liberalism was always staunchly radical.

Centralisation and mechanisation in hosiery and footwear challenged existing working practices and led to widespread discontent. This unrest also had fundamental political implications. It is argued that Liberalism began to weaken in Leicester when it became identified with a group of employers active in imposing factory production. It is further argued that the process of political change amongst the working class was also partly the product of Leicester's indigenous popular radical tradition.

The eventual victory of the factory system brought further political change. Local Socialism abandoned its early interest in cooperative production as the developments in the world of work rendered the ending of artisanal methods. Problems of poverty caused largely by displaced footwear workers became the prime concern of the infant Labour Party. It is argued that Labour consolidated its position in local politics and Liberalism ceased to be an effective force in working class areas because the new party was able to harness the problem of unemployment to its cause. Yet ambiguities remained. Old radicalism, Socialism and reformism were the major elements in working class politics in the years prior to the 1906 general election. These apparently contradictory aspects were ideally suited to the personality and political philosophy of J. Ramsay MacDonald, who skillfully utilised them in his successful parliamentary campaign.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the development of an attempt to answer a somewhat simple question during the third year of my undergraduate studies. My work on British Labour History, particularly in the years prior to 1914, highlighted the strains and tensions that existed in the early Labour Party. Dissatisfied with orthodox explanations on the early problems of the Labour Party, not because these accounts were fundamentally wrong, but rather that they lacked certain key dimensions, attention turned away from traditional areas of historical concern such as the relationship in parliament between Labour and Liberals and the apparently conflicting concerns of trades unionists and Socialists in the formation of politic objectives. A clue to what this missing dimension might be was furnished by reading Ross McKibbin's monograph on the early history of the party's development after 1910. It was not so much McKibbin's overall interpretation of events in the Labour Party that was appealing but rather his short chapter on constituency unrest in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914.¹ Why, for example, was the most potent challenge to the stability of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the major threat to the electoral arrangements between the party and the Liberals emanating not from the often tension ridden elements that formed the party nationally but from the grass roots activists in the constituencies? Was this unrest at a local level perhaps the beginnings of that often stormy relationship between Constituency Labour Parties and the national leadership and thus the subject of a potentially fruitful undergraduate dissertation?

1. R. McKibbin, The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-24 (Oxford, 1974) chapter 3.

My appetite was whetted and my curiosity increased when, after re-reading McKibbin it was noticed that perhaps the major event in this early expression of local unrest was the threat by the Leicester Labour Party to field a candidate in the 1913 parliamentary by-election, a direct contravention of the 1903 electoral agreement, and an apparent motion of censure against the performance of the parliamentary party. This incident was given extra significance by the fact that the sitting member for this double constituency was none other than James Ramsay MacDonald, the leader of the party in parliament and the co-author of the 1903 electoral pact.

Subsequent work on the topic for a short M.A. dissertation led into a direction opposite to that of my initial interest.¹ It was soon realised that the concern to examine a significant instance of early grass roots unrest in the Labour Party was becoming subordinate to a growing interest in the continuities between the Leicester Labour movement in the first years of the present century and previous forms of local working class political activities. During the M.A. research it was discovered that the Leicester Labour Party was partly the product of a tenacious local working class culture that stretched back deep into the nineteenth century. This realisation, only rudimentally conceived, appeared to answer more fully the original question and presented a truer picture of the early Labour Party. The end result of the research, and it is hoped that it comes through clearly in this thesis, is a depiction of the early Leicester Labour Party possessing a Janus face;

1. W. Lancaster, 'The Tradition of Militancy in the Leicester I.L.P.', Warwick University M.A., 1979.

on the one side the party with MacDonald at the helm appears to prefigure the future process of bureaucratising and centralising Labour politics; on the other the Leicester movement manifests itself as a product of a specific local political tradition deeply entrenched in, and taking direction from, issues emanating in the local community.

Such a characterisation sets this study apart from previous interpretations of the early Labour Party. For example the emphasis upon the continuing importance of the local dimension in the political activities of the working class during the Edwardian period challenges the argument of P.F. Clarke that '... the whole ambit of politics had changed from the local to the national'.¹ The attention given to local economic and social issues and their role as the generating force in the emergence of independent Labour politics is, of course, diametrically opposite to the organisational interpretation offered by McKibbin.² Similarly this focus on issues and their effect on the local community differs somewhat from the arguments of Henry Pelling. In his classic study, Origins of the Labour Party Pelling gives causative primacy to the failure of Liberals to allot adequate offices of representation to 'labour men' in his explanation of why the working class formed independent political institutions.³

It can be argued the community studied in this thesis was untypical of the Labour movement nationally and that the findings of this research should not be extrapolated as a general explanation of Labour politics.

1. P.F. Clarke, Lancashire and the New Liberalism (1971) p.6.

2. McKibbin, op.cit.; chapter 2, passim.

3. H. Pelling, Origins of the Labour Party (Oxford, 1966 ed.), p.222.

There is much to commend this argument but in defence of any wider claims that emerge in this study it should be pointed out that as yet we have very few works on local Labour movements on which to base firm judgements. Thus, unlike Clarke, no claim will be made that the arguments presented here can be writ large over working class politics nationally. Indeed a central theme of this study is that up to 1906 Labour and Socialist politics were essentially local. Where distinct, independent working class institutions occur they tend to be the product of specific struggles within individual communities. Therefore to apprehend the emergence of independent Labour as a political force it is necessary to study the movement's origins in individual localities. Once this exercise has been undertaken the historian will perhaps not be too startled to find that the early Labour Party did not represent the crystallisation of the movement nationally but rather the attempt to form a gel out of stubborn ingredients, the most obdurate one being an intense sense of parochialism amongst the rank and file.

In order to demonstrate the parochialism of a specific Labour movement it is necessary to pursue two themes. First a thorough understanding of the structure of the working class has to be achieved in order to grasp the complexities of the relationship between material forces and the local Labour movement. Thus close attention has to be paid to the world of work, its organisation and the changing relations of production during a period when work, or the lack of it, was the dominant feature of working class life. Important as this theme is, too great a reliance upon its explanatory power leads to a somewhat mechanistic analysis of working class political action. Moreover, such

an analysis would be crucially flawed as it would fail to take account of other important aspects of working class life that are not directly linked to the world of work yet can still play determinant roles in the politics of the Labour movement. This point can be underlined if we pose the question why do apparently similar communities, with similar economic structures, produce radically different forms of working class political action? The key to answering such a question lies in grasping the unique world of working class culture and political traditions that exist in specific communities. In short, working class communities possess both a structure and a nature. These two components, however, never exist in isolation from each other, they have to be seen as constantly interacting and reshaping each other.

To comprehend the dynamics of these two factors in shaping Leicester politics and creating the ambiguity that was so apparent to the local Labour movement in the early years of the present century the focus has shifted from perceiving local working class politics as adumbrating twentieth century trends. Instead this thesis will argue that the early years of the Labour Party in Leicester display all the tensions that existed in a political movement that looked back to the world of Victorian working class Radicalism while at the same time was taking its first hesitant steps towards social reformism that was to strongly characterise the modern Labour Party.

To reiterate the argument above Leicester was a unique and distinct community. It does, however, have a strong claim to significance in terms of English nineteenth century working class history. For example, continuity can be detected which links the world of the Hampden Clubs,

Owenism and Chartism, through to the era of the First International, working class Republicanism and Secularism, early forms of Socialism, the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party itself. Indeed there are few provincial communities that ranked as prominently as Leicester did in all these movements. Similarly, Leicester's major industries, especially hosiery and shoemaking, were trades that either figured in, or provided activists to, major episodes of working class upheaval.

The industries of Leicester played a major role in both generating issues that fed into these working class movements and by providing an industrial and social milieu in which traditions and political cultures could persist. An important theme that runs through this thesis is the longevity of the putting-out system of industrial organisation in both hosiery and footwear production. Indeed this theme cannot be stressed too strongly as the outwork system dominated many aspects of working class life, apart from those directly concerned with production. Thus when mechanisation and centralisation gathers pace during the 1870s and 1880s in hosiery its effects upon working class life are manifold and an even more noticeable upheaval is created when the larger footwear industry embarks on a similar process during the early 1890s.

It will be argued that the longevity of outwork in Leicester as the dominant mode of industrial organisation nurtured working class cultural traditions that are usually associated with artisanal forms of production. Furthermore, the persistence of outwork, by imbuing the working class with a strong sense of independence, produced much of the vitality that was so characteristic of the Leicester Labour movement. Indeed it will be shown that early Socialist movements, the I.L.P. and

even the Labour Party were born out of the social and economic tensions created by the centralisation of local industry. Such a portrayal of working class life and politics is no doubt radically different from other studies of the period which focus upon the factory community during the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet given the reiteration of Sir John Clapham's reminder on the slow growth of the factory system in England by a new generation of scholars, how far was Leicester from the norm?¹

This study begins in 1860, Leicester was then, at long last, entering a period of economic prosperity that was to last for three decades. The 'lean hungry stockinger' who worked in what was still the major local industry, was losing his deep association with poverty as living standards rose to levels unknown for two generations. The rising prosperity of the stockinger is accounted by both a rise in demand for Leicester hosiery, in line with demand for consumer goods nationally,² and the easing of the local labour market thanks to the rapid growth of the town's new ready-made footwear trade. This new industry, which had been growing since the early 1850s was soon to enter a period of spectacular growth increasing the size of its workforce nineteen-fold in the half century up to 1901 and contributed greatly to the three and a half fold increase in the town's population during the same period.³ By 1891 the workers in hosiery and footwear constituted 62.5% of Leicester's industrial workforce.

1. See especially A.E. Musson, 'Industrial Motive Power in the United Kingdom 1800-1870', Economic History Review, Vol. 29, 1976 and his subsequent work The Growth of British Industry (1978). See also R. Samuels 'The Workshop of the World, Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain', History Workshop Journal 3, 1977.

2. W.H. Fraser, The Coming of the Mass Market 1850-1914 (1981), chapters 2 and 5.

3. See appendices 1 and 2.

As has already been noted both these industries were based on outwork production late into the nineteenth century. Despite this atomisation of the work process both unions possessed strong trade union traditions which were to play an important part in both Liberal and Labour politics throughout the period. Outwork and its tendency to underpin an independent artisanal type culture insured, however, that working class politics were never totally subsumed within Liberalism. Similarly old forms of working class organisation from earlier in the century continued unhindered by the marching decades. Owenism and its subsequent transformation into organised Secularism being particularly important in Leicester.

This persistence of an independent artisanal culture was further assisted by the growing stream of immigrant workers into Leicester's mushrooming number of workshops. The majority of the migrants coming from the countryside, released from the communal bonds of rural life, found few constraints in their new urban surroundings. Fitting comfortably into the informal world of the workshops, where St. Monday was still honoured, they indeed found that 'city air breathes free'.

This world of work and all its communal and cultural manifestations became increasingly challenged during the 1880s and 1890s, by new machines and working practices as Leicester manufacturers undertook a far reaching programme of industrial restructuring to meet the real, and growing threat, of foreign competition, tariff barriers and a slump in demand. The turmoil created by these changes witnessed a shift in the local working class political culture away from extreme forms of Radicalism and a turning towards the new doctrine of Socialism. Yet this shift was far from being clear cut and a distinct sense of direction

failed to emerge. Rather Socialism was modified to meet the needs of workers still steeped in the artisanal notion of the independent self-regulating workman. We therefore find that during the 1890s cooperative production became intermingled and bound up with socialism as hosiery and footwear workers attempted to escape from the increasing vicissitudes of capitalist production and preserve their autonomy at work.

The Socialist commonwealth became coterminous with the cooperative commonwealth for many in the Leicester Labour movement during this period. An ideology that both looked forward to the communal ownership of the instruments of production and back to the old workshops, which if it had never been self-governing had at least enjoyed a high degree of informality. The victory of the manufacturers in both hosiery and footwear in their campaign to achieve centralised mechanised production, a victory cemented by the 1895 boot and shoe lock-out, also signalled the waning of the cooperative ideal. Just to survive cooperatives now had to compete with mechanised capitalist enterprises, a task which dictated not only similar machines but also similar relations of production.

Mechanised production not only entailed an element of de-skilling with handworkers being turned into semi-skilled machine operatives. Competition in both the home and international markets was so intense that manufacturers increasingly resorted to cutting labour costs still further by substituting young unskilled for old, previously skilled workers. Thus by 1900 Leicester was beginning to experience the ravages of long term structural unemployment, particularly amongst adult male footwear workers. With such changing social circumstances Leicester Socialism had to reshape itself. This primarily involved Socialism

developing a concern and formulating remedies for the growth of local poverty. We therefore find in this period the emergence of a distinct programme of municipal Socialism designed to alleviate poverty locally as well as a growing belief that independent Labour representation at Westminster provided the most potent long term solution to the problems caused by unemployment.

Yet in 1900 the Leicester Labour movement still had one foot in each century. It is true that locally the need for the palliatives of welfare reform were gaining expression, but many still clung to older solutions, especially land reform and agricultural colonies. It was into these circumstances that MacDonald stepped and by both stealth and populism was able to square the circle of apparently contradictory pressures. Despite this ambiguity the Leicester Labour Representation Committee (L.R.C.) with MacDonald on the figurehead was able to capitalise on growing concern over unemployment. By 1905 the new party achieved a solid electoral base in local elections and Liberalism was suffering organisational decline in many working class wards. The election of MacDonald to parliament in 1906 sealed the consolidation of class based, Labour politics in Leicester; it did not, however, eradicate its ambiguities.

Chapters I and II of this thesis are fairly long surveys of the economic development of Leicester's two major industries. Hopefully in the light of the preceding discussion the reader will appreciate the crucial importance of industrial development and organisation to the overall framework of this study and thus understand the reasons for treating the subject in such length. Chapter III, Work Consciousness and the Leicester Working Class 1860-1885, moves the focus of attention away from the formal area of economic history and examines the persistence

of artisanal work patterns in a communal context. Chapter IV, Radical Freethought in Mid-Victorian Leicester surveys one of the more pronounced expressions of working class cultural activity in Leicester from the demise of Owenism to the birth of the Socialist League.

Chapter V, Religion and the Working Class in Victorian Leicester, charts the shifting contours of working class religiosity during the period and assesses their cultural and political implications. This is followed by a discussion entitled Leicester Politics and the Working Class 1860-1885 which analyses the relationships between the working class and Leicester's Liberal Association. Chapter VII, Early Socialism in Leicester, follows the emergence of the local branch of the Socialist League out of the ranks of Secularism and hosiery trade unionism. Chapter VIII, Labour Struggles in the Leicester Footwear Industry and the Decline of the Liberal Old Guard, analyses the growing tensions amongst the workforce during a period when mechanisation and centralisation were being introduced by boot and shoe manufacturers. This discussion also includes an examination of the changing political ideology of the trade union, particularly the replacement of a Radical Liberal leadership by a new generation of young Socialists.

Chapter IX, Leicester Socialism 1890-1895, focuses upon the changing nature of local Socialism, especially the rise of Socialist shoemakers and their role in the foundation of the Leicester Independent Labour Party. Chapter X, Towards the Socialist Commonwealth? Producers' Cooperatives in Late Nineteenth Century Leicester, explores the factors behind the renaissance of producers' societies during the 1890s, links this movement to older local traditions and also stresses the function of the ideology of cooperation to both local Socialism and the wider working community. The final chapter surveys the changing nature of the

local working class and the growing importance of poverty and unemployment as key issues in working class politics. These issues also connect into both the nomination of Ramsay MacDonald as the L.R.C. candidate in 1900 and the strengthening of Labour's electoral performance in local elections. The chapter closes with a discussion of the 1906 election and attention is drawn to the ambiguities that exist in both the local Labour movement and the political philosophy of MacDonald.

This study, as well as addressing broad historical issues, also aims to fill in at least some of the gaps in Leicester's history. The town has been better served than many by past scholarly attention. In terms of nineteenth and early twentieth century history several distinguished works have been produced. A.T. Patterson's Radical Leicester, A History of Leicester 1780-1850, published in 1954 is a stimulating survey with a wealth of material on the social, economic and political forces that shaped the town up to 1850.¹ The town's notable Chartist period, covered in Patterson's work, has received closer scrutiny in J.F.C. Harrison's contribution to Chartist Studies.² Apart from several useful essays in Volume four of the Victoria County History of Leicester, the second half of nineteenth century Leicester history has until recently been a neglected area. M. Elliott's recently published Victorian Leicester³ which largely deals with the development of local government, paying particular attention to the role of the

1. A.J. Patterson, Radical Leicester. A History of Leicester 1780-1850, (Leicester, 1954).

2. J.F.C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester' in A. Briggs (ed.), Chartist Studies (1959).

3. M. Elliott, Victorian Leicester (Chichester, 1979).

medical officer of health, has provided an important contribution to our knowledge of this period. J. Simmon's Leicester Past and Present, Volume Two: Modern City 1860-1974, although designed for a wide audience, provides a lucid exposition of key themes in the town's history.

Most historians working in the field of local history at the present time are fortunate in being able to draw upon the unpublished work of other scholars. Leicester, with a university which has for many years been regarded as a centre for local historical research, is particularly well served in this area. Numerous short M.A. dissertations have been consulted in the production of this study, and although they may not be mentioned individually in this brief survey, future students of Leicester are urged to consult these works. Several theses have provided useful insights and a guide to source material. In particular P. Head, 'Industrial organisation in Leicester 1844-1914',¹ D. Freer, 'Business Families in Victorian Leicester',² and D.M. Thompson, 'The Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1851-1881',³ have been extremely useful. D. Cox's early work on the Leicester Labour Party, while only dealing briefly with most of the period covered in this study, has to be recommended to those readers who may wish to follow events up to 1930.⁴ This thesis therefore aims to fill in the gap between the first

1. P. Head, 'Industrial Organisation in Leicester 1844-1914', University of Leicester Ph.D., 1960.

2. D. Freer, 'Business Families in Victorian Leicester', University of Leicester M. Phil., 1975.

3. D.M. Thompson, 'The Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1851-1881' Cambridge University Ph.D., 1969.

4. D. Cox, 'The rise of the Labour Party in Leicester', University of Leicester M.A., 1959.

efforts of Leicester's working class to build a mass movement in the 1830s and 1840s and their eventual success in the early years of the present century.

Before we proceed with this study a brief note on source material used in this work is necessary. The local press has, of course, been extensively consulted. Both the Tory Leicester Journal and the numerous Liberal publications have provided a rich vein of information. The Labour press in Leicester, particularly the issues that have survived of The Countryman and The Pioneer have proved to be invaluable. A full list of archive material is presented in the bibliography, but the following deserve special mention. The archive of the Leicester Secular Society, although it contains no material prior to 1880 is nevertheless an important source on both the history of local radicalism and early socialism. No archive material on the local branch of the Independent Labour Party relating to the period covered in this study has survived. Fortunately a rich collection of Liberal Association papers, including minute books is available for consultation which graphically charts the impact of Labour upon the Liberal Party.

The other major sources used in surveying the development of the Leicester Labour movement are the Jung and Socialist League archives deposited at the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam. The archive of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, the monthly reports of the Leicester Amalgamated Hosiery Union and the Annual reports of the Leicester Trades Council, the Francis Johnson Collection which contains I.L.P. conference reports, minute books and correspondence files,

the Labour Representation Committee archive and the MacDonald papers contain much useful information on Labour in Leicester.

Parliamentary papers, the records of the Leicester Board of Guardians and the Annual reports of the Unitarian Domestic Mission have been utilised in both the analysis of labour conditions and local economic development. Unfortunately solid quantitative data relating to both the rise and scale of factory production has been difficult to find and this problem is discussed in Chapters I and II. Published census reports have been extensively utilised throughout this work. The census enumerators' books for the period up until 1871 were consulted but a detailed quantitative analysis of this source has not been carried out. The reasons for not undertaking this task were largely the product of problems encountered in the area of definition and chronology. For example a theme central to this thesis is the role of status divisions within the hosiery and footwear workforce. Yet invariably the enumerators books refer to all workers in these trades as 'boot hands', 'hosiery hands', or 'framework knitters', categories which defy precise analysis on the variegated nature of the workforce in both industries. A second and equally important concern of this study is the distinction between those workers located in workshops and those in factories. Again the enumerators' books are silent on this subject. A brief glance at Appendices I and II will highlight the other major problem which has precluded this source. The two decades between 1871 and 1891 witnessed a massive expansion of both population and the footwear industry. Unfortunately most of the research for this study was completed before February 1982 when the 1881 books were released for consultation. Thus any attempt to statistically analyse this growth would have only charted the beginnings of this demographic movement.

Finally the numerous directories and industrial guides and the wealth of contemporary printed material which is contained in the local history collection at Leicester Reference Library, together with the smaller archive collections and printed works deposited at the Leicestershire Records Office have been of great assistance in the production of this work.

CHAPTER I

The Leicester Hosiery Industry in the Nineteenth Century: A Survey

Hosiery was the single most important industry in Leicester up until the final quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1851 it was the largest single source of employment accounting for 38.5% of Leicester's industrial workforce and in 1891 it still provided 21.5% of the town's industrial employment. Moreover, the pattern of industrial organisation in the Leicester hosiery trade for a large part of this period, the putting-out system, served as a model to the new industry of mass produced footwear, introduced to the town in 1851. By 1891 Leicester was the undisputed capital of British hosiery and footwear production, the two trades employing 62.5 per cent of the workers in the town.

The hosiery industry has generally been overlooked by labour historians which is unfortunate for labour historiography in general, as the trade in Leicester offers a tangible link between the world of Thomas Cooper's Chartists, Edward Miall's Liberation Society and, arguably, the first British trade union to possess a socialist leadership. The experience of the Leicester Hosiery trade between the ending of Chartist hostilities and the emergence of socialism also carries implications for those accounts of mid-century class harmony, usually based on Lancashire sources that on the one hand stress the importance of status divisions within the working class, created by the labour process, and on the other focus upon 'employer hegemony' as a product of communal deference based upon close employer-employee relationships.¹

1. J. Foster, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in three English Towns (1974) (all works published in London unless otherwise stated) has been the most influential work on the 'Labour Aristocracy' in recent years. For a review essay that covers most of the contemporary material on the 'Labour Aristocracy' debate see H.F. Moorhouse, 'The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy', Social History (3) 1978. See P. Joyce, Work, Society and Politics: the Culture of the Factory in Late Victorian England (Brighton, 1980) on the subject of paternalism and factory community.

This chapter is primarily a survey of the economic and labour history of the Leicester Hosiery industry in the nineteenth century. Aspects of political and social history pertaining to the hosiery trade will only be touched upon incidentally and will be dealt with more fully in chapters three and four. The main reason for this division of labour is largely one of order. Hosiery in Leicester, for a large part of the nineteenth century was a political and social, as well as an economic force. Consequently an attempt to deal with the myriad of relationships and linkages that connected the trade with the community in a single chapter would lead to both confusion and needless repetition. It is therefore my intention in this chapter to build a structural spine out of the components of economic and labour history which will facilitate the emergence of a clear and recognisable model in later chapters.

I have divided this chapter into four parts. Part one, The Economic Development and Organisation of the Leicester Hosiery Industry in the Nineteenth Century, surveys the economic history of hosiery in Leicester and the development of the 'putting-out' mode of industrial organisation. Part two, The Persistence of Stagnation in the Leicester Hosiery Trade highlights the factors that caused the technological underdevelopment of Leicester hosiery. This is followed by Steam-Powered Factories which charts the arrival of the factory system in the Leicester trade. Finally, Labour Organisations in the Leicester Hosiery Industry 1853-1890 focuses upon developments within the hosiery labour movement.

The Economic Development and Organisation of the Leicester Hosiery Industry in the Nineteenth Century

In order to grasp the development of the Leicester hosiery trade it is necessary to go back to the origins of the industry in the town. This is because the trade in Leicester, as late as the 1870s was still dominated by the putting-out mode of industrial organisation; and this old form of production continued to exist symbiotically with the emerging steam powered factories well into the 1890s. There is, of course, no doubt that factory production dramatically affected both capital and labour, and that the appearance of factories in the late 1870s represents a distinct historical discontinuity. Nevertheless, change has to be balanced by continuity and a major theme in this chapter will highlight the point that attitudes and strategies developed by both capital and labour during the putting-out era continued to play an important role long after the establishment of a factory based industry.

The origins of the hosiery industry in Leicester lie deep in the seventeenth century.¹ The invention by William Lee of the stocking frame in the 1580s in the Nottingham village of Calverton was one factor in the geographical location of the industry in the East Midlands. Lee's frame broke with the principle carried out by hand knitters of producing hose in circular form. The frame-knitted stocking was produced flat and afterwards seamed. This was a disadvantage in one way but it meant that a frame-knitted stocking, or other garment, could be shaped or fashioned by varying the number of loops in a course of knitting. Lee thus established the principle on which all frame-knitted hose were made for some two hundred years. He also saw that there had to be one needle for

1. The following discussion is based largely on W. Felkin's A History of Machine Wrought Hosiery (centenary edition, Newton Abbot, 1967) and F.A. Wells, The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry (Newton Abbot, 1972).

each loop. The needles were set horizontally in a bar and in between were the sinkers which manipulated the thread laid across the needles. The mechanical parts, or 'innards' as they were often called, were made of wrought iron and fixed into a heavy wooden frame called the carcass, with a seat for the operative and three foot pedals. Two of the pedals worked the sinkers, laying the thread and forming the loops, first from one side then from the other. The loops were brought under the needle hooks by pulling the sinkers forwards; then the third pedal was used to bring down the pressure bar and the fabric was pushed over the closed needle hooks, thus completing a course of knitting. The completed fabric would then be passed on from the frame worker to the 'seamer' who would hand-sew the seams of the material into stocking form. The finished hose would then be taken to the 'mender' who would check the size and quality of the garment and carry out minor repairs before the goods were marketed.

Under royal patronage Lee removed the major part of the new trade to London, leaving only a few frames behind in the Midlands. At first the new trade prospered in London by concentrating on fancy silk hose and waistcoats, while those frames that remained in the Midlands capitalised on their proximity to high grade Leicestershire wool by developing the worsted hosiery trade. The formation of the 'Worshipful Company of Framework Knitters' in 1657 marked the arrival of the industry as a major trade and also heralded the ending of London's domination. Knitters and hosiers in both the Midlands and London became discontent with the Company for opposite reasons: the knitters complained of both the heavy fees charged by the Company to journeymen who wished to buy their freedom and the unregulated expansion of apprenticeship; while the hosiers became increasingly annoyed at the Company's attempts to control quality and

recruitment. This dissatisfaction resulted in the migration of many hosiery makers and journeymen back to the industry's birthplace in the East Midlands. The centre of gravity in the hosiery market was also shifting considerably, away from luxury silk goods, towards worsted hose aimed at a mass market. Leicestershire became particularly attractive to itinerant hosiery makers as it offered an abundance of cheap labour, many of whom were experienced hand knitters, and also the last vestiges of Leicester's medieval woollen cloth industry provided the vitally important ancillary crafts of wool-combing and spinning. The early framework hosiery makers however were often forced by the animosity of the local hand knitters to employ their frames outside the town and William Iliffe, the reputed father of the Leicester trade, was at first based in Hinckley. The early frames were far more productive than hand knitting needles, the frame being capable of ten pairs per week in comparison to one pair per day produced by hand.¹ Yet the hand trade survived for many years after Lee's invention as the richly embroidered hand product enjoyed continual demand. Eventually the practice of embroidering by hand finished frame-knit hose became established and this seems to have been an important factor in the establishment of the Leicester trade as the centre of the fancy worsted trade.²

It was during the first half of the eighteenth century that hosiery divided into three distinct geographical divisions. Nottingham began to concentrate on cotton hose; Derbyshire with its fast rivers became a centre for water-powered silk throwing mills and attracted hosiery makers eager to utilise the local yarn; while Leicester became the major centre for worsted hose. The Leicestershire trade enjoyed a steady expansion

1. S.D. Chapman, 'The Genesis of the British Hosiery Industry 1600-1750', Textile History, Vol. 3, 1972, p.10.

2. Ibid., p.12.

throughout the eighteenth-century and Blackner's early census recorded 11,183 frames in Leicestershire in comparison to Nottingham's 9,285. Leicester town began to specialise in fine goods such as gloves, waist-coats and fancy hose which overtook the old staple of coarse hosiery in importance.

It is difficult to describe with precision the sources of capital and the social background of the early Leicester hosiers. S.D. Chapman's recent research has established a strong link between entrepreneurs involved in both the declining woollen trade and the new hosiery industry in eighteenth century Leicester.¹ Wool mercers, dyers, bleachers and sheep farmers tended to dominate the ranks of the early hosiers. These early entrepreneurs also shared the common confessional bond of Unitarianism. To claim that the sect based at the Great Meeting in Bond Street dominated the town's trade is no exaggeration.

William Gardiner, a local hosier and Unitarian, whose father had been a bleacher, noted in his autobiography that it was the members of the Great Meeting who introduced the framework trade into Leicester.² This was no idle boast as the first major hosiers in Leicester to operate frames were the Iliffes, a staunch Unitarian family.³ Although there is no reliable data on frame-ownership in Leicester the evidence that is available suggests that a large majority of local frames were in the employ of Unitarians. The Biggs brothers, John and William, were reputed to employ a twelfth of all the hosiery workers in both the town and county and to have owned nearly 1,000 frames.⁴ By 1855 the Biggs brothers were

1. Ibid., p.32.

2. William Gardiner, Music and Friends (1838), Vol. 1, p.205.

3. S.D. Chapman, op.cit., p.34.

4. R.H. Evans, 'The Biggs Family of Leicester', Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological Society, 1972, p.32.

putting out work to nearly 4,000 frames.¹ The Walkers, Gardiners, Brewins, Rowletts, Harris's and Kempsons were all major employers each owning several hundred frames and all were members of the Great Meeting. Considering that the town possessed 3,620 working frames in 1844 the power of the Unitarians as an economic force must have been considerable.² The Unitarian families of Johnson, Fielding, Coltman and Whetstone accounted for the entire spinning industry in the town, and the economic dominance of the Unitarians in the hosiery trade was completed by their connection with the banking firm of Thomas Paget, another of their co-religionists. Paget, who came from a famous Leicestershire family of sheep breeders also owned hosiery interests in Loughborough and had many family connections with Leicester hosiers and he was also related to the Rathbones of Liverpool.³

The surest yardstick, however, of the local domination of these 'north-pole Christians, who only believed in one god yet paid 20 shillings in the pound' is the political control that they held over the town. The first seven mayors of the reformed corporation came from the Great Meeting, Thomas Paget being the first and the following six were all connected to the hosiery trade.⁴ The rule of the Unitarian hosiers was sealed with the election of William Biggs to parliament and the appointment of the hosiers Unitarian solicitor Samuel Stone, author of the famous 'Justices Manual' to the position of Town Clerk.⁵

1. Report of the Select Committee on Stoppages of Wages in the Hosiery Trade 1855. Evidence of J. Biggs, qq. 363, 391-2.

2. W. Felkin, 'An account of the machine-wrought hosiery trade and the condition of the framework-knitters', 1845, pp. 10-11.

3. L.S. Pressnell, Country Banking in the Industrial Revolution (Oxford, 1956), pp. 30-31, 344-5. D. Freer, Business Families in Victorian Leicester, University of Leicester M.Phil thesis, 1975, pp. 96-7.

4. R.W. Greaves, The Corporation of Leicester (Leicester, 1971 edition), pp. 158-9.

5. M. Elliot, Victorian Leicester (1979) p.39.

The hosiers conducted their business from warehouses located in the town centre. These buildings were the nerve centres of a network of industrial organisation that enmeshed the town and extended deep into the Leicestershire countryside. Inside these buildings the yarn was weighed and distributed to both middlemen and knitters. Completed fabric was received and re-distributed to the seaming and linking ladies, often by middlemen, who returned the final product back to the warehouse. Most hosiers also tended to employ a group of 'indoor' stockingers, often as many as twelve, to deal with 'special orders' and the fashion trade. The completed garments would then be checked and repaired by the women employed inside the building as 'menders'. The hose would then go to the 'counter section' where the 'warehousemen', a hybrid occupation combining the work of clerks and packers, would prepare the products for distribution to customers.¹

Immediately below the hosier we find another strata at work in the trade, that of the middlemen. At the end of the eighteenth century there were broadly speaking, two types of relationships between worker and hosier; some framework knitters worked direct to the hosier and others to small masters or middlemen. The relationship between middleman and knitter was undoubtedly the older of the two in the Midlands as the 'middlemen' had worked the middle shires for London hosiers long before the emergence of local hosiers.² There were several factors that contributed to the survival of the older relationship. Hosiers did of course claim that they got the work done more efficiently when the workers were under their direct supervision, which was particularly important in the higher quality trade and in the production of fancy

1. Webb Collection, Section A, Vol. 34.

2. Wells, op.cit., p.61.

goods where fashion changes were frequent and new lines were being continually introduced. On the other hand it was often inconvenient for the hosier to deal with large groups of people bringing in work and taking out yarn from the warehouse.

In the numerous inquiries into the constitution of the hosiery trade we find frequent complaints from stockingers of time wasted attending warehouses. The following statement is typical:

The worsted for the week is given out by the hosier, who lets frames and employs every Monday morning. Stockingers go for it about eleven and get it home about twelve or one, then some has to be damped and wound. They begin work about two on Monday and finish at two on Saturday to take the work back to the hosier. It must be in by four; sometimes they have to wait till six as all the work is weighed. At some warehouses the workers have to wait all day. ¹

The employment of middlemen was therefore a convenience both for hosiers and stockingers and as the trade expanded and spread into the country districts, this class assumed an evergrowing importance accompanied by an increasing independence. Yet the precise position of the middleman is often difficult to determine. Sometimes he acted simply as an agent between employer and worker and received a fixed commission for 'taking in', the amount being deducted from the workers' earnings. In other cases the middleman combined his agent's function with that of a master stockinger, working at the frame himself and giving out work to his own employee journeymen and apprentices inside his own workshop. Wells has summarised the entrepreneurial aspects of the middleman in the following terms:

1. Report of the Factory Commissioners, 1833, Vol. XX, p.535.

In many ways the putting-out system favoured the undertaker class and enabled persons who were enterprising and perhaps not over scrupulous to rise to positions of some importance in the industry. The middle-man who seldom worked for one hosier, but often represented six or eight, received yarn with orders to get certain goods made and he generally distributed the work as he pleased; sometimes giving out direct to stockingers and sometimes to small masters, who in turn shared it amongst their workers. He was often free to make his own bargain with the stockinger in which case he and not the hosier was the actual employer. Yet even where he was supposed to be merely an agent paying fixed prices for work, his position might be little different, for hosiers seldom troubled to inquire what price the worker actually received, and the putter-out could squeeze an extra profit by getting work done at cheap rates.¹

In a rather different position from the middlemen were the bagmen or bag hosiers. These were a class of small manufacturers found mostly in the villages, who besides putting-out work sometimes had frames on their own premises. They occasionally produced for the warehouses, but usually finished the goods themselves and sold them to small shopkeepers and hawkers.² The bagman acquired yarn from various sources, often from stockingers who had embezzled worsted from the hosier.³ Most of the abuses of the trade were attributed to this class and superior workmen only resorted to them in bad times when work was unavailable elsewhere.⁴

The considerable increase in the number of frames during the eighteenth century from 500 in the town in 1727 to nearly 21,000 in the county in 1844 poses the question of what were the sources of recruitment of operatives into the expanding Leicestershire hosiery trade?⁵ As we have

1. Wells, op.cit., p.63.

2. Ibid.

3. A.T. Patterson, Radical Leicester (Leicester, 1954) pp. 45-6.

4. Royal Commission on Framework Knitters, 1845. Minutes of evidence q. 79; q.129. (R.C. on F.W.K.s).

5. Wells, op.cit., pp. 49, 111. Unfortunately no separate figure for Leicestershire exists for 1727; Blackner's figures, the source used by Wells, enumerated the villages of Leicester, Nottingham and Derby collectively at 3,750.

seen Chapman has highlighted the importance of the pre-existence of a local workforce possessing skills in hand knitting but as the sexual composition of the hand knitters remains obscure their contribution to the ranks of the eighteenth century male dominated frame trade is uncertain. The recent work of the Cambridge Population Group has, however, produced a substantial contribution on the subject. This study published in David Levine's Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism focuses upon recruitment and employment in the Leicestershire hosiery village of Shepshed. Levine's work shows the important linkage between the declining Leicestershire woollen trade and the emerging framework hosiery industry, with the vast majority of immigrants into Shepshed coming from Leicester town and the old Leicestershire industrial villages, with most of the newcomers possessing skills that were relevant to the manufacture of worsted hosiery.¹ The major weakness in the Shepshed study, however, is its inability to explain the general expansion in recruits to the Leicestershire trade. The dramatic increase in the number of frames throughout the eighteenth century required other labour inputs than those from the old industrial centres. W.G. Hoskins's earlier work on Wigston Magna, a village that became a virtual suburb of Leicester during the nineteenth century, whilst not based on the modern technique of family reconstruction, has argued that the eighteenth century growth in the hosiery trade was greatly assisted by the influx of agricultural labour during the enclosure movement.² Obviously both works contain much of value but until more studies, similar in method to that of Levine, have been carried out the debate must be left unresolved.

1. D. Levine, Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism (1977) pp. 36-7.

2. W.G. Hoskins, The Midland Peasant, (1965) pp. 227-8.

The next area that needs to be discussed is the organisation of work at the stockinger's level. Perhaps the most striking phenomenon here was the knitter's relationship to the instruments of production. The high cost of the frame, during the early period of the industry, usually between £50 and £60, precluded the stockinger from ownership.¹ The frame, therefore, was nearly always the property of the hosier or middleman, leased to the stockinger on a rental basis. Yet the diverse geographical locations of the component parts of the labour process, the majority of which were domestically based, and the institution of frame rent, mitigated against the knitter's subjection to the full weight of proletarianisation. The worker often operated the same frame for most of his working life, as once the initial quirks of a particular frame had been mastered and the knacks of operation had been learnt, production could be maximised. The knitter was also responsible for routine repairs and maintenance, such as needle replacement, whilst the frame owner was obliged to finance major repairs such as the replacement of a new innard to the frame carcass. This latter operation, however, was a rarity as re-learning a new mechanism could prove a lengthy and costly exercise for the worker; and they inevitably endeavoured to keep their old frame running for as long as possible.²

Although the frame rent system emerged as a device to overcome the high cost of frame purchase during the early period of the industry by 1779 the price of a frame had fallen to £12.³ Workers did attempt to buy their own frames through organisations called frame clubs, and various co-operative production schemes were launched.⁴ These efforts usually

1. Wells, op.cit., p.64.

2. Select Committee on Framework Knitters Petitions, 1812, p.17.

3. Wells, op.cit., p.65.

4. W. Jackson, 'An address to the frame-work knitters of the town and county of Leicester', (Leicester, 1833).

resulted in failure, caused by the refusal of hosiers and middlemen to give out yarn to any but their own frames.¹ This issue of supply was in fact the key to the rent relationship from the stockinger's point of view: rent became institutionalised as a payment to the rentier, not only for the frame but also for the supply of work.²

Considerable advantages accrued to the frame owner from the rent system. Firstly, it was highly lucrative, a frame costing £12 could be rented out for as much as 4s per week.³ Secondly, when trade was bad, the hosier, by spreading what work was available amongst all the frames he owned, was still assured a steady income.⁴ The stockinger's claim that they bore the full brunt of economic depression was no exaggeration. Thirdly, the system acted as a kind of insurance policy against the possibility of the knitter undertaking work for a rival.

As the industry developed the frame rent system became increasingly an instrument of oppression and abuses were encouraged by the methods of collection which were part of the complex organisation of the framework knitting industry. Wherever employment and payment for work were indirect, so was the payment of frame rent. If the stockinger worked direct for the hosier he paid his rent direct, but if he worked for a middleman or a small master stockinger the latter parties deducted rent from earnings and in turn paid rent to the hosier from whom he probably hired in bulk at a fixed annual scale. Part of the middleman's profit was derived from this system of sub-letting frames, as it was customary to charge the knitter a higher rent than that paid to the actual frame owner.⁵ From the hosiers' point of view the extra rent obtained by the middleman could be regarded as a collection cost.

1. Wells, op.cit., p.65.

2. Select Committee on Framework Knitters Petitions, 1812, pp. 18-28.

3. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, q. 417, q. 512.

4. Report of the Royal Commission on the Truck System, 1871, qq. 41, 673.

5. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, p.48.

There were also many private persons who had invested in a number of frames and were prepared to let them out to anyone who could find work for them. Provided these owners received an adequate return on their investment the putter-out was free to exact as much as possible from the unfortunate stockings.¹

Another point that highlights the fact that the frame rent was more than a method of recompense for the cost of machinery was the general rise in the rate of rent in the first half of the nineteenth century, despite the proliferation of frames and the reduction in their purchase price. It is difficult to furnish exact figures on frame charges as the Leicester trade employed a vast variety of frames each with their own particular rate of rent. The lowly narrow frame, however, used mainly by women and youths, commanded 9d per week in 1780 and 1s. 3d in 1845.² The wide frame introduced in the early nineteenth century at a charge of 4s per week could, on occasion, be let at 5s per week.³

Frame rent, although a major item, was not the only deduction from the knitter's earnings. Before being sent to the warehouse, the hose, which was made flat on the frame, had to be seamed. If the stockinger worked at home this operation would, typically, be carried out by female members of his household. Similarly the domestic based worker would employ his sons at winding the yarn in preparation for the frame.⁴ On the other hand, if the knitter was based in a warehouse, or workshop, and the seaming was put out, the cost would be deducted from his earnings. Charges were also made for frame 'standing' and for taking in work in cases where the small master acted as agent for his journeymen. This list is typical:⁵

1. Report of the Select Committee on Frame-work Knitters Petitions, 1812, pp. 16, 19.

2. Wells, op.cit., pp. 66-7; Felkin, op.cit., p.24.

3. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, q. 417; Felkin, op.cit., p.20.

4. See the Withers family in Felkin's table, op.cit., p.24. 'Where William Withers, knits, wife Jane sews up hose and son Thomas, aged 11, winds for father'.

5. Select Committee on F.W.K.'s petitions, 1812, p.61.

Average weekly earnings from ten frames, each 13s 3½d.

Weekly deductions:

seaming	..	1s. 1d.
needles	..	3d.
oil	..	3d.
coals	..	1½d.
standing	..	3d.
expenses taking-in work	..	1s. 0d.
frame rent	..	1s. 0d.
clear earnings	..	9s. 3½d.

By 1845 this situation appears to have deteriorated. Samuel Bruce of Mill Street worked 16 hours per day for a gross wage of 11s. 4d. out of which he was charged:

rent	..	2s. 0d.
coals	..	2d.
candles	..	3d.
needles	..	2d.
standing	..	6d.
winding	..	9d.
taking-in	..	6d.

Leaving Samuel with a net cash wage of 7s. on which to feed his family of five.¹

Some manufacturers admitted, with an element of audacity, that profit from rent was more important than that derived from producing hose.²

It was undoubtedly more certain. Failure to pay rent could even lead to imprisonment as in the case of a stockinger brought before the Leicester bench in 1836. The defendant was charged with neglect of work, not having worked up the yarn given out to him, and was also in arrears with his rent. In his defence he stated that he was willing to give up the frames but had no security to offer for the arrears of rent. The magistrates took a dim view of such fecklessness and sentenced him to six weeks hard labour.³

1. Felkin, op.cit., p.24.

2. Report from the Select Committee on Stoppage of Wages (Hosiery) 1855, p.19, and Report of the Royal Commission on the Truck System, 1871. Evidence of S. Odams, q. 42,855.

3. Leicester Chronicle, September 19, 1836.

Despite the oppression and poverty the stockinger gained a strong sense of independence from the scattered locations of the instruments of production; while the system of rents and charges instilled the ideology of the independent artisan. 'Each man has full liberty to earn what he likes, and how he likes, and when he likes. We have no factory bell, it is our only blessing', declared a stockinger witness before the factory commission in 1833. Others, including hosiers, looked back to the industry's golden age at the beginning of the century when 'the lower orders were comparatively in a state of ease and plenty ... The stocking maker had peas and beans in his snug garden, and a barrel of humming ale. To these comforts were added two suits of clothes, a working suit and a Sunday suit: but, more than all, he had leisure ... Those who had their frames at home seldom worked more than three days in a week'.¹ When Gardiner, a Unitarian hosier, wrote his memoirs such recollections were indeed distant and contemporaries were increasingly alarmed at the dire state of the hosiery trade, predicting a similar fate for the stockinger as that which met the handloom weaver.

Among all the inquiries into industrial and social conditions undertaken by the reformed Parliament, there are few that produced a more depressing report than that issued in 1845 by Richard Muggerridge, the Commissioner on the framework knitters. The impression is that of utter stagnation; the stockingers and the manufacturers generally seemed to have been left behind in the backwash of industrial progress. If the handloom weavers were in a similar situation, it could at least be said that they were the victims of improvements in methods of production. No

1. William Gardiner, op.cit., Vol. I, pp. 43-4.

such mitigating circumstances appear in the case of the hosiery trade; the application of steam power was almost unknown and the frame itself had remained practically unaltered for a hundred years or more.

When hosiery manufacturers talked of the factory system they simply meant the concentration of hand frames in large workshops. The division of labour was as complete with ten or twenty frames as with fifty or a hundred, they said, and although there might be advantages in better control of output and materials they were not sufficient to outweigh the extra cost involved. Moreover, the workers were stubbornly opposed to the factory system with its regular hours and strict discipline. Several experiments which had been tried in the Midlands broke down for this reason, although one Leicester hosier who had fifty frames in a large workshop reported that he had more applications than he could fill.¹ In this case, however, the workers were mostly young girls; with the mass of the older workers, especially the men, it seemed that their habits were 'so fixed now that it would be utterly impossible to establish a factory working under any sort of regulation as to hours'. All things considered it seemed that the existing system was a manifestation of that natural order in which men had been taught to believe. As one manufacturer put it: 'The fair inference is that the way in which a business settles and has been carried on in any locality for fifty years or more is under all circumstances the best way'.² No doubt the inference was fair enough according to current doctrine, but the economic truth might have received less emphasis had it not harmonised so happily with the interests of the entrepreneurs.

1. R.C. on F.W.K.s, Minutes of Evidence, q.77.

2. Ibid., p.67.

One of the factory commissioners in 1833 offered an excellent description of working life in the Leicester trade.

We went to the house of William Farmer. He has two shops. The one on the ground floor I entered. There were six frames; three on each side. The room measured in height, 6 feet 8 inches, in length 13 feet, in breadth 10 feet 6 inches. The frames were wide ones turning off three or four stockings each at a time. They measured all alike, viz. 5 feet in length placed transversely with relation to the length of the room, height 5 feet, width 3 feet. It will be seen from the above proportions that little more than six inches were left for passage between two rows of frames. I got to the other end of the room with difficulty by stooping and moving sideways, where I found a little boy with a winding machine occupying the only space left by an irregularity in the wall. The men sat at their work back to back; there was just space for the necessary motion, but not without touching each other. The room was so close as almost to smother one. The shop above was of the same dimensions, containing also six frames. Of the men here at work most were sickly and emaciated. ¹

In 1844 William Felkin reported similar conditions to a British Association Conference.

After due inquiry (in Leicester) and from personal experience of what the character of these efforts must be, I humbly state my belief that less than 60 hours would not suffice to these men, nor less than 66 hours of close work to men of ordinary speed and application. Several of these men had often received from their masters 'certificates of non-employment', whereby they have been able in flat times to obtain parochial relief. Thus men in the best work seldom save enough to meet sickness or bad trade; are often forced from decaying strength and defective sight into the wrought lower paid branch, and can make no provision for age and decrepitude. I was strongly impressed with this fact in the following case on which I stumbled in visiting one of the above shops. Near it, I found a female at work between 9 and 10 o'clock at night; her husband and two journeymen at work above her head, up the step-ladder over the kitchen-place she was occupying. Her age 53; she had the appearance of 70; skin, sinews, and bone, no flesh. The mother of 15 children; 10 of whom

1. Factory Commission 1833, XX, p.540.

were bred up stockings. She could not work before breakfast, but laboured every night until 10 o'clock. Clear earnings about 2s. 6d. weekly. She had worked the same frame 19 years. It had been 'patched up' twice. Rent 1s. 6d. a week. Made three feet at once to worsted hose. Was cheerful, uncomplaining, thankful, and pious in her manner and speech. The house rent was 2s. 6d. a week, damp, ill-drained, and unhealthy, as are all around it. ¹

Despite these circumstances, the stockings were to prove as obdurate as the hosiers in their defence of the 'existing state of things'. The evidence contained in the 1845 commissioners report is peppered with such phrases as 'custom', 'natural order', and 'harmony' in the various accounts offered, by both hosiers and stockings, of the hosiery trade in Leicester and the failure of the factory system to develop. What, however, were the factors behind this apparent mutuality of interest between master and man on the continuation of the putting-out mode of organisation?

The Persistence of Stagnation in the Leicester Hosiery Trade

Contemporary observers were puzzled by the inertia and lack of innovation displayed by hosiery entrepreneurs. Why, they wondered, had hosiery, an industry based on mass production, so noticeably failed to follow the example of Lancashire cotton by eradicating the putting-out system and instituting steam powered factories? There were of course technological obstacles; it was not until the 1860s that a steam powered frame capable of producing fashioned hose was invented; but prior to this invention hosiery entrepreneurs seldom displayed any of the innovative zeal that distinguished the cotton manufacturers during their transition to factory production.² It was true that in 1844, T. Collins, a Leicester

1. Felkin, op.cit., p.20.

2. S.D. Chapman, 'Enterprise and Innovation in the British Hosiery Industry', Textile History, Vol. 5, 1974, pp. 28-32.

hosier, was producing straight hose on steam powered 'circulars' and that Caleb Bedell's invention of elastic web in 1839 initiated a period of product diversification to the hosiery trade, but most hosiers were reluctant to follow Collins, and elastic web products were easily produced on hand frames, thus giving a boost to the old system.¹ John and William Biggs, the largest hosier in Leicester at this period, displayed much ingenuity in harnessing Bedell's invention taking out patents on such items as elastic wristbands for gloves while at the same time they were adamant that the factory system was not suited to hosiery manufacture.² Although initially adaptable to the old system demand soon outstripped capacity as elastic web became widely used in the manufacture of braces, corsets and footwear gussets as well as in hosiery products.³ By 1853 Messrs. Hodges and Turner had opened a steam powered factory to produce elastic web and in 1863 it was claimed that profits were extremely large and the new trade was responsible for the recent rise in population.⁴ Wages were reported to be extremely high in the industry but as demand declined during the 1870s strikes became frequent and many firms left the town.⁵ Fortyseven elastic web manufacturers were reported to be operating in Leicester in 1877 but only thirty were reported in 1888.⁶

Several factors account for the reluctance, on the part of hosiers, to experiment with steam powered machinery but the one that we can give the least weight to is technological ignorance. The machine which later

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1. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, p.91; A.T. Pattersen, op.cit., p.381.
 2. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, q.882; A.T. Patterson, op.cit., p.381.
 3. Ibid.
 4. White's Directory of Leicester 1863, p.136.
 5. Ibid., 1877, p.756.
 6. Ibid., pp. 756-7; Spencer New Guide to Leicester 1888, p.190.

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became the standard instrument of production in the steam powered factories, the Cotton's patent, bears a remarkable resemblance to the old flat hand frame, harnessed to steam via a drive system worked out by a man with no knowledge of engineering.¹ A far greater obstacle was presented by the failure of demand to rise by any noticeable extent during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Commissioner in his report, in 1845, noted that demand was checked by the high price of hosiery products which, despite notoriously low wage rates, he blamed on low productivity.² Frame rent was also a major factor in the continuity of the putting-out system. As long as the hosiers received a steady guaranteed income from the existing instruments of production major investment in new plant that entailed a certain measure of adventure and risk was unlikely. Steam powered factories also entailed major dislocations to the local community and the hosiers were only too well aware, in the years immediately following the Chartist disturbances, of the potential hostility of the Leicester working class.³

Labour opposition to mechanical innovation had been present since the genesis of the industry in Leicester. The first frames to appear in the town in the early eighteenth century were greeted by rioting hand knitters.⁴ In 1788 the Unitarians Coltman and Whetstone attempted to introduce mechanised spinning into the trade which resulted in the female hand spinners trade union, known locally as 'The Sisterhood', stirring their men-folk to riot against the use of machinery.⁵ 'The Humble Petition of the Poor Spinners', their protest, ran:

1. Wells, op.cit., p.119.

2. R.C. on F.W.K.s Commissioner's report VIII, IX.

3. See J.F.C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester' in A. Briggs (ed.), Chartist Studies (1959) pp. 121-9.

4. Chapman, op.cit., pp. 33-5.

5. Gardiner, op.cit., Vol. I, pp. 82, 83.

which on a very moderate calculation consists of eighteen thousand five hundred, employed in the town and country aforesaid, showeth that the business of spinning, in all its branches, hath ever been time out of mind the peculiar employment of women; in so much that every single woman is called in law a spinster ... It is therefore with great concern your petitioners see that this ancient employment is likely to be taken from them - an employment so consistent with civil liberty, so full of domestic comfort and so favourable to a religious life. This we apprehend will be the consequence of so many spinning mills, now erecting after the model of the cotton mills. The work of the poor will be done by these engines and they will be left without employment.¹

Coltman and Whetstone fearing the worst moved the machines to Loughborough, but the Leicester mob 'encouraged by the superior class' marched to Loughborough, destroyed the 'jennies' and brought the fragments back to Leicester in triumph.²

A further indication of the workers' temper during the first phase of mechanical innovation is given in Thompson's History of Leicester, published in 1871; quoting from the Leicester Journal, March 20, 1773, he relates how a crowd of workers smashed a new frame, said to be capable of making a dozen pairs of hose at once, which was exhibited in the Leicester Exchange. On this occasion the hosiers were made to promise not to introduce any machine that might reduce employment.³

The severe fall in demand for Leicester hose after 1810 tended to check the impulse towards innovation. The period 1810-50 has been well documented by both hosiery industry and Leicester historians and little purpose will be served by going over in detail this well ploughed furrow.⁴

1. Quoted in B. Drake, Women in Trade Unions (1920) p.3.

2. Gardiner, op.cit., Vol. I, p.83.

3. J. Thompson, History of Leicester in the Eighteenth Century (Leicester, 1871) p.141.

4. See A.T. Patterson, op.cit., ch. 3; F.W. Wells, op.cit., ch. 7.

The problems of the industry during this era can largely be accounted for by the new fashion for men to wear trousers, thus reducing both the size and importance of stockings in male dress; and the tendency to keep in employment the abundance of frames that were produced in the boom years of 1790-1810. These factors together with foreign competition, particularly from Saxony, in Leicester's American export market, and the failure of the domestic market to expand, locked the industry in a depression that lasted for forty years.¹

The lack of innovation amongst hosiers was a much referred to phenomena at the 1844 Royal Commission. Conventional wisdom based on the Lancashire experience dictated that the eradication of out-work by the factory system, while painful in the short term, had the beneficial effects of ending the squalor and deprivation of the domestic system. As we have seen, however, the failure of demand and the overabundance of labour mitigated against innovation.² By the mid-century, therefore, Leicester possessed both a class of conservatively minded entrepreneurs whose income was stabilised and often dependent upon frame rent, and a workforce characterised by contemporaries as the 'stubbornly independent lean stockingers'. The long depression and system of frame spreading had rendered the trade highly seasonal in nature.³ This situation had reacted on succeeding generations of stockingers and produced a type of worker who was almost by nature, irregular in his habits.

1. Wells, op.cit., p.110.

2. See N. McKendrick, 'Home Demand and Economic Growth' in N. McKendrick (ed.), Historical Perspectives (1974) on the importance of demand factors in the rise of the factory system, and H.J. Habakkuk, American and British Technology (1962) ch. 5, passim. On the retarding effect to innovation created by an oversupply of labour.

3. R.C. on F.W.K.s commissioners report, passim.

It must also be remembered that for every stockinger at the frame there was also a female employed in the finishing processes.¹ The vast majority of these ladies worked at home 'seaming' for extremely low wages.² Yet their reluctance to leave home and seek work in the hosiery factories that appeared in the 1860s was only equalled by the 'sisterhood's' earlier opposition to the mechanised spinning industry.³ While those women who did enter the early factories caused their employers considerable concern by their refusal to come to work before breakfast and other matters had been attended to at home. One hosier, William Walker, told the Royal Commission on Childrens Employment that 'the difficulty here is to get them to work long enough; there is no fear of them being over-worked. Many of our women do not come now till 9 a.m., after breakfast, that is, though our doors open at 6 a.m.'⁴ These women caused Walker so much trouble that he finally resorted to sending his machines out to country girls on the out-door system.⁵

The failure of the factory system to emerge in Leicester prior to the 1860s had clearly produced a workforce, based on the putting-out system, with fixed habits and domestic arrangements that were hostile to the imposition of factory discipline. This hostility, however, was of an extremely long lineage and probably acted as a barrier to innovation during the first phase of mechanisation at the end of the eighteenth century. This factor, together with the failure of demand, an abundance

1. Felkin, op.cit., p.34.

2. Ibid., p.24. Wages for seamers could be as low as two shillings per week.

3. 1876 R.C. on the working of the Factory and Workshop Acts, q.7,608.

4. 1864 R.C. on Childrens Employment. Second report, p.166. Evidence of Mr. Walker.

5. Ibid., p.165.

of cheap labour and above all the system of frame rent, which gave the hosier a seemingly endless return on the existing instruments of production, undoubtedly delayed the arrival of the factory chimney on the Leicester skyline.

Steam Powered Factories

So far I have sketched out and surveyed the elements that produced the technological underdevelopment of the Leicester hosiery industry in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The question which now arises is how and when was this milieu of workshops and merchant manufacturers transformed into a factory system? Recent historians of nineteenth century Britain have drawn attention to Sir John Clapham's salutary reminder on the slow progress of the factory and the continuity of old forms of production up until the end of the nineteenth century, and above all the danger of viewing British industry in the nineteenth century through Lancashire eyes.¹ The experiences of hosiery manufacture in late nineteenth century Leicester ties in remarkably well with this school of historical revisionism.

Generally speaking the main stimulants to factory production were a general upturn of demand after 1850, increased competition from mechanised factories in Saxony, alternative employment opportunities in the new boot industry, and various legislative measures. Taken collectively these factors provided both the economic imperatives and the change in attitudes that were necessary for factory production. This process, however, did not occur overnight and the old system was far from extinct in 1880.

1. R. Samuel's 'The Workshop of the World', History Workshop Journal, Vol. 3, 1977. A.E. Musson, 'Industrial Motive Power in the United Kingdom, 1880-70', Economic History Review, Vol. 29, 1976.

Before we commence this survey of the emergence of the Leicester hosiery factory a note of qualification on the limitations of statistical information is required. Apart from Gravenor Henson's early history of the hosiery industry,¹ William Felkin's account, produced in 1845, is the most applicable early work on our period and above all it is the first history of the trade that contains reliable statistical information.² Felkin, a former framesmith and hosier from Nottingham, turned statistician, was fired by a philosophy of industrial 'Malthusianism' in his writings. Believing that the major cause of the industry's stagnation was due to an over-abundance of both men and frames he undertook his statistical survey as part of his evidence to the 1845 Commission. Felkin's highly detailed enumerations were presented as part of the Commissioner's report and received wide publicity throughout the trade and most importantly from the historian's viewpoint they were never challenged by any of the witnesses. This numerical snapshot of Leicester in 1844 does, however, lack detail in certain crucial areas. While Felkin's tables display the number, types and products of all the frames in the town they do not show where the frames were located. We therefore cannot with accuracy state the size of the 'workshop' and 'domestic' sectors. Felkin also fails to furnish data on the crucially important issue of frame-ownership and therefore the changing relationships between hosier, middlemen and stockings remains highly impressionistic.

Official statistics are even more elusive and frustrating than Felkin. Hosiery was included with other textile industries in the 1833 Factory Act, but the statistical emphasis of the early inspectorate was largely directed towards the Lancashire cotton mills. No figures at all on the

1. G. Henson, The Civil, Political, and Mechanical History of the Framework Knitters (1831).

2. W. Felkin, An Account of the Machine-Wrought Hosiery Trade: Its Extent, and The Condition of the Framework-knitters; being a paper read in the statistical section, at the second York meeting of the British Association, 1845.

hosiery trade appeared in the 'factory inspectors returns' until 1862, and these tables are of little utility as they enumerate the industry on county divisions and it is impossible to disentangle Leicester from Leicestershire in any meaningful way.¹

The two sets of 'returns' that were published before the 1867 Workshops Act, that contain information on hosiery, those of 1862 and 1867, do list the number of factories in Leicestershire and the number of hand and steam powered frames that they employed, but given the Factory Act's loose definition of what is a factory - any establishment employing over fifty people - it is impossible to differentiate between large workshops and genuine steam powered factories. The two 'returns' do show a small rise in steam horse-power in the five years between 1862 and 1867, from 305 h.p. to 330 h.p., but Felkin's 1844 survey shows that Leicester did not possess a monopoly on steam over the county; the town of Loughborough for instance employed 84 steam frames in comparison to Leicester's 24.²

One of the few hard pieces of statistical evidence furnished by official returns is contained in the 1870 'Boroughs enforcing the Workshops Acts' document. In this return Sergeant Wright, the Leicester Borough Sanitary Inspector responsible for enforcing the Workshops Act, claimed that the town possessed 714 workshops which were mainly employed in hosiery and footwear production.³ Unfortunately this figure is not broken down into its component industries and is only useful as an indicator to the overall industrial organisation of the town in 1870.

1. Return of factories under inspection, Steam and Water Power: persons employed, 1862; Return of the Number of Cotton, Woollen, Shoddy, Worsted, Flax, Hemp, Jute, Rope, Horsehair, Elastic, Hosiery, Lace and Silk factories, subject to the Factories Act, 1867-8.

2. Felkin, op.cit., p.10.

3. Return showing the Boroughs and districts in which the Workshops Regulation Act has been enforced, 1870, p.15.

The potentially fruitful returns of 1871 which attempted to incorporate data from both the factory and workshop sectors for the first time have proved to be invaluable to Musson's work.¹ The tables on Leicester, however, are incomplete with the local inspector admitting that the workshop returns were only 'partially received'.² Furthermore, the major section of this volume is tabulated in county divisions, which roughly accorded with the individual inspector's area of authority; with Leicester town failing to appear in the lists of tables from selected boroughs at the rear of the volume.

After 1871 the quality of the returns reverse dramatically with figures from the hosiery trade enumerated collectively under the heading of 'The Three Midland Counties', i.e. Nottingham, Derby and Leicester, and separate statistics fail to re-appear until 1887 in the returns relating to 'Factory Inspectors Salaries etc.' Again, unfortunately, these figures are based on Leicestershire, but they do, however, show the decline of the workshop, with less than 50 employees, and the domination of the factory employing more than 50, with 893 of the former and 1,118 of the latter.³

To conclude this brief survey of official statistical material it can clearly be seen that the available data is of minor use to a local historical study.⁴ The failure to differentiate between town and country is the over-riding weakness and precludes many potentially fruitful exercises, such as the subtraction of figures relating to the numbers

1. Musson, op.cit., passim.

2. Return of the Number of Manufacturing Establishments in which the hours of work are regulated by any act of Parliament, 1871, p.140.

3. Return of Factory Inspectors Salaries etc. 1887, p.5.

4. On the weakness of nineteenth-century official statistics see R. Davidson, 'Llewellyn Smith, the Labour Department, and Government Growth, 1886-1909', in G. Sutherland (ed.), Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government (1972). For a contemporary critique see 'The Official Statistics Committee', Mins. of Ev. Appendix A: memorandum by R. Giffen on the 'Compilation and printing of Statistics of the United Kingdom', 1881, pp. 117-38.

employed in establishments under the Factory Act with the number enumerated in the census returns as being employed in hosiery in the borough, the only near accurate method of assessing the extent of the workshop sector.

Before we turn to the evidence that can be found in the various Parliamentary inquiries and Royal Commissions a small note is necessary on unofficial sources. Local directories relative to the period have been consulted but these offer little apart from generalisations on the 'growth of large firms' and the appearance of 'several steam factories'.¹ Leicester in fact seems to have been peculiarly weak in the production of local directories and those that are extant lack the detail that has enabled one recent historian to produce a study that utilised the local directory of Cardiff as his major primary source.² The local press has also proved equally barren; while the records of the borough council, which passed a bye-law in 1849 to control smoke from factory chimneys contain no precise material.³

The minute books of the Leicester Chamber of Commerce also offer little on the subject but the following snippet from 1860, while impressionistic, is useful. When a deputation, sent by the Chamber, to Paris in 1860 to provide information on local industry for those negotiating the commercial treaty with France, they reported to the negotiators that: 'Steam-power is very little used for worsted and woollen hosiery owing to the exigencies of the trade requiring constant changes in the articles produced. Some of the large houses do not use steam-power at all, and they are able to efficiently compete with those who do

1. Wrights Directory of Leicester, 1860, 1877, 1880, 1890.

2. M.J. Daunton, Coal Metropolis, Cardiff, 1870-1914 (Leicester 1977).

3. On this bye-law, see M. Elliot, op.cit., pp. 81-2, 84.

use it, which fact is a sufficient evidence that steam power affords no calculable pecuniary advantage, the trade in this respect differing materially from other textile manufacturers'.¹ Works by and on local entrepreneurs and published firms histories are also scant in quantitative information. Although the biographer of the Unitarian hosier Richard Harris mentioned that of the 35 establishments described as factories in 1850 almost all the genuine factories were in the spinning trade.²

The most reliable source on the developments of the Leicester hosiery industry during the second half of the nineteenth century are the various Royal Commissions and Parliamentary inquiries that sat between 1845 and 1892. Numbers, of course, only appear spasmodically and are difficult to tabulate into an orderly list or graph, but nevertheless the wealth of impressionistic evidence, occasionally anchored in quantitative data, that appear in these reports, is the most reliable source available.

Perhaps the main consideration uppermost in the mind of Richard Muggeridge, the commissioner who sat in 1844 to consider the hosiery trade, was to find the answer to the failure of the factory system to develop in the industry. The plight of the Midland stockinger had received widespread national publicity and the actions of Thomas Cooper's Chartist followers were still fresh in the minds of concerned contemporaries. The solution to the ills of the hosiery trade was largely dictated by the ideology of Utilitarianism which perceived the emergence of regulated factories as the best method of overcoming the abuses and disorder of the apparently anarchic methods of organisation that existed in the hosiery industry.

1. Leicester Chamber of Commerce Yearbook 1860.

2. T. Lomas, Memoir of the late Richard Harris (Leicester, 1855) pp. 59-60.

Muggeridge, in his report, concluded that the stagnation of the trade was caused primarily by overpriced products which were the result of outdated methods of production. When an employee of T. Collins, the pioneer of steam-powered hosiery production in Leicester, informed the Commissioner on the easy application of steam power to hand-operated rotary frames, Muggeridge gave his statement an enthusiastic endorsement.¹ Collins, however, was the only manufacturer in Leicester applying steam in the 1840s and was undoubtedly the owner of the 24 steam rotaries enumerated in Felkin's statistics.²

Despite the obvious stagnation of the trade profound changes were taking place. Of the 65 working stockingers interviewed in 1844, 46 were employed in shops, the majority of which belonged to middlemen. The largest of these employed some 50 or 60 workers.³ In 1840 none of the six most important hosiers in the town had shops of their own, but those entering the trade in the next few years established their own workshops from the start. Thus by 1844 hosiers workshops, as well as those owned by middlemen were competing with, and in many cases, emptying the small shops adjacent to, and often inside, the stockinger's home. Thomas Winters told the Commissioner that 'Now there are many men who have to walk a mile from their homes, to work in large shops holding 40-50 frames or more'.⁴ The major spur to this process of centralisation was the increasing use of wide frames, Felkin's figures showing that two thirds of all the frames in Leicester were of the wide variety in 1844. These machines, which required considerable strength

1. R.C. on F.W.K.s 1845, minutes of evidence, q.91.

2. Felkin, op.cit., pp. 10-11.

3. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, minutes of evidence, q.127.

4. Ibid., q.135.

to operate, were generally used in garment production.¹ Each frame would produce a particular part so that production under one roof, especially if the seaming was also carried out within the building, was often seen to be desirable.

By 1855, however, only slight change can be discerned. The Report of the Select Committee on Stoppage of Wages (hosiery) 1855, noted that there were only 200 power frames in Leicester that year. There was also a slight drift away from the tendency to concentrate frames in workshops, which was caused by a revival in the fancy sector where hosiers needed to keep tight control on quality and thus preferred to deal direct with the knitter.² The workers, of course, favoured this development as it freed them from the middleman and assured them the full warehouse price. Nevertheless, in 1855 most of the hosiers of whom we have specific knowledge worked mainly through middlemen. R. Mitchell employed all his 700-800 outside frames via 'undertakers'.³ The 4,000 frames of John Biggs depended mainly on middlemen, and Biggs claimed that all the major hosiers did likewise.⁴ Bilson, Baines, Walker and even Corah who was rapidly overtaking Biggs as Leicester's largest hosier, all confirmed that they depended on middlemen.⁵ Clearly the wide frames, owned by large hosiers were increasing the activities of the 'undertakers', while the return of fortune to the fancy trade gave a boost to the small hosiers working the narrow frames.

1. When wide machines were introduced into the trade at Harwick, female knitters had to be replaced by men, a point that lends colour to the stockingers' view that the operation of wide frames was 'man's work'. Drake, op.cit., p.133.

2. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1853.

3. S.C. on Stoppage of Wages (hosiery) 1855, qq. 2-14.

4. Ibid., q. 363.

5. Ibid., qq. 391-2, 455.

A few major hosiers were reported to have attempted centralised production inside their own warehouses, but Baines told the committee that 'a few hosiers, having failed to make a workshop pay, because of the workers' opposition, were forced to return to putting-out through middle-men'.¹ At least two manufacturers, however, had made positive steps towards factory production, these two hosiers accounting for the 200 power frames recorded in 1855.²

Between 1855 and the 1871 Royal Commission on the Truck System our sources largely dry up. All we have are the crude bench marks supplied by the returns of the Factory Inspectorate, the inadequacy of which I have already discussed. These returns, however, if nothing else, confirm the slow growth of steam. In 1871 the County and Town of Leicester possessed only 389 h.p. of steam in comparison to 305 h.p. in 1862. The reasons for this slow progress can easily be discerned from the Reports of the Truck Commissioners.

Corah's informed the Commissioners that they had finally abandoned the rent system in 1866 with the opening of their Saint Margaret's works.³ Corah's, however, were an exception, their success being based on an elaborate network of regional warehouses which tended to iron out the fluctuations of seasonal demand.⁴ Indeed, the most striking feature that emerges from the pages of the 1871 report is its similarity to that of 1845. J. Brindley, a stockinger and leader of the local knitters union described a mode of industrial organisation that still clung to frame rent and ancillary charges, was dominated by middlemen and susceptible to severe seasonal fluctuations.⁵

1. Ibid., q. 2417.

2. Ibid., qq. 1198, 1206, 1238.

3. R.C. on the Truck System, 1873, q. 41, 652.

4. C.W. Webb, Corah's of Leicester (Leicester, 1948) pp. 16-18.

5. R.C. on Truck System, 1871, q. 41, 665.

'Spreading' of work amongst frames in times of poor trade still continued and one manufacturer had even given it a novel form. Brindley, when questioned on 'spreading' related how Sam Odams, a hosier employing two to three hundred men, owned far too many frames for the amount of work available. To overcome this problem Brindley claimed that:

He has instituted a system of lending money; it is called a bank there, and there is a cry on Mondays that the bank is open. In a factory of 200 or 300 men, there is always a number that will embrace the opportunity of borrowing money and getting drunk with it; and he calculates on a lot of the men going to drink with the bank money ... You have not to ask for the money; you walk into the warehouse, and show your face; there is a crowd about and it is quite well known what you want. The book-keeper looks round and puts the names down on the list; he places a couple of sovereigns¹ on the table and then he reads the names out for 2s. each'.

When questioned by the Commissioners Odams admitted that he did practice the 'bank system', but only for indoor men. When asked 'Is the rent you receive for your frames a very profitable part of the business of manufacture in Leicester?' Odams replied, 'We do depend on it being a profitable part'.² So profitable in fact, that even those manufacturers employing steam were still charging factory operatives machine rent which was often as high as thirteen shillings per week.³

A major technological breakthrough occurred in 1864 when William Cotton of Leicester invented his 'Cotton Patent' frame. This was a flat frame driven by a rotary mechanism which finally solved the problem of 'fashioning' by power. It followed the same principles as Lee's original frame but carried them out with different motions; introducing a needle bar which moved vertically. Moreover, its adaptability enabled all kinds of fashioned work to be produced and soon improved models were

1. Ibid., qq. 41, 673-4.

2. Ibid., q. 42, 855.

3. Ibid., q. 41, 732 and Select Committee on Stoppage of Wages (hosiery) 1855, q.186.

making a dozen or more hose at once.¹ The early 'rotaries' which appeared in the 1840s and were the first generation of steam powered machines in the industry were not superseded by the 'Cottons Patent' as both types of frame continued to produce their own specialities: the flat machinery usually producing garments or their separate parts and the circulars making large amounts of fabric as well as seamless stockings.²

Cotton was employed by a Loughborough hosier when he perfected his invention, but it was the Nottingham trade that was first to utilise the new technology when Mundella and Morley entered into an agreement with Cotton for the latter to build machines for their exclusive use.³ It was not until 1878 when Cotton started business on his own account that his machines became generally available.⁴ The contract between Cotton, and Mundella and Morley, was obviously an important factor in the slow growth of the factory in Leicester, as the Leicester trade increasingly based on garment manufacture, produced on wide flat frames, stood to gain most from the new technology.⁵

As we have already seen it is impossible to gauge with precision the genesis and development of the steam powered factory in Leicester. Much of the evidence contained in the reports of the Royal Commission on the Depression of Trade and Industry relates rather impressionistically the quickening pace of the introduction of steam powered frames in the late 1870s.⁶ Daniel Merrick, the founder of Leicester Trades Council,

1. W.T. Rowlett, 'The Hosiery Trade in Leicester', Leicester Chamber of Commerce Yearbook 1911.

2. Ibid.

3. Wells, op.cit., pp. 119-21.

4. Ibid.

5. See C. P. Cunnington and C. Willett, The History of Underclothes (1951) chs. IX and X on the growing importance of under-garments in the dress of the period and the important fad for Jaeger Sanitary Woollen underwear.

6. R.C. on Depression of Trade and Industry 1886. Appendix II, q.4715.

and the leader of the local hand frame knitters union, The Sock and Top Society, told the 1886 Commission that employment had been good up to 1875 then fell away, and by 1885 was totally depressed. Out of 1,100 skilled male workers, and 100 others, in that branch of the industry, 700 were wholly unemployed and 'new modes-of-production' were blamed.¹

Apart from the availability of new technology, other factors assisted the rise of factory production. Increased foreign competition undoubtedly acted as spur to innovation. The yearbooks of the Leicester Chamber of Commerce are replete with references to the urgent need for technical education throughout the 1880s, as a means of challenging the mechanical superiority of the Saxony trade based in the factory town of Chemnitz. When a technical school was opened in 1885 W.T. Rowlett, a major local hosier, set to work on translating Gustav Willkomm's college text book 'The Technology of Frame-Work Knitting' for the Leicester students.² The threat from the Chemnitz factories was indeed serious with the export value of woollen hose falling from £348,000 in the year 1861 to £288,000 in 1875.³

The industry faced other problems besides foreign competition. Perhaps the major obstacle to factory production was the deeply rooted structure of the putting-out system with its multitude of social and economic aspects. Professor Wells has argued that the most significant event in the decline of out-work was the passing of the Education Act in 1870.⁴ He claims that the old method of organisation was highly

1. Ibid.

2. Willkomm was the director of the Hosiery School at Chemnitz.

3. Wells, op.cit., p.149.

4. Ibid., pp. 129-130.

dependent on child labour. The boy, who from an early age, carried out his father's winding, became socialised into the stockinger's milieu and soon developed his father's attitudes and independence. Similarly young girls were trained by their mothers into the art of seaming. With the arrival of the board school, especially after 1876 when attendance was made compulsory, children were removed from the workshops into the classrooms where new horizons and attitudes were instilled, and the putting-out system received a short circuit in the vital area of recruitment.

There is much evidence to support this thesis. Angrave and Harris, the representatives of the Leicester Hosiery Manufacturers Association, to the Commission investigating the workings of the Factory and Workshops Acts in 1876, told the Commissioners that they wanted all child labour under thirteen years of age abolished, as Leicester manufacturers found it extremely difficult to recruit young and female labour into factories.¹ When asked 'How is it then with very much less wages in workshops you find any difficulty in getting them in factories where you are giving higher wages?' they replied, 'There are many circumstances that lead to that. There are family connexions, persons where they have been in the habit of working for a certain place continue to do so; they are brought up to work at that place and they remain there'.²

It is interesting to note the emergence of this manufacturers' society, and the formulation of corporate policies, which contrasts strongly with the diversity of opinion expressed by hosiers at the 1871

1. R.C. on the Working of the Factory and Workshops Acts, 1876. qq. 7602-7.

2. Ibid., q. 7608.

Truck Acts Commission.¹ A major stimulus to the formation of this association and the changing attitudes of hosiers towards technology must have come from the abolition of frame rent in 1874, the legislative outcome of the 1871 Commission. Wells claims that frame rent was virtually moribund by 1874 and the effect of the legislation was unimportant. This may have been the case in Nottingham, where Mundella and Morley pioneered factory production in the 1860s, but the hostility expressed by the Leicester knitters over frame rent to the 1871 commission and the evidence of Odams suggests that rent was still a major component in the Leicester trade in the early 1870s. Thus increased foreign competition, the rise of the board school, and the abolition of frame rent all acted in eroding the antipathy of the Leicester hosiers towards factory production.

The new technology was to prove expensive. Each 'Cotton's Patent' cost £200 plus a considerable further investment in steam plant. It is easy to imagine the reluctance of manufacturers to scrap the old system. With the high costs of installation hosiers endeavoured to maximise output. Thus night shift working became the norm, and as the 'Cotton's Patent' shared many characteristics with the hand frame, skilled hand frame knitters were recruited to operate the new machinery. Hand frame knitters also possessed maintenance skills, vital to the smooth running of the expensive machines, and unlike women they could work at night.²

1. I have been unable to locate any sources on the L.H.M.A., but as Angrave and Harris were prominent members of the Chamber of Commerce, which spearheaded the campaign for technical education in hosiery, the L.H.M.A. may have been a sub-committee of the Chamber during this period.

2. Mundella told the R.C. on Trades Unions 1867-8 that it was the policy of hosiers to select the most skilled hand frame knitters to operate the new technology. R.C. on Trades Unions 1867-8. Tenth Report q. 19,464.

With the spread of steam powered factories in the late 1870s the trade began to rationalise its ancillary processes. Improved sewing machines, capable of being powered by steam, facilitated centralised production. This development, however, was somewhat tardy. Among the early sewing machines there was only one type that rivalled hand work in the quality of its stitching. This was the 'linking' or 'turning-off' machine, invented by Campion of Nottingham in 1858, which joined the selvedged fashion fabric loop by loop with a chain stitch. For cut-work, however, with no selvedge, the 'linker' could not be used, and in any case it was too slow for the production of cheap garments.¹ In the early period of steam factories there was an expansion of putting-out to the seaming sector. The introduction, however, of a machine which neatly trimmed the edge of the fabric as it seamed gave a boost to the cut-out trade, but it was not until 1887 that the 'overlock', a machine that not only trimmed, but also covered the raw edge, finally solved the problem of seaming cut-out garments. Cut work now began to rival the fashioned article for quality and was so much cheaper in production as to have serious effects on the fashioned trades.² The concentration of female stitchers in factories now continued more rapidly and other classes of women employed in the trade such as 'menders' and 'cutters' whose work, although done by hand, was so closely allied with the other processes of manufacture that it could most conveniently be carried on in the same building.

1. Wells, op.cit., p.158.

2. Ibid.

Other mechanical changes were also affecting the sexual composition of the hosiery factories. Although some women were employed on mechanically driven circular frames from the beginning,¹ the demand, at first, was mainly for skilled men to operate the steam rotaries such as the 'Cotton's Patent'. We have already noted the advantages in employing male operatives on the rotaries, but as machines were improved and became more automatic in operation female substitution became possible, especially on the new 'Lamb's' and 'Griswold' machines.² The machine, however, that did more than any other to increase the numbers of women knitters was the automatic seamless hose and half-hose frame. Not only did this machine provide a new field for female employment, it also severely affected the demand for fully fashioned goods made on the rotaries.³ The prevailing desire throughout the trade was for cheaper and cheaper goods and the seamless automatic frame cheapened production two ways: it made possible the turning out of hose in one operation, and its operation only required semi-skilled labour.⁴ The following table clearly shows the increasing employment of women in Leicester hosiery:

Table 1.1 Numbers Employed in Leicester Hosiery

	<u>1871</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>
Males	3,037	3,391	4,286	3,282
Females	1,886	5,308	8,381	9,107

Source: Census reports 1871-1901.

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1. R.C. on Factory and Workshops Acts 1876, q.7,213.
 2. R.C. on Labour XXXV 1892. Minutes of evidence, qq. 13773-7.
 3. Wells, op.cit., p.156.
 4. Ibid.

This trend brought repeated complaints from the Leicester Amalgamated Hosiery Union (L.A.H.U.), whose policy of one man, one frame, was being seriously undermined.¹ The most ominous threat, however, to the standard of living of the town workers came from the country districts. All through the history of the trade we can trace the play of centralising and decentralising forces. In the early years of the steam factory the town was dominant; but during the last decade of the century this was reversed. One cause of the 'flight to the periphery' was the introduction of automatic frames whose operatives could be quickly trained. Another was the new marketing practice of selling by sample through travelling salesmen, which resulted in factories in the 'trade centre' losing their marketing advantage.²

Although country labour was less efficient, wage rates were often 30 to 50% below trade union prices. Country competition forced the L.A.H.U. to make concessions but the migration of work continued.³ Employers would select a poverty stricken area, where almost any wage would be accepted, in which to establish a factory. The L.A.H.U. would respond by reducing Leicester wage rates, to enable the town manufacturers to effectively compete, and to prevent a further migration of machinery. The country employers would then retaliate with even lower wages, and so the struggle went on. The last fifteen years of the nineteenth century witnessed a growth in hostilities between capital and labour which dominated the trade and to understand more fully the nature of these disputes it is necessary to examine in closer detail the world of labour organisation in hosiery.

1. L.A.H.U. Monthly report. April 1888.

2. Wells, op.cit., p.160.

3. R.C. on Labour, minutes of evidence, Part II. Evidence of J. Holmes, qq. 12,734-7.

Labour Organisations in Leicester Hosiery 1858-1900

There had been many instances of trade unionism amongst Leicester hosiery workers prior to our period. Indeed the Webbs, in their classic history, identified the eighteenth century East Midlands stockings' combinations as the pioneers of the British trade union movement.¹ These early associations were, however, to say the least, mercurial, often being formed solely for the advocacy of the enforcement of the laws of the old guild system.² The 'seven-year union' of 1819-26 was perhaps the first really permanent combination in Leicester. This union, which operated under the cloak of a friendly society during the era of the Combination acts was headed by Robert Hall, the minister of the Harvey Lane Baptist Chapel. Hall, who is widely regarded as Leicester's finest ever preacher, showed a remarkable talent in bringing together workers, hosiers, the Tory corporation and large county landowners to support the union. The main policy of the union was to maintain the statement of prices in Leicester by the device of paying the relatively large unemployment benefit of six shillings and six pence per week to those workers who refused to work at less than the statement.³ The scheme was of course a grandiose strike fund carried out under the guise of a friendly society which was designed to impose a town based 'producers cartel'. The main target of the 'union'⁴ were those renegade employers who attempted to gain competitive advantage by paying below the statement and also the bagmen described by Hall as 'that reptile race who with a mixture of cruelty and rapacity, at once snatch bread from the worker and

1. S. and B. Webb, History of Trade Unionism (1901 edition) p.40.

2. Wells, op.cit., p.88.

3. R. Hall, An Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Framework-knitters fund (Leicester 1820); and R. Hall, A reply to the principal objections advanced by Cobbett and others against the framework-knitters Friendly Relief Society (Leicester 1821).

4. Hall specifically called the society a 'union' in his pamphlets which is an interesting early appearance of the term.

fair profits from the hands of the regular and honest manufacturer'.¹

At its peak Hall's union represented 8,000 members who contributed 6d. per week to the fund which was supplemented by large cash payments from non-conformist hosiers, members of the landed aristocracy such as the Duke of Rutland and the Earl of Stamford and the Tory corporation. The parish authorities also made frequent contributions in lieu of the savings on local poor relief that resulted from the fund's operation. This unholy alliance of the usually warring factions of local society was probably the product of those troubled times. Luddism may not have appeared in Leicester but it was certainly abroad in the county, and this was also an era when revolutionary ideas were being expressed. A political battle between the largely Unitarian hosiers and the Tory corporation, however, dominated the local scene and the frameworkers with their freemans franchise which gave them nearly 20% of the electorate were obviously a section of local society that could not be alienated by either side.² The involvement of the aristocracy in the fund is more ambiguous as they could have been motivated by either a desire to extend Tory paternalism into the town during a troubled era or by a wish to assist their political colleagues in the corporation.

The outcome of this community based alliance was industrial peace for over a decade. The seven year union ceased its activities in 1826 after the repeal of the Combination acts which also coincided with an upturn in trade. The idea of a union of all classes still continued to receive a periodic airing. William Jackson, a stockinger and one of the leaders of the seven year union and a popular local figure, attempted to revive Hall's union when hard times again returned in 1833.³ Jackson's

1. Quoted in Wells, op.cit., p.63.

2. See Patterson, op.cit., chs. 7 and 8 on this interesting period. Also Leicester Poll Books 1826 on the stockingers' franchise.

3. William Jackson, 'An address to the frame-work knitters of the town and county of Leicester', (Leicester 1833).

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initiative appears to have failed by 1834,¹ but the idea of union of all classes was again taken up by J.P. Mursell, Robert Hall's successor at the Harvey Street Chapel. Despite support from some large hosiers including Biggs, Harris and Coltman, Mursell's plan was doomed to failure as they were unable to recruit the 'large bagmen', which made the formation of a 'producers' cartel' the central feature of the scheme impossible.² The following ten years of framework knitters organisation is closely linked to Leicester's famous Chartist period, an episode that has been the subject of two stimulating histories, and therefore little use would be served by going over this well ploughed furrow.³

While Chartism attracted the energy and talents of the stockingers' leaders major developments were occurring within the world of Leicester trade unionism. The emergence of a society exclusively for 'fine glove hands' in the early 1840s marks a distinct discontinuity in the history of hosiery workers' organisations. Unlike the 'industrial', 'open' unions of previous decades the 'glove society' were of an 'exclusive' type, ignoring their less fortunate colleagues in the 'common' branches.⁴ Glove hands had traditionally been the most skilled and highest paid members of the Leicester trade and the utilisation of elastic web helped to keep this section of the industry buoyant. In 1844 John Biggs employed 300 frames in the glove trade and in the same year Leicester contained 1,200 frames, nearly 30% of the town's total, that worked in the glove branch.⁵ The glove union claimed to represent 1,200 members, subscriptions

1. J.F.C. Harrison, op.cit., p.100.

2. A.T. Patterson, op.cit., pp. 298-300.

3. J.F.C. Harrison, op.cit.; A.T. Patterson, op.cit., chs. 15, 16.

4. R.C. on F.W.K.s 1845, qq. 8, 9, 31, 126.

5. A.T. Patterson, op.cit., p.381; Felkin, op.cit., pp. 10-11.

were 3d. per week and strike pay was fixed at 8s. per week.¹ Did the glove workers constitute an 'aristocratic' strata amongst the Leicester framework knitters? This question is difficult to answer due to the lack of precise data on those aspects of the 'labour aristocracy' identified by Hobsbawm.² William Biggs claimed that earnings in the glove branch were as high as three and occasionally five pounds per week during the early years of the trade, but by 1841 the wages of glove hands averaged 20s per week.³ Felkin noted in 1844 that glove workers averaged between 14s. and 17s. 8d. per week while one exceptional worker earned 38s in one particular week.⁴ Furthermore, Felkin pointed out that even glove hands had to seek parochial relief during slack periods.⁵

Glove hands may not have been 'labour aristocrats' but several important features set them apart from the rest of the trade. As we have seen there was a marked differential between the wages of the glove workers and other stockings, but of even more importance was the mode of organisation in the glove sector. Worsted gloves, being a fashion product, necessitated the gathering together of men and frames into relatively large workshops to facilitate the trade's quick response to the vagaries of demand. Thomas Winter, the secretary of the glove union, reported to the commissioner in 1844, that glove hands generally worked in large shops, often containing as many as sixty frames, and none of the men utilised the labour of their own families for winding and seaming.⁶ When questioned on the success of his union and the failure

1. R.C. on F.W.K.s 1845, qq. 30 - 38.

2. E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (1964) p.273.

3. William Biggs in Leicestershire Mercury, April 3, 1841.

4. Felkin, op.cit., pp. 19-20.

5. Ibid.

6. R.C. on F.W.K.s, qq. 121 - 7.

of other sectors of the hosiery trade to emulate the glove hands organisation, Winters pointed to two factors that aided the unionisation of the glove trade: high wages, and the centralisation of workers into large shops.¹

'The men in the glove branch have many more privileges than in the stocking branch', A. Caple, a glove worker told the Commissioner. We can, of course, isolate the material advantages of glove workers relative to the stocking trade; higher wages, trade union organisation, a domestic life uncluttered by frames and the attendant family labour. Another important feature that distinguished the glove branch was the reliance upon narrow frames in glove manufacture. Virtually every glove worker interviewed in 1844 had previously been employed in the narrow frame fancy hose sector. Thus while their colleagues in the stocking trade had, increasingly, to suffer the heavy toil of wide frames producing fabric for 'cut-outs' and the spurious trade, the glove workers were able to retain the 'genuine skill', that was essential to the production of fashioned garments on narrow frames.

The emergence of 'sectionalism' in the organisation of Leicester hosiery workers in the 1840s has interesting implications for the debate on the general rise of 'exclusive' unions during this period. The previous forms of trade unionism amongst Leicester hosiery workers were 'open' and usually involved other parts of the community, especially hosiers and the town corporation, in their efforts to impose a 'producers cartel'. This strategy, however, was peculiar to the predominantly home based stockinger of the 1820s, whose main strength lay in his 'freeman's' vote. In 1826 framework knitters constituted nearly twenty per cent of the electorate and it is not surprising that both radical

1. Ibid., qq. 111, 125.

hosiers and the Tory corporation were eager to assist in Robert Hall's union.¹ The proportion of enfranchised stockings declined after 1826 and by 1857 they accounted for only 8.6% of the electorate.²

The arrival of the glove union, therefore, was a distinct break from previous forms of trade unionism in Leicester. This organisation was firmly based in the new larger workshops, the majority of which were owned by former middlemen.³ Although the glove union declined, as the trade became depressed in the 1870s, its emergence in the 1840s was to herald the imminent arrival of other sectional hosiery organisations as the industry increasingly became based on workshops producing for particular branches of the trade.

During the 1850s the clouds of depression that had overshadowed the Leicester hosiery trade for more than forty years began to clear. The general rise of living standards gave a boost to the market and with the arrival of the boot industry in 1853, employment prospects brightened.⁴ This improvement was reflected in the growing confidence of the stockings and it was during the 1850s that permanent trade unions appeared in other branches of the trade. The Hose, Shirt and Drawer Union and the Sock and Top Union were both formed in 1858 and as their name suggests they, like the glove hands, were primarily concerned with their own particular sectors rather than the trade in general.⁵ Both unions

1. Leicester Poll Books 1826; also see R. Greaves, 'Catholic Relief and the Leicester Election of 1826' in Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 1940, on the importance of local factors in the 1826 election.

2. Leicester Poll Books, 1857.

3. R.C. on F.W.K.s, q. 129.

4. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1853.

5. Webb Collection, Section A, pp. 120 and 126.

enjoyed a certain measure of success: advances gained in the prosperous years of 1858-61 were maintained and by 1873 skilled rates had climbed to 24s. per week, in comparison to 19s. in 1859. In 1860 the Hose, Shirt, and Drawer Union represented 800 members in the town and 200 in the surrounding villages and by 1870 membership had increased to 1,000 in the town and 1,000 in the country. The smaller Sock and Top Union represented 800 workers in 1870 when its membership reached its peak.¹

Trade union organisation along product divisions was a consequence of the increasing number of large workshops specialising in particular branches of the trade and the marked variations in demand between the various sectors. In 1844 the glove hands pointed out to the Commissioner that despite their higher wages and 'privileges' the glove trade suffered from extreme fluctuations in demand in comparison to the stocking trade.² The Hose, Shirt and Drawer Union organised workers who were enjoying the fruits of the Victorian obsession with underwear, but this sector, like the glove trade, could often find itself victim to the folly of fashion.³ Another outcome of this work-differentiation was the emergence and institutionalisation of complex wage structures that were peculiar to each particular branch. The hosiery trade in Leicester had always produced a variety of products that commanded different levels of remuneration based on such factors as demand, labour supply and skill; but with the arrival of separate trade unions these variations became fixed and embodied in the various wage agreements negotiated by the

1. Ibid.

2. R.C. on F.W.K.s, 1845, q.55.

3. Cunnington, op.cit., chs. 7, 8, 9.

individual unions. Furthermore, these differentials appear to have been successfully maintained for many years.¹

Despite their undoubted success these sectional trade unions failed to effectively spread their influence into the country districts. The Leicester trade was therefore always susceptible to damaging competition from country entrepreneurs whose wages and costs were well below those in Leicester. Access to frames was still unrestricted and certain branches of the trade were faced with the problem of female labour working narrow frames. It is therefore not surprising to find these unions somewhat inclined to pragmatism and afraid of confronting major issues. Robert Brindley, the leader of the Hose, Shirt, and Drawer Union explained to the Commissioners investigating the Truck System why his union had not struck against frame rents and shop charges.

There is a union among frame-work knitters in Leicester, and there is no rule laid down in that union to strike against charges - not for their total abolition ... It is too formidable a question for us. It would be more than we would be able to overcome ... When we strike it is generally an isolated case; it is some unprincipled manufacturer who wants to get his work cheaper than the rest, and when we have one or two in hand we can overcome them, but if we had the whole body coming with their capital against us at once we should have no chance.²

As would be expected under these circumstances, subscriptions to both unions were very low. The Hose, Shirt, and Drawer Union charged 3d. per week when payment was first introduced in the early 1860s.³ Little is known of the early years of the Sock and Top Union but in the early 1870s

1. See the tables on wages in Miscellaneous Statistics, Part IV, 1862, p.256; Miscellaneous Statistics, Part IV, 1866, p.280; Miscellaneous Statistics, Part X, 1879, p.399; Miscellaneous Statistics, Part XI, 1883, p.418. All the above tables are sub-divided into Plain, Fancy, and Under Clothes sections.

2. R.C. on Truck Acts, 1871, pp. 821-22.

3. Webb Collection, Section A, pp. 121, 141.

their leader, Daniel Merrick, fixed subscriptions at 6d. per week for men and 4d. for women and boys.¹ Neither organisation paid friendly society benefits nor employed full-time officials.² Despite these shortcomings the Leicester knitters were fairly successful, wages rose steadily up to the late 1870s and they avoided being drawn into an arbitration agreement on the lines of Mundella's Nottingham scheme.³ The diversity of products manufactured in the Leicester trade also acted as an obstacle to an arbitration scheme as uniform 'statements' were virtually impossible to formulate. A board of arbitration was set up in the town in 1866 but its meetings were infrequent. Mundella informed the Commissioners investigating the truck system that 'The Leicester Board was not a very lively thing. It has not been carried out very well'.⁴

The slow introduction of steam powered frames in the late 1860s had no detrimental effects on the knitters' unions. If anything, the concentration of work into larger units, both factories and workshops, probably assisted the growth of two unions, and by 1885 the majority of the power frame workers in Leicester were organised by the Leicester and Leicestershire Framework Knitters Union, a product of the federation of the two Societies in 1872 designed to coordinate their campaign against frame rent.⁵ During the 1860s and 1870s increased product demand and the slow development of steam technology produced an indian summer for the hand frame knitters. The early steam machines displaced the broader

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. See R.C. on Trades Unions 1867-8. Evidence of A.J. Mundella, q. 19,342 on the lock-out that led to the instigation of the Nottingham Arbitration Board. Also J.H. Porter, 'Wage Bargaining and Conciliation Agreements, 1860-1914', Economic History Review, 1970.

4. R.C. on Truck Acts, 1871 p.840.

5. Webb collection, Section A, p.126.

gauge narrow frames, traditionally operated by young learners and women,¹ but created no disruption to the fancy sector, while the wide frames, producing garments and 'cut-ups', were improved to such an extent that they were able to match the early steam rotaries in performance.²

The increase in productivity led to a parallel increase in demand for seaming work. So great was the expansion of the domestic seaming sector, an area dominated by female workers paid incredibly low wages, that 'Some town councillors and other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, seeing with concern the depressed conditions of female labour in the Leicester hosiery trade appealed to the "Women's Trade Union League" for assistance'.³ A meeting was held in the Town Hall where the seamers formed a union. Negotiations with employers secured an advance of 25% on wages and members threw themselves with extraordinary vigour into the movement, conducting the whole of the business themselves. The Society of Seamers and Stitchers was governed by an executive committee composed of 'middle-aged and elderly married women' whose members would often walk ten or twenty miles to collect subscriptions or to interview employers'.⁴ Their secretary, Mrs. Mason, a colourful local personality, described to delegates at the fourth annual meeting of the Women's Trade Union League their efforts to recruit workers in the surrounding villages in the first winter of the union's existence. 'The ground was covered with snow and we had to go all through the snow and frost. We were over our shoe tops in snow and our clothes froze on us, but we did

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1. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 1863, p.264, ev. of A.J. Mundella.
 2. G. Willkomm, Technology of Frame Work Knitting (Leicester 1885) p.252.
 3. Quoted in B. Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p.14. The Rev. J. Page Hopps of the Unitarian Great Meeting seems to have been the main instigator of this move, Hopps being an active member of the league, *ibid.*, p.17.
 4. *Ibid.*

not care for that, we were in earnest and determined to find them out'.¹
 The valiant efforts of these pioneers were soon rewarded when membership climbed to 3,000 by 1876.²

Mrs. Mason represented her union at the T.U.C. of 1877, crossing swords with Henry Broadhurst over her opposition to the cotton union's resolution which called for greater restrictions on female labour.³ She was also the first woman to serve on a local trades council.⁴ The Seamers and Stitchers Society were obviously the league's major success and represent a remarkable achievement in the history of organisation amongst female out-workers. This success, however, was to prove short-lived. Mrs. Mason died in 1880, and the Society, in many ways a product of her hard work and considerable personality, lost nearly 2,000 members soon after her death, and the organisation became insolvent. The secretary of the framework knitters' union reported to the league that, 'the women have become indifferent to their union', adding that the long distances to be covered by homeworkers in order to pay contributions hampered the Society. By 1882 the Society of Stitchers and Seamers were forced to take refuge in the men's union.⁵

The hard work of Mrs. Mason and her friends was obviously a major factor in the rapid growth of the seamers' union, yet despite their efforts the society's decline was inevitable. Although the growth of factory production was particularly slow in the worsted hosiery trade, by 1876 the trend towards centralised production units can be discerned. When Mrs. Mathews, a member of the seamers' executive committee was asked

1. Women's Union Journal, July 1878.

2. R.C. on Factory Acts 1876, qq. 7808 - 10.

3. Drake, op.cit., p.16.

4. Ibid., p.14.

5. Ibid., p.15.

by the Commissioners investigating the workings of the Factory and Workshops Acts in 1876, if the numbers of hand seamers were declining she replied that her trade was increasingly being affected by the growth of factory based machine seaming.¹ Clearly the growth of factories was encouraging the implementation of Campion's linking machine; an ominous development for the seamers as this machine was only suitable for the better paid fancy trade. The seamers, therefore, were left with poorly remunerated cut-up work until 1887 when the arrival of the overlock stitcher ended the hand-seaming industry.² The meteoric rise and decline of the Seamers and Stitchers' Society can be accounted for by a unique conjunction of circumstances; middle class propaganda from the league, genuine grievances, the appearance of a strong local leadership, and above all a high demand for the women's labour. It is therefore not surprising that female workers in Leicester, apart from sporadic outbursts such as the 1886 riots, remained quiescent, generally leaving it to the men to 'do the fighting', until a remarkably similar set of circumstances appeared in the footwear trade in 1911.³

The 1870s witnessed the organisation of other groups of women workers in the hosiery trade. Barbara Drake has noted the formation of a small 'menders' society who followed the example of the seamers' organisation in 1874.⁴ The menders worked inside the hosier's warehouse alongside the 'aristocratic' warehousemen. These formidable ladies had for many years been a constant irritant to the Leicester hosiers. As the warehouses were classified as factories under the Factories Acts, the

1. R.C. on Factories Acts, 1876, q. 7804.

2. Wells, op.cit., p.158.

3. A. Fox, A History of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (Oxford, p.309. This time the propaganda came from the Suffragettes. 1958),

4. Drake, op.cit., p.14.

women were not allowed to work after 7 p.m.;¹ while their refusal to start work until after breakfast gave them the benefit of a relatively short working day. The mending ladies considered themselves superior to other female hosiery workers; Mundella even went so far as to compare their status with that of milliners.² The 'Menders Society' succeeded in obtaining wage rises of up to five shillings per week, and was finally absorbed into the L.A.H.U. in 1885.

The growth of a factory based labour force led to tensions between the factory workers and their predominantly workshop based union.³ Competition from country factories, constant changes in design and fashion, together with the depression of the early 1880s, all served to undermine the wages of the factory based knitters and to challenge their rule of one man, one frame.⁴ The hand knitters themselves were suffering from similar forces and with their lower wages they could be hardly expected to look favourably upon the factory workers' repeated request for union funds to maintain their higher rates.⁵ The outcome of this tension was the formation in 1885 of the Leicester Amalgamated Hosiery Union for the exclusive organisation of factory workers.

Unlike the older unions, the L.A.H.U. was an industrial union from the outset. The male power knitters were always aware of the threat from female factory labour and the recruitment of women into the union was

1. B.L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, A History of Factory Legislation (1903) still offers the best account of the complexities of the nineteenth century acts.

2. R.C. on Factory Acts, 1876, qq. 137 - 8.

3. Webb Collection, Section A, Vol. 34, p.2.

4. Ibid.

5. It is extremely difficult, because of the diversity of products, to furnish precise figures for wage rates. This is further hampered by the lack of data on this subject. The nearest reliable information that is available was published in 'Miscellaneous Statistics' Part XI, 1883, p. 418, which show that earnings for male power frame knitters in the plain branch of the trade were 30s. per week in comparison with 24s. for hand frame men.

obviously a sensible strategy for the men, especially as women were entering the factories in large numbers as the ancillary processes became centralised. Moreover as many of the new factories produced a host of different products under one roof the L.A.H.U. never faced the problem of sectionalism. Corah's for example produced virtually every type of knitwear imaginable in their Leicester factory which was marketed under their 'St. Margarets' label.¹ R. Walker's factories in Charles Street and Abbey Park Mills produced a diversity of products including their market leader of 'Wolsey' natural woollen underclothes.² Above all, the similarity of operating the same type of power-driven machine employed in the production of different items helped to develop a craft homogeneity amongst the male power machine knitters.

The emergence of the L.A.H.U. was to prove a distinct departure from the previous forms of hosiery societies. The secretary of the new organisation, Jimmy Holmes, 1850-1911, was the first full-time paid official in the hosiery trade since Gravenor Henson. Holmes's background was typical of the men that he led, entering the trade as a winding boy, progressing to hand frames before moving to the steam powered machines. His knowledge of the industry was vast and could claim with some justice to have operated almost every type of knitting machine in existence.³ He had been elected to the executive of the Leicestershire Framework Knitters Union in the mid-seventies and soon afterwards became the unofficial leader of the power machine men. Holmes was both an exceptional organiser and a powerful orator. His links with the local labour movement were,

1. C.W. Webb, op.cit., p. 33. The firm also did much business manufacturing football kits.

2. Leicester Illustrated, 1891, pp. 36-7.

3. R.C. on Labour, 1892, Part II, qq. 12,729 - 12,734.

to say the least, extensive: a secularist lecturer in the 1870s;¹ a leading member of the Leicester Socialist League in the 1880s;² a prominent I.L.P.er in the 1890s and shareholder in the Leicester Pioneer Press in the 1900s.³ He also possessed connections with the national labour movement with his membership of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee in the late 1880s and he became a founder member of the General Federation of Trade Unions in 1899. His life, however, ended in disgrace when it was discovered, as he lay dying of cancer in 1911, that he had embezzled union funds on a grand scale, investing them in property in, and around, Leicester.⁴

The L.A.H.U., unlike the old hand frame society, also possessed offices in Horsefair Street and began to issue monthly reports in 1886. Members' subscriptions were the same as those charged by the old society, 6d. per week for men and 3d. for women. By 1886 membership had reached 1,800 and grew steadily to a peak of 12,000 by 1914.⁵ Throughout these early years two major issues were to dominate the L.A.H.U.: competition from the country and the fight to retain male exclusiveness over the operation of power driven frames.

The process of removing work from the 'centre' to the 'periphery' in search of lower costs and higher profit was as old as the trade itself. In 1870 Robert Walker, a scottish hosier, opened a steam powered

1. E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, (Manchester 1980) p.20.

2. Commonweal, 24 March 1888.

3. D. Higgins, 'For the Socialist Cause. Rowland Barrett: 1877-1950', Warwick M.A. thesis, 1980, p.137.

4. Leicester Hosiery Union Minutes, August 14, 1911.

5. Drake, op.cit., Table II.

factory in the Leicestershire village of Fleckney and began the trend towards village factory production.¹ By 1886 at least 30 firms were to be found in 11 nearby villages, most of which had populations of under 5,000 inhabitants,² and in 1889 the Fair Wages Committee reported that over the previous 15 years one firm per year had been leaving Leicester for the rural districts. It is not surprising that the Leicester workers occasionally became desperate in their attempts to stop this exodus, and in 1884 they even struck for a reduction in wages in their efforts to stop an employer removing his plant.³ The 'General Strike' of February 1886, caused by the L.A.H.U.'s campaign to unify wages in the town led to riots and the stoning of hosiery factories and hosiers' homes, and also increased the pace of machine removal.⁴ Soon after the strike was settled, James Hearth and Co. left Leicester for Burbage and Wigston Magna, while Robert Rowley moved to Syston and Fleckney, and Taberer and Lorrimer to Foleshill, Warwickshire. In the following year there were reports of small steam hosiery factories being built in the villages of Rothley and Hathern.⁵

The obvious strategy for the union to follow under these circumstances was to recruit the country workers. This policy was in fact adopted at an early date when immediately after the 1886 strike, the union, although virtually bankrupt, sent a delegation, led by Holmes, to organise the Hinckley workers.⁶ This small town was the largest of the 'country villages' and most of the male workforce were old members of the moribund Frameworkers Union. Wages in Hinckley were amongst the lowest in the

1. T.J. Chandler, 'The Leicestershire Hosiery Trade 1844-1954', Hosiery Trade Journal, April 1955.

2. Wright's Leicester Directory, 1888.

3. R.C. on Labour 1892, qq. 12,723-7.

4. For an account of these riots see the issues of The Leicester Chronicle and Mercury for February 1886.

5. Wright's Leicester Directory, 1888.

6. L.A.H.U. monthly report, April 1886.

trade, the adult male rate, for example, at 16s. per week was less than two thirds of the Leicester average. Furthermore, women and youths were freely employed on the smaller and more automatic machines.¹ After several meetings, Holmes was able to recruit the 120 male knitters employed in Hinckley's two largest factories. The employers, however, threatened dismissal to all trade unionists and all but two employees relinquished their membership.² Keen to preserve their low cost advantage, the country hosiers battled against the Amalgamated wherever and whenever it appeared. The Nottingham trade was also experiencing similar developments and in order to fight the common enemy the L.A.H.U. joined forces with the Nottingham Rotary Union in 1888 to form the Midland Counties Hosiery Federation. The Federation saw their role as that of a protector to small village societies; while the very existence of the Federation, it was hoped, would encourage local organisation.³

The Federation certainly had appeal in some country districts, and by 1890, the L.A.H.U. were able to open a branch in Hinckley, with nearly 400 members, after a vigorous recruitment campaign by the Federation.⁴ Despite stiff employer opposition the L.A.H.U. were able to call out on strike 1,800 workers in Hinckley in 1892. The successful outcome of this action won wage increases of up to 40%. This victory was repeated at Earl Shilton, near Hinckley, where the L.A.H.U., after a recruitment rally were able to impose the Hinckley list on the village employers.⁵ The fortunes of the L.A.H.U. in the Hinckley area, however, did not last for very long. In 1895, an extremely poor year for the trade, the L.A.H.U.

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., October 1888.

4. Ibid., November 1890.

5. R.C. on Labour, 1892, Part II, q. 12789, evidence of J. Holmes.

in Leicester were forced to accept reductions of between 15 and 20% in the existing lists in order to redress the acute competition from country manufacturers. The Hinckley workers, fearing competition from Leicester, followed the Loughborough branch and seceded from the union.¹

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the vast majority of the country workers remained indifferent to union organisation; an indifference that was often reinforced by the hosiers' tight paternalistic control over village life. Walker, whose large works dominated the village of Fleckney was particularly notorious. After an unsuccessful recruitment campaign in 1889, Holmes was convinced that Walker had 'blinded his workers with benefactions of tracts, soup, and blankets'.² In 1890, perhaps because of the Hinckley victory, the Fleckney workers called on the L.A.H.U. for assistance.³ Walker replied by imposing fines of 1½d. in the 1s. on those employees who were brave enough to take out membership.⁴ Holmes broadened his campaign by attempting to organise another of Walker's factories in the village of Kirkby. This policy turned out to be quite successful and Holmes was able to call out the Kirkby workers in order to gain an advance in wages. Walker, ever determined to defeat the L.A.H.U., removed his machines from Kirkby to Nailsworth, a small village near Stroud in Gloucestershire. Holmes, indefatigable in his feud with Walker, organised and led a Labour League deputation to Nailsworth and tried to hold a meeting with a view of organising the district. Only to find on arrival that Walker

had packed the meeting, and did ... (his) best to make the meeting a failure. The ignorant, benighted people of Nailsworth howled, sung, groaned, and yelled to such an extent that we are bound to say that for ignorance, cowardice, meanness, and rowdyism, England has not a place to compare with Nailsworth, Gloucestershire. It is veritably "Darkest England", and the best way we found was the way out. 5

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1. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1897.
 2. L.A.H.U. monthly report, January 1890.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., October 1891.

The country recruitment campaign of 1886-94 was conducted against a backcloth of both small and middle-sized firms leaving the town and an open threat from Leicester's largest hosier that failure to unionise the villages would result in the ending of the 1886 list.¹ The revision of the Leicester list in 1895 underlines the failure of the L.A.H.U. to recruit the country workers. Nevertheless, in many respects Jimmy Holmes achieved a great deal. The workers of Hinckley, Earl Shilton, Loughborough, Fleckney and Kirkby were briefly brought within the L.A.H.U.'s fold. No mean achievement considering the centuries old antipathy held by the country workers against the Leicester trade, the grinding poverty that existed within the villages where the only alternative employment was agriculture, and the determined tactics of the employers to maintain their low cost advantage.

The policy of 'one man, one machine' had been central to the power knitters' defensive tactics since the genesis of steam powered knitting. These men, recruited from the ranks of skilled male wide-frame operatives, carried their craft tradition into the new steam factories.² This point is substantiated by several pieces of evidence from the 1890s. Jimmy Holmes, in his questionnaire returned to Webbs in 1894, stressed the importance of the heavy maintenance and repair tasks performed by 'Cotton's Patents' operators.³ This remark was more than a justification for sexual wage differentials as the consistent policy of the Leicester hosiers throughout this period was to turn the male 'Cotton's' operators into 'overlookers' and maintenance men.⁴ Those members of the L.A.H.U.

1. Leicester Advertiser, February 20, 1886. Letter from J.H. Cooper, director of N. Corah and Sons, and Cooper.

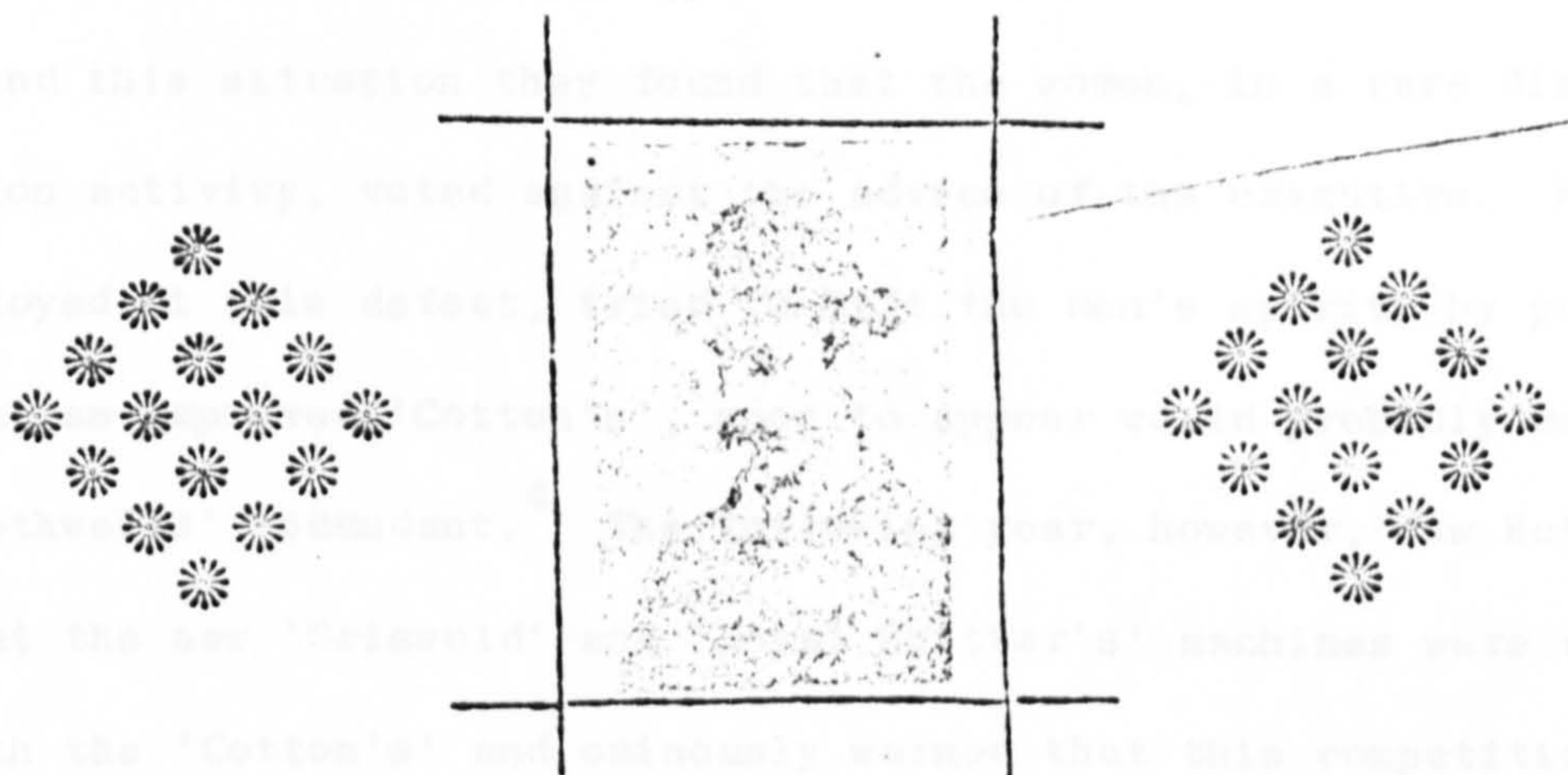
2. See above, p. 38.

3. Webb Collection, Section A, Vol. 34.

4. Ibid. Letter from Jabez Chaplin of L.A.H.U. executive committee related how this situation was already enforced by Nottingham hosiers, where one adult male 'overlooked' four frames typically operated by women and youths. Chaplin's major complaint was the development of this trend in Leicester and the L.A.H.U. had been forced in several instances to allow adult males to 'overlook' two frames each, operated by youths.

who accepted offers from hosiers, usually in the villages, to leave Leicester and take up positions as 'overlookers' could expect the full wrath of the union. The monthly reports during this period printed the photograph and personal details of members who had become overlookers, an honour usually reserved for 'blacklegs' and 'scabs'.

We publish below the portrait of Richard March, who has gone to Ratby as overlooker. He was Collector of the Trade money at Tyler's. He was the most opposed to a reduction in price of any man employed by the firm, and was on picket resisting a reduction when his photo was taken. It has been executed by the Photographic Company, 26, King Street.



'Cotton's Patents' were by no means the only steam powered machines in use during this period. The early rotaries that predated the 'Cotton's' in Leicester by 30 years were often operated by women,² and employers repeatedly attempted to place women on the new generation of machines that appeared in the 1880s. The 'Lambs' flat knitting machine, introduced into Leicester in the early 1880s, posed a major threat to the male operatives because its simplified needle technology, speed and lightness of operation, and productive versatility made it ideal for female operation.³ It is not surprising that the 'Lambs' was at the centre of one of the first major disputes faced by the L.A.H.U., when in 1886, J. Taberer, the director of Taberer and Lorrimer, defied the union

1. Printed in the L.A.H.U. monthly report, April 1888.

2. R.C. on Factories Acts, 1876, q. 7,213, evidence of D. Merrick.

3. Willkomm, op.cit., pp. 324-5.

by placing women on his new batch of 'Lambs' machines.¹ After a particularly bitter dispute Taberer removed his plant to Foleshill near Coventry, where he stubbornly refused to employ a single trade unionist.²

An improved version of the 'Lambs' appeared in 1888. Called the 'Rothwell' this machine was particularly adaptable to the circular rib branch and Holmes complained that the first factory to utilise the 'Rothwell' employed only ten men to 140 women.³ When the union tried to amend this situation they found that the women, in a rare display of union activity, voted against the advice of the executive. Holmes, annoyed at this defeat, tried to lift the men's spirits by pointing out that an improved 'Cotton's', soon to appear would probably make the 'Rothwells' redundant.⁴ The following year, however, saw Holmes complaining that the new 'Griswold' and 'Royal Knitter's' machines were competing with the 'Cotton's' and ominously warned that this competition would probably increase as the peddle powered 'Griswold' was ideal for domestic use.⁵

The 'Griswold' appears to have remained a threat to the factory workers for a number of years as Holmes expressed his fears on domestic based 'Griswolds' to the Webbs in 1894.⁶ By February 1890, however, the improved 'Cotton's' were replacing the older rotaries and a distinct

1. R.C. on Labour, Vol. 2, qq. 13,773-6.

2. Ibid.

3. L.A.H.U. monthly report, April 1888.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., May 1889 and January 1890. The efficiency and versatility of these machines was so great that even the union backed Leicester Cooperative Hosiery Society, a producers cooperative, were tempted to introduce the steam powered automatic 'Griswolds', see T. Blandford and G. Newell, A History of the Leicester Cooperative Hosiery Manufacturing Society Ltd., (Leicester, 1895), p.53.

6. Webb Collection, Section A, Vol. 34.

sexual division of machine operation appeared to have emerged: men on Cotton's, women on the new automatics, and some domestically based women operating the manual Griswolds.¹

The men were able to retain operation of the 'Cotton's' until 1914,² but they were often challenged and occasionally they had to accept the role of 'overlookers' while the frames were operated by youths. Yet despite this achievement the underlying trend of the hosiery trade towards the ascendancy of female labour continued unabated. This is well illustrated in Table I printed above which shows a dramatic fall of 25% male employment during the ten years between 1891 and 1901. This decline in male employment in hosiery, from 4,286 men in 1891 to 3,282 also underestimates the fall in numbers of adult male knitters, given the increasing tendency to employ unskilled youths on frame operation. In the monthly report of February 1890 Holmes noted, with an element of despair, the policy of firms to cease night shift production, the main preserve of male exclusiveness, with the slightest drop in demand.³ This caused the L.A.H.U. much concern as, more often than not, men who were laid off found great difficulty in regaining employment,⁴ a situation that was exacerbated following the implementation of the McKinley tariff, which caused the collapse of Leicester's major export market.⁵

In the late 1880s and throughout the 1890s Holmes found his organisation ensnared on virtually every front. The country question appeared insoluble, while the problem of female substitution was, to say the least, extremely delicate in a union in which women formed the majority.⁶ The union made repeated complaints throughout the period

1. L.A.H.U., February 1890.

2. Drake, op.cit., Table II.

3. L.A.H.U., February 1890.

4. Ibid., June 1888,

5. Ibid., January 1891.

6. In 1885 there were 800 female members to 600 males - Annual report of the Chief Labour Correspondent on Trade Unions.

over the difficulty experienced in recruiting the growing number of female workers. In 1885 Holmes informed the Women's Trade Union League that 'it is impossible to get a woman to serve on the Executive Committee, so accustomed are they to have everything done for them'.¹ A separate women's committee was started in 1886 to manage 'women's affairs' but was soon abandoned and was later described by the Union's President, Jabez Chaplin, as 'an expensive farce'.²

Furthermore, after the collapse of the American trade, following the McKinley tariff, the production of worsted hosiery became increasingly seasonal and by March 1895 the L.A.H.U. were complaining that only 10% of their members were in full time employment.³ Holmes, and the Executive responded in various ways to these worrying circumstances. A scheme was started which employed out-of-work members on the chopping and selling of firewood;⁴ while on a more grandiose scale the L.A.H.U. was firmly committed to cooperative production schemes as an answer to the distress caused by the recklessness of capitalist competition.⁵

Solutions to the problem of female labour required sensitive handling and it is not surprising that the monthly reports, distributed free to both male and female members, while often chastising the women for being poor trade unionists, rarely mentioned the subject of sexual demarcation. Indeed, Holmes only mentioned the problem once, during the 1888 dispute over women operating the new 'Rothwells', when he noted, with a touch of

1. Drake, op.cit. p.17.

2. Webb Collection, Section A, Vol. 34.

3. Wells, op.cit., p.164.

4. R.C. on Labour, 1892, Vol. 2, q. 12,835.

5. In the late 1890s the Leicester Cooperative Hosiery Manufacturing Society employed over 300 L.A.H.U. members and Holmes was both a member of the management committee and leading figure in the society. See Blandford and Newell, op.cit., p.14.

exasperation, 'How can a society fight its own members without committing suicide'.¹ The women, however, were not entirely at fault. The union, whose offices were too small for meetings and other functions, usually held their elections, general meetings, and social gatherings, in pubs and working men's clubs, hardly the best venues to attract female participation.² Outside the pages of the reports Holmes could be more sanguine in expressing his desire to see a reduction in female labour, especially amongst married women;³ while his support for Henry Broadhurst during the late 1880s may have been partly based on Holmes's endorsement of Broadhurst's campaign to increase legislation against female labour.⁴

Holmes and his executive were far from blind to the underlying forces generated by capitalist competition that were creating the problems experienced by the hosiery workers. His recruitment speech to the Hinckley workers in November 1890 contained an exposition on the virtues of cooperative production;⁵ and the leading article in the reports often expounded Holmes's thoughts on the 'Labour Theory of Value'.⁶ On the 18 March, 1888 Holmes, together with Warner, a member of the L.A.H.U. executive, and Barclay who had briefly been general secretary in 1886, and Robson, an L.A.H.U. activist, met with eighteen others at a house in King

1. L.A.H.U. Monthly Reports, April 1888.

2. The L.A.H.U. in November 1890, organised a meeting of all trades in Leicester, at the Bond Street Working Men's Club, with the object of increasing union membership amongst female workers. The only female speakers who appeared in the report of this meeting were Miss Abrahams (Lady Dilke's secretary) and Mrs. Briant of the Nottingham Cigar Makers Society. L.A.H.U. Monthly Report, November 1890.

3. R.C. on Labour, 1892, Vol. II, q. 12,806.

4. L.A.H.U., November 1889.

5. L.A.H.U., Monthly Report, November 1890.

6. Ibid., November 1889, August, 1889.

Street. The party sat down to have tea in honour of the Paris Commune, and in the discussion that followed it was resolved to form a Socialist Club and subscriptions were taken.¹ The Club, which became known as the Leicester Labour Club, was to provide a home for local socialists during the early 1890s, a period which was to witness a growing interest by trade unionists in Socialism.

To summarise this chapter, by the late 1880s the Leicester hosiery industry had been thoroughly transformed. A few stubborn pockets of the old hand trade still survived in the countryside, but overall the steam powered factory was now dominant.² The manufacture of hosiery had also become centralised with the removal of ancillary processes from the home and workshops into the new factories. Yet despite this belated modernisation hosiery played a diminishing importance in the local economy. Employment in the trade had increased by less than fifty per cent in the decades between 1851 and 1891,³ while the local industrial workforce had expanded by over 150%.⁴ Most of this increase in employment is accounted by the rise of the local footwear industry after 1851, a trade which by 1891 was dominating the local economy, having increased its number of workers seventeen-fold in the preceding four decades. Although hosiery was shrinking in local importance it was, however, a more prosperous trade in the 1890s than it had been at the mid-century. The 'lean hungry stockinger' was now gladly a phenomena of the recent past although his

1. Commonweal, March 24, 1888.

2. R.C. on Labour, Part II, q. 13,626.

3. 8,652 were recorded as being employed in hosiery in the 1851 census, 12,667 in 1891.

4. From 22, 456 in 1851 to 58,937 in 1891.

ghost was to still haunt the more conscious members of the workforce.¹

The trade was also more highly capitalised, expensive power driven machines now being the norm. Yet continuities were to persist between the old and new modes of production, particularly in labour relations. The male 'cotton frame' operative still possessed the stockings' sense .. of independence and their deep commitment to trade unionism, a point which is demonstrated by the 'Cotton's operatives' refusal to be divided by the manufacturers' attempts to transform at least some of them into a strata of junior management. Indeed it was this conflict that was at the heart of the employer's renewed tactic to remove parts of the industry to the country villages, a conflict which also impelled the L.A.H.U. to widen its political horizons and pay serious attention to the new doctrines of Socialism.

1. See the letter of J. Holmes to the Leicester Daily Post, November 30, 1889.

CHAPTER II

The Footwear Industry in Leicester

The arrival of the mass production ready made shoe industry in Leicester in the 1850s heralded a new era in the economic and social life of the town. Leicester's century old dependence on hosiery as the main source of employment was at last broken and the town entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. As the new trade flourished jobs were created in abundance and Leicester became a magnet for migrant workers attracted by the profusion of work in the semi and unskilled sectors of the shoe industry. This boom in the Leicester economy was reflected in the growth of the town's population from 60,584 in 1851 to 211,579 in 1901, the highest rate of expansion amongst towns of a similar size recorded in the United Kingdom during the period.¹ The role of boots and shoes in the multiplication of the town's population during the second half of the nineteenth century is highlighted by the growing numbers employed in the trade and the increasing importance of the industry as Leicester's major source of employment. Footwear employed 2,741 workers in 1861 and nearly 27,000 in 1901 and by 1891 the industry accounted for 41% of all industrially employed workers in the town.²

It might seem that footwear constituted a new social force, large scale production replacing the old domestic system which, as we have seen, was so characteristic of Leicester hosiery industry down to the 1880s. This picture of thorough transformation, though true in the long run requires some modification in the light of research. As we shall see, footwear was not entirely distinct from hosiery. Many Leicester hosiers sunk capital and other resources into the new trade

1. Census reports 1851 - 1901.

2. See appendices nos. 1 and 2.

during the 1850s and 1860s. Moreover, in the decades after the industry's arrival in Leicester, production methods were still quite primitive and ideally suited to the putting out system of production that already existed in the town.

The Anatomy of the Leicester Footwear Industry

Local historians have offered several accounts of the genesis of the Leicester footwear industry. Patterson has drawn attention to the influx of village shoemakers in 1851, who specialised in making boots for navvies, after the completion of the Syston to Peterborough railway and the arrival of a Northampton firm to employ these workers on Government contracts. This modest beginning being boosted in 1853 when Thomas Crick, a local shoemaker, invented the rivetting process of attaching soles to uppers, a method which annunciated the era of factory produced footwear.¹ Both Jack Simmons and V.W. Hogg have emphasised the importance of the pre-existence of a small, by Northampton standards, but nevertheless vital, local wholesale trade.²

In the first half of the nineteenth century Leicester could not be called a shoe town. In 1831, for instance, Leicester contained 21 shoemakers per 1,000 inhabitants. Set against the Northampton figure of 88 shoemakers per 1,000 population the Leicester footwear industry appears rather small, but when compared to an industrial town such as Newcastle, which contained only 14 shoemakers per 1,000 inhabitants the Leicester trade was obviously above average size.³ During the 1830s several

1. A.T. Patterson, op.cit., p.388. J. Simmons, Leicester Past and Present (1974) Vol. 2, pp. 2 - 5.

2. Ibid.; V.W. Hogg, 'Footwear Production' in Victoria County History of Leicester, Vol. 4, 1958, pp. 314-9.

3. V.W. Hogg, op.cit., p.314.

shoemakers in the town began to specialise in the production of cheap, brightly coloured strap-on sandals and boots for children, known locally as cacks, which were sold in large numbers to the country villages.¹ By 1835 the town contained two wholesale manufacturers, T. Crick of Peacock Lane and J. Dilkes of Lozeby Lane.² Dilkes was also a hosiery manufacturer and his early involvement in the footwear industry was to set a precedent followed by many of his fellow hosiers.

In 1843, 36 of the town's shoemakers owned their own 'show shops' for the sale of ready made boots and shoes but the main recruits to the ranks of the wholesalers, that is firms producing goods for retail outlets other than their own, came from the hosiery trade.³ The notable exception to this pattern of recruitment of wholesale manufacturers was Thomas Crick. The firm of T. Crick first appears in the town's directories in 1835 and continued to produce from the same premises for the following twenty years, which suggests that business was steady if not spectacular. In 1853 Crick invented, or rather rediscovered the method of attaching soles to uppers by means of metal rivets inserted by a mechanical press.⁴ This device undoubtedly revolutionised the trade as it rendered unnecessary that vital aspect of the cordwainer's work: the sewing, by hand, of the sole onto the upper. The division of labour was then possible in the production of footwear. The labour process of the old cordwainer, who typically performed all the operations in shoe manufacture became divided into four distinct areas. Clicking, where the

1. Ibid.

2. White's Directory of Leicester, 1846, p.143.

3. Ibid., pp. 172-4.

4. The method had been applied during the Napoleonic war, but had subsequently disappeared from use. See J. Clapham, 'Economic History of Great Britain', Free Trade and Steel (Cambridge 1963 edition,) p.94..

leather was cut and shaped prior to assembly, was the first. This was followed by 'closing' where the various pieces of upper leather were stitched together. The completed upper then passed to the 'making' sector where the upper was shaped onto a last and the sole attached. Finally the shoe would then pass into the hands of the finisher who trimmed off excess leather, burnished, and polished the shoe ready for marketing. Previous accounts of Crick's invention tend to focus primarily on the mechanical aspects of his new method. The more important question of why did he innovate has not been addressed. Perhaps we can go some way towards solving this problem by looking at the type of product made by Crick. In the 1840s Crick was known locally as a 'translator', that is, he was in the business of collecting and buying worn out shoes and boots and renovating them by attaching new soles to the old uppers.¹ This service must have been in great demand by the impoverished working classes of Leicester in the 1840s. When the new process was applied to the more discerning new boot market Crick experienced a degree of consumer resistance, and was forced, for a time, to dispose of his products via a chimney sweep who operated a stall in the weekly market.² This early setback was soon overcome and by 1855 Crick had moved to more extensive premises in Highcross Street in which steam power was utilised in the operation of the riveting machines.³

Crick's removal to Highcross Street witnessed the beginning of a period of spectacular growth in the firm's productivity. By 1863 Crick employed 420 females aged between 15 and 23, and 300 men and boys all of

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1. Hiltons 1869-1969 (Leicester 1969) p.6.
 2. Spencer's New Guide to Leicester, 1888, p.191.
 3. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.165.

whom worked inside the Highcross Street premises. Steam power was utilised to a series of different processes, the firm was the first to employ steam powered sewing machines and steam was also used to motivate pricking and cutting machines.¹ A year later the factory attained the distinction of being the first to employ 1,000 workers in the British shoe trade.²

Due to the lack of company records, caused by the high rate of bankruptcy in the trade and the take-over activities of the late Sir Charles Clore in the 1950s and 1960s, it is extremely difficult to precisely document the genesis of individual firms in the Leicester shoe trade.³ The historian is therefore compelled to rely on other source material, mainly directories, commercial guides, and snippets culled from official publications. This gap in documentation does of course preclude the formulation of precise descriptions and while the material available is, to say the least, second best, nevertheless it is still possible to sketch the broad strokes of economic development in the Leicester shoe trade.

Several distinct groups of entrepreneurs joined Crick in the mass production of footwear during the 1850s and 1860s. The largest source of capital and personnel undoubtedly came from local hosiery interests. As we have already seen Crick's sole cohort in the wholesale trade during the 1830s and 40s was the hosier J. Dilkes. By 1861 many of the major hosiery firms were also engaged in footwear manufacture including J. Biggs and Sons, J. Lanham and Sons, Pool and Lorrimer, and Corah's.⁴

1. Ibid.

2. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 3rd Report, 1864, p.125.

3. Cricks was the only Leicester boot firm to furnish specific data to the R.C. on Childrens Employment.

4. Drake's Directory of Leicester, 1861, pp. 74-5; C.W. Webb, op.cit., p.40.

J. Preston and Son and Walker and Kempson even went so far as to cease hosiery production and to concentrate entirely on footwear.¹

The precise details of the decisions by individual hosiery firms to enter the shoe trade will never be known. At best the historian can only suggest what appear to have been the major attractions of footwear manufacture to hosiery firms. The major asset which hosiery possessed during this period was its vast and intricate network of labour organisation. When Crick's invention had dispensed with the cordwainer's needle for sole attachment a division of labour was possible and the majority of the new processes could be quickly learnt by hosiery workers.² A more detailed analysis of skill will be given below but at this stage it is only necessary to point out that the majority of recruits to the new trade could be trained within weeks to perform the new simplified forms of shoe manufacture. Furthermore a system of leasing was employed early on by the manufacturers of shoe machines that was strikingly similar to frame rent.³ Many other aspects of footwear manufacture had a close relationship with hosiery. The elastic web trade for instance was initially an ancillary division of hosiery, but during the 1860s the fashion for elastic gusseted boots gave the industry a major new outlet. Did this development stimulate John Biggs, with his elastic web interests, into shoe manufacturing? Were female hosiery workers, skilled in stitching, recruited to the shoe trade to operate the 800 sewing machines

1. H. Hartopp, Roll of the Mayors of the Borough and Lord Mayors of the City of Leicester 1209-1935 (Leicester, 1933) pp. 211-12.

2. J. Dare, 'Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission', 1875.

3. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.166. Evidence of Mr. Johnson, Crick's foreman, 'Some employers let out sewing machines just as the old stocking frames were let out for hire. I believe they pay about 1s. 6d. per week'.

reported in the Leicester shoe trade in 1864?¹ How useful were the marketing networks developed by hosiers during the nineteenth century to the sale of Leicester made shoes?² These questions can, of course, never be satisfactorily answered, but, nevertheless, their posing is suggestive.

Other recruits to the ranks of early Leicester footwear entrepreneurs came from a variety of different backgrounds. The firm of Stead and Simpson were already established in footwear manufacture in Leeds before removing their business to Leicester in 1853 in order to escape from the labour difficulties they had experienced in Yorkshire.³ This company was to play an innovative role in the Leicester trade with their early introduction of American technology. The 'Blake' sewer, first used by Stead and Simpson in 1858, which stitched the insole, already attached to the upper, to the outer sole, proved to be even more important than Crick's riveting device.⁴ This method vastly improved the quality of mass produced footwear and at the same time facilitated a massive expansion in productivity. For example, one man and a boy assistant could last and rivet 18 pairs of shoes per day using the rivet method; while one operative on a treadle powered Blake could turn out 200 pairs in a ten hour day and 300 if powered by steam.⁵ In America this machine is reputed to have reduced sole sewing costs from 75 cents to 3 cents per pair.⁶ Stead and Simpson remained at the forefront of the Leicester trade for the rest of the century; their future managing director J. Griffin Ward became the future President of the Leicester Boot Manufacturers Association in 1890 and a leading advocate of mechanisation.⁷

1. Ibid., p.165.

2. See above, ch. 1.

3. Stead and Simpson Centenaries 1834-1934 (Leicester n.d.) Private print, unpaginated.

4. V.W. Hogg, op.cit., p.316.

5. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 3rd Report, 1864, p.130.

6. J. Schumpeter, Business Cycles (1939), Vol. I, p. 391.

7. National Union of Boot & Shoe Operatives, Monthly Report, Dec. 1890.

The firm of S. Hilton is an interesting example of the rags to riches type of shoe entrepreneur so often cited in historical accounts of the Leicester trade. Sam Hilton's father owned a small tannery in Leicester. This business was a small scale family affair and in 1876 Sam with the aid of a building society mortgage opened a small shoe factory in Wharf Street. The original workforce comprised of Sam, his sister, her friend, and one other.¹ Hilton's did however put work out to outside labour based in small workshops. Hilton's pioneered the factory owned High Street retail multiple shoe shops when they opened their first outlet in 1883. By 1889 Hilton's possessed 25 branches.²

The rise of the foreman and clicker to the ranks of the entrepreneurs is another aspect of local economic mythology that does have some factual basis. Sam Hilton, increasingly disgruntled by labour problems sold out his manufacturing interests in 1895 to two clickers, Tom Howard and Richard Hallam.³ Crick's foreman, J. Thornton, set up on his own account in 1866 and by 1891, Thornton owned a 'modest establishment' employing 150 workers and was 'favoured by well known wholesalers who draw upon him'.⁴ The major factor that assisted such humble men to become factory owners was undoubtedly the leasing method employed by machinery manufacturers, which allowed businesses to be set up with the minimum of capital outlay.

The origins of the leasing system are, to say the least, surrounded in obscurity. The connection between frame rent in hosiery and the leasing of shoe machines is, of course, obvious, especially so when the

1. Hilton's, op.cit., p.10.

2. Ibid., p.12.

3. A. Hartopp, op.cit., p.254-5.

4. Leicester Illustrated, 1891, pp. 58-9.

frame owner was also the owner of sewing machines which must have been the case amongst those entrepreneurs who had both hosiery and footwear interests. Before we can answer this question, however, we need to address another: why did the early entrepreneurs fail to follow Crick's example and set up factory based production units where manufacture was centralised, the capitalist owned the instruments of production outright, and paid his employees by the piece without the incumbency of rent and other deductions? Again, owing to a lack of documentation no precise answer can be supplied, but several factors peculiar to the early shoe entrepreneurs are suggestive. As we have seen the majority of newcomers to the trade in the 1850s already possessed hosiery interests. What footwear manufacture offered to the mid-century hosier was essentially a supplementary activity that neatly married into their existing organisations. Thus the few skilled clickers necessary to the labour process could be recruited from Northampton and accommodated within the hosiers' warehouse,¹ while the 'closing' process could be performed by female sewing machine operatives either inside the warehouse or in an outside workshop, or even inside her own home. Similarly the lasting operation could easily be performed by male operatives inside small workshops, the making process being suitable to the workshop sector as both the riveter and 'Blake sewer' could be manually operated.²

The early sewing machine vital to large scale production in the closing process provides a useful illustration of the interconnections between hosiery and footwear. Mr. Stanyon, a hosier and footwear manufacturer, whose warehouse was in Belvoir Street reported that:

1. R. Mountfield, 'The Location of Footwear Manufacture in England and Wales', Nottingham University Ph.D. 1962, p.286.

2. Clapham, op.cit., p.95.

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I have had as many as 120 machines on my premises, but I now much prefer to give my work out, ... I let out my machines at a fixed rent of 1s. a week; some have two and a few three of them. The cost of a machine is £11 or £12, and reckoning that they get knocked to pieces in two or three years, still it answers my purpose ... I would not go back to the old system, for I get by this means a better class of girls, whose parents would not like them to work in a factory. 1

Walker, of the Walker and Kempson hosiery and footwear business, reported to the Royal Commission in 1864 that 'We have some young women from a country village in the neighbourhood learning the use of the machine; when they are proficient they will be able to have their work at home, and bring, or send in every week or so,² which indicates that this firm in particular was utilising its network of country workers for the new trade.

The 'Blake' sewer which was arguably of even more importance to the emergence of the new industry than Crick's invention proved highly suitable to the outwork system. As we have seen the treadle operated 'Blake' was capable of extremely high productivity rates. The steam powered Blake was, of course, even more productive but it must be remembered that three of these machines in an outdoor workshop could produce the same amount of work as two steam powered machines. Considering the high investment costs required in establishing a steam powered factory, and the legacy of conservatism from the hosiery trade, it is not surprising that the majority of entrepreneurs in footwear opted for the continuation of the outdoor system.

1. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.247.

2. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.165.

The Blake machine was manufactured in the U.S.A. and imported into Britain and sold through showrooms that were established in the leading centres of the trade.¹ The leasing system of shoe machinery has traditionally been regarded as an evil forced upon the industry by unscrupulous Americans. Day, the editor of the trade journal, the Shoe and Leather Record, noted in his 1903 essay that the manufacturers paid Blakes a premium of £100 and a royalty of one penny for every pair of boots sewn by the machine even though the machine cost only £30 to manufacture. Profits for the machine companies were therefore considerable and Day commented bitterly that '... every yankee inventor began to turn his attention to shoe machinery as the easiest way to fame and fortune'.² Precisely when leasing began, however, is difficult to establish. David Schloss's research for Booth's London survey in 1889 contains references to some early 'Blake's being owned outright by the Manufacturer'.³ By 1871, however, it appears that it was the policy of the American company to only make their machines available on the leasing system. This policy is not really very surprising. Internationally, footwear production was carried out by outworkers.⁴ Moreover, these workers had often traditionally paid rent for certain, relatively expensive forms of machinery. The leasing system was, therefore, in many ways a continuation of past practice with the important difference that the machine manufacturer, rather than the merchant capitalist, being the recipient of the rent.

1. Leicester Illustrated, 1891, pp. 83-5.

2. J.T. Day, 'The Boot and Shoe Trade' in H. Cox (ed.), British Industries under Free Trade (1903) p.237.

3. D.F. Schloss, 'Bootmaking', Life and Labour, 1889, p.237.

4. E.J. Hobsbawm and J. Scott, 'Political Shoemakers', Past and Present, 89, November 1980, pp. 94-5.

In Britain in the 1860s there were only two steam powered footwear factories and a survey of these two plants highlight the retarding role exercised by the machine manufacturer on centralised production. Crick's in Leicester were able to initiate factory production in the early 1850s because Thomas Crick was utilising a technology, the riveting process, that was largely his own making. Similarly Clarks of Street in Somerset, were able to bypass the American machine companies thanks to the inventive genius of their employee, William Keats, who designed a series of machines that allowed the Somerset firm to mass produce footwear without recourse to American technology.¹

The Leicester footwear industry in the 1860s was largely carried out in small workshops or inside the workers' homes. How was this trade organised? What were the social relations of production? What was the social composition of the workforce and what were their working conditions? Again, owing to gaps in the source material available, these questions are difficult to answer with the precision usually expected by historians. Despite these limitations the best way of attempting to answer these questions is to follow the process of manufacture from a piece of leather on the clicker's table to the completed shoe on the finisher's bench.

The clicker was the undisputed aristocrat of the labour force. The price of leather accounted for between 50% and 60% of total production costs.² The skill of the clicker was therefore vital to the manufacturer's profitability. The clicker, in assessing the way a hide was to be divided, and therefore maximising the number of uppers from the raw material, required dexterity with scissors, a keen sense of geometry and

1. G.B. Sutton, C. and J. Clark 1833-1903. A History of Shoemaking in Street, Somerset (York, 1979) p.67.

2. H.C. Hillman, 'The size of firms in the Boot and Shoe Industry', Economic Journal, Vol. 49, 1939, p.283.

a deep understanding of the variations in different types of leather.¹

The craft involved a lengthy apprenticeship which survived while apprenticeship in other areas of mass produced shoemaking declined. The clickers were, in many ways, a real and tangible link with the old hand sewn industry. '... the steady clicker was the "Gentleman John" of the trade, not a few went to work and from their work in tall beaver hats...'²

Similar to the old cordwainer the clicker continued to work inside the employers' premises. Clickers were also paid by the day rather than by the piece which was the norm for other workers in the mass production trade. Face to face relationships with the employer also facilitated a harmony of interest between the clickers and their masters.³ As we have seen in later years it was not unusual for clickers to become manufacturers in their own right.

The apprentice clickers in the early years of the Leicester trade were normally employed on the less demanding task of cutting out the lining leather. As the division of labour in the trade became more organised and speed-ups in the closing and making departments became possible the labour process in the clicking room came under scrutiny. To meet this demand in the increase in productivity the clicker's work was broken down into smaller, less demanding tasks. Machinery could not be used as no two pieces of leather were the same and the demands of economy in the use of material made the clicker's eyes a major asset that could not be mechanised. The solution to the problem of productivity therefore

1. Talents which well accord with More's concept of 'genuine skill'. See C. More, Skill and the English Working Class 1870-1914 (1980) ch. 1, passim.

2. Quoted in A. Fox, History of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, 1870-1957 (Oxford, 1958) p.20.

3. Ibid.

lay in restricting the clicker's work to those tasks that only he could perform. Under this system the clicker would mark out the leather and leave the cutting to apprentices who were specially trained to work on one particular type of leather. This development in turn led to the decline of apprenticeships in the clicking room: the young apprentice became what was known in the trade as 'boy labour' performing repetitive tasks that could be learnt in a few months.¹

The clicking room which contained the aristocrats of the labour force was also the location of the 'rough stuff cutter', the worker with the least status in the trade. These workers cut out the soles and heels from tanned leather and similar to the clicker were paid by the day. Their wages, however, were generally acknowledged to be the lowest male rates in the trade. In 1866 for instance rough stuff cutters received 20s per week in comparison to 27s. 6d. which was the average wage paid to males in the Leicester trade.² By the early 1880s the rough stuff cutting process became mechanised with the arrival of the cutting press and after this period the workers in this branch became known as Pressmen. The low wages of the rough stuff cutters corresponded to their low status: '... of uncouth manners and untidy aspect ... he shambles in and shuffles out of the factory as though no man cared for his soul.'³ Collectively the workers in the clicker's room accounted for ten per cent of the workforce, although the number of skilled clickers employed was often minimal.⁴

1. Ibid., p.21.

2. Miscellaneous Statistics, Part VI, 1866, p.293.

3. Fox, op.cit., p.21.

4. Of the ten firms visited by the reporter who compiled the accounts of footwear factories for Leicester Illustrated 1891, the clicking rooms contained on average 10% of the workforce.

Once the leather had been cut out by the clickers' department the jig-saw pieces of material that formed the shoe upper had to be stitched together or 'closed' as the process was termed in the trade. In the old hand sewn industry this task had been performed by the cordwainer's awl but with the emergence of the sewing machine in the 1850s it became an ideal area of female employment. Despite the undoubted technological breakthrough created by the arrival of a sewing machine capable of stitching leather the early machine required several operations to perform the task of stitching pieces of leather together. The machinist, usually a girl in her late teens or a young woman who would have spent several weeks training in the methods of sewing machine operation, was assisted by one or two younger girls known as 'fitters'. This latter group of workers were employed in the task of positioning and holding the pieces of material in the machine while the machinist performed the stitching. In 1863 one Leicester manufacturer estimated that between two and three thousand women and girls were employed in operating the 800 sewing machines which were 'tolerably well known' to exist in the town.¹ The same manufacturer claimed that the majority of these machines were to be found in the 'larger factories', but this early trend towards centralised production was checked during the 1860s as manufacturers increasingly resorted to employing their sewing machines on the outwork system.²

As we have seen one dividend in putting out work was access to higher quality labour than those who were prepared to endure factory work. There were, however, other advantages to manufacturers in the

1. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.165.

2. Ibid., p.247.

outdoor system apart from raising the standard of employees. The small workshops in which the sewing machines were employed enjoyed much laxer regulations than the factories. W.H. Walker, of Walker and Kempson, when asked by the commissioners investigating the workings of the Factories Act in 1876 if he thought that '...the latitude allowed by the Workshops Act.. has tended to stimulate the number of small workshops competing with factories?' he replied 'Yes, decidedly, and the result has been that as far as may be the work has got done out of factories, and is sent into the workshops'.¹

The status of the machinists and fitters was never very high in the Leicester trade. In 1866 female machinists received 12s. per week for 60 hours work and the young fitters 11s. for similar hours. By 1879 the category of 'fitter' disappears from official sources on wages, which suggests that improved machines had rendered their services obsolete. The machinists' wages on the other hand had risen to 16s. for 56 hours work in 1879 but this was still 4s. lower than the rate paid to the rough stuff cutter.²

The availability in Leicester of this large source of cheap, young, female labour was undoubtedly a major factor in the location of the footwear trade in the town. The two major centres of English footwear manufacture, Northampton and Stafford, experienced major strikes in the 1850s against the introduction of sewing machines.³ Leicester therefore was able to capitalise on the productive potential of the sewing machine

1. Reports of the R.C. on the workings of the Factory and Workshop Acts 1876, q. 7140.

2. Miscellaneous Statistics, Part IV, 1866, p.293; *ibid.*, Part X, 1879, p.406.

3. V.A. Hatley, 'Monsters in Campbell Square. The Early History of Two Industrial Premises in Northampton', Northamptonshire Past and Present, 1966-7, Vol. IV, no. 1. R.A. Church, 'Labour Supply and Innovation, 1800-1860. The Boot and Shoe Industry', Business History, XII, 1970.

at the expense of the traditional shoe centres and at the same time utilise the skilled male labour which was forced onto the 'tramping system' by the troubles in Northampton and Stafford during the 1850s.

Once the uppers had been closed they returned to the manufacturers' warehouse to be distributed to the lasters, riveters and stitchers who performed the tasks in the 'making' process. The distinction between these three groups of workers is often blurred as it was common practice in Leicester at least for lasters to continue the making process by riveting or stitching the sole to the lasted upper. The workshops in which the making tasks were carried out were described by an assistant commissioner in 1864: 'In one of the former 13 men were working, and in another 10: in each case there were children of 11 or 12 years old'. One room was '... tolerably ventilated and not very dirty' but '... the other three were in all respects detestable; the ceilings and walls black with gas soot; the faces of the workpeople, men and boys alike, colourless and grimy; the children literally in rags of the dirtiest description, the heat of the atmosphere almost unbearable'.¹

The workers employed in the making process certainly brought much colour to Leicester life. Many of these men in the early years were recruited from the ranks of the itinerant shoemakers and they carried with them many of the traditions of that most radical of crafts. 'Your ... rivetter and finisher must keep "St. Monday" sacred; he must attend race meetings, rabbit coursings, trotting, bicycling, and foot racing handicaps and if he is not able to make up a little for lost time in a few extra hours at night in his own home, he and his family must suffer'.² Dare of

1. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.167.

2. Shoe and Leather Record, November 22, 1890, quoted in Fox, op.cit., pp. 22-3.

the Unitarian Domestic Mission noted in a similar vein the arrival of the riotous St. Crispin day festival in 1860.¹

It is notoriously difficult to document precisely the ebb and flow of itinerant workers into a particular locality. Recruits into the making trade were mainly composed of lasters and these workers invariably came from outside Leicester. Virtually all the lasters of whom we have specific knowledge, mostly trade union officials, came from older footwear centres.² Again, similar to the clickers, the lasters possessed a high element of skill and most appear to have served some form of apprenticeship.³ The task of mounting the upper on to the last, stretching and shaping the leather without creasing, required skilful manipulation. Again different qualities of leather and footwear styles demanded the types of skill that could not be picked up after a few weeks on the job. Because of the close proximity in the labour process between lasting and sole attachment, the lasters in the making shops also operated the various types of stitching and riveting machines.

S/ Finally the shoe, complete with sole, would travel from the making shop back to the warehouse to be again redistributed, this time to the finishing sector. Generally speaking finishing entailed the trimming of surplus leather from the edge of the wole, burnishing the edges, the inserting of socks and eyelets and the touching up of any marks present on the shoe. Little skill was required for any of these menial tasks and the finishing workshops were often staffed entirely by youths where 'they are packed as close as they can sit, on each side of a large table, on

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1. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1862.
 2. See also Appendix 5 which highlights the growth of immigrants from Staffordshire during this period.
 3. T.F. Richards, 'How I Got On', Pearsons Weekly, April 6, 1906.

which are several broad gas flames, always burning to heat their burnishing and other irons'.¹

Finishers, according to official wage data were usually amongst the highest paid in the Leicester trade, receiving 28 shillings per week in 1879, the same rate as that paid to clickers.² This figure, however, is deceptive. The finishers described in this official return were probably young men in their late teens, whom, according to Dare, were themselves small scale employers usually employing two or three younger boys or 'sweaters' as they were known in the trade.³ Apart from his 'sweaters' wages the finisher also had to buy from his employer eyelets, rivets and other materials, normally referred to as 'grindery'. Furthermore, the finisher would also have to pay rent for his use of the workshop and gas charges, known locally as blue light, and extensively used in the burnishing process.⁴

The finishing sector of the Leicester footwear industry, during the 1860s and 1870s was extremely labour intensive. The local factory inspector reported a scarcity of labour in the shoe trade in 1863 and by 1865 Dare was expressing concern at the rapid influx of youths from country villages into the finishing workshops.⁵ Finishing was undoubtedly the first access point for potential shoeworkers. After a year or so the young finisher would be both old enough and possibly have accrued enough

1. R.C. on Childrens Employment, 2nd Report, 1864, p.167.

2. Miscellaneous Statistics, Part X, 1879, p.406.

3. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1865.

4. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, March 1891.

5. Factory Inspectors Reports, 1863, p.39; J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1865.

money to undertake the apprentice lasters premium,¹ he himself being replaced in the finishing shop by one of his 'sweaters'. Dare, as the head of an agency which was instigated to morally uplift the lower classes, not surprisingly viewed the immigrant youths with concern. '... the vast number of youths of a certain grade who have passed the school age [and therefore received no Board School education] will continue to darken the skirts of society. They have in a great measure been created by immigration. Raw from the country they are intoxicated with town life and intensify its worse manifestations'.²

Thus by the 1870s the footwear industry was well established in Leicester. The mode of organisation in the industry following traditional patterns established by the hosiery trade with the notable exception of middlemen usually being absent from the network of production relationships.³ Workers were recruited both locally and from other footwear towns according to skill. Furthermore the industry was beginning to experience dramatic growth, employing 21.6% of the local workforce in 1871 and 33.4% in 1881.⁴ For the first time in living memory work for all was in abundance and the trade was even able to draw unskilled labour from the surrounding countryside.

The Economic Development of the Footwear Industry in Leicester

In the preceding section I traced the emergence and the establishment of the footwear industry in Leicester from its origins in the 1830s up to 1870. In this section I want to continue the analysis of the economic developments within the trade up to the late 1880s.

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1. T.F. Richards, 'How I Got On', Pearsons Weekly, April 6, 1906.
 2. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1875.
 3. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, September 1883.
 4. See Appendix 2.

The following table compiled from local directories gives some idea of the scale of expansion experienced by the footwear industry in the decades up to 1880.

Table 2.1 Number of Wholesale Manufacturers in Leicester

1861	...	21
1864	...	80
1870	...	117
1877	...	193

Source: 1861 Drake's Directory of Leicestershire.
 1864 Wright's Midland Directory
 1870 Harrod's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland
 1877 White's Directory of Leicester

This table of course only consists of firms manufacturing for the wholesale trade and does not account for those firms producing exclusively for their own retail outlets. Furthermore it offers no indication to the scale and extent of the workshop sector; the area where the major part of the production process was carried out. The reservations expressed against official statistics in the chapter on the hosiery industry equally apply to footwear. There is no extant, reliable data available to the historian on the scale and composition of the Leicester footwear industry. The Census returns offer a rough bench mark to the numbers employed in the trade but the proportion of the workforce employed in either factory or workshop can only be obtained from non-numerical, often impressionistic, sources.¹

1. The census figures are a probable understatement of the number of employees in the industry. Given the fact that the trade was highly seasonal there was probably a large reserve of labour in the town, mainly women and children who were often recruited to cope with periods of high demand.

Table 2.2 Numbers employed in footwear in Leicester

1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
1,396	2,741	5,103	13,056	24,159	26,561

Source: Census returns.

The membership figures of the workers' trade union, National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (N.U.B.S.O.) may offer a rather tentative comparison with Table 2.2 as the union had more success in recruiting in factories and larger workshops.

Table 2.3 N.U.B.S.O. membership in Leicester

1874	1881	1891	1901
1,397	2,129	11,965	10,933

Source: N.U.B.S.O. annual registers.¹

The larger manufacturers, when questioned by various commissioners investigating the industry, during our period, invariably admitted that the growth of large factories usually entailed an equal growth in the workshop sector. In 1876, at the Royal Commission investigating the workings of the Factories and Workshop Acts, John Butcher, the manager of the large Cooperative Wholesale Society works in Leicester and a leading advocate of factory production, confessed to Lord Balfour that even his plant almost totally relied on the workshop sector to perform the finishing processes.² W.H. Walker of the firm Walker and Kempson, when questioned in his capacity as a school board member, on the scale of the half-time system, informed the commissioners that the factories accounted for 331 half-timers in comparison to 931 from the workshops.³

1. The 1891 and 1901 figures include the clickers' 'number two branch' who joined the union in 1891.

2. R.C. on the Factories and Workshop Acts, 1876, qq. 7560 - 7575.

3. Ibid., q. 7090.

A major problem facing the School Board, according to Walker, was that many workshops were 'back kitchens and small rooms in private houses where a man works with two or three lads under him at some branch of the trade'.¹ Hence it proved extremely difficult to ensure that all eligible children attended school, a situation compounded by the vast influx of children from the country districts.²

Walker's evidence is also interesting in that while as a member of the School Board he was obviously concerned about truancy, he did not, like Angrave and Harris of the Leicester Hosiery Manufacturers Association, advocate a total ban on child labour. Walker, of course, was a member of the local Unitarian congregation³ and also possessed interests in the hosiery trade, but increasingly his firm's fortunes were tied to footwear production. As we have seen hosiers, by 1876, were firmly committed to factory production and they were extremely anxious to see the demise of the workshop sector in order to assist factory recruitment and discipline, but shoe manufacturers on the other hand were still highly dependent on workshops. Sergeant Buxton, a local policeman, who also carried out the function of sanitary inspector responsible for workshops informed the commissioners that in 1876 the 800 workshops were 'chiefly populated by boot finishers and boot riveters'.⁴

There were clearly marked differences in the patterns of development of the two major local industries. Hosiers by 1876 perceived quite clearly that their future lay in steam powered 'Cotton's patent' frames which in

1. Ibid., q. 7135.

2. Ibid., q. 7136.

3. The Unitarian's spokesman, J. Dare, had persistently denounced workshop production in the pages of his annual reports.

4. R.C. on the Factories and Workshop Acts, 1876, qq. 7516 - 8.

turn entailed centralised production, but what was the position of technology in footwear and to what extent did technology encourage rather than curtail workshop production?

In the preceding section I discussed the arrival of three different machines into the Leicester industry during the 1850s. Crick's riveter, the Blake sole sewer, and the Singer sewing machine and the effect wrought by these machines on the anatomy of the industry. I now intend to continue the technological survey up until the late 1880s. This survey, however, will go beyond a mere classification of new technology by locating the economic and social consequences rendered by the introduction of new machinery.

The main input of improved technology undoubtedly came from the American machine manufacturers, John Day, the editor of the Shoe and Leather Record, from 1886 until early in the present century, expressed the feelings of the shoe manufacturers towards the machine firms in an essay published in 1903. Day criticised the high profits made by the machine companies, denounced their monopolistic practices and noted that the leasing system began with the Blake company, whose profits were extremely large.¹ The Blake which cost £30 to produce was leased on an initial premium of £100 and a royalty of one penny per pair of shoes sewn was also levied.² The Blake was followed by an improved version called the Blake-McKay in 1867 and in 1872 the Goodyear Welt-sewing machine and Chain Stitcher was introduced, the latter it was claimed, was fiftyfour times faster than sewing by awl and thread and produced the first exact replica of the hand sewn boot.³ All of these machines,

1. Day, op.cit., p.237.

2. Ibid.

3. Schumpeter, op.cit., Vol. I, p.391.

however, were capable of operation by treadle. These machines essentially improved the quality of the ready made product, they did not affect the method of industrial organisation. If anything the improved quality of Leicester shoes helped to expand the market for the town's products which in turn stimulated an expansion of outwork. In 1872 Dare noted that 'numerous workshops, factories and dwelling houses ... have been built and others are being erected ...'¹

In the United States, on the other hand, factory production proper was becoming the norm. Stimulated by demand for army boots during the Civil War the Massachusetts manufacturers centralised production in large factories. Machinery was widely employed and those areas of production which had not as yet been affected by mechanical innovation, closing, lasting and finishing, were subjected to a highly detailed division of labour, in which the component tasks were broken down into simplified hand operations. This manual division of labour, known as the hand-team system, worked alongside the sewing and stitching machines to facilitate assembly line manufacture. In the Massachusetts shoe town of Marlboro, for instance, there were only five remaining outworkers in 1875.² Clark's of Street in Somerset had similarly perfected the team system by 1880. This firm did of course enjoy the benefits of geographical isolation which, together with a strong ethos of paternalism produced, by British standards, a compliant workforce.³

1. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1872.

2. M.H. Dodd, 'Marlboro Massachusetts and the Shoe Workers Strike of 1898-9', Labor History, Vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 1979. See also J.T. Cumbler, Working-Class Community in Industrial America (Westport, 1979) pp. 13-17, for a survey of the development of the shoe industry in Lynn, Massachusetts.

3. Sutton, op.cit., pp. 150-2.

Another important factor which aided the continuation of the workshop system was the tendency, during the latter half of the nineteenth century towards regional specialisation in footwear manufacture. Leicester's speciality was ladies' lightweight fashion shoes, children's footwear, some men's fashion products and novelty items such as football boots.¹ Northampton, the traditional centre for the production of men's hand sewn boots continued to concentrate on that sector after the introduction of machinery. Stafford produced heavy welted ladies' shoes, but increasingly after the 1870s, this town's trade declined as consumers began to favour the lighter Leicester product. Norwich produced high quality fancy ladies' shoes, while Bristol was famous for its heavy quality protective boots.² Street in Somerset produced quality men's boots and a rivalry existed between that town and Northampton.³

This marked regionalisation was largely the product of local specialities, for example Northampton's renown as the centre of quality men's boots rested on the town's reputation as an army supplier; while Leicester's position as the major manufacturer of children's and women's shoes can be attributed to the local entrepreneurs developing the market first opened up by the 'cacks' producers in the 1820s. Another important factor that contributed to local product specialisation was the diversity of products in the footwear trade. A manufacturer who wished to produce both male and female footwear would be faced with the considerable extra investment in lasts, machinery and warehouse capacity. Women's dress shoes could not be manufactured by a production unit specialising in

1. H.A. Silverman, Studies in Industrial Organisation (1946) pp. 204-9, surveys regional diversification in footwear production. See also Leicester Illustrated, 1891, p.51 on the importance of football boots to Walker and Kempson's factory.

2. Silverman, op.cit.

3. Sutton, op.cit., p.25.

men's boots. Furthermore, skilled labour experienced in working on a particular style of shoe usually found great difficulty in adapting to another type of footwear.¹

This regionalism carried important consequences for the economic development of the industry. Between 1860 and 1885 Leicester enjoyed an expanding market both home and abroad with virtually no competition. Indeed so great was the demand from both the Empire and South America for British footwear that they were often exported unpriced to be sold by auction on arrival, a marketing method which realised enormous profits for British manufacturers.² By 1881 the industry employed just over one third of the town's workforce and in the previous year the local directory proudly noted that 'Leicester has suffered less than almost any other town from the stagnation that had affected English industry, this applies especially to the boot and shoe trade'.³

This era of prosperity and lack of competition, which facilitated the survival and indeed the expansion of the workshop system of industrial organisation did not, however, continue unchecked during the 1880s. This decade witnessed a massive expansion in the numbers employed in the industry in Leicester from 13,056 in 1881 to over 24,000 in 1891, but this growth was increasingly punctuated by short time working and lay-offs.⁴ This was partly caused by an inherent weakness in the nature of Leicester's market: women and children acquired their footwear at particular times of the year, especially at Whitsun. It is extremely difficult to chart

1. D.F. Schloss, op.cit., p.254. Schloss noted that '... men's men can only make a lady's boot with difficulty and cannot make a lady's slipper at all; and vice versa'.

2. P. Head, 'Boots and Shoes' in D.H. Aldcroft (ed.), The Development of British Industry and Foreign Competition 1875-1914 (1968) p.160.

3. Wright's Directory 1880, p.13.

4. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, June 1887.

the ebb and flow of demand for Leicester footwear. The best source available, The Labour Gazette of the Board of Trade, which began in 1893 indicates that the months of April, May and June were invariably the busiest. The remainder of the year tended to be uniformly flat.¹ Other factors however, were also at work, the most important being the encroachment of competition into Leicester's traditional export markets. Canadians for instance were by the early 1880s predominantly wearers of shoes made in Massachusetts and the country was no longer the third largest export market for British footwear. Similarly, Australians were turning to both non-British shoes and increasingly to footwear manufactured by local industry.²

These changes in the industry's market brought several responses amongst Leicester shoe manufacturers. As we have already noted the Leicester industry was based on a mixture of factory and workshop production, individual firms typically relying on both methods. The entrepreneurs therefore, in an effort to cut costs and increase competitiveness, undertook measures that affected both areas of production. Inside the factory, new second generation technology imported from the U.S.A. was increasingly utilised. Those firms with the necessary capital began to slowly centralise production, a process that was aided by the arrival during the 1880s of machines capable of carrying out tasks in the finishing department, such as edge-paring, edge-burnishing, sole-levelling and buffing, and edge levelling.³ Another important technological breakthrough occurred with the development of various machines which revolutionised the heeling department. The emergence of the heel-building,

1. Labour Gazette 1893-1900.

2. Head, op.cit., p.159.

3. Fox, op.cit., p.89.

moulding, attaching, breasting and finishing machines, many of which were capable of operations by boys, made deep inroads into the area of handwork that still existed in the making departments.¹

Finally the most important breakthrough came in the late 1880s with the development of the lasting machine. The clickers apart, the lasters had traditionally considered themselves the elite of the trade. In some centres lasting was still the subject of apprenticeship, while in Leicester the more informal method of spending three or four years as a laster's boy was needed to master the craft. The calculated pulls and tensions upon the upper performed by the laster, while seemingly simple to the eye, was a genuine skill that took several years to master. Hence the Bed lasting machine and the Consolidated type removed from the labour process the operation which required skilled and therefore expensive labour and facilitated a sub division of labour in which the component tasks could be performed by relatively unskilled and often young workers. Of even more far reaching consequence was the fact that the lasting machine filled the technological gap that had previously existed in the production process; it was now possible to produce a shoe, from closing to finishing, in which all the major operations were mechanised. The trade union expressed much consternation of this development and noted 'the tendency these machines have to introduce the team system, as without it ... they will not pay'.²

Mechanisation, however, was only one response to increased international competition. Contemporary literature, particularly the trades journal, the Shoe and Leather Record, noted that the new machines

1. Ibid.

2. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, November 1888.

were largely being utilised by the 'more progressive houses'.¹ Although it is impossible to be precise most of the evidence suggests that the majority of Leicester trade was anything but progressive.² The workshop sector, in theory, was severely curtailed by the passing of the 1878 Factory Act, which supposedly brought the workshops into line with factories. In practice, however, the workshops continued unabated. One reason for this may have been that the traditional response of the Leicester entrepreneur, particularly those with a background in hosiery, to increased competition was to seek out cheaper sources of labour. The country workshops were to prove especially attractive.

Some early entrepreneurs, as we have seen, from an early date, utilised Leicester's traditional connection with outworkers located in the surrounding countryside. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s the network of 'country' workers continued to expand. In 1876 the evidence suggests that virtually all of the 'finishing' was still carried on outdoors³ and in 1881 the trade union reported a 'mushrooming of small shops in out of the way places'.⁴ A major factor in this continuous development was, of course, the failure of the factory inspectorate to enforce the legislation. H. Thornhill, the inspector whose district covered Leicester, Leicestershire and part of Derbyshire⁵ admitted to the 1876 commission that legislation 'was a dead letter in country villages'.⁶

1. Shoe and Leather Record, November 17, 1888.

2. Up until 1891 the greater proportion of Leicester shoe workers worked 'outdoors'. R.C. on Labour, 1892, Group C, Vol. 2, q. 16019, evidence of W. Inskip.

3. R.C. on the workings of the Factories and Workshop Acts, 1876, q. 7,573.

4. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, April 1881.

5. Inspectors of Factories Returns. Showing names, dates of appointment, salaries, etc. 1887, p.4.

6. R.C. on the Workings of the Factories and Workshop Acts, 1876, q. 7403.

By 1883 the union was noting with concern the tendency for redundant bag-hosiery to enter the footwear trade and their increasing use by even the large employers.¹

Paradoxically the workshop sector received a further boost during the 1880s from increased mechanisation. New machines and work methods produced widespread discontent amongst the town based workforce to such an extent that by 1880 the Leicester branch of the union was reporting up to four disputes a day.² In some instances the introduction of machinery was increasing costs rather than reducing them and in 1883 the C.W.S. Wheatsheaf works, the most highly mechanised plant in the town, was sending more work than ever out to country villages.³

During the late 1880s and early 1890s international competition continued unabated. Ominously, for Leicester, the most virile participants in the battle for overseas markets were the highly mechanised American factories whose speciality was high quality, low priced ladies' shoes.⁴ The initial thrust of the American export drive was directed to Britain's traditional markets in Canada and Australia. In the 1890s, however, the Americans turned their attention to England, Germany, Austria and France. High powered marketing techniques became the hallmark of the Massachusetts entrepreneurs and soon virtually all the major towns in England possessed an American owned shop selling American produced shoes.⁵ During 1894 American imports into Britain increased twelvefold and the British industry realised that its very existence was at stake. To survive, however,

1. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, September 1883.

2. Ibid., June 1880.

3. Ibid., September 1883.

4. Head, op.cit., p.171.

5. Ibid.

required a drastic change in working methods and above all the implementation of the team system. The major stumbling block to the introduction of the team system was the restrictive practices carried out by the workers. By 1894 N.U.B.S.O. was the second largest union in Britain, outside coal and cotton, and possessed an organisational power commensurate with its size. Leicester, as well as being the headquarters of the union, also possessed more than a quarter of the membership and it is therefore not surprising that the town became the centre of the employers' concerted attack against restrictive practices. Thus by the early 1890s market forces and technological developments were severely straining industrial relations in the Leicester trade. Tensions between manufacturers and labour were to dominate the industry for the following five years. We have seen the factors at work which impelled employers to change working practices. I now wish to chart the emergence of trade unionism in the trade up until the years immediately prior to the period of industrial conflict.

Labour Organisation in the Leicester Footwear Industry 1872-1900

The early organisation of British shoe workers has yet to find its historian. The Webbs, in their classic survey, note the formation of a national union of hand seam workers sometime in the 1840s,¹ but are silent on subsequent developments.² Alan Fox has sketched out the broad outlines of the cordwainers' national organisation at the time of the secession of the machine trade workers in 1874 but as yet we have no knowledge of the local structure of the parent union.³ What is certain,

1. S. and B. Webb, History of Trade Unionism, p.163.

2. See G. Thorn, 'The early history of the "Amalgamated Society of Boot and Shoemakers (Cordwainers)"', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 39, 1979, on the lack of source material on this organisation.

3. Fox, op.cit., Chapter I.

however, is that workers in the new machine-made industry were initially organised by the cordwainers' society. This is, of course, only to be expected as the infant machine made industry was highly dependent on an influx of skilled labour from the hand sewn sector. When the workers in the machine made trade decided to secede from the Cordwainers' Amalgamated in 1874 they already possessed a structure of local branches and a tradition of organisation typical of artisanal workers. The old union also bequeathed the new organisation another important feature; an open mode of recruitment. The cordwainers had early on recognised the importance and implicit organisational danger in the mushrooming new trade and subsequently changed their recruitment rules to facilitate the organisation of workers in the machine industry.¹

Jealousies, especially over finance, nevertheless, developed between the two classes of workers. Furthermore the cordwainers, ever aware of their craft status, were naturally, often antagonistic towards their less skilled brothers. The campaign for secession began when the secretary of the Leicester Riveters and Finishers Section, Martin Leader, canvassed fourteen other riveters and finishers sections on the possibility of a breakaway. The new organisation, The National Union of Operative Riveters and Finishers (N.U.O.R.F.) was formed at a meeting at Stafford in December 1873.² The new union took over the system of branch organisation founded by the cordwainers and continued many of the activities of the old craft union, such as the tramping system for many years.

1. This brief account is largely based on Fox, Chapter I, passim.

2. The union's name changed to N.U.B.S.O. in 1880.

The N.U.O.R.F. adopted a mode of organisation that was controlled by the General Council. This body comprised of the General Secretary, the General President, the Treasurer and four committee men. The union also adopted the 'Seat of Government' device in its ruling structure. The 'Seat of Government' was a method adopted by many early trades unions in order to overcome high transport costs incurred by officials attending meetings. All branches in the union voted every two years to nominate the 'Seat of Government'. Winning the seat, however, entailed more than kudos and convenience as apart from the General Secretary, who could be nominated from any branch, the remaining six posts on the General Council had to be filled by nominees of the branch in the town where the 'Seat of Government' was located. The union was nevertheless distinctly federal in its structure and the branches retained the right to rescind the instructions of council by the device of the 'branch General Meeting'.¹ The branches also retained one third of all financial income and were thus in a position to fund strike action which did not have the authority of the General Council.² This form of organisation was to be of profound importance to the Leicester shoeworkers.

Leicester, with its 1,397 members was by far the largest branch in the new union and easily won the nomination to be the 'Seat of Government'. Thomas Smith, the secretary of the Stafford Riveters and organiser of the 1873 conference, became General Secretary, the only paid post on the council, and removed himself to Leicester³ to join his Leicester colleagues.

1. S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy (1898), pp. 10-11. The Webbs noted that in Leicester the General meetings were often attended by 'thousands with results that are often calamitous to the union'.

2. Fox, op.cit., p.34.

3. Where he subsequently played an important role in Leicester affairs.

Throughout the rest of our period Leicester remained the 'Seat of Government'. The massive expansion in local membership gave the branch an unassailable position in the organisation of the union.

The early years of the union were as should be expected, mainly concerned with problems of consolidation. Recruitment was obviously the union's first concern and the Leicester branch gained a notable reputation in this area. Throughout our period the local branch was by far the largest in the union and often contained over 25% of the union's national membership. The massive expansion of the trade in Leicester aided union growth, but nevertheless the local branch pursued a vigorous recruitment campaign especially amongst the finishers and smaller workshops. In November 1880 Leicester reported 130 new members during the previous fortnight. 'The system we have now adopted seems likely to bring about results the most sanguine would hardly have expected. We have divided the town into districts and have over twenty real earnest workers, who are if necessary, doing a house to house call; this is to catch those working away from the factories, in small shops and their own homes, more especially finishers'.¹

Collective bargaining was conducted through the local boards of arbitration that sprang up during the seventies and the attitude of the union leadership towards the employers was generally conciliatory. The historian of the union has also noted that 'In each of these centres there was a group of employers who considered that regular joint discussions could play a constructive part in the smooth running of the industry'.²

1. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, November 1880.

2. Fox, op.cit., pp. 70-71.

Leicester was certainly one of the centres referred to by Fox and T. Smith appears to have enjoyed the friendship and confidence of local manufacturers.¹

A danger exists however, in viewing the 1870s in the footwear trade as a period marked by total harmony. Even in these boom years footwear, like all clothing trades, was subject to high levels of seasonality in demand. The union therefore normally found itself on the defensive for at least part of the year.

As the season advances the necessity for increased vigilance, calm reasoning, and firmness becomes greater; questions in dispute must be looked at from as broad a point of view, as it is at all compatible with our dignity as an association, conciliation must be our watchword; and if each officer and member will act upon this advice it will very materially assist us in successfully conducting our union through the difficulties by which our path is surrounded, and land us into the new year fresh and vigorous to meet the troubles we usually encounter at that season. 2

This statement of the union's attitude in a difficult period succinctly captures the ambiguity that surrounded the rhetorical expressions frequently voiced by the union officials. Harmony there may have been and Smith did after all resign his post as General Secretary in 1878 in order to become the full time secretary of the Leicester Liberal Association, but nevertheless it was also a strategy that would '... land us into the new year fresh and vigorous to meet the troubles we usually encounter at that season'. In April the following year the monthly report was noticeably ~~empty~~ of 'harmonious outpourings when the General Council denounced in

1. In September 1877 T. Smith was elected as a Liberal to the Leicester School Board. His candidature was nominated without opposition by W. Walker of Walker and Kempson's Shoe firm. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, September 1877.

2. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, October 1877.

in angry terms the attempts by the Leicester employers to introduce a statement that proposed major cuts in piece rates.¹

Another point which probably had some influence on the harmonious stance of the leadership was the fact that in Leicester at least there existed two systems of collective bargaining. Individual shop floor negotiations on the prices paid to the various groups of workers, all paid by the piece, were necessary in an industry that produced goods that were constantly changing in both type of construction and style. This grassroots mode of negotiation was complemented by the local arbitration board which in Leicester was designed to act as the court of appeal to the plethora of individual disputes that were constantly being created. Hence by 1882, George Sedgwick, the successor to Smith as General Secretary, went so far as to define the purpose of the union as '... to act as mediator between employers and workmen in trade disputes'.²

During the early 1880s the stance of moderation adopted by the union leadership was being seriously challenged by innovations carried out by employers to meet the needs of rapid technological and economic change during a period of a world wide decline in prices and a narrowing of profit margins. The response of the employers to this background of generalised depression and incipient competition from more technologically advanced foreign manufacturers was to seek out ways of lowering production costs. Thus the introduction of labour saving machinery, new systems of work organisation, the implementation of day work instead of piece rates, and the substitution of less skilled labour were often attempted by Leicester manufacturers.

1. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, April 1878.

2. Ibid., December 1882.

One of the early innovations to cause disruption in Leicester was the introduction of large numbers of 'boy labourers' into enterprises specialising in low quality footwear. These products high in cardboard and low in leather and craft content were generally manufactured by small and medium sized employers.¹ The growth of this low quality sector not only threatened the long term craft interests of the workers but the mushrooming of small employers in this area was also being felt in the composition of the local Manufacturers Association, formed in 1871.² The anger vented by the union in April 1878 against the implementation of a new statement designed to lower wages was heightened by the fact that for the first time the Manufacturers Association had failed to consult the union before introducing the statement. These small firms were also the first to reduce wages and to ignore what was left of the apprenticeship system. The rise of the small firms therefore carried serious consequences for the local labour market but they also threatened the stability of the larger enterprises which now had to cope with both a declining economic background and local low priced competition.

The major craft element in the labour process was lasting and this area was not to be mechanised successfully until the early 1890s, but the implications of the early steps towards a team system carried out by the larger employers in the early 1880s were quickly spotted by the workers as a threat against their craft status. The monthly report of the union in October 1881 called for more effort in organising workshops and gave the following appraisal of new innovations and their threat to the craft status of the workers:

1. Ibid., May 1878.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., March 1878.

The aspects of our trade are constantly changing in consequence of the rapid increase of productive power, caused by new systems of division and subdivision of labour, and the introduction of machinery; in fact many of our large shoe manufactories resemble more the appearance of an extensive engineering establishment than a place for the manufacture of shoes, so largely does the use of machinery obtain.

The knowledge of leather, its attributes and uses, are becoming day by day apparently less a necessity to the workman than the fact of being competent to direct or control some intricate piece of machinery. We say "apparently" advisedly, because, whilst it may be possible to create a race of human beings - flesh and blood as ourselves - but who, for all practical purposes, would be as much machines as the instruments of metal which they would tend, it is not possible to do this without at the same time destroying that individual tact, taste, and skill which has hitherto been a marked characteristic of the disciples of St. Crispin. The combinations of leather produced under such conditions would be void of those symmetrical proportions, the artistic outlines, and the life - so to speak - which is now so admirably blended in the various samples of our craft, which in their special lines, are today the pride of both maker and vendor. To maintain the position we have acquired in the markets of the world during the past, is none the less duty of the workman than the employer. This cannot be done by the unrestricted use of the automatons before mentioned. We have then, as workmen, the strongest incentive to at least endeavour to restrain, not only the unlimited importation of unskilled ill-trained labour into our midst, but also discourage as far as possible, the use of improper and worthless material.

1

The workers were of course in an ambiguous position on the machinery question. 'Machinery has played an important part in the past history of our trade, but we are fully assured that it is destined to play a more important part than it has hitherto done' declared the Monthly report of November 1888. The industry was after all based upon and clustered around mechanised forms of sole attachment and it is of no great surprise that the newly designed union emblem of 1885 contained an illustration of

1. Ibid., October 1881.

the 'Blake Machine'.¹ Mechanisation in the lasting department, however, not only threatened the workers major area of skill, but the attendant speed-ups in all the other areas of production the lasting machine would bring in its train would challenge the remaining craft pretensions of the rest of the workforce and open up the industry to a flood of unskilled, young workers.

Immediately prior to the first wave of lasting machines a new generation of sole attaching and finishing machines were introduced. These new machines produced by the highly competitive American shoe machine industry often carried inflated productivity claims. The union noted with concern 'that the introduction of machinery is responsible for a large proportion of disputes no one will deny, not because the workmen have in any way attempted to oppose its introduction, but because the inventors with the view of selling their machines more readily, have led employers to take more from the wages of the men than the portions of the work performed would warrant, hence the men's objections and ultimate resistance'.² The core of the problem in this situation was the utilisation by Leicester manufacturers of American production methods, while at the same time refusing to follow the American policy of paying high wages for high productivity. The Webbs, in their work, Industrial Democracy chose this specific problem of the Leicester footwear trade as a major example of obstinacy and conservatism amongst employers. They also commented with concern on the obduracy of the workers who clung tenaciously to the tenet of Owenite Socialism which claimed that the legitimate reward of labour was the entire commodity produced or its price

1. Ibid., April 1885.

2. Ibid., November 1888.

on the market.¹ The problems that arose over the machinery question during the 1880s were, however, pale foreshadows of the disputes created when a reliable lasting machine was introduced in 1889. These conflicts will be the subject of later chapters.

Up until the mid-1880s disputes over machinery were a minor irritant. The strong undercurrent of craft pride, independence and autonomy can, of course, be detected beneath the rhetorical surface of harmony between labour and capital, but these aspects of artisanal consciousness both remained submerged and flowed into the ideology of self help Liberalism shared by both master and men. As long as workers prospered in their workshops or were left relatively unsupervised, being paid by the piece, in the factories, harmony would prevail. The dynamic of expansion, with its effect of both increasing and enduring the workshop sector produced a system of industrial relations that assured the continuation of methods and practices that were rooted in the artisanal era. Unlike other mass production industries, most notably cotton textiles, paternalism played a minor role in the Leicester footwear industry. This is understandable given the fact that the manufacturer had little contact with the majority of workers, whom up until 1891, worked outside the factory.² Moreover, the vicissitudes of seasonality resulted in much of the workforce constantly moving from one employer to another.³

1. S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy, (1898), p.402.

2. R.C. on Labour 1892, Part II, q. 16,019.

3. Ibid.

The prosperity of the trade also removed some of the more raucous aspects from the shoemaking community. As early as 1862 the St. Crispin day celebration had been relocated inside the Temperance Hall and the highlight of the event was the address by the mayor to the assembled shoemakers.¹ Dare commented hopefully that this new venue 'will furnish a rational holiday instead of his old drunken saturnalia'.² More importantly the regular meetings between union officers and manufacturers that took place in the running of the local arbitration machinery facilitated personal friendships and collaboration between the two groups in areas outside industrial relations. As we have already seen two systems of collective bargaining existed in the early decades of the trade in Leicester, shop floor negotiations and arbitration. As long as the trade boomed the two did not come into conflict. Thus arbitration during this period tended to concentrate on fixing annual statements rather than involve itself in the cut and thrust of individual pricing negotiations.³ Thus the officer strata of the union increasingly came to see their role as that of an industrial police force rather than as champions of shop floor demands. Sedgewick's concept of the union's function as being that of a mediator 'between employers and workmen in time of disputes' underlines this point.⁴ Such conciliatory attitudes towards the manufacturers brought rewards to union officials other than endowing them with an inflated sense of their own importance and communal responsibility.

1. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1862.

2. Ibid.

3. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, December 1878.

4. Ibid., December 1882.

Political office was to be the most important of these benefits. Smith, Sedgewick and their successor as General Secretary, William Inskip, all sat on the Liberal benches of Leicester Council along with the ten or more Liberal councillors that were also shoe manufacturers during this period.

It is not surprising therefore that when the industry became bedevilled by disputes in the late 1880s, disputes that emanated from shop floor discontent, conflict soon developed a political dimension. Both Leicester Liberalism and the Leicester footwear industry were dominated by a group of men who were firmly based in a system of production that was distinguished by its artisanal mode of organisation and lack of centralisation. Hence conflicts that were to arise over efforts to change this form of manufacture questioned political as well as industrial relationships. Furthermore, change in the footwear industry, particularly centralised production, also entailed profound shifts in local social structure. I therefore intend to spend several chapters analysing local politics and social factors as without such an analysis the troubles in the industry during the 1890s are incomprehensible.

CHAPTER III

Work and Consciousness: The Leicester
Working Class 1860-1885

In the production of a thesis of this nature, which is essentially an examination of class structure and the emergence of independent labour politics, a certain teleological bias is inevitable. Yet the question 'what were the origins of the labour party?' is nevertheless a legitimate historical question. The danger which is constantly faced by historians in answering these backward looking questions is that of anachronism. Our focus is naturally aimed at those institutions and social groups which form the roots of the tree whose growth we are trying to explain. In pursuing this tracing exercise a tension is ever present inasmuch as antecedents may be exaggerated. Furthermore their relevance and social context during early periods may be misunderstood. A major theme of this thesis which will be developed further in a future chapter is that a major input into early socialism was a concern to defend certain forms of existing social relationships, particularly those based in the workplace. The ideals of the independent artisan and the self-regulating workman were the central issues in the battle between capital and labour that dominated Leicester during the period 1885-1895: a struggle which gave birth to early forms of socialism. In this chapter I want to concentrate primarily on the persistence of artisanal work patterns in a more general communal context than the one described in Chapters I and II. This will therefore deal mainly with the world of work as experienced by the majority of the working class in Leicester. Other important forms of class activity such as Owenism in its Secularist garbs and popular religion will be examined in the proceeding chapters.

The period generally was one of social and political stability. The era of mass movements and social unrest, with the notable exception of the reform agitation, appeared to be a thing of the past. Historians have generally explained this period of working class quiescence by reference to profound changes in the economy which affected the political disposition of the working class. One group of writers have drawn attention to growing divisions within the working class during a period of increasing economic prosperity and in particular to profound effects on class politics by the emergence of a labour aristocracy.¹ More recently the work of Patrick Joyce on industrial and communal relationships in the Lancashire cotton towns, with its emphasis on paternalism and deference has offered new insights into the history of the period.² Leicester, however, was a community particularly ill fitted to these two modes of explanation. There was no detectable strata sufficient in size and importance that corresponds with Hobsbawm's list of factors that supposedly identifies a labour aristocracy.³ Furthermore the few workers who do broadly match Hobsbawm's category, the clickers in footwear, and warehousemen in hosiery, tended to stand on the sidelines of working class politics,⁴ while their role in the production process tended to be

1. The material on this concept is, to say the least, copious. The following are some of the main texts on the subject. E.J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (1964), ch. 15; R.J. Harrison, Before the Socialists (1965); J. Foster, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution (1974); J. Hinton, The First Shop Stewards Movement (1973); R.Q. Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh (Oxford, 1976); H. Pelling, 'The Concept of the Labour Aristocracy' in Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain (1968) and A.E. Musson, British Trade Unions 1800-1875 (1972) offer a critical appraisal of the subject. See also H.F. Moorhouse, 'The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy', Social History, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1978 for a review of the debate.

2. P. Joyce, op.cit., For a particularly useful critique of Joyce's work see N. Kirk, 'Cotton Workers and Deference', Bulletin, S.S.L.H., 42.

3. Hobsbawm, op.cit., p.273.

4. During the period neither group formed trade unions nor participated in labour and working class politics.

somewhat marginal in comparison to that played by the spinners, engineers, hewers and checkweighmen in Foster's Oldham study. The politics of paternalism raises another important set of problems which in the context of Leicester cannot be so easily put to one side as those raised by the labour aristocracy theorists. Paternalistic interventions were regularly attempted by the Leicester Manufacturing class, but because local industry was largely dispersed on a system of outwork, these efforts were mostly carried out by agencies whose aim was to morally uplift the working class. In this chapter I want to assess the efficiency of these paternalistic devices, an assessment which I feel will expose the tenacity of the artisanal, workshop based, culture. Finally I want to address the overarching question of why did Leicester enjoy political and social stability during the period.

The prevalence of outwork manufacture during the period under review, provided fertile ground for the growth and maintenance of popular beliefs, attitudes and practices. It is true, as we shall see in Chapter VI that the Leicester working class accepted the policies and followed the leadership of middle class politicians throughout the period, but nevertheless the Leicester workers were rarely subjected to the full gamut of hegemonic devices practised by manufacturers in other parts of England.¹ Traditions and cultural patterns which can roughly be described as 'artisanal' flourished unhindered in this period of massive economic and population expansion. These cultural practices were slowly perceived by manufacturers as presenting a formidable obstacle to productive efficiency,

1. P. Joyce, op.cit.; Sutton op.cit., pp. 154-9 has useful material on Clark's more robust paternalistic regime in Street, Somerset.

especially during the latter part of the period when foreign competition threatened the viability of Leicester's two major industries, but as we have seen this recognition of the problem was slow, most manufacturers being reluctant to change a system that worked and generated profit for a minimal investment.

Some local observers, however, were alarmed and sensed a threat in the growing manifestations of working class cultural independence during a period of dramatic population expansion. Joseph Dare, the Unitarian Domestic Missionary, was particularly well placed to comment on the subject, being a paid employee of a congregation which largely consisted of the town's major hosiers, to carry out the task of both distributing charity and morally uplifting the lower classes.¹ A recurring theme in the annual reports of this nineteenth century social worker, expressed his concern and extolled his employers to do something about the audacious behaviour of the growing working class population. In particular Dare singled out the mass of newly arrived immigrant labour for comment. 'Raw from the country, they are intoxicated with town life and intensify its worse manifestations'. The influx of 'godless' shoemakers caused Dare much concern. In 1853, prior to their arrival, he noted that 'And again in reference to the reading tastes of the masses, an intelligent publisher informs me that he supplies now scarcely any of the licentious tales issued by "Lloyds" and "Reynolds"'. These abominations have been, at least in Leicester, nearly supplanted by the "London Journal", which has reached an immense circulation and is comparatively a serial of a much better kind,

1. The main benefactors to the mission in 1875 included Brewin, Coltman, Charlesworth, Fielding, Johnson, Paget, Rowlett, Riley, Simpson, Stokes, Stone and Whetstone. All of these apart from S. Stone, the Town Clerk, either owned, or were connected, with hosiery and footwear manufacturing. Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1875.

though it has some objectionable points'.¹ By 1857, however, Dare was concerned by '... these Sunday strollers who take the Reasoner, or Reynolds, with them, and are settling, with absolute decision, questions that the greatest minds never dare approach'.² He went on to complain about 'one cause of neglect of worship is the lamentable prevalence of infidelity, which prevails to an extent few can perceive, who have not mixed with all classes on common ground'.³

Dare's solution to the apparent problem of social control over the rapidly expanding working population was paternalism. In the comparatively calm days of 1853 Dare commented with satisfaction that 'No doubt a softening influence has been produced by many of the employers and their friends mingling with "the hands" in their summer festivities'.⁴ By 1864 the outdoor summer activities of the workers, according to Dare, had degenerated into '... what they call their recreations ... Often the fete ends in a mere riotous debauch, or is continued in the town for many days, to the neglect of employment, self-degradation and the privation of helpless dependents'.⁵ Dare's ideal type of summer outing were those provided by some of the larger employers, who would most probably be among his benefactors and thus singled out for special mention. For example:

I had the pleasure during the summer of spending a day with the hands of a very large establishment. The locality chosen for the holiday was Kenilworth. The heads of the firm accompanied their hands, numbering about five hundred, together with several friends who were specially invited to join them. They sat at tea, mingled in the country dance, or rambled over the magnificent ruins together, or as "fancy will

1. Ibid., 1853.

2. Ibid., 1857.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 1853.

5. Ibid., 1864.

determine" the employers or visitors referring to the various interesting legends or historical associations connected with them for the information and amusement of the merry group. All enjoyed themselves without restraint, neither quarrel nor drunkenness disgraced the scene, and the whole of the hands were at work the next morning at the usual time. 1

Dare's reports do, of course, require cautious treatment as he was undoubtedly prone to exaggerate the effects of the paternalistic interventions of his larger benefactors. We must in particular bear in mind that only a tiny proportion of the Leicester working class would in this period have been directly employed by the manufacturers on a regular basis and thus benefit from their paternalistic largesse. Patrick Joyce in his study of paternalism during this period has noted that 'Season, fashion, foreign tariffs, variations in raw material costs and a lack of alternative workers all compounded to depress the condition of the operatives and sever the link between master and man which continuous, dependable work created'.² Joyce here is referring to the failure of paternalism to establish itself in the West Riding, many of his factors were found in both footwear and hosiery and if we add the vital feature of outwork to Joyce's list, relationships between master and men must have been extremely tenuous in Leicester.

Nevertheless, the collective conscience of the Unitarian manufacturers as expressed through the mission did not eschew innovation and intervention into the affairs of working class everyday life. Education was a central objective of the mission. In the decades prior to the Education Act, the mission school provided lessons for 742 boys in 1862,

1. Ibid.

2. Joyce, op.cit., p.74.

by far the largest establishment of its kind in Leicester,¹ many of these scholars being part-time employees of Unitarian manufacturers.² The mission school continued up until 1872 by which time it was rendered obsolete by the new board schools.³ The Unitarians were also eager to provide adult recreational facilities including Instructional Classes, Sewing Classes, a Provident Club, Discussion Classes, Window-plant Shows and Sunday Schools. But how effective were all these activities in achieving their organisers' aim of producing working men and women of sober dispositions whose value system closely accorded with that of their benefactors? We have no means of gauging the effects of many of these activities and pastimes, but the evidence that is available, particularly on the working men's discussion groups, is revealing.

In the following chapter we shall see how the Domestic Mission provided a temporary home for early secularists who availed themselves of the Unitarians' warmth and shelter during the 1850s when the fortunes of Owenism were at a low ebb.⁴ In this chapter, however, I want to focus upon the activities of the Discussion Group during the 1860s. The adult male reading and discussion classes informed Dare in 1865 that they wished to form a working men's club. Dare's initial reaction was favourable, he himself became a committee member, being chiefly responsible for raising funds from local manufacturers.⁵ The club eventually opened on Easter

1. R.C. on Childrens Employment, First Report, 1863, p.293.

2. Ibid., 2nd Report, 1864, p.166.

3. J. Dare, 'Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission', 1875. The overall effect of pre-board school education in Leicester must have been minimal. The town was 7,000 places short in 1867 and the average attendance was 18 months. Ibid., 1867.

4. The middle class run Mechanics Institute provided similar temporary accommodation for 'infidel artisans' in the 1830s. F.B. Lott, Story of the Leicester Mechanics Institute (Leicester 1935) p.5.

5. Local Tories were however highly suspicious of the club's potential political influence, see Leicester Journal, May 4, 1866.

Monday at premises in St. Martins. The domestic mission provided newspapers and a library. Middle class men including Dare held a large presence on the committee and the club's future and direction appeared to be in their hands. Within weeks of opening, however, the working class membership announced their wish to offer 'the means of recreation and enjoyment with no temptations to excess, to enable them to get a glass of ale without the inducement of taking two for the good of the house, and to enable them to see in the club examples of moderation'.¹ The wishes of the members prevailed, setting a precedent for the club movement nationally. Dare, naturally, resented this development.² By the end of the year the Reading and Discussion classes were moribund, the members having joined the working men's club en masse.³ The club in contrast survived and prospered, and it appears to have been particularly attractive to footwear workers.⁴

There is, however, a danger in over-simplifying rejection from below of middle class inspired rational recreational initiatives. The local coffee and cocoa house movement, whose directors included such notable manufacturers as Angrave, Ellis, Simson, Stanyon and W.H. Walker, was established in 1877 and by 1882 the company was running eight separate houses.⁵ The question of popular attitudes to drink is a fascinating one but for reasons of space cannot be explored fully in this thesis. Nevertheless, the temperance movement did have an effect upon working class life, especially in the area of politics. For example, in November

1. Quoted in R.N. Price, 'The Working Men's Club Movement and Victorian Social Reform Ideology', Victorian Studies, Vol. 15, 1971, p.127.

2. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1866.

3. Ibid.

4. By 1882 the club had 500 members. George Sedgewick and William Inskip, both N.U.B.S.O. officers, held the president's and secretary's post at the club. Wright's Directory of Leicester, 1882, p.278.

5. Ibid.

1905 the Leicester I.L.P. were anxious to publicise the fact that 8 of the 9 I.L.P. town councillors were total abstainers, which suggests that abstinence was perceived as a major personal quality amongst working class political leaders.¹ Yet the reformers were faced with an uphill battle during the period. Footloose workers, probably new to the town, increasingly sought entertainment in drinking establishments, many of which, according to Dare, were expanding their premises to provide singing and dancing rooms.² The Unitarians were in the forefront in the campaign to provide counter attractions such as penny readings and factory brass bands. In 1864 Dare warned the mission's benefactors that 'counter attractions alone will do away with the casino and dancing saloon', but added ominously 'No doubt these moral agencies have produced and are producing very beneficial results as far as their influence extends, but they only reach down to a certain grade of the population, and are chiefly calculated to interest and improve those who already possess some little taste and information. I attended some of these social gatherings to see what kind of audiences came together, and I must say very few were present of those whom it is most desirable to call out. There are whole masses who are incapable of enjoying or profiting ... lower deeps still open wide to devour them'.³ Given Dare's frequent strictures on the licentious behaviour of young workers in the unskilled sections of the footwear industry it is quite clear who he was describing. Indeed later in the report he drew attention to the frequent instances of 'the embezzlement of materials entrusted to them'.⁴

1. Leicester Pioneer, November 18, 1905.

2. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1864.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

Dare's was not a lone voice in advocating the paternal approach as a solution to the problem, or potential problem, of social stability. Both the Tory journal and the Liberal Chronicle contained columns entitled 'Treats for Workers' which eagerly charted instances of employers' munificence. Yet by the end of this period under survey only one firm appears to have successfully established a paternalistic regime of a permanent nature. This not surprisingly was Corah's who with their large new St. Margaret's works were the biggest hosiery firm in the town and thanks to their innovations in machinery and marketing were the first and perhaps the only company who were able to provide continuous factory based employment.¹

1. When the firm opened the St. Margaret's works in 1886 one of the employees composed a poem to commemorate the event entitled 'The Warehouse Opening'; one of the verses ran as follows:

Here may the hand that's willing
 Find ever work to do;
 Here may the earnest hearted
 Work on with purpose true.
 May Workers and Employers
 Each for the other care,
 And in a generous spirit,
 Each other's burdens bear.

cited in C.W. Webb, op.cit., p.41. The firm also fielded its own cricket team in 1877, Leicester Chronicle, September 22, 1877, and organised a workers' 'Choral Union' in 1883. C.W. Webb, op.cit., p.44.

Other middle class inspired forms of working class improvement produced more tangible results. In particular the Freehold Land Society is worth attention.¹ Founded in 1849 by such staunch Liberals as the Biggs brothers, Joseph Whetstone and the two local M.Ps. Harris and Ellis, together with James Thompson, the editor of the Liberal Chronicle, the society's initial objectives were 'to overthrow the Tory domination of the County' by gaining the freehold county vote for subscribing artisans. Although initially bedevilled by speculators and jerry builders the society eventually provided 2,550 housing sites, one fifth of the total new stock erected in the period 1851-1881.² The society eventually became the Leicester Permanent Building Society and never appeared to have played the political role intended by its founders.³

Joyce has also noted that in general old cities and towns were usually difficult locations for the practice of throughgoing paternalism and the politics of influence.⁴ Alternative employment opportunities from those offered by the potential paternalist obviously made the price of a fully fledged system of influence too high. Furthermore, the process of mechanisation and centralised production, an essential feature in Joyce's typology, was accompanied in Leicester by intense class struggle in both footwear and hosiery. Industrial relations were thus well soured by the time that the process of factory building had been completed. Indeed worker-employer conflict was deep rooted in both industries decades prior to factory production. The issue of frame rent in hosiery was a

1. M. Elliott, Victorian Leicester (Chichester, 1979) Chapter 6, contains a useful survey on nineteenth century Leicester housing, including a discussion of the Freehold Land Society.

2. Ibid., pp. 108-118.

3. Ibid., p.116.

4. Joyce, op.cit, p.227.

constant source of acrimony amongst stockings in the apparently stable years of the 1860s and '70s; especially when no other employer followed John Biggs's example of abolishing rent in 1859.¹ The evidence of the stockings' leaders to the Commissioner examining the Truck System in 1871 highlights the stockings' long held anger on the frame rent question;² while in footwear during the same period the continued adjustment to statement prices necessitated by the trade's seasonality and sensitiveness to fashion changes mitigated against long term harmony.³ The net result of these sources of conflict in Leicester's two major industries was to produce an undercurrent of discontent amongst the workers that traversed the period under survey.

This phenomena of widespread antagonisms, ever present in work-based relationships, together with the spirit of artisanal independence, nurtured by the outwork system, negated the effects of paternalistic devices. Judging by Dare's comments who, despite his obvious bias, was a well situated observer, the effects of the mission's activities were minimal. The main recipients of the rational recreation movement were usually the better-off artisans who already possessed a modicum of 'knowledge and taste.' These men were also unlikely to be over impressed by the sanctimonious preaching of Dare and his ilk, preferring instead to avail themselves of those facilities that they found personally useful. Below this strata we find the mass of semi and unskilled labour, many of whom were new to Leicester. This sector of the population caused Dare the

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1. Select Committee on Stoppage of Wages in Hosiery, 1855, qq. 374 - 380.
 2. R.C. on the Truck System, qq. 41,665 - 41,711.
 3. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, October 1877; April 1878.

most anguish; not only were they usually found outside the factories in the small workshops well away from the potential sobering effect of the entrepreneur, they were also developing the artisan's spirit of independence, albeit in a less sober form.

If paternalism and the labour aristocracy are to be rejected as explanations for social stability in the period 1860-1885, what were the factors that underpinned this era of harmony? The answer I feel is rather simple and unsurprising. Leicester experienced in these decades an unprecedented economic expansion. Work, if always prone to seasonal fluctuations, was freely available, but of more importance the type of work undertaken represented no great break with past practices. The shoeworkers and stockings, never at the top of the wages table, enjoyed a lengthy period of relative prosperity; while those pioneer factory operatives who worked the Cotton frames still enjoyed the status of craft inside the factory. Furthermore, this economic expansion, being essentially an expansion of the outwork system, widened employment opportunities for the whole family. The sons of these workers may have endured the hardships of the shoe finishing workshops, their daughters and wives probably laboured over sewing machines, or stitched hosiery by hand at home, but the effect on the family economy must have been profound. Seasonality only confirmed the continuation of traditional work patterns, punctuations were often predictable, and underlined work rhythms that were the antithesis of factory discipline. If Leicester's stability was based upon as much an expansion of handicraft as of factory production, how does this accord to the national picture? One critic of Joyce has drawn attention to the narrow geographical area upon which he bases his generalisations; an area distinguished by early large scale factory

production, highly untypical of the period.¹ Similar criticism has been levied against Foster's labour aristocracy thesis.² One writer has recently argued that the British industrial revolution was founded on a broad handicraft sector, a situation which continued late into the Victorian period.³ This argument suggests that Leicester was probably closer to the norm than say Lancashire.

The longevity of the artisanal milieu also harboured deep rooted cultural manifestations, the pinnacle of which was the persistence and growth of freethought activities organised around the local secular society. It is this particular area of working class cultural life that will be examined in the next chapter.

To summarise this chapter, the workers in Leicester's two main industries in the period 1860 to 1885 continued to enjoy artisanal life styles and work patterns. The process of proletarianisation outlined by Marx entails both the removal of the instruments of production from the worker and the imposition of strict capitalist control over the work process.⁴ Up until the mid 1880s in Leicester only the first part of the Marxist formulation had been completed. The inefficiency of the outwork mode of organisation resulted in a low degree of capitalist control inside the workplace. Thus the forms of social control, albeit historically

1. Kirk, op.cit. p.43.

2. G. Stedman Jones, New Left Review, 90, 1975, pp. 35-71.

3. R. Samuel, 'The Workshop of the World', History Workshop Journal, 3, 1977.

4. K. Marx, Capital, Vol. I (Moscow, 1970) Chapter XV.

contentious ones, which have often been ascribed to the world of work during this period had little effect in Leicester. Pollard's points that 'the worker who left the background of his domestic workshop or peasant holding for the factory entered a new culture as well as a new sense of direction' and that 'continuous employment was one of the most hated aspects of factory life' were, generally speaking, still to be experienced by the majority of Leicester workers.¹

1. S. Pollard, The Genesis of Modern Management (1965) p.160; p.166.

CHAPTER IV

Radical Freethought in mid-Victorian Leicester

With the persistence of the workshop economy and the influx in large numbers of shoemakers, widely acknowledged as the most radical section of the English working class,¹ it is not surprising that Leicester was a major centre of secularism. This particular strain of artisanal culture had from the era of Tom Paine produced some of the most radical working class leaders of the nineteenth century. The role of notable members of the freethought and secularist movement such as Robert Owen, Richard Carlile, G.J. Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Edward Aveling and John Burns in working class political movements is, of course, well known and has already been the subject of two major works by one historian.² In this chapter I will survey the survival and rising fortunes of secularism in Leicester in the period between the demise of organised Owenism and the arrival of socialism. Such a survey, while providing interesting material on the persistence of artisanal political culture, is also necessary if the questions posed later in this thesis are to be adequately answered: what were the intellectual traditions and beliefs of early socialists and to what extent did earlier beliefs and practices help to shape the nascent socialist movement in Leicester?

Working class secularism in Leicester possessed deep roots. Radical artisans in the town corresponded with Paine in 1789³ and during the

1. See E.J. Hobsbawm and J.W. Scott's survey of shoemakers in the nineteenth century, 'Political Shoemakers' in Past and Present 89, 1980.

2. E. Royle, Victorian Infidels. The origins of the British Secularist movement 1791-1866 (Manchester 1974); and E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain 1866-1915 (Manchester 1980).

3. F.J. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society (Leicester 1900) p.4.

first decades of the nineteenth century Leicester was an active centre of the Hampden Clubs movement.¹ Secularism, however, began its formal existence with the foundation in 1838 of branch 26 of Robert Owen's socialist organisation at the Commercial Rooms in the Market Place.² Attempts to chronicle in detail the workings and social composition of marginal provincial Victorian institutions is notoriously difficult task for the historian. The Leicester Secular Society does possess archive material, but all that is extant is post 1880; the financing and building of the Secular Hall in 1881 being the occasion which instituted the orderly process of book-keeping.³ Prior to the 1880s we have no detailed knowledge of membership. What follows is largely based on autobiographical material produced by members,⁴ contemporary sources and recent secondary material.⁵

1. Patterson, op.cit., chapter 6 passim, for a survey of early nineteenth century radical movements in Leicester.

2. Ibid., p.288. See also E. Royle, Victorian Infidels, p.295.

3. Even after this date the records are not particularly revealing. For example the occupation of members is not given. Shareholders' lists of the Secular Hall Company, however, do give this information, but this is not representative of the membership as only the few better off members could afford the £5 shares.

4. T. Barclay, Memoirs and Medleys. The Autobiography of a Bottle Washer (Leicester 1934). Barclay, 1852-1933, was a working class member and socialist agitator. F.J. Gould as well as writing an early history of the society also relates much useful information on Leicester in his Life Story of a Humanist (1923). S.A. Gimson, the son of Josiah and President of the society from 1888 until 1937 produced two unpublished typescripts 'Random Recollections of the Leicester Secular Society with Digressions' Vols. 1 & 2, which are contained in the society's archive.

5. Both the Royle volumes contain information on the Leicester society.

By 1846 Robert Owen's branch 26, under the guidance of two of its leading members, Josiah Gimson and W.H. Holyoak, formed itself into a branch of the Rational Society.¹ Gimson, 1818-1883, an Owenite artisan engineer, who later became the owner of a large engineering concern, became the branch president, while Holyoak, 1818-1907, a local tailor, played a leading role in the branch's affairs as well as performing the function of bookseller to the society.² Under the guidance of Gimson and Holyoak the Leicester rationalists became close adherents to the brand of secularism advocated by G.J. Holyoake, with a strong emphasis on respectability, a concern for philosophical and intellectual issues and a belief that secularism was more concerned with constructive measures, such as cooperation and social improvement, than with the 'infidel's' traditional activity of 'bible-bashing'.³

Before the formal foundation of the Leicester Secular Society in 1866 the Leicester Owenites appear to have experienced difficulties in establishing a permanent organisation. The remnants of the Rational Society, headed by Gimson and Holyoak, found a temporary home in the Unitarian Domestic Mission Hall's evening discussion groups.⁴ At first glance this may appear to be an incongruous location for 'infidels' to gather but the Unitarians themselves were experiencing a major theological crisis. Owen Chadwick has identified this crisis as being essentially

1. Royle, Victorian Infidels, p.310.

2. Ibid., p.311.

3. In 1877 Gimson and the Leicester Society joined Holyoake in the formation of the Anti-Bradlaugh organisation, the British Secular Union. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, p.18. Gimson himself was a firm advocate of cooperative production in 1872. He introduced a profit sharing scheme into his own factory. Report of the Board of Trade on Profit Sharing, 1891, pp. 42-3. See also G.J. Holyoake, 'Secular Prospects in Death, an address at the funeral of J. Gimson', 1883.

rooted in a growing division between those Unitarians whose main beliefs were evangelical biblicism and those who were heirs to the sect's tradition of rational deism.¹ The first group were in essence ordinary bible protestants distinguished only by their disbelief in the Trinity, while the second were '... the heirs of old deism, preaching rational religion, unpoetic common sense, anti-evangelical, suspicious of fervours and enthusiasms, calm in religious life, and in religious thought, believing that more good was done by books than sermons'.² In Leicester the first group appear to have formed the post 1832 political oligarchy, while the second, including Coltman, Bilson, Wright and Sladen, all wealthy manufacturers, but imbued with the intellectual traditions of a congregation that was once closely related to Joseph Priestly, became attracted to the secularist doctrine formulated by Holyoake and locally advocated by Gimson.³

The influx of lapsed Unitarians into Leicester's old artisan organisation, while it may offer little direct evidence into working class culture and consciousness, does testify to the existence of a group of largely working men whose intellectual activity was of such a high order to attract local middle class radical intellectuals. Yet what evidence can we furnish on the social composition of Leicester secularism below the level of the society's middle class patrons? As we have seen the society's records are silent on this subject. We are therefore forced to

1. O. Chadwick, The Victorian Church, Vol. I, pp. 391-8.

2. Ibid. pp. 396-7.

3. All were large shareholders in the Secular Hall Company. Perhaps this schism may have been an element in Dare's frequent attacks on infidelity.

rely on evidence of a more impressionistic nature which generally describes Leicester secularism as largely a working class phenomenon. Gould in his history of the society noted the early involvement of working class political leaders, especially the former Chartists J. Seal and J. Sketchley,¹ while during the early period of the society's formal existence consisted mainly of discussion classes on 'the Peoples Charter, frame rents, Popular Education and Secularism, for the benefit of a group of working men'.² During the 1860s apart from Dare's regular warnings to his congregation on the growth of popular freethought our sources are silent. By 1873, however, the society had established itself in permanent rooms of a humble nature, in Humberstone Gate. Young Malcom Quinn, the future positivist socialist who spent part of his youth in Leicester, attended the society's weekly meetings in that year and found the membership to be 'largely proletarian with a few shopkeepers and manufacturers'.³ Gould, in a similar vein, asserted that 'Our membership - a motley of some two hundred - included nobody with a University degree and nobody who possessed a carriage'.⁴

The membership of the society expanded during the 1870s to the extent that Gimson was able to confidently embark on plans for a new purpose built hall. A Secular Hall Company was established in order to raise the capital. Two thousand square yards of land was purchased in Humberstone Gate and in 1878 the Secularist architect from Leek, Larner

1. F.J. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society, pp. 8; 10-11. See J.F.C. Harrison, op.cit. for Seal's Chartist activities. E.P. Thompson's William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary (1977 ed.) pp. 279-80 contains information on Sketchley's post-Chartist activities.

2. F.J. Gould, op.cit., p.8.

3. M. Quin, Memoirs of a Positivist (1924) p.48.

4. F.J. Gould, Life Story of a Humanist, p.85.

Sugden, was instructed to design the building which was to include an auditorium capable of holding an audience of 600.¹ The finance was raised by the sale of £5 shares, the majority of which, over 80%, was owned by the Gimson, Wright, Sladen and Coltman families, the rest being held by a medley of small traders, with a few shares bought by hosiery and footwear workers.²

The public face of Leicester secularism tended to portray the solid, rational respectability of the society's larger patrons. A group who eschewed the tub thumping style and political techniques of Bradlaugh in favour of Holyoake's quieter, more constructive form of freethought. In many ways the society represented the embodiment of Holyoake's ideals. The spare land owned by the Society was either rented for income, or parcelled out to members for use as allotments, organised on cooperative lines.³ Both the finances and image of Leicester secularism received a further boost when T.H. Huxley sent a large undisclosed sum of money to Gimson towards the upkeep of the hall and Holyoake also assisted by purchasing £500 worth of shares.⁴ Gimson was thus able to organise the society's activities upon a solid financial foundation.⁵ By 1885 the society was employing Thomas Slater, the Bury cooperator, as full time manager and librarian and a swimming club, gymnasium, Sunday school, evening classes and a women's group became regular features along with the weekly debating sessions.⁶

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1. F.J. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society, p.14.
 2. Shareholders List of the Leicester Secular Hall Company, L.L.R.O. 1068/15.
 3. F.J. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society, p.14.
 4. Ibid., p.28; list of Shareholders of the Leicester Secular Hall Company.
 5. His family owned firm set aside a trust fund to yield £100 per annum for the upkeep of the hall. Gould, op.cit., p.28.
 6. Ibid., pp. 11, 35.

Yet the society included other groups whose ideas and beliefs were somewhat different from those espoused by the now prosperous ex-Owenite Gimson and his lapsed Unitarian manufacturing colleagues. One important strand of Leicester Owenism had marched up the path towards Comteian religion alongside Holyoake in the 1850s and continued long after Holyoake halted.¹ The Leicester Society therefore contained from its earliest days a group of avowed positivists. The leader of the Leicester Comteians was George Findley, an old Chartist, who kept a second hand bookshop in the High Street.² Findley was a remarkable personality who corresponded with Congreve, Crompton and Carson who were also occasional visitors to his home. His son, also George, shared his father's beliefs and together with Malcolm Quin began to inject an element of religiosity into the society's proceedings. This first took the form of giving a short reading before the commencement of the Sunday lecture, a practice which began in 1878 and was later followed by glee singing with piano and harmonium accompaniment.³ In 1882 the positivists introduced a secularist Hymn book, which openly referred to secularism as a new religion,⁴ a choir was also formed and a choirmaster appointed. The positivists soon found their niche in the new hall when Findley and his followers took over the Sunday School.⁵

Despite the positivists' influence on the nature of Leicester secularism, a form of freethought that caused one officer of the National Secular Society (N.S.S.) to comment that the secularists in Leicester

1. For a stimulating discussion on the influence of Comte on Holyoake see E. Royle, Radical Infidels, chapter 3.

2. Quin, op.cit., p.43.

3. S.A. Gimson, 'Random Recollections', Vol. I, p.19; Quin, op.cit., pp. 43-4.

4. Which brought down the wrath of Bradlaugh's 'National Reformer', Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, p.138.

5. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society, pp. 33-4.

behaved as '... if they had signed a peace treaty with the Christians',¹ tension always existed between the Findley group and the society's patrons. The latter, like Holyoake himself, admired the constructive nature of Comte's system but were deeply suspicious of the priestly rituals associated with the Church of Humanity. A suspicion that was perhaps reinforced by the habit of Leicester positivists to attend High Church services in order to partake in, and study the benefits of ritualism.² The compromise between the Holyoakeians and the positivists however, did last for many years and it was not until the early years of the present century when the positivists became attracted to the I.L.P. whose political philosophy in the words of Quin promised the fulfillment of the Comteian ideal of '... a risen proletariat and a world at peace', that the tensions between them and the Liberal Gimson group became unmanageable.³

The society was also subject to pressures from another quarter during the same period. Politically the society during the years from its foundation up until the end of the century represented in microcosm the various elements that formed radical Liberalism. For example, in 1876 the shoe maker secularist Charles Eagle was jailed for ten days for disobeying the vaccination law, while the secularist manufacturer Michael Wright became one of the leaders of the local anti-vaccination movement.⁴ During the 1880s there is much evidence that working class membership of the society was increasing rapidly, a development that was at first welcomed but was ultimately to divide Leicester secularism's political

1. Royle, op.cit., p.134.

2. M. Quin, op.cit., pp. 27-8.

3. F.J. Gould was then full time secretary of the society and had taken over Findley's mantle. Gould was also an active member of the I.L.P. and town councillor. Relations between Gould and Gimson soon deteriorated to the extent that Gould and the positivists left the society to form a Church of Humanity in Highcross Street in 1908. Gimson's parting words to the positivists were 'Well my friends you can hardly expect us to turn our Secular Society into a Positivist Society and Labour Church'. Gould, Life Story of a Humanist, p.108.

4. Ibid., p.85.

loyalties. The factors which produced the growth of working class secularism during the 1870s and 1880s appear fairly obvious yet they are frustratingly difficult to document. As we have seen freethought in Leicester always contained a large working class element but the expansion of working class membership during the 1870s and '80s was supplementary to those older strands of popular infidelity. The influx of 'godless shoemakers' may have played a part in the society's growth and a few boot lasters and riveters do appear on the Secular Hall Company's list of shareholders. Disenchantment with the orthodox religions during a period of economic upheaval may have been another element, but apart from the few memoirs which have survived, there is not enough evidence to warrant theorising upon collective mentalities. Probably the most important factor in the Leicester secularist expansion was the same which produced the major growth in secularism nationally: the personality and charismatic leadership of Bradlaugh.¹ This may appear paradoxical to a provincial society that led the revolt against the N.S.S. and played a formative role in the B.S.U., but by 1884 the B.S.U. was a spent force, having realised that there was not enough room for two national organisations.² Thus for the sake of unity the Leicester society had to tolerate the existence of a Bradlaughite faction amongst its membership. Bradlaugh himself was a frequent lecturer at the society and was one of the guest celebrities at the Hall's opening ceremony.³

Prominent amongst the Leicester supporters of Bradlaugh were a group of hosiery factory workers led by Tom Barclay and George Robson from

1. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, chapter 3, passim.

2. Ibid., p.32. Royle has also noted the brief appearance of a rival N.S.S. branch in Leicester during the B.S.U. period, *ibid.*, p.56.

3. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society, p.22.

Corah's St. Margaret plant. Barclay, 1852-1933, the Leicester born son of Irish parents, who eked out a living as rag and bone collectors, was converted to secularism during the 1870s. His conversion occurred during a period when he was deeply troubled by his declining faith in Catholicism. This religious crisis coincided with his new employment at Corah's where he was befriended by Robson and other working class secularists.¹ His parents, poor yet devout, were appalled by their son's freethought and young Tom was forced to seek lodgings with Bill Lee, a secularist colleague at Corah's. In his autobiography Barclay paints a vivid picture of the working class auto-didact culture which Corah's and secularism brought him into contact. He described Robson as 'that rara aris in terra, the working man scientist; he didn't speak grammatically, and rather depended on me for a little polish in that direction, but he was an enthusiastic naturalist and gave all his leisure time to the practical study of Geology, Botany and Entomology'.² Barclay himself undertook an intensive course of self education, studying geology, physiology, biology, hygienics and economics,³ as well as attending the Rev. D.J. Vaughan's Working Men's college. This was followed by a course in Political Philosophy organised by the Cambridge University Extension Scheme⁴ which triggered off a life-long interest in the subject. Barclay became an avid reader of George Carruthers and Ruskin which, along with the secularist classics by Draper and Ingersoll were to form the bulk of his intellectual capital.⁵ Bradlaugh, however, was his main hero in this formative period

1. Barclay, op.cit., pp. 41 - 3.

2. Ibid., pp. 41-2.

3. Ibid., p.42.

4. Ibid., p.45.

5. Ibid., p.46.

of his development, although he gave him little attention in his autobiography, his editor has noted that Barclay was found by a friend 'crying like a child' in St. Saviours Road overcome with grief on the news of Bradlaugh's death.¹

Increased working class involvement in the working life of the Secular Hall brought distinct changes in the society's format of events. In particular the weekly diet of rational recreation was injected with an element of worldly excess when the society succumbed to working class demands and opened a bar serving alcohol to members and visitors in the early 1880s, an event described rather tersely by F.J. Gould as 'a measure to enhance their relationship with the non-teetotal working class'.² Other significant signs of greater working class involvement in the society can also be detected. The new hall became the venue of the footwear workers annual St. Crispins Day celebrations³ and in the turbulent period of the mid 1880s the hosiery workers union used the building for large general meetings.⁴

The major effect of an increased working class presence in the society was a distinct change in the subject matter of the weekly lectures and debates. As we have seen in Chapter I, the 1880s was a period of crisis for hosiery factory workers, a crisis that coincided with an event that shook the foundations of secularism nationally. The debate between Charles Bradlaugh and H.M. Hyndman, which took place at St. James's Hall

1. Ibid., p.122.

2. Gould, History of the Leicester Secular Society, p.43.

3. N.U.B.S.O. Monthly Report, October 1883.

4. This was especially so during the 1886 riots in Leicester. See Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, February 13, 1886.

in April 1884, opened up a period of intense discussion throughout the secularist movement. Dr. Royle has pointed to the importance of the debate and its effect upon a crucial strata of working class secularists. Furthermore 'the debate about radicalism and socialism, however, took place not between Secularist and Socialist societies but within secularism itself, before there were many socialist organisations in existence'.¹ Royle has assiduously chronicled the connections between local secularist groups and early socialist societies in the period immediately after the debate and Leicester complies closely to this pattern.

Sydney Gimson, in his memoirs, has commented on the intensity of debate on socialism within Leicester secularism that was initiated by the Bradlaugh-Hyndman confrontation. 'Among our members and in our audiences the discussion of Individualism and Socialism went on furiously and, though I was on the other side, I must admit that socialism was rapidly gaining converts'.² There is also some evidence that an interest in socialism amongst Leicester secularism preceded the St. James's Hall debate. On January 16, 1884 Hyndman had lectured at the hall on 'Constructive Socialism', followed a week later by William Morris on 'Art and Socialism'.³ The debate, however, increased this early interest by both bringing socialism to the forefront of the secularist agenda and by attracting major figures onto the provincial lecturing circuit. The Leicester secularists certainly had a full exposition of the various

1. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, p.232.

2. S.A. Gimson, op.cit., Vol. I, p.25.

3. Ibid., pp. 20-23. One of Morris's early converts was Sydney Gimson's young brother Ernest, who became a leading member of the Arts and Crafts movement. For an interesting account of Ernest Gimson's subsequent career see R. Gradidge, Dream Houses. The Edwardian Ideal (1980) pp. 163-172.

competing socialist theories with the Fabian essayists, Belfort Bax, John Burns and even Prince Kropotkin among the many lecturers at Leicester during the period immediately after the debate.¹ The Leicester secularist converts to socialism led by Barclay and Robson, opted for Morris's brand of the new ideology. On November 1, 1885 they constituted themselves into the Leicester branch of the Socialist League, holding their weekly meetings inside the Secular Hall.²

Any assessment of freethought and organised secularism in Leicester between the era of Owenism and Chartism and the socialist period must acknowledge the tenacity of the English working class radical tradition. To a certain extent the ideas, beliefs and practices of protest of the 1830s and '40s went underground and survived in the mission rooms and haylofts that were the meeting places for the early secularist groups. Traditions, however, must be treated with caution: we must remember that working class participation in freethought activity before even the flimsy documentation that survives from the 1880s was undoubtedly confined to a tiny minority. Furthermore, if we put to one side the political activities of Bradlaugh which did win some working class support, what remained of secularism's public face was a collection of beliefs that at best could elicit amusement and at worst ridicule. On the other hand we cannot ignore the positive contribution that secularism made to the early socialist movement. The most obvious connection is undoubtedly one of personnel. Aveling, Burns and Besant were national figures who highlight the importance of the relationship

1. See Barclay, op.cit., pp. 66-68 for a comprehensive list of speakers.

2. Commonweal, December 1885.

between the two movements; a relationship which had a local equivalent in the activities of, to cite a few examples, Maguire in Leeds, Snell in Nottingham and, of course, the Barclay, Robson group in Leicester.

The question on the ideological relationship between the two movements is more complex. The Victorian secularist was, after all, the radical individualist par excellence, an individuality underlined by his denial of God. Economic circumstances and events were certainly the main causal factors behind the influx of secularists into the ranks of the socialist collectivists. A Leicester born secularist, Percy Redfern succinctly summarised his own perception of the relationship between the two movements, after his own conversion to socialism in Nottingham during a coal strike. 'The militancy of my freethinking died. What remained was the positive secularist faith in mutual help. Man must aid man'.¹ It is not too difficult to pick out the influence of Holyoake in Redfern's musing, significantly both he and Snell became major figures in the cooperative world as well as espousing socialism. If the Holyoake strain of secularism found expression in cooperation and 'constructive socialism' where do we find the erstwhile followers of Bradlaugh?

Bradlaugh was undoubtedly the living embodiment of the raucous iconoclastic working class radicalism, the roots of which stretch back to the world of Carlile and Paine.² Like their mentor, Bradlaugh's supporters were distinguished by their audacity and plucky willingness to adopt controversial positions. Barclay and Robson personified this tradition and were to bring much of its spirit to early Leicester socialism. Their

1. P. Redfern, Journey to Understanding (1946) p.29.

2. Royle, Victorian Infidels, Chapter I.

demand for socialist speakers at the Secular Hall was itself an audacious gesture given the manifest espousal of radical Liberalism of the society's patrons. Moreover, their adoptions of street corner propaganda meetings links back to the days of the Chartists as well as copying the techniques used by Bradlaugh and his followers, most notably in London's Victoria Park, that were usually frowned upon by the more prim and respectable advocates of Holyoake.¹

The connections between secularism and socialism will be developed more fully in the chapter on early socialism in Leicester. At this stage, however, it is important to note that radical artisanal culture was still extant, and probably as strong as it ever had been in the early 1880s. Although middle class members largely controlled the purse strings of the Leicester Secular Society, and their leader Josiah Gimson had trodden the path from the world of Owenite artisans to the ranks of the local manufacturing class and the Liberal benches of the town council, their rule had never been total.² Indeed, even their Holyoakeian orthodoxy provided a platform for the discussion on what were to be such formative ideas as cooperative production. Furthermore, middle class munificence had provided a home for the disseminations and discussion of radical ideas amongst working class members. As long as the society existed orthodox political economy could never assume an uncriticised hegemony. Indeed secularism flourished on being iconoclastic, while much of the movement's audacity was often levelled against orthodox religion, a disposition to challenge and criticise established ideas was nurtured amongst the

1. S. Gimson noted that 'Our secularism is not intermittent, alternating grand revivals with seasons of sloth, we keep steadily at work month after month, year after year'. Quoted in Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, p.57.

2. Royle, Victorian Infidels, p.310.

membership. It is therefore not surprising when that most established of beliefs, classical political economy was eventually attacked by the new doctrine of socialism it was the audacious secularist working man who was at the forefront of the challenge.

Yet as I have already noted, secularism, while important, nevertheless only appealed to a tiny minority of Leicester's working class. Leicester's most notable social manifestation during the mid-Victorian period was not freethought but rather radical nonconformity. It is that subject and its relationship to the working class that I now wish to turn.

CHAPTER V

Religion and the Working Class in Late
Nineteenth Century Leicester

Religion is an area that warrants great attention in any local survey on the transition from working class Liberal to Socialist politics: Non-conformity in particular has been singled out by many historians for its formative role in the development of working class consciousness during the late nineteenth century. Working class non-conformity has been cited as a major factor in working class support for the nineteenth century Liberal party,¹ while in provincial England Hobsbawm detects an 'intellectual descent' from the dissenting chapel to the I.L.P.² Pelling, in contrast, has cautioned against oversimplification in this area, directing attention to the increasing middle class character of non-conformity during the period.³ Existing local studies have reinforced the pattern of complexity in this area, Clarke's work on Colne Valley has established a strong bond between chapel and early labour party life, while Thompson's study of nearby Bradford claims that the local I.L.P. was founded by a mixed group of secularists, catholics, followers of Edward Carpenter and a 'happy pagan', together with a few non-conformists.⁴ Clearly religion and popular beliefs of any given community reflect variables in local traditions, class structure and power relationships, and can only be understood by observing the interaction of these factors.

1. J. Vincent, The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857-1868 (1966), pp. 65-76.

2. Hobsbawm, op.cit., pp. 372-3.

3. H. Pelling, The Origins of the Labour Party (Oxford, 1965), Chapter 7, passim.

4. D. Clarke, Colne Valley. Radicalism to Socialism (Harlow, 1981), p.192. E.P. Thompson, 'Homage to Tom Maguire', in A. Briggs & J. Saville (eds.), Essays in Labour History, Vol. 1 (1960), p.289.

In this chapter I wish to examine two problem areas. First what were the changes, if any, in the nature of working class religiosity and denominational allegiances during the second half of the nineteenth century? The findings of this examination will then allow an assessment of the relative importance of religion to working class cultural and political activities; the extent of non-conformist hegemony; and patterns of worship that expressed both independence of, and resistance to, the dominant orthodox denominations.

Leicester's non-conformist character and its claim to the title 'the capital of dissent' was widely acknowledged by the mid-nineteenth century, but how true was this generalisation during the latter part of the century? Did the unifying role played by non-conformity during the church vestry disputes of the 1840s, which led to the formation of the Liberation Society by a local dissenting minister E.T. Miall,¹ continue during the subsequent decades? What changes occurred to the pattern of working class religion during the period of massive population and industrial expansion? Perhaps the best starting point in answering these questions is to look at the two statistical tables that are available on church attendance in Leicester.

1. D.M. Thompson, 'The Liberation Society' in P. Hollis (ed.), Pressure from Without in Early Victorian Society (1974), pp. 214-5.

Table 5.1

Denomination	Total Churches	Morning		Afternoon		Evening		Best Attd. Service
		Chs. Open	Att.	Chs. Open	Att.	Chs. Open	Att.	
Church of England	9	7	3,344	6	1,058	7	3,763	5,119
Wesleyan Methodists	2	1	600	1	31	1	800	831
Primitive Methodists	3	1	250	2	100	3	880	880
Other Methodists	3	2	570	2	230	3	1,140	1,140
General Baptists	5	5	1,419	-	-	5	2,197	2,197
Particular Baptists	2	2	1,156	-	-	2	1,326	1,326
Congregationalists	2	2	970	-	-	2	977	977
Calvinists	3	3	930	1	200	2	550	1,050
Roman Catholics	1	1	546	1	56	1	497	546
Others	5	4	953	2	161	4	1,076	1,324
Totals	35	28	10,738	15	1,836	30	13,206	15,390

Table 18: Attendances in Leicester by Denomination.

Source: D.M. Thompson, 'The Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1851-1881', Cambridge Ph.D. Thesis, 1969, Table 15, p.66.

This table was compiled by Thompson from the census schedules and omits the 'Sunday School Scholar' category included in the published returns. Thompson's table also tidies up the idiosyncrasies of denominational titles published in the returns. For Thompson's methodology utilised in the compilation of this table see his 'The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities', Victorian Studies, Vol. XI, No. I, 1967.

Table 5.2

Denomination	Buildings	Accommodation	Attendance		
			Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Church of England	24	16,408	5,904	2,180	9,783
Baptists	20	12,475	5,087	1,001	7,346
Congregationalists	8	5,132	1,765	-	2,607
Wesleyan Methodists	6	4,015	1,359	-	1,898
Primitive and Other Methodists	9	4,450	1,381	147	2,587
Presbyterians	1	700	89	-	107
Roman Catholics	2	900	547	-	863
Salvation Army	1	1,500	337	870	1,420
Others	14	4,220	1,069	1,497	3,339
Total	85	49,800	17,538	5,695	29,950

Table 25: Church Attendance in Leicester in 1882

Source: A. Mearns: Statistics of Attendance at Public Worship, 1882 (citing the Leicester Daily Post)

Table 5.1 is taken from the 1851 Census on Religion and Table 5.2 was compiled by a local newspaper which carried out its own survey in 1882. The 1851 survey has of course received much scholarly attention and criticism, but most agree that despite its obvious imperfections the census does provide a useful yardstick on the subject.¹ The same must also hold true for the 1882 exercise which was undertaken using similar methods to those applied in 1851. The most striking feature of Table 5.1 is that the total number of sittings could accommodate only 41% of the population, a proportion smaller than most comparable towns.² Furthermore, the Established Church appeared to be filling more of its available seats than the main dissenting chapels. A comparison with the 1882 table

1. D.M. Thompson, 'The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities', Victorian Studies, Vol. 11, No. I, 1967.

2. Census of Great Britain 1851, Religious Worship, p. cxxix.

reinforces this pattern. Accommodation did increase over the twenty year period broadly with a population rise of 120%, but in terms of numbers by 1882 72,576 people in Leicester did not have a church seat, in comparison to 35,576 in 1851. The trend in actual attendance is also revealing; in 1851 48,387 people did not, or could not, visit the largest attended service in the evening, a figure which rose to 92,426 in 1882.

The failure to fill even existing seats was an early concern for local religious workers. In 1846 Dare noted the religious sentiments of some of the recipients of the Unitarian Domestic Mission's charity: 'We do not go ourselves to a place of worship because our clothes are not fit; the rich tuck up their fine things and sit away from us, as if we were filled with vermin'.¹ This sense of class divisions within congregations was probably amplified by the high number of appropriated sittings, especially in the dissenting chapels.² Dare also pointed out that many of the poor whom he attended were never visited by a minister of religion, while others claimed that they needed Sunday for rest, many staying in bed all day '... while their body-linen is being washed, and to rest their limbs, as the work is too much for the food they got'.³

1. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1846.

2. For example, the General Baptists had 1,424 free seats in comparison with 2,005 appropriated. See Census Reports 1851, cclxi. Although of course it must be remembered that not all appropriated seats were rented for money.

3. Ibid.

Perhaps the major factor, however, in the low rate of working class attendance was the ever growing proportion of immigrants attracted to Leicester's expanding industries. Religious habits established in the source areas could be quickly discarded by the immigrant, a phenomenon that Dare well understood and frequently commented upon. The following statement by an immigrant worker quoted by Dare in 1857 was probably typical for many in a similar situation: '... Now change of place has brought change of habit, and although my predilections in favour of religion are as strong as ever, yet the habit of non-attendance seems confirmed'.¹

Recognition of the problems facing local religious bodies in the area of working class attendance gave rise to a spate of church and chapel building. Table 5.2 shows a rise in the places of worship between 1851 and 1882 from 35 to 85. The Established Church was clearly leading with an increase of 15 churches, while the main dissenting groups grew by 23 chapels. The 1882 figure for the number of dissenting chapels has, however, to be treated with caution as once this period of chapel building was completed, non-conformity found much difficulty in keeping together the new congregations. For example, seven Primitive Methodist chapels were closed between 1873 and 1900, some after only six years.² Furthermore, this trend was suffered by other dissenting sects and more than one chapel proudly built during the 1860s ended its life as an early cinema.³

1. Leicester Domestic Mission, 1857. This trend has also been found to occur in present day Britain, see M. Stacey, Tradition and Change (Oxford, 1960) p.71.

2. Victoria County History of Leicester, Vol. 4, p.393.

3. Ibid., pp. 390-4.

Perhaps a major factor that militated against the success of dissent's attempted expansion was the often close association between middle class manufacturing patrons and individual chapels.¹ The Hilton shoe manufacturing family dominated the Leicester Primitive Methodist congregations during the second half of the nineteenth century and many members of the family served as local class leaders.² Similarly the Harris's were the mainstays of the Harvey Street Chapel and the Evans's of the fashionable 'Pork Pie Chapel' in Belvoir Street,³ while the family of Thomas Walker and Sons were the main benefactors to the Melbourne Road Baptist Chapel and Sunday School.⁴

Nevertheless, it would be a distortion to claim that orthodox non-conformity was becoming totally class based. Some working class Congregational and Baptist chapels with deep communal roots continued to prosper; while the building of the Free Christian Church at the corner of Harrow Road continued the working class, orthodox non-conformist tradition, albeit independent of the mainstream denominations.⁵ The process by which working class support for non-conformity declined was,

1. See J. Freer, 'Business Families in Victorian Leicester', Leicester University M.Phil, 1975, ch. 9 passim; Dr. Clark has noted a similar pattern in the Colne Valley which led to the area being a relatively weak centre of non-conformity by 1900. See Clark, op.cit., p.192.

2. 'Hiltons', op.cit., pp. 3-6.

3. Freer, op.cit., pp. 271-2.

4. Illustrated Leicester, 1895, p.39.

5. George Banton, the first president of the Leicester I.L.P., future mayor and M.P. for the town, was a prominent lay preacher at this church. See his obituary in the Leicester Evening Mail, April 19, 1932.

it must be remembered, gradual. Working class allegiance to the political aims of dissent remained considerable, a point reinforced by working class support for non-conformist Liberals in the School Board election struggles of the 1870s.¹

The failure of dissent to meet the challenge of the 1851 census report is underlined by comparing the attendance figures for non-conformity in 1882 with the number of seats available listed in Table 5.2. The Primitive Methodists could not fill one third of their available places. The Congregationalist chapels managed to just half fill their benches during the evening service, while the Baptists managed to slightly better the Congregationalists. The Wesleyan Methodists equalled the dismal performance of the Primitives, while the Unitarians, never ones for proselytizing and not included under a separate heading in Table 5.2, ended their expansion programme by closing down their newly opened second chapel in Wellington Street.²

The Established Church, generally, out-performed dissent, in the field of expansion. They built proportionally more places of worship, which became established features of the Leicester skyline, and enjoyed more success than dissent in filling seats. The average best attended Anglican congregation in 1882 was 408 in comparison to the Baptists' 367 and the Primitive Methodists' 287. Further evidence suggests that some Anglican churches, particularly the new ones built in predominantly new working class areas, were achieving remarkably large congregations.

1. See below, p.172.

2. Victoria County History of Leicester, Vol. 4, p.394.

Several of these churches, most notably St. Mark's, St. Andrew's and St. Paul's, had Tractarian ministers who proved highly successful in attracting large working class congregations. The first ritualist minister in Leicester, however, was Anderdon, the vicar of the ancient parish church, St. Margaret's. Anderdon, a follower of Newman, was appointed to St. Margaret's in 1846, later left Anglicanism with his mentor to become a Jesuit, after building up a large, successful congregation.¹ The new churches of the 1870s were staffed by Tractarian incumbents appointed by Bishop Magee of Peterborough. James Mason of St. Paul's, distinguished by his flowing robes and luxurious beard, was highly successful in attracting a large working class congregation which soon rivalled St. Margaret's.² We know less of the early Tractarian vicars of the other new churches, but by 1903 St. Mark's, under the direction of F.L. Donaldson, was reported as having one of the largest and most successful working class congregations in Britain.³ The successor to Magee at Peterborough was Mandell Creighton, Beatrice Webb's close friend, who if he did not openly advocate tractarian practices, continued to support incumbent ritualists.⁴ His daughter described one of her father's visits to a ritualist church in Leicester in 1891.

'... [they drove to] a great ritualistic church where father was to preach. I got there about a quarter of an hour before service, but it was crammed and I got about the last seat. There were chairs all up the aisles and people stood all through the service and some hundreds were turned away'.⁵

1. J.E. Hextall and A.L. Brightmann, Fifty Years of Church Men and Things at St. Paul's, Leicester (Leicester 1921) p.19.

2. Ibid., p.16.

3. Church Times, October 9, 1901.

4. See, B. Webb Our Partnership (ed.) B. Drake and M. Cole (1948) pp. 205-210 for a brief biographical account of Creighton.

5. L. Creighton, Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton (1904) Vol. 2, p.25.

The success of ritualist incumbents in attracting a working class following has been the subject of recent scholarly attention.¹ This phenomenon can of course be the subject of endless, yet fascinating speculations. At the level of appearances and imagery we may agree with the old adage that what unites the English aristocrat and working man is a love of pomp and pageantry; especially as the ritualists so skillfully introduced the qualities of colour, music and ceremony into the often bleak working class urban environment of the late nineteenth century. While the ideology of the ritualists, which gave prominence to the concept of immanence, offered the vision of a return to a fantastic golden age where all men were both equal in the eyes of God and united in a classless society; perhaps the mediaeval organic parish or the early community of the Christian Church. In reality the leading ritualists, especially those close to Maurice and the Christian Socialism of Headlam, were advocates of class collaboration via the medium of cooperation and self-governing workshops.² But, nevertheless, the arrival of the ritualists in Leicester brought tangible benefits to the working class; not only was life slightly more colourful, the emphasis placed by the new vicars on parish work with its plethora of clubs and parish organisations and the ritualist's willingness to enter even the poorest homes went some way towards relieving urban alienation.³

In contrast evangelical Anglicanism appears to have been more middle class in complexion in late nineteenth century Leicester. One writer on the subject has detected a drift by some wealthy manufacturing families

1. See in particular D. Bowen, The Idea of the Victorian Church (Montreal 1968).

2. On the role of Christian Socialism to Leicester producers cooperative movement see below, Chapter X.

3. Hextall and Brightman, op.cit., p.60.

away from the dissenting chapels, especially the Great Meeting, into fashionable Anglican evangelical congregations.¹ This was particularly the case amongst the second and third generations of such formerly illustrious non-conformist families as the Corah's, Pagets, Gee's, Faire's, Russell's, and Viccars.² The attraction of Evangelical Anglicanism to certain non-conformist manufacturing families fits the pattern of socialisation experienced nationally. Prominent Leicester manufacturers began to favour public schools and Oxbridge for the sons, while the 'republican austerity' which prevented Joseph Whetstone, the hosier and wool spinner of the Great Meeting, from accepting a title at the time of Queen Victoria's coronation seems to have disappeared from Leicester manufacturers by the latter part of the nineteenth century.³

Despite the non-conformist manufacturer's ingrained suspicion of the established church, many found little difficulty in changing their allegiance. After all Leicester Anglicanism had traditionally been evangelical sharing the non-conformist's hatred of Rome. Thus the prosperous entrepreneur with his desire for status and perhaps a small country estate³ could find common ground, perceiving moderate non-conformity and evangelical Anglicanism as being the mainstream of English Protestantism. It would be a mistake, however, to depict Leicester evangelical Anglicanism as an exclusive middle class congregation. While there were undoubtedly fashionable middle class congregations such as that at St. James's facing Victoria Park, some evangelical ministers did extend their ministry to the working class.

1. Freer, op.cit., pp. 271-4.

2. Sir Samuel Faire, Sir Edward Wood and Sir Thomas Wright were all knighted in the late nineteenth century.

3. Many in fact made such a transition, the Corah's and Paget's being the most notable. Indeed it was a descendant of T.T. Paget who became master of the Quorn hunt later in the century.

The Vicar of St. Martin's, the Reverend, later Canon, Vaughan was undoubtedly the most active evangelical in attending to the needs of the working class. Vaughan distinguished himself in the field of adult working class education with the opening of the Vaughan Working Men's College in 1862.¹ The aims and objectives of the college were given a clear exposition in 1869 when Vaughan changed the name of the school from 'working men's institute' to 'working men's college' saying that it was '... important to mark in this way the characteristic features of the institute, an institute for self-improvement, for mutual improvement, and for cooperation in a humble yet earnest, endeavour to improve and elevate the working classes of the town intellectually and morally'.² Fired by such evangelical inspiration Vaughan was able to fill a gap in the town's education system, particularly amongst those who suffered from the inadequacies of the pre-1870 period. By 1869 the college was enrolling over 500 students, a figure which rose to 1,200 in 1880.³ Vaughan was held in high esteem by many of his former pupils which included men prominent in the labour movement, such as Merrick, Chaplin, Barclay and Robson, but there is no evidence that large numbers of his students themselves became active evangelicals.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Tables 5.1 and 5.2 is the growth and relative strength of those congregations gathered under the heading of 'others'. This group in 1851 included both the Quakers, who could attract 78 members to their morning service and the Unitarians whose morning congregation totalled 350.⁴ There were also 400 members of a

1. E. Atkin, The Vaughan Working-Men's College 1862-1912 (Leicester 1912) is an interesting early history of the college. See also A.J. Allaway, Vaughan College Leicester 1862-1962 (1962).

2. Atkin, p.52.

3. Ibid., p.52; p.66.

4. Census of Great Britain, Religious Worship, 1851, p. cxxix.

church or chapel of whom we have no information, the census simply calls this group of worshippers an 'isolated congregation'. The final group in this census category are the Mormons, who could boast 296 members attending their evening service inside a hall with 250 seats.¹ If we now examine Table 5.3, printed in The Nonconformist in November 1872 we can detect a rapid growth in the places of worship of the fringe sects.

Table 5.3 Places of Worship and Accommodation, 1872, with the changes since 1851.

Denomination	Places of worship 1872	Sittings 1872	Change since 1851 Places of worship	Sittings
Church of England	15	13,178	+7	+ 4,350
Baptists	12	8,793	+2	+ 2,150
Congregationalists	4	4,400	+2	+ 2,650
Wesleyan Methodists	2	2,070	+1 -1	+ 498
Primitive Methodists	5	2,221	+2	+ 1,100
Other Methodists	2	1,550	+1 -2	- 510
Presbyterians	1	650	+1	+ 650
Roman Catholics	2	555	-	-
Others ²	10	4,670	+5	+ 2,191
Total:	53	38,087	+21 -3	13,079

Source: The Nonconformist, November 6, 1872: Supplement.

1. For an interesting discussion of the Mormons in Victorian Britain, see D.J. Davies, 'Aspects of Latter Day Saint Eschatology' in Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain (1973) Vol. 6. See also P.A.M. Taylor, "Expectations Westward": the Mormons and the Emigration of their British Converts in the 19th Century (Edinburgh, 1965).

2. Includes Union Church, Society of Friends, Unitarians, Calvinists, Gospel Hall, Brethren, Christians, Hallelujah Band and the Catholic Apostolic Church.

If we exclude the traditional, small, congregations from this table's category of 'Others', we are left with a host of new groups, including the Union Church, the Gospel Hall, Brethren, 'Christians',¹ Hallelujah Band and the Catholic Apostolic Church. It is interesting to note that the Non-conformist appears to have overlooked, perhaps deliberately, the Mormons; given the strength of this church in 1851 it seems unlikely that even in a period of emigration, that it should have totally disappeared.² By 1882, as Table 5.2 shows the 'Others' had expanded to 14, If we discount the Quakers, Unitarians and Calvinists we are left with possibly 11 places of worship which most probably, we cannot be any more accurate than this, belonged to the new marginal sects. Interestingly the Hallelujah Band by 1882 was now the Salvation Army whose Hall during the evening service was virtually filled to capacity. Taken collectively these new congregations, together with the Salvation Army, represented the third largest denominational category in 1882, overtaking both the Methodists and Congregationalists.³

Is it possible to detect a trend or pattern in the changing religious complexion of Leicester in the period under study? By 1882 the three main non-conformist churches, Baptists, Congregationalists and Methodists, still represented, collectively, the largest portion of church attendance with 11,851 worshippers. This figure, however, represents 39.5% of total evening worshippers in comparison to the 1851 percentage of over 63%. for mainstream dissent. This decline must pose a major

1. Church of Christ.

2. Although there were sufficient emigrants from Leicester to enable the founding of New Leicester in Utah.

3. It is highly unlikely that the Quakers, Unitarians and Calvinists, which was probably the isolated congregation in 1851, could account for much more than their combined total of 828.

question mark against the use of the appellation 'Non-conformist' Leicester during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Can we discern any other trend or tendency to this pattern of declining, traditional, non-conformity?

The most interesting aspect, perhaps, of the rapidly changing religious contours of late nineteenth century Leicester is the decline of working class allegiance to middle class dominated evangelicism with its emphasis on the remorse, despair, and fear of Hell and its replacement by ritualistic Anglicanism and the rise of new sects, all of which gave liturgical centrality to the sacraments. We have already briefly surveyed ritualistic Anglicanism in Leicester; can a similar pattern of support and beliefs be found in the newer sects?

The first factor that we must note when surveying the new religious groups of late nineteenth century Leicester is that they appear to have played a similar role to that performed by Primitive Methodism in areas of rapid industrial and social change earlier in the century, inasmuch as their appeal was directed to, and support came from, sections of the working class who were unreached by or shied away from bourgeois non-conformity. Leicester was, after all, experiencing a population growth of 42% in the period 1871-1881. Thus in what must have been a period of generalised social 'anomie' many took solace and comfort from sects that offered both salvation and a sense of communal bond via common participation in the breaking of bread. Horton Davies, in his survey of English theology, has categorised these new sects as 'New Forms of Primitivism', representing often in advance of orthodox christology, a shift in emphasis, in both liturgical form and beliefs, towards the ideas

and practices of the early church,¹ a trend which was to eventually permeate most christian denominations as can be witnessed by the triumph of the Gothic style of religious architecture during the second half of the nineteenth century. Davies has drawn attention to five common characteristics shared by the new sects; a strong Biblicism; the revival of charismatic practices such as 'prophesising', 'speaking with tongues', sensational methods of attracting attention such as bands, banners, uniforms and processions; the rebirth of the impetus to revivalism connected with the conviction of the impending second coming of Christ; a marked fervour for the reunification of christendom; an appreciation of both the sacramental and ceremonial.²

The Church of Christ was founded in the United States of America by Alexander Campbell, a former Baptist with a strong belief in the imminence of the second coming.³ The English branch of the Church of Christ was started in 1843, although their numbers were to remain relatively small. Leicester appears to have been a provincial stronghold of the sect. The first church was started by two shoemakers; James and Thomas Levesley in their own home in 1859. The congregation, mainly composed of shoeworkers, steadily expanded so that by 1879 the sect had two chapels in Leicester.⁴ By the 1890s members of the sect were active in establishing a footwear

1. H. Davies, Worship and Theology in England (Princeton, 1968) Vol. 4, Chapter VI, passim.

2. Ibid., pp. 139-143.

3. J.F.C. Harrison, The Second Coming. Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850 (1979) p.184.

4. British Millennial Harbinger, 1859 p.467; 1860 p.254; 1861 p.572; 1875 p.217; 1866 p.147. The Grafton Street Chapel also had an educational building. A Mann, Democracy in Industry (Leicester 1914) p.6.

producers cooperative, were planning their own garden city, and two prominent members of the Church of Christ became important activists in the labour movement.¹

Less is known of the other new sects in late nineteenth century Leicester. The Salvation Army was probably the largest new group, warranting their own separate heading in Table 5.2. Yet as Davies has shown, the early 'Hallelujah Bands' placed the celebration of the sacraments as central liturgical features.² It was not until the 1880s that Booth was able to place the Army on a more evangelical keel by rejecting sacramentalism. Interestingly, during the period when Booth was imposing doctrinal uniformity amongst the provincial 'Hallelujah Bands', one of the Leicester bands declared themselves independent, an incident which required the despatch of William Corbridge, one of Booth's close colleagues, to rectify.³

Of the remaining new sects even less is known of their Leicester congregations.⁴ They rarely received mention in the local press and no extant archival material is available. On the other hand there existed

1. Amos Mann, the leader of the church, became a town councillor in 1896. He was joined in later years by another member of the sect, J.T. Taylor, who was also treasurer of the I.L.P. Mann was also President of the Anchor Boot and Shoe Cooperative, Taylor being manager. The two were also largely responsible for setting up the church's 'garden city' at Humberstone. See A. Mann, *op.cit.* for the history of the church and their subsequent activities.

2. Davies, *op.cit.*, p.168.

3. St. J. Ervine, God's Soldier: General William Booth (1934) Vol. I, pp. 377-8, 389-90. One of the dissatisfied salvationists in Leicester, Amos Sheriff, left the Army in the early 1880s and later closely associated himself with F.L. Donaldson, the local Christian Socialist vicar and high church ritualist. Sheriff was a founding member of the I.L.P., leader of the 1905 unemployment march, and was Mayor of Leicester in 1922.

4. Although the Catholic Apostolic Church had its roots in a small congregation of 'Irvingites', a millenarian sect, which met in Cank Street. White's Directory 1877, p.308.

other fringe groups in the town who received no acknowledgement in the religious surveys yet constituted another fascinating dimension to working class religiosity in late nineteenth century Leicester. By 1859 these small sects were beginning to establish themselves in Leicester, a phenomena which evoked scornful comments from Dare

As regards the religion of the working classes though perhaps there are but few who are wholly destitute of religious feeling, as manifested in seasons of sickness, death, or other calamity, yet vast numbers attend no place of worship. The existing forms of belief and methods of religious teaching do not interest them. Others who have any active religious sentiment are fond of running after strange doctrines. One while it is "Mormonism" then "Spiritualism" or some other "ism"; succeeds; and now a favourite doctrine in the Midlands is "Brownism"; recently started in Nottingham by an old pensioner named Brown, who is both lame and blind. The practice of this fourth consists of groups sitting in circles and gazing into an egg shaped crystal for divine revelations from the Angel Gabriel. Their doctrines are a sad jumble of vaticinations of Zadkiel and Dr. Cummings, mixed up with Owenism, socialism, Swedenborgism, and divination of the crystal. There are already one hundred Brownites in the town, who are very active in disseminating this wretched blasphemy. Now all this is very lamentable and no doubt originates in the neglect of early education and religious training. Through this neglect one portion of the working classes are filling the beer shops, and another propagating all manner of crude theories in religion and politics. 1

Logie Barrow has recently drawn attention to another form of popular religion, spiritualism, as a parallel continuity with secularism, of Owenite ideas.² Dare spoke of spiritualism in the passage quoted above,

1. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1859.

2. L. Barrow, 'Socialism in Eternity. The Ideology of Plebian Spiritualists, 1853-1913', History Workshop Journal 9, p.38.

perhaps the Brownites constituted a Midland variant of what was, during this period, an extremely diffuse movement.¹ Spiritualism may also have gathered older, peasant forms of popular belief into the movement; many of Leicester's poorer inhabitants continued to place great trust in the healing powers of Amelia Woodcock, the Wise Woman of Wing in Rutland.² The first mention of spiritualism in Leicester came in July 1875 when the Leicester circle published their first quarterly report. In this brief resume of their activities, Mr. Bent the chairman, pointed out that spiritualism had recently been organised on a permanent basis, although the practice had enjoyed a long existence in Leicester.³ We have no evidence on the size of the Leicester Group, but it was obviously large enough to support a permanent hall in Silver Street.⁴ Furthermore, the reports of Leicester spiritualism, in The Spiritualist, occasionally mentioned names of leading circle members, most of those occupations are supplied in local directories. The following list of Leicester spiritualists is of course not comprehensive and as most of these held some form of organisational office bias is inevitable.

1. It was not until the 1880s that spiritualism was able to establish a national movement. Ibid., p.39.

2. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1865.

3. The Spiritualist, July 23, 1875.

4. White's Directory, 1877, p.308.

Table 5.4 Occupations of Known Spiritualists in Leicester
in the late 19th Century

<u>Name</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
Jabez Chaplin	Full time Hosiery Union officer
Mr. and Mrs. Bent	Booksellers
Mr. Burdett	Shopkeeper
Mr. Grimes	Framework knitter
M. Harkins	Apartment house-keeper
J. Holmes	Newsagent and Hosiery Union Secretary
Mrs. Mansell	General dealer
Mr. Larrard	Factory foreman
Mr. Wightman	Butcher

Source: White's, Wright's, Leicester Directories, 1875-1890

It does, however, confirm Barrow's argument that both spiritualism and secularism constituted important types of what he has called 'plebian culture', that is forms of popular culture that embraced both skilled working men, and members of the lower middle class. The main thrust of Barrow's thesis is that while plebian culture supplied many individuals who were to play important roles in the Labour and Socialist movements of the 1890s, their intellectual freight produced a 'subtle and changing mix of individualism and collectivism' in plebian and working class politics during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹ The obvious place to address this argument is in Chapter 7, but it is worth noting at this stage those members of the Silver Street circle who became activists in the early socialist movement. Bent became prominent in the

1. Barrow, op.cit., p.63. Similarly, leading members of the Lancaster I.L.P. were also spiritualists. See N. Todd, 'A History of Labour in Lancaster and Barrow in Furness', M. Litt. thesis, Lancaster University, 1976, p.57.

Leicester S.D.F., later switching his allegiance to the anarchist communists.¹ Chaplin and Holmes were the two full time officers of the L.A.H.U. and founding members of the I.L.P.²

It could be argued that spiritualism should be excluded from a local nineteenth century religious survey as the organisation never espoused Christian or for that matter any mainstream religious beliefs. Spiritualists often travelled back and forth between local circles and secularist societies, and shared the latter's penchant for making derogatory statements towards organised religion.³ Yet while all spiritualists were not socialists they were united by a transcendental faith in the existence of the 'other world'. For the Owenite socialist spiritualist this involved accepting much of the panoply of mediums, pseudo-scientific gadgets, table levitations et.al., while clinging to the central belief that Owen's socialist Commonwealth had been temporarily transmuted into the 'other world', or as they preferred to call it, 'Summerland'.⁴ Thus the socialist spiritualist shared much with the millenarian Christian sects of the period, especially with those congregations such as the Church of Christ, who placed great importance on community building.

1. Freedom, August 1892.

2. 'T.U.C. Souvenir', Leicester 1903, p.51.

3. J. Holmes was a prominent Leicester secularist before his conversion in 1881. Medium and Daybreak, February 4, 1881.

4. Holmes reported a debate in which he was involved with local secularists, including Gimson, soon after joining the spiritualists. Holmes referred to his erstwhile colleagues rather scornfully as 'atheists and sceptics', which suggests that for Holmes, at least, spiritualism involved a 'leap of faith' similar to other religions, and beyond the ken of the hardened rationalist. Medium and Daybreak, February 4, 1881, p.75.

To summarise the survey on the religious complexion of Leicester in the second half of the nineteenth century, several features were prominent to the changing contours of the town's religiosity. Participation in religious worship was in decline, despite efforts by all the major denominations to reverse the trend. This was especially the case amongst the orthodox non-conformist denominations whose congregations were becoming increasingly middle class dominated. The only area of growth, apart from the Catholics, was amongst the smaller dissenting sects, many of which shared charismatic, millenarian and sacramental characteristics. Furthermore these new sects often gave a central position to a liturgy which emphasised 'brotherhood' and 'community', in place of a dependence on the sermon and the pulpit. This failure of non-conformity to retain the loyalty of the working class can partly be attributed to the tenacity of Leicester's independent artisanal culture which undoubtedly made an important contribution to some of the newer sects, together with the major influx of immigrant workers, many of whom quickly lost their former religious habits. Non-conformity also appears to have failed the challenge set by the massive growth of the urban working class population, particularly in the field of proselytizing and ministering to the very poor. The few members of the poor who attained any form of religious experience probably received it by joining the street processions and community activities of High Church Anglicans; by partaking in the ritual ceremony of the Hallelujah Band's parades, or by attending the phantasmagoric meetings of such fringe millenarian sects as the Brownites.

How does this pattern accord to the national picture? Historians are generally in agreement that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a decline in religious worship and attendance,¹ together with an

1. K.S. Inglis, Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England (1963) pp. 322-336; J. Obelkevich, Religion and Rural Society (Oxford, 1976) p. 328.

increasing tendency towards 'secularisation'.¹ At the level of class relationships and denominational adherence the situation was, however, far more complex, being highly dependent on pre-existing forms of worship, local social structure and economic relationships. Joyce, for example, has found that during an era of economic prosperity religion, for the factory population of certain Lancashire towns, could be an '... expression of allegiances formed at the level of the factory and its environment'.² Similarly Moore, in his study of Durham miners has described the importance of chapel building in the paternalistic policies of the coal owners in the Deerness valley;³ while Obelkevich has noted that the 'closed parishes [of South Lindsey] particularly those with resident squires were ... the favoured terrain of the Established Church'.⁴ The common feature of these three examples is the centrality of workplace relationships to the immediate environment and social milieu of the workforce. No Leicester manufacturer operating in industries which were virtually reliant on 'outwork', and suffering a constant round of seasonal fluctuations, could possibly hope to exercise the same power as a Lancashire mill owner or country squire over his workforce. Thus the 'independent' Leicester worker, typically employed in either hosiery or footwear, could opt out of formal religious activity or experiment with new creeds without fear of recrimination.

Moreover it was not just the expanding working class who were shunning religion. Dissent in particular appears to have increasingly distanced itself from working class social and political upheavals that distinguished

1. G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England (1962) ch. 6.

2. Joyce, *op.cit.*, pp. 240-1.

3. R. Moore, Pitmen Preachers and Politics (Cambridge, 1974) pp. 81-2.

4. Obelkevich, *op.cit.*, p.13.

the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Whenever there was a strike to be settled, a dispute arbitrated, the unemployed ministered to, it was invariably an Anglican incumbent who was first on the scene.¹ This situation, when compared to the part played in working class life by such notable chapel ministers as Hall, Mursall and Miall in the first half of the century, highlights the shifting lines between class and orthodox non-conformity that occurred during the period surveyed in this thesis. Indeed it was not until the first decade of the present century when the Leicester Congregationalists appointed an exponent of R.J. Campbell's 'New Theology' as one of their ministers that mainstream non-conformity, or at least a section of it, attempted to reverse the trend of declining working class support.²

The increasing middle class nature of orthodox dissent was not uncommon to Leicester. The rise of the fashionable middle class chapel was a phenomenon in many large towns, 'the chapel had become the church in name and design',³ while the previous 'separateness' of the Wesleyans from both church and dissent was replaced by an identification with orthodox non-conformity in order to facilitate broad based evangelical action.⁴ Even in the Pennine heartland of working class non-conformity, by the turn of the century the mill owners were the main patrons of the chapels, whose working class congregations were beginning to question their own allegiance.⁵

1. Hextall and Brightman, op.cit., p.61 on Mason's role as arbiter in footwear disputes. Creighton, op.cit.pp.127-8 on Creighton's activities in the 1895 shoe lockout. See below Chapter XI on Donaldson and the 1904-5 unemployment campaign.

2. The minister referred to here was the Reverend Beddow. I am indebted to Lord Brookway for this information. For a discussion of Campbell and 'The New Theology' see P. d'A. Jones, The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-1914 (Princeton, 1968) pp. 421-426.

3. Inglis, op.cit., p.72. See also Ch. 2 passim for a useful discussion of major trends in non-conformity during the period.

4. Ibid., p.66.

5. Clark, op.cit., p.192.

The social geography of the new sects that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century has yet to find its historian, thus what comparisons can be made must be extremely tentative. Birmingham, the place of publication of the Millenarian Harbinger, together with Nottingham and Leicester, were centres of the Church of Christ, all three towns sharing the common characteristics of high rates of immigration and tenacious artisan economies.¹ The spatial distribution of spiritualism on the other hand has received some attention. Barrow has concluded that 'plebian spiritualism remained predominantly northern and Pennine until the 1900s', a geographical rhythm that 'does not contradict that of secularism'.² Interestingly, Barrow also points out the close relationship between the 'map of spiritualism' and the early map of the ILP, a connection that the evidence presented above shows to be, in Leicester at least, more than coincidental.

By the final decades of the nineteenth century the Leicester working class manifested less religious enthusiasm than they had during the mid century: a pattern which accords with the national trend.³ Furthermore, the working class non-conformity entered a process of decline. What growth there was in popular religious activity was more likely to be found in the new Anglo-Catholic Churches or in the fringe sects. A process that was ultimately to contain a serious threat to the old equation of broad-based, popular non-conformity = radical Liberalism.

1. For the social and economic structure of Birmingham, see A. Briggs, The History of Birmingham, Vol. 2, 1952; for Nottingham, R.A. Church, Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town (1966).

2. Barrow, *op.cit.*, p.43.

3. See G. Kitson-Clark, The Making of Victorian England (1962) p.192 and Chapter VI, *passim*.

CHAPTER VI

Leicester Politics and the Working Class 1860-1885

The two and a half decades reviewed in this chapter were the golden years of Leicester Liberalism. The party reigned supreme in both local and parliamentary elections and previous tensions between Whigs and Radicals had been overcome with the formation of an apparently enduring compromise. In this chapter I wish to focus upon two questions. First, what were the attractions of Liberalism to the working class and why did they support the party? Second, how extensive were new forms of working class political activity and did these activities exceed the boundaries of the Liberal-Radical alliance?

1862 presents a convenient starting point to this preliminary survey of Leicester politics. The unopposed return of P.A. Taylor, a Radical Liberal, as M.P. for Leicester in the by-election of that year, marked both the reconciliation of the previous warring factions of the party and the beginning of stability within local Liberalism. Leicester Liberals had been divided over the question of electoral reform and secular education since the passing of the Corn Laws.¹ The Whig section of local Liberalism had viewed major changes in the franchise with caution and had frequently sided with the Conservatives during the 1850s to check the growing momentum of Radicalism.² The Radicals on the other hand, led by John Biggs, the hosier and M.P. for the town since 1855, refused to compromise on the franchise issue.³ Biggs and his faction pressed for the return of

1. R.H. Evans, 'Parliamentary History since 1835', Victoria County History of Leicester, Vol. 4, (1958) p.223.

2. Ibid., p.222.

3. See 'John Biggs 1801-1871', Leicester Museums Pamphlet (n.d.) for a useful summary of Biggs' political career.

two Radical Liberal members for parliament, a tactic designed to silence the Whigs and smash the old political equilibrium of Leicester Liberalism whereby the town's two seats had been shared by Radical and Whig since the first Reform Act.¹ The division within Liberalism, however, created by this strategy allowed the Conservative candidate, Heygate, to gain the first parliamentary victory for his party in over thirty years when he was elected to parliament in 1861.²

Heygate's victory undoubtedly served to bring the opposing Liberal factions back together. The Whigs felt a deep unease with the victory of their traditional adversary while the Radicals were able to capitalise on Biggs' retirement from politics in early 1862, following the collapse of his firm, by seeking a new compromise with their erstwhile political allies.³ The Whigs most probably objected to Biggs' populist style of Radicalism and his constant courting of working class support. Biggs, like his Whig adversaries, was a major manufacturer and a leading figure at the Great Meeting, yet a constant feature of his political life had been the propagation of extreme forms of Radicalism, particularly over the franchise issue, designed to cement working class support for Liberalism. The founder of the Leicester and Leicestershire Political Union in 1830, Biggs transformed this organisation into the Reform Society which by the early 1850s was advocating radical forms of electoral change.⁴

Biggs was primarily motivated in the early 1850s by his belief in the necessity to canalise working class dissent, recently expressed in the Chartist turmoils, into the Liberal Party. The Radical candidates who

1. Evans, op.cit., p.221-2.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p.223.

4. Ibid., p.216.

stood for election in 1852 as nominees of the Reform Society went to the electorate with a programme which advocated votes by ballot, the re-distribution of seats, triennial parliaments, the removal of taxes on raw material, the substitution of direct for indirect taxation, religious equality, a national system of secular education, and electoral rights made co-extensive with the payments of taxes and settled residence. Evans has noted that apart from the substitution of a householder and lodger franchise for universal suffrage this programme had much in common with the six points of the Charter.¹ Biggs himself was returned to Westminster in 1855 on the same programme; while his abandonment of frame rent, a unique gesture by a major hosier, must have further endeared him to the working class.² Biggs' populism certainly paid dividends; Buckby the former Chartist leader constantly advised his followers to vote radical.³

Paradoxically the man who replaced Biggs as M.P. in 1862 shared most of Biggs' views yet was fully backed by the Whigs. P.A. Taylor, 1819-1891, represented Leicester from 1862 until his retirement in 1884. His background was not dissimilar to Biggs'. A Unitarian by faith and a member of the Courtauld textile family, Taylor also shares much of Biggs' taste for radical politics.⁴ He was the chairman of the Society of Friends of Italy, a friend of Mazzini, a leading figure in the South Place Chapel, and the proprietor of the Examiner. As well as being a keen advocate of

1. Ibid.

2. Select Committee on Stoppage of Wages in Hosiery 1855, qq. 374-380. Biggs in this period was also fearful of the prospects of a possible Conservative-working class coalition, especially after Sir Henry Halford, the Tory M.P. for South Leicestershire tried to pass a bill outlawing frame rent in 1847.

3. Evans, op.cit., p.216.

4. This description of Taylor is largely based upon his entry in the Dictionary of National Biography compiled by the young James Ramsay MacDonal.

electoral and religious reform, Taylor was widely acknowledged as the most extreme Republican in the House of Commons throughout his parliamentary career.¹ Despite the many similarities Taylor was a very different politician to Biggs. This was especially the case with Taylor's many international contacts and his deep interest in foreign affairs, a subject which was to frequently dominate British politics of the period. Thus Biggs, an archetypal provincial Radical, was replaced by a leading exponent of international republicanism.

The consolidation of the rapprochement of Liberalism in Leicester was realised in 1865 with the defeat of Heygate by John Harris, who stood as a moderate Liberal candidate. Harris, another local hosier, along with leading members of the old Whig faction had realised since the early 1860s that electoral reform was to be the key issue of the decade and subsequently adopted a more flexible attitude to the franchise question.² The rising popularity of Gladstone, the man who 'by the velocity of his evolution towards many-sidedness, he temporarily squared the political circle', was also of importance locally and helped to heal old wounds.³ Perhaps of most importance in explaining the moderates' desire to forget old scores and develop a different position on the franchise issue was the changing structure of the local electorate. Heygate's defeat, despite Liberal unity, was uncomfortably narrow.⁴ In truth the electorate was becoming more conservative. In particular, the largely Liberal stockings' freeman vote had declined along with the collapse of the apprenticeship system and its attendant freemen's rights. The following table based on extant poll books illustrates this point.

1. A view held by Marx; see *The Minutes of the General Council of the First International 1870-71*, (Moscow 1964) p.165; p.277.

2. Evans, *op.cit.*, p.223.

3. J. Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party 1857-1868* (1966) p.228. *Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury*, February 25, 1865 on the local importance of Gladstone.

4. Harris, 2,295; Taylor, 2,199; Heygate, 1,945.

Table 6.1 Framework Knitters and the Leicester Electorate

	No. of F.W.K. Voters	Liberal F.W.K.s	Tory F.W.K.s	F.W.K.s as proportion of the electorate
1826	814	Party affiliation not given		20%
1832	No occupation given in Poll Books			
1835	425	265	163	15%
1837	533	371	162	16%
1852	390	327	63	14%
1857	278	198	51	8.6%
1861	382	263	119	9.4%

Source: Leicester Poll Books.

Thus the Liberal stockinger who had constituted 10% of the electorate in 1835 had declined to 6% by the late 1850s. A small drop perhaps, but with a margin of only two hundred and fifty votes over the Tory candidate in 1865 a highly significant one. 'The party needed new blood' declared one speaker at a Liberal electoral reform meeting in 1865 and given the long standing bias of the working class hosiery worker to favour Liberalism it is not surprising that reform was perceived as the surest way of checking rising Tory fortunes.¹

The 1867 Reform Act increased the size of the local electorate from 5,736 to 15,161.² The enlarged electorate certainly fulfilled the Liberal hope of bringing new blood into the party, the general election of 1868 witnessing the return of the two Liberal candidates unopposed by the faction-ridden Conservatives. By 1880 Gladstone mania reached its high water mark in Leicester when Taylor and McArthur, the Liberal sitting

1. Evans, op.cit., p.223.

2. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, October 12, 1867.

members defeated the two Conservative candidates by margins of over 6,000 votes.¹ Domination at the parliamentary level was also reflected in local elections. This was particularly the case in school board elections which breathed new life into the old controversy on the role of the established church in the early 1870s. The Liberals certainly relished the challenge at school board elections, perceiving them as a means that would '... throw new life into the party' and '... pave the way to victory at the next general election'.² The school board elections also acted to reinvigorate the Liberation Society locally as well as presenting the newly formed Democratic Association with its first experience in organising the working class vote.³

The Democratic, later, Republican Association was formed in 1871 by Daniel Merrick, the leader of the Sock and Top Union and perhaps Leicester's most prominent working man of the period.⁴ The political aims and objectives of the Democratic Association were to organise the newly enfranchised working class voter to support their call for universal suffrage. Given the fact that Taylor had advocated universal suffrage in the 1868 election campaign the Democratic Association was in reality the organised working class section of Radical Liberalism; a point underlined by the Association's social policy which was '... to educate the people in the principles of political economy, moral virtue and social advancement'.⁵

1. Evans, op.cit., pp. 226-8. The April 1880 general election result was Taylor, 10,675; McArthur, 10,438; Winterton, 4185; Warner, 3,820.

2. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, June 10, 1874, quoted in Evans, op.cit., p.226.

3. Ibid., March 4, 1871.

4. Merrick, 1821-1888, was the first working man to be elected to the town council, became president of the Trades Council upon its formation in 1872 and was nominated as a J.P. in 1886. See his obituary in Leicester Daily Post, February 21, 1888. Merrick does not appear to have been an active Chartist but his short book, The Warp of Life (Leicester, 1876) offers a vivid account of the period. See J.F.C. Harrison, Chartism in Leicester, pp. 126-7.

5. Leicester Chronicle, March 4, 1871; June 1, 1872.

In many ways the formation of the Democratic Association was part and parcel of a wider process of reform in the organisation of local Liberalism. For example, the Leicester Liberal Club was established in 1873 to replace the old Registration Society and by 1876 the Leicester Liberals had adopted a constitution based on the Birmingham model.¹ The close relationship between the Democratic Association and the Liberals was illustrated by the active assistance given to the Association's campaign for Liberal school board candidates by such well known Radicals as Page Hopps and Macdonald, both Unitarian ministers.²

It may seem surprising that no important working class organisation, independent from the major parties, was established in this period, especially given the town's recent Chartism. Yet this absence of formal working class independent politics is understandable in the light of the vigour of Leicester's Radical Liberalism. Indeed, two historians have argued in an important article that there was much common ground between the Chartists and Radical Liberals, particularly in the area of franchise extension, religion and the privilege of a seemingly exploitative aristocracy.³ Pursuing a similar theme the research of K. Tiller has shown the importance of local Chartism in shaping the future character of local Liberalism.⁴ Tiller's comparative study of Kidderminster, Wigan and Halifax concludes that in areas which possessed a strong Chartist legacy

1. Evans, op.cit., p.226.

2. Ibid.

3. B. Harrison and P. Hollis, 'Chartism, Liberalism and the life of Robert Lowery', English Historical Review, Vol. 82, 1967.

4. K. Tiller, Working Class Attitudes and Organisation in Three Industrial Towns, Birmingham University Ph.D. thesis, 1975.

Liberalism tended to be of the radical variety, while in localities which figured little in the Chartist turmoils middle class orthodox Liberalism became the norm.¹ This pattern is further reinforced by Vincent's work which highlights the importance of the Chartists in the composition of Rochdale Radicalism and the election to parliament of Edward Miall.² Leicester Radicalism certainly conforms to this model. Taylor, one of the foremost republicans of the day not infrequently stirred recent memories with his call for universal suffrage.³

This perspective which views Chartism as anticipating mid-century Liberalism rather than as a precursor and primitive form of working class political organisation is useful in understanding the nature of Leicester Liberalism. The subsequent career of John Markham underlines this thesis. Markham, described by the historian of the Leicester movement as 'Self educated, he was a fine example of the shrewd level headed type of working class leader' had by 1852 been elected to the town council as a Liberal and was a strong supporter of John Biggs.⁴

Yet if during the 1860s and 1870s Leicester politics had generally returned to the old opposition of People and Privilege, did anything remain of the Chartist ethos of working class isolation? The first and most obvious point to note in answering this question is the fact that despite its closeness, and working relationship with the Liberal Party, the Democratic Association nevertheless appears to have retained a distinct, identifiable working class image. The nomenclature, 'Democratic',

1. Ibid., p.545.

2. J. Vincent, op.cit., p.111.

3. Evans, op.cit., p.222.

4. J.F.C. Harrison, Chartism in Leicester, p.130.

'Republican', is also suggestive. The brief appearance in the winter 1861-62 of the Midland Workman and General Advertiser which advocated electoral reforms and contained articles by the Chartist leader John Sketchley, indicates, however slightly, that the embers of the old movement were not quite extinguished.¹ Of perhaps a more tangible nature were the activities of those Leicester men associated with the First International. Exactly when the Leicester branch of the First International was formed is unknown. The only member's name that has survived is that of E.W. Randle, the Secretary and an elastic web weaver by trade. It could have been that the Leicester branch was an appendage of the local elastic web weavers' trade union; these workers were well represented on the International and they frequently utilised the executive of the International as arbiters in disputes between various factions in the union.²

By February 1873 the local Internationalists had persuaded the Republican Club, the local name for the Democratic Association, which claimed 500 members, to affiliate to the International.³ The Republicans, however, were somewhat reluctant to change their name, a condition of affiliation.⁴ Randle appears to have overcome this initial reluctance and reported that a meeting of Republicans which he addressed on the question of affiliation at 'The British Workman' had to be adjourned so that larger

1. Midland Workman and General Advertiser, October 12, 1861- February 17, 1862.

2. J. Hales, the Secretary of the International, was an elastic web weaver. See the Minutes of the General Council, op.cit., pp. 92-4.

3. Archive of the International and British Federal Council (Jung Collection), International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 676/9 February, 1873, Hill to Jung.

4. Ibid., 677/12 February 1873, Hill to Jung. This was also a period when the International was receiving a bad press and commanded a certain notoriety. See H. Collins, 'The English Branches of the First International' in Briggs and Saville, op.cit. for the best account of the British participants in the International.

premises could be found to accommodate the numerous participants.¹

Despite this delay Randle was still confident in March that the Republicans would join and looked forward to visiting '... the villages round this summer and spread our principles and our cause i ham very glad to hear that you are going to lay the foundations of our commune it shall have my warmest support'.² This attempt to broaden the base of Leicester's branch of the First International foundered when Leicester became caught up in the machinations between Hales and his British Federal Council (B.F.C.) and Marx.³ Hales, despised by many elastic web weavers for his support of an employer utilising female labour, could not count on the support of the Leicester branch. Moreover, this branch, expanded by 500 new members would probably have wrecked his designs to change the B.F.C. into a working class political party with little connections with the International.⁴ Thus Mottershead, a colleague of Hales, was despatched to Leicester in order to persuade the Republicans not to affiliate. Hales was successful in this endeavour, being able to capitalise on press reports of the International which characterised it as a 'secret society' led by sinister foreigners.⁵

The documentation of the activities of the Leicester Internationalists is, of course, not substantial. The Leicester branch could be seen as being essentially a dissident section, the elastic web weavers trade union determined to pull the carpet from under Hales. Yet the letters from

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1. Jung Collection 923/1 February 19, 1873, Randle to Jung.
 2. Ibid., 924/1 March 12, 1873, original spelling and punctuation.
 3. Collins, op.cit., p.272.
 4. Ibid., p.248.
 5. Ibid., p.272.

Randle to Jung often contain deep convictions on wider political matters. For example his letter of February 19 ends with the following note: 'I hope Spain will hold her guard and rise mightily as a nation in the hands of a real republican government governed by the people and for the people not the Gladstone class Legislation which we have so much of'.¹ It is also interesting to note that during the aftermath of the Paris commune² the local Internationalists almost succeeded in winning over the 500 strong Republican Club to the cause of Britain's most avowed working class organisation. Indeed it took an alliance of the Hales circle and the Radical Liberal leadership of the Republicans to stop the alliance.³ This brief surfacing of the old insurrectionary tradition does show, no matter how briefly, that at least a small section of the Labour movement still retained a faith in the importance of independent working class politics, while the willingness of some Republicans to consider affiliation indicates that unease did exist within the class alliance of local Radicalism.

In general, however, the 1870s proved to be quiet years for the Leicester Labour movement. The working class continued to support Radical Liberalism and their leaders gave unstinting support to the party of reform. The most notable event of the period was the foundation of the Trades Council in 1872 by eight local trade unions.⁴ No archive material for the Trades Council prior to 1892 has survived, thus any analysis of the first.

1. Jung Collection. Randle to Jung, 923/1, February 19, 1873; original spelling.

2. The commune was celebrated for many years after in Leicester, see above p.66.

3. Hill, the secretary of the Republicans, persuaded Randle to relinquish his secretary's post of the Leicester Internationalists and hand over duties to the Republican leadership in anticipation of the alliance. After the visit of Mottershead, Hill effectively disbanded the Leicester branch by supporting Hales in the latter's feud against Marx and the General Council. See *ibid.*, 926/1, May 21, 1873. Randle to Jung.

4. W.H. Fraser, 'Trades Councils in England and Scotland 1858-1897', University of Sussex Ph.D. thesis, 1967, p.570.

two decades of its existence has to be tentative. The forces which created the Trades Council appear to have been concern amongst local trades unionists over the Criminal Law Amendment Act, while the holding of the T.U.C. Congress the previous year in Nottingham may have kindled local interest. Merrick, the hosiery workers' leader, was in the forefront of the local campaign against the legislation and he advised working class voters in 1874 to vote Liberal in order to have the act repealed.¹ Merrick, the first president of the Council and delegate to the 1875 T.U.C. claimed to represent 3,170 members affiliated to the Trades Council.² The first decade of the Council appears to have been unremarkable. The Council was, however, quickly recognised as being part of the local Liberal establishment; Merrick already a Liberal councillor, was nominated for the office of J.P. by the Trades Council in 1886, a post which he held for the two years prior to his death in 1888.³ Indeed, it was during the 1870s and 1880s that local trade union leaders became part of the fixtures of local Liberalism. Merrick was joined on the Liberal benches of the town council by Thomas Smith, the General Secretary of N.U.B.S.O., who also became the secretary of the Liberal Association when he retired from union office in 1878. Smith also sat on the school board along with Edward Kell, N.U.B.S.O.'s president and George Sedgewick, Smith's successor as General Secretary.⁴

Despite the apparent calmness of Leicester politics during the 1870s and early 1880s the Leicester working class were never a totally passive

1. Evans, op.cit., p.227.

2. W.H. Fraser, op.cit., p.78.

3. Evans, op.cit., p.232.

4. Leicester Mercury, March 26, 1934 contains an obituary on Sedgewick. For Kell see N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, March, 1891. A biographical entry on Smith is contained in Harttop, op.cit. The presence of these three N.U.B.S.O. officers on the school board may also indicate the wish of N.U.B.S.O. to stem the flow of young underage workers into the workshop sector of the shoe trade as well as the desire for political office.

component of the Liberal alliance. Perhaps the most interesting manifestation of working class political activity during these years was the anti-vaccination movement which gave Leicester national notoriety. The movement, which began in 1869, has been the subject of recent scholarly attention.¹ Initially the movement was started by mainly working class parents who formed a local branch of the Anti-Vaccination League.² The early meetings of the branch were poorly attended but with the passing of the 1871 Vaccination Act with its stricter requirements and compulsive provisions the movement began to grow, if somewhat slowly.³ A major impetus to the movement came from the ravages of the 1871-2 smallpox epidemic when Leicester reported over 3,000 cases and 358 deaths, some of the casualties having previously been vaccinated. It was later in the decade, however, when the benefits of a locally inspired isolation system became apparent that the branch received widespread local support.

The notification and isolation system was initiated by Dr. W. Johnson, the new assistant medical officer of health and one of a new generation of medical practitioners who espoused recent 'germ theories' and rejected the 'miasmatic' explanation of the disease.⁴ Johnson utilised Leicester's fever hospital, a remnant from a previous epidemic of scarlet fever, to isolate smallpox victims as part of a new rationalised system which still retained vaccination.⁵ The Johnson or Leicester system, as the method

1. J. Simmons, Leicester Past and Present, Vol. 2, 1974, pp. 17-19; 59; and S.M.F. Fraser, 'Leicester and Smallpox: The Leicester Method', Medical History, 24, 1980. See also R.M. Macleod, 'Law, Medicine and Public Opinion, the resistance to compulsory health legislation 1870-1907', Public Law, 1967, for a survey of the movement nationally.

2. S.M. Fraser, p.330.

3. Ibid., p. 229.

4. Ibid., p.332.

5. Ibid., p.330.

became known, soon achieved notable results and helped to convince working class parents, the main recipients of the act's provisions, that vaccination was unnecessary. Generalised disobedience of the 1871 Act became the order of the day and in 1881 1,154 prosecutions were brought against Leicester parents who refused to have their infants vaccinated.¹ Not surprisingly, the movement soon developed a political complexion. By 1882 it was virtually impossible for a pro-vaccinationer to get elected to the town council even though the council had no part to play in the administration of the act, while in 1886, the Guardians, whose function it was to enforce the legislation, were opposed to vaccination and were to frequently run foul of the law over its lack of implementation.² By 1881 1,154 prosecutions were brought against Leicester parents for refusing to comply with the act and in 1885 nearly 3,000 people were awaiting prosecution.³ The imprisonment of offenders had begun in 1869 when three Leicester parents were jailed. In 1876 feelings locally ran high when nine Leicester people were imprisoned and demonstrations became common. 'In May 1876 Charles Eagle and Frank Palmer after ten days in jail for disobedience to the vaccination law, went in a procession to the Market Place, and received the homage of fifteen thousand cheering townsmen'.⁴

Simmons has argued that this phenomenal instance of civil disobedience owes much to the Leicester radical non-conformitist society, part of the dissenter's character being a joy in 'martyrdom'.⁵ Fraser, on the other

1. Ibid., p.329.

2. Ibid., p.330.

3. Ibid.

4. F.J. Gould, 'Life Story of a Humanist', p.85.

5. Simmons, op.cit., p.59.

hand, has emphasised the exemplary effect of Johnson's method upon the local population.¹ Non-conformity is undoubtedly the weaker explanation. Why for example were other centres of dissent not distinguished by a similar movement? Furthermore, religious objections were rarely cited in the defence of those brought before the magistrates for refusing vaccination.² Moreover, if by implication radical non-conformity is meant to include the Liberal abhorrence of an interfering state, why did Leicester accept without complaint other legislation such as the Public Health Act? On the other hand, Fraser's explanation perhaps discounts too greatly the character of the local population. It was after all a working class secularist, Charles Eagle, who was a dominant figure in the local branch of the league, while his fellow secularist, the elastic web manufacturer Michael Wright, became the leader and main organiser of the local movement.³

Politically, the movement became Leicester's 'cause celebre'. Indeed, it was a Conservative councillor who first used the issue to gain electoral support but the activities of the Leicester branch of the league became closely identified with local Liberalism when P.A. Taylor championed anti-vaccinationists nationally.⁴ Taylor's successor as the Radical member, J.A. Picton, continued Taylor's parliamentary campaign and was able to secure the appointment of a Royal Commission in 1889. The Commission did not go far enough to meet the league's demands but exemption on the grounds

1. S.M. Fraser, *op.cit.*, p.331.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Gould, *op.cit.*, p.85. For the views of the secularists nationally on vaccination see Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, pp. 223-5.

4. Simmons, *op.cit.*, p.19.

of conscience was achieved.¹ Locally the town council put forward a private corporation bill which was passed by parliament in 1879. This act placed legislative weight behind the local notification system, persons who failed to immediately notify the authorities of an occurrence of smallpox were subject to a maximum fine of £10.²

Considerable working class involvement in the Leicester anti-vaccination campaign is acknowledged by all scholars who have previously written on the subject. Despite this heavy working class presence the movement tended to affirm rather than question the existing political status quo. Fraser has noted that the anti-vaccinationists in Leicester were composed of two groups, working class parents who had most to fear from the legislation and produced the majority of members to the movement, and middle class politicians who utilised the campaign for political purposes.³ A continuity can be discerned between the class alliances that were gathered within the anti-vaccination campaign and former movements such as the reform agitation of the 1860s and the controversy over religious education in the early 1870s. Yet in the midst of the vaccination turmoils, in the mid 1880s, a new issue was beginning to force itself on the local political agenda. The vicissitudes of factory production in hosiery, and mechanisation in footwear, exacerbated by both foreign and countryside competition were beginning to strain relations between employers and workers. Both these groups in local industry had for many years formed the backbone of Leicester's Liberal coalition and it is to the first serious challenge to the alliance since its formation in the late 1850s and early 1860s that I now wish to turn.

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p.18.

3. S.M. Fraser, op.cit.

CHAPTER VII

Early Socialism in Leicester

Socialism as a distinct and independent ideology emerged amongst a small group of young secularists, some of whom were also active hosiery trade unionists. The initial effect of the new creed upon Leicester politics was miniscule during its first five years of existence. Yet within two decades socialism was to replace Liberalism as the main form of working class political expression, a process which was to culminate in the election of independent working class candidates to local governing bodies and the victory of Ramsay MacDonald in the 1906 general election. This growth, however, was frequently punctuated and episodic. Up until 1890 socialism in Leicester consisted of a small branch of the Socialist League whose membership largely consisted of young hosiery workers and secularists. After 1890 young militant converts of the new movement were able to harness the growing discontent amongst local shoemakers in the establishment of a strong socialist base within the structure of footwear trade unionism. Upon this new foundation a branch of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) was formed out of the previous warring factions of local members of the Social Democratic Federation and the anarchist ridden Socialist League.

During this first phase of local socialism the young men from the Secular Hall were able to establish a footing in the newly formed L.A.H.U. This is not particularly surprising as hosiery had provided recruits to secularism for many years and these men, perhaps because of their disposition to audacity, were often ideally suited to trade union work. Indeed, trade unionism itself had often provided a refuge for working class radicals and as we have seen above, it was the secularist and trade union celebrants of the Paris Commune who embarked upon the formation of

a Socialist Club in 1887. The problems which beset the workforce in the nascent hosiery factory workforce were to hasten the development of local socialism. Yet during a period when local advocates of Socialism were as muddled as their national mentors on what strategy the new movement should follow this development was somewhat stunted.¹ Other factors were also at work in limiting the growth of socialism. Hosiery was increasingly becoming an industry of female workers. This is not to suggest that women were uninterested in politics; women in hosiery gave tacit support to the Socialist inspired leadership of the L.A.H.U. throughout the period, but during an era when politics was, formally at least, a 'man's business', they provided few recruits to the new movement. Shoeworkers on the other hand offered greater opportunities. Steeped in their tradition of radicalism and well versed in assuming the leadership of past popular movements it is surprising that we find so few from this trade in early Leicester Socialism. Shoemakers were eventually to become the driving force of local Socialism during the 1890s but why do they figure so little in the development of the Socialist League? I have been unable to find any satisfactory answer to this question. The following points, however inadequate, may provide some clues. Footwear was still relatively prosperous and the Radical Liberalism of the N.U.B.S.O. leadership, for many, still appeared to work. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, rising discontent amongst shoeworkers continued to be channelled into their formidable local union organisation. There

1. Pelling, op.cit., ch. 3.

were also problems of proselytization. The early members of the Socialist League in Leicester were generally earnest and inward looking and rather obsessive about the need to make Socialists through study rather than by propaganda. By the end of the period of this chapter a few leading militant shoemakers had joined the ranks of local Socialism and these men were to play the formative role in future working class political developments. Their presence, however, was disproportionately small considering the size of their occupation in Leicester.

In this chapter I wish to examine the emergence of a small yet virile branch of the Socialist League. Implicit to this examination will be important comparative questions of why Leicester, unlike many other similar towns, was able to develop and sustain an early culture of Socialism. The social composition of the branch will be explored, as far as source material allows, and the movement's impact upon the wider labour movement will be assessed.

The meeting in King Street in 1888 to celebrate the Paris Commune, referred to in Chapter I was more than a gathering of frustrated trade union activists impelled towards considering the benefits of Socialism to the labour movement by the specific circumstances of the Leicester hosiery industry. Many of the celebrants were active secularists and the heirs of an indigenous working class tradition that stretched back to the days of Robert Owen. Moreover, the purpose of the meeting was to commemorate an important event in the history of the European working class; while the presence of L.A.H.U. officers who were not secularists shows that participation in the working class radical tradition extended beyond the ranks of organised freethought. For at least three of the

celebrants, Barclay, Robson and Warner, the decision taken at the meeting to found a Socialist Labour Club was another step forward in a process of political education and activity which had been underway since the early 1880s. All three were active working class secularists who had followed with intense interest the emergence of socialist ideas at the weekly lectures in the Secular Hall. Barclay and Robson's radicalism had been reinforced and enhanced by a vigorous process of self-education, while Warner, who along with Barclay was an officer of the L.A.H.U., was ever aware of his family's past involvement in the Chartist movement.¹

Barclay was in many ways the key figure of this group. An avid reader of Ruskin and the literary classics, this young bachelor of Irish extraction was equally involved in both trade union and working class political culture. He was first to involve himself in the Socialist movement when he debated against Bradlaugh's anti-Hyndman position in the Secular Hall early in 1885, supplementing his crude Marxism a few months later with a lecture on 'John Ruskin's Political Economy'.² Barclay's early lectures at the Secular Hall received a mention in Justice which in turn prompted J.L. Mahon of the newly formed Socialist League to make contact with the young provincial. Barclay's reply to Mahon clearly demonstrates the role of the Secular Hall to the nascent Socialist movement:

Dear Sir,

I received a letter from you through some other person unknown to me, some two months ago. I must apologise for not answering before this. You heard that I was interested in the Socialistic movement and I may say that I am very much so. At the Secular

1. Freedom, August 1890.

2. K.757 Barclay to Mahon June 30, 1885. Socialist League Archive, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. (Hereafter S.L.)

Society, at which I am a member, I lectured in answer to Mr. Bradlaugh's "Some Objections" and since on "What should be the relations of Capital and Labour". These were reported in Justice. In May last I read a paper "John Ruskin's Political Economy". For two or three weeks I purchased a quire of Justice to sell. But I got poor encouragement here in Leicester. I may say that in answer to a question of yours that The Commonweal is sold at the Secular Bookstores and that it is on the Society Club Room tables. I doubt if I could contents bill displayed but I will try. Commonweal is much superior to Justice since the new editorship of the latter. I will do my best to push it (Commonweal) amongst my class. But it is hard. They are ignorant, selfish, apathetic.

If I have time I will send you a letter for July in reply to Salidin's [sic] most untruthful remarks in Secular Review of June 20th.

With best wishes for and thanks to all connected with The Commonweal.

believe me yours,
Thos Barclay,
wage slave. 1

The decision on what strain of Socialism local groups affiliated was often an historical accident. Provincial socialists making their first stumbling steps into the new theory could find difficulty in differentiating between the various versions on offer and tended to make their choice on personality rather than policy as Barclay's subsequent letter to the Socialist League clearly shows:

Gentlemen,

You must excuse me not answering before this, your notice of my letter and your requests. I have been Secretary pro tem on our Trades Union, and now very busy for over a week preparing for half yearly meeting. I am already a member of S.D.F.² but I send you P.O. and ask

1. Ibid.

2. Probably individual membership as no branch existed in Leicester until early 1890s.

you to enrol me one of the Socialist League. One is liable to get confused among Fabians, Anarchists, Socialists and Socialists. I have looked through your manifesto and compared it with that of the S.D.F. and the difference as far as I can see is "non est".

Nevertheless I shall be glad to belong to a Society that has amongst its members Wm. Morris and the daughter of Carl Marx.

I ask your Council's permission to form a branch of the Socialist League in Leicester which I shall try to do.

You may rely on my letter in reply to Saladin - shall send it in a day or two. My personal thanks¹ to Dr. Aveling for his lucid lessons in Socialism, which it is a pity all Socialists will not read.²

Yet personality and policy are often not so easily separated. Barclay with his love of literature, and especially Ruskin, obviously felt an empathy with Morris and Commonweal rather than the arid pages of Hyndman's Justice. Moreover Morris exerted an influence over the bohemian culture of young working and middle class intellectuals, centred at the Secular Hall. One of the outstanding members of this informal society, Ernest Gimson, the son of the Secular Society president, was soon to join Morris as a furniture designer.³ The question of whether Morris's Socialism was essentially moralistic rather than a material analysis of society has already been covered by historians.⁴ The main appeal of the League to Barclay and his circle was Morris's insistence that Socialism had to be made by making Socialists: an idea that found a ready response amongst these self-taught, bookish, workers. One of

1. Recently delivered at the Secular Hall.

2. S.L. K758/1. Barclay to Commonweal, July 19, 1885.

3. R. Gradidge, 'Dream Houses'. The Edwardian Ideal (1980) pp. 163-173. See also the Foreword to Barclay's Memoirs and Medleys by Sydney Gimson.

4. See especially E.P. Thompson's postscript to his 1976 Merlin edition of William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary.

Barclay's early branch reports underlines this point:

As regards the branch I must report that the whole of the organisation devolves upon me. After Dr. Aveling's lecture I expected to see more at our meetings, but very few came up. Then two or three of us put our heads together and resolved that we would not force the thing, for we saw that Socialism had to be acquired by gradual study and discussion.¹

Such a mode of proselytization could not, however, quickly establish a large political movement. The membership of branch 13, Leicester, of the Socialist League does not appear to have ever been more than 20 subscription payers.² Even these often found difficulty in paying their weekly sixpence and there appears to have been much internal dissent and suspicion over the state of the branch's finances.³ Furthermore, the seasonality of local trade, especially in winter, could affect both subscriptions and sales of Commonweal:

We are only a small branch at best two thirds of our members are out of work or on short time - we find it very difficult to get any money in at all - I have not sold more than 10 - 15 Commonweals per week for several months.⁴

Problems also arose from the section of the membership based in the older artisanal trades and thus susceptible to the itinerant work cycles. John Fowkes, the secretary, spent the autumn of 1888 taking samples of his work around potential employers in London and was finally reduced to begging his fare back to Leicester from the staff at the League headquarters.⁵ His predecessor as secretary, P.C. Copeland left Leicester

1. S.L. K.763/1, Barclay to Socialist League, November 20, 1885.

2. S.L. K.1120/1, Copeland to Socialist League, January 1887.

3. For example there were frequent requests from the secretary to Commonweal to acknowledge subscriptions in the journal's columns in order to allay local suspicion.

4. S.L. K.1445, Fowkes to Management Committee, January 18, 1888.

5. S.L. K.1446, Fowkes to Socialist League, October 23, 1888.

in similar circumstances the previous summer, taking the branch funds with him.¹ Another obstacle to growth during the League's early period in Leicester was the tendency for the membership to continue the old pattern of meetings typical of the era of self-educating artisans. Thus while the Leaguers could use their membership of the Secular Hall to press for leading Socialist speakers at the society's weekly lectures, their own weekly meetings and talks were often more narrow in appeal. For example, Barclay frequently spoke to the branch on Ruskin and Zola.² On the other hand we must not dismiss these literary interests as insignificant for what we are witnessing is a vital aspect of the intellectual development of a group of young men³ who were to play an important role in the development of Socialism in subsequent years.

With its roots firmly planted in the milieu of Leicester secularism the League attracted other young men from a social background markedly different to that of radical young hosiery workers. These young middle class members shared Barclay's and Robson's love of learning and the arts and became interested in Socialism largely by the elegance of Aveling's 'scientific' lectures at the hall. Typical of this group was Maximillian Bunting a young, well to do, cashier of Arthur Street and an early secretary of the branch. Bunting corresponded with Aveling, finding the latter's 'rational, scientific' image commendable and intellectually respectable.⁴ His support for the Socialist cause was, however, put to the test when he studied the League's manifesto for the

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1. S.L. K.1447/1, Fowkes to Socialist League, August 29, 1887.
 2. S.L. K.603, Lecture and propaganda list for Autumn 1885.
 3. Barclay, aged 33, was probably the oldest.
 4. S.L. K.974, Bunting to Aveling, July 1, 1885.

first time, finding the word 'revolution' particularly irksome: 'This word is a great stumbling block to us in the provinces. It has been so much applied to pikes and staves that for the progress of our movement it would be well left out.'¹ Bunting soon left the League but his gifts of cash and his ability to procure national speakers through his role as secretary of the Secular Society undoubtedly assisted the League's formative period.² Similar assistance came from James Billson, a son of the substantial manufacturing family and a friend of G.B. Shaw.³ The most enduring of these middle class supporters was Archibald Gorrie, a life long supporter of Barclay's political campaigns, who gained a certain notoriety in the early 1890s as the only Christian in British anarchism.⁴ Gorrie was converted to Socialism after hearing Barclay lecture and subsequently became branch secretary and benefactor and established ties with Edward Carpenter.⁵

This early bohemian phase ended with the departure of the majority of the branch's middle class supporters and a quickening of the tempo of upheaval in the hosiery industry. The branch's initial reluctance to push propaganda seriously hampered recruitment. So much so that a group of hosiery workers at a Leicester factory, unaware of the existence of the Leicester branch, contacted the Commonweal to enquire about membership.⁶ The Leaguers' focus of attention did, however, move towards industrial matters. The branch which had moved from the Secular to the Spiritualist

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1. S.L. K.976, Bunting to Mahon, September 28, 1885.
 2. S.L. K.763/1, Barclay to Socialist League, November 20, 1885.
 3. S.L. K.846/1-5, Billson to Socialist League (n.d.). See also Barclay's Memoirs and Medleys, p.87.
 4. Freedom, December 1891.
 5. Barclay, op.cit., pp. 75, 84.
 6. S.L. K.3277, Yeoman to Morris, November 8, 1886; Commonweal, December 25, 1886.

Hall in Silver Street, moved again to the offices of the Hosiery Union in Horsefair Street. The Horsefair Street period was in many ways also the League's most creative one. Warner and Barclay were union officials, while the union's up and coming officer, Jabez Chaplin, was increasingly being influenced by Barclay.¹ Furthermore the union's full time secretary, James Holmes, whose membership of the League is uncertain, had been a long standing friend of Barclay and sympathetic to socialist ideas. These were frequently expressed in the union's 'Monthly Notes' which were distributed amongst the membership and socialists joined the union's campaign to recruit country workers.²

If the Socialist League in Leicester was changing in social composition from a group of working and middle class young intellectuals into a body of politically minded young trade unionists, was this shift reflected in the political ideas of the Leicester Leaguers? In one sense this question has already been answered. During the first eighteen months or so of the League's existence the main concern of the group was to slowly build up the membership by encouraging other like minded young people to join their study and debating circle. The sloughing off of the initial middle class support and the accompanying crisis in the hosiery industry resulted in the League changing its focus from making Socialists to making trade unionists, especially in the country villages. In this respect the League members were following an age old Leicester pattern of trying to unite town and country against the manufacturer, an idea last voiced a decade and a half earlier by Randle of the International. This aspect of country propaganda, which, despite the political rhetoric

1. Barclay, op.cit., p.76.

2. Commonweal, January 1, 1887, October 22, 1887.

of Barclay and his colleagues, was politically circumscribed by the League's refusal to participate in both parliamentary and local government elections. Thus the political campaign in the country was essentially a consciousness raising exercise which ran in harness with Holmes's efforts to establish country branches of the L.A.H.U.

The methods adopted by the League in their country campaign followed both old patterns as well as introducing new ingenious methods. There are numerous references in both the Socialist League press and a recently compiled archive on early Socialist handbills to the League's village lecture tours.¹ The main topic was invariably Barclay's set piece 'Socialism, rent, and profit', although how these lectures were received and the size of attendance is a question that our sources cannot answer. Even if the League did contribute noticeably to the L.A.H.U. recruitment drive, that contribution has to be assessed alongside the shortlived success of the L.A.H.U. in the villages.

In many ways, the League's efforts in assisting the L.A.H.U., noble as these were, offered little political potential. Holmes was already sympathetic to Socialism and the union's regular trade council delegate, Warner, was a leading member of the League. In reality the most active sector of the L.A.H.U., the male Cotton Patents operatives numbered only six hundred and all the signs indicated a growing presence of females in the hosiery factories.² This is not to argue that women workers were always politically passive. Indeed, it was a crowded meeting of women workers in the Secular Hall during the 1886 February strike who noisily

1. M. Katanka and E. Frow (comps.), British Labour History Ephemera (World Microfilms, London, 1978), Reel 33, items 309-14.

2. See above p.63.

shouted down the proposal that Merrick 'the G.O.M. of the Leicester working class' should act as arbiter in the dispute.¹ Yet the problem still remained that it was difficult enough to encourage women to participate in trade unionist activities, let alone political organisation.

Barclay's most original contribution to the village campaign was the production of his weekly newspaper The Countryman.² This newspaper was distributed free to over fifty villages and is remarkably similar in format to present day weekly giveaways. The idea to launch The Countryman came from J.W. Barrs, a well to do secularist tea merchant. Barrs was a well known local Radical with idiosyncratic tastes in both arts and politics. 'Twas a habit of him to purchase and read any book that the popular and ordinary critic condemned'.³ On hearing that Barclay had left Corah's factory, Barrs contacted him with the idea of launching the paper, handing over complete editorial rights to Barclay. The first issue came out in March 1886 and displays Barclay's pen in full flow, with numerous articles tucked between the copious adverts. There were features on village hosiery strikes, political economy, magisterial appointments and an essay competition for agricultural workers. By the following year Barclay was extolling the Leicestershire miners to form a strong trade union, informing the country folk of the Chicago anarchists, the London Trades Council and statistics of national income. The Countryman claimed a circulation of 5,000, although this figure cannot be corroborated. By

1. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, February 13, 1886. The Midland Free Press, February 20, 1886 went so far as to claim that the strike and subsequent riots, the majority of participants in both being female hosiery workers, was orchestrated by 'Socialist ... designing demagogues'.

2. The first issue appeared on March 8, 1886, a copy of which is in Leicester Record Office; three more issues, nos. 22, 25, and 42 are kept in the I.I.S.H. periodical collection in Amsterdam.

3. Barclay, op.cit., p.81.

1889 Barclay became increasingly hostile to the Tory squirearchy and began to utter anti-royalist sentiments, calling the Queen 'a useless woman'. Not surprisingly advertisers began to fight shy of patronising such a newspaper and the Countryman ceased publication in the early 1890s.¹ This early venture into journalism was, however, to provide crucial experience in the formation of a local labour newspaper in the early 1890s.

As the 1880s drew to a close the League's political thinking became increasingly muddled. This was probably caused by the fact that apart from their trade union activities the members, having eschewed electoral politics, had no central concern upon which to focus their ideas and formulate policy. Their lectures and speeches more and more began to appear like an assortment of the various bees in the few bonnets that constituted the membership. For example, Barclay, possibly because of his impoverished background, held a long standing aversion to cooperative production. This proposed solution to the ills of the world was designed, according to Barclay, to enhance the status and economic position of the few well to do workers who were able to fund such ventures, and thus left untouched the deeper problem of poverty.² Despite the perceptiveness of this critique, Barclay was, by constantly attacking cooperators,³ isolating himself and the League from a considerable group of potential supporters, particularly young militant boot and shoe workers. There is also some evidence that Barclay's feelings on cooperation caused friction

1. Barclay, op.cit., p.78.

2. Commonweal, August 4, 1888.

3. See the Branch reports for 1888-9 published in Commonweal.

within his own group; on one occasion, the branch went so far as to pass a resolution supporting cooperative production.¹

Another source of weakness was an increasing ambivalence towards trade unionism. Robson, in particular, specialised in giving open air lectures on the 'iron law of wages'.² A position which was somewhat contradicted by their own trade union activities and their frequent praise lavished on James Holmes for the latter's writings on socialist matters.³ Warner, on the other hand, fell under the sway of anarchism which was beginning to receive a fair amount of exposure from Socialist League lecturers near the end of the decade.⁴

Judged in terms of membership and tangible connections with the Labour movement, the League's record during the 1880s was not particularly impressive. Branch membership was always miniscule and they never managed to increase their toehold in the trade union movement. Indeed Barclay, who had shared a position of almost equal power with Holmes in 1885, had retired from union activities into full time journalism. Warner remained a union officer throughout the period, but his influence was slight. Although he was the L.A.H.U. delegate to the trades council he must have been an isolated figure being the only anarchist on the council; with a penchant for advocating direct action, he probably suffered much ridicule from the majority of delegates who still espoused a Lib-Lab political outlook.⁵ Furthermore, the membership of the L.A.H.U., although relatively small, never demonstrated any overt Socialist attitudes. There were but a few Socialist hosiery workers in 1885 as there were in 1890.

1. Commonweal, March 12, 1887.

2. Ibid., August 4, 1888.

3. Ibid., July 27, 1889.

4. Ibid., August 12, 1890.

5. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1892. In that year Warner's lonely vigil as the only anarchist on the Trades Council was relieved with the arrival of George Cores, a N.U.B.S.O. delegate and leading member of the 'Freedom' Group.

Yet there is a danger of underestimating the effect of Branch 13 upon the Leicester Labour movement. Although few in number they had managed to give an airing to virtually every major Socialist speaker in the country. Their campaign of outdoor propaganda begun in 1887 reactivated the tradition of popular oratory on the time honoured pitches of Russel Square, the Market Place and Humberstone Gate, where many of Leicester's future Socialist leaders first contacted Socialist ideas.¹ Furthermore, their proposal to set up an independent working class political club, first formulated at the 'Commune dinner' of 1887, had by the early 1890s reached fruition with the opening of the Leicester Labour Club and Socialist Institute which was pledged to the improvement of the Conditions of the Working Classes, not only by the organisation of the workers, but also by all constitutional and political means'.² Finally Barclay's journalistic ventures were to provide the base for the setting up of Leicester's Independent Labour Press in the early 1890s.

Measured against the national picture, the achievements of the Leicester branch were considerable. They were one of the few provincial groups to send delegates regularly to the League's conferences and in 1890 Leicester was one of the organisation's six remaining provincial locations.³ Leicester Socialism undoubtedly had a strong advantage over provincial towns, being able to draw from and utilise the resources of the town's notable Secularist tradition. Conversely Barclay and his colleagues changed the direction and began to reshape Leicester's most

1. Barclay, op.cit., pp. 75-6.

2. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1893.

3. E.P. Thompson, William Morris, pp. 462-3, 571.

notable radical working class institution. After Barclay's 1885 lectures and the influx of Socialist speakers, the orthodoxy of Holyoakeian freethought ceased to dominate the thoughts and discussions of the more advanced sections of Leicester's Radical working class culture.

Perhaps the major reason for the lack of organisational success for the Barclay circle was the fact that the largest and best organised section of Leicester's working class, the footwear workers, enjoyed relative prosperity throughout the 1880s. William Inskip remained in firm command of N.U.B.S.O. and enjoyed considerable local political success, being Leicester's first working class alderman. When the economic climate in the footwear industry altered dramatically in the early 1890s the remnants of the League were committed anarchists, with a puritanical disregard for organisation and thus ill-disposed to capitalise on the growing unrest amongst footwear workers. Unlike the numerically small L.A.H.U., N.U.B.S.O. was the dominant working class organisation in Leicester with a virtually all male membership, organised in two branches whose combined total was over 12,000 workers. Moreover, N.U.B.S.O. dominated the trades council, and enjoyed much local political patronage. Thus problems in the footwear industry had manifold implications to Leicester's political and economic life. It is these problems that must now command our attention.

CHAPTER VIII

Labour Struggles in the Leicester Footwear Industry
and the Decline of the Liberal Old Guard

This chapter will analyse the growing turmoil amongst boot and shoe workers and its effect upon trade union politics. In order to answer the question why was the leadership of N.U.B.S.O. in Leicester a group of men who were a classic example of late Victorian Lib-Labism, replaced by staunch Socialists, emphasis will be given to the fundamental industrial changes that took place between the late 1880s and 1895. The complexities of this industrial theme are of crucial importance to this thesis and in order to deal with it adequately it is necessary to put to one side, until the next chapter, the wider political developments which accompanied these changes. It will be argued that increased mechanisation and new work patterns fundamentally threatened both the old system of informal work relationships and status divisions within the workforce. The increasing reality of this threat provided a platform upon which a young generation of Socialist shoe workers could stand up and act as the defenders of the autonomy and independence of the 'disciples of St. Crispin'. The success of the Socialists in these disputes had wider communal importance which will be dealt with fully in the next chapter, this chapter being primarily concerned with key developments in, what was then, Leicester's most important working class organisation.

In the years prior to the industrial turbulence of the early 1890s, N.U.B.S.O. experienced its golden age of Lib-Labism under the general secretaryship of William Inskip. His career began as a laster in the Leicester trade but his organising ability and tactical skill soon won

him union office as an 'investigator'.¹ This important post involved travelling around the various centres of the trade, investigating and attempting to settle local disputes and in the last resort authorising strike pay. His talent as a negotiator and the respect which he gained from both employers and workers assured him a base of support that extended well outside Leicester. Fox has summarised Inskip's social and political philosophy as 'In general he accepted the economic framework of the society in which he lived, looking rather to a strong trade unionism for amelioration than to any fundamental change in that economic structure. In general too he accepted its social values. He was contemptuous of egalitarianism, and convinced that progress required the generous rewarding of individual ability, thrift and energy'.² Similar to his predecessors, Smith and Sedgewick, he was a staunch Liberal in politics and upon his promotion to the office of General Secretary he also took on the political mantle of town councillor for St. Margaret's ward. Such attitudes and political trappings were, of course, highly suitable to a representative of workers in an industry that was enjoying a long period of prosperity and whose main sub-group of workers, the lasters, continued to enjoy craft status. The majority of footwear workers were still employed in small units, outside the factory, a milieu favourable to the ideology of self-help and personal economic independence.

The decade 1885-95 was, however, to witness a major shift in both the outlook and politics of Leicester's footwear workers. The Lib-Labism

1. What follows is largely gathered from Fox, op.cit., pp. 120-2.

2. Ibid., p.120.

of the mid 1880s gave way to Socialism which became the dominant feature of N.U.B.S.O.'s policy by 1895. What caused this change in the politics of Leicester's footworkers and how was a self-confident Lib-Lab union leadership replaced by a new strata of militant activists? Three developments in the industry underway by the late 1880s served to undermine the union leadership. These were growing discontent with the arbitration system; the campaign to bring all workers inside the factory; and the introduction of the lasting machine. Such fundamental changes in the structure of the industry were not, however, the product of separate independent developments in various sectors of the production process, rather they have to be seen as the logical responses by employers to modernise and re-structure the Leicester trade in order to meet the competition of American manufacturers in both the home and export markets. As we saw in Chapter II the technologically superior and well organised Massachusetts industry threatened the viability of the British trade during the late 1880s and early 1890s.

The manufacturers' first problem was to retain their place in the market by producing footwear as cheap and as attractive as the American product. The disputes which accompanied such extensive changes of style forced some manufacturers to resort to an older strategy of introducing a day-work wage system.¹ The attractions of such a mode of work organisation for employers were considerable. New products could be introduced without price negotiations with the workers and labour could be more flexibly utilised. The workers, however, reared in an artisanal tradition rooted in the piece-work system resented such new methods of

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, July 1887, noted an unprecedented number of disputes over prices to be paid for the new season's samples.

payment which entailed not only more work for possibly the same or less money, but also threatened the autonomy of the operative and his control over the pace of production. Yet while Leicester had been an acknowledged centre of the piece work method the union had never been able to eradicate local pockets of day work. The problem faced by the union was that during every slack winter season some employers would engage unemployed workers on the day system. The problem became so great that in 1881 the Leicester branch proposed that the rules of the union should be changed in order that

1. No member in any branch shall work day-work, with the exception of overlookers of apprentices and shop-foremen.
2. No member under any pretence whatsoever must article himself to an employer for any stated term of service, under the penalty of expulsion from the Union.
3. In cases where the members are already working day-work no action shall be taken on such shop or shops without first obtaining the sanction of the Council to do so.¹

These amendments were accepted with little opposition, but they did not solve the problem. By 1883 a delegate meeting had to be convened to debate the issue. In the two years between 1881-83, members, particularly in Leicester and Leeds, had been accepting day work during the winter slack season on such a scale that expulsion would threaten the very existence of the two local branches. The rules were again amended to allow those already working day work to remain in the union.² Many delegates were concerned at having to make concessions to day work and the new amendment was frequently debated at subsequent conferences.³

In Leicester the campaign was largely waged against attempts to expand day work into shops that traditionally paid by the piece. The

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, May 1881.

2. Ibid., March 1883.

3. See for example, Report of the Proceeding of the 1884 Union Conference, p.10.

first signs of competition impelled many local employers to resort to the day work system. The most noticeable and bitter dispute occurred in 1886 when the large Leicester firm of Walker and Kempson abandoned piece work. This firm owned by old Unitarian families, considered itself a leader in good industrial relations and enjoyed a close relationship with leading trade unionists in the early 1880s,¹ became the scene of a protracted industrial battle. The union report commented on the dispute with more than a touch of irony:

As will be seen responsibilities of no ordinary nature rest upon any one firm, which, whilst seeking to secure its own advantage pertaining to its self-interest alone, ruthlessly destroys the fabric which holds the welfare of the trade together as a whole, and would make impossible the continuance of those harmonious relations without which no trade or community can hope to be successful, or indeed hold its own.²

After a long drawn out battle the firm eventually conceded to union pressure and piece work was re-established in its factories, but not without damage to employer-union relations.³

The day work disputes of 1886-7 were, however, only the opening salvos of what was to be a long campaign. Day work having proved too costly a strategy for the employers was replaced by an increased reliance upon the existing arbitration system as a means of facilitating greater productivity. By resorting to arbitration manufacturers were not trying to recreate the trade harmony of previous decades, rather their motivation sprang from more immediate needs. Arbitration, by removing the dispute to the slow moving arbitration machinery gave the manufacturer both time and greater flexibility in introducing new styles. Moreover,

1. See above p. 103, footnote 1.

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, July 1886.

3. Ibid., January 1887.

fashions in shoes changed so quickly that often by the time a price dispute was settled by arbitration the product under question was no longer being manufactured, having been replaced by yet newer models, or poor trade had returned, allowing the manufacturer to dictate his own price. Resentment naturally occurred amongst the workforce over the arbitration system but the alternative, a plethora of strikes, threatened both the finances of the union and the political convictions of the union leadership which clung tenaciously to the belief that arbitration was the best guarantee for trade harmony.¹ Indeed Inskip and his fellow Council members were caught under the cleft stick of this particular employer strategy yet, if the manufacturers felt secure at having neutralised N.U.B.S.O.'s primary weapons, could they withstand a lengthy period of guerilla warfare?

The Executive Council's refusal to abandon arbitration gave rise to widespread grassroots discontent and brought to the fore a new generation of unofficial workshop leaders. The anti-arbitration campaign that emerged in many shoe centres during the late 1880s² was as much an attack against the political attitudes of the union leadership as it was a reaction against management strategies. Since Mundella arbitration had been a political ideology as well as being a device for settling disputes.³ While in the short term gains could be made by the manufacturers by overloading the system, in the long term they stood to lose the benefits that

1. Ibid., April 1891.

2. A. Fox, op.cit., Chapter 18, contains a useful summary on the emergence of a national anti-arbitration movement in N.U.B.S.O.

3. J.H. Woolley, President of the Leicester branch, spoke in defence of arbitration at a heated mass meeting in the Temperance Hall in the following terms: 'The settlement of disputes by arbitration meant progress, while a recourse to the old methods of brute force ... meant putting the clock back a quarter of a century'. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, October 1891.

accrued from the existence of a type of trade union philosophy that closely resembled their own world view. On the other hand it has to be conceded that manufacturers had little option but to pursue the course which they followed, with increased market penetrations by the Americans, the cosy world of first name relations with union leaders and the common language of radical Liberalism was no longer tenable.

The union executive, unable to satisfy demands from the membership to prorogue the arbitration machinery allowed by default the emergence of an unofficial strata of grassroots leadership. It is difficult to chart accurately the arrival of these unofficial leaders. The union monthly reports, baulked from giving the militants any direct publicity, choosing instead to attack the unofficial movement in generalised terms. There is a similar reticence on divulging personal information on the militants in the local press. Gradually, however, names do emerge and the militant leadership can be identified, albeit without the precision that the historian would normally hope to apply. The undoubted leader of the militants was young T.F. Richards, usually called Freddy Richards, who was born the son of a commercial traveller in Wednesbury, Staffordshire in 1863. Richards was apprenticed as a laster in the Staffordshire trade and appears to have drifted, along with the Staffordshire industry, to Leicester in the early 1880s.¹ By 1885 he was a member of N.U.B.S.O. A keen student at Barclay's socialist classes, sharing his teacher's love of Ruskin, Freddy was a committed socialist by 1889. He did not, however, figure in any of the activities of the local Socialist League branch.

1. See his autobiographical article 'How I Got On', in Pearsons Weekly, April 26, 1906.

Perhaps he was uneasy at Barclay's hostility to cooperation, Richards being deeply committed to producer cooperatives, or he may have been hostile at the League's later espousal of anarchism; on this point we can only speculate. In the early 1890s he was the leading figure in Leicester's Social Democratic Federation branch, although this group only had a fleeting existence, never securing permanent rooms or meeting places.¹

Richards was supported by two other young socialists of whom we have less biographical information. E. Clarkmead, another laster, was for a while even more prominent in the unofficial movement than Richards. He was the first Leicester Socialist to be elected to union office when he became the town's full time agent in 1890.² The third member of this group was Martin Curley, a young laster who was to remain Richards's staunch lieutenant for many years.³ The anti-arbitrationists were also joined by the fiery figure of George Cores, an anarchist shoemaker from the London trade who moved to Leicester in 1890. Cores combined his brief stay as a laster in Leicester with his activities as occasional editor of the Commonweal and organiser of the Walsall anarchists defence campaign.⁴ A staunch member of the Freedom circle Cores was nevertheless often at odds with his anarchist colleagues over his support and belief in trade union organisation.⁵ Cores sat alongside his fellow ex-Socialist Leaguer turned anarchist, Warner of the L.A.H.U., on the local trades council.

1. Justice, April 30, 1892, May 21, 1892, October 8, 1892.

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, October 1890.

3. They were all to be founder members of the Leicester I.L.P. in 1894, Curley and Richards were later officers of the local L.R.C., Clarkmead having died in 1895.

4. J. Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse (1978) pp. 136, 235.

5. Freedom, October 1893.

His fiery rhetoric and skill at controlling meetings soon won him a seat on the executive of the Leicester branch where his ability at passing Socialist resolutions at branch general meetings gained him some notoriety.¹

These young militants found the anti-arbitration feelings of the Leicester workforce to be an ideal atmosphere in which to organise unofficial strikes and attack the union leadership's Liberalism with Socialist rhetoric. A series of major unofficial strikes in 1889, led by Richards, proved successful for the workers and provided Richards with a firm platform to mount his challenge against the union leadership.² There is, of course, a major difficulty in attempting to assess the consciousness of working people by reference to the views of their union representatives. The election of Clarkmead as a full time official in 1890 and Richards' impressive performance in the election for the Leicester delegate to the national conference in 1892, where he secured 850 votes, the previous highest total for previous conference delegates being 228, suggests that the Socialists were gaining ground.³ Yet it could be argued that this growing support was an expression of the workers' approval of the Socialists' trade union style rather than their politics. On the other hand, my earlier point that arbitration in the Leicester footwear trade was as much a political philosophy as it was machinery for the settlement of disputes has to be noted. Clearly in terms of local politics in the early 1890s, when there was no separate

1. S. & B. Webb, 'Industrial Democracy', p.11 has a useful account of N.U.B.S.O.'s tumultuous branch general meetings.

2. Richards, op.cit.

3. Monthly report, March 1892, March 1890.

working class political party engaging in electoral politics, firm measurement of shifts in working class consciousness is extremely difficult. We can, nevertheless, detect cracks in the Lib-Labism of the Leicester footwear workforce.

The confidence of the class collaborationism of the N.U.B.S.O. executive showed signs of weakness when in 1887 Inskip brought his colleague from the T.U.C. parliamentary committee, Henry Broadhurst, to Leicester to inaugurate the founding of the Leicester District Labour Association. This organisation aimed to secure more working class candidates for school board and local government elections.¹ Although firmly in the Liberal camp the very existence of the Association indicates that despite the close connections between N.U.B.S.O. and the local Liberal Association, there appeared to be a need to place some distance between the leadership of the working class and local Liberalism. The Liberal leadership were naturally disturbed by the strains experienced by the old alliance and the mayor, Alderman Wood, who was also chairman of Freeman, Hardy and Willis, took the initiative by holding annual grand luncheons for Capital and Labour, Broadhurst being the main guest at the first such event.²

Despite these efforts to bolster local Lib-Labism the call for independent working class political institutions became more persistent. By March 1891 the Socialist toehold in the Number One (No. 1) Branch bore its first fruit with the inauguration of the Leicester Working Men's Political Council, a body whose purpose was to advocate independent

1. Evans, op.cit., p. 232.

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, October 1889.

Labour representation in parliament.¹ Similar tendencies were expressed by the previously political quiescent clickers, whose Number Two (No. 2) Branch demanded that the local May Day demonstration be held on May Day rather than the previous Sunday as well as passing a resolution in favour of a new political party '... separate from either of the great political parties'.² These moves by the clickers are also a significant indicator that disaffection with the politics of the union leadership was spreading to wider sectors of the workforce and was not confined to a few 'wild young lasters'.

The anti-arbitration movement finally came to a head locally in October 1891. A mass meeting attended by several thousand members was held at the Temperance Hall to debate the question 'Peace or War' in the Leicester Boot Trade'. This stormy meeting finally gave a narrow majority to Inskip's appeal to retain the local board of arbitration. Victory, however, was gained at an apparently heavy price. Inskip had to promise the meeting that he would give up all his public offices, including his seat on the town council, in order to devote more time to ensuring the smooth working of the board.³ It was this concession that won him the vote. Yet in the following month both Inskip and Woolley were re-elected to the council, a perhaps cynical act which was to have dire long term consequences for Inskip's reputation in the union.⁴

In the midst of the unofficial campaign many local employers resorted to sending out work to unorganised finishing shops both in the town and in adjacent country villages. For many manufacturers this was a short term

1. Ibid., March 1891.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., October 1891.

4. Ibid., November 1891.

expedient rather than a reversal to an older form of industrial organisation. A new generation of finishing machines were becoming common features of the larger establishments and N.U.B.S.O. was at last making real progress in organising finishers.¹ Nevertheless up until 1891 the majority of Leicester's footwear workers were employed outside of factories, however defined.² N.U.B.S.O. had traditionally been successful at organising lasters, whether inside the factory or in the workshop, the majority of whom would have served an apprenticeship and possessed a strong sense of craft solidarity. By contrast the finishers had always proved difficult to organise; the occupation being easy to learn it was often combined with other forms of employment during the seasonal lay-offs.³

With the increasing mechanisation of the finishing trades, the lasters who formed the overwhelming majority of the union were anxious to organise the finishers, an anxiety which coincided with the general upsurge of organising the less skilled in the late 1880s. There was, of course, a strong sense of self-interest on the part of the lasters behind the campaign to recruit the finishers. The manufacturer was naturally all too keen to promote increased sub-division in the lasting departments similar to what had already been achieved in the clicking process. Thus the finisher was the likely candidate to operate the stitching machine which had been the traditional preserve of the laster; while at the same time they could become the low-cost operatives of the new lasting machines.

1. Ibid., January 1885.

2. R.C. on Labour, part 2, q. 16,019.

3. T. Barclay for instance frequently drifted from hosiery to boot factories, where he worked as a finisher. 'I was a boot finisher's sweater, and peeled osier-rods on a plantation close by St. Mary's Mount in the Newarke ... Finally I managed to learn something of the Hosiery Trade through being a Rotary Hand's helper'. Barclay, op.cit., pp. 14-15.

The protection of demarcation lines was therefore vital to the employment prospects of the lasters, and in order to defend existing work practices, the finishers had to be organised inside the factories and outwork curtailed, as the latter gave the employers the ever present opportunity to start the de-skilling process outside the factory in the workshop sector.

These pressures motivated N.U.B.S.O. to embark on a campaign to force employers to bring all forms of production inside the factory walls. The issue of indoor working, however, provided common ground on which the militants and union hierarchy could campaign. Richards had been active in the fight to make employers provide factory accommodation for the finishing workers in the late 1880s;¹ while the union executive had been conscious for many years of the organisational and administrative benefits of 'indoor working'.² The campaign in Leicester proceeded with an unusually smooth process of negotiations. The Leicester branch notified the Executive Council in December 1890 of its intention to demand 'indoor working' from the local manufacturers at the next meeting of the arbitration board. The branch's request for funds for strike action, if negotiations broke down, was granted with no opposition.³ A meeting of the arbitration board was held the following month, attended by union officials and 140 Leicester manufacturers, to consider the question. To the undoubted surprise of the trade in general, the employers, with only three dissensions, agreed to implement the workers' proposals.⁴

1. Richards, op.cit.

2. Sedgewick, the General Secretary, in expressing his opposition to the resolution to outlaw day-work at the 1884 conference pointed out that day-work entailed indoor working. The net result of which would benefit the union as it would result in '... a closer connection between the men, and more united action'. 1888 Conference report, p.10.

3. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, December 1890.

4. Ibid., January 1891.

The union was jubilant with the outcome of the negotiations, but Day, the editor of the Shoe and Leather Record, attacked the Leicester employers for their apparent capitulation to the workers' demands.¹ Day's misgivings were, of course, based on the inevitable growth in union power that the decision entailed,² but it must also be remembered that Day was the spokesman for the manufacturers nationally, many of whom were not as advanced in factory production as Leicester, and were still highly dependent on outwork. The Leicester manufacturers on the other hand realised the determination of the local workers, together with the union's united position. Of even more importance the new generation of machinery, especially the lasting machine, necessitated the implementation of the Massachusetts style team system, a development which would render the demise of outwork.

The rapid transformation of the Leicester trade from a system of work organisation highly dependent upon outworkers to a fully fledged factory based industry inside twelve months was not without its difficulties or paradoxes. The fact that more than 12,000 of the town's 24,000 footwear workers were removed from their workshops and home based production units on the insistence of the minority of the local workforce increasingly based in factories, is not without significance for theorists of the 'proletarianisation' process. On the other hand, it has to be conceded that the structural changes underway in the local trade at the behest of technological progress produced an element of inevitability into the development. It is, however, the timing and form of these changes in a particular historical setting that are the major concerns of this chapter.

1. Shoe and Leather Record, January 19, 1891.

2. Membership of the Leicester No. 1 Branch expanded from 8,478 in 1890 to 11,341 in 1892.

To argue that the outworkers immediately appreciated the benefits of factory based employment would be a gross mis-statement. Union spokesmen could ally themselves with and utilise the rhetoric of anti-sweating campaigns¹ in presenting their case for indoor working, but the subject of their alleged munificence, the outworker, resisted the benign process of factory life. The problem was based upon the finishers' strong sense of independence and their sub-contractor status. As we saw in Chapter II the finisher usually employed up to six youths in his workshop. Thus the seasonality of work, the sense of independence endemic to the workshop situation, and the ability to exploit young labour gave the finisher a set of work rhythms that were the antithesis of factory discipline. Moreover, finishing had always been an occupation notorious for the raucous ill-mannered life style of its members, who lacked the civilising effects of a craft apprenticeship and artisanal existence.² The finishers' hostility to factory life was expressed in different ways. Many continued to ignore regulation timekeeping, choosing instead to wander off during working hours to pubs and other recreational activities. This particular problem became so acute that employers resorted to 'locking in' the workers at the beginning of each shift.³ Locks were broken by the men and disorder was not uncommon.⁴ The problem was exacerbated by the fact that St. Monday had traditionally been celebrated by shoemakers in Leicester both in factories and workshops. For example

1. For example Inskip chaired a meeting at the Leicester Working Men's club in November 1890 where Miss Abrahams (Lady Dilke's secretary) spoke on the evils of sweating in the home. L.A.H.U. monthly report, November 1890.

2. J. Dare, Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 1872.

3. British Shoe Trades Journal, April 30, 1892.

4. Leicester Footwear Manufacturers Association, Annual Report, 1892.

at the Cooperative Wholesale Society's newly opened Leicester factory in 1874, 40% of the lasters were absent every Monday from March to June, 17% every Tuesday and 12% every Wednesday.¹

Another aspect of dissent manifested by the new factory workers was their hostility to supervision over the work process. In particular the role of the foreman on the factory floor was difficult for the finishers to accept. Strikes caused by frictions between workers and foremen became more common and shop floor relations entered a difficult period.² This problem was exacerbated by manufacturers, who, wishing to strengthen the supervisory sector of junior management in order to deal with the influx of outdoor workers, actively recruited trade union officials as foremen.³ The No. 1 Branch lost the President, Treasurer and Secretary within a month.⁴ The motivation of manufacturers in recruiting trade union officials may have been more complex than a simple desire to bolster supervision,⁵ but all too often the solution backfired as ex-union officers proved to be tactless and overbearing foremen which fuelled the workers' already strong resentment to their presence.⁶ Furthermore, the peeling off of this strata of local union officialdom presented the young Socialist militants with the opportunity of gaining branch offices; Richards for example began his meteoric rise up the union hierarchy when he was elected vice-president of No. 1 Branch in 1892.

1. P. Redfern, The Story of the C.W.S. (Manchester, 1913) p.52.

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, February 1892.

3. Ibid., October 1891.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid. The union argued that it was a deliberate policy to pick off the cream of the branch leadership and thus seriously weaken the union locally.

6. There is a full and interesting account of a particularly bitter strike at the local Cooperative Wholesale Society's factory over the behaviour of Lane, a new foreman and former secretary of No. 1 Branch, in B. Jones, Cooperative Production (Oxford, 1894) pp. 228-30.

A much wider and perhaps more important implication of the successful outcome of the 'indoor work' issue was the contribution made by the 'finishers' to the internal relations of production of the Leicester footwear factories. The existing groups of workers in the factories, mainly lasters and clickers were steeped in a craft tradition. The lasters in particular had successfully resisted the process of sub-division and in the years immediately prior to the implementation of the lasting machine enjoyed a high degree of autonomy over the labour process. The extract from the monthly report of October 1881 quoted in Chapter II demonstrates that the lasters shared the language of craft common to other artisans of the period.¹ The historian, however, has to be wary of such florid language as it did after all have a propaganda function. On the other hand such rhetoric was a celebration and affirmation of the lasters' independence. The importance of the 'finishers'' arrival in the factories is that this sense of independence endemic to lasters became intermingled with the finishers' own boisterous form of work autonomy. This injection of workshop culture into the existing atmosphere of craft autonomy was to prove a unique and important dimension to industrial relations in the Leicester trade in the three stormy years between the arrival of the finishers in the factories in 1892 and the Lock-out of 1895.²

1. See above p. 106.

2. Griffin Ward, the chairman of the Leicester Footwear Manufacturers Association, complained in 1892 that 'We find a great difficulty in keeping order in our various establishments. The men have been used to working in their own homes, at their own pleasure, in their own way and doing what they liked in their own workshops and have grown up in habits which are perhaps somewhat difficult to eradicate. Sometimes there have been cases where men have set at defiance all regulations of the employers...' Leicester Footwear Manufacturers Association, Annual Report, 1892.

The anti-arbitration movement and the success of the 'indoor-working' campaign were both important in the changing pattern of union politics and local industrial relations but another factor, the arrival of the lasting machine, was to overshadow even these two major developments. Since the start of the trade's industrial revolution with Crick's riveter in the early 1850s, full flow mechanised production had long been anticipated by Leicester manufacturers. The major obstacles to this process, poor technology and an abundance of labour willing to partake in sub-divided work activities, have already been outlined in Chapter II. Elsewhere in the industry technological development followed a chequered pattern. In Northampton, for instance, which specialised in good quality men's boots, a certain amount of hand work was still demanded by customers which resulted in smaller units of production and a smaller reliance upon machinery than in Leicester.¹ By contrast the firm of C. and J. Clark of Street in Somerset were in the vanguard of technological innovation. This company had long been hampered by labour shortages and recruitment problems, having on occasion to resort to hiring female workers at agricultural fairs on three year indentured contracts.² Furthermore, the Clark family had long refused to have any dealings with the American shoe machine companies, choosing instead to embark on their own programme of invention and innovation. The result was that by 1880 the Clark factory, with its own closely guarded patented machines, was the first British shoe plant to fully employ a mechanised team system.³

1. Silverman, op.cit., pp. 204-11.

2. G.B. Sutton, 'Shoemakers of Somerset. A History of C. and J. Clark, 1833-1903', Nottingham University M.A. thesis, 1959, Chapter VI, part IV. See also Sutton's C. and J. Clark 1833-1903 (York 1979) Chapter I part 3.

3. G.B. Sutton, C. and J. Clark 1833-1903, p.152.

Similarly the Massachusetts industry, spurred on by high demand during the civil war, had perfected mechanised team production by the early 1870s with lasting remaining the only area of hand work.¹

Leicester gradually incorporated Massachusetts technology, albeit in a somewhat uneven manner. In 1853 there were four firms in Britain manufacturing the early crude types of shoe machinery and by 1896 this number had expanded to twentyfour.² This growth in the number of shoe machinery firms, however, disguises the increasing domination of the British market by the United Shoe Machinery Company (U.S.M.C.) of America, and the Leicester company of Pearson and Bennion. These two companies eventually merged in 1899, taking over many of the smaller firms in the process, to form the British United Shoe Machinery Company (B.U.S.M.C.).³

The machine companies that existed in the 1880s had concentrated on two types of machinery. The 'stitchers' which attached the soles to the uppers were produced by the American company, while an assortment of British firms manufactured finishing machinery to compete with those produced by U.S.M.C. The domination by the Americans, and their British licensees Pearson and Bennion, of the 'stitcher' market, and their insistence on leasing rather than selling their products, allowed them to gradually dictate the mechanisation policy of individual firms. For example, a shoe manufacturer who wished to lease the American 'stitcher' had to sign a contract with the machine company committing his firm to

1. See J.T. Cumber, *op.cit.*, pp. 16-17 for the technological development of the Lynn, Massachusetts footwear industry.

2. H.C. Hillman, 'The size of firms in the Boot and Shoe Industry', Economic Journal, 49, 1939, p.280.

3. J.H. Clapham, An Economic History of Great Britain, Vol. 3 p. 183.

only use machinery produced by U.S.M.C. throughout the factory.¹ The tendency of this development was for U.S.M.C. to gradually introduce the mechanised team system into Leicester factories. The more progressive manufacturers welcomed this trend and even Day, whose 1903 essay was written as an attack against the B.U.S.M.C. and their leasing system gave encouragement to increased mechanisation in the 1880s and 1890s.²;

The 'team system' as devised in Massachusetts finally overcame the remaining obstacle to complete mechanisation with the invention of the Consolidated lasting machine in 1889.³ When this machine was displayed in a Northampton showroom, N.U.B.S.O. expressed much concern.⁴ The machine which utilised self-adjusting power nippers to form the leather on the last was considered superior to hand work and even more worrying was the fact that the laster was demonstrated '...alongside other machines which were all manned by strong youths and linked in a team system'.⁵

It is difficult to accurately gauge the extent to which Leicester manufacturers adopted the new technology. Our sources are silent in revealing the number of firms which introduced the new machines in the early 1890s. We do know, however, that those factories which placed the U.S.M.C.'s Consolidated lasters on the shop floor in this period had great difficulty in persuading the workforce to operate them. Day ruefully compared the performance of a Leicester laster in 1892 with his Massachusetts counterpart:

1. J.T. Day, 'The Boot and Shoe Trade' in H. Cox (ed.), British Industries Under Free Trade (1903) pp. 237-40.

2. Shoe and Leather Record, March 27, 1891.

3. Fox, op.cit., p.132.

4. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, April 1889.

5. Ibid.

... in Leicester if they run a machine for five minutes at full speed, they seem to think it necessary to stop it and see that no breakage has occurred. Then they walk about the shop and borrow an oil can or spanners wherewith to do some totally unnecessary thing. This occupies anything from five minutes to an hour, and then the machine is run again for a few minutes, and if the operator is questioned he says "machines are no good; I could do the work quicker and better by hand". And so he could, for he takes care not to let a machine beat a shop mate working by hand on the same job and in short does all he can to induce manufacturers to abandon mechanised devices and go back to hand labour and not to earn as much money as possible per week, but as much as possible per job. In other words to keep the cost of production as high as possible.¹

The manufacturers did not take much persuading on the question of implementing the lasting machines in the early 1890s. As yet American competition was only affecting markets outside Europe and good profits could still be attained from the home market.² In January 1890 the Leicester trade was said to be 'the best in living memory', while as late as May 1893 full employment was recorded in local footwear factories.³ Indeed early 1893 was to prove a watershed in the Leicester trade. Business was so good that the union report for May noted a shortage of lasters in Leicester, an unusual comment as N.U.B.S.O. was traditionally reluctant to mention the existence of vacancies for fear of a major influx of applicants from other areas which would have the effect of lowering local wages.⁴ The report, however, went on to note that Leicester manufacturers were rapidly introducing lasting machines in an attempt to overcome the shortage of workers.⁵

1. Shoe and Leather Record February 19, 1892.

2. P. Head, 'Boots and Shoes' in D.H. Aldcroft (ed.), British Industry and Foreign Competition 1875-1914 (1968), p.169.

3. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, January 1890. Labour Gazette, May 1893.

4. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, May 1893.

5. Ibid.

Immediately following this Indian summer the fortunes of the Leicester trade rapidly diminished. By August the industry was depressed.¹ In September the Board of Trade's correspondent reported that 'The relations between employers and employed are much strained in consequence of continuous disagreements respecting the new system of employment brought about by the rapid substitution of machine for hand labour'.² The seasonal cycle of demand asserted itself the following May when lasters were again in short supply, but this revival was not of the same scale as previous years.³ The demand for lasters does, however, signify the success of N.U.B.S.O.'s rearguard action against the implementation of machine lasting, but as Head's study has shown the British footwear industry in the mid-1890s was on the brink of collapse.⁴ Overseas markets were rapidly falling into American hands and the once secure home market was feeling the first currents of the Massachusetts invasion. Most worrying for Leicester was the popularity and high quality of American ladies' footwear and the vanguard role that these products played in their manufacturers' export drives.⁵ Leicester may have been in the forefront of British factory production but the town's speciality of ladies' footwear and the dire state of local industrial relations made the local trade an easy target for the American competitors.

1. Labour Gazette, August 1893.

2. *Ibid.*, September 1893.

3. *Ibid.*, May 1894.

4. Head, *op.cit.*, p.171.

5. *Ibid.*

Under these circumstances the Leicester manufacturers were forced to act quickly. To meet like with like mechanised lasting had to be introduced. The employers, no longer able to rely upon the moderating role of the old union leadership began to lay plans for an eventual showdown with the workforce. In December 1890 the union reported in an ominous tone the meeting at the Bell Hotel in Leicester between manufacturers from the town and other footwear centres in order to form a national employers organisation.¹ The first tactic of the new association was to set up an elaborate bargaining machine to impose a semblance of order upon the industry known as the 'National Conference' and consisting of equal numbers of employers and union representatives. The new device was in reality a grandiose arbitration scheme that relied on the decision of an independent umpire. The first conference was held in Leicester in August 1892 at the Town Hall with the mayor in the chair and each side providing nine delegates. The employers were anxious to settle the question of discipline amongst the workforce and in particular the behaviour of the finishers recently brought 'indoors' from the workshops.² The union, however, deftly sidestepped this issue and brought the question of boy labour to the fore. The conference failed to solve this problem and the matter was thus referred to the umpire, Sir Henry James. The umpire's eventual verdict was that boy labour should be restricted to one youth, under eighteen years of age, to every three men.³ This was undoubtedly a major success for the union and a setback for the employers.

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, December 1890.

2. Report of the Proceedings of the National Conference 1892, pp. 45-6.

3. Award of the umpire on the limitations of Boy Labour 1892.

As yet the machines in the factories were still largely operated by men and the union's fear that an influx of 'strong youths' would both displace adult males and facilitate the full implementation of the 'team system' had been averted. Furthermore, the existing status quo had received the highest seal of approval.

Prior to the conference the employers' association had altered their rules to facilitate a national lock-out.¹ The authority of Sir Henry James's decision had made a lock-out politically unviable but the threat of such action had been made against the Northampton boy labour campaign earlier in the year.² The vexation of the Leicester manufacturers was further increased when Richards and the Socialist militants began to attack the tendency towards day work wages that had been creeping into the more mechanised local factories. The Socialists embarked on a two pronged strategy; Richards and his colleagues, who now controlled the No. 1 Branch, ordered union members in those factories who were working day work to restrict output to the number of shoes produced under the old piece work system that equalled the value of the flat daily wage. Richards shocked the local arbitration board when they sat to consider the union's action, by illustrating the case of one man receiving thirtyfour shillings per week for producing sixtyfive dozen pairs using modern methods: '... thus earning ten pounds eight shillings', the sum the worker would have been paid under the old statement price. 'He [Richards] always told the men to earn their money and no more'.³ Members who broke the union output quota were summoned before branch officials and fines were imposed varying between two shillings and sixpence and one pound.⁴

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, June 1892.

2. Ibid.

3. Shoe and Leather Record, March 31, 1893.

4. Ibid.

The Socialists' second strategy was, ironically, to recourse in 1894 to the local arbitration system in order to negotiate a statement for mechanised lasting. Richards, however, insisted that the rate per piece should be exactly the same as the old handwork statement, thus depriving the manufacturer of any benefit from mechanised production.¹ The Webbs point out that this strategy appealed to 'the operative boot-maker [who] has inherited a rooted belief that the legitimate reward of labour in the entire commodity produced, or its price on the market. This idea was the economic backbone of Owenite Socialism, with its projects of Associations of Producers and Labour Exchanges'.² The Webbs are typically perceptive in their explanation of the tactic's popularity. They, perhaps, underestimate the new generation of Socialists in propagating the idea and their leadership role. Fox has also qualified the Webb's argument by drawing attention to the strategy's job protection role: by restricting output the workers were attempting to retain the maximum number of jobs.³ Fox, however, by being predominantly guided by macro-industrial relations notions, such as orthodox collective bargaining procedures, and employee protection schemes, fails to draw out the important dimension of craft autonomy and the workers' control of the speed and rhythm of the labour process, which was closely bound into both the output restriction and piece work campaigns of 1893-4.⁴

1. S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy, pp. 401-6.

2. Ibid., p.402.

3. Fox, op.cit., pp. 213-4.

4. To be fair to Fox his subsequent theoretical works, particularly Beyond Contract: Work Power and Trust Relations (1974) abandons the ideas of the 'Oxford school' of industrial relations that dominated his history of N.U.B.S.O. and closely follow, at an abstract level, the interpretation taken in this chapter.

Given such a recalcitrant mixture of motives on the part of the workforce an equally obdurate stance by the manufacturers was inevitable. Inskip and the union executive had become a powerless rump, out of touch with the membership and only retaining office because of the union's system of tenure. Real and effective power was now in the hands of the Leicester Socialists whose large branch membership gave them the power to dominate union policy. The showdown between the manufacturers and the union which took place at the lock-out of April 1895 is a well documented major episode in British Labour history and it would be pointless to reproduce the full details here.¹ Instead I wish to explore a theme that has largely been ignored by scholars, but which I have emphasised in this chapter, that of the laster and the lasting machine. This dimension has been hidden from history largely, as I hope to demonstrate below, because the protagonists in the 1895 dispute both had interests in keeping it from popular attention. Furthermore, subsequently scholarly attention, particularly that emanating from the Oxford school of industrial relations, have seized upon the events of 1895 as an ideal example for their model of the development of industrial relations. Brunner for example notes that 'No lock-out or strike has taken place since 1895'. And 'The conciliation machinery then established has been taken as a model for other trades'.² 1895 thus becomes the 'anomic' centre of an industrial storm, which when passed leaves a new system of organisational 'solidarity' based upon strong employers' organisations, a strong union leadership and a national system of collective bargaining. This new 'modern' system is

1. See the Webbs, *op.cit.*, chapter 8. Fox *op.cit.*, chapter 22; E. Brunner, 'The Origins of Industrial Peace: The Case of the British Boot and Shoe Industry', *Oxford Economic Papers*, Nos. 1, 2, 1949.

2. Brunner, p.247.

contrasted strongly with the defunct pattern of local arbitration, local union autonomy and a weak leadership unable to impose its will. The Oxford school does acknowledge the role played by mechanisation in the 1895 lock-out but fails to distinguish between types of machines and the composition of the workforce.¹ Even Fox, in his major study, pays little attention to the craft dimension of lasting and the major role of lasters in the union. Indeed in his comparative section between the attitudes of workers in the nineteenth century to those in the mid-twentieth century he comments that 'Their 20th century shoeworkers relative industrial status stands substantially higher than that of the early riveters and finishers, with their crude, clumsy techniques, poor quality products, and doubtful reputation'.² No mention is made of the nineteenth century hand laster who fought so hard during the 1890s to retain his craft status and control over the work process. The omission is even more noticeable when consideration is given to the fact that N.U.B.S.O. up to 1895, despite its claims to be an industrial union, was essentially an organisation of, and led by, lasters.

This oversight on the part of Fox can be partly explained by the focus of his study which is primarily concerned with the emergence of a system of national collective bargaining. There is also, however, a tendency in the historical sources available, particular union documents, to obscure the lasters' domination of N.U.B.S.O. The union after all was seriously concerned with the business of recruiting other sections of the labour force and was thus reluctant to publicise the fact that it was essentially a sectional organisation. Great emphasis instead was given to

1. H. Clegg, A. Fox, A.F. Thompson, A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1964) pp. 198-202.

2. Fox, op.cit., p.638.

the recruitment of clickers, finishers and women closers. Yet these groups were, prior to 1895, a minority of the union membership.¹

The union in Leicester was, nevertheless, anxious to present itself as a genuine industrial union. During a period of rapid technological change survival depended upon extending union membership as widely as possible in order to retain the existing demarcation system. Indeed, the lock-out of 1895 in Leicester was brought about by N.U.B.S.O.'s spirited campaign to gain an advance for clickers.² Alongside this claim the union inserted the demand 'that all work cut in Leicester shall be made in Leicester', a longstanding source of trouble no doubt, but one which was gaining a new urgency when N.U.B.S.O. realised that some manufacturers had, or were threatening, to remove the lasting machines to the country villages.³ The manufacturers in the meantime had imposed seven principles upon the union to govern the trade's industrial relations. These principles known as the 'seven commandments' by the workforce gave the employers arbitrary rights over the working of the new technology, severely curtailed the activities of the local arbitration board and ruled out any wage increase for two years. With the loyalty of the clickers assured the scene was set for a bitter battle, which was to last for five weeks and seriously depleted the N.U.B.S.O. treasury.⁴

The lock-out was not a mere exercise on the part of the employers to impose a more orderly system of industrial relations upon the workforce.

1. In 1894 there were only 48 female N.U.B.S.O. members in Leicester, 1,838 male members of the clickers No. 2 Branch and 10,965 members of the mainly lasters, No. 1 Branch. Source, N.U.B.S.O. Annual Register, February 1894.

2. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, March 2, 1895.

3. Ibid.

4. The dispute cost N.U.B.S.O. over £56,000.

What was central to the dispute was the perceived need, on the part of the manufacturers, to break down and eradicate the craft autonomy and system of self-regulation amongst the lasters in order to turn the industry's workforce into semi-skilled machine operatives. The union could not of course publicise the centrality of the lasters' craft to the dispute for fear of creating sectionalism. The employers likewise realised that if the lasting issue became prominent they could be accused of vindictiveness against the officer strata of the union. This point was sharply recognised by the Bishop of Peterborough, Mandell Creighton, during his attempt to act as conciliator between the two parties in Leicester. Writing to Sir Courtney Boyle, the permanent secretary of the Board of Trade, who was also attempting to mediate, the Bishop noted that:

At present the position of the masters is very strong. The men are out of their calculations, this is the busiest time of the year, and they thought the Federation would break up through the inability of the smaller employers to hold out; but (1) the Federation has shown unexpected strength; (2) Public opinion has not been enlisted on the men's side. The men cannot expect to win on the country work. I think they must withdraw; the question is how?

Let me explain, though perhaps you know, the importance of the question, not for the present but for the future. Shoe work is divided into three main heads - the clickers who cut the upper leather, the lasters who make up the shoe into shape, and the finishers. Clickers and finishers need complicated machinery; but the work of the lasters, though done by this machinery to some degree, is not absolutely dependent upon it. Simpler machinery that could be used even at home would suffice. At present the lasting is done in the factories: but the men know this is not absolutely necessary. Further the lasters are the representatives of the oldest part of the transformed industry. They have the old traditions and are strongest in the Union. If the pressure of the Union was unreasonable, the masters could at a pinch withdraw some of the lasting to the country. Then the clickers and finishers would be dependent on the country workers and the strength of the Union would be broken.

Both sides see this and they are fighting with reference to this occult possibility in the future. The present is not of much moment: not much work goes into the country, and not much gain is made of it.

... The men's cry "Work begun in Leicester to be finished in Leicester" is like an attempt to build a great wall of China and so be secure.¹

The lasters failed to build their 'wall' and the manufacturers' victory was sealed by the men agreeing to nearly all of the seven proposals. The settlement which the workers were forced to accept ensured fundamental changes in working practices and industrial relations.² The 'Richards principle' of linking the payment for mechanically produced goods to the old hand work rates was killed off by making piece work payments discretionary to the manufacturer, the latter also fixed piece rates based on '... the actual capacity of an average workman'. The employers' ability to impose the day work payment system, together with the modified method of piece work no doubt improved productivity and flexibility and, what is often overlooked, tightened factory discipline. For example, the worker paid by the day was always 'in the boss's time'; while absenteeism, especially St. Monday, became an expensive luxury with workers being unable to make up the loss by extra effort during the rest of the week. Local arbitration was retained but in a diminutive form. The right of employers to refuse to employ any particular worker was not now negotiable at the local boards and thus the door was open to victimisation. Similarly boards of arbitration could no longer discuss the question of country work.

Manufacturers were also allowed under the settlement to 'make reasonable regulations for time keeping and the preservation of order', a

1. Louise Creighton, op.cit., Vol. 2, pp. 127-8. Mandell Creighton may have gained some of his perception into industrial matters from his close friend Beatrice Webb.

2. For a full discussion of the 'Terms of Settlement', see Fox, op.cit., pp. 231-234. See also his appendix pp. 662-674, for a facsimile of the 'Terms of Settlement'.

point which was to be later seized upon by employers during disputes arising from pace-driving foremen. The introduction of machinery was now entirely at the discretion of employers. The terms of settlement effectively destroyed the old system of industrial relations. The disciples of St. Crispin were now thoroughgoing semi-skilled factory operatives, the previous informal and self-regulating work rhythms being replaced by the relentless pacing of the foreman and machine.

It will be shown in Chapter XI that the industry was rapidly restructured during the remaining years of the decade, the factories by 1900 being largely manned by semi-skilled operatives, paid by the day and working to speeds dictated by the machine companies. Such profound changes in the relations of production were to be quickly reflected in local politics. Local class relations became extremely antagonistic. The mood of the shoeworkers during the dispute was foreshadowed fourteen months earlier when Cores the anarchist, seconded by Richards, proposed to a crowded meeting of No. 1 Branch the resolution that 'Hundreds of unemployed who are able and willing to work are in such a state of starvation that they will be compelled and entitled to take the means of subsistence by illegal methods unless help is speedily forthcoming'.¹ The other side could be equally audacious and there is some evidence that local manufacturers, perhaps with the hosiery strike riots of 1886 in mind, bought firearms during the lock-out.² The N.U.B.S.O. old guard who played such an important role in the local Liberal alliance were already experiencing a decline in their local influence amongst the working class

1. Freedom, December 1893. This anarchist journal greeted this resolution with jubilation and dubbed its passing as the beginning of Leicester's 'reign of terror'. I have not, however, found any evidence of its implementation!

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, December 1895 includes a reprint of a 'Midland Free Press' article on the subject.

electorate. By 1899 when Inskip died the 12,000 N.U.B.S.O. members in Leicester contributed £2. 0s. 3d. to his testimonial fund.¹ I have already implied that major changes in Leicester politics were underway in the early to mid 1890s and that the structural developments in the footwear industry described in this chapter provided the motive power for these political shifts. In the next chapter I intend to chart and analyse the changing contours of working class politics in Leicester during this period and highlight the role of shoemakers in the formation of Socialism in the town.

1. N.U.B.S.O. Conference report, 1900, pp. 66-73.

CHAPTER IX

Leicester Socialism 1890-95

Socialism in Leicester up to 1890 was largely the product of structural change within the hosiery industry combining with the intellectual ferment that occurred within the local Secular Society during the mid 1880s. Continuities with previous working class movements are obvious. The Leicester Socialist Leaguers were the intellectual heirs of a local tradition that stretched back to Chartism and Owenism. When the veteran Socialist, John Sketchley, lectured at the Secular Hall to a meeting chaired by Warner, on Socialism we can see an extraordinary juxtaposition of historical themes and personalities.¹ Sketchley, the old Chartist leader and founder of Britain's first Social democratic club in Birmingham, Warner, the son of another local Chartist and the Secular Hall itself, the physical expression of the tenacity of local Owenism. The subject of Sketchley's talk was new but the activist circle in which he mixed and whom he addressed at the meeting were remarkably similar to those whom he led fortyfive years earlier. Particularly the presence of the hosiery workers' leaders suggests continuity. Yet hosiery was by 1890 far less significant to the Leicester economy than it had been in the 1840s. The trade now only accounted for 21.5% of the industrial workforce, a figure which is roughly half of the 1840s proportion. Moreover the industry was increasingly becoming a female occupation, women representing over 66% of the trade's workforce of 12,667 in 1891. Even the male activists from the L.A.H.U. present at the meeting were the representatives of a minority in the trade, the L.A.H.U. membership

1. Socialist League 763/2. Barclay to Socialist League, January 1886.

being 1,500 early in 1886 of whom 600 were men, mostly 'Cotton patents' operatives.¹ Given such a small social base it is not surprising that Socialism was still a phenomena that existed on the fringe of the local Labour movement in 1890.

Furthermore Socialism shared the problem of recruiting women to their ranks with trade unionism. Only two females, Barclay's sister Kate, and Warner's daughter Clara, were active in the local Socialist League. Apart from material and sociological obstacles to female participation in labour movements, which have been explored elsewhere,² employment opportunities for women were bright in hosiery, the decade 1881-1891 saw their numbers rise from 5,308 to 8,381. Thus women were not subject to the same threats and problems that faced the adult males in the trade.

Besides the problem of a small membership, Socialism was also beset by other major difficulties at the end of the decade and during the early 1890s. In particular the crisis in the Socialist League nationally and the ascendancy of anarchist ideas had important ramifications for Leicester. The hardcore of the Socialists including Barclay, Gorrie and Warner attached themselves and the branch organisation to the growing anarchist tendency. Leicester also became an important staging post for anarchist speakers. In August 1890 Barclay reported that

Two members of Freedom Group paid visit to Leicester S.L. in July ... The workers of Leicester seem to regard Anarchism with favour ... Municipally Leicester seems to realise Sidney Webb's idea of Socialism ...

1. Webb collection, Section A, Vol. 34.

2. J.B. Hendricks, 'The Tailoresses in the Ready-made Clothing Industry in Leeds, 1889-1899: A study in labour failure', Warwick M.A., 1970. In particular Hendricks notes that most women perceived their working lives as short term, and episodic, being punctuated by marriage and child rearing, and thus felt little commitment to organisation. Involvement in trade unions were also often seen as disrespectful by women. See especially pp. 108-9.

Our Leicester comrades although nominally a branch of the S.L. are in reality Anarchist-Communists. They are constantly preaching Anarchism, and they have neither₁ council, committees, rules nor regulations.

Both Creaghe and MacQueen, two leading figures in the Freedom group became temporary residents in the town, while Cores, a future editor of Freedom, spent several years in Leicester employed in the shoe trade.²

Yet Barclay exaggerated the strength of the Anarchist movement locally. The emphasis of the Leicester group's activities was still centred upon propaganda and the need to make Socialists. The anarchist refused to organise and their tendency to frown upon committees and rules was perhaps its greatest attraction to the Leicester activists. Having '... neither council, committees, rules nor regulations' allowed them to continue what they enjoyed most: holding public meetings preferably outside in fine weather. Indeed in many respects the Leicester groups espousal of the principles of 'Freedom' style anarchism was paper thin.³ The Sheffield anarchists particularly their chief spokesman, Creaghe, opened up a rift between Leicester and the movement nationally when they attacked the Leicester men for religious toleration. Barclay, the long-standing Secularist thus found himself in the paradoxical position of defending Christianity. Creaghe's attack was in fact aimed at Gorrie, Barclay's close friend who was active in both anarchist and Christian Socialist circles.⁴

1. Freedom, August 1890.

2. J. Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse contains much information on these personalities.

3. In December 1891, Barclay criticised Creaghe's call for immediate revolutionary action and reiterated his own belief in the primacy of 'making socialists'.

4. Freedom, October 1891, November 1891, December 1891.

If Barclay and his followers preferred to concentrate on ad hoc propaganda campaigns others were showing interest in laying down organisational foundations. J. Billson, the secularist manufacturer who had been a member of the League in the mid 1880s had by 1890 joined the Fabians.¹ The ascerbic remark on Webbian Socialism made in the quote from Freedom, August 1890, mentioned above, is a veiled reference to the growing interest in Fabianism that Billson was generating locally.² More significantly the group were failing to attract new recruits amongst shoeworkers in the turbulent years of the early 1890s. In the spring of 1892 the Leicester group reported that 'agricultural workers show more interest in anarchism than shoe hands'.³ While both the last issues of Commonweal and the subsequent volumes of Freedom refer to local defections to the S.D.F.⁴ If Barclay and his followers refused to dilute the purity of their beliefs with organisational compromises others were not so inflexible. The question has, of course, to be asked, what were the alternatives to 'making Socialists' and were they as undesirable as the 'Socialist Leaguers' feared?

Stephen Yeo, in an important essay, has argued that the fervour and enthusiasm of socialist activists in the 1880s and early 1890s dissipated when Socialists began to compromise their religious like faith in the new philosophy in their dealings with other sections of the Labour movement.⁵ David Clark in his recent book on Colne Valley has enlarged

1. Commonweal, December 6, 1890.

2. Webb himself had spoken to a packed meeting at the Cooperative Hall in November 1889. The first of a series of local Fabian meetings. Commonweal, November 2, 1889, February 8, 1890.

3. Freedom, March 1892.

4. At least four of the seventeen members of the Socialist League mentioned by name, Holt, Chambers, Bent and MacLennan joined the S.D.F. during this period.

5. S. Yeo, 'A New Life: The religion of Socialism in Britain 1883-1896', History Workshop Journal, 4, Autumn 1977.

on Yeo's ideas by firmly pointing the finger of guilt to trades unionism as the major obstacle to the growth of ethical socialism during the period.¹ The very concepts of a 'religion of socialism' and 'ethical socialism' are of course highly problematic,² but a more important aspect of the debate has perhaps been left untouched. That is, what were the alternatives on offer in the early 1890s to, on the one hand, the nihilistic activities of the anarchists and the apparently teutonic statist obsessions of the Social Democrats on the other? Furthermore, the debate on socialist strategy in Leicester was carried out against a backcloth of large, popular trade union organisations. The major weakness in the Yeo essay is that he is discussing in general terms what was essentially a local problem. For example, Clark's celebratory survey on the fellowship of Socialism in Colne Valley and the community spirit engendered in the labour clubs of the constituency is a description of political activity undertaken in unique circumstances. The Valley had an unusual low level of trade unionism in an area noted for its lack of religious participation and more important was physically made up of small towns and villages with no focal centre. In such an area Socialism was able to fill the many gaps available in both working class political and communal areas. In contrast, Leicester already possessed strong working class institutions, most notably trade union branches,³ working men's clubs, cooperative societies as well as informal areas of working class community activity such as pubs, football grounds, cricket pitches, parks and a racecourse.

1. D. Clark, op.cit. Clarke concludes that the political and organisational success of the Colne Valley Labour League was due to local socialists who took a communal decision to reject the collective industrial approach, p.186.

2. See R.J. Harrison's correspondence on the subject in History Workshop Journal, 5, Spring 1978.

3. Attendances were often measured in thousands at the N.U.B.S.O. No. 1 Branch.

Ultimately the growth of socialism in Leicester was to depend upon winning over existing working class institutions to the socialist cause.

Such a strategy was largely precluded by Barclay's firm espousal of Morris's nostrum that Socialists had to be made, his growing impatience at working class apathy indicated above by his derisory contrast between agricultural and industrial workers, and the growing local presence of anarchism. Nevertheless it was during this period of apparently personal political impasse that Barclay undertook what were perhaps his greatest contributions to the local Labour movement.

The most enduring of Barclay's achievements during this period was his establishment of a local Labour press. Mention has already been made to his journalistic activities with The Countryman but this venture was to be overshadowed by his initiative in setting up a socialist weekly exclusively for the Leicester Labour movement. Exactly when The Pioneer first saw the light of day remains a mystery. The earliest extant copy is in the I.I.S.H. periodical collection in Amsterdam, numbered 'new series No. 6, old series No. 157' and is dated January 3, 1895. The journal appeared weekly which suggests that it was at least three years old in 1895. This issue was edited by Barclay and published by The Countryman. The Pioneer's style and sophisticated layout are testimony to Barclay's quickly acquired journalistic expertise. Despite its humble size, eight pages, The Pioneer was a lively read. For one halfpenny the claimed 5,000 readers were given football reports, league tables, train timetables, theatre and book reviews, as well as information on the local Labour movement. Barclay may have been borrowing techniques from Blatchford's Clarion, but this should not detract from his own strong ideas

on what a good socialist newspaper should contain; ideas that we have already seen expressed in his comparison between Commonweal and Justice. Approximately fifteen per cent of the paper's contents were advertisements; although we have no way of assessing what this meant in income terms it does question his claim that advertisers fought shy of The Countryman over its strong political opinions.

The Pioneer represents another continuity with Barclay's roots in the Socialist League, being yet another tool employed to make Socialists. The political position of The Pioneer also reflects Barclay's own tolerant attitude to various Socialist groups and personalities. In a particularly fierce debate in 1891 between anarchist revolutionaries and the followers of Morris, Barclay gave full expression to this toleration. 'I am a friend of Creaghe and a friend of Morris and Carpenter, but a greater friend of Socialism'.¹ The consequences of such a political position were that Barclay failed to give leadership to the local Socialist movement in the early 1890s, while his easy going attitude to anarchism precluded him from playing a more formative role in the establishment of links between Socialism and the larger Labour movement that were to take place in the mid 1890s. The first extant issue of The Pioneer displayed Barclay's political predicament quite clearly. Barclay had opened up the pages of The Pioneer to the recently established local Independent Labour Party activists. A fierce debate was waged between the groups. Salt, of the I.L.P., charged that the 'Anarchists were unwise in not trying their strength by getting on Councils of different kinds. Why not improve the people immediately if possible? The people did not understand anarchism

1. Commonweal, December 12, 1891.

but they could understand the I.L.P.' Warner replied for the anarchists saying that they were 'more numerous than the I.L.P. but kept no books and levied no subscriptions'.¹ This reluctance to organise was to prove the achilles heel of Leicester anarchism. Two issues later Barclay had been removed as editor, the newspaper was firmly controlled by the trades council and the I.L.P., and to rub salt into the wounds of the anarchists the new editor gleefully reported that the anarchists had been expelled from the Labour Club.²

The Labour Club was another of Barclay's bequests to the Leicester Labour movement. Again like The Pioneer it is difficult to establish its exact date of origin. The initiative for the Club's formation, as we have seen, was taken by Barclay and other radical hosiery workers at a dinner to celebrate the Paris Commune in 1888. The Club is mentioned in the trades council report for 1893 and was to figure in the formation of the local I.L.P. in 1894. The Club appears to have acted as an umbrella organisation for various Socialist groups providing the platform for the open debate between anarchists and I.L.P.ers in January 1895.

1. The Pioneer, January 3, 1895.

2. The claim of Warner that the anarchists were more numerous than the I.L.P. during this period was probably an exaggeration. Nevertheless, there were obviously enough of them to carry out disruptive activities in the Club. The Rules of the Leicester Labour Club specifically limited membership to supporters of the I.L.P. and S.D.F., while the 'objects' of the Club laid emphasis upon 'constitutional action'. See Rules of the Leicester Labour Club, 1896.

LEICESTER LABOUR CLUB,

The Home of Socialists.

JUBILEE BUILDINGS, Bedford Street.

All sympathisers should join the above at once whose objects are to elect, morally and financially, persons to all public bodies, pledged to the Programmes of the I.L.P. and S.D.F., and to encourage healthful enjoyment, recreation, and mental improvement. All kinds of games provided.

Spacious Library	Skittles	Drafts	Cricket
Billiards	Cards	Chess	etc., etc.

HEADQUARTERS OF THE **I. L. P.**

LECTURES.—Sunday Morning, 11 a.m., and 6-30 p.m.

CONCERT.—Saturday, 8 to 11. Sunday Evening, 8 to 10.

ENTRANCE FEE, 1/- CONTRIBUTION, 6d. per month.

Present Membership, 540.

ALL KINDS OF NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS PROVIDED.

[24]

Source: Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1894.

By this time, however, the Socialist activists of N.U.B.S.O. began to apply their organisational experience upon the affairs of the Club. Martin Curley, the staunch lieutenant of T.F. Richards, in his capacity of club secretary, carried out the expulsion of the anarchists.¹

Barclay appears to have been disillusioned by the events that surrounded The Pioneer and the Labour Club and soon left Leicester for London and a short career in the Gaelic League.² Surprising little reference is made to the Labour Club in his autobiography, while no reference at all is made to The Pioneer. Perhaps the events of the period left deep scars in his memory; after all his closest friend Archibald Gorrie, who continued his anarchist activities up until the late 1890s must have been somewhat annoyed at Barclay for having provided their rivals with two major local institutions that were eventually used against

1. The Pioneer, January 17, 1895.

2. Barclay, op.cit., p.95.

the remnants of Branch 13.¹ The Pioneer continued for a few more issues after the anarchist expulsion but then disappeared for several years. The precedent of a local Labour press had, however, been set and the newspaper was to re-emerge and perform a useful service after a five year lapse.

Despite Barclay's efforts in laying down Socialist institutions, as the 1890s progressed, he and his followers found themselves forced to the margin of the political arena by a second generation of young Socialists, based in the footwear industry, whose conception of Socialist strategy was markedly different from that of the Socialist League.

Barclay's problem was that his long commitment to the philosophy of Ruskin and Morris had endowed his group with a deep suspicion of 'statism' both nationally and locally. Such a stance held little attraction to shoemakers in Leicester who had long enjoyed the benefits of organisation. The young Socialist shoemakers from the No. 1 branch, in particular Richards and Curley, were becoming increasingly aware that they could follow the example of the union's Liberal old guard, and harness the power of N.U.B.S.O. in Leicester for local electoral purposes.² The S.D.F. were never to be popular in Leicester, but in the early 1890s they filled the vacuum created by the Barclay group's refusal to participate in organisational work. Similar to the League, the Federation found difficulty in establishing both permanent accommodation and presenting regular

1. Gorrie and the few remaining Socialist Leaguers continued on the fringe of the Leicester Socialist movement for a number of years. In 1898 they reformed under the name of the Leicester Socialist Society and claimed both support from young dissident I.L.P.ers and political currency from the temporary re-emergence of the anti-vaccination campaign. This society disappeared after August 1898. See Freedom, July, August, 1898.

2. The N.U.B.S.O. conference of 1892 was dominated by the 'Stafford Resolution' which was a move to gain union backing for independent Labour candidates locally and nationally.

activities throughout the year. They did, however, manage to recruit Richards and the other young N.U.B.S.O. militants.¹

The failure of the S.D.F. to establish itself in Leicester poses many important questions. Why, for example, did they fail to attract more disaffected shoemakers in a period when the industry was experiencing painful structural change? This failure is even more curious when we consider that both the shoe town of Northampton and the shoe districts of London were to both become S.D.F. strongholds.² Yet we must remember that Leicester was different in several key aspects to other shoe towns. First Leicester enjoyed a far higher degree of trade unionism than other towns engaged in the shoe industry. For example, N.U.B.S.O. in Northampton could only muster 600 members in 1888 in comparison to Leicester's 6,323,³ a figure which represented one trade unionist to every twenty shoemakers in Northampton, in contrast to the Leicester figure of one trade unionist to every 2.4 workers in the Leicester trade in 1891.⁴ Trade unionism amongst London workers was as weak as it was in Northampton. Furthermore, the structure of the industry in Leicester was far in advance of the Northampton trade, being increasingly dominated by mechanised factory production. Another important aspect in the comparison

1. In February 1892 the Leicester S.D.F. was only able to announce outside venues and there is no mention for several months of branch meetings. See Branch Reports in Justice.

2. Along with Burnley, Northampton was the major provincial centre for Social Democracy. See P.A. Watmough, 'The Membership of the Social Democratic Federation 1885-1902', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 34, Spring 1977.

3. Fox, op.cit., p.102.

4. Census reports 1891. N.U.B.S.O. Leicester Branch annual register 1891. This is the nearest date on which figures are available for comparison.

between Leicester and Northampton was the difference between local popular traditions, in particular secularism. In Northampton the organisation of freethought had never been as strong as in Leicester, a fact which is perhaps obscured by the close identity between Bradlaugh and Northampton.¹ Secularism in Northampton thus took on the colour and tub-thumping style of the town's M.P., a movement dominated by a demagogue which displayed more affinities with Chartism than the studious Owenism that characterised the Leicester movement.² It was from the working class followers of Bradlaugh that the S.D.F. emerged in Northampton. In particular, James Gribble, a member of an old infidel family who became leader of the local movement, displayed many Bradlaughite characteristics.³

These factors do not, of course, present a total explanation on the success of the S.D.F. in Northampton and its failure in Leicester. But they do question the model put forward by Hobsbawm which equates Social Democracy with a strong Anglican tradition, while the Independent Labour Party emerged in areas of non-conformity.⁴ Both Leicester and Northampton considered themselves centres of dissent. What moulded the nature of early Socialism in both towns was the interplay of distinct local forces. In Leicester a rapid process of mechanisation, strong trade unionism and a rather studious cadre of young Socialists. In Northampton a slower pace of mechanisation, the persistence of small units of production, and a strata of activists drawn from the town's robust political tradition.

1. E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans, pp. 23-6, 53-6.

2. Note the striking similarities between the stance of the Leicester Owenites during the Chartist era and that of the Socialist Leaguers. The Chartist leader, Thomas Cooper, noted bitterly the cynicism of the Leicester Owenites towards the aims of Chartism. Does not the 'anti-statism' of the Owenites closely resemble the ideas of the League on this subject? See T. Cooper, The Life of Thomas Cooper by Himself (1886) p.174.

3. Including attacking the mayor in the council chamber with the ceremonial mace while leading an unemployment demonstration. Northampton Echo, August 14, 1934.

4. Hobsbawm, op.cit., p.373.

Thus social democracy in Leicester faced an array of obstacles in the early 1890s. First they had to compete with anarchists to gain popular attention.¹ This split in the working class political movement further deprived the S.D.F. of the services of a significant sector of the local activist strata. Furthermore, in a period when the S.D.F. was trying to overcome its recent identity with riots and demonstrations the party locally often found itself being drawn along similar lines in their efforts to not be outdone by the anarchists. Richards's seconding of Cores's demand for looting illustrates this point. The Social Democrats were also hampered by their politics of 'statism'. Such a belief in abstract notions of nationalisation, and the state ownership of manufacturing industry held little appeal to a generation of workers who were only just beginning to experience the rigours of factory life. The response of these workers to the factory regime was to be, as we shall see in the following chapter, a demand for self-regulating producers' cooperatives. The most important check, however, on the growth of local social democracy was the strength of the existing Labour movement, especially trade unionism.

The attitude of the Federation's leadership to trade unionism and their espousal of the concept of the 'iron law of wages' is well known.² This ideology was largely propagated by Londoners in London, where there was a very narrow trade union base and thus the problem of cooperation between social democrats and trade unionists was virtually non-existent. Harry Quelch, the editor of Justice summarised the relationship between the Federation and trade unionism in 1891 in the following terms:

1. For example, in 1892 the S.D.F. were using the same outdoor pitches, Humberstone Gate and Russel Square, as the Anarchists. Justice, January 2, 1892.

2. H. Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation, in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), Essays in Labour History, Vol. 2 (1971).

The business of the social democrats as trade unionists is to permeate their trade unions with social democracy and on no account whatever to sacrifice to mere trade organisations that energy and enthusiasm which ought to be devoted to the spread of social democracy and social democracy alone. Look at it how we will ¹ trade unionism, old or new, can never reorganise society.

The problem was, of course, that Richards and his colleagues owed their position, and its continuation, to their vigorous pursuit of trade union matters. The Federation has undoubtedly received a bad press on its attitude to trade unions and recent work on Burnley suggests that the S.D.F. could, on occasion, find a niche in local trade union organisation.² But the role of the Burnley Social Democrats was always on the fringe of local trade unionism and they were never tested by the reality of assuming power. Indeed, the buoyancy of the Burnley economy, prior to 1914, sustained the Lib-Lab leadership of the local trade union movement and contained the Socialists to a marginal role, while the strength of local Lib-Labism served to confirm the S.D.F. belief in the inherent limitations of trade unionism.³ In contrast the problem faced by the Leicester Social Democrats was highly specific and touched a nerve in British Social Democratic philosophy: they were attaining union office and local prominence by their fierce campaign to protect the autonomy of the laster and by attempting to stop the encroachment of mechanisation. Such forms of trade unionism were anathema to the S.D.F. leadership who held rather crude evolutionary ideas on the whole process of industrialisation. Their position was spelled out with the utmost clarity by H.W. Hobart of the London Society of Compositors, and S.D.F. spokesman on

1. Justice, August 29, 1891.

2. J. Hill, 'Socialism and the Labour Movement in Burnley', in J. Halstead and W. Lancaster (eds.), Socialist Studies (forthcoming 1983).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

trade union affairs, at two lectures he delivered to Leicester Social Democrats in 1892. Hobart informed his Leicester audience that 'Trade Unionists, unfortunately do not appreciate the economic forces at work in society, and the consequence is that instead of giving way voluntarily on certain points, which evolution in production and distribution render inevitable, they turn obstinate, and false issues are raised which bring defeat!¹ What Freddy Richards, who chaired the second lecture, thought of such ideas we can only imagine.

The nostrums of the S.D.F. leadership did not, however, curtail the energy and enthusiasm of Richards and his colleagues in their trade union activities. The emergence of the Socialist leaders of the No. 1 branch and the issues which accompanied their progress have already been surveyed. The questions which now have to be asked is what were to be their political objectives and how were they to use their recently acquired power? The answer to the first question is that the young Socialists, prompted by both the Championite ideas on a working class political party, allied to the trade union movement, and the sheer weight of local circumstances, were to hesitantly set off down the path, first mapped out by Engels, towards the formation of an independent party of labour.² The critique of the S.D.F. against such a strategy was to be abandoned in the firm belief that the first and most important task facing Socialists was to form a truly class based organisation. Vast layers of the working class had to be peeled away from Liberalism and moulded into a new party, a party which they believed because of its composition could not be anything

1. Justice, May 21, 1892. Hobart's lecture was later published by the Socialist Group of the London Society of Compositors as Socialism and Trade Unionism (n.d. 1893?).

2. See F. Engels, 'A Working Men's Party' in The Labour Standard, July 23, 1881. Engels was to give the newly formed I.L.P. a glowing stamp of approval. See Pelling, op.cit., p.123.

but Socialist. With the benefit of hindsight such a strategy can be interpreted as being naive in the extreme, but when we consider both the local context and the political alternatives available, what other direction could Socialism in Leicester have taken?

The tactics for achieving this goal were largely determined by the answer to the second of the above questions. The power available to the Richards circle was largely contained to the No. 1 Branch. To achieve their political objectives the Socialists had to harness this power to change the union's political policy, which in turn would facilitate the intervention of Socialism into local electoral politics. This strategy, however, was not as clear cut or as easy as the above formulation would suggest. Two obstacles had to be overcome. First Inskip's political control of N.U.B.S.O. had to be broken and secondly the local trades council, the major local working class political institution, had to be won over to the cause of Socialism.

The political position of N.U.B.S.O., which under Inskip's control had been firmly Liberal, had to be changed in order to gain union support for Socialist candidates. The demands of both No. 1 and No. 2 branches for independent political representation, voiced in 1891,¹ were again expressed at the 1892 bi-annual conference. Support for this change in policy came from the London Metro branch whose representative, Votier, pointed out that only independent working class members of parliament would be able to secure the legislation necessary to ensure the full implementation of the London indoor work agreement.² The resolution put

1. See above, p. 209.

2. Conference report, 1892, pp. 11-13.

to the floor by Votier calling for union support for independent labour representation in parliament was carried by fortytwo votes to four. This decision came too late to facilitate any intervention in the July general election but it did have the important effect of stemming the growth of Lib-Labism in local elections as the resolution was generally interpreted as applying to both local and national polls.¹

Inskip's control was further eroded by Richards and Curley's resolution calling for union support for cooperative production schemes. The General Secretary was particularly hostile to the Socialists' demand that union funds should be used as venture capital for cooperatives. The idea of cooperative production was deeply held by the socialists who were to perceive the device as no mere palliative but rather as the building blocks of the Socialist commonwealth.² More importantly, in terms of union politics, cooperation could provide a common cause for both Socialists and the less doctrinal Liberal delegates. Thus by pushing the issue of cooperative production on the conference floor the Socialists were able to increase Inskip's isolation from the main body of delegates. The resolution proposed by Richards committing union funds to cooperatives received widespread support but an amendment left the initiative to individual branches rather than use central funds.³

During the two years between the conferences of 1892 and 1894, Leicester No. 1 Branch had been extremely active in supporting cooperative schemes. A committee had been elected to implement cooperatives, members

1. Conference report, 1894, pp. 39-41. Curley claimed that the 1892 resolution prevented two more Lib-Labers from sitting on Leicester council.

2. See Chapter X.

3. Conference report, 1892, p.56.

were levied, £1,000 of branch funds had been placed at the disposal of cooperative pioneers, and shares in the new factories had been sold to N.U.B.S.O. members.¹ By July of the following year the main recipient of this support, the St. Crispin's Cooperative, commenced production.² Set against the background of the union leadership's growing unpopularity throughout the membership during the last phase of the anti-arbitration campaign cooperative production appealed to both moderates and militants as a viable escape route from the industrial anarchy of the period. Thus when Inskip protested at the space given to a display of St. Crispin products on the conference floor in 1894 he found himself under bitter attack from all sections of the union.³

The majority of delegates who supported cooperative production did not, of course, see such schemes in the wider political context of a Socialist strategy. But the debate enhanced their growing suspicions that Inskip was firmly rooted in the past and was failing to alter his beliefs with the rapidly changing economic and political circumstances. His isolation and loss of control over the union machine was completed when the conference turned its attention to political matters and in particular the troubled question of his proposed candidature for one of the Northampton parliamentary seats. Inskip, who was also the union's parliamentary agent, and therefore the union's potential M.P., had put himself forward to stand alongside Labouchere as a Liberal for Northampton. Richards, with a touch of sarcasm suggested that Inskip was getting a bit

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, December 1892, February 1893.

2. Ibid., July 1893.

3. Woolley, Inskip's erstwhile lieutenant, was the main speaker against the General Secretary over this issue. Conference Report, 1894, p.53.

too big for his boots, pointing out that as well as being the union's general secretary and parliamentary agent, he was also an alderman, a magistrate and the treasurer of the T.U.C. parliamentary committee. The resolution by Votier and Richards to make the post of parliamentary agent a distinct one and 'that in no case shall it be held in conjunction with the General Secretaryship or the General President' was passed unanimously.¹

Inskip clung to the belief that this rules amendment did not affect his forthcoming electoral position. This hope was reinforced by the growing dissatisfaction with the resolution passed at the previous conference which committed union candidates to stand independently from the two major parties. Many delegates pointed out that the possibility of local Lib-Lab pacts was being thwarted by this rule.² Richards, however, strongly protested against any revision, '...he could not ... support the candidates of Liberal Associations ... That very class of people were their enemies ... They must go step by step to educate the constituencies'.³ The Socialists lost this issue. Many delegates came from areas where Lib-Labism still had much appeal, particularly Leeds and Northampton, and, of course, Woolley and several Leicester men were in favour of revision; while those London delegates grouped around Charlie Freak of the Metro branch were anxious to join hands with London progressivism. Richards did not lose entirely, his rider that committed the candidates to the political programme of the union was accepted without dispute.

1. Ibid., pp. 35-41.

2. Ibid., p.42.

3. Ibid.

This last point was to be the undoing of Inskip's parliamentary hopes. No sooner had the issue of independence been settled in the General Secretary's favour when an amendment to bring the political programme of the union in line with the Socialist one adopted by T.U.C. the previous year was put to the floor. It was decided that a hastily convened special committee composed of Freak, Poulton, Richards, Woolley and Bradley should present a new programme to the conference the following day. Their document presented to conference for approval was virtually the same as that adopted by the T.U.C. and called for the 'Nationalisation of the Land and the implements of production'.¹ The mood of the conference was that the union, then the third largest in the country, should fall in line with the T.U.C., while the more flexible Lib-Labers such as Woolley and Poulton envisaged little difficulty in continuing their political careers under the new programme. Indeed when Inskip, taking objection to the phrases on nationalisation, tried to pass an amendment for their exclusion from the programme, no delegate was prepared to second it.² Inskip, outmanoeuvred, steadfastly refused to forsake his laissez-faire credo and announced to the departing delegates his intention not to stand as the Liberal candidate for Northampton.³

The Socialists had not been totally successful in their attempt to harness union power to their political activities. Lib-Labism remained as a form of political organisation which had the approval of the union. Yet the spread of Lib-Labism had been checked in the important years between 1892 and 1894 by the Socialist resolution at the Stafford

1. Ibid., pp. 98-9.

2. Ibid.

3. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, May 1894.

conference. Moreover when Lib-Labism was re-established as an approved form of political activity in 1894 its potential for future growth was checked by the strictures of the new political programme. The Socialists were, however, victorious in breaking Inskip's political control of the union. The close relationship between the N.U.B.S.O. executive and the Leicester Liberal Association was now a thing of the past. Furthermore, as Richards and Curley increased their control over the No. 1 Branch they were secure in the knowledge that any future shoemaker councillor would have to tie himself to the union's political programme in order to gain both the support and resources that were at the disposal of the branch.

Parallel to these developments in union politics, initiated by the Socialists, was the local campaign to gain trades council support for the growing new movement.

The Leicester Trades Council, like so many others was formed in 1872 in the midst of the 'Criminal Law Amendment' controversy. Initially representing eight societies, by 1900 the council provided a forum for thirtyfour organisations representing over 20,000 members.¹ During the 1870s and 1880s the council had been in the mainstream of working class politics, endorsing candidates to the town council and school board. Daniel Merrick, the council's President, was their first nominee, winning a seat on the school board in 1877. Ties with the Liberal Association were further cemented in 1886 when Merrick and Sedgewick nominated the Liberal parliamentary candidate, McArthur.² The bonds between the council and the Liberals were finally sealed in 1890 when several Labour Association

1. Leicester Trades Council annual report, 1900.

2. Leicester Chronicle and Leicester Mercury, July 3, 1886.

candidates were elected. Such ties were, however, to prove shortlived. The Council's report for 1891 decorously noted the elevation of Inskip to the aldermanic bench, an act which was to prove the last of Liberal patronage towards the council.

The Socialists' presence within the trades council and their growing influence in the organisation's affairs was made relatively easy by the large presence of hosiery and footwear delegates. By 1891 these two unions accounted for 13,500 of the council's 17,000 membership.¹ It was not long before Holmes and Warner of the L.A.H.U. were joined by Socialists from N.U.B.S.O. The first issue which expressed the changing political complexion of the council was over the call for a May Day demonstration in support of the Eight Hour day in 1893. After some hesitation, which included changing the council's rules on representation to reduce N.U.B.S.O.'s presence,² the demonstration was held on May 7.

Five meetings were held in various parts of the town and the events of May 7 reached their climax when a reported 10,000 people crowded the Market Square in the evening.³ The anarchists who had long lobbied for the demonstration were active at each gathering, much to the trades council's chagrin.⁴ The major controversy, however, was created by Joseph

1. Leicester Trades Council annual report, 1891.

2. This amendment set an upper limit of 6,000 members for which societies could send delegates. Furthermore the number of delegates above the first 1,000 was drastically curtailed. See *ibid.*, 1893.

3. Freedom, June 1893. See also *British Labour Ephemera*, *op.cit.*, reel 20, items 209-12.

4. The trades council ruled that future May Day meetings were to be only addressed by bona fide trade unionists, a tactic designed to keep out itinerant anarchist speakers. See Freedom, June 1894.

Potter, a local shoemaker and future leader of the Equity Boot Cooperative, when he spoke to the crowd in the market square. Potter, a well respected local trades unionist, sat on the trades council as the delegate for the local branch of the Labour League.¹ This organisation has been described by the Webbs as being essentially a friendly society.² While Clegg, Fox and Thompson have noted its close association with the Land Nationalisation Society.³ Whatever its genealogy the Leicester branch is shrouded in obscurity, only ever receiving mention in Trades Council reports. The fact that the League locally claimed 800 members suggests that it may well have been a friendly society. Potter's speech was highly rhetorical, claiming that Picton the local M.P., who had recently voted against the Miners Eight Hour Bill, '... was, or had been a parson and a capitalist'. He went on to note that 'They might as well send a leopard in sheep's clothing amongst a flock of sheep as send a capitalist to represent the workers in Parliament'.⁴

Potter may well have been the local 'Championite' sarcastically referred to in the anarchist account of the meeting.⁵ The fact that the Labour League ceased to be represented on the trades council after 1894, when the local branch of the Independent Labour Party was formed may be more than coincidental. Unfortunately our sources do not allow us to be more precise. There is much evidence to suggest that H.A. Champion did have a provincial network of activists in the early 1890s pursuing his plan for the organisation of an independent labour party closely linked

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1. Leicester Trades Council annual report, 1892.
 2. S. & B. Webb, 'History of Trade Unionism', p.426.
 3. H. Clegg, A. Fox, A.F. Thompson, op.cit., pp. 179-80.
 4. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, May 13, 1892.
 5. Freedom, June 1893.

to trade union organisations.¹ Further evidence to support the claim of a 'Championite' presence in Leicester is furnished by the arrival of Arthur Field in the town. Field, an itinerant photographer, was at the I.L.P. inaugural conference at Bradford where he sat as the Leicester delegate and won election to the executive. A curious fact as no branch of the I.L.P. existed in Leicester at that time.² Field, despite being a firm follower of Champion, nevertheless was on good terms with Champion's political opponent, Joseph Burgess.³

Despite the obscurity that surrounded local Championite activity it is clear that the idea of an independent working class political party, closely linked to trade unionism, was gaining a local hearing. Moreover other sections of the local labour movement were becoming sympathetic to Socialist ideas. Carter, the Secretary of the engineers' branch, and the local typographers, helped to swell the Socialist presence on the council. This trend even began to thin the ranks of local Lib-Labism. J.H. Woolley, Inskip's main lieutenant on the N.U.B.S.O. executive, trades council delegate, and a successful Labour Association candidate at the 1890 local elections, quickly trimmed his political position to take account of the growing call for independent labour politics. Perhaps Woolley realised that Inskip's orthodox Liberalism was becoming untenable during a period when industrial turbulence in the shoe trade was being

1. The best general account of Champion's activities during this period is H. Pelling's Origins of the Labour Party, pp. 56-61. Recent local studies have highlighted the creative role played by his followers in the emergence of independent labour political institutions, see especially T. Woodhouse, 'The Working Class' in D. Fraser (ed.), A History of Modern Leeds (Manchester 1980). F. Reid's recent biography Keir Hardie (1978) contains a wealth of useful material on Champion's relationship with the independent labour movement of the early 1890s.

2. I.L.P. Conference Report, 1893.

3. J. Burgess, Will Lloyd George Supplant Ramsay Macdonald? (Ilford, 1926) p.63. Field's hostility to Maltman Barry, Champion's colleague, may explain his friendship with Burgess. See *ibid.*, p.74.

increasingly identified with local Liberalism, especially when shoe manufacturers formed the largest single group of Liberal councillors. Woolley cleverly began to distance himself from Inskip at the May 1894 N.U.B.S.O. conference where he opposed Inskip and supported the Socialists' resolutions committing the union to support cooperative ventures and banning overtime. More importantly he gave guarded approval to the resolution calling for independent working class political candidates.¹

Woolley was not the only important Lib-Lab to alter his political beliefs in the light of changing political circumstances. George Banton, the carpenters' delegate, president of the trades council, and Liberal general committee member for the Westcotes ward² became increasingly disenchanted with Liberalism. Jabez Chaplin, a full time official of the L.A.H.U., trades council delegate and Liberal general committee member for Latimer ward³ had long toyed with Socialist ideas, also began to climb off the Lib-Lab fence. There is even some evidence which suggests that Potter was an active Liberal in the Westcotes ward.⁴ With such a growing defection of important local working class figures from Liberalism the Lib-Labism of the trades council was rapidly diminishing. This is not to suggest that there was a stampede to Socialism. Many trades council delegates, particularly from the smaller trades and occupation groups continued to support Liberalism locally. The initial vote on whether or not to hold a May Day rally in 1893 went against the Socialists.⁵ It

1. N.U.B.S.O. General Council, May 1894, pp. 39-41, 53.

2. Leicester Liberal Association annual report, 1892.

3. Ibid.; Barclay, op.cit., p.76, regarded Chaplin as 'one of my pupils'. Chaplin was also a leading member of the circle at the Silver Street Spiritualist Hall.

4. Leicester Liberal Association annual report, 1892.

5. Freedom, June 1893.

was the narrowness of the decision and the uproar which followed that made the council reverse its original order. Moreover the trades council tactic to limit subsequent demonstrations to bona fide trade unionists has to be seen as both an attempt to preclude anarchist lecturers and a strategy to reduce the Socialist aura of the event by including non-Socialist speakers.¹

This lukewarm response to the growth of socialism in the ranks of the trades council finally foundered on the unique electoral events of 1894. In March, Picton, the senior member, announced his retirement from the house owing to ill health. The trades council held a meeting to consider their likely nominations or endorsements of potential candidates.² The name of Henry Broadhurst was mentioned as a possible choice which provoked the anger of the Socialists.³ Despite Broadhurst's previous reputation as the premier working man in parliament, the scandal which surrounded his involvement with the Brunner Chemical works and his attacks on Socialists at the T.U.C. had both tarnished his reputation amongst trades unionists and made him a prime target for a Socialist attack. Furthermore his longstanding partnership with William Inskip gave his nomination a certain piquancy amongst some sections of the local Labour movement. The outcome of the trades council's deliberations on the subject was a compromise. The trades council decided to back Broadhurst only if he stood as a trades council candidate, independent

1. Ibid., June 1894. The anarchists on this occasion were forced to mount their own rival demonstration. The trades council event was described by their leaflet as 'A Monstre Demonstration'. Individual meetings were chaired by Curley, Woolley, Richards, Banton and Inskip. Despite the presence of Liberals the final meeting called for the nationalisation of land and the instruments of production. The leaflets pertaining to this meeting are reproduced in the 'British Labour Ephemera' microfilm. Op.cit., reel 20, items 209-12.

2. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, March 17, 1894.

3. Ibid.

of the local Liberal organisation.¹ Such a position was, of course, unacceptable to the Liberal Association, which went ahead and nominated Broadhurst as a Liberal-Labour candidate.

The decision of the Liberal Association gave the Socialists on the trades council the opportunity they had been waiting for. The Richards group still retained tenuous membership of the S.D.F. and under the auspices of this organisation and the local Labour Club they invited Keir Hardie to speak at the local ice rink on June 2.² The meeting was organised by 'Mr. Chatterbox'³ of the S.D.F. and chaired by Richards. The meeting was ostensibly designed to satisfy a growing local interest in the I.L.P. The new party's leader did not have an easy time. He was grilled by the Leicester men for over an hour on the integrity of his commitment to Socialism. Hardie concluded with a statement that stressed the I.L.P.'s strong espousal of the collective ownership of land and capital '...without which political reforms were the merest shadow'. He then visited the Labour Club where he warned the members against '... turning the Club into a lounge for loafers', pointing out '... that liquor and labour don't mix'. The article in the Labour Leader which reported these events also went to great lengths in its praise of N.U.B.S.O.'s '... splendid organisation in Leicester'.⁴ Hardie's visit was in many ways a softening up operation designed to bring the Richards group into the I.L.P. His warning against alcohol had often been given

1. Ibid.

2. Labour Leader, June 2, 1894.

3. A deliberate misprint by the Leader? 'Chatterbox' was probably Chatterton the S.D.F. Midlands organiser mentioned in Justice, May 23, 1896.

4. Labour Leader, June 2, 1894.

locally by Richards, himself a staunch teetotaler, while Hardie's interest and support of the N.U.B.S.O.'s 'militants' organisation was in stark contrast to the utterances of the S.D.F. of militant trades unionism.

Richards appears to have quickly espoused the I.L.P. brand of Socialism, particularly its emphasis upon Socialism being allied to the broader Labour movement. The following month Richards wrote to Hardie requesting the party's N.A.C. to forward a candidate for the coming by-election.¹ Richards asked for a 'strong candidate to oppose Broadhurst' saying that 'Only a very strong man could bring about Broadhurst's defeat'. What Hardie wrote in reply to Richards is unknown but an unusual twist to local politics was to accelerate the growing relationship between the N.U.B.S.O. militants and the I.L.P.

Before the by-election could be held the junior member for Leicester, Whitehead, also tendered his resignation in early August. Rather than hold two separate polls it was decided to hold a double by-election on the date originally set to find Picton's successor, August 18. The Liberal Association had to quickly find another candidate to join Broadhurst. They chose W. Hazell, the owner of several printing works, including a profit sharing plant in Aylesbury, and a man who considered himself 'a friend of Labour'. Richards wrote to Hardie pointing out the new circumstances and demanding a firm reply to his request for a candidate.² Hardie responded by sending no less a person than Tom Mann, the secretary of the party, to investigate the viability of fielding a candidate in

1. Francis Johnson Collection. Correspondence file of the I.L.P. 1894/161. Richards to Hardie, July 18.

2. Ibid., 1894/179. Richards to Hardie, n.d.

Leicester. The arrival of Mann was to prove a turning point in Labour politics in Leicester. David Clark has already shown the effect that Mann had upon the Colne Valley, especially his ability to attract wide sections of the Labour movement to the I.L.P.¹ Mann's reputation as both a leading trades unionist and a Socialist was the ideal combination for winning over the trades council in support of Joseph Burgess, the hastily nominated I.L.P. candidate. So effective was Mann's speech to the trades council that George Banton of the carpenters' union, President of the council, and erstwhile Liberal committee member joined the I.L.P., becoming the first President of the Leicester branch. Mann's role as campaign organiser was assisted by the Liberals' choice of Hazell as Broadhurst's partner. The local branch of the Typographical Association, a union which was also threatened by structural change from the new linotype machine and consequently adopting a Socialist position in politics,² was notified by its executive of poor labour conditions in Hazell's factories.³ In particular Hazell's non-union Aylesbury plant was singled out for comment by the typographers who described it as '...one of the worst rat-houses in the country'.⁴ This intervention by the typographers was to be vital in winning the support of trades council for the I.L.P. candidate. At first Banton had pointed out to the trades council meeting that Hazell and Broadhurst were satisfactory candidates; the trades council had had a good record in nominating Lib-Lab candidates for local elections and most importantly the trades council was short of funds.⁵ Mann countered

1. Clark, op.cit., chapter 4.

2. See A.E. Musson, The Typographical Association (Oxford 1954) chapter 15.

3. The Times, August 25, 1894.

4. Midland Free Press, September 1, 1894.

5. Ibid., August 25, 1894.

with his impressive speech which appealed to the council's sense of class by pointing out that Hazell was an employer; Burgess by contrast had a deep knowledge of the hosiery trade,¹ and finally he told the meeting that the N.A.C. would make money available for Burgess's campaign.² The last point was to be decisive in gaining the endorsement of Burgess by the trades council.

Despite being the official trades council candidate and the availability of party funds, the Liberals were not to be disturbed by Burgess's intervention. After all, the I.L.P. man had no local organisation and his financial resources were meagre in comparison to those available to Broadhurst and Picton. The Conservatives, however, saw the by-election as their chance to score their first victory since 1861. The Conservative candidate, J.L.F. Rolleston, a local surveyor and land agent, enjoyed the advantage of being a local man, while his strong imperialist beliefs, which emphasised the need to acquire new markets, could appeal to both workers and manufacturers in the footwear industry who were beginning to feel the harder effects of international competition. Rolleston was also prepared to trim his policy to suit working men; for example, on the issue of the 'Miners Eight Hour Day' he was at one with the Liberal candidates.³ Burgess, by emphasising the need to nationalise land and the means of production, set himself well apart from the other candidates. His statement that 'Socialism would have to be carried out either by the vote or the bomb' may have been designed to silence local anarchist opposition but it must have also left the electorate in no doubt as to his own political position.⁴

1. Burgess had worked in the Nottingham trade and had founded the local Nottingham Labour newspaper, The Operative in 1885. See J. Burgess, John Burns (Glasgow 1911) pp. 3-4.

2. Frances Johnson collection 1894/187. T. Mann to John Lister. August 29, 1894.

3, Leicester Daily Post, August 24, 1894.

4. Quoted in The Pioneer, January 3, 1895.

The rush to hold the double by-election left the I.L.P. little time for preparation. Burgess did not arrive in Leicester until four days before the poll. Burgess and Mann, his campaign manager, were however, joined by Hardie and Clynes in what turned out to be a spirited campaign by all parties.¹ Although Burgess came bottom in the poll the voting figures were highly encouraging for the I.L.P. and shocked the local political establishment. Broadhurst was returned as senior member with 9,464 votes while Hazell, who was also returned, could only muster 7,184 votes. The Tory hope that the Burgess candidature would take votes from the Liberals and let their man in, was nearly realised. The 6,967 votes cast for Rolleston were only 217 short of the total gained by Hazell. The I.L.P. were even more heartened than the Conservatives by the result. Burgess, in only four days of campaigning received 4,402 votes, nearly 16% of all votes cast, and as each voter had two votes, a considerably larger percentage of the voters must have marked their ballot papers in favour of the Socialist. Hardie was jubilant, calling the Leicester by-election '... the thousand votes a day campaign' and claiming that the newly established Leicester branch of the I.L.P. had over 700 members.²

Hardie may have been exaggerating the size of the membership of the new branch. The earliest precise figure that is available on the Leicester party is contained in the I.L.P. conference report for 1897 which credits Leicester with 120 members, making the branch the thirteenth largest in the country. The Leicester branch was, however, to be unusually well grounded in the local Labour movement. Banton, the trades council president became branch president. Richards, the main initiating force

1. Leicester Daily Post, August 30, 1894.

2. Labour Leader, September 8, 1894.

in the emergence of the Leicester I.L.P., was also undoubtedly the most powerful local trades unionist of the period; Holmes and Chaplin, the two leading officers of the L.A.H.U. became founder members. The branch also encompassed trade union leaders from smaller occupational groups. Lowe and Hill of the Clickers No. 2 N.U.B.S.O. branch were both prominent party members as was Carter of the A.S.E. and Kenny of the trimmers, while print workers were always noticeable in the early period of the party. Tomblin of the Shop Assistants' union was soon to join the new branch and became an early delegate to national conferences.¹

Such a solid base in the local labour movement augured well for the new branch. Membership continued to grow throughout the 1890s, against the national trend, while the financial condition of the branch was constantly being praised in the I.L.P. press.² During the early years the branch was to remain a solid working class organisation with no prominent middle class members. With the exception of Tomblin of the shopworkers union, most of the men mentioned in the above paragraph were representatives of skilled manual workers, the majority of whom considered themselves craftsmen. Furthermore all these trades were experiencing major structural change, which uniformly carried the threat of craft dilution. What attracted this strata of the Labour movement to the I.L.P.?

1. As no list of membership is available this survey of leading I.L.P.ers in Leicester is, to say the least, provisional. Information contained in this paragraph has been gleaned from the following sources: the local press, particularly during local electoral activity, most of those named above stood as local candidates in the decade after the branch's formation; the T.U.C. Souvenir to commemorate the 1903 Leicester congress contains valuable biographical information on early Leicester socialists.

2. By March 1898 membership had grown to 225 and in July 1899 it was stated that only the Bradford, Halifax, Keighley and Leicester branches had adequate resources to fight elections. I.L.P. News, March 1898, July 1899.

We have already surveyed the growing relationship between the N.U.B.S.O. militants and the nascent I.L.P. in detail but some general comments are required to make sense of the party's wider appeal. First the I.L.P. as perceived through the eyes of the leaders of those sectors of the Leicester Labour movement facing a crisis of craft was essentially a party led by men not unlike themselves. Clynes, Hardie and Mann, who shared Burgess's electoral meetings were all men with a strong trade union background and like the Leicester activists they too had sound knowledge of the limits of trade union activity. But unlike the leaders of the S.D.F., the I.L.P. officers realised the importance of harnessing trade unionism to political activity. Socialism, whatever its merits may be in offering a solution to the ills of the world, could not win votes if it was seen to be in isolation from the major institutions of the working class. With the backing of a local trades council and the presence of local trades unionists, the Socialist candidate could, however, appeal to the class instincts of the working class voter. Richards understood all too clearly that his power base in trades unionism existed not because of his Socialist beliefs but because of his activities as an ardent advocate of his members' interests. His Socialist faith obviously played a major part in determining the overall trajectory of his trade union actions but his members' growing exposure to Socialism came from a different perspective. For them Socialism was inextricably identified with a particular new style of trade union action. Socialism above all was about work, its organisation and the social relations of production inside the Leicester factories. Burgess and the coterie of I.L.P. speakers recognised this fact clearly from the start. The campaign conducted by Burgess made little reference to poverty or wider social

issues choosing instead to concentrate attention on Hazell in his capacity as a dubious employer and on Broadhurst's association with the Brunner chemical firm. Thus Socialism in its first outing into local parliamentary politics was presented as a further extension of the battle against the employer class, a class who were to a significant section of the working class electorate, trying to mechanise their skilled adult operatives out of a job.

The I.L.P. could also appeal to the sense of status within the local working class. By presenting an array of youngish successful trades unionists as their main representatives in the town, the party was perceived in both class and status terms. On the one hand, none of the party's major representatives in Leicester could be seen as class collaborationists during this period. They were, after all, in Leicester trying to dish the most notable Lib-Laber in the country. On the other hand, they were not riff-raff. Burgess was the editor of The Workman's Times, a newspaper whose appeal was largely directed to the organised and hence by definition better off worker. Hardie, with his background in the proud collier tradition of Scotland positively oozed working class respectability.¹ Mann, a skilled engineer, was in this period returning to the problems of the skilled worker, a point emphasised by his advocacy of cooperative production schemes.² Perhaps all these figures had learned vicariously from the S.D.F. the small returns that were to be gained in political terms from fighting for the unemployed and disorganised. Even if this was not the case they all knew that what political power the working class possessed largely lay in the hands of the organised worker.

1. F. Reid, op.cit., Chapter 2.

2. T. Mann, Trades Unionism and Cooperation (1897) especially pp. 33-7.

The composition of the Leicester branch endowed the party locally with an ethos not dissimilar to a trade union branch. The assumption of officer roles came easy to a strata of men well experienced in organising trade union branches and trades council meetings. Despite these advantages the domination of the Leicester I.L.P. by trades union officials did have some shortcomings. Women, for example, found difficulty in both partaking in and identifying with a political group that closely resembled the intensely masculine milieu of local trades unionism. This problem was compounded by the I.L.P. holding its meetings in the Labour Club, an establishment where, apart from the Sunday afternoon lecture period, alcohol was readily available.¹ Moreover, women were excluded from club membership, those being active in the movement had to be satisfied with the weekly I.L.P. women's auxilliary meeting.² This male exclusiveness on the part of the I.L.P. is of course a manifestation of the origins of the local party in the trade union movement, but it also reflects a distinct cultural shift in local Socialism. Gone were both the days when Kate Barclay and Clare Warner shared stints with their male colleagues on Socialist League platforms and the wider political and philosophical perspective that so distinguished the Barclay circle. Mrs. Saunderson's article in The Pioneer was laden with references to Carpenter and Bebel, references that can be interpreted as both an appeal for feminism and a lament that the new Socialist organisation was cutting itself off from all forms of influence that did not have a direct bearing on 'the Labour Question'.

1. Rules of the Leicester Labour Club, 1896, p.15.

2. The Pioneer January 3, 1895, contains an article by Mrs. Saunderson, the secretary of the women's auxilliary, attacking the local leadership of the party for allotting women a marginal position.

It would, however, be unfair to characterise the early Leicester I.L.P. as a slate of trade union branch officials. The composition of the party was tempered by a small yet significant group of members whose background was in local marginal religious organisations. The I.L.P. was to draw support from three such bodies, the Church of Christ, the Salvation Army and the Spiritualists. It has been pointed out in a previous chapter that these three bodies were part of a wide expansion in fringe religious organisations during the period, but what exactly the connections were between the I.L.P. and this form of religious affiliation are difficult to establish. Millenarianism was a strong theme amongst these groups and perhaps the I.L.P. was seen as part of some wider benign convulsion; while all three groups had strong traditions of sacramentalism which may have disposed some of their members to the egalitarianism of the Socialist doctrine. Yet what scant evidence that is available does not facilitate such a generalisation. I.L.P. members from this type of background rarely spoke on the links between their religious and political beliefs. Furthermore this type of I.L.P. member was often acting in isolation from other members of his congregation. The Church of Christ, for example, was extremely active during the 1890s establishing a boot manufacturing cooperative and a garden city at West Humberstone, developments which coincided with many Socialist ideas of the period. Yet only one member from the sect, J.T. Taylor, as far as can be established, joined the I.L.P. It must, however, be noted that Taylor, the I.L.P. branch treasurer, future town councillor and conference delegate, was the manager and first president of the sect's cooperative which suggests

that a major section of the congregation saw no contradiction between Taylor's political and church activities.¹

The connections between spiritualism and Socialism have already been the subject of an historical article.² Barrow has drawn attention to continuities between Owenite Socialism, Spiritualism and the Socialism of the late nineteenth century and it is not surprising that Leicester, with its strong Owenite tradition gave expression to this development. Both the Socialist League and the S.D.F. used the Spiritualist Hall in Silver Street for meetings at various times. The Silver Street circle contributed three founding members to the I.L.P. branch, Chaplin, who was also a L.A.H.U. official, Bibbings, their full time lecturer, and Bent, an unemployed laster.³

Amos Sherriff, a notable Salvationist left the Army when he joined the I.L.P. Sherriff had no trade union background having raised himself from being an illiterate brickyard labourer to owning his own cycle shop. Like so many other young Socialists Sherriff's first exposure to the new doctrine was at a Barclay lecture.⁴ Sherriff was elected as a reserve executive committee member at the branch's formation meeting; he was also the central figure in the small local Clarion group, his shop being the outlet for the official Clarion Cycle'.⁵

1. Taylor's politics were singled out for note in the Anchor Cooperative's Jubilee history, whose writer proudly recorded that Taylor '... believed that the principles which Christ taught, ought to more largely influence industrial life ... and would cause the wealth of the country to be more evenly distributed'. A. Mann, Democracy in Industry (Leicester, 1914) p.47.

2. Barrow, op.cit.

3. Bent was one of the few anarchists who joined the I.L.P. After being fired for his anarchist activities he was advised by Curley '... to follow the policies of the I.L.P.'. Midland Free Press, October 6, 1894. Three weeks later he was elected to the branch's first executive committee. Ibid., October 21, 1894.

4. Barclay, op.cit., p.76.

5. Midland Free Press, October 27, 1894.

This strata of activists in the early Leicester I.L.P. tended to be overshadowed by the trade union officials. This is not surprising given the local backcloth of industrial disruption which dominated the 1890s. Yet their presence widened the appeal of the party, particularly amongst those sections of the working class who were not fully employed skilled workers, a factor that was to prove crucial to the widening local electoral success of the I.L.P. in the early years of the following century.

The branch's first outing in local elections followed rapidly on the heels of Burgess's late August campaign. Flushed with the success of the 'one thousand votes a day' by-election result the newly formed branch announced that it would contest the forthcoming November 1 local polls if resources could be found.¹ Banton, never one to exaggerate, told a crowded meeting, convened in the Cooperative Hall to discuss election policy, that although the branch had 800 paying members on the books, the party had not accrued enough funds to mount a campaign.² The question thus shifted to the trades council who decided that individual societies would have to decide their own electoral policy.³ This decision was obviously highly sensible, many unions were still firm believers in Lib-Labism and some of their delegates sat on the council on the Liberal side.⁴ To commit council funds to wage battle against leading delegates would create deep wounds. Moreover, there may have been a feeling that N.U.B.S.O., having solved the question of election finances at their recent

1. Midland Free Press, October 13, October 27, 1894.

2. Ibid. Perhaps Hardie's claim mentioned above that the Leicester branch recruited 700 members after the by-election, did contain an element of accuracy.

3. Ibid., October 20, 1894.

4. Francks of the Braid hands Society and Woolley of N.U.B.S.O. were the two major Lib-Labers on the council, while Green of the Railway Servants sat on the local bench thanks to Liberal patronage.

conference was in the best position to carry the major burden. The L.A.H.U., which was expected to join N.U.B.S.O. in providing electoral money was, however, faced by strong opposition from its members in the country villages who objected to '...being mulched by Leicester'.¹

The issue was resolved at the meeting in the Cooperative Hall when N.U.B.S.O. claimed their right to 'call the tune' and nominated Curley as candidate for Lattimer Ward and Richards for the Wyggeston Ward. Despite the obvious domination of N.U.B.S.O. this choice received the universal approval of the meeting. The significance of working people acting independently in elections without outside aid was not lost on the local press who gave the meeting wide coverage, while Barclay found the event so stirring that he forgot his long held objections to electoral politics and gave a strong speech in support of Richards.²

The problem of contesting local elections raised other issues apart from organisation and finance. The major question which had to be faced was what were the significant issues for the Labour movement in terms of local politics? The experience of the recent by-election and the campaign of the I.L.P. was not instantly translatable into local politics. Attacks against Hazell as both an unscrupulous employer and a carpet bagger could feed into the rising discontent against the employer class in general but the local Liberals, lionised by the local press and with their many local connections and Lib-Lab allies were not so easily villified. It is true that many local manufacturers were also members of the town council but the local Liberal Association had astutely nurtured a policy of placing Lib-Labers or 'friends of labour' in working class wards.

1. Midland Free Press, October 20, 1894.

2. Ibid., October 27, 1894. Barclay was punished by the local anarchists, who were also upset by the defection of Bent to the I.L.P. The following Sunday they wheeled away the dray from which he was addressing his regular meeting in the Market Place with Barclay still on top. Ibid., November 24, 1892.

Furthermore local government politics in this period could be intensely parochial in character and the determining electoral issues could often be particular to a ward rather than to the town in general. The traditional way of coping with this problem would have been to embark upon a muckraking campaign, keeping 'personality' constantly to the fore. Yet both Curley and Richards were themselves controversial figures and thus open to reciprocal action.

The problem was solved by the Leicester I.L.P. initiating its programme for municipal reform. The central focus of this policy drew attention to the council's role as an employer both currently and potentially. This position undoubtedly touched a chord with the growing resentment against employers expressed during the recent by-election, but by not being obsessed with personalities the I.L.P. municipal programme was able to creatively concentrate upon a wide range of working class problems and their solutions. The major plank in the I.L.P. municipal programme was the demand for better remuneration for council manual employees. Banton setting out this aspect of I.L.P. policy demanded that all municipal workers should be paid the same rate of pay as a police constable.¹ This was more than an attempt to court the council workers' vote. It is doubtful if they were a significantly large group in electoral terms, possessing the ability to influence the poll. Rather the wages strategy has to be seen in a wider perspective, encompassing the campaign being waged throughout the country, particularly by the followers of Champion, to force local councils to establish a 'Fair Wages' policy.² This tactic, moreover, was designed not only to uplift the

1. Ibid., October 13, 1894.

2. S. and B. Webb, History of Trade Unionism, pp. 384-6.

material circumstances of municipal workers, but also to establish a system of model employment which could eventually be emulated throughout the community.

The working out of this policy can be clearly seen in the rest of the I.L.P. municipal programme especially the way the various components slotted together to form a cohesive whole. For example, the Socialists demanded that the local bakery, milk and coal industry be municipalised which would ensure not only greater quality control but would also expand the 'Fair Wages' sector and hopefully intervene in the local labour market by finding work for the unemployed.¹ A further call was made for slum clearances and the erection of municipal artisan dwellings, controlled not by the private landlord but by the corporation.

Both Curley and Richards were defeated in the November poll, but Richards was given a second chance when the councillor for Wyggeston was elevated to the aldermanic bench. This ward by-election was to prove the first victory for the new party. Richards reversed his defeat of three weeks previously by gaining a majority of 81 votes.² So with a slightly higher turnout, and presumably a more prepared organisation, Richards showed that an independent Labour candidate could gain office in Leicester. It must, however, be remembered that Richards was a minority of one in the council chamber and it was not until 1896 that his lonely presence was relieved by the arrival of George Banton, the representative for the Lattimer ward. Despite these two successes the party faced an uphill climb in local elections. The I.L.P.'s first attempt to gain a foothold

1. Midland Free Press, October 27, 1894. See also the Leicester Trades Council annual report for 1895, which contains the I.L.P. municipal programme having been adopted by the Trades Council in October.

2. The figures for the by-election were: I.L.P. 936, Liberal 855. At the previous poll they had been Liberal 1,037, I.L.P. 718.

on the board of Guardians was a total failure, all six candidates coming bottom of the poll.¹ The branch had gained a toehold but nothing more. This is perhaps surprising considering the fact that the party was fielding local working men as candidates in working class wards, most of whom were already established figures in the Labour movement, during a period of serious industrial disruption. How do we explain the I.L.P.'s poor electoral performance at municipal elections?

The answer to this problem is highly complex and like most electoral analysis involves an element of punditry. The first and most apparent factor working against the I.L.P. candidates was their youth. Richards was undoubtedly hurt by charges from the opposition that the I.L.P. candidates were 'beardless youths'.² He did put on a brave face and attempted to ignore the taunt but the charge was loaded with an important electoral significance. For example, in March of the previous year, Richards, while addressing a union recruitment meeting for women workers, told his audience in jest that half of his branch's 11,000 members were single men and that he would 'forbid any of them to court a non-unionist. (laughter)'.³ In this joke Richards exposed his political vulnerability. He was after all only thirty years of age himself, while his political base in the union was founded upon his popularity amongst the young, and probably single, shoeworkers. The battles within the N.U.B.S.O. were fought along generational as much as political lines. Translated into votes at municipal elections his industrial strength counted for little. How many ardent supporters of Richards possessed the municipal franchise? It is impossible to answer this question accurately, but intuitively one suspects that the support for the older Lib-Labers was more concretely expressed at the ballot.

1. Midland Free Press, December 22, 1894.

2. Ibid., October 27, 1894.

3. Ibid., March 18, 1893.

Despite the emergence of class as a political phenomena in Leicester politics it is important that sight is not lost of the shifts being made by the supporters of class collaboration. Woolley as we have seen had been careful to distance himself from Inskip in N.U.B.S.O. policy, while Amos Mann of the Church of Christ and the Anchor cooperative factory made a point of sitting next to Richards on the council bench.¹ Indeed most of the local Lib-Labers, with the notable exception of Inskip, trimmed their political beliefs in the face of the rising socialist tide. Woolley in particular made a point of speaking in support of Richards in the November campaign, while in the following October the I.L.P. municipal programme was accepted by the trades council with no opposition. The Lib-Labers were also during this period actively drawing attention to the traditional radical Liberal alliance with progressive working class movements. The Midland Free Press, the most radical of the local Liberal newspapers, ran a series of weekly articles in 1893, entitled 'Former Struggles of Labour' which emphasised the old relationship between working class movements and Radical Liberalism. This initiative by the Lib-Labers culminated in the setting up of the 'Cooper Memorial Fund' headed by Cort, the N.U.B.S.O. branch president and a Lib-Lab Guardian, to raise money for a statue to commemorate the Chartist leader.² The I.L.P. no doubt felt affronted by the Lib-Labers attempts to claim the heritage of past Labour struggles. Even Burgess had to confront this tactic telling his audience at a crowded public meeting that the Liberals '... expected the I.L.P.ers back in the fold just like the Chartists'.³

1. T.U.C. Leicester Souvenir, 1903, p.48. Mann was in this period a Lib-Lab town councillor.

2. Midland Free Press, May 6, 1893.

3. Ibid., October 6, 1894. See also J.F.C. Harrison, 'The Portrait', History Workshop Journal 10, 1980, for a fascinating insight on the continuity of Leicester's Chartist tradition.

This Liberal hope was not to be realised. Eight years were to pass before the I.L.P. were able to expand their electoral base but what they achieved in 1894 remained solid and withstood Liberal attempts at erosion both at local and parliamentary elections. The general election of 1895 was largely a repeat performance of the 1894 contest. Broadhurst and Hazell were again returned to Westminster while the Conservative, Rolleston, narrowed his margin with Hazell to ninety-nine votes.¹ Burgess polled nearly four hundred votes less than at the by-election, a drop which can be explain^{ed} by the I.L.P. holding Sunday election meetings which offended some sections of the local community. The demand by Burgess to outlaw the employment of children under fifteen may also have upset some shoe finishers, many of whom still retained the privilege, granted in the 1891 indoor working agreement, to employ two boys on a sub-contract basis inside the factories.² Thus 1895 was not to be a repeat of the 1894 'thousand votes a day' campaign but the I.L.P. had proved their durability, while the narrowness of Hazell's victory over Rolleston gave the Liberal Association much cause for concern.

By 1895 the Leicester Socialists had achieved as much as circumstances would allow. Major sections of the local Labour movement were now allied to the I.L.P., while the grip of the Liberal Association over working class politics had been broken. Moreover the new generation of organic working class leaders, men like Banton, Chaplin and Potter, who under different conditions would have taken over the reins of the working class Liberal alliance from Inskip and Smith were firmly based in the Socialist camp.

1. Broadhurst 9,792, Hazell 7,753, Rolleston 7,654, Burgess 4,009.

2. Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, July 20, 1895.

Deprived of this new blood the future of the old alliance was bleak. Yet while the future offered little hope for Liberalism, Socialism had reached an apparent impasse. Four thousand votes for the I.L.P. candidate may have seemed a respectable turnout for a new party. The I.L.P. had nevertheless failed to expand its appeal to wider sections of the working class community. The truth was that the party was still essentially rooted in the skilled section of the two local major trades. During the mid to late 1890s Richards, Curley, Chaplin and Holmes were to expend as much energy pursuing cooperative production as that spent on purely political work. The problem faced by the Socialists was in a curious way similar to their failure as trades unionists in recruiting greater numbers of female and less skilled male workers. Perhaps the Socialists, despite their youth, were in many ways stuck on the tracks of craft sectionalism. Despite the arrival of class, both as a form of language and analysis, politics were still perceived as being primarily about the world of work. Indeed it would be difficult to refute the cynic's charge that Leicester Socialism circa 1895 was little more than an expression of the enlightened self-interest of certain previously privileged sections of the workforce responding to new economic circumstances. Yet we can, especially in the formulation of the I.L.P. municipal programme detect an emerging consideration for less fortunate members of the community. On the other hand this new dimension was largely overshadowed by the class struggles in the footwear industry. The poor showing of I.L.P. candidates in the 1894 Guardian elections reflect more than the electors' political weariness at having to cast votes for the third, and in some cases fourth, time in five months. The truth was that the I.L.P. found little time or energy to spend in this area and six years were to pass before they took

the election of Guardians with the seriousness that it deserved. Yet if they were to turn their backs upon the important social questions that were expressed in Guardian politics how could they hope to expand their electoral base? Before I develop this theme and chart both the I.L.P.'s growing emphasis upon palliatives and the arrival of James Ramsay MacDonald as their parliamentary candidate, I wish to explore and probe more fully the concept of cooperation and its importance to Leicester politics during the 1890s, because without a fuller understanding of the changing role of the cooperative ideology the important changes that were to take place in subsequent years become less meaningful.

CHAPTER X

Towards the Socialist Commonwealth?
Cooperation in Leicester in the
Late Nineteenth Century

An important component of local socialism in the 1890s was the idea of cooperative production. Such forms of industrial organisation could appeal to both Socialists and those workers whose sense of exploitation was heightened by the encroachment of mechanisation. For the Socialists, cooperative production had manifold attractions. Factories organised on cooperative principles were to provide the building blocks of the cooperative commonwealth, while the emphasis upon internal self-management, germane to such ventures, appeared to provide a clear cut answer to the Socialist dilemma on the relationship between workers and the state. The state was to nationalise the factories and hand them over to the workforce who would in turn organise production along cooperative lines. A further bonus was also provided to the Socialists by the fact that cooperative production in a town such as Leicester with its radical traditions and particular economic structure, had an appeal far wider than Socialism. In short, cooperation had theoretical, material and ideological functions of such an apparent potency that the idea became the central plank of the Socialist campaign during the 1890s. Moreover many workers were all too willing to follow the Socialist crusade for the setting up of such schemes. To the embattled workers in both hosiery, footwear and other local trades cooperation offered the possibility of controlling the influx of new technology, removing the sharp edges of exploitation then being felt by the arrival of new machines in capitalist controlled factories and freezing

the existing status divisions and relationships of production within the workforce. Thus for many workers, unlike the Socialists, cooperation was to serve essentially conservative aims.

Yet cooperation in Leicester during the late 1880s and early 1890s was not a virgin field upon which Messrs. Richards, Curley, Clarkmead, Leedham and Holmes could establish the foundations of an edifice that would, given favourable political conditions, eventually constitute a new commonwealth. Indeed the field was cluttered with the debris of valiant attempts of more than three generations of Leicester men to build similar structures. Moreover, well intentioned outsiders, in particular Christian Socialists, were already on the scene, superintending the erection of what were to the Socialist puritan, shaky, jerry built walls. The vista was further complicated by the growing presence of the cooperative retail society whose new premises dominated the town's High Street. How were relations to be established between the two forms of cooperation? The men who had founded and built the retail society were local men, sharing similar ideals and impelled by similar forces to those pioneers involved in production ventures. But were the interests of the two forms of cooperation not fundamentally diverse and thus antagonistic? Or is the distinction between the interests of the consumer and those of the producer too clear cut to offer a meaningful explanation of the activities of men who often perceived themselves to be engaged in the single cause of cooperation? More importantly, was it possible for the Socialist cooperators to find a space at all on this very crowded field? And if space was available how were they to assume the ideological leadership of this deep rooted movement?

The purpose of this chapter is not to present a detailed account of cooperation in Leicester. Such a task would demand and justify a separate study in itself. Rather the function of this chapter is to illuminate the role of cooperation in the formative period of Leicester Socialism in order to facilitate a more thorough understanding of the nature of the Socialists who were shaping the new philosophy to meet local circumstances and those sections of the working class who both formed the social base of the young Socialist militants and supported for their own conservative ends the concept of cooperative production. The ambiguities between these two conflicting interests represent the key to understanding the social relations within the working class during the period when Leicester Socialism established its first firm foundations. The first part of this chapter will chart cooperation, in both its productive and retail forms, up until the Socialist intervention around 1890. This will be followed by a survey of cooperation during the period 1890-95, when vast amounts of Socialist energy were expended pursuing cooperative goals. Finally I will discuss the demise of the cooperative ideal amongst Socialists, the factors which produced this decline and its significance to local Labour politics.

To explain the presence of cooperative concepts amongst the Leicester working class during the closing decades of the nineteenth century by reference to local radical traditions would be both a tautology and a neglect of the short term structural factors endemic to Leicester's industry during the period. The role of tradition is, of course, crucial to the development of cooperation in the town, but it must be remembered, and I hope that I have demonstrated this point in earlier chapters, that the material world, necessary for such traditions to endure, persisted in

Leicester up until the years under review. The small workshops and domestic workrooms, populated by conscious, if not actual, self-regulating workers were the natural habitat of the producer's ideology 'par excellence' of cooperative production. Since the days of Owen and beyond, the device had been perceived by workers as a means of closing the production circuit from the exploitative activities of middlemen and capitalists.

As early as 1817 some striking stockings had attempted cooperative production as a means of alleviating the hardships caused by the dispute.¹ Similar ventures were launched in the comparatively peaceful and prosperous years of the early 1820s which suggests that the stockings viewed cooperative production as more than a mere device to assist strike action. The Leicester hosiery workers were also participants in Owen's Labour Exchange scheme during the 1830s.² There is also some evidence that the young Josiah Gimson and his fellow members of the local Owenite branch practiced communal living in the 1840s.³

During the 1850s and 1860s cooperative production appears to have lost its appeal to Leicester workers. The cooperative doctrine was, however, kept alive by Daniel Merrick, the stockinger's union leader, who together with Thomas Cook, the erstwhile Chartist sympathiser and pioneer travel agent, opened a stall in Humberstone Gate in the late 1850s for the retailing of 'essentials of home consumption' on cooperative principles.⁴

1. A.T. Patterson, op.cit., p.121.

2. Ibid., p.288.

3. S.A. Gimson, op.cit., p.2.

4. J.T. Stephens, Social Redemption (Leicester 1911) pp. 114-5.

This early initiative proved to be short lived but was reputed to have had an educative effect upon future pioneers.¹ By 1861, a group of five elastic web weavers who resided in Wharf Street together with J. Woodford, a glove worker, had started the Leicester Cooperative Retail Society based upon the 'Rochdale' system.² Both glove workers and web weavers were amongst the highest paid section of the workforce,³ a point which accords with the general conclusion that early retail societies tended to be organised by and catered for the better off sections of the working class.⁴ Elastic web weavers also tended to work in factories rather than workshops⁵ which underlines Webb's point that workers based in workshops suffering from the vagaries of seasonal employment found it difficult to start retail societies.⁶

During the late 1860s elastic web weaving in Leicester was suffering from the effects of competition from new areas of production. By 1870 men from the Leicester trade were reported to be in London offering their labour at lower rates than those paid to London weavers.⁷ In the midst of this trade crisis a group of Leicester web weavers formed the Cooperative Manufacturing Society of Leicester, a producers' association that manufactured webs for the local shoe trade.⁸ The web workers, however, were not the first society in the revival of producers'

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p.22.

3. Report of the Commission on Framework Knitters, 1845. Appendix I, pp. 100, 121.

4. B. Webb, The Cooperative Movement in Great Britain (second ed. 1893) pp. 224-5.

5. Factories Acts Returns, 1867-8, p.821.

6. B. Webb, op.cit., p.226.

7. Minutes of the General Council of the First International, December 13, 1870, pp. 92-4 of the published volume.

8. B. Jones, Cooperative Production (Oxford, 1894) p.381.

cooperatives in Leicester. A small association of stockings had begun a cooperative venture in 1867 with £176 of share capital and £14 of fixed stock. Profits never exceeded £28 per annum, but the venture survived until 1875 when it was bought out by the Hosiery Operatives Union.¹ A common feature of both societies was their closeness and ultimate reliance on the local retail society. Web weavers were dominant in the early years of the retail society and appear to have used this influence in the sale of their products to the newly established Cooperative Wholesale Society's boot and shoe factory. This latter plant was one of the first manufacturing initiatives undertaken by the C.W.S. Production at the C.W.S. works commenced in 1873 under the management of John Butcher, the secretary of the Midland Section of the Cooperative Union.²

Butcher was undoubtedly the pivotal figure in the revival of cooperation in Leicester during the 1870s. Born into a Northamptonshire shoemaking family in 1833, in his early life Butcher was a follower of Ernest Jones and took part in the Birmingham demonstrations of 1867.³ A staunch Radical, he eventually settled in Banbury where he combined the managership of a small boot factory with local cooperative activities. He became the driving force behind the Banbury cooperative movement and soon rose to a position of prominence in both the Cooperative Union and the C.W.S. It was upon his advice that the C.W.S. embarked upon their second productive enterprise, the first being the manufacture of biscuits, with

1. T. Blandford and G. Newell, A History of the Leicester Cooperative Hosiery Manufacturing Society (Leicester 1895) pp. 11, 22.

2. Jones, *op.cit.*, pp. 222, 381.

3. What follows is largely gathered from the entry on Butcher in the Dictionary of Labour Biography (eds.) J. Bellamy and J. Saville, Vol. I, 1972.

the opening of the C.W.S. boot factory in Leicester. His experience as both a manager of a footwear establishment and as a notable cooperator made him the prime candidate for the top post at the new factory. Yet in the early years of the C.W.S. Butcher appears to have had no fixed opinions upon the growing debate within the society on the question of workers' self-management and profit sharing schemes. Indeed prior to the opening of the new C.W.S. West End works, Butcher was actively engaged assisting the web weavers to establish their society. As well as being an adviser to the web weavers he also became a shareholder and used his influence upon the board of management of the Leicester Retail Society in gaining 'store' capital for the new enterprise.¹

The hosiery society enjoyed similar assistance. Soon after it had been taken over by the trade union the enterprise was threatened with closure when many local trades unionists objected to funds being expended to allow the society to produce for stock.² A pertinent reminder that while workers may have given their blessing to the concept of cooperative production they were reluctant to finance such schemes themselves. Although this point may not be as damning as it seems. If the society was producing for stock then there was a strong possibility that the trade generally was suffering a cyclical downturn and trade union members may have objected to a group of workers enjoying the privilege of full employment and at the same time needed the very money that was going to the society for unemployment relief. The simple fact was that such a small

1. Jones, op.cit., p.381. Butcher's position as manager of the West End works was to be crucial in the survival of the elastic web society as the C.W.S. works became their main customer, thus assuring a secure market.

2. Blandford and Newell, op.cit., p.11.

local trade union did not have the resources to fully back such a scheme. The situation was saved when G. Bastard, a member of the retail society management committee, persuaded the 'store' to assist the hosiery society.¹ Funds were provided in the form of share capital and part of the 'store's' new premises, recently built under Butcher's initiative in the High Street, were handed over to the society for manufacturing purposes.²

In the period when the C.W.S. was limited to the manufacture of biscuits and boots the field was wide open for producers' societies to utilise the market provided by retail societies. Even in local terms the Leicester store, the ninth largest in the country with over 6,000 members in 1880, provided a major outlet for the society's products.³ Other retail societies, who had often found difficulty in dealing with capitalist manufacturers, became both customers and shareholders.⁴ This widening of the ownership base soon resulted in the society becoming embroiled in the debate amongst cooperators, during the 1870s and 1880s, over the role of labour in manufacturing enterprises. Blandford and Newell in their history of the society are not very informative on the early constitution. It does, however, appear to have been a self-managing workshop in the years prior to the union taking over control in 1876. After this date control first passed exclusively to the union, with Jimmy Holmes playing a prominent part, but following the influx of outside capital from retail societies, managerial power was shared by 'store' representatives and

1. Stephens, op.cit., p.105.

2. Ibid., p.22.

3. G.D.H. Cole, A Century of Cooperation (Manchester 1944) p.213.

4. Blandford and Newell, op.cit., p.25.

trade unionists.¹ Growing dissent, particularly by northern stores, over both the management of production enterprises and the thorny question of the 'bonus to labour' led to a crisis in 1883. The problem was solved by the society adopting a constitution drawn up by E.V. Neale similar to the one which he had recently introduced at Hebden Bridge.² Neale's constitution was in many ways a compromise. Managerial power was handed over to the 'stores' with the workers' committee men being reduced to a token presence of two representatives,³ while a bonus of ten per cent of profits was paid to the workers.⁴

The elastic web society appears to have followed a similar course to that taken by the hosiery cooperative. A share of profits was retained by the workers but management became the prerogative of the shareholders.⁵ It could be argued that the workers in both enterprises were more interested in the financial benefits of profit sharing than with the wish for self-management. The debate at the Hebden Bridge Fustian Mill in 1873 over the role of labour was to set a precedent for other producers' societies.⁶ The sale of shares to retail societies had been underway for a number of years with the result that the management board had become diluted with outsiders. The problem came to a head when the directors from the 'stores' attempted to remove the 'bonus' from the workers. The confusing debate which followed was settled by Neale's constitution which

1. Ibid., pp. 14, 25.

2. Ibid., p.26. P.N. Backstrom, Christian Socialist and Cooperation in Victorian England (1974) for a useful account of E.V. Neale and his colleagues during this period.

3. Ibid., p.66.

4. See B. Webb, op.cit., Appendix I, Class IV.

5. Ibid., Class III.

6. What follows is taken from H.D. Lloyd, Labour Co-partnership (1898), pp. 178-183.

preserved the bonus but ratified the presence of 'store' directors. Yet this was not a direct trade off of power for money. The mill was largely capitalised by the 'stores' who had exercised 'de facto' control for a number of years. The issue of the bonus, although couched in the language of cooperation, has to be seen as a last ditch attempt by the workers to limit the rate of profit extracted from their labour. By all accounts the closely related problems of control of the production process never figured in the Hebden Mill debate. The workers were probably more than satisfied with regular wages, half yearly bonuses and most importantly, one of the worker pioneers of the mill, Joseph Greenwood, remained as manager throughout the period. Thus it is highly possible that the experience of work altered little despite the change in ownership.

The experience of the hosiery society was similar to Hebden Bridge. Newell, the manager, positively welcomed the influx of the stores:

The committee of the Trade Union, who were of course all framework knitters, had the management. They had plenty of knowledge how to make the goods, but they lacked commercial knowledge, what to make, and how to sell ... The chief causes of our success have been the help which the cooperative societies have given us in capital and trade, and the fact that we have learned to put the welfare of the society before our own opinions ... 1

Again the transition of the society was eased by the continuous presence of Newell, one of the pioneer framework knitters, as manager. Moreover with only ninetyone workers inside the factory, regular work and relatively high wages, things appear to have been generally cosy for the workers. A journalist for the Workmen's Times described to his readers a visit that he had made to the factory in 1890 in the following terms:

1. Quoted in Jones, op.cit., p.378.

I saw enough during my tour to convince me that Mr. Holmes had not exaggerated when he described the situation of those employed under the society as being a very comfortable one. There are a large proportion of women and girls employed in the factory, and as I was passing through I heard many a snatch of a hymn, with an occasional chorus; and when I can hear the melody of human voices rising above the noise of mill machinery and blending in harmonious strains of praise, I need no further evidence to convince me that the iron has not entered into the souls of the singers, and that they are as happy as it is possible for people to be in the environment by which they are surrounded. Give me a class of work-people who can sing, and dare to sing, in the presence of their manager and strangers, and I will give you the character of the place at which they are employed without any assistance but my own intuition. ¹

With the potential of such congenial working conditions it is perhaps surprising that local shoemakers were not active in launching similar ventures during the 1870s and 1880s. Jones in his major survey of cooperative production during this period lists a plethora of boot and shoe cooperatives in the East Midlands but all were located outside Leicester.² The main reason for the dearth of such enterprises in Leicester was the dominating presence of the rapidly expanding C.W.S. works. It was claimed that the workers employed in the West End works '... had expected that they were producing the new millennium...'³ Clearly many local workers predisposed to cooperative schemes were delighted with the location of the C.W.S. plant in Leicester, especially as it was being managed by Butcher, a man with an impeccable cooperative pedigree. These aspirations, however, began to dissipate as the factory assumed a growing importance to cooperation nationally.

1. The Workmen's Times, November 14, 1890.

2. Jones, op.cit., pp. 401-421. Most of these societies were located in Northampton and Northamptonshire villages.

3. E.O. Greening, A Pioneer Co-partnership, p.10. Greening also noted that 'All their hopes were centred on uplifting the workers, as workers, on to a higher level for the enjoyment of happier lives'. Ibid., p.1.

C.W.S. production in Leicester mushroomed from 90,000 pairs in the first year of production at the West End works to 1,237,701 pairs in 1896 at the new larger Wheatsheaf factory.¹ As Leicester rapidly became the principal supplier of footwear to virtually every retail society in the country it became the major area of contention for the debate, which dominated cooperation during the 1870s, on the problem of bonus payments to labour. Indeed at the very establishment of the Leicester works an argument developed between E.O. Greening and W. Nuttall on the bonus question. Greening, a former northern wire mill owner with a longstanding interest in cooperation, and along with Neale was the major propagandist of the Christian Socialist school,² proposed that labour in the West End works 'should be made partners and sharers in the profits which they created'. He also added 'They must also have the right to invest their savings in the concern, and have votes in its management'.³ Nuttall countered 'The better policy was to let every worker be a member of the store and let the store make what is sold. He was then his own producer and would receive everything back in the form of dividends, and would be better off in the long run than if engaged as Mr. Greening proposed'.⁴ The debate ended in a compromise with the workers receiving a bonus but with no investing or voting rights.

The compromise proved to be short lived when the C.W.S. abolished the bonus system in 1876.⁵ Just how the employees reacted to this

1. Lloyd, op.cit., p.103.

2. See his biography Edward Owen Greening by T. Crimes (Manchester, 1923).

3. Lloyd, op.cit., p.105.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

development initially is unknown. But as the workforce expanded from 420 in 1876 to 1,295 in 1890, eventually reaching 2,249 in 1892,¹ relationships between the C.W.S. and the local labour movement began to sour. Difficulties arose when the C.W.S. increasingly resorted to using country labour for the finishing processes. The West End works were halted by a series of strikes over the issue. The first occurred in 1879 shortly followed by another in 1880 and in April 1883 the C.W.S. was accused of utilising '... the obnoxious system of the "Middle Man" for work made at considerably lower prices than called for upon the Leicester statement'.² Indeed N.U.B.S.O. became so concerned with this situation that they threatened to report the C.W.S. to the T.U.C.³ Butcher, in his evidence to the 1876 Commission admitted, under pressure from Balfour, that all the finishing work in Leicester was put out to small shops.⁴ The C.W.S. obviously did not want to incur the cost disadvantage entailed in factory finishing during these years and Butcher increasingly appears to have relished his role as an efficient manager.⁵ Yet such a situation could only antagonise the trade union whose affairs were dominated by the issue of country work during this period.

Butcher was persuaded to return to the helm of the C.W.S. works from his stint as a capitalist manufacturer upon the death of Mr. Dudley,

1. Jones, op.cit., p.228.

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly reports April 1879, July 1880, April 1883.

3. Ibid., April 1883.

4. Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors and others on the Factories and Workshops Acts, 1876. Minutes of evidence, qq. 7,560 - 7,575.

5. So much that he left the C.W.S. in the early 1880s to become a partner in a local private boot business. Jones, op.cit., p.227.

the man who had replaced him in 1880. Having sat for the previous two years with his fellow capitalist manufacturers on the Liberal benches of the town council, Butcher by 1885, was a long way removed from the cooperative idealism that inspired him in the early 1870s. Indeed he now saw himself as the improving technocratic manager giving his undivided attention in 'preparing to meet an increased demand by securing the most modern English and American machinery, which is necessary to successfully meet the evergrowing competition'.¹ Relations with employees had never been good and the factory was prone to the prerogatives of artisanal work patterns typical throughout the trade.² The return of Butcher also brought a further decline in industrial relations in the factory. His plans to build a branch factory at Enderby just outside the town, a village which was already being used extensively by the C.W.S. for finishing, brought an upsurge of hostility against his new regime culminating in a major strike in 1886.³ The strike lasted for two weeks before the workers returned without obtaining any of their demands, but in the midst of the strike many of the workers began to discuss the demise of cooperative principles within the plant. The workers must have undoubtedly been aware of the laudatory reports of the nearby hosiery society, while their early champion, Greening, had constantly raised the question of their status at cooperative conferences.⁴

1. Jones, op.cit., p.227.

2. See above, p. 214.

3. Ibid., p.228.

4. Ibid., pp. 222-5.

Some of the strikers were acquainted with Greening's recent publication in the Cooperative News dealing with the Familistere cooperative system at Guise in France and invited him to Leicester for informal discussions on launching a similar venture in Leicester.¹ Greening was initially apprehensive at both raising the hopes of the workers in embarking upon a venture that would have to compete against the highly capitalised C.W.S. works and possibly undermining his own position in the cooperative movement.² The feelings of the workers, however, ran higher than he had anticipated, charges of the misuse of boy labour and disputes over piece rates had added to the workers' anger over the 'country' question.³ The strikers were given a chance to express their wishes on the formation of a new society in a ballot. Over two hundred workers agreed to invest in the venture and Greening was asked to draw up a constitution.⁴

The end result was a cooperative which incorporated both the Christian Socialist ideals on the self-managing workshop and the workers' desire for independence from outside investors. The new enterprise called the Leicester Manufacturing Boot and Shoe Society, known locally as the 'Equity' began production in 1887 and by 1890 they were employing 170 workers. What made Equity unique in Leicester was the fact that it came close to realising the ideal of a 'brotherhood of workers', a point which brought grudging admiration even from Beatrice Webb.⁵ All the workers were shareholding members and outside investors were only allowed one third

1. Greening, op.cit., p.13.

2. Ibid., p.31. Greening had also been an early advocate of the C.W.S. commencing production in Leicester.

3. Ibid., p.10.

4. The rules of the new Society were in fact compiled by the Labour Association of which Greening, along with Neale, were the major figures.

5. B. Webb, op.cit., p.139.

of the fifteen seats on the management committee.¹ The start-up capital consisted of £380, £100 coming from the local N.U.B.S.O. branch, the remainder from the workers. Further capital was soon provided by southern retail societies, including the Arundel and Hackney stores, while the local retail society, then under the presidency of Amos Mann of the Church of Christ community, also 'proved sympathetic'.² By all accounts, despite an early struggle, Equity soon prospered and new steam powered premises were erected in Bede Street in 1889.³ Equity specialised mainly in high quality men's boots, a strategy which gave them a secure niche in the market provided by the 'stores'. Profits were divided by the following formula: 5% to share capital; 40% to workers; 20% to customers; 12% to the committee; 10% each to a provident fund and to share capital; 5% to a social and education fund, and 3% to remunerate members for special services.⁴ Profits averaged out over the first ten years of Equity's existence were over £1,000 per annum and with such an apparently secure base the members embarked on a grandiose community building project.⁵

1. Ibid., Appendix I, Class I.

2. Greening, op.cit., pp. 24-5.

3. Jones, op.cit., p.422.

4. Ibid., p.421.

5. Lloyd, op.cit., p.110.

The top floor of the new works in Bede Street contained a large hall for educational and social uses. Lloyd noted that the hall '... will seat two hundred and fifty people. There are newspapers, games, a piano of cooperative make, a library, portraits of prominent cooperators and cooperative curtains and windows'.¹ The 'brotherhood of workers' did not stop at the factory gate. Several building societies were formed amongst the workers and sixty dwellings erected. One street of these buildings which runs from Narborough Road towards the Bede Street factory was named Equity Road 'in honour of the works'.² The houses which cost on average £400 each were far higher in quality and certainly larger than typical working class housing. Lloyd noted that they '... contained four bedrooms, bathroom, parlour, dining-room, kitchen and scullery. There are marble mantels, attractive woodwork and gas fixtures'.³ The photograph below reproduced from his book, of an 'Equity' worker proudly standing in the wrought iron gateway to his imposing home certainly lives up to Lloyd's description.

1. Ibid., pp. 106-7.

2. The street is still standing as is the Bede Street factory.

3. Lloyd, op.cit., p.112.



'Why Should we not be our own Landlords'. An Equity worker's house, reproduced from H.D. Lloyd, Labour Co-Partnership, facing p.112.

Not surprisingly the Equity became a beacon of hope to the local labour movement. J.T. Taylor, a worker at Equity, and one of the founding members of the I.L.P., encouraged some of his fellow congregationalists at the Church of Christ to start up a venture specialising in nursery goods.¹ The tightly knit shoemaking community of the Church of Christ did not take much persuading. As well as Taylor the congregation had another notable cooperator, Amos Mann, amongst their membership. Again help was given from the local retail society and the Equity traveller carried samples from the new cooperative, called the Leicester Anchor Boot and Shoe Productive Society, when production commenced in 1893.² The 'Anchor' men were even more community minded than their 'Equity' mentors. The rules of the Anchor were broadly similar to those drawn up by Greening for Equity.

The members soon embarked upon plans to build their own 'Garden City' on twentyeight acres of land at Humberstone out of the society's profits.

In the same year that the Anchor society began production, a group of workers from the Glenfield district '... sought the advice of the Bede Street Society' about starting a similar venture.⁴ This mushrooming of productive societies naturally attracted trade union interest. As we have already observed relations between N.U.B.S.O. and the C.W.S. were anything but cordial and the union had no qualms in backing potentially rival undertakings. Capital was invested in Equity from branch funds

1. Amos Mann, Democracy in Industry (1914) p.5.

2. Ibid., p.6

3. Ibid., Chapter 8.

4. R. Halstead, The Story of a Village Industrial Democracy, being Twenty One Years History of the Glenfield "Progress" Cooperative Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Society (Leicester 1913) p.13.

and even William Inskip who could be extremely hostile to cooperative ventures possessed a deep admiration for the Bede Street factory as well as being a personal investor in the society.¹ The Socialist trade unionists, however, especially Richards and Curley, were even more enthusiastic in their support for such schemes. Indeed what differentiated the Socialists from Inskip on the question of supporting cooperative schemes was the former's plan to commit union funds to launch new enterprises. The successful genesis of the Equity works had spurred Richards and Curley into believing that similar ventures were possible and that the growing funds of N.U.B.S.O. should be utilised to these ends. Indeed Curley went so far as to oppose Richards during the anti-arbitration campaign arguing that union finances expended on strikes would be better used starting cooperatives.² Moreover the concept of cooperative production touched a thematic nerve that ran to the heart of young Socialist trades unionists during the early 1890s. The main tenets of this idea hinged upon the fact that where Socialism did exist in Britain during the 1890s it tended to be intensely local. Conflict and struggle occurred within specific communities and Socialist solutions, if they were to have any popular currency, had to be dressed in local garbs. Thus while a cursory glance at N.U.B.S.O.'s conference and monthly reports from the period show that the Leicester Socialists spent most of their energy pursuing cooperative aims, these aims were the core of the emerging local Socialist programme.

1. Royal Commission on Labour 1892. Minutes of evidence, Part 2, qq. 16,084 - 16,086.

2. Reports of the proceedings of the National Conference, 1893, contained in N.U.B.S.O.'s April 1893 monthly report, p.52.

Yet as we have seen existing societies in Leicester were already heavily influenced by the Neale, Greening, school of cooperation. Indeed this group of cooperative theorists had formed the Cooperative Productive Federation in 1882 to act as both a pressure group inside the Cooperative Congress, advocating the 'bonus for labour' issue, and to give assistance to new societies.¹ The upsurge of interest in the late 1880s led to a renewal of the debate on labour that had dominated the mid 1870s.² The new Leicester societies became the van of the new producers' movement and Greening and D.F. Schloss, the civil servant at the Board of Trade and spare time advocate of producers' societies gave the local enterprises much attention.³ Thus the Socialist cooperators of the early 1890s had to work within an existing ideology; while new Socialist inspired ventures could be more forthright about their ultimate aims, caution was needed in dealing with established societies. The hosiery cooperative is a good illustration of this point. The manager, George Newell, had been with the society since its birth in the late 1860s and over the years had developed a close affinity with Greening and Neale, eventually becoming a major spokesman for the Producers' Cooperative Federation.⁴ By the early 1890s, however, the L.A.H.U., which still had a presence on the board, became involved in the Socialist cooperative movement. Both Holmes and Chaplin, the union's most senior officials were I.L.P. members and brought Socialist ideas to the cooperative. The following advert from the Trades Council report of 1894 shows both their influence and the persistence of Christian Socialism class collaborationism.

1. Cole, op.cit., p.204.

2. Both B. Webb's and B. Jones' books which appeared in the early 1890s were largely motivated by this debate. Webb and Jones were, of course, attacking the producers' movement.

3. Greening, op.cit., p.74. Schloss was described as 'a friend of the works (Equity) during this period'.

4. Cole, op.cit., p.204.

LEICESTER CO-OPERATIVE
HOSIERY MANUFACTURING SOCIETY Ltd.

TO TRADE UNIONISTS.

How can the Workers obtain a larger share of the wealth produced? By Trade Unionists and Co-operators working shoulder to shoulder, and thus obtain direct control, year by year, of a larger amount of the Trade of the Country.

The Leicester Co-operative Hosiery Society employs only Trade Unionists under conditions which are commended by Trade Union Leaders. The aim of all workers should be to give a fair chance to honourable employers, to spend less in striking against bad ones, and by associated industry take their places.

You can help in this movement by purchasing your Stockings, Socks, Cardigans, and Woollen Underclothing, from the Leicester Hosiery Society through the Tailoring and Drapery Departments of the Co-operative Society, High Street.

Reproduced from Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1894.

Thus the language of 'direct control' becomes mixed with Christian Socialist pleadings for fairness to 'honourable employers' and the evils of strike action. This ambiguity was to remain within the older societies.

The centrality of the cooperative ideal to Leicester Socialism did not mean that the Socialist commonwealth was to be achieved by everyone becoming an employee of the store. Rather the self-managing workshop was to become the main form of industrial organisation in all areas of local activity. Burgess, the I.L.P. parliamentary candidate, outlined this vision in relation to the local footwear industry in a lengthy Clarion article in the midst of the 1895 lock-out. Rooting his analysis in Marx's writings on machinery and relating this theory to the turmoil in the boot trade, Burgess claimed that the local cooperatives, which were unaffected by the dispute, offered the only solution to the problem. The question was how were the cooperatives to be generalised? Burgess replied that this could only be achieved by '... the nation boldly

socialising the means of production', which in turn would be handed over to the workers to run on cooperative lines.¹ But before such a grandiose solution could be achieved the workers had to show that such a mode of organisation was possible, and it was this aim which inspired the Socialist activists during the period.

The ideal was not to be confined solely to manufacturing industry. We have already observed, in the previous chapter, the prominence given by Socialists in their municipal programme to the extension of cooperative principles to diverse forms of municipal activity. The town council was to play the initiating role in democratising other areas of production that lay beyond the established municipal undertakings of gas and water. Item seven of the Leicester I.L.P.'s municipal programme called for 'The establishment of Coal Yards, Bakeries, Farms, etc.'² This tactic was not unique to Leicester. Tom Mann, in his capacity as a member of the Labour Commission in 1892 sketched out the strategy during his questioning of J.T.W. Mitchell of the C.W.S.:

Q. 387. "I presume as you are trying to get control of the production of ordinary commodities on what we may term a democratic basis, your town council undertaking on behalf of the citizens of that town the control of your gas or waterworks, they too through the agency of the council are then controlling the production and distribution to that extent, are they not, of that commodity?"

Ans. "Yes".

Q. 388. "That is to be approved of is it not?"

Ans. "Yes".

1. J. Burgess, 'The Boot War. How to secure a permanent peace', The Clarion, April 13, 1895.

2. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1895.

Q. 389. "As thoroughly as your own work?"

Ans. "Yes".

Q. 390. "And if experience should show that there are other directions in which the town councils should enlarge their sphere of operations so that they could do it more effectively than you through your voluntary agency, you would still approve of it would you not?"

A. "Yes. It would depend on the circumstances of the case".

During the last decade of nineteenth century the state continued to perform a relatively minor function in the economy. Thus while Socialists ascribed to the somewhat abstract belief in the nationalisation of the means of production more often than not the idea of 'common ownership' took local form. The state did, of course, ultimately have a major legislative role to perform as Burgess's article highlights. Yet if the local community was to democratise both local industry and services, and if the immediate role of socialists was to help in laying down the foundations of the new industrial commonwealth, how were they to escape the very circumstances that was causing havoc in private industry this side of the legislative revolution?

To a certain extent the retail societies provided a vital lifeline by selling the goods made by the Leicester cooperatives. But even this market was to provide problems. For footwear societies their major obstacle was that they had to operate within the shadow of the C.W.S. works. Butcher had been none too happy when part of his workforce left to form the Equity. 'It was a creation' he declared angrily 'of an aristocracy of labour'.¹ It was even claimed that the C.W.S. brought

1. Lloyd, op.cit., p.104.

pressure upon several leather suppliers in an attempt to cut off supplies of raw material to the infant cooperative.¹ Moreover the new boot societies had to face the threat of competition from the C.W.S. during a period when Butcher was equipping the new Wheatsheaf works with modern equipment in order to stave off competition from private manufacturers.² This development, together with the new branch factory at Enderby brought widespread condemnation from the local Labour movement. Jimmy Holmes, in a letter to Commonweal attacked these developments and claimed that one of Butcher's objectives in his modernisation programme was to 'smash the Equity'.³

Undoubtedly many of the workers who established the Equity thought that the new factory would provide rather cosy working conditions similar to those enjoyed at the nearby hosiery cooperative. The producers' movement was closely linked, and indeed was largely a product of, the structural changes that were taking place in the private sector. Thus a high degree of obstinacy towards the introduction of machines was inevitable. The new cooperatives were not, however, totally lacking in machinery. Rather they were highly selective in the ones they used. Lasting machines were, of course, frowned upon as were some of the newer finishing devices. With such outmoded plant and a high element of hand-work, together with the fearsome competition from the C.W.S., life inside the Equity was no bed of roses. Certainly this worker described by Greening had little time, nor probably energy to sing hymns:

1. Ibid., p.106.

2. Jones, op.cit., p.427, noted that 'In 1889, Mr. Butcher visited America to inspect all the newest inventions in shoe making machinery'.

3. Commonweal, December 21, 1889.

One man was stamping out those ornamental figures they put round the tops of ladies boots, "gimping" I think they call it, by swinging round an immense lever; and he was swinging it round at a tremendous rate. He never stopped all the time I was talking to him. I said "You are working very hard, don't you stop that all day?" He said, "No! in the Wholesale Society they have got a steam engine to do this work, and I have got to get as many dozens a day done by this machine as their steam engine turns out, so I can't stop until I've got my number".¹

N.U.B.S.O. were not unaware of this problem and the Leicester Socialists, when launching the union funded St. Crispin's society in 1893. This cooperative was started with £1,000 of capital, given by both local branches without interest.² In order to distance the new society from the competition of the C.W.S., the union decided to market the cooperative's products in their own shop rather than through retail societies. Ninety per cent of St. Crispin's profits were to be devoted entirely to expanding the factory, and the society was run on self-managing principles, the majority of the committee being elected from the workforce. Clarkmead, Curley and Richards lobbied vigorously for more union funds in order to extend the scheme. They proposed, at the union's 1894 conference:

(1) that £3,000 from union funds be set aside to provide a market for the sale of goods by Cooperative Societies directly connected with the Union. (2) to be used as follows: by opening retail shops in various parts of the country, say Bristol, Nottingham, Northampton, Kettering, Leeds and Leicester, with a distributive depot in Leicester. All to be under control of a committee of five and a manager; the committee to be elected by Union Vote, and the manager to be appointed by the Committee. (3) The Committee to have power to purchase goods only from Union Societies.³

1. Greening, op.cit., p.60.

2. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, July 1893.

3. 1894 Conference Report, pp. 90-91.

Clarkmead asserted that this would be a notable advance by the Union. 'It would ultimately lead to the Union getting the benefit of the whole industry'.¹ These proposals, however, were rejected when it was disclosed that the St. Crispin shop in Leicester

... had been a miserable failure. The members had failed to show their sympathy with the principle in an effectual way. They had very few members who had paid up more than one share. Such was their interest in Cooperative Production.²

Clearly the workers in Leicester were not willing to invest their own capital, while the wider public's anticipated interest in C.W.S. cooperative boots had been overestimated. This is not surprising; finding share capital must have been difficult for workers during an unsettled period; while the public were probably reluctant to buy the more expensive St. Crispin boot. Circumstances at both the Equity and the Anchor were also proving difficult. Both societies were eventually forced by the reality of competition to consider the troublesome question of machinery. Indeed the problem was so controversial that despite the fact that Equity had been given special dispensation to pay below statement wages by the union in 1893 the promise that new technology would bring a rise in wages was rejected by a considerable section of the workforce. The committee was also divided on this issue but the fact that the survival of the cooperative was at stake resulted in the eventual mechanisation of the plant.³ Circumstances were no brighter at the Anchor, even though nursery goods generally involved more handwork. Mann remarked that 'There was a good deal of controversy at this time concerning this matter of the

1. Ibid., p.93.

2. Ibid.,

3. Greening, op.cit., pp. 101-4.

introduction of power'.¹ Again the committee was split over the issue and 'the then Committee did not see their way clearly to carry it out...'² The Anchor soldiered on without machinery but in 1896 a '... sub-committee was appointed to ascertain the cost of a gas engine' which was installed by August of that year.³

The remaining years of the 1890s for the cooperatives were primarily concerned with survival. The optimism of earlier years had dissipated, no new shoe societies were formed and those that remained often had to resort to distasteful measures. Equity became increasingly reliant upon professional managers, who were paid four times the rate of the average worker, to chart the society's path through the increasingly complicated world of shoe production. The education fund was steadily reduced and the retail societies were constantly demanding a higher return on their sales to equal that paid by the C.W.S.⁴ Things were little better at Anchor whose members had to cancel their annual paid weekly holiday.⁵

Circumstances were not quite so hostile to other cooperative ventures outside the shoe trade. The hosiery society expanded during the 1890s and employed over 300 workers.⁶ Moreover capital investment reached nearly £40,000 in 1897.⁷ Meanwhile a few out of work engineers, including T. Carter, the A.S.E. delegate to the trades council, and future treasurer of the local I.L.P.,⁸ formed a small engineering cooperative which, after

1. Mann, op.cit., p.19.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p.21.

4. Greening, op.cit., pp. 134-6.

5. Mann, loc.cit., p.24.

6. Blandford and Newell, op.cit., p.54.

7. Ibid., p.66.

8. T.U.C. Souvenir Leicester, 1903, p.21.

an early struggle became profitable in 1897.¹ Building workers also participated in the movement, a small society was set up in the early 1890s and appears to have been mainly employed in construction work for other cooperatives.² The most important new addition to the growing family of producers' cooperatives was undoubtedly the Cooperative Printing Society. This cooperative first appeared in 1894 and after a few months its future was assured when Richards, opposed vigorously by Inskip, secured the N.U.B.S.O. printing account for the society.³ Problems faced by typographers over the introduction of the 'Linotype Machine' closely resemble those caused by the lasting machine in shoemaking.⁴ As we have observed in the previous chapter the Leicester members of the Typographical Association were close allies of the N.U.B.S.O. militants in the Burgess by-election of 1894. Similar to shoemakers, typographers had a long tradition of cooperation which, in the early 1890s, was closely linked by militant printers to trade unionism and Socialism.⁵ This society prospered, winning many contracts from the Labour movement and indeed still survives.

Yet these new enterprises were, like the trades that they performed, limited to the service sector of an economy that was dominated by footwear. When the tide turned against boot cooperatives in the mid 1890s cooperation as an alternative political economy which could be made by the voluntary actions of working people became unviable. We should not be too unsympathetic when we judge the energy and idealism of the young men who attempted to create the commonwealth from 'the bottom up'. While we

1. Lloyd, *op.cit.*, p.118.

2. N.U.B.S.O. General Conference, 1894, pp. 95-6.

3. *Ibid.*, p.111.

4. A.E. Musson, The Typographical Association, (Oxford, 1954), p.351.

5. *Ibid.*, p.361.

can point to many flaws in their strategy, particularly a strong element of blind faith, which accounts for their misjudgement of ordinary working people's willingness to pay for the experiment, we must remember that for a short period cooperation did appear to work. Between 1889 when the hosiery society moved to larger premises and 1895 when the St. Crispin venture collapsed, an increasing number of local people had found a haven of employment in the producers' movement.

Most of the societies survived but at a price. Greening had imposed a rule in the Equity constitution which forbade political activity by the cooperative.¹ This may partly explain the departure of Taylor, the I.L.P. treasurer, to the Anchor, which had a similar constitution to Equity but appears to have ignored the political embargo.² Similarly Equity was only allowed to operate within the limits laid down by the retail societies. When the society opened up a retail shop in Huddersfield, where the local society refused to sell their shoes, investing stores forced Equity to close down this operation.³ These difficulties however, pale in comparison to the events that occurred at the hosiery cooperative early in the new century. Under pressure from the investing stores the cooperative was forced to sell out to the C.W.S. Despite earlier assurances, the latter organisation promptly closed down the Leicester works and removed the machinery to a country village.⁴

1. Greening, op.cit., p.130.

2. Though in future years the national cooperative movement could successfully curtail the political activities of Amos Mann. Mann had to turn down the offer of the Labour Party Parliamentary candidature because of pressure from the cooperative movement. See Mann's entry in Vol. I, Dictionary of Labour Biography, (eds.) Bellamy and Saville.

3. Greening, op.cit., p.88.

4. E.O. Greening, A Democratic Co-Partnership Successfully Established by Wigston Hosiery Limited (Leicester, 1921) pp. 33-4.

During these years the Cooperative Productive Federation, which along with its sister organisation, the Labour Association, was the remnant of the Vivian, Greening, Neale, Christian Socialist school, moved its headquarters to Leicester. This was largely an acknowledgement of the fact that the nineteen cooperatives in and around Leicester constituted one third of the movement's membership.¹ Yet as Cole has pointed out this body was little more than a rump of its former self.² Its days of influence in the wider world of cooperation were at an end. Certainly in Leicester the movement had peaked in 1895. Cooperative production in the town was impelled forward during the early years of the 1890s by the troubles that accompanied the structural changes within the footwear industry. After the victory of the manufacturers in the 1895 lock-out new ventures became unviable. Producers' cooperatives had to face the reality of the market which was dominated by machine made products from both Massachusetts and the native industry. The major factor which caused many Leicester shoeworkers to resort to cooperation was the deep rooted desire to either dodge the machine or to utilise it, on the worker's terms. Both the capitalists' victory of 1895 and Butcher's technocratic regime at the Wheatsheaf were the negation of this dream. Few had the prescience of Beatrice Webb who noted in her diary in December 1890. 'Visiting production societies roundabout Leicester (in bitter cold weather). Sad these efforts which are doomed to failure'.³

1. T.U.C. Leicester 1903 Souvenir, p.28.

2. Cole, op.cit., p.205.

3. Diary of Beatrice Webb, Vol. 14, part 1. December 6, 1890, p.1210 of typescript.

If machines, and people's reluctance to buy the cooperatives' goods, conspired against the strategy of cooperative production as a means of restructuring society, what were the implications for the local Labour movement? After 1895 Richards and Curley stopped delivering their lectures to trade union branches on the 'Industrial Cooperative Scheme'. The demands of branch administration undoubtedly increased during the following five years as membership declined and the cause of the unemployed shoeworkers came to the fore. In fact the victory of the shoe machines was also to produce changes in the politics of the Labour movement. The Socialists could no longer assume the leadership of skilled shoeworkers whose autonomy at work and craft status was under threat by mechanisation. The reality, after 1895, was now of a semi-skilled workforce payed by the day and paced by the machine companies. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, many of those whom the Socialists had championed during the first part of the decade, especially the lasters, were now facing long term unemployment thanks to the 'strong youth' and the lasting machine. Thus poverty was to replace worker autonomy as the dominant theme in Leicester Socialism.

CHAPTER XI

The Rise of James Ramsay MacDonald and the Consolidation of Class Politics, 1895-1906.

In the eleven year period between the boot trade lock-out and general election of 1906, major changes occurred in local working class politics. At the beginning of the period local Socialism was largely an expression of fear and uncertainty experienced by certain skilled sections of the working population threatened by structural changes in the organisation of work. The class antagonisms aroused by mechanisation gave birth to a form of Socialism that was designed to secure the material well being of those workers. Thus despite the fiery rhetoric of the young Socialist lasters, Cotton patents operatives, engineers and typographers, the new doctrine was as much concerned with preserving existing status relations within the workforce as it was in providing answers to the growing problem of poverty and the interests of the working class in general. By the early years of the present century, however, this emphasis upon the problems of the skilled man at work had given way to a new concern over the reality of the unemployed skilled man. As in the first half of the 1890s the footwear workers, particularly the lasters, were to be the central actors in the changing scene of working class politics. If the Socialism of the first half of the 1890s can be characterised as radical sectionalism, the Socialism of the subsequent decade can be described as aggressive reformism, as questions of worker autonomy were replaced by the necessity of finding palliatives and reforms to ease the burden of the growing army of Leicester's unemployed. The change in political focus is also illuminated by the change in Socialist parliamentary candidates. Joseph Burgess, the ex-editor of the Workmen's Times was an ideal spokesman for an embittered skilled workforce grasping for radical solutions during a period of .

upheaval. The appeal of James Ramsay MacDonald, on the other hand, has to be seen partly as an expression of growing local concern over the problem of poverty and the need to employ the agency of the state to alleviate working class misery. The word partly is used here because the division between the old and new forms of working class politics was never clearly separate during the period. Elements from both were to remain intermingled for many years, a situation which was often made more complex by Labour politicians choosing to give emphasis to either 'old radicalism' or new 'social reformism' to suit the demands of particular electoral circumstances.

This chapter, by following closely the process of structural change within the Leicester working class in the period under review, and the attendant shifts in Socialist politics, will attempt to answer two sets of questions both of which have a wide currency to contemporary Labour historiography. First, how do we explain the arrival and subsequent rise to power of MacDonald, the exemplar 'par excellence' of compromise and the softly softly approach to political reform, as the champion of a local Labour movement with a deeply ingrained militant, radical tradition? Second, to what extent had independent working class politics become a viable, electorally successful movement by the end of the period?

The events of 1895, in particular the April lock-out, proved to be a watershed in local Labour politics. The imposition of the employers' 'Seven Commandments' effectively curtailed the militants' area of activity and took the steam out of Leicester's Socialist movement. In other footwear centres, most notably London, the fortunes of local Socialist trade union officials were totally eclipsed as a cowed labour force, fearful of retaliation from the manufacturers' federation, declined to follow their erstwhile leaders on new campaigns.¹ Richards, by far the most

1. Fox, op.cit., p.240.

calculating of the young Socialists, however, sensing the changing mood of the membership dropped the politics and rhetoric of the class struggle and concentrated his energy on the immediate practical problems that faced his branch.

Uppermost amongst the difficulties faced by Leicester shoeworkers was growing unemployment as American imports continued to erode the local trade's markets and manufacturers restructured the workforce and production methods to make Leicester shoes more competitive.¹ How extensive was unemployment in Leicester and what groups of the workforce were affected? It is impossible to answer this question with precision. Labour statistics were notoriously inadequate during the period and no union branch records with details of out of work payments survive.² The problem is further exacerbated by the No. 1 branch, being the most wealthy in the union, tended to cushion members who failed to pay subscriptions and levies.³ Yet by 1900 the membership of the branch slumped by over two and a half thousand to 8,732 in comparison to the 1895 figure of 11,375 members.⁴ Moreover the 1900 membership return is not equatable with the number of trade unionists in work, indeed in the early years of the present century the No. 1 branch was paying out large amounts to unemployed members.⁵ Paradoxically employment in the footwear industry in Leicester had increased by over two thousand in the decade 1891-1901 to 26,561 workers.⁶ Several

1. P. Head, op.cit., p.6, notes that imports of foreign footwear did not peak until 1901.

2. See W.R. Garside, The Measurement of Unemployment in Great Britain 1850-1979 (Oxford 1980) Chapter I, on the difficulties of accurate measurement prior to the 1911 Insurance Act.

3. Fox, op.cit., pp, 242-3.

4. N.U.B.S.O. annual Register, 1895, 1900.

5. Leicester Daily Post, October 25, 1904.

6. Census Reports 1891, 1901.

factors explain the decline in union membership. Older workers, unable to cope with the new work rhythms of the team system were forced out of the trade. Even Day, the editor of the Shoe and Leather Record and no friend of the union, noted in his 1903 essay that 'there had been some hardship among the older men unable to learn how to operate the new machines.¹ Victimisation of previously militant members also took place but it is impossible to accurately gauge how extensive this was.² Female employment also increased during the decade from 7,320 workers in 1891 to 8,791 in 1901, but this is probably an indication of the general growth of the industry during the decade rather than a manifestation of female substitution.³ The union never complained of such a problem during the period and there is no evidence that women were as yet employed outside their traditional domain of the 'closing room'. Apathy amongst members after the 1895 lock-out may also have had an effect, but while this has a certain intuitive appeal it must be remembered that most trades unionists had an important material stake in the union's welfare functions and were undoubtedly unwilling to lose these benefits by foregoing membership in what was an extremely difficult period. The major factor in explaining the decline in union membership, and the one validated by contemporary comment from both sides of industry, was the substitution of young for old labour. The spectre of the strong youth which had haunted union officials since the demonstration of the lasting machine in the Northampton showroom in 1889 became a reality in the years immediately after the lock-out. Day candidly admitted that 'Younger men have had to be drafted

1. Day, op.cit., pp. 248-9.

2. Fox, op.cit., p.241.

3. Census Reports 1891, 1901.

into the factories and considerable displacement of labour has been inevitable'.¹ This process was largely centred on the lasting branch of the trade which had formed the core of the union's strength. Lasters were not only displaced by lasting machines. The lasting shops had traditionally performed various preparatory functions and sole attachment as well as lasting. In the years after the lock-out the reorganisation of production involved removing the preparatory work to the notoriously ill paid rough stuff department and the new, easy to operate, Goodyear welting machine replaced the more cumbersome Blake Stitcher.² Thus the autonomy enjoyed by workers in the lasting shops prior to 1895 was finally broken. The terms of the 1895 settlement having imposed both a system of day work wages and a major restructuring of the labour process. The proud lasters, many of whom had paid their apprentices' premium, were either being replaced by youths or were having to adapt themselves to the rigours of semi-skilled assembly line methods of production.

The young Socialists at the No. 1 Branch under Richards guidance responded quickly to the new industrial situation. Unlike their London counterparts they realised that the second part of the 1890s required caution. The rhetoric of class struggle Socialism may have had an appeal to their members in the first half of the decade, but what was now required was palliatives and first aid treatment to a dejected workforce. The first response of both the union generally and the Socialists was to encourage work spreading by limiting output. An element of piece work, linked to day rates, had been retained in the 1895 settlement and the

1. Day, op.cit., p.249.

2. Fox, op.cit., p.261.

union was partly successful in persuading members to limit output in order to both provide work for unemployed colleagues and to slow the pace of production to a speed manageable by older workers. Furthermore the union was able to gain overtime payments at a time and a quarter of normal rates in order to '... not so much to obtain time and a quarter as ... to do our best to abolish overtime, and thus secure more continuous employment to our members...'¹

Another strategy, this time initiated by Richards, designed to ease the growing problem of unemployment, was the campaign to persuade smaller employers to introduce the 'hand team' system. This method of work organisation involved the production of footwear with the minimum use of machinery, the majority of the work being done by hand workers organised on an extreme form of sub-division. The hand team system however met the staunch opposition of the machine companies who often managed to persuade employers not to give work to those workers who had been employed in hand work.²

Perhaps the most interesting development in the N.U.B.S.O. survival strategy during these difficult years was their efforts to use existing local political institutions to assist their rearguard action. In 1896 the union requested the trades council to lobby the town council on the plight of out of work shoemakers. The council complied with this request and the Town Clerk was instructed to write to local manufacturers suggesting that they '... should equally share the work among their various employees'.³ The council had, of course, intervened in previous

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, July 1898.

2. Fox, op.cit., p.276.

3. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, December 1896.

periods of local distress but the 1896 plea to employers was to be highly significant as it annunciated a new era of local political struggle over social questions. The council could no longer play a neutral role in issues between employers and workers, despite its desire to remain outside these disputes. The days of the early 1890s when the good offices of the mayor were opened to the two warring factions of local society to sort out their disputes were over. The Labour movement, despite their poor local electoral performance were pushed by circumstances towards a realisation that the municipality could provide palliatives; while the Socialists perceived that the struggle for local reforms could provide the stepping stones towards the fulfilment of their municipal programme. Thus the trades council successfully badgered the corporation into establishing a temporary labour bureau for the registration of unemployed workers.¹ It was reported in January 1897 that 1,500 people had recorded their names as totally unemployed. The corporation, in view of the scale of the problem, were forced to set up an unemployment committee and funds were raised to relieve the distress.² £670 was raised by public subscription for the fund and although the relief afforded to the unemployed and their 4,100 dependents must have been slight, the precedent of assistance without the usual penalties incurred by going to the Guardians was slowly being established.³ Furthermore, Socialist agitation was carried out alongside these developments. The following page from the trades council 1896 report bears the hallmark

1. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1896.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

of Richards's campaigns inside the council chamber as the champion of the municipal employee as well as his earlier use of the officer's salary question in his battles with Inskip.¹

ADVERTISEMENTS.

TO WORKING MEN VOTERS.

FACTS NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN AT THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS.

DEBT OF THE BOROUGH £2,250,000.

To Refund Capital and Interest a Sum amounting to £24,000 per annum is levied to pay off old debts.

During the Unemployed agitation the Council were asked to pay 5¹/₂d. per hour to the Unemployed who were worth it. This was refused, only nine supporting it.

Look how the Capitalist Party sweat their Working Men Employes, and yet raise their Favourites' Salaries

Fifty Labourers at Leicester Corporation Gas Works struck for an advance of One Halfpenny per Hour. This was refused, men turned adrift, and their places filled up by, guess—

When the overpaid Officials ask for a rise, what is the result. The following:—

Gas Engineer	•	•	raised from	£	£
Magistrates' Clerk	•	•	•	1000	to 1250
Borough Surveyor	•	•	•	700	to 1000
Waterworks' Engineer	•	•	•	500	to 600
Borough Accountant	•	•	•	400	to 500
Curator of Museum	•	•	•	200	to 300
Chief Constable	•	•	•	400	to 500
Librarian	•	•	•	180	to 220
Abbey Park Manager	•	•	•	160	to 200
Town Clerk's Assistant	•	•	•	160	to 200
Conveyancing Clerk	•	•	•	130	to 135
Cashier	•	•	•	150	to 160
Borough Surveyor's Assistant	•	•	•	250	to 300
Sewage Works' Assistant	•	•	•	180	to 200

The above will show to you that whilst some servants of this noble ancient borough are receiving 4¹/₂d. per hour upon which no man can live decently, others are receiving 10s. per hour. Compare the above Table with the Trades' Council's Maximum Wage of £500 per year.

Fellow Workers, this can be remedied by united action, the power is in your hands, use it with all the force your intellect can command.

Reproduced from Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1896.

1. N.U.B.S.O. General Conference Report, 1892, p.37.

The page which appeared in the report as an I.L.P. advert was obviously designed to inject an element of class into local politics and suggests that while the N.U.B.S.O. militants, who dominated the I.L.P. were drawing in their horns in the industrial arena, much of their rhetorical talent was being channelled into new areas. Yet lobbying and rhetoric were limited given the Labour movement's inability to increase their independent presence inside the council chamber. Despite the I.L.P.'s impressive start, relative to other areas of England, the Leicester branch was still organisationally weak and unable to translate growing working class discontent into electoral success.

The problem faced by the new party was essentially one of political organisation. It is true that in a large measure the Trades Council had been won over to their cause, but in electoral terms the I.L.P. lacked machinery outside Richards's power base in the Wyggeston ward. Prior to 1898 what ward organisation that did exist was located in the neighbourhood coffee and cocoa houses established by middle class patrons during the temperance fervour of the late 1870s.¹ What record remains of this early ward structure tends to confirm that local groups concentrated on informal gatherings and discussion circles rather than party building.² The I.L.P. was therefore forced to rely upon ad hoc assistance from the Trades Council. This assistance took two forms. First the Trades Council could use its traditional function as the local voice of labour to recommend Socialist candidates to working class

1. The Pioneer, January 19, 1895.

2. No I.L.P. archive material has survived from this period.

electors. This approval and recommendation was highly important in the politics of the period. For example, the Liberals spent much energy in trying to gain approval from the Trades Council for their parliamentary candidates.¹ Second, the Trades Council could assist with the election expenses of working men candidates.

Trades Council funding helped secure Banton's return as Richards' fellow representative of the Wyggeston ward in 1896. This ward, claimed to be densely populated with shoemakers, and sending three councillors to the town hall became a bastion of local Socialism during the period.² With much fanfare the ward eventually became completely represented by the I.L.P. in 1898. It is worth retelling Richards's account of the election of Slater, the leader of the local tailors' union, for the ward in 1898:

We set to work and our opponents say we do work. We paraded the ward with a home made lantern three feet square and set upon two poles, with mottoes on each side, and a naphtha lamp inside, and accompanied by our I.L.P. brass band ... More canvas, more votes, and whilst we are canvassing we are making Socialists, which is our principle object and we insist upon a good energetic canvass. Whilst one person is doing this and addressing circulars, the agitators are holding fifteen to twenty meetings, and we make a point of holding a meeting in each street of the ward, and often four or five upon a good central spot.

On polling day we see that³ all vote and give them no peace until they do.

Despite a strong element of working class self help Slater's campaign was expensive. The Trades Council awarded Slater £45. 11s. 4½d to

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1. Minutes of the Leicester Liberal Association, July 23, 1901.
 2. Labour Leader, December 3, 1898.
 3. Ibid.

cover his costs, which along with the £7 granted to Chaplin in his successful fight to be the I.L.P.'s fourth councillor in the Aylestone ward and the £8. 7s. 10d. expended on Carter's unsuccessful attempt to win a seat on the Guardians.¹

This expenditure, of over fifty pounds, placed a great strain on the Trades Council. The balance in hand the previous year had been over £41 and at the end of 1898 this had been reduced to 17s. 2d.² The problem was that electoral funds had to compete with other Trades Council activities such as assisting the local infirmary and making grants to workers on strike. George Green, the Trades Council secretary, lamented at the poor state of the Council's finances, caused by the election expenses, in his annual report and went on to call for a 'Federation of local trades', linked to a national federation, to superintend and finance working class candidates. Thus at a local level the need for a new organisation, distinctly geared to political activity, financed by trades unions for the return of independent Labour candidates was finding expression. To meet this demand the Leicester I.L.P. embarked on two courses of action. First key local activists, especially Richards, threw their energy into campaigning for a national party based upon an alliance of trades unions and Socialist groups. Second, local party organisation was streamlined and improved.

Richards, along with Barnes of the A.S.E. spent much of the following year touring Britain with J. Ramsay MacDonald, lecturing to Trades Councils, union conferences and local labour groups on the need

1. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1898.

2. Ibid.

to win T.U.C. support for a Labour Party.¹ Just when MacDonald first came into contact with the Leicester Labour movement is unknown. He would have almost certainly met Richards at I.L.P. national conferences in the late 1890s, especially as Richards was often a candidate for a place on the party's council.² Banton had also been a delegate to the national conference and in 1897 attempted to win a seat on the council.³ Indeed in subsequent years Banton was to establish close bonds with MacDonald,⁴ although the exact circumstances of MacDonald's early connection with the Leicester Labour movement are unknown.

Several factors help to explain MacDonald's eventual parliamentary candidature for the I.L.P. in Leicester. His staunch opposition to the S.D.F. must certainly have enamoured him to the Leicester I.L.P.⁵ Ever since the defection of the Leicester S.D.F. into the I.L.P. camp in 1894, local Socialists had come under scorn in the pages of Justice.⁶ On the other hand, the more moderate section of the Leicester I.L.P., particularly those such as Banton and Chaplin who had previously been Liberal party activists, probably saw MacDonald as the ideal candidate to negate Liberal opposition in future parliamentary elections.⁷ A point which is validated by the warm reception which greeted his eventual candidature in the local Liberal press.⁸ MacDonald's reputation as a Socialist intellectual, with

1. Labour Leader, March 18, 1899.

2. I.L.P. News, March 1899.

3. I.L.P. Conference Report, 1897, p.19.

4. See the correspondence cited in D. Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald (1977) p.82.

5. *Ibid.*, p.19.

6. See the acid comments on Richards's campaign for the post of N.U.B.S.O. General President in Justice, July 1, 1899.

7. Banton undertook the delicate task of negotiating with local Liberals MacDonald's status as candidate during the 1903 Gladstone-MacDonald discussions. See Marquand, *op.cit.*, p.82.

8. Leicester Daily Post, June 7, 1899.

copious theoretical publications and his editorship of the Ethical World, widely read in Secularist circles, must have appealed to the more studious members; while the financial independence which he gained at marriage may also have been a further attraction.¹ His circumstances were certainly much more fortunate than those of Joe Burgess, whose previous candidature had sorely taxed both branch and national party funds.²

Above all his position as a major figure in the party leadership both flattered the local branch and helped to bolster his popular appeal. Moreover, he possessed the good looks and the skills of oratory to complement his office. The Leicester branch were certainly not slow in exploiting these attributes, in the parliamentary campaign of 1900, threepenny tickets bearing MacDonald's photograph proved to be a useful money spinner.³ MacDonald's populism was certainly infectious. The anonymous poet, A.C.B., who tells the reader of his secularism and Socialism and his joy at working at the Leicester printing cooperative in his autobiographical poem was moved to write a sonnet in dedication to MacDonald, which also conveys much of his charismatic appeal:

1. Marquand, op.cit., pp. 50-51.

2. Francis Johnson Collection. I.L.P. correspondence file, 1894/187, Mann to Lister; 1895/110, Burgess to Mann.

3. I.L.P. News, February 1900.

A refuge from the storms of life

 These walls for years have stood;
Long may they stand till human strife
 Find rest in brotherhood.

He who loves Honour hates the tortuous tricks
Which constitute the game of Politics;
Therefore, though Labour's cause claims my support,
In fields of party strife I find no forte,
Save with a song of sympathy to assist
The side where stands the strong protagonist.
Thus, to my mind, Ramsay MacDonald seem'd
Destin'd to shape those ends of which we dream'd
We visionaries, looking for the day
When Falsehood, Force, and Fraud shall pass away.
No mindless mob can guide us to the goal,
Calmness of judgment, fervency of soul,
Must lead us on; two qualities united
In him for whom this sonnet was indited:-

When Labour's trumpet call to thee appeals,
 They resonant voice replies, and as the sound,
 Like Memnon's song, reverberates around,
The day of which we dream its dawn reveals;
The Memphian gloom departs; and Leicester feels
 A faith inspiring that in thee is found
 A Liberator, whose high aims are crown'd
With untold triumphs only Time conceals.

'Mong tribunes tried and trusted thou wilt stand
 Before the nation, in the people's name,
To aggrandise the fortunes of our land.
 And if above the rest we flaunt thy fame,
It is because in thy once slighted hand
 Are held the hearts and hopes thou wilt not shame.¹

Short term political factors also aided MacDonald's emergence as the I.L.P. candidate. The clouds of war in South Africa gathered ominously during the summer of 1899 which coincided with the months between his proposal as candidate by Richards to the Trades Council in June and his eventual nomination in October.² When hostilities began MacDonald found the Leicester I.L.P. shared his deep distaste for the war; 'On three

1. A.C.B. A Rhymsters' Recollections (Leicester, n.d., 1903?).

2. MacDonald claimed in June that he was still committed to the Southampton party as parliamentary candidate and gave no firm indication of his intentions to the Leicester branch until October. See Leicester Daily Post, June 7, 1899.

different occasions prior to the outbreak of hostilities resolutions were passed at the Corn Exchange meetings protesting against war in South Africa.¹ Furthermore, Leicester Liberalism had deep radical roots, Chamberlain's defection in 1886 having little local effect.² There was thus a staunch body of local Radical Liberal opinion that preferred MacDonald's stand against the war to the vacillation of Hazell, one of the local M.P.s, on the subject.³

Another factor which was to add to MacDonald's local appeal was the re-emergence of the 'Land Question' as a major element in local Labour politics at the turn of the century. The complexities of this issue will be discussed below but at this point it is worth noting that MacDonald's personal background gave him the capacity to fully exploit this issue. Born into the north-east of Scotland fishing and agricultural community of Lossiemouth, MacDonald soon developed the '... good honest hatred the Scotsman has for Landlords'.⁴ Land nationalisation had been the subject of an early youthful essay⁵ and his knowledge on the issue was to provide useful capital during his first years in Leicester.

The strength of Leicester Liberalism was also being sapped by the growth of Conservatism amongst local manufacturers. This expansion of local Toryism was not caused by defections from Liberalism, it was rather the product of new manufacturers, businessmen and professionals who

1. I.L.P. News, February 1900.

2. Evans, op.cit. p.229. Some local Liberals, most notably Thomas Wright did, however, join the Liberal Unionists.

3. Midland Free Press, September 29, 1900.

4. Marquand, op.cit., p.9.

5. Ibid., p.15.

emerged during and after the 1880s joining the Conservatives rather than the Liberals. This process, according to Freer, was a product of the different social background of the new rich; many came from farming and country stock, and found Leicester's Tory county society more congenial than the rather arid non-conformity of the indigenous elite.¹ Thus by 1900 the Liberal Association in Leicester was no longer the undisputed political expression of the local middle class. Indeed, despite the continuity of non-conformist Liberal Radicalism the war did fracture the unity of the Association. Sir Israel Hart, the Association's President became a staunch imperialist. Although the imperialist faction was to be outflanked by Edward Wood, the leader of the moderate Gladstonians, it would not have required much political foresight on the part of MacDonald to realise that when the war was over, Leicester Liberalism would be a mere rump of its former self.

MacDonald stood as candidate for the infant Labour Representation Committee in the 1900 general election in what turned out to be an extremely acrimonious local campaign. The Conservatives, as elsewhere, capitalised to the full on the war situation, while the fact that the local regiment had been under siege at Ladysmith added pique to the proceedings.² MacDonald, however, tried to divert attention from the war towards social issues: he intended to fight the election 'upon Leicester rather than Johannesburg, upon London rather than Pretoria ... upon the problems which faced the wage earners rather than upon the problems of the capitalists who did their mining for gold and diamonds

1. D. Freer, *op.cit.*, p.265.

2. Midland Free Press, March 3, 1900. The relief of Ladysmith and Mafeking were celebrated with gusto in Leicester and even the Trades Council was split over the war. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1900.

in South Africa by black labour'.¹ Thus his campaign concentrated upon the nationalisation of the mines, the taxation of land values to finance old age pensions and the provision of low interest loans to municipalities to improve working class housing.² MacDonald failed to better the vote cast for Burgess in 1895, but his 4,164 supporters added to the rising Tory fortunes whose candidate, Rolleston, beat Hazell by nearly 1,500 votes. The Leicester Liberal Association subsequently undertook an intense internal examination in the light of their first parliamentary setback in forty years. The Labour movement on the other hand, were undoubtedly pleased by MacDonald's performance. He had retained their share of the vote in circumstances that were unfavourable to Labour and his stand on South Africa both pleased I.L.P. militant activists and helped to split the Liberal camp.

If the Leicester Labour movement gained advantages from having MacDonald as their candidate, what were the attractions in Leicester for MacDonald? As we have already seen, a potentially favourable local political realignment must have figured in MacDonald's calculations. Furthermore he soon developed a close personal and political relationship with the emerging leader of local Liberalism, Edward Wood.³ Indeed Wood was persuaded to put money into the Leicester Pioneer when MacDonald was assisting the restructuring of the newspaper.⁴ Wood also had good contacts with established Labour figures, especially Banton, having for many years worked with Trades Council officials on the administration of

1. Quoted in Marquand, op.cit., p.73.

2. Leicester Daily Post, September 27, 1900.

3. Wood's address appears in MacDonald's address book of friends and colleagues, contained in the L.S.E. MacDonald archive.

4. Marquand, op.cit., p.81.

the local infirmary; while his annual 'Labour Dinner' helped to cement these ties.¹ Thus local circumstances appeared to favour future electoral negotiations with the Liberal Association. His candidature in Leicester also assisted MacDonald in winning N.U.B.S.O. support for the proposed L.R.C.² Richards played a crucial role in mustering support amongst the branches for union affiliation in what was a period of waning N.U.B.S.O. fortunes and political disaffection amongst the membership. In a very low poll the No. 1 Branch voted 295 for and 227 against joining the L.R.C., while the No. 2, Clickers branch, voted 91 for, 118 against.³ Affiliation, of course, also involved subscriptions which made the task of winning support more difficult, but with the help of Freak in London and other local activists a narrow majority in favour of joining was secured.⁴ MacDonald welded his position with the union by attending the 1900 union conference where in his address he declared 'that the time has now come for labour to take up an independent position upon all labour matters in the House of Commons'.⁵ Richards and Freak were the two N.U.B.S.O. delegates at the Farringdon Hall inaugural conference earlier in the year and upon his return Richards informed his members that

It [the L.R.C.] will bring together the toiling masses ... It will bring together the kindly disposed people who believe in humanity and will mark the period of the oppressed as against the oppressor ... There was every indication there of this when you take some of the extreme Socialists of a few years ago, who have not abandoned their hope of nationalising everything, yet still feel sure that they cannot hope

1. Wood also assisted on the joint administration of the 1896 distress fund with Trades Council officers. See Leicester Trades Council Annual Reports 1896, 1903.

2. N.U.B.S.O. were the third largest of the trade unions who gave immediate support to the L.R.C., while Leicester Trades Council, who also affiliated were the third largest Trades Council. See Pelling, op.cit., Appendix B.

3. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, June 1900.

4. Ibid.

5. 1900 Union conference report, p.50.

to succeed without joining hands with those who are not so extreme, viz. the steady plodding Trade Unionists.¹

The first part of this statement with its references to morally motivated people and crude historicism could almost have been penned by MacDonald, while the remainder indicates the distance travelled by the N.U.B.S.O. militants from the mid 1890s down the path of reformism.

The Trades Council, as we have seen, affiliated at the inauguration of the L.R.C. and other local unions soon joined the new organisation.² MacDonald undoubtedly had the solid support of local labour organisations but what type of political machine was he inheriting? The need to coordinate the political activities of the Trades Council, I.L.P. ward organisations, and the ad hoc parliamentary arrangements was apparent and being discussed in 1898.³ Indeed this need was a major factor in the attraction of MacDonald to the local Labour movement. The Trades Council's call for a political federation of all trades in 1898 foreshadowed the emergence of a local L.R.C. in early 1903, but in the years between these two dates activists had begun to establish a more structured organisation.

The colourful local election campaign in Wyggeston in 1898 could not be undertaken in every ward, but this type of intense community based activity did establish precedents for political organisation in other working class areas. Efforts were made to establish a network of supporters each responsible for propaganda, canvassing and registration work in their individual street.⁴ Even more novel was the post of 'workshop captain'

1. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, March 1900.

2. L.R.C. archive, correspondence file. L/97 for L.A.H.U. affiliation. 5/243 for elastic web weavers.

3. Leicester Trades Council annual report, 1898.

4. L.R.C. Archive Correspondence file 7/303; see also A. Henderson and J. Ramsay MacDonald, Notes on Organisation and the Law of Registration and Elections (1904) pp. 2-3.

established during this period. The 'workshop captain's' role was the same as that of the street organiser but based in the factory rather than the neighbourhood.¹ This system caught the imagination of MacDonald and Henderson who recommended its virtues in their handbook on party and electoral organisation. Not only was it potentially highly effective, but it also negated the need for paid full time party workers. It could be claimed that this system of political organisation was similar to the Liberal caucus machine perfected three decades earlier in Birmingham. More probable, however, was the precedent of local trade union organisation. Until recent years Leicester's industry, based primarily on outwork, produced a form of trade union organisation that leaned heavily on neighbourhood activists to collect subscriptions and pass on information to a workforce that was based in the community rather than the factory.²

Despite this high element of voluntary work the improved political structure still required money if labour was to increase its electoral performance. Here MacDonald was to play a key role. As author of the Leicester Labour Representation Committee constitution MacDonald was anxious to set a precedent for the movement nationally.³ The management committee of the Leicester L.R.C. was composed of five Trades Council delegates, five from the I.L.P. and three from the Building Trades Council, while trades unions and cooperatives were allocated one delegate per hundred members. Each delegate had to contribute one pound and the

1. Ibid., p.4.

2. See N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, November 1880. 'We have divided the town into districts and have real earnest workers who are doing house to house calls'.

3. Which indeed he did. The Leicester L.R.C. was held up as a model for other local groups to follow. See Henderson and MacDonald, op.cit., pp. 10-11.

trades unions and cooperatives were also charged one penny for each of their members.¹ Given the fact that N.U.B.S.O., the L.A.H.U., the elastic web weavers, and many smaller unions joined the local L.R.C., together with the retail cooperatives and two producers' cooperatives, the financial position of Labour's political organisation must have been a vast improvement from the situation of the 1890s.²

The formation of the Leicester L.R.C. coincided with the Gladstone-MacDonald negotiations on a future Labour-Liberal electoral pact. The coincidence was also geographical, the more crucial aspects of the agreement being finalised at MacDonald's bedside in the Leicester Isolation hospital where he was committed with a feverish infection.³ The negotiations had, however, been held up by another local incident, this time in the ranks of the Leicester Liberal Association. After the defeat of Hazell in 1900 the Association quickly dropped him as their future candidate. They first tried to replace Hazell by a politician of national stature, Asquith being one of many whom the Association contacted.⁴ Asquith declined the invitation and as the need to check the I.L.P. had been cited as a major consideration in choosing a new candidate, the Association offered the vacancy to Wood, the local 'friend of labour' and the sitting mayor.⁵ Wood, however, had the foresight to see that Labour's fortunes were rising after the arrival of MacDonald and turned down the offer.⁶ The situation was further complicated when Sir Israel

1. Rules of the Leicester L.R.C. contained in the L.R.C. archive correspondence file, 10/199.

2. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1903 lists those organisations which sent delegates to the first Leicester L.R.C.

3. A poignant setting! The hospital being a product of an older Labour-Radical Liberal alliance, the anti-vaccination campaign.

4. Minutes of the Leicester Liberal Association, March 21, 1902.

5. Ibid., April 23, 1901; October 6, 1902.

6. Ibid., January 12, 1903.

Hart, the leader of the Liberal Imperialist faction, offered himself as Broadhurst's partner. Hart's possible candidature was attractive to certain quarters of the Liberal establishment, who clung tenaciously to a belief that the two seats should continue to represent both moderate and radical Liberal opinion. Thus as Broadhurst was, in the eyes of many Liberals, the heir of Taylor and subsequent Radical members, many believed that Hart was only claiming the moderate's birthright. The problem was, of course, that the local political contours were rapidly changing. For example, Hart had offended the Labour movement and alienated himself from an important section of local Liberalism over his stand against increased municipalisation of local services,¹ while the South African war had also created new fissures inside Leicester Liberalism.

Wood outlined the options available to the Association in a future parliamentary election as follows: 1. Nominate only Broadhurst. 2. Nominate Broadhurst and make arrangements with Labour so that the Liberals could support MacDonald. 3. Nominate Broadhurst and Hart.² Wood favoured the second option and MacDonald's refusal to complete the agreement with Gladstone until the Leicester situation was resolved undoubtedly brought the pressure of the national party to bear upon the Leicester Association.³ The Post firmly siding with Wood, told Leicester Liberals that 'The paramount and pressing duty of every Progressive worthy of the name is to "go" for the only working political union that can enable Leicester to throw off its minority member'.⁴ Hart's

1. Ibid., April 21, 1902; Leicester Daily Post, March 16, 1901.

2. Leicester Liberal Association Minutes, June 26, 1903.

3. Marquand, op.cit., p.82. Gladstone was in contact with Wood and between them they managed to persuade the Leicester Daily Post to back the Broadhurst-MacDonald combination.

4. Leicester Daily Post, June 30, 1903.

candidature was heavily defeated at the annual meeting of the 'Liberal thousand' which endorsed the Broadhurst-MacDonald ticket, while another local claimant to the seat, this time the popular leader of the moderates, Walter Tudor, was hastily found a safe seat in the Sheffield division of Brightside.¹

Thus with an agreement between the Liberals and the local L.R.C. Leicester politics in late 1903 appeared to have found a new stability. Indeed the new political situation seemed to be the epitome of the electoral arrangements envisaged by MacDonald and Gladstone. The pairing of Broadhurst with MacDonald may have shown an uncommon bias towards Labour but as Wood candidly told the assembled 'thousand' in September, 'Labour M.P.s could be relied upon to vote with the Liberals'.² More importantly Labour locally appeared to have abandoned the political style and language of the class struggle that distinguished the mid 1890s and had joined hands with the Liberals in the great 'Progressive cause'. Even Richards, the erstwhile class warrior, had availed himself of the opportunities afforded by the electoral pact, by accepting L.R.C. nomination for the Wolverhampton West parliamentary candidature, one of the seats earmarked in the Gladstone-MacDonald arrangement, where he was reported to be wooing the electorate with his 'attractive personality, pleasing voice ... and great fairness and moderation'.³

For several months Leicester appeared to be the quintessential heartland of the Lib-Lab pact. The Post noted with pleasure the opposition

1. Leicester Liberal Association Minutes, September 4, 1903; July 24, 1903.

2. Leicester Daily Post, September 4, 1903.

3. N.U.B.S.O. monthly report, June 1903, quoting the Wolverhampton Express and Star, June 15, 1903.

of the I.L.P. in Dewsbury to S.D.F. local government candidates as an endorsement of the electoral arrangement's potential; 'Happily this new and most promising departure is already bearing fruit'.¹

Indeed it was generally assumed that the parliamentary pact should have a local dimension. The series of local government elections that were expected prior to the general election were looked upon as useful venues for cementing inter-party relations and improving electoral efficiency. The first test of the goodwill between both parties came in the November 1903 local government elections.

During the run up to this poll the term 'progressive' was employed by the Liberal press to describe both the Liberal and the two Labour candidates contesting for municipal office, the latter being given a free run against the Conservatives. At both Labour ward election meetings prominent Liberals shared the platform with Labour men. Peacock, the Labour candidate for St. Margaret's Ward told the assembled audience of Liberal councillors, Association officers and I.L.P.ers that 'he was much obliged to the Liberals who had supported him that week. Although he did not believe that the Liberals and Labour men would become one political party he thought the time would come when the old political names would change ... let them unite solidly so as to make a great progressive force'.² Similar feelings were expressed by Alderman T. Smith, secretary of the Liberal Association, who chaired Chaplin's, the Labour candidate for the Aylstone ward, pre-election meeting. 'The chairman said it no doubt seemed rather an anomolous thing for an alderman of the borough to be occupying the chair at that meeting when he remembered that

1. Leicester Daily Post, October 31, 1903.

2. Ibid.,

one of the strongest points in Mr. Chaplin's programme was the abolition of alderman. (hear, hear). This was, however, one of the sacrifices that Liberalism had to make for Labour when it was necessary for the two parties to unite'.¹

To the Tories' anger the alliance candidates romped home gaining almost 70% of the votes cast. The Liberal Post was ecstatic over the great progressive victory and looked forward to the next general election with zest.² The Liberal Leicester Chronicle's rather condescending prophecy made at an early I.L.P. intervention into local politics in 1895 that 'They cannot do any harm, of course, but if they take their share of the work, and are willing to be guided by experience, their ideas will be broadened. For the present they represent a body of opinion that should not be ignored, though it is crude and ill-informed' appeared to be realised.³ This success, however, was to be the high water mark of Labour-Liberal cooperation in local politics. Within four months the Liberals were crying foul when Labour, without consulting their erstwhile partners fielded thirteen candidates in the Guardian elections. Why this sudden change in electoral tactics on the part of Labour? A possible explanation could be that Labour was goaded into adopting an independent electoral stance by the constant stream of criticism levied against them by Sir John Rolleston, the Tory parliamentary victor of 1900, and the local Conservative press. There is an element of plausibility in this explanation. Rolleston and Hubbard, the secretary of the L.R.C., carried out a long and acrimonious correspondence in the local press on the question of Labour's

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., November 3, 1903.

2. Leicester Chronicle, April 20, 1895.

independence, which suggests that Labour felt the issue to be of some importance.¹ This line of reasoning, however, cannot satisfactorily explain the timing of Labour abandoning the alliance. Furthermore it ignores the fact that the Guardian elections of 1904 were conducted over specific issues, especially unemployment, a problem which divided and ultimately smashed the short lived political alliance.

Previous local government elections were distinguished by their mediocrity. At the previous Guardian polls in March 1901, the Liberals were complaining about the difficulty in arousing public interest. The main issues at stake were, the time honoured ones of vaccination and costs, the I.L.P. only fielding three candidates, one of whom was elected, at a very low poll.² Similarly in November 1902 the Post noted that the municipal elections presented 'no particular burning questions of a local character'.³ As expected the 1903 'alliance' elections concentrated on the lowest common denominator between the two parties, free trade and religious education.⁴ This local political plateau which had provided a propitious setting for Lib-Lab cooperation gained sudden relief from the ominous shadows of unemployment during the winter 1903-4.

As shown above the problem of unemployment in Leicester was the displacement of adult males from their traditional skilled tasks by machinery operated by youths and women. Both major industries had traditionally experienced seasonal unemployment as was the norm in most

1. Leicester Daily Post, June 10, 1905.

2. Ibid., March 16, 1901; March 23, 1901; March 26, 1901.

3. Ibid., November 3, 1902.

4. Ibid., October 31, 1903.

clothing trades. Lack of work in the early years of the present century was however, becoming profoundly different in character with the arrival of long-term structural unemployment disproportionately affecting the main breadwinner of the working class family. The problem had been accumulating for several years, Richards and Banton had tried to move a resolution for the council to borrow funds in order to undertake public works to employ those out of work, but significantly, their attempt failed due to not enough councillors being present to form a quorum.¹ Discontent was already being expressed at the 'alliance' elections in 1903. The Pioneer, the local Labour weekly, noted the increasing complaints by those men on the 'test' over the allegedly 'unsympathetic' and 'inhuman' attitudes of the Liberal dominated Board of Guardians.² By January 1904 feelings against the Guardians were so strong that the L.R.C. decided to field 13 candidates at the March elections. Unfortunately there is a hiatus in the extant copies of The Pioneer between October 1903 and January 1904, and from February 1904 until December 1904, so that it is impossible to accurately outline the changing attitudes of organised Labour towards the progressive alliance. We can, however, pick out the main economic developments that were underway during the winter of 1903-4 and relate these to the political upheavals of the following Spring.

Increased mechanisation, particularly in the shoe factories, wrought profound upheavals in the lives of working class families. The most important aspect of this development was the changing social composition of the poor law recipients. The Guardians were no longer dealing with a

1. Leicester Council Minutes, October 28, 1902.

2. The Pioneer, October 17, 1903.

clientele that was largely composed of the traditional poor and social misfits. Instead they were being swamped by applications from skilled and semi-skilled adult male shoeworkers. One Liberal Guardian, a member of the 'Test Yard' Committee, admitted that the majority of applicants for the test '... were workmen who had been thrown out of work by the introduction of machinery'.¹ Two weeks later it was noted in the Post that 'The labour test men are dissatisfied ... These men are mainly composed of shoe hands. They are trades unionists...'² Over the previous decade the number of inmates of the workhouse had risen from 700 to 1,100 and those on outdoor relief from 1,600 to 3,900;³ while the number of shoeworkers admitted to the workhouse increased by nearly 50% in the four years between 1901 and 1905.⁴ It is not too difficult to locate the source of dissatisfaction with the administering of relief, the issue upon which Labour fought the 1904 election. The Guardians, faced with an ever growing influx of applicants at the test yard were forced to rely upon the time honoured occupations of stone breaking, okum picking and wood chopping, tasks which naturally were found degrading by once proud shoemaking artisans. Furthermore, remuneration was poor, often as low as 10d per day, with a 4s per week maximum being paid to those on outdoor relief.⁵ It was not only the monotonous hard work of the test yard and pitiful level of remuneration that caused dissent, the loss of self respect and charges of shirking that met their protests tended to galvanise the men into action and organisation.⁶

1. Leicester Daily Post, March 10, 1904.

2. Ibid., March 23, 1904.

3. Ibid., March 10, 1904.

4. Leicester Guardian Workhouse Admission books 1900-5. In 1905 227 footwear workers were admitted to the workhouse, 141 in 1901.

5. The Pioneer, February 27, 1904.

6. See the letter from George White, the 'Test Yard' men's spokesman in Leicester Daily Post, March 28, 1904.

No doubt the men had used their previous trade union experience to bring their case to the attention of the organised Labour movement. Those fragments of The Pioneer that are extant are replete with grievances from the 'Test' men.¹ Moreover, with the major local trade union, N.U.B.S.O. hamstrung by the Taff Vale decision, and the continued displacement by youth labour, the reality of the 'test' loomed in all shoeworkers' minds.² Indeed local manufacturers began to gloat upon their success. One footwear manufacturer claimed that 'some of the businesses have produced veritable gold mines' ... 'It is the result of keener supervision, better organisation in the factories, the most approved equipment, and good management generally'.³ By March the casualties of this success had organised themselves under the capable leadership of George White, a young unemployed laster, and were actively campaigning in both the press and the Guardian election campaign.⁴

Leicester Liberalism was deeply grieved by Labour's new found independence. One Liberal guardian, seeking re-election, called Labour's intervention 'a kind of civil war', while another claimed that '... some of the most respected leaders of the Labour Party were just as discouraged and disappointed as members of the Liberal Party'.⁵ There may have been an element of truth in the latter claim; both Chaplin and Banton emphasised the point that Labour were fighting because they were under-

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1. The Pioneer, January 30, 1904.
 2. Leicester Daily Post, March 10, 1904. N.U.B.S.O. faced legal action against their recent attempts to restrict output, the traditional method of defending jobs threatened by mechanisation. Furthermore the union had been seriously weakened by having to spend more than £3,000 on unemployment relief in Leicester between 1903 and 1905. Labour Leader, June 2, 1905.
 3. Leicester Daily Post, March 5, 1904. Indeed profits were so high in the Leicester trade that even American manufacturers opened factories in the town. See *ibid.*, June 23, 1905.
 4. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1904.
 5. *Ibid.*, March 3, 1904.

represented on the Board,¹ a far more moderate position than that adopted by George Bibbings, the Labour candidate for Newton Ward, whose active supporters included George White, whose aim was 'relief without pauperisation'.² In the weeks leading up to the election lines hardened between the parties with attention being increasingly focused upon policy. Bibbings's programme involved increased payments for those on out relief, a more humane regime for the workhouse, and the provision of useful, reasonably paid employment. This policy, however, found the chink in Liberalism's progressive veneer and the ensuing debate took on the complexion of the classic 'economist' versus 'improver' controversy. 'Labourites seem to be more concerned to persons who are really undeserving than to the unfortunate or struggling ratepayer' thundered one Liberal candidate,³ while the Post warned against large increases in payments to the test men for fear that they would '... remain on the test when they might, could, and should obtain work in the ordinary channels of industry'.⁴

The thesis that the Labour Party came into existence because Liberalism refused to make more representative offices available to working men has often been employed by historians.⁵ The argument could be used to explain the intervention of Labour into the 1904 Leicester Guardians election. The statements of Banton and Chaplin on representation,

1. Ibid., March 4, 1904.

2. Ibid., March 23, 1904.

3. Ibid., March 5, 1904.

4. Ibid., March 23, 1904.

5. Pelling, op.cit., p.222. See also his Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910 (1967) p.434.

cited above, possibly underlines this explanation. Where the thesis falls short, however, is in the area of policy. The Labour candidates wanted increased representation, according to Martin Curley, the president of the L.R.C., in order that 'The policy of the Board of Guardians should be altered and if it were to be altered they must alter the representation on the board'.¹ In the following pages I wish to propose an alternative argument for explaining the consolidation of the Labour Party in Leicester. It will be argued that Labour dramatically improved its local electoral performance in the two years prior to the 1906 general election because the new party was able to successfully exploit rising working class concern over poverty and unemployment. The proposed solutions to this social problem forwarded by Labour breached the parameters of the local Lib-Lab alliance and irreversibly peeled off a large section of Liberal working class support. Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate that this haemorrhage of working class voters from the ranks of Leicester Liberalism had far reaching effects upon local Liberal organisation and that by 1906 the Liberal party machine had virtually collapsed in most working class areas.

The divisions between the two parties on the question of social policy were essentially ones of degree and cost. Labour's demands for more municipal employment was not a radical departure from current practice, and a far cry from the reforms proposed in their municipal programme, but their insistence that this work had to be paid for with

1. Leicester Daily Post, March 17, 1904.

acceptable wages was anathema to Liberalism. Well paid employment provided by the community was a demand that both touched the nerve of the ratepayer, whose cause the Liberals had traditionally championed and threatened the smooth working of the local labour market. Indeed the issue became so important locally that it drained the goodwill from the electoral alliance so noticeable at the previous autumn's municipal poll. The gulf between the two parties became so wide over this issue that even the middle ground of working class Lib-Labism disappeared.¹ Similarly the notion of the land as a solution to the problem of structural unemployment was espoused by both parties. Some years previously the Leicester Guardians had acquired several fields at nearby Gilroes and Crown Hill farms for cultivation by those on relief. Wages were equivalent to those paid in the 'test yard' and there were frequent complaints from the men over the long walk to work and the lack of shelter.² Labour were eager to take up Joseph Fels, the Georgite millionaire's offer to part-fund a Guardian run land colony similar to Fels' Hollesey Bay scheme. The Liberals were also interested in the plan but balked at the prospect of the large initial outlay demanded by Fels, although the Guardians did authorise the renting of an additional 35 acres to supplement their existing smallholding.³

Some Labour activists on the other hand, were far more committed to the belief that land colonies offered the most efficient solution to

1. See Amos Mann's (the Lib-Lab councillor for West Humberstone) attack on his erstwhile colleague George Banton, for making 'irresponsible statements' on the subject. Ibid., March 26, 1904.

2. The Pioneer, January 30, 1904.

3. Guardian Minutes, May 30, 1905.

both urban unemployment and rural depopulation. MacDonald told a Leicester audience that '... there must be two types (of land colonies), one penal for rogues and vagabonds and one educational for honest men ... a gateway back to the land, a means by which our population may be redistributed over England.'¹ Agriculture became an idee fixe with some Leicester I.L.P.ers which was to persist for many years.² In the 1907 Guardian elections for example, one Labour candidate advocated the abolition of stone breaking to be replaced by land schemes in order to 'get the men on the land, and give them a healthy useful training which would be valuable to them when the state provided for the acquisition of smallholdings'.³ The Labour advocates of land colonies were naturally infuriated by the Liberals' unwillingness to place the existing schemes on a sound footing. A long walk, perhaps through inclement weather, with the prospect of spending a day digging a wet field without facilities or shelter was probably an even worse prospect than stone breaking. Banton, motivated by a sense of frustration, and anger that the Labour vision was being killed at birth, spoke out furiously against conditions on the Guardians' allotments.⁴ Yet how realistic was Labour's vision of land colonies solving all the great problems of the day? More importantly did these plans carry popular support? The Leicester unemployed shoemakers appear to have shown little interest in the various schemes on offer. Significantly when the question of what to do with the money given

1. Leicester Daily Post, May 18, 1905.

2. Amos Sherriff, one of the leaders of the 1905 Leicester unemployment march used a small part of the money gathered by the marchers to fund a local land colony which continued in existence up until the second world war. See his obituary in the Leicester Evening Mail, May 19, 1945.

3. Leicester Daily Post, March 23, 1907.

4. The Pioneer, January 30, 1904.

to the men who took part in the June 1905 unemployment march by well wishers was discussed, the marchers turned down the plan advocated by two of their leaders, Sherriff and the Rev. F.L. Donaldson, to use all the funds to launch a land colony.¹ Nevertheless the Land Question, one of the most potent elements in nineteenth century working class Radicalism, took on a new life in the early years of the present century. The attraction of land reform to Labour politicians during the period was that it could both harness deep rooted opinion on the subject and be presented as a simple, easily understood answer to the problems of poverty and unemployment. Indeed Leicester was a most fertile setting for the revival of the Land campaign; rural labour either by migrating into Leicester or by producing goods in the villages that had previously been made in Leicester had been a constant problem to the local Labour movement. Thus the age old opposition of town and country was again revived, this time to compete with a programme of social welfare reforms in the formulation of Labour ideology.

Labour activists were not, however, united around the policy of agricultural undertakings as a solution to unemployment. Most noticeably Bibbings, a spiritualist lecturer elected as a Guardian in 1904, Richards and White preferred to concentrate on the policy of relief without pauperisation.² This division within Labour's ranks over policy contrasts strongly to the staunch support of cooperative production which unified the movement during the early and mid 1890s. The failure to formulate a

1. Leicester Daily Post, June 26, 1905. The marchers demanded that the majority of the cash should be divided between those who completed the march.

2. The MacDonald Collection (L.S.E.) Vol. 2. Reply by T.F. Richards to a questionnaire compiled by Mrs. M.E. MacDonald.

clear cut socialist programme, relevant to local needs and economic structure, largely explains the ascendancy of Land reform and welfare palliatives in the early years of the present century. This is not to argue the simplistic formula that Socialism consists only of ideas. Rather the social relations of production in the Leicester footwear and hosiery industry were at a particular stage of development. The rise of a young semi-skilled workforce who differed fundamentally from the skilled workers of the 1890s, saw little appeal in the Socialism of the artisanal producers' cooperative variety. While the increasingly disorientated skilled craftsmen who filled the ranks of the unemployment movement, witnessed with despair the triumph of the machine and the redundancy of their old cry for industrial self-management, both stumbled forward in their demand for welfare palliatives and harked back to nineteenth century radicalism with the old shibboleth of land reform. Land and welfare reforms were the lowest common denominators amongst an increasingly fractured labour movement that had lost the certainty of direction that was so apparent in the first five years of the 1890s.

Yet despite this confused policy situation we can still discern the interplay of themes that had been central to Leicester Socialism and Labour movement politics for nearly two decades. Land reform was more than old radicalism continuing to haunt and exercise an atavistic control over working class politicians. Rather it had to be perceived in the light of short term factors present at the turn of the century. In particular it was yet another device to rig and control the local labour market. Thus it represents a continuity of concern amongst Labour leaders, recently expressed by both cooperative production schemes and the I.L.P. municipal programme, to check and curtail the reserve army of labour. We must not, however, lose sight of the other major.

aspect of Labour policy. Palliatives, welfare measures, 'relief without pauperisation', all these were new elements in the Labour package and for their origins we need not search the excess baggage of Radicalism. These policies were the product, however imperfectly developed, of the growing notion of economic equality, an idea which emanated from Socialism.

The policy of reformism was implemented locally when in March 1904 the Trades Council persuaded the mayor to set up a citizen's aid society (C.A.S.) in order to distribute Trades Council funds and local charities to those out of work who were not in receipt of relief from the Guardians. This humble device which was never a success did, however, further the principle, locally, of relief without disenfranchisement.¹ The Post carried a somewhat abbreviated report on the society's formation, noting only that the organisation's aim was to cut out charitable overlaps. This apparent lack of interest by the Post is significant of both the Liberals' vexation at Labour's new found assertiveness and the increasing 'economist' position being adopted by the erstwhile party of progress. Moreover the concession by the mayor of the need for a second tier of relief confirmed that unemployment was far worse than the Guardians' statistics suggested. A potentially dangerous reflection upon a political party which was still largely identified as the party of the manufacturer boasting nine footwear factory owners as members of the town council.²

Ill feelings continued up to the elections. The disclosure that the Guardians had deliberately voted the two I.L.P. members off key committees incensed the Labour movement.³ The gulf between the former

1. Leicester Daily Post, March 5, 1904. It was reported in June 1905 that one C.A.S. ward committee had only £9 to distribute to 160 families. Leicester Daily Mercury, June 26, 1905.

2. Ibid., October 25, 1902. Leicester Daily Post, November 1904.

3. The Pioneer, February 27, 1904.

political partners became unbridgeable. 'They (the L.R.C.) were opposing not Liberals and not Tories, but the party of the capitalists and the employers', Hubbard, a Guardian candidate told his audience;¹ while Curley, the President of the L.R.C. laid down the party's new policy: 'The Labour Party would continue its propaganda in November next. They did not exist for one man, and whether Mr. MacDonald was returned to parliament or not they would go forward independent of the Liberal and Tory Parties'.²

Go forward they did, and in fine style, their thirteen candidates gaining one third of all the votes cast for the thirtysix seats, which gained Labour eleven members on the new board. This election was to be even more significant for local politics than the four thousand votes cast for Burgess a decade earlier. Labour, as the following table shows, had finally established a real electoral presence.

Table 11.1 Numbers of Labour candidates returned to the Board of Guardians

1902	1904	1907
2	11	16

Source: Guardian Minutes.

Furthermore, with the L.R.C. carrying out a coordinating function between the various sectors of the Labour movement the I.L.P. was able to concentrate on education and propaganda work. In short, Labour now possessed both votes and a party machine that was the equal of the two major parties. Moreover, Labour had enlarged and consolidated its

1. Leicester Daily Post, March 26, 1904.

2. Ibid.

position by engaging in conflict with established Liberalism over an issue which was of deep concern and importance to the working class and not by playing the role of junior partner in the progressive alliance. Labour's new found strength in Leicester was based upon the expression of class based politics that originated from the angry shoemakers forced to suffer the imposition of the 'test'.

Yet the election of March 1904 was only the first stage in the process of Labour's consolidation in Leicester. As Curley promised the propaganda continued in November when Labour fielded six candidates at the municipal elections, four of whom were successful. Again as in March the dominant issue was unemployment. The November elections in many ways were of equal significance as the earlier Guardian poll. Five Labour candidates fought contests in November, only the Westcotes contestant was unopposed; furthermore, these five Labour candidates were opposed by only a single candidate each. In short, Labour in Leicester was faced with a Liberal-Conservative pact in November 1904.¹ In two wards the Conservative candidates were given a clear run against Labour, the other three being straight Liberal-Labour contests. Despite this handicap there was a marked general increase in the Labour vote, a fact which alarmed the Post, which commented with a touch of despair that 'After all this shows not the stream of the tendency but the force of the current.'²

1. Ibid., October 25, 1904.

2. Ibid., November 2, 1904.

Table 11.2 The Number of Labour Councillors returned to the Town Council

1902	1903	1904	1905	1906
2	4	7	11	11

Source: Leicester Council Minute Books.

Clearly major developments were underway within Leicester Liberalism. The 'progressive' experiment had been smashed on the rocks of unemployment and the party was forced to adopt a new local electoral strategy. As early as February 1904 the Liberal Association was seriously discussing the parliamentary situation in the light of Labour's intervention at the Guardian elections.¹ By April 1904 the Liberal St. Margaret's Ward committee, a previous bastion of Lib-Labism, whose past municipal representatives had included the General Secretary of N.U.B.S.O. requested '... a reconsideration of parliamentary arrangements in the light of the organised attack against Liberal candidates throughout the town'.² The conclusion that Leicester Liberalism was forced to tolerate the parliamentary pact at the behest of the national party is inescapable. More ominously for the Liberals there were increasing danger signs that the local party machine was in need of major repair. Those wards that faced Labour candidates found that their existing organisation could not cope with the electoral pressures and were forced to seek help from the executive committee.³ As Labour contested seats in predominantly working class areas the Liberal machine in those wards faced two major problems, the recruitment of party workers and the collection of funds.

1. Leicester Liberal Association Minutes, February 8, 1904.

2. Ibid., April 12, 1904.

3. Ibid., October 12, 1904.

The working class Liberal wards had in the past a fair proportion of working class leaders on their committees. George Banton, for example, sat on the Westcotes ward committee in 1892, Jabez Chaplin on the Latimer ward committee and the Woolley brothers, both N.U.B.S.O. officers, were also members of ward organisations.¹ The formation of the Leicester I.L.P., however, in 1894, produced a haemorrhage of working class activists from Liberalism. Banton and Chaplin were perhaps the most notable of those working class Liberals who joined the ranks of the I.L.P. Paradoxically the 'progressive' election of 1903 assisted in the further alienation of working class Liberals. The electoral pact of November 1903 could not accommodate all the old Lib-Lab candidates, thus J.H. Woolley lost his municipal seat when his ward organisation was forced to accept an orthodox Liberal candidate.² Needless to say Woolley stood again several years later for the Labour Party. The process was also generational with many of the old guard of working class Liberals such as Inskip, the General Secretary of N.U.B.S.O., and Potter, the president of the Leicester Cooperative Society passing away. Perhaps of most importance the old connection between Leicester Liberalism and the national executive of N.U.B.S.O. was finally severed by Inskip's death in 1899. No future General Secretary was to sit in the council chamber as the Liberal representative for St. Margaret's ward, that seat being filled in 1904 by Charlie Freak, the union's General President and member of the national L.R.C. Leicester Liberalism failed to fill the vacuum created by desertion and death in its working class ranks. No satisfactory replacement for T. Smith, another former N.U.B.S.O. General

1. Leicester Liberal Association Annual Report, 1892.

2. Leicester Daily Post, October 31, 1903.

Secretary, could be found when he retired from the key position as Secretary to the Liberal Association and the small group of three Liberal working class councillors in 1902 were not replaced when they left office.

The working class Liberal wards underwent a period of financial crisis in the early years of this century, a crisis from which they failed to recover. To field a candidate against a Labour contestant placed the working class Liberal ward under severe pressure. The problem could only be solved by the Liberal Association imposing a levy of £10 on those Liberal candidates who were contesting seats where there was no Labour contestant.¹ By 1907 the Association's minute book noted the difficulty in finding candidates to fight the forthcoming Guardian elections, while the municipal elections in November of that year placed the party machine under such strain that the entire ward organisation of the town had to be subordinated to the executive committee.² Even this measure was not a success, the executive having to bail out the Castle ward to the sum of £15 after the election.³ During the following year Leicester Liberalism had reached a new low when the municipal election sub-committee reported that '... a vigorous electoral campaign will bring reprisals by our rivals and even safe seats would prove expensive to defend'.⁴

When a political party in the early years of the present century lost members it experienced other adverse effects apart from financial ones. In particular all those aspects of political life which can be

1. Leicester Liberal Association Minutes, October 10, 1904.

2. Ibid., March 5, 1907; October 1, 1907.

3. Ibid., December 9, 1907.

4. Ibid., July 28, 1908.

broadly categorised as social and educational began to suffer. Regular ward meetings became formal rather than lively and local organisations appear to have ceased their social and propaganda functions. Such atrophy during a period when local political organisation was highly dependent upon multifarious activities in order to hold together its activist members in the periods between elections could only spell disaster. The executive of Leicester's Liberal Association were naturally worried about the decline of ward activity. In November 1905 the Association's minute book expressed '... concern over the condition of ward organisation and the lack of interest shown in political work by various committees'.¹ During the following month the Association resolved 'that ward committees arrange more meetings of a social educational and political nature'.² By May 1908 a certain desperation can be detected in the Association's decision to combat Labour's propaganda campaign by holding out-door meetings, a method previously frowned upon by Liberals.³ These efforts to bolster their flagging organisation, however, appear to have born little fruit. Labour continued to gain seats on both the Board of Guardians and in the council chamber, while Liberalism became increasingly dependent on an alliance with the Tories in their attempt to stem the Labour tide.

The Liberals' concern with the decline of local organisation and propaganda suggests that the opposite process was underway in the Labour camp. We have already seen that Labour was riding a crest of popular

1. Ibid., December 11, 1905.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., May 11, 1908.

discontent over persistent unemployment, but to what extent was the party developing the accretions that are necessary to sustain a political organisation when popular movements inevitably wane? What contemporaries called a 'political machine' was undoubtedly established by Leicester's Labour movement during the period under review but a survey of this nascent organisation has to encompass other aspects of the movement than the simple sketching of the party's anatomy by marking the lines of local headquarters and ward committees. The establishment of the Labour party as a permanent political force in Leicester was achieved by the development of three distinct yet closely related areas of activity, propaganda, organisation and socialisation.

To a new political movement with few resources propaganda is the first and most necessary task for survival. The early Socialists in Leicester were perhaps more fortunate than others in starting life in the local Secular Hall. Tom Barclay and the few other working class Secularists who formed the nucleus of the local branch of the Socialist League brought two essential attributes to the movement; the ability to hold lively controversial discussions and the willingness to utilise Leicester's time-honoured open air pitches, at the Market Place, Humberstone Gate and Russell Square, in use since the days of the Charter and beyond, for propaganda purposes. Barclay was justly proud with his recruitment successes at these meetings, many of Leicester's future Labour leaders' first experience of Socialist doctrine was at these Sunday events. The tradition of the working class stump orator continued up until the first World War in Leicester as an integral part of the labour movement perhaps reaching its apogee during the 1905 unemployment

campaign.¹ Yet effective as outdoor campaigning could be it had serious limitations. Poor weather and a few dull speakers could combine to negate perhaps a year's hard work. Other means of getting the message across had to be found. The establishment of a local Labour press admirably filled this gap.

The Pioneer was probably one of the most successful of the early Labour weeklies. Started by Barclay in the early 1890s, the Pioneer, which cost ½d, claimed a circulation of 5,000 in 1895.² Publication, however, appears to have been intermittent until 1899 when F.J. Gould, the full-time secretary of the Secular Hall and former journalist, devoted his energy and organisational talents to the paper.³ Similar to the period of Barclay's editorship, The Pioneer was always well-endowed with advertisements and under Gould's guidance began a more settled period of publication. The paper developed a lively journalistic style, not unlike the Clarion, aimed at mass appeal. A sports page with commentaries on local soccer and cricket matches, reviews of performances at local music halls and theatres, book reviews and the serialisation of popular novels all helped to enliven The Pioneer's other more mundane functions. Politics as expected was given a central place in this Labour weekly. A page devoted to the national scene provided a useful left-wing contrast to the depictions offered by the national and local orthodox press, while local politics were presented in what must have been a refreshing new dimension. The Pioneer also served as a notice board for all the organisations involved in the Labour movement, from

1. For this campaign and the events leading up to the June 1905 march see the Leicester Daily Post, May, June, 1905, passim. Unfortunately no extant issues of The Pioneer for these months have survived.

2. See above, p.

3. F.J. Gould, Life Story of a Humanist (London, 1923) p.91.

the women's auxiliary of the I.L.P. to the Trades Council. Furthermore, The Pioneer offered the Labour movement the opportunity of engaging the attention of those members of the working class not formally active within the Labour movement, but who nevertheless sympathised with the Socialist cause, a section of society characterised by Blatchford as 'the unattached'. It is of course notoriously difficult to gauge the efficacy of the Labour press in such areas as propaganda and recruitment, but allegations of corruption on the Board of Guardians certainly caused a minor storm amongst the members when they appeared in 1904,¹ while MacDonald acutely aware of the role played by The Pioneer devoted both time, in the form of articles, and money into the weekly.² Above all The Pioneer assisted in the building up of a sense of unity and community in the local Labour movement; it was their paper and all the various groups and institutions used it to the full.

The importance of this coordinating function brings us to our next element in the process of party building, establishing a physical organisation. Gaining recruits and sympathisers during periods of industrial crisis or widespread unemployment is one thing, holding on to this new support and moulding it into a tangible phenomenon like a political party required different talents from those of stump rhetoric and cutting journalism. The new party could not compete with the salubrious offices of the Liberals and Conservatives but facilities were at hand within the existing Labour movement. An early example of cooperation between the industrial and political wings of the Labour

1. Guardian Minutes, December 13, 1904. The allegations concerned the sale of a pig from the Guardians' allotments to a member of the board.

2. His weekly column was entitled 'From Green Benches'. For his financial commitment see Marquand, op.cit., p.81. In later years MacDonald employed H. Reynolds, the manager of The Pioneer as his parliamentary agent. See The Barrett Collection MSS 83/LE1/111 which is deposited in the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

movement was the location of the office at the Socialist League branch inside the headquarters of the L.A.H.U. As we have seen the I.L.P. during the 1890s was based in the local Labour Club, but as this institution foundered the party headquarters moved along with the new L.R.C. into the Trades Council Hall.¹ The formation of the Leicester L.R.C. in 1903 provided an organisational lifeline to the I.L.P. The L.R.C. took over the important functions of coordinating, financing and superintending electoral matters. The I.L.P. was thus free to concentrate upon propaganda without the worry of having to constantly engage in fund raising activities. Despite the presence of a few Lib-Labers on the Trades Council the L.R.C. existed harmoniously alongside the I.L.P. The smooth operation of this political division of Labour can largely be explained by the dominant presence of N.U.B.S.O. and the L.A.H.U. upon the Trades Council, both these unions possessing Socialist leaders. Indeed most of the leading officers of the L.R.C. were long standing members of the I.L.P., for example, Martin Curley. The L.R.C. president was T.F. Richards, chief assistant in the industrial and political struggles of the early 1890s, a fact not lost upon Leicester's Liberals whose Association minute book acidly notes the decision to '... refer in future to the Labour Party as the I.L.P.'²

Liberated from electoral worries the I.L.P. concentrated its energies upon building up a strong network of ward organisations. Again the reorganised Labour movement was bequeathed a structure that had been first laid down in the early 1890s. The initial ward organisation of

1. Leicester Trades Council Annual Report, 1903.

2. Minutes of the Leicester Liberal Association, December 9, 1907.

the mid 1890s based in the neighbourhood coffee and cocoa houses was replaced by a more formal system holding regular meetings usually in school rooms. The new ward organisations were from the beginning extremely active in propaganda work and in bringing their respective communities into the party structure. Up until 1903 however, this ward organisation was probably skeletal and only functioned in those districts, such as Richards's base in Wyggeston, which had a tradition of electoral activity. The unemployment campaign of 1903-5 breathed life into the existing district committees as well as expanding their numbers.¹ With the growth of Labour's appeal the wards faced the task of socialising the new members into the party. This process took the form of women's circles, summer picnics, bazaars, children's activities and guest lectures.² The role of political discussion and education naturally took on a new significance and importance against the backcloth of the unemployment campaign and to meet this need many of the wards developed their own Labour churches based in the district committee rooms.

The first reference to the Labour church movement in Leicester appears in 1903 some years after the collapse of Trevor's organisation. By 1905 there were four churches in the town.³ It is all too easy to exaggerate the role of religion in the early Labour movement placing the party on a continuum that stretches back to Victorian non-conformity. The reports on the Sunday meetings of the four Leicester Labour churches that appeared in The Pioneer and presumably compiled by persons attending

1. It was during the Guardian and local government elections of 1904 that the local press first mention the existence of ward committees in every area where Labour fielded a candidate.

2. The Pioneer, February 27, 1904, November 11, 1905.

3. Ibid., November 11, 1905.

the gatherings rarely mention any religious aspects apart perhaps from an occasional visit from a Clarion choir.¹ The churches were invariably a winter phenomenon and appear to have been a substitute for Sunday outdoor campaigning; a point which suggests that the Labour church in Leicester was primarily a ruse to allow for indoor Socialist lectures on a Sunday without offending sabbatarian sentiments, especially amongst those responsible for hiring the publicly owned meeting rooms.² The leading figures in the movement came from a variety of religious backgrounds. Banton was a noted non-conformist, Gould a leading Secularist, Bibbings a spiritualist lecturer, Sherrif a lapsed salvationist, while many others appear to have had no religious affiliations. Above all, the meetings were political, favourite topics being the cure for unemployment, the land question and Socialist themes. The churches continued until 1910 when interest began to wane. Their purpose throughout the period being an integral part of the wards' social and educational activities.

The possession of a broad-based party machine could, however, present problems for the leaders of Leicester's Labour movement. In particular the L.R.C. was now vulnerable from policy initiatives emanating from the wards. The first signs of tension were, as we have seen, manifested in the 1904 Guardian elections when some of the local Labour leaders were unhappy at the party's break from the progressive alliance. Problems increased during the following years as the unemployment movement gathered momentum. The new Guardians elected in

1. Ibid., December 23, 1905.

2. A phenomenon not unique to Leicester. See S. Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (1973) p.239.

1904 included a number of men who differed in social background from the full time trade union officials who had previously dominated Labour's elected representatives. This new generation of Labour leaders were often men who had emerged through propaganda work and ward organisation rather than from a trade union milieu. Paradoxically the strength of the Leicester trade union movement and its staunch support for Labour had facilitated, by the creation of the L.R.C., the progress to office of Socialists who were not themselves trade union leaders, in contrast to the years prior to the formation of the L.R.C. when only Trades Council delegates were given election funding by the Trades Council. Furthermore, they came to office as the champions of the unemployed. Three of these Guardians, Bibbings, Harris and Sherriff, assisted White in the leadership and organisation of the local unemployed demonstrations and processions that began in the winter of 1904-5. These activities culminated in the June 1905 march of 470 unemployed shoemakers to London headed by Sherriff, the local purveyor of the Clarion bicycle, White and F.L. Donaldson, a high church Anglican vicar.

These processions, which were partly designed to bring local attention to the plight of the unemployed and partly to raise money for the workless by street collections started in the winter of 1904-5. The initial impetus for the processions began in October when the Corporation, under pressure from Labour councillors, opened up a Labour bureau for the registration of the unemployed, possibly in anticipation of the government extending the local works programme initiated by

Chamberlain some years earlier.¹ Resentment, however, was aroused amongst the thousand men who attended the opening of the bureau over footballers and bandsmen being given preference for corporation employment.² George White, the young crippled laster who had previously campaigned in the press and lobbied the Guardians for better treatment for those on the 'test' seized the initiative afforded by the lengthy queue of workless outside the Town Hall and led them on a march around the major thoroughfares.³ This local exercise in street drama caught the attention of a number of the newly elected Labour Guardians. Three of these Guardians, Bibbings, Sherriffand Harris, assisted White in the subsequent daily organisation of the processions and usually addressed the gathered unemployed when the walk ended in the market place.⁴

By May the daily gatherings of the unemployed were dominating the local press and the Trades Council was warning of the potentially riotous behaviour of the marchers.⁵ The local press was certainly concerned by these events and a distinct softening to their previous tough attitude on unemployment relief can be detected in the Post. For example, the newspaper's editorial for March 5, 1904, cited above, warning against making life easier for the unemployed for fear of upsetting the local labour market, when contrasted to the warm reception given by the Post to the news in May 1905 that the mayor was

1. Leicester Daily Post, October 22, 1904. K.D. Brown's Labour and Unemployment 1900-14 (Newton Abbot, 1971) is the best national survey of the unemployment agitation during these years.

2. Leicester Daily Post, October 22, 1904. It was reported that '... those employed in the shoe trade were there in good force'.

3. Guardian Minutes, November 1, 1904.

4. Leicester Daily Post, May 10, 1905.

5. Ibid.

convening the council's unemployment committee to find new ways of assisting those on relief shows how much the attitudes of local Liberalism had changed over the previous year.¹

A striking departure in the local unemployment campaign was initiated by the news in May that James Gribble, the full time N.U.B.S.O. official in Northampton and leader of that town's formidable S.D.F. organisation was embarking upon a march of striking shoemakers from the village of Raunds to London. This march was designed to lobby Whitehall to impose 'fair wage clauses' upon village manufacturers who had a notorious reputation for sweating their workers employed on army contracts.² The Leicester and Northampton Socialists had been keen rivals for some time, Gribble in particular was a fierce critic of Richards's recently acquired reformism.³ The successful outcome of the Raunds march, the government gave way to the strikers' demands, was widely reported in the local press, together with the warm reception given to the marchers in London.⁴ An element of upmanship was certainly present when Sherriff told the daily meeting of the unemployed on May 10 that plans were being drawn up for a march of unemployed Leicester shoemakers to London.⁵ An extra element of topicality was added when Sherriff announced that the march was not to lobby parliament, but to petition the king, taking as his precedent not Gribble but Gapon and the recent unrest in Russia.⁶ Needless to say the local Trades Council

1. Ibid., May 15, 1905.

2. See The Times, May 15, 1905 and K. Brooker, 'James Gribble and the Raunds Strike of 1905', Northamptonshire Past and Present No. 5, 1981, passim.

3. Fox, op.cit., p.337.

4. Leicester Daily Post, May 6, 1905.

5. Ibid., May 11, 1905.

6. Ibid., May 30, 1905; Labour Leader, June 9, 16, 23, 1905 contain reports by Pepper of The Pioneer which emphasise the importance of the Russian precedent to the leaders of the Leicester march.

and prominent Labour figures were embarrassed and opposed to Sherriff's scheme. Feelings were heightened when Sherriff told the crowd on May 29 that 'He turned away from a cruel and heartless Parliament and his object was to go and see the King.' '... the unemployed in England were suffering under the same conditions as the Russian peasantry; and if the King did not see them then the press of this country would no longer be able to throw stones at the Russian Monarch'.¹

Two days later the Trades Council condemned the proposed march. Chaplin noted that '... it was not likely that uncle Ted would leave his cosy room to meet them outside Buckingham Palace'; while Richards, his youthful militancy making a temporary comeback supported the march and added that '... the men were acting spontaneously and not on the advice of their leaders'.² The Trades Council voted 31 - 22 not to support the march.

This setback to the marchers was soon reversed. Local interest snowballed and by the time the marchers left the market place singing 'Lead kindly light', 80,000 people had gathered to see their departure.³ The intervention of F.L. Donaldson, a popular local ritualist vicar, helped to boost support for the march. Dressed in his surplice and academic hood, Donaldson frequently addressed the unemployed in the days prior to the march. On June 1 he spoke to the gathered crowd telling the men the value of processions and the ancient right of Englishmen to petition the King.⁴ When the marchers, mostly shoemakers, left the

1. Leicester Daily Post, May 30, 1905.

2. Ibid., May 31, 1905.

3. Ibid., June 5, 1905.

4. Ibid., June 1, 1905.

square headed by Sherriff and White they were joined by their erstwhile opponents Banton and Chaplin, while Donaldson, overcome by the occasion, agreed to accompany the marchers to London as their Father Gapon/John Ball.¹

The march itself was relatively uneventful. The monotony of the long walk only being punctuated by a hymn singing session orchestrated by Donaldson outside Bunyon's cottage in Bedfordshire.² Their time in London was in many ways a disaster, their two day stay being marred by relentlessly heavy storms. It was reported that Buckingham Palace was surrounded by armed guards, but the weather was so inclement that the men abandoned their march up The Mall.³ A large meeting, addressed by MacDonald who had been in charge of the London arrangements, was held in Trafalgar Square before the men started their long trek back to Leicester.

MacDonald, who had allegedly 'half killed himself' in organising and coordinating the marchers' activities in London, presided over the Trafalgar Square meeting. He did not make a speech, choosing instead to give a short introduction in which he claimed that the purpose of the march was to show solidarity with the unemployed of the metropolis.⁴ Jabez Chaplin, who along with other Leicester Labour leaders, had taken the train down to London for the event, was more specific. He noted that the main cause of the march was unemployment in the footwear trade caused by mechanisation and concluded that 'In a properly organised system of industry the improvements in industry would simply mean shorter hours

1. Labour Leader, June 9, 1905.

2. Leicester Daily Post, June 8, 1905.

3. The Times, June 12, 1905.

4. Ibid.,

and better labour conditions for the workers'.¹ Although involved in the march, MacDonald did not view the rising national unemployment movement as enthusiastically as Keir Hardie. The movement, claimed Hardie, would force the government to pass the Unemployment Relief Bill and thus establish the principles of (1) moving responsibility on to the community to find work for the unemployed; (2) the cost of this would be a public charge and not a charity; (3) relief would not involve the loss of the rights of citizenship.² MacDonald, on the other hand, claimed that the bill was fraught with pitfalls most notable being the failure to make the areas of administration rural, the towns being located within these units. He concluded that the bill required so many amendments that its passing was unlikely.³

The event was not, however, a total failure. A large sum of money, the organisers would never disclose how much, had been collected from well wishers and its subsequent distribution must have brought some relief. In wider terms the attention raised by the Leicester men helped to stimulate growing agitation against unemployment in other localities. Indeed Brown has argued that the sharp rise in demonstrations, often violent, that followed the Leicester march forced the government to pass the bill.⁴

The march was also significant in other respects. It can be seen as the swan song of the radical shoemaker, the death throes of a working class cultural tradition being hastened by rapid mechanisation and new

1. Ibid.

2. Labour Leader, May 26, 1905.

3. Ibid., June 16, 1905.

4. K.D. Brown, op.cit., pp. 59-61.

forms of work organisation. The strong element of street theatre that so distinguished the local daily processions, and the march itself looks back to the noisy era of artisanal agitations. On the other hand, the march was the first genuine unemployment march of the modern period and set precedents which others would follow. These events also show that the Socialist debate on strategy carried out in the late 1880s had not entirely killed the belief that extra-parliamentary agitation was a useful form of working class political activity. In this respect the march both looks back to the demonstrations of the 1880s and ^{forward to} the unrest of the years prior to the Great War.

The unemployment agitation in Leicester dissipated in the weeks after the march. Perhaps the organisation demanded by the event drained the energy of local activists. In the months of mid summer a sense of both anti-climax and anticipation on the outcome of the Unemployment bill became the dominant feature of the local Labour movement. Employment prospects also began to improve markedly. Hosiery, which had not suffered from unemployment during the first years of the present century¹ was employing nearly 6% more workers in November 1905 than it had been in the previous November.² More importantly the Leicester footwear trade was at long last increasing levels of employment. So much so that the Labour Gazette noted an improvement of 6.7% in employment figures in December 1905 in comparison to the previous December.³

1. In November 1904 Chaplin, in his questionnaire to M.E. MacDonald noted that Leicester hosiery manufacturers had more or less ceased to lay off adult male skilled operatives as they, the employers, were reluctant to use 'green labour' on the new generation of expensive machines. MacDonald Collection V.2, J. Chaplin to M.E. MacDonald.

2. Labour Gazette, December 1905.

3. Ibid., January 1906.

Unemployment, despite this marked improvement, remained the key issue in the November council elections. Labour contested three wards two of whom were successful. G.O. Kenny, the victor of the Aylestone contest was reported to have '... appealed to the voters because he is in favour of finding work for the workless, decent housing, and the feeding of starving children'.¹ The other successful Labour candidate, J. Riley, had '... campaigned strongly on the right to work'.² A fourth Labour candidate was given a clear run in the Wyggeston ward. In their summary of these results the Post commented bitterly that 'the Labour Party took up the position that any understanding which may exist between them and the Liberals applies only to the Parliamentary elections and claimed three more seats on the council'.³

The 1906 general election campaign was, in contrast to the recent local government contests, a low key affair. Both Broadhurst and MacDonald focused attention on land reforms in their local pre-election meetings. The Conservatives somewhat taken aback by this sudden appearance of unity, refused to attend the meeting arranged by the mayor to discuss the fixing of the polling day.⁴ The Conservatives were not the only body upset by apparent collusion between Broadhurst and MacDonald. The Trades Council meeting on January 2 was dominated by misgivings over the prospect of MacDonald sharing the same platform with Broadhurst. Many delegates expressed their concern over such a public abandonment of the principle of Labour independence and a fierce

1. Leicester Daily Post, November 2, 1905.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., January 2, 1906.

debate followed.¹ The discussion, however, was concluded by Chaplin pointing out to the meeting that no matter how distasteful they may have found the campaign, independence had to be sacrificed in order to reverse the Taff Vale decision.²

The Conservatives attempted to make tariff reform the main issue but as elsewhere the threat of a 'stomach tax' proved stronger than the vague promise of increased employment.³ Broadhurst initiated the Lib-Lab campaign by emphasising the importance of land reform in his first election meeting. The Land Question was the key issue in 1906, according to Broadhurst, as it was the only way to '... prevent the migration of labourers from the country into the great centres of industry'.⁴ MacDonald began his campaign three days later with a crowded open meeting at the Temperance Hall. Flanked by Sir Edward Wood and George Banton, MacDonald told the audience that he supported the Liberal government's proposals on Chinese labour and their amendments to the Unemployment Act. He continued with an outline of his own policies on such matters as three yearly parliaments, female suffrage, the payment of members and the abolition of the House of Lords. He concluded this section of his speech by noting that he was, however, '... Quite content to support such instalments of reform as he could get'.⁵ This was followed by his elucidation of his own social policies which were 'the elevation of the family, drastic land legislation, training colonies, the taxation of unearned income, and the rights of local authorities to acquire land'.

1. Ibid., January 3, 1906.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid. For the national picture see A. Briggs' lucid discussion 'The Political Scene' in S. Nowell-Smith (ed.), Edwardian England 1901-1914 (Oxford, 1964).

4. Leicester Daily Post, January 3, 1906.

5. Ibid., January 6, 1906.

There was little in this programme which differed from Broadhurst's policy. The 'elevation of the family' for example was MacDonald's term for ending female industrial labour. There was nothing new in this idea, indeed Broadhurst had proposed the same policy locally in the late 1880s.¹ 'Men were being supplanted by women ...', MacDonald told the audience, '... they were brought in not to be economically independent but to undersell man's labour. This was fundamentally wrong. (Cheers)'² Similarly his ideas on land reform display the hallmark of nineteenth century Radicalism. He '... believed in drastic land legislation, in reviving peasant industries ... in the revival of agricultural security and village recreations... unemployed farms should be made colleges of agriculture so that men and women could be taught the arts and mysteries of growing fruit and vegetables'.³ Such ideas no doubt would have sounded equally at home if they had been expressed in Lossiemouth but MacDonald was not out to inspire in January 1906; rather he was being extremely cautious so as not to alienate the Liberal vote from the 'progressive alliance'.

Away from the large, much publicised, town centre meetings MacDonald placed less emphasis upon land reform. This was especially the case in the wards where he could frequently be faced by a more critical audience. At one of these venues he was accused of 'hobnobbing with the bosses', a reference to his appearance on the platform with Wood, the Chairman of Freeman Hardy and Willis. He met this particular accusation with the

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1. L.A.H.U. monthly report, May 1889.
 2. Leicester Daily Post, January 6, 1906.
 3. Ibid.

riposte that he 'did not hobnob with anyone' and then went on to discuss the need for housing reform.¹ Yet even at these engagements MacDonald was ever cautious. For example, at the Willow Street meeting his late arrival gave his wife, Margaret, the opportunity to address the audience on the need for factory legislation and shorter working hours. When MacDonald finally arrived he took over from his wife, promising the audience that he intended to fight for a major redistribution of income. This reform, however, was to be achieved by '... not so much a detailed programme as a certain tone of mind'.² The spiritualists found him equally reticent when he addressed a meeting at their hall in Silver Street, chaired by Chaplin, the call for housing reform being the high point of his speech.³ The following day's meeting at Oxford Street School found MacDonald more forthcoming when he spoke on the need for the provision of school meals.⁴ This cautious approach paid handsome dividends. MacDonald polled only sixty votes less than Broadhurst, a good indication of the Labour candidate's appeal to Leicester Liberals.⁵

There is a danger of overemphasising the degree of potential criticism that could be levied at MacDonald from the ranks of the Leicester Labour movement. We must keep in mind the point that MacDonald's local popularity reached new heights in January 1906. This fact is well illustrated by The Pioneer's account of his adoption meeting at the

1. Ibid., January 9, 1906.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., January 11, 1906.

4. Ibid., January 12, 1906.

5. Broadhurst, 14,745; MacDonald 14,685; Rolleston, 7,504.

Temperance Hall:

As the speaker [MacDonald] led them through the many intricate subjects with which he dealt they seemed to follow him with an almost breathless eagerness. As he added fact to fact, and little by little completed the sequence of a practically faultless argument, one could almost feel the pent-up excitement of the audiences: and when the final climax came and the speaker had added the last link to his chain, there was such a round of cheers as could only have come from the throats of the British working men. ¹

David Marquand has warned the present day writer of the danger of anachronism in assessing the political theory of MacDonald during this period. 'His theory was produced in and for the 1900s, not for the 1920s and still less for the 1950s or the 1970s'.² Marquand buttresses his argument by pointing out that the heart of MacDonald's theory, a staunch belief that idealism not class was the motive power of history, was shared by many other Socialists and Radicals of the period.³ The Pioneer's account of his adoption meeting perhaps further underlines Marquand's point, inasmuch as it suggests that MacDonald's philosophy had wide popular currency. Yet if we move our focus away from the carnival atmosphere of the general election to the more mundane setting of the town council chambers and the Board of Guardians do we not find Labour representatives motivated by different forces from those of 'progressive idealism? This is not to argue that the Labour representatives who gained office in local government after 1903 were hardened marxists with a clear cut programme for social change. Far from it. They shared much of MacDonald's ambiguity and confusion on how Socialism was to be achieved. These councillors and guardians were, however, the

1. Quoted in Marquand, op.cit., p.95.

2. Ibid., p.92.

3. Ibid., p.93.

product of a local expression of a class based political movement which had tested and rejected the policy of collaboration with progressive Liberalism. It is therefore of little wonder that MacDonald proved to be so testy over charges of abandoning Labour's independence, for between the two poles of parliamentary and local elections lay two opposing conceptions of both the structure and style of working class politics.

This contradiction between 'class' and 'idealism' remained below the surface, apart from the few acid comments expressed at ward meetings, during the election campaign. Several factors explain this particular squaring of the circle. Taff Vale was undoubtedly an incident that worked in MacDonald's favour as it effectively silenced the Trades Council, the most powerful potential source of opposition. Indeed MacDonald was to fully utilise the acquiescence of organised labour to the idea of the Lib-Lab pact. At the Temperance Hall meeting he told his audience that 'He was on no account going to ask them to plump on polling day. The Trades Council advised everybody influenced by the Labour movement to vote for Mr. Broadhurst and him'.¹ Populism was another factor fully exploited by MacDonald. His remarks on the South African war and Chinese labour display his skill in appealing to the working man's sense of indignation over the loss of employment opportunity:

They were told it [the war] was going to plant the Union Jack upon the land of the free. But the echoes of the muskets had hardly died out on the battle-fields, the ink on the treaty was hardly dry, before the men who plotted the war began to plot to bring in Chinese slaves. (Cheers). They could talk about their gold; their gold is tainted. (Hear Hear) They could talk about employing white men; it was not true,

1. Leicester Daily Post, January 6, 1906.

and even if it were true, was he going to stand and see his white brothers degraded to the position of yellow slave drivers?¹ No, he was not. (Loud and continuous cheers).

If we project forward to the period immediately after the scope of this thesis it is interesting to note that virtually the same set of circumstances was to work in favour of the Lib-Lab pact. For example the need to reverse the Osborne Decision over the payment of members firmly tied Labour to the Liberal tail in the elections of 1910.² While MacDonald's local appeal was still of such a scale that his threatened resignation from the Leicester seat resulted in the abandonment of Leicester Labour Party's plan to field their own candidate at a by-election when the Liberal member resigned in 1913.³

To summarise this chapter which has dealt with one of the most formative decades in the history of both the English and Leicester working class the following points have to be underlined. Labour politics in Leicester after 1895 shifted away from a concern over the sectional interests of the more skilled male workers towards an emphasis on the problems created by poverty and unemployment in the wake of major industrial changes, particularly in footwear. The growing unemployment movement stimulated party organisation while the issues that unemployment created re-introduced the element of class into local politics shortly after the signing of the 'progressive alliance'. The subsequent local

1. Ibid.

2. Clegg, Fox and Thompson, op.cit., pp. 413-422 contains a useful summary on this episode.

3. W. Lancaster, 'The Tradition of Militancy in the Leicester I.L.P.', University of Warwick M.A., 1979, pp. 57-60.

elections witnessed the demise of class collaboration in parochial politics and the consolidation and growth of Labour's electoral performance. In order to check the rising tide of Labour's electoral success the Liberals formed a tacit alliance with the Conservatives in local government campaigns. Class collaboration had been abandoned by Labour but the movement continued to lack a sense of direction in terms of policy. Thus old palliatives such as land reform became intermingled with the more modern Socialist notions on equality. MacDonald was able to exploit this ambiguity in local Labour politics which together with short term factors, especially Taff Vale, assured him of a submissive Labour movement in his joint campaign with Henry Broadhurst.

Despite this 'progressive' victory the golden age of Leicester Liberalism was at an end. The backbone of Leicester Liberalism had been the coalition between the working and middle class, an alliance assiduously cultivated by John Biggs and sealed with the election of P.A. Taylor in 1862. This class alliance had been welded in a period dominated by artisanal forms of production. The inescapable fact behind the break up of the alliance was that by the early years of the present century the artisans had been replaced by semi-skilled factory operatives. The material base of Radical Leicester had vanished in the two decades that separate the retirement of Taylor and the election of MacDonald. Liberal Party organisation was in serious decline in most working class areas and after 1906 the Liberal presence in local elections became increasingly dependent upon terminal nursing care dispensed by the Conservatives.

CONCLUSION

By comparing the Leicester labour movement in 1906 with that of the 1860s we can detect both change and continuity. The first and most notable difference is that of size, the population having increased three and a half fold during the period. The local economy had also undergone a thorough going transformation, especially with the growing importance of footwear. Yet the economy was not, unlike other similar towns, experiencing the advantages of a diversified manufacturing base. Hosiery and footwear employed 37.3% of the workforce in 1861 and 53.9% in 1901. Leicester in 1901 still awaited the benefits of new metal based industries, this sector of the economy employing 7.2% of the workforce in 1861, and 6.1% in 1901. Despite the continuous importance of these two trades to Leicester major changes had occurred in the production of footwear and hosiery. If a stockinger or riveter from the 1860s could have toured a hosiery or footwear factory in the early years of the present century he would have been astounded by changes in the production process. First and foremost of these changes would be the actual location of production. Gone were the workshops, garrets and domestic based units, having been replaced by steam powered factories. Inside the factories noisy machinery had replaced the hand frames and lasting benches. While the workers who operated the new devices were, in hosiery largely female, and in footwear, if they were still predominantly male, they were younger semi-skilled operatives, being relentlessly paced by the mechanised teams.

Such profound changes in the world of work altered the cultural and political disposition of the workforce. The informal milieu of workshop production had provided the ideal environment for nurturing an artisanal

life style. Obeisance to St. Monday, a physical and material distancing from the ultimate employer, autonomy over the production process, and for those who had a taste for such things, participation in a lively radical political culture were real benefits which co-existed with the many curses of such a mode of industrial organisation. In contrast the hosiery and footwear workers of the early 1900s experienced the routinised reality of modern factory life. Hosiery production was becoming increasingly dominated by female labour while the descendants of the stocking frame knitters, the Cotton's patent operatives, were doggedly fighting to retain their place in this production process via the policy of 'one man one frame'. The changes in footwear were equally noticeable. The mechanised 'team system' had become virtually universal in the Leicester factories, while the pace of production was now fixed not by custom but by the American machine company. Moreover, deskilling had been carried out on a wide scale, and those workers who had previously considered themselves craftsmen would be fortunate if they still had work, albeit as semi-skilled machine operatives. Indeed the restructuring of the British footwear industry had become the model to those sections of the business community that still retained a strong faith in the ultimate virtues of free trade.¹

Yet this thorough going transition was not achieved without disturbing social and political life. This is not to argue that both these spheres were static prior to the arrival of factory production. The major expansion in local industry which occurred prior to the arrival

1. See the article 'The Victory of British Boots' in The Economist, May 3, 1913.

of widespread factory production was accompanied by a considerable influx of migrant workers. Such growth of what was a highly inefficient form of industrial organisation enhanced and reinforced old cultural and working patterns. It is hoped that the discussion on religion has highlighted at least one major shift that was underway in working class culture during the apparently stable decades between the 1860s and the 1880s. Manufacturers in Leicester during the 1880s and 1890s were therefore faced with what was a peculiarly obdurate workforce and the process of centralisation and mechanisation was destined to have fundamental social and political consequences upon the local community.

Employers in Leicester since the days of the reformed corporation had dominated local politics. The connections between class and political allegiance were brought to the fore as workers wrestled with manufacturers who formed the spine of local Liberalism. The political upheavals which accompanied the economic ones were not, however, simply a matter of workers becoming disenchanted with Liberalism because that happened to be the party of the bosses. This is not to deny that the identity of interest between employers and Liberalism was not brought into question by elements of the Labour movement. The rhetoric of the Socialist shoemakers during the early 1890s and the language of class that was utilised during the 1894 by-election highlight the importance of this factor. The argument that has been posed in this study is that Liberalism was questioned and ultimately rejected by a large section of the Leicester working class because it was both the manufacturers' doctrine and also highly unsuitable in dealing with the problems of poverty and unemployment created by economic dislocation.

Even the above formulation is incomplete. Socialism required more than propitious local circumstances and national advocates. A strata of local activists rooted in the community was required to build and sustain the nascent movement. Leicester was unusually well served in this vital area. The virile artisanal political culture of the town provided a group of young men well versed in the art of controversy and with the audacity to both espouse and propagate new radical ideas. Of perhaps equal importance were the people who listened to the Socialist propaganda and related the new theory to their own circumstances. In particular the trade union officers and Trades Council delegates who formed the bulk of the Leicester I.L.P. upon its formation in 1894 selectively harnessed ideas propagated by members of the Socialist League and the S.D.F. in the production of a political ideology tailored to local circumstances.

Thus the Socialism of the Leicester I.L.P. was an expression of indigenous working class traditions, contemporary circumstances and Socialist ideas. The Labour movement that the new party was attempting to lead and shape both looked back to what increasingly appeared to have been a golden age of workshop production and forward to the collective solution of poverty. The I.L.P. succeeded in winning a substantial section of working class electoral support because it could draw strength from both facets of this apparent ambiguity.

The themes pursued in this thesis are manifestly central to the debate currently being waged over the rise of independent Labour politics and the decline of Liberalism. One group of historians have argued that the rise of Labour was inevitable, although they differ over the factors

which created Labour's inexorable growth.¹ A second group has pointed to the tenacity of Liberalism; surviving on its traditional links with Non-conformity in Wales, re-invigorated by 'New' Liberalism in Lancashire or sustained by a combination of 'Old' and 'New' Liberalism in the North East of England.² The evidence presented in this study clearly supports the first group. Continuities can obviously be discerned between Liberalism and Labour in Leicester but grand generalisations on the subject loses sight of particularity, context and the drama of the historical process as it shaped, and was being shaped by, the activities of seemingly unimportant people.

1. Pelling, op.cit.; R. McKibbin, op.cit.; D. Clark, op.cit.; J. Hill, 'Manchester and Salford Politics and the Early Development of the Independent Labour Party', International Review of Social History, XXVI (1981) part 1; J. Reynolds and K. Leybourn, 'The Emergence of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford', International Review of Social History, XX (1975), part 3; T. Woodhouse, 'The Working Class' in D. Fraser (ed.), A History of Modern Leeds (1980).

2. K.O. Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of the Labour Party: The Welsh Experience 1883-1929', Welsh History Review, 6 (1973); P.F. Clarke, op.cit.; A.W. Purdue, 'The Liberal and Labour Party in North East Politics', International Review of Social History, XXVI (1981) part 1.

APPENDIX 1Population Growth 1851-1901 (Leicester)

	<u>1851</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>
Males	28,691	31,766	44,973	57,720	82,441	99,014
Females	31,893	36,290	50,247	64,656	92,183	112,565
Total	60,584	68,056	95,220	122,376	174,624	211,579
Decennial increase:						
numerical	7,472	27,164	27,156	52,248	36,955	15,643
percentage	12.3%	39.9%	28.5%	42.7%	23.2%	7.4%

Source: Census Reports, 1851 - 1901.

APPENDIX 2Industrial Employment 1851-1901:
percentages (Leicester)

	<u>1851</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>
Agriculture	3.4	3.6	3.1	1.1	1.8	1.3
Mines and quarries	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.5	1.2	.4
Metals etc.	4.0	7.2	6.0	4.6	6.2	6.1
Precious metals etc.	.2	.1	.3	.3	.3	1.0
Building etc.	5.6	6.8	10.8	10.2	6.6	9.7
Furniture etc.	3.7	2.4	6.2	1.0	1.1	2.2
Bricks etc.	1.7	1.4	.9	.7	1.0	.4
Chemicals etc.	1.1	.7	.9	2.9	2.2	2.1
Skins etc.	.7	.7	.8	.7	.8	.9
Paper etc.	.3	.2	.3	.9	1.2	3.9
Textiles	51.9	44.6	31.5	32.2	27.0	23.5
Dress	25.7	30.5	37.3	43.9	50.6	48.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
HOSIERY	38.5	26.4	20.7	22.2	21.5	17.1
BOOTS AND SHOES	6.2	10.9	21.6	33.4	41.0	36.8

Source: Census Reports, 1851 - 1901.

APPENDIX 3Industrial Employment 1851-1901:
numbers (Leicester)

	<u>1851</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>
Agriculture	757	906	733	413	1,035	920
Mines and quarries	392	436	450	604	725	298
Metals, machines, implements, conveyances	904	1,803	1,431	1,798	3,634	4,368
Precious metals, watches, games etc.	38	28	60	114	168	710
Building and construction	1,260	1,700	2,569	3,998	3,874	7,010
Wood, furniture, fittings, decorations	839	591	1,470	396	663	1,593
Bricks, cement, pottery, glass	377	351	200	280	604	272
Chemicals, oil,, grease, soap, resin etc.	258	188	226	1,153	1,274	1,524
Skins, leather, hair & feathers	157	182	196	252	444	679
Paper, prints, books & stationery	62	57	58	342	715	2,844
Textiles	11,643	11,128	7,488	12,575	15,944	17,004
Dress	5,769	7,611	8,862	17,178	29,857	35,029
Total	22,456	24,981	23,743	39,103	58,937	72,251
HOSIERY	8,652	6,602	4,923	8,699	12,667	12,389
FOOTWEAR	1,396	2,741	5,103	13,056	24,159	26,561

Source: Census Reports, 1851 - 1901.

APPENDIX 5The Employment of Male and Female Labour
in the Hosiery and Footwear Industries

	<u>1851</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>
<u>Hosiery</u>						
Numbers:						
M	5,759	4,153	3,037	3,391	4,286	3,282
F	2,893	2,449	1,886	5,308	8,381	9,107
	<hr/> 8,652	<hr/> 6,602	<hr/> 4,923	<hr/> 8,699	<hr/> 12,667	<hr/> 12,389
Percentages:						
M	66.6	62.9	61.7	39.0	33.8	26.5
F	33.4	37.1	38.3	61.0	66.2	73.5
<hr/>						
<u>Footwear</u>						
Numbers:						
M	1,071	1,897	3,714	9,173	16,839	17,770
F	325	844	1,389	3,883	7,320	8,791
	<hr/> 1,396	<hr/> 2,741	<hr/> 5,103	<hr/> 13,056	<hr/> 24,159	<hr/> 26,561
Percentages:						
M	76.7	69.2	72.8	70.3	69.7	66.9
F	23.3	30.8	27.2	29.7	30.3	33.1
<hr/>						

Source: Census Report, 1851 - 1901. The number of females employed, particularly in the hosiery industry, is likely to be underestimated during the early decades; the figures for 1871 are for persons over 20 only.

APPENDIX 5Estimated Immigration 1851-1901:
percentages (Leicester)

	<u>1851</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>
London	5.8	8.5	5.2	7.0	5.5	9.7
S.E. counties	2.4	3.2	3.3	3.2	4.5	8.9
S. Midland counties	18.8	19.4	25.6	19.8	17.9	14.7
E. counties	3.8	3.0	3.4	2.9	4.6	6.5
S.W. counties	2.4	1.7	3.5	2.5	2.9	1.1
W. Midland counties	19.4	29.1	22.3	23.8	17.8	18.2
N. Midland counties	28.9	20.0	18.4	23.8	22.5	12.3
N.W. & N.E. counties	12.4	7.5	9.3	10.3	14.3	18.3
N. counties	.9	1.0	1.4	1.2	1.2	2.2
Elsewhere	5.2	6.6	7.6	5.5	8.8	8.1
	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>
Northamptonshire	13.8	13.2	16.5	12.6	8.9	8.9
Warwickshire	11.5	21.4	9.3	11.2	5.0	4.0
Nottinghamshire	8.3	7.2	5.3	9.1	5.6	3.6
Staffordshire	3.2	3.8	6.9	8.6	7.0	6.9
Lincolnshire	10.9	3.9	5.7	5.8	8.2	3.9
Derbyshire	3.9	5.7	3.7	5.2	5.9	6.0

Source: Census Reports 1851 - 1901.

APPENDIX 6Trade Union Membership (Leicester)Boot and Shoe Industry

	<u>N. U. B. S. O.</u>		
	<u>National</u>	<u>Leicester</u>	
		<u>No. 1</u>	<u>No. 2</u>
1874	4,204	1,397	N11
1891	30,046	10,000	1,700
1893	41,274	11,200	2,000
1900	27,960	11,000	1,900
1910	30,197	11,000	2,463

Source: N. U. B. S. O. Annual Registers.

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