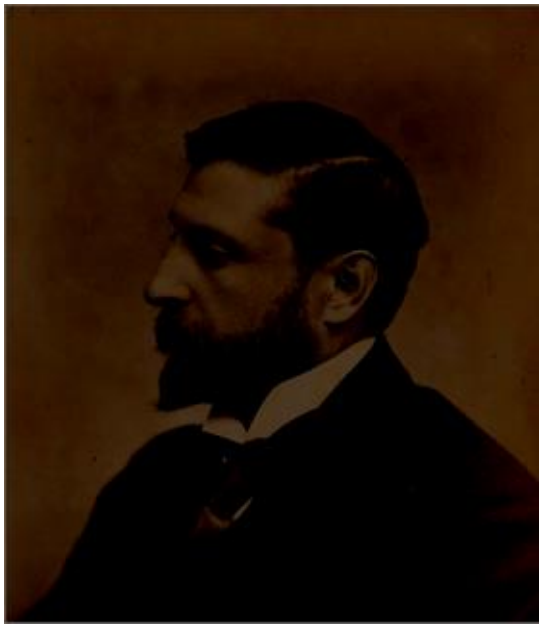
SIR HENRY RIDER HAGGARD VISITS BLUNTISHAM



When I was in my early teens I fell in love with the adventure stories written by Sir Henry Rider Haggard - 'King Solomon's Mines' and 'She' amongst them.

It came as a great surprise, therefore, when looking for information for my article on the old school registers, to discover that Sir Henry had visited the village in 1902. The purpose of his visit was not to seek out a possible setting for a further work of imperial derring do [now there's a thought!] but as a part of his survey of all the English counties with particular reference to the state of English farming.

As a landowner himself he was greatly concerned by the declining state of agriculture, the decrease in village populations as workers moved to the industrialised towns in search of better wages and the subsequent overpopulation and poor conditions encountered by those workers when they had made their move.

In Bluntisham he spoke with Mr CP Tebbutt and visited the cottages which were being built at the bottom of High Street. I'll return to this later but, firstly I think it might be helpful to understand the background as to the decline in agriculture so I'm going to have to leave off discussing Bluntisham for a short while.

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES?

To say that cereal farming during the 19th century hit highs and lows is probably understating matters. At the beginning of the century we were involved in the Napoleonic Wars and, because Britain had blocked produce coming from continental Europe, our cereal production was free from competition and our farms were profitable.

When the wars ended in 1815 it was decided to continue to regulate the importation of grain so that British prices could be kept high. The legislation governing this became known as The Corn Laws.

Needless to say, this found great favour with the wealthy landowners but it didn't find any favour

with other sectors of society. The high cost of bread and the overall cost of living meant that the working classes could barely afford to buy anything else apart from food. This, in turn meant that the sale of manufactured goods went down and bosses had to pay their workers more in order that they could at least feed themselves.

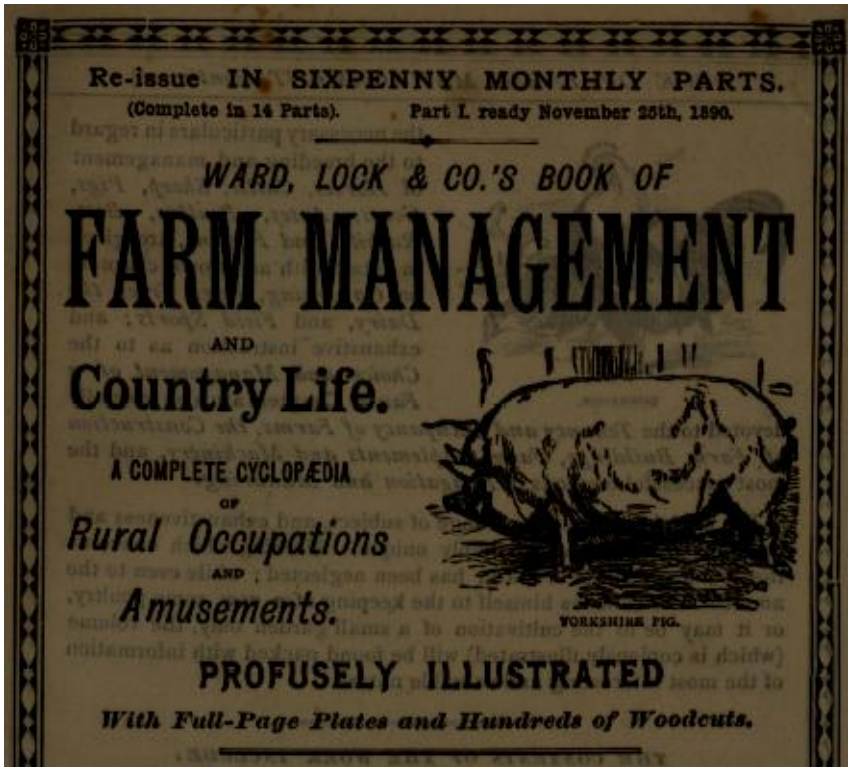
It was another thirty years before the Corn Laws were repealed. This should hardly come as a surprise bearing in mind that wealthy landowners who only made up 3% of the population were the only people allowed to vote and that they weren't going to vote in favour of abolishing something which was proving to be 'a nice little earner.'

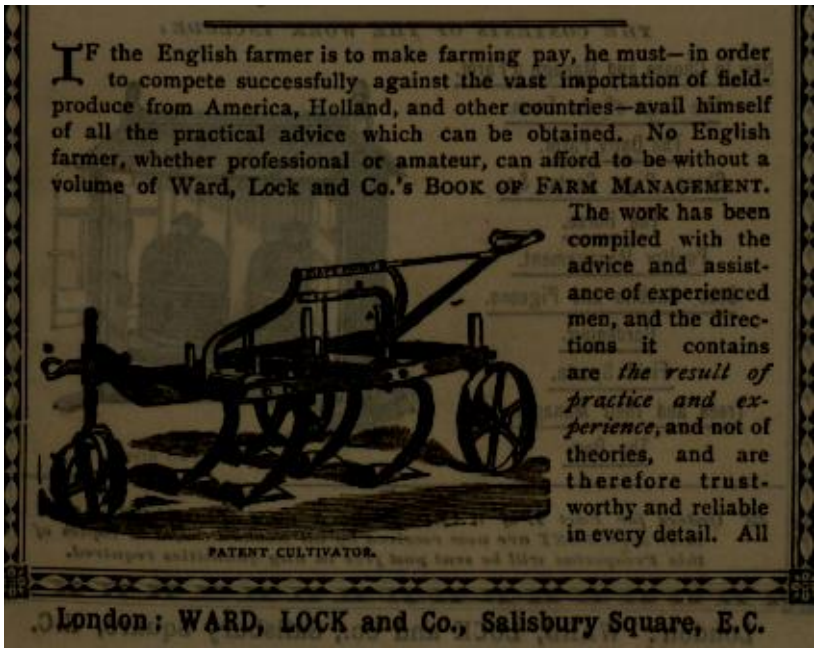
After rioting and other forms of social unrest [and Bluntisham was not untouched by this – more of which later!] it was finally decided to extend the franchise to the merchant classes. This became law in 1832 and even so, it took until 1846 for The Corn Laws to be repealed, thus paving the way for free trade and cheaper foreign imports.

Things didn't deteriorate immediately as was feared because other factors came into play. In fact the period between the mid 1850s and mid 1870s was dubbed The Golden Age of English Agriculture. A series of very good harvests, improvements in land management, the introduction of new machinery on farms and, finally, proving that every cloud has a silver lining The American Civil War and the Crimean War put a halt to grain importation. So, that was the good bit!

The next 30 years, however, became known as 'The Great Depression of British Agriculture.' There were several miserable harvests in succession and the growth of the railroad system in the U.S and faster and cheaper steamships meant that imported grain could be brought to our shores for a lower price. As a result there was a 90% rise in imported wheat and flour and, by 1894 and 1895, grain prices reached their lowest levels for 150 years. Not surprisingly, land growing cereals decreased by 22%. Oh yes, then there was the series of droughts in the 1890s!!

There was, however, help and advice at hand.





Census documents show, that between 1871 and 1881there had been a decrease in the numbers of agricultural workers. There were 92,500 less whereas urban workers increased by 53,496 many of them having been employed on the land.

So, it was against this background that Sir Henry Rider Haggard started his fact finding tour in 1901 and 1902. He published his findings in two volumes in the snappily named 'Rural England – Being an Account of Agricultural Researches carried out in the Years 1901 and 1902.' [Should you be desperate to read it, Bluntisham is in Volume 2!]

THE SURVEY

Sir Henry describes Huntingdonshire as the smallest county in England with the exception of Middlesex and Rutland. It was, he said, almost purely agricultural producing the usual crops, including a great deal of wheat. There was, he added, much grazing land on which cattle were fatted. On the whole the county was not well supplied with water, for which the inhabitants in some parts were obliged to rely on ponds. The drained fenland was very productive.

Considering that he was supposed to be commenting upon Huntingdonshire he seemed to spend a lot of time describing conditions in Bedfordshire and the land and living conditions in those villages which border the Great North Road. However, I think that it's worth mentioning some of his comments because it enables us to see how Bluntisham was faring in comparison.

Generally speaking he painted a very gloomy picture of the plight of farmers. Although there were pockets of fertile land and some well managed farms a lot of the land appears to have been in a very sorry state having been ravaged by drought or pests or both. Land values had fallen and farm rentals had plummeted. A farmer from St Neots had written to Rider Haggard stating 'Thousands of acres round here are quite or very nearly derelict and the farmhouses, buildings and cottages are slowly rotting down....All this land was cultivated and grew good crops up to the eighties. Here and there

are oases that show what the land was ---- and is.'

He was particularly interested in housing provided for farm workers. He cited many examples of what were no more than dilapidated hovels not fit for human habitation. He acknowledged, however, that the cost of building decent cottages at approximately £400.00 and the small amount of rent received from the tenants [averaging 2 shillings a week] did not make an attractive investment especially in times of landed depression. He doesn't make any comment as to the wisdom, perhaps, of having properly maintained the dwellings when times were good!

Under the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 money was available from the Public Works Loan Commissioners for the purpose of building or improving dwellings for the working classes but the red tape surrounding this plus the terms and conditions attached to the loans made it a less than attractive proposition.

Nearly all the people to whom Rider Haggard spoke cited poor housing conditions as one of the reasons that farm workers left the villages for other employment. However, there were other reasons for their departure.

Quite understandably, the prospect of higher wages which could be earned in the towns was a great lure. The workers who remained in the villages generally seemed to be regarded as a poor lot which is a much more polite way of summing them up as opposed to the way Rider Haggard expresses it. 'Everywhere the young men and women are leaving the villages where they were born and flocking into the towns. As has been shown again and again, it is now common for only the dullards, the vicious, or the wastrels to stay upon the land, because they are unfitted for any other life: and it is this indifferent remnant who will be the parents of the next generation of rural Englishmen. Hm!

Nevertheless, these 'dullards' were described by one farmer as receiving more money for doing less work than some of their predecessors. An example of being 'daft in the right road' perhaps.

There seemed to be general agreement that this migration was beginning to slow with, in some cases, workers actually returning to the villages. Some had possibly found that big city streets weren't paved with gold but mention was made of those men who had left for jobs created by the opening of new railway lines, and those who had found employment in the Peterborough brickworks, starting to trickle back as lines were completed and the brickworks were becoming less prosperous.

The other area of general consensus appears to have been the undesirability of compulsory education with one farmer believing that education in itself wasn't a bad thing but that it should be left to parents to decide how many hours schooling their children had. Mr Tebbutt also had firm views on this which I'll talk about later.

BACK TO BLUNTISHAM

By the time of Rider Haggard's visit Bluntisham had seen many changes in farming practice since the beginning of the nineteenth century. I have been very heavily reliant upon the information given in “Bluntisham – cum – Earith, Huntingdonshire. Records of a Fenland Parish” written by C.F.Tebbutt and from what I could glean from various census documents.

If you have read David Gedye's excellent article on the history of Colne Road you will know that much of Bluntisham land became enclosed in the early 19th century and, obviously, the landscape would have changed accordingly. The maps he has included in the same article give an idea as to how much the geography of the village would have been altered.

However, it goes without saying, that a village is much more than its landscape so, to try and get a clearer picture of how Bluntisham and its occupants might have fared over the decades before Rider Haggard's visit I started to look at the census documents as well as information provided in the Tebbutt book as stated earlier.

Unfortunately I could only access those documents dating from 1841 onwards and I stopped at 1901 as that was the year before the visit.

I was, however able to find the population figures going back to 1801

POPULATION FIGURES OF BLUNTISHAM 1801 TO 1901

1801	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
460	494	635	674	740	760	720	599	549	499	426

I was interested to discover that the population in 1971 was still only 654!

FARMING POPULATION 1841 TO 1901

	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Farmers	11	22	17	19	14	8	16
Farm labourers	50	127	158	135	96	89	62

So, the above figures seem to bear out the fact that Bluntisham was a growing village throughout the period when The Corn Laws were introduced and during the halcyon days throughout 'The Golden Age.'

Whether all the villagers were prosperous or not is a little more difficult to pin down.

VILLAGERS IN RECEIPT OF PARISH RELIEF

There had always been help for the poor of the parish and I don't want to become bogged down in the details as to what kind of help, administered by whoever etc etc. [The Tebbutt book provides a lot of information on this subject if you can get hold of a copy.]

The census documents give some clue as to how many of our villagers needed extra help.

1841 Only 1 person is listed as 'in receipt of parish relief.' This was a lady aged 50

1851 There were 38. 11 of these people were still listed as being agricultural labourers.

> The remaining 27 ranged from the very elderly, some of whom lived with their families, the others living alone. There were a couple of orphaned children, one a boy of 13 who was employed as an agricultural labourer and his sister, a 10 year old girl. One particularly noteworthy family was that of an agricultural labourer's widow, aged 39 who had 9 children ranging from 9 months of age to 18 years. The two eldest boys were employed as farm labourers, the rest were in receipt of relief.

1861 There was no mention of anyone receiving help.

1871 There were 16, most of whom were very old, some living alone, some within a household.

1881 Again, none mentioned.

1891 10 paupers were listed, again mainly very elderly people

1901 None listed

I don't think it would be wise to assume that the years in which no-one was listed as in receipt of relief meant that no-one actually was. The information requested from census to census was certainly subject to change.

Looking at the figures for 1841 for example. We can see that the village population had almost reached its peak. The Corn Laws hadn't yet been repealed so, theoretically, the farmers, and hopefully their workers, should have been enjoying the benefits of higher grain prices.

It was with interest therefore that I read, in Mr Tebbut's book, the account of a young man, Gifford White aged 18. In 1844 he was sentenced to transportation for life because he had sent a threatening letter to the farmers of Bluntisham. It read:-

'We are determined to set fire to the whole of this place if you don't set us to work, and burn you in your beds if there is not an alteration. What do you think the young men are to do if you don't set them to work? They must do something. The fact is we cannot go on any longer We must commit robbery and everything that is contrary to your wish.

I am,
An Enemy

On the next page is a cartoon that appeared in the February edition of Punch in 1844. It's a cartoon drawn by John Leech showing the dire living conditions of an agricultural labourer. Low wages and the ever growing fear of unemployment due to the introduction of farm machinery led workers to indulge in rick burning and destruction of the hated machines.

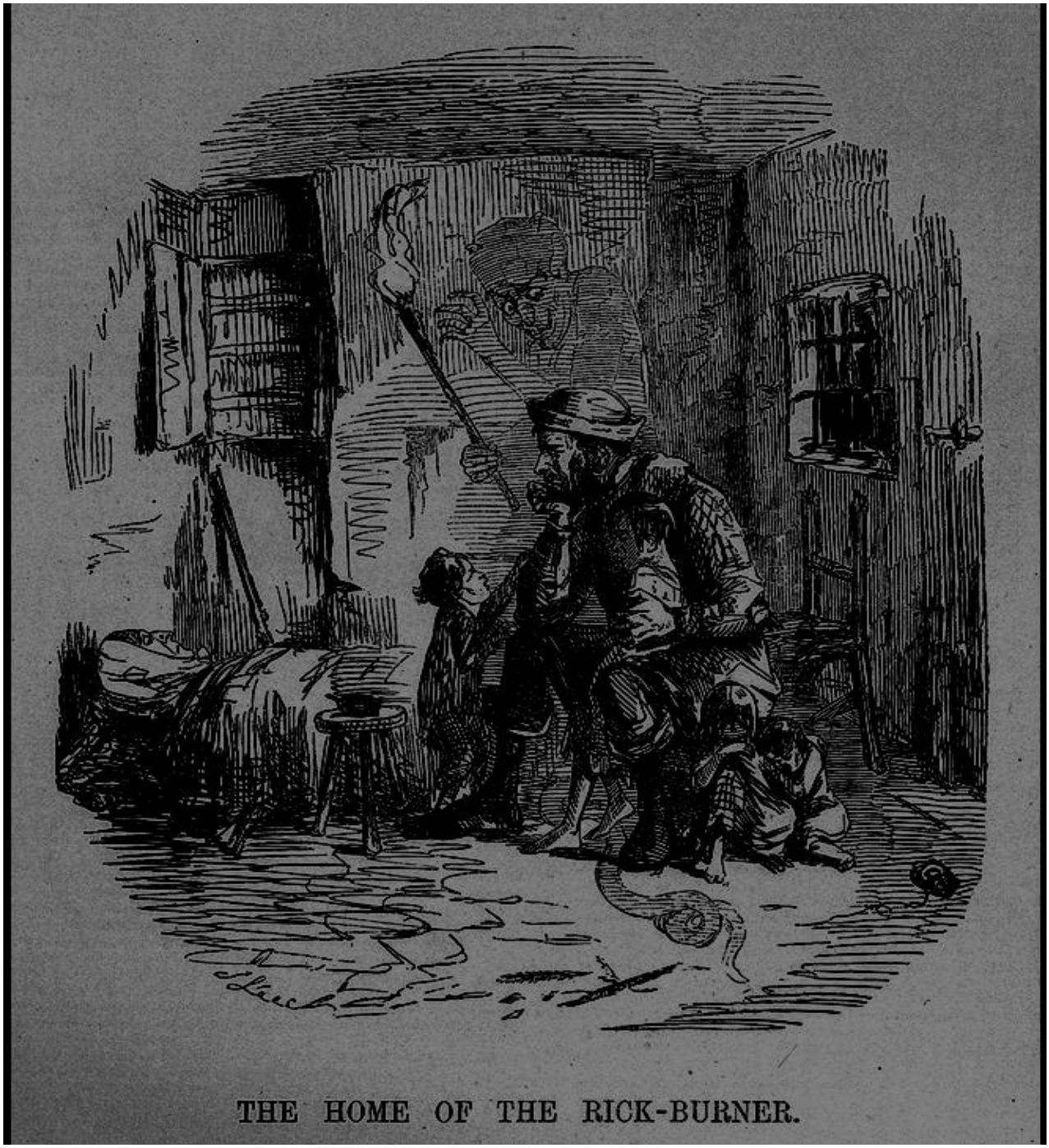
Whether it was something similar that prompted Gifford White to write his threatening note we shall, perhaps, never know but he might also have been inspired by the Swing Riots a decade or so earlier.

THE SWING RIOTS 1830

Briefly, this was an example of the social unrest and the riots I referred to earlier in this article. They were a widespread uprising by agricultural labourers in southern and eastern England in

protest at agricultural mechanisation and harsh working conditions. By late October this unrest had spread to Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire.

In 1830 farm labourers relied on Poor Relief for 15% of their annual income. Apparently, over 40% of the total population of Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire took their income from agriculture. As rural poverty increased so did the campaign of arson and vandalism against farmers. Warning letters were first sent to landowners detailing grievances and the action which might be taken against them



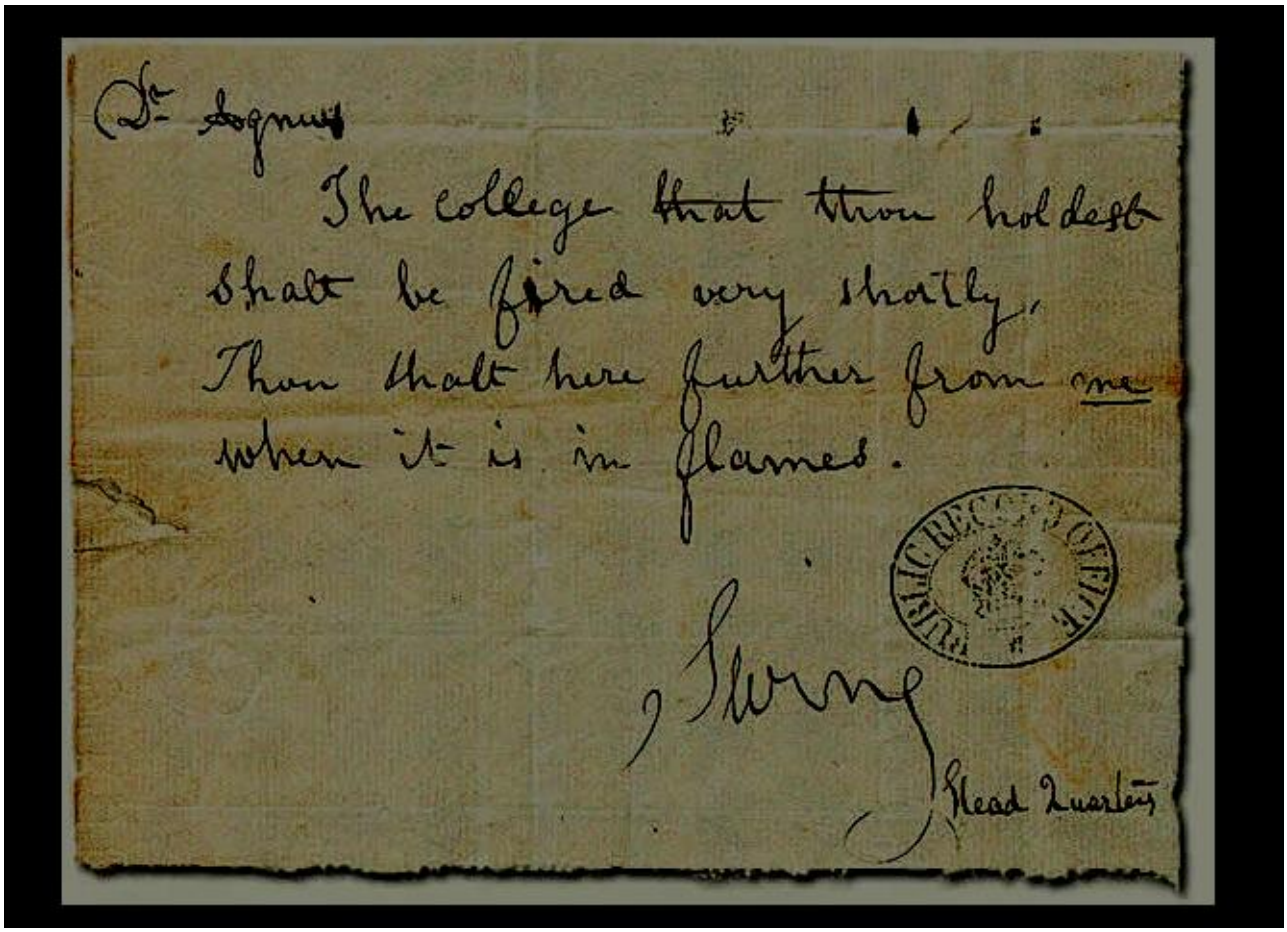
THE HOME OF THE RICK-BURNER.

Courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org. Wellcome Collection Gallery L000353

These were known as the Swing Letters. Captain Swing was a fictitious name which was often added to the bottom of these threatening letters. It's thought that it might have originated from the 'captain' or the leader of a work party who, once the workers had sharpened their scythes and were

ready to recommence their work, would shout out “Swing.”

This is one of the Swing Letters, sent to a Dr Agnus [Angus?] of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.



British Government- National Archive Swing Letters 1830

It was late 1830 when unrest reached areas of Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire opening with acts of arson and distribution of threatening letters in Huntingdonshire. Over the space of three days many threshing machines were broken, with unrest reported at Bluntisham. In 'Captain Swing' a book written by Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé I found that in Huntingdonshire 57 cases were heard, resulting in 22 people being acquitted, 30 jailed and 5 transported to Van Diemens's Land [now known as Tasmania.] The maximum penalty, imposed in other counties, was execution.

In October of 1830, in Bluntisham, a threatening letter was sent to one of the local gentlemen farmers re his threshing machines and in the following month a case of arson was committed, against a threshing machine.

It would appear that Gifford White didn't think that conditions had improved much in the ensuing years and his fate didn't deter others. In his book C.F Tebbutt reports how the first reaping machine brought into Earith in 1850 was thrown into the Old Bedford River.

Finally on this topic, he also reports that, because of the agricultural depression, only two farmers in Bluntisham remained solvent. The deliberate burning of haystacks to obtain insurance money was so common that people he spoke to remembered mounting the roofs of their houses every night to scan the horizon for fires.

A SELF SUFFICIENT VILLAGE?

Obviously, in the days before the arrival of public transport systems, just travelling to St Ives must have been an adventure. There was one carrier in the village and he only travelled to St Ives on Mondays and Fridays. By 1869 he was only going there on Mondays. By 1901 there wasn't a carrier at all.

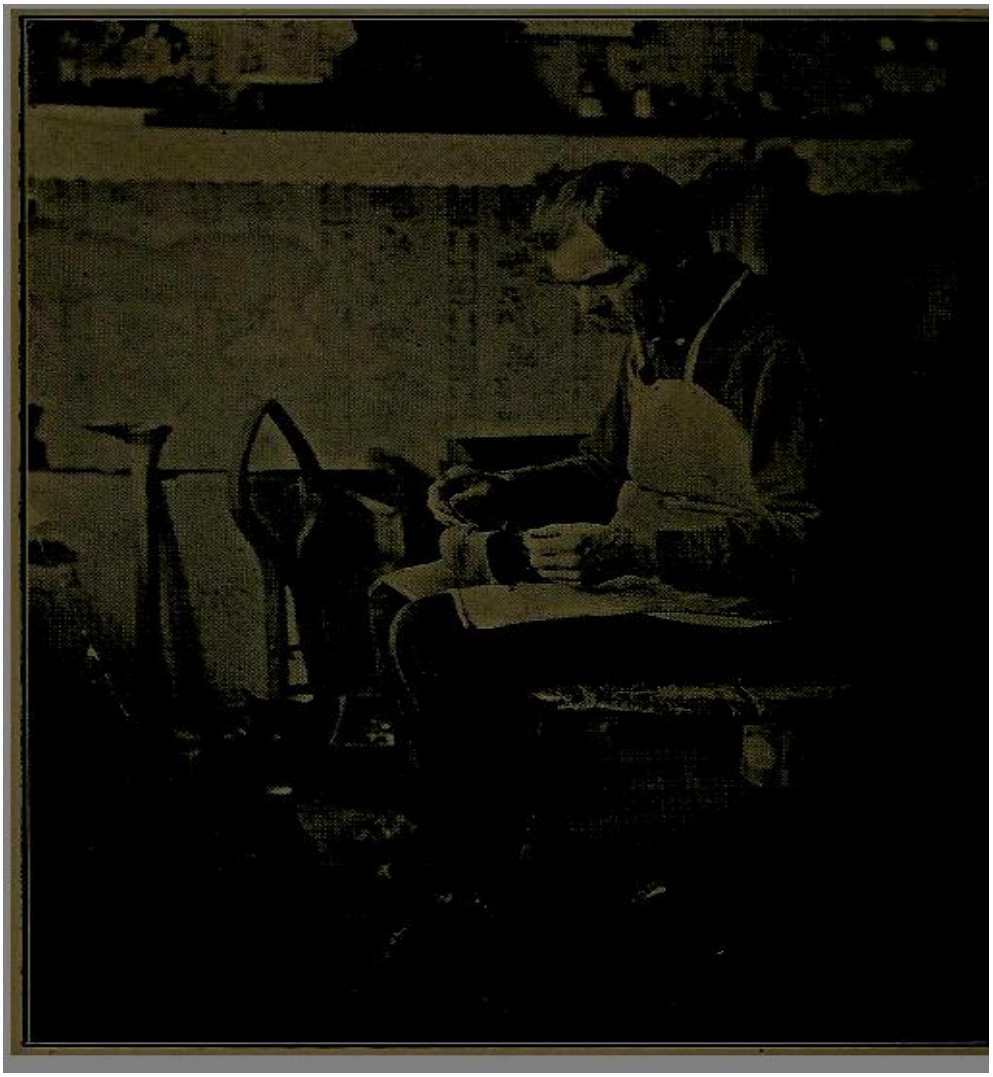
So, it makes perfect sense that a village had to provide everything needed on a daily basis.

As well as looking at the census forms I was able to find directories listing the tradespeople living and working in Bluntisham over the period from 1839 to 1901. I used Piggot's Directory 1839 and three Post Office Directories from 1847, 1869 and 1877.

I thought the information I would be able to glean would give a pretty good idea of how thriving or not Bluntisham was.

As you might expect there were blacksmiths, bakers, grocers, butchers, dressmakers, shoemakers, tailors etc and these remained a constant throughout the period although the numbers of some of them declined as the population decreased.

For example, there were 5 boot and shoemakers in 1841 but only 1 in 1901.



Courtesy of Project Gutenberg-tm License. [Manual of Shoemaking by William. H. Dooley]

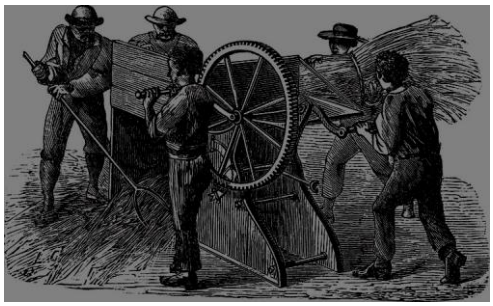
In 1871 there had been 3 bricklayers in the village. There were none a decade later. Similarly, there were 5 carpenters in 1861 but this was down to 2 in 1871.

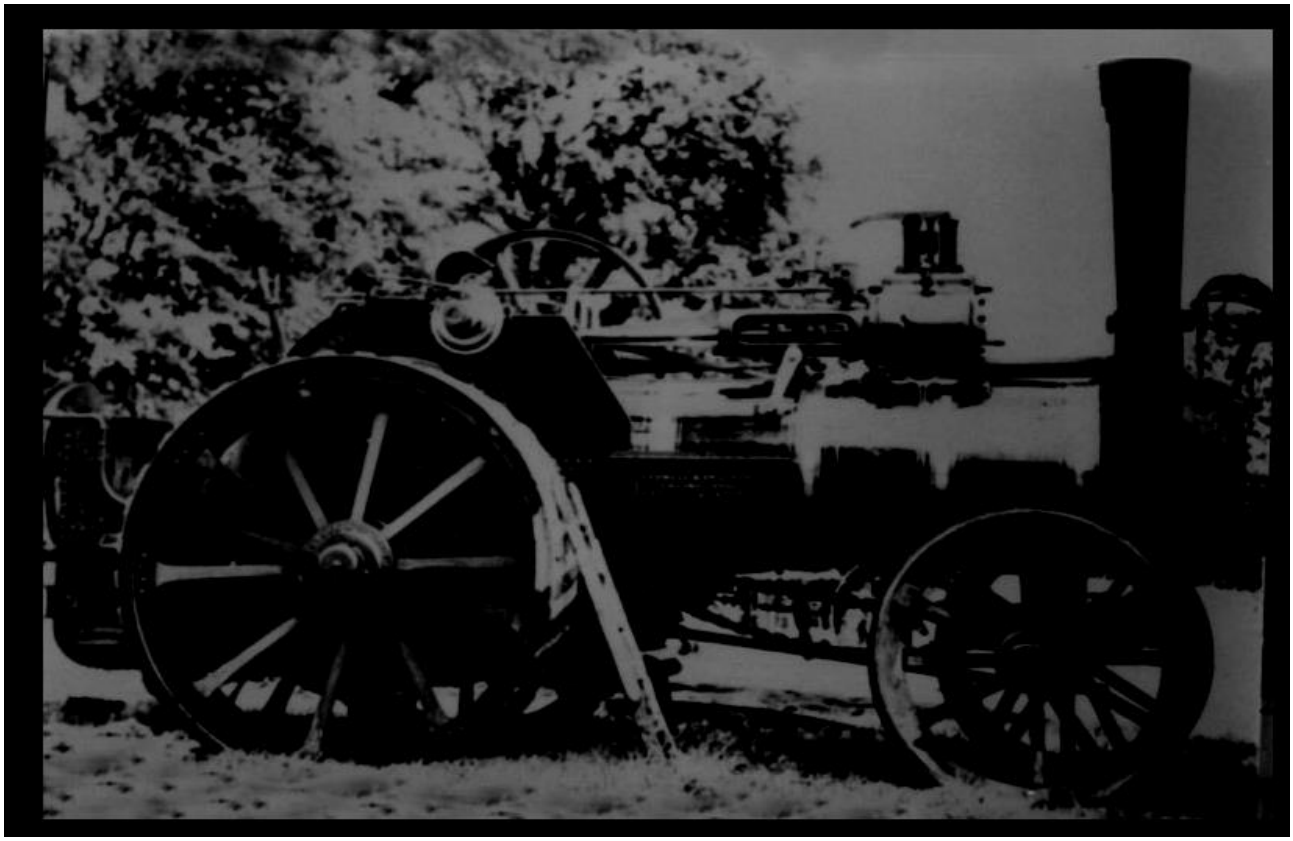
To sum up, in 1853 there had been a total of 53 people providing services and, by 1901, there were 25 and some of these people had more than one trade. In 1891 there were 3 grocers but one was a grocer and a draper and one was a grocer, draper and publican.

I haven't, in fact, included publicans, innkeepers and licensed victuallers [a rose by any other name I believe] because this group managed to keep their numbers steady although, again, some of them had secondary occupations – one was a dairyman, and one a tripe dealer for example.

The information obtained from the census documents bears witness to the introduction of mechanisation on the farms. The 1861 census mentions there having been 4 threshing machine drivers. In later documents there is mention of mechanics or 'machinists' as they were called.

This illustration is showing a threshing machine model from 1875.





In June 1891 the Hodge Brothers of Bluntisham had two of these magnificent beasts delivered to them. For all you petrol heads [or should I say steam heads?] it was a Fowell Agricultural Traction

Engine Number 53.

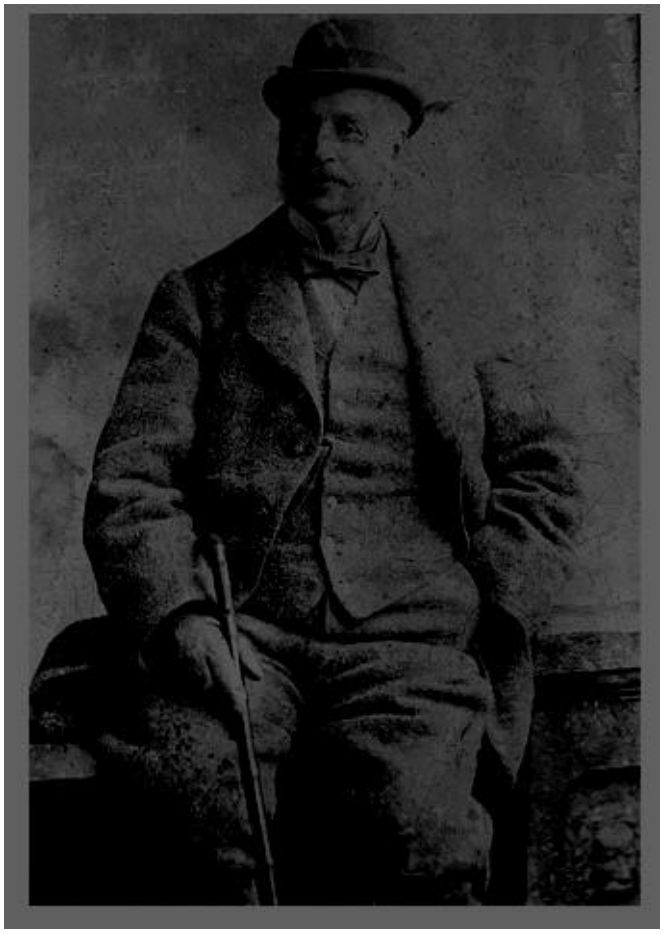
The arrival of the new railway station in 1878 also makes its presence felt. By 1881 8 villagers were employed on the railway, some of them being plate layers but there was also mention of a signalman, a station porter and, of course, the stationmaster.

In 1891 there was mention of market gardeners for the first time and by 1901 the number of market gardeners and fruit growers had increased, as well as those villagers who were employed as labourers in these occupations. No doubt the opening of the station had provided the opportunity for this to happen.

All this finally brings us back to the meeting between Messrs Rider Haggard and Tebbutt!

THE VERDICT?

Firstly, Rider Haggard describes visiting Mr Tebbutt, J.P who, he says, 'managed a bank and his large farm with equal success, as indeed he might be expected to do after an experience extending over a period of fifty years.'



Mr Charles Prentice Tebbutt

With thanks to Frances Tebbutt for providing this photo

Compared to the parched, pest ridden wastelands already mentioned by Rider Haggard, Bluntisham appears to be The Garden of Eden. He said, 'Here at Bluntisham were many fruit gardens, and, as a consequence, a large number of small-holdings. Mr Tebbutt was the pioneer of the industry in this district, and some of his orchards, planted thirty years ago, are very fine, especially one that

contains a splendid grove of Bigarreau cherries, of which the fruit was remarkable for its size and flavour. This orchard, which had gooseberries beneath the trees cost £30 an acre to set and was, I think, let at £5 the acre. Also, there were apple trees but these did not seem to do as well as the cherries.'

All seemed to be fine and dandy then. However Mr Tebbutt thought that, although fruit in the district had been remunerative, there were signs that its culture was being overdone but it was still a great mainstay to the smallholder. He also stated that fruit was only grown on the best of soils so, that out of a total of 3,000 acres in Bluntisham approximately only 10% was given over to fruit growing.

We hear that Mr Tebbutt farmed 600 acres, some of it his own land and some of it hired. One half of it was under grass. He raised a good many colts and about 60 calves a year. He also farmed fenland which he said grew very good crops. Oats and peas were mentioned as well as 7 acres of osiers which he cut himself [he was about 76 at the time!] In 1901 he was only getting £7 an acre owing to foreign competition. Rider Haggard stated, 'It seems we cannot make baskets as cheaply in England as they do upon the Continent because of our higher rates of wages, therefore the demand for British osiers is lessening.' It all sounds horribly familiar doesn't it?

As to the availability of labour, he explained that, in the past, labour had been a very great difficulty in Bluntisham and its neighbourhood, but since the Peterborough brickworks had ceased to be prosperous, more was available. The population still declined and the number of children in the schools was, he said, only half of what it had been.

Mr Tebbutt went on to say, 'What I feel to be the most serious thing is the fact that there is no young skilled labour.' He expressed the opinion that the only way the exodus could be met was by a radical alteration in the education laws. He was, apparently, in favour of adopting the plan enforced in countries such as Switzerland, in which boys devoted their winters to book work and their summers to the land. He explained that, in his experience, unless a boy began to labour in the fields at about the age of 10, he would never labour there 'since between 10 and 12 he acquires a bias which is unchangeable and will last him all his life.'

He then went on to explain that he, himself, began on the farm at 9 and by 14 had a good insight into agriculture. He also seemed to feel that the community wouldn't raise too many objections if the educational programme was changed in this way.

Following this conversation the two men drove round Mr Tebbut's farm firstly visiting the new cottages which he had just built. As we know, Rider Haggard had seen examples of extremely poor accommodation provided for workers so it's interesting to read his opinion of these. He says, 'First we visited a block of new cottages which he had just built at a cost of under £400 a pair. They were very excellent dwellings, erected with much taste, containing three bed and two sitting rooms. The great point about them was that they were roofed with that best of thatching material, sedge, which is warm in winter and very cool in Summer, as I proved by visiting the top rooms on that scorching day. If properly protected against nesting birds with fine meshed wire, this sedge is most durable; indeed, some of it in use upon these roofs had already done service for, I think fifty years upon another building..... Of course its drawback is the liability to fire, but, as Mr Tebbutt pointed out, there was no record in his neighbourhood of any life being lost by such an accident.'

In the Conclusion of his survey Rider Haggard presented a very pessimistic [but, I suspect, entirely justified] view of the state of English agriculture. The government of the day was again discussing a possible protectionist policy to help boost farming but he was against this and felt that, among many other ideas he put forward, the provision of more smallholdings within the rural communities,

where possible, could be an economically viable alternative.

It would be lovely to think that he was encouraged when he saw such smallholdings in the village and that, although he admitted that things were far from easy and that many farmers had gone under, 'Mr Tebbutt was still a believer in the future of land.'

NEW RIDGE-ROOFED COTTAGES, BLUNTISHAM, HUNTINGDONSHIRE.

Elaine Gebbie. June 2022