

Jesse Burgess and Riotous Droxford

Jesse Burgess, a young labourer from Droxford, offers us an unlikely insight in to the tension between free trade policies and workers' rights in early 19th-century England. His personal story sheds light on the broader struggles faced by agricultural labourers during a time of significant economic and social upheaval, echoes of which can be heard today.

In 1809, when Jesse was 15 he was sent to work for William Cobbett in Botley, a prominent journalist, reformer and pamphleteer known for his vocal criticism of the British government's economic policies. Although Cobbett championed the rights of workers in his writings, his treatment of Jesse told a more complex story. Jesse, became fearful of Cobbett's strict discipline and demanding work conditions, and fled from his employment. His decision to leave was not simply an act of rebellion but a reflection of the harsh realities many labourers faced: long hours, meagre wages, and little recourse against employer mistreatment.

This mistreatment came to light thanks to the local Magistrate Richard Goodlad (Hill Place, Swanmore Road), who helped Jesse take legal action against William Cobbett. This trial was national news and was sensationalised in various newspapers such as The Cheltenham Chronicle.

As the news paper attested, "In the month of February, the boy went home to his friends, at Droxford, about five miles from Botley, and complained that his master abused him, and made use of the most gross language; his mother would not attend to his story, but directed him to return, and that she would call on his master on the subject; the boy accordingly returned".

On the 2nd March he returned home again, and was arrested the following night by the sheriff Aslett, who just happened to be William Cobbett's blacksmith. After some tumultuous events Jesse's mother finally spoke with William Cobbett and this exchange offers a fascinating insight in to modern language in use during the 1800s.

"I beg your pardon, Sir — I am come to speak in behalf of the boy." To which he replied, "Damnation seize you! I won't hear what you have to say."

The mother then said, "I hope you will, Sir." He replied, "I hope I shan't; I'll send your boy on shipboard : if you had not encouraged him, he would not have been guilty of such a thing."

The mother replied, she did not encourage him, and begged he would hear what she had to say.

To which Cobbett answered, "Damn you, I won't hear what you have to say. Begone, you old b@@@h, off my premises; I desire you not to enter my house; your boy shall have no more than the law allows him, if he has so much."

Things escalated and Jesse and his mother left for home before being seized at gunpoint and held. It was the false imprisonment which later gave rise to Jesse being awarded £10 in damages. Jesse would later go on to buy an acre of land for £28 to give you some indication of value.

The Burgess's plight was not an isolated incident but part of a pattern affecting many rural labourers, who found themselves trapped between oppressive working conditions and a punitive legal system designed to protect the interests of landowners and employers. Here Jesse was helped by the local Magistrate Richard Goodlad who helped Jesse fight for justice.

William Cobbett's role in this narrative is particularly striking. Despite his public advocacy for the working class, his personal interactions with employees like Jesse reveal the contradictions inherent in the period's labour relations. Cobbett was a fierce opponent of free trade policies, which he believed sacrificed domestic workers' welfare for the benefit of wealthy merchants and foreign interests. He argued that the repeal of the Corn Laws and similar measures, while lowering food prices, led to widespread unemployment and depressed wages in rural communities.

In 1820, despite their trial the Jesse and William would interact again with William being accused of murdering Jesse. Jesse had to travel to the Coventry hustings and declare to William's accusers "I be the real Jesse Burgess". A saying he was later famous for.

In 1830, as part of the Swing Riots, Jesse was arrested and accused of being part of a gang that knocked a ladies hat off of her head and stole a gold sovereign. He was later acquitted with various respected people coming to his defence such as the local magistrate and the priest.

Finally in 1840, Jesse had become a respected figure. In the Daily News 26th February 1846 he is recorded being the chairman of a meeting of labourers and famous anti-corn law activists such as Richard Cobden and John Ekless. The group met at Shirrel Heath in Waltham Chase which according to the paper was "a wild district in the parish of Droxford".

Jesse was introduced to the crowd by Mr Ekless in the following passage:

"I congratulate you upon the choice of your chairman, for, though he is one of the humbler classes, he is still, as I know, a respectable man. To my knowledge he has brought up a family of eleven children, and has only had the aid of 24s. from the parish; and that fact, in my judgment, constitutes him a respectable man. (Cheers.) He is not only respectable, but he also fills a prominent place in the pages of history. Jesse Burgess is a man whose name is immortalised in the immortal writings of your great friend, and the defender of the rights of labour, William Cobbett. (Shouts of applause. Jesse Burgess is the man whom William Cobbett was accused, at the Coventry election, many years ago, of having flogged to death.-a most wilful and diabolical charge, brought forward by his opponents. This man—I mean your chairman - was sent for, post haste. He went down to Coventry, and from the hustings there boldly proclaimed the falsehood of the charge, by shouting, "I be the real Jesse Burgess" (Cheers and laughter). So that his name will go down in history to the latest period of time."

The meeting of Hampshire labourers, underscored the growing discontent among rural workers. These gatherings provided a platform for labourers to voice their grievances, demand fair wages, and call for legal reforms. Burgess's story became a focal point in these discussions, symbolising the broader fight for workers' rights in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

Jesse Burgess may not have set out to become a figurehead for labor reform, but his experiences encapsulate the struggles of countless workers caught in the crossfire of economic theory and harsh reality.

This article is based on the work of Adam Sinnott and Stuart Attrill using archive newspaper services online.