

# Landownership and Village Cultural Centres in Mid Nineteenth Century England

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This paper examines landownership and village cultural centres in mid nineteenth century England. Whereas the purpose built village hall was predominantly a feature of the English countryside after the First World War, village cultural centres in the mid nineteenth century were in fact interchangeable, with villagers occupying church, chapel, school and other private and public spaces to fulfil multiple objectives. According to Jeremy Burchardt, the village hall was a response to the demand for democratised leisure in rural England during and following the First World War, which resulted in an enlightened village culture.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation has projected negative connotations on to what preceded the village hall. Consequently, village culture in the Victorian era has been perceived as being bleak, constrained, manipulated and controlled.<sup>2</sup> Specific criticisms cited the practical limitations of using existing buildings and the exclusivity of many of the venues and activities.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, landownership and village culture have increasingly become synonymous with social control. Dennis Mills argued that the social, cultural and moral experiences of tenants were moulded and constrained by a landowner who eroded the ability to choose.<sup>4</sup> It has also been argued that landowners initiated a 'quite deliberate attempt to revive paternalism to recreate community', and that leisure and culture were ways in which this manifested itself.<sup>5</sup> Howkins argued that both large landowners and wealthy farmers withdrew into class-specific culture.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Howkins argued that concurrently landowners participated in the repression of popular culture and leisure, and that more rational alternative forms of entertainment were imposed.<sup>7</sup> Another consequence of these interpretations has been the notion of the 'survival' of less respectable and more popular culture. The role of landownership in village culture and leisure is therefore interpreted either to be dictatorial or self-motivated, with few opportunities to take ownership of village culture and leisure.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Burchardt, "A New Rural Civilization": Village Halls, Community and Citizenship in the 1920s' in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt, L. Thompson (eds), *The English Countryside Between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?* (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 28-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>4</sup> D.R. Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Croom Helm, London, 1980), pp. 125-8.

<sup>5</sup> H. Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, c.1780-c.1880* (Croom Helm, London, 1980), p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> A. Howkins, 'Social, Cultural and Domestic Life: Folklore, Folklife and Popular Culture' in E.J.T. Collins (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1850-1914*, Part 2 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1402-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1403-4, 1407-8.

An inevitable challenge for the study of rural culture and leisure in villages during the mid nineteenth century is the availability of sources. Contextual information and indicators of useful sources are provided by the work of historians on the subject.<sup>8</sup> Whilst a range of sources exist that facilitate the study of rural culture and leisure in the mid nineteenth century, much rural culture and leisure was undocumented. Nevertheless, the extensive analysis of newspaper reports, in conjunction with other sources where available, has illuminated the village cultural centre and organised village leisure in the Doncaster area during the mid nineteenth century. Using villages in the vicinity of the market town of Doncaster, this paper re-evaluates landownership and village cultural centres in mid nineteenth century England and challenges these perspectives. Firstly, the role of the landowner and the clergy are examined. Secondly, the tenant and the labourer as active participant are demonstrated. Thirdly, cultural centres beyond the village are discussed. It argues that the absence of a village hall did not equate to moribund village culture in the mid nineteenth century English countryside. Moreover, it argues that even where landownership and the clergy dominated village culture, it did not mean it was not vibrant or enjoyed by the recipients. On the contrary, vibrant cultural centres operated both within and outside existing institutions; and tenants and labourers actively participated in and contributed to these cultural centres and activities.

Landowners were undoubtedly well positioned, both socially and financially, to organise grand social events in the villages they owned. The Sprotbrough Subscription Ball, organised and paid for by Sir Joseph William Copley, was one such example. It brought together the social elite from throughout the Doncaster district, all of whom paid a subscription fee to attend. As the *Doncaster Chronicle* reported in 1850, 'a numerous and well respected company attended'.<sup>9</sup> In addition, tenants and servants from the village were invited to attend. Whilst they were afforded luxuries otherwise unobtainable, they were constantly reminded of their position in society and the control of the landowner. The event was held at the Copley Arms Inn, which was adorned with the Copley coat of arms. The large function room, which was used as the ballroom, was described in newspaper reports as being 'brilliantly illuminated, and tastefully decorated with evergreens and

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<sup>8</sup> R.W. Malcolmson, 'Leisure' in G.E. Mingay, *The Victorian Countryside*, Vol. 2 (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981), pp. 603-15; C. Phythian-Adams, 'Rural Culture' in Mingay (ed) *The Victorian Countyside*, pp. 616-25; R. Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996); P. Horn, *Pleasures and Pastimes in Victorian Britain* (Sutton, Stroud, 1999); Howkins, 'Social, Cultural and Domestic Life: Folklore, Folklife and Popular Culture', pp. 1399-1416.

<sup>9</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 18 January 1850, p. 5.

flowers'.<sup>10</sup> Sir Copley ensured 'an abundant supply of game' for the evening meal and hired a band to accompany the dancing. Consequently, Sir Copley was the recipient of numerous toasts, and acknowledgements both during the evening and in subsequent newspaper reports.<sup>11</sup> The Sprotbrough Subscription Ball may have provided entertainment for tenants and servants, and fostered social interaction, but essentially it reinforced the deferential structure of rural society.

The use of existing cultural centres, especially the church and the school, was an effective way in which landowners could further reinforce deference and social control. At Warmsworth and Sprotbrough, musical performances utilised both church and school, and involved both the clergy and school master and mistress.<sup>12</sup> The two villages each had a choir, which were supported by the landowners who were motivated by 'their desire for harmonious music in the church'.<sup>13</sup> The choirs were led by the school masters and/or mistresses, who used their own musical talent and their position in village society to provide instruction, leadership and inspiration.<sup>14</sup> At Sprotbrough, the schoolroom was used to stage amateur concerts, such as the one held in the village in 1864 to raise money for the victims of the Sheffield Flood.<sup>15</sup> Existing cultural centres could be adequately adapted for other cultural purposes. The Sprotbrough school room was accordingly modified at Copley's expense, with the addition of a gallery enabling the audience to see and hear the performances fully.<sup>16</sup> This counters the criticism that prior to the construction of purpose built village halls substitutes were wholly inadequate as cultural centres. Rather, they provided a suitable foundation on which village elites could construct improving cultural centres.

The use of existing cultural infrastructure to achieve social control and community cohesion additionally meant that the clergy themselves were prominent in the provision of culture and leisure in villages with and without a dominant landowner. For example, at Sprotbrough, the Revd. J.G. Fardell and his wife organised the National School's annual feast. These occasions juxtaposed structure and morality with amusement and indulgence. They began with Fardell delivering a lecture to the children in which he impressed the

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<sup>10</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 31 January 1851, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, *Doncaster Chronicle*, 30 January 1852, p. 5; *Doncaster Gazette*, 7 January 1853, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 9 January 1863, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 5 February 1863, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 9 April 1869, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 9 January 1863, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 9 March 1866, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 1 May 1868, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 29 April 1864, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 6 May 1864, p. 5.

importance of school attendance. The children then paraded from the school at one end of the village to the rectory at the other in what was a physical display of order and social control. In addition deference was shown to the landowner, with toasts to the Copley family. Yet for the children the highlight was the entertainment and refreshments provided for them at the rectory. Similarly at the multi-freeholder village of Fishlake, the annual school feast combined discipline and entertainment under the leadership of the Revd Ornsby.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the Revd Ornsby organised a series of supposedly improving lectures. The stated objective, indicative of the Victorian clergy, was to benefit working people by 'placing within their reach the means of acquiring sound, useful and entertaining information...with a view of cultivating a taste for mental recreation, of heightening their enjoyment and of elevating social condition'.<sup>18</sup> The clergy therefore used improving recreation to transcend moral duties and social desires. It is evident from villages in the vicinity of Doncaster that landowners and the clergy dominated the provision of cultural centres and leisure during the mid nineteenth century, and that this was partially responsible for creating passive recipients.

Nevertheless, the tenant and labourer were also active participants in the activities of prescribed cultural centres. Within the context of Victorian society, the reality was that organised recreation required the input of landowner, clergy or another elite. Yet certain cultural and leisure activities necessitated greater active participation of tenants and labourers in order for their success. Moreover, they attracted the support and enthusiasm of a wide range of rural inhabitants. This was prevalent in the villages in the vicinity of Doncaster, through cricket, horticultural societies and the annual 'feast'.

Most villages in the vicinity of Doncaster had a cricket team between the 1850s and 1870s. Cricket was an integral part of Victorian society, instilled with a sense of 'Englishness', although historians have predominantly focused on the urban experience.<sup>19</sup> Cricket perpetuated the social hierarchies inherent in English Society during the mid nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> According to Allen, the landed gentry 'had become firmly convinced of the inherent social value of cricket'.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, cricket was promoted throughout

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<sup>17</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 July 1859, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 11 December 1857, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> D. Allen, 'England's Golden Age: Imperial Cricket and late Victorian Society', *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2, p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Victorian society as both respectable and acceptable recreation.<sup>22</sup> This applied to the Doncaster district, with landowners and the clergy supporting and promoting village cricket teams. Whilst patronage was elite, participation was more diverse and socially embracing. Detailed analysis of the members of the village cricket teams in the vicinity of Doncaster demonstrates active participation. This has been achieved by cross-referencing the local newspaper reports with the census enumerators' books. Teams generally included a mix of tenant farmers, agricultural labourers, trades and crafts people, and domestic servants. In addition, continuity of team members and different members of the same family or household were characteristic of these village cricket teams.<sup>23</sup> Villages cricket matches therefore facilitated the ascendancy of tenants, crafts people and labourers to become active participants in their leisure, in addition to fulfilling the perceived moral and social objectives of landowners and clergy.

Village horticultural shows were another way in which tenants and labourers became active participants in village cultural life. Amateur gardening has been perceived as largely the recreational activity of elites during the nineteenth century. Indeed the landowners and principal farmers of villages in the Doncaster district were members of the Doncaster Horticultural Society, and either they or their gardeners exhibited at the society's shows. Yet, gardening had economic benefits for tenants and labourers, and had the ability to be yet another vehicle for rational recreation amongst the rural elites.<sup>24</sup> The Warmsworth Cottagers' Horticultural Show, which was established by the Aldam family, one of the landowning families in the village, had the primary objectives of making their tenants more industrious, and encouraging them to take pride in their homes and cottages.<sup>25</sup> Prizes, of a useful nature, were awarded for the best specimens of fruit, vegetables and flowers to stimulate their productivity. The show also took place in the schoolroom, meaning that an

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<sup>22</sup> K.A.P. Sandiford, 'Cricket and Rural Society', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter 1983), p. 304.

<sup>23</sup> *Doncaster Gazette*, 17 August 1849, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 17 August 1855, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 15 August 1856, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 24 May 1861, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 28 June 1861, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 12 June 1863, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 26 June 1863, p. 7; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 3 July 1863, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 10 July 1863, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 14 August 1863, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 6 November 1863, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 July 1864, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 5 August 1864, p. 8; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 12 August 1864, p. 8; *Doncaster Gazette*, 11 July 1873, p. 8; TNA, HO107/2346, *CEB Sprotbrough 1851*; TNA, HO107/2346, *CEB Warmsworth 1851*; TNA, HO107/2348, *CEB Rossington 1851*; TNA, HO107/2346, *CEB Braithwell 1851*; TNA, HO107/2349, *CEB Fishlake and Stainforth 1851*; TNA, RG9/3516, *CEB Sprotbrough 1861*; TNA, RG9/3514, *CEB Warmsworth 1861*; TNA, RG9/3522, *CEB Rossington 1861*; TNA, RG9/3513, *CEB Braithwell 1861*; TNA, RG9/3524, *CEB Fishlake and Stainforth 1861*; TNA, RG10/4716, *CEB Sprotbrough 1871*; TNA, RG10/4715, *CEB Warmsworth 1871*; TNA, RG10/4724, *CEB Rossington 1871*; TNA, RG10/4714, *CEB Braithwell 1871*; TNA, RG10/4726, *CEB Fishlake and Stainforth 1871*.

<sup>24</sup> S. Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Spring 1981), pp. 390-393.

<sup>25</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 July 1859, p. 5.

existing cultural centre was utilised. The *Doncaster Chronicle* heralded the show as being exemplary, citing improved order amongst tenants as being tangible benefits.<sup>26</sup> The *Doncaster Gazette* wrote that 'of all societies established for the benefit of a rural population, there is none which can be more advantageous'.<sup>27</sup> Yet the very nature of the show, which necessitated individuals to work independently for a common goal, stimulated active participation and communal ownership. The show cultivated a genuine interest in gardening amongst the tenants and labourers of the village. Each year, the profusion, variety and quality of specimens were acknowledged as being testimony to the role of cottager's in taking ownership of this process.<sup>28</sup> Detailed analysis of the prize winners, again cross referencing newspaper reports with census enumerators' books, demonstrates that the show brought together a diverse range of occupational groups. These included shopkeepers, crafts people, agricultural labourers and quarry workers. In addition, different members of the same family were involved, including women and children.<sup>29</sup> The inclusive nature of the Warmsworth show extended the cultural centre of the village to the gardens of each and every participant.

The whole village as a cultural centre was epitomised by the annual village 'feast'. The 'feast' was a celebratory festival, generally funded by subscription. These very communal occasions occupied the public open space of the entire village. The physical 'openness' of the village 'feast' fostered participation and interaction. As the *Doncaster Chronicle* reported in 1855, as a direct consequence of the village feast inhabitants who would normally not mix with one another were 'friends not strangers' thereafter. The extent and diversity of entertainment varied considerably. At Sprotbrough, the feast was limited to a church service, choral performances, cricket and refreshments. Whereas at Fishlake and Warmsworth, the feast was more entertainment orientated. Athletic sports, side shows, merry go rounds, rifle galleries and a photo caravan were all features of the Fishlake

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<sup>26</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 11 July 1845, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Doncaster Gazette*, 17 June 1842, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 25 June 1852, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 July 1859, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 17 July 1863, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Doncaster Gazette*, 17 June 1842, p. 5; *Doncaster Gazette*, 2 August 1844, p. 4; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 11 July 1845, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 7 June 1850, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 25 June 1852, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 8 September 1854, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 August 1856, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 July 1859, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 21 June 1861, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 17 July 1863, p. 5; TNA, HO107/2346, *CEB Sprotbrough 1851*; TNA, HO107/2346, *CEB Warmsworth 1851*; TNA, HO107/2348, *CEB Rossington 1851*; TNA, HO107/2346, *CEB Braithwell 1851*; TNA, HO107/2349, *CEB Fishlake and Stainforth 1851*; TNA, RG9/3516, *CEB Sprotbrough 1861*; TNA, RG9/3514, *CEB Warmsworth 1861*; TNA, RG9/3522, *CEB Rossington 1861*; TNA, RG9/3513, *CEB Braithwell 1861*; TNA, RG9/3524, *CEB Fishlake and Stainforth 1861*; TNA, RG10/4716, *CEB Sprotbrough 1871*; TNA, RG10/4715, *CEB Warmsworth 1871*; TNA, RG10/4724, *CEB Rossington 1871*; TNA, RG10/4714, *CEB Braithwell 1871*; TNA, RG10/4726, *CEB Fishlake and Stainforth 1871*.

feast.<sup>30</sup> Similarly at Warmsworth, the entertainment included cricket, dancing, donkey racing, flat and hurdle racing, sack jumping and women's races.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates how the cultural centre occupied multiple spaces in the village, and through varied activities involved men, women and children. With regards women and the cultural centre this was particularly notable. Women were often perceived as being outside the remit of village cultural centres.<sup>32</sup> Yet at Warmsworth, female residents were actively encouraged to participate publicly in sports. Such was the novelty of female participation, that packets of tea were donated as prizes to act as an incentive to the women of Warmsworth. Another notable feature of the 1869 'feast' was the dissatisfaction that erupted over the donkey racing, and the fact that trained donkeys and practiced donkey riders from neighbouring Balby had been permitted to enter the donkey racing, and yet had not contributed towards the subscription fund.<sup>33</sup> This reflected insular attitudes on the one hand and perceived ownership of the event through subscription on the other. A year later in 1870, the *Doncaster Chronicle* reported that 'This annual festival was kept up with great spirit by the villagers on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of last week'.<sup>34</sup> The 'feast' continued to be funded by subscription, and it is significant that Messrs Sharp and Chandler, who were amongst those collecting subscriptions, were coachman and gardener respectively, rather than landowners or tenant farmers. In other words, the village 'feast' provided an opportunity for everyone in a village to gather together for the primary purpose of entertainment, and in doing so motivated the tenants and labourers to become active participants and take ownership of their leisure.

Villages did not operate in vacuums, and nor did village cultural centres. Beyond the village, the market town of Doncaster provided an extensive range of cultural centres including the racecourse, fairs and circuses, pubs, theatres and railway excursions. The Doncaster Statutes, the annual hiring fair primarily for agricultural servants, were a renowned social occasion independent of the occupational function they performed. Such was the tradition and popularity surrounding the Doncaster Statutes, that moral reformers who sought to improve employment and hiring practices for farm servants faced opposition from those who felt their day of privilege was threatened.<sup>35</sup> As the *Doncaster Chronicle* reported, 'a great many of the country population came into the town...for the purpose of

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<sup>30</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 22 September 1871, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 16 July 1869, p. 5; *Doncaster Chronicle*, 15 July 1870, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Burchardt, 'A New Rural Civilization', p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 16 July 1869, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 15 July 1870, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 15 November 1861, p. 5.

securing a master or mistress; but secretly, we believe, with the intention of enjoying a day's recreation amongst their relations, friends, and sweethearts, dairy maids and agricultural labourers, - who find this an excellent opportunity for a rustic reunion'.<sup>36</sup> In 1843, entertainments including stalls selling gingerbread and lollipops, a show yard transformed into a scene as 'gay and gandy as the most ardent lover of such sights could wish' with 'flaming leopards and ferocious tigers', a sparring booth and the funfair. By 1863, a far greater array of entertainments were reported, including 'all the customary accompaniments in the shape of tom-fool shows, penny circuses, shooting galleries, pummelling saloons, cheap jacks, photographic galleries, fine art exhibitions, "spirometers", "muscular indicators", "coggy boats", "cock horses", with a host of itinerant dealers....'.<sup>37</sup> In addition, there were two circuses with animals, acrobats and clowns. Whilst this form of recreation and method of hiring faced moral opposition, the cultural centres of the market town exposed the inhabitants of villages in the vicinity to a multitude of experiences beyond the cultural remit of the village cultural centre.

Through the analysis of village case studies, this paper has demonstrated that vibrant cultural centres existed in the villages in the vicinity of Doncaster during the mid nineteenth century. Undoubtedly landowners and the clergy controlled many of these, with an emphasis on activities of an improving nature. Yet that did not equate to restrictive, unimaginative provision of leisure in the villages. Nor did it prevent the tenant or labourer from becoming an active participant in their leisure and culture within the village and taking some ownership of it, or being exposed to less respectable leisure and entertainment in the nearby town. A disparity clearly existed between the projected expectations and aspirations of landowners and the clergy on the one hand, and the experiences of the tenants and labourers on the other. Social control was effectively achieved within these villages through the assimilation of the recipients into the cultural centres provided for them. The fact that these cultural centres were interchangeable, ranging from existing buildings such as the church and school to more communal venues such as fields, cottage gardens and in the case of the 'feast' the whole village, made them more accessible and relevant. Village cultural centres varied considerably in terms of provision and participation, but to conclude the control of landownership and the absence of a purpose built village hall did not render village cultural life moribund, restrictive or passive.

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<sup>36</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 17 November 1843, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Doncaster Chronicle*, 20 November 1863, p. 5.