

Country Standard

FREE

For peace and socialism in the countryside

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Country Standard turns 90! p18

KICKED IN THE TEETH

NO EASING OF RURAL DENTAL CRISIS

RURAL DENTAL deserts still desperately need irrigation, new analysis by Country Standard reveals as the government belatedly struggles to get to grips with the dental crisis.

Predominantly rural areas currently have just one dentist for every 5,513 people – a rate of 0.181 per thousand, figures for England from the Local Government Association's LG Inform database show.

While still parched for toothcare, predominantly

by **Brett Perkin**

urban locales have 0.218 dentists per thousand people, one dentist for every 4,590 residents, figures for April-June 2024 – the most recent complete data set – reveal.

LG Inform pulls the figures from the Care Quality Commission and publishes rates for each local authority per thousand people. These can then be cross-referenced with the De-

partment for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' rural-urban classification index.

The only area where there is more than one dentist per thousand people is the City of Westminster, home to Harley Street and its private practices for the wealthy.

Toothless in England was launched in 2021 to demand action on the dental crisis facing the country.

There are signs that the

turn to page 3



Oscar-worthy action

Food workers across the country have made mincemeat of Oscar Mayer's bid to fire and rehire its staff.

Unite members targeted Pemberton Asset Management, owners of 85 per cent of the ready meal manufacturer. Activists made their presence felt at shareholders meetings across the country.

Demonstrations in Wales and the Natural History Museum where Pemberton's were holding an award ceremony stressed Unite solidarity.

Calling for pension funds to divest from Pemberton's, Unite Tolpuddle branch chair John Burbidge told a Bourne-mouth rally: "Fire and rehire is fundamentally wrong and the government has still not put an end to it."

"Oscar Mayer should respect their workers instead of trying to cut wages to make cheaper produce for the supermarkets."

Hundreds of workers also walked out at the Wrexham-based factory.

Affordable homes top the bill

UNITE'S call for affordable rural housing topped the agenda at the food drink and agriculture sector conference.

Delegates complained that former tied cottages get ever-scarcer as land-owners sell them off or let them out as Airbnbs, netting huge capital gains.

A Rural Housing Services report had shown only 9 per cent of housing stock in rural communities of less than

3,000 residents consists of affordable homes, compared to 17 per cent in urban areas.

The successful motion called on the government to urgently build new houses for rural workers; stop the discounting and sell-off of social housing; introduce new rent controls; and protect security of tenure when workers and their families in tied cottages retire or are made redundant.

Where's the AWB?

UNITE activist Ivan Monkton launched a blistering attack on the failure of the Labour government to bring back the Agricultural Wages Board at the sector conference.

"I am angry that they have so far, gone back on their promise to reinstate the AWB in England," he said.

Mark Heasman, Com-

monwealth War Graves Commission member, added: "As an ex-agricultural worker, we always had the wages board — we knew where we stood and knew what pay we would get."

"There were no ifs or buts: the farmer couldn't back away. It backed us up and made it a fairer system."

GET OFF MY LAND:
Farmers oppose inheritance tax changes in Whitehall



Farmers' fury at Reeves tax plans

by Michael Walker

LABOUR Chancellor Rachel Reeves sparked rural fury last year with the announcement of the family farm tax, expected to generate around £115 million a year for the Exchequer.

The tax puts a £1m cap on the combined use of agricultural property relief (APR) — which has

allowed family farms to be passed down free of inheritance tax since 1992 — and business property relief.

Anything above that would be taxed at 20 per cent.

APR was brought in to support food security and keep people in farming jobs, which otherwise promise hard physical labour and long hours for little financial reward.

The policy has been increasingly exploited by large estates and ultra-wealthy individuals as a tax avoidance strategy. This not only deprives the treasury of revenue but has also contributed to the inflation of farmland prices, making it more difficult for ordinary farmers to enter or remain in the industry.

Employers and the TUC have both raised the alarm.

TUC general secretary Paul Nowak said: "I'm wor-

ried about the impact of that on small farmers, you wouldn't want the policy to impact on small family farms, because that was never the intention."

Under the new rules, a single farmer could still pass on up to £1.5m tax-free, combining the £1m farm relief and the standard £500,000 personal allowance. For a farm valued at roughly the national average, £2.2m, this would leave £700,000 subject to tax — a £140,000 bill, payable interest-free over 10 years.

Married couples can transfer up to £3m tax free between them, meaning that many average-sized farms will escape the tax entirely.

However, larger or diversified operations — especially those incorporating tourism, retail, or other non-agricultural revenue — will likely be more affected. Business assets that previously qualified under business property relief will now count toward the same £1m cap.

While the Treasury es-

timates that only around 500 farms will face a tax bill each year — roughly a quarter of those claiming relief — the National Farmers Union (NFU) says that the true figure could be much higher.

Notably, the financial health of farms is not always tied to asset value. According to government farming data, 30 per cent of farms operated at a loss last year, while another 25 per cent earned less than £25,000.

For these farms, falling above the asset threshold could mean facing unaffordable tax bills. Heirs would be left with little choice but to sell.

The NFU has proposed a "clawback" mechanism where inheritance would only apply if qualifying assets are sold on within seven years.

Several European countries use a similar policy to help prevent tax abuse while allowing family farms to continue operating without disruption. In France, agricultural tax benefits

Unite SW/49823

Tolpuddle food, agriculture and transport branch



Greetings to our many friends throughout the trade union movement who will be pleased to know that we keep the flag of freedom, justice and hope alive in this area of Britain.

Even if all our friends cannot be with us at the rally and festival, we know that they will be with us all in spirit in remembering the Tolpuddle Martyrs and other trade union pioneers in other places who have taken up the cudgels against the powerful and savage.

Branch Committee, Tolpuddle Branch of UNITE the UNION, Dorset



Kicked in the teeth

From p1: campaign has had some success, with a net increase of 569 dental practices since the start of 2021 – a 0.004 per thousand people increase in rural areas and 0.001 increase in urban areas.

Toothless founder Mark Jones said: “The NHS constitution promises care for all, yet rural areas are routinely deprioritised. NHS dentistry has effectively been withdrawn.”

He puts this down to “systemic” problems – underfunding, understaffing, unviable contracts, and a “centralised model that funnels resources into urban hubs.”

Health Minister Stephen Kinnock unveiled small changes to the dental contract earlier this month, including payments for preventative work and new care pathways.

British Dental Association (BDA) general dental practice committee chair Shiv Pabary said: “These small, positive improvements are about as far as we can fix NHS dentistry while a broken system remains in place.”

“We hope this can steady the ship, but this this is not the final destination for a service still at risk of going under.”

The government’s 10-year health plan says that “by 2035, the NHS dental system will be transformed.” The BDA retorted: “Real reform cannot wait a decade, with change required in this Parliament, underpinned by sustainable funding.”

are granted only to those deemed “fit to farm.”

Other suggestions include separating agricultural and business property relief and adopting broader wealth taxation. Critics have also drawn attention to the 350 large aristocratic estates that still benefit from the little-known tax-exempt heritage assets scheme, raising concerns about fairness and equity in tax policy.

What’s clear is that, with broader consultation and more thoughtful policy design, it would have been possible to close loopholes that allow wealthy landowners to avoid inheritance tax – without harming genuine family farms. As it stands, rising land prices are increasingly pricing ordinary farmers out of the market, exacerbated by the use of agricultural land as a tax shelter by the wealthy.

Instead, the Chancellor announced these sweeping changes with little political foresight, no consultation with farmers or rural communities and – reportedly – without the involvement of her own Farming Secretary Steve Reed or Farming Minister Daniel Zeichner, who are now left to manage the fallout and attempt to rebuild dialogue with a frustrated agricultural sector.



Do your bit for better dentistry

by Mark Jones
Toothless in England founder

TOOTHLESS in England has relentlessly pushed the message in Westminster and Whitehall that the dental crisis must end. We’ve offered solutions on how to end it, with a focus on patients in rural and coastal communities.

Our evidence has been included in the Commons’s health and social care committee inquiry into NHS dentistry, we’ve attended government roundtables and submitted evidence to National Audit Office and public accounts committee investigations.

We recently met Health Minister Stephen Kinnock, telling him rural

and coastal communities have long been the backbone of England’s cultural and economic life, but they are too often left behind when it comes to healthcare.

He acknowledged the impact good oral health has on other health outcomes and recognised that NHS dentistry being made available to all would ease the burdens on cardiology, oncology and A&E departments.

If there’s any political will to end the dental crisis and turn NHS dentistry into something fit

for the 21st century, we’ll find out soon enough.

Join the Campaign

The countryside built this nation. It’s time it got the oral healthcare it deserves. This isn’t just about dentistry – it’s about health justice for countryside communities.

If you’re fed up with inaccessible oral healthcare, join us. Together, we can force the system to prioritise the treatment of patients ahead of targets and bureaucracy.

Campaign to pressure commissioners, lobby MPs and councillors, and demand an NHS dentist for everyone. Visit www.toothlessinengland.org.

Country Standard says: Irrigate our dental deserts

DENTISTRY in England’s rural and coastal communities requires urgent remedial action.

That means:

- Adequate funding
- Speedy recruitment of NHS dentists
- Changing dentists’ contracts

Toothless in England has exposed the collapse in NHS dentistry provision – people are having to pull their own teeth out and a quarter of five year olds have more than three rotting teeth (32.2 per cent in deprived areas, 13.6 per cent in wealthy).

The British Dental Association has rightly railed against the disincentives of NHS contracts to treat people most in need of care. They lose income – the winners are the growing army of profiteering private dentists.

Stephen Kinnock has acknowledged “the shocking state of NHS dentistry after 14 years of Conservative mismanagement.” But the £3 billion NHS dental budget, sufficient to treat only a half the population, won’t be increased – only rejigged.

His solutions are too little and too late if you’ve got toothache now. **The Country Standard says: It’s Time to Stump Up!**

Cost of rural crime drops 17%

THE COST of rural crime dropped 17 per cent in 2024, according to NFU Mutual’s latest crime report.

The insurer said the cost had fallen to an estimated £44.1 million in 2024, down from £52.8m in 2023.

Livestock theft cost farms around £3.4m last year.

Thefts of tractors, combines, and other farm

vehicles dropped by 35 per cent to around £7m. GPS theft fell by 71 per cent after a rise in 2023.

Quad bikes and all-terrain vehicles remain high on criminals’ wish lists, accounting for £2.7m in losses, although that figure is down 16 per cent on last year.

Dog attacks on sheep and other farm animals dropped from £2.4m in 2023 to £1.8m in 2024.

While some crimes are declining, offences against wildlife – like deer and fish poaching, harming badgers or bats, and killing birds of prey – are still happening across the countryside.

The Welsh government is rolling out an updated Wales Wildlife & Rural Crime Strategy and Britain’s first dedicated livestock theft officer to tackle the issue.

Farmland prices subside slightly

FARMLAND prices dropped slightly in the first quarter of 2025, according to a report by the Knight Frank Farmland Index.

It showed a 1 per cent fall to £9,072. It followed a reduction in the last quarter of 2024, meaning a 1.9 per cent drop in the last 12 months.

There was also an 11

per cent decline in the amount of land put up for sale in 2025 so far, according to Knight Frank.

According to Farmers Weekly, arable land values rose by 0.9 per cent to £9,811 per acre, while pastureland values increased by 0.8 per cent to £7,959 per acre, indicating ongoing demand for quality agricultural land.

Show some bottle: take back control of our water

WATER regulator Ofwat has opened the floodgates to average rises in bills of 36 per cent by 2030.

Water company bosses, meanwhile, continued to award themselves bumper pay rises and bonuses, despite a surge in leaks and sewage in our waterways.

After more than 35 years profiting off this basic commodity, the companies are failing to address the need to protect and increase our vital water resources.

The UK experienced its driest spring in more than a century, with just 80mm of rainfall recorded, according to the Met Office — well below the seasonal average of 229mm.

The last official drought occurred in the summer 2022, when hosepipe bans affected 19 million people. Rainfall in spring 2022 also reached about 78 per cent of the seasonal norm — this year it stands at 35 per cent.

Unison, which organises workers in the Environment Agency and the water companies, launched a new report, Clean Water — A Case for Public Ownership in Parliament this December.

Workers packed in to

hear MPs and academics emphasise the need for a water sector that prioritises public health, environmental protection and accountability.

When water services were privatised in England and Wales in 1989, it was claimed it would improve efficiency and attract investment. Since then, private water companies have raked in £72 billion in dividends for shareholders, while failing to invest adequately in infrastructure, says Unison.

Household bills have risen by 40 per cent in real terms.

England's rivers and beaches are in crisis, with companies spilling raw sewage into waterways for 3.6 million hours in 2024. Only 14 per cent of rivers meet good ecological standards.

Meanwhile, companies have built up a staggering £60bn in debt since privatisation, with much of it used to pay shareholders.

A case study in the problems

Thames Water epitomises the issues plaguing the sector.

Despite managing the UK's busiest water network, it loses 630 million litres of water daily, equivalent to 250 Olym-

pic swimming pools.

Since 2017, the company has paid £32.4m in fines for pollution, including dumping raw sewage into rivers.

Thames Water customers have faced significant service disruption in recent years, including a boil water notice in Bramley, near Guildford, last summer and a 40 per cent rise in sewage spills in 2024.

It is saddled with £19bn in debt, largely accrued to pay shareholders. In June 2023 it nearly collapsed, requiring a £750m bailout from investors.

This is not an isolated case. Financial mismanagement, excessive shareholder payouts and environmental harm are endemic.

Ofwat was established to hold private companies accountable for fair pricing and environmental protection. But Unison's report shows it has failed, allowing companies to get away with poor performance, focusing on short-term price controls instead of long-term investment.

After a 20 per cent price hike in July 2023, water company bosses got their way again with the announcement that bills would rise and

average 36 per cent over the next five years, more public money channelled into the reserves of foreign investors and private equity firms.

Renationalisation would eliminate the need to pay shareholders, allowing money to be reinvested into infrastructure and passed on to consumers as savings, says Unison.

Public ownership can prioritise ecological restoration, ending the sewage scandal and ensuring clean, safe water for everyone. Removing the profit motive would allow water services to focus on long-term planning and sustainable investment, not short-term gain.

Public ownership isn't just possible, it's popular. A 2023 poll found that 66 per cent of Britons support renationalising water, cutting across political and social divides.

Unison general secretary Christina McAnea said: "Unison will continue to pressure the government to make water security and renationalisation a key priority."

"It's time to end the 30-year experiment of privatisation and put water back where it belongs — in the hands of the public."

PROFIT OVER PLANET:

Water companies in England recorded 2,487 pollution incidents last year — more than double the target set by the Environment Agency, according to Surfers Against Sewage.

Firms were collectively set an Environment Agency target of a 40 per cent reduction in pollution incidents but instead recorded a 30 per cent increase, said the campaign, based on freedom of information data.



Labour can still make rural gains

by Dr Alex Bulat
Labour Councillor

IT WAS a sunny and very warm morning on 1 May. It was probably the fourth time I've done the circular "round" in the last few months in Holywell — one of the only three Saxon ring villages in Cambridgeshire and part of the parish of Holywell-cum-Needlingworth.

On the circular walk, everyone could see the "Vote Alex Bulat" garden stake displayed on

Holywell Front outside a house. Even the Reform double decker campaign bus, which visited the village a few weeks before the election, probably had to drive past it on its way to the pub.

My first conversation on polling day was about schools. I mentioned that I am a governor at the

local primary and we had a chat about education. She ended up saying: "I'll probably go and vote for you because you showed up."

Showing up — being present and active, this was a theme emerging throughout the campaign. Before moving to Huntingdonshire, I was used to campaigning in highly canvassed areas, where I was probably at least the second, if not

the third person knocking on a door that week before an election.

With six candidates for the county seat of St Ives South and Needlingworth, voters noticed how the election was highly competitive this time, with at least four candidates putting in the effort to speak to people on the doorstep and leafleting every door.

When the headline is that the local elections



were bad for Labour — our Cambridgeshire Labour group down from 10 to five councillors — the few Labour gains in the East of England aren't going to make the news.

But St Ives South and Needingworth has never been Labour since the county council was created and Labour came third here in 2021, a much better set of elections overall for Labour. So, what got it over the line?

The few Labour gains in our region all showed hundreds of hours of work and getting started early — and usually having a candidate that was known from a previous election, in my case, the 2024 general election where I stood in Huntingdon. They built on previous elections, whether it's having Labour town councillors,

or our first Labour district councillor in St Ives South, elected in 2022.

My campaign was run with a few regular volunteers, with late nights writing leaflets, creating road groups in the Christmas holidays and canvassing all year round, including in negative temperatures during the winter where no-one would go out to the shops, let alone for several hours of canvassing.

Every conversation mattered, on the doorstep and at local events. In the end, 88 votes got it over the line, with a close Liberal Democrat second and another close Reform third.

Most of all, winning required resilience — to keep it going even when some people tell you that you're better

off canvassing another "more winnable" area. Showing examples where even a handful of votes mattered to people who simply could not believe any result other than the usual can happen.

And most of all, keeping it positive: focusing on the candidate's experience, local issues raised on the doorstep and not promising to sort out every national problem or fix every pothole. Instead, being honest with voters on what you can realistically do if elected — and then actually being able to do it when elected.

Dr Alex Bulat is the Labour and Co-Operative councillor for St Ives South & Needingworth on Cambridgeshire County Council. She works as a policy adviser and finance manager for a non-profit organisation.

Riot plans in full swing

THE PROJECT to commemorate the bicentenary of the 1830 Swing Riots in Hampshire has been busy, building interest and participation. Following a mayoral reception in Winchester in January, local projects have started from Havant in the East to the New Forest in the West.

Romsey, Alresford, Overton, East Woodhay, Andover and Micheldever have all been involved. A little later this summer there will be events in Littleton and back again to Romsey in the autumn.

The launch of a Captain Swing exhibition at Emsworth Museum in mid-summer will be followed later in the year by Riots on Record, telling the story of the Hampshire riots via documents from the Hampshire Record Office. This exhibition can travel and could

by Liz Weston

be the basis for performances, readings and so on. A short lecture series will also accompany the exhibition.

At Winchester Heritage Open Day in September, the focus will be the rioters' prison experience, including a newly devised play *The Women Left Behind*, which will also be presented at Havant.

A major development has been a proposed partnership with the Hampshire Genealogical Society to investigate the families of as many as possible of the 300 or so prisoners tried in the grand assize of December 1830.

These include the family of actor Lesley Manville, featured in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, whose ancestor was a rioter in Headley and sentenced to transportation.

The Captain Swing Committee is looking ahead to the commemorative year of 2030 when we plan a programme of major events, including a touring play and exhibitions in key venues across the county.

All this will need funding, so we will be embarking on a campaign applying for grants and sponsorship.

By 2030 we plan to have a county-wide network of supporters and partners who will create events of the highest standard to attract regional and national interest.

If you want to be involved in developing a research project or host an activity, please contact the Captain Swing Bicentenary co-ordinator Edward Fennell at edward.fennell@yahoo.co.uk or visit www.englishprojectcaptainswing.org.



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We proudly stand with the trade union movement, providing legal support to members and their families.

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New tech hopes to detect critically endangered birds

Cutting-edge bioacoustic technology has been deployed across the Shannon Callows near Athlone, Co Westmeath, to detect the presence of the critically endangered corncrake.

Once widespread in Ireland, this elusive bird has vanished from much of its former habitat, including the Callows, where it was last heard over a decade ago.

Ireland's National Parks and Wildlife Service has installed acoustic recorders to capture nocturnal birdsong, particularly the male corncrake's distinctive "crex-crex" call. The devices record from 10pm to 5am, offering a less invasive and more comprehensive method than traditional field surveys.

The project, supported by the Breeding Waders

EIP initiative, aims to assess whether corncrakes have returned to the area. Conservationists hope a growing national population — 233 territories recorded in 2024, a 45 per cent rise since 2018 — may lead to recolonisation of former strongholds like the callows.

Corncrakes, which migrate from central Africa, are notoriously shy, but call up to 15,000 times a night to attract mates. Their detectability is influenced by weather and lunar conditions, peaking between 1 and 2am during May and June.

Dr John Carey of the Corncrake LIFE project stresses that comprehensive monitoring is crucial. If detected, conservationists may explore reintroduction efforts.

"The sound of the corncrake is part of the landscape here," he said.

"And many people along the Shannon would love to hear it once more."

RSPB Northern Ireland has recorded six calling male corncrakes on Rathlin Island this breeding season — a "record-breaking" return since the 1990s. This success is credited to the ongoing Giving Corncrake a Home initiative, which restores essential breeding habitat with volunteer-planted nettle cover.

Corncrakes, though still rare in England, can be heard in select areas with suitable habitats, particularly in the fens.

Key locations include the Norfolk Fenlands, especially RSPB Lakenheath Fen, where reintroduction efforts are ongoing, and WWT Welney, a release site for captive-bred birds. Ouse Fen in Cambridgeshire also offers potential sightings.



BREATHTAKING: Hindhead Commons and the Devil's Punch Bowl
Pic: National Trust/John Miller



Greetings and solidarity to everyone at Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival.

Phlebotomists in Gloucestershire have been on strike for over 100 days in a re-banding dispute.

Donate to their strike fund today and help them continue the fight.



UNISON
South West

Two iconic breeds baa-tle for survival

TWO ICONIC sheep fell into the urgent priority category on this year's Rare Breeds Survival Trust watchlist.

The Leicester longwool, renowned for its long, lustrous fleece and contribution to other sheep breeds, now has fewer than 500 registered breeding females in Britain.

And the Manx

loaghtan (pictured), a small hardy sheep from the Isle of Man which can grow up to six horns, has seen a 34 per cent decline in the number of dams producing pedigree offspring since 2022.

The longwool was developed in the 18th century by Robert Bakewell

a pioneer in animal breeding, known for his work at Dishley Grange, Leicestershire.

Bakewell's breeding techniques transformed it into a faster-growing, meatier breed. The sheep were introduced to Australia in 1826, and their genetics have since contributed to the development of other sheep

breeds due to their heavy fleece and quality carcasses.

Rare Breeds Survival Trust chief executive Christopher Price called on the government to re-establish the ministerial native breeds roundtable to better co-ordinate the response to declining numbers.

He said: "These two iconic breeds really pay testament to the fantastic and invaluable diversity within the UK's native sheep breeds, both breeds have distinct characteristics which enable the animals to thrive in their typical landscapes and environments."

"RBST will be working closely with the breeds' societies as we seek to reverse these declines."



Pic: geni/CC



Ninth nature reserve

NATURAL ENGLAND has unveiled the ninth new National Nature Reserve in the King's Series, a project to create or extend 25 new reserves by 2027.

Wealden Heaths National Nature Reserve in Surrey has inspired literary greats from Alfred Lord Tennyson to Arthur Conan Doyle and is a home for rare species such as nightjars, sand lizards, adders and natterjack toads.

It houses the Devil's Punchbowl, a dramatic natural amphitheatre in the heathlands near Hindhead steeped in legend. It is said to have been formed when the devil scooped up earth to throw at Thor.

It comes a couple of months after Bradford Pennine Gateway made the series.

Located in the heart of the Pennines, the landscape that inspired the Brontës, it includes key sites like Penistone Country Park.

Urgent action needed for future of woodlands

BRITAIN urgently needs to improve the condition and scale of its woodlands to tackle loss of native wildlife, mitigate climate change and boost people's wellbeing, according to a report from the Woodland Trust published last month.

The State of the UK's Woods and Trees report reveals that the quantity and variety of woodland wildlife is plummeting, despite a marginal rise in tree cover.

It builds on a 2021 Woodland Trust report which showed that only 7 per cent of Britain's native woodlands are in good ecological condition. This year's report warns that Britain's woodlands, once rich and complex ecosystems, are becoming increasingly simplified and less biodiverse.

Vital features such as veteran trees, deadwood, and a mix of species and ages are disappearing. Only one in 50 native woodlands contains more than one veteran tree per 20 hectares, despite their crucial role in supporting wildlife.

The decline in woodland health is having a profound effect on biodiversity, with woodland bird populations falling by 15 per cent over the past five years and by 37 per cent over the last 50.

Butterfly species linked to woodlands have also



SOS: Woods near Portsmouth

declined by 47 per cent since 1990.

The figures are alarming conservationists, especially as the government pushes forward with plans to streamline environmental regulations in favour of economic growth and infrastructure projects, potentially diluting wildlife protections.

Woodland Trust conservation director Abigail Bunker explained: "UK woodlands lack open spaces such as glades, which allow light to reach the forest floor and young trees to grow. There are also fewer older trees, which, along with their soils, lock in carbon from the atmosphere.

"Alarmingly, many British woodlands have very few — if any — ancient and veteran trees left."

She said: "We are calling on the government and others to invest in the management of our woodlands, so that people and wildlife can experience the benefits of these precious ecosystems, particularly in mitigating the effects of climate change."

The UK is one of the least-wooded countries in Europe, with just 13 per cent woodland cover compared to the European average of 44 per cent. Though woodland cover has grown since 1905 — when it stood at just 5 per cent — urgent

action is still needed. These forests are home to 60 native tree species and rare wildlife, like red squirrels and pine martens.

A government tree-planting taskforce was launched in 2024 to help meet the target of 16.5 per cent woodland cover by 2050 but the Woodland Trust report that less than half of the targets have been met.

UK forests currently store an estimated 1 billion tonnes of carbon and play a critical role in climate mitigation. Protecting and enhancing woodland habitats is not only vital for biodiversity but essential in addressing the climate crisis.

Future of our flying insects up in the air

A SHARP drop in Britain's flying insect population has been revealed by a new citizen science report.

The Bugs Matter survey shows spats on UK car number plates have dropped by 63 per cent since 2021.

The survey, co-ordinated by Buglife and Kent Wildlife Trust, analysed data from over 25,000 journeys across Britain and Northern Ireland.

Scotland saw the steepest fall at 65 per cent, followed closely by Wales (64 per cent), with England on 62 per cent and Northern Ireland on 55 per cent.

Although the decline slowed slightly in the most recent year — dropping 8 per cent between 2023 and 2024 — it fol-

lowed more dramatic drops of 44 per cent in 2023 and 28 per cent in 2022.

Kent Wildlife Trust's Lawrence Ball called the results "alarming," attributing the trend to a combination of long-term decline and short-term environmental pressures, including extreme weather linked to climate change.

Flying insects play a critical role in ecosystems, serving as pollinators, natural pest controllers, and a food source for birds and other wildlife. Scientists warn that continued losses could have serious ecological consequences.

The survey's findings align with declines seen in butterflies, moths, and other insect groups.

Scots teed off with lynx

SCOTTISH First Minister John Swinney has ruled out the legal reintroduction of lynx or other large carnivores into the wild.

His statement followed the illegal release of four lynx in the Cairngorms, which he branded "reckless," saying it posed a threat to the released animals' welfare.

Speaking at the NFU Scotland conference, Swinney highlighted concerns over rural livelihoods and food production, stressing that

such reintroductions are incompatible with the government's balanced rural agenda.

The Eurasian lynx, once native to Britain, was driven to extinction between 500 to 1,000 years ago due to habitat loss, hunting, and the disappearance of prey. While conservationists argue that reintroducing lynx could restore ecosystems and provide a huge tourist attraction, farmers remain concerned about livestock safety,

particularly sheep, and the economic burden of prevention measures like guard dogs and fencing.



FOOD WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE!

From 1834 to 2025 Unite food members have been digging, ploughing and packaging in solidarity with workers everywhere for better pay and conditions – ask our Unite Tolpuddle regulars and general aficionados – some of whom are pictured below.

Unite's Food, Drink and Agriculture sector sends solidarity greetings to all *Country Standard* readers and thanks you for your continued support for all Unite food workers in their continuing campaigns



Steve Leniec, Unite Food, Drink and Agriculture sub-sector chair

Paul Travers, Unite national officer, Food, Drink and Agriculture



To find out more or to join Unite visit www.unitetheunion.org

Resistance is essential

AT A TIME when disinformation floods our feeds, deliberate lies are packaged as truths to spread in the media, and far-right voices attempt to hijack the rural conversation, resistance is no longer optional — it's essential.

Understanding the issues is vital, but we must stand up to them to. From country lanes to the Commons, we must stand up against the lies being pushed by Reform and other nationalist factions who are exploiting real hardship in rural communities to sell a dangerous, regressive and racist agenda.

Some right-wing commentators, many of them climate change deniers or racists, are stoking division for profit — driven more by clickbait than by any genuine concern for rural Britain. They whip up resentment, blame environmental protections or immigrants and pit communities against one another, all while ignoring the structural neglect that's come from decades of underinvestment and austerity.

As in the US, this is not a time to look the other way. We must reclaim the rural narrative with truth, solidarity, and a bold, progressive vision for the future of farming and the countryside.

Taking back the narrative

While farming struggles we hear the likes of Tory MP Mark Francois claim that "people have made market choices." Nigel Farage is happy to accept cheap food imports

and low food standards including US imported chlorine chicken — as if our collapsing rural economies are simply the fault of consumer preference.

But this ignores the powerlessness many feel when faced with stagnant wages, unaffordable housing, and underfunded public services.

In contrast, voices like newly elected St Ives Councillor Alex Bulat remind us what real community politics looks like — where communication and trust come first, and where we build hope from the ground up.

Rural areas have been let down for too long. We need to offer people more than fear—we need to offer a future.

Beyond Austerity: values that matter

After 14 years of Conservative rule, we're left with an economy marked by low growth, deep inequality, and a degraded natural environment. We can't fix this by doing more of the same. Only by asking those who can afford it to contribute more — through fair taxation — can we rebuild our country.

Reform may claim to stand with "the people," but its leadership is packed with millionaire businessmen, many of whom don't even pay tax in Britain, or even live here. This isn't grassroots—it's a deception. Rural Britain deserves fairness, not Farage.

Investing in a better countryside

If we are to transform rural life, we must make



CASHING IN: After 14 years of running agriculture into the ground Tories take to the streets to complain about Labour policy

the case for real public investment — not just in farming, but in the very fabric of our countryside. That means holding supermarkets accountable for the pressure they place on producers. It means affordable rural housing, creating new national parks, expanding public footpaths, revitalising our rail and canal networks.

These are the hallmarks of a system built to serve the few at the expense of the many. Reform's sole purpose is to maintain that inequality. It's a Thatcherite project, led by a self-proclaimed Thatcherite.

But we don't have to accept their vision. Across the country, rural communities are forming mutual aid networks, building co-operatives and reclaiming power from the bottom up. These local actions must be matched by national policies that support

community resilience, public ownership, food sustainability.

We are still paying for the financial crash of 2008. We cannot afford another decade of privatisation, deregulation, and division.

Climate change is real, and rural communities often feel its impact more deeply than most. But they should not bear the financial burden of the transition alone. It's time for manufacturers, energy giants, water companies, and supermarkets to pay their fair share — responsibility must not fall solely on individual farmers or rural communities.

Government action

It's undeniable that Labour has, so far, failed to rise to the scale of the challenges facing British farming. To suggest otherwise would be wilfully blind. But these missteps don't lie at the feet of the

Defra — they stem from decisions made in No 11 Downing Street.

The problem isn't malice as peddled by the right; it's economic orthodoxy. The Treasury clings to the outdated logic of austerity, limiting the resources and flexibility needed to support rural communities and the farming sector. This isn't just a policy flaw — it's a strategic blind spot.

What's needed now is an urgent reset, and that change must be led by Labour's rural MPs. They are uniquely placed to speak for farming constituencies, challenge flawed thinking at the heart of government, and champion a bold, forward-looking rural agenda that finally treats farming as the national priority it truly is.

What We Fight For

We need to support our trade unions and community groups and build

a society rooted in care, dignity, and sustainability. The task ahead is not small. But history tells us that resistance works. When people organise, when we stop looking for divisions and look at what unites progressives, when alternative rural voices are no longer ignored—we can and do change the course of history locally and nationally.

As onetime US presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders once said: "You can turn away and you can ignore what goes on, but if you do that, you do it at your own peril."

That warning resonates here too. If we want a fairer rural future, we must act. Democracy is not a spectator sport. It's a fight for justice, and it requires unity, courage, and commitment.

Sharpen the sickle! The fields are white;

'Tis the time of the harvest at last!

EXPOSED: Reform UK

When Nick Wright and I published a pamphlet on Reform UK in July 2024, we set out to expose a party that, beneath its populist veneer, represents a dangerous shift in British politics.

What we uncovered was a movement rooted in the divisions of the capitalist class, exploiting the grievances of neglected communities while pushing policies that would deepen inequality, erode workers' rights, and gut public services.

Reform UK's recent electoral gains — on top of its four MPs, in the last general election it came second in 98 constituencies, 89 of them Labour-held — should alarm anyone who cares about the future of the NHS, education, and local government.

But this is not an unstoppable force. The party's agenda is vulnerable, and the labour movement has the tools to challenge it—if it acts decisively.

A party of the right, not the radical

Reform UK presents itself as an insurgent, anti-Establishment force, but its ideology is anything but new. It is the latest incarnation of a hard-right tradition that traces back to Thatcherism, UKIP, and the Brexit Party — hostile to unions, enamoured with deregulation, and committed to shrinking the state.

Its support is concentrated in areas hollowed out by decades of deindustrialisation and austerity: former mining and factory towns in northern England and the Midlands, struggling coastal communities, and an increasing

number of rural regions where public services are already threadbare.

These are places where the labour movement was once strong but has been weakened. Reform UK thrives where collective resistance has retreated.

Yet the party's rhetoric doesn't match its policies. It rails against immigration while quietly supporting migrant labour in sectors like agriculture and health-care — because cheaper labour keeps wages low and in swathes of related industries.

It claims to stand for "ordinary people" while advocating tax cuts for corporations, privatisation of the NHS, and the dismantling of workers' rights.

Farage may flex left on issues such as removing the cap on two child benefit and winter fuel allowance, but all Reform UK MPs voted against the Employment Rights Bill.

The real Reform UK agenda

Beneath the flag-waving and anti-elite posturing, Reform UK's policies would deliver a brutal assault on working-class living standards. It is no mistake that Starmer's recent comparison of Reform UK basket-case economic policy with that of ex PM Liz Truss, hit home hard.

The party champions a US-style voucher system for health and education, accelerating the sell-off of public services under the guise of choice. In reality, this means handing control to private insurers and profit-driven corporations, leaving those who can't pay with a second-rate system.

It plans sweeping cuts to public spending, further starving councils of funds. Local government, already weakened by Conservative cuts, would face even deeper slashes — hitting social care, libraries, and community projects. Rural areas, where services are

already sparse, would be hit hardest.

Deregulation is a core Reform UK pledge, with promises to "cut red tape" — a traditional euphemism for making it easier to fire staff, weaken unions, and scrap protections. Small business owners may cheer, but workers would pay the price with even greater job insecurity.

The party dismisses net zero targets as unaffordable, offering no solutions to soaring energy bills or the profiteering of fuel giants. Its refusal to invest in green energy locks Britain into a volatile fossil fuel economy, leaving working-class households at the mercy of global

price shocks. Reform UK would have us focus instead on gas as a main source along with the deeply unpopular fracking.

Reform UK's 'tough on crime' stance includes a "two strikes and you're out" policy — a gimmick that ignores the root causes of crime, such as poverty and underfunded public services. Meanwhile, its allies in the private prison industry stand to profit from a punitive justice system.

The local threat

In the May 2024 local elections, Reform UK made gains but did not secure a large number of rural council seats. Their performance was stronger in some areas than others, but they failed

to make a major breakthrough in most rural councils. Where successful, for example in Lincolnshire and Derbyshire, it seeks to use its new base to push through privatisation, service cuts, and deregulation at a local level. By and large, rural areas continued to vote Conservative.

It is in coastal areas that Reform UK made its biggest gains, in Essex, Kent, Great Yarmouth, Boston Lincs and along the South Coast.

Reform UK's appeal in

these areas rests on economic neglect and a failure of the Establishment parties to address decline. In Folkestone it played up the migration issue and linked it to the supply of local affordable housing. In the coastal areas in north-east England and Yorkshire, Reform UK has been able to capitalise on "left behind" sentiments. It did not win any coastal councils as UKIP once managed, but it is now the main challenger to the conservatives in areas where the main issues are access to health-care, housing, seasonal unemployment and a failure to invest in flood defences or transport.

How to fight back - outline of a plan

The labour movement can fight back across each and every one of these fronts. Unions remain among the most trusted institutions in working-class communities. They have the networks, the expertise, and the credibility to expose Reform UK's real agenda — not just in workplaces, but in town halls and village meetings.

But there will be no significant change unless the union movement can work together, in concert with local communities. Trades councils are therefore key to turning this dire situation around.

Reform UK claims to stand for "ordinary Britons," but its policies would devastate the very communities it courts. We should highlight these contradictions: its support for migrant labour in key industries, its ties to private healthcare



FALSE FRIEND: Nigel Farage at a farmers' protest

lobbyists, its refusal to tackle corporate greed.

Significant opinion polls demonstrate that its own voters support more employment rights and nationalisation of energy and water.

Criticism alone isn't enough. Nor is just shouting racist at those going into Reform UK meetings. The left must present a clear vision: properly funded public services, a wealth tax to replace council tax, regional investment, and democratic control over utilities.

In rural areas, this means fighting for public transport, affordable housing, and support for small farmers — not just big agribusiness.

Unions should organise public meetings, hold workplace discussions, and use social media to reach communities and workers. Where Reform UK peddles division, the labour movement must unite communities around shared interests: decent healthcare, fair wages and a sustainable future.

The most local way to combat Reform UK is in work, where we can tie the case for change with improvement in conditions and rights.

Reform UK's obsession with 'stopping the boats' distracts from its real agenda. Point out that it supports migration when it suits bosses — and that the real solution is fair wages and strong labour rights, not scapegoating refugees.

The stakes could not be higher

Reform UK is not a protest movement, it is a vehicle for a harder, crueller form of capitalism.

Its success depends on disillusionment, on the erosion of collective hope. But history shows that even in the most battered communities, the labour movement can rebuild.

At the turn of the 20th century, towns now targeted by Reform UK became strongholds of emerging working-class organisation. That spirit can be revived. The fight against this party is not just about elections — it's about rebuilding the idea that ordinary people, not profiteers, should shape Britain's future.

The time to start is now.

Phil Katz district secretary of the East of England Communist Party



Martyrs' blood flows in us today

AS WE gather for the 2025 Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival, we are reminded of the power of solidarity in shaping our future. This year, our celebration carries the echoes of struggles close to home, particularly the ongoing dispute by Unison Gloucestershire phlebotomists striking against a belligerent employer who refuses to pay them what they are worth.

The "magnificent 37" have surpassed 110 days of strike action with no signs of stopping any time soon.

Inspired by the victories of healthcare assistants across the

by Kerry Baigent
Unison South West

country, including those at Derriford Hospital who secured a well-deserved upbanging last year after their own successful strike action, Gloucestershire's phlebotomists are demonstrating the strength of unity.

Their battle for fair pay is a reminder that the fight for equality in the workplace is far from over and that the struggle is alive and kicking.

Meanwhile, in Dorset, Unison members continue to challenge proposals that would see 1,700 staff transferred into a wholly owned subsidiary,

or SubCo. This proposal threatens to undermine the terms and conditions of workers, shifting them into a structure that could erode their rights and protections and flies in the face of Labour's commitment for the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation.

The fight to defend their terms is crucial, as it represents a broader struggle against the erosion of public-sector services.

Unison is also at the forefront of the fight for migrant workers' rights. We continue to campaign for the introduction of a certificate of common sponsorship, which would allow mi-

grant healthcare workers to change employers without jeopardising their visa status. At the same time, we are challenging the government's proposed immigration white paper, which aims to double the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain from five to ten years. This proposal will only make it harder for migrant workers to build a future here and strengthen their contributions to our society.

As we reflect on the legacy of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, we draw strength from their sacrifice and commitment to justice. Their fight is our fight — one for fair pay,

secure working conditions, and a future where the value of work is truly recognised.

Today, as we celebrate our collective progress, let us remember that the battle for a just society is ongoing. The campaigns in Gloucestershire, Derriford, Dorset — and the struggles of our migrant workers — show that, through unity and determination, we can challenge injustice and build a fairer future for all.

Let us stand together in solidarity. Together, we can ensure that the voice of every worker is heard, respected, and honoured.

Kerry Baigent is Unison South West regional secretary

Time to rebuild

A year on from the election, STEVE LENIEC says workers need to get organised

TWELVE MONTHS ago we met at Tolpuddle with a hope that the last 14 years of austerity were over and change was finally coming. The party born out of our trade union movement had won an historic mandate on a manifesto of change and working people had a voice in government.

That was the promise, so how have things worked out so far? How much has changed for us, the working class and are things better?

The promised end to

austerity was broken early on: winter fuel payments for pensioners were cut, while the two-child benefit cap remained in place.

Trade union pressure delivered pay improvements for public service workers but for many of us the cuts of the last decade still bite.

Renationalisation of our railways has begun, but the water companies are still allowed to take the pee and quite literally dump it in our rivers with impunity, while paying their shareholders

billions in dividends.

The Employment Rights Bill is a step in the right direction, but fire and re-hire is still an issue along with zero-hour contracts.

It is always said that "to govern is to make choices" and we may not agree with Labour's priorities but understand that some changes take longer than others. For rural workers the abandonment of a national statutory wages board is a real kick in the teeth, how many shadow ministers have visited Tolpuddle and given that

commitment since the Agricultural Wages Board was abolished?

A dialogue with unions as stakeholders would help, but we are told that ministers cannot speak to us unless No 10 approves the meeting.

Finally, and for many of us the final betrayal has been the adoption of Reform's populist rhetoric on immigrants, our minority communities and welfare. Chasing right-wing votes while abandoning core labour principles will never succeed as we can see from the current polls.

Be bold, deliver the real change we voted for.

As trade unionists, we can no longer elect a Labour government and sit back thinking job done. We must fight for the country that we want, tolerant, fair and outward looking.

We must rebuild our movement and stand up for our values, just as the Tolpuddle Martyrs recognised all those years ago. The future lies in our hands brothers and sisters, together we can be the catalyst for real change.

Steve Leniec is Unite food, drink and agriculture sub-sector chair

Soil: the final frontier

CHARLIE CLUTTERBUCK explores the universe beneath our feet

SOIL IS the last great universe to be explored – yet virtually ignored by most.

'We' spend billions on sending telescopes to look in to the infinite nothingness, but have yet to invent a 'soilscope' to explore the tiny nooks and crannies teeming with life right under our feet. Yet that rich brown universe may hold the secrets to maintaining life on this planet.

We may be running out of time. Global warming is happening much faster than we first thought 30-40 years ago. Since 1980, each year has warmed up over 12 times faster than the average over the previous century. Yet we hear only about "pre-industrial" levels, not – say – "pre-globalisation levels."

Something has been going on over and above

the effects of greenhouse gases. They account for around 1°C rise of the 1.6°C since 1980 as measured by NASA. We need to be talking about this missing 0.6°C, as it may be something we can quickly solve.

Water has a lot to do with it as it carries 95 per cent of the Earth's heat but is not measured as too complex. There is also the matter of the soil holding water.

Forests and prairies have been turned to ploughed fields. Forests and grass keep the air cooler – by transpiration and reflecting the sun's rays off the surface. Brown arable soils absorb more heat and transpire less. Is the glorious 'green' revolution (the worldwide introduction of short-stemmed grains, grown as monocrops and drenched with chemicals) directly

affecting the warming of the globe?

We don't know because nobody is measuring surface temperatures. When I say "nobody," there is a study in India that has measured the increase of land temperatures as this "greening" goes on.

Perhaps we should talk about "pre-green revolution" times. Global warming drives climate change, as it warms the air and heats up seas so increasing their currents, in complex ways. We are hearing about more fires, floods and droughts – which are often put down to climate change. But the soil conditions, often baked because of loss of plants and rain, contribute to these extreme events.

Soil is ignored not just in weathering and warm-

ing, but just about everywhere in our culture. Mind you, one old chap called Karl Marx was aware of its importance, saying in an obscure tome *Capital* that the source of all wealth is labour – and soil.

Marx used to chat with German chemist Justus von Liebig, Father of Fertiliser, and as a result, he changed his mind from welcoming new agricultural technologies to seeing them as contributing to the metabolic rift between humans and the environment.

He was also aware of the guano wars, where countries were fighting over bird dung on remote islands. Bird dung is a good fertiliser as it's rich in phosphates, something those in the Wye Valley have noticed with the pollution of the river by intensive chicken production.

We certainly need a bigger debate about what is really going on, rather than reducing everything to carbon. Mind you carbon has brought some interest to soil. At Davos 2024, the World Economic Forum asked: "How can breakthrough finance, knowledge models and community collaborations realize the value of soil?"

The trouble is the most common answer is carbon credits. The soil is full of them – more of than the air and above ground biome together. But the money for carbon credits, now estimated at £1.5 trillion doesn't go back to the soil, but into the City.

There is also the problem of measuring the amounts of carbon, because half of soil carbon is running round in small soil animals.

The International

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) used to minimise the role of soil, saying that as the earth warmed up, it increased soil bacteria which in turn emitted more carbon dioxide and methane.

But in 2019 a combined international team of soil scientists showed that if woodlice (those boring brown bugs that scuttle away when you turn over a stone) are running round, eating the bacteria, then the carbon stays running round in/on the soil. The IPCC has now changed its tune. We need to have this more 'holistic' thinking than carbon reductionism.

However rather than investing in nurturing our soil, most countries seem hell bent on destroying it. The top 10 threats to soil health outlined by the United Na-

Red woods?

GREGG SACHNO wonders how we can we reclaim the revolutionary heritage of our forests and orchards

NESTLING quietly in the drumlins of Co Down, a mile north of the small coastal village of Portaferry, sits Corrog Wood, a six-hectare mixed broadleaf millenium wood.

A six-hectare millenium wood, it has established itself as a key habitat for hedgehogs, buzzards and an array of woodland birds can be seen.

As volunteer warden, I spend probably too much time in the woods and it got me thinking about these woodlands as something else — mindful spaces, yes; carbon capture, most definitely; but what if our trees and the places they inhabit are revolutionary?

Woodlands have always been places where people have met to discuss ideas, maintain cultures and defend their interests against outside forces.

From the early pre-Christian druids to the Brehon laws of the woods in the Celtic world to the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798 to the founding of the trade unions up today's attempts to alleviate the worst of the climate emergency woodlands and orchards have been at the centre of revolution, resistance, folklore, imperialism and change.

In Ireland we can see an attempt to separate a people from deep ecological roots to establish and eventual subjugate a forest people. The plantation of Ireland in the 17th century by English and Scottish settlers wasn't simply about the removal of the Gaelic language or laws, it was about the destruction of the historical link between the people and the land.

Central to this was the destruction of woodlands not only for eco-

nomic use but removing the cultural link.

Gaelic names often derived from woodlands, Derry for example comes from the Irish for "place of the oak" while Roscommon means St Conman's wood.

There are other examples of this deliberate cultural imperialism internationally. The subjugation of Native Americans saw them removed from their buffalo and forests, forced on the Trail of Tears to reservations thousands of miles away, with state-sponsored schools and religious assimilation.

This is not just history. In 2015 the Lakota Sioux campaigned against the development of a gas pipeline across ancestral land that would cause the destruction of ancient burial sites, woodlands, lakes and prairie.

Under ancient Ireland's Brehon laws, trees were measured in rank of importance to medicinal properties: oak, hazel and yew were seen as the nobles of the woods.

The laws also recognised divorce and women's rights. Central to the system was the community, with specific rights to pasture, coppicing and access to woods for resources. They were forcibly replaced by individual property rights from the 17th century onwards.

At the same time, tracts of ancient woodland were eaten up, often to make ships for the British empire's navy.

Today in coastal areas, traces of shipoak, taken from wrecks along the coast of Ireland can be found as structural supports in old cottages, including the house I am writing this in.

Only 2 per cent of native woodland is left

on the island of Ireland, there are more carparking spaces in Belfast than ancient trees.

The apple plays a central role in Celtic mythology, with the Isle of Avalon, island of the apple trees, entering Britain's Arthurian legend and the entrance to the otherworld framed by an apple tree.

But cultural imperialism has all but wiped out Ireland's apple heritage, with names anglicised such that of 7,000 varieties of apples, 2,000 in Britain and Ireland, there are just 30 traditional Irish cultivars.

Britain has also been victim. Pliny the Elder remarked that Britain's druidic caste "found shelter and worship in their oak groves. For imperial Rome, the oak groves proved a challenge, the spaces where the non-Roman worship of pagan gods had to be removed: you remove the forest, you remove the cover; you remove the cover you, remove the threat.

But what of today? How do we develop ideas around reclaiming our woodlands? In discussions about heritage, how do we ensure they include our ancient democratic woodlands and orchards?

The growth of community orchards is welcome. They are already attempting to alleviate the damage of climate change, but could they also be opened up as centres of outdoor education?

Every community orchard could have an apple pressing day, with storytellers, poets and mummers facilitating a discussion on the history of rural struggle. We have done this in our small orchard in Portaferry.

We talk about the rights of nature, the battle against climate change and rewilding in a setting that brings people closer to the earth.

If we organise at a local level, utilising our orchards and woods as starting points, we will be

building on the traditions of resistance of our woodland story. Could we think about a walk in the woods and orchards as doing something revolutionary?

As I finish my walk around Corrog, checking on the damage left by the most powerful storm in 100 years — Eowyn destroyed up to 10,000 trees in Mount Stewart just five miles from our small wood — it looks like we escaped lightly. A number of Scots pine and beech were destroyed.

I come to the gate and look back, this wood will outlast me, I am the first warden and with luck my daughter will be the next, this semi-mature woodland can teach us a lot as we move into what Ben Law described as "the new wood age."

Our revolutionary past and a more sustainable future are tied up in the story of our woods, as the effect of climate change affects us all we have a very simple choice, to walk into the woods and orchards and discuss and debate ideas and act on them and change direction or do nothing and live with consequences.

DESTRUCTION:
A tree felled by Storm Eowyn in Dublin



tion's Food and Agriculture Organisation are soil erosion, organic carbon loss, nutrient imbalance, salinisation, contamination, acidification, loss of biodiversity, soil sealing, compaction, and water-logging.

And then there is the impact on soils of deforestation (27 football pitches/minute) desertification (20 pitches a minute), floods and fires (18 a minute). All these soil surface changes will increase global warming and stir up climate change. Let's hope our collective will to stop these losses appears long before we run out of surface to play the beautiful game.

But the biggest problem of trying to make soils healthier is that while many of us may refer to "our soil," that soil is almost invariably under somebody else's land.

Can Labour rebuild trust?

The government has an uphill battle to get farmers back on side, but JOHANN TRASKER has some suggestions to make a start

IT'S BEEN a tough year for British farmers since Keir Starmer came to power — and the Labour government faces a critical challenge: how to rebuild trust with growers and livestock producers.

Farmers' confidence has been eroded by policy instability, disrupted subsidy reforms, unfavourable post-Brexit trade deals and a lack of clarity about the long-term role of British agriculture when it comes to food production and the environment.

If Labour wants to secure a thriving and sustainable agricultural sector, it must move quickly to repair the government's relationship with farmers following what many view as a series of policy blunders.

Long-term certainty on support

The shift away from the basic payment scheme (BPS) and the drawn-out introduction of the environmental land management (ELM) schemes has left many farmers uncertain about their financial future.

Delays, complexity and shifting criteria have made it hard for farmers to plan or invest in their own businesses. This includes the closure — without warning — of the government's flagship sustainable farming incentive to new applications.

Outlining a clear agricultural budget for at least the duration of this Parliament, with detailed guidance on the progres-

sion and accessibility of ELM and other schemes would go a long way to achieving this.

Farmers say they need clarity and consistency, not constant tinkering. Simpler application processes, transparent metrics and timely payments for farmers who deliver environmental benefits would be a good start.

Rebalance trade policy towards domestic production

Previous trade agreements, such as those signed with Australia and New Zealand, caused significant frustration within the farming sector. Farmers feel their interests are repeatedly sacrificed to achieve broader trade objectives.

British farmers abide by some of the highest animal welfare and environmental standards in the world — only to see their efforts undermined by food imports produced using methods that are banned in the UK.

Rather than rolling over in trade talks, the Labour government must take a firmer line. That means ensuring all future trade deals uphold British food, environmental, and animal welfare standards.

There should also be a reassertion of the value of home-grown food production within trade and economic policy. Farm leaders have suggested a food security impact assessment for all new trade agreements.

The message to farmers should be simple: British production is



valued, and government policy will reflect that.

Invest in infrastructure and innovation

Agriculture cannot become more sustainable or productive without targeted investment. Labour has pledged to support growth through innovation and green jobs — the rural economy must be part of that strategy.

Key areas include funding for precision farming equipment and decision support tools, research and development grants available through the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), Innovate UK and the UK Agri-Tech Centre.

Backing modernisation is especially important for livestock and upland farms, which often face the twin pressures of low margins and tougher environmental constraints in some of Britain's most valued landscapes.

Improving access to in-

novation and infrastructure will boost productivity while supporting net-zero goals.

Tackle labour and skills shortages

One of the most acute challenges facing the sector is the shortage of seasonal and skilled labour. Horticulture, dairy, poultry, and pigs all rely on a migrant workforce that has become harder to recruit since Brexit.

Labour must commit to a long-term seasonal agricultural workers scheme that is fair, timely and adaptable to sector needs. But the bigger issue is improving skills: encouraging the industry to work smarter, not just harder.

Employee recruitment continues to be a struggle for many farms. A government strategy could help alleviate this, covering agricultural education, apprenticeships, technical colleges and clear routes into farm management.

Without a pipeline of

trained domestic workers and access to essential migrant labour, productivity will suffer — and businesses will be unable to grow.

Food at the heart of policy

For too long, food policy has lacked co-ordination. Within government, agriculture sits separately from health, public procurement and the environment, despite our diet as a nation being a key factor in people's health and longevity.

A cross-government national food strategy — with clear targets for food security and self-sufficiency — would send a strong signal that the production and consumption of safe, healthy and affordable food is central to the nation's wellbeing.

It would also help secure a sustainable future for farming, by balancing environmental objectives with the need for domestic food security, which is particularly important in

a world of global supply chain shocks and climate disruption.

A well-designed strategy would support British producers, promote sustainable diets, reduce waste, and make the case for continued investment in farming — recognising the true value of food, rather than viewing it as a disposable commodity.

Engage with farmers

Finally, Labour must commit to genuine, ongoing engagement with the farming community. Many farmers feel sidelined by the government, consulted late or not at all on crucial issues, including the decision to impose inheritance tax on farms.

That must change.

Restoring trust will require more than stakeholder meetings. It demands active listening, co-designed policies, and feedback mechanisms allowing farmers to shape their own futures — while meeting the government's objectives too.

Engagement should include not only large-scale producers, but smaller tenant farmers, smallholders, devolved nations and under-represented groups as well — including farm workers and local communities.

The farming sector doesn't expect handouts. What it wants is fairness, consistency, and a policy framework that recognises food production as a public good, alongside environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

For Labour to succeed, it must shift from a top-down model to one of partnership. That means listening as well as leading — and investing in agriculture as well as regulating the farming sector.

If the government can offer certainty on support, uphold production standards in trade, improve access to labour and innovation, and treat food as a national priority, it has a real chance to rebuild the relationship with farmers.

Trust, once lost, takes time to restore. But with the right signals and sustained commitment, Labour can begin to turn the page.

Johann Tasker hosts the Farmers Weekly Podcast - available wherever you get your podcasts.

FUNDING PLEA: NFU Scotland members

Fair Funding
for Farmers &
Crofters

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We can GROW
with Funding

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We can GROW
with Funding

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Braced for the storm

THERE was a huge amount riding on the government's spending review in June. We knew many departments were being asked to cut their budgets. What if the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) farming budget — much of which is paying for the farm transition to nature and climate resilient farming in England — was cut in a big way?

There have been a fair few ways in which this government has not endeared itself to the farming community — the unexpected reduction in inheritance tax relief, accelerated basic payment scheme (BPS) cuts, capital grants pause, and the sudden pause on the sustainable farm incentive (SFI) scheme being big ones.

We know we need all farms, of all types and sizes, acting for nature, ecosystem recovery and for climate resilience. The farmers, workers and sup-

Agriculture has taken a battering under the new government, so nerves were high as the spending review approached, says VICKI HIRD

pliers, need support to do this as the market won't pay for the many vital things they can provide.

But when the government made a sudden decision to pause the SFI in March, it brought the farm transition — with many farmers starting to try agri-environment schemes for the first time — to a terrible halt. Even farmers who had done half the application were left in the lurch though that has been partly corrected.

The higher-ambition schemes, Countryside Stewardship, Landscape Recovery and old legacy schemes are also essential to support but have been looking hugely vulnerable. Cuts there would be a disaster for society as many provide vital water and flood management, carbon

storage in peat and trees, nature corridors and so much more.

The pauses and changes have all created huge uncertainty. Farmers were already questioning what support is going to be available and what should they plant, leave, buy, hire and so on.

Any cuts are bad news. So bad that an unholy alliance of 50 organisations including Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB joined forces with the NFU, and other farm groups.

They spoke as one to the media and to MPs in Parliament about the risk, and what further cuts to the farming budget would mean for farmers, for the ability of food producers to respond to climate change and for the chances of recovering nature before it is too late.

With the rumours of big cuts to Defra's farming budget in the comprehensive spending review in June, there was a very real risk of going backwards.

As it happens the cuts were not as bad as we feared — down to the heavy joint work by farm and conservation organisations plus, maybe, a recognition that we need resilient food supplies. The budget was almost maintained, but there were some cuts and the budget won't keep up with inflation meaning less year-on-year cash.

The united message from the alliance of green groups and conventional farming organisations was clear. The farming transition — funded by the budget and transfers from the old income supports

such as the basic payment scheme — has so much riding on it.

Its success or failure will determine whether rural economies thrive or wither, and whether targets to recover nature are met or missed, and whether we can feed ourselves healthily and affordably in the next years. Britain's legal commitments under the Environment Act, climate budgets, global targets and more also depend on it.

One small piece of good news is that Defra has stated that those who were in process of applying — over 3,000 of them — can now put their applications in and get some funds up to a maximum of £9,300. But we need all the schemes properly funded, so farm and rural communities

know where they stand.

As the Chancellor and No 10 did not make a bad choice — one that would have proved calamitous for the countryside, nature and climate action — we must be thankful. But the pressure is still on to ensure a budget reflects the scale of need we know there is, and to recognise inflationary impacts on farm costs.

Two jobs any government has, to protect its citizens from harm and ensure they can eat well, are both massively dependant on a resilient and confident farming system which provides healthy food ingredients that is protecting the ecosystems on which we depend for food and wellbeing. It should be top of its list.

Vicki Hird is strategic lead for agriculture at The Wildlife Trusts.

Highlands and Islands on the road to ruin unless we act

Young people are leaving and no-one can afford to replace them, warns RHODA GRANT MSP

THE GREATEST issue facing rural Scotland is depopulation. The loss of our young people is particularly keenly felt across the Highlands and Islands.

The SNP believe inward migration is the answer, a Scottish visa that allows migration into Scotland. This solution is simplistic and does not deal with the root causes of depopulation.

Our young people leave for several reasons with many of them wishing to pursue further and higher education. The University of the Highlands and Islands was created to counteract this, and while there has been some success, we see the underfunding of further and higher education disproportionately impact on what can be delivered locally through UHI.

It is clear that our people need to be better connected, both physically and digitally.

The main routes into my region are roads that are not fit for purpose. There has been continued calls to upgrade the A9 from Perth to Inverness to dual carriageway and calls have also been made for improvements to the road further north.

The A82 and A83, routes into the west highlands, are not double track in their entirety.

Rail lines are largely single track with insufficient passing loops and journey times have increased rather than decreased.

The same is true of modern communications. While some areas struggle to get any kind of digital connectivity, elsewhere speeds are increasing as is the use of data-rich modes of communication.

All this holds back our economy as is the case for other rural parts of the country too.

Without jobs and connections our young people are at a disadvantage.

Possibly the greatest issue forcing our young people out however is the lack of affordable housing.

We are very lucky to live in a beautiful part of the country, but it has its drawbacks. Financially better-off people can buy second homes in our rural areas, and many buy up property for the lucrative holiday let market.

Young people cannot compete with those cash buyers when they are starting out and often have limited savings. This is also true when we try and attract workers into the area: they need to find a place to live. Many of those who would move are at the start of their career, do not have deep roots in other communities and again

do not have the cash to compete.

These real challenges are not unique to the Highlands and Islands. I hear about young people in the south of England talking about these same issues with challenges in Cornwall sounding very familiar to our own. It's not just in Britain, young people in the Canary Islands have been protesting about the same issues.

While tourism is economically beneficial it ceases to be so if it is driving away our young people, and with that, the sustainability of our communities.

We need to have better-connected communities, more jobs and training opportunities, and more affordable housing to make living in rural areas more attractive for our young people.

National Parks and the Channel Islands operate different markets for holiday homes and local homes. Do we use housing burdens to retain local housing, especially those homes built with public funding, be they ex-socially rented, assisted purchases orcroft homes?

There are tools there that can be used and we need to look to use them before we end up with a demographic unbalance that we cannot rectify.

Rhoda Grant is Scottish Labour MSP for Highlands and Islands

The man who was never lost, never went very far

The life of GHB Ward

IN THE autumn of 1900, a simple newspaper advert sparked a movement. GHB Ward, better known as Bert, a 24-year-old socialist and advocate for access to the countryside, invited the public to join him on a moorland walk.

On Sunday 2 September 1900, 14 walkers — 11 men and three women — assembled in the Peak District for what is now

considered the first organised public ramble. It was the birth of the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers, a group that would become a pioneering force in the outdoor movement.

Named after the Clarion socialist newspaper, the club grew from its roots in Sheffield's working-class culture, in the early days departing from the Independent Labour Party headquar-

ters in the city.

By the 1920s, the club claimed to be the largest and most influential rambling group in the country, with 200 members and over 56 walks planned in 1928 alone. Clarion Ramblers branches were also formed in Rochdale, Halifax, Bury, Wakefield, Blackpool, Leeds, Mossley, North Staffs and Derby.

Ward, who lived at Storth Lodge in Totley for



A hall of our own

ONE HUNDRED years ago, in a quiet turning along High East Street in Dorchester, overlooking the banks of the River Frome, stood a modest but remarkable building. Once the Dorford Baptist Church, it became a symbol of determination and pride for Dorset's agricultural labourers — a testament to their struggle for dignity and unity.

As National Union of Agricultural Workers general secretary Bill Holmes observed: "That was the first building that agricultural workers had ever attempted to own as their own property in the country."

Built in the early 19th century, the Dorford Chapel was once the spiritual home of a young Thomas Hardy, who sat in its pews during his formative years in Dorchester.

But as the Baptist congregation outgrew the space, the building became available and it was the agricultural labourers of Dorset, then newly empowered by a growing union movement, who saw an opportunity.

With small but determined contributions — each union member giving a pound or more

— they pooled together several hundred pounds, forming what would become the Dorset Agricultural Workers Hall Society. The chapel was purchased, not as a place of worship (though many union members in Dorset were non-conformist), but as an organising HQ.

The former chapel was transformed into the Dorset County Committee Agricultural workers union headquarters, guided in its early days by Fred James, the respected figure in the local labour movement in Dorchester.

Later, under the leadership of Arthur Jordan, the union also outgrew the space and relocated to 8 The Cliff, Bryanston, near Blandford.

But the purchase of the old Dorford Chapel wasn't just about owning a building. It was about recognition — proof that farm labourers had a place in society.

The transformation of a riverside chapel into a union hall may seem like a small historical detail. But for those who worked the land, it marked a turning point, from isolation to organisation, from silence to solidarity.

many years, dedicated himself to securing public access to the moorlands, which at the time were tightly controlled by private shooting estates. The Clarion Ramblers led early trespasses, including a 1907 march across Bleaklow and an annual demonstration over Doctor's Gate until the path was reopened in 1927.

In April 1932, 400–600 workers, led by activist Benny Rothman, tres-

passed Kinder Scout to protest restricted countryside access.

Organised by the British Workers Sports Federation, they clashed with gamekeepers before reaching the summit. Six, including Rothman, were arrested and five jailed, sparking public outrage. The protest ignited the right to roam movement and

became a landmark moment in outdoor access history.

Tom Stephenson, a Lancashire lad from Whalley, was inspired by hikes on Pendle Hill to campaign for greater public access to the countryside—ultimately leading to the creation of the Pennine Way, Britain's first National Trail, opened in 1965. Alongside fellow reformer Thomas Leonard of Colne, found-

er of the Co-operative Holidays Association, he helped pioneer the National Trails and National Parks movement.

Through its long-running Clarion handbooks — packed with lore, geology and local history — and campaigns for open access, the club helped shape today's walking culture and the continued demands for better access to the countryside.



ENDURING LEGACY:

People revising the legacy of the British Workers Sports Federation today outside the Nelson Clarion House is located near Pendle in Lancashire. Situated on Jinny Lane, Nelson (BB12 9LL), this

historic site has been in continuous operation since 1912. It stands as a lasting testament to the Clarion movement's legacy and continues to serve as a beacon of its enduring values and community spirit.

Committed to rural workers: Jack Dunman

JACK DUNMAN, a prominent figure in the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) and post-war editor of Country Standard, was a tireless advocate for rural labourers.

Born on 5 February 1911, in Poole, Dorset, to Percy Dunman, a timber merchant, and Lisa Griffin.

He attended public school Marlborough College, where he excelled in athletics and rugby, eventually becoming head boy, before heading to Oxford.

He initially chaired the Oxford University Labour Club in 1932 before joining the Communist Party in February 1933. When

the war against fascism in Spain broke out, he was instrumental in raising funds for the Aid to Spain Movement across Dorset and Hampshire.

It was during his time at Oxford that Dunman met Helen Muspratt, a renowned photographer, who would become his lifelong partner. After graduating he worked in railway management in Oxford, Cambridge, and Hull.

But a near-fatal fall from a Cornish cliff, resulting in a fractured skull, forced a career change. Doctors advised Dunman to seek outdoor work and so he pursued his growing interest in farming.

He joined the NUAW in 1941 and threw himself into a lifetime's work for the union, in the process building one of the union's largest branches (Charlbury) in the county. By 1942 he'd risen to become the Oxfordshire county secretary and in 1944 he penned an eight-page booklet, Farm workers wage: the case for £4 10s 0d. Six years later he authored Farmworkers for peace and higher wages.

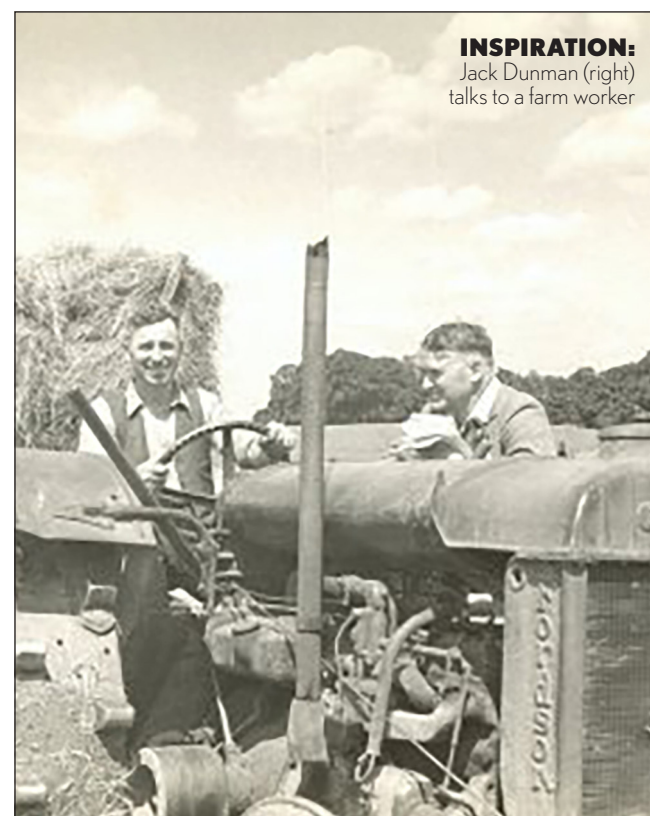
The end of the war in 1945 saw Dunman serve as editor of Country Standard and become national secretary of the Communist Party's agricultural advisory committee. He ran for

Abingdon in both the 1945 and 1950 general elections.

For three decades, Dunman, alongside figures like Ted Lomas and Ruth Uzzell, was a central figure in the Oxfordshire NUAW. He was also close to notable individuals such as Wogan Phillips (as Baron Milford, the Communist Party's only ever peer), Wilf Page (Norfolk), Arthur Jordan (Dorset), Les Shears (Dorset), Ted Sales (Dorset), JJ Waterman (Dorset), G Thomas (Cornwall) and the union's radical vice-president, Joan Maynard MP.

Dunman was known for his oratory skills, rarely needing a megaphone to address crowds.

His colleague Ted Lomas once recalled how Dunman would cycle to any district in need, remarking: "Jack's enthusiasm was an inspiration."



INSPIRATION:
Jack Dunman (right)
talks to a farm worker

Dunman was also active in the co-operative movement, writing Co-ops: the future in 1969.

But it was rural workers that he devoted most time to.

Joan Maynard said after his death: "Jack was a scholarly man, very cultured, keen on music and intellectual pursuits, but absolutely committed to the cause of farm workers. An obvious leader, an eloquent spokesman."

His union work was a great joy to him. In 1972, Dunman had the honour of delivering the opening speech at the NUAW biennial delegate conference, his last public address before his death the following year.

His contributions to the union and the agricultural workers' movement were deeply respected, ensuring his legacy as a dedicated champion for rural labourers.

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SCAN ME

A force of nature: Wilfred Willett

WILFRED WILLETT became a household name for his books on birds and flowers, but his life was just as colourful as the flora and fauna he described.

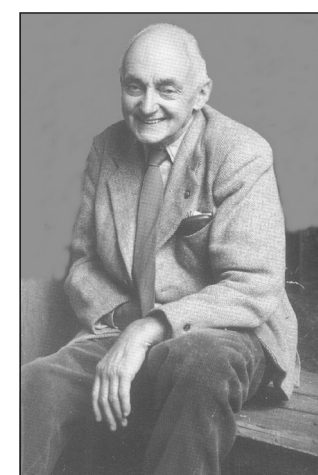
Born in Croydon in 1890, he attended Cambridge with dreams of becoming a surgeon. At a May Ball he met Eileen, a young woman he would secretly marry in December 1913, the pair living apart for fear of their parents' reactions.

He took the king's shilling in 1914, joining the London Rifle Brigade and quickly being sent to the front. He was in the trenches for the Battle of Flanders, where he was shot in the head by

a German sniper while trying to save an injured comrade in no man's land.

Eileen became concerned when the letters stopped and started pushing for information, eventually travelling to France — paying scant regard to military rules — and finding him close to death at field hospital. Against medical advice, she brought him back to England and made sure he got an operation to remove the shrapnel from his brain.

She'd spend the next five years nursing him back to health, though he never regained the use of his right arm, dashing his hopes of becoming a surgeon.



For his bravery in Flanders, Willett received a citation from war secretary Winston Churchill for "gallant and distinguished conduct in the field." He always retorted that he treasured more a

Happy Birthday to the Standard!

COUNTRY STANDARD is celebrating reaching the grand age of 90 with plenty of puff left!

Proudly proclaiming on our banner "For Peace and Socialism in the Countryside" the pantheon of writers and editors reads like a who's who of rural campaigners over nine decades.

All have been associated with the agricultural workers' union whichever form it took, from the NUAW to the NUAAW to the Transport and General Workers Union and now Unite.

On these pages we feature two such giants, Jack Dunman and Wilfred Willett. But the names of other huge contributors resonate to this day. Wilf Page, celebrated in Mike Pentelow's book *Norfolk Red*, edited the Standard in the 1980s with the help of a collective.



Wilf, remembered the 1923 farmworkers' strike in Norfolk, joined the RAF before the second world war and came out a communist. A commanding speaker for peace and justice for farm and allied industry workers, he was blacklisted but came back to represent rural workers on the T&G executive, even being voted president of the European Farmworkers Association. Later he became an inspiring rural pensioners leader.

Mike, himself, a former Landworker editor was part of a group who gave the paper a make-over a dozen years ago.

Chris Kaufman (another Landworker editor and Unite officer) and Michael Walker (Unison) are still at it to this day.

They have maintained coverage of vital environmental concerns like the Standard's joint campaign with the Daily Mirror and Landworker in the 1980s to ban the use of the weedkiller 245T.

They have continued the tradition of championing the rural workers' cause supported down the years by the outstanding editor Bob Wynn known for his talents on the *Daily Worker* and *Morning Star*. Joan Maynard the NUAAW-sponsored MP who led the charge in Parliament to kill the worst effects of the tied cottage system was a regular contributor. So was Lord Milford, better known as Wogan Phillips who carried the battle to the House of Lords.

Let's raise a glass to departed Dorset friends and contributors, Arthur Jordan, Ted Sales and Les Shears and to current supporters like Tolpudde's indefatigable Tony Gould. While we're at it let's raise a glass to those numberless friends and contributors who've borne our Standard high. ON TO THE HUNDRED!

Elizabeth Studham: Convict S0217

IN THE winter of 1830, the fields of Kent were not just yielding wheat — they were crackling with rebellion. Farmhands, driven to breaking point by low wages, harsh Poor Laws, and the spread of job-killing threshing machines, rose up in protest across much of southern England. The uprisings became known as the Swing Riots, named after the mythical Captain Swing, whose name appeared on threatening letters sent to landowners.

Most of the Swing rioters were working men. But one woman stood out from the crowd, both in courage and consequence: Elizabeth Studham.

Born in the quiet farming village of Monkton, Kent, in 1810, she would go on to become one of the few women transported to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) for her part in the Swing Riots.

Elizabeth's crime was dramatic: she was convicted of setting fire to the Birchington Poor House — a symbol of cruelty to many rural poor. It happened on the night of 21 November 1830, shortly after several men gathered at The Powell Arms in Birchington. The fire wasn't merely an act of destruction, but one of defiance — a cry against injustice.

The authorities came down hard. Elizabeth was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. But as was the case for many Swing rioters, her sentence was commuted to transportation for life.

She boarded the prison ship *Mary III* at Woolwich on 11 June 1831 and landed at Hobart, Van Diemen's Land on 19 October.

Her new life began in the Cascades Female

Factory, a prison for women. It was cold, crowded, and unforgiving. Women were sorted by behaviour and put to work in laundries, sewing rooms, or sent out as domestic servants.

Elizabeth was known in Tasmania's police system as Convict Number S0217 — the "S" standing for Studham.

She applied four times for permission to marry before finally wedding Joseph King on 24 July 1843 at Launceston. The marriage was officially registered, although later documents, such as her Ticket of Leave, still listed her under her maiden name. This was common, as convict records usually continued under the name they arrived with.

Just two years later, in 1845, Elizabeth was granted a conditional pardon, freeing her to live and work where she pleased — though she could not return to England.

Elizabeth was not alone for long. Her brothers, including John Studham, emigrated from Kent to Australia, bringing their wives and children — seven daughters in John's case. One settled in Tasmania.

Later, Elizabeth and Joseph appear to have moved to Victoria, where Elizabeth lived out her final years in Collingwood, a working-class suburb of Melbourne. She died on 8 November 1874, aged 64.

Elizabeth Studham's story is one of defiance, endurance, and reinvention. She was one of the very few women among nearly 500 Swing Rioters transported to Australia — a solitary figure representing the silent struggles of thousands of rural women who lived and laboured in hardship.

heartfelt letter from the soldier whose life he had tried to save.

With his medical career over, Willett channelled his energies into studying nature, becoming one of Britain's best known naturalist and writing numerous books on birds, flora, and fauna.

Having witnessed the horrors of war and the failure of successive governments to honour their pledge to build a Britain "fit for heroes," Willett increasing turned to radical politics and became a founder member of the Communist Party in 1920. He contributed to the party's paper, the *Daily Worker*, as a nature correspondent and wrote for our own *Country Standard*.

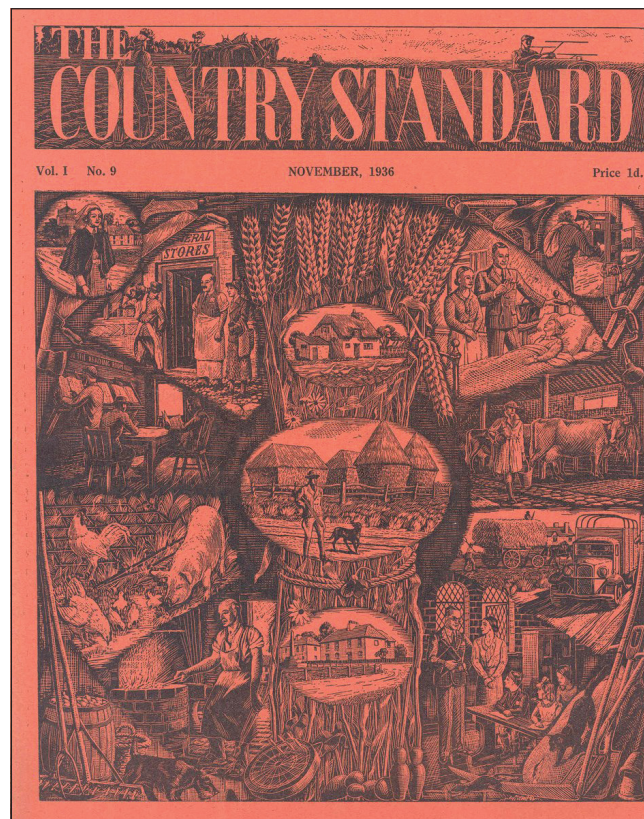
His growing commitment to the labour movement led him to become involved in the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) and so it was that from his home at The Rosery, Matfield, near Tonbridge

Wells, that he became chairman and later long-time secretary of the local branch of the NUAW.

Willett's writings were diverse, ranging from overtly political works like *British Farming: A Plan for Victory and Prosperity* (1937) to popular nature books. His book *Birds of Britain*, first published in 1950, became especially popular among young bird-watchers and was reprinted multiple times in the 1950s and 1960s.

Willett died in 1961 still wedded firmly to his radical views and leaving a legacy of dedication to both nature and social justice.

His life and the dramatic story of his early years were immortalised in a radio programme by Jonathan Smith and BBC TV series *Wilfred and Eileen* in November 1981. Marjorie Seldon, Wilf and Eileen's daughter later published a fuller family biography called *Poppies and Roses* — a story of courage.



OUR HISTORY: A front page of the *Country Standard* from November 1936.

The Communist Party founded the *Country Worker* in January 1935,

changing the name to *Country Standard* in '36.

Country Standard was refounded in 2010 by a collective committed to peace and socialism in the countryside.



LAST STAND? A sketch of the battle from the Penny Satirist

Britain's last armed rural rebellion

MICHAEL WALKER looks back at the oft-forgotten but significant Battle of Bossenden Wood

TODAY, Hernhill seems not unlike many other quiet Kentish villages, but nearly 200 years ago it was home to the last armed rebellion on English soil.

The Battle of Bossenden Wood was one of the most dramatic — and overlooked — events in England's rural history.

Against a background of rural discontent over the New Poor Law and the generally miserable status of the agricultural workers, William Courtenay, AKA John Nichols Tom, and a group of followers marched around the countryside on 29 May 1838, calling for better wages and living conditions.

The army was called in to quell the protest on 31 May, resulting in several deaths, including army officer Lieutenant Henry Boswell Bennett.

While Lt Bennett was buried with full military

honours in Canterbury Cathedral, commemorated with a marble memorial, the farm workers who died were buried in unmarked graves in St Michael's churchyard at Hernhill.

Until recently, there was no memorial for these men. A wooden board now lists their names and ages, but it offers no explanation of the circumstances in which they died.

These men deserve more. They deserve recognition not just as victims of violence, but as participants in a struggle for dignity, fair treatment, and justice. From the earliest days following the uprising, Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor proposed a monument to honour the memory of Courtenay's fallen followers.

A local group has launched a project to fund the creation of a permanent marble

memorial inside St Michael's Church, one that will stand alongside the names of these labourers and provide historical context. The goal is not only to honour the dead but to raise awareness of the event's broader significance.

As historian EP Thompson and others have shown, the Bossenden Wood uprising was part of a larger pattern of rural resistance in 19th-century England — a chapter in the formation of the working-class movement.

The story is not merely local; it is national, and it deserves to be told.

The memorial project will also include a booklet on the uprising. A formal launch event is planned at St Michael's Church, and efforts are underway to place an explanatory plaque beside Lt Bennett's memorial in Canterbury, helping to tell both sides of the story.



Pic: Penny Mayes/CC

By framing the battle not as a "riot" but as a turning point in rural labourers' struggle for fairer treatment, the organisers hope to encourage a deeper understanding of our shared past. It is a call not only to remember, but to recognise.

The battle's victims weren't just the dead of the day, in August 1838, 10 men were brought to trial at Maidstone assizes.

Thomas Mears was charged with the murders of Lt Bennett and Nicholas Mears, brother of the parish constable killed trying to arrest Courtenay. William Price

IN MEMORIUM

Buried in Boughton and Hernhill churchyard's are the following men who lost their lives in the Battle of Bossenden Wood:

William Courtenay (John Tom) (38)
Stephen Baker (22)
William Foster (33)
William Rye (46)
Edward Wraight (62)
Phineas Harvey (27)
William Burford (33)
George Griggs (23)
George Branchett (49)

was also charged with the constable's brother's murder, while another eight — Edward Curling, Alexander Foad, William Foad, Richard Foreman, Thomas Griggs, Charles Hills, Edward Wraight, and William Wills — were also up for the murder of Lt Bennett.

Mears and Price were tried first. The jury re-

turned a verdict of guilty, but with a recommendation for mercy. The judge accordingly pronounced the death sentence, but immediately announced that it would not be carried out.

Upon hearing this, the nine men charged with the murder of Lieutenant Bennett pleaded guilty. They too were sentenced to death but were all immediately reprieved. Thomas Mears and William Wills were sentenced to transportation for life to Australia. William Price received a sentence of ten years' transportation. The remaining men were sentenced to one year's imprisonment.

For more information—including an illustration of the proposed memorial—visit the Facebook group Bossenden Wood Memorial Group, where you are warmly invited to join the conversation and lend your support.