

# The farm workers' champion

Joseph Arch (1826–1919) was both a pioneering agricultural trade union leader and one of the first working men to be elected to Parliament, when he served as Liberal MP for North-West Norfolk from 1885 to 1886 and again from 1892 until his retirement from political life in 1900.

Arch was born on 10 November 1826, in the south Warwickshire village of Barford. He was the fourth child and only surviving son of John Arch, a local farm worker, and his redoubtable wife, Hannah. Hannah was ten years older than her husband and this was her second marriage, her first husband having died in 1816. It was from his mother that Arch inherited his early interest in religious nonconformity and his independent attitude. He later claimed she was the most important influence on his life.

After briefly attending the village school between the ages of six and nine, Arch began work as a bird scarer in the mid-1830s. Other land work followed and by the 1850s he had become a prize-winning hedger and ditcher, taking contract jobs as far afield as Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Wales. As early as the 1840s he had become a Primitive Methodist local preacher, thereby serving an apprenticeship in the difficult art of public speaking. In the middle of that decade he spent precious pennies earned running errands and doing odd jobs on the purchase of newspapers, so that he could read the speeches of William Gladstone and John Bright. From these he formed his lifelong political opinions.

By the early 1870s Arch's strong and determined character was recognised by his fellow land workers, at a time when pressure was growing for an improvement in their living conditions. These were years of rising food prices and of trade union agitation among many workers, including those in the building and engineering industries who were

demanding a reduction in the length of their working day. A new Trade Union Act passed in 1871, which explicitly legalised registered unions and provided security for their funds, also gave added impetus to the labour movement. Yet, despite sporadic attempts at organisation among farm workers in Herefordshire, Leicestershire and a few other areas, the agricultural labourers – the largest single sector of the work force – seemed unable to combine effectively. In April 1872 the *Illustrated London News* commented dismissively that they had been 'hitherto looked upon as the lowermost stratum of the industrial classes'.

It was in these circumstances that early in February 1872 some local labourers went to Arch's Barford home to ask him to hold a meeting in nearby Wellesbourne to highlight their grievances and to press for the formation of a trade union for land workers. The vigour and self-confidence of Arch's speech on that occasion, demanding higher pay and a reduction in the length of the working day, won the support of those present and led to the holding of many meetings elsewhere. Night after night Arch tramped to neighbouring villages addressing enthusiastic audiences. Soon the message was taken up in other parts of the country, aided by the support of a sympathetic newspaper proprietor, J. E. Matthew Vincent. He not only publicised the movement in his *Royal Leamington Chronicle* but thereby alerted the national press to the agitation. Later in the year he established the *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, to act as a link for members throughout the country. It continued publication, with some changes in name, until 1894.

Years later the novelist Thomas Hardy paid tribute to Arch's skill as a leader and effective public speaker. Hardy listened to him in Dorset, and wrote that:

Nobody who saw and heard Mr. Arch in his early tours through Dorsetshire will ever forget him and the influence his presence exercised over the crowds he drew ... The picture he drew of a comfortable cottage life as it should be was so cosy, so well within the grasp of his listeners' imagination, that an old labourer in the crowd held up a coin between his finger and thumb exclaiming, 'Here's sixpence towards that, please God!' 'Towards what?' said a bystander. 'Faith, I don't know that I can spak the name o't, but I know 'tis a good thing.'

Arch's efforts and the activities of other, less prominent, leaders, led in late March 1872 to the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, with himself as president. The initiative won the enthusiastic backing of a number of sympathetic outsiders, especially Liberal Party members from Birmingham. They included Jesse Collings, a close political ally and friend of Joseph Chamberlain. Within a year membership had reached about 72,000, concentrated particularly in the mid-land counties and in East Anglia.

The fledgling movement soon encountered bitter opposition from farmers and landowners, not only to its demands for higher pay but over the fundamental issue of workers' right to combine. Lock-outs and strikes followed, culminating in a major dispute early in 1874, affecting 4,000 – 5,000 unionists, mainly in East Anglia, one of the Union's strongholds. Arch was at the forefront of the resistance to the employers, addressing meetings in the affected areas and also undertaking fund-raising tours to the North of England to win support from urban trade unionists and others.

Arch realised that if the bargaining position of the workers vis-à-vis the farmers was to be strengthened they must encourage some members to emigrate. At the same time there was a growing demand for labour in New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Indeed, in 1873 Arch had directly involved himself in the emigration movement by visiting Canada in order to investigate conditions for himself. Yet, despite

emigration and attempts at mediation, in the end the 1874 lock-out was a defeat for the Union.

This led not only to disillusion within the membership but to splits and divisions among the leaders, some of whom resented Arch's autocratic style of leadership. They favoured a federal structure with more autonomy for individual union districts, rather than the centralised approach favoured by Arch. In the long run most of these regional bodies faded away. Only the Kent and Sussex Union carried on into the 1890s, placing particular emphasis on emigration to solve labour disputes.<sup>1</sup> Overall, however, these events seriously weakened the National Union and its membership fell from the 86,000 it achieved in 1874 to 59,000 a year later. The onset of agricultural depression, as cheap food imports combined with bad harvests in Britain undermined the prosperity of most agriculturists, further stiffened employers' resistance to the Union and its president. Cash wages on the land fell from the peak achieved in 1872–74, although living standards were still rising because of the cheaper food and manufactured goods now coming on the market.

Arch himself, meanwhile, continued to spearhead the struggle to maintain and improve workers' employment conditions. In the political sphere he pressed for the vote to be given to rural householders, to match rights given to male householders in towns in 1867. He also gave unstinting support to his hero, William Gladstone, and to the Liberal Party. That included an endorsement of Gladstone's powerful campaign against Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria in 1876–77. Arch also took up the cause of international peace, attending a Workmen's Peace Association conference in Paris during 1875. He adopted this pacifist stance despite the fact that his eldest son, John, was a sergeant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

In 1884 the franchise was finally extended to country householders. The next year, despite stiff opposition from the Conservative candidate, Lord Henry Bentinck, Arch was elected Liberal MP for North-West Norfolk.<sup>2</sup>

Some Liberal leaders, rather patronisingly, saw him as a valuable instrument for mobilising the newly-enfranchised rural voters in favour of their party in the vital county constituencies. Under the Union's aegis, for example, in the weeks leading up to the election, mock ballots were held to instruct the labourers in the basic mechanics of voting. Significantly, too, Chamberlain and Collings promoted a so-called 'unauthorised' political programme designed to appeal to rural workers, a key element of this being land reform to give the labourer 'a stake in the soil'. It was caricatured by opponents under the slogan of 'three acres and a cow', but it proved popular with many labourers. The success of these joint efforts was such that for the only time in their history the Conservatives did worse in rural constituencies than in urban areas. It was doubtless in recognition of Arch's contribution to this that the National Liberal Club organised a banquet in his honour in January 1886. Joseph Chamberlain presided.

Arch's electoral triumph proved short-lived. When the Liberal Government split over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, he lost his seat at the 1886 general election. This was despite a letter from William Gladstone urging voters in the constituency to continue to support him. The next few years were ones of considerable difficulty. The Union was very weak, with membership standing at just over 5,000 by the end of 1887. In addition there were allegations of corruption from opponents within the movement, as well as hostility to his authoritarian leadership. As regards the former charge, surviving accounts make clear that there was no financial malpractice. The latter complaint had more validity in that he often failed to listen to the views of critics or to make concessions to them.

At the end of the decade two events revived Arch's fortunes. The first was his election to Warwickshire County Council in 1889. The second was an upsurge in trade unionism among many unskilled or poorly-paid workers as a result of the successful London dock strike of August 1889 and an



found the late hours and the rituals and routine of the Commons uncongenial, especially as he was now well into his sixties. There is no evidence that Liberal Party leaders tried to keep him in his place or discouraged him from speaking in the Chamber. Indeed in 1893–94 he was asked to serve on the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor. One of his fellow Commissioners was the Prince of Wales and Arch was proud of this link and of the fact that Sandringham lay within his constituency. In 1898 his autobiography was published, edited by the Countess of Warwick, who in a new-found enthusiasm for left-wing politics began to take an interest in the old trade unionist who lived so near to Warwick Castle, and whose grandparents and mother had been Castle servants.

Arch was married twice. His first wife, Mary Ann, was a domestic servant and the daughter of Isaac Mills, a carpenter from Wellesbourne Mountford. The marriage took place on 3 February 1847, and the couple returned to live in the cottage where Arch had been born. It had been purchased by his maternal grandfather and it was to be his home for the rest of his long life. The Arches had seven children, four boys and three girls, of whom only the youngest girl, Elizabeth, failed to reach adulthood. Mrs Arch was a good mother and an efficient manager of the household but she played little part in her husband's trade union and political career. Somewhat unfairly he blamed her for her limited education, rather than blaming the society in which she had grown up, declaring she 'was not the woman my mother was ... She ... was no companion in my aspirations'. Nevertheless, if she had no intellectual ambitions of her own, she certainly encouraged him to add to his knowledge and his stock of books, and she gave solid unobtrusive support to him in his later parliamentary career. Mary Ann died after a long illness on 15 March 1896, aged 69.

On 27 December 1899, Arch married again, his bride being Miriam Blomfield, the daughter of a Norfolk sadler, about fifteen years his junior. She had been his housekeeper for some time before his wedding.

accompanying brief general improvement in trade and employment prospects. This movement, usually labelled 'new unionism', was largely socialist-led, however, and Arch had little sympathy with such political views or with those promoting them. He remained committed to old-style Lib-Lab policies, like many other established union leaders. He was wary of urban unionists, fearing they wanted to influence 'his' organisation for their own ends.

Nevertheless, the revival came at an opportune time for him, and in the general election of 1892 he was returned once more as MP for North-West Norfolk. Membership of the National Union, too, had risen again, reaching

around 15,000 by late 1891, of whom over 12,000 had been recruited in Norfolk. But the revival quickly faded and the end came in October 1896 when the Union was finally dissolved. Its demise placed Arch in financial difficulty and shortly before the dissolution Liberal Party friends organised a fund to provide him with an annuity. About £1,200 was collected, and an annuity of £157 purchased; among the contributors was the former Liberal Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery.

Arch remained an MP until 1900, when he retired to his cottage at Barford. He added little to his reputation during this second parliamentary stint, rarely contributing to debates. He

After his retirement from Parliament, Arch played little part in politics, although he did apparently make an unsuccessful attempt to set up a small-scale co-operative society. Neither did he take any further role in agricultural trade unionism, even when a new organisation was set up in Norfolk in 1906. As he sadly commented to one of the leaders who visited him in 1909, his work was 'all done now'. He was simply too old. Even his support for Primitive Methodism had faded away.

Yet, when he died on 12 February 1919, his important contribution to the emancipation of farm workers was recognised. His funeral service was conducted at Barford by the Bishop of Coventry, and a message from David Lloyd George, then Prime Minister, was read at the graveside by the Liberal candidate for the Rugby constituency. The press, too, paid tribute. The *Birmingham Daily Post* in a 'Special Memoir' declared that as a union activist 'he was a more commanding figure than any industrial agitator of recent times'. The *Manchester Guardian* of 13 February 1919 called him 'one of the most remarkable leaders that the English village labourers ever produced'.

At a time when class divisions were strong and agricultural workers were despised and disregarded, Joseph Arch gave them a sense of hope and self-confidence. His leadership embodied that spirit of social protest and, by his focus on workers'

ills, he achieved a clear improvement in their conditions. If this proved less sweeping and less permanent than he desired, nonetheless it meant they were never again dismissed as mere 'clodhoppers' or 'Johnny Raws' as they had been before his advent and that of the 1872 'Revolt of the Field' which he led.

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- 1 The Kent and Sussex Union was led by Alfred Simmons, editor of the radical *Kent Messenger and Maidstone Telegraph*. It was founded as a direct result of news of Arch's movement in Warwickshire. It continued to be a strong union during the 1880s, changing its name to become the London and Southern Counties Labour League and entering the next decade as one of the country's nine major unions. It was dissolved in 1895 with a membership of 13,000 but it was always sympathetic to urban unionists in a way that Arch never was. See Rollo Arnold, 'The "Revolt of the Field" in Kent 1872-1879' in *Past and Present*, No. 64 (1974), 71, 75 and 92-93
- 2 Arch unsuccessfully contested the Wilton constituency as a Liberal candidate in 1880. During the late 1870s he addressed many Liberal Party meetings as well as Union gatherings. Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch (1826-1919). The Farm Workers' Leader* (Kineton, 1971) pp. 122-126 and 152-156.

### Further reading:

Joseph Arch, *The Story of His Life Told by Himself*, edited by the Countess of Warwick (London, 1898). This has been reissued over the years, including in 1986, when it appeared as Joseph Arch, *From Ploughtail to Parliament* (London: Cresset Library edn., 1986)

Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers. A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (London, 1988)

Rollo Arnold, *The Farthest Promised Land* (Victoria University Press with Price Milburn, Wellington, New Zealand, 1981)

George R. Boyer and Timothy J. Hatton, 'Did Joseph Arch raise agricultural wages?: Rural trade unions and the labour market in late nineteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 47 (1994), pp. 310-34.

Reg Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle! The History of the Farm Workers' Union* (London, 1949)

Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch (1826-1919). The Farm Workers' Leader* (Kineton, 1971)

Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1870-1923* (London, 1985)

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