

The Okies of Ancient England

By FRANCIS NEILSON

Restrictive legislation was severe enough in England from 1351 to the middle of the sixteenth century; but under Elizabeth some relief was granted, and the laborer was permitted to go about the country in search of work. So long as he carried a discharge certificate from his last employer, and a testimonial from two house-holders, he was free to look for employment. The laws relating to the care of the poor, enacted during Elizabeth's reign, were for the purpose of relieving distress and want; but, as follows with all legislation of this kind, the Poor Law laid the basis of a system which perpetuated destitution.

The shameful work-house arose out of the poor law legislation of Elizabeth. Something had to be done and, as justice was not to be thought of, the worst form of charity became the law of the land. The rich were forced by statute to care for the poor, the consequence of their own deliberate policy of depopulating the countryside. During the reign of Henry VIII tens of thousands of vagrants and thieves were put to death. Over sixty thousand people, at one time, lay in the hor-

rible jails, so an act of Parliament in 1512 stated. Beggars were whipped, and burned through the tough part of the ear.

The poor law legislation of Elizabeth made every parish liable for the maintenance of the poor; housing and feeding of the lame, old, and blind were obligatory, and the idle were subjected to forced labor. Keepers of the houses of correction were instructed to provide the poor with materials for work and to pay them for their labor.

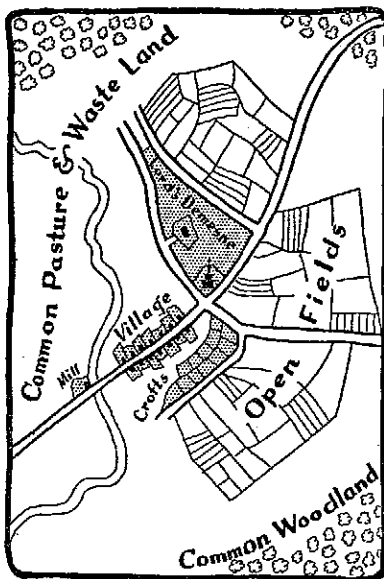
Shortly after the death of Elizabeth, the landlords, who had been kept in some restraint during her reign, resumed the policy of enclosing the land by force. Then came the rebellion of John Reynolds. The people rose against the enclosures, but thousands were killed and the revolt was crushed. The landless peasantry starved under Cromwell. How terrible the lot of the poor was can be estimated by the frequent uprisings. Many rich people sympathized with the rebels. Lieutenant-Colonel John Lilburne was imprisoned in the Tower for declaring: "England is not a free people till the poor that have no land have a free allowance to dig and labor the commons, and so live as comfortably as the landlords that live in their enclosures."

The Poor Law had directed the poor to repair to the place of their birth to be maintained there; but, by the time of the Restoration, the system had borne so heavily upon the rich that they in turn cried out for relief from the poor. In 1662 Parliament made the period of residence needful to obtain a settlement only forty days, and empowered any two justices to remove any newcomer to the parish where he was last legally settled, unless he either rented a tenement of ten pounds a year, or gave such security as the justices deemed sufficient. This Act tied the laborer to the village. He could not move about in search of employment; he became a serf. The

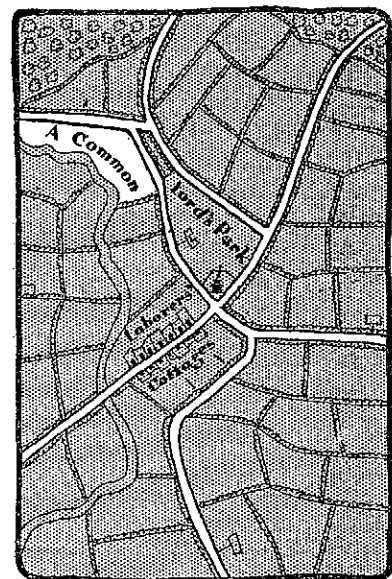
Act coined fortunes for lawyers, for millions were spent determining to which parish the poor were chargeable.

But this was not enough. The political means had not yet done all its deadly work. Enclosure by act of Parliament still remained, and in Queen Anne's time the hey-day of expropriation began. The procedure of enclosing land by act of Parliament was simple enough. Usually a great landlord, or his agents, got up a petition, signed by his people on the spot, describing the "ill-condition" of the land common to the people, their "lack of knowledge" of agriculture, the "waste of good ground," etc., and stating the advantages of enclosure. A Parliament of landlords would consider the petition and give leave to bring in a Bill. The rest was not difficult. The result: the common land added to the landlord's estate--and depopulation.

Dr. Slater in his admirable work on "English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields" shows how over six million acres of fertile land were enclosed under more than four thousand acts of Parliament



Before Enclosure



After Enclosure

from 1700 to 1844. All this was done by private Bill legislation—with the probable exception of the two General Enclosure Bills of 1801 and 1844. Thus the political means used the Parliamentary machine to evict the people from their common fields and wastes, and to scatter them over the highways of the land, finally to crowd them into the towns to raise a race of slum-dwellers. It took about a hundred and forty years to finish the job of making a landless people. The conspiracy, begun long before the days of Sir Thomas More, was completed in the days of the "hungry forties."

During the period of enclosure by act of Parliament, coal, iron-ore, clay, etc., sprang suddenly into general use, and the so-called factory system found the hungry millions already on the spot. It was not the factory which despoiled the worker; it was land enclosure, which deprived him of an alternative. Without land he was forced into the labor market to compete with his fellow, and consequently forced wages down to a subsistence level.

We are told by the Hammonds in their book, "The Village Laborer", that the

"governing class continued its policy of extinguishing the old village life and all the relationships and interests attached to it, with unsparing and unhesitating hand; and as its policy progressed, there were displayed all the consequences predicted by its critics. Agriculture was revolutionized; rents leapt up; England seemed to be triumphing over the difficulties of a war with half the world. But it had one great permanent result which the rulers of England ignored. The anchorage of the poor was gone. For enclosure was fatal to three classes: the small farmer, the cottager, and the squatter. To all of these classes their common right was worth more than anything they received in return."

It is strange how little has been said by historians of the English revolution which raged more or less fiercely from 1760 to 1832. The French revolution was perhaps more attractive, more sensational, more sentimental, and brought forth figures which were successful in holding the centre of the stage; therefore historians preferred these events on which to lavish their literary skill

to those far more vital, economically and politically, which were taking place in England. How few Americans know anything about the English revolution which had been in progress centuries before the House of Hanover was thought of? That desperate struggle, at the time of the American revolution, of the English people to regain their old liberty? Neglected as that period has been by historians, it is well to remind the people of this country of it; for the men who made the American Revolution, and carried the issue successfully, sprang from the same stock, and were to a great extent animated by the same principles of liberty, as those whose names were buried in the grounds of English jails and the Australian wastes.

It must not be forgotten in a consideration of the uprising of the peasant that, though his lot was sufficient to drive him to desperate acts, he had the knowledge that he had been deprived of his right to use the earth. The blessings of the free life of village communities might have been within his own experience, or its story imparted to him by his father or grandsire, who had witnessed the effect of enclosure, the depopulation of the countryside. No other peasantry in Europe was in a similar position. It was the English peasantry who, as a people, had enjoyed economic and political rights. They fought to regain their lost liberty. Their present woe was aggravated mightily by the sense of injustice done them by the governing classes.

The conclusion of this sad story contains a warning we might well take to heart. Since Waterloo we have had a century full of high-sounding phrases in which the words democracy and liberty have stood forth as beacons to guide the mass of men. Still, with all the advance in science and invention, the terrible business of disinheritance goes on. It takes another form, but nevertheless, brings the same dire results. Let us not hoodwink ourselves, for

"amid the great distress that followed Waterloo and peace, it was a commonplace of statesmen like Castlereagh and Canning that England was the only hap-

py country in the world, and that so long as the monopoly of their little class was left untouched, her happiness would survive. That class has left bright and ample records of its life in literature, in art, in political traditions, in the display of great orations and debates, in memories of brilliant conversation and sparkling wit; it has left dim and meagre records of the disinherited peasants that are the shadow of its wealth; of the exiled laborers that are the shadow of its pleasures; of the villages sinking in poverty and crime and shame that are the shadow of its power and its pride."

There is no period which illustrates so clearly as this how those economic principles, fundamental to English liberty, were ruthlessly destroyed. True, the period we have chosen is only the last phase of centuries of destructive work, but it contains an agglomeration of evil: economic, fiscal, political, social, industrial and legislative such as no other country ever experienced. And it is now an open book to which Americans may turn, if they wish to avoid the legislative pitfalls that have lain in the path of British progress down to this day. It is in misunderstanding the causes which led to that period of industrialism which steam and machinery, the factory system and protection, standing armies and imperialism, perfected, that brought about the modern phase of Socialism, and drove the thought of the masses away from economic principles to those of state control. This fact must be grasped and fully appreciated if there is to be economic reform.