

Prosperity and Decline in Nineteenth Century Shillington

LOVING MEMORY OF

EMMA COOPER

WHO ENTERED INTO REST JULY 1st 1912

ERECTED IN GRATEFUL RECOGNITION OF 45 YEARS

FAITHFUL AND DEVOTED SERVICE TO THE

CHURCH AND SUNDAY SCHOOL

This plaque is to be found in Shillington Congregational church. Forty five years service is in itself exceptional but perhaps Emma Cooper was seen by her contemporaries as exceptional other ways as well, as it is very unusual to find a commemorative plaque in a Congregational church. The 1851 census shows her, aged 23, living as a lodger in the house of Joseph Newman, an agricultural labourer, at Upton End. He was 33 as was his wife, Mary. They had 2 children, Mary who was 7 and James aged 5. There was another lodger in the household, Mary Cox, aged 71, a chair woman. Emma Cooper was a straw plaiter. By the 1881 census, Emma Cooper was still earning her living as a straw plaiter and still a lodger, but this time living in Church Street with another agricultural labourer, William Cole, aged 30. His wife, Betsy, was also a straw plaiter and they had 2 daughters, and 3 sons ranging in age from 8 years to 6 months.

Emma Cooper was unusual in being a lodger: there were few in the village, only 62 out of a population of 1,598 in 1851 while by 1881 she was one of only 3 lodgers out of the larger population of 2,226. Nothing is known about her family and it is rare to find a single woman, living independently, albeit as a lodger, solely dependant on her own wages throughout her life. It may reflect a strength of character which was recognised by her fellow Congregational members.

To be a straw plaiter, however, was not unusual. It was by far the most common occupation for the women in the village. In 1851, there were 235 including children and that number had nearly doubled by 1881. In this, Shillington was typical of South

Bedfordshire where there were 10,054 straw plaiters in 1851, a figure which had doubled by 1871¹. Shillington's nearest market for straw plait was Hitchin and some of the women would walk the six miles there to buy their straw and sell the completed plaits. Others bought the straw from dealers who came round the villages and then bought the plait they had made. The women probably got a better price by going into Hitchin but it was a long walk.

The straw was bought already cut into 9-10 inch length. The first task was to draw the straw through a splint mill, often nailed to the cottage door to create narrow strips or splint. The straw had to be kept moist to keep it pliable, so rather than sit near a fire in the winter, the women had earthenware pots filled with embers or charcoal under the skirts near their feet. The bundle of splints was held under the left arm while the woman was plaiting. Having split the straw, the pith side of the splint was, of course, dull compared with the shiny outer surface. The plaiter, therefore, drew the straw through the mouth to dampen the pith and then stuck two together to give two shiny sides.

Inevitably the right side of the mouth became first sore and then in time, calloused. It must have been a most unpleasant part of the job. As the splints were so short, new ones were constantly added in as the plaiter wove, using between three and seven splints at a time, depending on the pattern. Late nineteenth century photographs show plaiters both standing and sitting at cottage doors with the bundle of straws under the left arm and the completed plait in loops over the same arm. When a score (20 yards) had been completed, it was again damped and passed through a plait mill to flatten it. For all this work in the 1850s, a straw plaiter could earn between 4 and 6 shillings a week, a valuable addition to the family earnings, but for Emma Cooper presumably, her sole income.

A greater income could be earned by making up the plait into hats. There was one bonnet maker and two sewers in Shillington in 1851 and four sewers in 1881. They may have worked in the village or they may have been among the hundreds who migrated into Luton between December and May, the peak season for hat making, where they lived in crowded lodgings either working in someone's home or in larger numbers in a factory. Depending on the speed with which they worked, sewers could earn between 8s and 18s

1. Jean Davis : Straw Plait (Shire Publications Ltd. 1981)

a week². However, this work was seasonal and it was scarcely a practical proposition for a woman with children to move temporarily into Luton.

Emma Cooper lodged with agricultural labourers where the rent for her own room would have made a welcome addition to the family income and, as she worked at home, she may also have been helpful in keeping an eye on the young children. In 1850-1 the average wage of a farm worker in Bedfordshire was nine shillings a week, amongst the highest paid in the area. Agricultural labourers in Hertfordshire also earned 9s, but in Buckinghamshire 8s 6d and in Cambridgeshire, a mere 7s 6d. All such wages compare unfavourably with such workers in northern England where earnings were on average 3s a week higher³. An agricultural labourer might receive his cottage rent free or at a nominal rent and possibly also have a fuel allowance but they were day labourers and so always liable to be laid off if work was slack or the weather bad. Men worked from 7 a.m. to dusk during the winter and 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the summer with an hour and a half allowed for meals. Harvest was the vital time for everyone's income, both the farmer and his labourers. They worked from dawn till dusk and the additional pay they received helped to pay off the inevitable debts incurred during the winter and buy clothing and boots. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, they earned as much as two guineas a month⁴ during harvest and also were provided with food. It was the time of the year when they ate well, with meat regularly included compared with their normal diet of bread, milk, cheese, bacon and dripping with some vegetables.

Harvesting was hard work, the crop being cut by scythe or sickle, turned in the fields while it dried, then tied into sheaths for which the men were provided with coarse gloves and stood in stooks before being transported on horse drawn carts to the barns. The work during the winter, when it existed, while less unrelenting, was nonetheless physically demanding. Robert Long had a mixed farm of 280 acres in Stondon, a neighbouring village to Shillington and employed 16 men and 4 boys. He kept a diary and his entry for 27th January 1866 shows typical activities for a winter's day⁵.

2. S. Bunker et al : Changing Face of Luton p51

3. James Caird : English Agriculture in 1850-1 (1852) quoted in T. May : Economic and Social History of Britain p 88

4. Thomas Batchelor : General View of the Agriculture of the County of Bedford 1808 in N. Agar : The Bedfordshire Farm Worker in the Nineteenth Century p12

5. N. Agar : The Bedfordshire Farm Worker in the Nineteenth Century p106

1866

27th January. Very mild, very still, and chiefly dull, yet we had some sunshine. On Monday the teams finished up all the ploughing we have to do at present. Since then some of the horses carted dung from the yards, and two days the teams went out with the wagon to Ickleford with wheat. All the week the odd folks have carted dung from the yards and now we have a large pressed heap of it just at home near the horse pond, as handy as could be to the gate without damaging the roads, for all the time lately the ground has been so very wet and soft we could not cart on the land without doing damage. Four men have been draining, two in Debditch, putting in some new cross drains where the water stood in the hollows, and where some old wooden drains had burst out. The pipe drains are all cut into and run well. This Debditch field is now quite green in places after the steam ploughing and dung on the surface. I expect we shall have to plough it again in some way or other before the beans are put in but we must have dry weather before that can be done. It is terribly dirty now. Today I had chaff cut and meal ground, and roots pulped with the engine.

The entry not only shows the variety of the work but illustrates aspects of the 'high farming' typical of Bedfordshire under the leadership of the Duke of Bedford at Woburn. Fertilising the fields with dung had always been the practice and with a mixed farm Robert Long would have a good supply. By the 1860s, however, other fertilisers like superphosphate patented by John Bennet Lawes at Rothamsted, were in widespread use to enrich the land. Farming on gault clay, Robert Long was obviously giving considerable attention to drainage. In the 1840s mobile tile and pipe machines had been invented which could make the pipes on site and so make the whole process of making drains easier to accomplish. Furthermore in compensation for the repeal of Corn Laws, cheap loans were available from the government to meet the cost of between £4 and £8 an acre⁶. The entry also shows Robert Long used a variety of machinery and refers to steam ploughing. The Bedfordshire Agricultural Society, founded in 1801, held regular ploughing matches, using and measuring the effects of different types of plough. Like the sheep shearings at Woburn, the ploughing matches disseminated information,

6. G.E. Mingay : Rural Life in Victorian England p128

encouraged innovation and gave everyone a good day out. The Society did not forget the need to encourage agricultural labourers. In 1803 Thomas Lawrence of Shillington was awarded 5 guineas (a very large sum for him) in recognition of having brought up 9 children, still alive, without recourse to the poor law⁷.

That such an award was made is an indication that all was not sweetness and light between landowners and farmers and those they employed. There was uncertain prosperity for some in the Napoleonic war years at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With the end of the war in 1815, demobilised soldiers added to unemployment problems and wages were low and inadequate. Pressure on the poor law grew - hence the award to the thrifty Thomas Lawrence - and with it unrest. In 1827, four men from Shillington were arrested for wilfully damaging 4 wheelbarrows belonging to the overseer of the poor. They had presumably been set to road mending in order to earn poor relief. More common offences were those of theft - of sheep, fowl, peas for example - and of poaching, a reflection of poverty.

For the most part Shillington escaped the major disturbances which occurred elsewhere. 1830 saw the Swing Riots starting in Kent and spreading through southern England and into East Anglia. The focus of discontent was the introduction of farming machinery particularly the threshing machine which, it was feared, would greatly lessen the amount of work available in the winter months but the riots were joined by tradespeople and craftsmen as well as agricultural workers and were an expression of rural discontent at low standards of living. The nearest outburst to Shillington was at Stotfold where a crowd, variously numbered as two hundred or three hundred rampaged through the village demanding higher wages and the dismissal of the overseer of the poor. Although the men then returned to work, special constables were raised including 109 from Shillington by the vicar, John Hull, who was a magistrate. They were paid 1s. Ten ringleaders were arrested, five of whom were imprisoned for varying lengths of time and five were transported⁸. There were also serious riots in Ampthill in 1834 as a reaction to the implementation of the New Poor Law. This time there is no record of Shillington involvement in any way, even though the village was part of the Ampthill Poor Law Union.

7. J. Godber : History of Bedfordshire p420

8. Brian Keyser : The Stotfold Villagers Riots

Such rural disturbances died away and by the 1850s, wages for agricultural labourers had gradually risen to the average of 9s in Bedfordshire. Shillington was about to enter its greatest period of prosperity in the century. Like Robert Long, Shillington farmers had set about improving the drainage of their fields. It was while digging for new drains in 1862 that coprolite, known locally as dinosaurs' dung, was discovered on Chibley Farm⁹. Coprolite is a fossil with a high phosphate content and it was for the conversion of this into superphosphate that John Bennet Lawes held the patent. He immediately became involved in the digging at Chibley. From then until the mid 1870s, deposits were discovered in other areas of the village and provided alternative employment to farming for large numbers of men and boys, so that even in 1881 when coprolite digging had virtually ceased, 283 gave their occupation as labourers to the census enumerator compared with 158 agricultural labourers.

Coprolite digging transformed the appearance of considerable areas of the village on both sides of the Stondon road past Chibley farm as well as in the Pump Farm and Apsley End area. Land used for pasture or cereal crops became a wasteland of trenches, exposing the dull grey of the heavy gault clay. Careful contracts were drawn up to ensure that once the coprolite had been extracted, the land could be returned to agricultural use. The first task, therefore, was removing all the top soil away from the coprolite diggings. Once this was done, further hard manual labour was involved in digging trenches, infilling the previous trench from which the coprolite had been extracted as they went. The coprolite was taken by horse and cart to wash mills, sometimes tramways being made to make the carting easier. Water was pumped into the wash mills and then out into slurry pits between earthworks where it was left to drain away and dry out. Finally the washed phosphates were carted to the railway station at Henlow to be transported to John Bennet Lawes' works at Barking on the Thames. Finally the top soil was replaced over the trenches. The wash mill, tramways and stables were moved on to the next area to be worked. Coprolite labourers had less variety of work than their agricultural counterparts but the work was steady and better paid. In 1871, they earned 15s a week¹⁰.

9. Bernard O'Connor : The Coprolite Industry in Shillington p1

10. Ibid p14

These higher wages not only raised the standard of living of the labourers but benefitted others in the village. While agricultural and coprolite labouring together with straw plaiting were the occupations of most in the village, there were a variety of crafts and trades men and women as well, whose livelihood was affected by the economic well being of the village. In 1851, there were, for example, 4 butchers, 5 bakers, 3 grocers (one of them a woman) and 2 general dealers. In 1881 there were still 4 butchers and 2 general dealers but the number of bakers had increased to 9 and the 3 grocers had been joined by 3 others who combined the jobs of grocer and publican. The growth in population would account for the increase and yet it is a surprising development, as nationally village businesses were in decline. Improved communications by road and rail had expanded the range of goods available and made cheaper manufactured goods accessible in market towns such as Hitchin¹¹. Manufactured goods included clothing yet in Shillington, the 1 needlewoman and 7 dressmakers of 1851 had become 3 seamstresses and 15 dressmakers by 1881. It may be that cheaper factory made cloth could more readily be bought and then made up in the village, where local people would be given credit, not available in town markets and shops. Some crafts show a surprising decline - the 9 carpenters, 6 blacksmiths and 5 wheelwrights of 1851 have become 6 carpenters, 2 blacksmiths and 1 wheelwright by 1881. Even allowing for the increase in manufactured goods and the beginnings of the agricultural depression it is difficult to explain the decline. Repair and maintenance of tools and equipment had always been a significant part of the work of these craftsmen and for the blacksmith it is highly unlikely that there had been any lessening in the number of horses to be shod. Nationally, the number of horses in use was still rising in the 1880s¹². There is no obvious explanation as to why in terms of personal consumption, Shillington deviated from the national trend in retaining local trade and crafts and yet in work related crafts, there was a decline.

There was one area where there was no alteration in numbers. There were 7 public and 5 beer houses in 1851 and they all existed for the rest of the century, although, presumably with increased business as the population grew. The publicans obviously changed over the period and so did ownership. In 1851 it is likely all were privately owned but by the end of the century only 2 remained in private hands. This time in common with the rest

11. G.E. Mingay : Rural Life in Victorian England p177

12. Ibid p179

of the country, Shillington's public and beer houses became tied to local breweries. Lucas owned 3 as did Simpson & Co.; Morley and Co. and Newland, Nash and Co. owned 2 each. As chapel goers did not frequent such establishments and neither did women or children, the clientele of each cannot have been large. That Shillington supported as many as 12 is a reflection of the scattered nature of the village. After a hard day's physical work, pub goers would not want to walk far from home for a drink, warmth and company.

Changes in agriculture including the coprolite industry were not the only ways in which village people experienced the dynamism of the nineteenth century. A rural letter carrier, a telegraph messenger and a post master were among the 1881 occupations, evidence of increased communications as was the railway worker. The coal porter shows that no longer was Shillington largely self sufficient: local wood supplies were no longer an adequate source of fuel for heating and cooking. The introduction of compulsory education meant the solitary school teacher of 1851 became by 1881, a certificated elementary teacher, 4 teachers, 3 assistant teachers and a monitor who would have been paid a small amount preliminary to becoming a pupil teacher. The Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages further illustrates the increased power of the state.

The census returns are excellent demonstration of growing bureaucracy. Recording everyone's name, age, occupation and place of birth as well as where they lived and the relationship of each to the head of household was a mammoth task. Enquiries of each household were recorded, checked and collated to produce comprehensive and largely accurate information.

The returns for the village show that, apart from a handful of paupers, every man listed an occupation, but that women did not automatically have paid employment, although the number who did, rose during the century. In 1851, 37.8% of wives were employed compared with 71.6% in 1881. The reason for the change was principally economic need. By 1881, the coprolite boom was over and agriculture was entering a period of depression, so it is not surprising that 140 wives of labourers worked and only 35 did not. In contrast only 53 labourers' wives worked in 1851 and 94 did not. Straw plaiting was, of course, the predominant occupation, although it was coming under threat from cheaper

foreign imports from China and elsewhere. For a small minority, other work which could be carried out in the home such as dressmaking, featured. A number in 1851 are recorded as involved in the family business, as a baker's wife for example. Some young girls went into domestic service and school teachers begin to appear late in the century. Overall, the range of occupations was small. Economic need was the main motive for the wives of labourers to work and also of unmarried women who needed to support themselves and might well be trying to save to contribute to setting up a home when they married. The reason why the wives of some trades and crafts men worked and others did not is impossible to discern from the census. It may reflect the success of the business or the wish for a measure of independence or a desire to improve the family's standard of living. Neither age nor size of family seem obvious factors in the decision.

Until the latter part of the century when education became compulsory until the age of eleven, children were part of the workforce and, although the amount they earned was small, it was an important part of the family income. Again straw plaiting was the principal activity for both boys and girls from the age of five. When regulations were being enforced prohibiting the employment of young children, an H.M. Inspector of Factories examined six straw plaiting schools in the village in 1876¹³. The outcome is unknown. Such schools were small and sometimes taught reading but more usually were solely concerned with straw plaiting. The parents supplied the straw and sold the finished plait. Once the children had mastered the technique they remained in the 'school' working under supervision in cramped, crowded conditions in a cottage. The introduction of compulsory education in 1880 brought straw plait schools to a close, but did not end the children's involvement in other work they had performed for many years. The school logs record absences for harvest, 'peasing', planting potatoes and scaring crows¹⁴. Neither farmer nor parent was deterred by the School Attendance Officer.

That children should work was generally accepted as normal practice and even the relative prosperity of the coprolite years made no difference. In the approximately twelve years from 1862 when coprolite digging began there was full employment in the village

13. Patricia Bell : Shillington School

14. Ibid

and improved wages meant better food and clothing. For some, housing improved but for most it remained at a low standard. A 1864 National Inquiry into the Housing of Rural Labourers by Dr John Simon, Medical Officer of the Privy Council, found that of the 5375 cottages examined, 40.8% had one bedroom and 54.5% had two, with the average number living in a house of 4.87. Even more telling was the finding that the air space per person was 156 cu.ft. while the requirement for workhouses was 500 cu.ft.¹⁵ "In the straw plaiting district of Bedfordshire, 94 one bedroom cottages contained 264 adults and 210 children or an average of 5 per room"¹⁶. Overcrowding was not the only problem. The ground floor room usually had an earthen floor and an open fire for heating and cooking which was both inefficient and potentially dangerous. Earlier in 1842 Chadwick's report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Poor included a description of Toddington in Bedfordshire. "Very few of the cottages were furnished with privies that could be used and, contiguous to almost every front door, a dung heap was raised on which every species of filth accumulated. Scarcely any cottage was provided with a pantry and I found provisions generally kept in the bedrooms"¹⁷. Stockmen who had some security of employment as well as trade and craftsmen may have had better conditions but otherwise day agricultural labourers and coprolite workers in Shillington would have experienced such over crowding and squalor, probably made worse by the growth in population. In such conditions it is not surprising that illness was frequent. 1870 was a particularly bad year: the school log book records an outbreak of whooping cough in May, measles in June and scarlet fever in November¹⁸.

Examples of the better housing built in Shillington in the 1860s and 1870s can still be seen in Church Street. Built of local brick, the smaller ones are two up, two down with a scullery on the back. Owned by John King a builder, he charged a rent of £2-10s a year in 1877¹⁹. In 1881 they were inhabited by agricultural labourers. Larger homes in the same street were built and owned by Lot Richardson. Sixteen were rented at £3-10s and a further five at £4 a year²⁰. In 1881 a bootmaker, a tailor, a plait dealer as well as the Congregational minister lived in some of these houses.

15. John Burnett : A Social History of Housing p127

16. Ibid p128

17. Ibid p42

18. Patricia Bell: Shillington School

19. Shillington Valuation List 1877

20. Ibid

Lot Richardson was one of the success stories of nineteenth century Shillington. He first appears in the church wardens' accounts in the 1830s, regularly employed on repair work on the church and in 1839 he was made responsible for the maintenance of the fire engine. In the 1851 census he was 44, living with his wife, May, aged 50. He gave his occupation as plumber and glazier but was clearly running a family business as he had two sons living at home who were carpenters : Daniel, aged 21, and Joseph 19. Their 17 year old sister, Rebecca, was a dressmaker. There was also 15 year old Lot with no occupation and 2 younger girls who were scholars : May 12 and Elizabeth 9. By the 1860s he was describing himself as builder, plumber and glazier in Kelly's Trade Directory. He was still employed by All Saints and also by the Congregational church. He probably built the houses in Church Street that he owned and is likely to have worked in other villages besides Shillington. By 1881, he was retired and living with his wife and a servant, 42 year old Elizabeth Cole - an indication that he could afford a comfortable old age.

Another who prospered was William Hanscombe who inherited land in Pirton as well as Bury farm, Red House farm and Pump farm in Shillington. He was first affected by coprolite digging when land opposite the original Chibley site was found to hold coprolite. The land was owned by Trinity College, Cambridge but he was the tenant. Clearly he had been improving the land as he wrote to the Bursar of the college that the land was well drained and asking that the drains should be replaced once the coprolite digging was over, at no expense to him. This was agreed²¹. As the tenant, all Hanscombe received was compensation for the temporary loss of the use of the land. However, once the diggings reached Pump farm which he owned, his profits were considerable. Lawes Chemical Manure Company paid him £3,400 in royalties and a further £2,600 for working 20 acres and rights of way to the land. There were also smaller sums to be made such as £20 for the rent of the stables at Pump farm for the coprolite carters' horses²². He used his profits to build a substantial and spacious house, Pirton Hall, on the Shillington/Pirton boundary, next to Pump farm in 1879. It was described in a contemporary account:

21. Bernard O'Connor : The Coprolite Industry in Shillington p6

22. Ibid p18

The house now erecting is situate on the top of a gentle knoll, overlooking the present well-known moated Grange. The style of architecture adopted is founded upon that prevailing about the time of Queen Elizabeth and the materials employed are Hitchin bricks, Bath Stone and Broseley tiles. There is, however, a speciality in the colour of the Bath Stone; this is selected from a blue-grey vein, due to local discolouration that is occasionally, but seldom, found in quarries, and hitherto regarded as a blemish and wasted. Mr Sorby, however, adopted its use some few years ago for the beauty and softness of its tone and the delicacy of its contrast with the red bricks.

The total cost of the house is given as about £62,001 with a further £6,501 for the lodge and gate. On Friday 15 August 1879, Hanscombe celebrated the building with a 'raising feast' not only for the workmen but also for his tenants and the farm workers he employed on the Grange and Parsonage farms and their families. The festivities included a cricket match as well as a dinner 'to which ample justice was done.' Once the building was complete, Hanscombe employed some of the redundant coprolite workers in landscaping the grounds of the Hall.

Few prospered as Lot Richardson and William Hanscombe did and for the vast majority for whom prosperity meant full employment, the benefits were short lived. By the late 1870s the coprolite was largely worked out and the alternative, guano, was being cheaply imported. The last twenty years of the century was a period of agricultural depression, in large part because foodstuff could be cheaply imported in faster and refrigerated ships. There are various indications of the resulting poverty in the village, most notably that, having reached its peak in 1881, the population declined by a quarter by 1901, as the young particularly sought work elsewhere. As early as 1881 the census showed 15,543 from Bedfordshire living in London including one area near the Elephant and Castle which became known as Little Shillington²³. As well as seeking work in towns, enlistment in the army offered opportunities for some. Letters survive from Albert Culpin, the son of the Congregational minister in which he refers to Shillington men whom he met nearly everywhere he went. He was a restless man who enlisted at one

23. J. Godber : History of Bedfordshire p475

stage where he met some he knew. He then deserted and stowed away to America, travelled the country extensively and later went to Australia²⁴. He was one of the many Englishmen who sought their fortunes overseas. The parish vestry set up an Emigration Fund in 1848 but no records survive to show how active it was. In 1888, however, the vicar James Bonser, reported to the bishop, collecting for a special fund to help 3 young men emigrate and his intention to extend this help to others²⁵. Surprisingly for such an inland county, even the sea had its attractions. The 1881 census records a Mercantile Marine Apprentice, presumably home on leave, when the census was taken.

An even more telling indication of poverty was the offer of porridge breakfasts to school children by the vicar in January and February of 1886 and for the three subsequent years. Between 78 and 134 children took advantage of the hot food²⁶. In 1885 he reported to the bishop:

'Low wages and scarcity of work have caused not a little distress among our population this winter. With a view to alleviating this distress, it was suggested to me that the wealthier inhabitants of our parish should be invited to contribute to a fund for supplying coal to poorer families. This has been done and £18.17s.9d has been collected'²⁷.

Not everyone experienced dire poverty and various kinds of self help was encouraged. Early in the nineteenth century in 1819 and 1837, in response to the agricultural unrest of the time, permissive legislation had been passed allowing parishes to set up allotments available at low rental for families to grow fruit and vegetables for their own use. By 1833, 42% of Bedfordshire parishes had allotment schemes. It is not certain when they were introduced into Shillington. The earliest record of their existence is on the valuation lists of 1898 when there were 3 areas divided into allotments : Butts Close, part of Parsonage Farm and at Upton End. Friendly Societies existed in the village the regular dues being collected from members usually in the public houses. The Forresters Club, a

24. Letters of Albert Culpin

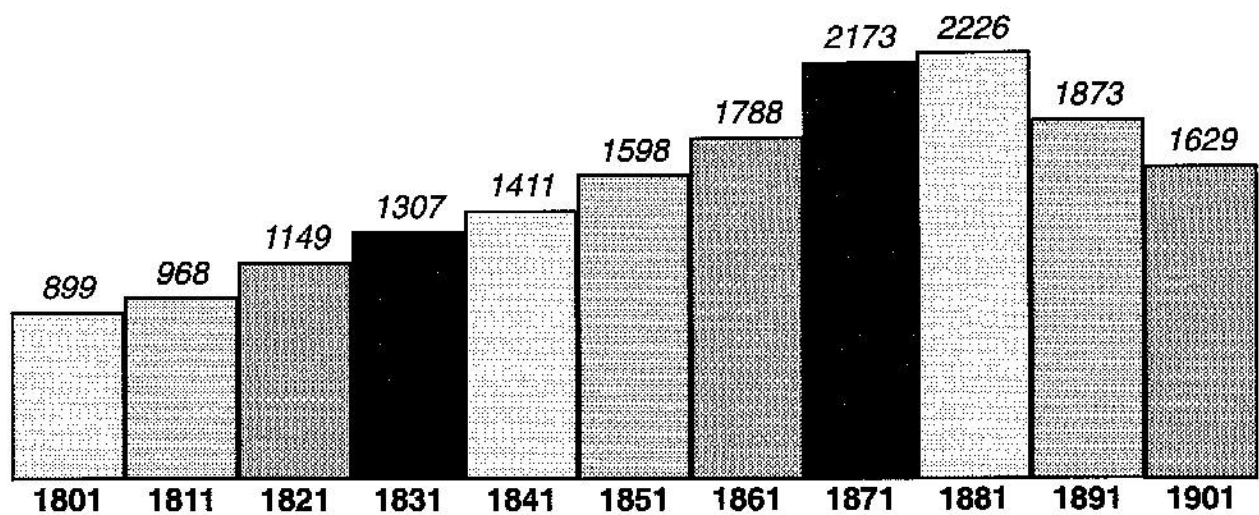
25. Bernard O'Connor : The Coprolite Industry in Shillington p33

26. Patricia Bell : Shillington School

27. Bernard O'Connor : The Coprolite Industry in Shillington p32

national society, owned cottages in Hillfoot End²⁸. The churches subscribed to hospital schemes on behalf of members of their congregation, who could then be recommended for treatment when they were ill.

Everyone born in the village in the early part of the century who lived into their sixties and seventies would have experienced the economic fluctuations of the period and seen their effect on others. Another major change which would have been equally clear together with its social implications was the expansion and then decline in population. This reached its zenith in 1881 and then declined but the village in 1901 was nearly twice the size it had been in 1801.



The growth in population was steady from one census to the next, with a somewhat larger jump between 1861 and 1871. The decline after 1881 was equally steady. The pattern of expansion follows the national trend. Up to 1851 half the population continued to live in rural areas, after which the continued move to the towns swung the balance to urban areas. A variety of explanations have been offered for the rise in numbers. Snell has argued that the decline in the practice of farm servants living in the farm house from the eighteenth century led to an earlier age of marriage for agricultural workers and so an increase in the birth rate²⁹. Improved wages led to better food and with that, life expectancy grew aided by increasing medical knowledge and greater concern for improved hygiene and sanitation. Immunisation, too, was increasingly widely adopted. All these reasons would have contributed to the rise in Shillington's population.

28. Valuation Lists of 1877 and 1887

29. K.D.M. Snell : Annals of the Labouring Poor

Did coprolite digging bring an influx of people and explain the somewhat larger jump in population between 1861 and 1871? This does not appear very likely. Under-employed agricultural labourers probably supplied most of the labour force needed though it is possible that a number of young men came into the village temporarily when the digging was at its height. One reason for arguing this is that a comparison of population patterns with the neighbouring village of Pirton shows considerable similarities. Pirton was a smaller village, about half the size of Shillington. It, too, reached its peak in 1881 with a 212.7% increase from 1801, compared with Shillington's 247.6%. The difference is small and it is not surprising that with a larger population to start with any increase in the birth rate or growth in life expectancy should produce a greater increase. Both villages show a similar rate of decline in the last twenty years of the century : 20% for Pirton 27% for Shillington. The importance of the comparison is that there were no coprolite diggings in Pirton.

A further reason for suggesting that coprolite was not a significant factor in population change comes from examination of the place of birth of residents. 62.5% of married couples in the village in 1851 had both been born in Shillington. This was little altered by 1881 when the figure was 59.2%. Clearly movement into the village was fairly commonplace, but of the men who had been born elsewhere, only 5 in 1881 were in coprolite related occupations: a foreman and 5 labourers. This compares with 15 agricultural labourers in 1851 and 19 in 1881 who moved into the village. Others who were born outside the village had a miscellany of jobs: some craftsmen like the wheelwright in 1851 and the bootmaker in 1881, some in trade like the dealer in 1851, the publican cum grocer in 1881, besides the vicar, the Congregational minister, the teacher and tenant farmers. Women who moved into the village also had a variety of occupations although it is more likely that it was marriage, not work that brought the move. The pattern of immigration illustrates the first of Ravenstein's Laws of Migration, promulgated in the 1880s³⁰. Most incomers travelled only a short distance. Some came from Meppershall, Stondon, Holwell, Pirton and Gravenhurst, all villages which shared a boundary with Shillington. A large number came from within a circle of a 5-15 mile radius : Clophill and Flitwick in Bedfordshire or Ickleford and Hitchin in Hertfordshire,

30. D.B. Grigg : E.G. Ravenstein and the Laws of Migration

for example. Only a few came from farther afield including the clergy and the teacher in 1881.

Most people lived in a household headed by a married couple. It was overwhelmingly a young population. In both 1851 and 1881 approximately half were under 20 with only 7% over 60 - a very similar pattern to Pirton. It is not surprising that compulsory education was resisted and that, once introduced, parents tried to insist that children left school immediately they were eleven. Their wages were needed and older children were also needed to look after the younger ones. Around 45% lived in households of between 4 and 6 people with a further 18% in households of 7 or more. No wonder overcrowding was so acute in one or two bedroomed houses. In 1851 the overwhelming majority lived in nuclear family groups of parents and children but the pressure of the increased population was such by 1881 nearly half lived in extended family groups that included elderly parents or grandchildren as well as unmarried sisters, occasionally a brother or a cousin and nephew and nieces. This was a considerable change as the nuclear family household had been the norm for centuries, the age of marriage being delayed until a separate household could be afforded. It may well have added to the pressures on the family which overcrowding exacerbated, as three generations lived together or the relative had a closer relationship to one partner of the marriage than the other.

And what of Emma Cooper whose commemorative plaque appears in the Congregational church? She saw her church's membership grow so that side galleries had to be added to the chapel in 1858. This is where she taught her Sunday School class until the new two storey classroom was built in the 1890s. The children she then taught attended school at the top of Church Street during the week. No longer, therefore would she have been teaching them to read as she perhaps did when she began as a Sunday School teacher. She knew what happened in the school, not only from the children but also from her minister's daughter who was an assistant teacher there. In fact, it is likely that she knew everything of significance that happened in the village. Church Street, where she lived, was the hub of the village. All Saints, the Congregational Church and for many years, the Wesleyan Chapel were all in Church Street as was the school, four almshouses and two public houses and two beer houses. The post office and grocery store was there as well as 2 bakers and a butcher. Lot Richardson's houses were inhabited by people of prominence:

one of them was bought in 1897 to be the Congregational manse. John King's new but cheaper houses were home to agricultural labourers and straw plaiters. She may have lived in one of them and joined fellow straw plaiters to talk as they worked of the 'hatches, matches and dispatches' of village people. But Shillington was no longer a world of its own. Talk would have included news of distant countries, where Shillington people now lived, national news gleaned from newspapers and celebrations of events like the relief of Mafeking or Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Emma Cooper never had the vote, but all the men of the village were enfranchised in her life time so elections, party policies, the expansion of government control were possibly discussed and what 'they' were up to. She lived through sweeping changes and died in 1912 before the First World War radically altered the world she had known.

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