

Agricultural Crisis and Industrial Salvation, 1850-1901

Before 1850 Hook Norton had existed primarily as an agricultural producer, not only feeding its own people but usually creating a small profitable surplus for outside markets. Since the Enclosure Act of 1773, however, those proceeds had benefited a narrow group of landowners rather than the broader community. As most local workers fell in status to become landless labourers rather than participants in a [communal agriculture](#),** so their standard of living deteriorated until poverty became widespread. Worse still, after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, demand and therefore in agricultural prices declined, meaning – in Hook Norton as in most of Oxfordshire west of the Oxford canal – that the local agricultural economy ceased to provide enough jobs or decent wages for local workers. At the same time many poor people, some of whom may have been pressured to leave the parishes they previously lived in, moved to Hook Norton, whose population increased by over 47% between 1801 and 1841. As a consequence, the burden of the poor law increased to levels far in excess of what was known in neighbouring parishes. In the 1820s Hook Norton became one of the first parishes in the county to sponsor overseas emigration schemes.¹

**Link to: <https://hook-norton.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Community-Farming.pdf> and <https://hook-norton.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Enclosure-Winners-and-Losers.pdf>

Then, after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the nation's agricultural economy declined even further in the face of cheap foreign grain imports. Consequently, people began to leave Hook Norton in a bid to find a better life elsewhere and so after 1851, despite a rising birth rate, the parish's population began to fall. The expansion of industry in the towns created new opportunities and enterprising people left in search of work and better prospects. In the process, Britain had changed by 1871 from a predominantly agricultural society to a largely urban and industrial one. Then after 1880 the immense expansion of agricultural production in the United States drastically lowered food prices even further, condemning a

¹ Pauline Ashbridge, *Children of Dissent* (London, 2008), 98-129, 145-152.

United Kingdom that was committed to free trade to unrelieved rural depression for at least the next two generations. To make matters worse, bad harvests followed in the 1880s, agricultural rents fell, and increasingly farmers changed from arable to meat and dairy, which required less labour. Between 1861 and 1901 the number of agricultural labourers in Britain fell by just over 60%, and overall nearly 40 per cent of males aged between 15 and 24 migrated from their home county. This drift away had the ironic effect in Oxfordshire of raising agricultural wages, to the embarrassment of employers, with the consequence that the county suffered one of the highest rates of farm bankruptcies and further reduced job opportunities.²

With pay rates in industry twice as high as in agriculture, western and northern Oxfordshire experienced significant rural depopulation during the second half of the nineteenth century. After fifty years of population growth up to 1851, the parishes surrounding Hook Norton suffered a decline of nearly thirty per cent over the next fifty. Those leaving tended to be young, between the ages of 15 and 34, and most moved to urban parts of Britain, especially London, rather than emigrate overseas. This was probably true of Hook Norton too, even though the parish had some [high-profile emigrants](#)** to North America and Britain's colonies in the southern hemisphere.

**[Link to emigrants section when new title and address clear](#)

What did make Hook Norton unusual was the fact that, in time, it managed to escape the general downwards drift in population size. Like neighbouring parishes, the number of Hook Norton's inhabitants slowly declined between 1851 and 1881 (from 1,496 to 1,232), but thereafter its numbers began to stabilise from the 1870s and then increase after 1887. By 1901 it was nearly back to the level it had achieved fifty years earlier, though after 1911 it would enter on a slow decline once more.³

What saved the parish from continuing depopulation – and potential collapse as a rural centre – in the late nineteenth century was the coming of the industrial revolution to Hook Norton. The parish never became a centre of manufacturing

² This and following paragraphs draw heavily, but not exclusively, on Simon Kennedy, "Beer, Iron and Locomotives: How These Saved Late Nineteenth-Century Hook Norton," *Cake and Cockhorse*, vol. 21 (2019), pages 2-24. This interesting article has inspired and informed this present contribution, though part of its argument and evidence is questioned below.

³ Kennedy, pages 7-8.

production but it did become a centre for the extraction of raw materials needed by modern industry – and it benefited incidentally as a supplier of desirable items of liquid consumption! The critical change was the arrival of the railway line from Banbury to Cheltenham, which connected Hook Norton with the outside world more effectively than previously. First of all, the long drawn-out process of building the line through the parish's difficult terrain – which, on and off, took thirteen stuttering years – brought jobs for both local labourers and outside workers that stimulated the local economy. Once completed in 1887, the railway then made possible the opening up of ironstone quarrying, which paid good if erratic wages. The Brewery, founded in 1849, no doubt benefited from the presence of thirsty railway construction workers, but its business did not begin to expand noticeably until after the railway opened up new marketing opportunities wider afield. In 1881 the Brewery employed only ten men, or two per cent of the village's working population; by 1901 it had expanded its workforce to 50, and needed to build larger and more technically up-to-date buildings, which still exist.⁴ The trinity of rail, iron and beer saved Hook Norton from the fate of other sorely pressed agricultural communities in Oxfordshire before the Great War.⁵

Who Were the New People?

It should not, however, be assumed that the reversal of Hooky's decline in population was the result of large numbers of railway workers settling in the place. The construction of the railway through Hook Norton parish took place in two periods: first, the initial diggings between 1874 and 1879, when some 2,000 labourers were required to dig the tunnel under South Hill and excavate the long railway cuttings at each end of it, as well as laying the line at each end where it entered the parish from Banbury and Chipping Norton; and, secondly, the final difficult burst of 1884-1887, crossing the two streams in the Hook Norton valley and completing the tunnel and station area. Recent historians of the Banbury and Cheltenham railway have argued that

⁴ Kennedy, pages 12-13.

⁵ Kennedy, "Beer, Iron and Locomotives".

railway construction projects in the agricultural areas of southern England ... were invariably built by farm workers or other labourers who would otherwise have been unemployed. The census [of 1881] lists one or two Scotsmen and several northern Englishmen but there were few (if any) Irishmen at work on the line in 1881 – Irish navvies were found more frequently in the industrial areas of the North and Midlands.

However, these judgements are based on the evidence of the building of the railway between Cheltenham and Bourton, in particular at Andoversford and Dowdewell.⁶

It has recently been argued that much the same was true of Hook Norton, but is that necessarily the case? There are signs that, in the more north-easterly, more difficult areas of the line like Hook Norton, a good number, though probably not most, of the workers came from farther afield and were of more varied origin. In 1875

Chipping Norton awoke one morning to find that it had been invaded by a number of foreign-looking workmen, many of them wearing earrings, and all requiring lodgings.

They were navvies who had come to start work on the construction of the tunnel.⁷

In Hook Norton the arrival of a large force of labourers camping in temporary huts close to the line of the railway in the fields east of the Swerford Road caused social tensions with locals in 1874-76, though the precise causes of conflict are not clear. In the 1880s, trouble sometimes arose because of thieving and fighting, and in 1883 Banbury police had to be called in to restore order when a ganger stole the men's wages.⁸ Local Quakers then started holding Meetings for Worship in a convenient barn for the men constructing the railway, only for them to be "well attended by villagers, but not many railway workers".⁹ At the school the headmaster complained in 1886, "Some of the children belonging to the navvies who are at work in the parish are addicted to swearing If we could legally do so, I would rather be without any of them."¹⁰ Navvies with experience from work elsewhere were essential for difficult

⁶ Stanley C. Jenkins, Bob Brown and Neil Parkhouse, *The Banbury & Cheltenham Direct Railway Company* (Lydney, Glos., 2004), page 43.

⁷ Quoted in William Hemmings, vol. 1, page 57.

⁸ Kate Tiller, "Hook Norton, Oxfordshire: An Open Village," in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), page 279.

⁹ Jack V. Wood, *Some Rural Quakers: A History of Quakers and Quakerism at the Corners of the Four Shires of Oxford, Warwick, Worcester and Gloucester* (York: William Sessions, 1991), pages 129-130.

¹⁰ Headmaster in HN School Diary, 1886, Village Archive.

and dangerous jobs like building the tunnels at Chipping Norton and Hook Norton, regardless of their origins or character.

The precise structure of this labour force and its origins cannot be confirmed by the census, as some historians claim, in either 1881 or 1891. Since the construction work of the 1870s ended in 1879 and did not restart until 1883, the census of 1881 merely confirms that there was not a large gang of railway workers in the parish at that time. If earlier there had been a large gang of navvies drawn from distant parts, they had moved on, probably to those parts of the line where work was continuing, as notably on the Bourton section, which opened in 1881. The final phase of building that began in 1883 in Hook Norton was dominated by the creation of huge embankments and massive viaducts. The latter alone represented a monumental task requiring 400 workers, many of them skilled masons, and they may well have come from farther afield. But again the 1891 census cannot tell us who these workers were and where they came from, because the work was completed by 1887 and most workers far from home had long gone before that census was taken. The labourers who *are* listed in the censuses for Hook Norton parish were indeed fairly local: between 1881 and 1901, a quarter of them had been born in the immediate locality and neighbouring parishes, another quarter came from elsewhere in Oxfordshire and, of the half that had been born outside the county, a good number probably came from places a relatively short distance away in Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Northamptonshire.

The main influx of new residents from outside the county came *after* the railway had been opened. Ironstone quarrying, in particular, had a significant impact on the local demand for labour and the character of its workforce, attracting in both labour and outside capital and technology. In 1895 the *Banbury Guardian* wrote that the further growth of ironstone quarrying at Hook Norton would be “a step to employing more labour in the neighbourhood – a consummation much to be desired in these days of severe agricultural depression”. When a further expansion was planned in 1898, it commented that “labour will have to be imported, as there has been no unemployment here for a long time.”¹¹ By now the major employer was the Brymbo Steel Company from North Wales, which found it necessary to build

¹¹ *Banbury Guardian*, March 14, 1895, September 22, 1898, quoted in Kennedy, pages 16, 15.

accommodation for workers it brought to Hook Norton. All in all, according to the *Banbury Guardian* in 1898, thirty new houses had been built in the village for workers from outside and another twenty were under construction. It is, however, not clear whether the second tranche was ever built, given that in 1901 a fall in demand forced the workings to close. Labourers had to be let go and some Brymbo workers returned to Wrexham. Yet the 1901 census still showed that ironstone labourers made up the largest single group of non-agricultural workers in Hook Norton, comprising 10 per cent of the village's working population compared with under 3 per cent ten years earlier.¹²

Taking Hook Norton workers of all kinds, the census of 1901 suggests that most workers were indeed men from local parishes, and no doubt local family bonds were important in persuading them to stay in the area. Many of their families had multi-generational roots in the village, and this was especially true of Brewery workers. Ironstone workers were more likely to be young men moving in from outside, but, if so, they tended to stay on in Hook Norton. Labourers' wages on the ironstone were significantly higher than in agriculture or, indeed, at the Brewery, but then the work on the ironstone was particular hard and wearing. Despite ironstone's temporary embarrassment, by 1901 a quarter (26%) of the parish's working population worked in the new industries, and half of them were locally born. Agricultural labour was still the largest employer of Hook Norton's working population, giving work to more than a third of them (37%), but it was the new jobs that made a difference to the prosperity of the village.¹³

People with Skills

The widening of employment opportunities after the line opened in 1887 tended to bring in outsiders who had special skills. Of the relatively few number directly employed by the railway after 1887, the senior and skilled staff came from outside the county, while the line labourers seem to have been locally born. Similarly, of the 50 men employed by the Brewery in 1901, 68% came from the locality, 14% from Oxfordshire, and 18% from the rest of the country. Here too, the

¹² Kennedy, page 17.

¹³ Kennedy, pages 21-23, 24.

locals made up the manual labour force, while the professional and commercial staff came mainly from outside the county.¹⁴ Similarly the Brymbo company brought into Hook Norton men skilled in science and technology to help create the new systems for generating electricity and gas as well as steam-powered machinery and its own small-gauge railway.

The village itself, though, contributed to its own economic survival. It had long had a vigorous internal life, with a mix of social classes, a variegated religious life, and some cultural vitality. It had long boasted a good collection of independent skilled craftsmen and mechanics, heading family-run enterprises and shops. The 1871 census had revealed there were 133 craftsmen in the village pursuing a wide range of different crafts.¹⁵ These people proved enterprising enough both to make the village a shopping centre for the surrounding area and to adopt new technologies into everyday life, with the result that the character of village life underwent a transformation, especially after the turn of the century. [*Link to:* <https://hook-norton.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Glimpses-of-Village-Life-1850-1930.pdf>].

The contributions that follow give detailed overviews of the railway, the ironstone quarries and the Brewery during this critical period of growth and on into the next century. At the same time lighting, electricity, radio, telephones and the internal combustion engine changed life, at least for the better-off. All these minor transformations would, however, be themselves transformed – and in some cases overwhelmed – by the far more earth-shaking and bloody impact of the Great War.

Donald Ratcliffe

October 2020

¹⁴ Kennedy, pages 11, 12-14.

¹⁵ Tiller, "Hook Norton," in Thirsk, ed., page 279.