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Dorchester Chronicles

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In 1834, the six men who became known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs were each sentenced to seven years' transportation to Australia. Their crime? They had formed a friendly society, which was not in itself an illegal action, and as a result had been charged and found guilty – such was the determination of the authorities to discourage them – of 'the administration of illegal oaths' under the 1797 Incitement to Mutiny Act. (This rather obscure act had previously only been used against sailors.)

The injustice of the sentences was apparent even at the time, and there were many protests, both in the county and elsewhere. But the local newspaper, the *Dorset County Chronicle*, remained hostile to the six men throughout the proceedings. It claimed that the severity of their sentences was a 'wholesome example' to other troublesome labourers, and would serve as a strong deterrent. 'That the laws of England are not to be defied with impunity; that there is still a power to maintain public security', proclaimed the *Chronicle* on the day of judgement.

This was very predictable. The *Dorset County Chronicle* was the voice of the landowners, the large farmers, the gentry and the clergymen of Dorset, and invariably sided with them. Like its readers, it had little sympathy with any demands, however fair, from workers or tenants. And the Martyrs' demands were fair. The main prompting for the setting up of the Tolpuddle Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers had been an unexpected reduction in the men's pay.

Never easy, times were especially hard for labourers after the latest enclosure of their common lands. This had deprived them of their rights to fuel, grazing, growing and gleaning, a loss not compensated for by their pay. At nine shillings a week, wages in Tolpuddle were

low: in other areas of Dorset they were 10 shillings weekly. In 1832 they were reduced by yet another shilling. After a meeting in Dorchester at which the Martyrs' leader, the remarkable George Loveless, spoke in favour of a local minimum wage, the wages were further reduced to seven shillings a week, and then finally cut to six. This was not enough for a man and his family to live on.¹

Even when justice was eventually done, and the men had returned from their exile back home to England, the *Dorset County Chronicle* persisted in its antagonism to them. It was still maintaining the same position one hundred years later, during the centenary celebrations of 1934 – another year of serious economic depression. Attitudes had changed, but the *Chronicle* had not changed with them.

A venerable newspaper, founded in 1821, the *Dorset County Chronicle* managed to survive until the 1950s, despite making no obvious attempts to widen its readership. It had faced growing competition for a long time. With the population becoming increasingly literate, over the years new publications had begun to appear which catered to their interests: to the world of the music hall and the public house. In 1896, the *Daily Mail* was launched by Alfred Harmsworth (who later became Lord Northcliffe) and immediately became widely successful. The market expanded; the *Mail* soon had many imitators. In 1921 the *Dorset Daily Echo*, a local, and therefore more serious, rival appeared (and continues to be published). By 1941 the *Chronicle* was certainly ailing, if not bankrupt. This was the moment when the most unlikely of purchasers came to its rescue – the Communist *Daily Worker*.

A tiny paper, the *Daily Worker* first went to press on 1 January 1930, from cramped and grimy premises in Tabernacle Street in the East End of London. It provided a platform for the Communist Party, as Lenin himself had advocated in 1921. He wrote:

You must start this paper not as a business (as usually papers are started in capitalist countries) – not with a big sum of money – but as an *economic & political* tool of the *masses* in their struggle.²

Despite rumours that the newspaper was being bankrolled by the Soviet Union, the *Daily Worker* was in fact entrapped in a continuous financial struggle. It attracted no advertisers, and was forced to set up a fighting fund, which fortunately proved to be quite lucrative. Only three weeks after the paper started up, the trade wholesalers began a boycott. This could have been (and was intended to be) a total disaster for the project, as retail distribution was crucial to any newspaper's survival.

The *Daily Worker* turned again to its readers, who responded with loyal enthusiasm and could be seen, as William Rust, the editor until 1932, wrote, 'in the small hours of the morning collecting parcels at the railway stations and delivering them to newsagents or direct to readers'.

This boycott went on for years. Among the volunteers were Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. On a burning hot day in 1936, they sold copies of the *Daily Worker* outside the Roman amphitheatre of Maumbury Rings, Dorchester, at the great rally organised by the Dorset Peace Council, for which Sylvia had recently become secretary.³

Thus the *Daily Worker* encountered opposition from the start. It was promptly attacked in a leader in the *Times*, and faced two court cases in the second year of publication, both of them resulting in staff members being imprisoned. In 1933, one of the Labour leaders, Ernest Bevin, successfully sued the paper for libel. He won, and was awarded £7,000 plus costs. Rust commented: 'Sufficient to say that we could not afford to pay and therefore did not pay.' They were also continually harassed by the law. For five years, according to Rust, the Special Branch kept 'hanging around our doorstep'. The police disappeared when the paper began to grow in importance, as Rust describes:

There can be no question at all that the *Daily Worker* greatly improved during 1934–35 both in appearance and in its trenchant handling of current affairs. It was becoming a political force and its views were widely noted. In April 1935, it announced a 50 per cent. increase in circulation compared to the previous September and promised an eight-page paper in the following October if the campaign was kept up. On October 1, the eight-page *Daily Worker* duly appeared. Communist Party membership was also on the increase.

This was followed in 1936 by what was possibly the *Daily Worker's* most successful period when they, and the Communist Party of Great Britain, gave their support to the Republican Government in the Spanish Civil War. The CP acquired many intellectual new members. The *Daily Worker* was taken more seriously than before (and even managed to attract some advertising revenue) during this time. They acquired two distinguished writers: the flamboyant journalist Claud Cockburn (pen name Frank Pitcairn) who became a militiaman in the Fifth Regiment in order to cover the war in Spain, and the eminent scientist, Professor J.B.S. Haldane, who wrote regular columns for the paper. Cockburn also produced his own duplicated newsletter, *The Week*.

The *Daily Worker* was active too in the Popular (or People's) Front, an international movement which attempted to unite left-wing groups in the struggle against Fascism, as a response to the rise of Hitler in Germany. Rust wrote of how 'the *Daily Worker* ... threw itself into the fight against Fascism with the confidence that it could be overthrown by the united front of the people'.

By the end of 1934 Ackland, growing increasingly left-wing, had become a subscriber to the paper; Sylvia moved in the same direction and both of them became members of the Communist Party in 1935. Warner and Ackland wrote for many left-leaning publications in the 1930s, presumably including the *Daily Worker*. Certainly a review of her novel *Summer Will Show* appeared in the paper on 23 September 1936, but it does seem unlikely that Warner or Ackland could have contributed much material to a London newspaper mainly concerned with the lives of the urban proletariat. A more fitting outlet for their work would have been the *Country Standard*.

The *Country Standard*, a publication dedicated to 'peace and socialism in the countryside', was founded in 1935 by a collective of Communist and Labour Party members. Unfortunately, neither the British Library nor the Marx Memorial Library hold copies of the pre-war editions of the *Standard*, which still survives in a brief form online. It was probably similar to J.W. Robertson Scott's left-wing magazine, *The Countryman*, to which Warner often contributed, adopting Robertson Scott's tone, dispassionate and well-informed, which he had used to great effect in his polemical *England's Green and Pleasant Land* of 1925.⁴

Valentine too was bombarding the newspapers with letters and articles with an almost religious zeal. A scrapbook in the Warner–Ackland archive includes some of these letters. While Sylvia was chiefly concerned with social injustice, Valentine was more emotionally concerned with the rural poor, writing from her personal experience of some of their conditions. She and Sylvia were living at 24 West Chaldon – nicknamed 'ye olde communists' rest' – in a house streaming with damp, where they received many Party members. Here, Valentine wrote a series of articles called 'Country Dealings' for *Left Review*, which were collected as *Country Conditions* and published by Lawrence and Wishart in 1936. Many of Ackland's and Warner's activities in the thirties were concerned with rural poverty and the pursuit of peace, as well as with the Republican cause.

In 1938 the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, signed the Munich Agreement with Germany's Chancellor Adolf Hitler. This agreement, while precariously keeping Britain's peace, allowed Germany

to extend its territory into German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia. The *Daily Worker* campaigned vigorously against the agreement, which in any case did not last. William Rust's resumption of the editorship of the *Worker* in 1939 coincided with the country's eventual declaration of war. The paper was still riding high, with 10,000 new readers in three months and a swelling fighting fund. A new rotary machine was being installed, promising 'a bigger and better paper'. Rust wrote:

In those days, almost every individual who had any democratic thoughts at all was sending good wishes to the *Daily Worker*. Even [the singer] Gracie Fields sent us a good luck message. 'Reit good luck to t'*Daily Worker* – reit good luck, laad. Tell 'em I'll be reit glad when there's more work i' Lancashire,' she told one of our reporters...

The *Daily Worker* celebrated its tenth birthday on 30 December 1939 with a larger than usual edition of eight pages instead of six, plus an extra column on every page. The headline read 'Ten Years and Still Hitting Hard', but soon they would be hit hard themselves. Their pro-Russian position was undermined when Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (also known as the Non-Aggression Pact) on 23 August 1939. The *Worker's* continued campaign for a People's Government brought economic pressure (they were forced to reduce the paper to tabloid size) and the threat of suppression under Defence Regulation 2D. This had been introduced after Germany began its attack on France, and allowed suppression of any publication which was critical of the war effort. On 21 January 1941 the *Daily Worker* became the first publication to be banned by order of the Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security, Herbert Morrison. It was charged with the 'systematic publication of matter calculated to foment opposition to the prosecution of the war'. Among the nine other publications banned was Claud Cockburn's *The Week*.

At some point in the first half of 1941 the *Worker* bought the *Dorset County Chronicle and Swanage Times*, most probably at a bargain price, as its proprietor, Mr Putnam, a self-made millionaire, was anxious to be rid of it. Exactly when they bought the *Chronicle* is unclear, as there was no announcement of any change of ownership in the paper. The purchase must have been made after the ban in mid-January, but until the middle of the year the *Chronicle* trundled along as before, fulfilling its role as a conservative rural newspaper, reporting cattle sales, births, marriages, deaths and local crimes (such as riding a bicycle

without lights). An eight-page weekly broadsheet, with a format that had scarcely changed over the years, it also made some mention of international and national news.

On 22 June 1941 Germany invaded Russia. British attitudes to the latter country changed, as the Soviet Union was now an ally, with Josef Stalin becoming affectionately known as 'Uncle Joe'. Nowhere was this change of attitude more noticeable than in the pages of the *Dorset County Chronicle*. A leader of 17 July was unexpectedly enthusiastic in its praise of Russia and the Russian peasants and called for a Second Front in Europe. This must have come as a surprise to the readers, who would have been yet more startled and puzzled by the leader's conclusion:

That brings us to the question of the embargo on the publication of the 'Daily Worker'. The proprietors of this newspaper have always advocated a policy of collaboration with the Soviets. Now that this policy has been officially adopted by the Government, surely the only logical outcome must be the lifting of the embargo. The 'Daily Worker' has a large following among members of the trade unions. Its one desire at the present time is to assist in extirpating the monstrous growth of Nazism by fearless but constructive criticism. By maintaining the enthusiasm of the workers, it can render valuable help. The ban should and MUST be raised.⁵

Some of the *Worker's* journalists were brought in as well. On 31 July, J.B.S. Haldane contributed 'Colder than the Pole', with a further article following on 24 August, 'Where the Bombers Flew'. Their special correspondent R. Page Arnot also wrote for the *Chronicle*.

There were other attempts to enliven the paper, with film reviews and a cookery column. There were features about 'manor houses and gardens and Dorset heroes past and present'. On 18 September the front page described how a 'Constant Reader from 1880 to 1941' had praised the 'great improvement in the paper during the last twelve months'. (The letter was said to be available for viewing in the *Chronicle's* offices.)

Another clue to the change in ownership was the paper's sudden concern with the continuing plight of the agricultural labourers, who were asking for a rise in wages to £3 a week. Neither the *Chronicle*, upholder of the status quo, nor the *Daily Worker*, with its urban focus, normally bothered themselves with such concerns. The campaign made the front page on several occasions, but failed to effect any increase in wages.

The appearance of the paper improved when the old Model One linotype machine was replaced, but despite the changes, the paper was still reassuringly recognisable enough as its old self, with its emphasis on local matters. The *Daily Worker* had not bought a rural newspaper in an unimportant county with a small population simply in order to revive it. *The Worker* had other aims.

According to Wendy Mulford in *This Narrow Place*, as leading Communists in the area, 'Sylvia and Valentine were asked over to meet the comrades who arrived to run the paper ... and to discuss ways in which they might support it. But the enthusiasm for round-the-clock activism of the thirties had waned, and it does not seem that much came of this connection.'⁶ Information is scant at this point. The couple anyway had other preoccupations in 1941 with their war work.

Fortunately, an article in the *Wessex Journal* for May 1997, 'Uncle Joe and his Second Front in the West', gives an invaluable insider's account of events after the takeover. Dudley Gardiner joined the *Chronicle* as a 'printer's devil' apprentice in 1937, at its offices in Trinity Street, Dorchester, to which it had moved in the early 1930s from the compact and charming building at 63 High West Street.⁷

Dudley therefore witnessed life at the *Chronicle* both before and after the changeover. When he joined, the business was owned by Mr Lacey, and then inherited by Mr Austen, who sold it on to Hugh Lineham and Mr Putnam. After gaining full control, Putnam sold it to the *Daily Worker*.

Whether Putnam approached the Communist Party bosses, or whether they approached him we shall never know. Either way *The Dorset County Chronicle*, born over a century ago and nurtured deep within the heart of True Blue rural Dorset suddenly became the plaything of British Communism and Mr. Putnam disappeared profitably into the great beyond.

Although somewhat wary of the 'comrades' as he called them, Dudley benefited by the sale. His pay was doubled, as was the overtime rate (as might be expected, the *Daily Worker* paid union rates, though Gardiner suspected that the *Daily Worker* staff were expected to contribute some of it to party funds). The new machinery made the work easier, as did the presence of printers with Fleet Street experience.

The increased overtime was a bigger bonus than he expected. As well as producing the *Chronicle* – and its sister paper, the *Southern Times* – the *Daily Worker*, deprived of its voice both by the ban and by

the bombing on 16 April of its London premises in Cayton Street (to which it had moved in 1934), was printing its own material. As Dudley Gardiner put it, 'How could anyone imagine that riproaring left-wing literature could emanate from such an impeccable, responsible source?'

The print runs in Dorchester were for a million-plus copies and the *Chronicle's* reel-fed flatbed newspaper press had a top speed of three thousand copies an hour, which meant that it had to be kept going 24 hours a day ... That operation alone, given the staffing and machine capability, was a miracle of organisation.

What was being produced was a series of 'Specials': four-page broadsheets, resembling the *Daily Worker* in all but name (and nicknamed the *Daily Blank*), which appeared at regular intervals. William Rust lists such titles as 'For Victory Over Fascism', 'British Worker', 'Workers' News', the 'Worker' and 'New Year Clarion' which 'reached an aggregate circulation of 2 million copies'. Rust adds that 'To back them up, for leading folk, there appeared from July 1941, to March 1942, thirty-two numbers of a weekly pocket-size "Commentary on Current Political Events" in an average print run of 7,000 copies.' To Dudley Gardiner it seemed that 'Political propaganda was everywhere, leaflets and pamphlets being called upon to be produced by the hundred thousands.'

The *Worker* constantly campaigned to get the ban removed. In 1942 it published a pamphlet entitled 'Lift the ban on the Daily Worker', citing the support of factory workers, actors, trade unionists and authors. Twenty-eight authors signed the petition, including Sylvia Townsend Warner.

Declaration by Authors: The undersigned are of the opinion that the continued ban on the *Daily Worker* has now passed the borders of justice and fairness. To those most concerned this ban may have had the right look about it sixteen months ago, but that is not so today. We do not question Mr. Morrison's sincerity, but we do question his right to an inflexible determination to keep this paper from its readers, whose sincerity should also be accepted. Many of them, it is important to remember, hold key positions in industry. We strongly urge that this ban be lifted without delay.⁸

There was much sympathy and support for the *Daily Worker* at this time – particularly after Germany invaded Russia. Weighty figures

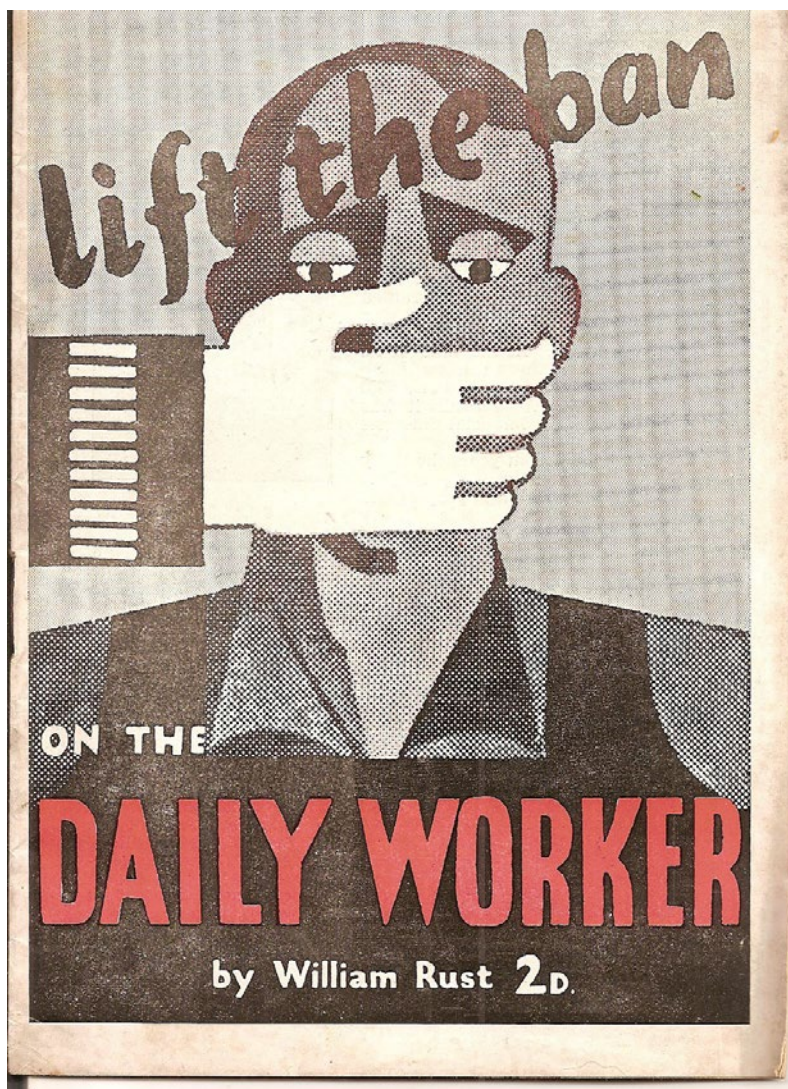


Figure 9.1 'Lift the Ban on the Daily Worker' pamphlet cover.

waded in. The newspaper published a leaflet containing a declaration by Lloyd George, the former Liberal leader and Prime Minister, demanding the lifting of the ban:

We have entered into a defensive and an offensive alliance with the Great Communist State of Russia in fighting one of the greatest wars in history for the liberty of the nations.

Why, therefore, should our Government suppress the publication of the only Communist daily paper in this country, especially when the Communist Party is committed to the prosecution of the war?

To manage to publish such material while under a banning order, the *Daily Worker* obviously had to be discreet about their ownership of another newspaper, although there were probably further reasons for their secrecy. Regular readers of the *Dorset County Chronicle* would have been dismayed – to say the least – to discover who the new proprietors of their newspaper were, while Communist Party members would have been shocked at their paper's association with such a reactionary publication as the *Dorset County Chronicle*.

Even in 1949, when the history of the *Daily Worker* was published, the author, Allen Hutt (who completed the work after the death of William Rust) was circumspect about the whereabouts of the paper in wartime, making vague mention of the fact that 'The Specials were produced on the press of a country weekly' in an unspecified place.

The ban was finally lifted on 26 August 1942. Shortly afterwards, the newspaper was being published in London again, from an old trade union printing works off Gray's Inn Road. In 1945 the *Worker* bought the freehold of a warehouse in nearby Farringdon Road. The newspaper was now owned and published by a cooperative, the People's Press Printing Society. The warehouse proved too war-damaged to be used and a 'modern steel-fronted building' was erected in its place. The new building opened amid cheering crowds on 31 October. Among the congratulations received was a 'simple telegram from the famous village of Tolpuddle'. Signed by George Loveless, a descendant of the Martyrs of 1834, it read 'Today is a proud day for us all. This is what our ancestors fought for. Long live the People's Paper!'

According to Dudley Gardiner, the *Daily Worker* sold the *Dorset County Chronicle* 'lock, stock and barrel to a Salisbury firm' in 1951. He thought that had it not been for the restrictions of paper rationing the *Chronicle* might have survived longer, building on the success that the *Daily Worker* had brought it. The *Chronicle* closed in 1957.

The *Daily Worker* was never to be so popular again. During the 1950s the truth about the brutalities of the Stalinist regime was emerging more fully. Many members left the Party, particularly after the Soviet Union's crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. Valentine Ackland left the party in 1955 (though Sylvia Townsend Warner never formally resigned).

In 1966, the *Daily Worker* became the *Morning Star*, and as such remains Britain's only Communist newspaper. Small and insignificant now, it remains important for the part it has played in left-wing history.

Notes

- 1 Details are taken from Joyce Marlow, *The Tolpuddle Martyrs* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), chapters 1–3, pp. 108 and 283.
- 2 Quotations relating to the *Daily Worker* are drawn from William Rust, completed by Allen Hutt, *The Story of the Daily Worker* (London: People's Press Printing Society, 1949), pp. 11, 13, 35, 29, 62, 77, 91, 127.
- 3 Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters and Politics, 1930–1951* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), pp. 61, 159.
- 4 J.W. Robertson Scott, *England's Green and Pleasant Land* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925).
- 5 Online: <http://country-standard.blogspot.co.uk/>. Accessed 14 August 2017.
- 6 Mulford, *This Narrow Place*, p. 159.
- 7 Dudley Gardiner, 'Uncle Joe and his Second Front in the West', *Wessex Journal* (May 1997), pp. 6–14.
- 8 William Rust, *Lift the Ban on the Daily Worker* (Dorchester: Dorset County Chronicle, 1942), p. 21.

Note on contributor

Judith Stinton is a founder member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society and was the Newsletter editor for 14 years. She is the author of ten books, including *Chaldon Herring: Writers in a Dorset Landscape* (1988 and 2004). She is currently writing a book about the lives of the people along Chesil Beach.