

THE ORIGINS OF THE TOLPUDDLE RALLY

The Tolpuddle Festival and Rally takes place in Tolpuddle this year between July 20th and 22nd: the actual rally and parade through the village is on Sunday, 22nd of July. This year the Festival has special significance because it falls on the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 1868. It goes without saying that the TUC is keen to encourage attendance and the residents of the village and others are preparing to welcome visitors who come from all over Britain and from other countries.

The events commemorate the heroism and dedication of the six men from Tolpuddle who in forming a branch of the trade union in the village, caused the local landowners and magistrates to decide that an offence had been committed. The ruling class duly had the six men transported to Australia in 1834. Demonstrations and an agitation mainly by trade unionists in London, caused them to be pardoned and returned to Britain at the expense of the state which had never happened before although there had been attempts to get pardons on previous occasions for other victims of ruling-class “justice”.

The Rally was not started by the TUC but it has now taken over the job of organising the annual event. The Rally was begun on a permanent basis by the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) in 1947 and by officials in Dorset. So, it was started not started permanently until just after the end of the Second World War. I am indebted to the late Fred Coles former Organiser for the NUAAW in Dorset, who had a letter published in the union journal in 1983 pointing out the history of the rally and how it came to be organised which is how we know about it. It is of interest that the history is largely forgotten about even in the village of Tolpuddle although the TUC has established a museum in the village. The NUAW has since become part of UNITE a larger more general trade union.

Prior to that, in between the two world wars, gatherings had been organised from time to time by the NUAW through the then Dorset organiser. These were meetings on the village green or in a field in the Eastern end of the village. There was of course, the large gathering at the event sponsored by the TUC when the Memorial Cottages were opened in 1934. Prior to the First World War we understand that memorial services were on occasions held at

the Methodist Chapel, to commemorate the work of George Loveless & Thomas Stanfield who had been lay preachers in that denomination and who were of course two of the six Martyrs. We do also know that there was a rally and picnic in 1875 when Joseph Arch the General Secretary of the National Agricultural Labourers Union came down from Leamington Spa to a meeting when he presented the silver watch to James Hammett to honour his work as the last remaining Martyr, who lived in Dorchester (the other five eventually emigrated to Canada having been re-patriated from Australia to Britain at the expense of the state).

The present rally which is the biggest of its kind in the south of England, depends basically on the efforts and enthusiasm of the people from the Tolpuddle area who help with catering and car parking and of course the South-West TUC based in Bristol.

If anyone would like to help please ring Tony Gould on 01305 848464 or call as I live opposite the pub in Tolpuddle.

Tony Gould.