

# Who's to pay? Cheshire attitudes towards paying for the cattle plague of 1865–1866

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This paper examines public attitudes in Cheshire towards paying for the cost of the cattle plague of 1865–66. The epidemic left the county in debt for thirty years, and the strains arising from both the epidemic itself and the need to repay the debt sharpened feelings between farmers and other sections of the community. Because Cheshire was affected far more than any other county, feelings ran strongly, and in particular there were the questions of who was to blame for the disaster and who was to bear the cost of it. Although the paper includes evidence from and views expressed in other counties, it concentrates upon Cheshire, and the responses of London and of government to the extent that Parliament was obliged to respond to the county's demands.

## The epidemic

The outbreak of Rinderpest in 1865–66 was by no means the only agricultural crisis that affected British farmers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Pleuropneumonia had attacked nearly a million animals in 1860–65 and in 1867–71 foot & mouth disease would affect 1.3m beasts, and cost an estimated £12m.<sup>1</sup> The plague of 1865–66 was different in several ways: its severity was concentrated over a period of less than a year, recovery rates were much lower than in any of the other diseases, and the shock of it induced a willingness among farmers to submit to crop and livestock censuses

<sup>1</sup> J. R. Fisher, 'The economic effects of cattle disease in Britain and its containment, 1850–1900', *Agricultural History*, 54 (1980), pp. 278–94.

which had previously been strongly resisted.<sup>2</sup> Last, it affected one county, Cheshire, quite disproportionately. Although the outbreak had taken hold in other areas by June 1865, it was October before it reached Cheshire, but once there it raged until the middle of 1866. From then on fewer cases were reported each month until the end of the year. In all, the county lost 84,159 beasts through death by disease or preventative slaughter, which exceeded 68% of the estimated normal stock.

Cheshire probably suffered most because of the structure of its dairy industry. In Fisher's words: 'Among cattle enterprises in rural areas, dairying in Cheshire most closely approached the urban system. It was characterised by small units whose high turnover of stock made them vulnerable to disease and a source of infection for other areas'.<sup>3</sup> The plague was made worse by a tendency to ignore the regulations imposed on the movement and slaughter of live-stock. The cost was reckoned to be about £1m, far more than a fair share of the national total of around £5m.<sup>4</sup> In February 1866 the government enacted the Cattle Diseases Prevention Act which authorised the slaughter of infected animals and the payment of a limited amount of compensation but it refused to pay compensation retrospectively or to give any financial assistance by way of grants from the Exchequer, limiting its contribution to the opportunity to borrow from the Public Works Loan Board at 3.25% interest over a term of thirty years. It made clear that each county was to stand alone in paying for the damage, an attitude which was particularly hard for Cheshire, though much easier for counties like Devon and Dorset whose losses were minimal.

The scale of Cheshire's distress can be seen from table 1. Although counties like Shropshire were able to levy a greater rate than Cheshire, and were implicitly praised by Waddington at the Home Department for doing so, the single large sum cleared the cost. In Cheshire there was seemingly no end to the misery. Eventually, it borrowed £270,000 from the Public Works Board, which had to be shared between the rate payers, until it was cleared in 1896.<sup>5</sup> Table 1

<sup>2</sup> S. Matthews, 'The livestock census of 1866', in *Agricultural History Review*, 48 (2000), pp. 233–28.

<sup>3</sup> Fisher, 'Economic effects', p. 287.

<sup>4</sup> For a narrative, see S. Matthews, 'The Cattle Plague in Cheshire 1865–66', *Northern History*, 38 (2001), pp. 107–19.

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Papers, *Report of the Cattle Plague Commissioners*, 1866 (218) IV, 501.

TABLE 1 Compensation and expenses in comparative counties (to the nearest £)

	Rateable value	Compensation paid	Expenses incurred	Total expenditure, including compensation	Separate rate in the £ levied
Cheshire	2,295,805	249,410	16,906	266,316	Nil
Lancashire	6,080,059	28,465	[31,667]	No return	1 $\frac{1}{4}$ d
Suffolk	1,432,569	3,903	[ 5,969]	No return	1 d
Shropshire	1,068,904	27,537	[29,227]	No return	6 $\frac{9}{16}$ d

Note: The rateable values are those at Michaelmas, 1867; all other figures are amounts up to that point.

shows the cost in three comparative counties, two of them bordering Cheshire, and Suffolk being taken at random. Not surprisingly, none made any return of expenses and I have inserted in brackets the amount levied for the purpose. This was presumably at least enough, since in each case it exceeded the compensation paid.

The official reports of the Cattle Plague Commissioners are the starting point for all statistical information, but apart from a brief initial judgement on each county they reveal little of opinions or attitudes. The correspondence between the Home Office and the Chairmen of Quarter Sessions was published at the same time as the Commissioners' third report: it reveals the attitude of the Home Department towards the financing of the loss and in particular the county's application for a loan.<sup>6</sup> This is the most extensive of the county representations, others being shorter and narrower in subject. I have relied primarily upon two newspapers which had contrasting attitudes, the *Chester Chronicle*, which supported the farming interest, and was thanked for doing so, and the *Stockport Advertiser*, which was far more urban and critical in its approach.<sup>7</sup> Both carried news reports of the plague and extensive reports of proceedings at Quarter Sessions and in Parliament as well as editorial comment, and correspondence which reveals how people felt both in official positions and as individuals. Correspondents to

<sup>6</sup> I have used the Commissioners' reports held in Manchester Central Library, as are the *Memorials of the County of Chester*, 1866 Session, 376, LIX.

<sup>7</sup> Both are available on microfilm in Cheshire & Chester Archives & Local Studies (CCALS).

*The Times* generally expressed metropolitan rather than county opinions.

Other views can be found in sermons and similar writings, whilst the chance survival of the Astbury parish magazine provides not only opinions and commentary but a wealth of statistics at local level, including a range of figures not available elsewhere. The magazine not only recorded losses but the size of the herds before the plague struck, providing a comparison not often, if at all, available for other localities. There is a dearth of private correspondence, a rare exception being the small collection at Arley Hall between Rowland Egerton Warburton and his friends.<sup>8</sup> There is in addition information scattered in other farming sources, but they rarely add much by way of opinion. Hansard provides the views of Cheshire MPs on legislation and possible government action.<sup>9</sup> Several contemporary contributions to the *Journal* of the Royal Agricultural Society of England offer insights and criticism, but most were made too early in the outbreak to contribute substantially to the debate.<sup>10</sup>

### Who was to pay?

The opinions revealed in this article have to be judged within the framework of mid-nineteenth century ideas about the role of central government. Authority rested with the county and the parish, and even within them there was little by way of a permanent bureaucracy to assist either in the devising of policy or its enforcement. The traditional relationship was well summarised by David Roberts.<sup>11</sup> After pointing to the minute scale of government—the Home Office employed 29 staff in 1846 compared with 203,900 in France—he illustrated the balance in a notable passage.

<sup>8</sup> S. Matthews, 'Our Suffering County: Cheshire in the Cattle Plague of 1866', in *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 96 (2000), pp. 95–121.

<sup>9</sup> All subsequent references to *Hansard* are to the third series.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Howard Reed, 'The Cattle Plague'; Lord Cathcart's address on 21 Mar. 1866, and J. Lewis's premature attack on the statistics in 'On agricultural statistics', all in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (JRASE)*, 2nd series, 2 (1866).

<sup>11</sup> David Roberts, *The Victorian origins of the welfare state* (Archon Press, 1969), pp. 8–22.

England's central administration did little in 1833 besides administer justice, collect taxes, and defend the realm. It rarely touched the life of the ordinary individual and showed little concern for his well-being. It failed even to supervise those local authorities and voluntary institutions that did concern themselves with the individual's welfare.<sup>12</sup>

Decisions were made at Quarter Sessions according to the opinions and prejudices of local worthies, and once made, they had to be implemented by officials locally nominated for the purpose: central government regarded even unpopular posts as duties that could be shared in rotation between not-too-reluctant members of the community.<sup>13</sup> Although by mid-century the remoteness in relations between central and local government, which is hard for us to understand, was beginning to change and Parliament was beginning to understand the need to legislate in, notably, industrial conditions, it was slow to provide the mechanism by which its edicts could be enforced notably in the provision of professional Inspectors. Even a crisis which affected a number of counties was still perceived as a series of local problems, each to be solved locally, rather than as a national issue that required intervention by Westminster. In the debate about the Plague, references were made to the Irish Potato Famine, to the earlier catastrophes at Sheffield and Holmfirth and to the (then current) Lancashire cotton famine. A brief comparison can be made with the last two, as they provide the simplest and least controversial demonstration of the way in which local disaster was typically handled.

During the Lancashire cotton famine, which had caused great hardship among the operatives put out of work, central government had refused to provide anything more than loans and had left relief to the generosity of local or national subscriptions.<sup>14</sup> It had done the same in response to the Holmfirth flood of February 1852, when a reservoir dam collapsed and sixty-two people were killed, mostly working men, women or children. Damage to property was initially thought to be £250,000, although that was probably a considerable

<sup>12</sup> Roberts, *Victorian origins*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> For appointments as Collectors of Taxes, see a circular from the Board of Inland Revenue to Clerks of Commissioners, dated 12 Oct. 1858, CCALS ref. 06148; for livestock inspectors, see Matthews, 'Our Suffering County', letter 3.

<sup>14</sup> W. O. Henderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861-65* (2nd edn, Manchester, 1969), pp. 64-81.

under-estimate.<sup>15</sup> Public charities raised over £69,000 which with one exception was spent to relieve human suffering. The exception was that £7,000 was allocated for the rebuilding of the Bilberry Reservoir, a decision reached after an earlier refusal. Facing a problem also faced in Cheshire, the Trustees of the main fund had to accept that allocating the money proved difficult: some claims were inflated; because 'the losses in many instances have fallen on those who were not properly objects of public subscription'; and because, demonstrating the strength of local independence, some towns which had raised money preferred to allocate at least part of it themselves, as they saw fit. In none of this did central government play a role.

Despite these precedents there was some thought in Cheshire as to how help from government might be arranged. Despite all the indications that the government would not help, as late as April 1866 there was still speculation in Quarter Sessions, reported in the *Chronicle's* issue of 28 April, with a division of opinion between those who felt that a national 3d. rate would be accepted and those who doubted the wisdom of even asking for one.

Although this paper primarily addresses opinions about the Plague within Cheshire, it must start with the national debate about bearing the cost, for although the arguments applied to all afflicted counties, they were critically important for Cheshire because of the severity of the epidemic there. Local attitudes polarised rapidly between the farming community on the one hand and other sections of society. The arguments can be summarised as an agricultural belief that farmers should be compensated for their losses, either by central government, by local authority, or by anyone else who was willing. Against that, some of the public responded by wanting to raise money by voluntary subscription, whilst others argued that the farmers should look after themselves, or that the greater landlords should provide the money.

Proposals for governmental intervention relied upon three courses of action: direct contribution from the Exchequer; nationwide taxes upon cattle to provide compensation; and the establishment of a compulsory national cattle insurance scheme to replace or underwrite local schemes. In practice these became intermixed and

<sup>15</sup> The paragraph relating to the flood is based upon the Huddersfield website, which itself reproduces a series of articles printed in the *Holmfirth Express* in 1910 but later edited by Stanley F. Dickinson (1991).

some advocates were not too clear as to which they were advocating. One of the early voices that may be cited in favour of national action was that of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth. Writing to *The Times* on 5 January 1866, he first reminded his readers of a letter he had written two months before, predicting the failure of local and county cattle associations because the losses would be too heavy to bear. He continued: 'For these and other reasons I propose to diffuse the burden over the whole of England, and, likewise, over a series of years'. He argued that if one fifth of the cattle in England died, the loss would amount to £14m and compensation (at a 2/3 rate) would be £9m. The balance would have to be borne by stock-holders and he suggested it should be eased by a loan from the Public Works Loan Commissioners over twenty or thirty years, the instalments to be collected as a rent charge. He was, however, unsure about the mechanism by which this should be achieved. He added that his suggestions were made in view of representations by a number of farming bodies to facilitate national insurance.

Support for a levy came from others: F. W. S. Loughton from Stratford suggested a tax of 2s. a head on his estimate of four million cattle adding that he was sure that 'farmers would gladly pay double or treble that amount to be relieved from the embarrassment and loss caused by Orders in Council'. W. Norman, writing from London, advocated a uniform rate, to be shared by 'landowners and occupiers', and within Cheshire G. Jackson, writing from Tattenhall Farm, not only noted the demise of 'cattle clubs' but advocated the levying of a tax on all cattle over two years old. His letter made two interesting points. The first was that he, as a farmer, appears to have accepted that it was that community that should shoulder the cost, for 'what owner would not cheerfully pay, with the certainty of receiving compensation for losses? The burden would then be put upon the right shoulders, and all would be only too willing to bear it'. He also made a point overlooked by others, arguing that since horses were 'taxed for fiscal purposes' there was no logical reason why the tax should not be extended to 'horned stock' for insurance.<sup>16</sup> The Aberdeen Insurance Scheme was offered as a model by a correspondent from Hertford but that contained two features rare elsewhere in that its contributions were compulsory and all its named members were wealthy landlords.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 2, 5 Feb. 1866 respectively; *Chronicle*, 9 Jan. 1866.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 31 Jan. 1866.

There were local calls for a national levy on all cattle to cover losses from plague. These ideas also came to nothing, even though some were thought out in detail like that of Edward Evans, solicitor in Chester.<sup>18</sup> He then outlined a plan for a compulsory county levy on all stock at a range of rates and according to age; that £8 per head should be paid for all cattle lost (less for younger beasts) and that any deficit be made good by a government loan. He warned that unless farmers were seen to contribute themselves, other groups would be unwilling to pay. He then pointed out that before the 'distressed Unions' in Lancashire were permitted to claim help from elsewhere, they had to show that they had spent 6s. 6d. in the pound in the relief of their own distress and farmers should be expected to do the same. Despite this and other similar suggestions, the government ruled out any direct aid and proposals for taxation of cattle and state insurance schemes came to nothing. Commercial insurance was no solution for although some policies had been issued earlier in the century, the companies which offered them had closed by 1861. Some changes to the rules for Friendly Societies in 1866 encouraged the establishment of a few societies in that form, and from the 1870s commercial insurance policies became available again.<sup>19</sup>

In passing, it should be noted that local cow clubs or cattle associations which were the only alternative to commercial insurance, were unable to meet the crisis. This is not the place for a full discussion of an ill-explored subject, but two failings are immediately clear from most, if not all of those that the author has been able to examine. They were run as members' clubs with voluntary subscriptions, so that contributors could withdraw or simply not pay if they felt unwilling to continue. Second, they were run on a year-by-year basis with no accumulation of reserves to meet difficult years, and in many cases no regular annual subscription.<sup>20</sup> There were exceptions, like that managed on the Crewe estates but even its reserves were inadequate and had to be supplemented by Lord Crewe.<sup>21</sup> In November, the *Stockport Advertiser* had reported pro-

<sup>18</sup> *Chronicle*, 3 Feb. 1866.

<sup>19</sup> H. A. L. Cockerell & E. Green, *The British insurance business* (2nd edn, Sheffield, 1994), p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the Cholmondeley cattle club accounts, CCALS, DCH/CC/1-13, DCH/VV/1; for the Wirral Society, *Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1865.

<sup>21</sup> Mr Manock, *Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1865.



posals by the Stockport Poor Law Union to set up an insurance fund for the Borough, but, by January, it had understood that existing arrangements had already failed. In a leading article it commented that in the early stages of the plague these associations had been able to cope but they soon ran out of money. With no compensation available, farmers then took risks and made matters worse.<sup>22</sup>

The *Chronicle* also realised that voluntary clubs could provide no solution, noting that only public companies, properly funded, would suffice.<sup>23</sup> Most probably none of the contributors to the debate at that early date had realised that the impact of the plague would vary so much between counties, and within counties, and therefore did not appreciate the resistance that there would be to the principle of helping one's neighbour. Part of the reason why all these ideas failed was that the government was not interested in promoting them, even though a deputation from South Lincolnshire to Sir George Grey was given good reason to believe that they might be adopted. Gladstone was keen to dismiss anything of the kind as he set out in a letter to Sir Thomas D. Lloyd, only a few days later.<sup>24</sup> He set out his objections under seven heads, ranging from the risk of fraud and waste, the diversion of interest away from prevention of infection to an inflationary impact. He finally turned to the medical precautions that could be taken and without explicitly criticising Cheshire methods, pointed to the difference in recovery rates between Cheshire and the whole of Scotland, respectively 8.5% and 34%. Given the differences in cattle density this would not be surprising.

Within Cheshire the response was condemned not so much as wrong but as simply inept, as it was by the *Chronicle* in a leader of 10 February. Gladstone had suggested that parishes help each other, but Robert Montagu, MP for Huntingdonshire preferred to extend the principle. He urged that the plague be seen as a 'national evil' which all should face together. The need for a national response was echoed in a letter to the *Advertiser*, where 'A Lover of Fair Play' argued that the county should petition Parliament to pay compensation for 'losses borne on behalf of the good of the whole nation'.<sup>25</sup>

Another parliamentary advocate of direct help from government was J. B. Smith, one of the two MPs for Stockport. In a debate on the Cattle Diseases Prevention Act in the Commons, he too turned

<sup>22</sup> 3 Nov. 1865, 26 Jan. 1866.

<sup>23</sup> Editorial, *Chronicle*, 16 Dec. 1865.

<sup>24</sup> Reproduced in *Chronicle*, 13 Jan. 1866.

<sup>25</sup> *Advertiser*, 25 May 1866.

Gladstone's argument against him. Gladstone had adopted an argument of John Stuart Mill that a shortage of cattle would cause the price to rise and therefore no one would lose but Smith realised that the uneven impact of the disease defeated this. The only fair solution, he argued was to lay a tax on all cattle in the country and then authorise local committees to pay compensation, following a Polish model.<sup>26</sup> In a letter to *The Times* of 8 January 1866 Montague (*sic*) had already demolished one of Gladstone's arguments concisely. After asserting that the plague should be treated as a 'state crisis', he continued 'the farmer who has lost his cattle will not be recouped by the high price of meat. The importer of cattle will gain thereby; but the importer suffers no loss'. In the debate Gladstone was pressed to make a direct contribution, but refused in the most forceful of terms, for the proposal, he argued, would then be simply about compensation to a single body of people, the owners of cattle, from a levy charged upon all.<sup>27</sup>

Hopes that the Government would put forward such a proposal were totally misplaced and one can only be surprised that hope lingered so late. Correspondence with Sir George Grey, later published in the Memorials, was finally to bring it to an end. There, Grey's officials at the Home Department argued that the same law applied to all counties and if others could levy a rate, so could Cheshire. The Department's letters must have infuriated county officials, for however obstinate the latter may have been, the Home Department resolutely refused to make any allowance for the scale of the problem in Cheshire.<sup>28</sup>

### The financial solution

In the end there was no alternative to the imposition of increased local rates, which would inevitably vary from county to county. This met with considerable opposition from both ratepayers and the officials who would have to administer it. Some people questioned the right of the government or of any other authority to slaughter livestock, which was an individual's private property, leading to a minor debate not directly germane to either of the questions

<sup>26</sup> *Hansard*, clxxxi, 612–13, 16 Feb. 1866.

<sup>27</sup> *Hansard*, clxxxi, 615, 16 Feb. 1866.

<sup>28</sup> See particularly a letter from Mr Knatchbull-Hugessen to the Chairman of Quarter Sessions, 11 May 1866, printed in the *Memorials*.

addressed in this paper. Lord Cathcart upheld the right in his address of 21 March, and Cheshire opinion generally respected that.<sup>29</sup> The need for compensation was not always so obvious. One correspondent, of an urban persuasion, thought not, and his letter expressed reservations hinted at elsewhere. He argued that the constitution gave power to the Privy Council to act in an emergency and pointed out that compensation was not paid if a dog had to be destroyed or a market closed. They were simply necessary acts for the public good.<sup>30</sup>

There was resentment particularly at known or suspected errors when healthy animals were slaughtered wrongly, as well as considerable opposition to slaughter as a policy at all.<sup>31</sup> Resistance was increased by an insular spirit that matched the attitude of government, whereby farmers in less affected areas saw little need to part with their own money to assist others in areas who were severely affected. As early as 21 April the *Chronicle* reported that the officials of the various Boards of Guardians 'have so strong an opinion of the injustice of the rate that they are fully determined on a little passive resistance'. They would simply not collect the money. The Stockport Guardians thought that the whole country should bear the burden, not Cheshire alone, Alderman Hallam ending his contribution to the debate by asserting 'and I'll do my best to prevent the collection and payment' of the proposed rate.<sup>32</sup> Later, clerks to the Unions reported that a 3d. rate would be accepted but anything greater would be strongly resisted.<sup>33</sup>

Cheshire was not alone, for in Flint, although much less severely afflicted, the Holywell Board of Guardians, chaired by Lord Mostyn, was similarly unwilling to collect a rate of over £3,000. They 'did not consider themselves bound to collect the money and declined to act upon the precept'.<sup>34</sup> As noted above, the burden was eased by a loan from the Government, though even this had its problems for as late as October 1866 there was still an argument over another expense, that of obtaining the loan from the government. The Guardians saw no reason why they should bear the substantial charges, which were

<sup>29</sup> *JRASE*, 2nd series, 2 (1866), p. 502.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from 'Examiner' of Frodsham, published 23 Dec. 1865.

<sup>31</sup> *Chronicle*, 20 Oct. 1866, in the examination of the Chief Constable's report, and the debate in Quarter Sessions in May, at Crewe.

<sup>32</sup> *Advertiser*, 20 Apr. 1866.

<sup>33</sup> *Chronicle*, 5 May, 21 July 1866.

<sup>34</sup> *Chronicle*, 5 May 1866.

said to amount to £900 for three of their bodies, Stockport, Macclesfield and Great Boughton. Their clerks felt that the county should bear half the cost.<sup>35</sup>

It is easier to understand the level of opposition to the imposition of a special rate, when the amounts are put in context. The Cheshire magistrates were obliged to levy a first rate of 7d. in the pound. For the largely urban Stockport Union, that represented 62% of the whole amount expended for the relief of the poor in the whole of the previous year. Some Unions simply did not have the money: Cheadle Bulkley had to pay £612 but its funds were exhausted. Bad though this was, it was calculated that another eight rates in the same amount would be needed to pay all the compensation, hence the need for the loan that was eventually secured.<sup>36</sup> Further resentment was caused by the fact that the 'wretched legislation' exempted boroughs with their own Quarter Sessions from a supplementary rate, except to the extent of their own losses. This meant that Liverpool, so heavily dependent upon Cheshire for food and milk, contributed nothing, while Birkenhead and Stockport, one of whose MPs raised the issue, had to pay heavily.<sup>37</sup> Cheshire, and possibly the bordering area of Flint, seem to be alone in objecting to the proposed rate. In the discussion at Quarter Sessions in July it was reported that Shropshire had paid a sixpenny rate without objection, Cumberland had paid and Lancashire had not only paid the rate but had settled all compensation claims.<sup>38</sup> It has to be noted, again, that the impact in those three counties was much less severe, overall losses being 6.1%, 6.2% and 2.9% respectively.

An alternative to help from the government was a loan from local institutions and in this spirit the chairman of Quarter Sessions asked the Trustees of the Weaver Navigation for a loan of £6,000 to meet an immediate cash need but that body regretted that they would not be justified in making it.<sup>39</sup>

There was opposition to the idea of a redistributive compensation system. John Tollemache in the south of the county, for one, believed that they were less inflicted than the north because they had followed the regulations while the north had made a bad situation worse. He complained about the resulting distribution of compensation money.<sup>40</sup> We can gauge the impact of the plague on

<sup>35</sup> *Chronicle*, 20 Oct. 1866.

<sup>37</sup> *Hansard*, clxxxiv, 1844-45, 1 Aug. 1866.

<sup>39</sup> *Chronicle*, 21 Jul. 1866.

<sup>36</sup> *Advertiser*, 18 May 1866.

<sup>38</sup> *Chronicle*, 21 Jul. 1866.

<sup>40</sup> *Chronicle*, 21 Jul. 1866.

his finances from his estate accounts. The income from his south Cheshire estates in 1866 was to drop from a nominal £20,247 (almost all of which had been collected in the year to March 1865), to £12,955, £6,585 being allowed on account of losses, with £706 recorded as arrears, presumably arising from other causes. By contrast, his Mottram estates in the extreme east of the county hardly suffered. Of the nominal £4,618 due, £4,210 was collected, with plague allowances of only £93 and arrears of £315 from other causes. One can well appreciate that he may simply have felt that having suffered so much in the greater part of his estates he wanted to retain what he had left rather than have to subsidise others. He was not alone, for compensation was resented and perceived to be working unfairly.<sup>41</sup>

### The debate about charity

The wishes of the farming community and its spokesmen were plain. Farmers had to be compensated by somebody and it hardly mattered by whom. They were loud in their calls for government aid by either direct payment or by insurance and when these calls were rejected they turned to local sources. Their general plea was made by Robert Barbour, High Sheriff, though only recently a Cheshire figure: he had purchased Bolesworth Castle about ten years before from a fortune accumulated in Manchester. It may be that his support reflected not only his official position but a desire to be seen as a landed county figure. His trenchant call in March for assistance from the country as a whole has been noted above. He was to repeat this plea in a letter to *The Times*, published on 25 April. He asserted that the losses suffered by Cheshire farmers amounted to about £500,000, but that while £100,000 was needed to give immediate relief, so far only about £22,000 had been contributed to the voluntary funds.

We will return in a moment to the question of public subscription: it is sufficient here to say that there appear to have been few donations from outside the county, and a disappointing response from within it. Barbour's and others' appeals for charitable donations were taken up by the editor of *The Times*, although he seems to have confused the issue by misunderstanding the comparison with

<sup>41</sup> See a report of the meeting of magistrates, *Chronicle*, 5 May 1866.

subscriptions raised to ease the cotton famine. In a leader on 26 April 1866, he urged the public to relieve farmers of the need to support the distressed 'agricultural labourers and dairymaids who have been thrown on public charity'. He went on to compare the appeal with assistance given in the cotton famine, but that was exclusively directed towards unemployed operatives who had no resource but their labour and excluded mill owners. There is, curiously, no mention in Cheshire sources of hardship among unemployed farm labourers. This is possibly because the small tenant farmers employed few people outside their own family: this is certainly the impression given by Caird in his survey of 1850.<sup>42</sup> The intended object of relief in this instance was the farmer himself and this created more controversy amongst those whose charity was sought, a topic to which we will turn in the next section.

The newspapers carried a number of letters on the question of charity for the farmers, though there were fewer than one might expect for such a crisis. These divided into four groups: those who advocated charitable subscriptions similar to those raised in the cotton famine; those who felt that the government should simply pay for the losses; those who felt that the farming community should look after itself; and finally, those who felt it was the duty of the larger landlords to come to the aid of their tenants. We will take these in turn.

The most articulate of those who advocated general subscription to assist farmers was Samuel Harlock of Nantwich, who wrote to the *Chronicle* suggesting the setting up of a county-wide fund.<sup>43</sup> After referring to a 75% mortality rate amongst affected cattle, he called upon the leading county gentry to head a subscription list for the relief of farmers, and then for deputations to be sent to all the towns in the county to raise more. His thoughts were sentimental rather than economically realistic and he was heavily influenced by the cotton famine and the response to the floods in Holmfirth and Sheffield which he instanced. In reality, farmers were unlikely to end up in the workhouse unless their landlords were unreasonable over rents and the terms of his appeal would have been better suited to help which might have been needed for any unemployed farm

<sup>42</sup> Caird, *English agriculture*, p. 252; M. Overton, 'Agricultural Revolution? England, 1540-1850', in A. Digby & C. Feinstein, eds, *New directions in economic and social history* (London, 1989), map 1.

<sup>43</sup> His first letter was published on 16 Dec. 1865.

workers. In March E. W. Watkin, one of Stockport's MPs, was active in setting up a county relief fund to assist the farmers and others who would not be compensated under the February Act. He gave £200, generous enough but dwarfed by the £5,000 given by the Marquis of Westminster (in addition to the £3,000 he had already given to his own tenants). The *Advertiser* followed him in urging the 'merchants in Stockport to reciprocate the assistance given to the working classes of the borough during the cotton famine' but it is not clear whether it was agricultural workers or farmers whom it had in mind.<sup>44</sup>

These thoughts were echoed in national terms by an outsider, though one with Cheshire connections. J. W. Watkin, DCL, of Stixwold Vicarage, Horncastle, and magistrate for parts of Lindsey, Lincolnshire, wrote to the *Chronicle* picturing the rosy cheeked farmer of the past, now turned pale and wan.<sup>45</sup> He called upon the Government to pay the losses. There was plenty of money in the Exchequer and it had given 'the lazy rebellious Irish ten millions in the time of the potato blight'. Further, it paid the cost of the police in Ireland equal to a rate of 1s. 10d. in the pound, compared with three farthings in England. He urged voters not to vote for a candidate who did not press the government to pay for the losses. His words must have been welcome to Barbour and others who were pressing for assistance from anywhere. The comparison with Ireland was also made by 'Christopher Cheshire', probably Edward Evans, solicitor of Chester once more, as his address was given. In a letter to the *Chronicle* of 2 June 1866, he wrote 'I do not see why a general rate is not good and proper for England if it is right in Ireland' but could not distinguish it from the proposal for a national rate.

Against this charitable view was opposed a less sentimental, perhaps more strictly commercial view, expressed by 'Examiner', of Frodsham, in a long letter published in the *Chronicle* on 23 December 1865. This made the comparison with other commercial activities which had to stand upon their own two feet and not rely upon charity or subsidy like the loss of a ship at sea, and with financial disasters like the 'railway mania' of 1847-49 which caused so much unrelieved distress. There was no precedent for giving assistance to the farmers, and a precedent would be needed before it could be done. For, after all 'the question is an agricultural one, and

<sup>44</sup> *Advertiser*, 16 Mar. 1866.

<sup>45</sup> *Chronicle*, 12 May 1866.

like the mercantile or manufacturing, with their fluctuating markets, must stand on its own basis. It is one between landlord and tenant, and embracing as the former class does the territorial magnates of the soil, men absolutely abounding with wealth, there can be no difficulty in the case'. The farmers were in any case foolish, not to have taken out insurance.

'Examiner' wrote again in the *Chronicle* of 6 January 1866. He took the argument back one stage, by starting with the relationship between landlord and tenant. They were, he argued 'co-partners in raising the production of the soil. The landlord is a sleeping partner; the farmer is the active business one. The one finds land as his share of the capital; the tenant finds the working capital and the business talent, and they divide the profits between them in certain understood proportions'. It followed inexorably from this premise 'that a partner, though a sleeping one, should sustain a share of loss resulting from an unexpected calamity'. It was therefore not only morally right, but legally right also, that the landlords should contribute.

Even if assistance were to be made available, who should qualify to receive it? The point had been made that farmers were not as a body suitable people to receive charity, but even if that objection were to be overcome, were they all suitable recipients? A letter to the *Chronicle* of 14 June from 'a loser but not a claimant' made the practical suggestion that 'would it not be well to make some enquiry on presenting the requisite forms, whether applicants belong to that class that need assistance from a public subscription? By doing so, the Committee would, I think, materially reduce the number, and so increase the sum given to the more unfortunate and deserving. Landowners and persons of good private income ought not to be the recipients of public subscription'. The administration of the charitable county fund caused controversy, both in the speed with which money was paid out and the people to whom it was paid. Inevitably, there were difficulties in payment, apart from complaints that payment had not been made.

There may be some justification for the latter, for on 5 May the *Chronicle* published a letter from 'Some of the Sufferers' asking when payment was to be made for 'now is the time that cash is wanted, as rents, taxes, etc., are all due', but it was not until mid-September that the City Finance Committee reported that all parties 'claiming under the recent Act' could be paid in full as there were



sufficient funds in hand for the purpose.<sup>46</sup> As at Holmfirth, there were seen to be philosophical problems in the administration of the charitable funds, relating back to the question of whether farmers as a class should receive what was seen as charity. The *Chronicle* addressed the issue on 29 September 1866, asserting that whilst mistakes may have been made, credit should be given for the difficulty of making a distinction between those who needed help and those who had merely suffered a loss. This was not the end of the grumbling for we read in December that a detailed record of expenses paid out was long over-due.<sup>47</sup> All this questioning takes us to the core of the problem: was assistance directed to the relief of hardship or was it compensation for the loss of livestock? The funds available pointed in different directions for the sums available under the February Act were compensation whilst the charitable funds were specifically for the relief of hardship. The question was complicated by the claims of those who had lost stock before February and were not eligible for statutory compensation. Should they be paid even if they were not suffering hardship? The decision might often be subjective and the distinction might not always be obvious either to farmers, townsmen, contributors or ratepayers.

### The landlords' duty

This dilemma leads on to the issue of whether it was the responsibility of the greater landlords to bail out their tenants rather than to rely upon the county rate or charity. Although they themselves rarely suffered direct loss from slaughter of cattle, their finances were in danger of being squeezed from both sides, from reduced rents on one side and their legal obligation to pay the increased county rate on the other as well as from their moral obligation to help their tenants. Nevertheless, they had extracted their rents over past years and there was a feeling that the financial salvation of the community lay with them. Related to this was a degree of urban hostility to the privileged position of the greater landlords, considered below. Their possible responsibility was aired at a meeting of the Great Boughton Union Mutual Cattle Insurance Association, as early as December 1865. Amongst calls for increased subscriptions, one member

<sup>46</sup> Letter from 'A Cheshire Farmer', and a news report both in the *Chronicle* 15 Sept. 1866.

<sup>47</sup> *Chronicle*, 1 Dec. 1866.

suggested that landowners should be invited to make a contribution but despite this promising start, another thought that the request was unwise for 'that class might look upon it as dictatorial'.<sup>48</sup> Some of the greater landlords did contribute handsomely to their tenants' relief, and gained their gratitude for it. Lord Crewe not only gave substantially but did so at precisely the time when Crewe Hall was burnt and had to be rebuilt, involving him in enormous additional expense. The Marquis of Westminster contributed generously to both the county fund and to his own tenants.

Others were not so well intentioned, and rumours circulated, usually with careful anonymity, about landlords who threw out good longstanding tenants who could not pay and installed new men. One such, who drew the scorn of the *Chronicle* was Leche of Carden, whose conduct will be considered below. Around High Leigh a group of neighbouring landlords were anxious to co-ordinate their reactions by having their agents work together and there Egerton Leigh relieved his tenants' financial distress, as he noted in a letter to his neighbour Rowland Egerton Warburton. He set out payments that he had made to individuals and ruefully commented that 'Thirty *counties* have suffered [less] than I have *individually*'.<sup>49</sup> In passing, we may note the force of his belief that some counties had suffered smaller losses than he had as an individual. Another, less generous though possibly in different circumstances, was Mr France of Bostock, who was credited with giving such of his tenants 'as comply with his terms' £2 6s. 8d. for each beast lost.<sup>50</sup>

Cheshire landlords were not alone in this, for example, *The Times* reported that 'Mr Robartes, MP for East Cornwall who is the largest landowner in the county of Cornwall, has made a deduction of 50% from the rents of certain of his tenantry who have suffered severely from the plague'.<sup>51</sup> Unless his estates were unusually badly affected, his generosity would be made easier in a county whose losses barely reached a thousand head of cattle and 0.79% of the stock. The affairs of the clergy were also closely tied to the rural economy and many were willing or obliged to waive tithes due to them in whole or in part. Some did so quietly, but they are hard to detect, whilst others

<sup>48</sup> *Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1865.

<sup>49</sup> Matthews, 'Our Suffering County', letter 15, dated 12 Apr. 1866. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>50</sup> *Chronicle*, 3 Feb. 1866.

<sup>51</sup> 25 Aug. 1866.

did so with some display of their generosity, making their action known through local newspapers. Thus, the Rector of Astbury published in the parish magazine his decision to remit a portion of the tithes due from each farmer who had suffered, 'in proportion to the losses of each'.<sup>52</sup> The Rev. Charles Earle Marsh likewise remitted 10% of the half year's tithes to the farmers in his parish.<sup>53</sup>

Outside the farming community there was some hostility towards the greater landowners, made explicit in a letter to the *Chronicle* which was remarkably bitter in its attitude:

The visitation is a very serious one both for landlord and tenant but especially the former, but, if like the American Civil War, which was over-ruled by the extinction of slavery, the rinderpest should eventuate in the extinction of game preserving with all its crimes, follies and miseries, it will have proved a blessing.<sup>54</sup>

If this view was typical or even common in market towns as opposed to manufacturing centres, it must indicate a considerable difference of opinion over the conduct of county society. Some people thought that a minority of landlords was not acting responsibly and in the interests of the farming community, notably that instead of being tolerant of a tenant's inability to pay the rent, they were throwing out otherwise good farmers and re-letting to newcomers who had the money. In a leader, the *Chronicle* lampooned Mr Leche of Carden who had angrily denied the 'calumny' of having reduced a tenant's rent. The leader then launched into a lengthy essay on the sense of duty and enlightened self-interest that should guide a landlord in the present crisis.

The attack may have been unfair and Mr Leche may have been unduly prickly, but in his favour we may remember that he had spoken out strongly against the injustice of the compensation arrangements, in that the Act offered nothing to farmers who had lost stock before February.<sup>55</sup> The paper's correspondent, 'Vindex', continued the theme, following praise of some of them, such as the Marquis of Westminster, with a savage attack upon a 'noble lord' whom prudently he did not name. The Marquis's 'princely gift to the voluntary subscription and his subsequent allowance to his

<sup>52</sup> June issue. A copy is available in CCALS and an original in Congleton Library.

<sup>53</sup> *Chronicle*, 16 Jun. 1866.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from 'Examiner' of Frodsham, 23 Dec. 1865.

<sup>55</sup> Both references are to the *Chronicle*, 5 May 1866.

tenantry, would make an ample fortune' and others had been correspondingly generous. In contrast the 'noble lord' was suing a tenant who had lost all his stock for a balance of rent, despite having 'excused himself from contributing to the relief fund on the ground that he intended to allow a liberal deduction from their rents to those who had suffered on his estates'. He attributed the fault to 'the absentee system that works such sad consequences in Ireland, and much the same might be urged against the same evil in this country. In the cases to which I have referred the difference between the conduct of the landlords may in great measure be traced to that cause. The good landlords are those who are living in constant sympathy with their tenants, whereas the other leaves them to the tender mercies of middlemen'.

In fact this weakness was exaggerated, for Westminster, John Tollemache and other great landlords spent much of their time and energy elsewhere, leaving the estates in the hands of agents. What mattered was the instruction that was given to those agents. The complaint echoed the sentiments set out by Rowland Egerton Warburton in the preface to his booklet on the eighteenth century plague, but to what extent was it a sentimental harking back to a largely mythical golden age?<sup>56</sup> To repeat a criticism, it had not been so apparent to Caird in mid-century. He judged that in Cheshire the landlords had historically taken too much and 'we do not hesitate to say that, taking into account the quality of the land, and the industry and frugality of the tenants, we have not yet seen any county in England where wet cold clay yields so much to the landlord, and so small a proportion of the produce to the tenant, as in Cheshire'.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusion

Any society tends to fall apart under strain, and the financial as well as the emotional crisis of 1866 revealed attitudes and arguments which remain unresolved to the present day. These arguments came to a head most forcibly in Cheshire because there the strain was most acute, but they were common to all counties to some degree.

First, the farming community felt that it ought to be helped, by

<sup>56</sup> Rowland Egerton Warburton, *Documents and letters relating to the Cattle Plague in the years 1747-9* (privately printed by Charles Simms & Co., Manchester, 1866). It was dedicated to Wilbraham Spencer Tollemache of Dorfold Hall.

<sup>57</sup> Caird, *English agriculture*, pp. 253-54.

direct government grant, by private subscription, or, as happened, by an increase in the rates to which everyone would contribute. There were three arguments against this. Many commercially-minded people saw no distinction between farmers and other traders or manufacturers: they should have insured, or saved against a rainy day, and if they had not, market forces should operate. Loss or destruction of goods by natural causes was a normal hazard of trade and the farmer had no more right to protection than any of his peers. A variation of this argument perceived farmers as sturdy independent creatures who were not suitable targets for charity and would not want to accept it. In addition, if the tenant farmers were unwilling or unable to insure, it was the responsibility of the larger landlords to see them through the crisis, either as partners or because they had taken too much in the past. This view saw the rural economy as a watertight entity whose members stood or fell together. In this, there was implicit criticism of the larger landowners for it was in part their lifestyle, especially hunting, which had made the crisis worse. Finally, was money paid for the relief of hardship or was it simply compensation for losses? Putting the question in reverse, should a poor man by his payment of the rates contribute to the pocket of someone who was nevertheless better off than himself? The question was never openly resolved.

The second major theme was a comparison between the treatment of the tenant farmers, the Irish in the potato famine and those who had suffered in other industrial calamities. They were quite different groups of people and the editor of *The Times* was not alone in confusing them. In reality there was no reason for this, for few, if any, Cheshire farmers suffered the distress felt by the other groups and few were abandoned by their landlords. There does not seem to have been an issue of distress among farm workers as there was among mill workers. There was a marked difference between the sympathetic view of the ways in which money had been provided by public subscription for the cotton operatives and a resentment arising from what was seen as preferential treatment by the government of the Irish. This is in striking contrast to modern perception of that crisis.

Third, if there was to be an increased rate, then it should bear equally upon everyone and the larger cities should not be exempt. Locally, it was felt that the burden should be shared by the whole country but this was a view that sprang primarily the disproport-

tionate impact of the plague on Cheshire. The global view failed even within the county for there was division and considerable criticism of one part by another as having made the situation worse. Above all, it was apparent how strong local feelings were and how undeveloped was any sense of a nation whose different parts should help each other.

Fourth, all parties outside government would probably have agreed on one assertion: the government had made matters worse. Reed was quite blunt about it. 'By acting too late and too weakly by appearing to give in to vested interests, it was seen by many to have helped the plague on its way, so that throughout the months of November, December and January, our loss doubled every four weeks, and at the close of February it amounted to nearly 12,000 a week'.<sup>58</sup>

Overall, had the country done its duty? Within the county, opinion remained divided to the end and we may finish, outside it, with the judgement of *The Times*.<sup>59</sup> In a leader it recalled that some people thought that 'the compensation had been excessive', and that farmers should have insured their livestock and if they did not, they were no more deserving of assistance than 'a merchant for a shipload of Manchester goods'. Against that, it felt that 'the nation ought not too readily and contentedly to repose in the belief that it has done the whole of its duty in this matter and all that its interest or good feeling required it to do. It appears to us a very proper matter for enquiry even if it is to end in leaving agriculturalists to the tender mercies of the Cattle Plague Act'. That was in October, and with that thought and a virtually plague free year ahead, the whole trauma passed from public conscience.

<sup>58</sup> Reed, *Cattle Plague*, p. 233.

<sup>59</sup> 27 Oct. 1866.