

ANNUAL MEMORIAL LECTURE 2023
COTTAGE ECONOMY

John Stevenson and James Grande

In celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of Cobbett's Cottage Economy, our two speakers help us to take a closer look at this most enduring work.

Part 1

COTTAGE ECONOMY

Dr John Stevenson

We are tonight celebrating one of Cobbett's most famous works, his *Cottage Economy*, first published in book form just over two hundred years ago in 1822, and hardly ever out of print since. The most recent printing from 2008, an attractive paperback in a series of 'rural classics' describes it as a 'bible of self-sufficiency'. The cover has a picture of an idyllic smallholding, complete with vegetable patch, pigsty, chickens, cow byre, rabbit hutch, compost heap, and busy bees from the hive. It is a not unfair representation of what Cobbett claimed to set out to do, except that the external scene of smallholding life cannot represent another central aspect of Cobbettian self-sufficiency, the brewing of beer and the baking of bread within the home. The essential ingredients of the *Cottage Economy* were the production, on a modest area of smallholding (no more than a quarter of an acre) of virtually all that was necessary for the sustaining of a family of almost any size; freeing them from the tyranny of wage labour in farm or factory, recourse to Poor Law relief, or the perils of emigration. Not only could a family produce its own food, but also produce for itself the most important elements of the daily diet - beer, bread, milk, eggs - without recourse to publican or shopkeeper and avoiding any taxes on common articles of consumption imposed directly or indirectly by the government.¹

The first appearance of *Cottage Economy* was as a series of seven pamphlets published between 1821 and 1822, dealing, in Cobbett's own words, 'with the brewing of beer, the baking of bread, keeping of cows, pigs, bees, ewes, goats, poultry and rabbits, and relative to other

¹ W. Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, Bath, 2008.

matters deemed useful in the conducting of the affairs of a labourer's family'. The pamphlets were cheaply priced at three old pence and proved so popular that 30,000 sets sold within a year.² Cobbett was even able to boast in December 1821 that fifty sets of parts one to five had been exported to France. Following the first edition in book form he attracted favourable reviews even in unexpected places like the austere Whiggish *Edinburgh Review*. Fresh editions followed, like a rolling stone gathering more prescriptions from Cobbett's fertile mind about how the labourer and his family could make a self-sufficient life for themselves. A new enthusiasm was the use of native, English grasses to make straw bonnets, for almost a century in different guises, the fashionable headwear of English women, but hitherto imported in very large numbers from Italy and elsewhere. So engrossed was Cobbett in the possibilities of this cottage industry, that a further pamphlet was produced with illustrations of the English grasses that could be used for bonnet-making. Later editions also encouraged the use of maize, which Cobbett had experienced as a useful food and fodder crop during his time in America. Having demonstrated it could be grown successfully this side of the Atlantic, he advocated 'Cobbett's corn' particularly as a feed crop for animals, especially the family pig whose role he saw as a mainstay of the self-sufficient smallholder. Following Cobbett's death in 1835, his daughter Anne published further editions, adding recipes for the use of meal and flour from maize in the cottage kitchen.

Cobbett was setting out in his pamphlets something both highly traditional and also revolutionary in its import. Writing in the midst of what historians would later call the 'agricultural revolution', in which the reorganisation and consolidation of holdings through enclosure, heavy investment in new crops and techniques, and a highly commercialised approach was causing immense upheaval for the rural poor, the offer of a return to a form of peasant proprietorship, a yeoman-freeman existence could look attractive. It offered an alternative to the prospect of pauperised wage labour, the loss of the commons, and the ever-present threat of dependence on parish relief and humiliating task work of the kind Cobbett found labourers

² M.L. Pearl, *William Cobbett: A bibliographical account of his life and times*, Oxford, 1953, pp. 119-20.

engaged in on his 'rides' across southern England in the 1820s.³ *Cottage Economy* offered a form of restoration, a return to a better way of life than that currently on offer in post-Napoleonic War England, where the rural labourers faced a perfect storm. They faced high taxes, rural unemployment, enclosures, and, in Cobbett's view, a distinct deterioration of the standard of life they had known when he was a boy sixty years earlier, before the long wars with France. Fundamental was his view that the labourer and his family had a right to a decent living, and his belief 'that the affairs of a nation ought to be so managed, that every sober and industrious and healthy man ought, out of his own wages, to be able to support himself, wife and family in a comfortable and decent manner.'⁴ But it went beyond material comfort, a return to the ample living and better times he believed had once existed for the labouring people from whom he had sprung, he aimed for a life of independence, self-reliance and dignity, increasingly under threat in a world of commercialised agriculture where farmers no longer ate with their labourers at a common table and were, increasingly, 'new men' made rich from the profits of corruption and stock-jobbing.

But it was revolutionary too in attempting to step aside from the other great revolution that was occurring in Cobbett's lifetime, the rise of industry and the world of the factory. Though essentially a man of the rural south and from the yeoman stock of Farnham where his family had farmed in a small way, he was aware of the growing factory culture already evident in some of the West Country wool towns, and could not ignore the even more dramatic industrial developments which had contributed to the Luddite convulsions in the midlands and north, and the reform agitation in the northern towns after 1815 which had led to events like the Peterloo 'massacre' of August 1819. Smallholding self-sufficiency was an alternative to the machine world, urbanisation and factory life, at a time when it was still possible to believe that the country's future prosperity lay predominantly with agriculture. Cobbett was writing in the age of the turnpike and canal, not of the railway, and the decisive economic

³ See for example W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, ed. I. Dyck, London, 2001, pp. 294-7 on the poverty of rural workers, and p.307 for people in rags.

⁴ Cited in K.W. Schwiezer and J.W. Osborne, *Cobbett in his Times*, Leicester, 1990, p.145.

predominance of manufacturing in the economy had still to come after his death. Large factories could be found, but the average size of factories as late as the 1840s was about forty employees: the small workshop was still the predominant mode of production across the broad range of manufacturing.

In the world that Cobbett knew, it was resolving the predicament of the rural labourer that was the major issue, and *Cottage Economy* the solution. It offered self-sufficiency in reward for hard work. It involved intensive mixed husbandry: intrinsic to the *Economy* was maintaining a cow to provide milk, butter and cheese. Raising its feed involved sowing and transplanting thousands of cabbage and turnip seeds to provide fodder for the cow and the other livestock. Grain was to be bought in, a quarter of an acre proving too small to grow extensive grain crops (and Cobbett's prejudice against potatoes prohibiting even a small potato patch), but milled by hand to avoid the extortions and abuses of which millers were widely suspected. Hard work he admits, but possible for a man helped by a sturdy youth. Milk and beer quenched the thirst of the household, the latter the traditional mainstay of households where water might be too dangerous to drink, and a weekly brewing of ale a natural accompaniment to the baking of bread. Milk and 'small' beer were for children and adults alike, avoiding the heavily taxed and unnourishing tea which Cobbett despised as 'a weaker form of laudanum'. But Cobbett was no puritan, the aim was a good life; he saw no merit in unnecessary sacrifice, and was vehement in his denunciation of those who praised up the merits of suffering and misery as worthwhile in their own right. He wanted families happily off, and to be happy the labouring family had to be well-supplied with wholesome food and drink and good clothing. In the introduction to *Cottage Economy* he gives full rein to the enlightened view that mankind has a right to a 'happy' life:

To live well, to enjoy all things that make life pleasant, is the right of every man who constantly uses his strength judiciously and lawfully. It is to blaspheme God to suppose, that he created man to be miserable, to hunger, thirst, and perish with cold, in

the midst of that abundance which is the fruit of their own labour.⁵

As suggested earlier, Cobbett was advocating smallholding self-sufficiency at a particularly difficult time for the rural economy. His major preoccupations were still the costs of the long wars against Revolutionary France which, with two short breaks, had been fought for the better part of a generation, from 1793 to 1815. He believed that their costs, through loans, the burgeoning National Debt and devices such as paper money, had been borne by the labouring classes. Extravagant rates of interest were being paid to those who lent money to the Government, supported by a corrupt political and financial class, which had effectively passed the colossal costs of the war on to the common people through taxes on consumption. For Cobbett, high taxation was *the* cause of the poverty he encountered. His support for radical parliamentary reform was so that he could break the stranglehold of the corrupt nexus of politicians and financiers who continued to enjoy the interest payments on the National Debt at the expense of the labouring poor. Cobbett wanted to slash payments on the debt, relieve the poor of unnecessary taxes, and thereby bring their standard of living back to what they had once enjoyed. He was faced, however, with a still obdurate, unreformed parliament, which was far from accepting his prescriptions for political and economic reform. In the meantime, a return to smallholding offered a way out of an entrenched system which condemned the labouring poor to a miserable existence.

There was no doubt, from its immediate popularity, that Cobbett's message met with a favourable response, not only from the readers Cobbett had aimed at with his cheap 'twopenny tracts', but also sections of the upper classes who recognised the widespread distress and hardships in post-war England. Cobbett was not alone in seeking to redress the position of the rural labourer. Others, like the radical Thomas Spence sought a wholesale redistribution of land to produce a more egalitarian system of landholding. Ideas of the land as the 'People's Farm' was the subject of philanthropic

⁵ *Cottage Economy*, paragraph 5.

musings and active experimentation on both sides of the Atlantic during the course of the 19th century, with various schemes for common ownership attracting both interest and investment.⁶ Cobbett, a firm believer in private property, remained at one level more conservative, seeking not a wholesale revolution in landownership, but simply enough land for the labourer to make a secure and happy life for himself and his family. But the relative modesty of Cobbett's proposals was to ensure their enduring legacy.

What Cobbett could not know was that the option for Great Britain to remain a primarily agricultural country was already being overtaken by the progress of industry and urbanisation: the country was inexorably moving towards becoming a predominantly industrial society. As it did so, however, the lure of an alternative remained attractive, particularly when the dislocation of the industrial economy faced people with the reality of the trap that could result from a downturn in trade or the economic cycle - for populations now dependent on the demand for the products they produced in their workshops or factories. These dilemmas were brought home starkly in the so-called 'hungry forties', the decade following Cobbett's death in 1835, when high prices and a downturn in the trade cycle exposed thousands of factory workers to their helplessness in the face of forces over which they had no control. One reaction by the Chartists, advocates of Cobbett's long-cherished but unrealised plans for radical parliamentary reform, who were being blocked in their political objectives, was the Chartist Land Plan.⁷ Thousands of factory hands and domestic craftsmen such as handloom weavers, subscribed to a scheme to purchase estates in southern England and farm them on a co-operative basis. Several were set up and their buildings are still evident; and though the scheme fell into financial ruin, it represented a powerful example of the continued hold that the rural dream had for many people in industrial Britain. It did not fade, and even in the late nineteenth century, when the self-confident Victorian economy was faced with further difficulties as foreign

⁶ See M. Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775-1840*, Oxford, 1988.

⁷ See A. Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company*, London, 1970.

competition was beginning to have its effects, some sections of the Liberal Party, with its roots in the reforming tradition, reacted to the onset of periods of unemployment and an increasing awareness of the slum conditions in which many urban workers lived, by voicing the need for a return to smallholding to relieve the pressures. The prominent Liberal leader Joseph Chamberlain in his 'Unauthorized Programme' of 1885, proposed to give local authorities greater powers to purchase land compulsorily in order to let out allotments and smallholdings. Bodies such as the English Land Restoration League and the Land Nationalization League sustained the concept of life on the land as an alternative to an urban existence. An Allotments and Smallholdings Association, formed in 1884, put pressure upon Parliament and local authorities to realise something of the Cobbettian ideas, producing the 1887 Allotments Act. Protagonists such as Jesse Collings MP was the first to popularise the phrase 'three acres and a cow' as the objective of those who sought a return to the land for the rural worker.⁸ More generous in its provisions than Cobbett's mere quarter of an acre, it chimed with the powerful 'Land Question' in pre-1914 England in which radical Liberal and socialist attacks upon large landowners, attempts to protect the rights of exiting crofters and small proprietors, and a resurgence of interest in resettlement schemes attracted widespread support.⁹

The issue was not confined to one part of the political spectrum: concerns about the health of the nation, 'national efficiency', the poor health of urban recruits to the Boer War and squalid living conditions among the remaining rural workers in the countryside, led many to question whether healthier alternatives existed. Cobbett's prescriptions received a fresh boost with new editions of *Cottage Economy* in 1916 and 1926, with introductions by the popular essayist and Roman Catholic, G.K. Chesterton. 'Farm colonies', both at home and abroad, were also a prescription of the founder of the Salvation Army, General William Booth, for the

⁸ J. Burchard, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change since 1800*, London, 2002, pp. 79-84.

⁹ See P. Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914*, Woodbridge, 2008.

urban squalor from which he sought both spiritual and practical escape.¹⁰

Although the practical results were small, a few hundred acres allocated to allotments and a scatter of farm settlements, the idea of smallholding survived into the interwar years, both in the form of government-sponsored resettlement schemes for ex-soldiers after the Great War, and, in the 1930s, as a viable alternative to the dole queues for the unemployed, with smallholdings provided by philanthropic bodies such as the Pilgrim Trust.¹¹ But a more pervasive influence of Cobbett's smallholding ideas than the wholesale resettlement of workers was the increasingly entrenched idea that the municipal housing being provided from before the Great War should be modelled with large gardens and sometimes with the additional availability of allotments for those who wanted them: the 'Garden City' and 'Garden suburb' idea of good quality housing set at a low density with large gardens and open space. The idea had a huge influence on the first model estates, such as Bournville, Port Sunlight and the first London County Council estates at Old Oak in East Acton and the much larger Becontree estate completed after the Great War.¹² For the next half century, well into the 1960s, 'council houses' were being built to patterns which provided front and rear gardens, and often additional side gardens for end-of-terrace properties, under the terms of the Tudor Walters Report of 1918, which accepted the idea of an English home as having to have large gardens for the health and wellbeing of the inhabitants. Even in reduced circumstances after the Second World War, the majority of new 'council houses' until the 1970s were not flats or tower blocks, but watered-down versions of a 'cottage home' in which a large garden was available for cultivation or recreation. As late as the 1960s, new council estates were being built with no provision for garages, but with gardens front and

¹⁰ W. Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, London, 1890. The fold-out frontispiece illustrates both domestic and foreign farm colonies.

¹¹ See The Pilgrim Trust, *Men Without Work*. London, 1938; Burchard, *Paradise Lost*. pp. 141-9.

¹² See C. and R. Bell, *City Fathers: The Early History of Town Planning in Britain*, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 270-86 on Bournville and Port Sunlight; pp. 282-3 commenting on the latter's provision of large gardens and Lord Lever's 'obsession' with gardening. On the L.C.C. see J. Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*, London, 2019, pp. 24-9, 33-7.

back: the British worker was expected to be a gardener, not necessarily a motorist.

Moreover, even as the world of TV, cars, and consumer goods overtook the ideals of town planners and public prophets, a new generation revived the notion of a return to the land, or at least being as self-sufficient as modern life permitted. Promoted by TV series like *The Good Life*, smallholding and self-sufficiency was again fashionable by the 1970s, from hippie communes to suburban householders reading John Seymour's *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency*, a bestselling handbook of 1976 by a veteran smallholder. In *Cottage Economy* Cobbett had let a genie out of a bottle: a recipe for the difficult times he lived through was to become an insistent and regular theme in the national psyche - a people who had 'lost' their rural roots, but were constantly trying to recapture them in garden, allotment or smallholding. Cobbett has much to do with it.

Part 2

FROM *RURAL RIDES* TO *COTTAGE ECONOMY*

Dr James Grande

Cottage Economy has long existed in the shadow of Cobbett's *Rural Rides*. It is easy to see why *Rural Rides* has retained greater appeal: its vivid descriptions of the English countryside and the window it offers onto the social history of the period, held together through the organising framework of the tour, is a compelling combination. It is also one that has shaped our image of Cobbett as, in the words of the critic John Barrell, 'an habitually *itinerant* man', always out on the road and reporting on what he finds.¹³ By contrast, *Cottage Economy* (1821-2) confines itself to the local and intensely practical pursuit of self-sufficiency, presenting itself as an authoritative source of 'information relative to the brewing of BEER, making of BREAD, keeping of COWS, PIGS, BEES, EWES, GOATS, POULTRY AND RABBITS, and relative to other matters deemed useful in the

¹³ John Barrell, 'Clare, Cobbett and the Changing Landscape', in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Blake to Byron*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 237.

conducting of the Affairs of a Labourer's Family'.¹⁴ This apparently modest work might be seen, however, as just as characteristic of Cobbett's work in the 1820s as the more celebrated *Rural Rides*, and these two books are in fact closely related, forming part of a common political project. Not content to simply map the post-war countryside and record the deleterious changes to the lives of farmers and agricultural labourers, Cobbett produced an instruction manual for his readers to find their own redress, taking his political analysis down to the level of the cottage. His advice in *Cottage Economy* always has a political aim in view, showing his readers how they could achieve a form of self-sufficiency by baking their own bread, brewing their own beer, reducing their wants, and (particularly important, this) avoiding taxed goods. For Cobbett, independence was itself a political virtue: as he wrote a few years later in *Advice to Young Men* (1829), 'The great source of independence, the French express in a precept of three words, "*Vivre de peu*", which I have always very much admired. "*To live upon little*" is the great security against slavery'.¹⁵ And as John Stevenson has shown, the spirit of *Cottage Economy* can be seen in many later attempts to return to the rural ideal, from Feargus O'Connor's Chartist Land Plan in the second half of the 1840s, the 'Hungry Forties', which aimed to resettle factory workers on smallholdings, to the back-to-the-land movements of the twentieth century and beyond.

Cobbett elaborated on this theme of independence in the introduction to *Cottage Economy*:

To live well, to enjoy all things that make life pleasant, is the right of every man who constantly uses his strength judiciously and lawfully. It is to blaspheme God to suppose that he created men to be miserable, to hunger, thirst, and perish with cold, in the midst of that abundance which is the fruit of their own labour. Instead, therefore, of applauding 'happy poverty', which applause is so much the fashion of the present day, I despise the man that is *poor* and *contented*; for such content is a certain

¹⁴ William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy* (London, 1822), title page.

¹⁵ William Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men* (London, 1829), paragraph 17.

proof of a base disposition, a disposition which is the enemy of all industry, all exertion, all love of independence.¹⁶

In *Cottage Economy*, producing your own food and abstaining from taxed items such as tea become practical forms of opposition to a corrupt system. Cobbett's advocacy of 'cottage economy' is in dialogue and pointed opposition to the emerging science of political economy, which Cobbett associates above all with Thomas Malthus's theory of population and the debate on poor law reform which in the 1830s would produce the New Poor Law and the workhouse system. So there was a politics and also a history to Cobbett's advice on home brewing: as Robert Poole observes, contemporary '[p]arallels were drawn with the American colonists' boycott of taxed goods fifty years before', as, in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre, radicals strenuously avoided excisable goods such as tea and commercially produced beer, sticking instead to water at their meetings and dinners.¹⁷

Cobbett's vision was of a restoration of what he insisted had been the state of things in the English countryside during his childhood, before political economy, paper money and the long and costly wars with revolutionary and Napoleonic France. In his contribution to the collection of essays that came out of the 250th Anniversary Colloquium, the sociologist Craig Calhoun declared that, 'Cobbett might never have been a radical (in the sense of critically challenging what was going on around him) were not the industrial revolution and liberal economics upsetting village life and what he saw as time-honoured principles of economic independence ... Though radical, Cobbett wanted to preserve traditions he thought not just valuable but definitive of English liberty ... His vision was of a society in which those who produced food would always have enough of it to eat.'¹⁸ With these concerns at the forefront of his political agenda, we can see *Cottage Economy* and *Rural Rides* as two sides of the same coin, for all their difference in form and approach. Both works were begun

¹⁶ Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, paragraph 5.

¹⁷ Robert Poole, 'The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Georgian England', *Past & Present*, 192 (2006), 109-53 (p. 139).

¹⁸ Craig Calhoun, 'Beyond Left and Right: A Cobbett for Our Times', in *William Cobbett, Romanticism and the Enlightenment: Contexts and Legacy*, ed. James Grande and John Stevenson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015), p. 160.

in the latter half of 1821 and published serially over the next few years: the first sixpenny number of *Cottage Economy* was issued in August 1821, while the first of what would become the ‘rural rides’ appeared in the *Political Register* in November of that year.

One of the purposes of Cobbett’s rides was to compare his vision of self-sufficiency set out in *Cottage Economy* with the existing reality. Riding through Sussex, Cobbett is pleased to observe a labourer ‘sitting under the shelter of a hedge at breakfast’ with ‘a good lump of household *bread* and not a very small piece of *bacon*’. Cobbett calls out,

‘You do get some *bacon* then?’ ‘Oh, yes! Sir,’ said he, and with an emphasis and a swag of the head which seemed to say, ‘We *must* and *will* have *that*.’ I saw, and with great delight, a pig at almost every labourer’s house. The houses are good and warm; and the gardens some of the very best that I have seen in England.¹⁹

Elsewhere he discovers proof of the reach of *Cottage Economy* and its practical effects; for instance, in Reigate,

I was going, to-day, by the side of a plat of ground, where there was a very fine flock of *turkeys*. I stopped to admire them, and observed to the owner how fine they were, when he answered, ‘We owe them entirely *to you*, Sir; for, we never raised one till we read your COTTAGE ECONOMY.’ I then told him, that we had, this year, raised two broods at Kensington, one black and one white, one of *nine* and one of *eight*[.] (185)

We might wonder how at moments like this Cobbett is recognised by people he has never met, in a period pre-dating the widespread visual transmission of celebrity: do we believe that this man instantly recognises this passing stranger to be the author of *Cottage Economy*? Elsewhere, Cobbett is not immediately recognised but nonetheless discovers evidence that his book is being read, finding his work, in the critic James Mulvihill’s phrase, ‘cited in the countryside itself’.²⁰

¹⁹ William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* ed. Ian Dyck (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 89-90. Subsequent references to this edition will be given within parentheses in the main text.

²⁰ James Mulvihill, ‘The Medium of Landscape in Cobbett’s Rural Rides’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 33.4 (1993), 825-40 (p. 830).

And this is particularly true of Cobbett's aim to popularise the domestic manufacture of straw hats and bonnets, previously imported from Italy, advice on which was included from the 1823 edition. In a roadside cottage in Kent, he meets a man who is unable to work in the fields plaiting straw, according to the instructions of '*a little book that had been made by Mr Cobbett*'. Cobbett 'told him that I was the man, and should like to see some of his work', and on further inquiry discovers that, 'some ladies in the neighbourhood had got him the book, and his family had got him the grass', these various activities becoming part of a common endeavour that Cobbett is part of (142-3). This shared activity binds Cobbett and his readers together within the rural economy, a process he describes in quasi-miraculous terms: in the village of Durley in Hampshire, which Cobbett describes as 'one of the most obscure villages in this whole kingdom' he finds girls plaiting straw in the way described in *Cottage Economy* and reflects, 'It is I, who, without knowing them, without ever having seen them, without even now knowing their names, have given the means of good living to a family who were before half-starved' (98-9). We might detect, as so often with Cobbett, a little exaggeration here and a canny sense for self-promotion. When he finds a toll-keeper in Sussex whose husband is making a straw hat for harvest, he advises her on how to get better straw and cut the grass, and concludes that '[t]his woman ought to have my *Cottage Economy*', offering to give her a copy of the work for free (92).

Cottage Economy and *Rural Rides* are, then, texts in close dialogue, as Cobbett gives advice on rural self-sufficiency as an alternative to wage labour, the factory system and the taxation economy and then looks for evidence that his ideas are taking root and being put into practice in the English countryside. This was, though, just one facet of Cobbett's political project in the 1820s and I want to briefly turn away from *Cottage Economy* to think about where Cobbett was exactly two hundred years ago, in January 1823, to bring in this wider context. While Cobbett's address in *Cottage Economy* was 'to the labouring classes of this kingdom', in January 1823 Cobbett was addressing a very different audience, far from Farnham, away from Surrey, Hampshire and what we usually think of as 'Cobbett Country', speaking to an audience of farmers and freeholders at St

Andrew's Hall in Norwich. On 3 January 1823, Cobbett addressed a county meeting attended by 7,000 people, the most ever assembled at such a meeting in Norfolk, which had been called by the large Whig landowners, chief among them Thomas Coke of Holkham, known as the 'greatest commoner in England', to petition parliament for relief from the hardships that were then being experienced by farmers. Cobbett effectively ambushed the meeting and, in place of the mild petition prepared by Coke and others, carried a much more radical petition, outlining a far-reaching programme of reform including the sale of church property and crown lands to pay off the national debt, the reduction of the standing army, abolition of pensions and sinecures and repeal of taxes on malt, hops, leather, soap and candles.²¹ Cobbett's parallel career as an orator, established through his 'rustic harangues' and presence at county meetings, is an aspect of his work that often receives less attention than his work as a writer, but it is no less crucial to understanding what Cobbett was attempting to achieve in the 1820s. With his intervention at the Norfolk meeting, Cobbett was persuading farmers to make common cause with agricultural labourers, as part of a united rural alliance, and agitate for reform.

This was a programme that Cobbett stuck to. As late as 1831, facing prosecution once again for his writings on the Captain Swing riots, and contemplating the prospect of a reformed parliament, Cobbett inserted 'for the fifth or sixth time in the *Register*' the 'NORFOLK PETITION agreed to in Saint Andrew's Hall at Norwich, on the 3d of January 1823', and reflected that,

Upon reading it again now, I see not one single word to alter. My opinion is, that a reformed parliament will pass acts agreeably to the tenor and the prayers of this petition ... It is just that this measure should be adopted; and it appears to me the only possible means of settling, in a peaceable manner, the troubled affairs of this country. If a reformed parliament should have enough of the old aristocratical leaven in it to induce it to treat the principles and propositions of this petition with scorn,

²¹ See George Spater, *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 419-21.

my opinion is, that the troubles of the country, so far from ceasing, will go on becoming greater and greater.²²

The moment of reform had finally arrived, after a period in which Cobbett's idea of an alliance reaching from the cottage to the great farmers had come under intense pressure. Soon after the Norfolk petition was carried, and similar resolutions carried at other county meetings, the price of wheat rose, inflation came down, and the immediate difficulties for farmers receded. The condition of the labourers, however, remained critical throughout the 1820s and we can place the success of *Cottage Economy* in his context: there was a genuine appetite for the kind of advice on self-sufficiency that Cobbett was offering. By 1828, *Cottage Economy* had sold almost 50,000 copies at two shillings and sixpence, and doubtless reached a much larger audience through the practices of part publication, reading aloud and sharing copies.

Although addressed to rural labourers, *Cottage Economy* was taken up by readers of all classes: for instance, Jane Welsh Carlyle writes in a letter of being unable to cook when she married Thomas Carlyle and they moved to a remote estate in Dumfries and Galloway: 'So I sent for Cobbett's "Cottage Economy", and fell to work on a loaf of bread.'²³ It had a long afterlife through the nineteenth century, kept in print by Cobbett's children and supplemented in 1835, the year of Cobbett's death, by his eldest daughter Anne's *The English Housekeeper: or, Manual of Domestic Management*, which itself was in its sixth edition by 1851. We might see Anne's *The English Housekeeper* as the link between Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* and the world of Mrs Beeton and Victorian cuisine. Although Anne insists that 'as a mere Cookery-Book, mine must submit to be placed in a lower rank than some others; because it brings to light no discoveries in the art called *gastronomic*, and it is not designed to favour epicurism', *The English Housekeeper* is certainly aimed at a higher class of reader, the lady with servants, and the somewhat austere diet

²² 'To the Readers of the Register. The Prosecution', *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 14 May 1831.

²³ Jane Welsh Carlyle to Mary Smith, 5 Cheyne Row, Chelsea, 11 January 1857, *The Carlyle Letters Online* <https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/32/lt-18570111-JWC-MS-01>.

of *Cottage Economy* is left far behind.²⁴ Anne's breakfast menu includes lobster salad, potted salmon and wine jelly; while what she describes as a five-course 'fashionable dinner for sixteen or eighteen persons' includes turtle soup, roasted pheasants or grouse, bologna sausages with parmesan, preserved pineapple and a pyramid of sweetmeats.²⁵ We have come a long way from her father's prescribed diet of bacon, bread and beer.

Cottage Economy remained in print into the twentieth century. A preface by G. K. Chesterton was initially added in a 1916 reprint and then included in the 1926 Peter Davies edition and the 1979 Oxford University Press edition. Chesterton claimed that,

William Cobbett is the noblest English example of the noble calling of the agitator. ... What Cobbett attempted to revive ... was really medieval England. For the more immediate purpose of politics, it was rural England. But it was not a Byronic repose in a rural barbarism; it was a quite business-like belief in the possibility, or rather the necessity, of a rural civilisation. He believed that agricultural labour could pay; he even entertained the Quixotic fancy that it might pay the agricultural labourer ... What distinguishes Cobbett from most rural idealists, such as Ruskin, is that he was a realist as well ... For a hundred years after Cobbett's forlorn hope we are confronted again by Cobbett's question. We must go back to freedom or forward to slavery.²⁶

If this is what Chesterton made of *Cottage Economy* a century on, how does this book speak to us today? We might conclude it does so most strongly in terms of what we can think of as Cobbett the proto-environmentalist. This is a connection that Raymond Williams was among the first to make, suggesting, with great prescience in his 1983 book on Cobbett – so this is really quite early in the modern environmental movement – that 'what is now called ecology has a friend in Cobbett'.²⁷ And this topic has been taken up more recently,

²⁴ Anne Cobbett, *The English Housekeeper: or, Manual of Domestic Management* (London, 1835), x.

²⁵ Anne Cobbett, *The English Housekeeper*, pp. 54-8.

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, 'Preface' to William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy* (London: Peter Davies, 1926), vii-x.

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Cobbett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 76.

for example, in a 2011 article in the *Guardian*, titled ‘William Cobbett: a Green guru?’, and in Katey Castellano’s recent account of what she terms Cobbett’s ‘food politics’.²⁸ As Castellano writes, ‘Cobbett prophetically analyses the political economy of food with the goal of reducing the public’s dependency on a global agricultural network whose distribution policies neglect the poor.’²⁹ Cobbett’s environmentalism is of a resolutely practical kind, and we might take him as an early proponent of staying local, growing your own, and reducing your food miles. Indeed, Cobbett perhaps speaks most directly to students and readers today not as a campaigner for parliamentary reform or commentator on the Napoleonic Wars but as an ecological writer, who instinctively resisted the claim that industrialisation represented progress and that other forms of knowledge and ways of life were no longer valid.

²⁸ Jonathan Kent, ‘William Cobbett: a Green Guru?’, *Guardian*, 12 April 2011
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/apr/12/william-cobbett-greens>.

²⁹ Katey Castellano, *The Ecology of British Romantic Conservatism, 1790-1837* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 11.