



## Jacob Baker

Jacob Baker was an agricultural labourer who lived with his family at Hodson, near Swindon. As was the situation with many labourers at the time, he did not have regular all-year-round work and had a difficult time keeping his family fed, especially 1850-1851, when the cost of corn fell, following the Government policy of Free Trade. He taught himself to read and write and the following two articulate letters were published in the local press at the time.

The 1841 census records the family at Hodson, Chiseldon:-

Jacob Baker, 32, Charlotte Baker, 33, and their children, Timothy, 13, Mary, 11, Frederick, 9, Ann, 7, James, 3, and Job, 8 months.

In the 1851 census at Hodson Street, Chiseldon we find:-

Jacob Baker, 41, agricultural labourer, Charlotte, agricultural labourer, 42, and their children, Timothy, 22, agricultural labourer, James, 13, agricultural labourer, Job, 10, scholar, Ellen, 8, and William 6.

## Swindon Protection Meeting A POOR MAN'S SPEECH

The following Speech, Jacob Baker, a poor labourer of Hodson, near Swindon, intended to deliver at the Protection meeting last week, but time would not permit. The poor man has therefore sent it to us to publish:

Gentlemen and Brother Labourers.

We are met here today, as I understand, to talk about Free Trade and our grievances. I am a poor labouring man, aged 40, with a wife and 9 children. I have a cottage of my own, but am not worth a shilling at this time. I job about and get work where I can, and being what is called a very handy fellow, I have at present kept out of the poor-house, but have had a hard matter to do so; and you, gentlemen, must know that our case is very bad, and that we have not near victuals enough. How would you like to sit down with your wife and young children 4 days in the week to not half bread and potatoes enough, and the other 3 days upon not half enough boiled Swedes, but with little fire to cook them with?

It is true we have got a poor-house; but who amongst you would like to be parted from his wife and children and to leave his home when there is no occasion for it? We have the same feeling for our little children as you have. Thousands would rather rob, or starve, than go into the house. I am no politician, gentlemen; I can read but little, and I learnt myself to write a little lately; and as I have heard so much talk about Free-trade of late, and read a speech or two in the papers, I am able to remember something of what I have read and heard, having a pretty good memory and a clear head by drinking plenty of water.

Now it appears to me, gentlemen, that you have been looking through a telescope for a long time - you have been looking too far off, much too far - you have been trying to benefit the foreigners, to the injury of we poor labourers, throwing a way of lot of money into the foreigners' pockets which they never asked for, and which money you want very bad yourselves; and spending money by millions in a shameful manner, at the same time over head and ears in debt, and on the brink of a general bankruptcy. I am no politician or man at figures, but have heard about millions; and I hear you are spending millions of money building a fine House of Parliament, at the same time have got a very good house already, too good for some that go there. Then I hear that you have spent millions of money in trying to stop the slave trade, and done more harm than good after all.

Now, gentlemen, I am for Queen, lords, and Commons. But look at our expensive Government. Who pays the 8 millions per annum for the Navy, and the 7½ millions for an Army? Think of sixty-three thousand pounds for a Royal household.

Hundreds of our Judges, Consuls and pensioners are receiving greater incomes than the President of the United States. At this time 23 thousand pensioners are receiving more than that sum. Why should a British Government require 920 thousand per annum, whilst an American Government cost but sixteen thousand per annum? No wonder we clamour for cheap bread.

Then I hear that they have used our Colonies so bad by this Free-trade measure, &c., that they are beginning to be independent, and perhaps it will require more soldiers there to keep them quiet than we can spare; and then if this great Mr. Cobden should turn the brains of Government once more and get the upper hand, how can you expect we poor, half-starved labourers to protect your property and persons? Lay the telescope aside, and visit us and see how we poor labourers live; find us some work at a living price - let us have some potatoe land - sell us some things at Free-trade prices - don't make us poor labourers pay poor rates - don't drive us into the house; - and then, if this said Cobden should stir up a revolution, you may rely upon it we shall very quickly put it down.

If Government chose to make you farmers build these poor-houses, you aren't obliged to fill them. We only want a place for a few old people and orphans, who have not friend to live with. Why don't you make a voluntary rate in the parish in the winter, and instead of throwing away millions in this way, if you don't want our services in the winter - instead of keeping a family in the house at 30s a week, give us a trifle to keep body and soul together, and we will try and make a shift for a few weeks when you don't want us. Don't confuse your minds about the old law. If a man has a pair of shoes which pinch his feet, he does not continue to wear them.

Now, gentlemen, I understand that wheat can be sent into this country even now at 17s 6d a sack, and your friend Mr. Benett and others only recommend a small duty, say 5s, which will bring present prices to £1 a sack; consequently, I am told, rents are to be lowered. I don't say rents should not be lowered; but what millions will be lost by so doing. What is to become of the shopkeepers, the mechanics, the turned-off servants, the charities, the old people? Our institutions will be shaken to the foundations. Now, gentlemen, if we are to have these bad times, of course, ALL these great men's salaries must be reduced half, at least, directly - our ambassadors, &c., and ALL gifts and appointments under Government. Why should they roll in luxuries, at our expence, and we starve?

Gentlemen, you must have a small fixed duty. This won't do the farmers much good, or the manufacturers any harm; but it will bring a large sum to Government, and enable them to take off some of the taxes, beginning at the Malt Tax, abolishing which will benefit the manufacturer, the mechanic, the labourer, the farmer, and the landowner; for I suppose we all prefer beer to that poisonous stuff, tea and cold water. Let us poor labourers have some table beer, and then we shall be able to fight your cause and tackle Cobden, when he comes, or anyone else that dare presume to take away your rights. Now, gentlemen, I have heard talk of Mr. Peel, and Mr. Russell, who you thought very clever men; but how could they be clever or honest men if they have managed our affairs so bad? - They ought never to have been in Parliament at all. We ought to have sound, honest, upright men, such men as young Mr. Goddard, our member - men whose fathers are good men. We don't want these clever fellows; they do more harm than good at home and abroad.

Now, my friends at the Station, are you for Free-trade or Protection, or are you, like most people, rather puzzled to know what to be? We must all mind the fable of the dog going over the bridge, that in catching after the shadow we don't lose what we have got already. Which would you like to see rolled down Swindon street, penny loaves or sovereigns? If you say penny loaves, then you can't have the sovereigns; if you say sovereigns, then you will have the money to buy the loaves and some cheese also. I am told that the landowners, farmers, and shopkeepers won't have any money in their pockets; and if this should be the case, who is to ride in your fine trains? You may hammer away if you like, and make some more, and ride in them yourselves for exercise and change of air. Man goeth forth to his labour; in the sweat of his brow he is to eat his bread; he cannot alter this; he cannot alter the work of God; either you believe this, or you don't believe the Bible. But as I have not half victuals enough, I am come here to know how I can get some more.

Now, gentlemen, a word to you landowners, monied men, and stewards. Let me intreat you to spend all the money you possibly can in improving your estates, &c., particularly in cases where by laying out shilling you can get two by it, and in giving us work and bettering our condition, secure our hearts and good opinions; and then when Cobden and his men come amongst us, we shall still uphold your rights. If the labourers can't be employed now, what will your sons do shortly, when the people are as thick again?

Now, gentlemen, I am a poor labourer out of work, and with no prospect of any constant work until mowing, and shall be glad if any of you gentlemen can give me and my son a month or two's work. I can have a good character from my various masters, and you won't repent giving me a job. I am what is called a hedger and ditcher and copse cutter, but I can plough, sow, reap, thrash and mow, with any man. I am also a rough carpenter, and can make ladders, gates, and common buildings; I can kill and cut up pigs, sink wells, and make ponds; I can do your gardens, and have done a deal of tree-planting and quick mounds; I mend my children's shoes and make my own clothes, and occasionally earn sixpence by drawing teeth. Now, gentlemen, is this not a shame that I should be out of work and in this distress? And I defy any man to bring any charge against me for dishonesty, drunkenness, or idleness.

#### **Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 14 February 1850**

On the 29th June of 1851, Jacob Baker and his family emigrated to South Australia, on the "Navarino" and arrived at Port Adelaide, South Australia, 25th Sept 1851. Jacob wrote back this letter to his friends and neighbours in 1852.

Hodson Cottage, Swindon, 15th July 1852

Dear Sir

Will you be so good, "the first opportunity", to insert in your Gazette a letter received from Jacob Baker, aged 42, who left this village, with his wife and 9 children!! "youngest 6 weeks, eldest 21 years," on 16th June, 1851, for Australia.

This is the same Jacob Baker, who was fully prepared to make a protection speech at Swindon, when Mr. Young, &c. &c. attended on the 6th of Feb, 1850, and whose intended speech was inserted in your paper soon after. Jacob is a capital labourer - worked for me the last 10 years, principally in the winter as woodman. He can plough, sow, reap, and mow - a capital woodman, very handy in the garden, house and stable; can kill pigs; is a useful carpenter and mason, good tooth drawer, makes his own clothes, &c. &c.; has a wonderful memory, and is a fine active handsome fellow, full of verve, capital constitution; went out under the auspices of the Wilts Emigration society, assisted by some gentlemen in this parish. He talked often about going for years before he went, and had a very hard matter to persuade his wife to start.

Believe me to continue, dear Sir,  
yours faithfully,  
THOMAS DYKE.

Lyndoch Valley, February 15, 1852.

Dear friends and naibers.

This comes with all our kind love to you, hoping to find you all in good health, as it leaves us at present, than God for it. We had a very good passage, and all of us got ovr quit safe in 13 weeks. We had two deaths and one birth in the ship. We landed at port Adelhed, 8 miles form the town, and we stoped there one week. We went to work in a gentelman's garden: Timothy and Fred and me for 1 shiling per day. Mary entered into a verey good serves, in a gentleman's hous, on the forst day we got there, at 15 pounds per year, and then a farmer came out of the bush and hired us, Jacob 10, Timothy 9, Fred 7, and James 5 shilins per week, with raishens, which is 40 pounds of flour, 40 doto of meet, beef or mutton, and 1 pound of tea and 4 pounds of sugger, with hous rent and firien free, so we have no miller or bucher for to pay. Ann can get 1 shilen a day and her grob with her nidel (*needle*): we have hired ourselves for a grat deel to little money. But we plesed master verey much in the moing, so he give Tim and me a very nice cow and calf over our wages: he had not got a coateg large anofe for us, so he found me the timber, and sent 2 men for to deg some stones and paid me for bilding the house. Day men get 12 shilins per week and raishens.

I could not think how it was for Iarbren men to get a farm, but now I can see how it is. I can save money anof in one week for to by one arker of land; so, if please God we have got our health, by the time this year is out I think of getting a little land: if I do not by some, I can rent some at 5s per arker, and by it for 1 pound doto. I am about taking 20 arkers of land. I have to thank God for the means wich brough us out hear. Plase for to tel Mr. Crowdy, Mr. John Brown, Mr. Meyrick, Mr. Dyke, that I will rite to them after a wile.

Master is verey well pleased with the boys, and have promied for to give Tim and Fred a young ox a pice after horuvest. If George Robson or aney one else ould like for to com they can do well and the longer the famley the better they can do. All my children can make thiear own forting if I should di to-morro. Mary and Ann have got the refues of 2 young farmers know, and there is another farmer and his wif who have got a farm of thiear own and ondley one daughter, and this daughter and her mother is verey much strock over our Fred, and all they have got is for the daughter. This is the contrey, my boys.

I have boate me a dog for shutting; Tim and me can take our gunes and dog, and go out and shut all we can without aney liencenes: we have pleanty of buteful parets and wild turckes, and duckes and other burds. Our master is a man of a grat deal of bieness, and is out for 3 or 4 days at a time; and I have to look after all the men, and the cear of all the cattel when he is out from home.

I sent out a letter and found my brother Tim about 5?0 miles from us, and there is a great deel of gold digin goin on there, and master and Tim is goin for to make a trial: some have been and have got 100 pounds a week for 6 or 7 weeks altogether, and praps we shall get a prise. I have seen Elen and Luzea and John Tucker, and they are all weel. Timothy ould like for Robert Bizely and Richard Osman, and John, or aney one else to com; they can get 12 shilins per week in to house. Poor pipel in Hodson do not know what good living is. We have got a goint of fresh meet on our table everey day, and little Bill sayes I want to give Tom Weston some. Thomas Archer can do well if he like to come.

Crismus Day is about the midel of harvest with us. We do not take out a beet of bread and chees into the feeld with us, but all com home to a good hot diner everey day. Barley mouing is 4s per arker and raishens, and hay mouing doto, and weat ripeng 12 per arker and raishens. Best weat, 4 shilins per bushel; barley, 2s per bushel. Butter, 9 pence per pound; best beef and mutton, 2 ½ d. per pound; a good fat sheep for 6s. Suger, 2 pence per pound; tea, 2s a pound; we do not put tea in the pot with a tea-spouan, but with the hand. Job is in to house, 3s per week.

Spiritual afaiers. When I forst com hear, the pipel did not go to Church or Chapel, and I asked them the rasen why they did not go. - It is 8 miles there and 8 back; so I told them we ould have chapel under that lorg tree next Sunday. So I went and preached Christ to them the next Lord's day, from this text: Awake to righteousness, and sin not, for some have not the knowledge of God. And I sun got a house for to

preach in; so the pipel com and hear the word with gladness, and the cry is, com over and help us; and it is no small task for me to meet the seam congregation every Sunday. So I say, Bless God, our meetings have not been in vain.

So no mor at present, from your old frend,

JACOB BAKER

Please for to tel our gentlemen I will send them som nusepapers.

Direct to me, Jacob Baker, Lyndoch Valey, near Goaler Sound, Fort Adelhed, South Austrilea.”

**Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 22 July 1852**