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COMBINATION AND CONTROL

Cultural politics in the management of friendly societies in nineteenth-century Essex and Suffolk[1]

D. J. Appleby

The records concerning nineteenth-century friendly societies contain such an immense volume of detailed and often intimate information that the unsuspecting researcher could easily be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of evidence. This is particularly true of Essex, where there were at least 353 societies with almost 15,000 members by 1803.[2] These local friendly societies had a far-reaching cultural and social significance in the region over the course of the following century. The nature of their influence, particularly the question as to whether these mutual institutions were independent combinations of working men formed for financial security and personal betterment, or whether they were instruments through which the clergy and landowners could exercise closer social control, is best explored by investigating the identity and motivation of the people who created and managed them.

Friendly societies appear in the index of practically every history of working-class society, but, apart from Gosden's *Friendly Societies in England*, the entries are often little more than footnotes to the struggles of more obviously heroic working-class activists.[3] As a result, the current historiography of friendly societies is rather fragmented. E. P. Thompson has observed that, unlike Radicalism or Chartism, early nineteenth-century friendly societies had 'almost no middle-class membership'.[4] This enables him to credit these societies with fostering the growth of 'independent working-class culture and institutions', and by extension the growth of working-class consciousness.[5] At first glance, Thompson's findings might seem at odds with Arthur Brown's observations that working men in Essex seem to have been in a minority within friendly societies affiliated to national orders such as the Manchester Unity of Odd Fellows.[6] Where the social historian might expect improvements in the standard of living to reduce dependency on such bodies, Dr. Brown observes instead that these improvements were 'reflected in the rapid increase in friendly society membership'.[7] Two points, therefore, require clarification: firstly, it is necessary to look more closely at the demography of membership and the social status of the individuals involved; secondly, it should be remembered that throughout *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson's writing infers that a distinction should be made between 'benefit' and 'friendly' societies. Although in the nineteenth-century the term 'friendly society' was frequently used as a generic for many types of self-help organisations, it is vital to differentiate between 'benefit' societies which, at least ostensibly, existed primarily to protect their members against want and 'friendly' societies (increasingly affiliated to national orders) whose function was manifestly less utilitarian. With due apology to the reader, it is a convention which is also followed in this article, as alternative descriptions such as 'self-help society' obfuscate more than they explicate. However, as one surveys the course of the nineteenth century it becomes increasingly evident that 'benefit' societies can usually

be defined as bodies of working men managed by middle-class landowners and professionals underwritten by gentrified patrons, whereas genuine 'friendly' societies usually appear to be those run and financed by their own membership.

Published research dealing specifically with local friendly societies has hitherto been infrequent, represented principally by John Appleby's surveys of Odd Fellowship in Essex and Suffolk, Pat Lewis' study of a selection of societies in north east Essex and a *Jublilee Souvenir* published by the Colchester District of the Ancient Order of Foresters in 1936.[8] Investigation into the actual machinery of control appears to have been restricted to Laura Swash's passing comments on the relationship between the managers and recipients of relief in *Horrid Lights*.[9] This exploration of the cultural politics of control in Essex and Suffolk societies, particularly within the affiliated orders, thus appears to enter largely uncharted territory. It will be argued that, despite frequent opposition and occasionally vitriolic criticism by gentry and clergy, the political authorities and their allies in the printed media came to accept that the affiliated friendly societies did not challenge, but rather consolidated the existing social order. The struggle for control of the hearts, minds and bodies of recruits thus tended to be internal, but, nevertheless, the 'argument of images' that this struggle produced throws up its own complex set of historical problems.[10] In order to resolve these questions it is necessary to begin with the political and cultural environment in which these societies functioned.

During the eighteenth century there was a sporadic and unregulated growth of 'tavern' clubs, whose ancestors were often seventeenth-century associations such as those formed by weavers in Colchester and Coggeshall.[11] Some of these organisations retained their 'operative' character, whilst others began to attract 'speculative' members unconnected with the original trades. Many of these latter organisations evolved through ritualistic traditions of mutuality into Masonic or quasi-Masonic lodges. It should be made clear, however, that Freemasonry is an entirely separate issue, and lies outside the remit of this present article.

Rose's Act of 1793, the first serious attempt to regulate the operation of friendly societies, initiated a programme of legislation which would culminate in the Friendly Societies Act of 1875. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the authorities were suspicious of 'combinations' of working men; friendly societies thus found themselves snared along with trade unions, republicans and nationalists by the provisions of the Combination Acts of 1799-1800.[12] After the repeal of these Acts in 1824, succeeding governments sought, in their own words, to encourage and promote self-help. In the course of this legislation, various types of self-help groups were identified, with the majority being rural benefit societies and friendly societies affiliated to national orders. Acceptance by the establishment was, predictably, on the terms and in the interests of the propertied classes, but it cannot be denied there was often a genuine philanthropic motivation behind the politics.

The textile industry of north Essex and south Suffolk had withered during the eighteenth century, leaving agriculture as the predominant sector of the regional economy. By 1793 rural landowners were the unchallenged rulers of the area, supported by the clergy (to whom they were often related by blood or marriage) and the majority of farmers. The regional establishment was thus 'overwhelmingly Tory and Anglican'.[13] As industrialists and retailers, even in towns as large as Colchester, depended largely upon

farmers' patronage the urban classes were thus almost as subservient to the landed interest as their country cousins.

Agricultural depression after 1815 led to falling wages, widespread unemployment and a steep rise in the poor rate. In addition to the cost of supporting the destitute, many respectable ratepayers believed that the old system of poor relief encouraged idleness and vice. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 supplemented the insecurity of unemployment and the stigma of charitable relief with the threat of institutionalised servitude in the parish union workhouse. Fear of the workhouse was intensified by the knowledge that inmates' bodies were frequently handed over to medical schools after death.[14] It is surely significant, therefore, that many early friendly societies emphasised their ability to provide for a decent Christian burial, and some clubs actually existed solely for this purpose. Such societies offered economically vulnerable workers not only a degree of protection against want, but a measure of control over their own bodies. The idea of self-help was equally attractive to landowners as it promised to reduce the burden of the poor rate whilst helping labourers to attain self-respect and security for their families. This philosophy was propagated by books such as *Advice to Agricultural Labourers and Others on Benefit Societies*;

> He, who lives by his own industry, and who provides an honest subsistence for himself and family by his own exertions, has a right to consider himself, and really is, as independent as any other person.[15]

Whether even the most deferential labourer believed such piety is arguable; 'freedom' as envisaged by the countryside's rulers was usually confined to freedom from claiming poor relief. Far from being considered fellow citizens, most rural labourers were looked upon as semi-educated brutes and treated accordingly. The fraternal message of Isaiah 41: 6, used repeatedly by many autonomous societies, was 'They helped every one his neighbour; and every one said to his brother, be of good courage'.[16] By contrast, the middle-class author of *Advice to Agricultural Labourers* preferred the stark doctrine of II Thessalonians, 'If any man will not work, neither shall he eat'.[17]

Up to 1800, friendly societies had been a feature of town rather than country life. As the years of rural depression accumulated, however, more and more village clubs began to emerge.[18] Many of these convivial tavern gatherings had a primitive benevolent system, usually a box into which communal funds were deposited against times of hardship. Such 'box clubs' were open to abuse. Dishonest or incompetent treasurers could often cause considerable financial problems in a community. Such disruptions attracted the attention of the local elite, particularly the clergy. No doubt mindful that several nonconformist benefit societies were now operating successfully in north Essex, and supposing unsupervised labourers inherently prone to debauchery and profligacy, many Anglican parsons made it their business to involve themselves in the labourers' clubs in their parish.[19] In 1820 some Ashdon labourers approached the newly-installed parson, the Reverend Benjamin Chapman, for a donation to their benefit club. Chapman was interested, but contributed rather more that the members had bargained for:

> On subsequently looking at their rules, I found them badly drawn up, and as badly observed. I endeavoured therefore to prevail on them to have them altered, but at that time without any success.[20]

Chapman proved subtle and persistent. He offered a further 'handsome donation' and enlisted seven wealthy honorary members. By 1824, when he wrote to the Clerk of the Peace regarding registration of the society, he had acquired sufficient political influence to 'summon' the members to meetings, and planned to abolish what he termed the two yearly 'abuses' - feasts regularly held by the members and financed out of club proceeds.[21] Legal difficulties eventually combined with the members' instinctive suspicion of magistrates to loosen Chapman's grip, although he seems to have persevered in his parish politics for some time. Such paternalism became ever more common as the Anglican clergy warmed to their task.

The clergy now took the lead in establishing local benefit societies, such as the Reverend W. G. Burgess who founded the Hundred of Tendring Provident Association. The founders used their contacts among local landowners, farmers and professionals to join as 'honorary members', in the process hoping to create an orderly and closely-related management structure. By 1877, the Aldham and United Parishes Insurance Society admitted as honorary members those who donated a lump sum of £10, or at least 10s per year to the Society's management fund.[22]

Labourers were recruited into a contributory financial plan, and listed in the annual reports as 'ordinary members'. Patrons were eagerly sought by benefit societies, particularly local Members of Parliament, and leading Essex politicians such as Charles Grey Round, J. G. Rebow, Sir George Smythe and P. O. Papillion were persuaded to lend their names to several societies. The names of other leading landowners appear at the top of annual reports with monotonous frequency. Apart from donations, the main function of these non-executive honorary members was to encourage the patronage of more of their own kind.[23]

Invariably in such societies the executive directors were chosen exclusively from the ranks of the honorary members. Although patrons could exert considerable influence, and ordinary members might occasionally protest, ultimately the directors controlled the benefit society. The list of honorary members in the Aldham & United Parishes Insurance Society (which was the largest and most influential society of its type in rural north Essex), shows a mixture of clergy, farmers and professionals. The clergy, who constituted roughly 25 per cent of the honorary members, consistently provided over 50 per cent of the AUP's directors.[24] Prominent amongst these clerics was the Reverend James Round, who was active in several benefit societies throughout Essex. Among the other directors, financial and medical professionals appear to have been disproportionately over-represented. Farmers appear to have been underrepresented, suggesting that the desire to manage society matters was not usually a motive for their participation.[25]

Every list of honorary members so far studied indicates both Liberal and Conservative participation.[26] The fact that Tories were in a clear majority among the honorary members of almost every society is surely a reflection of the local political landscape, rather than an indication of greater party-political commitment to the benefit system. Although separated by issues such as Free Trade and Reform, Liberal and Conservative landowners had much in common. Their published attitudes to working-class activists were often harsh; attempts to establish a trade union in Colchester in 1834 drew equal amounts of abuse and derision from the Conservative *Essex Standard* and the

Liberal *Colchester Gazette*.[27] The exploitation of societies for political gain may well have occurred; the Conservatives' distribution of blankets and coal to the poor during the 1868 election appears to have been expedited through the auspices of the Colchester Provident Labourers' Society.[28] By a quirk of the British electoral system labourers could occasionally be enfranchised, and it was often necessary to solicit their votes by a mixture of bribe and coercion.[29]

The moral attitudes of the ruling cadre had far-reaching implications in the admittance and supervision of the ordinary labouring members. Many of the poorest agricultural families were precluded from joining country benefit societies because of the cost of membership. In the 1877 revision of the AUP's rules, ordinary members up to date with their contributions could receive benefits of 7s per week sick pay (maximum 52 weeks), 5s per week pension after 65, £2 towards funeral expenses and a £3 lump sum for their spouse and children after their death. For this male participants were required to contribute 1s 9d at age 18, rising to 10s 2½d at age 50. Female participants were required to pay 2s 2½d at age 18, rising to 12s 7d for the same benefits. There were very strict rules regarding non-payment of contributions, leading to expulsion and loss of all claim on the Society for four consecutive missed payments. Contributions were expected each month regardless of whether the member was working or sick.[30] It can be seen from earlier rule books, and those of other societies that the contributions of the ordinary members were by no means inconsequential.

Other labourers could be excluded for moral, cultural or political reasons; the 1854 rule book of the Tendring Hundred Sickness Club reminded members that

> Good character, and Moral Conduct, form a material feature in the election of Members into the Club, and of their subsequent continuance in it.[31]

With only 140 labouring members spread over twenty-three parishes in 1854, such moral or political discrimination by the Tendring Hundred Sickness Club was perhaps of limited significance. The same could not be said of a powerful society such as the Aldham & United Parishes Insurance Society; although it covered approximately the same amount of parishes in the neighbouring Lexden Hundred, the AUP had 1,023 ordinary members by 1843, and 1,274 by 1853. The size and efficiency of such societies offered opportunities for social and economic control which appear to have been underestimated by historians, as have the often considerable amounts of money wielded by their management funds[32]. By 1849 at least forty-nine farmers were honorary members of the AUP. Each farmer would receive in the annual report a useful list of his peers in the farming community (offering opportunities for networking and cartels) as well as a list of ordinary members which was, quite literally, a register of over 1,000 'approved' labourers. Not only had these workers been vetted for 'moral' reliability, but, because of their often considerable personal financial commitment to the AUP's benefit scheme (and, as we have seen, the constant threat of losing not only future benefits, but also their past investment if expelled), they were arguably even more financially dependent (on local honorary members such as farmers) than those who received parish poor relief. Such labourers may consequently have been far more compliant in the introduction and use of new agricultural systems and machinery. In return, as it is logical

to suppose that the AUP would always seek to maintain the level of its ordinary membership and to avoid disruptions to its monthly income from financial contributions, it seems logical to suppose that AUP ordinary members would receive preferential treatment when jobs were scarce in their parish, and even referred to other parishes if no job could be found for them locally. A further possible advantage of the register (which lists labourers by parish) is that a farmer could employ AUP labourers from other parishes, and be reasonably confident of the character of men he had never met. Such a scenario would explain the growing use of machines and outside labour in the parishes under AUP influence. Anonymous threatening letters from disgruntled individuals such as that received by an Aldham farmer in 1844 thus take on a new perspective:

> We hear that you have had other parish men to do your harvest and that there is some wanting for work in your own parish… if you set them into your barn they will thrash but one day [before] you shall have a light.[33]

The ability of the country benefit societies to exert social and economic control over so many labouring families, and to discriminate against non-members, can hardly have failed to have been exploited by many farmers. It cannot be discounted as a motive for their becoming honorary members of the benefit societies in the first place. Further research might reveal such socio-economic manipulation to be a contributory factor in the rash of incendiarism in Essex and Suffolk in 1843 and 1844. Nevertheless, for the labouring member of a society such as the AUP, lack of independence had to be laid against enhanced security of employment, and even political protection; the AUP-sponsored *Advice to Agricultural Labourers* was less than subtle in implying that ordinary members would be supported in local disputes:

> …the Overseers know who are, and who are not, members of a society… if parishes should take an unfair advantage of those persons, who belong to the new societies, if the members apply to the Honorary Subscribers, they are more likely to have their grievances remedied…[34]

Proponents of patronised benefit societies were always sensitive to competition from the surviving tavern-based societies, and never passed up a chance to attack them. *Advice to Agricultural Labourers* warned its readers,

> …you will not find them quite so ready and willing to relieve your wants, and assist you through your misfortunes, as they are to establish Benefit Societies at Ale-houses…[35]

Another charge frequently leveled at the independent societies by the land-owning classes was that they were financially unsound. It was much better, labourers were advised, to join patronised societies run by experienced professionals. Certainly, each new Act relating to friendly and benefit societies appeared to favour those who could afford legal and financial advice. The Act of 1819 required contribution tables to be approved by a qualified actuary, and that of 1829 further specified that the society rules must be certified by a barrister. However, some professionals such as Mr Ambrose in the

Tendring Hundred and Issac Diss of Colchester made a good living as freelance consultants to the independent societies.[36] According to Pat Lewis, autonomous village societies were populated by independent rural artisans, 'who tended to be radical and non-conformist'.[37]

Some patronised benefit societies existed in the region's towns, with many of the same patrons as the rural organisations. Here, however, situated among heavy concentrations of better-off artisans, such societies enjoyed noticeably less influence. A Suffolk observer reported thirty-five benefit or friendly societies in Ipswich in 1850, most of whom appear to have been independent of the patronage of their social superiors.[38] Very soon after the beginning of the nineteenth century, there began to emerge a collection of artisans' societies with more stylised, quasi-Masonic traits. As these began to unite and affiliate with national orders, the smaller urban societies were swallowed up or squeezed out.

The best known of these new affiliated orders were the Odd Fellows, although several early societies and competing national associations used this generic term. They were from the first very public activists. Richard Barnes of Harwich noted in his diary late in 1809 that he had seen a procession in Colchester:

> I saw an Odd Fellows funeral. He was carried to All Saints Church, where there were prayers. I saw him carried there and I went into the church.[39]

Barnes' observations of a Masonic funeral two months later indicate that the Odd Fellows already had a distinctive appearance.[40] The Odd Fellows of the *Victoria* lodge, Colchester, affiliated to the London Unity of Odd Fellows in 1840.[41] In the same year Wisbech District of the much larger Independent Order of Odd Fellows Manchester Unity (founded in 1810) opened No. 2425 *Loyal West Suffolk Social Design* lodge in Bury St Edmunds. Within three years, the *Social Design* lodge had itself founded Manchester Unity lodges throughout Suffolk and north Essex, while further south Stepney District of the Manchester Unity was busily engaged in similar activity.

Fig. 1. Essex and Suffolk Odd Fellow lodges (Manchester Unity)[42]

	1835-44	1845-54	1855-64	1865-75	Total
Essex	13	14	2	3	32
Suffolk	20	17	9	6	52

The Ancient Order of Foresters, whose national headquarters were in Yorkshire, established Court No.1893 *Pride of the Village* in Wivenhoe in 1845, followed a year later by Court No.2094 *Ranger's Home* in Colchester.[43]

Fig. 2 Forestric courts in north Essex

	1835-44	1845-54	1855-64	1865-75	Total
Essex	0	2	7	8	17

In Essex Odd Fellow lodges and Forestric courts tended to be urban affairs, whilst several Suffolk lodges were located in villages. Membership soared in both counties. In

1848 the Manchester Unity Bury District of Odd Fellows had 2,587 members.[44] John Glyde of Ipswich noted 400 Odd Fellows and 165 Foresters in Ipswich alone just two years later.

Most of the members of these lodges and courts, if the experience of the *Victoria* lodge is typical, were artisans or retailers.[45] At the end of 1844 the *Victoria* lodge had forty members, including eight shoemakers, five mariners, four tailors, three victuallers and one shopkeeper. Only four members were labourers, and they were always to remain a small minority. In the 1840s the majority of *Victoria* lodge members were in their mid- to late twenties; the bulk of new members thereafter tended to be slightly younger (18 was the minimum age for admittance). Over 80 per cent of new members admitted from 1850 to 1860 were literate. Retention rates were initially high, and most of the early members appear to have remained in the lodge for life. Membership numbers grew steadily, from 40 in 1844, to 94 in 1854, to 106 in 1864, to 201 in 1874. The *Victoria* lodge did not suffer the level of resignations of the 1860s which Eric Hobsbawm noted for the Order as a whole, and which Clive Bradbury has recently noted in his research on lodges in the Staffordshire pottery towns.[46]

The geographical distribution of *Victoria* lodge members shows a predictable concentration of members in Colchester itself, particularly in Magdelen Street where the lodge meetings took place. However, there were members from outlying parishes as far afield as Aldham and St Osyth. The cost of travelling and entertainment on lodge nights, added to the basic quarterly premiums (a minimum of 5s in 1844) indicate that none of these artisans were poor. Most members admitted to the *Victoria* lodge in 1850 declared that they were earning 10s 6d per week,[47] against the local average labourer's pay of 8s.[48] The evidence of the *Victoria* lodge's accounts supports the view that Odd Fellows and Foresters were indeed overwhelming 'influential artisans who could afford to pay the dues'.[49] Added together, the Odd Fellows and Foresters of Essex and Suffolk were a particular combination of working men who were economically as well as numerically significant.

Baernreither, writing on working class association in 1893, noted that 'the most important point in the whole organisation of these orders is the relation of the various lodges to the central governing body'.[50] In the early days of the affiliated societies, the power of the centre was hampered by the legal technicality that the Orders themselves were not legal entities, and thus central funds had no protection in law. In addition to this Odd Fellows in particular had many independent associations or, 'Unities' competing for their allegiance. Control, therefore, was more often a face-to-face affair between the District and the individual lodge. Strong District officers, such as Brother Banyard of Bury St. Edmunds exerted noticeably stricter discipline over the lodges within his jurisdiction than did his colleagues in the neighbouring Maldon District. As 'empire-building' was rife, conflicts were inevitable. The disputes between Bury St. Edmunds and Maldon Districts (over who had the right to open a lodge in Coggeshall), and Bury St. Edmunds and Cambridge Districts (over a similar situation in Haverhill) were mirrored by what a Forestric author euphemistically calls 'friendly rivalry' between competing Ipswich and London District courts in Colchester.[51] Unlike the patronised benefit societies, however, there was underlying this rivalry a common sense of purpose; a purpose which drove Brother Samuel Davies of Maldon District to declare passionately, 'we are most emphatically, and in its truest sense, a republic'.[52] Strong words, one might

think, given that this sentiment was published in 1858, when memories of Chartism and other radical movements were still fresh, and the monarchy far from secure. But in many respects the affiliated friendly societies did indeed function as a democratic republic: District officers and Conference delegates were placed into office by the votes of individual members, rather by an accident of birth, or the patronage of an un-elected executive. The Provincial Grand Master for Maldon District was an inspector of weights and measures; his principal subordinates were a rope-maker and a seedsman. Many ordinary lodge members had occupations of similar standing, but all could aspire to the highest office. Encouragement to get on in life was common to all the affiliated orders, and society publications regaled members incessantly with anecdotes of successful brethren and their triumphs over adversity.[53] All was not entirely equal in this republic, however; self-employed artisans had an advantage over mere employees in that they could organise their time to facilitate their fraternal aspirations. It is also surely relevant that all District officers appear to have been well-educated men.

Much importance has been attached to a report of Colchester's politics in 1867, which noted 'a number of Odd Fellows, all of whom were Tories, and Foresters, who are all Liberal'.[54] Arthur Brown's comment that 'such a distinction, if it ever existed, had become blurred a decade or so later' is borne out by the available material. Many members of both Orders were enfranchised Freemen, but there is no evidence of an institutional political bias; far from being a Tory, for example, the Maldon District Treasurer, William King Digby, was also Secretary of the Maldon Literary and Mechanics Institution, traditionally a local Liberal bastion. There was in fact a ban on religious or political instruction in lodge, which was always strictly enforced; as Samuel Davies was to write:

> The society repudiates with scorn the party watch-words of selfish faction, and utterly disregards the distinctions of class or creed; nay, more, the deep rooted prejudices of national antipathy…[55]

If these are hardly the sentiments of a committed Tory club, neither does it appear that any Radicals or Chartists prospered in local lodges. The received assumption that Chartists and early trade unionists learned the art of organisation within the affiliated friendly societies is one which has yet to produce convincing evidence.[56] Such explicit disavowal of political activity (at least *within* the lodge or court) enabled Odd Fellows and Foresters to engage in secret ritual and fraternal combination with minimum government interference. However, the affiliated orders faced constant criticism and hostility from certain elements of the social elite, particularly the Anglican clergy. Typical was the attitude of a Leeds vicar, who refused to officiate at an Odd Fellow event, saying that 'he did not preach sermons for Oddfellows [sic], or anything of the kind'.[57] Local clergy frequently spoke out against the ceremonial and oration which attended Odd Fellow funerals, accusing the members of 'Deism'. The large and colourful lodge banners which were paraded at members' funerals fulfilled a public function which has already been discussed above, namely to impress passers-by and potential recruits with the power of the Order and its ability to guarantee a decent Christian funeral for its members. The banners could, however, indeed feature iconography likely to fill a clergyman with foreboding; although many symbols featured

impeccable Christian motifs such as the tablets of the Decalogue, others, such as suns, moons, scythes and skulls (in fact equally Biblical in origin) could easily be misrepresented by unsympathetic critics as tainted with more esoteric nuances. Odd Fellows in particular tended to be orthodox Anglicans, but they were nevertheless clearly resistant to the religious paternalism which the same Anglican clergy regularly bestowed on agricultural labourers in rural benefit societies. Accusations of financial mismanagement, a familiar propaganda weapon we have already seen used against independent tavern societies, were repeatedly made, without foundation, against Odd Fellows. The cost of their ornate regalia was cited as a particularly heinous example of waste. The Ipswich critic John Glyde sneered,

> …we are too utilitarian to appreciate flags, banners, medals, and aprons, or even feasts, when the expenses incurred for them is at all likely to intrench unduly upon the hard earnings of working men…[58]

Odd Fellows, however, felt that they had good reasons for ritual, as Samuel Davies explained:

> …it is a case of necessity; being bound to relieve all applicants belonging to the Order, and as it is not difficult to forge a traveling card, the password is our only protection.[59]

The ornate regalia was expensive - the *Victoria* lodge paid 5s a piece for one dozen aprons in 1847 - but such accoutrements were used to make the members feel that they were part of a brotherhood. As Davies said:

> …if it were simply a £sd society, it would lose a great deal of its interest - I am sure that it is equally advantageous to us, as a social institution, as it is, as a provident one.[60]

Ritual existed to cement fraternity and unity; and unity was strength. After the legal technicalities had been resolved, the Orders began to demonstrate their advantages over local societies with national projects to donate lifeboats to the newly formed RNLI.[61] An early initiative of 1847 was the 'Odd Fellows Relief Fund', set up to send aid to the destitute Irish starving after the failure of the potato crop.[62] This was an organisation with more vision and power than the likes of the Tendring Hundred Sickness Club.

In 1868 the *Essex Standard* announced that 'the First Annual Demonstration of the Odd Fellows and Foresters will take place early in August'.[63] In the subsequent annual displays, the rival Forestric Courts *Ranger's Home* and *Pride of Essex* marched to Lexden Park in full regalia beside the *Victoria* lodge of Odd Fellows. In addition to 'Montgomery's Troop of Artistes' and other curiosities marched two military bands. Whereas the troops in former years had been called out to attack trade unionists and Chartists in the streets, the authorities now sent their soldiers out to play music for the friendly societies.

If members of the affiliated societies could not be thought middle-class, they could certainly be described as the aristocrats of the working class. They were fully aware that they had a certain position in society and were quite explicit about their determination to protect it:

> …being members of so mighty an institution, we have a proportionate interest at stake in the well-being of the country. The committal of crime, and conviction for the same in a court of justice, would cause the immediate expulsion of any member from the Order; it is therefore important that we should not infringe the laws of the land, but yield obedience to our sovereign's rule.[64]

The Essex and Suffolk lodges were committed, as were all their brethren, to protecting the autonomy of their Unity. As this necessitated defending the status quo - 'we repress the slightest approximation to political feeling among our members as such'.[65] - it could be argued that the effective result was the political neutering of a large and influential social group. The voluntary abstinence from politics of so many potential leaders and organisers did indeed prove somewhat of 'a standing bulwark against extreme Socialism', as the *Essex Telegraph* proposed.[66] But these were never the 'flag-saluting, foreigner-hating, peer-respecting' plebeians that Thompson looked for in his postscript to *The Making of the English Working Class*.[67] Despite the hostility of the clergy, the affiliated friendly societies were rarely in direct competition with the patronised rural benefit societies. They had little in common with downtrodden agricultural labourers. In all the records of the Aldham & United Parishes Insurance Society, there is only one example of a defection to the Odd Fellows.[68]

The directors of the patronised benefit societies exercised a significant measure of social, cultural and even political control over their rural communities. They had little success in reducing the poor rate, and cannot claim to have improved the lot of the average labourer. They may, indeed, have added materially to the resentment which fuelled the outbreaks of incendiarism in rural areas of Essex and Suffolk in the mid-nineteenth century. The managers of the affiliated friendly societies exercised a significant measure of social, cultural and political influence within their communities. Although I have implied that they effectively acquiesced to the political establishment, it would be a mistake to think that they ceased to look for improvements in the social order. They believed in gradual and peaceful change. Ironically, the sons and grandsons of the early Odd Fellows and Foresters had just begun to infiltrate the council chamber and the magistrate's court when they were overtaken and marginalised by other working-class movements.

Author: D. J. Appleby, Department of History, Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG.

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[2] A. F. J. Brown, *Essex at Work 1700-1815* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1969), p.152.

[3] P. H. Gosden, *Friendly Societies in England 1815-1875* (Manchester, 1961).
[4] Brown, *Essex at Work*, p.460.
[5] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised ed. (London: Penguin, 1980), p.460.
[6] Although the current fashion is to use the term 'Oddfellow', the author, remembering a stern childhood lecture on the subject from his grandfather, prefers to retain the older form 'Odd Fellow'!
[7] A. F. J. Brown, *Colchester 1815-1914* (Chelmsford, 1980), p.176.
[8] J. S. Appleby, *Odd Fellows in Essex* (Colchester, 1947); J. S. Appleby, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Unity in Essex and Suffolk* (Bury St. Edmonds, 1994); P. Lewis, 'Some local friendly societies in north east Essex 1800-1850' (Cert. Thesis, University of Essex, 1995); Ancient Order of Forester, *Colchester District Jubilee Souvenir* (Colchester, 1936).
[9] S. Hussey & L. Swash, *Horrid Lights* (Chelmsford, Essex Record Office, 1994), p.19.
[10] The phrase is that of J. Fernandez, quoted by D. Maxwell, 'The Durawall of Faith: Pentecostal Spirituality in Neo-liberal Zimbabwe' (seminar paper, Perth, Australia, 6-8 February, 2002.
[11] K. H. Burley, 'The economic development of Essex in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries' (University of London DPhil thesis, 1957), p.130.
[12] There is some evidence that radicals and former Jacobins had indeed begun 'the systematic penetration of benefit societies' in the late 1790s; Thompson, pp. 182, 199, 3459.
[13] A. F. J. Brown, *Chartism in Essex and Suffolk* (Chelmsford, Essex Record Office Publications, 1982), p.11.
[14] Lewis, p.13.
[15] Anon. *Advice to Agricultural Labourers and Others on Benefit Societies* (London, 1828), p.5. The author was probably a director of the Aldham and United Parishes Insurance Society.
[16] Thompson, p.462.
[17] II Thess. 3: 10. *Advice to Agricultural labourers*, cover page
[18] Essex Record Office (ERO), Q/RS f10; Q.RS f1-2.
[19] Dissenters' benefit societies could be found at Fordham, Little Clacton and Manningtree by 1815; ERO Q/RS f2. The author has, as yet, found no local evidence of Roman Catholic benefit societies in Essex, although Clive Bradbury's on-going research in the Staffordshire pottery towns has done so.
[20] ERO Q/RS f6.
[21] ERO Q/RS f6.
[22] *Rules of the Aldham and United Parishes Insurance Society*, 1826, revised 1877, pp. 2, 3.
[23] For example, see the plea for more honorary members made in the *11th report* of the Tendring Hundred Sickness Club (1854).
[24] Calculations made from the aggregate of Aldham & United Parishes Insurance Society *Annual reports* of 1843, 1853 and 1859.
[25] Identification of financial and medical professionals has been made through consulting *White's Directory* (1849).
[26] See Colchester Borough poll books; A. Philips, 'Four Colchester elections', in K. Neale (ed.) *An Essex tribute* (Oxford, 1977), pp.198-218.
[27] Brown, *Colchester*, p.108.
[28] Philips, p.217.
[29] 80 labourers were enfranchised in Lexden and Mile End on one occasion; Philips, p.253.
[30] *Rules of the Aldham and United Parishes Insurance Society*, 1826, revised 187, pp. 7, 17. The rates quoted in the text appear in the contribution table on p.17 of the *Rules*. Other rates for alternative financial benefits appear on the succeeding pages.
[31] Tendring Hundred Sickness Club, *11th Report* (1854).
[32] To take two examples sixty years apart, the 1838 *Report* of the Aldham and United Parishes Society shows that it held almost £3500 in the Bank of England, while the *61st Report* of the Tendring Hundred Provident Benefit and Sickness Society shows that it held over £49000 in 1898, most of which was deposited with the National Debt Commissioners.
[33] *Ipswich Express*, 13 February 1844, quoted in Hussey and Swash, p.6.
[34] *Advice to Agricultural Labourers*, p.27.
[35] *Advice to Agricultural Labourers*, p.25.
[36] The names of both men appear several times in ERO Q/RS f1-2.
[37] Lewis, p.58.

[38] J. Glyde, *The social, moral and religious condition of Ipswich* (Ipswich, 1850), p.76.
[39] *Diary of Richard Barnes*, 17 December 1809 (private collection). A transcription of this diary is currently being prepared for publication by J. S. Appleby.
[40] *Diary of Richard Barnes*, 18 December 1809
[41] J. S. Appleby, *One hundred and fifty years of Unity in Essex and Suffolk*, p.3. The evidence that the *Victoria* lodge existed first as an independent society come from the printed heading of the *Declarations Book for 1845-1874* (private collection); the next volume includes London Unity headings, which were manually altered for entries after January 1883, when the *Victoria* lodge became *No. 6533 Loyal Victoria* lodge in the Manchester Unity of Odd Fellows. Publication of the demographic information in these lodge books is scheduled as a future project by the present author and J. S. Appleby.
[42] J. S. Appleby, *One hundred and fifty years of Unity in Essex and Suffolk*, p.5.
[43] Ancient Order of Foresters, *Colchester District Jubilee Souvenir*, p.9.
[44] Appleby, *One hundred and fifty years of Unity in Essex and Suffolk*, p.7.
[45] Demographic data drawn from the original *Victoria* lodge admissions and account books (see note 38 above).
[46] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring men* (London, 1964), p.135. I am grateful to the generosity of Mr. Clive Bradbury for allowing access to his ongoing PhD research on this subject.
[47] *Victoria* lodge (Odd Fellows London Unity), *Admission book for 1850-1874* (see note 38).
[48] M. Blaug, 'The myth of the old Poor Law', in *Essays in social history* (Oxford, 1974), p.149.
[49] Brown, *Colchester*, p.134.
[50] J. Baernreither, *English associations of working men* (London, 1893), p.222.
[51] Appleby, *One hundred and fifty years of Unity in Essex and Suffolk*, p.7; Ancient Order of Foresters, *Colchester District Jubilee Souvenir*, p.13.
[52] S. T. Davies, *Odd Fellowship* (Witham, 1858), p.12.
[53] T. R. Tholfsen, *Working-class radicalism in mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976), pp.300-1.
[54] Brown, *Colchester*, p.134.
[55] Davies, p.16.
[56] I am very grateful to Arthur Brown for discussions on this topic, and respectfully note his reservation that I may be underestimating the links between affiliated friendly societies and trade unions.
[57] Gosden, p.168. In Staffordshire, Clive Bradbury has noted similar expressions of clerical hostility, even while standing over the coffins of deceased friendly society members during their burial!
[58] Glyde, p.88.
[59] Davies, p.11.
[60] Davies, p.15.
[61] The Foresters' first two lifeboats in 1864 and 1867 were followed by the Odd Fellows' donation of the Grimsby lifeboat in 1868; *The Odd Fellow* (November 1968), p.512.
[62] Appleby, p.6.
[63] *Essex Standard*, July 1, 1868.
[64] Davies, p.l6.
[65] Davies, p.17.
[66] Brown, *Colchester*, p.135.
[67] Thompson, pp.916-7.
[68] James Bradbrook; AUP *Annual report*, 1847.