



Employment Oaksey

When Women Went on Strike

Another paragraph from the “Western Times” of a century ago, affords a further illustration of how we are apt sometimes to be misled by conventional ideas. How many people regard the so-called “modern” woman as a Post-war product? Miss 1930 is certainly independent, candid, self-assertive and daring. But is she as different from Miss 1830 as some writers would have us suppose? Is the picture of self-effacing shyness so often associated with the crinoline altogether a true one? Or was the “demure” maid of popular fancy in reality a wilful and at times a rather pugnacious creature? Let the “Western Times” story speak for itself, for it tells of West Country women who went on strike.

It happened in the parish of Oaksey in Wiltshire, where there are many to-day who have heard their grandmothers talk of the incident. In those days women went out haymaking by the dozen, and though their pay did not exceed ten pence a day they were not violently dissatisfied. But one day when the farmers went round with gloomy countenances and shaking heads, and (as farmers have done from time immemorial) spoke of the terrible plight of agriculture, and threatened to cut the rate down to nine pence, then hayfields became instantly a battleground.

In a body the women marched to the local belfry, and tolled the bell, and the countryside echoed with challenging sounds. A pre-arranged signal could not have been more effective for in a very few minutes the belfry was surrounded by such a gathering of indignant womenfolk as had never before been seen in Oaksey. And never before probably had been heard such a babel of tongues. Over seventy took the oath of defiance, and decided there and then to go on strike, probably the first strike of women in this country.

It would have been an unhappy ending to the story to say that they did not get their ten pence. Pleasanter it is to note that in this battle of the sexes the fortunes of war were on the side of the angels.

Western Times Friday 4 July 1930

OPC Note: The following is the report written in 1830.

On Wednesday last the farmers of the parish of Oaksey, Wilts, agreed to reduce the wages of the female haymakers from ten pence to nine pence per day; which caused general dissatisfaction among them; some of whom, assembled next morning at the belfry, and tolled the bell. Their numbers soon increased to between 60 and 70; when a “resolution was passed”, that they would not return to their work till the old price of ten pence per day should be obtained from their employers!

Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette Thursday 17 June 1830