



Story: Working for justice in an unjust world – a story from Methodist history

In 1834, over 800,000 people from all over the country signed petitions to Parliament to overturn a great injustice. This is a remarkable number – about one in every 20 people, willing to stand up and be counted at a time where there was little mass communication, no social media or Change.org, and when many people could neither read nor write. It was also a sensitive time in which to protest, yet when the petition was presented to the Home Secretary, 100,000 people took to the London streets to make their views known.

At the heart of this story are six farm labourers from Dorset who had come together to protest against the third reduction in their wages in as many years – down to six shillings a week when the ‘living wage’ would have been nearer ten.

What they were doing was not at all illegal, but the angry landowners and magistrates found an obscure law about swearing oaths under which to prosecute them. They were sentenced to seven years transportation to Australia and, as if this were not enough, the authorities did everything they could to make life difficult for their families to make an example of them too.

The petition was successful and, after a number of delays, the ‘Tolpuddle Martyrs’ were eventually returned. Most of the group settled in Essex where they continued to support causes such as the right to vote for ordinary people. But the authorities continued to make their lives uncomfortable, and they finally relocated to Canada.

Does it matter that several of the Martyrs were Methodist and two were Local Preachers? Historians think so. The courts were taken aback at how well their leaders spoke: they had expected the case to be a pushover, yet these mere agricultural labourers could read, write and command an audience at a time when there were no schools for the poor. Their oracy and literacy had been

mastered in circuit preaching and their Methodist Sunday School. As they studied the Bible for themselves, they had become confident in proclaiming a kingdom in which all people can flourish.

Their courageous example became a famous milestone for justice in the story of 19th-century Britain, on the road that rolled on to eventual electoral, educational and labour reform.