The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield

The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield: A Parallel Text Edition

By

Peter Cochran

with

The Thresher's Labour by Stephen Duck

and

The Woman's Labour by Mary Collier

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield: A Parallel Text Edition,
by Peter Cochran

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5365-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5365-1

I am very grateful to the British Academy and the Carl H. and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation, who provided me with the grants which enabled me to research the manuscripts of *The Farmer's Boy*. Peter Accardo and the staff at the Houghton Library, Harvard, were very helpful during my stay. My thanks also to Anne Barton and Eric Robinson for their help.

I am also grateful to John Gilroy for the loan of his copy of the poem's first edition.

CONTENTS

Abbreviations ix

The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield: Introduction 1

The Farmer's Boy, A Poem: Bloomfield's First Manuscript 27
Spring 28
Summer 38
Autumn 50
Winter 60

The Farmer's Boy, A Poem: First Edition and Second Manuscript 71
Spring 74
Summer 100
Autumn 130
Winter 158

Capel Lofft's Preface and Notes 185

The Thresher's Labour by Stephen Duck 217

The Woman's Labour by Mary Collier 227

Bibliography 237

ABBREVIATIONS

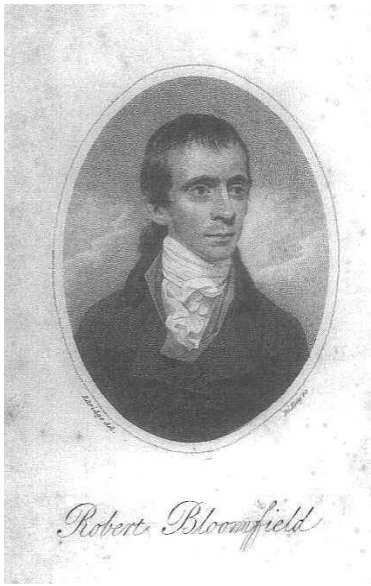
BCB: B.C.Bloomfield, *The Publication of The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield, The Library*, Vol XV (No.2) June 1993.

Hart: *Selections from the Correspondence of Robert Bloomfield The Suffolk Poet*, edited by W.H.Hart, F.S.A. (London 1870)

White: Simon J. White. *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism and the Poetry of Community* (Ashgate Publishing 2007).

THE FARMER'S BOY BY ROBERT BLOOMFIELD: INTRODUCTION

Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* was the poem most frequently printed in the "romantic" period. William St Clair credits it with having sold over 100,000 copies between 1800 and 1826.[1] Crabbe, Bloomfield's rival Suffolk poet, sold far fewer.[2]



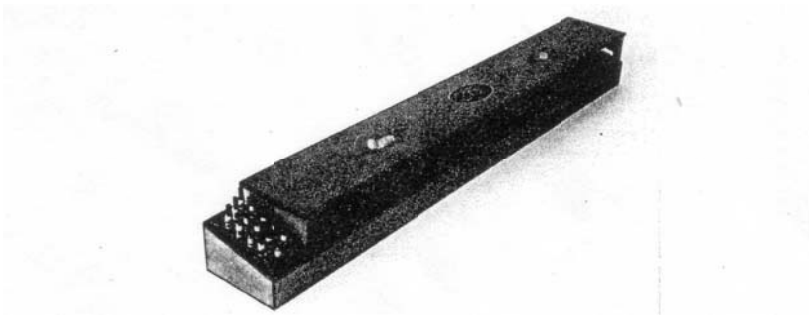
Bloomfield was born at Honington, south-east of Thetford in Suffolk, on December 3rd 1766. A distant cousin, called Blomfield, was Bishop of London. His father died of smallpox when he was a year old, and he was taught to read and write by his mother. He had five siblings, and when he

1: William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, (C.U.P., 2004) p.582.
2: Ibid, p.596.

was seven his mother married again, and had another family. At the age of eleven he was sent to his mother's brother-in-law at the nearby village of Sapiston; but was too small to be helpful at farmwork (even when fully-grown he was shorter than five feet, like his father),[3] and so he was sent to two of his brothers in London to train as a shoemaker. There he ran errands and read the newspapers aloud. He was fond especially of reading the poetry section of the *London Magazine*. Thomson's *The Seasons* was one of his favourite poems. More about his intellectual background will be found in Capel Lofft's[4] Preface, printed below: though according to John Clare, Lofft is untrustworthy:

> Began an Enquirey into the Life of Bloomfield with the intention of writing one and a critisism on his genius and writings a fellow of the name Preston pretended to know a great deal about him but I must enquire into its authenticity – Capel Loft did not improve on the account given by his brother George by altering it – Editors often commit this fault[5]

Bloomfield learned the violin, and became a maker of Aeolian harps.



Bloomfield's 1808 Aoelian harp, restored by Alan Grove
(picture by courtesy of the Robert Bloomfield Society)

3: BCB p.76.
4: Capel Lofft (1751-1824) jurist, poet, critic, and horticulturalist; friend of Fox, Wilberforce, Godwin and Hazlitt. Great admirer of Napoleon. Described by Byron (*EBSR* 774) as "The Mæcenas of shoemakers, and Preface-writer-general to distressed versemen; a kind of gratis Accoucheur to those who wish to be delivered of rhyme, but do not know how to bring it forth."
5: *John Clare By Himself*, ed. Robinson and Powell, Carcanet 2002, p.185.

He returned for three months to Suffolk, and then came back to London, where in 1790 he married. In the garret where he worked with five or six others, he composed *The Farmer's Boy*, initially for his mother's pleasure, creating and correcting long sections in his head. The poem was shown by his brother George to Capel Lofft, who had it published (by Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe), on March 1st 1800 – having sat on it, editing it, for fifteen months. Bloomfield had no idea it was being published. It was an instant success, counting Wordsworth and Coleridge among its admirers. Bloomfield was introduced to the Duke of Grafton,[6] had his portrait taken, and almost met the Prince of Wales. Part of *The Farmer's Boy* was translated into Latin: all of it, into French and Italian. It was published in American and Germany. A second edition was out in two months; by the seventh edition, it had sold 26,100 copies.[7] Bloomfield met and breakfasted with Samuel Rogers, and met Mrs Barbauld. He corresponded with Fox. Five more books of verse, and a play,[8] followed, all on rural themes; but fared less well. Bloomfield shared his income generously with his family, including his brother: a fact which led to his ultimate impoverishment.[9]

Bloomfield's birthplace, Honington, Suffolk (photo: Peter Cochran)

6: Augustus Henry Fitzroy, third Duke of Grafton (1735-1811) MP for Bury St Edmunds and sometime Lord Lieutenant of Suffolk. Colleague of Pitt the Elder (see Byron, *The Vision of Judgement* 71, 4). Chancellor of Cambridge University. Frequenter of Newmarket races.

7: BCB p.83.

8: *Rural Tales* (1802); *Good Tidings; or, News from the Farm* (1804); *Wild Flowers; or, Pastoral and Local Poetry* (1806); *The Banks of Wye* (1811); *May Day with the Muses* (1822); *Hazelwood Hall* (play: 1824).

9: See BCB pp.93-4.

Grafton had him appointed Under-Sealer in the Court of King's Bench, a job which exhausted him, so in 1803 he resigned it. He went into bookselling, where nothing went right for him, though Grafton compensated by awarding him fifteen pounds a year pension.[10] His publisher Hood died, and Sharpe sold up. In 1812, the firm failed, and its successor failed two years later.[11] There were arguments over copyright, especially of *The Farmer's Boy*. Bloomfield described himself as "cheated and bamboozled".[12] Sales declined. One of his daughters died, and his wife became a follower of Johanna Southcott. Grafton had died and been succeeded by his son, who was less generous. Wordsworth himself was moved to protest. On January 20th 1817 he wrote to Benjamin Robert Haydon:

> Bloomfield the Poet has been and I believe is, in considerable distress, probably owing to the failure of his Bookseller, by whom he has lost several 100 pounds. A subscription was set on foot for his benefit. You know perhaps that he is a native of Euston the Duke of Grafton's parish, his Grace's principal Seat and Residence. This Spot, and its neighbourhood are the scene of the Farmer's Boy; from this bond of connection something was expected from the noble Duke, nor was that expectation wholly fruitless – for he has given – five Pounds!!! This same illustrious person sold the Library which his Father had collected – God help the Literati of England if his Grace of Grafton be a fair specimen of the Patrons of the Day. But I know that he is not so.
>
> > O may the man who has the muses scorned,
> > Alive or dead be never of a muse adorned.[13]

Bloomfield became seriously ill: he seems to have suffered throughout his life from rheumatism and migraines. He was attacked by both political sides: Tories said he was a republican, and Cobbett claimed he'd been bribed to present working-class people in a poor light. He died in poverty at Shefford, Bedfordshire, on August 19th 1823. Clare, whom he admired, and whose *Shepherd's Calendar* derives in part from him, had returned the empathetic feeling. He wrote:

10: See BCB pp.80 and 84.
11: See BCB p.86.
12: Hart p.55.
13: *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Moorman (Oxford 1970), III pp.362-3.

… Bloomfield had not a £100 a year to mentain 5 or 6 in the family why I have not £50 to mentain 8 with this is a hungry difference[14]

I have desires to know somthing of Bloomfields latter days but I can hearing of nothing further then his dying neglected so it is of no use enquiring further – for we know that to be the common lot of genius[15]

poor Bloomfield I wish that death had left me a little longer the pleasure of his friendship[16]

Bloomfield's grave, south of Shefford (photo: Peter Cochran)

Bloomfield left an epitaph for himself, which was not used:

14: *John Clare By Himself*, p.200.
15: *John Clare By Himself*, p.194.
16: *John Clare By Himself*, p.216.

> First made a Farmer's Boy, and then a snob,
> A poet he became, and here lies Bob.
> April 1823[17]

Byron's friend John Cam Hobhouse (another propertied gentleman, masquerading as a radical) spent Tuesday April 8th 1823 with his other friend, and role-model, Sir Francis Burdett (a feudalistic plutocrat masquerading as a radical). He wrote in his diary:

> Burdett and I rode nearly thirty miles to meet the Pytchley hounds on Rockingham Forest – we did not find them for two hours, and when we did find them, had no sport. We put up afterwards at the George Inn, Kettering, dined, and slept comfortably. I read a little book of Lindley Murray's, containing accounts of men who had either lived or died piously. I do not think these sort of books are ever written well enough for their subject, which requires skill and address.
>
> Burdett read the Farmer's Boy for the first time – thought the versification smooth.[18]

Just as Hobhouse deflects the need to think about Murray's book on pious lives by impugning its style, so Burdett deflects the need to think about Bloomfield's poem by praising its style. Books, for both, are to be criticised and appreciated, not taken to heart. Gentlemen of property and leisure don't need books to teach them about life. Their patrician role is to apportion praise and blame. It's an attitude they share with Capel Lofft, Bloomfield's editor.

Anyone with experience of agricultural labour knows that it is filthy, exhausting, monotonous, depressing and mind-numbing. When Robert Southey writes to Horace Walpole Bedford, of the Pantisocrasy scheme, *"*... when Coleridge and I are sawing down a tree we shall discuss metaphysics; criticise poetry when hunting a buffalo, & write sonnets whilst following the plough. Our society will be of the most polished order …"[19] it's clear he's never tried it. All one can do after a day's work on a

---

17: BL. Add. Mss. 30809 f. 11, quoted *Robert Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, edited by John Goodridge and John Lucas, with an introduction by John Lucas, Trent Editions, 1998, p.131.

18: B.L. Add. Mss. 56547 f.46r.

19: Robert Southey to Horace Walpole Bedford, September 22nd 1794 (Bodleian M.S. Eng. Letters c 22 126-7; Curry I pp.70-4).

farm is sit still, and then sleep. If one were as guilt- and stress-free as Jiles, the protagonist of the poem below, one would admittedly sleep very well:

> Delicious sleep! from Sleep who could forbare
> With no more guilt than Jiles, and no more care? (*Summer*, 107-8)

… but if, like the farmers themselves, as opposed to the farmers' boys, one had a lot to worry about, one might not sleep at all. In modern times the suicide rate among farmers is higher than that of any other profession. Of all poetic traditions, pastoral is the most mendacious. Few pastoral poems are written in the country – Clare's being the exception.

That *The Farmer's Boy* is in an eighteenth-century style throughout is characteristic of the "romantic" period, which had the disadvantage, to our twenty-first-century eyes, of not realising that it was the romantic period, and thinking instead that it was the age of Napoleon, Byron and Scott – all three as backward-looking and unromantic, in their different idioms, as Bloomfield.

John Clare wrote two poems about Bloomfield. Here is one:

> Sweet unassuming Minstrel not to thee
> The dazzling fashions of the day belong
> Natures wild pictures field and cloud and tree
> And quiet brooks far distant from the throng
> In murmurs tender as the toiling bee
> Make the sweet music of thy gentle song
> Well—nature owns thee let the crowd pass bye—
> The tide of fashion is a stream too strong
> For pastoral brooks that gently flow and sing
> But nature is their source and earth and sky
> Their annual offerings to her current bring
> Thy injured muse and memory need no sigh
> For thine shall murmur on to many a spring
> When their proud stream is summer burnt and dry[20]

There's an element, even in Clare's attitude, of something which Bloomfield was never without – condescension. For Clare, Bloomfield is one of Gray's "mute inglorious Miltons," except that he was gifted with a voice, and was glorious – or, at least, found a patron.

20: *John Clare*, ed. Robinson and Powell, *The Oxford Authors*, (no date) p.108.

In May 1816, between fifty and sixty starving farm-workers got drunk at the Globe Inn, Littleport, just north of Ely. They said they were angry at the high price of bread; in reality, they no longer found life supportable. They charged through the village, wrecking everything. The vicar threatened to shoot them, but lost his nerve and fled to Ely. Legend relates that the Bishop of Ely, terrified, tried to leave, but his rear end was of such lateral generosity that he could not get into his carriage without his guards compressing him into it with their musket-butts.[21] The riot, which spread to Downham Market and Ely itself, was put down by the militia, and five of the rioters were hanged.[22]

Neither the desperation of the rioters nor the Bishop's embarrassment (which would make an excellent satirical image), could ever find places in Bloomfield's work.

Bloomfield was born near where Thomas Paine was born, but *seems* to share none of Paine's radicalism. He does not want the suffrage extended to all adult males, nor does he ask for annual parliaments. Jiles' cockade is "unambitious" and "peaceable" (*Spring,* 205). Bloomfield acknowledges working-class suffering, but his political ambition is restricted to getting masters to pay their labourers more and to give them a better life: "Let Labour have its due" is his modest request (*Summer*, 397, 399). See his note to *Summer*, 341:

> In reference to this passage, and as a thought, by way of illustration, I subjoind a passage from Cook's Voyage, not knowing but it was written by Cook himself, which I now find was not the case. I was quite uncertain during the 15 months which the poem remained in the hands of Mr Lofft and the publishers, whither this note would be printed or not. I was pleading for kindness between the ranks of society, and it seemed to suit my purpose. And if I could believe that what I said of Letting "Labour have its due" would only in one instance perswade a Farmer to give his men more wages, instead of giving, or suffering him to buy cheap corn in the time of trouble, I should feel a pleasure of the most lasting sort, having no doubt but that an extra half Crown earned is worth, morally, and substantially, a five Shilling Gift; to those who in the house of their fathers work for bread.

More often he writes of cruelty and injustice cryptically, and transfers what he knows of the sufferings of agricultural labourers on to their

---

21: W.H.Barrett, *Tales from the Fens,* ed. E.Porter, (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1963), p.94.

22: For a full account, see A.J.Peacock, *Bread or Blood* (forward by E.P.Thompson, Gollancz, 1965).

animals. Speaking to Dobbin, the worthy carthorse of whom Clare was to make such a symbol, he declares:

> Thy chains were freedom, and thy toils repose,
> Could the poor Post-horse tell thee all his woes:
> Show thee his bleeding shoulders, and unfold
> The dreadful anguish he endures for gold.
> Hired at each call of business, lust, or rage;
> That prompt the trav'ler on from stage to stage,
> Still on his strength depends their boasted speed,
> For them his limbs grow weak, his bare ribs bleed.
> And though he groaning quickens at command,
> Their extra shilling in the rider's hand
> Becomes his bitter scourge; 'tis he must feel
> The double efforts of the lash and steel … (*Winter* 161-72)

Bloomfield may be reflecting here on the difference between farm labour and urban labour (he had more experience of the latter than he had of the former). Even so, on the farm where he works, it's a jungle: parasites abound, for instance the Gander at *Summer*, 225-42, who makes life hell for all the other beasts, or the "the Mastiff, or the meaner Cur" at *Winter*, 221-32, whose irresponsible activities pre-echo those of Gabriel Oak's dog in *Far From the Madding Crowd.*

It was Byron (a rich radical, like Capel Lofft, whom he affected to mock), who said in the Lords:

> You must call these men a mob, desperate, dangerous, and ignorant; and seem to think that the only way to quiet the "Bellua multorum capitum" is to lop off a few superfluous heads. But even a mob may be better reduced to reason by a mixture of conciliation and firmness, than by additional irritation and redoubled penalties. Are we aware of our obligations to a *Mob*? It is the Mob that labour in your fields and serve in your houses, – that man your navy, and recruit your army, – that have enabled you to defy all the world, and can also defy you when Neglect and Calamity have driven them to despair.

But Byron had earlier, in *English Bards*, mocked the very idea of working-class poets, including Bloomfield:

> Heavens! how the vulgar stare! how crowds applaud!
> How ladies read, and Literati laud!
> If chance some wicked wag should pass his jest,
> 'Tis sheer ill-nature; don't the world know best?

> Genius must guide when wits admire the rhyme,
> And CAPEL LOFFT declares 'tis quite sublime.
> Hear, then, ye happy sons of needless trade!
> Swains! quit the plough, resign the useless spade!
> Lo! BURNS and BLOOMFIELD, nay, a greater far,
> GIFFORD was born beneath an adverse star,
> Forsook the labours of a servile state,
> Stemmed the rude storm, and triumphed over Fate:
> Then why no more? if Phœbus smiled on you,
> BLOOMFIELD! why not on brother NATHAN too?
> Him too the Mania, not the Muse, has seized;
> Not inspiration, but a mind diseased:
> And now no Boor can seek his last abode,
> No common be enclosed without an ode.
> Oh! since increased refinement deigns to smile
> On Britain's sons, and bless our genial Isle,
> Let Poesy go forth, pervade the whole,
> Alike the rustic and mechanic soul:
> Ye tuneful cobblers! still your notes prolong,
> Compose at once a slipper and a song;
> So shall the fair your handy work peruse,
> Your sonnets sure shall please – perhaps your shoes.[23]

It was one thing to express compassion for the poor; quite another to admit them to one's side as fellow artists. William Gifford, born into working-class Dorset and now editor of the *Quarterly* (and Byron's "literary father"), is, we protest, much less interesting as a poet than Robert Bloomfield: but Byron isn't concerned with fine distinctions.

At the end of *Spring* Bloomfield contemplates the slaughter of sheep, and it's in danger of getting to him as seriously as it will to Clarice Starling. He needs willpower to change his tone:

> Down, indignation; hence, ideas foul!
> Away, the shocking immage from my soul!
> Let kindlier visitants attend my way
> Beneath approaching Summer's fervid ray,
> Nor thankless glooms obtrude, nor cares annoy;
> Whilst the sweet theme is universal joy. (*Spring,* 353-8)

He knows that readers want uplift, a "theme of universal joy". "Indignation", whether radical, vegetarian, or both, won't get published in the 1790s, let alone read. Capel Lofft is more overtly radical than he; perhaps because, being rich, Lofft can afford to be. See Lofft's note, in his

23: *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* 769-96.

preface, on the suppression of working-class debating societies. Bloomfield could not put such thoughts into the poem: it's left to his patron and editor, the compassionate magistrate, to put one in a note. Bloomfield has to restrict himself to some thoughts – derived unimpeachably from Captain Cook – about the relatively class-free society of Otaheite (see his note to *Summer,* 341, referred to above).

Sometimes Bloomfield's references are at two removes, not one. Man's inhumanity to animals stands in for man's inhumanity to man. It's a development of Burns' *To A Mouse*: Burns has no ill-will towards the mouse – he's full of empathy for its houselessness. But Bloomfield laments, for example, the decorative docking of horses' tails:

> Poor patient Ball! and with insulting wing
> Roar in thine ears, and dart the piercing sting;
> In thy behalf thy crest of Boughs avail,
> More than thy short-clip'd remnant of a tail,
> A moving mockery, a useless name,
> A living proof of cruelty and shame.
> Shame to the man whatever fame he bore,
> Who took from thee what man can ne'er restore,
> Thy weapon of defence, thy chiefest good,
> When swarming flies contending suck thy blood. (*Summer,* 207-61)

Yet the horse's name might imply that it's gelding, not docking, to which Bloomfield is objecting. How poor and weak men are unmanned by rich and powerful men becomes clear in *Autumn*, when the field becomes a prison, just as palaces have for Blake and will for Byron:

> His banquet marr'd, grown dull his hermitage,
> The Field becomes his prison; till on high,
> Benighted Birds to shades and coverts fly.
> Midst Air, Health, Daylight, can he prisoner be?
> If fields are prisons, where is Liberty?
> Here still she dwells and here her votarys stroll,
> But dissappointed hope untunes the Soul.
> Restraints unfelt whilst hours of rapture flow,
> When troubles press, to chains and barriers grow. (*Autumn,* 222-30)

Liberty, Bloomfield concedes, exists; but it is liberty without hope – freedom to hope and be disappointed. It seems to be the passing of the old order which imprisons and unmans men:

> Such were the days: of days long past I sing,
> When pride gave place to mirth without a sting;
> Ere tyrant customs strength sufficient bore,
> To violate the feelings of the poor;
> To leave them distanc'd in the mad'ning race,
> Where-e'er refinement shows its hated face:
> Nor causeless hated; 'tis the peasant's curse
> That hourly makes his wretched station worse;
> Destroy's life's intercourse; the social plan,
> That rank to rank cements, as man to man;
> Wealth flows around him; fashion lordly reigns
> Yet poverty is his, and mental pains. (*Summer,* 333-44)

And how does wealth flow around him where hitherto it had flowed (in part) through him, but in the remorseless and greedy process of enclosure – to which, being a careful writer, knowing the dangers of his place, Bloomfield makes no reference? "No common be enclosed without an ode," sneered Byron – a rent-raiser, if not an encloser, himself (his great uncle had enclosed everything at Newstead that could be enclosed). The Duke of Grafton was a major encloser;[24] and, on June 19th 1800, an enclosure act was passed by Parliament, enclosing 831 acres of the village of Stanton in Suffolk – a process which had been in train since Capel Lofft had initiated it in 1784.[25]

Bloomfield has a mild protest at enclosure at *The Broken Crutch*, from *Wild Flowers*, 1806, lines 57-78. His brother Nathaniel composed a whole poem on the subject, *Honington Green* (1803), which, Bloomfield wrote, "… had melted me into salt water, and opened every latent weakness of my heart to a very uncommon degree".[26] Here are the fifth and sixth of its twenty-two stanzas:

> Sighs speak the poor Labourers' pain,
> While the new mounds and fences they rear,
> Intersecting their dear native plain,
> To divide to each rich Man his share;
> It cannot but grieve them to see,
> Where so freely they rambled before,
> What a bare narrow track is left free
> To the foot of the unportion'd Poor.

24: See David Dymond and Peter Northeast, *A History of Suffolk* (Philimore 1985), p.82.
25: See David Dymond, *Opposition to Enclosure in a Suffolk Village* (*The Suffolk Review*, Summer 1980 (Vol. V No 1), pp.13-22.
26: Hart, p.8.

> The proud City's gay wealthy train.
> Who nought but refinements adore,
> May wonder to hear me complain
> That Honington Green is no more;
> But if to the Church you e'er went,
> If you knew what the village has been,
> You will sympathize, while I lament
> The Enclosure of Honington Green.[27]

Capel Lofft, who did not think of himself part of "The proud City's gay wealthy train," had the editing of *Honington Green*, too. He writes of the theme:

> Of HONINGTON GREEN I am to speak next. And here it may be right to obviate some prejudice against the Poem, which, in the minds of several, may arise from the subject. I am not an Enemy to Enclosures: if the RIGHTS and INTERESTS of the POOR, and of SMALL OWNERS, be very carefully guarded, an ENCLOSURE may be a common Benefit. However, it is very liable to become otherwise. But be an Enclosure good or bad, (and every Man has a right to his opinion, and to support it by argument, on this subject and every other) there are particular circumstances and considerations which stand clear of the scope of the general question. The Spot which is the subject of the Ballad is less, I believe, than Half an Acre. It did certainly ornament the Village; independent of a just and laudable partiality in the Author. Thus it would have seem'd to the casual glance of a stranger. To the BLOOMFIELDS every circumstance gave it peculiar endearment. There the Author of 'THE FARMER'S BOY,' and of these POEMS, first drew breath. There grew the first Daisies which their feet press'd in childhood. On this little Green their Parents look'd with delight: and the Children caught the affection; and learn'd to love it as soon as they lov'd any thing. By it's smallness and it's situation it was no object: and could have been left out of Enclosure without detriment to the General Plan, or to any individual Interest. I wish it had: and most who love Poetry, and respect Genius, and are anxious to preserve the little innocent Gratifications of the Poor, will have the same wish.[28]

Had Honington Green been larger, and its inhabitants less amenable to his patronage, Lofft would not, we assume, encouraged and assisted the publication of Nathaniel Bloomfield's poem.

What the bourgeois readers of the romantic period thought they were reading when they bought *The Farmer's Boy* was a harmless and

---

27: Nathaniel Bloomfield, *An Essay on War … Honington Green, A Ballad* (1803) pp.31-2.
28: Ibid., pp.xviii-xix.

reassuring thing, celebrating a rural life which few of them knew anything of, and about which they could afford to be complacent: what the working-class readers may have read, if they were alert to subtextual allegory, was a depiction of man's cruelty to beasts, disguising not too covertly a depiction of man's exploitation of man.[29] Jiles's patient dumbness, and the fact that "he seeks no better name" than that of a Farmer's Boy (the reassuring motto was added by Lofft), may not have hidden Bloomfield's message from them. Like Dickens' Stephen Blackpool, the fact that Jiles is so a-political makes his life even sadder. Lofft added the motto to assure potential purchasers that this was no Jacobinical poem; and added "rural" to the subtitle to increase their anticipation of something sentimental and English – like Goldsmith – except that Goldsmith is hardly comforting:

> Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,
> Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;
> Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,
> And desolation saddens all thy green:
> One only master grasps the whole domain,
> And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain:
> No more thy glassy brook reflects the day,
> But chok'd with sedges, works its weedy way.
> Along thy glades, a solitary guest,
> The hollow-sounding bittern guards its nest;
> Amidst thy desert walks the lapwing flies,
> And tires their echoes with unvaried cries.
> Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
> And the long grass o'ertops the mould'ring wall;
> And trembling, shrinking from the spoiler's hand,
> Far, far away, thy children leave the land.
> (*The Deserted Village*, 35-50)

Capel Lofft is, in his preface, in effect patting Bloomfield on the head for being a good, obedient Christian labourer, who knows that feudal subservience and gratitude will bring its reward in the hereafter:

> When the *Spirit* of CHRISTIANITY declares "*blessed are the meek*," every heart which considers what meekness is, feels the truth of that

29: Compare this, from his *Letter … from an Earwig, deploring the Loss of all her Children* (1824): "I am surrounded by wood-peckers, jack-daws, magpies, and other devouring creatures, and think myself very unfortunate. Yet, perhaps, if I could know the situation of some larger creatures – I mean particularly such as would tread me to death if I crossed their path – they may have complaints to make as well as I".

> blessedness. It may smooth the way, and prevent impediments, which a different temper raises to temporal felicity: it certainly assures that Heaven which is *within*: and is a pledge and anticipation of the Heaven hereafter.

Had Bloomfield (or Jiles) been a Painite, we may doubt whether Lofft would have bothered to assist him at all.

In fact *The Farmer's Boy* gives a very partial account of country life. Jiles, the Boy, exists in a social vacuum. He speaks only to himself (*Winter,* 283-302: his interlocutor, seeming to be a spectre, is in fact an ash-tree). Only the Dairy-maid and his master speak to him (*Spring*, 167, and *Winter,* 80-126). There is another, "lovely MAID" depicted (*Summer* 169-80), with a "full, ripe bosom, exquisitely white;" but Jiles is not interested in her, and all she takes part in is

> In many a local tale of harmless mirth,
> And many a jest of momentary birth …

It was Harriet Martineau who mocked the blindness of Wordsworth about the sex-lives of country folk:

> I, deaf, can hardly conceive how he, with eyes & ears, & a heart which leads him to converse with the poor in his incessant walks, can be so unaware of their personal state. I dare say you [*Elizabeth Barrett*] need not be told how sensual vice abounds in rural districts. Here [*in the Lakes*] it is flagrant beyond anything I ever could have looked for; & here, while every Justice of the peace is filled with disgust, and every clergyman with (almost) despair at the drunkenness, quarrelling & extreme licentiousness with women, – here is dear good Wordsworth for ever talking of rural innocence, & deprecating any intercourse with towns, lest the purity of his neighbours should be corrupted![30]

It's hard to believe things were any tamer in Suffolk a mere thirty years before; but either Bloomfield didn't see it, or thought it unworthy of inclusion. I'm sure its omission increased the respectability and saleability of his poem. Jiles seems, from Bloomfield's hints, to be a beginner in sexual matters:

> The fullcharg'd Udder yields its willing streams,
> While MARY sings some lover's amorous dreams,
> And crouching Jiles beneath a neighbouring tree,
> Tuggs o'er his pail, and chants with equal glee … (*Spring*, 197-200)

30: Quoted Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth*, *A Life*, pp.410-11.

Death, without which any rural scene is incomplete, is – with the striking exception of the slaughtered lambs – absent from *The Farmer's Boy*. No human actors meet their ends in it; even the Mad Girl – we're informed in a note – got over it and led a normal life. This is so throughout much of Bloomfield's poetry. Even when his protagonists are extremely old, and might without strain or excessive grief have been depicted as dying content and surrounded by family and well-wishers, Bloomfield appears willing to face few scenes of terminal closure. Richard and Kate, the Baucis and Philemon, the Darby and Joan, of *Rural Tales* (1802), live on beyond the poem's end: and old Sir Ambrose Higham, the focal character of *May Day with the Muses* (1822), even though the fact that he "goes to town no more", is the talk of the territory, survives the poem still hale and hearty.

However, in *Good Tidings* and *To A Spindle* Bloomfield writes movingly of the deaths of his parents. And here is the last verse of *The Horkey*:

> Poor Judie! – Thus Time knits or spins
> The worsted from Life's ball!
> Death stopt thy tales, and stopt thy pins,
> – And so he'll serve us all.

The Manuscripts

Two manuscripts of *The Farmer's Boy* exist. I quote them by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, where their call numbers are fMS Eng 776 and MS Eng 776.1.The first is reproduced below by itself, the second below in parallel with the first edition, made by Capel Lofft. Both are fair copies, bound. fMS Eng 776 is an early one, for the press, with Lofft's corrections, and numerous illustrations glued in with care.[31] MS Eng 776.1 is from 1801, and is prefaced by two notices. The first is glued in:

> To My Dear Charlotte;
> Sincerely wishing that She may be as mild as *Phoebe*, as frank as *June* – and as worthy as Peggy Meldrum.
> Rob Bloomfield
> May 19. 1817.

31: For a discussion of the illustrations, see BCB 87-91, and Graver, Bruce, *Illustrating* The Farmer's Boy, *Romanticism* 9:2 (2003) pp.157-75.

Charlotte is Bloomfield's daughter, born April 20th 1801. Peggy Meldrum (a good Suffolk name) is the heroine of Bloomfield's poem *The Broken Crutch* from his 1806 volume *Wild Flowers*.

The second notice is part of the manuscript:

> City Road, London.
> Oct^{r} 8th 1801.
>
> The Original Manuscript of my "Farmer's Boy" is not likely ever to be in my possession again; it being left, by Mr Lofft's desire, in the hands of J Hill Esq. of Henrietta Street Covent Garden; where it now remains; except about two hundred and Sixty lines of the <Poem> commencement of the Poem which are lost.
>
> Wishing to possess a Manuscript like the Original, I meen that the right hand page of this Book shall contain a genuine ***Copy of the Poem As I wrote it at first;***[32] and that the *left hand page* shall shew the amendments and alterations introduced by Mr Lofft. This I can do *now* while my memory retains the deviations; but, some years hence, I may not be able, and may then wish that I had done it when it was in my power.
>
> Robert Bloomfield

MS Eng 776.1 is therefore another fair copy, made by Bloomfield for himself after the first two editions. It has Capel Lofft's corrections recorded on the left-hand side, together with several notes, and what Bloomfield wishes to record of the original on the right. This presents the text almost as it left his pen, and before Lofft got at it. Bloomfield mentions making the copy in a letter to his brother George, dated November 30th 1801. The letter also shows what a success the poem was financially:

> I mentioned nothing about money; but you see his answer (inclosed) mentions it, and is in all points highly satisfactory. The fifth and sixth edition of 'Giles' comprise together 10,000 copies, the new work 7,000, so that I have at any rate to share the profits of 17,000 books, for which (at full price) the public, if they are goodnatured enough to buy them, will pay no less than 36,025*l*.! I have felt sad, and uncommon trouble of mind; and I doubt it is not over yet. I am writing a fair copy of 'The Farmer's Boy,' exactly as you saw it in MS., and marking the alterations made by Mr. Lofft, and adding notes of information, &c. This I do, that as I have not the original, something in *my own hand* may be found hereafter; and I do it too to improve my handwriting: I shall have it bound carefully. I have by me the real original MSS. of the new volume, and shall bind them too. The

32: The phrases are more heavily inked-over than the rest.

> printers say now that it will not be out before Christmas; but I think that it will.[33]

Why Bloomfield wished "to possess a Manuscript like the Original" isn't clear. Sometimes he seems, in his notes, to agree with Lofft's changes, sometimes he demurs. Much as he owed to Lofft, he seems nostalgic for the time before Lofft came between him and his work. Lofft had deprived him of his real voice, and, as it were, dubbed over another, foreign one – for the market. Bloomfield wanted a non-commercial version of his poem, one in which he and his family could hear what he had heard when he wrote it. To this end he put back all the Suffolk vowel sounds and "un-grammatical" subject-verb relationships which he'd originally intended, but which Capel Lofft had erased in the interest of class-politeness (see next section).

For my first text below, I've reproduced the original manuscript, followed it with the first edition, and then, in parallel with the first edition, the fair copy Bloomfield mentions, which he made for his own reading.

The Text

I refer below to "social collaboration"; but the whole business of setting the poem up in type for the frst edition, and adding preface and notes, was done without Bloomfield being consulted once.

The Farmer's Boy was at first written partly in a Suffolk dialect which is today (2013) by no means extinct, though it's less common than it once was, as the great Tsunami of Esturary English creeps further and further north with the expansion of the London commuter-belt. Some rhymes – "plough / blow" for example, "repose / Ouse," or even, despite Bloomfield's note, "gate / feet," (at *Spring,* 65-6, 249-50, and 297-8) – work better with Suffolk vowel-sounds. The up-and-down of Suffolk cannot be reproduced in print (we need a CD), and so its main feature noticeable on the page is the suppression of the terminal "s" in third-person singular verbs, with which everyone who's been to the Ipswich area (at least) will be familiar (Lofft mentions this in his Preface). Thus *Spring,* 66 was originally, "While health impregnates every breeze that blow," and *Winter,* 18, "No nourishment in frozen pastures grow". At

33: Hart, pp.17-18.

Autumn, 204 "lo! the structure rise" has to give way to the correct "see the structure rise." At *Autumn,* 320, the original and authentic "many a human leader daily shine" has to go. Capel Lofft uses the text's preparation as a process of "social collaboration" by removing every sign of the fact that it's been written in the dialect of the county in which he lives. He's proud of his work:

> My part has been this, and it has been a very pleasing one: to revise the MS. making occasionally corrections with respect to Orthography, and sometimes in the grammatical construction. The corrections, in point of Grammar, reduce themselves almost wholly to a circumstance of provincial usage, which even well educated persons in *Suffolk and Norfolk* do not wholly avoid; and which may be said, as to general custom, to have become in these Counties almost an established Dialect:... that of adopting the plural for the singular termination of verbs, so as to exclude the s. But not a line is added or substantially alter'd through the whole poem. I have requested the MS. to be preserv'd for the satisfaction of those who may wish to be satisfied on this head.[34]

The "MS." to which he refers is fMS Eng 776. As Clare, however, wrote:

> Received another letter from the Editor of Bloomfields Correspondence requesting me to alter a line in my Sonnets on Bloomfield … Editors are troubled with nice amendings and if Doctors were as fond of amputations as they are of altering and correcting the world would have nothing but cripples[35]

For "amputation", see below, Bloomfield's note to *Spring*, 179-80.

In his 1817 burlesque *The Monks and the Giants*, also known as *Whistlecraft* (the poem which inspired Byron's *Beppo*), John Hookham Frere, speaking as a Bloomfield, is ironical at the expense of both Bloomfield and Lofft:

> Squire Humphrey Bamberham, of Boozley Hall,
> (Whose name I mention with deserv'd respect),
> On market-days was often pleas'd to call,
> And to suggest improvements, or correct;
> I own the obligation once for all,
> Lest critics should imagine they detect
> Traces of learning, and superior reading,

34: For an account of Lofft's changes to the poem's notes, and Bloomfield's response, see White, pp.86, 97 and 100.
35: *John Clare By Himself*, p.225.

Beyond, as they suppose, my birth and breeding.

Papers besides, end transcripts most material,
He gave me when I went to him to dine;
A trunk full, one coach-seat, and an imperial,
One band-box — But the work is wholly mine;
The tone, the form, the colouring etherial,
'The vision and the faculty divine,'
The scenery, characters, and triple-rhymes,
I'll swear it — like old Walter of the Times.[36]

Lofft had in 1781 published *Eudosia, or a Poem on the Universe*. He had also, in 1792, brought out an edition of *Paradise Lost*, "printed from the First and Second Editions collated, the original orthography restored; the punctuation corrected and extended. With various readings". He was thus an expert – though no humorist.

In claiming correct orthography and grammar as his sole aims in editing Bloomfield, Lofft is being disingenuous. What he does is to take the roughly-styled work and appropriate it into the safe, middle-class tradition of versification that he knows. It's not the case that "not a line is added or substantially alter'd". Indecency is another of his targets. There's little or no sex in the poem, but *Summer,* 141-2 changes under his hand from

Each sturdy Mower emulous and strong
Whose writhing loins meridian heat defies

to

Each sturdy Mower emulous and strong
Whose writhing form meridian heat defies

Autumn, 343 alters from

And many a clamorous Hen and capon gay

to

And many a clamorous Hen and cockrel gay

36: *The Monks, and the Giants (Prospectus and Specimen of an intended National Work, by William and Robert Whistlecraft, of Stowmarket, in Suffolk, Harness and Collar-Makers..:* (John Murray, 1817), III sts.28-9.