

RICHARD JEFFERIES & CIRENCESTER

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Richard Jefferies was chief reporter of the *Wilts & Glos Standard* in 1868-69 and 1872-73, right at the end of the Golden Age of (arable) farming. The plaque on the former *Standard* offices in Dyer Street describes him as a Wiltshire writer. He was and he wasn't. He was clever at covering his tracks and it is not always possible to tell when he is writing about Wiltshire or Gloucestershire or the London area, but one of his most important books, *Hodge and his Masters* (1880), is about Gloucestershire, Cirencester even. In *Hodge* he collected the articles about Cirencester he had published in the *Standard* in 1878-79. He called the town, 'Fleeceborough' (and also Woolbury) but another reporter confirmed that Fleeceborough was a faithful representation of Cirencester as Jefferies had seen it. Few towns can have had such a penetrating account written about them, a rare equivalent being Tewkesbury in the 1920s, immortalised by John Moore in *Portrait of Elmbury*.

Jefferies was the bookish son of a small, struggling farmer at Coate, just south of Swindon. He was thus a Moonraker. Yet he descended on his mother's side from the Gydes of Painswick, a printing family; lived as a boy on the outskirts of London with an aunt who was married to a printer; and became an outstanding observer of agriculture, nature and country life while doing little towards getting his own hands dirty. He was accused of idleness by undiscerning neighbours, yet in truth he was working at preternaturally close observation, as his diaries and subsequent writings show. To make a living he wrote about anything and everything, which has restricted his literary reputation, but his trademark style in non-fiction was quiet, detailed description of the everyday. This seems easy and mundane until one tries to do it oneself. Few people succeed (in my view one of them was Neville Shute, who draws the reader into his adventure stories despite utterly prosaic first chapters). Jefferies put in a lot of writing practice and at the end of the 1860s published in the *Standard* instalments of a dull, conventional and perhaps happily unfinished history of Cirencester. *Hodge* is nothing like that; it gets right inside Cirencester as he saw it. The writing is deceptive and entrancing.

Even leaving aside the local obsession with the Romans, the histories of Cirencester up to and including the current section in the Victoria County History lack much structure and show little familiarity with a social science approach. What I want to do here is set out the history as phases of

development in order to explain what type of town Jefferies was seeing and what its legacy was. After that I will try to distil what he tells us about it. I divide Cirencester's history before and until Jefferies's day into three phases of impacts and responses to disruptive technologies. This sounds ultra-modern but was the long and short of it.

In the first phase, cloth-making was the common occupation, as it was of so many southern towns in the Middle Ages. When that faded, the second phase was a much more original and unusually successful transition to becoming an entrepot for wool. Cirencester was already the least specialised town in Gloucestershire at the start of the 17thC, being a place of traders. After another successful makeover to a third phase – which was when Jefferies saw it – the town had become or reverted to being an agricultural market, service centre and superior leisure centre. The earlier shift from manufacturing woollen cloth to marketing the raw material was however the truly formative (and unsung) development. It has left many architectural traces for us to see. By Jefferies's day the final collapse of manufacturing had left a legacy of overcrowding, poverty and ill-health of which, happily, the testimony of only one of the 'courts' survives. But at one time, according to the *Gloucester Journal*, 'the line of demarcation between rich and poor is more clearly drawn than in many places.'

The disruption that had upset Cirencester's medieval woollen industry was competition from mills tapping the stronger water power of the Stroud valley. David Rollison thinks that Cirencester's industry shrank because of the lack of rivulets on which mills might be sited. The limited power generated at the existing mills was insufficient for them to raise their output (or cut their prices enough) to compete with the better-endowed Stroud valley mills. But resource endowment arguments are seldom complete. Commercial intentions are so much less obvious and so much worse recorded than physical features of mill sites and stream flow, and get undeservedly short shrift. In my view, Cirencester may have been as much drawn out as pushed out of manufacturing. It is likely that the profits of a mart for wool positively siphoned capital and enterprise away from the town's comparatively marginal manufacturing enterprises. All such transitions are hard to pin down given the fragmentary and usually non-statistical evidence; particular forms of enterprise lingered for a long time, overlapping their successors, which obscures transitions.

The transition from manufacturing to wool-stapling is the interesting one because it is so poorly defined. A vision of the Cotswolds as grassy downs grazed by sheep became anachronistic early on. Between about 1650 and 1750 there was an inversion of land use in southern England. The vales, including

the Vale of Isis or Thames that stretches south-east from Cirencester, were increasingly put down to grass, whereas the wolds were ploughed up and turned over to mixed farming based on hurdled sheep. These arable sheep were kept for mutton and to manure the crops, and the wool that came from such well-fed animals was coarse. Wool was brought in from elsewhere to be handled by the wool-staplers who sorted, combed, graded and redistributed it. This may have started to eclipse manufacturing in Cirencester as early as the mid-14thC.

Who was responsible for the transition from manufacturing is not clear – whether manufacturers who had some capital and had seen the writing on the wall, or fresh business entrants. Fortunately for the town, it was not very hard for newcomers to gain a footing, given that in the sixteenth century Cirencester had no proper guild to confine trades to local men. Maybe a big part of the shift was brought about by Quaker and nonconformist enterprise, since those sects were prominent traders with far more than local contacts. The original Baptist, Quaker and Unitarian chapels were reportedly built within two years of 1673.

Southern towns typically experienced a withering away of their cloth manufacturing but to remain prosperous via a large-scale replacement by middlemen was distinctly unusual. Neither Cirencester nor Tetbury had the ‘site advantage’ of natural resources: their water power was weak compared with the Stroud valley. Labour was not so cheap as to permit their manufacturers to offset fast streams or to compete later with the availability of coal for steam power in the north of England. (Witney’s blanket manufacture seems to have been the regional anomaly in that it alone successfully used cheap labour to overcome its disadvantages of little water power and no coal). Yet Cirencester and Tetbury did have a ‘locational advantage’. Both were close to sources of demand in the Wiltshire and Gloucestershire cloth industries and also inherited reasonable road systems along which distant, especially Midland, wool could come.

The main impetus for change was probably entrepreneurship but is difficult to fathom from the available evidence – it is probably easier to understand in the case of Chippenham, where the answer seems to have been individual enterprise inspired by political ambition. The Fludyer family moved there and became the greatest wool factors in the country. Why so few other clothing towns similarly reinvented themselves as entrepôts is not obvious. The cloth trade in Newbury, for instance, declined during the seventeenth century without any sign that it might turn to trading in wool, but unlike Cirencester it was not close to manufacturing areas with high demand for wool. Cirencester was one of the few places to reinvent itself.

Men in distant Yorkshire were aware of Cirencester as a significant home for wool staplers. I have an account book of 1829-1830 from the marvellously named Idle in the West Riding which carefully notes the address of a Cirencester wool stapler whose dwelling house, premises, counting house and mill were at the north end of Gloucester Street. This was The Old House in Gloucester Street and he was Thomas Slatter, who was also a fellmonger and tanner dealing in sheepskins, as well as being active in local politics. He died in 1860, not long before Jefferies arrived.

Physical evidence of the transition to wool-stapling survives on the ground. Cirencester offers at least one big wool warehouse and associated counting house, besides a Tallier's Cottage to which the name has only lately been restored. The Palladian townhouse which is now Lloyds Bank was built for a wool merchant about 1730 but had become a bank by about 1790. The prosperous marketing phase was on the brink of shrinking away in its turn because of competition from overseas supplies of wool. In addition there were developments in transport and communications that at first worked to the town's advantage, then to its disadvantage: the large through traffic of coaches was immediately halved by the railway. Admittedly we have no idea exactly when the stage waggons which had brought vast quantities of wool from far away were replaced or what happened to them: plenty of farm waggons survive but no road waggons except in pictures and one model in the new Marlborough museum.

Accordingly, by 1868, when Jefferies was writing for the *Wilts & Glos Standard* at the age of only 20, the town had undergone two major transformations and was experiencing a third. It now ceased to be a centre to which wool was brought in quantities from the South Midlands and as far afield as Lincolnshire and Pembrokeshire. The wool was meant to supply the manufacturers of Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, most of whom however collapsed by about 1830, undermining Cirencester's function of warehousing and redistributing the raw material. Wool buyers had already begun to short-circuit the market by riding out to farms to strike individual bargains. Gloucestershire clothiers even began to travel to Saxony for higher quality wool and were quick to tap Australian supplies. These developments amounted to disintermediation and are neither treated as a whole nor specifically explained in the histories.

Population figures indicate that Cirencester's growth was already slow in the eighteenth century. During that period of national expansion the town's sluggishness was a come-down for what had been such an active and prosperous place: 4,000 people in 1700 but only 4,130 a century later. By historical

standards the eventual collapse of the Cirencester textile marketing trades was abrupt: 13 per cent of the 600 householders entitled to vote were employed in textiles in 1790 but only nine per cent by 1812. There were 34 wool combers in 1790 but only 17 by 1812. By 1822 Cirencester had more attorneys than wool-staplers. In 1811 it was described as ‘a clean neat town all whitewashed’ though it still needed an Improvement Act in 1825. The population may have reached 8,431 by 1881 but this does not compare with growth in the industrial cities.

Fresh manufacturing alternatives scarcely prospered. A carpet factory employing 100 hands closed about 1839. A mill that lasted at Stratton until 1841 existed only to provide work for the poor. Edge-tool manufacturing also dwindled away. Other efforts were small beer: in 1850 Richard Haviland was a machine-maker in Cricklade Street and others followed him there and in Watermoor, but none made the town into a Sheffield or Birmingham. Haviland or perhaps his father sold long-case clocks in the market place and these sometimes come up for auction today, but they were high-class consumer goods appropriate for the market town and leisure centre that mid-Victorian Cirencester had become. Clock-making was a craft, not an industry employing any numbers; probably it involved only painting the dials and producing the cases for movements made elsewhere.

For all of Cirencester’s individual features, such as domination by the Bathursts and the founding of the agricultural college, what Jefferies found in the 1860s was a market town servicing local agriculture and providing a genteel life for those who could afford it. Fleeceborough might almost be thought an anachronistic label since wool stapling had faded away, though until 1962 leaving among its fossils a pub in Cricklade Street called the Bishop’s Blaize, after the patron saint of wool combers. Wool had been sold in the Boot Hall but by the late eighteenth century the sale was shrinking. The Corn Hall replaced the Boot Hall in 1863 during the euphoria of the Golden Age of High Farming but ironically on the verge of the arable depression. Cirencester’s function was as a market for live sheep. There was also bacon curing, flour milling and a horse fair, though it is not easy to gauge their scale or dates. Just as the great transitions had no sharp chronological edges, occupational phases overlapped and local historians are easily led to dwell on activities that had outlived their main period.

The life of the town seems more measured in *Hodge* than the alarming early stages of depression warranted because Jefferies was creating descriptive stills, not the script of a film. What definitely persisted were the steep social hierarchies indicated by the title *Hodge and his Masters* – they more than

persisted because opportunities for advancement shrank when trade and manufacturing were replaced by services and servility. As Jefferies says in *The Dewy Morn*, in the course of a fictionalised account of imparking and dominance by a great mansion, ‘our towns are governed by servility or clique; true self-government is unknown.’ He was cautious enough not to say the same of Cirencester.

In the countryside Hodge was perpetually in debt and so were the farmers, though Hodge had to borrow for consumption and the farmers to invest. In Cirencester poverty was severe. The town’s built-up area was hemmed in by estates and mansions, obliging workers’ housing and courts to be erected behind existing dwellings. Over-crowding was grotesque. Forty per cent of children in Cirencester died before they were ten. At the start of the 1890s infant mortality was well above the national average (an average that included all the dark, satanic mill-towns) and unvaccinated illnesses and deaths were higher than in London. Precisely when building escaped its confines is unclear, though the effect can be seen in what are now inner roads still called ‘lanes’. They are said to have been lanes in the fields surrounding the medieval borough but were eventually overrun by the town’s expansion. Meanwhile a number of suburban villas appeared as the houses, *inter alia*, of rich incomers attracted by Cirencester’s emergence as a centre for fox-hunting – it was called the Melton (Mowbray) of the West. Every year the White Rajah of Sarawak rented a house for the hunting. When Jefferies experienced it, leisure was a large part of the town’s role, though he is more interested in its business.

By 1912 Tetbury had perhaps become even more reliant on expenditures related to hunting. The author Whyte-Melville moved there to be able to ride with the Beaufort and Vale of White Horse hunts; he died in the field and is buried there. Both towns were grotesquely unequal societies and in Cirencester’s case the insanitary courts described by the best local historian, K. J. Beecham, were not merely ringed by fashionable villas but were cheek-by-jowl with the Bathurst’s mansion, protected by what is reputed to be the tallest yew hedge in Europe.

What Jefferies saw in Cirencester was therefore a market town more closely overshadowed than most by a great house. It was the home of the country’s first agricultural college. He entered a town that had now become an elite leisure centre, even Quakers being assimilated by ‘society’, including hunting society. The immensely prosperous Bowlys moved out to Siddington House. Whereas merchants and manufacturers fell from 8.6% to 5.9% of the population between 1768 and 1802, gentlemen and professionals rose from 3% to 9%. The professionals serviced the countryside around, one notable example

being John Bravender FGS, of Bravender & Son, who wrote the very sharp Royal Agricultural Society Prize Essay on 'Farming of Gloucestershire' in 1850 and became Professor of Engineering and Land Surveying at the Royal Agricultural College. He was prominent in town affairs and topped the local government poll in 1876. He was a true Victorian polymath, actively interested in geology, meteorology, archaeology, cartography, canals and railways, besides his day job in surveying, agriculture, water supply and land drainage. He may also have been a nurseryman and had interests in a tile manufactory, although it is not easy to be sure this was not some other family member. Certainly his son, Thomas Beverley Bravender, continued the land agency after his father's death and maintained their shared interest in Roman finds.

John Bravender was closely associated with the great scientific agriculturist, John Buckman, who was sacked by the clerical principal of the Royal Agricultural College in one of the scandalous episodes in which the Church of England tried to suppress Darwinian research. When Buckman was forced out his botanic garden was ploughed up, as described by Hugh Torrens in 'James Buckman (1841-1884): the scientific career of an English Darwinian thwarted by religious prejudice'. Jefferies would have known all these people.

On the bright side, the prosperity of the wool trade and lack of many manufacturing replacements has left some fairly striking seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses and streets. Stone lasts better than timber framing and brick so that we can still see an interesting, if haphazard, selection of the buildings Jefferies saw. Reece and Catling give useful maps of the buildings extant at successive periods. Many early ones do survive. Yet it is merely chance if they fairly represent the town's history. As Derek Hurst says in *Sheep in the Cotswolds* archaeological evidence is too indirect to tell us about the really important matter of food supply and in my view the same goes for architectural history. For a reconstruction, documentary evidence is needed too.

Jefferies knew the whole gamut of local farming, from hard-scrabble farms like his father's at Coate to the ultramodern steam-driven model farm run by George Stephenson's off-sider just west of the College and the other advanced one at Chesterton. He understood it was the town that knitted agriculture together, selling the inputs it needed, marketing its produce and providing the services to organise it all. In his day the town would have been nothing without the wealth created by farming in the surrounding region, which was the result of drudgery by Hodge, the farm labourer.

What does he tell us about Cirencester? It was dominated by ‘the Wall’ and ruled by ‘He’, Lord Bathurst, who kept a low profile but whose opinions were the subject of speculation at the level of Kremlinology. Everyday matters were debated in the parliaments of the inns, each the favourite of a fixed clientele. One of the inns Jefferies calls the Jason, presumably meaning the Fleece. Real business was centred on the two banks, called Old and New, and was mediated by the solicitors. The banks were Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and like all duopolies were probably not very competitive commercially, although the Old Bank had the more social prestige. Jefferies was well aware of the flows of money and credit between the banks and head offices in London and noted that absolutely all business was carried on by cheque. He was no-one’s fool and emphasised the device of the show of wealth which the banks put on in order to appear trustworthy. What a stress test might have revealed, who knows? But everyone did realise that credit fluctuated with the agricultural economy.

While the economy remained at a fairly average level the social picture was of a settled hierarchy. Rollison uses the term ‘associational community’ for Jefferies’ Cirencester, after the German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies. This means that people substantially behaved along lines that they and everyone else understood, without all the rules being written down. Grasping how the ‘associational community’ actually worked needs a contemporary literary account. Few towns possess that, but Cirencester does, which is where *Hodge and his Masters* comes in. The town certainly had an ‘attention structure’ which Jefferies elaborates by describing the graduated reception of people calling at the office of his friend, John Mullings, the solicitor. But that was just the class system and has hardly changed today even though Cirencester’s economic base has become so much broader. A noisy, radical opposition existed who would have liked to overturn everything: Jefferies did not rate their chances highly. All told he did not talk much about novelties, though restaurants were a recent introduction, and – given the flow of his prose – it would be easy to overlook some minor features of the day. One was that office personnel were all male, which we might not expect given that the females of the time were likely to be more biddable than the larrikins Jefferies watched at the solicitor’s. (In 2017 Mullings’ new solicitors and trainee solicitors were all women). Well-to-do professionals had already moved to residences on the outskirts, which we might not expect so early. Their womenfolk socialised downtown over coffee and were presumably shifting the balance of dining out to the new restaurants, away from farmers stamping their boots in the very rustic inns.

Associational community or not, a lot of rules were written down. Consider the solicitor's office:

'Bundles of letters tied with thin red tape, letters loose, letters unopened; parchment deeds with the seals and signature just visible; deeds with the top and the words, 'This indenture', alone showing out from the confusion; deeds neatly folded; broad manuscript briefs; papers fastened with brass fasteners; papers hastily pinned together; old newspapers marked and underlined in red ink; a large sectional map, half unrolled and hanging over the edge; a small deed-box, the lid open, and full of blue paper in oblong strips; a tall porcupine-quill pen handle sticking up like a spire; pocket-books; books open; books with half a dozen papers in them for markers; altogether an utter chaos. But the confusion is only apparent; the master mind knows the exact position of every document...'

This was just as well since otherwise it would not have been much of an advertisement for Mullings. Still, it is no surprise that for want of space the firm had a very large archive to deposit in the Gloucester Record Office. It is more surprising that much of the routine copying of documents was outsourced to London – this in the 1860s!

Cirencester was truly a market town and Jefferies presents a picture of bustle and good living in its main inns – the meals are simple, he says, and so are the waiters! Jefferies is not usually one to make digs like this but he did not think much of the poor literacy and even worse the indecisiveness of ordinary people, especially country people. Not much reading between the lines is needed to see that he was tired of arm-wrestling many of them into saying what they really meant in the advertisements they wished to insert in the *Standard*. The labour market depended on the newspaper, the mop fair already being on its way out. Farmers were advertising for hands, workers for jobs. But Jefferies was writing of the very end of the 1860s. The National Education Act was not passed until 1870 and widespread literacy would take another generation to establish.

In the commercial agriculture and rural society of lowland England change has been evident for centuries. As Lorna Sage says in *Bad Blood*, 'ways of life have been dying out in rural England time out of mind, at least for the two hundred and fifty years since the great wave of eighteenth-century enclosures. It's the sense of an ending that's timeless.' Jefferies does not give us a sense that the society he saw was coming to an end, his portrayal is too static for that. He had only the faintest premonition that within a very few years of *Hodge* agricultural depression would upend rural society. He was uncritical of Cirencester's social divisions in his day, preferring to concentrate on its

workings and cosier aspects of middle-class life. His is not a rounded picture; he knew too well who was going to read his articles in the *Standard* and buy a book called *Hodge and his Masters*. Nevertheless he provides an eloquent and, in its own terms, enjoyable insight into mid-Victorian Cirencester. Few towns can boast of the same.