

# The Tolpuddle Martyrs

The name Standfield is linked to a group of farm labourers from Tolpuddle in Dorset who set up one of the first unions in 1834. Our Standfields, while not direct descendants, but are never-the-less relatives of some of the martyrs. Here is a short history of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

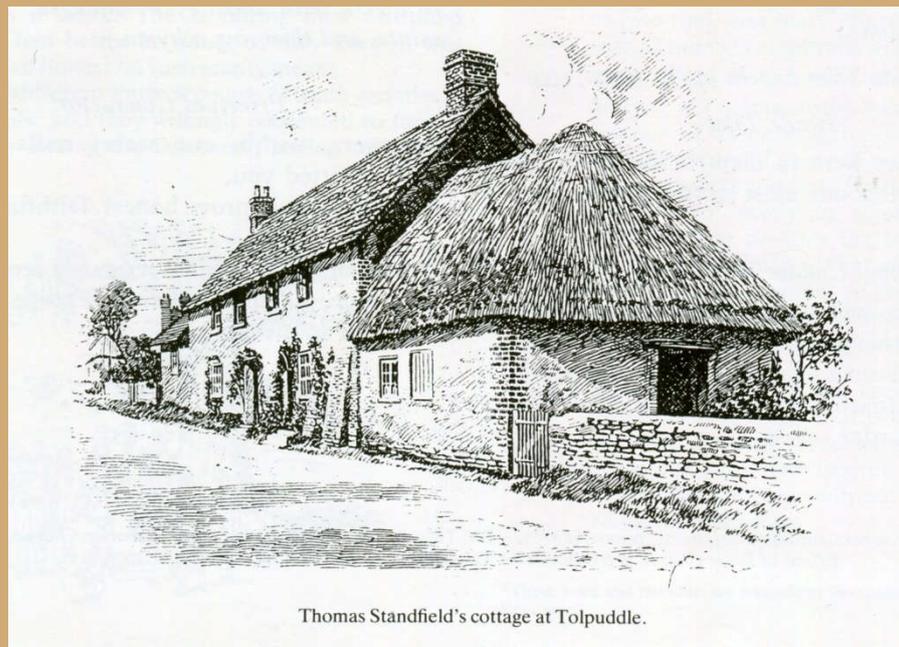
The Tolpuddle Martyrs were six farm labourers from the village of Tolpuddle in Dorset. In the six were Thomas Standfield and his son John. The leader of the group was George Loveless, Thomas Standfield's brother-in-law; Thomas was married to Loveless' sister Dinnah. The other three members were James Brine, who later was to marry one of Thomas Standfield's daughters, James Loveless, brother of leader George, and James Hammat.

In the early 1830s there was much unrest amongst farm labourers in rural England. The Tolpuddle labourers had a particular gripe. Their wages were 9 shillings a week when the average across rest of Dorset and indeed England was 10 shillings. The Tolpuddle labourers took their grievance to the local magistrates. The result being their wage was reduced to eight shillings with the warning that the wage would be further reduced to six shillings.

The farm workers began to meet and discuss what they could. Around England workers were organising themselves into unions for particular occupations. Unions had become legal about ten years earlier. The Tolpuddle farm workers decided to form a branch of the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers. They adopted rules and initiations that were common to other like organisations of workers. These initiations were similar to those of other Friendly Societies, Orangemen and Freemasons. Meetings were held and new members joined and were initiated.

Many of the meetings were held in Thomas Standfield's house in Tolpuddle.

In England the land owners the politicians and business owners were very nervous about the rise of unions. In Tolpuddle the MPs and magistrates thought they could bring down



Thomas Standfield's cottage at Tolpuddle.

the workers society by charging the leaders of the group with administering and illegal oath. Two new members to the Tolpuddle group turned out to be informers put up to joining by the local MPs and magistrates.



**Thomas Standfield's Cottage, Tolpuddle 1999**

A notice of caution was posted around the village on Saturday 22 February 1834. This notice warned that people who pushed workers into joining “illegal” Societies or Unions would be guilty of a felony and would be liable to be transported for seven years.

On the following Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> February all six labourers who would become known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs were arrested and marched the seven miles to Dorchester where they had their heads shaved and they were then put into gaol. They were there until the next Assizes (court hearing) which was on Saturday March 15. They went to trial on the Monday 17<sup>th</sup> and on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> were all sentenced to seven years transportation. On March 27<sup>th</sup> all but George Loveless were taken to a prison hulk in Portsmouth. George Loveless was too sick to make the journey.

On April 11, 1834 the five left England on the convict ship Surrey bound for New South Wales. They arrived at Sydney Cove on August 17 1834, a mere six months after their initial arrest in February. George Loveless had been moved to a hulk on April 5<sup>th</sup> but he was kept separate to the others and eventually transported to Van Dieman’s Land (Tasmania). It would be four years before he would he met any of them again.

In Australia the men each had particularly hard lives. They worked on chain gangs and on farms with few comforts. The Standfield were assigned to farms near Maitland, 150 miles from Sydney. Although on different farms Thomas and John were able to see each other occasionally until Thomas was moved to a farm further North at Williams River. Thomas had a particularly bad time. He was the oldest of the men and was a shepherd which meant living out with his flock of sheep, virtually camping out for long periods.

At home a movement to free the Tolpuddle had commenced immediately they had been taken into custody. On the 24<sup>th</sup> March five days after their sentencing a rally was held in London attended by over 10,000 people. A committee was formed to run a campaign and to look after the wives and families left without their men. Another rally in April attracted 30,000 people. Petitions were established all over the country. It was announced in parliament that some 800,000 people had signed them.

In June 1835, partial pardons were offered for the men, after further agitation in March 1836 the men were offered a full and free pardon.

Months, even years were to pass before the men got home. It appears even though the pardons were made the men's punishment continued for a period. The first home was George Loveless in June 1837. The two Standfields, James Loveless and James Brine arrived home in March 1838. James Hammat did not arrive home until 1839.

The committee that had run the campaign had enough money to settle the men as tenant farmers in Essex. Although pardoned Tolpuddle land owners were not happy to offer jobs to the men. Unfortunately this hostility to the men also transferred to Essex so at the expiry of their leases in Essex in 1845, all but James Hammat decided to emigrate to Canada and settled in the neighbourhood of London, Ontario. They led peaceful lives there. Initially they farmed but in 1874 John Standfield moved to East London where he ran the Dominion Hotel. They concealed their background and merged into the community. John Standfield became Mayor of his district and a J.P.