**THE LIFE AND TIMES of JOSEPH ARCH**

Joseph Arch was an English politician, born in Barford , Warwickshire on 10th Nov 1826, who played a key role in unionising agricultural workers and in championing their welfare.

He became a symbol of the farm workers’ struggle for a better life and was a household name in Victorian times. At the General Election held in 1885, he became the first agricultural worker to become a Member of Parliament. On his retirement in 1900 he returned to spend the last nineteen years of his long life in the tiny cottage in Barford in which he had been born.

Born in 1826 in the family cottage in Barford and started working 12 hour days at the age of 9 as a bird scarer for which he received 4d a day.( £1 in todays money). He progressed to being a plough boy and then mastered other agricultural skills, in particular hedge cutting, as the official champion hedge cutter of all England enabling him to move around the country earning a reasonable wage, but also witnessing the terrible conditions under which agricultural labourers lived and worked. He became a preacher in the Primitive Methodist Church which did not endear him to the local vicar. He married in 1847 and had seven children. He sought to further his education by reading newspapers and became a supporter of Liberalism and a well-known orator. In 1898 the plight of the workers was described by the Countess of Warwick as

Bread was dear, and wages down to starvation point; the labourers were uneducated, under-fed, underpaid; their cottages were often unfit for human habitation, the sleeping and sanitary arrangements were appalling. In many a country village the condition of the labourer and his family was but little removed from that of the cattle they tended.

His connection with Wellesbourne came on February 21st in 1872 - on a wet and cold evening when he was invited to address a meeting of agricultural labourers outside the Stag’s Head Pub by the Chestnut Tree. Rather than the expected 30 or so turning up, there were over 2,000 people present, so the meeting took place under the Chestnut Tree in Chestnut Square. It was one of the defining political moments of the 19th century and an event which shook the British establishment to its core.

Further meetings led to the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers Union in May 1872 with Joseph Arch as president. He travelled the country speaking in towns and villages drumming up support for the union which soon had 86,000 members. It was an astonishing feat of management and drive against the landed establishment at a time of its greatest power and arrogance.

Such were the ‘messiah’ qualities of Jospeh Arch that many self-respecting union-minded agricultural labourers would display a portrait of Joseph Arch in their homes. He also became the subject of such rallying songs as

Joe Arch he raised his voice,

'twas for the working men,

Then let us all rejoice and say,

We'll all be union men.

More than a hundred thousand copies of Songs For Singing at Agricultural Labourers’ Meetings by Howard Evans was published and bought during this time. ‘The Persecutors’, is one of many of these songs from this book, sung during Union meetings, that payed homage to the role of Arch in their struggle.

After a strike organised by the union, the labourers won an increase in wages but the farm owners fought back and the Union folded in 1896 to be replaced by the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers in 1906.

In later life he served as a County Councillor for three years and was the first agricultural worker to become an MP, serving a Norfolk constituency in 1885-6 and 1892–1900. He is credited with being largely responsible for winning the vote for agricultural labourers in the Reform Act of 1885. He was even invited to Canada and the United States. This led to a scheme whereby some 40,000 distressed agricultural labourers from Britain were assisted in emigrating to Canada and Australia.

Retiring from Parliament before the 1900 General Election, Arch returned to his home in Barford, where he continued to live until his death nineteen years later. He died on 12th February 1919.

The old ‘Wellesbourne Chestnut Tree’ died in 1948 but the old meeting place was marked with a new Chestnut Tree, a commemorative stone and renamed Chestnut Square.

The National Union of Agricultural Workers honoured Arch in 1922 with an obelisk at his final resting place in Barford cemetery and in 1952 with a Commemorative Plaque in the Chestnut Square ‘bus shelter in Wellesbourne. The people of Barford remember their famous son- the pub in Barford, once the Red Lion is now named the Joseph Arch.

**Local events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of Joseph Arch:**

The [Museum of English Rural Life](https://merl.reading.ac.uk/) commissioned a poem by Jack Thacker - Put Your Hands Together

10th Feb 2019 - A Living History Event - In the Footsteps of Joseph Arch - organised by Wellesbourne Allotments - see Press Release and event poster included

17th Feb 2019 - 2.30pm Memorial Service - Wellesbourne Methodist Church

2nd June 2019 - 11am-3pm Commemorative Walk organised by Wellesbourne Parish Council and 1st Wellesbourne Scout Group. Contact cllr.PaigeStimson@wellesbournepc.com