

We Unite to Assist Each Other

'We unite to assist each other.'

Notes on the history of the Friendly societies in Child Okeford



This Child Okeford Union Benefit Society banner will be familiar to many villagers, and it's motto will seem particularly apposite in these difficult times. We will come to it's history presently, but what do we know of the organisation that lay behind it?

The Victorians were very keen on 'Unions', they formed Temperance Unions, Christian Unions, even the Mothers Union – the only ones they weren't keen on were the trades unions. Another type of union – the benefits union- was hardly new; in one form or another it dated back to the 17th century and was designed to provide the poor labourer with money in the event of destitution, disease or death. The best known of these unions were known as 'Friendly' societies and social pressures in the 19th century led to a rapid growth in their numbers.

The principle was simple enough, for a modest weekly subscription you could insure yourself against disaster, for a bit more you could cover your wife and children. Most of these societies confined themselves to individual towns or villages, Beaminster for example had it's own society in 1762 but in 1825 a more adventurous proposal was put forward to create a Dorset- wide society. This was duly founded in 1826 and the following year the villagers of Child Okeford formed their own branch of the new 'Dorset Friendly Society'.

The larger Friendly societies were usually founded and sponsored by members of the local gentry who not only guaranteed their respectability but also helped subsidise them through a system of honorary subscriptions. The most notable family in the area were the Bakers of Ranston House in Shroton¹. In 1827, the oldest son of the family, Sir Edward, had just come of age [21 yr's in those days] and he was a promoter of the society. In celebration of the first anniversary of the Child Okeford branch [in 1828] "*a large party of gentleman, honorary*

members and the body of the club” met Sir Edward at Ranston House and “*walked in procession with a band of music and banners flying to church*” in Child Okeford. Afterwards they dined at the Baker Arms [at Sir Edward’s expense it must be said] where , John Newman, prepared an “*excellent dinner*” and the day was spent “*in the greatest harmony and conviviality*”.

The Dorset Friendly Society did not flourish. Unfortunately the board unwisely invested their capital in government bonds and when the government suddenly reduced the interest rate, at the end of 1828, the society could no longer meet its obligations and in January 1829 it was forced to close.

Sometime between 1828 and 1836, when he died, John Newman left the Baker Arms and founded a new pub in the village -one we know know as The Union Arms Inn. When precisely it was formed is not known nor why it was called the Union Arms although there may be a clue in his short obituary.

He was “*a man universally respected and esteemed....He was a member of the Friendly Society, and was attended to the grave by the whole of the members, 150 in number as well as by the great bulk of the inhabitants.*”

Since the Dorset Friendly Society had closed and there is not known to be any other in the neighbourhood it is probable that Newman founded the new society, basing it in his new inn, and most likely calling it the Child Okeford Union Benefit Society. We cannot be sure what kind of society it was but evidence from a much later time indicates that it was probably a ‘slate’ club. These originated in a custom amongst the customers of public houses to make a collection for burial expenses on the death of one of their fellow drinkers.² “*The accounts were of so simple a nature that they could be kept upon a slate and rubbed off from time to time.*” An important feature of slate clubs was their informality, they were run by the villagers themselves and although they did not provide the same level of benefit as the Friendly societies, they were popular because, unlike the Friendlies, if there were any profits left at the end of the year it was divided up and repaid to the members as a dividend.

For the next fifty eight years there there are no further records of the club but it must have remained in existence for in 1868 the banner shown above was purchased by it. After the failure of the Dorset Friendly society in 1829 it took another eighteen years until another Dorset wide society was set up. In 1847 the Dorset County Friendly Society [DCFS] was established at Dorchester, its President being Henry Ker Seymer the MP for Dorset and local resident who as it happened lived just down the road from Child Okeford, at Hanford House.

Nationally the DCFS was to become one of the most successful of all the Friendly societies, lasting well into the twentieth century but like many Friendlys the poor were distrustful of the gentry and no doubt felt they were being condescended to. This sense was not always

misplaced. At the 2nd annual meeting of the DCFS in 1848 Henry Ker Seymer noted that he had not been successful in recruiting in his area [Child Okeford and Hanford] as *‘the attention of the people had been of late given to the subject of emigration – and they could not give their attention to two subjects at once. [Laughter].’* He trusted those who remained would be induced by degrees to join the society. Since the poor were being forced to emigrate through abject poverty perhaps their minds were on other things.³

It wasn't until 1862, that the Child Okeford and Shillingstone branch of the DCFS was formed and in May 1863 they held their first annual meeting. As with the earlier meeting in 1828 and indeed most subsequent meetings, it was a grand affair. Setting off from the 'Endowed school room' the members marched all the way to Shillingstone led by the Shroton brass band, to visit the Honorary subscribers. They then marched back again before attending church and dinner at The Baker Arms. The Steward, Isaac Clench, a carpenter from Hanford then gave his report and commented that he had walked over 100 miles to collect money *“for their new banner”*. This cannot have been the surviving banner though, for this was bought in 1868.

So what did you get for your money? Well the benefits were based on the amount that you contributed but taking the number of members and dividing by the receipts the average subscription was a shilling a month. The purpose of the society was to relieve and maintain *“such of its members as may be disabled from work by sickness, accident or age”*. It provided benefits if the subscriber was ill but it did not cover unemployment – for that you still ended up in the workhouse. Boys over ten and girls over fifteen could join but married women could be covered on their husbands account by payment of a further 2s per annum with a sliding scale for children.⁴ For this they received the attention of the Society's surgeon who in addition to receiving a flat rate per capita [2s/6d] they could charge the society for any operations they carried out. For setting a fracture £1, for amputating a leg £5 and the same for a strangulated hernia. If the patient did not survive 36 hours the surgeon only got half the fee. The patient had to provide his own bandages.

These annual meetings of the Friendly Societies were probably the only real communal gatherings that the villagers enjoyed.⁵ They are probably the precursors of most village fetes and possibly even our own Hey Day. The descriptions of them could well have been written by Thomas Hardy. At Shroton in 1865 *“it was with merry hearts and glowing expectations that many a spruce rustic swain and buxom lass donned his and her “best bib and tucker”...in anticipation of a day of pleasure.”* *“a musical party consisting of artistes belonging to Sturminster Newton and Shroton”* were engaged to enliven the proceedings of the day. *“With waving banners and flags and carrying festooned wreaths of flowers the procession marched through the village which appeared ‘set by the ears’ at the unusual sounds of music, whilst the members themselves adorned as they were with holiday favours seemed bent on enjoying a thorough and honest days*

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pleasure.”

Two years later in 1867 the annual meeting of the DCFS was held in “*A pretty secluded village... gemmed with all the fairest flowers of spring..The village is embosomed in gardens and orchards and from the west and north-west affords many such pictures as a lover of rural scenery would delight in the dark mass of Hambledon Hill...*”

In other words Child Okeford. Perhaps the most impressive of all the meetings was held in 1876 at Shroton shortly after Sir Edward Baker Baker returned to the county after some years away. It started at the Stepleton bends and processed to Ranston house and was composed in order by;

Standard Bearer [Mounted]

Arms of Denmark [Mounted]

Flag with Prince of Wales’ Feathers [Mounted]

Blandford Brass Band

Shroton Banner

Members of Shroton and Iwerne Branch of DCFS

Childe Okeford Banner

Members of the Okeford and Shillingstone Branches

Pimperne Banner

Members of the Pimperne Branches

Sturminster Banner

[but no Sturminster members]

Members of Stourpaine and Durweston Branch

Royal Standard

Farmers of the neighbourhood forming a mounted escort

Union Jack

Tri-colour

The Carriage, with Sir Edward and Miss Baker drawn by 24 workmen and escorted by Mr T Fry and Mr H Barrett, tenant farmers

Blandford Drum and Fife Band

Flag [Sir Edward's Coat of Arms]

Shroton School Children headed by their master [Mr E D Harvey]

Flags and Bannerets

The neighbouring Gentry in carriages

Blandford Tradesmen in other vehicles.

The Villagers and other pedestrians in the rear.”

This massive assemblage was over $\frac{3}{4}$ mile long and composed of over 1500 men and women – the children were extra.

Despite the festivities many Friendly societies now began a long slow period of decline. Increasing regulation and costs led to fewer members and people turned to the cheaper and unregulated slate clubs. The problem for the local historian is that newspaper reports of the annual meetings are sporadic and unreliable. Their constitutions required them to meet annually but there are often large gaps in the newspaper coverage of their meetings. There are for example no accounts of meetings of the Child Okeford societies for the next seventeen years.

In 1893 we get the first mention in the papers of the Child Okeford “*Union Slate Club*”.⁶ There were 107 members and they paid the equivalent of £1 42p a year. Compared to the 12s that the members paid the DCFS in 1848 prices had certainly gone up. Since the members got back 75p of this in dividends it was not a bad deal. No mention is made of where they met and it is not until December 1898 that we get a specific reference to the “*Union Benefit Club*” meeting at the “*Union Arms Inn*” to distribute 87p in dividends.

There is now another gap in the records until August 1899 when the very first “Child Okeford Festival of Friendly Societies” was organised by the “Union Slate and Loan Club” [assisted by Dorset Friendly Society and the Society of Oddfellows].

It is probable that the Union Slate Club, the Union Benefit Club and the Union Slate and Loan Club, were all one and the same thing and were the probable successors to the Child Okeford Union Benefit Society established by John Newman in 1836. The problem is we cannot prove it and we cannot assume there was a continuity in the clubs existence. The 1899 account of the festival notes that the Slate Club was established in 1884 which clearly creates a problem for this

hypothesis.

The 1899 meeting was interesting for its topicality. Great social change was in the offing and this was reflected in the speech given by the Rector of Child Okeford, the Revd. J G Brymer. The Boer War would break out in October of that year and it was even being proposed in Parliament that £34m should be spent on pensions for the elderly. After the usual procession through the village, one hundred and twenty men and women sat down at the "Primrose League Hall". The dinner being provided by Hostess Adams of the Union Arms. It was "*all very well having a peace conference*" Brymer said, "*but England must have her army and navy. He was afraid the Army would shortly be involved in the Transvaal the Government having determined 'not to stand any more of President Kruger's nonsense [Applause]...The country did not belong to the Boers who were really robbers for they had 'trekked' their from the south. Englishmen and others had discovered the gold and diamond minesand yet Mr Kruger said they were to have no power in the ruling of the State. At last their voices had risen and Mr Kruger would be put down [Applause].*"

A man of strong opinions he didn't think much of the pension proposals either. After dinner there was a new innovation when "*a programme of sports was gone through*" by the men and boys. In the evening "*dancing and other pleasurable pastimes were indulged in.*" It's a poor reflection on life at the time that the conclusion was that "*From the all round success which attended the proceedings the promoters should be encouraged to relieve the monotony of village life again another year.*"

The next few years were a halcyon time for the Benefits societies. Festivals were held in 1900, 1901 and 1903. 1900 saw yet more innovation when, in addition to the sports activities in a field provided by Mr Frederick Baverstock, "*There were a number of travelling attractions in the fields to provide pleasure*"; in 1903 girls were admitted to the sports for the first time. 1902 saw the coronation of Edward VII and although the annual meeting of the DCFS was held in the village the usual festival was postponed⁷. In 1904 the "*Union Benefit Society Club*" held an annual fete but it does not appear that the DCFS or the Oddfellows joined in. There is no account of the fete but the advert for it invites "*TENDERS for ROUNDABOUTS or SWITCHBACKS or other AMUSEMENTS*"- the final innovation.

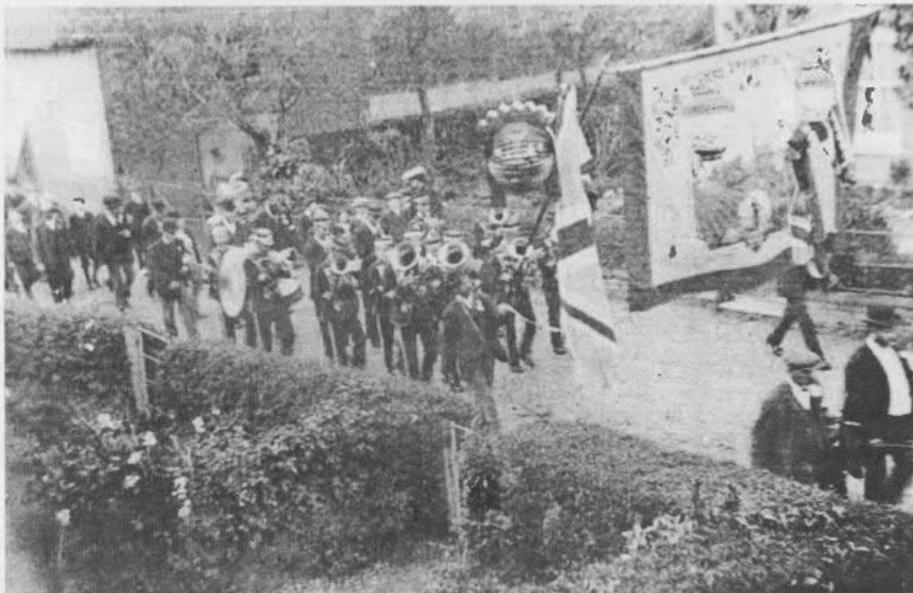
On each occasion the festival was held under the auspices of the Union Arms club although the names vary. In 1900 it is the "*Union Arms Slate Club*", in 1901 the advert for the festival was signed by Mr Hutchings the secretary of the Slate club and in 1903 it is the "*Child Okeford Union Benevolent Club*". It is also clear from those accounts that were published that all of the clubs were thriving throughout this period.

After 1904 there were no more fetes or festivals whether organised by the Slate club or not; after the war there were no more fetes and the weather turned bad. A report in 1925 noted that "*A few years ago a local representative committee...decided to hold an annual sports meeting....The*

venture however seemed to be dogged by misfortune for in three years only one of the meetings proved successful.” One was washed out completely and the other had to be abandoned because of foot and mouth in the area. The provision of village entertainment now fell to the sports clubs, the conservative association and others – but not the Friendly societies.

There are no more newspaper reports about any of the Friendly societies until 1928 when the “*Union Arms Slate Club*” distributed a dividend of 22s 10d to its members. During the 1930’s there are occasional reports about the slate club which was still flourishing with 99 members in 1930 and 140 members in 1940. The steward of the club being a Mr H Clench, whose family were involved with the rival DCFS back in 1862 and additional funding throughout this time was provided by the latest craze- whist drives. Oddly there are no accounts of the Child Okeford branch of the DCFS through this period even though the society was still thriving.

Child Okeford Union Benefit Society Banner (back)



Village Band with the Union Banner passing the old barn (now demolished) in The Hollow, before the First World War

Taken from ‘Child Okeford -A Dorset Village’ aka The Millennium Book

With the situation in Europe deteriorating 1937 saw the last recorded festivity involving the “*Child Okeford Slate Club*”. Two days before the coronation of King George VI another festival was held. Organised by the British Legion, The Girl Guides, The Slate Club and The Odd Fellows, it followed the usual format of a parade through the village to the church. In the afternoon a fancy dress procession, headed by the village band moved through the village up the Avenue to the Manor House. The children ran off a programme of sports and the British Legion provided them with tea and Mrs Bower [the rector’s wife] presented them with Coronation mugs. The adults were also treated to free tea and lunch and then had their own programme of sports before hush descended on the field – the famous King’s speech was then broadcast. After this

the company enjoyed community singing and in the evening there was a dance in the village hall where the music was provided by the 'Rhythmists' Dance Band".

It's worth remembering that immediately before the war there was no thought or consideration of a national health service, people were still expected to pay for their health care and there was still a need for the slate club. What comes as a surprise however is that a 'Women's Slate Club' was formed in 1937. It is not known if the membership was restricted to women but it was immediately popular as by the end of 1938 it had 136 members, had received £208 7s 6d in subscriptions, paid out £26 7s 6d in sickness benefit and £3 8s in death benefits. From now on it is the Women's Slate club that holds centre stage. Throughout the war they raised money through whist drives in aid of the Red Cross, Great Ormond Street Hospital, Aid to Russia, The Friendless Sailors Comforts fund and the RAF Pilots and Crew fund.

After the war with the establishment of the welfare state, the need for these societies diminished. The centenary meeting of the DCFS held at Shroton in 1847 was a sombre affair. The Secretary Mr Edwards regretted the effect the new institutions had had on "*the work of the many who out of consideration for others gave freely of their time and talents to help them.*" In January 1848 the DCFS was finally wound up.

The slate clubs appeared to be still going strong. The final newspaper reference to both the Union Arms Slate Club and the Women's Slate Club came in December 1950. At the time the Union Arms had 183 members with receipts of £312 17s whilst the women's club was doing even better with 311 members and receipts of £501 16s 4d. It seems unlikely that both clubs ceased to exist suddenly but there are no more records; we simply have no idea what happened to them.

The Child Okeford Banner.

The banner appears to have been made in 1868, the evidence coming from those who were involved with it in the 1990's and saw the box in which it was kept had this date on it. It is signed by George Tuthill and there is no reason to suppose that it was not made in his factory at 83 City Road, London. Tuthill is credited with making three quarters of all Friendly Society, Union and Colliery banners, and is described in the 1880 Post Office Directory as a Regalia manufacturer, he made not only banners but, collars, flags, emblems, aprons and sashes. Given his obvious fame at the time it is surprising that so little has been written about him. He appears in the newspapers of the time on only two occasions. The first in 1858 when his clerk attempted to defraud him and the second in 1888 – a year after his death- when the solicitor executing his will forged his signature on cheques.

Unusually most of the information we have about him comes from a museum in New Zealand which has one of his collars made for the Ancient Order of Foresters, a branch of which opened in the colony in 1852.⁸ According to them "*Born in Yorkshire in 1817, George Tutill was the son of an illiterate miller. He began his working life as a fairground showman and had an embellished*

caravan with ornate designs. This caught the eye of the trade union and friendly societies who asked him to design banners for them.” He moved to London early in his life and is found living in John Street, Holborn in the 1841 census when he is described as a painter. By the 1851 census he is living in St Botolphs, Aldgate. His life cannot have gone smoothly as his status is now ‘Widower’. He is now described as Banner Supplier indicating that he was running his own company. In the 1861 census he is living in Douglas Road London and has a 6 year old daughter. Again tragedy may have overtaken him as he is still described as “Widower” and although there is a house servant living with him there is no mention of his wife.

Tuthill was not only an artist he was an inventor and innovator too. *“He patented a technology for keeping the material flexible and durable in the wet and in 1881 he installed the worlds largest Jacquard Loom”.*⁹

Tuthill died in 1887 and left nearly £31,000 in his will [over £2m in today’s’ money] rather ironical when you consider that the people who he was making the banners for were amongst the poorer members of society.

After his death the business continued to thrive. Tuthill kept records of all of his banners but in 1940 the factory at Bow Street was bombed and they were all destroyed. The factory moved to Chesham and survived into the 2010’s but today it has been converted into housing appropriately named “Flagmaker House”.

The banner was found in the loft of the Union Arms in 1977 and somehow made its way to Dorchester. In 1987 it was loaned to Mr Jim Ackland by the Dorset County Museum although the loan document states One (1) Childe Okeford banner with supports and boxed from All Saints’ Church, Dorchester. It was put on display in the village hall but with its condition deteriorating it was sent to the Textile Conservation Centre at Hampton Court Palace. Their report states [in part]

“The banner is rectangular in shape .It measures 213 × 243 cm. It is made of pieced red and blue warp faced ribbed plain woven silk (?) fabric. The banner is signed on both sides G Tuthill, 83, City Road, London. The central panel of blue is painted on both sides.....At the lower edges of the banner are two brass studs,.....which bear the name of the banner makers, G Tuthill 83 City Road London Sole Manufacturer of Patent Banners.” The patent referred to presumably being the one mentioned above.

The estimated cost of restoration was over £4300 in 1990, nearly double in today’s money, and unfortunately this could not be raised by the village alone and it was returned to Dorset County Museum for conservation.



Although it is made of silk the embellishments are painted on. On the front can be seen the three fundamental activities in the farming life, ploughing, reaping [harvesting] and casting [sewing]. The choice of painting can be no accident for what is an essentially rural community. It's target audience is unashamedly the agricultural labourer. Notably absent is the presence of any form of machinery emphasising the centrality of his role in farming. Also absent is the e at the end of Child.

Tuthill produced a catalogue of standard designs, the price varying with the complexity of the design. Bespoke designs were available but this was probably too much for the inhabitants of Child Okeford. Note that in the panel with the harvester there is a windmill and as one is not known to exist in the village it is likely that the design was one of his standard designs.



The back side of the banner bears the same decorative embellishments and the Society's motto. It is not known where the motto comes from although in 2012 Jóhann Jóhannsson an Icelandic composer used "We unite to assist one another" as the name of a track on an album called "Miners Hymns" based on songs sung by Durham miners.

The main picture shows what is presumably a remarkably well looking man on his sick bed. The man shaking the patients hands could be the doctor or a member of the Benefits Union. If he is the former there are none of the usual appurtenances of the profession, Gladstone bag ,stethoscope and such like. The little boy drawing on his slate appears to have come straight out of the picture "*When did you last see your father*" by Frederick Yeames although this was painted ten years later. The man paying the benefit to the wife bears a remarkable resemblance to the patient. The bedroom appears to be rather more opulent with it's canopy bed than might be expected in the home of an agricultural labourer. Which suggests again that the design was one of his standard designs.

This article has been prepared by the author using information obtained from the British Newspaper Archive as part of a paid subscription. The village is indebted to Jim Acland and Jim Freer for overseeing the work in the late 1990's to preserve this piece of village history. The author would also like to thank David Pope for supplying the photographs of the banner and additional information which are held in the Village archive.

After whom the Baker Arms were named.

Deverell, E. (1899). Slate Clubs. *The Economic Journal*, 9(34),

For more on the subject of emigration go to <https://childokeford.org/the-blandford-colonisation-society/>

The rules varied according to society, Women could not join the Wiltshire Friendly Society at all.

Many areas held annual fairs but these were more for the buying and selling of livestock in the days before fixed livestock markets came into being. These were the precursors of the County Shows.

Note that even the newspaper put the "Union" inside quotation marks.

Oddly there are no reports of any celebrations in the village to commemorate the coronation.

<https://www.nz museums.co.nz/collections/3102/objects/996494/collar-ancient-order-of-foresters>

New Zealand Museum again.