

101-22



LETTER

TO THE RIGHT-HONOURABLE

WILLIAM HUSKISSON,

ON THE

CORN LAWS.

DEVONPORT:

PRINTED BY CONGDON & HEARLE,

52, Fore-street,

1827.

TO THE

RIGHT HON. WILLIAM HUSKISSON,

&c. &c. &c.

SIR,

IN your late visit to Manchester, you are reported to have cheered the Manufacturers with the idea of opening a new market to them, by enabling the Poles, the Prussians, and other northern nations, to send their corn here, in exchange for their manufactures.

Now, Sir, although I entirely agree with you in the principle, which I conceive to be the basis of your intended proceeding, viz.—
“That no foreign nation can trade with you
“that has not something to give you in exchange for the commodities which it is
“desirous of buying, and that its trade with
“you must at all times be limited by that
“something, whether it be raw produce, or
“manufactured goods, or good bills upon
“other countries, received for raw produce,
“or manufactures exported thither.”

Yet, has it never occurred to you that the same principle, which in this respect applies to the foreigner, does in the same manner and degree apply to all the different productive classes of this empire, who in this respect may be considered upon the same footing as so many foreign nations?—If, for instance, to enable the Polish farmer to purchase of your manufactures to the value of a million sterling, you take from him corn to that amount, has it never occurred to you that you disable the British and Irish farmers from purchasing your manufactures to a similar amount? It has been estimated, how correctly I know not, nor is it material to the present question, that the corn grown and consumed in the British Isles amounts, in wheat, to twelve millions of quarters, and of other grain to thirty-six millions.

Taking it for granted that these quantities are adequate to all the demands of a population of about twenty-two millions, and that the wheat be valued at sixty shillings per quarter, below which it will not remunerate the grower :—

Twelve millions of wheat, at 60s.	36,000,000	£
And 36 millions of other grain, at an average of one half this amount (30s.)	} 54,000,000	
And we have a total value of grain to the amount of	} 90,000,000	

Now, if but a tenth part of this supply be taken from the foreign grower, at half the price here stated, it would certainly enable, although not compel, the foreigner to take of your manufactures to the amount of four millions and a half more than he does purchase at present, but it will infallibly disable your own growers of corn from purchasing as much of your own manufactures as will be equal in value to that corn which they would have raised, and which, but for this importation of foreign corn, they would have brought to market ; and what is perhaps still more to be regretted, it will throw out of employ all that portion of the population of the country which would have been employed in raising this quantity of corn, together with an adequate proportion of the smiths, carpenters, wheelwrights, saddlers, &c. who chiefly depend on the cultivation of the soil for their employment ; and this, too, at a time when the greatest misery of the times arises from your not having sufficient employment for your manufacturers, nor sufficient vent for your manufactures.

It would be absurd, therefore, under these circumstances, to suppose, that you can with advantage convert your agriculturists into manufacturers, or that by employing Polish or

Prussian labourers, instead of British and Irish, you will increase the sale of your manufactures.

What, let me ask, do all the enquiries so diligently and fully made into the state of Ireland prove? What, but that the essential thing wanting to render that populous country wealthy and happy is employment? The sturdy Irish labourer is, in many parts of Ireland, glad to perform a day's labour for sixpence, or even less, when he can get it.

Great expenses have already been incurred by the nation in exporting shoals of Irish to our colonies; great expenses are at this moment incurring in Ireland, on the part of the United Kingdom, in carrying on public works, the object of which is to give employment, by these extraordinary means, to those who cannot obtain it by the ordinary demand for labour. And is this the moment which you would take for employing the Polish rather than the Irish labourer? Is this the moment which you would choose for robbing the Irish of this increasing source of employment and wealth, which he derives from supplying your markets with corn?*

* The average supply of corn from Ireland in the last ten years is stated to have been1,341,902 quarters.
In the year 1825 it amounted to. .2,203,962 quarters.

The history of the last seven years has abundantly proved the general capability of the British Isles to supply their own inhabitants with this first necessary of life, and that, too, at a very moderate price. But had it been at a much greater price, still the whole of that greater price would and must have been expended, either on British or Irish manufactures, or on foreign goods, which, according to the principle with which you and I both set out, would equally facilitate the export of British manufactures.

But it is said we must reduce the price of corn, to enable the British manufacturer to compete with the foreigner in the price of his manufactures.

That the price of corn does enter as an ingredient into the expense incurred, in carrying on every species of productive labour, is certainly true; but it is principally true and principally felt in those sorts of productive labour which are carried on at low wages, by the personal strength and skill of men, unassisted by machinery, and carried on too with small capitals. Such are especially the works in husbandry.

A case appears to have been tried at the Bolton Petty Sessions, on the 7th of last October, at which certain Tildesley workmen

were charged for a riot under the Combination Act. In this case it appeared that a spinner, previous to the reduction of wages made some little time before, could clear, after all deductions, 45s. per week, and in many instances, where the family of the spinner were employed, 60s. and, at the reduced list, that a spinner could, with his family, earn 40s.*

I believe it may be stated, that the average rate of labour in husbandry does at no time exceed from 9s. to 12s. per week. To a man working for such wages, and who has, perhaps, to maintain six persons in family, it is indeed of essential importance whether he pays sixpence or a shilling for the quartern loaf. It may make the difference of the value of nine quartern loaves; leaving him, in the case of the highest wages, and of the highest price, only three shillings, and in the case of the highest wages and the lowest price, seven

* Other indications of the rate of wages among the *spinners* have reached me from other quarters, and these, I believe, will be found to be the class of manufacturers the most prone to riot upon any reduction: and although it has been stated in Parliament, that many individuals in other branches of manufacture have not been able to earn more than 6s. 5s. or even 4s. 6d. in the week, yet these are rare cases of extraordinary pressure among the manufacturers, which are of every day occurrence among husbandmen.

and sixpence for the rest of his expenditure. While the spinner, who with his family as above stated, can earn, on an average, fifty shillings, will have forty one shillings per week left for the rest of his expenditure, after he has purchased his nine loaves at the highest price.

But, when in addition to this, we know that the principal grievance of which these spinners complain is, that the machinery employed to abridge labour underworks them to such a degree, that one machine performs, perhaps, the work of a hundred hands, we shall be easily convinced, that the price of bread can hardly be said to make any part of the calculation, as applied to manufactures, so assisted by machinery, and affording at the same time such high wages to the individuals who are employed.

As little does it become the master manufacturers to complain of the price of bread, while their profits are such as enable them to give such high wages, and when they have besides all the advantages over the foreign manufacturer, which large capitals, cheap fuel, and easy water communication by canal and sea, can give them. With what reason, with what decency, then, are all these clamours about the price of bread, raised by

and among the manufacturers, when they are in truth that class of the community by whom the price of bread is the least felt? Obvious as it then was that the distress of the manufacturers was in a great measure of their own creation, by having overstocked the markets of the world: obvious as it was that the miseries of the operatives were solely attributable to a want of employment, was it fair, politic, or just, to mislead the judgment of the public, by having recourse to measures, which not less injuriously than falsely pointed out the Corn Laws as the cause of the distress, by repealing those which were made for the protection of agriculture, and throwing thus the burden, and what is infinitely worse, the odium, of the grievance exclusively on the agriculturists?

But the agriculturists, no less than the manufacturers, are under a complete delusion, when the former hope, and the latter fear, that the effect of the existing Corn Laws is to increase the price of corn.

The whole history of our Corn Laws incontrovertibly proves, and we have the registered experience of above 150 years, from 1670 to the present time, that the greater and steadier the protection given to the growth of corn in this country, the lower

under similar circumstances, will and has been progressively its price.

The first important law for the protection of agriculture, the 22nd of Charles II, passed in the before-mentioned year; previous to that period the greatest fluctuations had taken place in the prices of corn, and the greatest inconveniences had been experienced by the public, in consequence of those fluctuations. By that law, when the value of money was at least double what it is now, and when the taxes did not amount to a twentieth part of what they are at present, a duty was imposed on the importation of wheat of 16s. per quarter, up to the price of 53s. 4d. per quarter; a duty of 8s. per quarter, up to the price of 80s.; and a duty of 5s. 4d. per quarter even after the price exceeded four pounds. Under this law the price of corn gradually and steadily diminished, as may be seen in the registered prices of the Windsor market, collected and stated by Smith, in his tracts on the Corn Laws.

A still further encouragement was given in the reign of King William, when by the 1st of William and Mary, c. 12, a bounty of 5s. per quarter was given on the exportation of wheat, whenever the price thereof was at or under 48s. per quarter, and on other grain in proportion.

Under this additional encouragement a still greater reduction of price took place, and the country, from having been an importer of corn to a considerable extent, became an exporter to as great an amount.

Such continued to be the flourishing state of agriculture in Great Britain, till about the year 1765, and between that and 1773, when a few consecutive unfavourable seasons having raised the prices, and produced (as in the late instance) some riotous proceedings among the manufacturers in the north, the timid or the interested representatives of those districts (not unlike one of the present day) prevailed on Parliament to withdraw the protection before given by law to the agriculture of the country, by rendering wheat (before *exportable*, with a bounty of 48s.) now *importable*, with the low duty of sixpence at that price.*

From the passing of this unfortunate Act, the offspring of timidity and ignorance, the country became more and more dependent on the foreigner for its sustenance—a dependence which produced during the late war more than once an apprehension of famine; and in this dependent state it would have

* 13 Geo. 3, c. 43, 1773.

continued to the present time, to the discouragement, and, finally, to the extinction of its agriculture, but for the law first enacted in the year 1815,* afterwards modified in 1822,† under which law the general powers of the British Isles to feed their own inhabitants, have been triumphantly shewn, in despite of the eternal fidget of a nervous administration, who have been perpetually and unnecessarily tampering with the subject, to the great distress and serious loss of the farmer.

When that law of 1815 was under discussion in Parliament, it was pertinaciously contended by the most strenuous opposer of the measure, (himself a great consignee of American corn) that the effect of the intended law would be to raise and keep up the price of corn, to or near to the price of 80s., at which alone it was by that act made importable.

What, in truth, has been the average price from that time to this; in the ten years from 1815 to 1825? 66s. 7d.

In the last five years? 55s. 4d.

What the present average? . . 55s. 6d.

Let but the law, then, have its course, and the competition between the farmers (a nu-

* 55 Geo. 3, c. 26.

† 3 Geo. 4, c. 60.

merous and wholly unconnected body) will always bring down the price as low as it can be raised at.

If the manufacturing classes are not content with this—if they still insist upon having it at lower prices than those for which it can be grown at here; they may by laws to that effect annihilate this most important branch of the agriculture of the country, but will they be gainers by the infallible result, that of ruining their best customers, and putting an end to a trade producing ninety millions sterling a year, which must be wholly spent to their benefit?

I may then be asked, if the effect of these laws, restrictive of importation, is to lower the price of grain, how, then, is the advantage of the farmer to be obtained by these restrictions?

The advantage of the farmer will be found under these laws, so long as they are not unnecessarily and capriciously tampered with by sudden and unexpected abrogations, from the assurance that they afford him, that if by the inclemency of the seasons there should be a failure of his expected average crop, he will at least obtain some compensation for the deficiency, by a rise in price up to a certain point, and that point far below the

price that the country has borne and can well bear. With the confidence inspired by this protection, he betakes himself freely to the culture of corn, which having its due and accustomed place, and that an important one in the rotation of his crops, the effect is general abundance and moderate prices, regulated, not by the will, the caprice, or the avarice of the farmer, but by that which must always regulate the farmer's trade—(from the impossibility of any combination between so numerous a body) by the supply and the demand.

An erroneous opinion has been ushered into the world, on mercantile authority, which for a time seemed to obtain credit among men who ought not to have been so misled, namely, that the price of corn in the market must depend on the price at which it could be raised on the poorest lands: a greater error was never promulgated.

The corn raised on the poor lands must share the fate of that raised on the rich, and equally depend on the quantity brought to market, compared with the quantity required in the market; and the difference in the quantity raised and in the expense incurred in raising a similar quantity in the poor land, as compared with that raised on the rich land,

will be felt in the smaller rent received by the landlord, or by the smaller profit made by the farmer.*

But at all events, as the quantity raised on the poor lands does, in fact, increase the quantity brought to market, its effect in the market is the very reverse of what has been supposed; its obvious tendency is to lower the prices, by an augmentation of the supply.

It cannot, however, be expected that corn can at this period, when the value of money is so much decreased, and when the taxes of the country have been so much increased, be grown at the same expense as in the time of Charles the Second, nor that the duties then imposed on the importation of corn should be adequate to its protection now. But were it thought necessary to make any alteration in the existing law, (a necessity which I do not

* By an established reduction of the price of corn, the poor lands will become utterly extinct as to the growth of that commodity; if a grower must inevitably incur a loss by the cultivation, he will cease to grow it. An instance has been stated to me (and many such, probably, exist) of an estate in Hampshire, now let at £500 per annum, which at a less price than the present would not be cultivated for corn, and except for corn it is absolutely worth nothing. The effect, therefore, of such reduction would, in such instances, be the annihilation of so much of the capital of the country.

admit) and were it thought fit to take the law of Charles the Second for a model, I am not at all sure that, making allowance for the difference in the value of money on the one hand, and for the increase of taxes on the other, a law framed on the principle of doubling the duties then enacted might not prove an adequate protection, and satisfy the reasonable men on all sides. A law so framed would impose a duty of 32s. on the importation of corn up to the price of 53s. 4d. and of 16s. up to the price of 80s. when its importation should be free, on the payment of 6d. by way of register of the quantity imported.

The idle part of society, in all countries, who are obliged to seek for amusement as a substitute for useful employment, have generally some plaything in vogue, which for a time intensely occupies their bodily powers, and in some degree their mental faculties, and become, what it is not improperly called the *rage*. At one time a *Bandelore*, at another a *Whiz-gig*, or the *Devil on two Sticks*, and now the *Gymnastics* among men, the *Callisthenicks* among the fair sex.

Something not unlike this takes place in the political world; they, too, have their *rages*. At one time a *Crusade*; at another the *Balance of Power*; at another the *Balance*

of Trade ; at another Equality ; and now, Free Trade and the Increase of Manufactures are the playthings and fatal illusions of the day, which for a time are in every mouth, and occupy every mind.

But, Sir, if the principle with which you and I set out, and which I conscientiously believe to be sound, namely, that no nation or people can trade with you but to the extent of what you reciprocally take from them ; or, more correctly, perhaps, that your exports to the rest of the world must always be balanced by your imports taken collectively from the rest of the world, then what, let me ask, is to be thought of the so highly vaunted advantage of foreign trade ?

Are we quite sure that it has any other advantage than that of supplying us with the raw materials we want, or with the luxuries we require ?

Pecuniary advantage it can have none, since the pecuniary account is always balanced between us and the rest of the world in even scales ; and the true philosophy upon this subject resolves itself into this one maxim, applicable alike to individuals and to nations—“ *Il faut cultiver son jardin.*”

The labour of a country constitutes its

riches ; its population and its morals constitute its strength : and is it, then, of no importance what is the quality and what the morals of that population, and what the species of labour to which its industry is directed ?

Does it not appear that your manufactures have already been too much extended ? Have not the improvements in machinery been such as to enable you rapidly to overstock the world, and in a short time to work up more materials than it can consume or purchase, and by such means suddenly to throw a large proportion of your manufacturers out of employ ?

And what is the remedy proposed ? To deprive the agriculturist of the employment in which he is beneficially engaged for himself and for his country, and drive him to seek for employment in manufactures, which are already overstocked with labourers.

While such is the glut of your manufactures, is it reasonable to expect that you will have the opportunity of increasing them ? And, allowing all the effect proposed by the reduction, how short-lived must be the policy. The same machinery will create and continue the plethora of manufactures ; and does it not

follow that corn must be again and again lowered, as the pretended only means of enabling the manufacturer to live under the redundancy of his own creation?

By admitting foreign corn in the place of your own, it has been already shewn that you will to a certainty destroy so much of the home market which you now enjoy, and might at all times command. Are you sure, or is it probable, that you will find a more eligible or a more extended market abroad, equally subject to your controul?

Would it be safe to depend for the first necessaries of life on the foreigner, who may be sometimes unable, and sometimes politically unwilling, to supply you?

Is it consistent with true wisdom to adopt measures for converting the sober, patient, and contented husbandman, the pillar of your physical and political strength, into the pampered, discontented, and riotous manufacturer, and thereby augment a class of persons which it requires the whole of your civil power, aided by all your disposable military force, to keep in order?

To exchange the industrious peasant, who works incessantly six days in the week, at the lowest rate of wages, for the manufac-

turer, who earns enough in four days to spend the remainder of the week in idleness and dissipation, assembling in clubs and at taverns to beset the magistrates of his neighbourhood, and frame resolutions subversive of the government and the constitution of the country in Church and State?

To our agriculture we look for the best materials for the recruit of our army; to our mercantile navigation for the support of our navy: these are above all the branches of our population which it behoves us to guard with peculiar anxiety—which it becomes us to encourage, and endeavour to increase. Upon these two depend, essentially, our independence as a nation, and our happiness as a people.

But, Sir, since penning the foregoing, perhaps desultory reflections, I have had the great satisfaction of reading a letter addressed by you to your constituents at Chichester, on the 23rd of May, 1814, on the subject of the Corn Bill, then under discussion. With every opinion contained in that letter I do cordially agree; to every opinion and statement in it I so entirely assent, that I have only to hope that the measure which you have announced to be submitted by you to Parliament, may

be grounded on those principles, and upon the experience derived from the history of our Corn Laws for the last 170 years, as stated by yourself.

Guided by those principles, and by that experience, we cannot greatly differ in the measures to be proposed for fixing the laws respecting this most important branch of our industry, and of our national independence and power, upon a firm and lasting basis, equally advantageous to every class of the community. Unless, therefore, your opinions have since the year 1814 undergone a very material and unfortunate change, as the facts of history and general principles which you then so clearly laid down as necessarily leading to the argument of your letter, still remain the same, to you, Sir, I shall look with confidence for successfully and permanently securing the interests of this great empire, upon this momentous occasion.

Sure I am that any plan which shall in any degree diminish the protection now given to agriculture, will afford no real advantage to the manufacturer; while by endangering the most important branch of our industry, it will be highly injurious to the general interests of the empire.

Desirous as I am to avail myself of the full weight of your great authority in support of the historical facts which I have cited, and of the arguments which I have maintained in the foregoing pages, I have taken the liberty of annexing an extract from this your very important letter.

I have the honour to be,

With great consideration,

Sir,

Your very humble Servant.

Extract from the Letter of the Right Hon. William Huskisson, to his Constituents at Chichester, May 23, 1826:—1814

“If I were not fully convinced that the consumer in general, but more especially that class of consumers whose subsistence depends on their own industry, would be benefitted by the proposed alteration, it would not have had my support. My sole object is to prevent (as far as human means can prevent) bread-corn from ever again reaching the late extravagant prices. Can any man have witnessed the scarcities and consequent privations of the

people, during six or seven different seasons of the last twenty years, without feeling anxious to guard the country against the return of such severe distress? But if we wish to cure an evil of this alarming magnitude, we must first trace it to its source. What is that source? Obviously this,—that, until now, we did not, even in good years, grow corn enough for our own consumption. Habitually depending on foreign supply, that supply was interrupted by war, or by bad seasons abroad. The present war, it is true, is now at an end; but peace is, at all times, too precarious not to induce us to guard against the repetition of similar calamities, whenever hostilities may be renewed. But even in peace the habitual dependence on foreign supply is dangerous. We place the subsistence of our own population not only at the mercy of foreign powers, but also on their being able to spare as much corn as we may want to buy. Suppose, as it frequently happens, the harvest in the same year to be a short one, not only in this country but in the foreign countries from which we are fed—what follows? The habitually exporting country, France for instance, stops the export of its corn, and feeds its people without

any great pressure. The habitually importing country, England, which, even in a good season, has hitherto depended on the aid of foreign corn, deprived of that aid, in a year of scarcity, is driven to distress bordering upon famine. There is, therefore, no effectual security, either in peace or war, against the frequent return of scarcity approaching to starvation, such as of late years we have so frequently experienced, but in our maintaining ourselves habitually independent of foreign supply. Let the bread we eat be the produce of corn grown among ourselves, and, for one, I care not how cheap it is; the cheaper the better. It is cheap now, and I rejoice at it, because it is altogether owing to a sufficiency of corn of our own growth. But in order to ensure a continuance of that cheapness and that sufficiency, we must ensure to our own growers that protection against foreign import which has produced these blessings, and by which alone they can be permanently maintained.

“The history of the country for the last one hundred and seventy years clearly proves, on the one hand, that cheapness produced by foreign import is the sure forerunner of scarcity; and, on the other, that a steady home

supply is the only safe foundation of steady and moderate prices. During upwards of one hundred years, up to the year 1765, the import of foreign corn was restrained by very high duties. What was the state of the country during those one hundred years? That in ordinary seasons our own growth supplied a stock of corn fully ample for our own consumption;—that in abundant seasons we had some to spare, which we exported;—that in bad seasons we felt no want, and were under no apprehension;—that the price of corn seldom varied more than a few shillings per quarter;—that we had no years of inordinate gain to the farmer, and of starvation to the consumer;—that prices, instead of rising from year to year, were gradually diminishing; so that at the end of this long period of a century, during which we never imported foreign corn, they were actually one-fifth lower than at the beginning of it. Would to God that we had continued in this salutary system! But in 1765 it was most unfortunately abandoned. What has been the result? Precisely the reverse of the former system. Instead of a steady supply, afforded at steady and moderate prices, we have witnessed frequent and alarming scar-

cities. Every year our dependence on foreign supply was increasing, till the war came, and, by interrupting that supply, greatly aggravated all our evils; for a country which depends on enemies or rivals for the food of its people, is never safe in war. In the first eighteen years of this war, we were forced to pay sixty millions of money (to nations, every one of whom has, in the course of it, been our enemy) for a scanty and inadequate supply of foreign corn, and when for this purpose we had parted with all our gold, and even our silver currency, combined Europe shut its ports against us, and America co-operating, first laid an embargo, and then went to war. This combination was formed with the vain hope to break our spirit by starving our bodies. We struggled hard both at home and abroad, but by the struggle we have gained much. Abroad we have subdued our enemies—at home we come out of the war with our agriculture so extended and improved, as to make us at this moment independent of foreign supply. We are so at this moment; and shall I, who, to the entire conviction of my own judgment, have traced the long sufferings of the people to a contrary state of things, be deterred from using my

honest endeavours in Parliament to prevent the recurrence of such sufferings? For that purpose we must go back to the principles of our forefathers; and by reverting, as much as possible, to their system, we shall secure to ourselves and our posterity all the benefits which they derived from it."

