

Why did quiet whispering make Tolpuddle a dangerous place to live?

- 1 In 1834, six farm workers were arrested in the picturesque village of Tolpuddle, Dorset. They were sentenced to seven years transportation to Australia. A very hard sentence. Why did this happen? What had they done to deserve such a harsh punishment?
- 2 Below are 24 clues. Use them to solve the mystery – why did quiet whispering make Tolpuddle a dangerous place to live? – and make sure that you can explain how you solved the task
 - 1 In 1811, workers upset by wage reductions destroyed machines in factories – The Luddites Riots
 - 2 The Government became suspicious of workers becoming organised, particularly if they met in secret – they could be plotting a revolution! So they ordered local law and order men to take serious action against any union groups.
 - 3 George Loveless supported his family on a ploughman's wage of 9 shillings a week.
 - 4 Loveless formed the 'Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers' in 1834 and made each of the six members swear an oath never to tell anyone about the society and to work towards getting better wages.
 - 5 Most of the Dorset magistrates were landowners.
 - 6 The Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU) was formed in 1833. Within months the GNCTU had 500 000 members.
 - 7 If a revolution started in Britain, the country could be vulnerable to foreign invasion.
 - 8 Employers hated and feared workers groups and many refused to employ them. Some even sacked workers who belonged to a union.
 - 9 Since the French Revolution of 1789 the rich people of Britain had been uneasy about large groups of workers.
 - 10 Loveless' men met in a room and talked in whispers to avoid being overheard. The manor farm they worked at was only a stone throw away.
 - 11 The Government were becoming very worried by the growing strength of the GNCTU.
 - 12 Farm wages had been declining for several years in Dorset: from 9d to 7d (35p) and by 1834 landowners were threatening to put them down to 6 shilling a week.
 - 13 At sea it was illegal to take secret oaths – in case you were plotting against the captain and planning to take over the ship. It was called the Mutiny Act.
 - 14 Between 1830 and 1832 there were 326 cases of arson and 390 attacks on threshing machines in the Midlands.

15 Lord Melbourne, the Home Secretary, told the Dorset magistrates about the Mutiny Act and encouraged them to use it.

16 Robert Owen formed the GNCTU to fight for better wages and conditions.

17 In 1825 the Government passed a new law that said trade unionists could not 'molest or obstruct' other workers.

18 The Tolpuddle farmers decided to join the GNCTU, but decided to keep it secret out of fear that landowners would try to break the union.

19 After years of war, high taxes, low wages and poor working conditions, farm labourers finally snapped in the 1830s – The Swing Riots.

20 Most landowners had tried to stop their labourers joining unions and some sacked those who did join.

21 The Government found an old naval law: Mutiny Act 1797.

22 The vague wording of the 1825 Act made it possible for courts to prosecute almost anyone who went on strike.

23 George Loveless and his friends were transported to Australia for 7 years.

24 It cost around 10–14 shilling a week to lead a normal life.