

Charles Higby Lattimore

Charles Higby Lattimore was born in Wheathampstead in about 1809, the son of Charles and Mary Lattimore. A cousin of the well-known family of brewers in Wheathampstead, he became a distinguished local and national figure in his own right.

In 1829, Charles Lattimore senior was offered the tenancy of Bride Hall, a 17th century house and farm owned by Charles Benet Drake Garrard of Lamer, the largest estate in the Wheathampstead area. Mr Lattimore senior was in poor health so the plan was that Charles Higby Lattimore would take on the work of the farm. A soil survey at Bride Hall in that year showed the soil to be 'extremely foul and utterly impoverished' and the yearly rental was subject to tithes amounting to £88.10s, so it would be a costly tenancy involving expense for improvements.

The 1831 draft tenancy agreement stated that the tenant must:

- reside at Bride Hall
- not break up any old pasture
- not sow more than two white crops¹ in succession
- pay for the ploughing of land for fallow and for grass seed
- not engage in sport on the said grounds.

It also stipulated that entry to and quitting of the tenancy was to be done 'according to custom'.

In return the landlord agreed to put the premises into tenantable repair and to erect a cart and cattle shed, though carriage of materials was to be undertaken by Mr Lattimore. Mr Drake Garrard or his agents and gamekeepers had the right to go over the said lands at all reasonable times.

The new tenants encountered problems from the start, resulting in conflict with their landlord. For example, there was no stabling for the horses and it was a great inconvenience to walk them elsewhere every night. In response to this complaint, Mr Drake Garrard argued that the rent was less on that account.

Mr Lattimore objected to the idea of allowing his landlord to hunt on the land at any time, while he himself was not allowed to have anyone else on the land as it would be treated as trespass.

He was also incensed at 'the ravages of game' (rabbits) on the land and claimed £100 a year compensation during the first three years of his tenancy. It was not forthcoming. Not unreasonably, he wanted the right to shoot the rabbits himself.

On one occasion when Mr Lattimore shot a rabbit in the lane leading to the house he received a letter from Drake Garrard's lawyer. Lattimore complained that, while Drake Garrard himself did not require the rabbits, Lattimore's gamekeeper depended on them for his livelihood. 'His wages were so low he could not live if the rabbits were destroyed'.

In May 1835 there was a problem with neglected timber. Lattimore wrote to Drake Garrard that 'Upwards of 20 oak trees had fallen' and were 'still lying on my corn for

¹ 'White crops' are cereal crops, which make heavy demands on soil fertility.

near a month ... blocking the paths and bridleways, turning all passers-by over my grass and corn.' No answer to this letter is recorded.

Mr Lattimore senior died in 1834; his dying words to his son on the subject of landlords must have been a spur to action for the young man: 'Whenever you have brought the land into a high state of cultivation, they will raise the rent and harass and annoy you in every way, and render it impossible for you to live there in any peace or comfort.'

From this time onward, Charles Higby Lattimore and Charles Benet Drake Garrard entered into a bitter political, financial and personal feud that lasted for most of their lives. It went to a House of Commons Select Committee and eventually contributed to changes in the law between landlord and tenant.

The 1841 census confirms that Charles Higby Lattimore (farmer) was living at Bride Hall with Mary (aged 35, his sister), a servant Mary Threader aged 24, and five farm labourers aged 34, 20, 18, 15 and 12.

At about the same time, the improvements that Lattimore had made at Bride Hall (including making a pond) were estimated at a value of £798. However, Drake Garrard sent him notice of an imminent rent increase (£70 p.a.) and a subsequent notice to quit.

In the meantime, Mr Lattimore had been in touch with other tenant farmers of the Lamer estate. For example, he had a personal statement from Mr Ralph Thrale, tenant of Mackerye End (a 16th century house and farm, now Grade I listed), accusing Drake Garrard of threatening him for refusing to comply with his request to vote for the Tory candidate. The landlord and agent, he wrote, had subsequently neglected him by not keeping the game down, which ruined the crops. Since he could claim no compensation he decided to 'relinquish the farm in view of the treatment he had received.' Drake Garrard thus found himself dealing with two men of independent turn of mind, wishing to vote in their own way, in league with each other, and complaining that they were hard done by their landlord.

Drake Garrard, in his turn, complained that Lattimore had come with 'the banners and colours of the Liberal candidate to canvass the other tenants on the estate, and particularly one by the name of Sibley, in whose house I was then residing.'

Mr Lattimore had also been active in a wider context – the national debate about the 1815 Corn Law that fixed the price of corn. Lattimore was in favour of free trade and opening up the market to competition, whereas Drake Garrard and the Tories wished to keep the price of corn high. This meant that the price of bread was also kept high, with consequent poverty, depression and mass unemployment. Lattimore was well known for his support for the repeal of the Corn Laws and, on 29 April 1843, he was in Hertford welcoming Richard Cobden, the famous radical campaigner who was devoted to free trade and hostile to aristocratic rule. It was Mr Lattimore who proposed the first motion at any county meeting in England in favour of free trade, that '... the Corn Laws have proved highly injurious to the independence and welfare of the tenant farmer and that they ought to be abolished'. For this he was later awarded a silver snuff box engraved at its four corners with sheaves of wheat and the word 'Free' in the centre. The presentation document read: 'Presented by the Tradesmen, Mechanics, and Working Men of the town of Hertford, as a token of their respect, and to mark the sense of the high opinion they entertain of his publick character for advocating the principles of Free Trade and a Total Repeal of the Corn Laws on April 29th 1843'.

Cobden considered Lattimore to be 'the best farmer of my acquaintance'.

First-hand evidence of the connection between Cobden and Lattimore has been generously donated to the Society by Joe Wheatley, a stamp collector in East Sussex, who found these envelopes in an old album.



Three of the letters were posted in 1854. The fourth (bottom right) has Cobden's signature and the date (Sept 25 - 1855) written on the left-hand side.

Drake Garrard issued another notice to quit when he learnt that Lattimore had been stirring things up with other tenants on the estate, in particular one Mr Blain (probably the tenant of Turners Hall Farm at the time). A letter from Drake Garrard's agent accused Lattimore of 'gross and vulgar slander' towards his landlord, alleging that he had told Blain that Drake Garrard was 'a double-faced fellow, would deny his own words, that his word was not worth a pin, that he would coax him (Blain) and then throw him out'.

In 1845, Lattimore quit Bride Hall and moved to Place Farm in Wheathampstead village but not without obtaining a judge's order to present his claim for compensation for 'the ravages of game, being subject to all sorts of annoyances ...' etc. He counted up the costs of all his improvements at Bride Hall (including chalking the soil, stocking hedges, foodstuffs for livestock) and reckoned them to amount to £1,127 14s 5¼d. He added a further £2,000 for disposal of stock during the great agricultural depression of 1844.

Charles Higby Lattimore lived at Place Farm for the rest of his life, gradually building up both his ownership and his tenancies of farmland to a peak of 380 acres in 1871 and employing some 20 men and six boys, plus the household servants. His sisters Anne and Mary lived with him.

Throughout his adult life, he was particularly concerned with the rights of tenant farmers, which were unprotected in law. He campaigned for security for tenant farmers and that landlords should not benefit from improvements to their land while the farmers themselves went out of pocket. The law was entirely in favour of the landlord; Lattimore was fighting for the rights of the tenant farmer. It was on this subject that he gave evidence to a Select Committee in the House of Commons in 1848.

In November of that year, he published a tract containing 19 pages of invective and frustration, relating his problems at Bride Hall as tenant under Drake Garrard, mentioning the 'pride, ignorance and rapacity of landlords' and describing his own class as 'the energetic and improving cultivators of our soil', pointing out that 'There is no instance of a tenant farmer ever recovering at common law any part of his capital expended on the land of another ...' .

His efforts, and those of many others, were crowned with success in his lifetime.

- The 1851 Landlord and Tenant Act gave tenants the right to remove fixtures or buildings that they had put up at their own expense.
- The 1875 and 1883 Agricultural Holdings Acts acknowledged the tenant farmer's right to compensation for improvements.

Charles Higby Lattimore died on 23 October 1889, aged 81. When probate was awarded (at the second attempt) his personal estate was valued at £25,139. 18s. 6d.. He is buried in a Grade II listed chest tomb in the churchyard of St Helen's, Wheathampstead with his father Charles (died 1834), mother Mary (died 1827), sister Mary (died 1883), and sister Anne (died 1857).



After his death, further Agricultural Holdings Acts followed in 1900, 1906, 1908, 1913, 1914 and 1923 which covered more or less all the points for which he had campaigned in his lifetime.

Ruth Jeavons
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Note: this account draws heavily on *The Story of Bride Hall: the house and its people* by Marion Hill (Phillimore 2006)