

THE STORY OF GEORGE LOVELESS AND THE TOLPUDDLE MARTYRS

Andrew Norman

George Loveless, the acknowledged leader of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, wrote two brief accounts: one of his arrest, imprisonment and trial; the other, of his experiences in Australia as a transported convict. Apart from this, however, a shroud of mystery hangs over his life, owing to a pact of secrecy, which he and those four of his companions who, like him, emigrated to Canada following their return from Australia, swore to one another. Nevertheless, by painstaking research, not only in the United Kingdom but also in Canada and Australia, it is now possible to reveal many, hitherto, unpublished details about George Loveless's life.

This is the story of how Methodism – for George Loveless was a staunch Methodist – was originally brought to Tolpuddle, and of the intense and violent prejudice which existed against such 'dissenting' religions at that time; of the socio-economic forces which compelled Loveless to establish his Tolpuddle trade union, and of the sly pretext on which the authorities arrested and charged him in 1834. We sense the humiliation of this righteous and God-fearing man as he is marched, unceremoniously, through the streets of Dorchester en route to His Majesty's Prison. We sense the anguish of his family as he is sent to the dreaded convict settlement of Van Diemen's Land in Australasia. Finally, we learn of his triumph when he, together with Martyr brothers James, Thomas and John Standfield, and James Brine make a new and successful life in Canada.

Andrew Norman has delved deep to reveal the truth about this important but almost unknown historical figure, including confirmation that George Loveless's cottage still exists as a listed building, although nobody in Tolpuddle, or indeed anywhere else, appears to be aware of this fact! He paints a vivid portrait of the man who, once vilified and who left Tolpuddle in shackles and chains, had the pleasure in his later years, of cultivating roses and making himself a rocking chair in the New World.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

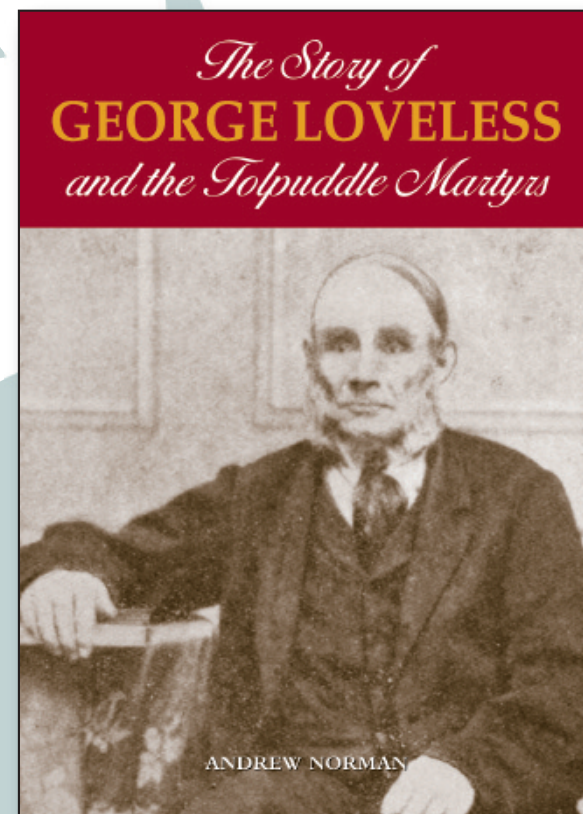
Andrew Norman was born in Newbury, Berkshire and educated at Thornhill High School, Gwelo, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, where he read animal physiology. In December 1970, he graduated in medicine from the Radcliffe Infirmary and entered into general practice in Poole, Dorset. In 1983 he sustained a back injury which forced him to give up his medical career; he is now a fulltime writer.

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Tolpuddle, Martyrs' Tree, circa 1900. Photo: Dorset County Museum.

London Township: George Loveless's home at Siloam.
Photo: JJ Talman Regional Collection, University of Western Ontario.



Dorchester, High West Street, circa 1860.
(County Hall near right).
Photo: Dorset County Museum.

Example of a double page spread.

1 *An Arrest*

The place is the village of Tolpuddle (population about 350), lying 8 miles or so to the east of Dorchester, county town of Dorsetshire (Dorset) in southern England. The date is 26 February 1797, the thirty-seventh year of the reign of King George III. Thomas Loveless and his wife Dinah, can be seen making their way from their cottage, along the main street, and up Church Hill to the church. In her arms, Dinah is carrying their sixth child George, born 24 days previously on 2 February; he is to be baptised by the Reverend Dr Bernard Hodgson, Vicar of Tolpuddle since 1775. The day is fine and mild, following an overnight frost.¹



Tolpuddle, Church Hill (West Farm's barns on left). Photo: Dorset County Museum.

In the year 1824, George Loveless, now aged 27 and a 'labourer in husbandry' (cultivator of the land); follows the same path to the church: this time to be married to Elizabeth Snook of the nearby village of Dewlish. Although Loveless is a staunch Methodist – in fact, a qualified preacher in

the Methodist Church – he is to be married in Tolpuddle's 12th century Anglican (Church of England) parish church of St John The Evangelist. The ceremony will be performed by the Reverend Thomas Warren (who succeeded the Reverend Hodgson as vicar on the death of the latter in 1805). It is the 26th of December, and again, the day is a mild one, with the occasional shower.²

Ten years later, on Monday 24 February 1834, which is two days before his thirty-seventh birthday, George Loveless, in his words, 'arose to go to my usual labour.' He and his wife Elizabeth ('Betsy') now have three children: George (aged 9), Robert (aged 7), and Thomas (aged 5). On this day, the weather is mild, with mist which will persist until the early afternoon when the rain will come. Having had his breakfast, Loveless, 5 foot 5 inches tall, with 'very dark brown' hair, and, 'dark grey' eyes' attires himself in the customary smock-frock (outer, linen garment), boots, and gaiters (covering for the lower leg as far as the knee). He says goodbye to Elizabeth, closes the door and begins walking down the street to the farm which is his place of work.

Loveless has taken but a few steps when he is approached by the constable of the parish, James Brine, who informs him that he has a warrant from the magistrates for the arrest, not only of him, but also for five of his companions and fellow labourers. These are his younger brother James (25, agricultural labourer, married to Sarah, with 2 children and another expected); Thomas Standfield (44, labourer, married to the Loveless's sister Dinah, with 6 children; Thomas Standfield's eldest son John (21, agricultural labourer, single, living with his parents); James Hammett (21, labourer, married to Harriett, with a one-year-old son); James Brine (21, labourer, single, whose mother Catherine, née Parnocott, was the widow of John, a shoemaker, with four younger children to support); James Loveless, like his brother George, is of the Methodist persuasion, as are Thomas and John Standfield. Also like George, James Loveless and Thomas Standfield are Methodist preachers.³ When George Loveless enquires of Constable Brine as to the contents of the warrant, the latter holds it out to him, saying, 'Take it yourself. You can read it as well as I can.' (In fact, all six men could read and write).

George Loveless had recently created a trade union in Tolpuddle; new members being admitted to it in a ceremony which involved the swearing of a secret oath. According to the warrant now placed before the men by Constable Brine, however, the swearing of such an oath was an illegal act,