

**Fascism in East Anglia: The British Union of
Fascists in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex,
1933-1940**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines five key issues relating to the emergence and development of the British Union of Fascists in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex between 1933 and 1940. Firstly, it provides an analytical account of the B.U.F.'s involvement in the East Anglian 'tithe war' during 1933-1934, which pays particular attention to fascist motivation, the extent of Blackshirt anti-tithe activism, and the various constraints limiting the impact of the Mosleyite interventionist strategy. Secondly, the B.U.F.'s anti-war policy and the government's implementation of Defence Regulation 18B (1A) are discussed in a regional context. Evidence from the three counties is used to give qualified endorsement to revisionist arguments, which maintain that the Blackshirt Peace Campaign boosted recruitment and attracted disaffected pro-appeasement middle class Tories. Reasons are also put forward to explain why the 18B round-up of B.U.F. adherents in eastern England proceeded in such an inconsistent manner. Thirdly, the size and social characteristics of the local Blackshirt support base are investigated. Approximate recruitment levels for active and non-active members in Norfolk, Suffolk and provincial Essex between 1934 and late 1938 are calculated, and detailed analysis of a sample of 230 Mosleyites from the area affords a valuable insight into the social class and occupational structure of the local movement. Fourthly, this thesis considers the protean nature of the B.U.F.'s appeal from both a 'regional' and 'national' perspective by consulting the oral and written testimonies of 22 'East Anglian' and 75 other Blackshirt adherents. Finally, the various external and internal factors hampering the B.U.F.'s progress in the three counties are discussed within the framework of a conjunctural model of fascist political success. A number of key constraints, including unfavourable socio-economic conditions, a lack of 'political space', internal deficiencies and state management of domestic fascism, marginalised the local Blackshirt movement.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE B.U.F., AGRICULTURE AND EAST ANGLIA

1. Introduction

For over 30 years, the British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.) has attracted an enduring scholarly and popular interest. As Britain's largest and most significant fascist movement, the B.U.F. has been subjected to considerable academic scrutiny in a number of key areas. Informative biographies of prominent Blackshirt figures, notably Oswald Mosley, William Joyce and A.K. Chesterton, have been published, which shed light on individual paths to fascism and the role of the leadership within the organisation.¹ Other scholars and writers have produced detailed general accounts of the movement's attempts to establish itself as a national political force between 1932 and 1940.² The B.U.F.'s controversial association with anti-Semitism has also been examined from a variety of perspectives, and several other studies consider the wider underpinning ideology of Mosleyite fascism.³ Furthermore, illuminating contributions have been forthcoming on various aspects of the B.U.F.'s membership, particularly the characteristics of its leading cadres, the pattern and level of recruitment, and female

¹ Robert Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley (London: Macmillan Press, 1975); Nicholas Mosley, Rules of the Game: Sir Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley 1896-1933 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1982); Nicholas Mosley, Beyond the Pale: Sir Oswald Mosley and family 1933-1980 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983); J.A. Cole, Lord Haw-Haw: The Full Story of William Joyce (London: Faber and Faber, 1964); Francis Selwyn, Hitler's Englishman: The Crime of Lord Haw-Haw (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987); David Baker, Ideology of Obsession: A.K. Chesterton and British Fascism (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 1996).

² Colin Cross, The Fascists in Britain (London: Barrie and Rockliffe, 1961); R. Benewick, The Fascist Movement in Britain (London: Allen Lane, 1972); R. Thurlow, Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); D.S. Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931-81 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

³ W.F. Mandle, Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists (London: Longmans, 1968); G.C. Lebzelter, Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-39 (London: Macmillan Press, 1978); Colin Holmes, Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); Neill Nugent, 'The Ideas of the British Union of Fascists' in Roger King and Neill Nugent (eds.), The British Right (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977), Chapter Six; G.C. Webber, The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939 (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Stephen M. Cullen, 'The Development of the Ideas and Policies of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 22 (1987), pp. 115-136; Philip M. Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 33 (1998), pp. 255-272; Steven Woodbridge, 'The Nature and Development of the Concept of National Synthesis in British Fascist Ideology 1920-1940' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Kingston University, 1997).

involvement in the organisation.⁴ Important research investigating the state's management of British fascism has also appeared.⁵ Finally, numerous published and unpublished local or regional studies have traced the development of the B.U.F. in northern England, Aberdeen, the west Midlands, east London and elsewhere.⁶

Two related areas which have not received sufficient attention in the existing academic literature on the B.U.F. are the Blackshirts' proposals for agriculture and the organisation's attempts to create a rural heartland. Although several commentators have briefly examined the Mosleyite platform on farming and rural issues, no detailed

⁴ W.F. Mandle, 'The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists', Australian Journal of Politics and History, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (1966), pp. 360-383; G.C. Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 19 (1984), pp. 575-606; G.C. Webber, 'The British Isles' in D. Muhlberger (ed.), The Social Basis of European Fascist Movements (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 140-154; M. Durham, 'Women and the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', Immigrants and Minorities, Vol. 8, Nos. 1 and 2 (1989), pp. 3-18; M. Durham, 'Gender and the British Union of Fascists', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 27 (1992), pp. 513-529; M. Durham, 'Women in the British Union of Fascists' in S. Oldfield (ed.), This Working-Day World: Women's Lives and Culture(s) in Britain 1914-1945 (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), pp. 101-110; M. Durham, Women and Fascism (London: Routledge, 1998), Chapters Two and Three.

⁵ A.W. Brian Simpson, In the Highest Degree Odious: Detention without Trial in Wartime Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); R. Thurlow, The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994).

⁶ 'The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40' (Trevelyan Scholarship Project, 1960); L. Kibblewhite and A. Rigby, Fascism in Aberdeen: street politics in the 1930's (Aberdeen: Aberdeen People's Press, 1978); C.J.F. Morley, 'Fascist Promise and the Capitalist Alternative: An analysis of Sussex coast fascism between the wars' (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, university unspecified, 1982. Copy held at the Wiener Library, London); S.J. Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s: A case study of Fascism in the North of England in a period of economic and political change' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Bradford, 1981); J.D. Brewer, Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1984); D. Turner, Fascism and anti-Fascism in the Medway Towns 1927-1940 (Rochester: Kent Anti-Fascist Action Committee, 1993); Stephen M. Cullen, 'Another Nationalism: The British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan 1932-40', The Welsh History Review, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1994), pp. 101-114; Stephen M. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists in Scotland', Proceedings of the Association of Scottish Historical Studies (Edinburgh: 1994), pp. 116-123; N. Todd, In Excited Times: The People Against The Blackshirts (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bewick Press/Tyne and Wear Anti-Fascist Association, 1995); T.P. Linehan, East London for Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex 1933-40 (London: Frank Cass, 1996); D. Renton, Red Shirts And Black: Fascists And Anti-Fascists in Oxford in the 1930s (Oxford: Ruskin College Library Occasional Publication, No. 5, 1996). Several edited collections contain chapters which examine some of the aforementioned (and other) topics relating to the B.U.F.. See K. Lunn and R. Thurlow (eds.), British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain (London: Croom Helm, 1980); T. Kushner and K. Lunn (eds.), Traditions of Intolerance: Historical Perspectives on Fascism and Race Discourse in Britain (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); T. Kushner and K. Lunn (eds.), The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain (London: Frank Cass, 1990); M. Cronin (ed.), The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition (London: Macmillan, 1996).

study of this subject has so far been produced.⁷ Such an omission may reflect the view, held by certain scholars, that the B.U.F. did not regard agriculture as a primary concern. For example, in noting that Mosley considered most of the major problems of the 'modern age' to be industrial, John D. Brewer has not only maintained that the movement "generally showed little serious interest" in agriculture but has also argued that "It is to fascist speeches in farming areas that one must look for any statement on agriculture, not to published works or the fascist press".⁸ Similarly, Anna Bramwell's wide-ranging study of ecology in the twentieth century, which contains a short section on the Blackshirts' plans for the countryside, has concluded that agricultural policy (as outlined by Jorian Jenks, the movement's rural expert) "remained peripheral to the B.U.F.'s chief interests".⁹

Blackshirt efforts to promote a grass root fascist presence in rural areas also remain largely uncharted. Indeed, Brewer's rather sketchy examination of the B.U.F.'s attempts to create a support base in the highly unreceptive Worcestershire farming district of Evesham constitutes the only regional study of Blackshirt activity amongst the agricultural community.¹⁰ The B.U.F. succeeded in establishing a small Evesham formation in 1934, and, two years later, a prominent local farmer and market gardener, John Dowty, was selected as the movement's prospective parliamentary candidate for the constituency. However, lacking financial resources, frequent propaganda visits from National Headquarters (N.H.Q.) officials, regular links with the Birmingham B.U.F., and an adequate number of fascist activists, the Evesham Branch made little headway in the period up to 1940.¹¹

⁷ See for example Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians', pp. 261-262; Cullen, 'The Development of the Ideas and Policies of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40', p. 132; Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, pp. 35-36 and pp. 72-73; Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939*, pp. 59-61.

⁸ Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p. 116 and p. 120.

⁹ Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 168. Bramwell's view is endorsed by Josef Craven who asserts that the B.U.F. failed "to involve itself in anything deeper than farmers' grievances, calls for greater agricultural economic protection and half-jokingly, a 'Fresh Air Department' at the Ministry of Health". See J. Craven, "Health, Wholeness, Holiness" *Radical Right and Fascist Attitudes to the British Countryside* (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1993), p. 17.

¹⁰ Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, Chapter Eight.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-127.

These internal weaknesses were compounded by four external factors which made Evesham particularly unpromising political terrain for the Blackshirts. Firstly, the prosperity of the local farming sector acted as a major constraint. Evesham, as one of the main fruit growing areas in England, was relatively unaffected by falling prices during the agricultural depression of the early 1930s. The essential buoyancy of the local economy can be gauged from the fact that the Borough's population increased by 20.5 per cent between 1931 and 1935, and unemployment peaked at 7.5 per cent (of the insured population) in 1932.¹²

Secondly, tithe obligations in Evesham (and Worcestershire generally) did not foster the widespread sense of grievance and resentment which characterised the response of the eastern counties' farming community to rent charge collection in the early 1930s. This more muted reaction was mainly due to the operation of the so-called 'Evesham Custom', the practice of conducting distraint sales by private treaty rather than by public auction, the less than militant attitude of the Worcestershire farmers, and the failure of the Blackshirts to intervene in any local tithe disputes.¹³

Thirdly, government action to assist the farming sector in the 1930s undermined the appeal of the B.U.F.'s agricultural platform. By introducing a series of measures, including marketing schemes to stabilise prices, subsidies to raise farmers' returns without reducing demand, and import restrictions to protect the home producer, the National Government provided a framework for agricultural recovery which effectively marginalised the Blackshirts' more drastic proposals.¹⁴

Finally, largely as a result of the first three factors, the Evesham farming community was not radicalised and broadly retained its Conservative loyalties. Without widespread feelings of political discontent to exploit, the local B.U.F. formation was

¹² Ibid., pp. 127-128.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 118-120. The 'Evesham Custom' was enshrined in the 1923 Agricultural Holdings Act. By giving a range of benefits, such as security of tenure, the incentive to make improvements and full value for produce, without conferring actual proprietorship, the Custom offered local tenants most of the advantages associated with landownership, but the responsibility to pay tithe remained with the landlord. The tithe issue is examined in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 128-129.

unable to make any advance. Interestingly, Brewer concluded that the movement's "link with British farmers came only from opportunistically exploiting a number of localised [tithe] disturbances in the circumscribed area of East Anglia".¹⁵

In an attempt to broaden our knowledge of the B.U.F.'s political fortunes in rural areas, this thesis investigates the development of the Blackshirt movement in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex between 1933 and 1940. A regional study of this type can be justified on at least four grounds, namely (1) the B.U.F. put forward a range of proposals for agriculture and actively courted the farming community, (2) the severe impact of the agricultural depression on the eastern counties in the early 1930s, together with the widespread discontent in local farming circles generated by the obligation to pay tithe, appeared to offer Mosley some scope for expansion in the area, (3) non-fascist contemporaries observed that the B.U.F. seemed to be making headway in rural districts, particularly in East Anglia, and (4) the work of academic and local historians, and other writers, provides further evidence to indicate that the B.U.F. was active in each of the three counties under investigation. These important points will be examined in turn.

Contrary to Brewer's claims, the B.U.F. did publish a number of books and pamphlets which analysed the condition of the farming sector and advocated the implementation of fascist remedies.¹⁶ These policy statements repeatedly stressed that agriculture formed "the corner-stone" of the "national edifice" and, as such, occupied "a leading place in the Fascist determination to rebuild Britain".¹⁷ Extensive discussion

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁶ Fascism and Agriculture (London: B.U.F. Publications, n.d.); Oswald Mosley, Blackshirt Policy (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1934), pp. 53-57; Fascism for the Million: The New Movement Simplified (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1936), Chapter Three; Oswald Mosley, Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1936), Questions 50-59; J. Jenks, The Land and the People: British Union Policy for Agriculture (London: Greater Britain Publications, n.d.); Oswald Mosley, Tomorrow We Live (London: Abbey Supplies, 1938), pp. 44-46 and pp. 53-54. Mosley did not examine agriculture in the 1932 edition of The Greater Britain on the grounds that such an important subject required separate detailed consideration and could not be discussed profitably in a work which was principally concerned with outlining the B.U.F.'s basic programme. However, the Blackshirts' main agricultural policies were explained in the 1934 edition. See Oswald Mosley, The Greater Britain (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1932), pp. 110-111; Oswald Mosley, The Greater Britain (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1934), pp. 126-131.

¹⁷ Jenks, The Land and the People, p. 4; Mosley, Blackshirt Policy, p. 53. See also Fascism for the

of farming and rural matters also took place in the Fascist Quarterly and the British Union Quarterly.¹⁸ The Mosleyite press devoted much space to these subjects as well. Each edition of the Fascist Week had an agricultural page and carried other articles on related topics. The Blackshirt gave much coverage to farming issues and, at various times, ran weekly columns such as 'The Farmworker's Diary', 'The Farmer's Diary' and 'The British Countryside'. Furthermore, from its inception in February 1936, Action also provided a fascist perspective on British agriculture through regular features and reports.

A cursory reading of this material reveals that, far from being a peripheral concern, agriculture featured prominently in the B.U.F.'s analysis of British 'decline' and the movement's programme for radical change.¹⁹ The Blackshirt critique

Million, p. 32.

¹⁸ See for example T.L. Butler, 'Agriculture in Britain', Fascist Quarterly (F.Q.), Vol. I, No. 2 (1935), pp. 169-178; T.L. Butler 'Fascism and Organized Marketing', F.Q., Vol. I, No. 4 (1935), pp. 470-477; Lt.-Col. H.E. Crocker, 'Agricultural Research at Rothamsted', F.Q., Vol. II, No. 2 (1936), pp. 267-276; Jorian Jenks, 'The Countryman's Outlook', F.Q., Vol. II, No. 3 (1936), pp. 396-404; Jorian Jenks, 'The Countryman's Outlook - II', F.Q., Vol. II, No. 4 (1936), pp. 521-529; Jorian Jenks, 'Precious Acres', British Union Quarterly (B.U.Q.), Vol. I, No. 1 (1937), pp. 41-50; Jorian Jenks, 'The Countryman's Outlook', B.U.Q., Vol. I, No. 3 (1937), pp. 84-95; Jorian Jenks, 'Politics and the Land', B.U.Q., Vol. II, No. 2 (1938), pp. 71-78.

¹⁹ According to Mosley and the B.U.F., Britain faced the prospect of a major economic crisis because purchasing power had not kept pace with the productive capacity of industry (the latter had increased markedly due to advances in science and technology). The end result of this underconsumptionism was mounting unemployment and falling demand. Purchasing power lagged behind because domestic capitalist competition depressed wages and foreign countries, in their drive to achieve self-sufficiency, were progressively closing off Britain's former export markets. The Blackshirt analysis maintained that the British liberal economic system had compounded the problem by continuing to export surplus goods, turning overseas markets into competitors by funding foreign industrialisation, and by making the British economy dependent on world markets which were controlled by financial institutions rather than productive enterprise. Parliamentary democracy and the mainstream political parties were unable to offer any real solutions since they were wedded to outdated procedures, thinking and policies. Only fascism possessed the dynamism, vision and programme of action to reverse Britain's decline. Central to the B.U.F.'s radical economic proposals was the introduction of the Corporate State, an overarching institutionalised framework which would manage the economy in the national interest and reorganise British industry to expand the home market. Corporations were to be established for every industry and profession with equal employer, employee and consumer representation in each. These bodies were to have a range of functions (including planning, rationalisation and social welfare) within their own sectors, but their prime responsibility was to raise salaries and wages in order to align consumption with production and thereby combat unemployment. Although nominally self-governing, these Corporations were to operate within the constraints imposed by the fascist government and the National Council of Corporations. The latter was to be a general economic council composed of representatives from every Corporation. To protect the high wage corporate economy, the B.U.F. advocated three measures to insulate Britain from the 'chaos' and unpredictability of international trade. Firstly, 'scientific protection' would exclude all foreign goods which could be produced at home and remove low-paying British employers. Secondly, domestic

maintained that, following the victory of bourgeois capitalism in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, the foundations of rural society were progressively destroyed by the imposition of the “political and economic policy of *laissez-faire* which sacrificed the land [and later industry] to international trade”.²⁰ Fascist writers claimed that the consequences of two specific events were of particular significance in this unfolding historical process. Firstly, the self-serving actions of the ‘Liberals’ in the first half of nineteenth century had severely undermined the farming sector:

The Liberals were the original culprits who ruined British Agriculture a hundred years ago in pursuit of their political feud with the Conservative Party. It was under their pressure and on account of their agitation that the Corn Laws were repealed, and the British farmer left defenceless against the competition of cheap foreign foodstuffs. With typical hypocrisy the Liberals contended that they brought this about to gain cheap bread for the poorer classes, when in fact the whole scheme was a political manoeuvre to deprive the old Tory landowners of their wealth and power in favour of the rising

agricultural production would be doubled within a five year period. Thirdly, the Blackshirts intended to create a self-contained British Empire with the Dominions and colonies supplying the primary products and raw materials, and Britain providing her imperial possessions with manufactured goods. These economic reforms were to be accompanied by the installation of a rigidly hierarchical authoritarian political system which would have destroyed the British liberal democratic tradition. Once the B.U.F. had secured a parliamentary majority, a General Powers Bill would be passed to give the fascist executive (consisting of a prime minister and a small cabinet) the ability to act by Order. Parliament would still meet regularly and be entitled to carry votes of censure against the government, but its debating and blocking powers were to be abolished. Opposition political parties would also be banned. Subsequent national elections were to be held on an occupational franchise to achieve more meaningful representation and bring technicians and experts into Parliament. Mosley justified this radical change by arguing that the average voter did not possess the specialist knowledge required to grasp the complexities of national politics and was mainly interested in work-related issues. Plebiscites on the government’s performance, involving the entire population, were to be held periodically. If the administration was defeated by such a direct vote, the Crown would appoint new ministers who would be subject to national approval through a further plebiscite. In addition, the House of Lords would be reformed into a Second Chamber reflecting the nation’s industry, culture and ability, with representatives drawn from the National Council of Corporations, the main religious denominations, education, the armed forces and those who had served the state with distinction. Finally, measures were to be implemented to ensure that the local authorities worked with, rather than against, the B.U.F. government. Under the new system, each local council was to be elected by occupational franchise and placed under the control of a fascist M.P., who would act as the area executive leader. See Mosley, *The Greater Britain*; Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*; Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*.

²⁰ W.E.D. Allen, ‘The Fascist Idea in Britain’, *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 261, No. 518 (October 1933), p. 228. See also W.E.D. Allen, *Fascism in Relation to British History and Character* (London: B.U.F. Publications, n.d.), p. 6; James Drennan (pseud.), *B.U.F., Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London: John Murray, 1934), Chapter One.

manufacturing class enriched by the Industrial Revolution. In this real object the Liberals were successful indeed, not only crippling the financial strength of the Tory landlords, but ruining British Agriculture for generations.²¹

Secondly, the Conservative Party had compounded this 'betrayal' by subsequently relinquishing its traditional role as the political guardian of the farming and landowning interest. Under leaders such as Disraeli and Baldwin, the Tories effectively rejected the ailing agricultural sector and turned increasingly to the more lucrative areas of big business and high finance. Thus, from the 1860s or 1870s, the Conservatives began the transition from the party of the countryside to a party dominated by the "the City of London and ... International Finance".²²

According to the B.U.F., by the 1930s these developments had helped to establish a system of 'financial democracy' in Britain, which subordinated the interests of British agriculture to the profit-making requirements of international finance.²³ In order to maximise their returns, financial institutions invested heavily in various foreign states (rather than the domestic sector) and received interest on the capital mainly in the form of cheap agricultural imports, which depressed prices for the British farmer.²⁴ This practice of providing overseas competitors with funds and accepting payment in a form which undercut the home producer was maintained because the financiers' 'money power' controlled the party system:

Neither Conservatives nor Socialists (much less the Liberals) really desire a revival of agriculture, because the resulting expansion of output would seriously embarrass influential supporters with foreign investments and conflict with the theory of international trade to which they subscribe. Their

²¹ *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 1.

²² Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy*, p. 56. See also *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 2; Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 3. Blackshirt literature claimed that the Socialists could not restore domestic agriculture because of their overriding allegiance to internationalism and the industrial working class. The B.U.F. also accused radical left-wing elements of advocating nationalisation of the land and the collectivisation of British farming.

²³ Increasingly, the B.U.F. defined 'international finance' in terms of 'alien' or 'Jewish' interests. See Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions asked and Answered*, Question 51; Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, p. 46.

²⁴ For example, the B.U.F. claimed that the interest on British loans to Argentina and other South American states was largely repaid in meat and grain imports. See *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 2; Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy*, pp. 56-57; Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 3.

“agricultural policies” are therefore mere appendages, furbished up at election-time in order to attract the rural vote.²⁵

The B.U.F.’s proposals to regenerate British agriculture formed an integral part of the movement’s overall programme for radical change. Three key measures were put forward to alleviate the depressed state of the British agricultural sector. Firstly, via the mechanism of the Corporate State, the B.U.F. pledged to raise wage levels significantly throughout industry, so that workers could comfortably afford to pay the higher food prices which were required to restore prosperity to farming. This increase in urban purchasing power was designed to give the farmer a market at an economic price, related to production costs, and to facilitate the payment of a living wage to agricultural labourers without eliminating their employers’ profit margins. Expansion of the home market was to be further encouraged by the removal of unnecessary ‘middle men’ agencies, which inflated food prices, and a government clampdown on profiteering in agricultural commodities. These measures, it was claimed, would increase the farmers’ income without raising the cost to the consumer.²⁶

Secondly, the B.U.F. advocated the progressive reduction of foreign imports over a period of three to five years, until all non-imperial overseas foodstuffs were completely excluded.²⁷ Blackshirt sources maintained that, by the end of the transitional period, British farmers would be entirely protected from foreign competition and thus be able almost to double home agricultural production from about £280 million to £500 million, without affecting food imports from the Dominions. The commodities that could not be grown or reared in Britain (such as Manitoba hard

²⁵ Jenks, *The Land and the People*, pp. 3-4. The B.U.F. argued that British agriculture had been neglected for at least 60 years. This had had far-reaching consequences, including rural depopulation, rising urban malnutrition, continued dependence on shrinking foreign markets, failure to develop the domestic market, and increased economic and military vulnerability due to reliance on food imports. See Jenks, *The Land and the People*, pp. 1-2.

²⁶ *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 3; Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy*, pp. 54-55; Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 5; Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, pp. 44-45.

²⁷ Mosley maintained that an exclusion policy was essential since tariffs and quotas, by allowing foreign goods into the country, displaced British agricultural products, destabilised the domestic farming sector and placed additional financial burdens on the consumer. See Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (1934 edition), p. 127; Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*, Question 50.

wheat) were to be obtained either from the colonies or the Dominions, which would also benefit economically from an enlarged British market and the exclusion of foreign imports.²⁸ This autarchic approach was based on the fascist principle “Home producer first, Empire second, and foreigner last”.²⁹

Thirdly, an Agricultural Corporation was to be set up within the framework of the B.U.F.’s proposed Corporate State to represent the interests of employers (yeomen farmers, tenant farmers, landowners and foodstuff manufacturers), employees (agricultural labourers and workers in foodstuff factories) and consumers. Providing it refrained from acting against the B.U.F.’s conception of the ‘national interest’, this body would be empowered to legislate for the industry and regulate its operation. Under the Agricultural Corporation, England, Scotland and Wales were to be divided into climate and soil zones. Within each of these, a district council would plan local production “according to a strict statistical method” in order to overcome the “present chaos of individual competition”, which created both shortages and gluts.³⁰ Farmers were to be allowed to market their produce cooperatively without the intervention of government schemes or the involvement of outside parties, such as buyers and distributors. The Corporation was also to be responsible for determining the level of farm rents and wages, mediating disputes within the sector, and advising the government on agricultural and food issues. Agricultural research stations and training centres, providing up-to-date technical advice and courses of instruction, were also to be part of the new corporate structure for farming.³¹

In addition to this trio of central proposals, the B.U.F. put forward a number of other policies to rejuvenate British farming. The movement maintained that, once in

²⁸ *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 3; Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (1934 edition), pp. 126-131; Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy*, pp. 55-56; Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*, Questions 52, 53 and 57; Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, pp. 44-45. These figures were based on B.U.F. calculations that in the mid-1930s Britain imported about £140 million of foodstuffs from the Dominions and approximately £220 million from foreign countries.

²⁹ Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9; A. Raven Thomson, *The Corporate State* (London: B.U.F. Publications, n.d.), pp. 28-30; Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 6.

power, it would alleviate agricultural debt and provide cheap development capital by establishing a state-guaranteed Agricultural Bank. The latter would channel national savings into the countryside via loan facilities, which used land, buildings and produce as security.³² Agricultural employees were also to benefit under a future B.U.F. government. Besides being promised their own elected representatives in the Agricultural Corporation and a reserved supply of rural cottages, farmworkers were to receive wages “more in keeping with those paid in the towns”, since they were engaged in an “exceedingly skilled occupation”.³³

Moreover, the Blackshirts expressed a commitment to maximise the total acreage under cultivation in Britain by adopting a variety of measures. One proposal was to set up a voluntary Land Army, composed of rural workers, to improve or clear land, either for farmers or state resettlement projects. Following a period of service, Land Army recruits were to be offered permanent jobs on farms or given assistance to acquire their own holdings.³⁴ Another Mosleyite solution was to put urban residents back on the land. Fascist propaganda claimed that this would be achieved partly through the implementation of the policies described above, since by raising the condition and status of agriculture the B.U.F. would also promote farm employment. Subsidised apprenticeships were to be established, and a special drive made to expand and support the small farming sector. The state would purchase and prepare land before dividing it into equipped family farm units. Under this scheme, applicants who were employed as farm labourers or who had served in the Land Army were to be given priority. Each set of family farms would have a group leader and access to a centre which would provide a range of services at cost (such as use of breeding stock and farm machinery) and act as a distribution and collection point.³⁵ Less specifically, the B.U.F. also signalled its intent to pursue a policy of ‘Home Colonisation’ by

³² *Fascism and Agriculture*, pp. 5-6; Jenks, *The Land and the People*, pp. 6-7.

³³ *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 6. See also Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*, Question 56; Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 7.

³⁴ Jenks, *The Land and the People*, pp. 7-8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8; *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 4.

establishing land reclamation projects to recover hundreds of thousands of acres and convert them into agriculturally productive areas. There was thus “no technical reason” to prevent the Wash being “rescued from the seas”.³⁶ In support of this argument, the movement pointed to the apparent success of similar schemes in Holland and Fascist Italy.

Other proposals to promote cultivation focused on the obligations fascism attached to both land utilisation and ownership. In the B.U.F.’s view, landowners and tenant farmers had a responsibility to conserve the soil through professional estate management and appropriate farming techniques. Consequently, to encourage this type of effective husbandry, the B.U.F. undertook to lighten the financial burden by abolishing tithes and other discriminatory forms of taxation.³⁷ Blackshirt agricultural literature also endorsed the principle of hereditary land tenure as the best means of ensuring the stability, prosperity and spirit of rural society, providing the heir had the ability to realise the potential of the inherited property. However, in the future fascist state, all landowners would be duty bound to use their holdings in the national interest: “The land-owner will be held responsible for the good use and stewardship of the land, and his rental charge will be regarded as payment for the management of the estate and the maintenance of the fixed capital on the land, such as farm buildings, cottages, roads, fencing, and other facilities”.³⁸ Neglectful owners were to be dispossessed by the government without compensation and their land handed over to the state, which would turn it to productive use.³⁹

Fascist propaganda contended that if all these measures were applied both the agricultural sector and the country as a whole would be placed on a far more secure footing. The national diet would improve, due to the greater availability of home grown produce, and the financial and strategic problems associated with Britain’s dependence

³⁶ *Fascism for the Million*, p. 34.

³⁷ Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 7.

³⁸ *Fascism and Agriculture*, p. 7.

³⁹ Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*, Question 59; Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, pp. 53-54.

on imported food would be reduced. Furthermore, internal trade would expand by at least £600 million annually, giving industry a more stable environment than the volatile foreign markets could provide. Finally, permanent employment would be found on the land for an additional 500,000 people, which in turn would create an equivalent number of jobs in industry and transport. Thus, in total, an extra one million families would be given economic security.⁴⁰

The B.U.F.'s commitment to the technological modernisation of the agricultural sector was juxtaposed with fascist notions about the 'moral' and 'spiritual' advantages of pastoral society. This rural romanticism stemmed from two basic assumptions. One was the conviction that, in both physical and mental terms, life on the land was far superior to the 'debilitating' urban existence ushered in by capitalism and industrialisation.⁴¹ The other centred on the belief that national regeneration required a return to the soil, since the latter was deemed to be the natural repository of the 'true' values and spirit of Britain:

A healthy and a mighty race must have roots deep in the soil of a native land. In the English countryside restored to a happy prosperity we will breed that race of men who in the days to come shall hold high the flag of Empire with constructive achievements, which shall be an example and an inspiration to mankind.⁴²

These 'back to the land' sentiments coexisted uneasily with the B.U.F.'s more dominant modernising impulse. However, they clearly informed Blackshirt attitudes to the countryside and influenced specific elements of fascist agricultural policy such as the land army, rural repopulation and hereditary tenure.

⁴⁰ Jenks, *The Land and the People*, p. 4.

⁴¹ For example, A.K. Chesterton criticised the uncontrolled growth of industrial towns across "the once fair face of Britain, denying sun and air and health to generations after generations doomed to inherit them". Similarly, F. McEvoy bemoaned the demise of the English peasantry who "were born and bred in the open country, and who, before they were driven by the blighting tyranny of modern capitalism to seek their livelihood in the sterile cities, knew the joy of working each morning in pure air to the song of the birds, or the voice of the wind in the trees, to the glow of the sun, the sting of the frost, or the soft patter of rain on the grass". See A.K. Chesterton, *Oswald Mosley: Portrait of a Leader* (London: Action Press, 1937), p. 138; F. McEvoy, 'The Disinherited of the Soil', *B.U.Q.*, Vol. III, No. 2 (1939), p. 73.

⁴² Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy*, p. 57. See also Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, p. 46.

Throughout the 1930s, the B.U.F. also pursued a range of propaganda activities in an attempt to develop a rural following. Mosley regularly undertook agricultural speaking tours in the county towns to promote the B.U.F.'s policy on farming. In 1933-1934, Blackshirts also became directly involved in the 'tithe war', which was then affecting parts of eastern and southern England, as a means of trying to convert landowners who were obliged to pay rent charge.⁴³ Moreover, in May 1934 the Blackshirts embarked on an intensive five month agricultural propaganda campaign across rural Britain. Three B.U.F. vans, each with a driver and two speakers on board, left N.H.Q. to take separate routes covering the south coast to Cornwall, eastern England to Northumberland, and the west Midlands, Wales and Scotland. The speakers reportedly held two meetings most days and four addresses were given in each agricultural constituency. Over 720 of these Blackshirt meetings were scheduled to take place during the five month period. Mosley supported this initiative by speaking in the important market towns.⁴⁴

At the beginning of 1934, the B.U.F. also assisted in the formation of a 'non-political' organisation known as the British Union of Farmers. The aims of the latter were to "link together the farmers of the country and enable them to look after their own interests in connection with the tithes and to follow a constructive policy for improving agricultural conditions".⁴⁵ Annual membership cost five shillings and provided free legal assistance but carried no obligation to become a Blackshirt even though the B.U.F. was pledged to support the new body. According to the fascist press, the British Union of Farmers made "rapid progress" in Cornwall and the west.⁴⁶

Deteriorating conditions in the British farming sector in the early 1930s suggested that the B.U.F. might be able to make some progress in East Anglia, one of

⁴³ See Chapter Two for a detailed analysis of the B.U.F.'s involvement in the East Anglian tithe disputes of the 1930s.

⁴⁴ *Fascist Week*, 27 April-3 May 1934, p. 7, 11-17 May 1934, p. 7, 18-24 May 1934, p. 2; *Blackshirt*, 4-10 May 1934, pp. 2-3 and p. 4, 25-31 May 1934, p. 4, 1 June 1934, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Fascist Week*, 2-8 February 1934, p. 7. See also Board of Deputies of British Jews (B.D.B.J.) ACC/3121/E03/096. The Development of the British Union of Fascists (confidential memorandum, n.d.), p. 4.

⁴⁶ *Fascist Week*, 23 February-1 March 1934, p. 7.

the worst affected agricultural regions. The collapse of the New York stock market in October 1929, which resulted in falling prices and a drastic restriction of credit, triggered a world economic crisis of unprecedented severity. Industry, commerce and agriculture were all adversely affected. Two features of the international trade in agricultural produce after the First World War were to have a direct impact on the British farming community when the crash came. Firstly, downward pressure had been exerted on grain prices throughout the 1920s, due to the rising supply produced by the major wheat exporting nations (the U.S.A., Canada, Argentina and Australia) and slowing demand in the bread-eating countries.⁴⁷ Secondly, as other European states closed their markets in the pursuit of nationalist policies after 1918, the United Kingdom remained comparatively open and became “the largest single buyer of agricultural produce sold through international trade”.⁴⁸ Consequently, in conditions of mounting economic difficulty, the U.K., as the major importer of food and a largely unprotected market, became a dumping ground for agricultural surpluses from abroad. Between 1929 and 1931, the total volume of food imports into the U.K. increased by 23 per cent.⁴⁹ The amount of foreign wheat and flour entering Britain peaked in 1931 at 134 million cwt., 15.8 per cent above the level recorded in 1928. Potato imports almost trebled in 1931, and, by 1934, approximately 60-70 per cent more overseas butter was taken than in 1928.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ E.H. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 227. Improvements in transportation and field cultivation contributed to rising wheat supplies. By August 1928 the four main exporting countries held stocks of wheat which were almost quadruple those of 1926. Slowing demand for bread in North America, Europe and those countries settled by Europeans was due to less pronounced population growth and rising real incomes. The latter enabled families to buy more meat, dairy produce, eggs, fruit and vegetables and less of the starchy foods. Falling prices prompted a number of nations to protect their domestic growers by restricting grain imports.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*. In 1930, the U.K. accounted for 99 per cent of the world's exports of bacon and hams, 96 per cent of the eggs, 59 per cent of the beef, 46 per cent of the cheese, 32 per cent of the wool, and 28 per cent of wheat and wheat flour.

⁵⁰ J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming 1870-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 108-109.

TABLE 1
INDEX NUMBERS OF THE PRICES OF PRINCIPAL FARM PRODUCTS,
1929-1934

	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Wheat	130	105	76	78	70	64
Barley	125	100	100	96	100	109
Oats	125	87	88	99	80	88
Cattle, fat	133	133	122	115	101	99
Sheep, fat	157	160	133	97	110	127
Milk	169	161	147	144	150	163
Butter	152	128	111	102	94	87
Cheese, Cheddar	158	130	116	127	111	103
Eggs	159	136	116	109	105	102

(Source: J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming 1870-1947*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987, p. 108)

In Britain, agricultural prices dropped by twenty per cent between 1929 and 1931 and then fell a further sixteen per cent over the next two years. Table 1 illustrates how the main farm products fared during this period. By the winter of 1932-1933, the agricultural price index stood at 107 (1911-1913 =100), its lowest point since 1914. Falling prices, compounded by the reduced domestic output of crops and livestock products, further curtailed the farmers' gross income, which was already at a low level by the late 1920s. The value of the gross output of agricultural holdings in England and Wales fell from £221,500,000 to £182,500,000 between 1928-1929 and 1932-1933.⁵¹

Official sources indicate that the gross return from grain crops dropped by over 50 per cent in the period from 1929 to 1931.⁵² However, since gross output included only sales for non-agricultural use, this sobering statistic does not fully convey the economic position of grain farmers at the height of the depression. The large volume of grain purchased from growers by merchants and then sold on as animal feed to other

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 107-109; Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939*, pp. 228-231; Richard Perren, *Agriculture in depression 1870-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 47-48.

⁵² Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939*, p. 232.

farmers also needs to be considered. According to K.A.H. Murray, stock feed accounted for approximately 33 per cent of the wheat, 25 per cent of the barley and 66 per cent of oats cultivated in the U.K. during the 1930s. At a time of declining prices, this, in effect, meant that income was being transferred from the producers to the buyers of grain, a situation which disadvantaged the arable farmers of eastern England and benefited grassland farmers located in other regions.⁵³

The plight of the agricultural sector was underlined in 1931-1932, when falling demand and increasing domestic and foreign supplies undermined prices for livestock and their products. In 1930, the agricultural price index for livestock remained largely intact at 97 (1927-1929 = 100) but then fell to 81 in 1931 and 75 in 1932.⁵⁴ One reason for this decline was the rise in food imports as other countries used tariffs, import quotas and exchange restrictions to limit access to their markets. Even in 1932, U.K. imports of 28 main foods were eleven per cent above the corresponding volume for 1928.⁵⁵ Another factor depressing prices was the fall in feed costs after 1929, since this encouraged many farmers to seek greater remuneration by using their grassland and arable produce to build up livestock numbers. Compared with 1930-1931, pig sales increased by approximately one million in 1932-1933, the number of hens doubled in the decade prior to 1931, and, during the 1929-1933 period, sheep stocks rose by an additional 2,500,000.⁵⁶

The export trade in particular received another blow when an epidemic of foot and mouth disease closed livestock markets in central and southern England at the end of 1932. For much of the 1920s, exports of horses, cattle, pigs and sheep by British

⁵³ K.A.H. Murray, Agriculture: History of the Second World War (London: H.M.S.O., 1956), p. 375 and p. 386. The low prices of cereals and oilcakes enabled most dairy farmers, smallholders with pigs and poultry, and some livestock producers to reduce their costs significantly at this time. The official feed price index (1911-1913 = 100) dropped from 145 in 1928-1929 to 82 in 1930-1931. After a slight recovery, it fell to 84 in 1933-1934. See Whetham, The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939, p. 232.

⁵⁴ M. Tracy, Government and Agriculture in Western Europe 1880-1988 (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 159.

⁵⁵ Whetham, The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939, p. 234. In 1931, the volume was seventeen per cent above the 1928 level.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

pedigree breeders had brought in over £1,250,000 a year, but, from 1932, this trade contracted dramatically as disease in Britain, exchange controls and the depressed condition of foreign agriculture took their toll. Price levels for both store stock and pedigree breeding stock plummeted.⁵⁷

These acute economic pressures had a significant impact on the agricultural community, not least because they followed a period when arable farming profits were generally hard to come by. Bankruptcies began to rise and the number of farmers declined. Between 1929 and 1933, an average of 444 farmers a year were declared bankrupt in England and Wales. In the peak year of 1932, 600 went to the wall.⁵⁸ Given that there were some 200,000 agricultural holdings over twenty acres in size, the failure rate remained remarkably low. This was partly because many creditors were prepared to let debts run on, as forced sales under such depressed conditions would have yielded little. A seven per cent reduction in the number of farmers in Britain in the ten years up to 1931, from 316,000 to 294,000, also reflected the hardships faced by the agricultural sector.⁵⁹

In the search for financial savings, farmers attempted to curb their labour costs, either by pressing county wage committees to lower minimum wage rates for farmworkers and extend the hours covered by these payments or by laying off agricultural employees.⁶⁰ Many county wage committees were persuaded to act. During 1931-1932, the working week was extended (normally by two hours) in a number of counties, including Dorset, Hampshire, Norfolk, Wiltshire and Worcestershire. In several regions, the minimum weekly wage for general farmworkers fell by one-two shillings, dipping below £1 10s. in Berkshire, Gloucestershire,

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 234-235.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 238; J.S. Venn, *Foundations of Agricultural Economics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 542; S.G. Sturmev, 'Owner-farming in England and Wales, 1900-1950' in W.E. Minchinton (ed.), *Essays in Agrarian History*, Vol. II (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1968), pp. 283-306.

⁵⁹ F.D.W. Taylor, 'United Kingdom: numbers in agriculture', *Farm Economist*, Vol. VII, No. 4 (1955), pp. 36-40; Perren, *Agriculture in depression 1870-1940*, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁰ Although the cost of living had fallen significantly since 1929, farm work was traditionally one of lowest paid manual occupations

Oxfordshire, Suffolk, Radnorshire, Breconshire, Merioneth and Montgomeryshire. Evidence brought before the Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance in 1931 indicated that, in the winter months of the late 1920s, more farmworkers than usual were 'stood off' in the arable districts. Without doubt, unemployment amongst the agricultural workforce became more pronounced as farm prices continued to fall from 1929. In the five years up to 1933, the number of regular farmworkers in England and Wales contracted from 644,000 to 597,000, a reduction of more than seven per cent. By 1939, when the corresponding figure was 511,000, the total so employed had fallen by approximately one fifth over a decade.⁶¹

Since the eastern counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire (excluding the Isle of Ely) and Huntingdonshire formed the "principal corn growing district in Britain", it was inevitable that the region would be severely affected by the agricultural depression.⁶² The area bounded by these counties covered almost 4,200,000 acres, of which 3,200,000 were under crops and grass. Two thirds of the latter was arable land. A further 170,000 acres were occupied by rough grazings.⁶³ In 1931, a University of Cambridge survey of 983 farms of twenty acres and above in eastern England found that the average annual farm income ranged from £28 in the 20-50 acre category to -£60 for those over 500 acres.⁶⁴ Only a general eighteen per cent rise in agricultural prices, with costs remaining constant, would have given occupiers a modest five per cent on their capital and a reasonable cash wage of 48 shillings per week. Consequently, the report concluded that, for each size band in 1931,

⁶¹ Whetham, The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939, p. 236; Brown, Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming 1870-1947, p. 84; Perren, Agriculture in depression 1870-1940, p. 48.

⁶² University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture (U.C.D.A.), An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1931 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 19, July 1932), p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 1 and p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Table II, p. 85. In the early 1930s it cost, on average, eight pounds to grow an acre of wheat, although actual expenditure ranged from twelve pounds per acre on heavy clays to four pounds per acre on mechanized light-land farms. Based on an average price of just under seven shillings per cwt and an average yield of seventeen cwt. per acre (two-thirds of which was sold), in 1930-1931 producers received between three and four pounds per acre for wheat. Consequently, only those farmers who were able to maximize their yields or keep their operating costs low avoided significant losses. See Whetham, The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939, pp. 232-233.

average farm income “failed by a very large amount to make a fair return for the capital invested and for the work of the occupier”.⁶⁵

East Anglia fared particularly badly partly because the region contained the main concentration of large arable farms in England and Wales. Approximately six per cent of the holdings in eastern England were 300 acres or more in size, compared with three per cent nationally.⁶⁶ With their capital and credit diminished by descending grain prices in the 1920s, many of these bigger farms lacked the financial resources to offset the collapsing agricultural price index after 1929. Annual surveys of approximately 1,000 farms in the eastern counties between 1931 and 1933 revealed that paid labour averaged 37.6 per cent of gross charges on holdings of 300-500 acres and 40.9 per cent on those over 500 acres.⁶⁷ Since falling prices were not matched by a corresponding reduction in costs, large farming enterprises with sizeable wage bills became increasingly reliant on bank overdrafts and ran up debts with corn merchants.

Agricultural unemployment was particularly severe in eastern England during the early 1930s. Some idea of the scale of the problem can be ascertained by considering annual government statistics on the number of workers employed on local agricultural holdings. In 1925, the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire combined contained a total of 134,089 employed farmworkers (110,769 regular and 23,320 casual). By 1930, this had dropped to 127,702 (107,401 and 20,301), and, a year later, there were only 119,148 (102,124 and 17,024).⁶⁸

⁶⁵ U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1931, p. 17.

⁶⁶ R. Caslow, ‘The Eastern Counties’ in J.P. Maxton (ed.), Regional Types of British Agriculture (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 118.

⁶⁷ U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1933 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 22, July 1934), p. 26.

⁶⁸ U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1932 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 21, July 1933), p. 70.

TABLE 2
AMOUNT OF OUTRELIEF GRANTED TO PERSONS ORDINARILY
ENGAGED IN SOME REGULAR OCCUPATION AND THEIR
DEPENDANTS

Administrative County	1931	1932	1933
Norfolk	£3,546	£44,966	£77,758
Suffolk (East)	£4,189	£10,909	£26,544
Suffolk (West)	£4,190	£8,960	£16,032
Essex	£34,761	£47,106	£102,560
Huntingdon	£1,387	£1,705	£3,182
Hertford	£6,868	£11,396	£20,282
Cambridge	£880	£1,269	£2,525
Total for Year	£55,821	£126,311	£248,883

(Source: U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1932,
Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 21, July 1933, p. 71)

Another useful guide, bearing in mind the fact that farm labourers were not then eligible for unemployment benefit, is to examine the payments for out of work relief made to able bodied workers in rural areas of East Anglia. Table 2 shows that, for the same counties, expenditure on this form of assistance rose dramatically in the early 1930s. Between 1931 and 1933, the overall amount granted in out-relief increased by 346 per cent, from £55,821 to £248,883, “to meet unemployment which arose mainly as a result of a depressed agriculture”.⁶⁹ In turn, this placed additional financial burdens on local farming ratepayers.

A number of contemporary non-fascist observers concluded that the B.U.F. was making some headway in rural districts. In November 1933, the Suffolk landowner Lady Eve Balfour warned that the agricultural depression and the resulting disaffection within farming society could play into the hands of the Blackshirts:

I think that a very large section of the community today feel the existing old political principles and the old monetary system inadequate to deal with present conditions, and

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

that if the life and health of the nation is to be restored something new must be found...Now the only party claiming to put forward a policy to uphold the producers' interests, is Mosley's party, and I think there is a very grave danger that if his remains the only party with such a policy that [the] whole of rural England will go black-shirt.⁷⁰

A Board of Deputies' confidential memorandum on the B.U.F., compiled in 1934, reported that "recently very considerable Fascist support has been obtained from the farmer in certain areas" and claimed that in "some cases the Farmers' Union branches have a 20% B.U.F. membership".⁷¹ During the same year, the authorities also noted that the movement "makes special efforts to attract farmers and the rural communities generally".⁷² These assessments were reinforced by Wilkinson and Conze's 1934 analysis of Blackshirt involvement in the 'tithe war':

They have secured a spectacular advertisement from their energetic and occasionally embarrassing interference in the "tithe war"...In the Eastern Areas there is a good deal of agricultural unemployment, and many bankruptcies, owing to foreclosing by the banks. As the labourers do not come under Unemployment Insurance they are naturally scared at anything that may cause them to lose their jobs. Hence on the whole they tend to support the farmers in the Tithe War. To this extent the Fascists have won sympathy among the labourers as well as the farmers.⁷³

More recently, academic and other writers have noted that the B.U.F. was active in the three counties and attempted to win over a following in the countryside. In his controversial biography of Mosley, Robert Skidelsky has gone as far as to suggest that the rural areas offered relatively "promising soil for the fascist seed", since the agricultural community responded cordially to the Blackshirts' overtures:

⁷⁰ Lady Eve Balfour. Quoted in John Mead, 'Suffolk and the 'Tithe War' of the 1930s', *East Anglian History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 1 (n.d.), p. 15.

⁷¹ B.D.B.J. ACC/3121/E03/096. The Development of the British Union of Fascists (confidential memorandum, n.d.), p. 4.

⁷² Public Records Office, Home Office series (P.R.O. HO) 144/20141/304. Report on the Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland. Report No. I. Developments up to the end of May 1934.

⁷³ E. Wilkinson and E. Conze, *Why Fascism?* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1934), p. 63. Other contemporary commentators feared that fascism could exploit divisions between farmers and farmworkers. See Valentine Ackland, *Country Conditions* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936).

Mosley's first rural campaign had been launched in East Anglia in 1933, when fascists took a prominent part in the tithe war. Throughout the 1930s he campaigned continuously there and in Lincolnshire, Worcester, the West Country and south and south-east England. Here the meetings were more relaxed and informal. Sometimes Mosley would be invited to address meetings of the National Farmers' Union. Often he would speak at garden parties organised by wealthy supporters or prominent agriculturists, such as Dorothy, Viscountess Downe, who became B.U.F. candidate for North Norfolk, Lady Pearson, sister of General Page Croft, who ran the Canterbury branch, and Jorian Jenks, farmer and author who played an active part in Surrey. The black shirt would be abandoned, or worn under a suit, and at most places no more than half a dozen stewards would be needed. Most of those meetings, and there were several hundred of them, were never reported in the national press, and so a completely distorted picture grew up of the 'typical' Mosley meeting. Outside East London, these were perhaps the meetings which Mosley liked best. This was his England, and it responded to him without hysterics.⁷⁴

Skidelsky's view has been given qualified support by Gerry C. Webber's important work on the pattern and level of Blackshirt recruitment between 1934 and 1939.⁷⁵ Webber's findings, based on declassified government and Special Branch files, indicate that in mid-1934 the B.U.F.'s national membership peaked at approximately 50,000, with East Anglia contributing around 2,500 to the total. Thereafter, according to this research, the Blackshirt presence in eastern England "waned rapidly and probably permanently".⁷⁶

Various biographical works on Henry Williamson have revealed that the writer and novelist joined the B.U.F. in late 1937 at the request of the prominent Norfolk Blackshirt, Dorothy, Viscountess Downe.⁷⁷ Williamson, who had survived front line

⁷⁴ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp. 326-327.

⁷⁵ Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists'.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

⁷⁷ Daniel Farson, *Henry: An Appreciation of Henry Williamson* (London: Michael Joseph, 1982); J.W. Blench, 'Henry Williamson and the Romantic Appeal of Fascism Part I', *Durham University Journal*, Vol. lxxxi, No. 1 (1988), pp. 123-139; J.W. Blench, 'Henry Williamson and the Romantic Appeal of Fascism Part II', *Durham University Journal*, Vol. lxxxi, No. 2 (1989), pp. 289-305; Lois Lamplugh, *A Shadowed Man: Henry Williamson, 1895-1977* (Somerset: Exmoor Press, 1991); Melvyn D. Higginbottom, *Intellectuals and British Fascism: A Study of Henry Williamson* (London: Janus Publishing Company, 1992); Margaret E. Romanovitch, 'Henry Williamson As A Romantic Fascist? The Origins, Context and Applications of Henry Williamson's Aesthetic and Political Ideas'

military service in the First World War, had only recently arrived in the county after purchasing Old Hall Farm at Stiffkey and was determined to turn his new acquisition into an economically viable concern. His recruitment owed much to a deep personal admiration for Mosley, the Blackshirt anti-war platform and the movement's proposals to rejuvenate British agriculture.

In addition, a few studies have focussed briefly, and in a largely narrative fashion, on the B.U.F.'s direct involvement in tithe disputes in Suffolk.⁷⁸ These show that the movement endeavoured to launch itself as a political force in the region by endorsing local agricultural opposition to rent charge collection and by offering active 'assistance' to farmers who had been served with notices of distraint for non-payment of tithe. Most accounts have concentrated mainly or exclusively on the highly publicised fascist intervention at Hall Farm, Wortham in February 1934 which delayed the removal of impounded stock from the property and resulted in nineteen Blackshirts being bound over at the Old Bailey after being charged with conspiring to effect a public mischief.

Thomas P. Linehan's impressive study of the B.U.F.'s emergence and development in east London has also demonstrated that the Blackshirts made some progress in the predominantly suburban and residential areas of south-west Essex.⁷⁹ By drawing on the oral testimonies of surviving ex-Blackshirts and a range of documentary sources, Linehan has identified four main features of Mosleyite fascism in south-west Essex. Firstly, the B.U.F. created and sustained Branch structures at East Ham, West Ham, Leyton, Ilford, Walthamstow, Epping and Romford, even though local factors (including low levels of latent and overt anti-Semitism, the opposition of Labour-controlled Borough councils and the internal weaknesses of B.U.F. Branches)

(Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Kingston University, 1992); Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995).

⁷⁸ Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, pp. 90-91; Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, pp. 48-49; Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, Chapter Eight; Roger Spalding, 'BUF Intervention in the Wortham Tithe Dispute', *East Anglian History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 1 (n.d.), pp. 9-12; Mead, 'Suffolk and the 'Tithe War' of the 1930s', pp. 13-17; Robert Halliday, 'The Tithe War', *Suffolk Review*, Series 28 (Spring 1997), pp. 33-40.

⁷⁹ Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapter Four.

militated against significant political success. Secondly, many of these Blackshirt formations were not only involved in the B.U.F.'s Peace Campaign and wartime propaganda activities but were also adversely affected by the implementation of Defence Regulation 18B (1A). Thirdly, the movement was able to establish a modest regional support base with certain local B.U.F. Districts, such as Epping and West Ham, attracting three figure memberships. Finally, the B.U.F. exerted a multifaceted appeal in the area which could not be reduced to a single policy or issue.⁸⁰

2. The B.U.F. in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex: themes and issues

Having discussed the reasons for undertaking this regional study of the B.U.F. in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, it is now necessary to outline the main themes and issues which will be addressed. Chapter Two aims to provide the first thoroughly researched study of the B.U.F.'s intervention in the East Anglian 'tithe war' of the early 1930s. The fascist anti-tithe campaign, which attracted widespread publicity in the local and national press, formed the crucial opening phase in the movement's attempt to create a rural heartland in the eastern counties. Although fascist involvement in some of the region's tithe disputes did attract recruits and sympathisers, the failure of this Blackshirt initiative to harness more than a fraction of local anti-tithe sentiment in 1933-1934 effectively established the parameters of fascist development in the area for the rest of the decade.

Several academic and local studies have briefly examined the B.U.F.'s foray into the tithe war, particularly Blackshirt involvement in the Wortham tithe dispute in Suffolk in February 1934.⁸¹ However, none of the existing accounts fully investigate a number of key issues surrounding the B.U.F.'s intervention. Firstly, little attention has been paid to the question of ideological motivation, particularly in respect of how

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapters Four, Five, Six and Eight.

⁸¹ Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, pp. 90-91; Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, pp. 48-49; Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, Chapter Eight; Spalding, 'BUF Intervention in the Wortham Tithe Dispute', pp. 9-12; Mead, 'Suffolk and the 'Tithe War' of the 1930s', pp. 13-17; Halliday, 'The Tithe War', pp. 33-40.

abolition of the tithe formed part of the B.U.F.'s policy for agriculture. Secondly, fascist involvement in the East Anglian tithe war was not confined to Suffolk, although most studies convey this impression. In fact, Blackshirt anti-tithe activity also took place in Norfolk and Essex. Thirdly, there is no detailed assessment of the extent to which the B.U.F.'s campaign against rent charge advanced the movement in the eastern counties. Finally, the various internal and external constraints limiting the impact of the Blackshirts' interventionist strategy have not been considered in any depth. These four neglected areas are examined in this thesis.

The current project also attempts to build upon Linehan's scholarly work on the B.U.F. in south-west Essex by incorporating relevant new information from Home Office and other sources, and extending the analysis to cover the entire county. In addition, a more systematic conjunctural model is adopted (across all three counties) to provide a fuller explanation for the local B.U.F.'s lack of progress. This analytical framework is required since Linehan's perceptive discussion of the constraints hampering the movement in south-west Essex fails to analyse in any detail how the local economic context affected the Blackshirts' prospects.⁸²

Two other under-researched themes considered in this thesis are the B.U.F.'s 'Peace Campaign' from 1938 and the crippling of the movement under Defence Regulation 18B in 1940. Although several scholars have produced informative general accounts of the Blackshirts' anti-war activities and the state's destruction of the organisation through detention without trial and enforced closure, the provincial dimension to these two important episodes in the history of the B.U.F. remains largely unexplored.⁸³

⁸²Linehan rightly stresses the factors accounting for the low incidence of latent and overt anti-Semitism in the region, the refusal of Labour-controlled Borough councils to let halls for B.U.F. meetings, the politically unreceptive culture of suburban residential life, the existence of a militant 'physical force' left-wing anti-fascist opposition, and the numerous organisational deficiencies and internal weaknesses of the B.U.F. Districts. See Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapter Four. The Griffin-Copsey conjunctural model used in this thesis is discussed in section three of this chapter.

⁸³Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*; Thurlow, *The Secret State*, Chapter Six. The impact of the B.U.F. Peace Campaign and Defence Regulation 18B in east London are examined in Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapter Five.

To this end, Chapter Six discusses the nature, impact and extent of fascist efforts to promote Mosley's anti-war platform in the three counties before and after September 1939, together with the countervailing factors which were operating locally. In particular, Skidelsky and Webber's revisionist argument that the Blackshirts' Peace Campaign raised recruitment levels in the late 1930s is assessed in the light of the available evidence for Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. Webber's additional suggestion that much of this newly-acquired support came from disaffected pro-appeasement middle class Conservatives is also examined from a regional perspective.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the implementation of Defence Regulation 18B (1A) is considered in a local context, principally by charting the uneven pattern of B.U.F. arrests and offering reasons to explain why the round-up in the eastern counties proceeded in such an inconsistent manner.

The level and nature of Blackshirt recruitment and support in the three counties also constitutes a major area for investigation. Previously, apart from the well publicised fascist affiliations of a small number of high profile local figures, such as Viscountess Downe and Henry Williamson, little was known about the region's Mosleyites. In order to remedy this deficiency, a serious attempt has been made to move beyond earlier national and local studies, which tended to rely either on semi-supported generalisations or information provided by tiny samples of ex-B.U.F. interviewees. By collecting as much empirical data as possible on Mosley's local support base, and building on two important contributions to the academic debate about the B.U.F.'s following, Chapter Seven endeavours to fill the gap in two fundamental ways.⁸⁵ Firstly, it offers a realistic estimate of Blackshirt recruitment levels for active and non-active members in Norfolk, Suffolk and provincial Essex between 1934 and late 1938. Secondly, detailed consideration of an extensive sample

⁸⁴ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp. 331-333; R. Skidelsky, 'Great Britain' in S.J. Woolf (ed.), *Fascism In Europe* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 275; Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists'.

⁸⁵ Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists'; Linchan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapter Six.

of 230 Mosleyites drawn from the three counties, provides a valuable insight into the social class and occupational structure of the 'East Anglian' B.U.F..

A related issue, also examined in this regional context, is the extent to which the B.U.F. relied on the support of disaffected Tories. The fascist press took every opportunity to publicise the backing given to the movement by Conservative adherents and remarked on the number of "loyal old Tories" at B.U.F. meetings in agricultural areas "who afterwards confess that they came to scoff, but remained to praise".⁸⁶ Contemporaries also noted that Mosley's organisation was making some in-roads into the mainstream right's constituency.⁸⁷ More recently, Gerry Webber's work on the inter-war British radical right has suggested that the B.U.F., with its pro-Empire and 'Mind Britain's Business' stance, was only able to increase its membership when Tory divisions surfaced over imperial and foreign policy:

...there are good but not indisputable empirical reasons for suggesting that support for the BUF was closely related to dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party. When the movement was doing 'well' (in 1934 and 1939) it relied heavily on the support of 'natural' Conservative voters and benefited from internal Conservative Party disputes, first over India and then over appeasement.⁸⁸

Several regional studies of the B.U.F. have also indicated that local Blackshirt formations were able to appeal to alienated Tories. Linehan's detailed reconstruction of Mosleyite activity in east and north-east London, for example, has established that Gentile agitation against alleged Jewish malpractice in the Stoke Newington retail trade (based on accusations of cut-price and unfair Sunday trading) helped to forge clear links between the B.U.F. and members of local 'Conservative' organisations, such as the United Ratepayers and the Stoke Newington Grocers' Association.⁸⁹ In northern

⁸⁶ *Blackshirt*, 1 June 1934, p. 3; *Fascist Week*, 18-24 May 1934, p. 2.

⁸⁷ *Saturday Review*, 5 May 1934, p. 499.

⁸⁸ Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939*, p. 45. Conservative-B.U.F. links are also discussed in R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); M. Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

⁸⁹ Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp. 33-36. Linehan also concluded that Blackshirt formations in south-west Essex relied heavily on dissident Tories. See *ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

England, certain B.U.F. formations, including those at Harrogate and Halifax, were composed almost exclusively of young people with affluent Tory backgrounds.⁹⁰

Blackshirt activity on the Sussex coast, in places such as Worthing and Brighton, also relied on “‘respectable’ bourgeois Fascism”, at least in the early stages.⁹¹

Finally, this thesis attempts to address the contentious and highly subjective issue of Blackshirt motivation by consulting the oral testimonies and written memoirs of 22 former B.U.F. members and sympathisers from the area. The importance of ‘lived’ history is not universally accepted within academic circles and its retrieval through interview certainly raises important methodological problems. Nonetheless, in the absence of other sources, careful use of ex-Mosleyites’ recalled experience has the potential to illustrate key aspects of the B.U.F.’s appeal. Kenneth Lunn has recently mounted a convincing defence of this approach with regard to the study of British fascism:

...we cannot afford to ignore the complexities of groups and the individuals who comprise those groups, the processes whereby they arrive at particular patterns of thinking and the reasons for their support of ideologies and organisations, however minuscule their impact on national and international politics may be deemed to be. There are significances in such processes which can be analysed and drawn upon and ought not to be neglected. To assume that only major groups and individuals count is a display of liberal arrogance and a dismissal will only weaken our ability to understand and explain the phenomenon of fascism.⁹²

Chapter Eight explores the reasons given by the 22 adherents for joining or supporting the B.U.F.. These regional case studies are discussed in a comparative context by considering the views of informed contemporary commentators on the subject of fascist motivation and by investigating why 75 other Mosleyites, who lived outside the three counties, also embraced the movement. This approach facilitates an examination of the protean nature of the B.U.F.’s appeal from both a ‘local’ and

⁹⁰ Rawnsley, ‘The Membership of the British Union of Fascists’, p. 157.

⁹¹ Morley, ‘Fascist Promise and the Capitalist Alternative’, p. 68 and pp. 35-38.

⁹² K. Lunn, ‘British Fascism Revisited: A Failure of Imagination?’ in Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism*, p. 178.

'national' perspective, although the limited samples involved allow only tentative conclusions to be drawn.

3. The B.U.F. and the problem of 'political space': a conjunctural approach

The existing academic literature on the B.U.F. concentrates on five main areas to explain the limited impact of the Blackshirt movement. These relate to (1) the B.U.F.'s misconception of, and inability to reap any significant political rewards from, the inter-war 'crisis' in Britain, (2) fascism's lack of resonance with the main tenets of British political culture, (3) the internal and ideological deficiencies of the organisation, (4) the role played by left-wing and Jewish opposition in countering the B.U.F.'s activities, and (5) state management of the B.U.F., involving the Home Office, the police and the security services.⁹³ Most commentators now accept that all of these factors contributed to the continued political marginalisation of the movement. It is therefore important to provide a brief overview of each general category of explanation before proceeding to discuss the analytical model which will underpin this study of the B.U.F.'s development in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex between 1933 and 1940.

Several researchers have advanced 'crisis' interpretations to account for the B.U.F.'s dismal performance. Brewer, for example, has focussed on Mosley's unrealistic view that a destructive societal crisis was imminent during the 1930s and that, under such conditions, the electorate would inevitably abandon the 'moribund' liberal democratic system and turn to the B.U.F., since only the latter had the dynamism and policies to rejuvenate the nation.⁹⁴ According to this approach, the Blackshirt leader overestimated the 'modernity' of both the period and the B.U.F.'s programme, underestimated the population's attachment to the existing political

⁹³ For a useful review of these explanations see R. Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism' in Andrew Thorpe (ed.), *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (University of Exeter: Exeter Studies in History, No. 21, 1989), pp. 67-84.

⁹⁴ J.D. Brewer, 'Fascism and Crisis' in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 13, No. 2/3 (1979), pp. 1-7; Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, Chapter Two.

framework, and failed to grasp that individual perceptions of, and reactions to, the impending crisis would vary.⁹⁵

In a similar vein, Lewis has accentuated the argument that Mosley made little headway because “a climate of disintegration” did not exist in Britain.⁹⁶ Unlike other countries in the inter-war period, British society was not ‘traumatised’ by the destabilising consequences of modernisation, the onset of severe economic depression or the legacy of defeat in the First World War. This absence of trauma denied the B.U.F. a vital precondition for growth, and, as a result, “fascism’s appeal to organic unity and national synthesis on the basis of enforced class collaboration” met with little response in Britain during the 1930s.⁹⁷

Other scholars, with varying degrees of sophistication, have stressed the constraints placed on the B.U.F. by the British liberal parliamentary tradition, which rejected political violence and anti-Semitism, opposed authoritarian solutions and regarded domestic fascist organisations as ‘alien’ or ‘foreign’. For D.M. Geiger, an important barrier to fascist growth in this country was the deep-rooted British attachment to democracy, based on the rule of law, respect for the rights of the individual, adherence to constitutional procedures and commitment to religious and political toleration.⁹⁸ Benewick’s analysis of the nature of ‘civil society’ in Britain has endorsed Geiger’s position, as has Mandle’s observation that the B.U.F.’s efforts to mobilise public support through anti-Semitic activities were impeded by “that mysterious entity, national character” and the “cultural obstacle” produced by the “English tradition”.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid..

⁹⁶ Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, pp. 223-224. See also pp. 263-265.

⁹⁷ Ibid..

⁹⁸ D.M. Geiger, ‘British Fascism as revealed in the British Union of Fascists’ Press’ (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, 1963), pp. 306-318.

⁹⁹ Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Chapter Thirteen; Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists*, pp. 65-66. Cruder versions of this argument have been heavily criticised by D.S. Lewis, who maintains “it is as well to dispense ... with the popular myth that fascism was eliminated by the moderation and tolerance of the British character, or culture. In reality neither nations nor races have inherent common traits of character. Nor even is there such an entity as a single national culture. Nations are no more than arbitrary lines drawn upon maps containing individuals and groups of individuals with competing interests and incompatible needs and

Far more subtle and nuanced versions of this argument have been put forward by Holmes and Susser. Holmes has maintained that Mosley was, in part, thwarted by “a tradition, deriving from the historical development of liberalism, which placed limits upon the expression and influence of anti-Semitism” but adds the important caveat that “it would be unwise to assume that it was universally accepted and dangerous to discuss it as some kind of autonomous, universal force inhering within the nation”.¹⁰⁰ Susser’s interesting cultural analysis has contended that the B.U.F.’s prospects were undermined by a ‘muscular Christian code’ which permeated British society primarily through the public schools, games and the Boy Scout movement.¹⁰¹ Since this code was “Deeply and uniquely embedded in British attitudinal and behavioural patterns, it led to a widespread rejection of the perceived fascist counter-culture”.¹⁰² Nevertheless, Susser conceded that this cultural barrier to fascism in Britain may not have proved insurmountable had economic conditions or political circumstances been different.

Academic accounts have also revealed how the internal weaknesses of the Blackshirt movement militated against its success. Thurlow, drawing on Home Office and police files released in the 1980s, has provided a detailed insight into the B.U.F.’s many shortcomings.¹⁰³ As leader, Mosley displayed poor tactical sense, an inability to judge character, a high degree of gullibility and a tendency to delegate administrative and organisational functions to mediocrities and incompetents. Economic difficulties also continually dogged the B.U.F.. Under Robert Forgan, the first Deputy Leader, financial control barely existed, and, in the mid-1930s, widespread petty theft depleted Blackshirt funds. The problem of financing the movement on a small paying membership became critical in the later 1930s following the gradual cessation of

aspirations. Certainly there were differences in the historical development of individual nations, but to suggest that there were any unique elements within British society, which made it immune to the threat of fascism, is to illustrate an extraordinary complacency founded upon misplaced arrogance”.

See Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p. 261.

¹⁰⁰ Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*, p.196.

¹⁰¹ L. Susser, ‘Fascist and anti-fascist attitudes in Britain between the wars’ (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis., University of Oxford, 1988), Chapter 39.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁰³ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 132-144.

Mussolini's aid. Deep expenditure cuts were then implemented which removed most of the paid staff and eroded N.H.Q.-District links.¹⁰⁴

These weaknesses were exacerbated by a basic division within the national leadership between those who favoured a 'military' approach, based on order, discipline and marches, and a 'political' faction devoted to the dissemination of fascist propaganda. Mosley, under severe financial pressure, eventually concluded that the 'militarists' led by Francis Hawkins were more effective recruiters than the 'politicals' under William Joyce, John Beckett and A.K. Chesterton. After the 'political' group had been subjected to economic cuts in March 1937, Joyce, Beckett and Chesterton all departed.¹⁰⁵

Rawnsley and Linehan's regional studies, which have charted the development of the B.U.F. in Lancashire and east London, reinforce this picture by revealing that, at various points in the 1930s, internal political divisions (within Branches and between N.H.Q. and Districts), factionalism, personal animosities, periodic expulsions and corruption also hampered the progress of the movement at local level. B.U.F. formations in Manchester, Central Hackney and Shoreditch were among those affected by such disruptions.¹⁰⁶

A number of other commentators have emphasised that the disruptive tactics of militant anti-fascist activists, in places such as London, north-east England, Aberdeen and elsewhere, also made a significant contribution to the containment of Mosleyite fascism.¹⁰⁷ The B.U.F. provoked a strident reaction from communists, other left-wing elements and Jews, who formed opposition groups and ignored official policies of non-engagement, because fascism abroad had destroyed labour organisations, curtailed basic freedoms and introduced anti-Semitic measures. Anti-fascists frequently disrupted

¹⁰⁴ Ibid..

¹⁰⁵ Ibid..

¹⁰⁶ Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s', p. 123, p. 137, p. 138 and p. 156; Linehan, East London for Mosley, p. 40 and pp. 44-46.

¹⁰⁷ Stephen M. Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 28 (1993), pp. 245-267; Todd, In Excited Times: The People Against The Blackshirts; Kibblewhite and Rigby, Fascism in Aberdeen: street politics in the 1930's.

the Blackshirts' political activities, particularly in the major urban centres, and this uncompromising opposition successfully saddled the B.U.F. with the public blame for the ensuing violence and disorder. Renton's recent work on the role of the anti-fascist left in Oxford during the 1930s, for instance, has illustrated the constraints such hostility placed on the British Union:

It was the organised anti-fascist movement which disrupted Mosley's meetings, and prevented the dissemination of propaganda, which sapped the morale of the organisation, and brought out the violence of the BUF stewards. The Left made it difficult for the BUF to organise, and impossible for it to present itself as the dignified, respectable, alternative to conservatism. Most importantly, the anti-fascists provided an alternative to the politics of fascism: while the stress was on the United Front, and the politics of class, the Left was able to recruit widely amongst Oxford workers. The large Left presence in Oxford provided a barrier to fascism which the BUF could never overcome.¹⁰⁸

Finally, as extensive research by Thurlow and Simpson has demonstrated, state management of the B.U.F. between 1933 and 1940 provides another important explanation for the failure of the Blackshirt movement.¹⁰⁹ The authorities, concerned that political extremists might be able to destabilise the liberal democratic system if a crisis developed, placed the B.U.F. under surveillance from November 1933 in order to prevent fascist infiltration of the establishment. Moreover, after Mosley and Rothermere had parted company in July 1934, official pressure marginalised the organisation through a publicity boycott. Newspaper editors and the B.B.C. were advised not to report fascist activities or publicise pro-Mosley views. This cautious 'sidelining' approach was the authorities' preferred strategy for dealing with the Blackshirts. However, the state turned to more drastic legislative solutions when the public order problems arising from the 'Battle of Cable Street' (October 1936) and the perceived national security threats of May 1940 appeared to indicate that stronger

¹⁰⁸ Renton, *Red Shirts And Black*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁹ Thurlow, *The Secret State*, Chapters Five and Six; Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*.

measures were needed to counteract political extremism, civil disorder and a potential pro-Nazi fifth column.

This investigation into the development and ultimate demise of the B.U.F. in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex between 1932 and 1940 clearly requires an underpinning conceptual framework to facilitate analysis of the factors promoting and retarding fascist growth in the area. In order to construct such a model, the author has drawn heavily on recent research by Roger Griffin and Nigel Copsey, which has adopted a conjunctural approach to explain the marginalisation of fascist and extreme right movements in Britain.¹¹⁰

Griffin's sophisticated interpretation offers a four-point conjunctural model to explain fascist success and failure in the inter-war and post-war periods. According to the first part of his analysis, fascism, defined as a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism, can operate only in certain types of society which have reached a specific stage of development. In essence, this would be a nation-state where modernisation has undermined the traditional conservative power system to such an extent that pluralistic politics have taken root, and currents of populist ultranationalism or indigenous/foreign fascist role models have emerged as potential mobilising forces. Such a society would also possess the idea that internal 'decadence' and 'weakness' could be banished by national regeneration, a concept based on a historical myth of past greatness, which not only gives credence to the notion of national decline but also inspires future rebirth.¹¹¹

Even under these circumstances, a second set of preconditions have to be present for fascism to develop a mass appeal. The existing system needs to be

¹¹⁰ R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1993), Chapter Eight; R. Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling' in Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism*, pp. 141-165; N. Copsey, 'The Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Portsmouth, 1995); N. Copsey, 'A Comparison between the Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain' *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1997), pp. 101-116. See also M. Durham, 'The Conservative Party, the British Extreme Right and the Problem of Political Space, 1967-83' in Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism*, pp. 81-98.

¹¹¹ Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp. 208-209; Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling', pp. 145-146.

destabilised by a major crisis, typically arising from the strains imposed by modernisation, the socio-economic and political problems generated by war or the consequences of severe economic depression. Without such an upheaval, fascism, as a revolutionary political creed, appeals only to a tiny minority, since, under 'normal' historical conditions, most people exhibit conservative, reformist or apolitical attitudes. A further crucial determinant is the amount of 'political space' available to the fascist movement in which to build up support. Communist regimes and states containing powerful non-fascist right-wing political forces effectively close down this space for fascism.¹¹² Thus, Griffin has argued, fascist movements can progress only in liberal democracies:

In principle,...fascism's *only* chance to take off without being crushed is in a relatively advanced liberal democracy undergoing a structural crisis without a strong non-fascist ultra-right poised to take over. Not only does the pluralism of such a society guarantee considerable political space in which competing ideological movements can develop, but liberalism's commitment to such values as materialism, internationalism, party politics and racial tolerance means that it can more easily be equated by ultranationalists with a corrupt, decadent system needing to be destroyed and replaced.¹¹³

The third part of Griffin's model postulates that if fascism is to make a serious bid for power, the liberal democracy under attack has to be at a particular stage between early development and full maturity. At this point, liberal democratic institutions are sufficiently established to resist the threat of a military or monarchical coup, but the system has yet to create a general consensus among the population endorsing the legitimacy of the liberal democratic political framework and its underlying values.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp. 209-210; Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling', pp. 146-147.

¹¹³ Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp. 210-211.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

In order to make the transition from embryonic revolutionary body to state power, fascism also has to benefit from a fourth precondition, that of 'favourable contingency'. A key consideration here is how credibly the fascist movement can project itself as a viable political alternative to potential supporters. This will depend, in part, on the calibre of the leadership, the activism of the rank and file, and the dynamism of the organisation. If fascism is able to pose a direct challenge to the government, the fate of the movement will be decided by another vital contingent factor - the nature of the state's response to this threat.¹¹⁵

Copsey's "generic schema of contemporary extreme right political success" derives from his illuminating examination of the contrasting political fortunes of the British National Front and the French Front National in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹⁶ Clearly influenced by Griffin's approach, this framework is also based on four critical conjunctural conditions. Firstly, ultranationalist ideology has to be given organisational expression (through the creation of a 'carrier' movement) in order to exist at a collective level. Only in this 'transpersonal' form can ideologies interact with social, economic and political structures to influence historical events. According to this model, ideological forces inhabit either central or peripheral 'political space', depending on whether they represent the legitimate political mainstream or the excluded margins.¹¹⁷

Secondly, the extreme right-wing ideology and the body promoting it can only make progress by moving towards the central political space, since occupation of the latter facilitates maximum ideological engagement with society. Failure to gain access to this important political 'terrain' will result in long-term marginalisation and lack of legitimacy. Thirdly, once in the realm of mainstream space, the far right movement has to consolidate its advance or else it will be consigned to the periphery. Retention of this dominant central position appears to depend on continued organisational legitimacy

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 211-212.

¹¹⁶ Copsey, 'The Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain', p. 212.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.; Copsey, 'A Comparison between the Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain', p. 102.

and the failure of mainstream political organisations to compress the space available to the extreme right.¹¹⁸ Finally, and most importantly, Copsey has argued:

Socio-economic conditions...determine the overarching historical context in which the contemporary extreme right interacts with society and develops its appeal. A key litmus test here is whether the historical context is one in which widespread personal and political alienation is experienced, as this combination serves as a major factor pushing individuals towards narrow ultranationalist responses.¹¹⁹

Assuming that the first fundamental condition is met (namely that for mobilisation to take place an extreme right-wing ideology and political movement has to exist in a particular society), the fourth becomes the key determinant of success or failure. If the socio-economic context is unreceptive to ultranationalist appeals, then the extreme right's prospects remain bleak, and it will be unable to grow significantly. The second and third conditions, although less important, help to account for the actual level of support given to the 'carrier' organisation.¹²⁰

A central aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that the 'Griffin-Copsey' model possesses considerable explanatory power for understanding the B.U.F.'s failure to make significant progress in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex during the 1930s. Thus, Chapters Two-Six incorporate a detailed conjunctural analysis to identify a number of key constraints which account for the movement's limited development in the region. The conjunctural occurrence of a range of critical external and internal factors fatally undermined the B.U.F.'s prospects for growth. Crucially, fascist mobilisation could not take place because economic conditions in the three counties were unfavourable. In short, the gradual onset and patchy impact of the depression, together with the modest upturn from 1933-1934, made the Blackshirts' radical policies for recovery appear unnecessary. The absence of a widely-perceived socio-economic crisis was reinforced by the extent and experience of unemployment in the region.

¹¹⁸ Copsey, 'The Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain', p. 213; Copsey, 'A Comparison between the Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain', p. 103.

¹¹⁹ Copsey, 'A Comparison between the Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain', p. 103.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

Fascist attempts to 'open up' significant political space in the area were unsuccessful due to the various forms of government assistance given to the agricultural sector in the 1930s (including legislation on the tithe), the hostility of the East Anglian labour movement, and the anti-B.U.F. stance taken by other key local organisations, such as the Suffolk Tithepayers' Association. County Blackshirt formations also encountered powerful barriers in their pursuit of political legitimacy. Council opposition, particularly in Labour-controlled Boroughs, prevented the B.U.F. from holding political meetings in public halls and thereby compelled the Blackshirts to rely mainly on less 'respectable' street propaganda methods. The 'direct action' tactics employed by anti-fascist activists in the region and local instances of B.U.F.-orchestrated violence and disruption further undermined the movement's reputation. In addition, provincial press coverage of fascist activities at home and abroad during the 1930s cast the B.U.F. in a negative light and helped to restrict Mosley's influence in eastern England. Moreover, the relative absence of the social, political, economic and cultural factors which promoted antipathy towards Jews in east London ensured that the B.U.F. had no future in the area as a channel for anti-Semitic grievances.

A number of internal deficiencies, relating to the Blackshirts' regional organisation, campaign initiatives, activism and membership, also eroded the East Anglian B.U.F.'s political credibility. The enduring problem of 'favourable contingency' was exacerbated by official reaction to Mosleyite fascism. In particular, state management of the B.U.F.'s intervention at Wortham in 1934 ended Blackshirt involvement in the tithe war, and the authorities' implementation of Defence Regulation 18B (1A) across the region in 1940 effectively destroyed the movement in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex.

CHAPTER TWO

THE B.U.F. AND THE 'TITHE WAR' OF THE 1930s

1. Introduction

During 1933-1934, the B.U.F., in a bid to secure rural adherents, mounted an activist campaign in support of local agricultural opposition to tithe rent charge collection. Blackshirt intervention in the so-called 'tithe war' was most apparent in, but not exclusively confined to, the eastern counties. In order to provide an analytical account of fascist involvement in the East Anglian tithe disputes of the 1930s, this chapter focuses on three areas. Firstly, the historical background to the 'tithe war' is examined, together with the reasons why resistance to the rent charge was so pronounced in eastern England. Secondly, B.U.F. policy on the tithe and Blackshirt intervention in local distraint cases is discussed in detail. Finally, the overall failure of the B.U.F.'s anti-tithe campaign in the region is assessed in the light of the Griffin-Copsey conjunctural model.

2. Background to the 'Tithe War' of the 1930s

Tithe was a form of property which dated back to the early Christian era in England when one-tenth of the annual output of the land, including crops and livestock, went to support the Church.¹ At the outset, payment of the tithe had been a

¹ The troubled history of the tithe is examined in Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present* (London: Longmans, 1936), Chapter XVI; E.J. Evans, *The Contentious Tithe: The Tithe Problem and English Agriculture, 1750-1850* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976); J.A. Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1933), Chapters VII and VIII; Doreen Wallace, *The Tithe War* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934). Shorter accounts can be found in C.S. Orwin, *A History of English Farming* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952), pp. 133-135; C.S. Orwin and E.H. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture, 1846-1914* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), pp. 183-186. See also John Mead, 'Suffolk and the 'Tithe War' of the 1930s', *East Anglian History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 1 (n.d.), pp. 13-17; Robert Halliday, 'The Tithe War', *Suffolk Review*, Series 28 (Spring 1997), pp. 33-40. Brief accounts of the B.U.F.'s involvement in the East Anglian 'tithe war' are given in R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), pp. 90-91; N. Mosley, *Beyond the Pale: Sir Oswald Mosley 1933-1980* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983), pp. 48-49; J.D. Brewer, *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1984), Chapter Eight; Roger Spalding, 'BUF Intervention in the Wortham Tithe Dispute', *East Anglian History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 1 (n.d.), pp. 9-12. I would also like to thank the East Anglian writer Carol Twinch for illuminating some of the darker corners of tithe history and for making the Mobbs Papers available for consultation.

moral duty placed on all Christians, but this tradition was subsequently enshrined in law by the later Anglo-Saxon rulers, notably King Edgar in 970. Originally, tithes were classified under three headings. Predial tithes were payable on produce from the ground, typically corn, hay, wood and fruits. Livestock nourished by the land, together with animal products, such as eggs, milk and wool, were subject to mixed tithes. Personal tithes were linked to the value of an individual's labour, including the wages and profits derived from trade and commerce. A further distinction was drawn between great and small tithes. The former generally encompassed corn, grain, hay and wood, with small tithes comprising the remaining predial and the mixed and personal categories. It was common for the rector to collect the great tithes and for the dues from small tithes to go to the vicar of the parish.²

In some places, the right to the 'tenth' belonged to religious institutions, such as monasteries. When these underwent dissolution in the sixteenth century, much tithe-ownership fell into lay hands. Henry VIII, by selling or handing over the property of monasteries, also transferred the accompanying tithes to the new owners, known as lay impropriators. The latter often had no connection with the area from which they now had the right to exact tithe. Furthermore, lay impropriators regarded this entitlement simply as profit-generating property, which could be disposed of or purchased as circumstances dictated. By the 1830s, tithe brought in approximately £4 million each year for the owners. Lay impropriators received nearly one quarter of the annual total.³

From the earliest times, money payment began to be substituted for tithe in kind, which was often cumbersome and costly to collect. This tendency was further encouraged by enclosures, particularly the eighteenth century parliamentary enclosure movement. Enclosure was often prompted by the landowners' desire to make larger agricultural profits, but, if new tithe arrangements were not established beforehand,

² Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, pp. 332-340; Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 17; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, pp. 150-153.

³ Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, p. 340; Orwin and Whetham, *History of British Agriculture*, pp. 183-184; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, p. 153.

tithe owners stood to gain an automatically increased income, just as they did when improvements in cultivation were made without preliminary enclosure. Consequently, one of the aims of the Enclosure Acts was to remove tithe obligations by offering in lieu either allotments of land or cash payments based on fixed sums or the current price of grain. Approximately 60-70 per cent of the Enclosure Acts passed between 1757 and 1835 made provision for such tithe commutation.⁴

The agricultural community had always regarded tithe as “a most irksome and unpopular tax” for a number of reasons.⁵ Resentment was stirred because it was not payable on all types of land and could fluctuate markedly. For example, Royal forests, old monastic property and naturally barren ground were not covered by tithe. More importantly, a statute of 1549 maintained that former waste land was exempt for the first seven years after being brought into cultivation and also stipulated that personal tithes could be enforced only if there was evidence of payment stretching back at least 40 years.⁶

Tithe assessment and collection provided another enduring focal point for conflict, since both procedures rested on a complicated and confusing patchwork of case law, precedent and custom. In addition, by the mid-eighteenth century, collecting revenues from the land in kind seemed archaic, and, increasingly in practice, tithe was being converted to a money payment. Even then, commutation carried with it the laborious administrative task of regular land and property valuations to ensure that obligations were assessed fairly.⁷

As commerce and industry developed in the early 1700s, farmers and landowners also denounced the fact that tithe liability fell almost exclusively on the agricultural sector. For example, in practice, it proved difficult to identify and calculate a merchant’s profits which, theoretically at least, were subject to personal tithe. By this

⁴ Evans, The Contentious Tithe, Chapter Six.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17; Ernle, English Farming Past and Present, p. 343; Venn, The Foundations of Agricultural Economics, p. 152.

⁷ Evans, The Contentious Tithe, Chapter Two.

stage too, opposition had successfully undermined the Church's claim to the 'tenth' on minerals, such as coal, iron and tin.⁸

Resentment was further fuelled by the obligations imposed by lay impropriators, since these were frequently collected by outsiders and made no contribution to the needs of the local Church. Another grievance was that, by constituting a tax on yield, tithe placed the heaviest burden on arable areas, which required more labour and outlay capital than either dairy or pasture land before full profits were achieved. Predictably, these discontents and anomalies led to "incessant friction" between titheowners and payers in the period up to the nineteenth century and beyond.⁹ Many such disputes ended as legal cases with numerous clerics and lay impropriators attempting either to secure unpaid tithe dues or establish claims through the courts.¹⁰

In 1836, the Whig government introduced the Tithe Commutation Act, which aimed to rationalise the system by replacing tithe in kind with an annual cash payment. This new rent was assessed by taking the mean value of tithe over the previous seven years (up to 1836) and linking it annually to the moving septennial average prices of wheat, barley and oats. The first seven year cereal scale was unveiled in December 1836, when £100 of tithe, divided into three equal parts, bought 94.95 bushels of wheat, 168.42 bushels of barley and 242.42 bushels of oats. Three Tithe Commissioners, backed by an extensive administrative machine, were appointed to supervise the commutation process. Owners and payers were given until 1 October 1838 to reach voluntary agreements on the current average value of the tithe. After this date, the Commissioners were empowered to enforce compulsory assessments. A further feature of the Act was that it transferred the onus of tithe payment from the tenant to the landowner. Tenants were also permitted to deduct the charge from their rents to the landlord. Under these new arrangements, the rent charge to be levied in England and Wales amounted to just over £4 million. By the early 1850s, 11,395 of the

⁸ Ibid., pp. 16-17 and p. 42.

⁹ Ibid., Chapter Two; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, p. 154.

¹⁰ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, Chapter Three.

12,275 apportionments were complete, with almost 58 per cent of cases settled by voluntary agreement between tithe owner and payer.¹¹

For half a century, commutation appeared to have resolved the contentious tithe issue, largely because rent charge values remained stable up to 1885. Based on the 1836 parity value of 100, the average for the period was 102.69, although a low of 89.79 and a peak of 112.78 were recorded in 1855 and 1875 respectively. However, falling crop prices in the 1880s placed the tithe question back on the political agenda. British arable farmers now faced stiff competition from cheap American and Canadian corn, and the rent charge, linked to grain prices, was inevitably affected. The rent charge index (taking 1836 as 100) dropped from 107.14 in 1881 to 87.44 in 1887. Four years later it stood at 66.59.¹²

Once again, the tithe system attracted widespread criticism. Ecclesiastical and lay tithe income dwindled, sometimes to subsistence level. Evidence presented in 1893 by a Durham rector, for example, indicated that the collapse in arable prices had reduced 1,586 of the 4,173 benefices valued at less than £200 to penury. Conversely, farmers regarded the £4 million rent charge as an unjust millstone, which could not be borne at a time when profits had evaporated. Resistance to the rent charge in Wales, spearheaded by the Anti-Tithe League from 1886, and renewed rumblings of discontent from the English arable sector intensified the pressure for legislative action.¹³

In an attempt to paper over the cracks, which had been exposed in the system by the agricultural depression, parliament passed the 1891 Tithe Act. This legislation finally made payment of the rent charge the responsibility of the landowner, who was deemed to be more favourably disposed towards the Church and less likely to default. The new measure also related these dues to rents by prohibiting tithe owners from claiming rent charge which exceeded two-thirds of the land's annual value.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., Chapters Six and Seven; Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, pp. 344-345; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, pp. 168-171.

¹² Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, pp. 161-163.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 163-164.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 164; Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, p. 345; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, pp. 175-176.

As the agricultural sector became more buoyant, boosted by wartime prosperity, the farming interest called for more far-reaching tithe reform. By 1918, the rent charge index had reached 109.19 and looked set to climb higher. Farmers now complained that commuted tithe demands seriously eroded their profits. Faced with the prospect of further rural militancy, the government felt compelled to introduce the 1918 Tithe Act, which made two significant alterations to the existing commutation procedure. Firstly, in a bid to placate farmers, rent charge was to be frozen at 1918 levels until January 1926, after which it was to be based on a moving fifteen year average of grain prices. Secondly, tithe payers were encouraged to redeem rent charge payments. Redemption had been possible before 1918 but could be achieved only with the tithe owner's permission at a rate of 25 times the 1836 parity value. This was an unappealing option after 1880, and, by 1918, only £73,000 of rent charge had been redeemed. Following the 1918 Act, redemption, based on the tithe owner's consent, took the form of an annuity, payable over a period not exceeding fifty years. The underlying principle was that the yearly income of the tithe owner, if invested in government stock, should match the net sum formerly acquired from rent charge, less collection costs and taxes. This incentive, coupled with the higher level of the charge, resulted in tithe to the value of £382,000 being redeemed between 1918 and 1925.¹⁵

The tithe issue was complicated in the 1920s by what F.M.L. Thompson has described as "startling social revolution in the countryside".¹⁶ Looking to offset the impact of increasing taxation, rising death duties and falling rents, numerous long-established landed families broke up their estates and sold off holdings, mainly to sitting tenants, from the eve of the First World War. Although they did not sell up completely, landowners, such as the Bedfords, Beauforts and Marlboroughs turned to the financial institutions of London to offer them securer forms of investment. The short-lived agricultural boom of 1918-1921 in particular acted as a catalyst,

¹⁵ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, pp. 164-165; Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, pp. 346-347; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, pp. 173-178.

¹⁶ F.M.L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 333.

encouraging the tenantry to buy their farms. Between six and eight million acres changed hands, which significantly broadened the yeoman-farming interest. At the beginning of the First World War, only eleven per cent of agricultural land in England and Wales was owner-occupied, but, due to these sales, by 1927 the proportion had risen to 36 per cent.¹⁷

This shift in the pattern of land ownership had a significant bearing on the tithe question. The new smaller owner-occupiers lacked the resources of their grander predecessors and were thus more vulnerable to fluctuations in the agricultural economy. Moreover, most of them had taken out large mortgages to purchase their farms at a time when the land market was at its peak. Consequently, the fall in prices and rents after 1921 seriously concerned these new proprietors and led to widespread criticism that the rent charge was an unacceptable burden. Much of this dissent was articulated through tithepayers' associations, which began to appear from the early 1920s.¹⁸

Mindful of this smouldering anti-tithe sentiment, the government concluded that it would be politically unwise to introduce the new fifteen year averages, inflated by war-time prices, since these would have subjected landowners to a rent charge index which had increased from 109.19 to 131.57 during a period of falling prices. The Conservative administration attempted to resolve the crisis with the Tithe Act of 1925, which abolished moving averages in favour of a constant money value, fixed at 105. However, in addition, each year landowners were to pay 4.5 per cent of par value into a sinking fund, created to redeem all ecclesiastical rent charges by 2012. Thus, lay tithes were set at 105 and their ecclesiastical counterparts at 109.5. Queen Anne's Bounty (Q.A.B.), a quasi-legal-ecclesiastical body, was made responsible for collecting

¹⁷ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 165. See also Madeleine Beard, *English Landed Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1989), Chapter Three; David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 103-112; D. Grigg, *English Agriculture: An Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Chapter Eight.

¹⁸ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 165; Erle, *English Farming Past and Present*, p. 346; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, p. 178.

church tithes, amounting to £2,165,000 per annum, and handing the money over to approximately 6,000 beneficed clergy.¹⁹

Any hope that the Baldwin government's initiative would provide a lasting settlement of the tithe issue was quickly dashed. Falling agricultural commodity prices in the later 1920s, followed by the trough of 1929-1931, convinced much of the farming community that the tithe rent charge had been set at an unrealistically high level in 1925. By the early 1930s, small proprietors in particular, who proportionately shouldered the heaviest tithe burden, regarded the payments as excessively onerous. Moreover, many of these owner-occupiers, after making purchases during the immediate post-war period, when estates were being broken up and sold off, saw their newly acquired land lose 50 per cent of its value within a decade or so.²⁰ In response, the National Tithepayers' Association was formed in Kent in December 1930 to press for reform, and a widespread campaign of non-payment was mounted.²¹

Within a year, county tithepayers' associations were established in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. In February 1931, the Suffolk Tithepayers' Association (S.T.A.) was founded at Ipswich under the chairmanship of Albert G. Mobbs, who farmed at Oulton.²² The S.T.A. attracted an initial membership of 150 and aimed "to secure any measure for the relief of the burden of tithe and its final removal as a charge upon the land".²³ Two years later, the S.T.A. was over 500-strong.²⁴ Similar anti-tithe organisations were also established in Essex and Norfolk during 1931.²⁵ Through a policy of passive resistance and submission to distraint, these associations hoped to

¹⁹ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 165; Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, pp. 346-347; Venn, *The Foundations of Agricultural Economics*, pp. 178-179.

²⁰ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 166.

²¹ P.J.O. Trist, *A Survey of the Agriculture of Suffolk* (London: Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1971), p. 331.

²² *East Anglian Daily Times* (E.A.D.T.), 18 February 1931, p. 11, 25 February 1931, p. 6; *Times*, 18 February 1931, p. 7.

²³ E.A.D.T., 25 February 1931, p. 6.

²⁴ *Eastern Daily Press* (E.D.P.), 1 March 1933, p. 16.

²⁵ *Essex County Standard* (E.C.S.), 16 May 1931, p. 5; E.A.D.T., 13 January 1932, p. 2; information provided by Carol Twinch.

make tithe collection such a costly and time-consuming administrative burden that the government would be compelled to re-open the rent charge question.

This organised agitation led to the so-called 'tithe war' of the early 1930s, which was 'fought out' primarily in the depressed and heavily tithed arable areas of eastern and southern England.²⁶ Farmers with tithe arrears, who were either unable or unwilling to settle, were served with county court distraint orders, impounding property in lieu of unpaid rent charge. The seized goods were then sold off to recoup the debt. Initially, distrained stock and items were offered at local public auctions, but these were frequently sabotaged by tithepayer opposition in the form of boycotts and deliberate underbidding. To overcome this resistance, Q.A.B. and titheowners increasingly applied to county courts for orders for sale by tender. Once again though, this procedure could be thwarted by the local farming community's refusal to bid for distrained property, the difficulty of hiring firms in the district to remove impounded items and the presence of tithepayer 'reception committees' when a successful tenderer arrived at a farm to collect the purchased goods.²⁷

Tithepayer resentment hardened during 1933, when a company called General Dealers Ltd., equipped with lorries and gangs of operatives, began to tender for and remove impounded stock. Set up with nominal capital of £100 and two one pound shareholders, this London-based business possessed depots in Wales and northern England. Although there is no evidence of a direct connection between General Dealers Ltd. and Q.A.B., the fact that the latter used the company extensively to effect distraints gave rise to widespread suspicions amongst the tithepayers that the business was little more than a front organisation for the Church.²⁸

Three factors help to explain why resistance to the rent charge was so pronounced in East Anglia during this period. In the first place, as the country's most important area of arable cultivation, the eastern counties had long been subjected to

²⁶ Wallace, *The Tithe War*; A.G. Mobbs, 'Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil' (Unpublished memoir, n.d.), Chapter VII.

²⁷ *Ibid.*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

extensive tithe obligations. By 1927, for instance, ecclesiastical tithe rent charge in England was running at £2,000,000 per year, with Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex contributing £197,000, £136,000 and £134,000 respectively.²⁹ This was compounded by the predominance of small-scale land-holding in the region. For example, of the 58,000 agricultural holdings in East Anglia at this time, half were less than twenty acres in size. The average central Suffolk farm covered just eight acres. Conversely, farms exceeding 300 acres accounted for only six per cent of the total.³⁰ Hence, the rural districts of eastern England contained numerous small owner-occupiers, who were required to pay tithe rent charge. Furthermore, the price of the principal agricultural products of the area, notably grain, had been badly affected by the depression. Between 1929 and 1932 wheat prices fell from 9s. 10d. to 5s. 11d. per cwt, and barley dropped from 9s. 11d. to 7s. 7d. per cwt.³¹ Over the same period, oats, sugar beet, dairy cows and livestock also declined in value.³² By the turn of the decade, therefore, many small proprietors in East Anglia faced the acute economic problem of having to pay rent charge, which had been fixed prior to the slump, at a time when falling agricultural prices were markedly reducing their income.

3. B.U.F. Intervention in the East Anglian 'Tithe War' 1933-1934

The B.U.F.'s decision to intervene in the 'tithe war' was impelled by several political motives. Chief amongst these was the desire to attract recruits from the beleaguered agricultural community. By posing as the farmer's champion on this issue, the Blackshirt movement not only hoped to translate anti-tithe resentment into fascist support but also aimed to establish a firm platform for sympathetic public consideration of its broader agricultural policy. Direct involvement additionally offered the B.U.F. a

²⁹ Halliday, 'The Tithe War', p. 33.

³⁰ R. Caslow, 'The Eastern Counties' in J.P. Maxton (ed.), Regional Types of British Agriculture (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 118 and p. 124.

³¹ University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture (U.C.D.A.), An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1933 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 22, July 1934), pp. 5-6.

³² *Ibid.*

means of commencing its regional campaign to create a thriving East Anglian fascist organisation with the maximum amount of publicity and impact. Indeed, the Blackshirts' deliberate strategy of tackling the tithe question through dynamic activist politics was intended to contrast sharply, and favourably, with the apparent indifference of the 'talking shop' approach of the parliamentary 'old gang'.³³

Naturally, Mosley's organisation offered more principled reasons for its interest in tithe reform, preferring to stress that what had been a "fully Fascist" concept at the outset was now totally obsolete.³⁴ According to the Blackshirt viewpoint, during the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had been entitled to the 'tenth' because it catered for a range of religious and social needs, such as spiritual guidance and the provision of poor relief, education and public health. However, subsequent developments over the centuries had eroded and distorted the original justification for this form of property. From Henry VIII's reign onwards, lay impropriators were created, and Catholics were compelled to pay tithes to support the Church of England. In addition, over time, various sectors of the economy, including manufacturing industry, had successfully avoided paying these dues, leaving agriculture to shoulder the tithe burden alone. Furthermore, the Church's social role had contracted as the government assumed increasing responsibility for education, health and poor relief.³⁵ In the B.U.F.'s estimation, the cumulative effect of these changes meant that tithes "have become to-day a complete anachronism".³⁶

Blackshirt literature contended that several facets of the contemporary tithe problem needed to be addressed urgently. In particular, declining agricultural prices after 1925 were perceived to have saddled the farmer with unacceptably onerous tithe obligations.³⁷ Faced with these deteriorating economic conditions, the B.U.F. observed, tithepayers had become even more disenchanted with lay impropriators, who

³³ See *Blackshirt*, 19-25 August 1933, p. 1; *Fascist Week*, 10-16 November 1933, p. 3, 5-11 January 1934, p. 3, 16-22 March 1934, p. 5.

³⁴ *Blackshirt*, 23 November 1934, p. 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Fascism and Agriculture* (London: B.U.F. Publications, n.d.), p. 9.

³⁷ *Fascist Week*, 16-22 March 1934, p. 5.

made no contribution to agriculture.³⁸ Fascist sources also focused on the resentment of non-Anglican tithepayers, who were obliged to contribute to a religious institution to which they did not belong, and highlighted the fact that many clergymen encountered fierce local opposition when attempting to collect tithes.³⁹ Furthermore, the B.U.F. claimed that active fascist intervention was designed primarily as a direct response to perceived irregularities in the distraint procedure:

It has been overlooked in the past that the law is intended to protect the tithe-defaulter as much as the tithe-collector. Fascists have had to intervene to see that this protection is given and that the high-handed actions of the County Court officers, and their bailiffs and helpers are not allowed to pass unchallenged.⁴⁰

Mosley's movement not only sought to emphasise the problem by organising a petition to the King but also advocated that all tithe payments be suspended, pending a round table conference of interested parties to revise the 1925 Act.⁴¹ The proposal was accompanied by a Blackshirt pledge that a future fascist government would abolish tithes and use the Agricultural Corporation to readjust the rental between the landowner and the farmer "in proportion to the useful service performed to the industry and to society in general by each".⁴² Ecclesiastical tithes were to be transferred to the Exchequer, and, in return, the Church of England was to be more securely funded from general taxation, which was derived from all industries. The B.U.F. had no plans to compensate lay titheholders on the grounds that the latter provided no services in return. However, after abolition, it was envisaged that government annuities would be made available to those in distress, who were completely or mainly reliant upon tithe income.⁴³

Although Blackshirt anti-tithe activity was most apparent in the eastern counties, fascist protests against rent charge also occurred in parts of southern

³⁸ *Blackshirt*, 23 November 1934, p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Fascist Week*, 5-11 January 1934, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10-16 November 1933, p. 3, 5-11 January 1934, p. 3.

⁴² *Blackshirt*, 23 November 1934, p. 8. See also *Fascist Week*, 16-22 March 1934, p. 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

England, notably Devon and Cornwall.⁴⁴ In December 1933, members of the South-Western Division of the B.U.F., led by the movement's National Political Officer, Richard A. Plathen, helped to prevent the sale by action of five impounded sheep at a market in Newton Abbot, Devon.⁴⁵ These animals belonged to J. Easterbrook of Hole Farm, Bickington and had been seized under a Newton Abbot County Court order for tithe arrears amounting to £32. As a result of this distraint and other tithe incidents in the area, the B.U.F. took out summonses against a local police inspector, the County Court Registrar and two bailiffs, alleging cruelty to animals, but the charges were dismissed two months later at Newton Abbot police court.⁴⁶ At the beginning of 1934, four Blackshirts barricaded a farm at Stoney Cross in north Devon occupied by the secretary of the local tithepayers' association to prevent the removal of a cow and items of furniture, which had been impounded to recover £4 6s. 6d. in unpaid tithe.⁴⁷

The B.U.F.'s first direct intervention in the East Anglian 'tithe war' took place at Woodlands Farm, near Ringshall in Suffolk in August 1933.⁴⁸ Mrs. Hannah Waspe, the 70 year old owner-occupier, who ran the farm with her two sons, Arthur and John Waspe, owed £47 in tithe dues to King's College, Cambridge. Three months after a court order was issued on 23 September 1932, agricultural implements worth an estimated £50 were impounded to cover the debt. The distrained goods were kept in a field on the property, but, before they were purchased, several of the seized items either went missing or had essential parts removed. Consequently, when the remainder were sold in June 1933, only five pounds (less £2 10s. for expenses) was raised.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Fascist Week*, 5-11 January 1934, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 December 1933-4 January 1934, p. 3. For local press reports of B.U.F. anti-tithe activities in Devon, see *Mid-Devon Advertiser*, 2 December 1933, p. 1, 23 December 1933, p. 1 and p. 10, 24 February 1934, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁶ *E.D.P.*, 21 February 1934, p. 11.

⁴⁷ *Fascist Week*, 19-25 January 1934, p. 5.

⁴⁸ For a contemporary account of the Ringshall tithe dispute see Wallace, *The Tithe War*, pp. 98-103. E.J. Waspe, Hannah Waspe's grandson, has also produced a short unpublished memoir relating to the events of 1932-1934 at Woodlands Farm. A copy is in the author's possession.

⁴⁹ Registrar, Ipswich County Court. Letter to A. Waspe, Woodlands Farm, Ringshall, Stowmarket. 1 April 1935. Copy held in the Mobbs Papers; *E.A.D.T.*, 9 August 1933, p. 5; *Daily Mail*, 9 August 1933, p. 10.

To make up the shortfall, a second distraint was instigated on 28 July 1933, when a bailiff, accompanied by twenty policemen, arrived at Woodlands Farm and impounded two fields of corn, one containing wheat and the other barley. Thereafter, the bailiff and a three-man police guard set up camp between the two fields to mount a 24 hour watch on the seventeen acres of crops prior to sale. Feelings ran high in the district because the estimated value of the impounded crops far exceeded the tithe debt. Tenders for the corn had to be submitted before 4 p.m. on Tuesday 8 August 1933, and the purchaser was to be responsible for cutting and removing the crop.⁵⁰

A small group of Blackshirts from the West Norfolk Branch of the B.U.F. appeared at Ringshall on 6 August 1933 and declared their intention of entering the local tithe dispute in support of Mrs. Waspe.⁵¹ According to the latter's grandson, Edward Waspe, who witnessed these events as a nineteen year old worker on the farm, the fascists had not been invited to participate in the dispute by the family.⁵² Nonetheless, this B.U.F. contingent set up camp in a field about half a mile from the farm.⁵³ Another group of black-shirted Mosleyites arrived on 7 August 1933 and proceeded to block the road to deny access to tractors and reaping equipment.⁵⁴ B.U.F. members posted notices on the gates of the farm criticising the principle of tithe paying and chalked anti-tithe slogans for about a mile along the connecting road.⁵⁵ The fascists also mingled with the crowds drawn to Ringshall because of the press coverage of the dispute and handed out a leaflet which stated:

Fascism stands for the revival of agriculture, therefore we join in the tithe war. Farmer, the tithe burden is crushing you out of existence. While you are waiting for Parliamentary action, your stock and crops are being taken away from you. Workers, the tithe burden causes the farmer to pay off his men. Fascists will co-operate with you in picketing

⁵⁰ *E.A.D.T.* 9 August 1933, p. 5; *Daily Mail*, 9 August 1933, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Lynn News and County Press (L.N.C.P.)*, 15 August 1933, p. 11.

⁵² Edward J. Waspe. Interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1993.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *L.N.C.P.* 15 August 1933, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *E.A.D.T.* 9 August 1933, p. 5.

to see that if a bailiff impounds a herd no supplies get to him. Fascists will help to resist tithe seizures, even by force. We ask that in return, our discipline and organisation be allowed to prevent any unduly violent incident. You, in your just wrath, may go too far, and there might be a bailiff less.⁵⁶

A few hours after the deadline for the submission of tenders for the corn on 8 August, a loud-speaker van, containing a further eight to twelve Blackshirts, arrived from London in anticipation of an imminent attempt to cut the impounded wheat and barley. After setting up camp, their leader, B. Denny, allocated a watch duty for the night and instructed his men not to use violence. Reporters were also informed that an additional 40 to 50 London Blackshirts would be rushed to the scene if there was any immediate prospect of the corn being moved. Police patrolled the vicinity by day and established two-hourly night watches.⁵⁷ Further B.U.F. reinforcements, including staff officers from National Headquarters (N.H.Q.), arrived at Woodlands Farm on 9 August 1933.⁵⁸

One Blackshirt, thought to be Kay Fredericks, who arrived with Denny's contingent, later wrote a revealing account of B.U.F. involvement at Ringshall.⁵⁹ According to this source, Mosley sent a small B.U.F. party from London headquarters to Woodlands Farm on 8 August, complete with camping equipment, enough food to last for six weeks and a beer allowance of two shillings per person per day. Once at the scene, these Blackshirts attempted to attract as much press publicity as possible and to hinder those guarding the seized corn.⁶⁰

In order to give the appearance of "secret strength", and to allow the encamped police no respite, the fascists set up a night watch to patrol the distraised crops.⁶¹ B.U.F. members also posed for press photographs as they scattered metal objects and

⁵⁶ Ibid.. Approximately 1,000 people travelled to Woodlands Farm, Ringshall on Monday 7 August 1933 to observe developments. See *News Chronicle*, 8 August 1933, p. 7.

⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 9 August 1933, p. 2; *News Chronicle*, 9 August, 1933, p. 7; *Daily Express*, 9 August 1933, p. 4.

⁵⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1933, p. 2.

⁵⁹ 'The Tithe War'. MSS 292/743.11/2. Modern Records Centre (M.R.C.). University of Warwick. I am greatly indebted to Philip Coupland for his courtesy in pointing out this source.

⁶⁰ Ibid..

⁶¹ Ibid..

farmyard waste across the impounded fields in order to hamper the use of reaping machinery. Another Blackshirt tactic was to pollute a local pond, which the police and bailiffs were using as their water supply. When these officials then had water delivered under guard in sealed gallon jars, three Blackshirts took turns with an air rifle in an unsuccessful attempt to break the earthenware containers. Although the police pursued the trio across the fields for a mile or so, no arrests were made, and official attempts to locate the air rifle, which had been hidden behind a straw bale in a barn, came to nothing. Reporters at the scene were also informed by the B.U.F. that the fascists were determined to prevent the removal of the corn, even if this meant setting it on fire. To make this threat seem more credible, the Blackshirts purchased two cans of petrol from the local village and told press representatives of their plan to throw stones attached to burning petrol-soaked rags into the fields. In reality, the fuel had been acquired for the B.U.F.'s van, but the reporters, having been told otherwise, were left to draw their own conclusions.⁶²

Rather than rely on fascist support, the Waspes coordinated their efforts with the S.T.A.. On 8 August 1933, a full meeting of the Executive of the S.T.A. was convened at the Y.M.C.A. in Ipswich to consider the details of Mrs. Waspe's case.⁶³ A letter was submitted to the Executive by Arthur and John Waspe, arguing against the second distraint on the grounds that the farm implements initially seized matched the value of the tithe claim and pointing out that the removal of this equipment hampered crop cultivation, thereby causing further losses.⁶⁴ It also emerged that the family had refused King's College's offer to suspend the recovery procedure in return for a pledge to pay off ten or fifteen pounds of the tithe arrears. Having considered the matter, the S.T.A. Executive resolved to give Mrs. Waspe the full backing of the county association.⁶⁵

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *E.A.D.T.*, 9 August 1933, p. 5.

⁶⁴ *News Chronicle*, 9 August 1933, p. 7.

⁶⁵ *E.A.D.T.*, 9 August 1933, p. 5.

Despite the strength of local anti-tithe sentiment, the presence of the fascists, and reports that preparations had been made to draft 150 police reinforcements into the area if necessary, the anticipated confrontation did not take place. In a surprise move, the King's College authorities, acting on legal advice, decided to release the impounded corn. Accordingly, under direction from the County Court Registrar, the bailiff and the police guarding the seized field folded their tents and left on 9 August 1933.⁶⁶

At this point, the sixteen or so Blackshirts stationed at the farm erroneously assumed that the bailiff's removal was the prelude to an attempt to cut the crops. In an effort to repulse the expected arrival of harvesting machinery, the fascists placed a variety of obstacles across the two main routes to Mrs. Waspe's property. One road was rendered impassable with seven telegraph poles, six heavy planks and five large drums of telegraph wire. The other, partially blocked with bundles of faggots, was patrolled by a small group of Blackshirts, who had orders to lay themselves down in front of any agricultural machinery seeking access to the farm.⁶⁷ These actions were accompanied by much fascist posturing:

They then, with much shouting, assumed 'positions of defence'. But nothing happened and they were left high and dry with nothing to do. For hours afterwards they patrolled the roads, and stood up in speeding motor-cars waiting for the cheers that never came from the great crowds of people who had gathered.⁶⁸

Once aware of the decision to release the fields, the B.U.F. contingent assisted the police in clearing away the items deposited on the roads. The Blackshirt leaders at the scene decided to leave a 'skeleton' staff until 10 August, by which time the Waspe family was expected to have official confirmation of the withdrawal. When Mrs. Waspe duly received notification from the County Court the next day, virtually all the B.U.F. members in the vicinity of the farm returned to London. Two Blackshirts stayed on for

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 August 1933, p. 5; *Daily Mirror*, 10 August 1933, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Daily Express*, 10 August 1933, p. 7.

⁶⁸ *Daily Herald*, 10 August 1933, p. 9.

a further day as a precaution, just in case the removal of the bailiff was a ruse on the part of the titheowner. Shortly afterwards, it was revealed that King's College had abandoned its attempt to secure payment of the overdue rent charge, because no purchaser for the impounded corn had been found.⁶⁹

Mrs. Waspé's repossession of the fields formerly under distraint was widely reported in the national press as a victory for the tithepayers and their supporters.⁷⁰ When asked to account for the return of the seized crops, John Waspé attributed the ending of the tithe action to the extensive press coverage of the Ringshall dispute, the support given to the family by the S.T.A., the depth of feeling aroused by this issue in the local farming community, and the presence of the B.U.F..⁷¹ Regarding the fascists' contribution, he said that the B.U.F.'s arrival "must have caused the authorities to doubt whether it would be wise to take the claim further".⁷²

In an endeavour to extract the maximum political advantage from the events at Woodlands Farm, the Blackshirts implied that it was their "markedly successful" first intervention that had brought the distraint proceedings to a halt.⁷³ However, although the presence of the fascists certainly helped to generate national publicity for Mrs. Waspé's cause and may have had a limited deterrent effect on the tithe claimant, more important reasons explain why the impounded crops were handed back for harvesting. Chief amongst these, of course, was the failure to secure an acceptable tender for the seized corn, but those in the vanguard of the tithepayers' struggle pointed to other factors as well. One press report maintained that "a carefully-planned course of persistent negotiation", conducted by the S.T.A., had been influential in securing the withdrawal of the bailiff.⁷⁴ Apparently, after taking legal advice on aspects of the distraint, A.G. Mobbs, the chairman of the S.T.A., contacted Messrs. Withers and Co.

⁶⁹ *E.A.D.T.*, 10 August 1933, p. 5, 11 August 1933, p. 5, 14 August 1933, p. 3.

⁷⁰ See for example *Daily Express*, 10 August 1933, p. 7; *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1933, p. 9; *Daily Herald*, 10 August 1933, p. 9.

⁷¹ *News Chronicle*, 10 August, 1933, p. 7.

⁷² *L.N.C.P.*, 15 August 1933, p. 11.

⁷³ *Blackshirt*, 19-25 August 1933, p. 1.

⁷⁴ *Daily Herald*, 10 August 1933, p. 9.

of London, the law firm acting for King's College. According to Mobbs, the titheowner's solicitors "appeared amazed" at the collection methods being employed and immediately attempted to communicate with John Maynard Keynes, the Bursar of King's College, on this matter.⁷⁵

Writing shortly after the event, the prominent Suffolk anti-tithe campaigner and novelist, Doreen Wallace, contended that the intensity of local feeling and the potential cost of removing the corn served as powerful constraints:

The assumption is that they found the job too big for them. No local labour could be hired to harvest the field: of that, Suffolk farmers are certain. And town unemployed, such as has been hired for other distraints, would make poor work of the skilled job of harvesting. Implements, too, would have to be hired or purchased; and later the problem of threshing would arise - for, without a fleet of lorries, corn could not be removed in bulk. No threshing gang was likely to undertake the work under the eyes of the whole of hostile Suffolk; and the cost of hire or purchase of a reaper-binder-thresher to do the whole of the work in one operation would be prohibitive. It is thought that these considerations influenced the legal adviser of King's College, Cambridge...⁷⁶

The B.U.F. also intervened in a long-running tithe dispute in north-west Essex, involving Mrs. Margaret Pickett Gardiner of Delvyns Farm, Gestingthorpe.⁷⁷ Mrs. Gardiner, a widow in her mid-forties, owed lay tithe rent charge, totalling £49, to the Reverend Henry Morris Greening, the rector of Gestingthorpe. Orders to distrain on Delvyns Farm were made in April and October 1932, and, on 14 February 1933, Greening applied for an order for sale by tender.⁷⁸ Three months later, a number of items belonging to Mrs. Gardiner, including two tumbrils, a reaper and a binder, were impounded in a barn on her property by the County Court bailiff. Meurig Lewis James, an auctioneer from Swansea, offered £35 for these goods, and his tender was accepted.

⁷⁵ Ibid..

⁷⁶ Wallace, *The Tithe War*, p. 101.

⁷⁷ On the Gestingthorpe tithe dispute see A. Cooper, *The Long Furrow* (Ipswich: East Anglian Magazine Publishing, 1989), pp. 174-181 and Wallace, *The Tithe War*, pp. 110-113 and pp. 117-123.

⁷⁸ *Times*, 26 July 1933, p. 4.

On 6 May 1933, three days after the initial distraint, officials also took possession of two of Gardiner's horses for tithe arrears.⁷⁹

These seizures caused much local resentment, not least because the farmer in question was a middle-aged widow, subject to lay tithe. It was widely felt that the loss of the agricultural implements sold off to recover rent charge would prevent Gardiner from cultivating her land. Moreover, the farming community in the area denounced these actions as illegal, since they considered the goods and animals impounded to be instruments of husbandry and 'beasts of the plough' respectively, categories usually exempted from tithe distraints.⁸⁰

On 22 May 1933, Meurig James arrived with a lorry at Delvyns Farm to collect the items he had purchased under the sale by tender system. He was accompanied by George Gibson, a solicitor from Braintree, and John Rose, a bailiff. Many farmers from districts in Suffolk and Essex gathered at Gestingthorpe on this occasion to protest against, and hamper, the removal of these goods. Approximately 100 cars were positioned to seal off the stackyard and obstruct all routes to the barn, which contained some of the seized implements. A large straw baler, drawn across the barn entrance, and two of the impounded tumbrils had wheels missing. Although James found these items, he could not put them back onto the machines. A hive of bees had also been placed nearby "presumably in case of emergency".⁸¹

A crowd of some 3-400 farmers followed the purchaser and solicitor into the barn. The atmosphere was heated, and the protesters nominated a spokesperson to induce James and Gibson to accept the sum of twenty pounds as settlement of the outstanding charge in lieu of the farm implements. The farmers undertook to let the two men out of the barn if they consented to this proposal, but neither of them would discuss the offer. As a result, James and Gibson were confined to the barn for about three hours and subjected to a "bad egg or two".⁸² A group of police officers, who had

⁷⁹ Ibid..

⁸⁰ Ibid..

⁸¹ E.A.D.T., 23 May 1933, p. 5.

⁸² Ibid..

been waiting at the roadside, eventually received instructions to retrieve the two men from the farm, but the protesters refused to give way, arguing they were on private property. Only after the police informed James and Gibson that they would return at their own risk were they permitted by the farmers to leave the barn. The two men were then given a police escort to the road.⁸³

During the same day, Mrs. Gardiner and Frederick C. Krailing, chairman of the Halstead Tithepayers' Association, visited the Rectory to suggest a settlement of £25. However, the Reverend Greening refused to speak to them and declined the offer through his solicitor. Krailing then presided at a protest meeting nearby, which was addressed by a number of speakers, including Lady Evelyn Balfour, whose farm at Haughley in Suffolk was also under distraint. At this gathering, P.J. Butler, secretary of the S.T.A., moved a resolution, endorsed unanimously, that condemned the Rector's "disgraceful attitude" towards the forcible collection of tithe.⁸⁴

The events of 22 May 1933 at Delvyns Farm had a number of significant legal repercussions, which ensured that the dispute received extensive press coverage. On 31 May 1933, Greening represented by J.E. Singleton, K.C., successfully applied to the King's Bench Divisional Court for a rule *nisi* against Margaret Gardiner, Frederick Charles Krailing and Frederick Thompson Smith, an inspector at the Felstead sugar beet factory, on the grounds that, between 8 and 22 May 1933, they "sought to interfere with, and incited others to interfere with, and obstruct the due process of the Sudbury County Court, and particularly, John Rose, the Bailiff of the Court".⁸⁵ The case was heard on 25 July 1933 in the High Court before the Lord Chief Justice (Lord Hewart), Mr. Justice Talbot and Mr. Justice Goddard. After considering evidence from Reverend Greening's legal representatives and Mr. Norman Birkett, K.C., counsel for the three respondents, relating to the recent distraints and disturbance at

⁸³ Ibid..

⁸⁴ Ibid..

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1 June 1933, p. 5.

Delvyns Farm, the Court found that no contempt had been committed and discharged the rule with costs.⁸⁶

This ruling did not end the matter, since, on 3 August 1933, 36 people, all but two of them farmers, appeared before Castle Hedingham Magistrates' Court in Essex, charged with unlawful assembly at Delvyns Farm during an attempt to collect goods sold under a tithe distraint order.⁸⁷ The summonses alleged "that on May 22nd 1933, at Gestingthorpe, you did unlawfully assemble together against the peace of our Sovereign Lord the King, his crown and dignity".⁸⁸ After a lengthy hearing, proceedings were adjourned until 5 September 1933 to allow the farmers concerned time to harvest their crops.⁸⁹

In the interim, a small group of Blackshirts set up an encampment at Gestingthorpe, apparently to observe developments in the local tithe dispute.⁹⁰ On 24 August 1933, they held a meeting in the village on the market hill, which attracted a large crowd.⁹¹ The following day, four B.U.F. members "invaded" Delvyns Farm and took over the barn, which was serving as base for the bailiff, who was distraining on farm implements for £49 in tithe arrears.⁹² According to the senior Blackshirt in the party, they intended to use "every legitimate means of passive resistance" to prevent the removal of the impounded items.⁹³

The new occupants wired up the half-door at the entrance to hamper access and stocked the barn with food and water in case a 'siege' developed. A short distance from the fascists, the bailiff's displaced man set up a straw bed in the stackyard. On 28 August, after seeing the Blackshirts head for Gestingthorpe, the ousted official scaled the half-door and re-entered the barn. However, this brief repossession ended when he was ejected from the building during a scuffle with the returning B.U.F. contingent.

⁸⁶ *Times*, 26 July 1933, p. 4; *E.A.D.T.* 26 July 1933, p. 5.

⁸⁷ *E.A.D.T.* 4 August 1933, p. 7; *Times*, 4 August 1933, p. 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*.

⁹⁰ *Halstead and Colne Valley Gazette*, 25 August 1933, p. 8.

⁹¹ *The Suffolk and Essex Free Press (S.E.F.P.)*, 31 August 1933, p. 9.

⁹² *E.A.D.T.* 26 August 1933, p. 2.

⁹³ *S.E.F.P.*, 31 August 1933, p. 9.

The bailiff's man was then instructed not to make any further unassisted attempts to enter the barn. That evening, the fascists were interviewed by officers from the Essex Constabulary, apparently to ascertain if they possessed any firearms, and, throughout the night, police patrols toured the area.⁹⁴ A further six Blackshirts arrived at the farm on 29 August.⁹⁵

Again, it seems clear that the fascists intervened without the farmer's consent. When they first arrived in the area, Gardiner refused to let them camp on her land, and, once the Blackshirts were in possession of the barn, she offered the bailiff the use of her telephone to contact either the police or the County Court. Her solicitor also stated that, although Mrs. Gardiner appreciated the B.U.F.'s interest, she could neither be linked with the fascists nor countenance the use of physical force.⁹⁶

Eventually, in late September 1933, Sudbury County Court informed Mrs. Gardiner that the distraint warrant was being withdrawn and the impounded goods released from custody. She was given no explanation for this decision. In accordance with the court's notification, the bailiff left the farm. The Blackshirts also departed after it became known that if they stayed any longer the farmer planned to bring an action against them for trespass.⁹⁷ Shortly afterwards, it was understood that a report made by the bailiff, which stated that he was unable to recoup the tithe due and the cost incurred, had prompted the court's action.⁹⁸ The leader of the B.U.F. contingent construed these developments as another success for fascist intervention:

We were expecting to stop in the barn for months, as long as the bailiff remained. We regard this as a victory for the cause we represent. We came here for the express

purpose of seeing fair play and we were determined that the goods which were alleged to be unlawfully seized

⁹⁴ *E.A.D.T.*, 29 August 1933, p. 12; *E.D.P.*, 29 August 1933, p. 7

⁹⁵ *S.E.F.P.*, 31 August 1933, p. 9.

⁹⁶ *E.D.P.*, 26 August, 1933, p. 10.

⁹⁷ *E.A.D.T.*, 25 September 1933, p. 11.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1933, p. 12; *S.E.F.P.*, 28 September 1933, p. 11.

should not be removed until the position had been clarified legally.⁹⁹

On 5 September 1933, the 36 charged with unlawful assembly at Delvyns Farm on 22 May 1933 reappeared at Castle Hedingham Sessions and were committed for trial. Bail was set at five pounds for each defendant.¹⁰⁰ The case was heard at Essex Assizes, Chelmsford between 2 and 6 November 1933 before Mr. Justice Horridge. On the judge's direction, 29 were formally acquitted by the jury. The other seven, including Mrs. Gardiner, Frederick Krailing and Frederick Smith, were found guilty, and each bound over for two years with recognisances fixed at ten pounds per person.¹⁰¹

The B.U.F.'s 'tithe war' activities also extended to Norfolk. A group of five Blackshirts from London N.H.Q. established quarters in a barn at Hall Farm, Fincham in Norfolk on 24 October 1933. This property belonged to Leonard Mason, vice-chairman of the Norfolk Tithepayers' Association, and was reportedly under threat of distraint.¹⁰² Mason was not a B.U.F. member and had neither asked for their assistance nor given them permission to stay in one of his outbuildings.¹⁰³

According to Roy Lee, the senior fascist in the Fincham contingent and a well-known former aeroplane stunt pilot, the B.U.F. were there to employ peaceful methods to ensure that no stock was moved from the farm.¹⁰⁴ Another fascist participant, Richard Bellamy, then the B.U.F. Branch Organiser at Downham Market, recalled that Mason believed that some of his lambs were about to be seized in lieu of unpaid tithe, and that the Blackshirts planned to play football in the loading area to

⁹⁹ S.E.F.P., 28 September 1933, p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ E.A.D.T., 6 September 1933, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 3 November 1933, p. 9, 4 November 1933, p. 9, 6 November 1933, p. 5, 7 November 1933, p. 5.

¹⁰² E.D.P., 28 October 1933, p. 9. In May 1933, following Q.A.B.'s application, Swaffham County Court made an order to recover £47 4s. 8d. in unpaid tithe from Leonard Mason. See E.D.P., 18 May 1933, p. 5.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 31 October 1933, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ L.N.C.P., 31 October 1933, p. 12; Lynn Advertiser, 27 October 1933, p. 9.

hinder the removal of the animals.¹⁰⁵ The regional movement's newspaper, the East Anglian Fascist, commented:

A detachment of our men are encamped in a barn belonging to Mr. Leonard Mason of Fincham. Mr. Mason was served with a notice of intention to distrain a fortnight ago but the bailiff has not yet put in an appearance. On the last occasion Mr. Mason was raided his friends were prevented from reaching him. This time his new friends, the Fascists, are on the spot first. Have the controllers of Queen Anne's Bounty developed cold feet?¹⁰⁶

The first area rally of the East Anglian B.U.F. was staged at Hall Farm, Fincham on 29 October 1933 in connection with the tithe dispute.¹⁰⁷ Detachments from the newly-created King's Lynn, Stoke Ferry and Hunstanton formations, led respectively by District Administrative Officers Horne, Smith and Callingham, attended the gathering. Three senior regional officials were also present, namely Douglas Gunson, the Area Administrative Officer, S.R. Behn, the Area Administrative Secretary, and R.J. Sutterby of the Fascist Union of British Workers (F.U.B.W.).¹⁰⁸

During the morning, the Blackshirts marched around the village and, in the afternoon, a B.U.F. meeting was convened at The Hall, where both Behn and Gunson delivered anti-tithe speeches to the assembled fascists. Afterwards, it would appear that the Blackshirts dispersed once the rally had concluded. In a newspaper interview, Behn explained that:

The object of the rally is to get known to the people of Fincham that we intend to act in the tithe war and it is not just a question of three or four men coming down, but that three or four hundred members can arrive at short notice. It is not a fresh stunt. We are resisting by all legal means the seizing of any goods for the payment of tithes. Our

¹⁰⁵ Richard Reynell Bellamy, 'We Marched With Mosley' (Unpublished unabridged manuscript, 1958-1968), p. 351.

¹⁰⁶ East Anglian Fascist. Quoted in E.D.P., 28 October, 1933, p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ Norfolk News and Weekly Press (N.N.W.P.), 4 November 1933, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid..

members are now standing by awaiting further developments. The bailiff has not turned up and our hands are tied until he does. We are the only organisation fighting Queen Anne's Bounty.¹⁰⁹

In November 1933, the Blackshirts also intervened at L.C.F. Arthey's farm at Kersey in Suffolk, shortly after six steers and heifers had been impounded for non-payment of tithe and put up for sale by tender.¹¹⁰ Arthey owed eighteen months of unpaid tithe totalling £103 and distraint was levied on £122. After the tithe owners, King's College Cambridge, had rejected his offer to pay 75 per cent of the outstanding sum, the County Court seized six cattle valued at seven pounds each and recovered £80 by selling off a motor car belonging to the farmer.

A fascist contingent from London headquarters arrived at the farm on Sunday 5 November and established quarters in a barn. Both Arthey and his sister had refused to give the Blackshirts permission to encamp on the property, but the B.U.F. party ignored their wishes.¹¹¹ Their arrival coincided with the disappearance of the impounded animals and other livestock from the farm. The Blackshirts denied that they were responsible and assisted the bailiff in recovering the missing cattle from a nearby field at Mason's Mill, about one and a half miles away. Early on Tuesday 7 November, two lorries from General Dealers Ltd., containing approximately fifteen men, entered the farm premises as a dozen police kept guard. After the impounded cattle were loaded into one lorry, the two vehicles drove off in the direction of Colchester. The Blackshirts, who had been joined by another B.U.F. member during the night in response to requests for reinforcements, departed as soon as the cattle had been taken away.¹¹²

The most famous, and final, direct fascist intervention in the East Anglian 'tithe war' took place at Wortham in Suffolk, on farms occupied by Rowland Rash. Born at Wortham in the early 1890s, Rash was described as "one of the largest farmers in the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid..

¹¹⁰ E.A.D.L., 7 November 1933, p. 11.

¹¹¹ Ibid..

¹¹² Ibid., 8 November, 1933, p. 7; S.E.E.P., 9 November, 1933, p. 4.

district” and sat on the East Suffolk County Council.¹¹³ Both he and his wife Doreen Wallace, the Oxford University-educated novelist, were prominently associated with the campaign against the tithe in the 1930s. Wallace’s book, The Tithe War (1934), championed the tithepayers’ case, and, towards the end of the decade, she became President of the National Tithepayers’ Association.¹¹⁴ In February 1934, Rash’s farms were under distraint for rent charge arrears, amounting to approximately £565.¹¹⁵ Under instruction from the Diss and Eye County Court, the bailiff impounded 134 pigs at Hall Farm, eleven cattle at Beech Tree Farm and another four cattle at Ixworth Sheds on 5 February 1934. Tenders for the stock were required by 10 a.m. on Tuesday 13 February.¹¹⁶

A contingent of eight Blackshirts arrived by lorry at Wortham on 9 February 1934, under the command of Richard Adolph Plathen, the B.U.F.’s National Political Officer.¹¹⁷ Previously, 33 year old Plathen had supervised fascist anti-tithe activities in Devon and Cornwall.¹¹⁸ The B.U.F. group, which was composed mainly of Norfolk and Suffolk Blackshirts, initially established quarters in a poultry house and a motor van.¹¹⁹ Plathen explained the purpose of their visit: “We have arrived to protect the interests of Mr. Rash. At the moment we are not able to say what action we shall find it necessary to take as our action is purely defensive and the initiative lies in the hands of the tithe collectors”.¹²⁰

¹¹³ E.A.D.T., 8 February 1934, p. 9. See also Times, 28 October 1977, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ Wallace, The Tithe War, Daily Telegraph, 25 October 1989, p. 19; Times, 26 October 1989, p. 16; Independent, 27 October 1989, p. 17; E.A.D.T., 25 October 1989, p. 6.

¹¹⁵ E.A.D.T., 18 October 1933, p. 7, 8 February 1934, p. 9, 12 February 1934, p. 7; E.D.P., 6 February 1934, p. 9, 8 February 1934, p. 15; Wallace, The Tithe War.

¹¹⁶ E.A.D.T., 8 February 1934, p. 9, 13 February 1934, p. 7, 27 February 1934, p. 3; Home Office series (HO) 144/19199/592548/29. Statement of Jonathan Norman, Bailiff to the Diss and Eye County Court. 14 February 1934. HO 144/19199/592548 Tithe Disturbance File was consulted on privileged access at the Public Records Office. Subfile 33 was withheld.

¹¹⁷ E.D.P., 10 February 1934, p. 9.

¹¹⁸ Fascist Week, 6-12 April 1934, p. 5; E.D.P., 10 February 1934, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ E.D.P., 10 February 1934, p. 9; HO 144/19199/592548/29. Statement of Charles Edward Hunt, Bailiff’s Assistant. February 1934.

¹²⁰ E.D.P., 10 February 1934, p. 9.

Additional Blackshirt detachments arrived at Wortham on 13 and 15 February, raising their overall strength to approximately 50.¹²¹ Between 9 and 16 February, the fascists, together with the Rash family, farmworkers and other members of the local community, took action designed to frustrate any sudden attempt to remove the distrained animals. At Hall Farm, Blackshirts and local residents dug trenches across the gateway to The Piggeries and blocked the approach road with a threshing machine and a straw pitcher, both of which had wheels removed. A lorry used by the fascists was backed into the largest trench. Access to the barn containing eleven impounded cattle at The Buildings, Beech Tree Farm was similarly obstructed. On one side, B.U.F. members dug another trench and a group of men from the village felled trees across the entrance. At the back of the yard large heaps of straw had been placed in the gateways. During this period too, the approaches to Ixworth Sheds, which housed the remaining four distrained bullocks, were blocked with felled trees and straw. A B.U.F. picket was permanently stationed at Hall Farm and Beech Tree Farm.¹²² In order to give advance warning of any suspicious traffic movements, a fascist vigil was maintained on the outskirts of London, and B.U.F. scouts were positioned in a ring around Wortham.¹²³

On this occasion, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest a degree of collusion between the tithepayers and the B.U.F.. Ronald Creasy, a Suffolk landowner, who was subsequently to become a senior East Anglian Blackshirt and a personal associate of Mosley, later recalled that the B.U.F.'s founder told him that the movement intervened at Wortham only after receiving a specific request for assistance from the tithepayer involved.¹²⁴ Both Rowland Rash and Doreen Wallace consistently maintained that they had done nothing to encourage the fascists to take a direct interest in their tithe case.¹²⁵ However, it can now be revealed that the Blackshirts were invited

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 19 February 1934, p. 9.

¹²² HO 144/19199/592548. Statement of Police Constable William David Martin (stationed at Palgrave). February 1934. See also *E.A.D.T.* and *E.D.P.* for daily reports on the Wortham tithe dispute between 9 and 16 February 1934.

¹²³ *E.D.P.*, 17 February 1934, p. 9.

¹²⁴ Ronald N. Creasy. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1995.

¹²⁵ See for example Doreen Wallace, *So Long To Learn* (London: Collins, 1936), Chapters XXXI and XXXIII; Doreen Wallace, 'My siege in the Tithe War', *The Countryman*, (Winter 1984-1985),

to play a supporting role. Early in February 1934, R.B.A. Wallace (presumably Doreen Wallace's father, R.B. Agnew Wallace, who was then residing at Wortham) sent a letter to the Commanding Officer at the B.U.F.'s Chelsea Headquarters which said: "The enclosed cutting explains itself. On former occasions your party has interested itself in these iniquitous distrains at the incidence of Q.A.B.. So perhaps in the present case you may care to take a hand and see fair play?"¹²⁶

It seems highly unlikely that either Rash or his wife were fascist supporters and, initially at least, they may not have been aware of R.B. Agnew Wallace's approach to the B.U.F..¹²⁷ Nevertheless, several features of the Wortham tithe dispute indicate that Blackshirt intervention was not entirely unwelcome. There was little sign of the frosty reception the fascists had encountered at earlier tithe disputes. During the distraint, Rash stressed that he had not invited the Blackshirts present to participate but added that "in the circumstances I cannot be unfriendly towards them".¹²⁸ Indeed, shortly after arriving, a number of fascists took up quarters at the farmhouse of Hall Farm, apparently at the invitation of Doreen Wallace's mother.¹²⁹ It was also evident that the Blackshirts coordinated their obstructionist activities at Rash's farms with local residents, who were similarly determined to prevent collection of the stock.¹³⁰ Furthermore, Doreen Wallace's fictionalised account of the Wortham tithe dispute in her 1936 novel So Long To Learn reveals it was recognised that the presence of the B.U.F. would generate extensive publicity for the tithepayers' cause.¹³¹

pp. 66-69; 'The Tithe War'. Yesterday's Witness series, B.B.C. 2, 25 May 1972.

¹²⁶ HO 144/19199/592548. R.B.A. Wallace, Wortham. Letter to the Commanding Officer, Fascist Party H.Q., King's Road, Chelsea. 6 February 1934. R. B. Agnew Wallace was active in the anti-tithe protest at Wortham. See E.A.D.T., 23 February 1934, p. 7; HO 144/19199/592548/29. Statement of Police Constable William David Martin. February 1934.

¹²⁷ Carol Twinch and June Shepherd, two East Anglian writers who knew the Rash family and who have investigated the Wortham tithe dispute for forthcoming publications, are certain neither Rowland Rash nor Doreen Wallace had any official connection with the B.U.F.. This view is endorsed by the Friends of Oswald Mosley (F.O.M.) organisation.

¹²⁸ E.D.P., 10 February 1934, p. 9.

¹²⁹ E.A.D.T., 19 February 1934, p. 5 and p. 12, 27 February 1934, p. 3; HO 144/19199/592548/29. Statement of Police Sergeant William Sidney Clarke (stationed at Ipswich). 13 February 1934.

¹³⁰ HO 144/19199/592548. Statement of Police Constable William David Martin. February 1934.

¹³¹ Wallace, So Long to Learn, p. 323.

Having been approached for assistance, the B.U.F. certainly saw the Wortham dispute as the most promising opportunity so far presented to make headway with the agricultural community on the tithe issue. National Headquarters supervised the Blackshirt operation at Rash's farms and sent around 50 fascists to his property in the period up to 17 February, reportedly at a cost of 8s 6d per person per day.¹³² This outlay, which far exceeded the resources devoted to previous B.U.F. tithe interventions, also suggested that the Blackshirts expected, and indeed received, a less than hostile reception at Wortham.

Eventually, on Saturday 17 February 1934, 100 policemen from the East Suffolk force were drafted in to Wortham. Forty of these officers, accompanied by Superintendent E.W. Lankester, Superintendent H. Eade and Inspector W.T. Bryant, arrived at Rash's farms and arrested eighteen Blackshirts, including the leader, Richard Plathen. None of the B.U.F. members offered any resistance when they were taken into custody and placed in a waiting bus, although one of their number, John Lewis Arnold, attempted to cut a tyre on a police vehicle with a knife, and two other Mosleyites were apprehended trying to set off a maroon. The police also removed rockets, picks, shovels and other items from the fascists' quarters.¹³³ By this time, almost 1,000

¹³² HO 144/19199/592548/29. D. Gunson, King's Lynn. Telegram to R. Plathen, B.U.F. National Headquarters, London. 8 February 1934; HO 144/19199/592548/29. D.A. Cutmore, B.U.F. Headquarters, King's Road, Sloane Square, S.W.3. Letter to R. Plathen, Wortham, Suffolk. 10 February 1934; HO 144/19199/592548/29. Neil Francis Hawkins, Adjutant, National Defence Force B.U.F., Fascist Headquarters, Sloane Square. Letter to N/P/O Plathen, Wortham, Suffolk. 12 February 1934; HO 144/19199/592548/29. George Staunton, Chief Constable of East Suffolk. Letter to Under Secretary of State, Home Office. 16 February 1934.

¹³³ *E.A.D.T.*, 19 February 1934, p. 5, 27 February 1934, p. 3; *E.D.P.*, 19 February 1934, p. 9. See also *Times*, 27 March 1934, p. 11. The arrested Blackshirts were Richard A. Plathen, 32, commercial traveller, of 33, King's Road, Chelsea; Edward Leonard Tolfts, 28, boxer, of 33, King's Road, Chelsea; John Lewis Arnold, 18, no occupation, of 11, Wendover Court, Finchley Road, London; Harold Rust, 37, decorator, of 33, King's Road, Chelsea; Brian Hartung, 24, politician, of 33, King's Road, Chelsea; Wilfred Maxwell Slegg, 27, labourer, of Cannon House, Downham Market, Norfolk; Ernest Dazley, 41, sales supervisor, of 82, High Street, King's Lynn, Norfolk; Edward Bernard Frost, 20, clerk, of 10, Cavendish Street, Felixstowe, Suffolk; George Alfred George, 27, caterer, of 73, Norfolk Street, King's Lynn, Norfolk; Alfred Austin, 39, miner, of 33, King's Road, Chelsea; Thomas Howard Collins, 22, motor driver, of 2, Tower Court, King's Lynn, Norfolk; Leonard Stanley, 23, salesman, of 33, King's Road, Chelsea; George Alton Saunders, 23, motor mechanic, of 27, Pembridge Villas, Bayswater, London; Walter Edward Dove, 25, motor driver, of 27, Pembridge Villas, Bayswater, London; William Andrew Chapman, 39, poultry farmer, of Lestrangle Terrace, Hunstanton, Norfolk; Frederick Bert Horace Burton, 22, seaman, of 3, Softley's Yard, King's Lynn, Norfolk; Albert Cox, 27, decorator, of Norfolk Street, King's Lynn, Norfolk. The nineteenth

people had gathered at the farms and “a certain amount of hissing and booing was heard”.¹³⁴

Later that afternoon, the eighteen men were brought before the magistrate, Lord Henniker, at a special court convened at the Hartismere Institution. After George Staunton, the Chief Constable of East Suffolk, had given evidence, the fascists were remanded in custody until the next Hartismere Petty Sessions on 26 February. The arrested Blackshirts were then taken under police escort by bus to Norwich Prison.¹³⁵

Afterwards, a group of senior police officers returned from the court with an ultimatum that all the Blackshirts remaining on Rash’s property were to remove their equipment and vacate the farms by noon the following day. On Sunday 18 February, three B.U.F. officers arrived from London at Hall Farm to take charge of the fascist tithe operations. Following discussions with the police, they assisted in the removal of Blackshirt baggage and obstructions. However, these officials were unable to shift the lorry from the trench of The Piggeries, apparently because an engine part was missing, and the only Blackshirt who knew where this was located had been arrested. By dusk, the fascists’ luggage had gone, and the Mosleyites had left the premises to set up a new base at Diss in south Norfolk.¹³⁶

B.U.F. reinforcements from London were conveyed in two buses to Wortham on 19 February 1934, increasing fascist strength in the area from around 20 to 50. They divided into groups and established several living quarters at various places near to the village. The officers in charge, who included Alexander Raven Thomson, Deputy Director of Policy, Rex Tremlett, managing editor of the Fascist Week, and Wilfred Risdon of the B.U.F. Legal Department, refused to be drawn about future fascist involvement in the dispute. This new fascist influx triggered rumours that 500

Blackshirt, Douglas Charles Hubert John Gunson, a 28 year old farmer, residing at Magazine Farm, Sedgeford in Norfolk, was arrested at his home on 24 February 1934. See E.A.D.T., 26 February 1934, p. 12 and E.D.P., 26 February 1934, p. 9.

¹³⁴ E.D.P., 19 February 1934, p. 9.

¹³⁵ Ibid.; E.A.D.T., 19 February 1934, p. 5; Times, 19 February 1934, p. 9.

¹³⁶ E.A.D.T., 19 February 1934, p. 12; E.D.P., 19 February 1934, p. 9; Times, 19 February 1934, p. 9.

Blackshirts, some disguised in mufti, had descended on Wortham overnight from other parts of East Anglia and elsewhere.¹³⁷

In order to secure the farm, Superintendent Eade and Inspector Bryant positioned a force of 30 or so East Suffolk police officers at Rash's property and had reserves standing by in case of an emergency. As an added precaution, the impounded stock was placed under police guard. However, nothing of an untoward nature took place. During the day, some of Rash's employees constructed a barbed wire entanglement in front of The Piggeries, and the crowd of onlookers listened to speeches made by two men, respectively claiming Conservative and B.U.F. allegiances.¹³⁸

On Tuesday 20 February, an application for the release on bail of the eighteen Blackshirts arrested at Wortham was granted in the High Court by Mr. Justice Charles. Bail was set for each fascist at £50, with an equivalent surety attached. Two requirements were reportedly imposed, namely that the eighteen would neither act in a manner similar to that alleged nor participate in any capacity at B.U.F. meetings. Furthermore, the bail order was made on condition that a surety of £50 per person would be obtained before midday on Wednesday, 21 February.¹³⁹

Rex Tremlett, the senior B.U.F. officer in the Wortham area, revealed that, under instruction from National Headquarters, about 200 plain clothed fascists left the district in the early hours of 20 February. About half departed for London, 40 went back to King's Lynn, and the rest returned to other parts of the eastern counties. Until then, they had acted as scouts and look-outs in the locality to raise the alarm in the event of any impending 'tithe raid' at the farm. By this stage, only eighteen Blackshirts were left at Diss. Later on that day, Superintendent Eade informed fascist leaders in the locality of the judge's order relating to bail for the men arrested on Rash's property. A police ultimatum also stipulated that, as a further condition for the granting of bail,

¹³⁷ *E.A.D.T.*, 20 February 1934, p. 6; *E.D.P.*, 20 February 1934, p. 9.

¹³⁸ *E.D.P.*, 20 February 1934, p. 9.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21 February 1934, p. 9; *E.A.D.T.*, 21 February 1934, p. 12.

there was to be no further B.U.F. activity in the tithe dispute at Wortham. Accordingly, the remaining Blackshirts were instructed to withdraw to Stowmarket by 8 a.m. on Wednesday 21 February. After that time, Tremlett and his chauffeur, still based at Diss, were to be the only fascists within a fourteen mile radius of the Wortham tithe dispute. During the evening of 20 February, Ian Hope Dundas, Mosley's Chief of Staff, paid a short visit to confer with Blackshirt officers in the vicinity.¹⁴⁰ A police tour of the district on Wednesday indicated that the fascists had moved from the designated exclusion zone, and this was confirmed by Tremlett.¹⁴¹ On Wednesday 21 February, sureties were accepted at Bow Street Police Court for the eighteen remanded Blackshirts. Captain C. Lewis, solicitor for the B.U.F., stated that four men were present in court willing to stand bail for the accused. The magistrate, Sir Rollo Graham-Campbell, therefore agreed to accept the sureties, subject to the normal police inquiries and the formal production of the judge's order.¹⁴²

With the fascists out of the area, a convoy of eight lorries carrying 40 operatives from General Dealers Ltd. arrived at Rash's premises at dawn on 22 February to collect the impounded animals. About 80 police officers were also in attendance to prevent any disturbance. Loading the fifteen bullocks and 134 pigs took over two hours to complete, and, although large crowds gathered to protest against the seizure of the stock, the proceedings were generally orderly, and no arrests were made. Afterwards, a protest meeting, attended by 250 people, was held in a meadow near the Rectory with Mr. Makens Turner, vice-chairman of the Suffolk Tithepayers' Association, presiding.¹⁴³

Nineteen Blackshirts appeared before the Hartismere Bench at Eye on 26 February in connection with the Wortham tithe dispute. Lord Henniker presided, supported by nine other magistrates. A group of local farmers, including Rowland

¹⁴⁰ Ibid..

¹⁴¹ *E.D.P.*, 22 February 1934, p. 9; *E.A.D.T.*, 22 February 1934, p. 7.

¹⁴² Ibid.. See also *Times*, 22 February 1934, p. 11.

¹⁴³ *E.D.P.*, 23 February 1934, p. 9; *E.A.D.T.*, 23 February 1934, p. 7; *Times*, 23 February 1934, p. 16.

Rash, were present as observers. The nineteenth defendant, Douglas Gunson, who was named in the original warrant, had been arrested only two days earlier at his Sedgeford farm in north-west Norfolk after an extensive police search. All nineteen pleaded not guilty and reserved their defence. After counsel had outlined the prosecution's case and evidence had been taken from Eye County Court officials and the police, the Blackshirts were committed for trial at the Old Bailey.¹⁴⁴ The following day the Blackshirts were released on bail from Norwich Prison. Seventeen of the men travelled by bus, via Diss, to Wortham, where they collected belongings and made an unsuccessful attempt to move the immobilised lorry, which was reversed in a trench by The Piggeries. Afterwards, they departed for London.¹⁴⁵ A group of fascists returned to Hall Farm on 1 March and recovered the vehicle.¹⁴⁶

On Monday 26 March 1934, the trial of the nineteen Blackshirts arrested at Wortham was held before Mr. Justice Hawke at the Old Bailey, with Mosley in attendance. Sir Patrick Hastings K.C. led the counsel for the defence, and the Attorney-General, Sir Thomas Inskip, prosecuted for the Crown. It was alleged that, between 9 and 16 February 1934, the accused had conspired, together with unknown persons, to effect a public mischief by obstructing the removal of livestock legally impounded under a tithe distraint order. The defendants also faced the additional charge of conspiring to obstruct the course of public justice. All nineteen Blackshirts pleaded guilty.¹⁴⁷ During the course of the trial, it emerged that the B.U.F. had intervened at Wortham on the basis of inaccurate legal advice. Hastings maintained that the fascists at Wortham had been mistakenly informed that an individual could go on to land, at the request or with the consent of the owner, and dig a trench without breaking the law.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ *E.A.D.T.*, 27 February 1934, p. 3; *E.D.P.*, 27 February 1934, p. 7; *Times*, 27 February 1934, p. 11.

¹⁴⁵ *E.A.D.T.*, 28 February 1934, p. 8; *E.D.P.*, 28 February 1934, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ *E.A.D.T.*, 2 March 1934, p. 7; *E.D.P.*, 2 March 1934, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ *E.A.D.T.*, 27 March 1934, p. 14; *E.D.P.*, 27 March 1934, p. 6; *Times*, 27 March 1934, p. 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*.

In giving his decision, Mr. Justice Hawke concluded that, although the Blackshirts had breached the law, they had been badly advised. He also considered that the accused men had shown no criminal intent and had not resisted arrest. All nineteen were bound over to keep the peace for two years in the sum of ten pounds, and each of them gave a personal undertaking to the judge not to interfere with the course of justice in the future. Richard Plathen and Edward Leonard Tolfts, identified as the B.U.F. leaders in Wortham, were ordered to pay the costs of the prosecution.¹⁴⁹

4. The B.U.F. Anti-tithe Campaign: Success and Failure

According to the B.U.F. press, fascist intervention in the East Anglian 'tithe war' was a resounding success in terms of winning recruits and sympathisers for the Mosleyite cause. After the Blackshirts' involvement at Woodlands Farm in August 1933, the B.U.F. claimed: "That our efforts at Ringshall were appreciated among the agricultural community has been proved by the shoals of letters we have received from farmers all over the country congratulating us in the action we took".¹⁵⁰

From then on, Blackshirt propaganda stressed how the movement's anti-tithe stance had generated widespread support among farmers and had galvanised popular sentiment against rent charge.¹⁵¹ In November 1933, Fascist Week declared that the tithepayer "is coming to rely upon this voluntary help from Fascism in Britain, accepting willingly the leadership offered by these determined young men, and glad to see the responsibility moved from his already over-burdened shoulders".¹⁵² The Blackshirts who were directly involved at the farms under distraint were eulogised as the fascist "pioneers" who had overcome agricultural society's "barrier of suspicion" concerning the B.U.F..¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ibid..

¹⁵⁰ Blackshirt, 19-25 August 1933, p. 1.

¹⁵¹ See for example Fascist Week, 30 March-5 April 1934, p. 4; Blackshirt, 7 September 1934, p. 9.

¹⁵² Fascist Week, 10-16 November 1933, p. 3.

¹⁵³ Blackshirt, 1 June 1934, p. 3.

Several letters of appreciation were published in the B.U.F. press. Fascist intervention at Ringshall prompted E.B. Mayhew of Romford, who had previously faced court action for non-payment of tithe, to wish the movement success in its “gratuitous assistance to the ‘Tithe’ sufferers down in Suffolk”.¹⁵⁴ Another endorsement came in April 1934, when ‘Son of the Soil’ from Redgrove, near Diss, wrote to Fascist Week explaining that he had joined the movement at the Wortham tithe dispute because the Blackshirts there were attempting “to help ease an unjust burden”.¹⁵⁵

It is also clear that a number of members of the agricultural community in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex became Blackshirts at least partly because of the fascists’ active campaign against the tithe. Arthur Barker of Sycamore Farm, Kenton, near Stowmarket joined the B.U.F. directly as a result of the organisation’s involvement at Ringshall in August 1933 and, thereafter, frequently endorsed Blackshirt agricultural policy in the local and fascist press.¹⁵⁶ A former Labour Party supporter, Barker had been hostile to fascism until he heard several Blackshirts speak at Woodlands Farm.¹⁵⁷ He appeared to be particularly impressed with the Blackshirts’ sense of ‘duty’: “I realise that the young men who came to help in Suffolk could have been enjoying themselves in a soft holiday; and there is hope for Old England as long as its young men are ready to put justice and the good of the Nation before money and self-interest”.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, George Hoggarth, a 23 year old Roman Catholic, who ran Clint Farm on the outskirts of Eye in Suffolk, discussed the B.U.F.’s agricultural policy with Blackshirts present at the Wortham dispute in February 1934. The subsequent arrest of Plathen and his colleagues induced Hoggarth, along with his brother and others, to join the movement. He later became the Eye B.U.F. District Treasurer.¹⁵⁹ Ronald Creasy, a

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-25 August 1933, p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ Fascist Week, 20-26 April 1934, p. 8.

¹⁵⁶ E.A.D.T., 20 February 1934, p. 9; Blackshirt, 26 August-1 September 1933, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ E.A.D.T., 20 February 1934, p. 9.

¹⁵⁸ Blackshirt, 26 August-1 September 1933, p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ G. Hoggarth, ‘The Essex Farmworker’ in L. Wise (ed.), Mosley’s Blackshirts: The Inside Story of

prominent Suffolk landowner and the B.U.F. District Leader at Eye from c.1936, also became more favourably disposed to the B.U.F. after witnessing their opposition to the distraint at Wortham. In his view, the “London boys [B.U.F. members from the capital at Rash’s farms] had a marvellous heart. It was really wonderful”.¹⁶⁰ Another supporter of the fascist stance on the tithe was P.M. Sloman of Greenstead, near Colchester in Essex, whose farm had been distrained upon in 1933 and 1934. In a letter to the B.U.F., Sloman argued: “I think it wants a party such as the Blackshirts to deal with such unscrupulous financial interests in a drastic way. Then we might get some semblance of fair play”.¹⁶¹

Furthermore, although it cannot be shown that Douglas Gunson and Sidney Charles Westren, two well-known East Anglian Mosleyites, joined the B.U.F. because of its opposition to rent charge during this period, both were involved in tithe proceedings which affected their own property interests. Gunson, the B.U.F.’s Area Administrative Officer for East Anglia in 1933-1934, rented Magazine Farm at Sedgeford in Norfolk from his father and had paid tithe on the property between 1927 and 1931 without revealing that he was not the owner.¹⁶² In May 1934, King’s Lynn County Court made an order on behalf of the Dean of Norwich Cathedral against Gunson for the payment of £71 in tithe, but, a month later, after it was established that he was a tenant at the farm, another order was issued appointing a receiver for the rent.¹⁶³

Sidney Charles Westren of Hall Farm, Elmsett, near Ipswich, who was later described in the fascist press as the “‘Stormy Petrel’ of Suffolk agriculture,” also clashed with the authorities over tithe debts.¹⁶⁴ In 1932, following Westren’s failure to reach agreement with Q.A.B. over rent charge arrears amounting to £127, eight corn stacks were impounded at his farm. When hauliers arrived from Cambridge to remove

the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940 (London: Sanctuary Press, 1986), pp. 43-44.

¹⁶⁰ Ronald N. Creasy. F.O.M. taped interview, n.d..

¹⁶¹ Blackshirt, 7 September 1934, p. 9.

¹⁶² E.D.P., 11 May 1934, p. 9, 15 June 1934, p. 16.

¹⁶³ Ibid..

¹⁶⁴ Southern Blackshirt, January 1939, p. 1.

the seized crops on 2 May 1932, 3-400 people gathered to frustrate them. Numerous cars were driven around the area to create delays, a trench was dug across the farm entrance, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to block the lane by felling a tree. Joseph Pryke, a labourer at Hall Farm, also positioned a fowl house in the middle of the road. Due to this interference, it took the hauliers over five hours to move a third of one stack, at which point they decided to abandon the job and leave.¹⁶⁵ Westren was subsequently able to regain the stacks for £40, but both he and Pryke were each fined £2 15s. at Hadleigh Police Court on 26 May for offences relating to obstruction of the highway.¹⁶⁶ In October 1934, a more successful 'tithe raid' at Hall Farm removed 25 cattle, eight corn stacks and items of household furniture to recover rent charge totalling £385.¹⁶⁷

The B.U.F.'s local campaign against the tithe was also instrumental in establishing a Branch at Diss in south Norfolk. This formation appears to have been stimulated by the presence in the town of outside Blackshirts, who were taking an active role in the Wortham dispute.¹⁶⁸ After these imported fascists had established a base at the Crown Hotel, Diss, following the arrest of eighteen of their number at Rash's property on 17 February 1934, their leader, Rex Tremlett, told the local press: "A branch of the Fascists (B.U.F.) has been formed in Diss but until this tithe dispute is settled the names of the officers and members will not be divulged. We have found widespread sympathy in the district with the policy of our organisation, particularly in agricultural circles".¹⁶⁹ Non-fascist sources confirm the existence of some support for the movement in the town during the first half of 1934. In February, the police ascertained that the landlord of the Crown Hotel and his son were "in league" with Tremlett's men.¹⁷⁰ Four months later, the Norfolk South Divisional Labour Party

¹⁶⁵ *E.A.D.T.*, 3 May 1932, p. 9; *S.E.E.P.*, 5 May 1932, p. 6.

¹⁶⁶ *E.A.D.T.*, 7 May 1932, p. 5, 10 May 1932, p. 4, 12 May 1932, p. 2, 13 May 1932, p. 5, 27 May 1932, p. 2; *S.E.E.P.*, 2 June 1932, p. 8.

¹⁶⁷ *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Royal Commission On Tithe Rent Charge* (London: H.M.S.O., 1936), p. 366.

¹⁶⁸ *E.A.D.T.*, 20 February 1934, p. 6, 21 February 1934, p. 12, 22 February 1934, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ *E.D.P.*, 22 February 1934, p. 9.

¹⁷⁰ HO 144/19199/592548. Statement of Police Sergeant William Sidney Clarke (stationed at

reported that a B.U.F. Branch was operating at Diss, where fascists were particularly active on market days.¹⁷¹

Police evidence indicates that the propaganda activities of the B.U.F. contingent during the Wortham tithe dispute attracted a certain measure of sympathy and the occasional recruit as well. On 13 February 1934, Richard Plathen and Douglas Gunson addressed 150 farmers and farmworkers, who had gathered at Rash's premises, and enrolled one listener into the movement.¹⁷² A police observer who was present noted that local farmers seemed to be "very interested" in Blackshirt meetings in the vicinity.¹⁷³ When the eighteen fascists arrested at Wortham were being driven away under police escort, they were cheered by sections of the crowd, and Rowland Rash apparently told the departing Plathen, "Goodbye for the present, I hope to be wearing a black shirt myself someday", a remark which also received vociferous approval from a group of onlookers.¹⁷⁴

Nevertheless, although the B.U.F.'s anti-tithe campaign attracted some support in the three-counties, the absence of several vital elements of the Griffin/Copsey conjunctural model prevented recruitment of the hoped-for 'fascist legions' in East Anglia. In essence, the Blackshirt movement faced three major constraints concerning its involvement in local protests against rent charge. Firstly, from the outset the existence of organised county and district tithepayers' associations severely hampered the B.U.F.'s efforts to carve out significant 'political space' for itself on this contentious subject. Government legislation passed in 1936, which reformed the rent charge system and made it less onerous, further marginalised the fascists. Secondly, the B.U.F. lacked what Griffin terms "favourable contingency" because of various

Ipswich). February 1934.

¹⁷¹ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire of 12 June 1934. Reply of Norfolk South Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/194.

¹⁷² HO 144/19199/592548/29. Statement of Police Sergeant William Sidney Clarke (stationed at Ipswich). 13 February 1934. See also HO 144/19199/592548/29. Statement of Police Constable George Roland Hitchens (stationed at Ipswich). 13 February 1934.

¹⁷³ Ibid..

¹⁷⁴ HO 144/19199/592548. Statement of Police Constable George Roland Hitchens (stationed at Ipswich). February 1934.

weaknesses in the Blackshirt interventionist strategy and the state's determination to bring the movement's anti-tithe activities to an end.¹⁷⁵ Finally, improving economic conditions in the agricultural sector from 1933-1934 dampened the 'tithe war' and reduced its importance as a mobilising issue.¹⁷⁶

The failure of the B.U.F.'s campaign against the tithe to open up 'political space' in the region owed much to the fact that the tithepayers in the eastern counties had created their own pressure groups to agitate for reform. This impaired the Blackshirts' ability to attract agricultural support in a number of ways. In the first place, the existence of county and district tithepayers' associations in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex meant that the Blackshirt movement could not pose as the only, or most credible, vehicle for protest against rent charge. Founded and led by respected local farmers and their allies, these associations offered moral support, legal advice and, in certain cases, financial assistance to tithepayers in arrears.¹⁷⁷ As grass roots organisations, they articulated and mobilised rural anti-tithe sentiment in a way that the interventionist B.U.F. never could. Certainly, the Blackshirts' entry into the East Anglian 'tithe war' failed to recruit disaffected tithepayers on the same scale as the S.T.A., which was 650-strong by April 1934, or the Colchester District Tithepayers' Association, which claimed almost 1,000 members in June 1931.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, since the three county tithepayer associations were created in 1931 and numerous other formations surfaced in the years up to 1934, local organised agitation was established well before the B.U.F.'s first direct involvement in August 1933.¹⁷⁹

Mosley's organisation might have had more success if these tithepayers' groups had proved to be inept champions of the cause, but, on the contrary, they were both resilient and resourceful. During the 1930s, the National Tithepayers' Association

¹⁷⁵ R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 211-212.

¹⁷⁶ The impact of local economic conditions on the regional B.U.F.'s development is examined in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

¹⁷⁷ See Wallace, *The Tithe War*.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89; Halliday, 'The Tithe War', p. 38.

¹⁷⁹ *E.A.D.T.* 18 February 1931, p. 11, 25 February 1931, p. 6, 13 January 1932, p. 2; *E.C.S.* 16 May 1931, p. 5; *Times* 11 May 1931, p. 18, 16 June 1931, p. 11; information provided by Carol Twinch.

(N.T.A.) and its most active county offshoots, such as the S.T.A., combined committed leadership with a pragmatic campaign of lawful publicity-seeking protest to maintain the pressure for change.¹⁸⁰

The central figure in this campaign was Albert George Mobbs, a farmer from Oulton in Suffolk, who had protested against the tithe since 1926. In 1931, he not only became president of the N.T.A. but also took on the chairmanship of the newly-formed Suffolk association. A tireless campaigner for tithe reform, Mobbs spoke at numerous meetings across the eastern counties and addressed gatherings in other parts of the country as well.¹⁸¹ According to a close friend in the tithepayers' movement, Mobbs knew his subject "from A to Z" and performed his official role "well, even spectacularly".¹⁸² Suffolk's most vigorous opponent of rent charge was ably assisted by a number of leading local anti-tithe activists, including Lady Evelyn Balfour, Philip Butler and Makens Turner. Another prominent supporter, Doreen Wallace, placed her considerable literary talents at the disposal of the movement.¹⁸³

The N.T.A. and its affiliated county associations also adopted shrewd tactics to promote their cause. Mobbs and his colleagues readily accepted that, in order to generate support and favourable publicity, their agitation against the tithe would have to be peaceful, law-abiding, politically unaligned and focused on economic, not religious issues.¹⁸⁴ For the most part, during the 1930s, this strategy preserved the reputation and credibility of the movement by giving form and discipline to the tithepayers' protests, which otherwise might have resulted in widespread violence and disorder.¹⁸⁵

The N.T.A. leadership also decided to remain loyal to the National Farmers Union (N.F.U.), even though it had been the latter's perceived indifference to the issue

¹⁸⁰ Mobbs, 'Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil', Chapter VII. See also E.A.D.T., 14 October 1974 and Eastern Evening News (E.E.N.), 5 December 1968. Press cuttings held at Suffolk Record Office, Lowestoft.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Doreen Wallace, 'Albert Mobbs', Suffolk Fair, (March 1979), p. 26.

¹⁸³ Mobbs, 'Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil', Chapter VII; Wallace, The Tithe War.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.; E.A.D.T., 14 October 1974; E.E.N., 5 December 1968.

in 1929 that had prompted the establishment of tithepayers' associations in the first place.¹⁸⁶ Such a move avoided fragmenting agricultural opinion and preserved links with an established channel to the government. In heavily-tithed Suffolk, the County Branch of the N.F.U. set up a tithe committee early on and cooperated with the S.T.A. in an attempt to secure a review of the rent charge system. The close links forged between the two bodies were illustrated by the fact that four members of the S.T.A. Executive Committee chaired the Suffolk N.F.U. in the 1930s. Eventually, the N.F.U. Council in London was persuaded to arrange a tithepayers' deputation, with Mobbs as the Suffolk representative, to the Minister of Agriculture. Furthermore, in 1933, following a resolution from the Suffolk Branch which received majority backing, the N.F.U. established a tithe committee, whose members were mainly tithepayers.¹⁸⁷

The tithepayers' associations were also resourceful fundraisers, and their methods went beyond subscriptions and collections at protest meetings. Gift sales raised much-needed income by auctioning off items donated by members and sympathisers. One such sale, held at Ipswich in April 1933, disposed of over 600 lots and provided £800 for the S.T.A.'s coffers.¹⁸⁸ Similar sales were conducted in Norfolk, Essex and elsewhere too during this period.¹⁸⁹ At Mobbs' instigation, the S.T.A. often gave guarantees in court that auction sales would result in the retrieval of the tithe debt, but, once the first round of bidding had satisfied this undertaking, the purchased goods would then be auctioned off again to supplement the association's funds.¹⁹⁰

Arguably, the only way the B.U.F. could have capitalised fully on the East Anglian 'tithe war' was by forging a link with the tithepayers' associations. However, given that these bodies were non-political organisations, committed to constitutional methods of protest, such an alliance was hardly tempting. Mobbs and the other

¹⁸⁶ Mobbs, 'Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil', pp. 56-58; information provided by Carol Twinch.

¹⁸⁷ Mobbs, 'Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil', pp. 67-69.

¹⁸⁸ Wallace, *The Tithe War*, pp. 136-138.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Mobbs, 'Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil', p. 62.

tithepayers' leaders realised that, by endorsing the B.U.F.'s involvement officially, the associations would sacrifice the perceived benefits of a lawful, politically non-partisan campaign in return for a potentially damaging alliance with a creed which was becoming increasingly linked with illegality and violence. Hence, although the B.U.F. made overtures and portrayed its relationship with the tithepayers' movement favourably in the Blackshirt press, the N.T.A. and its county offshoots decisively rejected the offer of fascist assistance.

When the B.U.F. first intervened in East Anglia, at Woodlands Farm, Ringshall in August 1933, members of the Executive Committee of the S.T.A. held conversations with the Blackshirt leaders present.¹⁹¹ As a result of this discussion, the B.U.F. reportedly gave an undertaking not to involve themselves in the farmers' policy, and the S.T.A. Executive issued a statement clarifying the position: "The Executive Committee of the Association repudiate any association with the Black Shirt movement, and has refused such offers of assistance as have been made. The Association dissociates itself entirely from the activities of the Fascist organisation".¹⁹²

Lady Evelyn Balfour, one of the S.T.A. members present at this meeting, reiterated the position saying that although the tithepayers were "glad of the moral support of any section of the community...the only people who can carry out a constitutional struggle are the farmers themselves".¹⁹³ Two days later, a full meeting of the S.T.A. Executive Committee at Ipswich endorsed the earlier statement, distancing the organisation from the B.U.F. and stressing the tithepayers' opposition to all forms of violence.¹⁹⁴

At Gestingthorpe, J.O. Steed, the solicitor acting for the Essex Tithepayers' Association (E.T.A.), interviewed the Blackshirts camped near Delvyns Farm and informed them that Mrs. Gardiner would neither be associated with them nor consider

¹⁹¹ *E.A.D.T.*, 7 August 1933, p. 5.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 August 1933, p. 5.

the use of force.¹⁹⁵ After the fascists had taken possession of the farmer's barn, another E.T.A. representative, F.C. Krailing, denied that the B.U.F. was acting on instructions from the tithepayers' associations and added that the Blackshirts' intervention was likely to make the Gestingthorpe dispute more difficult to resolve.¹⁹⁶

Similarly, in the aftermath of the Wortham tithe affair in February 1934, A.G. Mobbs, at the annual meeting of the S.T.A., reaffirmed the official policy of non-cooperation with the B.U.F., although it was accepted that individual members might hold a different private view:

...there is a rumour abroad that tithepayers' associations are linking up with the Fascist movement. I feel, therefore, that we should make our position quite clear. We started this Association as a non-political and non-sectarian organisation, and we still remain so. What individual tithepayers do is, however, another matter. A tithepayer has as much right to become a Fascist as he has to become a Conservative or a Socialist. And there is an old saying that a drowning man will clutch at any straw. I am not a Fascist myself, but I say this: I know of nothing in this country more calculated to encourage the growth of Fascism than the apparent indifference of Parliament to the grievances of the tithepayers.¹⁹⁷

Subsequent government action to overhaul the tithe system further reduced the 'political space' available to the B.U.F. by undercutting the potential appeal of the fascist policy on rent charge. In 1934, a Royal Commission was established to report on the present arrangements for paying tithe. After taking evidence from both payers and owners between October 1934 and March 1935, the Commission's Report was made public on 28 February 1936. Its recommendations formed the basis for new government legislation.¹⁹⁸

The ensuing Tithe Act, which became law on 31 July 1936, had clearly been influenced by the experience of severe agricultural depression at the start of the decade.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1933, p. 7; *S.E.F.P.*, 31 August 1933, p. 9.

¹⁹⁶ *S.E.F.P.*, 31 August 1933, p. 9.

¹⁹⁷ *E.A.D.T.*, 28 February 1934, p. 12.

¹⁹⁸ *Report of the Royal Commission on Tithe Rent Charge in England and Wales* (London: H.M.S.O., 1936)

Tithe rent charge payments were terminated on 2 October 1936, and tithe owners were compensated by the issue of £70,000,000 of gilt-edged government stock, yielding interest at three per cent, which was redeemable in 60 years. To recoup this money, landowners, whose property hitherto had been subject to tithe rent charge, were now made personally liable for payment of an annuity to the state over the same 60 year period. This financial obligation was limited to a yearly sum, not exceeding one third of the assumed net rent for each agricultural holding and was scheduled to end on 1 October 1996. At the tithepayer's request, redemption could be completed by the payment of a single lump sum, a procedure which was compulsory if the annuity was one pound or less.¹⁹⁹ During the first seven years of the new system, as agriculture's prospects improved, 160,000 landowners opted to redeem in this way.²⁰⁰ In future too, when tithed land was sold, the transaction would include an additional mandatory payment to complete redemption. The measure also established the Tithe Redemption Commission, which was given the responsibility of collecting the new terminable redemption annuities for the state.

Several features of the Act signalled the government's obvious desire to mollify the farming interest and dampen the anti-tithe agitation. The Royal Commission's recommendation for a maximum redemption period of 40 years was rejected in favour of a 60 year time frame, on the grounds that landowners would find the former overly onerous. Another conciliatory gesture reflecting official concern about the recent economic plight of British agriculture was the low annuity redemption rate, which was set at 91.56 for every £100 of rent charge outstanding.²⁰¹ One estimate suggests that 6,900 benefices collectively lost £475,000 under the new arrangements, which represented a total reduction in payment of eighteen per cent.²⁰² Set against this, the government's pledge to allocate £2,000,000 to compensate clergy whose income fell

¹⁹⁹ The 1936 Tithe Act. 26 Geo. V and 1 Edw. VIII c.43. The provisions of the 1936 Tithe Act are also contained in P. W. Millard, *The Law Relating to Tithes* (London: Butterworth, 1938)

²⁰⁰ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 166.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁰² G.F.A. Best, *Temporal Pillars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 479.

below £500 per annum due to the Act, was small comfort. Moreover, the new system soon compelled the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to use capital resources to meet stipendiary costs. Facing the mounting pressure, the church “virtually gave away” its tithe rights in 1936.²⁰³

The new Act was poorly received by many tithepayers who had been hoping for outright abolition. Particular criticism was directed at the scale of compensation offered to the church, since this determined annuity levels, and the fact that payments were turned into a personal debt. Dissatisfaction with the government’s proposals was most clearly expressed on 24 June 1936, when approximately 3,000 farmers took part in a protest march from the Embankment to Hyde Park in London.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, once it became law, the 1936 Tithe Act did much to quell rural discontent and weaken the anti-tithe movement. To be sure, distraints continued and stalwarts, such as Mobbs and Wallace, refused to accept the new arrangements, but even they had to acknowledge that the government’s concessions satisfied non-farming landowners and many farmers who did not possess heavily-tithed land: “It was only natural that following an Act of Parliament which after all reduced our capital obligations by some £20 million, and annual payments by nearly 20%, our agitation to some extent [sic.] died down”.²⁰⁵

The personal liability provision also meant that the Tithe Redemption Commission could use legal procedures to recover annuity arrears directly. Defaulters now not only faced the possibility of property distraints but were also confronted with a range of alternative official responses, including the removal of sums from personal bank accounts and the interception of payments for milk production. The greater flexibility of this approach made collection a quieter and more effective procedure. As

²⁰³ Evans, *The Contentious Tithe*, p. 167.

²⁰⁴ See for example *E.A.D.T.*, 25 June 1936; *Daily Sketch*, 25 June 1936; *News Chronicle*, 25 June 1936; *Farmer and Stock-Breeder*, 29 June 1936. Press cuttings in the Mobbs Papers.

²⁰⁵ Mobbs, ‘Eighty Years on Suffolk Soil’, p. 72. See also *E.A.D.T.*, 14 October 1974.

a result, landowners were denied the forced sales and distraints which had generated much valuable publicity for the anti-tithe campaign prior to 1936.²⁰⁶

Fascist attempts to mobilise support over the tithe issue were also compromised by the absence of 'favourable contingency'. At an internal level, this reflected the numerous shortcomings of the B.U.F.'s interventionist strategy. The Blackshirts' usual method of intervening without the prior consent of the farmer concerned was one reason why the organisation was unable to capitalise on anti-tithe feeling in eastern England to any significant extent during the period. Douglas Gunson, the Area Administrative Officer for East Anglia who took a leading fascist role in the 'tithe war', explained the B.U.F.'s tactics in October 1933: "While willing to help any tithepayer we do not wait for them to seek our help, nor do we ask their permission before we go on their farms".²⁰⁷

Despite this frank admission, the B.U.F. press attempted to convey the impression that the farming community was both reliant on, and grateful for the support of Blackshirt activists during the 'tithe war'.²⁰⁸ In reality, nearly all the fascist interventions in East Anglia were neither invited nor wanted. Consequently, as the events at Ringshall and Gestingthorpe demonstrated, these intrusions were more likely to reinforce rather than dismantle the B.U.F.'s perceived 'barrier of suspicion' inhibiting greater rural acceptance of fascism.

At Ringshall, Edward Waspe recalled that local residents generally assumed the B.U.F.'s sudden arrival and unsolicited involvement at Woodlands Farm in August 1933 was merely a political stunt designed to gain the organisation cheap publicity and boost its standing with the agricultural community.²⁰⁹ Given this widely held view, the B.U.F. had little prospect of mobilising significant support in the area. Certainly, the Waspe family were a "little bit wary, [a] little bit suspicious" of their would-be fascist

²⁰⁶ Ibid.; P. Horn, 'The Tithe War: Fifty Years On', *The Countryman*, (Winter 1984-1985), pp. 62-66.

²⁰⁷ *E.D.P.*, 31 October 1933, p. 13.

²⁰⁸ See for example *Blackshirt*, 19-25 August 1933, p. 1; *Fascist Week*, 10-16 November 1933, p. 3.

²⁰⁹ Waspe. Interview.

allies and kept contact with the encamped Blackshirts to a minimum.²¹⁰ The same uncompromising fascists tactics also alienated the farming interest at Gestingthorpe, not least because Mrs. Gardiner had neither requested B.U.F. assistance in the dispute, nor consented to Blackshirts setting up quarters on her property.²¹¹ Commenting on the Delvyns Farm tithe affair, the East Anglian Daily Times described the B.U.F.'s intervention as "really pathetic" and noted that the fascists "had not even the sympathy of those whom, presumably, they sought to protect".²¹²

Local reservations were also compounded by the fact that the vast majority of Blackshirts involved in these tithe disputes came either from London or other parts of East Anglia. Edward Waspe remembered that none of the Blackshirts at Ringshall in August 1933 were local men, and press reports indicate that the B.U.F. detachments at Woodlands Farm came from London and west Norfolk.²¹³ Moreover, of the nineteen fascists arrested in connection with the Wortham tithe dispute in February 1934, ten gave London addresses, eight came from Norfolk and only one resided in Suffolk.²¹⁴ The imported nature of the Blackshirt anti-tithe protest reinforced East Anglian agricultural opinion in its general view that the B.U.F. interventions were calculated attempts by an outside organisation to 'jump on the bandwagon' for political gain and press coverage, rather than sincere gestures of fascist solidarity with the hard-pressed tithepayer.

The arrival of urban Blackshirts with little appreciation of rural life at farms under notice of distraint further undermined the credibility of the B.U.F.'s interventionist strategy. Several eyewitness accounts of the events at Wortham emphasised that some of the Blackshirts there possessed little knowledge of farming or

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *E.D.P.*, 26 August 1933, p. 10.

²¹² *E.A.D.T.*, 26 September 1933, p. 6. See also *S.E.F.P.*, 28 September 1933, p. 7.

²¹³ Waspe. Interview; *L.N.C.P.*, 15 August 1933, p. 11; *Daily Mirror*, 9 August 1933, p. 4, 10 August 1933, p. 2.

²¹⁴ *Times*, 27 February 1934, p. 11; *E.A.D.T.*, 27 March 1934, p. 14.

the tithe issue.²¹⁵ Ronald Creasy, a future ardent Suffolk Mosleyite, recalled watching a B.U.F. contingent from the capital at Rash's farms in February 1934:

My only regret there was that I wasn't called in to control, to organise the London boys because...they were absolutely in deep water to be thrown into village life...They were camped out on the ground. They didn't know quite how to behave according to the rules of country life and country people. I was a bit sad about that...A lot of the farmers couldn't see eye to eye with the behaviour of the London boys.²¹⁶

At Diss, the formation of a B.U.F. Branch in the wake of the Wortham tithe affair aroused little enthusiasm. John Gaze, then working in the town at the family firm of auctioneers and surveyors, was engaged by the B.U.F. to prepare plans of Rash's farms, which were to be used in the Blackshirts' defence at the Old Bailey.²¹⁷ He recalled that most Diss residents had little time for Mosleyite fascism:

I remember them...at the Crown Hotel because they were dressed in their black shirts and there was a good deal of fuss in the town. The town in general didn't like it. They didn't want the Blackshirts strutting about the place... One of the Blackshirts was ducked by a general mob in Diss in the horse trough in Victoria Road.²¹⁸

Within the East Anglian B.U.F. itself, there were also disagreements over the tactics adopted during the tithe disputes. Will Smith, the B.U.F.'s District Administrative Officer for south-west Norfolk, who attended the Blackshirt anti-tithe rally at Fincham in October 1933, left the organisation shortly afterwards.²¹⁹ In a letter to the local press, Smith attributed his resignation partly to his unease over the B.U.F.'s activist approach to the tithe question and claimed that two other Norfolk Blackshirts, Richard Bellamy, the Branch Organiser at Downham Market, and a local Defence Officer named Jarvis, shared his reservations at the time.²²⁰ Smith maintained

²¹⁵ Wallace, 'My siege in the tithe war', p. 68; 'The Tithe War'. Yesterday's Witness series.

²¹⁶ Creasy. F.O.M. taped interview.

²¹⁷ John Gaze. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1993.

²¹⁸ Ibid..

²¹⁹ L.N.C.P., 27 March 1934, p. 9.

²²⁰ Ibid.. Richard Bellamy quickly dissociated himself from Smith and defended the B.U.F.. See L.N.C.P., 10 April 1934, p. 5.

that he had attended the Fincham gathering “under protest” because he was certain that involvement in the dispute would bring “nothing...but trouble and misunderstanding”.²²¹

Furthermore, the role of the state provided a critical external contingent factor explaining the Blackshirts’ failure to make much of an impact during the East Anglian ‘tithe war’. As Richard Thurlow’s detailed analysis of declassified Home Office files has shown, state management of the B.U.F. took a variety of forms during the 1930s and contributed significantly to the continued political marginalisation of Mosley’s movement.²²² The state regarded fascism and communism as cynical, externally-influenced ideologies, which claimed to safeguard the democratic rights of free speech, when, in reality, neither would countenance any opposition to their rule if they assumed power in Britain. Both extremist groups were permitted to undertake public political activity, providing they did not break the law, and the authorities assumed that, under normal conditions, the population would disregard their radical policies. Nevertheless, official assessments concluded that, in less favourable circumstances, political revolutionaries, including the B.U.F., had the potential to undermine the liberal democratic system by exploiting issues such as unemployment and immigration. Thus, although it remained convinced of the public’s basic common sense and fundamental devotion to democratic principles, the state was less sure about popular reaction in a crisis situation.²²³

This created a perceived need for the political surveillance of extremist organisations in order to prevent them recruiting state personnel or members of

²²¹ Ibid., 27 March 1934, p. 9.

²²² See, for example, R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); R. Thurlow, ‘The Failure of British Fascism’ in A. Thorpe (ed.), *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (University of Exeter: Studies in History, No. 21, 1989), pp. 67-84; R. Thurlow, ‘Blaming the Blackshirts: The authorities and the anti-Jewish disturbances in the 1930s’ in P. Panayi (ed.), *Racial Violence in Britain 1840-1950* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993), pp. 112-129; R. Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994); R. Thurlow, ‘State Management of the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s’ in M. Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 29-52.

²²³ Thurlow, *The Secret State*, pp. 193-194 and pp. 201-202.

respectable society. In the eyes of the authorities, their successful containment could best be facilitated by denying them access to the media and by persuading the establishment as a whole that such affiliations were discredited and self-defeating. The authorities were particularly concerned about the relationship between the Blackshirt movement and the continental fascist regimes, the disturbances generated by the B.U.F.-anti-fascist confrontations from 1933 onwards and the nature of Mosley's links with aristocratic society, big business and the armed forces.²²⁴

On 23 November 1933, Home Office officials, MI5 officers, Superintendent Canning, the head of Special Branch, and Lord Trenchard, the Metropolitan Commissioner of Police, attended a conference at the Home Office to set out the authorities' attitude to the B.U.F.. At this meeting, it was decided not to prohibit political uniforms but, rather, to initiate the systematic gathering of intelligence on fascist movements in the United Kingdom. Most of this information was to be derived from Chief Constables' monthly reports, Special Branch political surveillance and MI5 agents. Analysis of this material was to be undertaken by MI5, who were to send reports to the Home Office. To accommodate its expanded role, Special Branch took on another 64 officers in 1934, raising the total to 200.²²⁵

The state responded cautiously to political extremism in the 1930s, mindful of the need for broad agreement on the most appropriate approach within both the establishment and parliament. At the highest level, policy-making in this area reflected a shifting series of compromises between the liberal traditions of the permanent Home Office officials, who were determined to preserve civil liberties as far as possible, and the more restrictionist attitudes of the police and MI5, epitomised by Lord Trenchard, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner (1931-1935).²²⁶

The need for consensus on the containment of political extremism ensured that direct state initiatives were rare. Public order legislation, drawn up in the wake of the

²²⁴ Ibid., pp. 179-182 and p. 202.

²²⁵ Ibid., pp. 203-204.

²²⁶ Ibid., pp. 182-189; Thurlow, 'State Management of the B.U.F. in the 1930s', pp. 35-36.

National Unemployed Workers' Movement's London demonstration in 1932, foundered because of parliamentary divisions and the Attorney General's view that restrictions on processions and demonstrations would undermine civil liberties. Two years later, moves to ban political uniforms stalled due to the lack of cross party agreement, the improving public order situation after Mosley's Olympia meeting and growing criticism of Lord Trenchard by the permanent Home Office officials. Furthermore, the fact that the Incitement to Disaffection Act of 1934 provoked parliamentary opposition and demonstrations organised by the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.) and the National Council for Civil Liberties (N.C.C.L.) also fostered government caution regarding public order or domestic security proposals which did not command the broad support of M.P.s.²²⁷

The Home Office and the politicians were reluctant to embrace legislative solutions on the grounds that such measures led to a host of complications, including opposition to the curtailment of civil liberties and laws singling out specific groups, and the problem of reduced administrative flexibility. The authorities' favoured method of reducing the Blackshirt movement to a political irrelevance was to deny the organisation as many outlets as possible within the constraints imposed by liberal democracy. Informal government pressure and requests secured the cooperation of the media. Once Lord Rothermere had ended the Daily Mail's pro-B.U.F. campaign in July 1934, the government apparently asked newspaper editors to limit reporting of B.U.F. activities. Similarly, in response to official wishes, the B.B.C. also operated an unofficial publicity boycott of extremist views during the 1930s, which effectively sidelined the B.U.F.. Moreover, newsreel companies were discouraged from filming mass demonstrations in the 1930s.²²⁸ At times, fascist involvement in political violence and anti-Semitic incidents made this exclusionist strategy untenable, but then the

²²⁷ Thurlow, 'State Management of the B.U.F. in the 1930s', pp. 33-35; Thurlow, The Secret State, p. 197.

²²⁸ Thurlow, The Secret State, p. 182; W.J. West, Truth Betrayed (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1987), Chapter One.

media's coverage of such events sought to saddle the B.U.F. with the blame for the disturbances.²²⁹

Only when faced with public order problems in October 1936 and the invasion threat of 1940 did the authorities conclude that these techniques of social control were inadequate. On these occasions, the government felt compelled to introduce new legislation to strengthen the hand of the state against extremism, civil disorder and perceived security threats. At the 'Battle of Cable Street' on 4 October 1936, Mosley's intended East End march with 1,900 Blackshirts was blocked by a gathering of 100,000 communist-led anti-fascists. Sir Phillip Game, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, re-routed the B.U.F. procession to the West End of London to avoid an otherwise inevitable confrontation. However, police clashes with anti-fascists produced 83 arrests and over 100 casualties.²³⁰

Cable Street provided the catalyst for the 1936 Public Order Act. The latter owed much to Game's argument that he required more powers to ban marches to prevent a repetition of the events of 4 October and to official consideration of the possible threats posed to public order by the abdication crisis and the hunger marches in December 1936. Parliament hesitantly accepted the case for fresh legislation after the 'Battle of Cable Street' had exposed the need to extend police powers to cope with civil disorder.²³¹

The resulting Public Order Act, which came into force on 1 January 1937, was designed to control both the B.U.F.'s activities and anti-fascist protest by outlawing political uniforms and paramilitary formations, enabling the police to ban local marches, preventing the stewarding of outdoor meetings and prohibiting the use of insulting words in speeches.²³² During the later 1930s, this legislation enabled the authorities to

²²⁹ Thurlow, 'Blaming the Blackshirts'.

²³⁰ Accounts of the 'Battle of Cable Street' are given in D.S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931-81* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 123-125; R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), pp. 197-198; Thurlow, 'State Management of the B.U.F. in the 1930s', p. 46.

²³¹ Thurlow, *The Secret State*, pp. 197-198; Thurlow, 'State Management of the B.U.F. in the 1930s', p. 46.

²³² Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, pp. 149-160; Thurlow, *The Secret State*, p. 201; Thurlow, *Fascism*

manage the problems created by provocative fascist activities, particularly in the East End, with little resulting street violence, despite the fact that over 1,000 reported political meetings were held in each of the summer months between 1936 and 1937 in the Metropolitan Police District. In July 1937, the potential for conflict in east London was reduced by invoking the clauses of the Act which banned processions for six week periods at the request of the Metropolitan Commissioner. This restriction was not to be lifted in the East End until 1949.²³³

Outside London's East End, political anti-Semitism and fascist-communist clashes did not constitute a significant public order issue, and such problems as there were related chiefly to the handling of demonstrations and processions. Hence, although sporadic violence and anti-Semitic attacks continued in the East End and implementation of the law was not always consistent regarding the treatment fascist and anti-fascists received from the police and magistrates, the Public Order Act successfully strengthened the state management of political extremism in the immediate pre-war years.²³⁴

Home Office documents, seen on privileged access, also reveal that the state played a key role in monitoring and ultimately curtailing fascist intervention in the Wortham tithe affair.²³⁵ Officers from the East Suffolk Constabulary kept the Blackshirts in the vicinity of Rash's farms under observation from 9 February 1934, and regular reports concerning their activities were sent to George Staunton, the Chief Constable. On average, 50 policemen were engaged each day on this patrol and surveillance work in the period up to 22 February.²³⁶

Staunton passed on the information gathered to the Director of Public Prosecutions (D.P.P.) and the Home Office. The Chief Constable clearly took a dim view of the fascists at Wortham and stressed the need for action to be taken against

in Britain, pp. 112-116.

²³³ Thurlow, *The Secret State*, p. 203; Thurlow, 'State Management of the B.U.F. in the 1930', p. 50.

²³⁴ Ibid.; Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', p. 81.

²³⁵ HO 144/19199/592548. Tithes Disturbance File. Subfile 33 was withheld.

²³⁶ *E.A.D.T.*, 27 February 1934, p. 3.

them. In mid-February, he suggested to the Under Secretary of State at the Home Office that, since their presence constituted a “distinct menace” and an “unlawful assembly”, the Blackshirts at Rash’s property “might possibly be charged with conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice”.²³⁷

Staunton’s opinion of the B.U.F.’s intervention at Wortham was matched by considerable consternation in government circles. On 16 February 1934, Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, urged the Home Secretary, Sir John Gilmour, and the D.P.P. to take “swift action” against the Blackshirts at Wortham, given that, in his estimation, fascist activity in the Suffolk ‘tithe war’ was unlawful, meddlesome and contemptuous of basic civil rights.²³⁸ The Foreign Secretary advocated “vigorous measures” to halt the fascist intervention, including the arrest of B.U.F. personnel at Wortham on charges of malicious damage and conspiracy and the removal of the case to the Old Bailey.²³⁹ If those indicted were found guilty, he continued, the judge could administer “a proper dressing down” and then sentence them to three months’ imprisonment with hard labour.²⁴⁰ Simon wished to eradicate “this silly business of ‘playing at Mussolini’” and concluded:

But of course, as long as people in this country imitate Germans or Italians without breaking the law one can only deplore their want of national spirit. When it comes to a flagrant breaking of the law, by digging trenches and cutting down trees on other people’s land, I think such lunatics ought to be taught that in this country we have no use for such methods.²⁴¹

In fact, the D.P.P. was already considering charges against the Blackshirt contingent at Wortham by 14 February 1934.²⁴² Two days later, under direction from

²³⁷ HO 144/19199/592548/29. George Staunton, Chief Constable of East Suffolk. Letter to the Under Secretary of State, Home Office. 16 February 1934.

²³⁸ HO 144/19199/592548/30. Sir John Simon, Foreign Office. Letter to Sir John Gilmour, Home Secretary. 16 February 1934. Copies of the letter were also sent to the Prime Minister and the Attorney General.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *E.A.D.T.* 15 February 1934, p. 7.

the Attorney General, the Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions contacted the Chief Constable of East Suffolk and instructed him to apply for warrants against a number of the Blackshirts at Wortham for conspiracy.²⁴³ Accordingly, on 17 February 1934, Staunton visited Lord Henniker, the Chairman of the Justices of Hartismere Petty Sessional Division of Suffolk, and obtained a warrant against Richard Plathen, Edward Tolfts, Edward Frost, Douglas Gunson “and others wearing black shirts acting with the aforementioned persons”.²⁴⁴ Afterwards, the Chief Constable went to Eye to brief a police contingent on how to conduct the arrest of the fascists. A force of 100 officers then travelled to Wortham and took eighteen Blackshirts into custody.²⁴⁵

Once they had determined that fascist activity at Wortham was illegal, the authorities’ strategy was to remove the Blackshirts from the vicinity before the distressed stock was collected. Such a preemptive action reduced the likelihood of public disorder and violent resistance when General Dealers arrived to transport the impounded animals. Thus, as well as arresting eighteen Mosleyites, the police issued an ultimatum which ensured that the remaining Blackshirts had left Rash’s farms within twenty-four hours.²⁴⁶ On 20 February, a further directive from the police confined B.U.F. contingents in the area to Stowmarket from 8 a.m. the following day, thereby establishing a fourteen mile cordon around Wortham just prior to the removal of the impounded stock.²⁴⁷

Official concern about the B.U.F.’s role at Wortham prompted the Home Secretary, after discussion with the Attorney General, to convene a high-level meeting at the Home Office on 19 February 1934.²⁴⁸ The conference affords some insight into the authorities’ attitudes towards fascist involvement in this dispute and their proposals

²⁴³ HO 144/19199/592548/30. Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions. Letter to the Under Secretary of State, Home Office. 17 February 1934.

²⁴⁴ HO 144/19199/592548/29. George Staunton, Chief Constable of East Suffolk. Letter to the Director of Public Prosecutions. 18 February 1934. Documents A and B.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*.

²⁴⁶ *E.A.D.T.*, 19 February 1934, p. 12; *E.D.P.*, 19 February 1934, p. 9.

²⁴⁷ *E.A.D.T.*, 21 February 1934, p. 12; *E.D.P.*, 21 February 1934, p. 9.

²⁴⁸ HO 144/19199/592548/29. Note of the conference held in the Home Secretary’s room at the Home Office at 4.30 p.m. on Monday 19 February 1934.

for handling the trial of the arrested Blackshirts. Those present included the Home Secretary, the Attorney General, Sir Thomas Inskip, the D.P.P., Sir E.H. Atkinson, and the Commissioner of Police, Lord Trenchard. Seven other Home Office representatives also attended, and MI5 sent Colonel Sir Vernon Kell and O.A. Harker.

At this meeting, the Attorney General expressed his unease about the B.U.F.'s military demeanour and use of semi-military language, as revealed by a letter from Neil Francis Hawkins, Adjutant of the B.U.F. National Defence Force, which had been confiscated during the arrests at Wortham. The Attorney General also considered it "probable" that National Headquarters contained firearms, but felt that, in general, fascist activity was "mere play".²⁴⁹ Nevertheless, he not only advocated further Blackshirt arrests if the B.U.F. attempted to re-establish a base at Rash's farms but also called for thorough scrutiny of the movement's operations. Lord Trenchard hoped to step up police surveillance of the organisation shortly and maintained that the Blackshirts had to be viewed in a serious light, even if they did not possess guns.²⁵⁰

Those attending the conference were also informed that twenty B.U.F. reinforcements, driven to Wortham the previous night, were roaming the local roads. Sir John Gilmour, the Home Secretary, enquired if the Blackshirt leaders in charge could be compelled to enter into sureties to keep the peace, but the D.P.P. did not think this was feasible without more evidence of the fascists' intentions coming to light. After discussion, it was generally agreed that draft legislation dealing with political uniforms and extending the police's right of search in cases of sedition should be drawn up quickly and considered by the Cabinet when deemed appropriate.²⁵¹

The meeting also revealed the authorities' concern to minimise the publicity value of the forthcoming trial of the arrested Blackshirts for the B.U.F.. According to the D.P.P., counsel for the prosecution intended to conduct proceedings, as far as possible, without referring to the defendants' fascist affiliations.²⁵² Consequently,

249 Ibid..

250 Ibid..

251 Ibid..

252 Ibid..

when the case was eventually heard at the Old Bailey in March 1934, the Attorney General, leading for the Crown, played down B.U.F. involvement at Wortham.²⁵³ In a similar vein, Gerald Dodson, representing the D.P.P., attempted to relegate the issue of Blackshirt intervention during the committal hearing of the nineteen arrested fascists, which was held before the Hartismere Bench on 26 February 1934:

The prosecution are not concerned with any organisation, whether it is the Union of Fascists or any other. All they are concerned with is in dealing with any person or persons, whether they belong to an organisation or not, who interfere with the administration of the law and the liberties enjoyed under the law. People who intermeddle will be stopped.²⁵⁴

At the February conference, it also emerged that the case was to be transferred to London. The Attorney General explained that since Suffolk Assizes were not then in session, the trial could be moved to the Old Bailey under the usual legal procedures “without any fuss”.²⁵⁵ For the authorities, this had the obvious advantage of denying the B.U.F. a useful publicity platform on the tithe issue in the very rural area where the Blackshirts were striving hardest to capitalise on local resentment against rent charge. Indeed, three days earlier, Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, had urged the Attorney General to transfer the case to the Old Bailey so as to “avoid any prejudice arising from the pretence that these men [the Blackshirts] are defending the farmers against tithe”.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ E.A.D.T., 27 March 1934, p. 14.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 27 February 1934, p. 3.

²⁵⁵ HO 144/19199/592548/29. Note of the conference held in the Home Secretary's room at the Home Office at 4.30 p.m. on Monday 19 February 1934.

²⁵⁶ HO 144/19199/592548/30. Sir John Simon, Foreign Office. Letter to Sir John Gilmour, Home Secretary. 16 February 1934.

CHAPTER THREE

THE B.U.F. IN NORFOLK, 1933-1939

1. Introduction

Although the B.U.F.'s intervention in several local tithe disputes did not create a mass rural following in eastern England, the Blackshirt movement was able to establish and sustain a modest organisational presence in the three counties between 1933 and 1940. This chapter examines the progress made by the Norfolk B.U.F. from 1933 to 1939 and is divided into three parts. The first section provides a socio-economic overview of Norfolk in the 1930s in order to set local fascist activity firmly in its county context. In the second section, the history of B.U.F. Branch and District development in Norfolk is reconstructed, using written and oral sources. Finally, the third section employs the Griffin-Copsey conjunctural model to analyse the key external and internal factors which prevented the Norfolk B.U.F. from having a greater impact.

2. Norfolk in the 1930s

At the beginning of the 1930s, Norfolk encompassed the two County Boroughs of Norwich and Great Yarmouth and an Administrative County, comprising of two Municipal Boroughs, ten Urban Districts and twenty Rural Districts.¹ Taken together, these various Boroughs and Districts occupied 1,315,064 acres, making Norfolk the largest of the eastern counties.² By 1931, the population of the Administrative County of Norfolk, together with its associated County Boroughs, totalled 504,940.³ Since the first Census in 1801, when the corresponding figure for the Ancient County was 273,479, the rate of population growth in Norfolk had trailed behind that of the

¹ Census of England and Wales 1931: County of Norfolk Part I (London: H.M.S.O., 1933), p. vii.

² Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables (London: H.M.S.O., 1935), p. 89.

³ Census 1931: County of Norfolk Part I, p. vii.

country as a whole. Between 1801 and 1931, the population of Norfolk had not quite doubled, whereas that of England and Wales had more than quadrupled in size.

TABLE 1
THE POPULATION OF NORFOLK AND ENGLAND AND WALES,
1801-1931

YEAR	NORFOLK	ENGLAND and WALES
1801	273,479	8,892,536
1831	390,054	13,896,797
1861	434,798	20,066,224
1891	454,516	29,002,525
1901	476,553	32,527,843
1911	499,116	36,070,492
1921	504,293	37,886,699
1931	504,940	39,947,931

(Source: Census of England and Wales 1931: Preliminary Report, London: H.M.S.O., 1931, Part III, Table 1, p. 1 and Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables, London: H.M.S.O., 1935, Table 3, p. 4)

The largest and most populous urban areas at this time were the County Boroughs of Norwich and Great Yarmouth, which had populations of 126,236 and 56,771 respectively, and the Municipal Borough of King's Lynn, with 20,583. All the other urban areas in Norfolk had fewer than 6,000 inhabitants.⁴ For a number of decades, the population of the county had been fairly evenly distributed between town and countryside. Thus, in the early 1930s, the combined urban areas of Norfolk accounted for 48 per cent of the population, the remainder being located in the rural districts.⁵

The 1931 Census revealed that the overall population density for the county was 0.4 persons per acre. Average urban and rural densities were calculated to be 4.5 and 0.2 respectively. In individual urban areas, the ratio of population to acreage peaked at Norwich (16.0) and Great Yarmouth (15.8), and the lowest densities were

⁴ Ibid..

⁵ Census 1931: General Tables, Table 6, p. 10.

recorded in much smaller places, such as the Urban District of Swaffham (0.4) and the Municipal Borough of Thetford (0.6). The latter approximated to typical acreage densities in the rural parts of Norfolk.⁶

During the ten years after 1921, the stock of structurally separate occupied dwellings in Norfolk rose from 119,927 to 132,241.⁷ Over the same period, the number of private families also increased from 121,783 to 134,493, giving a steady average of 1.02 families per occupied dwelling across the decennium.⁸ By 1931, 12.9 per cent of these families lived in accommodation containing a maximum of three rooms, 49.4 per cent occupied four or five rooms, and 37.7 per cent had access to six or more.⁹ The corresponding increase in the private family population was far less pronounced, rising from 482,398 in 1921 to 482,752 in 1931. This was partly accounted for by the maintenance of a high marriage rate in the county, coupled with a significant fall in the birth rate.¹⁰ Consequently, the average number of persons per occupied room had fallen from 0.75 to 0.69 in the ten years prior to 1931.¹¹ On the basis of these statistics, the 1931 Census concluded that “the Norfolk population is on the whole better housed than it was in 1921”.¹² Indeed, during the early decades of the twentieth century, overcrowding (defined as “the ratio of more than two persons per room”) affected a progressively smaller proportion of the Norfolk private family population. In 1911, it was estimated that 3.7 per cent of the latter fell into this category, and the next two Censuses returned figures of 3.65 per cent and 2.68 per cent.¹³

One informed contemporary commentator remarked that “Norfolk depends upon agriculture for its welfare, probably more than any other English county”.¹⁴

⁶ *Census 1931: County of Norfolk Part I*, p. viii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁸ *Ibid.*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xi and p. xiii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹⁴ F. Rayns, ‘The Agriculture of Norfolk’ in *A Scientific Survey of Norwich and District* (London: British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1935), p. 72.

Agriculture dominated the county, both in terms of employment and land use. In 1931, almost one quarter of the total Norfolk workforce of 224,194 was directly engaged in agriculture, including 7,475 farmers and 29,194 agricultural workers and farm servants.¹⁵ The majority of land holdings were comparatively small. According to the Agricultural Returns of 1931, 8,779 of the 13,247 recorded holdings did not exceed 50 acres, and, of these, more than 6,000 ranged between one and twenty acres. Conversely, only 761 were over 300 acres in size.¹⁶ The largest holdings were found in the west and north-west of the county, where a number of farmers possessed 800 acres or more.¹⁷

Noting the abundance of easily worked soils and the strength of rural traditions, the Land Utilisation Survey (1931-1935) concluded that Norfolk was “essentially an arable county”, with approximately 708,443 acres devoted to this type of farming.¹⁸ In total, almost one million acres were under crops and grass. Barley, the most important cereal in Norfolk, occupied 180,000-200,000 acres annually between 1926 and 1931 and was grown throughout the prime arable areas of the Fens, south and mid-Norfolk and the Good Sands, Loam and Flegg regions. It was also distributed across the less arable lands of Breck Fen, the Greensand Belt and Cromer Ridge.¹⁹ The second crop, wheat, benefited from the county’s low rainfall, dry sunny summers and flat terrain, which facilitated mechanised farming. The chief areas of cultivation were located in the southern and central parts of Norfolk, the Fens and the Loam region. From the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, wheat claimed approximately 80,000-100,000 acres each year.²⁰ Hampered by an unfavourable climate and competition from barley and wheat, oats were the third-ranked crop, averaging 60-70,000 acres annually in the six years up

¹⁵ Census of England and Wales 1931: Occupation Tables (London: H.M.S.O., 1934), Table 16, p. 299.

¹⁶ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (M.A.F.), Agricultural Statistics 1931 (London: H.M.S.O., 1932), Vol. LXVI, Part I, pp. 64-65.

¹⁷ Rayns, ‘The Agriculture of Norfolk’, p. 71.

¹⁸ J.E.G. Mosby, ‘Part 70 Norfolk’ in L. Dudley Stamp (ed.), The Land of Britain: The Report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain (London: Geographical Publications, 1938), p. 160.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

to 1931. This cereal was grown in all areas, apart from Broadland and the North Alluvial Plain.²¹

Roots crops, an integral part of the nineteenth century Norfolk four-course rotation, continued to play an important role in mixed farming. In 1935, for instance, the combined area under swedes, turnips, mangolds and sugar beet amounted to 157,471 acres, which was slightly more than that given over to barley.²² Most of the turnips and swedes grown in the county came from the mid-Norfolk, Good Sand, Cromer Ridge and Loam regions. Mangold cultivation tended to be evenly spread across the main and less arable areas. During the decade after 1924, the acreage devoted to mangolds, turnips and swedes roughly halved, but this was more than offset by the expansion in sugar beet production in Norfolk, which was stimulated by the government aid embodied in the 1925 British Sugar (Subsidy) Act. Consequently, the area under sugar beet increased from 7,207 acres in 1924 to over 95,000 acres ten years later.²³ By the early 1930s, beet cultivation in the county was widespread, with concentrations discernible around the sugar factories at Cantley, Wissington and King's Lynn, and in the vicinity of Wells.²⁴

By the mid-1930s, nearly 90 per cent of Norfolk's arable land was given over to the three main cereals, roots and rotation grass (the latter accounting for approximately 120,000 acres).²⁵ The remainder was devoted to the cultivation of other cereals, such as mixed corn, rye and maize, together with mustard, flax, small fruit and a variety of vegetables, including peas, beans, potatoes, cabbage, carrots and asparagus.²⁶

Elsewhere, forestry and woodland development was widely pursued, partly to produce local timber. Furthermore, on the Fen Silts and in east Norfolk, there were approximately 10,000 acres of orchards, yielding chiefly apples, plums and pears. A

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 162.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 246-251.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 163-167.

number of large nurseries, specialising in flowers and salad vegetables, were established in the same areas, and the developing industry of rose-tree growing was located to the south-west of Norwich.²⁷

Although arable farming predominated, a significant number of animals were reared for meat and other products. Since the First World War, Norfolk had developed into a notable milk-producing area, due partly to the prospect of quick returns, but prompted principally by a marked fall in beef prices. In the period from 1924 to 1933, the county cattle total increased by 30,000 to 154,883. Within this category, the number of cows in milk rose from 33,637 to 40,861. Most dairy farms were located within ten miles of Norwich and in the central and southern areas. Norfolk-produced milk more than satisfied local demand, and most of the sizeable surplus was sold to the London market.²⁸

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, just under 300,000 sheep were grazed in Norfolk for wool and mutton, particularly on farms with light or medium soil. Over 100,000 pigs were distributed amongst the general farms in the county, but their numbers tended to be concentrated in milk-manufacturing areas and potato and cereal growing districts, where agricultural products could not be sold easily.²⁹ Commercial egg production also contributed to the rural economy, and, in the ten years up to 1934, the county's poultry stock had almost doubled to over two million. Most poultry farms were situated east of a line drawn between Thetford and Wells. The bulk of the eggs produced were taken by wholesale distributors to the capital, but large numbers were also sold in local markets, and some were purchased directly by customers.³⁰ Duck-rearing, chiefly confined to the Attleborough, Diss and Suffolk border areas, was also undertaken, primarily for the London market. Moreover, Norfolk was the most

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 182-185.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 169-170.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 170.

³⁰ Ibid..

important English county for turkey production. Around 60,000 birds were raised each year on general farms, particularly in the south.³¹

Inevitably, most of the important industries in the county depended on, or catered for, the agricultural sector. A number of large enterprises were engaged in milling at Norwich. The best known, J and J Colman Ltd., employed 2,000 workers in the early 1930s and milled mustard, flour and oats, as well as making starch and a wide variety of patent food and drinks.³² A few centres, notably North Walsham, Great Ryburgh and Diss, were still making agricultural implements, but this county industry was steadily being eclipsed by bigger concerns, established in places such as Ipswich and Lincoln.³³ The availability of local-grown timber had also prompted the emergence of numerous coach and joinery works. For some time prior to the 1930s, the latter had been fully involved in the construction of new housing estates in the region. At Wymondham, the Briton Brush Company Ltd., with its 500-strong workforce, used a certain amount of Norfolk-grown timber.³⁴

Several breweries were situated in the two County Boroughs and at Attleborough, the main cider producing centre in Norfolk, Messrs. Wm. Gaymer and Sons Ltd. engaged 300 workers and 50 clerks. Another firm at Banham also made cider.³⁵ Over the previous twenty years, fertiliser manufacturing had undergone significant expansion, and the main factories were located at Norwich, King's Lynn and Yarmouth. Lime works were situated at Heydon and Wells. Meal and other animal foodstuffs were prepared at Wells, King's Lynn, Yarmouth and Norwich. Jam factories and canneries operated at North Walsham, Thetford, King's Lynn and Wissington. Sugar processing was also undertaken at the latter two places and Cantley. Special

³¹ Ibid..

³² K.J. Allison, 'Industrial and Agricultural' in *Norwich and its Region* (Norwich: British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1961), p. 121. See also Mosby, 'Part 70 Norfolk', p. 186.

³³ Mosby, 'Part 70 Norfolk', pp. 186-187.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 186-187.

containers for cut flowers, fruit and other goods were made at Norwich and King's Lynn.³⁶

The wide range of Norfolk industries which were not directly linked to the products or needs of agriculture were mostly found in Norwich. Boot and shoe manufacture was the most important, accounting for 26 firms and over 11,000 workers in the city. Specialising in good quality women's footwear and children's shoes, Norwich produced six million pairs annually by the mid-1930s, which amounted to sixteen per cent of total British output.³⁷

The County Borough's long-established textile industry, dominated by the factories of Messrs. Hinde and Hardy Ltd., was then engaged in the manufacture of mourning crape, finer woven cloths, artificial silk and high class crepe fabrics. Ready-made clothing was also produced in Norwich, with several thousand garments being turned out each week.³⁸

Engineering and allied companies were well represented in the city too. The best known, Boulton and Paul Ltd., specialised in structural steel work, the construction of prefabricated buildings and the manufacture of wire netting. Barnards Ltd. offered a similar product range. Norwich also housed the largest metal casting foundry in the region. Another well-established firm, Messrs. Laurence, Scott and Electromotors Ltd., made electric motors and generators. In 1920, Heatrae Ltd. started to manufacture industrial and domestic heating equipment in the city and, by 1934, employed 3-400 skilled workers.³⁹

Led by A.J. Caley and Son Ltd., Norwich had branched out into the confectionery market in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1918, the firm had a workforce of 2,800 and specialised in the production of cocoa, chocolate,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁷ Allison, 'Industrial and Agricultural', p. 120. See also Herbert P. Gowen, 'Norwich and District Industries' in *A Scientific Survey of Norwich and District*. (London: Office of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1935) pp. 90-94.

³⁸ Gowen, 'Norwich and District Industries', pp. 96-97 and p. 99.

³⁹ Allison, 'Industrial and Agricultural', p. 121; Gowen, 'Norwich and District Industries', pp. 94-96; Susanna Wade Martins, *A History of Norfolk* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1984), p. 108.

crackers and mineral waters. It was taken over in 1932 by J. Mackintosh and Sons Ltd.. Other businesses in the area made vinegar and tonic water.⁴⁰

The County Borough was also home to a variety of concerns engaged in printing, bookbinding and photography. For example, Norwich possessed seventeen printing houses, of which Jarrold and Sons Ltd. was the most famous.⁴¹ Banking and insurance companies were well established too. The best known of the latter, the Norwich Union, employed about 1,300 people in the city by the 1930s.⁴²

During the herring season, between September and mid-December, a large fleet of smacks operated from Great Yarmouth, the principal centre of the East Anglian fishing trade. The fishery had peaked in the early 1910s, when almost 1,000 boats, employing over 1,000 local men, landed their catches at the port. Nevertheless, by 1930, Great Yarmouth still accounted for approximately 500,000 crans of herring per year, some twenty per cent of the British annual total. Furthermore, many worked in the town's salting, curing and pickling establishments, preparing herrings for continental markets.⁴³

The Great Yarmouth fisheries also yielded mackerel, cod, sprats, turbot, skate, whiting, eels and shrimps. Much of this produce was sent to London, Birmingham, Manchester and other urban centres. Several other enterprises in the County Borough manufactured boat equipment and clothes for seamen, thereby reflecting the importance of the local fishing industry. The ongoing development of the town as a seaside resort also gave rise to an expanding holiday industry, which created a wide range of seasonal jobs. Moreover, as east Norfolk's chief port, Great Yarmouth imported grain, timber, seed, oilcake, fishing salt, granite and coal and exported grain and cured fish.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Allison, 'Industrial and Agricultural', p. 121; Gowen, 'Norwich and District Industries', pp. 99-100.

⁴¹ Gowen, 'Norwich and District Industries', pp. 97-98.

⁴² Allison, 'Industrial and Agricultural', p. 122.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 123; Gowen, 'Norwich and District Industries', pp. 102-104.

⁴⁴ Ibid..

To the north-west, King's Lynn provided the most convenient sea link between the industrial Midlands and northern Europe and was of particular importance for the corn, timber and coal trades. Manufactured goods, machinery implements and coal were exported overseas via King's Lynn, and grain and sand were transported to other British ports. The town also served as a market centre for cattle, crops and other agricultural produce brought for shipment. During the 1920s, the Anglo American Oil Company, British Petroleum and Shell Mex Ltd., built storage tanks and depots at the local docks to facilitate the distribution of petroleum to inland towns. The King's Lynn fishing industry, which was based on sole, cod and smelt, sent large quantities of shrimps, cockles and mussels to London and the provinces.⁴⁵

In addition to the food industries already mentioned, King's Lynn boasted a variety of malt houses, breweries, corn mills, iron and brass foundries, machine makers, millwrights and coach and motor builders. Ropes, sails, brushes, agricultural tools and steam roundabouts were also manufactured in the area. Several of these local enterprises, such as Alfred Dodman and Co. Ltd., specialising in vertical steam engines and food-processing machinery, and Cooper's, an important inter-war producer of split roller bearings, were among the town's biggest employers.⁴⁶

3. The Development of the B.U.F. in Norfolk, 1933-1939

The Area Headquarters of the East Anglian B.U.F., during its formative stage in 1933, was at Magazine Farm, Sedgeford, near King's Lynn. This was the residence of Douglas Charles Herbert Gunson, a Norfolk farmer in his late twenties, who was described as "the pioneer of the Fascist movement in East Anglia".⁴⁷ The son of a Wisbech doctor, Gunson was the B.U.F.'s Area Administrative Officer and co-edited the movement's local paper, East Anglian Fascist, with S.R. Behn, the Area

⁴⁵ Paul Richards, King's Lynn (Chichester: Phillimore, 1990), pp. 139-146; Martins, A History of Norfolk, pp. 110-111.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Eastern Daily Press (E.D.P.), 26 February 1934, p. 9.

Administrative Secretary.⁴⁸ By December 1933, the East Anglian B.U.F. had relocated its organisational base to premises at 73, Norfolk Street, King's Lynn.⁴⁹

Gunson was the guiding force behind the establishment of the West Norfolk Branch of the B.U.F. during 1933.⁵⁰ The most important fascist group within the West Norfolk formation was located at King's Lynn. Blackshirt recruitment in this area had commenced by the spring of 1933 under the direction of J.P. Horne, the local District Administrative Officer, who had joined the movement in December 1932.⁵¹ After stints as a farmer in Australia and a film salesman, Horne managed the Electric Cinema in the town and was the first Deputy Branch Organiser of the King's Lynn B.U.F..⁵² According to Richard Reynell Bellamy, the B.U.F. Deputy Branch Organiser at Downham Market between late 1933 and the beginning of 1935, Horne was an effective disciplinarian who presided over a socially mixed membership:

All the yobbos and rough stuff and young hooligans in the town and a few professional men and one or two businessmen [joined the King's Lynn B.U.F.]...the Branch leader was a very good gang leader and he kept all these people in order...they made very good recruits. They'd see that the meeting didn't get broken up.⁵³

At the end of 1933, Horne relinquished his position and moved away to the west of England, apparently to take over the management of another cinema.⁵⁴ However, Horne's departure from East Anglia did not signal the end of his fascist career, since he was appointed an Assistant National Inspecting Officer for the B.U.F. in October 1935.⁵⁵

He was succeeded as Deputy Branch Organiser for King's Lynn by Edgar Gargett, a director of several local shipping companies, who resided at 'Southborne',

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28 October 1933, p. 9; *Norfolk News and Weekly Press (N.N.W.P.)*, 4 November 1933, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *E.D.P.*, 11 December 1933, p. 6, 20 December 1933, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Lynn News and County Press (L.N.C.P.)*, 11 July 1933, p. 12, 15 August 1933, p. 11.

⁵¹ Ibid., 27 March 1934, p. 7; 'Who's Who in Fascism', biographical section in B.U.F. souvenir programme for Mosley's Albert Hall meeting of 22 March 1936 (Supplied privately).

⁵² *L.N.C.P.*, 5 December 1933, p. 7; 'Who's Who in Fascism'.

⁵³ Richard Reynell Bellamy. Taped interview with Stephen Cullen, 1985.

⁵⁴ Ibid.; *L.N.C.P.*, 5 December 1933, p. 7.

⁵⁵ 'Who's Who in Fascism'.

Gayton Road, Gaywood.⁵⁶ Gargett, in his early fifties, was a well-known figure in the King's Lynn business community, having been both a director of a steam ship company and a former president of the local Chamber of Trade. During the First World War, he had served as a lieutenant in the Royal Engineers.⁵⁷ After only three months, Gargett resigned as Officer-in-Charge and rejoined the fascist ranks.⁵⁸ From March 1934, the leadership position was taken over by F.H. McCormick, who had been the Assistant Propaganda Officer at King's Lynn since 18 January.⁵⁹ McCormick, a former captain in the 3rd R.D.F. was thought to be employed as a schoolmaster.⁶⁰

Evidence suggests that the B.U.F. was able to make progress in the King's Lynn area between 1933 and 1934. The first reported meeting in the town was held at the Tuesday market place on 17 June 1933, when L.G. Waterman, a B.U.F. national speaker, explained the Blackshirt programme to a small open-air gathering.⁶¹ A range of fascist propaganda activities was conducted in the locality during this period. These activities included talks to organisations, such as Toc H and the Round Table, and additional public meetings.⁶²

Undoubtedly, the most important early B.U.F. event held at King's Lynn was Mosley's 'address to farmers', delivered on 4 November 1933 at the town's Corn Exchange. On this occasion, the B.U.F.'s founder offered a detailed exposition of the fascist case, concentrating particularly on agricultural issues, and was warmly received by an audience numbering "several hundreds".⁶³ Richard Bellamy attended this meeting as a recent convert and was tremendously impressed by the Blackshirt leader's oratory. He remembered that Mosley's speech at King's Lynn encouraged many listeners to signs up afterwards, although not always for the purest of motives: "A lot did do

⁵⁶ L.N.C.P., 29 January 1935, p. 1, 5 February 1935, p. 12; Lynn Advertiser (L.A.), 1 February 1935, p. 7. Gargett later became a shipping agent for the Wisbech Wharves Company.

⁵⁷ L.N.C.P., 21 April 1936, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Blackshirt, 16-22 March 1934, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2-8 February 1934, p. 4, 6-12 April 1934, p. 4.

⁶⁰ E.D.P., 13 September 1934, p. 7; Bellamy. Taped interview.

⁶¹ L.N.C.P., 20 June 1933, p. 12.

⁶² Ibid., 31 October 1933, p. 7 and p. 12, 7 November 1933, p. 11.

⁶³ E.D.P., 13 September 1934, p. 7; Richard Reynell Bellamy, 'We Marched With Mosley' (Unpublished unabridged manuscript, 1958-1968), pp. 345-348.

[including] unscrupulous businessmen. And I remember somebody joined up, and I heard them, 'Oh! Someone's signed along the line'. Who? And I knew him by repute to be a man of sharp practice, and I groaned".⁶⁴

Furthermore, at the beginning of December 1933, the King's Lynn formation moved into new headquarters situated at 79, Norfolk Street. This property, formerly a private house, was to be adapted to include a meeting room for women members.⁶⁵ By the end of the month, the King's Lynn B.U.F. claimed that membership was increasing and that a Women's Section had been established under a Mrs. Handcock.⁶⁶ By this stage, the King's Lynn grouping had attracted enough members to acquire full Branch status. Moreover, local Blackshirts maintained that the King's Lynn Branch "would soon rank as one of the largest in the provinces".⁶⁷ The promotion of three King's Lynn fascists - Ernest Dazley, Frederick Burton and Charles Hammond - to the position of Unit Leader in the early part of 1934 also suggests that the Branch continued to expand for some months.⁶⁸

Indeed, in July 1934, information from a correspondent, forwarded by Malcolm MacDonald M.P. to the Home Office, indicated that King's Lynn was one of the B.U.F.'s "chief centres of activity" in the eastern counties and alleged that neighbouring agricultural workers were travelling to the town to attend fascist meetings.⁶⁹ This view was reinforced by a letter sent to the local press in September 1934 by F.H. McCormick, the Branch Organiser, which revealed that the King's Lynn B.U.F.'s early membership was drawn mainly from farm labourers and ex-servicemen.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Bellamy. Taped interview.

⁶⁵ L.N.C.P., 5 December 1933, p. 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 26 December 1933, p. 7; Fascist News, 16 December 1933, p. 4; Blackshirt, 19-25 January 1934, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Blackshirt, 19-25 January 1934, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-8 February 1934, p. 4, 4-10 May 1934, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Public Records Office, Home Office series (P.R.O. HO) 144/20141/4. Malcolm MacDonald M.P.. Letter to Sir John Gilmour, Home Secretary. 2 July 1934.

⁷⁰ E.D.P., 13 September 1934, p. 7.

Despite the progress made by the King's Lynn movement in 1933-1934, Horne's departure precipitated a local leadership crisis, which started under Gargett and became acute when McCormick assumed the position of Branch Organiser. The Blackshirt schoolmaster lacked the personal authority to control the more unruly elements in the Branch. At this juncture, the King's Lynn formation became disorganised and collapsed because of its internal problems.⁷¹ Reorganisation followed in 1935, with Ralph Ratcliffe, a 29 year old commercial traveller from nearby Dersingham, taking over as the senior local official.⁷² Ratcliffe described himself as a "full-blooded Fascist" and had joined the King's Lynn B.U.F. in November 1933.⁷³ He was quickly appointed Propaganda Officer for the Branch.⁷⁴

After the internal disruption of 1935, fascist activity in King's Lynn resumed in the early part of 1936. In February of that year, S.R. Probyn, a National Headquarters speaker, delivered an address in the town, and Alexander Raven Thomson, the B.U.F.'s Director of Policy, held a meeting at the St. James's Rooms on 18 March to discuss agricultural affairs.⁷⁵ At this time, Blackshirt reported that "King's Lynn is forging ahead despite prejudice..."⁷⁶ During the summer of 1936, a B.U.F. van embarked on a four day tour of the district, holding meetings in the town and surrounding villages.⁷⁷

In July 1933, the West Norfolk B.U.F. held its first public gathering at Old Hunstanton at the Oddfellows' clubroom, where George Vincent, a Propaganda Officer from National Headquarters, outlined the B.U.F.'s programme, supported by Douglas Gunson.⁷⁸ By December 1933, Blackshirts from Hunstanton were not only engaged in literature sales but also touring "the surrounding districts, making fresh

⁷¹ Bellamy. Taped interview.

⁷² Blackshirt, 8 March 1935, p. 8; Ralph W. Ratcliffe. Completed questionnaire for Stephen Cullen, 1986.

⁷³ Fascist Week, 30 March-5 April 1934, p. 8; Ratcliffe. Completed questionnaire.

⁷⁴ Ratcliffe. Completed questionnaire.

⁷⁵ Blackshirt, 28 February 1936, p. 7; L.N.C.P., 24 March 1936, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Blackshirt, 28 March 1936, p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 August 1936, p. 6.

⁷⁸ L.N.C.P., 11 July 1933, p. 12; L.A., 14 July 1933, p. 14.

contacts".⁷⁹ In late January 1934, reference was made to a Hunstanton Branch in the fascist press, and the existence of a local formation was confirmed by the police at the beginning of May.⁸⁰ The first Officer-in-Charge was Deputy Branch Organiser Callingham, who held this position until 6 February 1934, at which point he returned to the Blackshirt ranks. He was succeeded by William Andrew Chapman, a 39 year old poultry farmer, who had previously been the Hunstanton B.U.F.'s Assistant Propaganda Officer.⁸¹ This change in the local leadership coincided with Chapman's arrest in connection with the Wortham tithe dispute in Suffolk.⁸²

The Branch was active during the first half of 1934, not only with routine propaganda work but also with more unusual initiatives. In January of that year, Blackshirt reported that the Hunstanton B.U.F. was devising a 'Poultry Scheme', which, it hoped, would "prove of great value to the Movement".⁸³ Four months later, under the direction of Chapman and Gunson, Hunstanton fascists formed a life-saving squad to patrol the beach during the holiday season.⁸⁴ No further activity was reported after May 1934, and it would seem that the Branch slipped quietly into obscurity.

To the north of the county, the B.U.F. was able to establish fascist outposts early on at Sheringham and Cromer. In the summer of 1934, Labour Party sources reported that a small Blackshirt Branch at Sheringham had recently been set up.⁸⁵ The Officer-in-Charge there was Oliver Hawksley, an ex-Liberal Party agent in his late thirties, who lived at Far End, Beeston Hills, Sheringham.⁸⁶ Described as a man of "exuberant verbosity", Hawksley had attended Gresham's School, Norfolk and later

⁷⁹ Fascist News, 16 December 1933, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Blackshirt, 26 January-1 February 1934, p. 3; P.R.O. HO 144/20140/110. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 1 May 1934.

⁸¹ Blackshirt, 16-22 February 1934, p. 4, 30 March-5 April 1934, p. 1; Times, 27 March 1934, p. 11.

⁸² Blackshirt, 23 February-1 March 1934, p. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 26 January-1 February 1934, p. 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-24 May 1934, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire of 12 June 1934. Reply of North Norfolk Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/193.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; Norfolk Chronicle (N.C.), 30 March 1934, p. 3; Home Office Advisory Committee (HOAC) Report. Oliver Hawksley. 7 November 1940. This document was consulted on privileged access at the Home Office.

served in the Royal Fusiliers during the First World War.⁸⁷ From the mid-1930s, he ran a pre-preparatory school at Sheringham. After joining the movement in 1934 because of its 'Britain for the British' stance, Hawksley was appointed B.U.F. Area Officer for North Norfolk within a few months.⁸⁸

By 1934, another formation had surfaced at Cromer. Richard Bellamy recalled that this was "the only Branch [in the county] with some money", due to the patronage of Brian Smith, a wealthy local resident.⁸⁹ A high-profile Norfolk Blackshirt, Smith was the third son of a well-to-do merchant. He was born in London in 1893, and, after attending Westminster school, he went on to Cambridge University, where he obtained a B.A. in History and Law. The young graduate then gained a commission in the R.A.S.C. (M.T.) and served for fourteen months in France during the First World War. In November 1923, Smith was selected by the Executive Committee of the North Norfolk Conservative Association to contest the parliamentary division at the general election the following month.⁹⁰ He was defeated in a straight contest by Noel E. Buxton, the sitting Labour M.P. for North Norfolk, who was returned with a majority of over 3,000.⁹¹

In July 1934, Smith resigned from the North Norfolk National and Conservative Association and made public his intention to join the B.U.F..⁹² He was attracted to Mosleyite fascism because of its patriotic language and policy for agriculture. This political change of heart also meant that Smith relinquished the chairmanship of the Sheringham National and Conservative Association.⁹³ In November 1935, he took over as chairman of Stapley and Smith Limited, the textile company his father, Sir Henry Smith, had helped to found some sixty years before. The new Blackshirt recruit had been a director of the firm since 1926.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ HOAC Report. Oliver Hawksley. 7 November 1940.

⁸⁸ Ibid.; *N.C.*, 31 August 1934, p. 7.

⁸⁹ Bellamy. Taped interview.

⁹⁰ *E.D.P.*, 20 November 1923, p. 5; *Cromer and North Norfolk Post*, 23 November 1923, p. 3.

⁹¹ *E.D.P.*, 8 December 1923, p. 10.

⁹² Ibid., 5 July 1934, p. 8.

⁹³ Ibid., 3 November 1934, p. 7.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 10 December 1935, p. 14; *Times*, 3 November 1919, p. 14; HOAC Report. Brian Smith. 20

Private meetings were sometimes held at 'Uplands', the Smith family home near Sheringham, at least in the early days. These gatherings were attended by twenty or so members.⁹⁵ In social terms, the Cromer membership comprised a "very mixed bag" of "all types and sorts of people".⁹⁶ There were, however, few public Blackshirt events in the area. The B.U.F. held a literature sales drive at Cromer in mid-July 1934, and "full information" about the movement was available from the Poppy Bookshop at nearby Overstrand.⁹⁷ Later the same month, William Joyce held the first Blackshirt meeting in Cromer at the resort's Lecture Hall "to begin Fascist activity in that district".⁹⁸ This event, although also attended by local B.U.F. luminaries, such as Douglas Gunson and Brian Smith, drew only a small crowd of about twenty people.⁹⁹

After 1934, the B.U.F. was less visible at Sheringham and Cromer. Oliver Hawksley remained both the fascist leader at Sheringham and the movement's senior official in north Norfolk until approximately late 1937, when he was asked to resign for not being sufficiently active.¹⁰⁰ Brian Smith carried on with local propaganda work for the B.U.F., but his business interests prevented him from becoming a Contact Officer for the organisation.¹⁰¹ Although both men continued to address meetings in places, such as Aylsham, Holt and Fakenham for a time, and to air their views in the correspondence columns of the county press, only sporadic fascist activity was reported in the two coastal resorts from 1935.¹⁰²

B.U.F. groupings were also established to the south and east of the county. In June 1934, the Norfolk South Divisional Labour Party reported that two Blackshirt Branches had been set up in the constituency.¹⁰³ One formation was located in

August 1940. This document was consulted on privileged access at the Home Office.

⁹⁵ Bellamy. Taped interview.

⁹⁶ Ibid..

⁹⁷ *Blackshirt*, 20 July 1934, p. 10.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 27 July 1934, p. 8.

⁹⁹ *N.C.*, 27 July 1934, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 22 February 1935, p. 6; *Blackshirt*, 15 March 1935, p. 8; HOAC Report. Oliver Hawksley. 7 November 1940.

¹⁰¹ *Blackshirt*, 15 March 1935, p. 8; HOAC Report. Brian Smith. 20 August 1940.

¹⁰² See for example *Blackshirt*, 22 March 1935, p. 8, 4 July 1936, p. 6; *E.D.P.*, 15 February 1935, p. 15, 17 April 1936, p. 7, 22 March 1939, p. 13, 29 August 1939, p. 11.

¹⁰³ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of Norfolk South Divisional Labour Party.

Gaymers Cider Works at Attleborough.¹⁰⁴ The other, situated at Diss, had been organised during the fascists' intervention in the Wortham tithe dispute earlier in the year.¹⁰⁵ By the summer, the B.U.F. had held open-air gatherings in the two towns and Wymondham and were said to be "very busy with meetings on Market Days using a Motor Van with loud Speakers".¹⁰⁶ At around the same time, the Blackshirts managed to secure a foothold in east Norfolk with a Branch at North Walsham.¹⁰⁷ These three groupings were, however, short-lived, and none of them seem to have survived for more than a few months.

Founded originally as a study circle in October 1933, the Norwich B.U.F. had acquired Branch premises in the city by February 1934 at 17a, Rampant Horse Street.¹⁰⁸ During this early period, Mosleyites from the County Borough also met on Wednesdays and Saturdays at the Bell Hotel.¹⁰⁹ Although one Norwich Blackshirt had spoken in a local debate in January 1934 on Germany's departure from the League of Nations, the fledgling formation first entered the public arena openly on 19 February, when the local Propaganda Officer, E.G. Futter, outlined the B.U.F.'s programme at a meeting of the Y.M.C.A. Debating Society in the city.¹¹⁰ This initial political outing was soon followed by other activities and addresses. On 13 March, the Blackshirts participated in a debate with the Youth Group of the Norwich Branch of the League of Nations at the Y.M.C.A. in St. Giles' Street. Two local fascists, R. Huthwaite and Charles Petley, defended the motion "That Fascism is not opposed to World Peace", but the audience voted by 23 votes to sixteen in favour of the anti-fascist case

LP/FAS/34/194.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid..

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.; *E.D.P.*, 22 February 1934, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ LP/FAS/34/194.

¹⁰⁷ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of the East Norfolk Divisional Labour Party.

LP/FAS/34/192.

¹⁰⁸ *E.D.P.*, 20 February 1934, p. 11. Blackshirts were present in Norwich from c. July 1933. See

L.N.C.P., 11 July 1933, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Fascist News*, 16 December 1933, p. 4; P.R.O. HO 144/20141/315. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland. Report No. I. Developments up to the end of May 1934.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.; *Blackshirt*, 19-25 January 1934, p. 3.

expounded by the two L.N.U. representatives.¹¹¹ One of the speakers who opposed the motion on this occasion, Wallace Pointer, recalled that the local B.U.F. arrived in numbers to extract the maximum publicity: "They turned up *en masse* in full dress uniform. We expected just a speaker to come...but they turned up and marched up St. Giles...There were about thirty of them, all in black shirts, jackboots, the lot, with the flag".¹¹²

Another debate, this time between the Norwich B.U.F. and the Junior Imperial League, took place at the Singing Kettle Tea Rooms in St. Andrew's on the 25 May 1934 in front of an audience of approximately 40.¹¹³ Three days later, Propaganda Officer Bacon gave an evening talk on fascism to members of Toc H at their Pottergate premises.¹¹⁴

Official positions within the Branch changed hands regularly during the early stages of development. In January 1934, Petley, the Deputy Branch Organiser, was made the Secretary-Treasurer, and, in March, Mack, the Assistant Propaganda Officer, took over in a temporary capacity from F. Boulton as the Officer-in-Charge of the Blackshirt movement in the city.¹¹⁵ At his own request, Boulton rejoined the B.U.F. ranks. A month later, a fascist named Bacon was appointed Assistant Propaganda Officer.¹¹⁶

According to an MI5 report on the B.U.F. for the period up to the end of May 1934, the Norwich Branch typically recruited farmers' sons, young businessmen and shop assistants.¹¹⁷ A local Labour Party opponent broadly endorsed this view but maintained that the Blackshirt formation in the city enrolled not only young Conservatives from well-to-do and upper class families but also some unskilled

¹¹¹ *E.D.P.*, 14 March 1934, p. 10; *Blackshirt*, 23-29 March 1934, p. 2.

¹¹² Wallace Pointer. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1994.

¹¹³ *E.D.P.*, 28 May 1934, p. 8.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 May 1934, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ *Blackshirt*, 5-22 January 1934, p. 4, 16-22 March 1934, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27 April-3 May 1934, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ P.R.O. HO 144/20141/315.

workers with violent tendencies: "It used to attract what we used to call 'bully boys'...It attracted the ignorant bully boys...who relied on force".¹¹⁸

It seems likely that the Branch struggled to maintain its momentum during 1935. This assessment is supported by the complete absence of reported fascist activities at Norwich in the local and B.U.F. press during the first eight months of the year. However, from late September open-air meetings held by John Beckett, William Joyce, Mosley and Ann Brock Griggs at Norwich signalled a renewed burst of political activity.¹¹⁹ Mosley addressed an orderly gathering of approximately 10,000 people at Norwich market place on 27 October 1935. Before the speech commenced, Norfolk Blackshirts marched through the streets, headed by the London Command Drummers. At this meeting, the B.U.F. leader took the opportunity to restate the fascist case on parliament, the empire, economics and agriculture.¹²⁰ According to Richard Bellamy, who arranged this meeting in his capacity as the B.U.F.'s Eastern Counties Organiser, Mosley claimed that this was the biggest provincial meeting he had held so far and felt this might herald "the beginning of the breakthrough".¹²¹

The B.U.F.'s higher profile in Norwich was maintained during the last two months of 1935. On 25 November, Brian Smith spoke at an "open discussion", together with Liberal and Labour representatives, at Norwich Men's Guild in Prince's Street. Smith's theme was the Blackshirt approach to the corporate state, the empire, economics and agriculture.¹²² This was followed in December by a B.U.F. luncheon at the Royal Hotel, where Mosley gave an address to the assembled members and invited local business owners.¹²³

Fascist activity in Great Yarmouth began as early as December 1932, when G.S. Gueroult, a B.U.F. speaker from National Headquarters, addressed a supper at

¹¹⁸ Pointer. Taped interview.

¹¹⁹ *Blackshirt*, 4 October 1935, p. 9, 11 October 1935, p. 8, 1 November 1935, p. 2, 13 December 1935, p. 8.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1 November 1935, p. 2; *E.D.P.*, 28 October, 1935, p. 9; *N.N.W.P.*, 2 November 1935, p. 7.

¹²¹ Bellamy. Taped interview.

¹²² *E.D.P.*, 26 November 1935, p. 13.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1935, p. 3.

Hills' Restaurant, organised by the Great Yarmouth and District Round Table.¹²⁴ Deputising for Mosley, Gueroult delivered a wide-ranging defence of the Blackshirt creed, criticised the workings of parliamentary democracy and provided a positive assessment of the fascist regime in Italy. Within five months, a Blackshirt Branch had been established in the town under the leadership of Frederick John Tunbridge, who resided at 99, Southtown Road.¹²⁵ A local newspaper columnist commented that the early membership "comprised...a few young men for whom no doubt the movement holds a certain fascination and possibly the uniform has an attraction too".¹²⁶

Although some of the initial B.U.F. meetings in the town encountered active left-wing opposition, the Branch continued to function, and, in mid-July 1933, a fascist group from the Yarmouth B.U.F. participated in a propaganda march through London's West End as part of a 1,000-strong provincial Blackshirt contingent.¹²⁷ By the following November, Thomas Hingley, a nurseryman in his early twenties, had taken over from Tunbridge as the Branch Organiser. Under its new leader, the Yarmouth B.U.F. paid its own tribute to the fallen on Remembrance Day. On the evening of 11 November, a number of Blackshirts marched to the war memorial at St. George's Park. A wreath containing golden fasces was laid, the fascist salute was given and a minute's silence observed before the B.U.F. group returned to their headquarters.¹²⁸ Shortly before Christmas, Hingley addressed a Toc H meeting at nearby Bradwell, and, in the spring of 1934, he married fellow B.U.F. member, Ivy Futter, at Yarmouth Registry Office.¹²⁹

MI5's report surveying the B.U.F. up to the end of May 1934, commented that in Yarmouth "the movement appears to have died out, as nothing has been heard of it for the last two months" and could not come to any firm conclusions about the Branch

¹²⁴ *Yarmouth Mercury (Y.M.)*, 17 December 1932, p. 15.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 May 1933, p. 11; *Yarmouth Independent (Y.I.)*, 17 June 1933, p. 15.

¹²⁶ *Y.M.*, 6 May 1933, p. 11.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1933, p. 11, 24 June 1933, p. 16, 22 July 1933, p. 11.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 November 1933, p. 16.

¹²⁹ *Fascist News*, 16 December 1933, p. 4; *Y.M.*, 12 May 1934, p. 5.

membership.¹³⁰ However, B.U.F. activity in the town, though sporadic, continued. Captain Vincent Collier spoke at the market place on 2 June 1934 as part of the B.U.F.'s rural tour, and, six days later, G.S. Gueroult took part in a debate at the Britannia Pier Pavilion with Dr. John Lewis, the Labour Party's prospective parliamentary candidate for Great Yarmouth.¹³¹ On 14 October, Mosley held an orderly meeting at the same venue, in order to explain B.U.F. policy and outline the patriotic and revolutionary aspects of fascism.¹³²

The Yarmouth Branch continued to function in a modest way after 1934. The local press reported in November 1935 that fortnightly meetings were being held at 57, High Street, Gorleston for B.U.F. members.¹³³ At the gathering held on 22 November, it was announced that a mass meeting was scheduled for early 1936 at the market place and that the B.U.F. would attempt to put up a parliamentary candidate for the Yarmouth division at the next election.¹³⁴ The District Officer, T.W. Hingley, also informed those present that a political programme was being formulated for the new year, which would hopefully begin in January. Further meetings were held at the District Office at Gorleston on 6 and 13 December 1935.¹³⁵ At the first local gathering in January 1936, Hingley announced that a number of national speakers would shortly deliver addresses at indoor and open-air venues in Yarmouth.¹³⁶ It was also claimed that, since November 1935, the Yarmouth Branch had been preparing for its summer political campaign, when it expected to have a new propaganda van to help spread the fascist message in the area.¹³⁷

Nevertheless, according to the available records, the only notable B.U.F. event in the area in 1936 took place at St. Andrew's Hall on 19 March, when Alexander

¹³⁰ P.R.O HO 144/20141/317. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland. Report No. I. Developments up to the end of May 1934.

¹³¹ *Y.M.*, 9 June 1934, p. 3; *E.D.P.*, 11 June 1934, p. 12; *Blackshirt*, 29 June 1934, p. 11.

¹³² *E.D.P.*, 15 October 1934, p. 13.

¹³³ *Y.M.*, 30 November 1935, p. 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 December 1935, p. 18, 28 December 1935, p. 7.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1936, p. 16.

¹³⁷ *Blackshirt*, 31 January 1936, p. 7.

Raven Thomson, the B.U.F.'s Director of Policy, gave a wide-ranging talk on the benefits of fascism and the 'failings' of democracy and international finance.¹³⁸ No more high profile B.U.F. meetings were reported in the local or fascist press after Thomson's visit, but the movement maintained a presence in the town at least until 1937, by which stage W.E. Bell, a Gorleston-on-Sea resident, had taken over as District Leader.¹³⁹ Furthermore, from time to time, fascist elements daubed slogans in whitewash on roads and properties in the Belton area.¹⁴⁰

In the spring of 1933, J.P. Horne, the District Administrative Officer for King's Lynn, recruited Will Smith, a farm labourer residing at Wretton, near Stoke Ferry, as his Blackshirt counterpart in south-west Norfolk.¹⁴¹ Smith was able to establish a small B.U.F. detachment at Stoke Ferry before the end of the year.¹⁴² Within twelve months of joining, however, Smith had become so disillusioned with the movement's political activities and internal manoeuvrings that he not only resigned from the B.U.F. but also aired his grievances against the organisation in the correspondence columns of the King's Lynn press.¹⁴³

The real task of 'opening up' south-west Norfolk for the B.U.F. fell to Richard Reynell Bellamy, a seasoned overseas traveller, who had returned to Britain in March 1931.¹⁴⁴ For much of the previous decade, he had pursued a number of work ventures in the South Pacific with varying degrees of success. Following his return, Bellamy settled at Wereham, where he experienced frequent periods of unemployment, interspersed with casual jobs at a local sugar beet factory.¹⁴⁵ After becoming a Blackshirt in August 1933, he formed a Branch at Downham Market at the suggestion

¹³⁸ *Y.M.*, 21 March 1936, p. 12; *Y.L.*, 28 March 1936, p. 5.

¹³⁹ *Y.M.*, 9 May 1936, p. 7; *Y.L.*, 9 May 1936, p. 12; Board of Deputies of British Jews (B.D.B.J.) C6/9/3/1. Pre-War Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and Provincial Towns. c.1937.

¹⁴⁰ *Y.M.*, 21 November 1936, p. 13, 8 May 1937, p. 15.

¹⁴¹ *L.N.C.P.*, 27 March 1934, p.9; *L.A.*, 13 April 1934, p. 6.

¹⁴² *N.N.W.P.*, 4 November 1933, p. 4.

¹⁴³ *L.A.*, 23 March 1934, p. 7; *L.N.C.P.*, 27 March 1934, p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Reynell Bellamy, 'Memoirs of a Fascist Beast' (Unpublished abridged manuscript), Chapter One; Richard Reynell Bellamy, 'A Bungled Beginning' (Unpublished separate autobiographical chapter, supplied privately).

¹⁴⁵ Bellamy. Taped interview.

of Douglas Gunson, the Area Administrative Officer for East Anglia.¹⁴⁶ The founder of the Downham Market B.U.F. later revealed that the local membership had a distinctly agricultural bias: "There were two or three farmers and quite a number of ex-servicemen, who were agricultural workers. Those were the best chaps I had. They were all a little older than me, but they were very good chaps".¹⁴⁷

In Bellamy's view, the Downham Market members were attracted by the B.U.F.'s patriotism and agricultural policy.¹⁴⁸ However, the scope for fascist growth in the Downham Market area was perceived to be extremely limited. Local members had little to do, other than steward meetings held elsewhere, and, although Bellamy "made some very good farmer recruits at that time", he was pessimistic about the B.U.F.'s long term prospects there.¹⁴⁹ A major problem for the Branch was that its membership was geographically scattered over a wide area. According to the fascist press, local Blackshirts lived up to twelve miles from the Downham headquarters.¹⁵⁰ In order to overcome this handicap, a B.U.F. cycling squad was created in 1934 to undertake propaganda work in the villages nearby and to provide a link with members in the outlying districts.¹⁵¹

The available evidence indicates that the Blackshirts were active at Downham Market for much of 1934. On 11 February, the local Branch and the Fascist Union of British Workers held a members' meeting, involving Gunson, Ratcliffe and Bellamy at the Cheques Club Room, which resulted in a number of new recruits, including several women.¹⁵² In addition, the cycling squad continued to function, at least during the first half of the year, and a detachment from Downham Market also attended Mosley's Hyde Park Rally in September 1934.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁶ 'Who's Who in Fascism'; Bellamy. Taped interview; Fascist News, 16 December 1933, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ Bellamy. Taped interview.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid..

¹⁴⁹ Ibid..

¹⁵⁰ Blackshirt, 22 June 1934, p. 11.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 19-25 January 1934, p. 3, 22 June 1934, p. 11.

¹⁵² Thetford and Watton Times (T.W.T.), 17 February 1934, p. 5.

¹⁵³ Blackshirt, 19-25 January 1934, p. 3, 22 June 1934, p. 11; E.D.P., 13 September 1934, p. 7.

For much of 1935, the B.U.F. concentrated its efforts locally on mobilising support and developing electoral machinery in south-west Norfolk as a precursor to contesting the division. The decision to create Blackshirt constituency organisations was encapsulated in the B.U.F.'s policy statement of 21 January 1935 and the directive of 3 May 1935.¹⁵⁴ These initiatives were introduced to rid the B.U.F. of its paramilitary structure and ethos, to make the movement's sprawling bureaucratic administration more cost effective and to build a viable fascist electoral machine. Such an extensive reorganisation was partly motivated by the assumption that, as the receding depression diminished the prospect of the Blackshirts securing power through a crisis, the movement would have to adopt the orthodox route of seeking a mandate from the electorate.

As part of this restructuring process, the Executive decision of 3 May 1935 decreed that, from then on, B.U.F. Branch organisations were to be remodelled into Districts or Divisions, which corresponded to parliamentary constituencies. Eventually, it was hoped, each District would possess a company of Blackshirts under a District Officer and his staff, based at the District Headquarters. Within this new organisational framework, Blackshirt Units and Sections were to canvass each ward, disseminate propaganda and provide a focal point for the mass membership of non-active fascists.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately, it was envisaged that the B.U.F. might infiltrate individual streets within every ward in each division, so that Street, Ward and District Leaders would create a flexible chain of command in the Blackshirt electoral machine.¹⁵⁶

Having informed National Headquarters of his reservations about the movement's prospects at Downham Market, Bellamy moved to Swaffham early in 1935 with official blessing:

So they sent a man, Captain T.L. Butler...from the political side of the movement to come down and see me, and he

¹⁵⁴ *Blackshirt*, 18 January 1935, pp. 1-2, 1 February 1935, p. 1, 24 May 1935, p. 2; P.R.O. HO 144/20145/203-206. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 22 July 1935.

¹⁵⁵ *Blackshirt*, 24 May 1935, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, April 1938, p. 1.

said, 'We're thinking of organising one or two selected constituencies entirely on the old orthodox constituency' [and] would I care to take over and become a Political Organiser full-time? I jumped at it. So I had to leave there [Downham Market] and go to Swaffham, which is the centre of the constituency of South-West Norfolk...I had an office there.¹⁵⁷

Bellamy's arrival at Swaffham coincided with the formation of the South-West Norfolk Fascist Constituency Association.¹⁵⁸ The newly-appointed Political Organiser took possession of an office in Station Street and began the task of creating a B.U.F. electoral machine in the division.¹⁵⁹ In order to get this process underway, T.L. Butler, the Deputy Director of Political Organisation, gave an address at the Swaffham Assembly Rooms, outlining the B.U.F.'s position on political and economic issues and indicating that the Blackshirts hoped to contest the next general election.¹⁶⁰

During the summer and autumn, continuous Blackshirt activity in south-west Norfolk led to intense speculation about the possibility of a B.U.F. parliamentary candidate being announced for the division in time for the next general election. At the end of May, Mosley addressed a large meeting at Swaffham and followed this up in September with speaking engagements at Thetford, East Dereham and Downham Market.¹⁶¹ On each occasion, the Blackshirt leader highlighted the problems facing British agriculture and the solutions offered by the B.U.F..

Other prominent members also visited the area in order to enhance the movement's prospects in the division. At an open-air Downham Market meeting held in late June, William Joyce, the B.U.F.'s Director of Propaganda, gave a summary of the Blackshirts' agricultural policy and informed his listeners that in the future a fascist candidate would stand for the South-West Norfolk division.¹⁶² The following month,

¹⁵⁷ Bellamy. Taped interview.

¹⁵⁸ *E.D.P.*, 27 May 1935, p. 14.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31 August 1935, p. 11; Bellamy. Taped interview.

¹⁶⁰ *T.W.T.*, 6 April 1935, p. 8.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14 September 1935, p. 4; *E.D.P.*, 27 May 1935, p. 14, 30 September 1935, p. 12; *Dereham and Fakenham Times (D.F.T.)*, 28 September 1935, p. 6.

¹⁶² *N.N.W.P.*, 6 July 1935, p. 8.

W.J. Leaper, the editor of *Blackshirt*, and S.R. Probyn, a National Headquarters official, pursued similar themes at East Dereham and Stoke Ferry respectively.¹⁶³

This flurry of high profile propaganda meetings, together with the establishment of a rudimentary fascist constituency organisation in south-west Norfolk, appeared to indicate that the B.U.F. had serious electoral ambitions for the division. The air of expectancy was reinforced by local newspaper reports, which concluded that the B.U.F.'s recent activities in the area had strengthened its grass roots support. It was understood that Mosley's meeting at Swaffham in June had produced a number of new recruits.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, the formation of a Blackshirt Branch at East Dereham by mid-October appeared to be part of a wider fascist organisational advance in the south-west of the county.¹⁶⁵ Towards the end of that month, Bellamy, now the B.U.F.'s Eastern Counties Organiser, confirmed that the local movement was gaining support: "We certainly have found a vast undercurrent of sympathy in South-West Norfolk for our political ideas and ideals, particularly with regard to agriculture. We are most satisfied with our progress. Since February we have made remarkable strides forward".¹⁶⁶

With the November 1935 General Election approaching, "persistent rumours" circulated that a Blackshirt candidate would be announced for the South-West division and that it might even be Mosley himself.¹⁶⁷ In support of this view, the local press noted that the B.U.F. leader had been impressed by the public response to his recent speeches in south-west Norfolk and that several halls in the constituency had been booked for Blackshirt meetings to be held during the run-in to polling day.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, although it was generally assumed that there was little prospect of the

¹⁶³ *E.D.P.*, 22 July 1935, p. 15, 29 July 1935, p. 13; *D.E.T.*, 27 July 1935, p. 13; *N.C.*, 26 July 1935, p. 10; *T.W.T.*, 3 August 1935, p. 9.

¹⁶⁴ *D.E.T.*, 27 July 1935, p. 8.

¹⁶⁵ *E.D.P.*, 25 October 1935, p. 14; *D.E.T.*, 19 October 1935, p. 8.

¹⁶⁶ Bellamy. Quoted in *E.D.P.*, 25 October 1935, p. 14.

¹⁶⁷ *N.N.W.P.*, 26 October 1935, p. 7.

¹⁶⁸ *D.E.T.*, 5 October 1935, p. 8; *E.D.P.*, 25 October 1935, p. 14.

B.U.F. winning the seat, several regional papers conceded that a fascist candidate could have an electoral impact in the division:

The Fascist movement in Norfolk and especially in the western part of the county is stronger than generally supposed. The movement's activities in connexion with the tithe distraint cases has gained it a considerable number of supporters, and although there would appear to be little chance of a Fascist candidate being elected for South-West Norfolk his adoption would undoubtedly make things uncomfortable for Mr Somerset de Chair, the National Conservative, whose only opponent at the moment is Mr Sydney Dye, the Labour nominee.¹⁶⁹

The local Blackshirt leadership could neither confirm nor deny that the B.U.F. would participate in the forthcoming South-West Norfolk contest, since the final decision rested with National Headquarters.¹⁷⁰ Shortly afterwards, it was announced that the issue would be resolved by Sunday, 27 October, when Mosley was due to address an open-air meeting at Norwich market place.¹⁷¹ On this occasion, the B.U.F. leader, in front of a crowd estimated at 10,000 people, explained that fascist involvement in national elections would have to be postponed, principally because the movement's electoral reorganisation was far from sufficiently advanced: "We shall not contest this election, but are organising our election machine for the coming election after this. You have first to create a movement and then in addition an election machine, which in Great Britain is a highly technical affair".¹⁷²

Under the May directive, the organisational base of the Norfolk movement was re-shaped to accommodate the construction of electoral machinery in the seven county constituencies.¹⁷³ B.U.F. Districts were established to correspond with the Parliamentary Boroughs of Great Yarmouth and Norwich and the Parliamentary County Divisions of East Norfolk, King's Lynn, North Norfolk, South Norfolk and

¹⁶⁹ *E.D.P.*, 24 October 1935, p. 8. See also *N.N.W.P.*, 26 October 1935, p. 7; *T.W.T.*, 31 August 1935, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ *E.D.P.*, 25 October 1935, p. 14; *N.C.*, 25 October 1935, p. 1.

¹⁷¹ *N.N.W.P.*, 26 October 1935, p. 7.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 2 November 1935, p. 7.

¹⁷³ For full details of the B.U.F.'s reorganisation, see *British Union of Fascists and National Socialists. Constitution and Regulations* (London: Abbey Supplies, 1936).

South-West Norfolk. However, as will be seen, the organisational demands made by the B.U.F.'s electoral strategy proved well beyond the resources and capabilities of the Blackshirt Districts in the county.

As the Norfolk B.U.F. began to reorganise on a constituency basis from 1935, Blackshirt prospective parliamentary candidates were selected for four county divisions. On 18 November 1936, it was announced that Miss Lucilla Maud Reeve, who resided at Braymead in Tottington, near Thetford, would contest the South-West Norfolk seat at the next general election.¹⁷⁴ Born in March 1889 to a Norfolk parlour maid, Reeve began her working life as a domestic servant, but, after taking a business course, she obtained a position in the City. From there, she moved on to become an assistant to an estate agent in Norfolk, who looked after Lord Walsingham's Merton estate. In 1927, Reeve took over the management of the entire 11,000 acre estate and soon successfully completed her land agent examinations. She clearly cut a dashing figure on the Norfolk country scene, not only because of her red sports car, nicknamed 'Red Angel', but also since she was a leading member of a local shooting syndicate.¹⁷⁵

A steadfast Conservative since 1922, Miss Reeve belonged to the party's South Norfolk divisional executive committee and had been a Tory platform speaker during the 1931 election campaign. Furthermore, she had served on the local Area Guardians Committee and the Wayland Rural District Council for a number of years, vice-chairing the latter's Rating and Valuation Committee. Her interest in the B.U.F. dated from May 1935, when she attended Mosley's meeting at Swaffham with the intention of heckling. However, Reeve was so impressed by what the Blackshirt leader said that she abandoned her Conservative affiliations and immediately signed up as an active member.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ *N.N.W.P.*, 21 November 1936, p. 5.

¹⁷⁵ *Blackshirt*, 21 November 1936, p. 5; Bellamy, 'We Marched With Mosley', p. 1007; Bellamy. Taped interview; documented information provided by F.O.M..

¹⁷⁶ *N.N.W.P.*, 21 November 1936, p. 5; Bellamy. Taped interview.

Two months later, Charles Hugh Hammond, a native of King's Lynn, was put forward as the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for Norwich.¹⁷⁷ The son of a former local headmaster, Hammond had attended Swaffham Grammar School on a scholarship before serving in the navy during the First World War. He was also a member of Shackleton's North Russian Expeditionary Force in 1918-1919. Prior to 1914, he had developed Tory political leanings but after the war joined the Independent Labour Party. Hammond was employed as a produce merchant's buyer and became a King's Lynn Blackshirt in January 1934.¹⁷⁸

Shortly afterwards, the movement appointed the local District Treasurer, Alfred Edwin Ilett, a married man with two young daughters, to be the fascist prospective parliamentary candidate for the King's Lynn division.¹⁷⁹ Ilett, who had only been a Blackshirt for twelve months, was then 33 years old and had been born in Worksop. He began his working life at fourteen in a coal mine before joining the staff at General Refractories Limited three years later. Over the next eight years, he worked his way up to become manager of the works at Bawsey, which produced foundry moulding sands. Confident that he could win the seat for the B.U.F, Ilett told the press that: "There is a large measure of support for Fascism in the Lynn Parliamentary Division which is not evinced for certain reasons".¹⁸⁰

In something of a propaganda coup, the Blackshirts were able to enlist another high profile female standard bearer, Dorothy, Viscountess Downe, a personal friend of, and former Lady-in-Waiting to, Queen Mary, to contest the North Norfolk division.¹⁸¹ The only child of Sir William Ffolkes, the third baronet of Hillington Hall and a former chairman of the Norfolk County Council, she married the ninth Viscount Downe, the owner of several large estates in northern England, in 1902 and settled at Wykeham

¹⁷⁷ *Action*, 16 January 1937, p. 7.

¹⁷⁸ *N.N.W.P.*, 16 January 1937, p. 7; *L.N.C.P.*, 28 July 1936, p. 12; A.W. Brian Simpson, *In The Highest Degree Odious: Detention Without Trial in Wartime Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 177.

¹⁷⁹ *Action*, 23 January 1937, p. 7; *E.D.P.*, 22 January 1937, p. 11.

¹⁸⁰ *E.D.P.*, 22 January 1937, p. 11.

¹⁸¹ *Blackshirt*, 12 June 1937, p. 5.

Abbey in Yorkshire. During the First World War, Lady Downe ran a Royal Flying Corps auxiliary hospital. She also served as a magistrate in Yorkshire and Norfolk and acted as president of the Scarborough Conservative Women's Association for eight years. After the death of her husband in 1931, the Viscountess returned to Hillington Hall, becoming chair of the King's Lynn Women's Conservative Association between 1932 and 1937.¹⁸²

Although Downe did not formally join the B.U.F. until February 1937, her connections with the Blackshirts went back to at least late 1934, when she gave the King's Lynn Branch a flattering assessment of conditions in the Third Reich after returning from a trip to Germany.¹⁸³ Her attachment to the fascist cause generally went back to the 1920s, when she had joined Rotha Lintorn-Orman's British Fascisti as a senior activist in Yorkshire.¹⁸⁴ Having heard Mosley speak in Norfolk, she caused a local sensation by becoming a member of the B.U.F.. *Action* explained that the Viscountess had "left the Conservatives in disgust" in early 1937 and had joined the movement because it was the "hope for the future of Britain".¹⁸⁵

At her first B.U.F. speaking engagement, held in May at the Blackfriar's Hall, King's Lynn, Downe recounted that, when she returned to Norfolk, she decided to become politically non-active, since there was no local fascist organisation in the area. However, feeling obliged to back the National Government in its task of reconstruction, she joined the Conservative Party in the hope that it would pursue dynamic policies. Instead, she had witnessed several years of Tory and democratic 'inertia', which, to her mind, not only failed to restore agriculture and create jobs, but also weakened Britain's international position.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² *L.N.C.P.*, 29 March 1957; *E.D.P.*, 27 March 1957. Press cuttings supplied by Friends of Oswald Mosley (F.O.M.).

¹⁸³ *L.N.C.P.*, 25 May 1937, p. 6, 11 December 1934, p. 7; *Blackshirt*, 21 December 1934, p. 9.

¹⁸⁴ B.L. Farr, 'The Development and Impact of Right-Wing Politics in Great Britain, 1903-1932' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Illinois, 1976), p. 258 and pp. 262-263; R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 87; *E.D.P.*, 22 May 1937, p. 7.

¹⁸⁵ *Action*, 12 June 1937, p. 7.

¹⁸⁶ *E.D.P.*, 22 May 1937, p. 7; *L.N.C.P.*, 25 May 1937, p. 6.

In an open letter to the Eastern Daily Press, published on 11 June 1937, Downe explained that she had become a Blackshirt because she had lost faith in the ability of the National Government and democracy to take decisive action to restore prosperity and combat unemployment. In her view, only fascism with its emphasis on leadership and prompt decision-making, possessed the means to reorganise industry through the corporate state, rescue the agricultural sector, adopt a 'non-interference' foreign policy, raise domestic employment levels and defend national and imperial interests.¹⁸⁷ Apparently, Lady Downe visited Queen Mary at Sandringham to tell her of this political change of heart and received the less than enthusiastic reply "Is that wise, Dorothy, is that wise?"¹⁸⁸ In June 1937, she was made the Blackshirt prospective parliamentary candidate for the North Norfolk division to challenge the sitting Tory M.P., Sir Thomas Cook.¹⁸⁹

The partial rejuvenation of the Norfolk movement after the low point of 1935-1936 owed much to the personal contribution of John Smeaton-Stuart, who became the National Organising Officer for the county in early 1936.¹⁹⁰ Described as a "Soldier-Settler from Kenya", Smeaton-Stuart enrolled as a Blackshirt in April 1934 and, after training as a B.U.F. election agent and registered speaker, joined the Headquarters Staff a year or so later at Mosley's request.¹⁹¹ After supervising B.U.F. work in Lancashire, he was appointed Assistant National Inspecting Officer for the Southern Counties in July 1935.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ E.D.P., 11 June 1937, p. 8.

¹⁸⁸ Oswald Mosley, My Life (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1970), p. 404.

¹⁸⁹ Action, 12 June 1937, p. 7.

¹⁹⁰ 'Who's Who in Fascism'; E.D.P., 10 February 1936, p. 3. Smeaton-Stuart was born in Singapore on 9 August 1893 and served in the army on a temporary commission for three years during the First World War. After 1918, he spent ten years farming in Kenya where he lost everything, mainly due to the slump. He then travelled for the next two years looking for work and eventually ended up in Malaya. Ultimately, after an absence of fifteen years, he came back to Britain. The military had always played a large part in Smeaton-Stuart's life. As a youngster, he had shot for his school at Bisley and recruited for organisations such as the O.T.C.. At London University, he enlisted in the Yeomanry and, during his years abroad, had been associated with the Kenyan Defence Force and the volunteers in Malaya. On his return, the former Conservative was disillusioned by the neglect of the Empire and the state of the country. He joined the B.U.F. because of its patriotic and pro-imperial stance. See P.R.O. HO 283/64. John Smeaton-Stuart; P.R.O. HO 45/25714. John Smeaton-Stuart.

¹⁹¹ 'Who's Who in Fascism'.

¹⁹² Ibid..

When Smeaton-Stuart arrived in East Anglia in late 1935, he found that the B.U.F. organisation in the area amounted to nothing more than “marks on a map”.¹⁹³ As the County Organiser, his principal task was to revive the movement’s flagging fortunes in Norfolk, and, over the next eighteen months, Smeaton-Stuart worked hard to raise the profile of the B.U.F. there. Using the Norwich B.U.F. District Headquarters at 10, Redwell Street as his base, he injected a new sense of urgency into local fascist activities by arranging B.U.F. events and co-ordinating the efforts of the regional movement.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, Smeaton-Stuart undertook numerous speaking engagements at Diss, Downham Market, King’s Lynn, North Walsham, Norwich, Thetford, Yarmouth and elsewhere, either to publicise the Blackshirt case or to rally the faithful.¹⁹⁵ By his own account, he persuaded a substantial number of people in East Anglia to join the B.U.F..¹⁹⁶ In 1937, Smeaton-Stuart was appointed Area Organiser for East Anglia and selected as the B.U.F.’s prospective parliamentary candidate for Southend.¹⁹⁷

Alfred Ilett’s selection as the British Union’s prospective parliamentary candidate for the King’s Lynn division in January 1937 maintained the local organisation’s renewed impetus. Ann Brock Griggs, the Chief Women’s Organiser, visited the town in May 1937 to speak in support of his candidature at the Blackfriar’s Hall.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, in September, Mosley himself introduced Ilett to a local public gathering at the Corn Hall, which was marred by interruptions from hecklers and scuffles.¹⁹⁹ According to Charles Hammond, now King’s Lynn District Leader,

¹⁹³ P.R.O. HO 283/64/34. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart.

¹⁹⁴ E.D.P., 16 July 1936, p. 8.

¹⁹⁵ See for example ibid., 19 December 1935, p. 10, 16 March 1936, p. 10, 6 July 1936, p. 9; D.E.T., 15 February 1936, p. 15; Y.M., 30 November 1935, p. 3; Blackshirt, 10 April 1937, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ P.R.O. HO 283/64/45. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart.

¹⁹⁷ P.R.O. HO 283/64/32. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart; Blackshirt, 2 January 1937, p. 7.

¹⁹⁸ Blackshirt, 5 June 1937, p. 6; L.N.C.P., 25 May 1937, p. 6; L.A., 28 May 1937, p. 9.

¹⁹⁹ Blackshirt, 2 October 1937, p. 8; L.N.C.P., 28 September 1937, p. 3; L.A., 1 October 1937, p. 5.

Mosley's visit increased membership and stimulated literature sales.²⁰⁰ By November 1937, the Branch was holding policy classes, and both Hammond and Ilett were addressing meetings and private gatherings in the area.²⁰¹ This local work was supplemented in December by a B.U.F. luncheon at the Dukes Head Hotel, designed to attract members of the King's Lynn commercial middle class. As the guest speaker at this event, Mosley gave a talk on fascist economics to the sixty business people who had accepted the invitation to attend.²⁰²

The British Union remained active at King's Lynn during 1938, with numerous meetings and propaganda events taking place. William Risdon, the B.U.F.'s Chief Election Agent, outlined the Blackshirt programme at the Cooperative Hall on 21 January, and, throughout the spring, Ilett spoke regularly in the district.²⁰³ The Branch also participated in the movement's Norfolk Propaganda Campaign in early April by holding three meetings in the division.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, during May and June, the local B.U.F. distributed 'Ten Point' leaflets and conducted literature sales in the town and surrounding villages.²⁰⁵

In view of the organisation's recent efforts to win the support of local business, it is interesting to note the King's Lynn B.U.F. decided to put forward a small trader, Philip A.E. Vare, as a candidate in the November municipal elections.²⁰⁶ This was the only occasion on which the British Union contested any type of election in Norfolk. Vare, a married man, was a 31 year old native of King's Lynn, who had attended King Edward VII Grammar School.²⁰⁷ He worked as a motor and radio engineer and, since April 1935, had been the sole proprietor of a bicycle, motorcycle and radio business located at 19-20, Railway Road.²⁰⁸ Vare contested the Conservative-held two seat

²⁰⁰ *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 12.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6 November 1937, p. 6.

²⁰² *E.D.P.*, 14 December 1937, p. 13.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 24 January 1938, p. 11; *Blackshirt*, April 1938, p. 7.

²⁰⁴ *Blackshirt*, May 1938, p. 2.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, June 1938, p. 5, July 1938, p. 6.

²⁰⁶ *Southern Blackshirt*, October 1938, p. 2.

²⁰⁷ *L.N.C.P.*, 18 October 1938, p. 14.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 April 1935, p. 6. Immediately afterwards, two local traders, who had supported Vare's nomination, complained to the local press that they had been unaware of his political loyalties at the

Middle ward, but the result was a severe electoral rebuff for the B.U.F., as their candidate received less than five per cent of the votes cast.

TABLE 2
KING'S LYNN MIDDLE WARD MUNICIPAL ELECTION,
NOVEMBER 1938

D.F. Burlingham	Independent	1,119 votes
J. Whitmore	Conservative	596 votes
E.W. Hodson	Conservative	338 votes
P. Vare	British Union	107 votes

(Source: Eastern Daily Press, 2 November 1938, p. 14; Lynn News and County Press, 8 November 1938, p. 11)

Viscountess Downe's decision to join the B.U.F. and subsequently become a Blackshirt parliamentary candidate provided fresh impetus for the north Norfolk movement in the later 1930s. Although now in her sixties, Downe took her commitment to the B.U.F. seriously and embarked on a series of public speaking engagements in 1937-1938 to advance the fascist cause in north Norfolk. Her social status and connection with the British establishment ensured that her work for the B.U.F. attracted the attention of the local press. For their part, the Blackshirts, recognising the propaganda value of their new convert, ensured that Downe frequently shared the platform with prominent local fascists, including Hammond, Ilett, and the writer Henry Williamson, and senior figures from National Headquarters, such as Mosley, Jorian Jenks, the B.U.F.'s Agricultural Adviser, and Ann Brock Griggs.²⁰⁹

Between mid-1937 and the end of 1938, Downe spoke on behalf of the movement at thirteen reported meetings held at Blakeney, Fakenham, Holt, King's

time and would not have endorsed him if they had had prior knowledge of his links with the B.U.F.. See *ibid.*, 15 November 1938, p. 2.

²⁰⁹ See for example *ibid.*, 25 May 1937, p. 6, 8 March 1938, p. 5; N.N.W.P., 27 November 1937, p. 3 and p. 11, 26 February 1938, p. 12; Blackshirt, 6 November 1937, p. 6; E.D.P., 1 November 1937, p. 13, 24 June 1938, p. 6, 22 November 1938, p. 7; D.E.T., 26 February 1938, p. 5; T.W.T., 20 November 1937, p. 7, 12 March 1938, p. 13.

Lynn, Melton Constable, Reepham, Sheringham, Walsingham and Wells.²¹⁰ On these occasions, the Viscountess usually shared the platform with other high profile members. Moreover, Downe appeared to make other electoral tasks a regular part of her political activities in north Norfolk. In July 1938, for example, the fascist press reported that the Dowager had canvassed sixteen villages with the help of two assistants.²¹¹

Downe's activism in the area led to the enrolment of her most prestigious B.U.F. recruit, the writer Henry Williamson, who had recently taken possession of Old Hall Farm at Stiffkey.²¹² Apparently, the Dowager visited Williamson in early October 1937 in order to express her agreement with the sentiments contained in his articles and to implore him to join the B.U.F..²¹³ Shortly afterwards, she informed the writer-turned-farmer by letter that "it was wonderful to meet someone who sees what fineness there really is in the Movement" and enclosed a selection of Blackshirt publications and a membership form.²¹⁴ Williamson must have enrolled almost immediately since, within a few days, he had received a receipt for his subscription from Lady Downe. At the her invitation, Williamson attended a luncheon at the Criterion in London on 26 November 1937 to hear the B.U.F. founder speak. The following month, again at Downe's instigation, Williamson and Mosley had a personal meeting at her Hillington residence near King's Lynn.²¹⁵ Impressed by the Blackshirt leader, the new member viewed Mosley as "A fine fellow: strong, determined, integrated, [with] staying-power".²¹⁶

Contrary to some accounts of his life, Williamson, once in the B.U.F., did become an activist for the cause.²¹⁷ On various occasions in the late 1930s, he shared a

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*. See also *N.N.W.P.*, 31 July 1937, p. 6.

²¹¹ *Blackshirt*, July 1938, p. 6, 9 October 1937, p. 12.

²¹² Henry Williamson, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), pp. 186-187.

²¹³ A. Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995), p. 220.

²¹⁴ Lady Downe. Letter to Henry Williamson. 7 October 1937. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 222.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*.

²¹⁶ Henry Williamson. Quoted in *ibid.*.

²¹⁷ For example, M.D. Higginbottom, *Intellectuals and British Fascism: A Study of Henry Williamson* (London: Janus Publishing Company, 1992); L. Lamplugh, *A Shadowed Man: Henry*

speaker's platform with Lady Downe and others, to endorse Mosleyite fascism in public addresses at places such as Blakeney, Sheringham and Wells.²¹⁸ Furthermore, several of his letters denouncing 'international finance' and extolling Mosley and the B.U.F.'s agricultural policy were published in the local press.²¹⁹ From 1938, Williamson also allowed his literary talents to be placed at the disposal of the movement by providing numerous articles and extracts for the B.U.F. weekly, Action.²²⁰

From November 1935 to mid-1937, Smeaton-Stuart, together with local fascists, including District Organiser, W.D. Rowe, District Treasurer, Charles Petley and Charles Hammond, the Norwich B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate, held regular meetings at Norwich market place and conducted frequent sales drives.²²¹ Circumstantial evidence indicates that the District partially recovered from the low point of late 1935 and early 1936. By November 1936, the Norwich District offices had relocated to larger premises at 9a, Redwell Street.²²² Furthermore, from December 1936, the Norwich District was regularly placed in the top six of the B.U.F.'s Southern Sales League for the number of fascist newspapers sold in the area.²²³ The Norwich Branch also took some rudimentary steps to create electoral machinery for the next general election. Hammond's nomination as the prospective parliamentary candidate was accompanied by Blackshirt canvassing in Norwich, and, in June 1937, Charles

Williamson, 1895-1977 (Somerset: Exmoor Press, 1991); Williamson, Henry Williamson all play down the extent of Henry Williamson's active involvement with the B.U.F.. M.E. Romanovitch, 'Henry Williamson As A Romantic Fascist? The Origins, Context and Applications of Henry Williamson's Aesthetic and Political Ideas' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Kingston University, 1992) offers a more realistic view.

²¹⁸ E.D.P., 17 November 1937, p. 16, 25 February 1938, p. 10; N.N.W.P., 26 February 1938, p. 12.

²¹⁹ E.D.P., 17 November 1938, p. 13, 21 December 1939, p. 13, 23 March 1939, p. 13.

²²⁰ See for example Action, 7 May 1938, p. 13, 13 August 1938, p. 5, 12 November 1938, pp. 8-9, 31 December 1938, p. 7, 28 January 1939, p. 7, 18 February 1939, p. 7, 3 June 1939, p. 11, 8 July 1939, p. 17, 15 July 1939, p. 6, 12 August 1939, p. 7, 2 September 1939, p. 17.

²²¹ Blackshirt, 29 November 1935, p. 8, 13 December 1935, p. 8, 2 May 1936, p. 6, 9 May 1936, p. 6, 16 May 1936, p. 6, 12 September 1936, p. 6, 24 October 1936, p. 6, 21 November 1936, p. 6, 10 April 1937, p. 6.

²²² Ibid., 14 November 1936, p. 6.

²²³ Ibid., 5 December 1936, p. 6, 12 December 1936, p. 6, 19 December 1936, p. 8, 26 December 1936, p. 6, 2 January 1937, p. 6, 9 January 1937, p. 6, 23 January 1937, p. 6, 30 January 1937, p. 6, 6 February 1937, p. 6, 13 March 1937, p. 6, 10 April 1937, p. 6, 17 April 1937, p. 6.

Petley qualified for the B.U.F.'s Second Class Certificate in the theory of elections by successfully sitting the examination for Agents held at National Headquarters.²²⁴

Mosley's frequent presence also helped to keep the Norwich B.U.F. in the public eye. Over a two year period from the end of 1935, the B.U.F. leader addressed no fewer than seven gatherings in the city, namely three public meetings, two private Blackshirt conferences and two business luncheons.²²⁵ The latter show clearly that the B.U.F. was attempting to broaden its appeal beyond the agricultural community by wooing commercial interest in the area. On 20 December 1935, Mosley gave a "short summary of the Fascist policy as affecting this country" to a luncheon audience at the Royal Hotel, Norwich. This meeting was attended by B.U.F. members and by several local business figures, who went on a 'no obligation' basis.²²⁶ Two years later, Mosley presided at another luncheon held at the same venue and took the opportunity to address the fifty businessmen and women present on the B.U.F.'s approach to foreign affairs.²²⁷ Eyewitness testimony suggests that this type of propaganda activity reaped some results. Eric Pleasants, an active Norwich Blackshirt between 1936 and 1939, recalled that the local Branch attracted mainly businessmen, professionals, shopkeepers and some well-to-do farmers.²²⁸

During the second half of 1937, the Branch busied itself with public meetings at the market place, canvassing, street newspaper sales and policy classes for members.²²⁹ Fragmentary evidence for 1938 suggests that these activities continued well into the following year.²³⁰ By late March 1938, Charles Petley had taken over as District Leader of the Norwich B.U.F, which was now operating from 21, Exchange

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 July 1937, p. 7.

²²⁵ See *N.N.W.P.*, 2 November 1935, p. 7, 28 December 1935, p. 4, 11 July 1936, p. 1, 19 December 1936, p. 1, 19 June 1937, p. 1, 18 December 1937, p. 7; *E.D.P.*, 14 December 1937, p. 9.

²²⁶ *E.D.P.*, 21 December 1935, p. 3; *N.N.W.P.*, 28 December 1935, p. 4.

²²⁷ *N.N.W.P.*, 18 December 1937, p. 7.

²²⁸ Eric Pleasants. Interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

²²⁹ *Blackshirt*, 11 September 1937, p. 6, 9 October 1937, p. 12, 16 October 1937, p. 6, 23 October 1937, p. 6, 30 October 1937, p. 6, 6 November 1937, p. 6, 13 November 1937, p. 6, 20 November 1937, p. 6, 27 November 1937, p. 6.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, May 1938, p. 2, June 1938, p. 7; B.D.B.J. C6/1/1/1. Coordinating Committee 1936-1939. Reports of Blackshirt Activities in the Provinces. c. July 1938.

Street.²³¹ This proved to be a temporary base because, within a few months, the local headquarters had moved to 21a, St. Giles'.²³²

After the intense speculation of 1935, the South-West Norfolk B.U.F.'s activities for the rest of the decade assumed far more modest proportions. The formation established at East Dereham in October 1935 continued to undertake small-scale political work throughout 1936.²³³ Moreover, two senior B.U.F. officers held meetings in the town during the same year. About 50 people gathered at the Assembly Rooms to hear Colonel H.E. Crocker give a Blackshirt address on 26 February.²³⁴ Nine months later, Clement Bruning, the B.U.F.'s Administrative Officer for Southern Propaganda, abandoned an advertised meeting at the same venue since "only a few could be enticed into the hall" in favour of an open air speech on the market place, where there was an "attentive audience".²³⁵ However, by June 1937, the local press understood that the East Dereham B.U.F. was no longer undertaking regular political work, and there were no reports of Branch activity after this date.²³⁶

The Blackshirt presence at Downham Market also seemed to tail off in the second half of the decade. Following his departure, and in line with reservations he had expressed about the movement's prospects in the locality, Bellamy's old formation appeared to become moribund. This view is supported by the fact that the B.U.F. meeting held at the town hall on 28 November 1936, at which J.A. McNab, the editor of the Fascist Quarterly, and Smeaton-Stuart spoke, was the only reported instance of Blackshirt activity in Downham Market after 1935.²³⁷ Thetford, too, rarely figured on the B.U.F.'s meeting schedule in the later 1930s. Raven Thomson, the Director of Policy, addressed a gathering of 50-60 people on foreign affairs, the corporate state and agriculture at the town's Guildhall on 21 March 1936.²³⁸ On the basis of this

231 E.D.P., 28 March 1938, p. 13.

232 Ibid., 17 November 1938, p. 5.

233 D.E.T., 29 February 1936, p. 5, 19 September 1936, p. 6.

234 Ibid., 29 February 1936, p. 6; E.D.P., 28 February 1936, p. 7.

235 D.E.T., 21 November 1936, p. 6.

236 Ibid., 19 June 1937, p. 5.

237 N.N.W.P., 5 December 1936, p. 9.

238 T.W.T., 28 March 1936, p. 4.

meeting, a local newspaper columnist concluded that the "Blackshirt movement does not appear as yet to have made any great impression upon Thetford".²³⁹ The only other report of fascist involvement with the town came in January 1939, when Miss Reeve participated in a local debate on Chamberlain's foreign policy.²⁴⁰

The movement's patchy recovery in Norfolk after 1935 was not helped by Smeaton-Stuart's resignation from the B.U.F. in July 1937, since it deprived the East Anglian Blackshirt organisation of one of its most energetic campaigners. He later recounted that the B.U.F. was riven with internal 'politics' and personal rivalries, particularly at National Headquarters, which hampered his fascist activities in the provinces from the outset.²⁴¹ Smeaton-Stuart considered that, by impeding his work in the eastern counties, the senior leadership "must have been either stupid or did not want it to grow the way I wanted it".²⁴²

The turning point came in March 1937, when the East Anglian Organiser was drafted in to run a committee room for the B.U.F. during the London County Council elections:

There I found myself right in the atmosphere of headquarters and I was frankly disgusted. We had a terrific competition going on between the two sections [Organisation and Propaganda]. Whether it was for personal glory or not I do not know, but I do know that the Propaganda Department was at daggers drawn with the Department of Organisation. At the end of the election I was congratulated on the work I had done, told to go back to East Anglia and carry on exactly as I had done for three months. The following three months I would have to spend nearer my constituency - Southend - and possibly move into Southend itself at the end of six months. But we were given a week's leave and during that week's leave the whole Propaganda Department was 'axed'. It rather disgusted me because I knew there was intrigue going on and I began to realise that this thing was not quite so idealistic as I thought. I expressed myself so.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁴⁰ *N.N.W.P.*, 21 January 1939, p. 10.

²⁴¹ P.R.O. HO 283/64/33-34. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart.

²⁴² P.R.O. HO 283/64/34.

Things began to go wrong and I maintain that they finally decided I was a nuisance to the Department of Organisation Chief and they literally fired me.²⁴³

Smeaton-Stuart left the movement on 27 July 1937, disillusioned with the in-fighting at the higher levels of the B.U.F. which had formed the background to the financial cut-backs imposed four months earlier. In a terse reply, dated 30 July 1937, Mosley maintained that the East Anglian Organiser's departure had more to do with the termination of his B.U.F. salary than with any "ideal" motives.²⁴⁴ Smeaton-Stuart emphatically denied this, claiming that he had already been offered a paid position as election agent for William Sherston, the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the Woodbridge division of Suffolk, to be funded from the latter's own income.²⁴⁵ According to Smeaton-Stuart's account, his resignation induced a number of other local members to leave the B.U.F., and, thereafter, "the whole district organisation in Norfolk fell to bits".²⁴⁶

4. The Failure of the Norfolk B.U.F.

According to the Griffin-Copsey conjunctural model, a key determinant of fascist or extreme right political success was a major social structural dysfunction (such as an acute socio-economic crisis), which severely eroded the legitimacy of the existing system, created widespread personal and political alienation, and made sections of the population responsive to fascist propaganda:

without a generalised 'sense-making crisis'...which called the status quo and all prevailing norms into question, fascism was impotent. But where objective pressures on the legitimacy of the existing liberal order created a sense of resonance with widely-held misgivings about its legitimacy and its capacity to deal with the crisis, it cast deep subjective doubts on whether the constitutional arrangements in which it is embodied were

²⁴³ Ibid..

²⁴⁴ P.R.O. HO 283/64/56. Oswald Mosley. Letter to John Smeaton-Stuart. 30 July 1937.

²⁴⁵ P.R.O. HO 283/64/35. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart.

²⁴⁶ P.R.O. HO 283/64/64. John Smeaton-Stuart. Letter to Home Office Advisory Committee. 7 June 1940.

not in fact alien to the national tradition, or an obstacle to its regeneration. At this point a fascist organisation could find itself with increased room to manoeuvre, and become a fully fledged 'mass movement'.²⁴⁷

This crucial precondition did not exist in Norfolk. Indeed, several features of the inter-war depression in Britain militated against such a crisis and restricted the B.U.F. to the political margins. Firstly, historians have noted that the indifferent performance of the British economy during the 1920s, when the jobless total never fell below one million, helped to lessen the impact of the 'Great Slump' at the end of the decade and thus blunt the appeal of economic and political radicalism.²⁴⁸ As Andrew Thorpe has suggested, this "made for more stability than if the depression of 1929-32 had followed a period of full employment".²⁴⁹ Hence, although the situation became more acute after 1929, the gradual onset of the slump denied the B.U.F. the political opportunities which might have accompanied a sudden and rapidly deepening economic crisis. After 1921, the staple industries, including the farming sector, experienced a significant downturn. The agricultural price index (1911-1913 = 100) plummeted from 292 in 1920 to 157 three years later, and, for the rest of the decade, the underlying trend was downward. By 1929, the index stood at 144.²⁵⁰

The gathering depression was clearly visible in Norfolk during the 1920s. Many of those who had invested in or purchased farms in the prosperous conditions of the immediate post-war period soon found themselves in economic difficulty. Just as their financial obligations increased, prices, and hence income, began to fall. The declining index also meant that farmers were now fully exposed to the economic 'time lag' between spending the outlay capital required to commence production and recouping this money at the eventual sale. For Norfolk arable farmers, the gap between initial

²⁴⁷ R. Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling' in M. Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 148.

²⁴⁸ J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *The Slump: Society and Politics during the Depression* (London: Quartet Books, 1979).

²⁴⁹ Andrew Thorpe (ed.), *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (University of Exeter: Exeter Studies in History, No. 21, 1989), pp. 7-8.

²⁵⁰ Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (M.A.F.F.), *A Century of Agricultural Statistics: Great Britain 1866-1966* (London: H.M.S.O., 1968), p. 85.

expenditure and final payment was approximately fourteen months.²⁵¹ Under such circumstances, losses were inevitable. Between 1924 and 1927, a Cambridge University survey investigated the profitability of 24 farms in the eastern counties, three of which were in Norfolk.²⁵² The results indicated that those most badly affected were located on the lightest and heaviest land. Smaller, family run farms tended to fare better, because of lower operating costs, but many larger county enterprises lost considerable sums during the 1920s. For example, between 1922 and 1929, seven farms occupying 3,388 acres on the Holkham estate sustained losses totalling almost £75,000.²⁵³

Due to the deteriorating economic climate, the number of Norfolk agricultural labourers fell by ten per cent in the decade after 1921.²⁵⁴ Moreover, with their revenue declining and prices dropping, farmers were keen to reduce their employees' wages, which accounted for nearly one-third of their fixed outgoings. Predictably, their attempts to drive down labour costs were resisted by local farm hands and the National Union of Agricultural Workers (N.U.A.W.) at a time when Norfolk agricultural labourers were the lowest paid farm employees in the country and their wages lagged well behind other manual occupations.

In March 1923, a drastic proposal to cut wages to 5.5d. per hour for a 54 hour week with no guarantee of a full week's work led to a N.U.A.W.-organised strike in the county.²⁵⁵ This lasted for five weeks and involved around 5,000 Norfolk agricultural workers. Eventually, on 18 April 1923, the two sides settled on 6d. per hour for a guaranteed 50 hour week, with special overtime rates above 54 hours. Even after the restoration of statutory wage legislation for agriculture in 1924, the Norfolk

²⁵¹ A. Douet, 'Norfolk Agriculture, 1914-1972' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of East Anglia, 1989), p. 113.

²⁵² University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture (U.C.D.A.), Four Years Farming in East Anglia 1923-1927 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 12, 1929), pp. 122-124.

²⁵³ Douet, 'Norfolk Agriculture' pp. 127-128.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁵⁵ For details of the Norfolk strike see A. Armstrong, Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980 (London: B.T. Batsford, 1988), Chapter Eight; A. Howkins, Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), Chapters VII and VIII; Douet, 'Norfolk Agriculture', pp. 115-126.

farmworkers' relative position remained the same. Weekly rates were increased in 1925 and 1926, the latter rise pushing agricultural wages in the county up to 30 shillings. They were fixed at this level until the end of 1931, 1s. 8d. below the national average for farm work.²⁵⁶

The poor state of farming in the 1920s also had repercussions for landowners. Between 1918 and 1922, rentals on private estates had risen by approximately 25 per cent in Norfolk, as elsewhere, in an attempt to offset a doubling of material costs, a threefold rise in labour expenditure and higher taxes.²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, these increases "did little more than regain some of the ground lost", and, after reaching a peak in 1922, rents thereafter reflected falling prices.²⁵⁸ Rebates became a noticeable feature on smaller, less affluent estates and poorer land in Norfolk during the mid- to late-1920s.²⁵⁹

Secondly, the B.U.F.'s progress was further impeded by the fact that in Norfolk, as in the country as a whole, the effects of the depression were not uniform. To be sure, much hardship was experienced by the county's farming sector in the 1930s. Eastern England was said to be in a state of "chronic indebtedness" in 1932, and most farmers only survived because of overdraft facilities.²⁶⁰ At this juncture, Norfolk farmers owed the banks £3.5 million, a sum approximately equivalent to £3 10s. for every acre of farm land in the county.²⁶¹ By the end of the decade, the agricultural price index, although edging upwards, was still nine points below the 1927-1929 level.²⁶² Low prices, compounded by higher farmworkers' wages, machinery costs and additional feed requirements for larger stock numbers, ensured that farmers struggled to improve their gross receipts.²⁶³

²⁵⁶ Douet, 'Norfolk Agriculture', p. 125.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 136-137. See also Pam Barnes, Norfolk Landowners since 1880 (University of East Anglia: Centre of East Anglian Studies, 1993), Chapter One.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

²⁵⁹ Ibid..

²⁶⁰ P.R.O. MAF 38/420. Bank Advances to Farmers, 1933-1945. 10 May 1932.

²⁶¹ Ibid.. Undated memorandum attached to a letter from William Deacon's Bank. 17 January 1939.

²⁶² M.A.F.F., A Century of Agricultural Statistics, p. 85.

²⁶³ U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England; U.C.D.A., Changes in the Economic Organisation of Agriculture (Farm Economics Branch, Report Nos. 22, 23,

Nevertheless, there were considerable variations within the county. More highly capitalised farms, which combined increased output with lower unit costs, were consistently profitable. Similarly, production could be raised by placing greater emphasis on sugar beet, secondary cash crops (including potatoes, fruit, seed crops and vegetables), dairying and pig rearing. Conversely, farms with extensive cattle and sheep-feeding commitments and a heavy reliance on barley for income generally found profits hard to come by. Indeed, lack of finance, poor soil quality and an inability to move away from traditional farming methods all placed obstacles in the way of profitability. Contemporary research suggests that most farmers in the county partially adjusted their agricultural operations to preserve their livelihoods, and those who moved into the most promising areas of production with sufficient capital and technical knowledge could make good profits.²⁶⁴

The better soil type areas fared best in the 1930s. North-east Norfolk, possessing good quality loams, doubled its sugar beet and pig production and increased the wheat acreage. The expansion of wheat, potato and sugar beet cultivation also took place on the silt fens. In less accommodating areas, such as central Norfolk and districts with heavier soil, some of the arable land, which had been turned into pasture at the height of the depression, was reclaimed, and sugar beet, wheat, dairy and pig production all increased. On the light lands of south-west Breckland, the growth of free range pig-keeping stimulated a rising barley acreage for feed. Yet, west Norfolk's continued reliance on malting barley and sheep offered poor financial prospects.²⁶⁵

Furthermore, although the regular agricultural workforce in Norfolk dropped from 34,598 to 29,482 during the 1930s, there were considerable variations between areas in the county.²⁶⁶ Job security depended on the relative economic strength of different agricultural sectors, the extent to which farmers adjusted their output

24, 26, 27, 29, 1933-1943).

²⁶⁴ Ibid..

²⁶⁵ Douet, 'Norfolk Agriculture', pp. 226-227.

²⁶⁶ M.A.F., *Agricultural Statistics 1931*, Vol. LXVI, Part I, p. 62; M.A.F., *Agricultural Statistics 1939* (London: H.M.S.O., 1941), Vol. LXXIV, Part I, p. 32.

accordingly and the ability to rely on cash crops. Between 1924 and 1939, the number of regular farm workers actually increased in the fens and east Norfolk by ten and five per cent respectively.²⁶⁷ Both these areas were involved in horticultural production, which was less affected by the depression. At the other end of the scale, many farms in west Norfolk had been abandoned, and the regular workforce had contracted by 29 per cent.²⁶⁸ For those who remained, agricultural wages crept upwards during the 1930s. In 1934, an adult male Norfolk farmworker earned a minimum weekly wage of 30s., but this had risen to 33s. 6d. by 1937, and, two years later, the rate stood at 34s. 6d..²⁶⁹ By this time, differences in agricultural wage levels had been largely eroded, and rates in Norfolk now either matched or marginally exceeded those in many other counties.

Finally, as Mosley later admitted, the B.U.F. had not been founded early enough to take political advantage of the slump.²⁷⁰ Just as the persistent economic problems of the 1920s and the depression's lack of uniformity tended to cushion the full impact of the 1929-1933 downturn, so the steady recovery in Britain from 1933 further prevented the B.U.F. from translating public discontent into significant fascist support. Hence, for much of its existence, the Blackshirt movement was attempting to attract a mass membership in the face of improving economic conditions. By the time the B.U.F. commenced its political activities in Norfolk in 1933, there were signs that the agricultural depression in the county was starting to recede. In October 1933, rising

²⁶⁷ Douet, 'Norfolk Agriculture', pp. 241-243.

²⁶⁸ Ibid..

²⁶⁹ The Agricultural Register 1934-5 (Oxford: Oxford Agricultural Economics Research Institute, 1935), p. 321; The Agricultural Register 1936-7 (Oxford: Oxford Agricultural Economics Research Institute, 1937), p. 229; The Agricultural Register 1938-9 (Oxford: Oxford Agricultural Economics Research Institute, 1939), p. 262-263; Armstrong, Farmworkers, p. 183. Between 1934 and 1938 minimum weekly wage rates for adult farmworkers rose from 28s. to 34s. in Suffolk, and from 30s. to 34s. 6d. in Essex. After 1924 there was an improvement in agricultural workers' earnings due to rising wages and a fall in the cost of living. Between 1924 and 1939, the cost of living fell by eighteen per cent, farmworkers' rates increased by 24 per cent, and real agricultural wages rose by about 40 per cent. In contrast, general manual earnings and real wages increased by only six per cent and twenty per cent respectively over the same period. However, it should be remembered that wage rates were usually higher and working hours shorter in other industries. See E. Mejer, Agricultural Labour in England and Wales Part II: Farm Workers' Earnings 1917-1951 (University of Nottingham: School of Agriculture, Department of Agricultural Economics, 1951), pp. 66-67.

²⁷⁰ Mosley, My Life, p. 310.

prices for barley, pigs and sheep began to ease the Norfolk farmers' cost-price ratio.²⁷¹ Moreover, regular surveys of 50 farms in the central Norfolk loam district indicate that farm income, although unpredictable, remained above 1931-1933 levels for the rest of the decade.

TABLE 3
ECONOMIC TRENDS PER FARM OF THE CENTRAL NORFOLK LOAM DISTRICT, 1931-1939*

	1931	1932	1933	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Gross Charges (£)	982	873	994	1091	1129	1144	1138	1124
% Change	1931-33=100			115	119	121	120	118
Gross Income (£) +	948	869	1108	1301	1292	1333	1305	1566
% Change	1931-33=100			133	133	137	134	161
Farm Income (£) #	-34	-4	114	210	163	189	167	442

(Source: University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture, A Financial Retrospect of Farming in the Eastern Counties of England 1931-1941, Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 33, June 1942)

* no survey was conducted in 1934

+ includes subsidies

the farm income figure is derived by subtracting the gross charges from the gross income for each year

These local economic conditions did not create the “subjective sense of crisis” which had to develop if the B.U.F. was to make political progress in the county.²⁷² The level of, and response to, unemployment in Norfolk during the 1930s reinforces this argument and supports earlier academic research examining how most of the out-of-work reacted to their predicament in the inter-war period. Although Mosley’s main reason for founding the B.U.F. was to solve the unemployment problem, few of the jobless in Britain were stirred by fascist promises in the 1930s. The long-term depression in the regions associated with the staple industries, including agriculture, generally fostered widespread apathy and fatalism, which prevented the unemployed

²⁷¹ U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1933 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 22, July 1934), p. 5 and p. 7.

²⁷² Griffin, ‘British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling’, p. 147.

from becoming a radicalising force in British politics.²⁷³ Several factors contributed to such passivity amongst the unemployed, including the widely-held view that the economic crisis had no obvious solution, the collective experience of unemployment in the areas most affected, the availability and administration of unemployment provision and the relative geographical isolation and essential conservatism of the jobless.²⁷⁴ Hence, even in the hard-hit areas targeted by the Blackshirts, those without work did not normally abandon their traditional Labour and trade union allegiances. Moreover, the small proportion of the jobless who became politically radicalised tended to look to the Communist Party and the National Unemployed Workers Movement (N.U.W.M.) for help, rather than the B.U.F.. Even then, as Harry Harmer's detailed investigation of the N.U.W.M. has shown, the extreme left could only engage the unemployed to any significant extent through the reformist activity of offering support and expertise in benefit payment cases brought before referees' tribunals.²⁷⁵

The extent and experience of unemployment in Norfolk during the 1930s placed significant barriers in the path of fascist growth. For 82 of the 116 months between January 1930 and August 1939, the county unemployment level (for the insured working population) was below the overall rate for Great Britain.²⁷⁶ Moreover, unemployment peaked in Norfolk in January 1933 at 24.9 per cent, well before the B.U.F. were organising on any scale in the county.²⁷⁷ Thereafter, as the B.U.F. attempted to establish itself in Norfolk between mid-1933 and late 1934, local unemployment began to fall, a trend which continued until 1938 and was then resumed in 1939. By July 1937, the county rate had fallen to 8.8 per cent.²⁷⁸ Faced with

²⁷³ See for example J. Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 291-293.

²⁷⁴ Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, pp. 270-276.

²⁷⁵ Harry Harmer, 'The National Unemployed Workers' Movement in Britain 1921-39: Failure and Success' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1987), pp. 156-184.

²⁷⁶ Ministry of Labour, *Local Unemployment Index*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1930-1939), January 1930-August 1939.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, January 1933, p. 2.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, July 1937, p. 2.

gradually improving job prospects in the county for much of its existence, the B.U.F. could make little headway.

Furthermore, for the most part, those out of work in Norfolk during the 1930s accepted their position with a sense of resignation, which helped to insulate them from the appeals of the extreme left and right. Many contemporaries noted the passive response of the county's unemployed during this period. At King's Lynn, for example, the Trades and Labour Council found that the apathy of the jobless made it difficult to stage successful local demonstrations against unemployment, and, in 1932, the Mayor referred to the town's unemployed as "the best behaved in England".²⁷⁹ Similarly, H.K. Hales, the M.P. for Stoke-on-Trent, after helping to canvass in Norfolk during the 1931 General Election campaign, told the House of Commons of:

...the distress and hopeless outlook of every one connected with that industry [agriculture]...I found that men had lost the will to live and that the women were broken-hearted at the outlook and were without hope to cheer them in their monotonous existence. It seemed as though emigration or the dole were the only alternative.²⁸⁰

Even in places, such as Norwich and Great Yarmouth, where unemployment remained a persistent problem for much of the decade, the jobless failed to provide the B.U.F. with a mass base. The Norwich unemployment rate, for example, reached 19.8 per cent in January 1933 and remained in double figures until June 1939, when it dipped to 9.4 per cent.²⁸¹ However, as Paul Cunningham's research has shown, the operation of the relief system in the city combined with the modest aspirations and conservatism of the bulk of the unemployed in Norwich to marginalise the appeal of fascist and communist remedies.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Richards, *King's Lynn*, p. 148.

²⁸⁰ *Parliamentary Debates* (House of Commons), Vol. 260, 1931: 1606.

²⁸¹ *Local Unemployment Index*, January 1933, p. 2, June 1939, p. 2. At Great Yarmouth, unemployment peaked at 33 per cent in January 1933 and remained above the British rate for 86 of the 116 months between January 1930 and August 1939.

²⁸² p. Cunningham, 'Unemployment in Norwich during the Nineteen Thirties' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of East Anglia, 1990), Chapters Six-Thirteen.

Three features of the complex network of unemployment provision operating in the 1930s reinforced the political passivity of the jobless in Norwich. Firstly, whatever the limitations of the unemployment relief system in the 1930s, it was perceived to be a considerable advance on those which had existed before and immediately after the First World War. In particular, the 'safety net' for those facing absolute destitution had been widened through the extension of the unemployment insurance scheme and the introduction of 'off insurance' benefits.²⁸³

Secondly, all forms of assistance in the 1930s were underpinned by a traditional moralistic and deterrent outlook, which served to regulate and contain the out-of-work. The culture of the Poor Law permeated the entire unemployment relief structure. Unemployment insurance attracted a high disqualification rate, and both transitional payments and unemployment allowances were only approved after detailed scrutiny of the overall income of the claimant's family. Ingrained Poor Law attitudes, such as the belief that husbands should maintain their wives and that the family of a claimant should contribute to the upkeep of their unemployed, were also carried over into the 1930s. Moreover, the Public Assistance Committee (P.A.C.) had the authority to attach various conditions to the granting of assistance, such as the expectation that the claimant would actively seek work. The P.A.C. was also empowered to provide relief in kind if, in its view, cash payments were likely to be squandered and to prosecute either fraudulent claims or men who abandoned their wives and families. Penalties were also imposed against unwarranted claims in both unemployment insurance and unemployment allowances. In addition, the authorities reserved the right to cancel or alter payments. Thus, the system of unemployment provision in Norwich, imbued with the ethos of social control and conditional support, tended to enervate rather than radicalise:

The unemployed individual, faced with the continuing difficulties of seeking a new job and surviving on the "dole", would be further discouraged from a too public

²⁸³ Ibid., pp. 329-330.

and prominent involvement in political agitation on the issue of unemployment; the system of relief reinforced the passivity of the unemployed by making the granting of payments uncertain and conditional.²⁸⁴

Thirdly, the unemployment relief system also provided a focus for discontent which did not directly challenge the economic or political order. Changes in assistance levels or procedures, such as the introduction of the means test into the transitional payments scheme and the ten per cent cut in unemployment benefits in 1931-1932, led to some local protest amongst the jobless. The establishment of the Unemployment Assistance Board (U.A.B.) in 1935 provoked public criticism in Norwich as well. Yet, such unrest was quelled by a reversion to the former conditions or levels of relief, and, in the case of the U.A.B., the popular hostility roused by the new unemployment allowance was rapidly dissipated by the 'Standstill Act'.²⁸⁵

The exceptionally modest aspirations of the Norwich unemployed themselves also precluded the possibility of mass radicalisation or the development of a revolutionary mentality. The jobless in the city tended to seek council relief work and unemployment assistance, which preserved their dignity and was devoid of any Poor Law connections.²⁸⁶ Most of the local unemployed retained traditional conservative attitudes, not only towards relief and the dole, but also towards institutions, such as the monarchy. The death of George V in 1936 produced expressions of loyalty to the throne from the city's workless.²⁸⁷ Three years later, when George VI visited Norwich to open the new City Hall, he was received at the Unemployment Welfare Association by the hundreds of jobless present without incidents or demonstrations of any kind.²⁸⁸

As regards efforts to entice the unemployed, the Norfolk B.U.F. was almost uniformly unsuccessful. Apart from a few such recruits in places like Downham Market, the local movement had a negligible impact on this section of society. Cunningham's conclusion that the B.U.F. "failed totally to make any inroads into the

²⁸⁴ Cunningham, 'Unemployment in Norwich', p. 331.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 332.

²⁸⁶ Ibid..

²⁸⁷ *E.D.P.*, 25 January 1936, p. 6.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 5 December 1985, p. 14.

unemployed working class in Norwich” can be extended to the rest of the county.²⁸⁹ At Great Yarmouth, the formation of a Blackshirt Branch in 1933 was accompanied by public fascist assurances that the unemployed could enrol at reduced rates and call upon B.U.F. assistance if they encountered problems with the unemployment relief system.²⁹⁰ However, few, if any, took up the offer. The Norfolk movement’s failure to make any headway with the unemployed was further revealed by the almost complete absence of reports in the fascist and local press regarding representations made by the B.U.F. on behalf of benefit claimants in the area.²⁹¹ Indeed, more radical members of the unemployed often spearheaded the anti-fascist opposition which disrupted B.U.F. activities in places such as Norwich and Great Yarmouth.²⁹²

Acutely hampered by these unfavourable socio-economic conditions, the county B.U.F. was further marginalised by the policies of the mainstream right and left during the 1930s. From 1931, the National Government provided a framework for agricultural recovery by introducing a variety of measures to help the beleaguered farming community.²⁹³ These initiatives offered three methods of assistance - tariffs, deficiency payments and market regulation - in a piecemeal programme built around the Import Duties Act of 1932, the Wheat Act of 1932 and the Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933. By turning agriculture in the 1930s into “a highly protected, organised and subsidised sector of the economy”, in order to combat the effects of the depression, the government also undermined the potential appeal of the B.U.F.’s agricultural policy in the eastern counties.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ Cunningham, ‘Unemployment in Norwich’, p. 335.

²⁹⁰ *Y.M.*, 13 May 1933, p. 15.

²⁹¹ *Blackshirt*, 24 August 1934, p. 11 refers to one case of B.U.F. representation in Norfolk.

²⁹² See for example *N.N.W.P.*, 26 October 1935, p. 7; *Y.M.*, 17 June 1933, p. 11.

²⁹³ Informative accounts of the National Government’s agricultural policy are to be found in E. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1914-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming 1870-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Andrew F. Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy, 1912-36: A Study in Conservative Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Richard Perren, *Agriculture in depression, 1870-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁹⁴ S. Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy 1914-1990* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p. 64.

The improvement in Norfolk farm profitability in 1932-1933 owed much to the intervention of the 1932 Wheat Act, which guaranteed a price of ten shillings per cwt. by imposing a levy on the sale of flour. In June 1932, wheat sold at Norwich Corn Hall commanded only six shillings per cwt., but the next crop attracted a subsidy of 4s. 3d. per cwt., which immediately prompted a 45 per cent expansion in the county wheat acreage to 132,000 acres in 1933.²⁹⁵ Norfolk farmers also benefited from continued government support for the sugar beet industry. Originally, under the terms of the 1925 British Sugar Subsidy Act, the sugar beet subsidy (backdated to 1924) was to last for ten years, but, in 1934, it was renewed for a further twelve months and then made permanent under the Sugar Industry Reorganisation Act of 1936.²⁹⁶ Agriculture in the county received an additional boost with the creation of the Potato and Milk Marketing Boards, which enabled farmers collectively to control prices, production and sales.²⁹⁷

The wheat and sugar beet subsidies played an important part in stabilising price levels, accounting for one-third of the sugar beet return and raising market prices of wheat by 100 per cent between 1932 and 1934. In the latter year, Norfolk agriculture received sizeable subsidies, amounting to £3 15s. per acre of wheat grown and £7 for every acre of sugar beet.²⁹⁸ Indeed, the extent of state aid led to criticism in the local press that Norfolk farmers were the “spoilt babies of British Agriculture”.²⁹⁹ Nevertheless, although such support provided much-needed assistance in Norfolk, government legislation did not usher in a period of unbridled agricultural expansion. Once wheat output exceeded 27 million cwt., as it did in 1934, the deficiency payment was progressively reduced. Similarly, under the 1936 Act, the sugar beet subsidy tied production to the existing area of cultivation, and the Potato Marketing Board limited farmers to their approximate 1931-1933 acreages.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁵ Douet, ‘Norfolk Agriculture’, p. 222.

²⁹⁶ Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, pp. 165-169 and pp. 244-245; Brown, *Agriculture in England*, p. 119.

²⁹⁷ Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, pp. 246-258; Brown, *Agriculture in England*, pp. 114-122.

²⁹⁸ Douet, ‘Norfolk Agriculture’, p. 223.

²⁹⁹ *E.D.P.*, 19 January 1935. Quoted in *ibid.*.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

The ideological and moral pressures exerted by the labour movement, together with other factors, also helped to ensure that the Norfolk B.U.F. was unable to create a sizeable working class constituency. The case of the farmworkers, the largest manual occupational group in the county during the 1930s, illustrates some of the difficulties faced by the fascists not only in Norfolk but also in Suffolk and Essex.³⁰¹ Firstly, an obvious ideological barrier existed since Norfolk in particular, and East Anglia generally, were strongholds of agricultural trade unionism. During the period 1930-1940, the estimated membership of the N.U.A.W. rose from 23,831 to 39,268. Most of these unionised farm employees were concentrated in the eastern counties.³⁰² In line with its pro-Labour orientation, the N.U.A.W. remained consistently anti-fascist and regularly urged its members through its journal, The Land Worker, to reject British and continental fascism:

Fascism - German, Italian, or any other - is not an advance, but a throwback. Dictatorships of any sort are a throw-back. They appeal to those who fear that if the choice of leaders depended on reason only, they would get left behind. The lust for power to control others is the worst lust to which men can yield...this evil is all over Europe, but in England we must stand firm against it. All the witness of our experience is against it. Only by this stand can we preserve our freedom.³⁰³

Secondly, as the B.U.F. conceded, the scattered distribution of the agricultural labour force and the fragmented nature of farm employment made it extremely difficult for the provincial Blackshirt movement, with its limited resources, to contact, mobilise and retain rural workers.³⁰⁴ This problem became increasingly acute in the mid- to late 1930s, as the regional movement's funds and active personnel dwindled. Thirdly, the

³⁰¹ The difficulties associated with the organisation and mobilisation of agricultural labourers are discussed in Armstrong, Farmworkers, pp. 185-186; H. Newby, The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia (London: Allen Lane, 1977), pp. 226-227; J.A. Venn, The Foundations of Agricultural Economics (London: Cambridge University Press, 1933), pp. 226-227.

³⁰² Newby, The Deferential Worker, p. 228; H. Newby, Green and Pleasant Land? Social Change in Rural England (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 142.

³⁰³ The Land Worker, December 1933, p. 13. See also *ibid.*, November 1933, p. 14, February 1934, p. 4, April 1934, p. 11, June 1934, p. iii, June 1934, p. 8, December 1936, p. 1.

³⁰⁴ Blackshirt, 8 June 1934, p. 11.

close working relationship between employer and employee enabled the farmer to exert pressure, normally in the form of quiet persuasion, to dissuade a worker from adopting 'unacceptable' affiliations. Finally, the B.U.F. were targeting a shrinking occupational group. Between 1930 and 1939, the number of regular farmworkers in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex fell by 14.79, 13.09 and 8.55 per cent respectively.³⁰⁵ This 'drift from the land' had several causes, including the impact of the depression, the growth of mechanisation in agriculture, changes in farm organisation, and the lure of better paid employment with shorter working hours in other sectors of the economy.

Faced with such obstacles, the Norfolk B.U.F. struggled to enrol manual workers. In 1933, the movement created the Fascist Union of British Workers (F.U.B.W.), which was designed to gain working class support by acting on behalf of claimants before public assistance boards, seeking to resolve industrial disputes and protecting fascists with jobs from discrimination at the workplace.³⁰⁶ It also compiled a Blackshirt register of jobless people looking for vacancies, which was available to employers. During 1933 and 1934, R.J. Sutterby, the East Anglian Area Officer for the F.U.B.W., was given the task of making working class converts in urban and rural Norfolk. F.U.B.W. representatives took the fascist message around the county in these early years, and a small number of agricultural labourers and urban workers did join local Branches.³⁰⁷ In 1934, farmworkers accounted for a significant proportion of the King's Lynn B.U.F. membership, and the Norwich formation attracted a few manual adherents, including railway and print workers, operatives from the boot and shoe industry and unskilled labourers.³⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority

³⁰⁵ M.A.F., *Agricultural Statistics 1930-1939* (London: H.M.S.O., 1931-1941), Vols. LXV-LXXIV. Between 1930 and 1939 the number of regular farmworkers fell from 34,598 to 29,482 in Norfolk, from 24,619 to 21,396 in Suffolk, and from 24,583 to 22,481 in Essex. The total number of regular and casual farmworkers fell by 9.79 per cent in Norfolk, thirteen per cent in Suffolk, and 8.82 per cent in Essex over the same period.

³⁰⁶ *Blackshirt*, February 1933, p. 4.

³⁰⁷ *N.N.W.P.*, 4 November 1933, p. 4; *D.E.T.*, 2 December 1933, p. 3; *T.W.T.*, 17 February 1934, p.

³⁰⁸ *E.D.P.*, 13 September 1934, p. 7; Bernard Tester. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1993; Pointer. Taped interview. Bernard Tester was a police officer stationed at Norwich during the 1930s. He had no connection with the B.U.F..

belonging to these categories rejected fascism, and assembled membership profiles tend to suggest that most Norfolk Blackshirts had non-manual occupations.³⁰⁹ B.U.F. luncheons for the local business community, which took place in Norfolk and King's Lynn from the mid-1930s, also indicate that the movement viewed the county's middle class as potentially more amenable.³¹⁰

A range of other external constraints deprived the Norfolk B.U.F. of much-needed political legitimacy. By 1936, in many areas around the country, local authorities had effectively banned the B.U.F. from using public halls under their control. This denial of municipal premises was usually motivated by the political opposition of Labour-dominated councils, local anti-fascist pressure and concern about property being damaged during a Blackshirt meeting. Thus, in the words of one commentator, by the mid-1930s "the hand of local government closed like a vice around the windpipe of British fascism".³¹¹ Private owners too, fearing that their premises might be wrecked, became increasingly unwilling to accede to B.U.F. requests.

Norfolk, however, did not conform neatly to this general pattern. Across the county as a whole, the B.U.F. was able to gain access to indoor venues throughout the 1930s. As late as 1939, for example, Mosley held political gatherings at the King's Lynn Corn Exchange and Aylsham town hall.³¹² Nevertheless, at Great Yarmouth and Norwich, the Blackshirts were denied the use of public halls, no doubt because of the disruption which often accompanied B.U.F. activities in these two urban centres. Without such an outlet in the County Boroughs, the Norfolk B.U.F.'s opportunities for high profile political campaigning were reduced. Furthermore, by having to rely almost exclusively on open-air meetings in these parts of Norfolk to maintain contact with the public, the Blackshirts were not only more vulnerable to the disruptive tactics of

³⁰⁹ See Chapter Seven.

³¹⁰ See for example *E.D.P.*, 21 December 1935, p. 3, 14 December 1937, p. 13; *N.N.W.P.*, 18 December 1937, p. 7.

³¹¹ D.S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931-81* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 135.

³¹² *L.N.C.P.*, 31 January 1939, p. 10, 28 July 1939, p. 10.

anti-fascists but were also less likely to attract 'respectable' support given the movement's association with the street politics of the fringe.

In August 1933, the Conservative council at Great Yarmouth refused an application for the B.U.F.'s founder to hold a meeting at the town hall on 30 September, probably on the grounds that serious disturbances were likely to occur at such an event.³¹³ In protest, local Mosleyites daubed pro-fascist slogans on the walls of several political clubs in Yarmouth, and the Branch Organiser claimed that the council's action represented a deliberate attempt by the "old parties...of this worn-out democracy" to check "the rapid growth of Fascism".³¹⁴ No B.U.F. meeting was ever held at Great Yarmouth town hall.

The Labour-controlled local authority at Norwich also appeared reluctant to make its facilities available to the British Union. Not one of Mosley's three public meetings in the city took place in council premises, although it is evident that the Blackshirts made approaches. In July 1936, when presiding at the B.U.F. leader's second market place speech, Smeaton-Stuart complained that their request to hire a public hall for the occasion had been declined and that private proprietors had also refused, even when given a fascist undertaking to insure against possible damage.³¹⁵ Eventually, in June 1937, Mosley was able to address an indoor meeting at Norwich, when the B.U.F. secured the use of the Carlton Cinema.³¹⁶ However, this turned out to be the first and last reported instance of a B.U.F. event taking place in a large venue at Norwich.

More direct forms of anti-fascist opposition, which resulted in sporadic violence and disruption, also served to discredit the county Blackshirt movement by associating it with disorder and physical confrontation. This was most apparent at Norwich, where several such incidents occurred. In September 1936, for example, a large crowd of anti-fascists came to blows with a small group of uniformed Blackshirts as the latter

³¹³ *Y.M.*, 12 August 1933, p. 3, 19 August 1933, p. 9.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18 November 1933, p. 11.

³¹⁵ *N.N.W.P.*, 11 July 1936, p. 1.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19 June 1937, p. 1.

were about to enter the Norwich B.U.F. District Headquarters in Redwell Street. Once the fascists had managed to get inside, their opponents made an unsuccessful attempt to break the door down and then vandalised a B.U.F. vehicle which was parked nearby. Those responsible for the damage quickly dispersed as the police arrived.³¹⁷

On at least two occasions Blackshirt meetings held in Norwich market place also resulted in violence.³¹⁸ In June 1933, the first B.U.F. public address at Great Yarmouth had to be abandoned because of the N.U.W.M.-orchestrated 'wrecking' tactics used by the several hundred unemployed who attended this event. Shortly afterwards, Cyril Betts, Secretary of the Norwich Communist Party, appeared before Yarmouth Police Court for his part in organising the disruption and received two fines of five pounds.³¹⁹ King's Lynn occasionally experienced similar problems. An agitated heckler, who was later fined five shillings for disorderly conduct, forced the closure of a Blackshirt meeting at the Tuesday market place, King's Lynn on 21 July 1936.³²⁰ Violence also marred Mosley's speech at the town's Corn Exchange in January 1939. His appearance on the platform led to a ten minute 'free fight' in the hall between B.U.F. stewards and a group of anti-fascist protesters.³²¹

Although regional newspapers tended to give the B.U.F. less hostile coverage than their national counterparts, particularly after the Rothermere interlude, the Norfolk press also helped to limit the influence of the Blackshirt movement in the area. Most of the county's newspapers reported local fascist activities in an even-handed manner and published letters from B.U.F. members and sympathisers throughout the 1930s. However, their coverage of events on the continent and of the violence associated with fascist marches and meetings elsewhere in the country cast the B.U.F. in a negative light. Editorials and regular columns reinforced this picture by overtly

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 September 1936, p. 1, 19 September 1936, p. 1; *E.D.P.*, 21 September 1936, p. 9.

³¹⁸ *N.C.*, 25 October 1935, p. 9; *N.N.W.P.*, 17 October 1936, p. 11.

³¹⁹ *Y.M.*, 17 June 1933, p. 11, 1 July 1933, p. 16.

³²⁰ *L.N.C.P.*, 28 July 1936, p. 12; *N.N.W.P.*, 1 August 1936, p. 9.

³²¹ *L.N.C.P.*, 31 January 1939, p. 10; *N.N.W.P.*, 4 February 1939, p. 5. As a result of this clash, two people later received hospital treatment, two demonstrators were forcibly ejected from the meeting, and one Mosleyite was knocked unconscious.

criticising Blackshirt attempts to attract local support. For example, 'The Tatler', who wrote a weekly column for the Norfolk Chronicle, was decidedly unimpressed:

Undoubtedly, Fascism will claim a few followers, because there is a certain irresponsible type of adult which cannot resist dressing up in fantastic uniforms, saluting, and generally playing at soldiers, but I have sufficient faith in the sound common sense of the average Norfolk to know that stunt politics will never catch on generally.³²²

Denied potential mobilising issues in the agricultural sector, the county B.U.F. also had few prospects as a local anti-Jewish movement since the social, political, economic and cultural factors which made anti-Semitism such a potent drawing card for the organisation in the East End of London were entirely lacking in Norfolk.³²³

³²² N.C., 27 September 1935, p. 10. See also E.D.P., 29 October 1935, p. 8.

³²³ The origins and impact of anti-Semitism in the East End of London are analysed in C. Holmes, Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); C. Holmes (ed.), Immigrants and Minorities in British Society (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978); C. Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the B.U.F.' in K. Lunn and R. Thurlow (eds.), British Fascism (London: Croom Helm, 1980); G. C. Lebzelter, Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939 (London: Macmillan Press, 1979); C. Husbands, 'East End Racism 1900-1980', London Journal, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1982), pp. 3-26; C. Husbands, Racial Exclusionism and the City: the Urban Support of the National Front (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983). For B.U.F. statements on the 'Jewish Question' see Oswald Mosley, Tomorrow We Live (London: Abbey Supplies, 1938), pp. 57-61; Britain and Jewry (London: Greater Britain Publications, n.d.); E.G. Clarke, The British Union and the Jews (London: Abbey Supplies, n.d.). Political anti-Semitism in the eastern part of the capital had deep-rooted social origins and was informed by a historical tradition of hostility towards aliens which, from the late Victorian era, had stressed anti-Jewish themes. Since the 1880s, east London had served as a settlement and staging area for Jewish immigrants fleeing from persecution in eastern Europe. By the 1930s, the East End was home to a large identifiable Jewish minority (comprising roughly one-third of the Jews in Britain) which preserved its own culture, language, laws and religious practices, and which figured prominently in certain local trades and industries. This influx of immigrants exacerbated many existing social difficulties in an economically declining region faced with unemployment and housing problems. Some of the new arrivals were able to prosper in east London, but criticism was levelled at the supposedly exploitative practices of Jewish businesses and landlords there. Indeed, before the B.U.F. became involved in the East End, the Labour and Communist Parties had expressed consternation at the methods of some local Jewish employers. The political left and the Jewish establishment maintained that fascism could best be contained by eradicating this alleged malpractice and by encouraging the Jewish community as a whole to adopt a code of conduct which was above reproach. Many Gentile Eastenders regarded the Jewish presence as an alien intrusion which threatened to undermine native social, economic, political and cultural interests. These attitudes, linked to genuine social discontent, made certain East End localities responsive to racial populists and anti-immigrant groups from the turn of the century. The B.U.F. rationalised its opposition to Jewry by claiming that (1) the Jews were persecuting the Blackshirt movement because fascism was striving to dismantle the 'Jewish' system of international usury and curtail Jewish influence, (2) the Jews controlled the major institutions and the mass media (either directly or through financial pressure) and used this power to advance the cause of international finance at the expense of British interests, (3) the Jews were attempting to embroil Britain in a war with Germany and Italy because the continental fascist nations posed a grave threat to international finance, and (4) the Jews operated as a

Scholars have put forward several arguments to account for the B.U.F.'s anti-Jewish stance. Psychological explanations have emphasised that the B.U.F. attracted, and was influenced by, adherents who exhibited anti-Semitic personality features. In particular, some Mosleyites used scapegoating mechanisms to project the blame for personal deficiencies and other problems onto the Jewish community. Mandle, for example, has stated that the "unconscious dynamic of the B.U.F....towards anti-Semitism" was driven by traits within the Blackshirt elite and wider membership which promoted antipathy towards the Jews.³²⁴ These characteristics included a high degree of individualism (at the leadership level), an attachment to conformity and discipline (at the rank and file level), the conviction that catastrophe may strike, belief in a Jewish conspiracy, personal insecurity, and an inability to maintain social and other relationships. Personality factors clearly played a crucial role for some within the B.U.F., such as William Joyce, but it cannot be argued, on the available evidence, that most Blackshirts possessed an anti-Semitic psychological make-up. Person-orientated explanations also make little reference to the wider social context in which the movement operated.

Another approach, endorsed by Benewick, has maintained that Mosley's turn to anti-Semitism in 1934 represented a cynical act of political expediency which was designed to resuscitate his ailing organisation by mobilising a new constituency of support.³²⁵ According to this interpretation, the violence at Olympia, the loss of Rothermere's backing and the receding depression threatened to destroy the B.U.F.'s prospects. In response to this crisis, the Blackshirts decided to take up the 'Jewish issue' as a propaganda weapon because anti-Semitism existed as a social force, Britain

'state within a state', were loyal only to each other, and had no national allegiances. Once in government, the B.U.F. planned to stop immigration and deport all Jews guilty of 'anti-British' conduct. Those Jewish residents who remained were to be stripped of British citizenship. Mosley also advocated the establishment of a Jewish national homeland (outside Palestine and the British Empire) for resettlement purposes.

³²⁴ W.F. Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists* (London: Longmans, 1968), pp. 19-23. Mandle considered that this psychological approach had to be viewed in conjunction with the B.U.F.'s political opportunism in adopting an anti-Semitic platform.

³²⁵ R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p. 133 and p. 151. See also Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists*, pp. 18-19 and p. 23.

possessed a number of geographically dispersed Jewish settlements, most notably in east London, and Nazi vilification of the Jews had reaped political rewards in Germany. This 'opportunistic' view of Blackshirt anti-Semitism oversimplifies what was, in reality, a complex and multifaceted process. It underplays the importance of ideological, socio-economic and cultural factors, and neglects to consider adequately the divisions which existed within the B.U.F. leadership regarding policy towards the Jews.

Skidelsky, Holmes and Thurlow have advanced a more sophisticated 'interactionist' thesis which argues that the B.U.F.'s anti-Semitism was largely the product of the convergence of opposed political, social, economic and cultural forces.³²⁶ For example, key elements of the Blackshirt programme for national revival, including 'Britain First', 'Britain for the British' and hostility to finance capital, encouraged an anti-Jewish perspective because certain sections of the resident Jewish community retained their own separate identity and some Jews were involved in merchant banking and similar occupations. Blackshirt antipathy towards the Jews also stemmed from the movement's 'symbiotic' relationship with the East End of London, an area where longstanding social and economic problems were complicated by significant Jewish immigration and a tradition of anti-Semitism. Moreover, the dynamics of the B.U.F.-Jewish conflict at street level fuelled fascist hostility since this type of confrontation involved not only unprovoked Blackshirt violence but also physical attacks made on B.U.F. personnel by militant Jewish activists. Critics assert that the interactionist argument needs to be treated with caution on the grounds that it partially reinforces Mosley's self-seeking claims about the 'aggressive' Jewish reaction to British fascism and underestimates the extent to which political calculation underlay the B.U.F.'s anti-Semitism.³²⁷

³²⁶ R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975), Chapter Twenty; R. Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism' in Lunn and Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism*, pp. 78-99; Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society*, pp. 185-190; Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the B.U.F.', pp. 118-123; R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918-1985* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 104-111.

³²⁷ Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, pp. 95-102.

More recently, T.P. Linehan's 'municipal particularist' analysis of the B.U.F. in east London has examined how the organisation was able to mobilise significant levels of support in Hackney, Stoke Newington, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Stepney and Poplar, partly by articulating and exploiting local anti-Semitic themes.³²⁸ Concentrated Jewish settlement and economic activity in the East End combined with the area's depressed condition and nativist anti-immigrant traditions to generate a number of anti-Jewish grievances within the host communities, which attracted many lower-middle and working class Gentiles to the Blackshirt movement during the mid to late 1930s. By providing an outlet for locationally-specific concerns, such as the perceived disruptive effects of Jewish residential 'encroachment' in Hackney and Stoke Newington, Gentile resentment of Jewish economic competition in Bethnal Green (particularly in the independent retail trade) and accusations that Jewish councillors in Stepney were favouring their co-religionists in the allocation of local authority jobs and street trading licences, the B.U.F. was able to tap a sizeable anti-Semitic constituency in the East End.³²⁹

For a number of reasons, however, the Norfolk B.U.F. could not emulate the east London movement's ability to capitalise on local anti-Jewish disaffection.³³⁰

³²⁸ T.P. Linehan, East London for Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex 1933-40 (London: Frank Cass, 1996).

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapters Two and Three.

³³⁰ An analysis of the factors limiting the development of anti-Semitism in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex partially supports Andreski's demographic-economic model. According to Andreski, demographic factors which increase the ratio of minority group to majority group members contribute to the growth of majority group antagonism towards non-dominant minorities. This hostility is triggered when the minority-majority ratio stands at approximately ten per cent. Andreski has also suggested that majority group animosity is influenced by the degree of economic competition between the minority and majority populations. However, although the demographic approach can help to account for the existence or absence of anti-Semitism, several important qualifying remarks need to be made. Firstly, the emergence and perpetuation of anti-Jewish attitudes within a given area are not necessarily dependent on the physical presence of Jews. Secondly, a certain level of immigration (in terms of absolute numbers or concentration in specific districts) can lead to problems but the minority-majority ratio activating hostility is neither constant nor can it be predicted accurately. Finally, there is little evidence to indicate that a close correlation exists between the relative size of an immigrant population, or its rate of growth, and the development of public attitudes. Bearing these reservations in mind, it would seem prudent to agree with Holmes that "at all times we need to probe behind the emphasis on the size of immigration in order to locate the economic, social and cultural fears, based on an interaction of past and present influences, which have provided the bases of opposition to immigration, which have provided a context in which those with deep-seated personality hatreds could flourish, and which have underpinned the stress on numbers and given it its

Jewish settlements in the county were tiny in comparison with their East End counterparts in the 1930s. At this time, there were approximately 350,000 Jews living in Britain, and, of the 230,000 residing in London, 150,000 were located in the eastern districts. Outside the capital, the only notable centres of Jewish population were Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow, with 37,000, 30,000 and 15,000 respectively.³³¹ Thus, whereas 60,000 Jews lived in Stepney, 20,000 in Bethnal Green and smaller settlements were to be found in Hackney, Shoreditch and Bow, Norwich had only 140 Jewish inhabitants in 1939, Great Yarmouth 25 and King's Lynn five.³³²

Since it was more scattered and less numerous, Norfolk Jewry was also far less visible. As a result, the county, unlike the East End, had no distinct geographically-defined Jewish communities or residential districts. In turn, this offered little focus for anti-Semitic resentment and served to dissipate any potential for Gentile-Jewish tensions. Moreover, lacking the east London experience of large scale immigration, Norfolk had not developed a variant of the nativist political and cultural tradition, which assisted B.U.F. recruitment in the East End. Given that, in 1931, the county contained only 272 naturalised Britons and fewer than 430 aliens, such ethnocentric perspectives could hardly flourish.³³³

Owing to their extremely low population densities and wide dispersal in Norfolk, neither Jews nor other minorities could be viewed as an alien 'menace' to the area. They were not concentrated in particular occupations in sufficient numbers to be construed as a serious threat to the livelihoods of those members of the host community who were engaged in the same types of work. Indigenous fears of residential and cultural 'swamping' were similarly non-existent. By the same token,

significance." See S. Andreski, 'An Economic Interpretation of Anti-Semitism', *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 5 (1963), pp. 201-213; B. Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Without Jews: Images of the Jews in England 1290-1700* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975); C. Holmes, 'The impact of immigration on British Society 1870-1980' in T. Barker and M. Drake (eds.), *Population and Society in Britain 1850-1980* (London: Batsford, 1982), p. 183.

³³¹ V.D. Lipman, *A History of the Jews in Britain since 1858* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), pp. 204-207; *The Jewish Year Book 1939* (London: The Jewish Chronicle, 1939), pp. 345-348.

³³² R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p. 393; *The Jewish Year Book 1939*, pp. 346-347.

³³³ *Census 1931: General Tables*, Table 30, p. 204.

these groups could not be perceived as pursuing self-interested local political agendas, nor portrayed as receiving preferential treatment in the distribution of important resources, such as accommodation and jobs. Consequently, the 'ethnic issue' offered the Norfolk B.U.F. little in the way of a promising propaganda target, since there were no local widely-held anti-minority grievances to be exploited or championed.

This assessment is supported by an examination of the B.U.F.'s political activities in the county. Certainly, some Norfolk members exhibited anti-Semitic tendencies. For example, Oliver Hawksley, the Sheringham-based Area Officer for the north of the county, apparently informed the local Labour Party agent that the first plank of the Blackshirt programme was "to clear out the JEWS".³³⁴ Albert Gore, a King's Lynn Mosleyite who owned a film transport company and four cinemas, admitted that he had "always been opposed to the apparent domination of this country by the Jews".³³⁵ Gore also maintained that Alfred Ilett, the local District Leader, supported Hitler's anti-Semitic policies.³³⁶ However, oral testimony provided by two former Norfolk Blackshirts and newspaper reports indicate that anti-Semitism did not form a central element of the movement's local campaign.³³⁷ The Secretary of the Board of Deputies Coordinating Committee came to similar conclusions after visiting Norfolk and Lincoln in October 1937 to gauge the nature and extent of B.U.F. activity in the area:

As to the policy enunciated by them in this part of the country, they [the B.U.F.] make no reference to Jews though there is an occasional reference to international finance as its being one of the reasons why agriculture is so stagnant and why adequate prices are not obtainable for home produce. The Jew is almost unknown in Norfolk

³³⁴ LP/FAS/34/193. In 1940, the Home Office Advisory Committee noted that Hawksley "dislikes all foreigners". HOAC Report. Oliver Hawksley. 7 November 1940.

³³⁵ P.R.O. HO 45/23681/840457. A.E. Gore. Letter to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs. December 1940.

³³⁶ P.R.O. HO 45/23681/840457/C. Aliens Advisory Tribunal Court No. 1. Notes of a hearing at the Berystede Hotel, Ascot, on Monday, 30th September 1940. Appellant: Mr. Albert Edward Gore.

³³⁷ Pleasants. Interview; Francis Jermy. Taped interview with Stephen Cullen, 1985; Francis Jermy. F.O.M. taped interview, 1989. Proposals to safeguard agriculture and the small trader dominated the B.U.F.'s propaganda effort in the county.

and the language and references used by the Fascists in Bethnal Green would only arouse amazement and probably amusement in the minds of the bucolic audience, the great majority of whom have never seen a Jew in their lives.³³⁸

Indeed, it would appear that the B.U.F.'s association with anti-Semitism helped to alienate at least one senior regional official. Shortly after leaving the organisation, John Smeaton-Stuart, a former County and Area Organiser, maintained that, when he had joined in 1934, the movement was not anti-Jewish. However, in his view, later on "it become more and more so; and I told them that I thought this was unscientific and certainly inhuman".³³⁹

The external factors conspiring to marginalise the B.U.F. in Norfolk were compounded by the local organisation's numerous shortcomings and weaknesses. In line with Griffin and Copsey's conjunctural models, internal deficiencies (relating to key issues, such as the calibre of the leadership, level of activism, commitment of the membership, and the degree of unity and purpose) ensured that the county Blackshirt movement possessed neither the dynamism nor the organisational coherence to establish itself as a credible political alternative.

Since the provincial B.U.F. depended heavily on the dedication of local and regional officials, the departure of a capable Blackshirt leader often resulted in the complete or temporary demise of the Branch concerned. Bellamy remembered several formations succumbing, due to the key personnel leaving: "You see many good Branches fade away when the man, through his natural abilities in his private life has been transferred or promoted...within a few weeks [the Branch] has collapsed again".³⁴⁰ Home's resignation as the senior official at King's Lynn plunged the local Branch into a protracted leadership crisis, which lasted for most of 1934.³⁴¹ Similarly,

³³⁸ B.D.B.J. C6/1/1/1. Memorandum on Fascist Activities in Norfolk and Lincoln. October 1937. See also B.D.B.J. C6/1/2. Jewish Defence Committee Minutes 1936-1939. Reports from the Provinces. July 1939 and November 1939.

³³⁹ P.R.O. HO 283/64/42. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart.

³⁴⁰ Bellamy. Taped interview.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Bellamy's promotion to the Blackshirt post of Administrative Officer for Northern Meetings at the end of 1935 deprived the East Anglian B.U.F. of a capable political organiser. Within a year or so of taking up his new duties, Bellamy's pioneering efforts in south-west Norfolk appeared to be in terminal decline.³⁴²

Ironically for a movement which prided itself on the 'leadership principle', the B.U.F. appeared to have more than its fair share of inadequate officials at both national and local level. The Norfolk organisation proved to be no exception. At King's Lynn, for example, the inability of Gargett and McCormick to impose discipline in 1934 led to the temporary collapse of the Branch. Local fascists conceded that, at this stage, the King's Lynn B.U.F. had "no good leadership at the top".³⁴³ Moreover, frequent personnel changes prevented the creation of stability and continuity within even the better-established Norfolk formations. Between 1933-1934 and 1939, both the King's Lynn and Norwich B.U.F. each experienced at least six changes of leadership. Such a high turnover hardly fostered a sense of purpose or permanence.

Internal conflicts had a net debilitating effect and, in several instances, led to the resignation of much-needed county activists. The departure of Will Smith, the District Administrative Officer for the south-west Norfolk area of Stoke Ferry in 1933-1934, was particularly damaging, since he disclosed his reasons for abandoning Mosley's cause in a letter to the King's Lynn press.³⁴⁴ In the process, he drew attention to some of the more unsavoury features of the regional movement. For a number of months, Smith had had reservations concerning the legality of the B.U.F.'s involvement in the tithe war, the extreme nature of various Blackshirt publications and the violent activities of a 'disreputable' section of the local membership. He also claimed that a number of people in the area were making money out of the organisation. Almost inevitably, when Smith raised these doubts and allegations internally, he found himself in conflict with the national and local leadership. Apparently, after sending his

³⁴² *D.F.T.*, 19 June 1937, p. 5.

³⁴³ Bellamy. Taped interview.

³⁴⁴ *L.N.C.P.*, 27 March 1934, p. 9; *L.A.*, 23 March 1934, p. 7.

criticisms to Robert Forgan, the B.U.F.'s Deputy Leader, Smith was reprimanded by Richard Bellamy and others before being instructed to refrain from contacting National Headquarters by letter.³⁴⁵

The nature of the B.U.F. membership in the county did not encourage either activism or lasting commitment to the movement. Gerry Webber has argued that, throughout the 1930s, the B.U.F. relied heavily on the support of dissident Tories, who were alienated by the pragmatic and consensual nature of Baldwinite Conservatism, the trend towards imperial decline epitomised by the 1935 Government of India Act, a perceived lack of patriotism within the party and Churchill's objections to Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.³⁴⁶ This view is supported by the available evidence relating to the Norfolk B.U.F.. Several high profile Blackshirt leaders in the area had been prominent local Tories before endorsing Mosley. Brian Smith, Miss L.M. Reeve and Dorothy, Viscountess Downe all fell into this category. John Smeaton-Stuart was another disillusioned Tory.³⁴⁷ Had further biographical information come to light, it is likely that many other Norfolk Blackshirts would have been added to this list.

Much impressionistic evidence concerning the two main centres of fascist activity in Norfolk reinforces the view that the local B.U.F. was largely sustained by members of occupational and social groups traditionally associated with the Conservative Party, such as farmers, businessmen, small traders and ex-military officers. According to Blackshirt and non-fascist sources, the Norwich B.U.F. depended chiefly on recruits drawn from the local farming and business community, with additional support coming from a few professionals, young Conservatives, shop assistants and unskilled workers.³⁴⁸ King's Lynn Mosleyites too were typically shopkeepers, small traders, businessmen or farmers, and several members in the district

³⁴⁵ Ibid..

³⁴⁶ G. C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 43-46.

³⁴⁷ P.R.O. HO 283/64/33.

³⁴⁸ Pleasants. Interview; Pointer. Taped interview; P.R.O. HO 144/20141/315.

had held commissions in the armed services.³⁴⁹ As far as can be ascertained, this broad pattern of recruitment was repeated in other parts of the county where the B.U.F. was able to establish a foothold.

Furthermore, in 1940 one county adherent claimed that a number of local Tories had belonged to the King's Lynn formation: "There is no doubt whatever that if inspection were made of the Membership Registers of the British Union now or at one time held by the Chief Constable at Lynn, many names would be found of prominent members of the Conservative party and other notabilities in the Town".³⁵⁰ Assessments provided by both the Conservative Party in Norfolk and the regional press indicate that the B.U.F. had the potential to win over discontented Tories in the area. In October 1937, Sir Thomas Cook, the sitting Tory M.P. for North Norfolk, conceded that the four Norfolk B.U.F. parliamentary candidates would attract a small anti-National Government protest vote but predicted that if they stood at the next general election they would be humiliated at the polls, just as Mosley's New Party had been in 1931.³⁵¹ However, other leading local Conservatives offered less comforting assessments of Blackshirt political influence in the north of the county. At the annual meeting of the Fakenham Branch of the North Norfolk National and Conservative Association in November 1937, several speakers expressed their concerns regarding the political influence of Downe and the B.U.F. in the area. Mr. W.H. Dennett warned fellow Tories against dismissing Downe's candidature because, in his view, she might be able to secure 3,000 votes. Lord Suffield also noted that the Dowager had previously worked for the Conservative Party at King's Lynn and could win over a number of Tory voters. Furthermore, he understood that parts of the North Norfolk division were responding positively to the Blackshirts' agricultural policy. Mr. F. Wortley concluded

³⁴⁹ See Chapter Seven.

³⁵⁰ P.R.O. HO 45/23681/840457. A.E. Gore. Letter to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs. December 1940. According to Gore, Alfred Ilett, then King's Lynn District Leader, informed him that a number of local Conservatives were each contributing 2s. 6d. to the B.U.F.'s funds. See P.R.O. HO 45/23681/840457/C. Aliens Advisory Tribunal Court No. 1. Notes of a hearing at the Berystede Hotel, Ascot, on Monday, 30th September 1940. Appellant: Mr. Albert Edward Gore.

³⁵¹ *N.N.W.P.*, 16 October 1937, p. 11.

by urging the party to make every effort to ensure that Downe did not make significant inroads into the Tory vote.³⁵² Local newspapers shared the opinion that the prospect of B.U.F. general election candidates in Norfolk threatened to reduce Conservative support at the polls.³⁵³

Although Norfolk did produce a small number of dedicated Blackshirt activists, generally speaking, the local B.U.F. membership lacked both the dynamism and ideological commitment to campaign openly for the movement. Most B.U.F. adherents in the county remained passive supporters, inhibited by notions of social respectability and the desire to protect their livelihoods from the commercially damaging effects of adverse publicity. For these reasons, many local Blackshirts not only shied away from street politics and market place meetings, but were also reluctant to become involved in routine propaganda activities, such as newspaper selling and leafleting. These attitudes and constraints severely limited the Norfolk movement's ability to sustain its propaganda efforts on any meaningful scale. Richard Bellamy recalled that the "respectable" B.U.F. Branch at King's Lynn in the mid-1930s undertook little political work and functioned more as a haven for literal social fascists: "...they got money and they rented a large house...and they had a bar there, and they drank cups of tea, and they all stood round and were very brave together, which is what O.M. [Oswald Mosley] deplored...[They] didn't get out on the streets".³⁵⁴

This reliance on disgruntled socially conservative elements within the Norfolk community also made the creation of a long-term stable membership highly problematic for the regional B.U.F., since such transient support tended to ebb and flow in response to national and local events. For example, fascist involvement in the East Anglian tithe war and Rothemere's endorsement of the B.U.F. boosted recruitment in Norfolk, but

³⁵² Ibid., 27 November 1937, p. 4.

³⁵³ See for example *ibid.*, 26 October 1935, p. 7; *E.D.P.*, 24 October 1935, p. 8; *T.W.T.*, 31 August 1935, p. 3.

³⁵⁴ Bellamy. Taped interview.

the numbers fell away once the Blackshirts had been legally compelled to abandon their direct intervention at Wortham and the Tory press baron had broken with Mosley.³⁵⁵

The Norfolk B.U.F. also failed to produce many registered speakers from the ranks of the local membership, which further militated against effective propaganda campaigns in the area. In turn, this reflected the B.U.F.'s slender support base in the county and the fact that most local Blackshirts were reluctant to be so publicly identified with the movement. Some Norfolk Branches, notably those at King's Lynn and Norwich, did hold regular open-air meetings for periods during the 1930s, but even these efforts fell far short of a coordinated and sustained attempt at political conversion. After 1934, Blackshirt formations elsewhere in the county were either unable or unwilling to maintain regular public political activities, such as meetings and sales drives.

Given the Norfolk B.U.F.'s relatively small membership, the local movement's promotion of fascism was continually hampered by insufficient manpower and finance. This ongoing problem was exacerbated by two important developments. Firstly, from 1935, the B.U.F.'s greater success in the East End of London encouraged the organisation to channel most of its resources into this area, thereby depriving the regions of much needed support.³⁵⁶ Moreover, with the drying up of Italian funding for the B.U.F. in 1936, Mosley was forced to impose drastic cuts, which slashed expenditure by 70 per cent in 1937 alone and reduced the national organisation's payroll from 350 to 50 between 1936 and 1939.³⁵⁷ As the central administration contracted under economic pressure, its ability to control the regions declined, and, increasingly, local Districts had to fend for themselves, despite the dedication of remaining officials and volunteers.

The Norfolk B.U.F.'s general lack of resources was graphically exposed by the May 1935 decision to remodel the movement along parliamentary constituency lines.

³⁵⁵ See Chapter Seven.

³⁵⁶ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 104-111.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-138.

With the exception of the considerable efforts made by local Blackshirts and the national leadership to establish a South-West Norfolk Fascist Constituency Association in 1935 as a prelude to electoral activity, this reorganisation remained largely a paper exercise in Norfolk. New B.U.F. Districts, based on the existing parliamentary constituencies, were created in the county, but it remained beyond the local movement's capacity to develop either an extensive electoral machine or a thriving political organisation in any of them.

The Blackshirt Districts established in the South and East Norfolk divisions attracted negligible support and failed to establish even a rudimentary constituency organisation. Mosley, never one to understate the level of fascist support, admitted as much in December 1937, when he conceded that the two Districts had not advanced sufficiently to merit the selection of prospective parliamentary candidates.³⁵⁸ In fact, during the later 1930s, the fascist press only once referred to the East Norfolk B.U.F., and there are no reports of meetings taking place in the area after 1936.³⁵⁹ Furthermore, although by August 1936 local Blackshirts claimed that a nucleus of B.U.F. members had been established in the vicinity of Diss, so the task of creating fascist electoral machinery in the South Norfolk division could now commence, there is no evidence to suggest that this endeavour got off the ground.³⁶⁰ Thereafter, fascist activity at Diss seemed to be confined to occasional open-air meetings and sales drives conducted by B.U.F. leaders from Suffolk and elsewhere in Norfolk.³⁶¹ Reorganisation at Great Yarmouth was equally hard to discern, despite the fact that low-key Blackshirt activity continued in the town after 1934. As with the East and South Norfolk divisions, the B.U.F.'s failure to put forward a prospective candidate for the parliamentary borough no doubt reflected the Yarmouth B.U.F.'s fragile support and lack of resources.

³⁵⁸ *E.D.P.*, 14 December 1937, p. 9.

³⁵⁹ *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 12.

³⁶⁰ *N.N.W.P.*, 15 August 1936, p. 3.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1938, p. 5; Ronald Creasy. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1995.

Even in the four constituencies where B.U.F. prospective parliamentary candidates were selected, there is little evidence to suggest that by the late 1930s the movement was making significant electoral and political progress. Despite the renewed activity which accompanied Ilett's nomination, the King's Lynn District B.U.F. was crushed in the one ward it contested during the November 1938 local elections and failed to develop any semblance of a Blackshirt Divisional structure in line with the May 1935 reforms.³⁶² The Norwich B.U.F. also lacked the support and resources to make the transition from a fringe political group to full-blown constituency organisation. Preparations in the parliamentary borough never got beyond basic canvassing activities in several wards and the training of an election agent.³⁶³

A similar fate befell the movement's constituency organisation in south-west Norfolk after 1935. Gerald Brown, who had succeeded Bellamy as the Blackshirt Political Organiser for the division in September 1935, was in turn replaced by Nigel A. Pelham by the following December.³⁶⁴ Pelham, at least during the early part of 1936, attempted to galvanise the local movement by "establishing formations in villages and hamlets", keeping in regular contact with the East Dereham B.U.F. and organising meetings in the south of the county.³⁶⁵ Nevertheless, such activity was short lived. By mid-1937, the Blackshirts' constituency office in Station Street, Swaffham had closed down and the Political Organiser had departed.³⁶⁶

Miss L.M. Reeve, the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the South-West Norfolk division, also endeavoured to retain and generate popular interest in fascism in the area. However, her efforts appeared to be hampered by the local movement's organisational deficiencies and lack of resources. Although Reeve was one of the first B.U.F. parliamentary candidates to be announced, almost a year elapsed

³⁶² *L.A.*, 4 November 1938, p. 3.

³⁶³ *Blackshirt*, 10 April 1937, p. 6, 3 July 1937, p. 7, 9 October 1937, p. 12, May 1938, p. 2, June 1938, p. 7.

³⁶⁴ 'Who's Who in Fascism'; *N.C.*, 25 October 1935, p. 1; P.R.O. HO 144/20146/76-79. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F., 16 December 1935; *E.D.P.*, 10 February 1936, p. 3.

³⁶⁵ *Blackshirt*, 28 March 1936, p. 6; *E.D.P.*, 10 February 1936, p. 3; *D.E.T.*, 29 February 1936, p. 5.

³⁶⁶ *D.E.T.*, 19 June 1937, p. 5.

before her formal adoption meeting took place. Eventually, on 27 September 1937, Mosley delivered a speech on agriculture at the New Hall, East Dereham in support of her candidature.³⁶⁷ Mosley's endorsement at East Dereham, according to the fascist press, enabled Reeve to establish "contacts" in the locality as part of an ongoing campaign.³⁶⁸ She continued her propaganda work for the movement during 1938 and 1939, but the available sources indicate that her efforts were, at best, intermittent.³⁶⁹ Indeed, the fact that Reeve felt compelled to write to the local press in March 1939 in order to deny reports that she had left the movement was symptomatic of the general malaise affecting the South-West Norfolk B.U.F. by the late 1930s.³⁷⁰

Despite the presence of Lady Downe, a high profile active convert, to carry the fascist banner in the North Norfolk Division, the movement's prospects seemed little better in this part of the county. Once again, the proposed constituency organisation could not be translated into reality due to the lack of support and resources. The North Norfolk B.U.F. remained reliant on a handful of committed activists and a small, geographically scattered membership. Downe's frequent campaigning on behalf of the movement in the area during the later 1930s had little discernible effect. On at least one occasion, at Fakenham in February 1939, she was forced to cancel an advertised speech due to lack of public interest.³⁷¹ Moreover, the author Henry Williamson, an ardent Mosleyite who assisted Lady Downe at a number of her meetings in north Norfolk, drove out with the Dowager at night in her car, equipped with a platform and microphone, but found that "Only the flint-and-brick walls sent the echoes of our words back to us".³⁷²

³⁶⁷ *Blackshirt*, 2 October 1937, p. 8; *E.D.P.*, 28 September 1937, p. 12.

³⁶⁸ *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 12.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, July 1938, p. 6; *N.N.W.P.*, 21 January 1939, p. 10.

³⁷⁰ *E.D.P.*, 3 March 1939, p. 13.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21 February 1939, p. 16.

³⁷² Williamson, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, pp. 282-283.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE B.U.F. IN SUFFOLK 1933-1939

1. Introduction

Apart from the B.U.F.'s involvement in the East Anglian 'tithe war', little is known about the movement's efforts to create a support base in Suffolk. The B.U.F. presence in the county after 1934, in particular, remains largely unexplored territory, even though one prominent local Mosleyite was elected on the Blackshirt platform to a Suffolk town council towards the end of the decade. The following investigation concentrates on this neglected area by examining the progress of the county movement between 1933 and 1939. For clarity and ease of analysis, this chapter is once again split into three sections which, in turn, outline the local socio-economic context, trace the development of B.U.F. Branch and District structures in Suffolk, and identify the conjunctural factors militating against fascist success in the county.

2. Suffolk in the 1930s

In 1931, the total population of the Administrative Counties of East and West Suffolk, together with that of the County Borough of Ipswich, was 401,114 persons. Since 1801, when the Ancient County registered 214,404 inhabitants, Suffolk, like Norfolk, had consistently lagged behind the overall growth rate for England and Wales.¹ By the early 1930s, East Suffolk (with its associated County Borough of Ipswich), which covered 557,353 predominantly rural acres, had a population of 294,977. Of these, 174,447 were concentrated in urban areas. The County Borough of Ipswich, with 87,502 people, was the most populated area. Contained within the Administrative County of East Suffolk were five Municipal Boroughs, seven Urban

¹ Census of England and Wales 1931: County of Suffolk Part I (London: H.M.S.O., 1933), p. vii. See also Census of England and Wales 1931: Preliminary Report (London: H.M.S.O., 1931), Part III, Table I, p. 1. Throughout this thesis the term 'Suffolk' refers to the area bounded by the Administrative Counties of East and West Suffolk and the County Borough of Ipswich.

Districts and ten Rural Districts. Lowestoft, one of the constituent Municipal Boroughs, recorded a population of 41,769 in 1931, making it the largest town.²

West Suffolk, the smaller of the two Administrative Counties, occupied 390,916 acres, but urban localities accounted for approximately only five per cent of this acreage. The 1931 West Suffolk population of 106,137 was divided into urban and rural components of 41,507 and 64,630 persons respectively. Comprising two Municipal Boroughs, four Urban Districts and eight Rural Districts, West Suffolk did not possess any large urban centres. The Municipal Borough of Bury St. Edmunds, containing 16,708 people at the beginning of the 1930s, was the most prominent. Indeed, by this stage across Suffolk as a whole, only Ipswich and Lowestoft had populations exceeding 40,000. Most towns in the area could not muster 5,000 inhabitants.³

During the decennium following 1921, the population density for Suffolk remained constant at 0.4 persons per acre. The corresponding average ratios for urban and rural areas were 3.9 and 0.2 respectively. Predictably, the 1931 Census recorded the highest individual urban densities at Lowestoft (12.6) and Ipswich (10.8) and found the lowest located in much smaller places, such as the Municipal Borough of Eye (0.4) and the Urban District of Glemsford (0.6). The least congested urban areas possessed acreage densities which tended to be the norm in rural Suffolk.⁴

Between 1921 and 1931, Suffolk's supply of structurally separate occupied dwellings had increased from 92,541 to 103,118. During the same period, the number of private families also rose by 11.43 per cent from 95,482 to 105,615. Consequently, there was a slight fall in the average number of families per occupied dwelling from 1.03 to 1.02.⁵ By 1931, 13.2 per cent of these families resided in property offering up to three rooms, 49.5 per cent had four or five rooms at their disposal, and 37.3 per cent occupied six or more. However, the continued high incidence of marriage in the county

² Ibid..

³ Ibid., pp. vii-viii.

⁴ Ibid., p. viii.

⁵ Ibid., p. xi.

after 1921, compounded by a marked fall in the birth rate, partially explained the fact that, although the number of private families had risen, the mean size of a Suffolk family had declined from 3.99 to 3.62 persons. As a result, the average number of persons per occupied room had fallen from 0.77 to 0.70 in the decade following 1921.⁶ These findings prompted the Registrar-General to state that it was “no doubt the case” that housing provision in Suffolk had generally improved in the ten years leading up to 1931.⁷ Over the same period, the extent of overcrowding in the county, measured in terms of more than two people to a room, had also been reduced. In 1921, 3.75 per cent of the Suffolk private family population lived in overcrowded conditions, but, ten years later, this had fallen to 2.41 per cent.⁸

Agriculture dominated the local economy. In the East Suffolk Administrative County (including the County Borough of Ipswich) 23,298 of the 128,649 employed were directly engaged in agriculture, including 3,120 farmers and 14,127 agricultural workers and farm servants.⁹ In West Suffolk, over one quarter of the occupied workforce, numbering 49,966, obtained their livelihoods from agriculture. Within this category were 1,661 farmers and 8,786 agricultural labourers and farm servants.¹⁰ As with Norfolk, small-scale agricultural holdings tended to be the norm. Government statistics revealed that, across Suffolk as a whole in 1931, 4,314 of the 8,362 recorded holdings were less than 50 acres in size, and only 460 exceeded 300 acres.¹¹

Suffolk was acknowledged to be “predominantly an arable region”.¹² In the mid-1930s, 70 per cent of the 716,574 acres under crops and grass was arable land. This amounted to over half the total area of the whole county. Barley and wheat were

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁹ Census of England and Wales 1931: Occupation Tables (London: H.M.S.O., 1934), Table 16, p. 346.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*.

¹¹ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (M.A.F.), Agricultural Statistics 1931 (London: H.M.S.O., 1932), Vol. LXVI, Part I, pp. 64-65.

¹² R. W. Butcher, ‘Suffolk (East and West) Parts 72-73’ in L. Dudley Stamp (ed.), The Land of Britain: The Report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain (London: London Geographical Publications, 1938), p. 320.

the two main cereal crops, the former giving better yields on the lighter loams, and the latter grown more successfully on the heavy clays. Wheat predominated in the south, west and central parts, and barley in the north, east and around Bury. Between 1926 and 1931, for example, approximately 80-100,000 acres were given over to wheat each year, and the annual barley acreage topped the six figure mark.¹³ Oats, the third cereal, was grown across Suffolk, but cultivation was most pronounced in the Newmarket area in response to the foodstuff needs of the racehorse industry. In the 1926-1931 period, approximately 50,000 acres of oats were sown each year in Suffolk. On the light soil of Breckland and in the east, around 5-7,000 acres of rye, mixed corn and similar crops were grown, often to provide poultry and game foodstuffs.¹⁴

Assisted by government legislation from the mid-1920s, sugar beet had become Suffolk's most important root crop, gradually displacing mangolds, turnips and swedes. Beet was to be found in the central and eastern loam districts, the light soil area of the north-west and the clays of mid- and south-west Suffolk. By the early 1930s, sugar beet accounted for over 30,000 acres each year. This amounted roughly to a tenfold increase on the position of 1924.¹⁵ Beans, peas and cabbages were also grown in the county, mainly for fodder. Clover, grown for seed and hay, occupied 70-90,000 acres each year during this period. Other crops grown on a small scale included carrots, celery, asparagus, chicory and mustard. Suffolk possessed a few scattered nurseries, and commercial orchards were located in the Fens and around Ipswich and Sudbury. During the 1930s, some land was turned over to orchard and market garden crops, particularly in the Bury loam area and the heavy clay region of the south-west.¹⁶

Stock raising also made an important contribution to the Suffolk rural economy. Pig production, a prominent local livestock industry, was largely confined to the central and eastern districts. By 1935, the county was responsible for seven per

¹³ Ibid., pp. 321-322.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 322-323. See also P.J.O. Trist, *A Survey of the Agriculture of Suffolk* (London: Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1971), Chapter Eight.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 323-325 and p. 338.

cent (240,182) of the total output for England and Wales. The same area was also engaged in the fattening of 40,000 or so bullocks during the decade. In the low-lying grassland situated along the Waveney and Gipping rivers and in the districts bordering Eye, Diss and Sudbury, dairy farming was pursued. The number of cows in milk had increased from approximately 26,000 in 1926 to 30,000 by the mid-1930s. Most of the milk produced was consumed in the region, but some went to London. The county also possessed around 200,000 sheep, and, although these were found across Suffolk, they were concentrated on the Eastern Sands and Gravels and in the Newmarket, Breck and south-western districts.¹⁷

Poultry farms tended to be located either near the main population centres or in the relatively poor crop producing regions with sandy or heavy clay soils. In the later 1930s, there were 2,000,000 head of poultry, 50,000 ducks, 10,000 geese and 50,000 turkeys in Suffolk, accounting for four per cent of the total fowl population of England and Wales. London took a significant number of eggs and dressed birds. Game-rearing, particularly pheasants, was undertaken in a few places, including the area around Woodbridge.¹⁸

Outside Ipswich and Lowestoft, the most important Suffolk industries were connected to agriculture. Bury St. Edmunds was the main brewing and malting centre. Cider was also fermented there and at Ixworth, mostly for the county's consumption. Agricultural implement factories were to be found at Bury and Sudbury, and fertiliser was manufactured at Stowmarket and Bramford. Sugar and bacon were processed at Bury and Elmswell respectively. A gut factory operated at Sudbury, and Stowmarket possessed a creamery and tanning works. A number of woven fabrics were produced in the county as well. Sacks and twines for agriculture were made on a significant scale at Halesworth, coconut matting came from Sudbury, and horsehair fabrics were

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 339-340.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 340.

manufactured at Glemsford, Lavenham and Haverhill. Glemsford also produced silken fabrics.¹⁹

Those Suffolk industries which had no link with agriculture were “few and unimportant”.²⁰ Chemical works were situated at Stowmarket, celluloid production took place on the Stour estuary, and corset-making was undertaken at Sudbury. A large printing concern was based at Beccles, and sail cloth was made locally at Bungay and Halesworth. Building materials, such as bricks and cement, were produced at Sudbury, Woolpit and Claydon. Flint knapping was still pursued on the heaths around Brandon.²¹

Ipswich, Suffolk’s chief port and largest market town, contained a wide variety of industries and trades, many of which had agricultural links. The largest milling operations were located in the County Borough, turning foreign wheat, maize, oilseed and other imported products into stock feed. Brewing and malting were also pursued on a commercial basis in the town, and several factories specialised in the production of sugar, bacon and fertiliser. Tanning and the manufacture of sacks and twine for agricultural purposes provided other forms of local employment. One of the largest and best known Ipswich firms, Ransomes, Sims and Jefferies Ltd., was established in 1789 and specialised in general electrical and agricultural engineering. The company’s Orwell Works on the docks covered 35 acres and engaged approximately 3,000 employees. Flour mill equipment specialists, Messrs. E.R. and F. Turner Ltd., were among the town’s other engineering concerns.²²

Railway plant, cranes and sluices were produced at the premises of Messrs. Ransomes and Rapier Ltd., and other local enterprises manufactured a range of products, including boots, shoes, clothing, corsets and bricks. Several shipyards also operated at the port. Another large Ipswich-based firm, Messrs. W.A. and A.C.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 342.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 343.

²¹ Ibid..

²² R. Malster, *Ipswich: Town on the Orwell* (Lavenham: Terence Dalton, 1978), pp. 11-19 and pp. 51-62.

Churchman, produced tobacco and cigarettes. Goods sent to Britain through the port came mainly from Belgium, the Netherlands, France and America. These imports comprised chiefly of grain, oilseed, oil-cake, iron, products to make artificial manure, phosphate of lime, timber, salt, slate, stone and sugar. Ipswich's export trade was based principally on agricultural implements, railway plant, artificial manures, oils and oil-cake, bricks, corn, roots and flour.²³

By the late 1920s, Lowestoft was the fourth most important fishing port in the U.K., and, together with its associated industries, this trade was the town's economic mainstay. Trawl fishing, particularly for plaice and sole, engaged about 180 boats in 1927 and produced a catch valued at £350,000. During the same period, some 450 drifters, over half of which were locally-based, operated from the port at the height of the herring season. In 1927, it was estimated that 291,860 crans of herring, worth almost £500,000, were landed at the port.²⁴

Several industries and trades were connected to the local fisheries. The bulk of the herring catch was pickled, salted or smoked in the town for export to Germany, Belgium, Italy, Greece, the Levant and the Baltic states. A large factory in the vicinity canned herring for overseas consumption, and other firms turned fish waste products into tallow, animal feed and organic manures. The presence of the drifters also created employment for net-makers and repairers. Lowestoft's ship and boat-building yards constructed and maintained steam drifters, sailing trawlers and a wide range of other working vessels. At nearby Oulton Broad, firms concentrated on the pleasure craft market. Local engineering companies similarly catered for the fishing industry by manufacturing marine motors, steam engines, castings and ship equipment, as well as commercial machinery.²⁵

Lowestoft was also home to a number of concerns engaged in automobile construction and coachwork. In the same field, other local companies produced car

²³ Ibid..

²⁴ Lowestoft Incorporated Chamber of Commerce Official Handbook 1928, pp. 21-22. Copy held at the Suffolk Record Office, Lowestoft.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 22 and pp. 24-28.

magnetos, vehicle accessories and motor pistons. The harbour too required a large workforce to lay railway track and maintain the dock area. Furthermore, as a seaside resort, the town relied on the tourist trade to provide seasonal employment during the summer. Lowestoft accommodated considerable maritime commercial traffic, with timber, iron, steel, rails and railway sleepers entering the port and fresh and cured herrings, machinery and general goods being exported.²⁶

3. The Development of the B.U.F. in Suffolk, 1933-1939

The B.U.F.'s recruitment drive in Suffolk commenced in the summer of 1933. As part of this propaganda effort, a series of public meetings were planned, starting at Stowmarket market place on the evening of Saturday, 19 August. On this occasion, William Barry, a speaker from National Headquarters (N.H.Q.), addressed a "huge crowd" from a platform rigged to the top of a car.²⁷ Accompanied by four B.U.F. bodyguards, Barry had to face a "considerable amount of heckling" during his speech, which was then followed by "a barrage of interrogation" at question time.²⁸

Two months earlier, the B.U.F. was in the process of organising at Bury St. Edmunds. An advertisement placed in the Bury Free Press in mid-June 1933 alerted readers to the formation of a local Branch and called upon all those interested to contact the Honorary Organiser at 63, King's Road, Bury St. Edmunds.²⁹ This announcement coincided with the convening of a B.U.F. general meeting at the town's Eastern Counties' Restaurant on Friday, 16 June 1933. As guest speaker at this gathering, William Risdon, then the B.U.F.'s Director of Propaganda, delivered a broad overview of the Blackshirt programme, and those members present were urged to support Mr. Linstead, the Bury St. Edmunds B.U.F. Organiser, in the task of consolidating the Branch. In addition, it was revealed that a proposal to establish a Fascist Union of British Workers (F.U.B.W.) offshoot in the town was currently under

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-28.

²⁷ Diss Express, 25 August 1933, p. 6.

²⁸ Ibid..

²⁹ Bury Free Press (B.F.P.), 17 June 1933, p. 8.

consideration.³⁰ However, after this initial attempt to make an impact on the Bury St. Edmunds' political landscape, the local B.U.F. appeared to languish. It would seem that only a handful of public Blackshirt events were held there during the rest of the decade. In the period from 1934 to the end of 1938, only five fascist meetings were reported to have taken place in the town, and at least three of these were conducted by outside speakers.³¹

Yet, the Bury St. Edmunds B.U.F. did not become defunct before 1940. Under the leadership of Lawrence Harding, a Catholic family man in his late thirties, the local Branch continued leafleting activities, literature sales and contact work for the rest of the decade.³² Members also met on a regular basis at the District Leader's house, situated at 20, Out Risbygate, Bury St. Edmunds.³³ Harding was assisted by Raymond Smith, a worker in a local sugar beet factory, who resided at 62, Grove Park. About six weeks after joining the B.U.F. in early 1937, Smith was appointed Acting District Treasurer, a position he retained for three years.³⁴ Both men sent several letters to the local press defending the Blackshirt stance on various contemporary issues.³⁵

Another early Suffolk Blackshirt formation surfaced at Ipswich. The first known Officer-in-Charge was H. Lacon-Meredith, who assumed the leading B.U.F. position in the Country Borough on 4 January 1934.³⁶ By the end of June 1934, C.T. Pertwee had taken over as the Organiser of the local Branch, which, at that stage, occupied premises at 17, Crown Hall Chambers in Crown Street.³⁷ The fact that the Ipswich B.U.F. had its own headquarters indicated that, initially at least, it attracted some support, but, even in 1934, neither the fascist nor the Suffolk press reported

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 June 1933, p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2 June 1934, p. 9, 26 September 1936, p. 7, 28 May 1938, p. 9; *Action*, 17 July 1937, p. 10, 9 December 1937, p. 12.

³² *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 12, June 1938, p. 5.

³³ Information provided by Mrs. G.C., a former neighbour of Lawrence Harding.

³⁴ *B.E.P.*, 13 August 1938, p. 13; Home Office Advisory Committee (HOAC) Report. Raymond Adrian Smith. 15 August 1940; HOAC Supplementary Report. Raymond Adrian Smith. 22 November 1941. Both documents were consulted on privileged access at the Home Office.

³⁵ See for example *B.E.P.*, 12 February 1938, p. 4, 6 August 1938, p. 6, 10 September 1938, p. 10, 11 March 1939, p. 4, 1 April 1939, p. 4.

³⁶ *Blackshirt*, 12-18 January 1934, p. 4, 16-22 March 1934, p. 4.

³⁷ *East Anglian Daily Times (E.A.D.T.)*, 29 June 1934, p. 2.

much in the way of local Branch activity. According to a government report for the period up to the end of May 1934, the Ipswich B.U.F. stimulated “little interest”, since “the Fascist efforts in Suffolk have been concerned with agricultural districts and the tithe question”.³⁸ The Ipswich Trade Council and Labour Party endorsed this view in mid-1934 by noting that, although a Blackshirt “District Office” had been established in the town, only occasional fascist street meetings and literature sales had been held there.³⁹

On the basis of this evidence, it would seem likely that, at most, a small group of largely inactive B.U.F. loyalists survived in Ipswich after 1934. No prospective parliamentary or local election candidates were announced. By late 1936 or early 1937, Patrick Owen-Burke, formerly a B.U.F. official in east London and Essex, had assumed the senior position at Ipswich.⁴⁰ Thereafter, sporadic Blackshirt meetings, conducted by Owen-Burke and others, were reported in the locality.⁴¹ Edric Sherston, the B.U.F.’s County Inspector for Suffolk, addressed the Ipswich Douglas Social Credit group on two occasions in the early months of 1938, and, during the same year, Mosley also held two meetings in the town.⁴² The B.U.F. leader had previously spoken at Ipswich in 1933 and 1934.⁴³

A Blackshirt grouping had also been established at Beccles by 1934. Supported by members of the Great Yarmouth B.U.F., the Beccles Branch held a number of open-air meetings in the town, two of which were reported by the local press.⁴⁴

³⁸ Public Records Office, Home Office series (P.R.O. HO) 144/20141/316. Report on the Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland. Report No. I. Developments up to the end of May 1934.

³⁹ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire of 12 June 1934. Reply of Ipswich Trade Council and Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/212.

⁴⁰ Board of Deputies of British Jews (B.D.B.J.) C6/9/3/1. Pre-War Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and Provincial Towns. c.1937; Norfolk News and Weekly Press (N.N.W.P.), 17 October 1936, p. 11. Owen-Burke lived at 52, All Saints Road, Ipswich.

⁴¹ Blackshirt, 19 September 1936, p. 6, 31 October 1936, p. 6, 14 November 1936, p. 6, 30 October 1937, p. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, March 1938, p. 6, April 1938, p. 7; Action, 14 May 1938, p. 17, 17 December 1938, p. 11; E.A.D.T., 9 May 1938, p. 7, 13 December 1938, p. 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8 November 1933, p. 5, 6 July 1934, p. 9; Blackshirt, 13 July 1934, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Blackshirt, 20 July 1934, p. 10; Beccles and Bungay Journal (B.B.J.), 2 June 1934, p. 3, 16 June 1934, p. 3.

However, with the resignation of Gordon Gardiner, the local Blackshirt Organiser, in mid-1934, the Beccles formation appeared to slip quietly into obscurity, despite the continued existence of some sort of B.U.F. grouping in the area under the leadership of B.C. Moates, a resident of Toft Monks.⁴⁵ Only two reported Blackshirt meetings took place in Beccles after Gardiner's departure. In June 1936, a Saturday evening address was given at the New Market by a party from the Norfolk B.U.F., and, almost two years later, another Blackshirt open-air meeting was held in the town.⁴⁶ The fact that no B.U.F. adherents from Beccles were interned in 1940 would also tend to indicate that the Branch had effectively lapsed by the late 1930s.

Mosley's speech as guest of honour at a business dinner at Waller's Restaurant, Lowestoft in c.1935 led to the establishment of a B.U.F. Branch in the town.⁴⁷ Two local men who attended this function, George Surtees, a 50 year old automobile engineer and radio dealer with premises at 9, Bevan Street, Lowestoft, and Arthur Swan, a 25 year old insurance agent for the Prudential Assurance Company, were so impressed by the B.U.F. founder's economic and political analysis that they set up a Blackshirt formation shortly afterwards.⁴⁸ A Northumbrian by birth, Surtees worked in the U.S.A. before serving with distinction in the Staffordshire Yeomanry and the R.F.C. during the First World War. His bravery earned him two commendations in dispatches and the Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaves. After 1918, Surtees struggled to find regular employment in England for several years and spent a brief period in the army of occupation in the Rhineland. His wife opposed a planned move to South America, and the couple eventually settled in Lowestoft where Surtees set up in business. Having turned to religion because of his experiences in the First World War, he became disillusioned with the National Government's 'war-like' foreign policy from 1935 and joined the B.U.F..⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Blackshirt*, 20 July 1934, p. 10; B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Pre-War Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and Provincial Towns. c.1937.

⁴⁶ *B.B.L.*, 27 June 1936, p. 3; *Blackshirt*, April 1938, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Arthur Swan. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; P.R.O. HO 45/23683. George Frederick Surtees.

Within a few weeks, the Lowestoft B.U.F. had seventeen recruits, including a wholesale newsagent, a draper, who had previously belonged to the Leytonstone Branch in Essex, and the owner of a grocery business. Five of these were activists. Surtees and Swan, District Leader and District Treasurer respectively until their detention in June 1940, were the two most prominent Mosleyites in the area.⁵⁰ Swan recalled that the Lowestoft B.U.F. tended to attract cautious and inactive adherents in their mid-twenties or older, who came from the middle ranks of society: "...lower middle class businessmen up to a few professional men or monied men, especially their sons, who were interested, but didn't want to be active or involved or known to be involved..."⁵¹

During a typical week, the Lowestoft Branch pursued a number of activities. On Saturday evenings up until the outbreak of war, Swan and one or two other local fascists attempted to sell Action outside the town's Odeon Cinema. Every Tuesday night, the District Leader, using a car which he had fitted with a platform and a tannoy system, would tour the neighbouring countryside and hold impromptu meetings in places, such as Somerleyton, Corton, Oulton and Wrentham. In the summer, two evenings each week were devoted to these addresses. There was also a weekly gathering of six to ten members at the District Treasurer's house, which served as the local headquarters, to consider B.U.F. matters. Another regular haunt was the Devil's Bar at the Imperial Hotel in Lowestoft, where men of different political persuasions met to engage in argument and discussion.⁵²

Although the Lowestoft B.U.F. had a small membership, some local fascists were not without influence or means. In late 1937, George Surtees and Vincent Smith, a linen draper who also belonged to the local B.U.F., persuaded fellow members of the Lowestoft Incorporated Chamber of Commerce to support a trades fair for private enterprises in the town.⁵³ An eleven-man committee, chaired by Surtees and including

⁵⁰ Swan. Taped interview.

⁵¹ Ibid..

⁵² Ibid..

⁵³ Lowestoft Journal (L.J.), 27 November 1937, p. 8, 22 January 1938, p. 11.

Smith, was set up to arrange this exhibition under the auspices of the Chamber.

Malcolm Humphrey, another local businessman and Blackshirt supporter, was also a member of this organising body.⁵⁴

The ensuing trades fair was held at the Grand Hotel's Empire Hall from 2-9 March 1938. Twenty local industries and traders, including Surtees, purchased stands at the venue.⁵⁵ Lady Somerleyton formally opened the event, and over 10,000 people visited the fair during the week. At a luncheon to mark the occasion, Surtees claimed that the public could help to keep the area prosperous if they patronised local businesses.⁵⁶ *Action* applauded this initiative, maintaining that Surtees and Smith were "to be congratulated for their magnificent effort in bringing before the public eye the supreme necessity in supporting the private trader in his struggle against the chain and multiple store".⁵⁷ This was not Surtees' first attempt to draw attention to small enterprise in the area, since, shortly before the trades fair, he had been instrumental in initiating a used car exhibition, arranged by the Lowestoft section of the Motor Agents' Association.⁵⁸

The middle class tone of the Lowestoft B.U.F. was reinforced by the fact that several local Blackshirt members and sympathisers were prominently connected with the Oulton Broad Motor Boat Club (O.B.M.B.C.). Two well-to-do brothers, Edward and George Treglown, both fascist supporters, were founder members and, at different times, Commodore of the club.⁵⁹ George Surtees, Arthur Swan, Vincent Smith, Malcolm Humphrey and another B.U.F. loyalist, Donald Savage, a newsagent, were also involved either as competitors or officials.⁶⁰ The club hosted and participated in a number of domestic and international race meetings in the late 1930s. In June 1937, the O.B.M.B.C. entered a British team to compete in the International Speedboat Regatta

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 March 1938, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 February 1938, pp. 6-8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 March 1938, p. 11.

⁵⁷ *Action*, 26 March 1938, p. 17.

⁵⁸ *L.J.*, 27 November 1937, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Swan. Taped interview; Arthur Swan. Memoir (Untitled, unpublished, n.d.).

⁶⁰ *L.J.*, 5 February 1938, p. 11, 3 September 1938, p. 11, 3 December 1938, p. 2, 28 January 1939, p. 9, 15 July 1939, p. 9.

at Grunau, Berlin. Four of the six selected to represent their country at this event were Lowestoft Mosleyites.⁶¹ Local enthusiasts also participated in outboard motor boat racing at Munich.⁶² The club's links with the B.U.F. and Germany were to give the authorities cause for concern in 1940.⁶³

The Eye District B.U.F. was formed in c.1936, under the leadership of Ronald Noah Creasy, a wealthy landowner and farmer in his mid-twenties, who lived at Cranley Manor on the outskirts of the town. Creasy came from a long-established East Anglian rural family, which, until 1931, had an interest in over 80 farms in Norfolk and Suffolk.⁶⁴ He was assisted by the District Treasurer, George Frederick Hoggarth, another young local agriculturist, who ran Clint Farm, which was also in the vicinity of Eye.⁶⁵ Both men retained their positions until they were interned in 1940 under Defence Regulation 18B. The District Leader appointed his wife, Rita Creasy, to take charge of the Eye B.U.F. Women's Section, which apparently accounted for approximately 25 per cent of the local Blackshirt membership.⁶⁶

In 1934, the Eye Divisional Labour Party reported that fascist adherents in the area tended to be "disgruntled farmers and small traders", an observation broadly supported by the local District Leader.⁶⁷ Creasy recalled that the Eye B.U.F. attracted a wide variety of recruits, whose ages ranged from eighteen to 72. Those who enrolled were drawn in equal measure from the land, the small trader fraternity and the professions:

...at the time, of course, farmers and agriculture were hit more than any other section of the community [and so] a considerable number would be...farmers and landowners ...Small tradesmen [joined] as we were against trade trusts, monopolies, combines. Sometimes they threw

⁶¹ Ibid., 12 June 1937, p. 10.

⁶² Swan. Memoir.

⁶³ See Chapter Six.

⁶⁴ Ronald N. Creasy. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

⁶⁵ HOAC Report. George Frederick Hoggarth. 17 August 1940. This document was consulted on privileged access at the Home Office.

⁶⁶ Creasy. Taped interview. Rita Creasy declined to be interviewed.

⁶⁷ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of the Eye Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/76.

leaflets back in your face, and sometimes they supported you
...I had quite a lot of members also from the professions...
doctors, dentists and clergymen and so on.⁶⁸

According to the District Leader, there also existed a significant body of hidden support in the area, which outstripped the Eye B.U.F.'s formal membership by approximately three to one. Creasy explained that many older sympathisers did not become officially associated with the movement because, lacking the "gust of youth", they were reluctant to "enter into the fracas" openly.⁶⁹ Others, including a handful of local industrialists, wished to remain anonymous, due to a desire to protect their businesses from the commercially damaging effects of adverse publicity.⁷⁰

In many ways, Creasy was a maverick fascist leader, who paid little heed to the B.U.F.'s official procedures and prescribed organisational structures. N.H.Q. tolerated his somewhat cavalier attitude towards the movement's rules and regulations, presumably for two reasons. Firstly, as a committed Suffolk activist possessing both social status and financial means, Creasy was certainly regarded as a valuable political asset in the eastern counties. Indeed, at a personal interview arranged at the movement's London headquarters to discuss the East Anglian landowner's future role within the organisation, Mosley apparently agreed Creasy would not only enter the B.U.F. as the Eye District Leader but should be given a free hand as the senior official in the area.⁷¹ Secondly, with the Blackshirt central and regional administration contracting after the economic cut-backs of March 1937, the local Districts had to rely increasingly on their own resources and initiative, a situation which suited Creasy's temperament and outlook.

His highly individual approach took several forms. The Eye District Leader concentrated on securing "100 per cent quality" by accepting support only from those who conformed to his strict criteria:

⁶⁸ Creasy. Taped interview.

⁶⁹ Ibid..

⁷⁰ Ronald N. Creasy. Taped interview with A. Mitchell, 1995.

⁷¹ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991; Ronald N. Creasy. Friends of Oswald Mosley (F.O.M.) taped interview, n.d..

I did not want men of poor quality. I wanted people to be of help and assistance, people you could rely on 100 per cent. You don't go in for quantity, you go in for quality. It is the quality that counts. Five men of quality are better than a thousand of poor quality...Men who could think clearly. Men who were obviously disturbed by the old regime and obviously genuinely wanted something different. And obviously men who had some trust in me and I knew that I could trust them.⁷²

Consequently, a number of potential fascists were turned away after an 'unsatisfactory' performance in Creasy's obligatory initial interview. Most would-be Blackshirts under the age of twenty were rejected on the grounds that they lacked the necessary experience and maturity to sustain a long-term commitment to the cause.

He also developed his own preferred B.U.F. organisational structure in the Eye area, by appointing reliable Assistant District Leaders on the periphery of his self-designated 'area' at Stowmarket, Halesworth, Beccles, Framlingham, Southwold, Aldeburgh, Saxemundham and the south Norfolk town of Diss.⁷³ These officials co-ordinated their Blackshirt activities with Creasy, who operated from Cranley Manor, which served as the Eye District Headquarters:

...my system was to create Assistant District Leaders and this was a large part of my success in my area. I don't know what others did; I'm not interested. As I got the genuine members...I appointed them as [Assistant] District Leaders on the outside circle of the Eye parliamentary area, advising them that I was the core, the centre. I would work out to them, and I'd expect them to work in to me. That was a very important matter.⁷⁴

A routine week for the Eye B.U.F. involved newspaper distribution, street sales and leafleting for two or three evenings, followed by a private meeting at Cranley Manor, where members socialised, listened to a speech by Creasy and purchased fascist literature from the District Treasurer. Public meetings and canvassing were also undertaken on a fairly regular basis.⁷⁵

⁷² Creasy. Taped interview, 1991.

⁷³ Ibid.; Creasy. F.O.M. taped interview.

⁷⁴ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991.

⁷⁵ Ibid..

In 1938, Creasy announced his intention to stand in the November elections to the Eye town council. Even though he had reservations about the parochial nature of this foray into democratic politics, his overriding objective was to secure 'positive' publicity for the movement:

...I made the decision for the simple reason that I realised if I did go onto the council it was a very important issue, propaganda if you like...for the B.U.F. and to establish the fact that we weren't just all pure idiots [as maintained] by the media and so on. That we could gain sufficient popular influence to get somewhere, even on a local council, and consequently I decided to put up, as much as I didn't like the idea, because I couldn't be bothered very much with local councils. We were on a national issue, not a local issue... We had a broad vision of things.⁷⁶

Creasy was one of five candidates contesting the four available seats. On a small poll, the Blackshirt landowner secured fourth place and was duly elected to the town council.

TABLE 1
-RESULT OF ELECTION TO THE EYE TOWN COUNCIL,
NOVEMBER 1938

Stanley Chambers	Farmer	Conservative	304 votes
Stanford Tillot	Retired farmer	Conservative	285 votes
Charles Riches	Insurance agent	Conservative	266 votes
Ronald Creasy	Agriculturist	B.U.F.	179 votes
John Harris	Independent	Liberal	166 votes

(Source: Eastern Daily Press, 2 November 1938, p. 14; East Anglian Daily Times, 2 November 1938, p. 12)

This modest achievement was unique, since it represented the only occasion in British electoral history when a candidate, standing openly on the Blackshirt platform, was successful. With the B.U.F. used to disappointment at the polls, Mosley was quick to congratulate Creasy on the "signal service" he had performed for the organisation by

⁷⁶ Ibid..

becoming a councillor.⁷⁷ Similarly, the Southern Blackshirt praised the Eye District Leader “for a first attempt victory”.⁷⁸

The new local representative was keen to capitalise on his election success and, shortly afterwards, managed to hire the town hall for a public meeting, which was to be addressed by Mosley. This took place on the evening of 30 January 1939 and was easily the largest B.U.F. event ever held in the Eye area. Four hundred people from towns in Suffolk and Essex attended and gave the Blackshirt founder a “fair hearing”.⁷⁹ Loudspeaker equipment was installed to ensure that the crowd, which had gathered outside the hall, could also listen to the speech. Mosley outlined the broad fascist programme, paying particular attention to the B.U.F.’s proposals for agriculture and the maintenance of international peace. A group of anti-fascist demonstrators outside the building twice interrupted proceedings by keeping up a chorus of shouts and boos, pelting the town hall door with stones and setting off fireworks.⁸⁰

The creation of a Blackshirt presence at Woodbridge closely resembled the pattern of development at Eye. After a few early fleeting visits to the town, it was not until 1936-1937 that the B.U.F. began to organise seriously in the area, due largely to the efforts of the Sherston family, who resided at Otley Hall.⁸¹ Dorothy Eden Sherston, a wealthy landowner with an interest in fast cars, and her only child Edric (first name William) were staunch Mosleyites and ran the Woodbridge District B.U.F. from their home.⁸² Born on 6 October 1876, Dorothy Sherston was very much a product of the British Establishment. Her father, General Sir William Parke K.C.B., a veteran of the

⁷⁷ Oswald Mosley. Quoted in Ronald N. Creasy, ‘The Suffolk Landowner’ in L. Wise (ed.), Mosley’s Blackshirts: The Inside Story of the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940 (London: Sanctuary Press, 1986), p. 10.

⁷⁸ Southern Blackshirt, November 1938, p. 7.

⁷⁹ E.D.P., 31 January 1939, p. 7.

⁸⁰ Norfolk and Suffolk Journal and Diss Express (N.S.J.D.E.), 3 February 1939, p. 2; Suffolk Chronicle and Mercury (S.C.M.), 3 February 1939, p. 7; Action, 4 February 1939, p. 3.

⁸¹ Woodbridge Reporter and Wickham Market Gazette (W.R.W.M.G.), 5 April 1934, p. 2, 17 May 1934, p. 3; HOAC Supplementary Report. William Edric Sherston. 15 June 1942. This document was consulted on privileged access at the Home Office.

⁸² E.A.D.T., 15 July 1933, p. 12; Blackshirt, 27 March 1937, p. 6; information provided by A.P. Moyes, whose father worked as a chauffeur, handyman, and poultry keeper at Otley Hall between 1924 and 1959.

Crimean War, had been Colonel of the 36th Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel of the 72nd Highland Regiment and an aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria. Furthermore, her great grandfather, Sir Evan Nepean, a baronet, had served as Secretary of State for Ireland in 1804 and was Governor of Bombay between 1812 and 1819.⁸³ In 1911, she married Somerset Arthur Sherston, a captain in 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade, who had acquired his wealth through banking. He purchased Otley Hall as the family seat and undertook its restoration. After army service in West Africa between 1908 and 1911, Sherston was killed in action at Framelle-Auber-Ridge in France on 9 May 1915 at the age of 35. He received the Military Cross.⁸⁴

According to a Blackshirt colleague who knew her well, Dorothy Sherston joined the B.U.F. primarily because of the “terrible plight” of British agriculture and, thereafter, “gave her life and a great deal of her fortune to the movement”.⁸⁵ Although she was the Women’s District Leader at Woodbridge, age and indifferent health prevented her from taking on an active B.U.F. role in the locality. The same source recounted that Mrs. Sherston had an overbearing personality and, initially, may have put some pressure on Edric to adopt her political opinions.⁸⁶

Whatever the precise origins of his fascist beliefs, Edric Sherston, the Woodbridge District Leader, became the most active Mosleyite in south-east Suffolk during the later 1930s. He was born at Otley Hall in July 1912, educated at Eton and became a Blackshirt in 1934. However, Sherston did not begin to campaign openly on behalf of the movement for a further two years. The fascist press stated that he had joined the B.U.F. to restore the fortunes of British farming and had also taken over the direct management of his Suffolk landholdings, in preference to his banking career, because of the “parlous state of agriculture in this country”.⁸⁷

⁸³ *E.A.D.T.*, 26 July 1950, p. 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; information provided by A.P. Moyes.

⁸⁵ Creasy. Taped interview, 1995.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁷ *Action*, 5 March 1938, p. 17. See also *E.A.D.T.*, 15 July 1933, p. 12. According to the Home Office Advisory Committee, W.E. Sherston was chiefly interested in the B.U.F.’s agricultural policy. HOAC Supplementary Report. William Edric Sherston. 15 June 1942.

In June 1937, Sherston was appointed County Inspector for the organisation, and, a month later, he informed the local press of his intention to stand as the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the Woodbridge division at the next general election. With the help of volunteers, the 25 year old local District Leader planned to canvass farmers and other electors in the constituency, particularly on agricultural issues.⁸⁸

From then on, Sherston spoke regularly in the Woodbridge area, often with other prominent East Anglian fascists, such as Charles Hammond and Ronald Creasy.⁸⁹ The most important meeting took place on 25 January 1938 at the Crown Assembly Hall, Woodbridge, when Sherston and Lady Downe, the north Norfolk Blackshirt, addressed representatives of local political and religious organisations on B.U.F. policy and answered questions.⁹⁰ Mosley's speaking engagement at Woodbridge market place, scheduled for late September the same year, was cancelled at short notice, apparently due to the international crisis over Czechoslovakia. On this occasion, Sherston and Alexander Raven Thompson, the B.U.F.'s Director of Policy, deputised for their leader, who remained in London to keep in touch with European developments.⁹¹

4. The Failure of the B.U.F. in Suffolk

The Suffolk B.U.F.'s inability to extract any significant political advantage from the agricultural depression proved to be a major constraint on the movement's progress. In essence, local socio-economic conditions did not accord with the Griffin-Copsey conjunctural model of fascist growth. The full impact of the 1929-1932 downturn had been offset to a certain extent due to the deteriorating economic outlook

⁸⁸ *W.R.W.M.G.*, 29 July 1937, p. 1; *E.A.D.T.*, 23 July 1937, p. 6.

⁸⁹ *Blackshirt*, 6 November 1937, p. 6, 20 November 1937, p. 6, 18 December 1937, p. 6, July 1938, p. 6; *Action*, 23 April 1938, p. 17; *W.R.W.M.G.*, 6 January 1938, p. 2, 13 January 1938, p. 3.

⁹⁰ *W.R.W.M.G.*, 27 January 1938, p. 1 and p. 4; *Blackshirt*, March 1938, p. 6.

⁹¹ *E.A.D.T.*, 26 September 1938, p. 11; *W.R.W.M.G.*, 29 September 1938, p. 4; *Action*, 1 October 1938, p. 17.

in the Suffolk farming sector from the early 1920s.⁹² A University of Cambridge survey which examined the costs and returns on 24 East Anglian farms (including ten located in Suffolk and five in Essex) between 1924 and 1927 found that, after taking into account the value of unpaid family labour and five per cent interest on occupiers' capital, the farms under scrutiny sustained an average loss in the mid-1920s equivalent to 8s. 8d. per acre of crops and grass or 3.9 per cent on the occupiers' capital.⁹³ When this was translated into mean earned income, the occupiers and their families received fractionally over five shillings per acre of crops and grass, which amounted to £50-60 per year on a 230 acre holding. These results, concluded the investigators, were "far from satisfactory".⁹⁴

Denied the potential benefits which might have accrued through a sudden, destabilising 'boom to bust' economic transition, the Suffolk B.U.F. was also handicapped by the uneven impact of the depression in the 1930s. Many of Suffolk's farming districts showed unmistakable signs of economic decline during this period. In 1939, the Suffolk County Branch of the National Farmers Union conducted a survey of Suffolk farms, which covered 412 parishes and involved 600 local farmers. The ensuing report noted that, within the area under investigation, there were 15,853 acres of derelict land, 22,800 acres of rough grazings which could be brought back into cultivation, 105,344 acres in need of drainage, and 1,232 sets of farm buildings urgently requiring repair.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, members of the county's farming community were not all equally affected by the economic downturn of the early 1930s. Under these adverse conditions, agricultural profitability, or the lack of it, depended on numerous factors including price levels, the availability of marketing opportunities, soil type,

⁹² For a general overview of Suffolk agriculture during the inter-war period see D. Dymond and P. Northeast, *A History of Suffolk* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1995), Chapter Nine; D. Wilson, *A Short History of Suffolk* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1977), Chapter Eight.

⁹³ University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture (U.C.D.A.), *Four Years Farming in East Anglia, 1923-1927* (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 12, 1929), p. 84.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*. The report concluded that between 1924 and 1927 capital invested in East Anglian farming enterprises had yielded returns only fractionally above those which could have been obtained from gilt-edged securities. See p. 89.

⁹⁵ P.J.O. Trist, *A Survey of the Agriculture of Suffolk*, pp. 341-343; *E.A.D.L.*, 11 May 1939, p. 9; *Farmers Weekly*, 12 May 1939, p. 27.

productivity and output relative to costs, level of capital investment, the managerial and technical efficiency of farm organisation, and the ability to diversify and develop more remunerative areas of production. In 1931 and 1932, Cambridge University Department of Agriculture investigated approximately 1,000 farms of twenty acres or more spread across nine representative districts in the eastern counties.⁹⁶ Profitable and loss-making enterprises were found in each selected area and acreage band. However, when the key economic and financial results for the two years were averaged out, it became clear that the depression had hit some farming districts much harder than others.

TABLE 2
THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL POSITION OF SELECTED
AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS IN THE EASTERN COUNTIES,
1931-1932

District	Per 100 acres of farmed land		
	Gross Farm Output (£)	Farm Capital (£)	Manual Labour (No)
S.E. Suffolk and N.E. Essex sand and gravel	810	1130	3.9
S. Hertfordshire	740	930	3.1
S. Essex London clays	740	980	2.6
S. Cambridgeshire chalks	620	980	3.1
Central Norfolk loams	620	1060	3.7
Central Suffolk loams	590	1020	3.5
N. Essex and Suffolk boulder clays	500	830	3
Norfolk and Suffolk 'breck'	370	650	2.1
Hunts. and W. Cambs. clays	360	710	2.2

(Source: U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1932, Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 21, July 1933, p. 27)

The district which incorporated south-east Suffolk was the one least affected by the deterioration in agricultural conditions and, even in 1932, this area returned a small

⁹⁶ U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1931 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 19, July 1932); U.C.D.A., An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1932 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 21, July 1933).

average profit per farm.⁹⁷ South-east Suffolk and north-east Essex possessed a number of advantages including “an easily worked responsive soil”, which facilitated diversified farming, local centres of consumption at Ipswich and Colchester, and the existence of retailing opportunities at Felixstowe, Harwich, Walton and Clacton.⁹⁸ A significant proportion of gross incomes in the locality were derived from sugar beet, potatoes and market garden crops. Less reliance was placed on wheat and barley. The area was also the third-ranked dairying district in East Anglia with twenty per cent of the milk sold at retail prices. Dairy produce generated over 40 per cent of the total income from livestock, the remainder coming principally from poultry, horned stock and pigs.⁹⁹

Conversely, the predominantly arable north-west Essex and south-west Suffolk boulder clay region was one of the three most unprofitable districts covered by the 1931 and 1932 surveys.¹⁰⁰ Hindered by heavy soil, small irregularly shaped fields and extensive drainage problems, the area lacked retailing opportunities and had no large centre of population. An additional disadvantage was the district’s over-dependence on wheat, which constituted the main cash crop. Barley, sugar beet and potato cultivation were restricted by the type of soil. Much land was left fallow, and the ‘high value’ cash crops grown in the area, such as sainfoin, clovers, trefoil and roots, provided only sideline enterprises. Compared with East Anglia as a whole, the district carried little livestock. Taken together, pigs and poultry accounted for over half the total sales in this category. In economic terms, dairying and horned stock were less important.¹⁰¹

Even in such an affected district, economic performance varied widely, as the 1932 survey revealed.¹⁰² Generally speaking, irrespective of size, profitable farms in north-west Essex and south-west Suffolk were more highly capitalised and secured a greater gross output per unit of land, labour, cost and capital. Production was increased by keeping larger numbers of pigs and poultry, cultivating more high value

⁹⁷ U.C.D.A., *An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1932*, p. 39.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

crops, such as sugar beet and seeds, and also by obtaining higher crop and livestock yields. More successful agricultural concerns also sold a greater value of crops and bought fertilisers and feeding stuffs in bigger quantities. Unprofitable holdings of between twenty and 50 acres were characterised by dependence on cereals, few high value cash crops, little investment in fertilisers, poor crop yields, and less interest in pigs and poultry. Medium-sized farms which did not grow small acreages of beet, potatoes and seed crops to improve crop sale income also appeared to struggle. Losses on properties exceeding 300 acres tended to reflect high manual labour costs.¹⁰³

Gradually improving agricultural conditions from 1933 provided another powerful constraint on the B.U.F.'s development in Suffolk. For example, calculations produced by the University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture, which were based on samples of 50 farms, indicated that farm income in south-west Suffolk, although remaining low and erratic, increased during the decade.

TABLE 3
ECONOMIC TRENDS PER FARM OF THE NORTH-WEST ESSEX AND
SOUTH-WEST SUFFOLK BOULDER CLAY DISTRICT,
1931-1939*

	1931	1932	1933	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Gross Charges (£)	960	852	967	1156	1215	1218	1302	1270
% Change	1931-33=100			125	131	132	141	137
Gross Income (£) +	869	944	1188	1367	1452	1374	1540	1632
% Change	1931-33=100			137	145	137	154	163
Farm Income (£) #	-91	92	221	211	237	156	238	362

(Source: University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture, A Financial Retrospect of Farming in the Eastern Counties of England 1931-1941, Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 33, June 1942)

* no survey was conducted in 1934

+ includes subsidies

the farm income figure is derived by subtracting the gross charges from the gross income for each year

¹⁰³ Ibid..

The diminishing impact of unemployment in Suffolk during the 1930s also blighted the B.U.F.'s prospects by removing another potential source of socio-economic instability. For 97 of the 116 months between January 1930 and August 1939, the rate of unemployment amongst insured workers in the county was below the corresponding percentage for Britain as a whole.¹⁰⁴ Unemployment in Suffolk peaked at 27.8 per cent in January 1933 and fell thereafter until 1938, reaching a low point of 5.8 per cent in October 1937.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, from the beginning of 1934 to August 1939, the county exceeded the British monthly rate on just four occasions. A more detailed statistical picture can be obtained by considering the principal local centres of population.

TABLE 4
AVERAGE MONTHLY RATE OF REGISTERED UNEMPLOYMENT IN GREAT BRITAIN AND SUFFOLK, 1930-1939 (%) *

	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Gt. Britain	16.23	22.05	22.21	20.32	17.32	16.23	13.91	10.75	12.7	10.95
Suffolk	12.69	19.56	21.96	18.89	14.63	12.38	10.17	7.56	9.51	10.03
Bury	9.69	13.88	16.34	13.14	10.57	12.08	8.58	5.96	7.03	10.23
Felixstowe	10.31	17	15.32	12.04	11.14	9.39	7.59	5.03	5.21	5.99
Ipswich	10.99	15.75	17.58	14.61	11.51	9.63	7.8	6.44	8.18	8.66
Lowestoft	16.69	23.06	26.93	23.9	20.77	18.56	17.33	12.54	16.5	16.8
Newmarket	10.69	17.44	19.32	14.41	12.36	10.1	8.24	5.28	7.47	7.85
Stowmarket	20.67	29.32	30.52	23.97	15.3	12.62	7.65	4.58	5.53	7.55
Sudbury	8.88	14.53	15.79	13.36	9.59	9.34	6.37	3.8	8.21	7.09

(Source: Local Unemployment Index, January 1930-August 1939)

* The average monthly rate of registered unemployment is expressed as a percentage of the insured population. The figures for 1939 are based on the eight months from January to August.

By the time B.U.F. formations began to appear in Suffolk, the number out of work in the area had already peaked and was starting to fall. During most of the second half of the decade, unemployment levels in places, such as Bury St. Edmunds, Felixstowe, Ipswich and Newmarket, remained well below the overall British rate.

¹⁰⁴ Local Unemployment Index (London: H.M.S.O., 1930-1939), January 1930-August 1939.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, January 1933, p. 3, October 1937, p. 3.

Hence, as the unemployment situation in Suffolk eased from 1934, Blackshirt hopes of converting the county's workless *en masse* evaporated.

The B.U.F.'s appeal was further reduced by the anti-fascist stance taken by several local organisations set up to provide the out-of-work with guidance and support. At Bury St. Edmunds, for example, an Unemployed Workers' Association (U.W.A.) had already been formed in 1932 to ensure the jobless in the area received advice and assistance.¹⁰⁶ This body moved quickly to alert its members to the perceived dangers posed by local fascism. At the U.W.A.'s first annual meeting, held in the Co-operative Hall, Bury St. Edmunds on 1 August 1933, George J. Freezer, the chairman, revealed that the Bury B.U.F. was targeting the unemployed and had tried to enrol several Association members. He warned those present, that once in power, the Blackshirts would dismantle democracy, close down working class organisations and suppress opposition to their rule, just as Hitler and Mussolini had done. For these reasons, Freezer argued, the jobless should avoid fascism "as they would a colony of lepers".¹⁰⁷

The B.U.F. had no more success at Lowestoft, where the unemployment rate exceeded Britain's for the most of the 1930s. This would tend to suggest that the various factors identified by scholars, such as John Stevenson, Chris Cook and Paul Cunningham, ensured that, in the main, the unemployed at Lowestoft responded passively to their predicament and rejected the solutions offered by fascism and communism.¹⁰⁸ One local Blackshirt, W.M. Emerson, apparently attempted to use his position as Secretary of the Lowestoft Omnibus Mutual Service Association (L.O.M.S.A.) to facilitate fascist recruitment.¹⁰⁹ The L.O.M.S.A., which incorporated the Lowestoft Unemployed Association, was established in January 1937 as an independent and voluntary body, open to both working and unemployed men. Its brief

¹⁰⁶ E.A.D.T., 3 August 1933, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid..

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁹ W.M. Emerson was an Industrial Officer for the B.U.F. and gave his address as 1, Park Mansions, North Lowestoft. See L.L., 21 May 1938, p. 6.

was to provide recreational facilities, educational lectures and courses, job searches for the unemployed and a legal advice bureau.¹¹⁰ A few days later, according to the Secretary for the Lowestoft N.U.W.M., Emerson, under the L.O.M.S.A's auspices, chaired a B.U.F. meeting at St John's Road, which, although intended to boost membership, attracted only a dozen or so listeners.¹¹¹ The L.O.M.S.A.'s vice chairman, A.R. Disney, in reply, stressed that the Association was non-political but also appeared to substantiate the N.U.W.M.'s claims by intimating that the alleged fascist gathering had indeed taken place.¹¹²

Another B.U.F. meeting for the jobless was held in Lowestoft on 25 May 1938, and it was claimed that a number of listeners subsequently submitted membership applications.¹¹³ Nevertheless, little, if anything, resulted from the B.U.F.'s attempts to win over the unemployed. A former Lowestoft herring fisherman later recollected that, when he was unemployed at the port during the 1930s, a "fascist" union leader named George Lambert helped him to obtain and retain dole money.¹¹⁴ Shortly afterwards though, Lambert was "thrown out" of the town by the local authorities.¹¹⁵ The B.U.F. press also reported that local Blackshirt Industrial Organisers represented a few Lowestoft cases before the Court of Referees.¹¹⁶ However, when interviewed, the District Treasurer could not recall a single unemployed B.U.F. member in the town.¹¹⁷

Mainstream right and left-wing opponents of the B.U.F. also ensured that the amount of 'political space' available to the movement in Suffolk remained minimal. Government assistance, particularly in the form of subsidies for wheat and sugar beet, helped to steer the Suffolk agricultural community away from financial ruin and Mosley. The introduction of the wheat subsidy in 1932, for example, provided a much

¹¹⁰ *L.L.*, 9 January 1937, p. 13.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16 January 1937, p. 10, 30 January 1937, p. 14.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 23 January 1937, p. 10.

¹¹³ *Blackshirt*, June 1938, p. 5.

¹¹⁴ Anonymous. Oral History Tape (O.H.T.) 99. Lowestoft Herring Fishing Industry, 1990. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Blackshirt*, 10 July 1937, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ Swan. Taped interview.

needed boost and was chiefly responsible for a 26.4 per cent increase in the county's wheat acreage the following year.¹¹⁸ Over the same period, the area under wheat in Essex expanded by 28.5 per cent.¹¹⁹ In 1933, wheat deficiency payments per 100 acres of farmed land amounted to £25 on the Norfolk and Suffolk 'breck', £86 in the central Suffolk loam region, £51 in the south-east Suffolk and north-east Essex sand and gravel district and £124 on the north Essex and south-west Suffolk boulder clays. In the latter case, this support added eighteen per cent to gross incomes.¹²⁰ The importance of subsidies for the wheat growing region of north Essex and south-west Suffolk can be gauged from the fact that, but for this financial assistance, gross charges incurred by farms investigated in the district would have exceeded gross incomes in 1932 and 1938.¹²¹

The ideological and moral constraints imposed by the Suffolk labour movement also meant that fascist overtures to the working class in Suffolk met with little positive response. After the B.U.F. leader had delivered a public address at Ipswich in July 1934, 26 representatives of the regional labour movement sent a joint statement on the Blackshirts to the local press. Seeking to alert "our fellow East Anglians" to the "dangerous and subversive" character of Mosleyite fascism, the signatories denounced the B.U.F. as an anti-democratic, militaristic and anti-constitutional organisation, which posed "a grave menace to the peaceful progressive development of our country".¹²²

In the later 1930s, Raymond Smith, the District Treasurer at Bury St. Edmunds, encountered worker opposition because of his fascist affiliations at the sugar beet factory where he was employed. He had been involved in arranging trade union representation at the premises but, after a petition from the workforce was sent to the

¹¹⁸ M.A.F., *Agricultural Statistics 1933* (London: H.M.S.O., 1934), Vol. LXVIII, Part I, p. 61.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹²⁰ U.C.D.A., *An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1933* (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 22, July 1934), pp. 13-14.

¹²¹ U.C.D.A., *A Financial Retrospect of Farming in the Eastern Counties of England 1931-1941*.

¹²² *Diss Express*, 13 July 1934, p. 2. The Suffolk signatories included George Freezer and Charles W. Rose of the Unemployed Workers' Association at Bury St. Edmunds and R. Lewis, President of the Ipswich Trades Council and Labour Party.

management calling for his removal, Smith resigned.¹²³ Furthermore, despite Blackshirt claims that the movement was “finding great support” amongst organised labour at Lowestoft, the local B.U.F. formation failed to attract working class members.¹²⁴ The former District Treasurer recalled that the B.U.F.’s attempts to recruit unionised workers in the town provoked vigorous opposition: “The Left, and they were all-powerful in Lowestoft, the shipyards, the factories and so on, they were all 100 per cent unionised, and they were all extremely Left. We could hardly hold a meeting anywhere without it being broken up or shouted down”.¹²⁵

Ronald Creasy and Edric Sherston were able to enrol a small number of agricultural workers in the Eye and Woodbridge areas respectively, although this marginally greater political success with the manual sector may have owed as much to their position as prominent local employers, as to their efforts at ideological conversion.¹²⁶ However, as with Norfolk, a variety of factors, including trade union and Labour Party ties, the scattered and isolated nature of the occupation, the enduring ‘paternalistic’ employer-employee relationship and the general lack of interest in radical alternatives prevented the vast majority of Suffolk farmworkers from donning the black shirt.

Moreover, urban fascists in the county also found it difficult to drum up support in the rural areas because, not having agricultural occupations, they lacked credibility when explaining B.U.F. farming policy. Arthur Swan remembered the Lowestoft B.U.F.’s efforts in this direction had negligible results:

We could only go out in the country[side] furtively with our tannoy equipment and speak at village meetings and get a bit of attention from farmers and their labourers and so on. We never did anything really worthwhile because we weren’t farmers. We couldn’t talk their language. We had no real contact...Later on we...learned that Creasy had become a councillor on the B.U.F. ticket. The reason why he had that

¹²³ HOAC Supplementary Report. Raymond Adrian Smith. 22 November 1941.

¹²⁴ *Blackshirt*, 10 July 1937, p. 6.

¹²⁵ Swan. Taped interview.

¹²⁶ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991; Creasy. Taped interview, 1995.

success and we didn't was simple. He was a farmer himself, and all his friends round about were farmers...and they were all in a terrible state. That was the reason why Creasy, as a B.U.F. man, was able to become a councillor in the period... We never really did any good in that sense.¹²⁷

For precisely this reason, Creasy refused to countenance active help from urban areas, such as London, to develop the Eye B.U.F., because he was convinced that intervention of this kind would only alienate local people and make his task that much harder:

They [East Anglians] knew if you understood them. That's very important. If you sent London members down here they wouldn't have understood them at all...however great and wonderful those London members were. Mosley wasn't quite sufficiently aware of that...That would have set it back even from inside the movement. People with different outlook ...people from the cities, if they had come, yes, they would have resented that.¹²⁸

Other external constraints, notably negative council and local press attitudes, operated at a less elevated level to undermine the legitimacy of the county B.U.F.. Political opposition was less evident when it came to booking local forums for Blackshirt events, since the B.U.F. was able to obtain regular access to council and privately owned venues for high profile meetings in Suffolk. At Ipswich, for example, the B.U.F.'s founder addressed gatherings at the Public Hall, the London Road Stadium and the Great White Horse Hotel between 1933 and 1938.¹²⁹ Ronald Creasy faced only one dissenting councillor in his successful attempt to hire Eye town hall for Mosley's meeting in January 1939.¹³⁰ Similarly, the Grand Hotel at Lowestoft made the Grand Empire Hall available to the Blackshirt leader in the later 1930s.¹³¹ Edric Sherston and Viscountess Downe spoke at the Crown Assembly Hall, Woodbridge in January 1938. Seven months later, Sherston gained permission from Woodbridge

¹²⁷ Swan. Taped interview.

¹²⁸ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991.

¹²⁹ *E.A.D.T.*, 8 November 1933, p. 5, 6 July 1934, p. 9, 9 May 1938, p. 7, 13 December 1938, p. 12.

¹³⁰ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991.

¹³¹ *L.L.*, 1 May 1937, p. 12, 18 March 1939, p. 11.

Urban District council for Mosley to hold a public meeting at the Market Hill car park in September 1938.¹³²

However, at least one Suffolk local authority refused to sanction large-scale fascist events, thereby denying the B.U.F. much-needed propaganda in the area. Bury St. Edmunds town council declined to let municipal property to the B.U.F. in December 1935 and February 1936, apparently because the town hall was being used as a temporary public library and the Athenaeum was undergoing alteration work.¹³³ District Leader L.W. Harding countered this explanation by maintaining that the B.U.F.'s applications had been submitted well before the two buildings had been rendered unavailable for public meetings. In his estimation, the refusal to grant the B.U.F.'s request reflected either the council's desire to prevent other political views from being aired or its fear of attendant anti-fascist hooliganism.¹³⁴

To a certain extent, the Suffolk B.U.F. was able to publicise its programme in the regional press. Fascist meetings were reported impartially, and several of the county's most prominent Mosleyites had letters published in the correspondence columns of local newspapers. Moreover, in May 1938, the East Anglian Daily Times carried an extended article by William Sherston entitled 'How Agriculture Could Be Restored', which contained a detailed exposition of the fascist policy for farming.¹³⁵ Ronald Creasy's contributions to the North Suffolk Messenger, a weekly publication circulating in the Beccles, Bungay and Southwold areas in 1938-1939, provided another valuable outlet for Blackshirt propaganda. According to Creasy, he was asked to write for the newspaper on a regular basis by the editor, D.J. Newby. Thereafter, a page in each edition was devoted to articles on fascism and agriculture written by the Eye District Leader and other Suffolk members.¹³⁶

¹³² W.R.W.M.G., 27 January 1938, p. 1 and p. 4, 18 August 1938, p. 1.

¹³³ B.F.P., 29 August 1936, p. 7, 5 September 1936, p. 11.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15 August 1936, p. 10; 5 September 1936, p. 11.

¹³⁵ E.A.D.T., 21 May 1938, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Ronald N. Creasy. Letter to Andrew Mitchell. 20 October 1995; North Suffolk Messenger, 19 November 1938, 17 December 1938, 21 January 1939, 18 February 1939, 24 April 1939. Copies supplied by R. Creasy.

This limited positive publicity was more than offset by the frequent appearance of articles, letters and commentaries in the local press which restricted B.U.F. influence. The East Anglian Daily Times, for example, regularly reported on the disruption which accompanied Blackshirt events in other parts of the country and contained numerous accounts of Hitler and Mussolini's excesses. Political opponents of fascism were also given space in the paper's columns to denounce Mosley's movement. Furthermore, editorials on the B.U.F. were consistently unfavourable:

The leader of the British Blackshirt movement has set himself a very long and tedious row to hoe if...he is out to persuade the electorate that their political liberty is worth little or nothing. We must suppose that Sir Oswald Mosley has already discovered that the chief obstacle in the path of progress of his organisation is the curiously tenacious respect which the people of this country have for that particular privilege. It may be, indeed, that never more so than now has that privilege stood at a higher premium.¹³⁷

The local movement also lacked the opportunity to champion or exploit an ethnic issue with the potential to mobilise sections of the host population. In particular, the minimal Jewish presence in the county during the 1930s ensured that the type of anti-minority grievances which had boosted B.U.F. recruitment in the East End of London were not to be found in Suffolk. In 1939, for example, there were only approximately twenty Jews living in Ipswich, the largest concentration in the county.¹³⁸ Consequently, Suffolk Jewry could neither be negatively associated with residential and cultural encroachment nor construed as dominating specific local trades and political institutions. Indeed, according to the 1931 Census, Suffolk as a whole contained only 207 naturalised Britons and under 330 aliens.¹³⁹ Thus, lacking the East End experience of large scale immigration, the county had no comparable nativist political and cultural tradition upon which the Blackshirts could build.

¹³⁷ E.A.D.T. 10 April 1934, p. 6. See also *ibid.*, 23 January 1934, p. 6, 12 June 1934, p. 6, 31 July 1934, p. 6.

¹³⁸ The Jewish Yearbook 1939 (London: The Jewish Chronicle, 1939), p. 346. In 1939 the total population of Ipswich stood at approximately 91,400.

¹³⁹ Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables (London: H.M.S.O., 1935), Table 30, p. 210.

Predictably, there is little evidence in the local or fascist press to suggest that open hostility to Jews was either common or a successful recruiting tactic in Suffolk. The District Treasurer of the Lowestoft B.U.F. also played down the importance of the Jewish 'issue' for the local movement: "We only knew of two [Jews in Lowestoft]. One was an antique dealer, and the other one was an electrician...There may have been others, but we only knew two, and I didn't even know they were Jews until Surtees [the District Leader] told me they were. I wouldn't have a clue. I didn't know what a Jew was".¹⁴⁰

Nonetheless, some convinced anti-Semites were to be found within the ranks of the Suffolk B.U.F, the most prominent being Ronald Creasy, District Leader for the Eye Division. In a series of letters to the East Anglian Daily Times, Creasy revealed himself to be an ideological anti-Semite steeped in conspiracy theory. Claiming that Bolshevism was "consonant" with Judaism, the Eye District Leader maintained that the Jews were endeavouring to replace Britain's Empire with one of their own and argued that "the authenticity of the Protocols [of the Elders of Zion] has been proved largely by deduction".¹⁴¹

Given the external constraints faced by the county Blackshirt movement, the Suffolk B.U.F.'s prospects depended all the more on its own capacity to project a politically credible image.¹⁴² However, serious internal weaknesses made this impossible to achieve. Few of the county formations were led for any length of time by committed, dynamic activists, who were capable of providing galvanising leadership. At Beccles, the Blackshirt Branch appeared to languish after the departure of Gordon Gardiner, the local Organiser, in mid-1934. Intelligence gathered by the Board of Deputies suggests that during the later 1930s small Blackshirt groups also existed at Sudbury and Wortham under the respective leadership of W.A. Carter and H.W. Humpage, but neither man was able to raise the B.U.F.'s local profile.¹⁴³ Although

¹⁴⁰ Swan. Taped interview.

¹⁴¹ E.A.D.T., 24 November 1938, p. 5, 14 December 1938, p. 2, 19 January 1939, p. 5.

¹⁴² On this point see R. Griffin, The Nature of Fascism (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 211-212.

¹⁴³ B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Pre-War Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and

more active, the senior Blackshirt officials at Bury St. Edmunds also appeared to have a limited appetite for street politics and tended to air their views through the correspondence columns of the local press, rather than via open-air speeches.

Even at Lowestoft, where Blackshirt meetings and street newspaper sales were more common, the B.U.F. leadership was reluctant to advertise its fascist credentials too openly. The District Treasurer explained that both he and George Surtees, the District Leader, felt self-conscious about taking the B.U.F.'s message onto the streets of the town and, instead, preferred to discuss Mosley's programme in more sedate settings, such as the local Blackshirt study group or the Devil's Bar at the Imperial Hotel. For similar reasons, Swan refused to wear a black shirt in Lowestoft when undertaking any form of political activity for the movement.¹⁴⁴

Within Suffolk, only Edric Sherston and Ronald Creasy approximated to the 'ideal' provincial fascist leader. As County Inspector from June 1937, Sherston spent much of his free time promoting fascism through speaking engagements and propaganda events, not just in the Woodbridge district, but in other parts of Suffolk too. At Eye, during the second half of the decade, Creasy proved to be another tireless worker for the cause, regularly addressing public gatherings and conducting sales drives. Without doubt, both men were driven by their fascist convictions, but such high profile activism was at least partly facilitated by their social position. As wealthy landowners, Creasy and the Sherstons not only possessed the financial security to publicise their controversial political views with relative impunity but were also able to devote considerable time to the movement each week.¹⁴⁵

As with Norfolk, many of the leaders of the Suffolk B.U.F. came from Tory backgrounds, including Ronald and Rita Creasy, George Surtees, Arthur Swan, and Edric and Mrs. Sherston. Swan, for example, had been associated with the Tories since his youth and had been an election worker for Pieterse Loftus, the successful

Provincial Towns. c.1937. W.A. Carter's address was given as the Shoulder of Mutton Inn, Assington, near Colchester. H.W. Humpage lived at 2, Battlefields, Wortham.

¹⁴⁴ Swan. Taped interview.

¹⁴⁵ Creasy. Taped interview, 1995.

Conservative candidate at the Lowestoft parliamentary by-election in February 1934.¹⁴⁶ Another prominent Lowestoft B.U.F. supporter, Malcolm Humphrey, also had links with the Tories, being the son of Major Selwyn Wollaston Humphrey. The latter, mayor of the Borough of Lowestoft on seven occasions between 1920 and 1939, had been chairman of the town's Junior Imperial League and the local Conservative Party.¹⁴⁷

It would appear that the Suffolk B.U.F. relied heavily for support on members of occupational and social groups usually associated with the Conservative Party, including farmers, businessmen, small traders and those with military backgrounds. The Lowestoft Branch was dominated by the owners of small businesses, supplemented by a few lower middle class, professional or monied adherents. At Eye, the B.U.F. principally attracted farmers, professionals and small traders. Edric Sherston achieved a similar Blackshirt membership profile in the Woodbridge division.¹⁴⁸

With the exception of a small number of dedicated Mosleyites, most B.U.F. members and supporters in the county possessed neither the enthusiasm nor the political conviction to promote the fascist cause in public. Most Suffolk Blackshirts eschewed active involvement because association with the B.U.F., if it came to light, could undermine their job or business prospects and lead to social ostracism. Consequently, since most local adherents were unwilling to undertake any form of political work for the movement, the Suffolk B.U.F. was unable to mount a credible, long-term propaganda campaign in the county.

Arthur Swan, the District Treasurer at Lowestoft, knew "dozens of men" locally with fascist sympathies, who "wouldn't dare to be involved or known to be interested".¹⁴⁹ Moreover, most of the Lowestoft members "wouldn't want to come out and deliver leaflets or anything like that".¹⁵⁰ Prior to 1937, some Lowestoft Mosleyites

¹⁴⁶ Swan. Taped interview.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.; *E.A.D.T.*, 31 August 1939, p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ See Chapter Seven.

¹⁴⁹ Swan. Taped interview.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid..

refused to participate in regional and national B.U.F. events because they did not want to be seen wearing a black shirt in public. Similar problems were experienced at Eye, where Creasy found that many followers did not want to give open support because of “the blood and thunder of the whole frightful thing, which you always do get in radical revolutions. Nor could they afford to lose out on their businesses”.¹⁵¹

The inability to create an ideologically committed membership also robbed the county movement of a sense of permanence, purpose and direction. Most Suffolk Mosleyites tended to be disaffected, socially conservative types, whose attachment to fascism intensified and faded depending on shifting national and local developments. Even some of those in Suffolk who were attracted enough by the B.U.F.’s agricultural policy to become openly associated with the movement for periods in the 1930s were either alienated by or lacked interest in other parts of the Blackshirt programme. These supporters never developed a full ideological commitment to Mosleyite fascism and tended to drift away after a short-lived membership. Arthur Barker of Sycamore Farm, Kenton near Stowmarket, provides a good example of this type of transient Suffolk adherent. Initially attracted to the B.U.F. because of its active involvement in the ‘tithe war’ at Ringshall in 1933, Barker, a former Labour Party sympathiser, joined the movement and thereafter endorsed the fascist line on agriculture and tithes in numerous letters to the East Anglian Daily Times.¹⁵² He also contributed articles with titles such as ‘Why Farmers Will Support the Blackshirts’ and ‘Low Wages On The Land’ to the fascist press.¹⁵³ However, Barker severed his B.U.F. connections in 1935 because Mosley, through his promotion of the ‘Mind Britain’s Business’ policy, had “supported Mussolini’s treachery in Abyssinia”.¹⁵⁴

Charles Westren, who farmed at Elmsett Hall near Ipswich in the 1930s, was another Blackshirt whose fascist beliefs did not appear to extend beyond the B.U.F.’s

¹⁵¹ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991.

¹⁵² Blackshirt, 26 August-1 September 1933, p. 4; E.A.D.T., 5 September 1933, p. 2, 26 January 1934, p. 11, 20 March 1934, p. 9.

¹⁵³ Fascist Week, 16-22 February 1934, p. 3; Blackshirt, 14 September 1934, p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ E.A.D.T., 3 March 1938, p. 5.

plans for agriculture. During 1938-1939, Westren actively campaigned for the B.U.F. by sharing a platform with Mosley at Ipswich, writing letters to the local press and contributing a pro-Blackshirt article to the North Suffolk Messenger.¹⁵⁵ Yet, his fascist zeal quickly abated afterwards. The District Leader at Eye, who knew Westren well, considered that the Ipswich farmer was “nervous” about his B.U.F. links and had an exclusive and self-interested preoccupation with agriculture: “...he [Westren] fought rather as a lone man and was rather spasmodic. At times he would come out into the open and speak and other times he wouldn’t...[He was] purely a follower on the agricultural side and that’s not good enough...You’ve got to take the whole of the policy throughout”.¹⁵⁶

Given the Suffolk B.U.F.’s small, shifting and mainly inactive body of support, few registered speakers emerged from the local fascist ranks, which further undermined propaganda efforts in the area. Only at Eye, Woodbridge and Lowestoft were B.U.F. meetings and sales drives held for any length of time during the 1930s. However, even in these districts, the essentially *ad hoc* nature of this activity was no substitute for a coordinated and sustained attempt at political conversion. After 1934, Blackshirt formations elsewhere in the county were either unable or unwilling to undertake regular propaganda work. These deficiencies were compounded by the B.U.F. concentrating its resources on the more promising area of east London from 1935 and by the severe internal economic retrenchment imposed by Mosley two years later. With the N.H.Q. administration shrinking due to financial constraints from 1937, the Suffolk B.U.F. epitomised the neglected provincial Blackshirt outpost, lacking personnel, money and direction from the centre.

In July 1936, Blackshirt reported that an electoral machine had been established to cover the entire county, but such a claim does not bear close scrutiny.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, the Suffolk B.U.F. did not possess the resources to translate the May 1935 decision to

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 December 1938, p. 12, 29 December 1938, p. 2; North Suffolk Messenger, 19 November 1938. Westren’s connections with the B.U.F. are also examined in Chapters Two and Six.

¹⁵⁶ Creasy. Taped interview, 1995.

¹⁵⁷ Blackshirt, 4 July 1936, p. 6.

remodel the movement along parliamentary constituency lines into reality. Throughout most of the county, this organisational overhaul remained a dead letter. By the late 1930s, the formations at Ipswich and Beccles appeared moribund and certainly were in no position to develop electoral machinery in the area. Likewise, the Bury St. Edmunds B.U.F., although still functioning during the second half of the decade, lacked the resources to develop a constituency structure. At Lowestoft, the unsuccessful efforts of a handful of activists to widen the movement's support base in the town also meant that the proposed restructuring could not be realised:

You couldn't sell any literature. We stood for hours...outside the Odeon every Saturday night. You'd be lucky if you sold half a dozen copies. People were afraid to be seen coming up to you to take one. It's true we used to go around delivering leaflets and pamphlets into people's doorways, but we never had anything from them. Nobody wrote to say 'What marvellous stuff you have on this leaflet. Let me know more about it.' We never had anything like that...We never got much in the kitty through selling stuff. We couldn't give it away. People didn't want to know.¹⁵⁸

The two most active Blackshirt Districts, Eye and Woodbridge, made more progress in this direction, although, in both cases, their efforts also fell far short of the ideal. Ronald Creasy, who became the British Union's prospective parliamentary candidate for the Eye division at Mosley's request in 1938, set up a rudimentary electoral machine by establishing small Blackshirt groups within the constituency, notably at Framlingham, Halesworth and Stowmarket. Each contingent was placed under the command of an Assistant District Leader, who, in turn, reported to Creasy. These small B.U.F. detachments were engaged in the "detailed work" of canvassing and disseminating propaganda.¹⁵⁹ At Eye itself, male activists, assisted by the Women's Section, participated in the November 1938 local election campaign on behalf of their District Leader and, afterwards, continued to support local B.U.F. meetings, distribute leaflets, canvass and make personal visits to potential sympathisers.

¹⁵⁸ Swan. Taped interview.

¹⁵⁹ Ronald N. Creasy. Letter to Andrew Mitchell. 11 April 1996.

Creasy also “thoroughly worked the whole of this area” by holding regular open-air meetings throughout the division.¹⁶⁰ On such occasions, he often shared the platform with Charles Hammond and Edric Sherston, fellow East Anglian B.U.F. prospective parliamentary candidates. Speakers from National Headquarters occasionally visited the locality to address public gatherings, but only at Creasy’s request.¹⁶¹

Edric Sherston also took the B.U.F.’s electoral ambitions seriously. When his candidature was announced in 1937, he formed a volunteer group of constituency workers to canvass and leaflet the parliamentary area. Blackshirt social events, such as dances and whist drives, were also arranged to boost the Woodbridge B.U.F.’s election fund.¹⁶² Furthermore, Sherston had both the commitment and the private financial means to employ an election agent, since he had offered this salaried position to John Smeaton-Stuart shortly before the latter left the movement.¹⁶³ The Woodbridge District Leader spoke regularly in the constituency and elsewhere in Suffolk, particularly on farming issues. In October 1938, along with the Conservative and Labour prospective parliamentary candidates for the division, Sherston addressed the County Executive of the Suffolk Farmers Union at Ipswich on the subject of agricultural policy.¹⁶⁴

The many weaknesses of the Suffolk movement were exacerbated by the general lack of collaboration between the various Blackshirt formations within the county. Although personal affiliations ensured that the Eye and Woodbridge Districts held joint meetings and propaganda activities, Ronald Creasy’s insular preoccupation with the movement’s fortunes at Eye and his determination to run his area on his own terms made him reluctant to cooperate with or seek out other Blackshirt groups in Suffolk. Consequently, throughout the second half of the 1930s, he was only vaguely

¹⁶⁰ Ibid..

¹⁶¹ Ibid..

¹⁶² W.R.W.M.G., 29 July 1937, p. 1, 16 December 1937, p. 6.

¹⁶³ P.R.O. HO 283/64/35. Home Office Advisory Committee to consider Appeals against Orders of Internment. Notes of a meeting held at 6, Burlington Gardens W.1. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. John Smeaton-Stuart.

¹⁶⁴ S.C.M., 14 October 1938, p. 2.

aware of the existence of the Lowestoft and Bury St. Edmunds B.U.F. and made no attempt to forge links with their respective District Leaders.¹⁶⁵

Lowestoft Mosleyites appeared to be equally isolated. The District Treasurer, Arthur Swan, admitted that inter-Branch cooperation was virtually non-existent and revealed that the Lowestoft B.U.F. had little knowledge of the extent of fascist activity elsewhere in the eastern counties:

Well...you see, there weren't any Branches as far as we were aware. The nearest one was Norwich and that's thirty miles away, which was a terrific trip for us to make in those days...I suppose we must have bypassed them then. Just far enough away to be not 'meetable' during the week, sort of thing...There was nothing at Beccles as far as I know...or Wrentham or Southwold...We used to go out and try to hold meetings in those sort of places, but never ran into any others. Even Yarmouth...we went there once or twice [but] we never found anybody.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Creasy. Taped interview, 1991; Creasy. Taped interview, 1995.
¹⁶⁶ Swan. Taped interview.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE B.U.F. IN ESSEX 1933-1939

1. Introduction

Blackshirt efforts to secure a organisational presence in Essex began in 1933 and, within a few months, the number of B.U.F. formations in the county had reached double figures. Although this early growth could not be sustained, the overall level of Branch activity, including fascist participation in local election contests, made the Essex B.U.F. appear a more vibrant political force than its Norfolk and Suffolk counterparts. Nevertheless, significant Blackshirt progress in the county proved to be equally elusive since the existence of a range of internal and external constraints kept the Essex movement firmly anchored to the political margins.

2. Essex in the 1930s

By the early 1930s, the Administrative County of Essex, together with the County Boroughs of East Ham, Southend-on-Sea and West Ham, possessed a total population of 1,755,459 and occupied 977,764 acres. The 40 urban localities in Essex (three County Boroughs, eight Municipal Boroughs and 29 Urban Districts) accounted for 84 per cent of the population but only sixteen per cent of the acreage. In contrast, the corresponding percentages for the seventeen Rural Districts were sixteen and 84.¹ After 1891, Essex recorded intercensal population growth rates of 38.4 per cent (1891-1901), 24.6 per cent (1901-1911), 8.8 per cent (1911-1921) and 19.4 per cent (1921-1931), each of which outstripped the respective rate of increase for England and Wales as a whole. The most populous areas in 1931 were the County Boroughs of West Ham (294,278), East Ham (142,394) and Southend-on-Sea (120,115) and the Municipal Boroughs of Walthamstow (132,972), Ilford (131,061) and Leyton (128,313). The Urban Districts of Dagenham and Barking Town also had populations

¹ Census of England and Wales 1931: County of Essex Part I (London: H.M.S.O., 1932), pp. vii-viii.

over 50,000, but, of the remaining 32 urban areas in the county, twenty had fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.²

According to the 1931 Census, the overall population density for Essex was 1.8 persons per acre, which reflected average urban and rural densities of 9.3 and 0.3 respectively. The largest towns, notably West Ham (62.8), Leyton (49.5), East Ham (42.8) and Walthamstow (30.6), tended to experience the highest population to acreage ratios. Density levels in the smaller urban areas, such as Waltham Holy Cross (0.6), Saffron Walden (0.8), Rayleigh (1.1) and Witham (1.2), resembled those typically recorded in rural Essex.³

From 1921 to 1931, the county's stock of structurally separate occupied dwellings increased from 285,592 to 386,475, and the number of private families rose from 338,829 to 451,436. As a result, the number of private families per occupied dwelling fell from 1.19 to 1.17 across the decennium.⁴ By 1931, 29.2 per cent of these families lived in properties of up to three rooms, 47.8 per cent resided in dwellings with four or five rooms, and 23 per cent were in accommodation offering six or more. Over the same period, the mean size of an Essex family had been reduced from 4.16 to 3.74 persons, partly due to the high marriage and falling birth rates in the county after 1921. Consequently, the average number of persons per occupied room had fallen from 0.92 to 0.84 during these ten years, which meant that, generally speaking, the Essex population was better housed in 1931 than in 1921. The proportion of Essex private families living in overcrowded conditions (defined as more than two persons per room) also decreased from 4.7 per cent to 3.4 per cent between these dates.⁵

Most of Essex was characterised by "rural, dispersed settlement" and relied to a significant extent on agriculture.⁶ Annually, around 700,000 acres of the county were

² Ibid..

³ Ibid., p. viii.

⁴ Ibid., p. xi.

⁵ Ibid., pp. xii-xv.

⁶ N.V. Scarfe, 'Part 82 Essex' in L. Dudley Stamp (ed.), *The Land of Britain: The Report of The Land Utilisation Survey of Britain* (London: Geographical Publications, 1942), p. 431; J.C. Leslie and D.J. Ewing, 'The Agriculture of Essex', *Agricultural Progress*, xii (1935), pp. 73-81.

under crops and grass throughout the 1930s. In 1931, 41,641 individuals (5.25 per cent of the employed Essex workforce) were engaged in agricultural occupations in the county, including 5,295 farmers and 21,199 agricultural labourers or farm servants.⁷ Relatively small-scale land holding tended to be the norm during this period. The smallest holdings were situated mainly in Billericay, Tiptree, Boxted, Rayleigh and the Lea Valley. Official statistics revealed that in 1935 4,604 of the 8,138 recorded holdings in Essex were under 50 acres. Only 132 exceeded 500 acres.⁸

Soil distribution and proximity to the “glorious insatiable God-sent market” of London were the two key factors which influenced land use in Essex.⁹ The demand generated by the capital for fresh fruit, vegetables, eggs and milk ensured that, to the south of the county, the heavy clay lands were given over to dairy farming and the light soils supported market gardening. Further away from the metropolis, soil type was generally more important than the needs of London in determining agricultural output. Broadly speaking, north Essex was a predominantly arable area although grassland was to be found south of Colchester and in the Cam-Stort valleys, which also contained glasshouse culture. South Essex was mainly grassland, but arable regions were located to the north-east of Southend, between Burnham-on-Crouch and Bradwell-on-Sea, and on a wide strip bordering the Thames from Ilford to Stanford-le-Hope.¹⁰

Wheat, the largest single crop in Essex, accounted for ten per cent of the county acreage (about 100,000 acres) per annum because the local soil and climate were conducive to high yields. Although the most widely distributed arable crop, wheat was mainly grown on the heavy boulder clays in the Rodings and north Essex. Barley occupied approximately 60,000 acres per year but, being less suited to exceptionally heavy and lime-free land, was not grown in south Essex to any extent. Cultivation was

⁷ *Census of England and Wales 1931: Occupation Tables* (London: H.M.S.O., 1934), Table 16, p. 202. The 1931 Census recorded that there were, in total, 793,514 individuals aged fourteen or over with occupations in Essex (including the County Boroughs).

⁸ Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (M.A.F.), *Agricultural Statistics 1935*, Vol. LXX, Part I (London: H.M.S.O., 1936), Table 12, pp. 86-87.

⁹ Scarfe, ‘Part 82 Essex’, p. 445.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 418 and p. 420.

chiefly confined to the chalk hill country bordering Cambridgeshire, the heavy boulder clays of north Essex and the Rodings, and eastern Tendring. Much of the crop was sent to London and Midlands breweries. Low quality barley was ground into animal feed at local mills. Oats covered about 30-40,000 acres annually, and the main concentrations were to be found in north-east Essex.¹¹

Clover cropping, second in acreage to wheat, took place mainly in the Rodings, the heavy north Essex boulder clays, the corn lands of eastern Tendring and certain coastal areas. Over 80 per cent of the clover produced in the county was cut for hay or seed. Sugar beet tended to be grown in the vicinity of the Felsted beet factory. Thus, the chief area was situated in the Rodings, but the chalk hill country and the localities around Sudbury, Elmstead and Bromley also cultivated beet. The largest acreages of potatoes were to be found in south-west Essex, the Rochford basin, the Rodings and the Ongar mixed farming area. Generally favouring light or medium soils, green peas were chiefly grown on the land bordering the Chelmsford-Colchester railway line and in the market gardening areas of south Essex.¹²

Market gardening in Essex was determined by three physical factors, namely light soil, flat land (to prevent water 'run off') and proximity to the sea. The most extensive area devoted to this type of cultivation was the south-west Essex market gardening plain (a zone stretching from Barkingside to Corringham), which specialised in potatoes, peas, cabbages, beans, rhubarb, lettuce, brussel sprouts, marrows and onions. Rochford and Dengie were the other key locations for market gardening. The main soft fruit producing areas were Tiptree Heath, the Totham and Tolleshunt plains, and the district around Langham. Commercial apple growing, although more widely distributed, was most evident in central Essex, particularly in the villages of Boreham Leighs, Little Baddow, Great Baddow, Danbury, Woodham Mortimer, Woodham Walter and Ulting. A significant quantity of apples also came from western Tendring.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 425-427.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 427-428.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 428-430.

Cattle, particularly dairy cows, constituted the most important livestock in Essex. Cows in milk were concentrated across southern Essex below a line linking Harlow with Maldon. Exceptionally high densities were recorded in the Ongar and Hanningfields districts. Above the Harlow-Maldon line, there were far fewer cows, but beef cattle were located in areas of intensive cultivation. Indeed, the Rodings region was the main beef producing area in the county. Sheep were also reared throughout Essex, but most were confined to the grasslands of the north-west, the south and the eastern marshes. Pig keeping in the county was mainly associated with arable farming districts, notably the heavy boulder clays of north Essex. North Tending was also well stocked, especially near Manningtree. The south Essex grasslands around Brentwood, Billericay and Danbury were the chief areas for poultry keeping. However, some hens were kept on arable farms to the north, and intensive poultry systems had been established in places such as Hatfield Broad Oak, Dunmow, Felsted and Braintree.¹⁴

Outside metropolitan Essex, most county towns functioned as cattle and corn markets, banking and shopping centres and locations for agricultural industries. Animal feed was produced in large quantities at Stanford Rivers, Battlesbridge, Southminster, Mistley and elsewhere. Agricultural implements were manufactured at Colchester (which also possessed a canning factory), Chelmsford, Earls Colne, Brentwood, Hornchurch and Wickford. Witham had a packing station, jam factories operated at Tiptree and Elsenham, and sugar beet was processed at Felsted. A chemical plant at Barking Creek produced manure. Many Essex market towns also boasted a range of industrial concerns. At Colchester, for example, there were iron foundries, footwear and clothing factories, and engineering firms, as well as mills, maltings and agricultural machinery works. Metal window frames were made at Braintree, Witham and Maldon. Chelmsford's industries included important electrical, ball-bearing and wireless manufacturers, and both Halstead and Walton-on-the-Naze were centres for minor engineering. Lace, velvet and silk production were mainly confined to Braintree,

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 422-424.

Halstead and Coggeshall in north Essex, and local chalk was used to make concrete at Saffron Walden.¹⁵

The most conspicuous development in the county during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth was the creation of metropolitan Essex, east of the River Lea and along Thames-side.¹⁶ Several factors were responsible for transforming previously semi-rural south-west Essex into an industrial and suburban dormitory area. Firstly, the region bordered the waterway which carried the capital's seaborne trade and was close enough for development as an industrial location. Secondly, London's commerce and industry no longer possessed sufficient space for expansion within the city and, from the mid-1800s, began to move outwards along the Thames. Thirdly, the inter-war depression, which particularly affected the industries in the north, encouraged industrial concerns to set up in metropolitan Essex, where trade prospects were brighter and transport costs less. Fourthly, the employment opportunities offered by this industrial growth attracted people from London, provincial Essex and elsewhere into the locality. Other London residents moved to the area to escape overcrowding, noise and pollution. Finally, south-west Essex constituted a logical reception area for the capital's overflow, given the London County Council's (L.C.C.) pressing need to relieve its own congested districts.¹⁷

Predictably, metropolitan Essex witnessed significant population growth during this period. West Ham's population increased sharply from 12,738 in 1841 to 294,278 in 1931. In the 30 years after 1891, East Ham swelled from an Urban District of 32,713 to a County Borough containing 143,246 persons. Between 1871 and 1931 the population total for Walthamstow also rose impressively from 11,092 to 132,972.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 433-434.

¹⁶ The term 'metropolitan Essex' has no precise or agreed definition but has traditionally referred to that part of the county contained within Greater London.

¹⁷ W. Ashworth, 'Metropolitan Essex since 1850' in W.R. Powell (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Essex*, Vol. V, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 1-92; K.J. Neale, *Essex In History* (London: Phillimore, 1977), Chapters Eight and Nine; A.C. Edwards, *A History of Essex* (London: Phillimore, 1978), Chapter XV; K. Neale, *Discovering Essex in London* (Ian Henry Publications, 1986), Chapters Two and Seven.

Leyton virtually doubled its numbers (63,056 to 124,735) over the two decennia up to 1911, and in 1931 the figure stood at 128,313. By the early 1930s, however, it was apparent that these Boroughs had reached saturation point, a fact reflected in their high average person to acreage ratios and declining populations.¹⁸

This burgeoning expansion had an obvious impact on local living conditions, particularly in West Ham, where the growth of industry was most apparent. At the beginning of the 1930s, four wards in the County Borough had average population densities exceeding 100 persons per acre, and over seventeen per cent of West Ham's inhabitants suffered from overcrowding (defined as more than two persons to a room). It was also estimated that 14.5 per cent of the local population lived in poverty, the working class districts of Canning Town and Silvertown being among the least affluent areas. The corresponding figures for East Ham, Leyton and Walthamstow were lower, partly because these Boroughs contained more extensive upper working class and middle class suburban residential districts.¹⁹

After 1918, new suburban housing projects were commenced by private developers and public authorities in places such as Dagenham, Ilford, Woodford and Chingford. For example, the construction of the Becontree Estate (1921-1932), under the auspices of the L.C.C., led to a dramatic influx at Dagenham, where the population rocketed from 9,127 to 89,362 in the ten years following 1921. Private housing schemes in Ilford, Chingford, Woodford and elsewhere offered affordable owner-occupation and also contributed to local population growth. Many of these inter-war initiatives included several features (such as fewer houses per acre and the provision of more open spaces and larger gardens) which ensured that, despite the rising numbers living at these locations, population densities remained low.²⁰

¹⁸ Ashworth, 'Metropolitan Essex since 1850', Tables 2 and 3, p. 5 and Table 10, p. 64.

¹⁹ Sir H.L. Smith, The New Survey of London Life and Labour 1931-35, (London: P.S. King and Son, 1931), Vol. III, Borough Summaries, pp. 343-412; Census of England and Wales 1931: Housing Report and Tables (London: H.M.S.O., 1935), Table 14, p. 45. In 1931, overcrowding stood at 6.23 per cent, 5.61 per cent and 5.62 per cent in East Ham, Leyton and Walthamstow respectively. The corresponding poverty rates were 9.9 per cent, 6.9 per cent and 7.3 per cent.

²⁰ Ashworth, 'Metropolitan Essex since 1850', pp. 63-67.

By the 1930s, parts of south-west Essex, notably Walthamstow, Leyton, East Ham, Ilford, Chingford and Woodford, had been transformed into 'London' dormitory areas for middle class employees engaged in clerical, commercial and financial occupations and a smaller manual labour force mainly concentrated in the engineering, transport (including the docks) and construction sectors. West Ham, which possessed a large industrial base specialising in chemical, engineering, food, textile and leather production, did not conform to this general suburban residential pattern. The Borough's employed population was composed chiefly of workers connected with the docks, rail and road transport, engineering and the building trade. Moreover, many West Ham residents also worked in the locality.²¹

Although less pronounced, industrial development was evident in other areas of south-west Essex by the 1930s. Factory districts had been established in north-west and east Walthamstow to manufacture a range of products, including mica, clothing and scientific instruments. In 1931, the Ford Motor Company opened a large industrial complex on a 500 acre site at Dagenham. This plant, which employed 12,000 workers by 1937, stimulated the growth of numerous satellite industries in the region. Another industrial zone, dominated by gas and chemical works and the docks, was located in south East Ham. Photographic materials and radio and television components were produced at Ilford. Other districts in the region, such as Wanstead and Woodford, possessed few industrial concerns.²²

3. The Development of the B.U.F. in Essex, 1933-1940

During the early stages of the B.U.F.'s development in provincial Essex, the senior Blackshirt official responsible for the county was Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-70; W.R. Powell, 'West Ham' in W.R. Powell (ed.), The Victoria History of the County of Essex, Vol. VI, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 76-89; Smith, The New Survey of London Life and Labour 1931-35, Vol. III, Borough Summaries, pp. 343-412.

²² Ashworth, 'Metropolitan Essex since 1850', pp. 67-68; P.H. Reaney and H.E.P. Grieve, 'Walthamstow' in The Victoria History of the County of Essex, Vol. VI, pp. 269-273; J.G. O'Leary, 'Dagenham' in The Victoria History of the County of Essex, Vol. V, pp. 284-285; W.R. Powell, 'East Ham' in The Victoria History of the County of Essex, Vol. VI, pp. 16-17; J.E. Oxley, 'Ilford' in The Victoria History of the County of Essex, Vol. V, pp. 254-255.

Edmund Crocker, a former army officer. Crocker had joined the B.U.F. in September 1933 as the Branch Organiser at Bournemouth and, seven months later, was appointed Officer-in-Charge, Home Counties East. He was also a National Speaker for the movement.²³ Born in September 1877, Crocker completed his education at Shrewsbury School before obtaining a commission in the Essex Regiment in 1900. After serving in the South Africa conflict, he commanded both the 13th Signal Corps and the 8th Cheshire Regiment during the First World War. His impressive military record in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia brought him the Distinguished Service Order (1916) and the Companion of St. Michael and St. George (1919). Crocker continued as a career soldier until his retirement in 1929.²⁴ As a committed high-profile Mosleyite activist based at Maldon, Crocker addressed numerous meetings in provincial Essex from April 1934 to publicise the B.U.F.'s programme and encourage the development of Blackshirt Branches in the area.²⁵ He contributed several articles on agricultural and imperial policy to the fascist press and, for a period in the mid-1930s, wrote 'The Farmworkers' Diary' column in Blackshirt.²⁶ According to B.U.F. sources, Crocker left the movement in the later 1930s and subsequently became a missionary in Africa.²⁷

By late October 1933, the B.U.F. had founded its first Branch in provincial Essex in the Municipal Borough of Maldon.²⁸ At this early stage, fascism was reported to be "very strong" in the district, and one local adherent claimed that 150-200 Blackshirt newspapers were sold in the Maldon area each week.²⁹ The first Branch officials were George E.L. Baker, Reginald Stuart and Harold Blind, who were Branch

²³ 'Who's Who in Fascism', biographical section in B.U.F. souvenir programme for Mosley's Albert Hall meeting of 22 March 1936 (Supplied privately); Blackshirt, 11-17 May 1934, p. 2.

²⁴ Who Was Who, Vol. VI, 1961-1970 (London: A. and C. Black, 1972), pp. 257-258.

²⁵ See for example Blackshirt, 11-17 May 1934, p. 2, 1 June 1934, p. 7, 8 June 1934, p. 11, 10 July 1934, p. 11, 18 January 1935, p. 2.

²⁶ See for example *ibid.*, 28 December 1934, p. 4, 24 January 1936, p. 6, 2 May 1936, p. 7, 25 July 1936, p. 7, 10 October 1936, p. 7, 14 November 1936, p. 3.

²⁷ Richard Reynell Bellamy, 'We Marched With Mosley' (Unpublished unabridged manuscript, 1958-1968), pp. 320-321; information provided by Friends of Oswald Mosley (F.O.M.). Crocker died in May 1962. See Who Was Who, Vol. VI, p. 258.

²⁸ Maldon Express (M.E.), 28 October 1933, p. 1.

²⁹ Colchester Gazette (C.G.), 29 November 1933, p. 6.

Organiser, Propaganda Officer and Officer-in-Charge of the Defence Force respectively.³⁰

These senior positions changed hands regularly during the first year or so. In February 1934, Branch Organiser Baker, the son of local alderman E.T. Baker, switched posts with F.J. Syder, the local Assistant Propaganda Officer.³¹ Three months later, Syder resigned as Officer-in-Charge of the Maldon B.U.F. and was succeeded by A.J. Macpherson, a farmer from Woodham Walter, who headed the Branch until December.³² Harold Blind, formerly an N.C.O. during the First World War, then assumed command of the formation.³³ A resident of London Road, Maldon, Blind was described as “a prominent organiser of the movement in Essex” and eventually received the B.U.F.’s Bronze Distinction in 1937.³⁴

At the outset, the Branch operated from office premises at 1a, High Street, Maldon, but, by May 1934, new headquarters had been established at 40, London Road, a property “kindly given” by a local adherent named Mrs. Gower.³⁵ The latter was one of a number of female recruits who had enrolled at the Branch by mid-1934.³⁶ During the initial period of development, local Blackshirts and National Headquarters (N.H.Q.) speakers held regular meetings in Maldon. Most of these were open-air gatherings at the market place, but, on occasion, B.U.F. public addresses also took place at the Parish Hall.³⁷ In November 1934, for example, William Joyce delivered a speech on the B.U.F. programme at this indoor venue.³⁸ Maldon Blackshirt activists

³⁰ *M.E.*, 28 October 1933, p. 1. Reginald Stuart was replaced as Propaganda Officer by F.J. Syder in January 1934. See *Blackshirt*, 19-25 January 1934, p. 4.

³¹ *Blackshirt*, 2-8 March 1934, p. 4, 19-25 January 1934, p. 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 11-17 May 1934, p. 4, 25-31 May 1934, p. 4, 8 June 1934, p. 11, 7 December 1934, p. 10; *Essex Chronicle (E.C.)*, 8 June 1934, p. 6.

³³ *Blackshirt*, 7 December 1934, p. 10; *E.C.*, 23 February 1934, p. 2.

³⁴ *E.C.*, 15 June 1934, p. 6; *M.E.*, 16 June 1934, p. 3; *Blackshirt*, 2 October 1937, p. 7.

³⁵ *E.C.*, 2 February 1934, p. 2, 23 February 1934, p. 2; *M.E.*, 28 October 1933, p. 1, 5 May 1934, p. 1; *Blackshirt*, 8 June 1934, p. 11; Public Records Office, Home Office series (P.R.O. HO) 144/20140/110. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 1 May 1934.

³⁶ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire of 12 June 1934. Reply of Maldon Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/35.

³⁷ See for example *M.E.*, 28 October 1933, p. 1, 11 November 1933, p. 1, 25 November 1933, p. 1, 17 February 1934, p. 1, 24 February 1934, p. 3, 17 March 1934, p. 1, 5 May 1934, p. 1, 2 June 1934, p.

1; *Blackshirt*, 9-15 March 1934, p. 2, 22 June 1934, p. 2.

³⁸ *M.E.*, 17 November 1934, p. 1.

also staged events, such as meetings and propaganda drives, at other locations in the area, including Braintree, Witham, Tillingham and Tollesbury.³⁹ Due to the growth of B.U.F. activity in the constituency, George Baker was promoted to Propaganda Officer for the parliamentary county division of Maldon in July 1934, and Harold Blind became Assistant Deputy Propaganda Officer for North-East Essex.⁴⁰

A B.U.F. Branch was established at Witham in early March 1934, shortly after fascist detachments from Maldon had organised a street newspaper sale and conducted an open-air meeting in the Urban District.⁴¹ The first Fascist-in-Charge of the Witham formation was Frederick Robert East, and another local Mosleyite, A.L. Cullen, served as Acting Assistant Propaganda Officer.⁴² Both men were former members of the Maldon B.U.F.. East, a 24 year old fascist loyalist who worked for Marconi, had lost his left hand in a chemical accident. He lived with his parents at North Corner Avenue Road, Witham, an address which also served as the local Blackshirt headquarters.⁴³ Towards the end of March, a group of Maldon Blackshirts supported the new Branch at an open-air gathering in High Street, Witham.⁴⁴ The first "big meeting" of the Witham Branch took place in June 1934, when Lt.-Col. H.E. Crocker addressed an audience of 50 at the Grove Hall.⁴⁵

By mid-March 1934, another Blackshirt formation was reported to be "growing strongly" at Braintree under the leadership of E.P. Allen and Norman Bullock.⁴⁶ The first reported Branch meeting took place during the same month at Thorogood's Cafe, Braintree and resulted in a number of enrolments.⁴⁷ From April

³⁹ See for example *Braintree and Witham Times (B.W.T.)*, 15 March 1934, p. 5; *E.C.*, 9 February 1934, p. 10, 2 March 1934, p. 10; *M.E.*, 2 June 1934, p. 1, 9 June 1934, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *M.E.*, 7 July 1934, p. 1; *Blackshirt*, 13 July 1934, p. 10. Blind had been Propaganda Officer for the Maldon B.U.F. since March 1934. See *M.E.*, 17 March 1934, p. 1.

⁴¹ *B.W.T.*, 8 February 1934, p. 8, 1 March 1934, p. 8; *E.C.*, 2 March 1934, p. 10; *M.E.*, 17 March 1934, p. 1.

⁴² *B.W.T.*, 8 March 1934, p. 10, 15 March 1934, p. 6.

⁴³ Home Office Advisory Committee (HOAC) Supplementary Report. Frederick Robert East. 8 September 1941 (This document was consulted on privileged access at the Home Office); *B.W.T.*, 31 May 1934, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *E.C.*, 30 March 1934, p. 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 June 1934, p. 10; *B.W.T.*, 31 May 1934, p. 8.

⁴⁶ *B.W.T.*, 15 March 1934, p. 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

1934, local B.U.F. and N.H.Q. personnel held regular meetings at Braintree market place, but on several occasions anti-fascists attempted to disrupt the proceedings with vociferous heckling.⁴⁸ The Blackshirts also locked ideological horns with their opponents more peacefully in June 1934, when representatives of the B.U.F. and the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.) held a political debate at the Braintree Institute.⁴⁹ Propaganda Officer A.C. Miles from London Headquarters opposed the motion that “Communism is preferable to Fascism as the alternative to Capitalism” but was defeated by 57 votes to twelve. The local press, noting that only 100 people attended this event, concluded that the B.U.F. had attracted only “a very small following” in Braintree.⁵⁰

A fourth Blackshirt Branch was operating in the Maldon constituency at Burnham-on-Crouch by mid-June 1934 after Captain Vincent Collier and Lt.-Col. Crocker had held separate B.U.F. propaganda meetings in the area during May. The new Branch also covered Southminster, Tillingham and the neighbouring villages.⁵¹

In order to facilitate the implementation of Mosley’s new electoral strategy, the Executive decision of 3 May 1935 remodelled the B.U.F.’s Essex Branch structures into Divisions or Districts, each of which corresponded to the geographical boundaries of the relevant parliamentary constituency.⁵² Consequently, in the spring of 1935, the Blackshirt Branches at Maldon, Witham, Braintree and Burnham-on-Crouch were subsumed within the new organisational and administrative framework of the Maldon Division B.U.F., which encompassed the parliamentary county division of Maldon. By July 1935, Captain W. Hart Gregson had been appointed Fascist Political Agent for the constituency, and, in November 1936, the movement announced that it intended to

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 April 1934, p. 2; *M.E.*, 5 May 1934, p. 4; *E.C.*, 8 June 1934, p. 8, 10 August 1934, p. 9, 2 November 1934, p. 8; *Blackshirt*, 11-17 May 1934, p. 2, 3 August 1934, p. 10.

⁴⁹ *E.C.*, 22 June 1934, p. 2; *Blackshirt*, 6 July 1934, p. 10.

⁵⁰ *E.C.*, 22 June 1934, p. 7.

⁵¹ *Blackshirt*, 8 June 1934, p. 11, 15 June 1934, p. 9; *M.E.*, 12 May 1934, p. 1, 2 June 1934, p. 1.

⁵² See Chapter Three.

contest the division at the next general election. However, no B.U.F. prospective parliamentary candidate was ever put forward.⁵³

Once the 1935 reforms had been implemented, Maldon remained the focal point of fascist organisation in the constituency. From then on, B.U.F. Divisional Headquarters were located at 1a, High Street, Maldon.⁵⁴ This address also served as an operational base for Harold Blind, who, in May 1935, was promoted to District Inspecting Officer for north-east Essex.⁵⁵ From April 1936, a Women's Section was located at the same premises.⁵⁶ By October 1937, the former Branch Organiser at Witham, F.R. East, had become District Leader of the Maldon Division B.U.F..⁵⁷ In 1938, East was appointed County Propaganda Officer for Essex and received the Bronze Distinction for service to the Blackshirt cause.⁵⁸

Maldon and Braintree continued to be the main centres of B.U.F. activity during this period. Open-air meetings were held fairly regularly in both towns by local Blackshirts and speakers attached to N.H.Q..⁵⁹ A number of these outdoor fascist addresses, particularly in Braintree, attracted considerable opposition, which sometimes spilled over into violence. In October 1935, for example, the B.U.F. complained that, during a recent Blackshirt street meeting at Braintree, one of their registered speakers had been subjected to a "cowardly and unprovoked assault" by a communist.⁶⁰ From the mid-1930s, the Maldon B.U.F.'s local propaganda campaign was reinforced by occasional indoor public meetings, which were addressed by senior Blackshirt officials. Henry Gibbs, Olga Shore, the Women's Executive Officer, Alexander Raven Thomson, Director of Policy, and Clement Bruning, Administrator of Southern Propaganda, all

⁵³ *M.E.*, 13 July 1935, p. 1; *Blackshirt*, 7 November 1936, p. 5.

⁵⁴ *M.E.*, 18 January 1936, p. 1; *E.C.*, 1 April 1938, p. 7; *B.W.T.*, 18 August 1938, p. 5.

⁵⁵ *E.C.*, 24 May 1935, p. 3, 28 February 1936, p. 6; *M.E.*, 25 May 1935, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *M.E.*, 11 April 1936, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 12.

⁵⁸ *B.W.T.*, 18 August 1938, p. 5; *Action*, 22 October 1938, p. 13; HOAC Supplementary Report. Frederick Robert East. 8 September 1941.

⁵⁹ See for example *M.E.*, 2 May 1936, p. 1, 10 October 1936, p. 1, 28 November 1936, p. 1, 20 February 1937, p. 1; *E.C.*, 2 October 1936, p. 12; *B.W.T.*, 30 September 1937, p. 6; *Blackshirt*, 9 May 1936, p. 6, 18 September 1937, p. 6, April 1938, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Blackshirt*, 4 October 1935, p. 8. See also *E.C.*, 4 October 1935, p. 12; *B.W.T.*, 10 October 1935, p. 6, 28 July 1938, p. 5; *M.E.*, 14 November 1936, p. 1.

endorsed the B.U.F. programme at indoor venues either at Maldon or Braintree in 1936-1937.⁶¹

Although the Maldon B.U.F. managed to sustain a political presence in the constituency after 1935, impressionistic evidence suggests that the formation was unable to increase its membership markedly. B.U.F. meetings in the area often attracted meagre audiences. This was most clearly revealed in April 1937, when Raven Thomson's scheduled meeting at the Parish Hall, Maldon had to be transferred to the market square due to poor attendance. An open-air debate on Spain between a B.U.F. speaker and a left-wing opponent, which was held before a large crowd at the Great Square, Braintree in September 1938, provided a further indication of the movement's limited support in the division, since only five of those present voted for the fascist case.⁶² The strident anti-fascist reaction to B.U.F. activities in Braintree and the failure to nominate a Blackshirt prospective parliamentary candidate also tend to endorse the view that the movement made little progress in the constituency during the remainder of the decade.

Mosley's public address on fascist agricultural policy at the Albert Hall, Colchester on 30 September 1933 appeared to be the catalyst for local Blackshirt activity.⁶³ By November 1933, a B.U.F. Branch at Colchester was in the process of formation under the leadership of Major Malcolm G. Sandeman, a former army officer, who resided at The Cobbs, Fordham. After joining the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1899, Sandeman served in various parts of the British Empire before being wounded and taken prisoner in the early stages of the First World War. He was eventually released following the cessation of hostilities and thereafter worked for the War Office until his retirement.⁶⁴ Within a few months, the local leadership passed to N. Goring who resided at 254, Ipswich Road, Colchester. However, Goring's

⁶¹ *Blackshirt*, 4 April 1936, p. 6, 18 April 1936, p. 6; *E.C.*, 15 May 1936, p. 9; *B.W.T.*, 28 January 1937, p. 5.

⁶² *M.E.*, 10 April 1937, p. 2; *B.W.T.*, 22 September 1938, p. 6.

⁶³ *C.G.*, 4 October 1933, p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Essex County Standard (E.C.S.)*, 24 November 1934, p. 3; *Blackshirt*, 16 January 1937, p. 7; *Clacton Times and East Essex Gazette (C.T.E.E.G.)*, 6 January 1934, p. 5.

stewardship was also brief, and, by December 1934, C.C. Stannard had taken the helm. Stannard's leadership proved to be more durable, lasting until at least 1936. By 1937, G.R. Lawson, of 5, Headgate, Colchester, had assumed the position of District Leader.⁶⁵

During the early months of its existence, although the Colchester B.U.F. had yet to acquire Branch premises, recruits came from all parts of the locality, particularly areas such as West Mersea. The local press reported that the new Blackshirt formation was attracting the interest of the farming community. A B.U.F. group was also established at Colchester Royal Grammar School under the leadership of a fascist named Collet.⁶⁶

Apparently, the local B.U.F. experienced difficulty in obtaining Branch premises and initially "were met with curt refusals from dozens of fearful landlords".⁶⁷ Thus, at the outset, the Colchester B.U.F. met at a private house belonging to a Mr. and Mrs. A. Taylor, but, by the end of June 1934, an office was established at 66a, North Hill, Colchester. By this stage, local activists were selling fascist newspapers in the High Street, promoting the B.U.F.'s agricultural policy in the rural districts and training promising recruits to be public speakers for the movement.⁶⁸ Just over a month later, the Colchester B.U.F. organised a series of open-air meetings at St. John's Green. During this period too, a women's sales force was organised by Miss K. Putt. A detachment from the Colchester formation also attended the large-scale B.U.F. events staged in London at the Albert Hall, Olympia and Hyde Park during 1934.⁶⁹

By the beginning of 1935, the local B.U.F. had moved into more spacious premises at 16a, St. John's Street due to increased membership and interest in the

⁶⁵ *Blackshirt*, 24 August 1934, p. 10, 7 December 1934, p. 10, 3 January 1936, p. 8; *East Anglian Daily Times (E.A.D.T.)*, 13 June 1934, p. 3; *E.C.S.*, 12 October 1935, p. 3; Board of Deputies of British Jews (B.D.B.J.) C6/9/3/1. Pre-war Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and Provincial Towns. c.1937.

⁶⁶ *C.G.*, 14 February 1934, p. 6; *Blackshirt*, 5-11 January 1934, p. 4.

⁶⁷ *Blackshirt*, 24 August 1934, p. 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; *C.G.*, 4 July 1934, p. 10.

⁶⁹ *C.G.*, 13 June 1934, p. 1, 22 August 1934, p. 9, 29 August 1934, p. 7, 12 September 1934, p. 1; *E.C.S.*, 28 April 1934, p. 15; *Blackshirt*, 24 August 1934, p. 10.

Colchester area. The new headquarters boasted the largest politically-owned hall in the town, which could seat 250 people. It was envisaged that this new base would facilitate regular physical training classes, lectures, speakers' classes, discussion meetings, socials and dances. Shortly afterwards, two of the region's senior B.U.F. officials gave addresses at these premises.⁷⁰

Thereafter, the B.U.F. was able to maintain a small-scale presence in Colchester until at least the second half of 1938 through a range of activities, including social functions, public meetings and sales drives.⁷¹ Visiting national B.U.F. figures also sustained some limited local interest in the movement during the mid-1930s. Mosley returned to Colchester in July 1934 and November 1936 for two more well-attended indoor speaking engagements, and other high profile B.U.F. public meetings were held in the town by William Joyce and John Beckett.⁷²

At the beginning of 1934, "a number of men interested in fascism", including Major M.G. Sandeman of Colchester, and S. Ralph Behn, the Blackshirt East Anglian Area Secretary, gathered to discuss the formation of a B.U.F. Branch in the Urban District of Clacton. By this stage, temporary Blackshirt headquarters had been established at The Retreat, Golf Green Road, Clacton. According to Behn, the East Anglian B.U.F. hoped to establish a thriving Branch at Clacton before the summer holiday season commenced.⁷³

On 10 January 1934 the Clacton B.U.F. held its first meeting under the chairmanship of R.J. Sutterby, the East Anglian Organiser for the Fascist Union of British Workers (F.U.B.W.). On this occasion, a Branch Organiser and Branch Secretary were appointed.⁷⁴ At a subsequent meeting, the senior local Blackshirt revealed that the Branch was currently searching for headquarters in the centre of the

⁷⁰ *C.G.*, 30 January 1935, p. 3, 6 March 1935, p. 3; *E.C.S.*, 16 February 1935, p. 9.

⁷¹ See for example *Blackshirt*, 3 January 1936, p. 8, 16 May 1936, p. 6, 12 December 1936, p. 6, 20 February 1937, p. 6, 7 August 1937, p. 6, 9 October 1937, p. 12, July 1938, p. 6.

⁷² *C.G.*, 25 July 1934, p. 7, 2 December 1936, p. 9, 10 October 1934, p. 14, 4 September 1935, p. 7. See also *Blackshirt*, 27 July 1934, p. 2, 12 December 1936, p. 6, 19 October 1934, p. 10, 6 September 1935, p. 6, 4 October 1935, p. 8.

⁷³ *C.T.E.E.G.*, 6 January 1934, p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Clacton News and East Essex Advertiser (C.N.E.E.A.)*, 13 January 1934, p. 4.

town. The Branch Organiser also stated that under the guidance of a Clacton fascist named Birkenhead, who was to be assisted by Area Headquarters, the F.U.B.W. was hoping to help some of the town's unemployed.⁷⁵

Within a month or so, the Clacton B.U.F. had acquired Branch premises at 5, The Lofts, Wellesley Road, Clacton, and was holding regular Tuesday night meetings at the new headquarters. By April 1934, H.F. Fancett had assumed the leadership of the Clacton formation, and C.H. Watson Junior occupied the position of local Secretary.⁷⁶ George Price, of Oak Bungalow, Jaywick Lane, Clacton, an ex-First World War Serviceman, who had lost his sight during a military engagement at Kemmel Hill in 1915, acted as Propaganda Officer. In October 1934, a Clacton Blackshirt named Stanley took over as Branch Organiser from Fancett, and the latter then took charge of the local Defence Force.⁷⁷ A Women's Section, based at Broadlands, Golf Green Road, Clacton, was launched by Mrs. Gordon Priestly in February 1934 and officially opened four months later, by which time the female membership was "numbered in scores".⁷⁸

During the summer of 1934, the Clacton B.U.F. held meetings, speakers' and defence classes, and sales drives on a weekly basis. This expansion of Branch activities led, in September 1934, to a proposal to extend the local Blackshirt headquarters, and the formation accepted an offer of winter premises in Old Road, Clacton. The existing headquarters at 5, The Lofts, Wellesley Road were retained for members' use and to accommodate the physical culture class. It was also decided to hold a series of open-air and indoor public meetings throughout the winter months, in cooperation with the Brightlingsea, Colchester and Dovercourt Branches.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 January 1934, p. 4; *C.T.E.E.G.*, 20 January 1934, p. 8.

⁷⁶ *C.T.E.E.G.*, 3 March 1934, p. 7, 17 March 1934, p. 8, 14 April 1934, p. 6, 21 April 1934, p. 5, 12 May 1934, p. 9, 19 May 1934, p. 10; *Blackshirt*, 2-8 March 1934, p. 2.

⁷⁷ *C.T.E.E.G.*, 23 June 1934, p. 7; *Blackshirt*, 29 June 1934, p. 3, 10 August 1934, p. 11, 26 October 1934, p. 11; *C.N.E.E.A.*, 23 June 1934, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *Blackshirt*, 2-8 March 1934, p. 2, 9-15 March 1934, p. 4, 29 June 1934, p. 3; P.R.O. HO 144/20140/109. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 1 May 1934.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 10 August 1934, p. 11; *C.T.E.E.G.*, 29 September 1934, p. 5, 20 October 1934, p. 8.

At the end of July 1934, a B.U.F. group was formed in the Urban District of Brightlingsea by a Mosleyite named Gerard Priestley. Initially, the fledgling formation was based at the Brightlingsea home of a Mr. and Mrs. W.R. Stokes, and, from the outset, street sales of Blackshirt and weekly open-air meetings were held in the town. Early recruitment, particularly among workers engaged in the local fishing industry, ensured that the Brightlingsea B.U.F. achieved Branch status by September 1934. During the same month, new headquarters were officially opened at 83, Colne Street, Brightlingsea, by Lt.-Col. H.E. Crocker, Officer-in-Charge, Home Counties East. Harold Blind, A.D.P.O., North East Essex, and representatives from the Maldon, Clacton-on-Sea and Hornchurch Branches were also in attendance.⁸⁰ The Brightlingsea B.U.F.'s new premises were situated in a cafe belonging to a local Blackshirt member named Rickman. In the early part of 1935, the Branch relocated to a property in Sydney Street.⁸¹

The first Branch Organiser at Brightlingsea was B. Armstrong, a local fascist who had previously served as the formation's Propaganda Officer.⁸² Armstrong's stewardship lasted only a few months, and, by April 1935, H.E. Stokes and a local printer named Roy Hockin were reported to be the senior B.U.F. officials in the town.⁸³ Several female posts within the Branch were filled in October 1934. Mrs. Paul was appointed Women's Organiser, the Branch Organiser's wife, Mrs. Armstrong, became her assistant, and Mrs. Rickman assumed responsibility for the canteen. Two other women were given the task of organising propaganda activities and, by November, female Blackshirts were canvassing the district.⁸⁴

Towards the end of 1934, several prominent Mosleyites spoke on behalf of the movement at Brightlingsea. On 20 September, Mary Richardson addressed the local

⁸⁰ Blackshirt, 17 August 1934, p. 11, 7 September 1934, p. 11, 21 September 1934, p. 11; E.C.S., 7 September 1934, p. 9.

⁸¹ Blackshirt, 26 October 1934, p. 9; E.C.S., 13 April 1935, p. 10.

⁸² E.C.S., 15 September 1934, p. 10. Armstrong's address was given as 14, North Road, Brightlingsea. See Blackshirt, 21 September 1934, p. 11.

⁸³ E.C.S., 13 April 1935, p. 10. Hockin lived in Station Road, Brightlingsea. See E.C.S., 28 September 1935, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Blackshirt, 26 October 1934, p. 9, 16 November 1934, p. 9.

Branch and held an indoor public meeting in the town. In October, Lt.-Col. Crocker and Lady Mosley, the B.U.F. leader's mother, visited the Branch headquarters to give private talks to the membership. Shortly afterwards, John Beckett was the principal speaker at a B.U.F. public meeting held at the Foresters' Hall, Brightlingsea.⁸⁵

By the summer of 1934, Blackshirt open-air meetings were also being held "fairly frequently" at Dovercourt, and, in June of that year, the B.U.F. announced the foundation of a Harwich and Dovercourt Branch. Those interested in joining were asked to contact Harold Blind at the Pier Hotel, Harwich. Following this propaganda activity in the district, it would appear that a local B.U.F. formation operated in the area during the latter half of 1934.⁸⁶

Due to the 1935 restructuring initiative, the Blackshirt organisations established at Harwich and Dovercourt, Clacton and Brightlingsea lost their Branch status in the spring of that year and thereafter operated as Units or Groups within the newly-created Harwich Division B.U.F., which covered the parliamentary county division of Harwich.⁸⁷ The first Officer-in-Charge of the Harwich Division B.U.F. was Len Hidden, a carpenter, who resided at Madeira Road, Holland-on-Sea.⁸⁸ A dedicated Blackshirt activist, Hidden undertook much propaganda work to further the B.U.F. cause in the area.⁸⁹ H.W. Saggs took over as District Officer at some point before October 1935, by which stage District Headquarters had been established at 252, Old Road, Clacton. After a period serving as District Treasurer, Hidden was reappointed leader of the Harwich Division B.U.F. towards the end of 1937.⁹⁰

Two other senior Blackshirts also endeavoured to mobilise popular support for fascism in the district during the second half of the decade. The Irish Mosleyite, Patrick

⁸⁵ E.C.S., 29 September 1934, p. 10, 20 October 1934, p. 10, 3 November 1934, p. 12; Blackshirt, 26 October 1934, p. 9, 16 November 1934, p. 9.

⁸⁶ Harwich and Dovercourt Standard (H.D.S.), 30 June 1934, p. 1; The Harwich and Dovercourt Newsman (H.D.N.), 30 June 1934, p. 1 and p. 3; C.T.E.E.G., 29 September 1934, p. 5.

⁸⁷ Blackshirt, 3 May 1935, p. 8, 27 September 1935, p. 8.

⁸⁸ C.T.E.E.G., 16 February 1935, p. 11; E.C.S., 28 September 1935, p. 13.

⁸⁹ C.T.E.E.G., 13 July 1935, p. 11; Blackshirt, 27 September 1935, p. 8; E.C.S., 28 September 1935, p. 13.

⁹⁰ H.D.S., 21 September 1935, p. 4, 12 October 1935, p. 4; Blackshirt, 30 October 1937, p. 6, 24 December 1937, p. 10.

Owen-Burke, was transferred from East London to Harwich in December 1934, with a brief to strengthen the local movement. An employee in the furniture trade, Owen-Burke had previously been the first official Branch Organiser of the Bow B.U.F..⁹¹ As a Headquarters Organiser for the Harwich Division, he undertook various speaking engagements in the area during 1935-1936 and was subsequently promoted to the rank of National Organising Officer for East Anglia. He lost his salaried position in March 1937, due to the severe financial cut-backs Mosley was obliged to impose on the movement.⁹²

John Garnett, who replaced Gerald Bowen as the B.U.F.'s Political Agent for the Harwich Division in mid-1935, also assumed the role of fascist standard bearer in the district, principally by arranging and speaking at local propaganda events.⁹³ After the collapse of his father's Lancashire cotton firm, Garnett, a product of Uppingham School, was employed briefly as a policeman and a schoolmaster in northern England. He joined the B.U.F. at Preston on 1 November 1933 and went on to hold official Blackshirt positions at Manchester and on the Lancashire and Cheshire Staff. During the mid-1930s, Garnett was appointed National Organiser for the Midlands and Essex and later became National Inspector for the Midlands and East Anglia. In December 1936, the 29 year old Mosleyite was put forward as the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the Harwich division.⁹⁴

After the 1935 reorganisation, the Harwich Division B.U.F. remained active in the constituency. Monthly members' meetings were held at the District Headquarters in

⁹¹ *Blackshirt*, 16 August 1935, p. 8; *Comrade: Newsletter of the Friends of Oswald Mosley*, 16 November 1996, p. 5; information provided by F.O.M..

⁹² *Blackshirt*, 16 August 1935, p. 8, 27 March 1937, p. 7; *C.T.E.E.G.*, 13 July 1935, p. 11, February 1936, p. 8, 29 February 1936, p. 11; information provided by F.O.M..

⁹³ *Blackshirt*, 30 August 1935, p. 12, 30 October 1937, p. 6, 11 December 1937, p. 6; *E.C.S.*, 11 May 1935, p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Blackshirt*, 5 December 1936, p. 5, June 1938, p. 8; *Comrade*, June/August 1991, p. 8; 'Who's Who in Fascism'. Garnett was one of six National Inspectors retained by the B.U.F. after the financial cut-backs of March 1937. He was placed in charge of the 'eastern counties', an area which extended to Oxford and included Leicester and Warwick. By June 1938, Garnett had also been appointed the B.U.F.'s Administrator of Reception and Enrolment and Organiser of National Transport. He continued as a National Inspector. See P.R.O. HO 144/21063/235. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 25 March 1937; *Blackshirt*, June 1938, p. 8.

Clacton, and local fascists participated in sales drives, poster parades, leafleting campaigns and village meetings on a regular basis.⁹⁵ Several national B.U.F. figures gave addresses in the division from 1935, including Mosley, who held well-attended indoor meetings at Dovercourt and Clacton.⁹⁶ However, with the exception of the B.U.F. leader's visits, the arrival of National Headquarters officials stimulated little local interest, reinforcing the view that Harwich Division B.U.F. membership was small and remained so for the rest of the decade. For example, William Risdon, the B.U.F.'s Chief Political Agent, and William Joyce, Director of Propaganda, could attract only small audiences when they spoke at Clacton Town Hall in the mid-1930s.⁹⁷ Similarly, Raven Thomson's May 1935 meeting at the Forresters' Hall, Brightlingsea prompted only a "sparse attendance".⁹⁸ Equally disappointing for the B.U.F. was the public's response to an advertised indoor meeting at the Alexandra Hotel, Dovercourt on 14 December 1936, which was addressed by Clement Bruning, Administrative Officer, Southern Propaganda. On this occasion, only twenty people turned up to listen.⁹⁹

By the end of March 1934, the B.U.F. was organising in the Municipal Borough of Chelmsford under Recruiting Officer, A.J. Macpherson, a local farmer, who resided at 75, Springfield Road in the town and at Hatchman's Farm, Woodham Walter. Prior to becoming a Blackshirt, Macpherson had travelled to Italy and Australia and had also worked in northern England and the Midlands.¹⁰⁰ He took over as Branch Organiser of the Maldon B.U.F. in mid-1934.¹⁰¹ Local B.U.F. headquarters had been established at 51, New Street, Chelmsford by November. The Chelmsford formation held its first open-air meeting in June 1934, when George Baker, the Maldon Blackshirt activist, explained B.U.F. policy outside the town hall. John Beckett and

⁹⁵ See for example *Blackshirt*, 27 September 1935, p. 8, 30 October 1937, p. 6, 4 December 1937, p. 6, 24 December 1937, p. 10, July 1938, p. 6.

⁹⁶ *H.D.S.*, 14 September 1935, p. 1; *C.T.E.E.G.*, 19 October 1935, p. 3, 13 June 1936, p. 11.

⁹⁷ *C.T.E.E.G.*, 22 February 1936, p. 11, 23 January 1937, p. 9.

⁹⁸ *E.C.S.*, 11 May 1935, p. 10.

⁹⁹ *H.D.S.*, 19 December 1936, p. 4, 12 December 1936, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ *E.C.*, 30 March 1934, p. 10, 6 April 1934, p. 4, 8 June 1934, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ *M.E.*, 2 June 1934, p. 1; *Blackshirt*, 8 June 1934, p. 11.

William Joyce also spoke on behalf of the movement at Chelmsford before the end of the year.¹⁰²

The inaugural meeting of the Brentwood B.U.F. took place in May 1934 at the Swan Hotel committee rooms in the town. Presided over by G.K. Dunn, the local Organiser, the gathering was “enrolled en bloc”.¹⁰³ Several “well known residents” attended and “pinned their faith to the Blackshirt policy with startling vigour”.¹⁰⁴ Those present agreed to establish a local network of Mosleyite formations, known as the Central Essex Fascist Group, with the Brentwood B.U.F. acting as headquarters for the area. Weekly Blackshirt meetings were to take place at the Swan Hotel from then on.¹⁰⁵ Two months later, the Brentwood Branch was inspected by a N.H.Q. official, who expressed satisfaction with the progress being made in the district. By February 1935, premises had been acquired in Brentwood High Street, and L.M. Wallis had taken over as Branch Officer. Wallis was later promoted to County Propaganda Officer for Essex.¹⁰⁶ During the mid-1930s, B.U.F. meetings, involving local and senior Blackshirts, were held at Brentwood on a periodic basis.¹⁰⁷

In May 1935, the Chelmsford and Brentwood Branches were reorganised into the Chelmsford Constituency Fascist Association, which, initially, was led by A.L. Stewart, the B.U.F. Agent and Secretary for the Division.¹⁰⁸ Seven months later, Mrs. M. Barraclough was appointed Acting Women’s District Officer, and, early the following year, the formation acquired official premises at 7, New Street, Chelmsford. Stewart was succeeded by the former Witham B.U.F. Branch Organiser, F.R. East, as District Officer by January 1936.¹⁰⁹ This change of leadership coincided with an

¹⁰² *E.C.*, 14 September 1934, p. 8, 30 November 1934, p. 4; *M.E.*, 16 June 1934, p. 3, 8 December 1934, p. 4; *Blackshirt*, 22 June 1934, p. 2, 7 December 1934, p. 2.

¹⁰³ *Brentwood Gazette and Mid-Essex Recorder (B.G.)*, 19 May 1934, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 14 July 1934, p. 3, 9 February 1935, p. 6; *Action*, 5 February 1938, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ *B.G.*, 9 February 1935, p. 6, 30 March 1935, p. 7, 21 March 1936, p. 1, 4 April 1936, p. 2, 27 June 1936, p. 6, 4 July 1936, p. 6, 5 September 1936, p. 6, 12 September 1936, p. 4, 19 September 1936, p. 6; *Blackshirt*, 12 July 1935, p. 8, 18 September 1937, p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ *E.C.*, 24 May 1935, p. 3, 20 September 1935, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ P.R.O. HO 144/20146/78. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 16 December 1935; P.R.O. HO 144/20146/136. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 24 February 1936; *Blackshirt*, 17 January 1936,

increase in fascist political activity at Chelmsford. Regular weekly public meetings were held by local and more senior Mosleyites at outdoor venues in the town during the subsequent period.¹¹⁰ After East had taken charge of the Maldon District B.U.F. by the autumn of 1937, Albert E. Jones, a local Catholic fascist, filled the executive post at Chelmsford.¹¹¹

In November 1936, the B.U.F. announced its intention to contest the parliamentary county division of Chelmsford at the next general election.¹¹² The Blackshirts' prospective parliamentary candidate for the constituency, Captain C.H. Blacker, was introduced by Mosley at an open-air meeting at the Recreation Ground, Chelmsford in June 1937.¹¹³ Born in August 1893, Blacker was educated at Radley and Hertford College, Oxford University, before serving as a lieutenant in the 5th Dragoon Guards during the First World War. After being demobilised, he pursued a somewhat chequered business career and travelled across Europe and America. In 1934, Blacker, then living in London, apparently had an interest in the colour sound process for films and was said to be experiencing financial problems. Early in 1935, he attempted unsuccessfully to become a U.F.A. film company agent, which would have allowed him to show German propaganda reels in Britain. Blacker had also accumulated a string of fines for motoring offences. His formal links with the B.U.F. went back to the movement's early period, when he was a member of the January Club, and since then he had played an active role in furthering the fascist cause.¹¹⁴ Shortly after receiving Mosley's public endorsement at Chelmsford on 7 July 1937, Blacker

p. 7, 14 February 1936, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ *Blackshirt*, 17 January 1936, p. 7, 24 January 1936, p. 7, 21 March 1936, p. 6, 11 April 1936, p. 6, 16 May 1936, p. 6, 13 June 1936, p. 6, 25 July 1936, p. 6, 15 August 1936, p. 6, 26 September 1936, p. 6, 20 February 1937, p. 6, 9 October 1937, p. 12. Popular Blackshirt speakers' pitches in Chelmsford were located at 'The Gun' and Tindal Square. Occasionally, the B.U.F. staged indoor public meetings as well. For example, Mosley and Raven Thompson both spoke at the Chelmsford Corn Exchange in the mid-1930s. See *E.C.*, 24 May 1935, p. 3, 6 November 1936, p. 5.

¹¹¹ B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Pre-war Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and Provincial Towns. c.1937; *E.C.*, 13 November 1936, p. 7.

¹¹² *Blackshirt*, 7 November 1936, p. 5.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 19 June 1937, p. 6; *E.C.*, 18 June 1937, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ *Blackshirt*, 12 June 1937, p. 5; P.R.O. HO 144/21064/190. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 8 July 1937.

embarked on a business trip to Germany and Italy, designed to promote the B.U.F. overseas, carrying Blackshirt credentials to facilitate access to “certain influential persons” in those two countries.¹¹⁵

By May 1935, the B.U.F. had also established a base in the parliamentary county division of Saffron Walden under Branch Secretary and Organiser Patrick Owen-Burke. This formation operated from offices in Town Street, Thaxted.¹¹⁶ On 14 May 1935, Alexander Raven Thomson spoke at Saffron Walden Town Hall but was unable to deliver his address fully due to the presence of a number of students belonging to the Cambridge University Socialist Party, who constantly heckled and questioned him. Despite these disruptions, no ejections or violent incidents took place.¹¹⁷ Over the next few weeks, T.L. Butler, Assistant Director of Rural Political Organisation for the B.U.F., held meetings at the Corn Exchange, Saffron Walden and the local Rotary Club.¹¹⁸ Thereafter, it would appear that fascist activity in the constituency was sporadic, but some sort of Mosleyite group was still functioning at Saffron Walden in 1938.¹¹⁹

After several abortive attempts, by May 1934 the B.U.F. had launched a Branch at Southend with headquarters at 215, Southchurch Road.¹²⁰ Assistant Propaganda Officer, W.W.E. Pooley, an ex-Tory propagandist, was the first leader of the local formation.¹²¹ Two months later, William Joyce addressed a “well attended meeting” on B.U.F. policy at the Crowstone Gymnasium, Westcliff-on-Sea.¹²²

¹¹⁵ P.R.O. HO 144/21064/190.

¹¹⁶ E.A.D.T., 16 May 1935, p. 4. In mid-1934 Labour Party sources reported that, although the B.U.F. had held a “few isolated meetings” in the Saffron Walden area, no local Branch had been formed and “very little” fascist literature had been sold or distributed in the district. See Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of Saffron Walden Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/308.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*; Saffron Walden Weekly News (S.W.W.N.), 17 May 1935, p. 11; Blackshirt, 24 May 1935, p. 8.

¹¹⁸ S.W.W.N., 24 May 1935, p. 11, 28 June 1935, p. 12.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1936, p. 11; Action, 7 May 1938, p. 19.

¹²⁰ Southend Standard and Essex Weekly Advertiser (S.S.E.W.A.), 17 May 1934, p. 5, 12 July 1934, p. 2; Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of Southend Trades Council and Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/109.

¹²¹ S.S.E.W.A., 12 July 1934, p. 2; LP/FAS/34/109.

¹²² Southend Times (S.T.), 13 July 1934, p. 1; S.S.E.W.A., 12 July 1934, p. 13; Blackshirt, 20 July 1934, p. 7.

During the summer period too, another Blackshirt formation surfaced in the Southend County Borough at nearby Leigh-on-Sea. Headed by George E. Sutton, the Leigh-on-Sea Branch operated from 127, Leigh Rd, the private residence of a Mrs. Lake, who was “one of the most energetic” local members.¹²³ Early activities included regular literature sales drives and a ‘drawing room’ meeting at Mrs. Lake’s house, which was addressed by Lt.-Col. Crocker and Miss Richardson, the Women’s Headquarters Organiser. A.K. Chesterton also spoke at St. Clement’s Hall, Leigh-on-Sea on 21 November 1934.¹²⁴ By early December 1934, a new Branch Organiser called Paine was in the process of “re-organising” the Leigh-on-Sea B.U.F..¹²⁵

Although visiting Blackshirt speakers held occasional meetings in the County Borough over the next two years, it was not until the summer of 1936 that the Southend B.U.F. undertook open-air public meetings.¹²⁶ By this stage, the District Leader was Dennis Higgs, a local resident in his mid-twenties, who managed shop premises at 366-368, London Road, Westcliff-on-Sea for his father, James William Higgs, a manufacturing furrier.¹²⁷ According to an ex-Blackshirt associate, Higgs “was a good organiser and leader, spoke well and was popular with all members”.¹²⁸ The Southend District Leader also employed a fervently pro-Hitler female German domestic servant, who belonged to the Nazi Party.¹²⁹ By May 1936, Higgs had rented a small shop at 136a, London Road to serve as permanent headquarters.¹³⁰ A former Southend Blackshirt recalled the local base: “It was a shop on the main road. It wasn’t all that big...two rooms probably. Nothing over the top. You went in the front, bought

¹²³ *Blackshirt*, 20 July 1934, p. 7, 3 August 1934, p. 10. Sutton lived at ‘Bethberai’, Chapmans Close, Leigh-on-Sea.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 July 1934, p. 7, 30 November 1934, p. 9; *S.T.*, 20 July 1934, p. 10; *S.S.E.W.A.*, 26 July 1934, p. 15.

¹²⁵ *Blackshirt*, 7 December 1934, p. 10.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 September 1934, p. 7, 9 May 1936, p. 6; *S.T.*, 7 April 1937, p. 8.

¹²⁷ *S.T.*, 5 February 1936, p. 4, 25 June 1936, p. 11; M.G.. Letter to Andrew Mitchell. 16 April 1993.

¹²⁸ M.G.. Letter. 16 April 1993.

¹²⁹ M.G.. Telephone interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1994.

¹³⁰ *Blackshirt*, 16 May 1936, p. 6; *S.S.E.W.A.*, 25 June 1936, p. 11; M.G.. Letter. 16 April 1993.

leaflets or books, and in the back there were members sitting and talking and so on, arranging campaigns for leaflet distribution or selling the paper, Action...”¹³¹

From the mid to late 1930s, the District B.U.F. was fairly active in Southend. Open-air meetings were held regularly at Elmer Approach and on the Marine Parade, together with occasional marches, canvassing exercises and street newspaper sales.¹³² The most committed local Blackshirts also met frequently at a flat above Higgs' business premises for political discussions. Although Higgs remained an active Southend Blackshirt, by November 1937, he had been replaced as District Leader by a local accountant named Paine.¹³³ At the beginning of 1937, John Smeaton-Stuart, then the National Organising Officer for Norfolk, was appointed the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for Southend.¹³⁴

In 1936-1937, several prominent B.U.F. figures, including William Joyce, Alexander Raven Thomson, A.K. Chesterton, Ann Brock Griggs and Clement Bruning spoke on behalf of the movement in the town either at open-air gatherings or the Cavendish Hall, Westcliff-on-Sea.¹³⁵ The largest B.U.F. event at Southend took place in April 1937, when Mosley delivered an address to an audience of approximately 2,000 at the Pleasure Beach skating rink. This engagement passed off peacefully.¹³⁶

From the mid-1930s, the B.U.F. also maintained an organisational presence in the parliamentary county division of South-East Essex. A Rayleigh B.U.F. Branch was set up in June 1934 with local headquarters apparently established at Francis House.¹³⁷ According to Labour Party and newspaper sources, this small formation, which mainly attracted adherents under the age of 21, was led by Branch Organiser C. Deal of

¹³¹ M.G.. F.O.M. taped interview, 1988.

¹³² See for example Blackshirt, 21 November 1936, p. 6, 30 January 1937, p. 6, 16 October 1937, p. 6, 13 November 1937, p. 6, June 1938, p. 5; Action, 22 October 1938, p. 18; M.G.. Letter. 16 April 1993.

¹³³ M.G.. Letter. 16 April 1993; M.G.. Telephone interview; Blackshirt, 13 November 1937, p. 6.

¹³⁴ Action, 2 January 1937, p. 7.

¹³⁵ See for example Blackshirt, 18 July 1936 p. 6, 5 December 1936, p. 6, 23 January 1937, p. 6, 5 June 1937, p. 6, 12 June 1937, p. 6, 6 November 1937, p. 6, 11 December 1937, p. 6.

¹³⁶ S.T., 14 April 1937, p. 9; S.S.E.W.A., 15 April 1937, p. 29; Action, 17 April 1937, p. 7; Blackshirt, 17 April 1937, p. 8.

¹³⁷ Rayleigh and Wickford Gazette (R.W.G.), 6 June 1934, p. 1; Blackshirt, 15 June 1934, p. 9.

Hadleigh and Secretary J.A. Prior, a Rayleigh resident.¹³⁸ Initially, B.U.F. activists delivered open-air speeches in the town on Friday evenings, and, in September 1934, Rayleigh Blackshirts launched a series of meetings at Canvey Island with a view to opening a Branch in the area.¹³⁹ During the same month, T. Moran from N.H.Q. participated in a local debate organised by the Rayleigh Cooperative Political Council. A few weeks later, John Beckett's "vigorous and eloquent" address on the B.U.F.'s programme at the Memorial Hall, Rayleigh met with "considerable interruption".¹⁴⁰

At some stage after late 1934, the Rayleigh B.U.F. appeared to become defunct, since in June 1935 an advertisement placed in the Mosleyite press called on members and sympathisers living in Thundersley, Rayleigh and Hadleigh to contact Charles V. Brook, a Thundersley Blackshirt. Two weeks later, it was announced that a local B.U.F. group had been established, with Brook in charge.¹⁴¹ In October 1936, police sources reported that a South-East Essex B.U.F. District had been formed recently under District Organiser M.D. Ruffler, who lived at Laindon Hills.¹⁴² For the rest of the 1930s, fascist activity in the constituency was sporadic and appeared to consist chiefly of occasional open-air meetings held at Grays.¹⁴³

The pioneering efforts of Oliver C. Mathews led to the establishment of a Chingford and Woodford B.U.F. Branch in September 1933. Mathews, a married local resident in his early 30s, had joined the movement four months earlier and became the first Branch Organiser. He was eventually promoted to District Inspecting Officer for

¹³⁸ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of South-East Essex Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/113; *R.W.G.*, 27 June 1934, p. 4.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*; *Blackshirt*, 21 September 1934, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ *R.W.G.*, 12 September 1934, p. 1, 24 October 1934, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ *Blackshirt*, 14 June 1935, p. 8, 28 June 1935, p. 12. Brook's address was Ashmount, Hart Road, Thundersley.

¹⁴² P.R.O. HO 144/21062/262. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 27 October 1936. Ruffler's address was 'Kalmeros', Thamesview, Laindon Hills. According to Blackshirt records, H.V. Ross was appointed District Treasurer for the South-East Essex B.U.F. on 27 April 1937. See *The British Union of Fascists and National Socialists Official Appointments List*, 3 May 1937.

¹⁴³ *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 12; *Action*, 16 July 1938, p. 18, 26 November 1938, p. 18, 21 December 1939, p. 7; *Essex and Thurrock Gazette and Grays and Tilbury Gazette*, 23 July 1938, p. 3, 26 November 1938, p. 6.

Area 5 of the London Command.¹⁴⁴ Mathews' sister and father were also founder members of the Chingford and Woodford B.U.F..¹⁴⁵

Initially based at 14, Stanley Road, Chingford, the Branch held a regular club night on Mondays and attracted "such interest" from "the younger section of the community".¹⁴⁶ A B.U.F. internal publication revealed in late 1933 that canvassing, literature sales and attendance at the monthly meeting of the local council also formed part of the fascists' political effort at Chingford.¹⁴⁷ In January 1935, the Branch held its first open-air meeting in the district, which was jointly stewarded by the Walthamstow and Chingford formations "under the reciprocal arrangements now in force between the two Branches".¹⁴⁸ By then, however, Walthamstow's Mosleyites had been downgraded to a sub-section of the Chingford organisation.¹⁴⁹ During 1934, the Chingford B.U.F. stepped up its propaganda activities by supplementing weekly gatherings at the Branch with monthly public addresses from N.H.Q. speakers at Martin's Cafe in Station Road and a scheduled series of outdoor summer meetings.¹⁵⁰

In the period up to mid-1935, the B.U.F. also extended its operations into neighbouring urban districts. Blackshirts began canvassing and selling newspapers in Woodford in late 1933, and fascist meetings were reported in the area over the next eighteen months, the most notable of these being John Beckett's address at the Memorial Hall in March 1935.¹⁵¹ A month later, the political endeavours of a 'Woodford Branch' were mentioned in the B.U.F. press. Furthermore, in June 1934, Epping Divisional Labour Party noted that fascist literature was selling widely, not only

144 'Who's Who in Fascism'; E.G.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1997.

145 Frederic Andre Ball. Interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

146 Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian (W.L.C.G.), 17 November 1933, p. 16, 13 July 1934, p. 7, 14 September 1934, p. 11.

147 Fascist News, 11 November 1933, p. 2, 23 December 1933, p. 4.

148 Blackshirt, 2-8 February 1934, p. 2.

149 *Ibid.*, 18 January 1935, p. 9.

150 W.L.C.G., 9 February 1934, p. 6, 13 April 1934, p. 5, 20 April 1934, p. 11, 11 May 1934, p. 10, 8 June 1934, p. 2, 3 August 1934, p. 12.

151 Fascist News, 11 November 1933, p. 2; Blackshirt, 30 November 1934, p. 10, 5 April 1935, p. 2.

in Chingford and Woodford but also in the Urban Districts of Wanstead and Epping.¹⁵²

Under the 1935 restructuring initiative, the Chingford and Woodford formations lost their Branch status and became Blackshirt Units or Sections within the broader organisational framework of the newly-created Epping District B.U.F.. As part of this drive to construct a viable electoral machine in the division, it was envisaged that a network of Blackshirt polling districts would be developed across the constituency. By December 1935, the Epping District B.U.F. had established polling bases in North and South Chingford, Woodford and Waltham Abbey. This reorganisation coincided with the Epping B.U.F. transferring to new District Headquarters at the Clifton Cafe, 124, Station Road, Chingford.¹⁵³

Due to the organisational and administrative problems posed by the size of the constituency, Unit headquarters were set up as 'satellites' in various parts of the division during the mid-1930s.¹⁵⁴ The Blackshirt Unit at Buckhurst Hill had obtained its own official premises by the end of May 1935, and Loughton's fascists met fortnightly in a rented room in a local cafe.¹⁵⁵ In February 1937, the B.U.F.'s Woodford Unit moved into premises at St. Alban's Road, Woodford Green, which also served as the District Headquarters until the end of 1938.¹⁵⁶ From then until 1940, the Epping B.U.F. was based at 68, Blackthorne Drive, Chingford Hatch, the private residence of the serving District Leader.¹⁵⁷

Oliver Mathews retained the executive post until 1936, when he was replaced by one of his personally recruited members, Frederic Andre Ball, of 42, King's Head Hill, Chingford. Ball, a 21 year old clerk, who worked for the Commonwealth Bank of

¹⁵² *Blackshirt*, 26 April 1935, p. 8; Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of Epping Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/34.

¹⁵³ *Blackshirt*, 24 May 1935, p. 8, 6 December 1935, p. 8. The polling bases were located at 124, Station Road (North Chingford), 53, Hampton Road (South Chingford), 8, St. Albans Crescent (Woodford) and 20, Romeland (Waltham Abbey).

¹⁵⁴ Ball. Interview; L.B.. Telephone interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1997.

¹⁵⁵ *Blackshirt*, 24 May 1935, p. 8; E.G.. Taped interview.

¹⁵⁶ *Blackshirt*, 20 February 1937, p. 6; *Action*, 25 June 1938, p. 19; Ball. Interview.

¹⁵⁷ L.B.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

Australia in London, had joined the Chingford and Woodford B.U.F. in October 1933. He remained the senior Epping official until September 1938.¹⁵⁸ At this juncture, the District leadership passed to L.B., a 28 year old Chingford Hatch resident, employed as a cabinet maker in his father's east London upholstery firm.¹⁵⁹

After reorganising on a constituency basis, Epping District pursued a range of propaganda activities in an attempt to extend B.U.F. influence throughout the division. By the end of May 1935, B.U.F. Units were active in Buckhurst Hill, Woodford and Walthamstow. During this period too, local Blackshirts were launching "weekly attacks" on Waltham Abbey, Harlow and elsewhere.¹⁶⁰ The first of a number of B.U.F. meetings at Waltham Abbey took place on 2 November 1935.¹⁶¹ Blackshirt detachments from Chingford were not only active locally from 1935 but also made propaganda visits to the more rural areas of the constituency.¹⁶² From August 1935, the Epping B.U.F. embarked upon the formation of a 'Youth Branch' composed of fourteen to sixteen year olds. Some progress was made in this direction, since in December 1936 the first Greyshirt meeting was held in George Lane, Woodford, and, by April 1937, three Cadet Units were said to be operating in the area.¹⁶³

The B.U.F. had also extended its activities into the parliamentary county division of Romford by mid-1934. In July of that year the fascist press reported that the "organisation of Romford...is proceeding apace" and alerted readers to the local formation's headquarters at 30, East Street, Barking.¹⁶⁴ Early Blackshirt meetings in

¹⁵⁸ Ball. Interview. According to Home Office sources, Ball had served as the Epping B.U.F. District Treasurer in 1935 and, for a brief period between 1936 and 1938, had been transferred to the Walthamstow East formation. Afterwards, he returned to the Epping B.U.F. and continued as District Leader. See P.R.O. HO 45/23767. Frederic Andre Ball.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.; L.B.. Taped interview.

¹⁶⁰ *Blackshirt*, 24 May 1935, p. 8.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 8 November, p. 8, 16 May 1936, p. 6, 20 June 1936, p. 6, 4 July 1936, p. 6, 18 July 1936, p.

¹⁶² Ibid., 24 May 1935, p. 8, 21 June 1935, p. 3, 5 July 1935, p. 8, 19 July 1935, p. 8, 16 May 1936, p. 6, 11 September 1937, p. 6, July 1938, p. 6; *Action*, 21 May 1938, p. 19, 18 June 1938, p. 19, 2 September 1939, p. 19.

¹⁶³ *Blackshirt*, 2 August 1935, p. 8, 19 December 1936, p. 6, 24 April 1937, p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Blackshirt*, 13 July 1934, p. 11. See also P.R.O. HO 144/20141/312. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland. Report No. I. Developments up to the end of May 1934.

the area sometimes met with organised opposition. In September 1934, hecklers disrupted a B.U.F. open-air gathering at Arcade Place, Romford by continually questioning the speaker about Mosley's private life.¹⁶⁵ Two months later, John Beckett's address at the Baths Hall, Romford, which attracted the presence of a group of vocal anti-fascists, "broke up in some disorder".¹⁶⁶

Despite such instances of orchestrated disruption, Blackshirt political activity continued in the area after 1934. In June 1935, Blackshirt reported that the Hornchurch Branch was making "steady progress" and pursuing a programme of regular sales drives and public meetings.¹⁶⁷ During the same month, the District Treasurer, accompanied by other local Mosleyites, undertook a propaganda drive and public meetings at Halstead, where the Essex Agricultural Show was being held. According to fascist sources, approximately 1,500 B.U.F. pamphlets on agriculture and the tithe were distributed at this event.¹⁶⁸

By September 1935, R. Stansbie Banyard had assumed the post of District Organiser for the division and conducted local B.U.F. affairs from headquarters at 2, Station Road, Hornchurch.¹⁶⁹ Banyard had been an active member of the B.U.F. for at least a year and was employed at Nelmes Farm, Hornchurch, which was then occupied by his father, a prominent local dairyman.¹⁷⁰ Within six months, however, the Romford District Office had closed, and Banyard was now running the local Blackshirt organisation from his private address at Nelmes Acre, Nelmes Way, Hornchurch. By September 1936, the District leadership had apparently passed to C. Hill-Willis of 39,

¹⁶⁵ Blackshirt, 28 September 1934, p. 11.

¹⁶⁶ P.R.O. HO 144/20144/273. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland. Report No. IV. Developments during October/November 1934. According to the B.U.F., the anti-fascists were communists mainly imported from Dagenham. See Blackshirt, 23 November 1934, p. 9.

¹⁶⁷ Blackshirt, 7 June 1935, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 June 1935, p. 8.

¹⁶⁹ Romford Recorder (R.R.), 27 September 1935, p. 4; The Romford Times (R.T.), 25 September 1935, p. 4; Blackshirt, 11 October 1935, p. 8.

¹⁷⁰ Blackshirt, 17 August 1934, p. 9; R.R., 28 October 1938, p. 10.

Lawrence Road, Upminster.¹⁷¹ Within a year, G. Catterall, a B.U.F. activist who lived in Hornchurch, had assumed responsibility for the local formation.¹⁷²

From June 1937, the Romford B.U.F. extended its activities into Dagenham by embarking on weekly meetings at Chequers Corner and Becontree Heath. This political activity was supported by street newspaper sales, house-to-house leaflet distribution and, on occasion, propaganda marches.¹⁷³ By October 1937, Romford District felt able to claim that Dagenhamites were “willingly turning to National Socialism” and, towards the end of the following year, *Action* reported that the locality now possessed a “strong organisation”.¹⁷⁴

The East Ham Branch of the B.U.F. was reportedly the oldest London formation east of Aldgate, having been founded in October 1933.¹⁷⁵ Prior to this, a Blackshirt group had been active in the area under the leadership of Thomas Sullivan, a 25 year old labourer, who resided at 28, Gillett Avenue, East Ham.¹⁷⁶ Sullivan became the first Organiser of the local Branch, which established headquarters at 1, Lloyd Road.¹⁷⁷ This address served as the East Ham B.U.F.’s permanent base until the closure of the District movement in 1940. As leader of the new Branch, Sullivan was supported by Section Leader Dean, a local man who supervised the ‘District Defence Force’ and ran physical training classes for East Ham Blackshirts. In addition, a Harley Street practitioner, Dr. Evans, was appointed ‘Medical Officer’ to the Branch.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷¹ P.R.O. HO 144/20147/303. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 25 March 1936; P.R.O. HO 144/21060/216. B.U.F. Regional and District Personnel. c. 8 September 1936; B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Untitled list of B.U.F. personnel in London and the provinces.

¹⁷² *Blackshirt*, 14 August 1937, p. 6, 1 August 1936, p. 6, 19 September 1936, p. 6, 19 June 1937, p. 6. Catterall’s address was given as 48, Sutton Avenue, Hornchurch. See also B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Pre-war Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in Country Districts and Provincial Towns. c.1937.

¹⁷³ *Blackshirt*, 26 June 1937, p. 6, 14 August 1937, p. 6, 28 August 1937, p. 6, 27 November 1937, p. 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 October 1937, p. 11; *Action*, 5 November 1938, p. 18. See also B.D.B.J. C6/1/1/1. Defence Committee. London Area Council Secretary’s Report. c. March 1939.

¹⁷⁵ *Blackshirt*, 5 June 1937, p. 6, 24 April 1937, p. 6.

¹⁷⁶ *East Ham Echo (E.H.E.)*, 2 August 1933, p. 2. See also *Fascist News*, 16 September 1933, p. 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Blackshirt*, 12-18 January 1934, p. 2; P.R.O. HO 144/20140/107. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 1 May 1934; *East London Blackshirt*, October 1938, p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ *Blackshirt*, 12-18 January 1934, p. 2, 23-29 March 1934, p. 2.

In 1935, Francis A.J. Osborn, a 35 year old married man with two children, took over as District Organiser.¹⁷⁹ A long-term East Ham resident, Osborn, who lived at 289, Central Park Road, had previously been employed as a printer and was later engaged as a packer in the Commercial Department at B.U.F. National Headquarters.¹⁸⁰ The new senior official at East Ham had joined the movement in its formative period and was a dynamic fascist activist.¹⁸¹ Under his leadership, the East Ham B.U.F. won the movement's Sales Cup for the period January to March 1937.¹⁸² When Osborn was appointed a B.U.F. voluntary visiting District Inspector for east London in 1938, another local B.U.F. loyalist, Hugh James Howard, became the East Ham District Leader. Howard, an accountant in his mid-twenties, lived with his Conservative middle class parents at 24, Monmouth Road, East Ham. Remembered as a "mild diplomatic studious gentleman" with a penchant for writing letters to the local press, Osborn's successor remained in charge of the East Ham formation until 1940.¹⁸³

The sporadic Blackshirt activity in East Ham during 1933 assumed a more regular pattern thereafter. During the early stages of 1934, the East Ham B.U.F. conducted propaganda drives in the Epping Division and undertook joint literature sales with the newly-formed Walthamstow Branch.¹⁸⁴ By mid-June 1934, open-air Blackshirt meetings were also being held on Friday evenings in the County Borough next to the Cock Hotel in High Street North.¹⁸⁵ The local Labour Party reported at this time that, although fascist activity in the area was generally on a small scale, the B.U.F. had developed a foothold in East Ham and was holding outdoor literature sales and the odd notable Blackshirt public meeting.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 22 November 1935, p. 8; T.M.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

¹⁸⁰ T.M.. Taped interview; E.H.E., 12 March 1937, p. 1, 22 October 1935, p. 1; P.R.O. HO 144/21281/27-29. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 18 February 1938.

¹⁸¹ T.M.. Taped interview.

¹⁸² *Blackshirt*, 5 June 1937, p. 6.

¹⁸³ T.M.. Taped interview.

¹⁸⁴ *Blackshirt*, 23-29 March 1934, pp. 2-3, 23 February-1 March 1934, pp. 2-3.

¹⁸⁵ P.R.O. HO 144/20141/324-325. J. Crossley, Officer in Charge, Stewards London Area, British Union of Fascists. Letter to Commissioner of Metropolitan Police. 11 June 1934.

¹⁸⁶ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of East Ham (Boro.) Trades Council and Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/106. This source refers to a B.U.F. meeting held at the East Ham town hall "some months ago" which attracted an audience of a few hundred. A hundred Blackshirts were also said to be in

Throughout the remainder of the 1930s, the East Ham B.U.F. pursued propaganda work on a fairly regular basis. By the end of 1934, a Women's Section had been formed and was holding meetings locally. Female speakers from National Headquarters made frequent visits to Kempton Road during 1935 to address open-air gatherings.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, Blackshirt activity remained a regular feature of East Ham street politics until May 1940.¹⁸⁸ Senior figures from the national leadership, including John Beckett and Mosley, also periodically addressed public meetings in East Ham to promote the Blackshirt cause.¹⁸⁹

Fascist activity in Ilford commenced in November 1933, when a National Headquarters speaker, escorted by members of the East Ham B.U.F.'s 'Defence Force', delivered the first public Blackshirt address in the Municipal Borough. Two months later, J.B. Barney, described as a "national director" of the organisation, defended fascism at the Ilford Parliament.¹⁹⁰ From April 1934, the B.U.F. began holding regular Saturday evening meetings in Ilford High Road and, during these early months, fascists engaged left-wing opponents in debate and attempted, unsuccessfully, to commandeer the local Labour Party's customary pitch.¹⁹¹ By the end of April, a B.U.F. sub-Branch had been founded in the Borough. In June 1934, under the leadership of Stanley Leigh, the formation was accorded full Branch status and opened headquarters at 16, Clements Road, Ilford. Within six months, however, the local Blackshirts were operating from a new base at 4, Clements Road. A Women's Section was also established in the municipality during 1934.¹⁹²

attendance at this event.

¹⁸⁷ *Blackshirt*, 23 November 1934, p. 9, 12 April 1935, p. 8, 10 May 1935, p. 8, 14 June 1935, p. 8, 29 November 1935, p. 9.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 March 1936, p. 7, 5 September 1936, p. 6, 19 December 1936, p. 6, 22 May 1937, p. 6, 31 July 1937, p. 6, 9 October 1937, p. 10, July 1938, p. 5; *Action*, 16 April 1938, p. 19, 4 June 1938, p. 19, 16 November 1939, p. 8, 11 April 1940, p. 8, 23 May 1940, p. 8. Regular B.U.F. speakers' pitches were established at Lloyd Road, Clements Road and Kempton Road.

¹⁸⁹ See *E.H.E.*, 1 November 1935, p. 1, 29 July 1938, p. 1.

¹⁹⁰ *Fascist News*, 18 November 1933, p. 5; *Ilford Recorder (LR.)*, 25 January 1934, p. 13.

¹⁹¹ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of Ilford Trades Council and Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/107-108.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*; *Blackshirt*, 4-10 May 1934, p. 4, 12 October 1934, p. 9; *Ilford Intelligence 1935* (Ilford: South Essex Recorders, 1935), p. 94.

At some stage between January and April 1935, J.R. Colsell took over as Branch Organiser, and, by September of that year, the local headquarters had moved to 25, Cranbrook Road, Ilford. Colsell's successor, Aubrey H.J. Hunt, assumed the position of District Organiser by the beginning of 1936. A 24 year old sheet-metal worker, Hunt had been educated at Raines Foundation School and resided at 8, Reigate Road, Seven Kings. After cutting his ties with the East Ham Conservative Association, he joined the B.U.F. in 1933-1934 and became a recognised speaker for the movement.¹⁹³

During 1936, the Ilford District Headquarters relocated to a shop back-room at 302, Ilford Lane.¹⁹⁴ This period also witnessed the appointment of Frederick A. Ralph, a nineteen year old baker's roundsman, as the local District Organiser. Prior to his promotion, Ralph, a resident of 48, Knox Road, Forest Gate, had been a committed Sales Officer for the Branch.¹⁹⁵ Apart from a brief interlude when a former East Ham B.U.F. activist, H.J.R. Gudgeon, became the local Organiser, Ralph remained in charge until the latter half of 1938.¹⁹⁶ In July 1938, the Ilford District transferred to smaller premises at 104, Ilford Lane, but these were not retained beyond the following year.¹⁹⁷ Throughout 1939 and early 1940, Frederick J. Cooper, then living at 15, Ley Street, Ilford, served as District Leader.¹⁹⁸

Frequent Blackshirt street meetings and other forms of fascist propaganda work, such as canvassing and sales drives, were undertaken at Ilford from 1934.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ Blackshirt, 12 April 1935, p. 8, 20 September 1935, p. 8; Ilford Intelligence 1936 (Ilford: South Essex Recorders, 1936), p. 94; LR., 21 October 1937, p. 9.

¹⁹⁴ LR., 5 November 1936, p. 19; E.G.. Taped interview; Ilford Intelligence 1937 (Ilford: South Essex Recorders, 1937), p. 81.

¹⁹⁵ V.N.. Telephone interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1992; LR., 5 November 1936, p. 19; B.U.F. Membership Cards listing District Officials for Essex (Supplied by F.O.M.); Blackshirt, 5 April 1935, p. 8, 26 April 1935, p. 8.

¹⁹⁶ LR., 21 October 1937, p. 9, 28 July 1938, p. 4; Ilford Intelligence 1938 (Ilford: South Essex Recorders, 1938), p. 80.

¹⁹⁷ Blackshirt, July 1938, p. 5; Ilford Intelligence 1940 (Ilford: South Essex Recorders, 1940), p. 54; E.G.. Taped interview.

¹⁹⁸ Ilford Intelligence 1939 (Ilford: South Essex Recorders, 1939), p. 86; Ilford Intelligence 1940, p. 54.

¹⁹⁹ See Blackshirt, 1 June 1934, p. 9, 26 April 1935, p. 8, 31 May 1935, p. 8, 25 October 1935, p. 8, 4 April 1936, p. 6, 15 August 1936, p. 6, 10 October 1936, p. 6, 30 January 1937, p. 6, 22 May 1937, p. 6, 18 September 1937, p. 6, July 1938, p. 5; Action, 25 April 1940, p. 8. Regular B.U.F. speakers'

On occasion, too, N.H.Q. officials, including William Risdon, the Chief Fascist Agent, visited the Borough for high profile events.²⁰⁰ In the later 1930s, Mosley also undertook three well-attended indoor public speaking engagements at Ilford, all of which passed off without incident.²⁰¹

At the beginning of 1937, Action announced that Miss L.A. King would stand as the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the Ilford constituency. Described as "One of the best type of business women", London-born King attended St. George's Catholic School, Walthamstow and was employed as the controller of the Daily Mail's Canvass Staff.²⁰² She joined the Blackshirts at some point before February 1934, becoming B.U.F. Woman Canvass Officer for the 9th London Area by late 1937. At that stage, King was awarded the movement's Gold Distinction for service to the cause. Within a year, she had assumed the position of Woman Canvass Organiser for Essex.²⁰³

Blackshirts were also operating in the Borough of West Ham by June 1934, when the Upton Divisional Labour Party reported that the B.U.F. was holding an outdoor meeting in the locality every Wednesday.²⁰⁴ During its formative period, the Branch was led by A. Richardson, a resident of Plaistow.²⁰⁵ His female counterpart in the West Ham B.U.F., Millicent Bullivant, lived in Forest Gate and came from a pro-Conservative middle class family.²⁰⁶ Before joining Mosley's movement, she had been a member of the British Fascisti. Bullivant was nicknamed 'Scat' because "although a quiet unassuming girl...if she came to a meeting it ended in a free fight".²⁰⁷ She used her position as the Sales Manager's secretary at Yardley of London Ltd., a

pitches at Ilford included Station Road, Cleveland Road and Walter Road.

²⁰⁰ LR., 18 November 1937, p. 9; Action, 30 October 1937, p. 7.

²⁰¹ LR., 9 July 1936, p. 13, 31 March 1938, p. 9, 30 March 1939, p. 9.

²⁰² Action, 16 January 1937, p. 7.

²⁰³ W.L.C.G., 16 February 1934, p. 1; P.R.O. HO 144/21064/48. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F., 10 November 1937; Blackshirt, 2 October 1937, p. 7; E.C., 3 June 1938, p. 9.

²⁰⁴ Labour Party Fascist Questionnaire. Reply of Upton Divisional Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/37.

²⁰⁵ T.P. Linehan, East London for Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex 1933-40 (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 111; Blackshirt, 7 December 1934, p. 10.

²⁰⁶ F.T.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1993.

²⁰⁷ A.R. Beavan. Taped interview with Stephen Cullen, 1986.

company specialising in the production of perfumes and cosmetics, to recruit other female employees from the firm as Blackshirt activists.²⁰⁸

Towards the end of 1934, a group of West Ham members, including Bullivant, visited National Headquarters to complain about the conduct of their senior Branch officials.²⁰⁹ Arthur Beavan, a 34 year old Welsh former communist, who held the position of Unit Leader in the B.U.F.'s 'I' Squad, was quickly dispatched to conduct a secret inquiry at West Ham:

When rumours of the disappearing funds...reached the Top Brass I was sent as a kind of undercover agent to investigate carefully. I took lodgings in the district and joined the Branch in the guise of a new local recruit, and began to collect evidence discreetly. It soon became apparent that the Branch organiser and the treasurer were pocketing most of the subscriptions and donations. I duly made my report to National Headquarters, and the offending officials were promptly expelled from the Movement.²¹⁰

At Beavan's suggestion, Richard Bullivant, Millicent's brother, took the helm at West Ham in January 1935. The new Branch leader managed Stone's Radio shop in the Ilford High Road and, like his sister, had previously belonged to the British Fascisti. Within two months of his appointment as the senior local B.U.F. official, Bullivant left the area to take up new employment outside London. From then until 1940, Beavan held the position of District Organiser, and, in 1938, he married Millicent Bullivant.²¹¹ Both husband and wife received Bronze Distinctions for service to the movement.²¹² Beavan became the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the Upton division in May 1938.²¹³

With the Branch reorganised and purged of corrupt officials, in July 1935 the West Ham B.U.F. established new District Headquarters at 18, Woodford Road in the

²⁰⁸ Ibid..

²⁰⁹ A.R. Beavan. F.O.M. taped interview.

²¹⁰ A. Beavan, 'The Welsh Security Officer' in L. Wise (ed.), Mosley's Blackshirts: The Inside Story of the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940 (London: Sanctuary Press, 1986), p. 59.

²¹¹ Beavan. Taped interview; information provided by F.O.M..

²¹² Blackshirt, 2 October 1937, p. 7, 8 January 1938, p. 1.

²¹³ Action, 14 May 1938, p. 17; The Boro' of West Ham, East Ham and Stratford Express (S.E.), 21 May 1938, p. 11.

Stratford division.²¹⁴ Initially, there were only four committed members, but subsequently the local formation was able to develop eight active Units involving about 70 Blackshirts.²¹⁵ Beavan placed a premium on grass roots work in an attempt to consolidate the B.U.F.'s position in West Ham. Political canvassing and propaganda events were organised across the Borough from 1935, and regular B.U.F. speakers' pitches were also established at various locations in the Stratford, Plaistow, Silvertown and Upton divisions.²¹⁶ As a precaution against possible victimisation, it became Branch policy to operate a rota system to ensure that West Ham Blackshirts did not undertake political work in the constituency where they lived.²¹⁷

This emphasis on street-level activism reaped some results. In March 1939, the West Ham District was awarded a silver cup for its sales of Mosley's book, Tomorrow We Live. Such a feat was, no doubt, partly attributable to Beavan's unorthodox methods of selling B.U.F. literature. He later recalled that non-active members at West Ham were encouraged to buy multiple copies of Blackshirt publications but to retain just one. The surplus purchases were then used as free propaganda material on canvassing drives.²¹⁸

In October 1933, a B.U.F. formation was also established in the Municipal Borough of Walthamstow, with headquarters at 111, Hoe Street.²¹⁹ By mid-February 1934, the Branch, which possessed a growing Women's Section, had relocated twice, moving first to 558, Forest Road and then to premises at 637, Forest Road.²²⁰ The Walthamstow Secretary during this early period was F.S. George Tyler, a committed

²¹⁴ Blackshirt, 13 December 1935, p. 8; Beavan. Taped interview.

²¹⁵ Beavan. Taped interview; S.E., 21 May 1938, p. 11.

²¹⁶ The main venues for B.U.F. street meetings were Capel Road in the Stratford division, Becton Road in the Silvertown division, Dongola Road, Hayday Road and Rochester Avenue in the Plaistow division, and Harold Road, Neville Road, Boleyn Road, Bull Road and Harcourt Road in the Upton division. See Blackshirt, 7 June 1935, p. 8, 28 June 1935, p. 12, 5 July 1935, p. 8, 19 July 1936, p. 6, 22 August 1936, p. 6, 29 August 1936, p. 6, 5 September 1936, p. 6, 26 September 1936, p. 6, 3 October 1936, p. 6, 14 August 1937, p. 6, 21 August 1937, p. 6, 9 October 1937, p. 11, 29 January 1938, p. 6; Action, 12 March 1938, p. 17, February 1940, p. 7, 11 April 1940, p. 8, 25 April 1940, p. 8.

²¹⁷ Beavan. F.O.M. taped interview.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Action, 1 April 1939, p. 13.

²¹⁹ W.L.C.G., 20 October 1933, p. 12, 27 October 1933, p. 15.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 January 1934, p. 16, 16 February 1934, p. 1.

ideological fascist and anti-Semite, who trenchantly defended the B.U.F. in numerous letters to the local and Blackshirt press.²²¹

Blackshirt speakers were operating in Walthamstow during the latter half of 1933, and the local Branch held its first indoor public meeting on 23 January 1934 at the William Morris School, Higham Hill.²²² In February 1934, the Walthamstow B.U.F. commenced joint propaganda activities with its East Ham counterpart and held a debate on fascism with the Higham Park Branch of the Junior Imperial League.²²³ However, this initial momentum could not be maintained and, although a Blackshirt presence continued to exist in the Borough, by January 1935, the Walthamstow Branch had been downgraded to a Section under the administrative control of the Chingford B.U.F..²²⁴ At some point during mid-1935, the Branch became fully operational again under the leadership of 'Wally' Silver, a 40 year old former communist, who was employed in the London furniture trade as a cabinet maker. Domiciled in the west parliamentary division, Silver had been a longstanding Walthamstow Mosleyite and conducted Branch affairs from his private address in Goldsmith Road, Higham Hill.²²⁵

By this stage too, the introduction of the organisational reforms, which were designed to facilitate the B.U.F.'s participation in the electoral process, had established two District formations in Walthamstow to correspond to the east and west parliamentary divisions.²²⁶ F.S. George Tyler became District Organiser of the Walthamstow West B.U.F. by late September 1935, a position he retained for at least a year.²²⁷ During his stewardship, the District Headquarters were located at 118,

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1933, p. 5. For Tyler's correspondence see *ibid.*, 29 December 1933, p. 5, 12 January 1934, p. 16, 9 March 1934, p. 9, 13 July 1934, p. 7, 31 August 1934, p. 6, 2 November 1934, p. 16, 18 January 1935, p. 2, 22 March 1935, p. 15, 12 April 1935, p. 1, 11 October 1935, p. 9, 20 December 1935, p. 9, 15 May 1936, p. 15. Tyler's letters also revealed him to be an enthusiastic advocate of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. See *ibid.*, 14 February 1936, p. 12, 14 August 1936, p. 12; *Blackshirt*, 19 September 1936, p. 4.

²²² *Fascist News*, 9 September 1933, p. 2, 30 November 1933, p. 4; *Blackshirt*, 2-8 February 1934, pp. 2-3; *Leytonstone Express and Independent (L.E.I.)*, 27 January 1934, p. 16.

²²³ *Blackshirt*, 23 February-1 March 1934, pp. 2-3; *W.L.C.G.*, 23 February 1934, p. 7.

²²⁴ P.R.O. HO 144/20140/107; *Blackshirt*, 17 August 1934, p. 11, 18 January 1935, p. 9, 24 May 1935, p. 8.

²²⁵ Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p. 115.

²²⁶ *Blackshirt*, 14 June 1935, p. 8, 15 November 1935, p. 8.

²²⁷ *W.L.C.G.*, 20 September 1935, p. 3; P.R.O. HO 144/21060/197-199. Special Branch Report on

Blackhorse Lane, which was also Tyler's private residence.²²⁸ Thereafter, the Walthamstow West B.U.F. was based in an upstairs room at 70a, Exmouth Road, which was rented from an adjoining timber yard.²²⁹

Tyler's opposite number in the Walthamstow East B.U.F. by November 1935 was Derrick J. Millington, a local fascist, who ran the District Office from his home at 57, Grosvenor Park Road.²³⁰ Three months later, the 29 year old dispensing optician was replaced as District Organiser by L.W. Poplett.²³¹ Despite this brief tenure, Millington remained an active Blackshirt in the area until the outbreak of the Second World War.²³² Mosley's movement proved incapable of sustaining a viable constituency organisation in the east parliamentary division. Consequently, in the summer of 1936, the Walthamstow East B.U.F. was dissolved, relegated to Unit level, and placed under the jurisdiction of the Walthamstow West District.²³³ Although sporadic attempts were made to revive Blackshirt organisation in the division, for the rest of the decade the B.U.F. could maintain only a rather nebulous presence in east Walthamstow.²³⁴

Once Tyler had relinquished the post of District Organiser in late 1936 or early 1937, the Walthamstow West B.U.F. experienced a series of leadership changes in the period up to 1940. Having been approached by a senior N.H.Q. official, P.F., then a registered Blackshirt speaker and Propaganda Officer at the Central Hackney Branch, took over as District Leader of the Walthamstow West B.U.F. in 1937. For the next six months, he attempted to galvanise fascist activity in the area.²³⁵ Following his departure, by 1938 the executive post has passed to David Freshney, a 28 year old

the B.U.F.. 1 September 1936. —

²²⁸ *Blackshirt*, 15 November 1935, p. 8.

²²⁹ P.F.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1993; R.W.. F.O.M. taped interview, 1988. See also *W.L.C.G.*, 8 July 1938, p. 9, 27 January 1939, p. 5, 16 June 1939, p. 5.

²³⁰ *Blackshirt*, 15 November 1935, p. 8.

²³¹ Derrick Millington. Completed questionnaire for Stephen Cullen, 1985; P.R.O. HO 144/20146/135. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 24 February 1936.

²³² Millington. Completed questionnaire. Millington took over as District Treasurer for the Walthamstow East B.U.F.. See P.R.O. HO 144/20146/135.

²³³ P.R.O. HO 144/21060/197-199.

²³⁴ *Blackshirt*, 9 October 1937, p. 10, 20 November 1937, p. 6.

²³⁵ P.F.. Taped interview.

local Blackshirt who worked in the tailoring trade. Previously, he had taken charge of the remnants of the Walthamstow East District and was later awarded the Bronze Distinction for service to the movement.²³⁶ Freshney's successor, John Joseph Aldrich, a 21 year old tobacco worker, residing at 70, Penrhyn Avenue, Walthamstow, had become District Leader by May 1938, but, within two months, he had given way to Harold A. Scott-Turner.²³⁷ The latter, a 27 year old journalist from Leyton, who had previously been District Leader at Leytonstone, also temporarily filled the breach at Walthamstow.²³⁸ For a brief period afterwards, 'Ernie' Dean, then the District Inspector for the region, assumed control of the formation before being replaced by Frederick A. Young, a 40 year old anti-Semitic fish curer, who lived at 10, Herbert Road, Walthamstow.²³⁹

Although the leadership of the Walthamstow West B.U.F. was in a constant state of flux in the later 1930s, fascist political activity continued in the Borough until 1940. From c.1936, open-air meetings were held on a quite frequent basis at established pitches, including Pretoria Avenue, Cleveland Park Avenue and Church Hill.²⁴⁰ Moreover, during this period, local Blackshirts staged a number of propaganda marches, and both Mosley and John Beckett addressed large outdoor audiences in the municipality.²⁴¹

The Blackshirts' initial foray into the Borough of Leyton was short-lived. A Leyton B.U.F. Branch, located at 359, Lea Bridge Road in the west parliamentary division was established during the latter stages of 1933, but, by May 1934, this had become defunct.²⁴² One Mosleyite, who enrolled at the Lea Bridge Road headquarters

²³⁶ Linehan, East London for Mosley, p. 133; W.L.C.G., 11 February 1938, p. 5; Blackshirt, 9 October 1937, p. 10; Action, 22 October 1938, p. 13.

²³⁷ W.L.C.G., 27 May 1938, p. 19; Blackshirt, July 1938, p. 8.

²³⁸ E.G.. Taped interview; W.L.C.G., 11 February 1938, p. 2.

²³⁹ Linehan, East London for Mosley, p. 134; W.L.C.G., 23 February 1940, p. 2.

²⁴⁰ See Blackshirt, 26 April 1936, p. 6, 29 August 1936, p. 6, 5 September 1936, p. 6, 14 November 1936, p. 6, 5 December 1936, p. 6, 30 January 1937, p. 6, 16 October 1937, p. 6; Action, 12 March 1938, p. 17, 12 October 1939, p. 8, 11 April 1940, p. 8.

²⁴¹ For reports of B.U.F. propaganda marches in Walthamstow see W.L.C.G., 1 May 1936, p. 7; Action, 9 April 1938, p. 19. For Beckett and Mosley's public meetings in the Borough see W.L.C.G., 26 June 1936, p. 9, 30 October 1936, p. 20, 8 July 1938, p. 9.

²⁴² Fascist News, 30 November 1933, p. 4; P.R.O HO 144/20140/107; Labour Party Fascist

in early 1934, remembered that, shortly after he had joined, the Branch “sort of dissolved”.²⁴³ The temporary demise of Blackshirt organisation in the Borough was also noted in June 1934 by the West Leyton District Labour Party, which referred to the recent removal of “mostly imported” fascists from local premises.²⁴⁴ A month later, the Leytonstone Express and Independent revealed that the Leyton Branch, no longer based at the “brown house” in Lea Bridge Road, had been “amalgamated” with the Hackney B.U.F..²⁴⁵

It was not until November 1935 that the Blackshirts officially opened another Branch in the West Leyton division.²⁴⁶ This new formation operated from the Green Cafe in High Road, Leyton until August 1938.²⁴⁷ Thereafter, the local District Headquarters moved to larger premises in a detached property at 669, High Road Leyton.²⁴⁸ The two earliest reported District Leaders were K.B. Barber, who lived at 80, Millais Road, E. 11, and S. Milner of 89, Forest Road, Leytonstone.²⁴⁹ Ernest Forge, a Leyton resident engaged in the furniture trade, then took the helm on a short-term basis. Previously, Forge had been one of Arthur Beavan’s loyal Blackshirt lieutenants at West Ham.²⁵⁰ By October 1937, the post of West Leyton District Leader had been assumed by R.A. Geddes, a pharmaceutical company representative in his early twenties, whose private address was 8, Huxley Road, Leyton.²⁵¹ Geddes retained the executive position until at least March 1939 but was eventually succeeded by a local postman, Leonard S. Fenn, who continued as the West Leyton B.U.F.’s senior official until 1940.²⁵²

Questionnaire. Reply of West Leyton District Labour Party. LP/FAS/34/305.

²⁴³ L.B.. Taped interview.

²⁴⁴ LP/FAS/34/305.

²⁴⁵ L.E.I., 28 July 1934, p. 10.

²⁴⁶ Blackshirt, 3 January 1936, p. 8.

²⁴⁷ B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in London Districts.

²⁴⁸ Action, 20 August 1938, p. 18; W.L.C.G., 16 September 1938, p. 4; E.G.. Taped interview.

²⁴⁹ W.L.C.G., 14 November 1936, p. 20; B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Leaders of the British Union of Fascists in London Districts. The West Leyton B.U.F. also had a Women’s Section since Miss A. Looffler was appointed Woman District Officer for the formation in early 1936. See P.R.O. HO 144/20146/135.

²⁵⁰ E.G.. Taped interview; D.T.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991.

²⁵¹ Blackshirt, 16 October 1937, p. 6; E.G.. Taped interview; B.U.F. Membership Cards listing District Officials for Essex.

²⁵² S.E., 3 March 1939, p. 18; B.U.F. Membership Cards listing District Officials for Essex; E.G..

In July 1934, a garden party at the Snaresbrook home of Captain R. Heath, Officer in Command of the North London Defence, led to the formation of the Leytonstone, Wanstead and Snaresbrook B.U.F.. Situated in the Leyton East parliamentary division, the new Branch was formally installed in modest District Headquarters at 114a, Fairlop Road, Leytonstone on 1 August 1934. However, by the autumn, increasing Blackshirt recruitment prompted relocation to more spacious premises on the middle floor of a large private house in Leytonstone High Road.²⁵³

Hector George McKechnie, the Leytonstone B.U.F.'s first Branch Organiser, lived locally and was regarded as "a rather upper class type".²⁵⁴ Born in 1899, McKechnie completed his schooling in September 1917 and obtained a commission in the Royal Flying Corps, seeing active service in France and Egypt during the First World War. He left the air force in 1922 to take up several commercial openings in the United States. Six years later, McKechnie established himself as a businessman at La Ceiba in British Honduras, where he was selected by the Foreign Office to be a Trade Consul. After journeying back to England in 1933, he became a member of the B.U.F. in the August or September of that year.²⁵⁵

Supported by the North London Area, McKechnie directed the Leytonstone B.U.F.'s activities until late 1934.²⁵⁶ During this period, he coordinated his local propaganda efforts with E.J. Montgomery, a monocled National Headquarters official, who gave regular public addresses in the district.²⁵⁷ In November 1934, McKechnie was promoted to Officer in Charge of the North London Area and, consequently, was replaced as Branch Organiser by J. Keeley, a disabled ex-Tory platform speaker, who also lived in Leytonstone.²⁵⁸ Following Keeley's brief stewardship, Harold

Taped interview.

²⁵³ *Blackshirt*, 20 July 1934, p. 3, 10 August 1934, p. 7, 26 October 1934, p. 4; E.G.. Taped interview.

²⁵⁴ E.G.. Taped interview. McKechnie lived at 35, Forest Drive East, Leytonstone. See P.R.O. HO 45/25699. Hector G. McKechnie.

²⁵⁵ This account of McKechnie's career up to 1933 is based on P.R.O. HO 45/25699; P.R.O. HO 283/48. Hector G. McKechnie; 'Who's Who in Fascism'; *Action*, 27 March 1937, p. 8.

²⁵⁶ *Blackshirt*, 26 October 1934, p. 4.

²⁵⁷ *L.E.L.*, 28 July 1934, p. 10; E.G.. Taped interview.

²⁵⁸ 'Who's Who in Fascism'; E.G.. Taped interview; B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/1. Leaders of the British Union

Scott-Turner took over as Leytonstone District Leader until 1938. Scott-Turner then relinquished the post due to a house move from Leyton to Chingford but later led the Walthamstow West formation for a time.²⁵⁹

4. The failure of the B.U.F. in Essex

A central explanation for the B.U.F.'s lack of progress in provincial and metropolitan Essex lay in the generally buoyant performance of the local economy during the 1930s. Denied Griffin and Copsey's vital precondition of a receptive socio-economic context, which undermined the legitimacy of the liberal democratic system, the Blackshirts had little prospect of developing a mass base in the county.²⁶⁰ The state of the local agricultural sector, which remained resistant to fascist penetration from the outset, illustrates this fundamental constraint.²⁶¹ Crucially, Essex farmers escaped the worst effects of the slump, a point noted by informed contemporary commentators:

It is doubtful if there is another county in England where the general level of farming prosperity is higher. In certain of the poorer areas the depression in agriculture has been felt very keenly, but on the whole Essex has possibly suffered as little as any county from depressed conditions.²⁶²

Surveys of selected farms in the south Essex clay region, conducted by University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture throughout the decade, support

of Fascists in London Districts. E.G. confirmed that McKechnie left the Leytonstone B.U.F. at the end of 1934.

²⁵⁹ E.G.. Taped interview; L.B.. Taped interview; *Blackshirt*, July 1938, p. 8.

²⁶⁰ Several of key factors limiting the B.U.F.'s appeal in the agricultural areas of Essex, particularly the gradual economic deterioration of the 1920s, the uneven impact of the 1929-1932 depression and the general improvement in farm income in north-west Essex during the 1930s, have already been discussed in Chapter Four.

²⁶¹ In a speech given to the Essex County Poultry Association at the Albert Hall, Colchester in July 1934, Mosley conceded that the B.U.F.'s attempt to convert the farming interest was "going slower in Essex than in any other part of the country I have visited". See *C.G.*, 25 July 1934, p. 7.

²⁶² Leslie and Ewing, 'The Agriculture of Essex', p. 73. The Land Utilisation Survey also noted that parts of Essex contained a high density of regular farmworkers, which indicated a degree of agricultural profitability. Measured on this basis, the most prosperous agricultural enterprises were (1) glasshouse cultivation at Waltham Abbey, Nazeing, Harlow, Stansted and Saffron Walden, (2) high grade market gardening in south-west Essex, (3) fruit, seed and vegetable production in central Essex, (4) market gardening on the coastal brickearths at Rochford and Dengie, and (5) arable farming in the Rodings. See Scarfe, 'Part 82 Essex', pp. 431-432.

this optimistic assessment. According to detailed investigations undertaken in 1931 and 1932, the district managed to produce a small average profit per farm and was one of three eastern areas which were relatively untouched by the depression.²⁶³ Although the south Essex clay region possessed heavy soil and drainage problems, its proximity to London offered “decided marketing advantages”.²⁶⁴ Furthermore, since Chelmsford and Southend were nearby and many large villages were situated in the district, local farmers had direct access to a sizeable number of potential consumers. As the most important grazing and dairying area in the eastern counties, south Essex obtained over 80 per cent of gross incomes from livestock and associated products. Dairy produce contributed the most, averaging £400 per 100 acres (49 per cent of gross incomes), which was approximately four times the sum brought in by poultry, the other main livestock enterprise. A large number of feeding cattle and grassland sheep were also kept in the district. In contrast, crop sales, based chiefly on potatoes and market garden produce, accounted for less than fifteen per cent of gross incomes.²⁶⁵

The B.U.F.’s prospects in the south Essex clay region were further undermined by gradually improving conditions after 1932. As the depression began to ease, the county agricultural sector showed clear signs of a modest, if fitful, recovery. This general trend was exemplified by the economic performance, based on samples of 50 farms, of the south Essex clay district.

²⁶³ University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture (U.C.D.A.), An Economic Survey of Agriculture in the Eastern Counties of England 1932 (Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 21, July 1933), p. 27 and p. 42.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*.

TABLE 1
ECONOMIC TRENDS PER FARM OF THE SOUTH ESSEX LONDON
CLAY DISTRICT, 1931-1939*

	1931	1932	1933	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Gross Charges (£)	1188	1137	1241	1321	1324	1364	1406	1469
% Change	1931-33=100			111	111	115	118	124
Gross Income (£)+	1406	1310	1419	1583	1615	1562	1554	1854
% Change	1931-33=100			115	117	113	113	135
Farm Income (£) #	218	173	178	262	291	198	148	385

(Source: University of Cambridge Department of Agriculture, A Financial Retrospect of Farming in the Eastern Counties of England 1931-1941, Farm Economics Branch, Report No. 33, June 1942)

* no survey was conducted in 1934

+ includes subsidies

the farm income figure is derived by subtracting the gross charges from the gross income for each year.

Receding unemployment levels in Essex during the 1930s provided another indicator of local economic conditions. Compared with other parts of the country, the county as a whole was not badly affected by the depression, as Ministry of Labour statistics demonstrate.²⁶⁶ For the entire period between January 1930 and August 1939, the monthly unemployment rate among insured workers in Essex remained below the corresponding overall British figure.²⁶⁷ Joblessness in the county peaked at 21.4 per cent in February 1932 and fell thereafter until 1938, reaching a low point of six per cent in July 1937.²⁶⁸ Following a slight rise in the Essex unemployment total in the late 1930s, by August 1939 fewer than six in every 100 insured workers in the county were without a job.²⁶⁹ Thus, local B.U.F. Branches were founded well after the Essex unemployment rate had reached its highest point, and the county Blackshirt movement's formative stage coincided with a period of improving job prospects. This general trend can be illustrated by examining unemployment levels in the principal locations in Essex where the B.U.F. established a presence.

²⁶⁶ Ministry of Labour, Local Unemployment Index (London: H.M.S.O., 1930-1939), January 1930-August 1939.

²⁶⁷ Ibid..

²⁶⁸ Ibid., February 1932, p. 1, July 1937, p. 1.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., August 1939, p. 1.

TABLE 2
AVERAGE MONTHLY RATE OF REGISTERED UNEMPLOYMENT
IN GREAT BRITAIN AND ESSEX, 1933-1939 (%)*

	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Great Britain	20.32	17.32	16.23	13.91	10.75	12.73	10.95
Essex	13.78	11.39	10.26	8.45	7.28	9.26	8.45
Braintree	14.87	7.75	6.93	5.47	3.38	6.83	8.36
Chelmsford	6.41	4.28	2.94	1.78	1.58	2.69	2.48
Clacton-on-Sea	8.55	7.25	8.22	8.98	9.6	11.8	12.19
Colchester	14.33	11.6	9.62	8	6.09	6.47	6.31
East Ham	11.23	10.11	8.84	7.51	6.38	7.03	6.54
Ilford	7.61	7.18	5.93	5.16	4.15	5.48	5.18
Leyton	10.18	7.97	7.48	5.62	4.73	6.68	5.75
Maldon	14.76	11.16	10.48	9.37	6.48	8.73	8.44
Romford	16.29	13.08	12.13	10.23	10.62	15.3	14.64
Southend	13.79	11.34	12	11.46	11.41	14.06	13.84
Walthamstow	11.52	8.53	7.88	6.23	5.15	7.02	6.68
West Ham	16.21	15.08	14.1	11.5	9.55	11.36	10.05

(Source: Ministry of Labour, *Local Unemployment Index*, London: H.M.S.O., 1930-1939, January 1930 - August 1939)

* The average monthly rate of registered unemployment is expressed as a percentage of the insured population. The figures for 1939 are based on the eight months from January to August.

Occasionally, the Mosleyite press reported instances of fascist assistance being given to the out-of-work in the county. In September 1934, for example, *Blackshirt* revealed that the Industrial Section of the B.U.F. had recently represented C. Blomfield, a Walthamstow man formerly engaged as a clerk, at a Court of Referees hearing and had secured unemployment benefit for him. In a letter of thanks, Blomfield claimed that the B.U.F.'s efforts on his behalf "only goes to prove to my fellow members of the working class that our great Movement is sincere".²⁷⁰ Another publicised case involved 'Mr. B.', an Essex resident on outdoor relief, who was unable to provide his family with a suitable diet. A Blackshirt from the Industrial Section approached the relevant authorities and obtained regular additional nourishment for Mr. B.'s children.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ *Blackshirt*, 7 September 1934, p. 4.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18 April 1935, p. 6.

However, isolated examples apart, there is little evidence to suggest that the B.U.F. in Essex was able to recruit the unemployed in significant numbers. Information provided by former B.U.F. members at East Ham, Epping, Ilford, Leytonstone, Walthamstow, West Ham and Southend-on-Sea indicates that few of the jobless were converted to the B.U.F..²⁷² Moreover, Blackshirt initiatives to assist the Essex unemployed had little tangible impact. For example, a plan under consideration by the Clacton-on-Sea Branch in January 1934 to extend the services of the F.U.B.W. to those out of work in the locality produced negligible results.²⁷³

The B.U.F.'s attempt to exploit a high profile local case also proved to be a non-starter. In March 1938, W. Neilson and A. Sparham, two workmen employed by Southend Corporation, were dismissed from their posts following an internal inquiry on the grounds that they had made unsubstantiated allegations of irregularities in the Sanitary and Cleansing Department. Eight months later, after collecting more documentation to support their claims, Neilson and Sparham began a campaign to clear their names and expose the perceived abuses by launching a petition for a public inquiry into the running of the Corporation. This quickly attracted the signatures of over 500 local ratepayers.²⁷⁴

In an endeavour to extract political capital from these events, the Southend District B.U.F. tried unsuccessfully to intervene. Immediately after news of the petition was carried in the local press in November 1938, a Southend Mosleyite approached Neilson and Sparham to offer them the movement's assistance, but both men firmly rejected the B.U.F.'s overtures.²⁷⁵ Having been decisively rebuffed, the Assistant District Leader at Southend claimed that fascist interest in the case had been guided by honourable motives:

We of the British Union look upon the exposure of all graft and corruption in any public department not only

²⁷² Taped and telephone interviews with ex-Blackshirts.

²⁷³ *C.T.E.E.G.*, 20 January 1934, p. 8; *C.N.E.E.A.*, 20 January 1934, p. 4.

²⁷⁴ *S.T.*, 9 November 1938, p. 1, 16 November 1938, p. 1, 23 November 1938, p. 1.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 November 1938, p. 1.

as a service but a duty to the community and shows the rottenness of the present system, and we do feel that both Mr. Neilson and Mr. Sparham no matter what their political views, should have been prepared to lay the full facts of the case before the local officials of the British Union who would have given them all possible assistance.²⁷⁶

Most of the Essex unemployed who became politically radicalised in the 1930s rejected the B.U.F. and gravitated instead towards left-wing anti-fascist organisations such as the Communist Party and the National Unemployed Workers Movement (N.U.W.M.), as a means of articulating their grievances. These bodies played a prominent part in disrupting and countering Blackshirt activity in the county. The hostility of the unemployed to the B.U.F. appeared to be particularly marked at Braintree, where the local Branch of the N.U.W.M. orchestrated a range of anti-fascist activities which were designed to thwart the dissemination of Blackshirt propaganda. Owing to its sustained opposition to B.U.F. activity in Braintree, the local N.U.W.M. formation was denounced by a Maldon Blackshirt activist as having “always been the first to stop us from getting a fair hearing” in the town.²⁷⁷

The previous two chapters have shown that the ‘political space’ available to the B.U.F. in Essex was severely restricted by government legislation to assist the agricultural sector and the labour movement’s ideological and moral hold over many local rural workers. Enduring working class loyalty to the Labour Party in urban areas of Essex also meant that Blackshirt appeals for manual support met with little response. In the Municipal Borough of West Ham, for example, the Plaistow and Silvertown parliamentary divisions, both traditional Labour strongholds, offered few political opportunities for fascist growth. The West Ham District Leader, Arthur Beavan, recalled that these working class areas, the “reddest parts of Britain bar the coalmines of Wales”, were particularly unreceptive to Blackshirt propaganda.²⁷⁸

From the mid-1930s, the movement also found it more difficult to hire halls for public meetings, particularly in Boroughs with Labour-controlled councils, such as

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 30 November 1938, p. 1.

²⁷⁷ E.C., 18 May 1934, p. 6. See also P.R.O. HO 144/20141/312.

²⁷⁸ Beavan. F.O.M. taped interview.

Leyton, Walthamstow, East Ham and West Ham. At Leyton, Blackshirt applications to hold a public meeting at the town hall were refused on four reported occasions between 1936 and 1938.²⁷⁹ A similar ban on the B.U.F.'s use of municipal property was imposed by Walthamstow council from the mid-1930s.²⁸⁰ Blackshirt attempts to secure private venues in Walthamstow were also unsuccessful. In May 1938, Canon G.D. Oakley withdrew permission for Mosley to address a gathering of local traders at the Church Hall in Orford Road.²⁸¹ A month later, the Walthamstow Chamber of Commerce declined a B.U.F. request to grant the Blackshirt leader an audience.²⁸² At East Ham and West Ham, the local authorities were also reluctant to approve lettings to the B.U.F..²⁸³

Elsewhere in Essex, the B.U.F. also encountered council opposition in its attempts to propagate the fascist message. Although generally more accommodating, the anti-Labour administration at Ilford refused to allow Mosley to speak at the town hall on 15 June 1936.²⁸⁴ Blackshirts felt that insult had been added to injury when Ilford council agreed to allow a left-wing meeting on Spain to take place at the same venue in September 1936.²⁸⁵ According to *Action*, B.U.F. activities faced similar restrictions in Colchester, Chingford and Loughton.²⁸⁶ When the B.U.F. tried to arrange a public meeting at Saffron Walden town hall in c.1935, the local council imposed a surety of £100 to cover any possible damage or loss.²⁸⁷ At Southend too, the District formation experienced difficulties in hiring council and private halls for meetings. In April 1937, almost a year after the local authority had refused to allow

²⁷⁹ *L.E.L.*, 4 April 1936, p. 10, 31 October 1936, p. 10, 4 December 1937, p. 13, 22 October 1938, p. 12.

²⁸⁰ *W.L.C.G.*, 24 July 1936, p. 3, 31 July 1936, p. 7, 16 October 1936, p. 13, 6 January 1939, p. 11 and p. 14.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6 May 1938, p. 15.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 1 July 1938, p. 11.

²⁸³ *E.H.E.*, 12 March 1937, p. 1, 9 June 1939, p. 7, 14 July 1939, p. 7; *S.E.*, 23 January 1937, p. 8.

²⁸⁴ *L.R.*, 28 May 1936, p. 4; *Borough of Ilford Agenda and Minutes*, Vol. XX, 4 May-27 October 1936, p. 837. Copy held at Redbridge Central Library.

²⁸⁵ *L.R.*, 24 September 1936, p. 13.

²⁸⁶ *Action*, 25 February 1939, p. 2.

²⁸⁷ *E.A.D.T.*, 16 May 1935, p. 4. It is not clear whether the B.U.F. met this condition and held the planned meeting at Saffron Walden. However, a later Blackshirt application to hire the town hall was successful.

Mosley to deliver a public address at the Floral Hall, the B.U.F. District Treasurer claimed that “we can’t hire a hall in Southend. They’ll let them to anyone except us”.²⁸⁸

The B.U.F. reacted angrily to this form of political marginalisation. At East Ham and Ilford, for example, Blackshirt deputations attempted, without success, to present their case to the council concerned.²⁸⁹ After John Beckett had been denied the use of Leyton town hall in April 1936, the B.U.F. attempted to launch a protest petition in the area.²⁹⁰ Several leading Essex Mosleyites wrote to the local press claiming that the refusal to let venues to the B.U.F. was either due to political censorship or submission to threats of anti-fascist disruption.²⁹¹ One Blackshirt denounced the ban in Walthamstow as “nothing short of gangster rule ... the council and the ‘gangsters’ have prevented us from the right as citizens to meet in any of the Borough halls or on private property”.²⁹² In places such as Leyton and Southend, fascist adherents were convinced that pressure from local Jews had contributed to the B.U.F.’s failure to hire indoor venues.²⁹³

Physical force tactics were also occasionally employed to register Blackshirt annoyance at being denied the use of halls. The earliest recorded incident of this kind in the county occurred at Ilford in September 1936, after the council had first refused an application from the B.U.F. and then made a venue available for a meeting jointly organised by the Spanish Workers’ Defence Committee and the local Labour Party.²⁹⁴ Viewing this as clear evidence of discrimination, a Blackshirt correspondent writing in the Ilford Recorder considered that the council’s “political opinions...would seem to decide the merits of the application”.²⁹⁵ When the left-wing gathering on Spain took

²⁸⁸ S.T., 7 April 1937, p. 8. On the Floral Hall ban see S.S.E.W.A., 11 June 1936, p. 10, 18 June 1936, p. 9.

²⁸⁹ E.H.E., 16 April 1937, p. 3; Borough of Ilford Agenda and Minutes, Vol. XX, 4 May-27 October 1936, p. 1471.

²⁹⁰ W.L.C.G., 10 April 1936, p. 8.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 24 July 1936, p. 3; LR., 23 July 1936, p. 4; E.H.E., 12 March 1937, p. 1.

²⁹² W.L.C.G., 6 May 1938, p. 15.

²⁹³ S.E., 25 April 1936, p. 8; S.T., 7 April 1937, p. 8.

²⁹⁴ Ilford Guardian (L.G.), 25 September 1936, p. 4.

²⁹⁵ LR., 24 September 1936, p. 13.

place at the town hall on 21 September 1936, eight fascists gained entry and attempted to disrupt proceedings before they were forcibly ejected by stewards.²⁹⁶

Further fascist attempts to sabotage left-wing meetings followed. In September 1937, a Labour Party public meeting, addressed by Clement Attlee, at East Ham town hall closed fifty minutes early due to Blackshirt members of the audience heckling, throwing stink bombs and setting off a firework.²⁹⁷ Herbert Morrison was similarly “howled down” by about 200 fascists at a disorderly Walthamstow Labour Party meeting held in the local Baths Hall on 19 February 1939.²⁹⁸

Other external factors helped to prevent the B.U.F. in Essex from creating any semblance of lasting political legitimacy. Militant anti-fascist opposition, Blackshirt law-breaking, the antipathy of the Essex press and the general culture of the suburban-provincial environment saddled the B.U.F. with a confrontational and ‘alien’ image. Left-wing anti-fascist activists regularly broke up B.U.F. meetings in Plaistow and Silvertown.²⁹⁹ The success of these ‘physical force’ tactics can be gauged from the B.U.F.’s disclosure in February 1940 that the movement had held only nineteen propaganda meetings in the Silvertown division between 1932 and January 1940.³⁰⁰

Blackshirt attempts to conduct open air addresses in the Beckton Road area of Canning Town often led to especially violent clashes with anti-fascists.³⁰¹ A former West Ham Mosleyite, who acted as a steward at several B.U.F. meetings in the vicinity of Beckton Road, recalled the hostile reception the fascists received:

....that was well-known as a tough area, a really tough area. We used to go. Headquarters had, I suppose you’d call them ...mini-coaches...They had barbed wire at the windows, had wooden bench seats either side. We’d drive there...I think we had may be a couple of these coaches and they’d park them. Then our speaker would get his platform ready...and

²⁹⁶ *I.G.*, 25 September 1936, p. 4.

²⁹⁷ *E.H.E.*, 1 October 1937, p. 1 and p. 7.

²⁹⁸ *W.L.C.G.*, 24 February 1939, p. 6.

²⁹⁹ Beavan. Taped interview; F.T.. Taped interview.

³⁰⁰ *Action*, 22 February 1940, p. 8.

³⁰¹ See *Blackshirt*, 7 December 1934, p. 10, 29 March 1935, p. 8, 6 December 1935, p. 8, 27 December 1935, p. 8, 24 April 1937, p. 6.

then he'd start the meeting and we'd be facing the speaker. Then stones would go over and somebody would throw a piece of wood or a tomato, something like that.³⁰²

Anti-fascist disruption also affected Blackshirt open air meetings, and other activities, at Walthamstow, Upton Park, Ilford, Braintree, Chingford and other parts of Essex.³⁰³ The tactics used included orchestrated barracking and singing, physical assaults and the destruction of speakers' platforms. Some of the individuals responsible for such incidents were brought to court and fined.

A steady stream of Blackshirt prosecutions from the mid-1930s hardly improved the movement's public image. Several cases, mainly in the Boroughs of Walthamstow and West Ham, involved fascist speakers who were either charged with, or fined for, using insulting words and behaviour at B.U.F. meetings.³⁰⁴ Two brothers, both Walthamstow Blackshirts, were convicted for violent offences in connection with their political activities.³⁰⁵ Other Essex Mosleyites found guilty in court included members of the Harwich and Ilford Districts who defaced roads with Blackshirt slogans and a Brightlingsea fascist who littered local streets with B.U.F. handbills.³⁰⁶

Frequent local newspaper reports of the disturbances and illegality which often accompanied the B.U.F.'s activities in parts of the county further eroded Blackshirt credibility. Negative public perceptions of the B.U.F. were also reinforced by hostile editorials in the Essex press. The Ilford Recorder, for example, dismissed Mosleyite fascism as an imported political creed opposed to the 'British' conception of government:

Against...[the] traditional British system, adapted to our needs through centuries of change and growth, we are offered a new

302 F.T.. Taped interview.

303 See for example S.E., 22 August 1936, p. 9, 10 October 1936, p. 5; LR., 22 October 1936, p. 16; E.C., 4 October 1935, p. 12; Benny Berg, former anti-fascist activist at Chingford. Letter to Andrew Mitchell. 23 July 1993. Much useful information on the disturbances and violence which accompanied B.U.F. activities is to be found in P.R.O. HO 144/20143/114-405. Disorder at Public Meetings etc.. Summary in the form of weekly returns, commencing 1st January 1934.

304 See for example W.L.C.G., 4 December 1936, p. 5; S.E., 4 November 1938, p. 8; E.H.E., 17 March 1939, p. 1.

305 W.L.C.G., 25 November 1938, p. 2; S.E., 15 September 1939, p. 14.

306 E.C.S., 28 September 1935, p. 13; LR., 24 October 1935, p. 9; E.A.D.T., 14 October 1935, p. 4.

and untried toy which, although tricked out to appear home-produced, bears the unmistakable stamp of its foreign origin.. Whatever the superficial modifications, British fascism in all essentials is based on the Continental model, and the people of this country will have none of it.³⁰⁷

In the East End, the Blackshirts' populist approach and radical open-air propaganda techniques attracted interest, support and extensive publicity because they reflected many of the political, socio-economic and cultural traditions of the area. However, B.U.F. marches, sales drives and outdoor meetings in the less dynamic and often more genteel social and political environment of suburban and provincial Essex introduced a style of street-corner activism which many found disconcerting. Local residents often registered their displeasure at B.U.F. attempts to establish regular speakers' pitches in their neighbourhoods. During September 1937 more than twenty Forest Gate householders unsuccessfully petitioned the police to ban the B.U.F.'s regular Sunday evening meeting at the corner of Capel Road because of the noise generated by this weekly fascist propaganda event.³⁰⁸ In March 1938, the residents' committee representing the inhabitants of the Carpenters Estate area of Stratford High Street sent a petition to their M.P., which protested against the staging of B.U.F. meetings in the vicinity.³⁰⁹

On occasion, it would appear that local traders' organisations also took exception to the disruptive effects of Blackshirt political methods. In an obvious reference to the B.U.F., one press report of October 1936 noted that the Ilford Chamber of Commerce had recently complained to the Borough council that open-air meetings were adversely affecting the business of some local traders: "It seems that the number of street meetings is increasing, especially for political propaganda. The activities of a certain militant party, which shall be nameless, have stirred opponents to

³⁰⁷ *L.R.*, 11 November 1937, p. 4. See also *ibid.*, 22 October 1936, p. 4, 4 November 1937, p. 4; *S.E.*, 16 February 1940, p. 11.

³⁰⁸ *S.E.*, 18 September 1937, p. 18.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 March 1938, p. 12; 26 March 1938, p. 7. The committee claimed that they had collected 700 local signatures in support of their aims.

go and do likewise, and of late there has been a plethora of meetings in and around Ilford Broadway, and near the railway station".³¹⁰

Compared with Norfolk and Suffolk, the incidence and intensity of latent and overt anti-Semitism appeared to be greater in Essex. In particular, reports of open Blackshirt and Gentile hostility towards Jews were more common in the county, especially in the Boroughs fringing east London. However, despite the B.U.F.'s more obvious promotion of an 'anti-alien' platform in Essex during the 1930s, the movement signally failed to mobilise a strong local support base on this issue.

Southend, according to the Board of Deputies, had "always been subject to a certain amount of anti-Semitism".³¹¹ At a hearing in the King's Bench Division in January 1936, J.W. Higgs and Son, a firm of manufacturing furriers with shop premises at 366-368, London Road, Westcliff, were ordered to pay £200 damages plus costs for displaying a libellous poster about Ernest Ashmele, a Jewish tobacconist trading in London Road under the name 'Jasby's'.³¹² After Ashmele vacated the adjoining commercial property, James William Higgs, sole partner in the furrier business, and his son Dennis, who worked as the shop manager, took over the empty premises and put up a defamatory notice which said :

Extension of premises - To be thoroughly cleaned and fumigated and opened by a real British firm this time - J.W. Higgs and Son, who trade under their own name and are real English manufacturing furriers and don't trade under other people's names. We are real English and proud of it, and please spend your money with real British shopkeepers and stall holders and there will be no unemployment. Real British means English, Scots, Welsh or Irish. That is real British, and nothing else.³¹³

During the court proceedings, it emerged that Ashmele had left his London Road shop because of the anti-social behaviour of the defendants. Evidence was also

³¹⁰ *L.R.*, 8 October 1936, p. 4.

³¹¹ *B.D.B.J.* C6/1/2. Jewish Defence Committee Minutes 1936-1939. Reports from the Provinces. July 1939 and November 1939.

³¹² *S.T.*, 5 February 1936, p. 4; *S.S.E.W.A.*, 6 February 1936, p. 20.

³¹³ *S.T.*, 5 February 1936, p. 4.

submitted that, in the past, James Higgs had stood outside Ashmele's premises making offensive remarks about "stinking Jews".³¹⁴ Dennis Higgs was then District Leader of the Southend B.U.F., and his father also belonged to the Blackshirt movement. In addition, both men were thought to be members of the Imperial Fascist League (I.F.L.), an organisation which made racial anti-Semitism its ideological cornerstone.³¹⁵

James Higgs' anti-Jewish attitudes surfaced in Forest Gate, West Ham, where he occupied factory premises at 471, Romford Road. His hostility towards supposedly 'foreign' or 'alien' business competitors in the area manifested itself in anti-Semitic newspapers advertisements, which claimed that he was the "only real British furrier between Aldgate Pump and Southend".³¹⁶ The Board of Deputies also reported that a variety of anti-Jewish posters and notices were to be found prominently displayed in the shop window of his Romford Road property.³¹⁷ Moreover, Higgs had appeared at East Ham police court charged with throwing tea over a Jewish woman outside his Forest Gate factory, but the case was dismissed because there was no evidence that this had been an intentional act.³¹⁸ Described as a chronic alcoholic, Higgs continued his anti-Semitic activities at both business locations until his death in September 1937 at the age of 64.³¹⁹

A few days before Mosley was due to speak at Southend in April 1937, a number of anti-Semitic slogans, including 'Perish Judah' and 'No Yiddish', were chalked along the Western Esplanade, Westcliff, together with B.U.F. symbols. Several local Jews complained that similar offensive messages had also been put on the walls of

314 Ibid..

315 E.G.. Taped interview.

316 B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E3/141/3. Anti-Semitism in the East End.

317 B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E3/141/3. Anti-Semitic Propaganda: Mr. Higgs of Romford Road, Forest Gate.

318 B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E3/141/3. Anti-Semitism in the East End.

319 M.G.. Telephone interview; F.T.. Taped interview; *S.T.*, 5 February 1936, p. 4; *S.E.*, 11 September 1937, p. 16.

their houses.³²⁰ Furthermore, in July 1939, *Action* carried an advertisement for the Mount Liell Hotel at Westcliff, which was described as “Strictly Non-Jewish”.³²¹

Throughout this period too, there was further evidence of anti-Semitic activity in the Borough of West Ham. In September 1939, in an episode which recalled Higgs’ earlier anti-Jewish propaganda in the locality, a Board of Deputies observer noted that many Gentile provision stores in Forest Gate had put up notices declaring that they were “100% British”.³²² Two of these shops were more explicit since their signs included the words “Not Yiddish”.³²³ West Ham was also regarded as promising anti-Jewish territory by the Imperial Fascist League. Special Branch reported in December 1934 that the I.F.L. generally was “showing increased activity” and was aiming to recruit disaffected Blackshirts in the Borough.³²⁴

In August 1938, Bernard Green, Secretary of the Canning Town Synagogue, informed the Board of Deputies that the activities of a local doctor named H.J. Ripka were quickly souring the “friendly and cordial” relations which had previously existed between Gentiles and Jews in the district.³²⁵ According to Green, Ripka’s “detestable intrusion”, which allegedly took the form of setting up a Canning Town practice contrary to the spirit of an agreement, undercutting Gentile doctors in the area and opening on Sundays, was rapidly turning the “whole neighbourhood” anti-Semitic.³²⁶ The Secretary also maintained that the B.U.F., hitherto denied a viable propaganda issue in the area, was now “making capital out of the scandalous business”.³²⁷ In particular, he claimed that the Blackshirts were trying to fan the anti-Semitic

³²⁰ *S.T.*, 7 April 1937, p. 1.

³²¹ *Action*, 29 July 1939, p. 19.

³²² B.D.B.J. C6/9/1/3. David Brotmacher. Letter to H. Solomons, London Area Council, Board of Deputies of British Jews. 25 September 1939.

³²³ *Ibid.*.

³²⁴ P.R.O. HO 144/20144/231. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 20 December 1934.

³²⁵ B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E3/74/2. Bernard Green, Secretary, Canning Town Synagogue. Letter to the Secretary, Board of Deputies of British Jews. 30 August 1938.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*.

resentment Ripka's methods had generated amongst local medical practitioners by sending copies of Action to Gentile doctors in Canning Town.³²⁸

B.U.F. involvement in the Silvertown parliamentary by-election of February 1940 prompted Mass-Observation investigators to examine the extent and intensity of anti-Semitism in the division.³²⁹ Accordingly during the election campaign, a small sample of 226 local people were questioned about their attitudes towards Jews.³³⁰ Almost one-third (31 per cent) gave anti-Jewish replies, a further 26 per cent exhibited ambivalent feelings concerning the issue, and 27 per cent had a positive opinion on Jews. The remaining sixteen per cent expressed no view on the subject.³³¹ Nevertheless, the Mass-Observation report noted that the intensity of anti-Jewish feeling expressed by critical Silvertown respondents was "not strong, not nearly as strong as in detailed investigations into Anti-Semitism undertaken by us during the first six months of 1939 in the East End of London".³³² The sample also offered little evidence to suggest that anti-Jewish attitudes led to fascist political sympathies.³³³

An undercurrent of tension between Mosleyites and Jews was also apparent in the Municipal Borough of Ilford. As early as October 1934, Blackshirt claimed that an Ilford fascist had been assaulted by a gang of Jews on his way home from the local Branch and also dismissed from his job by his Jewish employers, who had seen him at the recent Hyde Park Rally.³³⁴ The report concluded that the "identity of the attacked Fascist cannot here be stated because publication of his name and address would expose him to victimisation in his trade".³³⁵ Local Branch reports also complained about the presence of a Jewish opposition which occasionally made attempts to disrupt B.U.F. street meetings in the area.³³⁶ Antagonism was heightened when the Jewish

328 Ibid..

329 Mass-Observation Archive (M-OA): FR 39 Silvertown By-Election. 29.2.40.

330 Ibid., pp. 41-42.

331 Ibid., p. 42.

332 Ibid..

333 Ibid..

334 Blackshirt, 26 October 1934, p. 1.

335 Ibid..

336 Ibid., 25 July 1936, p. 6, 1 August 1936, p. 6.

organisation, the British Union of Democrats, and the B.U.F. attempted to hold rival meetings at Ilford, but it would appear that no serious violence ensued.³³⁷

Conversely, there is much evidence to indicate that Jewish Ilfordians faced various forms of harassment. In July 1935, The Star revealed that numerous cards bearing a red swastika and the words "Britons, do not allow Jews to tamper with white girls" had been scattered in the gardens of several houses in Waremeat Road, Ilford.³³⁸ Further anti-Semitic activity in the Borough was reported in September 1936, when Beatrice Levertoff, an Ilford resident, complained to the local press that gangs of young B.U.F. members from as far away as Manchester were gathering in the vicinity to castigate all those considered to be anti-fascist.³³⁹ Although Ilford Blackshirts were not thought to be involved, Levertoff considered that these youths' "insults to the Jewish people especially become more and more open".³⁴⁰ On Sundays, according to the same source, fascist meetings were held in York Road, Ilford so that returning worshippers were confronted with "uneducated young barbarians insulting this ancient people".³⁴¹

Between June and September 1938, the Ilford District B.U.F. used anti-Jewish propaganda in a concerted bid to convert local shopkeepers, who felt themselves to be the victims of chain store competition and unfair rating assessments.³⁴² A number of Ilford traders were canvassed during June 1938 about the local B.U.F.'s intention to form an organisation to protect the 'small man'.³⁴³ At the same time, the District's senior Blackshirt official, Frederick Ralph, advocated a fascist solution in the

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 August 1936, p. 6, 15 August 1936, p. 6, 1 August 1936, p. 6.

³³⁸ The Star, 24 July 1935. Quoted in B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E03/096. Anti-Jewish Activities in London and the Provinces.

³³⁹ LR., 24 September 1936, p. 4.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*.

³⁴² In February 1938, at a special meeting of the Ilford Chamber of Commerce, called to discuss the assessment issue, one member summed up the feelings of the local traders by stating that the "lives of our families are in danger. What future had the small man for his sons when he is competing with chain stores and cut prices". Two months later, the same body complained that since April 1937 rating assessments of properties in Zone 1 (High Road) had increased by 40 per cent and feared that similar rises were planned for other areas in Ilford. See LG., 11 February 1938, p. 5, 29 April 1938, p. 5;

Action, 30 July 1938, p. 6.

³⁴³ LR., 16 June 1938, p. 4.

correspondence columns of the Ilford Recorder. He claimed that the subservience of the mainstream political parties to international finance had left private retailers exposed to “the ‘cut-throat’ competition of the alien-controlled chain store” and further argued that only B.U.F. policy, based on the twin objectives of ‘Britain First’ and ‘Britain fit for the British’, could safeguard small traders’ interests.³⁴⁴ Ralph also maintained that the position of the small trader could be secured only by allowing shopkeepers to buy stock at the same rates as larger competitors, banning sweated goods and removing the problem of unfair rating assessments.³⁴⁵

The fascist campaign to mobilise Ilford’s shopkeepers culminated in two meetings organised by the local B.U.F. formation. On 11 July 1938 nearly 100 private retailers from the area attended a Blackshirt rally for small traders at the Grosvenor Hall, Ilford.³⁴⁶ In his address, the chief speaker, C.E. Greenwood, maintained that the “honest private shopkeeper” was being squeezed out of business by large combines, multiple shops, chain stores, and small ‘alien’-controlled cut-price establishments.³⁴⁷ Ralph, who also spoke at this gathering, urged those present to give an undertaking either to join the B.U.F. or vote Blackshirt at the next general election. In return, their names would be added to an approved B.U.F. list of Ilford traders, and local fascists would be encouraged to patronise only these recommended shops.³⁴⁸ A few weeks later, Alexander Raven Thomson pursued the same themes before another audience of Ilford shopkeepers.³⁴⁹

Jewish shopkeepers in the Municipal Borough of Walthamstow were also targeted by the B.U.F. in the hope of attracting support from their Gentile counterparts. Local Blackshirts and fascist sympathisers wrote to the Walthamstow press complaining about the presence of ‘foreign’ traders in the Borough, particularly in High Street and Hoe Street. In January 1935, for example, F.S. George Tyler, a

344 Ibid..

345 Ibid., 23 June 1938, p. 4.

346 Ibid., 14 July 1938, p. 3.

347 Ibid..

348 Ibid..

349 Action, 10 September 1938, p. 7.

prominent Walthamstow Mosleyite, referred to the “international element” amongst the High Street stallholders and asserted that the Labour-controlled local council’s attitude was “Make the alien comfortable and to blazes with the Englishman!”³⁵⁰

Political opponents accused the movement of actively promoting anti-Semitism in the area. Following a Blackshirt meeting at Leucha Road, Walthamstow in June 1936, the leader of Walthamstow Borough council’s Labour majority alleged that John Beckett, the chief B.U.F. speaker at this event, had incited Gentile resentment against Jewish private traders in High Street.³⁵¹ Furthermore, in a letter sent to the Borough council towards the end of 1937, the Walthamstow Branch of the Communist Party claimed that local Blackshirts were painting “disgusting anti-Semitic epithets” on the doorsteps of Jewish residential and commercial properties in the area.³⁵² In May 1938, fascists were also suspected of being responsible for smashing a Jewish tailor’s shop window in Hoe Street, using a brick which had been wrapped in paper bearing a swastika sign. The shop manager told the local press that, although this incident constituted the first “serious outrage” directed against the business, for “years” anti-Semitic slogans had been daubed on or outside the premises.³⁵³

The dissemination of anti-Jewish propaganda in Walthamstow formed an integral part of the Blackshirt drive to recruit Gentile small traders in the Borough. An advertisement placed in the fascist press in November 1935, aimed specifically at enrolling Walthamstow shopkeepers, announced that only the B.U.F. could save private retailers from the combines and bankruptcy.³⁵⁴ Just over a year later, Raven Thomson addressed a successful small trader meeting, organised by the local B.U.F., at the St. Mary’s Church Hall, Walthamstow.³⁵⁵ Permission was also sought for Mosley to hold two similar gatherings in the Borough in mid-1938, but both requests were

350 W.L.C.G., 18 January 1935, p. 2. See also *ibid.*, 6 July 1934, p. 6.

351 *Ibid.*, 3 July 1936, p. 7.

352 *Ibid.*, 5 November 1937, p. 15.

353 *Ibid.*, 20 May 1938, p. 8.

354 Blackshirt, 29 November 1935, p. 8.

355 W.L.C.G., 18 December 1936, p. 15.

turned down.³⁵⁶ The B.U.F.'s aggressively anti-Semitic stance had some limited success in Walthamstow because it accorded with the anti-Jewish sentiments expressed by some local traders' organisations. In particular, the Walthamstow and Leyton District Grocers' Association criticised those Jewish and 'alien' private retailers who were deemed to be engaged in unfair price-cutting.³⁵⁷

Several senior Walthamstow Blackshirts exhibited pronounced anti-Semitic tendencies. One of the movement's pioneers in the area, F.S. George Tyler, used the correspondence columns of the local and fascist press to propagate anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, which alleged that the Jews were using capitalism and communism to establish a world empire.³⁵⁸ Another Walthamstow West District Leader, John Joseph Aldrich, regularly made anti-Semitic pronouncements, which, on occasion, led to legal action. The 21 year old tobacco worker was bound over for twelve months at Stratford police court in May 1938 for singing the fascist marching song and shouting the slogans 'Heil Hitler' and 'Down with the Yids' with other Blackshirts in Hoe Street, Walthamstow.³⁵⁹ The following October, Aldrich was fined 40 shillings by the same court for using insulting words and behaviour when addressing an open-air B.U.F. meeting. During the course of his speech, Aldrich told his listeners that if they wanted war they should "have a smack at the Jews in this country. Fight them here and clear them out".³⁶⁰

In comparison, anti-Semitism was less pronounced in the Municipal Borough of Leyton, although a few cases of overt anti-Jewish behaviour are documented. One incident took place during the night of 18 April 1937, when six unidentified men, armed with iron bars, stones and an axe, attacked the Leytonstone and Wanstead

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 6 May 1938, p. 15, 1 July 1938, p. 11.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 16 April 1937, p. 13; B.D.B.J. C6/1/1/1. Jewish Defence Committee. London Area Council Secretary's Report. 13 February 1939.

³⁵⁸ See W.L.C.G., 14 February 1936, p. 12, 14 August 1936, p. 12; Blackshirt, 19 September 1936, p. 4.

³⁵⁹ W.L.C.G., 3 June 1939, p. 7.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 4 November 1938, p. 11; News Chronicle, 1 November 1938. Press cutting in B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/2. John Joseph Aldrich. The anti-Jewish activities of Frederick Arthur Young, another prominent Walthamstow Mosleyite, are discussed in Chapter Six.

Synagogue, situated in Drayton Road, Leytonstone. The perpetrators escaped after vandalising the windows and other parts of the property.³⁶¹ Moreover, at least one local Blackshirt was prosecuted for anti-Jewish activity. In June 1939, Elsie Sarah Constance Orrin, a 47 year old private language teacher residing at 14, Woodville Road, Leytonstone, was bound over for twelve months by Stratford Justices for shouting anti-Semitic slogans whilst selling Action in front of a Jewish grocer's shop in High Road, Leytonstone.³⁶² Prior to her arrest, Orrin had been seen on several occasions outside these premises. At the hearing she was reprimanded by the clerk of the court for publicly expressing doubts as to whether the Bench was composed of English people.³⁶³

Within the parliamentary county division of Romford, sporadic cases of anti-Jewish behaviour were also evident. Anti-Semitic attitudes emerged at a meeting of the Romford Chamber of Commerce in July 1939, which had been convened to consider the expansion of local street trading on Fridays. One member, arguing against the proposal, complained that the "foreign element" amongst the stallholders was already turning the market into a "glorified Petticoat-lane" on Wednesdays and Saturdays. He also claimed that there was a "constant war" between the market traders and local shopkeepers.³⁶⁴ Another Gentile trader informed Action that there were numerous Jewish stalls and 'non-British' shops in the area and alleged that plans to increase the size of the Friday market would "grant further facilities to Jews to undercut and drive Romford traders out of business".³⁶⁵

A month later, Frederick Hunt, a Goodmayes street trader, and his daughter, Irene Hunt, appeared at Stratford police court on summonses for assault brought by Israel Rees, a Jewish fruiterer and grocer, who occupied commercial premises at 798 and 786, Green Lane, Becontree. Rees alleged that Hunt, his daughter and a group of

³⁶¹ B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E3/245. Report. 19 April 1937. See also S.E., 15 May 1937, p. 10.

³⁶² L.E.L., 24 June 1939, p. 13.

³⁶³ Walthamstow Post, 23 June 1939. Press cutting in B.D.B.J. C6/9/3/2. Elsie S.C. Orrin.

³⁶⁴ R.R., 28 July 1939, p. 4.

³⁶⁵ Action, 19 August 1939, p. 12.

men had entered his new shop at 786, Green Lane, on the day it was being fitted out, and threw tools at him. Fearing for his safety, the shopkeeper was apparently compelled to take refuge in a nearby butcher's store. On several occasions, the complainant maintained, Hunt had remarked that the Blackshirts would drive him out of Becontree. The court was also informed that the grocer had received similar threats in anonymous postcards and telephone calls. Rees further testified that B.U.F. parades marched past his shop on Saturday nights, and, on one such evening, Irene Hunt had been in attendance. Both defendants denied the charges, claiming that Rees had not only insulted Irene Hunt but had also attempted to get street traders banned from local shop forecourts. The accused were bound over for a year and made to pay four shillings costs each.³⁶⁶

Anti-Jewish sentiment was reported to be widespread in the Dagenham area. An Essex electrician, participating in the Mass-Observation survey on anti-Semitism in early 1939, stated that half of the residents on the Becontree Estate disliked Jews and wanted to "Get rid of the B____s".³⁶⁷ During the same year, further evidence of local anti-Semitism was sent to the Board of Deputies by a manual worker employed at the Ford Motor Company in Dagenham. The informant revealed that, although the firm's factory staff was almost entirely non-Jewish, there were many "Anti-Jews" on the shop floor, whose "ignorant prejudice" served to perpetuate numerous anti-Semitic allegations, including claims that the Jews controlled economic and political affairs.³⁶⁸ Several pro-B.U.F. letters which criticised the influence of 'international finance' also appeared in the Dagenham press in the late 1930s.³⁶⁹

Elsewhere in the county, there were few documented instances of latent or open anti-Semitism. In the Harwich division, reported cases were few and far between, although one such incident occurred at Clacton in October 1932, when the local Urban

³⁶⁶ R.R., 1 September 1939, p. 4.

³⁶⁷ M-OA: DR 1153. Reply to January 1939 Directive.

³⁶⁸ B.D.B.J. C6/9/1/3. A.H. Kay, Dagenham. Letter to the Board of Deputies. 14 December 1939. Other allegations concerned the role of the Jews in both the 1914-1918 war and the present conflict. Kay stated that few of the anti-Jews at the factory were fascists.

³⁶⁹ Dagenham Post, 21 October 1938, p. 3, 28 October 1938, p. 2.

District council considered a petition from the residents of Marine Parade, which called for a ban on car parking along the sea front.³⁷⁰ During the discussion on this issue, Councillor Ball referred to “dirty Jews”, who “come down on a Sunday morning and bring a lot of rubbish on the beautiful front”.³⁷¹ Ball apologised for these remarks a few weeks later at a meeting of the Clayton Ratepayers’ Association after being criticised by a local Jewish woman in the audience.³⁷²

A similar picture emerges in the Chelmsford and Maldon constituencies, where anti-Semitic activity appeared to be limited to the occasional Blackshirt diatribe, such as the letter sent by ‘Brentwood Fascist’ to the local press in December 1934:

...the National Press is controlled, and its reports influenced, by Jewish and International finance, its power is centred in the hands of a despotic oligarchy of self-seeking financiers such as the Beaverbrooks and Elias who effusively pour forth their daily dose of nauseating dope on all problems, doctored and served up in any way that the controllers may deem fit...the Jews [are] pursuing a deliberate line of extremely violent Anti-Fascism, instigated by the inflammatory propaganda prevalent in the Jewish Press.³⁷³

In 1939, Mass-Observation’s ‘subjective’ investigation into anti-Semitism at Tilbury, an Urban District in the South Eastern parliamentary county division, came to much the same conclusion. The report noted that the number of Jews in the area were “too few to be conspicuous or invoke an anti-Jewish element”.³⁷⁴ In this regard, Tilbury was typical of the constituency as a whole. During the 1930s, there were also few reports of anti-Semitic activity taking place within Epping’s parliamentary boundaries. The general pattern in the division was epitomised by a Mass-Observation report on Waltham Abbey in 1939, which detected some latent, but no open anti-Semitism in the town, a finding the investigator put down to the “complete

³⁷⁰ C.T.E.E.G., 8 October 1932, p. 5; B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/B04/CL008. Untitled Report.

³⁷¹ Ibid..

³⁷² C.T.E.E.G., 5 November 1932, p. 5; B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/B04/CL008.

³⁷³ B.G., 8 December 1934, p. 5. See also B.W.T., 3 March 1938, p. 6, 10 March 1938, p. 6.

³⁷⁴ M-OA: FR A12. Mass Observation: Anti-Semitism Survey, December 1938. Part V Subjective Reports (February/March 1939), p. 55.

absence” of Jews in the locality.³⁷⁵ On occasion though, anti-Jewish behaviour became more strident. In April 1939, Blackshirts disrupted a public meeting at the Gresham Hall, Chingford, which had been convened to arrange local support for Jewish refugees from Europe.³⁷⁶

Although latent and open anti-Semitism appeared to be more extensive in Essex than in either Norfolk or Suffolk during the 1930s, the county also experienced considerably fewer anti-Jewish incidents than the East End of London over the same period. For the most part too, the intensity of anti-Semitic feeling in Essex did not rival the hostility frequently encountered in various Gentile localities in east London. Consequently, the B.U.F.’s successful use of anti-Semitic propaganda to help create and sustain large dynamic formations in Bethnal Green, Hackney, Shoreditch, and Stepney was not to be repeated in Essex. A range of constraints ensured that the county offered little scope for recruitment campaigns built wholly or partly on political anti-Semitism.

The extent and distribution of Jewish settlement in Essex during the 1930s provide key explanations as to why the overwhelming majority of Gentiles in the county remained immune to the B.U.F.’s anti-Semitic appeals. By this stage, the number of Jews living in Essex far exceeded the corresponding totals for both Norfolk and Suffolk, but, even here, the settlements remained small and scattered. Some idea of the numbers involved can be derived from synagogue records, providing it is remembered that synagogue membership never encompasses the whole Jewish population in any given area, is never entirely based on the specific locality, and does not keep pace with residential movement.

Established in 1936, the Ilford United Synagogue had just 192 male members by 1940, which indicates that Jews formed only a tiny fraction of the Borough’s population of approximately 167,000 during this period.³⁷⁷ Five years later after its

³⁷⁵ Ibid..

³⁷⁶ *W.L.C.G.*, 25 June 1937, p. 13.

³⁷⁷ B.A. Kosmin, C. Levy and P. Wigodsky, *The Social Demography of Redbridge Jewry* (London: Research Unit, Board of Deputies, 1979), p. 7.

foundation in 1932, the Highams Park and Chingford Affiliated Synagogue possessed a modest congregation of about 120 families.³⁷⁸ At West Ham, the District Synagogue's combined male and female membership was put at 594 in June 1935.³⁷⁹ Only ten families belonged to the Leytonstone and Wanstead Synagogue in 1934, a total which highlights the minimal Jewish presence in the Municipal Borough of Leyton at this time.³⁸⁰

These small congregations were placed in a wider comparative context by a contemporary survey, which estimated the distribution of Jewish settlements within Greater London in 1930, based on synagogue membership in the area.³⁸¹ This revealed that the Essex Boroughs of outer east London accounted for only three per cent of Metropolitan synagogue members, whereas the corresponding figures for east London, west London, and north and north-west London were 58.1 per cent, 22.5 per cent, and 11.8 per cent respectively.³⁸² In provincial Essex, the largest Jewish community was located at Southend. However, the 600-1500 Jews who resided at the coastal resort throughout the 1930s constituted barely one per cent of the local population.³⁸³

Since Jewish settlements in Essex were small and dispersed, their value to the B.U.F. as a propaganda weapon was severely restricted. Unlike east London, the Jewish presence in most areas of the county was barely visible and therefore could not be credibly portrayed by the fascists as a threat to Gentile interests. Essex remained unaffected by the type of demographic pressure which had accompanied the larger Jewish influxes into Hackney and Stoke Newington.³⁸⁴ As a result, the spectre of

³⁷⁸ *W.L.C.G.*, 25 June 1937, p. 13.

³⁷⁹ West Ham District Synagogue Order of Service at the Reconsecration, 16 June 1935. Quoted in H. Pollins, *Economic History of the Jews in England* (London: Associated University Presses, 1982), p. 284.

³⁸⁰ H.E.P. Grieve, 'Leyton' in *The Victoria History of the County of Essex*, Vol. VI, p. 233.

³⁸¹ Sir H.L. Smith (ed.), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour 1931-1935* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1934), Vol. VI, Table VI, p. 296.

³⁸² *Ibid.*. Outer east London comprised East Ham, West Ham, Leyton, Walthamstow, Barking, Becontree and Ilford.

³⁸³ *Jewish Year Book 1935* (London: Jewish Chronicle, 1935), p. 347.

³⁸⁴ On Hackney and Stoke Newington see Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapter Two.

unwelcome Jewish 'encroachment' in residential areas could make little headway in the county.

Blackshirt claims of Jewish domination and sharp practice in certain trades also had little resonance in the county. In north-east Bethnal Green, for example, intense Gentile-Jewish economic rivalry amongst independent retailers fuelled such propaganda and mobilised significant support for the local B.U.F..³⁸⁵ The Jews in Essex though were not concentrated in specific occupations in large enough numbers to be perceived as a serious economic threat by members of the host community who were engaged in the same types of employment. The more muted response to the B.U.F.'s anti-Semitic campaign aimed at Gentile shopkeepers in Ilford and Walthamstow during the later 1930s illustrates this point. It should also be noted that, in contrast to the East End, Essex as a whole experienced relatively low levels of socio-economic tension, possessed limited industrial development, and exhibited strong rural-suburban characteristics. In such an environment negative stereotypical images of the 'scheming' and 'exploitative' Jewish manufacturer could not take root.³⁸⁶

Fascist growth in parts of east London, including Shoreditch, was assisted by the transmission of generational hostility towards the Jews. However, the absence of a similar ethnocentric cultural tradition in Essex acted as another crucial retarding factor by drastically limiting the appeal of nativist politics. Specific issues which inflamed Gentile-Jew relations in the East End, such as Sunday trading and alleged council discrimination in favour of minority interests, also had far less pertinence in the county.³⁸⁷

Serious internal weaknesses also ensured that the Essex B.U.F. Districts lacked the "organisational legitimacy" to pose as a credible political alternative.³⁸⁸ Since the

³⁸⁵ Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapter Three.

³⁸⁶ The Board of Deputies collected information on two separate industrial disputes in the furniture trade, both involving Jewish employers, which took place in Essex during the later 1930s. The two businesses concerned were a Stratford cabinet-making firm (1937) and a Walthamstow furniture manufacturing company (1938). Neither dispute led to a reported rise in anti-Semitic agitation in the region. B.D.B.J. ACC 3121/E03/243. File 1.

³⁸⁷ On these comparative points see Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Chapters Two and Three.

³⁸⁸ N. Copsey, 'A Comparison between the Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain',



B.U.F.'s regional development depended heavily on the quality and durability of the senior Branch personnel, the inability of many local formations to acquire and retain high-calibre District Leaders acted as another impediment to fascist growth in Essex. For example, between 1935 and 1940, no fewer than eight District Leaders took charge of the Walthamstow West B.U.F., and, over the same period, at least five Blackshirts held the executive post at West Leyton. Moreover, from its foundation in 1934, the Ilford Branch also experienced a high turnover of senior officials, with six Mosleyites assuming control at various times prior to 1940. Lacking stable and sustained dynamic leadership, many Essex Branches struggled to maintain political and organisational momentum during the 1930s.

Even when a Branch was led by an energetic fascist loyalist for a prolonged period, a sense of collective purpose and commitment could still prove elusive. Arthur Beavan's unbridled zeal for the Blackshirt cause during his five year stewardship of the West Ham District B.U.F., alarmed and unnerved some local activists, who regarded him as a "fanatic" and a "really nasty type of person".³⁸⁹ Furthermore, as a former associate subsequently recounted, Beavan's uncompromising approach to political work on behalf of the movement did little to endear him to those within the formation who did not meet his exacting standards:

He was very unpopular with his members, but the fact is he ran one of the most active Branches...Having been in the C.P. [Communist Party], he was one of those who thought you devoted 100 per cent of your time to it. I mean there were plenty of people like that in the Communist Party. It was the beginning and end of life, and I suppose with that background he retained that attitude...If you didn't do that you weren't doing your duty. That didn't make him popular.³⁹⁰

Further problems stemmed from the nature of the local fascist membership which, at all levels, appeared to be composed mainly of dissident Tories. As with the

Contemporary European History, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1997), p. 103.

³⁸⁹ F.T.. Taped interview.

³⁹⁰ E.G.. Taped interview.

Blackshirt movement in Norfolk and Suffolk, many of the leading positions within the Essex B.U.F. were occupied by former Conservatives. Frederic Ball, who served as Epping District Leader, County Transport Organiser and County Propaganda Officer in the later 1930s, came from a staunch Tory family. Prior to joining the B.U.F. in 1933, he had undertaken political work for the Conservative Party in Epping and London.³⁹¹ Other ex-Tory propagandists who became active Mosleyites included W.W.E. Pooley, the first B.U.F. Branch Organiser at Southend, and J. Keeley, District Organiser at Leytonstone in 1936.³⁹² F.R. East, a founder member of the Witham B.U.F. in 1934 and later a County Propaganda Organiser for Essex, also abandoned his Conservative affiliations to take up the Blackshirt banner.³⁹³

Numerous other local Blackshirt officials had personal or family connections with the Conservative Party. William E. Fitt, an insurance company clerk, who, by early 1939, had become Assistant District Leader at Epping, was the son of Councillor W.B. Fitt, then leader of the official Conservative and Anti-Socialist opposition on Walthamstow Borough council.³⁹⁴ The one-time District Leader of the Leytonstone and Walthamstow West formations, Harold Scott-Turner, was another prominent Essex Mosleyite with Tory credentials. Before enrolling in the B.U.F. in 1934, Scott-Turner had belonged to the West Leyton Conservative Party and Junior Imperial League.³⁹⁵ Millicent and Richard Bullivant, respectively Women's District Leader (1934-1940) and temporary District Organiser at West Ham (1935) were raised in a Tory household. Prior to becoming a Blackshirt, Richard Bullivant, like Scott-Turner, had belonged to both the Conservative Party and the Junior Imperial League.³⁹⁶ Derrick Millington, District Organiser for the Walthamstow East B.U.F. in the mid-1930s, and R.W., Propaganda Officer for the Walthamstow West District in

³⁹¹ Ball. Interview.

³⁹² LP/FAS/34/109; E.G.. Taped interview.

³⁹³ B.W.T., 8 March 1934, p. 10, 18 August 1938, p. 5; M.E., 14 April 1934, p. 3.

³⁹⁴ L.B.. Taped interview; E.G.. Taped interview; W.L.C.G., 3 March 1939, p. 9, 5 May 1939, p. 12.

³⁹⁵ W.L.C.G., 28 October 1939, p. 3.

³⁹⁶ Information provided by F.O.M..

1937-38, were two more dissident Tories with right-wing family backgrounds.³⁹⁷

Moreover, the East Ham District Leader between 1938 and 1940, Hugh J. Howard, and his Ilford counterpart during 1936, Aubrey H.J. Hunt, also had pre-B.U.F. links with Conservatism.³⁹⁸

Impressionistic evidence suggests that, from the outset, ex-Tories also provided the Essex B.U.F. with a significant proportion of its recruits and supporters. The Essex Chronicle, reporting in April 1934 on the annual meeting of the Maldon Division Central Conservative and Unionist Association, noted the B.U.F.'s ability to attract younger Tories in the area:

It was made clear that some difficulty is being found in keeping the Junior Conservative Associations alive in different parts of the Division and a spokesman for Kelvedon stated that "politics are dull to the younger folk". It might have been added that the introduction of Fascism had had some effect, for the 'young bloods' of some well-known Maldon Conservative families are often to be observed on parade with the 'blackshirts'.³⁹⁹

The Colchester B.U.F. also appealed to wavering right-wingers. Following Mosley's address in the town at the end of September 1933, one Conservative councillor informed the local press that he was now almost a Blackshirt.⁴⁰⁰ In January 1935, it was claimed that Colchester Mosleyites were targeting members of the local Junior Imperial League through a letter-writing campaign. Although the B.U.F. denied that such activity had been officially sanctioned, the local Branch did not rule out the possibility that this attempt to convert young Conservatives may have been the work of "irresponsible sympathisers".⁴⁰¹ Furthermore, during the 1935 General Election campaign, the Colchester Gazette maintained that at least one prominent Blackshirt in the town was serving as a committee room worker to secure the re-election of Oswald

³⁹⁷ Millington. Completed questionnaire; R.W.. F.O.M. taped interview.

³⁹⁸ T.M.. Taped interview; I.R., 28 October 1937, p. 9.

³⁹⁹ E.C., 27 April 1934, p. 7.

⁴⁰⁰ C.G., 4 October 1933, p. 6.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 23 January 1935, p. 1.

Lewis, the sitting National Conservative M.P. for the division.⁴⁰² The local press also considered that the selection of Major Malcolm Sandeman as the B.U.F.'s prospective parliamentary candidate for the Colchester constituency in 1937 "may clip a certain number of votes off Mr. Lewis's poll".⁴⁰³

According to E.G., a former Leytonstone Blackshirt, most of those in the Leyton Conservative youth wing defected to the local B.U.F. formation during the autumn of 1934, and, from then on, ex-Tories constituted the mainstay of the Leytonstone Branch's membership.⁴⁰⁴ Certainly, in October 1934, H. Mole, formerly the Honorary Divisional Secretary of the West Leyton Junior Imperial League, left the Conservative Party to join the B.U.F..⁴⁰⁵ Mole's letter of resignation not only argued that the Tory national leadership lacked policies and political enthusiasm but also claimed that the local party had proved to be an ineffective propaganda machine. In contrast, he maintained that the B.U.F. offered a patriotic activist approach allied to a national programme, which would win over disillusioned Conservatives: "...I feel sure that a study of B.U.F. policy will lead many of my former colleagues to follow in the ranks of so many erstwhile Tories".⁴⁰⁶

The Epping District B.U.F. provided another political sanctuary for patriotic right-wing elements alienated by the National Government. As the last Epping District Leader later recalled, the majority of local members were disaffected ex-Tory nationalists:

I think most of the people who were in the Epping Branch joined out of sheer patriotism really...The Baldwin government was a bit of a wet lot and nothing ever seemed to be getting done. They had a bloody big majority and they didn't want to govern the country. They just wanted to sit back and let the country run itself. I think most of them joined [the Epping

⁴⁰² Ibid., 13 November 1935, p. 8.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 5 May 1937, p. 8.

⁴⁰⁴ E.G.. Taped interview. E.G. stated that about twelve members of the local Junior Imperial League became Blackshirts at this time.

⁴⁰⁵ S.E., 27 October 1934, p. 4; W.L.C.G., 26 October 1934, p. 12.

⁴⁰⁶ W.L.C.G., 26 October 1934, p. 12.

District B.U.F.] for patriotic reasons and a feeling of frustration.⁴⁰⁷

Similar patterns of recruitment and support were discernible elsewhere in Essex. At Southend, the District Treasurer revealed in April 1937 that the local Blackshirt membership was drawn predominantly from traditionally pro-Conservative social groups. Most B.U.F. adherents at the coastal resort were stated to be either “office workers” or representatives of the “‘capitalist’ class”.⁴⁰⁸ Rebuffed by Labour’s working class strongholds in Plaistow and Silvertown, the West Ham B.U.F. was compelled to rely heavily on the support of a small number of local Conservatives, who were attracted by the movement’s strident anti-left-wing propaganda. The majority of these Mosleyites resided in lower middle and middle class locations in the Upton and Stratford divisions.⁴⁰⁹ Dissident Tories also figured prominently in the Ilford B.U.F. during the 1930s. A former Branch member recalled that the middle class tone of the local formation owed much to the affiliation of “Ilford Conservatives disgusted with the government’s general lack of direction”.⁴¹⁰

This influx of discontented Tories into the Essex B.U.F. proved to be more of a liability than a benefit to the movement. Few of these converts developed a sustained ideological commitment to the B.U.F., and only a tiny fraction became active fascist propagandists. Social and occupational considerations, in particular, prevented most ex-Conservative Mosleyites in Essex from becoming publicly identified with Blackshirt politics. A former Organiser for the B.U.F.’s Youth Movement, who regularly visited many of the county’s formations during the mid-1930s, was later scathing about the quality of most of those disillusioned Tories who joined the Essex B.U.F. because of Lord Rothermere’s pro-Blackshirt press campaign in 1934: “I think a lot of them fell out pretty rapidly - the Daily Mail types. You can’t really count the ‘Rothermere

407 L.B.. Taped interview.

408 S.T., 7 April 1937, p. 8.

409 Linehan, East London for Mosley, p. 131.

410 V.N.. Telephone interview.

recruits'...they didn't mean a thing. They signed up and you didn't see them again very often or they paid two or three subscriptions and then vanished".⁴¹¹

Even those former Conservatives who developed a lasting attachment to the B.U.F. programme and assumed positions of responsibility within the local movement sometimes fell far short of the fascist ideal of dynamic leadership. In 1938, growing disquiet within the Blackshirt ranks at Epping concerning Frederic Ball's stewardship led to his removal as District Leader. A former Epping member recalled:

...when 'Eric' Ball was District Leader...the feeling was that he wasn't making a very good job of the District Leader. They had a meeting and voted him out and voted in L.B....I don't think there was anything personal in it. I just think they thought Eric Ball wasn't doing very much. We got our knuckles rapped for that because it should have been done through [National] Headquarters.⁴¹²

The 1935 reorganisation of the B.U.F. into Districts which corresponded to parliamentary constituencies served to highlight the Essex movement's general lack of personnel and resources. The difficulties experienced by the Blackshirt formation in the Epping parliamentary county division, which comprised the Urban Districts of Buckhurst Hill, Chingford, Epping, Loughton, Waltham Holy Cross, Wanstead, and Woodford, and the Rural District of Epping, illustrated many of the problems facing provincial fascism. It proved well beyond the Epping District B.U.F.'s limited means to engage in political activity across a constituency which, in 1931, occupied almost 63,000 acres and contained over 72,000 electors.⁴¹³ Lacking transportation and heavily reliant on a small number of committed Mosleyites working in a voluntary capacity, the former District Leader (1938-1940) later conceded that the Epping B.U.F. faced a constant uphill struggle: "We didn't have sufficient manpower in the area. We couldn't cover it. Our membership was too small...to progress with any speed anyway. We were like a rural constituency really".⁴¹⁴

⁴¹¹ E.G.. Taped interview.

⁴¹² D.T.. Taped interview.

⁴¹³ Census 1931: County of Essex Part I, Table 7, p. 15.

⁴¹⁴ L.B.. Telephone interview.

Blackshirt organisation and propaganda activity in the division centred on Chingford and Woodford, the two Urban Districts which provided the Epping B.U.F. with the bulk of its support. Units were also created at Buckhurst Hill, Loughton and Wanstead, but, due to poor recruitment and inadequate resources, this 'sub-Branch' system failed to provide an effective means of organisational coordination or political penetration within the division. For example, the Loughton Unit in the late 1930s contained just six inactive local adherents who were reluctant to engage in any form of open political activity.⁴¹⁵ According to one of the B.U.F.'s officials at Epping, these deficiencies meant that the Blackshirt Divisional structure in the constituency "existed in theory but not in practice".⁴¹⁶ The B.U.F. never managed to establish even the semblance of a permanent fascist presence in Waltham Holy Cross or Epping during this period. At Waltham Abbey, B.U.F. meetings failed to produce an activist core of dedicated Mosleyites.⁴¹⁷ Epping was rarely visited by the District B.U.F. because the distance involved "put it out of reach".⁴¹⁸ Indeed, the movement's lack of success at Epping was underlined by the fact that in the later 1930s no members or sympathisers were known to exist in that part of the division.⁴¹⁹

These various internal weaknesses and deficiencies also ensured that the Essex B.U.F. suffered from a shortage of registered speakers, which seriously hampered the dissemination of fascist propaganda in the area. Furthermore, the financial cut-backs of the later 1930s dismantled the supervisory network of paid Blackshirt officials, leaving a skeleton county staff of voluntary workers to arrange political activities and oversee the local Districts.⁴²⁰

Forced to operate under these severe external and internal constraints, the B.U.F. was able to achieve only limited political penetration in the county. This was amply illustrated by the Blackshirts' dismal electoral record. Only four Essex

⁴¹⁵ E.G.. Taped interview.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid..

⁴¹⁷ L.B.. Telephone interview.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid..

⁴¹⁹ Ibid..

⁴²⁰ E.C., 3 June 1938, p. 9.

formations, namely those at Ilford, Epping, West Ham and East Ham, contested local elections during the 1930s, and the results constituted a decisive rebuff for the movement. Deficiencies in fascist electoral machinery, lack of resources and the difficulty of finding Mosleyites willing to stand as candidates probably explain why District organisations elsewhere in the county did not participate in council elections.⁴²¹

In November 1937, the Ilford B.U.F. entered the Municipal Borough council elections by putting up Aubrey H.J. Hunt, an ex-Blackshirt District Officer at Ilford, in the Conservative-held Park ward.⁴²² Hunt's reference to P. Vigon, the Labour candidate in the ward, as "a Jew" shortly before polling day fuelled speculation that the fascists had only entered the contest to pursue an anti-Semitic agenda.⁴²³ In their defence, the Blackshirts argued that their own candidate had been selected before the Labour Party's nomination had become public knowledge.⁴²⁴

The local District Leader, H.J.B. Gudgeon, offered several other reasons for the B.U.F.'s involvement. He explained that a Blackshirt candidate was running because "A lot goes on that we never hear about and we want the Ilford electors to send our representative to the Council Chamber as a watch-dog".⁴²⁵ In addition, Gudgeon maintained that Park ward had been chosen since the District Headquarters were situated there, and the Blackshirts had been able to cultivate a large fascist membership in that part of the Borough.⁴²⁶ Fascist intervention was also probably motivated by the conviction that in the past the council had discriminated against the B.U.F. on political grounds, and so the only effective remedy was to secure the election of Mosleyite representatives.

⁴²¹ The West Leyton B.U.F. apparently considered contesting local elections, but no fascist candidate was put forward. See *W.L.C.G.*, 16 September 1938, p. 4.

⁴²² *LR.*, 21 October 1937, p. 9.

⁴²³ *LG.*, 29 October 1937, p. 1.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*.

⁴²⁵ *LR.*, 21 October 1937, p. 9.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*.

Hunt's campaign literature endorsed the B.U.F.'s manifesto, which pledged to remove jobbery and nepotism from local government, put the interests of Britons first, abandon the allegedly inefficient council 'committee system', and harmonise the functions of national and local government.⁴²⁷ His election address argued that not only were the rates too high for the level of welfare provision received in the Borough but also that social services could be improved by more efficient administration rather than through more money from the ratepayers. Hunt further claimed that the low turn-out at recent municipal elections in Ilford demonstrated widespread disillusionment with the 'old gang' political parties and he called upon the disaffected to support the B.U.F., which "enters the political arena not to participate in the party game, but to work, to watch and to guard".⁴²⁸

Raven Thomson, the B.U.F.'s Director of Policy, presided at an election meeting for Hunt at the Christchurch School, Christchurch Road, Ilford on 28 October 1937.⁴²⁹ As the only public event arranged to promote the Blackshirt candidate, this proved to be a lacklustre affair and excited little interest in the ward. A 'Christian Anti-Fascist' present reported that only a dozen residents attended, the audience being swollen by local Blackshirts and about 50 'imported' Mosleyites. Hunt addressed the meeting in a rather vague manner for under half an hour and then answered questions from the floor for just five minutes because, as he explained, he was due at work shortly.⁴³⁰

Although under 35 per cent of electors actually voted and the local franchise excluded the more youthful adherents of the B.U.F., the election result demonstrated that fascism had no solid foundation in Park ward. Councillor Wetton retained the seat for the Conservatives with 1,802 votes (58.4 per cent), Vigon, the Labour candidate received 1,185 (38.4 per cent), and Hunt mustered only 97 (3.1 per cent).⁴³¹ Hunt

⁴²⁷ B.U.F. election leaflet. Copy held at Redbridge Central Library.

⁴²⁸ Ibid..

⁴²⁹ *Action*, 30 October 1937, p. 7.

⁴³⁰ *LR.*, 4 November 1937, p. 4.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 4 November 1937, p. 9; *LG.*, 5 November 1937, p. 1

attempted to put a brave face on this electoral drubbing by claiming that the Blackshirts had made “a good start” and would contest future elections at Ilford.⁴³² A more dispassionate assessment was provided by the Ilford Recorder, which commented:

The first Fascist ever to stand in a municipal election in Ilford shared the fate of the Fascist candidates everywhere. The most significant thing about this result is not that he was defeated but that his defeat was so crushing...Park Ward rejected Fascism decisively and completely. There is nothing about Park Ward to suggest it is more anti-Fascist than other parts of the borough. It was a fair field for such a test, and the champion of Continental “ideology” ...could not have been expected to do better anywhere else.⁴³³

The Epping District B.U.F. mounted a more ambitious electoral challenge the following year. In April 1938, two senior local Mosleyites contested the Chingford Urban District council election as candidates in the Endlebury and Forest wards.⁴³⁴ A former leading B.U.F. official at Epping recalled: “The idea was to get electoral experience. It was purely an exercise in electoral experience, and a very valuable one too because we had complete copies of the registers, and we started tackling the very important area of door-to-door canvassing, which we hadn’t done until then”.⁴³⁵

However, although Chingford provided the Epping formation with most of its adherents, the results highlighted the B.U.F.’s slender support in the area. District Leader, Frederic A. Ball, was trounced in a four-cornered fight for the Endlebury seat, which was comfortably secured by the Rate Association’s nominee, who received 892 votes. Ball’s meagre tally of 27 was almost 200 votes behind that of the third-placed Labour representative.⁴³⁶ N.B., the Epping Women’s District Leader, also came bottom of the poll in the Forest ward, recording only 23 votes against 957 for the victorious Rate Association candidate.⁴³⁷ The two Epping Blackshirts attracted the

⁴³² L.G., 5 November 1937, p. 1.

⁴³³ L.R., 4 November 1937, p. 4. The Ilford B.U.F. decided to contest Park ward again in 1938 but withdrew shortly before polling day. See *ibid.*, 13 October 1938, p. 9.

⁴³⁴ Ball. Interview; W.L.C.G., 8 April 1938, p. 11.

⁴³⁵ L.B.. Taped interview.

⁴³⁶ Ball. Interview; W.L.C.G., 8 April 1938, p. 11.

⁴³⁷ W.L.C.G., 8 April 1938, p. 11; N.B.. Taped interview with Andrew Mitchell, 1991. When

lowest number of votes in the election, prompting the local press to observe that “the Fascists are given cause furiously to think”.⁴³⁸

In an attempt to retrieve some vestige of electoral credibility, the Epping B.U.F. put forward six candidates to contest seats in the Endlebury, Forest and Chingford Hall wards during the Chingford Municipal Borough council election of November 1938.⁴³⁹ The B.U.F. improved slightly on its April performance, with individual totals ranging from 153 to 36 votes, but the Blackshirt candidates remained firmly anchored at the bottom of the poll in each of the three wards.⁴⁴⁰

F.A.J. Osborn, the East Ham District Leader, twice submitted himself to the verdict of the electorate. In November 1937, he entered the East Ham Borough council elections, standing for the B.U.F. in the Wall End ward.⁴⁴¹ The 37 year old fascist nominee informed the East Ham Echo that the electors had to be told “exactly what happens in local government affairs” to enable them to “judge for themselves whether the present system is the best or not”.⁴⁴² Labour retained the seat with 1,884 votes, 637 ahead of the Independent Conservative representative. Osborn, the only other Wall End candidate, attracted just 105 votes.⁴⁴³ Twelve months later, Osborn contested the same ward on a platform which criticised the record of ‘democratic’ local government in East Ham.⁴⁴⁴ On this occasion, the B.U.F. was able to secure 215 votes, more than double its 1937 Wall End total.⁴⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Osborn still came last in a five-way contest won by Labour and recorded the lowest poll of any candidate in the November 1938 East Ham Borough council elections.⁴⁴⁶

interviewed, N.B. recounted that, prior to the poll, she had received only six pledges of support.

⁴³⁸ W.L.C.G., 8 April 1938, p. 10.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 28 October 1938, p. 3 and p. 4. Three Blackshirt candidates stood in the Endlebury ward, two in the Forest ward and one in the Chingford Hall ward.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 4 November 1938, p. 9.

⁴⁴¹ E.H.E., 22 October 1937, p. 1; P.R.O. HO 144/21064/53-60. Special Branch Report on the B.U.F.. 3 November 1937.

⁴⁴² E.H.E., 22 October 1937, p. 1.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 5 November 1937, p. 7; S.E., 6 November 1937, p. 4.

⁴⁴⁴ East London Blackshirt, October 1938, pp. 1-2. Osborn’s platform opposed the council’s denial of public halls in East Ham to the B.U.F., attacked the perceived shortcomings of running local government by the ‘committee system’, and criticised the present level of rents and rates.

⁴⁴⁵ E.H.E., 4 November 1938, p. 1; S.E., 4 November 1938, p. 4.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid..

The B.U.F.'s electoral intervention at West Ham was equally unimpressive. Francis Johnston, a 30 year old Ulster Protestant, who spoke locally on behalf of the Blackshirt movement, entered the West Ham Borough council elections in November 1937 as the B.U.F.'s nominee for the Labour-held West Ham ward.⁴⁴⁷ The fascist press of the later 1930s described Johnston as "a recent convert to British Union and a keen Trade Unionist".⁴⁴⁸ Councillor McGregor, the retiring socialist member, received 1,640 votes, outstripping Johnston's 139 votes by approximately eleven to one.⁴⁴⁹ The following November, in a four cornered contest also won by Labour, the electors of the West Ham ward delivered an even greater snub to the B.U.F. by casting only 54 votes for Johnston, who once again finished bottom of the poll.⁴⁵⁰

Arthur Beavan, District Leader at West Ham, attempted to bolster the Blackshirt vote in November 1938 by contesting the Forest Gate ward, which was located in that part of the Borough considered to be most responsive to Mosleyite propaganda. However, the hoped-for electoral breakthrough never materialised, primarily because of the B.U.F.'s inability to erode local Tory support for the incumbent Rate Association, which overcame a Labour challenge to retain the seat with 1,332 votes. Beavan, on 158, trailed well behind his two opponents.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁷ *S.E.*, 30 October 1937, p. 10; D.T.. Taped interview.

⁴⁴⁸ *Southern Blackshirt*, October 1938, p. 1.

⁴⁴⁹ *S.E.*, 6 November 1937, p. 4.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 November 1938, p. 4.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*; F.T.. Taped interview.