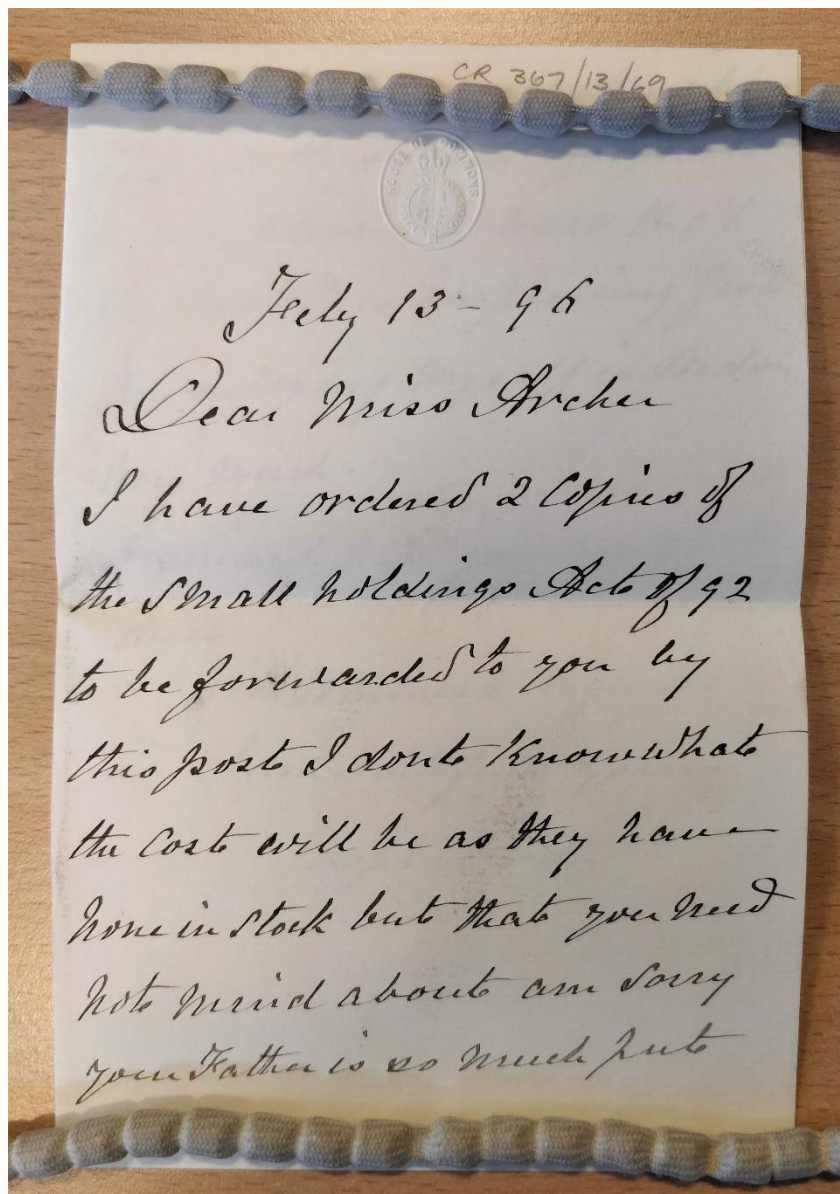


Letter from Joseph Arch to Miss Eleanor Archer

CR367/13/68-69

The Document of the Month for March is a letter from Joseph Arch, an MP and campaigner for agricultural labourers, to Miss Eleanor Archer, dated 13th July 1896. The letter and its envelope both bear the stamp of the House of Commons, where Arch was serving as the member for North West Norfolk.



Warwickshire County Record Office, CR367/13/69

In his brief message, Joseph Arch writes that he has ordered '2 copies of the Small holdings Act of 92' for Miss Archer, a law passed to help agricultural workers to purchase their own land, but which Arch remarked elsewhere was not 'of much, if any, good to the labourers'.ⁱ He also mentions the ill-health of Miss Archer's father, who worked as bailiff or farm manager on farms around Leamington Spa.ⁱⁱ

Despite his political ties to the south east, Joseph Arch retained his connections to his native Warwickshire, particularly Barford, the village of his birth. A previous letter in the same collection (CR367/13/66-67) indicates that Miss Archer had been staying in Arch's cottage in Barford in 1895, the home he was born and eventually died in.ⁱⁱⁱ



Warwickshire County Record Office, CR367/13/68

Joseph Arch: from agricultural labourer to Member of Parliament

Joseph Arch was raised in Barford, Warwickshire, his family having lived there for generations. Born in 1826, Arch lived during a time of struggle for agricultural workers, with poor wages and difficult working conditions meaning many struggled to get by. Arch's father was himself a farm labourer, and Joseph entered the trade as a crow-scarer at the age of 9, receiving only fourpence for a twelve-hour working day.^{iv}

As Arch developed his experience, his wages offered more security, but he recognised the poverty of many other labourers, who, he said, were forced to choose between starvation and the workhouse.^v In 1872, Joseph Arch became a leader for these downtrodden workers upon the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. The seeds were sown at a meeting held in Wellesbourne beneath a tree in the centre of the village, an occasion which is said to have gathered as

many as two thousand people, to whom Arch orated.^{vi} A committee for the Union was soon elected, and the organisation recruited rapidly, peaking at around 86,000 members in 1874.^{vii}

Alongside better pay and working conditions, Joseph Arch also advocated for the extension of the vote to the agricultural labourers, which was achieved in the Third Reform Act 1884. In her preface to his autobiography, the Countess of Warwick labelled the enfranchisement 'The supreme achievement of the Union, its culminating point'.^{viii} Arch went on to pursue politics, serving as a Liberal Party MP for North West Norfolk (1885-1886, 1892-1900) and also as a councillor for Warwickshire from 1889 to 1892.^{ix} The 1885 General Election was the first in which agricultural labourers were permitted to vote, and Arch became one of the first MPs of a working-class background.

Arguably, Joseph Arch's success as a union leader and politician is in part owed to his experience as a Primitive Methodist preacher, which allowed him to develop his skills of oratory.^x

Joseph Arch's legacy

Arch may not be as well-known as some of the political figures of his day, but he is still remembered locally. In Barford itself, his cottage still stands and is marked with a plaque bearing his name, and The Joseph Arch pub also commemorates him.^{xi} The tree under which the famous Wellesbourne meeting was held has been gone for decades, but a replacement tree and accompanying sign now memorialise the event.^{xii}

To mark the centenary of Arch's death in 2019, a group of local people walked from Arch's home in Barford to Wellesbourne, stopping to lay a wreath at his grave.^{xiii}

ⁱ *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life* (1898), by Joseph Arch and edited by the Countess of Warwick (London: Hutchinson & Co), p. 390.

ⁱⁱ Warwickshire County Record Office, CR367/10-12, 'Papers of Joseph Archer'.

ⁱⁱⁱ "'Arch's Cottage' / 29 Church Street', *Historic England*. Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/IOE01/01115/17>

^{iv} Information gathered from: *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life*.

^v *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life*, p. 67.

^{vi} 'Joseph Arch', *Southam Heritage Collection*. Available at:

<https://www.southamheritage.org/2019/02/23/joseph-arch/>

^{vii} 'Joseph Arch', *Spartacus Educational*. Available at: <https://spartacus-educational.com/TUarch.htm>

^{viii} *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life*, p. xiv.

^{ix} 'Joseph Arch', *Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Arch>

^x 'Joseph Arch and the revolt of the fields', *Socialist Worker*. Available at:

<https://socialistworker.co.uk/socialist-review-archival/joseph-arch-and-revolt-fields/>

^{xi} "Arch's Cottage" / 29 Church Street', *Historic England*. Available at:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/IOE01/01115/17>

^{xii} 'Commemorating Joseph Arch', *Our Warwickshire*. Available at:

<https://www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk/content/article/commemorating-a-warwickshire-hero>

^{xiii} 'Walk held to celebrate farm workers champion Joseph Arch', *BBC News*. Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-47190992>