

AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

Researched by: Chris Champion
Last Update: 4 February 2004

For most farm worker households in England it was necessary for the whole family to work to provide an adequate subsistence to live on, rather than simply rely on the efforts of a single breadwinner. The labourer's wife was usually a working woman and children also were put to work at an early age.

Wives would help on the farm, often up a couple of hours before their husbands, milking cows and then coming home to prepare breakfast. They would also leave work a couple hours before their husbands came home, to prepare the evening meal. Children would start working about 7:00am plaiting straw for several hours in the early morning, scaring crows, or weeding and picking stones from the fields. The girls were expected to work alongside their mother in a variety of handicrafts and household chores, including lacemaking, sewing, weaving and feeding hens. The boys, from about the age of seven, as they became stronger, would be working beside their father 10 or 12 hours a day, doing a full day's hard work contributing to the family budget.

Throughout the 18th Century, through to the mid 19th Century, Agricultural Labourers would be seen wearing smocks, which had elaborate embroidered patterns to denote locally their occupation, and quite often they wore hats which had an emblem (e.g. a simple feather), which also helped to identify their occupation. It was also quite common to see Ag. Labs wearing Top Hats ('Billy Cocks'), which were extended in height the longer they were in service.

However by the 1860s, smocks became impractical for identification of an individuals skills. Dress code changed, waistcoats, shirts and trousers replaced smocks, although hats still formed part of their dress code to identify individuals skills.

There were three types of employment; Ag Labs employed on an annual basis because they often moved around; General Labourers who were married and either lived in tied cottages on the farm because they were born or brought up on the farm and continued living there, or lodgings in a nearby village; and Farm Servants usually unmarried and under the age of 25, who worked on the farm and often employed for a year at a Mop Fair or hiring fair.

Labourers were either employed on a regular basis for a weekly wage or hired on a day to day basis as 'casual wage labourers'. The average weekly wage in the 1860s was 8s 6d, if they did not work then they did not get paid. Servants were hired by the year for board, lodging and wages that were given to them at the end of the year.

Most Ag Labs couldn't afford boots (avg weight 7lb), or couldn't afford to pay a shoe repairer to repair them, so they saved old pieces of leather to carry out their own repairs on their shoes. Foot odour was a problem then and to combat this at the end of a long working day they would use dry grass to absorb the odour.

At harvest time work was plentiful, but their working days were long, between 12 to 15 hours of hard physical work. A farm worker had, for the most part, to rely on the strength of his body and perhaps a horse if he was fortunate enough to have access to one. Ploughing, sowing, weeding or harvesting, or tending to sheep, cattle or other livestock were all labour intensive.

Most families lived in small villages or hamlets, and they depended on the land to support them. Their dependence was mainly due to their rights of access to common land where they could raise a cow or two, or some pigs or sheep at no cost at all. They also enjoyed the privilege of gathering fuel, by cutting bracken, turf, peat or brushwood. The hedgerows provided berries that could be eaten or turned into wine or pies, and nuts that could be gathered and stored. Rabbits, fish and birds could be taken, sometimes by poaching, all of which added to the limited resources of the agricultural labourer. Even where common land rights did not exist, most people had a small garden where they could grow potatoes, beans and cabbages, or keep a pig, or a few chickens or geese which could be fed on almost anything.

Before machinery was introduced women and children would collect loose grain left in the fields after the harvest was gathered in (known as 'Gleaning' dating back to Biblical times). The grain gathered provided enough for a few loaves of home-made bread and some straw for bedding. Farmers didn't have a clue how much was going to waste, and this was a kind of perk for labourers, but this eventually stopped as mechanism became more dominant and eventually Ag Labs reduced and moved onto new jobs and learnt new skills.

Self sufficiency was the order of the day. Nothing was wasted. Old pieces of leather were saved to repair harnesses, shoes etc. Old nails were put to one side and straightened to be used a second or third time. Rugs were made from old pieces of clothing (preferably from wool, which was more hard-wearing than cotton) which were cut into strips and hooked into pieces of sacking. Anything that could perhaps find a use in the future was put to one side and saved.

It was a hard existence, the family home would probably be a small rented cottage, with no water supply at all, other than a single pump situated on the farm or in the nearby village, serving the whole community.

Cottages were often old, dilapidated and damp because they were built below ground level. Dwellings had out side privy's comprising a wooden box with a hole cut out on top, placed over a cesspit, which had to be mucked out frequently by the occupiers. If the cottage was rented on a farm then more often than not you would find a pig sty at the rear.

A typical cottage layout was very basic, downstairs would be the main living room where everyone would wash, where meals were served, and where a variety of household chores were carried out. Some cottages also had a small room to the rear where they would store food, wood for fires, hang clothes to dry and place their boots etc. Upstairs you would find two rooms, one small size room, which tended to be for the parents, and a larger room for the children often sub divided by curtains or blankets. Rooms generally were damp, the only form of heating came from the fireplace in the main living room on the ground floor.

The average size family was 10, infants would sleep with parents, and younger children would be segregated according to sex. Older children would often be sent to live with extended families in the immediate area or found boarding accommodation with friends or fellow worker families on the farm where their parents were employed.

Schooling was almost unheard of for the labouring classes, and the few who were fortunate enough to receive any education, would at most only get three or four years education in elementary reading. It was not until 1870 that compulsory education for five to 13 year-olds became law in England. However, as the children worked beside their parents, they would learn about the weather, the seasons, the names of the animals and birds, and they could recognise the varieties of hedgerow berries and which were good food and which were poisonous. They also learned how to tend and take care of the farm animals and the land.

Washing clothes was a communal activity for wives and daughters in a village, but it was also common for this activity to take place in the main living room area of their cottage. Hygiene and cleanliness were little understood, so illness and injury took their toll. Many children died before they reached the age of five. Slight injuries became infected and often crippling, simply because medicine and cures were, largely, unknown. Disease spread rapidly often devastating whole communities.

In the 18th century, and to the early part of the 19th century, travel was usually neither desired nor undertaken by the labouring classes, except for an occasional journey of a few miles to a nearby village or market town. Parish records show that many would be born, married and die within the confines of their parish. There was little or no social life, often they were in bed by 8:00pm. If they did go out it was more often or not to a local pub to play cards, dominoes, skittles etc, or to see travelling entertainers.

Labourers would have scant knowledge of the events of the time in Britain or the world outside. It might be months or years later that news of events filtered through to them. They often listened to Missioners or 'Penny Readers' who read the latest news and charged 1d for the privilege, because few agricultural Workers could read or write. However, as more and more learnt to read and write so the Penny Readers slowly died out.

Bibliography

- (1) Society of Genealogists Lecture, 19 November 2003
Working Lives: Agricultural Labourers
- (2) 'Agricultural Labourers' from the Internet