

tenants with leases dating from 1812 and earlier who could continue to farm their land only by eating into reserves or by piling up arrears of rent. Tenants with one-year contracts received immediate relief by a reduction in rent. Leaseholders were, however, less fortunately placed, but were relieved by abatements in their rent, up to thirty per cent in some cases, until their leases ran out or until the worst of the immediate depression was over. Thus while the landlord had been quick to profit by the scarcity of foodstuffs during the war and had been somewhat reluctant to reduce his rents after the peak of 1812, he had accepted the fact of lower land values by 1820. Re-adjustment to the changed circumstances was not achieved without considerable financial loss by the farmers. But tenants in difficulty between 1819 and 1823 were not evicted, since the landlord preferred to adopt a realistic attitude rather than see his land withdrawn from cultivation.¹

¹ This was usually the case. See, for example, Joan Thirsk and Jean Imray, *Suffolk Farming in the Nineteenth Century*, Suffolk Record Society, 1, 1958, pp. 96 *et seq.*

Social Mobility in Nineteenth-Century Devon

By DUNCAN MITCHELL

DEVON is an area of small farms. The tradition is not a new one, for Robert Fraser, writing toward the end of the eighteenth century, noted it. "Farms in general are small, from twenty to forty acres being the common run of the holdings in this county." But he observed that there were some changes. "Of late, the farmers are beginning to increase, and one farmer is sometimes found to occupy two, three, or more of these tenements; but I found very few farmers exceed two, or at most three hundred acres." There was, in his words, a "respectable class of yeomanry."¹ This tradition of independent small-holdings was, and still remains, strong. The question arises, however, how this class of small-holder was recruited. Some evidence is available to show

that it was not altogether a self-perpetuating class, but that it drew some of its members from the labourers.

To appreciate this factor of social mobility we have to note two things. First, during the nineteenth century farmers quite often changed their holdings. In the years following the Napoleonic wars the return on farm produce was small; but although rentals were repeatedly lowered by from 25 to 30 per cent, such reductions did not prevent a considerable movement among farmers from one holding to another and cheaper one.² In the later times of relative prosperity the movement was reversed. This geographical mobility in fact persisted down to 1939. Men did not always feel obliged to farm the same land as their forbears, although they seldom left

¹ Robert Fraser, *General View of the County of Devon*, 1794, p. 17.

² *Agricultural State of the Kingdom in February, March, and April 1816.*

the same district, unless it was to emigrate overseas.

Secondly, labourers' wages during the last quarter of the nineteenth century varied between eleven and twelve shillings per week. They had been tending to increase since the 1850's; thus in 1858 they were between seven and eight shillings in north Devon, and between eight and nine shillings in south Devon. Perquisites such as four pints of cider per week and eight quarts during the harvest time were included. By 1880 a good man might earn fifteen shillings per week, rather higher than for some other parts of southern England.

The combination of improving wages and available small-holdings for rental provided opportunities for social advancement. But just how was it accomplished? Two examples will be given by way of illustration; both are drawn from the South Hams area.

In 1880 a stonebreaker, whose father was a farm labourer earning fifteen shillings per week, was employed on the roads at an average wage of seventeen shillings. On this wage he saved enough to buy a horse and cart and so offer his services to the local authority as a carter of stones for road repairs. This enabled him to increase his income. He had all along kept a few fowls by his cottage for his own use and as an additional source of income, and to these he now added a cow, which he grazed in a small field he rented. By dint of frugal living and saving he was able to invest in some more livestock until he was in a position to rent a thirty-acre holding. Soon after this he gave up carting stones, and eventually after some years he moved to a fifty-acre holding. He had two sons who helped him on the farm. They were unpaid but received pocket money. In late middle-age he moved again to a farm of a hundred and fifty acres. He died just before the 1914 war, but both sons were set up as farmers, one taking over from his father, the other farming near by.

The second case is particularly interesting because of an apparently little-known practice. In 1880 a hind (or foreman) to a gentle-

man-farmer besides keeping some fowls and a few pigs of his own also hired several milking cows. This hiring of cattle was not uncommon in south Devon. Usually the farmer provided the use of a building as well as the cattle, and charged a rent, but the sale of the milk and butter, with skimmed milk being fed to pigs, provided a profit. As a hind this man earned four shillings above the normal labourer's wage, and this together with his profit from the cows enabled him in 1900 to rent a fifty-acre holding. At that time he had two sons aged fifteen and twelve years, and both helped him on the farm. Nine years later the younger son emigrated to Canada, where he became owner of a large ranch. On his departure the elder brother suggested to his father that he be made a partner, but this was refused. Instead he was given five shillings per week and his board. Later the elder son married, left home, and rented a small-holding of fourteen acres; his father gave him a calf and a pig. He was employed as a labourer on a nearby farm for fifteen shillings per week and farmed his own land in his spare time. By 1914 he possessed two cows, several pigs, and some fowls. He succeeded in raising a strain of pig for which there was a good local demand. Later he moved to a thirty-acre holding. His father continued to manage his own holding with the help of a daughter for a further twenty years after his son left him.

Thus rising real wages, new forms of employment both full-time and part-time offering chances of an improved income, and geographical mobility among small-holders, combined to provide opportunities for labourers during the latter part of the last century and the beginning of the present one. It may be noted in addition that the small-holder class, relying on family labour and used to frugality, was able to withstand economic depression much better than the larger farmer. Hence this alteration in social standing was very frequently maintained throughout the period between the wars.