

East Yorkshire's Agricultural Labour Force in the mid-Nineteenth Century

By JUNE A. SHEPPARD

AN interesting aspect of agricultural history about which we have little information is the size and composition of the agricultural labour force. Some general impressions may be obtained from records of specific farms or estates at certain dates, but comprehensive information for extensive areas, that would allow regional comparisons to be made, is less frequently available. This limitation is as marked for the nineteenth century as for earlier periods. The agricultural writers often describe the labour position on particular farms, but these were frequently chosen for their special characteristics, and cannot be regarded as typical of their own regions, let alone the many parts where quite different types of farming occurred. It was not until 1921 that farmers were required to indicate on the June 4th returns how many labourers were employed, and even this information is not so full as we would wish, for no distinction was made between different types of workers, and members of the farmer's own family were not included.

There is, however, a source of information concerning the agricultural labour force which can be used, in conjunction with other sources, to give a reasonably detailed and accurate picture of conditions in the middle years of the nineteenth century. This is the manuscript books of the enumerators for the 1851 census.¹ These books provide very full information on the composition of the population in every township of England and Wales. The date is a particularly convenient one for the study of the agricultural labour force, for the rural population was then at about its peak, and farming was relatively prosperous, but the mechanization of agriculture had hardly begun. Hence the numbers employed in agriculture were at about their maximum.

The 1851 Enumerators' Books have been analysed for the East Riding of Yorkshire, a county which has the advantage of a variety of soils and types of farming, and where therefore some regional contrasts in the size and composition of the labour force would be expected.

THE ENUMERATORS' BOOKS

It is essential before considering the results of an analysis of the Enumerators' Books to assess the reliability and limitations of the data. Each

¹ P.R.O., H.O. 107.

township was enumerated separately, and within the township each household was numbered and clearly distinguished. For each member of the household, the details given were name, relationship to head of household, age, sex, marital status, occupation, and place of birth. Additional information of considerable relevance is given for farmers: the acreage farmed and the number of workers employed.

Agricultural workers are easily recognized in the occupation column, and three main groups may be distinguished. First, there are farmers and their male relatives working on the farm. The principal difficulty of interpretation in connection with this group arises from the prestige that was associated with the term farmer, which led to many persons with only a few acres giving themselves this title. It was therefore decided to set a limit at five acres, and those called farmers but having less than five acres of land were classed as agricultural labourers (unless an alternative additional occupation was given). The limit was not imposed, however, when the occupation was 'gardener' or 'market-gardener', as it is likely that such a person was engaged full-time in working his land. In imposing an arbitrary size limit some inaccurate classification must inevitably result, but this is unlikely to be very great, as small part-time farmers were not common in the East Riding at this date.

The second group of workers distinguished was the agricultural labourers. Shepherds have been included with these, and also gardeners for whom no acreage was given (on the assumption that these were garden labourers rather than masters). Certain occupations with agricultural affinities, such as mole-catchers and ditchers and drainers, have been excluded from consideration.

The third group comprised the farm servants. These were usually called farm servants in the occupation column, but sometimes they were described more precisely as ploughboys, waggoners, etc. The group is always clearly identified, however, by the fact that they are enumerated with the farmer's household, and under the column for relationship with head of household were always termed 'servant'.

The number of the three main classes of agricultural workers living in each township in 1851 can therefore be readily, if laboriously, determined. Very few women worked regularly in the fields of the East Riding, except in the extreme south-west, so the analysis has been confined to male workers only.

Many more problems are involved in using the information given concerning the acreage worked by each farmer and the number of labourers employed. The first limitation of the acreage figures is that they are missing

for some farmers, usually when the farm was run by a bailiff (rare in east Yorkshire), or when other evidence suggests that the farm was small. Some 90 per cent or more of the farms are given an acreage, however, and this would seem to provide a valid basis for calculating average farm size, except in a few townships where the proportion missing was much greater than usual. The second limitation is that we have no internal check on the accuracy of the acreages given. In some parts of the country gross inaccuracies occur,¹ but when a comparison was made for fourteen East Riding townships between the acreages given in the Enumerators' Books and those recorded in the Tithe Awards of the 1840's, only small discrepancies occurred, and these could be explained by the interval of time between the two records. This suggests that the farm sizes given are sufficiently accurate to warrant comparisons between different townships.

The value of the employment figures is limited by the fact that they, too, are not given for all farms, and it is sometimes impossible to tell whether the absence of a figure indicates that no workers were employed, or whether it means that the numbers were for some reason not recorded. In most cases the size of farm gives some indication as to which is the correct interpretation, and once again the details are sufficiently full for about 90 per cent of the farms. The number given referred to the workers employed on Monday March 31, a time of year which probably represented average employment conditions; there is no record of the additional large numbers of women and children employed at harvest time. The biggest problem in using these 'employed' figures is to decide which groups of workers are included. The instructions were that both 'in-labourers'—i.e. farm servants, and 'out-labourers'—i.e. agricultural labourers, should be specified, and in some townships this was done. More frequently, however, the formula used was 'farmer of (214) acres employing (12).' At first sight a single 'employed' figure would appear to be the total of farm servants and agricultural labourers, but detailed examination of the figures shows that in many cases this interpretation is impossible. In many townships the farm servant total was almost as great as the 'employed' total, and in a few townships their numbers exceeded the 'employed' total. The most likely interpretation therefore seems to be that a single 'employed' figure refers to agricultural labourers only.² A check on this is provided by relating the 'employed' total for the county to the number of agricultural labourers; if both referred to the same type of worker, the figures should be approximately the same. They were:

¹ e.g. in Devonshire (information from Mr W. M. Williams).

² The introduction to the printed Census reports for 1851 admits that "some uncertainty prevails as to whether the farmers returned all their in-door servants." p. lxxviii.

'employed', approximately 10,200; agricultural labourers, approximately 10,900. The difference of 700 amounts to roughly two labourers per township, readily accounted for by temporary unemployment, and employment on farms for which no 'employed' figure is given.

It would therefore appear that in the 1851 Census Enumerators' Books we have a source of information which, in spite of limitations, is of an order of reliability that makes detailed analysis worth-while and valid.

DISTRIBUTION OF WORKERS

It is possible to calculate the average acreage worked per individual for each township by dividing the total acreage of farm land by the total of family workers, farm servants, and 'employed'. One would expect a high acreage per worker on less productive soils, and a low acreage per worker on fertile soils.

The majority of East Riding townships in 1851 had averages of between twenty and thirty acres per worker. Very few had under fifteen or over forty acres per worker. There was a certain broad correlation with soil conditions. The highest acreages per worker, for example, occurred in townships on the high chalk Wolds, on the sticky lacustrine clays of the Vale of York, and on the heavier boulder-clay tracts of Holderness, whilst the lowest acreages per worker were found especially where the fertile silt soils fringe the Ouse. The correspondence with soil type was, however, far from complete. This is because the density of workers reflected not only soil fertility, but also farm size, and while the latter was itself to some extent related to soil fertility, it was also profoundly influenced by the historical evolution of land-ownership, which varied from township to township. Where numerous small farms were the rule, there was a tendency for more workers to be employed than were strictly necessary, while large farms led to a more economic use of labour and a large acreage per worker. Table I illustrates this relationship.

The average acreage per worker is of interest since it represents the approximate peak of employment in agriculture, and gives a ratio of workers to agricultural land two or three times greater than the present-day British average.

COMPOSITION OF THE LABOUR FORCE

The three classes that formed the agricultural labour force were quite distinctive in many ways. Although farmers ranged in age from the early twenties to the eighties, there was a preponderance in the 30-60 age group. The household composition suggests that it was the accepted social pattern for all sons to work on the farm from the time of leaving school until marriage, and the considerable number of unmarried brothers living and working on

TABLE I

	Township	Average farm size	Acres per worker
Fertile silts	Barmby Marsh	44	13
	Sunk Island	417	31
Less fertile Wolds	Langtoft	181	25
	Towthorpe	825	34

farms shows that family co-operation often persisted after the death of the father. The small number of retired farmers recorded by the enumerators indicates that most died in harness.

The majority of agricultural labourers were the heads of cottage households, and ranged in age from the early twenties to the eighties. These were the workers who were paid by the day or by the week, or at harvest time by piece-work. Legard, in his Prize Essay written three years before the Census, recorded that their average pay from Martinmas (November 11) to Candlemas (February 2) was 12s. a week, and from Candlemas to harvest time 13s. 6d. to 14s. a week.¹ During the harvest period they could earn several shillings more than the highest weekly rate. It is interesting to note that Legard considered the East Riding labourers to be among the best-paid in England. Cottage rents were between £3 and £6 a year, so that about one tenth of the labourer's income was spent on accommodation. Many labourers were the fathers of large families of young children, and in spite of their relatively favourable rates of pay compared with those of labourers in the south of England they must have had a very low standard of living.

With such pressure on resources, it is not surprising that the labourers' children were put to work at a relatively early age, though not so early as in counties farther south where adult wages were lower. The 1867 Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture reported that the East Riding children started work in the fields when they were eight or nine years old, but at this age they usually worked only in spring and summer, and especially at harvest time.² From November to March many attended school intermittently; thus almost every child under the age of thirteen was recorded in the occupation column of the Enumerators' Books as 'scholar'. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen, however,

¹ G. Legard, 'Farming in the East Riding of Yorkshire', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, IX, 1848, p. 125.

² First Report, 1868, p. 96.

nearly all left home, thus relieving the pressure on sleeping accommodation in the cottages, where there were rarely more than two bedrooms. The girls entered into service either in the countryside with farmer or master-craftsman households or in nearby towns, while the boys were recruited to the ranks of the farm servants.

Farm servants were hired and paid yearly, and received free board and lodging: "the farmer's house is like a barrack with a long chamber full of beds, one of which the foreman commonly occupies to keep order and rouse the men in the morning."¹ The young men started as ploughboys, receiving between £8 and £12 a year by the age of sixteen, while later they became waggoners and earned £14-20 a year. Foremen received up to £25.² Most farm servants married after about ten or twelve years of the life, and changed their status to agricultural labourers. The average age of this class of agricultural workers was therefore low, although the foremen were usually older, often either bachelors or widowers.

For the county as a whole, agricultural labourers were the most numerous group, forming 43 per cent of the total labour force; farm servants formed 33 and family labour 24 per cent. There were, however, considerable regional contrasts in these proportions and Figures I, II, and III show for each group those townships where the proportions were higher than the county average. Family workers (Fig. I) were especially important in the Vale of York (the lowland west of the Wolds), and in some townships there they formed more than 40 per cent of the total labour force. Parts of Holderness also had more than the county average of 24 per cent, but the proportions were rarely so high as in the west. Both agricultural labourers (Fig. II) and farm servants (Fig. III) were proportionately more important on the Wolds and in some parts of Holderness. Agricultural labourers rarely exceeded 60 per cent of the total labour force, but farm servants showed a greater variation from the average, with over 50 per cent of the total in several townships.

Farm size must be the first factor taken into account when seeking an explanation of these patterns of distribution. Small farms, often under fifty acres, were particularly numerous in the Vale of York, both on the fertile silt soils adjoining the Ouse and on the light sandy soils of the interior of the Vale. Although the land was worked intensively, rarely were more than four or five workers employed on one farm, and the family would usually supply several of these. Since these small farms were frequently in or close to the villages, the additional labour required was normally provided by agricultural labourers rather than by farm servants, who formed only a small proportion of the labour force of most Vale townships. Large farms (300 acres

¹ First Report, 1868, p. 367.

² Legard, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

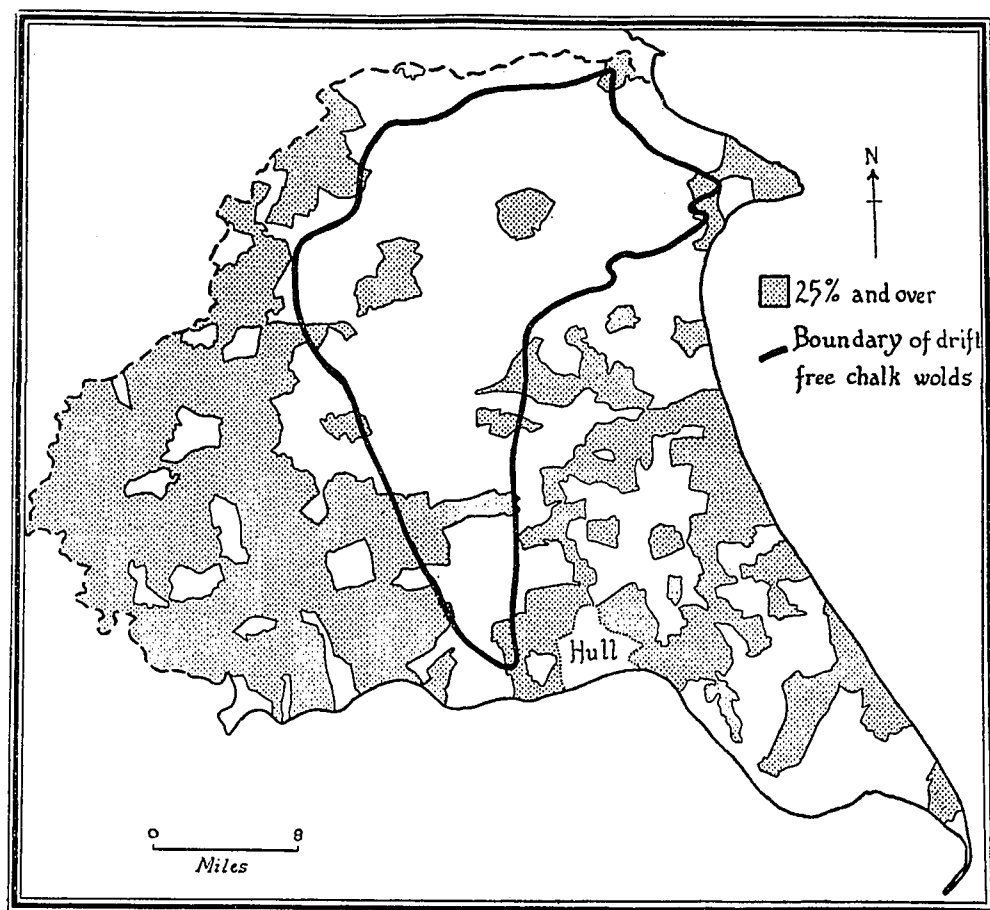


FIG. I
Family Workers

and over) predominated on the Wolds and in parts of Holderness, each requiring at least ten workers and often twenty or thirty. The family could provide only a small proportion of these, therefore many labourers and farm servants were employed. The relative importance of servants and labourers varied with the location of the farm; farms in villages had fewer servants than isolated farms. It was always convenient to have workers close at hand, and while the village farmer could rely on his labourers living just down the street, the farmer remote from a village had to board his workers to make sure of this convenience. The isolated farmhouses that were built in the fields after the Parliamentary enclosures were also as a rule larger than the village farmhouses and more suitable for the boarding of farm servants. In most cases the distinction between the two types of location is lost in the township totals, but in those townships without a village (e.g. the 'lost villages' of

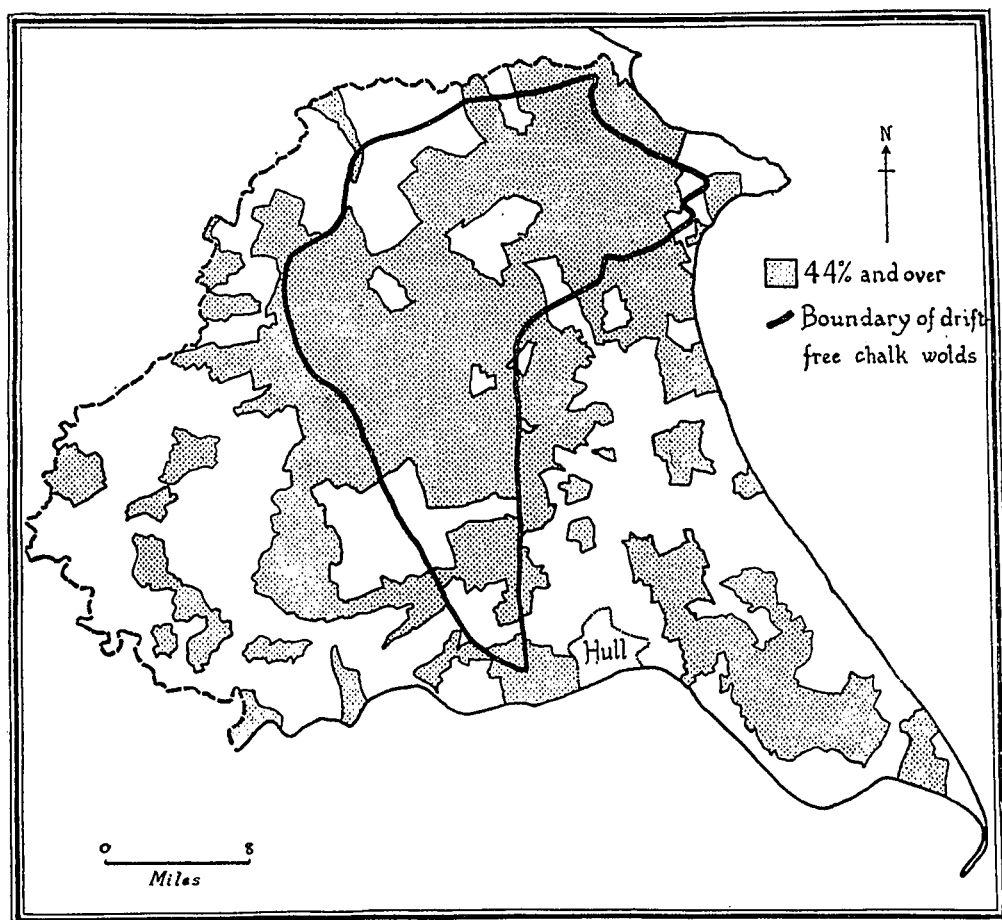


FIG. II
Agricultural Labourers

Towthorpe, Cowlam, Cottam, and Wharram Percy, and the newly-reclaimed Sunk Island) the proportion of farm servants was especially high.

Although small farms and a great use of family labour were characteristic of much of the Vale of York, and large farms and a preponderance of farm servants and agricultural labourers typical of much of the Wolds, there were some townships in both areas that were exceptions. Sutton-on-Derwent and Woodhouse in the Vale of York had larger farms and relied more on farm servants and agricultural labourers than their neighbours, while Langtoft on the Wolds had more small farms and family workers were more important than in surrounding townships. Such exceptions do not, however, detract from the clear regional emphasis of the two tracts. Holderness, in contrast, had no distinctive pattern of its own. In size of farms and composition of labour force it was closer to the county average than the other two regions,

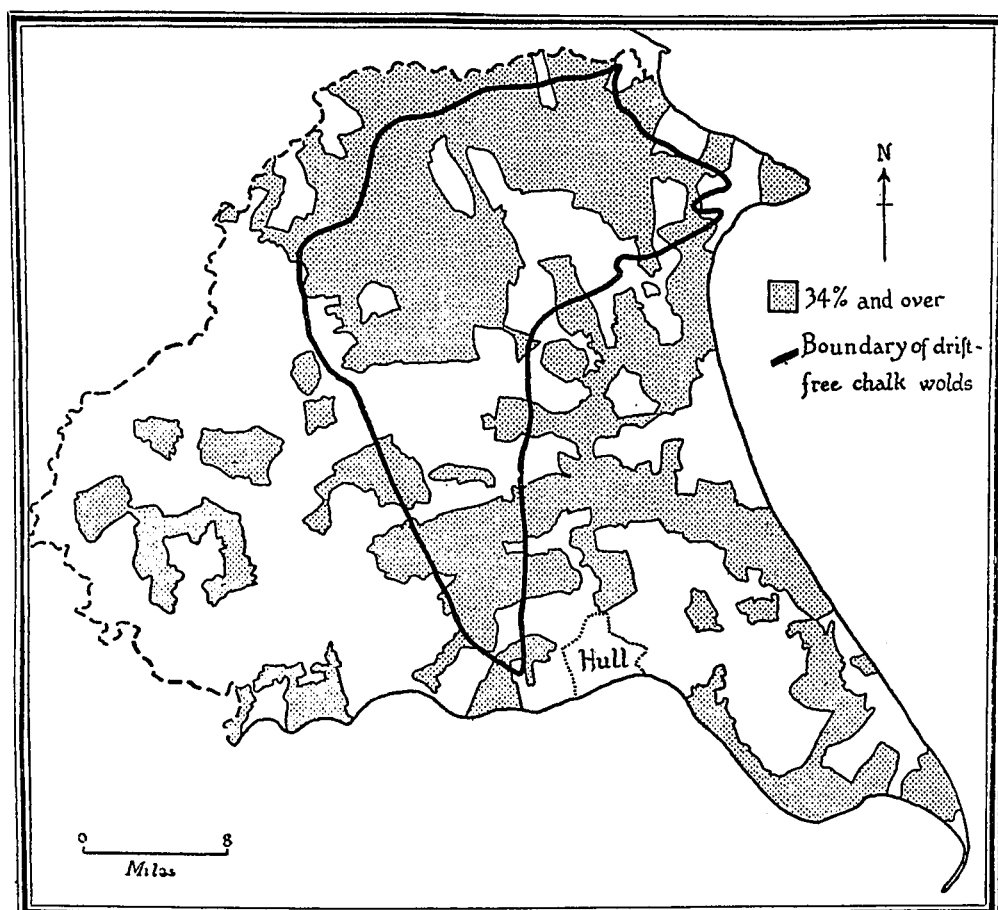


FIG. III
Farm Servants

and the differences from part to part brought out by Figures I, II, and III represent much smaller variations from the average than occurred in the other two regions.

THE LABOURER'S JOURNEY TO WORK

Whereas family workers and farm servants lived at their place of work, the majority of the labourers' cottages were in the villages. In some parts of the county, especially on the high Wolds, the villages were three or four miles apart, and this perforce involved those labourers working on the more remote farms in daily walks of up to four miles to and from their work. Frequently, however, even longer daily journeys were undertaken, for many labourers lived in the village of one township, but worked on farms in other townships. The First Report of the Commission on the Employment of

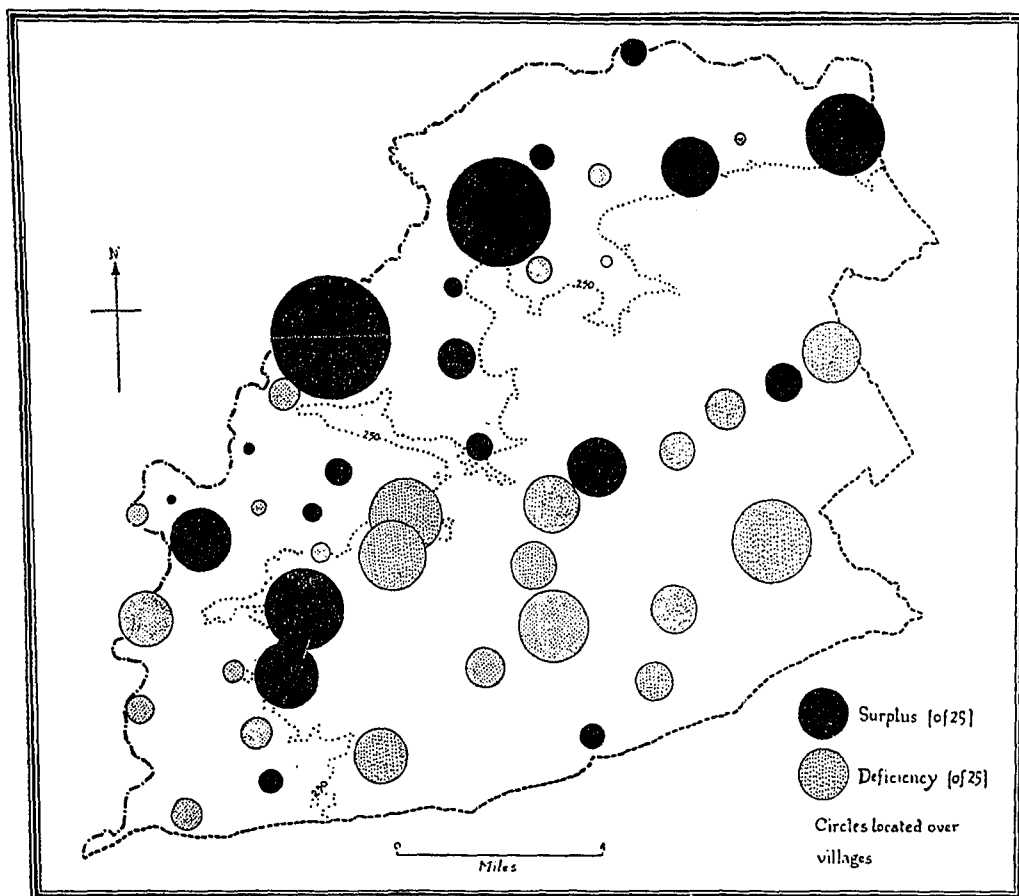


FIG. IV

Surplus and Deficit of Agricultural Labourers by Townships in N.W. East Yorkshire

Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture made several references to such movements; for example, the vicar of North Frodingham told the Commission "my parish supplies neighbouring parishes with labour, some of the labourers have long distances to walk to their work."¹

The details contained in the 1851 Enumerators' Books make it possible to obtain a more complete picture of this inter-township movement of agricultural labourers. A comparison of the total 'employed' in each township with the number of resident agricultural labourers reveals that while in some half of the townships there is a reasonably close correlation between the two figures, in the remainder there is a considerable difference. Where a difference occurs, an excess of 'employed' over resident labourers suggests that some of the 'employed' had to live elsewhere, whilst an excess of resident

¹ First Report, 1868, p. 371.

labourers over 'employed' suggests that some of the residents had to find work outside the township. As might be expected, surplus townships and deficit townships were fairly closely intermingled, especially in Holderness. There was, however, a concentration of townships with a deficit of resident labourers on the Wolds, and of townships with a surplus in the Vale of York and along the margins of the Wolds. Figure IV shows the detailed pattern in the north-west of the county, with the 250-ft contour picking out the approximate margin of the Wolds. Most of the Wolds townships included on the map had deficits of between twenty and fifty labourers, and the three townships with surpluses within the region could not have made good the whole of the deficit. Rather must the additional workers have been drawn from the several townships on the margins of the Wolds with large surpluses of forty or more labourers. The distance between the villages with an excess of labourers and the areas of deficit indicates that some labourers must have walked at least four miles from their homes to their places of work.

The long distance between home and work was disadvantageous to both farmer and labourer, for the walk was tiring, and reduced the labourer's value as a worker. It was no doubt at least partly in order to overcome this disadvantage that the practice had developed on the Wolds of providing three meals a day at the farm for the labourers.¹ Such day-labourers with board received wages approximately one-third less than day-labourers without board. Many did not bother to walk home and back every night, especially in bad weather, but slept at the farm; a Neswick farmer told the 1867 Commission: "I provide beds for the men if they want them, they usually go home on Wednesday and Saturday."² It is impossible to calculate from the Census how many adopted this practice, for it was taken on a Sunday night when virtually all labourers would have been at home. Many shepherds, however, spent the whole of the lambing season at the farm, and were recorded there at the time of the Census (March 30), while many village shepherd households were enumerated beginning with the shepherd's wife.

The lack of coincidence of labour supply and demand may be explained as deriving from the operation of the Poor Laws.³ Where ratepayers were few ('close parishes') no new cottages were erected and some of the old ones were pulled down so that the poor-rates could be kept low, and many labourers were forced to live outside the township. This tendency was especially strong on the Wolds, where the changes brought about by the Agricultural Revolution of the late eighteenth century had given rise to an increased

¹ *Reports of the Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, 1843, pp. 324, 329.

² First Report, 1868, p. 379.

³ 1867 Commission, First Report, 1868, p. 105.

demand for labour at a time when concern about poor-rates was especially marked. Where a township contained many ratepayers ('open parish'), agreement on limiting the number of cottages was less likely, and in fact many small freeholders erected rows of cottages for the labourers who could not find homes in the 'close' townships. In this way originated the practice of long journeys to work for the less favourably situated labourers.

CONCLUSION

This study of the composition of the agricultural labour force in the East Riding of Yorkshire in 1851 has revealed certain regional patterns. The main contrast is between the Vale of York and the Wolds. In the Vale of York there was a relatively high density of workers, and family workers played a very important rôle, while few townships (apart from those fringing the Wolds) showed either a marked excess or a marked deficit of agricultural labourers. On the Wolds, a lower density of workers was associated with a greater reliance on farm servants and agricultural labourers, many of the latter having to travel considerable distances from their village homes fringing the chalk uplands. Holderness had a more mixed and intermediate character. Until the statistics for further areas have been analysed it is impossible to say how far the characteristics exhibited by any of these regions were paralleled in other parts of England.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR (*continued from page 42*)

It is noteworthy that the localities in which the custom took place are in the Pennine and Cumbrian hill regions; a friend who is familiar with sheep in the East Riding of Yorkshire never saw it there. Mr M. M. MacKinnon, senior lecturer in preventive medicine in this Faculty, never heard of the custom in Devon,

and it does not appear to have reached Australia and New Zealand.

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