

The Influence of Demographic Factors on the Position of the Agricultural Labourer in England and Wales, c1750–1914¹

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I

MANY years have elapsed since the standard histories of the agricultural labourer first saw the light of day, and they are decidedly outdated.² It is true, several valuable contributions seeking to examine aspects of the labourer's position have appeared in academic journals and elsewhere, written by scholars with a specialist knowledge of agrarian or demographic change.³ Yet until they are satisfactorily integrated, popular impressions will continue to be shaped by writers who follow the tradition, set by the Hammonds, of giving excessive emphasis to institutional influences and concentrating upon colourful episodes such as the Swing riots which seem capable of being explained to a large extent by short-period influences. Innocently or not, such historians serve to cloud rather than illuminate the underlying factors affecting the situation of the labourer, by neglecting or misinterpreting the more fundamental economic, technological and especially the demographic determinants of his standard of life and position in society. The object of this article is to assert the importance of the last-mentioned factor; it will commence with an assessment of the demographic forces at work and proceed to analyse some of the implications which follow from them.

II

In their eagerness to dramatize the process of urbanization, historians frequently fail to emphasize sufficiently the absolute growth of numbers in the countryside. If we accept Chalklin's estimate that, in 1750, 25 per cent of the population of England and Wales lived in towns, we are left with 4.7m persons in the countryside.⁴ By 1901 the percentage of the total population living in the newly designated rural districts stood at only 23 per cent, but absolutely had reached 7.5m. Alternatively, if we take 16 counties identified by Deane and Cole as primarily agricultural in 1811, their aggregate population rose from 1.96m in 1750 to 6.5m in 1901.⁵ Whether we should think in terms of a doubling or trebling of the rural population over this one-hundred-and-fifty-year period depends upon questions of definition. But its growth was indisputably substantial and the rates of natural increase which obtained in the countryside were faster still. We may begin with the changes on the side of mortality and fertility which supported them.

The eighteenth-century population theorist, Richard Short, estimated the characteristic mortality levels of great towns to be 43–53 deaths per thousand at risk; in moderate towns 36–42; and in country villages 20–5.⁶ Similar urban-rural contrasts were attested to time and again in early Victorian England and, leaving aside the famous comparison made by Edwin

¹Based on a paper read to the British Agricultural History Society's annual winter conference, December 1977.

²Eg W Hasbach, *History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, 1908; F E Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, 1870–1920*, 1920; J L and B Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, 1911.

³In particular the works of Chambers and Mingay, Jones, Anderson, Collins, and Hunt, cited below.

⁴C W Chalklin, *The Provincial Towns of Georgian England*, 1974, p 17.

⁵P Deane and W A Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688–1959*, Cambridge, 1962, p 103; B R Mitchell and P Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge, 1962, p 20.

⁶Various works, quoted in T R Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Everyman edn, 1914, II, p 241.

Chadwick between Manchester and Rutland, even the normal level of mortality in urban sanitary districts was estimated by William Farr to be one-quarter higher than in their rural counterparts in the decade 1851–61.⁷ When we encounter, in the period 1848–54, crude death rates as low as 20 (Blofield), 19 (Romney Marsh, Cranbrook), 17 (Hendon, New Forest), 16 (Builth, Bootle in Cumberland), and even 15 (Glendale),⁸ it seems clear that the levels of mortality ruling in rural areas had fallen significantly below those of the distant past, even if this was due to the disappearance of the towering peaks of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mortality rather than to a major reduction of the general plateau. Moreover, there is no reason to think that the agricultural labourers had failed to share in this favourable development. It is true, there remained much ill-health amongst them, and that their record of morbidity, as evidenced by the 1846–48 statistics of the Manchester Unity, was bettered by a good many other occupational categories; indeed it represented an ‘aggregate sickness’ 6.2 per cent greater than the experience of the rural districts taken as a whole. Nevertheless, their expectation of life at various ages, according to the same source, was 45 years at 20, 30 years at 40 and 16 years at 60, a record which was surpassed only by carpenters among 25 occupational categories considered, and which represented marginally better survival ratios than those of rural members in general.⁹ This comparatively favourable experience of mortality was enjoyed through the remaining period considered here. As Dr Horn has pointed out, during the 1880s death rates among

agricultural labourers stood at only 66 per cent of age-standardized mortality among all adult males, whilst in the 1890s mortality from tuberculosis (the greatest single killer during the nineteenth century) reached only 62 per cent of standard levels.¹⁰ Likewise infant mortality in farm workers’ families was considerably below that of any other class of manual workers. In 1911 when the level stood at 125 per thousand at risk nationally, and at 172, 147, 161, 162, and 139 respectively among the offspring of dock labourers, carters, bargees, coachmen, and bricklayers’ labourers, the corresponding figure for agricultural labourers was 97.¹¹

With respect to marriage and fertility the position is less clear-cut. There was a common presumption among contemporaries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the usual age at marriage of labourers and their wives was falling as a consequence of the decline of living in, and the corrosive influence of the Old Poor Law. In point of fact there is no agreement in existing demographic studies that any such systematic variation occurred, but, as it happens, the hypothesis of rising levels of fertility in rural areas does not require it. Rather, an increase in crude rates is likely to have come about as a consequence of changes in the social configuration of rural society.¹² Against the background of a stationary or indeed slightly declining number of holdings, the long-term fall in the death rate inexorably produced a higher proportion of landless labourers, a trend by no means peculiar to England and Wales. If, as seems likely, they had at all times tended to marry a little earlier than farmers (and to slightly younger women), structural shift alone would have had some

⁷A F Weber, *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1963, p 355.

⁸E H Greenhow, *Papers Relating to the Sanitary State of the People of England*, 1858, pp 162–4.

⁹H Ratcliffe, *Observations on the Rate of Mortality and Sickness existing among Friendly Societies*, Manchester, 1850, p 50. NB Although agricultural labourers were not represented in the Manchester Unity in proportion to their numbers in the working population, nevertheless the 18,000 upon whose experience these statistics are based was the largest single occupational group to come within Ratcliffe’s purview.

¹⁰P Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside*, 1976, pp 182–3.

¹¹Registrar-General for England and Wales, *74th Ann Rept*, BPP 1912–13 XI, pp xli, xliii, 73–87.

¹²The potential importance of structural shifts in affecting crude rates is brought out in H J Habbakuk, *Population Growth and Economic Development*, Leicester, 1971, pp 40–3. However, he supposes that ‘the intersectoral shifts which were of critical importance were those from agriculture to industry’.

impact on crude birth rates in the countryside. Some useful calculations have been made on the basis of data showing the proportions ever married at the census of 1861. Dr Anderson has compared primarily agricultural registration districts where more than 75 and less than 45 per cent of the workforce consisted of labourers, and finds the mean age at marriage to have been lower by 1.9 years (for males) and 1.8 years (females) in the former. Even a structural shift involving only 20 per cent of the farm labour force, he estimates, could have produced as many as 6 per cent more births per marriage cohort.¹³ It is thus likely that structural change acting on the average age at marriage and thereby on fertility, played some part, at the margin, in promoting rural population growth in the century before 1861.

In contrast to older views, this argument assumes a high degree of stability in patterns of marriage and procreation. At any rate for the second half of the nineteenth century definite signs of behavioural inertia among agricultural labourers may be inferred from the findings of the 1911 Census, which reviewed the completed fertility of all marriages still extant.¹⁴ It is true, the average age at which agricultural labourers' wives were married rose, in conformity with the national trend, from 22.2 (1861-71) to 24.9 (1906-11). But their marital fertility declined comparatively sluggishly. Comparing the completed fertility of marriages of the pre-1851 era with those celebrated in 1881-86, the extent of the national decline was 21 per cent, and of the Registrar-General's Social Class I, 43 per cent.¹⁵ Since that of the agricultural labourers sank by only 15 per cent, it may be said to have been *rising* relative to that of other social groups. Moreover, because of the

relatively low levels of child mortality ruling among agricultural labourers, the effective size of their families remained distinctly on the high side. Table 1 illustrates these features.

TABLE 1
Children Born and Children Surviving to
Marriages of Various Dates:
Ratios for Agricultural Labourers to
Corresponding Rates for All Classes Jointly

Marriages of	Children born	Children surviving
1851-61	105	111
1861-71	104	111
1871-81	109	116
1881-86	114	122
1886-91	114	122
1891-96	115	122
1896-1901	114	119
1901-06	114	118
1906-11	114	116

Source: *Census of England and Wales, 1911, XIII.*

Fertility of Marriage, Pt II, p xc.

A further aspect of late nineteenth-century fertility is equally remarkable, and again, indicative of behavioural inertia. Dr Hunt has used the 1911 data to demonstrate that there was no sign of any significant relationship between fertility and the relative levels of money wages in rural areas, which suggests strongly that the birth rate was not responsive to market forces. Age-standardized fertility was higher in the rural districts of every Welsh and English county than for the average of England and Wales as a whole. He comments: 'This uncalled-for increase in the supply of labour imposed strain on all rural economies, most of all in the rural south where wages were lowest.'¹⁶

Given the size of the gap between fertility and mortality levels throughout the period considered here, rates of natural increase in rural areas were always considerable. It may be borne in mind that even a 1 per cent annual

¹³M Anderson, 'Marriage Patterns in Victorian Britain: An Analysis based on Registration District Data for England and Wales, 1861', *Jour Family History*, I, 1976, pp 65, 76.

¹⁴*Census of England and Wales, 1911, XIII. Fertility of Marriage, Pt II, 1923.* NB That the earlier the period of the marriage, the fewer that remained available for the purpose of the enquiry.

¹⁵J W Innes, *Class Fertility Trends in England and Wales, 1876-1934*, Princeton, 1938, p 42. See Table XIII.

¹⁶E H Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914*, Oxford, 1973, pp 232-7.

rate of increase will, on the principle of compound interest, double the population in 70 years, or, over 160 years, raise it by some 600 per cent. That the population increases in rural areas, whilst very appreciable, were of nothing like this order of magnitude was attributable to regular losses by migration.

The dimensions of the outflow prior to the advent of civil registration in 1837 remain to be properly assessed, although Deane and Cole calculated that the 16 primarily agricultural counties lost, on a net basis, some 36 per cent of their estimated natural increase between 1701 and 1831.¹⁷ However, disregarding scattered and localized instances, there are no signs of systematic absolute decreases in rural areas until a much later date, and it is well-known that the agricultural labour force reached its all-time peak at or about 1851. By this date the census had much improved and the era of civil registration had begun, so that it is possible to chart in more detail the drift from the countryside as a whole, and out of agricultural employment in particular. Summarizing the conclusions of some recent authors we find that:

(a) At the county level the losses were unspectacular. Only three English counties (Cornwall, Huntingdon, Rutland), and three Welsh (Cardigan, Montgomery, Radnor) showed absolute decreases between 1841 and 1911. However, such calculations mask the factor of urban concentration within counties, so that in Norfolk, the aggregate population of Norwich, Yarmouth and King's Lynn grew by 20.6 per cent and that of the remainder fell by 2 per cent.

(b) The statistics relating to over 600 registration districts are more revealing. The aggregate population of what Cairncross describes as the rural residual districts rose by 18 per cent in the north, 9 per cent in the south, between 1841 and 1911. But their net losses by migration had been considerable, amounting to some 79 per cent of calculated

inter-censal increases (births minus deaths), or, in effect, 1.6m persons from the northern, and 2.9m from the southern districts over the period.

(c) Concurrently, the number of agricultural labourers sank absolutely, falling about 23 per cent from its mid-nineteenth-century peak by 1911.¹⁸

Such summary statistics do not tell us everything we might wish to know about the nature of the migratory flows. Few, if any, occupational groups stood to gain more than farm labourers from emigration to foreign parts, or to the colonies. Yet modern research suggests that they were distinctly under-represented among emigrants from the United Kingdom. Agricultural labourers had some opportunities to avail themselves of publicly assisted schemes of the kind sponsored by the Poor Law Commissioners and bodies such as the Colonial Commissioners during the late 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. But America took by far the greater proportion of all United Kingdom emigrants on a private basis, and it would seem unlikely that many of these were farm labourers. During the 1870s the first successful trade unions in this field were making vigorous attempts to promote emigration on the presumption that the bargaining power of those who remained would be enhanced. In some individual villages quite dramatic effluxes occurred.¹⁹ Yet for various reasons the policy was not pursued with vigour into the 1880s when, paradoxically, the rate of migration from rural areas was running at its peak. In the light of recent work by Professor Erickson it appears that Cairncross may have erred in supposing that this decade was marked by

¹⁸ Mitchell and Deane, *op cit*, pp 20-2, 24-5; A K Cairncross, *Home and Foreign Investment*, Cambridge, 1953, p 78; F D W Taylor, 'United Kingdom: Numbers in Agriculture', *Farm Economist*, VIII, 1955, p 39. See also J Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851-1951*, 1957; and R Lawton, 'Rural Depopulation in England and Wales' in D Mills, ed, *English Rural Communities: The Impact of a Specialized Economy*, 1973.

¹⁹ P Horn, 'Agricultural Unionism and Emigration', *Hist Jour*, XLVI, 1972, pp 89-99.

¹⁷ Deane and Cole, *op cit*, p 108.

extensive direct transference of rural labourers to foreign parts, since the evidence of American shipping lists indicates that townsmen overwhelmingly predominated among emigrants from the United Kingdom.²⁰ From the perspective adopted here these distinctions are relatively unimportant. The direct effect of the loss of manpower upon the agricultural labour market was similar regardless of whether it was occasioned by overseas emigration, movement to the towns (which predominated at all times), or even permanent shifts of occupation without corresponding residential inobility.

The last demographic factor to be considered here was very directly affected by migratory flows, that is, the composition of the remaining population by sex and by age. Long ago Ravenstein announced as his seventh law of migration that females were more migratory than males, at least over short distances, a fact which obviously related to the easy assimilation of country girls into urban domestic service.²¹ This is consistent with the evidence of the 1911 Census which gives a ratio of 1087 females per 1000 males in urban districts and 1001:1000 in their rural counterparts. The contrast is often much more striking when individual towns and their rural environs are compared. In the case of York in 1851 the sex ratio was 1138 females to 1000 males in the Municipal Borough; 924:1000 in the rural residue of York Registration District.²²

The effect of migration on the pattern of age-distribution is more complex. On the evidence of the 1911 Census there was a comparative dearth of males aged 20–44 in rural areas; consequently the proportion of

males aged under 20 and over 45 was higher in the countryside than in the towns. In particular, the relatively high proportion of elderly persons attracted comment. Some years earlier, Charles Booth pointed out that according to the 1881 Census there were 28 persons per 1000 aged over 65 in urban districts and 53 per cent more (ie 43 per 1000) in rural districts, which he attributed to longer life expectation in the country and the habit of retirement to rural areas, but above all to the effects of age-selective migration from the countryside, deemed 'by far the greatest of the causes'.²³ Of course, these figures relate to rural populations as a whole, but all the indications are that the agricultural labourers corresponded to the pattern. From the 1891 Census it may be ascertained that elderly workers (ie those aged 55 and over) were approximately three times as numerous, as a proportion, in the farm labour force than among railway employees or coal-miners. Table 2 shows the comparative deficiency of men aged 20–44, those who had acquired the skills of the farm work and were still in the physical prime of life.

TABLE 2
Age Composition of the Male Labour Force
Aged 10 and Upwards,
England and Wales, 1891

	Percentage aged					
	–20	20–4	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–
A. Agric labs, farm servants, shepherds	28.0	11.9	16.8	12.7	11.9	18.6
B. Remainder of male occupied population	19.8	13.6	23.6	18.1	12.9	11.7
C. % by which A exceeds B	+41	–14	–29	–30	–8	+59

Source: Based on BPP 1893–94 CVI. 1891 Census, England and Wales. Ages, etc. Abstract. Table 5, pages x–xxv.

²⁰C Erickson, 'Who were the English and Scots Emigrants to the United States in the late Nineteenth Century?' in D V Glass and R Revell (eds) *Population and Social Change*, 1972, pp 359–60. However, Dr Erickson has no way of knowing to what extent these urban points of origin were temporary staging posts.

²¹E C Ravenstein, 'The Laws of Migration', *Jour Stat Soc*, XXXXVIII, 1885, pp 196–9.

²²W A Armstrong, 'The Social Structure of York, 1841–51', Birmingham University PhD thesis, 1967, Appendix, Table E6.

²³R.C. on *Aged Poor*, Mins of Evidence, Vol III. BPP 1895 V [C. 9684–II], p 587.

Changes in the age-sex composition characterizing rural areas and the farm labour force may have had some significant implications for labour productivity;²⁴ it is certain that they had a profound demographic influence, for, as a consequence of the shortage of young married adults, *crude* fertility rates had diminished, according to Cairncross, to 24 per 1000 in the northern rural residual districts and 23 in the south, by the first years of the twentieth century.²⁵ This does not signify that the families of those who remained were becoming much smaller. Indeed, as we have seen, in a relative sense they were becoming larger. Rowntree and Kendall pointed out that the ratio of children aged 0–14 enumerated in 1901 to married women was much as 20 per cent higher in rural than in urban districts.²⁶

III

Most historians tend to treat population as a derivative of economic and social change, and the latest series of articles attempting to link agrarian and demographic change in England and Wales are no exception to this general rule.²⁷ In the analysis which follows, population changes of the kind just described are taken as given, and their consequences are explored. This is by no means an inappropriate standpoint when we bear in mind that population growth was general in Europe. Nor is it in any way unconventional, since it accords closely with the position often adopted by present-day economists and

sociologists when they address the development problems of the third world. Lastly, it is not claimed as an original perspective. Whilst, hitherto, no-one has attempted to trace the influence of demographic factors across the lengthy time-period taken in this article, Professors Chambers and Mingay drew attention to the 'great upswing in population' as a cause of rural poverty in the early nineteenth century and later in their work acknowledged the impact of the rate of migration from rural areas on wage levels. Likewise, Professor Jones recognized migration as the major factor working to improve the farm worker's position once the overall size of the agricultural labour force began to fall.²⁸ It is convenient to take the year 1850 (before which the agricultural labour force was rising, and after which it fell), to divide the period 1750–1914 into two phases, manageable within the constraints of an article. Whilst each obviously contained very distinctive sub-periods, such an arrangement is best suited to the present purpose of surveying the significance of long-run demographic influences on the labourer's situation.

IV

The abiding impression drawn from the first period (c1750–1850) is of an extraordinary regional and even local variety of standards and experiences. From the mid-eighteenth century down to the French wars such evidence as we have shows little sign of advancing real wages among labourers even in the rural environs of London, whilst in parts of the south (notably the south-west) wage increases may not have kept pace with prices.²⁹ On the other hand northern wages, which in the past had tended to be lower,

²⁴On this controversy see E H Hunt, 'Labour Productivity in English Agriculture, 1850–1914', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XX, 1967, and the critical comments on his work by D Metcalfe and P A David in *ibid*, XXII, 1969 and XIII, 1970.

²⁵Cairncross, *op cit*, p 82.

²⁶B S Rowntree and M Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, 1913, p 34.

²⁷G Philpott, 'Enclosure and Population Growth in Eighteenth Century England', *Explor Econ Hist*, XII, 1975, pp 29–46 and M Turner, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and Population Change in England, 1750–1830', *ibid*, XIII, 1976, pp 463–8. Philpott contends that enclosure improved animal and thereby human health, and Turner criticizes his methodology and use of sources.

²⁸J D Chambers and G E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750–1880*, 1966, pp 102–3, 186–9; E L Jones, 'The Agricultural Labour Market in England, 1793–1872', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XVII, 1964, pp 329–32.

²⁹E Gilboy, *Wages in Eighteenth Century England*, Cambridge, Mass, 1934, pp 53, 56, 59, 130–1.

were from the 1770s showing definite signs of advance. The data founded by Bowley on wage-statements culled from Eden's *State of the Poor* suggests that by 1795 those counties later designated by Caird as 'northern' had already gained about a 19 per cent advantage,³⁰ and the reason is not far to seek. Evidence from the *General Views* of agriculture, notably those of Lancashire, Staffordshire and South Wales, attests to the significance of competition for labour from collieries, ironworks, lime-kilns, and canals as a factor affecting wages. The emerging 'north-south' differential was still more apparent by the mid-century, and was then estimated by Caird at 37 per cent.³¹ Whilst it was not demographic in origin the contrast reflected the emergence of a different balance in the supply of and demand for labour in agriculture, favourable in general to the northern counties.

The impact of the French wars upon the position of the labourer was complex and the hardships imposed by soaring prices in years of acute difficulty such as 1795, 1800-01 and 1812 should not be minimized. But it would appear that a 96 per cent advance in Gazette wheat prices between 1788-92 and 1810-14 was nearly matched by a 92 per cent increase in money wages, so that, as Professor Flinn concludes, it is not clear that any significant change in real wage-rates occurred either way during the period. Professor Jones goes further, arguing that real wages in agriculture actually rose during the war years.³² It seems likely that he had in mind not real wage-rates but real earnings, for we have numerous indications that the labourers were more fully employed than hitherto, raising the probability that their harvest earnings rose disproportionately. 'In the dear times they were then fully employed', commented a

Cambridgeshire contribution to the 1816 *Report on the Agricultural State of the Kingdom*.³³ Moreover the times were conducive to the extension of female and juvenile employment, especially at peak seasons. It is likely that this preceded the war years to some extent as a consequence of the cultivation of more root crops, whilst with the diminution of hand-spinning some of the traditional alternatives were already disappearing. Be that as it may, any such development can hardly fail to have been reinforced by a quasi-demographic factor, namely the absence of many men on military service. Dr Collins has estimated that the number of enlisted men rose from less than 100,000 in 1792 to 345,000 in 1802 and 465,000 (a figure equivalent to more than one-fifth of the male population aged 15-49 of England and Wales) in 1811.³⁴ Although many were drawn from the Highlands and from Ireland, a thinning of the ranks of agricultural labourers can hardly fail to have created more opportunities for females, and thereby to have raised gross family incomes.

In 1814-16 the agricultural industry passed from prosperity to extreme depression. Faced with falling prices farmers naturally looked to retrench and felt obliged to reduce their staffs just as huge numbers were being disgorged from the armed forces. It is true, the worst shock effects of peace were a passing phase, but the expansiveness of farmers as a body was never quite the same again through the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s. If demobilization had a once and for all effect, the remorseless pressure of rural population growth, hitherto masked by wartime conditions, came to exercise an unmistakable and baneful influence on the employment situation. These were the years when it came to be supposed, correctly, that the southern counties, at least, were afflicted with a grave

³⁰ A L Bowley, *Wages in the United Kingdom*, Cambridge, 1900. This calculation is based on the 1795 column of the table of weekly wages facing p 144.

³¹ J Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, 1852, p 516.

³² Mitchell and Deane, op cit, p 488; M W Flinn, 'Trends in Real Wages, 1750-1850', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXVII, 1974, pp 407-8; Jones, op cit, p 324.

³³ Board of Agriculture, *The Agricultural State of the Kingdom, 1816*, Bath, 1970 edn, p 42. See also pp 148, 229 for similar references from Leicestershire and Northamptonshire.

³⁴ E J T Collins, 'Harvest Technology and Labour Supply in Britain, 1790-1870', Nottingham University PhD thesis, 1970, p 155.

problem of 'surplus population', the nature of which was grasped clearly enough by Lord Melbourne: 'The evil is in numbers and the sort of competition that ensues.'³⁵ It revealed itself most clearly in acute winter unemployment, the details of which, for the most severely affected areas in the worst years, were brought together forty years ago by Professor Gash.³⁶ Against this gloomy background a trend to falling money wages might be expected; it is clearly in evidence in Bowley's statistics and in Dr Richardson's study of wages paid on individual estates across a wide area.³⁷ It is true, prices also were in secular decline, reflected in the cost of living indices for the period. The juxtaposition of the series then available caused Sir John Clapham to argue, optimistically, that the real wages of agricultural labourers advanced during the 1820s and 1830s.³⁸ There may be a parallel here with the situation a hundred years later, for it is now a commonplace observation in texts covering the inter-war years that those still in regular work secured significant advances in real wages. All the same, it would be difficult to represent these years as a time of broad-based advance in rural welfare. Too many men were either unemployed or under-employed, and the times were no longer propitious for extensive family participation, since there was a sense that adult males had a prior claim on what work there was. It is surely significant that these years witnessed the two major outbreaks of rural discontent in 1816 and 1830;³⁹ and no less so, in view of

what has been said about the importance of regional differences in supply of and demand for labour, that the northern and midland counties remained largely immune from the disturbances.

Taking fair advantage of hindsight, Dr Collins has detected the first signs of a drying-up of the labour surplus from as early as the mid-1830s, with corn output set on a rising trend and industry, especially railway building, exercising a vigorous pull on labour.⁴⁰ In fact the years down to 1850 are exceedingly complex with much variation from year to year and between different districts. Suffice it to say that in the later 1840s, with the labour force climbing to its zenith, the first of our two long periods closed on a sombre and cheerless note, with low prices following in the immediate wake of the Repeal of the Corn Laws and widespread reports of wage reductions and shortages of work.

Across the period so far considered, the labourer's living standard varied greatly from one region to another, and over time. Overall, so far as any averaging concept has value, it is difficult to see it advancing or declining significantly in an absolute sense. What seems incontestable is that the situation of the labourers, in general, was declining relative to that of the other agrarian classes, that is, landlords and farmers. This view derives some support from the work by Deane and Cole on factor shares in agriculture. Their statistics, which are expressed in money rather than real terms, exhibit an overall increase in rents and profits of some £17.3 million between 1801 and 1851, allocable among (we may safely presume) a stationary or even slightly declining number of claimants; whilst labour's share increased by only £13.7m, distributed among what was quite certainly a rapidly increasing body of

³⁵J L and B Hammond, op cit, 1978 edn, p 240; and see the editor's introduction, p xiv.

³⁶N Gash, 'Rural Unemployment, 1815-34, *Econ Hist Rev*, 1st ser, VI, 1935.

³⁷Bowley, op cit, table facing p 144; Mitchell and Deane, op cit, p 349; T L Richardson, 'The Standard of Living Controversy 1790-1840, with Special Reference to Agricultural Labourers in Seven English Counties', Hull University PhD thesis, 1977, chs 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17.

³⁸See the graph in J H Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, I, Cambridge, 2nd edn, 1930, p 128.

³⁹The most recent investigations of these events are A J Peacock, *Bread or Blood*, 1965, and E J Hobsbawm and G Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1969.

⁴⁰Collins, op cit, pp 179-80; and see his article, 'Harvest Technology and Labour Supply in Britain, 1790-1870', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXII, 1969, p 467.

workers.⁴¹ This accords with what one would expect according to the laws of demand and supply, and in the factors influencing the supply side, demographic circumstances apparently played a dominant role in accounting not only for the relative depression of the labourers' living standards, but also, in some measure, for the important regional variations.

Such a conclusion would doubtless fail to meet with universal assent. For example, Professors Hobshawm and Rudé, in *Captain Swing*, devote only half a page to population, blame the failure of employment to rise at a commensurate rate, and assert that 'it was not human biology but human society which created the surplus labour in the countryside'.⁴² Yet the institutional factors traditionally cited as primary influences upon rural population growth and on the position of the labourer in general carry less and less conviction. Modern research shows little if any sign of the much-vaunted demographic consequences of the Old Poor Law, with Professor Tucker finding no significant positive correlation between the 1821 census fertility ratios by county and levels of per capita poor expenditure over the period 1817-21.⁴³ Within the county of Kent an examination of 17 parishes gives no warrant for the view that the allowance system operated as a significant inducement to marriages and births. Rather, Dr Huzel is inclined to argue that far from being a catalyst to population increase, the allowance system was a response to it, citing with approval the opinion of Professor Chambers that, at most, the Old Poor Law caused 'only a mere eddy

on the surface of the demographic tide'.⁴⁴ This is not to suggest that the workings of the Poor Law did not colour social relationships, but it should fall into place as a consequential or secondary factor, just as the adoption of a hard-faced attitude to the rural poor on the part of many squires and overseers probably reflected their inability to perceive the nature of the forces in train, rather than the capture of their minds by a new set of *laissez-faire* principles, as historians such as E P Thompson and Harold Perkin believe.⁴⁵

Likewise the impact of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century enclosures has been grossly exaggerated in the past. In practice, as Gonner and Chambers showed, they were compatible with increases in the size of the farm labour force, and certainly not associated with rural depopulation.⁴⁶ Moreover those historians who lay stress on the loss of common rights have scarcely, if ever, asked themselves what would have been the consequences of rural population growth whatever benefits had been derived from the commons in the past. It must surely have implied either increasing proportions excluded from those rights, or, had universal access been allowed to the burgeoning class of labourers, a marked deterioration in the quality of grazing which was, in many cases, already poor. Recent studies give further

⁴¹ Deane and Cole, *op cit*, pp 152, 166. Note though, that landlords may well have benefited more than farmers from high wartime prices; whilst the absolute level of farm profits rose, the rate of return on the capital they employed only occasionally reached 14 per cent. This is the conclusion of G Hueckel, 'English Farming Profits during the Napoleonic Wars', *Explor Econ Hist*, XIII, 1976, pp 342-3, after consulting the records of nine farms.

⁴² Hobshawm and Rudé, *op cit*, pp 42-3.

⁴³ G S L Tucker, 'The Old Poor Law Revisited', *Explor Econ Hist*, XII, 1975, pp 239-40.

⁴⁴ J P Huxel, 'The Demographic Impact of the Old Poor Law: More Reflections on Malthus'. Unpublished paper, pp 28-30. (Forthcoming in *Econ Hist Review*.)

⁴⁵ E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963, pp 218-20; H J Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 1969, pp 184-7.

⁴⁶ E C K Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure*, 1912, pp 396-447; J D Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, V, 1953, pp 332-3, 339-40. Two recent theoretical studies have argued that the appearance of a higher labour-land ratio following enclosure does not mean that the change was labour-intensive in the economist's sense, but do not query the increasing aggregate level of farm employment in the period. See B D Baack and R P Thomas, 'The Enclosure Movement and the Supply of Labour during the Industrial Revolution', *Jour Eur Econ Hist*, III, 1974, pp 401-23 and N F R Crafts, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply Revisited', *Explor Econ Hist*, XV, 1978, pp 172-83.

support to the revisionist view of the social consequences of enclosure. Professor Tucker concedes that in the western counties, where pastoral farming predominated, enclosure was associated with 'a lingering element of social distress' which tended to inflate per capita relief in 1817-21; but in the predominantly arable east, where such outlays were in general higher, there was actually a significantly *negative* relationship with the percentage of land enclosed between 1761 and 1821.⁴⁷ Most recently, after going thoroughly through a mass of literature, Dr Yelling has concluded that although the impact of enclosure on population varied in individual parishes, its general effect was far from catastrophic; that its impact on the poor rates was not the main cause of their increase; and that most common-field townships already had a comparatively restricted pattern of ownership and common rights by the end of the eighteenth century if not indeed well before.⁴⁸ The frailty of the alternative institutional arguments leave a void which the demographic case neatly occupies.

V

In the years after 1850 the agricultural labour force began to shrink; the ratio of agricultural employees to farmers and graziers fell from 5.1 in 1851 to 2.9 in 1901.⁴⁹ Explanations of the trend have sometimes been sought in a theory of technological displacement, which, in the eyes of some historians, played a role complementary to that of enclosure in the previous generation. As Hasbach put it, 'What the intensive application of capital in agriculture effects . . . under conditions of free competition and tenant farming, is economy of labour in general'.⁵⁰ The theory has some superficial attractions. Save for the notorious case of the threshing machine, mechanization had hitherto made little impact on English

agriculture, and sowing machines in the 1850s and 1860s, the steam tractor from the 1870s and the self-binding reaper from the 1880s have to be reckoned with. Yet all these innovations had notorious drawbacks in use, and although it is possible to trace localized references to labour displacement in, for example, the material gathered for the Royal Commission on Labour (of 1893), there are also many suggestions that implements were being introduced on account of labour shortages, rather than as a means to enable workpeople to be dispensed with. Surveying the evidence as a whole W C Little was inclined to think that the reduction of farm staffs was a consequence rather than the cause of migration from the land.⁵¹ However, it is probable that increasing mechanization did tend to depress gross family earnings at harvest-time. Indicatively, it was reported that on account of 'the perfection of machinery', harvests in Wiltshire could be secured 'in as many days as it used to take weeks', given good weather; and that harvest earnings instead of being from £6 to £8, were considered good at £3.⁵²

If, as this suggests, the chief impact of mechanization was to reduce the level of dependence on casual labour in peak seasons, the weekly wages of the adult male labourer need not have been much affected. But it is clear that they continued to be very much influenced by the demographic factors which played so important a role in regulating the supply of labour. For the years down to 1870 (when his article terminates), we find Professor Jones arguing for a very gradual shift in the labourer's favour as the expansion of demand associated with the developments of the 'Golden Age' of agriculture began to overtake a supply which was beginning to contract. Admittedly, this was more obvious at some points than others, but there are

⁴⁷Tucker, *op cit*, pp 242-4.

⁴⁸J A Yelling, *Common Field and Enclosure in England, 1450-1850*, 1977, pp 226-8.

⁴⁹Derived from Taylor, *op cit*, pp 38-9.

⁵⁰Hasbach, *op cit*, p 258.

⁵¹R.C. on Labour. *The Agricultural Labourer*, vol V(I), *General Report*. BPP 1893-4 XXXVII — Pt II [C. 6894-XXV], p 40.

⁵²*Ibid*, vol I (II), *Report of C M Chapman*, BPP 1893-4 XXXVII — Pt II [C. 6894-II], p 46.

many signs, which he has documented, of changing attitudes to the labourer's welfare and of more vigorous philanthropic activity.⁵³ His contention that farm wages were directly influenced by the volume of migration has recently received valuable support from Dr Hunt's studies, which, at the county level, show that (in marked contrast to the relationship between wages and fertility), migration losses were linked with wage levels. Correlation coefficients of 0.47 and 0.33 emerge when the net migratory flows of 1871-91 and 1891-1911 are related to, respectively, farm earnings in 1867-70 and 1898. Migration thus harmonized to some extent with the pattern of wage differentials and is likely to have contributed significantly to their erosion. Of course, this is not to say that they disappeared. Indeed, so strong and deep-seated were the underlying regional forces affecting the market demand for agricultural labour that in 1907 the maximum wage still exceeded the minimum by some 28 per cent. However, in 1867-70 the corresponding figure had been 44 per cent.⁵⁴

Taken overall, the Bowley index of earnings in agriculture averaged 90 in 1860-66 and reached 117 during 1873-77 (1891 = 100).⁵⁵ It subsequently fell back noticeably but in 1890-96 still stood at 100, which means, when we bear in mind the falling cost of living during the later nineteenth century, that an appreciable increase in real wages had occurred. This cannot have been offset fully by decreased family earnings at harvest time nor even by the probable set-back to real wages which, in common with many other substantial sections of the working class, was the experience of most agricultural labourers in the years after 1900.⁵⁶ Moreover in the later nineteenth

century the position of the labourers no longer tended to deteriorate (as clearly it had in our first period) relative to the other elements of agrarian society. Indeed, according to the statistics given by Deane and Cole, labour's share of income from the 'depressed' agricultural sector tended to run at a slightly higher level during the second half of the nineteenth century, peaking in 1881 (40.2 per cent). The 1901 figure (38.8 per cent) remained above those derived from any of the eight observations covering the period 1801-71.⁵⁷

Needless to say these faint traces of a relative improvement pale into insignificance when the immense social differences still evident in English rural society are borne in mind. In many ways it is much more pertinent to compare the situation of the agricultural labourers with that of other elements in the working class. On the one hand, it is clear that their standard of life improved significantly between the 1850s and 1900, if not thereafter, and that migration had operated in such a way as to affect the relationship of demand and supply advantageously. On the other, it is just as apparent that their welfare, especially in the southern counties, trailed badly, and in many respects more obviously than ever, behind the progress of the working classes as a whole. According to Bellerby, the ratio between the average industrial and agricultural wage remained of the order of 2:1 in 1911-14.⁵⁸ Nor did this tell the whole story. Bienefeld has drawn attention to the reduction of hours in some trades and manufacturing industries from as

between 1900 and 1912, retail prices rose by 16 per cent; that after 1907 real earnings in the better paid counties were increasing but elsewhere they were not; and that overall, the real earnings of some 60 per cent of ordinary agricultural labourers decreased after 1907.

⁵⁷ Deane and Cole, *op cit*, pp 152, 166. Unfortunately it is not possible to quote a figure for 1911.

⁵⁸ J R Bellerby, 'The Distribution of Farm Income in the United Kingdom, 1867-1938', *Proc Agric Econ Soc*, X, 1953, quoted in Saville, *op cit*, p 13. Note also that in 1901, the share of labour in mining, manufacturing and dealing was 48.1 per cent and in trade and transport 46.5. (Deane and Cole, *loc cit*.)

⁵³ Jones, *op cit*, p 330-5.

⁵⁴ Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, pp 58-9, 244-5, 248.

⁵⁵ Bowley's national index is reprinted in Mitchell and Deane, *op cit*. See p 350.

⁵⁶ Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land*, I, 1913, pp 9, 11-12. It is suggested that whilst wages rose by 5 per cent

early as the 1850s, and to a general re-adjustment in 1872-74, whilst about 1880 a working week of some 54-56 hours became the norm.⁵⁹ By the Edwardian period the Saturday half-holiday was almost universal in towns. The case of the farm labourer was different. Partly on account of the nature of the work, the hours he was obliged to put in had been left at a decidedly higher level. Half-holidays were exceptional, stockmen could not avoid Sunday duties, and in two-thirds of the villages surveyed by the Land Enquiry Committee the usual hours of work, even outside the harvest period, were 10 a day, corresponding to 60 a week and often more. It was, according to a Lincolnshire labourer, 'the constant grind, month in and out, with never an hour to call their own' that the labourers increasingly resented.⁶⁰ Here we should recall that, on their modest wages, secured by dint of what were coming to be regarded as abnormal hours of labour, farm workers had a family of above-average size to maintain.

It would appear that, in the period after 1850, demographic factors continued to exert a powerful influence on the agricultural labourer's standard of life. They go far to explain the absolute increases that were won (through migration); the surviving regional differentials; and, in some measure, the disadvantages which, as a class, the labourers continued to suffer through their comparatively high marital fertility. Against this background of relative deprivation we need scarcely wonder at the frequency of contemporary comments concerning the labourer's 'want of outlook'; or at reading that a Northumbrian hind's daughter would consider that she had bettered herself by marrying *anyone* not connected with farm employment; or at learning that 'the girls would look at a boy in Ipswich on a Saturday

night, find out that he was a farm labourer, and then stop looking sharp'.⁶¹

VI

The point of view set out here carries what some would consider Malthusian overtones. However, the problem has not been approached as an exercise in arranging historical facts in such a way as to illustrate and justify a position rooted in a set of dogmatic theoretical principles. Nor should an implicit approval of Malthusian prescriptions (chiefly, the advocacy of a stringent poor law and a greater recourse to 'moral restraint') be read into the argument. In point of fact the demographic forces which so profoundly influenced the supply of labour and hence the worker's standard of life, as well as the low level of esteem in which he was held, were scarcely comprehended during most of the period considered by landlords, farmers and least of all by the labourers themselves. Even if they had been, it is difficult to envisage any sequence of development other than that traced in these pages. To analyse the position of the labourer in such terms may seem mechanistic and indeed somewhat fatalistic. Yet the demographic approach seems to have considerably more explanatory value than the usual alternatives which argue intuitively from harrowing individual cases; or which proceed from Marxist assumptions about class;⁶² or which, in the characteristic style of our times, seek to impute the blame for the labourer's misfortunes to such a safe but elusive target as society in the round.

1972 edn, p 100. The second reference, from a farm worker and trade unionist, refers to 'the old days', probably the inter-war period.

⁶² In case this point should be misunderstood it is worth stressing that the existence of vast social differences in rural society and even 'labour consciousness' is not in question. What is much more doubtful is whether the mass of the labourers were imbued with 'class consciousness' in the Marxist sense, leading them to perceive their interests as fundamentally opposed to their employers, and to seek to engage in 'class conflict'. In a word, they were unlikely to be guided by any acquaintance with either Marx or Malthus!

⁵⁹ M A Benefield, *Working Hours in British Industry*, 1972, pp 82, 106, 122.

⁶⁰ Land Enquiry Committee, *op cit*, pp 15-16.

⁶¹ R.C. on Labour, vol I (III). Report of A W Fox, BPP 1983-4 XXXV [C. 6894-III], p 103; R Blythe, *Akenfield*,