

'The Last Survivor of an Ancient Race': The Changing Face of Essex Gleaning*

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Abstract

Past authors have identified the early twentieth century as the point at which gleaning finally vanished from the lives and labour of the rural working-class. This paper seeks to re-position this decline, placing its disappearance forward some forty or fifty years to the decades following the Second World War. However, gleaning did not simply continue unchanged into the twentieth century, as the customary practices that had once accompanied it now became obsolete. The paper examines the reasons for the continued use of gleaning, its changed form, and places the decline of its customary practice within a wider context of changes occurring in rural popular culture at this time.

WISHING to capture what he believed to be the changing character of the inter-war English countryside H E Bates penned his story of *The Gleaner*.¹ Bates chose as its subject the tale of a single day's labour by an elderly woman as she gleaned in the late summer's heat of a harvest field. The tale is a short and unremarkable one. However, the subject matter and the way in which Bates expressed it are of interest as his narration communicates the author's wider observations and emotions. Within the story Bates' gleaner was clearly intended to represent a lost age in which people's lives and fortunes were bound inextricably to the soil upon which they worked. Where once:

Long ago, in another century, she also came up to the same field, on just such still, light-flooded afternoons, for this same eternal and unchanging purpose. But not alone; they would glean then, in families, occasionally in villages, with handcarts and barrows, from early morn until evening...²

Bates' gleaner was now left undisturbed in her efforts:

It is as though there is no one in the world except herself who gleans any longer. She is not merely alone: she is the last of the gleaners, the last survivor of an ancient race.³

The reference to 'an ancient race' was a deliberate attempt by the author to evoke the notion that the twentieth century was bringing an end to the 'traditional' culture and society of the countryside. Sharing a fashionable vision of the rural world with a diverse coalition of contemporary political, artistic and social commentators who included the likes of Stanley Baldwin, Ralph Vaughan Williams, H V Morton, Mary Webb and H J Massingham, Bates believed that this 'tradition' lay at the very core of the meaning of England and Englishness.⁴ His likening of the gleaner to an '...earth-figure, as old and ageless and primitive as the corn she carries...' and his description of her as being driven on in her work by '...some inherent, unconscious, eternal impulse...' merely served to underline his views. For Bates the dwindling number of gleaners in the fields of England was just a further manifestation of the erosion of the peasant-like qualities of rural working people as they moved

*The research for this article was generously supported by Essex County Council through their funding of my position as Essex County Council Research Fellow in Local History at the University of Essex. My thanks also go to John Walter, Alun Howkins, Steve Caunce and an anonymous referee for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I alone am responsible for any errors that remain.

¹ H E Bates, 'The gleaner', *Country Tales*, 1938 (1992 ed), pp 69–73.

² *Ibid*, p 69.

³ *Ibid*, p 71.

⁴ For a brilliant exploration of the range of adherents to the belief in the link between the countryside, nation, its people and their character, see Patrick Wright, *The Village that died for England: The Strange Story of Tyncham*, 1995, esp parts 2 and 3.

onwards into the twentieth century. The 'simple' rusticity and organic community that had supposedly characterized other centuries of village life was now being swept aside by the coming of the likes of motor transport, tinned foods, seaside holidays, weekly trips to the cinema and evenings around the wireless.

Bates' assertions regarding gleaning were correct in some respects. It did have lengthy antecedents which extended back into biblical references within the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.⁵ Gleaning had also long been an established part of the annual agricultural calendar, becoming a widespread feature of many household economies of the rural poor from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶ Bates was also accurate in his estimations of the importance that gleaners had once attached to their labour when he wrote 'Since it meant so much, since corn was life – that law was as old as time itself – they gleaned incessantly, desperately'.⁷ Peter King's research on gleaning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has shown that as much as one-eighth of a labouring household's annual earnings in central and southern England could come from this source.⁸

However, as an overall indication of gleaning activity in the countryside during the inter-war years Bates' account needs to be viewed with a good deal of circumspection. The research presented here employs a range of oral and documentary sources for a single county, Essex, to relocate the end of gleaning in the village from the late nineteenth century, the position assigned to it by Bates and modern historians alike, forward to the mid-part of the twentieth. In doing so it reveals that the gleaner remained a relatively common

sight in harvest fields throughout the 1920s and 1930s until the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁹ Nor were these gleaners just the solitary elderly members of an 'ancient race'. Instead they also contained the mixed ranks of younger mothers and children that had for decades made up the bulk of the gleaners' numbers. What this article demonstrates is that rather than eradicating the gleaner, the twentieth century brought with it changes in the ways in which people gleaned and the uses they put their gleanings to. Gleaning continued as a feature of village life but the customary regulation that had once accompanied it disappeared, while the place occupied by gleaning in the domestic economies of village people was shifted from their centres to their margins.

I

An elderly Essex gleaner of the 1920s wishing to reflect upon memories of her annual visits to village fields during the cereal harvest would have been able to point to several unbroken features of her days spent gleaning now and those of her youth in the 1860s and 1870s. Not least would be the back-breaking nature of the work amongst the rough stubble which was always ready to scratch the bare flesh of hands, arms and legs. The work remained as tough and as uncomfortable as it had ever been. Gleaning also continued to be dominated by village women and their children. The occasional presence of an elderly man would be the only representation of adult male workers at a time of the year when the demand for farm labour was at its highest point with the annual harvest.

⁹ This article is based upon twenty-five oral history interviews conducted in Steeple Bumpstead, Helions Bumpstead and Toppesfield, North Essex, between 1992 and 1995. Use was also made of the oral history interviews of Basil Slaughter (held at the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford [hereafter ERO]), Essex based interviews within the *Family Life and Work Experience before 1918* project (held at the Department of Sociology, University of Essex), and also the written reminiscences of elderly people collected in the annual Age Concern Essay Writing Competition dating from 1955 onwards (held at the ERO).

⁵ *Leviticus*, xix, 9 & 10; *Deuteronomy*, xxiv, 19 & 21.

⁶ Peter King, 'Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the labouring poor, 1750–1850', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, xxiv, 1991, pp 469–72.

⁷ Bates, 'The gleaner', p 69.

⁸ King, 'Customary rights', p 474.

Nonetheless, amongst the continuities within her memory the elderly gleaner would also have been able to point to a number of significant changes in the way in which gleaning was now organized in the village. Foremost in her thoughts would have been the virtual disappearance of the formal mechanisms by which gleaning had once been regulated. The sight of the guard sheaf and the sound of the gleaning bell would have formed part of her youthful experience of the harvest fields in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, by the 1920s and '30s such phenomena were likely to be nothing more than dim recollections.

The guard sheaf, or gleaning policeman as it was also known, was nothing more than a single stook of sheaves left in the harvested field. Nevertheless its significance was recognized by all in the village. While it remained none was to enter that field to glean. After reaping it was common practice for farmers to rake the harvested field to ensure that as many as possible of the valuable stray ears from the crop were collected. On occasions too, the farmer might prefer to fold his pigs or fowl upon a newly harvested field to pick amongst the stubble for the remaining grain. It was of course these same stray ears that were the prize of the gleaner. The guard sheaf ensured that the farmer took first claim to this bounty.

The use by farmers of guard sheaves to delay the entrance of the local gleaner was common in the Essex countryside of the nineteenth century. Writing in the columns of the *Essex Review* during 1925 but drawing on memories that extended 'back to the year 1842' one correspondent could recall the power and authority that this simple sign had held to the gleaners in his village, Earls Colne, near Halstead:

Gleaning was not allowed to commence until the field was cleared and a few sheaves left standing were quite sufficient to ensure this, and I have seen the gleaners, while waiting for the field to be

cleared, indulge in games or sing songs to wile away the time.¹⁰

An Essex farmer's son could also recall his father employing a 'policeman' at his farm in nearby White Colne:

At Colne we used to leave a trave or a couple of sheaves standing near the gate, until the rakings had all been taken up. As soon as this was removed the gleaners knew that they were free to begin.¹¹

At Radwinter and its neighbouring parish of Hempstead it was simply noted by another correspondent that '...there used to be sheaf of wheat left in the field if it had not been raked, and so was not ready for gleaners'.¹²

The regulation of gleaning did not only come from the side of the farmer. There were also rules which were self-imposed and widely respected by gleaners themselves. The central tenet to these was the regulation of hours. Until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gleaning operated in most Essex parishes to strictly controlled and well-observed timetables. In many parishes the beginning and sometimes the end of the gleaner's working day were governed by the ringing of a bell, usually the church bell, or as it was called locally, the gleaning bell. Eliza Vaughan, the Essex author whose books published in the 1920s gave a portrait of the people and events of her own village of Finchingfield 'in days gone by', described the 'ancient' practice of ringing the gleaning bell and the obedience that this exercised over villagers:

The work was conducted according to ancient customs; women and children might be seen hurrying off in the early morning to take up their places in some distant field, but not an ear might be picked up before, at eight o'clock, the gleaning bell from the church tower gave the signal to commence.¹³

From the Revd Cecil Deedes' and H B

¹⁰ Letter from Reuben Hunt, Earls Colne, *Essex Review*, xxxiv, 1925, p 162.

¹¹ Letter from Alfred Hills, Bocking, *Essex Review*, xxxiv, 1925, p 107.

¹² Letter from L Myhill, Saffron Walden, *Essex Review*, xxxiv, 1925, p 211.

¹³ Eliza Vaughan, *The Stream of Time: Sketches of Village Life in Days Gone By*, Colchester, 1926, p 84.

Walters' voluminous account *The Church Bells of Essex* (published in 1909) it also becomes possible to acquire an accurate guide to the hours of the gleaner's day. Basing their report on a survey of half the county's churches the authors noted those parishes in which a gleaning bell had been heard within the preceding twenty years and recorded that:

At Gestingthorpe and Hadstock the hours were 8am and 5pm; at Belchamp St Paul's, Boreham, Bulmer, Cressing, Great Maplestead and Stambourne at 8 and 6; at Ashdon, Broxted, Farnham, Hepstead, Henham, and Manuden, at 9 and 5; at Wendens Ambro at 8.30am; at Borley and Dedham at times not specified.¹⁴

Given the value of gleaning to the labouring household and given its limited supply and the few fleeting weeks at the end of each summer in which it became available, then the gleaning bell offered an important regulatory mechanism by which each household would be given an equal opportunity to take part. Crucially, by delaying the start of the gleaner's day it permitted those women with families the time in which to rise, marshal their children for the day's labour that lay ahead, and also to prepare their husband's breakfast and midday meal (the latter of which would be eaten in the fields). The gleaning bell was vital if this type of household was to be allowed to share in the hard-earned windfalls of the harvested fields. In a letter dated August 1933, Alfred Hills, solicitor and sometime agricultural correspondent to the *Essex Farmer's Journal*, wrote to an acquaintance recalling the purpose of the gleaning bell stating that he believed that 'This was to prevent ardent souls from getting up at two in the morning and starting gleaning before the mothers of the household could get a look in'.¹⁵ Others shared this view. Reuben Hunt recalled in

a 1925 edition of the *Essex Review* that at Earls Colne:

The bell was tolled by the church sexton at 8 o'clock in the morning, and I always understood the reasons for this was to give the married women time to dress their children and give them their breakfast before starting out, so that they had an equal chance with the single women.¹⁶

While the Essex clergyman and novelist Alfred Ludgater remembered gleaning and the gleaning bell from his youth and associated the latter with:

...the desire to give every gleaner a fair chance of getting a due share of the loose corn. Were there no rule of that kind some energetic but greedy gleaners would be in the fields at sunrise and stay till dusk.¹⁷

Elsewhere in the country the guard sheaf and the bell were sometimes accompanied by a gleaning queen, the name given to a woman elected each year by her fellow gleaners. Her role, which was not dissimilar to that of the 'lord' found amongst the reaping gangs at harvest, was to reinforce established rules of behaviour, restricting gleaning to certain hours and guarding against intrusion from the gleaners of neighbouring parishes.¹⁸ If a person was found to have broken any of these rules then it was the queen who would lead the response from the wider community of villagers. In the most well-known and detailed account of a gleaning queen, from Rempstone, Nottinghamshire in 1860, the list of punishments for disobeying her order in relation to the hours of gleaning was declared at her 'coronation and proclamation' which accompanied the beginnings of each season's gleaning. Part of her address to assembled villagers sounded the explicit warning that 'Should any of my subjects enter an ungleaned field, without

¹⁴ Reverend Cecil Deedes and H B Walters, *The Church Bells of Essex*, privately published, 1909, p 150.

¹⁵ ERO, T/P 116/86, Letter from Alfred Hills of Bocking to Mr Frank Hobson, Silver End, Whitham, 16 Aug 1933.

¹⁶ Hunt, 'Letter', p 162.

¹⁷ Letter from Alfred Ludgater, *Essex Review*, xxxiv, 1925, p 108.

¹⁸ For the functions of harvest lords see Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700-1880*, 1982, pp 111-16.

being led by me, their corn will be forfeited and it will be bestrewn'.¹⁹

There are far fewer references to gleaning queens in Essex than there are guard sheaves and bells. Just two separate sources point to their existence, both coming from the same village, Ashdon near Saffron Walden. Neither account suggests that the election of Ashdon's gleaning queen witnessed the same level of ritual and ceremony of the Rempstone example. Nevertheless the practical purpose of her investiture remained the same. As Ashdon gleaner Mary Goodwin recalled, part of the queen's role was to control entry into the gleaning fields:

There was a special way of doing it [gleaning]. We'd have to choose a sort of foreman called the 'Queen' and that 'Queen's' job was to see all started and finished at the same time and all had a fair crack of the whip. The 'Queen' would ring a bell for us to start off at about eight o'clock in the morning and we'd work on round till near seven at night. And when the bell rang again, we'd have to stop. Not that we needed telling at that time.²⁰

Two other Ashdon gleaners wrote of their village's queen noting that the community power she wielded would mean that miscreants in this part of Essex would suffer a fate identical to that of wrongdoers in Rempstone:

Those who infringed would have their gleanings taken from them and scattered. 'Fair shares for all' was the motto.²¹

By the inter-war years the excitement within parishes that had accompanied the election of the gleaning queen had been lost in the same way as the sight of the harvest field with a solitary guard sheaf and the early morning sounds of the gleaning bell. It is symptomatic of the disappearance of regulatory customs connected with

gleaning that when in 1925 a number of correspondents to the *Essex Review* wrote providing the journal with details of gleaning customs they did not describe the Essex countryside they saw around them but drew on their memories of the nineteenth century. The fact that their letters formed part of the magazine's 'Notes and Queries' column also suggests that the policeman, bell and queen had become consigned to the ranks of historical curiosities as opposed to remaining as contemporary aspects of village existence. This is certainly the category in which Eliza Vaughan placed the sound of Finchingfield's gleaning bell, choosing to include its description in one of her books under a chapter whose rubric simply reads 'Bygone Trades and Handicrafts'.²²

II

Yet the demise of mechanisms by which gleaning was regulated should not be taken as proof as to the end of gleaning itself. The fact that many families continued with this form of labour is apparent from the way in which gleaning features with striking regularity in the memories of those who grew up in the Essex countryside of the 1920s and '30s. No reference was made to the existence of the regulatory customs attached to gleaning by any of the twenty-five interviewees used for this research from the Essex villages of Steeple Bumpstead, Helions Bumpstead and Toppesfield. Nevertheless, twelve of the sample could recall being taken gleaning by their mothers or, in a minority of cases, by their grandmothers. Furthermore, all twenty-five could recall having seen gleaning taking place in their villages even if they had not participated directly themselves.

Gleaning had also left a lasting impression on those that had worked in

¹⁹ Letter from R F Sketchley, *Notes and Queries*, 2nd ser, Oct 1860, p 285. Also see D H Morgan, *Harvesters and Harvesting 1840-1900*, 1982, pp 158-9.

²⁰ Mary Goodwin, born 1884, interviewed 1971, in Robert Gibson, *Annals of Ashdon: No Ordinary Village*, Chelmsford, 1988, p 282.

²¹ Chris Ketteridge and Spike Mays, *Five Miles from Bunkum: A Village and its Crafts*, 1972, p 81.

²² Vaughan, *Stream of Time*, chap 9.

harvest fields as youths. Some, like Mr W of Toppesfield, were able to recall with considerable detail the method by which they had gleaned. His experiences relate to the years immediately after the First World War:

I've been gleaning, oh yes. Well, that was a right really. After the farmer had cut the corn, picked it up and, he was entitled to rake the field, but after he'd raked you could go and pick up the straws. We used to go and you'd get about, oh, twenty or thirty straws and you'd put them together like a bunch with just the ears sticking out and you'd twist the straw 'round, tie 'em with their own straw and you'd take 'em like that. Oh, gleaning was a right for anybody who would go on a corn field, at least we used to reckon it was. A farmer never stopped us.²³

Others, such as Mrs S of Steeple Bumpstead, recalled the sense of urgency that the onset of gleanng still brought each year:

We used to go gleanng. Dad used t'come home for his breakfast and say, 'Oh, you can go up Hungerdown today, the field is ready.' So off we used to go, ten o'clock in the morning, with a gleanng bag 'round here [points to her waist], pick up the short ears, and the other one would pick up the long ones and tie it up. Stop there 'till five and six at night. Take no food up there with us, we was out all day.²⁴

While the comments of another gleaner from Steeple Bumpstead suggest that gleanng remained a valued addition to many inter-war households:

The news spread about that so-and-so's field was ready for gleanng, the farmer's ready. There'd be such a rush and you'd go and glean it.²⁵

Other oral history work done in the county also points to the persistence of gleanng well into the twentieth century. Ashley Cooper has found people able to recall gleanng amongst the communities of north-east Essex in which he has lived and worked, while several of Rosamund Richardson's interviewees for her portrait

of a village community in the west of the county possessed similar memories.²⁶ Support is also lent to the oral sources from amongst the few written reminiscences from 'ordinary' villagers which survive in the Essex Record Office. Here gleanng features as a regular part amongst an array of other child labour tasks done in support of the household and which made such a constant part of rural working-class childhood experience in the first half of this century.²⁷

The qualitative evidence from Essex therefore implies that H E Bates' image of the gleaner as an elderly and solitary surviving member of an 'ancient race' was not replicated in the county. Here, as elsewhere across other grain growing counties of the east of England, gleanng continued to pull a sizeable proportion of the village female and child population into the newly harvested fields each year. What had changed were gleanng's scale, uses and customary practices. Each owed their metamorphoses to the common causes of agricultural mechanization and changes to the rural working-class household economy.

The nineteenth-century harvest field had presented opportunity for both farmers and labourers that neither could afford to ignore. As the scythe displaced the sickle during the late eighteenth century harvesting became a quicker but at the same time a more profligate operation.²⁸ While the scythe continued to dominate cereal fields then the harvest left considerable amounts of wastage, perhaps more wastage than had ever been the case previously.²⁹ For the farmer, therefore, the raking and

²⁶ See Ashley Cooper, *The Long Furrow*, Bulmer, 1982, p 107, and *Heart of Our History*, Bulmer, 1994, p 144; Rosamund Richardson, *Svanbrooke Down: A Century of Change in an English Village*, 1990, pp 32 and 63.

²⁷ See ERO T/Z 25/1794, T/Z 25/2608, T/Z 25/2562 and T/Z 25/2563.

²⁸ See E J T Collins, 'Harvest technology and labour supply in Britain, 1790-1870', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, xxii, 1969; M Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes: women's work and men's work at harvest time', *History Workshop*, vii, 1979; and Keith Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, 1985, pp 49-51.

²⁹ I am grateful to Steve Counce for suggesting this point.

²³ Interview with Mr W, Toppesfield, b 1909, recorded 1994.

²⁴ Interview with Mrs S, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1908, recorded 1992.

²⁵ Interview with Mr A, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1908, recorded 1992.

re-raking of the newly harvested field could substantially increase yields. This simple operation ensured that some of the ears that had been dropped or missed during the cutting, gathering and tying of the sheaves were salvaged. Yet the hand-rakes which were widely used in the nineteenth century could not guarantee to gather up every stray ear. As long as they accompanied the scythe then gleaning continued to provide substantial rewards for the sharp-eyed and dextrous woman and her children. However, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the hand-rake was gradually replaced by the more efficient horse-drawn rake which, as one Essex correspondent explained, '...searched the haulm [stumps] so thoroughly that there was little left to glean'.³⁰ This move towards increased efficiency was quickened by the parallel introduction of the horse-drawn reaper and eventually the reaper-binder. These machines harvested the grain closer to the earth than did the hand-scythe which they replaced, and the shorter stubble which was the result allowed the horse-rake to pick up still more of what would once have been the gleaner's prized ears of grain.³¹

Although the customary regulation had dissipated and the rewards for the long hours spent gleaning were now reduced it did not follow that villagers simply ceased to glean. The reaper-binder and the horse-rake reduced the contents of the gleaner's 'cotty' bag (as it was called in north Essex) and with this the number of villagers prepared to go gleaning. Yet the machinery was never efficient enough to eradicate all stray ears and therefore never thorough enough to deter the most determined or needy of gleaners. When questioned about the amount of material left by the reaper-binder one woman who had gleaned the

fields of Helions Bumpstead from the 1930s through to the late 1940s replied:

It left quite a yield. It was surprising. Sometimes the binder wouldn't cut it properly and it would get laid and you used to go along with a pair of shears and actually cut the ears, the stalks off the corn.³²

This and other oral evidence therefore suggests that the transformation in harvest technology during the second half of the nineteenth century did not, as Bob Bushaway and David Morgan have both proffered, put an end to gleaning.³³ Evidence from Essex shifts this demise forward to the middle of the twentieth century when a further wave of innovation in harvest technology finally served to remove gleaning as a widespread feature of the countryside. Within the written reminiscences of his life in Great Bentley, near Colchester, Carl Morton remembered that gleaning survived locally until just after the Second World War and the arrival of a new machine that was to be central in the transformation of both agriculture and the rural landscape over the next thirty years. As he recalled, 'The custom of gleaning the fields at harvest time died out when the binder became redundant, since the combine seldom leaves oddheads of corn behind'.³⁴ An agricultural engineer from Steeple Bumpstead concluded in the same fashion as he remembered, 'You see as soon as the combines come that was the end of it. There was no gleaning then. That was the end of it'.³⁵ What emerges from the oral evidence is a picture where gleaning becomes conspicuous only by its absence from the life stories of Essex villagers as these turn to the days of the combined harvester and agri-business during post-war decades of the 1950s and '60s.

³² Interview with Mrs W. Helions Bumpstead, b 1933, recorded 1995.

³³ Bushaway, *By Rite*, p 147; and Morgan, *Harvesters*, p 65.

³⁴ ERO T/Z 25/1574, 'Some old customs', essay by Carl Morton, Great Bentley, Essex, b 1903, written 1979.

³⁵ Interview with Mr M, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1925, recorded 1995.

³⁰ Letter from Philip Buck, London, *Essex Review*, xxxiv, 1925, p 211.

³¹ Hunt, 'Letter', pp 162-3.

Although gleaning survived until the coming of the combine it did not go untouched by machinery. Improvements made in harvest technology had shifted the place that gleaning occupied in the domestic economies of many labouring families. Once, in the nineteenth century, the efforts of the gleaner had been richly rewarded, as one of Alfred Ludgater's Essex gleaners exclaimed to her companion. 'I ha' sin the day, an' not so long ago, when I had to leave half m'corn in the field and come back for 't, coz I coont carry it all at once...'³⁶ This sentiment was shared by Eliza Vaughan as she recalled that women in her village of Finchingfield had once returned from the fields with:

...great bags on their shoulders full of golden corn. This was usually ground in the village windmill, and excellent loaves of bread were baked in wood-heated ovens from the cream coloured flour, which, of course retained all the nourishing properties.³⁷

However, the decline in gleaning yields due to the harvest mechanization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made the time and expense involved in first threshing the ears and then paying a local miller or farmer to mill the wheat an unviable operation for individual households. Furthermore, the gradual improvements in the real wages of the Essex labourer during the late 1800s, a trend that resumed in the years between the wars, had reduced the amount of self-provisioning undertaken in the village.³⁸ This is not to say that the labouring family of the 1920s could cover all of its dietary requirements from the wages of its members. The vegetable plot and allotment remained a mainstay and it was a fitting testament to the efforts of men as gardeners that the same village shops that held a vast

array of goods, where it was possible to buy anything from an ounce of tea to a full suit of clothes, that these same shops were bereft of green groceries. But other activities such as home-baking and home-brewing were dwindling. So much so that when the architect of a survey of working-class housing conditions in Essex published its findings in an account in 1891 he was able to remark on the number of cottages which had bakehouses but followed this observation swiftly with another which exclaimed that the facilities '...are now little used...' except as '...store rooms for wood...'³⁹ While in an article titled 'In Harvest Time' that first appeared in *The Land Magazine* in August, 1898, Charlotte Fell Smith wrote of her '...remote village in North Essex...' and recorded that '...most of the villagers have now given up baking at home...'⁴⁰ presumably preferring to procure their supplies from local bakers. Even those villagers who still desired to bake themselves may have found it increasingly difficult to obtain the services of a local miller who was prepared to take the time and the negligible remuneration involved in processing an individual's gleanings. In the face of competition from larger companies using the new techniques of roller-milling many village mills disappeared in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Over a period which stretched from 1878 to 1908 the number of millers in Essex was reduced from 263 to 149. By 1937 this figure had withered to just 56.⁴¹

By the inter-war years few if any villagers used gleaned wheat for bread-making. In fact none of the twenty-five interviewees used for this research could recall such a practice, while their comments suggested that even the most impoverished rural household now looked towards the

³⁶ Ludgater, 'Letter', p. 109.

³⁷ Vaughan, *Stream of Time*, p. 84.

³⁸ The rises in real wages of the Essex farm labourer during the late nineteenth century are detailed in Arthur Brown, *Meagre Harvest*, Chelmsford, 1990, pp. 114-7. For improvements to inter-war levels of the labourer's real wage see W. H. Pedley, *Labour on the Land*, 1942, chap. 2.

³⁹ John C. Thresh, *The Housing of the Working Classes in the Chelmsford and Maldon Rural Sanitary Districts*, Chelmsford, 1891, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Charlotte Fell Smith, 'In harvest time', *Essex Review*, xxxiv, 1925, p. 243.

⁴¹ Kelly's *Directory of Essex*, 1878, 1908, and 1937.

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village bakery for their supplies. As one Steeple Bumpstead man remembered of the village in the 1920s:

One of the head blokes in the village was a baker and if it hadn't been for him lots of people would've starved 'round here. 'Cos he'd go 'round with the bread and when he'd get to the door the woman'd say, 'I can't afford to buy the bread.' He'd say, 'Ne'er mind girl, you have one and pay me when you can.' And he left her bread perhaps three days a week. And when he went 'round the last day of the week she'd most probably found some money and paid him for it. There'd been scores of people gone without bread if it wasn't for him.⁴²

A noticeable shift emerges in the reasons given for gleaning when the written reminiscences of Essex villagers living in the late nineteenth century are compared to the oral testimonies of those who grew up between the wars. For the earlier generations the rationale behind gleaning was still tied very closely to procuring enough wheat for flour and then bread-making. As one anonymous gleaner born c 1880 wrote of her childhood experiences in Great Horkesley, near Colchester:

In those days there were many gleaners to be seen in the fields (including my mother and myself) this wheat would be ground into flour by the farmers (free of charge to the workers), money was very scarce and this flour was for our use during the winter.⁴³

This view was echoed by another gleaner born in 1876 at Broomfield, near Chelmsford, who remarked: 'After Harvest we would glean enough wheat to provide us with a sack of flour, and mother baked sixteen quartern loaves at a time'.⁴⁴

By the inter-war years the motivation of the gleaner had changed. Under the influence of improved living standards and

less profitable returns on their labour, villagers now gleaned for their animals and not their own consumption. Those people with pigs and especially those with chickens continued to prize gleaning as a welcome opportunity to add to their household economies with a free source of animal feed. The straw from gleaning was also valued for its use as bedding for the animals and as a lining to the earth clamps used by gardeners to store the root crops which acted as such an integral part of the effort to feed the family through winter. Gleaning for animal feed held the distinct advantage of not requiring milling, and it could also be composed of several crops including wheat, barley and beans, whereas gleaning for flour was restricted to wheat alone and of course demanded to be ground. Although none of the inter-war gleaners from Steeple Bumpstead, Helions Bumpstead and Toppesfield had spoken of gleaning for the purposes of home-baking, all mentioned it as a welcome source of sustenance for their animals. One woman described how in the 1920s she and her sisters were sent by their mother to glean expressly for this purpose: 'Oh we had to go and pick up enough corn to feed the chickens in the winter, that was our job'.⁴⁵ Her friend and neighbour remembered:

Another thing we used to do, that only happened in harvest time, me grandmother used to keep chickens, we'd go out gleaning. We'd go out into the fields once the farmer had carted his corn, and you'd go and gather wheat. You'd get a bottle of lemonade and a piece of cake. We'd sit and eat our meal in the field.⁴⁶

The same explanation was given by a Toppesfield woman:

Yes we used to go gleaning. My mother would go gleaning. But we only had four or five hens, we didn't keep a lot, we just kept enough for ourselves. We used to go gleaning for other people who had lots of hens and then they'd give us money or cakes.

⁴² Interview with Mr T, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1916, recorded 1992.

⁴³ ERO T/Z 25/27, 'Essex memories', essay by anonymous author, b c 1880, Great Horkesley, Essex, written 1955.

⁴⁴ ERO T/Z 25/63 'Childhood memories', essay by L Turvey, b 1876, Broomfield, Essex, written 1956. The link between gleaning and bread-making is made by a number of other writers in this collection of essays. In all instances the experiences of gleaning come from childhood in the late nineteenth century. See ERO T/Z 15/17, T/Z 25/27, and T/Z 25/33 (all written in 1955); also T/Z 25/64 (written in 1956).

⁴⁵ Interview with Mrs S, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1908, interviewed 1992.

⁴⁶ Interview with Mr A, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1908, interviewed 1992.

Did anybody glean to make bread?

No, I don't remember anyone making bread because we were quite well off with bakers here.⁴⁷

The popularity of gleaning as a means of procuring inexpensive animal feed ensured that it continued well into the twentieth century. Furthermore, it seems it even enjoyed something of a renaissance during the Second World War before disappearing in the 1950s. At a time when strict austerity policies placed commercially available chicken and pig feeds on the lengthy list of rationed goods a growing number of villagers were prepared to return to the fields.

III

If technological change and changes to the household economies of rural people were not enough to end the practice of gleaning until after the Second World War then their combination was sufficient to cause the swifter cessation of the customary framework that had once surrounded gleaning in Essex. The attitudes of rural communities to these customs were pragmatic. They were observed and practised just so long as the demand for controls to gleaning were needed. While the harvest produced enough wastage for farmers to be concerned about their yields then gleaning would be regulated from their side by the use of a guard sheaf. While the bounty of the gleaning fields drew the whole community of labourers and tradesmen to them, offering a munificent and valuable addition to domestic diets, then gleaning also required customary regulation on the side of villagers. It was here that the gleaning bell and, to a lesser extent, the gleaning queen fulfilled requisite controls safeguarding equitable shares for all those willing to labour. In the late nineteenth century the horse-drawn reaper-binder and horse-drawn rake reduced the contents of

the gleaner's 'cotty' bags and the demand for gleaning fell. Decline was enhanced by the slow but pervasive changes occurring to the domestic economies of the rural working-class. Central to these changes and most important for the fate of gleaning was a shift away from the home-baking of bread. In the course of the dual processes of mechanization and changing household economy the position of gleaning was transformed from one in which it had been a communal labour process involving a significant majority of the village to one on which a minority, those with chickens and pigs to feed, relied. As gleaning was moved from the centre to the margins of the village economy its customary regulations lost authority and therefore purpose. Issues of who should be allowed to glean and when slipped from the collective concerns of villagers. In this respect the loss of gleaning customs can be viewed alongside the diminution of others which were once integral to the harvest such as the harvest horkey, the harvest 'lord', the custom of largess and the bringing in of the harvest bow.⁴⁸ It might be interesting to note here that the Essex villagers who failed in their oral testimonies to recall the guard sheaf, the bell and the queen could also only recall other harvest rites and rituals as part of the inheritance of stories, folk-tales and local myth told to them by parents and grandparents whose own working lives had dated from the years of the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that gleaning continued in the twentieth century without any regulation. Farmers still gave their consent in allowing villagers to enter their fields. But the mechanisms of control were now informal; a farmer's permission being given through the medium of his men who would pass on this message to their families. To repeat the words of one inter-war

⁴⁷ Interview with Mrs E, Toppesfield, b 1929, interviewed 1992.

⁴⁸ For the gradual loss of these and other customary practices see Bushaway, *By Rite*, chap 4.

gleaner, 'Dad used t'come home for his breakfast and say, "Oh, you can go up Hungerdown today, the field is ready". So off we used to go...'⁴⁹ No longer did women and children stand patiently by the gates of fields singing songs and exchanging news while waiting for the symbolic last stook to be removed.

The gleaners themselves also continued their labour with some informal regulation of their own. From an elderly gleaner writing in the 1980s comes detail of a gleaning dispute from the 1920s at Parndon, an Essex village standing near its border with Hertfordshire:

Seldom was there any conflict between the gleaners, but rather good-natured gossip and laughter. I do recall one occasion, however, in 'Five Acres' (now a residential area of Harlow) when there was a bit of bad feeling. A well known Parndon lady, a Londoner by birth and upbringing strode across the field to another lady and said tartly: 'Madam, I have reason to believe that you do not live in this parish; if that is so, I would remind you that gleaning here is for the people of Great Parndon only.' Duly chastened, the lady (from Nettleswell) gathered up her children and gleaning and strode away.⁵⁰

In other words the rules that had once governed gleaning could still be evoked where gleaners felt their rights had been transgressed. However, the methods which they used to rectify these transgressions lacked the common customary symbolism that had once been present. There was no election of a gleaning queen in Parndon to warn off the prospective gleaners of neighbouring villages. When the 'well known Parndon lady' chose to stride across the field in order to challenge a foreign gleaner she did so only with the belief that what was grown in the parish belonged to its people but significantly she acted without the authority of the customary office of a gleaning queen.

IV

Gleaning was in decline during the first half of the twentieth century when it was yielding a diminishing reward even to the most industrious villager. Machinery had combined with changes to the rural household economy to undermine the central position that it had once held in every labouring family. The women and children of Essex villages were no longer entering the harvested fields in the numbers that their mothers and grandmothers had done. Nevertheless, for those households that kept animals gleaning could still offer an additional source of assistance that many villagers were unable or else unwilling to forsake. Given a good harvest, a gleaner might still gather enough material to supply the family chicken coup throughout winter. It was this incentive which meant gleaning remained a relatively common sight in many Essex villages beyond the late nineteenth century until its denouement in the 1950s with the wholesale adoption of the combined harvester.

Although gleaning continued well into the twentieth century its form did not go unaltered. The declining amount of harvest wastage left by machinery for the gleaner and its declining value in the eyes of both farmers and the rural working-class provides an explanation as to why the customs that had once acted to regulate the activity had now disappeared. Put simply, there was less gleaning to be done, fewer gleaners willing to do it, with less in terms of the household or the farm economy at stake. By reducing the numbers involved in gleaning and the pressure on its supply the customary of control provided by the gleaning bell, the guard sheaf and the gleaning queen was no longer needed to fulfil its once vital role in ensuring an equitable supply to all. These practices therefore slipped from the common currency of the Essex village so that while a significant minority of rural working-class people continued to glean they did so

⁴⁹ Interview with Mrs S, Steeple Bumpstead, b 1908, recorded 1992.

⁵⁰ Jim Priest, 'The fellowship of the fields', *The Essex Countryside*, 29, 1981, p 53.

without the accompaniment of collective custom that had gone before. The economic necessity for gleaning had outlived the accompanying gleaning rituals that in turn had formed part of the wider social framework of customary practices that had once thrived in villages. If we return one

last time to H E Bates' elderly woman and her labour, we might conclude that though she was not 'the last of the gleaners' she may indeed have been one of the last to remember the activity in the full context in which it had once taken place.

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