

Proletarian labourers? East Riding farm servants c. 1850–75*

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Abstract

In a recent 'polemic' examining the nature of the nineteenth century rural work-force, Alun Howkins emphasised the continued pervasiveness of peasant agriculture and farm service. This, he suggested, questions the legitimacy of rural historians' continued attachment to the notion of the agricultural proletarian as the main form of farm labour in nineteenth century Britain. In doing so Howkins placed all farm servants outside the category of the rural proletarian. This article considers the validity of this position and suggests that at least some nineteenth century farm servants should be regarded as proletarian labourers.

A debate has developed in recent years regarding the interpretation of the social structure and social relations of rural society in the nineteenth century. Within the dominant paradigm, enclosure, technological change and the transition to large scale capitalist agriculture from the mid-eighteenth century have been taken as the normal pattern of economic development. This agricultural modernization is in turn regarded as promoting a process of social modernization which resulted in a tripartite social structure of landlords, tenant farmers, and labourers. In general it has been accepted that this process of capitalist modernization involved the formal proletarianization of the labouring population in the sense that they came to lack ownership and control over the means of production. The main point of disagreement has centred upon whether this formal level of class formation was then translated into class-orientated socio-political consciousness. For some, the absence of a sustained and formally organized labour movement is interpreted as evidence that formal proletarianization failed to generate a class-orientated socio-political consciousness until at least the rural trade unionism of the 1870s.¹ In contrast, a revisionist interpretation of nineteenth-century rural society has sought to emphasise that the formal proletarianization of the rural labourer did result in class consciousness. Within this paradigm, the periodic riots, sporadic trade unionism, incendiarism and animal maiming that occurred in the decades after the Napoleonic wars are cited as evidence of an emerging

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¹ A. Armstrong, *Farm workers. A social and economic history* (1988) is generally regarded as a representative example of this position.

proletarian consciousness developing in opposition to that of the capitalist landlords and tenant farmers.²

More recently a third, 'post revisionist' interpretation has emerged which emphasises the geographical and theoretical limitations of the two existing paradigms. This view, which has been most clearly outlined by Alun Howkins, focuses upon the regional imbalance of most agricultural and rural history. Howkins suggests that an over concentration upon the large arable farms of southern and eastern England has resulted in a distorted 'tripartite' model of the rural social structure which exaggerates the importance of large-scale capitalist agriculture and proletarianization in shaping social relations precisely because it excludes those parts of nineteenth-century Britain in which neither predominated. In these excluded areas, it is suggested, a far more complex pattern of social relations existed which involved social groups such as peasants and farm servants, whose consciousness cannot be explained by reference to the orthodox model which assumes that the landless proletarian is the norm.³

Howkins' attempt 'to provoke thought and argument' offers a rural perspective on the more general re-interpretation of British social history of recent years. This has critically re-evaluated the orthodox linear interpretation of industrial development which still forms the material context for much rural social history: an interpretation which assumes that modern large scale production inevitably superseded older forms. The utility of concepts such as proletarianization and class formation as the 'master tools' of social history has also been questioned.⁴ Howkins' exploratory re-interpretation of the nineteenth-century social structure continues this recent reappraisal as he not only emphasises the survival of forms of production involving peasants and farm servants, but also the possibility that these were integral to a more diverse and overlapping mix of social relations than is allowed for by class orientated paradigms. The remainder of this article seeks to respond in a positive but critical fashion to some of the provocations offered by Howkins and focuses on a particular aspect of the debate he has attempted to stimulate: the implications of his ideas for the analysis and interpretation of nineteenth-century farm service.

Most historians have regarded farm servants as extraneous to the rural proletariat even when they depended upon wage labour for their existence. Ann Kussmaul, for example, has suggested that although farm servants were hired wage labourers engaged on annual contracts, their transitional status, their location within a familial regime, and the legal and customary expectations of the master-servant relationship set them apart from other wage labourers.⁵ This binary opposition between farm servants and proletarian labourers is also apparent in most interpretations of the process of proletarianization and class formation in southern England from the late eighteenth century. In general, these studies associate the emergence of a proletariat with

² See for example, R. Wells, 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700–1850', *J. Peasant Studies*, 6 (1979) and the same author's 'Tolpuddle in the context of English agrarian labour history, 1780–1850', in J. Rule (ed.), *British Trade Unionism 1750–1850: the formative years* (1988).

³ A. Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers: the marginal workforce in British agriculture, c. 1870–

1914', *AgHR*, 42 (1994). See also A. Howkins, 'Labour history and the rural poor, 1850–1980', *Rural History*, 1 (1990).

⁴ P. Joyce, 'Work', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge social history of Britain, 1750–1950* (3 vols, 1990), II, pp. 151–2.

⁵ A. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry in early modern England* (1981), pp. 8–9.

a corresponding decline of farm service. The classic example is Hobsbawm and Rudé's influential study, *Captain Swing*. This locates rural protest within the context of economic and social changes which included the transition to large-scale capitalist agriculture and a corresponding decline of farm service. Hobsbawm and Rudé regarded both as precipitating a deterioration in social relations which was integral to the 'relentless proletarianization of the farm labourer' and which, in turn, provided the stimulus for rural protest movements.⁶ A similar approach is apparent in the work of other historians who have also connected the emergence of agrarian capitalism and the decline of farm service with the formation of a rural proletariat.⁷ In general, two central themes inform these studies. Firstly, that farm service was a traditional, pre-modern labour system which declined with the emergence of modern capitalist agriculture; in Kussmaul's words it was 'one the large reptiles of economic history, extraordinarily successful in its time, and driven rapidly to extinction when times changed'.⁸ Secondly, that the decline of farm service was an integral aspect of the destruction of the customary social relationships that had previously fettered class formation in rural society. Taken together, these themes suggest that farm service is incompatible both with the forces and relations of production regarded as typical of modern agrarian capitalism, and that proletarianization and class formation can only occur outside of farm service. This further implies that any remaining farm servants that continued to survive into the nineteenth century should be regarded as being located within a network of pre-capitalist forces and relations of production.⁹

However, there have been a few dissident voices who have offered alternative interpretations of farm service. For example, there has been increased questioning of the idea that there is an essential incompatibility between farm service and modern forms of capitalist agriculture. This alternative view was pioneered by Brian Short who argued, contrary to Hobsbawm and Rudé, that farm service remained important in some areas of Sussex into the second half of the nineteenth century. He noted that this survival co-existed with large scale capitalist farming:

... even on the most highly-developed and intensely-capitalized farms of the South Downs producing large amounts of cereals and geared to a national or even international market by the mid-nineteenth century, there was living-in farm servants. Capitalist farming does not preclude the living-in farm servant.¹⁰

The experience of the East Riding of Yorkshire also demonstrates how capitalist farming and

⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1973 edn), p. 24.

⁷ B. Reay, 'The last rising of the agricultural labourers. The battle of Bossenden Wood, 1838', *History Workshop J.*, 26 (1988); Wells, 'Tolpuddle' and K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor. Social change and agrarian England, 1660-1900* (1987) all associate the emergence of large scale cereal farming with a decline of living-in farm service, which, alongside other factors, promotes proletarianization, protest, and class consciousness amongst the rural poor.

⁸ Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, p. 134.

⁹ Joyce, 'Work', p. 152, suggests that southern and

eastern agriculture had established capitalist relations of production by the early nineteenth century because it had abandoned living-in farm service. This, he suggests, had the effect of promoting a separate and differentiated lifestyle on the part of farmers and labourers, a situation which is contrasted with that pertaining in the north and west which retained living-in arrangements. Here, capitalist-proletarian relations had not developed and the farmhouse remained the focus of a shared culture for capital and labour.

¹⁰ B. Short, 'The decline of living in servants and the transition to capitalist farming', *Sussex Arch. Collections*, 122 (1984), p. 162.

living-in farm service can co-exist. The East Riding experienced considerable agricultural modernization from the late-eighteenth century. The changes were similar to those in the south and east of England: enclosure, increased farm size, new methods of cultivation and advances in mechanization. Yet, as the detailed study of East Riding farm servants by Stephen Caunce demonstrates, the transition to large-scale capitalist agriculture in the East Riding did not involve the abandonment of farm service. In fact those tenant farmers who presided over the development of the most advanced forces of production in the county remained most committed to the retention of living-in farm service and even increased their reliance upon it throughout the nineteenth century.¹¹ The fact that farm service continued to survive in areas of large-scale capitalist agriculture suggests that there is no automatic correlation between the development of modern forces of production and the decline of farm service.

The notion that farm servants should be regarded as non-proletarians has also been challenged. In a response to Short's article, Mick Reed has suggested that 'hired workers whether or not they lived in the farmhouse were proletarian; ... It is their divorce from the land or other means of production that makes them proletarians not their removal from the farmhouse'.¹² Two recent contributions to this *Review* by Richard Anthony and Stephen Caunce also appear to follow this formal definition of farm servants as proletarians.¹³

These questions of the nineteenth-century farm servant's pervasiveness and social position are central to Alun Howkins' post-revisionist position. He emphasises the continued vitality of farm service and urges a revision of the view 'argued by Ann Kussmaul and others that farm service was in decline in England from the 1830s and had become insignificant by the 1870s ...'.¹⁴ Whilst accepting 'Kussmaul's dichotomy between service and day labour', Howkins adopts a broader definition of farm service based on hiring by the year or half-year which encompasses many varieties. Helpfully, he offers a model that identifies three kinds of farm service in nineteenth-century England. He begins with "classic" farm service in which one or two sons or daughters of social equals lived with a different family and "learnt a trade", hoping themselves eventually to take a farm'. This, he suggests is 'the form that most concerns Kussmaul and is certainly in decline throughout the nineteenth century'. More significant in the nineteenth century was 'the practice of hiring young men and, to a lesser extent, women into the farmhouse or another house or both on the farm but whose status was that of hired labour with little or no hope of ever becoming farmers themselves': the East Riding of Yorkshire is cited as the prime example of this mode of farm service in England, followed by Lincolnshire and parts of Nottinghamshire. In some areas of Scotland and England this departure from the classic form of farm service co-existed with Howkins' third variety of service – family hiring – which involved 'the head of the household ... being hired for a year with his or her family to live and work on a particular farm'. Under this revised model Howkins suggests that farm service is far more common in the nineteenth century than has been thought. 'In

¹¹ S. Caunce, *Amongst farm horses. The horselads of East Yorkshire* (1991).

¹² M. Reed, 'Indoor farm service in nineteenth century Sussex: some criticisms of a critique', *Sussex Arch. Collections*, 123 (1985), p. 226.

¹³ R. Anthony, 'Farm servant vs agricultural labourer,

1870–1914: a commentary on Howkins', *AgHR* 43 (1995); S. Caunce, 'Farm servants and the development of capitalism in English agriculture', *AgHR* 45 (1997).

¹⁴ For what follows, Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers', pp. 57–61.

England, the counties of Cumberland, Westmorland, north Lancashire, Northumberland, Durham, and Yorkshire were dominated by farm service even in 1905. It was also present in some form in all but thirteen English counties'.¹⁵

This attempt to revise the orthodox model of the nineteenth century labour force is not merely an exercise in quantification. Howkins' discussion of the survival of farm service is but one element in his wider project of offering a new interpretation of nineteenth-century rural Britain. Basically, the pervasiveness of nineteenth-century farm service is used as a stick with which to beat the standard model of proletarianization and class formation which still informs much rural history. For example, the continued existence of the three varieties of farm servant are used 'to question the notion that the main form of farm labour in nineteenth-century Britain was "agricultural proletarian"'.¹⁶ Taking farm servants, peasants and other 'marginal' workers, whose wage relationship fell short of the 'pure cash nexus' into account, Howkins goes on to suggest that:

... the 'classic proletarian' farm labourer is probably in a minority, albeit a slight one, of all those who worked the land of Britain in the nineteenth-century. Moreover he is probably regionally restricted to the eastern, and some southern counties and some midland counties. It is here that 'proletarian' social relationships might be expected to develop in the form of trade unions and political organizations and of course, they do, although still only among part of the labour force ... In contrast, a substantial area of England and especially Scotland, Wales and Ireland was worked by farm servants. Most contemporaries and many more recent writers noted that hiring by the year frequently led to close and apparently harmonious relationships between employer and employed.¹⁷

The fact that Howkins continues to regard the transition to capitalist agriculture as significant in generating proletarian social relationships in the south and east of England whilst excluding even those farm servants employed as waged labourers on large capitalist farms in the north is important. It suggests that he regards all forms of farm service, even those variants that co-existed with capitalist forces of production, as fundamentally unproletarian.¹⁸ This appears to mark a break with at least some of his earlier writing on this subject in which he suggested that some farm servants might be regarded as proletarians.¹⁹ The source of this departure may be statistical in the sense that this most recent revisionism is burdened with the task of broadening the

¹⁵ This is perhaps not incompatible with Kussmaul's general conclusion that farm service declined as a national institution as England became divided between a low service agricultural south and a high service industrial north and west. See Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, p. 130 and ch. 7. It is perhaps unfortunate that this chapter, which concedes the persistence of farm service in the north of England, is entitled 'Extinction'.

¹⁶ Howkins suggests that hiring was the main difference, but other factors, such as payment in kind (including board and lodging) also modified the position of farm servants and blunted the pure cash nexus of the wage relationship.

¹⁷ 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers', p. 61.

¹⁸ Howkins readily acknowledges that farm service as a labour system is capable of generating antagonistic social relations, but his analysis suggests that such conflicts should be regarded as taking non-proletarian forms.

¹⁹ A. Howkins and L. Merricks, 'The Ploughboy and the Plough Play', *Folk Music J.*, 6 (1991); A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (1991); and Howkins, 'Labour History', have encouraged this author's view that farm servants engaged on large capitalist farms may be regarded as proletarian labourers.

definition of the farm servant in a manner that facilitates claiming the highest possible membership for the non-proletarian group. This enables him to deploy *all* farm servants alongside the re-discovered peasantry in support of a thesis that claims that 'By a narrow majority, those who worked the land of Britain, the object of our search, were not proletarianized and landless day labourers but peasants or servants'.²⁰ However, his inclusion of all farm servants in the non-proletarian group also suggests that he regards their social situation and consciousness as qualitatively different from other wage labourers. It is the contention of this article that this importation of all farm servants into the world of the non-proletarian may be taking revisionism too far. One area in which this reasoning (which places all farm servants outside of the rural proletariat) might be challenged is in those situations where agricultural modernization promoted the emergence of a type of farm service which marked a significant departure from the 'classic' form of farm service studied by Kussmaul: i.e. the practice of hiring labourers who had little expectation of anything other than paid wage labour. The East Riding of Yorkshire is the prime example of this variant of nineteenth-century farm service. Should the East Riding farm servants of the mid-nineteenth century be regarded as non-proletarians?

Initially I wish to focus on proletarianization as a process which involves the expropriation of labour as a commodity. In this respect, following Marx, the East Riding farm servants are required to meet a number of conditions. That, as the sellers of labour power, they are free to dispose of this labour power as their own commodity. That they have no other commodity other than their labour to sell. That they meet the owner of capital in the market on the basis of equality before the law, and that they sell their labour power only for a definite period.²¹ The structure of agriculture and the nature of farm service in the East Riding appear to satisfy this formal level of class formation. By the mid-nineteenth century agriculture here was a predominantly capitalist industry in which tenant farmers employed waged labour and sold what they produced on the market. In some parts of the East Riding, the greater proportion of this labour took the form of living-in farm servants engaged on annual contracts created through a process of verbal bargaining at an annual round of hiring fairs.²² These hirings had once been part of a system of statutory wage regulation; however, the statutes were repealed in 1813 and their enforcement had, in any case, declined from the mid-eighteenth century. From that time onwards, there was (in Kussmaul's words), 'a flowering of free and open markets in agricultural labour, centred around the hiring fair'.²³ Thus, whilst Howkins emphasises the significance of farm service in modifying the wage relationship in the sense of blunting the dependence of the worker

²⁰ Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers', p. 60.

²¹ K. Marx (ed. F. Engels), *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (4 vols, 1974 edn), I, pp. 164-5.

²² J. Sheppard, 'The East Yorkshire agricultural labour force in the mid-nineteenth century', *AgHR*, 9 (1961). By the mid-nineteenth century there were 25 substantial hirings in the East Riding lasting from early November to early December. Custom determined that servants were free to attend several hirings. For details of East Riding hiring fairs

see S. Caunce 'East Riding hiring fairs', *Oral History*, 3 (1975); *Amongst farm horses*, chs 5 and 6; G. Moses, 'Rustic and rude: hiring fairs and their critics in East Yorkshire c. 1850-75', *Rural History*, 7 (1996); S. Parrott, 'The decline of hiring fairs in the East Riding of Yorkshire: Drifffield, c. 1874-1939', *J. Regional and Local Studies*, 16 (1996).

²³ Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, p. 63, notes that farm servants regarded board and lodging as an integral part of their wages to be negotiated in the market place.

on the market, the evolution of the hiring fair in the East Riding limited this considerably. The transformation of the hiring fair into a labour mart within which farm servants sold their labour as a commodity meant that farm servants shared a common dependence upon waged labour. In this formal sense the East Riding farm servants conform to Charles Tilly's definition of proletarians as 'people who work for wages, using means of production over whose disposition they have little or no control'.²⁴ In their recent contributions to the *Review*, both Anthony and Caunce appear to accept this formal categorisation in their own questioning of Howkins' attempts to exclude all farm servants from the category of the rural proletariat.²⁵

Howkins' decision to exclude the East Riding farm servant from the ranks of the rural proletariat would seem to suggest that he regards a formal definition of proletarianization based upon non-ownership of the means of production as too shallow, and that he regards the everyday experience of farm service as transcending this formal dependence upon market relations and encouraging a level of consciousness and action which is non-proletarian. It is worth examining, therefore, farmer and farm servant relations on the farm away from the hiring fair. It is here that Howkins' view that farm service constituted a non-proletarian experience is perhaps most apposite. For example, although farm servants created their contracts in a free and unfettered fashion, and increasingly regarded them in cash terms, perhaps the nature of the master-servant relationship thereafter distinguished the farm servant's experience from that of the classic proletarian. Howkins cites contemporary testimony of the 'clannish' feelings between employer and employed on northern farms employing farm servants as evidence of the fact that living-in on the farm could limit the emergence of a proletarian consciousness in the form of, for example, trade unions.²⁶ Support for such an interpretation may be derived from Dunbabin's work on agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s in which he noticed the relative failure of organized agricultural trade unionism in the north of England. He related this to the continued pervasiveness of farm service there:

a high proportion of the farm workers were unmarried, and boarded in the farmhouses. And this certainly militated against the development of formal trades unions. For a strike must have been difficult to organise when one was actually living in a farmer's house; and close social relationships were universally believed to make for an identification of the farmer's and labourers' interests.²⁷

The case of the East Riding of Yorkshire, an area in which the ratio of indoor to outdoor servants was 1:1.4, apparently endorses this analysis. Three other factors which Dunbabin suggests correlate with trade union activity elsewhere – arable farming, large farms and Primitive Methodism – were also present. Yet he describes trade unionism as 'very weak' in the East Riding.²⁸ As trade

²⁴ C. Tilly, 'Demographic origins of the European proletariat', in D. Levine (ed.), *Proletarianization and Family Life* (New York, 1984), p. 1.

²⁵ Anthony, 'Commentary', p. 63; Caunce, 'Farm servants and capitalism', p. 59.

²⁶ Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers', p. 61.

²⁷ J. P. D. Dunbabin, 'The incidence and organization of agricultural trades unionism in the 1870s', *AgHR*, 16 (1968), p. 122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124. This may be something of an exaggeration as there is evidence of considerable trade union activity in the East Riding during the early 1870s. However, this seems to have generally excluded farm servants. For details see M. G. Adams, 'Agricultural Change in the East Riding of Yorkshire 1850–1880' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1977), pp. 350–1; and *Hull and Eastern Counties Herald*, 25 Jan. 1872;

unionism is emphasized by Howkins as an indication of the level of socio-political consciousness amongst rural labourers, it is tempting to regard the farm servants' absence from the East Riding trade unionism of the 1870s as confirmation of the proposition that farm service inhibits the development of a proletarian consciousness.

However, the manner in which the farm service system had evolved in the East Riding during the nineteenth century minimized the extent to which payment in kind in the form of living-in could modify the relationship of master and servant as implied by Howkins' and Dunbabin's analysis. Contemporary comment on the increased wealth and social pretensions of East Riding tenant farmers suggests that the social and cultural forces that encouraged the decline of service in the south and east – a desire for privacy, and a growing distaste for the idea of accommodating servants in one's home – existed here, and these alone would have promoted the decline of farm service if other constraints had not dictated otherwise.²⁹ However, the combination of economic and demographic factors that permitted the abandonment of service in the south of England after the Napoleonic wars did not prevail in the East Riding. Here, the resurgence of capitalist arable agriculture occurred within the context of a dispersed settlement pattern and the proximity of alternative industrial employment. This ensured that living-in and annual contracts remained the most effective means for farmers to satisfy a large proportion of their labour requirements.³⁰ The salience of economic criteria in this decision to retain rather than abandon farm service ensured that the East Riding system was subject to a number of innovations that facilitated the development of capitalist social relations *within* farm service. For example, although the East Riding developed a relatively unusual symbiosis between farm service and arable agriculture, it otherwise conformed to a pattern of agricultural development that E. L. Jones identified as emerging elsewhere in England from 1850.³¹ Jones suggested that from this time the agricultural labour market began to tighten, particularly in areas of arable high-farming systems on recently reclaimed land away from established settlement patterns and in close proximity to alternative industrial employment. He argued that farmers responded to this tightening labour market through a combination of mechanization and workforce reorganization that enabled a regular core of farm staff to handle a large

22 and 29 Feb. 1872; 7, 14 and 21 Mar. 1872; 4, 11, 18, Apr. 1872.

²⁹ There is evidence that in the years following the Napoleonic wars, a situation of labour surplus induced some East Riding farmers to abandon the farm servant system. BPP, 1836, *Second Report from the Select Committee appointed to enquire into the State of Agriculture*, evidence of Mr C. Howard, Q. 5434. By the mid-nineteenth century the wealth and increasingly gentrified lifestyle of the larger East Riding tenant farmer was a common theme in the local press, see, for example, 'The Yorkshire Wolds', by 'the roving commissioner of the Newcastle Daily Chronicle', *York Herald*, 8 Oct. 1864, who described them as living 'in the style of country squires rather than tenant farmers'; see also the *Hull Advertiser*, 12 Apr. 1850, and J. Caird,

English agriculture in 1850-51 (1852), pp. 310-1. Caird regarded Wolds tenant farmers as probably the wealthiest in the country.

³⁰ O. Wilkinson, 'The agricultural revolution in the East Riding of Yorkshire', *East Yorkshire Local History Ser.*, 5 (1956); J. Sheppard, 'Labour force'; A. Harris, *The rural landscape of the East Riding of Yorkshire, 1700-1850* (1961); M. B. Gleave, 'Dispersed and nucleated Settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds, 1770-1850', *Trans. Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (1962); Adams, 'Agricultural change'; Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, introduction and ch. 16, and the same author's 'Twentieth-Century farm servants. The horselads of the East Riding of Yorkshire', *AgHR* 39 (1992).

³¹ E. L. Jones, 'The agricultural labour market in England', *EcHR* 17 (1964).

proportion of the all-year-round work. Much of the East Riding, particularly the Wolds and Holderness, conformed to this model. There was, for example, a correlation between high acreage, new cropping techniques, increased mechanization and the expansion of resident farm servant labour in the region. There is also evidence of a tightening labour market from the early 1850s.³² Consequently, although preserving a degree of continuity with the past, both the employment relationship and the labour process became less intimate during the mid-Victorian period. Employers retained control over hiring and the general organization of production but, increasingly, had little direct contact with the greater proportion of their workers. Large arable farms developed a labour regime in which the care, feeding and working of the horses was organized around a mass horseman system which utilised the divided labour of young proletarians disciplined and supervised by the more experienced foreman (or hind) and wagoner.³³

The transition to large-scale capitalist agriculture in the East Riding also encouraged a reshaping of female farm service. As the nineteenth century progressed, the sexual division of labour within farm service became more clearly delineated as male and female servants came to occupy separate but overlapping domestic and non-domestic spheres in terms of hiring arrangements and work. Some women became the more specifically domestic servants demanded by the genteel privacy now characteristic of larger farmhouses whilst others were employed to service the extensive board and lodging requirements of the male farm servants, combining domestic and farmyard duties with cooking and cleaning. Many undertook a mixture of all these, coupled with periodic bouts of field labouring and threshing. These trends also involved the development of more formal and impersonal relationships between employers and their female servants.³⁴ The pivotal relationship between farm service and the development of high-farming in the East Riding ensured, therefore, that the working relationship between master and servant lost most, if not all, of its 'clannish' familial associations.

The intensification of capitalist agriculture in the East Riding not only increased the size of farms and the average number of farm servants employed but also encouraged changes in their accommodation. Many new farm houses were built whilst others were modified and enlarged. The prevailing trend in both new and enlarged farms was for the farm servant accommodation to be located in a separate and distinct part of the farmhouse away from that occupied by farmers and their families. This often involved almost total segregation, with all farm servants housed in separate dormitories located in adjoining outbuildings, with only limited and discrete access to the main body of the farmhouse. In some cases both innovations were combined, with the female servants occupying a wing of the farmhouse with its own access to the wash-house and kitchen, whilst the men occupied a separate dormitory outbuilding or 'mens end' attached to the farmhouse but with its own external doorway and yard.

A further significant change was the development of the 'hind house' system. Here the role and functions of a single foreman who lived with and oversaw the younger servants were transferred to a hind: a married man who, with his wife, female servants or daughters housed and fed the servants in a separate 'hind house' away from the main farmhouse. Each of these

³² Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, especially the introduction and ch. 16. Adams, 'Agricultural Change', pp. 346-7 for the tightening labour market.

³³ Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, chs 4, 7 and 8.

³⁴ I. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution* (1969 edn), chs 2 and 4.

changes had precedents prior to the mid-Victorian period, but where they had once been exceptional, by the 1880s they were combined to form a near-universal pattern of social segregation between capital and labour on the larger tenant farms of the East Riding.³⁵ Thus the continued reliance on farm service demanded by the economic needs of high farming in East Yorkshire did not necessarily ensure the continuation of pre-capitalist social relations; rather, farm service was adapted in ways which suggest that the relationship between servant and master lost its close paternal intimacy and became, in the words of the leading historian of East Riding farm service, 'almost entirely economic'.³⁶ This interpretation is given further endorsement by contemporary Anglican opinion which was increasingly critical of East Riding farmers for their abdication of responsibility for anything other than the working aspects of their farm servants' lives.³⁷

Since the evidence considered so far suggests that yearly hiring and living did not necessarily create the ideal conditions for close and consensual social relations, it is worth considering whether any other aspect of the system is able to bear the burden of explaining the apparent absence of socio-political consciousness amongst the East Riding's farm servants. One aspect of the East Riding system worth further consideration is the manner in which its mode of labour organization delegated day-to-day management functions to supervisory workers who presided over an authoritarian but relatively autonomous labour hierarchy. Labour systems which allowed such autonomy may be interpreted as limiting the emergence of a proletarian socio-political consciousness because they fell short of establishing the real subordination of labour.³⁸ This, it could be suggested, created space for a compromise between labour and capital centred upon the work group's self-discipline and the workers' positive identification with the objects of their labour. The discipline of the East Riding farm servant system is almost legendary. Caunce has recently likened the system to a form of 'proto-Taylorism'. His study of twentieth-century farm servants also testifies to the degree of intrinsic job satisfaction afforded to farm servants who worked with horses.³⁹ As he demonstrates, the male farm servants employed within this system undoubtedly derived a sense of pride in their capacity for hard work, their skill at

³⁵ For contemporary details of farm servants' accommodation in the East Riding, see BPP, 1868, *First report from the commissioners on the employment of children, young persons and women in agriculture*; W. H. M. Jenkins, 'Show farm "Eastburn", Driffield', *J. Royal Agricultural Society*, 5, pt 5 (1869); BPP, 1896, *Reports of the royal commission on the depressed condition of the agricultural interests*, assistant commissioner Coleman's report on agriculture in Yorkshire; M. C. F. Morris, *Yorkshire Folk Talk* (1911), described the hind system as largely prevailing in the East Riding by the late-Victorian period, especially on the Wolds. For a recent analysis of these changes which emphasises the social distancing between farmers and servants during the nineteenth century, see C. Hayfield, 'Farm servants' accommodation on the Yorkshire Wolds', *Folk Life*, 33 (1994).

³⁶ Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, p. 86.

³⁷ Examples include R. I. Wilberforce (Archdeacon of the East Riding), *A letter to the gentry, yeomen, and farmers of the archdeaconry of the East Riding* (Bridlington, 1842); Rev. J. Eddowes, *The agricultural labourer as he really is: or, village morals in 1854* (Driffield, 1854); M. E. Simpson (ed. Rev. F. Digby Legard), *Ploughing and sowing: or, annals of an evening school in a Yorkshire village, and the work that grew out of it* (1861); Rev. F. Digby Legard, 'The education of farm servants', in Legard (ed.), *More about farm lads* (1865), pp. 2-3; W. Thomson (Archbishop of York), *Work and prospects - a charge* (York, 1865).

³⁸ G. S. Jones, 'Class struggle and the Industrial Revolution', *New Left Rev.*, 90 (1975), p. 49; Joyce, 'Work', p. 151; Howkins, 'Labour history', p. 118.

³⁹ Caunce, 'Farm servants and capitalism', p. 55; *Amongst farm horses*, ch. 10 and *passim*.

the plough and from the condition of the horses placed under their supervision. A graphic illustration of this latter aspect is also provided by Herbert L. Day who worked as a farm servant between 1916 and 1930. In his book *Horses on the Farm*, he refers to the 'imaginary ownership' of animals and tools that occurred amongst farm servants. 'Hired horsemen lived in a world of make-believe. They imagined that they owned the horses they drove, the tools they used and the plough or wagon they were allocated'.⁴⁰

This positive identification forms part of the basis of Caunce's explanation of the absence of overt socio-political consciousness amongst East Riding farm servants. He suggests that the East Riding system constituted a form of 'social control' based around a combination of the authority of the supervisory workers and the servants' own desire to do their jobs well. When both functioned effectively, they fostered a sense of internal order and harmony within the labour hierarchy. He does not, however, suggest that this alone was a sufficient explanation for the consent and equilibrium that developed. Instead, he emphasises the importance of locating the workings of the labour system within the broader context of the mobility, internal promotion and material benefits afforded by the positive market situation of the East Riding farm servant as mediated through the annual contracts bargained at the hiring fairs.⁴¹ Dunbabin suggested that hiring fairs nullified the need for formal trade unions because they fulfilled comparable functions but generated less conflict, and Caunce pursues a similar argument when he compares the hiring fair 'to an informal and temporary union' which involved 'genuine and sometimes fierce bargaining with the farmers' and 'helped reinforce the servants' sense of common experience and common identity as a group by requiring them to stand up to the farmers'.⁴² He suggests, though, that the extent and depth of this conflict was contained by the ritualized nature of annual hirings and the equalized bargaining power that existed between farmers and servants.⁴³ Thus, although Caunce regards farm servants as formal proletarians with a potential conflict of interest with their employer, the workers' identification with their labour and the benefits they obtained through the system of contracts and bargaining at hiring fairs resulted in general worker satisfaction with farm service as an institution. It is not that farm servants were antipathetic to trade unions in principle (after all, many of those East Riding labourers that participated in the trade unionism of 1870s were ex-farm servants), but the workings of the system meant that conflicts were channelled into other forms which limited the extent of ill-feeling.⁴⁴ This helps explain the absence of formal trade unionism amongst East Riding farm servants who, according to Caunce, were 'non-unionized and relatively acquiescent in things as they were'.⁴⁵ Consequently, although Caunce's interpretation differs from Howkins', it may lend some comfort for his decision to exclude the East Riding farm servants from the ranks of the rural proletariat as it offers an explanation for the absence of trade union militancy amongst East Riding farm servants, the level of socio-political consciousness that Howkins regards as integral to the fully-fledged proletarian.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ H. L. Day, *Horses on the farm* (Beverley, 1981), p. 18.

⁴¹ Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, ch. 7.

⁴² Dunbabin, 'Agricultural trades unionism', pp. 120–2; Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, p. 67; 'Farm servants and capitalism', p. 59.

⁴³ Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, pp. 67–9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Howkins' argument that farm servants' conflicts with capital should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of proletarian consciousness possibly gains support from Caunce's conclusion that 'The

It is important to emphasise at this point that Howkins does not seek to argue that farm servants were incapable of engaging in social conflict with their employers. He readily acknowledges that farm servants, including those in the East Riding, were capable of maintaining conflicts as sustained and possibly even more astringent than those involving labourers in the English south. What appears to distinguish these conflicts from those of the proletariat is the absence of institutional expression in the form of militant organizations. An alternative interpretation might build upon Counce's argument and follow Reed in regarding all farm servants as proletarians whose conflicts with capital should be regarded as a form of socio-political consciousness analogous to that exercised by other workers through formal organizations such as trade unions.⁴⁷ This approach, which integrates farm servants into the tripartite model and grants them a proletarian socio-political consciousness, obviously questions Howkins' decision to set them apart. It is therefore worth considering whether Reed's position is appropriate for the East Riding during the mid-Victorian period.

There is evidence that at this time the working and hiring practices of the East Riding farm service system were increasingly generating conflicts between labour and capital. One example of such a conflict was over the control of horses. Within the male work force there was intense rivalry centring on the relative condition of the horses under each farm servant's supervision. In their desire to outstrip their peers, farm servants often used linseed cake or drugs to fatten and improve the appearance of horses.⁴⁸ There were cases in the mid-Victorian period of farmers summoning farm servants for appropriating oil cake and administering drugs without consent.⁴⁹ There were also prosecutions of farm servants for refusing to obey orders, assaulting their employers, refusing to work in the evenings and resisting the introduction of new technology.⁵⁰ Counce acknowledges (and offers evidence) that farm service could generate conflicts that challenged the authority and discipline inherent within the system and suggests that it was on the larger capital intensive farms, with the largest concentration of farm servants, that the problems of control were most pronounced. He also suggests, however, that incidents of this type were exceptional deviations that serve to underline the harmony that normally prevailed.⁵¹ This is a reminder that some degree of friction can be beneficial in the maintenance of a general equilibrium. There is also the danger, however, that an overly functionalist approach, with its emphasis upon the positive contribution of all social action to the maintenance of social order, can overstress the extent of integration and consent. The existence of conflict is a reminder that farm service was not necessarily a total institution that completely contained the tensions inherent in the capitalist labour process. Furthermore, the possible correlation between farm size and conflict suggests that the larger arable farms should perhaps be interpreted as a variant of the large, bureaucratic type of enterprise that has been regarded as facilitating the formation of a class-orientated socio-political consciousness amongst rural labourers.⁵² This is not least

outlook of farm lads undoubtedly moved a few steps towards that of the industrial working-class as their status as permanent wage earners became clear and unarguable in the nineteenth century, but before 1914 it was only a few steps', *Amongst farm horses*, p. 200.

⁴⁷ Reed, 'Criticisms', p. 233.

⁴⁸ See Counce, *Amongst farm horses*, ch. 9, for a dis-

cussion of horse feeding.

⁴⁹ See for example, *Driffield Times*, 8 May 1875.

⁵⁰ *Hull and Eastern Counties Herald*, 9 May 1872, *Hull Times*, 5 June 1875, *Hull and Eastern Counties Herald*, 11 July 1872.

⁵¹ Counce, *Amongst farm horses*, ch. 7.

⁵² D. Lockwood, 'Sources of variation in working class images of society', *Sociological Rev.*, 14 (1966).

because in their work-orientation and everyday life, the farm servants employed on the larger isolated farms shared many characteristics with the 'occupational community' regarded by some as conducive to the formation of a radical social imagery amongst agricultural workers.⁵³

There is further evidence that farm servants were exhibiting a disposition to act in class ways in the mid-Victorian period. This relates to two areas: bargaining at hiring fairs, and the operation of annual contracts. Caunce has emphasized the essential fairness of the East Riding system for both masters and servants, comparing the East Riding fairs to the classical economists' ideal of the perfect market. He acknowledges that conflict could and did occur, but the comparatively high wages obtained by the farm servants and the formulaic and routinized nature of the hirings limited its extent.⁵⁴ Yet the master-servant relationship remained exploitative and it is worth considering whether this manifested itself at the hirings in ways which might be regarded as indicative of a proletarian socio-political consciousness. At this point the notion of 'structural conflict' may be of some utility. This concept was developed by Alun Howkins as a means of analysing non-institutional forms of conflict between farmers and labourers which occurred at certain times of the agricultural year, particularly at moments of labour shortage which placed farm workers in a stronger bargaining position.⁵⁵ In many respects the November location of hiring fairs favoured farmers as it coincided with a slack period of the year when, as one farmer noted in a letter to the *York Herald* in 1876, 'Masters usually have much less business of importance, and servants are of much less value to masters than they could be, by any means, at any other time of the year'.⁵⁶ As the 1876 hiring season illustrated, this structural advantage for farmers was accentuated when fine weather had enabled farmers to progress their farm work significantly. In that year, although servants were holding out for higher wages, farmers were able to resist because they were well advanced in their work and therefore felt little pressure to re-engage at the levels demanded.⁵⁷ Of course there were times when the short term seasonal situation favoured servants. If employers were behind with their work, they were obviously under greater pressure to hire. There is evidence that farm servants tried to take advantage of these factors. It was complained, for example, that as the hiring season approached, farm servants became unruly and inattentive to their work, attended an unreasonable number of hiring fairs and thereby placed farmers at a disadvantage in the hiring season.⁵⁸

However, the most important factor determining the outcome of the bargaining process was not the short term seasonal situation but longer term shifts in the labour market. As the *York Herald's* report emphasized, the principal cause of the 'downward tendency of wages' in 1876 was 'the depressed condition of agriculture and the overstocked market for servants'.⁵⁹ Indeed that year appears to mark the onset of the effects of agricultural depression upon the farm servant labour market which, thereafter, enabled farmers to drive down wages.⁶⁰ For much of the mid-Victorian period however, labour had been in a stronger position as farmers found

⁵³ C. Bell and H. Newby, 'The sources of variation in agricultural workers images of society', *Sociological Rev.*, 21 (1973).

⁵⁴ Caunce, *Amongst farm horses*, p. 67 and ch. 6, *passim*.

⁵⁵ A. Howkins, 'Structural conflict and the farm-worker', *J. Peasant Studies*, 4 (1977).

⁵⁶ *York Herald*, 13 July 1876.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 18 Nov. 1854.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ By 1880, despite determined resistance, farmers were able to dictate terms, *Beverley Guardian*, 20 Nov. 1880; and 'make a resolute stand against the high wages which have so long obtained', *York Herald*, 15 Nov. 1880.

that their reliance upon farm servants could create situations in which demand exceeded supply. This problem became most acute during the early 1870s, but during the previous twenty years farmers had been complaining of the changing balance of power in the local labour market.⁶¹ E. L. Jones suggested that in areas where this tightening labour market situation emerged after 1850, it enabled and encouraged a greater sense of assertiveness and independence amongst the labouring population. He argued for a correlation between the workers' strength in the labour market and the emergence of independent working class organization in the form of religious organizations and friendly societies, a process that culminated in the trade unionism of the 1870s.⁶²

I would suggest that there is evidence of a similar pattern of development in the East Riding. Despite the fact that farm servants did not participate in the formal trade union activity that developed in the East Riding during the 1870s, the tightening labour market created the conditions for farm servants to engage in analogous structural conflicts which involved them in the successful use of the hiring fair as a vehicle for informal but effective collective bargaining. This view is supported by the newspaper reports of East Riding hiring fairs during the mid-Victorian period which supply evidence of the farm servants' assertive use of the hiring fair, an assertiveness that often enabled both female and male servants to overcome the seasonal disadvantage of autumn hiring and secure higher wages. One illustrative example is that of the Beverley hirings on 6 November 1874 at which *The Beverley Recorder* reported 'an immense assembly of farm servants and domestics' and added that 'It had been expected that owing to the open weather and the consequent forwardness of field operations wages would be lower, but to the surprise of farmers the men stuck out for an advance, and as the Beverley hirings generally rule this district the fact was significant'.⁶³ Servants pursued other tactics designed to maximise the potential offered by the fact that hirings were a frequent occurrence over an extended period. One practice was for servants to reach agreements with several farmers over a period of time but to fulfil only the most lucrative contract. Farmers complained that this increasingly common occurrence meant that they had become 'tools in the hands of the servants' because they 'had to attend five or six different hirings before they could get servants'.⁶⁴ Servants also refused to be hired if employers tried to impose unacceptable conditions such as regular attendance at church.⁶⁵ Not surprisingly servants of both sexes also resisted attempts to abolish or reform hiring fairs, to alter hiring practices, and to restrict the number of hirings they attended, regarding such moves as 'hostile to their interests'.⁶⁶

Nor was this burgeoning assertiveness confined to bargaining at hiring fairs. One of the attractions of farm service for farmers was that it reduced their vulnerability to structural conflicts because servants' fixed contracts and wages prevented them from capitalising upon short term seasonal fluctuations in wages at peak times of the agricultural year. However, there is also evidence that at this time the East Riding farm servant system was increasingly unable to fulfil this function of guaranteeing all year round labour requirements. During the 1850s there were complaints by farmers regarding the number of farm servants breaking their contracts at peak

⁶¹ W. Barugh, *Master and man. A reply to the pamphlet of the Rev. John Eddowes, entitled 'The agricultural labourer as he really is'* (Driffeld, 1854).

⁶² E. L. Jones, 'Agricultural labour market', pp. 332-7.

⁶³ *Beverley Recorder*, 7 Nov. 1874.

⁶⁴ *York Herald*, 7 May 1875.

⁶⁵ BPP, 1868, p. 100.

⁶⁶ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 25 Nov. 1854.

times of demand for labour. William Barugh defended himself and his 'brother farmers' against the accusation made by local clergy that farmer neglect was the root cause of the perceived demoralization of the farm servant population. He rejected this in favour of an explanation that dwelt upon the farm servants' changed position in the labour market. It was this, he suggested, that explained 'the numerous cases of litigation betwixt masters and servants which have come before the magistrates in recent years'. He argued that farm servants were hiring in autumn and then leaving to take employment at higher wages in the spring for the rest of the year.⁶⁷ This problem of enforcing contracts became more acute after the Master and Servant Act of 1867 stipulated that all contracts of a year or more had to be in writing. As most farm servants' contracts were verbal and ended on 23 November, any contract agreed before this was potentially invalid and farm servants exploited this loophole when summonsed to appear before the magistrates for breaking their contracts. By the 1870s, the policy of enforcing contracts, retaining farm servants, and maintaining discipline over them had become a major source of debate in Chambers of Agriculture and at public meetings called specifically to discuss these issues. The East Riding Chambers of Agriculture pressed for the alteration of the dates of hiring fairs so that none occurred before the 23 November. They also organized boycotts of earlier hirings, campaigned for an alteration of the law of master and servant, and tried to prevent servants attending so many hiring fairs.⁶⁸

Mick Reed has suggested that we should not assume that the absence of formal trade unionism is evidence of an absence of socio-political consciousness amongst English farm servants.⁶⁹ I would tentatively follow his lead and suggest that the mid-Victorian period was a time when East Riding farm servants combined the custom of the annual round of hirings with the idea that labour is a commodity to be sold in the market as dearly as possible. The conflicts over contracts and other aspects of the labour process suggest that this was part of a broader process involving the formation of an informal socio-political consciousness within the farm servant population. It seems plausible to suggest that there was an interaction between three factors: the farm servants' experience of the modernized system of farm service, the changing condition of the labour market and the carnivalesque environment of the hiring fair. This resulted in the hiring fair becoming an increasingly effective vehicle for the expression of a form of collective opposition by farm servants against employers. This action took forms not always recognized as evidence of a socio-political consciousness, but the tactics and actions of East Riding farm servants are comparable with those of other proletarian workers in the mid-Victorian period in that they were seeking to mitigate and qualify their formal dependence upon the labour market. These actions are, perhaps best categorized as evidence of corporate class consciousness.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Barugh, *Master and man*, p. 19.

⁶⁸ For a fuller discussion of this campaign see Moses, 'Rustic and rude'.

⁶⁹ Reed, 'Criticisms', pp. 226–35. Both I. Carter, 'Class and Culture among Farm Servants in the North-East, 1840–1914', in A. Maclaren (ed.) *Social Class in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1976); and Anthony, 'Commentary' suggest that Scottish farm servants

were also capable of developing a proletarian socio-political consciousness.

⁷⁰ As in a class 'which pursues its own ends within a social totality whose global determination lies outside it'. P. Anderson, 'Origins of the present crisis', in P. Anderson *et al.*, *Towards Socialism* (1965), p. 34.

Alun Howkins' attempt to forge a new interpretation is valuable in that it highlights the potential weaknesses of the existing rural labour/social history paradigms: namely, their tendency to underplay the uneven nature of the nineteenth-century rural economy and the diversity and heterogeneity of social relations that this enabled. His assertion of the importance of forms of identity and consciousness other than class rightly emphasises that nineteenth-century rural society was a more complex matrix of structures, identities and relations than is often allowed for by a strict adherence to the conventional tripartite model. However, Howkins' continued attachment to the notion of proletarianization and class formation in some regions of developed agrarian capitalism suggests that he retains a commitment to some form of economic and social determination. The logic of this position suggests that if southern, eastern and some midland labourers are to be considered as proletarians, then so should farm servants engaged on large arable farms in the north of England. It is true that farm servants constituted a group that was distinct and separate from other labourers in terms of their work tasks, contracts and residence on the farm. However, all of these labourers shared a common dependence upon wage labour throughout their working lives, and the divisions between male and female farm servants and between all farm servants and day labourers was less graphic than the gulf which had emerged between the substantial capitalist masters and all labourers. In terms of socio-political consciousness the farm servants may have diverged from the formal requirement of forming trade unions, but their more informal activities should perhaps be interpreted as a different, but equally valid, response to the process of proletarianization. Therefore it appears reasonable to regard the distinction between labourers and servants as one that reflects different stages in the farm labourer's life and to regard all farm labourers as variants of a rural proletariat. In support of this point, it is worth emphasising that East Riding farm servants also participated alongside other labourers in the development and organization of the two institutions which E. L. Jones suggested were indicative of the development of independent working class feeling in mid-Victorian rural society: Primitive Methodism and friendly societies. David Neave has argued that East Riding friendly societies were largely independent working-class organizations which were able to withstand upper and middle class attempts to control them. He also states that 'hired farm servants were among the most active in joining the affiliated orders'. He emphasises that the East Riding was second only to Cornwall as a bastion of rural Methodism and notes the strength of the 'more radical' Primitive Methodism.⁷¹ Neave suggests that the experience of farm service, Primitive Methodism and friendly societies helped to foster a sense of independence, assertiveness and mutual solidarity amongst the farm servant population. As he says,

The distinctive elements of East Riding rural society in the nineteenth century were the overwhelming support for Methodism and the continuation and development of the tradition that the young men would spend the first ten years of their life as hired farm servants. Neither of these two elements contributed to producing a dependent, submissive, cap touching proletariat. In Methodism particularly Primitive Methodism, the labourers and rural artisans demonstrated their independence from the control of clergy and landowner and in the hirings

⁷¹ D. Neave, *Mutual aid in the Victorian countryside. Friendly societies in the rural East Riding, 1830-1914* (1991), p. 11.

and mutualism of living-in were learnt the benefits of collective action. This independence and collective action were combined in the village branches of the affiliated order friendly societies to produce what was the only strong rural working class organization in the Victorian countryside.⁷²

I would broadly endorse this analysis and follow Neave in describing the nineteenth-century East Riding farm servants as 'a mobile and independent rural working class'.⁷³

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

⁷³ Neave, 'Mutual aid', p. 11.

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