

Early modern servants in husbandry revisited*

by Donald Woodward

Abstract

The publication of Ann Kussmaul's *Servants in husbandry* in 1981 was a landmark for rural history. Much of what she revealed has stood the test of time but two areas need further exploration. First, why did employers continue to favour annual contracts, especially for their younger workers? It is argued here that the value of the arrangement lay in the availability of servants for work 24 hours a day throughout the year. Secondly, doubt is cast on Kussmaul's argument for the existence of long-run swings in the incidence of service in husbandry between the late fifteenth and the nineteenth century.

Since the publication of Ann Kussmaul's *Servants in husbandry* in 1981, historians have been far more aware of the importance of service to early modern farmers.¹ It was predominantly a life-cycle phenomenon; girls and boys became servants in their early to mid-teens. Perhaps sixty per cent of those aged 15 to 24 were servants at any one time. Service provided secure employment, board and lodgings in their employer's household, and a small cash income for many adolescents before they embarked on marriage in their mid to late twenties. Most were hired on annual contracts and at the end of each year many moved on, negotiating new terms of employment with a new master.² Service was at the heart of the agricultural arrangements of early modern England but, despite the efforts of Ann Kussmaul, the institution has not yet been fully anatomized. In particular, two areas which need further analysis will be investigated in this short article. The first section will discuss the rationale of service and its value to the employer, emphasising the central features of the institution; the second section will challenge the belief that the incidence of service from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century was characterized by long-term swings determined by employers' changing attitude to the employment of servants, based on the cost of feeding them.

I

It has recently been suggested by Caunce that service was valued by employers because it provided a well motivated and permanent labour force. Day labourers existed in late medieval and early modern times but, unfortunately, 'they could not deliver a *reliable permanent* labour

* I have benefited from the comments of Richard Hoyle and my colleagues Michael Turner and Judith Spicksley on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ A. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry in early modern England* (1981).

² Alan Everitt had little to say about servants in his excellent discussion of farm labourers: A. Everitt, 'Farm

labourers', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, IV, 1500-1640 (1967), pp. 396-465. S. Caunce, 'Farm servants and the development of capitalism in English agriculture', *AgHR* 45 (1997), pp. 49-60.

force, and while serfdom could do that, it could not *motivate* workers'. Service, on the other hand, 'could do both, and capitalism needed that mix'.³ So, we are to believe that service provided an ideal labour force for thrusting capitalist farmers like Robert Loder and Henry Best who were fully aware that time meant money.⁴

The permanency of servants is not in any doubt; many were hired for the year and would be liable to the various penalties laid down by statute if they left before their contracts were completed. However, their reliability and motivation is open to question. Two of the most articulate employers in early-modern England, Henry Best and Robert Loder, together with Parson Woodforde and William Marshall in the later eighteenth century, had no doubt that servants needed to be supervised with great care. Best's advice to his son made it plain that the master should oversee work closely: 'you must call' to the reapers 'to stoop and to cut low and round'. In this he was echoing Tusser who had given the advice: 'Go muster thy servants, be captain thyself'. Sometimes, however, advice was passed on to the foreman who then supervised the servants. When hiring servants, Best was equally circumspect. His advice was to enquire from a former master or neighbour 'to know of them whether he be true and trusty, if he be a gentle and quiet fellow, whether he be addicted to company-keeping or no': indeed, 'if he have any of the forenamed ill properties, your best way will be to forebear hiring of him'. Maid servants should not be 'of a sluggish and sleepy disposition for danger of fire'; moreover, maids should never be hired who were 'too near their friends, for occasion is said to make a thief'. Once engaged, continued vigilance was necessary: 'see into all things yourself ... keep as much as you can under lock and key'.⁵

Robert Loder was equally aware of the possible deficiencies of his employees. In 1618 he contemplated a particular course of action, but only 'if I can have trusty servants'; and he found threshing especially difficult to supervise. When calculating the cost of threshing by the piece in 1612 he had observed that 'all workmen almost ... will play "legerdemaine" with their masters and favour themselves'; and later, when comparing the cost of the operation from one year to another, he added 'thus men can work if they list and so they can loiter'. He was also fully aware that his servants stole corn from him, possibly to feed to the horses in their charge: on one occasion he felt that this was because two of his servants were 'then in great love'. Finally, in 1618, he decided that it would be better to hire men than women to pick cherries: the men 'would do twice so much I think; and then there might be perhaps half those eaten by our gatherers saved'.⁶ In the eighteenth century William Marshall found servants uncooperative and Parson Woodforde, who hired an average of five servants a year, had difficulty with a number of his employees. Over a period of 26 years, ending with his death in 1802, we are given the reasons for the departure of 15 servants. In eight instances it was Woodforde's own decision to terminate their employment: the grounds were drunkenness, incompetence, foul language,

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–2 (my italics).

⁴ D. Woodward (ed.), 'The farming and memorandum books of Henry Best of Elmswell, 1642', *British Academy Records of Social and Economic History*, new ser. 8 (1984, hereafter 'Best'); G. E. Fussell (ed.), 'Robert Loder's farm accounts, 1610–1620', *Camden Soc.*, 3rd ser., 53 (1936, hereafter 'Loder').

⁵ 'Best', pp. lvii, 49, 113, 140–1. For thieving by servants see P. Earle, *The making of the English middle class. Business, society and family life in London, 1660–1730* (1991), pp. 102–3; Kussmaul, *Servants*, pp. 35, 45.

⁶ 'Loder', pp. 25, 59, 127, 148, 156. Legerdemaine is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as 'sleight of hand, conjuring tricks, juggling; trickery; sophistry'.

illness, and pregnancy. The remaining seven left to return home, enlist, go to better service, or because the youth considered himself too old to be 'a boy'.⁷

Suspicion of servants permeated the whole of society; higher up the social ladder, in the early seventeenth century, Sir William Wentworth was in no doubt that servants needed to be watched carefully. In his *Advice to his son* he voiced the strongest reservations:

For servants be very careful to keep only those that be born of good and honest friends and be well willing, humble, diligent and honest. Yet in any case trust them not more than you needs must in matters that may greatly concern your danger. For almost all treacheries have been wrought by servants and the final end of their service is gain and advancement ...⁸

There is no reason to suppose that servants were intrinsically more reliable than day labourers; indeed, given the youth of the majority of servants, and the absence of the responsibility which marriage brought to day labourers, it is likely that servants were among the least reliable of employees and would have been even more unsteady without close supervision.

The essence of service, which made it so attractive to early modern farmers, was that it provided a central core of workers who were available throughout the year, at any time of the day or night,⁹ and that they remained under the direct gaze of the master or his foreman most of the time. Day labourers worked long hours – first defined in the statute of 1495 – but they were free to pursue other activities, whether leisure or income-generating, when they were not at work and could not be called out to deal with a sudden emergency in the middle of the night without the employer incurring further expense.¹⁰ In contrast, the statute was silent on the issue of the hours which servants were expected to work. Service often involved working unsocial hours, including essential work every Sunday and even on Christmas Day. On a farm this included feeding the stock, milking and any other chores which could not be deferred until the following day.

Most accounts which refer to the work of servants of all varieties indicate that they worked long hours. As Henry Best explained: 'when our folks go to Malton [some fifteen hilly miles away], they are usually stirring 4 hours before day, which is about 3 of the clock'. In the spring, corn was taken to that market by wains from the surrounding countryside and they 'went all night ... and were met out of Malton before seven of the clock'. When artisans were lodged at Elmswell for short periods, they were expected to graft like servants: cobblers 'are to work with a candle after supper 'til such time as they go to bed'.¹¹ Similarly, as an apprentice, William Stout, the Lancaster shopkeeper, worked very long hours. 'We apprentices laying in the shop were early called up'. A few years into his apprenticeship he 'attended the shop in winter with the widows open, without [any] sash or screen, until nine in the evening and with the windows shut and the door open till ten o'clock without coming into the house except to our victuals or to the fire, having our bed in the shop'.¹² The domestic servants of Samuel Pepys were also

⁷ Kussmaul, *Servants*, pp. 44–8, 55–6.

⁸ J. P. Cooper (ed.), 'Wentworth papers, 1597–1628', *Camden Soc.*, 4th ser., 12 (1973), p. 15.

⁹ Kussmaul, *Servants*, p. 4 makes this point in passing but without stressing it in any way. For supervision, see also A. H. Smith, 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk', *Continuity and Change* 4 (1989), p. 17.

¹⁰ 11 Henry VII, c. 22. For a detailed discussion of the hours worked by labourers and building craftsmen and arrangements for overtime payments, D. Woodward, *Men at work: labourers and building craftsmen in the towns of northern England, 1450–1750* (1995), pp. 122–8.

¹¹ Best, pp. 106–7, 149.

¹² J. D. Marshall (ed.), *The autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster, 1665–1732* (1967), pp. 75, 81, 90.

aroused at unsocial hours to do their chores: on 26 October 1663 he 'waked about one a-clock in the morning to piss ... and then my wife, being waked, rung her bell and the maids rose and went to washing'. Pepys and his wife returned to bed. In the later eighteenth century William Marshall explained that Yorkshire servants were notable, among other things, 'for the length of their working hours'.¹³

Servants of all varieties were able to work such long hours because they were fed well; certainly they fared better than many married day labourers who did not always know from where their next meal was coming. To calculate the cost of feeding his servants, Robert Loder simply divided his total annual food bill by the number sitting at his table; servants and family members ate alike. This implies that his servants were well nourished. Although Henry Best's servants did not always eat as well as their master, they were better fed than many in early Stuart society and Best himself was convinced that he fed them better than did most men. William Marshall was not altogether impressed by the diet given to servants in Yorkshire; they had plenty of milk but meat only once a day. 'Nevertheless', he admitted, 'if one may judge from their appearance, and from the quantity of labour they dispatch, their mode of living is conducive to health'.¹⁴ Workers – like draught animals – worked much better on a full stomach. In contrast, it has been suggested that many workers, whose daily incomes were erratic, were often insufficiently fed to allow them to sustain long periods of hard work.¹⁵

No doubt there were seasonal variations in the amount of work expected of servants.¹⁶ They probably worked shorter hours in the winter, although they would have been kept hard at it during those hours, and indoor work, by candle or rush light, was always a possibility. There was much to be done round the farm in winter and it is unlikely that Henry Best, Robert Loder and their peers would have allowed their servants to indulge in long hours of idleness. Much more labour was required during the summer months – and especially during harvest periods – and this involved unremittingly hard work for both the servants and the day labourers who were hired and fed for the season. Throughout the year the closely supervised servants provided the central core of the labour force on many farms and they were expected to work hard at all seasons, no doubt switching – where possible – to indoor work during inclement periods. On rainy mornings, Henry Best made his harvest workers mend the barn floors or thresh some peas.¹⁷

II

According to Ann Kussmaul, the propensity of farmers to employ servants before the nineteenth century was linked to changing demographic structures and associated shifts in living standards. She argued that in the late fifteenth century, the incidence of service was at a 'probable high point' because the population was relatively low and the cost of food, which was an important

¹³ R. C. Latham and W. Matthew (eds.), *The diary of Samuel Pepys* (11 vols, 1970–83), IV, p. 348; W. Marshall, *The rural economy of Yorkshire* (2 vols, 1788), I, p. 259.

¹⁴ 'Loder', pp. 45, 68; 'Best', pp. xlvii–ix; Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, p. 259. See also S. Caunce, *Amongst farm horses. The horselads of East Yorkshire* (1991), pp. 137–46; W. A. Armstrong and J. P. Huzel, 'Labour II: food, shelter and self-help', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The agrarian history*

of England and Wales, VI, 1750–1850 (1989), p. 729.

¹⁵ On the inability of many workers to work at a sustained rate because of an inadequate diet, see H. Freudenberger and G. Cummins, 'Health, work and leisure before the Industrial Revolution', *Explorations in Economic History* 13 (1976), pp. 1–12.

¹⁶ Caunce, 'Farm servants', p. 53.

¹⁷ 'Best', p. 114.

component in the remuneration of servants, was relatively low compared with the price of labour. This made the employment of living-in servants particularly attractive to employers. As the population rose substantially in the course of the sixteenth century, the situation began to change and by the early seventeenth century surplus labour was readily available so that it was no longer essential to hire labour by the year. She argued that

Desperation, not annual contracts, would have ensured the attendance of workers when they were needed. Wages need have been paid only for work done, and annual contracts, which served as insurance against the everyday risk of finding no workers willing to work, were unnecessary.

Thereafter, as population growth petered out around the middle of the seventeenth century, fears about adequate supplies of labour began to be felt once more and farmers began to keep servants in greater numbers. Service reached a second peak in the middle of the eighteenth century before its disappearance from many areas in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁸

Plausible though these views may appear at first glance, they are not built on firm foundations. Ann Kussmaul's construction of long run shifts in the incidence of service is based on three broad lines of argument: economic reasoning based on her analysis of what was in the interests of employers in different situations; evidence relating to changes in the seasonality of marriage which can be interpreted to indicate shifts in the incidence of service; and direct evidence of the decline of service. Over time the argument becomes more compelling: to support her belief in high levels of service in the later fifteenth century, Ann Kussmaul was forced to rely on economic logic alone; for the trough of the early seventeenth century the same economic logic can be bolstered by the evidence of shifting marriage strategies; for the later eighteenth centuries all three lines of argument can be deployed for a period undoubtedly characterized by a movement away from service in many southern and eastern counties.

Central to Ann Kussmaul's second study – *A general view of the rural economy of England, 1538–1840* – is the belief that the nature of local economies and the associated seasonality of annual hirings determined, to some degree, the timing of marriage. A peak period for marriage in many parishes was just after the end of the contract year when young people, who did not intend to return to service, were able to marry. A knowledge of marriage patterns (derived from parish registers) could, she argued, indicate the nature of the economy of particular parishes and also the relative importance of annual service. In predominantly arable areas, annual hiring took place in the autumn after harvest (typically at Michaelmas – 29 September – in southern England and at Martinmas – 11 November – in the North): thus, any move away from an autumnal concentration of marriage could indicate either a shift in the nature of the local economy (hirings in pastoral districts were usually in the early summer after lambing and calving) or a decline in the incidence of annual hiring.¹⁹

The whole of the Kussmaul thesis relating to long-term swings in the incidence of service in early modern England depends on the interpretation of events in the early seventeenth century, although we know of only one employer who articulated the problem of whether or not to hire

¹⁸ Kussmaul, *Servants*, pp. 97, 100–1.

¹⁹ A. Kussmaul, *A general view of the rural economy of England, 1538–1840* (1990), *passim*.

servants. On a number of occasions in the second decade of the century, Loder calculated the cost of feeding his servants at between £10 and £12 a year; this level of remuneration was more than most day labourers could earn in a year.²⁰ In 1613 he argued that 'it were good for me to keep all my servants at board wages [i.e. money wages plus a food allowance], or else to keep none at all if I could handsomely bring it to pass'. Loder experimented with putting his carter on board wages but the experiment proved too costly and he continued to provide board and lodging for his servants.²¹ However, the carter would still have been a servant in essence, with the expectation that he would turn out for his master at any time of the day or night. Loder did not contemplate the apparently cheaper option of dispensing with his servants and relying on day labourers.

Loder returned to the theme of his labour problems the following year:

Memorandum that every of these [servants] spent me in meat and drink ... one with another £12 apiece and a little above. So that I judge it were good (in such dear years) to keep as few servants as a man possibly can, by any means convenient to effect which I know no other means, but by putting forth a man's land to tillage, or at a rent, or else keeping them on board wages.²²

In fact, Loder did none of those things but continued to hire servants as before. The same was true of the Tokes of Kent and Henry Best; the engagement of servants by the latter seems to have varied with the amount of land in hand rather than with the price of provisions.²³ There is no direct evidence that service was on the wane in early seventeenth-century England. And it is difficult to see how commercial farmers like Best could have managed without a central core of workers who could be called upon any hour of the day or night for 365 days a year; to have done so would have involved developing a completely different approach to the organization of their enterprises. Loder recognized the problem of escalating costs but did not feel that he could do anything to remedy the situation; he certainly did not contemplate switching wholeheartedly to day labourers.

Ann Kussmaul's belief in the existence of significant long-term swings in the incidence of farm service relies heavily on the discovery that in 56 southern parishes there was some movement away from autumnal marriages in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. This finding gave an air of plausibility to her broader hypothesis based on economic reasoning. Evidence from the 56 parishes suggested that from the middle of the sixteenth century, when the incidence of October marriages stood at 2.3 times the expected frequency which a random distribution would suggest, the proportion fell to a low point of 1.6 in the early 1650s. Thereafter the incidence of October marriages rose to over twice the random frequency by the end of the seventeenth century and to 2.5 times by the middle of the eighteenth century. On the basis of this evidence – and the arguments relating to the relatively high costs of keeping servants in

²⁰ Loder paid his day labourers 6d. to 8d. a day in winter and a penny or tuppence more in the summer. When mowing hay or reaping corn they got between 14d. and 16d. a day. If a man worked for 20 weeks at 8d., 20 weeks at 10d. and 10 weeks at 16d. a day he would earn £13: this is based on the assumption that he would and could work for an unbroken period of 300 days. In

practice, of course, few would be offered so much work. 'Loder', p. xviii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68; Kussmaul, *Servants*, p. 103.

²² 'Loder', p. 90.

²³ E. C. Lodge, 'The account book of a Kentish estate', *British Academy Records of Social and Economic History* 6 (1927); 'Best', pp. xxxvii–viii.

an inflationary era – Kussmaul argued that there was a significant reduction in the frequency with which farmers hired servants by the year in the early seventeenth century.²⁴

We might ask why it took so long for farmers to realise that hiring servants was a fool's game. Inflation began in the early decades of the sixteenth century and the complaints of the wage labour force made it apparent that by the middle of the century their standards of living were being seriously eroded.²⁵ Conditions worsened as the century ended and, in terms of relative costs, the employment of servants was becoming increasingly uneconomic. Nevertheless, some early parish censuses – and especially that for Ealing in 1599 – indicate high numbers of servants.²⁶ Thereafter, according to the evidence of the 56 parishes, the incidence of service fell, although it is difficult to understand why this particular response to rising prices should have been so long delayed.

Since the early 1980s historians have focused increasingly on shifts in marriage strategies in their search for explanations of changes in demographic trends, and the current fashion is to stress the significant rise in the proportion of those who never married; numbers of celibates are believed to have risen from around 10 per cent in the later sixteenth century until they may have accounted for over 20 per cent of the population by the middle of the seventeenth century.²⁷ Given that some of the never-marrieds would have been servants, a rise in the proportion of celibates was likely to affect the number and significance of October marriages. Indeed, it is highly probable that those who were not inclined to marry would seek to remain in service for a longer period. That is, a decline in the proportion of October marriages could have been the product of the combination of increased celibacy and an increase – rather than a decrease – in the incidence of service. Changes in the incidence of October marriages may tell us little about shifts in the incidence of service.

There is also a problem about the nature of the data derived from the parish registers. Ann Kussmaul admitted that the decline in October marriages – to the low point of 1.6 times the random distribution in 1653 – was exaggerated because of the impact of the Commonwealth Marriage Act of that year. The act, which instituted civil marriage before JPs, came into force on 29 September and led to 'the virtual absence of October marriages in 1653' in her 56 parishes, thereby depressing the proportion of October marriages for 1653 and surrounding years. The act also distorted the marriage evidence in other ways, although it is evident that Ann Kussmaul did not take this into account when she processed the data derived from the aggregations available at the Cambridge Group.²⁸

It is not possible at this stage to analyse the distortions caused by the Marriage Act to Ann Kussmaul's 56 registers for southern England – although this would be highly desirable – but a cursory look at the printed parish registers for Yorkshire indicates the nature and scale of the problem. After 1653, marriages often took place at the home of the JP and a record made in the register of the parish to which at least one of the partners belonged. But this was not always

²⁴ Kussmaul, *Servants*, pp. 97–100.

²⁵ D. Woodward, 'The background to the statute of artificers. The genesis of labour policy, 1558–1563', *EcHR* 33 (1980), pp. 32–44.

²⁶ Kussmaul, *Servants*, p. 71.

²⁷ E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E. Oeppen and R. S.

Schofield, *English population from family reconstitution, 1580–1837* (1997), pp. 121–6, 552; ex inf. Roger Schofield.

²⁸ D. Woodward, 'The impact of the Commonwealth Act on Yorkshire parish registers', *Local Population Stud.*, 14 (1975), pp. 15–31; Kussmaul, *Servants*, pp. 97–8.

TABLE 1: Howden Marriages

	Average number of marriages per annum	Percentage of November marriages
1590-9	36	20
1630-9	28	29
1654-6	42	13
1661-70	26	23

Source: G. E. Weddall (ed.), 'The registers of the parish of Howden, I, 1595-1658'; II '1543-1702', *Yorkshire Parish Register Soc.*, 18 (1904); 24 (1905).

the case and it is evident that these vital events were sometimes logged in a register other than that which would have been the usual one. This is indicated by the significant increase in the numbers of marriages recorded for some places. At Leeds the annual average number of marriages, which had stood at 109 during the 1640s, shot up to an average of 185 during the years 1654-7 before falling back to 74 in 1658 and averaging 90 in the early 1660s. Similarly at Hull, the average number of marriages was 49 during the 1640s but rose to 137 in 1654 and averaged 101 for the years 1654-8; the average in the 1660s stood at 48. In the York parish of All Saints, Pavement, there were six marriages a year in the late 1630s and early 1640s but the number rose to 86 in the four years 1654-7 before sinking back to a low level in the late 1650s. Conversely, no marriages at all were recorded at St. Crux, York, from May 1654 to October 1659.²⁹ Substantial changes occurred elsewhere. At Howden in the East Riding overall numbers rose but there was a fall in the incidence of November marriages in the mid-1650s. However, the level in the 1660s was closer to that of the 1630s than the 1650s.

The disruption caused by the Marriage Act of 1653 may well have helped to cause the apparent reduction in October marriages noted by Kussmaul. The transfer of the recording of marriages from their natural registers probably distorted the true pattern of events in at least some parishes. And there may well have been other factors at work, including the availability of a willing JP. At Clapham in the Yorkshire Dales, John Assheton, a local JP, married eight couples on a single day in June 1655, while in the small hamlet of Scarborough in East Yorkshire two couples, where one of the partners was recorded as 'servant' in each case, had to wait until early January to be married although their banns had been called in the previous November.³⁰

Distortions caused by the Marriage Act of 1653 and doubts about the meaning of changes in the levels of October marriages in southern England prompt doubts about the reality of the drift away from service in the early decades of the seventeenth century.

Some medievalists, convinced by the arguments indicating the decline of service in the early

²⁹ I am grateful to the Cambridge Group for supplying me with the aggregative analysis data for the two Hull parishes. G. D. Lumb (ed.), 'The registers of the parish church of Leeds, 1639-67', *Proc. Thoresby Soc.* 7 (1897); T. M. Fisher (ed.), 'The parish register of All Saints Pavement, York', I, '1554-1690', *Yorkshire Parish Register Soc.* (hereafter *YPRS*), 100 (1935); R. B. Cook and P. Harrison (eds), 'The parish register of St Crux, York,

1539-1716', *YPRS* 68 (1922). All numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number. It would, of course, have been better to re-process the 56 registers used by Ann Kussmaul; perhaps this will be possible in the future.

³⁰ J. Charlesworth (ed.), 'The parish registers of Clapham', I, '1595-1683', *YPRS* 67 (1921); A. T. Winn (ed.), 'The registers of Scarborough', *YPRS* 8 (1901).

seventeenth century, have argued that 'backward extrapolation of the early-modern cyclical patterns is plausible, and that the weight of agricultural labour was probably tilted more towards servants and away from labourers during the century and a half after 1350 than the preceding and succeeding periods'.³¹ This is despite the fact that the same author tells us on three separate occasions that the sources 'simply do not exist to demonstrate empirically whether the same forces acted with equal effect in England before 1500' as in the early seventeenth century.³² The supposed high water mark of service in the later fifteenth century flies in the face of much of the available evidence. As Christopher Dyer explains:

the numerous disputes over the wages paid for short-term employment found in manorial court rolls, and the mass of complaints that after 1349 workers refused annual contracts and preferred to be hired by the day, suggest that the part-timers were becoming more important sources of labour than the servants.³³

If this were the case, and it has been restated recently with telling effect by Mark Bailey,³⁴ the desire of farmers to take on greater numbers of servants was not realised because of the reluctance of labour to accept annual contracts. It seems highly likely that the fifteenth century did not witness a peak in the incidence of service.

III

Long-run swings in the incidence of service may well turn out to be illusory. In the late medieval period, prices were relatively low and, given the buoyancy of real wages during the period, it would have been in the interest of employers to engage large numbers of servants and pay the bulk of their remuneration in kind; but the availability of land and the relative shortage of labour meant that many older workers were reluctant to commit themselves for a year at a time. As Christopher Dyer points out, service in husbandry was a feature of the late-medieval economy, but the period probably did not witness the peak of activity envisaged by Ann Kussmaul and others.³⁵ It seems likely that many younger workers moved into service for some years, encouraged to do so by their parents who were relieved of the burden of supporting them. But it is unlikely that being bound into annual servitude held any great attraction for older workers, especially those with families to support. By the early seventeenth century the combined effects of inflation and population growth led at least one employer to question the sense of hiring servants; but Loder and others continued to do so and we have only the dubious marriage evidence for a number of southern parishes to suggest a general drift away from service. Moreover, as outlined earlier, a reduction in the number of autumn marriages could

³¹ L. R. Poos, *A rural society after the Black Death: Essex, 1350-1525* (1991), p. 223 following R. M. Smith, 'Some issues concerning families and their property in rural England, 1250-1800', in R. M. Smith (ed.), *Land, kinship and life-cycle* (1984), pp. 35-7, and Kussmaul, *Servants*.

³² Poos, *A rural society*, pp. 182, 233, 225.

³³ C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages* (1989), p. 213.

³⁴ M. Bailey, 'Demographic decline in late medieval England: some thoughts on recent research', *EcHR* 49 (1996), pp. 5-17. Also J. Hatcher, 'England in the aftermath of the Black Death', *Past and Present* 144 (1994), pp. 13-17. See also the interesting case study by Deborah Youngs, 'Servants and labourers on a late medieval demesne: the case of Newton, Cheshire, 1498-1520', *AgHR* 47 (1999), pp. 145-60.

³⁵ Dyer, *Standards of living*, p. 21.

have been associated with an increase in the number of servants; that is, an increase in the number of those not available for marriage. And there is the further complication of the disruption to the parish registers caused by the act of 1653.

From the middle of the seventeenth century food prices continued to reflect shifts in harvest qualities but no longer continued their secular upwards drift. Perhaps this induced some farmers to seek to employ more servants while others turned to the practice for the first time, although there is little doubt that the labour market remained overstocked and casual labour continued to be available at the going wage. Economic logic would suggest that out-workers remained keen to find paid employment and it is difficult to believe that there was substantial pressure on farmers to employ servants in order to avert a labour shortage. Thus, if there had been a drift away from service in the early seventeenth century, it is not entirely clear why the process should have been reversed in the later decades of the century. It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that service remained crucial for the maintenance of essential work on the great majority of early modern farms throughout the period, and that levels of service – especially by young males and females – may not have varied markedly from one period to another. It is possible, however, that higher stocking rates within English agriculture during the Tudor and Stuart periods dictated some movement towards service rather than away from it.³⁶

In the eighteenth century the picture is somewhat clearer. It is generally accepted that the level of farm service was high in the first half of the eighteenth century – as perhaps it had been during previous centuries – but that it began to decline, especially in the southern and eastern counties, after mid-century. On this occasion there is direct evidence of the flight from service shown in the settlement documents analysed by Keith Snell.³⁷

Any important new study like Ann Kussmaul's *Servants in husbandry* leads historians, for at least some years, to believe that a particular subject has been adequately dealt with. This is rarely the case. Once the dust settles, we find that there is much that still remains obscure. In this instance, the existence of long swings in the incidence of farm service before the middle of the eighteenth century has not been established beyond reasonable doubt. For historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there is another agenda. By the middle of the nineteenth century, service in husbandry had largely disappeared from a broad swathe of the southern and eastern counties, although it remained remarkably resilient throughout much of the North. Various explanations have been advanced to account for these differing experiences, although even a cursory glance at the literature reveals that there is little agreement among historians. Why precisely did service survive so long in the North of England? It would be good to know.

³⁶ B. M. S. Campbell and M. Overton, 'A new perspective on medieval and early modern agriculture. Six centuries of Norfolk farming, c. 1250-c. 1850', *Past and Present* 141 (1993), p. 83.

³⁷ Kussmaul, *Servants*, p. 97; K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor. Social change and agrarian England, 1660–1900* (1983), pp. 67–103.