

The employment of women and children in agriculture: a reassessment of agricultural gangs in nineteenth-century Norfolk

by Nicola Verdon

Abstract

This article examines one of the most infamous forms of rural labour in nineteenth-century Norfolk: the agricultural gang. Using Parliamentary Papers as its source, the paper argues that some previous interpretations of this form of organized labour have both exaggerated the scale of ganging in the county, and misrepresented the composition of agricultural gangs. It will be shown that, far from exploiting the cheap labour of young children and adult women across Norfolk, by the 1860s, agricultural gangs mainly consisted of a youthful workforce and were regionally concentrated in the west of the county. It calls for a more considered approach to using Parliamentary Papers to prevent the perpetuation of generalizations concerning female and child labour in the nineteenth-century countryside.

In recent years research on the employment of female and child labourers in British agriculture in the period after 1750 has expanded significantly. The potentially substantial, even vital role women's and children's earnings played in family subsistence is now generally recognized. Despite this, our knowledge of the position of women and children in rural society is still far from complete: in too many instances consideration of female or childhood issues is still subject to generalization and marginalization. The current state of research on women's farm labour in the early industrial period from 1700 to 1850 has been highlighted by Pamela Sharpe in a recent article for this *Review*. She argues that historians' knowledge of female employment in this period is still sketchy, a situation that can only be rectified by 'exploration of the regional context of women's work' to 'provide a fuller and more nuanced picture'.¹ Recent detailed research on a number of English counties has begun to reveal the complex regional diversity of rural women's work in agriculture. Judy Gielgud has shown that in Northumberland, women remained a vital component of the agricultural workforce into the twentieth century, whilst Celia Miller and Helen Speechley demonstrate that even in parts of the south-west, substantial numbers of women (and children) were employed as part of the agricultural day labour force well into the nineteenth century.² Joyce Burnette on the other hand argues work

¹ Pamela Sharpe, 'The female labour market in English agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: expansion or contraction?', *AgHR* 47 (1999), p. 162.

² Judy Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-century farm women in Northumberland and Cumbria: the neglected workforce' (D.Phil thesis, University of Sussex, 1992); Celia Miller,

'The hidden workforce. Female fieldworkers in Gloucestershire, 1870-1901', *Southern Hist.*, 6 (1984), pp. 139-161; Helen V. Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural day labourers in Somerset, c. 1685-1870' (University of Exeter Ph.D thesis, 1999).

opportunities for women in south Yorkshire fell over the period between 1770 and 1830.³ This article seeks to contribute to the growing historiography on the employment patterns of rural women and children by presenting a regional case study of one of the most notorious aspects of farm labour in nineteenth-century Norfolk – the agricultural gang – and reassessing the importance historians have hitherto accorded this form of labour.

As the quintessential corn growing arable region of nineteenth-century England, the county of Norfolk is by no means underrepresented in the literature on agricultural change, agrarian conditions and the rural workforce. However, wherever female and child labour is discussed to any extent, it is largely in relation to the gang system. Contemporary observers and official investigators were fascinated and mostly scandalized by this type of organized labour. The Rector of South Acre echoed the opinion of many when he commented in 1843: 'I have been resident in this parish forty years, and can, from my own personal knowledge, affirm that the gang-system has produced, and is still producing, on the rising generation, morally, physically and intellectually, immense evil.'⁴ Later historians, reliant on the parliamentary reports of the nineteenth century for the bulk of their evidence, have also focussed on the existence of ganging in Norfolk. Some writers have suggested that the system of organized labour in the form of gangs of women and child workers was widespread in Norfolk in the period after 1830. In many respects Ivy Pinchbeck's account of ganging, published in 1930, remains the most substantial and influential piece of analysis. She argues that although gangs existed before 1834, 'it was not until after the New Poor Law and the new economic situation that gang-work really developed, especially in connection with the work of women and children'.⁵ Pinchbeck is assertive in her claim that gangs were widespread across the county of Norfolk, as well as on the Lincolnshire Wolds and Fens. In these areas, she contends, 'where a great deal of weeding and light labour was required, almost all the work was done by the gangs which grew up naturally in the open villages'.⁶ This view of Norfolk ganging has been adopted by other historians and is well established as the orthodox account. Alun Howkins for example, implies that women's work in agricultural gangs was widespread. 'It was in eastern England, in the great wheatlands, especially Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire that the casual employment of women seems to have been both most widespread and organised'.⁷ Most recently, Katrina Honeyman, echoing Pinchbeck, has argued that women joined gangs in search of casual employment to avoid the workhouse, and that this form of labour 'became more prevalent after 1834, especially in the eastern counties, in order to meet irregular demands for labour on large farms'.⁸

However, although the gang system has been represented by many as a widespread system

³ Joyce Burnette, 'Laborers at the Oakes. Changes in the demand for female day-laborers at a farm near Sheffield during the Agricultural Revolution', *JECH* 39 (1999), pp. 41–67. See also Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to capitalism. Working women in the English economy, 1700–1850* (1996); Nicola Verdon, 'Changing patterns of female employment in rural England, c. 1790–1890 (University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 1999).

⁴ BPP, 1843, XII, *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioner on the Employment of Women and*

Children in Agriculture, Report by Mr Stephen Denison on Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire, p. 277.

⁵ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (1930, 1981 edn), p. 86.

⁶ Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 87.

⁷ Alun Howkins, *Reshaping rural England: a social history, 1850–1925* (1991), p. 106.

⁸ Katrina Honeyman, *Women, gender and industrialisation in England, 1700–1870* (2000), p. 79.

of organized labour which drew heavily on a surplus of cheap child and female labour across Norfolk (as well as other eastern counties), some writers have sounded a note of caution. In particular it has been suggested that the system in Norfolk was, in fact, largely concentrated in the west of the county. Jennie Kitteringham, for example, argues that the system 'was most firmly established in the Fen districts of East Anglia ...', whilst G. E. Mingay points out it was in 'districts where large acreages had recently been enclosed from waste ...' that gangs predominated.⁹ Another point of debate has surrounded the role of the 'open' and 'close' parish system in generating and perpetuating the gang system in Norfolk. It is therefore surprising that there has been no attempt to resolve these issues through a detailed study looking specifically at the incidence and composition of agricultural gangs in nineteenth-century Norfolk. Indeed it would seem that the presence of much accessible contemporary published material has given the impression of a more consummate understanding of this topic than is actually the case. Reassessing the available evidence, this article will argue that some previous writers on nineteenth-century Norfolk may have distorted and exaggerated the role played by agricultural gangs by an over simplistic reading of contemporary evidence. The first section will present an overview of ganging in nineteenth-century Norfolk and review explanations for the evolution and growth of the system in the county. The next section will go on to present a close reading of all the evidence presented in two nineteenth-century reports: the *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission* (1867) and the *First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture* (1867-8). As already suggested, these are sources familiar to all historians of women's labour in nineteenth-century agriculture and are often quoted. However, the information contained in these reports is often taken at face-value and incorporated into analyses without critical assessment. Although much of the evidence presented in these official sources is impressionistic, it will be shown that they contain a great deal of untapped material which can throw some fresh light onto the subject of agricultural gangs. Through the unravelling of such evidence, this article will reveal that by the mid-nineteenth century, gangs in Norfolk were largely located in the western part of the county and that they employed mainly children and unmarried teenagers between the ages of seven and eighteen. That gangs offered employment opportunities to only a small proportion of adult women and very young children in the county has important implications for arguments which suggest the widespread exploitation of cheap child and female labour to feed the demands of an increasingly capitalist farming system in Norfolk in the mid-nineteenth century.

I

According to contemporary accounts agricultural gangs in nineteenth-century Norfolk fell into two categories: public and private. The public gang system originated in the Norfolk parish of Castle Acre in the mid-1820s.¹⁰ J. H. Bloom, writing in the early 1840s, was one of the first authors

⁹ Jennie Kitteringham, 'Country work girls in nineteenth-century England', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Village life and labour* (1975), p. 98; G. E. Mingay, *A social history of the English countryside* (1990), p. 102.

¹⁰ John Todd, overseer of a gang, told the 1843

Royal Commission that the system had been running for seventeen years. BPP, 1843, XII, report by Denison, p. 276. That date - 1826 - is the one Pinchbeck uses in her analysis. Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 87.

to make detailed reference to the existence of the system in the parish of Castle Acre. 'A custom has for many years prevailed in the place, and been encouraged by the occupiers in adjacent parishes, to farm out the work necessary to be done on their respective lands to one or two individuals, who shall provide hands to accomplish it in the best manner and on the most reasonable terms'.¹¹ Thus the gangs operated essentially as a system of subcontracting between farmers and gangmasters. Farmers with a particular piece of work to be done which demanded a large number of labourers, would contract a gangmaster to carry out the work for an agreed sum of money. The gangmaster would then employ sufficient numbers of women and children to perform the task, working in gangs and paid at a daily rate. Private gangs, which were defined in the 1860s as 'a group of children, young persons and women in a farmer's own employ, and superintended by one of his own labourers', existed alongside the public gang system in Norfolk.¹² It was the public gangs which aroused most contention in the mid-nineteenth century and against which legislation was directed. Numbers employed in public gangs typically totalled around twenty, whilst private companies tended to be smaller.¹³ Standard jobs performed by both public and private gangs varied according to the season but consisted principally of three main tasks: the cleaning of land by weeding and stonepicking, the planting and then the harvesting of root crops such as turnips, potatoes and mangolds. Hours of work were generally 8 am until 5 pm, with an hour break in the middle of the day, although working days were shorter in winter. Bands of workers travelled to their work on foot, often covering distances of up to eight miles each way. Occasionally the farmer would provide a cart for excessive distances or gangs would stay overnight in a barn, although both were exceptional practices. Remuneration for women gang members was typically 8d. or 9d. a day in the mid-nineteenth century. Children usually received 3d. or 4d. a day. Labourers employed in the Norfolk gang system thus obtained day wages on piecework tasks, foregoing the increased profits usually associated with the latter.¹⁴ Moreover, if bad weather curtailed the day's work, labourers were not paid for their time.

The public gang system in particular was usually considered an exploitative one, with farmers and gangmasters benefiting at the expense of workers. Employers benefited from the system by getting work completed quickly and cheaply, paying female and child day rates for piecework. Gang labour could be used if and when needed, and could be easily dispensed with at the end of a task. The gangmaster was responsible for the work and behaviour of the gang, freeing the farmer – or any of the farmer's regular labourers – from supervisory tasks. The gangmaster profited from the system by being elevated to the position of overseer and received remuneration relative to this role. They were often depicted by contemporaries as brutal and tyrannical men of little refinement. Bloom wrote, 'These parties are termed *gang* masters, and a very significant term it is, for surely no gang of wretched slaves beneath the sweltering sun of the tropics, could materially fall beneath the generality of persons thus assembled in intellectual debasement and moral depravity'.¹⁵ Similarly, Joseph Arch argued that the gangmaster was 'a

¹¹ Rev. J. H. Bloom, *Notices, historical and antiquarian, of the castle and priory at Castleacre in the county of Norfolk* (1843), p. 307.

¹² BPP, 1867–8, XVII, *First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, report by Rev. James Fraser, on

Norfolk, Essex, Sussex, Gloucester and parts of Suffolk, p. 11.

¹³ The term 'company' was used interchangeably with 'gang' by contemporaries.

¹⁴ BPP, 1843, XII, report by Denison, p. 276.

¹⁵ Bloom, *Castleacre*, p. 307.

rough bullying fellow, who could bluster and swear and threaten and knock the youngsters about and brow-beat the women, but who was nothing of a workman himself ...'.¹⁶ Gangmasters took as much as a third of the wages of those in his gang. According to the Diocesan Inspector of Schools for Norwich, this could total as much as 15s. to 20s. a week on a gang of 15 to 20 people in the 1860s.¹⁷ They also made profits by selling provisions to gang members. One witness, who gave evidence to the 1843 Royal Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture, argued that the gangmaster in her parish kept 'a flour shop', forcing 'all his gang to deal with him'.¹⁸ Although the gang system was seen as being particularly disadvantageous to those who laboured under it, it was often argued that this was the only form of employment available to many rural women and children in Norfolk. In the region surrounding Castle Acre in the 1840s, for example, it was suggested that 'were it not for the gang-system many persons would be out of work altogether, who are now enabled by great toil to earn some sort of livelihood'.¹⁹

Attention was first drawn to the existence of the gang system in 1843 by the report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture. As Pinchbeck points out, although at that time the system was still in its infancy, the Commissioner who reported on Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire, Stephen Denison, 'found it almost universally condemned in consequence of its injurious influences, both moral and physical'.²⁰ Denison focussed his report on the case of Castle Acre. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, as already shown, this was the parish in which the system had been functioning the longest and could therefore be seen as the place most familiar with the operation of the gangs. Secondly, Castle Acre could be highlighted as the most extreme example of a parish labouring under a system which was seen to be damaging to the local population. In many ways Castle Acre was a unique Norfolk parish, but the condemnation of the gang system and those who laboured under it was used to draw attention to the wider social and moral issues arising out of the operation of the gangs in other Norfolk villages. Denison attributed most of the problems associated with Castle Acre 'in the first instance to the peculiar circumstances of that parish'.²¹ Castle Acre, he argued, was an 'open' parish, in the hands of a considerable number of proprietors, while surrounding parishes were dominated by one or two landowners who restricted cottage building in their villages to control settlements and keep the poor rates low. People were forced to reside in Castle Acre in poor quality housing charged at exorbitant rents by speculative landlords and, as a consequence, the village became 'overstocked with inhabitants that do not properly belong to it', whilst adjoining parishes did not accommodate enough residents to cultivate the soil.²² He quoted supporting evidence from local landowners, farmers and overseers, one of whom famously described the parish as 'the coop of all the scrapings in the county'.²³ Denison contended that the solution to the evils existing in Castle Acre would not be resolved by simply abolishing the gang system. Instead the solution lay in the hands of neighbouring landowners who should be made responsible for their employees' well-being. Karen Sayer has analysed the ideological

¹⁶ John Gerard O'Leary (ed.), *The autobiography of Joseph Arch* (1966), pp. 92-3.

¹⁷ BPP, 1867-8, XVII; Evidence to Fraser's report, pp. 83-5.

¹⁸ BPP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p. 275.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-4.

²⁰ Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, pp. 87-8.

²¹ BPP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p. 221.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

constructs which underpinned the nineteenth-century Parliamentary Papers and points out that the Commissioner's opinions in 1843 were informed by the middle-class construction of the rural idyll. In this vision the closed village, with its paternalistic landowner and deferential social relations, was seen to form the ideal model of an organic community.²⁴ Denison's attitudes were summed up when he wrote:

If those 103 stranger families, who now swell the amount of crime and misery at Castle Acre, were living in their own parishes, subject to the control of their landlords, aided by their care and kindness, guided by their example benefited by that chance contact with persons of birth, education, and station, which directly tends to civilise ... Castle Acre would not be reproached ... its own native population would be uncontaminated by the refuge of other parishes; the gang system would necessarily cease and Castle Acre would no longer by what it now is, the most miserable rural parish I ever saw.²⁵

The contention that the 'open' and 'close' parish system created and perpetuated the gang system in Norfolk pervades later nineteenth-century Royal Commissions. The summary section of the *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission* argued that the gang system was a 'direct result ... of the pulling down of cottages in what are termed "close" parishes to avoid poor rates, and thereby driving the agricultural population off the land and into distant villages and towns ...'.²⁶ James Fraser, who reported on Norfolk for the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, used the categories as a model of analysis throughout his writing. He contends, 'It is impossible to exaggerate the ill-effects of such a state of things in every aspect – physical, social, economical, moral, intellectual ... Socially nothing can be more wretched than the condition of "open" parishes like Docking in Norfolk, and South Cerney in Gloucestershire'.²⁷ This is an argument which historians such as Pinchbeck and Kitteringham have utilized.²⁸ More recently, however, Sarah Banks has questioned this model for understanding nineteenth-century rural society. Banks contends that the 'open' and 'close' parish issue should 'properly be regarded as a scandal exaggerated by advocates of settlement law reform'.²⁹ She shows, using the 1851 census return, that the rapid growth in Castle Acre's population in the first half of the nineteenth century was caused less by an influx of people from neighbouring parishes, and more by the low levels of out-migration from the parish.³⁰ This was because people living in Castle Acre had opportunities to work in local trades and crafts, as well as in agriculture. Furthermore, in none of the surrounding parishes did the population decline in the first decades of the century, but as husbandry tasks became more intensive – coupled with a ready supply of cheap labour – farmers were encouraged to employ more labourers generally, whether from their own or other parishes. Castle

²⁴ Karen Sayer, *Women of the fields. Representations of rural women in the nineteenth century* (1995), p. 38.

²⁵ BPP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p. 226.

²⁶ BPP, 1867, XVI, *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission*. Summary report by H. S. Tremenheere and E. C. Tufnell, p. xxi.

²⁷ BPP, 1867–8, XVII, report by Fraser, p. 95.

²⁸ Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 87; Kitteringham, 'Country work girls', p. 98.

²⁹ Sarah Banks, 'Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model? A new look at "open" and "close" parishes', *EcHR* 41 (1988), p. 51.

³⁰ Banks' analysis of the Castle Acre census returns for 1851 shows that the proportion of migrants – or non-native inhabitants – aged 15 and over living in the parish was actually smaller than the percentage of migrants residing in other neighbouring parishes. Banks, 'Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model?', p. 69.

Acre, even in times of greatest demand, did have an excess of labour power which neighbouring parishes relied and drew upon.³¹

Thus another explanation often used to account for the rise of ganging in Norfolk lay in local farming patterns. Farmers, landowners and other experts interviewed by Denison in 1843 highlighted the role improved agricultural techniques played in encouraging the growth of the gang system in Norfolk. John Hudson, a farmer of some 1300 acres in Castle Acre and one of the most celebrated farmers in the county, illustrates this process:

When I first resided here, the gang-system was not known; the work now done by them was performed by women, or rather it was left undone. But from one or two farmers cultivating their lands in a superior manner, getting their farms perfectly clean and free from weeds; many others have been induced to follow their example and employ more hands; and where there used to be £1 expended in the cultivation of the land 20 years since, there are now £5 expended for the same.³²

Turnip cultivation was mentioned most often as a causal link.³³ Over the next twenty years, as more land was brought under cultivation during the mid-Victorian agricultural boom, seasonal demands for extra labour rose. This, it is argued, fuelled the persistence of ganging in Norfolk. For example, one witness from Stow Bardolph told the Children's Employment Commission, 'Gangs are commonly employed about here, and have been more or less for the last 30 years, but more of late, owing probably to improvements in the system of farming, which have been very great: tidy farmers will not be seen to grow weeds now'.³⁴ So, although the gang system was condemned in the 1843 Report, it continued unrestricted, proving economically attractive to both Norfolk farmers and labouring families: the former needed the hands to cultivate the land and for the latter it afforded the opportunity to acquire extra income to enable them to live above subsistence levels. This was recognized by Thomas Hudson, son of John Hudson, who gave evidence in the 1860s:

The work done by them is of great importance, both to the support of their families, and to the land. There are no manufactories here, and consequently a poor man with barely sufficient earnings for himself and wife could not possibly maintain a family of four or five grown-up daughters, and the work performed by the women and girls could not, or at any rate would not in fact, ever be done by men. I do not see any other way in which their work, e.g., weeding etc., could be done.³⁵

This statement is interesting not least because Hudson resolutely dismisses the claim often levelled at agricultural gangs, that male labour was displaced in favour of cheap female and child workers. The summary report of the Children's Employment Commission held this opinion and contended that 'under the present system, by which the labour of children and women is so largely employed, the price of many kinds of work which is ordinarily done by

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-70.

³² BPP, 1843, XII, report by Denison, p. 274.

³³ See for example *ibid.*, p. 277. Turnips were by far the most dominant root crop grown in the Freebridge Union where Castle Acre was situated. In 1854 they made up 87% of all root crops grown in the region.

S. Wade Martins, *A great estate at work. The Holkham estate and its inhabitants in the nineteenth century* (1980), p. 265.

³⁴ BPP, 1867, XVI, evidence on agricultural gangs collected by Mr J. E. White, pp. 95-6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

adult male labourers is much reduced, and such labourers are out of employment for several weeks, or even months, while their wives and children are doing their work'.³⁶ However as Anne Digby has shown in her analysis of parishes surrounding Castle Acre, the displacement of resident male labour engaged in regular employment would have been prohibitively expensive in poor relief and did not occur.³⁷ Moreover, much of the agricultural work performed by gangs – weeding, stone picking, planting and harvesting root crops – was traditionally carried out by women and children. This rigid sex-typing of agricultural labour whereby female and child labourers were utilized for a number of operations associated with cleaning the land and tending crops such as potatoes and turnips is reinforced by analysis of farm labour books from across the county.³⁸ Moreover the sexual division of labour was long-standing on Norfolk farms, as A. Hassall Smith showed in his analysis of the late sixteenth-century accounts of Nathaniel Bacon at Stiffkey. He found that women were principally employed on weeding, haymaking and harvesting whilst men ploughed, harrowed, threshed, carted hay and corn, dug ditches and cut hedges.³⁹ Thus it is unlikely that gang labour undermined the position of male agricultural labourers in nineteenth-century Norfolk: tasks performed by gangs were those traditionally sex-typed as women's and children's work and Norfolk farmers drew upon the surplus pool of cheap casual female and child labourers to carry out additional work created by intensified cultivation of the land.

It is clear that by the mid-nineteenth century the rural woman worker had emerged as a distinct social problem in the eyes of many contemporary commentators. It was women who participated in gang labour in the eastern counties who were most often vilified. According to Sayer, by the mid-1860s 'public concern about ganging had grown so great' that Lord Shaftesbury directed the existing Children's Employment Commission to investigate the work of children in organized public gangs within the eastern counties.⁴⁰ It is, however, hard to find evidence for large-scale public disquiet over ganging prior to the mid-1860s. Sayer quotes evidence from the *Sixth Report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council* (1863), which focussed on women's labour in ganging districts as a cause of infant death. Yet few of the agricultural writers who visited and commented on Norfolk farming in the mid-nineteenth century, such as Bacon, Almack and Sewell Read mentioned ganging in their accounts, and the existence of gangs did not seem to induce any sort of debate between farmers and agriculturists in the pages of contemporary journals and pamphlets.⁴¹ However, the publication of the *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission* in 1867 was a watershed in the perception of ganging and certainly fuelled sensational reporting. The parliamentary investigators in 1867 were clearly shocked that exploitative systems of labour were not restricted to urban-based manufacture.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, summary report, p. xx.

³⁷ Anne Digby, *Pauper palaces* (1978) p. 121.

³⁸ Verdon, 'Changing patterns of female employment', ch. 4.

³⁹ A. Hassall Smith, 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England. A case study from North Norfolk', *Continuity and Change* 4 (1989), pp. 11–52. See also Sharpe, 'Female labour market', pp. 167–172.

⁴⁰ Sayer, *Women of the fields*, p. 72. Again Pinchbeck's analysis seems to be influential here. Pinchbeck writes,

'Although the gang system was condemned in the Report of 1843, it persisted and increased for another quarter of a century until public opinion, roused by its worst features, demanded an inquiry which resulted in the regulation of gangs after 1868.' Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 89.

⁴¹ R. N. Bacon, *The report on the agriculture of Norfolk* (1844); B. Almack, 'On the agriculture of Norfolk', *JRASE* 5 (1845), pp. 305–57; C. Sewell Read, 'Recent improvements in Norfolk farming', *JRASE* 19 (1858), pp. 265–311.

They were especially struck by the similarities between the operation of the gang system and other forms of subcontracting in urban trades. This attitude is most poignantly expressed by an anonymous correspondent to the *Quarterly Review*, who wrote:

The report is one of the most painful which it has been our duty to pursue, for it proves to distraction that the social evils which were long supposed to be peculiar to manufactures exist in an even more aggravated form in connection with the cultivation of the soil. Great numbers of children, young persons and women are, it appears, employed in companies or 'gangs' in certain counties which have acquired an odious notoriety for one of the most flagrant abuses which has ever disgraced a civilised land.⁴²

The summary report of the Sixth Report set down recommendations regarding the regulation of gangs, most of which were enacted in the Gangs Act of 1867. This was the only government legislation which was aimed specifically at curtailing the agricultural employment of women and children in the nineteenth century. This act, according to Sayer, 'had a concrete effect on many women and children employed in agriculture'.⁴³ However it must be remembered that it was only public gangs which were addressed under the legislation. Four aspects of ganging were targeted specifically by the act: after 1867 the employment of children under eight years of age in gangs was prohibited, a system of licensing for gang masters was instigated, female gangs now had to be overseen by a woman licensed to act as a gangmaster, and distances children were allowed to travel were regulated. Recommendations which were not taken up by the legislators in 1867 were the exclusion of females (partial or entire), regulating hours that could be worked, restricting females working in wet corn, instigating a register of those employed and setting up some schooling of children by the gangmaster.⁴⁴ In addition to the 1867 act, the government appointed the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, which was instigated to investigate the issue on a nationwide footing. It is from these two reports of the late 1860s that the most complete evidence on the nature and extent of ganging in nineteenth-century Norfolk is found. Whilst these are by no means unworked sources, they still contain a good deal of material which has yet to be fully exploited by historians. The next two sections will discuss in more detail the contents of these reports.

II

Mr. White and Mr. Longe, instructed to investigate the incidence of ganging in the eastern counties by the Children's Employment Commission in 1867, found the total number of labourers employed in public gangs across the whole district to be somewhere in the region of 6000 to 7000.⁴⁵ In Mr. White's district – covering Norfolk, Suffolk, Nottinghamshire and parts of Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire – it was estimated the total number engaged in the public gang system was 3017.⁴⁶ Whilst the authors contended that it was not in their 'power to give accurate statistics of the number of persons employed in these public gangs in the counties

⁴² Anon, 'Agricultural gangs', *Quarterly Rev.*, 123 (1867), p. 174.

⁴³ Sayer, *Women of the fields*, p. 68.

⁴⁴ BPP, 1867, XVI, summary report, pp. xv–xviii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. x.

where they exist ...', some estimates of the extent of public gangs in Norfolk were printed in the summary report.⁴⁷ The number of parishes that returned circulars from Norfolk was 26, indicating the total number employed in public gangs was 956.⁴⁸ Most of these parishes were situated in the west of the county, with the addition of some gangs operating in the villages surrounding Wymondham and Diss. A circular was distributed by commissioners 'to all classes of persons likely to be able to afford useful and trustworthy information', but at best this figure is only an estimate of the number employed in public gangs in those parishes which returned the questionnaire.⁴⁹ Indeed the summary report recognized that the figures would be 'subject to considerable variations at different periods of the year'.⁵⁰ Thus White's figure of 956 gang workers in Norfolk in 1867 is not an estimate of the total number employed throughout the county. However the returns do begin to indicate the regional distribution of the phenomenon. More detailed returns from a good number of these 26 parishes offered information on the age and sex of those employed and places the composition of public gangs in an interesting perspective. Sixty one per cent of workers were female. Of these, 32 per cent were aged between seven and thirteen years, 30 per cent were between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, and just under 40 per cent were eighteen years old and above. Of the women over eighteen, the majority – 71 per cent – were married. The bulk of males employed – 87 per cent – were boys and lads aged between seven and eighteen, with only 37 men over eighteen working in gangs. Only two children under seven years of age – one male and one female – were recorded.⁵¹ Obviously this data is not ideal. In particular we have to question the typicality of the parishes from which this information is derived. The replies may potentially be distorted in a number of ways and we have to question the underlying motives of those returning the questionnaire. Respondents driven by a desire to disguise the workings of the system in their locality, may have been unwilling to admit for example, that very young children were being employed. Conversely, those who held strong opinions on the 'proper' place of women and children in mid-Victorian society, could have seized the opportunity to deliberately exaggerate the extent of ganging in an attempt to undermine the scheme. Yet this is still an important source in that it represents the most detailed information available on mid-nineteenth-century Norfolk gangs and can serve as a useful indicator of labour trends.

Whilst bearing in mind that we have no reliable data on the total numbers of women and children employed in public gangs across the whole of Norfolk in the 1860s, it seems possible to suggest some tentative conclusions which emerge from White's inquiry. Firstly, very young children were rarely employed in Norfolk gangs. The notion that children aged seven and under were being exploited by farmers, gangmasters and parents is a common one. The authors of the summary report argued that there were some instances 'recorded in the evidence of children as young as six being or having been employed in these gangs ...'.⁵² Pinchbeck sees that ganging had the worst effect 'on the lives of children, some of whom worked in gangs at four, five and six years of age', whilst Kitteringham similarly considers that children in particular 'were very much at the gangmaster's mercy' and 'his interest was to extract as much work as possible from

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. x–xi. These percentages have been calculated using the highest estimates of the numbers employed.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

them'.⁵³ But any large-scale exploitation of very young children in Norfolk gangs is not borne out by White's investigation for the Children's Employment Commission. The legislators in 1867 were blind to the true extent of child labour in public gangs however, and, as already shown, children under eight years of age were barred from this type of work by the Gangs Act.

The second point that emerges from White's figures concerns women's labour. Although contemporaries and historians have concentrated on women's agricultural work in gangs, it is likely that gang labour actually accounted for only a small percentage of female agricultural workers in Norfolk in the mid-nineteenth century. White's figures indicate that fewer than 40 per cent of the members of public gangs in Norfolk in the second half of the nineteenth century were women aged eighteen and over: the majority of those employed – 70 per cent – were children aged seven years and over and unmarried teenagers.⁵⁴ Once again, the legislators were insensitive to this trend, insisting that female gangs had to be overseen by a woman gangmaster. However because very few all-female gangs existed in the late 1860s, there is little evidence that more women were licensed as gangmasters after 1867. The lack of adult women in Norfolk gangs could have important implications for the contemporary arguments which linked women going out into gang work – especially married women – to the decline of family life. Rev. Beckett gave evidence to the 1867 Children's Employment Commission and expressed comments that were typical of his contemporaries. He believed that married women who worked a full day in a gang returned home

tired and wearied, and unwilling to make any further exertion to render the cottage comfortable. When the husband returns he finds everything uncomfortable, the cottage dirty, no meal prepared, the children tiresome and quarrelsome, the wife slatternly and cross, and his home so unpleasant to him that he not rarely betakes himself to the public house, and eventually becomes a drunkard. The wife becomes indifferent about her personal appearance, neglectful of her domestic duties, and careless of her children. Those who visit the cottages of the labouring poor will invariably find misery and discomfort in those homes where the wife is employed in field labour, as compared with those where the wife stays at home and attends to her domestic duties.⁵⁵

Women's own attitudes towards gang work reveals a rather different viewpoint. The evidence of women gang labourers contained in both reports shows, as Sayer points out, 'that the observed differed from the observers in their understandings of women's paid work' and provides the historian with the 'only real documentation of working class ideology at this time'.⁵⁶ This evidence shows the extent to which most labouring women viewed working in gangs as an economic necessity, entered into only because there were few alternative opportunities to gain paid employment in the area. Similarly, the sense that it was only absolute necessity which forced labouring families to send their children into gangs prevails and it has been shown that

⁵³ Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 89; Kitteringham, 'Country work girls', p. 99.

⁵⁴ These findings are interesting in comparison to those of Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries on married women's and children's contributions to family incomes. Where the contributions of these two groups could be distinguished, they found children's contributions to

low-wage agricultural families exceeded those of their mothers, especially in the period after 1840. Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male-breadwinner family, 1790–1865', *EcHR* 48 (1995), pp. 102–3.

⁵⁵ BPP, 1867, XVI, evidence on gangs, p. 85.

⁵⁶ Sayer, *Women of the fields*, p. 55.

very young children were mostly spared this expedient. Harriet Bell told the Children's Employment Commission that 'I have three girls at gang work, aged 15, 13, and 11 ... I always go out with my girls when I am able, so as to look after them a bit ... I would sooner that they were at anything else, and it went very much against me to put them out, but as my children are all girls bar one I cannot get any other work for them'.⁵⁷ Elizabeth Havers spoke in similar terms: 'I call it no better than negro driving or slavery, and can't think it anything better ... Still poor people must work to get a living, and I cannot see how a poor man with children could do if they were not allowed to work too'.⁵⁸

III

It has been possible to establish from the *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission* that the composition of agricultural gangs in mid-nineteenth-century Norfolk consisted mainly of children aged over seven and young unmarried teenagers. Looking at evidence contained in Fraser's report for the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture some further insights into gangs can be ascertained. In particular, it may be possible to argue that the occurrence of public gangs in mid nineteenth-century Norfolk was much smaller than some historians have previously suggested. Fraser collected evidence from four Poor Law Unions in Norfolk which he thought 'might be considered typical'.⁵⁹ These were St. Faith's in central Norfolk; Depwade, bordering Suffolk to the east; Docking in north Norfolk and Swaffham, in the western division of the county. In the evidence attached to his report, which in total covered 127 parishes, only nine mention the existence of public gangs within their borders. Only in Swaffham, the most purely agricultural region, was the gang system found to prevail extensively, and was, according to Fraser still the 'most deeply rooted'.⁶⁰ In the Swaffham union five parishes mentioned the existence of public gangs: Ashill, Saham Toney, Great Cressingham, Gooderstone and Swaffham. The return from Ashill stated, 'There are three or four public gangs in the parish constantly employed throughout the year'.⁶¹ In Docking union, a district of large farms, sparse population settlements and light lands – factors which perpetuated the existence of gangs in the Swaffham area – Fraser writes, 'The gang system exists, but to a smaller extent than might have been expected under the circumstances'.⁶² In the Depwade region the system was reported to be dying out. At Stratton St. Michael, for example, a gang was reported to be occasionally utilized but the witness noted that the system was generally 'dying out in this neighbourhood' and whereas several farmers had used gangs in the 1830s and 1840s, 'at present only one farmer employs a gang'.⁶³ The gang reported at Pulham Magdalene in this region was said to consist entirely of boys.⁶⁴ On a number of occasions, replies insisted that residents of Depwade union would not understand the meaning of the term gang. At Bunwell and Carleton Rode it was reported that there were 'no gangs employed in either parish' and that 'many people would not know what the system means',

⁵⁷ BPP, 1867, XVI, evidence on gangs, p. 92.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ BPP, 1867–8, XVII, report by Fraser, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶¹ BPP, 1867–8, XVII, evidence to Fraser's report, p. 59.

⁶² BPP, 1867–8, XVII, report by Fraser, p. 7.

⁶³ BPP, 1867–8, XVII, evidence to Fraser's report, p. 43.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

whilst the return from Drayton insisted that 'A gang has never been heard of in the parish'.⁶⁵ At Haverland and Weston in St. Faith's union, a gang of around twenty was employed due to the deficiency of labourers resident in the villages, but no others were declared.

Thus evidence from this Royal Commission suggests that by the late 1860s the existence of ganging was very regionally based in the western portions of the county around Swaffham. A sense of decline pervades the parochial replies from across the rest of Norfolk. By this time, it seems likely that employment in agricultural gangs was an option open to only a limited number of female and child labourers where the successful cultivation of the land still required some system of organized labour. Once again care has to be taken when using evidence from the Royal Commission and, as with the Children's Employment Commission, the biggest question mark surrounds the pattern of parochial replies. Fraser's investigation of ganging rests on evidence from only a sixth of the total number of parishes in Norfolk in the 1860s. Fraser himself was aware of this and the regionally specific pattern of gangs in Norfolk which emerges from this source seems to be the correct one.

IV

Much of the evidence so far relates specifically to public gangs, but by concentrating on the public gang system are we in danger of underestimating the scale and importance of private gangs on mid-nineteenth-century Norfolk farms? The Children's Employment Commission argued that the number of women and children employed in private gangs in Norfolk was 'greatly in excess' of those employed in public ones: 'Where the numbers of the latter "are", to use a common mode of designating them, "counted by hundreds, those in the former are counted by thousands"'.⁶⁶ Moreover the authors drew little distinction between the two types of gang: 'There is no practical difference between the ages and hours of work, the modes of work, the composition of the gang, the state of education and the moral condition, in the case of those employed in the private and the public gangs'.⁶⁷ It was reported that one effect of the Gangs Act was to induce farmers substantially to increase the use of private gangs, thereby avoiding the restrictive regulations set out in 1867. Thus although Sayer sees this act as having a significant effect on female labourers, from the evidence contained in the Sixth Report it could be argued that the overall impact of the 1867 statute was debatable. There is, however, an interesting discrepancy between the summary report of the Children's Employment Commission and Fraser's report. Fraser found little evidence for the widespread existence in the county of private gangs. In reference to the Sixth Report he comments dryly, 'I have not been able to discover the foundation of this impression in any part of the district that was assigned to me'.⁶⁸ Fraser contends that only seven parochial returns acknowledged the existence of private gangs and these were on a very limited scale, with only the largest farms finding continuous employment for them. In addition these were 'without the accompaniment of any of those circumstances of physical or moral degeneration which startled and shocked the public mind when it first read the revelations of the system of public gangs'.⁶⁹ Whilst Fraser was by

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 31.

⁶⁶ BPP, 1867, XVI, summary report, p. xxiii.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

⁶⁸ BPP, 1867-8, XVII, report by Fraser, p. 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

no means happy to witness women and children performing hard physical labour often under demanding and demoralizing circumstances, he manages to avoid sensationalizing and condemning the situation of those he is observing, a trap which the Children's Employment Commission seems to have fallen into on a number of occasions.

V

Gangs seem to have been entrenched in the local system of agriculture in the Swaffham area right up to the end of the nineteenth century. By the 1890s, gangs of women and children were still reported to exist at Swaffham and surrounding parishes. The system was still economically attractive to both large farmers and labouring families at this time. Mr. Perkins, a gangmaster at Swaffham, told the Royal Commission on Labour in the early 1890s

I believe if there was not a woman's gang there would be some families here without anything to support them. I mean in such cases where a man has died and left a widow and children, or where the husband is sickly and families are large or where young women are unfit for service.⁷⁰

The scale of these gangs is likely to have been small if the example of Lodge Farm, Castle Acre is representative. Farm accounts from the mid-1890s show the persistence of gang labour on this farm, although by 1897-8 only three per cent of annual labour expenditure went on gangs. This was spread fairly evenly over the agricultural year, although gangs were not employed at harvest.⁷¹ Unfortunately, the accounts do not record the sex (or age) of those employed in gangs, so it is impossible to analyse the composition of the labour force involved by this date any further. The persistence of ganging on this farm into the late nineteenth century was certainly exceptional. Elsewhere the system – where it existed at all – became redundant from the early 1870s as farmers began to abandon cleaning operations such as weeding and stone picking in response to the agricultural depression. It was mainly economic pressures which dictated the final demise of the gang system in Norfolk. We should not overlook the impact that the reluctance of local women to labour in such conditions – and to send their children to work in organized gangs – could also have contributed to the demise of the gang as a system of labour.

VI

A number of interesting points emerge from this investigation of gang labour in mid-nineteenth-century Norfolk, not least in connection to historians' use of Parliamentary Papers as evidence. Whilst these are among the most accessible and widely used sources for historians interested in nineteenth-century rural labour, they are too often incorporated into accounts without critical assessment or thorough examination. This study of the *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission* and the *First Report of the Royal Commission on the Employment*

⁷⁰ BPP, 1893-4, XXXV, *Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer*. Report by Mr. A. Wilson Fox on the Poor Law Union of Swaffham, p. 86.

⁷¹ Norfolk RO, BR 111/29, farming records of the Everington family. Farm accounts, Lodge farm, Castle Acre, Oct. 1897-Oct. 1898.

of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture has shown that, whilst they are certainly not free from inconsistencies and biases, they do still contain much useful information which has yet to be fully exploited. These reports do not provide us with a complete account of the scale and composition of gang labour across Norfolk in the nineteenth century, but they do yield enough information to cast doubt on some previous interpretations of agricultural gangs. Rather than being viewed as a widespread system of organized labour which exploited female and child labour, instead it has been posited that the scale of agricultural gangs was relatively small in mid-nineteenth-century Norfolk, that the distribution of gangs was regionally specific within the county, and that the composition of the typical gang workforce was youthful.

Banks has argued that the 'open' and 'close' parish system was a scandal that was exaggerated by those pushing for reform of settlement law in the nineteenth century. In many ways it is possible to categorize the gang system in a similar way. This system of labour aroused so much contention in the mid-nineteenth century as middle-class observers discovered that social and economic relations in the English countryside could be as exploitative and degrading as those in urban areas. The controversy that surrounded the system of gang labour was excessive, but this is not to underestimate the arduous work women and children in Norfolk performed under the system, often simply because there were no alternative opportunities to earn money in the oversupplied and casualized rural Norfolk labour market of the nineteenth century.⁷² Clearly gangs did exist in some districts of mid-nineteenth-century Norfolk and were important to the cultivation of large farms in some instances, but the system became a cause célèbre in the 1860s and its scale and character has been misconstrued ever since.

⁷² See Alun Howkins, *Poor labouring men. Rural radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923* (1985), p. 9.