

Village Life in Dorsetshire

Freedom Press

October, 1887

I remember when laborers were paid only seven or eight shillings a-week, and their food was mostly barley cake and potatoes. They used to help themselves to swede turnips out of the fields, and to all the fuel they cooked with. They are better off now, but still it is sad enough.

The people have been driven out of the villages to seek work in the towns. In 1857 the population of this village was 595, and in 1881 it was 422—a decrease of 173 in 30 years. The number of houses is less by 24.

At the present time a farm laborer has eleven shillings a-week wages, and a house valued at from one shilling to eighteen pence a week rent. In hay-making time he gets ten shillings beer money. At wheat harvest he has £1, and during wheat tying, which lasts about six days, he can earn five shillings a-day, harvest work being paid by the job. The same holds good of hoeing root crops, at which a man can get three and sixpence or four shillings a-day for about fifteen days in the year.

Carters receive from twelve to thirteen shillings a-week, a house and wood fuel free, and two hundredweight of coal, besides £1 at haymaking and £2 at harvest for beer money. Shepherds get the same wages and beer money as carters, and an allowance of about one penny on each lamb they rear.

There is generally on each farm, besides the above, a "hedge-carpenter" and rick thatcher, who is paid fourteen or fifteen shillings a-week.

All these laborers have 20 or 30 lug of ground, rent free, to grow potatoes. (A lug is 5 1/2 square yards, yearly rent value 2d.) But I very much doubt if the men get much benefit from these potato grounds, which they have to plant, hoe, and dig when they come home, tired out after a long day's work. They require more and better food and drink to enable them to stand this extra exertion, and they have to find their own tools.

During hay-making and harvest the laborers are working from four or five in the morning till nine or ten at night. Carters always have to be in the stable as early as 4 a.m. They go out with the plows at six o'clock, and return to the stable at two in the afternoon, feed the horses and go home to dinner. At three they must be back again to clean down the horses and the stable. Then they go home to tea, and at eight have to return to the farm to feed the horses again and bed them for the night. Not much time for potato hoeing after that!

As for the shepherds, during January and February, the lambing season, they have to sleep in the fields in a covered cart, called the shepherd's lambing house, or under some thatched hurdles; for many times during the night they must get up and see if the sheep want assistance.

The plan of granting a house rent free as part of wages puts the laborers under the farmer's thumb, and now all the landowners let their cottages to the farmers. Thus the laborers can be evicted immediately without the case going to the county court. A few years ago I saw three laborers, with their wives and children, and their furniture, by the road-side at Milborne Bt. Andrews. They had been evicted by the farmer, because they were union men and would not work for the wages he offered. One of them had the pluck to turn a hive of bees loose in his cottage to prevent the furniture being thrown out. This same farmer was a queer fellow as well as a hard master. Once he had a wagon placed before his window, and set a man to turn the wheel all day long. A convict's task; one to make a fool of a man but the laborer had to do it or get turned off. In the end this village tyrant shot himself.

It must not be supposed that laborers are able to spend their extra harvest money on extra comforts or enjoyments. Alas! they are run too short all the rest of the year for that. As soon as a man gets his harvest wages, he must pay the shopkeeper, the shoemaker, etc., for the bills run up in winter. And then he has to buy his pig of the farmer. That costs £1, paid in installments of one shilling a-week. By harvest time the hog-tub is generally full of potato parings, and with these and small potatoes and a littler bran and barley, piggy is fattened. About Christmas-time he is killed, but then half of him must be sold to pay the grocer's bill.

The food of a laborer's family is bread, skim milk cheese, fried potatoes and cabbage or parsnips for breakfast, with a little coffee to drink. Dinner consists of bacon, with potatoes and cabbage boiled; supper of bread and butter, with the invariable potatoes and cabbage or parsnips fried, or perhaps stewed turnips for a change. The wife always boils an extra quantity of vegetables at dinner-time, so as to have plenty ready to fry morning and evening.

There is no possibility of putting by money or feeding useless mouths, all the old folk have to go to the union workhouse.

Such is the life of a Dorset laborer. A lifelong, exhausting round of labor for the benefit of the monopolists of land and capital, the landlord and the farmer. A slavery which takes all joy out of the healthiest and most natural of human occupations, and drives men out of the country to overcrowd our large towns, where they are often far worse off in the end.

A DORSETSHIRE MAN.

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Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 2, No. 13, online source RevoltLib.com,
retrieved on May 8, 2020.

Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism

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