

*Labour and  
Wages  
Agricultural*

GIANNI BRISTON  
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS  
LIBRARY

# AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN ENGLAND AND WALES

PART I

1900—1920

by

E. MEJER, M.Sc. (Wilno).



University of Nottingham, School of Agriculture  
Department of Agricultural Economics  
Sutton Bonington  
Loughborough.

Price — 4s. od.

AGRICULTURAL LABOUR  
IN ENGLAND AND WALES

PART I

1900—1920

by

E. MEJER, M.Sc. (Wilno).

University of Nottingham School of Agriculture  
Department of Agricultural Economics

1949

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

The author extends his sincere thanks to Mr. J. F. Duncan, LL.D., for his valuable advice and suggestions in connection with these studies, and to Mr. W. E. Heath, B.Sc. and Mr. J. H. Smith, M.Sc., for their encouragement and helpful criticism in the preparation of this report.

## CONTENTS.

FOREWORD	....	9
INTRODUCTION	....	11
<b>I. COMPOSITION OF LABOUR</b>		
1. Problem of man-power in agriculture	....	15
2. Adult male labour	....	17
3. Child labour	....	18
4. Women	....	19
5. Soldiers and prisoners of war	....	21
6. Casual and migratory labour	....	22
7. Supply of labour in Wales	....	22
<b>II. QUALITY OF LABOUR</b>		
1. Elements of efficiency	....	24
2. Conditions of efficiency	....	24
(a) muscular fitness	....	25
(b) mental alertness	....	26
(c) skill	....	27
(d) willingness to work	....	28
3. Farm workers' budgets and efficiency	....	29
<b>III. CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT</b>		
1. Classification of labour	....	40
2. Methods of engagement	....	40
3. Length of engagement	....	40
4. Hours of work	....	41
<b>IV. EARNINGS</b>		
1. Cash wages	....	43
2. Overtime	....	45
3. Piece-work	....	45
4. Customary payments	....	47
5. Allowances	....	47
6. Total earnings	....	49
7. Earnings of "boarded-in" workers	....	52
8. Juvenile labour	....	53
9. Women's wages	....	55
10. Changes in earnings, 1914-1918	....	55
11. Losses of wages due to "standing-off" or sickness...	....	56

## V. HOUSING AND RENTS

1. Tied cottages	....	....	....	....	....	....	58
2. Rents	....	....	....	....	....	....	60

## VI. OTHER PROBLEMS AFFECTING AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

1. Relations with the employers	....	....	....	....	....	....	62
2. Gardens, allotments and small-holdings	....	....	....	....	....	....	63
(a) gardens	....	....	....	....	....	....	63
(b) allotments	....	....	....	....	....	....	64
(c) small-holdings	....	....	....	....	....	....	64
(d) profit-sharing schemes	....	....	....	....	....	....	66
3. Social insurances and voluntary organisations	....	....	....	....	....	....	67
(a) health and unemployment insurance	....	....	....	....	....	....	67
(b) old age pensions	....	....	....	....	....	....	68
(c) co-operative movement	....	....	....	....	....	....	68
4. Trade Union movement	....	....	....	....	....	....	69
CONCLUSIONS	....	....	....	....	....	....	75

## INDEX OF TABLES.

1. Age of males employed in agriculture.
2. Estimated weekly expenditure of a farm worker's family.
3. Weekly expenditure of farm workers' families in 1918 and increase on estimated expenditure in 1914.
4. Cost of living.
5. Rates of cash wages of ordinary agricultural labourers.
6. Effective utilisation of labour in England (unweighted figures).
7. Effective utilisation of labour in England (weighted figures).
8. Effective utilisation of labour in Wales.
9. Prevailing weekly cash wages in England.
10. Prevailing weekly cash wages in Wales.
11. Prevailing rates of pay for piece-work in England and Wales.
12. Total yearly earnings of workers in Lincolnshire.
13. Wages in Kent.
14. Estimated wages and cost of board and lodging.
15. Average prevailing rates of yearly cash wages of boys boarded on a farm.
16. Average wages of boys living away from a farm (prevailing weekly cash).
17. Estimated position of rural housing in England and Wales in 1913.
18. Profit-sharing by agricultural productive societies 1911-1916.

## FOREWORD.

In this study Mr. Mejer reviews the conditions of agricultural workers in England and Wales from 1900 up to the end of the First World War. A second report will deal with the period between the two World Wars and a third will describe conditions from 1939 to the present time.

It is realised that by division in this way the continuity of the subject may suffer. A preliminary survey of the field, however, indicated the importance of the political, economic and social effects of the two wars on labour problems and suggested the division that has been adopted. The 20-year period covered by this study is marked by notable changes both in the attitude of agricultural workers to their environment and in the attitude of the community to the workers. After a temporary set-back during the early years of the First World War the agricultural Trade Unions movement achieved a remarkable impetus until by 1920 as many as 210,000 workers or something like one out of every three hired workers belonged to a Trade Union. The second period from 1920 to 1939 is marked, until well on into the thirties by a declining interest of agricultural workers in Trade Unionism and as a result of the Agricultural Wages Regulation Act 1924, by the introduction of a new era in the relationship between the worker and the State. In 1939, the beginning of Mr. Mejer's third period, the position again changed. The Second World War with its attendant circumstances placed the agricultural worker in a new relationship to the community. The blockade, the shortage of shipping and the subordination of the whole national effort to the one aim of winning the war had far reaching effects on the conditions of agricultural workers in England and Wales. These conditions will form the subject matter of the third report.

There are many articles, papers and reports dealing exclusively with various aspects of labour in agriculture and much contemporary economic and historical literature contains brief references to problems of agricultural labour. In this and the two reports which will follow this information is brought together and reviewed.

Wm. E. HEATH,  
*Head of Department of Agricultural Economics.*

## INTRODUCTION.

Until recently there has been a tendency in many quarters to regard agriculture in Britain as a way of life (and an inferior one at that), or at the best as an extra source of food supplies in times of national emergency and ensuing difficulties of importing foodstuffs from overseas. This tendency originated from the fact that by 1900 Britain had become a great industrial and commercial country and agriculture seemed to have lost its importance especially in view of the readiness with which the cheap food was offered to this country in exchange for manufactured goods. Agriculture had been relegated to the secondary position in our economic life but from the national point of view its importance remained unchanged.

Since 1939 the economic life of Britain has undergone a number of revolutionary changes which have not only affected agriculture, but also influenced public opinion and national policies. These changes are not confined to Britain alone and their importance lies principally in the fact that they represent general recognition of the rights of primary producers. No such recognition would have been possible without far reaching effects of the fear of want caused by the war, and in that field the foundation of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations may be justly regarded as an important step to better understanding and more effective co-ordination of the rights of primary producers and of the nutritional requirements of consumers.

Historically we see the social consciences stirred into action during periods of depression, but a country largely dependent upon manufactures and with a large industrial population cannot resist the clamours for cheap food. In the 19th century cheap food meant imports from the New World but now all this has changed. This country has spent many of its foreign investments and its hold on the world's market for manufactured goods has weakened.

It is now realised that in agriculture Britain must not only strive to achieve a very high standard of efficiency and production, but also to maintain that standard, once achieved, for an indefinite number of years. The country is now in the middle of what is called the battle of export, in fact, in the middle of what is probably the most acute economic crisis which it has experienced. Unless this battle is won and the gap between imports and exports is closed, our standard of living will have to be lowered. Also because of fears that the nations, generally, may fail to establish and maintain friendly relations, it is felt necessary to safeguard against the possibility of shortage of food in some future international conflict. We are now striving therefore to expand and develop agriculture in this country.

The world to-day is divided by curtains of distrust and fear, and the indications are that these curtains, instead of vanishing, will tend to grow firmer and more impenetrable. It is also important to



remember that in the world, generally, many people have spent a large part of their lives either in the armed forces or under some other form of regimentation and war economy. It is not surprising, therefore, that the feeling of uncertainty of the future, and the instinctive distrust of any bright prospects which may be displayed, permeated the lives of individuals as well as those of the whole communities. It would be a dangerous folly for Britain to advocate ideas of an economic nationalism or national self-sufficiency. The choice of an effective economic policy for Britain lies in striking a balance between the internationalism with all its economic advantages, and the development of a high degree of efficiency and adaptability in its home industries. Such policy should be pursued relentlessly in our own interest as well as in the interest of human progress in spite of disappointments and difficulties arising from the confused state of the world to-day.

In analysing the present position and the future of British agriculture the social aspect of the problem must be considered. The history of the last hundred years of agriculture in Britain tells, on one hand, of a continuous struggle of the farming community in maintaining their standard of living, and on the other of a bitter and often hopeless fight of the agricultural labourer for something better than an existence on or just above the starvation level.

A detailed analysis of the present state and future ways and means of British agriculture is outside the scope of this series of reports, which are confined to the labour aspects of the situation. But, however good the national policy and however great the effort in planning and in investing capital and machinery in the industry, it is the human factor which is decisively important.

The First World War and the realisation of the importance of agriculture in the national economy contributed to an improvement of the position of both the employer and the employee classes of the industry, but conditions, at the beginning of the Second World War, still remained far from satisfactory. The Second World War made it clear that neither the policy of grudgingly granted concessions nor part-time restrictive measures will bring about a steady development of agriculture as an industry of national importance.

Mechanisation of agriculture during the Second World War, the recruitment of labour force from all levels and quarters of the community and the renewed interest of all those engaged in agriculture in the development of the industry in other countries, contributed greatly to the better understanding between town and country population. Thousands of town people with hardly any previous knowledge of agriculture, in war time and through direct contact with country life, have become receptive to new ideas. They are much more appreciative than formerly of the trends and problems of the rural worker.

It is necessary that the industry should be run with the maximum of efficiency, and to achieve this some reorganisation of systems of farming and of methods of production is necessary. Maximum economic efficiency will not be reached until all

economic and social resources available to the industry are allocated in such a way, that no further gain can be achieved through their re-allocation, and an allocation of fresh resources becomes necessary. A combination of balanced industries creates the framework of an efficient national economy, and it is the task of the policy making bodies to determine for each the volume, the character of production, and the distribution of national resources.

The efficient organisation of agriculture represents a combination of manual labour efficiently utilised, capital economically employed and distributed among farm enterprises, and managerial ability of those responsible for the organisation of production. Taking into consideration special characteristics of agriculture, these elements of efficient organisation should be supplemented by the permanency of national policies, creation of conditions in which the industry may be run at a reasonable profit and readjustment of conditions of life and work of those actively engaged in farming at least to the level afforded by other industries of national importance.

The absolute importance of each of these factors is beyond question, but the most important is the human factor. It is the focal point of every economic and social activity. The labour bill of farm enterprises constitutes about one-third of total expenditure and the shortage of labour is now claimed by agriculture as one of the main obstacles to further progress. The whole set of problems of demand, supply, efficient allocation and utilisation of labour calls for an urgent investigation especially if, as we hope, agriculture in this country is going to embark on a long term policy of development and expansion.

Since 1881 this country has experienced a continuous drift of men from the land, which varied in strength but was never reversed or even permanently arrested. It is also interesting to note that only in war time, and that mainly because of the direction of labour, has the agricultural labour force increased to any considerable extent. Even then the ranks of the agricultural labour force were supplemented by the members of the Women's Land Army and by prisoners of war, of which the former afforded only a certain degree of permanency and the latter none at all.

The decline in agricultural population has attracted considerable attention in the past. It has often been stressed that poor pay and unsatisfactory living conditions of agricultural workers constituted one of its foremost reasons. Another, and not a less important reason given was a lack of possibilities of advancement, a dead-end alley, out of which every ambitious individual tried to escape before his ambitions were damped and he himself engulfed in the dreary existence afforded by agriculture. This reason was not confined to workers alone, and owing to the uncertainty of the future, low returns and competitive attractions of other occupations had its effect too upon the members of the farming community.

This view, though frequently exaggerated on sentimental grounds, should not be underestimated. On the other hand, however, the decline in agricultural population may be regarded as a normal occurrence resulting from the increasing efficiency of farm-organisation. Neither of these views can be accepted unreservedly on the strength of available evidence and only further studies of this problem may contribute to finding the right answer. A similar difficulty arises out of consideration of the adequacy of the labour force in agriculture to-day. The generally accepted opinion that agriculture is undermanned is not sufficiently substantiated and will remain so until the questions of efficient organisation and utilisation of labour are carefully examined and the size of labour force required for running the industry efficiently will be determined on the basis of results of such an examination.

However, the labour problem is not confined to ensuring an adequate volume of labour for the needs of the industry. The question of quality is equally important, and the methods of engendering the requisite degree of labour efficiency for the future constitute a whole set of problems in themselves. Agriculture of to-day is very different from that of fifty years ago. It may still be regarded as an art in so far that the inbred ability to sense things, common to all successful business men, plays a more important part in agriculture than in any other industry. But agriculture of to-day is a highly specialised job and in many ways it requires skill and technical training of a very superior quality.

The adequate supply of a well trained labour force does not solve the problem entirely. Appeals to the man's patriotic feelings or forced labour camp tactics will not make an efficient worker out of a man unless he and his family are given decent living conditions, unless he is adequately paid, and has equal facilities for advancement as in other industries, and finally, unless he is conscious of the value of the quantity and quality of work he performs in his own interest, as well as in the interest of the community.

It is a formidable array of questions and the task of answering them is not an easy one. It includes a great variety of problems, some of which may only be measured by an estimate, always open to criticism, especially if conclusions drawn are intended to cover the subject on a national scale. Many aspects of these problems have been the subject of study by various investigators and the results of their studies have been of a great value in the task of sizing up the position of labour in agriculture.

## I. COMPOSITION OF LABOUR.

### 1. PROBLEM OF MAN-POWER IN AGRICULTURE.

A survey of the problem of agricultural labour, as it is to-day would not be complete without, at least, a brief review of events and an analysis of conditions prevailing in the past. The end of the 19th century, the early years of the 20th century, and especially the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War brought a valuable crop of books, articles and other publications dealing with economic and social conditions in agriculture. They provide most valuable information both in contemporary and in historic retrospective, and among other problems discussed, that of the agricultural worker takes a prominent place.

The minute study of the history of the agricultural labourer by Dr. W. Hasbach<sup>1</sup> and the valuable works of J. L. and B. Hammond<sup>2</sup> Seebohm Rowntree and May Kendall<sup>3</sup>, or Sir Rider Haggard<sup>4</sup>, not to mention Mr. Wilson Fox's Report on the Wages, Earnings and Conditions of Employment of Agricultural Labourers in Great Britain<sup>5</sup>, and many other studies, have introduced the public mind to the problem of labour in agriculture and disclosed at the same time the unhealthy state of that problem.

Just after the turn of the century events were leading up to some constructive action in respect of the general conditions, wages and security of agricultural workers in this country.

The Land Enquiry Committee<sup>6</sup> under the chairmanship of the Rt. Hon. A. H. Dyke Acland summarised the position on the eve of the First World War, but however beneficial its recommendations might have been for the agricultural population, their execution was arrested by the outbreak of hostilities.

It is not proposed to extend this survey of the agricultural labour problem further back than the years preceding the First World War. Too many changes have taken place since in the political, economic and social life of the country to make the comparisons possible or useful for our study. The intention is to draw a picture of conditions of agricultural workers towards the end of the First World War. It gives the starting point for future studies, and it must be remembered that in many ways the position then was analogous to that existing now.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. W. Hasbach. *A history of the English Agricultural Labourer.* London 1920. (First Original Edition 1894).

<sup>2</sup> J. L. and Barbara Hammond. *The Village Labourer, 1760—1830.*

<sup>3</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree and May Kendall. *How the Laborer Lives,* 1913.

<sup>4</sup> Sir H. Rider Haggard. *Rural England,* 1902.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wilson Fox. *Report on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in 1906.* Cmd. 341.

<sup>6</sup> *The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee.* Vol. I. 1913.