TIME AND WAGES OF WEST COUNTRY WORKFOLKS IN THE
SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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While working on a research project about the parish of Colyton in Devon, I
discovered some interesting estate accounts relating to types of work and wages
on two estates in Devon and Cornwall in the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries. The first set of documents related to Antony estate on the Torpoint
peninsula near Plymouth, and consisted of workfolks’ wages books for the
period 1673 through to 1691, and a hired labour agreement book for 1692 to
1714.¹ These gave both wages by the week and day and agreements made for
yearly hiring. Comparison can be made with a century later for another estate
owned by the Pole family, Shute Barton, situated in East Devon. The records
for Shute Barton consist of a day labourer’s book for the 1790s.² Shute was a
small parish neighbouring on the larger town of Colyton and some of the
workforce of Shute Barton were drawn from Colyton. We still have little
information about wage rates and labour force participation for ordinary people
in the past,³ and even though these records only provide details from two
estates, and large ones at that, they do help us to shade in the picture to a
small extent.

Roughly equal numbers of males and females were employed on the Antony
estate in the seventeenth century. Day workers were often related to each other.
For example, one entry reads ‘pd Martha Trewharse, daughter and
granddaughter’. Females were only employed in the summer months; in the
winter work volume was greatly reduced and the estate just employed men. In
summer, women participated in ‘weeding in ye garden’, ‘beating’, ‘winnowing
collecting’, ‘threshing and drying oats’, ‘fishing’, ‘collecting eggs’, as well as
haymaking and harvest work. There was also a large pastoral sector.

Wages differed between men and women who worked in the fields. Men
received between 6d. and 8d. per day and women received either 3d. or 4d. per
day. These wages are higher than those found by Shammas for seventeenth
century Swarthmoor Hall in Lancashire but not as high as agricultural wages in
Essex at a similar period.⁴ Where husbands and wives both worked on the
Antony farm, married women normally worked about a third of their
husband’s time. Women would work a total of two days on average (which, in
some cases, consisted of four half days), but men would work a full six days in
a summer week. On average children worked half the time of adult males. At
haymaking a large number of extra women (notably no men) were recruited.
Since certain people appeared together to work, an informal word of mouth
and family recruitment system seems to have been in operation.
Sometimes women did particularly physically strenuous jobs and were paid more than other women. Jane Garland was paid 6d. per day at Antony in 1687 for shearing ewes which was on a par with men in other tasks. The same amount was paid to two other women who each did five days of shearing for 2s. 6d. Similarly, a woman was paid 4d. per day for four days of attending a thatcher. Henry Best described women in a similar sort of work in 1641;

Wee usually provide two women for helpes in this kinde viz. one to draw thacke and the other to serve the thatcher, shee that draweth thacke hath 3d. a day and she that serveth the thatcher 4d. a day because shee is also to temper the mortar, and to carry it to the toppe of the house.\(^5\)

Comparison can be made with the Shute Barton Estate for which records exist from 1791 to 1794, although this record contains details of regular agricultural labourers rather than casual workers. At Shute at this time, which covers the start of the Napoleonic Wars, arable was more important than it had been in Antony. Oats and wheat were the main crops, but timber management, fishing and attending the hounds also feature as significant jobs. Women here earned 6d. per day for field work and men generally received a shilling a day or slightly more.

The female agricultural labourers were employed in weeding, haymaking, harvesting in the fields and gathering of fruit. One woman ran the dairy which was probably just for household consumption. This was all year round work. The season, within which women worked, now lasted most of the year possibly because some of the women were doing men’s jobs while they were away in the militia. Weeding started in March, cultivation of the potatoes and plantations took the work into November. Turnips were singled in mid-winter and this was always female work. For example, in January 1794, Martha Strowbridge was ‘6 days cleaning the Brickyard, putting, washing and cutting of Turnips 3s.’.

The women who did work on the Shute Barton Estate could be linked to the reconstitution of Shute.\(^6\) The women were all single and mainly aged in their early twenties. They were daughters or siblings of the male workers on the estate. Interestingly, there is no record of any of them ever marrying and most of them had had illegitimate children, or went on to have them in the future. It seems likely that these women became agricultural labourers because they had difficulty in getting, or keeping, a job as a domestic servant. There were no married women who were agricultural workers although we could expect them to have been contributing to the estate as casual workers at the busiest times of the year.

It is unfortunate that few similar series of wages or work agreements survive for smaller properties since records from large estates are not necessarily representative. However, some conclusions can be drawn from the west country data even though the estates were very different. In both sets of records it is clear that women agricultural workers were paid less than the rates of pay for
men, even when they appear to have done directly comparable work. For example, in May 1683, Jone Clements and her husband were both paid for a day's threshing. She was paid 4d. and he was paid 5d. This differential appears to have become wider over time, as by the late eighteenth century female labourers were certainly earning less than half of men's wages for a week's work despite the fact that they may have been substitutes for male labourers who were in the militia. Historically, wages were extremely regionally specific. They were much higher in the south-east of England in the seventeenth century, but much lower in the north-west of the country. By the late eighteenth century however, Shute Barton had male wages which do not differ widely from those in Essex at the same period, or in any of the English parishes for which David Davies collected budgets. 7 Whereas Antony provided diverse employments for local women who probably worked on their family gardens or small farms for part of the week and year, by the 1790s there had been a transformation in both agricultural techniques and regional market integration. The resulting capitalist farms relied on landless labour. As a result Shute Barton used the sort of workforce which was described in the texts of the agricultural improvers. 8 Nevertheless, it is striking that on both estates at both times the labour force was drawn from certain families.

NOTES

1. Cornwall Record Office CA/H/115-116; CA/H/117.
2. Cornwall Record Office PA/32/27-29.
6. The reconquest of Shute was carried out by Roger Sellman and presented to the Cambridge Group.
8. For example, A. Young ed., Annals of agriculture, in 44 volumes from 1784 to 1806.