

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

FARM SERVICE IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

Nigel Goose

There can be no doubt that farm service was in decline between the middle of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, for contemporary testimony to this fact is deafening and historical opinion categorical.² The regional pattern to this phenomenon was clear cut: farm servants survived in much greater numbers for far longer in the north and south-west of England, where pasture farming predominated, settlements were more dispersed, farms were generally smaller and alternative employment in rural industries more readily available. In the southern half of the country, however, excluding only Cornwall and Devon, farm service was in rapid decline. Some contemporaries appear to have believed the process to be complete by the 1820s and 1830s, but the agricultural labour force in the several southern counties still comprised between 15 per cent and 38 per cent farm servants as late as 1831, these figures perhaps erring on the generous side.³ Despite a recent reassessment of the 1831 census data which concludes that the contrast between the north and west and the south and east has been exaggerated, a clear contrast remains.⁴ By mid-century, 'few servants in husbandry were hired in the south and east'.⁵ Although a couple of reports to the Poor Law Board on the Law of Settlement in 1847 and 1851 do suggest that the removal of the hiring head of settlement in 1834 had produced a slight revival of farm service, this does not appear to be supported by the published census reports for 1851.⁶ Across nearly the whole of the south and east by this date, the proportion of the labour force (male and female) who were farm servants stood between 4 and 14 per cent according to Kussmaul, whilst the more reliable figures relating to males only presented by Snell stand in single figures for the great majority of southern counties.⁷

Hertfordshire was no exception, and again contemporaries were well aware of the process. The Hertfordshire responses to the rural queries framed by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1834 are particularly revealing, the key question being number 38, 'Do the labourers in your neighbourhood change their services more frequently than formerly and how do you account for that circumstance?', to which 16 of the 18 Hertfordshire parishes responded.⁸ Only

one of these, Stanstead Abbots, answered in the negative, a qualified 'not generally'; all of the rest agreed that this was indeed the case. The evidence of the published report on the 1851 census is no less categorical, for in Hertfordshire at this date a mere 7.9 per cent of the male labour force were recorded as farm servants, just 1,861 out of a total of 23,476.⁹ As in 1831 the figure stood within the range 20-25 per cent,¹⁰ farm service in Hertfordshire would appear to have been very quickly on its way to extinction at mid-century. How paradoxical, therefore, to find Edwin Grey, in his reminiscences of Harpenden in the later 1860s, clearly reporting the continuation of the practice of farm service, both in Harpenden itself and elsewhere in the county, both lads and men presenting themselves at the annual hiring fairs held at St Albans or Luton, agreeing weekly wages, a lump sum of £2 at the end of the year's contract plus one shilling in binding money.¹¹ Farm service, this account suggests, may indeed have been changing, but some 15 years or so after the 1851 census it still appears to have been in active operation.

In an attempt to resolve this paradox the census enumerators' books (hereafter CEBs) for the St Albans district, which included Grey's Harpenden, were examined in detail. The St Albans Superintendent Registrar's District in 1851 incorporated the Borough and Liberty of St Albans, and the surrounding villages of Harpenden, Redbourn, Sandridge and Wheathampstead. The population of the Liberty of St Albans was 11,160 (including the workhouse), but the borough proper encompassed only some 6,985. Hence there was a substantial rural area lying within the Liberty amounting to approximately 4,000 individuals, besides a further 6,831 rural inhabitants living in the four villages near to the town.¹² For the St Albans region, farm servants appear to be reasonably well recorded in the CEBs and distinguished from house servants in all but the area designated as the Out-hamlets (on the fringes of St Albans) and, to a lesser extent, in Sandridge. The returns for the Out-hamlets are particularly suspicious, for a number of entries occur here where young male servants living on farms are recorded either as 'servant' under occupation as well as under relationship to head of household or, more commonly, the occupation column is left blank, and it is probable that these were in fact farm, rather than domestic, servants. This is true of the farms of Henry Kerley, William George, George Longstaff and William Wise, among others, and the net effect is quite considerable. If all of the suspect cases are counted, then a total of 19 farm servants have been omitted, against a recorded total of just 27.¹³ In Sandridge the enumerator appears to have made a very clear distinction between farm and house servants, until the phrase 'general servant' begins to appear towards the end of the enumeration, always against the names of male residents, which might indicate that the 11 individuals so described on the farms of Jonathan Cox, Robert Smith, William Holloway and Elizabeth Booth were both farm *and* household servants, and hence should be added to the 48 farm servants proper identified here. In the tabulations which follow, therefore, adjusted figures are presented for both of these districts.

The CEBs identify farm servants and farm labourers in three ways: through description of the relationship of a living-in labourer to the head of household, through the designation given under occupation, and through the details

Table 1 Male Living-in Farm Servants (1).

| | No. Labourers | No. Living-in | %Living-in | No.Under 20* | %Under 20 |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| URBAN | | | | | |
| St Albans (town) | 34 | 6 | 17.6 | 3 | 50.0 |
| RURAL | | | | | |
| St Michaels (rural) | 119 | 33 | 27.7 | 23 | 69.7 |
| St Stephens | 198 | 46 | 23.2 | 30 | 65.2 |
| Out-hamlets | 181 | 47 | 26.0 | 25 | 53.2 |
| Harpenden | 177 | 38 | 21.5 | 18 | 47.4 |
| Redbourn | 126 | 35 | 27.8 | 24 | 68.6 |
| Sandridge | 255 | 59 | 23.1 | 34 | 57.6 |
| Wheathampstead | 167 | 28 | 16.8 | 20 | 71.4 |
| Total | 1,257 | 292 | 23.2 | 177 | 60.6 |

Note: * Excludes the one labourer who lived-in with Arthur Timperon, for whom no age is given.

under farmers' occupations of the size of their farm and the number of labourers they employed—the latter only occasionally distinguishing living-in from living-out labourers.¹⁴ Two approaches were adopted to determine the proportion of the agricultural labour force that were farm servants. First, the information regarding number of labourers that each farmer employed contained in the occupation column, where this was given, was compared with the number of labourers identified as living-in with their employer. The results of this exercise are presented in Table 1. The proportion found to be living-in, just over 23 per cent, is remarkably high given the evidence of the published census report. The percentages are fairly consistent between parishes, only Wheathampstead and the town of St Albans exhibiting notably lower proportions, but even here the figures remain double the county average. The situation could, however, vary considerably from one farm to the next. In Harpenden, for example, Robert Sibley of Annobles Farm employed 22 labourers, none of whom lived-in at the farm, while of the 15 employed by Joseph Willmott at Cooters End six did so.

In St Michaels (rural) all six of Thomas Hollingshead's labourers at Kettlewell Farm lived in, whilst all other farms in this part of St Michaels parish included only between one and three live-in labourers, regardless of the size of the total labour force. In all, however, of the 149 farms suitable for analysis, 111 or fully 75 per cent included at least one living-in labourer. On the other hand, over 60 per cent of farm servants were under the age of 20, and the majority of the remainder were in their twenties, confirming farm service as predominantly a feature of a particular life-cycle stage.

Table 2 Male Living-in Farm Servants (2).

| | No. Labourers | No. Living-in | %Living-in | No.Under 20* | %Under 20 |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| URBAN | | | | | |
| St Albans (town) | 130 | 6 | 4.6 | 3 | 50.0 |
| RURAL | | | | | |
| St Michaels (rural) | 167 | 45 | 26.9 | 29 | 64.4 |
| St Stephens | 352 | 51 | 14.5 | 32 | 62.7 |
| Out-hamlets | 302 | 52 | 17.2 | 27 | 51.9 |
| Harpenden | 358 | 41 | 11.5 | 20 | 48.8 |
| Redbourn | 300 | 40 | 13.3 | 27 | 67.5 |
| Sandridge | 173 | 64 | 37.0 | 36 | 56.3 |
| Wheathampstead | 378 | 35 | 9.3 | 24 | 68.6 |
| Total | 2160 | 334 | 15.5 | 198 | 59.3 |

Note: * Excludes the one labourer who lived-in with Arthur Timperon, for whom no age is given.

The second approach adopted conformed to that apparently employed by the General Register Office in processing the returns for publication: that is, all the labourers listed under 'occupation' were counted, and the number living in with their employer identified. This method produced very different results, as shown in Table 2.¹⁵ Now the number of labourers identified is substantially larger, 2,160 as compared to 1,257, and in consequence the proportion living-in is considerably lower, standing at a little over 15 per cent overall. Differences between parishes are now considerably exaggerated. The low percentage among those found in the borough comes as no surprise, given the fact that so few farmers lived here, but even between the rural areas there are marked differences, with only just over 9 per cent living-in in Wheathampstead and fully 37 per cent in Sandridge. Indeed, there were fewer labourers living in the village of Sandridge than the farmers reported they employed, 173 as compared with 255, the obverse of the situation found in all other parishes. Clearly, some parishes were exporters of labour to work on farms situated in others, most clearly those lying within the borough of St Albans, while the village of Sandridge was importing labour from elsewhere in the district. It is also likely that some of the labourers listed here were actually employed in surrounding parishes which bordered the St Albans district, while others living outside the district may well have found employment within it. These are, of course, imponderables, but if our data shows nothing else it does indicate that any analysis based upon the individual parish could well be entirely misleading.

There are a number of possible conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis. Whatever method is employed to calculate the proportion of labourers who were farm servants in the St Albans district in 1851, the figures stand substantially above the county figures given in the printed census reports, either double or treble the level shown there. Alongside the fact that the majority of farmers continued to keep at least one live-in labourer, this appears to indicate much stronger survival of farm service at mid-century than has often been assumed, and helps us to understand Grey's testimony concerning the situation in the 1860s. How do we explain the discrepancy between the local evidence of the CEBs and the published county figures? It is possible that the totals given in the printed census report are wrong, and that occupational designations have been relied upon to determine the number of farm servants rather than careful identification of labourers' living arrangements. It is also possible that the St Albans district was exceptional in its retention of farm service at mid-century, although this would inevitably imply that levels were very much lower elsewhere in Hertfordshire: the 334 live-in labourers listed in Table 2 represents fully 18 per cent of the county total given in the report while the district contained only 11 per cent of the county's population and was also relatively highly urbanised. Furthermore, the labourer to farm ratio was high in this district, a feature commonly associated with low rather than high levels of farm service.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is a respect in which the St Albans district was exceptional, and this is in the remarkable opportunities for additional earnings from the straw plait and straw and Brazilian hat trades.¹⁷ If one reason for the retention of farm service in the pastoral regions of the country was the existence of competing forms of industrial by-employment, the existence of these thriving industries in south and south-west Hertfordshire may have exerted a similar impact here too. Whatever the explanation, our data would seem to indicate at the very least that considerable variation could be found within as well as between counties and that in some southern areas farm service declined far more slowly than is often assumed and was certainly not close to extinction at mid-century.

Recent studies of groups of parishes in other southern counties have similarly identified surprisingly high numbers of farm servants at mid-century in comparison with what contemporary testimony and the evidence of the published census reports would have us believe, and the growing weight of evidence supports the view that the chronology and scale of changes to the agrarian social structure in this period requires re-evaluation.¹⁸ To do this effectively, however, and to determine whether it is local variation that is being detected or serious under-recording of farm service in the published census reports, examination of an entire county is required. Full analysis of farms and farm service throughout Hertfordshire, paying particular attention to the quality of recording in each enumeration district, is currently underway. Once this analysis is complete, it will not only be possible to determine whether or not the published reports are indeed defective, but we will also be able to relate such variations as are identified to differences in soil conditions, proximity to London, and to the local availability of alternative employment in cottage and small factory industry.

NOTES

1. The original research for this pilot survey was conducted in 1998/9, and the results partially presented in N. Goose, *Population, economy and family structure in Hertfordshire in 1851: Vol. 2 St Albans and its region* (Hatfield, 2000), 110-13.
2. A. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1981); K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: social change and agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985), esp. 67-103; *Report of the Select Committee on Agriculture 1833*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1833, V, *passim*.
3. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, 126-7; Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, 84.
4. A.J. Gritt, 'The census and the servant: as reassessment of the decline and distribution of farmservice in early nineteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, 53 (2000), 84-106.
5. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, 10.
6. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, 97 fn. 65.
7. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, 20; Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, 95-7.
8. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law 1834, Appendix (B.1) IV*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1834, XXXIII, 217-27. There were 18 responses from 16 parishes, as Shenley and Westmill each provided two.
9. *Census of England and Wales 1851, Population Tables II. Ages, Civil Condition, Occupations and Birthplaces of the People*, 163. This tallies exactly with the figure given by Snell, and of necessity excludes shepherds: *Annals of the labouring poor*, Table 2.1, 96.
10. Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry*, Figure 7.1, 127.
11. Grey indicates that teenage boys would earn 3s. 6d. to 5s. per week, adult general farm hands 11s. to 13s weekly in summer and 9s. or even less in winter, whilst head ploughmen, cowmen or shepherds would earn 15s per week, although it was also possible to earn an extra 7-10s weekly at harvest time: *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village* (St Albans, 1935), 57, 59-62.
12. For a full description of the topography of the area see Goose, *St Albans and its region*, 27-33.
13. For a similar problem in Atcham, Shropshire, in 1851 see P.R.A. Hinde, 'Household structure, marriage and the institution of service in nineteenth-century rural England', *Local Population Studies*, 35 (1985), 45-6.
14. For a discussion of the way in which farms, farmers and farm workers were recorded in the CEBs see D. and J. Mills, 'Farms, farmers and farm workers in the nineteenth-century census enumerators' books: a Lincolnshire case study', *The Local Historian*, 27 (1997), 130-43. For difficulties in interpretation of the number of labourers per farmer presented under farmers' occupations see J.A. Sheppard, 'East Yorkshire's agricultural labour force in the mid-nineteenth century', *Agricultural History Review*, 9 (1961), 45-6; R. Peek, 'Farm labour in mid-nineteenth century Warwickshire', *Local Population Studies*, 31 (1983), 47.
15. Unlike in the published census reports, the few shepherds, cowmen etc. were included in this exercise.
16. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor*, 95.
17. Goose, *St Albans and its region*, 70-4, 82-106.
18. B. Short, 'The decline of living-in servants in the transition to capitalist farming: a critique of the Sussex evidence', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 122 (1984), 147-64; M. Reed, 'Indoor farmservice in 19th-century Sussex: some criticisms of a critique' and B. Short, 'A rejoinder', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 123 (1985), 225-41; N. Verdon and A. Howkins, 'Far from extinct: farm service and the agricultural labour force in England and Wales, c. 1800-1945', unpublished paper presented at the Economic History Society Annual Conference, Royal Holloway, University of London, 3rd April 2004; Gritt, 'The census and the servant', 105.