

Agricultural labourers

Joe Saunders

Agricultural labourers or 'Ag-labs' were once a ubiquitous feature of rural landscape and society. To work in agriculture was common in England and Wales from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Many family, social and local historians come across them in our research.

Agricultural labourers were usually married men who lived in cottages on the estate of their landowner or in the nearby village. They were hired on a regular weekly wage or on a casual basis for piece-work. While census entries often confused the two they differed from farm servants who were usually single, employed yearly, lived on the farm, and were paid through their board, lodging and wages. In sixteenth and seventeenth century England and Wales agricultural labourers made up to a third of the countryside population. This would have varied regionally, with the proportion lower in moorland areas while higher in fertile corn-growing localities and unenclosed heath- and forest-lands.



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Far from being simply a generic worker the term 'labourer' could encompass a wide variety of work with individuals possessing specialist skills such as ploughman, horseman and dairyman.

As the population grew so did the proportion of labourers and by 1700 they probably made up nearly half the populace. Landless, migrant labourers were increasingly numerous. The significant growth in population from the mid-18th century onwards caused even more

people to seek out work as wage-labourers. At the same time the proportion of live-in farm servants declined. The agricultural workforce peaked in around 1851. The 1851 census for England and Wales indicates the rate of labourers to all farmers was 3:1. From this high point in the middle of the nineteenth century the percentage of agricultural labourers within the workforce declined. This was due to mechanisation and increasingly cheap and widely available imported foodstuffs. The proportion of Agricultural labourers in England and Wales was very small by the late twentieth century.



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Bad weather and the seasons determined the work available. Migration was a common feature of labouring life and the annual cycle of the countryside. English farmers were often dependant on Irish and Scottish labourers to get in the harvest. While many labourers faced uncertain work and living standards some did however hold a little land. Conditions varied regionally with the worst said to have been in southern England, especially Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire. In northern England competition with industrial wages meant labourers were paid proportionally more than their southern counterparts. Rural discontent was therefore more prevalent in the south.

In addition to census records there are a variety of methods to research Agricultural labourers. Due to the erratic and low-paid nature of their work labourers and their families can often be found in records of poverty such as parish charity or from the Poor Law. With their intimate relationship to the land Ag-labs can also be found in records of landowners

and their estates such as manorial records. Agricultural labourers were also mentioned in a variety of other sources such as parish registers, wills, quarter sessions and newspapers.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 8-9 and Mark D. Herber, *Ancestral Trails: The Complete Guide to British Genealogy and Family History* (2000), 65.

Books:

Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, iv. 1500-1640* (1967)

G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, vi. 1750-1850* (1989)

K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (1985)

Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History, 1770-1980* (1988)

Websites:

[British Agricultural History Society - for the study of rural history, countryside history and landscape history \(bahs.org.uk\)](http://bahs.org.uk)

[The Museum of English Rural Life \(reading.ac.uk\)](http://reading.ac.uk)

Courses:

[Agricultural Labourers Ag Labs Online Genealogy Course \(pharostutors.com\)](http://pharostutors.com)