



Depiction of Rural Poverty in Victorian England

Rural Poverty 1844-1846

Comments from a letter address to the Labourers of the County of Wilts. From John Arkell, Stratton St Margarets, 22 April 1844.

“A Mr Phelps, the agent to the Marquis of Lansdowne, says – I was engaged in taking the census in Bremhill parish, Wilts, and in one case, in Studley, I found twenty-nine people living under one roof, and amongst them were married men and women, and young people of nearly all ages. In Studley it is not at all uncommon for a whole family to sleep in the same room; the number of bastards in that place is very great.”

Wiltshire Independent Thursday 25 April 1844

Abraham Rivers of Bremhill said he had a wife and 6 children. He had been obliged to apply to the parish for work, and had 7s a week to maintain his family, out of which it cost him 6d per week for tools. It was not enough to keep them in bread, and he had no potatoes. He was sure one reason why labour was so scarce and so many labourers out of employ in his parish was because the farmers used drill machines and thrashing machines so much instead of employing men.

When the farmer's rent becomes nearly due they send for one of these machines to get their corn thrashed out quickly to turn it into money. But for Lord Lansdowne's land his family would have been in a state of starvation.

For miles round there was scarcely any work to do and no likelihood of any. If the men went to a farm house to ask for a bit of bread they were frequently sent away without any, and he had himself frequently given a man half of his scanty meal.

Wiltshire Independent Thursday 25 July 1844

On Tuesday week, a moonlight meeting was held at Bremhill, a Wiltshire hamlet, (Job Gingell in the chair) "for the purpose of taking into consideration the distress of the people, and of petitioning parliament for the repeal of the corn laws".

Job stated that he was a labouring man, with a wife and seven children, and his wages were 8s a week. His wife earned 9d a week, two of his sons 2s and one of them 1s 6d, making their total income 12s 3d a week, or £31 17s a year. Rent took away £3 10s; fuel £2 12s; shoes £2 18s 6d; clothing £2 12s; soap, candles &c £1 5s 11d.

There then remained £18 4s to feed nine people for twelve months. Three halfpence a day per head was the allowance enjoyed by the labouring population under "protection".

Worcestershire Chronicle Wednesday 18 February 1846