Aspects of the Life of the Wiltshire Agricultural Labourer, c.1850

By Mark Baker (Published 1981)

In the ballroom of the Goddard Arms Hotel in Swindon, which was then called the Assembly Room and was two-thirds of its present size, one day at the beginning of February 1850 an interesting political meeting took place. It was organised by the North Wiltshire Protection Society, and the object was to gain support for a resolution in favour of protection. The Queen was to be asked to dissolve Parliament, so that a general election could be held, in which, it was hoped, the protectionists would gain a majority of seats in the House of Commons and be able to undo the iniquitous measure introducing free trade in corn and withdrawing the protection given to British farmers which Sir Robert Peel had carried out three and a half years before. This was political dynamite, and the supporters of free trade in New Swindon organised themselves to protest. There might have been serious trouble when the free traders gathered outside the Goddard Arms carrying big and small loaves on sticks to advertise the advantages of free trade in corn and the disadvantages of protection; but the recently formed county police, under the command of the Chief Constable for Wiltshire, Captain Meredith, were also present, and the day passed peacefully. Inside the Assembly Room some influential and important persons were gathered on the platform, including two M.P.s., a number of landowners and parsons, and the Chairman of the North Wiltshire Protection Society, who was one of the leading farmers in Wiltshire, Mr. George Brown of Avebury.

A word must be said about Mr Brown. Although this article is concerned with the labourers, it is impossible to leave him out of it. The head of a great farming family, he was one of the most influential men, in Wiltshire, respected alike by other farmers, by landowners, and by labourers, not only for his championship of the cause of protection but also for his public spirit generally, for his courage and his outspokenness. A story told about him helps to explain his reputation. Riding back from Calne market one day, he had been attacked by two highwaymen. He beat them off, galloped to Avebury and mustered help, then scoured the downs for his assailants; they were caught, brought to justice and transported. Mr. Brown was the sort of man who stood no nonsense. For six years now he had campaigned against free trade as Chairman of the Society; he and Walter Long, M.P. for North Wilts, had stood shoulder to shoulder through the crisis over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, George Brown keeping up the pressure in the county and Walter Long doing his best in the House. Now that the battle was lost and more than three years of agricultural distress had ensued, George Brown was convinced that hard times lay ahead for farmers and labourers alike and that the cause was simply free trade in corn. But at this meeting he was careful not to push himself too far forward, especially as some of the mechanics from the Swindon railway works were bound to be there; they were free traders to a man, and regarded farmers as backwoodsmen. The meeting was also intended to attract agricultural labourers, and this perhaps explains George Brown's surprising choice of a chairman for it. He had persuaded Earl Stanhope to preside – a nobleman whose sympathies were with the labourer were well known; for he was a keen opponent of the New Poor Law and had told the House of Lords in 1839 that it was time labour was represented in Parliament. 'Stanhope', as G.M. Young said, 'proclaiming the right of the unemployed man to maintenance in full comfort, seems to have strayed into the wrong century and wrong House'. At the Swindon meeting he acquitted himself well, supporting George Brown and protection and allowing only one of the railway mechanics to advertise the cause of free trade. But unfortunately he failed to allow a man to speak, whose views might have caused quite a stir and on the subject of workhouses would have made Stanhope feel how right he was about the New Poor Law. This man was Jacob Baker, a labourer from the tiny hamlet of Hodson in the parish of Chiseldon south of Swindon, now not far from the M4; he had taught himself to read and write, and had written out his speech carefully. When deprived of the opportunity of delivering it, he showed it to a friendly farmer, Thomas Dyke, who passed it on to the Devizes Gazette. The editor of that Conservative journal. to his lasting credit, published it in full.' With hindsight one can see that the presence together in the Assembly Room of the Goddard Arms that day in 1850 of the leading farmer in Wiltshire, the outspoken labourer, and the rebel peer was an interesting historical coincidence, and that, while Stanhope had certain links with the future, Jacob Baker was the one with whom the future really lay, while George Brown, like many other farmers, was living in the past.

Jacob Baker's speech, though it could have been better arranged, was a remarkable performance for the working man in 1850, and it tells us much about the labourer's way of life and his difficulties. Baker was just over forty. A God-fearing man, he had married very young, after the country fashion, when a child was on the way. By 1851 he had nine children; and feeding such a large family in the middle of winter, when he had no regular work and therefore no regular income, seemed an almost insoluble problem, and the contemplation of it roused his wrath. 'And you, gentlemen, must know that our case is very bad, and that we have not near victuals enough. How would you like to sit down with your wife and young children four days in the week and not half bread and potatoes enough, and the other three days upon not half enough boiled swedes, and but with little fire to cook them with?' The solution offered by state and local authority of going to the workhouse, either on his own or with the whole family, was not to be endured. 'Thousand would rather rob or starve than go to the house.' Baker had no prospect of any constant work till mowing time, although he had plenty of the countryman's skills; he could plough, sow and reap, make ladders and gates, cut up pigs and sink wells. 'I mend my children's shoes, and make my own clothes, and occasionally earn sixpence by drawing teeth', Somehow the family go through the winter of 1850 and through the next winter too, but that was their last in England; for in the summer of 1851 they all emigrated to Australia. There Jacob Baker found conditions very different. Writing to his friends in Hodson in February 1852, just two years after the Swindon meeting, from the Lyndoch Valley north of Adelaide, he reported that there was no lack of work for himself and his able-bodied sons and daughters, and the food was marvellous. 'Poor pipel in Hodson do not know what good living is. We have got a goint of fresh meet on our tabel everey day, and littel Bill says I want to give Tom Weston some.' Little Bill was six years old, and Tom Weston was a chum of his in Hodson. 'We do not put in tea the pot with a tea-spuoan, but with the hand!.. 'This is the contrey, my boys…' Jacob baker lived to be over eighty, and his wife, surely an heroic woman, appears to have outlived him. His evidence is particularly valuable, not just because he was one of the very few articulate labourers but even more because he could so graphically point the contrast between the misery in Wiltshire and the rude plenty in South Australia.

Did he exaggerate? There is no reason to doubt his word about winter unemployment, and little Bill's remark shows what a luxury meat was in Hodson. How did others fare over employment and food?

The employment situation varied greatly between summer and winter. In the summer, specially during the haymaking and the corn harvest, labourers were in demand, for the work all had to be done by hand. The casual labourer then came into his own, and nearly everyone worked overtime, to ear the extra money that would help to keep them going in the winter. Somewhere in or near the Pewsey Vale it was said that hayrakes six feet wide were made, so that men strong enough to wield them could make exceptional earnings when the mowing was done on a piece-work basis. Up till 1850, by which time their numbers were reduced to vanishing point by famine and emigration, Irish reapers came over for the haymaking and harvesting and camped out in tents and barns – a sign of plentiful employment. In the winter it was very different. The field emptied and the workhouses filled up; even those tragic outcasts, the 'surplus children' – illegitimate orphans boarded out by their parishes and employed in picking stones for the road-menders – were sent to the workhouses. Some farmers tried to keep men employed by threshing with the hand-flail rather than support them in enforced idleness on the rates. For in spite of George Brown's claim in October 1849 that 'we have plenty for them to do', inevitably there was less work on a farm in winter, and except in the cheese-making areas of North Wiltshire very little of it brought an immediate financial return. Earl Bruce, son and heir of the Marquess of Ailesbury, was worried by the number of men who call at his house in Savernake Forest in autumn and winter, asking for work which they said the farmers wouldn't give them, and refused to accept George Brown's explanation that it was all the result of the repeal of the Corn Law. Bruce was not the only landowner concerned about the situation. During the winter of 1844/45 some landowners and formers in the Lacock area had pledged themselves to provide work for the labourers in winters by a scheme which was partly financed by that wealthy and generous man, T.H.S..Sotheron Estcourt. The scheme seems to have failed in the end because some of the farmers would not co-operate; at any rate it was not repeated after 1845. Perhaps it was too altruistic to have any chance of success. Could that have been the reason why the lord of the manor of Lacock seems to have completely ignored it? This curious fact remains unexplained, and is not without interest because the lord of the manor of Lacock was William Henry Fox Talbot, the father of modern photography, a man of genius. Absorbed though he was at the time in his calotype experiments and other scientific matters, he must have known what was going on in the parish of Lacock. Or didn't he? There was no Jacob Baker in Lacock to make it absolutely clear to him what the labourer's lot was like.

There is no doubt at all about the under-nourishment. Jacob Baker's complaints are confirmed by the comments of investigators and by other indications. For instance, James Caird, writing for The Times in 1850 on the state of English agriculture, enquire into the labourer's diet on Salisbury Plain and found that it did not amount to much. For breakfast he had flour with a little butter and water from the tea-kettle poured over it; for his tea (as we should now call it) a few potatoes and possibly a little bacon; and for supper at bedtime bread and water. Caird was not surprised to find in the men who lived on such a diet 'a want of that vigour and activity which mark the well-fed ploughman of the northern and midland counties'. Lord Bruce, whose father had estates in Yorkshire as well as in Wiltshire, had noticed the same difference. A Poor Law Assistant Commissioner, enquiring into the work of women and children in agriculture in 1842, was told by two mothers in Calne that their children never really had enough to eat. One of them made the point clear by adding '…at the end of the meal the children are always asking for at every meal; I then say, "You don't want your father to go to prison, do you?" Many of course did go to prison. The magistrates, who included most of the landowners and some of the parsons, knew only too well the numerous cases of sheep-stealing, corn-stealing and other kinds of stealing to get food, quite apart from poaching. The more enlightened landowners look round anxiously for remedies; the most obvious seemed to be emigration.

Sydney Herbert, who has been given little credit for his interest in the matter, quietly encouraged men from the Pembroke estates to go to Australia; Bruce, his brother-in-law, followed suit more ambitiously – a story that cannot be told here. Even Harriet Marchioness of Bath, placed in the awkward position for a woman of being trustee for her son, the 4th Marquess, during his minority (1837-52), managed to help some young men to emigrate from the Longleat estate. Emigration could certainly improve the situation a little – given time. Meanwhile some of the parsons as well as some landowners encouraged the provision of allotments. Parsons could do it out of glebe land, as Augustus Hare did at Alton Barnes in 1832 and the Rev .J.H. Waugh, Evelyn Waugh's great-grandfather, at Corsley. No rent was charged at Alton Barnes, but landowners and parishes charged rents; the landowners had to , if the land was entailed, in order to keep possession of it. There were 57 allotment holders on parish land in East Knoyle in 1850, which suggests that many labourers felt it worth while to pay the rent in order to get the extra vegetables, especially potatoes when the potato blight was not operating.

Perhaps worst off of all for food were old people dependent on their families, many of whom would today be living in old people's homes or geriatric wards in hospitals, the so-called aged and infirm. If they did not go into the workhouse, separated from their families and losing their independence, or did not have a small allowance from a farmer they had worked for, they could not often expect to have a square meal. For the sixty of them who happened to live in Collingbourne Kingston, a large overcrowded village on the Savernake Estate, one square meal a year was provided, just after Christmas, by Lady Ailesbury and the principal inhabitants of the parish. Maria, Marchioness of Ailesbury, the attractive young second wife of the elderly Marquess, was a fashionable and charitable lady, popular in London society and on her husband's estates. The occasion was considered worth reporting in the Devizes Gazette, and in writing his account in January 1849 the reporter pulled out all stops.

'It was with extreme satisfaction, on the recurrence of this annual feast, on Tuesday last, we observed the Marchioness of Ailesbury accompanied by the Lady Cardigan, taking a most active and prominent part, by personally waiting on the humble recipients of this well-timed bounty; on which occasion we scarcely knew which to admire most – the extreme dexterity with which the noble Marchioness applied the knife to the ponderous joints beneath which the table groaned, or the earnest and affable manner that distinguished these noble parsonages, as they condescendingly waited behind chairs of the lowly by astounded guests.'

Noblesse oblige indeed!

Another of the labourer's disadvantages was the poor quality of rural housing and the inadequate supply of it. Here again a contrast with the north of England was noticed, where the cottages were said to be much more roomy and comfortable. In Wiltshire in 1850 there were cottages and cottages. The best were those recently built by landowners, but even they had no more than two rooms up and two down as a rule. However, if the Savernake estate semi-detached cottage built in 1846, in which this article is being written, is anything to go by, the walls were strong and thick (14 inches of solid brick) and the roof would be covered with thick tiles of different patterns and made at one of the landowner-s brick-kilns. A well in the garden supplied water, and sanitation was of course out of doors. Farmhouses built at that time had some attempt at a damp course; there were no damp courses for labourers. Only the lucky few had cottages like these, well built by estate workmen, with some form of elementary drainage. The vase majority of labourers lived in thatched cottages of far inferior quality, and some villages were really squalid. Warminster Common, where a privy was regarded as something of a luxury and cottages swarmed with vermin, had been perhaps the most notorious in the county, till the Methodists cleaned it up, and surprisingly it escaped the cholera epidemic of 1849. It may be argued that primitive housing had a certain advantage for the labourer who emigrated; he and his family knew how to rough it. Jacob Baker made no complaint about having to build his own house in Australia; the materials were supplied by his employer, and it was fair enough that he should have to put them together. That does not excuse or mitigate the severe overcrowding which cannot all be blamed on the landowners; they after all had to build schools and churches as wells as cottages. A landowner like the Duke of Wellington, whom Caird particularly praised for his cottage-building at Stratfield Saye in Berkshire, might, as was the Duke's case, make little or nothing out of his estate. Parish authorities were sometimes to blame when they tried to escape the worst consequences of the law of settlement and keep the poor rated down by reducing the number of dwellings inside their boundaries, for instance by letting cottages that belonged to the parish fall into decay. With the large families of those days some overcrowding seemed inevitable, not only in working class homes; as the last Sir Harold Nicolson pointed out, the Tennyson family cannot have found it easy to fit themselves into Somersby Rectory, complete with servants and guests. But there was a limit to overcrowding, and Lord Lansdowne's agent thought that limit had been reached when he discovered 29 people, including married couples, living under the same roof in a village not under his control. At Horningsham on the Longleat estate in 1844 a man and his wife with seven children varying in age between 5 and 22 were living in two rooms, a fact of which Lady Bath was probably quite unaware. It was common enough for all the children in a family, whatever their ages, to sleep in the same room; and the room was called a sleeping room, not a bedroom, for there may not have been room for beds.

Some of the parsons complained of the bad effect of overcrowding on morals. The loudest protest on this score came from Dorset, not far from the Wiltshire border, when the Rector of Bryanston and Vicar of Durweston, the Hon, and Rev. Sidney Godolphin Osborne, published in 1844 his view of the Low Moral and Physical Condition of the Agricultural Labourer. S.G.O., as he came to be known from the letters and articles published over his initials in the Times, became a parson because his father told him to one day when they were out shooting, and having become one took his duties very seriously, sacrificing all prospect of promotion in the church by his championship of the rural poor. What a nuisance he would have been on the bench of Bishops in the House of Lords – almost as tiresome as Stanhope! In a more restrained way, without writing to the press about it, Lord Lansdowne's domestic chaplain, John Guthrie, Vicar of Calne, expressed the same concern about morals, and his remarks were not inconsistent with S.G.O.'s broad hints at the prevalence of incest and abortion. A general decline in moral standards seemed obvious to observers. In 1845 Ella Wyndham, while staying with he Codrington cousins at Wroughton near Swindon, wrote: 'I dislike this place much, it has no recommendation for me, the population being numerous, dirty, idle and drunken. The whole place swarms with children that are being brought up to anything but obtaining an honest livelihood'. When the cholera took a hold on the country during the summer of 1849 and Salisbury, as the Annual Register said, was 'grievously afflicted', the vestry of Wilton became seriously alarmed at the overcrowding in their midst and took the then unusual step of rehousing 'such of the poor inhabitants of the parish as the medical officer may consider fit and proper objects to be removed from their residences by reason of the confined state thereof or the number of residents therein'. Such were the consequences of overcrowding – a population 'numerous, dirty, idle and drunken', 'fit and proper objects to be removed'. That line of though led straight to emigration.

To consider the labourer's position without taking into account his wages would make an incomplete picture; yet it is very difficult to assess the real value of the weekly wage. It was bound to vary so much according to whether a man had to pay rent for his cottage or not, whether he earned much at harvest time, how large a garden he had and how large a family. The nominal value of the weekly wages seems small. In Wiltshire in 1850 it was seven shillings or eight shillings, the latter being more common in the north of the county. In time of great difficulty for farmers it might be reduced to six shillings; and in 1835 there had even been talk among farmers at Devizes market of bringing it down to five shillings. Roadmenders, working on the parish roads, as opposed to the turnpike roads, might earn four shillings and sixpence or even less; but it is not clear whether they were working part-time or not. At the end of his pamphlet on the low moral and physical condition of the labourer Sidney Osborne published two tables showing the expenditure and earnings of a labourer with a wife and four children for 49 weeks of the year 1843; this Dorset evidence could apply most equally well to Wiltshire, and lets us into the secret, which puzzled Guthrie and others, of how the labourer contrived to make ends meet. Francis Horlock, the labourer concerned, was earning eight shillings a week, and was lucky enough to keep fit throughout the year; he made a little extra by haymaking and even more in the corn harvest, which enable him to buy that vital domestic article, the backyard pig, without having to sell it later on, like one of the Calne families, to pay the shoe bill. His children earned a little by making Dorset buttons, an occupation not available to Wiltshire children. The table of expenditure in housekeeping show how near to the bread-line, even with these advantages, the Horlock family lived. Their only luxury food was a few currants; their household replacements were absolutely minimal; butcher's meat was a great rarity; and for clothes they were dependent on the clothing club, which cost them one shilling and eightpence a month. Clothing clubs were very important, and provided blankets as well as material for making clothes; this can be clearly seen in the handsome Corsley clothing book, started when the clothes and blankets were the landowner's gift under the management of Harriet Bath. Francis Horlock's careful budgeting allowed him to pay eightpence a month for 'schooling', presumably for one child, and to make a monthly contribution to the benefit club. This also was very important; for the benefit club stood between the labourer and the workhouse or starvation when he fell ill or for one reason or another ceased to be employable, and helped his widow when he died. It would not be long before benefit clubs were largely replaced by friendly societies, among which the Wiltshire Friendly Society after a shaky start became outstandingly successful. With its greater numbers and securer finances the Friendly Society could offer the invalid or injured labourer greater protection than the much smaller benefit club, which might have to demand an extra payment when a member died and spent some of its slender resources on social occasions. The Wiltshire Friendly Society was the creation of T.H.S. Sotheron Estcourt and was perhaps his greatest achievement. One cannot help wondering whether Lord Derby had it in mind when he persuaded Sotheron Estcourt to become President of the Poor Law Board in 1858.

Wages were not always paid wholly in cash; part of them might be paid in corn or butter or firewood, at the farmer's estimate of their value, or eve, it was sometimes rumoured – though instances cannot be quoted – in beer. Payment in kind was the natural consequence of the old-fashioned way of regulating the weekly wage according to the price of a bushel of wheat, on the assumption that bread was the staff of the labourer's life and wheat to make it with the main thing he would have to buy if it was not supplied by the farmer. There were of course different qualities of wheat, as is shown by the fact that wheat for making the royal bread at Windsor Castle used to come from a particular farm at Heston in Middlesex which has been obliterated by London Airport; and the conscientious farmer would see that his labourers got good wheat. 'In former times', wrote Charlotte Starky, wife of the squire of Bromham, in 1835, 'the price of a bushel of wheat was reckoned good pay for a week, and if a shilling over the bushel very excellent pay'. Not all the men worked on the Spye Park estate would necessarily have agreed with her, but her words suggest that the bushel of wheat standard for wages was only just on the way out in 1835. The repeal of the Corn Laws seems to have killed it for good. But part-payment of wages in kind continued on some farms, and was not regarded as a bad thing provided it was done fairly. As late as 1871 the Archdeacon of Wiltshire, giving evidence to a Royal Commission, mentioned occasional part-payment of wages in butter in his parish of Burbage; and, though there was much that he disapproved of in the condition of the Burbage labourer, he did not disapprove of that. It made sure that the labourer and his family did have some butter to put on their bread; and, as we have seen, butter was included even in the diet of the labourers of the Plain in 1850.

The attitude of the Wiltshire labourer to wages was, roughly, that seven shillings or eight shillings a week was what you had to put up with, six shillings was hitting below the belt, and nine shillings, never obtained by 1850, would be decent. When during the wing of 1850 labourers in West Lavington heard that farmers were about to reduce the weekly wage to six shillings, they protested to the landowner's agent; and, that having no effect, they went round the farms, like flying pickets, preventing people from working. Once more Captain Meredith and the county police were brought into action. When the magistrates locked up the ringleader, there was a march of angry men to Devizes, who arrived too late to rescue him. Then in the winter of 1853, in the valleys of the Wylye and the Nadder men actually went on strike for higher wages, demanding nine shillings a week; emigration to the Australian goldfields and elsewhere had thinned their ranks, and they were in a stronger position than they had been three years before. The strike was conducted in an orderly manner, unlike the Lavington affair, but the men were very positive about the nine shillings. When the Rector of Barford St. Martin – a Fellow of All Souls and a future bishop – was called upon to arbitrate between farmers and labourers and proposed a weekly wage of eight shillings, this was 'indignantly rejected by the men'. As so often happens, the story is incomplete, and we do not know whether they got their nine shillings. The incident provoked an interesting comment in an article on 'Landlord and Tenant" in the Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette in March 1853. 'Scarcely a year ago', we are told, 'agricultural labourers, starving or maintained by the poor rates, constituted one of the nightmares which haunted the dreams of some of us. Now the tables are turned, and we hear from all quarters of a scarcity of labourers… Labour is now about to have its day'. Famous last words. In that same month it was rumoured that men were agitating in Beckhampton, Winterbourne Monckton and East and West Kennet for higher wages, and the agitation quickly collapsed. The presence of Mr. George Brown in the area may have had something to do with that. Similar agitations for high wages occurred in other parts of the country in the sixties, and culminated in the disastrous strike and lock-out of the Suffolk labourers in 1874, which nearly killed Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union almost as soon as it was born. No – on the farms and great estates of Wiltshire as well as in other parts of the south of England labour was by no means about to have its day.

Yet it is easy to exaggerate the discontent. Though there had been a steady stream of emigrants to North America and Australia from Wiltshire, as from other counties in the south and midlands, since the 1830s, many of them came from towns like Trowbridge and Calne where the west of England woollen industry had fallen on bad times, and among agricultural labourers not even the younger men were all keen to emigrate. A farm was a community, where work done today by a youth with a tractor often needed several men and boys to do it in 1850, and they were all accustomed to working together. The parish in which the farm was situated was the place where the labourer had his settlement and could expect to be maintained somehow. There were the two poles on which his loyalty hinged and round which his life evolved; he hesitated to tear himself away from them.

In the middle of the village stood the church – or, for a few, the chapel – which was the centre of his spiritual life; and 'spiritual affaiers;, as Jacob Baker called them, mattered much more then than they do now. When Jacob Baker found in Australia that people refused to walk eight miles to go to church, he got up under a tree and preached to them. Labourers could be seen in church on Sundays in embroidered smocks, their wives in scarlet flannel shawls. The parson's influence sometimes had a surprising effect on the young. A boy of seventeen at Stanton St. Bernard fell off a hay-cart on to the sharp teeth of a harrow, and as he lay dying in agony he had a dream which re related to his father, who was sitting beside him. 'Father, I have been a long way. I saw in my dream a great hill and there was a narrow path up it, and I wanted to go along it, but there were so many bushes on both sides I could not get along, and I saw Christ at the top calling me to him, but I could not get to him till He held out his hand and helped me.' That, in 1832, says much for the good influence and teaching of the Rev. George Majendie as well as for the boy's confidence in his Saviour. The seed did not always fall on such good ground; but the influence of the village church and the reading of the lessons could be far-reaching. In 1850 a young emigrant to Australia, writing home with many difficulties over spelling and phraseology, seems to echo a voice from the pulpit and the noble language of the Authorised Version. Addressing his family as 'My Dear friends', he tells them how Í had a dreadful Bad feaver But But By – the Blessing of God that soon passed away.' To one of the two clerical brothers who ran the affairs of Norton St. Philip, the village from which he came (just inside Somerset but very near the Wiltshire border), he writes: 'if we are not spared in this world ihope ishall met you all in heaven tell my Dear father and Mother and Brother and sister that the sun never goes don without my thinking of them.' Poor James Roberts, son of a carpenter, following his father's trade in Australia, fell off a scaffold and, though he recovered from this accident, he disappeared in the gold rush and was never heard of again. By 1870 the influence of Joseph Arch had begun to undermine the influence of the country parson, making him appear an establishment figure rather than a moral leader; but the effect of Arch's propaganda varied from place to place, and certainly in 1850 the parson was still respected and listened to, unless there was some very good reason why he should not be; and , since he normally presided over the parish vestry, in some ways he ministered to the labourer's material as well as to his spiritual needs. It is significant that many of the parsons encouraged emigration.

Those who earned more than the rest and enjoyed certain privileges seem to have been reasonably content with the labourer's life. Shepherds earned an extra shilling a week and had the right to sell the skins of all the moles they could catch. It was difficult to persuade shepherds to emigrate. Their lonely life on the downs, then covered with sheep, satisfied them; they had the same kind of independence that the lorry-driver enjoys today, and could feel a certain pride as they drove their sheep to the fair, knowing that they could keep the inhabitants of the town awake all night with the sound of their bleating. Carters too earned an extra shilling a week, and had the right to sell the bales of straw put on top of the corn they were taking to market. There was some security of employment for those who were taken on for a year at the hiring fair; and an old farm servant could not easily be sent away, even he quarrelled with the farmer. 'Look here, Sir', said a carter who continued to turn up for work after dismissal, 'if you don't know when you got a good servant, I knows when I got a good master. I broke in all our hosses, so no man knows how to feed and place them as well as I do, and I tells you plainly I beaint agoing to leave you.' That was that. James Stratton, who tells the story, says that the carter remained on the farm 'until the end' and was 'never allowed to want'.

It is worth noticing the reference to 'our hosses'. The labourers regarded everything on a farm as being theirs as well as the farmer's and their responsibility as well as his. This expressed the team loyalty which held them together, and which can be sensed by anyone who goes to the Victoria and Albert Museum and stands in from of John Frederick Herring's vast canvas 'Seed Time', painted between 1854 and 1856. The farm here was in Kent or Sussex, where conditions may have been better than in Wiltshire, but the human relationships and the attitude to work were similar on all well-managed farms.

The man in a waistcoat, the boy in a smock with a round hat decorated with a simple blue riband, the man carrying a basket of seed, the other men in the background, the younger boy, the well-groomed horses, and the women coming up the hill with food and drink for the lunch break on a bright April morning take us into a different world from our own, a world where men would naturally work together in a harmonious group, knowing and caring for each other and for the animals they worked with. It is easy to sentimentalise, but undoubtedly this is a happy scene. Very small wages, bad or indifferent housing, little help in illness, few amusements, no holidays – these things could not deprive the labourer of the pleasure of working in the beautiful English country-side of the mid- nineteenth century, before pesticides had killed off so many of the wild flowers and so much of the wildlife, and before a farm could be run by two or three men working in solitude, cooped up for much of the day inside the cabin of a tractor.