

Devon's Farm Labourers in the Victorian Period: the Impact of Economic Change

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ABSTRACT

The material standard of living of Devon's male agricultural labourers over the Victorian period is reconstructed from contemporary wage and price data. The major picture which emerges is that wages fluctuated at around the subsistence level until the late 1860s, and then rose rapidly until the Edwardian period. From a wage level of only three quarters the national average in the 1860s, Devon's labourers caught up completely by the outbreak of World War One. Census population data shows that migration from rural Devon was relatively heavy throughout the Victorian period, which helps to explain this transformation. In addition, however, it appears that farming in Devon did not suffer at all as badly as other parts of Britain during the 'Great Agricultural Depression'. This may account for the apparent lack of vociferous complaints from the county's farmers about steeply rising labourers wages.

IN his well known survey of the fortunes of Devon's farm labourers between the Elizabethan and Victorian periods W. G. Hoskins concluded that the average farm labourer was no better off in the 1840s than three centuries before.¹ This article takes the end of Hoskins' study as its starting point and carries the story through to 1914. Changes in the material standard of living of Devon's agricultural labourers during the Victorian period are of some interest in their own right. Perhaps more importantly, however, they afford the opportunity to gain an insight into some of the other aspects of economic change in the county during a key period in the spread of the effects of the Industrial Revolution.

A series of Parliamentary enquiries, accounts and reports provide material which yields useful estimates of wage rates throughout the Victorian period. This official data can be supplemented by direct

documentary evidence in the form of farm and estate accounts, letters, and other contemporary agricultural surveys, newspaper advertisements, and reports.² Much of this data was collected by the local farmers, gentry and clergy, who would probably have tended to overestimate the level of wages paid. On the rare occasions that labourers were allowed to speak for themselves their claims sometimes differed significantly from those put forward by their masters. In the Barnstaple area the weekly cash wage of ordinary labourers was said to be 10 to 12 shillings per week in 1860 but on Lord Rolle's north Devon estates in 1865-6 8 shillings per week was the norm. The average cash wage of 410 ordinary farm labourers scattered across Devon in 1907 was 14s. 6d. but six years later a labourer at West Worlington in deepest mid-Devon claimed he had only 11s. 8d. per week to maintain himself, his wife and seven children.³

These reservations do not make the wages figures valueless, especially given that the emphasis of this investigation is on trends more than on absolute amounts. The money wage figures shown in Table I are based on the estimates for individual years derived from the sources mentioned above, and the time series figures were used for interpolation up to 1904.⁴ Values are included for non-monetary perquisites such as a cheap or rent free cottage, allotment or potato ground, cider, milk, and firewood. Because most of the Parliamentary enquiries were concerned with either the total labour cost to farmers, or the material welfare of labourers (but rarely both at the same time) investigators usually made reference to the level and nature of 'privileges' given in each locality. The figures relate only to ordinary male labourers weekly earnings, so it is worth considering whether other components of agricultural earnings suggest revisions to the figures shown in Table I.

Bonus payments at harvest time and other piecework earnings are not included in the 'weekly earnings' total for want of information. It was stated in 1871 that in the Barnstaple area extra wages were not always paid for harvest work but on many farms it appears to have been a regular feature.⁶ The few references found to actual payments also seem to suggest that bonus payments, like piece rates, did not increase for much of the Victorian period. Harvesters in the Okchampton district were paid 30 to 40 shillings in 1872 and perhaps more around Tiverton.⁷ There are also references to 66 shillings being paid to harvesters at Tavistock and 60 shillings at Payhembury, East Devon, in 1898 and 1900 respectively, but the average for the county as a whole was set at 20-40 shillings in 1908.⁸ In 1904 it was said that the adoption of reaping machinery had reduced harvest wages but that apart from this 'considerably more would be earned by piecework now than 50

TABLE I
Money and Real Earnings of Male Agricultural Labourers, 1840-1913

	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
1840	9.5	100.0	100.0	100.0	1874	13.13	138.2	110.9	124.7
1841	9.55	100.2	101.7	98.5	1875	13.21	139.1	111.5	124.7
1842	9.56	100.5	94.6	106.2	1876	13.35	140.5	112.3	125.1
1843	9.58	100.6	94.0	107.0	1877	13.59	143.0	114.0	125.4
1844	9.61	100.8	95.0	106.1	1878	13.81	145.4	107.8	134.9
1845	9.65	101.5	100.9	100.6	1879	14.01	147.5	108.9	135.4
1846	9.7	102.1	105.0	97.3	1880	14.11	148.5	108.1	137.4
1847	9.71	102.2	104.4	104.4	1881	14.2	149.5	110.1	135.8
1848	9.75	102.6	99.6	103.0	1882	14.24	149.9	106.5	140.8
1849	9.8	103.2	89.6	115.2	1883	14.26	150.1	106.0	141.7
1850	9.83	103.5	89.4	115.7	1884	14.28	150.3	100.1	156.0
1851	9.93	104.5	88.9	117.6	1885	14.3	150.5	97.5	154.3
1852	10.02	105.5	90.7	116.3	1886	14.35	151.1	94.1	160.6
1853	10.12	106.5	103.8	102.6	1887	14.47	152.3	96.0	158.7
1854	10.24	107.8	107.9	99.9	1888	14.62	153.9	98.3	156.5
1855	10.24	107.8	109.3	98.6	1889	14.78	155.6	97.0	160.4
1856	10.3	108.4	105.8	102.4	1890	14.9	156.8	96.4	162.7
1857	10.3	108.4	100.5	107.8	1891	14.95	157.4	101.1	155.7
1858	10.4	109.5	96.5	113.5	1892	15.0	157.9	94.0	168.0
1859	10.49	110.4	97.8	112.9	1893	15.02	158.1	92.8	170.5
1860	10.58	111.1	108.6	102.3	1894	15.12	159.2	87.5	181.9
1861	10.78	113.5	109.0	106.1	1895	15.27	160.7	89.0	180.5
1862	10.92	114.9	107.6	106.8	1896	15.41	162.2	89.3	181.7
1863	11.05	116.3	101.6	112.7	1897	15.8	166.3	91.8	181.2
1864	11.1	116.8	102.8	113.7	1898	16.3	171.6	91.7	187.2
1865	11.14	117.3	103.9	112.9	1899	16.51	173.8	91.9	189.1
1866	11.26	118.5	110.1	107.6	1900	16.68	175.6	93.9	187.1
1867	11.35	119.5	114.3	104.5	1901	16.87	177.6	92.7	191.6
1868	11.37	119.7	109.5	109.3	1902	17.08	179.8	91.3	196.9
1869	11.4	120.0	105.8	113.4	1903	17.34	182.5	92.8	196.7
1870	11.57	121.8	106.7	114.2	1904	17.62	185.5	93.7	197.9
1871	12.1	127.4	109.4	116.4	1907	17.75	186.8	94.0	198.8
1872	12.69	133.6	113.0	118.2	1913	17.9	188.4	102.6	183.6
1873	12.93	136.1	118.1	115.2					

Column 1: Weekly earnings of ordinary male agricultural labourers (s.)

Column 2: Index of Column 1, 1840 = 100.0.

Column 3: Cost of living index. See Note 5.

Column 4: Real wage index for ordinary male agricultural labourers (col 2/col 3).

years ago with less work'. Payments for specific tasks such as hoeing and hedging rose by only 47% between 1854 and 1904, compared with 70% for weekly wages so this may have been more a reference to increased efficiency in the performance of tasks than to increases in payments per task.⁹

Traditionally, there had not been a great deal of piecework offered on Devon's farms. There was, however, a productivity incentive as described at Whimble in east Devon in 1833: 'There is a customary day's work. When this is done, the labourer is at liberty to go'.¹⁰

Although it appears that the amount of taskwork performed had increased by the turn of the century, labourers in the Barnstaple area derived less than 10% of their earnings in this way in 1898.¹¹ It is unlikely that seasonal variations could have significantly complicated the general picture. Summer wages on Devon farms, unlike in many parts of Britain, were, on average, hardly different to winter wages throughout the period, reflecting the seasonally fairly constant labour demands of pastoral farming.

There remains the role of agricultural work performed by members of labourers' families other than male household heads. The increase in the pay of women appeared not to lag far behind that of ordinary male agricultural labourers: rates of pay for men rose by 56% between 1843 and 1892, and for women by 60%. This rise occurred simultaneously with what appears from the Census to have been a rapid decrease in fieldwork performed by women and children. This was in many ways a symptom of increased prosperity among rural labouring families rather than a change which may have seriously dented the income of such households, as noted by a farmer in 1892 in commenting on changes in rural life,¹² but even in 1848 it was said that 'although women frequently work on the land . . . their employment is far less prevalent than in neighbouring counties'.¹³

In some parts of the county rural industry provided employment opportunities for women in which rates of pay compared favourably with those in agriculture. In 1870, for example, women who wove wool at North Tawton could earn between 6 and 8 shillings per week.¹⁴ But many of the mid 19th century rural industries which relied heavily on female labour declined drastically in the subsequent half century or so. Even in 1863, however, before this reduction had proceeded very far, only 14% of total family income was earned by wives and children in Smith's sample of rural labouring household budgets in Devon.¹⁵

Within the agricultural labouring sector, then, the complicating factors of privileges, piecework, seasonal variations, and womens employment do not appear seriously to affect the utility of the main series of money wages. On the whole it seems reasonable to treat the figures shown in Table I as being representative of the changes in the material standard of living of Devonian farmworkers in the Victorian period. Discussion of the real wage trends can be conveniently organised into three parts: the short term fluctuations which were particularly pronounced in the early part of the period, the stagnation of real wages until the late 1860s, and the rapid rise which took place thereafter.

The short term increases in real wages before the 1870s correspond to periods of low prices and may simply be a statistical illusion brought

about by the failure of the agricultural wage data to take account of compensatory year to year changes in money wage rates. A cheapening of foodstuffs often provided employers with an opportunity to reduce wages. 'No-one has dropt [sic] wages in this neighbourhood yet' wrote a small landowner living on the fringe of Dartmoor in February 1850,

but it is all very natural that wages should be dropt, if the labourer can live for about half what he has hitherto required . . . I have no doubt that wages will come back to the old standard of 1s. 2d. and 1s. 4d. instead of 1s. 6d. (per day).¹⁶

The survival of a number of parish road surveyors' account books from this time allows a judgement to be made about changes in the usual daily rates paid to rural road labourers. It appears that these rates declined between 1848 and 1851 as prices fell, and then rose again in the early 1850s with prices.¹⁷ There is also circumstantial evidence of a similar ebb and flow in wage levels in the towns.¹⁸ Yet none of the time series of wage rates used for the agricultural money wage index show any sign of short term changes in response to price fluctuations at this or any other time before World War One.

Underlying these cycles there seems to have been little upwards movement in the secular trend before the late 1860s. It is also fairly clear, both from mathematical exercises that compare wage levels with the cost of subsistence dietaries and from general observations made by contemporaries from Marshall onwards,¹⁹ that the wages of ordinary agricultural labourers in Devon kept their families in abject poverty. In the wake of low wages came malnutrition and poor housing conditions, which led to reduced physical energy and productivity, and this in turn helped to keep wages low. As Hunt had found, the traditional poverty trap of rural life operated in the 1850s much as it had done for centuries.²⁰ To the farmers, especially those with experience of other regions, labourers were simply lazy. 'The labourers here (West Devon) are very slothful; two Cornish men are equal to four here' was perhaps a typical comment, but others were more perceptive:

for the most part the men do not get sufficient food of a good quality to enable them to do such a day's work as is done in other parts.²¹

The unemployed and underemployed labour surplus, relative to the nature and strength of demand, had a great deal to do with the emergence of the North-South disparity in the 18th century, noted by Caird and others at a later date.²² As Pollard has suggested, this economic relationship was overlain by reinforcing practices of social control, which worked to keep wages down.²³ Canon Girdlestone's

efforts to encourage Halberton labourers to move to work elsewhere were impeded by the local farmers in their capacity as magistrates by suing for breach of contract.²⁴

Migration of labour away from rural Devon appears to have begun as early as the 1820s so it could well be that, as Jones suggests, the forces of custom were able to hold wages in check until the 1868–73 boom.²⁵ It is also possible that there was no growth in real wages before that date simply because there was a great deal of ‘slack’ in the rural labour market. The growing impact of migration on the labour market may be assessed in part by a comparison of agricultural and road labourers wages in mid-Victorian Devon. Although farm labourers are often thought to have been the most ‘residual’ group of rural employees, it seems that parish road mending was even less desirable an occupation, undertaken by old men no longer fit enough for farm work and the lowest of the rural poor. As already mentioned, the wages of road labourers drawn from a sample of parishes fell in line with prices over the late 1840s, and it also appears that, at around 14d. per day (or 7s. on the bold assumption of a full working week) they were generally lower than farm labourers’ wages. The figures shown in Table II below suggest that real wage rates rose from the 1850s onwards. That road menders wages did not drop when prices fell in the late 1850s may well be in substantive contrast to the late 1840s. This in turn may be an indication of the effects of the gathering pace of rural depopulation, in reducing the ‘slack’ in rural labour markets.

Among farm workers it appears that by the 1860s real wages were fluctuating around a level 10% higher than during the early 1840s, a

TABLE II
Real wages of road labourers, Devon, 1830–73

<i>Road Labourers</i>				<i>Road Labourers</i>			
<i>Money Wages (d./day)</i>	<i>Real Wages (Index)</i>	<i>(Ag. Lab Real Wages) (Index)</i>		<i>Money Wages (d./day)</i>	<i>Real Wages (Index)</i>	<i>(Ag. Lab Real Wages) (Index)</i>	
1830	13.5			1852	13.0	110.2	116.3
1840	13.0	100.0	100.0	1853	14.5	107.4	102.6
1843	13.5	110.4	107.0	1855	16.6	116.8	98.6
1845	13.6	103.8	100.6	1859	17.0	133.8	112.9
1847	14.5	106.9	98.0	1860	17.5	124.0	102.3
1850	13.0	111.8	115.7	1863	17.5	130.4	112.7
1851	12.5	108.1	117.6	1873	24.0	156.1	115.2

Sources: see Note 26.

tentative sign that progress was being made. The effects of this were recalled by a Devonian clergyman several decades later:

In 1856 one man in the village [in South Devon] occasionally killed a sheep, and one would get once a week beef, if a joint was ordered. Before I left it in 1873, three butchers came through the place every week with their loaded vans, and apparently did a good trade.²⁷

Compared to this, the change in trend around 1870 shown by column 4 in Table I, is dramatic. The boom which appears to have formed the turning point was marked in many parts of Britain by a brief flowering of agricultural trades unionism.²⁸ While Devon was not in the forefront of this movement it is clear from newspaper accounts of the time that groups of farm labourers were able to organise collectively and succeed in raising wages, despite general opposition from the farmers.²⁹ One north Devon farmer exhorted his fellows to increase labourers wages to the standard cash rate of 12s. per week in 1872³⁰ but at that time such generosity was not expensive.

More surprising is that cash wages continued to rise when prices fell during the 1880s. There is annual wage information from account books for seven farms, and on none of them was there a drop in the wage rate. Because of this, the surge in real wages was maintained until the turn of the century, with only brief checks when prices rose, as in 1891. Despite an erosion in the real value of wages during the Edwardian period, in common with the rest of Britain,³¹ real wages were much higher in 1913 than they had been 50 years earlier. Money wages had virtually doubled since 1840. The changes had been noted by contemporaries for several decades. Some of the comments by mid-Devon farmers to the assistant Commissioner reporting to the *Royal Commission on Labour* show an awareness of the changing circumstances of labouring life:

His wages are higher than they used to be; his privileges remain much the same; cottages are gradually improving without any increase in rent; town shops are increasingly sending carts around with materials at a cheap rate; bread and clothing are cheaper; and newspapers and railways have come within the reach of the labourers.

Instead of drinking excessively at the village revel the labourer now goes to the seaside.³²

A labourer at Sandford was of the opinion that as 'there are no barley puddings now, things must be better'³³ but several bemoaned another gradual change in the rural labour market, the diminution of casual

work, or strapping. There can be little doubt that grinding poverty continued to be the lot of many rural inhabitants—the state of housing appeared to have changed little by the Edwardian period, for example³⁴—but in a relative sense conditions had undoubtedly improved since the 1850s and 1860s. ‘The farm labourer today’, wrote a Devonian farmer in 1905, perhaps sensing an opportunity to remind him to be grateful to his employers,

with his cash wage of 15 to 18 shillings per week, cheap necessities and humble luxuries, much free entertainment and excitement at hand, with a good free education for his children, hardly realises his privileges over those of his grandfathers.³⁵

Where it is possible to compare real wage trends with other parts of Britain, Devon appears in a favourable light, because in many places cash wages fell after the prosperous early 1870s, although often from higher absolute levels. Ashby and King found that in south Warwickshire wages fell from an average of 14.98s. per week in 1873 to 13.7s. within a decade, and to 13.1s. by 1892.³⁶ Near Spalding in Lincolnshire, farmers who had paid between 16s. 6d. and 18s. 6d. per week in 1872–4 were paying 3 to 4s. less by 1880 and less still during the later 1880s. Fenland wages remained high, at between 15s. and 16s. 6d. in the mid 1870s but then fell towards 12 and 13 shillings per week by the early 1890s.³⁷ Closer to home, farm wages in Dorset fell back from the 10s. 9d. reached in the second half of the 1870s to the pre-boom figure of 10s. per week in the decade after 1885.³⁹

When an attempt is made to broaden the scope of this spatial comparison by relating Devon’s agricultural earnings to a national average, the results are inevitably tentative, but they tend to support the cases just mentioned. Hunt found that over the country as a whole the percentage by which the region of highest agricultural pay exceeded the region of lowest pay declined from 44% of the British average in 1867–70 to 28% in 1907.⁴⁰ Table III shows this process at work at a more specific level. The substantial gap in earnings between Devon and the national average in the third quarter of the century was probably in continuation of the disparity noted by observers in the first half of the century. But this gap closed rapidly in the two decades after 1872, and virtual parity was reached by the eve of World War One.

The migration mentioned before seems to supply a straightforward explanation of this transformation of the relative position of the Devon farm labourer. Girdlestone’s policy of sending trainloads of farm labourers from east Devon to become policemen in Lancashire during the 1860s and 1870s is said to have led directly to the raising of wages in

TABLE III
*Weekly Earnings of Adult Male Agricultural Labourers,
 Devon and England, 1840-1914 (shillings)*

	(1) <i>Devon</i>	(2) <i>England</i>	(3) <i>Devon as percentage of English average</i>
1840	9.5	11.7	81
1850	9.8	11.5	85
1860	10.6	13.6	78
1867-70	11.42	15.1	76
1870	11.6	15.1	77
1872	12.7	17.1	74
1880	14.1	16.4	86
1886	14.35	15.8	91
1892	15.0	15.8	95
1898	16.3	17.2	95
1900	16.7	17.2	97
1907	17.75	17.94	99
1913	17.9	18.1	99
1914	19.3	19.7	98

Notes and sources: See Note 38.

his neighbourhood and others too were aware of the effects of migration.⁴¹

Summary migration figures for Devon can be readily calculated from the population and rates of natural increase statistics tabulated in the county census reports.⁴² For the purposes of this analysis it is necessary to get beyond the county aggregates and concentrate on the rural areas. To this end the parish by parish figures were reconstituted into district groupings of ten to twenty parishes each. This allowed the growing urban areas, almost wholly located on the coasts, to be separated from the countryside.⁴³ The aggregate population of rural Devon reached a peak of 305,478 in 1841 and declined thereafter to 225,371 inhabitants by 1911.

A disparity between urban and rural experience is also brought out in columns 3 and 6 of Table IV. There was a substantial difference between the county-wide migration rate and that for the predominantly rural, districts alone. While for the whole of Devon the migration rate only reached 10% in the 1870s, for the depopulating districts themselves it did not fall below below 15% until the Edwardian period. Losses in the countryside were almost as heavy in the 1850s as those of the 1870s which are picked out at county level. The sharp reduction in the county's migration rate after 1880 was a product of urban resurgence, for in the countryside population losses continued to run at

TABLE IV
Levels and rates of migration, Devon, 1841-1910

1	Devon		Declining districts			Migration Rates	
	Population	Migration Rate	Population	Net Migration	Migration Rate	Southern England	Ireland
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1841-50	532,865	-5.49	305,478	-46,291	-15.15	7.6	
1851-60	567,465	-8.39	301,465	-54,050	-17.93	13.2	
1861-70	584,803	-9.37	284,450	-46,249	-16.26	11.1	16.9
1871-80	601,634	-10.05	274,942	-50,670	-18.43	14.6	12.7
1881-90	602,771	-5.51	253,692	-39,339	-15.5	12.8	16.3
1891-00	632,019	-3.34	243,255	-36,647	-15.06	10.9	11.8
1901-10	662,343	-2.03	227,321	-18,122	-7.97	3.7	

Sources: See Note 44.

a high level until 1900. There were significant variations in the rate of change within the county, broadly reflected in the pattern shown in Fig. 1. The poor upland Culm Measures country of West Devon consistently suffered from higher rates of net outmigration than the better circumstanced South Hams and the fertile red lands of the Exe basin.

Although the base data are not strictly comparable it also seems from columns 6, 7, and 8 of Table IV that migration from rural Devon was higher than from both Cairncross's southern 'rural residue' and net emigration from southern Ireland.⁴⁵ Brinley Thomas gives a net emigration rate of 25 per 10,000 per year from England and Wales in the 1880s, when national emigration figures were at their height. In Devon the corresponding figure appears to have been 37 per 10,000, or nearly 50% higher.⁴⁶ Unfortunately it is not possible to explore here the complex relationships underpinning these interesting figures, and attention must be limited to the likely impact of migration on wages.

A relationship between these two variables can perhaps be detected on comparing the pattern shown in Fig. 1 with the figures presented in the last column of Table V. In north-west Devon and the Barnstaple-Bideford area it seems that wages grew noticeably faster than the average for the whole county over the seventy years to 1903, and the migration rate calculated for this part of the county was substantially higher than the 1840-1911 average for rural Devon. But the correlation breaks down if it is pursued for the South Hams ('average' migration, but slow wages growth) and mid-Devon, suggesting that other forces such as variations in agricultural and non-agricultural labour demand must also be considered.

It was the close availability of alternative work which kept

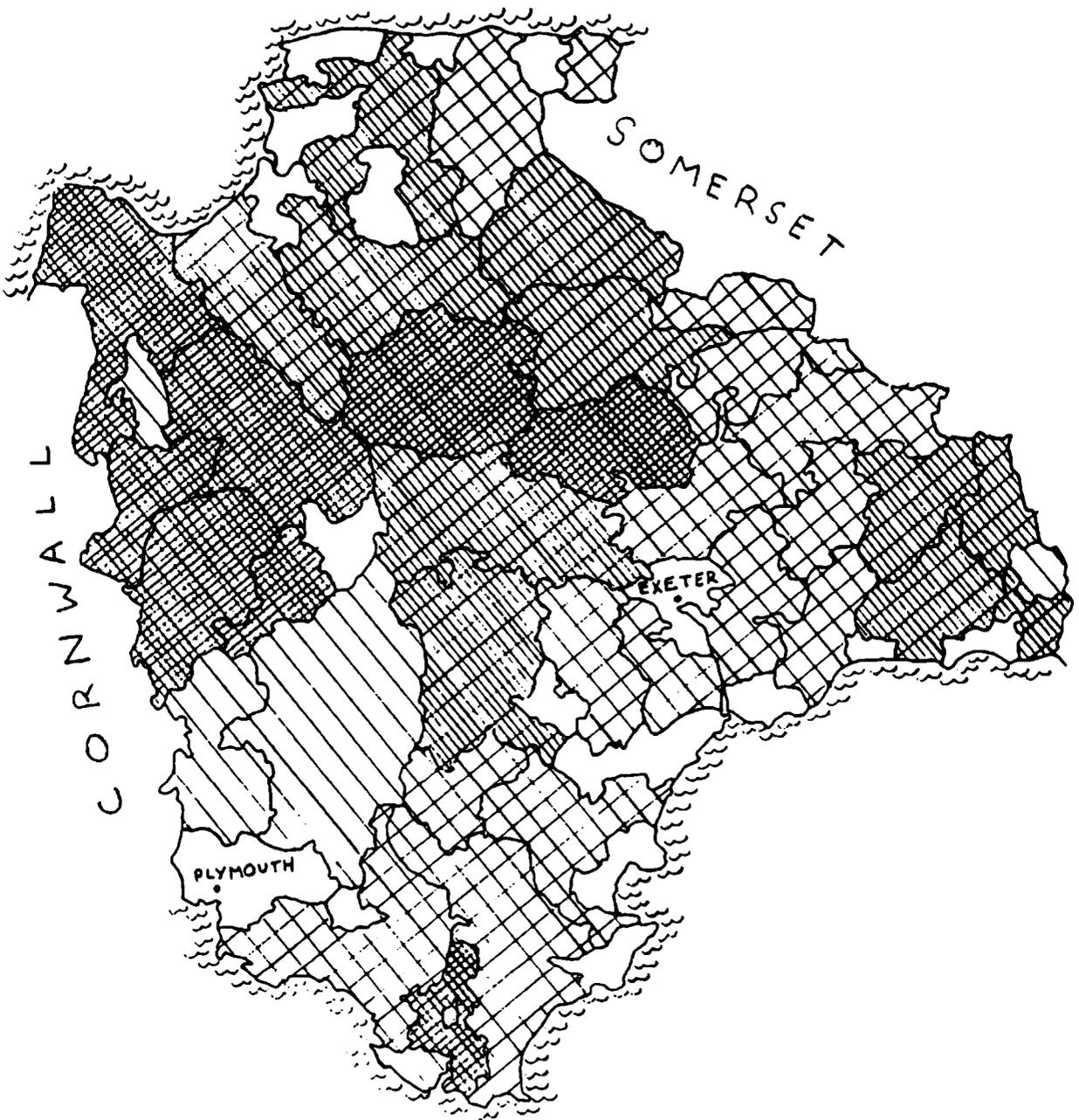
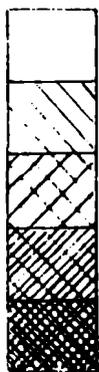


Figure 1: Migration Rates in Devon, 1841-1910

unweighted average of decennial migration rates for each population district.



less than -5.0 and districts of migration gain

-5.0 to -11.0

-11.0 to -14.5

-14.5 to -17.0

over -17.0

TABLE V

Regional differences in money wages in agriculture in Devon

	1833-40	1860s	1881	1894-8	1901-3	% change 1833-1903
Barnstaple/Bideford	95	100	102	100	104	100
N. W. Devon	85	80	98	97	90	97
Mid-Devon	96	90	99	100	90	70
South Hams	107	110	106	105	100	72.5
Plymouth district	108	114	116	120	110	88
Exeter district	101	(88)	90	97	95	74
East Devon	90	84	88	100	90	85
DEVON	100	100	100	100	100	85

Sources: See Note 47.

agricultural wages high in the Plymouth area, for example, and it is not surprising to find that farmers in the district were eager to impress upon their men the false prosperity, squalor and poverty of that city, no doubt in an attempt to dissuade them from moving.⁴⁸ Many mid-century commentators refer to the operation of similar forces in several districts, and the following example (from 1874) is typical of many:

The new Devon and Somerset line from Taunton to Barnstaple, then in process of completion, passed across the north of Devon, and necessarily created a demand for the best and strongest of the agricultural labourers. In the neighbourhood of North Molton, too, iron and copper mines had been opened; so farmers in these districts were compelled to give their men 12 and 13 shillings per week.⁴⁹

It is not necessary to find a direct relationship between migration rates and wage increases for it to be clear that the availability of alternative work and a declining supply of labour in the countryside exerted upwards pressure on agricultural wage rates after 1870. What is surprising is that the changing circumstances, particularly the continued rise in money wages during the 'Great Depression' should be accepted with such relative equanimity by the county's farmers, especially in the light of Girdlestone's experiences at Halberton in the 1860s. Remarks to the 1881 Royal Commission expressed some concern that 'they have copied those higher up and lived too extravagantly' and that partly as a consequence 'they take less interest in their work and their employer's welfare'.⁵⁰ Labour was said by some to be 'scarcely equal to demand',⁵¹ yet apart from these perennial grumbles there were no serious and sustained complaints from the employers about the

rising cost of farm labour. Rew's report on agriculture in north Devon in 1895 is notable for the fact that at the well attended public meetings he organised for the region's farmers, and at which they were invited to air their grievances, the high price of labour did not figure in discussion. Instead, attention was confined to the level of rents, the Law of Distress, the 1883 Agricultural Holdings Act, the incidence of local taxation and the conditions of sale of foreign meat.⁵² It is too much to surmise that Devon's farmers were of the collective and unanimous opinion that labourers were at last beginning to receive the just rewards they had always deserved. The explanation must be sought in more strictly economic territory.

The relatively pastoral nature of Devon's agriculture was significant in this respect. Not only did it make the county less vulnerable to the 'Great Depression', it must also have meant that labour accounted for a smaller percentage of total costs than elsewhere. In his submission on the state of Devon's agriculture in 1881 W. C. Little provided a few farm accounts in which labour costs were only 8% of the total and he went on to contrast this with the 30% which was more typical of the arable districts of England.⁵³ It may be more than co-incidental that in the Vale of Gloucester, close to Bristol and largely given over to dairy farming, there seems to have been no decline from early 1870s agricultural wage levels by 1877-8. Wages in the district may even have risen slightly by 1891-2.⁵⁴

Beyond this, however, there is evidence that agriculture in Devon appeared to adapt relatively well to the hostile economic environment normally associated with the 'Great Depression'. The acreage of land laid down to wheat and barley fell by 65% and 36% respectively between 1870 and 1895. Efforts were made in many places to accommodate the squeeze on prices of pastoral products. For example, the Torridge Vale Butter Factory was set up in 1874 to produce a consistently high quality of butter, and in Hemyock farmers set up a co-operative dairy to produce and market their own butter from 1886 onwards.⁵⁵ In ways such as these it was still possible to obtain premium prices for high quality beef and dairy produce, particularly as railways gave access to a large enough market to maintain an adequate volume. It is estimated that around 78,400 head of livestock left the county by rail in 1856, rising to at least 250,000 by 1913.⁵⁶

The adaptability of the county's farmers which impressed observers such as Rew and Little probably extended beyond versatility in choosing an appropriate product mix to making efficient use of available labour and increasing overall productivity on the farm. An early intimation of this kind of positive response was given by one farmer in a description of the state of farming in his district in 1859. He

remarked that the developing 'evil' of a deficiency in labour supply had been counteracted by the introduction of machinery, implying that higher wages had been thus accommodated.⁵⁷ Between 1851 and 1901 the Devonian agricultural labour force diminished at a rate 15% faster than the whole of England and Wales. In 1911 2.43 labourers were employed for every 100 acres of farmland in England and Wales as a whole, but only 1.8 in Devon.⁵⁸

Whatever the assumptions traditionally held about the pace of change in Devon, they probably have little foundation when it comes to the county's agriculture during the Victorian period. It appears that a healthy, if inevitably diminishing, demand permitted the productivity changes which allowed supply to dovetail adequately in the market for rural labour, instead of a straight contraction of labour supply raising wages in the face of strong complaints from farmers about falling quality and quantity.

At the same time the proportion of the local workforce employed in agriculture remained substantially greater than the national average.⁵⁹ This is normally used as an indicator of relative economic backwardness. In Devon's case we have seen that it was accompanied by a sharp reduction in the regional agricultural wage differential. It also appears that there were significant rises in the volume of agricultural goods 'exported' from the county. Thus a fairer interpretation of this aspect of Devon's economic development could be that the continued relative dependance on agriculture increasingly represented a rational deployment of resources in response to the changing structure and more pervasive influence of external demand. However, further investigation of this interesting area in Devon's recent economic history is required before these speculations can be confirmed.

NOTES

1. Hoskins, W. G., 1952. *The Devon Farm Labourer through Four Centuries*. In Hoskins, W. G. and Finberg, H. P. R. *Devonshire Studies*, p. 439.
2. The full list of sources used in this article is given in Finch, G. P., 1984. *The Experience of Peripheral Regions in an Age of Industrialisation: the case of Devon, 1840-1914*, D.Phil thesis, Oxford. (hereafter referred to as '19th Century Devon'), Appendix 4.4, pp. 319-20. Copies are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the West Country Studies Library.
3. British Parliamentary Papers. 1861 L (14); DRO 96M/Box 2/6; 1900s:PP 1910 LXXXIV (Cd5460), *Earnings and Hours of Labour Enquiry*. V: Agriculture, pp. 480-1; *Exeter Flying Post*, 25 Oct 1913.
4. Major reference years were 1833, 1860-1, 1868, 1872, 1881, 1896, 1902, 1907, 1914. More detail on wage series construction can be found in Finch '19th Century Devon', pp. 319-23.
5. Cost of living figures taken from '19th Century Devon', App. 4.3, pp. 307-16.
6. PP 1871 LVI (181), p. 615.
7. PP 1873 LIII (358), p. 705.

8. PP 1900 LXXXII (Cd346), p. 596; W. H. Curtler, 'Agriculture in Devon,' unpublished paper for Victoria County History of Devon, Inst. of Historical Research, V.C.H. Papers Env. 440 p. 13.
9. PP 1905 XCVII (Cd2376), p. 565, 2nd Report by A. Wilson-Fox on Wages etc.
10. Thos. Buller, J.P., PP 1834 XXX (44) Ans. to Commrs. Rural Questions, App. B, Part 1, p. 135a.
11. PP 1900 LXXXII (Cd346), First Report by A. Wilson-Fox, p. 596.
12. The prosperity of a family is shown first by the girls ceasing to work at farm work, then the wives, and lastly the sons.' PP 1893-4 XXXV (Cd6894-II), Crediton Poor Law Union, p. 253.
13. Tanner, H., 1848-9. The farming of Devonshire, *Jour. Royal Ag. Soc. Eng.*, IX, p. 491.
14. PP 1871 LVI (181), Av. rate of weekly earnings in agriculture, p. 599.
15. PP 1864 XXVIII (3416), Appendix 6, p. 304.
16. Letter quoted by Torr, C., 1921. *Small Talk at Wryland* (Cambridge), Vol. II, p. 11.
17. see Table 2.
18. *Exeter Flying Post*, 9 Oct. 1851, p. 5 (Tiverton); 23 Oct. 1851, p. 4 (Ashburton).
19. Marshall, W., 1796. *The Rural Economy of the West of England*, pp. 107-8; p. 238.
20. Hunt, E. H., 1967. Labour Productivity in English Agriculture, *Economic History Review*, 2nd Ser., XX, pp. 280-92.
21. Respectively, a farmer at Pyworthy and the vicar of Holsworthy, both in west Devon PP 1868-9 XIII (4202), p. 400. In his report in the same volume Portman observed that 'whereas in Lancashire a man would get 2s. 6d. a day, and in Devon 1s 8d. a day, the former would do for 7d. the same as the latter for 1s. 8d.': report H, p. 48.
22. Caird, J., 1852. *English Agriculture in 1850-1*, pp. 512-3.
23. Pollard, S., 1978. Labour in Great Britain, In Mathias, P. and Postan, M. M. (eds). *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. VIII, part 1, p. 147.
24. *Western Times*, 11 June 1872; the local farmers also sought to oppose Girdlestone by boycotting the church in favour of the chapel, but the non-conformist minister told them they had better go back, Heath, F. G., 1874. *The English Peasantry*, p. 168.
25. '19th Century Devon', Table 2.1, p. 24; Jones, E. L., 1964. The agricultural labour market in England, 1793-1872, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., XVII, pp. 337-8.
26. Road labourers wages were taken from 12 Devon parish surveyors account books in the Devon Record Office. Real wages were deflated by the cost of living index used in Table I.
27. Hawker, Rev. T., 1884. The Devon Farm Labourer, *Rep. Trans. Devon. Ass. Admvt Sci.*, 14, p. 334.
28. Ashby, M. K., 1961. *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, 1859-1919*, (Cambridge), pp. 58-63.
29. At Modbury in the South Hams, for example, *Exeter Flying Post*, 8 May 1872, Porter, J., 1985. The revolt of the field, *Southern History*, VII, pp. 163-78.
30. *Exeter Flying Post*, 10 Jan 1872.
31. Phelps-Brown, H. and Browne, M. H., 1958. *A Century of Pay*, pp. 159, 169.
32. PP 1893-4 XXXV (Cd6894-II), p. 253 for all quotations.
33. *ibid.*
34. As found by a report to a Diocesan conference: *Exeter Flying Post*, 25 Oct 1913.
35. Amery, T. S., 1905. In *Rep. Trans. Devon. Ass. Admvt Sci.*, 37, p. 117.
36. Ashby, J. and King, B., 1893. Statistics of some Midland Villages, *Economic Journal*, III, pp. 1-22.
37. Haresign, S. R., 1980. Agricultural Change and Rural Society in the Lincolnshire Fenlands and the Isle of Axholme 1870-1914, Univ. East Anglia Ph.D thesis 1980, p. 400.
38. English wages taken from Bowley, A. L., 1900. *Wages in the U.K. in the 19th Century*, endtable, Orwin, C. S., & Felton, B. I., 1931. A century of wages and earnings in Agriculture, *Jour. Royal Agricultural Society of England*, XCII, pp. 245-7, Hunt, E. H., 1973. *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914*, p. 62, *Wages and Conditions in Agriculture*, PP 1919 IX (Cmd. 25).
39. Perry, P. J., 1969. Working-class isolation and Mobility in Rural Dorset 1837-1936, *Trans Inst. British Geographers*, XLVI, p 133.
40. Hunt, E. H., 1973. *Regional Wage Variations*, p. 58.
41. A land agent in east Devon remarked, almost wistfully, to the Royal Commission on

- the Depression in Agriculture in 1881 that he no longer saw men sitting around on street corners: PP. 1881 XVII (c3096), p. 721.
42. These sources are surveyed and the figures drawn from them are presented, in '19th Century Devon', App 3.1-3, pp. 282-92.
 43. The precise delineation of this classification, its rationale and pitfalls, and the construction of population totals and migration rates associated with it is discussed in more detail than is possible here in '19th Century Devon', pp. 173-7, 183-5.
 44. Figures for Devon were calculated at population district level from Census parish data and R.D. natural increase figures, '19th Century Devon', App. 3.2, pp. 288-90. The migration rate is the number of net migrants per 1000 resident population per year, calculated taking into account the under registration of births quantified in Wrigley, E. and Schofield, R., 1981. *Population History of England, 1541-1871*, App. 8, pp. 631-3. Col. 7: Migration rate from the southern English 'rural residue'; Cairncross, A., 1949. Internal migration in Victorian England, *Manchester School of Econ. and Social Studies*, XVII; Col. 8: Migration rate from southern Ireland; Carrier, N. & Jeffery, J., 1953. *External Migration: A Study of the available statistics*, p. 14.
 45. Such a high level of net out-migration could conceivably have resulted from an equally high rate of natural increase of population but natural increase was at a lower rate in Devon and rural Devon than in England and Wales and the Southern Rural Residue respectively. While the crude death rate in Devon was 94.7% of the national level over the whole period the crude birth rate stood at only 88.4%.
 46. Thomas, B., 1973. *Migration and Economic Growth* (Cambridge), p. 124; '19th Century Devon', p. 199.
 47. '19th Century Devon' App. 4. 4. The Exeter district figure for the 1860s is based on very few observations.
 48. Haggard, H. R., 1902. *Rural England*, Vol. II, p. 185.
 49. Heath, *The English Peasantry*, pp. 124-5.
 50. PP 1882 XV (c3375), p. 153.
 51. PP 1895 XVI (c7728), p. 26.
 52. Rew, R. H. Report on North Devon, PP 1895 XVI (c7728), pp. 25-6.
 53. PP 1882 XV (c3375), App. C (e)—II (South west counties).
 54. Miller, C. A., 1980. Farming, Farm Work and Farm Workers in Victorian Gloucestershire. Univ. Bristol Ph.D, Appendix 5/1.
 55. Strong, H., 1888. *Industries of North Devon* (Barnstaple), p. 121; Stanes, R., 1979. Notes on the Culm Valley, *Devon Historian*, XIX, p. 31.
 56. using the PP Railway Returns and GWR records as basis for calculations; see '19th Century Devon', Table 3.6, p. 58.
 57. Mortimer, J., 1860. The agriculture of north Devon, *Jour. Bath and West of Eng. Soc.*, VIII, p. 94; my parentheses.
 58. Agricultural Statistics, PP 1912/3 LXXIX, (Cd 6021), Census Occupational Abstracts, PP 1913 LXXIX (Cd 7019), pp. 86-98. It is also worth speculating here that the rise in wages might in itself have had a positive impact on the quality of labour insofar as it lessened the physical debilitation amongst farmworkers commented on in the 1860s.
 59. In 1911 7.8% of the GB workforce was employed in agriculture; in Devon, 14.7% '19th Century Devon', App. 1, p. 267.