

1. Down To Earth Agricultural Workers in Renfrewshire

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There are three important considerations in mind when discussing the question of farm workers in Renfrewshire and all three are interrelated. Agrarian studies in the west of Scotland form a relatively neglected area of historiography. The east coast has always attracted more attention and its experiences are often used to make generalisations about Scottish agriculture.

It is the case, however, that farming in the west is very different. The differences concern the size of farms, patterns of employment and farm architecture. The second consideration which stems largely from the first is that the number of farm workers in the west and in counties like Renfrewshire was much smaller than in other parts of the country. This was dictated by the fact that, in general, west coast farms were smaller than those in the east and were pastoral rather than arable. Pastoral farming is less labour intensive. An important factor was also present in the competition for labour provided by the development of industry in large urban areas like Glasgow and Paisley and indeed in the villages like Lochwinnoch, Kilbarchan and Johnstone. The third and final consideration is that it has to be remembered when we are studying agricultural workers that we are always working at one remove from our subjects. This was after all a transient and often migratory workforce; they left few records. It has to be said, however, that this was a characteristic of the farming community in general. A gentleman farmer may have had the time to keep letters, diaries and accounts but few working farmers did.

In attempting to look at farm workers, who then are we really talking about? Prior to the agrarian improvements of the 18th century the nuances of status can be difficult to judge, especially from the point of view of the work involved. In Renfrewshire most of those involved with farming were "workers" in the broadest sense. The small owner occupiers and the tenants would have found themselves undertaking the same work as their hired farm servants. Moreover the standards of living of servants and master will have differed very little.

Wilson in his *Agricultural Survey of Renfrewshire* in 1812 gives the impression that labourers often fared better than the smallest tenants whom he described as

"indolent, prejudiced and parsimonious." (1)

Looking at the period 1680-1730, the *Judicial Records of Renfrewshire* suggest that poverty was the common lot of tenant, proprietor and labourer. Commenting on Kilmacolm around 1750 the records highlight what was considered to be a lack of responsibility and intelligence of all classes and that the hallmarks of rural civilisation were at best ignorance and sloth.(2) Despite this cosy picture of what appears to have been to Victorian observers a conspiracy of rural underachievers, there clearly was a social structure, even if it was blurred at the edges. This structure had its roots deep in feudal society and perhaps even before. The agrarian improvements of the 18th century probably served to sharpen the edges of the rural social structure and

developed class attitudes among the landowners, tenants and labourers.



a Fanner.
b Driver.
c Woman feeding the hopper.
d Woman taking up corn.

e e Women riddlers.
f Corn-basket.
g Wooden shovel.

h Besom.
i Light corn.
k Chaff.

Barn fanners were used in Renfrewshire as a mechanised form of winnowing. Lochwinnoch Community Museum has a similar machine in its collection.

This process would not have been uniform throughout the county, and these categories can be misleading. It was the case that there were many small landowners just as there were large tenants. The tenant might well have been a more substantial man than his owner-occupier neighbour.

It is difficult to provide a precise definition of the "farm worker". Some writers include the cottager or crofter in their description of farm workers. The cottar was in an inferior position to the tenant and very often was a subtenant employed as a ploughman. He was provided with a cottage and a small piece of land and grazing rights. The cottar paid his rent by labour and frequently performed some other occupational work such as shoemaking or tailoring. In all probability this category of agricultural worker was less common in Renfrewshire. There certainly seems to be a consensus that 'cottages' as such were less common in this county than others. The term cottar, however, was used and at Risk Farm which is just outside Howwood there was a Cottar Raw. Perhaps the best definition of an agricultural worker would include all those who were truly landless in terms either of rental or owner occupancy.

Landless labourers or farm servants, both male and female, were hired by the year, half year and sometimes by the month. In peak seasons they were hired by the day. In Steven's **Book of the Farm** they are divided into two classes,

"those who are constantly employed in the work of the farm and those who occasionally work on a farm but principally support themselves by independent labour."(3)

Servants were hired as ploughmen, shepherds, cattlemen, hedgers and field workers. Female servants were hired usually to work in the house or the dairy. The characteristic farm servant was the ploughman or hind as he was often known. He was considered the aristocrat of the labour force. In upland areas, the shepherds were usually considered a superior race. They led a lonely life with

"long hours of work determined by the needs of their sheep".(4)

They were often particularly well read men and one has only to think of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, for an example. Quite often farm servants were the junior members of the cottars' or poor tenants' family. None of these men had a legal right to occupancy and it was as T.C. Smout has said

"...singularly easy to evict a lowland farm labourer from his cottage".(5)

Generally speaking farm servants were hired by half yearly or yearly arrangements. These were the Whitsun and Martinmas terms of May and November. These are also the times of year when the calves go out to pasture and are returned to the byre. The importance of these points in the agrarian calendar is reflected also by the fact that they were the times of the year when the country churches celebrated communion. This is still the custom in Howwood. Servants were often taken on at hiring markets or feeing fairs, such as that held at Graham Square in Glasgow. In the 20th century these fairs gradually died out and the labourer's chief guide to employment opportunities was to be found in the **Scottish Farmer**.(6) Some agricultural servants would be asked to stay on by the farmer for the next term. In the local dialect they were "spiered" to stay on and they would simply reply "aye" if they wanted to or "naw" if they fancied a move at the end of the term.

The constant moving from place to place should not be regarded as a troublesome burden. Single men liked to skirt around the farms in the Glasgow area, especially in this century when they had access to a train, bus or tram. A pub near Glasgow Cross called the **Silver Bells** was a favourite Saturday night haunt for farm workers. Women too had the opportunity to move even if it was only within a narrow radius of Glasgow. They regarded it as a good opportunity for spring cleaning and often moaned if their husbands responded positively to the "spiering".(7) Not everyone moved. In May 1935 John Murdoch of the Risk was awarded a certificate by the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland for 30 years service with Thomas Orr and Miss Annie Orr.(8)

In addition to those workers hired at the 6 monthly fairs there was also the

employment of seasonal migrant labour at periods of peak farming. These might, for the harvest, be domestic servants from Glasgow temporarily laid off with their master's and mistress's departure for holiday homes on the Clyde Coast. Until the final decades of the 19th century lowland farmers depended a great deal on migrant workers from the highlands. Some have argued that the seasonal opportunities for highlanders actually decreased in the 19th century as the Irish took over the traditional highland roles of harvesting. If this is true it may be related, as Devine and Fenton have pointed out, to

“a subtle but nevertheless vital revolution in hand tool technology, the adoption of the scythe hook in preference to the toothed sickel [sic]”(9)

The argument was that the scythe hook was a man's tool and most of the Irish were men, whereas the sickle was used by highland women. In all probability this picture was too black and white. There is some evidence that the Irish workers were still a feature of Lochwinnoch farming life in the 1950s. Seasonal workers were also employed from a more local pool. In Lochwinnoch a farmer could usually guarantee to hire extra hands at short notice around Lochwinnoch Cross. Another group of people who were a useful source of labour were the tinkers and travelling people. Children were also involved at the harvest. The Log books for Lochwinnoch public school during the month of August in the 1880s and 1890s are full of references of low attendances because of children being engaged in harvest work.(10)

The hours of work and the tasks undertaken varied on different farms and types of land. In his survey of agriculture in Renfrewshire in 1812 Wilson describes the hours of servants as from 6 in the morning until 6 in the evening and from 8 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon in winter. Active farmers, as Wilson points out, did not "limit themselves to any fixed time especially at seed time and at harvest".(11) Even today at silage and haymaking times in Lochwinnoch, when some occasional labour is still hired, machinery can be heard long into the night to take advantage of dry weather and light nights. In winter the yearly farm servants of the 19th century were employed through the day carting manure, in ploughing and in threshing corn with the flail where it was not superseded by the threshing machine.

This picture of long hours and hard work was little altered in the 20th century and in the 1930s on Darnley Mains farm the day began at 5am when the farm manager's wife, who was in this case Elizabeth Anderson, took the byreman tea. They then went to the byre, scraped down the stalls and washed the cows prior to the arrival of the milkers at 5:30. At 5:30 the ploughmen fed the horses and mucked them out; then went for breakfast; then groomed and harnessed the horses ready to start at 7.00 am. As the ploughmen were going out breakfast was served for the byremen and milkers and this was followed by mucking out and feeding. The ploughmen worked until dinner-time which was 12 noon to 1pm and then worked until 6pm. As we have already said the ploughmen were the elite of the farm servants eclipsed in some areas only by the shepherds. Even among ploughmen there was a firm pecking order. For example the 1st ploughman took his horses out before the 2nd ploughman who took his horses out before the 3rd ploughman. The odd horse, looked after by the orr or orraman went last. As well as ploughing, in suitable

weather the ploughman also harrowed and sowed crops such as oats, wheat or beans. They also sowed grass seed when the oats were high enough to give them cover. In wet weather they cleaned harness and in frosty weather they helped put out the dung, usually 2 carts each.(12)

Married farm servants did not work in isolation from their families, indeed the man was very often employed on condition that one or more of his family worked on the farm. A ploughman was often obliged to maintain a labourer himself as was the shepherd. Where possible, those were sons. A ploughman with a wife and working sons would maximise the family's income. The need for children in the economic unit that was the labouring family is one of the reasons put forward for the high rates of illegitimate birth in the Scottish countryside. Indeed the Registrar General published figures in the 1850's that showed there was a higher rate of illegitimacy than in England and most of Europe(13) It made economic sense to make sure that a woman could bear children before marrying her. In the Scottish countryside illegitimacy seems to have carried less of a stigma than elsewhere. Under Scottish law subsequent marriage legalised a bastard which was not the case in England. Writers have also commented that abortion and infanticide were not practised in the countryside.(14) As part of the labouring unit, ploughmen's wives would help at harvest and hay time in addition to more regular duties. The byreman would have his wife working as the milker or as a dairymaid. On a small farm women could be working as early as 3 to 4 in the morning even in the 1930s. In between milking there was house work, cooking, washing, cheese making and there would be occasional turns at feeding the cattle and cleaning the byre. There were of course usually a number of children in tow. Little wonder that the **Scottish Farmer** felt the need to encourage the women on the farms with little morally uplifting pieces. For example the **Scottish Farmer** of January 7th, 1893 extolled housework as an exercise:-

"To keep the complexion and spirits good, to preserve grace, strength, and agility of motion there is no gymnasium so valuable, no exercise more beneficent, in result than sweeping, washing, dusting, making beds and polishing. One year of such muscular effort within doors, together with regular exercise in open air, will do more for a woman's complexion than all the lotions and pomades that were ever invented.

Perhaps the reason why housework does so much more for women than games is the fact that exercise which is immediately productive cheers the spirit. Or gives women courage to go on living and makes things seem really worth while."(15)

This must have been welcome news in Renfrewshire where there were a large number of female farm servants. In Lochwinnoch in the late 17th century and early 18th century the Poll Tax records indicate that female farm servants were more common than male. This was particularly the case on small farms. Thus at Easter Kerse one John Craig employed 1 female with a male at harvest time. The larger farms in the area had 2-3 servants and these were usually female. Industrialisation must have altered this picture particularly with the demand for female labour in the textile industry.(16)

It seems to be generally thought that the wages of Scottish farm servants were

higher than their English counterparts. English wages tended to be paid in money unlike the Scots who were paid in a combination of money and kind. The competition for labour from the late 18th century with industry ensured that Renfrewshire wages were higher than most. Even in the 17th century the lower money wages seem to have been eked out by payment in kind such as shoes, hose, linen and harn for a shirt and apron and one or two lengths of plaid. This was equal to one quarter of the money wage and was received twice a year.(18) Writing in 1812 Wilson commented on the high money wages of farm servants in Renfrewshire.(19) Stephens, ***Book of the Farm*** in its 5th edition of 1908 records that the cost of farm servants wages and labour had increased by 30% to 50% since 1850 in Scotland as a whole. Stephens also produced figures to show that a ploughman in Renfrewshire was certainly among the top cash earners in the countryside.(20) Moving on a little in the late 1930s it was possible to earn £1.00 a week in Renfrewshire as a male labourer; this did not include a house or food.(21) This would have been considered very good. In the early 1930's £5.00 for six months was a good farm wage. Payment came at the end of the term unless there had been an agreement to pay in instalments. If the farm servant left before, he got nothing. Some farmers did get a reputation for initiating bad feeling so that labourers would leave before the end of the period and they could avoid paying.(22)

Making judgements on the standards of farm servants is full of pitfalls. The question of working-class living standards has vexed many of our foremost historians. As Smout has pointed out, middle class observers have often expressed a general belief that the working class were better off in the country areas.(23) Perhaps a greater tendency towards co-operation and sense of community made it less painful to be poor in the countryside. Opportunities for poaching for example made it possible to supplement the rural diet.

Housing standards and conditions varied considerably. Enid Gauldie in her work on the ***Scottish Country Miller*** reminds us that in any consideration of housing in the country it has to be born in mind that at best the home of the Scots peasant was a "comfortless hovel".(24) This probably accounts for the fact that few surviving rural domestic buildings pre-date the improving movement. It was the case however that, in general, farm servants in Scotland resided on or very near the farms in which they were employed. Indeed it was common for the farm servant to live under the same roof as his or her master. In Renfrewshire this reflected the smallness of the farming unit and the tendency to employ fewer farm servants than elsewhere. There are not many farm cottages in Lochwinnoch but a large number in Inchinnan and Bishopton areas. There were of course larger farms, Darnley Mains had five cottages for married workers. However, boarding in the husbandman's house was still common at the beginning of the century. With the changes in agriculture taking place from the 18th century and the so-called revolution of manners and the consequent development of class attitudes, many farmers began to dislike having their workers under the same roof. Inevitably a gulf developed between master and servant. Single men could be accommodated in the bothy. In 1906 Stephens described these as:-

“a structure in which a single man lives without the comfort of a resident housekeeper. In not a few cases the men cook the whole or part of their own

food, but in all instances the cooking, cleaning and bed making should be done by a woman".(26)

This statement was less about a woman's place in the countryside and more of a concern about the debasing effects the lack of female company had on a group of men isolated from family life. The system was described by many as "evil" and there were real concerns for the opportunities created for drinking, gambling, and all manner of immorality. The churches (as articles in the **Scottish Farmer** show) were aware of their failings in terms of the farm labourers and there were attempts to set up, for example, Ploughman's Missions. In this part of the country the system was more flexible and both workers tended to be fed in the farmhouse. Quite often the reference to the bothy here may in fact be a room above the stable or barn or, even at "Nervelston" in this century, in the attic of the dwelling house.(27) Some, like the bothy in Gavilmoss Farm in Lochwinnoch, had its own fireplace and was considered to be quite warm and comfortable.(28) **The Royal Commission on Labour** in 1893 was full of comments on the difficulty of obtaining lowland farm servants. The masters in Renfrewshire couldn't always afford to treat their workers harshly or put them into poor housing, especially if they were not in a position to introduce labour saving machinery.

Of the farm servants' possessions we know little. They will have had a wooden kist to contain valuables and which was used to store linen and clothes at "the flitting time", or which could be easily concealed in a roadside hedge if the servants were "contemplating doing a moonlighter", which did happen.(29)

Single male servants had little except their working clothes and Sunday best. Families will have had bedding, a few pieces of blue and white china, cooking pots, some ornaments and a few pieces of furniture. Until the last war a mattress was easily made with some ticking filled with wool flock or chaff. Chaff was considered a great treat, especially as it could be renewed at every threshing. It was the farmers responsibility to flit his workers after their hiring.(30)

As far as the food consumed by the farm servant is concerned, evidence at least from the second half of the 17th century would suggest that diet was adequate if monotonous. Oatmeal was the staple; it was frequently part of the wage in kind. It could be made into porridge, gruel, oatcakes or bannocks. Little meat was consumed even by the mid 19th century. Cheese and butter were more heavily consumed in Renfrewshire and the south west, simply because it was produced here. Kail was grown throughout the lowlands and was used to make broth. Poultry were kept for eggs and the meat for soup. Fish was eaten in Renfrewshire. "Herring Nanny" and "the fish man from Beith" were regular visitors to Lochwinnoch Main Street in the 1890s.(31) Most food was boiled or roasted on an open fire with a swey. Baking and roasting were difficult until the development of the range. Milk and ale were drunk. Whisky was for social occasions. The Statistical Accounts for Renfrewshire in 1836 describe three meals a day. Breakfast consisted of porridge, bread and cheese. Broth and possibly butcher meat were eaten for dinner and for supper it was porridge again or potatoes. The Reverend Robert Smith stressed his belief in that year that the peasantry "with solitary examples live well".(32) An investigation into the diet of

agricultural labourers in 1868 believed them to be quite well fed and one which has been found to contain the same energy values of as the diets of labourers in 1926. (33) By the 20th century food for agricultural labourers had really changed little although coal stoves and ranges made baking possible. The main meal of the day continued to be and often still is at mid-day but called dinner. Quite often wives produced a two-course meal at mid-day of a substantial soup and pudding and the main or meat course was eaten for the evening meal The author's father-in-law, the son of a Borders ploughman, kept this custom up throughout his life on Sundays.

This survey of farm workers in Renfrewshire has not looked at many aspects of their lives, much remains to be said about entertainment, education, literacy, religion and labour organisation. There is much room for research among the census, parish records, poor law records and school log books. The physical and mental stamina of these people must have been considerable. Living and working on farms in the west of Scotland with the difficult land and unrelenting weather was a triumph of the human spirit. Perhaps it is pertinent to conclude by highlighting some comments from a retired farm worker. The lady now in her 80s, was a farm servant in the 1930s.

"Do you miss the old days?"

"Aye I dae"

"Was it hard work?"

"Aye especially with 10 children"

"But the harder it was the better I liked it", (34)

References

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- (3) J. Macdonald, ed, *Stephen's Book of the Farm*. vol 1, 5th edition, 1908, 226.
- (4) Conversation with Mrs Elizabeth Anderson, Warlock Gates Farm Lochwinnoch.
- (5) T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People*, (London 1986), 59.
- (6) *Conversations with Mrs Anderson, and Mr and Mrs William Paton former farm servants in Lochwinnoch.*
- (7) Mrs Anderson.
- (8) LW/577/1986, Collection of Lochwinnoch Community Museum, Renfrew District Council.
- (9) T.M. Devine, *Temporary Migration and the Scottish Highlands in the 19th century*, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol XXXII, no 3, August 1979, 347-8.
- (10) Lochwinnoch Public Schools. Log Books, on loan to Lochwinnoch Community Museum.
- (11) Wilson, *op cit*, 159.
- (12) Mrs Anderson.
- (13) Smout, *op cit*, 166.
- (14) *ibid.*
- (15) *Scottish Farmer*, January 7 1893. 13.
- (16) Poll Tax 1695, Parish of Lochwinnoch. Stephen, *op cit*, 207.
- (17) reference missing in text
- (18) Hector, *op cit*, 333.
- (19) Wilson, *op cit*. 88 and 157.
- (20) Stephens *op cit*, 289.
- (21) Mr and Mrs Paton

- (22) Mr Louis Anderson.
- (23) Smout, op cit, 80.
- (24) E Gauldie, The Scottish Country Miller, (Edinburgh 1981), 24.
- (25) Stephens, op cit, 207.
- (26) Stephens, op cit, 226.
- (27) Conversation with Miss Margaret Brodie of the Knowes formally of Nerveiston, Lochwinnoch.
- (28) Mr William Paton, op cit.
- (29) Mr Louis Anderson.
- (30) Mr and Mrs Anderson.
- (31) Peter Dewar Collection of Photographs, Lochwinnoch Museum, Renfrew District Council.
- (32) The New Statistical Account, Parish of Lochwinnoch 1836,91.
- (33) Smout, op cit, 80.
- (34) Mrs Paton.