

CHILDREN'S AGRICULTURAL WORK IN MID NINETEENTH CENTURY NORFOLK

This paper examines the nature of agricultural work undertaken by children in mid nineteenth century Norfolk. It draws upon parliamentary reports of the time and first hand accounts by child workers and their parents.

Parliamentary Reports

In 1867-8, the First Report on the findings of a Commission on the employment of women and children in agriculture across the country was published.¹ In Norfolk, 4 districts were selected in an attempt to give a representative picture of the county. These were the Unions of St Faith, Depwade, Docking and Swaffham.² A child was defined as being under 13 years of age. Earlier in 1867 another Parliamentary Report was published, which focused more narrowly on the issue of agricultural gangs.³

Age that Children went to Work

The majority view of the farmers expressed in the 1867-8 Report was that children were not much use to a farmer under the age of 10. Reasons given included that younger children required too much supervision and could not stand the cold in winter. Nevertheless, it was admitted that children younger than 10 were often employed, due to labour shortages and/or at the request of the parents.⁴ First hand accounts by parents or children usually indicate poverty as the reason for children starting work at a young age.

Type of Work done by Boys

Types of work done by boys were reported to include “tending bullocks and sheep, weeding, singling, carting and cleaning turnips, stone picking, and bird keeping.”⁵ In some places, boys were said to be needed just as much in winter as summer for such things as “pulling, cleaning, and cutting turnips, feeding cattle and sheep, etc, so that there is no slack time of which advantage can be taken for boys after the age of 10 to attend school.”⁶ In other places, it was said that there were some slack months in the winter. There were also different views about the age at which boys could stand the cold in winter (between 10 and 12 years old).

Type of Work done by Girls

Types of work done by girls were reported to include “turnip singling, twitching, and bird keeping in the spring and summer.”⁷ Other work mentioned in first hand accounts included pulling turnips and mangolds. Sarah Ann Bullard described the effects of this work on her daughter Maria, aged 9:

“Her poor little hands have been so sore at night, from pulling turnips and mangolds with them, that I have had to doctor them; the backs were cracked open from the wind and wet

in the morning, and blisters inside. Now she pulls with a crome (tool). She gets quite wet through sometimes, and has very little to change.”⁸

Agricultural Gangs

Agricultural gangs were a particular way of organising labour whereby groups of people, including children, were hired and controlled by a gangmaster who let them out to work for different farmers. It has been argued that by the 1860s, gangs were largely concentrated in the west of the county.⁹

The disadvantages to those working in gangs were that they earned less than they would have done without the gangmaster’s cut and that they often had to walk long distances to and from work. One mother reported:

“When the gang goes far it tires the children much more, and takes the shoes off their feet quicker, and they have to carry tools and extra victuals for the longer time, but have no more pay. Some of mine have gone four, five, six and seven miles off, and have gone from me at 6.30 a.m. regular for a good time, and have not been home till 7 or 8 at night, or even later.”¹⁰

Effects on Health

A doctor reported that: “Some of the work, e.g. stone picking, is heavy, and injures some who are not strong. The stone pickers gather the stones in a sort of apron fastened over their necks or shoulders, and when it is full carry them to where it is collected...The effect of this work is in some cases to strain and cause injury, particularly to the spine...Several cases of fracture of the radius or small bone of the forearm have come under my notice in work such as turnip pulling...”¹¹

Also mentioned in first hand accounts by children and their parents were cut and blistered hands from work such as turnip pulling, and swollen and aching feet and legs from getting wet.¹² Longer term effects cited included rheumatism, lung diseases and premature aging.¹³

Treatment by Employers

While there must have been variation in the way that employers treated children, common factors are clear. Children were expected to work long hours and they were expected to do their work properly, however young they were.

Reports of physical chastisement are frequent. Hopefully, employers were not all as severe as the gangmaster described by a mother as “kicking them, hitting them with fork handles, hurdle sticks, etc., and even knocking them down. These are not things to hit a child with.”¹⁴

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APPENDIX: FIRST HAND ACCOUNTS:

GEORGE EDWARDS – MARSHAM

“On coming out of the workhouse in March 1856 I secured my first job. It consisted of scaring crows from the fields of a farmer close to the house. I was then six years of age, and I was paid 1s. for a seven-day week...

My troubles began in the second week of my employment. Having to work long hours, I had to be up very early in the morning, soon after sunrise, and remain in the fields till after sunset. One day, being completely worn out, I unfortunately fell asleep. Equally unfortunately for me the crows were hungry, and they came on to the field and began to pick the corn. Soon after the farmer arrived on the scene and caught me asleep, and for this crime at six years of age he gave me a severe thrashing and deducted 2d. from my wage at the end of the week...

Having finished crow-scaring for that season, I was set looking after the cows, to see that they did not get out of the field, and take them home in the evening to be milked. This I continued to do all the summer.

In 1856, I entered upon my first harvest. During the wheat-cutting I made bonds for the binders. There were no reaping machines in those days, the corn all having to be cut by the scythe. Women were engaged to tie up the corn, and the little boys made bonds with which to tie the corn. For this work I received 3d. per day, or at the rate of 1s. 6d. per week.

When the wheat was carted I led the horse and shouted to the loaders to hold tight when the horse moved. When this work was finished and there was nothing further for me to do, I went gleaning with my mother. In those days it was the custom for the poor to glean the wheatfields after they had been cleared. This was a help to the poor, for it often provided them with a little bread during the winter months, when they would not have had half enough to eat had it not been that they were allowed to glean...

In the year to which I am referring, after harvest, I went keeping cows until the autumn, working for a farmer named Thomas Whighten. At the next wheat-sowing, I was again put to scaring crows, and when this was finished I was set to work cleaning turnips, and what cold hands I had when the snow was on the ground! And what suffering from backache!...

In the spring I left this employer and went with my father to work in the brickfield for a Mr. John Howlett, the leading farmer, who had about two years before put my father into prison for taking home turnips, but after a time had set him on again...I was just man enough to wheel away eight bricks at a time. The summer being ended, I helped my father to feed bullocks. In the spring of 1858 I again went into the brickfield, and during the following winter was set cleaning turnips by Mr. Howlett. By this time my wages were raised to 2s. per week. Well can I remember the many sore backs I had given me by

the old steward, who never missed an opportunity to thrash me if I did not clean enough turnips. I might say I do not think I ever forgave this old tyrant for his cruelty to me. The treatment I received was no exception to the rule, all poor boys in those days were treated badly. One farmer I knew used to hang the poor boys up by the heels and thrash them on the slightest provocation, and the parents dare not say anything. Had my father complained of the treatment to his son he would have been discharged.

In the spring of 1859 I was set to work as a horseman. This was a new experience to me, but afterwards I was to become an efficient workman, having a liking for horses from the very first. My first job as a horseman was to lead the fore-horse in the drill, and many times the first day the horse trod on my feet. My next job was rolling, and I then thought I was a man, having for the first time a pair of reins in my hands. This change of work brought me another 6d. a week increase in my wages. By the next spring (1860) I was so far improved that I was set to plough...¹⁵

ELIZABETH DICKSON – SPORLE

“My children were obliged to go out to work very young, some before they were 7 years old. If you have nothing except what comes out of your fingers’ end, as they say, it’s no use, you must let them; they want more victuals.

My husband left me a widow with 11 children living, out of 15; nine of them being then under 16 years old, and three under 3 years, two being twins. The parish allowed me 3s. 4d. in money and goods (bread) according to the number of children, but not widow’s pay...

Jemima was not more than two months, I think, over 6 years old when she went out. She said, ‘Mother, I want some boots to go to school,’ so I sent her out and saved up what she earned till it was enough to get them. She was a corpse from going in the turnips. She came home from work one day, when about 10 ½ years old, with dizziness and her bones aching, and died and was buried and all in little better than a fortnight. The doctor said it was a violent cold stuck in her bones. Children stooping down get as wet at top as below. They get wet from the rain too. Perhaps they may have to go out three or four times in a week and not earn 2d., not having made a quarter (of a day), and come home so soaked that the wet will run out of their things. I have often been obliged to take my flannel petticoat off and roll it round a girl’s legs and iron it with a warming pan to take off the pain and misery of the bones and let her get to sleep.

Some of the work is very hard, as pulling turnips and mangolds, muck shaking, and when turnips are put into the ground putting muck as fast as the plough goes along, - work which women and girls have sometimes to do. Drawing mangolds is the hardest; globe mangolds are fit to pull your inside out, and you often have to kick them up. I have pulled till my hands have been that swelled that you can’t see the knuckles on them...At singling, the little ones cry out about their backs, and stand with their hands behind, so, saying ‘Oh, I must rest.’”¹⁶

¹ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, *Commission on the employment of children, young persons, and women in agriculture (1867). First report of the commissioners, with appendix.* 1867-8.

² Ibid, p6

³ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, *Children's Employment Commission (1862). Sixth report of the commissioners, with appendix.* 1867

⁴ House of Commons (1867-8), op cit, p36

⁵ Ibid, p40

⁶ Ibid, p41

⁷ Ibid, p28

⁸ House of Commons (1867), op cit, p89

⁹ Verdon, Nicola, 'The employment of women and children in agriculture: a reassessment of agricultural gangs in nineteenth-century Norfolk, *Agricultural History Review*, 2001, vol 49, no 1, pp41-55

¹⁰ House of Commons (1867), op cit, p89

¹¹ Ibid, p93

¹² Ibid, p89

¹³ Ibid, p84

¹⁴ Ibid, p89

¹⁵ Edwards, George, *From Crow-Scaring to Westminster*, 2008, p17-19

¹⁶ House of Commons (1867), op cit, p89