

Government Provision of Farm Labour in England and Wales, 1914-18

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I

THAT the British economy experienced a labour shortage during the First World War is well known. There were two main aspects to the labour-supply problem; sufficient manpower had to be found for the Armed Forces, yet, at the same time, adequate labour supplies ensured for those civilian industries deemed "essential."

The redistribution of the national labour force necessitated by the war was largely accomplished by voluntary choice, and not by compulsion. Thus voluntary recruiting was not replaced by conscription into the Forces until March 1916.¹ Voluntary choice also dominated the other aspect of the labour problem; the transfer of labour from "inessential" to "essential" industries. In the crucial early months of the war, when the wartime structure of the labour force was being formed, official regulation was confined to declaring certain industries exempt from the attentions of the recruiting authorities. Admiralty and War Office personnel were the first to enjoy this protection, in the autumn of 1914. The first industry to enjoy complete protection was munitions, on the formation of the Ministry of Munitions in July 1915.² The result of this lack of an overall labour distribution policy was that labour was largely redistributed within the civilian sector by market forces. The strength of market forces was particularly apparent in the case of munitions, the most spectacular of the wartime growth industries. The historian of wartime labour regulation, writing about the transfer of labour into munitions, commented:

This vast transfer was not as to the greater proportion due to Government action, but rather to the operation of the laws of supply and demand, assisted by patriotism on the one hand and by a desire to remain in civilian life on the other.³

It was not until 1916 that official policy became more positive. Conscription, it was hoped would solve the first aspect of the labour problem. The second was to be tackled, for the first time, in a comprehensive manner; a list of "reserved occupations," which accompanied the promulgation of conscription, specified industries whose occupants were exempt from conscription. Should, however, they leave the shelter of their reserved occupation, they would lay themselves open to the attentions of the military authorities.⁴

The late application of these measures could do little to counteract a distribution of labour which had already largely taken place through the operation of market forces. The tardiness of government in evolving a positive policy also ensured the failure of a later and more ambitious attempt to control the civilian distribution of labour: the inception of the Ministry of National Service. Formed in August 1917 and charged, *inter alia*, with arranging the transfer of labour from "less essential" to "more essential" industries, this aim was defeated by the existence of a labour shortage which by that time had become general.⁵

However, even in the early months of 1916, it seems apparent that the free working of the labour market had already largely determined the wartime distribution of civilian labour. Henceforth the government had to work within a framework which was not of its making. Should it wish to alter this framework—for

¹ N. B. Dearle, *An Economic Chronicle of the Great War for Great Britain and Ireland, 1914-1919*, Oxford, 1929, p. 75.

² H. Wolfe, *Labour Supply and Regulation*, Oxford, 1924, p. 20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-2.

example, to resuscitate a previously neglected industry—it would face two major obstacles. Firstly, the existence of a general labour shortage meant that the free market could not be relied upon for the necessary labour supplies: the mere raising of wages in the particular industry would not necessarily call forth the requisite supply of labour from other industries. Secondly, should the government attempt to use labour over which it had direct control (e.g. soldiers), it would be open to the charge of “industrial conscription,” to which it was extremely sensitive.⁶

II

In December 1916 the government decided to adopt a policy of increased food production, and, shortly afterwards, the Food Production Department was formed to carry out this policy. The general success of the department's work is already known.⁷ It is less often recognized that its success was closely bound up with the importation into agriculture of government-controlled labour on a large scale, that opposition to this procedure from the existing labour force was ineffective, and that such a major intervention in the labour market probably worked to the economic detriment of the civilian labourer. After the war, in an unusually candid moment, Lord Ernle (who as R. E. Prothero was President of the Board of Agriculture during the last two years of the war) described the official labour supply as “blackleg labour on a massive scale.”⁸ It is proposed here to examine the ways in which agriculture made good its losses of labour during the war, to evaluate the relative efficacy of the various types of replacement labour, and finally to inquire how the government was able to draft a large amount of labour into agriculture without effective opposition from the existing labour force.

The decline in the regular farm labour force,

⁶ See n. 60, below.

⁷ The food production campaign is detailed in T. H. Middleton, *Food Production in War*, Oxford, 1923.

⁸ Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, 6th edn, 1964, p. 405; *idem*, *The Land and its People: Chapters in Rural Life and History*, 1925, p. 69.

and the degree to which this was offset by a rise in the supply of replacement labour, is set out in the Appendix. The supply of conventional labour had fallen by 1916 to about 90 per cent of its pre-war level, and did not recover thereafter. But replacement labour of various types ensured that the overall labour supply had recovered to about 97 per cent of its pre-war level by the last year of the war. Officially supplied labour (chiefly soldiers, prisoners of war, and the Women's Land Army) accounted for slightly over half of all replacement labour during the war. The remainder consisted largely of village women and some miscellaneous types of labour.

Soldier labour was officially supplied to farmers as early as the summer of 1915; those who wished it were given two weeks' leave for the purpose. The finding of employment and the rate of wages to be paid were left to private negotiation between soldier and farmer. The scheme was elaborated in the early autumn, when official rates of pay for the corn harvest were specified, and it was stipulated that soldiers would be supplied only if it could be proved that a shortage of civilian labour existed.⁹ In the spring of 1917 the amount of soldier labour made available to farmers was substantially increased; special agricultural companies, formed from Home Defence troops, were placed in camps of about 100 men apiece in agricultural areas, and farmers could apply to the camp commandant for soldier labour. At the same time attempts were made to locate soldiers who could plough, and supply them to farmers for the ploughing season. Initially this scheme misfired: out of 12,500 soldiers who claimed to be able to plough, it was found that only about one-eighth could do so, and the rest had to be recalled. A more accurate count was then taken, and finally about 18,000 were released for ploughing. A few thousand more were supplied for general purposes, so that by late in the spring of 1917 there were about 40,000 soldiers

⁹ A. K. Montgomery, *The Maintenance of the Agricultural Labour Supply in England and Wales*, Rome, 1922, pp. 22-3.

on the land.¹⁰ Numbers fell off in the autumn, possibly to as low as 26,000, but were back at the 40,000 level by January 1918.¹¹ From then on growth was rapid, and by late spring there were some 60,000 at work. For the hay and corn harvests, extra men were supplied, and the final figure at the end of the war may have been as high as 84,000 (11 November 1918). There were still 72,000 on the land at the end of December 1918.¹²

In sheer size, soldier labour was the largest single source of replacement labour. Whether it was as efficient as the labour which it replaced is disputed. Since they were drawn from the young adult male population, it might be presumed that soldiers were at least as physically capable as civilian farm workers. This was the position adopted in a comprehensive survey of the farm labour supply by the Agricultural Wages Board during the winter of 1917-18, which concluded that soldiers were as efficient as civilian labourers.¹³ This was an opinion from which many farmers dissented, especially when it seemed to them that the Army had not taken sufficient care to select men with an appropriate background. But in spite of some unfortunate initial experiences, there seems little doubt that, as the Army became more careful in its selection, complaints became less frequent.¹⁴ The soldiers who had been taken for ploughing also benefited from an increasing number of training courses run by the Food Production Department: in all, 4,000 were trained for horse ploughing, 4,000 for tractor ploughing, and some 200 for steam ploughing.¹⁵ As time went on, the soldiers also acquired valuable experience. Although officially subject to recall at short notice in case of emergency, the bulk of the soldiers were in practice permanent members of the farm labour force, and it may be presumed that this

encouraged farmers to pay more attention to training than might otherwise have been the case. Where information is available it suggests that the soldiers were by 1918 a skilled work force; in Kesteven (Lincs.) in January 1918 only 109 out of a total of 957 soldiers were classed as unskilled (usually taken to indicate men without responsibility for animals)—a ratio of 11 per cent, which compares well with the 56 per cent revealed by the 1911 Census of Population.¹⁶ On balance, it seems not unlikely that the average soldier may indeed have become as efficient as the average civilian labourer.

Even if soldier labour eventually became as efficient as civilian labour, it was for most of the war more expensive for the farmer. Soldiers were supplied after the summer of 1915 at rates of pay determined by the War Office, and, until the minimum wage for farm labour came into force after March 1918, War Office rates approximated those of the most skilled farm labourers—those in charge of animals. Thus in 1915 and 1916 Army rates worked out at 24s. per six-day week.¹⁷ This may be compared with an average rate for civilian cattlemen in the winter of 1916-17 of 24s. 2d. per week.¹⁸ Thereafter civilian rates rose faster than Army rates, and the gap was closed in 1918. Yet, until then, the Army was in effect demanding a skilled wage for labour of only average efficiency.

The use of prisoners of war in agriculture was virtually ignored for the greater part of the war, but in 1918 this was radically changed; prisoners were utilized in agriculture on a large scale, especially during the last few months of the war, and agriculture dominated the allocation of prisoner labour.

The first plans for the employment of prisoners in farming date from February 1917, when "a few prisoners" were at work. By June of that year "a considerable number" were working on farms and upon some of the land-drainage schemes operated by the Board of

¹⁰ Middleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-6. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹² Report of the War Cabinet for the year 1918, B.P.P. 1919, xxx, pp. 236-7; Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹³ Agricultural Wages Board, *Report on the Wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture*, 1, B.P.P. 1919, ix, paras. 119-26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, paras. 121, 123.

¹⁵ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-40.

¹⁶ Agricultural Wages Board, *op. cit.*, II, para. 18; *Census of Population, General Report*, p. 113.

¹⁷ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-3.

¹⁸ Average of rates for thirty-eight English and Welsh counties in Agricultural Wages Board, *op. cit.*, II, para. 272.

Agriculture in the eastern counties.¹⁹ But as late as February 1918 agriculture occupied a low priority in the allocation of prisoners, employing only 4,000 out of a working population of 25,000 (16 per cent). Shortly after this agriculture rapidly assumed first priority, and by June was employing 60 per cent of the working population (25,000 out of 42,000). In absolute numbers the peak level of employment was reached in early November, with 30,000 working in agriculture out of a total prisoner work force of 50,000 (60 per cent). During the last months of the war, agriculture completely outweighed the claims of other bodies competing for prisoner labour—chiefly the War Office, Ministry of Munitions, and the Air Ministry.²⁰

Before 1918 the general organization of the prisoners working in the United Kingdom was not conducive to their use in agriculture, since they were located in large camps chiefly in urban areas. When it was decided to supply much greater numbers to agriculture a different scheme was devised: a large number of camps situated in rural areas, each with a much smaller complement of men than had hitherto been customary. In this way a much greater number of farmers could be supplied with labour. This method was adopted from January 1918, and the bulk of prisoners supplied to agriculture came from such camps. By October 1918 there were about 330 of these camps (or "depots") in existence, each with a complement of about eighty men. Although under the control of the War Office the men would be made available to local farmers if suitable arrangements for their supervision could be made. At first this provision proved an impediment to their use, since the War Office insisted that they should be guarded by a British N.C.O. while at work. Such men were, however, in short supply (about one to every 200 prisoners), and so the rule was later amended to permit a wider range of supervisors; a policeman, British farm

worker, or even a prisoner N.C.O. Even more usefully, from the farmer's point of view, it was made permissible for prisoners to be lodged on farms. Up to three prisoners per farm were allowed for minimum periods of two weeks. Thus the time previously occupied in daily travel could be put to good account.²¹

The efficiency of prisoner labour, however, left something to be desired. An inquiry into this matter in the summer of 1918 by the Prisoner of War Employment Committee (which controlled the allocation of prisoners) produced general agreement that it was extremely inefficient. It was not a matter of inferior-quality work, but of slow work. Farmers, camp commandants, and officials of the Food Production Department acknowledged that prisoners had performed almost every possible farm task conscientiously, but at about half of the speed of British civilian workers.²²

There were several reasons for the low productivity of prisoners. Two possible explanations were dismissed by the committee: inexperience and malice. It was observed that prisoners did not work faster as they gained experience, and it was considered that, on the whole, they could not be justifiably accused of idling. But it was noted that there were several objective reasons for their poor performance. Firstly, they were poorly fed during the day. Until July 1918 when farmers were obliged to provide a midday meal, they were forbidden to feed the prisoners; only tea, coffee, cocoa or milk was permitted. (It was noted, however, that when farmers had disobeyed instructions and given some food, productivity had increased appreciably.) Apart from these liquids, the prisoners had only camp rations, 4 ounces of broken biscuit and 1 ounce of cheese to sustain them from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. The committee described this ration as "not really enough to enable a man to perform hard

¹⁹ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-7; *Prisoners of War Employment Committee, First Interim Report, op. cit.*, pt II, Remuneration of prisoners.

²² P.R.O.: Nat. Serv. I/132, L. 1/627, Meetings of 7 June and 21 June 1918, especially evidence of J. Steel, W. P. Theakston, and Lieutenant Parker.

¹⁹ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²⁰ P.R.O.: Ministry of National Service, Nat. Serv. I/132, L. 1/627, *Prisoners of War Employment Committee, First Interim Report*, pt I, App. B(1).

manual work." Secondly, the inadequate supervision also reduced productivity. In the absence of a British N.C.O., or a guard with personality and drive, the prisoners worked largely at their own pace. Thirdly, it was recognized that the prisoners had no incentive to work harder. They were paid either 1d. or 1½d. an hour, and piecework was not usual. Nor was there any provision for buying extra food with the money which they earned.²³

In spite of the low productivity of prisoner labour, the War Office charged farmers for their services at rates approximating to those of civilian British workers. After paying the prisoners the balance was used by the War Office to defray the cost of the scheme. In terms of cost-efficiency to the farmers, prisoners must be rated as the least successful of all the types of labour imported into agriculture during the war.

Considerable effort was expended during the war in attempts to mobilize educated women for work in agriculture. The most successful, and the most novel, example of this was the Women's Land Army, formed in January 1917. For the first time, the government raised a trained, mobile force of women for agricultural work, organized (at least, superficially) on military lines. The experiment made a striking impression on contemporaries, and formed the model for the much larger Land Army of the Second World War. But two cautionary points should be made. Firstly, the W.L.A. did not spring into being fully fledged from the imagination of the Board of Agriculture: its main distinguishing features had already been present in previous organizations. Secondly, the direct importance of the W.L.A. as a source of replacement labour was small. Even at the height of its strength during the last year of the war, it accounted for no more than about 7 per cent of the replacement labour. For the whole war period the figure is about 5 per cent.

²³ P.R.O.: Nat. Serv. I/132, *Notes by the Food Production Department as to the Present System of Employing Prisoners of War in Agricultural Work*, n.d. This report seems to be based on the evidence referred to in n. 22 above.

Prior to the formation of the W.L.A. there can be traced five organizations working towards similar ends. Four of these were private bodies: the National Political League, the Women's Defence Relief Corps, the Women's Legion, and the Women's Farm and Garden Union.²⁴ They all had the common aim of raising the number of women working on the land, and in practice most of their effort went towards recruiting the educated woman. The work of the N.P.L. and of the W.L. was terminated by the Board of Agriculture, which considered that of the former to be "mischievous" and that of the latter to be inefficient.²⁵ The W.D.R.C. survived intact until its work was taken over by the board in 1917. The most successful of the four was the W.F.G.U., which survived throughout the war, although in attenuated form after the beginning of 1916 when the board, drawing on the experience of the W.F.G.U., formed its own organization to undertake similar work. This, the last of the pre-W.L.A. organizations, was the Women's National Land Service Corps. It existed to supply farmers with seasonal female labour (again, of the more educated type), and performed this function throughout the war. However, after the formation of the W.L.A. it was largely directed to the harvesting of flax, in high demand for aircraft fabric, for the remainder of the war.²⁶

In spite of the efforts of the various organizations the results up to the formation of the W.L.A. were not impressive. Even taking the whole war period these organizations garnered no more than about 12,000 recruits (4,000 of whom were flax harvesters).²⁷ Moreover, the majority were untrained seasonal workers. But the essential strengths of the W.L.A.—the

²⁴ Imperial War Museum, LAND IV; P.R.O.: Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, MAF 42/8, 12027/L.3.

²⁵ P.R.O.: MAF 59/1, L. 29047, *Women's County Committees: Organisation of Women's Labour*, p. 20; P.R.O.: MAF 42/8, 12027/L.3, especially the report of Miss Hobbs (17 Oct. 1917).

²⁶ Imperial War Museum, LAND IV, especially the interim, annual, and final reports of the W.N.L.S.C. (Feb. 1916–Nov. 1919).

²⁷ Imperial War Museum, LAND IV, *Annual Report of the W.N.L.S.C. for the Period 1.10.17–30.9.18*, p. 30.

emphasis on *esprit de corps* and a well-educated labour force—had been pioneered.

The aims of the W.L.A. were to supply a full-time, mobile, trained, and disciplined force of women which would be available throughout the year. These were rather different from the aims of previous organizations. The W.L.A. also was distinguished by offering a living minimum wage to its members, and by having a much more elaborate organization. There was, however, a broad similarity between the W.L.A. and the other bodies in the type of recruit, who tended to be middle class, comparatively well educated, and of urban origin.²⁸

The Land Army proved extremely popular on its inception: 45,000 applications for membership were received in the first few months of its existence. Selection standards, however, were high, and only 5,000 of these were recruited.²⁹ After this a period of slow growth set in; by the end of 1917 there were still no more than 7,000 members. It was not until the spring of 1918 that it began to grow more rapidly, but then expansion was rapid; by the late summer it had more than doubled, and reached its maximum working size of 16,000 in September 1918.³⁰

The reasons for this erratic growth are various. The initial concept of the W.L.A. was a limited one; it should be a high-quality, extremely mobile force, capable of giving aid at the most acute points of labour shortage as they developed. Farmers were assured that it would be a small, auxiliary organization. This was a necessary reassurance, since its creation was feared by farmers as the prelude to further conscription of their regular labour force. This limited role was abandoned in the spring of 1918, following the German offensives and the consequent increase in the rate of conscription. A new recruiting campaign for the W.L.A. was begun, the welfare organization was expanded, and the Land Army became, in

Lord Ernle's words, ". . . a cadre capable of indefinite expansion."³¹

If the actual working size of the W.L.A. was comparatively small, this was offset by the high quality of the recruits. The high rejection rate among the first applicants was attributed by Ernle to the high standards of physical fitness required, but there seems little doubt that much attention was also given to the need to maintain a high standard of character and morale, and the result was a highly motivated and comparatively well-educated labour force.³²

The Land Army morale was assisted with material advantages not enjoyed by previous organizations. The most important was a minimum wage. Throughout the war this was maintained at a level inferior to that of the civilian male labourer, but above that of the village woman. Thus in the spring of 1918, when a minimum wage of 25s. per week for adult male civilians was being instituted, the W.L.A. minimum was 20s., and the average rate for village women was reckoned as 18s.³³ In addition, should she become unemployed through no fault of her own, the Land Army woman would receive free board and lodging for up to four weeks. A complete uniform and footwear were provided free of charge, as was free rail travel when changing employment.³⁴

It was especially necessary to maintain morale, since the calibre and attitude of the recruit were the main determinant of the amount and quality of work performed. In spite of its name and uniform, members were not subject to military discipline. Rules were plentiful but there was no sanction which could be imposed if they were breached, short of dismissal. Although members undertook to serve for periods of six months or a year, they were in practice free to leave at any time.³⁵ Self-discipline seems to have been the only effective form of discipline, and on the whole it

²⁸ Ernle, *The Land and its People*, ch. vii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³⁰ Imperial War Museum, LAND V, F.7; Ernle, *The Land and its People*, p. 128. V. Sackville-West, *The Women's Land Army*, 1944, p. 9, refers to a maximum enrolment of 23,000 in 1918, but this is unconfirmed.

³¹ Ernle, *The Land and its People*, pp. 128-9, 178, 186.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 128; P.R.O.: MAF 42/8, 33867, p. 3.

³³ Agricultural Wages Board, *op. cit.*, I, para. 329; Ernle, *The Land and its People*, p. 184.

³⁴ Imperial War Museum, LAND V, *W.L.A. Handbook*, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

worked well. Indiscipline seems to have been a minor problem, and morale was high except for a lean period in late 1917 when it was felt that farmers did not appreciate the services of the Land Army.³⁶

The effectiveness of the Land Army is not in doubt. Numerous testimonies from farmers show that a high opinion was held of its work. These are perhaps best summed up in the words of a Northamptonshire farmer, who described the Land Army women as "plucky, patriotic and keen."³⁷ There are also more objective reasons for this belief. The Land Army women had all undergone at least one month's training (later extended to six weeks), and, although it was conceded that this period was inadequate to do more than train the muscles, it meant that, at least formally, the Land Army women were the most highly trained of all the types of replacement labour. The only extant survey of W.L.A. occupations, for August 1918, shows that of 13,000 recruits in the sample about 6,000 were engaged in milking—one of the most skilled tasks on the farm.³⁸ In view of the fact that they were paid less than the civilian male labourer, the Land Army women must be reckoned from the farmer's point of view to be at least as cost-effective as his regular labour.

The largest source of non-governmental replacement labour was the village woman (although government exhortation played some part in inducing village women to take up farm work). No precise tally of the numbers involved is available. The War Cabinet reported that in 1917 there were 270,000 women working on the land, and 300,000 in 1918. The reports assumed that before the war the number of women employed on the land was 90,000, so that an increased employment of 180,000 in 1917 and 210,000 in 1918 is implied.³⁹ These figures, the only national ones available, have necessarily had to form the basis for the calculations in the Appendix, and it should be

noted that there are potential sources of error which make it advisable to treat them with caution.

First, there is no agreement on the size of the pre-war female labour force. A subcommittee of the Board of Agriculture, considering this problem in 1919, commented: "There is not one set of these figures which can be reconciled with another. . ." The figures ranged from 244,000 (1908 Census of Production) to 57,000 (1911 Census of Population), depending on the extent to which farmers' wives and other female relatives are included in the agricultural work force.⁴⁰

Second, official records covered only women who were induced by the government to work in agriculture and omitted those who found work privately. Notwithstanding this, the War Cabinet figures purport to include all women engaged in agriculture. The information on which the War Cabinet based its estimates came from the local Labour Exchanges and the Women's Organizers of the Food Production Department. While the latter would have known how many women were officially registered, they had no means of knowing how many women found work privately, while the Labour Exchanges were habitually ignored by farmers, even in war time.⁴¹ The suspicion must remain that a large part of the War Cabinet's figures were based on guess-work.

Having accepted (with reservations) the War Cabinet estimates as a starting-point, the next problem is to determine how much of the female work force was employed on a part-time basis. There is evidence to show that only a small proportion of the women allegedly at work on the land were actually so employed at any one time. Thus in 1916, the Board of Agriculture reported that 140,000 women had been officially registered for agricultural work, and that 72,000 of them had been issued with arm-bands, which were issued on completion of one

³⁶ Ernle, *The Land and its People*, pp. 177-8.

³⁷ Agricultural Wages Board, *op. cit.*, 1, para. 145.

³⁸ Ernle, *The Land and its People*, pp. 182-3.

³⁹ *Report of the War Cabinet for 1917*, B.P.P. 1918, XIV, p. 161; *Report of the War Cabinet for 1918*, B.P.P. 1919, xxx, p. 237.

⁴⁰ Board of Agriculture, *Report of the Sub-Committee Appointed to Consider the Employment of Women in Agriculture in England and Wales*, 1919, p. 29.

⁴¹ P.R.O.: MAF 42/8, *Report of the Food Production Department (England and Wales) for the Period up to the 1st June 1918 (from 19 Feb. 1917)*, p. 10.

month's work on the land.⁴² But a tally of the numbers actually at work in August 1916, also carried out by the Board of Agriculture, showed only 28,767 at work.⁴³ In July 1918, when according to the War Cabinet an extra 200,000 women should have been at work on the land, a survey by the Board of Trade (the body responsible at that time for questions concerning agricultural labour) could find only 30,000 permanent, and 15,000 temporary workers.⁴⁴ On balance, it seems not unreasonable to assume that four-fifths of the women cited by the War Cabinet were part-timers, and the War Cabinet figures have been scaled down accordingly.

Whether the village woman was a satisfactory labourer is difficult to say. The Board of Agriculture considered that on the whole village women were satisfactory, but it is not difficult to find instances of dissatisfaction amongst farmers, especially when comparing the village woman with the educated woman. Thus a farmer in south-west England commented in July 1917:

The countrywoman, even if she condescends to work, is no earthly use. The educated girl, with a little patience, makes an invaluable worker.⁴⁵

This attitude may have had some basis. Village women had not been engaged in field work on a substantial scale for several decades. The sole major exception to this was Northumberland, where it was still customary for farmers to hire married couples to undertake jointly the whole range of farm operations (the so-called "double hind" system). A national inquiry in 1918 by the Agricultural Wages Board into the whole question of agricultural

⁴² I. O. Andrews and M. A. Hobbs, *Economic Effects of the War upon Women and Children in Great Britain*, New York, 1920, p. 71.

⁴³ P.R.O.: MAF 59/1, L. 29369, *Work of the Women's War Agricultural Committees for the Year Ending August 1916*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Board of Trade, *Report on the State of Employment in all Occupations in the United Kingdom in July 1918*, 1918, pp. 11, 24.

⁴⁵ Board of Trade, *Report on the State of Employment in Agriculture in Great Britain at the End of July 1918*, 1918, p. 5.

labour saw fit to mention women's work as widespread in only two other counties—Lincolnshire (Holland) and Oxfordshire. In other parts of England and Wales women were extensively employed in yard and barn work, but those concerned were usually members of the farmers' families; the use of outside women was the exception rather than the rule.⁴⁶ Thus the rural females who were not members of farm families did not have the necessary skills which could be called upon in war time. Nor were such skills imparted during the war: although training centres did exist, some run by the Board of Agriculture, some by county authorities, and some by private citizens, they had few pupils. In addition there were financial disincentives; subsistence allowances whilst training were rare, some centres even charged tuition fees, and relatively few scholarships existed; in the year 1916-17 only 426 scholarships for women were provided by the Board of Agriculture.⁴⁷ The board's major training effort was reserved for the Women's Land Army in 1917 and 1918; the relatively unskilled village woman was ignored.

Of the remaining miscellaneous categories of replacement labour the largest group was that of schoolchildren. From the earliest months of the war farmers demanded the co-operation of local education authorities in releasing children from the obligation to attend school so that they might be employed in agriculture. It was legally open for any child to be withdrawn from school attendance in the case of sickness "or any other unavoidable cause." It was also permissible for any education authority to pass a by-law stating that employment in a specified occupation might constitute such an unavoidable cause in time of national emergency.⁴⁸ Many authorities rapidly passed such by-laws with a view to enabling children to work in agriculture during school terms: by the autumn of 1916 fifty-seven authorities had

⁴⁶ Agricultural Wages Board, *op. cit.*, 1, paras. 132, 138.

⁴⁷ P.R.O.: MAF 59/1.

⁴⁸ Board of Education, *Correspondence Relating to School Attendance between the Board of Education and Certain Local Education Authorities, since the Outbreak of War*, B.P.P., 1914-16, L, pp. 7, 11.

done so. At that time the maximum number of children recorded as exempt from school for agricultural employment is recorded—some 15,000.⁴⁹ Returns of the numbers involved apparently ceased after this time, but the system continued in existence and there is no indication that the number declined. There seems little doubt that this form of labour was extremely low-cost to the farmer. No minimum rates of pay were laid down. The Board of Education confined itself to suggesting to education authorities that, should the proposed employment not pay more than 6s. a week for a child under thirteen years of age, it might be better for the child to remain at school.⁵⁰

In addition to the children exempted from school attendance there was also of course the labour of children employed during the school holidays. While it seems likely that this increased during the war it has gone largely unrecorded, with the exception of camps of public-school boys formed to assist with the 1917 and 1918 harvests. The numbers involved were, however, comparatively small: 5,000 in 1917 and 15,000 in 1918.⁵¹

The last type of miscellaneous labour of any noteworthy size is that of the War Agricultural Volunteers. This body was formed by the government in May 1918, shortly after the upper age limit for conscription had been raised from forty-five to fifty-one years. The scheme permitted men aged forty-five years and above, who would otherwise be liable for service in the Forces, to elect to work in agriculture instead. The scheme also embraced men who, although under forty-five, were not fit enough for active service (although still fit enough to join the Forces). Most of the men who entered the W.A.V. had previously been employed in gardening; at its peak the W.A.V. had a strength of about 4,000.⁵²

⁴⁹ Board of Education, *School Attendance and Employment in Agriculture*, B.P.P. 1914-16, L, Cd. 7881, pp. 5, 9; Cd. 7932, pp. 4-5; B.P.P. 1916, xxii, Cd. 8171, p. 4; Cd. 8202, pp. 3-4; Cd. 8302, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁰ Board of Education, *Report of the Board of Education for 1914-15*, B.P.P. 1914-16, xviii, p. 20.

⁵¹ Ernle, *The Land and its People*, p. 129.

⁵² *Report of the War Cabinet for 1918*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

Two other types of labour, upon which high hopes had been placed, proved disappointing. Few of the large number of Belgian refugees had any farming experience. Of the 100,000 or so who arrived in England, 23,907 were occupationally classified; it was found that only 654 had previously been engaged in agriculture. Montgomery, who gives this information, adds that "a few" entered agriculture, but gives no details.⁵³

Similarly, most of the alien citizens interned seem to have been reluctant to take up farm work. One source states that in May 1917 500 were employed on farms, but this is unconfirmed.⁵⁴ The sole instance which has been traced is the use of twenty aliens in Lincolnshire in January 1918.⁵⁵

III

There are two main questions raised by a consideration of the history of wartime labour replacement in agriculture. First, why was so much of this labour officially supplied? Second, why was little effective opposition to this process shown by the existing labour force?

The answers to the first question lie in the nature of the agricultural industry, and in the nature and timing of policy changes. In industrial economies agricultural incomes per head are usually lower than industrial incomes.⁵⁶ On the eve of the First World War British agriculture was a low-wage industry. Since the government largely left the agricultural industry to the free play of market forces for the first two years of the war, and since other forms of employment proved attractive to the agricultural worker, by the end of 1916 farming, as well as still being a low-wage industry, suffered from a greater degree of labour shortage than previously. But with the inauguration of the food production campaign in January 1917 policy suddenly changed. Alone among the

⁵³ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49. Ernle, *The Land and its People*, p. 128, states that "under 2,000" were engaged in agriculture.

⁵⁵ Agricultural Wages Board, *op. cit.*, II, para. 18.

⁵⁶ J. R. Bellerby, *Agriculture and Industry: Relative Income*, 1956.

major industries agriculture was now required to expand its output, after two years of growing shortage of labour and other factors of production had barely permitted the pre-war level of output to be maintained.⁵⁷ The labour force would clearly have to be expanded, but market mechanisms would have been inadequate for the purpose. The continuing gap between agricultural and industrial earnings meant that very large wage increases would have to be offered to draw off labour from non-agricultural occupations. Also, by this time the degree of general labour shortage was becoming marked, so that even if farm wages were to rise sharply the necessary labour might not have been forthcoming. And if wages had risen thus, and labour had shown its willingness to move into agriculture, there was still the problem of lack of time; in January 1917 only a few months remained before the harvest had to be sown. The only certain way in which adequate labour could be provided for the food production campaign of 1917 and 1918 was for the government to play a far larger role in directly supplying labour than it had so far done. Thus the officially supplied labour force grew during 1917 and was further expanded in 1918, partly as compensation for the renewed conscription of farm workers which took place during the spring.

If the timing of the campaign made government intervention in the supply of labour necessary it also made it more feasible, since it was only after the first two years of the war that the government had sufficient supplies of labour under its control which it felt able to use in agriculture. The removal of fear of a German invasion as a consequence of the Battle of Jutland (30-31 May 1916) left the Army free to deploy its Home Defence forces on other tasks, while the sharp rise in 1918 in the numbers of prisoners available swelled the ranks of potential farm labourers.

The second striking feature of labour replacement—the lack of opposition from the

existing labour force—presents a sharp contrast with other industries, where stronger trade unions had erected barriers to entry. In the case of munitions, for example, much negotiation was necessary before the trade unions agreed to “dilution” by unskilled labour from outside the industry. Such barriers were not in evidence in the case of agriculture. The main reason for this is simply that agricultural trade unions were comparatively weak before the war, and in spite of the enhanced degree of labour shortage during the war did not improve their position before the government began to supply replacement labour in large quantities.

Agricultural trade unionism, having virtually expired since the heyday of Joseph Arch's union in the 1870's, had begun to revive only in the early twentieth century. The one purely agricultural union, the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, founded in Norfolk in 1906, had about 12,000 members in 1914. The only other union with a substantial number of farm workers amongst its members was the Workers' Union, founded in 1896. Although the number of farm workers in the union is not known, it was estimated to have 250 purely agricultural branches in the summer of 1914.⁵⁸ During the war, the National's membership may have risen to about 16,000 by the end of 1916, but any increased influence which this may have brought was offset by a conflict within the leadership over whether to resist government labour importation or not. This conflict was not resolved before the food production campaign began.⁵⁹ The number of agricultural branches in the Workers' Union fell sharply to about forty in late 1916 owing to the recruitment of members and organizers (although the actual drop in membership is again unknown). The influence of both unions, especially the National, revived with the food production campaign, especially during 1918, when they

⁵⁸ Estimates of the strengths of the two unions before and during the war are discussed by R. Hyman, *The Workers' Union 1898-1929*, unpubl. D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1968, pp. 269-70.

⁵⁹ M. Madden, *The National Union of Agricultural Workers 1906-1956*, unpubl. B.Litt. thesis, Oxford, 1956, pp. 36-7.

⁵⁷ P. E. Dewey, 'Agricultural Labour Supply in England and Wales during the First World War', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxviii, 1975, p. 105.

were installed as a permanent part of the wage-negotiation machinery. This recognition led to an enormous rise in membership, but came too late to stiffen opposition to government labour importation.

In spite of the low level of unionization in agriculture before the war, it might have been expected that some more effective protest would be made at wartime labour importation. The War Cabinet was certainly concerned at the possibility; it was discussed on 13 July 1917, and it was decided that the existing system of loaning soldiers to agriculture should be continued "until the question of industrial conscription should be raised."⁶⁰ The question, however, never was effectively raised. This was almost certainly due mainly to limited unionization, but there were other factors at work: the policy split in the National cited above; a feeling that food production was more important than sectoral advantage; and, in 1918, the undercutting of potential unrest by the inauguration of the minimum wage.

⁶⁰ P.R.O.: CAB 23/3, 184 (12).

Thus farming provides a striking contrast to the wartime labour history of most civilian industries. Government-controlled labour was imported in large quantities, with little effective opposition. The main reason for intervention on this scale was the official resuscitation of agriculture, at a time when free market mechanisms would have been inadequate to meet the increased demand for labour. The weakness of the agricultural trade unions, plus the large force of labour directly under government control, allowed such intervention to succeed. Without such intervention it might have been expected that the sudden rise in demand for agricultural labour after 1916 would have led to a more rapid rise in agricultural than in industrial wages. This did not take place: the gap between agricultural and industrial incomes was as great at the end of the war as at the beginning.⁶¹ It was indeed, as Lord Ernle remarked, a case of "blackleg labour on a massive scale."

⁶¹ A. L. Bowley, *Prices and Wages in the United Kingdom, 1914-1920, 1921*, pp. 105-6.

APPENDIX

Labour Supply and Replacement in Agriculture, 1915-18

TABLE I
TOTAL AGRICULTURAL LABOUR SUPPLY, 1908 AND 1915-18
(*'000 man-units*)

	1908	1915	1916	1917	1918
Conventional labour (As per cent)	1,318 (100)	1,231 (93)	1,195 (91)	1,173 (89)	1,172 (89)
Replacement labour (As per cent)	—	15 (1)	30 (2)	86 (6)	114 (8)
Totals (As per cent)	1,318 (100)	1,246 (94)	1,225 (93)	1,259 (95)	1,286 (97)

TABLE II
LABOUR REPLACEMENT IN AGRICULTURE, 1915-18
(*'000 man-units*)

	1915	1916	1917	1918	1915-18 Totals	As per cent
<i>Official labour:</i>						
Soldiers	11	14	40	45	110	45
Prisoners of war	0	0	3	14	17	7
Women's Land Army	0	0	3	8	11	5
<i>Other labour:</i>						
Village women	0	6	25	30	61	25
Miscellaneous	4	10	15	17	46	18
Totals	15	30	86	114	245	100

Source: P. E. Dewey, 'Agricultural Labour Supply in England and Wales during the First World War', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxviii, 1975, p. 104.

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