

# Twentieth-Century Farm Servants: The Horselads of the East Riding of Yorkshire

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## Abstract

By the 1920s, the East Riding of Yorkshire was the last arable county in England where the hiring of single youths on yearly contracts as living-in farm servants was unquestioned and universal. Mostly by oral history it has been possible to analyse this traditional way of life in depth, and particularly to get the servants' own views on it. As a very practical way of running a horse-powered farm, it offered distinct economic advantages to both farmer and servant as long as labour was relatively short. It also preserved many pre-industrial attitudes to work and management, and was integrated into the wider life of the community. This study of adaptation to change shows that mechanization did not require a break with the past, and that the degraded position of nineteenth-century servants in the south is no guide to the way the system had run before the labour market collapsed there.

UNTIL the nineteenth century, the wage-earning farm labour force of much of England contained large numbers of farm servants as well as day labourers. In recent years both agricultural and demographic historians have become increasingly aware that this division was not just a matter of different ways of hiring workers. If we exclude the far northern counties, English farm servants were overwhelmingly unmarried, young, and resident in their employers' houses. The hiring of servants radically reshaped the households of those involved in the system and was a determining factor in creating the typical pre-industrial pattern of delayed marriage. It provided a purpose-built bridge from childhood to adulthood, exactly tailored for a society built around families rather than individuals. It gave farmers a wholly reliable core around which to shape their labour force according to the needs of the seasons, at a time when many adults did not wish to be committed to full-time work. Little detailed work has been done on investigating this group,<sup>1</sup> and surviving

seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents do not make it easy to discover very much about their lives.

This is especially true of the arable counties of England, where few servants were hired after the middle of the last century. In the south-east, indeed, they are found only in localized pockets after the Napoleonic Wars. It is rarely realized that in the East Riding of Yorkshire and the neighbouring parts of surrounding counties, the system continued to flourish well into this century. Many people still alive today began work as farm servants, with a few being hired as late as the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Servants continued to be generally hired throughout the north in fact, but the East Riding was the only arable county to continue hiring single farm servants as a universal and essential element of its labour force,<sup>3</sup> and its entire rural society was distinguished by it. With one foot firmly in the high-wage north, and the other just as firmly in the

<sup>1</sup> Virtually the only book is Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England*, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> I Megginson, *Mud on my Doorstep*, Beverley, 1987, pp 59–60.

<sup>3</sup> The system was not, of course, confined within exact county boundaries, but its coverage extended into neighbouring counties rather than including them. Its universality quickly diminished outside the county.

arable east, as Map 1 shows, a unique overlap existed here. As late as the 1920s, up to half the workers on farms were servants. Most working-class boys<sup>4</sup> had no other expectation than that of spending their adolescent years in farmhouses. The personal testimony of these survivors, supplemented and confirmed by newspaper reports and more conventional sources, allows a remarkably whole and human picture of the system to be put together.<sup>5</sup>

Because there was this remarkable continuity between the distant and recent past in the county, many of the most distinctive features of early modern servantry could still be seen in action in this century. More importantly, their underlying rationale can be recovered and we can see why some puzzling and even, on the surface, obnoxious aspects of the system evolved into the form they did. It could be argued that the very fact of survival marked the area out as distinctive, but it can be proved that the East Riding felt all the forces that led to wholesale abandonment elsewhere. It was the county's position on the fringe of the industrial north, and its own potential for taking advantage of the opportunities this offered to farming, that kept the system alive and dynamic. There was a continuing need for servants due to the high demand for labour within the county. In contrast, many servants further south, and they are known to have existed in some localities

well into the nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> can be shown to have survived as mere victims of the exploitation of certain features of their contracts. This manifestly distorted the way the system worked, leaving men like Joseph Arch deeply hostile because of the near slavery that it could produce.<sup>7</sup> The East Riding system, in contrast, depended on the mutual willingness of farmers and servants to be bound by the traditional constraints of yearly hiring, right to the end. Both sides had rights and duties, where further south the system survived mainly as a prison for those workers who could not escape, because of a labour surplus that left them powerless.

The system largely collapsed in the 1930s, and the reasons for its sudden decline from automatic acceptance to a fragmented and increasingly incoherent relic of a past era are worthy of study. They cast light on the general abandonment a century before, for both took place in the atmosphere of a post-war depression and a rising tide of rural unemployment. They also allow us to study an essentially pre-industrial system in direct conflict with twentieth-century consumerism and individuality. The use of oral history to examine a vanished rural way of life inevitably suggests an involvement with folklore which may cause some historians to doubt the value of the conclusions. However, if we look behind the label and see it as an exercise in unravelling a sub-culture where social and economic spheres have no clear boundaries, we can come to see more clearly the role of customary methods of organization in maintaining a practical way of life, avoiding the trap of looking only at those customs which stand out precisely because they have outlived their original purpose and now survive only

<sup>4</sup> Girls were also hired to live in, but with significant differences. There is no room to discuss their experiences here.

<sup>5</sup> The oral evidence consists of twenty-nine tapes, together with a small number of records of untaped interviews, collected from twenty-six people who took part in the farm servant system in their youth. They were recorded between 1973 and 1975 for my PhD thesis, 'Farming with Horses in the East Riding of Yorkshire: Some Aspects of Recent Agricultural History', (unpublished, Leeds University, 1989). A slightly shortened version was published, as *Amongst Farm Horses: The Horselads of East Yorkshire*, Stroud, 1991, and details on the contributors will be found there. Considerations of length preclude any extensive use of direct quotation in this article, but the whole direction of my conclusions was determined by the oral evidence. Specific points are supported by reference to the tape number and side in the author's collection. The tapes will soon be lodged with the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at Sheffield University.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, B Short, 'The Decline of Living-in Servants in the Transition to Capitalist Farming, a Critique of the Sussex Evidence', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, CXXII 1984, 147-64.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Arch's statements in *Evidence to the Rich Commission*, PP 1882, XIV pp 127-8, q 60, 227 and p 140, q 60, 564.

[illegible]

Terms of employment for farm horsemen in England, 1902, and the extent of living in, 1907

- ← (3.0) Percentage of farmworkers living in and paid yearly  
 ← (1.5) Percentage of farmworkers living in and paid weekly  
 ← (n) Negligible numbers, but higher than zero, for either category

as rituals.<sup>8</sup> There was never any question in the descriptions of this system but that it was there to do a job: to get the farm horses fed, cared for, and worked at a profit for the farmers.

## I

Male East Riding servants were all hired on yearly contracts to live in, receiving board and lodging as a substantial part of their wages.<sup>9</sup> Apart from a few bachelors and widowers, they were therefore boys and young, single men. They entered service on leaving school, usually aged thirteen,<sup>10</sup> and at this point their keep formed virtually the whole of their wage. They gave it up on marriage in their middle or late twenties and then usually took jobs as farm labourers, on terms little different to any contemporary manual worker's, or else left farming altogether. The only alternative within farming was to become one of the married shepherds, *beastmen*, or foremen, who were in charge of the sheep, cattle, and horses respectively. Shepherds and beastmen would have worked with sheep and cattle before marriage and they might now have sole charge of the animals in their care, for they were specialists. The foreman, on the other hand, was responsible for everything else on the farm and so, despite being head horseman, he was only able to exercise a supervisory responsibility over the horses in normal times. The bulk of the servants were employed to work under him, caring for four horses each, or six with another servant to help them.<sup>11</sup> To use them in this way, mostly as *horselads* (as they were

known), but also as single shepherds and beastmen, as their assistants, and in a few cases as single farm foremen, was logical because their contracts made them available for the regular long hours that caring for animals required, and for any emergencies that might arise.

With over 26,000 agricultural horses and brood mares in the county before 1914,<sup>12</sup> large numbers of horselads were required, especially compared to the more pastoral counties of the rest of the north. There most servants were hired in ones and twos onto family farms, but the East Riding was a county dominated by large farms. In 1919, 37 per cent were over 300 acres, 11 per cent more than the national average and one of the highest figures for arable counties.<sup>13</sup> Wolds farms, on the range of chalk hills that cuts the county in two, were the largest and commonly contained between 500 and 1000 acres. Here the lads formed substantial groups, sometimes numbering over a dozen.

The labourers, in contrast, 'hadn't much to do with the horses . . . They got their orders every morning: "Well, they want some help in the sheepfold," or, "You help the beastman," or otherwise they'd send them to hedge,'<sup>14</sup> recalled Mr Johnson. They were set to work at anything which was pressing, including fieldwork that did not require horses. Most farms hired enough horselads to manage all the horsework even at peak times like ploughing, so there was no need for labourers to take horses unless a lad was ill or they themselves needed one, to cart away hedging refuse for instance. There was however no question of them being less skilled than the horselads, for they would all have been horselads themselves. In 1919 an official investigator, concerned that the title might mislead his readers, explained

<sup>8</sup> E Gutch, *Examples of Printed Folk-lore Concerning the East Riding of Yorkshire*, 1911, County Folklore Series, vol 6, contains a comment in the preface on the sparsity of obvious folk material in the county.

<sup>9</sup> For the youngest boys, most of their pay was in kind, with only a few pounds in cash. For the eldest, they themselves regarded it as an equal division, taking one year with another.

<sup>10</sup> Despite an official school leaving age of fourteen, anyone who passed an examination could leave a year earlier, and a variant of the half-time system could allow a further three months' reduction in the age. Tape 5/1 and see E and R Frow, *A Survey of the Half-Time System in Education*, Manchester, 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Tape 5/2.

<sup>12</sup> Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Agricultural Statistics*, 1914, 1915, Table 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Report on the Wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture*, 1, General Report, PP 1919, IX, p 5.

<sup>14</sup> Tape 5/1.

that, 'in the East Riding the ordinary labourer is a highly-skilled man, who can do any work on a farm . . . He comes really in the class of "First Class Agricultural Labourer" . . . [and] is considered to compare favourably with any farmworker.'<sup>15</sup> Harvest was virtually the only time the two groups merged together, so distinctive were their separate functions. Each farmer could therefore fine tune his labour force to his own particular requirements by a careful consideration of costs, experience, ability, strength, and convenience. Boys could be hired very cheaply, but they lacked strength and skill. A top horselad's wage, generally reckoned to be paid half in cash and half in board and lodging, was comparable to a labourer's, and while an older labourer might not have a youngster's speed and strength, his experience and skill could counterbalance this. It was common for servants of all types to equal the number of labourers.

The 1911 Census figures clearly reflect this idiosyncratic system, even though they are distorted by an assumption that labourers were a residual group beneath a skilled élite of horsemen, shepherds, and cowmen. 3954 horsemen were returned, but younger horselads with mixed duties were certainly included among the 6499 not distinguished, as were the substantial number of casual labourers who preferred to work regularly for no-one. Figure 1 compares the age structures of both groups for counties selected to represent different farming regions and social systems, and in all cases any statistical tendency to distortion would mask differences between counties, not exaggerate them. Taking the age of twenty-five as the nearest approximation to the age of marriage<sup>16</sup> that the figures will allow, the East Riding had by far the fewest single

labourers and the county's horsemen are clearly shown to be the youngest. The contrast is greatest with Suffolk, the county with the most similar agriculture. An East Riding horseman was most likely to be seventeen in 1911 and only 15 per cent were over twenty-five, but in Suffolk he would be between twenty-five and thirty-four, and only 19 per cent were below twenty-five years old.<sup>17</sup>

The effects can also be seen in Map 2, based on a 1907 Board of Trade enquiry into farm wages, which found that a greater East Riding, which here included the other two Yorkshire ridings, Derbyshire, and parts of northern Lincolnshire, was the only area of England paying horsemen less than labourers.<sup>18</sup> Horsemen usually received a premium rate of pay because good horses were the backbone of the arable farm. They needed long hours of skilled attention quite apart from the hours put in in the fields. Here, however, boys sometimes went straight from school into caring for horses. Then, after building up experience for twelve years or more, they ceased to have anything to do with them. The key to this puzzling approach was the foreman. He provided the skills and long experience needed to care for sick horses, he foaled the mares, and then broke in the foals, and he kept a constant, if unobtrusive eye on the stables. The large farms all had foremen in this century, usually as a married *hind* living on the farm in a house provided for him. It might even be the old farmhouse where the farmer had moved into something better. The farms without foremen were usually the family farms, which existed in the county but which were also those without much hired labour. From a farmworker's point of view, Mr Baines said, 'They were pretty well-to-do, t'bosses, and you hardly

<sup>15</sup> *Report on the Wages, II, Reports of Investigators*, PP 1519, IX, p 383.

<sup>16</sup> The figures in the relevant tables are gathered in five and ten year groups and in 1921, for instance, under 20 per cent of males were married before reaching twenty-five, but over 50 per cent were married by thirty, *Census of England and Wales, Yorkshire, 1921*, 1922, p 177.

<sup>17</sup> See Fig 1 for source.

<sup>18</sup> *Report on the Earnings and Hours of Labour of Workpeople in the United Kingdom, V, Agriculture in 1907*, PP 1910, LXXXIV, pp 6-13.

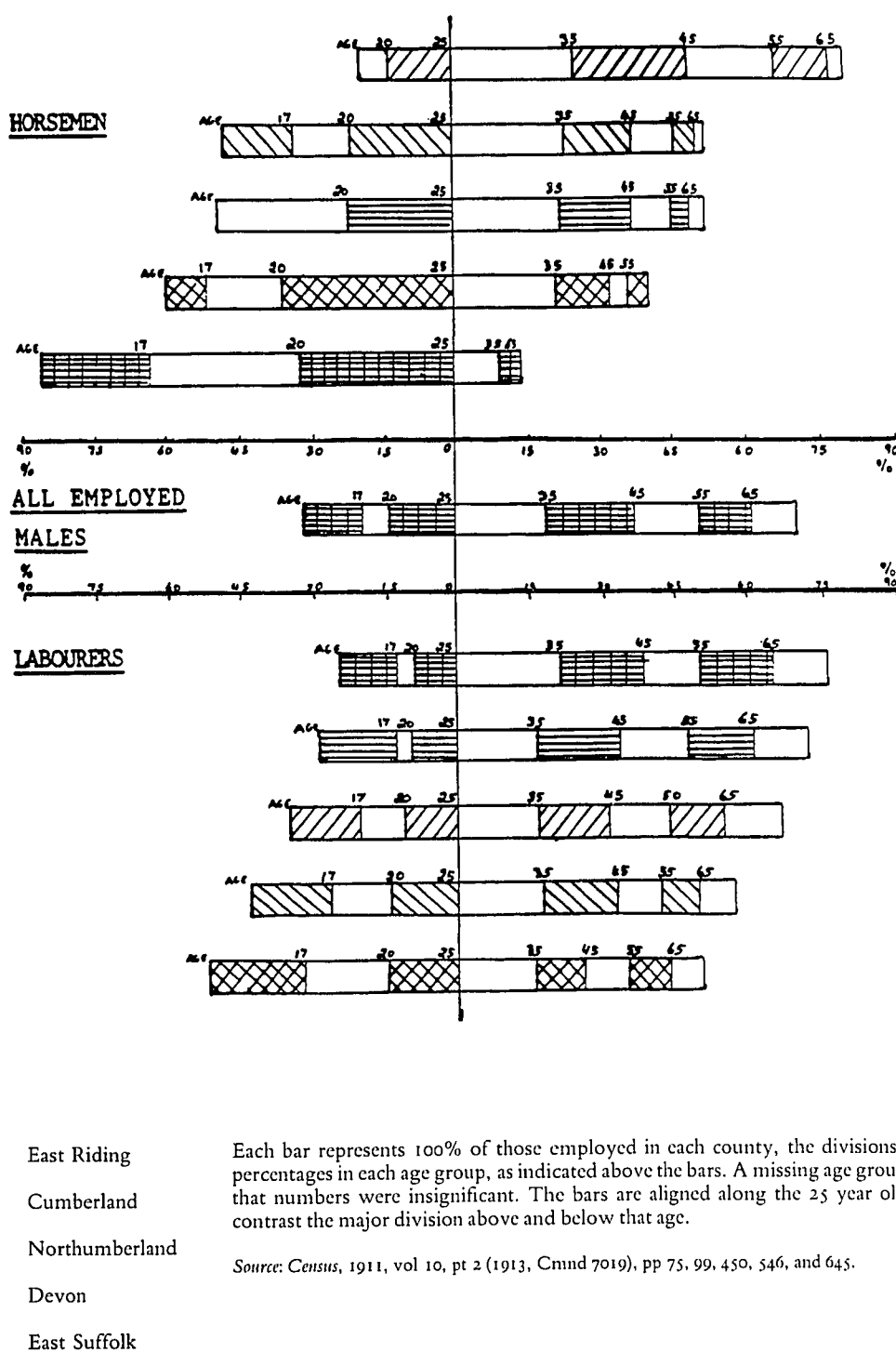
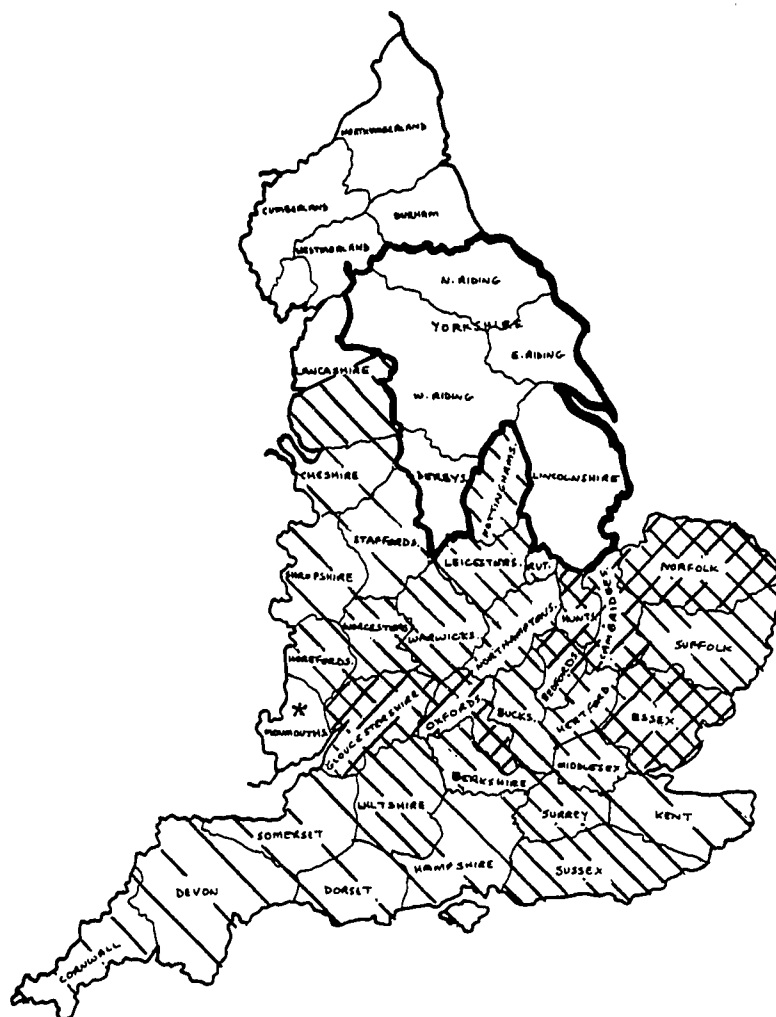


FIGURE I

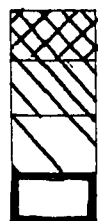
The age distribution of horsemen and labourers on farms in selected counties of England, 1907



MAP 2

Pay differentials between horsemen and labourers on farms in England, 1907

KEY



Horsemen receive 2s or more per week above labourers' earnings

Horsemen receive 1s to 1s 11d per week above labourers' earnings

Horsemen receive 1d to 11d per week above labourers' earnings

Horsemen receive less than labourers

\* no figures available

NB The northern counties' figures cannot be analysed in this manner.

Labourers' earnings include all forms of payment and are adjusted so that they are based on a standard week.

Source: *Earnings and Hours*, pp 6-13.

saw your bosses: very rare. Your foreman was your main man.'<sup>19</sup>

The foreman often had to be a 'good managing man',<sup>20</sup> as Mr Johnson confirmed:

One place I was at, the farmer lived . . . at Speeton which was about [twelve miles] off and he only really came once a month. Well, I'd to use my own judgement, and then as regards cropping . . . we'd maybe have a bit of a talk . . . But the next place I was at . . . he used to tell me, like, and that was all there was about it . . . Then it was left to the foreman to do, see, like working and that.<sup>21</sup>

They had no control over the shepherds or the beastmen and they were expected to join in the work themselves when they were needed, so they were not farm managers. Their duties, however, including the control of the labourers, made them far more than head horsemen. If they were hinds, they boarded all the servants, including those who worked among the stock. They were paid by the farmer for doing so and acted as his proxy. The farm servants' contracts ran from one Old Martinmas Day (23 November) to the next. They were unwritten and based on local custom, and no amount of notice could break them on either side. At the end of the year, unless a new contract had been agreed, both sides were automatically free to negotiate with anyone they liked. This usually happened at the hiring fairs which were held in all market towns, and in some smaller centres as well, as shown in Map 3. Bargains were sealed by the payment of a *fastening penny* or *fest* and once it had changed hands, 'if you left during the year, well it was up to your employer whether he paid you any money or he didn't. And he couldn't get out of it because it was a contract',<sup>22</sup> said Mr Johnson. The entire contract had to be completed before any cash was due to be paid. Farmers often advanced small subs during the year, but there was no obligation to do so. If

either side broke the contract, magistrates or judges had special powers to enforce it, or else set it aside, either in a police court or a county court. They could also award small damages to the injured party. These special hearings were swift, cheap, relatively informal, and could only be brought during the term of the broken contract. The servant could claim back wages earned up to a dispute if a farmer broke the contract, but a farmer could never recover his outlay on board and lodging.

Servants effectively sold their labour for a year at a time, in advance, and they were then at their employer's disposal, within bounds set by reason and customary practice. They received no overtime, harvest money, or customary tips, but they were never put on piecework either, and their pay could not be varied because work was short, or even if they had an accident or became ill. Before 1914 their duties involved rising at four o'clock in the morning and either caring for or working the horse until about eight or nine in the evening, with little time off except that actually spent eating or dressing. The very term farm servant, or the common nickname of *farmer's joskin* (a knee-band for tying trousers up), denotes a relationship much tighter than that between a labourer and an employer. They could be asked to work at any time of the day or night when circumstances demanded it. The only exception was Sunday, which was sacrosanct apart from the necessary care of the horses.

Servants generally worried more about the difficulty of leaving a job they did not like than any possibility of being sacked. Mr Fisher remembered that 'you had to do summat daft, or summat like that. As long as you did somewhere near a day's work . . . you couldn't get away'.<sup>23</sup> If they decided they had to leave they usually ran away, an evocative phrase in itself. If it happened within a week or so, most farmers tolerated

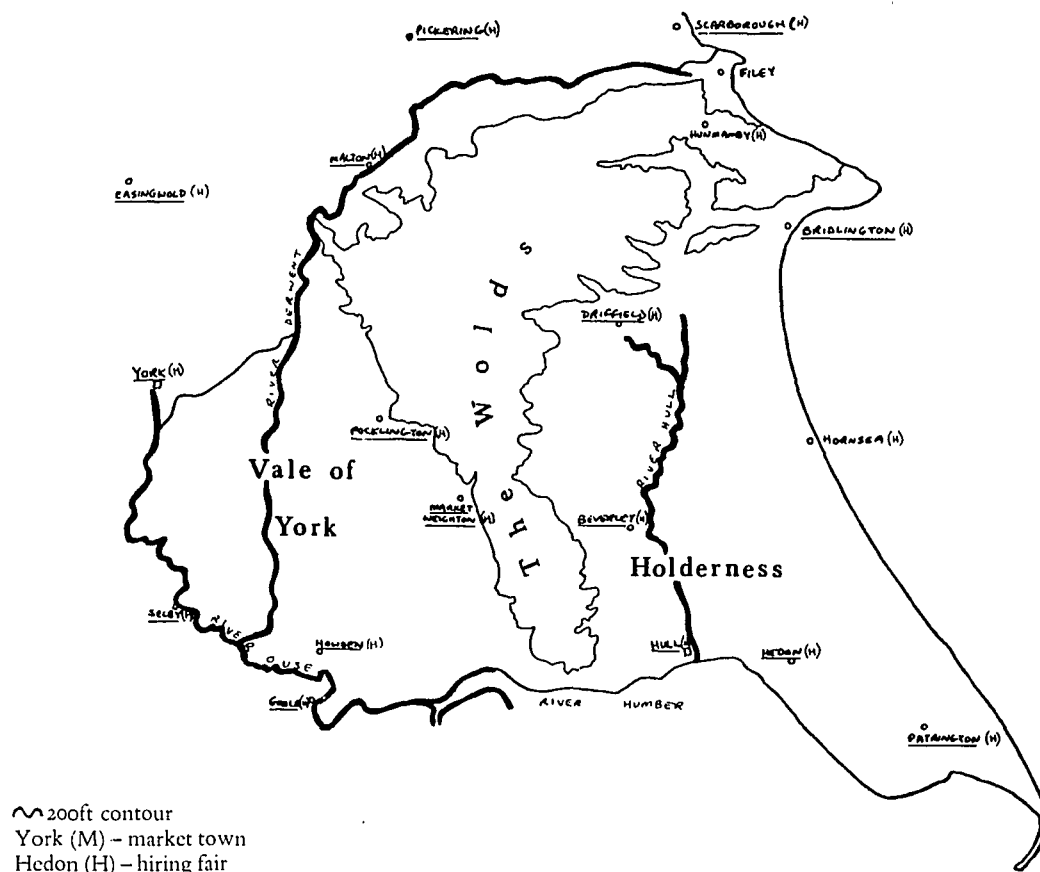
<sup>19</sup> Tape 4/2. See also H L Day, *Horses on the Farm*, Beverley, 1981, pp 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> *Yorkshire Herald*, (York), 12 Nov 1910, supplement.

<sup>21</sup> Tape 25/2.

<sup>22</sup> Tape 5/1.

<sup>23</sup> Tape 6/2.



MAP 3  
 The East Riding and its vicinity, c1914

it as they lost little and most felt, like Mr Baines, that 'if you weren't suited and if the place didn't suit you neither, what the devil's good stopping? You'd be no use to nobody'.<sup>24</sup> Where the courts were certain to be invoked was where a lad, usually a senior one, left late in the year over some real or imagined grievance. Coultas Vasey, for instance, seriously inconvenienced his employer by leaving just as harvest started and he had to go to court to seek the £13 6s 8d he was owed from his wage of £20.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Tape 4/1.

<sup>25</sup> *Malton Messenger*, 10 Nov 1900, p 3. This report contains a complete exposition of the contemporary legal view of the contract.

With no written contracts and with cases that rested largely on unprovable assertions, cases were decided according to local custom, verified by witnesses. Landlords and farmers usually presided in court, so their sympathy would normally be with the employer, and Coultas Vasey in fact lost his wages despite producing witnesses that he had left because of unreasonable behaviour by the farmer. There were many decisions in favour of servants, however, and the courts gave statutory backing to customary rights which enabled servants to strike better bargains than they could have otherwise. This even benefited the labourers as a climate of opinion was created that ensured them

regular *upstanding* wages every week of the year, unlike in the south where bad weather often meant no work and no money. There, such servants' contracts as persisted were often little better than slavery, and the courts were used to quell opposition, using clearly defined written agreements.<sup>26</sup> These were drawn up by the farmers and removed all the servants' rights. In the East Riding, both sides had rights as well as duties, in practice as well as theory.

### III

It is now time to consider how the system worked in practice: how all these bones were clothed with flesh. The results were often surprising, even paradoxical, and provide a view of it that could never have been deduced from the documents available to us without the oral testimony. The yearly bond, for instance, did not really belong in courts for all its legalistic nature. None of the people I spoke to had ever been taken to court, though a couple were threatened and one left the Riding to avoid a summons he believed would be issued. It really rested on mutual trust and its terms were historically open to informal change by general consent within this framework. This prevented it becoming an anachronism in districts where it was still a vital institution, and it also accounts for many of the divergences that arose between its various forms recorded in different counties, especially in the far north.

There was a general sense of security that both helps explain and is perfectly illustrated by the mobility that farm servants were famous for. Mr Pridmore never stopped even two years on one farm on principle,<sup>27</sup> and very few lads would stay more than

three, however good the job. For the ambitious, moves brought greater experience, but they also expressed a youthful freedom servants knew would end on marriage. Mr Pridmore always intended to work on the railways when he was old enough, so his mobility had nothing to do with ambition. The majority of moves were made within a home territory, such as the northern Wolds, for instance. This was often co-extensive with the catchment area of the hiring fairs they used, though this is more a reflection of the fact that any market town serves a natural region than a causal factor in itself.

It was rare to cross from the Wolds to the lowlands, or vice versa, because the vastly different soils led to differing farming practices. Simple homesickness was a common cause of running away, and it was far more likely if a lad crossed these natural boundaries. Mr Easterby remembered one committed roamer from Beverley who went to Fimber on the high Wolds. The lads rose in the dark on the first day, it being December, and they were in the fields as dawn came. As they ploughed, he kept hoping for Beverley Minster's twin towers to appear from the gloom as a link with home, but they did not. At midday he hardly ate, and by bedtime he felt so ill he walked the fifteen miles home.<sup>28</sup>

No stigma was attached to frequent job changes for it suited the farmers as well as the lads. As boys grew up they expected higher wages, so it was better for both sides if they moved on. This provided a strong disincentive for any farmer who might have wished to vary the way he ran his farm. Lads needed to be able to begin work on any farm with a minimum of acclimatization or they would be endlessly retraining. There is no evidence that the farmers' freedom to experiment with new crops or techniques was in any way inhibited, but it did cause a remarkable homogeneity of organization of the labour force on every farm. It was,

<sup>26</sup> On labourers, see *Report on the Wages*, II, p 383, and *Second Report on the Wages, Earnings and Conditions of Employment of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom*, PP 1905, XCVII, p 23. The English Land Restoration League, *Special Report, 1893: Among the Agricultural Labourers with the Red Vans*, 1894, p 16, reproduces an actual written contract of this type, headed 'Slavery in East Wiltshire'.

<sup>27</sup> Tape 3/2.

<sup>28</sup> Mr Easterby, untaped interview record, p 1.

moreover, a highly distinctive organization for the nature of the contract was such that servants could not be managed as the labourers, or most industrial workers, were.

Farmers had no power to dismiss except in extreme cases and no power to reduce or

enhance wages, so by modern standards they were left in a peculiar position as employers. In addition, there was every likelihood that work would be disrupted by personal quarrels among these groups of adolescents, who had to spend most of a



PLATE I

A horselad at Manor Farm, Thixendale. The distinctive dress of the horselads before 1914 is clearly visible, though it was not a uniform. He is wearing a *raddy* or *raddy-doo* hat, for instance, which could be pulled down over the ears in cold weather, but many lads preferred caps. If any one activity predominated in a horselad's life, it was ploughing, especially for the middle ranks who were often called ploughlads.

This was probably a spring ploughing, probably after a turnip crop used to feed the sheep that winter. The thin, flinty soil was easy to work and did not retain a clear furrow pattern as heavier soils did. The plough seems to be a JHB design, named after John Harvey Bell of West Lutton, which were light, single-furrow ploughs popular on this sort of Wold land. Taken late 1890s.

This is part of a large series I copied from Mr Walker. They were mostly taken on this farm, probably in the late 1890s when it was farmed by Messrs Cook and Taylor. It may be that they were the work of the farmer himself, for they were taken over a long period. Dr Colin Hayfield discovered the same set of photographs independently and after recovering a good deal of information about their subjects as part of his researches in the Wharrah area, he published them as part of *Thixendale Remembered*, Spring Hill Publications, Arley, Warwickshire, 1985. I am grateful to him for allowing me to incorporate these details here.



PLATE II

On the Wolds all the ploughs on a farm were usually sent out to work together, one behind another, rather than each taking their own patch as was more common elsewhere. This was known as foxhunting and it could be an impressive sight, as here. Five teams are visible, and the first four are drawing double-furrow ploughs. If there are no more teams beyond the edge of the photograph, this group is therefore ploughing nine furrows on each run down the field. Taken near Bridlington, c1930.

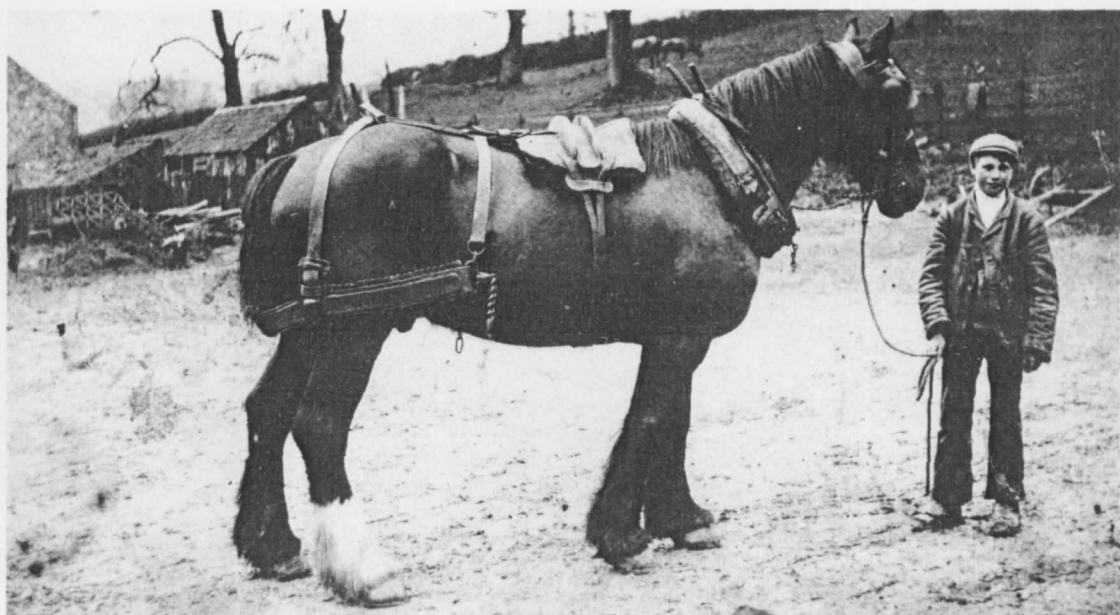


PLATE III

The least lad (the youngest boy on the farm) in the stackyard at Manor Farm, Thixendale. His clothes are obviously hand-me-downs which would have to suffice until his wages were paid at the year-end, and perhaps even longer. His horse also has old harness on, and would itself be well past its prime. Taken late 1890s.



PLATE IV

A three-horse team and a pole waggon delivering corn in sacks at Burdale station on the Malton–Driffield line c1900. The railway was a vital part of the East Riding rural economy since local markets on the scale needed to absorb its production did not exist, and waggons were only economic for short hauls. The wide shelves that overhung the wheels to increase carrying capacity can be clearly seen. The use of a draught pole instead of shafts and the associated practice of the lad driving his team while riding the nearside horse, using a saddle and stirrups, was unique to the county.

year living in each other's pockets. A highly distinctive approach to industrial relations therefore developed, with each lad being given a fixed place in a rigid hierarchy. This avoided any temptation to create one of their own by vying among themselves as the year progressed, and it set up a remarkably effective self-disciplinary structure. No room was left for disputes over who should have the best horses, or leave the stables first, or have the last wash in a morning. At the top came the *waggoner*<sup>29</sup> or *wag*. Nominally, he was the second man after the foreman, so below him came the *third lad* or *thirty*, *fourth*, *fiver* and so on. If any of them had assistants to allow them to care for six horses instead of the usual four, they came next in a new sequence of *wag*

*lad*, *thirty lad*, and so on. Below them, especially on a big farm, might come *groom lads* and *box lads*, hired to care for the blood horses and light horses respectively, a *back-door lad* who helped in the house as well as the fields, and a *Tommy Owl* who acted as a general stand-in. Cowlam, a big farm of over 1100 acres, had an *eighth*, assistants and lesser lads, while small farms might have just the one. They called each other by their titles and everything a group of lads did together, they did in this order. Even their double beds were allocated without regard for personal preferences. Wag slept with thirty, fourth with fiver, and so on.

To the teenagers the waggoner was often a heroic figure with the best horses, the best harness, and skills the others did not possess. Filled corn sacks, for instance, weighed sixteen to nineteen stones and had to be carried in and out of the granary with no

<sup>29</sup> In the Vale of York the waggoner was rated first in the hierarchy, so here the lad under him was the *second waggoner* or *seconder*.

mechanical assistance. The waggoner was the only man who could be asked to undertake this job, which gave him a chance to display his strength for all to see. When he issued instructions, boys were expected to respond instantly, or a liberal helping of boot-toe was likely. Whenever a delivery or collection off the farm had to be made, he went, sometimes sitting up half the night to prepare the harness. The waggoner was normally the oldest and the ages of the rest conventionally reflected their positions, though a big lad, or a skilful one could advance ahead of his years at times.

The waggoner was expected to keep the others in line and if anyone had to intervene between him and another lad, or had to correct him over the state of the horses, he was failing in his task. This made life hard on the big Wolds farms sometimes, for with so many lads under him, some might well be bigger or older than him. It was also easier for someone antisocial to get hired here than elsewhere, for such farms had to be less choosy than smaller operations. He was not expected to back off from enforcing discipline physically if he had to, and this easily spilled over into bullying the youngest boys if he was that way inclined. On the other hand, no one was stuck at the bottom of the hierarchy for long, for marriage left vacancies every year at the top and everyone moved up as they got older. It took skill and hard work to become a waggoner, but it was something anyone could aim at.

The hiring fairs provided an excellent medium for transacting all these various individual bargains needed to keep the system functioning, and they did it with a minimum of difficulty and wasted time and effort. They were the obvious method of doing business in a pre-industrial world where transactions had to be face-to-face, but they had evolved into complex and specialized institutions with many non-economic functions besides their obvious role as a labour market. Much of the attention they have received in print has

been critical and they deserve a much better press, in the north at least.<sup>30</sup> At most East Riding centres there was not one fair but a series. The first was usually early in November and servants had a right to leave work to attend one of these first hirings, but only one. There were usually two more in the week following Old Martinmas Day, when all contracts terminated. This was the servants' only prolonged holiday, stretching to a fortnight sometimes, so they could attend as many of these sessions as they could fit in.

First hirings often functioned as preliminary sessions allowing everyone to see how the market stood so that negotiations in Martinmas week could be conducted at realistic levels. No standard rate would emerge, however. Farmers with bad reputations found it hard to hire, while workers with a good name could play off several

TABLE I  
Wage variations in 1890 for waggoners,  
third lads, and boys, first time out

| Fair        | Date   | Wages per year – £ |          |      |
|-------------|--------|--------------------|----------|------|
|             |        | Wags               | Thirdies | Boys |
| Driffield   | 11 Nov | 17–20              | up to 14 | 10.5 |
| Market      | 13 Nov | 17–20              | 8–10     | –    |
| Weighton    |        |                    |          |      |
| Howden      | 19 Nov | 15–17              | –        | 6–8  |
| Scarborough | 21 Nov | 16–18              | –        | 6–8  |
| York        | 25 Nov | 14–19              | –        | 3–8  |
| Scarborough | 28 Nov | 15–18              | –        | 6    |

Source: *Yorkshire Post*, dates as given, pp 5, 3, 6, 3, 6, 3 respectively.

employers against each other. Table I shows the wages various grades were getting at several fairs in 1890, according to the newspapers. Even this may mislead, for a good workman could add substantially to his wage by bargaining for a big fest. Mr Fisher reckoned to add £1 to a yearly wage of £39 between the wars.<sup>31</sup> In the East Riding

<sup>30</sup> I have given a fuller account of the fairs in 'East Riding Hiring Fairs', *Oral History*, 3, no 2, 1975.

<sup>31</sup> Tape 6/1.

there was usually a balance between lads and jobs on offer. Servants never refrained from shopping around in the fear that the first offer might also be the last one. Hirings have been portrayed as virtual slave auctions,<sup>32</sup> and they might be exactly that in the south, but the public nature of the trading was intended as a typical pre-industrial protection for the individual against the machinations of those who might try to manipulate the market. No farmer controlled more than an insignificant percentage of the jobs on offer and no individual bargain could affect the overall level of wages. Both sides, moreover, usually had access to networks of acquaintances able to give information about the other party. Hirings, in other words, came very close to the classical economists' concept of the perfect market, and in the East Riding they functioned as such, even if elsewhere the overwhelming power of the farmers had destroyed the theory.

Servants and farmers both exploited the fairs' possibilities as a bargaining arena. Depending on supply and demand, inflation, the state of farms, and the prosperity of farmers, wage levels could fluctuate sharply from year to year around a long-term trend. At Howden in 1900 'there was not a very large attendance . . . and little hiring was effected. Men held out for big wages',<sup>33</sup> said one newspaper report, and others showed the reverse. A kind of individual collective bargaining took place, and it was backed up in a sense by a ritualized strike for all the servants went home in the Martinmas week and all work with horses ceased. Since all contracts had to be renegotiated whether lads stayed or moved, and since the 'strike' had a known duration, besides occurring at the quietest time of the farming year, an annual payround was

maintained with a minimum of bad feeling. There was certainly no evidence of attempts by either side at collusion to evade the genuine nature of the bargaining. It is also interesting to note that in 1910 the newly created York Labour Exchange attended fairs across the Riding and transacted no business at all.<sup>34</sup> The servants clearly saw no advantage in changing even to such a neutral, and free, service. This seems to be compelling evidence that they did not see public hiring as either a degrading experience or as one which reduced their wages.

This was not merely a randomly gathered group of workers: most of them were teenagers and a good number would still be in full-time education today. Leaving home at thirteen accelerated their passage to maturity, but they were still in transition from childhood to real adulthood. The servant system still seems to have been ideally suited to carrying them over this difficult time socially as well as economically, while harnessing both their energy and their freedom from family commitments in a very practical and effective way. It is possible to imagine the actual hiring of servants continuing without fairs, but the loss of other aspects of these gatherings would certainly have impoverished their way of life, perhaps even to the point where many would have opted out of it. The most mundane features of their lives had all been shaped and interlocked to create a remarkably integrated pattern, with even holidays and leisure fulfilling a clear role that made them much more than a chance to get away from work.

Hiring out particularly threatened to break up families even though it operated within a family framework, and by splitting up the rural population among many isolated farms, it also endangered the cohesion of communities. Holidays were usually tied

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, T E Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer*, 1887, pp 91-3, or W Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, 1908, p 84.

<sup>33</sup> *Yorkshire Post* (Leeds), 26 Nov 1900, p 7. See also 13 Nov 1906, p 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Yorkshire Herald*, 14 Nov 1910, p 8; 22 Nov 1910, p 8; 24 Nov 1910, p 8; and 25 Nov 1910, p 8.

to festivals that helped to reinforce these ties, often in a ritual or ceremonial way to counteract this tendency. Plough Monday had once been a festival dedicated to the horselads as a group within the community, when they paraded with a plough and collected money, enforcing recognition and even punishing those who had offended them by ploughing up their gardens.<sup>35</sup> In this century it was almost defunct, perhaps a symbol that servantry had not stood still in the nineteenth century, but had had to adapt to a more capitalist style of farming where the village community was no longer the dominant force in rural life. The highpoints of servants' lives now lacked the obvious characteristics that attract folklorists, but they still fulfilled similar functions.

Martinmas had filled the gap left by the demise of Plough Monday and it focused on their role as hirelings, reflecting the new realities. It was a servant's only chance to take a few days away from farming and the towns filled with young people eager to have a good time at the funfair every hirings attracted, as well as those in search of a new job. They needed to do all their shopping for the next year of renewed isolation, and they had all their last year's pay in their pockets, less anything required to settle the debts they inevitably built up in a year without a cash income. They bought clothes and wooden chests to keep them in, watches, bicycles, presents for parents, and anything else they wanted. Some shopkeepers sold more in Martinmas week than they did in all the rest of the year,<sup>36</sup> so this was an important contribution to the towns' economies. The mere fact of gathering together folk who were normally scattered around isolated farms was in itself important, allowing the community a rare chance to assert itself in a renewal of friendships

and the visiting of relations, especially at the third hirings which many married people attended as well as servants.<sup>37</sup>

The pubs naturally shared in the spending spree and it was easy to drink too much and become involved in fights. This attracted a good deal of contemporary criticism, especially from the clergy,<sup>38</sup> but the oral evidence makes it clear that not only was drunkenness far from universal, but the fights usually had a deeper significance. After a year on farms with the same company and little leisure, it is hard to see how some blowing off of steam could have been avoided in any case, but the fighting was in any case often a delayed settling of grievances that would otherwise have disrupted life and work on the farms. The hierarchy was remarkably successful at channelling and controlling tensions among these adolescents and young adults, but it could not eliminate them. Instead they were set on one side and settled once and for all off the farm before an audience. Even the police acquiesced in this, leaving combatants alone as long as they caused no general trouble.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from Martinmas, most days off were spent in visiting village shows and feasts, all of which reunited the family ties stretched by hiring out. Leisure consisted of Sundays and a few hours in the evenings. Far from turning away from work in this limited time, they played and talked in the stables, and turned their horses into their hobby. In particular, pilfering forbidden delicacies for them from the outbuildings took great ingenuity and filled many hours. The ultimate aim was expressed in an invitation to Mr Brambles from a friend in the 1930s: "Have a look over ours on Sunday, just have a look at my hosses, lad, by God, they are fat! They do look well." . . . That was it. . . away you went and have a look at so-and-so's horses and see if

<sup>35</sup> See F Kitchen, *Brother to the Ox*, 1942, pp 64-5, and Rev M C F Morris, *The British Workman Past and Present*, 1928, p 55.

<sup>36</sup> F Austin-Hyde, 'Old Time Martinmas Hirings', *York Times*, autumn, 1962, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Tape 17/1.

<sup>38</sup> Caunce, *op cit*, 48-9.

<sup>39</sup> Tape 17/1.

they were fatter than yours, and if their skins shone more'.<sup>40</sup> Great gangs of lads went from farm to farm on Sundays, checking horses and workmanship in this way, but their desire for fat horses would often conflict with real working efficiency. Mr Fisher was unequivocal from his experience as a lad and as a farmer in saying that farmers 'wouldn't give a toss for lads who did not steal food'.<sup>41</sup> However, by making them 'steal' it rather than giving them free rein, the amounts involved were cut down and the lads were given a harmless way of filling time that otherwise might have hung heavily on them.

This is an age group which has always been a prime source of rebelliousness. Ann Kussmaul has said that in early modern times the hiring out of servants was consciously seen as a way of splitting up this rather anarchic group and delegating their control to the heads of the host households, who could manage them as small groups far more effectively than any alternative approach could have done.<sup>42</sup> This pre-industrial rationale can still be seen at work in the East Riding in this century. Servants were still exchanging a natural family for an economic one which was usually better equipped to care for them in material terms. Whatever family nature the relationship may once have had, it had long since ended in a domestic sense, but the yearly bond was still in essence a quasi parent-child affair. Even though the farmers commonly discharged their parental duties to feed and house their servants through the hinds, they never attempted to evade the ultimate responsibility. In Cambridgeshire, foremen also boarded servants, but as lodgers who paid for their own keep out of board wages.<sup>43</sup> Servants in the East Riding were

still making the ancient bargain of surrendering their independence in return for security, a very different arrangement. They still retained the view that service was a worthwhile preparation for adult life, when independence would be regained by the simple act of setting up their own households.

The poor might have been driven into service by necessity, but it also attracted hinds' and small farmers' children, such as Mr Baines and Mr Jarvis. Dr Edward Smith found in 1864 that East Riding farm lads were better fed than any comparable income group he investigated in a wide-ranging national survey that included their own parents as well as urban workers.<sup>44</sup> In the 1920s the lads expected three substantial meals a day, most including meat, pies, vegetables, and cheesecakes, as well as plenty more besides. The work was hard, not all farms came up to scratch, and even on the good ones they were often hungry by meal times, but their diet was incomparably better than that of their town contemporaries. A bad meat house was soon widely known and had difficulty in hiring good lads, whereas a good meat house could demand great efforts in the fields without getting complaints. Their parents, moreover, could live better because there were fewer mouths to feed and there is no doubt that most, if not all, families recognized that sending out their children was the key to a better life for everyone. This seems to be proof that the life they lived, if not one of comfort or leisure, was one that had distinct advantages.

#### IV

Is all this of merely local interest, or does it have wider implications? Farm servants everywhere, for instance, have become recognized as a group with a clear tendency

<sup>40</sup> Tape 18/1.

<sup>41</sup> Tape 6/2.

<sup>42</sup> Kussmaul, *Servants*, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Report by Mr Wilson Fox on the *Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom*, PP 1900, LXXXII, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Sixth Report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council*, PP 1864, p. 238.

towards late marriage. The East Riding example shows this mechanism in action even in this century. There was no need to marry just to get out of a crowded home and their ability to save, particularly in their twenties, encouraged both partners to wait so as to marry with a substantial sum in hand. Traditionally this was the crucial step up to independence, giving the chance to take a small farm or to set up in some business. In 1900, it could still be said that in the Lake District, 'Many of [the] farmers have risen from the ranks of the farm servants, and there are numerous instances in which they have become farmers on a large scale . . . Not infrequently a hired man marries a young woman who has also saved money as a dairymaid'.<sup>45</sup>

It was the ability thereafter of most adults to look after themselves at least part of the time which made them prefer the status of a day labourer to that of a permanently employed wage earner, and the comments of the enclosure propagandists of the early nineteenth century make it clear that a man did not have to acquire more than access to the common to become an unreliable wage labourer.<sup>46</sup> This, in turn, created a need for servants to fill the gap. In this century, in an arable county like the East Riding, farmers had become virtually a hereditary caste and few servants could realistically hope to take a farm any longer. The system survived because, quite apart from the fact that even a cottager's marriage got off to a better start with savings behind it, an adequate replacement motivation had been evolved: the chance to become a hind. Even though change had occurred, there was such a clear continuity that it is apparent that the same mechanism was still at work, but through different channels.

The hinds were recruited from the ranks of the waggoners, though a few years in between as a labourer were almost

inevitable. They held responsible jobs that provided a large house as well as good wages, so there was still something for ambitious lads to aim for after marriage. Their savings helped to set up a comfortable home, and they could hope to hang on to their good start, rather than seeing poverty eat it away as would have been inevitable in most southern counties. The hind had not existed, as far as is known, in the eighteenth century,<sup>47</sup> and numbers only became significant in the late nineteenth century as farmers yielded to the social pressures that urged them to separate themselves from their inferiors.<sup>48</sup> His predecessor was the single farm foreman who was usually a senior farm servant, and the nature of his contract was somewhere between a servant's and a labourer's. His promotion was the result of the farmers' need to preserve the servant system, albeit at arm's length, rather than to destroy it. The servants' traditional role of providing committed labour as an extension of the family so that the core of essential and repetitive work could be guaranteed was still needed.

Continuity, then, seems proven, but it still remains open to question how far the East Riding experience represents a general pattern. Nationally, there seems to have been a large degree of unity to the hiring and usage of farm servants down to the mid-eighteenth century, but from this point on regional experiences did diverge sharply. The south-eastern arable zone led a rejection of the whole concept of hiring as a large and permanent labour surplus built up in most counties in the early nineteenth century. Previously, conditions in the labour market had led to long term rises and falls in the use of servants, but this total abandonment was unprecedented.<sup>49</sup> The East Riding

<sup>45</sup> Report by Wilson Fox, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, A Young, *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England*, 1770 vol 1, p. 173.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, I Leatham, *A General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire*, 1794, p. 31. Morris, *British Workman*, pp. 55-6, notes the beginnings of the system half a century later, but even in 1871 a search of ten townships' Census returns revealed only two hinds.

<sup>48</sup> Kussmaul, *Servants*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, chap 6.

emerged from this period with an intact farm servant system not because it was different or because it was immune to the forces that led to this historic change, but because local forces existed here which counterbalanced the others, neutralizing them to a large extent.

Probably most important was its agriculture's ability to cope with the increase in its population from 80,000 in 1801 to 136,000 in 1851.<sup>50</sup> Outside Hull, the county has always been wholly dependent on farming and no industries developed to take the strain. Despite being part of Yorkshire, it remains today one of the most completely rural English counties, and the 1831 Census commented that it 'would be entirely agricultural did not the town of Kingston-upon-Hull . . . contain the manufactures indispensable to an active Seaport'.<sup>51</sup> This was partly because there had never been a tradition of craft employment that could be developed. On the other hand, it also meant that a failure to industrialize did not in itself create unemployment as crafts declined, so the crucial question was whether agriculture could create extra, productive jobs for the ever-rising population of the villages.

The growth of Hull and, more especially, the West Riding towns provided an escape route for those wanting to leave farms, but more importantly, it also provided an ideal market for East Riding agriculture. Already in 1793, Isaac Leatham commented that the two Ridings were exchanging coal and lime for food, making 'so happy a combination . . . as each county is adapted to supply the wants of the other [and] . . . the most convenient channel of communication is afforded by the adjoining rivers'.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly the East Riding specialized in the industry which suited it best within the booming regional economy. The Wolds were the most visible symbol of the increased

intensity of production that resulted, with its extensive sheepwalks and rabbit warrens turned into permanent and highly productive arable through the careful application of scientific rotations.<sup>53</sup> Large areas elsewhere had also been idle or underused and its farming had been backward. A significant group of prosperous farmers only arose in the eighteenth century, but by 1851 Caird reported that they were 'probably the wealthiest men of their class in the country'.<sup>54</sup>

As new land was brought under the plough the ox was replaced in front of it by the horse, and then a steadily increasing proportion of the farmwork was done by machinery rather than direct hand labour. The isolated nature of many new farmsteads and the work the actual improvements themselves created meant that there was an increased need for both servants and labourers in their traditional roles. Even though labourers now were mostly full-time employees, the division of work between them and the servants still fulfilled a function, for they were naturally less willing than the servants to take on the long hours of looking after stock. There were bad periods,<sup>55</sup> but the labour market locally never allowed farmers to dispense with servants, or even to maltreat them so much that they would wish to opt out of the system, as happened wherever a board wages system was adopted.

Change certainly occurred, as we have seen, and the increase in the number of large farms reinforced a trend towards an increase in the size of servant groups on farms. The growing social separation between the farmer and his servants also made these groups more self-contained and more likely to adopt a culture appropriate to permanent employees, but such changes as resulted were an organic development that preserved the spirit of the hiring system as nearly intact as it could be.

<sup>50</sup> B R Mitchell and P Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, 1962, p. 6. Does not include Hull.

<sup>51</sup> *Census of Great Britain, 1831, Enumerators' Abstract*, II, PP 1833, XXXVII, pp 750-1.

<sup>52</sup> Leatham, *Gen View*, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, A Harris, *The Rural Landscape of the East Riding of Yorkshire, 1700-1850*, 1961, esp pp 100-6.

<sup>54</sup> J Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51, 1852*, p. 310.

<sup>55</sup> See C Howard, 'Farming at Scoreby', in Howard, *A General View of the East Riding of Yorkshire*, London, 1835, 19-20.

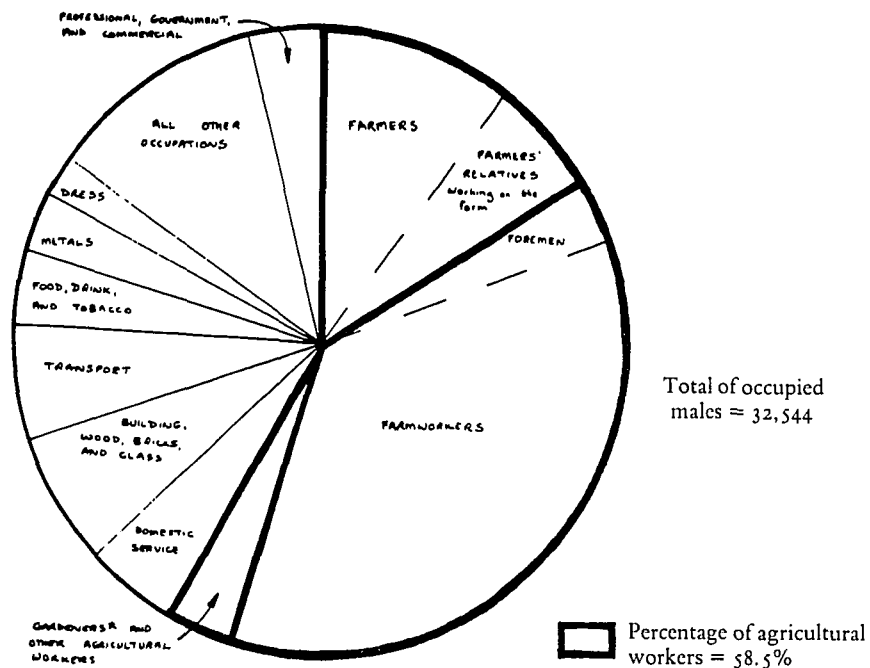
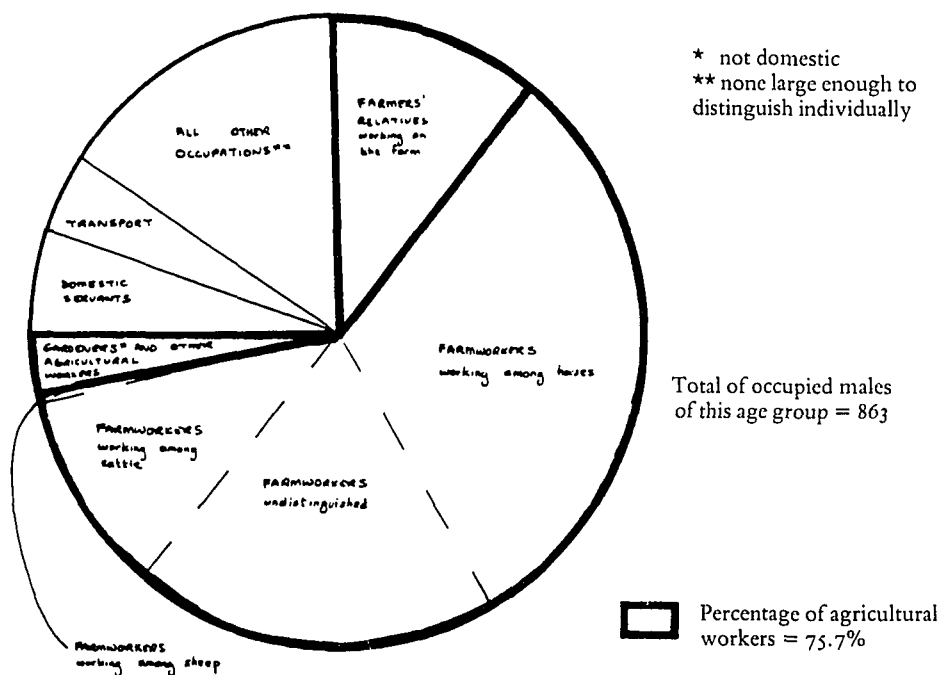


FIGURE 2A

The occupations of all males at work in East Riding rural districts in 1911



Source: Census, 1911, X, pt II (PP 1913-14, LXXIX, Cmnd 7019), pp 644-6.

FIGURE 2B

The occupations of males aged fifteen to sixteen years at work in East Riding rural districts in 1911

If a square peg's hole becomes round, it must acquire rounded corners or lose its function. Functionless survivals are easy to spot precisely because of their fossil nature and their romantic appeal as quaint by-gones, whereas customs and practices that are still evolving will usually seem mundane because they are so practical, yet it is the latter that offer a living connection with the past. This does not mean they are the only ones worth studying, but perhaps by collating both we can get the fullest vision of past societies.

This evolution had produced a stable system by 1914 which seemed to meet the needs of both farmers and farmworkers. This is not to argue that it was perfect or that individuals did not suffer under it or reject it, but merely that it avoided many of the miseries suffered by farmworkers further south and that East Riding society as a whole accepted it. Unionism made little headway in the county before the First World War, which seems to show that there were no grievances important enough to cause the men to unite against their masters. Those I talked to remembered the period as one when change seemed far distant even though they knew it was no golden age. When change did come to seem possible later, they worked for it and welcomed it, as with the extension of statutory holidays to farming. In 1914, however, the system was so all-embracing that acceptance was easy and change seemed to be precluded. As Figure 2 shows, nearly 60 per cent of males in employment in the rural county worked on farms in 1911, whether as farmers, their relatives, or employees, and most of the rest worked in transport and agricultural support industries. Of fifteen-year-olds, 76 per cent were in farming.

## V

Despite this impressive stability, however, the system collapsed in the ensuing three decades, and after the Second World War there were only a handful of servants left.

The most obvious explanation, mechanization, can be quickly rejected. Horses held their own in the county better than they did nationally,<sup>56</sup> and tractors were no real threat to them until the 1930s, as Figure 3 shows. Between 1921 and 1925 there were only 2000 tractors at work in the whole country, compared to 796,000 horses, and they were primarily competing with steam tackle and stationary engines.<sup>57</sup> At this time they were simply mechanical horses with very high operating costs, offering in return only greater pulling power and large savings in the care spent on horses.<sup>58</sup> Reductions in horse numbers in the 1920s were a result of economies and a reduction in farming intensity. Even in the 1930s progress was slow and by 1939 the 549,000 horses still at work vastly outnumbered the 55,000 tractors. In the continuing liquidity crisis of the Depression years, horses that could be bred on the farm and fed on farm products, which seemed to have no profitable outlet, made more economic sense than tractors that had to be bought, fuelled, and repaired for cash.

The Depression hit the East Riding savagely. Competition from abroad was compounded by the collapse of prosperity in the West Riding. Mr Johnson took a farm in 1931 and a friend said,

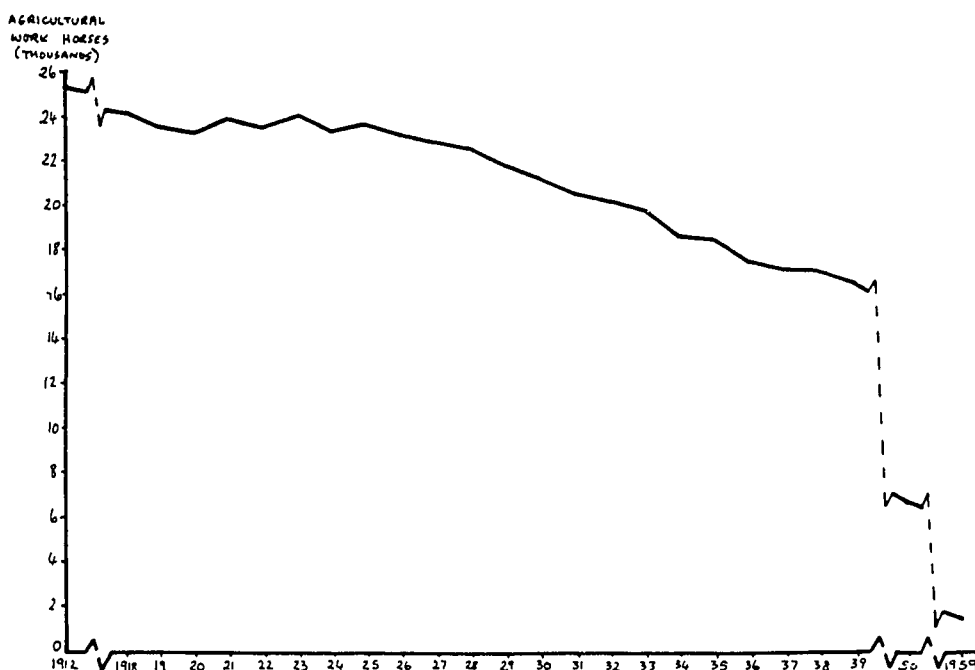
'You're all right, things is – they're at the bottom. They can't go any lower' . . . And he was wrong, they did . . . Between 1930 and 1942, say if you made a living and came and paid your debts, you were lucky . . . You had to, you know, work all hours God sent to make a living, and men out of work in every village and . . . we had plenty of work but couldn't employ them.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> K Dexter, 'The Economic Position of the Horse in British Agriculture', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 1953, esp map 2. This covers the history of horse replacement very thoroughly and uses the East Riding as a case study.

<sup>57</sup> Claude Culpin, *Farm Mechanization: Costs and Methods*, 1950, p 40, and D K Britton and I F Keith, 'A Note on the Statistics of Farm Power Supplies in Great Britain', *The Farm Economist*, VII, 1950, 163–4.

<sup>58</sup> S J Wright, 'The Next Phase in Agricultural Mechanization', *Journal of the Farmers' Club*, pt 7, 1945, 90.

<sup>59</sup> Tape 5/2.



Source: *Ag Stats* (1912-59). The numbers used are those for horses which had been broken and therefore exclude young horses and stallions.

FIGURE 3

The decline in the horse population of the East Riding after 1918

With cash so short, with all the social tensions of taking servants into the farmhouse solved, with no poor law regulations to discourage hiring for fear of giving settlements, and with no chance of subsidising wages out of the poor law, farmers had none of the reasons to cease hiring servants that had motivated their southern counterparts in the depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars, when hiring was largely given up in this region. Servants' wages were never more than 50 per cent cash and much of their food could be provided by the farm, especially if garden produce like rhubarb and apples could be put on every menu. It has also been noted that there was a 41 per cent reduction in the numbers of under twenty-one-year-olds at work on the county's farms between 1921 and 1938,<sup>60</sup> and since there was no move to introduce

married horsemen, it may be that farmers still needed to tie this age group to them to be sure of their services. Bargaining at the fairs made servants' wages very responsive to depression conditions once wage regulation ended in 1920. In 1918 waggoners were offered £50 to £57 at Howden, whereas in 1922 they 'were content with £25 to £30' at Hull.<sup>61</sup> Hinds came under pressure to board lads for less, some being offered 6s per week per man instead of the 7s 6d they expected. Some ended the year badly in debt, while the lads were being hit in their most sensitive areas, their stomachs.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, though the Depression brought no direct reduction in servants' numbers, it did create a background against which dissatisfaction could grow. The war had taken large numbers of lads out of their enclosed lives and showed them a range of possibilities they

<sup>60</sup> W H Long 'Agricultural Labour and its Problems in Wartime', *Journal of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society*, 97, 1940, 44.

<sup>61</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 2 Dec 1918, p 19 and 29 Nov 1922, p 13.

<sup>62</sup> Mr Brambles, untaped interview record, p 2 and tape 9/1.

had never thought existed. They might have gradually learned to disregard their experiences, but their lives were changing at home as well. Bicycles, previously beyond their means, gave them much greater mobility, and radios and the cinema brought national and even international culture into the rural areas. Trade unionism exploded, especially on the Wolds, with servants flocking to join as much as labourers, even though their contracts in theory precluded all industrial action.

There were large-scale strikes in 1918, 1920, and 1922, and there was some support for the General Strike.<sup>63</sup> Working hours were shortened and holidays gained, but otherwise neither the strikes nor the unions' negotiations showed many positive results. Even so, the mere fact that workers were prepared to organize and strike was a severe blow to the old society. Some servants who struck were treated as contract breakers, but most farmers preferred to reach an accommodation, especially as they usually won the disputes. Some servants went home for the duration, like Mr Tate's brothers who had 'the best time they had in their life . . . They'd have strike pay, that would pay for my dad's keep, you know. Aye. And they went to all the farm sales there was'.<sup>64</sup> Others stayed on the farm, caring for the horses in return for their keep, and passing the time by picketing neighbours.

This is further proof that while the yearly contracts of the servants may have been the backbone of the system, it was not their legally binding nature that gave them their real strength. Once mutual agreement as to the fairness of the bond was lost, wholesale threats of legal action would destroy relations between the farmers and their lads, who would not have entered contracts that denied them rights everyone else had, except

under extreme duress. The farmers also acceded gradually to demands for weekly wages, for farm lads were starting to feel the attractions of consumerism, and saving for marriage was becoming less important to them. Some farmers even began to pay overtime, which was always an issue on any farm that acquired a tractor. They were worked as long as possible and the lads saw no reason why long hours on a tractor seat should attract extra pay when their even longer hours among horses did not. Mr Rispin actually gave up hinding because of the tensions this caused on his farm, which were making it very hard to get the horses properly cared for.<sup>65</sup>

Lads had further cause for questioning the value of the traditional system to them after 1924. The renewed legal regulation of wages effectively set norms and removed much of the bargaining from the fairs to the county wages committees.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, from 24 November 1935 the East and West Ridings' unique 'fixation of special rates according to the nature of duties was discontinued',<sup>67</sup> so that lads' wages were now ruled almost entirely by their age. A capable, ambitious lad was entitled to no more money if he accepted extra duties as, say, a waggoner than if he did not. There was an increasing tendency towards a better defined working week, with more leisure and statutory holidays which diminished the importance of Martinmas. There could no longer, in the 1930s, be said to be one employment system for youngsters in the East Riding, for the effect of all these changes was to fragment it.

Had the inter-war years been prosperous, with plenty of jobs to leave agriculture for,

<sup>63</sup> See R Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle: the History of the Farmworkers' Union*, 1949, p 175; 'Annals of Bridlington', cuttings collection in Bridlington Public Library, 30 Aug 1918, 27 Sept 1918, 3 Sept 1920, and 10 Sept 1920; tape 7/2.

<sup>64</sup> Tape 19/1.

<sup>65</sup> Tape 27/2.

<sup>66</sup> Groves, *Sickle*, pp 207-9, and see, for instance, *Yorkshire Post*, 28 Nov 1927, p 17, and *Bridlington Chronicle*, 2 Dec 1927, in 'Annals'.

<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Report of Proceedings under the Agricultural Wages (Regulations) Act, 1924, for the Year Ended 30th September 1936, 1937*, pp 38-9.



PLATE V

Taken in the 1930s in south Holderness as the horse era drew to a close, all trace of distinctive dress has gone from this picture. Otherwise, however, this study of a lad and his horse is timeless and perfectly illustrates the uneasy mixture of change and tradition that epitomized this period.

it is possible that the system could have adapted as it had in the past. The post-war depression of a century before had bitten deep, but hiring survived because both sides wanted it to. Now the farmers were merely hanging on, rather than seeking creative change, and the lads' demands therefore

simply broke the system up. Some areas seemed to remain untouched right down to the war, but this indicated neither immunity nor an ability to cope. Rather it signified an increasing remoteness from the reality of the modern economy. An inner decay had set in, stemming from the growing integration of farming into the international economy, and of all farmworkers into a national society. Where no one pushed, its effects did not show openly, but the weakness was still there. When prosperity returned after the war, horses and servants vanished from the scene together everywhere with great rapidity.

The yearly bond had been far more than just a contract between employers and employees. It was a rich and complex socio-economic system that carried children from dependency to independency, aiding and controlling them while using their labour to the full on farms. It flourished in the East Riding until the 1920s despite all the adjustments farming had made in the nineteenth century, and it did not become a quaint relic that attracted the attention of folklorists. The similarity of modern oral accounts to the fragmentary mentions in the *General Views* of a century before suggest that we can extrapolate backwards to a more intimate understanding of the system as it operated in most villages in pre-industrial times, as long as we tread cautiously. The oral contributors certainly felt that, from their memories of their parents' recollections, little had changed in the previous century. It also seems likely that many of the conclusions drawn from this one county may be relevant to the whole arable area of England.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

##### *Ag Stats*

*Agricultural Statistics*, published annually up to and including 1918 by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries; afterwards by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries; and from 1952 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Up to and including 1920, the horse population of the East Riding is given in table 3, thereafter in table 2.

##### *Earnings and Hours*

Report on the Earnings and Hours of Labour of Workpeople in the United Kingdom – V, *Agriculture in 1907* (PP 1910, LXXXIV).

##### *Second Report*

Second Report on the Wages, Earnings and Conditions of Employment of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom (PP 1905, XC VII).