

RT6083**English Country Bumpkins! Tracing Rural Ancestors.**

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Before the industrial revolution the majority of England was employed in some capacity on the land. Labourers who worked for a particular farmer or estate for a long period or often their whole lives. Labourers who worked on a much shorter term usually on an annual basis who were known as “hired men or women”

“A farm servant generally an adolescent boy or young single man who resided on the farm and was engaged for a short period of time usually no longer than a year at a time. No set working hours and available when required ... contracted at hiring fairs. Contract related to board and lodging”

An Agricultural labourer was usually married and resided with his family in a cottage or house off the farm or on its perimeter and worked for a weekly wage for fixed hours and with greater security of employment”

Ian Waller *My Ancestor was an Agricultural Labourer*

Agricultural labourer is a broad term for many rural occupations - reaping, threshing, mowing, wood cutting, animal husbandry, stockman, milkmaids, ditching, fencing, maintaining roads, carting and carrying, catching moles and vermin, warrener, gleaning ... blacksmith, game keeping, shepherds, sawyers.

Of course there were other rural cottage “industries” e.g. straw platting in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire; framework knitting in Leicestershire, Rutland and Northampton; lace making, weaving, coal mining villages, fishing in coastal villages

- Censuses 1841-1911 show ag labs, farm servants etc, farmers and employees, rural communities
- Directories will list landed estate holders, tenant farmers, self-employed rural artisans and occupations.
- Land ownership and substantial tenancies endowed rights and responsibilities to
 - Vote and stand in parliamentary elections
 - Become jurors
 - Pay taxes
- Land tax 1780-1820 (few from 1698)

Introduced in 1693 and only finally abolished in the mid twentieth century.

Records of most use for the period 1780-1832 (before and after this date returns are fragmentary). For this period the records doubled as “electoral registers” of those who were entitled to vote and are stored in the quarter session records at county record offices.

Returns for the tax in 1798 were copied by the Inland Revenue and hence returns for this year for the whole country can be found at the National Archives (IR 23) and on Ancestry.co.uk. Many returns for the counties have been published by local history or family history societies. See the Gibson Guide *Land and Window Tax Assessments 1691-1950*.

- Wills and Inventories

Free index to post 1858 to date wills <https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate> also indexes only on Ancestry, Findmypast and FamilySearch. PDF copies £1.50 available after 10 days. Copies available from FamilySearch and Affiliate Libraries such as SoG 1858-1925.

Wills before 1858 fell under the jurisdiction of many local church courts. There is no one website that lists them all but many published indexes and some images are on line and all church court probate documents can be viewed at a FamilySearch Affiliate Library such as the Society of Genealogists. Prior to the mid 18th century many wills have accompanying inventories itemising the movable property of the deceased. For examples see *Farm & cottage inventories of mid Essex, 1635-1749 : Essex record publication, no. 8 (corrected edition)*, edited by Francis Steer, 1969.

- Enclosure Maps

Between 1700-1900 about 7 million acres of land enclosed – transferring small strips of open arable and common land to larger more efficient fields. Private agreement enclosure by Act of Parliament and accompany maps etc. are recorded in the Parliamentary archives, Maps and awards also copied to clerks of the peace and hence in local record office.

The *1836 General Enclosure Act* allowed the enclosure of open arable and (extended to other types of land from 1840) without the need for an act of parliament but by an award of appointed commissioners. Awards and maps since 1836 lodged with clerks of the peace and hence in County Record Offices.

The *General Enclosure Act of 1845* established a standing Enclosure Commission. When the enclosure of land was proposed the Commission held a local enquiry and made recommendations to the House of Commons. If the Enclosure was approved it was effected by the Commission. Three copies of the award with map were produced. One copy for the parish, one copy for the Enclosure Commission and hence deposited in the National Archives in series MAF 1. The third was lodged with the Clerk of the Peace and hence in CROs

- Tithe Maps and Awards

The historic and contested payment of tithes (one tenth of produce or cash equivalent paid to the church) were finally reformed under the *Tithe Commutation Act* of 1836 which commuted the tithe payment into an annual rent or charge. Between c 1840-1854 Tithe Apportionment Files (in The National Archives Series IR 29) or accounts and maps (IR30) were prepared for most parishes and copies of the maps are either with the parish, the diocese and the Tithe Commissioners in TNA. Some parishes had already made similar

arrangements and hence no records survive other than what might be noted in enclosure awards for example. TNA maps and awards are digitised by the Genealogist website

- Newspapers

British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

- Voting

1832

In counties:

(a) 40 shilling-freeholders

(b) Men having a life interest in, or occupation of, property worth £2-£5 a year.

(c) Holders of land worth at least £10

(d) Tenant occupiers paying rent of £50 a year or more

In boroughs:

Owners or tenants of buildings worth at least £10 a year if they had 12 months residence and had paid their poor rates and assessed taxes.

About 1 in 7 adult males could now vote.

1867

Large reduction of property qualification in boroughs and counties e.g. to land holdings worth £5; and men over 21 who occupied as owner or tenant for 12 months a separate dwelling (with no regard to value), or lodgings of £10 unfurnished value. About 1 in 3 adult men could now vote.

1884

Further reduction of property qualification, affecting especially rural areas. About 4 out of 5 men allowed to vote, although Gibson and Rogers estimate that only 60% actually registered.

- Militia Lists from 1757 – adult males

Local records generally record those who were eligible or balloted to serve in the militia whereas the records held at the National Archives and indexed onto the Findmypast website record those who actually served. However, as many of these local lists are contemporary with the early census returns, the two sources used together can often provide an interesting and comprehensive picture of the adult male population at this period. Looking for both is a useful exercise as we shall see later.

War with France in 1757 meant that Government had to recruit quickly and re-establish a local defence force for the counties of England and Wales. The Militia of the previous centuries had become dormant and it was seen immediately that not enough volunteers were likely to come forward to serve. The 1757 Militia Act introduced a form of conscription in which parishes made lists of adult males and then ballots were held to choose some of them for compulsory service. If the chosen men were not willing to serve, then they were required to find other men to serve in their stead as substitutes.

In an extensive article on the subject in the *Genealogists' Magazine* vol 23 June 1989 p 55 and again in the Introduction to the book *Militia Lists and Musters 1757-1876* by Jeremy Gibson and Mervyn Meddlycott (Federation of Family History Societies, 2013), Mervyn Meddlycott defines the limited lists of the men actually drawn in the ballot as **Militia Muster Rolls** or Enrolment Lists. These were not the lists of the men in the parish from whom the draw should be made which he defines as Militia Lists or **Militia Ballot Lists** which are the more impressive documents listing the names of all men eligible for the ballot.

- Church and Parish Records

Parish Registers, Monumental Inscriptions and Parish Chest documents such as Vestry Minutes, Constables Accounts, Rate Books, Church Repairs and Highway Maintenance. Many are online or published or can be viewed at a FamilySearch Affiliate Library such as the Society of Genealogists.

- Rural Poor

The Speemamland system grew out of a meeting in 1795 of the justices of the Peace in the village of Speemamland in Berks to set a minimum income according to size of family and the fluctuating price of bread. Widely adopted in rural South and South-East and resulted in suppressed incomes and cuts to outdoor relief. Discourage hard work and resulted in lower productivity, larger families

The system kept wages low during Napoleonic wars but post war depression hit agriculture hard with falling wages and increasing welfare costs. Cuts in relief led to impoverishment and widespread social unrest.

Documents relating to the poor can be local reports and ad hoc lists found in record offices along with more formal documents generated by the Old Poor Law and Act of Settlement in 1666 such as Settlement and Bastardy Examinations, Removal Orders and the New Poor Law Union Workhouse Records and outdoor relief. Later affiliation orders came to replace Bastardy Bonds and Examinations.

- Friendly Societies

Mutual unions or insurance clubs with defined payments and benefits. Noted by Sir Frederick Moreton Eden in *The State of the Poor or a History of the Labouring Classes in England .. Vol ii Parochial Reports*, 1797

Rule books filed with Registrar of Friendly Societies now at TNA

Local records of members, minutes and claims but survival is patchy

- Quarter Session Records see Jeremy Gibson et al *Quarter sessions records for family historians : a select list*, 2007

Gamekeepers' licences and certificates; lists of pauper lunatics in a parish; matters relating to the relief of the poor; lists of properties, occupiers of and land tax; hearth and window tax; register of local friendly societies; apprenticeship disputes

- Vaccinations

Widespread vaccination of children began in the 1830s with the passing of the first Vaccination Act. The vaccination programme was funded through the Poor Rate and administered by the Poor Law Unions. However, the voluntary nature of the Act meant that take-up was poor so the authorities made vaccination compulsory in 1853 with a new Act. The legislation stipulated that parents must vaccinate their children within three months of birth. Vaccination registers were kept by local registrars and a vaccination certificate was issued to the parents of each vaccinated child.

- National School Logbooks and Admission registers from 1870

Compulsory Education only from 1870s and only free from 1890s. Records generally in local record offices with 100 year closure.

Findmypast has a project **National School Admissions and Log-Books 1870- 1914**

Ancestry has **London, England, School Admissions and Discharges, 1848-1911 (Ancestry.com)**

- County Surveys of Great Britain 1793-1817

Sponsored by the Board of Agriculture. Digital facsimiles can be found on the Internet Archive. A comprehensive list and guide can be found at the University of Southampton Perkins Agricultural Library <https://library.soton.ac.uk/perkins>

- Manorial and Estate Records

Identify the manor where your ancestor lived and worked and locate surviving manorial records via TNA's Manorial Documents Register
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/finding-records-in-discovery-and-other-databases/manorial-documents-register/>

Also use TNA Discovery Catalogue to establish local record office estate holdings

- National Farm Survey England and Wales 1941-1943

'Second Domesday Book', a 'permanent and comprehensive record of the conditions on the farms of England and Wales'. Every farm and holding of five acres and more was surveyed, including those of market gardeners, horticulturists, and poultry-keepers. The resulting National Farm Survey consists of two distinct components:

A set of forms for every farm, completed by farmers and farm inspectors, referred to in this guide as '**individual farm records**' or sometimes simply 'the forms'. They make up TNA record series [MAF 32](#).

A set of maps for each county, based on Ordnance Survey maps, showing the land belonging to each farm. These make up TNA record series [MAF 73](#).

The survey looked at farm land, farmers and farm owners, life on a farm and the wider community within the parish where a farm was located

See TNA research guide <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/national-farm-survey-england-wales-1941-1943/>

Recommended Reading

My Ancestor was an Agricultural Labourer, 2nd edition, 2019 by Ian Waller , Published by the Society of Genealogists

Reading University Museum of Rural Life <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/>