

## 2. SOCIAL BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

In other countries, most people who earned a living from the soil were peasants, occupying a small plot of land from which they could feed their family. However, in Eastern and Southern England most farms were worked by a few landowners or by the larger number of their tenants. These employed labourers who worked for wages and who made up the bulk of the rural population.

In August 1826, the political commentator William Cobbett visited the Pewsey Vale and the Avon Valley in Wiltshire and was appalled at what he found. He prophetically recorded:

*"In taking my leave of this beautiful vale I have to express my deep shame, as an Englishman, at beholding the general extreme poverty of those who cause this vale to produce such quantities of food and raiment. This is, I verily believe it, the worst used labouring people upon the face of the earth. Dogs and hogs and horses are treated with more civility; and as to food and lodging, how gladly would the labourers change with them! This state of things never can continue many years! By some means or other there must be an end to it; and my firm belief is, that the end will be dreadful."*

In the past there had been two kinds of farm workers: farm servants, who were (usually unmarried) men and women living on the farm, employed on ongoing work as horsemen, carters, dairymaids, shepherds, etc. and normally paid by the year; and labourers coming in to work, paid by the week or day, or sometimes by piecework on hedging, specialist jobs like sheep-shearing, or haymaking and harvest.

In Eastern and Southern England by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a surplus of day labourers. The population rose rapidly up to 1830. Fewer farmers took on living-in farm servants. Farmers would no longer feed and lodge their workers, as they did formerly, because they could not keep them on the little they gave them in wages.

Worst of all it became customary to subsidize farm labourers out of local rates when harvests were poor and wages fell below subsistence level. Thus the distinction between workers and paupers vanished. In some places, it became customary for the housing rent of a large section of the parish's population to be paid from the rates.

In 1815, the percentage of paupers in the southern counties was as follows:

### *Paupers Relieved as per cent of Population*

Berks.	17	Hunts.	12.5
Wilts.	15	Suffolk	12.25
Sussex, Essex	14	Cambs.	11.5
Dorset, Oxford	13	Kent	11.25
Bucks.	12.75	Herts. Norfolk	11

By 1830, it was estimated that the English farm labourer relied on the poor law for a minimum of 15 per cent of his income, and in the Swing counties, a great deal more. However, 1830 was well past the peak of Poor Law generosity. In that year per capita expenditure on the poor in England and Wales was down to 9 shillings 9 pence or almost a quarter below 1815-1820.

This was achieved essentially by making the Poor Law harsher in administration, more humiliating and more repellant to anyone with self respect or a minimum of alternative resources. Significantly, crime increased further. Between 1824 and 1830 crime rose by at least 30 percent (allowing for under reporting) in later years and stood about 15 percent above its earlier peak in 1822.

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<sup>1</sup> The Village Labourer J.L. & Barbara Hammond Chapters Ten & Eleven

The laboring task of threshing the wheat harvest once lasted from November to January, and could take a quarter of labour requirements. Use of machines increased in the post-war agricultural depression (though not all farmers were keen on them). They threatened to make a labourer dependent on relief at the hardest time of year, and became a symbol of his misery.

Lack of political rights put effective action out of the labourer's reach. He did not own property and hence had no right to vote. He could only resort to crime (theft, poaching, smuggling), or blackmail (incendiarism, machine-breaking) to force farmers to pay more.

The level of available work was related to the level of prices and with the state of the harvest. 1827 was a year of good harvest. However, 1828 was as good a summer as any year since 1814 but there was a poor harvest. The following year, 1829, there was a worse harvest that was very late with snow in October. It was a disastrous year for labourers who were cold, hungry and unemployed. In Spring 1830, the weather promised a better harvest, and was reported to be "*most propitious to all growing crops*", however the harvest was poor.

The death of George IV in June 1830 and accession of a new King, William IV, was welcomed because some country people believed he wanted threshing machines to be destroyed and labourers to be paid 2s a day. His accession required a general election and this resulted in a Tory government, led by the Duke of Wellington. The government was unpopular and deeply divided over such issues as parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation. The election had provided an opportunity for political grievances to be highlighted and by 16 November, these led to the resignation of Wellington who was replaced by Earl Grey and his Whig Ministry. Lord Melbourne replaced Sir Robert Peel at the Home Office.

The tense situation was aggravated by news in July of revolution in France. King Charles X of France was forced to abdicate and he was replaced by Louis Philippe "the Citizen King" Almost invariably if there was unrest in France it could be found elsewhere in Europe.