

THE HIRING FAIRS OF NORTHERN ENGLAND, 1890–1930: A REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIAL AND SOCIAL NETWORKING IN AGRICULTURE

In considerations of rural England, the century after 1850 is too often portrayed, especially outside academic circles, simply as a period of decline. Sometimes the mood is nostalgic, but often the narrative is of depression and exploitation, showing farm labourers to be universally badly treated and seriously underpaid. Thus, a recent review by Terry Eagleton of Roy Strong's *Visions of England* in the *Guardian* rightly castigates visions of an 'Arcadian paradise of rosy-cheeked peasants' and also dismisses any 'dream of rural harmony'; but Eagleton then completes a breathtaking sequence of misunderstandings, anachronisms and myths by his own simplistic account of 'peasants . . . who had been reduced to landless labourers by market forces and the Enclosure Acts, or driven into the satanic mills of early industrial England'.¹

The accuracy of such generalizations is not just a peripheral issue, for two reasons: first, because the 1851 census showed the rural population of England reaching its all-time maximum, with farm labourers still forming the largest single occupational group; and, second, because the British experience has been widely drawn on as the basis for modelling economic development processes. Some counties certainly suffered general and serious rural distress for most of the nineteenth century; but others emphatically did not. In the decades around 1900 successive Royal Commissions, inspired by concern about the state of agriculture, gathered vast amounts of evidence about rural life, which reveals a great diversity of regional experiences. Indeed, it is clear that the very structures of rural life differed significantly across the country.

Thus, in 1900 Arthur Wilson Fox, a leading statistician and a regular and meticulous investigator for these Royal Commissions, reported that in 'the counties of Northumberland, Durham,

¹ *Guardian*, 2 July 2011, Review section.

Cumberland, Westmorland, and Yorkshire and the northern part of Lancashire . . . a large number of the men are hired by the year and the half-year', while for those working with animals, 'Yearly and half-yearly engagements are the most common in the Northern Counties, where the system of hiring at fairs still prevails extensively'.² Servants hired at fairs were engaged on long, legally enforceable contracts, which were everywhere still governed by a distinct body of established law. By modern standards these laws placed onerous conditions on both employers and employees, for hirelings had to perform any reasonable work demanded of them in return for an agreed cash wage, which was legally guaranteed for the full term even if prolonged illness occurred. Most, though not all, were also boarded and fed, according to customary local norms, which in northern England primarily required the provision of substantial amounts of food. The fairs remained a vital element of this system, allowing large numbers of new contracts to be arranged at the end of each term, when all contracts expired automatically. This established system of farm service was associated with high wages in these areas, but its persistence has largely been ignored by historians. Sir J. H. Clapham long ago noted with regret that 'the decline [of farm service] has suffered exaggeration in popular historical retrospect'.³ An example of the picture still found in general textbooks is François Crouzet's statement that, of 1.5 million British farm labourers in 1851, 'only 128,000 were servants housed by their employers, most of them being women. [Farmworkers generally were] . . . employed irregularly, with long periods of unemployment in winter'.⁴ This figure for servants is actually just the female total; England and Wales alone then had 189,000 male servants.⁵

² Report by Mr. Wilson Fox on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom (hereafter *Report on Wages and Earnings*), Parliamentary Papers (hereafter P.P.), 1900 (Cd. 346), lxxxii, 10, 12.

³ J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1926–38), i, 451–4.

⁴ François Crouzet, *The Victorian Economy*, trans. Anthony Forster (London, 1982), 182. The anti-service orthodoxy can be seen, for instance, in Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969), 147, which was endorsed in R. J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution, 1780–1850* (London, 1979), 49–50. See also Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987), 22.

⁵ Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers in England and Wales: A Social and Economic History, 1770–1980* (London, 1988), 94 (table 4.2). See also A. J. Gritt, 'The Census and the

(cont. on p. 215)

This article sets out to examine the network of the hiring fairs mentioned by Wilson Fox in order to show how different the northern English experience was from the general depiction of agriculture in this period, especially because this region continued to rely on the apparently archaic farm service system of employment. More importantly, the article seeks to identify and explain the distinctive sub-regional variations in farm service that had developed across the north. It will be argued that, despite this diversity, the common features of northern service suggest a high degree of underlying functional unity, rather than a separation into largely self-reliant *pays*, the reason often cited for such rural differentiation. The period chosen, 1890 to 1930, covers the final decades of real significance for farm service, but it must be stressed that up to about 1920 northern service and hiring fairs both flourished, allowing us to fully understand the inner workings of farm service rather than just to study its decline.

Over the whole of the north, the percentage of servants within the farm labour force had probably increased over the nineteenth century, although statistics are not available to confirm this. The Royal Commissions all made it clear that Yorkshire was the only northern county where married farmworkers who lived in cottages in the villages and were nominally employed by the day, as was almost universally the pattern further south, formed even a bare majority.⁶ During the 1920s, however, unprecedented cultural change, epitomized by the arrival of radios and cinemas, rapidly undermined acceptance of many aspects of farm service, and economic depression made it seem less necessary to farmers. It withered rapidly in the 1930s, and Second World War conscription and rationing effectively completed its demolition as a significant component of the English rural labour force, although the Lord Mayor of Newcastle upon Tyne was still issuing posters publicizing hiring fairs in his city in 1955.⁷ Other fairs also

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Servant: A Reassessment of the Decline and Distribution of Farm Service in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, liii (2000).

⁶ For instance, *Report on Wages and Earnings*, P.P., 1900 (Cd. 346), lxxxii, 9–10, 12–14.

⁷ Poster held in the archive of the Beamish Museum (hereafter BM), no ref. number.

continued to function.⁸ It must also be stressed that the 'capitalistic' casualization on which southern English farmers had relied for more than a century did not spread north to fill the vacuum after 1945. Both systems vanished simultaneously in post-war England, and were generally replaced by straightforward employment on reliable weekly wages, or by family labour as mechanization steadily reduced the size of staff required on any farm.

Specialized interest in farm service has grown in the thirty years since the publication of Anne Kussmaul's research into its role up to 1850. Kussmaul's work upholds Peter Laslett's assertions about the centrality of farm service to early modern English society. The recent search by Alun Howkins and Nicola Verdon for survivals in the south and midlands indicates a growing realization that Kussmaul's simple assertion that after 1850 farm service hardly mattered does not hold up to scrutiny.⁹ Historians have increasingly tried to understand the complexity of patterns of life outside the rapidly growing urban areas, but a sense of asserting what the rural experience *ought* to have been remains a widespread tendency outside academic circles. Leigh Shaw-Taylor has recently produced striking statistical proof of how distinctive the south-eastern agricultural experience was, and has shown that it cannot therefore function as a national template. Plotting the numbers of adult male paid farmworkers on a county basis as

⁸ J. Bernard Bradbury, *A History of Cockerthorpe* (London, 1981), 109.

⁹ Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981) was the first concentrated examination of the system, but said little about the north. Peter Laslett, 'Characteristics of the Western Family Considered over Time', *Jl Family Hist.*, ii (1977), 90. Armstrong, *Farmworkers in England and Wales*, handled service fairly within a thorough overview, but gave it little prominence. A book and two articles by Stephen Caunce investigated East Yorkshire in depth: *Amongst Farm Horses: The Horselads of East Yorkshire* (Stroud, 1991); 'East Riding Hiring Fairs', *Oral Hist.*, iii (1975); 'Twentieth-Century Farm Servants: The Horselads of the East Riding of Yorkshire', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xxxix (1991). Alun Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers: The Marginal Workforce in British Agriculture, c.1870–1914', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xlii (1994) was the first sign of real change in the perceived status of service. Judy Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-Century Farm Women in Northumberland and Cumbria' (Univ. of Sussex Ph.D. thesis, 1992) is self-explanatory; and Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in 19th-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge, 2002), has taken this further. A. J. Gritt, 'The Survival of Service in the English Agricultural Labour Force: Lessons from Lancashire, c.1650–1851', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 1 (2002) is admirably grounded in local, detailed research; see also Alistair Mutch, *Rural Life in South-West Lancashire, 1840–1914* (Lancaster, 1988); Alun Howkins and Nicola Verdon, 'Adaptable and Sustainable? Male Farm Service and the Agricultural Labour Force in Midland and Southern England, c.1850–1925', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, lxi (2008).

recorded in the 1851 census, Shaw-Taylor showed how, across one large zone clearly focused on London and its wholesale markets, most farmers employed substantial staffs of adult males, whereas outside that zone far fewer were employed.¹⁰ However, Shaw-Taylor does not give a definition of 'adult male', and clearly fails to see that even quite young teenage servants formed part of the core labour force in the north. His maps accordingly highlight how overtly committed the south-east had been for some time to a commercial farming system many would call capitalist, but the variety of alternatives elsewhere, and especially the north's different and more recent path to production for sale, remains hidden.

If we are to seek sounder foundations for theories about farm service, we must pay greater heed to geography, as many historians are rediscovering for a range of topics. It is not good enough to assume that a relatively uniform experience can be generalized from research in any one region, or even county. This is not to attack the intrinsic quality of older research, simply to agree again with Clapham that it was 'East Anglia and those recently enclosed Midlands whose agrarian history too often serves as the agrarian history of England'.¹¹ This tendency for generalization from the particular was understandably reinforced by the fact that most of the high-profile rural events and movements in this period were acted out in the southern half of England. Yet if Captain Swing hardly crossed the Humber, or Joseph Arch explicitly gave up on unionizing northern farmworkers, this does not mean that serious agriculture barely existed in the north, simply that strains were not so severe there.¹² Yet, to take some typical and classic accounts, the Hammonds' *The Village Labourer* rarely mentions any of the northern counties in its index, and the references there are peripheral; Edward Thompson quietly moved his focus from northern textile workers into the south when *The Making of the English Working Class* shifted from industry to agriculture; Howard Newby's highly influential study *The Deferential Worker* is based entirely on research done in Suffolk in the 1970s, placed in a context of very traditional historical accounts; and even Alun Howkins's early *Poor Labouring Men* led on to

¹⁰ Leigh Shaw-Taylor, 'The Rise of Agrarian Capitalism and the Decline of Family Farming in England', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, lxxv (2012), esp. fig. 6.

¹¹ Clapham, *Economic History of Modern Britain*, i, 451–4.

¹² Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, 190–6.

Reshaping Rural England, without recognizing how distinctive the north was.¹³ Scotland has over the past few decades used its new-found assertiveness to break decisively with such unitary thinking, and the fact that commercial Scottish agriculture similarly maintained service as a central part of its even more dramatic economic development, with the hiring of many of its paid workers taking place at fairs (often called feeing marts), has been thoroughly investigated.¹⁴ This suggests that rural historians could usefully look more across the border than they currently do in either direction, and think of England less as a naturally homogeneous entity.

A widespread sense that the north had become a largely urban/industrial region helps to explain the lack of interest in its farming, but there is now plenty of proof that the six ancient northern counties actually became leaders of agricultural progress during the nineteenth century, as did lowland Scotland. Agriculture's *relative* share of the growing northern English economy certainly shrank rapidly from, say, 1780, but Scola decisively demonstrated the corollary, that multiplying urban populations in the north meant unprecedented opportunities for the region's farmers, especially since London's equally rapid addition of extra millions ensured that southern agriculture could now send little food north.¹⁵ In 1750 much northern land was waste or severely underutilized and no widespread and robust peasant economy had existed over much of the region, so the new opportunities provided by population growth led to substantial change. In particular, new commercial farms of various sizes were created here from the enclosure of waste land (not from the dispossession of

¹³ J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (1911), 4th edn (1927; London, 1978); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised edn (Harmondsworth, 1968); Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia* (London, 1977); Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1872–1923* (London, 1985); Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England, 1850–1925: A Social History* (London, 1991).

¹⁴ Ian Carter, *Farm Life in Northeast Scotland, 1840–1914: The Poor Man's Country* (Edinburgh, 1979); T. M. Devine, *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1770–1914* (Edinburgh, 1984); Richard Anthony, *Herds and Hinds: Farm Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1900–1939* (East Linton, 1997).

¹⁵ Roger Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City: The Food Supply of Manchester, 1770–1870* (Manchester, 1992); J. D. Marshall and John K. Walton, *The Lake Counties from 1830 to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 1981), 4–5. See also Stephen Caunce, 'Northern English Industrial Towns: Rivals or Partners?', *Urban Hist.*, xxx (2003).

existing small farmers). In absolute terms, therefore, northern agriculture developed and grew, and was a vital part of the north's pioneering shift to an economy dominated by industry, again as in Scotland.¹⁶ F. M. L. Thompson's thorough statistical analysis has confirmed how effectively northern agriculture weathered the effects of international competition after 1870, and by 1890 there were substantial, and sometimes growing, arable tracts in every county except Westmorland.¹⁷

Not only did farmworkers exist in large numbers in the north, but, as the sharp line drawn across the midlands in James Caird's much misinterpreted map of mid nineteenth-century rural England indicates, earnings in the northern zone consistently stood much higher than in the conventional southern 'heartland'.¹⁸ Until the economic crisis of the 1920s, various calculations of Northumbrian and Lancastrian weekly cash wages consistently put them at least 50 per cent higher than those prevailing across the south, apart from in the immediate vicinity of the metropolis. Moreover, northern regular workers were paid all year without fail, whereas many weeks' wages were lost by their southern equivalents due to bad weather or lack of need for work to be done. Caird's map also demonstrated that this northern distinctiveness did not stem directly from either cropping systems or terrain, though both have been repeatedly cited as explanations then and since.¹⁹ It was instead due to competition for labour, which also explains why the north had generally welcomed the threshing machine and rejected as irrelevant both Captain Swing and the chiliastic unionism of Joseph Arch, and why its family farms were still multiplying vigorously.²⁰

Finally, northern urbanization combined an apparently scattered character with heavy concentration in restricted areas,

¹⁶ Stephen Caunce, 'A Golden Age of Agriculture?', in Ian Inkster *et al.* (eds.), *The Golden Age: Essays in British Social and Economic History, 1850–1870* (Aldershot, 2000).

¹⁷ F. M. L. Thompson, 'An Anatomy of English Agriculture, 1870–1914', in B. A. Holderness and Michael Turner (eds.), *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700–1920: Essays for Gordon Mingay* (London, 1991).

¹⁸ James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850–51* (London, 1852), frontispiece.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Peter Dewey, 'Farm Labour', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, vii, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2000), 839, or James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976), 69.

²⁰ Andrew Charlesworth, *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548–1900* (London, 1983), 42.

which meant that substantial parts of the region were left far more lightly populated and lacking in towns of any kind than the south with its metropolis surrounded by a dense network of old market towns. We therefore have an apparent paradox of a new and prosperous rural northern England thriving alongside and even amid northern industry, and it would be absurd to assume that such a different setting would simply echo the kind of society seen in the south. Conventionally, a steady 'release' of rural labour is assumed to be essential to sustain manufacturing growth, yet unprecedented population growth in the north meant that the much-cited flight of the southern dispossessed to northern factories was not needed — and has long been disproved by detailed research.²¹ Most southern rural migrants went to London, and the scale of the relocation was due more to the capital's evident economic success, coupled with local deindustrialization, than to enclosures. In 1850 Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire together accounted for a twelfth of English and Welsh agriculturists and they were home to over 40 per cent of the north's total, despite being England's most intensively industrialized counties. Even in 1911, census figures show this region, together with Cheshire, accounting for almost exactly a fifth of the total people in agriculture in England and Wales, even disregarding the region's unusually heavy informal commitment from farmers' wives and daughters.²² *A Century of Agricultural Statistics* singled out Lancashire and Cheshire as displaying consistently outstanding absolute concentrations of agricultural workers in the nineteenth century.²³ Northern farms also produced a greater share of the nation's food than the relative size of the labour force indicated.²⁴

To leave the north out of any attempt to understand rural England as a whole, then, is indefensible, and even to sideline it is to miss out such a vital aspect that what remains misleads very seriously by default. Its experience shows that the English countryside was not simply a periphery left behind by modernization, or even fractured by it. Agriculture was so heavily integrated into the overall processes of social and economic change in this crucial

²¹ Arthur Redford, *Labour Migration in England, 1800–1850*, 2nd edn, ed. W. H. Chaloner (New York, 1968).

²² HMSO, *Census of England and Wales, 1911*, x (London, 1914).

²³ Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics* (London, 1968), 63 and maps 17A and 17B.

²⁴ Caunce, 'Golden Age of Agriculture?'

region that our understanding of the character of the whole industrialization process is faulty if we do not investigate it. Indeed, the efficient commercial farming that emerged there defied development theories of all shades.²⁵ This article therefore aims not to replace existing accounts, but, rather, to supplement them in a vital way. The hiring fairs are placed at the centre because they provide a clear and accessible indicator of the extent, variety, vitality and equitable nature of service across the north, something that is hard to investigate by other means. They are also worthy of deeper analysis in their own right, for they collectively provided a surprisingly sophisticated management tool for getting the most out of the available farm labour within each locality and across the north as a whole; but these aspects and much else about them are worthy of further research and are beyond the scope of this article.

I

THE HIRING FAIRS

Because service contracts in each given area terminated at the same time and servants did not generally remain on the same farm, hiring fairs were among the most important and persistent events of the northern rural calendar, forming the linchpin and public face of northern service. They served both sexes and combined pleasure and business, as a typical newspaper report from Kirkbymoorside, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, in 1901 laconically encapsulates: 'there was a big crowd here . . . and the usual amusements afforded good fun for the servants. The weather was fine, and several servants were engaged for another year. Girls were in great demand'.²⁶ Gary Moses has calculated from incomplete police estimates that about 16,000 people sought jobs every year between 1864 and 1871 at the hirings held within Yorkshire's East Riding, when almost half its major venues lay just outside its boundaries.²⁷ The 'usual amusements' mentioned above ensured

²⁵ Stephen Caunce, 'Farm Servants and the Development of English Capitalism', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xlv (1997); *Wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture*, vol. ii, *Reports of Investigators* (hereafter *Reports on Wages and Conditions*), P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 253.

²⁶ *Malton Gaz.*, 30 Nov. 1901.

²⁷ Chief Constable's Report to East Riding Quarter Sessions, quoted in Gary Moses, '“Rustic and Rude”: Hiring Fairs and their Critics in East Yorkshire, c.1850–75', *Rural Hist.*, vii (1996), 172 n. 36.

that attendances could be far higher than even Moses' figures suggest, as we shall see. It is therefore remarkable that these events have been largely forgotten except in works on folklore, which itself is an intriguing comment on historians' priorities.²⁸

Hirings have been easy to overlook because they directly generated almost no conventional documentary evidence, since contracts were oral. This also means that direct, quantifiable data is virtually non-existent. In addition, they were very rarely listed in directories and almanacs, because those who used them were well aware of their location and dates. The information in the Royal Commissions referred to already made an invaluable starting point for this investigation and it was cross-checked against the extensive, albeit usually brief, factual reports, such as the one above, from the local and regional press. Press reports usually listed agreed wage rates, but frustratingly for historians, their lack of processions, civic ritual or speeches by notables meant that most saw them as unworthy of attention. Feature articles do very occasionally provide small windows into service as contemporaries saw it, however. Oral testimony exists from interviews conducted by various collectors around the north, which cumulatively is so consistent as to be beyond serious doubt. For coherence and brevity, just one speaker is used here — Mr Spearman, who attended the fairs in Northumberland as both a hireling and a hirer.²⁹ A remarkable and coherent record of the fairs' locations, the business done and the wages agreed emerges from all these sources. We can delineate the zone within which fairs flourished and therefore where service continued to be both generally accepted and significant in extent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the census no longer concerned itself with such matters. We can also examine how an apparently utilitarian institution actually served many purposes, explain why all participants were determined to maintain it and

²⁸ See, for instance, Christina Hole, *British Folk Customs* (London, 1976), 97, 127; J. P. D. Dunbabin, 'The Incidence and Organisation of Agricultural Trades Unionism in the 1870s', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xvi (1968); J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1974), chs. 7 and 11. Dunbabin showed little interest in fairs as events. Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-Century Farm Women', deals with fairs in general, but briefly and without detail. Jon Catt, *Northern Hiring Fairs* (Chorley, 1986), covers the whole region but is far less academic.

²⁹ Mr Spearman, born 1896: BM, tapes 118 and 119. He spent his entire career as a farm servant and then farmer in south Northumberland. Interview conducted by the author.

repudiate the common view that it had simply persisted from inertia.

The most distinctive function of hiring fairs throughout their long history was simply facilitating the negotiation of the thousands of new contracts between farmers and farm servants, male and female, once or twice a year.³⁰ Most servants were notoriously footloose when contracts ended, yet the 300 farmers who were estimated to attend Ulverston, for instance, or the 150 reported at Lancaster, met their goals rapidly with no queuing, no form-filling, and with nobody else to blame if it went wrong.³¹ Fairs were thus a sensible means of handling this brief and intense burst of negotiation that resulted from the simultaneous termination of all contracts covering the same type of worker in any area. Where few servants were needed, however, they could be hired informally, and in our period fairs were absent from the heavily industrialized zone made up of Lancashire south of the Ribble valley together with virtually the whole of the contiguous industrial zone that spread over the Mersey into Cheshire and across the Pennines into Yorkshire as far as Leeds and Sheffield, except an enclave around Penistone. Thus, the commissioner Dewhurst described hiring at fairs in Cheshire in 1919 as 'moribund' in his Royal Commission evidence, and though he found one elderly farmer who still attended a fair in Macclesfield, another farmer just 2 miles away professed to be unaware of that fair, or of service as a practice.³² The timing of contracts remained synchronized for convenience, in Cheshire, for instance, still being agreed 'a month before Christmas'.³³ This distinctive sub-region, stretching from Preston southwards, where small family farming provided a more effective solution to the problems of getting labour in the face of industrial competition, provides a valuable internal counterfactual to the general situation, preventing a drift into a crude geographical determinism that has undermined many analyses of northern high wages. Low but sometimes significant numbers of servants, and some fairs, also existed in the

³⁰ Counce, 'East Riding Hiring Fairs'.

³¹ *Lancaster Guardian*, 28 Nov. 1901.

³² *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 39, supported by C. Stella Davies, *A History of Macclesfield* (Didsbury, 1961), 66–7. Wilson Fox recorded several term dates, and *Kelly's Post Office Directory, 1896* (London, 1896), noted a fair at Sandbach (but no others) on 28 December.

³³ Frederick H. Crossley, *Cheshire* (London, 1949), 316.

east midlands, but they genuinely seem to have become a relic within a fundamentally different system by then, so they are not included in this article.³⁴

The northern fair calendar, unlike that of the south, revolved primarily around the November festival of Martinmas, though only at Ripon and Macclesfield were fairs ever apparently tied to that specific day. This gives extra significance to the November term dates for Cheshire contracts. In most of Yorkshire, where contracts ran for the traditional twelve months, one sequence of Martinmas fairs sufficed. The calendar change of 1752 had required that such events maintain their established places in the natural cycle, despite nominal religious links, and thereafter most of Yorkshire duly located the fairs around Old Martinmas Day, 23 November. Elsewhere the traditional date of 11 November was maintained, however, often with a spring hiring as well. The origins of this latter are unknown, though apparently in the north-west the development of Whitsun fairs came after 1825 or so. Using a moveable feast complicated negotiations by creating summer and winter terms that varied between twenty-four and twenty-six weeks, which could explain why other areas that had biannual hiring preferred a fixed date in May for the first fair.³⁵ Some argue that such patterns reflected a need for less winter work in pastoral districts, but varying work intensities provided the explicit legal reason why no part of yearly cash wages could traditionally be claimed until the whole contract was completed.

East of the Pennines, towards the Scottish border, the distinctive hiring of whole families created peculiarities, though the yearly term was retained. These families were housed in cottages on or near the farmstead, and negotiated contracts in mid March to allow the organization of affairs and the planting of gardens before the general exchange of accommodation on the day before Old May Day, the 13th. Mid May also saw half-yearly hirings for single people throughout Northumberland and County Durham, though the latter also saw yearly hiring at Martinmas.³⁶

³⁴ Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 56, 66–9.

³⁵ Robert Poole, *Time's Alteration: Calendar Reform in Early Modern England* (London, 1998), ch. 9 and also pp. 142–7; C. M. L. Bouch and G. P. Jones, *A Short Economic and Social History of the Lake Counties, 1500–1830* (Manchester, 1961), 337; Charles R. Denton, 'Cumbrian Hirings', in Hilary Gray (ed.), *Cumbria: Lake District Life. A Celebration of 40 Years* (London, 1991), 34.

³⁶ *Yorkshire Herald*, 29 Nov. 1910, for instance, quotes annual wages from several hirings as the norm.

Northumbrian autumn fairs were simply called 'November Hirings'.³⁷ Specialist jobs could generate additional small fairs, as with the hiring of stewards and shepherds at Berwick on 5 January.³⁸ Wilson Fox reported an annual Candlemas fair at Garstang, held on 2 February, something unique but confirmed by local press reports at the start of our period.³⁹ *Whitaker's Almanack* cited a hiring there on Old Martinmas Day, but this remains unsupported and seems unlikely. Still other fairs in May and June, known in Skipton at least as 'barber hirings', provided temporary workers for haymaking. Many of those who attended were outsiders, including itinerant Irishmen.⁴⁰ In southern Lakeland itinerant workers might wait for several weeks in bad weather since hiring began only when the hay was ready.⁴¹ Such events were known elsewhere, but I have not attempted to locate them all since those involved were not hired as servants.⁴²

Fairs were much more than just business events, however, for the large crowds drew substantial funfairs and many itinerant traders. Such occasions attracted many more people of all ages who were not looking for work, or were not even servants, and fairs flourished well into the 1920s. About nine thousand people came by train alone to Cockermouth in Cumberland in 1874.⁴³ The formalities associated with major civic events, or the formal folk rituals often seen at traditional carnivals, might be lacking, but larger hirings provided entertainment otherwise never seen in small market towns because they generally occurred when few other opportunities existed for itinerant traders, commercial funfair operators and proprietors of entertainments, including

³⁷ H. M. Neville, *A Corner in the North: Yesterday and Today with Border Folk* (1909; Newcastle upon Tyne, 1980), ch. 4. See also William C. Little, 'Report on the Farm-Prize Competition in Northumberland and Durham in 1887', *Jl Roy. Agric. Soc.*, 2nd ser., xxiii (1887), 594.

³⁸ A. R. Wright, *British Calendar Customs: England*, ed. T. E. Lones, 3 vols. (London, 1936-40), ii, 78.

³⁹ *Report on Wages and Earnings*, P.P., 1900 (Cd. 346), lxxxii, 16; *Preston Guardian*, 3 Feb. 1889; 7 Feb. 1891; 6 Feb. 1892.

⁴⁰ *Whitaker's Almanack* (London, 1899) refers to the forthcoming event in 1900; staff at Skipton Library kindly provided local information; Mr E. Jarvis, tape 11/2, author's collection.

⁴¹ Roger K. Bingham, *The Chronicles of Milnthorpe* (Milnthorpe, 1987), 67-8, 229-30.

⁴² They do not occur in any fair lists.

⁴³ Cockermouth figures from *West Cumberland Times*, 30 May 1874.

travelling theatres.⁴⁴ Major hirings could take on new lives from these apparently secondary purposes, so, for instance, thirteen local mayors opened an immense pleasure fair at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1937, long after business had permanently ceased at the once equally enormous hiring fair. The pleasure fair continues today, still known as ‘the mop’, the southern term for a hiring.⁴⁵ We must be careful not to give too much emphasis to these attractions: at Keswick in November 1890, for example, ‘there was little to show an observer that there was anything beyond an ordinary market’; but this was a very rare report.⁴⁶ A general account of north-western hirings from a newspaper in 1910 is much more representative, and is supported by oral testimony:

The inrush of people to the local market town is remarkable [as] the country folk regard the occasion as a general holiday — pretty much the same as townfolk look upon Bank Holidays — and they resort to Carlisle, Penrith or Kendal etc, en masse, for business or for pleasure, but usually for both combined. Term Saturday in Kendal or Term Tuesday in Penrith — for the hirings are invariably held on market day — is a happy meeting time for the young people who are either seeking engagements, or who merely look forward to a day’s outing if they be ‘stoppin’ on’ as the phrase goes. To the rural mind, the crowd on ‘Term Tuesday’ seems to be unlimited; it would be impossible to match it anywhere . . . ‘London and Leeds! Cush, man, Billy, yeh’ve surely never seen Pe’rith platform on a “Big Whissen Tuesday” . . . now that’s a crowd. I guess they never have half such a crush i’ either London station or Leeds!’

. . . North-country men and women are not easily depressed by any unfavourable weather. They can bear a good deal of discomfort with scarce a grumble while they smilingly say, ‘We’re neither sugar nor salt — we’ll not melt . . .’ It is, perhaps, not remarkable that the lads and lassies, testing the joys of temporary release from service, exhibit a noisy joviality when meeting . . . Not given to shaking hands in a general way, their hearty greetings at ‘Term-time’ are as boisterous as they are genuine. Their faces are bright and happy, as if care were a stranger to them, and their pockets are full of money . . . and they are generous in treating their sweethearts to ‘penorths o’ taffy’ or ‘penorths o’ ginger-bread’, or to an exciting round among the various shows and hobby-horses.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ A dramatic painting of a fair after dark in 1891, by Cuthbert Rigby, is reproduced in Kendal Civic Society, *Old Kendal: A Selection of Paintings, Drawings and Prints from the Collection of Kendal Town Council* (Kendal, 2003), 37, accompanied by a photograph of the same fair in 1900. Mr Spearman: BM, tape 119/2, recalled that funfairs were found mostly at the November hirings in early twentieth-century Northumberland.

⁴⁵ *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 15 Oct. 1937, 1, quoted in Wright, *British Calendar Customs*, ed. Lones, iii, 98–9. Stratford Library staff kindly provided information on the modern mop.

⁴⁶ *Westmorland Gaz.*, 15 Nov. 1890.

⁴⁷ *Yorkshire Post*, 10 Nov. 1910.

We should not, therefore, underrate the wider importance of fairs for society, and such reports indicate that rural labourers here had embraced commercialism in their own fashion, rather than resisted it. It was usual practice for servants to receive their full term's wage just before a fair, and they therefore made many purchases. Metcalfe and Bainbridge of Penrith, for instance, placed a large newspaper advertisement declaring a Martinmas sale on suits and overcoats in 1895, and Berry's at Darlington in 1908 boasted 'November Hirings: Best Show in Darlington of Jewellery, Watches, Clocks, Suits, Breeches, Boots and Presents'.⁴⁸ The willingness to advertise in this way testifies to the relative prosperity of these working-class youths and young adults. There often seems to have been friction between market traders and the farm lads, who always collectively supported anyone who suspected underhand dealing, but, again, plenty of business was done.

The fairs' boisterous character, with plenty of drinking and fighting, also reflected a role as the only real safety valve for servants who spent most of the year tied to farmsteads even after work in the fields was over. However, a small but vociferous group of clerical critics, mostly Evangelicals and their supporters, perceived the fairs as immoral and even actively wicked. Their virulent condemnation began in the mid nineteenth century, but the campaign's ineffectiveness, despite their persistence over decades, demonstrates their isolation.⁴⁹ Certainly, for shopkeepers these were probably the busiest days of the year in towns like Kirkbymoorside, with its population of only about one and a half thousand, so they offered little support to the evangelical campaign. Thus, Appleby in 1895,

compared with many former years . . . may be said to have been practically deserted — a circumstance which, says our correspondent, most folks attribute to the excessive charges made for the standing room of shows &c. by a Corporation which claims to be 'reformed', but whose action in this respect has injured the town very materially from a financial point of view, whilst little, if any, gain has morally accrued.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Penrith Observer*, 5 Nov. 1895; *Darlington and Stockton Times*, 14 Nov. 1908.

⁴⁹ See Gary Moses, *Rural Moral Reform in Nineteenth-Century England: The Crusade against Adolescent Farm Servants and Hiring Fairs* (Lewiston, NY, 2007), for the fullest account of their actual campaign. Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-Century Farm Women', 187–8, reveals a very similar picture in the north-east. Clerical campaigning is irrelevant here, but has strongly influenced many historians' perceptions of fairs, as, for instance, David Kerr Cameron, *The English Fair* (Stroud, 1998), 120–1, and ch. 8 generally.

⁵⁰ *Penrith Observer*, 5 Nov. 1895.

With regard to actual hiring, cash wage rates for servants differed greatly from year to year according to demand and supply, unlike the rates for non-servants. Youngsters sought steady yearly wage increases, and everyone else embraced a culture of automatic and determined renegotiation. In 1817 times had been so bad that men had agreed to work for no cash wage at all in the north-west, and similarly in 1922 at Keswick, 'an influx of unemployed for the first hirings for the county . . . were willing to take almost anything to get a job with good food'.⁵¹ Following the Wall Street Crash, Bob Stephens found wages on offer in Cocker-mouth at Martinmas 1929 exactly half the value of those he had secured the previous Whitsun, but he remembered youngsters being philosophical.⁵² In contrast, Manchester Corporation's construction of a water pipeline created such a labour shortage around Kendal in 1890 that many servants agreed good terms before Martinmas, and the actual hirings saw 'a very large assemblage of agriculturists' so desperate that wages increased sharply.⁵³ May at Hexham in 1900 saw 'servants holding out for big wages, which masters were compelled to give. The hirings were described by some farmers as the dearest ever held'.⁵⁴ Police, army and even industrial recruiters might attend, providing opportunities for those at the end of service and tired of farming, or wanting more money, which increased the pressure on farmers at such times. As I have argued elsewhere, these fairs automatically created uncoordinated but very effective collective bargaining.⁵⁵ Organized if short-term agitation which consciously echoed the southern campaign of Joseph Arch occurred at Cumbrian hirings in the early 1870s, and Moses felt the same was true in East Yorkshire. J. P. D. Dunbabin recorded even more determined activity in the north-east, including the formation of short-lived unions, in which women played a full but unappreciated part, according to Judy Gielgud.⁵⁶ Again,

⁵¹ Bouch and Jones, *Short Economic and Social History of the Lake Counties*, 338; *Yorkshire Herald*, 16 Nov. 1922.

⁵² Melvyn Bragg, *Speak for England: An Essay on England, 1900–1975, Based on Interviews with Inhabitants of Wigton, Cumberland* (London, 1976), 184–6.

⁵³ *Westmorland Gaz.*, 15 Nov. 1890.

⁵⁴ *Newcastle Courant*, 19 May 1900.

⁵⁵ Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, 69–71.

⁵⁶ Marshall and Walton, *Lake Counties*, 75–7, based upon reports from the *Whitehaven News*; Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent*; Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-Century Farm Women'.

the reporting of wage rates across the region is clear proof that they were of much more than local interest.

II

SPATIAL AND FUNCTIONAL PATTERNS OF FAIRS

The Map represents the most complete identification and mapping of fairs' locations for this period to date, drawn mostly from the press and supplemented by Royal Commission lists and oral testimony. In addition, all established market centres with no hiring fairs are indicated.⁵⁷ The spatial pattern changed slowly in response to economic change, with a slow process of concentration apparent before 1890, contradicting any expectation that traditional events would be inherently inflexible. A few unsubstantiated references have been discounted, and some puzzling omissions, especially Skipton in Yorkshire, were confirmed by local enquiries.⁵⁸ The line Wilson Fox drew between counties doing significant business and those where fairs functioned primarily for pleasure by 1900 is indicated, although Lincolnshire's internal variation is obscured because Wilson Fox followed county boundaries. Rutland's inclusion within his service zone confirms the residual hiring in the east midlands, often with terms tilted against hirelings.⁵⁹

Within the active zone, no settlement, however small, was more than 15 miles as the crow flies from a hiring. The overwhelming majority of servants lived and worked within 6 or 7 miles of at least one, which fitted with the traditional rule of thumb for spacing

⁵⁷ The table 'Population of all the Market Towns and Boroughs in England', in E. Baines, *History, Directory and Gazetteer of the County of York*, 2 vols. (Leeds, 1822-3), ii, 611-14, provides a comprehensive, contemporary list not influenced or obscured by the later massive rise in urban populations.

⁵⁸ The Map is a full record of northern fairs held for hiring servants in this period discovered by the author. *Whitaker's Almanack* (London, annual) provides the most accessible, but very incomplete, listings of fair venues. It only gives dates, and some entries seem incorrect. Some trade directories also provide very incomplete listings, with no detail. Most local histories, including the *Victoria County History*, ignored them, and can in any case be unreliable: for instance, K. J. Allison, in *A History of the County of York, East Riding*, ii (Victoria County Histories, xlii, Oxford, 1974), 54, says Bridlington fairs ceased around 1900 and refers only to those 'held on the Tuesday nearest to 14 November', actually only the first of a sequence of three. Wright, *British Calendar Customs*, ed. Lones, iii, collates fragmentary notes from many contributors, but is also incomplete and must be used with extreme caution. The author would welcome evidence of hiring at other venues in order to complete a definitive list.

⁵⁹ *Report on Wages and Earnings*, P.P., 1900 (Cd. 346), lxxxii, 15-18.

rural markets conveniently. Most people could therefore readily choose between two or more venues and visit several on different days. Most Yorkshire venues started their yearly sequence before contracts ended, so hirelings had a customary right to attend one early fair. The majority of fairs occurred in Martinmas week, however, so not all could be held on market days. As this was a period between contracts, servants attended as many as they wished. A total of three fairs per venue was commonest, though Thirsk had four, and Hull only one very large event.⁶⁰ Some small fairs also apparently held just one session, where servants could try their luck with the option of using others later.

Two fairs twice a year seemed most usual where contracts were shorter. Thus Penrith hiring fair started on (New) Martinmas Tuesday, accompanying the regular market, and the town held its second a week later.⁶¹ Fairs in County Durham and northerly parts of Yorkshire were similar as to timing, as at Darlington on Monday 13 and 20 November in 1899, followed by Monday 7 and 14 May in 1900.⁶² In addition, Ulverston had a third, run-away fair for those wanting a change soon after starting work, something also known in East Yorkshire, although theoretically illegal.⁶³

Northumbrian reports indicate just one fair per term, and H. M. Neville indicates that farmers allowed servants extra time off here, sometimes several days together, specifically for attending fairs.⁶⁴ This was necessary as three days off at each break between contracts was all that was routinely allowed otherwise. Elsewhere, servants on half-yearly contracts were given two separate paid holidays of a week each, which understandably formed a powerful incentive for participation. In November, it must be noted, absences rarely caused employers any real inconvenience; on the contrary, it could save them money if they were not obliged to provide meals.

Servants definitely shopped around: Mr Spearman, a Northumbrian farm servant, recalled going to Bellingham fair in 1907 or 1908, about 15 miles from home, and refusing the only offer he

⁶⁰ Counce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, 55–6.

⁶¹ *Penrith Observer*, 19 Nov. 1895.

⁶² *Durham County Advertiser*, 17 and 24 Nov. 1899; 11 and 18 May 1900.

⁶³ William Rollinson, *Life and Tradition in the Lake District* (Clapham, 1981), 188–9; Counce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, 37.

⁶⁴ Neville, *Corner in the North*, 16.

**NORTHERN ENGLISH
HIRING FAIRS,
1890-1930**



Market centres listed in Baines but without hiring fairs by 1890

- | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Longtown | 14. Stokesley | 27. Cawood |
| 2. Haltwhistle | 15. Sedbergh | 28. Aberford |
| 3. Sunderland | 16. Carlmel | 29. Kirkham |
| 4. Houghton-le-Spring | 17. Askrigg | 30. Preston |
| 5. Ailston | 18. Leyburn | 31. Sherburn |
| 6. Maryport | 19. Masham | 32. South Cave |
| 7. Workington | 20. Kirkby Lonsdale | 33. Ormskirk |
| 8. Hartlepool | 21. Grassington | 34. Clitheroe |
| 9. Middleton-in-Teesdale | 22. Boroughbridge | 35. Dalton-in-Furness |
| 10. Orton | 23. Gisburn | 36. Hawes |
| 11. Brough | 24. Ripley | 37. Leeds |
| 12. Whitehaven | 25. Poulton-le-Fylde | 38. Skipton |
| 13. Yarm | 26. Tadcaster | |

- Annual November fair at market centre listed in Baines's *Directory*
- Biannual fair at market centre listed in Baines's *Directory*
- Annual fair at centre with no market listed in Baines's *Directory*
- Biannual fair at centre with no market listed in Baines's *Directory*
- (2) Number of fairs in the Martinmas sequence, from press reports
- (+) More than one fair reported in the Martinmas sequence; number unclear
- Market centre for rural area, listed in Baines's *Directory*, but with no hiring fair

received when another lad warned him against it; but at Hexham he later got a job at a much higher wage. This was a typical experience that refutes the common elite characterization of hirings as slave markets. At the same time, this wage variability largely cancelled out any apparent risk of unemployment.⁶⁵ Nor were all fairs alike: at Newcastle in other years Mr Spearman found the demand was mostly for milk lads, a job he disliked, and the extreme drunkenness at Morpeth in the afternoons put him off hiring there.⁶⁶

Explaining the geographical location of hiring fairs is surprisingly difficult, which suggests that it was driven by its own logic. Thus, fair location certainly did not respect county boundary lines, especially in the East Riding. Also, livestock fairs generally had a locational pattern and calendar of their own even though hirings did sometimes coincide with them, as at Doncaster, Barnard Castle and Wigton, possibly because Martinmas was also the traditional time for clearing out surplus livestock.⁶⁷ A link to market towns does exist, but is not definitive. Thus, Carlisle, Thirsk, Berwick and Beverley were commercial centres for prime agricultural production areas, and hosted hiring fairs, but Skipton, a similar nodal point, saw only haytime hiring. Overall, in Cumberland, Westmorland and north Lancashire, around half the functioning market centres had no hirings: this was true of Longtown, Whitehaven, Kirkby Lonsdale and Poulton-le-Fylde. In Northumberland, in contrast, where market centres were thinly dispersed and sometimes tiny, they were all venues for hiring, and in addition, Lowick and Cornhill-on-Tweed (perhaps the smallest venue of all) hosted hirings despite having no nineteenth-century market functions. Similarly, a greater East Riding had fairs in all its functioning market centres, and also in some which had once had important markets but were now severely or totally decayed, such as Hunmanby and Hedon. Sheriff Hutton in the North Riding (population c.600) continued to function as a hiring though little more than a village which never possessed a railway station, and despite the proximity of several better-connected fairs, including York. However, hiring here sometimes followed market functions into abandonment, as

⁶⁵ Mr Spearman: BM, tape 118/1.

⁶⁶ Mr Spearman: BM, tape 119/1.

⁶⁷ *Yorkshire Post*, 12 Nov. 1914; Alan Wilkinson, *Barnard Castle: Historic Market Town* (Otley, 1998), 112; Denton, 'Cumbrian Hirings', 35.

at South Cave.⁶⁸ In Durham and the remainder of Yorkshire hiring fairs took place in half to two-thirds of the available market venues.

The persistence of so many centres apparently served several purposes. Most obviously, when numbers of those seeking work grew too big for personal, random negotiations to work well, effectiveness was impaired. Most servants apparently wanted a job in a familiar place, where they could maintain some contact with friends and family. Mr Spearman, recalling his time as a farmer, remembered that Hexham employers liked to hire Durham men, considered north Northumberland men too slow, and used Scots as a last resort. He never saw any Yorkshire workers so far north, and recalled the conventional opinion that men from southern England only did two hours' worth of work a day.⁶⁹ Such perceptions are important here as evidence of invisible internal barriers to the notional free flow of labour so beloved of classical economists.

However, some towns, such as Doncaster, served large regions and were always very busy. Thus, in 1906 Millom saw 'a large attendance of farmers and farm servants from South Cumberland and North Lancashire'. Apparently, even some Skipton workers visited it.⁷⁰ The long sequence of four Martinmas fairs at Thirsk may also reflect this town's location between the Yorkshire and far northern systems, with their differing term dates and practices. Going to one of these regional fairs allowed an adventurous minority to seek a fresh start.⁷¹ Also, migration in general during the period covered by this article was more a cumulative matter of many short moves rather than a few long ones, and in this setting such a mechanism allowed the northern fairs to facilitate, more or less invisibly, a regional response to changes in both the general and local economic climate by the

⁶⁸ *The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812–1837*, ed. Janice E. Crowther and Peter A. Crowther (Oxford, 1997), records hiring in this 'important market village' taking place throughout the 1820s and 1830s, and shows both the presence of stalls and the fact that young people also went to Hull on the stagecoach for pleasure. Moses confirms that the number of venues reduced sharply after the 1870s: Gary Moses, 'Social Relations in the Victorian Countryside: Hiring Fairs and their Critics in the East Riding of Yorkshire, c.1840–1880' (Nottingham Trent Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2000), 126, 183–4.

⁶⁹ Mr Spearman: BM, tape 119/2.

⁷⁰ *Yorkshire Post*, 14 Nov. 1906. Information from Skipton Library.

⁷¹ Melvin Bragg, *The Hired Man* (London, 1969), a novel based closely on oral testimony, begins with such a decision.

agricultural labour force, as with the strong response to the Wall Street Crash mentioned previously. Though firmly rooted in locality, northern fairs actually prevented parochialism becoming a barrier to commercial effectiveness, with the possible exception of Garstang's Candlemas fair.

The nature of the venue was evidently quite irrelevant in determining whether hiring took place there. Certainly, no chasm existed between major urban centres and rural areas, for fairs flourished in the heart of both Hull and Newcastle upon Tyne. Fairs also coexisted with heavy industry in Millom, Darlington and Rotherham; with mining in Bishop Auckland and Doncaster; with tourism in Scarborough, Hornsea and Bridlington; and with a fishing economy at Whitby. In contrast, Preston was so central to agricultural marketing in mid Lancashire that, despite industrialization, it had possibly the largest entry for produce and livestock fairs in *Whitaker's Almanack* in 1900 apart from London. Moreover, the Preston courts had heard nineteenth-century cases of breach of contract associated with service contracts.⁷² However, the town was the only county or riding administrative centre in the six northern counties that never hosted a hiring fair, even though Garstang (population 1,100), just 10 miles north, did. The 1919 Royal Commission pointed out that what little labour the small milk-producing farms in the heavily industrialized Ribble valley above Preston needed was hired to live in, but these farmers seem to have contacted men at markets, or by word of mouth, as previously discussed. Leeds and Hawes (population 1,400), as different as two places can be, both lacked ordinary fairs after 1890, but each provided hay harvest labour for the Yorkshire dales.⁷³ The latter still attracted two Irishmen in 1967, and was obviously convenient for local farmers.⁷⁴ Leeds must have relied on its excellent communications, and may have once seen general Martinmas hiring, though apparently mostly

⁷² See, for instance, a case from Broughton, between Preston and Garstang, and another from Walton-le-Dale, south of Preston, in *Preston Guardian*, 31 Aug. 1844; 26 Jan. 1850.

⁷³ *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 137–8. Perusal of the *Darlington and Stockton Times* showed that in this period, while other events in Hawes were reported, no hiring fairs were recorded except at haytime. The paper made a policy of reporting such fairs in other nearby centres shown on the Map.

⁷⁴ *Guardian*, 5 July 1967, quoted in Dave and Toni Arthur, 'Available for Hire', *Folk Rev.* (Sept. 1972), 6.

for females seeking domestic service.⁷⁵ Hawes had once had a conventional Martinmas fair.⁷⁶ The possibility of travelling in by train may have benefited some places, but since rural stations lay miles away from most outlying farms and hamlets in catchment areas this is easily overstated.

No specialized infrastructure was required as hiring usually involved servants lining up informally in a particular street, and farmers walking up and down before selecting someone to open negotiations with. The presence of itinerant market traders reduced the need for permanent shops, and funfairs would appear anywhere that business justified setting up. Pubs were much appreciated since, quite apart from their celebratory atmosphere, November weather could be dreadful, but the really small venues with few or none managed somehow. The Evangelicals did achieve the widespread adoption of indoor hiring for females, but otherwise fairs remained stubbornly outdoor affairs. There are references to indicate that at Newcastle all hiring business moved indoors, but even here it simply located itself in the Corn Exchange without altering its character. Moreover, male outdoor hiring definitely still took place in the Bigg Market after 1900.⁷⁷ Even women and girls seem to have universally resisted the registry format that moral reformers also urged, and in 1899 at Driffield 'the farmers' wives seemed at their wits' end over the servant girl question. They were difficult to hire and very independent'.⁷⁸ The essence of these fairs was avoidance of bureaucracy or expense, both virtues desired by business in the twenty-first century, but never achieved, and the tiny documentary footprint they have left in archives should be acknowledged as an indicator of business efficiency, not irrelevance.⁷⁹

Change to this locational pattern was easier than with other types of fairs because, as with much else in the north, hiring fairs rested upon neither ancient privilege nor vested interests, and could respond to customers' preferences where a real consensus for change developed. In the East Yorkshire system in

⁷⁵ C. C. Robinson, *The Dialect of Leeds and its Neighbourhood* (Leeds, 1862), s.v. 'statutes'.

⁷⁶ *Bedale and Northallerton Times*, 29 Nov. 1884, reported a busy hiring at Hawes.

⁷⁷ Information from John Gall of Beamish Museum, based on the recollections of his father, an ex-farmworker who became a farmer.

⁷⁸ *Beverley Guardian*, 18 Nov. 1899.

⁷⁹ For more details, see Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, ch. 5.

particular, fairs after 1750 reflected changes in marketing links to the industrial districts. Thus, despite being located across the river Ouse in the West Riding, the new port of Goole eclipsed the ancient market centre of Howden, as well as nearby Snaith. We have already noted that South Cave's hirings ceased, along with some other older markets. In Lancashire North of the Sands, Barrow-in-Furness never challenged Ulverston, but nearby Millom, a smaller creation of the Cumberland iron boom, acquired a fair, probably at the expense of nearby Bootle. Egremont's lost market status, including a hiring, was revived by industrialization, but Workington and Whitehaven never developed fairs despite long-standing and flourishing markets. The law always recognized the fairs not as single events but as a system, with the sixteenth-century Statute of Artificers explicitly requiring constables to manage them according to need and custom rather than naming specific venues.⁸⁰ No one levied traditional tolls, no licence to trade was needed and, almost certainly, they had emerged spontaneously in the medieval period before the law stepped in to regulate and make use of them.

This pattern emphatically does not suggest a landscape cut up into the natural, self-contained *pays* or 'countries' beloved of enthusiasts for an idealized rural past.⁸¹ The most frequent location was towards or at the mouth of a significant valley as it emerged onto a plain, allowing the business of hill farms and the more densely populated lowlands to be combined at around the 100-metre contour. Thus, Mr Spearman recognized Morpeth's two distinct groups of farmers, those from the Pennines, whom the lads preferred, and those from around Newcastle.⁸² Rotherham was an old and successful regional marketing hub and kept its fair because it was similarly located between the Pennines and the southern end of the Vale of York.

⁸⁰ W. E. Minchinton, 'Wage Regulation in Pre-Industrial England', in W. E. Minchinton (ed.), *Wage Regulation in Pre-Industrial England* (Newton Abbot, 1972); Caunce, 'Farm Servants and the Development of English Capitalism', 52–3, 57–9. Bradbury, *History of Cockermouth*, 109–10, records that after 1900 the local council laid down regulations for dates and locations which simply endorsed prevailing usages. The previous local board had considered moving amusements away from the streets, but never actually attempted this. See also K. L. McCutcheon, *Yorkshire Fairs and Markets to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Leeds, 1940). The legal status of the pleasure fairs attached to hirings is not clear, and would repay further investigation.

⁸¹ See, for instance, Alun Howkins, 'Types of Rural Communities', in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vii, 1338.

⁸² Mr Spearman: BM, tape 119/1.

Around the detached upland area of the North York Moors, and even around the Yorkshire Wolds, the same pattern of location is visible, although in the latter case the only settlements inside the 100-metre contour were isolated farms. Such locations generated sufficient business to give both hirers and hirelings the choice and lively atmosphere they desired and facilitated the movement of people both around and outside their immediate locality.

Where the Pennines linked up with the Lakeland fells, a handful of fairs, all on major through routes, served relatively isolated internal areas. Only Keswick really lies inside rough terrain, however, for Appleby and Penrith are the 100-metre-contour towns at either end of the route between the river Tees and the Cumbrian ports, now the A66/A594. Kirkby Stephen is similarly on a side route down through the fertile Eden valley to Kendal, the metropolis of south Lakeland. Bishop Auckland and Bellingham, the highest and most isolated hirings, lay on the secondary route north from Darlington to Hawick and Jedburgh. However, the transpennine route through Wensleydale had lost its main hirings at Hawes, and the ancient and important Aire Gap route only had Settle.

North of the Tees the eastern lowland plain was relatively narrow and Morpeth and Newcastle clearly provided the most convenient venues for arable Northumberland and northern County Durham. Progressing south, the plain expanded, and that necessitated additional, purely lowland, fairs. Stockton, Northallerton and Thirsk served the plain above the Tees and also the northernmost extension of the Vale of York. Below the North York Moors, in agricultural terms the Vale effectively merged with the coastal plain despite the existence of the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Wolds. Large Yorkshire farms could include over a thousand acres of plough land and might hire twenty-five single males and females of all ages from 12 years upwards. Here fairs were plentiful and, as we have seen, very responsive to changing needs because the terrain exercised so little influence over their location.

Even so, the line of Pennine edge fairs continued along the Vale's western boundary until Otley, on the river Aire, marked a sharp end to the main service zone. The farming south of the town was essentially of the same, family-based types seen in Pennine south Lancashire. For example, Dan Byford remembered servants living in with his grandfather in the 1920s less than 9

miles north of Leeds, but, further south, industrial competition for labour and sheer lack of cash for any purpose made it essential to avoid employing anyone regularly if possible.⁸³ However, the substantial elevated tableland between Huddersfield and Sheffield has already been noted as a unique enclave within this exception to the northern rule, a reminder about the caution needed in generalizing from the particular. Despite its altitude, this tableland formed a small but thriving arable area between the two separate industrial zones of south and west Yorkshire, and Penistone hosted an active small hiring as well as steel mills.⁸⁴

Around Ormskirk in Lancashire, in contrast, there were some substantial farms and some weekly paid labour, but the dominance of small farms and family labour largely obviated the need for servants despite an intensive arable regime.⁸⁵ Cheshire agriculture was unusual in many ways, but its hiring of servants mostly without fairs was not always the rule, for we have noted the vestigial fair at Macclesfield still functioning after 1900. This is a Pennine edge town, and Nantwich and Sandbach had also once supported fairs, out in the plain.⁸⁶ South of Cheshire, old hiring centres again had located close to the 100-metre level, as they also continued to do on the other side of the Peak District. The industrial areas of Staffordshire apparently had had no fairs in recent times. We should always be cautious about premature verdicts of demise, however, since newspaper reports indicate active hiring in this period at Worksop, Newark, Bingham and Burton upon Trent, as well as many Lincolnshire towns, and Gainsborough still had multiple hirings.⁸⁷

III

FARM SERVICE AND INDUSTRY

If the fairs were more than local events we have to explain why they were so differentiated into sub-regions. This demands an

⁸³ Dan Byford, 'A Pennine Dairy Farm in the 1930s', *Rural Hist. Today*, no. 5 (2003), 5.

⁸⁴ *Yorkshire Post*, 8 Nov. 1905, for instance, reported a substantial attendance.

⁸⁵ Mutch, *Rural Life in South-West Lancashire*.

⁸⁶ *Report on Wages and Earnings*, P.P., 1900 (Cd. 346), lxxxii, 17.

⁸⁷ *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 11 Oct. 1913, quoted in Wright, *British Calendar Customs*, ed. Lones, iii, 6 Oct.; *Yorkshire Post*, 6 and 26 Nov. 1890; 29 Nov. 1910. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 81-2, shows Lincolnshire hirings, held around Old May Day, to have been very similar to events before our period.

awareness of population density, the proximity of industrial opportunities for unskilled labour and the nature of the soil. Northern England is by far the most diverse section of the UK in its geology, landscapes, agricultural potential, and concentrations of population and industry.⁸⁸ The common, apparently obvious, assertion that a preponderance of pastoral family farm enterprises accounted for northern service's survival is clearly wrong, despite the prevalence of service in some parts where livestock farming dominated. Hewlett, another commission investigator, commented in 1919 with regard to the sheep farming that predominated in the western third of County Durham, that there was 'so little hired labour as to be negligible'.⁸⁹ In east Lancashire, commissioner Dewhurst confirmed that 'the farms are mostly small-holdings of some 30 acres, and the labour is limited to the farmer and his family'.⁹⁰ Research by Christine Hallas has shown that this was also the preference in Wensleydale and Swaledale.⁹¹ The main aim of the northern family farm was, if feasible, to avoid the payment of any wages, and a commitment to paying them for six months or a year was to be avoided if at all possible. Instead, the persistence and adaptation of service at a regional and sub-regional level is best taken as a key part of a flexible and effective strategy for both retaining and maximizing the potential effort of the northern population in its rural areas, and hence agricultural production and profits. Certainly, it was in the areas dominated by large arable farms that the employment of many servants was found. It was direct and indirect competition for labour with industry that made both long contracts and high wages necessary. Thus, even in north Northumberland, where the economy was completely rural, commissioner Hewlett commented that because the population was so sparse, 'the farm labourer . . . is making a good income, and he knows it'. It was high productivity that sustained living standards: a Northumbrian 'works hard, but he [also] works well', Hewlett added.⁹²

⁸⁸ J. T. Coppock, *An Agricultural Atlas of England and Wales*, revised edn (London, 1976), ch. 2.

⁸⁹ *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 81.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹¹ Christine Hallas, *Rural Responses to Industrialization: The North Yorkshire Pennines, 1790–1914* (Bern, 1999), 24–30.

⁹² *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 253.

The basic attraction of service to northern farmers is therefore clear. Before 1914, an unmarried servant's regular working day could easily extend over thirteen hours, six days a week, and many servants were engaged at their peak strength. Meal breaks were brief and often offset by additional duties around the farmstead. There is space here only for a simplistic outline of the many variations in servants' duties found across the north, not a full exploration, but work with livestock was common since single male servants had no family responsibilities and lived on the job. Thus, ploughing was entrusted to servants everywhere that they were hired, though the actual division of responsibilities involved in caring for and working horses differed widely. Girls and women were hired for domestic service within farmhouses, or sometimes for farm work or a hybrid combination. Their presence was an essential support for intensive work in the fields since northern male servants, unlike some in Scotland, were never left to look after themselves in bothies.

Arable Yorkshire, mostly divided into substantial holdings at some distance from industry, stayed closest to traditional norms of service, with specialized tasks undertaken by a substantial, regular, paid agricultural labour force that was fairly equally divided, as already stated, between single, living-in servants and married day labourers.⁹³ On the smaller and more mixed farms of the plains of Cumberland, Westmorland and north Lancashire, unmarried and relatively unspecialized young, living-in servants formed a clear majority, partly because some went on to rent small farms rather than becoming labourers, partly due to more direct industrial competition for adult males locally, and a great propensity to migrate in search of jobs as adults.⁹⁴ In south Lancashire, in contrast, service had only briefly been important in the decades around 1800, and while in Cheshire it had been somewhat stronger, by the twentieth century it decreased from a fairly low peak.⁹⁵ Farmers here and in south Lancashire, often

⁹³ Howkins feels the system here was quite the opposite, 'not a "survival" of farm service but . . . a new form': see his 'Types of Rural Communities', 1313.

⁹⁴ *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 53, states that 'half the farmers in Cumberland began as labourers'. J. D. Marshall, 'Some Aspects of the Social History of Nineteenth-Century Cumbria: I. Migration and Literacy', *Trans. Cumberland and Westmorland Antiq. and Archaeol. Soc.*, new ser., lxix (1969); *Report on Wages and Earnings*, P.P., 1900 (Cd. 346), lxxxii, 9.

⁹⁵ Andrew Jonathan Gritt, 'Aspects of Agrarian Change in South-West Lancashire, c.1650-1850' (Univ. of Central Lancashire Ph.D. thesis, 2000).

very close to heavily industrialized towns, relied on family labour as much as possible, and also used Irish casual labourers living in lodgings. In Cheshire in 1891 only 2.3 workers per farmer were employed compared with 3.8 in East Yorkshire.⁹⁶ The latter had roughly two servants per farm in 1851, compared with one per farm in Cheshire and 0.5 in Lancashire as a whole.⁹⁷

In Yorkshire, the care of groups of unmarried servants was often delegated to a foreman, or 'hind', himself a hired man. He was either given the use of the original farmhouse or else a 'hindhouse' with adequate sleeping accommodation and a package of supplementary payments in money and in kind, often including female servants to assist his wife.⁹⁸ In modern Cumbria and other upland areas, most farms were small and farmers worked in the fields and maintained frugal lifestyles, so they looked after hirelings themselves, sometimes almost as family members. The unusual pattern of hirings in Northumberland north of the river Coquet reflected the fact that 'generally and remarkably . . . farm labour is a family employment: father, mother, sons and daughters all work on the same farm', and so only a few single 'hinds', as farmworkers were known here, lived in.⁹⁹ Fathers made a bargain for them all as a team and personally undertook the heaviest and most skilled work. The controversial mid nineteenth-century practice of some male hinds themselves hiring female 'bondagers' to complete their family units was pronounced dead by all observers by 1900, and women increasingly hired themselves separately.¹⁰⁰ Family hiring was practised as far as North Yorkshire. Durham was the county with the most variable arrangements, partly because different systems were found north, south and west of the county, and also because its sprawling coalfield intermingled extensively with farms.

⁹⁶ Francis George Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour* (London, 1911), ch. 1.

⁹⁷ Clapham, *Economic History of Modern Britain*, i, 453.

⁹⁸ Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, ch. 13; *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 384.

⁹⁹ *Reports on Wages and Conditions*, P.P., 1919 (Cmd. 25), ix, 248. In East Yorkshire, only foremen were known as hinds.

¹⁰⁰ *Second Report by Mr. Wilson Fox on the Wages, Earnings, and Conditions of Employment of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom, with Statistical Tables and Charts*, P.P., 1905 (Cd. 2376), xcvi, 14–15. The term continued in use within family units, however.

IV

CONCLUSION

The origins of the hiring fairs of northern England are obscure, but they probably began in medieval times as purely local labour exchanges, and in the early modern period they operated under the firm control of employers and the local authorities. This study reveals that, by 1890, however, they had become a self-organized regional network that covered the north and had no external agency directing it. Moreover, it was made up of several lesser networks fitting neatly alongside each other, except for Garstang. All rested upon a common legal foundation even though each had its own distinctive practices. It must be stressed that in 1890 all parts of the network were flourishing: this is not a story of the steady, inevitable decline to extinction of this system, but rather one of continuing success and general acceptance at least until the late 1920s. Newspaper reports for the first five years after the First World War do show that some fairs were being thinly attended, but always because of weather or some other rational cause, not because they were seen as irrelevant. Economic depression then took a toll, but no alternative system emerged before 1939.

Throughout this period the entire system of hiring at the fairs was run informally by the participants, generating an absolute minimum of both bureaucracy and records. Attempts to interfere with working arrangements were rare, and apparently failed almost entirely, whether they aimed just to alter dates or venues or to transform negotiating methods. The national state's only involvement lay, first, in providing an archaic and loose definition of the employment contract, but with the terms left open to much negotiation; and, second, in hearing breach of contract cases at petty sessions in the tiny minority of instances where employer and employee could not work things out between themselves. Even the police generally kept their distance during the fairs, intervening only if events appeared to be getting out of hand.

Hiring fairs thus formed an integral part of a nineteenth-century northern agricultural system that, viewed as a business and without nostalgia, not only remained consistently viable but actually thrived on proximity to industrial towns. This was not a case of an industrializing region turning its back on a rural past, but one where all resources were used as intensively as possible. Without such an effective food production strategy, northern

industrial centres might well have faced starvation before large-scale imports were possible. In contrast, many widely accepted features of modernization theory actually turn out to be associated in England with regions that deindustrialized in the nineteenth century, and experienced government interventions comparable to the structural adjustments imposed on post-colonial economies in the late twentieth century, notably the New Poor Law of 1834, which claimed that welfare provision was crippling the country and must be reduced to a minimum.

Some labour was available to farmers everywhere across the north at a price, and if that price was high by southern English standards, making efficient use of it allowed farmers of all types to earn a living that satisfied them. Service also accorded workers a high degree of job security, which made wages that remained below industrial levels acceptable to them for at least the first part of their working lives, until marriage changed their attitudes. Widespread and accurate perceptions that there were other jobs to be had for men with families not too far away, often at better pay and with access to better housing, contributed a great deal to the system's survival. The general effectiveness of this strategy is clear from the fact that except in the manufacturing heartlands, where industrial jobs were readily available without rural workers needing to migrate even a short distance, adapted forms of service everywhere formed an integral part of a commercialized agriculture. In northern England, more conventionally 'modern' forms of casualized labouring never provided a viable alternative, even at the end of the period under study, though maximum use was made of a limited desire for genuine casual employment by itinerants and the skilled and independently minded who negotiated good terms for specific tasks, as at the hay hirings. On both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border, indeed, both productivity and production increased vastly during this period, and even the smallest farms became determinedly commercial in outlook, so any reliance on a heavily modified service system cannot just be a localized anachronism.

The variety of northern towns that acted as hiring centres and the lack of automatic linkage to conventional markets and fairs indicates that this was a network with a specific task, and that it was network completeness that primarily determined the spatial patterning of fairs, not a need to fit in with other marketing systems. The widespread reporting of wage rates across the region by

newspapers also shows a concern with more than just the local situation.¹⁰¹ Northern servants around 1900 evidently did not form either the local pockets of dispossessed and downtrodden peasants central to popular views of the industrial revolution, or one large labour pool, as neoclassical economic theory tends to assume. Instead the multiplicity of fairs and servants' genuine but limited desire to move around combined to create an articulated system that satisfied the desires of both employers and employees in the long term, including relatively high wages. Servants even sometimes crossed from Scotland to England, though at Berwick the Scots and English had separate 'stances'.¹⁰² By 1890 northern service had facilitated a set of discrete, localized and flexible responses to a new economic order. There is no intention here to romanticize the fairs, but they deserve on many counts to be retrieved from the residual category of folkloristic oddity that they seem to have drifted into, and instead seriously investigated by social and cultural historians.

Thus, service should not be assumed to epitomize traditional, conservative social structures which modern, market-based economic mechanisms must push aside, for the terms of service contracts came to reflect a thoroughly commercial attitude to agriculture, where it paid to tie labour to the farm. Service was also not associated with passivity among the northern workforce, but with a pragmatism that paid dividends, as Joseph Arch recognized. As Hewlett perceptively pointed out, even when conditions in the First World War gave servants unprecedented bargaining power for several years, they demanded higher wages rather than fundamental changes to the system. Equally, farmers, for all their grumbles about high wages, consistently refused to support evangelical demands for registries and references which apparently would have given them more control over their workforce. In 1910, for instance, the chairman of the Cumberland and Westmorland Chamber of Agriculture publicly rebuffed his apparent class allies and said, diplomatically but unmistakably, that fairs did an excellent job for his members.¹⁰³ The respectable

¹⁰¹ Moses made a similar point for the preceding decades: see his 'Social Relations in the Victorian Countryside', 138–9.

¹⁰² *Hexham Courier*, 13 Mar. 1915.

¹⁰³ *Yorkshire Post*, 28 Nov. 1910. Moses, 'Social Relations in the Victorian Countryside', 291–2, notes that farmers' view of hirings as basically commercial events remained despite clerical presentation of moral issues.

classes of the towns tolerated a few days of high jinks partly because they also enjoyed a break from a routine that, in small places, was often deadly dull, and partly because town shops and craftworkers so obviously gained thereby, even sometimes depending on the fairs for survival in small places like Kirkby-moorside.¹⁰⁴

This analysis may seem to contradict some of the fundamental assumptions of Kussmaul's classic analysis of service, but that did not deal extensively with the north, and the findings here in fact confirm her central concept that throughout history service was strengthened by labour shortages and weakened by a surplus.¹⁰⁵ Agriculture in those counties where development of manufacturing created a widespread and continuing demand for relatively unskilled labour thus followed just as distinctive a course as in Shaw-Taylor's metropolitan zone. However, whereas the former has been the focus of most research done by English rural historians, the latter has been virtually ignored. It is also important in understanding how service worked to note that, despite personal rivalry between farmers, the system within which they operated was not one of competitive capitalism, for success for one farmer had no connection to failure for others, and they were mostly tenants who relied on landlords for most of the fixed capital they used. Instead, the system resembles the business networks of Marshallian industrial districts, which have aroused much interest in the last two decades among business historians. Fairs, as a system, fit well within this framework since they reinforced the high degree of trust and informality of a local event upon which such networks depended, yet collectively spanned and connected the whole region.¹⁰⁶ They formed part of a remarkably complete and successful agricultural market system, supporting small producers and traditional norms of mutual respect, quite different from that seen in modern advanced economies today. In general terms, no participant or group at any level could dictate terms to others except in occasional, remarkable circumstances, a cherished aspect of the fairs for workers.

¹⁰⁴ Mike J. Huggins, 'More Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Classes in Victorian England', *Jl Social Hist.*, xxxiii (2000).

¹⁰⁵ Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Casson, *Entrepreneurship and Business Culture: Studies in the Economics of Trust* (London, 1995), 91.

The result, as in most northern and midland manufacturing districts in the nineteenth century, was flexibility, compromise with rivals, and mutual benefit for the majority, even though some would fail through inefficiency or bad luck. Northern fairs were thus unlike those held in Dorchester and famously described by Thomas Hardy. This town was the only one with a hiring fair still functioning in the south, according to Alun Howkins, and for many the accessibility of Hardy's description has made it a definitive national template even though it operated under conditions that were utterly different from those in the north.¹⁰⁷

This all helps to explain the evident continuing success of northern farms in their apparently unsuitable business environment until the inter-war depression, which hit farming badly in both direct and indirect ways, and thereby removed much of the economic logic that had supported fairs. Lifestyles were also changing, as noted earlier, and even rural areas were increasingly affected by new aspirations.

Fairs were a vital, functional part of the system, and widening the scope from initial investigations in East Yorkshire to the whole north has amply supported a long-standing conviction that no institution has ever come closer to realizing the Smithian (but not Thatcherite) concepts embodied in the phrase 'labour market', and fairs accordingly also deserve much more attention from economic historians. In addition, they had developed a highly complex role as promoters of working-class consumption and providers of entertainment, together with the reinforcement of family and communal ties that service disrupted. They thus not only mediated between employers and employees, but also between tradition and the challenge of new opportunities, and even between differing visions of society.¹⁰⁸ Even in the twentieth century, they formed for a while a prime and rare example of a truly popular, and vital, cultural form, constantly renewing themselves while largely unaffected by conscious outside pressures and elite values, and wholly detached from metropolitan concerns.

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¹⁰⁷ Dewey, 'Farm Labour', 839, and Gordon Cherry, 'Summary and Reflections', 1749, both in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vii.

¹⁰⁸ Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 81.