



Archdeacon Stanton & the Wiltshire Labourers



THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS OF WILTSHIRE

The Ven. Archdeacon Stanton at a sitting in London on Tuesday gave some interesting information relative to the condition of the agricultural labourers of Wiltshire, to members of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the prevalence of the truck system and the different modes of payment for labour. The Archdeacon said he had lived in the midst of an agricultural population in Wilts for 19 years and had had considerable experience among that class in regard to their habits and labour. The county was generally thinly populated, except in the old localities, where it was the reverse: and the position of the labourer he considered was decidedly low. The rate of wages, he thought, was about 8s. or 9s. a week; and though the farmers would doubtless deny that those were the rates, because there was a bonus at Michaelmas, of sometimes, £2 as a harvest gift, yet, in fact, those rates were the truth, as the labourers were little benefited by the bonus and gift, both of which were sometimes considerably lower, and they had little effect over the whole year. These gifts, too, were only given to the men engaged for the whole year, and not those engaged by piece-work. Those engaged in piece-work earned more a week than the yearly labourers; but in the winter they had no work, unless it was draining work, from which most of them shrank because of the consequences, it often entailing rheumatism or an attack of rheumatic fever. There seemed to be a fear, too, of moving from one place to another among the people. They were attached to their villages, where they had friends who knew them, and they were assisted there or had benefits there from charities which they were loth to lose. The rent of their cottages was low, which was another inducement for them to stop, the rental being only about £3 or £4 a year. On the subject of how the wages were paid the witness said the labourers were paid monthly, and this system was very injurious to them. One of the consequences was that the people were always in debt to the little shopkeeper, to whom they were obliged to go for credit. The people could not go to market and lay out their money to the best advantage, having it at such long intervals; and as the shopkeepers had to make the customers who paid likewise pay an insurance for those who did not pay, the people had to pay a high price for an inferior article. He did not know of their being paid in kind, with the exception of having some articles, such as butter; but they were not called upon, that he knew of, to take meat – they did not look to have it. He believed the weekly wages would decrease drunkenness, and he was sure that the deferred payments increased drunkenness, as when the piece-workers, at the time of full work, obtained a month's earnings at once, they felt they were rich men, and made free accordingly. Then he regarded as a great evil that the men were often paid in a publichouse. Being asked if a meal, or cider, or beer was or was not given in aid of wages, he said there was a sort of understanding that the men were to have a warm draught of a morning, a sort of broth; but there was no cider. Another great evil was that of hawkers, who got the women, mostly servants, into debt, and then summoning them to the county courts, entailed the additional costs of a summons to the extra cost of goods on trust.

(Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette – Thursday 12 January, 1871)

REMONSTRANCE

The *Devizes Gazette* of Jan. 12, 1871. Contained a report of some evidence relative to the condition of the agricultural labourers in Wiltshire, said to have been given by Archdeacon Stanton before a Royal Commission sitting in London; and as many of the statements in that evidence are totally erroneous and likely to mislead the public as to the rate of remuneration paid to the laboring population of thos county, as well as their actual condition, we the undersigned farmers and others of the County of Wilts, feel it our duty to give them an unqualified denial. And we hereby publicly challenge Archdeacon Statnton to substantiate his statements (if he can); by the production of facts; or retract what at present we regard as an unfounded aspersion upon the farmers of Wiltshire.

Dated 19th January, 1871

(Signed)

AT WARMINSTER MARKET

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Herbert Smith, Baverstock

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(Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette – Thursday 26 January, 1871)
