THE HOME, THEN AND NOW.

IN CONSIDERING this vast subject we decided that it might be interesting to find out what we could about the lives of three different classes of our village community over the past 100 years: the farm labourer, the tenant farmer, and the squire. Much of the evidence is of necessity hearsay; we have been able, however, to substantiate statements about prices and wages by actual records, going back as far as 1843, and we think that what we now give is a reasonably accurate picture.

What has, perhaps, struck us most of all, in considering numerous account books, is the seasonal fluctuation and instability generally. We in this generation have got used to a degree of price control and stability; within limits, we can assess what our home is likely to cost to run this year, and next, and the next. But neither the farmer nor his men could have hoped to do this 100 years ago, or even 20 years ago, and there can never have been a sense of security in a society in which wages and prices varied not only seasonally, but from year to year. Exciting it may have been, and the brave spirits seem to have survived it, but for a great number of people it must have been a hard life and one devoid of any degree of security.

A hundred years ago British agriculture had reached its highest development and was reasonably prosperous. The rising population had to be fed largely by home production; mechanical aids in farming were beginning to come on the market, and livestock was beginning to benefit from the progress of science. It is unlikely that this prosperity was felt by the farm labourer to anything like the degree it was felt by the farmer and the squire. At the same time, there seems to have been full employment for both men and women in the country, and industrial development in South Wales and in the big cities opened up further opportunities for those with the spirit of adventure.

For those who remained on the land, however, prosperity came to an abrupt end soon after 1875. Bad harvests and the flooding of the market with overseas meat and grain caused a series of agricultural depressions, particularly bad in the 80's and 90's; and indeed it was not till the First World War that the industry recovered from the doldrums. There followed immediately after the First War a period of inflation, when wages and prices soared; but early in the 20's yet another depression began to set in, wages and prices alike came tumbling down, and many went bankrupt or were unemployed. Although some farmers, especially milk producers, seem to have started to recover around 1936, it was not really till the Second World War that agriculture made a full recovery and settled down to the prosperity which it now enjoys.

Against this background we shall try to give a picture of our Eardisland farm labourer and his family over the hundred years.

In 1855 his wage would probably have been around 9/- a week (and there was no limit to the hours he might have to work). Wages we have actually seen in a Wages Book are: 1855, 9/-;

1857, 10/- (and 3/- for a boy, and 1/- a day for hop-picking); 1858, 9/-; 1859, 8/-; 1860, 8/-; 1861, 9/-. There might, of course, be extras. We have an entry, for example, "One night's Clover Grinding, 1/-". And in the hop-picking, his wife could earn 1/- a day, plus 1d. Supper Money, and his small son and daughter could earn a further 4d. or 6d. a day each, school holidays doubtless being arranged to make this possible. From 1864 - when 12/- a week is recorded - wages on the farms in Eardisland (for a married man) do not seem to drop below 10/-; and in this period the highest unskilled wage we have seen recorded is that of 1/6d. for half-a-day's work, paid in 1897 for cleaning the flues at the Church. After 1890 the wages seem to have remained steady at about 12/- for a labourer and 14/- for a waggoner. It is said that 25/- a week was being paid in Eardisland in 1916, rising to 32/6d., for the first fixed wage. After the First War the rate further rose to 45/-, but by 1926 had dropped to 27/-, and even in 1935 it was only 35/-. In 1940 it was raised from 41/6d. to 54/-; now, in 1955, it has risen, by stages, to 127/-.

During the whole period craftsmen seem to have demanded higher rates, a skilled Wheelwright (Master Man) in 1880 earning 4/- a day, a skilled Tiler (1873) 3/-, and a Timber-faller (in 1875) anything from 12/6d. to £1 a week.

Our Eardisland farm labourer would almost certainly have hired at Pembridge Fair - wearing his best white cords, with his white slop, the latter a sign to the farmers that he was available for service. For work he wore a sleeve-waistcoat, of cord, with long sleeves and back of cloth and his cord trousers; and on Sundays he probably wore a smock and a slouch hat. We are told that ready-made clothes were available for men quite early on in the period and were cheap, a suit costing as little as 18/-.

The farm labourers worked, of course, all day Saturday, and quite frequently on Sundays, also, as animals had to be tended. This would mean an early start for his wife, as he would have to be at work at 6 a.m. (perhaps even 5 a.m. if he was a waggoner); and, if their cottage was some distance from the farm, she would have to prepare some food for him to take with him. There would be no need for her to see to liquid refreshment for him, for on his back he would carry his costrel (the small cider barrel, now promoted to the realms of the antique shop) and this he would fill morning and midday at the cider-house at the farm. She might also have to prepare some food for her children to take to school; distances in those days could be long and, of course, the only means of transport was on foot. At night she would prepare the main meal of the day, which would usually be eaten at about 7 o'clock.

In between times she would be busy cleaning her house - it might be of the one-up-and-one-down plan, but in any case there would be stone flags to scrub. There would be a cast-iron range in the kitchen, with a sway for kettles and pots and a small side-oven, and probably a spit. This type of cooking-stove still persists in our Parish, for mercifully it works reasonably well on wood - quite a consideration to the labourer of the last Century, with coal costing anything up to 22/6d. a ton (1893). Our Winter Coal Fund, however, would have been a boon to him, for in the early days of the depression there was

a free issue for each family and even in 1904 our Parish Magazine says it is available, "at 8d. a cwt. to labourers who do not possess a cottage of their own or a cow, and who do not have coal hauled for them, and whose total earnings, including house-rent, do not exceed 15/- per week."

Our labourer's wife would keep her own pig - and in the 60's she would have had to pay around 9/- for a sack of sharps. In due season the pig would be killed and cured. Little butcher's meat would be eaten in the labourer's cottage; but there would be a dish of boiled bacon and vegetables on Sundays, with a Roly-poly pudding boiled in the same pot, and all the lard and bacon fat would be used in providing the meals for the household. (Incidentally, the prices of beef, mutton, pork, etc. seem to have remained remarkably constant right up till the First World War: beef, 5d. and 6d. per lb.; mutton, 6d. per lb.; bacon, 8d. to 10d. per lb. In 1921 beef is recorded as having cost 1/9d.; mutton, 1/10d.; lamb, 2/-, and pork 1/10d.)

She would probably grow her own vegetables and fruit, and an allowance of potatoes might be given from the farm. After the harvesters had finished in the fields she would be allowed to go in and gather any heads of corn that remained; the barley she would use for feeding the pig and the wheat she would have milled into flour at the local Mill. (We had three Mills in our Parish and a fourth on the boundary.) We have been told about one labourer's wife, the mother of 7 children, who worked so conscientiously at the gleaning that every year she collected enough wheat to feed her family for 6 months. What she had to buy from the farmer for the remaining 6 months she was allowed to pay for at the rate of 3d. a week.

Once a week a fire would be lit in the bake-oven, and enough bread would be baked to provide the staple diet for her family. It is doubtful if they would often see butter, for it can never have cost less than 7d. a lb. and often cost as much as 1/6d., varying throughout the season. A hundred years ago tea would have been out of the question for (in 1843) it cost 6/- a lb., and at the same period sugar was 8d. a lb. Sugar, however, did come down to 3d. a lb. by 1900, and is not recorded at 8d. again till 1919. By 1900 tea could be bought at 2/-.

We have no record of the price of cheese in 1855, but presumably it was always made locally. In 1900 it cost 7d. a lb., rising after the First War to 1/-.

When boots were needed by herself or her family they could be made to measure in the village, for we had as many as four boot-makers at one time in Eardisland. They would be made to last and would cost from 4/- for a child (1875) to 12/- for a labourer (1863), a pair of men's best shoes in 1875 costing 18/8d.

We have a record of candles costing 6½d. each in 1843, and, in 1874, 1 lb. cost 1/-; in 1844, to our astonishment we found the entry, "4 oil lamps, 2/-". It is reasonable to suppose that the labourer usually made his own candles from mutton fat, and early to bed would be the rule in the Winter nights.

It seems that ready-made clothing was not available much before 1900. Before that our farm worker's wife would have had to make her own, presumably buying the material through the Eardisland Clothing Club. This Club was certainly going strong

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Our Oldest W. I. Member, Mrs G. Evans.
In 1874. In 1888.

Her Two Sons, Harold and William,
early 1890's.

in 1869, and probably earlier. Members paid anything from 2d. to 6d. a week, donations were added to the total subscribed, and once a year the savings were returned to the members, plus a share of the donations. Facilities were made available for them to buy yardage, etc., at two Leominster shops; and we find, too, that in 1883 (and probably before that) paper patterns were available at the prohibitive cost of 4/- for a dress and 2/- for a blouse.

From a purely pecuniary point of view the woman without children was the better off. She could work on the land then, as now, for 9 months of the year, at a wage of anything from 6d. to 1/- a day. (In the 70's we find the rate stated on one farm as 10d. a day, or 5/- a week.) The rates paid for housework were the same, and the day would consist of 12 hours. Also, the woman with children could not look forward, as she can to-day, to financial help from her sons and daughters when they went out to work; indeed, it is likely that she would have to help them to buy their clothes. Right up until 1900 the wage paid to a girl in service, living in, was from £4.10.0. to £5 a year; she started her day's work at 6 a.m. and "there was never such a thing as time off, unless you asked for it, and you were too frightened to do that!" Only her morning and afternoon uniforms were provided by her employer; everything else had to be found from her wages. Our oldest W.I. member recalls that for going out only a plain black dress was permitted, with a black velvet bonnet and strings; and absolutely no flowers or feathers were allowed for trimming. She was obliged to go to Church every Sunday; there was a Staff pew, and the Gentry sat in the Chancel. Her morning uniform was a print dress and a large, topless, white linen apron; for afternoons she had a plain black dress and a frilled muslin apron, and caps and cuffs were always worn. Soft soap was used for scrubbing and the maids had to make their own polish. One can be sure that the lot of the general servant on the farms was even harder, for all the milking was done by the women in those days, and indeed until just after the 1914-18 War in this Parish - and there would be butter and cheese to make, as well as all the household jobs.

After the First World War one notices a change, in that casual women on the farms are now paid at an hourly rate, of 4½d. to 6d. Nowadays the time rate is 2/1d. an hour, and during the fruit season they can earn over £1 a day, working only part of the day.

As to the boys, the wage for a living-in boy 100 years ago could be as low as £2.10.0. a year: "it was one mouth less to feed, when times were hard"; and £4.10.0. seems to have been a good wage for a boy right into this Century. If he lived at home his wage would be anything from 3/- to 6/- a week. In one farm diary, belonging to Mr. Davies of Arrow Mill, we came across the following entry for May 4th, 1846:

"Settled with Wm. Wilett for 1 year's Servitude, at £3.10.0. per year. Shoe Bill, 15s.10d. Tailor Bill, 8s.6d. Washing, 15/-. Cloth for shirts, 4/1d. Overpaid last year, 11/2d. New Frock, 8/6d."

So at the end of 2 years' work poor Wm. Wilett went forth into the world with his new frock and 6/11d. in his pocket. We could not find any comparable entry for the period under study - but no doubt the story was very much the same as in 1846.

Local Farms

Local Fairs - especially Pembridge and Leominster - were

high lights in our labourer's year. The Eardisland farm labourer hired at Pembridge Fair; this was a very big hiring Fair, patronised by as many as 200 farmers, many from Radnorshire. The labourer wore in his slouch hat something to indicate the sort of work he wanted - horsehair for a waggoner, wool for a shepherd, and so on. The farmer gave him 1/- as a bond of hiring, and when he had hired he removed the horsehair from his hat and proceeded to enjoy his shilling. Hiring at Pembridge Fair is said to have ceased about 1900.

The only holidays allowed to him were two days at Christmas, if he was lucky, and Good Friday. Of Good Friday our Parish Magazine in 1888 says: "We would earnestly ask all employers of labour to give their labourers an opportunity of attending public worship on Good Friday, certainly once, and, as much as lies in their power, prevent football and other sports, certainly during the hours of divine worship." And again, in 1883: "With too many people Good Friday is made a holiday for merry-making and worldly enjoyment; with others it is considered a good opportunity for house-cleaning and other home employments." After the 1914-18 War legislation was introduced in regard to overtime rates. Even so there were many in Eardisland who, as recently as 20 years ago, adhered to the old tradition and demanded nothing more for overtime and Sunday work than their quota of cider - though the custom of Harvest Money (£1.10.0. for the Hay Harvest and £1 for the Grain Harvest, irrespective of the time it took to get it in) was beginning to go out of practice. In 1938 holidays with pay for the farm worker became law, and thus his status was brought into line with that of the worker in industry.

Before leaving our farm labourer and going on to the farmer we should like to record some memories of one of our local farmers who was born in 1883 and has spent most of his life as a farm labourer. We asked him how his mother managed in the old days:

"My mother had 10 children, although only 7 survived infancy. My father was a woodman foreman, earning 14/- a week, the same as the men under him. He paid £5 a year for his cottage and had no perquisites from the Estate. My first suit was made by my grandmother, from a coat left by a local lady who used it to cover her wedding clothes when she eloped. I remember it well, it was brown.

I had to pay 1d. a week for my schooling, and my elder sister had to pay 2d. Later on it was free. We children all came home to dinner every day, but many lived too far from school to do this, and I remember some who had to go through the day without dinner, and with their toes sticking out of their boots. There was one boy who lived 2½ miles from the school. He was a hungry boy and always ate his dinner on the way to school - and all he had at dinner-time was a swede that he picked up on the way

My mother could not write, but she had taught herself to read. She could not cut out clothes, so she had to pay a woman to help with the dressmaking, but she did all our mending herself. She was a good cook. She bought a pint of fresh milk every day, for the younger ones, and a quart of skimmed milk for making puddings for our mid-day meal. We also had Welsh Cakes at this meal very often. My father didn't come home to dinner, but took with him bread and cheese, or bacon sandwiches, or bacon which he fried in the woods - and a flask of tea. We grew our own

vegetables and always had a good cooked meal at night. For breakfast we often had Kettle Broth - bread, with hot water and the liquor from fried bacon poured over it - and tea. Sometimes we older ones had salt butter, and my mother bought half-a-pound of fresh butter every week for the younger ones.

We kept our own pig. We fed it on wych-elm leaves and nettle tops, mixed with bran and scalded. We bought the wheat from the farm and had it ground at the Mill.

I left school at 12 and worked as a waggoner's boy at a neighbouring farm. At 14 I went out to a farm, living in, at £4.10.0. a year. For two whole years I never saw an egg (all went to market) and I never saw new milk. The food was very poor. For breakfast we had broth, made from the liquor from boiled beef and bacon, with bread in it, and a pint of cider if you wanted it; no tea. We took a lump of fat bacon or cheese to work with us and this we had at 10 o'clock. For dinner we had a hot meal on Sundays and Wednesdays - boiled beef and bacon, with a pudding boiled in it. The rest of the week we had anything that was going. We had nothing between 1 o'clock and supper at 7 o'clock, and our supper consisted of a basin of cold skimmed milk, and toast.

I was up at 5 every morning and never finished much before 9. I remember the time the waggoner woke me at 3 o'clock when there was a terrible storm of wind and rain, to fetch the horses in. Looking back on it, the horses mattered a lot more than I did! At each one of the 7 different farms I worked it was an offence to use the farmer's earth closet. We usually washed at the pump and rarely had the luxury of hot water for shaving.

At 15 or 16 we were expected to do a grown man's job. You had no recreation, and the only holidays you had were two days at Christmas, called Christmassing, and Good Friday. Harvest and Hay Money bound you for a month of extra hours. We had casual men, called "harvest men", engaged at 2/6d. a day and their food, including their breakfast. I remember they used to enjoy the broth when it was so fat I couldn't face it, and they used to say: "Good broth this morning - plenty eyes on the top!"

We used to think them hard times, but my grandfather, who had been a labourer all his life and only at the end of his days earned as much as 14/-, used to say: "Ye dinna know ye be born". Yet when his wife died it was discovered that, all unknown to him or anyone else, she had managed to save £300! When I got a job as waggoner I earned £20 a year - right up till the Great War. What we called Rationing and grumbled about during this last War I would have thought luxury in my young day... I never envisaged such times of plenty.

Was I contented? Of course I was. I've yet to meet the horse I couldn't manage... I could get behind a pair of horses and sing and whistle all day. I hate the sight of these tractors buzzing around. In the old days, with 8 mowing, and 8 collecting and stytching, you could cut, tie and stook a 15-acre field of barley in a day. It was just like rowing, all eight of you in rhythm."

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