

## CHILDREN OF THE NORTH COTSWOLDS: ONE HUNDRED YEAR AGO

By Gerald Asbury

In any one of the 29 villages, which initially composed the Winchcombe Poor Law Union, children formed a significant section of the population. These children were principally the sons and daughters of agricultural labourers who represented the largest single occupation group. Because the fathers were unskilled farm workers, earning the lowest possible subsistence wage, these children lived their lives at extreme poverty levels. To a large degree this poverty was fixed within the rigid social structure occupied at the top by

to supplement meagre family incomes. Not surprisingly the outcome was, regular school attendance remained subordinate to field labour right through to the turn of the century. A Royal Commission reporting in 1868 on the problem in Gloucestershire<sup>2</sup> noted that in a sample of 26 parishes, an average of 11 children were working full-time 9 to 14 hours a day. At Alderton school, as late as 1897/98, children were working illegally on the land. *'Some 30 scholars returned to school after a week's absence having been employed*



Standard II at unknown school.

wealthy landowners, farmers of large acreages and the clergy. Their unanimous view was expressed as; *'a farm labourer should not be paid a penny more that he could subsist on'*.<sup>1</sup> Partly as a result of the author's research, it is possible to describe accurately the main details of their daily lives in the final decades of the Victorian period.

Most villages by the 1870s had a school provided for the benefit of farm labourers' and other children, and by 1880 compulsory attendance for all pupils was legally required, but in rural areas seldom achieved. The reason for this simply was the need for children to work in the fields in order

*illegally ... and many of the same children working from 5 or 6am to 5 or 6pm'*.<sup>3</sup> Normal levels of attendance, recorded in the school log book, indicated that the 30 absentees represented between 1/3 and 1/2 of the pupils on the roll. Moreover this type of absenteeism was not confined to the main harvest period but happened at other points in the farming year. Analysis of the reasons for all types of non attendance at this school over a ten year period (1892-1901) shows that working in the fields was the primary cause, and that the problem increased towards the turn of the century, 20 years after the introduction of

compulsory education.<sup>4</sup>

What was the nature of this irregular child labour and how much money did they earn? The commonest jobs were bird scaring, collecting stones and helping with the main harvest. Both of the first two occupations were solitary and boring, the birds merely flying from one part of the field to another. Backache was common, and the need to work in all weathers with inadequate footwear or clothing, frequently affected the child's health. Using a combination of cut down cast off clothing and a sack for head and arms thrown over the upper body, boys attempted to keep the severest weather at bay.<sup>5</sup> Wealthy farmer-employers exploited children, indeed maintained that some farm work depended on them, and all for about sixpence (2p) a day. When this level of physical hard work is looked at in terms of a child's typical diet, it is amazing so many children survived in relative good health. The father's weekly income was consistently around 11 shillings (55p), with fluctuating numbers of shillings from wives and children. This was subsistence level living. Few families could afford to buy meat, employer farmers preferred to feed skimmed milk to animals rather than sell cheaply to their labourers, so vegetables formed a staple diet when grown in the garden. Bread was home baked if there was a suitable oven in the cottage and, of course, occasional items were obtained by poaching. Survival for numerous agricultural labourer families depended on them being able to raise a pig. If this was possible, a meat supply of kinds was now available for most of the year. What all this amounted to in terms of daily feeding was, in times of shortage, father took the major portion, since he was the principal wage earner, and the rest of the family dined on scraps. Breakfast could sometimes be as basic as cider sop (bread soaked in cider).<sup>6</sup> On meatless days vegetable soup or boiled vegetables formed an evening meal. And, of course, bread and/or cheese (without butter) supplied the mid day meal eaten in the fields. It is clear that low food intake levels were sometimes identified and dealt with at school. *'The rector informed me, that in any case which came under my notice when children were in my opinion insufficiently fed, I was to order provisions (bread and cheese) and distribute them'*.<sup>7</sup> This was happening in a village in the ownership of a family noted for its above average quality of housing, and a long history of charity to the poor!

What were conditions like for those children who attended school regularly? The day began with a

walk of up to 2 miles, in all weathers, along field paths and roads, frequently in muddy conditions. The lucky children wore strong leather boots which cost the best part of a father's weekly wage; the unlucky ones made do with older brothers' cast offs. Arrival at school, wet and cold on occasions, led to constant usage of the schoolroom heating stove as clothing was dried out. Such conditions linked to poor diet, contributed to illnesses, which sometimes ravaged the community. Coughs, colds, whooping cough, measles and scarlet fever were often present and sometimes resulted in the temporary closure of the buildings.<sup>8</sup> Changes of school were quite common in response to their fathers annual (or shorter) hiring agreements. *'Ten children have left school owing to the changing of farm labourers'*.<sup>9</sup> The teaching was very formal, based on rôle learning and centred on the 3Rs (reading writing and arithmetic). Classes were large; children sat on benches at desks and found their copy work on slate boards was accompanied by generous applications of the cane. Pupils were expected to conform to high standards of behaviour, neatness and courtesy. Physical punishment was awarded to boys and girls as the aims of the school to produce loyal, conformist subservient adults were applied by those who saw themselves as socially superior.<sup>10</sup>

Poaching was an activity practiced by many labourer families but severely condemned and punished by the Squirearchy. Boys frequently made catapults, which were ideal for felling larger birds and rabbits, and, of course were easily concealed. If caught, penalties were extremely harsh, often amounting to costs equal to a week's wage. Non payment, which happened frequently, meant instead 10 days hard labour in prison. A case recorded at Northleach petty sessions in 1882, described as *'larceny of water cress'*<sup>11</sup> resulted in a fine of 1s-6d (7p) and 10s-6d (52p) costs and shows how the punishment failed to fit the crime.

Village children lived in dilapidated, unsatisfactory, meagerly furnished tied cottages in which their parents had no real security of tenure. A typical cottage consisted of a 12 foot by 12 foot (3.7m by 3.7m) living area with a small back kitchen. Upstairs was one main bedroom with sometimes a small one situated in the roof area, reached by a crude wooden ladder. Neither walls or roofs were rainproof or the few windows and general structure windproof. Bedrooms rarely had fireplaces so were very cold in winter. Body heat made up some of this deficiency created by the necessity for children to sleep top to tail, due to



H.M.I. Certificate 1888

shortage of beds. Rag rugs on bare boards were found on the upper floor area, whilst below, flagstones on bare earth often resulted in marked dampness. Photographs of labourers' cottages often show them with the front door open to enable dampness and smells to disappear. With water having to be carried from a village spring, well or pump and earth closets up the garden (sometimes shared with other cottages) conditions were clearly unhygienic. Drinking water was often suspect, indeed some families bought buckets of spring water from itinerant water sellers! Official judgment supported this profile of housing conditions: *'The majority of the cottages that exist in rural parishes are deficient in almost every requisite that should constitute a home'*.<sup>12</sup>

In this sort of environment lived the typical agricultural labourer family consisting of mother, father and 2.5 children. The generally held view of large families was not supported from the evidence analysed.<sup>13</sup> In fact 66% of this sample had families of one, two or three children, a puzzling factor when more children meant more income for the family. Wives of labourers were viewed as easy opportunities for cheap labour by the farmers who frequently allocated repetitive menial tasks to them such as hoeing or root crop trimming. They were

paid less than half the rate for their husbands, 8d (3p) a day in winter and 10d (4p) in summer and possibly a shilling (5p) at peak harvest times.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless it was their hard won earnings which kept them from pauperism. Indeed, whatever stability, health or happiness was present in these families at the lowest level of Victorian agricultural society, was largely due to these wives and mothers. There is evidence to support the view that agricultural labourers saw themselves as wage earners and their wives as income managers. *'The men worked for the money and the women had the spending of it'*.<sup>15</sup> Careful control over household spending accompanied by meticulous budgeting, made the pennies go further.

In spite of long hours of work for children, attendance at school, baby minding and sometimes glove making, these children did experience happiness. Play was almost always out of doors with the rich natural resources of the countryside at hand. In late Victorian England the rural environment was a relatively safe place to play, with swimming, tree climbing, bird nesting and collecting, looming large.<sup>16</sup> The farms generally welcomed children who could obtain occasional rides on horses and wagons. Almost always the blacksmith could be watched engaged on his fascinating work. Accidents on, or caused by,

agricultural machinery were rare. Photographic evidence from the late Victorian period perhaps profiles fairly accurately the balance experienced between work and play.<sup>17</sup> Out of a total of 452 photographs depicting rural agricultural life, 35 contained children and of these 22 show children clearly at work.

It is important to emphasise that for children who lived in the area of Winchcombe Poor Law Union, travel between villages, or beyond, was almost impossible. Carriers operated between villages and market towns but their fares were unaffordable. The railway through Winchcombe was not yet built. Labourers and their wives living in smaller country areas rarely travelled far from place of birth.<sup>18</sup> Analysis of the data collected on 139 families residing in Hailes, Alderton and Great Washbourne showed 93% of this population moved jobs only within a confined local area. Their children by and large repeated this pattern, although, church outings and annual Fairs provided the opportunity for more distant occasional social visits.

Children of agricultural labourers therefore led an edge-of-poverty existence throughout their childhood, characterised by hard work in home, field and school. To this constant drudgery was added limited hours of play. Those who survived this childhood regime achieved the unenviable position of becoming agricultural labourers or female servants themselves. Only by moving to higher skilled jobs could the poverty be relieved, but very few such opportunities occurred. Some young men made their way to industrial areas where they earned higher wages; some emigrated. Both routes represented an aspect of the decline in agricultural occupations between 1870-1900. 'In Gloucestershire, the national decline was mirrored by a reduction from 20,586 agricultural labourers in 1871 to 13319 in 1901'.<sup>19</sup> It might be assumed that the full-time education a majority of pupils achieved by the turn of the century would increase social/job advancement. From the school logs studied, only one case of a child moving to Grammar School was found,<sup>20</sup> although it is likely that some children profited from the opportunities presented by evening classes. For the mass of the working village population in the North Cotswolds, therefore, the field labourer continued 'to live on farthings while the farmers starved on pounds'.<sup>21</sup> Sadly for a significant section of the rural population in this 90 square mile area, this was literally true. Through illness or unemployment, people were forced to apply for

out relief, or worse still enter the workhouse. The degrading experience of children in Winchcombe workhouse will form the subject area of a subsequent article.

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The author is prepared to give talks on the subject of this article and can be contacted on 01242 620182. (Ed.)