Tough times: life in Norfolk England in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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William White published his second history, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk in 1845, only a couple of years before the Pointon brothers emigrated to South Australia. The introductory section of his extensive work contained, in part, the following description of the county.

> *Norfolk, the most eastern division of England, is an extensive maritime county, comprising 412,664 inhabitants, and about 1,300,000 acres of land, divided into thirty-three Hundreds, and about 740 Parishes including the City of Norwich, which forms, with its precincts, a Town and County of itself. Compared with the other Counties of England, it ranks fourth in territorial extent, and the eighth in population. It is celebrated for the diversity and high cultivation of its soil; for the abundance and excellence of its agricultural productions; for its crape, bombasin and other manufactures of silk and worsted; for its herring and mackerel fisheries; and for its numerous antiquities, market towns, villages and parishes, but in some cases, two or three of the latter are united either ecclesiastically or for the support of the poor.*

The agricultural writer Nathaniel Kent estimated that by 1796, two-thirds of the county of Norfolk was used for arable farming. Whereas in the 16th and 17th centuries a majority of the populace owned land, many with only small holdings, a fundamental change in the agricultural situation gradually occurred during the 17th and 18th centuries. This was the change from open-field strip farming to enclosed fields (the controversial process called 'enclosure'), which had profound social as well as organisational effects. Previously farmers often shared ploughs, horses and manual tasks; now farms were strictly individual units with very small owners often left with unworkably smallholdings. By 1750, however, there were very few strip fields remaining, and as a result of private exchanges, farms were being consolidated. The poor lost their rights to gather timber for fuel and to pasture a cow or pig on land traditionally available to them. So the social effects were quite serious. Enclosure of common land required legislation (and much was enclosed during the Napoleonic wars). During this period, the land-owning community consisted of 'gentlemen farmers', wealthy tenant farmers and small farmers. The first group didn't rely on farm income for their wealth and tended to have special interests like breeding pedigree livestock. On the other hand, the rich tenant farmers worked large holdings in an intensive way and had the interest and capital to experiment with new ideas. The vast majority of farmers owned smallholdings which had often 'been in the family' for generations. Lack of money often inhibited their interest in trying new ideas, but for them, farming was a way of life; it was 'in their blood'. Some of these latter farmers were employed by, or leased land belonging to, the wealthy estate owners. But, the proportion of landless labourers in the rural community steadily increased.

The Norfolk Pointons, like most other people, were closely tied to the land. While there is evidence that some of our ancestors existed in more fortunate circumstances, most were farm labourers or agricultural workers. John Pointer, father of James William and Jeremiah, was an agricultural labourer according to census records. Yet on his death certificate his occupation was given as 'husbandman' (farmer) suggesting that in the last years of his life he may have been the owner of a small parcel of land. So, what would it have been like to have been an agricultural labourer (or, a member of the family of one), in Norfolk in the 18th and early 19th centuries?

As only a very few anecdotal records about many of our ancestors are available to give us insights into their exact circumstances, it is necessary to draw a generalised picture of how they lived from social and economic histories of those times. In the early 18th century, Norfolk still had a largely agricultural and cottage industry base to its economy, and many densely populated villages, especially in the east and middle of the county, offered plenty of work, even for children, in spinning and textile-related activities. These 'affluent' villages supported the market towns like Holt with goods and livestock, while small ports like Blakeney and Cley were the sea-trade centres for exports like grain to Holland and imports such as coal from northern England. However, cottage industries such as spinning and weaving eventually died out in the countryside of Norfolk, as the industrial revolution saw mechanised power in factories centralise these in the capital and largest city, Norwich.

Norfolk was particularly well suited to the export of grain to the continent. By 1794, more grain was leaving the ports of Norfolk for Holland than from the whole of the rest of England. The Napoleonic wars had boosted agriculture, especially the production of grain. A huge farming effort was channelled into growing cereal crops, even in unsuitable areas, encouraged by a price escalation for grain which far out-stripped that for livestock. During the l8th and early 19th centuries, great agricultural improvements took place throughout England, with Norfolk farmers playing a significant role in both developing and publicising improved farming management and methods. Fostered by the efforts and enthusiasm of people like Coke of Holkham and 'Turnip' Townshend, many advances were made in farming techniques, land management and machinery, and in the development of better breeds of livestock and the introduction of new and better crops. By growing turnips and artificial grasses instead of leaving land fallow, they achieved higher soil fertility. They became known across England for their progressive farming. By 1760, turnips and clover were almost universally grown on land that previously would have been 'lain' (left) fallow, but it is uncertain just how widespread formal crop rotation was practised.

Townshend and Coke evolved the famous Norfolk 'four course' system. The crops that were rotated in four groups depended somewhat on the type of soil. For example, in the heavy land districts it was: first year fallow (either clean fallow tares, beet or turnips); second year barley; third year half clover, half peas or beans, alternately; fourth year wheat. The course on the light land districts was: fallow, swedes, white turnips, mangel-wurzels or carrots in the first year; followed by barley; then by seeds in the third year; and wheat last of all. But there was, naturally, much variation in the order of cropping, especially among the smaller farmers.

Employment and wages in the last half of the 18th century and in the 19th century, the only major employment in Norfolk was in agriculture and the great majority of the working population was labourers on the land. Agricultural work provided many different types of employment for labourers, but they could be categorised into two main groups:

1) Those labourers who worked for a particular farmer, and who stayed on the same farm or estate for long periods of time often all their working lives. Frequently, they were born on

the farm in a tied cottage (belonging to a particular farm), and never left, the house being passed on to the son on the death of the labourer. These labourers tended to become the 'elite' of the class because they had (relative) stability of employment, and because of their permanency and great knowledge of the farm and its workings could rise from mere farmhands to become more valued farm workers, with tasks such as herdsmen or ploughmen. Their families were born and raised there, and from an early age both sons and daughters would work on the farm, initially as bird scarers, gleaners after the harvest, cow boys and similar. As they grew up they would enter the more 'advanced' jobs, and the women would go into the dairies, the house itself and the tasks such as butter-making and looking after vegetable and fruit plots. This was not always the case but was common practice. It is worth emphasising that the work wasn't contracted in the modern sense; there was absolutely no guarantee of employment. If the farm fell on hard times, or the farmer decided that he could dispense with the services of a particular labourer, then he could and would dismiss him and turn him and his family out of their cottage without compensation. This was more likely when people grew old and infirm, and so, less useful to their employer. A good employer might make provision for a worker such as this, giving him or her easier or sedentary jobs, and perhaps a certain amount of charity; a more ruthless one would just turn them out.

2) Those labourers who were more mobile, and contracted out their labour usually every year. These were the 'hired men' and 'hired women', who crop up frequently in novels about the period (e.g. those of Thomas Hardy). It was the normal custom for hiring to be done once a year, at Michaelmas (29 September), the place of hiring almost always being a country fair, or, less often, a market. The fairs were frequently called 'hiring fairs' (although other business and sales would also be transacted), and they were common throughout the county (e.g. 25 were held in 1762). The labourers would stand on a platform, or in an enclosure, to be 'looked over by the prospective employers for features such as strength, general appearance and character (and, in the case of girls, probably their attractiveness as well!). They would then be questioned about their skills and abilities, their previous employment and their liabilities (which might well include wives and children).

3) Finally, there would be a bargaining of sorts regarding a wage - with the obvious proviso that in hard times the labourer had no bargaining power, but in good times, or in areas where labour was scarce, they were at a premium.

In the early decades of the 19th century in Norfolk, agriculture was frequently depressed and rural poverty great, so bargaining was less feasible. Skilled workers with a particularly useful trade or experience would often hire themselves on this basis because they could demand good wages, and farmers might vie with each other to get the worker they wanted. This was the case quite often with people such as plough-team leaders and very experienced cowmen. It seems that some of the most highly valued jobs (those involved in handling livestock the teamsman who looked after the horses, the yardsman who cared for the cattle and the shepherd) often had a cottage made available to them. However, during the latter part of the 18th century and into the 19th century, the trend was away from the annual 'hiring fairs', towards a more casual engagement of workers. This was usually on a daily or weekly basis, with no pay on wet days. Later, during the Victorian era, with farm sizes increased, farmers could no longer manage with just family and some yearly engaged 'live-in' servants. Farmers needed more labour and greater flexibility in employment, and agricultural labourers (like their industrial counterparts the factory workers) found themselves entirely at the mercy of their employers, who could reduce their pay whenever prices for their farm products dropped. Wages for the least secure, most poorly skilled or least experienced farm workers were very low. The struggle for existence can best be

illustrated by the loss in value of wages. In a fifty year period in the late 18th century, wages rose by only 25 per cent but the cost of living increased by 60 per cent. Labourers were in a weak bargaining position due to the over-population from which Norfolk was suffering. Wages were usually low, and were not infrequently paid in the form of goods or food, or the labourer was allowed a small plot of land to raise vegetables and perhaps to keep a pig or two. The pig was fattened and then killed in the late autumn, to be salted or smoked as a source of meat through the winter and early spring. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* gives a very vivid and convincing account of such a pig-killing, and this was one of the major events in the calendar of most rural families. Everything would be used skin, bristles, bones, every scrap of meat, blood (made into puddings with oatmeal and herbs), etc. Wages also varied enormously between periods of plenty and periods of scarcity, and the 1820s and 1830s were, in general, a time of low wages in East Anglia. This was particularly so in these counties because the woollen industry was in a state of rapid decline, as the great textile areas of northern England flourished. With alternative employment not readily available, it led to an excess of agricultural workers.

Settlement and the poor

Underpinning support for the poor, was the Old Poor Law (i.e. pre-1834). The Act of Settlement of 1662 gave every individual a legal place of settlement. A parish or township was legally bound to provide him or her with poor relief in the event of their becoming destitute through old age, unemployment or other personal circumstances. As the number of destitute increased, ratepayers were faced with astronomical increases in the parish poor rates (money paid to help support the poor in their own parish). A person could obtain this 'settlement' in the following main ways:

1) through the place of birth of their father (in the case of children under 16 or those with no other place of settlement for any other reason)

2) through their own place of birth (especially in the case of abandoned and illegitimate children)

3) through serving an apprenticeship in that parish

4) through working more than one year in a parish.

Thus, an individual would begin with a legal settlement in one place, but might well gain settlement in several other parishes during his or her lifetime. Each successive settlement cancelled all previous ones.

The result of this procedure (and, most specifically, that relating to work in a place for more than a year) was that very frequently, employers insisted that hiring contracts were made for 364 days rather than a full year. The labourer would then be dismissed one day short of the period necessary to qualify for a place of settlement in that parish. He would then either go to a hiring fair and move elsewhere, or be re-employed by the same farmer after one or two days interval. The year requirement was not cumulative, and so dismissal and re-employment did not amount to sufficient to give settlement. Some parishes were small and the farmers were not only the main employers but also the main payers of the parish poor rates. Had the workers gained settlement there, these farmers eventually would have become liable to pay them in their eventual destitution as well as wages while they worked. Therefore, the complex system of short-term contracts and hiring was a general feature of life in rural areas. Eventually parishes

combined in finding a solution to the problem of supporting their poor, by grouping those from neighbouring parishes and establishing 'houses of industry'.

In these work houses, the earliest of which was built in 1767, the poor had to live and work, undertaking spinning for outside (mostly Norwich) manufacturers. In some, just the women and children worked indoors while the men were engaged on nearby farms. By 1834, half of the parishes of Norfolk had access to a 'poor-house' as they were sometimes called. After this date it was common for families and married couples to be separated. The conditions of the agricultural labourer reached a very low ebb by 1815, but things got worse. The end of the wars meant that many ex-soldiers were unemployed. Grain prices fell and farmers lowered wages; a landowner-dominated Parliament passed the Corn Laws, which prevented the import of grain until the price of English wheat reached 80 shillings a quarter.

It is not surprising, therefore that discontent, fuelled by steep rises in the prices of bread and flour during the post-Napoleonic wars depression, led to violence. Rioting occurred in 1816, (just five years before James Pointon was born), with the anger directed at property, machinery in particular. Ricks (stacks of hay, corn or peas, often thatched [roofed with straw] for weather protection) were burned and threshing machines broken. The latter were depriving labourers of valuable winter employment and consequently were much hated. Further rioting broke out in 1830 as again farm workers demanded rises in wages and the abolition of threshing machines, twenty-nine of which were smashed. As the population continued to rise, under employment became worse and consequently, poor rates had to be increased, leading to strong moves among ratepayers for all relief to the poor outside of workhouses to be abolished. This national reform movement resulted in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which led to eighteen new Poor Law Unions and twelve new workhouses being established in Norfolk. The paupers found themselves being divided into groups based on age, sex and state of health, and were supervised in their extremely tedious and repetitive work and in their living areas by a very watchful 'master'. While some practices were downright obnoxious (like unmarried mothers having to dress differently from the other women and being treated almost like criminals), the tenants were at least able to obtain regular meals, even if they were monotonous. Education of a sort was also available to their children, an unlikely occurrence outside the workhouse. The 1834 Act took little account of the needs of the sick, especially of the mentally sick, and many 'harmless idiots' were living amongst the general pauper population in the union houses. The appointment of Poor Law medical officers considerably improved the standards of care for the sick poor, certainly above that of the village quacks to whom they would have previously turned for cheap treatment.

Many of the Unions of parishes sought long-term answers to the enormous and growing problems of care of the poor, in the form of sponsored emigration to other parts of England (especially the industrialised north) and overseas. However, the difficulties were not eased much because generally it was only the more able and younger people who emigrated. The Poor Law Guardians had very hard and at times inhumane attitudes to the poor, probably regarding their condition as being their own fault, and their continued existence as a costly nuisance to those who had to contribute to their support. On estates where the demand for labour exceeded the cottage accommodation, gangs of workers were brought in from elsewhere. They came from other villages, which were not controlled by the one landlord where speculators erected rows of poor cottages and charged exorbitant rents because of the shortage of housing. Labourers from these villages would often travel quite a distance to where the work was offering and be formed into work gangs by 'gang masters'. These organisers could offer such gangs for hire to farmers to do various types of work such as weeding, potato digging and turnip hoeing.

Farm Work

While the steady introduction of an increasing range and quality of machinery was an irreversible trend from the early 1800s, there was resistance to their use (as previously described), by the large numbers of farm labourers who feared the inevitable loss of work and income. But the work they had using the traditional methods was arduous, long, repetitive and not always regular. For example, before the drill method of sowing turnips became the norm, they were sown broadcast or fleet on the ground. When the seed was sown by hand the sower had a small seed-bowl on his chest: this was secured by a leather band which went round his neck. He took the small seed between his finger and thumb and sowed in step; that is, as his left foot came up, his left hand dipped into the seed bowl and scattered the seed. It was a skilled job to sow with both hands and keep in step, as the rhythm could very easily be broken. If this happened the sower would have to stop and start again as a break in the rhythm meant a blank patch in the sowing. Few men, too, could judge the amount of seed to sow at each pinch of the thumb and forefinger. Turnip seed was sown at the rate of half a pint an acre and if the sower dug too deeply into his bowl with his thumb and forefinger he would not make his seed last. Not more than one or two men on each farm could sow at the necessary rate with two hands. Most men were only able to sow with one. This was necessarily slower, but the sower who used one hand only was able to carry a seed-hod - a bigger container - on one side of his body.

Clover and mustard were sown in the same way as turnips. When the turnips came up, it would be some time during the harvest; and the men would be set to hoe in the early morning before breakfast when the dag or dew would still be on the corn. They would likewise hoe turnips when a damp or wet day compelled them to make a break in the harvesting. It was a hard job hoeing plants that grew from broadcast seed, and they would have to hoe twice; the second time to cut out the knots or concentration of plants and the weeds that had grown since the first hoeing.

Traditionally, the method of harvesting the grain crop was by hand, using a sickle. By 1850 the scythe had replaced the sickle. An 1843 description of harvest describes the activities and methods:

> *Thirty-four men mow the wheat and in order to lay it evenly their scythes are fitted with cradles made of iron rods. These men are each followed by two women ..... and a boy or girl to gather up the corn into small sheaves. Eight teamsmen ..... follow to shock up the sheaves of which they place ten in a shock ..... 300 acres of wheat is cut in six days. Carting takes a further eight. Eighteen to 20 days are needed to complete the harvest.*

The women mentioned previously, were usually the wives of the harvest workers and were called gavellers. Their job was to rake the mown corn into gavels or rows ready for tying into sheaves, or for carting if left loose. Barley was often left 'on the gavel'. The stubbles are dew-raked by men drawing a long iron-toothed rake. A tool called a shack-fork a fork with curved tines and an iron bow at the shoulder was used to gather the swathes of barley into gavels ready for pitching onto the wagons. A gaveller worked behind each wagon feeding the corn to two men one on each side of the wagon who did the pitching while another two men on top of the load received the corn and arranged it evenly. The man paid the gaveller about a shilling a day: if she had a young child to look after at the same time, she would have to manage as best she could. Men, women, lads, boys and girls all worked in the fields and each had certain jobs and set wages.

'What was the difference between a boy and a lad'? The lad got more money than the boys: he was, in fact, older and would not he called a lad until he had left school. While he was still at school he was a boy until he was seventeen or eighteen he would be called a lad. A lad who had not long left school would be taken on at harvest time as a half-man. That is, he received half a man's wages. He did very light jobs during the harvest: taking the loaded wagons to the stack yard; or drag-work, leading a horse with the drag-rake. The horses he handled would he the staid old jobbing horses that had lost all their sprightliness after long years of hard ploughing. When a lad was sixteen or seventeen he was taken on as a three-quarter man, getting three-quarters of a man's wages. He did all the jobs a full-man did except pitching, the handling of the sheaves of corn from the ground on to the wagon the heaviest job of all. A three-quarter man was usually stationed on top of the load.

Boys and girls who were still at school were usually taken on at fixed wages. They had various jobs: they helped with the turnip hoeing. They carried the elevenses and fourses - the men's snacks at eleven in the morning and four in the afternoon into the fields; some of the boys would lead the wagon horses and both boys and girls would be employed as bind pullers. The bind-puller worked with a tier-up, the man or the woman who came after the reaper and tied the corn into sheaves. When the cradle or horns attachment was used with the scythe it would leave the wheat or oats, that had been cut, leaning against the standing corn; the tier-up put his foot underneath a bunch of corn to help him lift it into his arms. The boy or girl who was acting as his bind-puller would, in the meantime, have pulled out three or four ears of corn from a bunch lying somewhere near and would be ready to hand these to the tier when he was ready to make his knot . Boys, moreover, meant a lower wage bill.

After the corn was cut and carted it was stored in huge wooden eighteenth-century barns for storing and processing. Norfolk farmers liked to keep most of their crop indoors rather than stacking it in a yard. In spite of constant improvements to the design of threshing machines and its increasingly widespread use on many farms in the 1840s, the crop was still being hand-flailed, a handy activity for otherwise idle hands in the winter. The threshing was done on the middle-stead, the middle of the barn, the floor of which was paved with clay-daub (dab) which was clay beaten down until it became as hard as concrete. The threshing was done with a flail, or frail, which had an ash handle with a swivel on top. The part that struck the corn was called the swingel and was made of tough wood, like holly or blackthorn. It was attached to the swivel on the handle by thongs of snakeskin, or eel-skin using a knot of special design. When using the flail the thresher swung the handle over his shoulder and brought down the swingel across the straw just below the ears so that the grains of corn were shaken out without being bruised.

Great skill was needed to use the flail consistently effectively - it was very easy for an inexperienced thresher to hit himself on the back of the neck. While the threshing was being done the big double doors at one end of the barn and the single door at the other end were opened to allow the through draught to blow away the dust. After the threshing was completed the sievers job was to separate the cavings from the grain and chaff, the grain being piled at one side of the middle stead. A scuppit (a wooden casting shovel) was then used to throw the grain high in the air, the heavy grains falling furthest away and the lighter ones dropping short forming a kind of tail. Thus these inferior grains became known as tailings; they have mostly ever been used for cattle feed.

An indication of the rate of threshing can be gauged from the writings of H. Rider Haggard who, at the turn of the twentieth century, recorded:

At Kelsale, on a farm belonging to Mr Flick, we saw his bailiff, Philip Woodward, a fine old man who said that he had been sixty years in farming. As a boy he had started on sixpence a week; and as a young man was paid ten pence a coomb (equivalent to four bushels) for thrashing with a flail with which instrument he knocked out something like three and a half coomb a day.

Another old farm-worker, keen to dispel any impression that threshing was in any way a romantic or colourful activity is recorded as unequivocally stating, 'threshing was real, downright slavery.'

One of the skills that had the highest acclaim in the East Anglian countryside under the old farm economy was the ability to draw or plough a straight furrow and lay a level stetch (a section of ploughed land) so that it looked like a well-made length of corduroy. So great was the interest in ploughing a well-finished stetch with mathematically straight furrows, and so keen was the rivalry between various horsemen that, even after they had spent most of an autumn day ploughing an acre or so in the field, they would spend the rest of it ploughing the land over once again in the cosiness of the inn bar.

All farm workers were labourers with that term's implication of unskilled and unintelligent toil; and that label stuck to them until recent years. And it must be admitted that the low level of wages the farm-worker received appeared to the uninformed, justification enough for not changing their image of him. But the farm-worker was practised in numerous skills as well as ploughing and drilling. These other skills included stacking, thatching, hedging, ditching, and looking after the horses (with no vet to call on).

Accommodation and domestic life

Accommodation for agricultural workers was generally unsatisfactory, with crowded and sub-standard conditions being the norm. It was mostly supplied by employers and almost never owned by the labourers themselves. The settlement laws which made the local populace of each village responsible for those born, or claiming a settlement in that parish, contributed to the lack of new dwellings erected and the decay of older ones. As small farmers were bought out, the farm houses were divided to house the increased number of labourers needed to work the larger holdings. Typical dwellings in the early nineteenth century were quite dilapidated being held up with wooden shoring and having decayed sagging roofs. It was not uncommon for one bedroom houses to have seven to ten inhabitants.

In northern Norfolk, especially, (Morston and Saxlingham are good examples) flintstone was the predominant building material, so the few better homes were made of flint and brick with a pantile roof. Around Binham, many buildings were built of limestone, as large quantities were available from the ruins of the Priory, which became the village quarry. But the labouring class mostly lived in cottages of mud and straw until the middle of the 19th century.

By the 1840s the majority of people lived in a one or two-roomed cottage with, perhaps, a scullery or back-house added on. Most also had a shed for livestock attached to the house (the smell must have been appalling), all being set in a small plot of land used for vegetables and as a hen and pig run. There would have been no sanitation of any sort, unless the cottage happened to be near a stream or pond, which case would have been used. Otherwise, a hole in the garden or a pail or tub in the house, emptied more or less often, and used to manure the garden. More prosperous families had candles, and oil lamps perhaps, but most workers homes were lit by rush

lights- rushes stripped to expose the pithy centre and then dipped in melted tallow (greasy remnants of animal fat) which burned dimly and smokily, and gave out a vile smell. And, of course, such light as was given out by a fire of wood (no coal, except in port towns and perhaps in some of the small coastal villages with harbours). The fire also provided the only means of cooking, with ranges and other 'cooking stoves' not appearing until late in the 19th century.

Most small cottages would not have had their own well, so the village pump was the most likely water supply, though those near a stream would have used it (even though it was also used for effluent). Pollution and contamination were widespread, and produced terrible recurring epidemics of diarrhoea, gastric disorders and fevers, with typhoid a frequent visitor, and, after its first appearance in 1832, cholera. As mentioned, pigs provided most of the meat, apart from old hens (after laying had stopped for good) and perhaps very occasionally a bit of poor quality beef if a cow had died of old age. Usually a cow was much too expensive and ate too much for a family to keep. Some employers would dish out meat from time to time, especially on feast days, and some would have big suppers for all the workers at Christmas, Michaelmas or other special days. Milk was scarce (with most being made into butter or cheese, in any case, as it would not keep), so water and ale were the most common drinks ale, being processed, was much safer than polluted water. They ate large amounts of coarse bread, perhaps with cheese or pork dripping, or the crackling from pork skin occasionally. Vegetables were eaten often but there was not much variety - cabbage and carrots mostly; with potatoes becoming more general in the early 19th century. In addition onions and garlic (despite alleged English hostility to them!), boiled wheat and a great deal of pot barley used in stews and soups. Fish was a more regular item in the diets of coastal people, but some was transported inland to supplement that caught in the larger rivers. Rabbits and game birds were eaten with great relish whenever available, but there were limited opportunities to obtain them because of the strict poaching and game laws.

Despite the great estates being jealously guarded, many was the time when rich and fragrant stews had to be hidden in the roof or at the bottom of the garden while the gamekeeper was in the neighbourhood. In some areas of Norfolk great rabbit warrens were maintained, and these afforded the determined poacher good potential. But the penalties were extremely severe, and execution or transportation was very common. It was often said that one was more likely to be hanged for killing a rabbit than for killing a fellow human being! So diet was plain, monotonous and cheap, and reasonably healthy provided there was enough of it. There were periods of near famine in the late 18th century and starvation was by no means uncommon, but less so in England than elsewhere in Europe, and almost always only among the poor and the vagrants.

For most people schooling was non-existent, except in some parishes where 'dame schools' taught perhaps the rudiments of reading and writing. These would have been at a nominal charge. In the early 1820s, the National Society established its large network of schools across the country. State support for education began in the 1830s.

Entertainments were few for the labouring class. Even though there were no public holidays, there were times for recreation and enjoyment. Harvest time was the period of fullest employment and traditionally the farmer provided a 'frolic' when it was completed. On a few days each year there might he a fair in a neighbouring larger village or small town, or a wedding or funeral. Occasionally they could deal with a travelling pedlar or hawker who might bring cheap trinkets, cheap earthenware and pottery, ribbons and combs, toys and news from outside the area.

Village life

Villages by the hundred still exist in Norfolk many not all that changed in appearance from how they looked one hundred and fifty years ago, and longer. Take away the bitumen roads, vehicular road signs, phone boxes, telephone and power lines, television aerials, the few modern homes and buildings and the odd modern advertising signs, and one could visualise fairly closely their traditional state. But, what has changed a good deal is village life - so much so that, paradoxically, village life as it was in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, is dead.

Back then, 'village life' meant a unique kind of isolation from the rest of the world, for the village and its surrounding farms were a 'villagers' world. It meant knowing and being known by everyone else in the village. It meant knowing quite clearly one's station in life and what this entitled one to do or to be, even how and with whom one could and should go about. It meant finding one's entertainment, such as it was, in the village or within walking distance of it.

Church activities and involvement meant a great deal to a considerable proportion of the village inhabitants, and the annual Sunday School outing was for many children the only or most eagerly awaited treat of the year. For those women not forced through necessity to work some or all of the time in the fields, village life meant being: tied to the home all day every day, their monotony relieved by a regular succession of 'packmen', 'tally men', itinerant traders calling at the kitchen door with groceries, hats, crockery, brushes, underwear, ribbons, etc. Nobody bought or sold fruit, flowers, vegetables, plants - one exchanged, bartered, begged or gave them away. The same with pig 'fry'. The same with sittings of eggs. It meant speaking the local dialect, and distrusting or despising anyone who did not - except the parson and the schoolmaster. It meant going to the toilet in a dark and draughty privy at the bottom of the garden or at the back of the house. It meant going to bed early to economise in lamp-oil and coal; washing in cold water from pump or well; eating cold fat bacon for breakfast or going without. It meant finding your way across fields and along deserted lanes in the dark, and enjoying it, especially if you were courting. All that, and very much more, are what 'village life' used to mean.

The rise of Methodism

In the eighteenth century, England emerged from being a fairly apathetic nation in respect to religion, to one of widespread religious renewal, as a forerunner of the striking and vigorous religious revival of the nineteenth century. The Reformation had not removed the many undesirable practices of the Church of England such as non-residence, plurality and nepotism. The Bishops gave little effective leadership in Norfolk and many vicars lived a comfortable lifestyle amongst the leisured classes, only having dealings with the more humble parishioners through necessity.

The dissenting Churches that had broken away from the Church of England after the 1663 Act of Uniformity, the Congregationalists, Independents and Baptists, were stagnating alongside the 'Mother Church'. Their adherent's were mostly tightly knit communities in scattered, isolated places, and they had little impact on the established church. What did arouse the Church and the populace was the arrival of the Wesleyans in the last half of the eighteenth century. John Wesley made more than forty visits to Norfolk between 1745 and 1790, but the great bulk of conversions were brought about by the work of his lay preachers, who persisted in spite of mob violence and attacks on them by opponents. Wesley established small bands of believers who actively set up additional groups or 'classes' of converts in surrounding villages, making up a larger group, or

circuit, which had as its coordinating base the chapel in the most central and usually largest town.

The Walsingham circuit, which reached out to the Saxlingham and Field Dalling area, was set up in 1791. By 1800, there were about seventy-five villages with licensed meeting places, usually chapels in the towns, and private houses or other buildings, elsewhere. Their organisational strength was the circuits. But after Wesley's death in 1791, leadership splits occurred and factions developed. The greatest efforts at reaching the working class people seem to have been concentrated in the industrial cities and towns, yet in rural Norfolk itinerant Wesleyan preachers were very active and well received amongst the farm-labouring populace, providing plain sermons which addressed the needs of the poor. Another thirty houses were licensed for preaching by 1820 and groups that had raised enough capital built chapels. Debate within the Church of England was promoted by an evangelical movement centred around Clapham in London. Church restoration was one of the many reforms advocated by the academic, clerical and conservative movement known as the 'Oxford Movement', which was mostly concerned with establishing 'high church' ritual and theological debate.

By 1851, breakaway Methodist groups consisted of the New Connexion, the Bible Christians, the Wesleyan Methodist Association, the Wesleyan Reformers and the most significant new group, the Primitive Methodists, which had working class leadership as well as membership. This latter group had 234 chapels with over 25,000 members by the year 1851, whereas the total adherents of all other Wesleyan groups was 42,000, spread amongst 260 chapels. The messages of the dissenting Churches appealed strongly to the rural labouring population and they found willing converts, especially the Primitive Methodists. Their services were generally well attended and the Primitive's, in particular, had fairly lively proceedings with enthusiastic participation by members of the congregation. Very popular were the 'camp meetings', when preachers spoke from wagons in a meadow and there was much hymn singing; also the 'love feasts'.

For significant numbers of people, life in the villages and towns became much more focused on the Church and religious activities. The dissenters held Church services two or three times on Sundays, and the Sunday School and its annual 'treat' dominated the lives of younger people. During the Sabbath all other activities were severely curtailed including reading, except for The Bible or Pilgrim's Progress. Even in daily life throughout the week, religion played a greater part than it had previously for a fair percentage of the population. Two of the Pointon family at least, James and Jeremiah, converted to Wesleyan Methodism. James is known to have become a member of the Wesleyan Church about the year 1836, when he was 15 years of age, and four years later to have commenced preaching, an activity he pursued fervently all his life, literally until his death. Jeremiah also had a lifelong association with Methodism which began in his teens, and, whilst nothing in particular is known about his activities in England, he was a fiery lay preacher in each of the many districts in which he resided in South Australia. It is possible that William, too, became a Wesleyan, but the only evidence of any active involvement with the Church, was a mention in Rev Harrold Pointon's Memoirs that, 'he was a worker in the Curramulka Church before my day there'.

Whilst their faith may have been one of the factors in the decision by James, Jeremiah and Frances to emigrate, it does not appear to have been a dominant one. The extent of persecution and other social pressures on Wesleyan and other non-conformists in England was abating somewhat by the late 1840s. The extensive conversion to Methodism of the rural, working class population, especially in Norfolk, meant that there was 'strength in numbers' and less need to be considering seeking religious freedom in far-off places. However, that being said, there were

still difficulties in being able to worship completely freely and unmolested, even during their voyage of emigration. Their strong faith was a wonderful sustaining force during their long and testing shipboard experience, and it was probably also of immense value to them in the actual making of their decision to emigrate.

Endnotes and references

i Susanna Wade Martins, A History of Norfolk, Philimore & Co Ltd., Chichester, 1961, p 54.

ii The table "Farm Labourers' Earnings and Expenses in Norfolk in 1799 and 1838" is adapted from Martins. p. 59. No comment was made in the source regarding the Total Outgoings exceeding the Earnings.

iii Martins, p 60.

iv Geo. Ewart Evans, Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay, London, p 88.

v Martins, p.57.

vi Evans, p 87.

vii Evans, p 89 - 90.

viii Evans, p 94.

ix Evans, p 96.

x Geo. Ewart Evans, Where Beards Wag All, Plymouth, 1971, pp 64-5.

xi Roof tiles transversely curved to ogee shape.

xii Roland Parker, The Common Stream, London, 1975, p 263.