

THE DECLINE OF LIVING-IN SERVANTS IN THE TRANSITION TO CAPITALIST FARMING: A CRITIQUE OF THE SUSSEX EVIDENCE

by Brian Short

'Nowhere does the antagonistic character of capitalist production and accumulation assert itself more brutally than in the progress of English agriculture . . . and the retrogression of the English agricultural labourer.'

Karl Marx, *Capital* (Penguin edn., introd. E. Mandel, 1 (1976), 828)

The decline of the living-in servant has been taken as a symbolic and necessary part of the overall decline of that special relationship between master and man which had characterized English agriculture before the advent of capitalism. The household links which derived their origin from the close bonding between the provisioners of capital and labour living under the same roof and forming a small unit of production, were seen by Marx to be very characteristic of the feudal mode of production. By separating master and man, by depriving the living-in servant of customary entitlements to board and lodging, and by the progressive proletarianization of agricultural labour, the cash nexus was established and a landless, and mostly casualized, labourer was created. It is this concept of a social and spatial polarization of classes in the English countryside which will be examined here in some detail, with reference to material drawn from Sussex. It will be argued that the concept of class polarization, at least when seen in the perspective of Sussex, has been too simplistic. When one considers, for example, the actual experiences of farm workers, as well as the abstractions of political economy, the situation becomes very much more complex. A re-evaluation is now long overdue.¹

THE LIVING-IN SERVANT

According to Laslett 'service was a universal characteristic of pre-industrial English society'.² Its spatial manifestation, however, was complex. It did not exist to the same degree in all regions, and as the 18th century progressed living-in lingered more on those small enclosed pasture farms of the west, south-west and north of England where social differences were perhaps less pronounced. The system consisted of servants being hired yearly for a cash sum, having board and lodging in the farmhouse with the farmer and his family, i.e. working and eating together with the employer and obtaining some part of the wage in kind—a wage which was consequently lower than that obtained by

daily labourers, but which brought with it a more secure form of employment. Typically such servants were young and unmarried, learning farm and domestic skills for use in later life. The median age of such servants by 1851 was 19.8 years.³

In parts of the north of England, especially Northumberland, the system had a long history and survived strongly throughout the 19th century. Here there was a scarcity of population and large isolated farms were held on long leases by tenants who hired servants for specific purposes. Shepherds might therefore be hired together with other 'hinds' to ensure an adequate workforce. As the 19th century progressed there was some loss of labour to industrial employment in

the north-east of England, and the role of family labour became that much more dominant. Hinds would be required to be married men, and to provide 'bondagers' or female servants and their families to work on the holdings. Similarly on the dairy farms of 18th-century Cheshire, living-in was the normal practice on the larger farms. Here the farmer's wife and the women servants played a crucial role in dairy production, and the latter could command a good wage, particularly after the attractions of the cotton mills became apparent.

In most cases the supply of servants came from the families of smaller farmers and cottagers, and they would be working on middle-sized or very large farms. In all districts there were farms of a smaller, largely subsistence type, which could be run solely by family labour, and the relationship between these farms and the larger ones was thus crucial to the existence of the living-in system. The farm servants most vital to the running of the farm, such as the bailiff or foreman, the ploughman, and the cow-keepers, shepherds and carters would get their board and lodging, and their washing done for them. Normally such servants would be hired at an annual 'mop' or 'statute' fair which would be held at a nearby market town, but in some areas servants moved themselves from farm to farm, or gained situations by personal recommendation. Their standard of living would have been low, particularly where smaller farms also took in yearly servants when there was insufficient family labour available. But on the larger farms food could be very good indeed. William Marshall noted that the food of Hampshire farmhouse servants consisted of a breakfast of bread and skimmed milk with bacon; a lunch of bread and cheese with small beer; a dinner of pickled pork or bacon, potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables; and bread, cheese and ale for supper. Wages varied according to age and expertise. At the end of the 18th century a head carter might command eleven guineas and his mate about nine guineas. A boy assistant might get four guineas. A second carter could also expect about

nine guineas, and assistants and boys less according to their abilities. The dairymaid and cook would expect about five guineas, and girls about two and a half or three guineas. Board, lodging and washing might or might not be deducted from the wage.⁴

In an important contribution to the subject, Kussmaul has pointed out that by 1851 the south-east had few servants in husbandry (living-in farmworkers) but a large number of day-labourers. This was in contrast to the situation in the north, where servants were kept in the house, but where labourers were scarcer because of the greater range of options for employment in industry. However, in the early modern period farm servants were kept in regions where pastoral farming was more important, and where the farming régime demanded a more regular supply of labour, with less seasonal variation. The supply of day labour might also be restricted in those areas of dispersed settlement and small farms, set among commons and wastes, where rural crafts and trades provided dual occupations and by-employment, lessening dependence on agriculture. Small farmers sent their children to service, or hired those of their neighbours, as their particular family circumstances dictated.⁵

Although an area with relatively few living-in labourers, the south-east did have some regions with as many such servants as any in the north. Kussmaul plotted the numbers in 1851 by registration district, and cited the 'Sussex Wolds' as being one area where servants still existed.⁶ She presumably was referring to the Weald, for it is precisely this region which was characterized by the wood/pasture complex noted above. This paper will therefore attempt to develop the Sussex evidence so that more information is available on the decline of living-in in this highly commercialized agrarian county.

LIVING-IN IN SUSSEX

Some of the most prosperous farms in Sussex where one might expect the largest

SUSSEX : AGRARIAN REGIONS C.1750

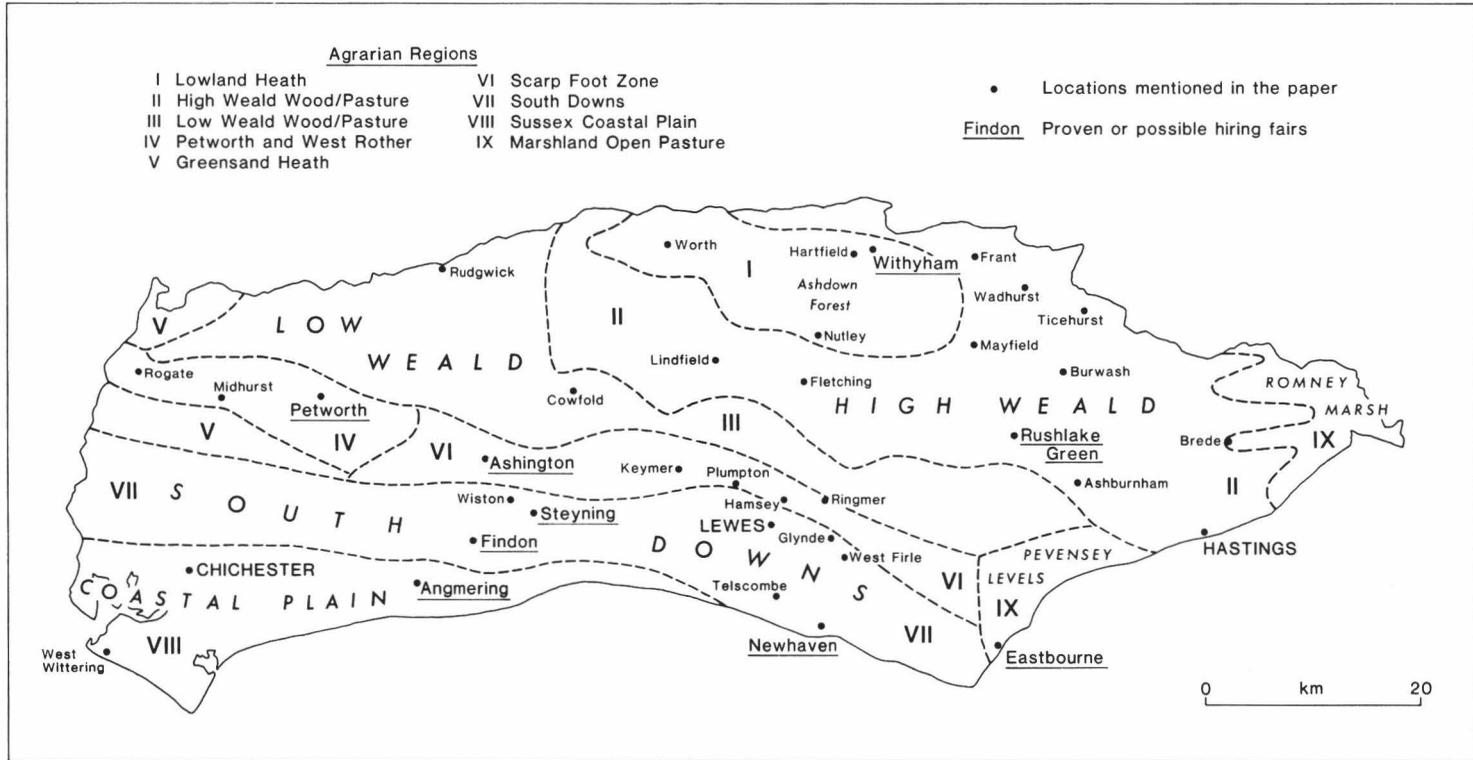


Fig. 1.

number of living-in servants, were those of the Sussex coastal plain (Fig. 1). By the early 18th century Cakeham Manor farm on the coast at West Wittering consisted altogether of 900 a. (370 ha.) of arable and pasture, 30 a. (13 ha.) of meadow, 40–50 a. (16–20 ha.) of woodland and coppice, and 40–50 a. (16–20 ha.) of 'wild ground'. Evidence given in a dispute over the stewardship of this farm in the first decade of the 18th century gives us much information on its organization and household servants. It was probably typical of many such farms in the area. George Walldron, a former bailiff, gave evidence against the present bailiff and noted that:

On 22nd December 1704 there were kept on the said farme as servants in the house at bed and board three men servants and two boys one of the said men was Thomas Cromwell to goe with the head teame of the said farme, one other to goe with the Ox teame and the third Thomas Hunt to goe as carter to the under teame and the said boys went with the said two teames and they were kept in the house at bed and board three women servants i.e. a housekeeper, a maide and a girle under her.

The defendant therefore kept three men servants, that is one for each of his two teams and an undercarter, and three women servants. These 'ordinarily changed each yeare'. The head carter was paid £6 per annum, the 'man that went with the ox teame' £4 15s. and 'the man who went with the under teame had noe wages because his tyme was out as an apprentice at the said farme'. The housekeeper received 55s., the maid 40s. and 'the girle was an apprentice on the said farme'. These wages were those commonly paid to servants for performing such services. The servants were referred to as 'the familye kept in the house' whenever references were made to the amount of food being consumed there. By 1708 there were six men living in the house including the farm's shepherd. In fact, from the 16th and throughout the 17th and 18th centuries the

number of living-in servants probably increased in the coastal plain and downland, due to the engrossing of family farms in this high farming area.⁷ In this area, increasingly geared to capitalist farming, there was thus no incompatibility with living-in during the transition from feudal relations.

The living-in servants in this area were probably hired at Chichester. Certainly during the 18th century this was the usual place for servants to go in order to change their service. By 1798 William Marshall noted that Michaelmas was the time to change servants and that:

On the 10th October: the roads were crowded, with farm servants, leaving their places and hying to the fair. It was a complete holiday: not a team to be seen; or a stroke of work going forward.⁸

Marshall strongly objected to 'this evil of changing servants at Michaelmas', noted also in the Isle of Wight and Surrey, because of the halt that it brought to farm work.

There are few written references to hiring fairs in Sussex. The 10 October fair at Chichester referred to by Marshall may have derived more from a Wessex/Hampshire tradition than a Sussex one. Hiring fairs were also held at Petworth and Angmering but it is possible that much of the annual hiring in Sussex was done by door-to-door application on the part of would-be servants, or by word of mouth. In 1792 there were fairs on 10 October at Chichester, Eastbourne, Newhaven, Rushlake Green (Warbleton), Steyning and Withyham, and there were in total 17 locations, both rural and urban, where fairs were held between 20 September and 10 October. At this time many were considerable stock fairs, where the side-shows and pleasure aspects had not yet begun to dominate, so they may not have been hiring fairs as well. Steyning and Findon did, however, hold such fairs (Fig. 1). By 1888, however, it was stated that there were only five such locations holding fairs of any sort at this time of the year and any hiring

practices would have been discontinued at some point in the interim.⁹

By the time that Marshall was writing the nation was at war; and with the need to ensure supplies of farm labour at a time when young men were being enlisted, there were treatises being produced which dealt, among other things, with the care and maintenance of indoor and outdoor servants. J. Carpenter's *Treatises on Agriculture* (1805) noted that 'it is requisite to hire the servants that are young'; and that scolding should be avoided. The hiring of servants at 'mops' should be similarly avoided since 'such yearly meetings are injurious to the morals of the servants, and promote a roving disposition, equally prejudicial to themselves and those they are to serve'. It was noted also that 'a bad effect attends the prevailing custom of the heads of families withdrawing themselves, in an evening, from their servants'. Carpenter also advised that the sabbath should be observed regularly, and that servants be allowed time to 'keep company', and to make and repair their clothing, 'which should be of durable quality'.¹⁰

That such advice should be given at this time indicates both the desire to retain good servants and the continuance of the custom of hiring them. Either way, it cannot be indicative of the decline of living-in.

THE DECLINE OF LIVING-IN

Many modern writers would agree with Pamela Horn's description in her recent book *The Rural World 1780-1850* of the decline in the system of living-in as developing from a 'penny-pinching desire to keep down food bills, as well as a wish to reduce the household duties of the farmer's wife. But it was a reflection of growing prosperity and social aspirations too'. Thus 'cartoonists like Gillray savagely mocked the pretensions of men who were too proud to eat with the labourers, who kept a piano in their drawing room and who sent their daughters to a boarding school'.¹¹

The casting aside of the labourer has been

analysed by Hobsbawm and Rudé in terms of economic, social, and institutional factors. Economically, the war years between the 1790s and 1815 brought with them rising grain prices, and a concomitant increase in the amount of arable land. Farms which had formerly produced balanced amounts of grain and livestock were now depending heavily on the former to produce larger sums of money than the latter. One result of this was that farm servants were needed less than formerly outside the harvest peak period. In many instances it was difficult to find sufficient work for such hired hands to do. The price of corn made it profitable to sell it, rather than feed it to employees. It was far better for the farmer to convert his produce into cash and then pay his employees, rather than to make payments partly in kind. After the war it became more difficult for servants to obtain places, for the increases in population during this part of the 19th century provided an ever-growing 'reserve army' of agricultural labour in the countryside. It therefore became again rather cheaper to hire labour, particularly by the day, than to arrange accommodation by the year.

The social reasons for the change have already been alluded to in the work of Horn. It is possible in fact that both farmers and labourers found living-in irksome. For the farmer a lack of privacy at a time when his growing wealth might lead him to demand more of this commodity, made him resentful of the old custom. For the labourer, it was noted that young men in particular resented their obligations and the lack of freedom incurred by living in the farmhouse. Hobsbawm and Rudé quote the evidence of Thomas Law Hodges M.P. on the Weald of Kent, that both sides became dissatisfied with the situation 'and thus by mutual consent, the Masters and the Labourers parted'.

Hobsbawm and Rudé also noted institutional reasons for the decline in living-in. Once employed for a year, a servant might become chargeable to the local poor rate and the per-

ceived ease by which labourers obtained money from these rates aggravated a growing social tension between farmer and labourer. And 'with the inevitability of tragic drama the defences of the village labourer against the traditional troubles of the poor, were thus stripped away'.¹²

Therefore, one would not expect to find many living-in farm labourers in Sussex by the second and third decades of the 19th century. This seems to be reinforced by the opinions of contemporary commentators in the 1830s. Most seemed to be of the opinion that living-in had largely finished as a practice during or after the Napoleonic War. D. Rowland, J.P., of Frant, reported to the Commission on the Poor Law in 1834 that:

upon the poorer farms in Sussex the custom had almost ceased of domesticating the labourers. Upon the large South Down Farms, it is done, but only to a limited and necessary extent. I have in my eye a few solitary incidences of all the labourers 'unmarried men' living with their employer, and I can well imagine the superior advantages of the old system . . . the change, I presume proceeded from the growing refinement, and greater affluence of the agriculturists, in the last 30 years. Those new habits have now become fixed. From an excess of population which was not felt during high prices, the farmer can now command any labour when he wants it, without burthening himself permanently, with indoor labourers.¹³

Robert Weale, a solicitor from Midhurst, noted that:

it is unfortunately now less common than formerly for labourers to live with their employers; in fact, I may say that this wholesome and salutary plan is extinct. There are many reasons for this; the two principals of which I take to be, first, the necessity the farmers feel of employing persons belonging

to Parishes who are married, in order that they and their families may not be absolutely dependent on the Parish; and secondly, the desire the present race of farmers feel to be relieved from the trouble occasioned by having servants resident in their houses.¹⁴

One relatively systematic source of evidence comes from the questions addressed to parish officials by the Commissioners on the Poor Law in 1834.¹⁵ In the first and second editions of the questionnaire question 38, on living-in, was as follows:

Is it less common than formerly for labourers to live under their employers' roofs? And to what do they attribute the change? Do they change their services more frequently than formerly? How do you account for that circumstance?

In the third edition the question was shorter and more straightforward, but less directly addressed to the living-in situation:

Do the labourers in your neighbourhood change their services more frequently than formerly? And how do you account for that circumstance?

For those replies which did indeed indicate that it was less common for labourers to live in, and that they changed their services more frequently than formerly, the evidence is given below. Some comments, such as that from Ticehurst, were very full and informative. Many parishes, however, did not answer the question at all. In all there were 73 responses to this particular question, mostly from parish officials, but some from officials responding on behalf of, for example, the Lower Division of the rape of Chichester, or the Eastern Division of the county, or the neighbourhood of Lewes. Table 1 sets out the overall conclusions to be drawn from the information.

TABLE 1
Broad Features of the Responses to the Poor Law
Commissioners' Question 38 for Sussex

Parishes noting a decline in farm servants	45
Parishes not noting a decline in farm servants	13
Parishes where only poor farm servants or young people changed	3*
Parishes where not much difference was noted	9
Parishes where the respondent did not know	3
Total	73*

*including a combined response for Sedlescombe and Westfield

Table 2 sets out the responses from those parish officials who did agree that there had been a decline, and that labourers changed their situations more frequently. It should be noted, however, that the quality of response to question 38 varied enormously.

Some parishes did not answer the question at all; others answered in one word, 'yes' or 'no'; answered very sketchily; or answered in great detail, giving more than one response. The parish of Ticehurst, so often quoted for its response to the Poor Law Commission, is thus noted no less than five times in Table 2. Altogether, 16 different reasons could be adduced from the responses to the Poor Law Commissioners. The characterization of these responses in Table 2 is partly a question of judgement, and thus might be open to differences of semantic interpretation, but it does show the great variety of reasons perceived by contemporary observers, and by men in addition who had direct knowledge of the problems associated with the ever-growing numbers of poor in Sussex at this time. Table 2 is helpful in several ways. It indicates that the most prominent reason given for a decline of living-in was the availability and ease of parish aid. The situation in the Lower Division of Chichester rape was explained thus:

Certainly the reciprocal kind feeling which formerly existed between master and servant is now completely severed, and the independent feeling of the servant is at an end. He has now little or no interest for his master. As he feels no disgrace to apply for parochial aid, he cares but little if thrown out of work, well knowing that he can, by an application to the magistrates, compel the parish to find him employment, or to support himself and his family.

This 'spirit of pauperism' was noted by respondents from 12 other parishes throughout Sussex. At Eastbourne it was noted that 'restlessness and improvidence' resulted from the poor laws, and from Hamsey it was noted that there was 'an impatience of control and facility of employment or maintainance from the parish'. The disturbing influence of beershops was also often quoted as a reason for a greater turnover of servants. According to the Lindfield respondents the turnover was induced 'from the satisfaction and idleness produced in great measure from them frequenting the beershops'. And from Ringmer came the opinion that 'morals were spoilt by beershops', which at Wadhurst were seen as 'the cause of incalculable mischief'.

Many other examples could be cited to illustrate the reasons given for the decline of living-in. Table 2 also endeavours to generalize the responses into those reasons which indicated servants being pushed from the farmhouse and those reasons which indicated them being pulled away to go elsewhere. This again opens up the question of individual interpretation of the evidence, but it would seem that whereas the decreased profits of farmers, the ease of obtaining labourers, and the ease of paying wages rather than subsistence, could be characterized as 'push' factors, others, such as the disturbing influence of beershops or the 'careless disposition of the labourer' might (superficially at least) be termed 'pull' factors. Cause and effect is often difficult to unravel in situations such as this. Thus, reason number 11, 'the poorer regu-

TABLE 2
Reasons Given to the Poor Law Commission for the Decline of Living-in in Sussex (Question 38)

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>'Push' or 'pull'*</i>	<i>Number of replies citing this reason</i>	<i>Parishes</i>
1. 'Availability & ease of parish aid'	push <i>and</i> pull	14	Chiddingly, Eastbourne, Ewhurst, Framfield, Funtington, Hamsey, Isfield, Northiam, Rogate, Sompting, Ticehurst, W. Chiltington, Yapton, Chichester rape (Lower Division)
2. 'Disturbing influence of beer shops'	pull	8	Cuckfield, Little Horsted, Lindfield, Mountfield, Ringmer, Rottingdean, Wadhurst, Eastern Division of Sussex
3. 'Labourers dislike of confinement'	push <i>and</i> pull	6	Barcombe, Chailey, Hamsey, Ifield, Lewes neighbourhood, Ticehurst
4. Decreased profits of farmers	push	5	E. Grinstead, Hailsham, Hartfield, Withyham, Worth
5. Easier to get labourers/more competition for employment	push	5	Angmering, Ifield, Lodsworth, Wisborough Green, Worth
6. Prevention of settlement	push	3	Amberley, Slaugham, Ticehurst
7. 'Disruption of the tie'	push <i>and</i> pull	2	Funtington, Slaugham
8. Early marriages of labourers	push <i>and</i> pull	1	Amberley
9. Day-labour easy to obtain	push	1	E. Grinstead
10. 'Careless disposition of labourer'	pull	1	Hellingly
11. 'Poorer regulation of farmhouses'	push	1	Lewes neighbourhood
12. Easier to pay wage than subsistence	push	1	Pulborough
13. 'Ease of obtaining labour from parish poor relief'	push	1	Rogate
14. 'Against family comfort'	push	1	Ticehurst
15. High wages after 'Swing' riots	push	1	Ticehurst
16. 'Habit'	push <i>and/or</i> pull	1	Westhampnett
Parishes where decline noted but no reason given		6	Ardingly, Clapham, Fletching, Tillington, W. Dean, W. Firle
Totals	push factors 9 pull factors 2 push <i>and</i> pull 4 unclassifiable 1	52	45 separate parishes or individual responses

*For an explanation of these terms see below.

lation of farmhouses', which was seen to be pushing labourers from these houses in the neighbourhood of Lewes, might itself be the result of a growing dissatisfaction on the part of the farmers' wives with the habits of boarders. The disturbing influence of the beershops would presumably also be nullified if there were no grudges to be discussed therein.¹⁶

So the reasons are intertwined throughout, particularly where the availability and ease of parish aid are being discussed. At Rogate the position was made quite clear:

Formerly when labourers were scarce they were taken into the house, to secure their services for the year; but now if the farmer wants a labourer for any particular purpose, he can take one that is at parish work, and as soon as he is finished with the job he is returned to parish work again.

Because of this intertwinement some reasons are listed here as 'push and pull'. An obvious case is the labourers' 'dislike of confinement'. This could be put down to restlessness of spirit on the part of younger men and women, or equally to an increasingly hostile environment in their living quarters. E. P. Thompson reminds us also that labourers freed from living-in were:

more free from discipline in their daily work, more free to choose between work and leisure, less situated in a position of dependence in their whole way of life.¹⁷

The general dominance of push factors over pull factors is seen in Table 2 but this is much modified when 'push and pull' factors are also added into the scheme. It would seem, if these responses are to be taken at face value (which is not certain), that the creation of a landless labouring class in the countryside was a two-way affair. There is no simplistic indication here of the heartless casting aside of young labourers by farmers during the prosperity of the Napoleonic Wars, as indicated by Horn. Kussmaul's chapter

on the 'extinction' of the species of indoor labourers would similarly have benefitted from a more explicit treatment of such factors, although the structural and historical context of indoor servants is otherwise clearly outlined.¹⁸

TABLE 3
The Living-in Decline in Sussex in the
National Context

<i>Kussmaul category of response</i>	<i>National (%)</i>	<i>Sussex (%)</i>
Fear of creating new settlements	28	35
Surplus of labourers available	21	14
Need to cut farming costs	20	12
Elevated manners of farmers	10	4
New manners of labourers	7	29
Lower age at marriage	2	2
General, unattributed	12	5
	—	—
	100%	101%
(Sample size)	239	52)

Sources: Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, 128; *Report of Royal Commission on Poor Law*, H.C. 44 (1834), xxvii, Appendices.

With Sussex responses rearranged into the less detailed categories adopted by Kussmaul, the Sussex experience can be evaluated in a national context (Table 3). The greatest difference lies in the respondents' perceptions of the 'new manners' of the labourers in Sussex, where four times as many replies noted this for the county as for the country as a whole. The recent assertive but defensive riots of 1830 may well have left an imprint on the minds of the respondents, and the influence of the beershops, cited by 16 per cent, was especially noted. It is also interesting that in Sussex, a county often berated for its lack of agricultural progress and skill, fewer respondents than the national average cited a perceived surplus of labour; fewer cited a need to cut farming costs; and fewer noted the elevated manners of the farmers. Instead the emphasis was firmly on the behaviour of the labourer and the operations of the poor law.

As shown above in Table 1, not all respon-

THE DECLINE OF LIVING-IN SERVANTS IN SUSSEX :

The spatial pattern of response to question 38 of the Poor Law Commissioners Enquiries, 1834

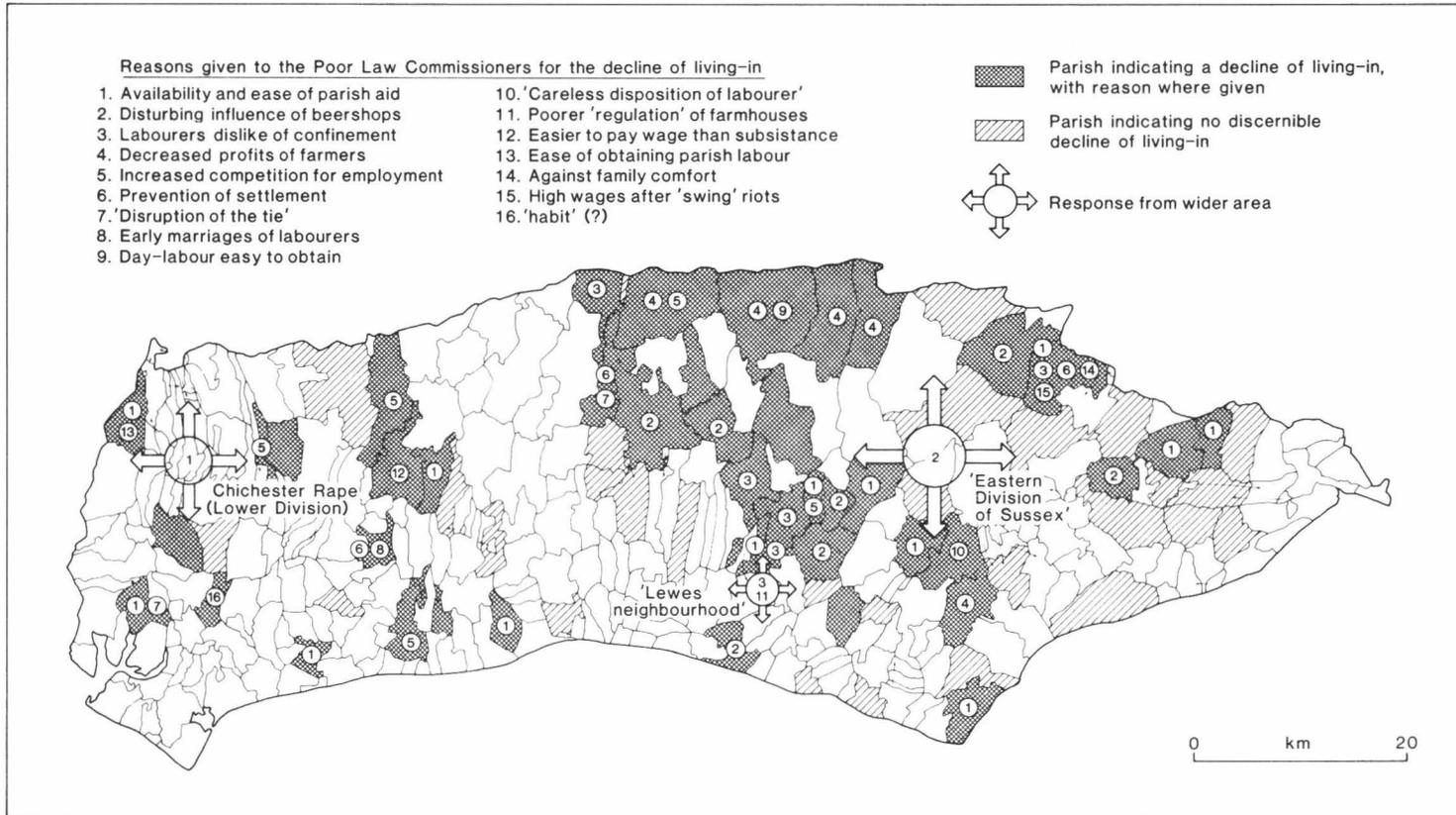


Fig. 2.

dents indicated a decline in living-in. Many hinted at a more complicated picture, and at West Firlie it was noted that movement of labourers was not more frequent than formerly, because it was more difficult to obtain a place in a farmhouse since 'very few were being kept in farmhouses in comparison to what used to be'. Fig. 2 attempts to portray the spatial pattern of the responses. It should be noted that there are areas of Sussex for which we have little information: the far west of the county; the country south of Chichester; the deep clayland Weald of West Sussex between Rudgwick and Cowfold; and the far eastern borders of the High Weald and Romney Marsh interface. Overall, too, it should be noted that there are more responses for East than for West Sussex, and that the parishes along the South Downs are sadly under-represented. There is a slight Wealden bias in the sample, with 67 per cent of parishes reporting a decline in living-in being Wealden, compared with 61 per cent Wealden in the Sussex total sample, although this perhaps reflected a true indication of concern felt over the state of the poor law before 1834, and the plight of the paupers in the northern parts of Sussex. Such parishes would be more likely to respond to the Commissioners than the largely 'close' parishes of the Sussex downland. The uneven spatial incidence of response makes generalizations about patterning difficult. However, it must be noted that there were many parishes in the eastern part of the Weald which indicated no discernible decline in living-in, and that among these parishes were those such as Burwash and Brede where rural discontent had always smouldered, and where eruptions had burst forth in 1830 during the discontent of the winter months. Brede in particular had been a centre of the 'Swing' riots but the respondents noted that there had been little decline in the amount of living-in in the parish and that the good servants stayed, whereas the poorer moved.

There are particular clusters of responses to be noted when examining those parishes which indicated a decline of living-in. The influence of

the beershops was felt exclusively in eastern Sussex, according to the responses. Parishes which detailed the decreased profits of farmers as a reason for the decline seemed to be clustered in the area between Worth and Withyham in the northern Ashdown Forest area. The 'dislike of confinement' on the part of young labourers was one reason closely associated with the area around Lewes; while all the 'pull factors' operated in East Sussex rather than in West Sussex. It would be possible to suggest reasons for this. One could easily account for the lack of profits in farming in the northern Ashdown Forest area, or the significance of the beershops in the more radical, cottage-dominated economy of eastern Sussex; but how significant would such explanations be? One is here facing a particular geographical problem, since in looking at a distribution of this type one must question the independence of the observations made in each parish. To what extent, for example, was there any collaboration between the respondents in these particular areas, which produced such a clustering? Was the labourers' dislike of confinement particularly manifested in those parishes around Lewes, or had the respondents met and agreed that this would be a suitable answer to the Commissioners? As yet, no evidence has been found to support or deny this hypothesis, and thus no further explanation can satisfactorily be entered upon at this stage.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SUSSEX WEALD IN THE 19TH CENTURY

When we turn to the actual experiences of labourers, as distinct from the view 'from above' of vicars, churchwardens, etc., who were at pains to point out the demoralizing effects of the poor laws as constituted before 1834, the situation takes on a different hue. This section will therefore enlarge on Census and oral historical material, in an effort to counterbalance the view so often received from the past.

Between 1876 and 1882 a lawsuit was in progress over the common rights on Ashdown

Forest. In an effort to prove rights of user, a great deal of evidence was collected by W. A. Raper, a solicitor acting on behalf of the commoners, including a record of interviews with 'all the old men living around the forest'.¹⁹ These interviews, held in 1878, were primarily concerned with the use of the forest for the collection of litter (ferns, heather, etc.) but are also an unrivalled source of information about the lives of labourers in the Ashdown Forest area, stretching back to the Napoleonic War. The main point here is that nearly all these men had been in service at some time during their youth. The normal pattern was for the youngsters to leave home from the age of 10 or 12 onwards, and to live in service with a local farmer until they married, usually in their mid or late twenties. The length of service varied from a six-month period between Ladytide and Michaelmas (late March to the end of September) to varying periods of years. The relatively late age of marriage of these men can be explained by reference to an excerpt from the *Report from the Select Committee on Immigration* of 1827 cited by Hasbach:

If a man aged up to 25 or 30 had been accustomed to live in a better way of life, he would consider twice before he went to live in a wretched cottage upon potatoes and tea.²⁰

The custom of the 18th century had been one of late marriage by men, living perhaps relatively comfortably in service, perhaps saving some wages, and looking forward to a prospect of independence on marriage. In this sense the experience of the Sussex labourer could be correlated with that of his counterpart in the Warwickshire Felden studied by Martin, who correlated a late age of marriage in that region with economic stress.²¹ Fig. 3 shows the amount of movement by two labourers around the Sussex Ashdown Forest parish of Hartfield. Abraham Edwards was born in 1813 and it is worth quoting from his evidence in some detail:

. . . when about twelve years old I went into service. Before and after we moved my father worked for Mr. Combebridge at Harts Farm and the summer before I went into service I worked for Mrs. Combebridge for about 4d per day. I then went into service in Lower Parrock Farm under Mr. Richard Spencer for three years viz. as odd boy one and half years and carter boy one and half years . . . as carter boy I used to go out and fetch litter and I used to see it used on the farm I do not remember it having peat or turf or turning out stock on the Forest. . . . The Forest was free to any one any man could go and cut it and sell it to anybody I next went to service with Mr. Philcox at St. Tyes and North Clays for two years as mate with a team. I then went to Old Lodge under a Mr. Gardner for half a year then I worked about the summer and then I worked some years for Mr. Philcox who had moved to Lower Parrock Farm . . . Philcox then left and I worked two years for his successor a Mr. Bonnick. I then went with his team on the Forest . . . I then got married at the age of 30 or 31 and worked at various places on the border of the Forest in Hartfield for two or three years, then I went to work for eleven years for Mr. Fillery who had Newbridge Mill and Peculiars Farm and I lived at the farmhouse . . . I then worked for Mrs. Henicker at High Beeches for four years . . . I then came and lived at the Furnace Farm and worked on it two years for Mr. Abel Elliott . . . I then worked that winter on the Forest cutting litter . . . from that time I have worked ever since for Mr. Hale this seventeen years come the 24th November 1879.²²

The pattern of Abraham Edwards's work places has been mapped in Fig. 3 and an attempt has likewise been made to chart the work experience of his contemporary James Everest. Others could have been similarly studied, but

The changing locations of living-in labourers within the parish of Hartfield, Sussex, 1814-79

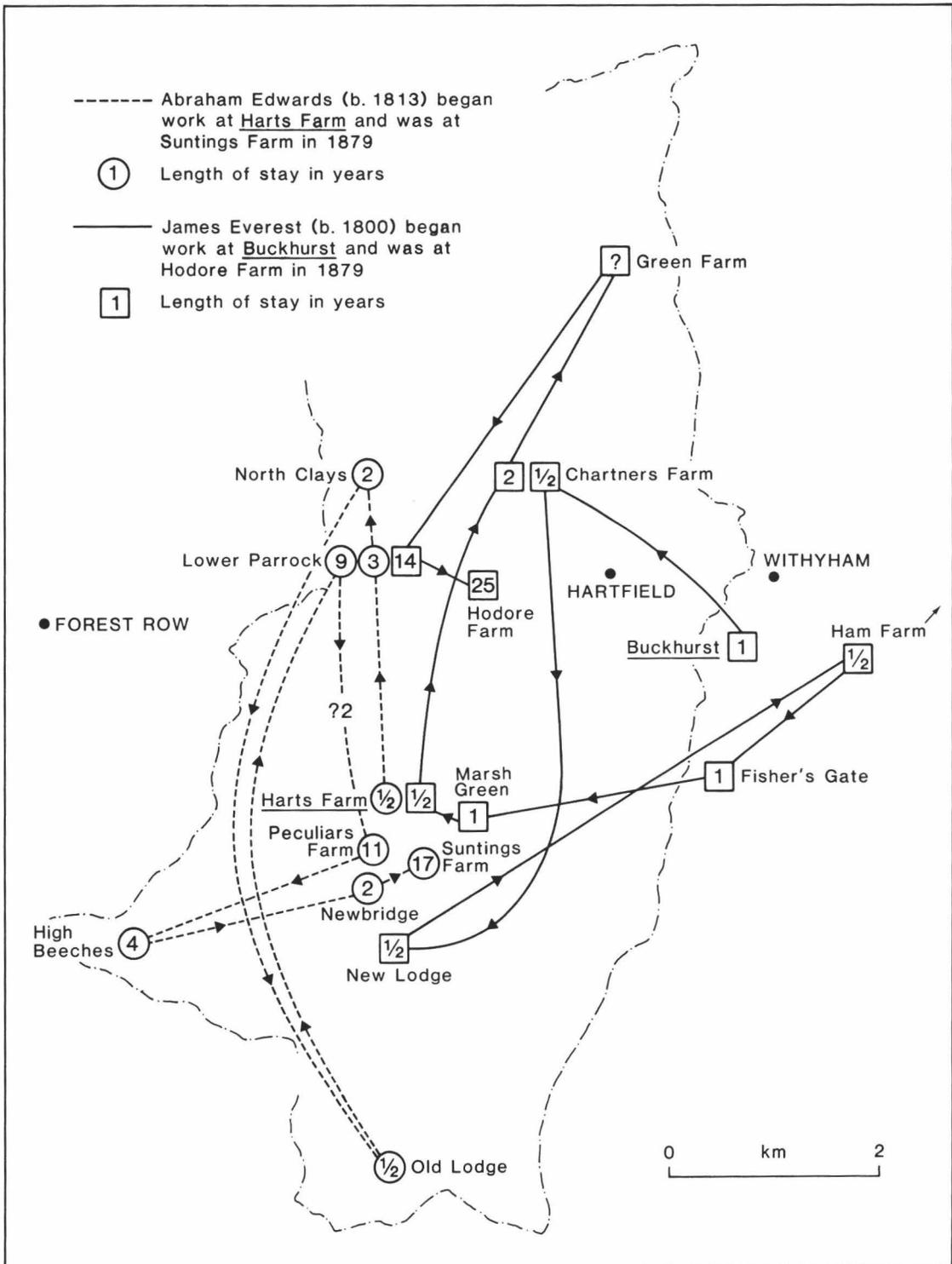


Fig. 3.

these two men are typical in the pattern of their working lives. James Everest began work at the large farm of Buckhurst and worked half yearly, as did many of the living-in servants at this time, so that they might not become eligible for settlement and thus poor relief in the event of misfortune. The length of service varied, but James Everest did not stay any great time at his farms until he had been employed by at least eight different masters. When he was older and married he was taken on for longer spells, and eventually stayed 14 years at Lower Parrock Farm; he had been 25 years at Hodore Farm when he was interviewed. It is quite clear from the significant body of evidence that the practice of in-service continued well into the middle of the 19th century. It was a pattern of work related closely to the stages of the life cycle. Benjamin Richardson, born at Thompssetts Bank, went to service at 12 or 13 years of age to a farmer and miller where he spent four or five years; went as undercarter to two other farms for four or five years; and 'then I worked on my own account for pay for six or seven years till I married when I went and lived at Thompssetts Bank where I worked for Robert Edwards . . . for over twenty years'. In this area many were fortunate in obtaining small cottages, carved out of the edge of Ashdown Forest either immediately before or during their lifetimes. While some could remember these cottages being pulled down on the orders of the lord of the manor of Duddleswell, such an opportunity to erect accommodation was invaluable, and provided a certain amount of independence.

Some witnesses recalled that they had begun their period of service through being hired out from the parish workhouse. J. Bedwell from Piltdown, born about 1804, remembered that 'When I was a child we moved to Nutley for two years then we came to Fletching workhouse for three years. When I was about 12 the parish put me out at service with Mr Cheale at Portmansford farm in Fletching. One year as under-carter . . .'. Similarly William Brooker, aged 63 and bailiff to Lord Sheffield, was 'put out as a parish boy under Squire Hutchinson at Woodgate

farm, Fletching. I acted as carters boy for 12 months . . .'.²³

It is not surprising in view of such comments that in the 1841 Census enumerators' schedules for the parishes containing Ashdown Forest, many farmers still indicated large numbers of living-in labourers in the farmhouse. Since the relationship to the head of household is not specified until the 1851 Census, it is not clear whether they were boarders or only lodgers. Their ages were commonly given in 1841 as 15, although this could have meant that they were anything up to 19 years of age. Often their work was specifically stated, e.g. waggoner. In 1841 the parish of Hartfield contained 188 agricultural labourers, and about one third of these were living in the farmhouses. In 1851, when the relationship to the head of household is shown, Hartfield had 50 lodgers (boarders not being separately shown), of whom 40 were male and of whom 20 were unmarried. It would appear, at least from preliminary analyses, that this late retention of living-in was not peculiar to Hartfield. In the parish of Plumpton to the south, straddling the Downs, scarpfoot and Wealden clays, a similar situation prevailed. Here 19 out of a total of 51 agricultural labourers in 1841 were living in the farmhouse with their master as their head of household; 23 were their own masters, living in cottages or barrack accommodation; while a further nine were lodgers or kin, also living in these cottages.²⁴

However, the Plumpton evidence is revealing when studied through successive Census returns. Whereas in 1841 19 out of 51 agricultural labourers were possibly living in, by 1871 probably only 9 out of 68 labourers were in this position; 30 were then heads of household in their own right, but 29 were lodgers or kin. In Plumpton there appears to have been a decline in living-in which had been inversely related to an increase in the number of lodgers. The progressive distancing of the farmer from his labourer during the early and mid 19th century can thus be charted at Plumpton. The decline is not as fast as would otherwise have been predicted, but the changeover from living-in ser-

vant to lodger was a significant one. The lodger might often be living in a household where he shared his occupation with the head. This occurred at Plumpton with agricultural labourers, basket makers, lime burners, and railway labourers. Several of the nine labourers who were living in were related to the farmer, for example as a son-in-law or nephew. The pure form of living-in had therefore been further eroded, since the co-residence of kin is probably not part of the 18th-century pattern, although this is, in the absence of satisfactory records, still unresolved for Sussex.²⁵

The decline in the pattern of living-in in the Sussex Weald was more prolonged than might be supposed from a reading of the work of many historians. In the Weald there was still a felt need to retain workers for care of stock on the Wealden mixed/grassland farms. The hiring system therefore represented an insurance system or buffer to allow sufficient labour over and above that of the family when urgently required. Although the trend towards arable farming in the Napoleonic Wars, noted by Hobsbawm and Rudé, could be seen also in the Weald, there was in general a far greater preponderance of live-stock enterprises.²⁶ A girl born in 1837 near Mayfield therefore recalled going into domestic service at a neighbouring farmhouse at the age of 19 years:

Three men were boarded in the farmhouse. There were ten cows for the men to milk. Milking did not come into my work but they taught me there how to do it. Except a couple of hours during the afternoon I worked from five in the morning to nearly ten at night. You see there were six people in the house: Master, Missus, three men, and myself.²⁷

This then was the pattern of living-in still being practised in the Sussex Weald in the mid 1850s. Many of the Wealden farmhouses, perhaps relics of a more prosperous age, were still very large. Such farmhouses, sought after avidly today by a wealthy metropolitan, ex-urban,

population, could accommodate servants yet still provide the privacy deemed important in the early years of the 19th century. The nuances of social differentiation could therefore be observed. For example, it might be possible for the immediate family to eat at the same time as the servants, but at a different table or even in a different room, thereby preserving the household bonding, but observing the niceties of social etiquette. On the mixed farms of the Weald, moreover, the ease of feeding a large household might be sufficient to allow the retention of living-in, whereas on the more specialized corn-producing downland and coastal plain farms, food might have to be purchased for a large household. The Weald also had many examples of a poor-law system which encouraged the 'putting out' of pauper children. The evidence of William Brooker and J. Bedwell was referred to earlier. During the 1820s at Hartfield the poorhouse was putting out between 40 and 50 children a year. Boys were supplied with two pairs of breeches or trousers, three pairs of stockings, three shirts, two pairs of shoes, two hats or capes, two waistcoats, two round frocks, and two handkerchiefs. The child was not to be returned within one year unless sick, and the clothing was to be returned in the same good state. The degradation induced by a system which actually seemed to allow the auctioning of poor children among the farmers of Hartfield according to the childrens' ages and capabilities, can be imagined. There is little evidence here of any humanitarian concern for the paupers. In March 1827 the Hartfield workhouse contained 39 males, of whom 14 were put out for service; 19 females, of whom one was put out; and 24 other children, of whom 12 were put out for service.²⁸

LIVING-IN: THE NEED FOR A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

At least three new perspectives should be brought to bear on the problem of living-in. Firstly, there is a need for us to re-examine the chronology and speed of change. In England as

a whole by 1861 there were still large numbers of living-in servants, and not all of these were limited to the northern and western regions of the country. Neither was there a direct and simplistic change from living-in farm servant to day labourer.

Secondly, the speed of change quite obviously varied with location and ecology. The transition to a cash economy varied spatially, depending on the particular regional complex of economy and social structure exhibited; and the relating of social structure to geographical milieu is both fruitful and indeed essential in order for us to understand the richness of local detail in the experiences of the people being studied. The social differences between 'open' and 'close' parishes is highly significant here and has been examined elsewhere.²⁹ Moreover, it should be noted that the same feature, in this case the persistence of living-in, can occur in different regions but through different causal mechanisms. In Sussex, the Weald retained the system longer because of factors within its society and economy as outlined above. However, the Downs, because of a longer history of engrossing of copyholds and depopulation of parishes, had reached a position during the early 19th century in which many parishes contained only one farmhouse with perhaps a cluster of buildings around it. Even in such a situation one would expect living-in servants, and the Census returns do show this clearly once again. On the farms of Glynde, Telscombe and West Firlde there were living-in servants, although admittedly few in number.³⁰ Even the classic Sussex downland parody, *Cold Comfort Farm*, had a reference to this phenomenon:

The meal for the men was set on a long trestle at the farther end of the kitchen, as far away from the fire as possible. They came into the room in awkward little clumps, eleven of them. Five were distant cousins of the Starkadders, and two others were half-brothers of Amos, Judith's husband. This left only four men who were

not in some way connected with the family; so it will readily be understood that the general feeling among the farm-hands was not exactly one of hilarity . . . The five half-cousins and the two half-brothers came over to the table, for they took their meals with the family. Amos liked to have his kin about him, though, of course, he never said so or cheered up when they were.³¹

The flinty downland of the Starkadders apart, even on the most highly-developed and intensely-capitalized farms of the South Downs, producing large amounts of cereals and geared to a national or even international market by the mid 19th century, there were living-in farm servants. Capitalist farming does not preclude the living-in servant.

Finally, the local processes of change could be examined in more detail as well as in the context of the wider, national situation. The 18th-century farm servant, living and boarding with the farmer's family, represents the first and ideal stage of the living-in phenomenon. The first erosion of this ideal stage occurred in Sussex with the process of 'boarding out' some or all of the labourers and paying a lump sum annually to cover board wages on top of the quarterly wage. On the Shiffner estate at Hamsey, near Lewes, men were being paid this board wage by the 1770s.³² At the end of the 18th century the high price of food, and the growing independence of the farm labourer, brought a further decline in the pattern of living-in. High food prices made it more profitable to sell food than to feed it to servants, and production on a full cash basis was entered upon. However, this was something of a cyclical process at this stage, for with the end of the Napoleonic War came a return in some areas to the boarding-out of labourers or the provision of some type of accommodation for farm labour. It may be that from this period onwards were constructed 'barracks' for labourers, as at Plumpton and Keymer in the scarpfoot zone. On the Ashburnham estate in the eastern Weald single men were

boarded in similar barracks and were cared for by one resident family. In this respect it is worth noting the 1834 response of George Wells, rector of Wiston in West Sussex, to the Poor Law Commissioners: 'It is more common than it was ten years ago for labourers to live under their employers' roofs, owing to the supply of food being easier to the farmer than that of money.'³³ In other words, as the 1820s and early 1830s wore on the recession bit hard into farmers' profits, and it became easier for them to give food and services in kind to their living-in servants. The response from Ticehurst was similar in some respects:

The late agricultural distress and particularly the want of ready money to pay weekly wages, was in some instances, though not extensively, leading to servants being taken into the farmers family again; but the increased wages, in consequence of the late disturbances, have influenced the labourer, and the irregularities occasioned by the beershops have checked the masters in returning to a practice which I think is never likely again to become general.³⁴

The final part of the process, quicker in some regions than in others, was the conversion of the living-in servant to day-labourer and to pauper. The progression from living-in to

boarding-out and then to payment by the week, then by the day, and even by the part-day, and by piecework, can be charted in some farm accounts. The accounts of the Shiffner family noted above are valuable in this respect, stretching as they do from the middle of the 18th century through to the 1830s. It should also be remembered that some forms of living-in persisted throughout the century and into the present century, particularly where the care of livestock was involved. There was no direct change from living-in to farm labourer. When the actual experience of men is examined, rather than merely the expectation derived from a theoretical stance, the situation becomes far more complicated. The progression, part of the wider transition to capitalism in the English countryside, must be charted more accurately through time and over space. It is hoped that this small case study illuminates some of the local difficulties, but illustrates one way towards the closer integration of empiricism and theory in this respect. While a powerful historical materialist framework can do much to explain the structural changes and tensions inherent within the transformation to a fully-fledged commercialized agricultural society, it is also necessary to adopt an experiential approach to illuminate and present social and spatial differences.

Author: Brian Short, School of Cultural and Community Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN.

Notes

¹My initial interest in this subject was aroused by the invitation to give a paper at the 15th History Workshop, held at Brighton in November 1981. I thank Alun Howkins for the kind invitation, and other speakers and discussants at the sessions, and in particular Ian Carter, whose ideas at a more general level I have attempted to translate into a more localized Sussex experience. None of the contributors would necessarily agree with my findings. I would also like to thank Mick Reed for his comments on an earlier draft of this text.

²P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1971 edn.), 16.

³A. Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (1981), 133.

⁴W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1920 edn.), 81-4; P. Horn, *The Rural World 1780-1850* (1980), 22-3; E. Hostettler, 15th History Workshop Conference Paper; W. Marshall, *The Rural Economy of the Southern Counties* (1798), 2, 233; A. Howkins, 'In the Sweat of thy Face: The Labourer and Work', in *The Victorian Countryside*, ed. G. E. Mingay (1981), 2, 507.

⁵Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, 10-23.

⁶*Ibid.* 130. However, the plotting only includes males aged 20 years and over, and due to varying median ages in different areas, shows some with higher ratios of servants to labourers than others, when overall the reverse might be the case. Thus Berkshire is shown by Kussmaul to have

had a higher ratio of servants to labourers than Sussex, when the reverse is true. This is because 62% of servants in Berkshire are under 20 years of age, compared with 47% in Sussex. It has also been pointed out by M. Reed (pers. comm.) that Kussmaul's figures for Petworth are incorrect, understating the number of servants and overstating the number of labourers. The actual ratio is 1:9.5, not 1:12.2.

- ⁷Public Record Office, E 134/8 Anne East./20; E 134/9 Anne East./17; C. E. Brent, 'Rural Employment and Population in Sussex between 1550 and 1640', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **114**, 37.
- ⁸Marshall, *Rural Economy*, 2, 233; 10 October is Old Michaelmas day.
- ⁹*Universal British Directory* (1792); *Report of Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls* [C. 5550], H.C. (1888), liii, p. 211 and *passim*; *Victoria County History, Sussex*, 6(1), 29, 235 (my thanks are due to the editor of this volume, Dr. T. P. Hudson, for drawing my attention to this reference). Kussmaul adds Ashington in West Sussex to this list, this being her sole instance of a Sussex hiring fair: Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, 159. The significance of the extremely close juxtaposition of Findon, Steyning and Ashington has not yet been determined.
- ¹⁰J. Carpenter, *Treatises on Agriculture*, taken from *The Agricultural Magazine*, 13 (July 1805), 33-7.
- ¹¹Horn, *Rural World*, 47.
- ¹²E. Hobsbawm & G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1969), 18-24.
- ¹³*Report of Royal Commission on Poor Law*, H.C. 44 (1834), xxxvii, Appendix C, p. 470c.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.* p. 471c.
- ¹⁵*Report of Royal Commission on Poor Law*, H.C. 44 (1834), xxvii, Appendix B. Responses to question 38 are in vol. 13 of the Irish University Press edn.
- ¹⁶For a defence of farmers' wives' attitudes see Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (1930, reprinted 1981), 37-40.
- ¹⁷E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebian Culture', *Jnl. of Social Hist.* 7(4), 384.
- ¹⁸Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, 128.
- ¹⁹E(ast)S(ussex)R(ecord)O(ffice), transcript of W. Raper's notebooks recording the life histories of residents of Ashdown Forest, 1878, in connection with the Ashdown Forest Case.
- ²⁰Hasbach, *English Agricultural Labourer*, 177.
- ²¹J. M. Martin, 'Marriage and Economic Stress in the Felden of Warwickshire during the Eighteenth Century', *Population Studies*, 31, 519-31.
- ²²E.S.R.O., Ashdown Forest Case, evidence of Abraham Edwards.
- ²³*Ibid.*
- ²⁴E.S.R.O., 1841 and 1851 Census enumerators' schedules, Hartfield and Plumpton.
- ²⁵*Scarpfoot Parish: Plumpton 1830-1880*, ed. B. M. Short (University of Sussex Centre for Continuing Education, 1981), esp. 36-46.
- ²⁶Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 21-3.
- ²⁷Alice Day, *Glimpses of Rural Life in Sussex* (1927), 16.
- ²⁸E.S.R.O., Ashdown Forest Case, 3904-5; PAR 360/12/12.
- ²⁹For an examination of the relationship between 'open' and 'close' communities in Sussex, and their ecological, economic and social milieux, see B. M. Short, *The Geography of Local Migration and Marriage in Sussex 1500-1900* (University of Sussex Research Papers in Geography, 15, 1983); *idem*, 'The Changing Rural Society and Economy of Sussex 1750-1940', in *Sussex: Environment, Landscape and Society* (British Assoc. for Advancement of Science, 1983).
- ³⁰E.S.R.O., Census enumerators' schedules, 1841-71.
- ³¹Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (Penguin edn.), 39.
- ³²E.S.R.O., SHR 3570 (farming accounts).
- ³³*Report of Royal Commission on Poor Law*, H.C. 44 (1834), xxvii, Appendix B, p. 533d.
- ³⁴*Ibid.* pp. 528-529d.