

The Agricultural Labourer in Worcestershire: Responses to Economic Change and Social Dislocation 1790 – 1841

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ABSTRACT

The study of rural history and social unrest in the English countryside has concentrated largely on East Anglia and southern England. Apart from one or two recent studies, the western agricultural counties have been relatively ignored. More importantly, apart from giving some detailed accounts of the lives of rural political activists, many historians have paid less attention to the daily lives of the majority of agricultural labourers. This has led to a general acceptance that most labourers were part of a rural proletariat whose loss of common rights and declining living standards culminated in the Last Labourers' Revolt of 1830. This thesis seeks to broaden this view by providing a more holistic view of labourers' lives in Worcestershire in order to determine what social and economic changes had the most impact on rural life in general and on three settlements in particular. The introduction demonstrates how romantic views of the past have influenced some historians' attitudes. It then determines the empirical basis for this study. Chapter One challenges the view that enclosure had a major impact on labourers' lives by ending fundamental common rights. Chapter Two considers work and wages during this period and explores how individual lives were affected by social and economic changes and by the Laws of Settlement. Chapter Three considers whether the Old Poor Law was as beneficial as some historians have supposed and considers the impact of growing unemployment and underemployment on local poor rates in three particular parishes. It also demonstrates how high price years impacted on individual parishes. Chapter Four explores whether growing unemployment and rural poverty led to a general increase in crime and whether the modern terminology of 'social crime' and 'symbolic' crime can be attributed to certain types of offence. It also seeks to use surviving records to illuminate labourers' daily lives in specific Worcestershire villages. Chapter Five gives a detailed account of the Last Labourers' Revolt and considers why there was relatively little unrest in Worcestershire in 1830. Chapter Six seeks to explain the role popular culture played in labourers' lives and its potential for maintaining conservatism. It also suggests that attacks on popular culture began to erode social relationships in rural areas. Chapter Seven analyses the impact of the Last Labourers' Revolt in Worcestershire and whether any subsequent social and economic changes benefited

Worcestershire labourers or contributed to a further decline in economic standing and social relationships. The conclusion suggests that changes in key aspects of agricultural labourers' lives during this period led to an increasing awareness of their social position, indicating that class-consciousness was beginning to develop.

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