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Chapter 4

Living and working conditions

Despite the popular notion of the countryside as a rural idyll, a space that was healthier to live and work in than were Victorian towns and cities, there was increasing awareness that rural areas contained their own challenges.¹ Social investigations of the 1830s and 1840s began to reveal the extent of rural poverty and prompted more detailed parliamentary enquiries examining the countryside. During these two decades, the *Morning Chronicle* drew attention to the condition of agricultural labourers in southern England, using testimonials from the labouring population, letters and observations.² The reports argued that the new poor law had ‘unquestionably added to the privations of the agricultural labourers’ and that landowners (among others) had a responsibility to attend to their needs.³ In responding to these reports, the clergy and poor law guardians defended themselves and other rural elites from accusations that their actions, especially in administering the new poor law, were responsible for the condition of agricultural labourers. The 1867–8 parliamentary commission into the employment of children, young people and women in agriculture included northern counties and so had a broader geographical reach than earlier investigations, but drew its evidence largely from rural elites. As such, parliamentary commissions effectively set an agenda that understood the labouring poor within an upper- and middle-class interpretive framework.⁴ In other words, the problems of the poor were reported by farmers, landowners and the clergy rather than by the labouring population itself, and the perceived causes of these problems often became interwoven with the economic or moral motivations of those giving evidence to the commission. Living and working conditions, which were to a large extent determined by landlords and employers, are defining characteristics in historians’ models of village typology, as shaped by nineteenth-century reports. This chapter examines four

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- 1 A. Howkins, ‘Rurality and English identity’, in D. Morley and K. Robbins (eds), *British cultural studies* (Oxford, 2001); E.K. Helsinger, *Rural scenes and national representation: Britain, 1815–1850* (Princeton, 1997); K. Sayer, *Country cottages: a cultural history* (Manchester, 2000); G.E. Mingay, ‘The rural slum’, in M. Gaskell (ed.), *Slums* (Leicester, 1990); M. Freeman (ed.), *The English rural poor* (London, 2005); K. Waddington, ‘“It might not be a nuisance in a country cottage”: sanitary conditions and images of health in Victorian rural Wales’, *Rural History*, 23/2 (2012), pp. 185–204.
 - 2 *The Morning Chronicle*, 16 November 1838, p. 3; *The Morning Chronicle*, 27 November 1838, p. 3; *The Morning Chronicle*, 18 December 1839, p. 3; *The Morning Chronicle*, 5 April 1843, p. 6; *The Morning Chronicle*, 22 June 1844, p. 6; Freeman, *Social investigation*, p. 25
 - 3 *The Morning Chronicle*, 16 November 1838, p. 3; *The Morning Chronicle*, 27 November 1838, p. 3; *The Morning Chronicle*, 1 November 1844, p. 3.
 - 4 Freeman, *Social investigation*, p. 25; N. Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth century England: gender, work and wages* (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 72.

key indicators of living and working conditions in the Doncaster district – wages and bonuses, employment patterns and hiring practices, attitudes to the employment of women in agriculture, and the quality and availability of housing and gardens – in order to examine the extent to which such conditions varied between estate and multi-freeholder communities.

In 1848 J.H. Charnock argued, in his *JRASE* prize essay, that perhaps nowhere in England were agricultural labourers ‘better paid, better housed, and better cared for’ than in the West Riding of Yorkshire.⁵ Agricultural wages were generally higher in the industrial north, as they had to compete with those of industrial occupations.⁶ According to Charnock, the wages of common labourers in the West Riding of Yorkshire were 14–16s a week, increasing to 18s per week for an occupation requiring more skill and judgement.⁷ By contrast, the national average weekly wage for comparable work was between 11s and 12s.⁸ Charnock also argued that Yorkshire labourers were more comfortable on account of the ‘cheapness and excellency of fuel’ there.⁹ Nevertheless, within the county considerable variation existed, not simply between different parts of the region but also within localities. The situation also changed over time.

Evidence of living and working conditions in the Doncaster district can be drawn from wage reports, parliamentary enquiries and local commentators. The official reports and enquiries provide comparative evidence of living and working conditions, albeit imbued with the moral or social overtones of rural elites: as already described, it was usually members of the clergy or landowners who gave evidence to the commissioners. Those who wished to reform hiring practices, see a reduction in the employment of women in agriculture or improve cottage accommodation spent a disproportionate amount of time drawing attention to these issues in their evidence. The clergy were increasingly concerned with the ill health of the labouring population, as well as their perceived immorality, which was on occasion blamed for their general condition, and sought to use the commission as an opportunity to highlight the need for reform. In contrast, those who had something to gain from the status quo, such as farmers who relied on female labour, highlighted the benefits thereof. Nevertheless, such contributions still provide valuable insights, especially regarding contrasting attitudes, either in the absence of other data or when used in conjunction with other records, and can be used to evaluate existing models of village typology. After all, despite ostensibly being about the employment of women and children in agriculture, the 1867–8 commission was considered nothing short of a comprehensive survey of the labouring population in rural England.¹⁰ The printed reports of the commissioners and T.E. Kebbel’s *The Agricultural Labourer* (based largely on these reports)

5 Charnock, ‘On the farming of the West Riding’, p. 311.

6 Afton and Turner, ‘Wages’, p. 2013; E.H. Hunt, ‘Industrialisation and regional wage inequality: wages in Britain, 1760–1914’, *Economic History Review*, 46/4 (1986), p. 947.

7 Charnock, ‘On the farming of the West Riding’, p. 311.

8 Hunt, ‘Industrialisation and regional wage inequality’, p. 965.

9 Charnock, ‘On the farming of the West Riding’, p. 311.

10 Freeman, *Social investigation*, p. 38.

highlighted housing, modes of employment and hiring, wages, diet and education as affecting the condition of labourers and their position in society.¹¹

Mills' 'open-closed' model of village typology suggested that the living and working conditions of agricultural workers can be clearly delineated according to the concentration of landownership. The conditions of the rural poor, while frequently attributed to the attitudes and actions of rural elites, are far more complex and nuanced than this suggests. Evidence from the Doncaster district demonstrates the difficulties of applying this model to a range of rural communities in close proximity to one another. Not only were there disparities in labourers' conditions in places with similar landowning structures, but concerns about living and working conditions were often shared by reformers in estate and multi-freeholder villages, thus transcending landownership. Moreover, living and working conditions were not synonymous with one another, especially as many agricultural workers did not live and work in the same place and the fluidity of the agrarian population and social hierarchies (defined by type of work, skill, wages and position in society) among agricultural workers meant that change and differentiation were characteristic.

11 PP 1867–8, XVII, *Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture 1867*; T.E. Kebbel, *The agricultural labourer: a short summary of his position* (London, 1870).