

**This article appeared in THE FARMER MAGAZINE
in 1850.**

**It compares a farm labourer's wages and living conditions, to those of a
clay worker living in Purbeck**

The nature of the arrangement between them is such, that beyond seeing that the work is not wholly neglected, the employers exercise little or no control over the men employed. They lay down some general rules which must be observed by all, such as no liquor shall be taken to the works, for the infraction of which they invariably discharge the transgressor. But the men may choose their own hours of working, provided they supply their employers with sufficient produce to meet the demand upon them. I have known work in the mines suspended at two o'clock. The wages are all paid weekly, the accounts being kept with different parties at work. According to the quantity of work done, the sum earned is handed over to the head of the party, who divides it with his comrades in proportion to the amount of work done by each, As each works for all, and all for each, they keep a sharp look-out upon each other when actually at work. The proportion which each is to receive is, therefore, entirely regulated by the time for which he has been at work during the week. If he has been absent for a day, half a day, or two days, a deduction *pro tanto* is made from his share of the common earnings. I was very courteously permitted by Messrs. Pike to inspect their books, and found that, whilst the miners generally earned from a pound to a guinea a week, the pitmen averaged sometimes from 3s. to 3s. 6d., and at others from 2s. 6d. to 3s. per day. The average earnings of the latter were from 2s. 6d. to 2s. 9d. a day. It is obvious how so large a demand for a particular species of labour at so high a price must affect the general rate of wages in the district.

To the stone-works at Swanage I shall have occasion hereafter to refer. These, together with Lord Eldon's improvements, have also a favourable effect upon wages in the neighbourhood of Wareham. The latter have not benefited the district as much as they might have done, inasmuch as they are being partly affected by imported labour. They have nevertheless, afforded considerable employment to the resident population in the neighbourhood of Encombe, the only drawback to which is, that it has been to some extent casual instead of continuous. The works are in the hands of contractors, who of course, look less to the employment of the labour of the district than to procuring the labour most adapted to their purposes.

The bargemen employed in carrying the clay from Wareham to Poole get 1s a ton for a ton for the quantity carried. They have not steady employment, but their wages, when they earn them, are good, and exhibit a comparatively high average throughout the year.

It is by the demand for labour to which these different occupations give rise, that the value of agricultural labour is favourably affected in the neighbourhood of Wareham. But even here the wages of the farm-labourer are, after all, as already said, only comparatively high. Except to carters, who receive 9s., the maximum paid is only 8s. a week. With this, some of them, but not all, have a free house. In most cases they have their fuel in addition. This consists of turf, which they themselves cut, but which is carted to their houses by the farmers, who claim the ashes as sufficient compensation for their trouble, which is very little, seeing that the heath where the turf is cut is generally hard by the labourer's hut. I regret to say that this is the most favourable report which I have to make as regards the wages and condition of the day-labourer on the farm in Dorset. Standing on this, then, as the highest point in the scene, the reader will have to contemplate a dreary level of misery and privation around him.

In inquiring into the condition of the labourer in the neighbourhood of Wareham, I first directed my attention to the district lying immediately south of the town, known as the Isle of Purbeck. This district varies much in its surface and general character, some of it being high and fertile, and other portions low, heathy, and irreclaimable. Close to the town, and between it and the arm of the sea into which the Frome discharges itself, a portion of the low-lying lands has been reclaimed from the waste, and now extends in one dreary and monotonous level of damp meadow land. The greater portion of its surface is but little elevated above high water mark; and during the night it is generally overspread with noxious malaria, which commences to rise from it with the setting of almost every sun. Yet in this ungenial spot are several cottages, containing in all nearly 100 human beings. I examined several of them, and will describe a few, taking their inmates as I found them, bargemen, claypit men, and farm labourers together.

The first that I visited was a cottage, occupied by a family of the name of Galton. The family consists of six persons—the father and mother, a son, and two daughters, and a grandchild, the illegitimate offspring of one of the daughters. When I entered, the only persons at home were the mother and the younger daughter. The mother informed me that her husband had steady work from Farmer Boyt, at 8s. a week, with a cottage free, and turf carried in. On the whole, the wages might be taken as amounting to about 9s. 6d. a week. They kept a pig which they intended to kill at Christmas, and to which they looked as the only animal food which they were likely to have for the season.

An open ditch, which served as a sluggish drain for the meadow, after touching one of the back corners of the house, which was a thatched mud hut, turned at a right angle, and extended along the back of it, right under the wall. The character of this ditch was indicated by the vegetation which thickly incrusts its stagnant contents. A little in front was another ditch, filthy in the extreme, though not quite so bad as the other. In front of the house was an ash-heap, where it would remain until the farmer chose to carry it away. The pigstye was behind, leaning against the wall of the fuel-house, which formed part of the building. So low was the hovel situated, that whenever it rained heavily it was completely inundated. Some time ago, after a heavy thunder-storm, the intrusive waters took possession of the whole floor, invaded the cupboard of the dresser, and rose, in an inner room, "half way up the legs of the bed." It was a long time afterwards ere the house got dry--indeed, it was not thoroughly so ere it was again flooded. It was about three years since the family had entered the house, They had all had ague shortly after doing so. The youngest daughter, the one then at home, had never got rid of it. Her sunken cheek, languid motions, and jaundiced complexion, all but too well attested the presence of the disease. The smells, I was further told, were sometimes very bad, but they were neither so numerous nor so offensive as those to which they had been accustomed at Newton, some miles off, where they formerly lived. There they had occupied a house from which the ague was never absent. Such was the domicile which they got rent free, instead of an extra shilling in the shape of money wages. But had they had two extra shillings, the poor creatures knew not where to get a better house, for there was none vacant in the district.

My next visit was to a hut but a few yards removed from that just described. It was one of a row consisting of four, being all thatched, and the crumbling walls constructed of mud and brick. In front of the door was a small close porch entered from the side. From this porch I stepped into the hut, in doing which I had to descend a step. The situation was as low and damp as that of the other cottage; nor was the house improved in this respect by the step down which had to be taken to gain the floor. There were but two rooms, one below and one above, which as usual, served as the sleeping apartment. The lower room was dingy in the extreme, its dimensions scarcely exceeding 12 feet by 10. The floor was composed of small, rough, and irregular flags, and so close were the two floors together, that I had barely room to stand erect, without my hat, between the beams supporting the upper one. The tenant's name was Stockley, a common name in these parts. He was six feet two inches in height, and had never stood erect in his own house. There was not a corner of it in which he could do so. All the wood-work was blackened with smoke, and clammy with moisture. The wall was bulging in on all sides, and seemed scarcely capable of supporting the crazy roof. The family consisted of seven - viz., the father and mother and five children, all boys. The eldest boy was 16 years of age, and worked with Farmer Boyt at 3s a week. The second son was earning 4s a week at the clay-pits. Both of them could read a little, but the second only could write - that is to say, he could write his own name. They all slept in the apartment upstairs. It contained two bedsteads, in addition to which a bed was made up on the floor. One corner of the sleeping-room had to be avoided on account of the floor having given way; it hung partly down into the lower room, so that the weight of a child almost would have brought it down altogether. About the middle of the floor the rents were so large that I could see almost the whole of the sleeping-room through them. But the most extra-ordinary feature connected with this house was the provision made by the inmates for baling the water out when the hut happened to be flooded by it. For this purpose, three of the flags were kept movable. I desired them to be lifted, and on being so, discovered under each a large hole scooped out in the clay, each hole capable of containing about a gallon. When the water began to rise on the floor, which was not unfrequently the case, to a height which threatened to extinguish the fire, these flags were raised, and the intrusive flood was drained into the holes in question. From these it was easily baled out by means of a tin dish. But for this device the floor would be frequently several inches under water. When the water subsided the flags were replaced, not to be removed again until the next heavy rain should be followed by a tide within the dwelling. One of the three holes which was under the only table in the house was deeper than the others, and had always more or less water in it. But for this, the floor would never be dry. It was very damp when I saw it, but Mrs. Stockley called it dry. For this wretched den no less than £3 a year are paid in rent to Mr. Dennis Brown, of Wareham. There is much, however, which might be done to it to render it more comfortable than it is. I inquired why the family stayed in such a hole, and was informed that they

had no alternative but to do so, as it was the only house they could get "convenient to their work." The ague was seldom out of it. Both father and mother had it on first taking the house, and not a year passed without some of the children being for a time stricken down by it. The mother was still annually attacked by premonitory symptoms of ague; but she was now accustomed to the disease, and stifled it at once by the use of active remedies. The other three houses of the row where some what larger and drier than this; but they, too, were damp, dark, filthy, and unwholesome. The whole row was not much more than fifty feet long - it contained in all eight rooms, and accommodated twenty-three people. They all slept in the roof of their respective domiciles, so that if the whole roof were thrown into one elongated chamber, and the occupants of the four houses lay side by side, each would have a strip of little more than two feet wide; in other words, they could scarcely lie without touching each other. Distributed as they were, each sleeping room averaged about six occupants.

I found most of the denizens of this marshy and unwholesome plain in receipt of very good wages. But few of them were farm-labourers, the majority being either bargemen or clay-pit workers. Stockley wrought in the pit, and his earnings averaged about 14s. a week. Two of his sons, as already shown, earned between them 7s., so that the united earnings of the family amounted to a guinea a week. Others, both bargemen and claymen, were in receipt of equally high earnings, and yet they did not appear to be a whit more comfortable than the Galton family, whose whole support was the 8s. a week earned on the farm. Mrs. Stockley complained that she and her family seldom tasted meat, and so did Mrs. Galton. The Stockleys paid rent, it is true, whilst the Galtons did not. But after deducting their rent, the earnings of the Stockleys were more than double those of the Galtons, whilst there was but one more child in the family. If the seven Stockleys were miserable on a guinea a week what must the six Galtons be on 8s.? I confess it puzzled me at first to ascertain how it was that the one could not make 2s. go farther than the other made 1s. go. I requested Mrs Stockley to inform me how the weekly earnings were spent. She soon disposed of the 7s. earned by the boys, by saying that they consumed all they got, and frequently more than they got. They worked hard, and fared at least, as the men did. There was the cost of their clothes and their shoes, of which they had but a scanty stock, it was true, but still more than their lot had they been earning nothing for themselves. But supposing the boys to be self-subsisting and no more, there were still the fathers earnings, 14s., for the maintenance of the remaining five of the family. Taking the rent out of this would leave about 12s. 9d. as the fund for the support of five. But still for the support of the six Galtons there were but 8s. a week; and yet the Galtons did not seem more wretched than their neighbours. The secret by and by came out. The Galtons had 8s. a week steadily throughout the year, whilst the greater incomings of the Stockleys were casual and fitful. Stockley's employment was tolerably constant, but Galton's was steady and uninterrupted. The consequence was, that Mrs. Galton could, from week to week, take the exact measure of her means, and manage accordingly. Not so with Mrs. Stockley. The earnings of each week went as they came. But in the one case each week brought with it the same measure of comforts as the preceding one; whereas in the other, the comparative abundance of one week might be followed by the privation of the next.

"The working people can't stand an uncertainty," said a friend to me, who drew my attention to this point as intimately connected with the general condition of the labourer. Except in the case of purely agricultural labour, casual employment is generally accompanied by high wages. A man thus casually employed may average more per week through out the year than a man having steady work at low wages. But it is generally found that the former is frequently worse off than the latter. Nothing can better illustrate this than the case of the bargemen who ply their craft between Wareham and Poole. When engaged, they receive very good remuneration for their work. The barges do not belong to them, but they work them at so much per ton of goods actually carried. Their employment is not very constant, but they make good wages when they are engaged. Yet there is no set of men in the district more miserably off as a class than these very Men. The Messrs. Pike have recently employed thirteen of them in manning a few barges connected with their clay work. Since the beginning of the year these thirteen have earned amongst them £700. One of them who was in a better situation than the rest, and whose earnings were frequently

considerably over £1 a week, was some time ago detained by illness from his work. He had not been laid up a week ere he sent a begging letter to his employers. And so with most of them. If they are out of work for a few days, they wend their way to the union for relief. Their superior earnings avail them not, coming fitfully as they do - even though they come with sufficient frequency to give a comparatively high average through out the year.

None are more convinced than the poor themselves of the evils consequent upon uncertain employment and irregular wages. They are aware of their want of self-control, and some of them, more prudent than the rest, take measures to prevent their defect in this respect from being injurious to their families. Some of them who drink beer at their work, prefer buying it in small quantities, as they require it, to the cheaper course of laying in a large quantity at a time. Their reason for so doing is that if they adopted the latter course, what they laid in would be consumed at once.

The point to which I next bent my course was the village of Corfe Castle, once a parliamentary borough, returning two members to parliament. It lies about four miles to the south of Wareham, immediately beyond the clay-pits, and on the borders of the agricultural district stretching between them and the sea. On my way thither I passed through the village of Stoborough, about half a mile from Wareham. To do justice to the filthy aggregate of human dwellings passing under that name, is scarcely possible. There are hardly half-a-dozen houses in it fit to be inhabited, and yet almost every hovel swarms with more than its proper complement of inmates. Here too, you have different scales of wages giving rise to but slight differences in condition. The street on either side is one line of dung and ash heaps. The cottages which seem to be centuries old have a dangerous and tumble down look about them; and indeed most of them would by this time have been among the things that were, but for the stout brick buttresses which have recently been built against the walls for their support. There is a sink with a light iron grating over it before most doors, from which odours ascend in moist or hot weather of no very desirable kind. Notwithstanding this, there is much stagnant surface-water generally in the street. At the upper end of the village, the houses seem actually rotten with age. Before one is a filthy duck pond full of slime and garbage. A little way further up is a horse-pond, in which turnips are sometimes washed before being given to cattle. When I was passing, a boy was paddling in the water in search of the turnip-tops, which he was to take home to be cooked and eaten.

About two miles from Stoborough my attention was attracted by a cottage which stood a little way off the road to the right. On examining it I found it inhabited by a family of the name of Keats. It had recently been a stable, from which, by means of a little patching, it had been converted into a house. The walls were of mud, here and there strengthened, where they had been giving way, by patches of brickworks. The family consisted of six persons. There were two rooms on the same floor, there being no room above. The rooms were so low that here again, I was pushed to stand erect. The ceiling of the common room was a perfect wreck. It had formerly consisted of a layer of coarse plaster spread over reeds by way of laths, which were attached to the slender beams which stretched from wall to wall. The plaster was in places gone, and so were the reeds, so that at different points the whole anatomy of the ceiling was exposed. The whole, too, instead of stretching straight across, hung downwards, like so much loose canvas suspended over head. Off this room was the bed-room. It was about 12 feet long by 8 feet wide, yet it contained 3 beds, and accommodated six people. One of them was a girl of twenty-one, another a boy of sixteen. For this house a rent of £1. 1s. is paid. It is on the property of Mr. W. Bankes, which is at present under the management of Mr. George Bankes, M.P. for Dorset.

Leaving this I proceeded direct to Corfe. The old castle completely overlooks the town from its isolated, and once commanding position. The grim old pile is rich in historic associations. During the "great rebellion" it was heroically defended for some time by Lady Bankes against the hosts of Cromwell. The name Bankes is yet associated with many objects in its neighbourhood; prominent amongst them is an old almshouse, which is at the entrance to the town, and at the base of the castle. It is no longer an almshouse, being now filled with a colony of poor, wretched, and squalid-

looking tenants. The house, which occupies two sides of a court, is of some size, and it contains from seventy to a hundred individuals. I believe that rent is paid for every room occupied in the house. There is a stable-yard in front of the court which it faces. It is also, as I was told, under management of Mr. Bankes. A short time before I got there, a large heap of dung had been deposited close to the gate leading into the open court. It was still in the state of reeking fermentation, and the smell to which it gave rise was offensive in the last degree. When I entered the court I found the whole population assembled, and bordering on mutiny. The dung heap in question was the grievance which had excited their ire. They were quite sure it would bring the cholera amongst them, if anything would ever bring it; whilst some of them assailed me as if I had put it there, although I was perfectly ignorant as to who was the delinquent. I vainly endeavoured to obtain information in the town as to how this charity had become transformed into private property.

Corfe is a small place, but the great proportion of the houses which it contains are of a miserable description. This is particularly the case in the lanes and outskirts of the town. I visited several of the worst description. One of the first was inhabited by a family of the name Grant. There were twelve of them in the house. They had a good deal of room below, but only two sleeping-rooms above. In these were four beds; and it was with no satisfaction that Mrs. Grant told me that they did not "sleep thicker than three in a bed". The family was then suffering considerably, owing to the husband and father being out of employment.

The next which I inspected was occupied by a family by the name of Brett. It had four rooms, two below and two above. It was very low, and the upper rooms were wholly in the roof. One of the lower rooms would, as regards to size, have afforded tolerable accommodation to a small family. The other was a mere closet, the floor of which was almost wholly covered by the bed, which occupied it. A child lay sick in the miserable and mouldy chamber. I ascended to the upper chambers. They had been plastered and whitewashed many years ago, but were wholly out of repair. The roof rose on either side from the very floor, so that the only perpendicular walls were at the two ends, if walls can be called so which have not known the perpendicular for years. Had the two rooms been thrown into one, they would have afforded available room more than 16 feet long and 10 wide. In the centre of the room I could stand erect, but nowhere else. Indeed, they virtually formed but one room, the thin deal partition between them not rising to the roof, and the door through it being too small to fill the doorway. In several places whole yards of the lath and plaster seemed to be hanging to the rafters only by hairs. At the farthest end of the inner room I touched the plaster thus situated with my stick. Down instantly came a large quantity of black dust, which formed a tolerably sized heap upon the floor. I touched it in another place with a similar result, the rotten thatch and yawning plaster, in this instance, on one of the beds. I was told that when the wind blew very hard and shook the house they could sometimes pick up near a "barrow full" of this debris in the room. When it was wet, too for any length of time, the rain percolated through the rotten thatch and yawning plaster. In these two rooms, or rather in this one room, were four beds, which were occupied by twelve people. The whole number inhabiting this wretched tenement was fourteen. There were two families in the house - two sisters with their husbands and children. These made thirteen; the fourteenth being the brother of the two sisters, a man tolerably advanced in life. One of the sisters occupied with her husband the small room below. The other with her husband and six children, together with the five children of her sister and brother - that is to say, the uncle of all the children - occupied the upper room or rooms, if they could be called so. Several of the children were grown up, and one, who was then in the house, was a girl of seventeen. In winter, notwithstanding, the number occupying it, the upper room was often bitterly cold, and no wonder, for one of the end walls seemed to have parted company with the roof, and leant out considerably. In the summer, again, it was perfectly stifling, the small windows not sufficing to ventilate the room. Had the walls been perpendicular on all sides, they thought that they might get on, but the space being contracted, from being entirely in the roof, they were sometimes nearly choked "with their own breaths" as they said. The rent paid for this novel was 1s. per week. I asked them why they did not seek a better house? but was told that they could not get one for love or money. The two sisters had been bred in the house themselves.

They were also married on the same day, and for want of cottage room in the neighbourhood the two married couples had to settle themselves in the mother's house. There they since remained, and have reared up in the same place no less than twenty-two children! "Yes" said one of them, with considerable emotion, "I have brought up eleven, and so has my sister, and ne'er a fire-place have we had but that one," pointing to the huge but cheerless hearth. They could scarcely speak with patience of the den inhabited by them, to which they applied the most uncomplimentary epithets. I enquired if they would be willing to pay more rent for better accommodation. "I would live on a dry crust to be able to do it," said the one "That we would, and gladly," echoed the other. I then ascertained that a promise had lately been made them that the house should be pulled down and a new one erected in its place, which they were to have. But it appeared that this project had been abandoned, and that they were then promised that the house would be repaired next spring. It seemed, however, that the agent had just informed them that it could stand for two or three years as it was; which was very problematical to say the least of it. But for the cow-house in the shape of a "lean-to," one of the end walls would have been down long ago. The inmates complained bitterly of the unsteadiness of their work.

This house is, like many others near it, the property of the Rev. Mr. Bond, rector of the neighbouring parish of Steeple. Of the reverend gentleman I heard none express themselves but in terms of the highest respect. Testimony to his humanity and kindheartedness was universally and ungrudgingly given. Surely he cannot know the state in which some of his tenants live.