

SIX CENTURIES
OF
WORK AND WAGES

The History of English Labour

BY
JAMES E. THOROLD ROGERS, M.P.

CHEAP



EDITION

London
SWAN SONNENSCHN AND CO.
PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1894

PREFACE.

SINCE I published, nearly eighteen years ago, the first two volumes of my history of agriculture and prices, I have been frequently urged to extract and exhibit those parts of my researches which illustrate the history of labour and wages. To have done this to any purpose, it was necessary that I should have in my possession such a continuous record of wages actually earned as would enable me to traverse the whole of the six centuries which intervene between the time at which the first information begins and that at which our present experience concludes. I have already published the facts which bear on more than half the whole period, *i.e.*, for 324 years, and I have collected evidence, as yet unpublished, for 120 years more, *i.e.*, for the 444 years which begin with the forty-third year of Henry III., 1258-9, and conclude with the first of Anne, 1702-3. Sufficient information for the residue has been supplied from the writings of Arthur Young and Sir Frederic Eden in the eighteenth century, and from numerous writers in the nineteenth, the principal authority in the latter period being Porter.

It would have been of little value to have collected evidence as to the wages of labour unless I had also been in possession of adequate information as to general prices from which to estimate precisely what was the purchasing power of wages. Now I have published the prices of food from 1259 to 1582, and from 1582

Preface.

a record of wheat and malt prices has been registered every six months at four important centres, Oxford, Cambridge, Windsor, and Winchester, under the statute 18 Eliz. cap. 6. Besides, for the purposes of my inquiry, I am sufficiently provided with the evidence of such other prices as enables me to translate money wages actually paid into the necessaries of life. I cannot, indeed, in the later period exhibit the position of the labourer with the same exactness which is in my power for the period during which I have compiled and published the evidence of wages which were actually paid, and provisions which were actually purchased or sold. In the period which intervenes between the first record of wages and the death of Henry VIII. (1547), during which the condition of the labourer was progressively good for more than a century and a half, and stationary at the highest level for nearly the whole of Henry's reign, more than thirty-seven years in duration, it is possible to follow the course of wages as exactly as that of any other article which is bought or sold, and to represent them by their power over all kinds of commodities. After this date, when they declined greatly in value, and the degradation of labour, owing to causes which I hope to make clear, began, I possess nearly the same continuous and minute knowledge for more than a century and a half, some being published, some being in notes. But except for about fifty years in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, the wages of labour have been a bare subsistence, constantly supplemented by the poor rate, till, in modern times, a considerable amelioration in the condition of some kinds of labour, owing, I believe, to a peculiar cause, has been effected. I have attempted to point out what that cause has been, and to suggest that it should be extended and encouraged.

It may perhaps be objected, that though I have dealt with a subject which is entirely new, I have appended no notes and have given no authorities for my facts. But for half the period

I could have made no reference except to my own publications, and for another century and more I can refer only to my unpublished notes, and the tabular statements which I have drawn up from them. The difficulty is an exceptional one, for no one has entered on this field of research but myself, or has even, to the best of my knowledge, attempted to make use of what I have published for purposes like those which are before me in compiling the present volume. I could, if it were needed, however, give ample verification for all that I have alleged, not, indeed, from the original sources, for those are contained in muniment rooms, in the Record Office, and in public libraries, but from my own transcripts and averages. For the later period, the authorities, as I have said, are chiefly Young, Eden, and Porter.

Again it may be objected, that I reiterate particulars in dealing with the topic before me. But in the reconstruction of the social state of England six centuries ago, and in the narrative of its history or development, it is frequently the case, especially when there is seen to be no marked change in the process under which men lived and worked, except in so far as the interests of the class about which I am writing are raised or depressed, that one has to piece out the picture which one attempts to draw from details which may need to be restated in the narrative, but were characteristic of an earlier as well as of a later epoch. Thus there is little change in the economy of rural life, as far as the labourer is concerned, from the days of the third Henry till the days of the eighth, and illustrations of the labourer's condition may be safely taken from any part of the period.

The plan which I put before myself was to devote the first chapters of the book to a sketch of early English society up to and during the latter half of the thirteenth century. In handling this part of my subject, I had to deal with the pursuits of the Englishman at this time, and especially with that

which was the business of the vast majority of our people, agriculture; land in England, as one can gather by a wide induction from the facts contained in existing records, having been divided in nearly equal moieties between manorial lords and tenants at fixed rents and with permanent holdings. Having dealt with the pursuits of this vast majority, it remained that I should say a little about life in towns and the processes by which trade was carried on. This is followed by an account of the several classes who made up mediæval society, all these subjects being handled in the first six chapters.

The remainder of the work deals particularly with the history of labour and wages, though I have felt myself constrained to touch on the general history of agriculture, and to dwell on some few particulars in the political history of the country, in connection with the main topic of my inquiry. But I have designedly abstained from entering on the new system of taxation which, beginning with Cecil's book of rates and continuing through the excise and customs system of the Protectorate, the Restoration, and the Revolution, at last imposed nearly all the burden of taxation on those whose resources were crippled, and whose freedom was taken away by a variety of enactments imposed in the interests of a narrow but powerful class.

I have attempted to show that the pauperism and the degradation of the English labourer were the result of a series of Acts of Parliament and acts of government, which were designed or adopted with the express purpose of compelling the labourer to work at the lowest rates of wages possible, and which succeeded at last in effecting that purpose. These Acts have become historical, and except in so far as they are responsible for the existence of much that is difficult and regrettable in the condition of the working classes now, they have no existence at the present time. We have long since ceased to regulate wages by Acts of Parliament and the ordinances

of quarter sessions. The despotic law of parochial settlement has been materially modified; working men are no longer liable to imprisonment and penal servitude for trying to sell their labour at the best advantage; and the wages of labour are no longer mulcted by corn laws and other restraints of trade. There still, I am aware, exist persons who would, if they could, resort to the old system upon specious prettexts, or with avowed audacity. But it does not follow that because the cause is removed, the effect has ceased.

I cannot, therefore, be charged with attempting to set class against class in the narrative which I have given. Were it necessary, indeed, to do so, in order to assist the moral and material progress of those who, living by labour, enable others to live without labour, or live by mischievous labour, I should not hesitate to use all my powers in that direction, for the charge of setting class against class has always been made by those who wish to disguise their own indefensible advantages by calumniating the efforts of those who discover abuses and strive to rectify them. But I believe that the efficacy of the charge has been much weakened by the estimate which the public instinctively forms about those who venture on using it.

My reader will, I trust, find that I have been able to trace the causes which brought about the misery and degradation of labour to acts and persons which are historical, and that the process of restoration is retarded by privileges and practices which are still dominant,—privileges and practices which, unless they are relinquished and abandoned, will give occasion in England, which has hitherto been quit of it, for an extension of that spirit of communism which finds its origin and its apology in the injuries, some real and some imaginary, which the many suffer at the hands of the few.

I have the further purpose of contributing one portion to the historical method of Political Economy. The older dogmatism of this science or philosophy, after being for a long

time distasteful, has latterly been shown to be untrue. Many of the formularies which were accepted as axiomatic truths by the disciples of Ricardo and Mill are now found to be as incorrect as they are unsatisfactory. Besides, it is not enough for the economist to predict, he is expected to suggest the remedies for the evils under which society is labouring, or yield the social question up to the socialist. It may be that he has discovered certain laws of nature which will, unless proper means are used, bring about permanent evils, though very frequently his laws are merely tendencies, the corrective to which is supplied, partially at least, from agencies which the science has hitherto neither suspected nor accounted for; sometimes are paradoxes which are quite baseless. Now a science which detects a disease has its use if it can point out how the disease has arisen, and thus can check the development of that which would make the malady continuous and permanent. That science, however, takes a far higher place which is not only accurate in its diagnosis but skilled in the proper therapeutics. But the discoverer of true causes has travelled a long way on the road to the remedy. And this, if it be rightly taken, is what the historical economist may effect, but the theoretical economist has mistaken.

Since I have written the pages which follow, the attention of the people has been called from various, and I am bound to say, very unexpected, quarters, to the question of how the working classes in large cities, perhaps even in rural England, are to be housed. I am not quite sure that many of those who have made this an urgent question will relish the inevitable answer which will be given as to the causes of the situation and as to the changes which must precede the development of a better result. If an attempt is made to meet the mischief by putting the burden of satisfying a public necessity upon those who are no way responsible for the result, and by exempting those who are responsible from all the charges of

reform, and even by enriching them through the machinery of the reform, I venture on predicting that some of those who have raised the question will regret that they were rash enough to have stirred in the matter.

Fortunately for all, the leaders of English labour have sought to better the condition of their followers by processes which the most rigid of economists cannot condemn. I have taken occasion to point out what, in my opinion, is the economical significance of a trade union or labour partnership. That this principle may be extended so as to embrace all labour, should, I am convinced, be the wish of every one who desires to save his country from the spread of doctrines which are as pernicious to the true interests of labour as they are destructive of all progress, and ultimately of all hope. Nothing would be more fatal than the despair which might succeed in reconstructing society from its foundations.

Since this book has been written,—since, indeed, the foregoing part of the preface has been written—I have had the advantage of seeing the very able and intelligent essay of Mr. Giffen, the President of the Statistical Society, on the progress of the working classes during the last half-century—*i.e.*, from 1833, speaking generally, to 1883. A great deal of what Mr. Giffen has collected by way of material for his conclusions is of very unequal value. Many of his inferences are perhaps too hopeful, many of his economical principles are of very doubtful cogency, and I have, indeed, read nothing lately, the results of which are more open to debate and discussion.

But Mr. Giffen's figures (and he regrets, as I do, that evidence for the last fifty, or, indeed, for the last hundred years, is not more copious) are, as far as they go, exact and instructive. The period with which he starts was one of unexampled oppression. The legislature had, indeed, got rid of the combination laws, but the political economists of

the old school and the judges had revived them in the very worst form and with the most malignant pedantry. I need only refer to the conviction of the six Dorsetshire labourers in July 1834, their transportation for a perfectly innocent act, their pardon, and the concealment of the pardon from them, in consideration, I presume, of the vested interest to which the Sydney Government had sold them at a pound a head. It is, I think, to be regretted that Mr. Giffen did not describe, as he certainly could have done, what was the condition of wages in relation to profits fifty years ago. I hope that I have sufficiently stated it; I am certain that I have done so with much restraint and moderation in the following pages. That wages have risen I thankfully admit. Water rises in an artesian well. But the physicist who explains the rise has to take account of the pressure which previously kept the water below its just level. In the case of labour, the economist should have announced and deplored it.

It is noteworthy, too, that the kinds of labour for which Mr. Giffen has adduced evidence have all been aided and protected by trade unions. I refer to those which are tabulated in page 5 of his address. The inference from those paid for seamen is more doubtful; for the comparison is between wages paid in sailing and in steam vessels, two callings which are only nominally one. Most doubtful is the estimate of Sir James Caird as to the wages of agricultural labourers. Here we do not know whether the 60 per cent. means the rate of wages, or the cost of labour. We do not know, as we can know in the case of artizans, whether it means real wages or money wages, or whether it is not true that the mere cost of living fifty years ago in country places was fifty per cent. less than it now is, while occupation was more certain and more continuous. The critics whom the landowners employed to examine the agricultural statistics of the past, always used to comment on the allowances made to,

farm labourers. There must have been some meaning in the plea, or it would hardly have been put forward. I speak of responsible writers; no reasonable person notices anonymous critics, least of all those who take the wages of a publisher's review.

The question, in fact, of the present position of labour cannot be discussed in a short essay. But no comment, however slight or superficial, will be other than misleading which does not give an estimate of the English labourer's condition fifty years ago, when it dwells on the progress which he has made since that period. What the state of this country would have been, if he had not made progress, is pretty certain; and I am afraid that we shall not entirely escape the speculative evils on which most far-sighted people are now dwelling, if he is not made to realise that other and considerable reforms are forthcoming in the near future.

In the interval, despite the interest which is felt in speculative novelties and startling theories of reconstruction, the English workman, in his best and most thoughtful forms, is more intent on seeking out and adapting the process by which the interests of employer and employed should be harmonized than in striving after an entirely new departure. The Continental socialist has hitherto owned that England is a barren field, which bears none of his fruit, and seems unable even to make the seed which he sows germinate. This indifference to theory is not due to selfishness or to the deadening effects of competition, for it is the essential characteristic of the trade unionist that he sacrifices himself to the good of the voluntary corporation with which he has associated himself, to an extent which foreigners do not understand or imitate. According to those who are entitled to speak with authority on the subject, the English unionist readily subscribes for the purpose of his organization fully two-and-a-half per cent. of his income, and sometimes more. The Conti-

mental artizan, it would seem, can with difficulty be persuaded to contribute a sixth of the sum. I do not, therefore, infer, with my friend M. Laveleye, that the English workman is yielding to Continental ideas, for I find that the essence of all foreign schemes, as portrayed in M. Laveleye's excellent work, "Le Socialisme," is the sacrifice of others, while the English workman essays to achieve the solution of his problems by the preliminary sacrifice of himself; partially, imperfectly, and unequally, I grant, but still consistently and on principle. Above all, he does not invoke the aid of the State.

For my part, I believe that as the English people has taught other nations the machinery of parliament and representative government, has slowly, after many struggles, and after having been long made the experiment of insincere factions, won, or is winning, the admission of all who deserve it to the constitution, and has constantly falsified those sinister predictions about a hungry and angry democracy which have been the stock-in-trade of reactionaries, so it is likely hereafter to solve the far more important question as to the true harmony between the rights of property and the rights of labour. We have been confidently warned that the power of the people will be the spoliation of the rich. Nothing of the kind has happened as yet; nothing of the kind has been threatened; nothing of the kind has been hinted at. The democracy of the towns have formulated no claim, instructed no representative in this direction. They wish to distribute property, but by the honest operation of an equitable purchase. They wish to better the wages of the workman, but by the equally equitable interpretation of the market, of the goods which they produce, and the price which the consumer is prepared to give for them. They are singularly, generously oblivious of past ill-usage, and seem to have no animosity against the classes and the institutions to which

their fathers owed the miseries deliberately inflicted on their lot. They contrast favourably with many of their critics, who do not disguise their desire for reaction. But the best hope of the future lies in the existence of a temper among the people, which is equally removed from the temptation to revenge and is contemptuous of the sophistries which a narrow self-interest is ventilating.

I am well aware that these views will seem paradoxical. But in political matters it has been long since proved that aristocratical government is a failure and its prolongation a mischief and a menace. It forms wrong judgments, and when it is right by accident in its ends, it adopts wrong means, or inverts the order in which its grudging and tardy reforms should be effected. Nor has the franchise of a more extended and real kind than that which existed from the Restoration to the first Reform Bill done much better. This country owes much to the Parliaments which sat between 1832 and 1868. But they would have done far better had the franchise been that of 1867. They will do better still when the peasant is allowed to express his judgment on the policy of Government.

But the value of popular opinion on the policy of Parliament and the administration is as nothing to the usefulness of combined action on the part of labour with regard to social questions. "The crowd," says Aristotle, the wisest interpreter of ancient political forces under the clearest circumstances in which they have ever been estimated, "makes better general judgments than any individual whatsoever. It is in the main incorruptible. Like a large sheet of water, the multitude is less liable to sinister influences than the few, for when the individual is influenced by passion or any similar impulse, his judgment must be distorted, while it is hard for all collectively to be led by passion or to err."

The difficulty is not to get wise action, but to get any

action at all. The mass of persons in England take a languid interest in political action, and a capricious line on social questions. They have had reason to believe that politics are the mere game of two hereditary and privileged parties, in which it signifies little which gets a temporary ascendancy. They are convinced of the hollowness of political cries, and are under the impression that the public service is a phrase by which politicians mean private advantage. Since 1867, they have made few demands on Parliament, apparently because they have seen that Parliament is more busy in arbitrating between rival interests of a special character than in considering the general good. They may do more in the future. They may, like Jonathan in the day of battle, taste the wild honey in the wood and find their eyes enlightened. But I for one do not fear that, like the rest of the people, they will fly upon the spoil.

JAMES E. THOROLD ROGERS.

House of Commons.

CONTENTS.

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| CHAPTER I. | |
| INTRODUCTION | 17 |
| CHAPTER II. | |
| RURAL ENGLAND—SOCIAL LIFE | 38 |
| CHAPTER III. | |
| RURAL ENGLAND—AGRICULTURAL | 70 |
| CHAPTER IV. | |
| TOWN LIFE | 102 |
| CHAPTER V. | |
| THE DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH AND TRADE | 128 |
| CHAPTER VI. | |
| SOCIETY—WAGES—PROFITS | 159 |
| CHAPTER VII. | |
| THE KING AND HIS EXTRAORDINARY REVENUES | 188 |
| CHAPTER VIII. | |
| THE FAMINE AND THE PLAGUE | 215 |
| CHAPTER IX. | |
| DISCONTENT—COMBINATION—INSURRECTION | 243 |

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| CHAPTER X. | |
| THE LANDLORD'S REMEDIES | 274 |
| CHAPTER XI. | |
| THE DEVELOPMENT OF TAXATION | 300 |
| CHAPTER XII. | |
| 2 LABOUR AND WAGES | 326 |
| CHAPTER XIII. | |
| THE CLERGY TILL THE REFORMATION | 356 |
| CHAPTER XIV. | |
| 3 WAGES OF LABOUR AFTER THE RISE IN PRICES | 387 |
| CHAPTER XV. | |
| 4 THE ENGLISH POOR LAW | 414 |
| CHAPTER XVI. | |
| ENGLISH HUSBANDRY FROM THE RISE IN PRICES | 442 |
| CHAPTER XVII. | |
| 5 AGRICULTURE AND AGRICULTURAL WAGES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY | 468 |
| CHAPTER XVIII. | |
| 6 WAGES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY | 494 |
| CHAPTER XIX. | |
| 7 THE PRESENT SITUATION | 521 |
| CHAPTER XX. | |
| 8 REMEDIES | 548 |
| INDEX | 577 |

CHAPTER I,

INTRODUCTION.

Archives of English History—Number and Copiousness of—Domesday, and the Blank which follows it—Commencement of Economical Archives—Degradation of the Anglo-Saxon Nobility—The English the Allies of the King—He is the largest Landowner—The Ministers of the Sovereign, Churchmen—The King's Principal Revenues—The Exchequer, a Source of Power and Object of Attack—The Method of the Exchequer Audit copied in private Accounts—These Accounts Evidence of Title, and therefore preserved—Henry the Second's Position and Abilities—Effects of Becket's Murder—The Liability to Military Service at the bidding of the Crown—The Origin and Effects of Escuage—The English Army, its Character and Traditions—Open to Villeins, though the Militia was not—The Story of Sale in 1381—The Contrast of England with other Nations in Western Europe—The Treatment of the English King by his Subjects—The Commutation of Military Service for Money imitated in Domestic Matters between Lord and Serf—Matthew Paris—His Value as an Interpreter of Public Opinion and Social life—The Beginnings of Hostility to the Roman Court—Henry III.—His Character, and that of his Reign.

THE archives of English history are more copious and more continuous than those of any other people. The record of public events begins with the Teutonic invasion of the fifth century, and is prolonged, with scarcely a break, down to our own times. There are periods in which the information is scanty. The events of the reign of Edward IV. have not been preserved in such abundance as those of Edward I. We know more about the life and times of Archbishop Becket than we do about the life and times of Archbishop Morton. But we are rarely left without contemporary annalists, and those authoritative materials by which the historian can give continuity and vivacity to his narrative. As the political history of England can be written from its beginnings, so can the history of its laws, which are founded on the customs of the Teutonic races. Again, the constitutional history of our people has been traced back to customs which long precede