

## CHAPTER 2. WORK, WAGES AND DISLOCATED LIVES 1790-1820

Enclosure in Worcestershire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had an impact on a minority of agricultural labourers, cottagers and squatters, but it did not bring about major changes in most labourers' lives nor a significant relocation of population. This study will suggest a number of other factors that did have more impact. Although contemporaries like Viscount Torrington, firmly believed rural depopulation was widespread in the 1790s and blamed this on enclosure, capitalist farming<sup>1</sup> and more work being available in manufacturing towns,<sup>2</sup> there was a simple explanation for his belief. In the Midlands most contemporary comments about agricultural issues took place in years of poor harvests and high price years when food riots occurred in both market towns and industrial urban areas. The rising price of bread led contemporaries to develop logical, but simplistic explanations that insufficient grain for bread must be the result of other factors as well as a bad harvest. As early as 1766, some years before enclosure in Worcestershire gained momentum, a pamphlet sent to *Aris' Birmingham Gazette* blamed the high rise in provisions on three factors: rural depopulation; a change of land use from arable to pasture and land-owners turning more and more land over to game preserves.<sup>3</sup> After local bread-riots in Birmingham, Stourbridge and Bromsgrove were over and ringleaders arrested, however, contemporary commentators changed their opinions. Riot leaders were labelled as people who only wanted to live 'by idleness and plunder' and those referred to positively and sympathetically in previous reports as 'Labourers' or 'the poor' were now called 'the lower sort of people' in whom 'that licentious spirit of insurrection....now rages so furiously'.<sup>4</sup> So underpinning economic explanations and feigned sympathy was the belief that food riots were also a threat to the established social order.

Similar explanations were put forward when food riots recurred almost forty years later in the high price years 1800 to 1801. This time, however, more blame

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<sup>1</sup> Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol. 2: 276.

<sup>2</sup> Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol. 3: 33.

<sup>3</sup> *ABG*: May 26<sup>th</sup> 1766.

<sup>4</sup> *ABG*: October 13<sup>th</sup> 1766.

was attached to farmers, who were accused of becoming so avaricious that the rural poor were being denied their gleaning rights or the opportunity to gather turnip tops to supplement their diets and compensate for their inability to buy more food. That said, no specific farmers' names were attached to this generalisation and publishing such opinions was probably another device intended to placate the rioters.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the 1766, the 1800-01 riots and disturbances were suppressed more fiercely, probably because urban areas were now highly politicised and, after the influence of the French Revolution, English urban labourers were thought to be even more insurrectionary. Evidence that some urban labourers were politicised was indicated by the fact that one of the Birmingham food rioters was arrested for carrying 'caricature prints of an inflammatory and dangerous nature',<sup>6</sup> while in other industrial areas of the Midlands political pamphlets were circulating and riots were accompanied by widespread arson.<sup>7</sup> Those leaving surrounding rural areas during the crisis to try to obtain work or poor relief in Birmingham, not surprisingly, were seen at a time of heightened tension as unwelcome 'incomers' likely to swell the ranks of Jacobin radicals. For this reason, magistrates decided to order the arrest of the increasing number of beggars arriving in the town in 1801.<sup>8</sup> Another perceived increase of beggars in 1816 met with arrests and the same intolerance, the justification being that Birmingham 'has enough poor of its own'.<sup>9</sup> Studies of other growing industrial and market towns also indicated that vagabondage was increasing elsewhere and that similar steps were taken to keep out 'incomers'.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the available evidence suggested, however, that geographical mobility in rural Worcestershire was relatively static though a general population increase during the late eighteenth century inevitably had an impact on agricultural work and wages. This was in keeping with a pattern that was evident elsewhere. Snell found evidence that from the 1780s onwards, many predominantly rural counties saw increasing seasonal unemployment and poverty because a growing

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<sup>5</sup> *ABG*: August 18<sup>th</sup> 1800 and February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1801.

<sup>6</sup> *ABG*: September 15<sup>th</sup> 1800. See reference to the arrest of a man called Purcell.

<sup>7</sup> *ABG*: November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1800.

<sup>8</sup> *ABG*: February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1801.

<sup>9</sup> *ABG*: July 8<sup>th</sup> 1816.

<sup>10</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 164. Snell cited the city of Nottingham as a key example. See J. D. Chambers' *Nottingham in the Eighteenth Century* (1932): 179-182.

pool of labour meant there were fewer hirings by the year, more short-term contracts and a growth in demand for day labourers. The result, Snell suggested, was a fall in agricultural labourers' real wages after 1815 and a subsequent deterioration of labourers' living standards.<sup>11</sup> As well as a marked population increase after 1750, which led to labour supply outstripping demand, Snell suggested that agricultural employment was also becoming increasingly seasonal. This trend provided farmers with an opportunity to hire fewer farm servants who lived in and more local day labourers, dispensing with their services as and when lack of work and poor weather demanded.<sup>12</sup> Snell also suggested that unemployment and underemployment were particularly affected by the major food crises of 1795-96 and 1800-01, which were only partly alleviated by the on-going mobilisation of able-bodied men to fight in the war with France. In any case, Snell maintained that structural changes taking place in the rural economy had a long-term effect on employment opportunities partly because price and wage inflation experienced in war time eventually led to severe post-war deflation and unemployment.

That said, other historians have noted some positive economic factors so far as work opportunities were concerned. Between 1811 and 1821, although agricultural production fell by 4.6%, manufacturing rose by 8.2%.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that fewer working opportunities in the countryside were partly being compensated for by the demands of industry. But as well as outsiders not being welcome in growing urban areas, unemployed rural labourers wishing to re-locate faced problems linked to their legal Settlement. This was because local unemployment in all areas was inextricably linked to a poor law system where the parish had to maintain its own poor. Under the Settlement Act of 1662 every individual belonged to a parish, either through birth, apprenticeship, obtaining a year's hiring, serving in parish offices or paying parish rates. This meant that a simple period of residence in another parish was not in itself a qualification for Settlement and that if residency was not gained on statutory grounds, one took one's father's Settlement

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<sup>11</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 22-36.

Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat', M. Reed and R. Wells (eds.), *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700 – 1880*: 33.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat', 32.

<sup>13</sup> J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England* (London: Longman, 1986): 5-8.

or that of any male ancestor who had gained a statutory Settlement. This meant, effectively, that the Law of Settlement divided the Kingdom into what Poynter called, 'a multitude of little principalities in matters of poor relief, each with its own citizenship and each willing to beggar its neighbour rather than increase its own local financial commitment'.<sup>14</sup>

Although the Act of 1662 was followed by more legislation, most agricultural labourers and their families gained their first Settlement by legitimate birth, whilst illegitimate children gained theirs from the parish their mothers were living in when they were born, regardless of the mother's legal place of Settlement. When labourers began work, Settlement was gained by yearly hirings, but if these were interrupted, or less than a year was served, they were not legal.<sup>15</sup> Labourers, however, were allowed to travel to look for work elsewhere provided they had a certificate stating that their home parish would provide relief for them in times of distress. Women gained Settlement by marriage provided a husband's Settlement was known or it could be gained by owning a freehold property, however small, or by renting a tenement worth four shillings a week.<sup>16</sup> Since parish relief depended on proof of Settlement and virtually no support was given without it, many applicants found their applications for relief subject to stringent and protracted enquiries that often left individuals and families without money for many weeks. Proof of Settlement took time because it depended on both the memory and honesty of the claimant and those of his or her previous employers. This, in turn, gave parish overseers the opportunity to evade their responsibility to provide relief and take the easy way out by sending the poor back to any parish where they appeared to have a likely claim to Settlement. Parishes, however, often hotly contested removal orders, since they were reluctant to add to their own costs by taking in the poor returned to them.

Poynter saw the Law of Settlement as the greatest barrier to social mobility and often a cause of great suffering and cruelty.<sup>17</sup> Wells agreed and suggested that it was a key reason why agricultural labourers in the south and east of England

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<sup>14</sup> J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969): 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 71-72.

<sup>16</sup> Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*: 5.

<sup>17</sup> Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*: 6.

stayed put, despite the fact that this created large local pools of labour for farmers to hire and fire at will.<sup>18</sup> Snell, however, thought that, despite the problems imposed by legislation, it did not change the traditional pattern of most agricultural labourers' working lives. This pattern meant that it was common practice for those unmarried to leave home at fourteen in order to work for a year to gain their own Settlement. On marriage, custom and practice determined that men moved from being yearly servants to labourers hired by the week, whilst their wives supplemented the family income by seasonal fieldwork or craftwork carried out at home.<sup>19</sup> He accepted, however, as did Rule, that poverty in the countryside also had a close connection with the labourer's cyclical lifestyle. Once a single man married and had dependent infants, his wife's ability to contribute to the family's weekly income was often severely restricted. Later on, if wife and children were able to contribute, family incomes might increase. There were, however, a number of other factors that contributed to rural poverty: illness; desertion of the husband; death of a spouse; seasonal underemployment or unemployment.

None of this was helped by the fact that the Settlement Act 1795 meant that removing an 'outsider' from a rural village could only take place if the person became chargeable for poor relief.<sup>20</sup> Rule believed this factor led to a further decline in yearly hirings and that 'outsiders' were increasingly harassed in times of agricultural distress or when seasonal unemployment led to their applications for poor relief. Parish vestries also sometimes used the Act as a good reason for pulling down cottages on surviving wastes to deter the poorest families from settling and apprenticing children beyond the parish bounds if their parents were on relief and had little or no means of supporting them.<sup>21</sup>

If this was the generality, were the lives of Worcestershire's agricultural labourers during this period lived within similar contexts, following the same patterns, or were there other differences depending on parish location, the type of agriculture practised and the size of local populations? The answers to these questions were partly determined by examining the county's 'agricultural year' and

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<sup>18</sup> Wells, 'The Development of the Rural Proletariat', 32-33.

<sup>19</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 73.

<sup>20</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 17.

<sup>21</sup> J. Rule, *Albion's People: English Society 1714-1814* (London: Longman, 1992): 126.

labourers' employment opportunities and wages within various geographical parts of the county. Consideration was also given to the impact of social and economic change on working patterns and employment opportunities in the county from the 1790s onwards and particular attention paid to the impact of the Settlement Acts in the specific parishes chosen for this study. Evidence suggested that these Acts created far more social dislocation than enclosure ever did and contributed to the growing sense of resentment, particularly evident in the post-war period of agricultural distress 1815 to 1820.

The best evidence for Worcestershire's agricultural year was found in William Pitt's *General View of the County of Worcestershire* published in 1813,<sup>22</sup> although analysis proceeded with some caution since, as Rosalind Mitchison pointed out, the Board of Agriculture's reporters (like Pitt) were often ignorant of farming, produced reports at speed and were usually strangers to the district. As such they were reliant on farmers to give accurate evidence and they were possibly afraid to do this.<sup>23</sup> David and Fussell in their study of the Acreage Returns for Worcestershire in 1801 agreed with this view and stated that farmers in some areas of the county were indeed extremely reluctant to reveal the state of their business to outsiders.<sup>24</sup> These limitations notwithstanding, Pitt's evidence, gathered on visits between 1805 and 1807, gave a clear picture of Worcestershire agriculture, the agricultural working year and stated how labour was employed and paid for in various parts of the county. As one of the primary sources for this period it was necessary to deal with its contents in some detail.

Pitt's *General View* began by dividing the county into its various parts according to agricultural specialism. To begin with it was a county with rich river meadows and pastureland, totalling some 140,000 acres, particularly along the banks of the Severn, Teme, Stour and Avon. These were largely used for raising cattle and sheep, although the Teme valley to the west of the county also specialised in hops and fruit orchards. The majority of the land, some 360,000

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<sup>22</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 1.

<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Mitchison, 'The Old Board of Agriculture (1712-1822)', *English Historical Review*. Vol. LXXIV, (1959): 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> K.G. Davies and G.E. Fussell, 'Worcestershire in the Acreage Returns of 1801', *Transactions of Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, Vol. XXVII, (1950): 20.

acres, was given over to arable farming, especially wheat, corn, oats and beans.<sup>25</sup>

Crop rotation on arable land followed two traditional yearly patterns:

1. wheat, followed by turnips, then barley, before lying fallow or turned over to pasture for one or more years.
2. wheat, followed by turnips, then barley, followed by several years' usage as pasture.

Although traditional practice may have determined these rotations, it is likely that in years when cereals fetched high prices, there would be more pressure to increase the acreage for wheat as opposed to providing more land for turnips and barley. Potatoes were also grown, but were only used as human food in times of scarcity. When cheap and plentiful, they tended to be used as food for pigs and cattle.<sup>26</sup>

The most specialist agricultural area of the county, however, was the market garden area of Evesham, consisting of some 300 acres producing crops like asparagus, cucumbers and onions for Birmingham, Bristol and Bath. Norton, near Evesham, specialised in growing poppy heads for druggists,<sup>27</sup> quite a lucrative crop since opium formed the basis of many popular medicines and cough mixtures. Fruit was also grown around Evesham and in other areas, especially cherries, apples, pears and plums, but seasons were variable. In years of scarcity, the crops were scarcely worth growing and in years of plenty there was no profit at all and fruit was left on the trees to rot, although surplus apples were often used in domestic cider making.<sup>28</sup> The only other area of specialist agricultural activity in the county was forestry, which was carried out at Wyre Forest, near Bewdley, and on the lower slopes of hilly areas like Malvern, Bredon, Abberley and Lickey. The timber was mostly used for rails, hurdles and laths, but growers also produced quick set hedging for enclosures.<sup>29</sup> Hill country was also used to graze sheep and horses, particularly in the limestone area of the Cotswolds in the south of the county bordering on Gloucestershire. Pastureland and meadowland along the Severn, Avon, Stour and Teme valleys was used for cattle raising.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 6-8.

<sup>26</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 65. 94.

<sup>27</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 135. 137.

<sup>28</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 148.

<sup>29</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 187.

<sup>30</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 9.

For most labourers the working year began in February when the first crops, such as beans, were sown by horse drill or hand-sown by women and children paid 1s 6d to 2s a bushel plus a quart of cider. It took two to three bushels of beans to sow an acre of land.<sup>31</sup> Ploughing was the chief activity for March and the type of soil determined how much labour was required and what type of plough was used. In most of the county, soils were light to sandy and a two-wheel single furrow plough or a two-furrow wheel plough was used. These ploughs required two to three horses, one man or one man and a boy to assist. Around Evesham, where the soil was a mixture of clay and marl, a 'heavy' horse-drawn plough was more suitable. This was followed by manuring the land by spade, the dung being drawn to the fields by carts and the work usually undertaken by men.<sup>32</sup> To the west of the county, where hops were grown, the same system of ploughing and manuring took place in order to prepare the land. This was followed by pole-tying prior to hops being sown. This meant hand-tying the poles with rushes, for which men were paid 16s an acre.<sup>33</sup>

According to Pitt, most crops were sown between March and May, the chief of these being spring wheat, barley, corn, carrots, oats, vetches, peas and potatoes. Horse drawn drills planted most seed and a number of these were made in the area around Evesham. Richard Arklues of Great Hampton was a key manufacturer.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, men and women still sowed carrots by hand, particularly in the area surrounding Wolverley. The practice here was for a man with a hand drill to make three rows and to be followed by women sowing the seed by hand.<sup>35</sup> Between March and June, women also sowed potatoes, a popular crop, using containers to carry them up and down the fields and setting them by hand.<sup>36</sup> On-going work at this time of year involved hand-hoeing turnips (5s an acre the first hoeing and 2s 6d an acre for the second hoeing) and hoeing carrots.<sup>37</sup> Women were also employed to weed cereal fields and, to the west of the county, to tie the vines of hops, for 6d a

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<sup>31</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 88.

<sup>32</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 43, 44 and 144.

<sup>33</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 117.

<sup>34</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 45.

<sup>35</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 103.

<sup>36</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 93. They were usually helped by their children.

<sup>37</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 104.



day and a quart of beer.<sup>38</sup> Other women worked continuously as dairymaids or assisted their mistress about the farmhouse. There was also general repair and maintenance work to be done by men as well as more specialist tasks associated with horses and livestock.

May to July saw the start of hay-making, with men, women and children engaged in cutting grass with scythes, then turning it with pitchforks and prongs before putting it into cocks and, finally, stacks.<sup>39</sup> From late July to August and September men, women and children were engaged in harvesting, the workforce often supplemented by casual workers from urban areas. Wheat and barley were cut by sickle (1750 onwards) whilst beans were cut with a hook before being dried and stacked.<sup>40</sup> Hops, however, were hand-picked, usually by women and children from neighbouring counties, although many came from Wales, which was some thirty to forty miles away. Men were employed at the same time to bag the hops and remove the hop poles from the fields. The women were paid 6d to 8d a day plus a pint of thickened milk for breakfast, two quarts for the rest of the day and two dinners a week. Male pickers received 1s a day, plus drink, but the pole-men received 4s to 6s a week plus all meals and drink.<sup>41</sup> Where fruit was grown, it was harvested between June and October and either hand-picked for specialist markets or shaken from the boughs with long poles and collected by men, women and children beneath.<sup>42</sup>

In late August, ploughing and manuring recommenced in order to sow autumn wheat or spring vetches to provide grazing for animals the following April to May.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, threshing began and lasted well into October. Although one farmer at Shifnal in 1807 had a threshing machine for barley, bought for 88 guineas, men in barns using flails, sieves, brooms and buckets did most of the work. Many farmers did, however, have winnowing machines, bought for £7.7s, which helped separate the grain from the chaff. After the harvest was over, the chief activity for men during the winter was hedging and ditching, using

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<sup>38</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 127.

<sup>39</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 51. 142-143.

<sup>40</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 78.

<sup>41</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 127.

<sup>42</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 154.

<sup>43</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 72.

hedging hooks and wheelbarrows. Mittens were also used in order to protect them from the cold. Apart from this, there were still repairs to be carried out around the farm, fencing and buildings to be maintained, livestock to be tended and sheep to be prepared for lambing. Most farms were of ancient construction and their outer buildings were poor. Many, in fact, lacked sheds for cattle during the winter.<sup>44</sup>

Pitt is quoted at length, both because his was the only cross-county survey for this period and because his study demonstrated how labour intensive Worcestershire agriculture was in the period 1790 to 1815. He also indicated that, whilst there was a core labour force that could be employed all the year round, there were occasions when more casual workers were needed, mostly women and children. Pitt's work showed that hop growing in particular was heavily reliant on casual labour at harvest time and that this generated 'time-limited labour mobility'<sup>45</sup> into the hop-growing areas from nearby counties and Wales. Using casual labour, then, was already a noticeable feature in Worcestershire agriculture and made sound economic sense. The problem for some labouring families was that casual employment was both seasonal and dependent on farmers maintaining or extending arable farming. There was, however, less demand for casual day-labour in traditional sheep rearing areas and on dairy farms. That said, war-time demand for timber, probably meant more opportunities for carpenters and sawyers, although these occupations were restricted to certain parts of the county and tended to be monopolised by family groups where skills were handed down from father to son.

Despite some technological developments elsewhere, agriculture in Worcestershire was heavily reliant on human resources because farmers made limited use of agricultural equipment. Although Meickle's threshing machine made its appearance in 1786, it was a long time before its use spread from the corn counties of Scotland to southern England. This was because early machines were large, had complex gearing and farmers thought them complicated and expensive. Their use was limited further by the fact that there were no engineering companies

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<sup>44</sup> Pitt, *General View*. 47. 51.

<sup>45</sup> This refers to labourers moving from one area to another for the specific duration of the harvest and then returning to their place of Settlement.

mass-producing them. This meant that construction was left to individual specialists or local blacksmiths, millwrights and carpenters able to copy machines to the best of their abilities.<sup>46</sup> The latter, however, were likely to be inferior copies, which did not work well. In 1794, there were virtually none in southern England, despite the fact they were now being used extensively in Scotland, north-east England and Wales. By 1808 there were only a handful in the Midlands, despite much publicity in agricultural periodicals during the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>47</sup> Stuart Macdonald has suggested that there were a number of other reasons why threshing machines failed to make any impact in southern England. Firstly, machinery was most welcome in areas where labour was scarce and costly, but they were regarded as ‘parochial evils’ where labour was plentiful and readily available. Secondly, threshing machines were more effective and saved more labour when used on large farms and contemporaries regarded small farms as a barrier to innovation.<sup>48</sup> Worcestershire was just such a county of small farms.<sup>49</sup>

Although Midland counties were slow to adopt new technology, farmers in Worcestershire were relatively more prosperous than those in other counties. In Herefordshire, for example, farmers were influenced by rising grain prices and chose to specialise increasingly in grain production from the 1790s onwards, especially in central, eastern and southern areas. This meant that major labour problems occurred in the county at the time of the crash in cereal prices in 1813 and from 1815 onwards when agricultural labourers were forced to migrate elsewhere, especially to Wales and the industrial north of England.<sup>50</sup> In Wiltshire, the situation was more complex since the county divided into two main agricultural districts: ‘Chalk’ to the south and east of the county, where the soil was predominantly chalk and flint, and ‘Cheese’, the dairy farming area which constituted the rest of the county. In the ‘Cheese’ areas, some parishes had a growing body of unemployed men due to the fact that dairy farming required less labour. During the summer, agricultural and textile workers from the ‘Cheese’ areas would ‘beat out’ to other

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<sup>46</sup> Stuart Macdonald, ‘The Progress of the Early Threshing Machine’, *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 23, (1975): 65-66

<sup>47</sup> Macdonald, ‘The Progress of the Early Threshing Machine’, 68-69.

<sup>48</sup> Macdonald, ‘The Progress of the Early Threshing Machine’, 72-74.

<sup>49</sup> Pitt, *General View*: 25.

<sup>50</sup> Shakesheff, ‘Crime, Petty Crime and Social Crime’, 40.

parishes to find work at harvest time, despite the fact as ‘outcomers’ they were deeply resented by the parishes they went to work in.<sup>51</sup>

Worcestershire, in comparison, was predominantly arable but did not overly specialise in cereal production except in years of high prices such as 1801. Many parishes, in fact, were areas of mixed farming. More importantly, contemporary records suggested that the working population of the county was equally divided between trade and agriculture. Laird recorded 30,230 workers employed in trade and manufactures compared with 30,865 employed in agriculture. This meant that there was a strong urban market for agricultural produce and some opportunities to move from agricultural work into manufacturing. Laird, however, implied that labour mobility was limited when he pointed out that poor rates in Worcestershire had been increasing for many years, largely due to an increase in day labourers within the county.<sup>52</sup>

Poor rates were probably increasing because wage rates fluctuated during this period and usually not to the labourer’s advantage. Rule found that although average agricultural labourers’ wages rose between 1795 and 1850 from 8s 11d to 9s 6d a week on average, labourers in southern, eastern and western counties were still living in extreme poverty and squalor. He suggested this was due to the fact that winter rates in these areas were lower, and although they rose from 6s to 7s a week in 1794 to 12s a week in 1814, the ensuing agricultural depression made them fall back to pre-war levels in 1817 when they were no more than 7s to 8s.<sup>53</sup> Billinge, however, in her study of Wiltshire pointed out that talking about averages was sometimes unhelpful because labour demands varied according to the type of agriculture and seasons and wage rates fluctuated with prices, especially wheat. This meant that it was common for wages to be lowered when the price of wheat was low.<sup>54</sup> Billinge believed that an increase in rural population during this period meant that many rural labourers were redundant between November and March and

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<sup>51</sup> Billinge, ‘Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire’, 36-38.

<sup>52</sup> Laird, *Worcestershire*: 46-48.

<sup>53</sup> Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England*: 19 and 38.

<sup>54</sup> Billinge, ‘Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire’, 36. Wheat prices were a very effective barometer of the well being of the poor, although it is difficult to gauge subsistence rates throughout this period. The final chapter of this study does have some contemporary evidence on subsistence rates during the 1830s.

either had to supplement their incomes or were forced to apply for poor relief. In Wiltshire the employment of women and children was an important factor in family life and often meant the difference between poverty and survival.<sup>55</sup>

Evidence of wage rates for this period in Worcestershire, however, was patchy. Pitt collected average rates for 1794 and 1807, whilst Gaut's *A History of Worcestershire Agriculture* includes specific wage rates paid at Eardiston (1771-1776) and Inkberrow (1797). Gaut also provided a list of average wages in Worcestershire between 1836 and 1845.<sup>56</sup> When these were collated they provided some useful indicators of labourers' wages throughout the period.

**Table 2.1. Agricultural Labourers' Wages in Worcestershire, 1771-1845**  
**(derived from William Pitt and R.C. Gaut)**

	<u>1771-76</u>	<u>1794</u>	<u>1797</u>	<u>1807</u>	<u>1836-45</u>
Labourers (Weekly)	6s-7s	7s	6s-7s	10s 6d	6s-9s
Labourers (Daily)	10d-1s	1s	1s	1s 6d	9d-1s
Labourers (Harvest month)	2s an acre	£2. 16s	£1.1s - £2.2s	No data	£2 - £2.8s
Women (Day rate)	5d-7d	6d-7d	4d-9d	6d-8d	6d-7d
Women (Harvest: day rate)	5d-7d	No data	No data	No data	6d-10d
Boys	3d-5d	No data	No data	No data	3d-7d
Girls	No data	No data	No data	No data	3d-4d

<sup>55</sup> Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 63-64.

<sup>56</sup> Gaut, *A History of Worcestershire Agriculture: 179-180*. Gaut noted one farm servant's yearly agreement was for £5.10s 'and a fleece of wool if he behaves well'. Payments 'in kind' further complicate attempts to work out subsistence levels and labourers' standards of living.

These figures were not, however, the whole story. Specialist workers like carters could command wages of 11s – 12s a week in 1794, whilst labourers who were only ‘moderate hands’ could only earn a maximum of 6s. Labourers also received lower weekly wages if their employer gave them food or made payments in kind. Farmers also paid piece rates for tasks like hedging and ditching and women were often paid a set rate of 5d a day for apple picking or 6d a day for hop picking. Overall, however, daily wage rates for women appear to have changed little over the period 1771-1845 and varied between half or three-quarters of men’s wages.<sup>57</sup>

The figures quoted here for Worcestershire support Rule’s argument that wages were rising prior to 1813, but fell back again afterwards. This was also in keeping with Gaut’s earlier findings that agricultural labourers’ wages were reduced significantly after 1815. By 1818 wages were so low that Earl Beauchamp made a speech at the opening of the Lent Assizes in Worcester criticising farmers for paying miserly wages and telling them that labourers were turning to crime as a result.<sup>58</sup> Gaut’s final calculations for labourers’ wages in Worcestershire for the period 1836 to 1845 confirmed that wages remained largely stagnant from 1815 onwards. This was in keeping with Chambers and Mingay’s findings for South Worcestershire where they gave the winter rates as follows:

- 1794 - 6s to 7s a week
- 1804 - 8s a week
- 1814 - 12s a week
- 1817 to 1818 - 7s to 8s a week
- 1817 to 1844 - 7s a week

Chambers and Mingay also found that women got three-quarters of the male weekly wage and carters and shepherds two shillings a week more.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> This is in keeping with Nicola Verdon’s findings in *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Gaut, *A History of Worcestershire Agriculture*: 241. In the actual speech recorded in *Berrow’s Worcester Journal* on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1818, Earl Beauchamp was also concerned with the growing practice of making up the difference in labourers’ wages from the poor rates and the fact that labourers were choosing to emigrate overseas. Twenty-four people were said to have left Tenbury Wells that year for America.

<sup>59</sup> Chambers and Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880*: 137-138.

This study, however, did not set out to debate the intricacies of labourers' wages in order to assess hypothetical standards of living, but to take a more detailed look at labourers' working lives to see if they fell in line with other studies which indicated a decline in yearly hirings during this period and a rise in day labour and short-term contracts.<sup>60</sup> It also sought to provide more detail about the working lives of individuals and to assess the impact of the Settlement Laws on people within their communities. This could only be done through random sampling and micro-studies of individual Settlements, despite the problems inherent in this methodology. This approach, however, shifted the focus away from Chambers and Mingay's generalities which assumed labourers in southern England were relatively well-off because of comfortable allotments and family earnings,<sup>61</sup> or the view that all labourers must have formed part of a growing proletariat and that the idea of an entrepreneurial 'peasant' must be mistaken.<sup>62</sup>

Labourers in Worcestershire during this period were not a group of homogeneous people living equal lives, but a rich mixture of individual men and women whose circumstances and fortunes varied. Job Cooke, for example, stood out as a representative of many whose working lives began well enough, but were marred by later difficulties. Born in Crowle he worked in his own parish for over eight years before going off to work for a year in Powick in 1777 and then spending some time in Belbroughton before he got married in 1778. After 1778, however, Job had no regular work and was removed from Bromsgrove back to Crowle in 1785. Once back in his birthplace, Job found little work and was soon dependent on poor relief. He then conceived a clever plan and went back to Powick voluntarily, taking his family with him. Cooke then told the workhouse contractor, Norgrove Evans, that Powick was his parish of Settlement and claimed relief. Evans failed to check on Cooke's papers, allowed him to stay in the parish and then employed him as a labourer for about three weeks. Evans then offered Job Cooke a shilling a week if would leave the parish and go somewhere else. Cooke then took his family back to Crowle and claimed relief there whilst going back to Powick

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<sup>60</sup> For a recent insight into the debate on living standards see G. Clark, 'Farm Wages and Living Standards in the Industrial Revolution: England 1670-1869', *The Economic History Review*, August 2001, Vol.54, No.3.

<sup>61</sup> Chambers and Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution*: 134.

<sup>62</sup> Reed, 'Class and Conflict in Rural England: Some Reflections on the Debate', 12.

every week to collect his shilling from Evans, who thought he was living in Cropthorne. Matters only came to a head in 1797 when Cooke abandoned his family in Crowle completely and a warrant was issued for his arrest.<sup>63</sup>

Other labourers, however, spent some years on the land before entering the armed services during the Napoleonic Wars, as was the case with John Pardoe, born in Ombersley in 1780. Although John was hired for a year at the age of 13 in 1793 for £2, he only spent one more year in full service before choosing to work for a number of different people over the next ten years. Around about 1803, he decided to go to sea and remained a sailor for seven or eight years. Between 1812 and 1813, he left and returned to Ombersley and got married. By this time he was unemployed and chargeable.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Joseph Watson from Alvechurch was apprenticed at the age of 14 as a farm servant. He worked in his home parish for five years then went nailing for a month in 1801 before joining the marines. Between 1801 and 1815, Watson fought in the Napoleonic Wars, married at Newbury, Berkshire, and had five children. At the end of the war he left military service and returned with his family to his home county of Worcestershire, becoming chargeable in the parish of Studley in 1821. Despite all his travels, he and his family were removed to Alvechurch, the last legal Settlement and a place he had not lived in for over twenty years.<sup>65</sup>

Some labourers, however, appear to have had aspirations to work their own land rather than spend all their lives as servants or labourers. John Coley, born in 1782, began his working life at 14 as a farm servant in Alvechurch earning £4.4s a year. After this, he only worked as a day labourer, but apparently saved money because after his marriage in 1809, he rented a house at £3 a year. In 1810 he rented one and a half acres in Ombersley for £17.17s a year and held it for 13 months. Although the nature of his agricultural enterprise could not be ascertained, it clearly failed and by 1813 he and his family were chargeable to the parish.<sup>66</sup> This setback did not immediately deter Coley from looking for a new occupation and he worked as a boatman for three or four years until he became chargeable to the parish of

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<sup>63</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/12, The Examination of Job Cooke, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1797.

<sup>64</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, The Examination of John Pardoe, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1813.

<sup>65</sup> WCRO: BA/5498/9, The Examination of Joseph Watson, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1821.

<sup>66</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, The Examination of John Coley, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1813 at Ombersley.



Claines.<sup>67</sup> Another aspiring entrepreneur, John Allen, was born in Ombersley in 1791. Allen, a single man, worked as a farm servant with his last continuous stretch of yearly employment in Ombersley between 1818 and 1821 when he was hired for £10 a year. In 1824 he had sufficient money to rent 3 acres of land at Hartlebury for £16 a year on which he grew potatoes. John Allen was removed back to Ombersley when he became chargeable to Hartlebury parish in 1834 after this enterprise failed and he was forced to seek poor relief.<sup>68</sup>

There were others, of course, who were simply born into unfortunate circumstances and probably had wholly dislocated lives. William Barker, for example, was born illegitimate in the workhouse at Stoke Prior in 1797. From the age of four until he was ten he lived in the workhouse with his mother, who died in 1807. William claimed never to have had an apprenticeship and never to have gained a legal Settlement. At the age of 35 his left leg was amputated and in 1837 he sought poor relief in Droitwich. When he was examined, it was decided that his Settlement relied wholly on birth, so he was removed back to the parish of Stoke Prior.<sup>69</sup> Although only this one example is cited, there were undoubtedly many children born into labouring families during this period whose physical disabilities or learning difficulties made it extremely difficult or impossible for them to obtain work and who were thus dependent on the care, attention and support (or lack of it) of those immediately around them.

Compared to men, rural women's working lives showed less variation, but more vulnerability. This was because their early working lives were mostly spent in service and, on marriage, they usually took their husband's Settlement. If they became widows, they ran the risk of being sent back to the husband's original Parish Settlement, a place which was often completely unknown and alien to them. There were other less respectable women, like Mary Pardoe alias Thomas, who followed the life of a 'rogue and vagabond'<sup>70</sup> and others, like Penelope Billings, who spent a relatively short period in farm service before becoming pregnant and

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<sup>67</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, The Examination of John Coley, 11<sup>th</sup> of April 1817 at Claines.

<sup>68</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, The Examination of John Allen at Hartlebury, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1834.

<sup>69</sup> WCRO: BA/5476/14, The Examination of William Barker 1837.

<sup>70</sup> WCRO: BA/5476/14, The Examination of Mary Pardoe a rogue and a vagabond taken at Kington, Herefordshire, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1817. Mary had been arrested for begging in Kington.

forced back to her original Settlement.<sup>71</sup> Fewer rural labouring women appeared to have opportunities to earn high wages, although there were well-paid jobs in service if they worked for the gentry or managed to obtain positions in the City of London. Mary Fudge, aged thirty in 1820, obtained a good position in 1818 with Captain Ram's family earning £10.10s a year before she became pregnant and was removed to Powick.<sup>72</sup> Another Worcestershire woman earning £10.10s a year was Ann Arnold who worked as a servant for Henry Fearon in the parish of St. Ann, Blackfriars, London.<sup>73</sup>

Rising in service, however, did not in itself guarantee a secure future. Ann Evans, born in Somerset in 1784, prospered initially and worked from 1805 to 1817 for a Mrs. Wildman in Chiswick, London, for wages of £10.10s a year. She then worked almost a year for a Mrs. Hatch of Claybury Hall, Essex for £12.12s before marrying a fellow-servant from Chiswick, John Evans, a gardener. In 1822, however, when they were living in Powick, he died and she became chargeable and threatened with removal to Chiswick.<sup>74</sup> If some women had relatively prosperous working lives, however, others did not. Ann Carradine, once a servant at St. John in Bedwardine, Worcester, had returned to her parents near Tenbury Wells where she became mentally ill and bedridden. Since both her parents were on parish relief, they tried desperately to get some support for their daughter from the overseers at St. John's. The overseers' initial response was to threaten to remove Ann from Tenbury Wells to St. John's and they were only prevented from doing so because Ann was too ill to travel.<sup>75</sup>

Individual labourers' lives, therefore, did not conform to generalities. Some were born in better circumstances than others, some had aspirations to improve

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<sup>71</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/8, Powick Examination Book 1818-1820. The Examination of Penelope Billings, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1819. Penelope Billings was 23 and in 1817 had spent a year as a farm servant at Great Malvern. She served six weeks of her second year before becoming pregnant and chargeable.

<sup>72</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/8, Powick Examination Book 1818-1820. The Examination of Mary Fudge, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1820.

<sup>73</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/12, The Examination of Ann Arnold at Powick, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1817.

<sup>74</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/12, The Examination of Ann Evans, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1822. Ann had no link with Worcestershire other than through her husband finding employment there. His last legal Settlement, however, appeared to be Chiswick.

<sup>75</sup> WCRO: BA/1671/19, Letter from the churchwardens of St John to the churchwardens of Tenbury Wells August 20<sup>th</sup> 1835. There were, however, cases of such people being moved in spite of their illness and dying in transit.

their incomes, whilst others were subject to chance and changing circumstance. Some were no doubt more intelligent than others, had an aptitude for specialisation at work, and were stronger in body or generally healthier. As such they were able to work on large prosperous farms and command higher wages. Others who were less able had to content themselves with work on smaller farms, probably for farmers who were less likely to pay a 'standard' wage. This meant that labourers' wages were never 'average' but subject to great variability, depending upon time of life, individual circumstances and the vagaries of the local economy. A detailed survey of 47 Settlement examinations between 1767 and 1818 suggested that, in reality, wages varied according to the age and quality of the labourer. A boy aged 12 to 14 starting work as a farm servant between 1790 and 1818, for example, would usually enter service at £2.2.0 a year and this might rise to £4 by the time he was 16. Amongst this group, however, were some young adults aged 19 earning as little as £3.3.0 as yearly servants and unable to earn more than four shillings a week afterwards as day labourers.<sup>76</sup> Conversely, whilst one servant, James Price only received £4 a year in service at Ombersley in 1814, his brother, Joseph, aged 19, found a live-in job in the same parish in 1815 paying £9 a year.<sup>77</sup> Wage variations in these cases were probably more linked to a labourer's ability than to a farmer's inability to pay high wages.

Men's wages in Worcestershire for a year's farm service, whilst variable, did, however, indicate a pattern if analysed over a period of time. From 1767 to 1800 the most common yearly rate of pay was £6.6.0 and no male farm servant appeared to have been paid a higher rate more than £8.8.0 a year. Between 1800 and 1812, male farm servants' yearly wages rose from £8.8.0 to £11, probably due to wartime demand, but fell back to between £5 and £10 in the years 1813 to 1818. Further evidence of this wartime demand for labour was found in a letter to Francis Moule, a gentleman farmer at Elmley Lovett, from a group of itinerant harvesters

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<sup>76</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, The Examination of Samuel Pain, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1817. Pain, who was 33 at the time, had only one year's service at Rock in 1803. In 1813 he worked for a farmer at Astley for 15 months for 4s a week, but this was not regarded as a year's service. It may, of course, have included food and lodging, thus accounting for the low wage. Pain's Settlement, however, was regarded as Rock.

<sup>77</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, The Examination of James Price, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1820 and the Examination of Joseph Price, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1820.

from Westhoughton in Lancashire. Writing to Moule on the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1810, they offered their services as follows:

Sir

We receivd yours Dated 5 on the 13 Inpt and we will Come too your house about the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> of August and there is Six of us Entends to come as good or better than we was in the Last harvest if not ready at that time please write to us again and you may depend upon us at your time appointed but if ready sooner please to write

From yours most humble Serts<sup>78</sup>

These men did not appear to have been local labourers who had migrated north, but industrial labourers who probably found gang-work at harvest time sufficiently profitable in wartime to be worth their coming so far south. Possibly they saw the job as an opportunity for a holiday as much as it was a means of earning supplementary wages in the summertime. It was also interesting to note that Francis Moule found it preferable to employ harvest labourers at a great distance rather than bringing in local labour from nearby villages. This suggested either that such labour was not available locally or that he had a preference for employing a small gang of outsiders on what might well have been lower pay. Since Elmley Lovett was a small and prosperous parish, it was likely that insufficient local labour was available at harvest time. However, there was another pool of labour even closer to hand for local farmers to take advantage of since evidence from settlement examinations suggested a reasonable amount of migration was taking place from Herefordshire into Worcestershire during this period. This was probably due to men moving in search of higher wages since, as Rule noted, by 1805 wages in Herefordshire were said to have been stagnant for forty years.<sup>79</sup> A survey of 161 Worcestershire agricultural labourers' settlement examinations indicated that between 1790 and 1840, 11 per cent of migrant labourers came into

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<sup>78</sup> WCRO: BA/11,171/6/i, Letter to Francis Moule from William Gregory, John Hawker, Richard Leigh, William Mangnall, Joseph Coupe and William Green 'To be left at the Wheatsheaf Inn, Kidderminster with Speed'.

<sup>79</sup> J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England: 1750-1850* (London: Longman, 1986): 39.

Worcestershire from Herefordshire as opposed to 3.8 per cent from Gloucestershire and 2 per cent from Warwickshire. Although only a small sample, this supported the hypothesis that as well as there being little migration from rural areas in Worcestershire to nearby industrial towns there was also relatively little geographical mobility into the county from agricultural labourers from neighbouring counties or elsewhere.

That wages were lower after the period 1800 to 1812 was supported by the detailed account books of William Hunt, who farmed at Morton Underhill near Inkberrow. Hunt's was a mixed farm, growing wheat and potatoes as well as raising livestock for meat and dairy produce. He owned his own mill and also ran a farm shop selling cheese and coal to local villagers. Hunt was very prosperous and well able to afford the costs of roads, trees and hedging when surrounding land was enclosed in 1816. His agricultural year was also a busy one and meticulously recorded. Records showed that he knew the names of all his fields and cattle and dates when 'Honey', 'Crocket', 'Judy', 'Chearey' and 'Cockhorns' were all put to the bull between April and June were meticulously recorded. Hunt also sold 'partaters', (sic.) coal and cheese in large or small amounts. For example, although he did business with other farmers and shopkeepers, he would sell as little as one and a half pounds of cheese to local villagers like Dame Willis and was even prepared to take payment 'in part'. He sold his livestock at Worcester, Evesham, Redditch, Bromsgrove, Alcester, Droitwich and Birmingham, and also butchered and sold animals as beef, veal and lamb.

Hunt's wage bills for male servants in 1821 indicated that yearly servants were still employed on his farm and that their wages were determined by age. For example, a boy received £3, another male servant £5 and his highest paid male servant £7.10s. A female servant was employed for £5.5s and probably worked in the dairy as well as in the house. Hunt also employed agricultural labourers at 1s a day, but, interestingly, when he had a new stable and pig-sty built in 1828, he had to pay bricklayers 3s a day and a builder's labourer 1s 8d a day. Agricultural day

labourers were also only paid for the hours they worked and Hunt's records indicated that some men were occasionally paid for three-quarters of a day rather than the full daily amount.<sup>80</sup> This, in itself, was yet another variation that made some agricultural day labourers' wages lower in some weeks than in others.

Hunt's accounts suggested that by 1819 to 1821 he was employing more day labourers than previously, which appeared to be in keeping with Snell's views on the decline of service and the increasing number of men employed as day-labour or paid by the week. Other Worcestershire farmers, however, operated wage systems which changed abruptly according to prevailing economic circumstance. For example, on October 27<sup>th</sup> 1835 Frank Wheeler, a farmer at South Littleton, cut his labourers wages because the price of wheat was low. He had been paying them 9s a week with beer, but lowered this to 7s a week with beer and 8s a week without beer. With winter approaching, this was undoubtedly a major blow and no doubt many other farmers took equally arbitrary action.<sup>81</sup> It was unlikely that Frank Wheeler acted independently of other farmers in the area and this suggests there were occasions when wage rates fluctuated suddenly and dramatically.

Many agricultural labourers' working lives began, however, with some form of apprenticeship. This was because the Statute of Artificers of 1563 ruled that no trade could be exercised without workers serving seven years as an indentured apprentice.<sup>82</sup> By the eighteenth century, although legal apprenticeships were dying out in industrial areas like Lancashire, they were still common in Worcestershire. However, it was important to remember for the purposes of this study that apprenticeships under the Statute of Artificers usually fell into three categories:

- those where a man took on his own son regardless of a written agreement
- those where a man took on someone else's son to learn a trade, usually from a respectable family
- those where employers were forced by law to take on a pauper child.

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<sup>80</sup> WCRO: BA/4311/1, William Hunt: Account Book.

<sup>81</sup> WCRO: BA/5044/7, Frank Wheeler: Memorandum Book 1835. See entry October 27<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1961): 453. The Act was repealed in 1809.

The last category was the most unpopular of all and there were many employers who paid a fine rather than take on an apprentice they felt no need for.<sup>83</sup> Many of the poorest agricultural labourers and female servants in Worcestershire began their working lives as parish apprentices. This usually came about because their families could no longer afford to support them and poor law overseers sometimes wished to cut the cost of maintenance in periods of high unemployment or seasonal underemployment. For example, in the winter of 1828-29, three nine-year-old boys, John Sermon, Charles Duffin and George Craddock, appeared before Alvechurch Magistrates to be apprenticed to local farmers. They were there so that the magistrates could check their ages and their parentage and ensure that they were going to farmers of suitable character. It was more than likely, however, that the main purpose was to apprentice poor young children as quickly as possible rather than make any careful enquiry into the moral character of any future master or mistress.<sup>84</sup> Of the 45 pauper children apprenticed at Alvechurch between 1812 and 1828, 27 per cent were aged nine, 44 per cent between ten and eleven, 13 per cent aged twelve and 8 per cent were thirteen.<sup>85</sup> A further 8 per cent were eight years old. Almost all these children were apprenticed to local farmers within the parish of Alvechurch, with occasional apprenticeships to nail-makers, grocers or shoemakers. A few children were apprenticed outside the parish, but usually within travelling distance of home. This meant that most pauper children in Alvechurch retained their Settlements in their place of birth.

One parish in Worcestershire, however, appears to have used apprenticeships as an opportunity to move pauper children out of the parish in order to save on local poor rates. Bewdley's select vestry used local charity money for a short period in the 1820s to pay higher rates when boys were apprenticed out to Kidderminster weavers or to Wolverhampton locksmiths. The parish paid the masters £3.3.0 and £4.4.0 a time and also supplied the boys with a new suit of clothes, unusually generous terms for the period. Girls were also apprenticed to weavers or to

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<sup>83</sup> Louis Moffit, *England on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution* (London: Frank Cass 1963): 260-261.

<sup>84</sup> WCRO: BA/5498/9 (i), Handwritten document written by clerk to Alvechurch Justices of the Peace, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1829. There is, however, evidence that some children were returned later when it became clear that their masters were found morally wanting or when cases of cruelty ended in the apprenticeship being made void.

<sup>85</sup> WCRO: BA/5498/9, Alvechurch parish apprenticeship records.

Kidderminster mantle-makers. This practice lasted from 1822 to 1825 and only stopped because it was pointed out that this charity money was not intended for that purpose.<sup>86</sup> Although apprenticing children out of a parish might seem harsh, these overseers at least had the foresight to see that more employment opportunities were available in growing industrial areas rather than in Bewdley, where the river trade was in decline. They were also no doubt aware that once Settlement was gained in the parish where the apprenticeship was served, this ensured that those apprenticed out were chargeable elsewhere in future.

There was some evidence, however, that where agricultural labourers could, they made provision for their children themselves as indentured craft apprentices, either because they wished to improve their chances in life or to protect their right to Settlement or help keep the family together. In 1828 John Rogers, a labourer, apprenticed his son, John Rogers junior, to Thomas Rogers, a shoemaker in Studley, using £2 of his own savings for the premium.<sup>87</sup> It was likely that Thomas was a relative of John's and John was using kinship to secure his son's future. Earlier, when Mary Webb, an Alvechurch widow, married Edward Dukes, an Aston locksmith, she arranged for him to take on her son, Edward, aged eleven and her daughter, Sara, aged nine, as apprentices. This freed the parish of any responsibility since the children's Settlement was transferred from Alvechurch (their birthplace) to Aston, their stepfather's, where they would now serve their 'apprenticeship'.<sup>88</sup>

Other apprentices, however, did not necessarily see learning a trade as a good opportunity. Benjamin Barker from Hartlebury, for example, was apprenticed to a Kidderminster weaver when he was aged fifteen, but when he was examined at Stone in 1784, he was, by choice, an agricultural labourer.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Aaron Millichap of Elmley Lovett had been apprenticed to a shoemaker at Kidderminster,

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<sup>86</sup> WCRO: BA/4600/962, Bewdley Vestry Notebook: See entries 1822-25.

<sup>87</sup> WCRO: BA/5498/1, Indenture between John Rogers and Thomas Rogers 1828.

<sup>88</sup> WCRO: BA5489/9, Indentures between Mary Webb and Edward Dukes 1792. Mary's motive was to secure the children's Settlement as Aston rather than run a future risk that they might be removed back to Alvechurch.

<sup>89</sup> WCRO: BA/5660/4, Examination of Benjamin Barker at Stone, Worcestershire, and 21<sup>st</sup> January 1784.



but ran away after five years and also became an agricultural labourer.<sup>90</sup> Joseph Fowles from Powick was also apprenticed to a Kidderminster weaver but ran away after one and a half years and returned home to Powick to become a farm servant.<sup>91</sup> Although only a very small sample, it suggested that rural depopulation was not inevitable and that new opportunities in a growing manufacturing town like Kidderminster were not necessarily seen by young people as offering a better lifestyle than work in the countryside.<sup>92</sup> Failure to complete an apprenticeship, however, was not simply because the call of the countryside was irresistible. Ill-treatment of apprentices was common, and some employers also went bankrupt or died. This meant that apprenticeships were either terminated or transferred (not always successfully or harmoniously). In some instances, apprentices even took their masters to court, as in the case of James Hands of Evesham, apprenticed in 1807 to Joseph Branson, a Stratford-upon-Avon wool-comber. In 1809 Branson was brought before magistrates for beating his apprentice with a stick and throwing him to the floor. He justified his act by saying that the boy had spoilt work and deserved the beating. The magistrates, however, thought otherwise and James Hands was released from his apprenticeship.<sup>93</sup>

To lose one's apprenticeship at a young age, however, often made children even more vulnerable, especially if they had no parents to depend on. This was particularly true for pauper children. In 1792, for example, Elizabeth Wharton, a pauper apprentice who ran away from her master tried to survive by begging. Wandering onto the site of a coal pit in Bilston, Staffordshire, to beg for potatoes she fell into the pit and died.<sup>94</sup> Others might not meet an unhappy fate, but were often shuttled about between parishes if no one was prepared to take responsibility for them, as the following letter testified:

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<sup>90</sup> WCRO: BA/5660/4, Examination of Aaron Millichap at Stone, Worcestershire, and 21<sup>st</sup> March 1823. Theoretically the apprenticing parish had to agree to the apprentice's release from his indenture. If an apprenticeship broke down, however, a master might not report the absconding apprentice or the parish turned a blind eye rather than seeking the absconding apprentice's arrest and returning him to his master.

<sup>91</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/8, Powick Examination Book 1818-1820 the examination of Joseph Fowles, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1818.

<sup>92</sup> Boys and girls apprenticed to Kidderminster weavers worked long hours in poor conditions and were often treated badly by their masters.

<sup>93</sup> WCRO: BA/8719/15, Documents relating to the release from apprenticeship of James Hands.

<sup>94</sup> ABG: October 5<sup>th</sup> 1792.

Dear Sir        You have sent your Boy to me but I can assure you he does not belong to Wolverley Parish as I have heard him say he was often sent from Egghill to Wolverley & back again at times, as the boy tells me. Therefore where the boy slept the night before the indentures was cancelled the apprentice gained his settlement, the Boy tells me he slept at the Overseers in St Peters Parish – You may see Burns Justice which will give you a full account of the case, therefore I do not like to take the boy under my care<sup>95</sup>

Others, who were returned to a poor house, where one existed, were sometimes incarcerated there until they were sixteen and faced a very uncertain future afterwards.

Although not all apprenticeship indentures have survived, many pauper children in rural parishes in Worcestershire were apprenticed to local farmers. The extent to which this was done appears to have varied according to local conditions and economic circumstance.<sup>96</sup> So far as the particular parishes chosen for this study were concerned, the sharpest contrast was demonstrated by comparing Elmley Lovett with Inkberrow. In Elmley Lovett, a prosperous parish, very few children were apprenticed between 1790 and 1829, but in impoverished Inkberrow, between 1781 and 1800, parish children were being apprenticed on a regular basis, usually to farmers in other parishes. By December 1800 when agricultural distress made this practice difficult, if not impossible, all Inkberrow farmers were ordered to take a poor child or children as apprentices until such time as the children could support themselves. Failure to do so resulted in a fine of £5, the usual fine in other parishes being only £2. This measure still failed to resolve the problem and by June 1801 the overseers had changed their policy and had gone back to trying to apprentice

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<sup>95</sup> WCRO: BA/5476/14, Undated letter from William Major, Inspector to Mr Broad at Egghill near Droitwich. 'Burns Justice' refers to Richard Burn's *Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer* (1755).

<sup>96</sup> It has also been argued that these were not, in any case, true apprenticeships, but simply a means of getting rid of dependent children.

children elsewhere whilst encouraging local farmers to take local pauper children, 'in turn'.<sup>97</sup>

Whether working life began with an apprenticeship or not, evidence in Worcestershire supported Snell's view that after 1780 there were noticeably fewer hirings by the year and more young obtaining work as day labourers.<sup>98</sup> A close study of 49 agricultural labourers' Settlement examinations made between 1790 and 1840 revealed that from the 1780s onwards, although most young men worked for a year and gained a Settlement, more were working as weekly labourers for several years before marriage took place. For example, William Nott began his working life as a farm servant in 1790 at Knightwick, but after three years he quarrelled with his master and went back to his home village of Ombersley where he worked as a weekly labourer for two years before he married. He then continued as a weekly labourer until becoming chargeable to the parish in 1812.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Samuel Pain, aged 33 in 1817, worked for a year at Rock in 1803 before spending the next ten years as a weekly labourer. Between 1813 and 1815, he was employed regularly by a farmer at Astley at 4s a week, before working by the week for different employers. In 1817 he became chargeable to the parish of Ombersley and it was interesting to note that the overseers did not regard his time at Astley as a yearly hiring and removed Pain back to the parish of Rock. It was likely, therefore, that Pain's 15 months' employment at Astley consisted of wages plus meals, but that he did not live in the farmhouse and had not been hired by the year.<sup>100</sup> What was also noticeable was that after 1815 there was a rise in unemployment or underemployment between March and May, when labourers who had been unemployed during the winter would normally be expected to find work. The author's analysis of 146 agricultural labourers' Settlement examinations between 1790 and 1831 revealed the following periods when labourers became chargeable:

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<sup>97</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, See Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1781-1801 and Vestry Minute entries on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1800 and June 11<sup>th</sup> 1801.

<sup>98</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 49.

<sup>99</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, Examination of William Nott, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1812.

<sup>100</sup> WCRO: BA/3572/13, Examination of Samuel Pain, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1817.

**Table 2.2: Examinations for eligibility for poor relief in Worcestershire  
from a sample of 146 applicants, 1790-1831**

<u>Year</u>	<u>March- May</u>	<u>June- August</u>	<u>September- November</u>	<u>December- February</u>
1790-1814	14 (30%)	10 (22%)	7 (15%)	15 (33%)
1815-1831	37 (32%)	21 (18%)	28 (25%)	29 (25%)

This table indicated that although applications for winter relief were higher in the period 1790 to 1814, applications for relief after 1815 began earlier in the year and lasted longer. This suggested that some families needed assistance for up to three-quarters of the working year. Such findings, however, were not unexpected since the end of the Napoleonic wars brought more men back into the rural labour market at a time of agricultural depression and there was a particularly sharp rise in applications for poor relief in the winter of 1817. There was also some evidence in the period 1815 to 1830 that the unemployment of young men was causing particular concern. In Ombersley, for example, four young men were examined in April 1820: James Price (aged 20), his brother Joseph (aged 24), Thomas Miles (aged 20) and William Freeman (aged 25). Neither of the Price brothers had worked a year's service in Ombersley since 1816 and Thomas Miles and William Freeman had last worked a full year's service in the parish between 1818 and 1819.<sup>101</sup>

In two of the parishes chosen for this study, the post-war period 1815 to 1820 brought particular problems. In Powick, the overseers created a special Examination Book for the period 1818 to 1820, indicating both a rise in the frequency of men and women becoming chargeable and an influx of agricultural labourers crossing from Herefordshire to Worcestershire in search of work. In Inkberrow, however, the problem was even more marked, with the parish forced to

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<sup>101</sup> WCRO: BA/3573/13, See the examinations of James Price, Joseph Price, Thomas Miles and William Freeman, April 1<sup>st</sup> 1820. The fact that able-bodied young men were still unemployed during April probably gave cause for concern, because they were seen as potential troublemakers or criminals.

employ the able-bodied poor themselves and to make up labourers' wages from the poor rates. In 1818 the numbers of men in Inkberrow having their wages supplemented in this way rose from five in September to 19 by the end of December and 21 by the end of January 1819. 19 men were still having their wages made up by the end of March 1819, suggesting that, as was the case at Ombersley, more men were now unemployed in the spring, regardless of the parish being willing to make up a portion of their wages.<sup>102</sup>

For those who were unemployed or became chargeable to the parish for any other reason, it is possible that their greatest fear was not applying for poor relief, but the danger of being removed to their last place of Settlement. Because of the decline of service, many agricultural labourers had Settlements gained in parishes they worked in many years before, long before they had married and settled down as day labourers in their present villages. Not only would their wives and children have been unfamiliar with that place of Settlement unless they had visited previously, the men themselves had usually been resident there as farm servants, not as weekly labourers living in the community. Often the place of Settlement was not even the place of their birth. To be sent back to one's Settlement, therefore, was to be sent into unfamiliar territory as a pauper and an outsider, with little likelihood of gaining employment, so the family was probably subjected to some local contempt because of being housed and maintained by that parish. For these reasons alone, it was likely that some examinees were not only economical with the truth but also sometimes gave their birthplace as their last place of Settlement or named a parish they remembered as being more congenial or more prosperous and therefore more acceptable to be sent back to. Although many historians have highlighted the impact of enclosure on agricultural labourers' lives this was relatively insignificant compared to the impact of removal. Removal meant families being uprooted almost immediately and sent with all their possessions back to a largely alien environment where no welcome awaited them.

On the surface removal to one's place of Settlement often involved no more

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<sup>102</sup> WCRO: BA/818/5, Inkberrow Parish Account Book 1818-1819.

than moving several miles from one parish to another, which might seem insignificant. A sample of 169 Worcestershire removal orders analysed by the author revealed that 79 per cent of all removals took place within Worcestershire, whilst the remaining 21 per cent involved removal between a Worcestershire parish and one of the neighbouring counties (Warwickshire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire). It was significant, however, that removals rose markedly after 1800 suggesting that more labourers were becoming dependent on poor relief and risked the upheaval of being sent from one parish to another.

**Table 2.3: Author's Analysis of 169 Removals in Worcestershire, 1790 –1830**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number Removed</u>	<u>Percentage of all removals</u>
1790s	5	3
1800s	16	10
1810s	70	41
1820s	44	26
1830s	34	20
<b>Total Removed</b>	<b>169</b>	

This sample also indicated that the rise in removals coincided with the rise in unemployment and underemployment occurring from 1812 onwards and it was not surprising to discover that 23 per cent of all removals occurred in the post-war agricultural depression 1816 to 1818.

For parish overseers, removing those who became chargeable was an expedient process, although not always an easy one. Other parishes frequently contested removal notices at the Quarter Sessions and parish overseers sometimes wished to remove people who were too ill to travel. Nevertheless, most removal

orders eventually succeeded and the impact on individual lives deserves some consideration. For example, Samuel Matty was born at Ashchurch, Gloucestershire and lived there for many years before abandoning his wife in 1791 and eventually settling in Powick. In Powick he married Margaret Phillips bigamously in 1799. When both became chargeable in 1801, they were promptly moved back to Ashchurch. Not only had the second Mrs. Matty never been there, but also no doubt when she and her 'husband' arrived in Ashchurch they faced several domestic repercussions resulting from his sudden departure ten years previously.<sup>103</sup> Less comical, but more telling was the case of Richard Griffiths, born in 1769. Griffiths' only year's service had been at Tenbury Wells in 1777, when he was a child of eight, yet when he, his wife and child became chargeable at Powick in 1818, they were sent back to Tenbury, a town that Richard had not seen for forty years.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, when William Lampitt, his wife and seven children became chargeable at St. John in Bedwardine in 1831, the whole family was returned to Defford, where Lampitt spent a year in service many years before. The overseers and churchwardens at Defford strongly opposed this removal, no doubt because Lampitt had rheumatic fever and would be an on-going burden on the poor rates because he was unlikely to ever work again.<sup>105</sup>

In all these cases there was no evidence of care for the individual, only a preoccupation with lowering the cost of relief. Moreover, once a removal order had been made successfully, the actual removal itself involved a specific process to ensure that the poor could not escape or slip away en route. In effect, the family were treated like prisoners and sent on a cart with their possessions from parish officer to parish officer until they reached their final destination, no matter how far that might be. Thus Margaret Farmer, a vagrant, was removed from St. Albans to Kidderminster in 1781 by being sent firstly to Little Brickhill, Buckinghamshire, then to Stanford, Northamptonshire and to Willoughby, Warwickshire. After that she was sent to Yardley, Worcestershire then through Halesowen, Clent and Churchill, before finally arriving in Kidderminster. The journey lasted from

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<sup>103</sup> WCRO: BA3802/12, The Examination of Samuel Matty, labourer, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1801.

<sup>104</sup> WCRO: BA/3802/8, Powick Order Book 1818-1820 The examination of Robert Griffiths, 3rd November, 1801.

<sup>105</sup> WCRO: BA/1671/19, Letter of the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1835 from the overseers and churchwardens in Defford to the overseers and churchwardens in St John in Bedwardine.

February 9<sup>th</sup> to February 19<sup>th</sup> 1781 and at the end of each section of the journey a parish officer superintended her.<sup>106</sup> No doubt she was also subject to much opprobrium en route. The possessions sent with such paupers seldom amounted to very much. When Eliza Houseman and her illegitimate child were removed from Plymouth to Droitwich in 1836, all her possessions fitted into one trunk<sup>107</sup> and when James Harris, a labourer, and his family were removed from Tarrington, Herefordshire to St. John in Bedwardine in 1831, their worldly goods consisted of a flock bed, three sheets, a blanket, a coverlet, two tables, eight chairs, two pots and a kettle and a frying pan.<sup>108</sup>

Removals, then, meant uprooting individuals and families from their current place of residence and sending them back to what one can only speculate to be, possibly, a strange and hostile parish. What few possessions they had went with them. As travellers they may have been conspicuous as ‘removed’ people and stared at periodically until they arrived at their destinations to uncertain futures. It was left to the Poor Law overseers of their new parish to ensure that they were housed and maintained and since many overseers objected to such removals, they were probably resentful at having to support unwanted new arrivals. Occasionally, however, if family members were too old or ill to be removed, it was often easier to maintain them where they were as in the case of the ninety year old Elizabeth Walker, who was maintained in Evesham by her husband’s parish of Settlement, Bilston, Staffordshire.<sup>109</sup> Often, however, parishes squabbled about who should maintain paupers living in other parishes and they actively avoided making a decision. This made it inevitable that some sick or elderly paupers died before removal could actually take place and all that was left to quarrel about was which parish should bear the cost of the funeral.

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<sup>106</sup> WCRO: BA/4766/21, Record of the journey of Margaret Farmer from St Albans to Kidderminster in 1781. This did not mean, however, that those removed did not sometimes make their way back a town or village they were more familiar with rather than remain in their legal place of Settlement.

<sup>107</sup> WCRO: BA/5476/14, Examination and removal notice re Eliza Houseman, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1836.

<sup>108</sup> WCRO: BA/1671/19, Removal order and other details relating to the removal of James Harris and family, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1831. In comparison to the reported possessions of some urban labourers, however, the Harris family were quite well off.

<sup>109</sup> WCRO: BA/8719/7, The Examination of Elizabeth Walker, 13<sup>th</sup> February 1821.



So far as work opportunities and the threat of removal were concerned, it was noteworthy that no group of people in Worcestershire were more vulnerable than labouring women. Employment openings for unmarried women were mostly limited to domestic or farm service and there was little evidence that many women were able to work their way up into the higher echelons of being ladies' maids. Wages in farm service ranged from £2 to £5 a year between 1790 and 1826 and wage-rates remained largely stagnant. Female farm servants also ran other risks. Of a sample of 85 female servants removed back to their original parish of Settlement between 1790 and 1830, 78 per cent of removals were of single women and 42 per cent of those removed were recorded as being pregnant or having recently given birth to an illegitimate child. This was in some ways an astonishingly high figure, but servants were often surrounded by potential seducers, be they day labourers, male farm servants, farmers or landowners. The second largest group removed (21 per cent) were widows or widows with children. The remaining 1 per cent of removals consisted of women vagrants and married women abandoned by their husbands. Both abandoned wives and widows faced the daunting prospect of being removed to their husband's last legal place of settlement. Where widows had several young children who were also chargeable, they were usually removed as quickly as possible. For example, when Ann Pert's husband died and left her with three sons to support, she was removed within a month from St. John in Bedwardine to her husband's last parish of legal Settlement at Dymock in Gloucestershire.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, when Ann Harvey's husband abandoned her in Kidderminster in 1838 after 30 years of marriage, she and the children were quickly removed to his last place of Settlement, St. Peter's parish in Droitwich.<sup>111</sup>

A careful consideration of work and wages in Worcestershire not only supported Snell's overall view that winter employment became more acute between 1815 and 1834 it also demonstrated some labourers' lives were more vulnerable than others.<sup>112</sup> This was not only because some parishes were poorer than others but also because children from pauper families in particular often started working

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<sup>110</sup> WCRO: BA/1671/19, Removal orders on Ann Pert, widow, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1836.

<sup>111</sup> WCRO: BA/5476/14, Examination of Ann Harvey, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1838.

<sup>112</sup> Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*: 21.

life from a disadvantageous position. Not only did they come from poor families to begin with, they were mostly apprenticed to local farmers for little more than their keep and therefore least likely to learn a skill or specialism that would earn them higher wages in the future. Although there was evidence that one or two individual adult agricultural labourers could thrive and prosper, not only were most labourers' wages relatively static in the 1790s, they could also fall periodically depending on individual farmer's employment practices and general economic circumstances. Overall, wages fell back significantly between 1794 and 1836, partly due to lower prices and partly to a growing rural labour market. Rural women had the least opportunity to prosper and if they did it was usually by delaying marriage and remaining as a well-paid servant in continuous service in a prosperous household. Women, however, became vulnerable to experiencing a life of poverty if they became pregnant, left service to get married, were widowed or if their husbands abandoned them. Whilst many women were able to make a contribution to the family income after marriage, this depended on their skills at crafts like glove-making or straw-plaiting, whether they had children and what opportunities existed locally for casual fieldwork. In the post-war period from 1815 onwards there was sufficient evidence to suggest that less work was available for both men and women, even in springtime, so that more families were becoming reliant on poor relief, although numbers undoubtedly varied from village to village.

Seen against this bigger picture, evidence relating to the villages chosen for this study showed them to be distinctly different settlements. Elmley Lovett was a small prosperous parish in a mixed farming area and there was little evidence of unemployment or underemployment throughout this period. During the 1790s this parish had only a small number of resident pauper families and only a few poor children to be apprenticed out. A surviving letter, previously cited, from a group of travelling labourers offering their services at harvest time in 1810 suggested that local labour was fully employed at that time of year or that, being wartime, there were insufficient numbers of local labourers available for harvest work. Powick, on the other hand, whilst being a much larger parish had different issues to contend

with. As a prosperous farming area on the fertile Worcestershire Plain and close to the neighbouring County of Herefordshire it was inevitable that labourers migrated from there to Worcestershire in search of higher wages. In times of agricultural depression, Powick found itself with growing numbers of dependent paupers and on such occasions overseers were proactive in removing them back to their original Settlements. At these times they were also avid apprentices of poor children. This situation appears to have worsened after 1815 so that parish officers found it necessary to create a designated removal book in 1818 in order to deal with numbers becoming chargeable on an almost daily basis. Inkberrow, on the other hand, appeared to have been a particularly poor parish with significant numbers of poor children to apprentice out from the 1790s onwards. In the 1800s the parishes problems became exacerbated and agricultural labourers' wages were subsidised in order to keep men in work. At the same time opportunities for apprenticeship dried up and parish officers tried to deal with this by apprenticing poor children out to local farmers on a compulsory basis.

Regardless of local variables, however, the general picture in Worcestershire was not a favourable one, so that throughout this period most agricultural labourers were experiencing deteriorating work opportunities and were increasingly subject to removal under the Settlement Laws. Despite removal being a long and drawn out process, parish officers in Worcestershire pursued agricultural labourers relentlessly and mostly regardless of the financial and human cost. Those removal examinations that survive suggested that the process involved little regard for the feelings of the poor, their individual histories or the consequences of sending them back to a Place of Settlement where they would be unknown and unwelcome. In crisis years in Worcestershire, scarcely a week went by without agricultural labourers, female servants and others being shunted from parish to parish or removed even greater distances. Only frailty in old age or illness prevented removal or provided temporary respite from a removal order. Unlike enclosure, however, where the initial impact affected relatively few labouring families, removals and forced apprenticeships affected every rural parish and were

part of a larger and perhaps crueller, picture. Since some historians held the view that the Old Poor Law was a more humane system of relief than that which developed after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, it was thought worth examining local systems of poor relief in more detail to see if those who had a legal right to Settlement were treated more humanely.