

**THE STATUS OF FEMALE AGRICULTURAL
EMPLOYEES IN A NORTH OXFORDSHIRE VILLAGE
DURING THE POST WAR PERIOD**



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Gill White

This valuable short study offers insights into the changing character of agriculture in the parish after the Second World War, the experience and outlook of some of its female manual workers as well as their employers.

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Editor



Win W.'s daughter, Pat B.'s brother, Win W., and Mrs S.,
with hand-operated potato sorter,
1949.

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Introduction and Aims

Agricultural workers are typically seen to be men, while women in the fields were apparently a rare sight by the turn of the century. When women appear in rural studies, they are depicted as part of the pastoral idyll, as seasonal workers during harvest or haymaking. Otherwise country women are portrayed as conforming to the ideology of housewife and mother, firmly rooted in the farmhouse, emerging only as far as the kitchen garden and dairy, or earning a little pin-money with their poultry. The Women's Land Army provided a fleeting challenge to this image. Their war-time contribution has been widely documented, but women employed on a regular basis are virtually invisible. However, in the north Oxfordshire village of Hook Norton there are a considerable number of women who worked in gangs during the study period 1930-1970. Some of them were willing to be interviewed for an oral-history project on women's work.

Agricultural employees are at the bottom of the labour market. The work is rough manual labour, exposed to the elements, epitomising drudgery. If the division of labour places the full-time permanent contracted skilled work in the hands of men, what is the position of women employed in agriculture? In the post-war period of widening material expectations and expanding employment opportunities, what options did the Hook Norton women have? How and why did they find jobs in an increasingly mechanised industry with a rapidly shrinking labour market? What were their own perceptions of such apparently low status work?

The definitive study on agricultural workers is Howard Newby's *The Deferential Worker*. It is a sociological survey based in Suffolk, published in 1977, in which the views of the workers themselves were examined. As Pahl points out, postwar research into working-class employment tended to assume that employees were men (Pahl, 1984, p.3). Newby's work is no

exception, with women only being mentioned in the role of wives. This is in spite of a table showing that 1/8 of whole-time workers were female, and that over 1/2 of part-time regular workers were women (Appendix 1). Between 1948 and 1958 they were the only sector in the industry that increased in numbers against a background of accelerating drift from the land. The Hook Norton women were therefore not an isolated phenomenon, and their narratives would be a useful counterbalance to the male perspective. The aims of this project is to study the status of women who were employed on the land, and to examine the extent to which the Hook Norton womens' experiences match Newby's findings for male workers.

Secondary Literature

The literature on women land workers is very sparse, thus confirming the invisibility of this section of the labour force. Typically, in *Country Voices - Life and Lore in Farm and Village* (1984) Rightly states that "all year round women farm labourers, already becoming unusual in Flora Thompson's Oxfordshire in the 1880s, have become comparatively uncommon within living memory" (p37). *Country Women on the Land - Memories of Rural Life in 1920s and 30s* by G.K. Nelson (1992), through a series of personal narratives, describes the tough living conditions leaving little time and energy for employment. Outdoor work was mostly unpaid on family holdings, or seasonal. *Fen Women - a Portrait of Women in an English Village*, by Chamberlain (1975), covers the project period, with a useful comparative section on work. Chamberlain found that women were exploited as a cheap source of labour, as were the men. She describes a vicious circle in which the men's low wages force the women out to work, but as their income also supports the family, low pay for the bread-winner is justified. Chamberlain finds that unemployment is high for rural women with minimal choice. Pahl's *Divisions of Labour* (1984), in a broad historical sweep, examines "work" in its widest sense. The working-classes' search for "a living" includes all family members' contributions from the informal to the formal. The opportunity to "earn an extra bob or two" is a traditional exploitation of the possibilities of

acquiring additional resources, with the difference for mothers being that it needs to be near home.

There is no shortage of literature giving the historical background to farming. The last government report by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries was in 1919, *wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture*. Volume 11 gives details of localised conditions, and covers the North Oxfordshire area including mention of Hook Norton. *One Hundred Years of British Food and Farming*, by H.F. Marks (1989), gives a significant comparison with manufacturing and service industry where average weekly earnings in 1960 were £14.10, but only £10.32 in agriculture. *The Countryside Between the Wars* by Creasey and Ward (1984) traces the improvements in farming against a background of rural decay in which hand work was still the norm. In addition to *The Deferential Worker* and Newby's *Green and Pleasant Land?* (1985), Stacey's local study, *Tradition and Change - a Study of Banbury* (1960), examines social status.

The course *offprints Collection* and Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* (1988) provide sources for the oral history perspective. The national trends in women's work is covered by Lewis in *women in Britain Since 1945* (1992).

Methodology

The oral-history advice to "dig where you stand" is particularly apt for a project on land-workers. My nine interviewees all live in Hook Norton, and were familiar faces. News of my interest had often preceded my first visit, giving an easy introduction and providing a snowball of new names. In addition to the employees, I interviewed a retired farmer giving a pre- and postwar view of the locality, and Tommy W, the son of the farmer Tom W, who had employed all of the women at various times.

For each interview I made an appointment, and returned subsequently to fill in missing details, for the copyright to be signed and to acknowledge their contributions to the study. All the interviews took place in my partner's homes with no one else present. There were no interruptions, and no problems with

extraneous noise - even a TV was turned low enough not to intrude on the recording.

I used a battery-operated tape recorder without microphones that proved to be unobtrusive, easy to use and problem free. None of the interviewees had any difficulties with its presence, and after the initial testing, quickly settled into the interview. Afterwards the tapes were identified and dated. I had difficulty concluding the first interview with Pat B which lasted over 2 hours. I transcribed it in full, but the subsequent sessions were all shorter, and the transcriptions were edited depending on the relevance of the material. The recorded voices were audible, with only the occasional indecipherable word. There were few colloquialisms, and the local dialect was easy to follow. As Thompson found, their language was sometimes "grammatically primitive, full of redundancies, and back-loops, emphatic and subjective" (1988, p.243), with the rhythms of their speech uniquely conveying their oral testimonies.

The interviews were preceded by a brief description of the project, without mentioning that status was to be the main theme, although a key question could have acted as an indicator. I emphasised the value of their perspectives in this neglected field, and requested life-history details. Following the first interview, the aims of the project were formulated providing a basis for the subsequent recordings. Within a free-flowing format, a range of semi-structured questions were posed that were concerned with social status and were guided by Newby and Stacey's work. (See Appendix 2)

The greatest difficulty was the sequencing of events. As is usual with oral history, dates were the least reliable, and confusion was compounded by the three generations of farmers. Occasionally contradictory evidence would emerge, but on the whole there was a high degree of consistency. Only the 81 year old worker was suffering obvious memory loss and a degree of confusion. Most of the women spoke of the past community and life-style with a sense of loss that is typical of elderly people's reminiscences. Oral history can sometimes trigger

painful memories, and be responsible for a re-evaluation of one's past that requires sensitivity in the interviewer. The return visit offered an opportunity to discuss some of these issues.

Biographies

MRS WIN W. was born in 1912 in a tied cottage 8 miles from Hook Norton. Her father, an agricultural worker, was killed in the First World War. She is the 3rd child of 4, and came to the village at the age of 14. She married in 1932 and has 6 children.

MRS IVY C. was born in 1914 five miles from Hook Norton. Her father worked in the ironstone quarry and was killed in a road accident when Ivy was 10. She is the 3rd eldest in a family of 7. Her mother remarried and had 2 more children. Ivy is widowed with one son.

MRS FLO S. was born in Hook Norton in 1921. She is the 3rd of 5 children. Her father, who came from Bicester, worked on the railway, the ironstone and the council. She is widowed with 4 children.

MRS PAT B. was born in Hook Norton in 1924. She is the 4th of 12 children. Her mother was from Bristol and was a field worker till the age of 73. Her father was a "jack-of-all-trades", including the railway and field work. She is married and has had 2 children.

MRS GLADYS F. was born in Hook Norton in 1930, and had 8 older brothers. Her father was a farmer. She is married with 3 children.

MRS PHYLLIS S., sister of Pat B., was born in Hook Norton in 1931, the youngest of the family. She is widowed with 4 children.

MRS MARY G. was born in 1936 in Hook Norton next door to Pat and Phyllis. She was the 5th child with 6 brothers. Her father, from Hook Norton, was a farm worker, in the ironstone, and the Electricity Board. Her mother was from Birmingham. She was widowed after the birth of her son.

(See Appendix 111 for more detailed employee biographies)

MISS MOLLY B. was born in 1911 in Hook Norton, the only daughter of a farmer. She has farmed all her life.

MR TOMMY W. was born in Hook Norton in 1950, and has 2 older sisters. Since childhood he worked on his father, Tom W's farm, which he sold in 1988. He now owns the village shop.

Background

Hook Norton is situated on the eastern edge of the Cotswolds, 8 miles from Banbury with its expanding industries, and 5 miles from the small market town of Chipping Norton, whose main employers were a furniture factory and Bliss Tweed Mill, (See map, Appendix 1V). Having a legacy of open-village status, together with being comparatively large, having a population of 1,800, gave the community a strong sense of independence and self-sufficiency. The high proportion of pubs and Nonconformist chapels, and the absence of a squirearchy, indicate, according to Newby, a non-quiescent, non-deferential working-class. From being an occupational village based on agriculture, with a wide range of trades and the nineteenth-century additions of brewery and ironstone workings, there was a shift to commuting to manufacture and service industries due to the loss of land-based work. Pre-war council houses and owner occupied cottages, with no new post-war estates, had largely maintained the social structure of the village, retaining a strong sense of continuity into the 1970s.

Hook Norton is 300 feet above sea level, and is described in the 1919 report as an ironstone district that is very fertile, being 2/3 arable and the rest rich feeding

grassland. Molly's description is very similar: "Years ago it was all mixed. If you failed in one you could come up trumps on another". Holdings fluctuated in size between 100 and 200 acres, with 30 or so family-run farms in the parish. The exception was Mr. S.W. just outside the parish, who grew 100 acres of sprouts for the London market, employing local people seasonally. There was a gradual change from tenant farming to ownership, which was in line with the national trend (Newby, 1979). Tom W's acreage increased during this period from 30 to 90 acres, with the closure of the ironstone workings in 1946 releasing more land for sale.

Newby describes the 2nd Agricultural Revolution since World War II from horse and hand technology to adoption of the internal combustion engine. The application of scientific research enabled rotational farming to give way to greater specialisation, aided by the state's postwar price guarantees. The growth of urban centres and industry opened up accessible markets. Tom W's farming echoes these changes. He switched from his father's mixed farming to concentrate on cash-crop vegetables, selling to Banbury wholesalers, who supplied the new schools and factory canteens before the growth in frozen, pre-packed and imported food. Tommy conveyed the excitement of working virgin ground, trying new crops, increasing the yields: "There was an explosion in the 60s. If you were prepared to work hard you could make a good living. Everything was new. The science was new, new chemicals ... new tractors ... all sorts of tax advantages ... the government was actually encouraging expansion".

Newby's most significant finding was the isolation of agricultural workers. The new processes had "left the fields of most arable farms empty of human life for almost the whole year..(and had)..eliminated the need for gang labour" (1979, p.88), echoing the 1919 report which was surprised to find a gang of 10 women root-hoeing "as late as 1916". Tom W's switch to labour intensive horticulture therefore enabled a residual practice to continue, and at that time, as Tommy said, "It was just as cheap to hand hoe because chemicals were quite expensive". The range of crops demanded a regular year-round

supply of labour, with roots, sprout picking and potato sorting in the autumn and winter, and sowing, singling, hoeing, planting, pulling, and harvesting peas, beans and salad crops throughout the spring and summer. Tom W's new planter and potato harvester marginally eased the work, but did not reduce the labour during this 25-year period.

Newby's study found essential differences in status between the archetypal forelock-tugging labourer and the reality of the postwar farm worker, whose greater isolation gave him greater autonomy, while the face-to-face contact with the farmer had broken down the divisions of labour and fine gradations of class-consciousness. As in the country generally, pay, housing and conditions had improved, but the workers were aware of a downward social mobility compared with employees in other industries.

Newby usefully adopts the interactional and attributional divisions of social status. The latter is objectively defined by a person's economic position within the class structure, placing the agricultural worker in a position of poverty and powerlessness. Interactional status is subjectively and locally defined, being based on esteem, giving the agricultural worker scope for establishing a reputation based on skill, personality, and respectability. Newby finds that as the occupational community retreats, so the agricultural worker's interactional status diminishes in the face of a changing village population, with newcomers imposing attributional criteria to judge landworkers' social position. Their status is then romanticised as they are reduced, in Pahl's words, to "props on the rustic stage".

Findings

The oral evidence revealed at the outset that the women had a robust confidence in their narratives, which was in contrast to the literature's findings. Kightly's labourers were surprised at his interest, and Chamberlain found that the women had little confidence in the skill of story-telling. Flo was initially shy, but then like the others she showed a pleasure in recalling the camaraderie as well as the hardships in the work. There was also

the sadness at the passing of an era, demonstrating Grele's "binary opposition", a sense of then and now: as Phyllis said with a sigh, "Good times up there but they'll never come back". Superficially there were no obvious reservations in the responses, but the fact that everyone knew each other so well, may have acted as an unconscious veto on information concerning family and neighbours, as reflected in Flo's "as long as nobody don't hear what I told you, not anybody what knows me". References concerning Tommy were uninhibited, perhaps because he was seen as the younger generation, and the person who was responsible for introducing the changes that they perceived as ending an era.

An evaluation of the womens' material position, Newby's attributional status, is a useful starting point. The classification that Stacey used indicates that their origins were undoubtedly from the rough end of the poor working-class, with Gladys in the ambiguous category of daughter of a farmer who fell on hard times. All the women were from large families living in cramped, insanitary conditions. Their fathers moved between a range of land-based manual jobs, principally ironstone and field work, supplemented with earnings on the side such as rabbiting and pig killing. Flo remembered her father reduced to opening gates for 6d in the 30s. Their job irregularity and mobility indicates minimal skill levels. The mothers' jobs, when known, were in service or field work, with Pat recalling that her mother went stone-picking. She added, "I considered myself poor then, but we weren't poor compared with some people". Similarly Mary said, "We were brought up poor, but we always had our belly filled".

As in Gitten's findings (Offprints, p.103), the women were expected to contribute to the household economy before marriage. As children they had gathered and sold mushrooms, blackberries, poppy petals for dye, and gone leasing and wooding for the house. They all left school at 14, and four of them went to work at Bliss Mill in Chipping Norton. They had to cycle because their mothers could not

afford the rail fare. The other three were in service, although Win left because she hated it, taking odd jobs including potato picking. For many women the war offered the opportunity to broaden their horizons in the labour market, but in this sample only Ivy and Pat were conscripted. Both were at "The Alley", the aluminium factory in Banbury, and Pat was trained to operate the railway signal boxes. Pat was unusual in changing jobs to suit herself, and as the most outspoken was able to challenge the management at Bliss Mill and "The Alley" for improved working conditions. Pat longed to have a bit of land of her own, but none of the others expressed any particular aspirations. They appear to have been unaffected by "the new consumerism", living within their financial constraints and limited by the lack of choice in the rural labour market. As with Newby's men, they accepted the inevitability of their position.

Marriage closed the opportunities for many working-class women to independently improve their economic status through work, but it offered the opportunity of social mobility through dependence on their husbands' earning potential. For all seven women marriage brought little immediate change. Except for Flo, whose husband was in the regular army, they all moved out of the parental home, two into caravans and the others into rented one-up and one-down terraced cottages. For their husbands, postwar growth brought greater job security with skilled work in service or manufacturing industries, but forced them to commute out of the village to work. Early widowhood left Mary with her mother and son as dependents: she has "never had much money, I've sort of growed up with it and I'm still like it", as is shown by her sparse living conditions in a council bungalow. Win's husband moved from agriculture at £1.50 a week for the improved pay of £2 at "The Alley". She and Flo moved into and remained in council houses, while Phyllis, Pat and Ivy were able to buy their rented cottages, and to extend and upgrade them over the years, although Pat's toilet and washing facilities remain in an outhouse across the yard. Gladys and Phyllis's husbands became self-employed and

their economic status marginally improved, as is shown by their furnishings and larger owner-occupied homes.

In line with postwar changes in womens' working patterns, the women stayed in their jobs after marriage until the birth of their first child. Babies altered their availability for work, and immediatly changed their status as workers. From full-time employees working long hours travelling to Chipping Norton or Banbury, they became part-time casual workers, mostly cleaners in the village. From employees their identity changed to that of mothers, and subsequent jobs were not seen as proper employment, in spite of the economic necessity for them to earn. Pat said, "When we first got married we were glad to go and earn some money to make up for what our husbands didn't earn...I used to lock lt in that bureau, and that was for help with the mortgage, the electricity, the rates and that". Gladys was the sole bread winner for a period when her husband was ill, and similarly for Mary, "I had a widows pension but that aint nothing". Win "went up to the fields to work, for pocket money, because his wage wasn't a lot", but she considered lt "my bit of freedom money. That was mine".

Child-care became the chief consideration that determined the jobs that they were able to do. Pat took her baby when cleaning, and Gladys would "take the pram, do the silage and that". Ivy had a living-in half-sister and all of them used their mothers at various stages. None of them experienced adverse judgement as working mothers, and none of their husbands apparently objected. Flo had declared to hers, "No way are you going to stop me from going", adding, "Well, I mean the men wears the trousers, and the years we had was happy like, but he never interfered". Similarly Win showed an awareness of supporting her husband's role as breadwinner: "He wasn't earning good money, but he was supposed to be keeping the family you might say". All of them emphasised that they were available for their children, and had adapted their working lives accordingly. Win was the only one to adopt a bimodal pattern, staying at home till her children went to school. They all had had experience of seasonal fieldwork, particularly potato

picking for small local farmers, or peas and sprouts for Mr. S.W., and Ivy had worked on threshing machines over many years, but it was the postwar development of Tom W's market garden that enabled them to work as mothers, all year round 10 - 4 on a daily basis, plus evenings and weekends when the work was there. During the course of interviewing, it gradually emerged that at various times they had taken their children into the fields while they worked. As with Phyllis, there was often a denial that they had done so: "I didn't take my children up there but there was a lot of women who did", followed by "I did used to take the twins with me if I was hoeing". Similarly Ivy said, "While Bill was a baby I never took him in the fields", and later "I took him along in the pushchair ... when he could toddle about he used to get like a ploughed field hisself". Mary recalled, "I feit sorry for him in the winter-time ... we used to run our kids round the field to get them warmed a bit, cos they used to be crying with cold". For some of the women it was a means of retaining an essential income, for others it was part of the tradition and culture of field work; Pat and Phyllis remembered making tea in the fields for their mother's pea-picking gang. Their reticence around this solution to child-care indicates an example of Grele's "underlying structure of consciousness" (Offprints, p.53). It reveals the age-old conflict between the role of mother and the economic and/or social necessity to work. It may also have been a defence against my middle-class position, and also their own awareness of today's attitudes to the presence and dangers of children in the work-place.

Working as a gang was the essential difference between this group and Newby's isolated workers. In spite of the conditions, often in mud or thick snow, the social aspect was confirmed repeatedly. Win, for example, said, "Brussel picking was worse when ice and all was on them, but we had such fun altogetther". There was mutual support - Gladys would carry Pat's heavy nets - and gossip, with the drama of rows, especially between interrelated members of the group. The proximity of their homes - at one stage, four were actual

neighbours - again contrasts with Newby's men, many of whom lived out of the village often in isolated tied cottages. The women in Hook Norton were able to maintain "the twin supports of village and workplace conviviality" (Newby, 1977, p.297), which had been lost by the men. Unlike the men the women were not involved with unions, but their numbers gave them a certain bargaining position which they used, for example, to negotiate holiday pay. Tommy recalled occasions when picking should have started early because of snow forecasts, but the women were set in their 10 o'clock start routine. "We had to go along with that because we couldn't get labour from elsewhere, and they knew that. It was very much in their favour". In fact gangs were brought in from Banbury when needed, causing rivalry, but the availability of work, and a pool of labour created a mutual dependency, resulting in, as Tommy said, "a definite loyalty from our women, and they appreciated the fact that we were loyal to them".

Newby found that there was a reduction in class antagonisms in the closer gaffer-to-boss relationships, especially in the small farms with a patriarchal style of management. There was no oppositional subculture, and there was a greater commitment and identity with the work, resulting in high levels of job satisfaction. The fine divisions of labour were gone, with work requiring a versatile range of skills. In contrast, the women on Tom W's holding were performing the heaviest, most monotonous tasks for minimum pay, yet they all spoke about the nature of the job with great pleasure. "I was in my glory outside" came with feeling from Win. Working as a gang of around ten created solidarity when necessary, but not opposition to Tom, about whom they expressed warmth, loyalty and respect. He epitomised paternalism, lending the deposits an Pat and Ivy's cottages, spending time with them at home when he delivered their pay, working alongside them in the fields. Pat said, "He was one of the best men that ever broke a bit of bread". He was a fair no-nonsense employer who talked straight. "You knew where you was", said Mary, and Pat, "If you were in trouble, you wanted to know anything, he would find out for

you". There were face-to-face rows but they were resolvable, as in the ups and downs of daily familiarity. But there was an awareness of the inequality in their relationship, that Tom was the capitalist employer, who was able to send his children to private school, and who had the power to be generous or otherwise with the pay in kind. Pat once accused him, "You've a mind like a cash register". Here was Newby's "small firm connectedness", in contrast to the bureaucratic management style of Mr. S.W.'s, where a foreman was in charge.

A major difference that emerged between Newby's male workers and the Hook Norton women was their levels of dependence on the work. The men, as main bread-winners for their family, were dependent on their employers, requiring a degree of deference towards him. They were obliged to acknowledge their relative powerlessness. In contrast, as wives and mothers, the women were dependent on their husbands, even Mary who relied on her widow's pension, however small. Not considering their jobs as real work gave them an independence in their relationship with both Tom W. and Mr. S.W., a freedom to "tell them to bugger off, sling their hook", as Ivy said, which a number of them did after disagreements with Tom. Pat related "some terrible rows. I threw a bucket of fertilizer at him one day and walked off and he came and fetched me back". In a way that wasn't possible for the men, they thought of their work as temporary. As Win said, "In the winter brusselling we used to think at the end of the day, oh I don't think I shall come tomorrow, but we did, we still went up there".

The interactional status in the locality as skilled workers, however low generally, gave the men a degree of esteem not available to women. Thompson states that "farm labourers ... come close to the bottom of any classification, but the extent of their skills, dexterity and knowledge of their work world is undeniable. The exclusion of women from the category of skilled workers is again social rather than technical in basis" (Offprints,p.186). For these women skills were not relevant; some of them could drive tractors but did not seek to do so. As Phyllis said, "exams weren't about in our day. I

could count me money, that's what bothered me". Improving their job status would have meant travel, involving fares and longer hours. The women all chose to stay with Tom W. for 20 to 30 years. Only Flo moved on to work in the brewery so that she could be in the dry, and was suprised to find herself earning double a field worker's pay.

In response to the question, "Would people have thought women field workers a tough lot, maybe a rough lot, as they were doing such rough work?", they all replied that people were amazed at the conditions that they tolerated. Flo, for example, said, "They used to say to me, we don't know how you stuck it, you did work some weathers, we felt sorry for you lot, specially in the winter and that". This may have indicated genuine admiration, or a disguised condescension. Tommy's answer to the question was, "They were a rough and ready lot, and they were proud of it, very proud. There was none of this feeling of being looked down on". Typical of the responses was that from Win, who said that for people in the village who knew them, "It was just a job that we went and did, and I don't think they thought any different", and from Phyllis, whose sister thought she had ideas above her station. "We'd come off the field thick with mud ... the cars used to go by and they used to look up, it didn't bother any of us". Win and Phyllis' responses neatly encapsulate the difference between attributional and interactional status.

In her investigation of the social structure of Banbury in the 1950s, Stacey examined the membership of voluntary associations, including religious and political institutions. Levels of involvement are useful markers of interactional status, and questions were posed on leisure pursuits, and religious and political leanings. There was a consistent lack of interest in politics, from Win's "I don't understand it" to Gladys and Phyllis' "not bothered". For some it was seen as a source of conflict in the family. Taking the role of peace-maker, Flo advised her Labour voting husband when he left the army, "Don't mention anything in front of our Dad because of what he's like", explaining that in spite of suffering unemployment in the 30s he still voted Conservative.

There was a very mixed response to the question concerning the part that religion had played in family life. Only Win still goes to church, Mary is a lapsed Catholic, and the others in their youth moved freely between the Church of England and the Nonconformist chapels. As with politics, Pat had experience of religion dividing the family, with a C of E grandmother in Bristol refusing to return the eldest brother to prevent him being baptised into the Baptist church. The impression conveyed by the variety of these responses is that the women were in no way obliged to conform to social pressures, and they felt free to make their own decisions.

In responding to questions concerning their leisure pursuits the women focussed on their pre-marriage period, with socials and dances predominating. As a married woman Flo declared she was "too busy at home", Win belonged to the YWCA and the WI, Ivy went to the pub and bingo, Gladys was in the Girls Life Brigade and pub's darts and Aunt Sally teams. Phyllis' social life was family-orientated around her husband's and son's football and cricket matches. Again the variety of participation indicates their individuality and a degree of flexibility across the rough to respectable working-class informal social life of the village.

Conclusion

The oral history process has enabled an intimate examination of the lives and attitudes of women field workers. The degree to which their particular experiences can be generalised is hard to assess, given the paucity of the literature, but the study appears to have covered a period in which a specific set of localised circumstances enabled these women to work in a way that was already an anachronism. A parallel study would ascertain the uniqueness or otherwise of the Hook Norton womens' experiences.

The attributional status of the women conforms to the expectations for agricultural workers. Their housing and living standards are commensurate with low-income families, with Gladys and Phyllis being the exceptions, having raised

their economic, and possibly social status through their husbands' modest business ventures during a period of growth. With the possibly exceptions of Ivy and Mary, they would all now consider themselves to be respectable working-class women.

Parenthood was the major factor that divided the women's working life from the men's. Having children shifted their status to housewives dependent on the family wage. In line with the national trend, as mothers they became a "reserve army of labour", a flexible labour force, that these women experienced as symbiotic with their employer Tom W., allowing them to acquiesce with their low status in the work place. However, their role as workers was seen as secondary to their role as mothers, giving them a freedom to express their independence in their relationships with employers which was not available to men.

The life-style of the modern agricultural worker emerged from Newby's study as dramatically different from the past, whereas the Hook Norton women were more representative of the old occupational community, and as such can be seen as part of a residual culture. The rigours of manual labour and working in gangs would have been more familiar to prewar labourers than their contemporary male workers. Certainly it was different from that of their husbands, who had lost their agricultural roots by the end of the war. The life stories reveal a continuum in their interactional status, firmly rooted in motherhood, kinship, and the working-class village community. This aspect of life appeared dislocated for the men, who sought esteem in the new skills of their restructured work. Land work did not separate the women from their peers, but enabled them to continue a meaningful tradition on and off the field.

Appendix 1

Changes in agriculture's use of hired labour in England and Wales, 1948-68

	Regular whole-time tvorkers				Regular part-time seasanal temporary				Total hired tvarkers			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
Total 1948	506.5		66.2		110.6*		58.2		617.1		124.4	
Average annual thange	Na.	% P-a-com-pound	Na.	% P-a-com-pound	Na.	% 1 ² -a-com-pound	Na.	% p.a.com-pound	Na.	% P-a-com-pound	Na.	% P-a.COM-pound
1948-53	—15 ¹	—1•3	—41	—78	—1•3	—2•6	+0•1	+0-1	—76	—	—v5	-v2
1953- ⁸	—135	—3•4		—67	-2'5	—v8	-1-P6	+v6	-176	—3.2	—09	
1958-63	—177	—3*6		—5.5	—v5	—v8	—I.'	—t.7	—4.0	—3.0	—2"6	—2.8
1963-8	—177	— ^b *4	-1'1	—5.3	—5.t	—8.1	, -2.0	—3*5	—2e9	—72	—3* ¹	—3'9
190-68	—13.2	—3.6	—v3	—6.7	-28	—y3	—0.4	—0•6		-3"6	-27	—2.3
Total 1968	2431		194		53•7		31.1		29&8		70-6	

*Including 11.4 thousand prisoners of war

Source: Agricultural Census

Reprinted from *The Deferential worker*, Howard Newby (1977).

Appendix 2

Aide-memoir to guide questions during interviews.

Life-history:-

- age
- siblings
- position in the family
- childhood
- place of birth
- parents' occupations
- domiciles
- pre- and post-marriage work
- date of marriage
- husband's occupation
- children and child-care arrangements

Images of self:-

- relations with employers
- relations with fellow workers
- leisure culture and peer groups
- religion and politics

The workplace:-

- job satisfaction
- conditions, hours, relative pay
- temporary, seasonal, regular
- skills, division of labour
- culture and hierarchy
- transport
- unionism, negotiations

Choices:-

- within the workplace
- within the locality
- pressures to work - influences/attitudes
 - tradition
 - parents/husband
 - economic
 - lifestyle/consumerism

Appendix 3

Biographies of Employees

MRS. WIN W.

Born - 1912. Aged 83 years

Place of birth - Barton-on-the-Heath, tied cottage

Position in the family - 3rd of 4 children

Father - agricultural worker, killed WW1

Mother - hotel kitchen

Domiciles - Little Compton aged 3

Bloxham till aged 14

Hook Norton - moved between 5 rented cottages

council house

retirement bungalow

Marriage - 1932, aged 20

husband - farm worker, "The Alley", ironstone,

railways during the war, MEB

Children - 6, 1st born pre-marriage and brought up

by grandmother, 12-year gap between 1st

3 and last 3. Eldest daughter worked for

Tom W. (See cover photo)

Work - casual jobs, child care, domestic service, field

work; when children at school, regular field work

Leisure - knitting, WI, YWCA, dancing, pensioners' club

Religion - mother C of E, attended Methodist Sunday school

now attends C of E

Politics - none

MRS IVY C.

Born - 1914. Aged 81 years

Place of Birth - Bloxham

Position in family - 3rd of 7, plus 2 half-siblings

Father - Bloxham ironstone, killed road accident Ivy aged 10

Mother - from Bloxham, re-married

Domiciles - Broughton, Nill cottages 1 mile from Hook Norton,

rented then bought cottage in centre of village

Marriage - 1937?

husband - council and railway worker, caddy,
factory, agricultural deliveries
children - 1 son
Work - school kitchen and parlour maid, seasonal threshing,
cleaning, war work at "The Alley", seasonal field work,
regular field work, Bliss Mill, cleaning
Leisure - Bingo, pubs
Religion - Wesleyan, Baptist
Politics - none, husband Labour

MRS FLO S.

Born - 1921. Aged 74 years
Place of birth - Hook Norton
Position in family - 3rd of 5 children, had bovine T.B., left
school aged 11 years
Father - from Bicester, railway worker, ironstone, council
Mother - from Hook Norton, housemaid
Domiciles - rented High Street cottage, council house
Marriage - 1942, aged 21
husband - from the North, regular army, "The Alley"
children - 4
Work - Bliss Mill till marriage, seasonal then regular field
work, the brewery for last 10 years till retirement,
cleaning
Leisure - dances, sewing classes
Religion - grandmother very religious C of E, attended Wesleyan
Baptist, Quakers, confirmed C of E
Politics - Labour

MRS PAT B.

Born - 1924. Aged 71
Place of birth - Hook Norton
Position in family - 4th of 12, eldest brother brought up in
Bristol, sister died aged 4¹/₂, brother
killed in MEB accident. 4 siblings worked for
Tom W.
Father - Hook Norton born, field worker, thatcher, pig-killer,
railway worker, etc

Mother - from Bristol, stone-picker, helped husband with pig-killing, field worker till aged 73
Domiciles - council house, rented then owned High Street cottage
Marriage - 1948, aged 24
 husband - Hook Norton born, building, haulage, Cowley Oxford
 children - 2, one son died road accident
Work - pea-picking, Bliss Mill, "The Alley", railway Signal box operator, Bliss Mill, cleaning, seasonal then regular field worker
Leisure - dances, Chipping Norton cinema
Religion - Mother C of E, father Baptist, baptised C of E
Politics - none

MRS GLADYS F.

Born - 1930. Aged 65 years
Place of birth - Hook Norton
Position in family - youngest of 9
Father - farmer
Domiciles - farmhouse, rented cottage, caravan, rented cottage, owner-occupied house
Marriage - 1953, aged 23
 husband - partner in plant-hire business
 children - 3
Work - family farm, service, housework, seasonal then regular field work
Leisure - dances, whist-drives, socials, Girls Life Brigade, darts and Aunt Sally teams
Religion - baptist, Mother C of E
Politics - none

MRS. PHYLLIS S.

Born - 1931. Aged 64
Place of birth - Hook Norton
Position in family - youngest of 9
Father - as for Pat B.
Mother - as for Pat B.

Domiciles - rented cottage, council house, rented
cottage which was purchased
Marriage - 1964?
husband - MEB, self-employed electrician, died
1992 children - 4
Work - Bliss Mill, egg factory, seasonal then regular
field work
Leisure - family involvement with football and cricket
Religion - Baptists, but christened C of E, husband
Methodist
Politics - none

MRS MARY G.

Born - 1936. Aged 59
Place of birth - Hook Norton
Position in family - 5th of 6, brother worked for Tom W.
Father - agricultural worker, ironstone, MEB
Mother - from Birmingham
Domiciles - rented cottage, caravan, council house, retirement
bungalow
Marriage - 1964
Husband - at "The Alley", died 1965
children - 1, worked for Tom W.
Work - Bliss Mill, regular field worker
Leisure - cinema, dancing, walking
Religion - lapsed Roman Catholic

