

Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture (1867)

*The evidence given by employers and children to the parliamentary commission
(Somerset Archive and Record Service)*

Mr. Hancock, of *Halse* — farms 480 acres — employs eight or nine boys all the year round; of these the youngest is eleven, the rest very much the same age. These boys are employed at all times of the year. In July and August, Mr. Hancock sends out a man into the village to get all the children he can find, both boys and girls, to 'single' turnips. Some turnip pickers are nine years old. They work in a row. There is a man to look after them. He tells the younger ones what to do if they fall behind the others. It is light work, and there is no unkindness used. Younger boys do bird-keeping, but that is more often done by little girls. The boys generally get regular work, such as keeping sheep or leading horses, at an earlier age than girls.

Rev. E. Spurway, *Heathfield* — Boys are employed at the age of ten years and upwards all the year. It is not desirable to limit the age at which they should start work; they seldom do anything precious to ten, and then I consider that unless they become acclimatized and hardened to cold and wet at that age, they cannot rough it when older. Girls under thirteen are employed only at certain seasons of the year, viz, bird-keeping, picking apples (cider district), singling turnips, and mangolds and stones.

Rev. Richard W. Lambert, *Fitzhead* — Boys in the parish generally are employed at the age of eight in the summer to keep birds away from the newly-sewn corn, and to help parents to plant potatoes. In the summer, they help with minding the pigs or sheep. When they're older they drive a plough.

Rev. R. Watson Moor, *Stoke St. Gregory* — Boys are employed at all times of the year from eight years old upwards. There is a good deal of withy-peeling at which a child of five years can earn one shilling a week. All the women and children do this, and it keeps the latter much from school.

James Hoare, aged 13, *Staple Fitzpaine* — I began work at seven years old driving the plough for my father (a farmer with twenty acres). Found I could not manage the horses well. Sometimes they knocked me down, never hurt me, ran over me sometimes. I went to school before I worked. After I began working, I did five months at school and the rest of the year I worked. I left school at eleven. I liked school better.

Henry John Pearce, *Bishop's Lydeard* — Some boys are employed at eight, but there are very few under the age of ten. The usual thing is bird-keeping; after ten, they go with the horses. There's perhaps one accident a year from their being put so young to mind such big horses, and that is generally riding on the shafts. It is heavy soil here, and three horses are required to plough, so a little boy is required to lead them; but the farmers are trying to get into using reins. Few girls are employed, and do little beyond apple picking. A great many are idle. Mr. Pearce is trying to get started, so as to find them occupation and a means of earning a little money.

George Wembridge, aged 10, *Staple Fitzpaine* — Began working at nine years, driving plough; can manage horses and keep pigs. Father is a labourer. Horses never knocked me down. Was taken away from school to mind birds. The farmer wanted a boy, he gave me two shillings.

Alfred James Dinham, aged 13 — Began work at eight, driving plough. Horses knocked me down once, but I found I could manage them. Came to school again the year after, and was only employed after Lady-day (25 March). Up to eleven years of age came to school a few months, and worked a few. Liked coming to school best. It was terribly tiring walking with horses. Had supper when I came home, bread and meat, cider to drink. I like keeping birds better than going to school.

Thomas Hole, age 16 *Bishops Lydeard* — I first went to work at eight. Went to regular work at nine, when I began to lead horses. Horses used to knock me down sometimes, but never hurt me; trod on my feet now and then. The first work I did was keeping birds — Sundays as well as week days. Hours 5.30 am to 7 pm in barley sowing; wheat sowing 6.30 am to 4.30 pm because the days are shorter. None in August. Was paid 4d a day bird-keeping, and the same for ever so long after I began regular work. Only had a dinner given me on Christmas Day. When I came home after being out in the rain I had to dry myself as best as I could at the fire; but often, when it rained, I rigged up a hurdle with thatch to shelter me in the corner of a field. Never went to school at all.

Maria Hayes, age 10 *Bishops Lydeard* — Mother goes out washing, and I stay to take care of the children. One of them is seven years old, the other is four. I can take very good care of them. I like coming to school best.