



Your Ag Lab Ancestors

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Do you have agricultural labourers in your family tree? I bet you do. Taking at random the 1851 census for Castlemartin, of the 135 males listed with occupations, 87 were agricultural labourers. Of the other significant occupations there were 15 farmers, 7 millers or assistants, 6 carpenters and 5 blacksmiths.

This article was inspired by the Pharos Tutors course *Discovering More About Your Agricultural Labourer Ancestors*. Run by Janet Few, this course caused me to delve more into the types of ag lab, the work they did, and find out more about the farms they worked on and their living and working conditions. In it I share some of the findings about my own ancestors who worked on the land in Pembrokeshire.

Not All Ag Labs Are The Same

The very term agricultural labourer is a catch-all for any number of jobs on a farm. If they specialised they may well be described in censuses as a ploughman, carter, horseman teamster, dairy maid, shepherd, waggoner etc. Their tasks would vary throughout the seasons. On an arable farm, for instance, they might do the following:

- Winter – ploughing, hedging, harvesting root crops
- Spring – sowing, maintaining fences
- Summer – weeding, hay making, repairing gates and fences
- Autumn – harvesting corn, sowing winter crops.

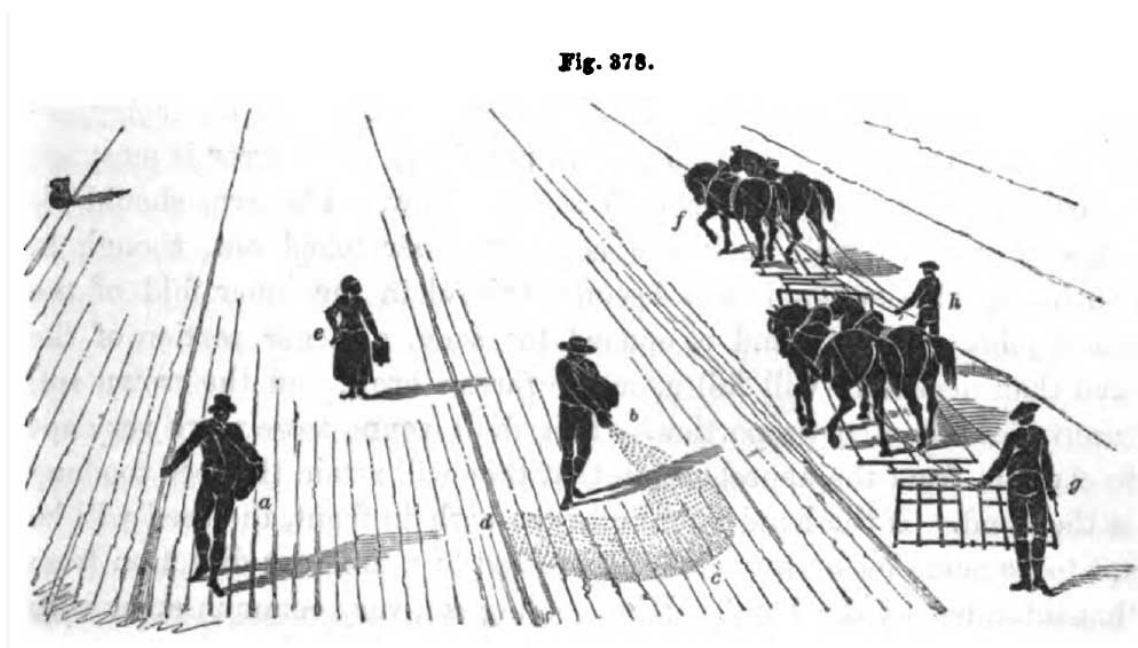
We tend to think of labouring as an unskilled job. But the very comprehensive *Book of the Farm* spells out in considerable details the intricacies of all the jobs that needed doing on a farm.¹ I shall use the job of sowing oats as an example, since the entry for Castlemartin in Kelly's 1895 directory says: "The soil is sand and limestone; chief crops, oats, barley and wheat". Page 586 of Volume 2 of the *Book of the Farm* describes what was involved. In summary:

1. The furrows are ploughed, the ploughman leaving sacks of seeds at suitable intervals
2. A seed carrier, described as "she", fills a basket with seed from a sack
3. She gives the seed to the sower who has a sheet (suspended over his shoulder and arm) which she fills allowing him to pick out and broadcast the seed with his right hand
4. She refills her basket from a sack and then goes to the next stop; she serves two sowers
5. After sowing, the ploughman drives a harrow to cover the seeds
6. The field should then be rolled, but if it's dry, priority is given to sowing more seed and leaving the rolling until later

¹ This book by Henry Stephens was first published in two volumes in 1842. It ran to several editions and became the standard reference work for agriculture in the second half the 19th century. Many volumes are accessible for free at books.google.com.

7. A good day's sowing work is a labourer sowing broadcast 16 acres at 11 bushels an acre taking 10 hours.

The description is detailed but difficult to visualise. I had to keep going back to earlier sections of the book to find the detail. There were no YouTube tutorial videos in those days that would make it clear! But this diagram gives a good idea of what was involved:



Overall, it was a finely tuned operation of teamwork with a degree of skill to keep the sheets filled with the right amount of seed and to spread the seeds evenly.

Farms and Cottages

There are several ways of working out which farm your ag lab ancestor might have worked. The first is to identify from the address in a census where they lived and look on an early OS map for farms in the neighbourhood.² Also check nearby census entries for farmers and the numbers of people they employed. If you are lucky you may find your ancestor as a single young man living in the house of his farmer employer. Knowing that my ancestors came from the hamlet of Jameston, Manorbier, I searched the OS 6in and 25in to the mile maps (Pembrokeshire XL 1862 and XL.16 1906 respectively) and found the following farms:

- Buffaloe Farm, Mead Farm, Rock Farm, Landway Farm and Green Grove

The last named turned out to be where my ancestor John SKYRME (1814-1886) lived at each of the censuses.

Tithe maps and apportionments are also helpful if your ancestor was a tenant. Those for Wales are free to view at <https://places.library.wales/>. For each field it gives the name of the landowner and occupier. You may also find a farm or estate being sold in a newspaper advert and among the lots it may list a labourer's cottage saying who was currently living there.

There is a series of books called *The General View of the Agriculture* for a given county. Some of these run to several hundred pages. But those for Dyfed are much smaller. For example, *The General View of the Agriculture of the County of Cardigan, with Observations on the Means of Its*

² The National Library of Scotland has a good range of old OS maps to view online at <https://maps.nls.uk/>. They include 6in to 1 mile map in the 1860s for Pembrokeshire and the 1880s for Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire.

Improvement by Thomas Lloyd (1794) is only 37 pages, while those by Charles Hassall for Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire are not much larger (54 and 63 pages respectively). They describe the classes of soil in the county, the price of labour, types of farm buildings, what crops are grown, the tools that are used and what livestock was reared. For the soil of Pembrokeshire Hassall writes that it “includes the extremes of good and bad in a striking degree.” He then describes four grades of soil, the first class of which is “strong red loam ... what is here provincially called Rabb”. The fourth grade is peat unsuitable for agriculture. However, you often get a better description in the gazetteer section for a specific place in the relevant trade directory, as in the case of Castlemartin earlier.

These books are also quite revealing about what they say of farms and farm buildings. In Carmarthenshire, for example, Hassell writes:

“The situation of farm houses in this district is frequently very bad. They are, in many instances, built in low bottoms; and in others, at the extremity of the land.”

The more comprehensive books for English counties often describe the types of cottage that labourers lived in. For example, in the book for Herefordshire it says:

“The cottages in Herefordshire are generally of very humble and inferior construction: many are built on waste ground by their proprietor, whose means are far from adequate to the attainment of comfort and convenience.”

It then describes such a cottage in detail alongside a plan of one.

Livestock

A significant proportion of the land was given over to pasture. Hassell writes about Pembrokeshire:

“The land is generally employed in mixed husbandry; most of the farmers having dairy stock, breeding stock of cattle, and colts and also a portion of their farms is tillage”.

Whilst I was familiar with Herefordshire cattle, in which Skyrme families played an important part in improving the breed, I was unaware of how much appreciated was the Pembrokeshire breed in the 19th century. Again, citing Hassell:

“Of the stock of this district, the horned cattle claim the first consideration, as being by far the most valuable stock the farmers of Pembrokeshire possess. The Pembrokeshire cows are coal black, except now and then a dark brown: and sometimes a white face, or a white list along the back, makes its appearance.”

Wikipedia explains:

“The ancient breed was indigenous to the old Welsh counties of Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, and South Cardiganshire. There were distinct strains in the Castlemartin area of South Pembrokeshire and the Dewslan area of north Pembrokeshire. These cattle were locally regarded as hardier on the poor land than English dairy breeds such as the Shorthorn.”

The Castlemartin breed featured in several newspaper articles, but after Lord CAWDOR sold his herd in 1888 there was concern about its future. Although the number of articles featuring the indigenous breed seemed fewer in the following years, the breed initially survived, e.g. at the 1910 annual fat stock show: "The Castlemartin breed of cattle were well represented" but by 1918 "the shorthorns seem to be gradually supplanting the more hardy black cattle breed. Most Pembrokeshire farmers are now of the opinion that the shorthorns, if well housed, have superior milking qualities."

So if your ag Lab ancestor was a cowman then such information adds useful insight into the stock they were working with.

The Agricultural Hierarchy

Your agricultural labourer ancestor was generally at the bottom of the agricultural hierarchy. He or she would work on a nearby farm which was typically tenanted. At the top of the hierarchy was the landowner.

One branch of my ancestors worked on the Corston estate on the Pembroke to Castlemartin road. Here the landowner was the Leach family. The 1861 census for Monkton enumeration district 22 shows Thomas SKYRME, then aged 20, at Bridge Farm (part of the estate). The next entry is for Corston Mansion where Henry Leach, is “proprietor and farmer of 440 acres with 10 men, 4 boys and 3 women”. In this census district there were 11 farms and around 45 farm labourers, giving an average of four labourers to a farm. The average acreage was around 150, i.e. one labourer for about 40 acres. This figure is confirmed by details of the largest farm - Brownslate Farm of 455 acres, farmed by Yorkshire man George DICKENSON “employing 9 labourers and 2 boys”.

Another addition to the hierarchy may be found on larger farms. This is a farm bailiff. He would be appointed by the landowner and was responsible for collecting rents from tenant farmers and generally overseeing the estate and making sure that good farm practices were followed. A highly respected agricultural labourer could be appointed to this role and this exactly what happened to Thomas Skyrme when in his 50s.

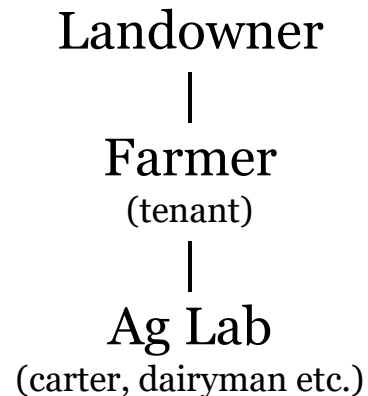
Estate Records

Having identified on which farm your ancestor may have worked, you may find more about them from estate and manor records. One underused resource is the free images of manor records at FamilySearch.org. Most such records are not transcribed or indexed. Therefore, instead of clicking “search records” by name, “search images” by place. It’s a bit fiddly and I did not find any for my Dyfed ancestors. You may have more luck with local archives. For my Corston ancestors, I found that the papers of the estate were held at the National Library of Wales. An extract from the catalogue entry says:

“Papers, 1745-1905, relating mainly to the Leach family of Corston and Ivy Tower, Pembrokeshire, the collection being largely composed of accounts, sale books, rentals and other details of estate management, together with material relating to family wills and personal estate.”

No doubt there are references to my ancestors in the account and rental books. However, there are 72 volumes in total, and with no access during lockdown, I haven’t yet pursued this resource. However, being such a significant estate, I did find other relevant records online, such as:

- Return of owners of land 1873: Henry LEACH and his son between them owned 1,812 acres at Corston
- Newspaper articles: information about Henry as an army colonel, Justice of the Peace, Sheriff of Pembrokeshire (1852), master of the South Pembrokeshire hounds; when he died in 1905 his personal estate was £34,000, worth over £3m today. In 2017 Corston Farm and an associated farm were sold for over £8m



- School records and log books: Although I expected to find the admission records for the Skyrmes of Corston at Monkton School, most were at Warren which although not in Monkton parish is just a short way south of Corston. More interesting was the Warren school log book. In it there are frequent references to Henry's wife Mrs Leach supporting school activities such as "taking the girls for needlework".

Farm Accidents

Farming is a hazardous occupation. Today agriculture has the worst rate of worker fatality, being 20 times higher than the average for all industries. With less mechanisation in the 19th century, common causes of death were being gored by a bull or run over by a cart. Here is one example of an accident on the Corston estate reported in *The Pembrokeshire Herald and Advertiser* of 28th June 1878;

"John Cole, the farm bailiff of Major Leach, of Corston, was driving a mule and cart, the mule took fright and the cart upset, throwing Cole out on his head, fracturing his skull and cutting his upper lip off. He was conveyed to the Infirmary and attended to by Dr. Murray. Little hopes are entertained of his recovery."

Even the weather can play a part as this extract from *The Tenby Weekly Observer* of 17th August 1871 shows:

"On Saturday last as a labouring man, named John Price, aged 60 years, in the employ of Captain H. Leach, Corston, was tying corn in the harvest field, he was stricken with sunstroke and died in a few minutes."

Possibly one of my ancestors witnessed this death. But with the advent of mechanisation, the danger of death increased. My own ancestor Thomas Skyrme suffered a lingering death. The story handed down was that he was killed by a pedigree black bull. But a few years ago I found a bundle of papers at Pembrokeshire Archives dated 1910 where Thomas's widow Mary of Axton Hill sought compensation under the Workers Compensation Act of 1906 from Mrs Mary Leach (now also a widow). The final settlement was £156. An extract from *The Pembrokeshire County Guardian* of 11th Feb describes what really happened. It reads:

"It appears that a threshing machine, belonging to Mr. Rogers, of the Speculation, was being moved in the rickyard at Axton Hill Farm, a part of the Corston estate, belonging to Mrs. Leach, and that the work was being supervised by Thomas Skyrme, Mrs. Leach's foreman, when owing to the breaking of an axle the heavy machine toppled over, and Skyrme received such shocking injuries that he died the same day... Skyrme moaned 'I am done, carry me to the hay house'. He was carried into the servants' hall and the doctor called. However, almost all the bones in his body were broken and after surviving 7 hours during which he was conscious, he died."



An early 20th century threshing machine (image courtesy of Ceredigion Museum)

Conclusion

This course caused me to find a significant amount of contextual information about my ‘ag lab’ ancestors which will make my write up of my family history more interesting. It gave me a much better appreciation and admiration of the work that they did and the conditions in which they lived.

So next time you come across an agricultural labourer in your family tree, don’t just dismiss him or her as yet another “ag lab”, but research more about the farms on which they worked and the life they lived. You may be pleasantly surprised by what you learn.

Additional Sources

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Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside, Pamela Horn (1976)

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