

**AGRICULTURAL
LABOURERS, AS THEY WERE,
ARE, AND SHOULD BE, IN
THEIR SOCIAL CONDITION**

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Agricultural Labourers, as They Were, Are, and Should Be, in Their Social Condition by Harry Stuart

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HARRY STUART

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SOCIAL CONDITION;

BY

**THE REV. HARRY STUART, A.M.,
MINISTER OF OATHLAW;**

BEING AN ADDRESS, DELIVERED TO A GENERAL MEETING OF THE FORFARSHIRE
AGRICULTURAL ASSOCIATION, JUNE 1853, AND PUBLISHED
AT THE REQUEST OF THE ASSOCIATION.

" Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

GALAT. VI. 2.

**WILLIAM BLACKWOOD & SONS,
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AN ADDRESS, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

When I offered myself, in January last, as a member of this Association, on the understanding, that one of its objects of attention would be, *The improvement of the social condition of your agricultural labourers*, I did not think I would thus have the honour of addressing you on this subject so soon after; but when your Committee signified to me, about two months ago, you would be disposed to hear, in June, a paper prepared by me on it, I lost but little time before I made such inquiries as might render my Address, on the present occasion, worthy, in some degree, of your hearing.

With this view, I visited not only most of the districts of this county, but of other counties also, where I thought a better state of things among the labourers might be in practice; inspecting cottages and bothies, and gathering as I went along the opinions of all classes—of landlords and tenants, of clergymen and schoolmasters, of overseers and labourers of every kind, and was everywhere most kindly and politely received by all parties. From the kindness of the Secretary of the Highland Society, I have been enabled to see very much that has been written on the subject. I have carefully, of late, too, gone over the great mass of evidence taken, about ten years ago, by the Poor-Law Commissioners on the state of the agricultural labourers in all parts of Scotland. I have also compared much of the Old with the New Statistical Account of Scotland, from which I have obtained a comparative view of their condition during the farming of the old school with that of the present times. But I beg to state, that I have not derived my knowledge of agricultural practice, both new and old, of yesterday, or from books only. Besides having been, for a number of years now,

the minister of a parish, the whole of which has gone through all the changes of farming, and of profit and loss upon it, that any district can go through ;—in my boyhood, even, from the tales of a grandfather, who lived, in the full vigour of his mind, to a patriarchal age, and who, just a hundred years ago, with the best education of the times, and on the wreck of the property of his father and friends, who were involved in the troubles of those times, commenced farming on a large scale*—from him, and from others of nearly the same standing (some of them spirited proprietors, bringing things over from the old to the new school), I acquired in my school holidays from town, and do still retain, a very distinct picture of what farming and what the condition of farm labourers was in those days ; for it was a never-failing subject of conversation with these venerable worthies, and whose fine, and kindly, and polite spirit has so impressed me, that I cannot pass them even now without thus noticing it to you. But, truly, the picture our grandsires gave of agri-

* He was not originally intended for farming, but for the Roman Catholic Church, as a priest, having four uncles in that office. They all were involved in the troubles of 1746, and had to flee the country ; so that I have often heard him say, in joke, that " the Prince made him heir to six relatives all in one month, at " seventeen years of age, and he could not help, therefore, wishing him well." Collecting the debris of what his relatives had, and falling in love with a neighbouring laird's daughter, whose father and brothers also spilt their blood and lost their all in the " cause," he abandoned the church for the plough, taking things very easy as to spades, but not as to books—and his books were no joke, either as to matter or as to language. He used to tell myself, when I grumbled that the master would tell me nothing in explanation of Latin, how easy the way we took to learn it, from what it was in his day—Ruddiman's Larger Grammar committed to memory, to begin with, and not a word spoken in the school but Latin. He was totally blind the last ten years of his life, but it never affected his cheerfulness, which was great indeed. I have often heard him say, that he would not now like to " see," as he could only see things to vex him. I have often awakened at two and three in the morning, and heard my aunt finishing off Sir Walter Scott's last. She would often stop and say, " Now, father, there's just all our friends o'er again." " Tush, Betty, read on, will you ? Sir Walter kens a' about them as well as you do, and tells about them a vast deal better." There were many such farmers as he, reading their T. Livy to their breakfast, and a tilt at the fencing foils in the evening with the young fellows. I might have given a " sample " of others, but for grateful feelings for the stimulus he gave to my very early and very hard way at school of fitting myself for my present office, and partly to give my observations the more weight on the farming of those times. After the fashion of them, he kept open house, and I heard all the good and the evil of the old and new school just opened, discussed a thousand times over by his visitors, most of them retired farming officers, who had seen much in other countries, and in a rough enough way, and who did a great deal in spriting on improvements. The people were not idly inclined then, but the men had no field for their energies, except that of war. They only waited to

cultural life, and of its ways and means, and its comforts, in their time, was any thing but a cheering one, and they hailed with delight the dawn of our modern improvements and progress. There was then in farming life, among all its members, it is true, what is much wanting in it now, plenty of good-fellowship and friendship, and plenty of leisure time to cultivate this social spirit, and a higher and holier spirit with it ; but there was, withal, a lamentable, and to us now-a-days an unbelievable, penury of almost every thing else that is earthly, and which renders mortal life comfortable. Their houses, their clothing, their dietary, were generally of the very poorest and worst description. Very many of their infants could not come through the great privations their parents were subjected to, and whole families were often cut off together, on the very threshold of manhood, by agues and consumptions, by small-pox, and other epidemics, without having any means tried to save them. It is true that their work was not either very constant or very heavy, but then the fruits of their labours were just as scanty and precarious. Every other harvest was then, from bad husbandry, a late one ; and a late and bad harvest not only brought a scarcity, but even a famine upon the land ; and, except for the *kindly give-and-take way, and the never-moves way*, in which employer and employed in general lived together, the state of their other comforts seems to have been wretched in the extreme. Now, all this statement, sad as it is, may be easily gathered or substantiated by an inspection of kirk-session records of the times, or of Sir John Sinclair's first Statistical Account of Scotland, most of the contributors to which express their delight at the new system that was beginning in their day even—that is, towards the end of the last century. One of them, for instance, says :—“ Since the improvements in agriculture and manufactures have begun to stimulate industry, the mode of living amongst our people is very much changed ; they are much better lodged, clothed, and fed, than they were twenty years ago. The meagre look, the tattered garment, the wretched hovel, the ill-cultivated and unproductive field, with the other miserable effects of feudal tyranny, and the sure effects of personal services, are causes from which this part of the country has long since been generally delivered.”—(Old Statist. Acct., Parish of Craig.)

Again, another writer says :—“ They pay much more attention to cleanliness and neatness in their persons and dwellings than formerly.

be shown the way, and stimulated to it ; and the pressure from without chiefly did this in time, as it has done in other countries ; as now witness in Ireland, from the failure of the potatoes. The same thing happened to the run-rigs of Scotland from the failure of the manufactures. Thus good comes out of evil.

“ Although there be nothing foolishly shewy, yet the outward appearance of the congregation, on a Sabbath, forms a striking, pleasing, and respectable contrast to what it was forty years ago. Now the labouring classes, both males and females, appear in church as neatly and respectably dressed as the laird’s or minister’s family did then.”
—(Garcock, Stat. Acct., 1836.)

I think it but fair to make these statements, because some still bewail the country labourer’s lot now, to what it was in the “ good olden times.” Certainly there was much in it then that was good that is very scanty in it now; but, truly, not of the personal creature-comfort kind. There was infinitely more hardness in it in this respect, indeed, in point of personal comforts—there is almost no comparison with those of the present day.

In the beginning of this century, and somewhat earlier in many districts, a great change began to take place in the relative position and employments of all classes. Before this period, manufactures, trades, and agriculture, were in a great measure conjoined, and in the same hands; and the females, of the grass-house men, and crofters, and of small farmers, and the numerous crofter—“ *customer work* ”—weavers, always paid their rent, and something more, from their spinning and their knitting, and from their weaving and selling their home-made cloth, both linen and woollen. “ There is hardly a house in the parish,” says the minister of Kirkden, in 1790, “ where one or more women are not employed in spinning yarn for Osnaburgh weavers. Many millions of yards of Osnaburgh cloth are every year made in this county. A good spinner can earn 3s. 6d. per week, and they reckon their board only about 1s. 6d. For this reason, many, instead of going to service, continue with their parents and friends, merely for the purpose of spinning, as being a more profitable employment, and in which they enjoy more liberty. Some go to service where only a part of their time is spent at the wheel. Weavers are interspersed at small distances over all the country.”—(Stat. Acct.) And in the same Old Statistical Account we are often told how women, old men, and even boys, would knit stockings while herding their cows, or while going a distance of six or eight miles, without hindering this their work at all by walking, and for the spinning and knitting a pair of which they would get from one to three shillings. But when, on account of the improvements in machinery and the unlimited power of steam upon it, all this source of revenue was withdrawn, and concentrated in towns, the little villages of crofters that were on every large farm were then necessarily broken up, for want of the means of existence. Their ill-tilled run-rigs generally gave them food, and very plain