A LINCOLNSHIRE HORSEMAN: WORK AND CLASS, by Adrian Hall

In the summer of 1974 I worked during my college vacation for five weeks on the harvest at a farm in Holton-cum-Beckering, between Lincoln and Market Rasen. There I worked with Frank Stanney, an agricultural worker and one-time railway worker. We discovered a common interest in the old culture which surrounded the horse in agriculture, and Frank introduced me to his father-in-law, Austin Chapman, who spent almost all of his working life with horses on various farms around the Lincolnshire Wolds. It seemed to me that Mr. Chapman's experiences as a horseman between the wars should be recorded, and so it was that on 19th January 1975, the three of us sat down in the sitting-room of Frank's tied house at Holton with a tape-recorder between us.

In what follows I am offering the more interesting extracts from the recording with an attempt to reconstruct in part the broad culture which gave rise to them.

The central theme of social relations among the horsemen was the hierarchy. Most farms of any size would maintain three horsemen, known in Lincolnshire as the waggoner, the second chap, and the third chap. The status of these three positions was reflected in wage differential, in responsibility, and in ritual. Closely related to these was of course the level of the horseman's skill. Mr. Chapman told me: 'We used to walk miles /on a Sunday/ to see other people's work'. A badly ploughed field would rapidly become the common knowledge of the

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All of the comments on the extracts are highly tentative, and some will contain echoes of George Ewart Evans: but I hope that in any event these transcripts will make a small contribution towards the reconstruction of the history of the rural working class in general and of the horsemen in particular.

Thanks are due to Frank Stanney, who made the introduction, to Austin Chapman for his patience in answering what must have seemed rather facile questions at times, and for his anecdotal generosity, and to Frank's wife, Margaret, for her hospitality.

locality and would reflect badly upon the farmer and his head horseman, or waggoner. All three horsemen were expected to be able to handle a team and plough with adequate skill, but it was up to the waggoner to oversee the work, maintain standards, and if necessary, put right a bad job himself.

Mr. Chapman recalled the daily routine. 'When we first started we used to start at six in the morning, finish at six at night. But us 'ossmen had to get up at four o'clock in the morning - half past three to four. And then we used to go to bed about seven...For a start we had to get up and feed the 'osses, get 'em a drink of water, clean 'em, brush 'em down like, and roll the bedding up as we used to call it, clean 'em out, and then put the collars on. And then we used to go for our breakfast. We had half an hour for breakfast, and the foreman'd tell us at breakfast what we had to do, and then we used to put the gears on, and then at six o'clock he would stand at one end of the stable and shout "elter"! and you all put the elters /halters/ on and off you went to your day's work. You went till half past nine and then you had a little lunch. Then you carried on again till half past two, and then you come home and took the gears of your 'osses. Sometimes we'd give 'em a ladle of linseed porridge to lick at till we got our dinner, then come out and give 'em a drink, then feed 'em, clean 'em, and bed 'em down for the night and that was it for the day, like'. (Mr. Chapman 'first' worked as an ordinary labourer).

This was a fifteen-hour day, with eight and a half hours in the field and the rest, besides breakfast and dinner, spent caring for the horses. For this, in 1919, as Mr. Chapman remembers it, the rate was £24 p.a. for the waggoner, £20 p.a. for the second chap, and £13 p.a. for the third chap. In the early years of his working life there was no time for recreation save on a Sunday, and then he was expected to attend church or chapel. Christmas Day was the only holiday, at first, with possibly the traditional Plough Monday. Life was lived in a state of dependency on one's superiors. On the other hand a skilled horseman could command a higher degree of respect from his employer than an ordinary labourer. The task of developing this skill in the third chap, who was usually no more than a lad of sixteen, was the waggoner's: 'When I first took a double plough - it was a brand new one - when I was turning round at the end, it tippled over, and I went with it. Well, I was scrambling up, and the waggoner come, and he gave me a boot up the behind. He said "If you do it again, you'll get the same". So it learned me, didn't it, not to do it? That was your training. It tippled over again in the daytime, but he didn't see me and I was pleased. It'd made me learn the first time. He did give me one! I think that was your training, with a boot. Because if you didn't do what you was told, like, they'd give you a boot, or something, like - a box across the ears. The foreman there at Cadeby, he used to give me one across the ears. The waggoner used to set the rig, and he would set it straight. Well, then he would set my plough up, and and he'd keep coming to see if I was doing it right, and if I wasn't, of course, you got the boot again'.

All three horsemen, if unmarried, lived in with the foreman, whose wife was generally held responsible for their welfare. This in itself is interesting, as there is some slight evidence to suggest that forty years earlier, single men on the home farms of some estates in Lincolnshire had to find their own board and lodging. Another interesting contrast is with the family-owned farms of the North and West, where the horsemen lived in with the farmer, rather than the foreman. The generally larger size of Eastern-counties farms probably accounts for this difference, while shortage of skilled labour might partly explain the change within Lincolnshire itself. Be that as it may, in Lincolnshire between the wars, a strong sense of dependence surrounded the living conditions of the horsemen, and the treatment they received depended largely on the good will or otherwise of their foreman's wife. Mr. Chapman recalls two incidents in which the lack of good will on her part led to discomfort and bad feeling for the men.

In the first instance the three horsemen had been to Grimsby from the farm at Cadeby, with four horses and a waggon each. 'It was on the Monday. And we come home for our dinner. It had been snowing all the way from Grimsby - cold and wet. And anyway, we went in for our dinner, and it was a cold dinner. And it was this here pig-toe pie. A big pie in an enamel dish, like. The waggoner cut it straight across and give me a bit on my plate ... we ate the crust like, and the gravy and the potatoes, but we put all the pig's toes back in the dish, like. Next day we went to plough. And we ploughed all day and come home for dinner, and the same thing was on the table again with a crust over. But we didn't know it was the same till the waggoner cut the first slice out. He cut the slice out to see what it was, and he picked it up like this-here, and then let chuck in the fire-grate. And the foreman was stood tother side back to where the grate was. The foreman was t'other side doing his boots, and he come to see what was up. And of course, he see this pie in the hearth. And he said

"What have you done that for?" And the waggoner told him. He said "We had pig-toe pie yesterday and we ate the crust and the gravy and potatoes, and," he said, "we've gotten the same dish today with another crust on". He said "We can't eat it, and we're not going to". Well the foreman went to the pantry and he brought us some ham, what they'd had for their dinner, and it was neither hot nor cold, but he said "Here, have that". And his wife wasn't there, do you see? And he didn't know what we was eating'.

On another occasion the men were caught in a rain storm. 'We had the day off - August Bank Holiday. We took it off, but we wasn't supposed to have it. And we went to Cleethorpes. And it rained all day. We went by train from North Thoresby. It rained all day. We was wet through. We come home and went to bed, like, and got up next morning, and said to the foreman's wife would she dry our clothes? We'd got wet through. She said "No". She said "I aren't". She said "I'm not prepared to dry your clothes". And we brought them down with us in the morning, do you see? So we laid them in what we called the porch. So when we went out from breakfast we picked them up and took them in the stable. Waggoner says "We'll take them with us to plough". We took the clothes and we hung them on a hedge. Well, they dried well, till about two o'clock, and it come a thunderstorm! And they were as bad as ever! So we put them on the hames to go home at night, like, to go home at lowzing-time. And there was a little chap there called Bobby Traves, and he come in the stable. He said "What are you doing with all them-there clothes?" So the waggoner said "Why", he said, "we brought 'em with us to try and get them dry". He said "The foreman's wife won't dry 'em". "Now", he says, "you bring 'em across to me tonight", he says, "my wife'll dry 'em". So we had our tea, and we went across. We went and knocked the door, and "Come in!", and we sat down, and she got our clothes and put them on clothes-horses like, you know. She gave us a cup of tea and some dry meat. That was what we wasn't used to like, you know. We had a good feed-up, and went home. And she says "You come back tomorrow night and pick your clothes up". We went back next night, and they just looked like new. They was all pressed, the trousers was all pressed...and we got another good feed, and we went home and took 'em to bed with us, like, and that was it. Foreman's wife never said a word more on it. That chap never went without anything as long as we lived at Cadeby. If he hadn't rabbit for Sunday dinner, he had hare, or something'.

These anecdotes also illustrate the fact that despite the hierarchy in the productive rleations of the horsemen, the waggoner was not, and did not see himself as, the foreman's lieutenant: notice the hostility in his action over the pie. If anything, the waggoner was leader and spokesman for the horsemen, who saw themselves as a distinct social class within the broad rural working-class. In this respect he resembles the 'captain' of the shearing-gang, although the latter had far greater power to bargain wages and conditions. There was certainly solidarity amongst the horsemen and the ordinary labourers in the face of the difficult circumstances which dependency created. A more serious example of this solidarity than the above, is the following, from the days of the 'Slump'. 'At that time I lived out there at Wellingore. I was married. And I come here after a job at Linwood. I got to this-here house, and I've said it before, if there was one there was sixty people there, and it was only a six-horse farm...I was one what they come and told me to hold on a bit, and there was give of us for that job, out of this sixty. And there was one chap, he'd seven in the family - we was all talking, like - and he stood the same chance as what we did, like, you know. So we knocked our heads together to let him have it, that we wouldn't go back. And he went and got the job'.

This social solidarity produced a clear polarisation between workers and their employers, despite the hollow benevolence of harvest suppers and the contact between the two, which was rather more frequent than in industry. 'It was harvest festival at the Wesleyan chapel, when we all got together. There was over fifty of us single chaps like. They'd had the harvest festival on the Sunday, then on the Monday it was the sale. So we went to this-here sale, and there was a big box come on, and it was up for auction, like. So we knocked it in our heads that we'd have it between us, and we paid twenty-five shillings for it'. The box apparently contained several layers of wrappings or boxes, in the manner of a 'nest' of dolls. 'But when we got down to the bottom of it, it was an empty matchbox. Well, we shouldn't have cared if it'd been a full one. It was something, wasn't it? But it was empty. The farmer's wife had done it. So we were so mad about it, like, that we got up and walked out, and we decided what to do. So we went to Marsh Chapel, and we went into the shop - of course, it was closed, however, the woman let us in because she knew us - and we said "Have you any Epsom Salts?" And she said "Yes". So we said "Can we have a quarter of a pound?" She said "Yes". We had this quarter of a pound, and the copper was boiling for their supper, you see, and we had to keep our eye on the woman what was seeing to it, like.

And she was getching some coal or something, and one of us shot in, and turned it in, and gave it a stir and galloped out again. Of course, we all leaves'. Needless to say, the 'single chaps' had not sampled their own brew! Propriety of the occasion, however, seems to have prevented the waggoner of Mr. Chapman's farm from being associated with their action. He had, after all, to keep up appearances commensurate with his status as the aristocrat of rural labour-aristocrats. The indiscriminate nature of the men's revenge, however, meant that he paid a price for his status on this occasion. 'Next morning, me and the waggoner had to go to Louth with the waggons, like. Well, we set off at five in the morning from Grainthorpe. We'd just got up to Grainthorpe and the waggoner, he had to gallop! He said "Keep your eye on the horses a minute", and he skipped over the hedge, like, and did a job for his sen. And he did seven or eight before he got to Louth! And he'd been to the supper. He said "Are you all right?" I said "Aye, I'm all right". And we went to go home, and he wasn't so bad going home. But, however, we got in to dinner and the foreman was there. "Now", he says, "how are you?" "God", he says, "you know when I'm not on the seat my missus is!"'.

The first thought of the horseman was to drive his plough or seed-drill 'as straight as ever you could', and to take good care of his horses. The brasses, in which the gears abounded, were, in Frank Stanney's words, 'your pride and joy', and hours were spent polishing them. But wages and conditions were the horseman's central concern in employment terms, of course. When Mr. Chapman lived at Brackenborough, near Louth, as a third chap, he earned £16 for the first year, whereas he later went to work at Grainthorpe as second chap for £30. '...When I went from Brackenborough to Colonel Fenwick at Grainthorpe, well, I mean it was one of the best, one of the best places, you m' say, in Lincolnshire, Colonel Fenwick's was...we even had a place to go in at night - what they called the saddle 'ouse. Well there was chairs like this to sit in /padded armchair/, and a stove in the middle, and coal, and that-there. Well, at Brackenborough you had nothing. If you were locked out you slept in the stable. Well if you were locked out at Grainthorpe you could sleep in the saddle 'ouse, where it was warm. Brackenborough, when I was locked out there, I used to go and sleep in the cut-beet bin. I slept in the cut-beet bin first night - till the rats ran over me legs so many times, so I got up and went in the beans. 'Cause there was some rats in them days. We used to get tuppence a tail - aye, we'd get tuppence a tail, for catching 'em'.

Such drastic differences as these would decide a man whether to leave or stay with a job. Under the living-in system marriage could represent a considerable risk to employment. 'If you wanted to get married, well you had to look for another job...I mean, you was a single chap, and you were living-in with the foreman. Well, of course, if you wanted to get married, then you had to find a house, hadn't you? I mean, he couldn't employ you, not as you was, could he? He could maybe take you on for a labourer, or anything like that, but otherwise you had to look for a different job. Well, I mean if you was a horseman you wouldn't take a job as a labourer, not if you was interested in horses. So you'd look out for a waggoner's job or a second chap's job...' Living-in, the skilled man was tied to the employer and could be paid less than if living out with a family. The system tacitly worked against marriage. On the other hand, it was precisely his skill which allowed the horseman a limited power of bargaining. 'If you was anything of a chap, they was on before you - when they knew you was leaving they was after you. I mean I was lucky, I never had to - when I was single - I never had to go after a job because I was - they more or less come to me'. Farmers ceased to go to Mr. Chapman, apparently, when he was no longer single. So long as he was, reputation was the best recommendation for a job. Other than this, jobs were sought in the local paper or at markets. 'At Binbrook there used to be a hiring-place in the market on a certain day in May week, for the single chaps...and the farmer would come across to you and ask if any of you wanted a job. And if you did, well, he'd maybe go away to a pub, and give you a drink, and tell you what he wanted. And if it didn't suit you, well, you walked away and left him sitting in the pub'. Onee married, reputation, it seems, became even more important in the employment market.

Throughout the Twenties, hours of work slowly decreased and wages rose. Mr. Chapman had been working as a horseman for about a year when Saturday afternoon was added to the Sunday off, but as he remarked: '...we didn't know what to do with it when we had half day, because we were paid by the year, you see. We had no money. First half day we had off, there was four on us and we hadn't a penny between us. So we went round the farms looking for rabbits. And we got some rabbits and we took 'em to the pub at night. We selled 'em to the customers and then we got some drink, or a bit o'money for a bit o' bacca'.

Rabbit-catching, which was technically poaching, was not necessarily frowned on in the Lincolnshire Wolds, where rabbits had always been over-abundant. It was a highly skilful pastime, and often a profitable one, for the rural worker who travelled on foot. Mr. Chapman used a catapult with three metal 'stones', which he claimed always to have recovered. Called out to drive the reaper one Sunday, for his boss to have a shoot as the rabbits broke cover, he was eventually allowed to use his catapult, and claims to have shot twenty-seven rabbits while the foreman took his place on the reaper. The guns had claimed only two! Frank Stanney's father, also a horseman, used a belt with a large buckle. 'It was one Sunday morning at Scallows Hall Park /near Binbrook, on the Wolds/ ...he says "Look out boy", he said "There's a rabbit there". He said "You get opposite me, I'm going to go round him". And he started walking round and round and round and round, and I was opposite. While the rabbit was watching him I was going round the other side back on him, like. While he was walking round he was taking his belt off. And he wrapped it round one hand, and he was going clockwise round it while he got his belt up, and he just wrapped it round his hand once and hit it on the head. I can remember the tongue /of the buckle/...going straight in between his eyes'.

When the working day began to shorten, so that the men finished at five o'clock, three or four of them in the stable would pass the time with a nine-peg meril board on the beet lid, playing with matches. The board was designed with three squares, one inside the other, their corners joined by diagonals. The object was to align one's counters at the centre of the inner square, on the diagonal. This extremely old - certainly medieval - game of meril lasted for as long as a fortnight's spare time. Otherwise, Mr. Chapman recalls that quoits, with a gate-hook in a wall and a ring on a piece of string, was 'a good game'.

Both in and out of work, songs were an essential part of the old rural community. 'That man what was behind them horses, he was either whistling to his sen all day or else he was singing. Them days, they were singing and whistling all day. Some of them used to have a mouth organ, and he'd be holding the plough in one hand and the mouth organ in the other, and going up and down the field...' A story about one of these singers illustrates not only their spontaneity, but also how sounds could be turned to express the conflict between horsemen and their employers. 'The chap what used to sing it, now he could sing it. They called him Tom Merritt.

By God he was a good singer. I don't know whether he's alive today or not, but he used to sing all day. And he started singing this song, and it goes:

I'm seamin' seams,
I'm schemin' schemes,
I'm building twitch high.
Its days are few
When I come along
With a Fenton plough.

And I know we were singing it one day...and the boss, he used to creep up the hedge side - I've seen him on his hands and knees - so that he could see that we'd started ploughing, you know...and he came out there and says "I wish you chaps wouldn't sing that song", he says, "It's not my fault there's all this twitch"'. The farmer was clearly annoyed that his workers were making fun of him as a farmer.

The first Fordson tractors were just around the corner, however, and gradually over coming decades the tractor would replace the horse as an instrument of labour. 'The organisation and division of labour varies according to the instruments of labour available', wrote Marx in 1847. Soon the agricultural division of labour would alter radically, the rural class structure would be transformed, and there would be little opportunity for collective criticism or action against employers where the isolated tractor driver replaced the horsemen who were thrown together in field, stable and house. For the rural worker, industrialisation has had the opposite effect to that which it has had for the urban worker.