

The Salamanca Corpus: "The Buckinghamshire Labourer"
(1869)

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Text type: Buckinghamshire

Date of composition: 1869

Editions: 1869, 1870, 1882, 2009, 2012

Source text:

Rowe, Richard. 1870. "The Buckinghamshire Labourer" (From *Good Words* July 1869). *The Sidney Morning Herald* 27th January: 6

e-text

Access and transcription: November 2012

Number of words: 4,460

Dialect represented: Buckinghamshire

Produced by María F. García-Bermejo Giner

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THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

27th Jan. 1870

[6]

THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LABOURER

(From *Good Words*.)

I SHALL best enable my readers to "get at" the Buckinghamshire labourer by writing out a few notes of his surroundings and of conversations with him and his.

I started to talk with him in his home, and on both sides of the hedges, in the golden spring weather, which prematurely bloomed out between rain and snow in February. On the main line the long train, bound from black, busy London to the black, busy north, puffed and rattled away on the sun-gilt metals, and silence once more brooded over the station. In the leisurely style which characterises even railway management in agricultural districts, the branch train got under way, and rumbled most decorously out of the Hundred of Dacorum into equally rural Bucks. On both sides the flat, greenly fat country spread in sunny peace. Half-a-dozen men, employed in building what looked like a village "cage," knocked off work to watch the train go past. Little lambs galloped

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away from the line fences on long black legs. A sweep's pony, standing at a level-crossing gate, took fright, turned tail, and scampered down a lonely lane with its soot-sack laden cart, and two black familiars after it. In the train the talk was of old-fashioned seasons come again, promising old fashioned haymaking in May. The town at which the train stops—in spite of the good looking new buildings and plate-glass shop fronts in which it has broken out, in spite of more than one railway station and a canal wharf, in spite of street lamps (economically not lighted when the almanac says that it ought to be moonlight), and its multitude of signs, hung out like banners, seems almost as sleepy as the country round. It is not market day, and a bashful stranger might feel inclined to blush at having to walk alone across the bright, broad, bare market-square, watched as he goes with sleepy curiosity by tradesmen basking at their shop-doors. A quiet, sunny, old fashioned red street leads up to the green, many-graved churchyard, begirt, in cathedral-close fashion, with quaintly picturesque old houses, ripe red and yellowish-white. In the middle of the churchyard rises the fine cruciform church, a landmark in the fertile Vale of Aylesbury part of it as fresh looking as when just finished, and the other part under the tools of workmen who are chipping off the rough plaster which still disfigures its stone, in the leisurely style which seems to be the characteristic (save in sport, volunteering, and duck-hatching) of the latitude. But, if the town is quiet, the country outside it seems—to one who was in London an hour or two before—almost sound asleep; that is, so far as human life is concerned. Larks are singing by the hundred, in their "privacy of glorious light;" visible, plump, brown thrushes are also singing all round, glossy rooks caw, circle, drop, strut, and then rise in pettish alarm, to drop again, and strut again, with clerical stateliness, on both hands; now and then a cow lows, a bullock sulkily soliloquises, a sheep baas like a hoarse basso, a lamb bleats plaintively, a sheep bell rattles its muffled tinkle, or a far-off dog barks and bays; but a man's shout across the brown and green fields is so rare, that it sounds startling. The eye wanders over lonely field after lonely field, without lighting on a roof. Beyond the fat, low land rise the still lonelier-looking Chiltern Hills, with single trees upon their sky-like, pall-like dark woods sweeping down their sides; and chalky, unwooded, furze-dotted pastures beneath the woods, that make one think of the shorn, tufted lower limbs of poodles. On the highway, the silent roadmender gazes for

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five minutes after the pedestrian who passes him, or the hip booted horseman who gallops past, or the taxed cart, to which the fat old lady gives a "list to port," or the half-tilted miller's waggon, slowly drawn by a pair of plump dappled greys, whilst the white-powdered miller's man beguiles the tedium of his journey by pitching fragments of his lunch to the white-and-liver spaniel that is leaping and whining at the cart's tail. When the waggon has ground out of hearing, there is nothing to remind the road mender that there is any man besides himself astir in the world, except the sullen thud of the flail, that comes from the long, low, black barn a field off.

Lanes branch from the highway at right angles, with white finger posts indicating the distance of the villages to which the lanes lead in miles and furlongs. These lanes are even more lonely than the road. In one of them stands a smock-frocked little boy, holding the halter of a rough coated horse that lies upon its side, twitching its lips, and now and then giving a convulsive little kick. He watches it stolidly, like a statue of puzzled patience. "What's the matter with your horse?" he asked. "Pretty near dead." "And what are you going to do?" "Doan't know, sir, unless summun comes along." And then he resumes his silent sentry, staring straight at nothing like a mounted Horse Guards sentinel. Presently, another little boy is fallen in with. He is coming from a farm in whose dank strawyard, trodden into deep mud near the horse-pond, half a dozen white and brown bullocks and a chesnut colt, with a long silver tail and mane, are feeding out of grey and yellow structures like unpainted four-post bedsteads without tops, whilst a white legged tortoiseshell cat is daintily picking her way through the drier rick-yard. He is a very thin "weedy" little boy, with pale brown face and languid brown eyes. He wears a peak [?] cap, an old red comforter, and a faded tattered smock. He pants as he propels his two-wheeled barrow, and shovels horse dung into it with a rusty spade. He looks as if he must be very badly off, but he does not turn out to be so, according to the general notion of the state of things in the South Midlands This is the account he gives of himself—each item pulled out, like a cork, by a separate question "I'm gooin' thirteen, sir. Yes, I goo to school. To the chapel school. It begins at nine a-Sundays. No, I don't goo to no school a-weekdays. I have meat about twice a week. Meat such as *I* eat (said very proudly) costs ninepence a pound—tenpence sometimes. Beef and mutton both. I'm pickin' up dung for Mr. —. I get him a cartload a week. Two

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barrersfull a day. Each on 'em takes me about a hour. Miles, I s'pose, I walks. He gives me 5s. 6d. a week. Little boys (said very superciliously) as goos crow-keepin' an' such, gets 3s. a week, sometimes 3s. 6d. —that's what *they* gets. Rest o' my time I'm plaitin'. I get three-halfpence a score* for that. Can't say a score o' what. We call it a *score*. Don't know what you mean, sir. I can do any kind o' work (said with unlimited confidence in the universality of his genius). Yes, sir, I should be glad to get summut else to do."

On again through the lonely lanes The brown hedges are sprinkled with bursting buds, yellow catkins dangle from them, and "palm" branches are buttoned with silver-gray floss-silk. Little wrens run in and out of the hedges like mice, homely brown sparrows chirp inside, and in the fields beyond, larks, singing as they go, are making painful efforts to rise, like young poets. The furze is in blossom, the hedgeside grass is starred with dandelions, and just above the ditches the cuckoo-pint raises its glossy spear heads. Some of the fences are of dead thorn-branches — sometimes sliced from the live stems which show their transversely truncated torsos close by — arranged in zigzags. Beside others lie faggots of brushwood, a tumbril-load of which a tiny Hodge, in Jim Crow, smock, and buskins, is driving off as seriously as if he was a grandfather. Little brooks, spanned by little plank bridges, cross the road. The gates have a park-like look, being almost all painted white. Under the clipped hedges, and on the brown furrows, smock-frocks squat, with their legs apart like the legs of compasses, munching their bread and cheese in sociable silence. One man eats his all alone in the middle of a meadow blotched with old mole- hills. Over a ploughed field, littered with lumps of chalk, toils another smock-frock, lifting up his legs as if his goal lay, in Yankee phrase, "somewhere on the other side of eternity." After the rush of city life, there is something very refreshing in the leisureliness of country life. *Clodhopper* seems a very inappropriately jerky name to give to ploughmen. As the cochineal insect takes its colour from the opuntia, so country-people seem to take their tone from the crops in the midst of which they live. The grass and the corn do not hurry—and why should *they*? In a wide meadow, ruled with wheeled sheep-troughs, two other men are plodding, in equally leisurely style, from the far-off yellow litter and cut-plum-cake-like stack, with pitchforked loads of straw and hay upon their backs. Here a plough rests, as if asleep,

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between the furrows; there a plough, drawn by a tandem of four black horses, or three brown horses with black manes and tail, turns the sparsely green soil into bristly brown clods. The plough is steered by a man in neutral-hued monkey jacket and corduroy breeches, and a little fellow in a grey-green smock cracks his big whip as he walks backwards alongside his team. Yonder, a dim blue, single-horsed, two-manned plough goes backwards and forwards. In the next field two or three men are stooping over the dark soil, dibbling holes with one hand whilst they dip the other into their leather seedpouches. In another field a brown and a white horse are drawing harrows, driven with cord reins by a man in a red shirt, which blazes like a poppy on the brown clods: an old fellow, in a rusty velveteen shooting-jacket and dingy white hat, trudging at the same time, with his gun under his arm, over the [?] looking square.

But now there are signs of a village. Plump, snowy-white ducks are paddling in the ditches; and a man is forking manure into a tumbril from the "farmer's short-cake" that raises its straw-bristled table-land above the roadside turf. The village is a cluster of cottages; some two-storied, with red brick walls and slated roofs, some of yellow-washed timber panelled brick, with high low-hanging roofs of mossy thatch; and others of whitewashed brick and flint, both showing through the wash, with cracked grey shutters that hang down like table-leaves, and tiny quasi-dormer windows in the low thatched roofs. At some of the cottage doors women stand plaiting straw. In the churchyard the sexton is turfing a grave, but jealous for his village's reputation in a sanitary point of view, he anxiously explains that it is an *old* grave. He invites the wayfarer to enter the vestry to see the church's "lions" — the carved closet in which the surplices are kept, and a painting of Moses and Aaron. Hard by the church is a sleepy, cosy old mansion, with an avenue of trees in a green paddock begoldened with Lent lilies; and hard by that, the red rectory with an ivy-clad, bee-hived lodge. In the outskirts of the village stands a square, low, old-fashioned farmhouse, with fruit-trees trained upon its walls. There are old grassy orchards here and there, in one of which hangs a public-house sign. Altogether, the village seems an "idyllic" kind of place to live in; but let us hear how its inhabitants do live in it. At another public-house, labourers are taking their mid day rest and beer. One of them is picked out by his fellows to give the information required, as being most familiar with all kinds of agricultural labour. He has

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scanty, iron-gray hair, moistly wisped down on his weatherbeaten forehead, and white stubble on his chin. He wears corduroy trousers and a bone-buttoned fustian jacket, and his brickdust-coloured throat is bare. This is what he says, spontaneously and in reply to questions: — "Yes, sir, I can do any kind o' hagricult'ral labour. Ast anybody that knows me. I don't care who ye ast. I've worked for Mr. — and Mr. — close by; an' you can goo to them when you've done talkin' to me. I'll goo from the plough even to the buildin' an' thetchin', an' that takes it all through. I've been a prizeman at the buildin' an' thetchin'. Law bless ye, sir, it ain't confined to *this* parish! Men comes from thirty and forty miles round t'other side a long way o' the Chilterns: 15s. is the first prize, and 12s. 6d. the second I can't say what the third is. I never got so low as that. I get 5s. the square, naked work, a-thetchin'. an' 3s. 6d. the other. P'r'ps I'm better off than some—moor so than may be. The work's in my hands, an' I know how to do it, an' so they can't take it out. A ploughman hereabouts may get 14s. a week, an' a shepherd the same, but, take it all round, wages is 10s. or 11s. Some of the farmers let out their work at haytime and harvest, an' then you may get moor. But then you're days and days'out o' work in the year. I reckon I don't get moor than eight months out o' the twelve; an' my boys don't get that. Yes, you may call i me an 'odd man,' if you like—I'll turn my hand to anything. An' so'll my boys. One on 'em's sixteen, an' the other's quite growed up. An' I've had to keep them two great boys all winter—an' will if I can. Yes, all the winter I have, 'cept when there come a machine, an' they got 2s. or 1s. 6d. a day for takin' away the straw and chaff. They'll go crow-keepin'—sixpence they'll push in for; and what's moor, they'll bring it home. That'll buy a loaf o'bread. Half a loaf, we say, is better than none—much moor a whole 'un. If they could but earn a shillin' a week each certain, that 'ud be summut. Sometimes my youngest son gets a job pig-drivin' to Aylesbury, but the soldiers is al'ays at him, an' that makes him rusty, an' he swears. He don't want to be forced to goo for a soldier. He's a great tall chap, 'an so's his brother. You see, sir, he ain't eighteen yet, an' so his time wouldn't count, would it, sir? I want him to try for the police, but he says, 'No, father, I'll never be a bobby—not if I starve.' I'm six in family, sir—four gals, youngest is eight. All on 'em plaits, but that's like throwin' one 'a'penny arter another. You buy sixpennorth o' straw, an' you gets 9d. for it when its done, an' it takes you four or five hours to do it. Some, p'r'aps, can do the thirty yards in three and a

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half—that's according to quickness. 2d. a week is what's paid at the plaiting schools. If I'd to pay that for my gals now, it would pull me all to pieces. There'd be 8d. a week goin' out—see how that would muddle me. A penny a week, I think, is what they pay at the parish school. I've no wish to speak ill o' hanybody, but my opinion o' parsons mostly is, that what they've got they'll keep. There's no lace-makin' just here. There may be about Buckingham—I never was so far. No, you won't see women workin' in the fields here, 'cept, p'a'ps, a wife reapin' with her husband at harvest. No, sir, I've no wish to hemigrate—not as I knows of. Of course, if I could get such wages as them you tells me on in—where was it? —an' house an' food, too—I'd take 'em, if I could get to 'em. There's people here that gets out-door relief, but I can't tell ye much about that. I don't suppose I could get so much as a parish-doctor to come to me. Yes, we've a club —it's held here—sixteenpence a month. Whit Monday's our club-day. *Live*, sir? We live as we can, an' not as we would. I've had turnip-tops, an' nothing else, an' them begged. Bless you, we've no garden ground—not so much as we could put a plant n. Pigs! There ain't many pigs about here. If we could keep 'em, we ain't able to get 'em. There was a deal o' distress here last winter. For four days I'd nothing—next to nothing to eat, though I was in work—I was clearin' off a score. If we'd had sickness, God A'mighty only knows where we should ha' been. Arter all, the Lord al'ays provides somehow. If He hadn't put that there gift o' mine to do anything into my hands, how would my poor children ha' got on? I don't know who ye are, sir, or what ye are, but I've told ye more about myself than I ever told any man afore, if I was to tell ye all, it would fill that there black book ye're writin' in."

And next for a talk with a shepherd. He is a ruddy, robust young fellow, standing in the midst of his ewes and lambs in a hurdled oblong of turnips ; and when he sees a stranger suddenly turn aside from the road, climb the hedge bank, stride over the low thorn fence, and straddle across the hurdles, the stalwart young shepherd takes his hands from his pockets, and looks very much inclined to knock the stranger down, under the impression that such eccentrically audacious proceedings can only spring from rabid ovine kleptomania.

But the shepherd's pipe is empty, and the stranger professes to want a pipe-light. The production of a tobacco-pouch on one side, and the striking of a lucifer held, when

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alight, between hollowed hands on the other, are the preliminaries of peace; and when a little lamb, which the shepherd has been obliged to take from its mother, runs up bleating first to him, and then takes its stand between the stranger's legs, rubbing its white ears and black face against his muddy boots, the shepherd relaxes into conversation. Close by us a pied wagtail runs in and out under the sheep's bellies without the least alarm. Its remarkable lameness is remarked upon; but it does not interest the shepherd: he professes even not to know tho wagtail under that or any other name. His sheep are half-breds, he says; but he cannot tell between what. "That's a Down," he adds, pointing to a plump, broad-backed, black faced ewe; but he cannot say what "Down." He gets 14s. a week, thinks others get as much. Carters and ploughmen get 13s. anyhow. He has lived in the neighbourhood six years, and was never three months out of work. *He* never heard of any distress "to speak on "thereabouts." What we eat or what we buy, sir, do you mean?" he cross-questions, when asked how often he gets meat. "I get meat twice a day," he goes on, an' I expect most o' the people hereabouts gets it once or twice a day. Meat here's 8d. and 9d. Couldn't get pork last winter under 8 ½ d. The price o' bread makes a diff 'rence. When bread's down, the masters lower the wages. Yes, I've a pretty sight o' lambs, an' I haint lost a yow this 'ear—that's pretty good, we reckon. Yes, them Australian wages ain't bad; but I suppose they don't do much else than shepherd in them parts. But I must be gettin' on—it's pretty nigh milkin' time."

A little brown-faced fellow in a blue-and-white neckerchief, buskins, and a verry ragged jacket, is asked what he has got in the basket on his shoulder. " My *old* coat," he answers, looking his interrogator sturdily in the face, as if determined to defend that treasure at all hazards against felonious appropriation.

" How old are you, my boy?"

"Just gone ten."

"And what are you doing?" " Stone-pickin' in the fields,"

"When did you begin ?"

"I've been at it a 'ear."

"What do you get?"

"Two and sixpence a week."

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"Do you go to school?"

" No, I doan't goo to school—*no*," answers the small boy, with scornful emphasis, as if he thought such a mode of spending time would be very puerile for a person of his manly wage earning importance.

Another white finger-post points the way to another whity-brown village church, with an embattled tower. Green-powdered beech-boles (the Sylva of Buckinghamshire—the shire of the *ham* in the midst of the *boc*—still justifies its name) rise in the green graveyard flush with the top of the roadside wall. Green, white-and-yellow tombstones, lean back in the hushed sleeping-place—a very different *κοιμητηριον* from the Tower Hamlets' Cemetery, with its ever rushing and rumbling trains on the straddling viaducts hard by. A little farther on is another quiet, quaintly-named, and quaintly-built jumble of Buckinghamshire cottages—lichened gables, mossy, thatch, red brick, yellow brick, dusky plaster, timber parallelograms, white, grey, green, and blick weather-board. The roar of the blacksmith's bellows, the rhythmical cadence of the hammers on the anvil, in the low black forge, are almost the only sounds of human life throughout the place. A cottage-door stands open. Two or three children are squatted before the hearth-fire, on the pitted, lanky-bricked floor of the only lower room. A young woman is ironing on a low, unpainted table, chief piece of furniture, placed beneath the back window. An attempt to obtain "social statistics" is made by the stranger who has stepped in, but the young woman takes alarm. "If you please, sir, I'd rather not do it," she says; and fidgets about like a hen, when a hawk is hovering over a farmyard, until the intruder beats an apologetic retreat. A neighbour is less cautious, and more communicative. He is a very feeble old man, with a grey-bristled chin, and limbs that seem to be rather hoisted up and down by halyards, with half-jammed blocks, than moved by spontaneous volition. "I'm seventy-six," he pipes. "Yes, I s'pose I'm past work. I've put my shoulder out; but I was just goin' to try to walk into Buckin'am. The duke may be a very good landlord, for aught I know, but I don't live under him. My cottage belongs to Mr. —, "We've only the lower room, and one above. Yes, there's a good many like that. Some, by chance, may have two rooms over. Yes, men with ever so many children lives the same. Me an' my old womsn gets three shillins a week from the parish, an' three loaves; and a shillin' has to goo out o' that for rent. There's been hard times here last winter. Lace? Lace

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makin' ain't what it was. Little uns may get 2d. a day, and big gals, mayhap, 6d. Yes, a good muny on 'em make it hereabouts—yes, both in Buckin'am an' the villages; but it's a poor livin'."

There is nothing "sensational" in the English peasant's life—except when he turns poacher, and shoots the keeper through the head, or gets knocked down and taken up himself. He is not a piquant subject for a character-sketch. He bears his "prosperity" at 14s. a week, and his semi-starvation on 1s. and a loaf and a-half a week, with apparently equal stolidity. It must be admitted, too, that a good many of our town poor—to say nothing of country air—are worse lodged than the peasant, are as badly off, in a pecuniary point of view, as he is at his worst, and would think his receipts at his best a little fortune. But, still, there is something specially pathetic in the way in which the hard-up farmer's man speaks of his lot. He grumbles, of course, but he does not grumble like the hard-up in towns—as if he had an undoubted right to a great deal better fate; he accepts his destiny in a quiet, half-stunned fashion, as if he felt that he could not have been born to anything better, however disagreeable it may be. It is normal for him to live from hand to mouth, with no hopes of better things beyond. He does not turn a Jacobin, like the town-proletary. Slower wits, no doubt, have something to do with the peasant's sullen resignation. If he were not so apathetic, he could find better markets for his labour. Still, there is something respectable in the unenvious way in which the peasant speaks of his "betters." He has to acknowledge "social superiority" far more constantly than the town poor are compelled to—it is, indeed, painful to see a hard-working Hodge touching his hat, under a sense of duty, as if he were still a serf, to any one who passes him "dressed like a gentleman," although clothes may be the sole point of superiority which the touched-to can claim over the toucher; and in all manly virtues, and *real* gentlemanlike feeling, the one who has obeisance done him may be far inferior to the one who does it. But still Hodge goes on touching his hat; and his way of thinking of those "above him" is sweeter-blooded, so to speak, than that of the town struggler. Hodge would naturally like to be better off, but he does not want to rob others, in order to become so. He still reverences the squire, and all kinds of spiritual and secular pastors and masters; that is, unless he has had his somewhat slavish deference sapped by a sojourn in towns. He sometimes leans ultra-democracy there: *ecce signum* —I

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overheard a Buckinghamshire bumpkin describing his experiences in some hospital from which he had recently been discharged—not the County Infirmary: Buckinghamshire people boast of *that* as a model institution which "Londoners might take copy from."

"The doctor come to me," said the discharged patient, "and, 'young man,' says he, 'you're a deal better.' 'Excuse me, sir, ' says I, 'but you're a fool!' Yea, I did, though he was a doctor."

"But that was cheeky," said the patient's companion.

"An' wouldn't *you* ha' been cheeky?" was the rejoinder. "Don't a man know his own in'ard better than another man ? "

*Of yards.

