

How did the Dorset Rural Poor keep warm in the Nineteenth Century?

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Isaac Purcell is a second year student at Oxford Brookes University who took up a work placement at Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust in the Autumn of 2024. At this time we were running a programme with Historic England as part of their national scheme, 'Everyday Heritage: Celebrating Working-Class Histories'. Isaac wrote this article for us as part of our work on re-imagining the lives of the labouring poor in Dorset.

This article investigates how the rural labouring classes in England kept warm during the nineteenth century. It examines three primary concerns of keeping warm: fuel, shelter, and the money that kept the roofs over their heads and their fires burning. The primary focus of this article is Dorset, although other areas will be included for contextual purposes.

Keeping warm was primarily a financial concern for the rural labouring classes in the nineteenth century. The availability of employment, wages, and supplementary income from local trade determined their living standards. With money, rural labourers could buy warm clothes or rent land for fuel collection.

One of the main factors that affected the income of rural labourers was enclosure, the revocation of common rights that the peasantry had historically enjoyed on the lands of the parish. The government implemented enclosure to make land more productive for landowners, and this simultaneously restricted the rural poor's access to grazing pasture and fuel. Until the nineteenth century, enclosure had been an ongoing, and slow process over

the centuries. However, the government increased the rate of enclosure with the Enclosure Acts of 1805.¹

So, how did enclosure affect the income of the rural labouring classes? In the case of our primary focus, Dorset, enclosure frequently saw farmland converted into pasture. This had the effect of reducing employment opportunities in the region as it lowered the need for farm labourers. Not only did this put labourers out of work, but it increased competition for jobs, which depressed wages.²

Enclosure also reduced the means that the rural poor had to supplement their income. In pre-enclosure Dorset, rural labourers might have owned cows, pigs, or some poultry. They would have taken their animals to graze on common land. Occasionally, these animals could be sold to supplement income during the winter or periods of illness, to raise funds to maintain cottages or to buy winter clothes. After enclosure, most rural labourers had to sell their animals as they no longer had adequate grazing land.³

This effect of enclosure was recorded by the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes in 'The Common A-Took in, Thomas and John,' written in 1834. In this poem, John expresses his worries about enclosure to Thomas. "Why, I'm a-getten rid ov ev'ry goose, An' goslen I've a-got: an' what is woose, I fear that I must zell my little cow." To this Thomas explains that John

¹G. E. Mingay, *Parliamentary Enclosure in England: An Introduction to its Causes Incidence and Impact, 1750 – 1850* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 143; History of the Heaths, Dorset council, accessed on 8th September 2024, <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/w/history-of-the-heaths#:~:text=The%20Enclosures%20Act%20of%201805%20determined%20much%20of,the%20heath%20with%20pine%20to%20%27improve%27%20the%20area.>

²Mingay, *Parliamentary Enclosure in England*, 143.

³ Ibid., 131-132.

could rent an allotment if the landlords decide to lease the land. To which John replies. "*I do hope that they will do it here, Or I must go to workhouse, I do fear.*"⁴

Ultimately, enclosure removed a vital source of income from the rural labouring classes in Dorset. It also destabilised employment by removing jobs, and this reduced incomes which made it harder to access the resources needed to stay warm.

Another factor that impacted the living standards of the rural poor was their ability to supplement their income through factory work. Here we see a distinct difference in northern and southern rural communities. In the south, we find families such as Joseph Houghton's, a 45-year-old casual labourer in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire. In 1867, his wife and four young children were described sitting around a meagre fire in an ill-maintained, sparsely furnished, single-room cottage, "nearly naked...with very little poor clothing."⁵ In the north, as the nineteenth century wore on, rural labourers often resided closer to industrial areas and could supplement their wages with factory labour. This earning opportunity was much less common in the South. In Dorset there were limited opportunities for work in the fabric mills, but not a lot else. As the historian Mark Freeman has pointed out, the west country had the lowest agricultural wages and the living standards for rural labourers. The living conditions of rural labourers in Dorset were more likely to be like those of Joseph Houghton's family.

We can now turn our attention to fuel. What did the rural labouring classes of the nineteenth century burn in their fireplaces? Coal might be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of fuel in this period. However, in the countryside, coal was a luxury, and not

⁴William Barnes, "The Common A-Took In, Thomas and John," in *The Poems of William Barnes Vol One*, edited by Bernard Jones (London: Centaur Press, 1962), 13.

⁵Barnes, "The Common A-took in," 121.

widely used due to cost, unless there were charitable schemes to help the poor such as those undertaken in Norfolk, where eighty acres of land were rented to raise funds to buy coal for the poor.⁶ In Dorset, there was no evident equivalent of the Norfolk coal charities. This is most likely due to the comparatively high price of coal in Dorset. In 1869, The *Poole Pilot* attributed the high price of coal to a lack of exports from Poole to coal-producing cities, such as Newcastle. On such ships, coal could have been brought back to Poole affordably.⁷ With no coal charities and higher than-usual coal prices, the average rural labourer was almost certainly dependent on fuel sources that could be scavenged or extracted locally. In 1805, J. M. Ducumb noted that in the neighbouring county of Devon “the poor burn no coals, and very little wood, on account of the expense.”⁸ We can also assume that wood was not used much in Dorset either. This is because of the expense of allotment rent, which was likely to be unaffordable. Writing in Gillingham in 1774, John Hutchins noted that in order to access forested land, cottagers needed to pay a yearly sum.⁹ We can reason that this type of arrangement spread throughout Dorset as enclosure progressed.

If coal and wood were unaffordable or inaccessible for most, what else was there to burn? In late eighteenth-century Suffolk, the poet George Crabbe referred to the heaths as the origin of “the light turf that warms the neighbouring poor.” Likewise, J.M. Ducumb stated that in Devon “most of their fuel is peat or turf.”¹⁰ From this, we can deduce that the rural poor also made use of the Purbeck heaths in Dorset for fuel. There is further evidence of this in

⁶Sara Birtles, “Common Land, Poor Relief and Enclosure: The Use of Manorial Resources in Fulfilling Parish Obligations, 1601-1834.” *Past and Present* no.165 (Nov. 1999), 91-93.

⁷“Cost of Coals,” *Poole Pilot*, (February 1869), 3.

⁸J. M. Ducumb, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hereford* (1805), 14.

⁹John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the Country of Dorset* (London: W. Bowyer and J. Nichols, 1774), 240.

¹⁰J. M. Ducumb, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Hereford* (1805), 14.

Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*, which is set in the late nineteenth-century Dorset heathlands. Here Hardy describes a woman raking over a turf fire and stacking blocks of "fresh turf" over its smouldering embers.¹¹ Moreover, Hardy also writes about the use of furze, also known as gorse, in fires. Furze is a thorny, dry, and highly flammable shrub that grows in the Dorset heathlands. This fuel would be cut, bundled, and sold by furze-cutters. Hardy, through the dialogue of his characters, describes how furze is a low-quality fuel that burns quickly and brightly.¹²

It seems that the rural labouring poor in Dorset primarily burned turf or peat, or furze, especially after enclosure. We can now ask: how did they light it? In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy describes a woman striking a light on kindled furze.¹³ In this description, Hardy is referring to a fire-striker or a flint and steel. Fire-strikers were made from a thin steel plate, about an eighth of an inch thick and two inches long. They were commonly an inverted U-shape so they could be secured over the fingers and struck upon a piece of flint. Most English labourers used a fire-striker to light a fire, and they remained in common use after the invention of matches. This was because they were durable and affordable, costing around fourpence each.¹⁴ Those without a fire-striker would ask their neighbours for some burning embers to start a fire.¹⁵

The fire-striker would be kept in a tinder box, another essential component of lighting a fire.

This box would be divided into two or three sections. The first, smaller section, would

¹¹Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (London: Belgravia, 1878; Auckland: The Floating press, 2010), 610.

¹²Ibid., 51-52.

¹³Ibid., 601.

¹⁴Miller Christy, "Concerning Tinder-Boxes. Article I.-Domestic Tinder Boxes," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol.1, no.1 (March 1903), 56-59

^{15A}. Roger Ekrich, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, Inc., 2005), 102.

contain a piece of flint and a fire-striker, and the other sections would contain tinder. These boxes were wooden and fairly large, around 10 inches long, and sometimes had a handle. They had a simple and functional appearance. The tinder section could contain various combustible materials: the down of reed mace, dried leaves, dried horse dung, or thistles. However, the commonest type of kindling was Amadou, from the French *amadouer*, which means to allure, as it enticed the spark into a fire. Amadou could be made from any type of puffball fungus, which grows in between the layers of fallen, decaying oak or willow trees. The fungus would be gathered in the autumn, beaten with a mallet till soft and stored in the tinder box next to the fireplace or hearth.¹⁶

Keeping a fire alight is also about shelter. What, then, was the housing situation of the rural labouring classes? Labourers often built cottages on waste or common land. These were simple buildings, constructed from a timber frame; most often with wattle and daub walls and space for window shutters; the floors were earthen, or made from wooden planks, and the roofs were thatched. Some were built with stone chimneys. However, many were built originally with large holes in the roof instead. Once constructed, manorial lords would usually incorporate the cottages into their lands to legitimise the property and extract rents.¹⁷

In other situations, rural labourers might live in converted farmhouses. In 1867, a commissioner described a converted farmhouse in Southwater, Sussex, that was barely habitable. According to the commissioner, the house had such a large chimney that a fire couldn't be kept alight on wet days. On these days, the commissioner added, the families are

¹⁶Christy," Concerning Tinder-Boxes," 60.

¹⁷John Broad, "Housing the Rural Poor in Southern England, 1650 – 1850," *The Agricultural History Review* 48, no.2 (2000): 154.

forced to keep warm by going into their beds. However, even when they did escape to their beds, the houses were in such a state that the roofs would be unable to weather any sort of downpour. This would result in their bedding being drenched in rain.¹⁸

Cottages may have had some of the same problems. In William Barnes's poem *The Settle an the Girt Wood Vire*, he remembers sitting in his Dorset cottage around a fire. He states "I cou'd zee al up into the sky, An' watch the smoke goo vrom the vire, al up an' out o' tun an higher."¹⁹ Due to this chimney, or 'tun', being large enough to enable a view of the heavens, it most likely let rain in too. Overall, rural housing during the nineteenth century can be summed up in the words of Rev. A. H. S. Barwell, "very cold, badly closed, and badly drained."²⁰

The question of how the rural labouring classes kept warm during the nineteenth century has many answers. The poor were dependent on myriad factors to stay warm: the availability of employment, the cost and availability of fuel and the condition of their housing. There are still more variables that I have not covered, such as their clothes, access to hot meals, and social spaces with open fires where they existed. The rural poor felt the impact of these factors depending on their region: in the south we know that the living standards were generally worse than those regions with industrial developments and alternative means of earning money. Furthermore, Dorset labourers were the most poorly paid in southern England, and as a result they would have struggled. Here, we can surmise that trying to fend off the cold was at best hard work, and at worst a mere aspiration.

¹⁸Tremenheere, *Commission on Employment of Children*, 98.

¹⁹William Barnes, T. L. Burton, *The Sound of William Barnes Dialect Poems: Vol. 1, Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect, First Collection (1844)* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide press, 203), 345.

²⁰Tremenheere, *Commission on Employment of Children*, 160.