

A
TRAGEDY
OF
ENGLISH
HISTORY.

Wage Condition of the English Labourer
In proportion to the Cost of Living
From 1260 to 1887.

Illustrated with Diagrams, constructed
From THOROLD ROGER'S
"Six Centuries of Work and Wages." *

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A TRAGEDY OF ENGLISH HISTORY.

How Landlordism brought Poverty and Misery to
"Merrie England."

BY SAMUEL MILLIKEN.

LABOUR is the maker of all wealth. Why then is labour so often without wealth? We can easily understand why there should be pauper idleness; but why should there be pauper labour?

In order to understand the cause of pauper labour, let us consider the case of English working men.

Has labour-saving machinery caused their poverty? That does not seem reasonable. Machinery helps the workers to double, or treble, or quadruple their power of production, and in the very nature of things should make the labour lighter and the labourer more comfortable. To say that machinery which makes the production of things easier and cheaper is the cause of the worker's poverty, or, in other words, his inability to get such things is not good sense.

Has free trade caused their poverty? Surely not, for the rate of wages is higher in England than in any other part of Europe.

Is the cause to be found in the money question? Scarcely, for bitter poverty exists all over the world, regardless of money systems which vary widely.

The cause seems to be deeper than machinery or tariffs, or money. And it is—in the land. The solution of the labour problem lies under your feet.

Look at the following diagram (pp. 4 & 5) of the wage condition of the English farm labourer from 1265 to 1887. It is the fruit of twenty years' searches among old records, and has been made chiefly from the work of the most patient student of modern times, Professor J. E. Thorold Rogers, of Oxford University, England. He traced, as he said, "certain mischiefs to their root." The so called "aristocracy" of England at once took alarm at his showings, and he was dismissed from his position.

Look at the diagram carefully.

Notice first the dotted line across the chart. It stands from year to year, and from century to century, as the cost at that particular time of supporting a family of five persons. And the heavy irregular line shows from time to time how the wages of the labourer were more than this cost, or fell short of it—in other words, how far he kept his head above water, or how hopelessly he sank below it.

You will notice that the labourer, though working but eight hours a day, was never so well off as in the years 1485

1495, nor never so poor as between the years 1790-1870.

The first four century sections are headed :

- (1) Period of Serfs.
- (2) Struggle for Freedom.
- (3) Golden Age.
- (4) Robbed of Land.

Up to the year 1495 notice the wonderful improvement in their condition. But at that time occurred what Rogers calls "The Landlords' Conspiracy." Says he: "The complaint about enclosures is as old as the fifteenth century, when the land hunger of the age led to encroachment on common pastures, and the forcible extinction of rights over common land."

The labourer was robbed of the commons, which were forcibly parcelled out by the landlords as private property, and the people then were rack rented by them.

Notice, at once, the quick and distressing fall in wages, which to this day have never been regained. As for the labourer, he descended into the hell of poverty, where he remains to-day.

In that day, as in our day, the clergy in general did not denounce the land grabbers, and demand restoration of the people's rights—not they. They saw the robbery, but comforted the poor by writing a "prayer" for them. Here is the prayer as set forth by order of King Edward the Sixth, about the year 1550 :

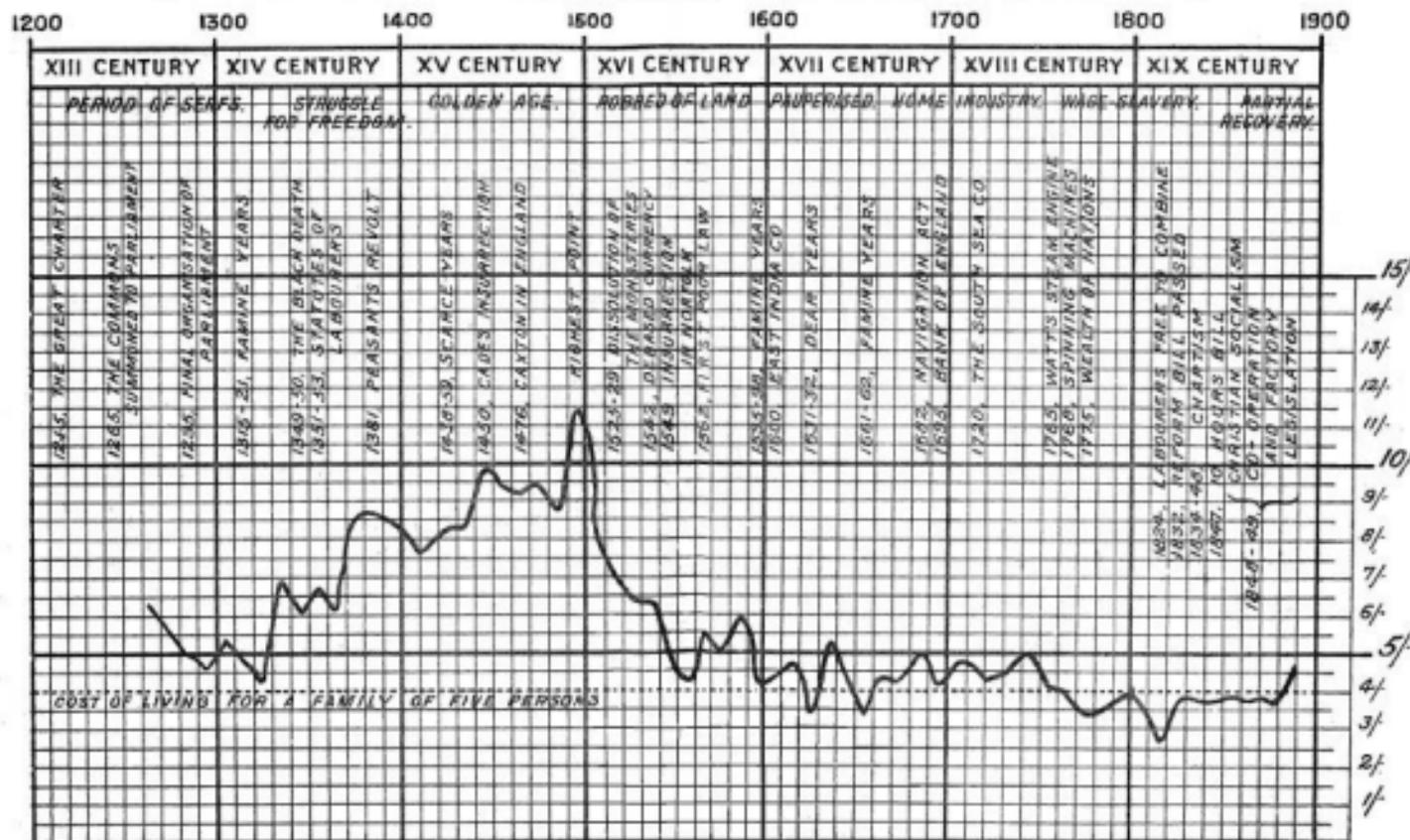
"We heartily pray Thee to send Thy Holy Spirit into the hearts of them that possess the pastures and grounds of the earth, that they, remembering themselves to be Thy tenants, may not rack or stretch out the rents of their houses or lands, nor yet take unreasonable fines or moneys, after the manner of covetous worldlings: but so let them out that the inhabitants thereof may be able to pay the rents, and to live and nourish their families, and remember the poor. Give them grace, also, to consider that they are but strangers and pilgrims in this world, having here no dwelling place, but seeking one to come; that they, remembering the short continuance of this life, may be content with that which is sufficient, and not join house to house, and land to land, to the impoverishment of others; but to behave themselves in letting their tenements, lands and pastures, that after this life they may be received into everlasting habitations."

Notice the date of this prayer, 1550. Look to the diagram and see the heading for that period—"Robbed of Land." See how wages dropped in consequence of this robbery until they became almost as low as was that piece of blasphemy called the "prayer."

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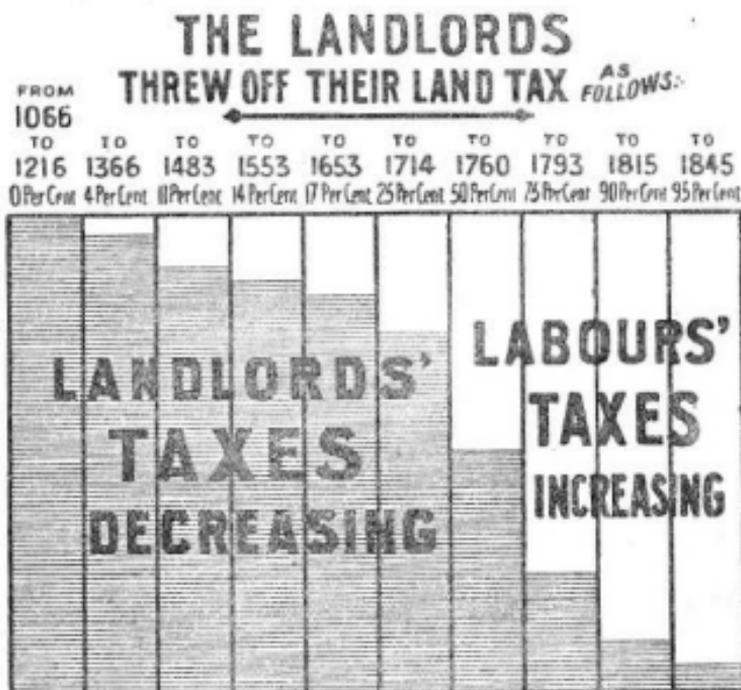
Wage Condition of the English Labourer in proportion to the Cost of Living for a Family of Five Persons for each Decade from 1260 to 1887.

Diagram constructed from THOROLD ROGER'S "Six Centuries of Work and Wages."



Does not the diagram prove that to enslave men one need not own men, but only the land which the men must use?

Now I shall ask you to look at another diagram, first, however, explaining in a few words what is known as the "feudal tenure" or fee tenure of land, which in England was the old time theory and practice. William the Conqueror, after invading and subduing England in the year 1066, allotted large tracts of the country to his retainers on condition that they should, out of the land revenues, pay all the military expenses of the Kingdom—which were very large. This large payment was the fee or "feu." The "feu" of the church lands (afterwards confiscated and sold outright by Henry VIII.), was the support of the State religion. The civil expenses of government were met by revenues from the crown lands; and large tracts were left in commons.



The diagram here shows how the landlords of England, after robbing the poor of the commons, having power to make the laws, had excused themselves and their lands from bearing their just burdens, and had shifted them to the backs of the poor. So the people were doubly robbed. The landlords then, by making laws known as "Corn Laws," prevented foreign grain from entering England, in

order that their own rents for land might be increased, and the poor further oppressed. So the people were trebly robbed.

In the course of his great agitation against the cruel "Corn Laws," Richard Cobden spoke bitterly, as follows :

"I warn ministers, and I warn landlords and the aristocracy of this country, against forcing on the attention of the middle and industrial classes, the subject of taxation. For . . . mighty as I consider the fraud and injustice of the Corn Laws, I verily believe, if you were to bring forward the history of taxation in this country for the last 150 years, you will find as black a record against the landowners as even in the Corn Law itself. I warn them against ripping up the subject of taxation. If they want another league at the death of this one—if they want another organization and a motive—then let them force the middle and industrial classes to understand how they have been cheated, robbed, and bamboozled."

. . . "Honourable gentlemen claimed the privilege of taxing our bread on account of their peculiar burdens in paying the highway rates and the tithes. Why, the land had borne those burdens before Corn Laws had been thought of. The only peculiar state burden borne by the land was the Land Tax, and I will undertake to show that the mode of levying that tax is fraudulent and evasive, an example of legislative partiality and injustice second only to the Corn Law itself. . . . For a period of 150 years after the conquest, the whole of the revenue of the country was derived from the land. During the next 150 years it yielded nineteen-twentieths of the revenue—for the next century down to the reign of Richard III. it was nine-tenths. During the next 70 years to the time of Mary it fell to about three-fourths. From this time to the end of the Commonwealth, land appeared to have yielded one-half the revenue. Down to the reign of Anne it was one-fourth. In the reign of George III. it was one-sixth. For the first thirty years of his reign the land yielded one-seventh of the revenue. From 1793 to 1816 (during the period of the land tax), land contributed one-ninth. From which time to the present (1845) one twenty-fifth only of the revenue had been derived directly from land. Thus the land, which anciently paid the whole of taxation, paid now only a fraction or one twenty-fifth, notwithstanding the immense increase that had taken place in the value of the rentals. The people had fared better under the despotic monarchs than when the powers of the state had fallen into the hands of a landed oligarchy, who had first exempted themselves from taxation, and next claimed compensation for themselves by a corn law for their heavy and peculiar burdens."

Now look at this second diagram again. Instead of the reigns, the dates are shown.

From 1066 to 1216 the landlords shifted none of their just burdens. But from 1216 they shifted them as the diagram shows. The clear columns show the increasing share of the tax burdens unfairly lifted from their own backs to those of others. The shaded columns show the lessening proportions at those periods still borne by the landlords. As rentals grew, taxes on rentals were legislated away—the landlords being the lawmakers.

The landlords controlled the lands and rented them at high figures; they had also for their benefit and the people's misery the "Corn Laws," and, in addition, they had shaken off their "feu" or "fee" almost wholly upon the poor, taxing the poor man's food, clothing, and shelter.

The trifling taxation of the landlords' estates encouraged them to get more and more land, and consequently the poor have ever held less and less—large holdings are growing larger, and small ones are disappearing.

There is, however, an easy remedy if you will take it. It is, moreover, the only way, the Taxation of Land Values. In that way Englishmen acted centuries ago, namely, compelling the landlords to pay the expense of government, taxing labour products nothing. And along that road men shall yet enjoy life as the English labourer used to enjoy it. Says Rogers—"I have stated more than once that the fifteenth century and the first quarter of the sixteenth were the golden age of the English labourer, if we are to interpret the wages which he earned by the cost of the necessaries of life."

But of to-day he says, relatively speaking, "the working man of to-day is not so well off as he was in the fifteenth century."

He speaks, too, of masses of England's poor whose condition to-day "is more destitute, whose homes are more squalid, whose means are more uncertain, whose prospects are more hopeless than those of the poorest serfs of the middle ages, and the meanest drudges of mediæval cities."

It ought to be clear to you that to monopolise land is to monopolise life. Therefore it is only by killing the growing and greedy monopoly in land that you can hold for yourself and your children a fair chance to life itself.

This reform, the taxation of land values into the public treasury, to be used for public purposes, will secure you that fair chance; will give every man equal use of the earth.

In England four hundred years ago the working man had a taste of the taxation of land values, and the country was then known as "Merrie England."