

# The movements and hirings of Austrey farm labourers, servants and apprentices, 1735-1804

The records of the Warwick Quarter sessions, examinations, certificates and bonds of indemnity, provide a treasure trove of useful information about the movements of farm labourers, servants and apprentices. Extracts from these records relating to the parish of Austrey in north Warwickshire reveal a complex pattern of hirings from towns and villages throughout the midlands, usually for one or two year stints with negotiated wages. The movements of this itinerant workforce were complicated by various Acts of Settlement, going back to the Tudor poor laws, giving the overseers of the poor legal rights to ensure that itinerant labourers and servants who fell destitute did not become a burden on the parish. The 1662 and 1697 Settlement Acts for example obliged a stranger hired as a farm labourer to bring a certificate from his home parish guaranteeing to take him back after his employment finished.

The movement of servants and farm labourers can be traced through a series of "examinations" in the quarter sessions courts. The examination of John Vincent taken on 9th of June, 1735 reveals that he was born at Pipehill in the parish of St. Michael's, in Lichfield. He was hired for a year by Josiah Flavell of Fisherwick in the county of Stafford and paid five pounds and ten shillings wages. That of Varnam Noon taken upon oath on 17th of November, 1739 reveals that the deponent was born in the parish of Clifton in the county of Stafford where his father was a "settled inhabitant". Varnam was hired for two years as a coachman by Mr Harold of Austrey, for an annual wage of £5 before moving to Oldbury where he was employed by Mr Oakover at half a crown a week till Lady Day, the agreement being that "if they liked one another he was to have the same wages of the other coach man paid by the year which was five pounds a year". He received his weekly wages and then served another year from Lady Day at this annual rate. He got married "betwixt Candlemas and Lady Day" while still in service, and received fifty shillings wages but this precarious allowance was evidently insufficient to live on. On 10th of December, 1743 a letter was sent to the deputy overseer of Austrey requiring him to bring Varnam with some others before two of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace at Tamworth, to determine their last place of settlements, as they were faced the prospect of being chargeable to the Overseers of the Poor.

One of the noticeable features of these hirings was their short term between migrations. The Examination of Aaron Wood taken upon oath on 18<sup>th</sup> of October, 1743 records that he was born in the parish of Chedleton near Leek in the county of Stafford and that he was employed as a day labourer ever since, "sometime in one county, sometimes in another". He had never been hired for a year or served a year in any one parish, nor gained any settlement other than in Chedleton. The examination Edward Orton taken upon oath the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of December, 1747 reveals that he was born in Tamworth where his father lived "by virtue of a certificate from the parish of Kingsbury" and that the last place he was hired for a year in and served out the whole year was in Austrey where he was employed by William Lilly, a local farmer, for five pounds ten shillings wages. He too had married while in service, the day before Michaelmas.

The Examination of Thomas Tunicliffe, on the 25th of October, 1755 records that he was born at Uttoxeter in Staffordshire where his father was a parishioner, and that he was first apprenticed as a tailor to William Snape of Uttoxeter for seven years. After serving five years of this apprenticeship his

father bought out the remainder of his indentures and Thomas took work around Uttoxeter as a farm labourer. From Michaelmas 1754 he was hired as a “weekly servant” by Edward Wilson of Austrey, a Malster. Despite his changes and his recent marriage he declared to the court that made no attempt to gain a legal settlement in Austrey.

The movement of servants of in search of work and a place to settle is epitomised by Thomas Spencer a resident of Austrey, examined by the Warwick justices on the 26th of February, 1757. Thomas declared that he was about 41 years old, and that he was born in Austrey his father George Spencer being “Certificated” from Polesworth to Austrey. Apparently when he was about ten years old his father moved to Atherstone taking his family with him with him, although Thomas could not say “whether he took a Certificate to Atherstone or not”. After staying in Atherstone for about eight years at his father moved his family to Polesworth where some 22 years ago Thomas was hired for a year by John Bray. After leaving this position he was hired by Thomas Hinks of Austrey for another year before going to “several places but did not serve a year at any of them”. He returned to Austrey and worked for John Erpe, then Thomas Hinckes for a year or more, “upon an understanding”. Since then Thomas had ceased to be a yearly hired servant and made no attempt to gain a legal Settlement although he was apparently by this time well established in Austrey, with a wife named Elizabeth and three children, one apprenticed to William Kines of Cullington, the other two, Mary about fifteen years old and Susan about four years old, still living at home.

The examination of Elizabeth Spencer, Thomas’ widow on 11th of May that same year reveals more of the circumstances that prompted these movements. Elizabeth revealed that about 16 years ago her late husband “had carnal knowledge of her body whereby he did beget her with child of a female Bastard child which was born at Haunton in the county of Stafford”, six weeks or two months before they married. After Mary was born they returned to Austrey, her husband’s home parish, staying there up to the 5th of March last past when they were removed by order from Austrey to Polesworth. The inference is that Elizabeth and her children were forced to move after her husband died to avoid becoming a charge on the parish.

The sessions hearings record a series of memorandum and hearings relating to apprenticeship indentures. The justices enforced payments of outstanding amounts due for wages or bond payments, as indicated by the “Memorandum” that Henry Leise of Austrey, a farmer paid to George Bealey his servant the sum of five pounds one shilling for eleventh months and three days service for the period starting from the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1763 to 18th September 1764, witnessed by two Austrey gentlemen, John Moore and Henry Foster. The range of the court’s jurisdiction is also demonstrated in an undated Agreement between William Bostern of Austrey, a butcher, and another William Bostern, of Amington in the county of Warwick, a labourer, and William Lakin of Amington, husbandman, binding them to John Smith of Austrey, gentleman, John Thomas, and Joseph Orton, both Austrey husbandman for a hundred pound security, the exact purpose being unspecified.

#### **The Examination of Joseph Skellet “touching his legal settlement” on 6th January**

1791, records that he was 24 years old and born in Austrey where his father was certificated from the parish of St Martins in the Borough of Leicester and that when he was about the 13 years old he was bound as apprentice to William Smith of Austrey, a carpenter to serve him till he was 21, Smith having apparently been certificated from Appleby to Austrey. It seems that after Joseph had served his

master about five years of his apprenticeship his father gained a settlement in Austrey, and that on May Day 1789 he was hired by William Shotley of Lichfield for 9d a week.

During her examination on 7th October, 1793, Sarah Smith, a singlewoman stated that she was born "as she verily believes" in the parish of Austrey "at which place she believes her father is legally settled". A fortnight after Michaelmas, 1790 she was hired for a year by a Mr Richard Farrin of Twycross in the county of Leicester. She was apparently re-hired by Mr Richard Farrin for another twelve months at Michaelmas the following year, "on the morning of Kesworth Statute Fair". This was perhaps a reference to Kenilworth in Warwickshire, one of the Statute or "Mop Fairs" set up in chartered towns throughout the country for hiring servants and farm labourers. The Statute Fairs served a useful purpose in this regard, despite the ill-deserved reputation given by to them by the Archbishop of York, as "nurseries of crime and powerful incentives to vice" (Kussmaul, p. 63).

Sarah does not appear to have been happy with her position as only a week after entering service she ran away to Burton on Trent and had to be fetched her back by her employer's son, by virtue of a Warrant issued by one of the justices. The records reveal that she continued in Mr Farrin's service till Easter 1792, after which she left his employ and hired herself to Mr William Wilson of Austrey. A fortnight after Michaelmas 1792 Sarah found employment for another year with Mr Hinks, another one of the principal farmers in Austrey "with whom she lived till about a fortnight after Lady Day". Sarah declared to the court after leaving Mr Hink's service that she had not made any attempt to gain a settlement "to the best of her knowledge and belief".

One of the attractions of Austrey and surrounding towns and villages was the possibility of piece work in framework knitting trade. This often meant long apprenticeships. In 1795 John Spencer a poor child aged about eight years old was put apprentice to Thomas Copeland of the parish of Hinckley, a framework knitter, until he reached the age of twenty one years. On 20th October, 1796, the Overseers and churchwardens of Austrey placed George Spencer "aged ten years or thereabouts, a poor child of the said parish", apprentice to Thomas Copeland to live with him and serve him until he reached the full age of twenty one years, Copeland being bound to "instruct him in the trade of framework knitting". These may well have been direct descendants of Thomas and Elizabeth Spencer mentioned in an earlier session hearing.

The vexed and tortuous system set up to determine places of legal settlement continued into the new century, the sessions records providing some insight to the workings of apprenticeship as a first step to regular employment. The examination of William Alsop, a labourer living in Austrey, taken on 22nd December 1801, "touching his settlement", reveals that he was about 35 years old and born in hamlet of Cumberford in the parish of Tamworth where his father resided under a certificate from the parish of Polesworth, and that he had a wife named Elizabeth and two young children William aged eight years and Mary aged six years. Thomas Bates of Austrey, a woolcomber examined before the court on 26th December 1801, describes himself as a twenty four year old "born as he hath been informed and verily believes in the parish of Austrey, where his father resideth under a certificate from the hamlet of Amington in the parish of Tamworth" Thomas told the court that when he was about twelve years of age his father hired him to John Brenton of Bagworth in the county of Leicester in the Spring until Michaelmas for a shilling a week, and that "at Michaelmas his master told him that if he would serve him again on the same terms and that if he "behaved well, give him something over" to which this examinant agreed, until the following Michaelmas when his master paid him his wages and gave

him an additional half crown. On 10th October 1792 Thomas bound himself apprentice by indenture to John Barnes of Austrey, another woolcomber, for the term of seven years and served the whole term.

The final case to be considered in this account records the examination of John Hill of Austrey, a 25 year old labourer, on 22nd December 1804. Born “he believes in the parish of Austrey... where his father was legally settled”, John related that when he was about twelve years of age he was bound apprentice to John Wilkinson of Nuneaton by the trustee of Monk’s Charity for seven years, and after that “he made an agreement with John Barnes of Austrey ... to learn the trade of woolcombing” paying his master two shillings a week for training and being paid for his finished work, the agreement being later “destroyed by mutual consent”. By this time it appears John was married, with a wife named Mary and two young children, Mary aged 2 years and William about six months.

Many similar cases drawn from all over the midlands are recorded by Ann Kussmaul in her extensive study of servant mobility. This handful of quarter session records describing the movements of farm labourers, servants and apprentices into and out of a single north Warwickshire parish tends to confirm that there was a fairly high mobility of unmarried servants, transients and farm labourers through the village. It is clear that they represented a very flexible workforce, serving a wide range of occupations, particularly the apprenticed woolcombers working in the new manufacturing trades connected with framework knitting.

#### **MS Sources: Warwick County Record Office**

Quarter Sessions Examinations (1714-1818), DRB 48/55

Quarter Sessions Certificates (1714-1805), DRB 48/56

Quarter Sessions Bonds of Indemnity (1758-1777) DRB 48/57

Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.