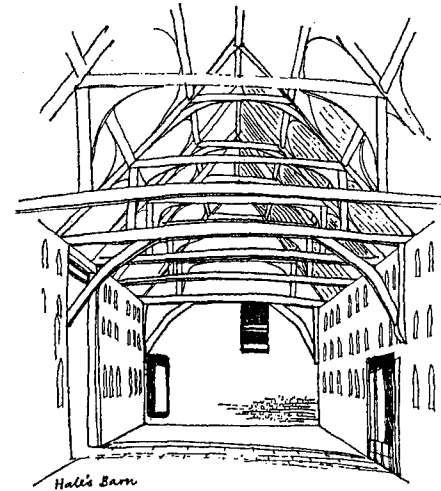


EVANS, GEORGE EWART,
 WHITE BEARDS WAG ALL:
 THE RELEVANCE OF ORAL TRADITION
 LONDON: FABER 1970



Sam Friend's Burton teapot



21 *On the Move*

It has been suggested that the main use of oral information is to supplement and fill out evidence taken from other sources. But there are some aspects of the old type of East Anglian farming and the society which it nourished that are recorded chiefly—and in some instances only—in the oral tradition. These relate to migrant workers. There were three classes of these: those who moved about within the region, those who came from outside, and those workers who went outside the region to other trades during different seasons of the farming year. Documentary evidence of these movements is often small, and in one or two instances almost non-existent. But the oral information that comes from the oldest generation of farm-workers suggests that the movements were varied and in certain trades very considerable.

One of the movements which was undoubtedly of long standing arose out of the close link between East Anglian farming and the sea. Up to the recent past young farm-workers from the villages on the Suffolk and Norfolk littoral went fishing after the corn harvest and remained at sea during the autumn and the early part of the winter. They went mainly from Lowestoft and Yarmouth.

Migrant Workers

Eric Fowler of the *Eastern Daily Press* (Norwich) gave me an account of the latter part of this movement: 'They used to call them *joskins*—farm-workers who became unskilled members of fishing-crews after the corn harvest was over. The peak time of the movement was towards the end of September or the beginning of October. The finest herrings were caught at the time of the October full moon, and the first Scottish boats came down into East Anglian waters about that time. The special trains from Scotland bringing the fisher-girls used to arrive about the same time. These "girls"—a number of course were middle-aged married women—came down in crews of six with the most responsible member in charge. Their job was to gut and salt the herrings and pack them in barrels for export to Germany, Russia and elsewhere. I remember a day in the late 'twenties—I believe it was 1928 or 1929—I was at Beccles station when one of these special trains full of herring girls pulled into the station just as a local train was arriving. This was full of the joskins from East Suffolk and Norfolk. I've not heard such a combination of accents in my life as the fisher-girls and the joskins exchanged greetings. Many of the girls came from Stornoway in the Hebrides and from Wick and Fraserburgh in the north of Scotland—and there was a fair mixture of East Anglian accents as well.

'A great number of farm-workers went away from the Stalham area of Norfolk during the fishing season, but I believe the numbers that went fishing were greatest before the 1914 war. It was easy to recognize them: they wore blue jerseys and duffle trousers and they carried kit-bags.'

Many of the farm-workers in the Suffolk village of Blaxhall used to go fishing after harvest, some of them up to the period of the last war, but many more in the pre-1914 years when the demand was greater. These men, when they returned after Christmas, filled in their time until haysel by doing seasonal jobs on the land: bark-peeling, and ditching and draining.

The corn harvest was naturally the peak period of employment in this region, and during these few weeks many workers came into the region. Irish workers penetrated as far east as East Anglia though not in the same numbers as they went to the north of

On the Move

England and Ayrshire, for instance, for the potato-harvest. Geoffrey Goddard, grandson of John Goddard of Kettleburgh and Tunstall, remembers his grandfather talking about Irish workers but more particularly about the harvest workers he took on from Lincolnshire: 'My grandfather told me about these men who came down to Suffolk from Lincolnshire *to take the harvest—take it to do*, as we say around Kettleburgh. These workers would get paid their *earnest* or *hiring money* of a shilling in the normal way, after the contract had been signed, and they'd immediately go out and drink it. For a shilling they'd get six or eight pints of beer—depending on the quality—or a half bottle of gin. I know that was the price because when my father was a boy, at the end of last century, the sheep clippers used to send him out to the pub with a half-crown for a bottle of gin, and he used to bring sixpence change. I remember my grandfather telling me once that on the first morning these travelling workers came in a gang to work (after spending the earnest money the night before) he'd lock the gate to the farm; and he'd be out there waiting for them before five o'clock in the morning. They'd still be more or less drunk from their spree, and he wasn't having them in that state. He used to stand in the yard, and he'd front 'em and say: "The first man who puts his hand on that gate, I'll hit it with this stick."

'To begin work he wanted them sober—as he meant them to continue. It was necessary to show these travelling workers who was master because he would not have the same hold over them as he would over his own local workers.'

It is likely that the Lincolnshire men came down into Suffolk and did a harvest on one of the farms there before returning to take part in a rather later harvest in their own county. This was not an uncommon practice with Suffolk workers at the beginning of this century. Some went first into Essex and took a harvest there before returning to Suffolk to do a second one. A Blythburgh (Suffolk) worker talked about this same period, sixty to seventy years ago; and about an earlier one: 'There was more money in Essex for harvesting. You could get over £8 10s there. My father, I recall, used to do two harvests, one in Essex and

Migrant Workers

then another in Suffolk. This was before I can remember. But they used to say that south of Bourne Bridge in Ipswich you'd get more money working on the farm. If you came this way [well into the north of Suffolk] it meant a bob or two less a week. That's the reason I kept a-travellin' about. I kept going where I thought was the biggest money.'

This is an interesting and accurate observation. Nineteenth-century records show that the average wages for farm-workers in East Anglia were low compared with many other areas, especially with the Midlands and the industrial North; and the general level of wages in all industries in the region remains low to this day.¹ This is generally attributed to the region's being removed from any large industrial complex which would compete for labour. The worker in East Anglia during the Industrial Revolution and up to the present day sold his labour in a buyer's market: the nearer he was to London—'up Essex way'—the more likely he was to get higher wages; and apparently this still holds to a certain extent today. Harold Goddard, a Rendham (Suffolk) farmer, confirms the pre-1914 practice of workers taking part in two harvests, one in Essex and one later in Suffolk; and he adds the interesting note that at one time Essex farmers harvested early because they were not so particular about the quality of their corn. They got a good price for their corn-straw, selling in the London area for packing material and for the hat-making industry. James Seely, the Norfolk farmer, gave me some information about a migration—the extent of which is unknown—when a farm-worker actually penetrated into the Metropolis and sold his skills there, presumably at the highest rate of all: 'I knew an old man who worked on a farm near Hales—he'd be some bit over a hundred if he were alive today—and he once told me he used to go to London hay-making. The chaps on the farm used to laugh at him. But he was right. He was telling the truth. He used to make hay in some of

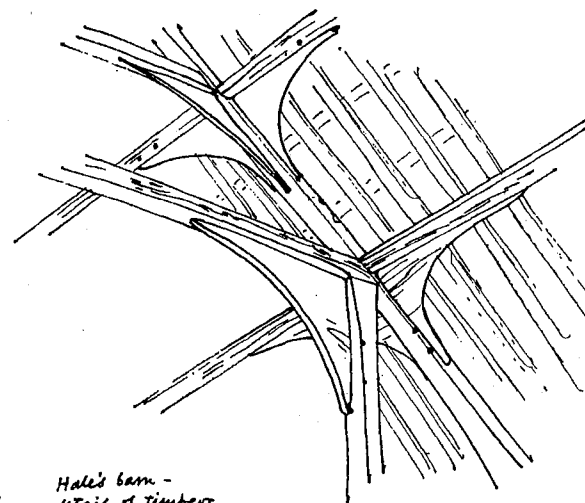
¹ *East Anglia; A Study*, H.M.S.O., 1968; para. 415: 'Table 30 shows regional differences in average tax case incomes for 1965-66 and indicates that East Anglian earned income falls some way below the United Kingdom average. East Anglia has the lowest average earned income from employment for all the English regions.'

See also: 'East Anglia Consultative Committee': *A Regional Survey, 1968. A Regional Appraisal, 1969*.

On the Move

the London parks. Before they had the machines they used to cut the grass with scythes. But at that time when there were no other transport except horses they could use all the hay they could get up in London.'

Sam Friend (born 1888) gave me an example of internal migration in East Anglia: 'A big farmer in Cretingham owned three farms, and at harvest there were allus three companies of men, eight men in each company. They took the harvest separate. Two



Hales' barn -
detail of timbers

of the companies agreed on the farmer's terms; but the third—the company from Doves's—wouldn't agree. They got taken on for harvests at other farms, and the farmer got eight men from Bungay to take the harvest for him at Doves's. The farmer came from Bungay, so likely he knew his way about up there. This was when I was a boy at school over seventy years ago. I recollect it well. One of the men from Bungay stopped me on the road one day and he ask me: "Where do Sam Friend live?". So I took him home, and my father he say: "Stannard! What are you a-doing down here?" My father had worked at Bungay and he knew the man well. Afterwards we went down to where the Bungay men