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Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850

By PETER KING

An accurate assessment of the material benefits that the rural poor gained from their access to customary rights can provide important insights not only into the impact of changes in the availability of those rights, but also into the changing vulnerability of the poor to poverty, unemployment, and dearth. It can also provide more accurate data on a neglected area of the standard of living debate—the effects of relative shifts in population from rural to urban areas on levels of informal, non-wage family earnings. Unfortunately, the precise value of customary use-rights to the labouring poor is extremely difficult to calculate. It is easy to establish that the right to pasture their animals on common lands was often a very important part of the poor's 'economy of makeshifts' but it is much less easy to quantify the benefits obtained. The poor's rights to gather wood, turves, wild fruits, furze, and other natural resources clearly allowed them to garner substantial quantities of fuel and food,¹ yet these benefits were so piecemeal and so intermittent that their monetary value is hard to estimate. The value of the unreaped or fallen grain gathered from the farmers' fields after harvest, however, is less difficult to calculate, for gleaning was done at a particular time each year. It resulted in a measurable quantity of grain with a specific market value and the amount gleaned by different local families was often the subject of discussion and pride among the poor. At Lark Rise, for example, the gleanings were 'often kept for a time on show' in the living rooms of labouring families, and passers-by were invited to step inside and inspect them.²

This paper will attempt to measure the proportion of labouring families' annual incomes contributed by the gleanings and the extent to which that contribution changed between 1750 and 1850. It will also assess the geographical variations in the importance of gleaning within England and Wales and the extent to which all the labouring poor had access to the

¹ I would like to thank Liverpool University for the Research Fellowship which made this work possible and John Walter for his encouragement. For good recent discussions see Snell, *Annals*, pp. 138-227; Neeson, 'Common right'; Malcolmson, *Life and labour*, pp. 23-35. For an excellent attempt to estimate the value of other customary rights which appeared after this article was written, see Humphries, 'Enclosures'.

² Thompson, *Lark Rise*, p. 26; Moreau, *The departed village*, p. 122. Gleanings were not tithed and there was therefore no incentive to hide the size of a family's haul. Redstone, 'Records', p. 279.

gleaning fields, thereby illuminating not only an important aspect of rural living standards but also a neglected area of women's work, for gleaning was one of the few customary activities controlled almost exclusively by women. As spinning and other by-employments declined and the opportunities for female wage-earning in agriculture contracted in the early nineteenth century,³ gleaning played an increasingly important part in women's work. By the 1830s gleaning was not infrequently listed as one of the main forms of work available to women in some parts of eastern England. At Stradbroke in Suffolk, for example, the parish officers responded to the Poor Law Commissioners' enquiries about the availability of women's work in the early 1830s by noting 'Summer not anything except in harvest by gleaning. Winter no employment whatever since machinery superseded handspinning of wool.'⁴

I

What contribution did gleaning make to the earnings of labouring families between 1750 and 1850? The value of the gleanings depended on the type of crop involved. Gleanings of barley and beans were very useful as feed for chickens, pigs, and other animals,⁵ but wheat gleanings were more central to the living standards of the poor since they supplied them with bread during the post-harvest months, when wages and employment prospects were at their lowest. Many eighteenth-century commentators were aware of the importance of the gleanings as a safeguard against the privations of winter. Several also suggested that the gleanings might remain a useful resource throughout the year. In the 1750s Ellis noted that wheat gleanings supplied many families with bread for 'most part of the year'. Forty years later Eden suggested that 'the poor make a great deal by gleaning. . . . Several families will gather as much wheat as will serve them for bread the whole year; and as many beans as will keep a pig.'⁶

The only historian who has gone beyond vague generalizations and attempted a statistical assessment of the value of the gleanings is Bushaway. Using three late eighteenth-century sources from Norfolk, Suffolk, and Sussex, he suggested that gleanings represented between 2.7 and 4.1 per cent of the annual family income of labouring families.⁷ However, other sources of the period indicate that this was a considerable underestimate. In Northamptonshire in the 1790s Eden calculated that gleanings were worth about 30s. or 5.7 per cent of a labouring family's annual earnings. In 1791 Arthur Young noted that some Essex families collected £5 worth of gleanings and that the average family probably gathered about £2 worth. Gleanings on this scale would have represented between 5.5 and 13.7 per cent of a labouring family's annual earnings. At Newent, Gloucestershire, in 1789 a

³ Snell, 'Agricultural seasonal unemployment'; and *idem*, *Annals*, pp. 15-66; also Armstrong, 'Labour', pp. 685, 717-9.

⁴ *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx); Snell, *Annals*, pp. 54-5.

⁵ Morgan, 'The place', p. 54.

⁶ Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 151; Ellis, *The modern husbandman*, v, p. 35; Eden, *The state*, II, p. 547.

⁷ Bushaway, *By rite*, pp. 143-4.

correspondent of David Davies recorded that gleanings were worth 33s.—10.4 per cent of the annual income of families on fixed wages and about 8 per cent of the earnings of those who worked on the more lucrative local piece rates.⁸

Similar results emerge from a study of the parish responses to the Poor Law Commissioners' questionnaire sent out in the early 1830s (table 1). The questionnaire did not address the issue of customary rights directly, but fortunately a few parish officials responded to the questions on the average yearly earnings of labourers and of women and children by offering detailed breakdowns which enable us to reconstruct the importance of gleaning to different subgroups within the labouring poor.⁹

Table 1. *The value of gleaning in relation to the annual income of labouring families*

Parish	County	Absolute value of gleanings (£)	Gleaning as % of annual income ^a	Arable acres per head	Total population
Papworth St Agnes	Cambs.	3.5	6.7-13.0	8.0	106
Westmill	Herts.	3	5.9-8.4	3.7	418
Llanvapley	Monmouth	3	9.7-10.7	—	99
Rougham	Suffolk	3	7.7-9.4	—	868
Bishopstoke	Hants.	2.4	3.8-12.7	—	1,026
Fowlmere	Cambs.	2.5	5.8-11.4	3.5	547
Stanstead Abbots	Herts.	2	5.0-?	—	966
Leamington Hastings	Warwicks.	1.75	5.0-5.2	2.8	464
Drinkstone	Suffolk	1.50	4.8-5.2	2.4	469
Average		2.64	6.0-9.5	—	551

Note: ^a annual income = the income of an 'average' labouring family.

Source: R.C. on the Poor Laws (P. P. 1834, xxx)

Four parishes offered particularly detailed data on both gleanings and family income sources. At Fowlmere in Cambridgeshire gleanings by a wife with four children were worth 50s. out of an average total family income in the parish of just over £38, or 6.5 per cent. For the favoured few, whose household heads earned £5 more than the average labourer, the figure was 5.8 per cent. However, in many families the gleanings made a much bigger contribution, for the family income estimate of £38 was based on the wages of 'average labourers, in constant employment' while in fact nearly 1 in 5 were 'generally out of employment'. Moreover the overseer admitted that 'labourers not constantly employed are nearly the whole winter and early part of the spring upon the parish; and often when employed at other times . . . are paid at a lower rate of wages than other labourers'. The £38 included nearly £8 earned by a son aged 14, which would not have been available to the many families who had no male children old enough to get separate

⁸ Eden, *The state*, II, p. 546; Young, *General view*. . . Essex, I, pp. 308-9; Brown, *Essex at work*, p. 134; Davies, *The case*, pp. 160-3.

⁹ R.C. on the Poor Laws (P.P. 1834, xxx). The following parish analyses are all based on this source. For further discussion and use of it, Cunningham, 'The employment', pp. 134-40.

employment. Thus, in a considerable number of families annual earnings would have ranged from about £22 to £30 and gleanings would therefore have represented between 8.3 and 11.4 per cent of annual income on the assumption that gleanings were worth 50s.

At Papworth in the same county gleanings were worth between £3 and £5 while the average labourer's wage was £30 or less. In the theoretical family used as a model by the questionnaire, which had children aged 14, 11, 8, and 5, this would have been supplemented by children's earnings of between about £8 and £12, depending on whether or not the eldest child was a boy. Assuming maximum earnings and minimum gleanings, the contribution made to family income by gleanings would have been 6.7 per cent. Assuming the oldest was a girl and gleanings were worth £5, the figure would be 11.4 per cent. In families where all the children were under 11, gleanings would have been worth between 8.2 and 13.0 per cent.

At Bishopstoke, just north of Southampton, where gleanings were worth £2 to £4, a similar family would have obtained between 5.1 and 12.7 per cent of its income from gleaning. If boys of 11 and 14 were available to add to the average labourer's earnings the figures would have been between 3.8 and 9.0 per cent.

In the fourth parish, Westmill in Hertfordshire, both the rector and the overseer calculated that gleanings were worth £3. Their estimates of total yearly earnings for a family of four including a boy of 14 were approximately £48 and £50 respectively, and thus gleanings represented about 6 per cent of earnings. In families without teenage boys the comparable figure was between 7.9 and 8.4 per cent.

The questionnaires returned by five other parishes offered information on the value of gleanings but more limited breakdowns of family incomes. In three of these, gleanings were valued at between 30s. and 40s., which represented about 5 per cent of annual income (table 1). However, in the two remaining parishes gleanings were valued at £3. At Rougham in Suffolk they represented 7.7 per cent of family incomes where there were 3 employable children and 9.4 per cent where there were none. At Llanvapley in Monmouthshire the figure was 9.7 per cent if there was an employable teenage boy, 10.7 per cent if there was not.¹⁰

On average, therefore, in these nine parishes the gleanings represented about 6 per cent of the income of high-earning labouring families and 9.5 per cent of the income of those with low earnings. But how reliable and how typical are these figures? Although the replies were written by overseers, churchwardens, clergymen, or magistrates, who would have had extensive local knowledge, there is no way of knowing the accuracy of their estimates of 'average' wages, of female and child earnings, or of the value of gleaning yields in a typical year. However, their estimates are both broadly consistent with and confirmed by other contemporary sources.

The 1843 Royal Commission report estimated gleaning yields at between

¹⁰ *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx). Even in these four parishes information is limited and it has not been possible to develop accurate income estimates. At Llanvapley it seems that the farmers expected assistance at other times in exchange for access to gleanings, a rare stipulation not apparent in any of the other parishes mentioned.

3 and 8 bushels and this was exactly the same range of figures as those mentioned by the five 1830s parish replies which described gleaning yields in terms of bushels of wheat.¹¹ The Raynbirds' report on Suffolk agriculture in the late 1840s made similar estimates. 'Women will not work in harvest, only glean', it recorded. The usual yield was between 6 and 8 bushels, worth between 45s. and 60s. at the average prices prevalent between 1830 and 1850.¹²

The overall validity of the 1830s information is further confirmed by the fact that among the five parishes for which information on arable acreage is also provided in the replies, gleaning yields varied in sympathy with the number of arable acres per head of population (table 1). The gleanings were worth least at Drinkstone, which had the lowest number of arable acres per head, and most at Papworth with the highest figure. Thus, although there were large variations in the share of gleanings in the incomes of labouring families, such variations were not random. They were due largely to differences in the acreage of arable crops available per inhabitant; to differences in the availability of paid work for men, women, and children; to the number of employable children in the family; or to variations in the wages paid to household heads.¹³

Do the data in table 1 tend to overestimate or underestimate the importance of gleaning? It is possible that gleaning yields were more likely to be discussed in detail by parish officers in areas where gleaning was particularly valuable. However, the gleaning yields described by other contemporary sources—Young, the Raynbirds, Glyde, and the 1843 report—were very similar. The percentages in table 1 may also slightly exaggerate the value of the gleanings as a proportion of total earnings because several informal, piecemeal benefits—such as wood gathering, or the raising and slaughtering of animals—were not allowed for in the calculations of annual earnings made by local officials.

However, in at least four ways these data tend to underestimate the value of the gleanings. First, the effects of seasonal unemployment can only be calculated for one parish, Fowlmere. Many families in the other eight parishes would also have earned much less than the average wages reported in the 1830s replies, which usually assumed full employment throughout the year while making no allowance for loss of earnings through such factors as sickness or bad weather. Secondly, a subgroup of larger families made much greater gains from gleaning. In mid nineteenth-century Gloucestershire yields of 24 or 25 bushels were not unknown. In Northamptonshire some families 'gleaned enough corn to justify hiring a threshing machine'. Some gleaners

¹¹ Ibid. The 5 parishes were Little Massingham (5 to 8 bushels) and West Raynham (4-5) in Norfolk; St Alkmund, Shrewsbury (4-6); Wroxall in Warwickshire (3-6); Stone in Worcestershire (3). In monetary terms, at Massingham, gleanings would have fetched between 37s. and 60s. Family incomes varied from about £40 to £47. Gleanings therefore represented between 4.0 and 7.5 per cent of annual family income. For 1843 see *R.C. on the Employment of Women and Children* (P.P. 1843, XII), pp. 16, 65, 233.

¹² Raynbird and Raynbird, *The agriculture*, pp. 89, 282. For a similar estimate (4-8 bushels) see Glyde, *Suffolk*, p. 350. Wheat prices; Mathias, *First industrial nation*, p. 441.

¹³ In the two Hertfordshire parishes, for example, proximity to London meant that labourers' annual wages were between 7 and 25 per cent higher than those in the Cambridgeshire or Suffolk parishes in our sample. For an analysis of London's effect on wage levels, Armstrong, 'Labour', p. 697.

secretly increased their yields by taking grain from the sheaves as well as the stubbles—a practice which the farmers tried to prevent by barring the gleaners from the fields until the crop was carted. 'The mischief this gave rise to was often great,' Wilson recorded in 1848, 'the loss incurred has been calculated as high as 30 per cent. To avoid such degradations the wheat crop was often cut too late and carried home too quickly because the farmer dared not trust it in the field while the poor were perpetually among the sheaves.'¹⁴

Thirdly, in years of dearth the gleanings would have been even more valuable than in relatively normal years such as 1832-4. For example, 6 bushels of wheat would have been worth about 40s. in 1790 and about 50s. on average between 1825 and 1834 but between 80s. and 100s. in 1800-1 or 1812-3. Of course, the amount of gleanings available may also have fallen in these bad harvest years, but the relatively inelastic nature of the demand for bread usually meant that after a bad harvest prices rose much more rapidly than grain yields fell. More important, gleaning yields did not necessarily decline in years of poor harvests. In 1766 Homer noted that 'there is often as much corn to be gleaned in years of scarcity, as there is in those of plenty; and therefore it is most advantageous when it is most wanted to be so.' Particularly windy or wet conditions just before the harvest might drastically affect the farmers' yields while being to the gleaners' advantage. Arthur Young described one such season in which 'the high winds and violent rains in the beginning and middle of July, had so beat it [the wheat] down, thrown it about and entangled it, that the reapers unavoidably left behind them an uncommon number of ears, and every ear was unusually full of the best grains.'¹⁵

Fourthly, the percentages quoted in table 1 do not take account of the fact that the gleanings would have been particularly valuable in households headed by widows, that is in about 1 household in 8. At Westmill a woman gleaning alone could gather £2 worth of wheat in the 1830s. A widow with young children could gather £3 worth.¹⁶ Given the collapse of spinning employment and the increasing problems rural women were experiencing in finding work by the early nineteenth century, gleanings would have represented a major source of income to most widows. Single women on parish relief in this period often received only £5 or £6 a year. Gleaning might increase this by more than 25 per cent. It is not surprising therefore to find several writers noting that, even when unwell, many women pushed themselves hard in order to get the most from their right to glean.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., x (1860), p. 476; Bates, *The vanished*, 1, p. 17; Wilson, *The rural cyclopaedia*, II, p. 455.

¹⁵ Homer, *An essay*, p. 25; Young, *General view . . . Essex*, 1, pp. 308-9. The ears that fell were also noted as the heaviest and highest yielding in Holt, *General view . . . Lancashire*, p. 66.

¹⁶ Laslett, 'Mean household size', p. 147; *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx). Raynbird and Raynbird, *The agriculture*, p. 282, noted a similar ratio: 'The most active women gather 4 bushels commonly . . . the children, according to age, from one bushel upwards.'

¹⁷ King, 'The origins', traces three case histories of widows, including the gleaner involved in the 1788 case, who were paid this amount. For an Essex example see Margaret Lazell, Essex Record Office, P/LWR 15, D/P 185/12/2—a gleaning widow receiving about £5 a year from the parish in 1803 but willing to risk losing these payments by gleaning against the orders of the overseer. *R.C. on the*

II

How typical are the parishes for which we have detailed information on gleaning? Although the nine parishes involved cover a range of population sizes from under 100 to over 1,000 (table 1), they are clearly not geographically or demographically representative. The replies of the town authorities virtually never mention gleaning¹⁸ and rural England and Wales are not fully covered either. All nine parishes were south of Caird's high wage area and all but one were in regions with very high densities of arable and more especially of wheat production.¹⁹ The figures in table 1 are therefore, at best, only a guide to practices in rural communities situated in the southern part of the predominantly arable central and eastern lowland region of England—the region in which one would expect gleanings to be most important.

What can the rural parish replies of the early 1830s tell us about the geography of gleaning? If the Poor Law Commissioners had asked directly about gleaning practices it might have been possible to measure the proportion of parishes where gleaning was significant, but unfortunately they did not do so. They simply asked what 'employment' was available for women and children and what they might be expected to 'earn'. Some of the replies ignored these particular questions completely. The majority of those who did reply seem to have interpreted employment to mean paid employment, and earnings to mean payments made by employers—interpretations which would make it unnecessary to mention gleaning. However, despite the form of the questions, a remarkable number of replies made reference to gleaning. The highest proportions were in Essex and Suffolk where more than 40 per cent of replies referred, usually very briefly, to gleaning.²⁰ In neighbouring Cambridgeshire 36 per cent did so (figure 1). Apart from Herefordshire, all the other counties in which over 20 per cent of replies mentioned gleaning—Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, and Hertfordshire—were either in eastern England or in the east midlands. By contrast all those where no mention was made of gleaning were in northern or western England.

Since only 13 per cent of rural parishes replied to the 1830s questionnaire, this pattern must be interpreted with care. In particular it should be noted that in Wales and in many of the northern counties where gleaning was not

Employment of Women and Children (P.P. 1843, XII), p. 71; *Essex Review*, XII (1903), p. 246, on illness and gleaning.

¹⁸ *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx). Only two towns, Ellesmere and Barking, out of more than 350 replies mention gleaning.

¹⁹ Overton, 'Agriculture', pp. 35-7 indicates that in the 1840s and 1850s all the counties represented in tab. 1 were in the highest category of tillage per 100 acres and of wheat acreage, except for Monmouthshire; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 5.

²⁰ Questions 11 to 13 on the rural districts questionnaire were the ones that might induce replies referring to gleaning. They asked 'Have you any . . . employment for women and children?' 'What can women and children under 16 earn in summer, winter and harvest, and how employed?' 'What might the labourer's wife and 4 children, aged 14, 11, 8 and 5 . . . expect to earn?' The vast majority of replies mentioned gleaning only in passing. Typical Essex examples include 'Harvest, gleaning.' 'Harvest generally glean corn.' 'Harvest, nothing but gleaning.' 'Harvest all employed in gleaning.'

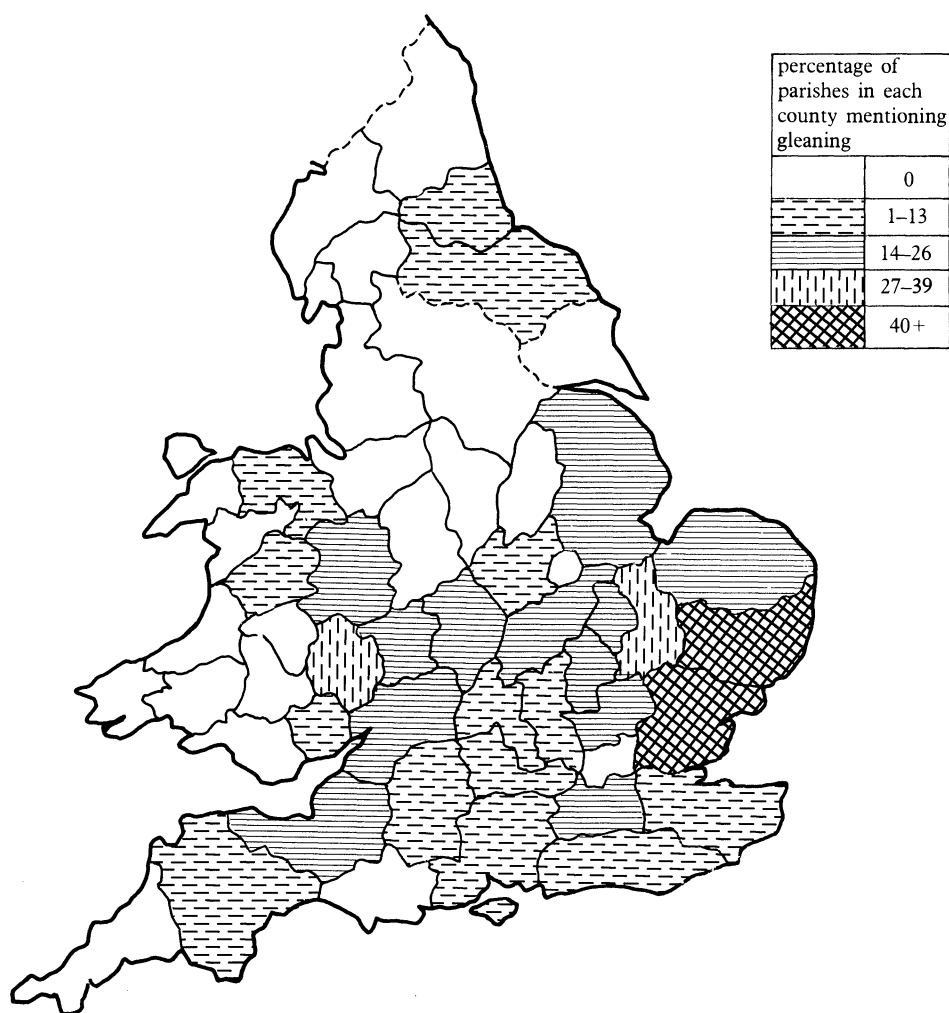


Figure 1. *The relative importance of earnings from gleaning by county, 1834*

Note: compiled from parish replies to the 1834 Poor Law Commission's questions on family earnings, making at least incidental reference to gleaning.

mentioned—such as Cheshire, Derbyshire, Northumberland, Staffordshire, and Lancashire—only between 2 and 4 per cent replied.²¹ However, this broad division between north and south and the tendency for gleaning to be most significant in central and eastern England is confirmed by other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources. *The complete farmer*, published in 1807, concluded that gleaning was 'a practice that prevails much more in the southern part of the island . . . than in the North', and the Board of Agriculture's county surveys broadly confirm this observation. Like the 1830s questionnaires, the county surveys did not include any specific sections

²¹ Blaug, 'The poor law', pp. 236-7.

on gleaning, but it was mentioned under headings such as harvesting, poor rates, or labourers in several southern volumes including those for Essex, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Bedfordshire, Hampshire, and Sussex.²² Late nineteenth-century evidence also reveals a similar geography to that in figure 1. After 1860 *Notes and Queries* published an extensive correspondence about gleaning, but once again no northern counties were involved. The letters came from Suffolk, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Rutland, Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire, Hampshire, Dorset, Oxfordshire, and Gloucestershire.²³

The absence of references to gleaning in some northern counties may simply reflect the relatively small amount of gleanings available in predominantly pastoral areas or the different work roles available to women at harvest time, but it is also possible that gleaning was not a customary right in some northern counties. When Lord Loughborough enquired into the universality of the right to glean in 1788, he concluded that in some districts 'it is wholly unknown'.²⁴ If there were such areas they appear to have been largely confined to the northern counties. In eastern and central England it is clear that gleaning was practised in the vast majority of parishes. In Essex, for example, I have found references to gleaning in over 60 parishes, and Neeson's work on Northamptonshire revealed a similar pattern. In Suffolk the 1843 report mentioned gleaning in almost every district it investigated.²⁵ Any conclusions drawn from table 1 about the importance of gleaning to the labouring poor can be applied only to eastern and central England but within that area gleaning appears to have been practised in the vast majority of parishes.

III

Which social groups had access to the gleaning fields in the arable counties between 1750 and 1850? Medieval manorial records suggest that gleaning was largely confined either to 'the young, the old and those who were decrepit and unable to work' or to those specifically given permission to do

²² Anon, *The complete farmer*; Young, *General view* . . . Essex, 1, pp. 310-1; Vancouver, *General view* . . . Essex, p. 162; Young, *General view* . . . Norfolk, pp. 492-4; Gooch, *General view* . . . Cambridge, pp. 132-3; Young, *General view* . . . Lincolnshire, pp. 444-5; Batchelor, *General view* . . . Bedford, pp. 130, 374; Vancouver, *General view* . . . Hampshire, p. 388; Young, *General view* . . . Sussex, p. 409. This is not necessarily a comprehensive list although 36 volumes covering 29 counties including many northern and western ones have been consulted. Gleaning in Devon is mentioned in Marshall, *Rural economy*, p. 170 and he also refers to it in his southern and midlands volumes: *Notes & Queries*, 12th ser., IX (1921), p. 114. Gleaning in Essex, Yorkshire, and Northamptonshire was discussed in *Museum Rusticum et Commerciale*, I (1764), pp. 20, 158-9; II (1764), pp. 30, 81, 360.

²³ *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., X (1860), pp. 285, 356, 476, 519-20; 4th ser., IV (1869), pp. 216, 286; 6th ser., XII (1885), p. 186; 12th ser., IX (1921), pp. 70, 112-5, 136, 157, 216, 256. John Styles kindly supplied these references.

²⁴ Hill, *Eighteenth-century women*, p. 192; *English Reports*, CXXVI, Common Pleas, IV, p. 33.

²⁵ Essex references taken from *Essex Review*, XII (1903), pp. 242-6; XXX (1921), p. 73; XXXIV (1925), pp. 56-7, 106-10, 162-3, 192, 210-1; XXXVI (1927), p. 117; Geare, *Farnham*, p. 148; Jones, *A history*, p. 180; Brown, *Essex people*, p. 192; Young, *General view* . . . Essex, 1, p. 310; Essex Record Office, D/Q 8/8; E/ML 101/1; D/P 275/28/2; P/Lwr and P/Cor searched for gleaning disputes; *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx); Neeson, 'Common right', p. 74; *R.C. on the Employment of Women and Children* (P.P. 1843, XII), pp. 227-33.

so by the farmer—usually his own labourers and their families. ‘There is no suggestion’, Ault concludes, ‘that the poor as such had a right to glean.’²⁶ The early modern pattern was more complex. The vast majority of contemporary writers and lawyers agreed that ‘the poor’ were entitled to glean. ‘Corne carred, let such as be poore go and gleane’, wrote Tusser in 1557, while Hale’s legal opinion was that ‘the law gives license to the poor to glean’. The Hertfordshire gleaners agreed. By 1603 they were claiming that it was usual for ‘all the poor’ to go gleaning.²⁷ In practice, however, several different definitions of ‘the poor’ were still being applied in this context.

On the one hand, employers, parish officials, and magistrates sometimes attempted to confine gleaning to much the same groups as those mentioned in earlier manorial regulations. In 1643 Henry Best excluded those ‘unwilling to work’ from the gleaning fields and gave privileged access to the wives and children of his workers. In the late 1630s the authorities in Dorset and Norfolk attempted to confine gleaning to the aged, weak, and infirm, or to those specifically listed as poor by the parish officers.²⁸ On the other hand, in many places ‘the poor’ were being defined very widely to include almost every landless family. For example, the customs of Barham Manor on the border between Cambridgeshire and Essex laid down in the late sixteenth century that ‘no inhabitant having yearly four acres of corn growing, nor their family, shall glean in harvest time’ while allowing all families with ‘no corn growing’ to glean at set times.²⁹ This ambivalence can still be found at the beginning of the eighteenth century when Hilman continued to define ‘the poor’ partly by reference to their role in the labour market. The gleaners must, he wrote, ‘be the real poor, that is such ancient people, boys and girls that cannot assist in harvest works, or at least are not required, and I believe it is no sin for a farmer to turn that gleaner out of his ground, who is able and refuses other work’.³⁰

The exact relationship between the state of the labour market and the farmers’ willingness to allow labouring families a more or less unrestricted right to glean is extremely difficult to assess on the basis of the limited and geographically diverse evidence available. However, it is clear that by the later eighteenth century definitions of the poor in this context had expanded to include almost anyone who belonged to the household of a landless agricultural labourer. ‘Gleaning’, Ellis wrote in 1750, ‘is of such importance that many poor large families supply themselves with bread by it most part of the year.’ Half a century later the Board of Agriculture’s surveys often assumed that all labouring families would be able to use gleanings to bolster

²⁶ Ault, *Open-field farming*, pp. 27–32; *idem*, ‘By-laws’; *idem*, ‘Open-field husbandry’; Homans, *English villagers*, pp. 102–3; Coulton, *The medieval village*, pp. 479–80; Smith, ‘Some issues’, p. 84.

²⁷ Tusser, *Five hundred points*, p. 124; Ruggles, ‘On gleaning’, pp. 642–3; Hardy, *Hertford*, 1, p. 35; Sharpe, *Crime in seventeenth century Essex*, p. 170.

²⁸ Woodward, ed., *Farming and memorandum book*, p. 46; Fussell, *The English countryman*, p. 57; Assize orders for North Elmham, 1634; a reference kindly sent to me by Tim Wales who has found two quarter sessions orders in Norfolk relating to gleaning in 1859 which are not, however, as restrictive.

²⁹ Cambridge Univ. Library, Manuscripts Collection, Palmer A25, ‘Customs of Barham manor’; Sharpe, *Crime in early modern England*, p. 123.

³⁰ Tusser, *Five hundred points*, p. 305 (Hilman’s later footnotes as published in Hilman, *Tusser*).

their diets. The Essex volume noted that at Dunmow £400 worth of gleanings were collected by 200 families—well over half of the parish's households.³¹ Petty sessions records indicate that large crowds also went gleaning in several smaller Essex parishes in the late eighteenth century. The same source records that most of those involved in gleaning disputes were the wives of labourers or husbandmen while about a quarter were widows, children, or single women. A few were married to artisans. Although those involved in these disputes were not necessarily a typical sample of gleaners as a whole,³² by the late eighteenth century women and children from large labouring families were clearly the most important subgroup among the gleaners. When the Terling vestry in Essex attempted to restrict the categories of inhabitant allowed to glean during the harvest crisis of 1795-6, they concentrated on ensuring that the gleanings went to those among the 'industrious poor' who had large families, rather than returning to the older definition of the poor as simply the young, the aged, and the impotent.³³

Ellis's comments in the 1750s would imply that this broader definition was well established before the last two decades of the eighteenth century, but it may well have been reinforced in that period by parish officers' growing awareness that labouring families were increasingly likely to become a burden on the rates and by the reduced role of women in the harvest labour force. The extensive debates that arose out of the famous gleaning cases of 1786 and 1788 indicate that while contemporaries often differed about whether or not the poor had a legal right to glean, none seem to have doubted that labouring families availed themselves of this privilege in large numbers or that it would be difficult to prevent them from doing so.³⁴

This very wide definition of the right to glean did not change significantly after 1788 in eastern and central England. The farmers' legal victory at the Court of Common Pleas in 1788 did not enable them to increase their control over gleaning practices significantly or to confine gleaning to specific groups such as paupers or employees.³⁵ Contests over the gleaning rights of the poor continued sporadically throughout the period 1750-1850. A small minority of parish authorities attempted to limit gleaning to the 'deserving' poor or to other subgroups. Some farmers tried to confine the right to glean to certain labouring families only. In general, however, a strong tradition of collective protest among the gleaners of southern and eastern England,

³¹ Ellis, *The modern husbandman*, p. 35; Young, *General view . . . Norfolk*, pp. 492-4; Vancouver, *General view . . . Hampshire*, p. 388 links gleaners to the 'peasantry'; Gooch, *General view . . . Cambridge*, pp. 132-3; Young, *General view . . . Sussex*, pp. 409-10 for two labouring budgets including gleanings. Young, *General view . . . Lincolnshire*, p. 445 suggests that women could earn more for themselves by gleaning than by other forms of harvest work—a theme repeated in mid nineteenth-century sources. Young, *General view . . . Essex*, p. 310 for Dunmow gleaners.

³² For detailed discussion and sources see King, 'Gleaners'. Widows dependent on relief may have been more reluctant to get involved. Children were largely excluded from legal proceedings.

³³ Essex Record Office, D/P 299/8/2. It is possible that throughout the early modern period definitions of 'the poor' in this context were altered by the authorities in years of dearth, but I have found too little evidence to be able to assess this aspect of attitudes towards the gleaners.

³⁴ *Annals of Agriculture*, ix (1788), pp. 13-4, 164-7, 636-46; x (1788), pp. 218-27; *Cambridge Chronicle*, 21 June 1788; *Bury and Norwich Post*, 31 May 1786, 7 June 1786, 17 Sept. 1788; *Northampton Mercury*, 26 Sept. 1795; Young, *The farmer's calendar*, p. 431; *The Farmer's Magazine*, III (1802), p. 341.

³⁵ King, 'Gleaners'.

combined with widespread sympathy for their case and with the difficulties involved in invoking formal legal sanctions against them, made it extremely difficult to prevent almost all the local poor from gleaning. In 1817 Williams's handbook *The farmer's lawyer* suggested that virtually the entire 'lower class of the community' still believed that they had a right to glean and a large number of gleaners continued to assert that right. By listing gleaning as a source of income and work opportunities for the average labouring family, the 1830s parish replies made it clear that the vast majority of labouring households sent members to the gleaning fields. In some parishes this was explicitly stated. At Moulton the president of the Northamptonshire Farming Society reported that 'All the women and children glean'. At Thaxted in Essex 'all were employed in gleaning'.³⁶

The pattern may have been different in the north and west where two 1830s replies indicate that the poor were only allowed to glean if they agreed to help the farmer with other tasks,³⁷ but within the predominantly grain-growing regions only a small minority of farmers seem to have made any attempts to control who was allowed to glean before 1850. By the 1860s observers in Nottinghamshire and Gloucestershire were noting that farmers were beginning to confine gleaning rights to the families of their own workers but these were recent initiatives and in many areas no such constraints were introduced. During Fred Gresswell's childhood in late nineteenth-century Lincolnshire, for example, 'most of the women and children' gleaned and 'it was recognised you could trespass on the farmer's property with impunity'.³⁸

IV

It is difficult to assess how much the value and importance of the gleanings changed between 1750 and 1850. The doubling of the acreage under wheat between 1750 and the 1840s, combined with a rise of 50 per cent or more in yields per acre, brought substantial gains for the gleaners in many areas,³⁹ but the growth of the rural population would have counteracted this to some extent. The customary rule that gleaning was largely confined to local inhabitants probably meant that the rural labouring poor were not disadvantaged in parishes adjacent to rapidly growing towns, although in 1820 there were complaints that 'in populous neighbourhoods' the value of gleaning was reduced by 'great numbers' of 'strangers' who forced their way into the gleaning fields.⁴⁰

³⁶ *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx). The writings of rural poets from poor backgrounds confirm that gleaning was a normal part of labouring life in counties such as Suffolk and Northamptonshire. Clare, 'The harvest morning', p. 8; Robinson, ed., *John Clare's autobiographical writings*, p. 32; Wickett and Duval, *The farmer's boy*, p. 82.

³⁷ *R.C. on the Poor Laws* (P.P. 1834, xxx): Llanvapley in Monmouthshire and Whitburn in Durham. For a different pattern in Yorkshire, Hill, *Eighteenth-century women*, p. 192.

³⁸ *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., x (1860), p. 476; 4th ser., iv (1869), pp. 216, 286; Gresswell, *Bright boots*, p. 47.

³⁹ Holderness, 'Prices', pp. 128-9, 140, 145, which suggests that wheat output increased more than threefold c.1750-1850. For yields see Turner, 'Agricultural productivity'; Overton, 'Agricultural productivity'.

⁴⁰ On the gleaners' battles to prevent intruders from other parishes, King, 'Gleaners'; Bushaway, *By rite*, p. 139; *Farmer's Magazine*, xxi (1820), pp. 413-5.

The influence of technical changes before 1850 is also difficult to assess. The extensive late eighteenth-century debate about the impact of the transition from sickle to scythe failed to reach any definite conclusion about whether or not gleaning yields were significantly affected.⁴¹ They may have risen in value. Roberts has recently suggested that the use of scythes increased the quantity of corn lost or damaged and Hennell concluded that 'reaping with fagging hooks or scythes left more for the gleaners, if anything, than did sickles'.⁴² However, Hennell also pointed out that reaping machines and horse rakes reduced gleaning yields. The mechanical reaper did not come into general use until after 1850⁴³ but the horse rake may have affected the gleaners before that date. One writer certainly claimed in 1831 that as the scattered corn 'became more valuable' it was 'raked with greater closeness and care'. However, other evidence suggests that the gleaners may only have been marginally affected by this change before the 1870s. 'A little while ago', a Gloucestershire writer noted in 1860, 'leasing was threatened to extinction by the use of the horse-rake, fortunately, however, it proved not to pay the expense of working.'⁴⁴ Information about the proportion of each year's crop that went to the gleaners is very difficult to find. Sir John Sinclair suggested that the loss was sometimes as high as 30 per cent because 'the poor presumed to glean not only among the sheaves, but . . . from them'. More accurate perhaps was the *Farmer's Magazine's* estimate that 2 to 3 bushels per acre were lost to the gleaners if the reapers left lengthy stubbles. This figure represented between 9 and 15 per cent of average wheat yields—sufficient to explain why some farmers risked communal censure by putting their animals onto the stubbles before the poor had finished gleaning.⁴⁵

However, as harvesting techniques changed in the second half of the century this proportion fell substantially. The introduction of mechanical reapers, of more sophisticated horse rakes, and of self-sheaving reaper-binders all contributed to this decline. By 1901 a Cambridge newspaper reported that 'gleaning has commenced but in the machine-cut fields little is left to gather'. Hennell, writing 30 years later, argued that higher wages for agricultural labourers had also persuaded many to relinquish their right to glean, but he went on to stress that 'the introduction of reaping machines is the chief reason why there are no gleaners now . . . the earlier reaping machines and horse rakes left less behind them, the side-delivery reaper and the self-binder successively less and less'. But gleaning remained a significant source of income for many families throughout the nineteenth century. At Blaxall in Suffolk, for example, farm labourers' wages were still so low in

⁴¹ *Museum Rusticum et Commerciale*, I (1764), pp. 20-1, 158-9; II (1764), pp. 29-30, 34-5, 81-5, 92, 360; III (1765), p. 192.

⁴² Roberts, 'Sickles', p. 16; Hennell, 'Gleaning', p. 94. For the opposite view, *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., x (1860), p. 476.

⁴³ Morgan, 'The place', pp. 61-2; Walton, 'Agriculture', p. 248.

⁴⁴ Postans, *Letter*, p. 8; *Notes & Queries*, 2nd ser., x (1860), p. 476; Stephens, *The book of the farm*, III, p. 1083 is, however, more enthusiastic about the usefulness of the horse rake. It was seen in a reasonable number of farming machinery orders between 1820 and 1845 but then dipped in popularity in the period 1845-65; Walton, 'Agriculture', p. 248.

⁴⁵ Wilson, ed., *The rural cyclopedia*, II, pp. 455-6; *Farmers' Magazine*, III (1802), p. 341; Holderness, 'Prices', pp. 140-5.

the 1890s that the 'loss of gleaned corn could mean actual hunger to many a farm-worker's family' and many autobiographies recall late nineteenth-century childhoods in which gleaning played a part. However, by the first two decades of the twentieth century it was becoming an increasingly marginal activity. In Essex the bells which regulated the gleaners' hours were still rung in some parishes in 1910. By 1930 they had fallen silent. A small number of gleaners continued to collect grain to feed their hens and pigs, particularly during wartime, but the amounts involved were negligible.⁴⁶

Between 1750 and 1850, however, it appears that the poor's level of access to the gleaning fields was reasonably constant. Morgan has argued that the farmers mainly attacked the gleaning of barley rather than that of wheat, but before 1850, at least, there is little evidence that barley gleaning was more easily undermined. As one early nineteenth-century Cambridgeshire writer noted, 'gleaning is a general evil in this county and is unlimited extending to every grain and without regulations. . . . The custom of gleaning all grains is uniform.'⁴⁷ Thus, a rough comparison of the early 1830s evidence about the value of the gleanings with the less complete information provided by Eden, Davies, Young, and others in the 1790s suggests there was no major change in the importance of gleaning between these periods. In both periods between about 3 or 4 per cent and 13 or 14 per cent of the average labouring family's annual income was contributed by the gleanings.

Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the vast majority of labouring families in central and eastern England not only had access to the gleaning fields but also used that access to great effect. Gleaning was not a marginal activity in most grain-growing parishes. It contributed up to one-eighth of annual household earnings and often even more in households headed by widows. It was a vital safety net for the winter months and was a particularly useful source of food in years of dearth. 'How many days', asked Thomas Ruggles, the gleaners' opponent in the 1780s debate, 'are lost by the mother of a family and her children, in wandering about from field to field to glean what does not repay them the wear of their cloaths in seeking?'⁴⁸ The answer, although it did not suit Ruggles's argument to admit it, was none. In central and eastern England at least, women and their children undertook the back-breaking task of gleaning for several weeks from morning till night because their work yielded a vital piece in the jigsaw of makeshifts that kept their household economies afloat.

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⁴⁶ Morgan, 'The place', pp. 53-65; *Cambridge Independent Press*, 23 Aug. 1901; Evans, *The farm*, p. 80; *Essex Review*, XXXIV (1925), pp. 162-3.

⁴⁷ King, 'Gleaners'; Morgan, *Harvesters*, p. 155; Gooch, *General view . . . Cambridge*, pp. 132-3. Morgan argues that gleaning disputes coming before the courts almost all related to barley or beans. For cases refuting this view, *Cambridge Chronicle*, 27 Sept. 1856; *Northampton Mercury*, 26 Sept. 1795; Essex Record Office, P/Lwr 6, 21 Aug. 1788, 1 Sept. 1788. These cases, brought immediately after the 1788 judgement, involved wheat gleaning. Thus, although the judgement itself concerned a dispute over barley gleaning, farmers immediately tried to apply it to wheat; King, 'The origins' and *idem*, 'Gleaners'.

⁴⁸ *Annals of Agriculture*, IX (1788), p. 13.

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