

Cider as Wages in Devon

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by John Torrance (Branscombe Project)

*with Barbara Farquharson, Robert Crick and Tony Lambert
supplying voices for historic persons quoted, shown here in italics.*

1. The origin of the custom of part-payment of wages in cider

Anglo-Saxon England had only wild crab apples, and Saxons didn't drink cider — they drank beer or mead or, if they were rich, imported wine. But Normandy was already the home of cider, as it still is, and the Normans brought apple-orchards and cider with them to English counties like Devon that had a suitable climate, and the cider press, in its basic form, is said to have been invented in the 13th century.

By the 14th century it was the general custom to dole out cider or beer to workers at harvest. An account of the manor of Branscombe in 1307 mentions orchards (*pomaria*). In 1339 the Dean and Chapter of Exeter cathedral, who were lords of the manor, received from their steward the following document:

A rental and custumal, drawn up because of various disputes between the tenants and me, Canon William Penkrich, lord and steward of this manor.

It listed the services that the tenants were obliged to render as part of their rent:

He shall reap the lord's crop for four days with a sickle, and he shall come quickly after sunrise and stay until midday, or he shall come at midday and stay until a little before sunset, as the lord's bailiff shall choose ...

And he shall have bread made from wheat and barley ... and, sharing with one of his neighbours, five of the best herring and one lettuce and sufficient drink, that is, beer or cider as the lord wishes.

I think this custom is probably the origin of the cider ration given to farm labourers in Devon (and of beer rations elsewhere). It arose from feudal relations imposed on a peasant society. It wasn't a wage, because the

villeins, or unfree tenants, were obliged to give labour to the manor, unpaid, for a specified period. But during that period they and their labour belonged to the lord, and the lord was obliged to feed them.

By Elizabethan times, Devon had become a land of small farms. Large manorial estates had been parcelled out as tenant farms, some former villein holdings had grown into copyhold farms, and common land had been enclosed and leased to tenant farmers. The descendants of dispossessed villeins became day-labourers, and a statute of 1563 required county justices to fix maximum farm wages. The way this was done shows that the custom of providing free food and drink persisted, but now it was treated as part of wages.

In 1594 the Devon justices fixed the maximum wage of farm workers at 7d a day without meat and drink from November 1st to February 2nd, and at 8d a day for the rest of the year. But where meat and drink were provided, the rates were fixed at 3d and 4d for the two periods. At harvest, men working long hours might earn up to 1/- a day, or 6d with food and drink.

Not all farm labourers were day-labourers. The replacement of manorial estates by small farms meant that many men and women farm servants now lived in. Their wages also were fixed, but at higher rates, and clothes were provided as well as board and lodging, and they benefited generally from living in a better household.

2. Devon Colic

In the 17th and 18th centuries people in Devon, but especially farm workers, suffered from a mysterious illness. Symptoms were severe stomach pains, leading in extreme cases to blindness, madness, even death. It was called Devon Colic, and was usually blamed on the acidity of cider, especially on drinking too much of it. Its real cause was discovered in 1767 by the queen's physician, Sir George Baker, who wrote

Devon colic interested me because I'm a Devon man: my father was vicar of Modbury. I had noticed that the symptoms were identical with those of lead poisoning. Being therefore, in the month of October 1766, at Exeter, I procured some of the expressed juice of apples, as it flowed from a cider-press, lined with Lead, in the parish of

Alphington. On this I made and repeated several experiments which entirely satisfied me that it contained a solution of Lead.

I made four more experiments in London, with the assistance of a chemist. And in order to leave the matter entirely without doubt, an extract from 18 common quart bottles of Devonshire cider that had been in my cellar for more than three months, was prepared. This extract, being essayed with the black flux, a quantity of lead, weighing four grains and a half, was found at the bottom of the crucible.

Lead was used to caulk or line cider presses in Devon, but not elsewhere, and not everywhere in Devon. In the mid C18 Devon produced about 170,000 hogsheads of cider a year (over 10 million gallons). It cost 2d or 3d a gallon 'at the pound's mouth' and labourers earned 7s a week, with a daily winter allowance of 2 quarts of cider when working, and 3–4 quarts during haymaking and harvest. This was more than enough to produce chronic lead poisoning. When lead caulking stopped, Devon colic disappeared. But that was the only blessing for farm workers in a period of increasing hardship.

3. Moral effects of cider

Cider drinking was perceived to have other ill effects beside colic. Here's William Marshall, son of a Yorkshire farmer, who published his book *Rural Economy of the West of England* in 1805. He took a dim view of it:

The drunkenness, dissoluteness of manners, and the dishonesty of the lower classes might well be referred, in whole or in great part, to the baleful effects of cider; which workmen of every description make a merit of stealing: and what is noticeable, the effects of cider, on working people appears to be different from that of malt liquor. Give a Kentish man a pint of ale, and it seems to invigorate his whole frame: he falls to his work again, with redoubled spirit. But give a Devonshire man as much, or twice as much cider, and it appears to unbrace and relax, rather than to give cheerfulness and energy to his exertions.

Crying up beer against cider was a stock ploy of those who derided Devon as backward, just as praising cider was a point of Devonian pride.

By the 19th century the temperance movement, advancing hand-in-hand with Methodism and other varieties of bible Christianity, was targeting cider

rations on Devon farms. In 1838, a farmer wrote to *The Western Temperance Advocate*, published in Plymouth, reporting

... a successful trial of the principle of Abstinence, during harvesting, by my own men, who gathered in about 70 acres of hay, 64 acres of corn, besides shearing upwards of 400 sheep without the aid of alcoholic drinks ... At first, some of the men seemed to think it would be quite impossible; however, on its being explained, to them, that the money would be shared amongst them — that is, the saving in expense in comparison with former years — they made no objection; and, after the harvest, they all expressed their great satisfaction.

And William Edgcumbe, a labourer and teetotaler, claimed

I was shearing 11 days — sometimes with others who used these liquors and sometimes with those who did not; in the former case, the men tried to outdo me, but before the end of the day, by my steady progress, I was before any of them and, as to doing the work, they all allowed that my sheep were shorn well; and I was very comfortable.

A farmer near Tiverton told the *Western Times* that tea was just as good a lubricant as cider:

I let my grass to be cut at five shillings an acre, and nine quarts of cider, and this quantity was drunk by a man in doing the work in a day. And I employ a teetotaler who gets 18p for his allowance, reckoning the cider to be worth 2d a quart, and the mistress supplies him with tea to his contentment. He stands to his work quite as well on tea as on cider.

4. Poverty and low wages

Preachers of abstinence and salvation railed at the drunkenness of farm workers, but the day-labourer's basic problem was poverty. Listen to W. G. Hoskins:

In the 200 years between 1594 and 1796 his money-wages had only risen from 8d a day to a shilling for the greater part of the year, a rise of 50%. But the cost of living had trebled during the same period ... Those who lived in were much better off... [They were] as well off as their Elizabethan forebears had been, but the day-labourer and his family were incomparably worse off.

Rural poverty worsened dramatically towards the 1830s. The ‘Swing riots’ and smashing of threshing machines in 1830 were brutally punished, in Devon as elsewhere.

It was the practice in Devon for parish overseers to place pauper children as apprentices with farmers. In 1843 the Poor Law Commissioners reported on the treatment of women and children in agriculture, and found that some Devon apprentices were treated as little better than slaves. But we also have a glimpse of how such a farm household could be run, cider and all, in a good case. Mrs Tuckett, who farmed her late husband’s farm at Dunsford, said:

My house is conducted in the old fashioned Devonshire way. Myself, the servants, and apprentices, all get meals together, and all have the same things: breakfast, dinner, and supper. Between breakfast and dinner the boys and girls always have luncheon; boys take it out with them into the fields — bread and cheese, and cider in their kegs. Every boy has his keg for cider.

I think that apprentices are better off in all respects than children at home, especially in their moral habits. ... Apprenticeship makes boys and girls much better able to conduct themselves after they grow up.

The immediate causes of rural poverty were various — enclosures, rural over-population, tithes collected in cash, the old poor law which allowed farmers to rely on the parish to top up low wages, and so on — but some agreed with Mr Head, a Herefordshire man who claimed in 1837 that

The money payment of wages is low, because the farmer generally, in addition, supplies his men with two or three quarts of cider a day in winter, and still more in summer. A portion of the man’s earnings is thus given in a form that contributes almost exclusively to his gratification.

By the 1850s some landowners and large farmers were substituting money for cider, to set an example. This line of benevolent reform converged with that of temperance campaigners. Low farm wages also began to interest liberal intellectuals. Edward Spender, member of a Liberal parliamentary family, condemned payment in cider in a lecture to the British Association in 1865 on ‘The Cider-truck System in some parts of the west of England’. The Statistical Society published his lecture and posted it to Devon MPs.

A riposte came from Samuel Kekewich, Tory M.P. for South Devon:

Cider is the most wholesome beverage that a labourer can use... The labourer born in this county and used to cider from his earliest years will not drink beer. Indeed, it makes them heavy, sleepy and stupid, whereas cider has a contrary effect. ... It is quite true that they often drink too much, but that is not the fault of the farmer, but of the men, who will not work in mowing, reaping or turnip hoeing, unless they have as much as they like to ask for.

As to the payment of wages in cider, you are mistaken in thinking that the farmers insist on this to get rid of their bad cider. The labourers will not have it ... It is a mistake to suppose that if the labourer were paid 10s instead of 8s 6d in money and 1s 6d in cider, that the 1s 6d would go in bread and meat. If he was deprived of cider during the hours of labour when he requires it, he would go to the cider shop, one of the worst places of resort, where all the worst people congregate. ...

I make no cider, and do not purchase it for my labourers, and therefore I give my labourers 11s per week, but I am sure they would prefer cider.

The most outspoken of these reformers was another member of the Statistical Society, Canon Edward Girdlestone. In 1863 He moved from a Lancashire parish, where the demand for labour in factory towns kept farm wages high, to become vicar of Halberton in North Devon. Shocked by the contrast, he wrote to *The Times*:

Labourers' wages are 8 or 9 shillings a week, with two or one and a half quarts of cider daily, valued at 2s per week, but much over-valued. Carters and shepherds get 1s. a week more, or else a cottage rent free. The labourer has no privileges whatever. He rents his potato-ground at a high rate. Though fuel is said to be given to him, he really pays its full value by grubbing-up for it in old hedges in after-hours. In wet weather or in sickness his wages entirely cease. The cottages as a rule are not fit to house pigs in. The labourer breakfasts on hot water poured on bread and flavoured with onions; dines on bread and hard cheese at 2d a pound, with cider very washy

and sour, and sups on potatoes or cabbage greased with a tiny bit of fat bacon. He seldom more than sees or smells butcher's meat. He is long-lived, but in the prime of life 'crippled up', i.e. disabled by rheumatism, the result of wet clothes, poor living, and sour cider.

Peter Orlando Hutchinson, writing his history of Sidmouth in the 1870s, also commented on this point:

Some charge the acidity of cider with the prevalence of rheumatism among so many of the farm labourers. Yet such is the force of habit, that they prefer dry cider to sweet, and have frequently told me that they can do a harder day's work on it in the hay and harvest field than upon malt liquor.

One suspects that rheumatism was mainly the result of bad damp housing.

Canon Girdlestone was sure that the solution to low wages in Devon was to reduce the local labour supply by encouraging migration, either to better-paid jobs elsewhere, or to the colonies. Between 1866 and 1872 he arranged for more than 400 men, two-thirds with families, to move away to better-paid work. Not surprisingly, he incurred the wrath of local farmers who boycotted his church. He also had definite views on payment in cider:

There is a growing feeling among the labourers and farmers of this country against the system. ... Though the cider might elevate the labourer it did not strengthen the man, and if he had beef and mutton instead of cider he would be a stronger man, for he would have more muscle and he would be a more powerful and efficient labourer. I would never believe but what a highly skilled and strong labourer would get far higher wages than the mere cider-fed, uneducated man.

In 1870, when Girdlestone addressed the Devon Central Chamber of Agriculture, full of big farmers, the discussion went his way, in favour of substituting money for cider. But farming opinion was divided. In 1871, when Sir Thomas Acland (1809–1898) Liberal MP for North Devon, made the same point as Girdlestone, but he was chided by a farmer called Pidsley at Sowton ploughing match:

I don't agree with Sir Thomas. 12s a week is not equivalent to 10s and liquor!

While another farmer wrote to the Western Times:

I totally disagree with Mr Pidsley's statement ... I believe Sir Thomas to be the working man's true friend in this matter.

He said more money wages would mean more choice and less drunkenness. But what did the workers themselves think of all this? Ah, if only we had their voices!

Joseph Arch founded the first National Agricultural Workers' Union in 1872. He addressed a thousand-strong crowd in the market place at Ilminster, mostly labourers and their families. A newspaper reported one farm worker there who certainly thought payment in cider was a poor deal:

Nine shillings a week, no pay if you lose a day's work, no overtime if you work more than a day, only a little wash-gut cider!

Canon Girdlestone supported the Union, unlike the Bishop of Gloucester, who said that Union agitators should be thrown into village ponds. The background to these events was the agricultural depression that began in 1870 and lasted to the end of the century. Farmers couldn't afford to be philanthropic, and workers couldn't afford dues to the Union, which was soon crushed.

Farming was now beginning to be changed by technology, which replaced day-labourers at harvest. In 1874 a long article in the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette described the effect of horse-drawn reaping machines:

They cut down more wheat in a day than 30 or 40 men with sickles did 30 years ago. Labourers must come behind to tie the sheaves and stook them, but women can do it. Each sickle man needed a gallon or gallon and a half of cider a day, besides bread, bacon and cheese. In Devon only a quarter as much cider is consumed now as in the 1840s. Moralists may rejoice at the natural result of all this — less dissipation, fewer quarrels amongst workmen at harvest time, and a diminution of crime. The reaping machine is rapidly becoming a gigantic civiliser.

There was a womens' angle on this, as a farmer's wife explained:

Well, this is a revolution truly, for which the female domestics of every farmer's household will be only too grateful. The labour of flagon-filling every morning at harvest time is hard work, and nasty.

5. Truck Acts

When Edward Spender used the phrase ‘cider-truck system’ in 1865 he was being deliberately provocative. The truck system was when workers were compelled to take part of their wages in kind, in products sold to them by their employers at the employers’ prices. In 1831 a Truck Act banned this abuse in most branches of trade and industry, but a let-out clause allowed food and drink, dressed and consumed under the employer’s roof, to be given in lieu of wages. On the strength of this, no attempt had been made to apply the Truck Act to wages paid in cider.

This was changed by the Truck Amendment Act of 1887. Sir Thomas Charles Acland (1842–1919) M.P. son of Sir Thomas, introduced an amendment to prohibit paying wages in cider, with fines for farmers who did so, and the Bill that finally passed allowed part-payment of agricultural workers in food and drink but not in intoxicants.

It’s not clear how effective this was, but by now farm labour was becoming scarcer. Canon Girdlestone’s trickle of migrants from Devon villages was turning into a flood — to America, the colonies, the South Wales coalfields, and to growing cities and holiday resorts.

More farmers, it seems, were now prepared to count cider as a traditional benefit over and above a decent wage. Farms still grew large quantities of apples and made cider for sale, and the precise status of cider rations for farm workers seems to have been left as a grey area. By the turn of the century farmers sometimes had to advertise for farm workers in newspapers, and by 1915, when military service had further tightened the labour market, farmer Pyle of Talaton, near Ottery St Mary, was offering for

A carter (good) to drive team of shire horses; cottage, garden potato ground, and cider; good wages to suitable man.

6. The First World War and after

Payment of wages in cider was brought to an end, like much else, by the First World War. To safeguard the country’s food supply, agriculture was regulated by law. Labourers’ wages were fixed at 25s a week. In 1917 Sir Francis Acland, nephew of Sir Thomas Charles, wrote to the Western Times:

Several Farmers' Societies have resolved to make a deduction [from wages] for cider, but this is not advisable. Workers can claim for a shortfall in wages, and benefits not prohibited by law can be counted as wages, at values approved by the Agricultural Wages Board. But deducting for cider is prohibited by the Truck Act of 1887, so it wouldn't be recoverable by workers. They would seek their 25 shillings from another employer.

The same newspaper reported in 1919 that since cider was no longer deductible from wages, farmers were not expected to make more cider than they could sell.

Despite this, the acreage of orchards in Devon increased with cheap railway transport and a growing urban market for cider. Whiteways Cider Factory at Whimple sent cider to London by rail (it also made a cider allowance to its employees). Oral history from Branscombe shows farmers still profiting from this in the 1950s — but also, still giving cider to their workers.

Here's Ron Denning, a farmer:

My orchard at Manor Mill farm produced 1 ton of apples a year for Whiteways. We still gave a firkin to the men at haymaking.

Horace Pike, a labourer, remembered that

Coxes farm used to 'ave a quart a day. Unless you was 'aymakin' or 'arvestin', and you got as much as you wanted then.

And Ralph Cox remembers

At my father's farm at Lower Bulstone, where he still ploughed with horses in the 1950s, the two farmhands would come in the morning, let out the horses to the trough, and then go down to the cellar and drink a pint each from a 56 gallon hogshead of home-made cider. Then they'd take a quart pot each into the fields and another quart home on leaving. None of this was treated as part of their pay.

(They'd finish the day at the Fountain Head, where the back door was kept open for locals to come back after closing time.)

But by now orchards were not being replanted, and in the 1960s farmers received grants for grubbing up old orchards and converting to cereals. Since then Devon has lost 60% of its orchards. So, does free cider for farm workers survive anywhere, I wonder?

Sources: Exeter Cathedral Archives; Wikipedia; Leicester University; Anne Acland, *A Devon Family*; W. G. Hoskins, *Devon*; ww.halberton.org/standrews, www.devonhistorysociety.org, Branscombe Project Archive. Newspaper cuttings kindly supplied by Sue Dymond.