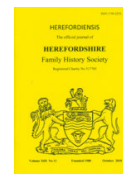


# Your Ag Lab Ancestors

David J Skyrme



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This article was first published in *Herefordiensis*, Vol. XV, No 3, pp69-74 (October 2022)

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Do you have agricultural labourers in your family tree? I bet you do. Looking, for example, at the 1851 census for Vowchurch, of the 121 males listed with occupations, 62 were agricultural labourers or farm servants. Of the other significant occupations there were 9 farmers, 8 masons, 5 shoemakers and 4 tailors. Less common occupations included a lath cleaver, flax dresser, roll collector and musician.

I have used it in this article to illustrate how to delve more deeply into the lives of your ag lab ancestors. What started me on this journey was an online Pharos Tutors course *Discovering More About Your Agricultural Labourer Ancestor* run by Janet Few. The course caused me to delve more into the types of ag lab, the work they did, and find out more about the farms they worked on and their living and working conditions. My Skyrme One-Name Study found that Vowchurch in the Golden Valley was the place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the largest cluster of Skyrmes. I have therefore mostly used this place for my examples in this article.

## ***Not All Ag Labs Are The Same***

The very term agricultural labourer is a catch-all for any number of jobs on a farm. If they specialised they may well be described by other terms such ploughman, carter, teamster, waggoner etc. Their tasks would vary throughout the seasons. On an arable farm, for instance, they might do the following:

- Winter – ploughing, hedging, harvesting root crops
- Spring – sowing, maintaining fences
- Summer – weeding, hay making, repairing gates and fences
- Autumn – harvesting corn, sowing winter crops.

We tend to think of labouring as an unskilled job. But the very comprehensive *Book of the Farm* spells out in considerable details the intricacies of all the jobs that needed doing on a farm.<sup>1</sup> The Golden Valley of Herefordshire was a mix of arable, grassland and a few orchards. I shall use the job of sowing wheat as an example. Page 553 of Volume 1 of the *Book of the Farm* describes what was involved. In summary:

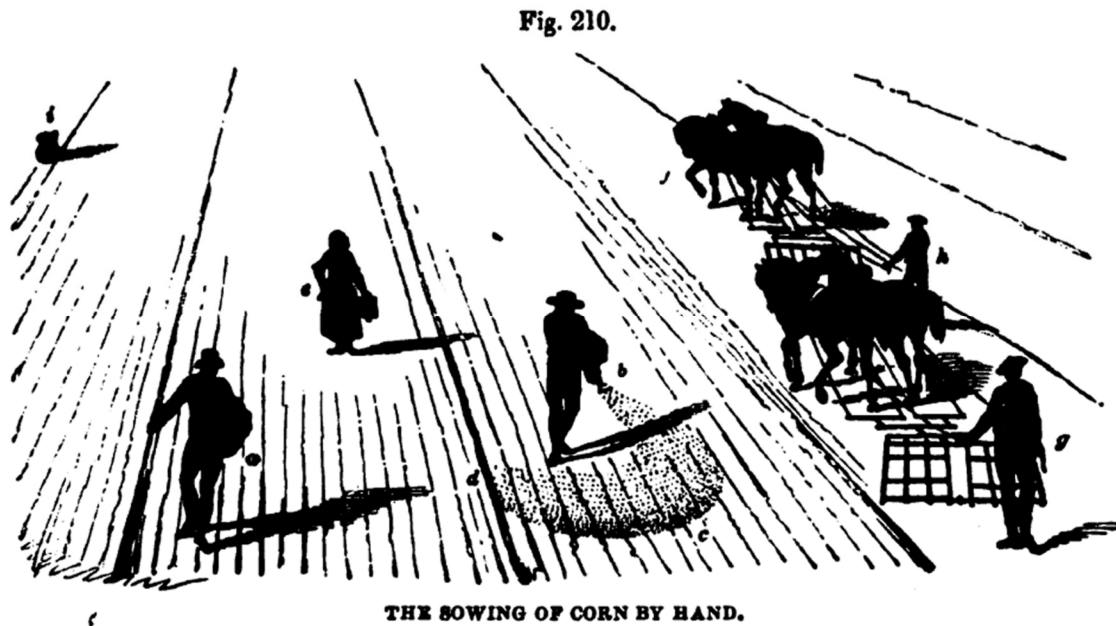
1. The furrows are ploughed, the ploughman leaving sacks of seeds at suitable intervals
2. A seed carrier, described as "she", fills a basket with seed from a sack
3. She gives the seed to the sower who has a sheet (suspended over his shoulder and arm) which she fills allowing him to pick out and broadcast the seed with his right hand
4. She refills her basket from a sack and then goes to the next stop; she serves two sowers
5. After sowing, the ploughman drives a harrow to cover the seeds

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<sup>1</sup> This book by Henry Stephens was first published in two volumes in 1842. It ran to several editions and became the standard reference work for agriculture in the second half the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many volumes are accessible for free at [books.google.com](https://books.google.com).

6. The field should then be rolled, but if it's dry, priority is given to sowing more seed and leaving the rolling until later
7. A good day's sowing work is a labourer sowing broadcast 16 acres at 11 bushels an acre taking 10 hours.

The description is detailed but difficult to visualise. I had to keep going back to earlier sections of the book to find the detail. There were no YouTube tutorial videos in those days that would make it clear! But this diagram gives a good idea of what was involved:



Overall, it was a finely tuned operation of teamwork with a degree of skill to keep the sheets filled with the right amount of seed and to spread the seeds evenly.

### ***Farms and Cottages***

There are several ways of working out which farm your ag lab ancestor might have worked. First identify the farms in the neighbourhood. Censuses, directories, tithe records, land tax records and early OS maps can all help.<sup>2</sup> For Vowchurch, the census mentions a few, but more comprehensive was Cassey's 1858 Herefordshire Directory which listed the following farms:

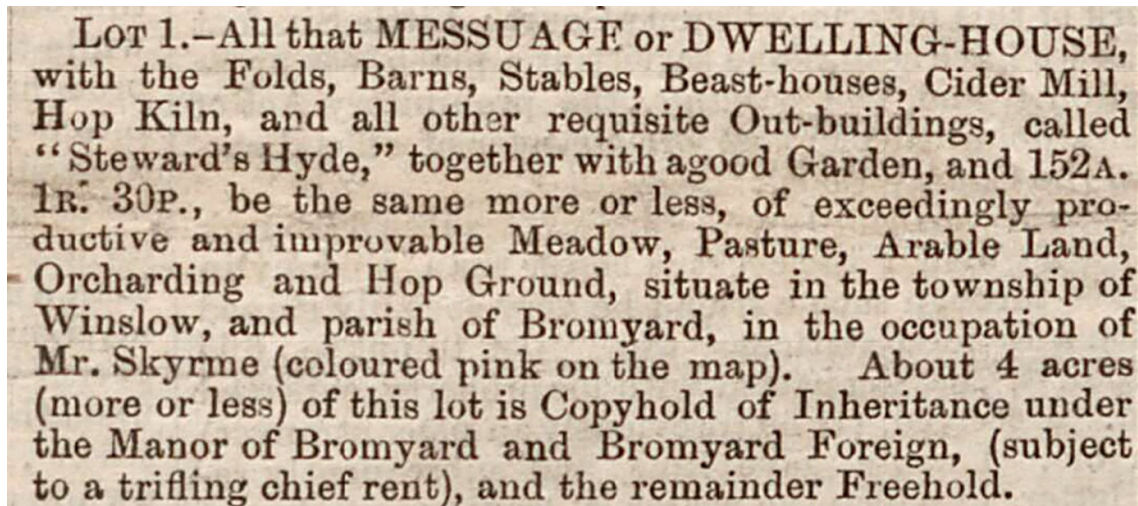
- Poston Lodge, Poston Mill, Chanston, Hill Farm, Vowchurch Court, Pont-y-Pinna, Monnington Court, Holstrey.

You may be lucky and find your ancestor as a single young man living in the farmer's house. In my case 25-year old William Skyrme was a servant in the household of farmer John Hancorn at Hill Farm. Also a John Skyrme was in a cottage next to Holstrey farm, so it is highly likely that he worked there.

<sup>2</sup> The National Library of Scotland has a good range of old OS maps to view online at <https://maps.nls.uk/>. There is good coverage of 6in to 1 mile maps for Herefordshire published in 1887.

Tithe maps and apportionments are also helpful. We are lucky in Herefordshire in that there is a comprehensive database of landowners at <https://htt.herefordshire.gov.uk/her-search/field-names-and-landowners/>. Thus I found John Skyrme and Samuel Skyrme as owning orchards. However, you will need to view the full apportionment (at the archives) to see the occupiers.

Old newspapers at the British Newspaper Archive ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)) can help, particularly adverts of farm auctions. Many list all the farm tools and implements they would have used.



LOT 1.—All that MESSUAGE or DWELLING-HOUSE, with the Folds, Barns, Stables, Beast-houses, Cider Mill, Hop Kiln, and all other requisite Out-buildings, called “Steward’s Hyde,” together with a good Garden, and 152A. 1R. 30P., be the same more or less, of exceedingly productive and improvable Meadow, Pasture, Arable Land, Orchard and Hop Ground, situate in the township of Winslow, and parish of Bromyard, in the occupation of Mr. Skyrme (coloured pink on the map). About 4 acres (more or less) of this lot is Copyhold of Inheritance under the Manor of Bromyard and Bromyard Foreign, (subject to a trifling chief rent), and the remainder Freehold.

*Hereford Times* advert of 16th June 1855 advertising an auction. (©The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)).

There is a series of books called *The General View of the Agriculture* for a given county. The one for Herefordshire was published in 1813 and runs to 173 pages. It covers the climate and soil in the county, types of farm buildings, what crops are grown, the tools that are used and what livestock was reared. It lists the owners of large estates as including the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Essex and the Governors of Guys Hospital. I’ve found several leases or mortgages between Skyrme family members and Guys Hospital at Vowchurch, Sellack and Stretton Court.

On farm buildings it says:

“The old farm-houses of Herefordshire, as well as of other counties, are inconvenient, and the office ill adapted to the purposes for which they were designed.”

It goes on to say how the Governors of Guys Hospital under the management of their steward James WOODHOUSE, have been “particularly attentive to the interests and convenience of the tenants”. It reports that several old farm houses have been demolished and new ones built “to the great advantage and comfort of the farmer”.

As for where your ag lab ancestor might have lived, it says about cottages:

“The cottages in Herefordshire are generally of very humble and inferior construction: many are built on waste ground by their proprietor, whose means are far from adequate to the attainment of comfort and convenience.”

It then describes such a cottage in detail alongside a plan of one. On the ground floor it would have one room in front 12ft x 14ft with a shed behind. On top would be a bedroom of the same size.

### ***Cattle and Crops***

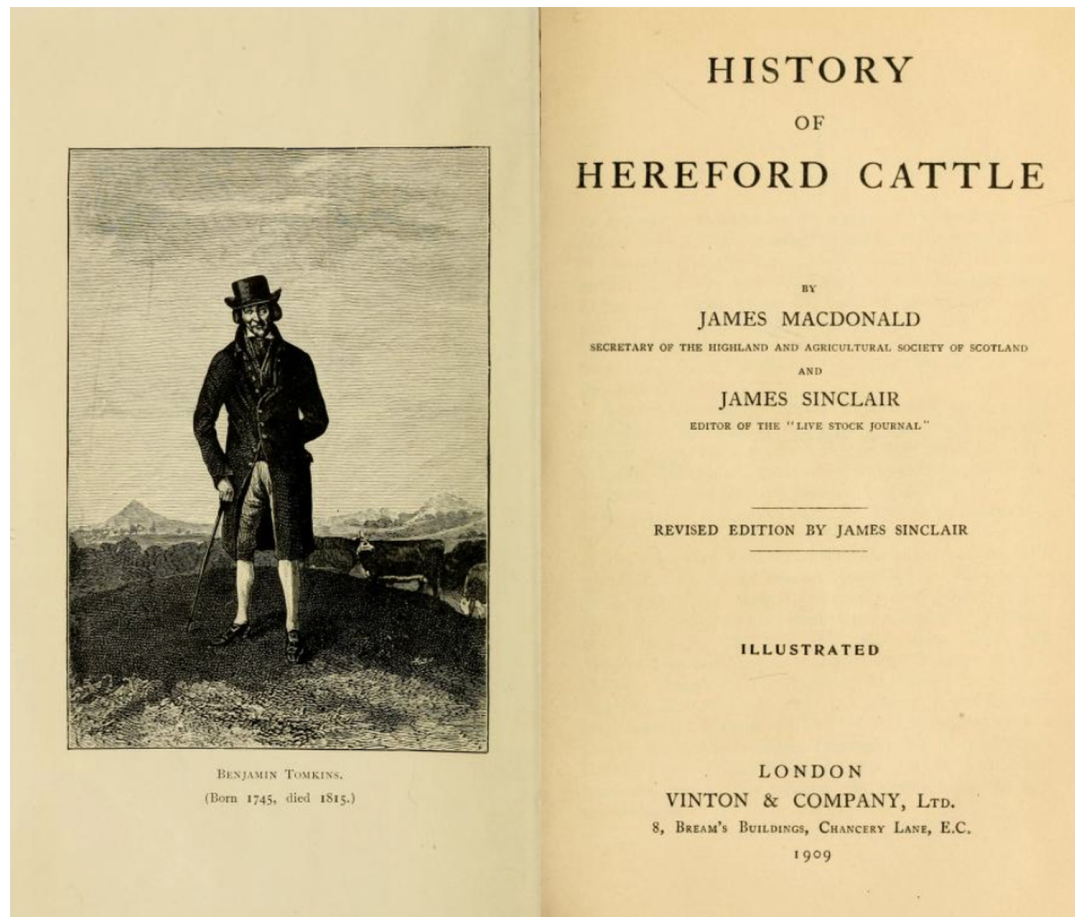
Wheat was extensively grown throughout the county. Apple growing and raising cattle, were of course two of the main staples of farming wealth.

Herefordshire cattle, with characteristic white face and reddish brown body are well known throughout the world. The *General View of Agriculture in Herefordshire* starts the chapter on cattle with:

“The cattle of Herefordshire have long been esteemed superior to most, if not to all, the breeds in the island”.

There is a 500-page book published in 1900 devoted to the history of this breed. The picture on the front is of pioneer Benjamin TOMKINS (1745-1815). Other families which feature prominently include HEWER, GALLIERS, HAYWOOD and JEFFRIES. In addition it says that no history of the breed would be complete without reference to the TULLEYS and SKYRMES:

"The Tully and Skyrme cattle formed the foundation of a large number of other herds, as will be shown when the proceedings of later breeders engage attention”.





Later it says:

"The cattle of Mr. Skyrme of Stretton, of which records are still more scanty, were of a light red colour inclining to yellow, with the faces occasionally faintly ticked or speckled. William Skyrme of Dewsall, who died in 1804, aged 65 years, had a somewhat noted herd. His daughter, then in her 86th year, informed us that her father's cattle were red with white face and had wide horns. But it is from the herd of Skyrme of Stretton that the most famous animals of this strain are descended. It is a misfortune that so little can be ascertained as to the material they used, and their method of breeding."

Old books like this are freely available at [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) and can provide useful background on your ag lab ancestors who worked with cattle.

Herefordshire has a strong tradition in cider making going back several hundred years. In fact it was the nation's most popular drink for part of the 16th century. And for much of the time since Herefordshire has been responsible for about half the country's cider production. In 1883 there were 27,000 acres of apple orchards. Most farmers would make cider. They would make it one Autumn to be supplied to their farm labourers the following year, especially at harvest time. There also grew something of a practice of giving labourers part of their wages in cider. This system of "truck cider" which was described as 'pernicious' by one outraged correspondent in The Hereford Journal of 4th February 1857:

"This is a main cause if not the cause of the abounding of crime in this county. If the adult population be immoral and drunken, no wonder if the children born in sin and neglected in infancy, grow up in crime."

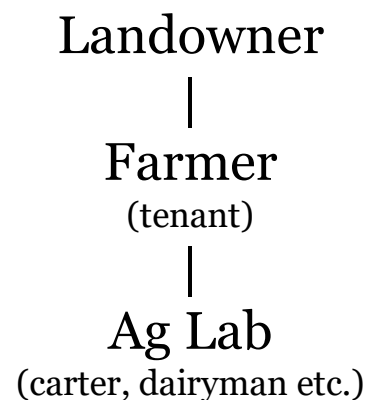
Just to underline the ubiquitous nature of apple growing, orchards feature in the first document picked out at random of about 30 indentures that I photographed at Herefordshire Archives. This is an 1838 surrender and release of "a messuage, farms and lands in the parishes of Staunton-on-Wye and Monnington". One of the parties was George Skyrme. The first two items in the schedule are:

1. "A dwelling house called The Red Door with the outbuildings, gardens and orchard thereunto".
2. "An inclosure of arable land and orcharding called The New Orchard adjoining the Garden and Orchard above mentioned - 4 acres 2 roods 18 perches."

### ***The Agricultural Hierarchy***

Your agricultural labourer ancestor was generally at the bottom of the agricultural hierarchy. He or she would work on a nearby farm which was typically tenanted. At the top of the hierarchy was the landowner.

Another addition to the hierarchy may be found on larger farms. This is a farm bailiff. He would be appointed by the landowner and was responsible for collecting rents from tenant farmers and generally overseeing the estate and making sure that good farm practices were followed. At Vowchurch we find farm bailiffs Richard SMITH at Holstrey in 1851 and Peter WILLIAMS at Monnington in 1881.

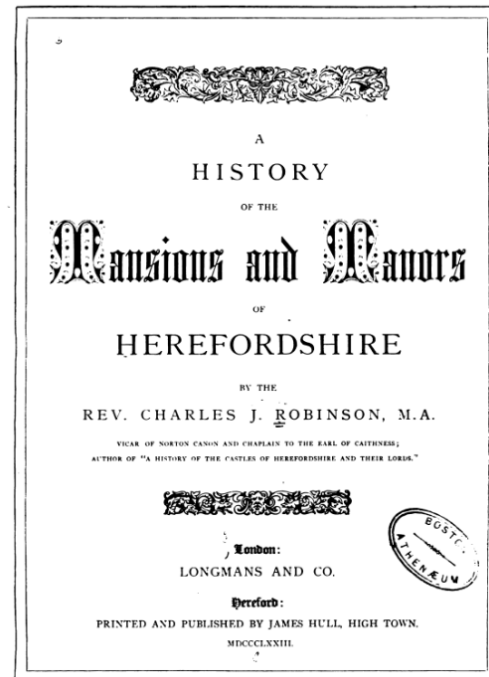


The labourers life was a hard one. In mid-Victorian times they would have earned around 8 shillings a week. From this rent may take 1s or more, fuel another shilling. Bread was a staple on which perhaps 3-4s would be spent, and additional 2-3 shillings on other food. That would not leave much for other household necessities, let alone clothing and footwear. It was therefore necessary for younger members of the family to start earning as soon as they could.

### ***Estate Records***

Having identified on which farm your ancestor may have worked, you may find more about them from estate and manor records. One underused resource is that of the free images of manor records at FamilySearch.org. Most such records are not transcribed or indexed. Therefore, instead of clicking “search records” by name, search the catalogue by place to see what is available. Also useful as a starting place is the 1873 book by Charles Robinson *The Manors and Mansions of Herefordshire* (available online). For many places it includes pedigree charts of the families that held the manor.

Mostly, however, you’ll need to search <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> to find where relevant records are held. Typing “Manor and Herefordshire” comes up with over 10,000 records. Over 2,500 are held at The National Archives, such as the Court Rolls for Vowchurch, whilst over 7,500 are held at other archives, not just Herefordshire Archives and Records Centre.



Estate records includes lease and rental records as well as proceedings on the manorial court. To complement estate records there was a national ‘Return of owners of Land’ 1973. This is organised by county and then list those who owned more than 1 acre alphabetically – see extract for Skyrme.

Name of Owner.	Address of Owner.	Extent of Lands.			Gross Estimated Rental.	
		A.	R.	P.	£	s.
Skyrme, George -	Canon Pyon -	5	1	27	11	5
Skyrme, J. H., Rps. of	(Ross) -	222	3	16	859	5
Skyrme, Lucy -	Vowchurch -	1	-	14	5	-
Skyrme, Richard -	Canon Pyon -	12	2	18	23	15
Skyrme, William -	Birley -	16	-	9	20	5

Care is needed, though since it gives the place where the owner lived, not necessarily the location of the land they owned. The largest holding in Vowchurch was that of H H Wood who owned 1,125 acres. He happened to own the Whitehouse estate. It’s worth checking whether someone has written a

history for a particular estate. Thus there is *A Short History of Whitehouse, Vowchurch and its Owners*, Timothy Wood (1999). The history listed the owners of Whitehouse starting with Symond PARRY (born 1573) and gives interesting biographies. The H H Wood from the 1873 return was Herbert Howarth WOOD who owned Whitehouse from 1862-1924. He and other landowners were instrumental in conveying land free of charge to allow the Golden Valley Railway to be built, and he also co-founded the Vowchurch and Turnastone school in 1872.

Once you know the names of the estate owners, it opens up many more records to explore such as informative newspaper articles.

### ***Farm Accidents***

Farming is a hazardous occupation. Today agriculture has the worst rate of worker fatality, being 20 times higher than the average for all industries. With less mechanisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, common causes of death were being gored by a bull or run over by a cart. One that caught my eye (since an ancestor of mine died in a similar accident in 1910) was reported in the *Hereford Journal* of 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1853:

“On the morning of Friday last, a lad in the employ of Mr. Wilkes, of the Fern, near Tenbury, met with a fatal accident while engaged with a thrashing machine work. It appears that the unfortunate youth by some mishap got between the wooden shafts of the machine while in motion, and was almost immediately crushed so dreadfully that before medical aid could be procured he was dead.”

Even the weather can play a part as this extract from the *Hereford Times* of 7<sup>th</sup> September 1867 shows:

“A Man Killed by Lightning – We are sorry to have to record the melancholy intelligence that a man, named Jones, a shepherd, in the employ of Mr Edwards, of Brampton Bryan, was killed by the electric fluid, while he was, with others, attempting to cover a rick. His death was instantaneous.”

### ***Conclusion***

This article demonstrates how you can make the writing up of your family history more interesting by finding out more about the work and lives of your ‘ag lab’ ancestors. As a result of the course I attended I have a much better appreciation and admiration of the work that they did and the conditions in which they lived.

So next time you come across an agricultural labourer in your family tree, don’t just dismiss him or her as yet another “ag lab”, but research more about the farms on which they worked and the life they lived. You may be pleasantly surprised by what you learn.

### ***Additional Sources***

*My Ancestor was an Agricultural Labourer*, Ian H Waller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2019)

*Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside*, Pamela Horn (1976)

*History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, W Hasbach (1894, German), translated by Ruth Kenyon (1908)

*Rural Life in Victorian England*, G E Mingay (1976).

**David J Skyrme**

**Email: [davidskyrme@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:davidskyrme@yahoo.co.uk)**

**Membership No. 3192**

**Website: [www.skyrme.info](http://www.skyrme.info)**