

# Northumbrian Farm Workers

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In Northumberland and on the Scottish borders male farm workers were known as *hinds*. They were often employed for only one year but some remained with a farmer for many years. If the farmer no longer needed them or if they wanted to change farms (perhaps for a better wage) they attended the annual *March Hirings* in Wooler, Alnwick, Berwick or elsewhere. This was a day out for them, probably their only day off in a year, when the workers and the farmers gathered together in the market square. The hinds would stand around waiting to be approached by a farmer when they would strike an agreement, with the farmer paying the man a small sum to start work with him later in May.

Most hinds had with them a young woman farm worker, often a daughter, known as a *bondager* which greatly increased his chances of being hired. At the Hiring Fair, work hours and a wage would be agreed for both, as well as accommodation, potatoes, corn and other perks. The hind would work as a ploughman and horseman, taking on the heavier and more skilled jobs, such as building stacks.

The young woman *bondager* would be paid a lower wage. She worked on many labour-intensive tasks, hoeing turnips, harvesting potatoes, and helping with the hay and corn harvests as well as the other farm chores. The hours were long and the work often back-breaking, and needed to be undertaken in all weathers. Her clothing might consist of a long woollen skirt (a *drugget*) worn with a blouse and *pinny*. In winter there would be warm underwear, leggings and a coat. Laced boots were worn and, to protect from the weather, a headsquare and lined straw hat with a black and red ruche (a frill of lace or some other material).

The hind and his family lived rent free on the farm often living in the rows of farm cottages that can still be seen in most border villages to this day. Families during the nineteenth were usually large and there were wall beds in the downstairs room and some more upstairs, if there was an upstairs. Water had to be carried in pails from a well and there would be a dry toilet outside in a hut. Cooking had to be done on an open fire. Later on there may have been a hot water tank, and an oven on either side of the fire. The families usually kept a cow, a pig and some hens. They would be supplied with potatoes and grain from the farmer and would be able to grow vegetables. I imagine that they were well-fed, strong, healthy people, able to claim good wages especially if, as in the case of my ancestors, several members of the family unit were all working on the land.

After the March hirings, on 12<sup>th</sup> May, came *Flitting Day*, when the hind and his family might move house. The new farmer would then pile in all their belongings, children, pig, chickens and pets to move to the new farm.

Although it must have been a hard life by our standards, working long hours, in all weathers, and without holidays, I believe that they would have been reasonably content with a roof over their heads, plenty of food and a wage to support the family and educate the children.

This article appeared in the Spring 2006 (Volume 31, Number 1) edition of the *Northumberland & Durham Family History Society Journal*. I am indebted to Pat for allowing me to reproduce her article here. For more details of the *NDFHS* see the links page.