Servants in Rural England 1560-1650: Kussmaul Revisited

In her classic study of early modern servants in husbandry Kussmaul argued that the incidence of service ‘did not remain fixed, but rose and fell in two major cycles from c.1450-1900’. The underlying cause of these cycles were changes in population. As population rose so did the cost of living, while real wages fell. This encouraged farmers to employ day labourers rather than servants. In the opposite situation, with declining or stagnant population, farmers were keen to employ servants to ensure they had workers available when they needed them. The increase in servant employment was amplified by a switch from arable to pastoral farming. A rising population increased the demand for grain and encouraged arable agriculture; declining or stagnant population levels encouraged the switch the pastoral farming. The steadier seasonal labour requirements of pastoral farming lent itself to the employment of servants on annual contracts rather than day labourers. Kussmaul had good evidence for high servant employment in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and a sharp decline in servant employment in the century after 1750, but her evidence for a decline in servant employment in the period before 1650 was slim, resting almost entirely on the seasonality of marriage.

Figure 1: from Kussmaul, Servants, p.98.

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Kussmaul argued that in areas of southern and eastern England where arable agriculture dominated, servant contracts began and ended at Michaelmas (29 Sep) after the grain harvest. As many servants married just after leaving service, the degree to which October marriages predominated over marriages at other times of the year can be seen as a measure of the incidence of service over time. Data from 52 largely agricultural parishes in southern and eastern England showed that the incidence of October marriages declined from 1570-1650 and rose from 1650-1750, before declining once more. Thus Kussmaul argued that service in husbandry must have been in decline in the period 1570-1650. Kussmaul’s reliance on the marriage data has been criticised by Woodward. He notes the fragility of the data, showing that Kussmaul underestimated the impact of the Marriage Act of 1653 in causing the steep dip in the mid seventeenth century. He also observes that there is no evidence of farmers increasingly relying on labourers rather than servants in the early seventeenth century.

Robert Loder moaned about the cost of providing board for his servants and experimented with paying his carter board wages, but did not reduce the number of servants employed in favour of labourers. Kussmaul’s own analysis of a sample from the 1608 Gloucestershire muster rolls shows that amongst males aged 20 and over there were 78 servants to 96 labourers, or one servant for every 1.2 labourers. As servants worked more regularly than labourers, and were often aged less than 20, this hardly indicates a preference for labourers in this period. The sample lists 245 farmers, also indicating that reliance on hired male workers was still limited, with 0.71 workers to each farmer.

These observations suggest that a more fundamental critique of Kussmaul’s argument is possible. There were other important changes in the structure of rural society between the early sixteenth century and the early nineteenth century, and these too had an impact on the institution of service. First, the size of farms was increasing, particularly in southern and eastern England. Although it is hard to quantify, the proportion of farms large enough to require hired labour certainly increased between c.1550 and c.1650. Second, partly as a result of increased farm size, the proportion of the population of rural England reliant on earning wages for a living increased as small peasant farms became increasingly difficult to acquire. However, day labourers in the early seventeenth century were not as fully proletarianized as those of eighteenth century. As studies by Everitt and others have shown, early seventeenth-century farm labourers were typically smallholders and owners of livestock who worked irregularly for wages to supplement other income sources. Third, over time agriculture became more regionally specialized. However, this trend only became marked after 1650. Mixed farming was typical even on large farms in southern and eastern England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Arable farmers such as Robert Loder had herds of dairy cattle, pigs and sheep. East Anglia was an important area of dairy production and many rural inhabitants were also employed in the cloth industry. By the late eighteenth century this situation had been transformed, and a much sharper division between the arable south and east, pastoral west, and industrial north had emerged. All these changes impacted on the nature of service.

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3 Kussmaul, Servants, p.16.
Increasing farm size encouraged increased the employment of servants. The partial proletarianization of day labourers discouraged farmers from relying on labourers for their basic farm work and also favoured servant-employment. The mixed nature of farming meant that even arable farms required a resident workforce to care for livestock and similarly encouraging servant employment. The widespread incidence of dairying encouraged the employment of female servants as well as men.\(^6\)

This paper explores the potential of farm and household accounts to provide detailed information about servant employment in rural England. Accounts are rare before 1550, but become increasingly common after that date, although they survive only for wealthy households. Information is drawn from 14 sets of accounts (see table 1), some of which are more useful than others. All these households were involved in farming, and all the accounts included wage payments to agricultural labourers as well as payments to servants. The gentry varied widely in the servant employment practices in this period. In the late medieval period the aristocracy and upper gentry employed large numbers of liveried servants or retainers, who were essentially a show of power and status rather than a workforce. The accounts of the Earl of Leicester 1558-1561 show the survival of this pattern into the sixteenth century. Such households are characterised not only by very large numbers of employees retained on annual wages but also by the absence of female servants: Robert Dudley had over 90 male servants, but paid wages to only three women, all laundresses.\(^7\) In some cases, the gentry and aristocracy continued to retain large numbers of servants in the seventeenth century, particularly in northern England,\(^8\) as can be seen in the case of the Howards of Naworth Castle. However, even in these households the number of female servants employed increased over time, indicating a change in household organisation. Female servants were 29% of those employed on annual contracts by Charles Howard at Naworth in 1648. At least some of Howard’s servants were agricultural workers, evident from the job descriptions given in the accounts, including two herders, two carters, a bailiff, swine boy, and ‘dairy wench’. Overall, the trend amongst the elite was for households to become ‘purely domestic institutions’: by the early seventeenth century they were smaller and more feminized.\(^9\) In fact, households such as those of county gentry like the Le Stranges of Hunstanton, or aristocrats like the Earl of Bath at Tawstock in Devon, became much like those of the lesser gentry. They are set apart only by the employment of an occasional falconer or a male cook.

Table 1: Servants in 14 sets of farm and household accounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accounts</th>
<th>Servants</th>
<th>Servant-wage bill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roberts family of Boarzell, Sussex: 1569.</td>
<td>2 female servants, 7 male servants</td>
<td>£19 10s 8d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuttleworths of Smithills, Lancashire:</td>
<td>3 female servants, 14 male</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Surname, Location</th>
<th>Number of Servants</th>
<th>Yearly Wage (1615)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1587</td>
<td>Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey, Norfolk: 1587-97.</td>
<td>2-3 female servants and 8-10 male servants (husbandry servants only)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1603-1608 and 1616.</td>
<td>Ann Archer of Coopersale, Theydon Gernon, Essex</td>
<td>3 female servants and 1 male servant</td>
<td>£8 10s (1616)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1610-20.</td>
<td>Robert Loder of Harwell, Berkshire:</td>
<td>2 female servants and 3 male servants</td>
<td>£9 13s (1613), £12 (1615)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1611-1621.</td>
<td>John and Marie Coke of Hall Court nr Preston, Herefordshire</td>
<td>3-7 female servants and 3-7 male servants</td>
<td>£13 1s 11d (1612), £19 12s 7d (1619)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1613-1628.</td>
<td>Hamon and Alice Le Strange of Hunstanton, Norfolk,</td>
<td>5 female servants and 11 male servants</td>
<td>£40 (1617)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1617-8.</td>
<td>Henry Best: Elmwell, East Riding Yorks:</td>
<td>2 female servants and 6 male servants</td>
<td>£13 9s 4d (1617)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1628-32.</td>
<td>Nicholas Toke of Godinton near Ashford, Kent:</td>
<td>2 female servants and 10 male servants</td>
<td>£55 13s 10d (1628); £52 18s 9d (1632)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1628-31.</td>
<td>Reynell family of Forde, south Devon:</td>
<td>5 female servants and 8 male servants</td>
<td>£34 11s 0d (1628)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1644-6.</td>
<td>Willoughby family of Leyhill, east Devon:</td>
<td>4 female servants and 6 male servants</td>
<td>£25 9s 0d (1645)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon c.1645.</td>
<td>Earl and Countess of Bath, Tawstock,</td>
<td>6 female servants and 13 male servants</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648 and 1651.</td>
<td>Sir Peter Leicester of Tabley, Cheshire,</td>
<td>5-7 female servants and 12-13 male servants</td>
<td>£46 6s 8d (1648)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648.</td>
<td>Charles Howard of Naworth Castle nr Carlisle, 1648.</td>
<td>12 female servants and 29 male servants</td>
<td>Half year £128 8s 4d (1648)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some lesser gentry households, such as that of Henry Best or Nicholas Toke, as in the in the household of Robert Loder, a wealthy yeoman, the servant workforce was almost entirely agricultural, geared towards the management of a large farm. In others, such as the Le Stranges, or Earls of Bath, the farm was smaller, geared primarily towards provisioning the household: most fell
somewhere between these two extremes. An exception was Ann Archer’s household in Essex where there is no evidence of arable production and the three female servants seem to have been employed partly to care for Archer’s children. Nonetheless, Archer’s later accounts do record hay-making and dairy cows. In all these households both male and female servants undertook domestic tasks. Men cooked, brewed, drove coaches and went on shopping errands. Women cooked, brewed, cleaned, did laundry and cared for children. But female servants also ran the dairy, cared for poultry and did harvest work. The division between domestic and farm work shouldn’t concern us greatly: many servants did a mixture of these tasks, and the discussion below is based on ordinary, unmarried servants who received wages of £8 or less a year. Agricultural or domestic they sought work in the same labour market and were contracted and paid on similar terms. The discussion below focuses on three main issues: wage rates, length of service and seasonality in entry and exit from service. It argues first, that there is little evidence of an over-supply of servants in this period or an unwillingness for employers to keep servants, and second, that service in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century differed in a number of important ways from the institution that Kussmaul described so vividly for the long eighteenth century.

**Wage rates**

A strong indication that servants remained in demand in the early seventeenth century is the level of wages paid. Legal maximum wage rates for servants were set at the quarter sessions from 1388 onwards. These wage assessments have often been treated as equivalent to actual rates of pay. Comparing the rates of pay recorded by Loder, Best and Toke with those recorded in wage assessments Kussmaul concluded that they did not exceed the legal rates, ‘with the exception of some men on the Kentish estate, where wages of £6 were higher than the £5 maximum’. However, in none of these three cases was Kussmaul able to find an assessment that was close in time, comparing Loder’s Berkshire wages in 1610-1620 with a Wiltshire assessment for 1703, Best’s wages in 1641 with a North Riding assessment of 1658, and Toke’s wages for 1616-1704 with a 1724 assessment for Kent.

Figures 2-5 and table 2 plot legal wages from assessments and actual wages from accounts for men and women. In both assessments and accounts wages varied according to age and skills and thus only the rates for the best paid male and female servants are used here. In the first half of the seventeenth century actual wages commonly exceeded legal rates of pay for both men and women. The figures show a great deal of regional variation in the wages paid at any particular date. As with other wages, the highest rates of pay for servants were found close to London in Kent and Essex, and the lowest in the north and west of England. Table 3 compares particular households with particular assessments. In only one case was the maximum wage paid lower than the legal assessment set at the quarter sessions. Sir Hamon Le Strange of Hunstanton, Norfolk, paid his best female servant, Abigail Towers, more than twice the legal maximum in 1610, despite the fact he was a JP at the Quarter Sessions, and would have helped set the legal rates. In 1613, after improvements to their house, farm and service buildings, the Le Stranges expanded their workforce from seven to thirteen servants. They attempted to employ five women at the legal wage rates of between £1 and £1 6s 8d

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11 Kussmaul, Servants, p.36.
12 Only unmarried servants were included in the data set, servants described as ‘Mr’ or ‘MRS’ were excluded. Such individuals were rare in any case.
a year: three stayed less than a year and none for more than eighteen months. From 1614 onwards all their female servants received at least £1 10s, the wage given to the scullery maid and the wash maid, while the dairy maid and chamber maids received at least £2 a year.

Figure 2

![Graph showing highest male wages (legal) wage over time]

Figure 3

![Graph showing highest male wages (actual) wage over time]
Table 2: Wage rates in shillings (highest rates for servants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1560-1599</td>
<td>47.96</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46.67</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26.68</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600-1650</td>
<td>66.94</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>89.19</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31.57</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40.68</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1560-1650</td>
<td>51.87</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>83.64</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26.18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>39.28</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600-1629</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>81.12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39.51</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39.51</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1630-1649</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>108.05</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>43.92</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43.92</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 and figures 2-5 plot legal wages from assessments and actual wages from accounts for men and women. In both assessments and accounts wages varied according to age and skills and thus only the rates for the best paid male and female servants are used here. In the first half of the seventeenth century actual wages commonly exceeded legal rates of pay for both men and women. The figures show a great deal of regional variation in the wages paid at any particular date. As with other wages, the highest rates of pay for servants were found close to London in Kent and Essex, and the lowest in the north and west of England. Table 3 compares particular households with particular assessments. In only one case was the maximum wage paid lower than the legal assessment set at the quarter sessions. Sir Hamon Le Strange of Hunstanton, Norfolk, paid his best female servant, Abigail Towers, more than twice the legal maximum in 1610, despite the fact he was a JP at the Quarter Sessions, and would have helped set the legal rates. In 1613, after improvements to their house, farm and service buildings, the Le Stranges expanded their workforce from seven to thirteen servants. They attempted to employ five women at the legal wage rates of between £1 and £1 6s 8d a year: three stayed less than a year and none for more than eighteen months. From 1614 onwards all their female servants received at least £1 10s, the wage given to the scullery maid and the wash maid, while the dairy maid and chamber maids received at least £2 a year. It seems that these higher wages were necessary in order to retain good servants.

Table 3: Regional wage rates and legal wage assessments compared, for best paid servants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Men’s legal wages</th>
<th>Men’s actual wages</th>
<th>Women’s legal wages</th>
<th>Women’s actual wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wilts/Berks</td>
<td>£3 3s 4d (Wilts 1604)</td>
<td>£3 6s 8d (Loder, Berks, 1614)</td>
<td>£1 15s (Wilts 1604)</td>
<td>£2 7s (Loder, Berks, 1614)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>£5 (1621)</td>
<td>£8 (Toke, 1628)</td>
<td>£1 13 4d (1621)</td>
<td>£3 (Toke, 1628)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norfolk</td>
<td>£3 16s 8d (1610)</td>
<td>£4 (Le Strange, 1610)</td>
<td>£1 6s 8d (1610)</td>
<td>£3 (Le Strange, 1613)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herefordshire</td>
<td>£2 13s 4d (1632)</td>
<td>£3 10s (Coke, 1621)</td>
<td>£1 (1632)</td>
<td>£1 6s 8d (Toke, 1621)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>£4 8s 4d (1654)</td>
<td>£3 13s 4d (Willoughby, 1645)</td>
<td>£1 10s (1654)</td>
<td>£2 10s (Willoughby, 1645)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 also indicates that wages were rising over time, men’s wages more than doubled between 1560-1599 and 1630-1650, while women’s wages rose in a more gradual but still definite trend. In the same period day wage rates also increased: the daily wages of building craftsmen rose from 10d in 1561-73, to 12d in 1580-1629, and to 16-18d in 1642-1655. However, by Clark’s calculations, day wage rates for male agricultural workers were more sluggish, rising from 7-8d in 1560-1589, 8-9d in 1590-1649, before jumping to 11.7d in 1650-9. Day wage rates rose from 1590 onwards under

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13 Only unmarried servants were included in the data set, servants described as ‘Mr’ or ‘Mrs’ were excluded. Such individuals were rare in any case.


pressure from steep rises in the cost of living. Servants’ wages did not suffer from this pressure: cash wages were paid on top of the board and lodging provided by employers, yet nonetheless, servants wages rose substantially. Many servants received other payments in kind in addition to the cash wage, board and lodgings. The Le Stranges provided their bailiff in husbandry, Thomas Lane, with 2 acres of land to sow with barley each year as well as his £3 wage in 1616-1619. Their cook, William Cox, had the right to sell all calf-skins, rabbit-skins and lamb-skins from animals slaughtered for the kitchen in his contract of 1625, as well as an annual wage of £4 10s. Edward Carter, Nicholas Toke’s gardener, was employed in 1631 for an annual wage of £6 10s and 100 cabbages. Each year Toke made an extra payment to his servants for new harvest gloves ‘men 1s, boys and maids 6d’. Henry Best supplemented his servants’ cash wages with the right to keep sheep and gifts of old clothing. Wealthier gentlemen often provided liveries. Sir Hamon Le Strange bought liveries for all his senior male servants paid between £2 10s and £5 a year, but not for his common servants in husbandry. John and Marie Coke of Hall Court near Preston in Herefordshire provided liveries for all their male servants, who were largely agricultural, in 1611-21.

Servants cash wages were small, although the cash earnings of some of the best paid male servants rivalled what a casual day labourer might earn in year, but these wages were received on top of board, lodgings and other gifts and payments. The logical explanation for these payments is that servants were in demand in the early seventeenth century. Robert Loder moaned about the cost of his servants, but he did not change his pattern of hiring. There is no evidence from the accounts studied here of extra day labourers being employed instead of servants, or of the employment of unmarried labourers other than children. In these accounts, the main reasons for expansion and contraction of the servants employed by particular households over time were changes in income, and the movement of land in and out of direct management. Loyal and well-trained servants were an asset to a household, and many employers seem to have been willing to pay extra to ensure servants stayed with them for periods of longer than one year, as examination of the length of service shows.

Length of service

Of the 89 servants first employed by the Le Stranges between 1613 and 1628, the average length of employment was 37.7 months, or just over three years. Only 15% served for less than one year, while 18% served for five years or more. The highest turnover was amongst female servants, who stayed at Hunstanton Hall for 2 ¾ years on average. It was the low paid male servants who stayed longest: male servants with wages of less than £2 5s a year stayed for an average of 4 ¾ years, while the higher paid liveried male servants stayed for 3 ½ years on average. Only one of these 89 servants received more than £5 a year in wages. The Le Stranges were county gentry who might have commanded a special degree of loyalty amongst their workforce, and they certainly offered high quality food and accommodation (the liveried male servants and female servants all slept on feather beds), if not particularly high wages. However, a very similar pattern of employment is found in Nicholas Toke’s household in Kent, which was primarily a large farming enterprise. The 41 servants

17 Details of servants’ contracts from the memorandum book of Sir Hamon Le Strange, NRO LEST/Q38.
which Toke first employed between 1628 and 1632 stayed with him for an average of 39.8 months or 3 ¾ years. This was despite the fact 22% stayed for less than a year: they were counter-balanced by the 27% who stayed for five years or more.

Given the length with which some servants remained in a household, it is only possible to measure length of service effectively with a long run of accounts, and ideally accounts which record the exact date at which a servant was employed as the Le Strange and Toke accounts do. But other households provide indications that this pattern of employment was not unusual amongst the wealthy. Of Ann Archer’s three maid servants, Elizabeth Hauking remained with her from 1602 until at least 1616, while Elizabeth Barger was with her from 1601 to 1605. For the Cokes’ household in Herefordshire, recording was not as detailed with servants only listed annually, but the accounts from 1611-21 still show that servants remained in employment for 2.5 years on average. Lower down the social scale turnover may have been higher. On Robert Loder’s farm, with an average length of service of 1.7 years, but servants names are only recorded from 1613-1619, and then only listed annually. Kussmaul analysed servant mobility in Cogenhoe in Northamptonshire using intermittent household listings dating from between 1618 and 1628. They showed a rate of annual turnover each year of between 100% and 46%. The widely fluctuating number of servants recorded, however, ranging from 28 in 1618 to 15 in 1620 with 100% turnover between those two years, suggest that the listings may not always have been accurate.  

Large households were able to retain servants not only because of the good living conditions they provided, but also because they offered the chance of promotion to more skilled and better paid work within a hierarchy of servants. Toke seems to have actively sought to retain his male servants in particular by giving them small pay rises each year. The Le Stranges were less generous and only occasionally awarded pay rises. Their servants in husbandry never graduated to the better paid liveried posts such as bailiff of husbandry or coachman. Nonetheless at least one female servant did graduate from being a low-paid scullery maid to a better-paid dairy maid. She was probably trained while in service, as it is likely the scullery maid helped the dairy maid to milk the herd of 20 cows twice a day in the summer.

The pattern of servant employment in early seventeenth-century wealthy households, even amongst servants in husbandry, seems to have been substantially different than that described by Kussmaul for the eighteenth century. Her analysis of settlement examinations showed that 76% of servant hirings lasted for 12 months and no longer. Not only did the term of employment in households such as those of the Le Stranges and Tokes average over three years in length, but employment for terms of 12 months were also rare. In the Le Strange accounts, among the 89 servants employed 1613-1628, only 8 (or 9%) served for a term of 12 months, while the equivalent figure for the Toke accounts 1628-1632 was 6 out of 41 (or 15%). It is possible that the turnover of servants was higher in less wealthy households where living conditions were less favourable and opportunities for promotion more limited, but there is little concrete evidence to prove this. Another possibility is that servants normally worked for longer and more flexible terms in the early seventeenth century. Instead of the economic situation discouraging employers from hiring servants, it seems instead to have encouraged servants to stay in employment for long periods of time once they found a

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20 Kussmaul, Servants, p.53.
favourable place. Given the high cost of living, rising rents and low day-wages, leaving service to marry entailed a substantial drop in living standards.21

Seasonality of entry and exit

Not only did servants work for longer terms with particular employers, but the seasonal distribution of their entry and exit into service in the first half of the seventeenth century differed markedly from that found in the later period. Kussmaul’s analysis of eighteenth-century settlement examinations found that 98% of servant contracts from Norfolk and Cambridgeshire began and finished at Michaelmas. The picture revealed by the Le Strange accounts was a great deal more mixed. Figure 6 shows that Michaelmas (week 28) was the most common time change over time for servants, although Our Lady (week 1) was actually the most common finish date. The quarter days of Our Lady, Midsummer and Michaelmas all show as noticeable peaks, but many servants started and finished at other times. Only 18% of servants either started or finished at Michaelmas. Figure 7 reveals a similar variety of start and finish dates on Toke’s Kent estate. Our Lady was the most common start and finish time there, accounting for 22% of start or finish dates, followed by Michaelmas with 16%, but again servant hirings and departures were spread throughout the year.

Figure 6: Le Strange servants employed 1613-1628: start and finish dates

![Bar graph showing start and finish dates for Le Strange servants employed 1613-1628. Peaks for Michaelmas and Our Lady are visible.]

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Accounts show that servants were normally paid either half yearly, at Our Lady and Michaelmas, or quarterly at Midsummer and Christmas as well. Less detailed accounts often give the impression that these were the dates when servants were hired, but the best accounts add notes such as ‘paid at Midsummer for wages due on 20 May’ and so on, revealing the true variety. Servants who left at a different date from their arrival, were paid for their ‘odd time’ calculated in weeks. In this case, it seems unlikely that such a customs of hiring could have been restricted to wealthy households, as the servants employed worked in the same labour market as servants in poorer households: it must have been the general pattern of employment. Similar patterns of employment, without pronounced hiring dates, has also been noted at Stiffkey and Marsham in north Norfolk for the second half of the sixteenth century.22

Perhaps this should not surprise us greatly. The rigid hiring patterns encountered in the eighteenth century were a consequence of servants relying on hiring fairs to find employment. As Kussmaul notes, the popularity of hiring fairs was spread by the rise of county newspapers in the eighteenth century. Hiring fairs grew out of petty sessions, which had existed since the fourteenth century. But early petty sessions were primarily administrative: they registered the contracts of servants already in employment, and placed those without employment in service.23 They do not seem to have acted

as hiring fairs. The pattern of hiring shown in figures 6 and 7 suggests strongly that servants sought employment door to door and through family connections, rather than via hiring fairs.\textsuperscript{24}

Returning to the argument set out at the start of the paper, if this was the general pattern of hiring, Michaelmas marriages cannot be upheld as a measure of servant employment in the period before 1650. Servant employment was not strongly seasonal and therefore the incidence of servant employment had little impact on the seasonality of marriage. It is more likely that the decline in Michaelmas marriages between 1570 and 1650 was caused by a decline in the number of households dependent on arable agriculture as their main livelihood. It was a consequence of the engrossment of large arable farms, and the spread of rural industry, crafts and retail as a source of alternative employment for poorer households. The rise of Michaelmas marriages after 1650 had another cause: the sharper regional differentiation of the English rural economy illustrated so well by Kussmaul in her second book.\textsuperscript{25} As areas like East Anglia gradually de-industrialised and reduced involvement in pastoral farming, the working population was thrown back into dependence on arable agriculture as paid employees.

Conclusions

Service as a life-cycle stage and a means of providing agricultural labour was already entrenched in England’s rural economy in the fourteenth century. In the century 1550-1650 service provided the backbone of the workforce for an increasing number of large commercial farms. While it is impossible to know if the proportion of servants in the population was increasing or decreasing, there is no evidence of any significant decline. The decline in Michaelmas marriages in rural parishes had other causes. The wealthy households that left farm and household accounts were not typical servant employers, but nor did they exist in a world that was separate from ordinary households. Their workers were drawn from households lower down the social scale and were part of a wider labour market. Farm and household accounts reveal a servant workforce that was relatively well paid, with wages rising between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and again by the mid seventeenth century. Servants in these households often worked for three years or more, and there was no strong pattern of changing employer every 12 months. Servant contracts started and finished at all times of the year: neither Michaelmas nor Lady Day hirings were in the majority. The picture of service provided by settlement examinations in the early eighteenth century is very different, with its anonymous hiring fairs, regimented year-long contracts, and a yearly move for most employees. Kussmaul was right to conclude the service was not a static institution, but she underestimated true extent of change, economic and social, across time in the early modern countryside.

Notes on sources

Table 1

\textsuperscript{24} Searching for work door to door persisted in the SW and Kent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Kussmaul, Servants, p.58.

\textsuperscript{25} Kussmaul, A General View, p.3.

Table 2 and Figures 2-5


Table 3

Figures 6 and 7

Data from Sir Hamon and Alice Le Strange’s accounts: Norfolk Record Office, LEST P7 and Eleanor Lodge ed. *The Account Book of a Kentish Estate 1616-1704* (Oxford University Press, 1927), respectively.

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