

LANDLESS LIFESTYLES

“Back to the land!” The more urban we become, the more people dream of that little bit of land which could be the answer to most of life’s problems. *The Land* has been in the forefront of promoting this old idea for over a decade. It’s time we admitted that, yes, a life of working on the land has a few drawbacks. No longer can you look out on a fine morning and enjoy the view – all you see is the falling-down fences and rampant brambles. And, let’s face it, it’s usually raining (or failing to). Your world shrinks to this little bit under your feet, and its never-ending demands. Ownership can be onerous. Ancient jealousies between settlers and nomads, landworkers and hunter-gatherers, run highest in summer, when the most dogged farmer might occasionally long to put down the pitchfork or switch off the tractor and go a-wandering. In this section we offer a vicarious holiday, and an insight into other approaches to living on, and off, the land. Foraging is one of these – perhaps.

TINKER, VAGABOND, JOURNEYMAN, TRAMP.

Nowadays many people make a conscious choice to be rootless, to “go off and join the circus” or to see the world. In the past such freedoms entailed much hardship and peril. GILL BARRON explores the history of vagrancy, both willing and unwilling, in Early Modern times.

One seldom hears that controversial word “gypsy” these days. A pity, because it’s a colourful word, originating in “Egyptians” – that’s the story peddled by the first wave of Gypsies, displaced from India via Greece over centuries, who arrived on these shores in Tudor times. Their welcome (or not) depended on being interesting, exotic, glamorous¹ in a world of humdrum village boredom. Some had in fact come via Egypt, in a previous generation, but the resonance was biblical – just as Moses’s people were expelled from Egypt, so the Gypsies could also claim divine intervention. Another story was that the blacksmith who made the nails that pinned Jesus to the cross was a Gypsy, and consequently the curse on him spread to all his tribe, condemned to wander till Judgement Day; both God-ordained excuses to not settle down. In Tudor times, these foreigners trickled into a country already awash with itinerants: Gypsies were in a minority. Much has been written about them already; so here we look at the others; the displaced, wandering natives of Britain.

The astonishing fact is that, by the mid-1500s, anything up to one-third of the population of England were living in poverty as homeless nomads on the fringes of an increasingly bourgeois society, in which they had no part.² How did this happen? Who were they? How did they survive?

For some time past, the feudal system had been breaking down, and the former ties of serf, villein and all the other working classes to the manor of their birth were loosening. This was partly due to the population turmoil caused by the Black Death; workers were in short supply, and started demanding high wages. Where once a peasant who went AWOL would have been hunted down and fiercely punished, now a blind eye was more often turned to “escapees” whose labour was unaffordable. Newly liberated country folk would often head to the city, but if work was unavailable, or the conditions too

grim, they might well find themselves back in the countryside, uprooted and homeless. Enclosure and the dissolution of the monasteries added to the numbers of these “masterless men”, both envied and feared by those still caught in the manorial web. The attitude is described by a contemporary:

“A traveller on foot in England is considered as a sort of wild man or an out-of-the-way being who is stared at, pitied, suspected and shunned by everybody that meets him.”

Not to mention feared – vagabonds were of many types, and usually desperate people with little left to lose, except their “nasty, brutish and short” lives. The penalties for even trivial offences were draconian: hanging was the cheapest and most efficient.

Rocky Roads

The conditions of travel were frightening too. Roads before about 1750, when the turnpikes began, were

“foul, clinging morasses over which the wayfarer fought for the firm ground against all the other road users; herdsman with their cattle, goosegirls with their flocks, great heavy lumbering carts that sank almost to their axles in the mud. Today we can hardly appreciate just how bad they really were. After reading an account of a traveller falling into a pothole and drowning in the middle of the highway, it is not difficult to understand why ladies and gentlemen might prefer the comforts of home.”³

Hazards were many, including dungheaps flung into the road, and dogs, sometimes rabid. To deal with these, travellers were advised to, “arm yourself with an iron stick of about 4/10ths. of an inch in diameter, with a hook near the hand and a spike at t’other end.” Bolting horses could be heard from afar, but there might not be anywhere to dodge out of their way. The biggest fear was being “benighted”, a forgotten word nowadays, meaning to be caught out by the coming of darkness, far from shelter.

Night itself was a time of random terrors: no lights, and tramps' fires were a notorious cause of barns burning down. Vagrants, as opposed to people on a definite journey, would stick to a known area and be familiar with the distance between places, and the location of barns, hollow trees, the undersides of bridges, wayside ale-houses, and any soft-hearted folk that might provide an occasional roof. Good Christians were expected to take in itinerants, and church tithes could in theory be diverted from the priest's pocket to "succour and comfort the poor, the hungry, the naked, the harbourless, the wayfaring man". But by 1632 the hospitable Christian was being recommended to "only entertain *honest* guests and travellers".⁴

Passe Partout

Establishing the honesty and credentials of transient strangers was a major headache for the parish authorities, since identity was tightly connected to a birthplace from which these travellers were now detached, and there were various obligations to provide relief for all the poor within the parish, temporary as well as resident. How to discover who these strangers really were? A system of locally issued passports was brought in, in 1531, supposedly to give travellers "safe passage" to return to their native place, but it proved counter-productive. In practice, possession of such a document allowed almost unhindered mobility, because it gave not only a licence to travel – to ramble around aimlessly, begging – but also entitlement to poor-relief from officials along the way. These papers also listed the person's "criminal" record and so were unhelpful in getting employment; but to have no documents at all entailed serious punishment.

Hit The Road, Jack

Not all travellers were full-time beggars, or all-purpose rogues. There were many professions where "moving on" was essential to finding work. In fact this idea was built into the Guild system, where craftsmen served first as apprentices, in a master's workshop, and once skilled, were sent out as "Journeyman"



The Wayfarer. Stanley Anderson 1941. A "Gentleman of the Road" with stick and hankerchief bundle impresses his simple audience with worldly wisdom and sophisticated tales of adventure.

to gain experience. Thus masters avoided direct competition from their erstwhile pupils, but the journeyman had to find his own niche, in a place in need of his particular trade. He might wander for years, and if unsuccessful, or his tools were stolen, end up among the despairing multitudes of the homeless. In much the same bracket were domestic servants, usually female, who had lost their "place" through some misdemeanour, falling out with harsh employers, or enforced pregnancy. No appeal or retribution against these "masters" would have been possible.

A primitive kind of social assistance was introduced after the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, namely the "Old Poor Laws" which sought to contain people in their birthplace. These doles were officially administered by monasteries, rather patchily, but the system broke down completely after the Dissolution. And, during the 16th century, the population almost doubled, from 2.3 million in 1521 to 3.9m in 1591. The 1590s were a decade of failed harvests leading to actual famine and widespread, involuntary, displacement. Immense pressure on slender resources caused recurrent waves of administrative panic.

The Statute of Cambridge in 1388 had defined beggars as "sturdy" - fit for work, and "impotent" - too disabled, or old; the latter were entirely dependent on charity, and generally confined in early versions of the workhouse. For the sturdy, vagrancy was defined by unemployment, and punishments became harsher with the passing years, as the numbers on the roads increased, swollen by ex-soldiers and sailors disabled by war. A series of Vagrancy Acts in 1495, 1531, 1547 (otherwise known as the Slavery Act) 1559, 1572, and 1597 contained vicious disincentives against what we would now call social mobility. Parishes were expected to enforce them.

In 1495 a Statute had provided for stocks to be built to confine beggars for three days on bread and water - simultaneous containment and punishment. The Poor Law of 1531 stipulated that "vagrants be tied to the end of a cart naked and be beaten with whips around the town or village till their bodies



Haves and Have-Nots? The Vagabond's life has its ups and downs.



A rather nonchalant 16th. century woodcut of a beggar being whipped through the streets, with a gallows in the distance.

be bloody". Under the 1547 Act, passed by Edward VI, weekly collections were to be made in every parish for the relief of the impotent poor; however it also stipulated that sturdy vagabonds should be enslaved for two years. They were to be fed bread and water "or small drink" and could be made to work by beating, chaining, or whatever methods their master chose. Vagabonds were allowed to be bought and sold just like other slaves. Also, should nobody want the vagabond slave, he or she was to be sent to their town of birth and be forced to work as a slave for that community. Vagabond children could be claimed as "apprentices" and be held as such until the age of 24 if a boy, or the age of 20 if a girl.⁷ Should they attempt to escape, they were subject to enslavement for the remainder of the apprenticeship. All these vagrants were also to be branded, with hot irons, with the letter "V" on their chests.

This unpopular Act was repealed in 1550, only to be replaced by the reinstated 1531 Act (the tied-to-a-cart one). This was reinforced by the 1572 Act which required "all vagabonds to be grievously whipped and burned through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron an inch in diameter".³ The extent of this punitive regime is shown by the fact that, by 1630, London and its suburbs had 60 sets of whipping posts, stocks and cages, and 18 jails. The offence of vagrancy was one without a victim, so any idea of restorative justice could not apply: there was no chance of "making good"; the crime was simply to be in a certain economic position of poverty and homelessness, without a passport. But the even greater villains, in official eyes, were the actual Gypsies, and yet another Statute, in 1562, made "consorting" with Gypsies a felony punishable by hanging. This was done, quite often.

Roll Up! Roll Up!

Clearly, the need for a valid profession, a good excuse to be "on the road", was paramount. So, for displaced men and women, once the realisation dawned that there was no going back, new livelihoods had to be found, or invented. Life in the settled part of society was repetitive, predictable; and so news and entertainment were highly prized. Enter the troubadours:

"Huge caravans incessantly arrive, with their wild beasts, theatricals, dwarfs, giants and other prodigies and wonders. Then come trotting in those neat, light covered waggons, containing sundry bazaars that are speedy to spring up. As you go out of the town at any end, you meet caravan after caravan, cart after cart, long troops of horses tied head and tail, and groups of those wild and peculiar-looking people that are as necessary to a fair as flowers are to May;

"Vulgarly Called Vagabonds"

A vivid contemporary portrait of life in Elizabethan England is to be found in a treatise by a Kent country magistrate called Thomas Harman, who was frequently housebound by illness and relied on passing tramps and pedlars for news and entertainment. His account makes it "abundantly clear that 400 years ago, vagrancy was not merely a condition but a profession, carried on by large numbers of trained practitioners". His aim is to give warning against the "abominable, wicked and detestable behaviour of all this rowsey, ragged rabblement of rakehells." He lists some 300 Kentish vagabonds by name, including one Richard Horwood ("well near 80 years old; he will bite a sixpenny nail asunder with his teeth; and is a bawdy drunkard"); and Thomas Graye ("his toes be gone"). He also provides a catalogue of wandering types, each more alarming than the last:

A *Ruffler* was a bogus soldier or sailor, discharged from the service, and so mean he would rob even his fellow-vagrants. An *Uprightman* was an intimidating marauder, armed with a truncheon, leader of a gang of country beggars. A *Hooker* or *Angler* was a thief with a long pole who would fish garments or bedclothes out of open upstairs windows. A *Rogue* was just a common beggar or thief, but a *Wild Rogue* was one born into the profession, ("beastly begotten in barn or bushes") and thus would be "more given by nature to all kinds of knavery" than a mere first-generation Rogue.

Palliards, also known as *Clapperdudgeons*, wore patched cloaks bristling with the straw that they slept on. A favourite begging trick was to rub their legs with toxic plants to raise ugly blisters, which they would show off to passers-by in the hope of eliciting sympathy, and cash. It was believed that many of them were Welshmen. Then there were the *Abram-Men*. These were inmates of Bedlam who were allowed out sometimes to beg; but could be pseudo-lunatics who feigned madness by throwing terrifying, though fake, fits.

FreshWater Mariners and *Whipjacks* were ex-sailors, or beggars who pretended to have been sailors, often claiming to have been wrecked by pirates. Thomas Harman describes them as "a kind of caterpillars" whose ships had sunk "in the plains of Salisbury". *Priggers of Prancers* were horse-thieves, and *Priggers of Cacklers* were raiders of hen-houses. *Swaddlers* were beggars who also beat up their victims. *Jarkemen* and *Patricoes* were learned beggars, verbose impostors of clergy and monks, carrying fake papers and certificates often forged by themselves. *Drummers*, by contrast, feigned dumbness and would "gape, and with marvellous force hold down their tongues doubled, groaning for your charity".

That's just the men. The women come lumped together under the name of *Morts*; a *Walking Mort* was a female tramp, a *Kinching Mort* a small girl carried on her mother's back, and an *Autem Mortem* (autem being a church) a married tramp. A little more specialised were *Demanders for Glimmer*: women who claimed to have lost all their belongings in a fire (as they might well have done.). A *Dell* was a virgin and a *Doxy* a prostitute; whereas a *Bawdy Basket* was a *Doxy* who also hawked pornographic books and ballads, and probably had a sideline in stealing drying washing off hedges.

The Elizabethan countryside was clearly a dangerous place, quite unlike the world we know now. "Honest people who lived in it must have had a tough time, struggling not only to feed and clothe themselves, but also to defend their flimsy abodes against the depredations of so many professional scavengers".

Abridged from "*Professional Muggers of Yore*" by Duff Hart Davies, in the *Independent's* Country Matters column, circa 1987. The treatise on which it is based is *A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds*, by Thomas Harman, published as a broadsheet in 1566. For more in this vein, see also Thomas Dekker's *The Bellman of London*, 1608.

– all kinds of strollers, jugglers, beggars, gypsies, singers, players, dancers, players on harps, Indian jugglers, Punch and Judy exhibitors, and similar wandering artists and professors.”⁵

That description is from some three centuries later, and probably early Tudor bands of strolling players were less romantic and more ragged. Nonetheless, falling somewhere between the medieval Mystery players and mummers, and the Shakespearean troupes to come, and accompanied by “dancing” bears, they were armoured with the glamour of strangeness; and found safety in numbers. Such processions would be less vulnerable to arbitrary arrest. On the other hand, large numbers of raucous passing strangers caused alarm, and swelled the political case against the Masterless classes.

More sober in appearance were travelling preachers, the successors of the itinerant Friars, who travelled from shrine to shrine, often selling “indulgences” and holy relics – mummified body-parts, supposedly of saints, to gullible villagers to whom the “old religion” still mattered. These holy-joe con-men were one cause of the growing disrepute of the Church, as it transited through the Reformation. In such a time of religious flux, God-related merchandise was an unreliable way to make a living. Better to be an ordinary pedlar of ordinary goods that could not be got or made at home. How the ex-monks and nuns displaced by Henry VIII’s evictions of the monasteries survived, we do not know. Although a few bands of pilgrims might still be encountered, journeying to the many shrines that lingered on till Oliver Cromwell’s time, these were folks with homes to go back to; tourists rather than travellers.

Tinkers, Potters, and Gaberlunzies.

Two indigenous, Gypsy-type tribes, both with oral traditions that take them back to, not only pre-Romany, but even pre-Roman times, were familiar inhabitants of the medieval highways. Tinkers were, and still are, Scots, Hibernians: making and mending vessels of copper or tin, and occupying the same niche as the Coppersmith Gypsies of Europe. Unlike blacksmiths, they needed no forge, anvil or stock-in-trade of heavy metals; small tools sufficed. Potter people travelled less lightly, since their trade was selling crockery, trundled about in waggons packed with straw, between manufacturing places and the rustic customers. Side-trades such as knife-grinding, horse-dealing, peg-making, rat-catching, rag-picking, farriery, fortune-telling and so on broadened their economic scope. To some extent



these occupations persist today among their mostly red-haired descendants, the North Country Potter and Scots “Tinkler” Travellers. Although they carried on a useful range of trades, they were viewed with the same xenophobia applied to all wanderers; King James V of Scotland brought in some savage laws against itinerants.

A tinkers’ legend relates how King James liked to escape by night, in disguise, from his palace at Holyrood and hang out around the campfire of one Johnny Faa, himself a “king” of the Gypsies. One night James put his hand upon the knee of a woman of the clan, and was rebuked – probably they set the dogs on him and chased him from the camp. Thereafter James brought in a law that “wherever six Gypsies are found consorting together, five are to be hanged, and the sixth let go free”. This supposes that the sixth might have been himself. James was nicknamed “the Gaberlunzie Man”, gaberlunzie being a Scots word for a beggar.⁷

Harvests and Holidays

According to the Justices of the Peace Act 1361,[1-34 Edw 3] anyone en route to a charter fair or market, or on their way home from one, was entitled to be on the highway, and to stop along the way to rest horses, to sleep at night and so forth.⁸ In the days when such journeys might take weeks, and there was always another fair on the calendar to travel to, the annual round of occasions created a licence to travel. It also allowed time for casual seasonal work such as fruit-picking and hay-making. The labour and vagrancy laws provided exceptions for people looking for farm-work. This, when found, offered only the barest subsistence. For instance, in 1614, a harvester, expected to “reap an acre of rye in a day, with his own sickle”, would only get 3d. a day, plus food. However, judging by this quote, being a vagabond was already a full-time occupation. They

“made their way to all manner of public event, making the statement “you have the poor always with you” literally true. ... They attended plays, bear-baitings, and horse-races; stationed themselves where the nobility passed in coaches, flocked to sermons and Sunday services, and swarmed to aristocratic funerals to receive a meal and a dole. At the obsequies of the fourth Earl of Northumberland in the late 15th century, 13,000 vagrants were said to have been present.”⁶

Perhaps they sang some version of that sinister ballad, *Bedlam Boys*: “Bedlam boys are bonny – and we all go bare, and we live by the air, and we want nor drink nor money”. (That’s “want” meaning “to Rembrandt’s etchings of beggars from the early 1600’s show real individuals, portrayed with a compassion rare in those times.

go short of” – clearly drink and money were as desirable then as now.)

“Seditious and Heretical”

Common vagrants had the advantage, from the viewpoint of officialdom, that they were “just passing through”, requiring little but alms and leaving not much trace. Far more dangerous were those who spread new ideas and left discontentment with society in their wake. Wandering booksellers, “hawkers of printed works” were ineffectually controlled by licencing laws, brought in in 1538, and in 1570 the death penalty was extended to “anyone assisting the author of a seditious book”. In 1649 Leveller John Lilburne was put on trial for publishing “treasonable venomous books”. Others might be taking books to Recusants, persecuted Catholics in hiding. In such times of upheaval and mass insecurity, any conduits for free-thinking would be viewed with suspicion by the authorities, as any traveller might be a heretic of some sort. But “the torrent was basically uncontrollable. Here today and gone tomorrow, all types of hawker proved difficult to suppress, even with vagrancy laws”.³

In all of this there are many parallels with our own times, not least the invidious distinctions made between economic migrants and genuine refugees, just like the “sturdy” or “impotent” beggars of yore. “The poor are always with us” is said by the smug Haves in irritation with the “feckless” Have-Nots, and the latter often have little stuff because they left it all behind, somewhere else, having been displaced by forces vastly beyond their control. Whether pushed by war, famine, drought, earthquake or mass unemployment; or pulled by human nature to go a-seeking a better life elsewhere, itinerants (from the Latin for “to go forth”) are a permanent fact of all societies. Whether the ancient conflicts between settled people, those who have secured their patch of the planet, and nomads (by birth, or choice, or force of hardship) will ever be amicably resolved is doubtful, on the present showing, but surely some recognition of the transience of all life would help with

Gaberlunzie’s Song

*O come all ye tramps and hawker lads, ye gatherers of braw,
That tramp the country round around, come listen one and a’,
For I’ll tell to you a roving tale of sights that I have seen,
Oh it’s far into the snowy North, and south by Gretna Green.*

*Ofttimes I’ve laughed unto myself while trudging on the road
Toerags round my sweaty feet and my face as brown’s a toad,
Wi’ lumps of cake and tattie scones, wi’ whangs of braxy ham
Nae given a thought to where I’ve been and less to where I’m gan.*

*I’m happy in the summertime beneath the bright blue sky,
Nae thinkin’ in the mornin’ where at night I’m gan to lie,
In barn or byre or anywhere, or dossin’ in the hay
And if the weather treats me right, I’m happy all the day.*

Traditional, Scottish

understanding why the security of land-owning should never be taken for granted, and why the Vagabond is a vital figure in our lives, reminding us that we are all “just passing through” this world. But then, as the philosopher Pascal observed, “All man’s troubles arise from a single cause: his inability to sit quietly in a room”. Either way, history proves that xenophobia leads to horrors. Perhaps a spell on the road, as a hobo, a Dharma Bum, should be seen as essential in the human life-cycle, a vital part of the metamorphosis that helps our strange and savage species to evolve into something like humanity.

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8. Parts of the 1361 Act have never been repealed, and it is an argument against being “moved on” still used by canny horse-drawn travellers. Police-men have never heard of it - they have to go away and look it up. It is also the “bound over to keep the peace” legislation.
9. McCormick, Andrew *The Tinkler Gypsies* 1907 (Reprinted 2013)

Jacques Callot, Les Bohémiens, 1621



This French engraving from 1621 is one of a set of four depicting the motley wandering tribes known as Bohemians, another variation on Egyptians. This one shows scrawny horses and dogs, umpteen children, and alarming weapons, but also gaudy finery and a jaunty air. Callot’s other procession - or “caravan” - features huge cooking-pots, some worn as hats, and cockerels riding pillion on barrels of (presumably) wine. His captions are sympathetic: this one’s translates as “these poor adventurous beggars carry nothing with them, only their hopes for the future”. Biographies of Jacques Callot all repeat a legend that at the age of twelve he ran away from home, and travelled to Florence with a band of Gypsies, after his parents had forbidden him his great wish to see Italy. So these images are probably the closest we will ever get to contemporary snapshots of vagabonds’ lives in those times.

Sullivan, Edward J: *Jacques Callot’s Les Bohémiens* The Art Bulletin Vol. 59, No. 2 (Jun., 1977) pp. 217-221

THE CASE OF THE VANISHING VAGRANTS

Where did all the wayfarers go? The sight of a professional pedestrian, festooned with tat-bundles, trudging along a country road is now rarer than spotting a hen's tooth, or a hitch-hiker. Perambulating bag-ladies, with or without the pram, or shopping-trolley, are almost as scarce. What happened? It's obvious, really. The Twenty-First Century happened. All the things that *The Land* regularly bemoans, like thunderous traffic on featureless bypasses, security-patrolled privatisation of town centre squares and parks, ASBOs, PSPOs, NFU-sponsored CCTV cameras in every barn and byre, and the whole paranoia industry that fuels this phoney economy have put paid to drop-outs. "Stranger danger", they call it, and fear of out-of-the-ordinary people is stoked by the media daily.

Google "tramp", and what you get is a members-only nightclub in Mayfair. "Vagabond", likewise, yields only pricey shoes and spikey-haired comic book heroes. "Vagrant" is a type of computer software. What we have lost from our language,



our culture, our history, and our options to live as free human beings, independent of state or social control, enjoying the planet we were lucky enough to be born on – is immeasurable. Choosing to live thus, not as a consumer, but instead travelling light, is a tradition and an outlook on life deserving of all respect. Welsh poet and Super-Tramp WH Davies summed up the wanderer's attitude when he wrote

*A poor life this, if, full of care,
we have no time to stand and stare.*

Among the many charities who offer practical support to modern vagabonds, now re-labelled by society as the homeless, or rough sleepers, the Simon Community stand out as a shining light of fellowship. Their philosophy of love, tolerance, acceptance, self-help and abundant sandwiches recognises the rights of people to live as they see fit, and to not be "rehabilitated", as if housedwell-ing were the only possible mode of existence. Everyone born is entitled to sleep out under the stars if they choose to. Whose stars are they anyway?

But ... When the Living is Easy...

Offering an alternative to "three acres and a cow", a traditional slice of rural society adopts a saddhu's lifestyle - cutting down on belongings to only what a red and white spotted hankerchief can hold. So if you fancy swapping a peasant's existence for the vagabond life, fear not – most of your needs will be met ...

Sleeping ...



Housing ...



Nice gaff, Bert. Mine's a three-litre Rover near Dorking – it's compact, it's bijou, retro leatherette interior ...

Plumbing ...



Cooking ...



according to Thelwell