



Cumann Staire Chontae Thiobraid Árann

Co. Tipperary Historical Society, The Source Library, Cathedral Street, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, Ireland
353 (0) 52 616 6123 society@tipperarycoco.ie www.tipperarystudies.ie/this

**Tipperary Historical Journal
2004**

A labourer's life in mid-twentieth century Co. Tipperary

by Derbhile Dromey

The shed is tiny, dark, without a proper window or door. Now used as a storehouse for blocks, it looks like the sort of place where a farmer might have housed animals. But it is the place where Ned Britton slept when he was a farm labourer in the 1950s.

His situation was typical of many farm labourers in the Ireland of the 1940s and 50s. Ned died in April 2004, having retired from the army, where he spent 21 years.

To a young person growing up in today's more affluent society, the life of a farm labourer would seem alien: a world of privation and endless drudgery. But Ned's experiences were fairly typical for a farm labourer of that time.

Ned was himself raised on a farm near Two-Mile Borris in Tipperary. He began working as a labourer when he was eighteen, and spent four and a half years working on various farms around Clonmel and Cahir.

Ned's daily work followed the rhythm of the seasons. It began at around 7am and finished at around 8pm; although even at night, Ned had to keep one eye open to help a cow or sheep give birth.

In winter, Ned milked the cows, and fed all the animals before breakfast. He foddered cattle, cut ditches and built fences. On wet days, he did yard work, or cut trees for firewood. Sundays were little different from other days, except that he got time off for Mass, and a break in the afternoons.

Spring was the season for harrowing and ploughing. As well as his other duties, Ned had to plough on foot, which was a backbreaking task.

Meals were regular, but monotonous. The staples of his diet were bread and tea. He also ate bacon and cabbage, or kale. Occasionally he got an egg – if he was lucky. 'The worst thing was not being able to eat meals in the same kitchen as the family,' he says.

Accommodation varied according to the places where Ned was working. In one place, he slept in a loft above a stable. But in another place, he could see the stars through the roof of the shed, and the walls were damp.

Rain was a constant problem. Even though he wore a sack on his shoulders, his clothes were constantly soaked, and there was no place to dry them. 'I took off my clothes wet, and put them on wet the following morn.'

Fair Day was a major occasion in the life of a farm. Fairs were held in Clonmel or Cahir. On Fair Day, Ned got up at 3 am, to drive the cattle into town on foot.

If the farmer did not sell, Ned had to bring the cattle home again. 'It was always raining, and you'd be drenched by the end of the day.'

A typical weekly wage was 24 shillings, a little over a pound a week. There were no standard conditions of work; conditions were laid down by individual farmers.

For example, there was no sick pay; so it was fortunate that Ned never suffered from any illness beyond the common cold. A fixed holiday period was non-existent, and he wasn't paid for any time off he took.



Ned Britton is 2nd on left of this group of workers in the bog

Most of his money went on buying clothes. The wet conditions meant that his clothes were quickly destroyed. 'They'd rot off your back.'

In 1949, farm labourers were granted a half-day, which Ned availed of, though he wasn't paid. 'I got no supper, and the farmer had a long face on a Sunday morning.'

'The farmer wasn't too worried about us. He looked in on his cows, calves and horses before he retired for the night, but he never looked in on his workmen. But the funny thing about it was that the farmer learned quite a lot from the worker.'

Ned had quite a few hairy experiences during his years as a farm labourer. For a week, he ate his dinner on a snowdrift under a ditch. The farmer felt he'd lose too much time going back to his house, so the dinners were brought to him.

He also had to stand up to his neck in water near Knocklofty bridge, washing sheep, during March.

In one place, Ned had to do all the work alone, because the farmer was in hospital during the spring and summer. In return he got a week's notice in Christmas week; the foreman did not want a man for the winter.

Another farmer Ned worked for was unstable, often firing at targets, and Ned lived in fear of being shot at any minute. 'He would keep the gun cocked on a table facing the kitchen door, with the trigger tied back to the trigger guard with twine.

'One day I asked him why he left it like that and he said some day the twine will break and either you or the wife will be shot.'

Not all Ned's experiences were negative. He spent a very pleasant Christmas on one of the farms, but left it to join the army. 'An old man said to me that when the dog started waggin' its tail, it was time to move on.'

Ned remembers the exact date he joined the army: January 18th, 1953. Rather like a prisoner remembers the date he was released.

'When I saw a fire at each end of the billet, I said to myself, I'm not moving from here. It was like heaven.'