

**VILLAGE LIFE IN THE FENS,
OR, OLD AGE PENSIONS
AND "BACK TO THE LAND"**

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Village Life in the Fens, or, Old Age Pensions and "Back to the Land" by Frederic J. Gardiner

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OR

Old Age Pensions and "Back to the Land."

BY

FREDERIC J. GARDINER, F.R.HIST.S.

Author of the "History of Wisbech and Neighbourhood."



"With a Patch of Land and a Pension there are few who could not look forward to old age with equanimity, if not with pleasure."

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PREFACE.

This work is intended to illustrate the conditions of life existing in a Fen village and some of the causes which have led to rural depopulation, as well as to the consequent migration to larger centres of population. One eminent statesman is said to have suggested that a circus was required to add to the gaiety of village life, failing to realise that the aspirations of the toiling population are towards something better, that will secure their independence in old age, lessen the constant anxiety which is often felt lest the Workhouse should be the last refuge to which illness or family responsibilities might drive them. The question, at least, is not one of mere fleeting pleasures, such as a village fair or exhibition may give, but the desire to participate in the opportunities for acquiring reasonable home comforts and subsistence, as well as that knowledge and information often afforded by the Institutes and classes which are organised in our towns. Still more is there to be found the wish to possess the secure tenancy of some plot of land, upon which leisure time may be profitably spent. Such ambitions are deserving of encouragement, and the Small Holdings Act which has come into force, and the prospective Old Age Pension scheme are indications of the general desire to improve the condition

of those who live from hand to mouth. Such advantages would give assistance in discriminating between the thrifty and industrious toilers and those who are careless and indifferent. Hitherto, the best of the workers have been too often tempted to seek their fortunes in the larger towns, or to go abroad to seek their fortunes in distant lands, resulting in the survival of the fittest, but the disappointment of some. If village life be made more attractive, if men can have their allotment or small holding to cultivate, and possibly look forward to an old age pension, if misfortune prevent any provision for the helpless period of life, there is no reason why many should not be satisfied to remain at home. A happy and contented peasantry is a country's pride, and to make life more endurable and hopeful by just laws, calculated to improve the lot of the workers, would confer an incalculable benefit upon a sturdy, hard-working class of men, most of whom would greatly appreciate such advantages, and become increasingly contented and grateful subjects of our worthy King, Edward VII. His Majesty has done much upon his own estate at Sandringham and in that district by the erection of well-built cottages and club-rooms, as well as by the provision of allotments, to promote the happiness of his dependents and has set a noble example that is worthy of imitation in the desire to ameliorate the lives of the less fortunate in the battle of life. May not the familiar words of Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" be altered and adapted:—

Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for labour's fate,
Still persisting, still pursuing,
Begin to act—nor longer wait!

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VILLAGE LIFE IN THE FENS.

CHAPTER I.

DREAMS OF AN OLD AGE PENSION.

"Sixty foive year auld to-day and no auld age 'lowance yet!" was the despondent exclamation of a prematurely decrepit man as he sat in his arm-chair in a barely furnished room, while the wintry wind whistled and rumbled outside, as though it would strip the very thatch from the roof of his frail cottage.

John Woodhouse was a son of the soil, and an agricultural labourer who, year in and year out, had toiled hard to bring up his family respectably and start them in the world. And now he had reached his sixty-fifth birthday, he and his wife, Mary Woodhouse, to whom the remark was addressed, bearing the traces of the hard life they had lived, battling with poverty, almost dragged under by illness in their family, but bravely struggling against adversity, their industry and sobriety enabling them so far to safely weather the storms of a life of not a little privation and self-denial. The sadness in the tone of the old man betokened despair rather than complaint, for the strain of life was beginning to tell upon him, and whilst his physical powers were declining, there was that ever-present prospect before him of his last days