

**BOARD OF AGRICULTURE AND  
FISHERIES, REPORT ON THE  
DECLINE IN THE AGRICULTURAL  
POPULATION OF GREAT BRITAIN,  
1881-1906**

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**R. H REW**

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BOARD OF AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES.

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# REPORT

ON THE

## DECLINE IN THE AGRICULTURAL POPULATION

OF

GREAT BRITAIN,

1881—1906.

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Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty.

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## REPORT.

TO THE SECRETARY OF THE BOARD OF AGRICULTURE  
AND FISHERIES.

SIR,

THE reduction in the number of persons returned as engaged in Agriculture in Great Britain has been one of the most prominent features of the Census Returns for the past 50 years, and it has never been more apparent than in the figures for 1901, when a decline of about 20 per cent. in the number of agricultural labourers during the preceding decade was indicated. The special circumstances existing at the time when the Census of 1901 was taken probably tended to exaggerate in some degree this apparent reduction, but when all allowances are made the significance of the returns is sufficiently evident. Much public attention has been and continues to be aroused in the question of what is somewhat loosely termed "Rural Depopulation," but during the long interval which elapses between one Census and another no statistical measure is available of the intensity of the movement. In the absence of definite data there is obviously a risk that observations made under exceptional conditions or over limited areas may be put forward and accepted as characteristic of the whole country. Generalisations in regard to British Agriculture are peculiarly difficult, in view of the wide diversity of conditions prevalent in different counties, and any series of observations can therefore have little validity unless they are made on a uniform basis and at points which are distributed with some geographical regularity.

Decrease of  
Agricultural  
Population

The Board, in their staff of Agricultural Correspondents, possess facilities for obtaining observations by well-qualified observers, distributed in every county of Great Britain. It appeared desirable, therefore, to take steps to elicit the views of this body of competent observers with regard to the present movement of the agricultural population and the causes which affect it. With this object, the following circular letter was issued to each of the Agricultural Correspondents of the Board in March last:—

Circular of  
Enquiry.

I am directed by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries to call your attention to the accompanying statement showing the changes which are

recorded in the Census Returns as having occurred among the principal classes engaged in Agriculture during the 20 years 1881-1901 in the County of—

The Board desire to obtain the views of their Agricultural Correspondents as to the various causes which have contributed to the changes thus recorded.

In almost every County of Great Britain a reduction in the number of persons who have returned themselves as engaged in Agriculture has taken place during the last 20 years, and I am to ask you to be good enough to favour the Board with your opinion, based on your knowledge of the facts in your own district, and on such reliable information as you may be able to obtain, on the following points :—

1. Have the changes indicated by the Census Returns in 1901 continued in the same direction since that date?
2. What in your opinion are the immediate causes of the decline in the Agricultural population, naming them in order of importance, in your district?
3. Is there any difficulty in obtaining land either for Small Holdings or Allotments, and if so has this difficulty contributed in any degree to the decline in the Agricultural population?
4. The Census figures record the population on the 1st of April. Can you say whether the number of Labourers temporarily employed on the land at particular seasons, *e.g.*, for corn harvest, fruit-picking, hop-picking, &c., has declined to a greater or less extent than the resident labourers during the past 10 and 20 years respectively?
5. To what extent have alterations in the system of farming in your district affected the demand for labour? Has any particular agricultural industry such as fruit-farming, vegetable-growing, poultry rearing, &c., tended to check the decline in the agricultural population?

These points are intended as suggestive only, and the Board will be glad to receive the fullest details in connection with them and the subject generally that you may be able to give.

Accompanying the circular was a statement giving each Correspondent the Census figures for his particular county, as shown in Table I. of Appendix A to this Report.

Replies  
received.

The total number of replies received was 248, and the names and addresses of those who furnished them are given for reference in Appendix B. The Board are indebted to those who rendered assistance for the care which they have taken to furnish well-considered replies to the enquiries addressed to them. In very many cases the replies have been prepared after consultation with, or reference to, a large number of persons able to give special information throughout the county or district in which the Correspondent resides. It has not been found possible to print the whole of the replies *in extenso*, but they have been carefully analysed and condensed in the summary which follows this Report (pp. 23-112).