

THE DECLINE IN THE AGRICULTURAL POPULATION.

The Board of Agriculture and Fisheries has issued a "Report on the Decline in the Agricultural Population of Great Britain, 1881-1906."

The reduction in the number of persons returned as engaged in agriculture in Great Britain, says the report, 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 Board, in their staff of agricultural correspondents, possess facilities for obtaining observations by well-qualified observers, distributed in every county of Great Britain, and it appeared desirable to take steps to elicit the views of these observers with regard to the present movement of the agricultural population and the causes which affect it. With this object, a circular letter, asking certain questions, was issued to each of the agricultural correspondents of the Board in March last. The total number of replies received was 248. From these it appears that opinions as to the continuance of the decline in agricultural labourers since 1901 differ somewhat widely. In one or two counties it seems to be thought that the rate of decline has been accelerated, while in others, such as Middlesex and Ayrshire, labourers are said to be more numerous than in 1901. On the whole, however, the tenor of the majority of the reports indicates that since 1901 there has been some further reduction in the number of men employed on farms, but that the diminution is proceeding at a slower rate than during the ten or 20 years preceding that date. From almost every county the reply is received that there is a greater reduction of casual than of permanent labour. The use of labour-saving machinery is the main cause assigned. "Whether we assume," says the report, "that the present rate of the decline in agricultural labour is 10 or 20 per cent. per decennium, or, as is perhaps probable, something between the two, it will be granted that its continuance is a serious economic and social fact."

The causes assigned fall into two categories—(a) those which occasion a diminished demand, and (b) those which account for a reduced supply. First as to the causes assigned for a smaller demand for labour on the farms, the compulsion put upon farmers to reduce their expenditure by reason of low prices and diminished capital is very commonly referred to. They have altered their methods of farming so far as possible with the view of economizing labour. The most important change, which is referred to in the reports from practically every county, is the laying down of land to grass. The loss of 2,000,000 acres of arable land in Great Britain in the 20 years 1881-1901 probably threw out of work from 60,000 to 80,000 labourers at least during that period.

The withdrawal of the plough from an extent of land as large as Hampshire and Somerset put together has, however, only partially accounted for the reduction of labour. The displacement of manual labour arising from the greatly extended use of drills, horse-hoes, mowers, binders, manure distributors, and the like must have been in the aggregate very great, and probably to this more than to any other single cause the reduced demand for farm labourers may be attributed. Alongside the influences affecting demand, and more than keeping pace with them, has been the increasing desire of the labourers to leave the land. An absolute disinclination for work on the land on any terms is frequently noted as a characteristic of the labouring class, particularly of the younger generation, and complaints that the methods of education in the rural elementary schools foster this distaste are made in many of the reports. Among specific causes of discontent, a deficiency of adequate or satisfactory housing accommodation is reported from about 30 counties. The rural labourers' standard of comfort has been raised, and they are not now contented with the accommodation which previous generations placidly accepted. Many correspondents refer to the absence of an incentive to remain on the land. "It is indeed impossible," says the report, "not to recognize that the ordinary career of the agricultural labourer offers little scope for ambition. If he is intelligent and quick-witted he may practically have become a master of his craft by the time he is 21, but after rising to the position of horse-keeper or shepherd, or, perhaps, foreman, there is little further outlook and small hope of increased wages. . . . Advancement to the man who lives by the land means in the end the occupation or the ownership of land for himself, and the presence or absence of a reasonable prospect of attaining this goal must no doubt affect the willingness of young and enterprising men to persevere in farm work." So far as allotments are concerned, there is a very general consensus of opinion that requirements are as a rule well satisfied. The majority of the correspondents report that there is a demand for small holdings, which is not satisfied. The belief that their provision would tend to keep the population on the land is expressed in many reports. While the advantages of small holdings are very generally recognized, the difficulties of providing them are referred to by many correspondents. Various obstacles are mentioned, but that which may be said to overshadow all the rest is the cost of equipment. The suggestion that money should be advanced at a low rate of interest and by the assistance of the State for the equipment of small holdings or for the building of cottages is made by several correspondents. "If encouragement for the future is to be found anywhere," says Mr. R. H. Rew in concluding his introductory report, "I am inclined to think that it is in the evidence furnished of the extent to which farmers have adapted themselves to the times by taking up the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, the rearing of poultry, and other industries of a so-called subsidiary character. The extension of dairy farming . . . is, perhaps, the most striking example of their enterprise, but not only for the sake of retaining labour on the land, but also in the interests of agriculture generally, the evidence of the attention given to what used to be thought 'small things' may be regarded as one of the hopeful facts which the present inquiry has elicited."