

Wage labour and living standards in early modern England: a case study of the Shuttleworth accounts, Lancashire 1582-1621

Li Jiang, History Department, University of Exeter

lj373@exeter.ac.uk

Supervisors: Prof Jane Whittle & Dr Freyja Cox Jensen

Wage labour has been recognised as a key feature of capitalism which contributed to the rapid development of England's economy, and our understanding of the living standards of wage labourers who lived in early modern England has been dominated by the reconstruction of real wage series. However, when discussing the purchasing power to acquire a basket of consumables, most money wages used by historians have clear 'seasonal preferences', and the basket of consumables have depended too much on the prices collected from southern institutions. In addition, the simple division between skilled and unskilled workers, and the assumed 250/260 working days per year hide the real employment patterns of wage workers who lived during early modern period.

Instead of estimating living standards based on these assumptions, by using over 9,000 records collected from the household and farm accounts of the Shuttleworth family in south-east Lancashire between 1582 and 1621, this paper studies in detail the working lives of casual labourers and building workers in northwest rural England, exploring their daily costs of living, annual working days and daily wage rates.¹ And particularly, gendered comparisons are made accordingly.

Cost of Living

As an important aspect of living standards, the cost of living has been discussed by historians with different baskets of consumables, which contain different items, such as food, cloth and fuel. The cost of living fluctuates as the prices of the items within the basket change over time. Although scholars provide different baskets, their work are mainly influenced by David Davies and Frederic Eden who recorded the living conditions of labourers in the later eighteenth century (Davies 1795; Eden 1797). The baskets of consumables can be used to track long-term costs of living, but they have a number of weaknesses which need to be considered. Firstly, they have relied heavily on southern prices despite the fact prices varied regionally (Rogers 1866-1902; Beveridge 1939). Woodward's series was a response to this issue, although he did not take drink into calculation (Woodward 1995). In addition, two points need to be addressed. Although calories play an important role in labourers' productivity, it is possible that proportions of things within the composite unit would vary over time, particularly in the later sixteenth century when the price movements suggest that there were more people eating cheap grains. Adjustments based on a fixed basket can hardly help us get close to what items were

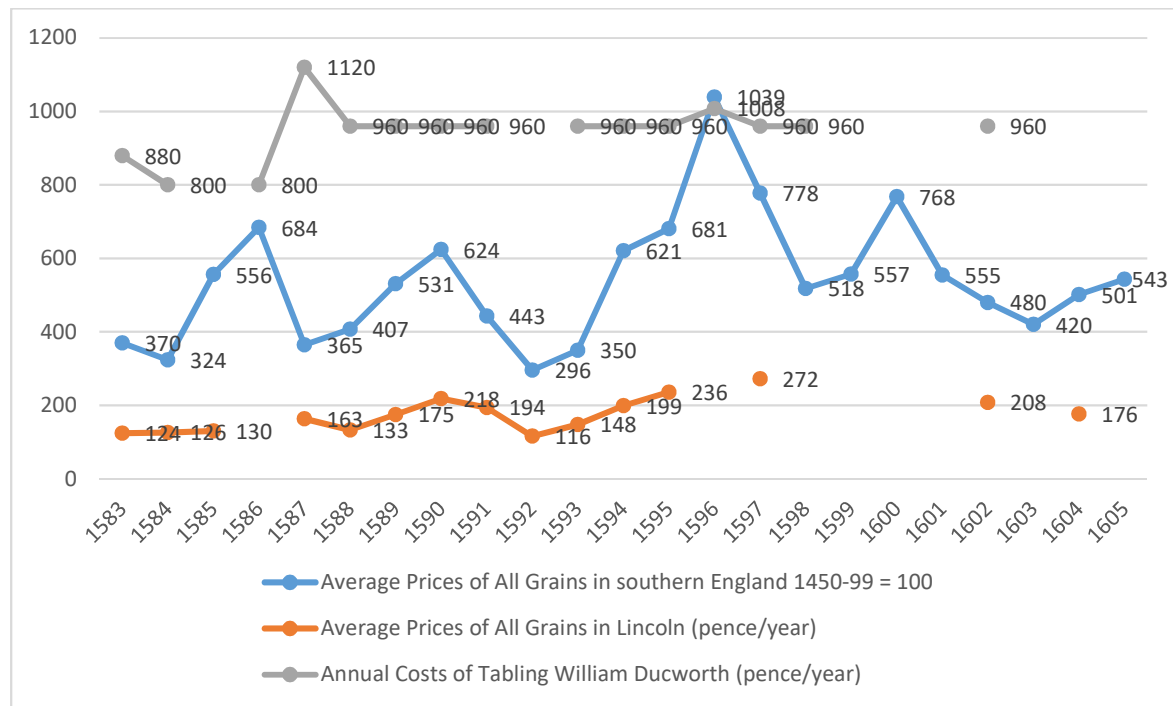
¹ The Shuttleworth accounts, Lancashire Archives DDKS 18/1-9.

consumed by early modern people. Also, regional differences in consumption should be taken into consideration when creating such a basket. The most apparent difference is that while wheat was consumed in the south, oats and barley were more common in north-west. When describing food consumed by poorest labourers in the north of England, Scotland and Wales, Eden said that they ate a variety of dishes which 'are wholly unknown to the southern inhabitant of this island' (Eden 1797, p. 497).

The Shuttleworth accounts recorded the costs of *tabling* different types of wage workers, making it possible to track and compare these costs over time instead of constructing a basket of consumables. In 1580s and 1590s, payments were mainly made to people who lived at Tingreave (Eccleston), Lostock and Hool, where the Shuttleworths owned farm lands at some distance from their main residence. In the early 1600s, payments were mainly made to local inhabitants who lived at Mitton Wood, where workers collected timber for building Gawthorpe Hall. And thus, based on 176 entries in 1582-1599 and 1600-06, and some scattered evidence in 1610s, the costs of diet for tabling servants in husbandry, day labourers, and craftsmen and building labourers can be tracked.

Based on quarterly and yearly payments, figure 1.1 compares the annual costs of feeding William Ducworth from 1580s to 1600s, and the changes on average prices of all grains in southern England and Lincoln during the same period. William Ducworth was a servant who had worked for the Shuttleworths since 1582. He lived at Tingreave, Eccleston, and received a cash wage of £1 6s 8d per year. Two peaks in the annual costs of diet, 1587 (Oct 1587 – Oct 1588) and 1596 (Oct 1596 – Oct 1597), appeared at the same time as peaks in grain prices. Although the high cost of diet in 1587 corresponds with Appleby's observations about the delayed influence of harvest failure in 1586 in northern England, the poor harvests of the 1590s which led to near-famine conditions in some parts of the north did not influence the annual cost of diet significantly (Appleby 1978, pp. 135-7).

Figure 1.1 Yearly Costs of Tabling William Ducworth and the Comparison with Average Prices of All Grains, 1580s-1600s



Sources: Annual costs of tabling William Ducworth see Lancashire Archives, DDKS 18/1-3, 5; Average prices of all grains in southern England see Peter Bowden, 'Statistical Appendix', in Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales IV, 1500-1640*, Cambridge, 1967, pp. 819-20; Average prices of all grains in Lincoln see Sir Francis Hill, *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln*, Stamford, 1991 (first published in 1956), p. 224.

Compared with annual costs of diet for servants in husbandry, the costs of daily diet reacted more quickly to grain prices, and increased apparently in around 1586. Despite some fluctuations over time, the daily costs of tabling the Shuttleworth's casual labourers and building craftsmen normally ranged 3-5d per day in 1582-99, which is higher than the daily cost of feeding annual servants such as Ducworth, of 2.6d per day. The highest daily costs of diet, 6d per day, appeared occasionally in the late sixteenth century when Henry Roggers, a craftsman, was employed for mending ploughs. In 1600-06 when building workers worked at Mitton Wood to get timber, most of them were catered for at a cost of 6d per day for diet. This payment was much higher than that regulated by 1595 Lancashire wage assessment, which stipulated that the daily cost of food and drink for feeding workers should range from 2d to 4d per day.

The payment comparisons reflect the fact that, in addition to the prices of food, the costs of diet for wage workers would be influenced by the demand on labour strength and the skills used in work. Although it is unclear how much of the money paid was for the work of preparing the food, the evidence found in the Shuttleworth accounts suggest that instead of following a stable basket of consumables, the daily costs of feeding wage workers ranged widely.

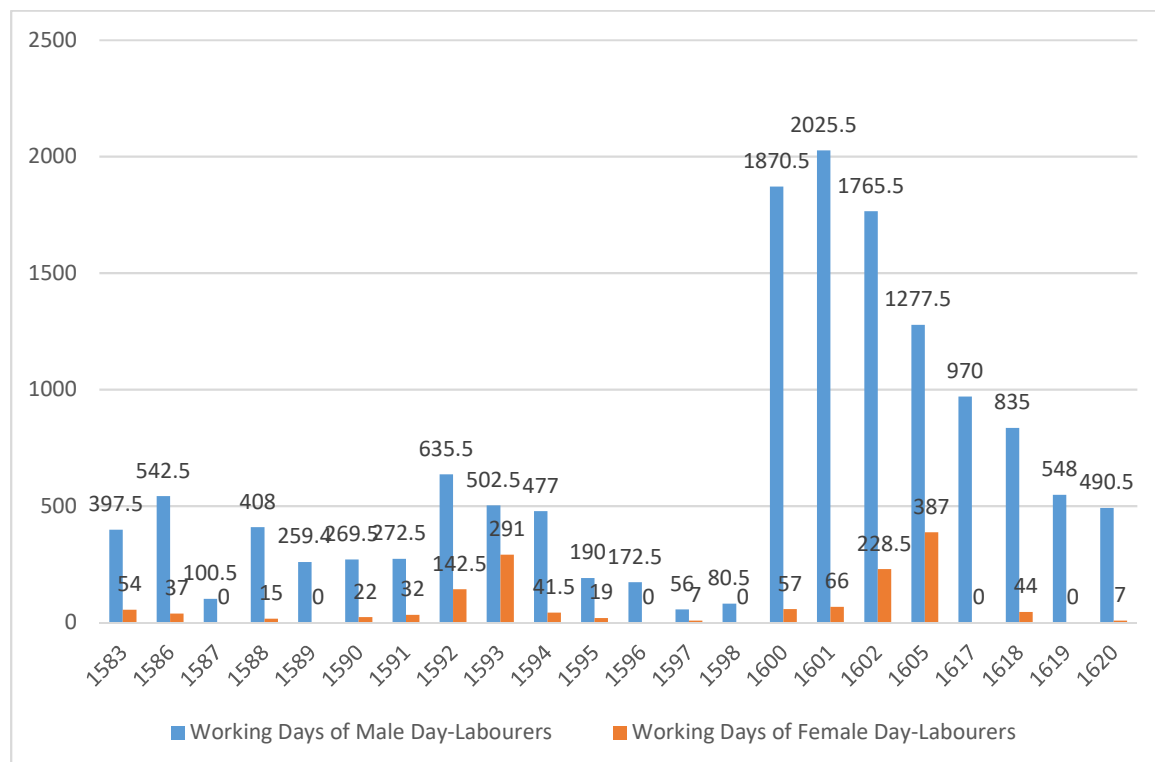
Annual Working Days

The number of days worked played an important role in wage workers' annual income. This section discusses the annual working days of casual agricultural labourers, building workers, and day labourers who did both building and non-building tasks.

Figures 1.2 and 1.3 present the number of days worked by labourers per year, and the number of labourers hired per year by the Shuttleworths between 1583 and 1620. Between 1600 and 1605 the building of Gawthorpe Hall attracted a number of building labourers who worked for the Shuttleworths, leading to a peak in the number of days worked.

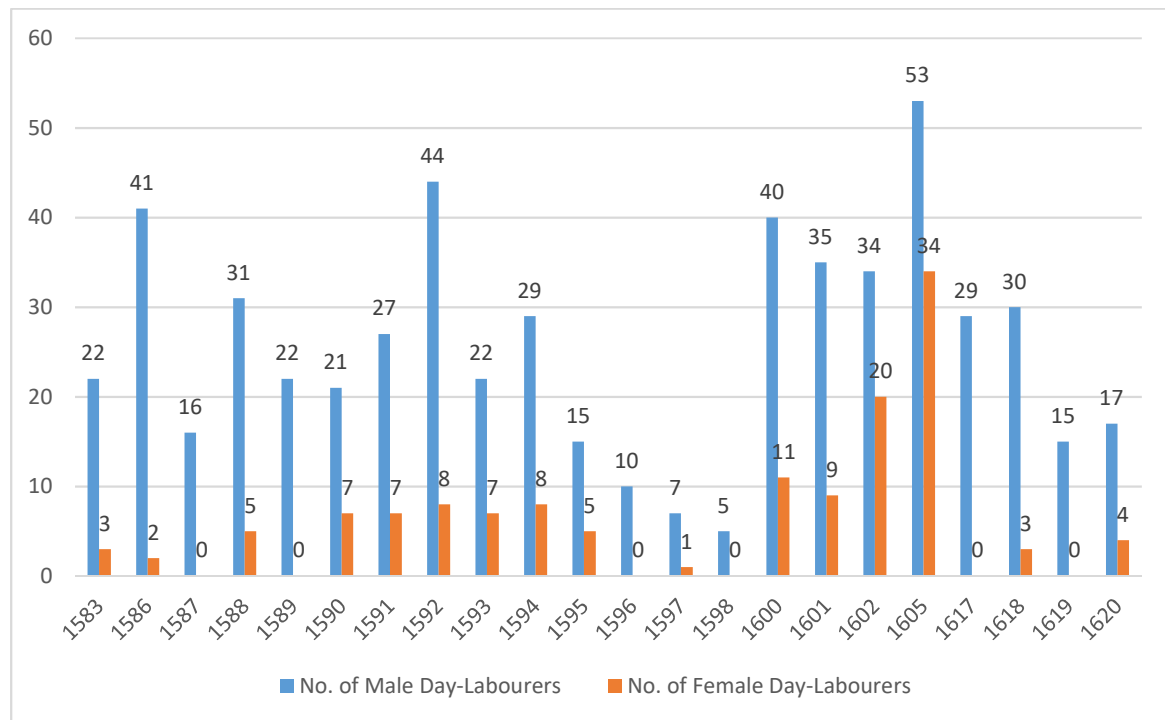
This household had a clear hiring preference for male workers: the average number of working days undertaken by male and female labourers were 643 and 66 days respectively; while the average numbers of male and female labourers were 26 and 6. The annual working-day gap was smallest in 1593 when three women were employed at spinning for 36 weeks, leading to a total of 291 days worked by female labourers if we assume they worked six days per week. Nevertheless, when taking the annual number of day labourers into consideration, the average working days undertaken by one labourer per year would be far less than the 250/260 days assumed in wage series.

Figure 1.2 The Annual Number of Days Worked by Labourers for the Shuttleworths



Source: Lancashire Archives DDKS 18/1-9.

Figure 1.3 The Annual Number of Day-Labourers Hired by the Shuttleworths



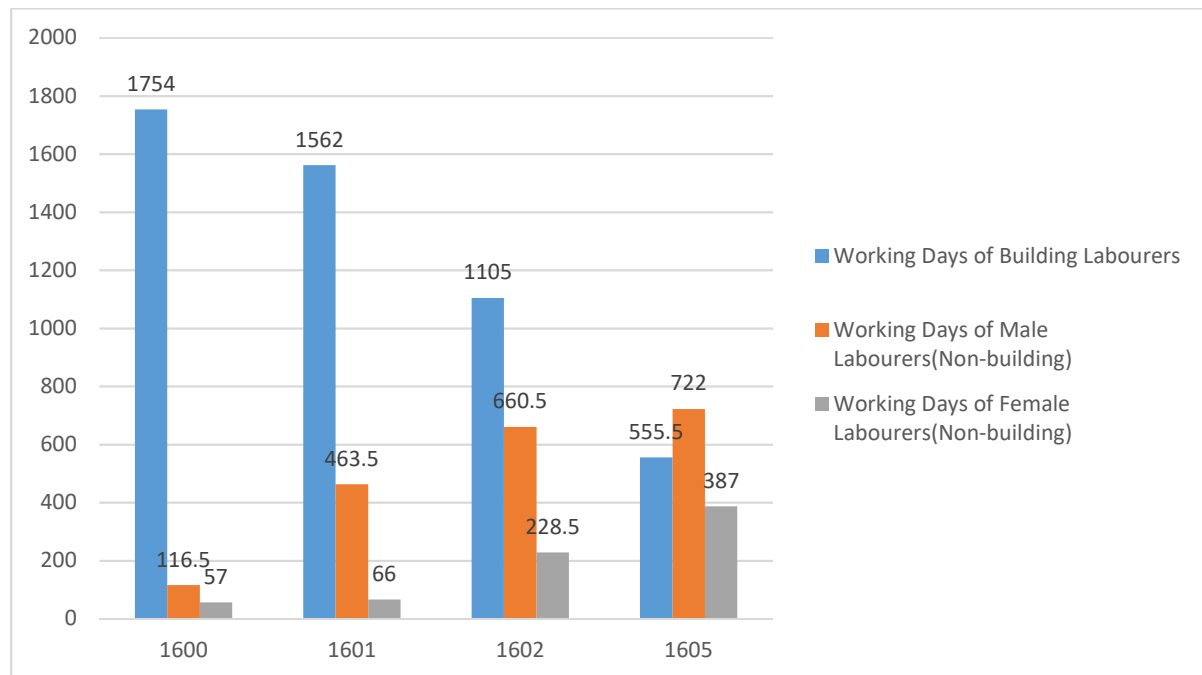
Source: Lancashire Archives DDKS 18/1-9.

Figure 1.4 compares the days worked by both building and non-building labourers and by men and women in four years with complete accounts.² While the days worked by building labourers were decreasing, the annual days worked by both male and female non-building labourers were rising steadily. In fact, all these female labourers, except three in 1600, were harvest workers.

The high participation of female labour in 1600s was not a result of demographic crisis as the local parish registers show that population was rising gradually during this period. Instead, it seems that the building of Gawthope Hall attracted more men who worked as building workers, and thus left some harvest work for women. Another likely reason is that difficult economic circumstances encouraged women to work for wages during early seventeenth centuries. Muldrew’s estimations of family earnings show that it was particularly hard for families to make ends meet during this period (Muldrew 2011, pp. 217, 257). In addition, the Shuttleworths’ active response to Poor Law might explain this situation as well, since the employment of female labourers may have been another way to reduce the need for poor relief by local families.

² As two volumes which covered the periods: 20 August 1603 – 7 July 1604 and 30 June 1606 – 1 July 1608, were lost, the incomplete data on 1604 and 1606 are excluded.

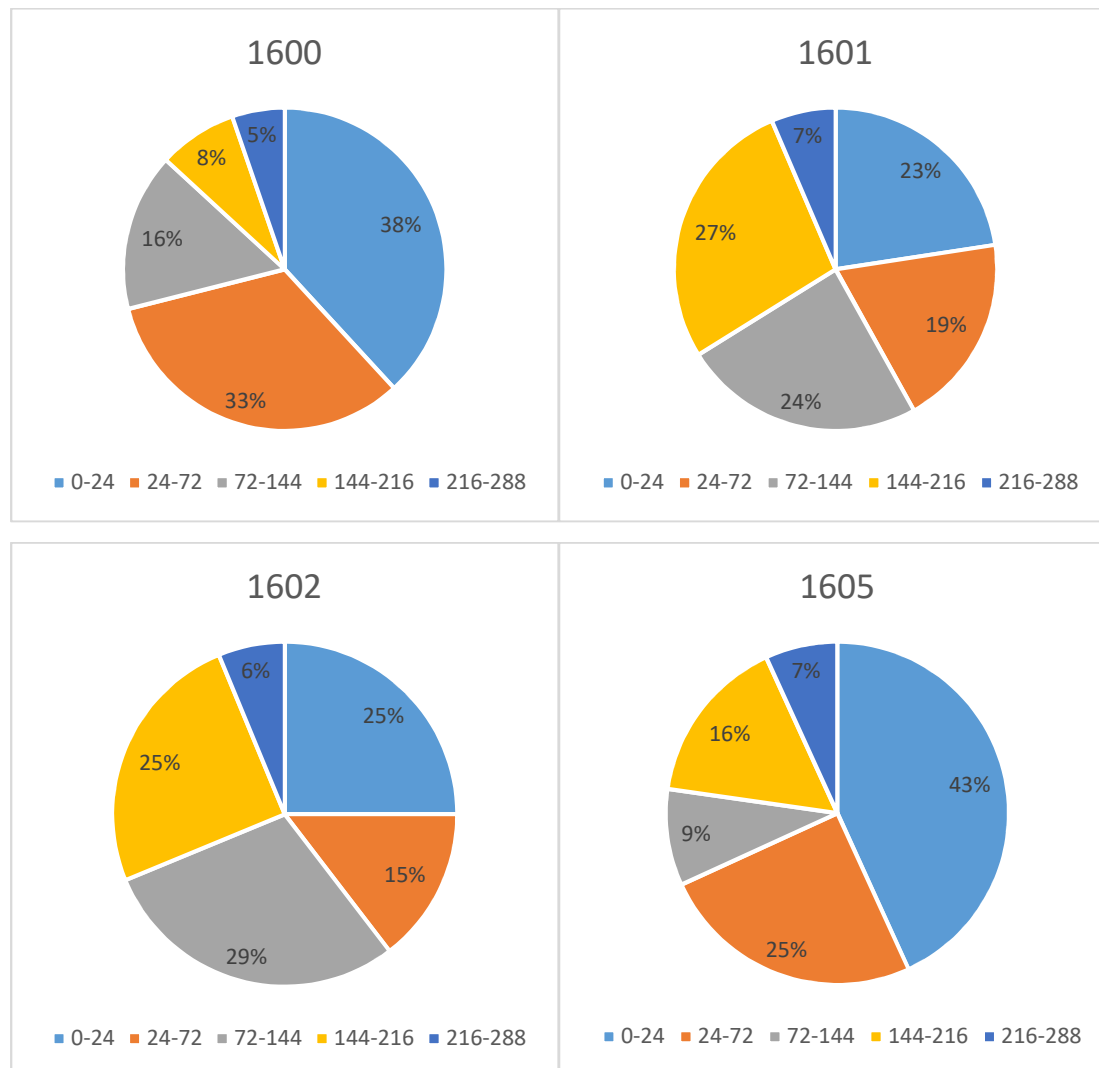
Figure 1.4 The Comparison of Working Days by Building and Non-building Labourers in 1600-02, 1605



Source: The data about female labourers were collected from figure 1.2, the data about male labourers were collected from Lancashire Archives DDKS 18/4-7.

When concentrating on the working days undertaken by building workers per year, the figures were also less than 250/260 days per year. We can look in detail at the 230 building workers recorded in 1600-06, 92 of whom were building labourers (as opposed to more skilled craftsmen). Since some building workers only appeared temporarily in the accounts, five different lengths of employment: one month (24 working days), three months (72 working days), six months (144 working days), nine months (216 working days) and twelve months (288 working days) are used here to make further comparisons. As shown in figure 1.5, most building workers hired by the Shuttleworths worked less than 250 days during the building of Gawthorpe Hall in 1600-6. In fact, there were only twelve workers (11 craftsmen and 1 labourer) who worked over 216 days annually in the four years analysed in detail, half of whom were paid wholly or partly by the quarter and worked less than 220 days per year. Among the other six workers, William Fouldes, a wright, was the only craftsman who worked over 260 days; the annual length of employment for the other five workers (4 craftsmen and 1 labourer) ranged from 220 to 250 days.

Figure 1.5 The Proportional Distribution of Working Days undertaken by Per Building Worker Hired by the Shuttleworths in 1600-02, 1605



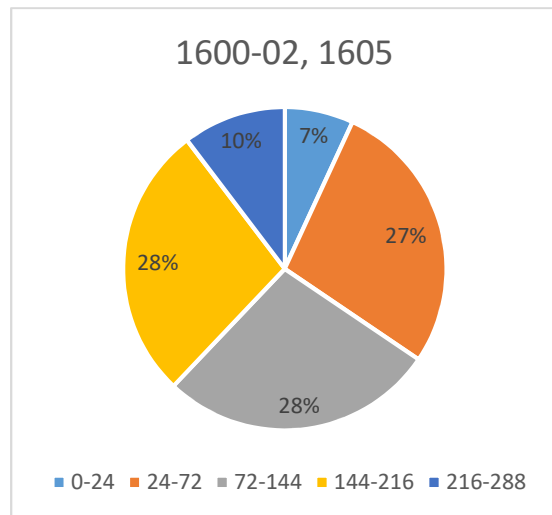
Note: six working days per week have been used to calculate the working days. When workers were paid quarterly, it is assumed they worked six days per week.

Source: Lancashire Archives DDKS 18/4-7.

Further analysis can be made by taking working days on both building and non-building tasks into calculation. Among 29 labourers who were paid solely by the day but participated in both building and non-building tasks in 1600s, as shown in figure 1.6, only 10% of labourers worked over nine months (216 days) per year. The majority of labourers worked for between one month and nine months (24-216 days) each year for the Shuttleworths in the early seventeenth century, accounting for 83%. Only 7% of labourers worked for less than one month. John Cockshot was the only labourer who worked more than 260 days in one year: the sum of his working days in 1605 was 278, his daily wage rates ranged from 1d to 2d per day and he received a total of £1 16s 7d for this year. His wife, a haymaker, received 3s for working 16 days in the same year. In all, John and his wife earned £1 19s 7d by labouring for the Shuttleworths in 1605. Although they received food as well as wages when employed, without

other sources of income or means of subsistence, this annual income could not support the cost of diet for Cockshot and his wife when they were not working for the Shuttleworths.³

Figure 1.6 The Proportional Distribution of Selected Instances of Building Labourers Hired for Different Lengths by the Shuttleworths in 1600-02, 1605



Note: six working days per week have been used to calculate the working days.
 Source: Lancashire Archives DDKS18/4-7.

Daily Wage Rates

When they were catered for by the Shuttleworths, daily wage rates received by casual labourers and building labourers normally ranged from 1d to 3d per day. The highest daily wage rate, 6d per day, was paid to both mowers and building craftsmen. Gendered comparison can be made of wage rates as both male and female labourers participated in certain types of tasks when working for the Shuttleworths. Table 1.1 compares daily wage rates received by male and female labourers when they did six types of tasks. The numbers in the brackets indicate the sum of examples collected from accounts. Although these daily wage rates changed over time, there was no big wage gap between male and female labourers who did same tasks during a specific period. Labour efficiency and customary discrimination have been used to explain gender wage gap (Woodward 1994; Bardsley 1999, 2001; Hatcher 2001; Lane 2004, pp. 102-118; Burnette 2008, pp. 72-135). However, the evidence found in the Shuttleworth accounts shows that the gender wage gap was caused by the type of tasks men and women did, and the number of days they were employed, rather than by different wage rates for the same task.

³ 1595 Lancashire wage assessment is used here to estimate the daily cost of diet. According to this wage assessment, the daily cost of feeding an agricultural labourer ranged from 2d to 4d per day.

Table 1.1 Gendered Comparison of Daily Wage Rates in the Shuttleworths Over Time (d/day)

	The Shuttleworths 1583, 86-98 (Smithills)		The Shuttleworths 1600-02, 05, 1617-21 (Gawthorpe Hall)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Shearing corn ⁴	2.9d(34)	3d(1)	2.9d(66)	3d(42)
Haymaking	1.4(27)	1.5d(1)	2.3d(55)	2d(128)
Weeding	1.4d(1)	1.4d(1)	2.1d(11)	1.7d(5)
Winnowing	1.5d(1)	4d*(3)	6d*(20)	6d*(2)
Sheep husbandry	2d(1)	3d(1)	4d(2)	4d(4)
Getting turves	1.1d(12)	1.4d(25)		

Note: * means the wage rate without food and drink.

Sources: Lancashire Archives, DDKS 18/1-9.

This analysis of the Shuttleworth accounts indicate that current research on living standards of early modern period presents an incomplete picture of the real lives of wage labourers. Labour strength and skills applied in tasks played an important role in wage workers' daily costs of living. Using a stable basket of consumables does not reflect the wide range of payments for feeding different types of wage workers. Also, the *actual* annual working days undertaken by most casual labourers and building workers were far less than the assumed 250/260 days per year, requiring a reconsideration of their dependence on monetary wages as well as other sources of income. Lastly, instead of disappearing gradually from agricultural employment, the high participation of female labour in the early 1600s shows that female labourers could sometimes contribute to family income by working during harvest seasons with similar wage rates as their male counterparts. However, we should also take into account the fact that women were rarely employed at other times of the year, meaning that their off-season day wage rates have limited relevance.

⁴ Reaping.