

# Casual or annual labour? Work organization on family farms in Sweden, 1860-1900.

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*First very short preliminary version – Do Not Quote!*

## Introduction

The nineteenth-century agricultural revolution of Sweden resulted in a growth of the semi-landless and landless classes. From being a fifth of the rural population in 1750, by the mid-nineteenth century the non-landholding class were as large as the landholding one (Winberg, 1975). In the contemporary society, the growth of the labouring classes was seen as a problem since it resulted in pauperisation and social unrest (see Utterström, 1957, *passim*). From the 1970s and onwards, this view has been revised with the argument that the growth of these classes was intimately connected to a increased demand for labour from the farms during the agricultural revolution. Consequently, labourers had employment and played an important part in the overall transformation and growth of the sector (Winberg 1975: 269; Fridlitzius 1979; Schön 1979: 81; Gadd 1983: 285).

The second half of the nineteenth century, particularly from the 1870s, meant a restructuring into more animal-based agriculture, i.e. dairy and pork products. This was due to changing relative prices and increasing demand for these products (income and price effects). At the same time, large-scale operators, as estates, lost ground to family farms. According to some researchers (e.g. Djurfeldt, G. 1994: 57-61; Dovring 1965: 120-127) this led to wage labour turning less important and being replaced by family labour. This was a reverse development to what was the case during the early parts of the agricultural revolution

and the rise of the wealthy farmers. Agriculture from then on, changed in structure and in wealth, up to the 1940s. But is this true – did wage labour disappear (through emigration or urbanization) and if so, how was this process on farm level. Using our sample of different farmers with the detailed records on all labour put down on the land, we are able to follow this transition.

The (remaining) landless workers in agriculture, employed on family farms and estates, have by some been seen as an early form of free labour, reflecting emerging capitalistic relations between employers and workers. This includes both that they earned their wage in cash and that the hiring of them increasingly occurred on a free labour market (Lundh, 2008: 117; Winberg 2000: 140). Contracts between employer and employed replaced the previous feudal relation of master and servant (Spross and Samuelsson 2021: 19). “The day-labourers were modern wage workers paid in cash, but only for the time their labour was used” as Christer Lundh summarized the group when going through the different segments of the landless classes (Lundh, 2008: 117).

On the other hand, others have nuanced this, observing the increase of day-labourers over servants, as in the much earlier English case, and the growth of cash wages, but stressed that old customs to some extent still prevailed in the late nineteenth century (Granlund 1944; Utterström 1957; Uppenberg 2018: 161). With the findings on multi-faceted strategies among crofters to secure livelihoods, this speaks to day-labouring being one thread in a complex weave of provision among the rural labourers of nineteenth century Sweden.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it significantly extends our knowledge on how farmers organized the labour over the year. Previous studies have focused on large-scale estates and capitalistic farmers where organization can be expected to be different than on family run farms. By using information on as well family labour, annually employed servants as on casual labour a detailed and encompassing understanding of

farmers' planning of work is acquired. Integration of all these three groups is necessary since the relation between them is interdependent; a growth in one would affect the size of the others. Second, the long-term character of the sources makes possible to study if and how this organization of labour input was affected by changes in demand for the products and to changes in supply of labour. Third, the study contributes indirectly with information on the way that the farm workers could provide for themselves, working on landholders' farms, and when they could not.

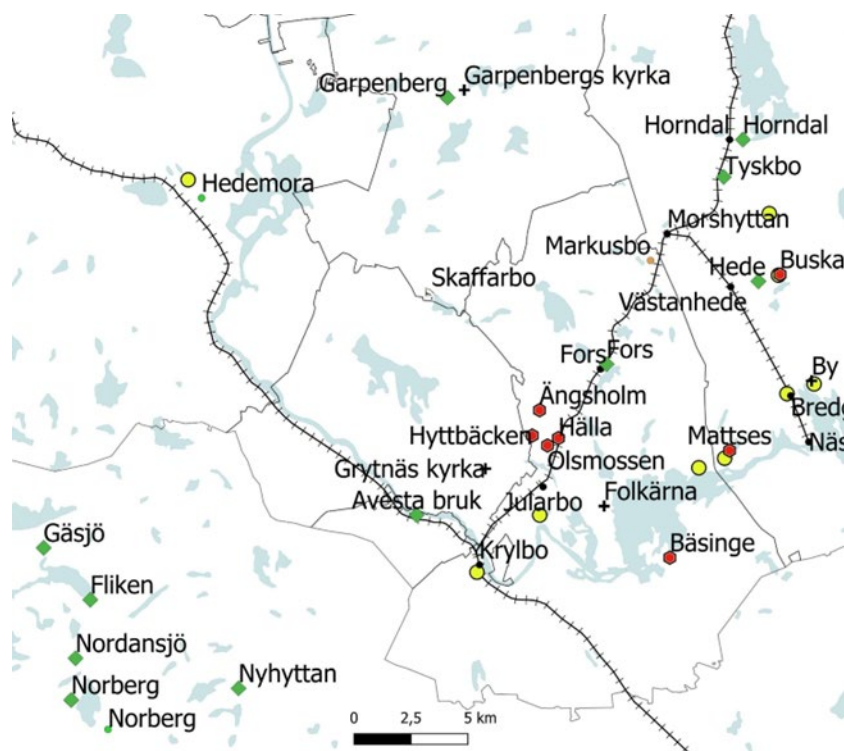
## Context and sources

Seven farms in the same small local area provide the basis for the empirical study: The Tomtas farm in Bäsinge village, Matses in Norra Strandmora, Bengts in Buskas, and Hyttbäcken, Hälla, Olsmossen and Ängsholm all in Stora Dicka village.<sup>1</sup> The villages are located in the two parishes of By and Folkärna in the southernmost part of the county of Kopparberg in central Sweden. The region was the main iron producing area of Sweden in the nineteenth century and in its southern part, farmers relied on a combination of grain and animal production alongside the use of forest resources for firewood or charcoal, and from the end of the nineteenth century also in the form of timber production. Farmers could also make an extra income from handling transports of charcoal, iron ore, and finished products to and from the ironworks (Larsson i By 1968; Isacson 1979). The period 1860 to 1910 encompassed an agricultural transformation in the form of enclosures and investments in land and buildings. At the same time, Swedish industrialisation took up speed, resulting in alternatives for the rural labourers.

Map 1. The location of the parishes in Sweden.



Map 2. The farms and the surrounding economy, c. 1880.



Note: The farms with journals are in red, the yellow markings are dairies and the green are ironworks. Main roads and railways are also visible.  
Source: Map made by Anna Westin.

Whereas Hyttbäcken and Ängsholm were large family farms, others like Tomtas and Hälla were medium-sized, and some, Olsmossen, Matses and Bengts, were small, at least regarding arable land.<sup>ii</sup> This will make it possible to study the work organisation and variability in labour demand for farms of different scales.

The reason these farms have been chosen as study objects is that diaries, or perhaps rather journals in the sense we are using their information, written by farmers are preserved for them.<sup>iii</sup> The journals, among other things, contain daily observations on work performed. They include if other people than the farmer family members and the annually employed servants were hired and what type of work that was executed each day. The span of the journals written, or preserved, differs between the farms with the longest streak starting in the 1840s and ending in the 1920s (father and sons) and the shortest only for ten years. The completeness of daily notations during a full year are also inconsistent which will affect which farms and which years that can be used for different questions raised in this study.

Table 1. The farms studied, their size (in hectares, around 1860), and the length of the journal observations.

<i>Farm</i>	<i>Village</i>	<i>Parish</i>	<i>Size in ha (arable)</i>	<i>Journal</i>
<i>Bengts</i>	Buska	By	67 (10)	1895–1908
<i>Matses</i>	Norra	By	59 (10)	1840, 1851– 1924
<i>Hyttbäcken</i>	Stora Dicka	Folkärna	129 (34)	1840–1919
<i>Hälla</i>	Stora Dicka	Folkärna	50 (22)	1876–1883, 1888, 1894
<i>Olsmossen</i>	Stora Dicka	Folkärna	23 (8)	1892–1923
<i>Tomtas</i>	Bäsinge	Folkärna	92 (21)	1872–1900
<i>Ängsholm</i>	Stora Dicka	Folkärna	94 (40)	1856–1908

Sources: Peasant journals SBD; for size: Land surveyor archives.

The journals were all written by men and primarily noted the work managed and led by these men. This means that they recorded work on the arable, the meadows and the forest together with transports but not much at all on for example animal handling, milking or indoor work.

Generally, this is of course a flaw when aiming for a total calculation of work input, but for the present study it is less of a problem. This is because the latter work were year-round tasks managed by the family and hired annual servants (e.g. Larsson in By, 1968), while the former was the work where additional, non-household, labour was needed. There were some exceptions to this, in the journals also extra labour at festivities (cooking), the slaughter, or at times of washing clothes are noted. These are mostly women and few in relation to the overall day-labourers employed. Important to keep in mind though is that while men wrote the diaries, the day-labourer squad in general consisted of both men and women, and their sons and daughters, as we will see below.

In addition to the journals, information on the family composition and annually hired labourers/servants has been extracted from the parish registers<sup>iv</sup>, which allows for a quantification of total labour input within the area of work covered by the journals.

## Work organisation on family farms in Sweden

Most nineteenth century family farms in Sweden rested on labour input consisting of a combination of family members, annually employed servants and day-labourers (Utterström, 1957: *passim*; Dribe and Lundh, 2005). The magnitude and importance of the latter two categories were of course dependant on the size of the farm, the type of production, and the size of the family labour input. Theoretically, the farmer couple sat down in late summer and started to plan next year's needs. First, the labour from the family itself was put into the equation. Second, additional labourers were to be employed in relation to labour needed at the farm, considering the family input. Here, two options were possible: to employ full-time annual servants or to employ day-labourers. Servants were to be employed if there were tasks over the full year, day-labourers for peak season tasks. The relation between these groups was also dependent on their relative costs and on the availability of workers. It could be the best economic choice to employ full-time servants although there were not sufficient tasks over

the full year if day-labour wages were very high during peak season or if there was a scarce labour supply during this period.

To study how this worked in practice, we utilise the information given in the farm journals. Not all journals for all years contain notations for all days. There are sometimes periods within a year without any information at all. For some there is also a year missing now and then; this probably related to preservation of the journals rather than to the farmer stopping writing the journal for a year. Since it is crucial to get a full understanding of the size of the work performed by the day-labourers we have only selected years with full coverage. Moreover, it is probable that labour demand varied over the years, in line with weather variations and thereby harvests. Another selection criterion has therefore been to try to use streaks of full coverage years for the same farm. If possible, the years chosen should overlap between farms for some of the years. For this purpose, we will therefore follow the labour input on the Tomtas farm from 1872 to 1900, Hälla 1878 to 1883, Olsmossen 1892 to 1899, and Bengts 1896 to 1903. From the journals we get the day-labourers and the days worked by them. To this we add information on the family labour (all males over the age of 15 present at the farm) and male servants from the parish registers. For the latter two we assume that they work all days when work is noted, which is around 295 days per year, but subtract the days when the journals note that they are away.

When the female members of the households, family and servants, participated in the work covered by the journals they are noted as doing so. This is mostly during harvest season but occasionally also performing other tasks. However, since they had other tasks to perform simultaneously, the observations are rather few. When noted as participating, they have been included in the calculations of the total labour input.

On all farms there is a negative correlation between the family labour input and the annual servants employed. These two types of workers were interchangeable. On the Tomtas

farm, the father and his grown-up son were supplemented by a male servant during the years 1872–1875. The younger son turned 15 in 1875 and the next year there was no male servant employed; the labour input remained constant through the younger son joining his father and brother in work, clearly noted in the journal. In late October 1882 at the Hälla farm, the uncle who had worked there for many years moved away and was instantly replaced by a male servant for the coming year. At the Matses farm, the farmer and his son were the only permanent male workforce and when the son moved away for a year a male servant was employed and when the son returned the next year, no servant was hired. Overall, the labour input from these two types of labour was rather constant over time at each farm. The servant system provided a foundation for matching labour demand and supply at the farm level (cf. Dribe and Lundh 2005).

Saying that, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, a new strategy was adopted on the Hälla, Tomtas and Olsmossen farms. During the winter months, labour demand was lower and in some years the farmers did not employ the servants over the full year but rather from the early Spring to November. At the Bengts farm, the male servant was hired out to another employer during these months in the 1890s. Over time, the male servants was replaced by married workers living outside the farmer household, employed from around Arpil/May to October/November.

The replacing of servants with workers working large parts of the year, but not the full year, and living outside the farm household is consistent with the population censuses. These show that from 1860 to 1900, the number of servants decreased substantially.

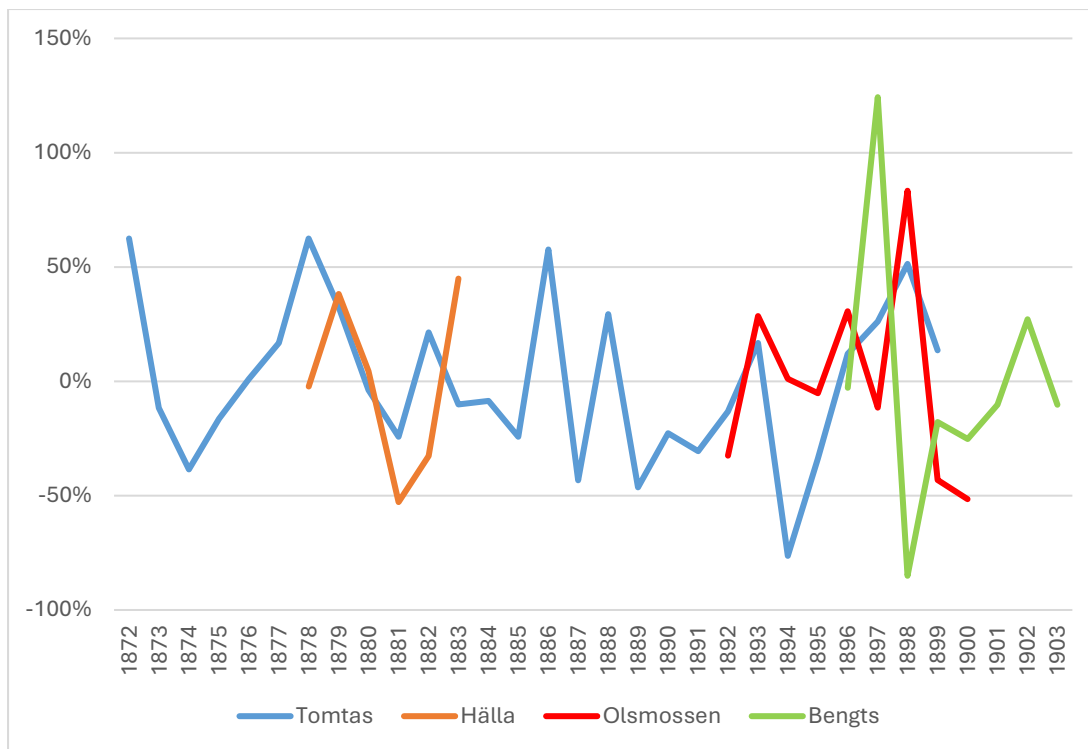
Then remains the day-labourers. On average, their part of the total labour input amounted to seven percent on Tomtas, eight on Olsmossen, four on Hälla and merely two percent on the Bengts farm. This might seem insignificant but given that they were hired for work in the most pressing times, it mattered. On average, from a selected sample of years, a

third of all days worked by day-labourers concerned the grain harvest and a bit over a fifth was in haymaking. Over a half of all days were devoted to the harvests which by nature were the tasks most dependent on weather. The two tasks, haymaking and the grain harvest, were also very much interdependent since in normal years haymaking came first and was finished before the full labour force spent its time harvesting the grain. However, due to delay by rain or early ripening of the grain, the haymaking and the harvest could collide and lead to an imminent need for extra labour.

Day-labourers also were involved in tasks such as threshing and in preparing the soil by ploughing and manuring, cutting firewood, and charcoaling, and in investments, such as digging ditches or building fences.

The large share of work done by day-labourers during the hay and grain harvests as well as in threshing made demand for their work vary between years. In reality, there were no normal years, but if we relate each year's number of days worked by day-labourers to the average number of days worked by them, we see that from one year to another the number could double, or half (see Figure 2). This variation cannot be derived from the planning of the individual farmer for each year. That planning mainly concerned keeping the input from the household constant. Instead, the variation in demand for day-labourers were decided by the weather, causing large or small harvests, and, as noted before, collisions in time.

Figure 1. Day-labour days on four family farms, 1872–1903 (percentage difference from average day-labouring days per farm)



Sources: Peasant diaries: SBD 3, SBD 4, SBD 5, SBD 43.

A previous study of day-labourers on manorial estates have found a strong correlation between harvest volumes and the number of days worked by day-labourers (Bengtsson and Olsson, 2025: 29–30). Some indications of the harvests are available also in our journals. For 1881, the farmer at the Matses farm noted that it was a very dry year with a low hay harvest and an almost failure with the spring crops.<sup>v</sup> In 1887 the Hyttbäcken farmer summarised the year by saying that the hay harvest and the spring grain was much below average. The autumn-sown rye was acceptable, but “times were bleak and troublesome for all enterprises”.<sup>vi</sup>

The journals show that when planning the labour input for the coming year, the farmers made within-household choices (between family members and annually employed servants), making sure the labour input was constant over the years, while day labourers were a flexible input hired after varying needs of, and under, the specific year. For the day-labourers this meant a highly variable income from working at the farms.

## Day labourers as the new modern workers

One characteristic of day-labourers as the emerging new modern proletariat would be that they were paid in cash. Using scattered notes in the journals and above all a ledger over workers at the Hyttbäcken farm, kept from the 1820 to the 1890s, we can extract how the day-labourers were paid.

While the small part of the salary for the annual servants, the cash part, actually was paid mostly in cash, almost half of the wages paid to day-labourers were paid in kind. In the 1860s around 58 percent of the wage was in kind, in the 1880s it constituted 37 percent and in the 1890s around 42 percent.

One example of a day-labourer paid partly in-kind is the worker Johan Sahlström who worked at the Hyttbäcken farm in the 1890s. He lived in the hamlet of Östanbyn in the neighbouring parish of Grytnäs and was 35 years old in 1894, married with four small children. This year he worked by day during harvest in July, August and September, in total 73 days. The next year he worked during the Spring chopping and spreading peat. This work was also paid per day, and he worked 36 days that Spring. To this he made fence posts and dug ditches as piecework. The total wage was 302 kronor and 91 öre. Around two-thirds was paid in cash, while the remaining part was paid in kind in the form of 48 percent in grain, 25 percent in different types of inputs for his own cultivation (seed, manure and loan of a horse), 5 percent in dairy products, 9 percent in pork and firewood, and the remaining 4 percent as clothes.

Besides the fact that a large part of the wages for day-labourers were paid in-kind speaks against them being modern cash wage earning workers, also other features of their employment corroborates that the old traditional labour market still prevailed over a new modern one. Many of the day-labourers had long-term relationships to particular farms and worked there every year and even came back after a year without employment (due to low

labour demand). In many cases several family members worked at the same farm, husband, wife, and children. The day-labourers are also sometimes mentioned in the farm journals for other reasons than work, for example when they married or died. The farmers did in some cases visit the funerals and at least once arranged the probate record meeting for one worker. Long-germ social and economic relations and wages paid in-kind dominated over farmers finding workers in a free market and paying them in cash.

## Discussion and conclusion

Using farm journals, this study has analysed the work organisation on family farms and the role of day-labourers in this on the micro level. On all farms, there was a strategy to keep the permanent labour force, the family and the annual servants, constant, while the use of day-labourers were decided by the needs of the specific year.

The servant system was gradually dismantled during the second half of the nineteenth century, at least as regards the male servants. First by employing male servants only for parts of the year and then by replacing them with married workers employed for parts of the year and living outside the household. As for female servants, their need in the households turning more to milk and cheese production rather increased than decreased.

The day-labourers predominately worked during haymaking and the grain harvest, and with the outcome of this, through threshing. This means that in good harvest years there was a large demand for their services, where the day-labourers were a vital resource, and vice versa. Some years, the labouring families worked up to fifty days and the next year there could be no demand for them at all. So, income fluctuated.

The same pattern has been found for day-labourers on one manorial estate in southern Sweden (Bengtsson and Olsson, 2025). What differs is that the day-labourers at the family farms worked somewhat less days per year, probably due to family farms having much less large investments than the estates. However, in both Swedish contexts day-labourers worked

much less than what has been found for eighteenth century England (Muldrew, 2011). This implies that the Swedish ones to a larger extent had other means for provision.

## Sources

Hyttbäcken's farm archive

- Ledger over workers (*Arbetsjournal*)

National Archives (*Riksarkivet*)

- By kyrkoarkiv
  - o Parish registers (*Församlingsböcker*) Al: 17a – Al: 19d, All: 1a – All: 1d.
- Folkärna kyrkoarkiv
  - o Parish registers (*Församlingsböcker*) Al: 17a – Al: 20c, Alla: 1a – Alla: 1e.

Nordic Museum (*Nordiska museet*)

Swedish National Farm Diary Register (SBD)

- SBD 1: Hyttbäcken; SBD 2: Ängsholm; SBD 3: Olsmossen; SBD 4: Hälla; SBD 5: Bäsinge (Tomtas); SBD 43: Bengts; SBD 44: Strandmora (Matses).

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<sup>i</sup> All the diaries used here have been catalogued in the Swedish National Farm Diary Register (SBD) and they are in order presented here: SBD 5, SBD 44, SBD 43, SBD 1, SBD 4, SBD 3, and SBD 2, see Larsson (1992).

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- <sup>ii</sup> The official statistics uses less than 2 hectares of arable land, 2 to 20, 20 to 100 and above 100 as different groups. In Morell (2001) this is discussed and for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Sweden, Morell argues that a smallholder had 2 to 5 hectares and sometimes up to 10 hectares of arable land, whereas a middle-sized family farm had 10 to 30 hectares (Morell, 2001: 345).
- <sup>iii</sup> The diaries/journals vary in content and in length of the daily notations but overall they are dominated by information on work performed, if outside labour was employed, and the weather. To this comes occasional notations on social events. Before or after the daily notations, they often contain summaries of the year, weather and harvest-wise, as well as scattered notations on wages, on personal events, and sometimes on local politics or meetings attended.
- <sup>iv</sup> The parish registers are updated annually and thereby cover the servants. In cases where these were hired for shorter periods information might therefore be lacking. This is corrected for by using notations in the diaries on servants starting and ending their service.
- <sup>v</sup> SBD 44, 1881.
- <sup>vi</sup> SBD 1A, 1887.