

# The first poverty line? Davies' and Eden's investigation of rural poverty in the late 18th-century England

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## ABSTRACT

Two important and well-known surveys of the household budgets of the English rural labouring poor were produced by David Davies and Frederick Eden in the 1790s. We revisit these from the point of view of their original rationale – an investigation of the characteristics and extent of poverty in the countryside. We argue that Davies' standard of 'tolerable comfort' can lay claim to being the first poverty line based upon the application of a minimum consumption standard to household income. We find that the majority of households fall below this standard, although those in the south of England were worst off, that family size was the largest coefficient and poverty reduced as the age of the first child increased. The incidence of poverty was not highly correlated with the absence of a woman wage earner.

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## 1. Introduction

The plight of the labouring poor at the end of the 18th century was famously documented by David Davies and Frederick Eden. Davies (1742–1819) came from a background of small farmers and became rector of the parish of Barkham in Berkshire in 1782, after earlier periods spent as a sugar plantation manager in Barbados and a tutor back in England. His observations of the slave trade and his intimate knowledge of his own English parish, led him to articulate a profound sympathy and understanding of the lives of the rural labouring poor.<sup>1</sup> Frederick Eden (1766–1809), in contrast, was the eldest son of the governor of Maryland (who became a baronet in 1776). Eden made his career in the insurance business, being one of the founders and chairmen of the Globe Insurance Company, and his name in self-financed social and economic investigations, where he applied his considerable knowledge of poor relief administration and insurance.<sup>2</sup> The importance of their surveys, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry*, and *The State of the Poor*, published in 1795 and 1797 respectively, was immediately recognised. A reviewer for the *Gentleman's Magazine* thanked Davies for his painstaking work, which he hoped would 'attract a degree of attention proportional to the importance of the subject and the merit of the execution'.<sup>3</sup> Successive generations of historians have also acknowledged their indebtedness to Davies and Eden. Their surveys have been widely trawled for information on general economic and social conditions in the late 18th century and led the Hammonds to conclude that 'the normal labourer, even with constant

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<sup>1</sup> Horn (2004), 'David Davies' (1742–1819).

<sup>2</sup> Winch (2004), 'Eden, Sir Frederick Morton, second baronet' (1766–1809).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Oliver (1976), 'David Davies', p. 383.

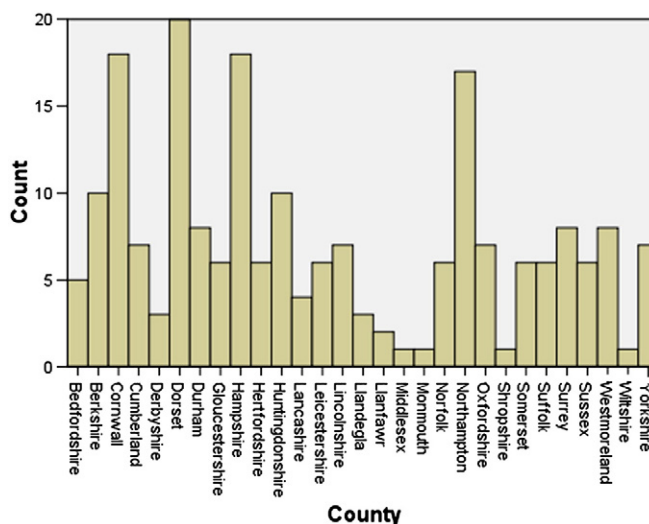


Fig. 1. The regional distribution of Eden and Davies' budgets.

employment, was no longer solvent' at the end of the 18th century.<sup>4</sup> Their recordings of earnings and expenses also appeared in two early influential and widely used attempts at charting the long term course of wage and price fluctuations by [Bowley \(1899\)](#) and [Phelps-Brown and Hopkins \(1956\)](#).<sup>5</sup>

More recently the budgets of Davies and Eden have been used by historians in two areas of debate. First are those interested in labour markets, wage levels and standards of living during the period of the industrial revolution. [Crafts \(1980\)](#) used the studies, alongside that of Neild's on Lancashire, to estimate the income elasticity of demand for food during the industrial revolution.<sup>6</sup> [Lindert and Williamson \(1983\)](#) utilised the wage data from Davies and Eden in their reassessment of living standards.<sup>7</sup> [Horrell and Humphries \(1992, 1995, 1996\)](#) used the Eden's and Davies' budgets to investigate various questions connected to workers' living standards between the 1780s and 1860s, as did the new cost-of living index constructed by [Feinstein \(1998\)](#).<sup>8</sup> Within this strand of the literature only one attempt, by [Sokoll \(1991\)](#), has been made to analyse Davies' and Eden's budgets in isolation.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on earnings, and the balance between earnings and expenses, Sokoll revealed the level of deficit in the budgets, and discusses the ways that poor families might have made these up.

The second area of debate is also linked to the standard of living but centres on labourers' diets and nutritional standards. Davies' and Eden's budgets have proved a rich source for historians concerned with calorific intake. [Shammas \(1990\)](#) calculated that the national average calorific intake in the late 18th century ranged from 2500 to 2700 in terms of adult male equivalent units. This largely corroborated Fogel's daily calorific consumption figure of 2826 for the 1790s.<sup>10</sup> This, it followed, fell way below the needs of an early modern labourer, and some would have struggled to perform sustained heavy manual work, even allowing for the smaller stature of 18th century adults ([Floud et al., 2011](#)).<sup>11</sup> This has been questioned by [Muldrew \(2011\)](#), who contends that food consumption levels were significantly underestimated in Davies' and Eden's as they were conducted during a period of high food prices when consumption had to be cut back. His calculations based upon a wider range of sources reaches a figure of 5130 cal for men, 4176 for women (at 0.8 male equivalent) and 2625 for children (at 0.5 male equivalent) in 1800. Muldrew's calculations also make an allowance for the energy derived from beer consumption, which is under-recorded in Eden's and Davies' budgets.<sup>12</sup> [Horrell and Oxley \(2012\)](#) have investigated the relationship between dietary quality and its impact on physical stature. They identify a positive relationship between regional diet and height in Eden's budgets, which had largely disappeared by the 1830s.<sup>13</sup>

It cannot be claimed therefore that Davies' and Eden's are newly discovered sources or that they have been neglected or under-utilised by historians. Why revisit them? We believe that despite their prominence, these sources have not been fully

<sup>4</sup> [Hammond and Hammond \(1911\)](#), *Village Labourer*, pp. 69–70. See also [Pinchbeck \(1930, 1981\)](#) *Women Workers*, ch. II; [Snell \(1985\)](#) *Annals*, p. 56; [Boyer \(1990\)](#), *English Poor Law*, pp. 41–2.

<sup>5</sup> [Bowley \(1899\)](#) 'The statistics of wages'; [Phelps-Brown and Hopkins \(1956\)](#) 'Seven centuries'.

<sup>6</sup> [Crafts \(1980\)](#), 'Income elasticities of demand'.

<sup>7</sup> [Lindert and Williamson \(1983\)](#), 'English workers' living standards'.

<sup>8</sup> [Horrell and Humphries \(1992\)](#), 'Old questions, new data'; [Horrell and Humphries \(1995\)](#), 'Women's labour force participation'; [Horrell \(1996\)](#), 'Home demand and British industrialisation'; and [Feinstein \(1998\)](#), 'Pessimism perpetuated'.

<sup>9</sup> [Sokoll \(1991\)](#), 'Accounting the unaccountable'.

<sup>10</sup> [Shammas \(1990\)](#), *Pre-Industrial Consumer*, ch. 5.

<sup>11</sup> [Floud et al. \(2011\)](#) *The Changing Body*, pp. 119–133.

<sup>12</sup> [Muldrew \(2011\)](#), *Food, Energy*, Table 3.16, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> [Horrell and Oxley \(2012\)](#), 'Bringing home the bacon?'

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