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Dutch live-in farmhands and maids in the long 19th century: the decline and near disappearance of the lifecycle servant system for the rural lower class

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Preliminary version

Abstract

From 1850 onwards it became increasingly uncommon for unmarried children in the Dutch countryside to become live-in servants. Concentrating on developments in the strongly market-oriented province of Groningen the paper tries to get a more in-depth picture of who these live-in servants actually were, and if their composition changed. Using the digitalised civil registration of the province from 1811 until 1930 the importance of live-in servants (farmhands and maids) in different age categories and the social origin of these servants (occupations of parents) is explored. Especially interesting are the questions of whether social origins changed during the period and whether there were important gender differences. The hypothesis is that while the children of unskilled labourers kept adhering to the system until well after 1900, better off artisans and small farmers stopped letting their offspring leave home for a live-in position early.

1. Introduction¹

Before the twentieth century, everywhere in northern and western Europe a huge amount of the agricultural work was performed by live-in farm servants (Mitterauer 1992: 324-325; Mitterauer and Sieder 1979; Schlumbohm 1996; Kussmaul 1981; Devine ed. 1984; McIntosh 1984; Anderson 1992; Eriksson and Rogers 1978: 26-37, 57-74, 156-158), in Eastern and Mediterranean Europe this was only the case to a considerably lesser extent (Engel 1994; Da Molin 1990; Reher 1998; Dubert 2004). The use of live-in servants was a typical characteristic of the North-western European economic-demographic system (Hajnal 1983). Two different models of domestic service can be discerned (Lundh 1999: 66-68). In regions without a large completely proletarianised labour force (for example the interior provinces of The Netherlands) the system was mainly used to even out shortages and surpluses between family farms caused by (temporary) discrepancies between family-size and disposable land. Social differences between servants and masters were relatively small. Servants often acquired a (small) farm of their own after marriage, just like their parents. In more

¹ Parts of this paper form an updated version of R. Paping, 'Oferta y demanda de criados rurales en Holanda, 1760-1920. El caso de Groningen', *Historia Agraria. Revista de agricultura e historia rural*, 35 (2005) 115-142.

capitalistic regions as the Dutch coastal provinces including Groningen – usually with larger social differences within the agricultural population – the situation was quite different. A part of the farms was too large to be driven by the farmer and its family alone, while within landless labourer households useful economic activities were lacking, stimulating the members of these families to work for the farmers, partly as live-in farm servants.

Dutch research until now concentrated mostly on girls doing live-in domestic work (Henkes and Oosterhof 1985; Poelstra 1996; Bras 1998; Bras 2002). Around 1900 the position of domestics became increasingly unpopular under young girls. Supply of domestics decreased, because it was felt as humiliating to serve and the work offered few prospects for the future (Poelstra 1996: 260-264). Girls preferred to work in a factory or in a shop, inasmuch as these positions offered more individual freedom (factory workers) or a higher social status (live-in shop servants). While demand for domestics did not fall, domestic work was increasingly done by non-resident women. After the first World War the resulting shortage of live-in domestics was partly solved by the influx of a large number of German maids to do this kind of domestic work (Henkes 1995). Although attracting less attention in literature, the number of live-in farm servants was probably higher than of genuine domestics in most of the nineteenth century.

The only estimates on the number of Dutch female live-in farm servants in literature are made by Van Zanden (1985: 69-70, 75, 427-429), and are based on the combination of data on the number of live-in servants taxed (officially making a difference between servants who ‘worked’, and those who mainly were active in house-keeping) and on census-data, both sources with major interpretation problems. According to him there were 37,200 girls aged 16 and older in 1810, 42,200 in 1850, 33,000 in 1880 and 28,500 in 1910. These figures show a fall from 1850 onwards, which is even more pronounced if we take the development of the total Dutch population into account: 1810: 1.7% – 1850: 1.4% – 1880: 0.8% – 1910 0.5% of the population were farm maids of 16 and older. Unfortunately, Van Zanden does not provide exact data on farmhands.

By analysing a sample of census lists for the period 1830, 1850, 1870, 1890 and 1910 we previously tried to estimate the development of the number of live-in farm personnel in the Groningen clay region (more than half the province), these estimates can be compared to a special detailed Groningen agricultural statistic of 1862 (table 1). The estimates for 1862 are somewhat higher than that of 1849 and 1869. The figures suggest that all live-in farm servants accounted for about 10% of the rural population, though after 1860 a both relative and absolute decline started. The province as a whole counted 6,319 live-in farm maids and 7,443 live farmhands in 1862, or 7% of the total population, including the city of Groningen. These figures, by the way, cast serious doubts on the estimates of Van Zanden, who mentions 4,700 maids in 1858, or a quarter less. For 1889 he takes 3,100 maids in the province, while that was already the amount living in the Groningen clay region as table 1 indicates. The problem of Van Zanden’s estimates is the low quality of his sources. The Dutch occupation censuses from 1849 onwards do not make a clear distinction between farm labourers living-in on the farm and those living elsewhere and classifications are continuously changing, while the taxation data mix up those active in agriculture and those in other economic sectors. Consequently, the only way to get more reliable figures is to take a regional approach.

Table 1. Estimated number of live-in farm servants in the Groningen clay region, 1829-1909.

	1829	1849	1862	1869	1886/1889	1909
Farm maids	3,200	3,500	4,211	3,500	3,100	1,800
Farmhands	4,300	4,300	5,134	4,000	3,800	1,000
Total personnel	7,500	7,800	9,345	7,500	6,900	2,800
Maids pro farm	1.1	1.2	1,3	1,0	0,8	0,5
Hands pro farm	1.5	1.5	1,6	1,1	1,0	0,3
Total pro farm	2.7	2.7	2,9	2,1	1,9	0,8
% of population	11%	9%	10%	8%	6%	2%

Source: Collenteur & Paping (1997) 101.

Around 1900, the number of live-in farm servants fell dramatically in Groningen, after a slow decrease since about 1860. This last decrease is also discernible in the figures of Van Zanden (1985: 70) for nearly all Dutch provinces. However, the dramatic fall around 1900 is not, because the taxation data being his most important source end in 1896. Van Zanden tries to explain the decrease in female live-in servants by the rise in the number of live-in domestics (mainly in the cities) from 58,100 in 1846 to 125,300 in 1896, suggesting those positions were more attractive for country girls. If we look at unmarried female domestics in the censuses, we see that this development continued, with 138,000 in 1889, 173,000 in 1899 and 198,000 in 1909. A problem is, however, that it is not sure that farm maids who usually were also called domestics might be partly included in these figures.

In this article I want to study the long term development and eventually strong decline of the Dutch farm servant system, looking from different perspectives and using alternative regionally available sources from the perspective of the Groningen countryside, concentrating on the Groningen countryside, and more in detail on the clay parts. Main question is how the characteristics of live-in male and female farm servants have developed over time in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, looking at ages, social background, household structures and wages, and if these have been changing? In this way I want to try to shed light on the causes and consequences of the decline of a system which seemed to have involved large parts of the unmarried rural youth for centuries and must have constituted one of the main sources of agricultural labour.

2. The Groningen countryside

The province of Groningen comprises the city of Groningen and its agricultural surroundings, all together nearly 200,000 hectares of mostly fertile land. Clay soil can be found in about half the province (the coastal parts) where 51,000 people lived in 1795 and 119,000 in 1900 mainly in villages with 300 to with a few exceptions 2,000 inhabitants. The other parts of the province counted another 40,000 persons in 1795, to rise to 114,000 in 1900, who were living partly in semi-urbanised settlements with more than 5,000 inhabitants or more like Veendam, Hoogezaand, Sappemeer, Oude/Nieuwe Pekela and later on Stadskanaal (Voerman 2001). Next to this, the population of the city of Groningen increased from 24,000 to 67,000 inhabitants in the same period. In this period, the share of the province in total Dutch population increased from 5.5% to 5.8%. In the clay parts the economy was dominated by a very market-oriented agriculture on medium and large scale farms, being generally

between 10 and 60 hectares. The rest of the province had sandy and peat soils, with many medium-sized and small farmers and peasants which were especially in the few sandy regions partly directed to self-provision (as often elsewhere in the interior of The Netherlands). The economy of the Groningen clay soil area, but also to a lesser extent the peat districts – though having its own peculiarities – resembled in a lot of ways the coastal parts of Friesland, the countryside of the coastal Dutch provinces of Holland and Zeeland, and the neighbouring German province of East-Friesland (Faber 1973; Priester 1998; Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden 2001; Aden 1964). Farm labourers constituted a lower share of the population in the peat and sand regions than in the clay soil area, and some of these farm labourers can also be better characterised as crofters, having some livestock and land at their disposal, working for wages mainly to supplement their “income” from these sources, while in the clay districts the majority of the labourers were landless, having wage work as their only means of existence.

In the eighteenth century, the occupational structure of the Groningen countryside was – except for the sandy parts – already highly diversified, thanks to a nearly complete specialisation of economic activities. In the Groningen clay regions the share of farmer households fell from 32% in 1770, to 17% in 1850 and 13% in 1910, while the share of unskilled and semi-skilled wage labourers increased from 27% to 53% (Paping & Collenteur 1998, heads of households without occupation were not taken into account). The rest – including employees and self-employed in industry and services and also skilled wage-earning positions like civil servants – first remained rather stable with 41% in 1770, and 42% in 1850, to fall to 34% in 1910.

This non-agricultural group was even larger in the peat and other districts. Not only was the ground in the peat colonies reshaped in fertile arable land after the removal of the turf, but at the same time also an impressive shipping fleet came into being, firstly to transport the turf, though later on concentrating on sea shipping on relatively small ships. This also resulted in the rise of a large shipbuilding industry, while from 1840 onwards a large agricultural industry developed, directed at the production of potato flour and straw board. Unfortunately, we can only make a comparison between the clay parts and the rest for the year 1862 using the agricultural statistic of that year (*Bijdragen* 1870).² In the Groningen clay area we find 17.1% farmer households, 41.0% farm labourer households and 41.8% households occupied elsewhere, whereas in the rest of the Groningen countryside these figures are 23.4% farmer households, 30.2% farm labourer households and 46.4% households occupied elsewhere. These differences both reflect small scale farming in the very agricultural sandy regions with many smallholders and few labourers, and the partly industrialised nature of the peat districts.

The in the nineteenth century rapidly growing number of labourers was mostly absorbed by agriculture in the clay regions, while in the peat districts they also found work in the rising number of large factories. High agricultural prices stimulated intensification of land use. This process, however, ended during the agricultural crisis of the 1880s. Rising unemployment and limited future prospects brought lots of labourers and farm servants from especially the Groningen clay villages to leave for America (Paping 2004a). The same development took for example place in nearby

² We used the agricultural heads of household reported in that year, and made an estimate of the number all households, using census population figures for end of 1859, and taking into account an average household size of 4.4 and 11.5% heads of households without occupation, both based on a sample of census registers (Paping 1995: 327).

Friesland (Galema 1996). This heavy out-migration resulted in a considerably lower rural population growth after 1880.

3. The system of unmarried live-in farm servants

Already in the seventeenth large Groningen farms had such a high demand for labour, that it was impossible to meet by the farmer and his or her family. On the other hand, there was an excess of labour in the land poor families of the labourers, small farmers and some of the artisans and tradesmen, mainly consisting of male and female juveniles who had finished primary school at the age of 12 or 13 and were difficult to employ at home. Primary school attendance was already widespread in the eighteenth century and in practise nearly compulsory in the Groningen clay area in the nineteenth century. Secondary schools on the other hand were very rare and only attended by children of the very well-to-do. A very efficient way to use the labour surplus within the lower class families was to let older children move into the households with a shortage of labour: the system of live-in servants.

Already since 1623, a tax of 5% on the wages of all the live-in servants – to be paid by the employers – existed in the province of Groningen, weighing mostly on the farmers. From 1806 onwards one had to pay a specific amount of money for each live-in servant working in agriculture, industry or commercial services, which was one of the main sources for the calculations of Van Zanden (1985) already discussed; the tax to be paid for so-called luxury servants doing only domestic work was higher. Special ordinances on the hiring of live-in servants were issued in the Groningen countryside in 1702 and 1703, bringing those servants nearly completely under control of their employers. Especially measures were taken against servants leaving their employers without consent. They lost their wage, which normally only was paid at the end of the contract period, and they even had to pay an extra half year of wage to the poor-relief board if they did not come up with a good reason for departure. Farmers who dismissed their personnel only had to pay an extra six weeks of wage (from 1783 onwards twelve weeks if this happened in winter) to get rid of an unacceptable servant (Sleebe 1994: 337-346). In the nineteenth century with the coming of new laws, the position of farmer and servant in case of a sudden ending of the labour contract became somewhat more equal, though the employer still had far more rights than the employee (Poelstra 1996: 30-37). Usually, both paid a fine to the other party of 6 weeks of wage if one dissolved a contract without mutual agreement. Quarrels, illness and incapability, but also marriage, pregnancy, military service and later on departure to North America could be reasons to split up.

In Groningen, servants were hired for a whole year or sometimes for half a year, starting around 12 May, or in some villages around 11 November. Because all the contracts ended at the same date, it was easy to change employer or servant. Only a minority of the servants stayed longer than one year on the same farm, which doesn't suggest a very paternalistic relationship between employer and employee. For example, only about one third of the male (13 of 41) and of the female (14 of 38) live-in servants of the farm Terborg in Loppersum during the period 1869-1889 was allowed to stay the next year.³ Also, differences in religion between farmer and servant were not uncommon in Groningen, as is shown by the accounts of the farmer

³ Groningen Archives, archive Terborg, inv.nr. 87.

family Feddema in Kloosterburen belonging to the roman-catholic minority, who employed a considerable amount of protestant live-in staff during the period 1817-1900.⁴ However, they had a clear preference for personnel of the same denomination.

Searching for a better employer was a good way to develop some kind of a career (Paping & Collenteur 2004). In the winter months December, January, and February new labour contracts were negotiated each year – partly by mediators – and confirmed with the payment of earnest-money. Most farmers seem to have had a good idea concerning the capacity and experience (age) of the servants they needed. Large farmers employed several male and female servants who performed specialised jobs related to their age, on the other hand small farmers needed only one or two servants at most to fill in labour gaps due to the actual family composition. For example, widows and widowers using relatively few hectares and without grown-up children hired respectively a farmhand or maid to replace their deceased partner.

So, farmers mostly used live-in servants to fill in part of the labour gaps within the farmer household (Breen 1983: 87-88; Lundh 1995: 43-51). Farmhands performed partly the same work of the farmer and his sons. Farm maids did in general the same work as the farmer's wife and daughters. The different agricultural activities were quite strictly divided between the sexes. If some adult sons were present on the farm, fewer farmhands were hired, and the same was the case with daughters and maids.⁵ In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the members of the (richer) farmer families increasingly stopped doing physical work on the land, which was left to hired personnel. Mostly the farm servants did work that had to be done the whole year through. Farmhands mainly worked with horses, especially ploughing and gathering the crops in summer. They threshed in winter, fed the cattle and did all kind of other things. Farm maids did domestic work like cleaning and cooking, milked, churned, took care of the vegetable garden, fed the pigs and the calves, activities mainly undertaken under the supervision of the farmer's wives; in harvest-time they also helped bringing the yields to the farm. If the churn was driven by a horse this work was done by males. On large farms there was a rather clear-cut division between male and female work. Logically, most of the servant's activities had a lot to do with the animals on the farm: the servants were used to them and knew them and they were nearly always present on the farm (day and night) in case of emergencies, this in contrast with the non-resident male and female labourers, who mainly threshed, weeded, reaped and tied corn, mowed grass and cleaned the ditches.

The advantages for farmers of the servant system are that they were sure they could dispose of the labour every moment they wanted; long working days were possible because these workers did not have to travel to other households and were not daily involved in these other households; the control of labour was easier as live-in servants officially fell directly under the authority of the farmer; farm servants working normally for at least a year on a specific farm, obtained knowledge of the special aspects of this farm (for example knowledge of the specific animals). The advantages for the farm servant (and his parental household) are also clear: the cost-of-living of servants (children) was borne by the farmer; there was no risk of unemployment (especially in winter); a guaranteed annual income was earned; useful skills were learned concerning agriculture and housekeeping (maids). Of course the

⁴ Groningen Archives, NAHI, farm accounts Negenboerenpolder.

⁵ Which is not in accordance with Breen 1983 who found for Ireland that the relation between the number of farmhands and male family members wasn't strong.

live-in servant system also had disadvantages for both parties, which we will discuss later on, and eventually stimulated the near destruction of the system around 1900.

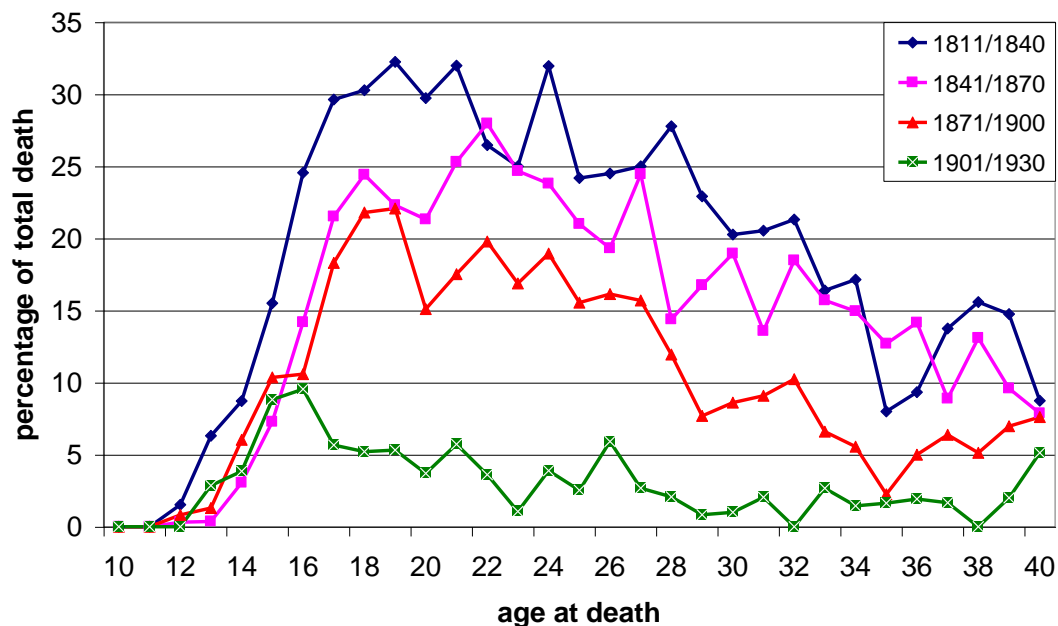
4. The age structure of live-in farm servants

We already pointed at the situation that children of poor households with a labour surplus were after they finished primary school around the age of 12 in theory available to perform all kinds of tasks. However, this does not mean that they directly started to work as live-in servants. The reason might have been that children who were that young, were not physical well enough developed to perform the often heavy tasks on the farmstead, and in this way these boys and girls could be rather a nuisance than a help for the farmer. To get an impression of the development of the amount of juveniles of different ages active as live-in farmhand, all the death certificates of the Groningen countryside for the period 1811-1930 will be analysed. These death certificates make it possible to get comparable figures over quite a long period, including the years of decline of the live-in farm servant system.

Unfortunately, the death certificates have also some problems, of which the most important are: 1. that especially weaker persons and disabled will have remained unemployed, having a higher chance to die, while for instance strong healthy children will start to work early as a live-in personnel. Presumably, this might result in an underestimation of the importance of share of live-in personnel, also considering that morbid people could stop working the months before their death; 2. mortality was partly related to social origin, however, the difference does not seem to have been large in Groningen (Paping & Schansker 2014); 3. the indications of occupations on the death certificates do not always give enough information on the nature of the work. Especially for a lot of girls, no difference can be made between live-in servants on farms, and domestics in other households. Boys are usually called farmhand in the source, but we also took less frequent unclear occupations like 'hand' into account; 4. young soldiers formed a considerable part of the boys dying due to the compulsory enrolment system. Especially in the period 1811/1840 the share of soldiers was very high, as the Netherlands from 1830 onwards had a very large standing army due to the secession of Belgium. After 1840 this share decreased, to become negligible after 1900, suggesting by the way also a very large improvement of the military health care. In some of the figures we omitted the soldiers as special cases.

Graph 1 suggests that only at the age of 17 all the boys who were to become live-in servant really had moved to the farm. The youngest boys were 12, but that were clear exception, and most of the boys stayed at home until aged 14, or even 15. For the period 1811/1840 on average 30% of the unmarried rural boys between 17 and 24 seemed to have been working as live-in farmhand. This share on first sight seems rather low, but it has to be taken into account that parts of east-Groningen (especially the peat districts) were quite urbanised. The share of agriculture (including unskilled labourers) in the occupational structure in Winschoten was 21% in 1849 to fall to 12% in 1900; in Oude Pekela this share went from 22% to 27% (due to a crisis in local shipping); in Veendam from 33% to 26%; in Hoogezand from 36% to 27% and in Sappemeer from 28% to 18% (Voerman 2001). For many of the young boys in these settlements to become a farmhand was much less likely than to start working as sailor, apprentice in shipbuilding and other industries or later on as factory worker.

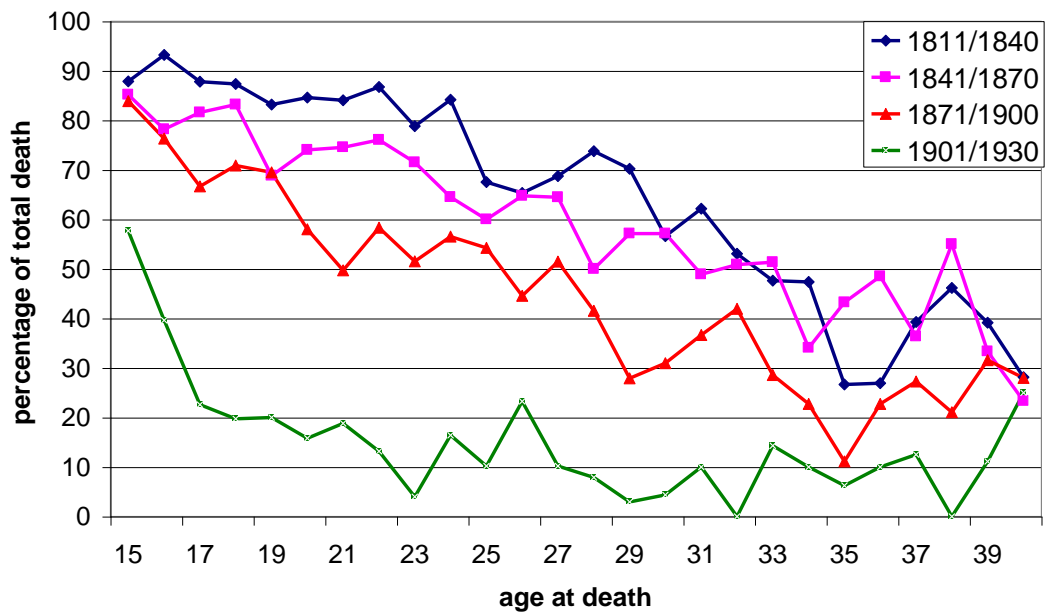
Graph 1: Share of live-in farmhands in unmarried dead males between age 10 and 40 in the Groningen countryside (1811-1930)



The rising importance of other economic sectors is partly reflected in the falling share of live-in farmhands in the age-group 17-24, going from 30% in 1811/1840 to 24% in 1841/1870 and 19% in 1871/1900. However, this development took mainly place outside the Groningen clay regions comprising more than half the area studied and in this way cannot explain this substantial fall wholly. And next to this, it certainly does not offer an explanation for the diminishing of the share of farmhands under deceased boys ages 17-24 to only a very low 4% in 1901/1930. In just a few decennia becoming a live-in farmhand had developed into a rather exceptional decision for at least the older country boys. In graph 2 we compare the number of farmhands with the number of labourers dying in the same age group. The great majority of the unskilled labourers worked in agriculture, although some of them might have also done some peat digging, dike maintenance work and other physical labour tasks. There are two main differences between farmhands (“*boerenknechten*”) and farm labourers (“*arbeiders*”, “*dagloners*” and “*werklieden*”), as the first group lived on the farm and had usually annual contracts, while the latter stayed in other households and were hired on a daily basis, that’s why they are frequently called day labourers.⁶

⁶ Today the distinction has become blurred in Dutch language, and a lot of people use the word farmhand (“*boerenknecht*”) while they actually mean farm labourer (“*landarbeider*”). As a consequence in many simple genealogies farmhand appears as an occupation of married people. However, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century people were very well aware of the difference, and in the later analysis of the occupations of nearly 50,000 parents of older children, the occupation farmhand only shows up 10-15 times, presumably in situations where a widowed father returned to the farm to become live-in servant again.

Graph 2. Share of live-in farmhands in unmarried dead male farm and other unskilled waged labour aged 15-40 in the Groningen countryside (1811-1930)



Already in the first half of the nineteenth century, older – though still unmarried – farm servants started to give up this job to become non-resident labourer, a process starting from the age of 25 onwards. Around the age of 30 just as much men were farmhand as were farm labourer. Clearly, this denotes that despite the advantages of a regular position as a farmhand, with secured work and board and lodging the whole year through, there must also have been important disadvantages to such a position, that restricted personal freedom to a very large extent. Nevertheless for quite a lot of older unmarried men active in agriculture the position of farmhand remained attractive enough compared to the loose labour relations of a farm labourers (34% farmhands against 66% labourers in the age group 35-40 for the period 1811/1840, the first share even increased to 40% for the period 1841/1870).

Graph 2 shows that the breakdown of the farm servant system for farmhands was a slow but steady process, and suggests that it started already before the middle of the nineteenth century, though accelerated around 1900. Especially under boys from age 19 and older the occupation of farmhand became less popular, and more of them left the farms to become non-resident labourer. In the period 1871/1900 already 30% of these boys were working as labourers, which it has to be remarked, might also partly signify the rise of unskilled positions outside agriculture in the peat districts, for instance in potato flour and straw board factories offering a lot of work during several months each year.⁷ Nevertheless, the constantly falling share of farm servants also must imply a shift from resident to non-resident wage labour in agriculture.

When the system neared his end in the early decades of the twentieth century, it were mainly very young boys who became farmhand, possibly on instigation of

⁷ One with an unskilled temporary position in a factory might also sometimes have been registered as labourer, although many factory and other specialised workers also show up in the sources, and these were not taken into account in graph 2.

their parents, as it was difficult to find other regular wage work. After the age of 16, however, these boys rapidly left the farms, presumably returning to their parental home to start to working as an irregular labourers. Table 2 confirms this proposition, with the average number of sons above 16 living at home in labourer households increasing from 0,11 in 1862, to 0,20 in 1889 and 0,35 in 1909, notwithstanding that ages at marriage of labourers were constantly falling in this period. It was presumably the still relatively high age at marriage around 1829 that resulted in relatively many older labourer's sons staying at their parental home. They will have been former farmhands returning home later in life, as is confirmed by the extremely low number of children aged 16-20 living in these labourer households.

Table 2. Estimated average household composition of labourers in the Groningen countryside, 1829-1909.

	1829 clay	1862 clay	1862 rest	1889 clay	1909 clay
Male head of household	0.82	0.85	0.87	0.92	0.94
Female head of household	0.91	0.90	0.91	0.92	0.91
Sons till 11 year	0.72	0.89	0.86	0.74	0.58
Sons 12-15 year	0.14			0.22	0.28
Sons 16-20 year	0.03	0.11	0.21	0.10	0.19
Sons 21 year and older	0.17			0.10	0.16
Daughters till 11 year	0.71			0.89	0.85
Daughters 12-15 year	0.14	0.12	0.20	0.17	0.25
Daughters 16-20 year	0.05			0.11	0.13
Daughters 21 year and older	0.10			0.10	0.11
Servants	0,00	0,03	0,03	0,05	0,01
Average household size	3.69	3.79	3.93	4.15	4,12
Number of cases studied (N)	640	7,647	4.669	585	360

Source: Calculated from census-data of several municipalities, with thanks to Geurt Collenteur for supplying part of the data; 1862: *Bijdragen* (1870).

According to the figures in graph 1, a lot of farmhands came to the farmstead only between the age of 15 and 17, which is perhaps later than what happened in reality. It has already been suggested that this might be a result of the method using death certificates, with many weaker juveniles with of course a high mortality rate remaining at home for more years because of this reason, while the stronger ones with a lesser change to die leaving already early to become a servant. As an alternative source we can look at the age distribution of farm servants in farms according to the census in some selected municipalities in the clay region.

The figures in table 3 confirm some of our previous conclusions. It were indeed the older boys – in the recent past the bulk of the farmhands – who largely disappeared from the farms, while the system remained quite popular under very young boys around 1909, at least in the Groningen clay region. The share of farmhands aged 15 or younger increased from a minor 13% in 1829 to 35% in 1909 of all farmhands. If we assume that in 1829 by the age of 16 all the potential boys have already entered farm service, than half the boys aged between 12 and 15 were already farmhand, suggesting an average starting date around the day these boys had their fourteenth anniversary. This indeed would mean that the death certificates seriously underestimate the share of very young boys working as farm servants.

Table 3. Age distribution of servants on farms in the Groningen countryside, 1829-1909.

	1829 clay	1862 clay	1862 rest	1889 clay	1909 clay
Farmhands till 15 year	0.14	0,25	0.09	0.07	0.07
Farmhands 16-20 year	0.37	1.33	0.56	0.25	0.08
Farmhands 21 year and older	0.53			0.17	0.05
Maids till 15 year	0.15	0.25	0.08	0.07	0.07
Maids 16-20 year	0.28	1.02	0.56	0.26	0.14
Maids 21 year and older	0.51			0.26	0.08
Servants per farm	1.98	2.85	1.29	1.08	0.49
Number of farms studied (N)	409	3,187	3,615	281	186

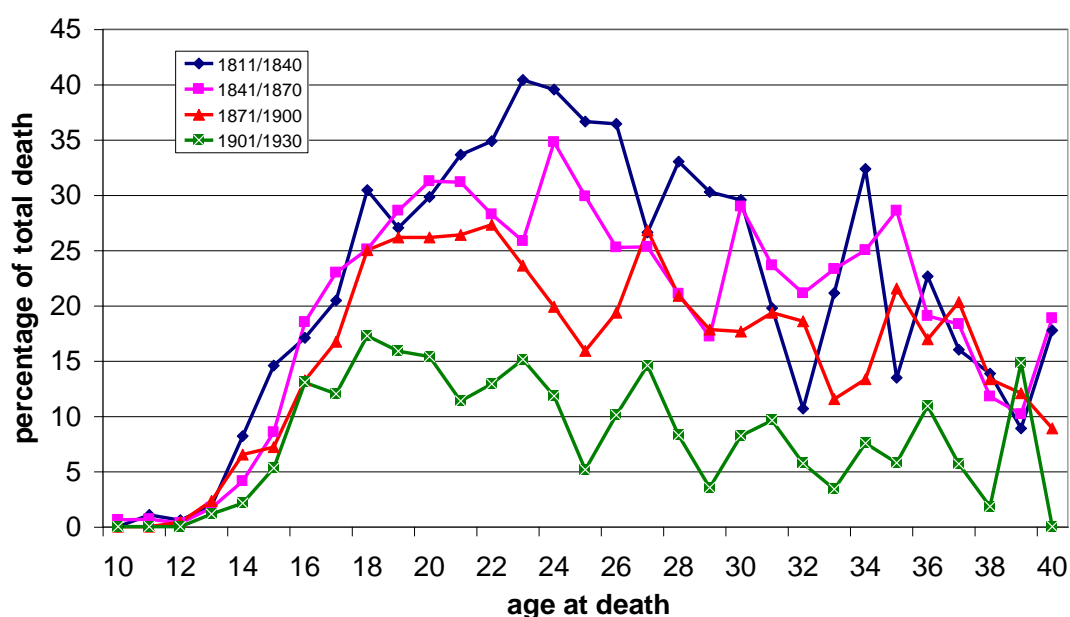
Source: Calculated from census-data of several municipalities; 1862: *Bijdragen* (1870).

Unfortunately, for female live-in servants we cannot make a division between those living on farms and active in agriculture, and those working as a maid elsewhere, as in most of the sources the same names are used for them: “*dienstbode*” or “*dienstmeid*”, stressing in particular their household tasks. For this reason we have to take farm maids and other maids together in the following analysis.

In the period 1811/1840 the share of maids under the deceased girls was continuously rising, until a peak of 40% at the age of 23. This contrasts sharply with the farmhands who already at the age of 17 nearly reached their peak of by then 30%. The relatively larger share of girls active as live-in servant will be a consequence of the quite numerous maids in wealthy non-farmer households, as for instance that of merchants, the miller and the reverend, but also in households of widowers. The origin of the late age peak in this early period is unclear. In the later periods this age seems to fall to 20 in 1841/1870 and even 18 in 1871/1900.

Although less abrupt than farmhands, the share of live-in maids shows a steady fall during the nineteenth century. The difference was not in the young girls becoming servants, but in a decrease of those between 20 and 30 according to graph 3, although the pattern is also much less clear than for farmhand, especially above the age of 26. As numerous girls were already married at that age, the numbers involved become quite low, and chance results in heavy fluctuations of the lines drawn. In accordance with our previous estimates on farm maids (table 1), the number of live-in maids in general diminished rapidly around the start of the twentieth century. Its share of the deceased did not become much higher than 15% in the age group 18-20, while it was well above a quarter in every period of the nineteenth century. Presumably, it was especially the near disappearance of live-in maids on the farms that was responsible for this development, as even in the countryside the hiring of other domestics by the well-to-do – for instance by the in this period rapidly rising group of rich retired farmers – did not seem to have diminished.

Graph 3. Share of live-in maids of unmarried dead females aged 10-40 in the Groningen countryside (1811-1930)

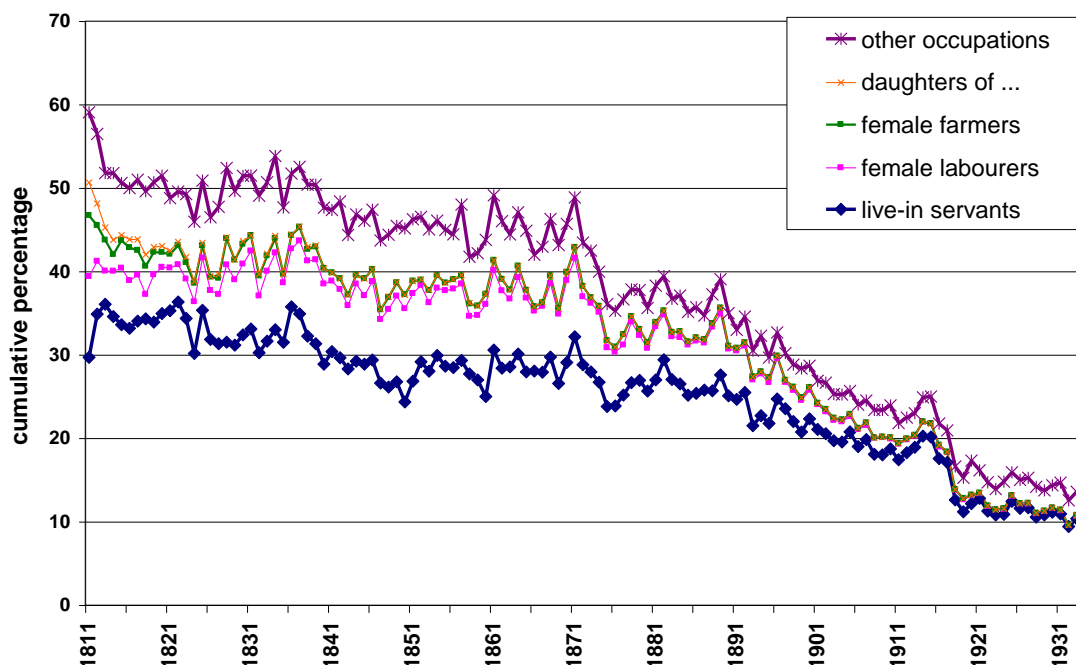


Graph 4 presents figures on the development of the number of brides (including widows) in marriage certificates, that were described as maids (so again farm maids and other domestics are mixed up) in the total Dutch province of Groningen.⁸ The share of brides stated to have been live-in servant slowly but continuously decreased from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards. Before 1840 usually more than 30% of the brides had been live-in servant, afterwards it was nearly always less, dropping to about 20% around 1900, to sharply decrease during the First World War (in which the Netherlands were not involved), to become a little more than 10% in the twenties of the twentieth century. The graph shows also clearly that every year servants formed the majority of the brides having an occupation.

Unfortunately, there are some problems with these figures. At the moment of marriage most maids had stopped working as live-in servant as marriages were often conveniently concluded in May when the annual contracts ended. In a previous paper (Paping 2012) I showed, that the marriage registers showed heavy clustering effects of bridal occupations, the chance to have an occupation registered was strongly related to the registration of an occupation of the previous bride in the marriage register. Some civil servants were very much inclined to mention an occupation, while others seem to have been very reluctant. Of course they had a lot of decision room as most maids really had stopped working (at least as a servant) at the marriage date. Before 1860, these clustering effects were relatively small, and might be attributed to live-in servants marrying usually shortly after each other in the same period, while brides from a farmer or middle class background – often without occupation – married more spread over the year. However, for the periods 1886 /1910 and 1911/1934 clustering effects became really very high, suggesting a very substantial under registration of occupations of brides, presumably because occupations of women increasingly did not fit into the societal views of a part of the civil servants.

⁸ In the future I want to restrict the data to the countryside.

Graph 4: Occupations of brides in marriage certificates in the province of Groningen (incl. city), 1811-1934 (N =244,226)



It was also possible to test the meaning of occupations in marriage records in a different way, by investigating the occupations in marriage certificates of girls who we know for sure to have been a maid on a farm earlier in life. Using the wage registration on live-in servants of the Nieuw-Scheemda farm of Jannes Van Cingel and Grietje Meihuizen over the period 1869-1901, it was possible to identify 44 girls who also married (2 others died unmarried).⁹ At their marriage date 20 of them were reported to be live-in servants (45%), 6 were called female labourers (14%) and a huge 18 were stated to have been without occupation (41%). Of course it is possible that some stopped working completely some time before their marriage – in accordance with our falling share of living-servants under deceased unmarried women after the age of 23 (graph 3) – but that this had happened in 41% of the cases is difficult to believe.

For some girls there are strong indications that being “without occupation” was a rather misleading description of their previous economic activities, as they had been working for Van Cingel until shortly before their marriage. Grietje B. (born 1880) for instance left the farm as a maid 15 September 1900, to bear a bastard child 23 October, having no occupation. Shortly afterwards she married on 19 January 1901, again having no occupation. Anna D. (born 1875) was hired May 1893, but did not show up, or left after a few months. On 21 December 1893 she married having no occupation. Trijntje K. (born 1872) left the farm in October 1897, to marry without an occupation on 4 November 1897 and to deliver a child on 21 December 1897. An interesting case is also Zwaantje W. (born 1840) who worked for Van Cingel from

⁹ Farm account Van Cingel in private possession; copy of the original by the author.

May 1872 to May 1873, but was nevertheless called female labourer when she married 1 May 1873. The numbers are very small, but interesting is that this sample also shows an increasing tendency to enlist former live-in servants as being without occupation at their marriage date in the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

The conclusion might be that the heavy fall in live-in servants showing up at the end of the nineteenth century in the Dutch marriage and death records might be overstated, as civil servants became increasingly less inclined to register female occupations. However, table 1 is based on counting of population registers and in that case it is difficult to miss live-in servants, because they were explicitly mentioned that way, as not living with their parental family at the moment of the census. According to these figures the number of farm maids also fell considerably around 1900, but less than of farmhands. This is in line with a few farm accounts on live-in servants hired, in which originally 4-6 servants were mentioned each year, but which ended in the first decennia of the twentieth century with only one maid being employed year after year.

If we do the same procedure for farm maids as we did for farmhands for the year 1829 (table 3) assuming that by the age of 16 all potential girls have already entered farm service, then more than half the girls aged between 12 and 15 were already maid, suggesting an average starting date already before their fourteenth anniversary. This by the way suggests that the death certificates also seriously underestimate the share of very young girls working as farm servants.¹¹ The figures in table 3 show that in the second half of the nineteenth century in first instance it was especially the number of young farm maids below the age of 16 that diminished. However, after 1900 the same development took place as for the farmhands, with an increase in the share of maids aged 15 or young to nearly a quarter. This tendency is also reflected in the development of the average age of farm servants found in our sample of municipalities used partly in table 1 to 3. The average age of farmhands fell strongest from 22.4 year in 1869, to 20.4 year in 1889 and 18.7 year in 1909. For farm maids the fall was slightly less from 20.5 year in 1869, to 20.1 year in 1889 and 18.6 year in 1909 (Collenteur & Paping 1997).¹² In contrast with their brothers the girls above 16 who stopped on the farm did not show up in the parental home to a large extent around 1909, but might have left to the rapidly increasing cities, perhaps to become a domestic over there. As mentioned, the Netherlands counted some 200,000 unmarried girls active as domestic according to the occupational census in 1909.

¹⁰ Period 1872-79 30% (n=10); 1880-89 31% (n=16); 1890-99 50% (n=10); 1900-1906 67% (n=6).

¹¹ Rather surprisingly, Bras 2002: 73-75 calculates for Zeeland maids for a slightly later period a median age of leaving home of 18 to 20 year. The difference seems to be related to the use of the Dutch population-registers. Children were only registered as leaving home if they really left the municipality. Consequently, at the time of a census, numerous teenage children proved to be living outside the parental home, although this change wasn't previously registered in the municipal records. We only looked at the situation after the date of the census when all these mistakes were solved, and a lot of young girls are actually reported as maids.

¹² Of course this had also to do with the falling ages at marriages. However, these two developments were in some way interrelated: the longing for independence from masters and parents can have promoted younger marriages.

5. Social background of farm servants

Being a live-in servant must have been an ordinary stage in the lifecycle of people from the labouring and lower middle class already for centuries in the coastal parts of the Netherland. Originally this phase often ended with a marriage. Sometimes the live-in servants returned to the parental home for short periods, because of illness, discharge or problems at home. In theory the annual contracts ended all in May making it possible to stay away from the parental home forever, with as the only exception the holiday week in May. A lot of lower class families really had to get rid of their children as soon as possible, children were expensive to feed, and it was very difficult to make their labour productive. So, in Groningen in the nineteenth century it was indeed economically attractive that children of farm labourers became live-in servants shortly after the primary school. Table 4 shows the popularity of lifecycle servant system for labourer families in the first half of the nineteenth century regarding the employment of sons. However, the share is considerably lower than might be expected with 46%, numerous of the dying labourers' sons between the age of 15 and 35 being reported as without occupation, and even more than a quarter working in different occupations in economics and services (partly as live-in apprentice) and also quite often as unspecified labourer, either in agriculture or elsewhere.

Table 4: Share of unmarried men aged 15-35 dying as a live-in farmhand from different social groups (percentage of all unmarried children dying with a certain parental social background).

	1811/1840	1841/1870	1871/1900	1901/1930
Labourers	46%	41%	31%	9%
Farmers	13%	7%	5%	3%
Employers/self-employed*	12%	7%	4%	1%
Other occupations	12%	5%	4%	1%
Unknown	16%	16%	12%	4%
Total	21%	20%	15%	4%
N (farmhands)	1,049	1,355	861	167
N (children dying)	4,918	6,768	5,800	4,023

*: in industry and economic services.

Clearly, there must have been a lot of room for different choices even within poor labourer households, although they will have been influenced by personal circumstances such as the need for income, related to other sources of revenue and the burden of other children. For younger children working decisions were made by the parents, though older children could decide for themselves. However, it might have been difficult for them to change the direction their parents had chosen for them earlier in life. In the farm accounts of Glas in Loppersum the contracts of the youngest servants were negotiated by their parents. Their wage was also handed over to them. Only if a servant had a written note of his or her parents, he or she was allowed to collect the money. After about the age of 18 the children, however, acted independently, receiving and spending their wage themselves, although legally they

still fell for some years under the supervision of the parents till well into their twenties, unless they married.¹³

Looking at the occupational career of sons there were three different possibilities:¹⁴ 1. Entering the lifecycle farm servant system, which meant normally ending up as an unskilled farm labourer; 2. Trying to start a different job as for instance an apprentice of a craftsman and learn the skill by on-the-job training. These positions were less well paid for teenagers, so they meant an important financial investment (Paping 2014). The advantage was that in this way a significantly social position as a petty artisan could be obtained in the end; 3. Becoming a non-resident farm labourer, usually staying in the parental home. On the one hand this meant more freedom, high wages during peak times in agriculture, and gave the opportunity for other activities creating future prospects (for instance doing some trade). On the other hand it was difficult for this group to find work the whole year through. Clearly, what employment was chosen during the teenage years was of immense importance for the future of at least the boys.

Table 5: Employment of deceased sons of labourers aged 15-35 according to the death records

	1811/1840	1841/1870	1871/1900	1901/1930
Farmhands	46%	41%	31%	9%
Labourer	10%	20%	25%	43%
Apprentice, employer or self-employed in industry and economic services	11%	9%	9%	14%
Farmers	0%	0%	0%	1%
Soldiers	5%	2%	4%	0%
Other occupations	3%	4%	7%	9%
Without occupation	23%	23%	24%	23%
N	1,016	2,018	1,740	1,214

*: in industry and economic services.

Table 5 perfectly shows what happened in the second half of the nineteenth century. There was a continuous rise of the share of unmarried labourer's sons becoming non-resident labourer instead of live-in farmhand. However, the real breakthrough came again at the turn of the century, after which farmhand became suddenly a quite unimportant occupation, while non-resident labourers took in their former position as main occupation of unmarried labourers' sons. Also, interesting is the rise in usually socially better positions in industry and services, and also of farmers after 1900 – leaving out soldiers – from 13-14% in 1811/1870, to 16% in 1871/1900 and 24% in 1901/1930. This is clearly a sign of increasing upward social mobility for the Groningen labouring class.

Table 4 makes clear that only a limited part of the children of other social groups became farmhand. In the period 1811/1840 this still happened quite frequently, with more than 10% of the deceased sons of all groups farmers, artisans

¹³ Farm account Glas in private possession; copy of the original by the author.

¹⁴ Engelen (2002): 459-460, suggests that sending out children as servants was not necessarily a rational and conscious choice, but could also be a tradition. However, if such a tradition existed there was in practise in Groningen so much room to diverge from it, that it can have played only a minor role in the actual employment decisions that were made.

and shopkeepers and other occupations in industry and services being occupied as a farmhand. In the next century this completely changed, with only very few (1-3%) of the deceased unmarried sons of each group ending up as farmhand. How dramatic this fall seems, it was quite in line with what happened for the sons of labourers, who also largely moved to the occupation of non-resident labourer as we have seen.

Table 6: Parental social background of live-in farmhands dying between 15 and 35 in the Groningen countryside (percentage of total farm servants dying).

	1811/1840	1841/1870	1871/1900	1901/1930
Labourers	71%	82%	84%	81%
Farmers	12%	7%	6%	11%
Employers/self-employed*	14%	9%	8%	5%
Other occupations	3%	1%	2%	2%
N	668	1,020	642	129

*: in industry and economic services.

In the nineteenth century, an increasing part of the farmhands was descending from labourer families (table 6). However the rise was mostly happening between 1811/1840 and 1841/1870. From 1840 onwards always more than 80% of the dying farmhands were children of labourers. Starting an (unattractive) career as farmhand became especially increasingly unpopular for the children of craftsmen and other small businesses, which might be a sign of a larger distance between these lower middle class groups and the usually poorer labourers. Because artisans usually could afford it, they rather did not send their sons to a farm, as they knew that in the end the only prospect was to become a farm labourer.

Table 7: Parental social background of unmarried labourers dying between 15 and 35 in the Groningen countryside (percentage of total unmarried labourers dying).

	1811/1840	1841/1870	1871/1900	1901/1930
Labourers	73%	84%	85%	83%
Farmers	13%	6%	3%	5%
Employers/self-employed*	10%	9%	9%	6%
Other occupations	4%	1%	2%	5%
N	140	481	507	640

*: in industry and economic services.

It was already mentioned that the fall in farmhands was accompanied by a near equal rise in labourers. In that respect it does not come as a surprise that the social background of those between 15 and 35 dying as labourers was divided exactly in the same way as the farmhands (table 7). Even the developments were largely the same, with as an only exception the rising suddenly share early twentieth century of farmhands that were sons of farmers, however, this seems like a statistical artefact as the number of farmhands was by then very small.

Though, there are in general a lot of similarities between farmhands and maids, there are also some striking gender differences, mainly having to do with both the limited alternative labour possibilities for girls next to becoming a live-in maid, and the low quality of the registration of female occupations. Table 8 shows that in the first half of the nineteenth century nearly half the deceased daughters of labourer families was registered as live-in servant, working either on a farm or in other

households. However, nearly just as much girls did not have any occupation according to the death certificates.

Table 8: Employment of daughters of labourers aged 15-35 according to the death records

	1811/1840	1841/1870	1871/1900	1901/1930
Maid	47%	44%	36%	20%
Labourer	7%	10%	7%	1%
Other occupations	4%	4%	6%	4%
Without occupation	41%	41%	51%	74%
N	766	1,488	1,116	850

*: in industry and economic services.

It is hard to believe that in these for them economically still rather difficult period (Paping 1995), 40% of the unmarried female children of the relatively poor labouring families did not perform any substantial economic labour during their most productive years, in which they often did not have much other obligations. In contrast with the labourers' sons, the decline in the share of maids was not accompanied by a rise in the importance of other occupations. Even the opposite was the case, with the share of female labourers falling from 10% in 1841/1870 to a negligible 1% in 1901/1930. The suggestion is that those increasing number of unmarried daughters staying at their parental home or also often living elsewhere (table 3) usually did not have any source of revenue. The problem is that this fall in occupations in table 8 can be attributed to two developments working in the same direction around 1900. Firstly, there was a rising under registration of female labour after 1885, as we have concluded analysing occupations of brides. Secondly, females presumably really became less active on the labour market, due to the rise of the male bread-winner model. Unfortunately, at the moment it is difficult to disentangle both effects without further micro research (See also Van Nederveen Meerkerk & Paping 2014).

Table 9: Parental social background of live-in maids dying between 15 and 35 in the Groningen countryside (percentage of total maids dying).

	1811/1840	1841/1870	1871/1900	1901/1930
Labourers	63%	77%	74%	64%
Farmers	11%	6%	3%	5%
Employers/self-employed*	5%	2%	5%	13%
Other occupations	21%	15%	18%	19%
N	568	842	547	266

*: in industry and economic services.

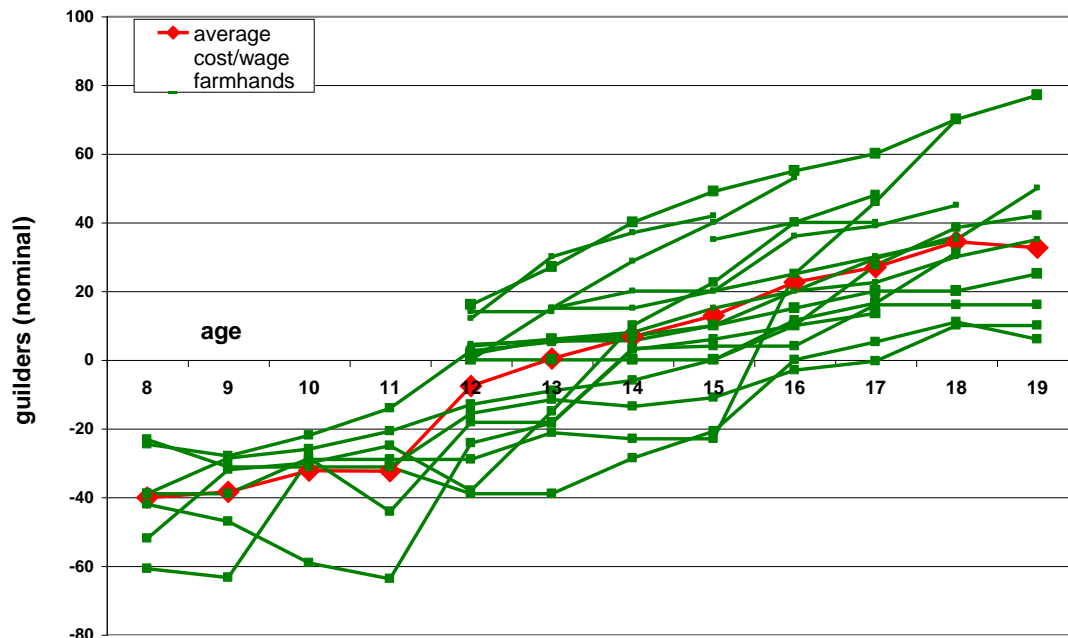
Looking at the parental background of those girls who were surely registered as dying as live-in servant, again the similarities with the farmhands are large. In the period 1811/1840 still quite a lot of maids had a background differing from unskilled labour. The large share of those descending from other occupations might seem to be a surprise. However, this rest category consisted to a considerable extent of heads of households with a rather personal occupation that could only be fulfilled by the head itself, and didn't offer a lot of possibilities for daughters to help, for instance semi-skilled factory workers, millers' hands, schoolmasters and so on. For the poorest of these households letting their daughters become a maid was an attractive choice,

comparable to that of the labourer households. Presumably, quite a lot of these girls became servant in households outside agriculture. The same can apply as an explanation for the relatively high share of maids originating from employers and self-employed in industry and economic services. It will have been the rise in the number of live-in servant positions outside agriculture that might have caused the share of maids coming from labourer families to fall after 1900. However, it seems that it were just the lower middle class groups that withdrew from positions of maids – by that time still mainly farm maids – in the second half the nineteenth century as is suggested by the figures in table 9.

6. Development of wages

The popularity of the live-in servant system had a lot to do with the high costs of children and the difficulties to use their earning capacity effectively in a lot of families. However, it is not easy to make exact calculations of the (net) economic costs of children. Of course, it is clear that the costs or benefits of children depend for a considerable amount on their age. Presumably the older they are, the more they cost, however also the more they can earn. A proxy of these costs and benefits for the eighteenth and nineteenth century can be made using data of poor-relief boards, we collected for a few villages and the city of Appingedam¹⁵ (see for more details Paping 2014).

Graph 5: Age-dependent annual wages and maintenance costs (excluding clothing) of poor (future) farmhands born 1754/1831 in nominal guilders



According to the sample presented in graph 5, it was only at the age of 13 that a farmhand earned enough to pay with his labour for his food and shelter (board and

¹⁵ Among others: Groningen Archives, NH gemeente Appingedam, inv.nr. 41-46.

lodging). For younger boys the poor relief board had to pay on average quite substantial sums to take care of them, although there were boys who already earned quite decent annual wages when they were 12.¹⁶ In general, the differences in earning between boys of the same age, doing the same work is striking. Only very partly, these differences are the effect of general changes in the wage and price level, it were personal capabilities, including physical strength that determined the wage level in individual cases. These characteristics will also have caused the setbacks in wage we notice for some in the graph, and that were sometimes definitely related to periods of illness reported in the poor relief accounts.

That boys on average by 13 had enough labour power to pay for their own food and shelter does not mean that they were independent, as quite a lot of other costs still had to be paid by the parental households, for instance clothing, shoes and small expenses on fairs. It was presumably only around the age of 15 that farmhands could really take care of themselves, and shortly afterwards these boys started to withdraw from poor relief, so they could keep their high salaries. Consequently, the average wages reported in graph 5 are increasingly underestimating the real average wage of all farmhands from age 16 and older.

For a later period we analysed the wages of farm servants hired by farmer Glas in Loppersum in the period 1880-1903. For 44 farmhands both the age as well as the wage are given in the account. Boys aged 14 earned a wage which was 26% of the wage of adult farmhands of 20 and older ($R^2=0,95$): 37 guilders compared with 141 guilders yearly. This confirms our results from graph 5 that wages of farm servants were indeed highly depending on their age, as being in general a very good proxy for the ability to perform their often physically very demanding tasks on the farm.

An important point is that male orphans under the poor relief board earned considerably higher wages at a farm than when they were placed with artisans like tailors and shoemakers (Paping 2014). This situation is also suggested by official statistics.¹⁷ For parents and also for the poor-relief board it was the choice whether or not to invest into the skills or human capital of the children. If you let boys become a live-in hand of an artisan, they could be a source of costs till a much older age. However, as already remarked the social position of small artisans was in general better than of unskilled labourers (Paping 2010). So the choice of parents to let their son become the (low-paid) hand of an artisan and learn in this way the necessary skills to become an independent artisan after marriage himself, must definitely have had an investment character.

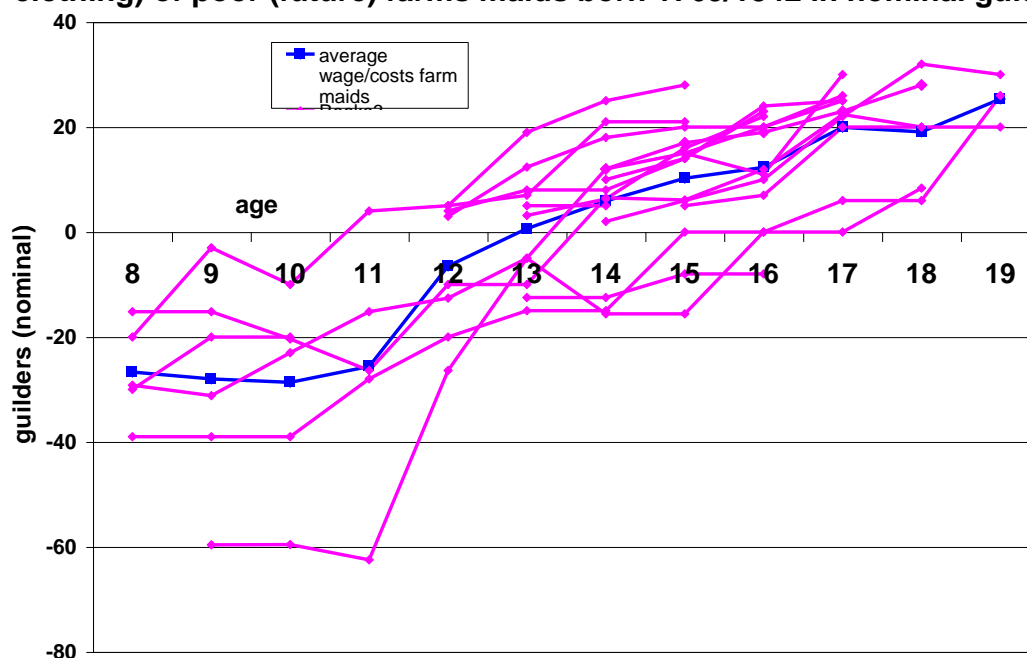
Graph 6 presents the development of the wages of a few farm maids depending on poor relief. The conclusions are exactly the same as for the farmhands. On average around 13 girls were able to work hard enough to pay their own food and shelter, though quite a lot of girls were already able to do that at age 12, while some other girls were only earning enough at age 15, 16 or even later. Although there are some methodological difficulties with this comparison – due to most of the best paid boys and girls disappearing from the sample as already described – the annual salaries

¹⁶ The age in the text and the graph relates to the average age in the year when they were occupied in service. So age 12 means that they were on average between 12,0 and 12,99 in that year.

¹⁷ Paping (1995) 320: if we subtract the value of board and lodging; average annual wages for live-in mates of tailors, shoemakers, bakers, cartwrights and coopers were around 1819 between 33 (shoemakers) and 63 (coopers) guilders, and around 1856 between 30 (tailors) and 63 (coopers) guilders. Average annual wages paid to live-in farmhands around 1819 were 95-97 guilders, and still 65-66 guilders around 1856.

of farm maids above the age of 13 seem to have been consistently lower than that of farmhands.

Graph 6: Age dependent annual wages and maintenance costs (excluding clothing) of poor (future) farms maids born 1769/1842 in nominal guilders



The sample of 44 girls working for the Glas-farm in Loppersum in the period 1880-1903 show that age-dependent wage-differences for girls were less than for boys, with 14-year olds earning 40% of the wage of a grown-up maid of 20 or older ($R^2=0,90$): 33 guilders compared with 84 guilders yearly. So girls aged around 14 had already a relatively high part of their potential earning capacity, compared to boys of the same age, although the last ones earned a few guilders more. This seems to suggest that farm maids of 14 were already more mature than farmhands of the same age.

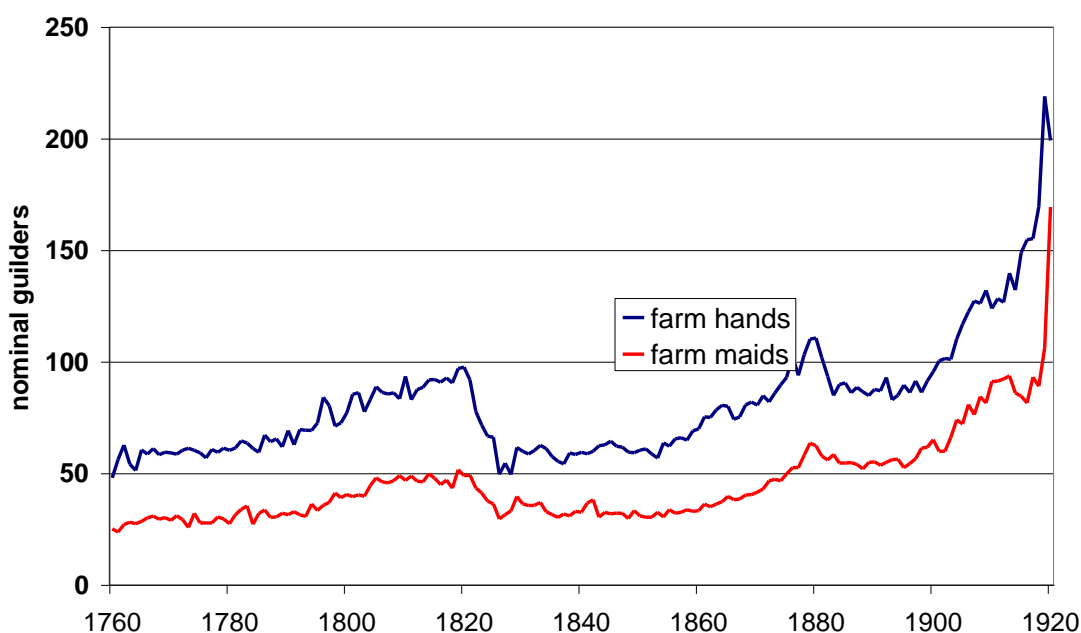
In graph 7 the average nominal annual wages of farmhands and farm maids is pictured for the long period 1760-1920.¹⁸ Farmhands earned in the eighteenth century more than double the wage of maids. With rising prices in the last decades of the eighteenth century and also during the French period, wages of farm servants increased significantly. However, the first agricultural depression of the nineteenth century (1819-1835) resulted in wages returning to their eighteenth century level. After 1800 the wages of maids developed relatively favourable, rising till about 60% of the wage of farmhands. This last figure reflects the normal wage difference between male and female non-resident labourers in Groningen. Most of the years, however, maids earned relatively less than non-resident female labourers compared to farmhands and non-resident male labourers, because they had free board and lodging¹⁹ and a job the whole year through, while non-resident female labourers

¹⁸ Collenteur & Paping (1997): figures being based on several dozens of farm accounts. For most of the years some 20 to 45 wages are known for each group.

¹⁹ Two farm accounts of 1794-1829 and 1854 (Paping 1995: 405-406) state both that farmers valued board and lodging at 100 guilders a year for a farm servant, which makes clear that food and a shelter

probably could only find paid work for less than half of the days of a year, as opposed to male labourers who could easily find work for eight months or more (Van Nederveen Meerkerk & Paping 2014). The rise in wages might have something to do with falling ages at marriages causing a fall in supply and a rising demand for domestic help because of the increasing wealth of farmers till 1820.

Graph 7. Annual nominal wages of live-in servants in the Groningen countryside



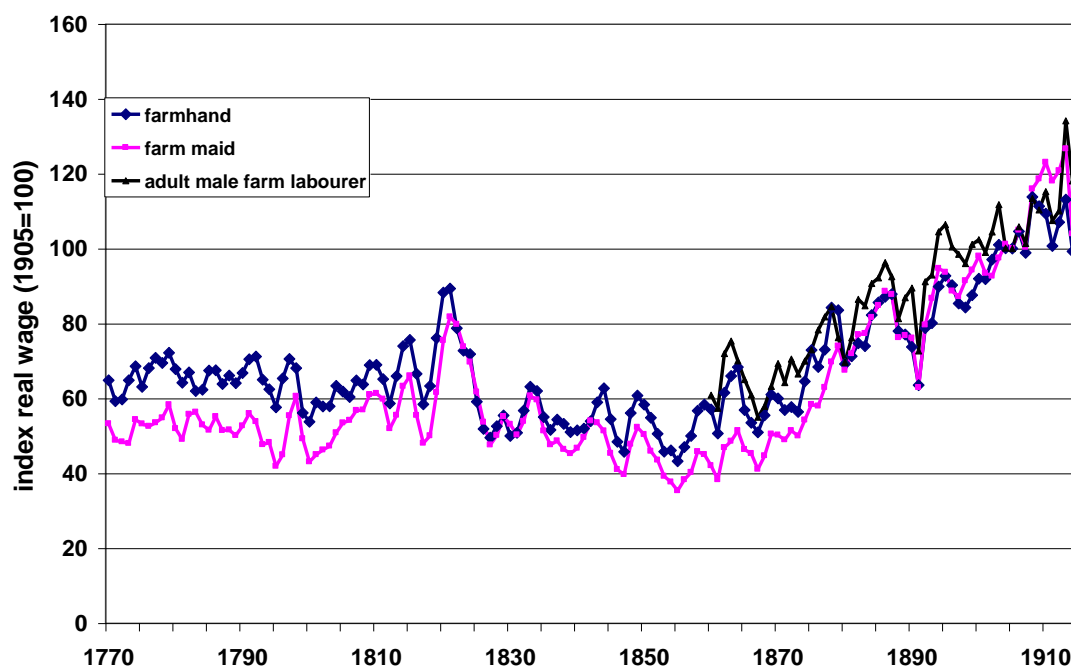
Between 1830 and 1865 the wage of maids fell again to 45% of the wage of farmhands. Around 1850 wages of first the farmhands and some years later also the wages of farm maids began to rise again, first slowly, and in the middle of the sixties even quite fast, to reach a peak in the years 1878-1880. While the wages of farm servants were concluded nearly half a year in advance, they reacted with some delay on the crisis. As was the case in the period 1819-1821, farmers had to pay high wages, while being confronted with low agricultural prices. In contrast with the first crisis, however, the wages of farm servants did not decrease a lot during the second agricultural crisis. Especially the wages of maids remained at a much higher level than in the prosperous period before 1875. The wage differential with the farmhands diminished between 1865 and 1915, with maids ending up owing on average 70% of a males wage.

Around 1895 when agricultural prices again began to rise and partly also because of rising productivity thanks to increasing row cultivation, new machinery (steam threshing machines) and widespread use of better fertilisers improving the yields per hectare, agriculture in Groningen started to flourish once more. Bread grains like wheat and rye, but also sugar-beets became more important in these last decades of the nineteenth century at the expense of potential fodder like oats, barley

made up the largest part of the income of farm servants, especially of the maids whose money wage was considerably lower.

and cole-seed (Priester 1991: 302). Wages of male and female live-in farm servants nearly immediately reacted on the price rise with a fast increase, which continued well into World War I. After the end of World War I wages of farmhands began to decrease (not in graph 1), while the wages of maids began to rise quickly. The nominal wage series shows indisputably that wages reacted on economic forces, and one can not say that a traditional wage level for farm servants existed. On the contrary, wages of farm servants were quite volatile. However, if we want to know what these wages meant for the people who earned them, it is better to take a look at real wages (graph 8).

Graph 8. Real wages of live-in farm servants and non-resident adult male farm labourers in the Groningen countryside 1770-1915



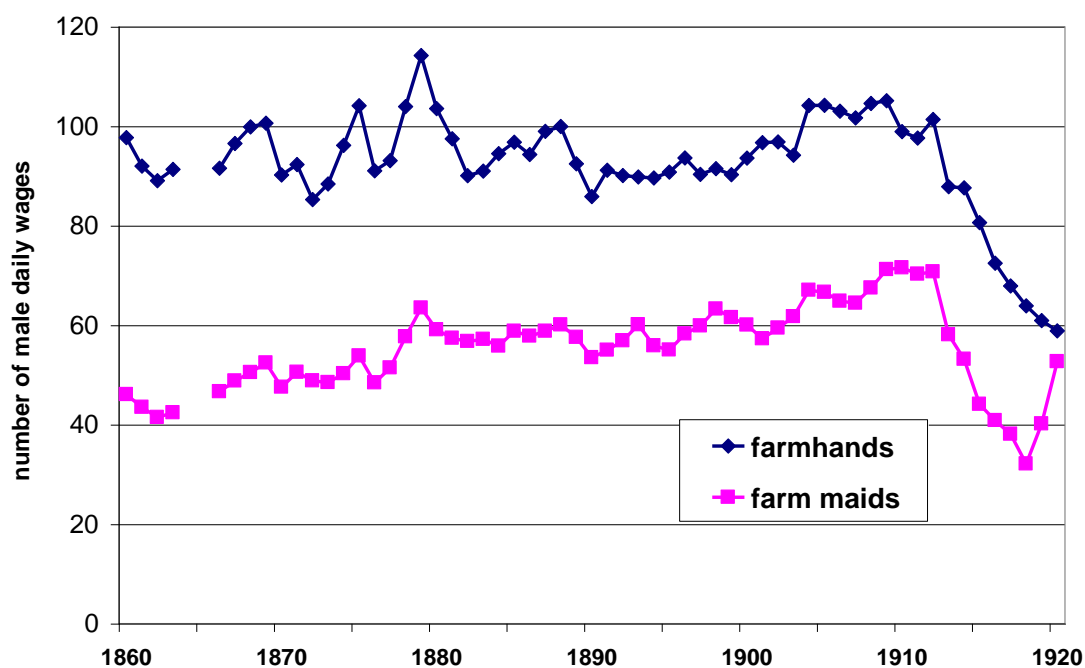
Because the nominal wages of farm servants reacted quite heavily on agricultural prices, one could suggest there was some kind of automatic price-correction. If we take a long term view at the development of real wages as is done in graph 2, it becomes clear that real wages, although relatively stable, showed a slow downward tendency in the period 1770-1860.²⁰ After 1860 the purchasing power of farm servants increased continuously. In the second half of the nineteenth century, it nearly doubled. From 1860 onwards, we also have data on the average daily wage of adult labourers working regularly or semi-regularly on farms. These wages show in general the same tendency as the wages of the servants, although the rise was a little bit less. Clearly, the economic welfare of the class of farm labourers improved considerably during this period. Farm labourers and their families were no longer living on the edge of subsistence – if they ever had been – and new possibilities opened up for them.

²⁰ For the deflator see: Collenteur & Paping (1997): 119. The weights in this deflator, however, reflect the consumption of families rather than expenditures of young adults having board and lodging for free.

7. The disappearance of the lifecycle servant system

Both the nominal and real wages of farm servants rose after 1860, nevertheless, the number of farm servants was falling. Using a simple demand-supply market model, it can be concluded that what was taking place was a fall in supply causing a rise in prices. In Paping (2005) it is calculated that a fall in the potential supply of sons and daughters of labourer and other lower class families might partly explain the slow decrease in farm servants between 1870 and 1890, however, such developments can in no way explain the dramatic fall in live-in farm personnel after 1890, as the potential number of potential farm servants from labourer households was rising again. For farmhands we showed that this was caused by a rapid shift of labourers' sons to the occupation of non-resident labourer, while – not completely undisputed – sources suggest that labourers daughters increasingly remained unemployed. The only conclusion can be that the position of farm servant became very unattractive for juveniles. Farmers began to have difficulties to hire farmhands and farm maids and the scarcity in supply of live-in personnel resulted in a considerable upward pressure on the wages of live-in farm personnel.

Graph 9. Annual wages of Groningen live-in farm personnel expressed in daily wages of non-resident adult male labourers



Graph 9, shows that not only the real wages of farm servants were rising considerably from 1860 onwards (graph 8), but they also increased a little more than the wages of adult non-resident male labourers, who constituted the largest part of the agricultural labour force in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was especially the case for farm maids, which number declined far less than that of the farmhands in this period. The figures clearly indicate that to work as a non-resident labourer did not become financially relatively more attractive. The first effect of the higher wages was that owners of small and medium farms started to stop hiring expensive live-in personnel. On these small and medium farms they used to employ only one to three

servants who were most of the time an integral part of the family, for example they ate together with the farmer family at the same dish, restricting both the privacy of the farmer family and its personnel.

Only the large farmers – for which a lot of farm accounts are available – in first instance were still prepared to pay the high wages, as they could also afford it (Collenteur & Paping 1997). On these farms, the three to seven farm servants were strictly separated from the farmer family in Groningen, having a special room where they could eat and stay in the evening. Here, the servants were at first less seen as a hindrance to privacy than on the smaller farms (compare Devine 1984: 2). Also large farmers could not easily do completely without live-in personnel, they were necessary, not only for domestic work in the big farm-houses, but also to take care of the animals.

However, after 1910 the situation completely changed when wages of both farmhands and maids fell considerably compared to non-resident farm wages. It was from this period onwards, that the larger farmers also did not want to hire live-in servants anymore. Although the personnel was living separately in a different part of the house, both the burden and the responsibility for these juveniles of a lower social class increasingly did not fit with their concept of family life as the large farmers began to have around the First World War. After 1914 they managed to organise their farms in such a way that they could do without live-in farmhands and some of the maids. The richest farmers kept one or sometimes two maids only for domestic work to help the wife and daughters to keep the house clean and to take care of the children. These farm maids had turned into real domestics, who disliked to milk cows or do other farm work. The tasks of the farmhands were taken over by young labourers living still at the parental home, a change made easier by the spread of bikes. Also demand for maids went down, however, after the First World War this demand again resumed, because of the need for domestic personnel of well-to-do farmers.

So, the final blow to the live-in farm servants system was in this way given by the large Groningen farmers whom around World War I nearly completely changed from resident to non-resident workers, what better fitted in what The Netherlands is called “the Bourgeois Civilisation Offensive”, the idea of the private family household found rising popularity. Live-in farm servants can be seen as a hindrance for private family life of the farmers (Devine 1984: 2). However, the first blow to the lifecycle servant system was already given in the last decades of the nineteenth century by the labourer families who clearly preferred to keep their older children at home, to work as non-resident farm labourers.

As stated previously, it wasn't economically attractive for labourer families, but also for families with only small businesses in industry and services to keep their children at home. There was not much economic work for these children in the parental household, and it was difficult to get steady jobs for these adolescents. With the help of a few very detailed farm accounts from Nieuw-Scheemda the last point can be illustrated (table 6). Except for Hindrik Snitjer not one of the children aged 14 to 16 was able to find paid work on a farm for more than half a year. Under the age of 14 these possibilities were even smaller. Adolescent daughters could earn wages only 50 to 90 days a year, which made it very attractive for parents to send their daughters away to work as a live-in domestic. In total, daughters living at home were not able to earn as much as a maid in money, and a maid also received board and lodging extra.²¹

²¹ Schellekens 1993: 207-210, also concludes that daughters contrary to sons, remaining at home after the age of 15 were likely to be a burden for their parents.

The conclusion seems to be clear: keeping children at home was a very expensive strategy even in the last decades of the nineteenth century, even though more labour opportunities for adolescent children living with their parents came about.

Table 6. Annual paid working days of labourer's sons and daughters living with their parents, Nieuw-Scheemda 1870-1900.

SONS	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Hindrik Snitjer	?	?	?	?	?	?	282	293	294
Koert Snitjer	?	?	?	?	23	31	Farmhand at 14		
Harm Snitjer	0	0	3	20	?	?	Farmhand later on		
Koert Greven	0	0	10	110	88	Farmhand at 13			
Harm Greven	3	1	0	44	29	52	144	36	*
Thomas Prak	9	8	15	5	57	89	149	143	110* *
Stinus Bos	?	?	?	0	0	49	61	118	102
DAUGHTERS									
Trientje Apoteker	0	1	0	0	51	Maid at 13			
Engeltje Apoteker	0	0	3	0	57	Maid at 13			
Aaltje Snitjer	?	?	?	?	?	39	86	Maid at 16	
Maria Prak	0	0	0	9	29	36	50	59	64

Source: Paping (2004b). NB: * Harm Greven farmhand at 16, ** Thomas Prak farmhand at 17.

If keeping their adolescent children at home was such a precious strategy, why did labourer families started to chose for such strategy more and more during the second half of the nineteenth century? A possible explanation could be that the parents were able to get hold of the earnings of their older children when they remained at home. In 1906 it is stated in a governmental report that “Families are delaying the moment at which the children leave the parental home. Girls, too, often engage in casual labour and pay board and lodging or contribute their entire wages. This may be explained by a growing desire for freedom” (Paping 2004a). The working hours of servants were extremely long, they even had to work part of the Sunday, and in the house they fell completely under the supervision of the master, so their freedom was indeed very low, even compared to children remaining with their parents.

Live-in servants of 18 and older mostly had been quite independent of their parental family and kept their wage for their own use to spend on cloths, drinks and other expenses at festivities, jewels, and partly also savings, so the parents did not profit a lot from them. Although parents were legally entitled to their children wages until about the age of 21, they in practise let them keep the money if children were still younger. On the other hand, most of the older children staying at home, had problems finding enough wage work to even pay for their own food, which made their stay at home less advantageous for the family. In the Groningen clay soil area outside the agricultural sector there were only very few job opportunities for these young people. However, with the higher real wages at the end of the nineteenth century it was easier to earn enough with irregular agricultural work to make staying at home possible and attractive for the parents.

A part of the explanation for the growing reluctance of children of labourers to become live-in farm personnel has to be sought in an absolute preference for staying at the parental home. It is possible that this preference developed in the slipstream of

the so-called “Bourgeois Civilisation Offensive” attaching great value to family life, which was of course completely distorted when children from 13 and older were sent away to live and work elsewhere. Also a tendency to greater freedom can be discerned under the juveniles themselves. In the year 1908 the 18 year old maid Janke Westra did not want to work for farmer Glas anymore, because she didn't want to ask him beforehand each time she wanted to come home after 10 o'clock. This seems especially to have been a problem for the older servants, who wanted more freedom than they got under the supervision of the farmer. In this respect it is not strange that the average age of both farmhands and farm maids was falling so rapidly in the last part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, according to several of our sources. In 1906 it is stated in an agricultural report that “One is living for a longer period with their parents, and also the girls are going to work as irregular labourers and are paying board or they hand over their wage completely. A desire for freedom is the reason” (*Algemeen* 1908: 64).

It can not be ruled out that labourer families always had preferred to keep their children at home, though they could not to afford such strategy before the last decades of the nineteenth century. By then, the substantial rise in real wages and so in purchasing power made it economically possible for more lower class parents to keep their children at home. Only the poorest families still had to send their children away as live-in farm servants. There was another reason that this was despite the costs an attractive strategy, as research shows that the future prospects of children staying at home were far better than of those children who became live-in servant, for every social group (Paping 2004a).²² The reason might be that staying at home made it easier to acquire a broader job experience than a live-in farm servant could with its rather one-sided activities. Daughters staying at home and not becoming a live-in servant were also on average marrying grooms of a higher social status than maids, taking into account only those who stayed in the province of Groningen.

Although it isn't completely clear if the bad prospects of live-in servants were known beforehand inside the families, the great enthusiasm for keeping the children at home when this became economically feasible points at that direction. This suggests that the shift from live-in servant to searching work while remaining in the parental home was an investment strategy of lower class families directed at a better future of their children. However, it has to be remarked in this respect that Bras (2002) investigation on Zeeland maids born between 1835 and 1927, however, is less pessimistic on their chances. The chance to marry an unskilled labourer was only slightly higher for these maids, and for girls from labourer families it was even lower than to marry someone of a different social group. For this improvement many of these maids actually had to leave rural Zeeland and migrate to Holland cities with its large and rapidly increasing demand for domestics. This makes the often urban maids studied by Bras, quite difficult to compare to the rural Groningen maids discussed in this paper (Paping 2005). Maybe it was becoming live-in servant in the countryside that was especially diminishing ones social chances from 1850 onwards. It was only by then that a period started in The Netherlands characterized by urbanisation and a decreasing relative importance of the countryside in general and agriculture in particular.

²² Lundh (1999): 75-77, finds similar results for nineteenth century sons and daughters of Swedish "peasants". However, contrary to the Groningen clay soil area, becoming a servant seemed to have increased the chances on upward social mobility for other (landless) social groups in Sweden.

8. Concluding remarks

In the Dutch province of Groningen the family lifecycle system was still nearly intact in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Not only the labourer families, but also quite a few farmer and middle class families contributed children to system, who were usually live-in farm servant between their early teens and their marriage. However, in the course of the nineteenth century less and less children of farmers, artisans and others became live-in farm servant, and only the labourer families kept on supplying numerous children to the system. In the same period, also more of the slightly older unmarried children stepped out of the lifecycle servant system without marrying. Consequently, the share of young teenagers under the live-in personnel was increasing, and their average age was falling. Many older unmarried children of labourers started to work as non-resident labourers, and increasing numbers even never entered service.

Servanthood suddenly was no longer an ordinary stage in the lifecycle of nearly all the children of the farm labourer families and also other lower class families. Clearly, the system deteriorated because more and more of these relatively poor families were no longer inclined to send almost all their adolescent children to other houses for work in the period 1860-1910. As a reaction on this fall in supply of servants, wages of live-in servants in first instance rose relatively, as farmers still wanted their labour on the farms. Presumably, this costly labour strategy – made possible by rising real wages – was motivated by a rising preference for family life and for more freedom for the children, though it was not without costs as they had usually a less secure livelihood and a worse income than live-in servants. In the long run, however, children remaining at home were mostly better off than those becoming a live-in servant, and in this way stepping out of the lifecycle servant system can perhaps even been seen as an investment strategy in the children.

The high wages of the live-in servants first stimulated the smaller farmers to stop hiring live-in personnel. In 1910 it were nearly only large farms who employed live-in personnel. However, around the First World War they also dismissed their farmhands and most of their maids, keeping only a maid for domestic and not for farm work. The last development is possibly connected by a greater desire for privacy of the large farmers. So the first and heaviest blow to the system was given by the labourer families, however, the system was nearly completely swept away a few decades later by decisions of the farmer families. After World War 1 live-in hands became rare in the Groningen agriculture, while the few maids who were still living on the farm, were mainly occupied with domestic work and far less involved in agriculture.

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