

Statute of Laborers, 1351

Representative of the long-term problems of labor shortage caused by the Black Death, the Statute of Laborers was a vain attempt to enforce the Ordinance of Laborers, which had in theory frozen wages at their pre-plague levels. While showing the attitudes of the nobility toward the commoners, this statute also shows the attitudes of the commoners toward the nobility.

Whereas late against the malice of servants, which were idle, and not willing to serve after the pestilence, without taking excessive wages, it was ordained by our lord the king, and by the assent of the prelates, nobles, and other of his council, that such manner of servants, as well men as women, should be bound to serve, receiving salary and wages, accustomed in places where they ought to serve in the twentieth year of the reign of the king that now is, or five or six years before; and that the same servants refusing to serve in such manner should be punished by imprisonment of their bodies, as in the said statute is more plainly contained: whereupon commissions were made to divers people in every county to inquire and punish all them which offend against the same: and now forasmuch as it is given the king to understand in this present parliament, by the petition of the commonalty, that the said servants having no regard to the said ordinance, but to their ease and singular covetise, do withdraw themselves to serve great men and other, unless they have livery and wages to the double or treble of that they were wont to take the said twentieth year, and before, to the great damage of the great men, and impoverishing of all the said commonalty, whereof the said commonalty prayeth remedy: wherefore in the said parliament, by the assent of the said prelates, earls, barons, and other great men, and of the same commonalty there assembled, to refrain the malice of the said servants, be ordained and established the things underwritten:

First, that carters, ploughmen, drivers of the plough, shepherds, swineherds, deies [dairy maids], and all other servants, shall take liveries and wages, accustomed the said twentieth year, or four years before; so that in the country where wheat was wont to be given, they shall take for the bushel ten pence, or wheat at the will of the giver, till it be otherwise ordained. And that they be allowed to serve by a whole year, or by other usual terms, and not by the day; and that none pay in the time of sarcling [hoeing] or hay-making but a penny the day; and a mower of meadows for the acre five pence, or by the day five pence; and reapers of corn in the first week of August two pence, and the second three pence, and so till the end of August, and less in the country where less was wont to be given, without meat or drink, or other courtesy to be demanded, given, or taken; and that such workmen bring openly in their hands to the merchant-towns their instruments, and there shall be hired in a common place and not privy.

Item, that none take for the threshing of a quarter of wheat or rye over 2 d. ob. [2 1/2 d.] and the quarter of barley, beans, pease, and oats, 1 d. ob. if so much were wont to be given; and in the country where it is used to reap by certain sheaves, and to thresh by certain bushels, they shall take no more nor in other manner than was wont the said twentieth year and before; and that the same servants be sworn two times in the year before lords, stewards, bailiffs, and constables of every town, to hold and do these ordinances; and that none of them go out of the town, where he dwelleth in the winter, to serve the summer, if he may serve in the same town, taking as before is said. Saving that the people of the counties of Stafford, Lancaster and Derby, and people of Craven, and of the marches of Wales and Scotland, and other places, may come in time of August, and labor in other counties, and safely return, as they were wont to do before this time: and that those, which refuse to take such oath or to perform that that they be sworn to, or have taken upon them, shall be put in the stocks by the said lords, stewards, bailiffs, and constables of the towns by three days or more, or sent to the next gaol, there to remain, till they will justify themselves. And that stocks be made in every town for such occasion betwixt this and the feast of Pentecost.

Item, that carpenters, masons, and tilers, and other workmen of houses, shall not take by the day for their work, but in manner as they were wont, that is to say: a master carpenter 3 d. and another 2 d.; and master free-stone mason 4 d. and other masons 3 d. and their servants 1 d. ob.; tilers 3 d. and their knaves 1 d. ob.; and other coverers of fern and straw 3 d. and their knaves 1 d. ob.; plasterers and other workers of mudwalls, and their knaves, by the same manner, without meat or drink, 1 s. from Easter to Saint Michael; and from that time less, according to the rate and discretion of the justices, which should be thereto assigned: and that they that make carriage by land or by water, shall take no more for such carriage to be made, than they were wont the said twentieth year, and four years before.

Item, that cordwainers and shoemakers shall not sell boots nor shoes, nor none other thing touching their mystery, in any other manner than they were wont the said twentieth year: item, that goldsmiths, saddlers, horsemen, spurriers, tanners, curriers, tawers of leather, tailors, and other workmen, artificers, and laborers, and all other servants here not specified, shall be sworn before the justices, to do and use their crafts and offices in the manner they were wont to do the said twentieth year, and in time before, without refusing the same because of this ordinance; and if any of the said servants, laborers, workmen, or artificers, after such oath made, come against this ordinance, he shall be punished by fine and ransom, and imprisonment after the discretion of the justices.

Item, that the said stewards, bailiffs, and constables of the said towns, be sworn before the same justices, to inquire diligently by all the good ways they may, of all them that come against this ordinance, and to certify the same justices of their names at all times, when they shall come into the country to make their sessions; so that the same justices on certificate of the same stewards, bailiffs, and constables, of the names of the rebels, shall do them to be attached by their body, to be before the said justices, to answer of such contempts, so that they make fine and ransom to the king, in case they be attainted; and moreover to be commanded to prison, there to remain till they have found surety, to serve, and take, and do tehir work, and to sell things vendible in the manner aforesaid; and in case that any of them come against his oath, and be thereof attainted, he shall have imprisonment of forty days; and if he be another time convict, he shall have imprisonment of a quarter of a year, so that at every time that he offendeth and is convict, he shall have double pain: and that the same justices, at every time that they come [into the country], shall inquire of the said stewards, bailiffs, and constables, if they have made a good and lawful certificate, or any conceal for gift, procurement, or affinity, and punish them by fine and ransom, if they be found guilty: and that the same justices have power to inquire and make due punishment of the said ministers, laborers, workmen, and other servants; and also of hostelers, harbergers [those who provide lodging], and of those that sell victual by retail, or other things here not specified, as well at the suit of the party, as by presentment, and to hear and determine, and put the things in execution by the exigend after the first capias, if need be, and to depute other under them, as many and such as they shall see best for the keeping of the same ordinance; and that they which will sue against such servants, workmen, laborers, [and artificers], for excess taken of them and they be thereof attainted at their suit, they shall have again such excess. And in case that none will sue, to have again such excess, then it shall be levied of the said servants, laborers, workmen, and artificers, and delivered to the collectors of the Quintzime [the tax known as the "Fifteenth"], in alleviation of the towns where such excesses were taken.