

I shall point out below what were the actual effects of this great and sudden scarcity of labour. At present I merely continue the narrative. Parliament was broken up when the plague was raging. The king, however, issued a proclamation, which he addressed to William, the primate, and circulated among the sheriffs of the different counties, in which he directed all officials that no higher than customary wages should be paid, under the penalties of amercement. The king's mandate, however, was universally disobeyed, for the farmers were compelled to leave their crops ungathered, or to comply with the demands of the labourers. When the king found that his proclamation was unavailing, he laid, we are told, heavy penalties on abbots, priors, barons, crown tenants, and those who held land under mesne lords, if they paid more than customary rates. But the labourers remained masters of the situation. Many were said to have been thrown into prison for disobedience; many, to avoid punishment or restraint, fled into forests, where they were occasionally captured. The captives were fined, and obliged to disavow under oath that they would take higher than customary wages for the future. But the expedients were vain, labour remained scarce, and wages, according to all previous experience, excessive.

As soon as Parliament could meet, the proclamation was reduced to the form of a statute, which remained, with the proclamation, a law, till both were formally repealed by 5 Elizabeth, Cap. 4. The statute contained eight clauses:—(1) No person under sixty years of age, whether serf or free, shall decline to undertake farm labour at the wages which had been customary in the king's twentieth year (1347), except they lived by merchandize, were regularly engaged in some mechanical craft, were possessed of private means, or were occupiers of land. The lord was to have the first claim to the labour of his serfs, and those who declined to work for him or for others are to be sent to the common gaol. (2) Imprisonment is decreed against all persons who may quit service before the time which is fixed in their agreements. (3) No other than the old wages are to be given, and the remedy against those who seek to get more is to be sought in the lord's court. (4) Lords of manors paying more than the customary amount are to be liable to treble damages. (5) Artificers are to be liable