

# ‘I think myself honestly decked’: Attitudes to the Clothing of the Rural Poor in Seventeenth-Century England

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**Abstract:** This article explores attitudes to the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth-century England. It begins with an analysis of the representation of rural clothing in country themed ballads, showing how ‘homely’ country clothing was used to construct an image of a contented and industrious rural population. It then considers how such popular literary representations influenced the way that diarists Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn recorded their encounters with the rural poor. The final part of the article looks at attitudes of the rural poor to their own clothing, drawing on evidence from a range of documentary sources as well as the autobiographical writings of Edward Barlow. In contrast to the stereotypical depiction of the rural poor recorded by ballad writers and elite observers, the article will show that for the actual poor clothing could serve both as an expression of the ‘self’ and as a potent marker of social differences and moral and material inferiority.

## Introduction

This article takes as its subject attitudes to the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth-century England. It continues and extends a theme that I introduced in a previous article on the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth-century Sussex. This took what I described as a functional approach to the subject, looking at what poor men and women wore and where they got their clothing from. As I acknowledged, this approach was partly dictated by the difficulties in reconstructing the cultural value of plebeian clothing, or, put another way, identifying what poor men and women thought about their own clothes and the clothes of those around them.<sup>1</sup> The context for my interest in the cultural value of clothing is the recent studies of elite dress in early modern Europe by Susan Vincent, Aileen Ribeiro and Ulinka Rublack in which each author demonstrates the importance of elite clothing to the formation and mediation of social identities.<sup>2</sup> Thus Rublack observes, ‘we can think of it [the act of dressing] as part of the symbolic toolkit through which people could acquire and communicate attitudes towards life and construct visual realities in relation to others.’<sup>3</sup> And Vincent argues that clothing ‘was fundamental to an individual’s experience and creation of self, and mediated his or her relationships with others’.<sup>4</sup> Vincent acknowledges that non-elite clothing was also ‘imbued with meaning’

and ‘important to its wearers’ but points out that its importance ‘is extremely difficult to retrieve for it has left little historical record’.<sup>5</sup> If you restrict your analysis to the rural poor this lack of historical record becomes even more acute. This article therefore approaches its subject from a wider perspective, looking initially at social attitudes to the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth-century broadside ballads and in the diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, before attempting to recover the poor’s attitudes to their own clothing.

The appeal of ballads for a study of this kind is that they were indisputably popular: they were printed in their thousands, distributed throughout the country and had a readership that crossed the social divide. Since they were intended to be sung rather than merely read, their contents were accessible to non-literate audiences such as the rural poor. Moreover, their distinctive woodcuts, often unrelated to their contents, made them attractive as a cheap form of decoration for alehouse and cottage walls. They may have been, as Bernard Capp suggests, one of the few forms of representational art the poor encountered.<sup>6</sup> It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the ballads discussed in this article *had the potential* to reach the rural poor even if there is no actual evidence that they did so. We know that Pepys read and enjoyed ballads since he had amassed a collection of over 1,800 by the time of his death in 1703, including many of the ballads discussed here.<sup>7</sup> The obvious difficulty that presents itself when using them as a source to explore attitudes to rural clothing is identifying whose attitudes they reflect. This is a question this article will address.<sup>8</sup> The documentary sources that are used in the last part of this article are mainly those that I have used previously for my study of the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth-century Sussex: probate material (wills and inventories), overseers’ accounts, coroners’ inquests and depositions surviving amongst quarter session records for eastern and western Sussex.<sup>9</sup> To these have been added two additional sources: church court depositions for the archdeaconry of Chichester and the autobiographical writings of Lancashire-born seaman, Edward Barlow.<sup>10</sup>

The use of the word ‘poor’ in this article is intended to cover that large, shifting and seemingly amorphous group that contemporary commentators labelled the ‘poorer’ or ‘meaner’ sort, to distinguish them from the ‘better’ or ‘best’ sort and the ‘middle’ sort.<sup>11</sup> This group was expanding in the early seventeenth century as a growing population began to outstrip the demand for labour and the economy entered a period of long-term inflation which saw the cost of rents and consumables rising rapidly whilst wages remained low. Using contemporary socioeconomic descriptors, those belonging to this group included poorer husbandmen, tradesmen and craftsmen, labourers, the parish poor (those in receipt of parish relief) and vagrants. In Sussex, the words ‘husbandman’ and ‘labourer’ were frequently interchangeable, reflecting the reality that many of those described as ‘husbandmen’ had little or no land and were at least partly wage-dependent, although they might also be involved in some trade or craft activity.<sup>12</sup> Both ‘husbandmen’ and ‘labourers’ might find themselves in need of parish support at some point in their lives or, indeed, might be forced out onto the road through economic necessity. It has been estimated that whilst those on relief constituted perhaps five per cent of a parish population, a further twenty per cent or more may have been ‘in need’. In other words, they were living at or below subsistence some or all of the time.<sup>13</sup>

**'The happy husbandman': broadside ballads and rural clothing**

The broadside ballads considered here can be loosely categorised as 'georgic' in that they are set within the present and depict aspects of rural life with a degree of realism. Characters in these ballads have names like Mary, Kate, Dick and Tom and engage in recognisable forms of rural work.<sup>14</sup> These ballads are easily distinguishable from those that are 'pastoral', in the sense of being set in a classically-inspired, extra-temporal Arcadia, populated by idle and usually lovelorn shepherds and shepherdesses with names like Harpalus and Philena.<sup>15</sup> Pastoral ballads draw on elite and popular forms of cultural expression such as pastoral poetry and prose, court masques and paintings.<sup>16</sup> However, many georgic ballads also incorporate obvious pastoral motifs and classical references, an example being 'The Happy Husbandman: Or Country Innocence' (1685–8) which sets rural labour of hoeing, mowing, dairying and spinning within an Arcadian landscape of fountains, groves and dales.<sup>17</sup> But even where classically-inspired pastoral motifs are absent, these ballads offer a highly idealised view of the countryside and its inhabitants. The rural world they depict is populated by honest, industrious and deferential workers for whom 'daily labour' and straightened material circumstances are a source of pride and contentment. For example, in 'The Nobleman's Generous Kindness or the Countryman's Unexpected Happiness' (1685–8) a nobleman observes his neighbour, a 'poor thresher', who supports his seven young children with 'none but his labour', going to work each day with 'joy and content'. Meeting the thresher one morning, the nobleman asks him:

Thou has many children I well know  
 Thy labour is hard, and thy wages is low  
 And yet thou art cheerful; I pray you tell me true  
 How you do maintain them so well as you do.

In reply the thresher tells him:

I reap and I mow, and I harrow and sow  
 Sometimes I to hedging and ditching do go  
 No work comes amiss, for I thresh and I plough  
 Thus I eat my bread by the sweat of my brow.

To reward him for his 'industrious care' the nobleman gives the thresher a thirty-acre farm.<sup>18</sup>

Rural contentment is most clearly articulated in a group of ballads in which the narrative drive is provided by contrasting the stable and productive 'country' with the restless and parasitic 'city'. This is achieved either by means of a debate between two stock figures, usually a husbandman and a serving man, or through a direct address to the audience from a country man or woman, in which the 'voice' of the country always defeats the voice of the city.<sup>19</sup> As the Londoners who take on the countryman in 'Downright Dick of the West' (1685–8) discover, 'the ploughman in wit is too hard for them all'.<sup>20</sup> It is in these ballads that we encounter rural clothing since one of the ways in which the country proves its superiority is by contrasting the hard-wearing and home-produced clothing of the rural poor with the self-indulgent frippery and luxury of urban fashion. An example of a 'debate' ballad is 'God speed the plough, and bless the corn mow' (1684–6) in which a

serving man argues for his superiority over the ‘honest’ husbandman by drawing attention to his fine clothes:

*At the court you may have  
Your garments fine and brave  
And a cloak with a gold lace laid upon  
A shirt as white as milk  
And wrought with finest silk  
That’s pleasure for a serving man.*

But the husbandman is not persuaded and responds:

*Such proud and costly gear  
Is not for us to wear  
Amongst the briars and brambles many a one  
A good strong russet coat  
And at our need a great  
That will suffice the husbandman.*

The serving man is eventually obliged to concede defeat and admits that the husbandman’s calling is the best.<sup>21</sup> A similar debate takes place in ‘The Contention between a Countryman and a Citizen for a Beauteous London Lass’ (1685–8) but this time the stakes are higher since they are arguing over the hand of a young woman. To the countryman, the citizen’s clothes are ‘gay and gaudy’ suggesting false wealth, unrealistic expectations (‘you build castles in the air’) and lack of constancy. He tells the citizen:

Although you wear fine cloth and beaver  
And I but poor felt and frieze  
Leather breeches will not leave her.

In other words, what you see with the countryman is what you get. His integrity and steadfastness win out and the young woman chooses him over the citizen.<sup>22</sup>

In these ballads the husbandman or ploughman appears to be modestly prosperous in the sense of having enough for his needs. But in the ballad world even the truly indigent could express their delight with their lot. In ‘A New Song Called Jack Dove’s Resolution’ (c.1602–46) Jack Dove declares himself to be poor but ‘content with what little I have’. This includes his clothing for:

Some men do suppose, to go in brave clothes  
Does purchase a great deal of respect  
Though I am but poor, I run not on score  
I think myself honestly decked.<sup>23</sup>

A similar theme runs through ‘Ragged Torn and True, or the Poor Man’s Resolution’ (1628–9) in which the poor man wanting both money and clothes asserts that he nevertheless lives ‘wondrous well’ and has a ‘contented mind’. His cloak is ‘threadbare’, his doublet ‘rent in the sleeves’ and his jerkin ‘worn and bare’ but he remains ‘honest and just’. In contrast, he has seen ‘a boot of Spanish leather . . . set fast in the stocks’ and gallants wearing their wealth on their backs ride up Holborn in a cart.<sup>24</sup>

Country women are similarly modest in their attire and expectations. In 'The Country Lass' (c.1628) the female narrator tells her audience:

*Although I am a country lass  
A lofty mind I bear a  
I think myself as good as those  
That gay apparel wear a  
My coat is made of homely grey  
Yet is my skin as soft a  
As those that with the chief wines  
Do bathe their bodies oft a.*

She keeps to 'country fashion' and in her 'country guise' she is 'as pretty as those that every day devise new shapes in Court and City'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the country lifestyle keeps country women healthy and sexually wholesome, in contrast to their city sisters whose painted faces and fancy clothes disguise their 'green sickness' and queasy stomachs. Their love of fashion is their undoing:

Dressed up in their knots  
Their jewels and spots  
And 20 knick-knacks beside  
Their gallants embrace 'em  
At length they disgrace 'em  
And then they will weep and wail.<sup>26</sup>

In these ballads the modesty and thrift of the rural poor, content with their locally-produced russet and frieze, allows them to live within their means: as Downright Dick tells his London Don, 'both linen and woollen, whatever we will wear, we have of our own by industrious care'.<sup>27</sup> The serving men and gallants, on the other hand, are forced to borrow money or resort to crime to fund their fashionable attire. Moreover, much of their clothing is made of foreign materials: silk from France, fine linen and lace from the Netherlands, leather from Spain. The adjective that is frequently used to describe the attributes of country life is 'homely': 'my coat is made of homely grey'; 'we country lasses homely be'; 'a homely hat is all I ask';<sup>28</sup> 'in homely frieze';<sup>29</sup> 'homely cottages'.<sup>30</sup> We can interpret the word in two ways: firstly, to denote a wholesome, uncomplicated and honest way of life, characterised by comfortable domesticity, and secondly to mean 'of or belonging to a person's own country or native land'.<sup>31</sup> The second meaning is consistent with the general tenor of these ballads which use clothing to create a vision of the countryside as inherently English in contrast to the city which is depicted as foreign.

These ballads attribute to the rural poor some fairly clear attitudes to their clothing. They want it to be hard-wearing, plain and modest, the antithesis of city 'fashion'. They use their clothing not only to define their lowly social position but to articulate a set of values that they insist should be associated with that status: honesty, industry, thrift, modesty, deference. However, in these ballads the role of the 'country' is merely to act as a counter to the 'city', which emerges as the primary target of the ballad writers. These ballads pick up on a set of contemporary concerns about clothing, the textile industry, elite fashion and urban identities that can be found in a range of literary forms as well as in

the repeated calls to reintroduce sumptuary legislation.<sup>32</sup> The English were supposedly peculiarly fickle in their sartorial habits and slavishly devoted to foreign fashions. As early as 1542 Andrew Boorde had satirised the Englishman's obsession with fashion by depicting him naked with a pair of shears in his hand because he could not decide what to wear:

For now I will wear this and now I will wear that  
 Now I will wear I cannot tell what  
 All new fashions be pleasant to me.

This depiction of the naked Englishman became a 'stock emblem for representing the absurd sartorial habits of the English' but its deployment was not merely intended to be comic.<sup>33</sup> It highlighted a very real concern expressed repeatedly throughout the seventeenth century that adherence to foreign fashions damaged the English woollen cloth industry and drained the country's wealth through excessive consumption.<sup>34</sup>

In the ballads considered above the 'serving man' or the young, male servant is used as a stock figure to represent the excess, immorality and social confusion of the city. Household servants and apprentices, both male and female, were noted to have a particular weakness for fashionable clothing. In 1611 the Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Craven, and the Common Council issued what was in effect a piece of sumptuary legislation aimed at regulating the clothing of apprentices and female servants. This restricted the type, amount and value of fabric, leather and trimmings that apprentices and female servants could wear. For example, apprentices were not allowed to wear hats 'lined, faced or turfed' with 'velvet, silk or taffeta', their bands (collars) must be made of holland 'or other linen cloth' rather than lawn and cambric and could not be edged with lace. Their breeches must be made of woollen cloth like kersey or fustian and they were banned from wearing shoes made of Spanish leather. This was not just about ensuring that apprentices and female servants wore clothing appropriate to their 'degree' but about circumscribing the wanton behaviour that was associated with their fashionable attire, which for apprentices included frequenting a variety of disreputable establishments such as dicing houses and brothels.<sup>35</sup>

In the light of this analysis it is reasonable to suggest that many of these ballads are about the city and its inhabitants and not about the countryside at all and that their intended audience was primarily urban. The representation of the countryside that we encounter also draws on well established themes explored in other types of popular literature, like the pastoral romances which proliferated throughout the seventeenth century and 'debate' literature which pitted the country against the city.<sup>36</sup> But it also feeds off a culture which viewed the poor as profoundly problematic. This is most clearly seen in the debates surrounding the development and implementation of the poor law legislation over the course of the seventeenth century, which was shaped by a desire to separate the deserving from the undeserving poor. In trying to distinguish the one from the other, social commentators and poor law authorities applied a set of behavioural criteria based around perceptions of honesty, industry, thrift, sobriety, piety and deference, which reflected wider social expectations about how the poor ought to behave.<sup>37</sup> The poor man or woman was expected to work hard, live independently and be grateful for what they

had. In other words, they should be just like the 'poor thresher' in 'The Nobleman's Generous Kindness'.<sup>38</sup>

### **'Seeing' the rural poor: Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn**

In July 1667 Pepys was in Ashted in Surrey visiting his cousin, John Pepys, when he came across a shepherd and his young son on the Downs, 'the most pleasant and innocent sight that ever I saw in my life'. The little boy was reading the Bible to his father so Pepys asked the boy to read to him, which he did. Afterwards, Pepys spoke to the father. Pepys observed that the shepherd looked:

*Most like one of the old Patriarchs that ever I saw in my life, and it brought those thoughts of the old age of the world in my mind for two or three days after. We took notice of his woollen-knit stockings of two colours mixed [i.e. of different-coloured yarn], and of his shoes shod with iron shoes, both at the toe and heels, and with great nails in the sole of his feet, which was mighty pretty; and taking notice of them "Why", says the poor man, "the Downs, you see, are full of stones, and we are fain to shoe ourselves thus; and these", says he, "will make the stones fly till they sing before me". I did give the poor man something, for which he was mighty thankful.*<sup>39</sup>

In October 1685 John Evelyn visited Lady Clarendon at her house at Swallowfield in Berkshire as she was getting ready to accompany her husband to Ireland.<sup>40</sup> Evelyn recounted that all the 'good people and neighbours' were in tears at the departure of this 'charitable woman', including:

*A maiden of primitive life, the daughter of a poor labouring man, who had sustained her parents (sometime since dead) by her labour, and has for many years refused marriage, or to receive any assistance from the parish, besides the little hermitage my lady gives her rent-free; she lives on four pence a day, which she gets by spinning; she says she abounds and can give alms to others, living in great humility and content, without any apparent affection or singularity; she is continually working, praying or reading, gives a good account of her knowledge of religion, visits the sick; is not in the least given to talk; very modest, of a simple not unseemly behaviour; of a comely countenance, clad very plain, but clean and tight. In sum, she appears a saint of extraordinary sort, in so religious a life as is seldom met with in villages nowadays.*<sup>41</sup>

For both men the description of clothing forms part of a broader depiction of these representatives of the rural poor which follow the stereotypical view offered in the ballads. Each individual is appropriately deferential to his or her social superiors, industrious and pious. The poor woman Evelyn encounters not only lives without parish support but is sufficiently thrifty to be able to offer alms to those in greater need than she is. For Pepys, the shepherd is like one of the 'old Patriarchs', a reference, presumably, both to his physical appearance and to the aura of religiosity that Pepys thought surrounded him. The defining feature of these two individuals is that they appear to the men who observe them to be entirely contented with their lot.

It was not unusual for Evelyn to include sympathetic observations about 'the poor' as a social group in his diary but this is his only description of an individual.<sup>42</sup> Evelyn makes relatively few references to clothing in his diary, unlike Pepys who had an obsessive interest in his own clothes and those of others.<sup>43</sup> Those Evelyn does make, such as the reference to the 'monstrous farthingales' of the Portuguese women who accompanied the

future Queen, Catherine of Braganza, to London in May 1662, or to the ‘fantastical habits’ worn by the French courtiers who visited Charles II in May 1671, usually reinforce the criticisms of excessive fashions that he expressed in his ‘little trifle of sumptuary laws’, *Tyrannus, or, the Mode in a Discourse of Sumptuary Laws*, which he presented to Charles II in November 1661.<sup>44</sup> In describing the poor woman’s clothing as ‘tight’, Evelyn may have been contrasting her exemplary morals with those of the women he encountered at court whose fashionable ‘loose’ gowns were viewed by some as immodest because they could conceal an illicit pregnancy.<sup>45</sup>

Amongst the 1,800 or so ballads that Pepys collected were many in the pastoral mode featuring fictional shepherds in Arcadian landscapes such as ‘The Complaint of the Shepherd Harpalus’ and it is possible that his decision to stop and talk to the shepherd was motivated by preconceived, literature inspired, notions about the romance of the shepherd’s life.<sup>46</sup> This idea is given credence by Evelyn’s diary entry for September 1658 in which he describes how he has ridden across the Surrey Downs ‘discoursing with shepherds’.<sup>47</sup> That Evelyn’s view of the countryside was shaped by contemporary Arcadian motifs is suggested by his observation on the landscape surrounding Stonehenge, which he visited in July 1653. He describes passing over ‘the goodly plain, or rather sea of carpet, which I think for evenness, extent, verdure, and innumerable flocks, to be one of the most delightful prospects in nature, and reminded me of the pleasant lives of shepherds we read of in romances’.<sup>48</sup> With both Pepys and Evelyn, therefore, we encounter what at first sight is a realistic image of the rural poor but the ‘realism’ is sublimated to well-established pastoral themes, to contemporary ideas about the deserving poor and, in Evelyn’s case, to his views on clothing and morality.

### **‘Clothes to go handsome in’: the clothing culture of the rural poor**

*Yet with that and such like work I made shift to buy me some clothes, and then I went to church on Sunday, which I never could do before for want of clothes to go handsome in. My father being poor and in debt could not provide us with clothes fitting to go to church in (so we could not go to church) unless we would go in rags, which was not seemly.*<sup>49</sup>

This passage is taken from the autobiographical writings of Edward Barlow, the son of an impoverished husbandman, born in Prestwich in Lancashire in 1642. Written retrospectively when Barlow was a thirty-one year old seaman and had learned to read and write, it describes the period leading up to his first departure from home aged twelve or thirteen.<sup>50</sup> Since his father could not afford to indenture him as an apprentice, Barlow worked for his neighbours, harvesting and haymaking and carting coal from the local coal pits, for which he received ‘but small wages’ of about two or three pence a day.<sup>51</sup> By making ‘shift’ he was able to buy himself some clothes to ‘go handsome in’ to replace the ‘rags’ that he had worn before. The significance of these new clothes in Barlow’s account is that they allow him to attend church, something he could not do before ‘unless [he] would go in rags, which was not seemly’. His description of his clothing as ‘rags’ may be an exaggeration but it enables Barlow to express his sense of shame at having nothing



decent to wear to church. However, Barlow does not want just any clothes: he wants clothes 'to go handsome in'. In other words, he wants to look good.

Barlow's account is a useful introduction to a discussion about the significance of clothing to the rural poor as defined above. If we turn to documentary evidence from rural Sussex we can see that the clothing choices of the poor were constrained by two main factors: practicalities and income.<sup>52</sup> Clothing had to be made of robust material to withstand wear and tear. Limited resources also meant restricted clothing choices and garments that were often second-hand in the first place which had to be worn for a considerable number of years.<sup>53</sup> The type of woollen cloth that appears most frequently in testamentary clothing bequests is russet, a coarse but relatively light cloth. Other types of coarse woollen cloth recorded in wills, quarter session records and overseers' accounts were 'homemade', blanket, thickset, kersey, frieze, serge and so-called 'cotton'.<sup>54</sup> Linsey-woolsey (flax and woollen mix) and fustian (a flax and cotton mix) were also used for a variety of outerwear. Men's working clothes (their doublet and breeches) were often made of canvas or leather and sometimes cloth breeches had detachable leather linings. Coarse linen cloth like canvas, linsey and lockram was used for head and neckwear, smocks, shirts and aprons, and sometimes for outerwear. Most of these textiles were being produced in seventeenth-century Sussex or elsewhere in England.<sup>55</sup> In this respect, the stereotype we encounter in the ballads of the husbandman wearing locally-produced russet or frieze reflects the reality.

It is difficult to evaluate either the quantity or quality of clothing worn by the rural poor. Woollen outerwear was brushed down rather than being immersed in water, so in theory one set could suffice, but in practice even the very poor seem to have had a variety of woollen (or woollen and flax mix) garments, even if they did not amount to a complete second set. Linen clothes were washed regularly, which means that all but the truly indigent would have a minimum of two sets.<sup>56</sup> Testators sometimes described clothes in their wills as 'work days', 'ordinary' or 'holidays' indicating that they made a distinction between working clothes and 'best'.<sup>57</sup> They also identified clothes by their position within carefully constructed personal clothing hierarchies, such as 'best', 'second best', 'best save one', 'new', 'old', 'the worst'.<sup>58</sup> The distinction between 'ordinary' and 'best' is reflected in Barlow's account of the day he left home for the second time, now aged fourteen and heading for London:

*I went up into the chamber where I lay, and put on my best clothes, which were but ordinary in the country . . . So coming down the stairs, my mother and one of my sisters being in the house and not knowing my intent, marvelled to see me put on my clothes that day.*<sup>59</sup>

For his mother and sister, his appearance in his 'best' clothes on a working day is a surprise, signifying something unusual. However, Barlow acknowledges, presumably with the benefit of hindsight, that what he and his family regarded as his 'best' clothes were really only 'ordinary'.

The hierarchical ordering of clothing in wills and Barlow's descriptions of his own clothing show that for the rural poor clothing had an importance beyond the purely functional. Even 'ordinary' clothing was often brightly coloured: red, green, blue, yellow. The most popular colour for women's petticoats was 'red', a colour achieved by dyeing

the cloth with the roots of the madder plant, which could produce a vibrant red, but also 'red' shades varying from dark russet to soft apricot. Women could achieve an element of social display by wearing fine, imported linen head and neckwear trimmed with bone lace. Coloured 'ribbon', which was probably more like braid, was used for a variety of decorative purposes, such as trimming for petticoats, apron and shoe strings, hat bands and fastenings for neckwear. Men could also enhance their appearance with fine linen neckwear, decorative hatbands and coloured handkerchiefs.<sup>60</sup> An apparently trivial detail like the colour of a waistcoat, the fineness and whiteness of a linen apron or the pattern of lace on a neck scarf might hold considerable sartorial significance both for the wearer and for those who observed her. Moreover, a relatively old piece of clothing could be given a new lease of life by being re-cut, re-dyed or re-trimmed, allowing the wearer to present a 'new' appearance.<sup>61</sup> The clothing of the rural poor could therefore be aspirational in the sense that they aspired to look their best, at least when wearing their 'holiday' clothes.

The ballads discussed above draw attention to pecuniary differences amongst the fictionalised rural poor: some are poorer than others. These differences are manifest in their clothing. We can compare, for example, the husbandman of 'God Speed the Plough and Bless the Corn Mow' with his 'good strong russet coat' with Jack Dove in his 'threadbare' cloak, torn doublet and 'worn and bare' jerkin.<sup>62</sup> The same pecuniary differences can be perceived in the way the actual poor articulate their own clothing needs or describe the clothing needs of others. But these descriptions are frequently drawing attention to something more nebulous than mere material difference, highlighting social complexities and gradations amongst the rural poor and drawing attention to their perception of their own position in society at large. In this respect, they can be as culturally loaded as the descriptions in the ballads or in Pepys' and Evelyn's diaries. For example, Barlow's description of his clothing as 'rags' should probably be interpreted to mean that it was shabby and well-worn rather than that it was literally 'in rags', the deliberate exaggeration not only indicative of his sense of shame at being seen in public in such inferior clothing but also his pride in furnishing himself with clothes 'to go handsome in'. Similarly, Susan Elliot's explanation to the court of quarter sessions in 1661 that she had stolen clothing and a sheet 'for pure need, having nothing to cover her nakedness' can be interpreted as a description of a state of destitution which she hoped would elicit the court's clemency, rather than that she had no clothing at all.<sup>63</sup>

The way that clothing could be used to express social, material and moral differences amongst the poor can be seen in a case from the Chichester archdeaconry court in which it features as part of a series of complex narratives intended to undermine the credibility of a witness. In March 1614 Alice Hayward was called as a witness on behalf of Margaret Grevett who had allegedly called Mercy Lock, a whore and her husband a cuckold 'with a mind and purpose to disgrace, defame and abuse them'.<sup>64</sup> Witnesses on behalf of Mercy Lock, who had brought the case, claimed that Grevett had lent Hayward clothes 'for the better countenancing of herself when she was produced and sworn as witness in this court on behalf of the said Margaret'.<sup>65</sup> Henry Oley (a 'nailer') deposed that on the day Alice went to give evidence her husband, who lived by 'making or mending of bellows', had come into his shop.<sup>66</sup> Oley asked him 'whither his wife went she was so fine' to which Hayward had replied that she was going to be Grevett's witness. Oley, 'knowing her life

to be lewd and herself of small credit' then said to Hayward 'she . . . would be a good witness no doubt' (meaning, as he said, the contrary) to which Hayward answered 'what cares she what she says or swears so long she may have meat, drink and apparel'. Oley further deposed that he:

Did see a hat upon the said Alice Hayward's head which he has also seen the said Margaret Grevett wear before that time and that at the same time the said Alice Hayward did also wear other apparel which this deponent does verily believe was none of her own for he had never seen her wear it before nor since.

Concluding his evidence, Oley told the court that Alice had worn borrowed clothes when she went to her brother's wedding, adding that 'it is well known that she is so poor and indigent that she has not of her own neither is she able to buy such by reason of her poverty'.<sup>67</sup>

Oley's description of Hayward's sartorial need is about her lack of suitable clothing to wear in public. Like Barlow's description of his own clothing, Oley is articulating a view that decent clothing and respectability are closely related and that the latter cannot be achieved without the former. Borrowed clothes could not bestow respectability. Whilst the church court officials would not know that Alice was wearing borrowed clothes, her neighbours in the small rural parish where she lived identified her sartorial transformation immediately: as Oley deposed 'he had never seen her wear it [i.e. the apparel] before or since'. Hayward's indigence is given material expression by her lack of decent clothing. But the various witnesses called on behalf of Mercy Lock also attribute to her a range of moral failings which are presented as if they were both a result and a cause of her poverty. According to Christopher Tidy, she was 'an idle woman, a common liar and a tale bearer, a reporter of untruths and false tales and a very poor and needy body'. Tidy's wife, Margaret, deposed that 'she is so poor and indigent that no man will trust her' and accused Alice of stealing a piece of fustian, a pie and some roast beef whilst attending the wedding dinner of John Pratt.<sup>68</sup> These witnesses were poor themselves. Tidy, a tailor, told the court that he was worth, 'every man paid', forty shillings, a sum which Alexandra Shepard has identified as a marker of church court deponents' relative poverty in the early seventeenth century.<sup>69</sup> Like the 'statements of worth' analysed by Shepard, cases like this one reveal 'the many gradations at the lower end of the social hierarchy' which enabled some members of the rural poor to claim a social, moral and material superiority over others. Shepard observes a 'critical dividing line' amongst the poor between those in need of charitable relief, either from the parish or well-meaning neighbours, and those who were able to support themselves.<sup>70</sup> However, there is nothing in the deponents' statements to indicate that either Alice or her husband were in receipt of alms. In fact, their depositions suggest that the Haywards 'made shift' for themselves.<sup>71</sup> What Alice thought about her own clothes, her penury or her neighbours' ruthless assessment of her is not recorded.

In the case of Alice Hayward, her lack of suitable clothing is used as evidence of her social inferiority. But clothing could also be used by the rural poor to express a view that they were as good as their social superiors and that it was merely their outward appearance that made them inferior. In 1630 Thomas Newland found himself in the archdeaconsry

court of Chichester for allegedly verbally and physically abusing a local minister, Robert Johnson. Newland was alleged to have called the minister a ‘boy priest and jackanapes’ and claimed that he, Newland, was ‘as good a man as . . . Mr Johnson . . . excepting his cloth and place in the church’.<sup>72</sup> In 1636, Joanne Chart, a young servant, gave evidence to the court of quarter sessions against a labourer called John Phillips whom she accused of stealing hemp cloth from her master. Chart recounted how after she had given her information to the local justice of the peace, Sir Henry Compton, she had encountered Phillips at Compton’s gate and that he had said to her ‘if he had his best clothes on . . . he would show the constable a pair of heels’. What precisely Phillips meant by this is unclear but it is apparent that he thought that putting on his ‘best clothes’ would give him a social advantage.<sup>73</sup> The comments of both Newland and Phillips point to an underlying resentment of their social and material inferiority which is here expressed through the medium of clothing.

As these cases show, rather than being a material sign of social stability and contented and deferential poverty, clothing could be indicative of social flux and grinding and humiliating poverty. This is perhaps nowhere more clearly apparent than in the records of the courts of quarter sessions where clothing and textile theft constituted a significant proportion of all indicted crime.<sup>74</sup> Much, perhaps the majority, of clothing theft was opportunistic, motivated by need. It was sold for cash, exchanged for food or immediately put on by the thief.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, those accused of the organised theft of clothing were often vagrants who were believed to work in criminal gangs.<sup>76</sup> These accusations were no doubt rooted in the reality that crime and vagrancy went together but they also reflect prejudice against, and fear of, the homeless poor.<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to try to recover attitudes to the clothing of the rural poor by looking at a disparate range of sources, both fictional and supposedly factual. The voices that we have encountered, such as those of Jack Dove, the Surrey shepherd and Alice Hayward, are mediated by their narrators, whether an anonymous ballad writer, a diarist or witnesses in a defamation suit. Even the young Edward Barlow’s voice is mediated by his prosperous and well-travelled adult self. This mediation can be revealing about the broader cultural influences that shaped society’s attitudes to the rural poor as well as the poor’s own perception of their status within their social and material environment. With the vagrant and criminal poor we have moved a long way from the vision of the countryside and its contented and settled workers imagined by the ballad writers and supposedly seen by Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. In the ballads, the social problems that are identified are those of the city and not the country. Instead, the country becomes the repository of a set of values which are articulated through the voices of the fictionalised poor: morality, honesty, industry, humility, social unity. The portrayal of the clothes on their backs, as rough, hardwearing, modest and home-produced, is integral to this representation of the countryside. Put simply, the rural poor would not want fashionable clothes even if they could afford them.

This stereotypical depiction of the clothing of the rural poor was not entirely without basis in reality. As we have seen, hardwearing and locally-produced woollens like russet and frieze were widely worn. But in other respects the stereotype was wide of the mark. The rural poor wanted 'clothes to go handsome in' and the lack of such clothes could cause social embarrassment. This reflects the fact that, for the rural poor, clothing was more than merely functional. It could be an expression of the 'self' in the same way as the clothing of the elite. This meant, as in the case of Alice Hayward, that it could serve as a potent marker of social differences and moral and material inferiority. These differences, glossed over by ballad writers and elite observers, were of crucial significance to the poor themselves.

### Notes

1. D. Tankard, "A Pair of Grass-green Woollen Stockings": The Clothing of the Rural Poor in Seventeenth-century Sussex', *Textile History*, 43:1 (2012), 5–22.
2. S. Vincent, *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); A. Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (New Haven and London, 2005); U. Rublack, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford, 2010).
3. Rublack, *Dressing Up*, p. 25.
4. Vincent, *Dressing the Elite*, p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
6. T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), pp.1–3; B. Capp, 'Popular Literature' in B. Reay, ed., *Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (London and Sidney, 1985), p. 231.
7. For a description of the Pepys Collection see <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/Pepys>. Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013.
8. Ballads are closely related to other forms of popular literature such as so-called chapbooks, which Pepys also collected, and prose romances. Neither of these genres is discussed in any detail in this article. For chapbooks see M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985); L. H. Newcomb, 'What is a Chapbook?' in M. Dimmock and A. Hadfield, eds, *Literature and Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 57–72. For prose romances see P. Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558–1700: A Critical History* (Oxford, 1985); L. H. Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance in Early Modern England* (New York, 2002).
9. For an explanation of these sources and the way they have been used to examine the clothing of the rural poor see Tankard, 'Grass-green Woollen Stockings', 7–8.
10. West Sussex Record Office EpI/11/12, 14; B. Lubbock, ed., *Barlow's Journal of his Life at Sea in the King's Ships, East and West Indiamen and other Merchantmen from 1659–1703* (London, 1934).
11. For a discussion of the development of the 'language of sorts' see K. Wrightson, "'Sorts of People" in Tudor and Stuart England', in J. Barry and C. Brooks, eds, *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 28–51; and H. R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England 1600–1750* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 1–29.
12. This is my own assessment based on my work on a range of documentary sources but in particular the records of the Sussex courts of quarter sessions. However, it is corroborated by Alexandra Shepard's analysis of 'statements of worth' in church court depositions which shows that nearly seventy per cent of husbandmen appearing in the church courts of the diocese of Chichester stated they lived by their labour compared to fifty per cent in the

- diocese of Salisbury and thirty per cent in the diocese of Canterbury. See A. Shepard, 'Poverty, Labour and the Language of Social Description in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 201 (2008), 64–5.
13. S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c. 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2009), p. 4.
  14. Ballads have been identified in two ways: firstly, from an online search of the English Broadside Ballad Archive at the University of California-Santa Barbara (<http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/>) and secondly through a contents list and index search of the Ballad Society printed edition of the Roxburghe Ballads (nine volumes, London, 1869–1899). They are used in this article as literary rather than pictorial sources. For a discussion of the usefulness of some woodcut images for the study of dress history see A. McShane and C. Backhouse, 'Top Knots and Lower Sorts: Print and Promiscuous Consumption in the 1690s', in M. Hunter, ed., *Printed Images in Early Modern Britain* (Aldershot, 2010), pp. 337–57.
  15. 'The Complaint of the Shepherd Harpalus' (Pepys I.369, c.1625).
  16. Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction*, pp.140–50. For a discussion of pastoral literature see A. McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1600* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 262–99, L. S. Marcus, 'Politics and Pastoral: Writing the Court on the Countryside', in K. Sharpe and P. Lake, eds, *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 139–59 and Salzman, *English Prose Fiction*, pp. 59–97, 123–47.
  17. Roxburghe II 205.
  18. Pepys II 56.
  19. See for example: 'A Pleasant New Dialogue; Or, the Discourse between the Serving Man and the Husbandman' (Roxburghe, I, 98,99, c.1640); 'God Speed the Plough and Bless the Corn-Mow: A Dialogue between the Husbandman and the Serving Man' (Pepys IV 272, 1684–1686); 'Downright Dick of the West; or the Ploughman's Ramble to London, to See my Lord Mayor and the Rest of the Fine Folk of the City' (Roxburghe II 117; Pepys IV 279, 1685–1688); 'The Innocent Country Maid's Delight or, a Description of the Lives of the Lasses of London' (Roxburghe II 230, 1685–1688); 'The Contention between a Countryman and a Citizen for a Beauteous London Lass, who at Length is Married to the Countryman' (Pepys III 255, 1685–1688).
  20. Roxburghe II 117; Pepys IV 279.
  21. Pepys IV 272.
  22. Pepys III 255.
  23. Roxburghe I 160, 161.
  24. Roxburghe I 352, 353.
  25. Roxburghe I 52, 53.
  26. 'The Innocent Country Maid's Delight', 1685–8 (Roxburghe II 230). See also 'The Milkmaid's Life', c.1633–1669 (Roxburghe I 244, 245).
  27. Roxburghe II 117; Pepys IV 279, 1685–1688.
  28. 'The Country Lass', c.1628 (Roxburghe I 52, 53).
  29. 'The Map of Mock-Beggar's Hall', c.1640 (Roxburghe I 252, 253).
  30. 'The Countryman's Delight', 1681–1684 (Pepys IV 349)
  31. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, 2013. <http://www.oed.com/view/entry/87905>. Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2013.
  32. For a discussion of concerns about elite fashion see A. Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (London, 1986), pp. 74–94 and Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction*, pp. 159–213. For a discussion of the repeal of sumptuary legislation in 1604 and attempts to revive it see N. B. Harte, 'State Control of Dress and Social Change in Pre-industrial England' in D. C. Coleman and A. H. John, eds, *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-industrial England* (London, 1976), pp. 148–9 and A. Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (Basingstoke 1996), pp. 321–4.

33. R. Hentschell, 'A Question of Nation: Foreign Clothes on the English Subject' in C. Richardson, ed., *Clothing Culture, 1350–1650* (Aldershot, 2004), p. 55. However, as Rublack has shown, this was also a 'stock emblem' across Europe during the same period: Rublack, *Dressing Up*, p. 145.
34. Hentschell, 'A Question of Nation', pp. 49–62; see also Hentschell, *The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England: Textual Constructions of a National Identity* (Aldershot, 2008).
35. *An Act for the Reformation of Apparel to be Worn by Apprentices and Maid Servants within the City of London and the Liberties thereof* (London, 1611). See T. Reinke-Williams, 'Women's Clothes and Female Honour in Early Modern London', *Continuity and Change*, 26: 1 (2011), 69–88 for a discussion of this legislation in relation to concerns about female clothing.
36. For pastoral romances see Salzman, *English Prose Fiction*, pp. 59–97, 123–47. Examples of debate literature are Robert Greene's *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier: Or, a Quaint Dispute between Velvet Breeches and Cloth Breeches* (first published in 1592, with subsequent editions in 1606, 1620, 1622 and 1635) and Nicholas Breton's *The Court and Country, or a Brief Discourse Dialogue-wise Set Down between a Courtier and a Country Man* (1618). Both Greene and Breton wrote pastoral romances which were adapted into ballads. For Greene see L. H. Newcomb, 'Greene, Robert (bap. 1558, d.1592), writer and playwright', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; for Breton see M. G. Brennan, 'Breton [Britton], Nicholas (1554/5–c.1626), poet', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
37. S. Hindle, 'Civility, Honesty and the Identification of the Deserving Poor in Seventeenth-Century England', in H. French and J. Barry, *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 38–59; see also C. Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 298–318.
38. Pepys II 56.
39. R. Latham and W. Matthews, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, volume 8, 1667 (London, 1974), pp. 338–9.
40. Henry, second earl of Clarendon, had been appointed lord lieutenant of Ireland: W. A. Speck, 'Hyde, Henry, Second Earl of Clarendon (1638–1709)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
41. W. Bray, ed., *Evelyn's Diary and Correspondence* (London, c.1870), p. 491.
42. Evelyn's comments about the rural poor were not always positive, however. In 1654 he described the inhabitants of Rutland as 'idle and sluttish' and those of Lincolnshire as 'a poor and very lazy sort of people': *Evelyn's Diary*, pp. 235, 239.
43. For a discussion of Pepys' attitude to clothing see J. L. Nevinson, 'Dress and Personal Appearance' in Latham and Matthews, *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, volume 10, pp. 98–104 and Vincent, *Dressing the Elite*, pp. 1–4; 80–1; 92–4.
44. *Evelyn's Diary*, pp. 281, 284, 353–4. Although intended as a satire, *Tyrannus*, had a serious intent in calling for the reintroduction of sumptuary laws to regulate what Evelyn describes as 'this slavish deference of ours' to the fashions of other nations.
45. Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction*, pp. 175–6. Evelyn describes visiting the private rooms of the King's mistress, the Duchess of Portsmouth, of whom he disapproved, in 1683 and seeing her in her 'morning loose garment': *Evelyn's Diary*, p. 450.
46. Pepys I.369, c.1625.
47. *Evelyn's Diary*, p. 259.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
49. Lubbock, *Barlow's Journal*, pp. 15–16.
50. P. Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2006), pp. 66–8. Barlow was going to Manchester as a trial apprentice to a 'whitester' or bleacher.
51. Lubbock, *Barlow's Journal*, p. 16.

52. This paragraph summarises my previously published research. See Tankard, 'Grass-green Woollen Stockings', 9–10.
53. See West Sussex Record Office Ep/I/11/15, fo. 275r (Bachelor versus Strudwick, 1634): A sawyer, Thomas Tribe, wore the suit (doublet and breeches) he bought from the possessions of his deceased neighbour, as a 'holy day suit' for seven years. See also East Sussex Record Office QR/E168, fos. 63, 66: Dorothy Burgess claimed that the petticoat she was accused of stealing in 1671 had been given to her by her mother '13 years since'.
54. 'Cotton' was a type of woollen cloth that had been 'cottoned', i.e. the nap raised up and then shorn.
55. Tankard, 'Grass-green Woollen Stockings', 10.
56. *Ibid.*, 9.
57. See, for example, the wills of Agnes Slatter (West Sussex Record Office STC I/15/238, 1606): 'one holidays neckerchief and one other for the working days'; Margaret Jelley (West Sussex Record Office STC I/22B/81, 1661): 'one of my working days petticoats'; and Nicholas Stevens (West Sussex Record Office STC I/26/48, 1675): 'one suit of my ordinary wearing apparel'.
58. See for example the wills of Joanne Forbench (West Sussex Record Office STC I/15/224, 1605): 'my best gown and my second best petticoat'; Dorothy Overington (West Sussex Record Office STC I/15/232, 1605): 'my best gown save one'; Agnes Blackman (West Sussex Record Office STC I/15/337, 1609): 'my best gown', 'my worst gown', 'my best red petticoat', 'one old red petticoat', 'my best hat'; John Turges (West Sussex Record Office STC I/26/35, 1675): 'my best wearing coat', 'my lesser coat'.
59. Lubbock, *Barlow's Journal*, pp. 20–1.
60. This paragraph draws on my previously published research, Tankard, 'Grass-green Woollen Stockings', 10–11.
61. In the case of the stolen petticoat referred to in note 51 above, Mary West claimed that she knew it was hers 'by the strings and the gathering of it' and that 'there was a red bordering to the petticoat which is pulled off since she lost it'. She explained the fact that the petticoat was a different colour from the one she had lost by stating that the alleged thief, Dorothy Burgess, had 'new dyed it' (East Sussex Record Office QR/E168, fos. 63, 66).
62. Pepys IV 272; Roxburghe I 352, 353.
63. East Sussex Record Office QR/E132, fo. 52. See P. D. Jones, "'I cannot keep my place without being deascent": Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750–1830', *Rural History*, 20:1 (2009), 33–4, for a discussion of the use of the word 'nakedness' as a rhetorical device rather than a literal condition.
64. West Sussex Record Office Ep I/11/12, fos. 141r-v (Lock v Grevett).
65. West Sussex Record Office Ep I/11/12, fos. 73v-74r.
66. West Sussex Record Office Ep I/11/12, fo. 72r.
67. West Sussex Record Office Ep I/11/12, fos. 75r-v.
68. West Sussex Record Office Ep I/11/12, fos. 72v-75v.
69. Shepard, 'Poverty, Labour and the Language of Social Description', 66–8.
70. *Ibid.*, 52, 58.
71. There are no surviving overseers' accounts for the parish of Easebourne where Alice Hayward lived which would allow us to check whether she was receiving poor relief.
72. West Sussex Record Office Ep I/11/14, fos. 199r-v (Johnson v Newland).
73. West Sussex Record Office QR/EW35, fo. 86. See Tankard, 'Grass-green Woollen Stockings', 19.
74. Cynthia Herrup has calculated that approximately thirteen per cent of indictments of stolen property presented to the court of quarter sessions for eastern Sussex between 1625 and 1640 were for cloth, clothing or shoes: C. Herrup, *The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 124. This figure



excludes thefts for which benefit of clergy was not available, i.e. breaking and entering, horse theft, cutpursing.

75. For example, in 1639 Elizabeth Joab stole three napkins and two aprons which she sold to a beggar woman for a penny and a piece of bread and cheese (East Sussex Record Office QR/E44, fo. 58) and in 1679 Edward Stacy admitted that he had stolen a pair of woollen stockings that were hanging on a tree outside John Agate's house and that he had 'afterwards put them on his legs' (East Sussex Record Office QR/EW202, fo. 55).
76. See for example East Sussex Record Office QR/E67, fos. 67–70 (1645).
77. A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560–1640* (London and New York, 1985), pp. 123–45.