

## Pre-industrial workers had a shorter workweek than today's

from *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, by Juliet B. Schor

See also: [Productivity and the Workweek](#)

and: [Eight centuries of annual hours](#)

*The labouring man will take his rest long in the morning; a good piece of the day is spent afore he come at his work; then he must have his breakfast, though he have not earned it at his accustomed hour, or else there is grudging and murmuring; when the clock smiteth, he will cast down his burden in the midway, and whatsoever he is in hand with, he will leave it as it is, though many times it is marred afore he come again; he may not lose his meat, what danger soever the work is in. At noon he must have his sleeping time, then his bever in the afternoon, which spendeth a great part of the day; and when his hour cometh at night, at the first stroke of the clock he casteth down his tools, leaveth his work, in what need or case soever the work standeth.*

—James Pilkington, Bishop of Durham, ca. 1570

One of capitalism's most durable myths is that it has reduced human toil. This myth is typically defended by a comparison of the modern forty-hour week with its seventy- or eighty-hour counterpart in the nineteenth century. The implicit -- but rarely articulated -- assumption is that the eighty-hour standard has prevailed for centuries. The comparison conjures up the dreary life of medieval peasants, toiling steadily from dawn to dusk. We are asked to imagine the journeyman artisan in a cold, damp garret, rising even before the sun, laboring by candlelight late into the night.

These images are backward projections of modern work patterns. And they are false. Before capitalism, most people did not work very long hours at all. The tempo of life was slow, even leisurely; the pace of work relaxed. Our ancestors may not have been rich, but they had an abundance of leisure. When capitalism raised their incomes, it also took away their time. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that working hours in the mid-nineteenth century constitute the most prodigious work effort in the entire history of humankind.

Therefore, we must take a longer view and look back not just one hundred years, but three or four, even six or seven hundred. Consider a typical working day in the medieval period. It stretched from dawn to dusk (sixteen hours in summer and eight in winter), but, as the Bishop Pilkington has noted, work was intermittent – called to a halt for breakfast, lunch, the customary afternoon nap, and dinner. Depending on time and place, there were also midmorning and midafternoon refreshment breaks. These rest periods were the traditional rights of laborers, which they enjoyed even during peak harvest times. During slack periods, which accounted for a large part of the year, adherence to regular working hours was not

usual. According to Oxford Professor James E. Thorold Rogers[1], the medieval workday was not more than eight hours. The worker participating in the eight-hour movements of the late nineteenth century was "simply striving to recover what his ancestor worked by four or five centuries ago."

An important piece of evidence on the working day is that it was very unusual for servile laborers to be required to work a whole day for a lord. One day's work was considered half a day, and if a serf worked an entire day, this was counted as two "days-works." [2] Detailed accounts of artisans' workdays are available. Knoop and Jones' figures for the fourteenth century work out to a yearly average of 9 hours (exclusive of meals and breaktimes) [3]. Brown, Colwin and Taylor's figures for masons suggest an average workday of 8.6 hours [4].

The contrast between capitalist and precapitalist work patterns is most striking in respect to the working year. The medieval calendar was filled with holidays. Official -- that is, church -- holidays included not only long "vacations" at Christmas, Easter, and midsummer but also numerous saints' and rest days. These were spent both in sober churchgoing and in feasting, drinking and merrymaking. In addition to official celebrations, there were often weeks' worth of ales -- to mark important life events (bride ales or wake ales) as well as less momentous occasions (scot ale, lamb ale, and hock ale). All told, holiday leisure time in medieval England took up probably about one-third of the year. And the English were apparently working harder than their neighbors. The *ancien régime* in France is reported to have guaranteed fifty-two Sundays, ninety rest days, and thirty-eight holidays. In Spain, travelers noted that holidays totaled five months per year. [5]

The peasant's free time extended beyond officially sanctioned holidays. There is considerable evidence of what economists call the backward-bending supply curve of labor -- the idea that when wages rise, workers supply less labor. During one period of unusually high wages (the late fourteenth century), many laborers refused to work "by the year or the half year or by any of the usual terms but only by the day." And they worked only as many days as were necessary to earn their customary income -- which in this case amounted to about 120 days a year, for a probable total of only 1,440 hours annually (this estimate assumes a 12-hour day because the days worked were probably during spring, summer and fall). A thirteenth-century estimate finds that whole peasant families did not put in more than 150 days per year on their land. Manorial records from fourteenth-century England indicate an extremely short working year -- 175 days -- for servile laborers. Later evidence for farmer-miners, a group with control over their worktime, indicates they worked only 180 days a year.

## Sources

[1] James E. Thorold Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), 542-43.

[2] H.S. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 104-6.

[3] Douglas Knoop and G.P. Jones, *The Medieval Mason* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 105.

[4] R. Allen Brown, H.M. Colvin, and A.J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works*, vol. I, the Middle Ages (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1963).

[5] Edith Rodgers, *Discussion of Holidays in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 10–11. See also C.R. Cheney, "Rules for the observance of feast-days in medieval England", *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 34, 90, 117–29 (1961).

## Eight centuries of annual hours

---

### 13th century – Adult male peasant, U.K.: 1620 hours

Calculated from Gregory Clark's estimate of 150 days per family, assumes 12 hours per day, 135 days per year for adult male ("Impatience, Poverty, and Open Field Agriculture", mimeo, 1986)

### 14th century – Casual laborer, U.K.: 1440 hours

Calculated from Nora Ritchie's estimate of 120 days per year. Assumes 12-hour day. ("Labour conditions in Essex in the reign of Richard II", in E.M. Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History*, vol. II, London: Edward Arnold, 1962).

### Middle ages – English worker: 2309 hours

Juliet Schor's estimate of average medieval laborer working two-thirds of the year at 9.5 hours per day

### 1400–1600 – Farmer-miner, adult male, U.K.: 1980 hours

Calculated from Ian Blanchard's estimate of 180 days per year. Assumes 11-hour day ("Labour productivity and work psychology in the English mining industry, 1400–1600", *Economic History Review* 31, 23 (1978).

### 1840 – Average worker, U.K.: 3105–3588 hours

Based on 69-hour week; hours from W.S. Woytinsky, "Hours of labor," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. III (New York: Macmillan, 1935). Low estimate assumes 45 week year, high one assumes 52 week year

### 1850 – Average worker, U.S.: 3150–3650 hours

Based on 70-hour week; hours from Joseph Zeisel, "The workweek in American industry, 1850–1956", *Monthly Labor Review* 81, 23–29 (1958). Low estimate assumes 45 week year, high one assumes 52 week year

### 1987 – Average worker, U.S.: 1949 hours

From *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, by Juliet B. Schor, Table 2.4

### 1988 – Manufacturing workers, U.K.: 1856 hours

Calculated from Bureau of Labor Statistics data, Office of Productivity and Technology