



[Home](#) :: [Pupil activity sheets](#) :: [Teacher info sheets](#) :: [Contact Us/Bookings](#) :: [Links](#)
[English](#) :: [Maths](#) :: [History](#) :: [Science](#) :: [Art and Design](#) :: [English as a foreign language](#)

What is a Yeoman?

Thomas Wells was a yeoman. Yeomen were large scale farmers, usually farming at least 100 acres, sometimes holding land in more than one parish, and distinguishable from husbandmen by their superior wealth. They produced a large marketable surplus each year and were regular employers of non-family labour. These men constituted a rural middle class, below the ranks of gentry, but above the ranks of husbandmen and labourers.

In 1577 when William Harrison wrote his Description of England he observed that, 'we in England divide our people commonly into four sorts, as gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen, and artificers or labourers'. Yeomen, according to Harrison 'are those which by our law are called legales homines, freemen born English, and may dispend of their own free land in yearly revenue to the sum of 40s sterling, or £6 as money goes in our times'. 'This sort of people' he continued 'have a certain pre-eminence and more estimation than labourers and the common sort of artificers, and these commonly live wealthily, keep good houses, and travail to get riches'. 'The fourth and last sort of people' are 'day labourers, poor husbandmen, and some retailers (which have no free land), copyholders, and all artificers, as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, brickmakers, masons, etc'.

Harrison's observation that yeomen 'travail to get riches' is one of the things that distinguishes them from the gentry since yeomen typically farmed the land themselves rather than earning rental income from it. In terms of wealth, however, the wealthiest yeomen could be as rich if not richer than the minor gentry and could enjoy a similar standard of living. As Harrison subsequently describes, yeomen 'often, setting their sons to the schools, to the universities, and to the Inns of Court, or otherwise leaving them sufficient lands whereupon they may live without labour, do make them by those means to become gentlemen'. In other words, yeomen were socially ambitious and were capable of promoting their sons to the ranks of the gentry by educating them at the right places and providing them with enough land.