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'Real wages and living standards in early modern Normandy'

This paper presents a new estimation of real wages for early modern Normandy with regard to a subsistence line. It uses prices information relating to urban and rural grain markets and newly collected wages from the account books of building sites, parishes' fabrique and private diaries to analyse the evolution of living standards in Normandy before the French Revolution. Recent researches suggest that real wage levels, an important factor in Allen's theory of Industrial Revolution, have been probably underestimated in France outside Paris. We take up the case of Normandy, a wealthy province northwest of Paris that accounted for 10 per cent of the total French population, to bring new evidence to the debate. Normandy was an important centre of textile manufacturing, and by the end of the 18th century, the larger regional exporter of textile products in France. We construct series of real wages for skilled and unskilled workers in both urban and rural areas. We also provide tentative series of real wages for unskilled women, textile workers, navy workers, and stable employment in rural areas. We provide new evidence that workers often worked 270 days or more from the early 18th century onward. We further document that urban workers earned an average premium of 20% and women earned about 50% less than men per day, whereas textile wages were on par with wages in the agricultural sector. The rapid development of the cotton industry in Rouen and its surroundings resulted in labour shortage that forced local authorities to implement new labour regulations. We also shed light on the socio-economic factors, including wars and industrial or commercial shocks, which explain short-term variations in real wages during the 18th century. Finally, we find that real wages were much lower than in London, on par with Italian wages, and between Paris and Strasbourg.