

**Changing Patterns of Female Employment in Rural England,**  
**c.1790-1890**

**by Nicola Verdon**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines a previously neglected aspect of agrarian social and economic history: the work of rural labouring women in nineteenth-century England. The subject is approached firstly through a thorough investigation of a variety of contemporary printed sources: parliamentary papers, census figures, journal articles, books and pamphlet literature. The general pattern of female employment emanating from this analysis suggests a continuity - and in some sectors, an increase - in rural women's work opportunities and wages until the 1840s. Thereafter, the sense of decline in women's economic participation is shown to pervade the printed literature.

This 'official' model of change forms the background to an in-depth analysis of women's work at a local level. A three county inquiry - in the East Riding of Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire - constitutes the main body of the thesis. These counties all lay in arable-dominated eastern England, but the types and amount of work available to women varied significantly. The sexual division of work and wages, the importance of the family economy, the role of ideology and the significance of the lifecycle are all considered using farm and estate accounts, local newspapers, census enumerators books and autobiographical material. The concepts of work and earnings are used throughout in a broad sense to encompass the whole range of tasks women undertook in the formal and informal economies of the nineteenth-century countryside. However the nature of the surviving sources means that women's paid employment in the formal economy of nineteenth-century rural England forms the main focus of the thesis.

Women's employment patterns are shown to differ according to the nature of the agricultural system, the method of hiring labour, the crops grown, and the proximity to industry in the three counties. Contrasts in female employment patterns, both between different counties and within the same county are uncovered. In conclusion, it is argued that archival sources also indicate continuity and perhaps a rise in women's work and earnings opportunities in the period c.1790-1840. In the mid Victorian era the general pattern of women's work shows a considerable decline from the early nineteenth century trend, and in the period c.1870-1900, this decline continues. However archival research shows this pattern was not universal and the contradictions and complexities in women's employment over the nineteenth century are discussed.

## **Table of Contents**

Table of contents	i
Tables in the thesis	iii
Maps in the thesis	iv
Figures in the thesis	v
Acknowledgements	vi
 <b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	
1.1: Overview	1
1.2: Women and work in historical perspective: the urban experience	2
1.3: The debate on rural women's employment	13
1.4: Aims and objectives of the thesis	26
1.5: The uses and limitations of sources	31
1.6: The structure of the thesis	45
 <b>Chapter Two: A Survey of Printed Primary Sources, c.1790-1890</b>	
2.1: The sources	47
2.2: The budget accounts of Davies and Eden	48
2.3: The General Views of Agriculture	60
2.4: The 1834 Poor Law Report	72
2.5: The Royal Commissions	89
2.6: Women 'in their proper sphere': 1870-1900	102
2.7: The official view of women's employment	106
 <b>Chapter Three: The East Riding of Yorkshire</b>	
3.1: The rural East Riding: background	109
3.2: Female farm servants: the experience of work	118
3.3: Servant wages in the nineteenth century	127
3.4: The changing nature of farm service in the late nineteenth century	131
3.5: Female day labourers in agriculture: the seasonality of employment	135
3.6: Day labour payments	146
3.7: Women's work and the family economy	155
3.8: Continuity or change?: some conclusions	166
 <b>Chapter Four: Norfolk</b>	
4.1: Norfolk in the nineteenth century	169
4.2: Agricultural gangs: a reassessment	178
4.3: Day labourers in agriculture: the sexual division of work and wages	191
4.4: Women's work at harvest time	208
4.5: The composition of the female workforce in Norfolk	213
4.6: The importance of informal economies	219



<b>Chapter Five: Bedfordshire</b>	
5.1: Introduction	228
5.2: The rural economy of Bedfordshire in the nineteenth century	232
5.3: Bedfordshire agriculture and women's work	241
5.4: Women's employment in the domestic industries, 1840-1900	257
5.5: Conclusion: the significance of alternative employment opportunities	266
<b>Chapter Six: Conclusion</b>	
6.1: The informal economy: how did rural women 'make shift'?	270
6.2: Economic, social and ideological change: women's work in the formal economy of the nineteenth-century countryside	282
<b>Bibliography</b>	304

### **Tables in the thesis**

2.1: Average annual earnings of men, women and children in the household accounts of Davies and Eden	56
2.2: Wages of general male and female servants in first edition General Views	65
2.3: Wages of general male and female servants in second edition General Views	66
2.4: Male and female agricultural day rates as recorded in the General Views	69
2.5: Women's by-employment by region in 1834	76
2.6: Agricultural work for women by region in 1834	78
2.7: Women's participation in harvest by region in 1834	79
2.8: Women's participation in gleaning by region in 1834	80
2.9: The incidence of women haymaking by region in 1834	82
2.10: Summer and winter employment of women by region in 1834	83
2.11: Average annual earnings of men, women and children by region in 1834	84
2.12: Weekly earnings of agricultural labourers in England, Michaelmas, 1860	97
2.13: Number of agricultural labourers in England and Wales, 1841-1901	105
3.1: Overall averages for day labour payments on East Yorkshire farms	147
3.2: Day rates for male and female labour in East Yorkshire	153
3.3: Total farm expenditure in East Yorkshire	154
3.4: Women workers on Laxton Manor farm, 1883	159
4.1: Percentage of days worked and payments made to female, male and child workers on Norfolk farms	193
4.2: Day rates for male, female and child labour on selected Norfolk farms in the nineteenth century	207
4.3: Female labourers on Flitcham Hall farm, 1851	214
4.4: Female labourers on Old Hall Farm, Hoverton St. Peter, 1871	216
5.1: Annual farm expenditure on male, female and child labour in nineteenth-century Bedfordshire	242
5.2: Nineteenth-century weekly wages in lacemaking, strawplaiting and agriculture	244

### **Maps in the Thesis**

3.1: The regions of East Yorkshire in the early nineteenth century	112
4.1: Norfolk in the nineteenth century	171
5.1: The regions of Bedfordshire in the early nineteenth century	233

### **Figures in the Thesis**

3.1: Movement in servants wages: Driffield, 1870-1890	130
3.2: Number of days worked by day labourers on John Lockwood's farm, Beverley, 1818	137
3.3: Monthly employment of Hannah Moor, John Lockwood's farm, Beverley, 1818	138
3.4: Number of days worked by male, female and child labourers, Saltmarshe, 1840	140
3.5: Average number of days worked per labourer per month, Saltmarshe, 1840	141
3.6: Number of days worked by male, female and child labourers, Sewerby, 1861	144
3.7: Number of days worked by male and female labourers, Sewerby, 1881	144
3.8: Percentage of annual labour payments to women day labourers on selected East Yorkshire farms	148
3.9: Day labour payments by month, Brecks farm, 1851	151
3.10: Day labour payments by month, Saltmarshe, 1820	152
3.11: Women's annual earnings, Saltmarshe, 1840	157
4.1: Annual labour payments to women day labourers on selected Norfolk farms	195
4.2: Days worked by male, female and child labourers, Earsham Home farm, 1807	196
4.3: Days worked by male, female and child labourers, Earsham Home farm, 1837	198
4.4: Total labour payments by month, Earsham Home farm, 1807	199
4.5: Days worked by male, female and child labourers, Stody Hall farm, 1828	201
4.6: Labour payments by month, Stody Hall farm, 1828	202
4.7: Days worked, Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter, 1871	204
4.8: Annual earnings of Fanny and Frances Thistle, Flitcham Hall farm, 1851	215
5.1: Numbers employed in lacemaking and strawplaiting in Bedfordshire, 1841-1901	259
6.1: Labour payments to women day labourers in agriculture in Norfolk and East Yorkshire in the nineteenth century	287
6.2: Labour payments to male day labourers in agriculture in Norfolk and East Yorkshire in the nineteenth century	288
6.3: Percentage of annual labour payments to child workers in Norfolk and East Yorkshire in the nineteenth century	291

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1: Overview**

The central intention of this thesis is to analyse the involvement of labouring women in the rural economy of nineteenth-century England. Women's work in the nineteenth century is an issue that has produced an impressive amount of historical research in recent times but developments in an urban context still dominate the literature.<sup>1</sup> Despite the growth of women's history and agrarian social history in the last thirty years, the role of women workers in rural society still remains largely unexplored. The near-total exclusion of women from previous studies of nineteenth-century rural society and economy is surprising for a number of reasons. In particular it is difficult to gain a complete understanding of the lives of poor labouring families without a full consideration of the economic contribution made by women to the rural household. Furthermore, whilst research on urban based women has initiated debate on the impact of industrialisation, technological change and government legislation on working women across the century, few of these theoretical arguments have been applied to women who lived and worked in the nineteenth-century countryside. This thesis aims to make a contribution towards filling these substantial gaps in the history of nineteenth-century rural England. It does so by analysing in detail the work performed by women from the rural labouring class in three chosen counties, the East Riding of Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire. This introduction will provide a historiographical frame of

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<sup>1</sup> Sommestad, L., 'Rethinking gender and work: rural women in the western world', Gender and History, 7 (1995), 100-5 (p.101).

reference for the thesis, outline the issues and themes that the thesis explores and discuss the sources used in the study.

## **1.2: Women and work in historical perspective: the urban experience**

There is a general paucity of literature on the economic position of rural women in the nineteenth century. This contrasts with the interest shown in women who lived in industrial and urban areas of England.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, awareness of the importance of gender is an increasingly significant part of economic history and this has resulted in a steady move away from analyses that concentrate on the male experience of labour in the formal economy of paid work outside the home.<sup>3</sup> The debates on the impact of industrialisation in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century England are vast and complex. Attention has focused on the standard of living and consumption levels, demography and employment patterns. The specific issue of women's employment has engendered fervid debate in recent years and a number of key themes emerge from the literature.<sup>4</sup> These include changes in technology and the organisation of work, the

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<sup>2</sup> The split between the rural and urban economy was not unequivocal however, particularly in the early phases of industrialisation when much industrial employment was situated in the countryside.

<sup>3</sup> Pat Hudson has shown how research on women and industrialisation has altered since the mid 1980s. Earlier accounts, she argues, were based on attempts to write a parallel history of women to match those of the male experience. These were concerned with the formal economy of waged work outside the home and produced a linear picture of radical change in women's lives. More recent histories have attempted to integrate women's experiences into mainstream accounts and new themes and concerns have emerged as a result. Hudson, P., 'Women and industrialisation', in Purvis, J., ed., Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945. An Introduction (London, 1995), pp.23-50 (pp.25-26).

<sup>4</sup> There are a large number of books and essays which seek to summarise the debates surrounding women's work and the process of industrialisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among the most useful include, Bradley, H., Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment (Cambridge, 1989); Hudson, P., and Lee, W. R., eds., Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective (Manchester, 1990); Humphries, J., "Lurking in the wings...": women in the historiography of the industrial revolution', Business and Economic History, 20 (1991), 32-44; John, A. V., ed., Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England, 1800-1918 (Oxford, 1986); Joyce, P., ed., The Historical Meanings of Work (Cambridge, 1987); Pahl, R. E., Divisions of Labour (Oxford, 1984); Purvis, ed., Women's History, especially ch. 2 and ch. 4; Rendall, J., Women in an Industrialising Society: England, 1750-1880 (Oxford, 1990); Rose, S., "Gender at work": sex, class and industrial capitalism', History Workshop Journal, 21 (1986), 113-131; Sharpe, P., 'Continuity and

separation of home and workplace, the changing sexual division of labour, hierarchies of skill, the role of ideology and the impact of state legislation on female labour. In addition, theories of continuity and change underpin much of the literature that is concerned with women's economic history. Whilst it is not possible to fully explore these controversies here, it is necessary to outline the main recurring issues in order to set the historiographical context for women's employment in the nineteenth century before turning to a consideration of literature on rural women and work.

Historical debates on the impact of industrialisation are frequently polarised: 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic', 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary'.<sup>5</sup> In terms of female employment the 'optimistic' view argues that the industrial revolution gave women more job opportunities and led eventually to their emancipation. R. M. Hartwell, Ivy Pinchbeck, Neil McKendrick and Edward Shorter have all been labelled in this way.<sup>6</sup> The 'pessimist' account suggests that industrial development reduced women's

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change: women's history and economic history in Britain', *Economic History Review*, 68 (1995), 353-369; Thomas, J., 'Women and capitalism: oppression or emancipation? a review article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), 534-549; Valenze, D., *The First Industrial Woman*, (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Cannadine, D., 'The past and the present in the English industrial revolution, 1880-1980', *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), 149-158, for a review of the ways historians have conceptualised the industrial revolution in the past century.

<sup>6</sup> Hartwell writes, 'It was during the Industrial Revolution, and largely because of the economic opportunities it afforded to working-class women, that there was the beginnings of that most important and most beneficial of all social revolutions of the last two centuries, the emancipation of women'. Hartwell, R. M., *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth*, (London, 1971), p.343; Pinchbeck argues that the industrial revolution gave single women 'social and economic independence' whilst married women gained 'since it led to the assumption that men's wages should be paid on a family basis, and prepared the way for the more modern conception that in the rearing of children and in home-making, the married woman makes an adequate economic contribution'. Pinchbeck, I., *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850*, 2nd edn (London, 1981), p.313. McKendrick sees industrialisation as increasing women's earnings which became central to the domestic economy of nineteenth-century families. McKendrick, N., 'Home demand and economic growth: a new view of the role of women and children in the industrial revolution', in McKendrick, N., ed., *Historical Perspectives in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb*, (London, 1974), pp.152-210. Shorter meanwhile argues that individualism of the market place was transferred to family roles and structures during industrialisation, liberating women in the process. Shorter, E., *The Making of the Modern Family*, (London, 1976), pp.255-256.



economic options and left them increasingly dependent on men.<sup>7</sup> Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries have suggested that these disparate views can be reconciled if more attention is focused on the timing of industrialisation and a clear distinction drawn between proto-industry and factory production.<sup>8</sup> Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson have recently argued that most established histories have failed to acknowledge that economic change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries swelled opportunities for women's work in certain regions and sectors.<sup>9</sup> Proto-industry - the production of goods (mainly textiles) in cottage workshops by a cheap labour force supplying national and international markets - placed women's work at a premium. This phase saw the use of female and child labour in market-orientated production on a uniquely large scale compared with previous or subsequent developments.<sup>10</sup> Berg highlights how cheap women's labour was utilised in conjunction with technical and

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<sup>7</sup> Alice Clark is the most widely quoted proponent of the pessimist viewpoint. She argues that the great deterioration of women's position occurred in the seventeenth century as a result of the rise of capitalism. Clark, A., Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century, 2nd edn (London, 1982). Eric Richards also argues that before the industrial revolution there was substantial female participation in the economy which fell off as a result of industrialisation. Richards, E., 'Women in the British economy since about 1700', History, 59 (1974), 337-357. Marxist feminists also espouse a pessimistic view of industrialisation, arguing that the oppression of women was necessary for the operation of industrial capitalism. See Barrett, M., Women's Oppression Today, (London, 1980); Thomas, 'Women and capitalism', p.536.

<sup>8</sup> Horrell, S., and Humphries, J., 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male breadwinner family', Economic History Review, 64 (1991), 89-117 (p.94).

<sup>9</sup> Berg, M., and Hudson, P., 'Rehabilitating the industrial revolution', Economic History Review, 65 (1992) 24-50.

<sup>10</sup> Berg, M., 'Women's work, mechanisation and the early phases of industrialisation in England', in Joyce, ed., Historical Meanings of Work, pp.64-98. The concept of proto-industry is not without controversy and has also generated a large amount of literature. See Mendels, F., 'Proto-industrialisation: the first phase of the industrial process', Journal of Economic History, 32 (1972), 241-261, and a reply, Coleman, D. C., 'Proto-industrialisation: a concept too many', Economic History Review, 36 (1983), 435-448. Good overviews of the uses and limitations of the concept are provided by Houston, R., and Snell, K. D. M., 'Proto-industrialisation?: cottage industry, social change and industrial revolution', Historical Journal, 27 (1984), 473-492; Clarkson, L. A., Proto-industrialisation: The First Phase of Industrialisation?, (London, 1985) and Mager, W., 'Proto-industrialisation and proto-industry: the uses and drawbacks of two concepts', Continuity and Change, 8 (1993), 181-215. One of the most significant drawbacks of the concept is the fact that it is very restricted in the range of occupations it encompasses. Nearly all of them are drawn from the woollen, linen and cotton industries and other sectors are ignored because they do not fit into the dynamic model. See Clarkson, Proto-industrialisation, p.54.

organisational innovation to yield higher profits than were possible under earlier manufacturing regimes.<sup>11</sup> Textiles, especially cotton, was a key sector in this process. When production was transferred to factory based production in this industry, the central role of women continued.<sup>12</sup> By the mid nineteenth century however, the integral role of female and child labour was beginning to decline: the proto-industries were largely collapsing in the face of heavy factory competition and women workers were absent from the radically transformed heavy industries such as shipbuilding, iron and steel which became increasingly important as the century wore on.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in this scenario the process of industrialisation first increased female opportunities only to shut them down at a later stage.

Under some conditions industrial capitalism did result in dramatic changes in the type and processes of women's employment. However whilst women's importance in the textiles sector is acknowledged, there are dangers in concentrating on this form of employment. Female textile workers in factories were untypical and unrepresentative of the nineteenth-century female workforce as a whole. As Michael Fores argues:

Although 'dark satanic mills' may have been the symbol of modern times for England (or Britain)...it seems unlikely that more than about 12% of the British workforce - and probably as few as 10% - were employed in factories by the time the 'revolution' was meant to be over.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Berg, M., The Age of Manufactures 1700-1820: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain, 2nd edn (London, 1994), p.142.

<sup>12</sup> Berg, M., 'What difference did women's work make to the industrial revolution?', History Workshop Journal, 35 (1993), 22-44 (p.27).

<sup>13</sup> Jordan, E., 'The exclusion of women from industry in nineteenth-century Britain', Comparative Studies in Society and History, 31 (1989), 273-296; Berg and Hudson, 'Rehabilitating the industrial revolution', p.37. This does however ignore the new service jobs for women which developed during the second half of the nineteenth century including domestic service, dressmaking and tailoring.

<sup>14</sup> Fores, M., 'The myth of a British industrial revolution', History, 66 (1981), 181-198 (p.191).

The vast majority of women continued to work in their homes, in small workshops, in the sweated trades and in domestic service. Horrell and Humphries, using a database of household budgets drawn from a cross-section of labouring families, argue that with the exception of factory families, women and children did not substantially increase their relative contribution to the household income in most occupational groups in the first half of the nineteenth century. 'If anything', they contend, 'there was a decline, with increasing dependence on male earnings'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover although industrialisation generated significant growth in textile factory jobs for women, at the same time it destroyed a stable by-employment for women in the form of spinning.<sup>16</sup> This loss was devastating for rural women and forms a dominant theme in much contemporary writing in the early nineteenth century. The significance of this decline will be further explored in chapter two.

It is virtually impossible to be certain about eighteenth and nineteenth-century female labour participation rates. Reliable statistics for the eighteenth century are exceedingly uncommon and there are many drawbacks to the nineteenth-century censuses (which will be outlined later in this chapter).<sup>17</sup> However, using the census as a rough indicator, Elizabeth Roberts has shown how industrialisation had little impact on women's participation rates which remained static in the nineteenth century at around 30%.<sup>18</sup> This follows on from the work of Louise Tilly and Joan Scott. In their seminal text Women, Work and Family, Tilly and Scott contend that, on the whole,

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<sup>15</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', p.105.

<sup>16</sup> Humphries, "'Lurking in the wings...'", p.40.

<sup>17</sup> However there are two sets of pre-census listings for Cardington, Bedfordshire in 1782 and Corfe Castle, Dorset in 1790 which provide interesting information on occupational structures. See Saito, O., 'Who worked when: life-time profiles of labour force participation in Cardington and Corfe Castle in the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries', Local Population Studies, 22 (1979), 14-29.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, E., Women's Work, 1840-1940, (London, 1988), p.21.

industrialisation did not change the type of work women did, nor did it greatly increase the percentage of women in work over the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Because of the lack of dependable statistics the overall effects of industrialisation on women workers remains unresolved. The process of industrialisation and the transition to new forms of work and workplaces was very regionally and occupationally specific, a diversity masked by generalisations.

The once-dominant assumption of the increasing separation of home and family has been questioned by recent research. The continued interaction of employment and family in the nineteenth century and the persistence of the household as a site for waged work into the twentieth century is now recognised. Sally Alexander for example, has shown how the high price of rent and fuel in London meant the introduction of mechanised production in a factory based system was not viable in the capital, and few trades were transformed in this way until the twentieth century. The supply of cheap female labour favoured the development of sweated outwork and the work women did, Alexander argues, was either a transference of domestic skills such as cooking and cleaning to the market, or work that had traditionally been done by women as part of domestic manufacture.<sup>20</sup> Sonya Rose has shown how the demand for women to do homework as seamers actually increased during the transition to factory production in

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<sup>19</sup> Tilly, L., and Scott, J., Women, Work and Family, 2nd edn (London, 1987), p.77. Peter Earle's research on women's work in London also backs up this proposition. He argues that the general structure of female occupations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was very similar to that in the 1851 census with women workers concentrated in a narrow range of occupations including domestic service, making and mending clothes, charring and laundry work and nursing. Thus there is 'little evidence of a narrowing of women's employment opportunities as a result of the industrial revolution or Victorian mores'. Earle, P., 'The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', Economic History Review, 62 (1989), 328-353 (p.342).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, S., 'Women's work in nineteenth-century London: a study of the years 1820-1850', in Mitchell, J., and Oakley, A., eds., The Rights and Wrongs of Women, (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp.59-111. See also Schmielechen, J., Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades, (Urbana, 1984).

the Nottinghamshire framework knitting industry. This increased demand was a result of changes in the methods of manufacture.<sup>21</sup> Leonore Davidoff also highlights the interaction between home and work in the nineteenth century by looking at the case of women who took lodgers into their households.<sup>22</sup>

It is now widely recognised that an assessment of the industrial revolution should not be confined entirely to the consideration of broad economic transformations and technological change. The conditions of women's work were not determined solely by economic factors but also by a complex mixture of wider social and cultural attitudes that placed certain restrictions on female labour. Industrialisation did bring some widening of opportunities for women to work outside the home in certain regions and occupations, but it was accompanied by a reworking of the sexual division of labour, as well as the emergence of new ideological and social constraints.

Although proto-industry relied heavily on female labour there is little evidence to suggest that it was accompanied by any wholesale change in the status or perception of women workers. Female labour was cheap and remained so because women's work was seen as low status and supplemental to household income. Women were not released from traditional domestic roles and 'proto-industry added to the drudgery of female existence'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, technological change in the later stages of industrialisation did not affect significantly the type or status of work performed by women. In theory, as Hudson argues, the deskilling of industry which was implicit in many forms of

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<sup>21</sup> Rose, S., 'Proto-industry, women's work and the household economy in the transition to industrial capitalism', *Journal of Family History*, 13 (1988), 181-193.

<sup>22</sup> Davidoff, L., 'The separation of home and work?: landladies and lodgers in nineteenth and twentieth-century England', in Burman, S., ed., *Fit Work for Women* (London, 1979), pp.64-97. Diana Gittins has also revealed the complex interaction between the three spheres of marriage, work and kinship in her essay 'Marital status, work and kinship, 1850-1930', in Lewis, J., ed., *Labour and Love: Women's Experiences of Home and Family, 1850-1940*, (Oxford, 1986), pp.249-265.

<sup>23</sup> Hudson, P., *The Industrial Revolution*, (London, 1992), p.227.

mechanisation, might have been expected to create new openings for women in previously male dominated areas of work as divisions based on physical labour became obsolete. However, the transition to factory production, technical change and the extensive subdivision of labour processes - where these occurred - were accompanied by 'a reworking of gender notions that served to retain the more prestigious and better-paid work for men'.<sup>24</sup> The meanings attached to the notion of 'skill' were ideologically constructed and new types of skill networks and labour hierarchies emerged in factory settings.<sup>25</sup> Nancy Grey Osterud has analysed gender divisions in the Leicester hosiery industry during its transition from outwork to factory production in the nineteenth century. She argues that the gender division of labour was 'amplified' and 'sharpened', when production moved outside the home into the factory. This move created gender-defined work that provided the basis for a customary woman's wage, paid at a lower rate than the male wage.<sup>26</sup> Catherine Hall has similarly shown how the sexual division of labour was reworked in cotton textiles as changes in technology and location of work occurred. Thus men monopolised mule spinning in the factories and the newly formed male unions operated limitations on entry to the trade as a protective measure.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hudson, Industrial Revolution, p.229.

<sup>25</sup> Important discussions of skill and its meanings can be found in Phillips, A., and Taylor, B., 'Sex and skill: notes towards a feminist economics', Feminist Review, 6 (1980), 79-88; Cockburn, C., Brothers: Male Dominance and Technical Change, (London, 1983); Lazonick, W., 'Industrial relations and technological change: the case of the self-acting mule', Cambridge Journal of Economics, 3 (1979), 231-262.

<sup>26</sup> Grey Osterud, N., 'Gender divisions and the organisation of work in the Leicester hosiery industry', in John, ed., Unequal Opportunities, pp.45-70 (p.65). Osterud does show how the move from home to factory production was not fully completed until the 1870s however.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, C., 'The home turned upside down?: the working class family in cotton textiles', in Whitelegg, E., et al, eds., The Changing Experience of Women, (Oxford, 1982), pp.17-29. Humphries has attempted a reinterpretation of the sexual division of labour which, she argues, was linked to the control of female sexuality in order to control population growth in times of scarcity. Humphries, J., "...the most free from objection...": the sexual division of labour and women's work in nineteenth-century England', Journal of Economic History, 67 (1987), 929-948 (p.947).

The concept of the family wage - whereby a male worker was paid sufficient to be able to support his family without his wife having to work - although always remaining an ideal rather than a reality, legitimised the continuation of low female wage levels as women were seen as working only as a supplement to the male wage.<sup>28</sup> As the perception of 'work' as the occupation of a family shifted to 'work' as the waged labour of an individual in the nineteenth century, the male wage was prioritised.<sup>29</sup> Women were viewed as dependants, supported by their husbands or fathers. Men thus largely retained their ability to define their superior social status through work, whereas women's standing in the labour market continued to be defined through their domestic and reproductive responsibilities. Moreover, protective legislation singled women out for the first time as a group requiring special protection, further reinforcing the belief that women's roles should be confined to the domestic sphere. This placed constraints on when women could enter the workforce and the nature of the waged work they could perform.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Humphries argues that the family wage was not a sexist device adopted by nineteenth-century working class men, but a strategy adopted by men and women against the exploitative capitalist system. Humphries, J., 'Protective legislation, the capitalist state and working class men: the case of the 1842 mines regulation act', Feminist Review, 7 (1981), 1-33. This is criticised by Harold Benenson who argues female textile workers in Lancashire did not embrace the concept as it would have meant job losses. See Benenson, H., 'The "family wage" and working women's consciousness in Britain, 1880-1914', Politics and Society, 19 (1991), 71-108. Humphries view is also criticised by Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh who argue the concept enforced the oppression of women and increased dependency on men. Barrett, M., and McIntosh, M., 'The "family wage"', in Whitelegg et al, eds., Changing Experience of Women, pp.71-87. See also Land, H., 'The family wage', Feminist Review, 6 (1980), 55-77; Seccombe, W., 'Patriarchy stabilised: the construction of the male breadwinner wage norm in nineteenth-century Britain', Social History, 11 (1986), 53-76; Rose, S., 'Gender antagonism and class conflict: exclusionary strategies of male trade unions in nineteenth-century Britain', Social History, 13 (1988), 191-208 and Clark, A., The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class, (London, 1995), ch.7.

<sup>29</sup> For an interesting discussion of the evolution of the concept of the 'wage' see Rule, J., The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England, 1750-1850, (London, 1986), ch.4.

<sup>30</sup> Humphries, 'Protective legislation'. John, A. V., By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coalmines, (London, 1980) traces the evolution of miners' resistance to women workers in the coal industry.

Notions such as the male breadwinner became instruments of power in the nineteenth century and were sustained and endorsed by the growing strength of the domestic ideal for women. Put simply this belief situated women in the private sphere of home, dependent on men who went out into the public sphere of work.<sup>31</sup> Many of these ideological constructs were not unique to the nineteenth century. However as society became increasingly urbanised and class based, working women emerged as a 'problem' and a threat, and it is within this context that especially elaborate expressions of women's 'proper' place were articulated. The domestic ideology affected many prevalent attitudes to female work in the nineteenth century, although how far women themselves colluded with the attitudes of employers and male trade unionists is unclear. However, Roberts has suggested that many working class women expressed ambiguous attitudes to their work throughout the century, and in many respects perceived their liberation in terms of a move back into the home, not into paid employment outside the household.<sup>32</sup>

Historians such as Judith Bennett have employed the concept of patriarchy to explain women's subordinate position in the nineteenth-century labour market.<sup>33</sup> Judith Lown describes patriarchy as a 'hierarchical system whereby adult male men occupy superordinate positions of power over women, children and younger men'. Paternalism, on the other hand, with its reliance on personal ties of dependency and deference, 'is

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<sup>31</sup> Hall, C., 'The early formation of Victorian domestic ideology', in Burman, ed., Fit Work for Women, pp.15-32. Hall argues that although many of the ideas propounded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were formulated by Puritans a century earlier they were reclaimed and strengthened by the new bourgeoisie who emerged as a result of industrialisation. See also Vickery, A., 'Golden age to separate spheres?: a review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', Historical Journal, 36 (1993), 383-414 which is a critical review of the two concepts.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, Women's Work, p.58.

<sup>33</sup> Bennett, J., 'Women's history: a study in continuity and change', Women's History Review, 2 (1993), 173-184. See Beechey, V., 'On patriarchy', Feminist Review, 3 (1979), 66-82, for a discussion of the different approaches to the analysis of the concept of patriarchy.



one form of legitimisation that holders of patriarchal power adopt'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, scholars such as Lown argue the action of patriarchy forms a 'central axis of historical and social change'.<sup>35</sup> In her work on the Courtauld's silk factory in Halstead, Essex, Lown highlights how patriarchal family relations were reformulated in the factory setting, where workplace supervision and hierarchies replicated the power structures of the family, with the employer as patriarch at the head of the system. She argues:

In the social and economic transformation which was to alter the productive and reproductive arrangement of emergent capitalist societies, patriarchal interests were at the very centre of the struggles reshaping the class and gender hierarchies.<sup>36</sup>

Much of the literature on women's employment in the industrial era has been concerned with either the direction of change or the underlying continuities of work patterns. The debate has recently re-emerged within the pages of Women's History Review. Bennett argues that continuity is the dominant theme when women's employment is placed in a long-term perspective and affirms the endurance of patriarchy across the centuries.<sup>37</sup> Bridget Hill meanwhile contends that those who argue for continuities ignore processes such as capitalism and industrialisation and deny that economic factors were crucial in shaping women's roles.<sup>38</sup> Evidently social, cultural and ideological factors have to be incorporated into the economic history of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to provide a clearer analysis. Pamela Sharpe maintains that by doing this, 'we no longer need be hampered by overarching narratives

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<sup>34</sup> Lown, J., 'Not much a factory, more a form of patriarchy: gender and class during industrialisation', in Gamarnikow, E., et al, eds., Gender, Class and Work (London, 1983), pp.28-45 (p.29).

<sup>35</sup> Lown, 'Not much a factory', p.35.

<sup>36</sup> Lown, 'Not much a factory', pp.43-4. See also her book based on the Halstead silk factory, Women and Industrialisation: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England, (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, 'Women's history'.

<sup>38</sup> Hill, B., 'Women's history: a study in change, continuity or standing still?', Women's History Review, 2 (1993), 5-22.

of “continuity” versus “change”, leading us to an understanding of individual experiences within the broad framework of the economic past’.<sup>39</sup>

### **1.3: The debate on rural women’s employment**

Writing on rural England has tended to fall into two camps: those interested in the activity of farming and those more concerned with the wider social and cultural aspects of the countryside. One factor uniting the two groups is that both have tended to ignore the gender aspect of agrarian history and there has been relatively little written on the role of women workers in the nineteenth-century English countryside.

The timing of the ‘agricultural revolution’ has been a dominant theme in agrarian history in the twentieth century. Early accounts, such as that by Lord Ernle, stressed the role of technological change and new crops in the period 1760 to 1840, and the ‘Great Men’ who implemented them. These were facilitated by changes in the institutional structure of farming - especially parliamentary enclosure - as common property rights had hitherto inhibited innovation.<sup>40</sup> This view of the agricultural revolution remained the consensus opinion until the 1960s when it was undermined on several grounds. J. D. Chambers and Gordon Mingay showed how eighteenth-century changes could be traced back to the seventeenth century and earlier, although they still placed the revolution in the century after 1750, and cited new fodder crops and rotations, convertible husbandry and parliamentary enclosure as its most significant factors.<sup>41</sup> Eric Kerridge meanwhile, argued the revolution took place between 1560 and 1673, whilst E. L. Jones contended

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<sup>39</sup> Sharpe, ‘Continuity and change’, p.364.

<sup>40</sup> Ernle, Lord., English Farming Past and Present, 6th edn, (London, 1961).

<sup>41</sup> Chambers, J. D., and Mingay, G. E., The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880, (London, 1966).

that the period 1650 to 1750 witnessed the zenith of agricultural change.<sup>42</sup> Thus by the 1970s, the period of the agricultural revolution had been stretched from the mid sixteenth century to the mid nineteenth century. Most recently however, Mark Overton has reinstated the case for the agricultural revolution taking off in the period after 1750. It was not until after 1750, he argues, that the dramatic and unprecedented improvements in output, land productivity and labour productivity associated with equally dramatic changes in husbandry were underway on a broad scale.<sup>43</sup>

What were the wider effects of this process of revolution on those labouring men and women who lived in the countryside in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? The first comprehensive attempt to trace the history of the agricultural worker was William Hasbach's A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, which was published in English in 1908.<sup>44</sup> He attempted to chart the progress of the labouring class from the Black Death to the end of the nineteenth century. He argued that loss of common land during enclosure led to the 'demoralisation' of the 'agricultural proletariat' which they endeavoured to overturn during the remainder of the nineteenth century. This critique of agricultural improvement was carried forward by J. L. and Barbara Hammond in The Village Labourer.<sup>45</sup> This book presents a picture of an efficient common land system which was destroyed by enclosure. Consequently the

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<sup>42</sup> Kerridge, E., The Agricultural Revolution, (London, 1967); Jones, E. L., Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution, (London, 1974).

<sup>43</sup> Overton, M., Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500-1850, (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>44</sup> Hasbach, W., A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, 1st edn 1894 (London, 1966). There are several other books published around the turn of the century which attempt an overview of the history of the rural labourer. These include, Garnier, R. M., Annals of the British Peasantry, (London, 1895); Beverstock, Rev. A. H., The English Agricultural Labourer, (London, 1912); Fordham, M., and Fordham, T. R., The English Agricultural Labourer, 1300-1925, (London, 1925) and Green, F. E., A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, 1870-1920, (London, 1920), which concentrates on the growth of agricultural trade unionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hasbach's remains the most comprehensive account however.

<sup>45</sup> Hammond, J. L., and Hammond, B., The Village Labourer, (London, 1911).

peasantry were driven from the land and the foundations of agrarian capitalism - dominated by a three tier social structure of landlord, large tenant farmer and landless labourer - were laid. In the aftermath of this, a bitter outburst of rioting, the 'Last Labourers Revolt', shook southern England in the early 1830s.

A critique of the Hammonds' account of enclosure is central to Chambers and Mingay's account of the agricultural revolution.<sup>46</sup> From this work a very different picture of the agricultural history of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century emerged in which enclosure replaced an inefficient and outdated productive system with a highly successful one, providing the basis for the prosperity of the mid Victorian period. According to Chambers and Mingay the costs of this change were exaggerated by the Hammonds', and enclosure meant 'more food for the growing population, more land under cultivation and, on balance, more employment in the countryside...'.<sup>47</sup>

This view of agrarian history in the nineteenth century has not gone unchallenged and since the 1960s the revival of social history has produced much useful work which focuses on the history of rural England 'from below'. An important recent study by J. M. Neeson has questioned the nature and effects of enclosure on small landowners and commoners in the Midlands region. 'In most villages studied', she argues,

...parliamentary enclosure destroyed the old peasant economy  
...by more than decimating small occupiers and landlords...  
and by expropriating landless commoners on whom much  
of the old economy had depended.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> On the enclosure debate see also Chambers, J. D., 'Enclosure and labour supply in the industrial revolution' Economic History Review, 5 (1953), 319-343; Orwin, C. S., and Whetham, E. H., A History of British Agriculture, 1846-1914, (London, 1964); Kerridge, The Agricultural Revolution; Mingay, G. E., Enclosure and the Small Farmers in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, (London, 1968); Yelling, Y. A., Common Field and Enclosure in England, 1450-1850, (London, 1977); Turner, M., English Parliamentary Enclosure: Its Historical Geography and Economic History, (Folkestone, 1980); Beckett, J. V., The Agricultural Revolution, (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Chambers and Mingay, Agricultural Revolution, p.104.

<sup>48</sup> Neeson, J. M., Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820, (Cambridge, 1993), p.223.

In books by George Rudé, Eric Hobsbawm and A. J. Peacock, the social history of the rural labourer is viewed through a particular episode: the Swing riots in south-eastern England in the 1830s and the 'Bread and Blood' riots in East Anglia in 1816.<sup>49</sup> An impressive body of research on rural crime and social protest has followed. Barry Reay's The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers focuses on the uprising of Kent labourers in 1838 whilst John Archer's 'By a Flash and a Scare' looks beyond isolated events and focuses on the wider incidence of incendiarism, animal maiming and poaching in nineteenth-century East Anglia.<sup>50</sup> The history of union activity among agricultural labourers has been an additional area of interest and key texts by Alun Howkins and Howard Newby analyse the links between farmworkers, trade unionism and political radicalism in late nineteenth-century East Anglia.<sup>51</sup> Finally a collection of essays on class and conflict in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century countryside has been edited by Mick Reed and Roger Wells, who conclude:

we are satisfied that the debate to date has achieved something, if nothing more than some acceptance that the study of the history of rural communities should comprise much more than the traditional emphasis on agriculture and its development.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hobsbawm, E. J., and Rudé, G. E., Captain Swing, (London, 1969); Peacock, A. J., Bread or Blood: A Study of the Agrarian Riots in East Anglia in 1816, (London, 1965).

<sup>50</sup> Reay, B., The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural Life and Protest in Nineteenth-Century England, (Oxford, 1990); Archer, J., 'By a Flash and a Scare': Incendiarism, Animal Maiming and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870, (Oxford, 1990). The historiography of rural discontent is a growing field and includes Dunbabin, J. P. D., 'The "revolt of the field": the agricultural labourers movement in the 1870s', Past and Present, 26 (1963), 68-97; Dunbabin, J. P. D., 'The incidence and organisation of agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s', Agricultural History Review, 16 (1968), 114-141; Dunbabin, J. P. D., Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain, (London, 1974); Wells, R., 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700-1850', Journal of Peasant Studies, 6 (1979), 115-139; Charlesworth, A., 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700-1850: a comment', Journal of Peasant Studies, 8 (1980), 101-111; Wells, R., 'Social conflict and protest in the English countryside in the early nineteenth century: a rejoinder', Journal of Peasant Studies, 8 (1981), 514-530; Charlesworth, A., An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548-1900, (London, 1983); Muskett, P., 'The East Anglian agrarian riots of 1822', Agricultural History Review, 32 (1984), 1-13; Rule, J., and Wells, R., Crime, Protest and Popular Politics in Southern England, 1740-1850, (London, 1997).

<sup>51</sup> Howkins, A., Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923, (London, 1985); Newby, H., The Deferential Worker, (Harmondsworth, 1977).

<sup>52</sup> Reed, M., and Wells, R., eds., Class Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880, (London, 1990), p.215.

However a significant omission from most of these texts is a consideration of the role of women, as workers, as rioters or as agents of social change. This is despite the fact that Raphael Samuel, writing in 1975, had exposed the exclusion of women from working class history and singled women out as worthy of academic attention.<sup>53</sup>

More general texts aimed at a wider audience look at the nature of change in rural communities from the viewpoint of all members of society. These include the numerous volumes produced by Pamela Horn and Mingay.<sup>54</sup> Such works do acknowledge women's contributions to the family income through paid work in agriculture and cottage industries, but it is a rather cursory treatment. The two volumes The Victorian Countryside, edited by Mingay, includes only one essay specifically devoted to female labour.<sup>55</sup> In the more recent Agrarian History of England and Wales, the massive volume six, covering the years 1750 to 1850, includes a section on the 'Employment of women and children' that runs to just five pages.<sup>56</sup> One of the few studies which has attempted an overview of the working lives of rural women from all social groups is Horn's Victorian Countrywomen. She looks at the working lives of professional women, farming women, domestic servants, agricultural labourers and women involved

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<sup>53</sup> Samuel, R., ed., Village Life and Labour, (London, 1975), p.xvii. This volume is sensitive to the role of women in rural areas and includes the essay by Jennie Ketteringham, 'Country work girls in nineteenth-century England', pp.73-138, which has sections on farm work, gangs, rural industries and morals. Karen Sayer has more recently researched the resistance of rural women in Chipping Norton in 1873 and the response to it by the radical, mainstream and feminist press. Sayer, K., 'Field-faring women: the resistance of women who worked in the fields of nineteenth-century England', Women's History Review, 2 (1993), 185-198.

<sup>54</sup> See for example Horn, P., Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside, (London, 1976); Horn, P., The Rural World, 1780-1850: Social Change in the English Countryside, (London, 1980); Horn, P., The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales, (London, 1984); Horn, P., Life and Labour in Rural England, 1760-1850, (London, 1987); Mingay, G. E., Rural Life in Victorian England, (London, 1976); Mingay, G. E., A Social History of the English Countryside, (London, 1991).

<sup>55</sup> Mingay, G. E., ed., The Victorian Countryside, 2 vols (London, 1981). See Horn, P., 'Women's cottage industries', vol. 1, pp.341-352. Howkins' contribution to this project, "In the sweat of thy face": the labourer and work', vol. 2, pp.506-520, does briefly mention the position of female workers.

<sup>56</sup> Armstrong, A., 'Labour 1: rural population growth, systems of employment, and incomes', in Mingay, G. E., ed., The Agrarian History of England and Wales, vol. VI, 1750-1850, (Cambridge, 1989), pp.641-728, (pp.683-688).

in rural industries. Although it provides much interesting material, the study is largely unsuccessful because it offers little interpretative perspective.<sup>57</sup>

A number of other recent surveys of rural England do provide a good sense of the chronology of nineteenth-century agriculture from the viewpoint of the labouring poor, and are also more sensitive to the position of women. Keith Snell's Annals of the Labouring Poor seeks to analyse the impact of long-term social and economic changes on the labouring poor in the face of advancing capitalist agriculture in south-eastern England. The book includes chapters on women's labour and unemployment, the decline of farm service, apprenticeship of women, enclosure and poor relief.<sup>58</sup> Alan Armstrong's Farmworkers examines the experiences of farm labourers in four contexts: the home, workplace, the local community and wider social environment.<sup>59</sup> He details changes in the social and economic positions of farmworkers from the emergence of a fully fledged commercial farming system in the late eighteenth century, through the impact of war between 1793 and 1815, the golden age of mid Victorian agriculture, to the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century. Sensitive to regional and local variations, a consideration of shifts in female employment patterns is included within this analysis. In a similar vein, Howkins' Reshaping Rural England details the regional nature of female labour and wages within his general discussion on the changing nature of the English countryside in the period 1850 to 1925.<sup>60</sup>

However in many respects Pinchbeck's research on rural women still remains the major piece of analysis and provides a starting point for most historians interested in the

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<sup>57</sup> Horn, P., Victorian Countrywomen, (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Snell, K. D. M., Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900, (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>59</sup> Armstrong, A., Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History, 1770-1980, (London, 1988).

<sup>60</sup> Howkins, A., Reshaping Rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925, (London, 1991). See also Newby, H., Country Life: A Social History of Rural England, (London, 1987).

question of women's labour in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century countryside.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, as Hill has pointed out:

The fact that today any investigation of women's work...must start with a study that is now over half a century old...is a tribute to the continuing importance of that study and a comment on the paucity of work that has followed it.<sup>62</sup>

Following on from Pinchbeck's analysis, the theory of decline in women's work in nineteenth-century agriculture is firmly established in the historical literature.

Pinchbeck writes, 'By the end of the nineteenth century women had almost ceased to be employed as wage-earners in agriculture', and as a consequence, 'women day labourers as a class disappeared'.<sup>63</sup> Later writers express similar sentiments. Jones for example suggests that 'the voluntary withdrawal of female and child labour', was a beneficial change in line with trends such as 'the fading away of poaching gangs'.<sup>64</sup> Mingay, echoing Pinchbeck, argues that by the latter decades of the nineteenth century 'the troops of women who could once be seen helping on the farms had disappeared'.<sup>65</sup> Snell, using rural settlement examinations looks at long-term changes in the roles of women and men in the agricultural workforce between 1690 and 1860.<sup>66</sup> He argues the decline in work opportunities for women labourers in the nineteenth century was the continuation of a prolonged process in south-eastern England beginning from the mid eighteenth century. The expansion of grain production was accompanied by a greater demand for male harvest labour and heavier technology. Thus women's harvest employment was progressively marginalised as the sickle was replaced by the heavier

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<sup>61</sup> Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*.

<sup>62</sup> Hill, B., *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, 2nd edn (London, 1994), p.1.

<sup>63</sup> Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, p.110.

<sup>64</sup> Jones, E. L., *The Development of English Agriculture, 1815-1873*, (London, 1968), p.32.

<sup>65</sup> Mingay, *Social History of the English Countryside*, p.171.

<sup>66</sup> Snell, *Annals*, ch. 1.



scythe for the harvesting of wheat and rye. Consequently, female employment was increasingly confined to participation in spring weeding and early summer haymaking. Snell contends that the sexual specialisation of agricultural labour did not stem from Victorian attitudes concerning the proper place of women, and qualitative evidence such as the 1843 Royal Commission on Women and Children in Agriculture merely traced the completion of a long-term process begun a century earlier.

Snell's theory on the effect of changing agricultural technology on women's employment and the sexual division of labour follows on from the work of Michael Roberts. Roberts argues that with surplus grain production in early eighteenth-century agriculture, the scythe was extended from its traditional use for barley, oats, peas and beans to the harvesting of wheat and rye. This had the effect of relegating women harvest workers to the subsidiary task of raking and 'as the male-dominated corn-scythe became more popular the value of men's wages was enhanced and women had to start looking elsewhere for well paid employment'.<sup>67</sup> This point is also made by Eve Hostettler who has assessed the impact of heavier hand tools and machinery on the demand for female harvest labour in the nineteenth century using illustrations from Henry Stephen's The Book of the Farm. With the advent of the scythe, she concludes, 'the woman's role in the harvest field began to change from cutting and gathering to gathering and making straw bands', whilst the introduction of the reaping machine 'removed at a stroke...the farmer's need to find extra labour every year at harvest time'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Roberts, M., 'Sickles and scythes: women's work and men's work at harvest time', History Workshop Journal, 7 (1979), 3-28 (p.19).

<sup>68</sup> Hostettler, E., 'Gourlay Steell and the sexual division of labour', History Workshop Journal, 4 (1977), 95-100 (p.97).

Snell's hypothesis has been uncritically accepted by many historians who use the notion of a decline in female employment opportunities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century countryside to define their own frameworks. Hill, in her investigation of eighteenth-century women writes:

Thus, with the specialisation on corn production and the consequent decline of traditional areas of agriculture in which women's labour had predominated, the potential in the south and east for a wide participation of women in agricultural labour was in decline long before the process of industrialisation got under way.<sup>69</sup>

In her wide-ranging study of the 'industrial woman', Deborah Valenze argues that,

...for women, the chances of finding work in agriculture, at least in the major corn-growing regions of the south and east, grew slimmer toward the end of the eighteenth century and worsened later on.<sup>70</sup>

The consequences of this agricultural transformation on labouring women, she concludes, marginalised women who 'lost their claim to the traditional rural images of female productivity'.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Sally McMurry contrasts the persistence of women's role in English cheesemaking throughout the nineteenth century with their 'early disappearance' from arable agriculture which, she argues, has been 'convincingly' documented by Snell.<sup>72</sup>

However, whilst the theory of decline in women's agricultural work is sometimes indiscriminately incorporated into historical texts, recent research has suggested that historians have severely under-estimated the real size of the female labour force in the nineteenth-century countryside. Armstrong has reviewed Snell's 'substantial but

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<sup>69</sup> Hill, Women, Work and Sexual Politics, pp.53-4.

<sup>70</sup> Valenze, Industrial Woman, p.45.

<sup>71</sup> Valenze, Industrial Woman, p.47.

<sup>72</sup> McMurry, S., 'Women's work in agriculture: divergent trends in England and America, 1800-1930', Comparative Studies in Society and History, 34 (1997), 248-270 (p.269).

controversial work'<sup>73</sup>, stressing the danger in the arguments being 'pressed too far'.<sup>74</sup> Resting only on evidence from south-eastern England and not incorporating detailed parish to parish demographic analysis, Snell's argument also 'implies that women had little choice in the matter'.<sup>75</sup> Armstrong shows how most returns to the Poor Law inquiry outside the eastern counties in the 1830s stated that women were engaged in harvesting, even in southern counties such as Sussex and Kent where the 'surplus population' problem was said to be particularly acute.<sup>76</sup> Sharpe has also questioned the orthodox account of technological change, the growing sexual specialisation of agricultural work and the subsequent impact on the employment of women on a number of grounds. Firstly, the notion of sexual equality in agricultural work which Snell argues was in evidence before the mid eighteenth century is undermined by studies that indicate 'gender-specific employment patterns in day labour' on sixteenth and seventeenth-century farms.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, Sharpe points out that new agricultural technology was slowly implemented in the nineteenth century and in Essex at least, there is 'little wholesale evidence for the replacement of the female reaper by the male mower or for any other determinative technological change in the Essex farm accounts'.<sup>78</sup> Finally, Snell's main source - settlement examinations - refer to the work of

<sup>73</sup> Armstrong, Farmworkers, p.13.

<sup>74</sup> Armstrong, Farmworkers, p.40.

<sup>75</sup> Armstrong, Farmworkers, p.97.

<sup>76</sup> Armstrong, 'Labour 1', in ed., Mingay, Agrarian History of England and Wales, VI, p.685.

<sup>77</sup> Sharpe, P., Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850, (Basingstoke, 1996), p.74. These studies include, Hassell-Smith, A., 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk [Part 1]', Continuity and Change, 4 (1989) 11-52; Hassell-Smith, A., 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk [Part 2]', Continuity and Change 4 (1989), 367-394; Sharpe, P., 'Time and wages of west country workfolks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', Local Population Studies, 55 (1995), 66-69; Shammas, C., 'The world women knew: women workers in the north of England during the seventeenth century', in Dunn, R. S., and Dunn, M. M., eds., The World of William Penn, (Philadelphia, 1986), pp.99-114.

<sup>78</sup> Sharpe, Adapting to Capitalism, p.75. This argument follows on from the earlier hypothesis of E. J. T. Collins. He shows the slow implementation of different hand tools in nineteenth-century British agriculture. Thus 'on many farms sickle, reap-hook, bagging-hook and scythe were viewed, for a time at least, as

female farm and domestic servants, data that can 'tell us very little about changes in women's agricultural work and the sexual division of labour'.<sup>79</sup> Sharpe argues that the change in seasonal employment which Snell detected, was not as a result of changing participation in agricultural tasks, but represented increasing employment opportunities in 'seasonally-specific alternative employments', notably in the fashion and service trades in the counties surrounding London.<sup>80</sup>

So, recent studies on female employment in rural England have begun to highlight the regional diversity of working patterns. What emerges is a model of change that was not one of straightforward decline over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as Snell, Hill and others have suggested. Armstrong argues for the increasing involvement of family and juvenile labour in agriculture after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act implemented more stringent conditions of relief in the countryside.<sup>81</sup> Judy Gielgud's research on women employed in agriculture in Northumberland and Cumbria shows women remained a vital component of the workforce into the twentieth century. The number of female day labourers, she argues, increased in regularity and diversity during the first half of the nineteenth century as improving farming methods spread. The bondager system meanwhile provided regular work for independent women on terms that were virtually equivalent to those of a man throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Mary Bouquet argues that women in

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interchangeable tools, as complementary elements within the spectrum of available hand-tool techniques, the exact mix in any one season being determined by labour supply and crop condition'. Collins, E. J. T., 'Harvest technology and labour supply in Britain, 1790-1870', *Economic History Review*, 22 (1969), 453-473 (p.462).

<sup>79</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.75.

<sup>80</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.76.

<sup>81</sup> Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, p.79. This is a point also argued by Pinchbeck who quotes supporting evidence from the annual reports of the Poor Law Commissioners after 1834. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, pp.84-6.

<sup>82</sup> Gielgud, J., 'Nineteenth-century farmwomen in Northumberland and Cumbria: the neglected workforce', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1992). See especially ch. 3 and ch. 5.

Devon in the first half of the nineteenth century were employed as day labourers on a regular and constant basis throughout the year, and that male and female unemployment patterns followed the same annual pattern 'with minor variations'.<sup>83</sup> According to Bouquet this sequence altered only in the late nineteenth century when women workers became more specialised within the dairy and household, marking,

the beginning of a gender division of labour related...to the decline of female productivity in cultivation activities and...to the development of the milk industry in which women initially played a significant role.<sup>84</sup>

Celia Miller meanwhile reveals a substantial number of female day labourers being employed on mixed arable and pasture farms in the Cotswolds region of late nineteenth-century Gloucestershire. Women were employed on a wide range of agricultural tasks including reaping and threshing, their peak period of activity extending into late summer harvesting. Thus, she concludes, 'the sexual division of labour was still incomplete in the last decade of the nineteenth century'.<sup>85</sup>

It is now becoming clear that there were enormous regional differences in rural women's employment in nineteenth-century England. Studies such as Miller's, Gielgud's and Bouquet's serve as models and sound a cautionary warning to historians who have embraced Snell's decline theory.<sup>86</sup> Moreover attention is now being paid to

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<sup>83</sup> Bouquet, M., Family, Servants and Visitors: The Farm Household in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Devon, (Norwich, 1985), p.40.

<sup>84</sup> Bouquet, Family, Servants and Visitors, p.44.

<sup>85</sup> Miller, C., 'The hidden workforce: female fieldworkers in Gloucestershire, 1870-1901', Southern History, 6 (1984), 139-155 (p.151). This article is part of her thesis which assesses the impact of agricultural change in nineteenth-century Gloucestershire on all members of the agricultural community. Miller, C., 'Farm work and farm workers in Victorian Gloucestershire', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bristol, 1980).

<sup>86</sup> Reay in his work on nineteenth-century Kent has also pointed out that extensive hop and fruit growing ensured an important role for women in the cycle of employment in the county. Thus, he contends, away from the pure corn lands of southern England, Snell's argument does not stand up. See Reay, Last Rising of Agricultural Labourers, p.45 and Reay, B., Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930, (Cambridge, 1996), pp.109-112.

the more informal ways in which rural women made economic contributions to labouring households. Humphries for example highlights how women and children were the main exploiters of common rights in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, allowing them to substantially contribute to family earnings. The loss of these rights led to the increased dependence of families on wages and wage earners.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Peter King's work shows how gleaning, a customary task performed by women and children, remained a significant source of income for many families throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Finally Reed's exploratory work on the nature of non-market orientated exchange channels between small rural producers in the nineteenth century may have important implications for research into women's neighbourhood networks in the countryside.<sup>89</sup> Women's labour did not always readily translate into wages, and evidently a broad definition of 'employment' is necessary when considering women's economic activities in nineteenth-century rural England.

A discussion of previous research on women's employment illustrates the traditions that have helped to shape the method and focus of this thesis. Having explored the approaches adopted by other historians, it is now necessary to relate the thesis more directly to these historiographical traditions and comment upon the main focus and concerns of the study.

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<sup>87</sup> Humphries, J., 'Enclosures, common rights and women: the proletarianisation of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *Journal of Economic History*, 50 (1990), 17-42.

<sup>88</sup> King, P., 'Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850', *Economic History Review*, 64 (1991), 461-476.

<sup>89</sup> Reed, M., "'Gnawing it out": a new look at economic relations in nineteenth-century rural England', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 83-94.

#### **1.4: Aims and objectives of the thesis**

Our knowledge of women's employment in the nineteenth-century countryside is still far from complete. Indeed the presence of much accessible contemporary published material has given the impression of a more consummate understanding than is actually the case. Too many historians have closed-off issues which are central to a consideration of rural female employment patterns. The decline of women's work, in all its manifestations, is irrefutably accepted by many and labouring women are too often depicted as an undifferentiated group of workers without agency. A number of recent studies have begun to question received wisdoms on women's work in nineteenth-century agriculture and these serve as examples on which to build. Miller concluded her research into late nineteenth-century Gloucestershire by surmising:

It is difficult to believe that the experience of one county was unique...and it is tempting to speculate that research along similar lines in other countries with a high proportion of arable and mixed farms would show similar results.<sup>90</sup>

However whilst research along these lines has been done on a county-basis, no study has yet attempted a detailed analysis of the whole range of occupations rural women participated in, nor has a comparative regional synthesis been forthcoming. Karen Sayer's study of rural women is loosely based on a consideration of three counties - Norfolk, Northumberland and Somerset - although she looks specifically at the representations of women and not the actual work they performed.<sup>91</sup> There are still several omissions evident within the current literature on nineteenth-century women's employment in the countryside which this thesis aims to rectify.

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<sup>90</sup> Miller, 'Hidden workforce', p.153.

<sup>91</sup> Sayer, K., Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century. (Manchester, 1995).

Historians such as Edward Higgs and Hill have highlighted problems in applying narrow econometric definitions of 'work' and 'occupations' to the study of women's labour in the nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup> This thesis is therefore based on a broad understanding of the concepts of 'employment' and 'earnings' to include where relevant not only paid work in agriculture, paid work in rural industries and service in husbandry, but also the more informal ways in which women contributed economically to rural labouring households. These include the exploitation of common rights such as gleaning, the cultivation of allotments and cottage gardens and the rearing of animals. Such an approach allows the connection between different types of employment, and the interaction between the informal and formal economies to be addressed. However, surviving sources for the study of women's work in the countryside relate overwhelmingly to waged labour in agriculture, farm service and, to a lesser extent, rural industry. A holistic and systematic analysis of the whole range of tasks undertaken by rural working women in the nineteenth century is therefore unrealistic within the confines of a doctoral thesis. Although contemporary reminiscences and autobiographical writing allow a glimpse into the alternative survival strategies of women and have been used where relevant, it is paid employment in the cash economy that forms the primary focus of the study.

The geographical and chronological boundaries of the thesis means a comparative approach across both time and space can be undertaken. Three counties have been chosen to study in detail. These are the East Riding of Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire. Howkins has noted that much of the discussion on rural labour in the past

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<sup>92</sup> Higgs, E., 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth-century censuses', History Workshop Journal, 23 (1987), 59-82; Hill, B., 'Women, work and the census: a problem for historians of women', History Workshop Journal, 35 (1993), 78-94.



'has centred on southern and eastern England'.<sup>93</sup> In many ways this study is no exception. All three counties chosen for analysis in this study were located east of James Caird's division between the corn and grazing districts of nineteenth-century English agriculture and were dominated by arable farming.<sup>94</sup> However, as Howkins goes on to argue, 'boundaries' in nineteenth-century rural society were as much to do with 'custom, kinship, work and labour processes'.<sup>95</sup> So, whilst the three counties were located within a distinct geographical area - eastern England - and displayed outward similarities in terms of crops and farming methods, significant differences between the counties were present. The persistence of different methods of hiring rural labour, and the contrast in the availability of alternative forms of employment for women outside agriculture in the three counties, means a unique examination of the regional differences in rural women's work is possible. Moreover, there has been little detailed analysis of farm and other archival records from eastern England. The in-depth study of East Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire will also therefore provide a useful comparison to studies that have been carried out on counties in the south-west and far north of England. To fully explore the continuities and changes in patterns of female employment in the three counties a large timescale has been adopted. The thesis is based on the period from the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars in the 1790s to the close of the agricultural depression in the 1890s. Thus, the impact of shifting economic forces, technological innovations and social attitudes on the availability of work for rural women across the nineteenth century forms a central concern of the thesis.

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<sup>93</sup> Howkins, A., 'Labour history and the rural poor, 1850-1980', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 113-122, (p.119).

<sup>94</sup> Caird, J., *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, (London, 1852).

<sup>95</sup> Howkins, 'Labour history', p.120.

On a simple level the thesis is an empirical investigation into the types of labour rural women were employed to do on a day-to-day basis in nineteenth-century East Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire. The experience of work - or lack of work - was one of the defining features of the lives of the labouring poor in the nineteenth-century countryside. The work of women is rarely seen in such terms and is usually relegated to the sidelines of male experience. An exploration of women's employment opportunities is important therefore for a number of reasons. A comparative three county study allows detailed occupational research to be undertaken on a local level. This reveals much about the regional nature of the types of work labouring women were engaged to perform, the terms of their employment and the level of wages paid for female labour. Such an approach, as Horrell and Humphries argue, will 'limit "grand theories" of the causes of women's marginalisation'.<sup>96</sup>

However important an empirical account of women's employment is, the nature of women's labour in the nineteenth-century countryside has to be conceptualised within the broader theoretical debates on women and work. So far this has only been done in the case of changing technologies in nineteenth-century agricultural work - especially harvest work - and the subsequent impact on the nature of women's work. The design of this thesis is therefore based on a number of broad questions. Two key areas of analysis emerge. Firstly the sexual division of labour will be explored. The thesis will attempt to discover whether there was a rigid division between men's work and women's work in the three counties studied, or whether boundaries were more fluid and regionally specific. Whether women's employment in rural England was low paid and labelled as unskilled as it was in most urban occupations in the nineteenth century

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<sup>96</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', p.105.

will also be considered. The issue of continuity and change in women's employment forms the second core concern. The amount of work women performed and the ways this changed over the course of the century will be addressed. The notion of a decline in the participation of women in the formal economy of paid work as farm servants, day labourers in agriculture and workers in domestic industries will be questioned. Other areas of concern have also been investigated. The position of women workers at different stages in the lifecycle is examined. Important variables such as the marital status of women, the number and age of children in a family are considered in order to assess how far women could contribute to the household economy in the nineteenth-century countryside. Whilst a detailed parish-by-parish analysis of demographic trends is not possible within the confines of this thesis, it is important to reveal the context of individual women's lives in order to add flesh to the bare figures of quantitative analysis. In addition the important issue of ideology needs consideration and the impact of changing attitudes to female employment on opportunities for women to work in rural England will be explored. The significance of concepts such as separate spheres, domestic ideology and the family wage to labouring families in the nineteenth-century countryside forms part of this concern.

Looking at women's employment patterns can enhance understanding of broader social and economic trends in the nineteenth-century countryside. Whilst the labour of women forms the central axis of this study, the complex and changing relationship between male, female and child workers in the nineteenth-century rural economy has to be considered. The importance of kinship networks, both in the formal economy of paid work and in the informal economy, are revealed. Indeed, the labour of women and children was often inextricably linked. Women were perceived as the carers and

supervisors of children, and any wages children earned by working alongside their mothers was recognised in labouring households as women's earnings. The questions asked overlap with and contribute to several historical fields and this study can begin to bridge the gaps between economic history, rural history and women's history.

### **1.5: The uses and limitations of sources**

Having outlined some of the areas where the thesis can contribute to historical knowledge, it is necessary to consider the key source material on which this contribution is made. Although sources for the study of women's work in the nineteenth-century countryside are particularly difficult to uncover, evidence does exist to enable the reconstruction of the working lives of labouring women, although it is often of a varied and very fragmentary nature. Official, archival and personal records have all been used and bring to light snippets of information which can reveal a picture of women's work. Official publications such as the nineteenth-century parliamentary papers are among the most accessible sources. Census enumerators books also provide a traditional avenue of research into nineteenth-century occupations. These sources have been extensively used by historians in the past and tend to reinforce the argument that opportunities for women to work productively in the rural economy declined significantly over the course of the nineteenth century. This is not to dismiss these sources outright, but their use in conjunction with other material such as farm records, newspaper reports, contemporary writing and autobiographical material, ensures a move away from the official framework and biases inherent in formal published material.

Census records are still one of the most obtainable and widely used forms of historical document. Much historical research based on census data advancing theories

about the changing structure of women's work, women's participation in the nineteenth-century workforce and the sexual division of labour in different occupations has been produced. Eric Richards' article on women's participation in the British economy is heavily reliant on this source and led him to conclude that,

the most widespread opportunity for female employment was domestic service. This was the largest single occupational category in the Victorian economy...Apart from domestic service, textiles, stitching and washing, there was little else open to women of any class in England before the final decades of the century.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly Michael Anderson utilises mid nineteenth-century enumerators books from Preston in his study of family structure in Lancashire. Within this study data on women, lifecycle and occupations is considered. He argues the reliability of the census 'is usually considered to be high'.<sup>98</sup>

In recent years a considerable body of literature has emerged concerned with highlighting problems associated with using the occupational census records. Higgs in particular has argued that 'the process of accumulating, arranging and analysing census data was not a value-free exercise, especially with regard to the work of women'.<sup>99</sup> The precise meanings that were attached to terms such as 'worker', 'occupation' and 'labour force' are crucial to understanding census material. Hill shows how, from 1841, the values underpinning census collection and analysis were informed by classical economics. Thus 'work' was defined by the fact that it had a market value and could be measured in monetary terms.<sup>100</sup> However, much of the work performed by women in both pre industrial and industrial societies was not of this nature. The multi-

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<sup>97</sup> Richards, 'Women in the British economy', pp.348-9.

<sup>98</sup> Anderson, M., Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire, (Cambridge, 1971).

<sup>99</sup> Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.60.

<sup>100</sup> Hill, 'Women, work and the census', p.81.

occupational, predominately part-time, casual or seasonal work of women in town and countryside alike tended not to be seen as a personal 'occupation' but 'pin money' earned to supplement the male wage. Such work often went unrecorded.

Both Higgs and Hill have highlighted numerous problems associated with census collection and analysis. The whole process of collection and inspection was predominately a male affair and dominated by men who held certain assumptions about the role of women in society.<sup>101</sup> Treatment of women's work depended on the outlook and conventions employed by individual enumerators. Census returns were filled in by the head of household (usually male), and other family members were defined in terms of their relationship to the patriarch. Householders and enumerators varied in the extent to which they regarded women's employment outside the home and duties within it as an 'occupation'. It was often assumed that women were dependants whatever their productive functions, whilst men were classified according to the nature of their work.

These problems were often compounded by the changing and often complex instructions issued to enumerators and householders. The types of labour that were regarded as an 'occupation' changed from census to census and the degree to which the instructions were followed varied extensively. In 1841 compilers were instructed that the 'profession etc' of wives or offspring living with and assisting parents but not apprenticed or receiving wages, 'need not be inserted'.<sup>102</sup> Some interpreted this by leaving the space blank next to wives and thus explains why married women figure so little in the nineteenth-century censuses. In the following three censuses there was some

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<sup>101</sup> Higgs reveals that senior figures at the General Register Office were all male, that enumerators were appointed by male registrars and women were not eligible for this work until 1891. He also argues that the census office regarded motherhood as the prime function of women in the nineteenth century. Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.62.

<sup>102</sup> Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.63.

recognition that much unpaid female work in the home contributed to the market economy, so the occupations of women who were 'regularly employed from home, or at home in any other than domestic duties' were to be 'distinctly recorded'.<sup>103</sup> In 1881 however women's household manufacturing was excluded from the definition of those who were economically active and these women were placed in a residual 'unoccupied' category. Female relatives who had previously been regarded as helping in the family business were now abstracted as dependants.<sup>104</sup> Because of this, comparisons between pre and post 1881 censuses are fraught with difficulties.

Using other sources such as contemporary wage accounts and oral history, a number of studies have suggested the extent to which women's work went unrecorded in a variety of occupational sectors. The omission of any occupational designation for married women in particular was frequent. Lown's study of the Courtauld silk mill at Halstead shows that it was common practice among enumerators to omit any occupational designation for married women workers. The category was either left blank or the description 'wife' added to the occupation of the woman's spouse.<sup>105</sup> Roberts' use of oral history suggests that much part-time work performed by women in the north-west was also systematically under-recorded, again with serious implications for an accurate view of married women's work.<sup>106</sup>

Problems associated with census material has specific ramifications for the way in which rural women workers were classed. From 1841 onwards households were asked to give details of persons under their roof on one night of the year. In the

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<sup>103</sup> Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.63.

<sup>104</sup> Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.70.

<sup>105</sup> Lown, Women and Industrialisation, p.156.

<sup>106</sup> Roberts, E., A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women, 1890-1940, (Oxford, 1984), p.136.

nineteenth century this was usually in March or April, making it difficult to use this source to study the seasonal nature of women's work in agriculture. Precisely because women's labour was seasonal or casual it was unlikely to have been regarded as an 'occupation' and the fact that a wife followed the same occupation as her husband such as agricultural labourer may have led to the assumption that she was not following an 'independent' occupation, merely assisting the spouse. The category of domestic service is a particularly difficult one especially in relation to female farm servants. As well as performing general household duties, these employees were also expected to help in the dairy and with livestock in mixed and pastoral farming regions, and also assisted in the fields during peak seasons. The exact status of female farm servants - domestic or agricultural workers? - was thus notably difficult to determine and the classification of these workers depended on the attitudes and assumptions of individual enumerators. The exact status of female farm servants will be further discussed in chapter three.

Much evidence that highlights the under-recording of women's rural labour in the nineteenth-century censuses has been uncovered. Jessica Gerard proposes that every country house in nineteenth-century England employed local people (especially women and children) to perform much informal, part-time and casual work, but such servants remain invisible, not being classified in official census returns.<sup>107</sup> Miller's detailed study of contemporary farm labour accounts, wages books and other ancillary material in late nineteenth-century Gloucestershire, demonstrates how women day labourers, many of whom worked in the fields for a third of the year or more, were returned as 'unoccupied' by local enumerators. This was because they worked on a basis that did

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<sup>107</sup> Gerard, J., 'Invisible servants: the country house and the local community', Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, 57 (1986), 178-188. This theme is further explored in her book, Country House Life: Family and Servants, 1815-1914, (Oxford, 1994), especially ch. 7.



not conform with definitions contained in official census instructions.<sup>108</sup> Higgs has highlighted four main areas of under-recording of the agricultural workforce in nineteenth-century England: the omission of seasonal labour; the exclusion of workers not given occupational titles; the removal of female relatives of farmers from the occupied population, and the placement of workers in categories other than agriculture.<sup>109</sup> In combination, this meant the serious under-enumeration of women workers and 'should help to modify the conventional view propounded by Pinchbeck, and recently restated by Snell, that women had almost ceased to be employed as wages earners in agriculture by the end of the Victorian period'.<sup>110</sup> The work of Horrell and Humphries also shows how female participation rates differ according to whether an 'occupational' or 'earnings' definition is applied to women's labour. In their research on married women's employment in a cross-section of industries, an occupational definition produced lower estimates of participation than an earning definition. This was especially the case for women married to agricultural workers, particularly in low-wage counties which were mainly located in the south and east of England.<sup>111</sup>

There are serious difficulties with the census returns which historians now recognise. Many of these problems are reinforced by analysis of census material carried out in this thesis. Where individual labourers have been named in farm accounts, cross-referencing with relevant census data has revealed information on the under-enumeration of women employed in the nineteenth-century countryside. This has serious implications for the conventional picture of female workers in East Yorkshire

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<sup>108</sup> Miller, 'Hidden workforce', p.147.

<sup>109</sup> Higgs, E., 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), 700-716 (p.704).

<sup>110</sup> Higgs, 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce', p.706.

<sup>111</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', p.97.

and Norfolk in particular and will be further discussed in chapters three and four.

However, despite the drawbacks associated with this material, there are certain reasons why it continues to be used in historical accounts and why it has been consulted in this thesis. The census data can disclose interesting demographic details on individuals and families who would otherwise remain anonymous. Tentative conclusions on the marital status and familial ties of working women can be made. The relationship between ages, number of children and ability to contribute to the household economy can also be analysed. Whilst exact figures and precise comparisons based on data of working women from the censuses should be treated with great caution, and particular problems are apparent in the enumeration of female agricultural labourers, in certain cases the gender-blindness of census returns are less distorting. They can be used fairly accurately for plotting the incidence of some domestic employments. In a county such as Bedfordshire, where female workers were concentrated in domestic industries, census data is one of the few sources which documents the existence of these labourers across the nineteenth century. It seems that enumerators in Bedfordshire were far more likely to record women working in rural industries as occupied than they were women working in agriculture. This anomaly, and the paucity of surviving sources on women who worked in the domestic industries will be further analysed in chapter five.

A wide range of contemporary published material has been used for this thesis. There is a multitude of parliamentary papers from which evidence of agrarian matters may be extracted. Most important to this study are the reports on the employment of women and children in agriculture published in 1843 and 1867-1870, the 1834 Poor Law Report, the reports to the Children's Employment Commission of the 1860s and

the Royal Commission on Labour which was published in the 1890s.<sup>112</sup> Numerous other reports contain information of relevance to the thesis. These include the Select Committees on the agricultural depression in the 1820s and 1830s, the Royal Commission on agricultural interests of the 1880s which charts the depression of late nineteenth-century agriculture and Arthur Wilson Fox's reports on agricultural wages and earnings at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>113</sup> The annual reports of the poor law commissioners have also been consulted.<sup>114</sup> These official sources are voluminous and have been widely used by historians. Early writers such as Hasbach and Pinchbeck relied heavily on parliamentary reports. Snell quotes evidence from the 1834 Poor Law Report and 1843 Royal Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture to reinforce his argument on the increasing sexual specialisation of agricultural work in early nineteenth-century agriculture.<sup>115</sup> These reports contain a mass of information on male, female and child labour, wages and working conditions, as well as much incidental material covering housing conditions, education, allotments, diet and living standards. They are also one of the few sources which reveal the spoken

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<sup>112</sup> PP 1834, XXX, Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws. Appendix (B.1). Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts. Part I; PP 1843, XII, Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture; PP, 1863, XVII, First Report of the Children's Employment Commission; PP, 1864, XXII, Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission; PP 1867, XVI, Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission; PP 1867-1868, XVII, First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture; PP 1868-1869, XIII, Second Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture; PP 1893-1894, XXXV, Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer. Reports from the Assistant Agriculture Commissioners.

<sup>113</sup> PP 1821, IX, Select Committee on Petitions complaining of Depressed State of Agriculture of UK; PP 1881, XVI, Royal Commission on Depressed Condition of Agricultural Interests. Reports of Assistant Commissioners; PP, 1900, LXXXII, Report by Mr. Wilson Fox on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the UK.

<sup>114</sup> Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales, 1835-1847. Thereafter Annual Reports of the Poor Law Board, 1848-1871. In 1872 this became the Local Government Board. The poor law union papers at the Public Record Office (M. H. 12), covering the years 1834 to 1900 have also been consulted for the three counties studies in this thesis.

<sup>115</sup> Snell, *Annals*, pp.51-53.

evidence of working women. However there are numerous problems associated with official reports, not least in the likelihood of bias and of interested presentation of material in reports and evidence. These issues will be fully explored in chapter two when the value of these reports to the historian of women's rural labour will be considered in more detail.

Alongside the official parliamentary reports, a large body of other contemporary literature has also been extensively surveyed. There is a plethora of contemporary literature on rural issues in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century England. The writing of David Davies and Frederick Eden at the beginning of the period under investigation, the mid 1790s, have proved useful.<sup>116</sup> The reports on the counties of England to the Board of Agriculture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have also been of use.<sup>117</sup> Again, these will be further examined in chapter two. A number of nineteenth-century journals and periodicals have also been scrutinised and relevant articles from the pages of the Annals of Agriculture, Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, Journal of the Statistical Society and the Farmer's Magazine located. There are also a number of rural 'journeys' published which provide contemporary accounts throughout the period. These include William Cobbett's Rural Rides, Caird's English Agriculture in 1851 and Henry Rider Haggard's Rural England.<sup>118</sup> Contemporary pamphlet literature and books have also formed an area of investigation.

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<sup>116</sup> Davies, D., The Case of Labourers in Husbandry, Stated and Considered, (London, 1795); Eden, Sir F. M., The State of the Poor, 3 vols (London, 1797).

<sup>117</sup> A good bibliography of the General Views is included in Tate, W. E., The English Village Community and the Enclosure Movement, (London, 1967), pp.177-8.

<sup>118</sup> Cobbett, W., Rural Rides, 1st edn 1830 (Harmondsworth, 1985); Caird, English Agriculture; Haggard, H. R., Rural England: Being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried out in the Years 1901 and 1902, 2 vols (London, 1902).

For the historian of women's employment such sources can prove to be exceptionally frustrating. Only occasionally do contemporary commentators directly address the issue of women's work. This is usually when the question became a point of contention; for example when spinning declined in the late eighteenth century and the under-employment of females constituted an extra burden on parish resources, or in the second half of the nineteenth century when women labouring in the fields stood outside the Victorian ideal of womanhood and were labelled a 'problem'. The sheer volume of irrelevant material concerned with the numerous other aspects of agriculture and rural society contained in the literature outlined above make searching for material on women's labour very time consuming and cumbersome. The nature of the evidence contained in such material is also ambiguous. The background of the author and the intended audience affects the opinions expressed in such material. Despite this, contemporary literature does offer useful insights into the nature of female employment patterns in the nineteenth-century countryside and is a good indication of the way attitudes towards working women changed over the course of the century.

The final printed source that warrants investigation is the local newspaper. W. B. Stephens argues that 'for the nineteenth century...newspapers must be regarded as an essential source for the local historian'.<sup>119</sup> Before the nineteenth century local newspapers were largely weekly versions of the London press with much reprinted material. By the 1840s this had changed and provincial papers began to carry a great deal of local news to appeal to resident farmers and gentry.<sup>120</sup> The wealth of detail contained in local newspapers is immense and for the agricultural historian reports on

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<sup>119</sup> Stephens, W. B., Sources for English Local History, 2nd edn (Chichester, 1994), p.24.

<sup>120</sup> Howkins, Reshaping Rural England, p.240.

the state of crops in the locality, local markets and the price of labour can be of particular interest. Again however, when searching for information on female employment in the countryside, the use of newspapers is a time-consuming and often fruitless affair. There are exceptions to this however. In the East Riding numerous local newspapers reported the yearly hiring of male and female servants at the various Martinmas fairs in November giving information on wages, the state of the local labour market and other incidental items. Local newspapers have thus been widely utilised as a source on farm servants in chapter three.

The problematic nature of contemporary published material makes it essential to use additional archival evidence. Farm records form the main source in the investigation of women's work in rural East Yorkshire, Norfolk, and Bedfordshire. E. J. T. Collins, writing in 1966, argued that 'Farm records remain, by and large, a much neglected historical source'.<sup>121</sup> From the pages of surviving account and cropping books, herd and flock books, diaries and memoranda, he contended, numerous subjects relevant to the social and economic history of the countryside could be investigated.<sup>122</sup> Whilst work on farming output and productivity - particularly on the larger estates - has been produced, the utilisation of farm records for the study of agricultural labour, especially female labour, is still largely untapped.<sup>123</sup> The unpublished theses of Miller and Gielgud remain the only systematic studies of female farm labour and these only cover the counties of Gloucestershire and Northumberland.<sup>124</sup> The numerous problems

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<sup>121</sup> Collins, E. J. T., 'Historical farm records', *Archives*, 35 (1966), 143-149 (p.143).

<sup>122</sup> Subjects he cites include 'the levels of farm output, receipts, expenditure, profits and investment; the influence of price movements on individual farming systems...crop and milk yields', Collins, 'Historical farm records', p.145

<sup>123</sup> Turner, M. E., Beckett, J. V., and Afton, B., 'Taking stock: farmers, farm records and agricultural output in England, 1700-1850', *Agricultural History Review*, 44 (1996), 21-34.

<sup>124</sup> Miller, 'Farm work and farm workers'; Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-century farmwomen'.

associated with utilising farm records may account for the under-employment of this source. These problems have a bearing on the usefulness of the source for historians of women's labour and need to be considered in some detail.

Firstly the representative nature of surviving farm records has to be questioned. In the eighteenth century the practice of book-keeping was still in its infancy and improved only slowly over the course of the nineteenth century. A large estate, managed by a bailiff or steward, was more likely to keep systematic records of crops and labour than a smaller farmer. Farm records are therefore 'unlikely to be representative of the class of farmers as a whole' and surviving accounts tend to originate from larger estates and holdings.<sup>125</sup> A farm of under 100 acres would generally not employ sufficient labour outside the family to require labour books. The labour performed by women and children on smaller holdings throughout England is therefore under-represented.

The nature of surviving accounts renders these records very illuminating and exceptionally frustrating to use in turn. Estate records most often kept separate accounts for household expenditure, farm labour costs and other outgoings. The best labour accounts include the full name, number of days worked per week, tasks performed and payments made to individual labourers. Male labour is however much more consistently recorded. The women and children employed are often bunched together under one heading at the end of a page which in itself reveals much about the way contemporaries viewed the work of women. On smaller farms, account books - where they survive - are often a jumbled record not just of farm business but also of domestic and personal expenditure. The regular printed farm account book such as Webb's first appeared in

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<sup>125</sup> Turner, Beckett and Afton, 'Taking stock', p.27.

the first half of the nineteenth century but their use did not become standardised until after the 1850s.<sup>126</sup> In some collections the sequence of account books spans several decades and can reveal much about the running of a farm over a long period of time. A consistently good set of surviving accounts is a rarity however.

Despite these drawbacks farm labour books do yield much interesting information on women's employment in nineteenth-century agriculture. Seven accounts were located for the East Riding, twenty for Norfolk and eleven for Bedfordshire. These accounts have made it possible to calculate labour payments made annually to male, female and child workers on farms in the three localities. The seasonality of labour patterns can be explored through an examination of the number of days worked by farm workers over the course of a year. The sexual division of agricultural tasks can be obtained where individual work patterns are recorded and the nature of piece-work on nineteenth-century farms is revealed. Where individual workers are named the familial relationships between workers on the farm can also be investigated.

Farm records, newspaper articles, parliamentary reports and census data have been used as the main sources in this thesis. Two further restrictions circumscribe the types of work it is possible to analyse using these types of evidence. Firstly these sources tend to concentrate on female employment in agriculture, as day labourers and to a lesser extent farm servants. This may exclude a number of other working opportunities which were open to rural women. Secondly, these sources relate mainly to paid work in the formal economy. The many ways village women 'made shift' outside the cash economy remain largely unrecorded in sources such as farm accounts and

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<sup>126</sup> Collins, 'Historical farm records', p.147.



census records.<sup>127</sup> These strategies included the exploitation of common rights such as gleaning and fuel gathering, keeping small animals and poultry, taking in washing and sewing, charring for local farms and country houses and pig keeping and killing. Whilst the primary interest of this thesis remains women's wage earning opportunities, some recognition of the other ways in which women contributed to the rural family exchequer is important. One way to begin to reveal the complex, multi-occupational nature of the daily pattern of rural women's working lives is through autobiographical writing and personal reminiscences of village life in the nineteenth century. As David Vincent argues:

There is a limit to the insights that can be gleaned from the most subtle analysis of census material, and whilst it is necessary to place this qualitative evidence in the context of the statistical data now available, it should be possible to use the memories and observations of these writers to help tease out the skein of human relationships that is family life. Furthermore, it is here that the autobiographers are most likely to discuss the crucial connections between their material lives, their existence as workers, both as children and adults, and the other basic areas of experience to which they attach significance.<sup>128</sup>

The working class autobiography developed in the nineteenth century 'into a remarkably diverse and fertile genre' and became increasingly common in the latter decades of the century as literacy levels improved.<sup>129</sup> A number of working class autobiographies centring on village life in nineteenth-century England have been consulted. In addition many autobiographies and reminiscences by authors who rose out

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<sup>127</sup> Lane, P., 'Work on the margins: poor women and the informal economy of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Leicestershire', *Midland History*, 22 (1997), 85-99. Lane adopts this phrase from Olwyn Hufton's research on eighteenth-century France in which she reveals 'an economy of makeshifts'. See Hufton, O., *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789*, (Oxford, 1974).

<sup>128</sup> Vincent, D., *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*, (London, 1981), p.12.

<sup>129</sup> Burnett, J., Vincent, D., and Mayall, D., eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*, vol 1, 1790-1900, (Brighton, 1984), p.xiii.

of the ranks of the labouring poor but who remained connected to rural life have been analysed. These are discussed fully in chapter six although any accounts relevant to the three counties studied have been included in the main body of the thesis. Work, childhood, home and family life form core themes in most accounts. Unfortunately autobiographies written by working women are rare although they do exist.<sup>130</sup> The lack of written records of women workers means a reliance on the perspective of male members of the community is necessary. Whilst this makes it virtually impossible for the historian to probe women's own attitudes and perspectives on their working and family life, the insights offered by male autobiographers on work and community in the nineteenth-century countryside can be illuminating. Such material also forms an important comparison to official and archival material which concentrates on work in the formal economy.

### **1.6: The structure of the thesis**

Having outlined the context and focus of the thesis and pointed to some of the issues concerned with the collection and evaluation of the data, an explanation of the organisation and structure of the thesis is called for. Chapter two is a detailed survey of the range of printed primary sources that addressed the issue of female employment in the nineteenth-century countryside. In particular it considers the usefulness of parliamentary papers, journal literature and contemporary writing to the study of rural women's employment. This approach provides an overview of the changing nature of

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<sup>130</sup> See for example Burrows, Mrs., 'A childhood in the fens about 1850-60', in Davies, M. L., ed., Life As We Have Known It, 2nd edn (London, 1977), pp.109-114. The autobiography of Lucy Luck, a straw-plait worker is reprinted in Burnett, J., ed., Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s, 2nd edn (London, 1994), pp.53-63. The most comprehensive index is provided in Burnett, Vincent and Mayall, eds., Autobiography of the Working Class and is arranged by both region and trade.

women's employment across the nineteenth century 'from above'. The following three chapters are in-depth studies of female employment patterns on a county basis. These chapters are underpinned by the broad theoretical questions outlined in section 1.4 of this introduction. The East Riding of Yorkshire will be considered in chapter three. This was the only arable county to continue hiring annual farm servants throughout the nineteenth century. The position of female farm servants, a previously neglected group of workers, will form a central concern of this chapter, alongside an investigation of women day labourers in agriculture. The absence of industry in this county indicates that opportunities for women to enter the formal economy were restricted mainly to farm labour. Chapter four turns to the position of women workers in Norfolk. Here the decline of rural industry and farm service in the early part of the nineteenth century point to the increasingly casual nature of women's employment. The existence of gang labour, a form of employment which caused much contemporary consternation, will be reassessed in detail. Chapter five looks at women employed in nineteenth-century Bedfordshire. The persistence of two significant domestic industries in this county - lacemaking and strawplaiting - offered women an alternative to agricultural labour and the interaction between the two types of employment is examined. The last chapter summarises the findings and concludes the thesis. Paid work in the formal economy of the nineteenth-century countryside will be given a broader frame of reference in the conclusion where women's work in the informal economy will be considered in greater depth. The questions raised by the thesis show that research on women's employment in rural England in the nineteenth century is far from complete and should engender a stimulating forum for debate.

## **Chapter Two: A Survey of Printed Primary Sources, c.1790-1890**

### **2.1: The sources**

This chapter provides a general overview on women's employment throughout rural England in the nineteenth century from information contained in a number of contemporary printed sources. The analysis begins with an examination of the household budget accounts of the labouring poor collected by David Davies and Frederick Eden in the 1790s. The General Views of the agriculture of each of the counties of England will then be assessed for the possible insights they offer into the subject of female employment at the beginning of the nineteenth century. A number of well-known parliamentary commissions form the basis of the remainder of the chapter: the 1834 Poor Law Report, the 1843 and 1867-1870 Royal Commissions on the employment of women and children in agriculture and the 1893-1894 Royal Commission on Labour will be considered in detail. In addition, a number of contemporary periodicals, pamphlets and books, as well as other relevant parliamentary publications have been included in the enquiry. These are by no means unworked sources. Earlier historians of rural England relied heavily on these published sources and writers continue to make use of such documents today. However, information is often taken at face-value and incorporated into analyses without critical assessment. The sources utilised in this chapter are therefore treated in a more thorough and analytical way than previous historians have contemplated. The approach taken is chronological although the examination of each of the sources is thematic. In particular this chapter will consider what the documents reveal about the regionality of

employment opportunities and wages for women over time in rural England and the changing perceptions of working women over the period.

## **2.2: The budget accounts of Davies and Eden**

The household accounts of the labouring poor assembled by Davies and Eden in the last decade of the eighteenth century are unique. They form one of the earliest and largest samples of the earnings and expenses of agricultural labouring families in England and 'reveal a numerical scrupulousness which practically excluded the possibility of deception through ideological bias'.<sup>1</sup> Davies, rector of the parish of Barkham in Berkshire, amassed and printed over 120 budgets of the English labouring poor in the appendix to his book The Case of Labourers in Husbandry, published in 1795.<sup>2</sup> Eden collected 53 household accounts published in 1797 as appendix 12 in the final volume of his three volume work The State of the Poor.<sup>3</sup> Both sets of accounts are printed in a tabular form listing expenses and earnings by the week and year, together with additional information on the composition of the families involved and other relevant observations. Despite the similarities in methodology, these two men represented very different ideological viewpoints. Eden was critical of the Poor Law and sought to demonstrate that the labouring poor could lead independent, self-reliant lives without being a burden on the poor rates. Davies defended the poor's right to relief and linked

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<sup>1</sup> Sokoll, T., 'Early attempts at accounting the unaccountable: Davies' and Eden's budgets of agricultural labouring families in late eighteenth-century England', in Pierenkemper, T., ed., Zur Ökonomik des Privaten Haushalts, (Frankfurt, 1991), pp.34-58 (p.37).

<sup>2</sup> Davies, D., The Case of Labourers in Husbandry, Stated and Considered, (London, 1795), 'Appendix containing a collection of accounts shewing the earnings and expenses of labouring families in different parts of the Kingdom'. He also collected 5 budgets from Wales and 8 from Scotland which have been excluded from the analysis here in order to maintain geographical symmetry.

<sup>3</sup> Eden, Sir F. M., The State of the Poor, 3 vols (London, 1797), vol 3, 'Appendix No. XII. Expenses and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in various parts of England, collected in January and February 1796'. In fact, both Davies' and Eden's accounts are biased in favour of families residing in low-wage southern England as defined by James Caird's farming map of England.

the pauperisation of the labouring poor at the end of the eighteenth century to wider economic factors such as enclosure and under-employment.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of the household budgets collected by Davies and Eden has not gone unrecognised and they have been widely quoted by several generations of historians.<sup>5</sup> So far however the only extensive quantitative analysis of this data has been attempted by Thomas Sokoll.<sup>6</sup> He considers the information contained in Davies and Eden on both earnings and expenses, relating the structure of the family income to family size and annual family expenses. An evaluation of women's earnings is included within this analysis, although women's employment opportunities are not considered in the wider socio-economic context of the late eighteenth century. This is surprising as both Davies and Eden offer extensive commentaries on the place of women workers in rural society.

An examination of the household accounts published by Davies and Eden sheds light on the issue of women's employment in rural England in the 1790s in a number of ways. Both commentators highlight the decline in opportunities for women to contribute to the family budget at this time, linking this development to changes in both the agrarian and manufacturing sectors of the economy. Davies' astuteness with regard to changes in the rural economic environment is particularly striking. Firstly he notes the decline in labourer's real wages from the mid eighteenth century as a result of the

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<sup>4</sup> Sokoll, 'Accounting the unaccountable', pp.37-38; Styles, J., 'Clothing the north: the supply of non-elite clothing in the eighteenth-century north of England', *Textile History*, 25 (1994), 139-166 (p.139).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Bowlby, A. L., 'The statistics of wages in the UK during the last hundred years (part I). Agricultural wages', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 61 (1898), 702-722; Lindert, P. H., and Williamson, J. G., 'English workers' living standards during the industrial revolution: a new look', *Economic History Review*, 36 (1983), 1-25 (p.18); Snell, K. D. M., *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900*, (Cambridge, 1985), p.56; Boyer, G., *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850*, (Cambridge, 1990), pp.41-42.

<sup>6</sup> Sokoll, 'Accounting the unaccountable'. See also Sokoll, T., *Household and Family Among the Poor: The Case of Two Essex Communities in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, (Bochum, 1993).

rising price of necessities.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, he argues that labourers were being deprived of 'some advantages which they formerly enjoyed', namely the loss of land through enclosure and the engrossing of farms.<sup>8</sup> Finally, both these trends were exacerbated by the decline of employment opportunities for women and children.

Prior to enclosure, Davies contends, labourers were able to 'raise for themselves a considerable part of their subsistence'.<sup>9</sup> Whilst some of the more fortunate cottagers were allowed to retain their gardens or were given a small allotment of land in exchange for common rights and so able to 'breed a few fowls, with which they buy what sheets and blankets they want', in the majority of cases families were denied land even to 'keep a pig or a chick'.<sup>10</sup> Eden too notes the 'immediate and intimate connexion between enclosure and the circumstances of the Poor' (*sic*), but as an enthusiastic advocate of agrarian improvement, is rather more critical of the value of common rights. '...the advantages which cottagers and poor people derive from commons and wastes', he argues, 'are rather apparent than real'.<sup>11</sup> Recent research tends to reinforce Davies' account however and has pointed to the contribution women and children could make to the family income through the exploitation of traditional rights to rural resources in the late eighteenth century. Jane Humphries argues parliamentary enclosure eroded non-wage sources of subsistence such as cow-keeping, fuel gathering and other grazing rights, leaving families increasingly dependent on wage earners.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, p.25.

<sup>8</sup> Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, p.25.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, p.56. Davies calculates for example that a family could cut enough fuel for a year in a week and to replace this after enclosure would cost anything from £1. 15s. to £4. 3s. Davies thus puts the value of common fuel at 10% of a labourers wages. See Neeson, J. M., Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820, (Cambridge, 1993), p.165.

<sup>10</sup> Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, p.16.

<sup>11</sup> Eden, State of the Poor, vol I, p.14.

<sup>12</sup> Humphries, J., 'Enclosures, common rights and women: the proletarianisation of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', Journal of Economic History, 50 (1990), 17-42 (p.21). Among those who suffered most, according to Ivy Pinchbeck, were widows and single women whose common

According to Davies and Eden the deprivation of precious resources through the erosion of common rights was exacerbated in the late eighteenth century by declining opportunities for women to contribute to the family income through waged work. This was most notable in the case of spinning. Spinning was a ubiquitous female employment in the eighteenth century, complimentary to seasonal agricultural labour, managing livestock and gathering fuel, as well as to the care of the family. The importance of spinning wages is shown in some of the budgets of Eden and Davies. Davies for example, illustrates the importance of spinning wages to the 'common stock' by taking the case of a family of seven (the children aged between 12 years and one year). Together they earned annually £39. 17s. 4d., of which £5. 17s. represented the spinning wages. With the yearly expenses amounting to £39. 14s. 4d. the significance of spinning wages is clear. According to the account the earnings of the husband and elder boys maintained the family in food whilst the money earned by the wife and girls in spinning and harvest, bought them 'clothes, linen and other necessities'.<sup>13</sup> 'It is owing to money gained by spinning', Davies argues, 'the family is able to keep out of debt, and to live so decently'.<sup>14</sup> This view reiterates the comments of a correspondent writing in the Annals of Agriculture in 1786. Spinning was,

...a species of industry, which appeared to them capable of having a more extensive influence on the poor, than almost any other kind of industry, by establishing *earlier* habits of industry and good behaviour, by its employing the youngest of one sex, and all ages of the other, and at all seasons.<sup>15</sup>

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rights had enabled them to avoid resorting to the parish for relief. Pinchbeck, I., Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850, 2nd edn (London, 1981), p.45. Of course not all areas of England were affected by parliamentary enclosure in such a drastic way as Midland England. For the regional impact of enclosure see Turner, M., English Parliamentary Enclosure: Its Historical Geography and Economic History, (Folkestone, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, p.84.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, p.86.

<sup>15</sup> 'T.B' and Young, A., 'On spinning among the poor', Annals of Agriculture, 5 (1786), 417-422 (p.417).



Although spinning could still be profitable in some circumstances, it is clear from both Davies and Eden, and other contemporary accounts, that its decline was causing distress in many rural areas. In 1787 Arthur Young, stirred by the debate waging in the House of Commons between wool growers and manufacturers over the woollen bill, conducted an enquiry into the conditions and earnings of spinners throughout England. He found earnings from 9d. a day in Sussex, Lancashire and Yorkshire, to 3½d. a day in Suffolk. The latter was having the 'effect of almost starving the poor in the two counties of Norfolk and Suffolk'.<sup>16</sup> Eden records a decline in the earnings women could gain from the industry across the country. At Kirkoswald in Cumberland, he notes, 'The wages of spinners are very inconsiderable: a woman must labour hard at her wheel, 10 or 12 hours in the day, to earn 4d.'<sup>17</sup>; at Brixworth, Northamptonshire, 'Women earn 4d. to 6d. a day by spinning jersey; some few years ago, they earned from 6d. to 10d. a day, but the wages are much lower than they were formerly'<sup>18</sup>, whilst at Swineshead in Lincolnshire, earnings from spinning were 'so extremely low that scarcely one person in ten will apply to it'.<sup>19</sup> Technical and organisational transformations ultimately removed women from their primary role in production and deprived them of a meaningful source of income. At Seend in Wiltshire, for example, Eden argues that 'since the introduction of machinery, which lately took place, hand spinning has fallen into disuse...and the Poor, from the great reduction in the price of spinning, scarcely have the heart to earn the little that is obtained by it'.<sup>20</sup> The overall effect of the

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<sup>16</sup> Young, A., 'On the price of wool, and state of spinning at present in England', *Annals of Agriculture*, 9 (1788), 266-345 (p.266). The decline of spinning employment is detailed in other volumes of this journal. See especially Various, 'Replies to the editors circular letter', *Annals of Agriculture*, 24 (1795), 239-293 and 297-348, continued in vol 25 (1796), 473-506 and 599-642, and vol 26 (1796), 1-26 and 115-158.

<sup>17</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 2, p.84.

<sup>18</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 2, p.528.

<sup>19</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 2, p.404.

<sup>20</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 3, p.796.

transition to machine spinning was to concentrate the production of textiles within specific regions of England, mainly Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. For the great numbers of rural women who had formerly relied on the wages of spinning to augment the family income, this transition was disastrous.

In some regions of the country the decline of spinning was offset by an increase of employment opportunities in other domestic industries. The existence of lacemaking and strawplaiting is revealed in the south Midland counties. In Bedfordshire, according to Eden, women could earn 6s. to 12s. a week in straw work, such earnings 'for the last four years' being 'exceedingly great'.<sup>21</sup> Women who were 'expert in making lace' could also maintain themselves 'even in the present dear times'.<sup>22</sup> In Northamptonshire women lace workers were reported to be earning from 6d. to 14d. a day.<sup>23</sup> Women throughout England were also able to get work as agricultural day labourers. Under some circumstances this could be profitable. In Kent, during the hop picking season for example, women received 2s. 6d. to 3s. a day.<sup>24</sup> Agricultural work was not constant however and female wages were generally low. At Bromfield, Cumberland, Eden perceptively noted the disparity between male and female wages:

women, who here do a large portion of the work of the farm, with great difficulty get half as much. It is not easy to account for so striking an inequality; and still less easy to justify it.<sup>25</sup>

As a consequence of economic changes in the late eighteenth century, both commentators note the mounting reliance on male wages to keep families afloat. Eden concludes that the most effectual method of 'keeping the poor in constant employment'

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<sup>21</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 1, p.2.

<sup>22</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 1, p.2.

<sup>23</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 1, p.548.

<sup>24</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 1, p.787.

<sup>25</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 2, p.47.

was to have a mixture of agricultural and manufacturing industry, whilst Davies argues that the two most needed measures were an increase in wages to counteract falling real wages and a revival of employment for women. Davies also stresses the need for fuller employment during the winter months.<sup>26</sup> 'If constant employment were found for the wives and children of labouring men as well as for men themselves', Davies concludes, 'the benefit public and private hence resulting would be great'.<sup>27</sup>

An analysis of the budget accounts reprinted in Davies and Eden indicates that the typical labouring family's earnings in the mid 1790s were below subsistence, making it especially difficult to absorb the loss of income associated with the decline of domestic spinning. Of the 53 budgets reprinted in appendix 12 of Eden, 83% reported a deficiency of earnings. Similarly, 82% of household accounts printed by Davies reveal a shortfall of earnings compared to expenditure. The mean deficiency was £3. 5s. although an excess of £14. 9s. was recorded at St. Austell.<sup>28</sup> This situation led Davies to maintain that 'the present wages of a labouring man constantly employed, together with the usual earnings of his wife, are barely sufficient to maintain all in necessities...'.<sup>29</sup>

Any interpretation of these budgets has to be handled with care however. Both sets of budgets were collected at a time of very high prices and this may have affected the results. In both, the harvest earnings seem to be omitted, yet this was the time of year when most rural labouring families received their highest wages, used for necessities such as clothing and shoes. Indeed, this is recognised by Eden on several occasions. At Clopshill, Bedfordshire, he writes, 'The Harvest earnings are not included: They go a

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<sup>26</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 1, p.628; Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.56.

<sup>27</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.61.

<sup>28</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.142.

<sup>29</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.24.

great way towards making up the deficiency'<sup>30</sup>, whilst at Colneis and Carlford in Suffolk, although all six printed budgets returned a deficiency, it was claimed that these could, in the majority of cases, be 'made up by a good harvest'.<sup>31</sup> In addition, it is difficult to assess how reliable the figures for earnings are; agricultural labourers were often paid by the piece, or in kind, both of which tend to boost day wages substantially.<sup>32</sup>

How far did women contribute to the household economy of labouring families? Table 2.1 shows the annual average wages of women, men and children in the budgets of Davies and Eden. These accounts show a high incidence of women and children in wage-related employment: women earned something in 80% of families, children did so in half of all families.<sup>33</sup> In Davies' budgets women were earning on average £2. 3s. a year, whilst women in Eden's earned slightly more at £2. 15s annually. Women are shown to be contributing just under 10% to annual family budgets. Children's contribution was 13% to 14%, whilst women and children together provided 22-23% of yearly family earnings. Thus without the contribution of women the yearly deficiency would have been even greater. The fact that so many women were earning money in one form or another, indicates that the labouring poor themselves perceived the work of women as vital and necessary.

These accounts expose a clear relationship between the number of dependants at home, the ability of women to earn money and the average annual deficit. Women's

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<sup>30</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 3, p.cccxxxix.

<sup>31</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 3, p.cccxiix.

<sup>32</sup> The recording of both earnings and expenditure were based on oral accounts given by the families involved, not on accurate accounts kept by individuals throughout the year. They were kept mostly by the clergy of the parish who communicated with Davies on the project.

<sup>33</sup> Sokoll, 'Accounting the unaccountable', p.40.

**Table 2.1: Average annual earnings of men, women and children**  
**in the household accounts of Davies and Eden**

	Davies	Eden
Women's earnings	£2.3s	£2.15s
Children's earnings	£3. 3s	£4. 4s
Women and children	£5. 6s	£6.19s
Men's earnings	£18. 8s	£22.14s
Family total	£23. 14s	£29.13s
Women's contribution	9%	9%
Children's contribution	13%	14%
Women and children	22%	23%
Men's contribution	78%	77%

Sources: Davies, Labourers in Husbandry, Appendix; Eden, State of the Poor, vol 3, Appendix 12. In Davies' budgets, 12 accounts were left blank apart from the family total and have been excluded. Similarly, 4 accounts lump together the earnings of women and children and have also not been used in these calculations. The average earnings in Table 2.1 do not include money gained through harvest work, taking in lodgers, garden produce or any other informal tasks as these are not systematically recorded.

wages varied sharply across families and over time within families, their earnings conditional not only on the availability of employment but also the number and age of children still living at home. Of the budgets in Davies which reported excess earnings, most had older, economically active children at home. Davies himself noted 'the exceedings...are only owing to the age of the children, which enables them to contribute so much to the family stock, and to the care taken to supply them with constant employment'.<sup>34</sup> Both writers it seems, tended to collect budgets at the stage in the lifecycle when the number of dependants was at its maximum, and the strain therefore the greatest, with women having fewer chances to earn wages. According to Alan Armstrong, the mean number of co-residing children in the budgets of Davies is 4.05, whilst in Eden it is 3.62.<sup>35</sup> The following comments taken from Davies are illustrative of this point. At Pangbourne, Berkshire, he notes, 'The woman earns nothing, having a sick child, besides the other children to attend'<sup>36</sup>; at Keddlestone in Derbyshire, 'The wives, it seems, earn nothing, their employment being to look after the children, and make and mend for their families'<sup>37</sup>, and at Tanfield, Durham, '...the women earn nothing, as she will have enough to do to keep the family clean, and clothes whole'.<sup>38</sup>

There were however other forms of productive labour which women and children were engaged in. These are mostly excluded from the earnings accounts. At Roade, Northamptonshire, for example, Eden illustrates the importance of gleaning to a labourer's family. He argues 'several families will gather as much wheat as will serve

<sup>34</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.155.

<sup>35</sup> Armstrong, A., *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History, 1770-1980*, (London, 1988), p.257. This can be compared to the average household composition in Ardleigh, Essex in 1795-6 as compiled by Sokoll. He found 2.10 co-residing children in the average 'non-pauper' household and 3.41 in the average 'pauper' household ('pauper' being those in receipt of poor relief). Sokoll, *Household and Family*, p.157.

<sup>36</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.139.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.147.

<sup>38</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.159.

them for bread for the whole year, and as many beans as will keep a pig'.<sup>39</sup> This would have been worth around 6% or more of the family's annual income.<sup>40</sup> The management of animals is a practice also mentioned in the accounts. The purchase of a cow, where possible, and 'the good management of the wife', Eden suggests, could prevent families resorting to 'the parish as long as the cow lasted'.<sup>41</sup> At Holwell in Somerset, Davies records a woman who made 'some money by geese'<sup>42</sup>, whilst at Buckden, Huntingdon, Eden chronicles a labouring family who 'made up their deficiencies by keeping two pigs and cultivating a little garden'.<sup>43</sup> The possession of animals and a small amount of land by labouring families was seen as beneficial by many other contemporary writers and forms the subject of debate in a number of journals.<sup>44</sup> Two additional practices recorded by Davies and Eden which enabled women to contribute to the family income represented an extension of household duties. Davies' accounts reveal women on a number of occasions taking in washing for young single men in the parish<sup>45</sup> and taking in lodgers was a practice which 'lessens their rents...is not included in the weekly earnings, and which contributes to account for making up the deficiencies'.<sup>46</sup> Earnings

<sup>39</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 2, p.547.

<sup>40</sup> King, P., 'Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850', *Economic History Review*, 64 (1991), 461-476 (p.462).

<sup>41</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 1, p.628.

<sup>42</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.179.

<sup>43</sup> Eden, *State of the Poor*, vol 3, p.cccxli.

<sup>44</sup> See for example, Durham, Bishop of., 'Extract from an account of three cottagers keeping cows and renting land in Rutlandshire', *Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor*, vol 1 (1798), 116-119; Winchelsea, Earl of., 'Extract from an account of the advantages of cottagers renting land', *Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor*, vol 1 (1798), 129-139; Glasse, Rev. Dr., 'Extract from an account of the advantage of a cottager keeping a pig', *Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor*, vol 1 (1798), 193-196; Harries, E., 'Land for cottagers', *Annals of Agriculture*, 36 (1801), 355-359; Sinclair, Sir J., 'Observations on the means of enabling a cottager to keep a cow', *Annals of Agriculture*, 37 (1801), 225-245; Estcourt, T., 'An account of the result of an effort to better the condition of the poor in a country village', *Annals of Agriculture*, 43 (1805), 1-9 and 289-299; F. C., 'Agricultural labour', *Farmers Magazine*, 2 (1835), 114. See also Cobbett, W., *Cottage Economy*, 1st edn 1822 (Oxford, 1979), pp.96-97 on the advantages of keeping a cow.

<sup>45</sup> See for example Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p.137, p.143 and p.167.

<sup>46</sup> Davies, *Labourers in Husbandry*, p. 181.

gained in ways such as these, rather than representing strict monetary value, propped up the financial structure of the family.

The nature of the accounts collected by Davies and Eden restricts the types of female work and workers it is possible to analyse. The overwhelming focus of both writers was on mature family groups. Eden samples only mature nuclear families containing a married couple with children under 16 years of age. Davies does include some families of widows or deserted wives, but neither quote a single case where more than two generations of the same family co-reside in the household.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, there is an absence of single adult female units, or young families without children, who would have been in a better financial position than families with young children. Moreover because the accounts were not collected systematically from across the country this source does not provide a clear overview of the regionality of work opportunities and wages for women. However these publications are an important source for the historian of women's employment. The information they provide on the decline of spinning places women at the centre of the process of pauperisation which affected the labouring poor at the end of the eighteenth century. The wages women did earn, by whatever means and however small, are also shown to be important to the overall family economy and the crucial significance of child earnings are also revealed. Whether these trends continued into the first decades of the nineteenth century will underpin analysis of the next source, the General Views of the agriculture of the counties of England.

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<sup>47</sup> Sokoll, 'Accounting the unaccountable', p.38. The existence of multi-generational families living in the same household was exceptional however, even in pre-industrial times. Thus, Davies' and Eden's concentration on smaller families may have been more representative than first appears. See Laslett, P., The World We Have Lost Further Explored, 3rd edn (London, 1983), p.92.



### **2.3: The General Views of Agriculture**

Ivy Pinchbeck contends that 'it is impossible to make statements of any accuracy concerning women's...employment' during the period of the Napoleonic Wars as 'the only indications of its extent are the vague generalisations sometimes made by the reporters to the Board of Agriculture'.<sup>48</sup> How accurate is Pinchbeck's assessment of this source? The first set of county reports to the Board of Agriculture were published around 1794; the second editions between 1804 and 1817. The General Views were written by a variety of 'roving reporters' and are a very impressionistic source. All volumes include sections on labour and the poor although these are generally submerged between discussions of agricultural innovations, new crops and methods of cultivation which were of much greater interest to the writers. The authors were not always familiar with local trends. Indeed William Marshall, one of the most prominent commentators on rural matters at this time, accused some of the reporters to the Board of Agriculture of being 'transient tourists', wholly reliant on second-hand accounts.<sup>49</sup> Sometimes the second editions are reprints of the earlier one, containing no new information on work or wages. In addition, most of the General Views (except in the case of servants) only give a daily or weekly wage for men and women labourers, if at all. The casual nature of women's employment makes an analysis of daily or weekly wages problematic because it is impossible to know how many days a week or weeks a year women would have been employed. The annual incomes reported in Davies and Eden although not free from problems, are a more reliable basis for analysis.

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<sup>48</sup> Pinchbeck, Women Workers, p.63.

<sup>49</sup> Neeson, Commoners, p.40.

There are a number of ways the General Views can illuminate patterns of female employment in the early nineteenth century however. Firstly they add to the chronology of the decline of spinning. Although the value of it was small, nine first editions mention the availability of spinning for women.<sup>50</sup> At Foulmire in Cambridgeshire it was reported in 1794 that 'The spinning of woollen, or worsted yarn, for the Norwich and north country markets, has a good effect in giving employment to the women and children of this neighbourhood'.<sup>51</sup> In Huntingdonshire, '...women and children...may have constant employment in spinning yarn'<sup>52</sup>, whilst in Gloucester, 'The woollen manufactories supply spinning work to the poor women in many parts of the district', although the reported earnings were 'very low'.<sup>53</sup> The later editions confirm the pattern of decline of this rural industry and the lack of work for women is lamented. In Devon 'the want of employment for the females' was 'very much felt and complained of', and the failure of spinning employment had relegated women to 'rummaging about for a few loose sticks in order to procure a scanty supply of fuel'.<sup>54</sup> In Cornwall, the 'total decline' of spinning work had added to rising poor rates<sup>55</sup> and in Wiltshire 'the failure of spinning work for women and children', along with the scarcity of fuel and dearness of provisions, had broken the 'independent spirit' of the labouring poor who were in a 'wretched condition'.<sup>56</sup> The transition to machinery in the industry is also frequently cited. In the Vale of Evesham district of Gloucestershire, Thomas Rudge, writing in 1813, argues that the introduction of machinery had,

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<sup>50</sup> These counties are Cambridge, Dorset, Essex, Gloucester, Huntingdon, Lincoln, Somerset, Suffolk and Wiltshire.

<sup>51</sup> Vancouver, C., General View of the Agriculture in the County of Cambridge, (London, 1794), p. 71.

<sup>52</sup> Maxwell, G., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Huntingdon, (London, 1793), p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> Turner, G., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester, (London, 1794), p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Vancouver, C., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon, (London, 1808), p. 464.

<sup>55</sup> Worgan, G. B., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Cornwall, (London, 1811), p. 33.

<sup>56</sup> Davis, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Wiltshire, (London, 1811), p. 215.

annihilated the means of domestic employment of women and children, not only in the adjacent villages, but through the whole of the agricultural district, to the extent of 40 miles. The families of labourers who were used to earning a good deal towards their maintenance by spinning, have now no employment in the winter, and only a partial supply of such agricultural business as is suited to their strength in the summer.<sup>57</sup>

As spinning declined, strawplait was introduced into a number of rural areas. This was seen as a useful employment for redundant female labour. In many regions this was a philanthropic exercise to ameliorate the condition of the poor, although commercial success was soon reported.<sup>58</sup> Arthur Young noted in Essex in 1813, 'The introduction of the straw-plat manufactory by the Marquis and Marchioness of Buckingham, has been one of the greatest of temporal blessings to that place...'.<sup>59</sup> This industry was also reported in the counties of Bedford, Buckingham and Hertford by the early nineteenth century. The second editions record lace work in Bedford, Buckingham and Northampton, whilst the button making industry was also noted in Dorset. All reported large earnings for women in these industries, especially in comparison to spinning and agricultural day rates. This meant female participation in fieldwork in areas with thriving domestic industries was uncommon. In Dorset farmers complained they could not procure women to weed corn for 9d. a day when they could earn 12d. to 18d. a day

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<sup>57</sup> Rudge, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester, (London, 1813), p.341.

<sup>58</sup> Cobbett was one of the most enthusiastic champions of the straw industry. He argues that the cutting, bleaching, sorting and plaiting of straw was 'of all employments, the best suited to the wives and children of country labourers' and was a useful replacement for spinning work. See Cottage Economy, p.153.

<sup>59</sup> Young, A., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Essex, 2 vols (London, 1813), vol 2, p.395. See Sharpe, P., 'The women's harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c.1793-1885', Rural History, 5 (1994), 129-142, for the history of the strawplait industry in Essex. See also Bernard, T., 'Extract of an account of the introduction of straw platt at Avebury' (*sic*), Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, vol 4 (1805), 90-111. In this district of Wiltshire women and children had been deprived of spinning work which had formerly provided 'the greatest and most profitable part of their domestic employment' (p.99). Thus a 'gentleman of the neighbourhood' had introduced strawplaiting and within 12 months women and children were reported to be earning between 3s. and 10s. a week (p.91). The venture ultimately proved to be unsuccessful however because the area lacked a large market for the product.

in button making.<sup>60</sup> In Buckinghamshire, women's earnings at straw and lace work were recorded at 7s. to 30s. a week, rates farmers could not match. As a consequence women would not 'undertake work in the fields at such a rate as the farmer could afford to pay'.<sup>61</sup> The reluctance of young women to enter service in these regions was another repercussion of high earnings in the domestic industries. However, on the whole commentators welcomed the benefits domestic by-employments bestowed on the poor. Young, surveying Hertfordshire, typically wrote:

It is however, highly beneficial to the poor: a child can begin at four or five years old. Some men employ themselves in getting straw for their wives. Some women have earned £2. 2s. a week, but that lasted only a short time...women can earn £1. 1s. a week on average...It is without doubt of very great use to the poor, and this has considerable effect in keeping down rates, which would have been far more burdensome without it.<sup>62</sup>

The General Views contain information on one group of rural workers absent from the accounts of Davies and Eden: servants in husbandry. 17 county reports in the first series include some material on male and female servants; 19 volumes from the second editions hold similar details. The nature of this evidence is problematic and difficult to quantify however. The fact that many county reports do not mention this type of employment is not an indication of the absence of service in those areas. It is more likely that the writer did not deem it a worthy subject to include. It is therefore not possible to accurately map the incidence of service from this source. The different ways authors noted servant wages makes it difficult to compare male and female wages across the country. Some writers simply give an average amount whilst others divide servants into different grades and note wage levels accordingly. Despite this some

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<sup>60</sup> Stevenson, W., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dorset, (London, 1812), p.453.

<sup>61</sup> Priest, Rev. St. John., General View of the Agriculture of Buckinghamshire, (London, 1813), p.346.

<sup>62</sup> Young, A., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hertfordshire, (London, 1804), p.223.

analysis is possible. Tables 2.2 and 2.3 show the wages of general female servants and general male servants in the first and second editions where these were recorded, along with the mean average female-to-male wage ratio. Female servant wages in the first editions show regional similarities. On average female servants in the 1790s earned a third to a half of their male counterparts. The wages of both men and women from the second editions are more erratic and show greater regional variations. In Buckinghamshire, the wages of female servants were said to 'have risen much' on account of the existence of the lace and straw industries which competed for female labour and made it difficult to procure any female servants at all.<sup>63</sup> In Hertfordshire, the presence of strawplaiting also raised the wages of female servants. Thus in Hertfordshire, according to the General View in 1804, general women servants received on average 67% of the male wage, whilst in Buckinghamshire in 1813, female servants earned 91% of the male yearly wage. In the other counties, women servants in the early nineteenth century earned a third to a half of their male counterparts. In the five counties where figures exist for both periods - Cheshire, Cumberland, Derby, Durham and Worcester - the ratio of female-to male wage is shown to be stable and female wages here were not declining in proportion to men's. The sense of service in husbandry as a declining institution does pervade the second editions in a more general way however. Changes in this type of employment were noted on three grounds. Shorter hirings were prevalent in Dorset, Cumberland and Westmoreland to prevent settlements in the parish. The costs of feeding and boarding servants was also complained of. In Norfolk and Middlesex, the practice of giving board wages to servants instead of boarding them in the farmhouse was recorded. In Lancashire it was noted:

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<sup>63</sup> Priest, General View...of Buckinghamshire, p.335.

**Table 2.2: Wages of general male and female servants in  
first edition General Views**

County	Year	Female wage	Male wage	Average female-to-male wage ratio
Worcester	1794	£2.10s-£4	£5-£7	54%
Northumberland	1794	£3-£4	£7-£10	41%
Hereford	1794	£3.3s-£4.4s	£6.6s-£9.9s	45%
Cheshire	1794	£3.10s-£4.10s	£6-£9	53%
Cambridge	1794	£4.10s	£10	45%
Northampton	1794	£4.10s	£8-£10	50%
Derby	1794	£4-£5	£10-£12	41%
Cumberland	1794	£4-£6	£12-£14	38%
Durham	1794	£4-£6	£10-£14	42%
West Riding	1794	£5.5s	£10.10s	50%

Sources: Polleroy, W. T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Worcester, (London, 1794), p.18; Bailey, J., and Culley, G., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Northumberland, (London, 1794), p.53; Clark, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hereford, (London, 1794), p.29; Wedge, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County Palatine of Chester, (London, 1794), p.24; Vancouver, General View ...of Cambridge, p.212; Donaldson, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Northampton, (London, 1794), p.44; Brown, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Derby, (London, 1794), p.39; Bailey, J., and Culley, G., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Cumberland, (London, 1794), p.37; Granger, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Durham, (London, 1794), p.44; Rennie, Mr., Brown, Mr., and Shirreff, Mr., General View of the Agriculture of the West Riding of Yorkshire, (London, 1794), p.81.

**Table 2.3: Wages of general male and female servants in  
second edition General Views**

County	Year	Female wage	Male wage	Average female-to-male wage ratio
Cornwall	1811	£3-£4	£8.8s-£12.12s	33%
Leicester	1809	£3-£5	£6-£12	44%
Cheshire	1808	£4-£6	£8-£10	56%
Cumberland	1813	£4-£6	£10-£14	42%
Derby	1817	£4.4s-£5.5s	£10.10s-£12.12s	41%
Worcester	1813	£5-£6	£10.10s	52%
Bedford	1808	£5.5s	£10.10s	50%
Hertford	1804	£5.5s	£6.6s-£9.9s	70%
Lincoln	1813	£5.5s	£14.14s	37%
Lancashire	1815	£8	£15-£20	46%
Durham	1810	£9	£21	43%
Buckingham*	1813	£10.10s	£10.10s-£12.12s	91%

\* Aylesbury region

Sources: Worgan, General View...of Cornwall, p.159; Pitt, W., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Leicester, (London, 1809), p.305; Holland, H., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Cheshire, (London, 1808), pp.296-297; Bailey, J., and Culley, G., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Cumberland, 3rd edn (London, 1813), p.253; Farey, J., General View of the Agriculture and Minerals of Derbyshire, 3 vols (London, 1811, 1813 and 1817) vol 3, p.185; Pitt, W., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Worcester, (London, 1813), p.253; Batchelor, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Bedford, (London, 1808), p.580; Young, General View...of Hertford, p.217; Young, A., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lincoln, (London, 1813), p.444; Dickson, R. W., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lancashire, (London, 1815), p.593; Bailey, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Durham, (London, 1810), p.262; Priest, General View...of Buckinghamshire, p.334.

The large farmers commonly keep as many servants in their houses as are sufficient to perform the necessary business of the farm, but they begin to to complain, in many places, of the heaviness of the expenses of this method, and more frequently employ day-labourers.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the behaviour of servants was represented as alienating farmers. In Middlesex servants were 'mostly a bad set'<sup>65</sup> and in Surrey servants were viewed as 'unsettled and continually wandering from one master to another'.<sup>66</sup> Despite these changes the General Views indicate that service in husbandry was still economically viable in the early nineteenth-century countryside and offered young men and women an opportunity to leave home and enter the paid workforce. The real decline in service, in the south-east at least, occurred after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.

What was happening to female agricultural day labour between 1795 and 1815?

Is Pinchbeck correct in her assertion that this period witnessed a rapid increase in female day labourers in agriculture?<sup>67</sup> Overall the General Views confirm this trend: In Cornwall it was argued in 1811 that 'women ...perform a large share of the rural labour...They have more employment in the winter than they formerly had'<sup>68</sup>; in Devon the use of threshing machinery and drill husbandry 'affords an opportunity of employing a large proportion of women and children...'<sup>69</sup> and in Middlesex, the

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<sup>64</sup> Dickson, General View...of Lancashire, p.598.

<sup>65</sup> Middleton, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Middlesex, (London, 1813), p.500.

<sup>66</sup> Stevenson, W., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Surrey, (London, 1809), p.540.

<sup>67</sup> Pinchbeck, Women Workers, p.57.

<sup>68</sup> Worgan, General View...of Cornwall, p.159.

<sup>69</sup> Vancouver, General View...of Devon, p.123. The introduction of new innovations in agriculture such as drill husbandry, dibbling, hoeing and weeding was welcomed by many observers as they not only aided the production of crops but also provided employment for women and children who could easily be taught such tasks. One commentator called for all farmers to drill their turnips 'as well as pease and beans, as the hoeing may be then done by the women and children' (*sic*). See Estcourt, T., 'Provisions for the poor', Annals of Agriculture, 34 (1800), 145-150 (p.149). Rev. Glasse writing in 1802, similarly argued that dibbling gave 'helpful and satisfactory occupation, and means of subsistence, to thousands of women and children, at the dead seasons of the year, when there is a general want of employment'. Glasse, Rev. Dr., 'Extract from an account of the superior advantages of dibbling wheat, or setting it by hand', Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Improving the Comforts of the Poor, vol 3 (1802), 85-92 (p.91). See also Young, A., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Suffolk, (London, 1794), p.25, on the importance of wheat dibbling; Mavor, W., General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire, (London,



‘number of women...who are employed by the farmers and gardeners round London...is astonishing. Their industry is unequalled in Britain, or perhaps the world’.<sup>70</sup> But to unearth any meaningful information on women’s agricultural employment over time and space beyond this literary evidence is difficult. The frustration for the historian of women’s work in using this source can easily be illustrated: most first and second editions record some information on agricultural day rates, but it is not systematic and varies widely according to the author. Some second editions are simply reprints of the first and no new information on wages is added. However there is much valuable information contained in the General Views and those volumes which note a day rate for both male and female agricultural labour have been recorded in Table 2.4. These rates represent the usual day wage for male and female labourers and exclude higher earnings at harvest or on piece-work.

At the end of the eighteenth century female day wages in agriculture are shown to be between a third and a half of men’s. Women earned between 6d. and 12d. a day for agricultural work; men from 10d. to 1s. 8d. a day. No regional pattern emerges from this analysis however: there seems to be no relationship between the agriculture of the county and the size of the wage-gap. For example in Suffolk, an arable-dominated, south-eastern county, women earned 33% of men, the same amount as women in North Yorkshire. In Somerset meanwhile, women gained 50% of men’s wages, the same as women in East Yorkshire. By the second decade of the nineteenth century female day rates were recorded at 6d. to 18d. while men received 1s. 6d. to 4s. a day. As with

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1809), p.365, on women weeding; Worgan, General View...of Cornwall, p.70, on the usefulness of hoeing, and Stevenson, General View...of Surrey, p.587, for a description of turnip drilling.

<sup>70</sup> Middleton, General View...of Middlesex, pp.497-498.

**Table 2.4: Male and female agricultural day rates as recorded  
in the General Views**

County	Edition	Female rate	Male rate	Average female-to-male wage ratio
Hereford	1st (1794)	6d	10d-1s	55%
Huntingdon	1st (1793)	6d	1s-1s.2d	46%
Suffolk	1st (1794)	6d	1s.4d-1s.8d	33%
Lincoln	1st (1794)	6d	1s-1s.2d	46%
Wiltshire	1st (1794)	6d	1s-1s.2d	46%
Durham	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-1s.6d	47%
East Yorkshire	1st (1794)	6d-8d	10d-1s.6d	50%
Gloucester	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-1s.8d	44%
North Yorkshire	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-2s.6d	33%
Northumberland	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-1s.4d	50%
Somerset	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-1s.4d	50%
Warwick	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-1s.4d	50%
Worcester	1st (1794)	6d-8d	1s-1s.2d	54%
Kent	1st (1794)*	8d	1s.6d-1s.8d	42%
Westmoreland	1st (1794)	8d-1s	1s.4d-1s.8d	56%
Berkshire	2nd (1809)	6d-8d	1s.6d-2s	33%
Cornwall	2nd (1811)	6d-8d	1s.6d-2s	33%
Leicester	2nd (1809)	8d	2s	33%
Oxford	2nd (1813)†	8d	1s.6d	44%
Hampshire	2nd (1810)	8d	1s.6d-2s	38%
Dorset	2nd (1812)	8d	1s.6d	44%
Wiltshire	2nd (1811)	8d	1s.6d-1s.8d	42%
Durham	2nd (1810)	8d-1s	2s-3s	33%
Buckingham	2nd (1813)‡	8d-1s	1s.6d	56%
Lincoln	2nd (1813)	9d	1s.3d-2s	55%
East Yorkshire	2nd (1812)	9d	2s.6d-4s	23%
Rutland	2nd (1808)	9d-1s	1s.9d-2s.2d	45%
Kent	2nd (1813)	10d-1s	2s-2s.6d	41%
Gloucester	2nd (1813)	10d-1s	1s.6d-2s	52%
Warwick	2nd (1813)	1s-1s.6d	2s-3s.6d	45%

\* Isle of Thanet      † Tetsworth area      ‡ Stone district

Sources: Clark, General View...of Hereford, p.29; Maxwell, General View...of Huntingdon, p.18; Young, General View...of Suffolk, p.56; Stone, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lincoln (London, 1794), p.24; Davis, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Wiltshire, (London, 1794), pp.89-90; Granger, General View...of Durham, p.44; Leatham, I., General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire, (London, 1794), p.32; Turner, General View...of Gloucester, p.20; Tuke, Mr., General View of the Agriculture of the North Riding of Yorkshire, (London, 1794), pp.78-79; Bailey and Culley, General View...of Northumberland, p.54; Billingsley, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset, (London, 1794), p.153; Wedge, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Warwick, (London, 1794), p.23; Polleroy, General View...of Worcester, p.18; Boys, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Kent, (Brentford, 1794), pp.24-25; Pringle, A., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Westmoreland, (Edinburgh, 1794), p.30; Mavor, General View...of Berkshire, p.145; Worgan, General View...of Cornwall, p.159; Pitt, General View...of Leicester, p.305; Young, A., General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire, (London, 1813), p.317; Vancouver, C.,

the first editions, there appears to be no distinct regional pattern for the size of the female-male wage gap. This is probably due to the nature of the sources in that wages were not systematically recorded by all the authors of the General Views. This analysis does however reveal the very general nature of the female-male wage gap in agricultural day labour in the period 1794-1815. Seven counties record comparable information in both editions and can indicate how the female day rate for agricultural work was holding up during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Durham and the East Riding, the average amount women are paid for farm work declines significantly compared to the male rate between the first and second editions. In Wiltshire, Warwick and Kent, the wage ratio is more stable and shows only a slight decline between the two editions. In Gloucestershire and Lincolnshire, the evidence suggests the female-to-male wage ratio strengthens at this time. This may reflect the particular conditions of the Napoleonic Wars when the shortage of male labour meant farmers turned to female workers to perform essential agricultural tasks.

The General Views do not include any annual budget accounts of the rural labouring poor. This makes it impossible to assess how women's and children's contribution to the family economy was faring at the beginning of the nineteenth

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General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire including the Isle of Wight, (London, 1810), pp.385-386; Stevenson, General View...of Dorset, p.434; Davis, General View...of Wiltshire, pp.210-211; Bailey, General View...of Durham, p.262; Priest, General View...of Buckinghamshire, p.337; Young, General View...of Lincoln, pp.444-445; Strickland, H. E., General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire, (York, 1812), p.259; Parkinson, R., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Rutland, (London, 1808), p.151; Boys, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Kent, 2nd edn (London, 1813), p.190-192; Rudge, General View...of Gloucester, p.328; Murray, A., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Warwick, (London, 1813), p.163.

century. An analysis of the wage data on yearly servants in husbandry, although limited, indicates that on the whole female wage rates were not declining in comparison to male earnings during the Napoleonic War period. Female day labourers in agriculture were more vulnerable and the wage gap between male and female day rates seems to have strengthened in northern counties. In other areas however, female day rates increased in proportion to the male rate. Evidence contained in the General Views of agriculture therefore could suggest that the decline of rural female work opportunities and wages from spinning was absorbed initially by an increase in agricultural day labour and other cottage industries in certain regions.

The position of rural labourers - both male and female - appears to have deteriorated significantly after 1815. Agricultural depression followed the restoration of peace. Demobilised soldiers flooded the rural labour market and farmers responded by cutting day rates for agricultural work and, in the south and east, dismissing servants in favour of casual labour. William Cobbett notes the correlation between this trend and the pauperisation of rural workers:

Why do not farmers now *feed* and *lodge* their work-people, as they did formerly? Because they cannot keep them *upon so little* as they give them in wages. This is the real cause of the change. There needs no more to prove that the lot of the working classes has become worse than it formerly was.<sup>71</sup>

Statements of agricultural distress throughout England after the Napoleonic Wars were recorded by various government enquiries which reveal the want of employment in the

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<sup>71</sup> Cobbett, W., Rural Rides, 1st edn 1830 (Harmondsworth, 1985), p.227. This view is reiterated by a correspondent to the Farmers Magazine who argued 'the great cause, if not the sole cause, of this deplorable state of the agricultural districts, is to be attributed to the system of the Farmers discontinuing to board and lodge their men in their houses...'. Anon, 'Suggestions for improving the moral character of the agricultural labourers, etc', Farmers Magazine, 1 (1835), 8-9 (p.8).

countryside and the increased reliance on parish assistance.<sup>72</sup> The burden under-employed rural labourers presented to the poor rates constituted one of the pivotal concerns of the early nineteenth century. The lack of employment for women was central to this matter and was therefore one of the subjects investigated by the major parliamentary enquiry into the operation of the poor laws. This forms the basis of the next section.

#### **2.4: The 1834 Poor Law Report**

The Poor Law Report is the best indicator of the state of the rural employment market in the early 1830s.<sup>73</sup> A questionnaire was distributed among rural parishes in the summer of 1832 by the Poor Law Commission, the returns being printed as Appendix B of the 1834 Report.<sup>74</sup> The rural queries consisted of 58 questions relating to, amongst other things, the administration of poor relief, wage rates and employment opportunities for men, women and children. Of particular relevance to this study are questions 11, 12 and 13. Question 11 asked, 'Have you any and what employment for Women and Children?'. Question 12 requested, 'What can Women and Children under 16, earn per week, in Summer, in Winter, and Harvest, and how employed?', and question 13 read 'What might the Labourers Wife and four Children aged 14, 11, 8 and 5 years respectively, expect to earn in the year?'. However care has to be taken when using this source as an indication of trends in rural female labour and contemporary attitudes

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<sup>72</sup> See for example, Mingay, G. E., ed., The Agricultural State of the Kingdom in 1816, (Bath, 1970); PP 1821, IX, Select Committee on Petitions complaining of Depressed State of Agriculture of UK; PP 1824, VI, Select Committee on Agricultural Wages, and the Condition and Morals of Labourers in that Employment; PP 1833, V, Select Committee on State of Agriculture in UK.

<sup>73</sup> PP 1834, XXX, Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws. Appendix (B.1). Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts. Part 1.

<sup>74</sup> Boyer, Poor Law, p.127.

towards it. Only approximately 1100 responses were returned, or 10% of rural parishes in England and Wales.<sup>75</sup> This raises doubts over the typicality of those parishes which replied. Three different editions of the rural queries were circulated and respondents indicated on the returns which edition they had used. The wording of questions is slightly different in all editions, although the substance of the queries remains the same. However, in all three the questions are poorly worded, leading to problems of interpretation and analysis. Many replies are incomplete or ambiguous. Some are simply left blank. Also of significance was the meaning bestowed on terms such as 'employment' and 'earnings'. As a number of historians who have used this source have pointed out, employment was mostly taken to mean paid employment and earnings to mean payments made by an employer. A reply of 'no employment' could therefore denote that there was no wage labour in the parish, not that there was no work at all for women and children.<sup>76</sup> This is significant as Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries have shown how an 'occupational' definition of work produces lower estimates of women's labour force participation than an 'earnings' definition.<sup>77</sup> Finally, as Hugh Cunningham points out with regard to his research on the employment of children, the frequent uniting together of the experiences of women and children in this source renders analysis even more problematic.<sup>78</sup> This is still an important and under-utilised source however, and its nationwide coverage means a thorough investigation of the regional nature of women's employment is possible.

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<sup>75</sup> Blaug, M., 'The poor law report re-examined', *Journal of Economic History*, 24 (1964), 229-245 (p.231).

<sup>76</sup> King, 'Customary rights', p.467; Cunningham, H., 'The employment and unemployment of children in England, c.1680-1851', *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), 115-150 (p.139).

<sup>77</sup> Horrell, S., and Humphries, J., 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male breadwinner family', *Economic History Review*, 64 (1991), 89-117 (p.97).

<sup>78</sup> Cunningham, 'Employment of children', p.134.

Replies to the 1834 Poor Law Report have been analysed to indicate the types of labour women were involved in according to region in the early 1830s. This approach can begin to reveal the complex, varying nature of employment patterns across regions in England, if not over time. The methodology behind this exercise requires explanation. Not all counties have been included in the investigation as this would have been prohibitively time-consuming. Instead a number of counties have been selected as the best way of characterising the different regions of England. Region A represents the south-west counties of Devon, Somerset and Dorset; region B denotes the south Midland counties of Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire; region C includes Norfolk and Suffolk whilst region D stands for the eastern counties of Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Region E represents the northern areas of Northumberland and Cumberland. Regions F and G are Essex and Kent respectively. The number of parishes which returned questionnaires in each region are given under the region heading in Table 2.5. Essex and Kent were kept as separate regions because of the large number of returns for these counties. Replies to questions 11, 12 and 13 have been dissected to reveal the extent of women's participation in harvest work, haymaking and gleaning. Forms of domestic employment have been combined together under the heading 'by-employment' and the incidence of these has been assessed from question 11. The extent of women's involvement in summer and winter employment has also been calculated using question 12. Any mention of these categories of employment in any parish replies in the chosen regions was stored as a positive response in a specially constructed data-base. From this it is possible to establish the percentage of parishes returning a positive reply in any given region. A separate figure has been calculated for the percentage of replies which specifically

stated that women were involved in the particular task or season (as opposed to those which united women and children together). Finally a 'total mentions' figure establishes the overall percentage of parishes in a particular region which indicated that type of employment was available in all three questions combined. This does not distinguish whether the task was undertaken by women or children, or both. The figures cannot disclose the proportion of women in employment in individual parishes which stated they had work. In some parishes the labour of women may have been deemed too casual or occasional to have been worth mentioning whilst in others, even if only a handful of women were involved in a certain task, that employment may have been recorded. In approaching the source in this way however, some of the problems associated with a more qualitative approach may be avoided.

All regions indicate a high incidence of employment available for women in 1834. 85% of returning parishes in the south-west stated they had work for women in one form or another. Essex returned a figure of 88%. Both East Anglia and the northern region declared a 90% return whilst Kent, the eastern region and the south Midland region returned comparable figures of 93%, 94% and 96% respectively. There are interesting regional differences in the types of employment available to women which these overall percentages conceal however. The incidence of domestic industry is shown to be centred around the south Midland counties of Northampton, Bedford and Buckingham (Table 2.5). Lacemaking and strawplaiting were the forms of employment most frequently mentioned and in some parishes fieldwork for women was relatively unknown. At Whitchurch in Buckinghamshire, the return states, 'Few women, comparatively, are in Buckinghamshire employed in field-labour; they make lace, and



**Table 2.5: Women's by-employment by region in 1834**

	Region A (65) S/West	Region B (67) S/Mids	Region C (92) E/Ang	Region D (53) East	Region E (67) North	Region F (49) Essex	Region G (56) Kent
Q11 Mentions by- employment	46%	78%	11%	13%	7%	24%	2%
Specifically for women	18%	24%	3%	6%	3%	10%	2%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1.

Region A: Devon, Somerset and Dorset

Region B: Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire

Region C: Suffolk and Norfolk

Region D: Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and East Riding of Yorkshire

Region E: Northumberland and Cumberland

Region F: Essex

Region G: Kent

in many Parishes plait straw'<sup>79</sup>; at Caddington in Bedfordshire, 'The women and Children are rarely, if ever, employed in field labour. All plats straw'<sup>80</sup>, and at Lidlington in the same county, 'Women are scarcely ever employed in agriculture, but mostly in lace-making...'.<sup>81</sup> The south-west counties of Devon, Dorset and Somerset also returned a relatively high incidence of domestic industries, with buttonmaking, gloving and silk throwing being most commonly referred to. The lowest return for by-employment came from Kent, a mainly agricultural county where, 'The only labour is Agricultural Labour', as the return for Milstead states.<sup>82</sup> However, domestic employment opportunities were not to be found in every village and were regionally

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<sup>79</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.47a.

<sup>80</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.3a.

<sup>81</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.5a.

<sup>82</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.251a.

specific within counties. In Somerset for example, the gloving trade was centred around the town of Yeovil, providing 'work for all who wanted it, when they are capable of using a needle'.<sup>83</sup> Moreover responses make it clear that wage rates for women and children engaged in domestic industries were declining in the early 1830s. This stands in stark contrast to the high levels of earnings reported in the General Views twenty years earlier. At Puddington, Bedfordshire, the lace making trade was described as 'very bad'<sup>84</sup>; at Easton Mawdit in Northamptonshire, the same occupation was 'not a thriving trade' at this time<sup>85</sup>, and in Buckinghamshire several returns imply that lace work had declined in the face of machinery competition and was consequently 'badly paid for'.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, female button makers at Fontmell Magna, Dorset, were paid little 'beyond the value of the materials'<sup>87</sup> and at Yeovil, because of the heavy importation of French gloves, 'Females do not earn so much by half as formerly, wages being so much lowered'.<sup>88</sup> Complaints of the lack of by-employment's in the East Anglia region were frequent, and the finality of the collapse of the spinning industry in the countryside is shown. At Saxingham in Norfolk, the return states that spinning used to afford employment to a great number of villagers but had 'been entirely given up since the general employment of machinery'<sup>89</sup>, and at Nayland, Suffolk,

...formerly, they used to be employed in spinning; and it was not unusual for the Wife and Children to earn as much as the Husband. The descendants of those who were master clothiers formerly in this village are now paupers. It is supposed that at least, 40,000 people were employed in spinning and weaving in Suffolk about 40 or 50 years ago. Places most noted for manufactures then are now noted for a

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<sup>83</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.409a.

<sup>84</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.7a.

<sup>85</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.334a.

<sup>86</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.45a.

<sup>87</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.140a.

<sup>88</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.409a.

<sup>89</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.320a.

pauperised and degraded population...<sup>90</sup>

Turning to agricultural employment, most places reported they had some farm work for women in 1834. Table 2.6 indicates the percentages of parishes in each region which stated in their answers to questions 11, 12 and 13 combined that they had some form of agricultural work in their village. Those regions with the highest incidence of domestic industries recorded the lowest levels of farm labour, whilst regions C, D, E and G all show fairly comparable returns at between 88% and 93%. However, parishes clearly differed enormously in the type and amount of agricultural work they offered women. A cursory glance at the parish replies indicates how difficult it is to draw conclusions from this source. At Ford in Northumberland, is it stated, 'Women...have constant Summer and some Winter employment on the Farms'<sup>91</sup>; at Springfield in Essex, 'We have not much employment for Women and Children, the little we have is

**Table 2.6: Agricultural work for women by region in 1834**

	Region A S/West	Region B S/Mids	Region C E/Ang	Region D East	Region E North	Region F Essex	Region G Kent
Total mentions of agricultural work	77%	73%	90%	91%	88%	80%	93%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1.

<sup>90</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.465a.

<sup>91</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.347a.

**Table 2.7: Women's participation in harvest by region in 1834**

	Region A S/West	Region B S/Mids	Region C E/Ang	Region D East	Region E North	Region F Essex	Region G Kent
Q11 Mentions harvest work	11%	13%	10%	30%	34%	14%	41%
Q12 Mentions harvest work	46%	55%	58%	77%	73%	65%	54%
Q13 Mentions harvest work	2%	9%	3%	4%	24%	2%	9%
Specifically for women	26%	34%	22%	38%	39%	10%	29%
Total mentions	52%	63%	60%	87%	82%	67%	75%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1.

principally confined to field-work for a few weeks in Summer...'<sup>92</sup>, whilst at South Ormsby cum Ketsby in Lincolnshire, 'Employment in Harvest, but at other times it is precarious...'.<sup>93</sup> The more quantitative approach adopted in this chapter makes a regional analysis more plausible. Table 2.7 is an indication of the extent of women's harvest participation in 1834. The highest incidence of harvest employment was in the northern and eastern regions. The latter region was a classic arable area in the nineteenth century, whilst the customary involvement of women in agriculture in the northern region was well-established.<sup>94</sup> Kent, a purely agricultural county, also returned a high percentage of female involvement whilst the south Midlands, East Anglia and Essex areas show some consistency of involvement. These figures suggest that the

<sup>92</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.186a.

<sup>93</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.296a.

<sup>94</sup> See Gielgud, J., 'Nineteenth-century farmwomen in Northumberland and Cumbria: the neglected workforce', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1992).

lowest participation rates were in the south-west. In that region only 52% of parishes in all three questions mentioned the existence of harvest labour for women and children. Once more, it must be emphasised that these percentages do not tell us the precise numbers of women involved in any particular parish or the type of harvest operation they laboured at; they are simply an indication of the percentage of parishes mentioning harvest labour in their returns. Indeed most returns do not specify the exact roles available to women in harvest, and in some cases ‘the harvest’ could mean gleaning.

Although the questionnaire did not specifically address the issue of customary rights, there is enough information on gleaning in the 1834 returns to plot the regional incidence of this form of labour. This is shown in Table 2.8. Essex and the East Anglian counties of Norfolk and Suffolk dominate this form of non-monetary labour. In the northern counties of Northumberland and Cumberland this practice was unknown

**Table 2.8: Women’s participation in gleaning by region in 1834**

	Region A S/West	Region B S/Mids	Region C E/Ang	Region D East	Region E North	Region F Essex	Region G Kent
Q11 Mentions gleaning	3%	7%	4%	8%	0%	12%	0%
Q12 Mentions gleaning	5%	7%	26%	4%	0%	43%	2%
Q13 Mentions gleaning	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Specifically for women	2%	7%	7%	0%	0%	4%	0%
Total mentions	6%	13%	32%	9%	0%	45%	2%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1

according to these returns.<sup>95</sup> The involvement of women in gleaning in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk may help to explain their relatively low participation in the actual harvest. Conversely, the high percentage of women work's in the harvest in Kent and the eastern area - also arable regions - possibly suggests profits from gleaning were not so essential.

This 'mention' system seems to indicate a higher incidence of female involvement in harvest operations across the country than previously suggested. Keith Snell in particular argues that by the early decades of the nineteenth century women in south-east England were becoming increasingly unlikely to retain their position in the harvest, finding more security of employment in springtime activities such as weeding and early summer haymaking.<sup>96</sup> The 1834 Poor Law Report, he contends, is a good reflection of this sexual specialisation in agricultural work, quoting examples from the counties of Cambridge, Bedford and Essex to illustrate his point. In his analysis, spring weeding and haymaking are the agricultural events most frequently mentioned as being performed by women, with their role in harvest by this date limited to gleaning.<sup>97</sup> The 'mention' system adopted in this chapter indicates surprisingly low participation rates for women and children in haymaking (see Table 2.9). The most mentions of this form of employment were returned by the east, north and Essex areas, although in none of the regions did more than 36% of replies to questions 11, 12 and 13 combined indicate the existence of haymaking as a form of employment for women or children. The reason for this may lie in the wording of the questions. Question 12 - 'What can Women and Children under 16, earn per week, in Summer, in Winter and Harvest, and how

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<sup>95</sup> These figures reinforce the research of Peter King, which shows the broad division between the north and south of England in the incidence of this customary right, and the tendency for gleaning to be most significant in the central and eastern counties of the country. King, 'Customary rights', p.468.

<sup>96</sup> Snell, *Annals*, p.22.

<sup>97</sup> Snell, *Annals*, p.55.

**Table 2.9: The incidence of women haymaking by region in 1834**

	Region A S/West	Region B S/Mids	Region C E/Ang	Region D East	Region E North	Region F Essex	Region G Kent
Q11 Mentions haymaking	9%	7%	15%	21%	27%	27%	27%
Q12 Mentions haymaking	5%	13%	7%	6%	9%	10%	7%
Q13 Mentions haymaking	11%	15%	10%	19%	7%	14%	5%
Specifically for women	2%	10%	1%	0%	10%	0%	5%
Total mentions	18%	22%	23%	32%	36%	31%	27%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1.

employed?’ - may have prompted the respondents into mentioning harvest work whilst ignoring other tasks women were involved in.

What can the 1834 Poor Law Report reveal about the seasonality of women’s employment opportunities? Table 2.10 shows the extent of summer and winter work by region as indicated in question 12. Unsurprisingly, most parish replies in all regions indicate wider opportunities to work in the summer. However, the number of parishes which positively mention work for women and children in the winter months was also high, especially in the eastern counties of Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and the East Riding, and in the northern region. The lower returns for East Anglia and other south-eastern counties seems to suggest that women were increasingly unlikely to find employment in the winter months in that area of England.

**Table 2.10: Summer and winter employment of women by region in 1834**

	Region A S/West	Region B S/Mids	Region C E/Ang	Region D East	Region E North	Region F Essex	Region G Kent
Q12 Mentions summer work	51%	60%	60%	79%	69%	67%	57%
Specifically for women	35%	40%	39%	38%	34%	29%	36%
Q12 Mentions winter work	45%	49%	45%	64%	58%	53%	43%
Specifically for women	23%	23%	20%	19%	15%	12%	9%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1.

The Poor Law Report also provides information on the average annual earnings of men, women and children by region in 1834. These are shown in Table 2.11. Figures for women and children have been derived from information provided in question 13, whilst those for men are taken from question 10, which asked, ‘What might an average Labourer obtaining an average amount of Employment, expect to earn during the year, including Harvest work?’. Many replies are incomplete or left blank. Some only note a weekly or daily wage but do not specify an annual sum. Others note the earnings of women only, or children only and do not provide the complete picture. Therefore the number of parishes in each region where all relevant information is available is much smaller than for Tables 2.5 to 2.10. The number of parishes included in the analysis is stated in brackets under the region heading. The estimated averages of the amount of yearly earnings can give an indication of female wages and the contribution women made to the family income at this time. Women’s yearly earnings range from £1. 10s. to



**Table 2.11: Average annual earnings of men, women and children by region in 1834**

	Region A (1) S/West	Region B (9) S/Mids	Region C (1) E/Ang	Region D (2) East	Region E (3) North	Region F (1) Essex	Region G (2) Kent
Women	£1.10s	£6.2s	£1.5s	£4.12s	£4.2s	£2.10s	£5.10s
Children	£10.6s	£12.13s	£3.12s	£16	£7.2s	£13	£12.5s
Women and Children	£11.16s	£18.16s	£4.17s	£20.12s	£11.4s	£15.10s	£17.15s
Men	£18s	£27.13s	£25s	£30.10s	£26.6s	£26	£33
Family Total	£29.16s	£46.9s	£29.17s	£51.2s	£37.10s	£41.10s	£50.15s
Wife's contribution	5%	13%	4%	9%	11%	6%	11%
Children's contribution	35%	27%	12%	31%	19%	31%	24%
Women and Children's contribution	40%	40%	16%	40%	30%	37%	35%
Male contribution	60%	60%	84%	60%	70%	63%	65%

Source: PP, 1834, XXX, Appendix B.1.

£6. 2s. Female earnings are shown to be the highest in the south Midland region.

Although many replies state that the wages women could earn in the domestic industries were falling at this time, this analysis indicates that such employment was still profitable especially when performed year round. The relatively large number of parishes from which information was available in this area may affect the result somewhat. The agricultural regions of Kent and eastern England return the next highest annual female wages at around £5. Women's involvement in the harvest fields in these regions may account for this and the specialist work of women in the hop fields of Kent was also a profitable exercise.<sup>98</sup> The lowest annual earnings of women come from the south-west region and Essex. The decline of spinning and the small participation of women in the harvest fields of these regions could explain this. As expected, children's average annual wages increase according to age; by the age of 14 children were earning significantly more than women, although as many reporters noted, the sex of the child would affect the amount of money they could earn.<sup>99</sup> The wives' contribution to the family total was between 4% and 13%; on average this corresponds to the figures derived from the budgets of Davies and Eden and points to a continuity in women's ability to contribute to the family income between the 1790s and 1830s. In most instances whilst (married) women's earnings were neither central nor marginal, they remained important. These figures also largely correspond to those calculated by Horrell and Humphries. In low wage agricultural counties they found married women's contribution to the family budget between 1787 and 1815 was 9.6%, rising slightly to

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<sup>98</sup> At Marden in Kent for example, in the summer months women worked 10 weeks tying hops for 2s. per week; spent two weeks in the corn harvest at 12s. a week and picked hops for three weeks also earning 12s. a week. This amounted to £4 in total. PP, 1834, XXX, p.253a.

<sup>99</sup> Cunningham, 'Employment of children', p.134. Only the child of 14 is revealed to be a boy; the identity of the younger children in the 1834 Report are not shown.

11.6% in the 1821-1840 period. Only after 1840 does the percentage of female contribution collapse, to just 1.6% in the 1846-1865 period, although their sample sizes for the later periods are much smaller.<sup>100</sup>

The figures on women's earnings derived from the 1834 Poor Law Report are limited as they represent only one sub-group: married women with four children under 15 years of age. For a whole range of women - single women, widows, married women without children - potential earnings may have been higher. On the other hand, there would have been many women in the early nineteenth-century countryside with very young children who, as a consequence, were even less likely to procure waged labour in the formal economy. As it was, many reporting officials suggest that women with four children had many disadvantages and were frequently kept from labour by family commitments. At Hackthorn, Lincolnshire, the return reads, 'A Woman with four Children cannot work for her employer more than four months in the year, in consequence of bad weather and her necessary attention to the family'<sup>101</sup>, whilst at Woolborough in Devon, the returnee states, 'Mothers of four or five children are supposed to have quite enough to do to take care of the family, and, of course, cannot earn anything'.<sup>102</sup> However, whilst most returns include sums represented by gleaning activities, it is likely that the majority of annual figures exclude many other forms of earnings. At Sarston in Norfolk, as an illustration, it is noted that 'Very few women go out to work...others do better by washing and taking in work'.<sup>103</sup> One commentator from Essex also observed that it was 'very difficult to get at the amount of earnings of

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<sup>100</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', p.98.

<sup>101</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.293a.

<sup>102</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.293a.

<sup>103</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.325a.

that part of the family which is not employed by the farmer, as they conceal them for fear of having their allowances diminished'.<sup>104</sup>

One of the effects of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was the implementation of more stringent conditions of relief to labourers. Historians have argued that a repercussion of this clause was the extension of child and female employment in rural areas as families fought to stave off the spectre of the workhouse.<sup>105</sup> William Hasbach for example quotes Dr. Kay's testimony to the Lords Committee on the Poor Law Amendment Act as an illustration of this trend:

The extent of employment for women and children has most wonderfully increased since the Poor Law came into operation... The expedient adopted by all the employers of labour in getting rid of the allowance in aid of wages, consists in affording such employment to the women and children, especially in large families.<sup>106</sup>

A similar conclusion was reached by Pinchbeck who argued the continued economising of farmers also led to extra work being provided for women and children.<sup>107</sup> Some evidence for the desire on the part of rural labourers to find employment for all family members can be found in the 1836 Select Committee on the State of Agriculture, the Reports from the Select Committee on the Poor Law Amendment Act and the annual reports of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales. Thus the New Poor Law was seen to have had 'an excellent effect'<sup>108</sup> upon the labourer who 'now finds he has nothing but his labour to depend on, and he goes and seeks the best market for it'.<sup>109</sup> In the Pewsey Union of Wiltshire there was 'a greater desire on the part of the work

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<sup>104</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.175a.

<sup>105</sup> See Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, p.79.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Hasbach, W., *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, 1st edn 1894 (London, 1966), p.225.

<sup>107</sup> Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, pp.84-86.

<sup>108</sup> PP 1836, VIII, Select Committee on the State of Agriculture, Third Report, p.167.

<sup>109</sup> PP 1836, VIII, Select Committee on the State of Agriculture, Second Report, p.219.

people to procure regular employment' including a 'large proportion' of women and girls, whilst at Witham in Essex there was a previously 'unknown energy' in the desire to seek work which was 'very striking by the great addition of female working' and children being withdrawn from schooling to 'earn a fewpence'.<sup>110</sup>

Interest in the productive capabilities of women residing in the countryside informs the published material produced between the 1790s and 1830s. After this date attention paid to rural working women begins to shift from a concern over the lack of employment opportunities for women to anxiety over the moral and physical effects of labour. This transformation is reflected in the types of information chronicled in the published sources such as the Royal Commissions. Observers become less involved in recording the daily, weekly and annual wages of women, children and men across the country, or tabulating the budgets of labouring families. Instead writing is focused more on qualitative debates such as the age at which children should be allowed to work, the impact on family life of married women working outside the household and the most respectable work suitable for single women. The ways the historian of women's employment patterns can utilise these sources also changes. It becomes more difficult to statistically and accurately map the regional availability of work and wages after 1835. Similarly, the reconstruction of annual family earnings and expenses is less readily achieved. However evidence from the Royal Commissions can be used to show the shift in ideology regarding female employment in the nineteenth century. In addition, the published testimony of working people forms an interesting aspect of sources published after 1835. This will be shown in the following section which firstly examines the

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<sup>110</sup> Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales, (London, 1836), p.318 and p.258.

information contained in the 1843 Royal Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture.

## **2.5: The Royal Commissions**

The first major investigation of women's employment in the countryside after 1834 was the 1843 Royal Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture. This report was written under the auspices of the Poor Law Commission and, according to Karen Sayer, 'provides our first example of an excursion by the state into the countryside on a specifically gendered issue'.<sup>111</sup> It was appointed in December 1842 by the Home Secretary and assistant commissioners were given thirty days to cover their designated region. Its coverage was selective: Alfred Austin inspected Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset; Henry Vaughan, Kent, Surrey and Sussex; Stephen Denison visited Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire whilst Sir Francis Doyle looked at Yorkshire and Northumberland. This report was not a major parliamentary event. It was appointed during the Christmas recess and starved of resources. Unlike the 1842 report on women and children in mining, it did not animate the public imagination and its findings were not discussed in parliament.<sup>112</sup> Despite this the report is, in Armstrong's view, 'a major source for rural social history in the period, offering a great deal of information on conditions incidental to the main topic of inquiry'.<sup>113</sup> So, in addition to details on the employment conditions of women and children in agriculture,

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<sup>111</sup> Sayer, K., Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century, (Manchester, 1995), p.34.

<sup>112</sup> Sayer, Women of the Fields, p.35. It was not until March 1844 that the report was mentioned in the House of Commons, when it was referred to by William Cobden, a leader of the Anti-Corn Law League. See Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-century farmwomen', pp.431-432.

<sup>113</sup> Armstrong, A., 'Labour 1: rural population growth, systems of employment, and incomes' in Mingay, G. E., ed., Agrarian History of England and Wales, vol VI, 1750-1850, (Cambridge, 1989), pp.641-728 (p.685).

these reports also provide a great deal of material on the education of rural children, the allotment system, cottage accommodation, the diet and dress of labourers, as well as issues of morality and religious instruction.

The appointed commissioners found women to be employed generally in the agriculture of all the counties under scrutiny but there were numerous regional and local differences which makes any comprehensive survey of the information difficult. The commissioner for the south-west wrote:

The practice of employing women in farm labour...prevails throughout the four counties mentioned...but the number of women so employed, and the kinds of work which they perform, are not always the same. A difference is sometimes found in their occupations on two adjoining farms...<sup>114</sup>

Despite this some generalisations are possible. In Kent, Surrey and Sussex women earned an average 8d. to 10d. a day in spring and summer field labour, rising to 10d. to 1s. for haymaking and 1s. 6d. at corn harvest. The horticultural cultivation of the region also furnished women with much employment. In the hop district around Tunbridge Wells, women were paid 10d. to 1s. a day for opening the hills and poling, 9s. an acre for tying the poles and around 1s. 8d. for picking. Higher wages could be gained by working with the whole family at task work, with women generally tending and tying plants whilst men did the ground work.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, in the orchard fields surrounding Maidstone, women were paid 1s. 3d. a day for picking summer fruit.<sup>116</sup> In the south-west counties, Austin found that there were 'but few families' where women and children were not engaged in fieldwork, although they were most regularly employed in

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<sup>114</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture. Report by Mr. Alfred Austin on the counties of Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset, p.3.

<sup>115</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Mr. Henry Vaughan on the counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, pp.166-169.

<sup>116</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Vaughan, p.169.

Devon where continuous work throughout the year was common. Women on average earned 7d. or 8d. daily in winter, rising to 10d. in summer and 1s. a day at harvest, although once again, more could be gained by task work.<sup>117</sup> In Northumberland, female day labourers received 10d. a day, rising to 1s. 6d. to 3s. a day in harvest; in Yorkshire women - who could find work in most regions except the large grazing Dales area - earned 8d. to 10d. a day, increasing to 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. in harvest.<sup>118</sup> Denison reported that women in Suffolk and Norfolk received, on average, 8d. a day, but those in Lincolnshire were paid 10d. being generally speaking 'much better off...than in the former'.<sup>119</sup> In this region day rates in the hay and corn seasons rose to up to 1s. 6d. a day for women workers. Generally therefore, female day rates were highest in the northern district and the specialist hop regions of south-eastern England. Women in the south-west and East Anglian regions received the lowest recompense for agricultural day labour.

Because of the irregular and seasonal nature of women's work it is difficult to calculate from this information women's annual earnings or their contribution to the family income. Pinchbeck points out, 'Women's agricultural employment was too irregular and uncertain in its amount to allow of the daily rates being used as a basis for any calculation of average yearly earnings'.<sup>120</sup> Women's earnings were supplemented by task work. There were also a number of other sources from which the labouring family supplemented the annual income. The 1843 report only occasionally provides information on female occupations outside paid agricultural work for farmers but these

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<sup>117</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.4.

<sup>118</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Sir Francis Doyle on the counties of Yorkshire and Northumberland, p.295.

<sup>119</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Mr. Stephen Denison on the counties of Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire, p.217.

<sup>120</sup> Pinchbeck, *Women Workers* p.96.



clearly existed. Gleaning is referred to by the commissioners for the south-west and eastern regions. Austin calculates that '3 or 4 bushels of corn are by no means an uncommon result of the gleaning', or the equivalent to 25 to 30s.<sup>121</sup> In Dorset, button making was still 'followed by nearly all the labourers wives and children above six years old'<sup>122</sup> whilst in Yorkshire 'a few women take in washing...and in every village there is a certain proportion (near the towns a considerable one) of dress-making and bonnet-making'.<sup>123</sup> However in Norfolk and Suffolk 'no other domestic manufacture' had been found to supply the place of hand-spinning and the population was 'strictly agricultural'.<sup>124</sup> Allotments or cottage gardens were reported in all regions. It was the usual practice for the labourers' wife to assist in the maintenance of these. This was seen to 'give a more active character to the women's household employment'<sup>125</sup> and according to Austin was 'by no means an unimportant addition to the means of subsistence to the family'.<sup>126</sup>

On the whole female labour is not denounced in the 1843 Royal Commission.<sup>127</sup> Austin and Vaughan concluded that the effect of farm work was 'beneficial', Denison noted that all his informants bar one agreed that outdoor labour was 'conducive to health' and Doyle argued that 'no particular evil' in terms of the 'manners and morals'

<sup>121</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.16.

<sup>122</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.16.

<sup>123</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Doyle, p.284. William Howitt, a popular writer on rural England at this time also noted that married women could supplement the earnings of her husband 'by taking in washing, helping in harvest-fields, charring in more affluent people's houses and so on...'. Howitt, W., The Rural Life of England, 3rd edn (1844), p.405.

<sup>124</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.220.

<sup>125</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Vaughan, p.143. George Nichols, writing in the Royal Agricultural Society journal, believed that garden work was much better suited to the 'sex and circumstances' of rural women than 'habitual field work at all seasons'. See Nichols, G., 'On the condition of the agricultural labourer', Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, 7 (1846), 1-30 (p.19).

<sup>126</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.15.

<sup>127</sup> Gang labour in the eastern counties was condemned by witnesses as producing moral, physical and intellectual evils. This will be further discussed in chapter four.

of women resulted from their work.<sup>128</sup> Instead women's employment is recognised for its economic significance to the rural labouring family. Austin argues that women's earnings were,

a benefit to their families which cannot be dispensed with without creating a great deal of suffering. And upon fullest consideration, I believe that the earnings of a woman employed in the fields are an advantage which, in the present state of the agricultural population, outweighs any of the mischiefs arising from such employment.<sup>129</sup>

This attitude has much in common with the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century investigations of rural women. Twenty five years later when the next Royal Commission on this subject reported its finding, shifts in the ideological outlook of the country facilitated the production of a rather different enquiry.

By the 1860s mounting unease surrounding women's employment, and especially outdoor labour, induced the government to investigate the gang system as part of the Children's Employment Commission. When this report was published in 1867, a public and parliamentary outcry resulted. Richard Heath, a prominent writer on the nineteenth-century countryside commented:

Let anyone look at the Sixth Report...and he will there find a tale of horror as to some facts of social life amongst the labouring people of the fen districts...By such authoritative testimony the cause is shown to be mainly due to the destruction of the maternal instinct in women whose lives are hardened and brutalized by unsuitable toil and continual contact with moral corruption, and by the neglect that must ensue when they are obliged to leave their babies to the care of others.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.7; Report by Vaughan, p.133; Report by Denison, p.215 and Report by Doyle, p.293.

<sup>129</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.28.

<sup>130</sup> Heath, R., The Victorian Peasant, 1st edn 1893 (Gloucester, 1989), p.156.

The evidence on gangs contained in the 1867 report led directly to the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. The two volumes relating to the English counties appeared in 1868 and 1869, the third and fourth reports on Wales and Scotland in 1870. Its scope was much wider than any previous Commission, focusing not only on the type and amount of work performed, but also on the state of children's education, cottage accommodation and the physical and moral effects of labour throughout Great Britain. For the first time agriculture was defined as an industry which could be regulated in the same way as manufactures.<sup>131</sup> Judy Gielgud has suggested that this report was not an investigation primarily established to explore the work of women in agriculture as is often assumed. She demonstrates how the commissioners selected were, on the whole, not experts in agriculture but in education. In this context, as Gielgud contends, women are often marginalised in the text, and where they are discussed it is largely in relation to moral degradation and impropriety.<sup>132</sup>

Once again, the reports highlight the diversity of agricultural production, and the different systems of hiring, organisation of labour and female and child employment patterns which emerged from this. In the mainly corn producing south and east, women's employment was brought into production at certain times of the agricultural calendar under the gang system. This form of labour was reported in the counties of Lincoln, Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk and Nottingham. Women were paid between 8d. and 10d. a day for tasks undertaken on a seasonal basis but which added together

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<sup>131</sup> One commentator argued that the Commission was 'for the purpose of ascertaining to what extent, and with what modifications, the principles of the Factory Acts could be adopted for the regulation of such employments, and especially with a view to the better education of such children'. See Dent, J., 'The present condition of the English agricultural labourer', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 2nd ser., 7 (1871), 343-365 (p.345).

<sup>132</sup> Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-century farmwomen', p.416.

covered much of the year.<sup>133</sup> The horticultural cultivation of Kent and some regions of Midland England also furnished women with a great deal of work. Indeed, their labour was so vital in critical seasons, it was often a stipulation of male hiring that the labourer's wife and children were available to work when required.<sup>134</sup> Women in Kent were paid 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. for hop work and could earn up to £7 in a year.<sup>135</sup> Because of the nature of their employment, fewer objections were raised to working women in Kent than in other regions of England. Edward Stanhope reported:

Women will work more here than in any place that I have seen. Hop-tying lasts a long time...Then there is fruit gathering. Picking cherries is women's work...Some few work in winter at chopping manure, though they dislike it as a rule. I see less objection to women's labour, as carried on here than anywhere else. The women are in fact, compelled by the farmer to go out. It is a healthy life and on the whole they like it...<sup>136</sup>

As previous investigations had highlighted, where domestic industry persisted, few women were employed in field labour, as in the gloving district of Somerset and the lacemaking and strawplaiting counties of Northampton, Buckingham and Bedford. There it was the 'exception rather than the rule for a woman to go to work in the fields'.<sup>137</sup> In northern England the bondager system and the family system of hiring persisted, providing work for women year round. Family hiring also remained in some regions of the south-west, although here it was a symptom of the weak position of the

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<sup>133</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. The Hon. Edward Stanhope, M.A., Report on the Counties of Lincoln, Nottingham and Leicester, p.74.

<sup>134</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Second Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. The Hon. Edward Stanhope, M. A., Report on the Counties of Dorset, Kent, Chester, Salop, Stafford and Rutland, p.49.

<sup>135</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Report by Stanhope, p.49.

<sup>136</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Report by Stanhope, p.47.

<sup>137</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, George Culley Esq., M.A., Report on Northamptonshire, p.111.

agricultural labourer, and labour surpluses meant that farmers could demand family hiring as a condition of work:

...the smallness of the income of the agricultural labourer...means that advantage should be taken of any help which the wife, or which any of the Children, may afford to add to that income. This facilitates the practice, so unfair to the agricultural labourer, of *hiring not the man alone, but his wife and family also*; so that whilst he continues in the employ of his master, his wife and any boys old enough must work when required.<sup>138</sup>

The county reports submitted to the Royal Commission point to the persistence of regional differences in women's waged labour in the 1860s. The evidence is inconsistent and impressionistic however, with no systematic wage data provided. The earnings of agricultural workers are perhaps best summarised by following Frederick Purdy's estimates of the weekly earnings of men, women and children in 1860 (Table 2.12). These weekly sums preclude perquisites labourers received from employers and task work payments. They also omit the gleanings collected by women and children which 'will produce an amount...he regards as important', the fruits of the cottage-garden, and in some areas common rights 'under which he cuts furze, or digs turf for fuel, or which yield an excellent run for his poultry'.<sup>139</sup> This comment points to some of the areas of labour where women's contribution was still vital but which remain essentially hidden in the 1867-1870 Royal Commission. In 1860 male and female weekly wages were once again reported to be lowest in the south-west region of England and highest in the north, north-west and Yorkshire areas. Women labourers in the north - Durham, Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmoreland - were reported to earn 10s. 6d. a week, three-quarters more than their west country counterparts. The

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<sup>138</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Report by Stanhope, p.20.

<sup>139</sup> Purdy, F., Esq., 'On the earnings of agricultural labourers in England and Wales, 1860', Journal of the Statistical Society, 24 (1861), 328-373 (p.330).

**Table 2.12: Weekly earnings of agricultural labourers in England,**  
**Michaelmas 1860**

Region	Men	Women	Children under 16	Female-to-male ratio
South-east	11s. 11¼d	4s. 7d	3s. 7d	38%
South Midland	10s. 7½d	4s. 7d	3s. 5d	43%
East	12s. 1d	4s. 4d	3s. 7d	36%
South-west	9s. 6¾d	3s. 9d	3s. 4d	39%
West Midland	10s. ½d	4s. 2d	3s. 3d	41%
North Midland	13s. 1d	4s. 8d	3s. 2d	36%
North-west	13s. 3d	6s. 11d	4s. 9½d	52%
York	14s. 3½d	5s. 9½d	3s. 7d	41%
North	14s. 10d	10s. 6d	5s. 9½d	71%

Source: Purdy, 'Earnings of agricultural labourers', p.358.

South-east: Surrey, Kent, Hampshire and Sussex

South Midland: Hertford, Northampton and Bedford

East: Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk

South-west: Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset

West Midland: Gloucester, Hereford, Salop, Stafford, Worcester and Warwickshire

North Midland: Lincoln, Nottingham and Derby

North-west: Cheshire

York: West, East and North Ridings of Yorkshire

North: Durham, Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmoreland.

average female weekly wage was still between a third and a half that of men, apart from in the exceptional northern region.

Evidence from the commissioners in the late 1860s points to the essential nature of women's labour, without which much of the agricultural work of the country would not get finished. J. Dent notes,

it is very clear that, with improved agriculture, a great deal of light work, such as weeding, stone-gathering, potato-harvesting, fruit gathering, not to speak of haytime and harvest, demand labour in addition to that of adult males...<sup>140</sup>

So at Starston in Norfolk, it was claimed, 'the employment of females in field labour at certain seasons cannot be dispensed with', and at Amcotts, Lincolnshire, '...I fear that it would be scarcely possible to carry on the work of the neighbourhood without female labour'.<sup>141</sup> There were certain types of agricultural labour which were considered 'women's work' and the fact that women could be deployed at a much cheaper rate than men was an added bonus. R. F. Boyle, investigating Somerset, observed that,

...in the west of the county labourers wives still go out usually at busy times for their 8d. a day. It is not that there is a want of male labour; from time immemorial there has been certain field work that is looked upon as women's work, and they are often to be seen working when men are out of work...most of them only come for haymaking, harvest and to work among the turnips and mangolds, which seems to be always considered the principal women's work.<sup>142</sup>

Yet there is a good deal of material to suggest that the prevalent Victorian attitude to women fieldworkers was one of forthright disapproval. The sentiments of Rev. James Fraser, visiting Norfolk, Essex, Sussex and Gloucester, were typical and such comments pervade the reports:

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<sup>140</sup> Dent, 'Condition of the agricultural labourer', p.357.

<sup>141</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, The Rev. James Fraser, M.A., Report on the Counties of Norfolk, Essex, Sussex, Gloucester and parts of Suffolk, p.40; PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Stanhope's report, p.294.

<sup>142</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Robert F. Boyle, Esq., Report on Somerset, p.123.

It is universally admitted that such employment, not so much from causes inherent in it as from circumstances by which it is surrounded, is to a great extent demoralising. Not only does it almost unsex a woman in dress, gait, manners, character, making it rough, coarse, clumsy, masculine; but it generates a further pregnant social mischief by unfitting or disposing her for a woman's proper duties at home.<sup>143</sup>

Not all women workers were condemned in this way. Dent asked people to 'pause before we condemn the labourers' daughter, who, by working in the field, can earn an honest livelihood'<sup>144</sup> and Northumbrian women in particular were depicted as thoughtful, unselfish workers and mothers. W. E. Henley who reported on this region in 1867 argued:

The Northumbrian women who do these kinds of labour are physically a splendid race; their strength is such that they can vie with the men in carrying sacks of corn, and there seems to be no work in the fields which affects them injuriously, however hard it may appear.<sup>145</sup>

However the general impression of women's employment promoted by the majority of reporting commissioners in the late 1860s is of a decline in the participation of women in the formal economy of rural England. This is especially perceptible in the reports on the southern and eastern regions. Thus in Sussex, 'Females, whether old or young, married or single, are rarely employed by the farmer: not to a tithe of the extent that they were 20 years ago'.<sup>146</sup> In Gloucestershire, Fraser found, 'Everywhere I heard the same story, that women are found to be less and less disposed to go out to work upon the land'.<sup>147</sup> In Somerset women 'do not work out so much now as formerly' and 'the

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<sup>143</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.16.

<sup>144</sup> Dent, Condition of the agricultural labourer', p.357.

<sup>145</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Joseph J. Henley, Esq., M.A., Report on Northumberland and Durham, p.55.

<sup>146</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.8.

<sup>147</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.17.



labouring class are beginning to see that the women's place is by her own fire-side'<sup>148</sup> and in the east Midlands, 'the employment of women...is certainly decreasing'.<sup>149</sup>

There are clearly many biases inherent in the reporting of female agricultural labour in the Royal Commissions. As Sayer points out, although each commissioner occupied a different social, economic and political standpoint, they shared an urban, male, middle-class ideological construction of gender which ultimately coloured their perceptions of rural working women.<sup>150</sup> In contrast, the evidence of women labourers shows 'that the observed differed from the observers in their understandings of women's paid work', and provides us with 'the only real documentation of working class ideology at this time'.<sup>151</sup> Women provided evidence to both Royal Commissions; the lack of written material left by rural working women adds a special significance to this oral evidence and it is worth considering in isolation.

The testimony of a number of female labourers is printed in both the 1843 and 1867-1870 reports. This evidence is one of the few ways the historian can begin to probe women's own attitudes towards their work in the nineteenth-century countryside. It may also be helpful in assessing how far middle class ideologies had permeated into rural working class thinking. Women's evidence tends to highlight the physical rather than moral consequences of field labour. In 1843 Mary Haynes thought reaping 'the hardest of all the work I have ever done,'<sup>152</sup> whilst Mrs Smart had been so strained by haymaking 'sometimes I could not get out of my chair'.<sup>153</sup> Women were often critical of the conditions under which they were forced to labour, and were reluctant to send their

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<sup>148</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Report by Boyle, pp.123-124.

<sup>149</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Stanhope, p.76.

<sup>150</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p.79.

<sup>151</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p.55.

<sup>152</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.69.

<sup>153</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.65.

children to work under such circumstances, but necessity drove them to this. Mrs

Sculfer of Castle Eden commented:

I have six children; three girls and three boys; my two eldest girls go out - most to my grief that I am obliged to send them...My eldest girl has a thorough dislike to it. She almost goes crying to her work. She would almost rather do anything than it...I wish I knew of any place I could get for her, but I don't. I am sure I don't know what to do.<sup>154</sup>

In the 1840s there is little indication that the growing middle class ideology of separate spheres for men and women had filtered into the rural working class consciousness.

Jane Long of Wiltshire told Austin that she 'was always better when working in the fields than when I was staying at home'<sup>155</sup> an opinion reiterated by Mrs Britton:

I never felt that my health was hurt by the work. Haymaking is hard work, very fatiguing, but it never hurts me. Working in the fields is not such hard work as working in the factory. I am always better when I can get out to work in the fields. I intend to do so next year if I can. Last year I could not go out, owing to the birth of the baby.<sup>156</sup>

Examining the interviews published as evidence in the later Commission, some of the ideas of the interviewed women overlap with those of the reporters. For instance, one woman in Lincolnshire stated, '...my place is at home'.<sup>157</sup> But on the whole women's evidence, as in 1843, reveals an alternative viewpoint. Time and again women point to the inevitability of fieldwork out of sheer necessity and the picture conveyed is one of laborious toil of an unpleasant nature, not the sense of independence and freedom the commissioners observed. Mrs Jenner, a labourer's wife from Cranbrook in

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<sup>154</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.275.

<sup>155</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.70.

<sup>156</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Austin, p.66.

<sup>157</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Stanhope's report, p.323.

Kent articulates this feeling and exhibits a sense of grievance at the low rates of pay given to women:

Women ought to go and do women's work and help their husbands, and not stay at home. I have taken my daughters out at 6 years old to hop tying...I go ladder tying too. I go and do more than a man would, and yet they give me 1s. instead of 2s. 6d. I work from 8 til 5. I had rather work by the piece, but they won't have it...<sup>158</sup>

How reliable is this evidence? The words of women labourers are sometimes paraphrased by the reporting Commissioners. The accuracy of the words of women therefore has to be questioned, as does the typicality of those selected to appear in the reports. At a time when the value of rural female labour was being increasingly challenged in contemporary publications however the presence of women themselves is meaningful and provides a useful contrast to the opinions of official male correspondents.

## **2.6: Women 'in their proper sphere': 1870-1900**

According to Arthur Wilson Fox, writing in 1903, a number of circumstances came together to facilitate the decline of rural women's employment after 1870, including higher male wages, the demand for domestic servants in towns and the increased use of harvest machinery. In the early 1880s, he argues, women's labour, 'had entirely ceased in many districts'.<sup>159</sup> This trend is substantiated in many publications from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Complaints by farmers throughout the country to the Royal Commission on Agricultural Interests in the early 1880s blamed the 'refusal of

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<sup>158</sup> PP, 1868-9, XIII, Report by Stanhope, p.49.

<sup>159</sup> Wilson Fox, A., 'Agricultural wages in England and Wales during the last fifty years', Journal of the Statistical Society, 66 (1903), 273-348 (p.298).

women to work' and the 'non-employment of children' after compulsory education on rising costs of labour in the countryside.<sup>160</sup> In the south Midlands, it was noted,

Although light harvest is still pretty generally done by women, their labour is far less available, and when available is much more highly paid than formerly. The ability to dispense with the earnings of his wife may afford gratifying evidence of the improved condition of the labourer, but it tells heavily upon the labour-bill of the farmer.<sup>161</sup>

Charles Whithead believed that the 'gradual influence of public opinion' and higher male wages meant it was now possible 'to keep women in their proper sphere'<sup>162</sup> and Thomas Keeble similarly argued 'women had been gradually emancipating themselves from the more injurious and debasing kinds of work' at this time.<sup>163</sup>

The downward trend in rural women's work was confirmed by the evidence contained in the sections on the agricultural labourer in the 1893-4 Royal Commission on Labour. This had been established in 1892 to inquire into working conditions and relations following many years of unrest.<sup>164</sup> The commissioners appointed to cover agricultural labour were instructed to look at the supply of labour, conditions of engagement, earnings, cottages, allotments, trade unions and general relations in the countryside. Women's labour was to be addressed where relevant within this general framework but it was not, by this time, a specific area of concern. The dominant image perpetrated in these reports is one of the invisibility of rural women workers. Women were not interviewed by commissioners and female wages were not included in any of

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<sup>160</sup> PP, 1881, XVI, Royal Commission on Depressed Condition of Agricultural Interests. Reports of Assistant Commissioners. Mr. Coleman's Report on the State of Agriculture in Yorkshire, p.163.

<sup>161</sup> PP, 1881, XVI, Report upon Agricultural Depression in the Counties of Oxford, Stafford, Warwick, Gloucester, Worcester, Salop, Hereford and Monmouth by Mr. Doyle, p.306.

<sup>162</sup> Whitehead, C., Agricultural Labourers (London, 1870), p.53.

<sup>163</sup> Keeble, T., The Agricultural Labourer: A Summary of His Position, 4th edn (London, 1907), p.138.

<sup>164</sup> Sayer, Women of the Fields, p.137.

the household budgets printed in the county reports.<sup>165</sup> Mr. Aubrey Spencer, who visited Dorset, Wiltshire, Kent and Somerset for the commission, echoed the comments of many when he argued:

In all districts which I visited it was said that, except at such light work as fruit, pea and hop picking, women work now much less than they used to do. The reason for this appears undoubtedly to be that the labourer is better off than previously, and can now afford to do without the extra earnings of his wife at hard field work.<sup>166</sup>

The decline in women's participation in agricultural work proposed by late nineteenth-century reports is reinforced by figures recorded in the official census returns (Table 2.13). These show a peak in women's employment as agricultural labourers in England and Wales in 1851 at 70,899, or 7% of the total figure for this class of worker. According to these returns, between 1851 and 1871 the participation of women declined by 47%, and by 1901 female agricultural workers represented under 1% of the total number of labourers. However it was shown in the last chapter that there are many problems inherent in the production of these census figures. The under-recording of seasonal female labour from these figures was a particularly serious omission: the fact that much female agricultural work was part-time and casual meant it was not viewed as an independent occupation by enumerators in the nineteenth century. Women married to agricultural labourers often worked on the same farms as their spouses, yet this work was also overlooked as it was not viewed as a separate occupation. The placing of female farm servants into other occupational

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<sup>165</sup> Female wages were excluded from a number of other analyses of agricultural workers at this time. See Bowlby, 'Statistics of wages in the UK', Wilson Fox, 'Agricultural wages', and PP, 1900, LXXXII, Report by Mr. Wilson Fox on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the UK, p.8.

<sup>166</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer. Summary report from Mr. Aubrey Spencer, pp.10-11.

**Table 2.13: Number of agricultural labourers in England  
and Wales, 1841-1901**

<b><u>Agricultural Labourers</u></b>			
	Male	Female	Total
1841	854,660	35,262	889,922
1851	1,006,728	70,899	1,077,627
1861	914,301	43,964	958,265
1871	764,574	33,513	798,087
<b><u>Agricultural Labourers, Farm Servants and Cottagers</u></b>			
1881	807,608	40,346	847,954
<b><u>Agricultural Labourers and Farm Servants</u></b>			
1891	709,283	24,150	733,433
1901	573,751	4,254	578,005

Sources: Census reports of Great Britain: Population Tables: PP 1851, LXXXVIII, Ages and Occupations, vol 1 (1852-3); PP 1861, LIII, Abstracts of Ages, Occupations and Birthplaces of People, vol 2 (1863); PP 1871, LXXI, Ages, Civil Condition, Occupations, and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1873); PP 1881, LXXX, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1883); PP 1891, CVI, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1893-4); PP 1901, CVIII, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 1 (1904).

categories - notably domestic service - also significantly distorts these figures. The changing way occupations were classified also renders census figures problematic. After 1871 agricultural labourers were no longer classified separately from farm servants or cottagers. Moreover in 1881, the census stopped counting the female relatives of farmers as productively employed, misrepresenting the position on the majority of English farms.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Howkins, A., Reshaping Rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925, (London, 1991), p.171.

Great caution is therefore needed in utilising census figures as a guide to the number of female agricultural workers employed in the nineteenth-century. Indeed, a close reading of other late nineteenth-century sources shows women's labour was still essential in some regions at that time. Wilson Fox implies as much in his 1900 report on the wages of agricultural workers:

In the hop-growing districts of Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Hereford... and also in parts of Cambridge, Lincoln, Kent and Worcester, much extra labour has to be employed at certain times of the year.<sup>168</sup>

In the Glendale Union of Northumberland, women workers had 'stayed roughly the same ratio to all agricultural labourers' according to the 1893-4 Royal Commission.<sup>169</sup> The market garden regions of Bedford and Kent also employed women workers in significant numbers. In the hop districts of Hollingbourne, Kent, women could earn £2.15s. a year for hop tying, £3 for picking and £2.10s. for fruit picking.<sup>170</sup> Similarly in the poor law union of St. Neots, women worked year round in market gardens, earning from 1s. 2d. to 1s. 4d. for an 8 hour day, and could gain much more working by the piece.<sup>171</sup> Spencer, investigating Kent, concludes that the 'opportunity which women and children have of earning money...is a special advantage of the labourer in this district, and materially conduces to their well-being'.<sup>172</sup>

## **2.7: The official view of women's employment**

In many respects the published sources discussed in this chapter are products of their time. The period from 1790 to 1835 was one of increasing hardships for the rural poor,

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<sup>168</sup> PP, 1900, LXXXII, Report by Wilson Fox, p.11.

<sup>169</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report from Mr. Arthur Wilson Fox on the Poor Law Union of Glendale, p.54.

<sup>170</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report from Mr. Aubrey Spencer on the Poor Law Union of Hollingbourne, p.40.

<sup>171</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report from Mr. William E. Bear on the Poor Law Union of St. Neots, p.40.

<sup>172</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report from Spencer, p.53.

with the decline of real wages and customary rights, and women's work, in whatever form, was an economic necessity. This reality was underpinned by the dominant ideology of the time: in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the notion of 'common interest' was prevalent and writers acknowledged the contribution women workers made to the family economy. The Ladies Committee for promoting the education and employment of women concluded in 1805:

To *men*, the extended commerce and increased manufactures...will supply countless occupations. To *women*, there can be opened, at best, but a limited scope of action; and it is for the benefit of all, looking to the increase of the general fund, that they should not be precluded, from contributing their portion of productive industry.<sup>173</sup>

After 1834 this attitude begins to change and certainly by the time of the 1867-1870 Royal Commission, interest in the productive capacities of women was being eclipsed by concern over morality and the 'proper' place of women in society. At the close of the century, the notion of the family economy and the image of rural women as economically productive had been eclipsed in most contemporary investigations.

The changing pattern of female employment in the countryside between the 1790s and the 1890s which emerges from printed primary sources is a complex one. The information provided on the whole range of female occupations throughout the nineteenth century is not systematic. However an analysis of these sources point to a sense of continuity in women's work and wages up to the 1830s at least. In the second half of the period, information tends to focus on female agricultural labour, which is described as peaking in the 1850s. In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century the decline in women's economic participation in the paid workforce according to printed

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<sup>173</sup> Bernard, T., 'Extract from an account of the ladies committee for promoting the education and employment of the female poor', Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, vol 4 (1805), 181-192 (pp.184-185).



sources was unremitting, although in certain regions it was still viable. Is this pattern of women's work in rural England across the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries corroborated by evidence contained in archival sources at a local level? Is it correct to assume a decline in participation of women in all forms of work as the nineteenth century progresses or is the chronology of female labour more complex than this in different regions of the country? The following chapters will address these points through an examination of rural women's employment from a wide range of sources in three specific counties. The position of women in the East Riding of Yorkshire will be considered in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three: The East Riding of Yorkshire**

### **3.1: The rural East Riding: background**

Women employed in rural East Yorkshire throughout the nineteenth century are consistently ignored or marginalised in most historical accounts. In her analysis of the mid nineteenth-century agricultural labour force of the county, June Sheppard argues, 'Very few women worked regularly in the fields of the East Riding, except in the extreme South-west so the analysis has been confined to male workers only'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly Stephen Caunce's pioneering work on farm servants in nineteenth and twentieth-century East Yorkshire, tends to obscure the role of female workers. In a 1991 article one footnote reads, 'Girls were also hired to live in, but with significant differences. There is no room to discuss their experiences here'.<sup>2</sup> Such an omission represents a significant gap in the historiography of rural East Yorkshire and an awareness of the position of women in the labour force of the county is essential to a full understanding of the social and economic history of the region.

This chapter will firstly consider the role occupied by female servants on East Yorkshire farms in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Who exactly were female farm servants? How did they differ from domestic servants? What jobs were they employed to do and how much were they paid? Were male and female farm servants engaged on similar terms of employment? Did the role of female farm servants change over the course of the nineteenth century? Local newspapers and other

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<sup>1</sup> Sheppard, J. A., 'East Yorkshire's agricultural labour force in the mid nineteenth century', Agricultural History Review, 9 (1961), 43-54 (p.44).

<sup>2</sup> Caunce, S., 'Twentieth-century farm servants: the horselads of the East Riding of Yorkshire', Agricultural History Review, 39 (1991), 143-166 (p.144).

contemporary published material have been analysed to reveal the patterns of work and the movement of wages experienced by women servants over the century.<sup>3</sup> The position of female day labourers in agriculture will then be considered. Data from seven East Yorkshire farm accounts have been systematically analysed for this purpose. These cover various years from the 1790s to the 1890s. The seasonality of work opportunities, the sex segregation of agricultural tasks, the payment of wages and the familial relationships between farm workers has been analysed from this material. Can Keith Snell's theory that increased sexual specialisation took place in agriculture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries be applied to East Yorkshire? Does the pattern of female employment in the formal economy of the county follow that presented in the printed sources of the nineteenth century as detailed in chapter two? Do working women remain important to the rural economy of East Yorkshire until mid century and then withdraw from the labour force, or are other models of employment discernible? Before tackling these issues however, a consideration of the social and economic structure of rural East Yorkshire, the predominant systems of farming and the modes of hiring labour in the nineteenth century is needed.

In the nineteenth century the East Riding was dominated by agriculture. The industrial revolution made little impact on the county. Issac Leatham in 1793 found only one 'manufactory' in the county outside Hull, and that city was the only urban

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<sup>3</sup> Settlement examinations have been utilised by several historians interested in farm service, and can provide information on the wages of examinant, age at leaving home, the places at which the examinant served and conditions relating to the hiring. However the quality of information varies tremendously from one parish to the next. Those surviving for the East Riding are very poor in quality and record no interesting biographical information relating to the examnants hiring. Thus they have not been used for a source in this study. See Holmes, J., 'Domestic service in Yorkshire, 1650-1780', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 1989), p.30.

centre by the mid nineteenth century to achieve a population totalling over 15,000.<sup>4</sup>

However, the county's close proximity to the heavily industrialised West Riding was vital and provided an expanding market for the foodstuffs produced in the East Riding.

The county was geographically divided into three distinct districts, all physically different and farmed in diverse ways that suited their particular soil types. (Map 3.1). The Wolds, a chalk district running through the centre of the county, was the largest and highest region. Holderness, stretching from the sea coast to the eastern foot of the Wolds, was a very low lying district dominated by heavy clays and susceptible to drainage problems. Finally the Vale of York, on the Western side of the Wolds, was an area with a great variety of soils, light and sandy ones being predominant. Rapid enclosure in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries changed the landscape dramatically, with much unproductive grass land being converted to arable. This process was most discernible on the Wolds: by 1848, according to George Legard, two thirds of this region lay under tillage and many new large farms were built, often long distances from centres of population.<sup>5</sup> Holderness underwent major drainage schemes, although the heavier soils were not successfully cultivated until the late nineteenth century. The lighter soils of the Vale of York benefited more readily from new husbandry and root crops prospered.<sup>6</sup> The county was characterised by large landowners: in 1873, twelve families with more than 10,000 acres each, together possessed 30% of rural East

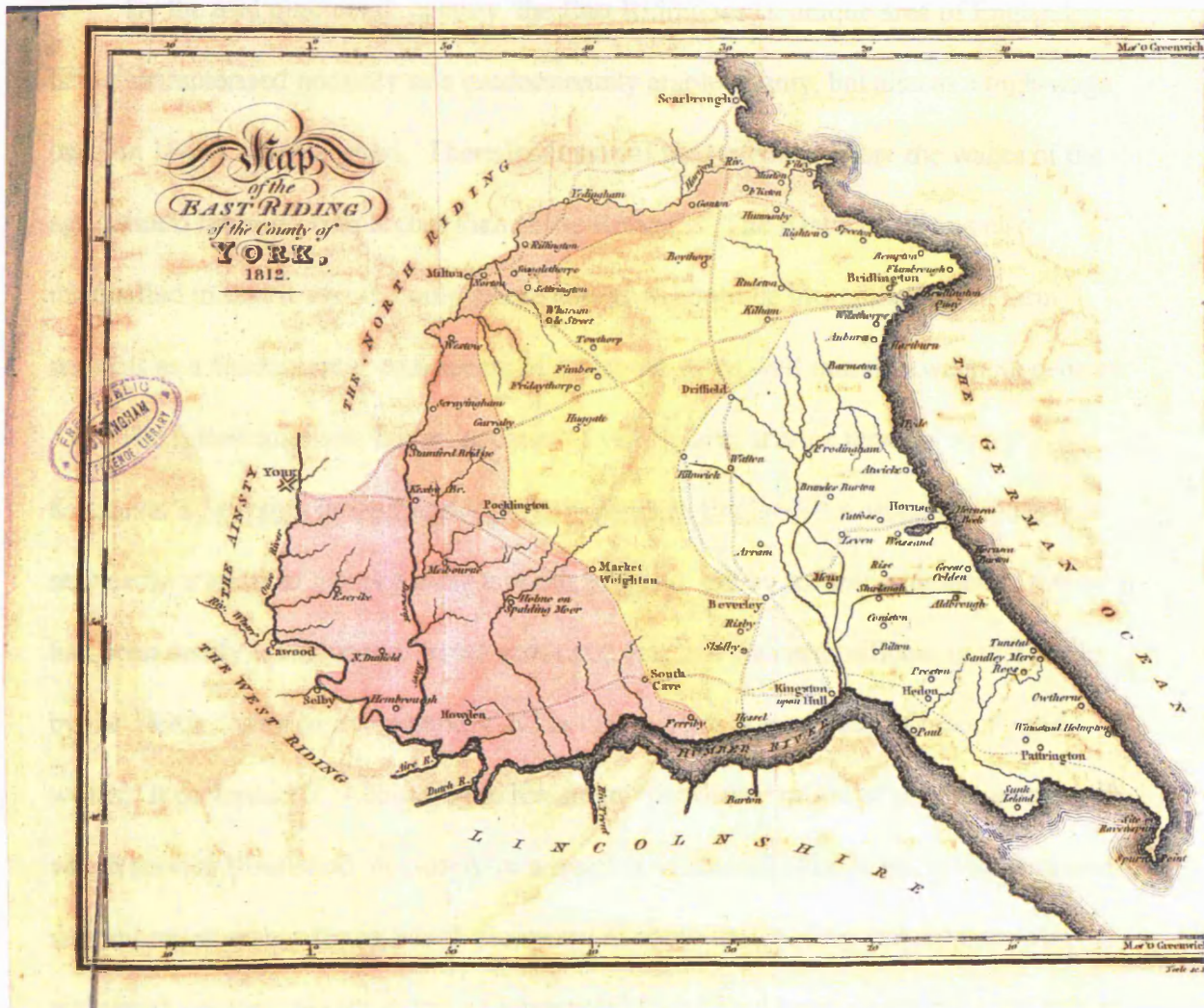
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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Caunce, S., Amongst Farm Horses: The Horselads of East Yorkshire, (Stroud, 1991), p.6; Harris, A., 'The milk supply of East Yorkshire, 1850-1950', East Yorkshire Local History Society, 33 (1977), p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Legard, G., 'Farming of the East Riding of Yorkshire', Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, 9 (1848), 85-136 (p.103).

<sup>6</sup> Allison, K. J., The East Riding of Yorkshire Landscape, (London, 1976), p.157

**Map 3.1: The regions of East Yorkshire in the early nineteenth century**



Source: Strickland, H. E., *General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire*, (York, 1812).  
 The pink section represents the Vale of York, the yellow zone, the Wolds region and the green area, Holderness.

Yorkshire.<sup>7</sup> Within all the farming regions of the county, the landowners operated primarily as landlords and not farmers, although some owners, through their bailiffs, farmed their land as 'home farms'. By and large however, land was leased to tenants who worked the farms with their families and hired labour.<sup>8</sup>

By the mid nineteenth century, the East Riding was a unique area of England, being characterised not only as a predominately arable county, but also as a high-wage one.<sup>9</sup> In 1848 Legard argued, 'There is no part of the kingdom where the wages of the agricultural labourer rule higher than in the Riding'.<sup>10</sup> The East Riding was also unequalled in that it was the only arable county to continue hiring unmarried farm servants as a fundamental component of its labour force well into the twentieth century.

The fullest and best known account of yearly farm service remains Ann Kussmaul's Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England.<sup>11</sup> Kussmaul argues that service flourished in most of early modern England, but by the mid nineteenth century it had been nearly extinguished in the south and east and was insignificant in that region by the 1890s. 'Service in husbandry did not evolve into a new form of labour', she writes, 'It collapsed'.<sup>12</sup> According to Kussmaul, the deterioration of the environment in which service flourished occurred for a number of reasons. The large, newly enclosed and improved arable farms which prospered in south-eastern England from the late eighteenth century, meant it was no longer viable to board large numbers of servants in

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<sup>7</sup> Caunce, Amongst Farm Horses, p.11. In Holderness farms of 300-800 acres were usual; on the Wolds 500-1000 acres was the average farm size. The presence of large landowners meant that there was little scope for owner occupation in the county.

<sup>8</sup> English, B., The Great Landowners of East Yorkshire, 1530-1910, (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), p.146.

<sup>9</sup> This is confirmed by James Caird's farming map of the English counties published in 1852. Caird, J., English Farming in 1850-51, (London, 1852).

<sup>10</sup> Legard, 'Farming of the East Riding', p.125.

<sup>11</sup> Kussmaul, A., Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England, (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Kussmaul, Servants in Husbandry, p.133.

the household. Moreover, very high grain prices and rising costs of living led to growing dissatisfaction from farmers concerning the economic burden of boarding servants. This was accompanied by a pronounced shift to wheat production, which required large labour inputs at certain seasons, but not year round. It therefore made more economic sense to hire a large number of day labourers on short-term contracts. Where farms remained small and wastes unenclosed, farmers retained the need for servants, as was the case in the north and west.<sup>13</sup> The increasing burden of poor relief at this time also affected the institution of service, as a full years service guaranteed a person a settlement in the parish of employment. Farmers acted to deny settlements by dismissing servants before the years end. Snell, using evidence from settlement examinations, has traced the increasing use of shorter periods of hiring. He argues that between 1780 and 1810 there was a noticeable upswing in shorter hirings, and after 1820 this trend escalated so that the practice of yearly hirings in the south-east region was persistently giving way to shorter hirings of periods from one week to fifty one weeks.<sup>14</sup>

Kussmaul contends that these trends were not unique to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but until 1815 farmers were thwarted in their attempts to discontinue yearly hiring by a series of temporary labour shortages.<sup>15</sup> During the Napoleonic Wars in particular, service continued in an even more accentuated form because of a dearth of labour. Evidence for the economic viability of service at this time is contained in the General Views of Agriculture, as seen in the previous chapter. After

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<sup>13</sup> Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, p.121.

<sup>14</sup> Snell, K. D. M., *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900*, (Cambridge, 1985), p.75.

<sup>15</sup> Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, p.124.

1815 however, a mass of demobbed soldiers swamped the labour market in the countryside, enabling farmers to dismiss servants in large numbers and replace them with day labourers. Thus by 1851, Kussmaul contends, 'England had been divided between the low-service agricultural south and high-service industrial north and west'.<sup>16</sup>

Kussmaul's argument has come under recent scrutiny. Her conclusions have been described as 'clearly overdrawn' and a 'blanket generalisation' by Mick Reed.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the census enumerators schedules of 1851 for Sussex, Reed argues that these indicate a 'far more vigorous existence of service' than the county totals suggest and indoor servants 'remained a significant feature of Wealden life until after the Great War'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly Alun Howkins has highlighted how Kussmaul's thesis is framed in a particularly English, not British outlook, and in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the percentages of hired workers who were servants remained high into the late nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, 'service' survived in many different forms according to Howkins and should not be employed as a blanket term to describe a uniform, unchanging form of employment. He identifies three kinds of farm service still extant in the nineteenth century. Firstly family hiring, where the head of household was hired for a year with his or her family and provided with a house survived in Kent and Dorset. Secondly 'classic' farm service, where a young person lived with a family, learned a trade and hoped to

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<sup>16</sup> Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, p.130.

<sup>17</sup> Reed, M., 'Indoor farm service in nineteenth-century Sussex: some criticisms of a critique', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 123 (1985), 225-241 (p.228).

<sup>18</sup> Reed, 'Indoor farm service', p.230. See also Short, B., 'The decline of living-in service in the transition to capitalist farming: a critique of the Sussex evidence', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 122 (1984), 147-164.

<sup>19</sup> Howkins, A., 'Peasants, servants and labourers: the marginal workforce in British agriculture, 1870-1914', *Agricultural History Review*, 42 (1991), 49-62 (p.57). In Wales in 1871 for example, 52% of all hired workers remained servants, in Ireland 60% and in Scotland most permanent farm workers, married and single, were hired servants. Even these figures are likely to be an under-representation as they refer only to actual living-in service. Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers', p.57. See also the reply to this article by Anthony, R., 'Farm servant vs agricultural labourer, 1870-1914: a commentary on Howkins', *Agricultural History Review*, 43 (1995), 61-64.



become an owner-occupier themselves persisted in parts of Durham, Kent and Sussex, and finally the hiring of young unmarried men and women into the farmhouse, with little hope of them ever becoming farmers, thrived in the East Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>20</sup>

The East Riding was alone among arable counties in persisting with its system of hiring young unmarried male and female servants into the farmhouse on a yearly contract up until the Second World War. As a county, East Yorkshire faced the same pressures which led to most areas of the south and east abandoning the institution of service: enclosure, mass conversion to arable production, engrossing of farms and the adoption of new methods of cultivation. However a number of factors ensured that service remained a widespread form of employment in the East Riding. The county specialised in agriculture to exploit a clear opening for foodstuffs in the West Riding. This laid the foundations for an 'uninterrupted run of prosperity' in the mid Victorian years.<sup>21</sup> Agrarian modernisation promoted a settlement pattern in which isolated farmsteads away from the villages were common and the hiring of servants, especially on the Wolds, continued to remain the most reliable and practical means of procuring and retaining labour for the whole year. Sheppard's analysis of the 1851 census indicates how farm servants were the largest single category of the agricultural workforce on the Wolds in that year, and their share of the total agricultural workforce actually increased during the mid Victorian period.<sup>22</sup> As agriculture boomed, farmers expanded their year round labour requirements and therefore became more dependent on farm service. This attachment to yearly service did not indicate an economic

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<sup>20</sup> Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers', pp.58-9.

<sup>21</sup> Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.196.

<sup>22</sup> Sheppard, 'East Yorkshire's agricultural labour force', pp.48-50. Holderness possessed fewer new farms and smaller scale enterprises than the Wolds and therefore required fewer living-in servants. Farmers on the Vale of York required more day labour and fewer servants as small-scale farming dominated the area. Family run farms also remained common in the Vale of York.

backwardness: service adapted itself successfully to cope with the increasingly intensive agrarian system in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

The year-round labour of hired servants was supplemented by male, female and child labour from local villages. Itinerant workers were also used at peak seasons such as corn harvest, when there still may have been a shortage of labour. Servants and labourers experienced very different terms of employment and types of work, and rarely worked together except at harvest. This division, as Counce points out, owed little to skill, as most married labourers had been servants when single.<sup>24</sup> Servants were hired by the year and boarded in the farmhouse. Their yearly pay was understood to cover the different workloads of the seasons, and they worked the whole year as required. Married labourers and their families lived in cottages in the village and were used as day labour if and when needed. Work therefore could be intermittent, especially in slack seasons, although unemployment was less of a problem in the East Riding than other arable counties in south-east England.<sup>25</sup> Having outlined the background to life and labour in rural East Yorkshire it is to the experience of female servants that attention will now turn.

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<sup>23</sup> The attachment to service in the south and east was often associated with economic and technological backwardness of farmers. See Moses, G., "Rude and rustic": hiring fairs and their critics in East Yorkshire, c.1850-75', *Rural History*, 7 (1996), 151-175 (p.155). One example of the way service adapted was the move away from boarding servants with farmers, to using hinds or foremen who thus took the place of the farmer as the head of the servant household. Farmers themselves gradually withdrew from direct involvement, building new houses, and housing the foremen and servants in the old farmhouse. See Counce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.197.

<sup>24</sup> Counce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.16.

<sup>25</sup> Counce argues that farmers applied the same principle to male day labourers as yearly servants, expecting constant work of them and rarely laying them off because of bad weather or shortages of work. See Counce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.32. One contemporary writer also argued that it was 'a characteristic' of labourers to 'remain at the same farm from youth to old age' in the county. Jenkins, W. H. M., 'Eastburn farm, near Driffild, Yorkshire', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 5 (1869), 399-415 (p.415).

### **3.2: Female farm servants: the experience of work**

The analysis of female servants in this chapter has been confined to women who were hired by the year to work on farms in the East Riding; the large number of women who were employed as servants in the country houses of the region have been excluded. The terms of hiring of the two groups were distinct, although there is confusion over the precise definition of these workers. By the mid nineteenth century, Kussmaul argues, most female servants were 'domestics', employed to uphold the image and lifestyle of the rural middle classes, not 'productive' servants who were previously hired to 'maintain the household economy'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the census seems to record a steady decline in the number of women employed as farm servants in England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1851 and 1871, according to census returns, the number of female farm servants in England and Wales fell from 128,251 to 24,599. Similarly, in the East Riding the number of female farm servants decreased from 1,055 in 1851 to just 215 in 1871, a decline of 80%.<sup>27</sup> However, Edward Higgs in his analysis of census material has questioned the distinction between 'farm' and 'domestic' service, and the former's decline in favour of the latter. Domestic service, Higgs argues, is one of the most difficult occupations of the period to interpret, being an umbrella category covering many terms such as 'general servant', 'housekeeper', 'nurse' and 'cook'.<sup>28</sup> General servants on farms are one likely source of under-enumeration in the census returns, being persons recorded officially as occupied in the final tables but

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<sup>26</sup> Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry*, p.4; p.9.

<sup>27</sup> Census Reports of Great Britain: Population Tables: PP 1851, LXXXVIII, Ages and Occupations, vol 1 (1852-3); PP 1861, LIII, Abstracts of Ages, Occupations and Birthplaces of People, vol 2 (1863); PP 1871, LXXI, Ages, Civil Condition, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1873).

<sup>28</sup> Higgs, E., 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth-century censuses', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), 59-82 (p.68).

placed in other economic categories.<sup>29</sup> Guidance issued to enumerators advised that only men were to be counted as farm servants in the agricultural sector of the published tables. In 1861 it was directed,

The female servants of a farmers family should generally be referred to as 'farm-servant' ("indoor"); but if the duties of the servant are described simply those of a household servant, such as 'Cook', 'Housemaid', 'General Servant', she should be referred to the sub-order for domestic servants.<sup>30</sup>

But on a farm, especially a small farm, it would have been very difficult for an enumerator to distinguish between a woman servant hired for purely household duties, as opposed to farm work. Indeed, a number of recent studies have shown that there was an indiscriminate mixing of tasks in the house and on the farm in the past. Mary Bouquet argues that on early twentieth-century Devonshire farms, female servants divided their time between the home and dairy.<sup>31</sup> Oral history in Lincolnshire suggests that domestic servants in rural areas at the turn of the twentieth century were expected to milk cows, make butter and cheese and tend to livestock, as well as carry out household duties.<sup>32</sup> Snell also notes how terms such as 'servant in husbandry', 'house servant', 'husbandry and housewifery' were used indiscriminately in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This, he argues, makes it difficult to separate 'agricultural' servants from 'domestic' ones, 'given the combining of occupations by many employers' at that time.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Higgs, E., 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review*, 68 (1995), 700-716 (p.707).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.71.

<sup>31</sup> Bouquet, M., *Family, Servants and Visitors: The Farm Household in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Devon*, (Norwich, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Green, J. A. S., 'A survey of domestic service', *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology*, 17 (1982), 65-69.

<sup>33</sup> Snell, *Annals*, p.23 and p.283.

Farm service in East Yorkshire occupied a distinct phase in the lifecycle of rural women. Girls left home to go into farm service between the ages of 12 and 14. This system of hiring farm labour continued to offer young single people an important opportunity to leave the parental home, relieving 'their parents houses from overcrowding'.<sup>34</sup> As with male servants, the hierarchy among female farm servants depended on age and experience. Young girls embarking on their working lives began as 'nurse' girls, minding the babies and young children of the farmhouse. After gaining experience they were promoted to 'general' servants - housemaids, kitchengirls and dairymaids - and by their early twenties became 'upper' servants commanding the highest wages. The number of female servants hired varied from farm to farm and between regions. The larger, isolated farmsteads on the Wolds hired the most female servants who worked under the supervision of the farmer's or hind's wife. All female servants were hired on a legally enforceable one year contract, which ran from Martinmas to Martinmas (November 23rd). Any servants hired after this date were not hired for a whole year, but until the following Martinmas. The yearly hiring included board and lodgings for the whole year, with wages being paid at the end of the year's service. Female servants were hired on exactly the same terms as men at the hiring fairs. However, a system of one month's notice on either side was widespread and was the accepted principle on which the hiring of female servants in East Yorkshire rested.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> PP, 1867-68, XVII, First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. The Hon. E. B. Portman, M. A., Report on the Counties of Yorkshire and Cambridgeshire. Evidence to Portman's report, p.366.

<sup>35</sup> This was the same system that was operated when hiring domestic servants in towns and is confirmed by newspaper accounts of cases brought before the courts over breeches of contract. See for example the case of Robertson vs Hodgson, where the servant was hired for a year with either party to give the other a month's notice, Beverley Guardian, February 2, 1856. See also Simpson, M., 'The life and training of a farm boy', in Legard, Rev. F. D., ed., More About Farm Lads, (London, 1865), pp.75-100 (p.90). An exploration of the legal basis of servants contracts is provided in Caunce, S., 'Farm servants and the development of capitalism in English agriculture', Agricultural History Review, 45 (1997), 49-60.

The annual hiring fairs brought together farmers searching for new servants and workers wanting new positions. It was exceptional for male or female servants to remain at the same situation for more than three years. Each fair served a distinct district; few servants moved outside the district of their birth and movement between the Wolds and the lowlands was especially restricted.<sup>36</sup> Servants indicated by a symbol or badge the service they sought or the particular skill they possessed. A shepherd, for example, would pin a bunch of wool to their jackets, housemaids, a sprig of broom and cooks carried a basting spoon.<sup>37</sup> After being hired both sexes pinned brightly coloured ribbons onto their clothing to indicate their hired status.<sup>38</sup> When a master or mistress made an agreement, they gave the servant a hiring or 'fest' penny. If the servant retained this, he or she was considered engaged until the following Martinmas. If it was returned at any time before the service began, no agreement was upheld.<sup>39</sup> Caunce compares the atmosphere of the hiring fair to 'an informal and temporary union', where the bargaining was collective, with servants facing potential employers together, knowing the level of wage being demanded and received by friends and colleagues. It was 'one of the few places where a workman could genuinely negotiate his own contact directly with an employer without being at a gross disadvantage'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.40.

<sup>37</sup> Many servants at the hirings would not have a clearly identifiable occupational symbol to display however, being expected to perform a whole range of different tasks over the agricultural year. This was especially relevant in relation to female servants. See Roberts, M., "Waiting upon chance": English hiring fairs and their meanings from the fourteenth to the twentieth century', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1 (1988), 119-160 (p.141).

<sup>38</sup> Keeble, T. E., *The Agricultural Labourer: A Summary of his Position*, 4th edn (London, 1907), p.91.

<sup>39</sup> Chester, G. John., *Statute Fairs: Their Evils and their Remedy*, (York, 1856), p.7, argues that the sum was between half a crown and half a sovereign. At Saltmarshe Home farm in 1839, the foreman was given the sum of 10s., other male servants 5s., and the female servant, 2s. 6d. East Riding Record Office, (hereafter ERRO) DDSA 1203/1-6, Farming receipts and expenses, Saltmarshe, 1801-46. See DDSA 1203/5.

<sup>40</sup> Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.67. Kitchen, F., *Brother to the Ox: The Autobiography of a Farm Labourer*, (Horsham, 1981), provides a good description of the hiring fair for farm servants from south Yorkshire, north Nottinghamshire, north Lincolnshire and Derbyshire, pp.97-101.

Contemporary observers viewed the hiring fairs from an alternative perspective.

To prominent local writers such as Mary Simpson and Rev. Eddowes fairs were degrading and demoralising.<sup>41</sup> Analogies were frequently drawn between the public hiring of servants and slave markets, and farmers were criticised for looking only at the physical attributes of potential workers and ignoring the moral character of servants. A public meeting at Howden in 1854 strongly urged the use of written characters for both male and female servants, stating the length of service, abilities and general conduct of servants, as a prerequisite for hiring.<sup>42</sup> Reforming activities from the mid nineteenth century centred around the segregation of male and female hiring via the introduction of indoor accommodation and registration facilities for women. In 1860 the Corn Exchange in Driffield was opened for the hiring of women, 'in order that females might not be exposed to the weather and the degradation of standing in the open street to be publicly hired'.<sup>43</sup> The same move took place in Bridlington in 1860, although there was initial reluctance to take up the proposition. '...owing to the favourable weather,' the Hull Advertiser reported, women 'did not avail themselves fully of this kind offer'.<sup>44</sup> By the 1870s however, this was the prevailing mode of hiring female servants throughout the East Riding, and along with the partial establishment of a system of register offices, has been described as one of 'the main long term achievements of the

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<sup>41</sup> See Eddowes, Rev. J., The Agricultural Labourer As He Really Is, or Village Morals in 1854, (Driffield, 1854); Barugh, W., Master and Man: A Reply to the Agricultural Labourers As He Really Is, (Driffield, 1854); Eddowes, Rev. J., Martinmas Musing: Or Thoughts About the Hiring Day, (Driffield, 1854); Morris, Rev. F. O., The Present System of Hiring Farm Servants in the East Riding of Yorkshire with Suggestion for its Improvement, (Driffield, 1854); Simpson, M., Ploughing and Sowing: Or Annals of an Evening School in a Yorkshire Village, (London, 1861); Simpson, M., Gleanings: Being a Sequel to Ploughing and Sowing, (London, 1876); Stephenson, Rev. N., On the Rise and Progress of the Movement for the Abolition of Statutes, Mops or Feeing Markets, (London, 1861).

<sup>42</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 2, 1854.

<sup>43</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 16, 1860.

<sup>44</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 16, 1860.

campaign against hiring fairs and constitute a major reform'.<sup>45</sup> Indoor hirings did not prevent women from returning to the fair afterwards, and the drunkenness, criminality and promiscuity which supposedly accompanied the fairs was a further cause of condemnation. The following views of a local Superintendent were typical of many observers:

Nor are the men-servants the only victims here, for the servants girls are as plentiful as the servants men at the Mop, and they throng the public houses, drinking, dancing and singing with drunken men and prostitutes, lying with the men in adjoining buildings, and taking part in scenes of which no-one can form a correct opinion unless they have witnessed them.<sup>46</sup>

The Martinmas holiday extended to a week after which all servants were expected to report to their situations. Hired females were responsible for a number of tasks: preparing food for the household; cleaning the farmhouse; washing clothing; running the dairy and taking care of poultry and other small animals. The work expected of all grades of female servants involved very long hours, heavy laborious tasks, with little leisure time or home comforts.<sup>47</sup> Servants who were hired to milk rose by 5am. Milk, butter, cheese and curds were all made in the dairy; these were for consumption in the farmhouse and also to sell commercially at market. Rev. M. C. F. Morris describes the work of one such servant:

I have heard of a girl...who had to help in the milking of nearly twenty cows daily. The cows would assemble on the back 'causer' in a ring; they would not be tied, for without the least trouble each would go to its accustomed place. It was reckoned rather a feat to milk these cows in an hour, but Jane was 'a rare strapping lass'...Then came the dairy work, 'siling' the milk, churning and what-not.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> G. Moses, "Rude and Rustic", p. 165.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Skinner, Rev. J., Facts and Opinions Concerning Statute Hirings, Respectfully Addressed to the Landowners, Clergy, Farmers and Tradesmen of the East Riding of Yorkshire, (London, 1861), Appendix II, p.9.

<sup>47</sup> Caunce argues, 'In terms of non-stop effort the inside servant worked even harder than horselads, though the lads had the heavier jobs to do', Amongst Farm Horses, pp. 148-9.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, Rev. M. C. F., The British Workman Past and Present, (London, 1928), pp.57-8.



On the farm where Margaret Moate worked, at Cottingham, near Hull, the milk 'from a herd of eight cows, would be separated into cream and churned into butter, which was sold to the local Dairy'.<sup>49</sup> Much food was homemade by servants in the farmhouse. Pigs were killed on the farm, the meat cured and by-products made into pies and puddings. All tasks were crucial as the reputation of a farm rested on the quality of the food served.<sup>50</sup> Morris observed a Wolds farm of 1000 acres which employed 14 male and two female servants:

The quantity of food consumed was enormous. They would bake forty 'standing pies' together once or twice a week; these were made of meat in winter, fat mutton being commonly used, and fruit in summer. Eight stone of flour and one stone of bacon would be used, and a sheep killed every week.<sup>51</sup>

Moate describes a similar scene on the smaller farm where she worked:

We always kept five pigs to be slaughtered for the house. They would weigh about twenty-five stone each and were always sows who had had one litter. The hams and fletcher would hang, after salted, from the kitchen rafters. Sausages, black puddings and pork pies were made after the pig killing, and the fat rendered down into lard for cooking.<sup>52</sup>

The washing of the male servants clothing was part of the hiring agreement and this, 'added to the regular washing for the household, was no light matter'.<sup>53</sup> Wash day usually fell on a Monday, when, according to Morris, the women would rise at 1am and have 'but little intermission for the rest of the day...'.<sup>54</sup> All the cleaning of the house and servants quarters also fell to the female servants. This would have been very arduous

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<sup>49</sup> Unpublished memoirs of Margaret Moate, born Cottingham, 1879. East Yorkshire Local Studies Library, Beverley (hereafter EYLSL). No page numbers. The farm employed three male and one female servant. When she was 13 the family moved to a farm in Holderness and Margaret began work alongside the female servant Lizzie.

<sup>50</sup> Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, p.143.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, Rev. M. C. F., *Yorkshire Reminiscences*, (London, 1922), p.311.

<sup>52</sup> *Memoirs of Moate*.

<sup>53</sup> Morris, *British Workman*, p.58.

<sup>54</sup> Morris, *British Workman*, p.58.

work, without the assistance of modern household devices. Alice Markham, a hind's daughter from Paull, near Hull, describes the weekly routine of indoor labour for female servants at the turn of the twentieth century:

There was a regular routine of housework which was rarely changed. Monday, of course, was washday, followed by ironing on Tuesday. Wednesday was a baking day, and the bedrooms were 'done' on Thursdays. Friday was another day for a big baking session before the weekend, although no day went by without hours spent on baking.<sup>55</sup>

Female servants were also expected to assist in the fields in the peak seasons. As Morris writes, 'The girls, too, would frequently lend a hand in the harvest field, and at odd times they would have other odd jobs to do such as "pulling" turnips...'.<sup>56</sup> In 1848 the Hull Advertiser reported an accident involving Esther Scarborough, a female servant who had been assisting at the threshing machine when 'her clothes unfortunately became entangled in the wheel, and she was not rescued before one of her legs had been lacerated in the most dreadful manner'.<sup>57</sup>

The tasks individual women performed depended on the size of the farm, the number of male servants employed and whether there were other female servants working on the same farm. On the larger farmsteads, women would have been hired to perform distinctive roles such as a dairymaid or nursemaid, whilst servants working on smaller farms would have been expected to act as a 'maid-of-all-work' and undertake the whole range of tasks. However, contemporary descriptions of female servants work patterns highlight the juxtaposition between household and outdoor tasks for women of all ages. Morris notes the position of a young nursemaid in her first situation who 'has to

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<sup>55</sup> Markham, A. M., Back of Beyond: Reminiscences of Little Humber Farm, 1903-1925, (North Ferriby, 1979), p.27.

<sup>56</sup> Morris, British Workman, p.58.

<sup>57</sup> Hull Advertiser, December 15, 1848.

make herself generally useful in the house and out of it from morning till evening', whilst a dairymaid was expected to 'milk five or six cows every day and assist in the harvest-field and other out-door work...'.<sup>58</sup>

Female servants were lodged separately from the men, often in attic rooms. Their situations could be very lonely and isolated, and cases of harassment from male servants were reported in local newspapers. In 1861, for example, a Mrs Fuller took her ex-employer Mary Edmond of North Cave to court to recover £2. 4s. 9d. in wages. She had run away from her service, arguing the situation 'was anything but agreeable to her in consequence of being continually pestered by the men'.<sup>59</sup> Contemporary observers certainly considered farmhouse life to be demoralising and degrading, and many accounts highlight the consequences of poor supervision from masters and mistresses, and the mixing of the sexes in the house. Edwin Portman, reporting for the 1867-70 Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture wrote:

After the servants are hired little or no trouble is taken to keep them in the right way...The masters, taken as a whole, seem unaware that they are in duty bound to take some interest in the moral education of the servants. The separation of the sleeping rooms of the two sexes is very often most incomplete.<sup>60</sup>

The absence of primary evidence from female servants makes it difficult to corroborate or disprove the opinions of observers like Portman. It does however, seem unlikely that much promiscuity or misconduct occurred, given the length of the working day and lack of leisure time on nineteenth-century farms.<sup>61</sup> Cases of masters' cruelty or abuse were

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<sup>58</sup> Morris, *Yorkshire Reminiscences*, p.311.

<sup>59</sup> *Beverley Guardian*, September 21, 1861. Mrs Fuller married after leaving service.

<sup>60</sup> PP, 1867-68, XVII, Report by Portman, p.100.

<sup>61</sup> This may downplay the ways both male and female servants utilised their free-time however. See Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses*, ch.14 on the leisure pursuits of farm servants.

also occasionally reported, and the system of boarding hired servants for the year certainly broke down in some instances. In 1869 a judge found a farmer at Foggathorpe guilty of 'unfeeling' and 'cruel' behaviour towards his female servant who had been taken ill for two weeks, but had given a satisfactory account of her absence from work. 'No wonder that there are bad servants', the judge in this case concluded, 'when masters treat them in this way'.<sup>62</sup> In 1871 Elizabeth Grasby of Hotham, who had been employed in service by Thomas Craven, a farmer at Driffield, was charged with attempting to take her own life by laudanum. She argued that an intimacy had existed between her and Mr. Craven, and that he had promised her marriage all the year, but had deceived her and turned her out of her place.<sup>63</sup>

### **3.3: Servant wages in the nineteenth century**

According to H. E. Strickland the wages of all classes of servants in the East Riding in 1811 were 'exorbitantly high', most having at least doubled in the years since Leatham reported to the Board of Agriculture in 1794.<sup>64</sup> Undergirls and dairymaids earned from £9 to £12 a year in 1811; housekeepers from £12 to £16. Ploughboys, aged 14 to 16 years, received from £14 to £17, whilst foremen were given £28 to £35 a year.<sup>65</sup> Strickland argued that such high wages led to a frivolous and squandering lifestyle among servants:

...a passion for finery prevails so extensively that notwithstanding their exorbitant wages, the whole is commonly anticipated before the end of

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<sup>62</sup> Beverley Guardian, November 18, 1869.

<sup>63</sup> Beverley Guardian, November 25, 1871. Late nineteenth-century newspaper accounts can be useful in offering insights into the wider social and cultural context of women's work situations as these examples prove. The local papers for the East Riding have not been comprehensively analysed over the whole period for such information as this would have been too time-consuming in a comparative study such as this thesis. There may however be a fuller picture to be revealed by doing this.

<sup>64</sup> Strickland, General View of...the East Riding, p.258.

<sup>65</sup> Strickland, General View of...the East Riding, p. 258.

the year, and not unfrequently a considerable debt remains undischarged, very few laying by anything for their future establishment in life, or the assistance of their aged parents.<sup>66</sup>

The rise of farm servants wages during the Napoleonic Wars was substantially curtailed after the restoration of peace in 1815. Because of the depressed state of agriculture in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, farmers expected a decrease in servants wages, and local papers reported a reluctance to hire the usual number of hands. 'There appears to be a general disposition among masters and mistresses', it was noted in 1849, 'to economise in doing with as few servants as possible'.<sup>67</sup> Undergirls were hired at Bridlington for £4 to £6 per annum in 1847, whilst Legard noted a foreman's yearly wage at £22 to £25 in 1848.<sup>68</sup>

Wages remained unchanged until the mid 1850s when they began to rise briskly. The period from 1850 to the mid 1870s was one of great prosperity and progress for Victorian farming, and arable farmers and landowners in the East Riding were renowned for their progressive, enlightened management. At Driffield, in the centre of the Wolds, in 1856, 'Servants stood out for higher wages' and obtained them, and at Bridlington in the same year wages were 'rather high for all descriptions of servants'.<sup>69</sup> The Hull Advertiser reported in the mid 1850s:

The conditions of the farm servants generally, from their outward appearance in dress etc., the conclusion would be that they are in comfortable and thriving circumstances especially when compared with their costume and general demeanour a few years since...<sup>70</sup>

By 1877 the onset of agricultural depression was reported in most local newspapers, farmers refusing wages demanded and servants submitting to reduced wages. Wolds

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<sup>66</sup> Strickland, General View of...the East Riding, p.284.

<sup>67</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 16, 1849.

<sup>68</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 19, 1847; Legard, 'Farming of the East Riding', p.125.

<sup>69</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 15, 1856.

<sup>70</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 18, 1854.

farmers cut wages by between £2 and £5 per year in 1878, at Malton between £2 and £4 and at Howden, reductions of up to £8 upon previous wages were recorded in 1879.<sup>71</sup>

The Driffield Times reported in 1878:

More than usual interest is taken in the hirings this year on account of the depression in trade and its re-action on the agricultural interest, which has led the farmers to make a determined stand against the high wages paid for the last five or six years.<sup>72</sup>

The movement against wages continued through the 1880s and only began to stabilise during the following decade. Newspapers throughout the 1880s reported that farmers were exercising great economy in respect of labour and were not eager to hire servants.

In periods of high wage demands farmers often responded by substituting less experienced and cheaper labour for the more experienced and expensive male servants. According to newspaper accounts the demand for female servants remained buoyant throughout the mid nineteenth century across the county. In Driffield in 1859 it was reported that 'much business was said to have been done in the hiring of under servants, both male and female', but fewer engagements with upper servants were reached, 'in consequence of their standing out for an advance of wages'.<sup>73</sup> Similarly at Howden in 1868 'female servants hired well', with the 'demand for foremen and older class of farm labour less brisk than usual'.<sup>74</sup> This would suggest that in certain circumstances the labour of male and female servants in the second half of the nineteenth century was interchangeable. Thus, whilst gender roles and physical strength were important

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<sup>71</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 20, 1878; Eastern Counties Herald, November 20, 1879.

<sup>72</sup> Driffield Times, November 16, 1878.

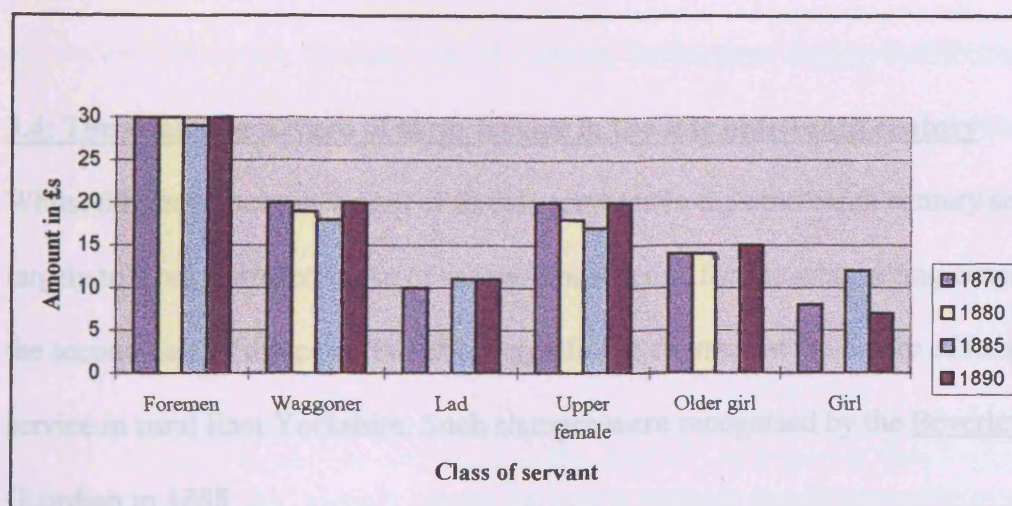
<sup>73</sup> Hull Advertiser, November 19, 1859.

<sup>74</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 18, 1868.

considerations in hiring patterns, farmers were cost conscious operators and responded to changes in wage demands by dismissing expensive male workers.<sup>75</sup>

The movement in servants wages in the latter part of the century has been plotted for Driffield between 1870 and 1890 (**Fig 3.1**). The amounts shown are the highest that servants of the classes highlighted could expect to be paid in those years. The peak in wages in the 1870s is clear for the more experienced servants, both male and female. Foremen, waggoners and upper females, all felt a dip in wages through the 1880s, stabilising towards the end of the decade and reaching previous amounts by the 1890s.<sup>76</sup>

**Fig 3.1: Movement in servants wages: Driffield, 1870-1890**



Sources: Eastern Counties Herald, November 17, 1870; Driffield Times, November 13, 1880; Driffield Times, November 14, 1885; Driffield Times, November 15, 1890. In some years not all information was available.

<sup>75</sup> See Burnette, J., 'Testing for occupational crowding in eighteenth-century British agriculture', Explorations in Economic History, 33 (1996), 319-345, for a discussion of the importance of social custom and economic motivations in hiring workers in the eighteenth century.

<sup>76</sup> Although the decrease in servants' yearly wages during the 1880s was probably made up for by the fact that prices were falling and real wages rising.



This graph shows that younger servants were in greater demand on the Wolds at the height of the agricultural depression in the mid 1880s, particularly young girls, as farmers cut back on labour bills. Lads' wages remained fairly stable throughout the period; girls experienced greater fluctuations and by the 1890s they could only expect similar wages to those twenty years earlier. The percentage experienced female servants earned in relation to foremen also remained stable throughout the period at around 60%. General female servants received from 60 to 75% of their male equivalent's wage also. Younger girls were paid yearly wages nearer their male counterparts than any other class of female servants: the gap between men's and women's wages thus began to widen with age and experience, although it was also influenced by other external factors such as the state of the agricultural and the labour market.

### **3.4: The changing nature of farm service in the late nineteenth century**

Whilst the movement in wages of female servants in the nineteenth century seems largely to have mirrored those of males, a number of factors were acting concurrently in the second half of the period to affect significant changes in the nature of female yearly service in rural East Yorkshire. Such changes were recognised by the Beverley

Guardian in 1888:

The scarcity during the past two or three years of good domestic servants is more than ever acutely emphasised this Martinmas, and at all the Yorkshire statutes mistresses are finding the greatest difficulty in procuring useful girls for general domestic work, although more liberal wages are being offered. The advertising columns of the county newspapers also bear out these facts, and certainly the state of the labour market in this direction seems undergoing a remarkable change.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Beverley Guardian, November 26, 1888.



By the late nineteenth century farmers were complaining that they could not obtain women to undertake certain kinds of outdoor work which female servants were traditionally associated with. The most persistent lament concerned the scarcity of women who would work in the dairy. At Driffield in 1869 it was reported that a distinct new feature in the hirings 'was the extensive requirement for girls who would undertake milking the cows, which the females are now beginning to think too slavish and dangerous a duty to be performed by them'.<sup>78</sup> A similar dearth of dairymaids was noted at Howden in the same year and at Hedon in 1874, milking maids were 'in great demand, the supply being far short of previous years'.<sup>79</sup> On the Wolds, the practice of turning the work of the milkmaid over to a male servant was noted, which had led the dairymaids to 'make a stand against carrying the milking pail in the future'.<sup>80</sup> These reports are interesting for a number of reasons: firstly, they suggest that farmers may have been acting to push women servants out of the dairy or other outdoor work, encouraging a more segregated workforce on the farm, with women servants increasingly confined to indoor, domestic labour and men monopolising most of the outdoor agricultural work.<sup>81</sup> This process, Gary Moses argues, helped to facilitate the acceptance by women servants of segregated hirings at the Martinmas fairs, indoor hirings mirroring the 'already established trend towards gender segregation within the farm service labour force'.<sup>82</sup> The trend to more domestic yearly service for rural women servants and indoor hirings also attached more respectability to the occupation, and as

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<sup>78</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 18, 1869.

<sup>79</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 25, 1869; Eastern Counties Herald, November 19, 1874.

<sup>80</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 18, 1869.

<sup>81</sup> Higgs suggests that farm service for women as a whole was not declining but rather 'the use of space on the farm changed' with the farmhouse increasingly 'a space dominated by the work of women'. Higgs, 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce', p. 708.

<sup>82</sup> Moses, "Rude and rustic", p. 168.

the nineteenth century wore on notions of what types of work were suitable for women to perform became more pronounced. The vicar of Elvington, in the Vale of York, giving evidence to the 1867-70 Royal Commission, for example stated that, 'in this parish very few of the young women become agricultural servants; it is decidedly better for them to go into respectable domestic service'.<sup>83</sup>

Whilst it appears that farmers may have been active in changing the role of female servants on the farm, women themselves were by no means passive bystanders in this process. Women began to refuse to carry out certain tasks and by the last two decades of the century showed an unwillingness to be hired into yearly rural service at all. Virtually all newspaper accounts throughout the region by the 1880s note the scarcity of female servants to hire and the demand for high wages of those who did attend the hiring fairs. One explanation for this may have been that more women and girls were being attracted into town domestic service. Richard Jefferies noted the restlessness of rural girls in service in the late nineteenth century:

The girls are not nearly so tractable as formerly - they are fully aware of their own value and put it extremely high...Most of them that are worth anything never rest till they reach the towns, and take service in the villas of the wealthy suburban residents.<sup>84</sup>

Population figures do indicate that the female population of East Yorkshire towns increased significantly in the last decades of the nineteenth century whilst the population of rural districts decreased. In the Bridlington district, the female population aged 15 years and over increased by 22% between 1871 and 1891, and in Beverley, the female population over 15 years increased by 19% between those dates. In both regions, the expansion of young women in the age group 15 to 19 was especially great: 26% in

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<sup>83</sup> PP, 1867-68, XVII, Evidence to Portman's report, p.388.

<sup>84</sup> Jefferies, R., Hodge and His Masters, 1st edn 1880 (Stroud, 1992), p.185.

Bridlington and 24% in Beverley. Over the same period, the male population aged 15 and over in these towns increased by only 4% and 11% respectively. The rural Patrington district witnessed a 5% decrease in the female population aged 15 and over between 1871 and 1891. However women in the age group 20 to 24 years declined by 9% and those aged 25 to 29 by 7%. In the Howden region, the female population aged 15 and over decreased by 8% between 1871 and 1891. Women in the age group 20 to 24 dwindled by 10%, although those aged 15 to 19 and 25 to 34 remained stable. Over the same period, the male populations of Howden and Patrington (aged 15 and above) decreased by 7% and 8%, again with significant reductions in the younger age groups.<sup>85</sup>

Population figures may indicate a drift to local towns by rural women in the younger age groups. Certainly, the census returns record an increase of women in East Yorkshire classified as domestic servants by 95% between 1861 and 1891, although as we have seen, there are serious problems with the enumeration of this category of worker. In Bridlington in 1887, it was reported that ‘...there was a falling off in the attendance of females’ at the hiring fair; at Malton in the same year, ‘Female servants were very scarce. There were more employers than servants amongst the females,’ and at Market Weighton in 1889, ‘the streets were crowded with male servants, but the attendance of female servants was very small...hiring among them was virtually at a standstill’.<sup>86</sup> By this time female servants found it less necessary to attend the hiring fairs to find a place of employment for the year and they increasingly used newspaper advertisements and registration offices to find positions prior to the Martinmas fairs.

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<sup>85</sup> Census Reports of Great Britain: Population Tables, PP 1871, LXXI, vol 3 (1873); PP 1881, LXXX, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1883); PP 1891, CVI, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1893-4). See also, Neave, S., and Ellis, S., eds., *An Historical Atlas of East Yorkshire*, (Hull, 1996), pp.46-49.

<sup>86</sup> *Driffeld Times*, November 15, 1887; *Driffeld Times*, November 18, 1876; *Beverley Guardian*, November 16, 1889.

The available evidence therefore suggests that as farmers increasingly moved women servants into the domestic sphere of the farmhouse, women themselves were moving away from rural farm service altogether. This may have been one case where prevailing middle class notions of 'respectability' and 'fit' work for women were impinging on rural women's consciousness and affected how they viewed their work. This was certainly the case at Lark Rise, in late nineteenth-century Oxfordshire, where 'farmhouse servants were a class apart' and mothers were 'ambitious for their daughters' to enter domestic service in respectable country and town houses.<sup>87</sup>

### **3.5: Female day labourers in agriculture: the seasonality of employment**

Farmers in the East Riding supplemented the year-round labour of hired servants with the labour of married men living in village centres, their wives and children. The distinction between single and married workers, both male and female, was absolute and marriage marked a distinctive turning point in the lifestyle of rural workers in this county. Thus, few unmarried women were employed as day labourers in agriculture as most entered yearly service by the age of fourteen.<sup>88</sup> Regularity of employment and the tasks women were hired for were influenced by local farming patterns and by the crops grown on individual farms, by male work patterns and by the number and age of children in the family, as well as by local routine and custom. This was recognised by Sir Francis Doyle who investigated Yorkshire as part of the 1843 Royal Commission:

As the employment of women in fieldwork is partial and uncertain, the fact that whilst employed, they receive 10d. a-day at one time and 1s. at

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<sup>87</sup> Thompson, F., *Lark Rise to Candleford*, 1st edn 1939, (Harmondsworth, 1984), p.157.

<sup>88</sup> This point is made by numerous people giving evidence to the nineteenth-century Royal Commissions. See for example, PP 1843, XII, Reports of the Special Assistant Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture. Report by Sir Francis Doyle on the counties of Yorkshire and Northumberland, p.293, p.323 and p.341.

another, affords no clue to the whole amount of their earnings, or to the extent to which the physical well-beings of their families and themselves depends upon a continuance of such labour...but as it depends mainly upon the quality of the soil, and the nature of the crops principally grown round about it fluctuates by the mile, and more than general accuracy is not to be looked for.<sup>89</sup>

Generally, women were more extensively employed as day labourers in agriculture on the Wolds and Vale of York. In the latter region large-scale potato cultivation meant full-time employment all year for women who wanted it. Outside the hay and corn harvests women obtained little employment in the Holderness region. These trends are highlighted in the official sources: in 1843 for example, 'full employment all year round' was available to women in the potato districts of the Vale of York; on the Wolds, 'in spring and summer, there is full employment for them', but across Holderness, women were 'but little employed...except in harvest; then perhaps, one in four or five'.<sup>90</sup>

These trends seem to be borne out by a closer examination of the farm records. The first example comes from a farm situated near Beverley, on the south-eastern edge of the Wolds, which was farmed by John Lockwood. This was a mixed farm of around 325 acres; its main crops were wheat, oats and turnips, with some beans and barley grown. The farm also kept just under 800 sheep and 15 horses.<sup>91</sup> The farm employed four to five male yearly servants, including a hind who boarded the servants in the old farmhouse, and a shepherd. Much of the labour of the farm was performed by the yearly servants. In addition a number of male, female and child day labourers were employed.

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<sup>89</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Doyle, pp.282-3.

<sup>90</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Doyle, p.284.

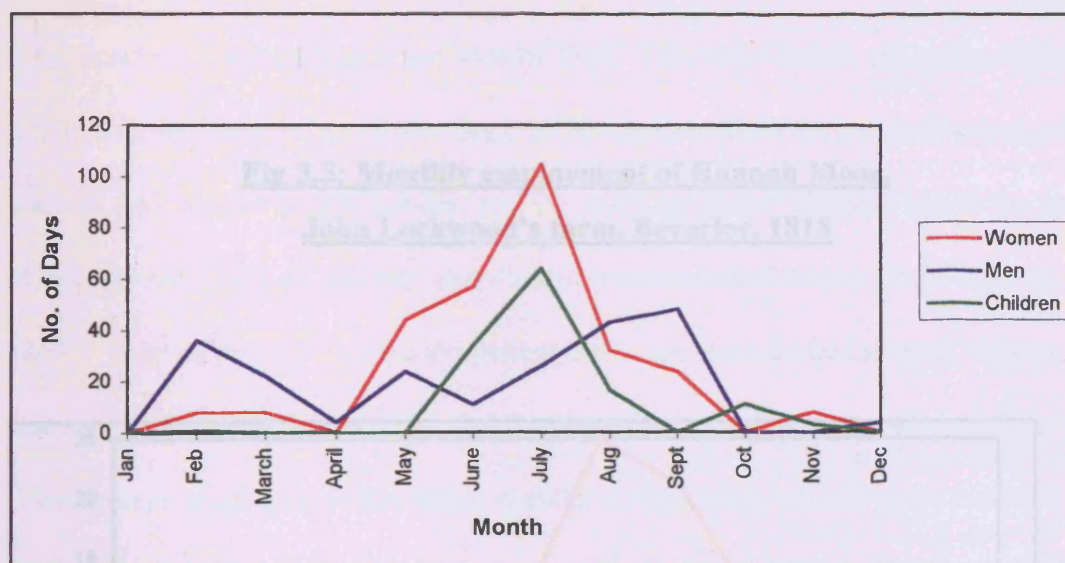
<sup>91</sup> Hull University, Brynmor Jones Library (hereafter BJL), DDJL 5/1-4, Farm account books of John Lockwood, Beverley, 1817-20 and 1824-25. The name of the farm is not known. The figures on animals and crops are taken from the year 1819 to 1820. Wheat was by far the most profitable crop at £492. 3s.

Fig 3.2 shows the number of days worked by the day labourers on the farm in 1818.

632½ days were worked altogether, 45% by women, 35% by men and 20% by child workers.<sup>92</sup> Women were employed for an average of nine days a month, although the peak period for their employment was the summer months, particularly for haymaking and to a lesser extent harvesting. Children too could expect an average of nine

**Fig 3.2: Number of days worked by day labourers,**

**John Lockwood's farm, Beverley, 1818**



Source: BJL, DDJL 5/1-2.

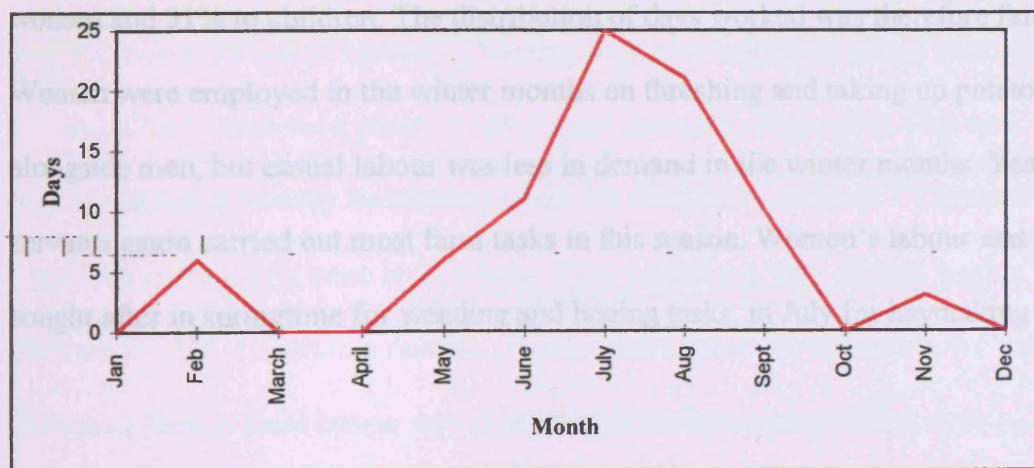
<sup>92</sup> The day labour figures for this and all other farms, were calculated by simply counting the number of man-days, woman-days and child-days worked in any given year as recorded in the accounts. The average number of days worked per woman per month was calculated by dividing the overall number of women who worked during the year, by the total number of days worked in the year by women. The same was done for men and children.



days work a month and their seasonal work pattern follows that of women. The number of days worked by male day labourers is considerably under-represented however: for much of the year they were employed in task work, especially threshing in the winter months and harvesting in the summer, and individual days worked were not recorded in the accounts.

The types of seasonal jobs women were employed to do on this farm have been plotted for one of the most regularly employed women in 1818, Hannah Moor. She worked 82 days across the year, the vast majority between the months of June and September. (Fig 3.3). This graph shows near full-employment in the summer months

**Fig 3.3: Monthly employment of Hannah Moor,  
John Lockwood's farm, Beverley, 1818**



Source: BJL, DDJL 5/1-2.

during haymaking and harvest. Additional tasks Hannah and other women were employed to perform were mostly connected to cleaning operations - particularly weeding which occupied Hannah for many days in June, July and September. Work in the turnip fields was also common. Women on this farm were however involved in a number of tasks that casual women labourers in the south-east may not have been: threshing was a widespread female task in the East Riding, a job Hannah performed in November and February. More unusually she also helped the thatcher during August and September.

The second illustration of the employment patterns of day labourers is from a farm situated at Saltmarshe in the Vale of York. This was a small, straggling village, situated on the banks of the River Ouse. It was renowned for its potato farming, vessel loads of which were sent to London and the south by water.<sup>93</sup> Fig 3.4 shows the number of days worked by men, women, and child labourers at Saltmarshe Home farm in 1840.<sup>94</sup> 5650 days were worked altogether; 34% can be attributed to men, 35% to women and 31% to children. The distribution of days worked was therefore fairly even. Women were employed in the winter months on threshing and taking up potatoes alongside men, but casual labour was less in demand in the winter months. Yearly servants again carried out most farm tasks in this season. Women's labour was most sought after in springtime for weeding and hoeing tasks, in July for haymaking

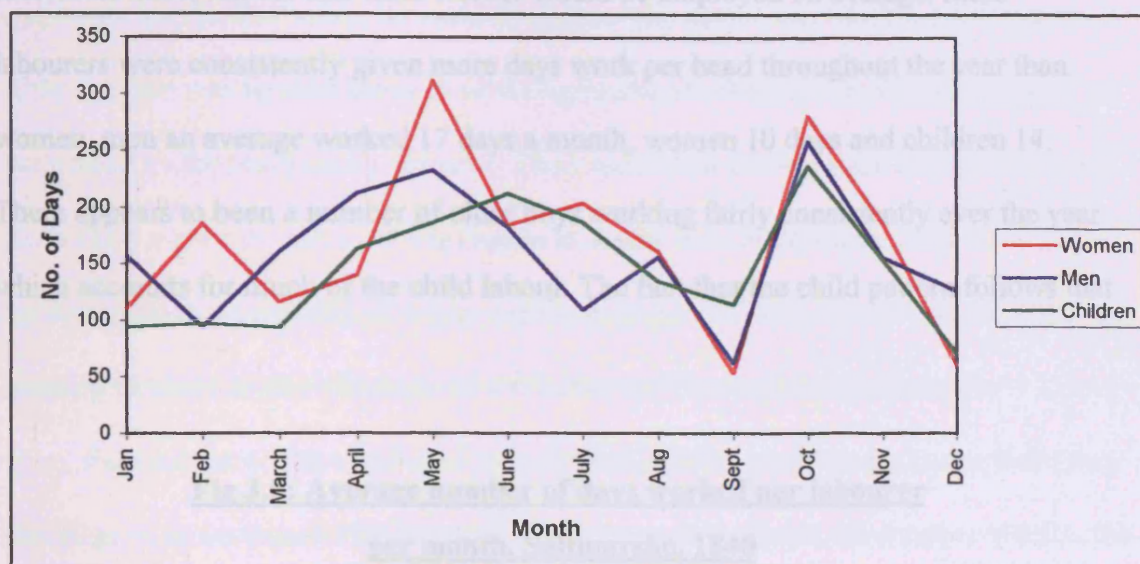
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<sup>93</sup> ERRO, DDSA 1198, Saltmarshe, MSS. History of the village and family, written in 1894.

<sup>94</sup> ERRO, DDSA 1219/2, Women's labour journals, Saltmarshe, 1835-41; DDSA 1203/5. The latter includes the labour of men only. Child labour is included in the women's accounts. The farm, 311 acres, was part of the estate of Philip Saltmarshe Esq., who owned land in Saltmarshe, Laxton and Kilpin parishes, totalling 2,700 acres.



**Fig 3.4: Number of days worked by male, female and child labourers, Saltmarshe, 1840**



Source: ERRO, DDSA 1219/2; DDSA 1203/5.

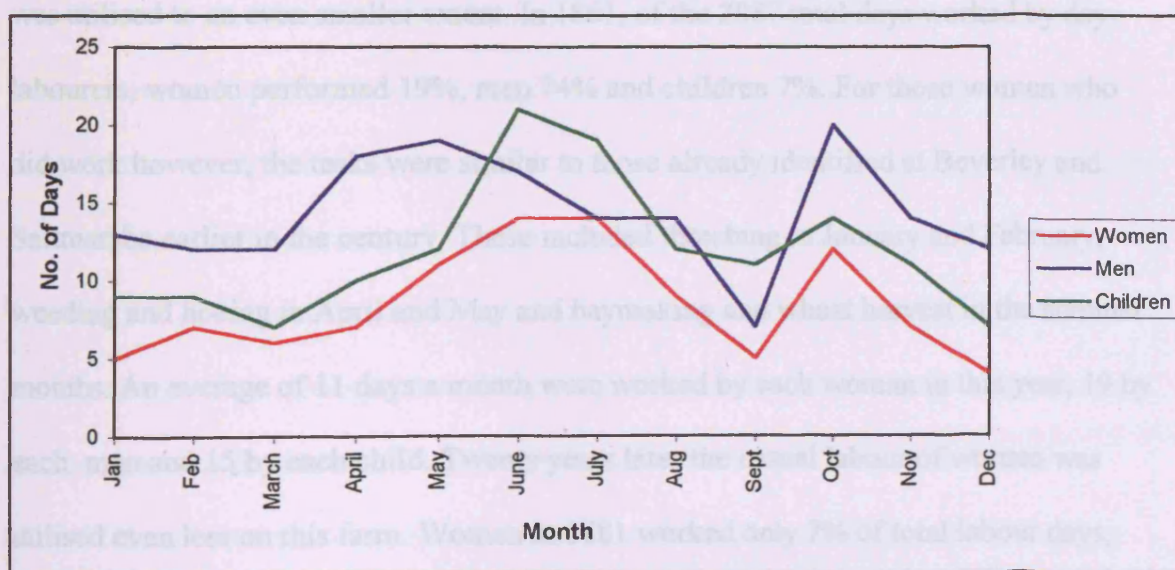
and in October for wheat harvest.<sup>95</sup> Women were also employed on the specialised task of flax pulling which took place in late August and early September. This was considered too physically demanding a task for children to perform.<sup>96</sup> Children employed on this farm were mainly boys: boys carried out 84% of days worked by children in 1840. However a number of girls were also employed across the year, indicating female child labour was in demand in certain regions of the county. This graph shows how, at certain points of the year, there were often more women and

<sup>95</sup> The wheat harvest was probably taken in at the usual time, late August and September, but days worked and payments made for this task were recorded after its completion in October and sometimes November.

<sup>96</sup> PP, 1867-68, XVII, Report by Portman, p.94.

children working than men on this Vale of York farm. However a calculation of the average number of days worked per labourer per month for the same year produces a slightly different graph (Fig 3.5). This figure shows how many days per month an individual male, female and child worker would be employed on average. Male labourers were consistently given more days work per head throughout the year than women: men an average worked 17 days a month, women 10 days and children 14. There appears to be a number of older boys working fairly consistently over the year which accounts for much of the child labour. The fact that the child pattern follows that

**Fig 3.5: Average number of days worked per labourer per month, Saltmarshe, 1840**



Source: ERRO DDSA 1219/2; DDSA 1203/5.



of women is interesting and may suggest a link between the working patterns of the two groups, with young children in particular only working on the days their mothers did.<sup>97</sup>

However, as at John Lockwood's farm, it must be remembered that this farm also employed four to five yearly servants throughout the period for which records survive. Although one was female, the bulk of the agricultural workload would have been performed by the male yearly servants. Their individual tasks are not recorded in the Saltmarshe accounts making it impossible to assess their contribution in relation to the male, female and child day labourers but the existence of farm servants would affect the working patterns of day labourers on the farm over the course of the year.

Figs 3.6 shows the number of days worked in 1861 on Sewerby Home farm, near Bridlington, in north-east Holderness.<sup>98</sup> This shows that outside the summer months, the casual labour of women was less in demand than in the Vale of York and child labour was utilised to an even smaller extent. In 1861, of the 2087 total days worked by day labourers, women performed 19%, men 74% and children 7%. For those women who did work however, the tasks were similar to those already identified at Beverley and Saltmarshe earlier in the century. These included threshing in January and February, weeding and hoeing in April and May and haymaking and wheat harvest in the summer months. An average of 11 days a month were worked by each woman in this year, 19 by each man and 15 by each child. Twenty years later the casual labour of women was utilised even less on this farm. Women in 1881 worked only 7% of total labour days,

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<sup>97</sup> The rector of Dalton Holme giving evidence to the 1867-70 Royal Commission stated, 'Young girls never work except with their mothers, or at turnip singling with their fathers' PP, 1867-68, XVII, Evidence to Portman's report, p.367.

<sup>98</sup> BJL, DDLG 43/5-15, Farm and private accounts, Lloyd-Greame family of Sewerby, 1821-1893. See DDLG 43/10 which covers the years 1857-1861. These are not an unbroken run of accounts and in the mid nineteenth century become very difficult to decipher. Some accounts are split into separate private and farm expenditure, in other years these are mixed together.

although the spring and summer peaks when female labour was still in demand for weeding, hoeing and haymaking was still apparent (Fig 3.7). Yearly servants were not recorded in the accounts for this farm, although they may have been an integral part of the labour force.

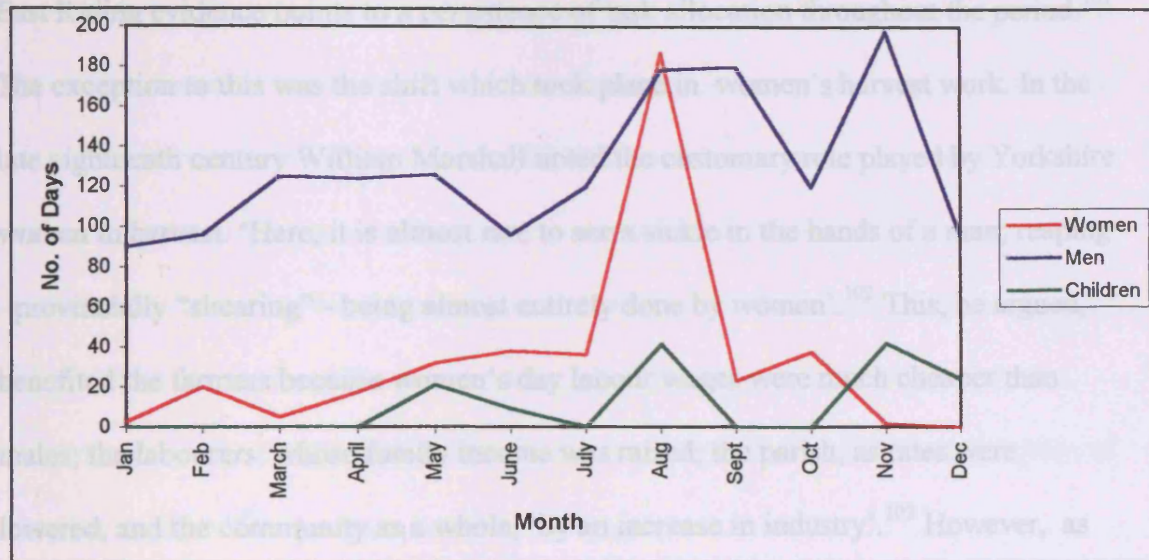
The task allocation of agricultural work on nineteenth-century East Yorkshire farms suggests that a sexual division of labour existed whereby women were utilised as a source of labour mainly for cleaning operations like weeding and hoeing, in the planting and harvesting of root crops such as potatoes and turnips, and in both the hay and corn harvests. The production of root crops on the Wolds and Vale districts, meant their labour was more in demand in those areas than throughout Holderness. Women did work alongside men on certain tasks, but others - notably ploughing, hedging, ditching and looking after livestock - were specifically male jobs, and ones performed mostly through the winter months. Women were employed in agriculture because they were a cheap pool of local labour and they were seen as more suited to cleaning and planting jobs. Legard noted with regard to turnip hoeing in 1848 for example, '...women are employed for the purpose, and it is thought that they are more adroit at this work than men'.<sup>99</sup> The types of work women were doing throughout most of the nineteenth century seem to have changed little from the previous century: Elizabeth Gilboy found a similar task allocation on the Thornborough estate in North Yorkshire in the period 1749-1773, with women employed in haymaking, harvest, spreading manure, weeding and stonepicking, and working at the limekilns, with men doing the threshing, hedging, ploughing and ditching.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Legard, 'Farming of the East Riding', p.111.

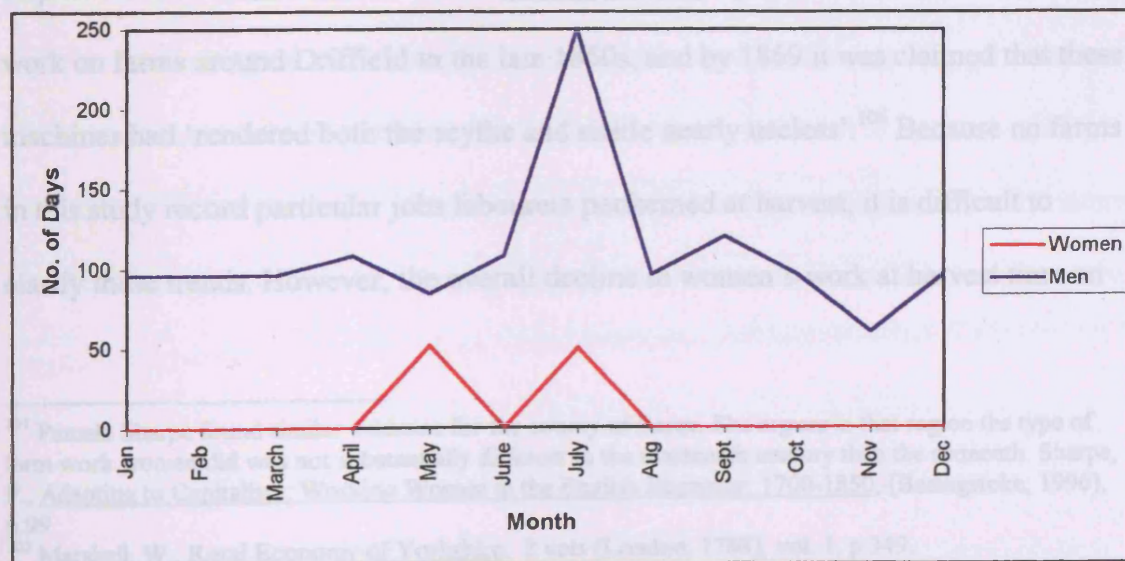
<sup>100</sup> Gilboy, E., 'Labour at Thornborough: an eighteenth-century estate', *Economic History Review*, 3 (1932), 388-398 (p.391).

**Fig 3.6: Number of days worked by male, female and child labourers, Sewerby, 1861**



Source: BJL, DDLG 43/10.

**Fig 3.7: Number of days worked by male and female labourers, Sewerby, 1881**



Source: BJL, DDLG 43/14, Farm book, 1880-1888.

In many respects therefore, Snell's thesis that increased sexual specialisation took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has to be questioned. The East Riding evidence points to a persistence of task allocation throughout the period.<sup>101</sup> The exception to this was the shift which took place in women's harvest work. In the late eighteenth century William Marshall noted the customary role played by Yorkshire women in harvest. 'Here, it is almost rare to see a sickle in the hands of a man; reaping - provincially "shearing" - being almost entirely done by women'.<sup>102</sup> This, he argued, benefited the farmers because women's day labour wages were much cheaper than males; the labourers, whose family income was raised; the parish, as rates were lowered, and the community as a whole, 'by an increase in industry'.<sup>103</sup> However, as the scythe superseded the sickle, women's opportunities to work productively in harvest declined as the scythe was a physically demanding tool and used exclusively by men.<sup>104</sup> The introduction of the reaper machine in the mid nineteenth century led to a further displacement of female labour.<sup>105</sup> The Hull Advertiser reported that reapers had been at work on farms around Driffield in the late 1850s, and by 1869 it was claimed that these machines had 'rendered both the scythe and sickle nearly useless'.<sup>106</sup> Because no farms in this study record particular jobs labourers performed at harvest, it is difficult to clarify these trends. However, the overall decline in women's work at harvest time on

<sup>101</sup> Pamela Sharpe found similar evidence for the county of Essex. She argues in that region the type of farm work women did was not substantially different in the nineteenth century than the sixteenth. Sharpe, P., Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850, (Basingstoke, 1996), p.99.

<sup>102</sup> Marshall, W., Rural Economy of Yorkshire, 2 vols (London, 1788), vol. 1, p.349.

<sup>103</sup> Marshall, Rural Economy of Yorkshire, vol. 1, p.350

<sup>104</sup> See Snell, Annals, ch. 1; Roberts, M., 'Sickles and scythes: women's work and men's work at harvest time', History Workshop Journal, 7, (1979), 3-28.

<sup>105</sup> Hostlettler, E., 'Gourlay Steell and the sexual division of labour', History Workshop Journal, 4, (1977), 95-100.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Adams, M. G., 'Agricultural change in the East Riding of Yorkshire, 1850-1880: an economic and social history', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hull, 1977), p.128.

Sewerby Home farm is clear: in 1861 14 women worked a total of 210 days in harvest; by 1891 only four women were employed for 48 days over the harvest period. In contrast, the threshing machine, which first appeared in the 1790s, was widely used on East Riding farms by the first quarter of the nineteenth century, giving opportunities for women to work over the winter months. This option was not widely available in other regions where women were not customarily employed in threshing.<sup>107</sup> This was often considered a dangerous occupation for women by nineteenth-century observers, a point illustrated by the death of Hannah Newham, aged 19, who was killed by her clothes being caught in the machine whilst threshing beans on the farm of William Ibbotson of Howden in 1863.<sup>108</sup>

### **3.6: Day labour payments**

An analysis of annual labour payments on East Yorkshire farms shows that even if farmers were dealing with more women and children per head at certain points of the year, by far the biggest proportion of overall payments, without exception, go to men. This was the case even at periods when women's labour was most in demand - during the French Wars or the mid Victorian boom in agriculture for example. Table 3.1 shows the overall mean averages for labour payments at all seven farms included in this study.

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<sup>107</sup> In Essex, according to Sharpe, threshing was done entirely by men. Sharpe, Adapting to Capitalism, p.78.

<sup>108</sup> Eastern Counties Herald, November 26, 1863.

**Table 3.1: Overall averages for day labour payments on East  
Yorkshire farms**

Farm	Year	Men	Women	Children	Unknown*	Task work
Holme-on-Spalding Moor	1796	71%	11%	8%	-	10%
John Lockwood's farm, Beverley	1818	20%	13%	4%	-	63%
Saltmarshe Home farm	1819-1821, 1836-1840	52%	22%	8%	13%	5%
Scampston	1842, 1846, 1850, 1854	92%	5%	1%	-	2%
Brecks farm, Seaton Ross	1851	70%	5%	2%	-	23%
Laxton Manor farm	1883	79%	11%	10%	-	-
Sewerby Home farm	1822, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891	88%	6%	1%	-	5%

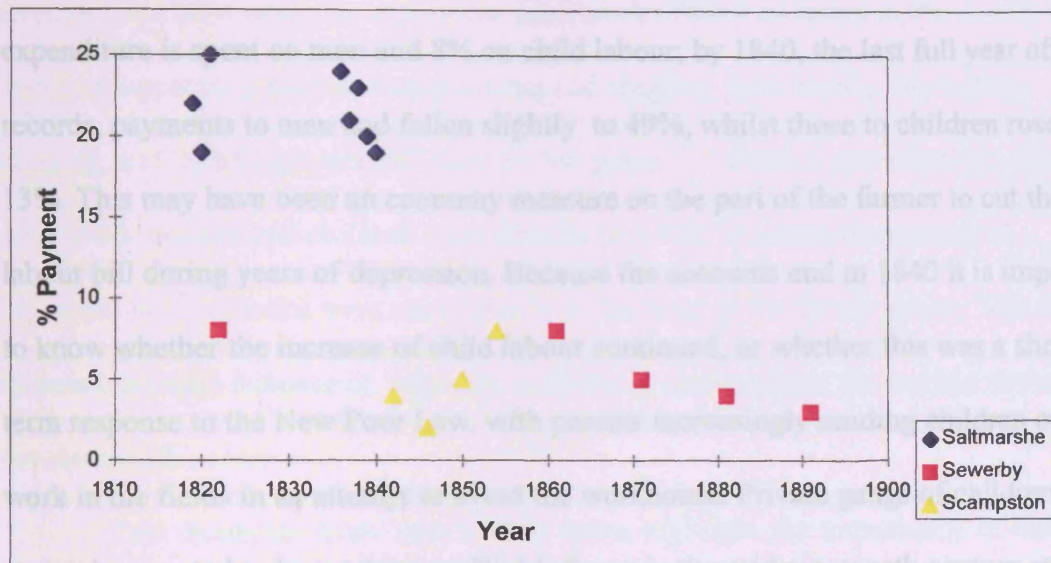
\*Unknown payments are all those assigned to no specific person/persons

Sources: B JL, DDLA 34/8, Langdale family of Holme-on-Spalding-Moor, Accounts, 1792-1799; B JL, DDJL 5/1-2; ERRO, DDSA 1219/1-2; ERRO, DDSA 1203/1-6; B JL, DDSQ (3) 21/19-21, Estate accounts, St. Quentin family of Harpham and Scampston, 1841-1854; B JL, DDEV 56/331-5, Farm account books, Brecks farm, Seaton Ross, 1851-1858; ERRO, DDSA 1067, Labour journals of Laxton Manor farm, May 1882-January 1884; B JL, DDLG 43/5-15. One year has been sampled from the accounts at Holme-on-Spalding-Moor, Beverley, Seaton Ross and Laxton to be representative of work and payment patterns. Where the accounts were especially detailed, as at Saltmarshe and Scampston, more years were analysed. For Sewerby the mid century accounts were very difficult to decipher but improve after 1860. Between 1860 and 1900 one year a decade was examined to reveal trends over time.

The proportion of payments made to women workers across the century is between 5 and 22%. Some continuities in the amount of farm expenditure spent on female labour across the century can be seen: the 11% at Holme-on-Spalding-Moor in 1796 was the same figure recorded at Laxton nearly a century later, both farms being situated in the Vale of York. However these overall figures disguise certain movements across time. Annual labour payments to female day labourers at three farms where a run of figures was available has been plotted in Fig 3.8. This graph shows more clearly the movement in labour expenditure on women day workers on individual farms over the course of the



**Fig 3.8: Percentage of annual labour payments to women  
day labourers on selected East Yorkshire farms**



Sources: ERRO, DDSA 1219/1-2; BJL, DDLG 43/5-15; BJL, DDSQ (3) 21/19-22.

century. The percentage spent on women's labour at Scampston, in the north-west of the county doubled between 1842 and 1854 from 4% to 8%, revealing the growing demand for cheap female labour as the agricultural depression lifted. At Sewerby Home farm, the sum spent on women's labour remains stable at 8% between 1822 and 1861. Thereafter it declines steadily to just 3% in 1891. On this farm, the nature and size of the agricultural workforce changes in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in response to the agricultural depression. Thus casual workers were largely dispensed with, and the work of the farm was performed by a core male labour force employed throughout the year. Cleaning operations such as weeding and stone-picking - traditionally 'women's work' - were abandoned for reasons of economy. At Saltmarshe

Home farm, women's labour payments always constitute around a fifth of total labour expenditure for the years the surviving records cover. During the late 1830s child labour increases at the expense of male workers. In 1836 for example, 53% of labour expenditure is spent on men and 8% on child labour; by 1840, the last full year of records, payments to men had fallen slightly to 49%, whilst those to children rose to 13%. This may have been an economy measure on the part of the farmer to cut the labour bill during years of depression. Because the accounts end in 1840 it is impossible to know whether the increase of child labour continued, or whether this was a short-term response to the New Poor Law, with parents increasingly sending children out to work in the fields in an attempt to avoid the workhouse. Private gangs of children were certainly reported to be working on Wolds farms in the mid nineteenth century at tasks such as weeding, labouring under the supervision of a farmer's labourer and paid by the employer. This may also have been the case at Saltmarshe in the late 1830s.<sup>109</sup>

It cannot however be assumed that the figures recorded in farm accounts are the total expenditure on female and child day labour in particular. Task work payments on all farms, without exception, were always paid to a male labourer. Task work on typical East Riding farms involved threshing, hedging and ditching in winter, hoeing in the spring and haymaking and harvesting in the summer months. Legard noted in 1848, 'Very great attention is paid by the turnip-growers to the period of hoeing. It is customary to let this operation by the acre: 3s. 6d. per acre has been the average charge of late years for finishing the job...'.<sup>110</sup> Jack Bowden writes of family labour during the harvest period:

...very little female labour was used except in harvest when most of

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<sup>109</sup> PP, 1867-68, XVII, Report by Portman, p.95.

<sup>110</sup> Legard, 'Farming of East Yorkshire', p.111.

the families made up a gang to follow the two corn reapers. A lad would make the band, the woman take the sheaf up and lay it on the band and then the man would bind it and make it something like tidy for the stokers...'<sup>111</sup>

Even by the 1890s when the amount of piecework offered on farms in the county had declined, operations such as turnip hoeing and singling, corn hoeing, harvesting, hedging, and threshing were still done by the piece.<sup>112</sup> This fact may conceal a lot of other work women and children were directly involved in across the century as payments for piecework were paid directly to the head of the family group. This is therefore another instance of women's work being omitted from the written records of the nineteenth century.

Two examples from East Riding farms highlight the importance of task work payments over the course of the agricultural year. At Brecks farm, Seaton Ross in 1851 23% of labour payments were assigned to task work (Fig 3.9).<sup>113</sup> This included much threshing, hedging and spreading manure in the winter months, and hoeing in the spring and summer. Typical entries read, 'April 14-20 Jas Hatfield and others. Tasks. £1. 19s'. It has been shown that many of these tasks were traditionally women's occupations on East Riding farms in the nineteenth century. Therefore, even where the final payment is given to the man, it is likely that this work was completed with the assistance of other family members. At Saltmarshe Home farm in 1820, task work made up 8% of the years

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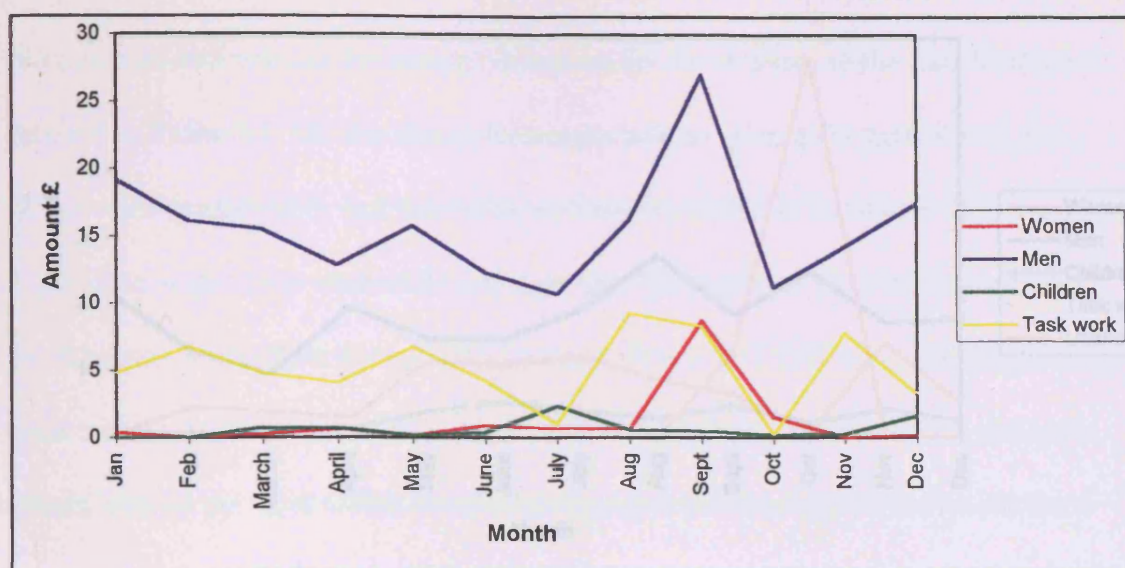
<sup>111</sup> Bowden, J., 'Recollections of a farm worker', Journal of the North Yorkshire County Record Office, 1 (1975), 35-39 (p.37).

<sup>112</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer. Report from Mr. Edward Wilkinson on the Poor Law Union of Driffield, p.55.

<sup>113</sup> B JL, DDEV 56/331. Breck's farm was part of the Everingham estate.



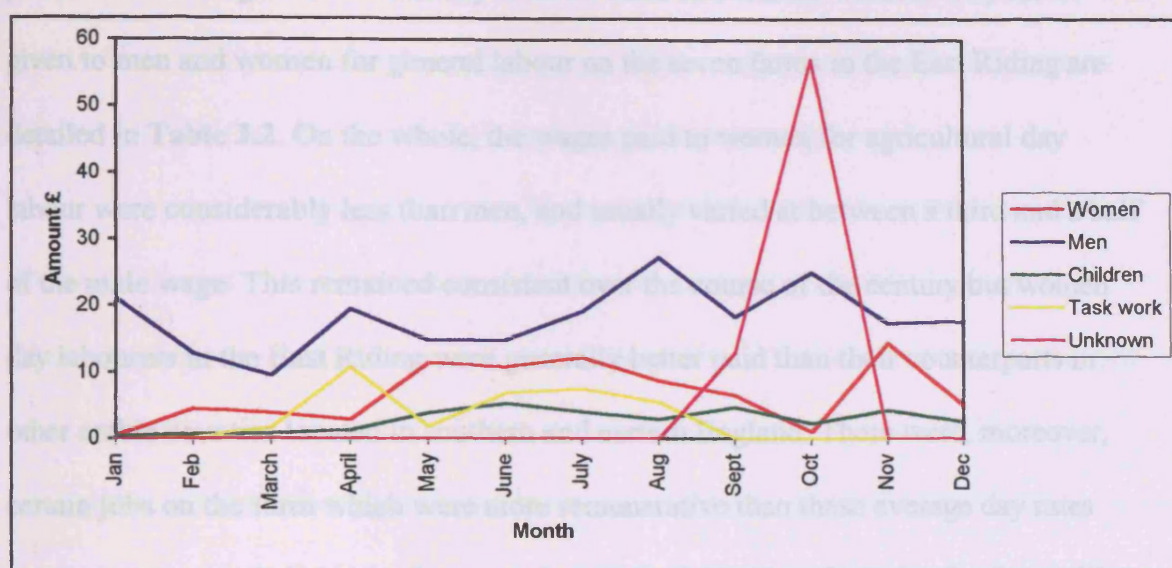
**Fig 3.9: Day labour payments by month, Breeks farm, 1851**



Source: BJL, DDEV 56/331.

labour expenditure, mostly paid between February and September. (**Fig 3.10**). Some of this was for jobs which only men would have performed such as woodplanting, hedging and mowing. Again however, task work also involved much threshing of beans and wheat, and hoeing. In June for example, 'Garbut and Co' were paid £1. 10s for hoeing ten acres of beans at 3s. an acre. This farm serves as an excellent example of the difference between the number of days worked throughout the year by different groups of workers, and total labour expenditures. So, although women workers account for

**Fig 3.10: Day labour payments by month, Saltmarshe, 1820**



Source: ERRO, DDSA 1219/1; DDSA 1203/2

38% of total days worked in 1820, only 19% of payments went to women. Men worked a similar number of days - 41% - but received 50% of payments. The 'unknown' category which was only a feature on this farm and especially significant in October, were lump-sum harvest payments not assigned to any individual labourers in the accounts. These may have been itinerants employed during the harvest peak, labourers who usually came down from the north Yorkshire Dales to the East Riding for the duration.<sup>114</sup> It is unlikely therefore that these figures included any local female labour.

<sup>114</sup> Legard in 1848 argued that Irish harvesters were very little employed in the East Riding as they were unused to mowing, 'Farming of East Yorkshire', p.117; Robert Sharp of South Cave also recorded in his dairy for 1831, 'Not an idle person scarcely to be seen in the street. Eight or ten Irishmen I saw go past today, there are none employed here, nor ever were. Poor unfortunates'. ERRO, DDX 216/4, Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave, 1826-1837.



The disparity between total expenditure on male and female labour on all farms points to the divergence between day rates for male and female workers. Day rates given to men and women for general labour on the seven farms in the East Riding are detailed in Table 3.2. On the whole, the wages paid to women for agricultural day labour were considerably less than men, and usually varied at between a third and a half of the male wage. This remained consistent over the course of the century but women day labourers in the East Riding were generally better paid than their counterparts in other arable counties located in southern and eastern England. There were, moreover, certain jobs on the farm which were more remunerative than these average day rates suggest: women at Saltmarshe for example, received 1s. 4d. to 2s. a day for flax pulling in August and September in the 1830s. There is also evidence to indicate that women's day rates at corn harvest strengthened in comparison to men's, particularly in the late

**Table 3.2: Day rates for male and female labour in East Yorkshire**

Farm	Year	Female rate	Male rate	Average female-to-male wage ratio
Holme-on-Spalding-Moor	1796	6d	1s.-1s.6d	40%
John Lockwood's farm, Beverley	1818	10d-1s	1s.10d-2s	48%
Saltmarshe Home farm	1836	8d	1s.8d-2s.3d	34%
Scampston	1842	1s	2s-2s.6d	44%
Breek's farm, Seaton Ross	1851	1s-1s.6d	2s-2s.6d	56%
Sewerby Home farm	1861	10d	2s.4d	36%
Laxton Manor farm	1883	1s	2s.6d	40%

Sources: BJL, DDLA 34/8; BJL, DDJL 5/1-2; ERRO, DDSA 1203/5; BJL, DDSQ (3) 21/19; BJL, DDEV 58/331; BJL, DDLG 43/9; ERRO, DDSA 1067.

eighteenth and early nineteenth century before mechanisation curtailed women's role. So at Holme-on-Spaling-Moor in 1796 women's harvest rate was 1s. 3d., or 70% that of men's. Similarly, on John Lockwood's farm in 1818, women received 2s. 8d. a day in the harvest, 65% the rate of male day workers at that time in the year.

The wage analysis in this section has been confined to day labourers on East Yorkshire farms. It has already been noted that on some farms the employment of yearly servants may distort the overall calculations of days worked by male, female and child labourers in this region. Similarly, servants wages may also have an affect on yearly labour expenditure. Four of the accounts record the wages of annual farm servants alongside day labour payments making it possible to assess the amount spent on male, female and child workers as a percentage of whole farm labour expenditure. This is shown in Table 3.3. For three of these farms - Brecks farm, Laxton Manor farm and Saltmarshe Home farm - the overall figures are changed little by this exercise, indicating that servants were less important to these Vale of York farms. (See Table 3.1 on p.147 for farm expenditure on day labourers). However on John Lockwood's farm in 1818, the percentage spent on male labour as a whole rises to 59% with the amount

**Table 3.3: Total farm expenditure in East Yorkshire.**

Name of farm	Year	% Men	% Women	% Children	Unknown	Task
John Lockwood's farm, Beverley	1818	59%	7%	2%	0%	32%
Saltmarshe Home farm	1819-1821; 1836-1840	55%	22%	7%	12%	4%
Brecks farm, Seaton Ross	1851	72%	5%	2%	0%	21%
Laxton Manor farm	1883	83%	9%	8%	0%	0%

Sources: BJL, DDJL 5/1-2; ERRO, DDSA 1219/1-2; DDSA 1203/1-6; BJL, DDEV 56/331; ERRO DDSA 1067.

spent on women and children declining. This shows the integral part male farm servants played on this farms in the early nineteenth century.

### **3.7: Women's work and the family economy**

Many female and child labourers on East Riding farms had familial connections to male workers. Indeed, it seems that labour was often hired implicitly or explicitly on a family basis, with spouses and siblings expected to provide extra hands at peak seasons.

Portman wrote in 1867:

...in a few instances there is, I fear, a tacit understanding between the employers and the labourer that in consideration of yearly and permanent employment for the father of the family, the labour of the wife and children shall be placed at the employers disposal if required at any particular season.<sup>115</sup>

That farmers used this method of employing day labourers is confirmed by cross-referencing named labourers in farm accounts with relevant census records. This has been done for two of the most comprehensive labour accounts, Saltmarshe Home farm in 1840 and Laxton Manor farm in 1883, although some discrepancies are likely because of the gaps between the years covered by the farm accounts and the census years.

Most of the day labourers employed at Saltmarshe Home farm in 1840 can be found in the census of the following year. Not all farm workers lived in Saltmarshe parish: some travelled from the neighbouring villages of Kilpin and Laxton, where Philip Saltmarshe also owned land, and Yorkfleet. The information contained in the 1841 census enumerators manuscripts is however rather vague. Only the names, ages and occasionally occupations of the villagers are noted. Family relationships or marital

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<sup>115</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Portman, p.99.



status are not explicitly recorded although people seemed to be grouped into family units. In 1841 enumerators were advised that the 'profession etc. of wives, or of sons and daughters living with and assisting their parents but not apprenticed or receiving wages, need not be inserted'.<sup>116</sup> This clause explains the lack of occupations assigned to women. Despite these drawbacks a number of tentative conclusions are possible. Virtually all the women employed on the farm in 1840 were married, and married to agricultural labourers. Not all of the men worked permanently on the farm, although there were a significant number of husband and wife teams: John and Mary Chaser, Hannah and John Glue, Joseph and Betty Allen being some examples. There were exceptions: Hannah Marshall from Laxton parish was married to a carpenter. She worked for 126 days in 1840 and earned £5. 0s. 4d. A number of single women, probably widows, and their offspring were also employed, such as Hannah Tomlinson and her sons George and Charles, who together earned £11. 12s. in 1840.

It is obvious that a woman's ability to contribute to the family economy in the nineteenth century was affected by a number of important variables, including her age, time of year and number and age of her children. Doyle, in 1843 estimated that the 'average' female in Yorkshire added £5. 4s. per year, or 2s. a week to the family income. This assumed that 15 weeks were worked each year, that the standard wage was 10d. a day, rising to 1s. 10d. in corn harvest. In this estimation women's earnings therefore made up around 10% of family income.<sup>117</sup> Looking more closely at the earnings of labouring families in Saltmarshe in 1840 how do these figures correspond with those published in official sources in the same era? Firstly, it is obviously very

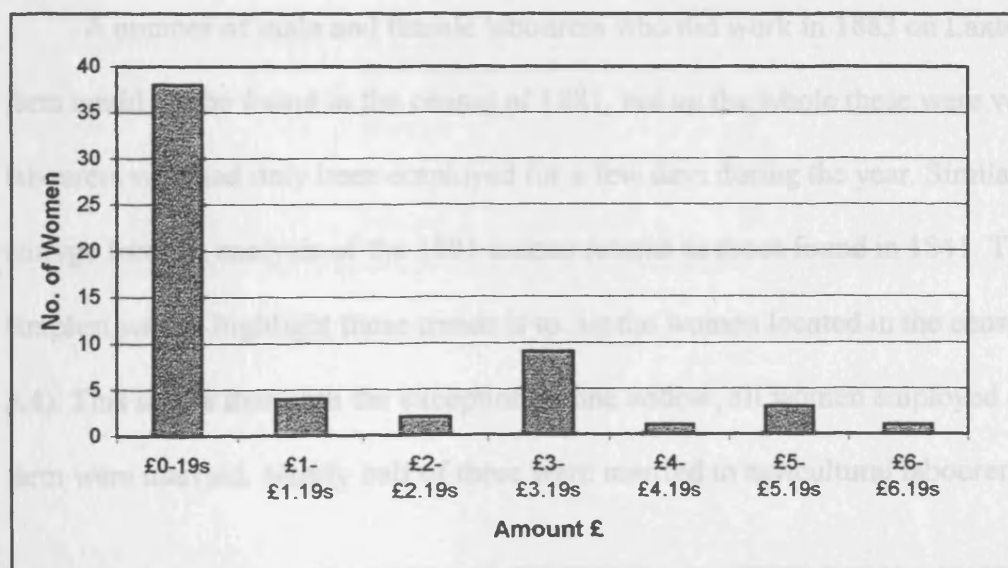
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<sup>116</sup> Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work', p.63.

<sup>117</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Doyle, p.282. The 10% figure corresponds largely to my own findings on women's contributions to family incomes in the period c.1790-1835 in chapter two.

difficult to talk about the ‘average’ woman or ‘average’ family. Fig 3.11 shows how many women earned what amount from farm work in 1840. This shows that a large amount of women were very casually employed for only a few days a year, earning less than £1, but a number worked for over half the year and added £5 or more to the family income. An example of the latter is Hannah Glue, who was married to agricultural worker John, and had a daughter Hannah, aged fourteen, still living at home. The seasonality of their employment largely mirrors that already discussed: John was fairly consistently employed year round whereas Hannah’s peak work times were in hay and corn harvests. The same was true for their daughter. Between 1836 and 1840 (the years

**Fig 3.11: Women’s annual earnings, Saltmarshe, 1840**



Source: ERRO, DDSA 1219/2.

for which records survive in full), Hannah senior worked for at least a third of each year on this farm, earning between £3. 10s. 7½d. and £7. 3s. 2d. Her husband earned on average just over £22 a year from work on this farm.<sup>118</sup> The wife therefore contributed around 19% to the family's income each year. Their daughter during this time worked on average 30 days a year during the summer months, adding around £1 to the family exchequer. Hannah Glue is just one example of a woman at the stage in her lifecycle, with only one older child at home, when childcare considerations no longer restricted her ability to enter productive work outside the home and her contribution to the family economy was therefore quite substantial. Did the presence of young children in the home restrict the number of days women worked on the farm, or were other factors influencing the work patterns of rural women? Such questions can be answered with more authority by using the 1881 census returns for Laxton as familial relationships are recorded in much greater detail.

A number of male and female labourers who did work in 1883 on Laxton Manor farm could not be found in the census of 1881, but on the whole these were very casual labourers who had only been employed for a few days during the year. Similar patterns emerge from an analysis of the 1881 census returns as those found in 1841. The simplest way to highlight these trends is to list the women located in the census (Table 3.4). This shows that with the exception of one widow, all women employed on the farm were married. Nearly half of these were married to agricultural labourers who also

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<sup>118</sup> However this presumes that agricultural work on this farm was the total family income for that year. In fact John's wage seems very low and it may have been possible that he was earning money at other farms in the region on specialist task work. Hannah also may have taken part in other productive work on different farms in the area or additional money-making activities outside agriculture.

**Table 3.4: Women workers on Laxton Manor farm, 1883**

Name of woman	No. days worked	Age	Marital status	Occupation of husband	No. + age of children	Amount earned in 1883	Occupational description in 1881
Hannah Briggs	55	55	Married	Railway gateman	1 (16)	£3.7s.4d	No. occupation
Alice Marshall	12½	27	Married	Agricultural labourer	2 (3+2)	12s.6d	No occupation
Harriet Marshall	79	57	Married	Agricultural labourer	None	£4.12s.3d	Agricultural labourer's wife
Jane Marshall	68	62	Married	Farm labourer	None	£3.13s.3d	Farm labourer occasionally
Hannah Morley	64	53	Married	Farm labourer	2 (24+12 +grandson)	£3.14s.9d	Farm labourer's wife
Mary Morton	75½	28	Married	Railway signalman	1 (7)	£3.19s.4d	No occupation
Dinah Poole	28	49	Married	Agricultural labourer	1 (14)	£1.7s	Agricultural labourer's wife
Ann Roberts	49	41	Married	Shoemaker	None	£2.8s.4d	Shoemaker's wife
Sarah Sims	34½	27	Married	Ratcatcher	4 (10,4,4+2)	£1.14s.6d	Ratcatcher's wife
Jessy Steels	78	29	Married	Railway signalman	4 (9,6,4+1)	£4.2s.6d	No occupation
Ann Wainman	72	40	Widow	—	6 (19,15,9,10, 8+4)	£3.16.6d	Charwoman
Emma Wainman	59½	35	Married	Labourer	2 (14+1)	£3.3s	No occupation
Elizabeth Waterland	58	34	Married	Butcher slaughterman	6 (12,10,8,6 +2)	£3.2s.6d	Butcher slaughterman's wife
Mary Wilson	23½	34	Married	Agricultural labourer	3 (13,12+9)	£1.5s.3d	No occupation

Sources: ERRO, DDSA 1067; EYLSL, Census enumerators book, Laxton parish, 1881.

worked at the same farm for much of the year. Harriet Marshall was married to William who worked 292 days in 1883 on the farm; Dinah Poole was married to Robert who worked 251 days and Jane Marshall was married to John who laboured for 273 days on Laxton Manor farm. A significant proportion of women were married to men who were not employed on the land however. The Doncaster to Hull railway line passed through the edge of the village, employing many local men. Thus Hannah Briggs was married to railway gateman William, Jessy Steels and Mary Morton were married to railway signalmen, Edward and George. A number of men not employed in agriculture also helped out at peak seasons in the fields. Shoemaker Edward Roberts, husband of Ann, worked for a few days in September for example, earning 6s. a day in harvest.

Very few women who were employed on the farm are assigned any occupation in 1881. In many instances the enumerator simply added the word 'wife' to the occupation of the woman's spouse. Thus Harriet Marshall, who worked 79 days in 1883 and earned £4. 12s. 3d., was returned as 'agricultural labourer's wife', as was Hannah Morley and Dinah Poole. Ann Roberts, who worked 49 days, was recorded as a 'shoemaker's wife', Sarah Sims, 'ratcatcher's wife' and Elizabeth Waterland a 'butcher slaughterman's wife'. Ann Wainman, a widow aged 40 years, was returned as a 'charwoman' although she worked for over 70 days on Laxton Manor farm and earned £3. 16s. 6d. in agricultural work. Only Jane Marshall was returned as a 'farm labourer occasionally' on account of her 68 days worked on the farm. So the part-time, casual agricultural work performed by women on Laxton Manor farm in the early 1880s was essentially omitted from the official occupational tables in the census return for the parish. Out of 14 women workers who could be located in the census, only one is classified as an agricultural labourer with the proviso 'occasionally' recorded by her occupational

designation. Another female worker is listed in a different occupational category, in this case, charring. Six women are given no occupation and six others are recorded in relation to their husbands work. This exercise reinforces the notion that census material produces a significant under-estimate of the real size of the female agricultural labour force in the late nineteenth century and should be treated with great caution.

How did the number and age of children at home affect the number of days women worked in the fields? It seems possible to divide women in this analysis into three broad categories. Firstly there appears to have been a number of older women with no children at home who worked a considerable amount of days on the farm across the year. These women would no longer have the financial strain of small mouths to feed nor were they restricted in the quantity of days they could work in terms of childcare considerations. However the fact they worked in the fields suggests that their financial contribution was still considered important. The addition of the wife's agricultural earnings to those of men shows the importance of their wages: Hannah Marshall worked 79 days, earning £4. 12s. 3d. Her husband William earned £34. 15s .9d. on Laxton Manor farm. His wife contributed 12% to their total earnings from this farm. Similarly Jane Marshall took home £3. 13s. 3d. from 68 days worked, and her husband John earned £35. 4s. Jane's contribution was 10% of their total earnings from agricultural work on this farm.

Mary Wilson and Dinah Poole are examples of women who have a number of older, economically active children living at home and therefore worked fewer days themselves. Mary's sons George, aged 13, and John, aged 12, worked nearly 300 days between them in 1883, earning over £14. Dinah Poole worked only 28 days, earning £1. 7s. Her son Amos, aged 14, earned £7. 13s. 6d. on this farm, 15% of the family's total

earnings. Her husband Robert earned £32. 2s. 6d. from work on this farm in 1883.

However this trend was not universal for women at this stage in their lifecycle. Some women with older, working children also worked a significant number of days on the farm themselves, once more suggesting their wages, no matter how small, were still vital to the family. Thus Emma Wainman worked for 59½ days, adding £3. 3s. to the earnings of her husband and two sons; Hannah Morley worked for 64 days earning £3. 14s. 9d. and Hannah Briggs worked for 55 days, earning £3. 7s. 4d.

Did the existence of young children in the household make it less likely for women to work outside the home in this example? This time in the lifecycle, with 'many mouths to feed, and no child yet old enough to earn as much as fourpence a day on the farm', was described by a contemporary writer as the one of 'greatest pressure' on the rural family in the nineteenth century.<sup>119</sup> Again, the evidence from Laxton Manor farm is contradictory. Certainly women like Alice Marshall, who had two boys aged 2 and 3 years, only worked a few days in the year. Alice earned just 12s. 6d. in 1883 on this farm. However, evidence also suggests to a certain extent that the more young children a woman had, the greater the pressure to work, leaving the children in the care of older children, relatives or other women in the village. Both Elizabeth Waterland and Jessy Steels had very young children but worked over 50 days in the fields.

It is very difficult from the analysis of one parish to reach definite conclusions on the relationship between the number and age of children and the quantity of days worked by women. The over-riding impression is of the importance of women's wages, however small, to all labouring families in the 1880s. Male day wages in agriculture in the East Riding as a whole rose by 20 to 25% between the early 1850s and the mid

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<sup>119</sup> Anon, 'The life of a farm labourer', Cornhill Magazine, 9 (1864), 178-186 (p.181).

1870s, whilst the general price level at that time increased by only 5 to 10%.<sup>120</sup>

However it seems unlikely that this improvement in real wages was sizeable enough to make labourers markedly less dependent on the intermittent earnings of their family, and the earnings of women and children would have been as important here as at any time during the century. Edward Wilkinson, reporting in the 1890s, estimated that rents in the county ranged from £1. 14s. 8d. to £2. 12s. for a one storey, two roomed cottage without much garden, up to £5. 4s. a year for a four or five roomed house with a large garden.<sup>121</sup> Thus the wages of women such as Emma Wainman, Hannah Marshall and Harriet Marshall would have been enough to pay the yearly rent on an average cottage in the county. Clearly the need for women to work in the fields was still felt by both local farmers and labouring families in Laxton in the 1880s, although much of this work was ignored or marginalised in the official sources.

Of course it cannot be presumed that remuneration from agricultural labour as recorded in farm account books, were the total earnings of rural men, women and children in the nineteenth century. There were a number of other ways women contributed to the family income in the county. Firstly there were those activities which were an extension of household duties. Arthur Tweedy recollects his mother 'was never without a few lodgers who came to work in the parish, doing all kinds of work, such as fencing, draining, ditching...'.<sup>122</sup> Scattered throughout the household accounts of many of the large estates are references to local women charring and washing. Thus, at Skipwith Hall in 1849, as well as the regular indoor servants, Anne Roberts was paid for

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<sup>120</sup> Adams, 'Agricultural change in East Yorkshire', p.348.

<sup>121</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilkinson, p.55.

<sup>122</sup> Tweedy, A., 'Recollections of a farm worker. Part 1', Bulletin of the Cleveland and Teesside Local History Society, 21 (1973), 1-6 (p.1).



charring, brewing ale in the scullery and washing, earning £1. 15s. 4d. between July and December.<sup>123</sup> The same references can be found in the accounts of Burton Constable in Holderness. In 1872, for instance, Mrs Machlin and Mrs Thomson were employed on a casual basis as charwomen; Mrs Merrit was employed for making beds and Mrs Thompson also earned 14s. for 'dressing feathers'.<sup>124</sup>

Families living in rural East Yorkshire also enjoyed a wide variety of perks. Most labourers had gardens attached to their cottages. This enabled them to produce food for their own consumption and to feed animals on. Strickland noted in 1812 that, 'the greater part of labourers have gardens attached to their cottages for the growth of vegetables and are able to feed annually a bacon hog...'.<sup>125</sup> Thomas Jackson's family had a garden of half an acre 'of the richest soil, which produced a yearly supply of potatoes, sufficient for the use of the family, and the support of a pig.'. <sup>126</sup> George Hardy's family also sold the produce of their garden commercially:

Father worked twelve hours a day on the farm and then worked in the big garden round our cottage until it was dark. This was how the family always had enough food...on Saturday mornings I had to drag a box on wheels, loaded with vegetables, from our home village of Woodmansay to Beverley. There I sold the stuff door to door and often took home 8s. or 9s.<sup>127</sup>

Some labourers rented land off their employers to keep a cow, the value of which, according to Legard in 1848 was 'so highly appreciated by both the labourers and their employers that efforts are now being generally made to facilitate this valuable acquisition to the poor man'.<sup>128</sup> Michael Adams estimates that half of the labourers on

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<sup>123</sup> B JL, DDFA 37/23 Housekeeping book, Forbes Adams family of Skipwith Hall, 1845-1852.

<sup>124</sup> ERRO, DDCC (2) 19/7, Servants wages and liveries book, Burton Constable, 1872.

<sup>125</sup> Strickland, General View...of the East Riding, p.285.

<sup>126</sup> Jackson, T., Recollections of my Own Life and Times, (London, 1874), p.9. He was born near Market Weighton in 1783.

<sup>127</sup> Hardy, G., Those Stormy Years, (London, 1956), p.11. He was born at Woodmansey in 1884.

<sup>128</sup> Legard, 'Farming of East Yorkshire', pp.125-6.

the Sledmere estate, in the centre of the Wolds, rented cow pastures of around 3 acres in the early 1870s. The annual value of a cow at that time was put at £12.<sup>129</sup> Jack Bowden, who grew up in neighbouring North Yorkshire, remembered his father,

had 12/6 a week in money and a cow which belonged to the farmer; he had to supply the next-door neighbours with milk and the rest of the profit from the cow helped with the making up of wages. He was also allowed to keep twenty head of poultry and a pig.<sup>130</sup>

The importance of these extras to the labouring family remained constant throughout the nineteenth century. Even in the last quarter of the century when labourer's wages rose in real terms, the economic contribution generated by garden produce and animals was pivotal and figure prominently in memoirs of local people such as Bowden, Hardy and Jackson. All of these are difficult to assess in strictly economic terms. Nonetheless the labour of women in maintaining and utilising such perks would have been important to family subsistence.

Being a predominately farming county, opportunities for women to contribute to family incomes productively outside of agricultural work were limited however. The 1843 Royal Commission records the dearth of domestic industry in the county. There was a little glovemaking around Pocklington and some dressmaking, but there was 'little spinning and no plaiting in the East Riding of Yorkshire'.<sup>131</sup> Finally, gleaning, which played an important part in the economies of rural labourers in the south-east, seems to figure very little in accounts of the East Riding and was not a major occupation for women after the completion of the corn harvest. Bowden recollected that after 'the fields were cleared and horseraked we were allowed to glean the corn and it

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<sup>129</sup> Adams, 'Agricultural change in East Yorkshire', p.391.

<sup>130</sup> Bowden, 'Recollections', p.35.

<sup>131</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Doyle, p.323.

was surprising what could be gathered...It made all the difference at our house'.<sup>132</sup> But his account is exceptional. The absence of references to gleaning in the East Riding, as in other northern counties, may reflect the wider roles women played in the actual harvest process itself, or it may have been that gleaning was not a widespread customary right as it was in southern England.<sup>133</sup>

### **3.8: Continuity or change?: some conclusions**

From a review of printed primary sources, the pattern of women's agricultural work in East Yorkshire over the course of the nineteenth century, as both farm servants and day labourers, appears to have been one of straightforward decline. This pattern is depicted by official parliamentary reports and by the census figures, which record a 50% decrease in the number of women classified as farm servants, agricultural labourers and cottagers between 1881 and 1891. By the early 1890s, it was reported that, 'Women are very seldom engaged in fieldwork now except at harvest'.<sup>134</sup> The decline in women's agricultural employment has been linked to the increased mechanisation which lessened the need for casual labourers, a drift to towns by servants and general improvements to the condition of the male agricultural workforce as real wages began to rise at the end of the century.<sup>135</sup> In 1894 Wilkinson concluded, 'I think that, on the whole, the condition of the agricultural labourer is satisfactory in this district'.<sup>136</sup> This change in the utilisation of day labourers, both in terms of the reduction in the number of casuals (especially women) employed, and in terms of increasing use of a core male workforce

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<sup>132</sup> Bowden, 'Recollections', p.37.

<sup>133</sup> See King, P., 'Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850', *Economic History Review*, 64 (1991), 461-476.

<sup>134</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilkinson, p.55.

<sup>135</sup> Adams, 'Agricultural Change in East Yorkshire', p.377.

<sup>136</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilkinson, p.62.

does seem to be confirmed by the farm accounts of the Lloyd-Graeme family of Sewerby. This farm displays the classic pattern of women's agricultural employment as represented in the official sources: a peak in employment in the mid nineteenth century followed by a steady decline to the close of the century, when only three or four women were utilised in hay and corn harvests. Newspaper accounts and population figures also point to a considerable decline in the number of female farm servants at the close of the century.

Was this decline linked to rising real wages of male labourers and to changing attitudes towards women's outdoor employment, or was it more generally linked to the crop patterns and agricultural practises of the region? Male real wages did rise in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This may have offered married women an opportunity to withdraw from the formal workforce. However the wages of the head of household would not have been enough to support girls and young single women, who would still have been expected to enter service by the age of 14. Moreover, the casual earnings of married women were still seen to be of importance to East Riding families in the late nineteenth century. Wilkinson summarises the earnings and expenditure of an 'average' East Yorkshire family, consisting of a man, woman and three children, in his report to the Labour Commission. Earnings of the head of household totalled £42; expenditure was calculated at exactly the same figure. Rigid economising was still essential at the end of the century, and any irregular earnings of women and children would have been as vital here as at any time during the century.<sup>137</sup>

The significance of local crop patterns may have been pivotal in determining women's employment. Sewerby Home farm was situated in north-east Holderness, a

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<sup>137</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilkinson, p.57.

region never particularly reliant on the casual labour of women and children. The situation was very different in the south-west part of the county. Saltmarshes Home farm, situated in the very south of the county, shows no decline in the participation of women in agricultural work as day labourers in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1820, women carried out 38% of days worked on the farm; in 1840 the figure was 35%. Similarly, in 1840 women's work constituted 19% of expenditure on agricultural day labour, the same figure as twenty years earlier. Moreover accounts which survive for the neighbouring parish of Laxton in the early 1880s still point to a considerable input from local women throughout the year. Out of a total of 4155 days worked in 1883, 20% and 19% were worked by women and children respectively, with men carrying out 61%. Dominated by root crops and specialised crops such as flax, this region relied to a much greater extent on female labour throughout the agricultural year. Female labour was still far from marginalised on this farm in the 1880s, despite the fact that most of these women were not recorded in the 1881 census as having any formal occupation outside the home. Because most accounts only survive for short periods of time, it is only possible to speculate on changing patterns of agricultural employment across the century. However, certain regions of the East Riding still needed the seasonal input of female labour at the end of the century. Thus the decline in women's participation in the formal rural economy as depicted in the official printed sources was not universally applicable. Was the situation in the East Riding of Yorkshire typical of other arable counties in the nineteenth century? This will be discussed as attention turns in the next chapter to Norfolk, the 'classic' arable region of south-east England.

## **Chapter Four: Norfolk**

### **4.I: Norfolk in the nineteenth century**

Ostensibly, rural Norfolk exhibited similar traits to the East Riding of Yorkshire in the nineteenth century. The two counties underwent sweeping agricultural change in the period so that by the middle decades of the century both were characterised by enclosed fields, arable production and innovative methods of cultivation. In Norfolk, as in East Yorkshire, the nature of the agricultural system had an important influence on the type and amount of work available to local women. However, there were some significant differences in the economies, methods of hiring labour and farming practices of the regions. This meant the patterns of women's employment in rural Norfolk did not always replicate those found in the East Riding and offers an interesting contrast to the situation in the northern county.

In the eighteenth century Norfolk had been a thriving industrial county, heavily involved in the production of cloth for home and overseas markets. The spinning of yarn provided work for all members of the family in rural villages. Daniel Defoe captured the bustling nature of the region in the 1720s:

When we come into Norfolk, we see a face of diligence spread over the whole county; the vast manufactures carry'd on (in chief) by the Norwich weavers, employs all the country round in spinning yarn for them; besides many thousand packs of yarn which they receive from other countries, even from as far as Yorkshire, and Westmoreland...<sup>1</sup>

By the late eighteenth century increased foreign imports, and the use of water-powered and later steam-powered machinery meant the centre of industry shifted to West

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<sup>1</sup> Defoe, D., A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain, 2 vols, 1st edn 1726 (London, 1962), vol 1, p.61.

Yorkshire and Lancashire. Norfolk lacked the necessary natural resources for the successful establishment of mills.<sup>2</sup> The importance of spinning to rural families became clear as this avenue of work disappeared from the countryside. This was highlighted by contemporary writers such as David Davies and Frederick Eden and has been discussed in chapter two. In the early 1840s the final demise of this employment and its effects on women's earnings in Norfolk was recorded by parliamentary investigator Stephen Denison:

Some years back, the labouring classes in Suffolk and Norfolk were much better off than they are now, owing to the very general employment of women and children in hand-spinning. That employment has been put an end to by machinery, and no other domestic manufacture has been found to supply its place. The population is, therefore, strictly agricultural; and... the family earnings and employment are so much lessened by the loss of the spinning.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst the fortunes of cloth manufacture in Norfolk began to decline at the end of the eighteenth century, profound changes in the local system of agriculture were making the region one of the most famous and prosperous agrarian counties in England. The county was noted for its rich variety of soils and land use, but clearly divided into two distinct areas: the 'wet' region of the south and east, dominated by heavy soils, and the 'dry' north and west region, with lighter soils (Map 4.1).<sup>4</sup> The latter area was dominated by great estates and larger farms of 300 acres and above, leading the way in investment and agricultural improvement. Smaller farms without the capital to develop

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<sup>2</sup> Wade Martins, S., *Norfolk: A Changing Countryside*, (Chichester, 1988), p.1.

<sup>3</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture. Report by Mr. Stephen Denison on Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire, p.220.

<sup>4</sup> Young, A., *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk*, (London, 1804), p.17.

**Map 4.1: Norfolk in the nineteenth century**



Source: Young, *General View...of Norfolk*. The 'dry' region is labelled by Young as 'Goodsand', where classic 'Norfolk Husbandry' prevailed. The 'wet' region is denoted by 'Loams' in the east of the county.



significantly, and a much greater concentration of owner-occupations were characteristics of south and east Norfolk.<sup>5</sup>

During the eighteenth century Norfolk had risen to agricultural prominence for a number of reasons. Firstly, increased productivity was achieved by a more rapid abandonment of the old open-field system than in previous centuries. The four-course crop rotation system was implemented. The region was especially adaptable to the production of corn, particularly wheat and barley. Norfolk's access to local markets, London and foreign destinations by water and road was also significant.<sup>6</sup> The Norfolk system was acclaimed and disseminated by agricultural writers like Nathaniel Kent, William Marshall and Arthur Young, so that by the late eighteenth century, the county 'had become the best known and most productive region in Britain'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, by 1794 the county was exporting more corn than all the rest of England combined.<sup>8</sup> Farmers' prosperity expanded rapidly during the Napoleonic Wars when the continental blockade meant foodstuffs had to be produced at home. High prices for wheat and rising rents made it economical for landlords to drain and improve more land for cereal production, and even the most marginal lands were drained and ploughed up for sowing.<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary enclosure climaxed during this period of high prices. In 1794 Kent had calculated Norfolk still contained 143,000 acres of common land; by 1844 only 27,000

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<sup>5</sup> In the mid nineteenth century, 58% of Norfolk farms were under 100 acres. A quarter were between 100 and 300 acres, with farms over 1000 acres making up only 1.8% of Norfolk farms as a whole. Most farmers were therefore working on a small scale, with little capital. Wade Martins, S., A Great Estate at Work: The Holkham Estate and Its Inhabitants in the Nineteenth Century, (Cambridge, 1980), p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Riches, N., The Agricultural Revolution in Norfolk, (London, 1937), p.18. The influence of prominent landlords was important too, although R. A. C. Parker has argued that changes in estate management which are usually attributed to the late eighteenth century actually occurred earlier in the century. See Parker, R. A. C., 'Coke of Norfolk and the agrarian revolution', Economic History Review, 8 (1955), 156-166 (p.166).

<sup>7</sup> Dymond, D., The Norfolk Landscape, (London, 1985), p.219.

<sup>8</sup> Riches, Agricultural Revolution, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Parker argues that rents rose by two times between 1776 and 1816, not the four, nine or ten times increase as sometimes stated. Parker, 'Coke of Norfolk', p.166.

acres remained.<sup>10</sup> Farmsteads were also frequently replanned and rebuilt on major estates, all resulting in a geometric landscape of planned hedges, straight roads and new buildings. Depression followed the Napoleonic Wars in the 1820s and 1830s, with grain prices reaching their nadir in 1833, but land on the whole remained well maintained and improvements continued.<sup>11</sup> During the mid century period of 'high farming', farmers continued to prosper, enjoying rising rents and investing the capital this produced. At this time statistics collected from every owner occupier over two acres, revealed the dominance of mixed farming across the county, with wheat and barley the main grain crops and turnips the predominant root crop.<sup>12</sup> During the 1870s grain prices again collapsed, ushering in an era of depression that lasted until the mid 1890s. Although Norfolk was not one of the worst affected counties in eastern England, rent reductions, unlet farms, a general decline in farming standards, and a conversion of arable land to permanent pasture were significant features of the period.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the century, Norfolk farming had settled down into a new, less intensive system, still relying on cereal production, but also diverting into new crops such as fruit, vegetables, and sugarbeet.

It was shown in the last chapter that the East Riding was a unique area of England in the nineteenth century being the only arable county to persist with the system of hiring unmarried farm servants on yearly contracts. The hiring of servants remained the most reliable means of procuring and retaining labour for the whole year in the tight

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<sup>10</sup> Figures quoted in Dymond, *Norfolk Landscape*, p.223.

<sup>11</sup> Wade Martins, *Norfolk*, p.35.

<sup>12</sup> In 1854 the counties of Norfolk and Hampshire were chosen to take part in an experimental method of collecting agricultural statistics. Statistical committees were established in each poor law union in both counties, usually consisting of a small body of agriculturists, the chairman of the board of guardians and a classifier. Questionnaires on how much land was under cultivation and the type and number of livestock kept enable a comparison of farming practices across regions. Wade Martins, *Great Estate at Work*, p.19.

<sup>13</sup> See Howkins, A., *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923*, (London, 1985), p.2.

labour market of East Yorkshire. Norfolk stood in stark contrast to this. It was a low wage region, with an increasingly casual workforce susceptible to spells of under-employment and in need of parish relief. The system of hiring yearly living-in servants in Norfolk began to deteriorate as the sweeping agricultural changes of the early nineteenth century took hold. Grain and root crops required a large amount of seasonal labour, making the year round labour of boarded servants largely redundant. After male labourers returned from the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, labour surpluses meant farmers could dismiss servants in Norfolk in large numbers. Thus large farmers in the county were able to hire and dismiss day labourers at will, hiring by the week, day and even hour in some circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

Late eighteenth-century commentators were aware that the increasing profits of Norfolk farming at that time were accomplished at the expense of labourers. Marshall noted in 1787, 'In respect to DAY-LABOURERS, two remarkable circumstances are united; namely hard work and low wages!'.<sup>15</sup> His contemporary, Kent, estimated that during the second half of the eighteenth century, wages had risen 25%, but the average price of foodstuffs had more than doubled, thus rendering it impossible for workers to live off their labour.<sup>16</sup> Susanna Wade Martins and Tom Williamson have shown that the expansion of arable production which occurred in East Anglia in the period 1750 to 1840 was largely dependent on an abundance of cheap and flexible labour. The 'classic East Anglian agricultural revolution', they argue, 'rested firmly on the backs of an

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé point out that this permanent surplus of labour was a significant factor after the Napoleonic Wars. Hobsbawm, E. J., and Rudé, G. E., Captain Swing (London, 1969), p.42. The surplus was also linked to the increase in population in the Norfolk countryside, which began to rise dramatically after 1750 but was especially significant in the decade 1811 to 1821. See Dymond, Norfolk Landscape, p.240.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, W., Rural Economy of Norfolk, 2 vols (London, 1787), vol. 2, p.173.

<sup>16</sup> Kent, N., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk (London, 1794), p.163.

under-employed and impoverished rural workforce'.<sup>17</sup> The decline of service in husbandry, the demise of alternative employment opportunities in the countryside such as spinning and also the loss of commons during the period of parliamentary enclosure, made labourers increasingly reliant on waged labour. Labourers lived near starvation levels during the Napoleonic Wars and inflation, high food prices and shortages led in 1816 to food riots throughout East Anglia after the passing of the Corn Laws prevented the importation of grain until the price of English wheat had reached 80s. a quarter.<sup>18</sup> At this time, an average male day labourer in Norfolk could expect to earn around 1s. 8d. a day in winter, rising to 1s. 11d. in summer. Their northern counterparts in the East Riding earned over a third more for the same work. Women in the East Riding could generally earn 2d. a day more in agricultural labour than Norfolk women.<sup>19</sup> Discontent surfaced again in East Anglia in the early 1830s when Swing rioters demanded a rise in wages and removal of threshing machines which they perceived as a major cause of under-employment.<sup>20</sup> The casualisation of the rural Norfolk workforce by the mid nineteenth century is shown clearly by Alun Howkins. He has calculated that in the 1840s a ratio of two regular to three casual workers at normal times of the year could alter to three casuals to one regular worker at harvest.<sup>21</sup> As in East Yorkshire from the 1870s the labour market did begin to shift in favour of the rural worker and the cost of living for rural workers declined. This was because falling prices of provisions,

<sup>17</sup> Wade Martins, S., and Williamson, T., 'Labour and improvement: agricultural change in East Anglia, circa 1750-1870', *Labour History Review*, 62 (1997), 275-295 (p.293).

<sup>18</sup> Peacock, A. J., *Bread or Blood: A Study of the Agrarian Riots in East Anglia in 1816*, (London, 1965), pp.43-4.

<sup>19</sup> Young, *General View... of Norfolk*, pp. 487-8; Strickland, H. E., *General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire*, (York, 1812), p.258.

<sup>20</sup> Hobsbawn and Rudé, *Captain Swing*. See also Muskett, P., 'The East Anglian agrarian riots of 1822', *Agricultural History Review*, 32 (1984), 1-13, which discusses an outbreak of rioting in the early 1820s.

<sup>21</sup> Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, p.9.

especially wheat, meant wages rose in real terms. Indeed, many farmers saw the rise in agricultural wages as a principle cause of depression: Henry Overman, giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Agricultural Interests in the early 1880s, argued that the cost of labour between 1872 and 1881 had risen by 5 shillings an acre, stating that labourers were the best off class in the countryside and 'lived in affluence'.<sup>22</sup>

As a quintessential corn growing arable region, the county of Norfolk is by no means under-represented in the literature on agricultural change, agrarian conditions and the rural workforce. Contemporary writers were in no doubt about the importance of the county and reports on Norfolk agriculture appeared frequently in the pages of current periodicals such as the Annals of Agriculture and the Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society.<sup>23</sup> Contemporary interest has been matched by twentieth-century historians, with a plethora of books, articles and pamphlets published on the region. Norfolk agriculture and the role of individual pioneering landlords have been extensively analysed by Naomi Riches, Wade Martins and R. A. C. Parker amongst others.<sup>24</sup> L. Marion Springall, Howkins and A. J. Peacock have concentrated on the rural workforce, agricultural disturbances and the growth of agricultural trade unionism in the county.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile the oral accounts of George Ewart Evans have broadened

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Wade Martins, Great Estate at Work, p.28.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Marshall, Rural Economy of Norfolk; Young, A., 'A week in Norfolk', Annals of Agriculture, 19 (1792), 441-499; Kent, General View...of Norfolk; Young, General View...of Norfolk; Bacon, R. N., The Report on the Agriculture of Norfolk (London, 1844); Almack, B., 'On the agriculture of Norfolk', Journal of the Agricultural Society, 5 (1845), 305-357; Sewell Read, C., 'Recent improvements in Norfolk farming', Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, 19 (1858), 265-311.

<sup>24</sup> Riches, Agricultural Revolution in Norfolk; Parker, 'Coke of Norfolk'; Parker, R. A. C., Coke of Norfolk: A Financial and Agricultural Study, 1707-1842 (Oxford, 1975); Plumb, J. H., 'Sir Robert Walpole and Norfolk husbandry', Economic History Review, 5 (1952), 86-89; Wade Martins, Great Estate at Work.

<sup>25</sup> Springall, L. M., Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages, 1834-1914, (London, 1936); Howkins, Poor Labouring Men; Peacock's, Bread or Blood and Hobsbawn and Rudé's Captain Swing both look at agricultural disturbances in the south-eastern counties as a whole but include much Norfolk material.

the historians knowledge of daily East Anglian life at the end of the last century.<sup>26</sup>

However, as with the literature on the East Riding, the position of women workers in rural Norfolk is continuously marginalised or overlooked. Whilst many texts acknowledge the existence of women in the agricultural workforce of Norfolk in the nineteenth century, their labour is still subject to gross generalisations. Women workers are repeatedly only considered in combination with children and few writers explore the wider socio-economic context of women's employment. Where female labour is discussed to any extent, it is largely in relation to the gang system, which formed a notorious aspect of Norfolk agriculture in the mid nineteenth century.

The conventional historiography of the female workforce in nineteenth-century rural Norfolk will be questioned in this chapter. It will begin with a reassessment of the debate on the gang system. The mid nineteenth century parliamentary reports have been extensively analysed for this purpose. This will be followed by a discussion of the position of women working in agriculture outside the gang system. Farm accounts again provide the best material for this aspect of women's employment patterns. Such evidence does not permit much insight into the daily life and working patterns of women inside and outside the home, and the work of casual agricultural day labourers dominates the discussion. However it will be argued that the informal economy of the period was central to women in Norfolk, and their additional means of 'making shift' will be considered alongside their work in the formal labour market.

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<sup>26</sup> There are numerous books published by George Ewart Evans but some of the most interesting include, Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay, (London, 1956); The Farm and the Village, (London, 1969); Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of the Oral Tradition, (London, 1970) and The Days We Have Seen, (London, 1975).

#### **4.2: Agricultural gangs: a reassessment**

Where female and child employment in nineteenth-century rural Norfolk is discussed in the literature, it is largely in relation to their role in agricultural gangs. Contemporary observers and official investigators were fascinated and mostly scandalised by this type of organised labour. The rector of South Acre echoed the opinion of many when he commented in 1843:

I have been resident in this parish forty years, and can, from my own personal knowledge, affirm that the gang-system has produced, and is still producing, on the rising generation, morally, physically and intellectually, immense evil.<sup>27</sup>

Later historians, reliant on the parliamentary reports of the nineteenth century for the bulk of their evidence, have also centred on the existence of ganging in Norfolk.<sup>28</sup> Few contentious issues have materialised from these accounts: the matter is seemingly a straightforward one of rise and fall over five decades of the mid Victorian period. The only point of debate has surrounded the role of the 'open' and 'close' parish system in generating and perpetuating the gang system in Norfolk. However, it is possible that by concentrating almost exclusively on ganging, previous writers on nineteenth-century Norfolk may have distorted and exaggerated the role played by women in the agricultural labour force at that time.<sup>29</sup> It will be argued that a close reading of the

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<sup>27</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.277

<sup>28</sup> See for example, Pinchbeck, I., Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850, 2nd edn (London, 1981), pp.86-90; Kitteringham, J., 'Country work girls in nineteenth-century England', in Samuel, R., ed., Village Life and Labour (London, 1975), pp.73-138 (pp.98-112); Springall, Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages, pp.42-45.

<sup>29</sup> Writers on Norfolk have suggested that women's role in agricultural gangs in the county was widespread. Springall for example argues, 'There was regular work in the fields too, especially in west Norfolk. Women hoed, weeded, picked stones, singled, pulled and cleaned roots, and even helped with the threshing machine'. Springall, Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages, p.63. Howkins also suggests women's role was widespread: 'It was in eastern England, in the great wheatlands, especially Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire, that the casual employment of women seems to have been both most widespread and organised'. Howkins, A., Reshaping Rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925, (London, 1991), p.106. Ewart Evans also writes with regard to the position of the nineteenth-century labourer, '...his wife and children were forced to work in the fields to get enough money to keep the family

official nineteenth-century reports indicates that the gang system in Norfolk was very regionally specific, and inextricably linked to both local farming patterns and the chronology of Victorian agriculture, as well as individual parish systems of land ownership.

The public gang system originated in the Norfolk parish of Castle Acre in the mid 1820s.<sup>30</sup> It was a system of subcontracting whereby a farmer with a particular piece of work to be done which demanded a number of hands, would contract a gangmaster at a sum to carry out the work. The gangmaster would then employ sufficient numbers of women and children to do the work at a daily rate. Private gangs, defined in 1867 as 'a group of children, young persons and women in a farmer's own employ, and superintended by one of his own labourers', existed alongside the public gang system, although it was the latter which aroused most contention in the mid nineteenth century and against which legislation was directed.<sup>31</sup> Numbers employed in public gangs typically totalled around twenty, whilst private companies tended to be smaller.<sup>32</sup> Standard jobs performed by gangs varied according to the season but consisted principally of weeding corn and other crops, picking couch grass, singling turnips, setting potatoes, picking stones and topping and tailing root crops such as turnips and mangolds. Hours of work were generally 8am until 5pm, with one hour for dinner, although working days were shorter in winter. Bands of workers travelled to their work

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together. The system whereby women and children worked on the land in poorly paid gangs was widespread'. Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, p.114.

<sup>30</sup> John Todd, overseer of a gang, stated in the 1843 Royal Commission that the system had been running for seventeen years. PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.276. That date - 1826 - is the one Pinchbeck uses in her analysis. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, p.87.

<sup>31</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. Report by Rev. James Fraser, M. A., on Norfolk, Essex, Sussex, Gloucester and parts of Suffolk, p.11.

<sup>32</sup> The term 'company' was used interchangeably with 'gang' by contemporaries.



on foot, often covering distances of up to eight miles each way. Occasionally the farmer would provide a cart for excessive distances or gangs would stay overnight in a barn, although both were exceptional practices. Women commonly received 8d. or 9d. a day, children 3d. or 4d. in the mid nineteenth century; workers thus obtained day wages on piecework tasks, foregoing the increased profits usually associated with the latter.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, if bad weather curtailed the day's work, labourers were not paid for their time. Thus employers benefited from the system by getting work completed quickly and cheaply, paying female and child rates for piecework. The necessary labour for any crop was obtainable the moment it was required and could be dispensed with once the operation was concluded. The gangmaster was responsible for the work and behaviour of the gang, freeing the farmer from supervisory tasks. The gangmaster benefited from the system by being elevated to the position of overseer and received financial rewards. Often depicted by contemporaries as brutal and tyrannical men of little refinement, gangmasters took as much as a third of the wages of those in his gang. According to the Diocesan Inspector of Schools for Norwich, this could total as much as 15s. to 20s. a week on a gang of 15 to 20 people in the 1860s.<sup>34</sup> They also made profits by selling provisions to gang members.<sup>35</sup> The system was seen as being particularly disadvantageous to those employed under it although, as Denison noted in 1843, often this was the only form of employment available to rural women and children in Norfolk. 'In the present state of Castle Acre', he wrote, 'were it not for the gang-system

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<sup>33</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.276.

<sup>34</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, pp.83-5. Joseph Arch described the gangmaster as 'a rough bullying fellow, who could bluster and swear and threaten and knock the youngsters about and brow-beat the women, but who was nothing of a workman himself...'. Arch, J., Joseph Arch. The Story of His Life, (London, 1898), pp.249-250.

<sup>35</sup> Mrs Sculfer, giving evidence to the 1843 Royal Commission argued that the gangmaster in her parish 'keeps a flour shop, and forces all his gang to deal with him'. PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.275.

many persons would be out of work altogether, who are now enabled by great toil to earn some sort of livelihood'.<sup>36</sup>

Attention was first drawn to the existence of the gang system in 1843 when the Royal Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture reported. Although by that time the system was in its infancy the Commissioner, Denison, found it almost universally condemned in consequence of its injurious influences, both moral and physical. He attributed most of the problems associated with Castle Acre '*in the first instance* to the peculiar circumstances of that parish'.<sup>37</sup> Castle Acre, he argued, was an 'open' parish, in the hands of a considerable number of proprietors, while surrounding parishes were dominated by one or two landowners who restricted cottage building in their villages to control settlements and keep the poor rates low. People were forced to reside in Castle Acre in poor quality housing charged at exorbitant rents by speculative landlords and, as a consequence, the village became 'overstocked with inhabitants that do not properly belong to it' whilst adjoining parishes did not accommodate enough residents to cultivate the soil.<sup>38</sup> He quoted supporting evidence from local landowners, farmers and overseers, one of whom famously described the parish as 'the coop of all the scrapings in the county'.<sup>39</sup> Denison contended that the solution to the evils existing in Castle Acre would not be resolved by simply abolishing the gang system, but lay in the hands of neighbouring landowners who should be made responsible for their residents well-being. As Karen Sayer notes, the Commissioner's opinions were informed very much through the middle class

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<sup>36</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, pp.223-4.

<sup>37</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.221.

<sup>38</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.221.

<sup>39</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.276.

construction of the rural idyll, in which the closed village, with its paternalistic landowner and deferential social relations, should form the ideal model of an organic community.<sup>40</sup> Denison explains:

If those 103 stranger families, who now swell the amount of crime and misery at Castle Acre, were living in their own parishes, subject to the control of their landlords, aided by their care and kindness, guided by their example benefited by that chance contact with persons of birth, education, and station, which directly tends to civilise...Castle Acre would not be reproached...its own native population would be uncontaminated by the refuge of other parishes; the gang system would necessarily cease and Castle Acre would no longer be what it now is, the most miserable rural parish I ever saw.<sup>41</sup>

The contention that the 'open' and 'close' parish system created and perpetuated the gang system in Norfolk pervades later Royal Commissions. The summary report of the Children's Employment Commission argues, 'It is the direct result...of the pulling down of cottages in what are termed "close" parishes to avoid poor rates, and thereby driving the agricultural population off the land and into distant villages and towns...'<sup>42</sup>, and James Fraser, who reported on Norfolk in 1867, uses the categories as a model of analysis throughout his report.<sup>43</sup> Historians such as Pinchbeck and Pamela Horn have drawn extensively on the argument.<sup>44</sup> More recently however, Sarah Banks has questioned this model for understanding nineteenth-century rural society and contends that the 'open' and 'close' parish issue should 'properly be regarded as a scandal

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<sup>40</sup> Sayer, K., Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century, (Manchester, 1995), p.38.

<sup>41</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.226.

<sup>42</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission. Summary report by H. S. Tremenheere and E. C. Tufnell, p.xxi.

<sup>43</sup> Fraser writes, 'It is impossible to exaggerate the ill-effects of such a state of things in every aspect - physical, social, economical, moral, intellectual...Socially nothing can be more wretched than the condition of "open" parishes like Docking in Norfolk, and South Cerney in Gloucestershire', PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.95.

<sup>44</sup> Pinchbeck, Women Workers, p.87; Horn, P., Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside, (London, 1976), p.13.

exaggerated by advocates of settlement law reform'.<sup>45</sup> This puts the history of ganging in Norfolk into interesting perspective. Banks shows, using the 1851 census return, that the rapid growth in Castle Acre's population in the first half of the nineteenth century was caused less by an influx of people from neighbouring parishes, but more by the low levels of out-migration from the parish, where people had opportunities to work in local trades and crafts, as well as agriculture. Furthermore, in none of the surrounding parishes did the population decline in the first decades of the century, but as husbandry tasks became more intensive - coupled with a ready supply of cheap labour - farmers were encouraged to employ more labourers generally, whether from their own or other parishes. Castle Acre, even in times of greatest demand, did have an excess of labour power which neighbouring parishes relied and drew upon.<sup>46</sup>

Farmers, landowners and other experts interviewed by Denison in 1843 often highlight the role improved agricultural techniques played in encouraging the growth of ganging in Norfolk. Turnip cultivation was mentioned most often as a causal link.<sup>47</sup>

John Hudson, a farmer of some 1300 acres in Castle Acre, illustrates this process:

When I first resided here, the gang-system was not known; the work now done by them was performed by women, or rather it was left undone. But from one or two farmers cultivating their lands in a superior manner, getting their farms perfectly clean and free from weeds; many others have been induced to follow their example and employ more hands; and where there used to be 1/ expended in the cultivation of the land 20 years since, there are now 5/ expended for the same.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Banks, S., 'Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model?: a new look at "open" and "close" parishes', *Economic History Review*, 61 (1988), 51-73 (p.51).

<sup>46</sup> Banks, 'Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model?', pp.68-70.

<sup>47</sup> See for example evidence given by B. Francis of Litcham, PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.277, and A. Hammond of West Acre, PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.280. In 1854 turnips made up 87% of root crops in the Freebridge Union where Castle Acre was situated. Wade Martins, *Great Estate at Work*, p.265.

<sup>48</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.274. John Hudson of Castle Acre was one of the most celebrated farmers of the region in the mid nineteenth century and also provided much information to Barugh Almack in the mid century report on the agriculture of Norfolk.

Over the next twenty years, as more land was brought under cultivation during the mid Victorian agricultural boom, seasonal demands for extra labour rose, fuelling the persistence of ganging.<sup>49</sup> Thus, although the gang system was condemned in the 1843 Report it continued unrestricted, proving economically viable to farmers who needed the hands to cultivate the land and also to labouring families who required the extra income to enable them to live above subsistence levels. This was recognised by Thomas Hudson, son of John, who gave evidence in the 1860s:

The work done by them is of great importance, both to the support of their families, and to the land. There are no manufactories here, and consequently a poor man with barely sufficient earnings for himself and wife could not possibly maintain a family of four or five grown-up daughters, and the work performed by the women and girls could not, or at any rate would not in fact, ever be done by men. I do not see any other way in which their work, e.g., weeding etc., could be done.<sup>50</sup>

In this statement Hudson resolutely dismisses the claim often levelled at agricultural gangs, that male labour was displaced in favour of cheap female and child workers.<sup>51</sup>

Much of the work performed by gangs - weeding, stone picking, topping and tailing root crops - was traditionally executed by women and children and sex-typed as 'women's work'. Moreover, as Anne Digby has shown in her analysis of parishes surrounding

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<sup>49</sup> S. Hudson of Stow Bardolph told the Children's Employment Commission for example, 'Gangs are commonly employed about here, and have been more or less for the last 30 years, but more of late, owing probably to improvements in the system of farming, which have been very great: tidy farmers will not be seen to grow weeds now'. PP, 1867, XVI, Evidence on agricultural gangs collected by Mr. J. E. White, pp.95-6. The census returns for Norfolk also show a peak of female activity in agriculture in 1861 (when 3,258 women were recorded as agricultural labourers, or 6% of the total number of agricultural labourers in the county). Anne Digby also makes the link between improved cultivation and the growth of ganging in Norfolk. Digby, A., *Pauper Palaces*, (London, 1978), p.121.

<sup>50</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Evidence on gangs, p.90.

<sup>51</sup> The summary report of the Children's Employment Commission stated, 'It is averred that under the present system, by which the labour of children and women is so largely employed, the price of many kinds of work which is ordinarily done by adult male labourers is much reduced, and such labourers are out of employment for several weeks, or even months, while their wives and children are doing their work'. PP, 1867, XVI, Summary report, p.xx.

Castle Acre, a displacement of resident male labour engaged in regular employment would have been prohibitively expensive in poor relief and did not occur.<sup>52</sup>

Sayer argues that by '1865 public concern about ganging had grown so great' that Lord Shaftesbury directed the existing Children's Employment Commission to investigate the work of children in organised public gangs in eastern counties.<sup>53</sup> It is however, hard to find evidence for a large-scale public outcry over ganging. Sayer quotes evidence from the 1863 Sixth Report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council, which focused on women's labour in ganging districts as a cause of infant deaths. This was unlikely to have reached such a wide audience as to spark widespread concern. Few agricultural writers of the mid nineteenth century mention ganging in their accounts, and there is no evidence that the existence of gangs induced any sort of debate between farmers and agriculturists in the pages of contemporary journals and pamphlets.<sup>54</sup> However, as was shown in chapter two, the publication of the Children's Employment Commission in 1867 was a watershed in the public perception of ganging and induced sensational reporting.<sup>55</sup> The summary report of the Commission set down recommendations regarding the regulation of gangs, most of which were enacted in the Gangs Act of 1867. This act, according to Sayer, 'had a concrete effect on many women and children employed in agriculture'.<sup>56</sup> Under it the employment of children under

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<sup>52</sup> Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, p.121.

<sup>53</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p.72.

<sup>54</sup> None of the mid nineteenth-century writers on Norfolk - Bacon, Sewell Read, Almack and so on - make any mention of gangs in their reports.

<sup>55</sup> An anonymous correspondent wrote, 'The report is one of the most painful which it has been our duty to pursue, for it proves to distraction that the social evils which were long supposed to be peculiar to manufactures exist in an even more aggravated form in connection with the cultivation of the soil. Great numbers of children, young persons and women are, it appears, employed in companies or "gangs" in certain counties which have acquired an odious notoriety for one of the most flagrant abuses which has ever disgraced a civilised land'. Anon, 'Agricultural gangs', *Quarterly Review*, 123 (1867), 173-190 (p.174).

<sup>56</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p.68.

eight years of age in gangs was prohibited; a system of licensing for gang masters was instigated; female gangs now had to be overseen by a woman licensed to act as a gangmaster, and distances children were allowed to travel were regulated.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the government appointed the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, to investigate the issue on a nationwide footing. It is from these two reports that the most complete evidence on the nature and extent of ganging in mid nineteenth-century Norfolk is found.

Mr. White, instructed to investigate gangs by the Children's Employment Commission, estimated the number employed in public gangs in Norfolk in the 1860s to be 956, going out of 26 parishes.<sup>58</sup> Detailed returns from 16 of these parishes offered more information on the age and sex of those employed: 60% were female, of whom a third were aged between 7 and 13 years, 27% were between the ages of 13 and 18, and just over 40% were 18 years old and above. Of these women over 18, the majority were married (71%). The bulk of males employed were boys aged between 7 and 18 (88%), with only 36 adult men over 18 working in gangs. Only two children under 7 years of age were recorded.<sup>59</sup> It is virtually impossible to place these estimates into context as no other figures from Norfolk - either earlier or later - exist to use in a comparative exercise. However if White's figure of 956 people working in gangs in the 1860s remained stable over the course of the decade, then only 12% of women recorded as

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<sup>57</sup> Recommendations by the commissioners to the Children's Employment Commission not enshrined in this legislation were the exclusion of females, partial or entire; regulating hours; regulating females working in wet corn; a register of those employed and a recommendation of some schooling of children by the gangmaster. PP, 1867, XVI, Summary report, pp.xv-xviii.

<sup>58</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Summary report, p.ix. It is impossible to know how accurate this figure is. A circular was distributed by commissioners 'to all classes of persons likely to be able to afford useful and trustworthy information' (p.viii). At best they are only an estimate of the number employed in public gangs and the summary report recognised that the figures would be 'subject to considerable variations at different periods of the year' (p.ix).

<sup>59</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Summary report, pp.x-xi.

agricultural labourers in the 1871 census returns for Norfolk, would have been employed in gang labour.<sup>60</sup> This suggests that very few members of public gangs were adult women and may have important implications for the contemporary arguments which linked women, especially married women going out into gang work, to the decline of family life. Rev. Beckett gave evidence to the 1867 Children's Employment Commission and expressed comments that were typical of his contemporaries. He believed that married women,

Being employed from 8 in the morning till 5 in the evening they return home tired and wearied, and unwilling to make any further exertion to render the cottage comfortable. When the husband returns he finds everything uncomfortable, the cottage dirty, no meal prepared, the children tiresome and quarrelsome, the wife slatternly and cross, and his home so unpleasant to him that he not rarely betakes himself to the public house, and eventually becomes a drunkard. The wife becomes indifferent about her personal appearance, neglectful of her domestic duties, and careless of her children. Those who visit the cottages of the labouring poor will invariably find misery and discomfort in those homes where the wife is employed in field labour, as compared with those where the wife stays at home and attends to her domestic duties.<sup>61</sup>

Women's own attitudes towards gang work reveal a rather different ideology. This shows the extent to which most labouring women viewed working in gangs as an economic necessity entered into because there were few alternative opportunities to gain paid employment in the area. The sense that it was only absolute necessity which forced labouring families to send their children into gangs prevails. Harriet Bell stated:

I have three girls at gang work, aged 15, 13, and 11...I always go out with my girls when I am able, so as to look after them a bit...I would sooner that they were at anything else, and it went very much against me to put them out, but as my children are all girls bar one I cannot

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<sup>60</sup> In 1871, 1860 Norfolk women were recorded as agricultural labourers in the census. Here I have taken 60% of the 956 figure to have been female and 40% of these to have been women over 18.

<sup>61</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Evidence on gangs, p.85.



get any other work for them.<sup>62</sup>

Elizabeth Havers spoke in similar terms:

I call it no better than negro driving or slavery, and can't think it anything better...Still poor people must work to get a living, and I cannot see how a poor man with children could do if they were not allowed to work too.<sup>63</sup>

It has been possible to establish from the available evidence that the participation of women in agricultural gangs in mid nineteenth-century Norfolk was probably much smaller than some historians have suggested. Looking at evidence contained in Fraser's report for the 1867-1870 Royal Commission, this may be further substantiated. Fraser collected evidence from four Poor Law Unions in Norfolk which 'might be considered typical'.<sup>64</sup> These were St. Faith's in central Norfolk; Depwade, bordering Suffolk to the east; Docketing in the north and Swaffham, in the western division of the county. In the evidence attached to his report, covering in total 127 parishes, only 9 mention the existence of public gangs within their borders. Only in Swaffham, the most purely agricultural region, was the gang system found to prevail extensively, 'and is still most deeply rooted'.<sup>65</sup> Five parishes in this union mentioned the existence of public gangs - Ashill, Saham Toney, Great Cressingham, Gooderstone and Swaffham. The return from Ashill stated, 'There are three or four public gangs in the parish constantly employed throughout the year'.<sup>66</sup> In Docketing union, a district of large farms, sparse population settlements and light lands - factors which perpetuated the existence of gangs in the Swaffham area - Fraser writes, 'The gang system exists, but to a smaller extent than

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<sup>62</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Evidence on gangs, p.92.

<sup>63</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Evidence on gangs, p.92.

<sup>64</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.4.

<sup>65</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.7.

<sup>66</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p.59.

might have been expected under the circumstances'.<sup>67</sup> In the Depwade region, the system was reported to be dying out. At Stratton St. Michael a gang was reported to be occasionally utilised but, 'the system is dying out in this neighbourhood; 30 years ago several farmers used it; at present only one farmer employs a gang'.<sup>68</sup> The gang reported at Pulham Magdalene in this region was said to consist entirely of boys.<sup>69</sup> On a number of occasions, replies insisted that residents of this region would not understand the meaning of the term gang.<sup>70</sup> At Haverland and Weston in St. Faith's union, a gang of around 20 was employed due to the deficiency of labourers resident in the villages, but no others were declared. Thus by the late 1860s, the existence of ganging was very regionally based in the western portions of the county around Swaffham and a sense of decline pervades the parochial replies from across Norfolk. By this time, employment in agricultural gangs was an option open to only a very limited number of women where the successful cultivation of the land still required some system of organised labour.<sup>71</sup>

It was recognised in the Children's Employment Commission that the number of women and children employed in private gangs in Norfolk was greatly in excess of those employed in public ones.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, it was reported that one effect of the Gangs Act was to induce farmers to substantially increase the use of the former, avoiding the restrictive regulations set out in 1867. An idea of how these companies of workers operated can be gleaned from some farm accounts. At Gaywood Hall farm in the early

<sup>67</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p. 43.

<sup>69</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> At Bunwell and Carleton Rode, 'There are no gangs employed in either parish; many people would not know what the system means', PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p. 47; and at Drayton, 'A gang has never been heard of in the parish', PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p. 31.

<sup>71</sup> Of course the pattern of parochial replies in Fraser's report may skew the results. Only 127 parishes replied out of a total of 740 parishes in the 1860s. However, I would argue that the overall pattern is still generally applicable.

<sup>72</sup> PP, 1867, XVI, Summary report, p. xxiii.

1830s for example, it seems that female day labourers often acted as informal gang leaders for some piece-work operations. 'Mrs Laws and Co.', 'Mrs Rasen and Co.' and 'Mrs Smith and Co.' were engaged in much hoeing and weeding from April to December in this manner. In 1831 typical entries read, 'May 1, Mrs Rasen and Co wheat hoeing 13a. @ 3/6, £1. 8s. 0d.'; June 5, 'Mrs Laws and Co 6a. oats hoeing @ 4/6 second time £1. 7s. 0d.'; October 9, 'Mrs Rasen and Co 10a. weeding at 1s. 10s'.<sup>73</sup> However, once more, Fraser found little evidence for their widespread existence by the 1860s in Norfolk: only 7 parochial returns acknowledged the existence of private gangs and these were on a very limited scale, with only the largest farms finding continuous employment for them.<sup>74</sup>

Gangs seem to have been entrenched in the local system of agriculture in the Swaffham area right up to the end of the nineteenth century. By the 1890s, gangs of boys and women were still reported to exist at Swaffham, Castle Acre, Saham Toney, Ashill, Cressingham and Munford, being economically attractive to both large farmers and labouring families at this time.<sup>75</sup> The scale of these is likely to have been small however, if the example of Lodge Farm, Castle Acre is representative. Farm accounts from the mid 1890s show the persistence of gang labour on this farm, although by 1897-8 only 3% of annual labour expenditure went on gangs. This was spread fairly evenly over the agricultural year, although gangs were not employed at harvest.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO), BL Xllk/12 Gaywood Hall accounts, August 1829-October 1832.

<sup>74</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Fraser, p.11.

<sup>75</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer. Report by Mr. A. Wilson Fox on the Poor Law Union of Swaffham, p.67; Mr. Perkins, a gangmaster at Swaffham, stated in 1892, 'I believe if there was not a woman's gang there would be some families here without anything to support them. I mean in such cases where a man has died and left a widow and children, or where the husband is sickly and families are large or where young women are unfit for service', PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilson Fox, p.86.

<sup>76</sup> NRO, BR 111/29, Farming records of the Everington family. Farm accounts, Lodge farm, Castle Acre, October 1897-October 1898.

Unfortunately, the accounts do not record the sex of those employed in gangs, so it is impossible to calculate the numbers of women involved by this date. The persistence of ganging on this farm into the late nineteenth century was certainly exceptional however. Elsewhere the system - where it existed at all - became redundant from the 1870s as farmers began to abandon cleaning operations in response to the agricultural depression. Whilst it is clear that gangs did exist in mid nineteenth century Norfolk and were important to the cultivation of large farms in some instances, the system became a cause célèbre in the mid century and its existence - both in terms of the areas where it was adopted and the numbers employed under it - has been exaggerated ever since. Ganging in fact represented an employment opportunity to only a small proportion of adult women in rural Norfolk and the controversy it aroused appears to have been significantly disproportionate to its extent. The next section will investigate whether women found more scope to earn money in agricultural work outside the gang system.

#### **4.3: Day labourers in agriculture: the sexual division of work and wages**

As spinning declined at the beginning of the nineteenth century, opportunities for women to work in the wage economy of Norfolk were mostly restricted to agriculture. The collapse of service in husbandry in the county meant children did not leave home at an early age as in the East Riding, but were forced to enter paid agricultural work to help supplement meagre family incomes. Outside the ganging districts, women and children were employed on Norfolk farms if and when needed, on delegated tasks, as a complement to male day labourers. Thus, there was not the absolute distinction between married and single workers that existed in East Yorkshire, but women and children of all ages were found toiling in the fields alongside men. Indeed, it was this aspect of

agricultural work in Norfolk - the mixing of ages and sexes - that most outraged mid Victorian investigators. The organisation of work on a farm depended upon its size and type, although rural workers in nineteenth-century Norfolk were not an undifferentiated group of labourers.<sup>77</sup> The most skilled arable workers - the teammen - looked after the horses. Equal to these were the stockmen, who looked after other animals, although there were secondary in Norfolk agriculture where animal husbandry was less important than crop cultivation. Labourers - by far the largest group - were subdivided on the basis of their age and skill. Only a minority of male labourers found year-round employment on the same farm in the first half of the nineteenth century. Women stood at the bottom of this hierarchy, forming a pool of casual labour feeding the capitalist farming system at certain points in the agricultural year, and especially susceptible to long periods of under-employment and changes in the farming structure as a whole.

Unsurprisingly for a county so dominated by agriculture in the nineteenth century, surviving farm accounts from Norfolk are relatively plentiful. Twenty of these accounts have been located and analysed, although the information they record on female labour varies significantly. Table 4.1 is a summary of days worked and wages received by day labourers on 20 Norfolk farms where information for this exercise could be obtained.<sup>78</sup> Of the eleven years where data on days worked was available, women on average carried out 10% of total days worked, men 67% and children 24%. For overall labour payments, women on average made up 5% of yearly farm expenditure, men 83% and children 5%. Task work payments accounted for 6% of expenditure and unknown

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<sup>77</sup> See Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, pp.19-20.

<sup>78</sup> The decline of service in husbandry in the first half of the nineteenth century in Norfolk means that the amount spent on day labour was likely to have been the total annual expenditure on labour on these Norfolk farms. It is possible that servants were still employed on some of these farms but no accounts record servant wages in their pages.

**Table 4.1: Percentage of days worked and payments made to female, male and child workers on Norfolk farms**

Farm	Year	% Days Women	% Days Men	% Days Child	% Pay Women	% Pay Men	% Pay Child	% Pay Task	% Pay unknown
Earsham Home farm	1807	25%	57%	18%	14%	71%	6%	6%	3%
	1827	15%	57%	28%	10%	70%	5%	14%	1%
	1837	10%	63%	27%	7%	78%	7%	7%	1%
Church farm, Great Witchingham	1827	n/a	n/a	n/a	6%	87%	6%	0%	1%
Stody Hall farm	1828	13%	70%	17%	5%	63%	3%	29%	0%
Felbrigg	1835	n/a	n/a	n/a	2%	90%	3%	5%	0%
	1844	4%	51%	45%	2%	66%	22%	10%	0%
Ketteringham	1845-46	n/a	n/a	n/a	8%	64%	10%	18%	0%
Flitcham Hall farm	1851	n/a	n/a	n/a	10%	71%	8%	11%	0%
	1872	n/a	n/a	n/a	6%	84%	5%	5%	0%
Bessingham	1852	n/a	n/a	n/a	1%	91%	3%	5%	0%
Costessey	1853	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	95%	2%	0%	0%
Wereham	1856	n/a	n/a	n/a	15%	79%	0%	6%	0%
Ludham	1861	n/a	n/a	n/a	5%	80%	10%	2%	3%
Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter	1861	12%	62%	26%	4%	75%	8%	13%	0%
	1871	7%	70%	23%	4%	81%	7%	8%	0%
	1881	2%	77%	21%	2%	85%	8%	5%	0%
	1891	1%	79%	20%	1%	86%	7%	6%	0%
Wacton	1864-65	n/a	n/a	n/a	2%	98%	0%	0%	0%
Wood farm, Runhall	1864-65	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	78%	7%	12%	0%
Tuttingham	1873	n/a	n/a	n/a	2%	77%	13%	0%	8%
Hindringham	1875	5%	72%	23%	3%	85%	8%	4%	0%
House farm, Ingham	1880	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	94%	2%	0%	1%
Winfarthing	1881	17%	83%	0%	7%	93%	0%	0%	0%
	1891	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	96%	0%	1%	0%
Barnham Broom	1883	n/a	n/a	n/a	6%	79%	6%	9%	0%
Eastfield farm, Hicking	1895-96	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	89%	1%	0%	7%
Lodge farm, Castle Acre	1897-98	n/a	n/a	n/a	2%	94%	1%	0%	3%

\* Unknown payments are those not assigned to any specific person or gender in the ledgers.

N/A indicates data was not recorded in the accounts.

Sources: NRO, MEA 3/27-51; NRO, MC 561/47; NRO, MC 3/89,400x; NRO, WKC 5/248-255,400x; NRO, Accession 15.3.1972; University of Reading Library (hereafter URL), NORF P429/1-4; Private collection of R. Fiske, Spurrell records; NRO, BR 126/3; URL, NORF, 11/4/1; NRO, MC 527/71-74; URL, NORF 9.1/1-75; NRO, BR 134/1; URL, NORF 10/1/1; NRO, MC 825/1, 797x1; NRO, MF 3/1; URL, NORF 3.3/1; NRO MC 299/28; NRO, Accession 4.7.1966; NRO, BR 108/58; NRO, BR 111/29. For full references for all farms see the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

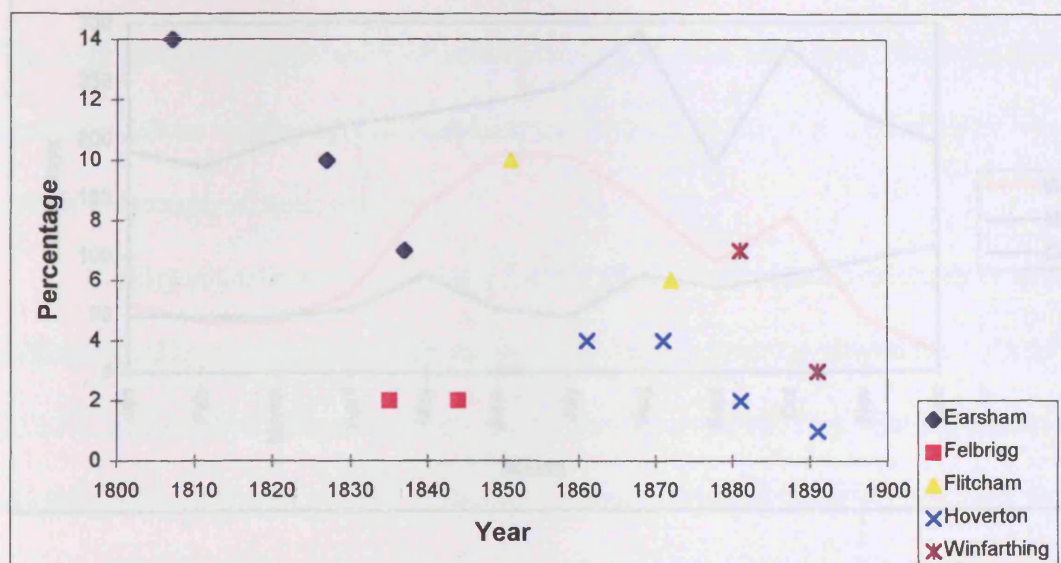
payments account for 1%. These average figures for the nineteenth century are interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly it would seem that women's labour was utilised to a much lesser extent than children's in Norfolk. Secondly, these figures present a contrast to the East Riding where women workers made up 10% of labour payments on average across the century, men 67%, children 5% and task work 18%. Women also carried out double the number of days worked on average in the East Riding - 22% - whilst men accounted for 66% and children 12%. (See Table 3.1, p.147 for East Riding figures). Thirdly, the main trend emerging from these Norfolk figures is decline. On the farms where a run of figures exist - Earsham, Winfarthing, Hoverton St. Peter and Flitcham - the data suggests a decline in women's participation both in terms of days worked and payments received. Fig 4.1 shows clearly this trend in terms of labour payments on these farms. Only at Felbrigg does the percentage of payments made to women remain stable between 1835 and 1844, although at just 2%, this indicates their labour was not central on this farm. How are these general observations borne out in individual cases?

The first investigation of labour trends is from Earsham Home farm in the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>79</sup> In the first year of analysis, 1807, women's employment is fairly substantial: out of a total of 4646 days worked across the year by

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<sup>79</sup> NRO, MEA 3/27-51, Farm accounts of Meade of Earsham, 1807-1838. The years 1807, 1827 and 1837 were chosen as random samples from the accounts. During the 1810s the surviving accounts are very sketchy and could not be transcribed effectively. Earsham is situated on the Suffolk border, one mile from Bungay. Dominant crops in the parish were wheat, barley and beans.

**Fig 4.1: Annual labour payments to women day labourers  
on selected Norfolk farms**



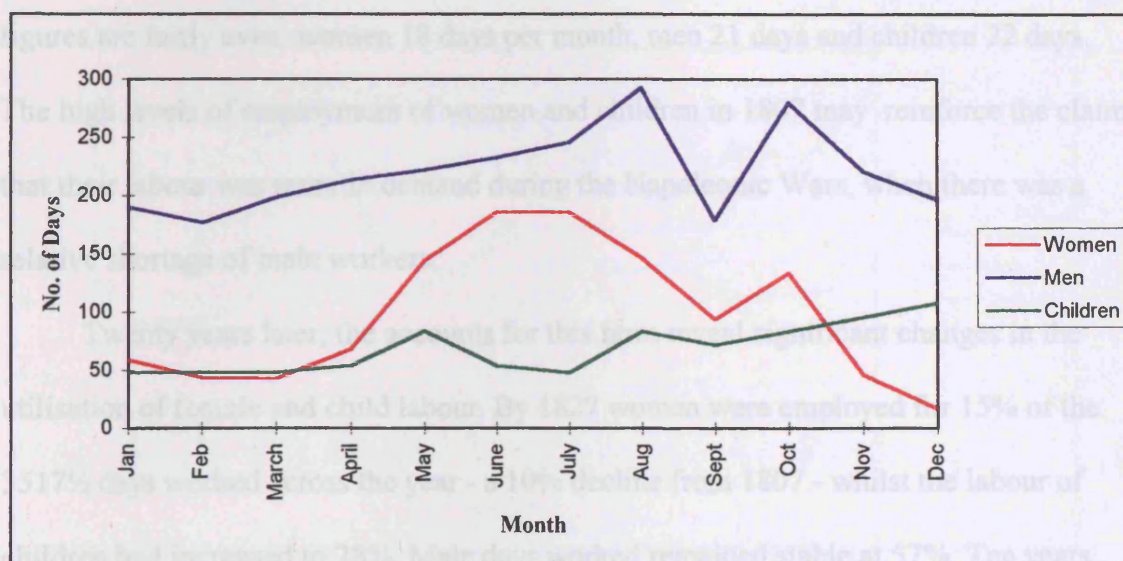
Sources: NRO, MEA 3/27-51; WKC 5/248-255,400x; URL, NORF P429/1-4; NORF 9.1/1-75; NRO MC 299/28

all labourers, 25% can be attributed to women, 18% to children and 57% to men.

Women therefore carried out a quarter of all days worked on this farm. **Fig 4.2** shows that women's labour was most in demand in springtime for weeding and hoeing tasks, in July for haymaking and to a slightly lesser extent in the corn harvest. Of these women a number were employed nearly all year round: Cress Read worked 238 $\frac{3}{4}$  days,



**Fig 4.2: Days worked by male, female and child labourers,  
Earsham Home farm, 1807**



Source: NRO MEA 3/27.

earning over £8 for the year; Mary Cooper worked 166½ days, earning £5. 13s; Letty Read worked 215½ days, earning over £7 and Sarah Kerry worked 212 days for which she received £7. 3s. 4d. Other women were employed more casually between May and October. Children's employment remained fairly constant across the year: in fact two older 'lads' worked year round tending cattle and assisting with the horses. A number of younger boys worked on seasonal tasks such as crow scaring and cleaning the farmyard, particularly in the winter months.<sup>80</sup> There is little evidence of the employment of female

<sup>80</sup> Ewart Evans describes succinctly the division between 'boys' and 'lads' in the nineteenth century. 'What was the difference between a boy and a lad?', he writes, 'It can be seen from the contract that the lad got more money than the boys: he was, in fact, older and would not be called a lad until he had left school. While he was still at school he was a boy...a boy left school when he was between ten and twelve years of age. From that time until he was seventeen or eighteen he would be called a lad'. Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, p.89.

children on this farm. A calculation of the average number of days per month an individual male, female and child worker could expect to be employed shows the figures are fairly even: women 18 days per month, men 21 days and children 22 days. The high levels of employment of women and children in 1807 may reinforce the claim that their labour was more in demand during the Napoleonic Wars, when there was a relative shortage of male workers.

Twenty years later, the accounts for this farm reveal significant changes in the utilisation of female and child labour. By 1827 women were employed for 15% of the 3517½ days worked across the year - a 10% decline from 1807 - whilst the labour of children had increased to 28%. Male days worked remained stable at 57%. Ten years later in 1837, women's labour had declined further still to 10% of days worked, whilst men worked 63% and children 27%. By the 1820s and 1830s, women's labour had become increasingly seasonal. This is shown clearly in Fig 4.3. By 1837 women workers were employed only during the months May to August, for weeding, stone picking, haymaking and for a few days in corn harvest. This evidence seems to reinforce Keith Snell's theory that increased sexual specialisation took place in agricultural operations on farms in south-eastern England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>81</sup> By 1837 women worked on average 13 days a month when employed at Earsham. Men were employed for 19 days a month on average and children for 21 days. Again, the consistent employment of a number of older lads

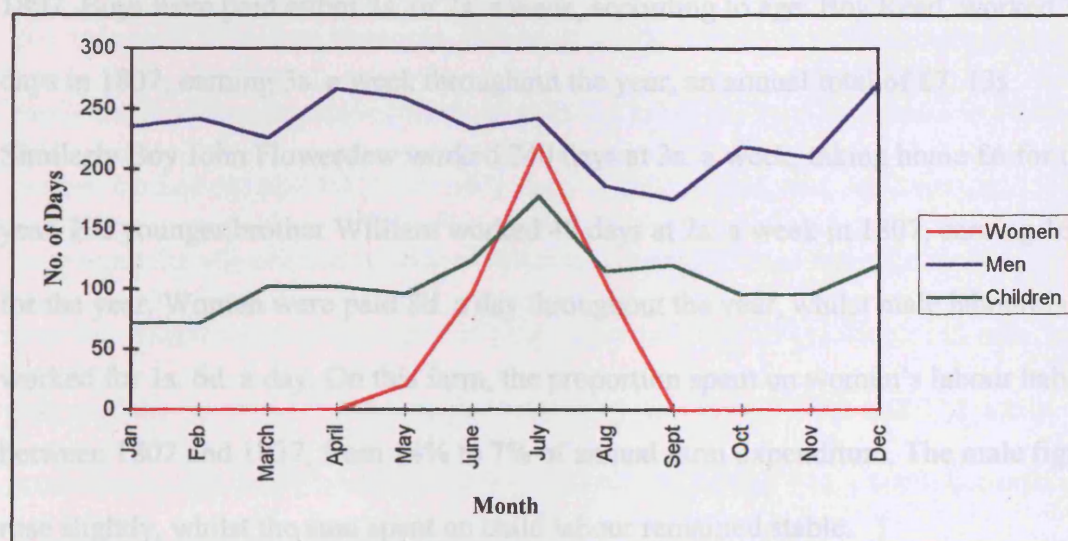
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<sup>81</sup> Snell, K. D. M., *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900*, (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 1. A. Hassell-Smith, in his analysis of the accounts of Nathaniel Bacon at Stiffkey, shows that a sexual division of labour existed on Norfolk farms in the late sixteenth century. Women were principally employed at weeding, haymaking, and shearing and tying wheat in harvest. Men ploughed, harrowed, threshed, carted hay and corn, dug ditches and cut hedges. So although sexual segregation on Norfolk farms was not new, it was strengthened in the early nineteenth century as the increasingly seasonal employment of women at Earsham shows. Hassell-Smith, A., 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk [Part 1]', *Continuity and Change*, 4 (1989), 11-52 (pp.28-29).



**Fig 4.3: Days worked by male, female and child labourers,**

**Earsham Home farm, 1837**



Source: NRO, MEA 3/51.

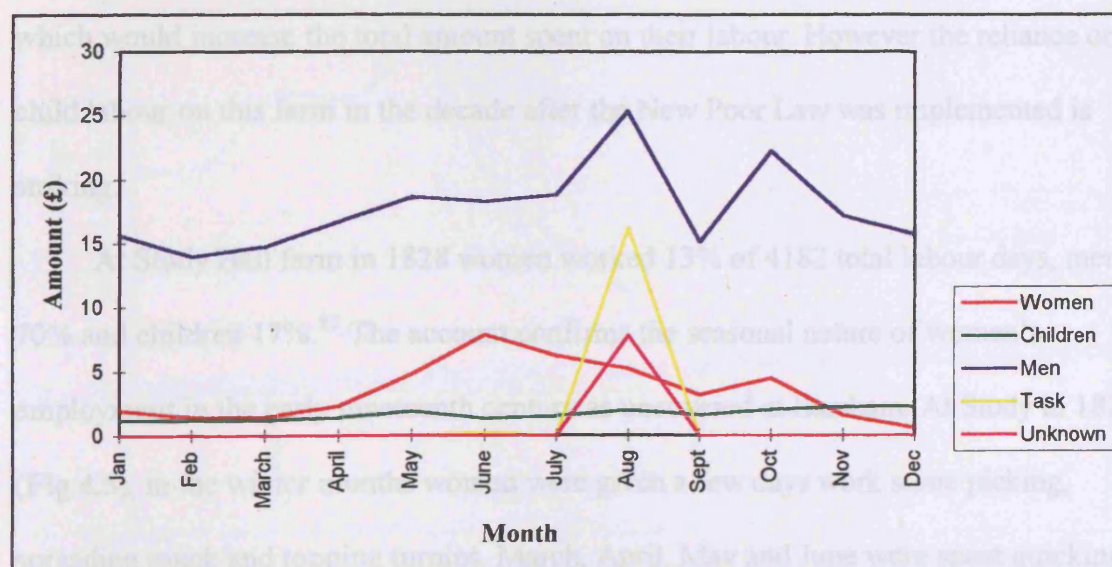
sustains the child figure. It would appear therefore that on this farm women's employment declined significantly after the end of the French Wars, whilst male child labour rose proportionally. The fact that women's labour continued to decline after the mid 1830s is especially interesting and suggests that, on this farm at least, women's labour did not rise significantly as a direct result of the New Poor Law, although it is impossible to tell whether the decline of women's work continued beyond that decade.

Looking at labour payments on this farm, it becomes clear why some farmers in Norfolk found child labour so attractive: it was cheap and represented only a small proportion of overall annual expenditure. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century at Earsham when children were carrying out over a quarter of all days worked



across the year payments made to them represented only 5% to 7% of annual farm outgoings on labour. **Fig 4.4** represents the monthly labour payments on this farm in 1807. Boys were paid either 3s. or 2s. a week, according to age. Boy Read, worked 306 days in 1807, earning 3s. a week throughout the year, an annual total of £7. 13s. Similarly Boy John Flowerdew worked 240 days at 3s. a week, taking home £6 for the year. His younger brother William worked 48 days at 2s. a week in 1807, earning 16s. for the year. Women were paid 8d. a day throughout the year, whilst male labourers worked for 1s. 6d. a day. On this farm, the proportion spent on women's labour halved between 1807 and 1837, from 14% to 7% of annual farm expenditure. The male figure rose slightly, whilst the sum spent on child labour remained stable.

**Fig 4.4: Total labour payments by month,**  
**Earsham Home farm, 1807**



Source: NRO, MEA 3/27.

Are these trends at Earsham replicated on other farms throughout Norfolk for the early nineteenth century? This is difficult to prove as no other surviving accounts from this time exist for a long timespan. However, single ledgers from the era do point to small levels of female employment: At Felbrigg in the north of the county in 1844, women carried out just 4% of the 5471 days worked in that year. Men worked 51% and once more the use of child labour - 45% of days worked - was remarkably high. The near full employment of a number of older boys on lower wages than adult men, again may explain this trend.<sup>82</sup> Boys on this farm were paid between 6d. and 11d. a day according to age. Male labourers were paid between 8s. and 11s. a week according to their position, whilst all women were given a flat rate of 8d. a day throughout the year. Between 1835 and 1844 the amount spent on child labour on this farm rose significantly, from just 3% in 1835 to 22% in 1844. The figure spent on male workers declined from 90% in 1835 to 66% in 1844. Men were also employed in task work which would increase the total amount spent on their labour. However the reliance on child labour on this farm in the decade after the New Poor Law was implemented is striking.

At Stody Hall farm in 1828 women worked 13% of 4182 total labour days, men 70% and children 17%.<sup>83</sup> The account confirms the seasonal nature of women's employment in the early nineteenth century as uncovered at Earsham. At Stody in 1828 (Fig 4.5), in the winter months women were given a few days work stone picking, spreading muck and topping turnips. March, April, May and June were spent quicking,

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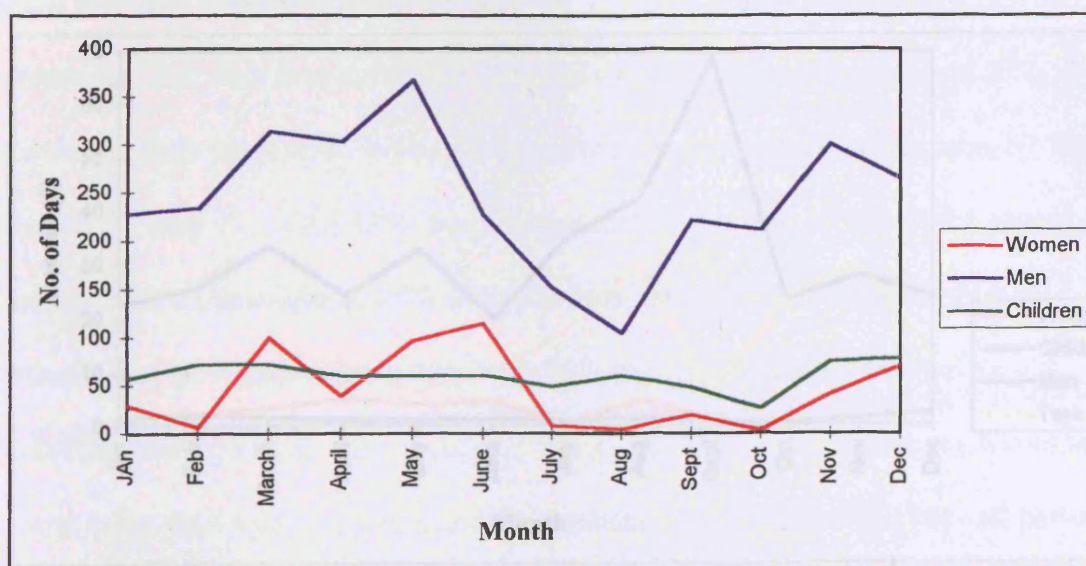
<sup>82</sup> NRO, WKC 5/248-255, 400x, Labour accounts, Ketton-Cremer collection, Felbrigg estate, 1834-1845. See WKC 5/248.

<sup>83</sup> NRO, MC 3/89, 400x, Stody Hall farm accounts, 1827-9. This farm was situated three miles south-west of Holt in north-central Norfolk. Wheat, barley and turnips were the main crops.



hoeing and weeding corn. Women were employed for a few days making hay and turning barley at harvest time and in November and December pulling up turnips was their main task. Two male children were employed year round on this farm. Boy Middleton worked 236 days from January to October, earning £3. 15s. 6d. and Boy Bullock worked 300 days, earning over £5. As much work in haysel and harvest was done by the piece, not by the day, the male figure is slightly skewed and the fall in the summer months is not a true representation of their employment pattern. Indeed this may also account for the relative absence of women in the harvest fields, a subject

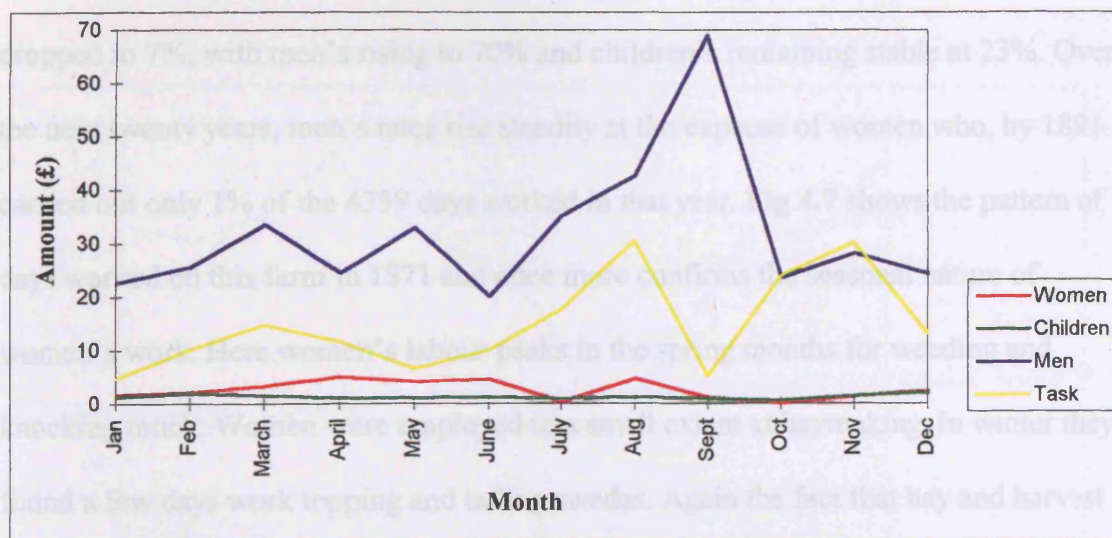
**Fig 4.5: Days worked by male, female and child labourers, Stody Hall farm, 1828**



Source: NRO, MC 3/89.

which will be discussed later. Task work payments at Stody Hall farm in 1828 accounted for nearly a third of overall annual expenditure on labour. This can be seen in Fig 4.6. As well as haysel and harvest, task work also included threshing and ditching in the winter, and hoeing and spreading muck in the spring and autumn. Again much of this was probably performed by women but is obscured as payments were made to the male head when undertaken by a family team. However there is evidence to indicate that women themselves were hired to carry out work by the task, particularly for hoeing and gathering stones by the acre in the spring months. So at Stody in April 1828 for example, 'Jane Yarman and 6 other' were paid £1. 15s. for hoeing 14 acres of wheat at

**Fig 4.6: Labour payments by month, Stody Hall farm, 1828**



Source: NRO, MC 3/89



2s. 6d. per acre. This stands in contrast to the East Riding of Yorkshire where task work payments on all farms were paid to a male worker.

Moving into the second half of the century, evidence indicates that low levels of female participation in agriculture persisted, and perhaps decreased further as the agricultural depression took hold. The best evidence for this trend comes from The Old Hall farm at Hoverton St. Peter, north-east of Norwich. This was an arable farm of 420 acres, employing around 15 men and 4 boys, with women and younger children employed at certain points in the year. Unusually for Norfolk, accounts survive for a long timespan - from 1859 to the 1930s - and here the census years 1861 to 1891 have been taken as points of analysis.<sup>84</sup> Between these years the employment of women falls considerably, so that by 1891 women played little part in the agricultural work on this farm. In 1861 women worked 12% of the 4710½ labour days. Men worked 62% of these days and children account for 26%. By 1871, the female participation rate had dropped to 7%, with men's rising to 70% and children's remaining stable at 23%. Over the next twenty years, men's rates rise steadily at the expense of women who, by 1891 carried out only 1% of the 4359 days worked in that year. Fig 4.7 shows the pattern of days worked on this farm in 1871 and once more confirms the seasonal nature of women's work. Here women's labour peaks in the spring months for weeding and knocking muck. Women were employed to a small extent at haymaking. In winter they found a few days work topping and tailing swedes. Again the fact that hay and harvest payments were made separately and days worked in these operations were not recorded

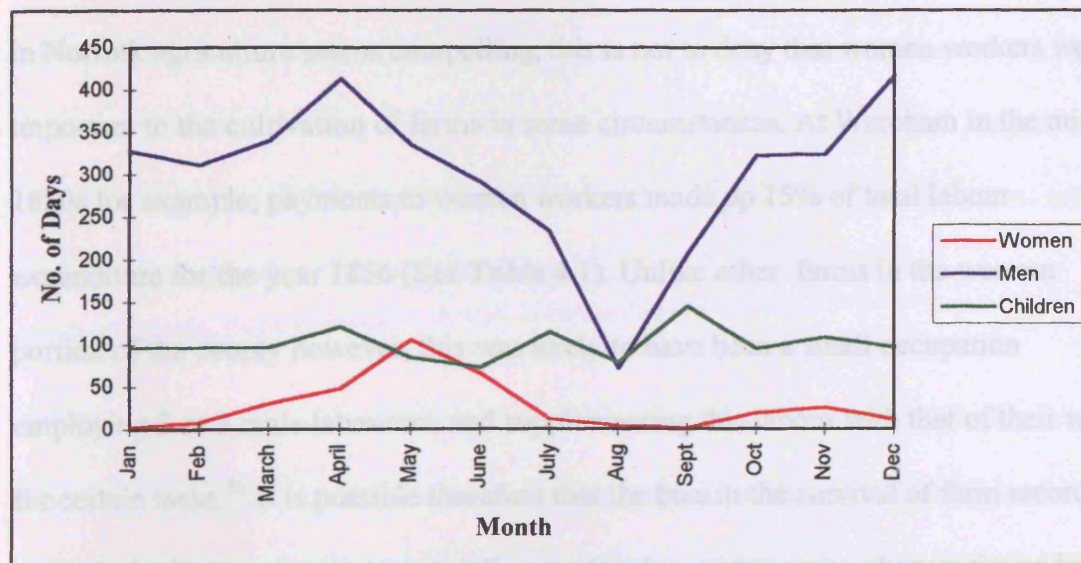
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<sup>84</sup> URL, NORF 9.1/1-75 Farm account books, Neatishead, 1859-1938. Although these accounts are classified as belonging to a farm in the parish of Neatishead, by cross referencing named workers in the ledgers with census returns it became clear the farm was actually The Old Hall Farm in the neighbouring parish of Hoverton St. Peter.



significantly distorts the line of the graph in the summer months. By 1891, women were employed for only a few days between May and July. This pattern of decline is reflected in the official census returns for the county as a whole. Between 1861 and 1891 the census records a 74% decline in the number of women classified as agricultural workers in Norfolk, from 3,258 to just 860. It also confirms the opinion that women's labour was adversely affected by the agricultural depression from the 1870s and that as the workforce was transformed to a core male one constantly employed over the year, casual women labourers were marginalised even further. Male day rates had risen to between 10s. and 11s. a week at Hoverton in 1871, whilst the female day rate remained at 8d. a day. Boys meanwhile received from 1s. 6d. up to 7s. a week for the older lads.

**Fig 4.7: Days worked, Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter, 1871**



Source: URL, NORF 9.1/1/10, Farm accounts, 1870-1871.

The percentage spent on child labour on this farm in the second half of the nineteenth century remains very stable. In 1861 child workers accounted for 8% of annual farm expenditure; in 1891 the figure was 7%. Male child labour thus remained attractive to both farmers and parents at this time, although children's employment in agriculture was under pressure from official sanctions.

It would appear that farm workers fell into various categories, each having a different degree of security, with women especially marginalised in the nineteenth-century rural Norfolk labour market. Whilst the position of male day labourers stabilised and improved during the agricultural depression, the position of women became increasingly insecure. At Heath Farm, Tuttingham, the farm accounts of J. Soames for the 1870s reveal that whilst men were paid by the week (or daily if they did not work a full week) women, when present, were paid by the hour throughout the year.<sup>85</sup> Thus Elizabeth Spink worked over 420 hours between April and September 1879, earning £4. 8s. However, although the evidence for the marginalisation of women in Norfolk agriculture seems compelling, this is not to deny that women workers were important to the cultivation of farms in some circumstances. At Wereham in the mid 1850s for example, payments to women workers made up 15% of total labour expenditure for the year 1856 (See Table 4.1). Unlike other farms in the western portion of the county however, this was likely to have been a small occupation employing 2 or 3 male labourers, and supplementing this labour with that of their wives for certain tasks.<sup>86</sup> It is possible therefore that the bias in the survival of farm records towards the larger, more commercially orientated operations may obscure the wider role

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<sup>85</sup> NRO, MC 825/1, 797x1, Labour account book of William Beck for Mr. J. Soames Esq., Heath farm, Tuttingham, October 1878 - October 1879.

<sup>86</sup> URL, NORF 11/4/1 Labour book, Wereham, 1855-1868.

women were given on smaller, family run farms. At Winfarthing in south Norfolk in the 1880s, women were also still employed to work 17% of the 3013¾ total labour days in that year (See Table 4.1).<sup>87</sup> Moreover this is likely to have been a considerable under-estimation of total female labour. Days worked in both the hay and corn harvests by women at Winfarthing were not individually recorded although payments made to women workers were noted. On July 24th for example, women were paid £3. 2s. 1d. and on September 25th, £2. 8s. 7d. for labour. The same applies to male labour. There is no evidence of children working on this farm in the 1880s. However the pattern of work on this farm confirms that already highlighted with women's work most in demand in the springtime and early summer months of March to July.

The wage gap between male and female day labourers in the East Riding was replicated in Norfolk. Again women were paid only a third to just under a half of the male day wage, and this gap was a persistent feature on all farms in Norfolk throughout the century. However women in Norfolk were paid less than their counterparts in East Yorkshire and their wages showed little movement over the course of the century. This is shown in Table 4.2. Only a handful of the farm accounts utilised in this chapter record day rates for all labourers, and women and child workers in particular are often simply lumped together under headings such as 'boys' and 'women'. However the farms listed do show clearly how women were paid a flat rate of 8d. a day for agricultural work throughout most of the century. The day rates given to children also remained stable at between 4d. and 1s. a day for the whole period. Male wages do

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<sup>87</sup> NRO MC 299/28, Farm account book of Betts of Fornsett, Tibenham and elsewhere, including farm labour book, 1880-1902.

**Table 4.2: Day rates for male, female and child labour on  
selected Norfolk farms in the nineteenth century**

Farm	Year	Female rate	Male rate	Child rate	Average female-to-male wage ratio
Earsham Home farm	1807	8d	1s.6d	4d-6d	44%
Stody Hall farm	1828	8d	1s.4d-2s	4d-6d	40%
Felbrigg	1844	8d	1s.4d-1s.10d	6d-11d	42%
Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter	1871	8d	1s.8d-2s	4d-1s	36%
Ingham	1880	9d	2s-2s.6d	-	33%

Sources: NRO, MEA 3/27; NRO, MC 3/89; NRO, WKC 5/255, 400x; URL, NORF 9.1/1/10; URL, NORF 3.3/1.

show some improvement: an average male day rate rose by 30% between 1844 and 1880 according to these figures. The persistently low wages paid to women, and the endurance of the wage-gap may be an indication that payments made to women in nineteenth-century Norfolk were based on custom rather than on the actual market value of their work.<sup>88</sup>

The task allocation of agricultural work on all farms in nineteenth-century Norfolk suggest a sexual division of labour existed which largely mirrors that uncovered for the East Riding of Yorkshire. There were some significant differences between the two counties however. Women in both regions were utilised for cleaning operations like hoeing and weeding, in planting and harvesting roots crops such as potatoes and turnips and in haymaking. However there is little evidence that women were employed to any great extent on threshing machines in the winter months in

<sup>88</sup> However Joyce Burnette points out that the wage gap was often a result of different hours worked and when this is taken into consideration, the actual ratio of female to male wages is larger. See Burnette, J., 'An investigation of the female-male wage gap during the industrial revolution in Britain', *Economic History Review*, 50 (1997), 257-281 (p.269).

Norfolk as they were in East Yorkshire. Moreover, women in Norfolk seem to have played a much smaller role in the corn harvest than their contemporaries in East Yorkshire. The next section will discuss the possible reasons for this.

#### **4.4: Women's work at harvest time**

Women were recorded as being employed on the subsidiary tasks of gathering and raking in some accounts but on the whole it is men who are recorded as working in the harvest fields in nineteenth-century Norfolk. The difference between the utilisation of female labour at hay and corn harvests in Norfolk is striking. It is possible to establish how central women workers were to haysel using detailed statements of cost concerning the mowing and making of hay at Langley in the 1820s.<sup>89</sup> In 1826 for example, the mowing of the hay was exclusively a male task: seven men were paid £11. 0s. 9d. for mowing 101 acres of grass. The haymakers - 17 men and 34 women - were employed for just over two weeks. Men were paid by the day according to age; the most experienced men received 2s. a day, the youngest 8d. a day. All women were paid a flat rate of 8d. a day. In the first week, men worked 54 days, receiving £3. 7s. 4d. whilst women worked 179½ days for £5. 19s. 8d. The second week showed a similar pattern: men worked 70 days for £5, and women 166 days for £5. 10s. 8d. A few men worked 10 additional days the following week for 15s. 4d. The total cost of the whole operation was £31. 13s. 9d., 35% of which can be accounted for by women haymakers. Clearly women were indispensable for this task on the farm. This stands in contrast to women's involvement at harvest on Stody Hall Farm in the same decade. The farmer hired 12

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<sup>89</sup> NRO, MS 21593/2, Haymaking accounts, Beauchamp-Proctor, Langley estate, 1824-1828. The hay making accounts for the years 1824-8 were found in a cash ledger from the Langley estate. No other farm accounts seems to survive.

men for the harvest period, giving them 1s. hiring money each, with 1s. 6d. beer allowance. Two older boys were hired and given 1s. 6d. for their hiring and beer and 2 younger boys were also hired for 6d. Male labourers worked the harvest for £5. 10s. each, with extra workers cutting wheat and barley by the acre. Women on the other hand were only hired by the day for turning barley, and paid a flat day rate. This rate was higher than usual day rates for women, rising from 8d. a day to 1s. 4d. However female participation was marginal and they were only employed for a few days during the harvest period. Of the total cost of harvest in that year - £104. 5s. 5d. - women's labour accounts for only 5%.<sup>90</sup>

However, as has already been suggested, female labour may have been utilised more fully as much harvest work was done by the piece and performed by all members of the family, although it was recorded under the name of the male head of the family group. In 1867 it was noted, 'In wheat harvest, when it is put out by the acre, women would take part with their husbands in the work'. However, when 'a contract is made with the men at so much for the job, these women are not employed'.<sup>91</sup>

Autobiographical evidence does indicate a wider role for women in the harvest fields across the nineteenth century than the farm account books. In the middle decades of the century before the widespread use of self-binding machines, the 'King of the Norfolk Poachers' argues that women 'paid a big part in the harvest fields in them days wen all was done by hand, tiyen corn, and racken and other jobs' (*sic*).<sup>92</sup> Arthur Randall similarly recalls his mother in the early twentieth century, 'was especially busy' at

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<sup>90</sup> NRO, MC 3/89.

<sup>91</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p.39.

<sup>92</sup> Haggard, L. R., ed., 'I Walked by Night': By the King of the Norfolk Poachers, 1st edn 1935, (Oxford, 1982), p.93.

harvest time, tying and shocking sheaves all day 'as fast as any man'.<sup>93</sup> That the whole family was called upon to participate in this activity is reflected in the following passage:

As soon as I could toddle I used to run about alone in the harvest field while my parents and older brothers and sisters were at work there. My parents had harvested on the same farm for many years, and as soon as we children were able to do so we had to tie the corn, and then, as we got older, to tie and shock alongside our elders.<sup>94</sup>

It was his father who fixed a price per acre for tying, shocking and carting in the harvest field and who was given the final payment however. The mechanical reaper-binder eventually eliminated the branches of harvest work that had been chiefly performed by women and children - the making and tying of sheaves. Alfred Smith noted in 1875 that 'these are the great and wonderful improvements of the age in the shape of labour: we certainly now have scarcely any hard work to do by hand...'.<sup>95</sup> However the reaper-binder was only slowly implemented and the hand labour of women and children was still used in some localities into the early twentieth century, as the evidence of Randall suggests.

The importance of gleaning to the family economy in Norfolk may also have limited women's role in harvest work. These findings correspond to those of Pamela Sharpe, who has analysed farms in the heavy Essex clays, and found women's main role in harvest to be gleaning.<sup>96</sup> Gleaning was a particularly important aspect of the non-wage economy in nineteenth-century Norfolk, being a customary right controlled almost exclusively by women themselves. This may have been an exceptionally important

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<sup>93</sup> Randall, A., Sixty Years a Fenman, (London, 1966), p.17.

<sup>94</sup> Randall, Sixty Years a Fenman, p.22.

<sup>95</sup> Norfolk Agricultural Association, Lord Leicester's Prize Essay on Agriculture. No. 1 by Mr. Alfred J. Smith (Norwich, 1875), 1-35 (p.29).

<sup>96</sup> Sharpe, P., Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850, (Basingstoke, 1996), p.99.

aspect of women's work in areas such as Norfolk where the role played by women in harvest was minor and opportunities to earn money through other forms of by-employments such as spinning, had declined irrevocably. The significance of gleaning to Norfolk women contrasts strongly to the situation in the East Riding where gleaning was not a widespread customary right and women's role in getting the harvest in was much greater.

It is difficult to assess precisely how much annual gleanings could contribute to the household economy, although it has been estimated that between 1750 and 1850, gleanings could make up from 3% or 4% to 13% or 14% of an average labouring family's income.<sup>97</sup> The sweeping agricultural changes of the period actually enhanced the profits from this common right as specialisation in cereal production and higher yields increased the potential for gleanings. Crop rotation also meant that peas, beans, barley and wheat may all be gleaned in a year.<sup>98</sup> C. D. Brereton, writing in 1824, argued that the extension of land under wheat cultivation in early nineteenth-century Norfolk had proved favourable to labouring families, enabling women and children to glean between 8 and 16 bushels of wheat. 'The earnings of the women and children by this means', he wrote, 'have often amounted to more than the earnings of the labourer himself in harvest, when his wages are the highest'.<sup>99</sup> James Phillips Kay estimated the average gleanings of over 500 labouring families in Norfolk and Suffolk in the late 1830s amounted to the equivalent of £1. 1s. 10d, or 3% of average annual incomes.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> King, P., 'Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850', *Economic History Review*, 64 (1991), 461-476 (p.473).

<sup>98</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p.82.

<sup>99</sup> Brereton, Rev. C. D., *A Practical Inquiry into the Number, Means of Employment and Wages of Agricultural Labourers*, (Norwich, 1824), p.49.

<sup>100</sup> Phillips Kay, J., 'Earnings of agricultural labourers in Norfolk and Suffolk', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 1 (1839), 179-183 (p.183).



He found that the amount of corn gleaned increased only slightly with the number of children in a family. Similarly, the age of children had no great influence on the final outcome, although older children tended to be in more permanent employment themselves and therefore did not take part in the activity. These average estimates probably underplay the significance of gleanings to families headed by a widow, or in years of dearth such as 1800-1 or 1812-13 however.<sup>101</sup>

Changes in harvest technology in late nineteenth-century Norfolk, notably the widespread introduction of the mechanical reaper, had an impact on gleaning as there was less waste left in the fields.<sup>102</sup> David Smith, writing on neighbouring Essex in the late nineteenth century, argued:

The custom survived the first insufficient reapers, but with the introduction of the first modern binders, and the use of the horse rake to gather any corn left lying in the fields, the gleaners wandered disconsolate for a year or so, and then gave it up.<sup>103</sup>

However, other autobiographical literature suggests that gleaning remained an integral part of women's work to the turn of the century. Wheat gleanings were important as they could provide the family with bread through the winter months. Even in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when food prices declined this was still seen as important. Kate Taylor's family 'always hoped to glean sufficient wheat for bread for the winter'<sup>104</sup>; Bessie Harvey's gleanings 'used to make enough for two or three bakings

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<sup>101</sup> King, 'Customary rights', p.466.

<sup>102</sup> Morgan, D. H., 'The place of harvesters in nineteenth-century village life', in Samuel, ed., Village Life and Labour, pp.29-72 (p.65).

<sup>103</sup> Smith, D., No Rain in Those Clouds, (London, 1943), p.41. Stephen Hussey argues that changes in harvest technology did not put an end to gleaning in Essex and that it survived until after the Second World War. Hussey, S., "'The last survivor of an ancient race": the changing face of Essex gleaning', Agricultural History Review, 45 (1997), 61-72.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Burnett, J., ed., Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s, (London, 1982), p.290.

of bread on Fridays'<sup>105</sup>, whilst Bill Partridge argues that 'Some o' the women...used to git as much as a comb o' wheat' (*sic*) to grind into flour in his turn-of-the-century village.<sup>106</sup> Finally, many of the older women Mary Chamberlain interviewed in the Fens in the 1970s recalled the gleaning fields of their childhood's, including Mary Coe, who stated:

Gleaning we used to go, at harvest, after they got the corn in...I used to enjoy gleaning. Mother used to go and take us children, the bigger ones looked after the little ones in the fields...and after we got it, father would have it threshed...and then he took it to the mill and had it ground. And that'd be our flour for the year. Or we'd sell it and that had to pay the rent.<sup>107</sup>

#### **4.5: The composition of the female workforce in Norfolk**

Census analysis confirms the composition of the female day labour force on farms in Norfolk followed the pattern of that discovered in East Yorkshire: most women employed on farms in the second half of the nineteenth century at least, were married and worked on the same farm as their husbands. Two farm accounts from Norfolk are detailed enough to permit cross-referencing with census data: Flitcham Hall farm and Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter. Table 4.3 shows women regularly employed at Flitcham in 1851 and information recorded about them by the census enumerator. All lived in the Flitcham parish. With the exception of Bet Bridges and Ann Bridges, a widow, all women were married to workers on the same farm: Peggy Howard to John, Susan Fickle to William, Fanny Thistle to Frances and Mary Fulcher to John.

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<sup>105</sup> Harvey, B., 'Youthful memories of my life in a Suffolk village', *The Suffolk Review*, 2 (1963), 198-201 (p.199).

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Kightly, C., *Country Voices: Life and Lore in Farm and Village*, (London, 1984), p.19.

<sup>107</sup> Chamberlain, M., *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village*, (London, 1975), p.29.

**Table 4.3: Female labourers on Flitcham Hall farm, 1851**

Name of woman	No. days worked in 1851	Age	Marital status	Occupation of husband	No/age of children at home	Amount earned in 1851	Occupational description in 1851
Bet Bridges	n/a	46	Married	Blacksmith	8 (21,18,16, 12,10,8, 5,2)	£10.9s.6d	Blacksmith's Wife
Ann Bridges	n/a	30	Widow	-	3 (11,10,7)	£1.2s.1d	On parish allowance
Susan Fickle	n/a	32	Married	Farm Lab.	None	£3.11s.10d	Labourer's Wife
Mary Fulcher	n/a	37	Married	Farm Lab.	3 (12,10,8)	£3.17s.10d	Labourer's Wife
Peggy Howard	n/a	31	Married	Farm Lab.	None	£4.12s.6d	Labourer's Wife (Farm)
Fanny Thistle	n/a	33	Married	Farm Lab.	None	£5.6s.5d	Labourer's Wife

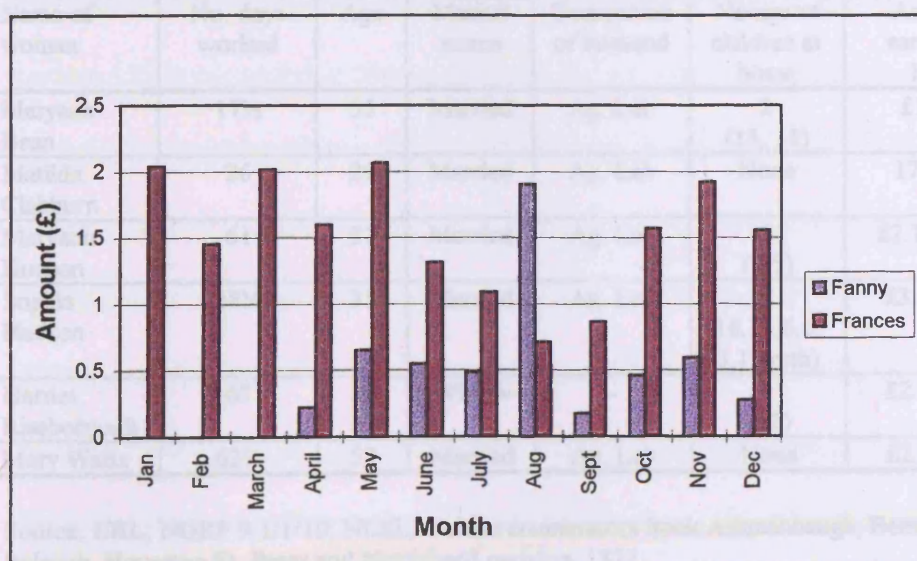
Source: URL, NORF P429/3, Farm records of Flitcham Hall farm, Flitcham, including labour account books, August 1847-October 1852; Norfolk Local Studies Library (hereafter NLSL), Census enumerators book, Flitcham parish, 1851.

Although women received only a third of male day rates, it is clear that what they did earn could still make a considerable difference to individual family incomes. At Flitcham in 1851, the four women who worked alongside their husbands contributed and a quarter of their husbands total earnings on this farm. Ann Bridges, a widow aged 30, earned £1. 2s. 1d at harvest time. She was recorded as being 'on parish allowance' and it is unlikely she would have admitted to earning extra money for fear of having her allowance taken from her. The wages of both men and women are likely to be an underestimate of their actual earnings however: men worked by the piece at hay and corn harvests and women earned additional sums stonepicking by the acre, although these figures were not noted under individual labourers in the accounts. The example of Fanny Thistle and her husband Frances has been plotted in Fig 4.8. Frances worked more consistently over the course of the year whilst Fanny worked between April and

December only. Days worked were not recorded separately in these accounts, but it is likely that Fanny worked around 150 days over the year, paid at 8d. a day.

Accounts for this farm also survive for 1872, although only one woman, Mary Fulcher, is named. Other work was performed by women but individual workers are not specified. In 1872 Mary still earned £3. 2s. 11d. in agricultural work on that farm and possibly more in piecework. So her labour participation had not declined from twenty years earlier. It is impossible to know whether the other women listed in 1851 had dropped out of the workforce by the early 1870s. However the circumstances of two of the women had certainly altered radically. According to the 1871 census Bet Bridges only had her grandson aged 11 still living at home. There would therefore have been

**Fig 4.8: Annual earnings of Fanny and Frances Thistle, Flitcham Hall farm, 1851**



Source: URL, NORF P429/3; NLSL, Census enumerators book, Flitcham parish, 1851.

less pressure for her to work to help feed the family and the opportunity for her to drop out of the workforce was evident. Fanny Thistle meanwhile had died as her husband Frances was listed as a widower in 1871.

In the ledgers of the Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter, women's first names are rarely stated, so there is some doubt over their correct identities. However after a thorough search through the census records, it has been ascertained that the women regularly employed on the farm in 1871 are those shown in Table 4.4. Again, with the exception of one widow, all women employed on the farm were married to agricultural labourers on the same farm: Matilda Clabburn to George, Maryann Bean to Robert, Mary Watts to James, Maryann Hudson to Samuel and Sophia Hudson to James. A

**Table 4.4: Female labourers on Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter, 1871**

Name of woman	No. days worked	Age	Marital status	Occupation of husband	No/age of children at home	Amount earned in 1871	Occupational description in 1871
Maryann Bean	17½	55	Married	Ag. Lab	2 (15, 11)	£1.15s	No. occ
Matilda Clabburn	26	29	Married	Ag. Lab	None	17s.10d	No. occ
Maryann Hudson	61	27	Married	Ag. Lab	2 (6,5)	£2.11s.10d	No. occ
Sophia Hudson	68½	35	Married	Ag. Lab	7 (16,11,8,6,3,1,3mth)	£3.5s.11d	No. occ
Harriet Riseborough	63	56	Widow	-	1 (32)	£2.11s.5d	No. occ
Mary Watts	62½	57	Married	Ag. Lab	None	£2.11s.5d	No. occ

Source: URL, NORF 9.1/1/10; NLSL, Census enumerators book Ashmanhaugh, Beeston St. Lawrence, Belaugh, Hoverton St. Peter and Neatishead parishes, 1871.

‘widow Hudson’ who is mentioned in the accounts could not be traced. None of the labourers lived in Hoverton St. Peter but travelled from the neighbouring villages of Neatishead, Ashmanhaugh, Beeston St. Lawrence and Belaugh. It is clear that none of these women workers at Flitcham or Hoverton were returned as being occupied, the enumerator at Hoverton recording ‘no occupation’ in all cases and the official at Flitcham adding the work ‘wife’ to the occupation of the spouse. Once again, this evidence points to the omission of the part-time, casual agricultural work of women in the second half of the nineteenth century and adds more weight to the notion that the real size of the female agricultural workforce in the late nineteenth century was significantly under-recorded in official sources.

At Flitcham in the 1850s, the evidence suggests that where women were employed in agricultural work, their contributions to annual family income could be quite substantial. Three of these women had no children living at home and demands on both time and money would have been less pressing (See Table 4.3). Phillips Kay, investigating the earnings of agricultural labouring families in Norfolk and Suffolk in the late 1830s argued that ‘the earnings of the wife of a labouring man without children are exactly one-third greater than those of women with children’.<sup>108</sup> However at both Flitcham and Hoverton, the women who worked most consistently were those with the most number of children at home. Bet Bridges was nearly fully employed year round at Flitcham and earned £10. 9s. 6d. on that farm. She had eight children still at home between the ages of 21 and 2 years. Her grandson John also resided in the household. Her two eldest sons, Ruben aged 21, and Martin aged 18, worked as agricultural labourers, and Frederick, aged 16 was recorded as a ‘farm servant’. It is not clear

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<sup>108</sup> Phillips Kay, ‘Earnings of agricultural labourers in Norfolk and Suffolk’, p.182.

whether any of her family worked on the same farm as Bet, although the accounts do record a male 'Bridges' earning £6. 5s. 10d across the year in 1851. The wages of the young male Bridges would have been significant to the family income but the fact that Bet worked year round suggests that financial necessity was the most important consideration here. It is probable in this large family, older children would have been expected to mind younger ones whilst the mother worked. At Hoverton in 1871, Sophia Hudson had seven children at home, aged from sixteen to one year, yet she still worked 68½ days on the farm, earning £3. 5s. 11d. Her work was also seasonal, based between the months of February and August, whilst her husband James worked six days a week year round, at 11s. a week, except at harvest where he was paid £6 extra. Although women's agricultural work accounted for only a small portion of overall annual labour expenditure on these farms, the amount they earned - no matter how small - was still significant to individual family budgets. The importance of these sums tends to be obscured by general observations.

The dwindling female labour force on the Old Hall farm at Hoverton St. Peter can be traced through to the last decade of the century. In 1881 six women are named in the accounts: woman Daniel earned just 4s. 10d. weeding; woman Kemp earned £1. 7s. 3d., woman Riseborough, £1. 5s. and woman Hudson £1. 14s. 1d., all working between April and June, whilst woman Chaplin and woman Lisser earned £1. 5s. 4d. and £1. 4s. in the turnip fields in November and December. Women also worked in the harvest, gathering barley for £3. 15s., although who these payments went to is unknown. In 1891 only three women are mentioned in the ledgers: woman Riseborough, woman Libbes and woman Hudson. Harriet Riseborough, who according to the census of 1891 was then 85 years of age and still living with her unmarried son Charles in Belaugh, earned

just 5s. Maryann Libbes, aged 40, worked for 16s. 1d. weeding, whilst women Hudson worked for 11s. 5d. Thus only a handful of rural women in the latter part of the decade tentatively clung onto agricultural labour. This trend is succinctly summed up by Flora Thompson, who argued that whilst ‘most country women had a distaste for “goin’ afield”’, a few women still did agricultural work in the 1880s,

most of them being respectable middle-aged women, who, having got their families off hand, had spare time, a liking for an open-air life, and a longing for a few shillings a week they could call their own.<sup>109</sup>

#### **4.6: The importance of informal economies**

Evidence points to the small participation of women in the formal agricultural economy of Norfolk. Despite a rise in male wages in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and a fall in the price of food, household budgets remained tight, suggesting any contribution women could make to the family income, by whatever means, was still significant. Wilson Fox found earnings of ordinary male labourers in the county ranged from £35 to £43 in the early 1890s.<sup>110</sup> The expenses of a typical family of six at this time was calculated at just under £32 per annum. This included food, fuel and boots but excluded rent, which averaged £4 to £4. 10s, and clothing.<sup>111</sup> Thus whilst the ‘general condition of the agricultural labourer is said by everyone to be better than it was’, labouring families still ‘must have a struggle to make both ends meet...’.<sup>112</sup> Wilson Fox noted that labourers generally disliked their women seeking employment but it was viewed, even in the 1890s, as,

a necessity, in order to meet the expenditure of the family...it often

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<sup>109</sup> Thompson, F., *Lark Rise to Candleford*, 1st edn 1939, (Harmondsworth, 1984), p.58.

<sup>110</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilson Fox, p.69.

<sup>111</sup> Budgets quoted in Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages*, p.139.

<sup>112</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilson Fox, p.71.



brings that additional money into a house, which just makes the difference in a large family, or where the man is wholly or partially incapacitated from work, between privation and what they would consider sufficiency.<sup>113</sup>

Women's evidence to the Royal Commissions suggests a growing unwillingness to send their daughters into agricultural work and most regarded service as a much better option for single women.<sup>114</sup> Kate Edwards argued that:

It were nothing for a girl to be sent away to service when she were eleven years old...It were better than working on the land then... Mostly they went to the farmers' houses ten or twenty mile from where they'd bin born. These farmers...took advantage o' the poor people's need to get their girls off their hands to get little slaves for nearly nothing.<sup>115</sup>

The increase in domestic service in the second half of the nineteenth century was dramatic: in Norfolk the number of servants increased by 75% between 1871 and 1891. Young women also migrated further afield: by 1881 there were 57,602 Norfolk born women working in London and the south-east, many as servants in affluent areas such as Islington and Kensington.<sup>116</sup> The migration of women from rural Norfolk was twice the rate of men in some areas. In the Swaffham union for example, the male population decreased by 2.6% between 1881 and 1891 whilst the female population decreased by 4.5% between the same dates.<sup>117</sup>

Domestic service dominated young, unmarried women's work options in the second half of the nineteenth century. Autobiographical writing meanwhile hints at the extent of the intermittent, seasonal and casual range of activities which were available

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<sup>113</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilson Fox, p.68.

<sup>114</sup> Mary Lyon told the 1867 Children's Employment Commission, '...girls don't ought to go with boys. I should like to get mine a place out at service', and Catherine Etheridge believed that a place in service was 'more to their credit' than field labour. PP, 1867, XVI, Evidence on gangs, p.87 and p.90.

<sup>115</sup> Marshall, S., Fenland Chronicle: Recollections of William Henry and Kate Mary Edwards, (Cambridge, 1967), pp.230-231.

<sup>116</sup> Howkins, Reshaping Rural England, p.13.

<sup>117</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilson Fox, p.67.

to married and widowed women in nineteenth-century Norfolk. These show the unremitting daily grind of rural women who had to balance domestic and childcare responsibilities with earning money. Thus whilst the male wage remained central, women nursed, cleaned, sewed and washed, as well participated in seasonal agricultural labour to help supplement these incomes. In his autobiography the 'King of the Norfolk poachers' illustrates the unremitting daily grind of local women in the second half of the century:

I have seen many a Poor woman go to the fields in bitter winter weather, cleaning turnips and beet for the sum of ten pence a day. They would come home up to there knees in mud and whet, and then they would have the household work to do, washing cooking mending, and all the other jobs which come along when there is a big famely to do for, and famleys mostly were big in them days (*sic*).<sup>118</sup>

Edwards depicts a similar picture at the end of the century:

If life were hard for the men, it were harder still for the women. They often worked side by side with their menfolk in the fields all day, then went home and while their husbands fed the pig or fetched a yoke o'water, they'd get the meal going. But most men could rest a while after tea, at least in winter, but the mother had to set about preparing for the next day, getting the children washed and off to bed, and making and mending clothes and what bits o' furniture and linen they had in the house. Then they'd have to be up with the lark in the morning to sweep and clean the home afore it were time to go to work again (*sic*).<sup>119</sup>

This evidence also offers an interesting contrast to contemporary writing by male, middle-class observers of country life. Augustus Jessopp, the vicar of Scarning, writing in the 1870s, argued for example that by that date the rural Norfolk labourer was a great deal better off than those of previous generations. One manifestation of this was a change in the position of the labourer's wife who was 'no longer the poor drudge she

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<sup>118</sup> Haggard, ed., 'I Walked By Night', pp.90-91.

<sup>119</sup> Marshall, Fenland Chronicle, p.216.

almost invariably came after her fourth or fifth child', but who now took pleasure in material possessions such as perambulators and sewing machines, who read novels and had, as a consequence, 'almost passed out of the labour market'.<sup>120</sup>

The range of activities women participated in were similar to those already discussed in East Yorkshire. However, the casual nature of women's agricultural employment in rural Norfolk suggests that alternative employment strategies were of more significance in Norfolk than in northern counties. Evidence indicates that women sought to add to family income through a number of routes. Firstly they engaged in other types of paid employment outside agriculture such as washing and charring for local residents. Conducted indoors, these tasks were perceived as an extension of her domestic duties and often not classified as 'work' at all. Laundry work was 'taken-in' and performed by women in their own homes. A good water supply and convenient drying ground made the task more tolerable. Meg Ladell remembers her mother at the beginning of the twentieth century taking in washing, as well as charring for the local butcher. 'If she hadn't', she contends, 'we would have starved and gone barefoot'.<sup>121</sup> Such work was paid for in food and cast-off clothing, as well as money. Ladell's mother was paid a shilling in meat for a day's work on Saturday's which 'would be a meal for the family on Sunday'.<sup>122</sup>

Women also took part in non-monetary activities which added to the well-being of the family. It has already been shown that gleaning was of great significance to labouring women in nineteenth-century Norfolk and constituted one of their main employments at harvest time. As in East Yorkshire, the wives and children of labourers

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<sup>120</sup> Jessopp, A., *Arcady. For Better for Worse*, (London, 1877), p.18.

<sup>121</sup> Chamberlain, *Fenwomen*, p.41.

<sup>122</sup> Chamberlain, *Fenwomen*, p.41.

also helped to look after animals such as pigs and poultry. It was noted in the 1870s that 'where the daughters and wives look after the poultry and the cows they'll never lose any money and they'll never starve'.<sup>123</sup> Allotments were viewed as beneficial in Norfolk not least because they traditionally occupied women and children. Allotment cultivation was viewed as suitable work for women, being linked to the home and aiding the management of domestic budgets.<sup>124</sup> At Elmham in 1843 it was argued,

there are perhaps, 100 allotments here; the women and children invariably work on them. The good effects, in every respect, are beyond calculation. This system promotes happiness, contentment, industry, regularity of habits, and is duly appreciated by the poor themselves.<sup>125</sup>

In the 1890s Wilson Fox found allotment holders who rented one-eighth of an acre at 4 to 5s. in Swaffham could make up to £3 a year profit.<sup>126</sup> This self-supporting economy is summed up by Ewart Evans who describes the life of Priscilla Savage, a typical agricultural labourers' wife 'who had to bring up a large family on low wages':

With so little money few things could be bought in the shops and people rarely went out to buy things in the town; the village was almost entirely self-supporting, most families living on what they grew or reared on their *yards* or allotments.<sup>127</sup>

Inside the home women made and mended clothing, baked bread, pickled and preserved food. None of these activities represented strict monetary value but they were pivotal to household management. Randall's mother 'baked all our bread, brewed all our beer and did all our cooking...She made our shirts too, getting the material for them once a

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<sup>123</sup> Various, The Agricultural Crisis: The Condition, Prospects and Needs of Norfolk Agriculturists, (London, 1879), p.23.

<sup>124</sup> For a recent discussion about the role of allotments in nineteenth-century rural society see Moselle, B., 'Allotments, enclosure, and proletarianization in early nineteenth-century southern England', Economic History Review, 68 (1995), 482-500, and a reply to this by Archer, J. A., 'The nineteenth-century allotment: half an acre and a row', Economic History Review, 70, (1997), 21-36.

<sup>125</sup> PP, 1843, XII, Report by Denison, p.260.

<sup>126</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Wilson Fox, p.71.

<sup>127</sup> Ewart Evans, Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay, p.55.

year when the harvest wages came in'.<sup>128</sup> George Baldry's grandmother looked after the family's cow, pigs and fowls, as well as making sheepskin gloves and buskings by candlelight at night.<sup>129</sup> As a girl Gladys Otterspoon helped her mother knit her father's socks and sew his flannel shirts, all of which were 'too dear to buy'.<sup>130</sup> In contrast to official parliamentary reports of the nineteenth century, much of this evidence indicates that poor labouring women strove hard to maintain respectability in their households, despite the lack of domestic comforts. As Edwards recollects:

The women did try hard to keep their houses clean and tidy and neat. They were proud o' what they had, even if it were only a few odd sticks of furniture and one bed... They were forever making and mending and washing and ironing, and took a pride in doing it. They knowed very well that what they cou'n't or di'n't conjure up out o' bits and pieces, their families cou'n't have (*sic*).<sup>131</sup>

Although this material is sparse and almost impossible to quantify, it reveals an alternative village economy based on self-sufficiency and mutual aid among neighbours which mitigated against the deficiencies of the weekly agricultural wage in Norfolk. Women were central to these survival networks. This is well illustrated by Richard Cobbold's account of Wortham in mid nineteenth-century Suffolk where women provided neighbourly assistance and help on a day-to-day basis. They carried faggots from cottage to cottage, ran errands to the shops, nursed and minded the sick and needy. Thus Old Moll King, wife of the village barber, was the 'active nurse of all the parish'<sup>132</sup>, whilst Lucy Rodwell at 72, was 'always on the trudge', running errands and

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<sup>128</sup> Randall, *Sixty Years a Fenman*, p.16.

<sup>129</sup> Baldry, G., *The Rabbit Skin Cap: A Tale of a Norfolk Countryman's Youth*, 1st edn 1939 (Norwich, 1974), p.24.

<sup>130</sup> Chamberlain, *Fenwomen*, p.33.

<sup>131</sup> Marshall, *Fenland Chronicle*, p.225.

<sup>132</sup> Fletcher, R., ed., *The Biography of a Victorian Village: Richard Cobbold's Account of Wortham, Suffolk*, (London, 1977), p.124.

was 'the active agent for many'.<sup>133</sup> The fact that male villagers were treated as the focal point of interest by contemporary observers has resulted in scant knowledge of the everyday life of rural labouring women in the nineteenth century. The need for women to string together earnings from a whole range of sources - fieldwork, outwork, common rights, self-help - remained vital in Norfolk throughout the period, when it was not possible to sustain a living wage from one source alone.

The whole range of alternative strategies women engaged in were of crucial significance in Norfolk where archival evidence suggests a low level of female activity in agriculture in the nineteenth century as a whole. This would seem to contradict previous arguments which have linked increased arable cultivation in the early nineteenth century in areas such as Norfolk to increased employment opportunities for labourers, including women and children. Brereton wrote in 1824 for example that had it not been for the fact that women had turned from spinning to agricultural work, 'the land of this county could not have been cultivated as it has been, by the *male* population of the last thirty years'.<sup>134</sup> Recent research by Robert Allen reveals that large farms incurred lower labour costs, and employment per acre declined with size for male, but especially female and child labourers. 'The rapid decline with size in the employment of women and boys compared to men', he argues, 'meant that the eighteenth-century shift to large farms changed the sex balance of rural employment'.<sup>135</sup> So, in this analysis, the changing structure of farms in Norfolk in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would have had important and far-reaching effects on women's

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<sup>133</sup> Fletcher, ed., Biography of a Victorian Village, p.161.

<sup>134</sup> Brereton, Practical Inquiry into...Agricultural Labourers, pp.26-7.

<sup>135</sup> Allen, R. C., 'The growth of labor productivity in early modern English agriculture', Explorations in Economic History, 25 (1988), 117-146 (p.130).

agricultural employment. The labour of boys and older lads did remain vital to Norfolk agriculture throughout the century however. The marginal position of women in nineteenth-century agriculture also seems to substantiate Snell's thesis that increased sexual specialisation of agricultural work after the mid eighteenth century brought with it a declining participation of women within the agrarian workforce of south-eastern England arable counties.<sup>136</sup>

The regional bias in the surviving farm accounts from which much of the Norfolk evidence has been culled may affect the overall results. Most of the accounts are situated in mid and east Norfolk, away from the lighter lands and larger farms of west Norfolk. Other evidence from mid century suggests that female participation in agricultural work in west Norfolk was vital and substantial. In the Swaffham union during the 1860s it was claimed, '...in some parishes, where, owing to a deficiency of cottages, there is an inadequate supply of labour, the cultivation of land would often be seriously interfered with but for the employment of female labour'.<sup>137</sup> James Freezer, farm bailiff at Holkham similarly maintained that a farm of one thousand acres required 'about 16 women all through the year to cultivate this quantity of land properly'.<sup>138</sup> Clearly there were certain farm operations which women workers were in demand for, and this remained the case for much of the nineteenth century.

In many ways Norfolk and the East Riding represent contrasting arable counties in the nineteenth century. In East Yorkshire the persistence of farm service occupied young men and women between childhood and marriage. The position of day labourers was more secure due to the county's proximity to a thriving industrial region. Norfolk's

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<sup>136</sup> Snell, *Annals*, ch.1.

<sup>137</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p.66.

<sup>138</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Fraser's report, p.66.

rural workforce, in contrast, was distinguished by low wages and casualisation, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Women's involvement in the formal economy of East Yorkshire was more widespread than in Norfolk, although this depended on the crops grown in different localities. Yet there were some similarities in patterns of employment. In both counties the utilisation of female child labour was not extensive. Male children, especially older lads, were employed in large numbers however. The adult female farm workforce in Norfolk and East Yorkshire largely consisted of women married to agricultural labourers who worked on the same farms. The shift to domestic service for young unmarried women in the second half of the nineteenth century was discernible in both regions. Women's formal work options in rural Norfolk and East Yorkshire were dominated by agriculture and service. These were reinforced by a whole range of survival strategies which revolved around a number of informal strategies. Women's involvement in these were central, particularly in Norfolk where their participation in farm work was restricted. How did the existence of other work options disrupt this pattern of female employment? This question forms the pivotal concern of the next chapter which focuses on women's work in nineteenth-century Bedfordshire.



## **Chapter Five: Bedfordshire**

### **5.1: Introduction**

In many ways the county of Bedfordshire exhibited most of the characteristics of nineteenth-century agriculture already noted in the East Riding of Yorkshire and Norfolk. It was one of the arable counties east of James Caird's division between the corn and grazing districts of England, and throughout the century was at the forefront of technical progress in English farming. As in Norfolk, the system of hiring yearly living-in servants had essentially disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century in Bedfordshire, replaced by the employment of labourers on a daily or weekly basis. However, in contrast to East Yorkshire and Norfolk, the widespread existence of two established domestic industries in Bedfordshire - lacemaking in the north of the county and strawplaiting in the south - offered rural women an alternative employment opportunity. This meant women played little part in the agricultural process in Bedfordshire as a whole.

Although they tended to oscillate between prosperity and decay, the important contribution these industries made to the subsistence of rural labouring families was recognised by contemporary observers throughout the period. Frederick Eden attributed the low poor rates at Dunstable in the last decade of the eighteenth century to the widespread employment of 'every woman, who wished to work' in straw manufacture.<sup>1</sup> William Bennett, writing in 1857, similarly described the additional employment of

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<sup>1</sup> Eden, Sir F. M., The State of the Poor, 3 vols, (London, 1797), vol 2, p.2. Arthur Young made a similar observation on visiting the lacemaking village of Shefford. 'It is remarkable that poor rates at Shefford are at present in this severe scarcity only five shillings in the pound, not having been raised by these bad times above sixpence', he wrote. Young, A., 'Lace making', Annals of Agriculture, 37 (1801), 448-450 (p.448).

women and children in strawplaiting in the agricultural districts of south Bedfordshire as a 'most welcome addition to the income of the household'<sup>2</sup>, and at the close of the century, William Bear, reporting for the Royal Commission on Labour, lamented the decline of the two industries in the county, arguing that,

the total money earnings of the labourers and their families are certainly much less than they were in the times when plaiting and lace-making were fairly remunerative and when every member of a family not a mere infant contributed to the total takings.<sup>3</sup>

Historians have matched contemporary interest in the manufacture of lace and strawplait and this has resulted in a vast literature on rural industry in nineteenth-century Bedfordshire. Attention has focused on certain aspects of the two trades. Early histories tended to romanticise the passing of the industries and offered overviews of the origins and fortunes of the industries across the centuries.<sup>4</sup> More recently the teaching of lacemaking and strawplaiting in village schools, the role of dealers and middlemen, and the influence of late nineteenth-century Lace Associations have been analysed.<sup>5</sup> The exploitation of child workers in both industries and the physical and

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett, W., 'The farming of Bedfordshire', Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, 18 (1857), 1-29 (p.26).

<sup>3</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer. Report by Mr. William Bear on the Poor Law Union of Woburn, p.25.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Austin, T., The Straw Plaiting and Straw Hat and Bonnet Trade, (Luton, 1871); Channer, C., and Roberts, M. E., Lacemaking in the Midlands, (London, 1900); Dryden, A., 'Pillow lace in the Midlands', Pall Mall Magazine, 8 (1896), 379-391; Mincoff, E., and Marriage, M., A History of Hand-made Lace, (London, 1900); Palliser, Mrs Bury., A History of Lace, (London, 1875); Sharpe, M., Point and Pillow Lace, (London, 1899); Wright, T., The Romance of the Lace Pillow, (London, 1900). See also Freeman, C., Luton and the Hat Industry, (Luton, 1953) and Freeman, C., Pillow Lace in the East Midlands, (Luton, 1958) for general overviews of the history of the two industries.

<sup>5</sup> Buck, A., 'The teaching of lacemaking in the east Midlands', Folk Life, 4 (1966), 39-50; Bushby, D., 'The Bedfordshire schoolchild', Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 67 (1988); Thorburn, D., 'Gender, work and schooling in the plaiting villages', The Local Historian, 19 (1989), 107-113. On the role of dealers and middlemen, see Buck, A., 'Middlemen in the Bedfordshire lace industry', Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 57 (1978), 32-58. On the lace associations see Spencerley, G., 'The lace associations: philanthropic movements to preserve the production of handmade lace in late Victorian and Edwardian times', Victorian Studies, 16 (1973), 433-452.

moral consequences of this has formed an area of particular interest.<sup>6</sup> However, despite the sheer volume of literature few points of real contention or debate have emerged. Some dispute over the origins of lacemaking has been generated, although this is an argument peripheral to the actual employment of women.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that the historians' understanding of both the lace and straw industries is based on a restricted number of familiar sources may account for the absence of proper discussion. The records of manufacturers and dealers are difficult to uncover since many firms were small and went out of business in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary writers such as Arthur Young and William Cobbett only refer intermittently to the trades in their writings, especially at times when extremities in wages were causing concern.<sup>9</sup> So the historian interested in lacemaking and strawplaiting is left with the official parliamentary commissions and census returns as the major point of reference. There were three major reports looking into the lace and

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<sup>6</sup> Spencerley, G., 'The health and disciplining of children in the pillow lace industry in the nineteenth century', *Textile History*, 7 (1976), 154-171; Gróf, L., *Children of Straw: The Story of a Vanished Craft and Industry in Bucks, Herts, Beds and Essex*, (Buckingham, 1988); Horn, P., 'Child workers in the pillow lace and straw plait trades of Victorian Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire', *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 779-796.

<sup>7</sup> See Spencerley, G., 'The origins of the English pillow lace industry', *Agricultural History Review*, 21 (1973), 81-93. Mrs Palliser attributes the introduction of lacemaking in Bedfordshire to Katherine of Aarogan in the 1530s whilst other writers, including Wright, place the origins with Flemish immigrants to Cranfield in the late sixteenth century. Palliser, *History of Lace*, p.336; Wright, *Romance of the Lace Pillow*, p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Bedford and Luton Archives and Records Service (hereafter BLARS), maintain the records of the Willis Brothers, straw hat and bonnet manufacturers of Luton, and John Eyles, strawplait manufacturer of Luton. See BLARS M15/32-34, Statement of affairs and list of creditors of Willis Brothers, straw hat and bonnet manufacturers of Luton, 1873; BLARS M15/35, List of creditors and accounts of John Eyles, straw plait manufacturer, Luton, 1879. Both went out of business in the 1870s are list creditors, assets and liabilities but reveal nothing on labour employed at the firms. The accounts of Mrs Rachael Read, pillow lace manufacturer of Cranfield also survive, but are sketchy notebooks of orders and customers and again shed no light on women workers employed in the trade. See BLARS X259/1-4, Pillow lace books and photographs of Mrs Rachael Read, Pillow lace manufacturer, Cranfield, 1886. Luton Museum's collection includes the account books of Henry Horn, a Dunstable plait dealer in the late nineteenth century. Again the information they contain on women workers is limited. See M8/6-8, Account books of Henry Horn, plait dealer, Dunstable, 1870s.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Young, A., *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hertfordshire*, (London, 1804); Cobbett, W., *Cottage Economy*, 1st edn 1822 (Oxford, 1979); Cobbett, W., *Rural Rides*, 1st edn 1830 (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp.117-118.

strawplait trades in the nineteenth century, published in 1843, 1863 and 1864.<sup>10</sup> All were written under the auspices of the Children's Employment Commission and therefore tend to concentrate on child employment in the trades. The 1867-1870 Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture and the 1893-1894 Royal Commission on Labour also comment upon employment in the two industries in certain localities.<sup>11</sup> These reports have been widely utilised, resulting in a retelling of 'familiar facts without adding much to our knowledge' of the two industries.<sup>12</sup> There are still significant gaps in the historiography of the lace and strawplaiting trades, especially with reference to the role of women workers. The formulation of new approaches and fresh questions is needed in order to open up and expand the debate. This chapter will aim to do this by focusing on the contribution women made to the economy of rural Bedfordshire on a number of levels. It will be shown from an examination of surviving farm accounts that the utilisation of women in the agricultural of the county was slight although not invisible or unchanging across the course of the nineteenth century. The employment of women in the lace and strawplaiting trades will be linked to the agricultural process and a number of questions will be addressed: Did the existence of domestic employments mean that local women made a conscious choice about what type of work they engaged in? What was the exact

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<sup>10</sup> PP, 1843, XIV, Children's Employment Commission (Trades and Manufactures). Report by Major J. G. Burns on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Paper-Mills, etc., in the South-eastern Counties of England and on the State, Condition, and Treatment of such Children and Young Persons; PP, 1863, XVII, First Report of the Children's Employment Commission. Report upon Lace Manufacture by Mr. J. E. White; PP, 1864, XXII, Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission. Report upon the Straw Plait and Bonnet Manufacture by Mr. J. E. White.

<sup>11</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, First Report from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. George Culley Esq., M. A., Report on the Counties of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire; PP, 1893-4, XXXVII, Royal Commission on Labour. The Employment of Women by Clara Collett; PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear.

<sup>12</sup> Sharpe, P., 'The organisation of the lace industry in England and Ireland', in Devonshire, A., and Wood, B., eds., *Women in Industry and Technology*. (London, 1996), pp.179-183.

nature of women's contribution to the domestic industries and what changes in female employment occurred across the century? Were women better off in Bedfordshire than other counties in eastern England where their roles in the formal economy were essentially restricted to agricultural work? Before these can be answered, the economy of the region needs to be outlined.

### **5.2: The rural economy of Bedfordshire in the nineteenth century**

Bedfordshire was divided into three geographically distinct regions: clay soils dominated the whole northern division of the county above Bedford, sandy soils prevailed in the eastern division, whilst chalk soils covered the southern area of the county bordered by Hertfordshire (**Map 5.1**).<sup>13</sup> All were farmed in different ways that suited their particular soil type: market gardening was extensively adopted in the eastern parishes, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century; the superior wheat produced in the chalk district underpinned the strawplaiting industry there and even the clay lands 'when in the hands of persevering and enterprising farmers, can be made exceedingly productive'.<sup>14</sup> Like Norfolk and the East Riding, Bedfordshire agriculture underwent far-reaching changes over the course of the nineteenth century which in turn affected the type and amount of labour employed on the land. When Thomas Stone visited the county in 1794, he found agriculture in a generally 'wild and uncultivated state', the local landowners having given little attention to 'advancement in rural economy'.<sup>15</sup> He estimated that a third of the land lay in permanent pasture with the

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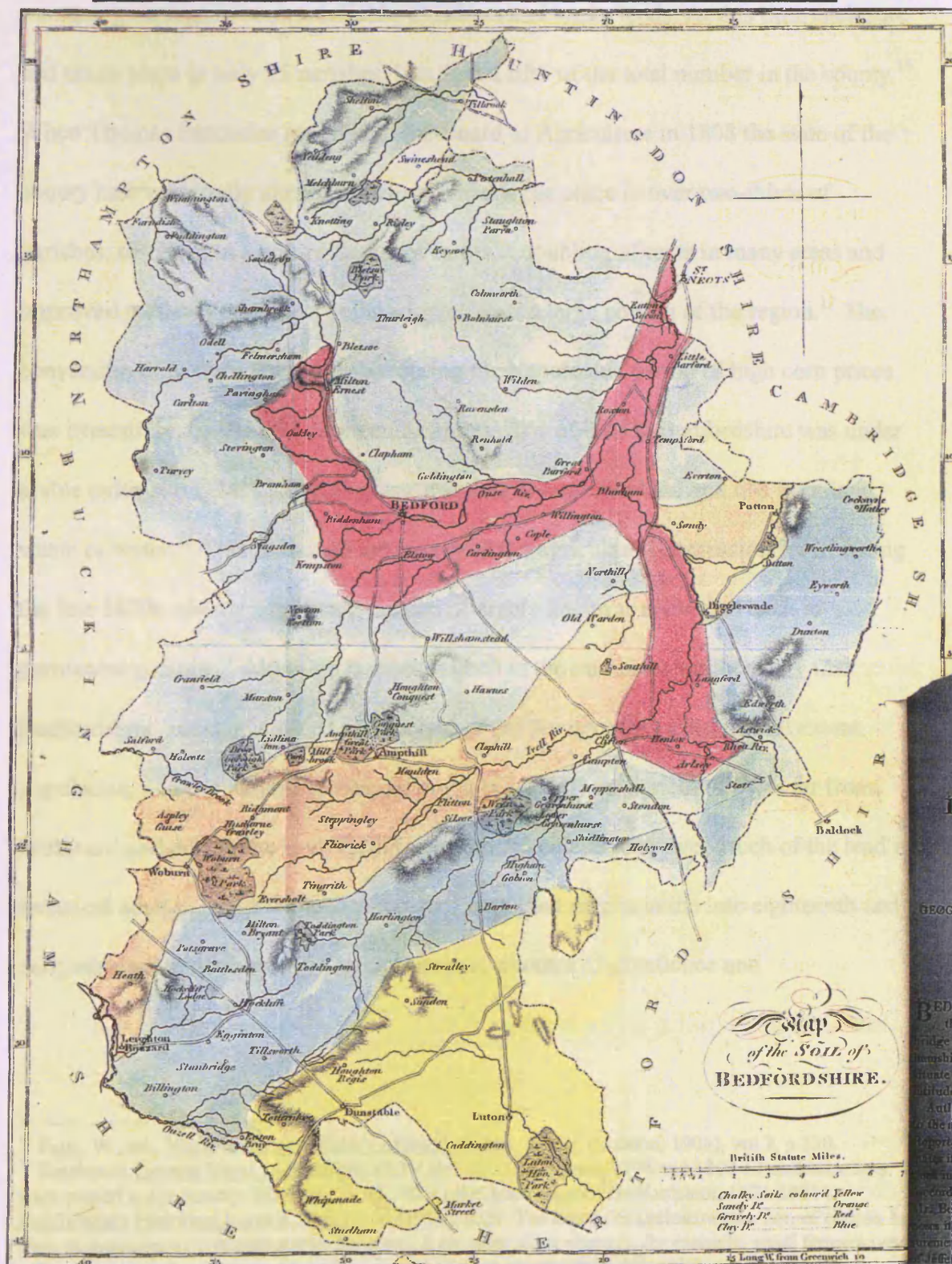
<sup>13</sup> Bennett, 'Farming of Bedfordshire', p.2.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett, 'Farming of Bedfordshire', p.3.

<sup>15</sup> Stone, T., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Bedford, (London, 1794), p.10.



**Map 5.1: The regions of Bedfordshire in the early nineteenth century**



Source: Batchelor, T., *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Bedford*, (London, 1808). Clay soils are shown in green, sandy soils across the centre of the county are depicted in orange and chalk soils, in south Bedfordshire are in yellow. The red shading is an area of gravelly soils.

remaining acreage in common fields, meadows and waste lands. At this time enclosure had taken place in only 25 parishes, less than a fifth of the total number in the county.<sup>16</sup> When Thomas Batchelor reported to the Board of Agriculture in 1808 the state of the county had 'materially altered': enclosure had taken place in over two-thirds of parishes, resulting in a consolidation of farms, a doubling of rents in many areas and improved methods of culture being adopted over a large portion of the region.<sup>17</sup> The conversion of pasture land to arable during the Napoleonic period of high corn prices was irresistible: by the mid nineteenth century 70% of land in Bedfordshire was under arable cultivation, 24% stood as grass, meadow or common land and 6% woodland, waste or water.<sup>18</sup> This remained the case until the agricultural depression set-in during the late 1870s when a significant portion of arable land was converted back to permanent pasture.<sup>19</sup> Although Bennett argued in the mid nineteenth century that Bedfordshire 'must be classed as a second or third-rate county in territorial extent, population, and the natural fertility of much of its soil', its agriculture was far from backward and during the mid Victorian boom the county took over much of the lead in technical advancement hitherto associated with East Anglia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>20</sup> Woburn became a centre of excellence and

<sup>16</sup> Page, W., ed., Victoria County History of Bedfordshire, 2 vols, (London, 1908), vol 2, p.130.

<sup>17</sup> Batchelor, General View...of Bedford, ch.IV and ch.XII. Between 1794 and 1807 52 enclosure acts were passed in the county. Marshall, L. M., 'The rural population of Bedfordshire, 1671-1921', Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 16 (1934), p.24. The impact of enclosure may not, of course, have been as sweeping as contemporaries believed. Even after these changes, for example, small farmers were still numerous in the northern part of the county with its poorer clay soils, which were less readily adaptable to new methods of cultivation.

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, 'Farming of Bedfordshire', p.18.

<sup>19</sup> In 1891 for example, a third of the total cultivated area of the county was in permanent pasture, an increase of over 17,000 acres in twelve years. PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.17.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, 'Farming of Bedfordshire', p.1. See Agar, N., 'The Bedfordshire farmworker in the nineteenth century', Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 60 (1981), p.2.

experimentation, and commentators testified to the skill of Bedfordshire farmers in this period.<sup>21</sup>

The condition of agricultural labourers in Bedfordshire largely echoed the pattern outlined in the last chapter on nineteenth-century Norfolk. The system of hiring yearly farm servants had irreversibly declined by the mid nineteenth century. Batchelor noted the beginning of this change in 1808, apportioning blame to the high costs of feeding servants in the farmhouse:

The greatest part of the business of husbandry is performed by day-labourers in every part of the county. It is common, however, on most farms of considerable size, to retain annual servants in the capacity of horse-keeper, cow-man, shepherd and kitchen-maid, though the great advance in the price of provisions has apparently contributed to diminish the number of domestic servants of every description.<sup>22</sup>

As in Norfolk, the return of labourers in 1815 after the French Wars was the catalyst for dismissing servants in large numbers and replacing them with labourers hired on a weekly or daily basis. The high ratio of corn-growing land in Bedfordshire and the seasonal input of labour this needed, combined with a general shortage of capital for farming improvements after 1815, resulted in 'extreme seasonality' in local labour demands, especially in the Woburn and Ampthill areas.<sup>23</sup> Farm accounts from this period show 'roundsmen' employed on local farms on trivial or inessential work and paid less than ordinary labourers.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary commentators referred constantly to

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<sup>21</sup> Bedford, Duke of., A Great Agricultural Estate: Being the Story of the Origin and Administration of Woburn and Thorney, 3rd edn (London, 1897). Bennett wrote, 'in the progress of its agriculture, in the improvement of its stock, and, it may be added, in the social order, public spirit, and intelligence of its yeoman, it occasions an honourable and prominent position among the counties of England'. Bennett, 'Farming of Bedfordshire', p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Batchelor, General View... of Bedford, p. 580.

<sup>23</sup> Apfel, W., and Dunkley, P., 'English rural society and the new poor law: Bedfordshire, 1834-1847', Social History, 10 (1985), 37-68 (p. 59).

<sup>24</sup> Under the roundsmen system, labourers were taken on by the farmers in the village in proportion to each farms rateable value. The farmer received back from the poor rate part or all of the money given as wages to labourers. See Cirket, A. F., 'The 1830 riots in Bedfordshire: background and events', Bedfordshire



this 'surplus labour' problem in the early nineteenth century. The Duke of Bedford's steward Thomas Bennett wrote in August 1833 for example:

Men have been then to spare in every parish round about us during Harvest, a striking proof that the population is overabundant: we have made no arrangements as yet; but there are so many out of work, in Ridgemont, Crawley and Eversholt, that we must do something this Week...<sup>25</sup>

As a result poor relief in Bedfordshire doubled in the first two decades of the century, costs reaching a peak in 1830.<sup>26</sup> The 1834 Poor Law Report found average male weekly wages of 9s. to 12s. a week in the county. This corresponded to those of Norfolk labourers and confirms the pattern that southern labourers were paid approximately a third less than their northern counterparts for comparable work. Wages in Bedfordshire did marginally improve in the 1850s and 1860s as agriculture became more prosperous with the increasing urban demand for food. Bennett reported wages were 'about the average of the kingdom' in 1857<sup>27</sup>, whilst Culley recorded typical weekly earnings of 11s. to 14s. a decade later.<sup>28</sup> As in Norfolk, the labour market did shift in favour of the rural workers from the late 1870s. Bear reported in the 1890s that employment on farms in the Woburn district 'appears to be exceptionally regular', with farmers employing 'as many regular hands in winter as in summer'.<sup>29</sup> Thus whilst farmers complained 'their own outlook was never so gloomy', the lower price of provisions and tighter labour market meant 'labourers were never as well off as they are at the present time'.<sup>30</sup>

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Historical Record Society, 57 (1978), 75-112 (p.75). For farm accounts which record this system in operation see BLARS, OR 1370-1381, Farm and estate accounts of Richard Orlebar, Podington, 1792-1888 (see OR 1370 for the years 1792-1802) and BLARS, X 297/81, Farm accounts, Birchfield farm, Howbury estate, 1817-1819.

<sup>25</sup> BLARS, R3 3772, Correspondence of the Russell estate. Duke of Bedford's steward's correspondence. Thomas Bennett, August, 1833.

<sup>26</sup> Apfel and Dunkley, 'English rural society', pp.39-40.

<sup>27</sup> Bennett, 'Farming of Bedfordshire', p.25.

<sup>28</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.124.

<sup>29</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.19.

<sup>30</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.25.

In rural Bedfordshire, the domestic industries of lacemaking and strawplaiting co-existed alongside agriculture. The manufacture of pillow lace was introduced into England by Continental refugees escaping persecution in the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>31</sup> By the early decades of the seventeenth century it was firmly established on a commercial basis and was carried out over a wide area of Britain, partly at the initiative of Poor Law overseers who were anxious to increase the employment of paupers in their villages.<sup>32</sup> When Daniel Defoe visited Bedfordshire in the 1720s he discovered a flourishing trade:

From hence, thro' the whole Part of this County, as far as the Border of Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, the People are taken up with the manufacture of Bone-Lace, in which they are wonderfully encreas'd and improv'd within these few Years past.<sup>33</sup>

The closure of the American market during the War of Independence severely disrupted the industry, causing the decline of lace manufacture in many outlying districts of England. Thus by the late eighteenth century lacemaking was firmly concentrated in the south Midlands counties of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, and also the Honiton region of Devon. In 1780 it was estimated that the industry employed over 140,000 people in the three Midlands counties alone.<sup>34</sup> Prosperity returned during the Napoleonic Wars when foreign imports were halted. After 1815, the freeing of imports and the consequent drop in lace prices coincided with the rise of machine-made lace and contemporaries conveyed a picture of a pauperised industry in the

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<sup>31</sup> Freeman, Pillow Lace in the East Midlands, pp.10-11.

<sup>32</sup> The earliest reference to the teaching of lacemaking to pauper children comes from Eaton-Socon in 1596. See Buck, 'Teaching of lacemaking', p.39. See also Kennett, D. H., 'Lacemaking by Bedfordshire paupers', Textile History, 5 (1975), 111-118.

<sup>33</sup> Defoe, D., A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain, 2 vols, 1st edn 1726 (London, 1962), vol 2, p.114.

<sup>34</sup> Pinchbeck, I., Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850, 2nd edn (London, 1981), pp.203-204.

Bedfordshire countryside of the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>35</sup> Major Burns, reporting to the 1843 Children's Employment Commission found the trade in a 'depressed state', the numbers learning the trade 'very much diminished'.<sup>36</sup> The industry attempted to compete with machine-made lace by adopting repetitive patterns and coarser thread, and this partly succeeded in the 1850s and 1860s when Maltese lace was in vogue. However this move had the effect of lowering the standards of lace and the skills of workers and failed to halt the decline of handmade lace in the face of machinery competition. Lace schools also died out in the 1870s under pressure to reform after the passing of the 1867 Workshop Act and the 1870 Education Act. The decline of the trade caught the attention of local authorities and philanthropists and in the general revival of interest in rural life and handicrafts at the end of the century, a number of Lace Association were established to secure a market for the production of better quality lace.<sup>37</sup> However these had little impact on the industry as a whole and in 1893 Bear wrote of an industry 'nearly extinct' in Bedfordshire, with few women 'who injure their health by stooping over this monotonous and tiresome work'.<sup>38</sup>

The strawplaiting trade originated in Tuscany in the fourteenth century and like lacemaking was introduced into Britain by sixteenth-century refugees.<sup>39</sup> By the late seventeenth century, the industry was firmly localised in the south Midlands region, although it did not become a significant employer until the end of the eighteenth

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<sup>35</sup> Following the French Wars import duties were lowered in 1826, 1842 and 1846 but were not removed altogether until 1860. See Wardle, P., Victorian Lace, (London, 1968), p.136. Heathcote patented his improved machine for bobbin net in 1809 and the manufacture of machine lace spread thereafter. See Pinchbeck, Women Workers, p.209.

<sup>36</sup> PP, 1843, XVI, Report by Burns, p.a12.

<sup>37</sup> Spencerley, 'The lace associations'.

<sup>38</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.24.

<sup>39</sup> Freeman, Luton and the Hat Industry, p.8; Law, C. M., 'Luton and the hat industry', East Midland Geographer, 4 (1968), 329-341 (p.329).

century. The importance of the light, chalky soils of the Chilterns to the growth of good quality wheat was highlighted by early nineteenth-century writers. The suitability of Midlands straw was reflected in the fact that Essex and Suffolk dealers bought straw in Hitchin market and transported it back to their localities.<sup>40</sup> The industry grew rapidly during the Napoleonic Wars import embargo, both geographically and in terms of the numbers it employed. Batchelor noted the expansion of the plaiting district in 1808:

Straw-plaiting was formerly confined to the chalky part of the county; but has been so much encouraged within the last few years, that it has spread rapidly over the whole southern district, as far as Woburn, Ampthill, and Shefford.<sup>41</sup>

Thus areas previously noted for lacemaking gave way to strawplaiting under the inducement of higher wages.<sup>42</sup> The introduction of the straw splitting machine in 1800, making a finer plait possible, further aided the expansion of the industry. The presence of renewed imports from Italy and Switzerland after 1815 depressed the English strawplait industry but it was only after the importation of cheap plait from the Far East in the 1870s that the collapse of the English industry began in earnest. New importations coincided with the introduction of the sewing machine into the bonnet industry and the home plaiting industry was unable to meet the increased demand of the bonnet trade. In 1893 it was estimated that less than 5% of the plait sold at Luton market was English and around the Woburn district it was noted that the 'plaiting

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<sup>40</sup> A. J. Tansley for example writes, 'Bedfordshire has long been celebrated for the production of beautiful wheat straws, suitable for the purpose of plaiting...Straw growing now extends throughout the southern part of the country, in the valleys and along the slopes of the Chiltern hills, and also in parts of Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire'. Tansley, A. J., 'On the straw plait trade', Journal of the Society of Arts, 9 (1860), 69-77 (p.69). See also Law, 'Luton and the hat industry', p.332 and Sharpe, P., 'The women's harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c.1793-1885', Rural History, 5 (1994), 129-142 (p.130).

<sup>41</sup> Batchelor, General View...of Bedfordshire, p.594.

<sup>42</sup> At Northill, originally at the centre of the lacemaking district, it became impossible to find applicants for Hutchinsons' Charity for educating and apprenticing fatherless girls 'in consequence of their preferring the home industry of plaiting, at that time very flourishing'. Quoted in Dony, J., A History of the Straw Hat Industry, (Luton, 1942), pp.32-33.

industry once hardly inferior to that of agriculture as the mainstay of the working class in the district, is all but extinct'.<sup>43</sup>

Contemporaries describe Bedfordshire agriculture in the nineteenth century as an overwhelmingly male activity. Batchelor wrote in 1808, 'very few women attend to any of the business of agriculture', and parish replies to the 1834 Poor Law Report depict a similar absence of women from the fields.<sup>44</sup> This situation was confirmed by Culley in 1867, who wrote:

It is not, however, the custom to employ women in farm labour in Bedfordshire. In the north of the county the females of the labouring class are engaged in lace making, and in the south and more populous part of the county in plaiting straw...<sup>45</sup>

This view has been accepted uncritically by modern historians and has led to a dichotomy in the literature between male dominated agriculture and largely female dominated work in the local domestic industries. This leaves many questions unresolved and tends to discount possible links between the two types of employment. Are there times in the nineteenth century when women were to be found working in agriculture and what jobs were they employed to do? If they were absent from the fields, who carried out the jobs typically performed by women in Norfolk and the East Riding such as weeding, hoeing and haymaking? What were the links between female and child labour? Did the existence of employment in domestic industries affect the wages of men who worked in agriculture? The relationship between Bedfordshire agriculture and women's work in the domestic industries in the nineteenth century will be considered first. The persistence of female employment in the domestic industries

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<sup>43</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXVII, Report by Collett, p.24.

<sup>44</sup> Batchelor, General View...of Bedford, p.597. The absence of women engaged in agriculture in regions with domestic industries in 1834 is examined in Chapter two, pp.74-77.

<sup>45</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.124.

throughout the century will then be analysed from census material. It will be argued that far from collapsing in the 1830s and 1840s, both domestic industries continued to offer Bedfordshire women a viable employment option throughout most of the nineteenth century.

### **5.3: Bedfordshire agriculture and women's work**

Table 5.1 shows the annual farm expenditure on male, female and child labour on eleven Bedfordshire farms where information could be obtained for the purpose of this study. These range in years from 1795 to 1894 and confirm the official view that agriculture in nineteenth-century Bedfordshire was a male affair.<sup>46</sup> On only four occasions do women appear to have been employed in agricultural work of any description. On no farms do women account for more than 3% of total annual expenditure on labour. So how can these figures add to an understanding of women's work in the county? At Podington Manor farm, a 215 acre farm situated in the north of the county, three women were very casually employed for a few days weeding barley in June, haymaking in late July and raking barley after the harvest in October 1795. In total this amounted to £2. 11s. 10d., or 1% of the total farm labour expenditure.<sup>47</sup> At Eversholt in 1811 women were employed for a number of days between May and August, and although tasks were not recorded in this account, the pattern of work is likely to conform to that at Podington. This was a small farm, employing two to four male labourers in this year with total labour outgoings of £91. 17s. 8d.<sup>48</sup> Women do not

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<sup>46</sup> As with other counties included in this study, where a run of accounts survive, for example at Podington and Upper Stondon, certain years have been sampled to be representative of trends as a whole. In most cases accounts only survive for a few years and so only one year was sampled.

<sup>47</sup> BLARS, OR 1370.

<sup>48</sup> University of Reading Library (hereafter URL), BED P245/1, Farm accounts, Eversholt, 1802-1817.

**Table 5.1: Annual farm expenditure on male, female and child  
labour in nineteenth-century Bedfordshire**

Farm	Year	% Men	% Women	% Children	% Task
Podington Manor farm	1795	82%	1%	3%	14%
	1841	78%	0%	8%	14%
	1885	78%	0%	6%	16%
Eversholt	1811	77%	3%	1%	19%
Birchfield	1818	55%	0%	6%	39%
Manor farm, Upper Stondon	1832	61%	0%	8%	31%
	1862	85%	0%	4%	11%
Rameridge End farm, Luton	1835	87%	1%	12%	*
Cardington	1848	88%	0%	10%	2%
Chalgrave Manor farm	1848	86%	0%	10%	4%
Chawston Manor farm	1869	90%	0%	10%	*
Manor farm, Stevington	1875	93%	0%	7%	*
Duck End farm, Wilstead	1881	83%	0%	17%	0%
Parsonage farm, Shillington	1894	93%	2%	5%	*

\* On these farms it was impossible to distinguish task work payments from ordinary weekly wages.

Sources: BLARS, OR 1370-1381; URL, BED P245/1; BLARS, X 297/81; BLARS, X 159/1-3, Wages books of the Long family, Manor farm, Upper Stondon, 1817-1887; BLARS, Z 600/2, Farm accounts of William Barber of Rameridge End farm, Luton, August 1833-August 1837; BLARS, MIC 85, J. Newman's account books, Cardington, 1839-1848; BLARS, X 52/70, Labour book, Chalgrave Manor farm, 1847-1857; BLARS, Z 512/1, Chawston Manor farm, labour books of John Wilkinson of Rostow, 1868-1885; BLARS, X 117/22, Farm account book, Manor farm, Stevington, 1875-1876; BLARS, MIC 85, J. Newman's account books, Duck End farm, Wilstead, 1875-1891; BLARS, X 230/6, Parsonage farm, Shillington. Accounts, 1893-1898.

figure to any significant extent in any labour accounts again until the 1890s at Shillington. This probably coincided with the increase of market gardening in the eastern division of the county. This point will be expanded upon later in the chapter. Both the Podington and Eversholt evidence coincides with the French Wars period when male labour shortages may have prompted farmers to turn to other sources of employees. It was mentioned in the correspondence of a local Bedfordshire doctor that labour shortages had forced up wages greatly during the harvest period in 1797:

Our harvest is very promising, but the price of labour is enormous. What we used to pay 5 shillings an acre for reaping, is now 15s. to a guinea which will make considerable difference in regard to the profits on the produce. Thanks to Mr. Pitt for having been the cause of destroying so many of our fellow countrymen and of making of those few that remain at home soldiers.<sup>49</sup>

However the utilisation of women on these farms was tiny and certainly does not provide 'widespread supporting evidence' for an 'increase of female employment in the years 1780 to 1815' as Alan Armstrong has argued.<sup>50</sup> These findings for Bedfordshire correspond to those of Pamela Sharpe who established that women did little work on farms in the strawplaiting district of Essex during the Napoleonic Wars, with farmers trying to ensure a male labour supply by using contract men, including soldiers.<sup>51</sup>

Why were women not more extensively employed on farms in Bedfordshire at this time of possible male labour shortages? The answer lies in the prosperity of both lacemaking and strawplaiting in the county during this period. Both trades would have been a more remunerative option for women and largely kept them from agricultural

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<sup>49</sup> BLARS, BS 2094, Letter from William Lee Antoine to Lawer, 20th August 1797.

<sup>50</sup> Armstrong, A., 'Labour 1: rural population growth, systems of employment, and incomes', in Mingay, G. E., ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol VI, 1750-1850, (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 641-728 (p.684).

<sup>51</sup> Sharpe, P., *Adapting to Capitalism: Women Working in the English Economy, 1700-1850*, (Basingstoke, 1996), pp.85-86.



work. Table 5.2 shows the levels of weekly wages obtained by women working in the lace and plait trades across the nineteenth century. Male weekly wages in agriculture have been included for comparative purposes. This exercise highlights the peak in wages for women engaged in the domestic industries during the Napoleonic Wars. Strawplaiting was by far the most lucrative and sums of a guinea were quoted. Batchelor was somewhat sceptical about this amount, speculating that some would 'boast of their earnings', but he believed it was 'an undoubted fact, that straw-plait to the value of a guinea, and upwards, has been sometimes manufactured in one week by a

**Table 5.2: Nineteenth-century weekly wages in lacemaking, strawplaiting and agriculture**

Year	Women in lace	Women in straw	Men in agriculture
1808	5s-9s	Up to 21s	8s-10s
1834	1s.6d-3s	5s-10s	9s-12s
1843	3s.6d	3s-4s	8s-12s
1867-8	2s.6d-3s	2s.6d	11s-14s
1893-4	6d	6d-1s	12s-16s

Sources: Batchelor, General View...of Bedford, p.596; p.594; p.582; PP, 1834, XXX, Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws. Appendix (B.1). Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts. Part 1, p.3a; p.7a; p.8a; PP, 1843, XVI, Report by Burns, p.a11; p.a12; PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.134; p.136; PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.24.

single person'.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising that strawplait ousted lacemaking as the dominant occupation of women in the southern region of Bedfordshire at this time, but even those districts entirely reliant on lace prospered. An experienced lacemaker could earn up to 9s. a week, the equivalent of an average weekly male wage in agriculture. 'The families of those women who do not understand this useful art', Batchelor complained, 'are often extremely troublesome to the parishes'.<sup>53</sup>

Strawplaiting did however experience great seasonal fluctuations which undermined the amount women could earn over the course of the year. The spring and summer price of plait was double that of autumn and winter. Lucy Luck wrote in her autobiography, 'The straw work is very bad, as a rule, from July up to about Christmas'.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, as Batchelor noted, expedients such as the expense of the straw and the time occupied in sorting and bleaching the article were often 'overlooked in those high-sounding calculations'.<sup>55</sup> In the early nineteenth century straw bundles were bought by the plaiters direct from local farmers, cut into lengths and split ready for plaiting at home. As the trade increased, dealers bought the straw from farmers, sorted it and sold it to women in smaller quantities. The finished plait was coiled into scores (20 yards) ready for sale. The poorest women sold to the village dealers, often at lengths of less than 20 yards, where the lowest prices were obtained but the need the greatest. It was far more advantageous for women to sell at market themselves, vying for the highest price, as Edwin Grey describes in his autobiography:

Many of the women preferred to sell their plait at greater advantage in the open market at St. Albans, than to any of the merchants calling and collecting locally, also at the same time the

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<sup>52</sup> Batchelor, *General View...of Bedfordshire*, p.594.

<sup>53</sup> Batchelor, *General View...of Bedfordshire*, p.596.

<sup>54</sup> Burnett, J., ed., *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s*, 2nd edn (London, 1994), p.63.

<sup>55</sup> Batchelor, *General View...of Bedfordshire*, p.595.

money obtained could be spent more advantageously at the large shops in the town.<sup>56</sup>

Lacemakers were less affected by dramatic seasonal fluctuations but more dependent on dealers whose exploitative tactics could significantly affect the remuneration women received for their work. Laceworkers were dependent on dealers for thread, patterns, orders and payments on completion. They were under an obligation to sell lace made from a buyer's pattern to that buyer only. In the lace villages there was a 'cut-off' day every four to five weeks, where lace was removed from the pillow and sold. The lace dealer was either an independent salesman who bought lace from workers and resold it to merchants, or were agents for a merchant. The latter middlemen took over much of the business of sale in the nineteenth century and conducted it without much knowledge of the craft, concerned only with buying and selling at the best prices. Often the agent was a village shopkeeper and frequently operated the truck-system, which was a great grievance to lacemakers.<sup>57</sup> Women were often sold thread at highly inflated prices (Batchelor estimated the expense totalled one-eighth of the gross value of the lace), sums also overlooked in most wage estimates.<sup>58</sup> Joseph Bell wrote of how this process affected the work of his mother and sister in the Bedfordshire village of Turvey in the 1840s:

For all their labour and contrivance they were very badly paid. They had to work long days to earn a few pence...by the time they had paid for the hire of their parchment and the cotton they had the handling of very little money indeed but were often in debt - which was often much to their disadvantage, which made them feel very humble and submissive...many of these lace dealers were what are

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<sup>56</sup> Grey, E., *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*. (St. Albans, 1935), p.78.

<sup>57</sup> White found that the truck-system, 'either entire or partial, is the rule, though I am told not the universal rule, of the pillow lace manufacture. The small manufactures or buyers have shops of grocery and drapery, etc., which much be taken in payment'. PP, 1863, XVII, Report by White, p.185.

<sup>58</sup> Batchelor, *General View...of Bedfordshire*, p.596. White believed the total expense of buying 'thread, silk, patterns etc' from the buyers could amount 'to a third or more of the entire cost, from the price paid'. PP, 1863, XVII, Report by White, p.185.

called 'Tallymen'. In this way they would get this beautiful lace out of these poor people for a mere nothing... This goes to show how these commercial capitalists had battered and fattened on these poor people.<sup>59</sup>

Seasonal fluctuations and the exploitative tactics of the dealer were exacerbated by changes in fashion which affected both trades enormously. Because of this, as Sharpe points out, the amount of employment and level of wages obtained by women working in these rural industries was dictated by the urban market.<sup>60</sup>

Ivy Pinckbeck argues that the wages of agricultural labourers in areas with established domestic industries 'were generally low, and based on the assumption that wives and children by some means or other, earned their own keep'.<sup>61</sup> This view has been recently reinforced by Sharpe who maintains that in Essex 'male wages were noticeably lower in parishes with female work of any type, including strawplaiting'.<sup>62</sup> However, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the buoyancy of female wages in the strawplaiting districts of south Bedfordshire seems to have raised the wages of agricultural workers as a whole. The existence of a prosperous, alternative trade competing for labour with agriculture, raised the wages of those employed in the latter. Batchelor argued that five guineas was the average servant-maid's wage in Bedfordshire in 1808, though that sum was 'rather below the average of the straw-plait district in the south-east of the county'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, male weekly agricultural wages were recorded at 8s. to 9s. a week in the west and northern portions of the county, whereas 'in the south

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<sup>59</sup> BLARS, FAC 129, The autobiography of Joseph Bell of Turvey. The story of twelve years in the life of a village orphan, 1846 to 1858 told by himself, pp.14-15.

<sup>60</sup> Sharpe, 'The women's harvest', p.138.

<sup>61</sup> Pinckbeck, Women Workers, p.202.

<sup>62</sup> Sharpe, Adapting to Capitalism, p.59.

<sup>63</sup> Batchelor, General View...of Bedford, p.581.

and eastern district, the wages are in general rather higher; as from 9 to 10 shillings in the greater part of the district included between Eaton-Socon, Dunstable and Luton'.<sup>64</sup>

Whilst the benefits of female employment were recognised in the early nineteenth century, the possibility of women earning very high wages drew much condemnation from observers. There were frequent reports that women and children earned more than their husbands at farm work, discouraging men from seeking permanent employment or contributing fully to the family exchequer. Around Hempstead it was noted,

...it is too much the case that married men, knowing their wives and families earn enough to support themselves by plaiting, take no care about them, and spend all their own earnings at the beer-houses.<sup>65</sup>

In prosperous years men were drawn into straw and lace work, although it was most likely to have been looked upon as a secondary occupation, in times of bad weather or under-employment, rather than as a permanent substitute for agricultural work.<sup>66</sup>

Women were further criticised for abandoning their domestic duties in the home and the monetary and social independence gained by young women was blamed for the scarcity of servants in the county.<sup>67</sup> Thomas Bennett, the steward to the Duke of Bedford, writing on a scheme to pay labourers part of their wages in wheat, argued this would,

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<sup>64</sup> Batchelor, *General View...of Bedford*, p.582.

<sup>65</sup> PP, 1843, XIV, Report by Burns, p.a50.

<sup>66</sup> The Proceedings of the Committee of Lace Manufacturers for the Counties of Buckingham, Bedford and Northampton recorded in 1815 that 'Lace making is the employment not only of nearly all the adult and unmarried Females but of Mothers of Families. Children of both sexes and some cases of Men especially of the aged and infirm and others who are unfit for Laborious occupations' were also employed in the trade. Proceedings, 1814-15, Newton and Cowper Museum, Olney. However in Ivinghoe, Buckinghamshire, it was found that 76 males in 1871 still earned a living as plaiters according to the census of that year. In addition three men worked as dealers, one man as a strawcutter and two men as plait dealers in the village. See Horn, C. A. and Horn, P., 'The social structure of an "industrial" community: Ivinghoe in Buckinghamshire in 1871', *Local Population Studies*, 31 (1983), 9-20 (p.10).

<sup>67</sup> Young commented on the strawplait trade, 'The farmers complain of it doing mischief, for it makes the poor saucy, and no servants can be procured, or any field work done, where this manufacture establishes itself'. Young, *General View...of Herefordshire*, pp.222-223.

enable the labourers to grind their own Wheat and make their own Bread...and to get more wholesome article of food. The labourers families would also profit by this as it wd accustom them to more domestic work and fit them better for going in Farm Houses etc instead of learning nothing at home but the lace pillow and straw plaiting, the fertile source of prostitution and other depraved habits, which our villages are become most notorious for.<sup>68</sup>

Single women in particular were condemned for the frivolity of their lifestyles.

According to Batchelor in 1808:

The female sex are fond of the luxury of dress; the lace-makers and female servants, who receive from four to seven guineas per annum, can afford to purchase a pair of shoes every three or four months, and other apparel not much inferior to that of their employers; in consequence of which, in a few years after marriage, they become dependent on their parish for food and clothing, household furniture, and even rent.<sup>69</sup>

The affluence of these domestic industries and the effect on local agriculture is shown clearly by comments made by the authors of the General Views of the neighbouring county of Buckinghamshire. In 1794 it was noted that local industries did 'not employ so great a number of hands as to produce any particular effect upon the agriculture of the district', but by 1813, employment in lace and straw manufacture was so 'advantageous' and 'the consequence is, that the farmer suffers: no women nor young persons will work in the field...'.<sup>70</sup> As Sharpe points out, the main seasons for plaiting - spring and summer - overlapped with the peak times for the employment of women in agriculture for tasks such as weeding and hoeing.<sup>71</sup> The high earnings in the former would have therefore dissuaded women from participation in the latter. Lacemaking

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<sup>68</sup> BLARS, R3 4739, Correspondence of the Russell estate. Duke of Bedford's steward's correspondence. Thomas Bennett to C. Haedy, 1843.

<sup>69</sup> Batchelor, General View...of Bedfordshire, pp.607-8.

<sup>70</sup> James, W., and Malcolm, J., General View of the Agriculture of the County of Buckinghamshire, (London, 1794), p.46; Priest, Rev. St. John., General View of the Agriculture of Buckinghamshire, (London, 1813), p.81.

<sup>71</sup> Sharpe, 'The women's harvest' p.134.

was less interwoven with the agricultural calendar but was still essentially incompatible with agricultural work. Joanna Bourke has shown how in nineteenth-century Ireland, attempts were made in some regions to make lacemaking a supplementary form of labour for the wives and daughters of labourers in slack agricultural seasons when their labour on farms was not required. A number of problems resulted from this experiment: lace output in these areas dropped in the spring and autumn seasons when women's work in agriculture peaked, an interruption in production not appreciated by lace dealers; higher wages had to be paid to try and retain lace workers during the harvest period, and women found their coarsened hands clumsy for detailed lace work.<sup>72</sup>

Following the depression in the domestic industries after 1815, and the growth of an over-saturated rural labour market, the correlation between high agricultural wages and the existence of domestic industries decreased. As Table 5.2 indicates, wages in both domestic industries collapsed after 1815. In replies to the 1834 Poor Law Report the trade in lace was described as being in a 'very bad state'<sup>73</sup>, with average weekly sums of 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. reported.<sup>74</sup> Straw work was still held to be profitable for women in some parishes, wages of between 1s. and 6s. per week 'according to the work', was the average.<sup>75</sup> Although wages in the plaiting trade held up better than lace, the sense of depression was unavoidable. Cobbett wrote in the 1820s:

In this country, the manufacture was, only a few years ago very flourishing; but it has now greatly declined, and has left in

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<sup>72</sup> Bourke, J., "I was always fond of my pillow": the handmade lace industry in the United Kingdom, 1870-1914', *Rural History*, 5 (1994), 155-169 (p.162).

<sup>73</sup> PP, 1834, XVI, Report by Burns, p.7a.

<sup>74</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.8a.

<sup>75</sup> PP, 1834, XXX, p.8a. At Caddington however, it was reported that single women could earn from 7s. to 10s. per week and married women from 5s. to 7s., according to the size of their family. PP, 1834, XXX, p.3a. It was shown in chapter two that even though wages in these industries were depressed in the early 1830s (especially in comparison to twenty years earlier), they still made a significant contribution to the rural labouring family income. See chapter two, pp.83-84.

poverty and misery those whom it once well fed and clothed.<sup>76</sup>

In 1843 the 'very depressed state' of the trade continued, with women working up to 14 hours a day to earn 3 or 4 shillings a week, 'the earnings now of the plaiters at least a third less than they were in former years'.<sup>77</sup> The situation for lacemakers was described in similar terms: 'A young woman must work hard for 14 or 15 hours a day to earn 3s. 6d. a week, who formerly could easily have made 8 or 9s'.<sup>78</sup> William Apfel and Peter Dunkley conclude that by this time the straw industry 'had only limited affect on the agricultural labour market' and the depressed conditions of lace by the 1820s meant that there was little evidence it 'substantially mitigated the disruptive influence of the agrarian calendar'.<sup>79</sup> By the time Culley reported in the 1860s, male agricultural wages in the plait districts were the lowest in the county, at 11s. per week before extras.<sup>80</sup> The correlation between the existence of a flourishing manufacturing industry and high agricultural wages was noted by John Howlett in the late eighteenth century, who correctly predicted the decline in both by the middle decades of the nineteenth century:

...the fluctuation of manufacturers themselves will greatly affect the earnings of the husbandmen and his family. While manufacturers are flourishing and increasing, the price of agricultural labour in the immediate vicinity will flourish and increase too; but the decline of the former will soon be followed by the decline also of the latter.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the depression in the domestic industries after 1815 there is little evidence to suggest that women sought alternative opportunities to supplement family

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<sup>76</sup> Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, p.154.

<sup>77</sup> PP, 1843, XVI, Report by Burns, p.a11. The depression was caused by the removal of protection tariffs in 1842.

<sup>78</sup> PP, 1843, XVI, Report by Burns, p.a12.

<sup>79</sup> Apfel and Dunkley, 'English rural society', p.59.

<sup>80</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.124.

<sup>81</sup> Howlett, Rev. J., 'The different quantity and expense of agricultural labour in different years', *Annals of Agriculture*, 18 (1792), 566-572 (p.571).



earnings by agricultural employment. Women are virtually absent from all Bedfordshire farm accounts from the 1820s to the 1890s. At Podington in 1841 Hannah and Bet Lovell, Sarah Clark and Hannah and Lucy Brown were employed for weeding in June and shocking oats and barley in September, although this made up less than 1% of the farm's labour expenditure for that year.<sup>82</sup> All these women are described as lacemakers in the census of 1851: their work in the fields was therefore exceptional and entered into only at peak seasons. At Rameridge End farm, near Luton, one woman was employed at harvest time in 1835, earning £1. So again, her presence in agriculture was exceptional and only appears at the period of greatest labour activity.<sup>83</sup> This pattern of labour is confirmed by evidence given to Culley in 1867. At Clapham for example, it was noted, 'Females are not employed in this district in fieldwork, except in the hay harvest, even this through the general use of machinery is on the decrease'.<sup>84</sup>

The general absence of Bedfordshire women from the haymaking and harvest fields is not surprising given the incompatibility of agricultural employment and work in the domestic industries. Women did participate in gleaning after the harvest though, and as in Norfolk, the valuable contribution this source of income made to the rural family economy may have offset their not being able to partake in agricultural work at the same time as lace or straw work. A. G. Tansley wrote of the 'interruption of harvest time' to plaiting work, when 'plaiters do but little then, especially when the time of gleaning arrives'.<sup>85</sup> The involvement of women in gleaning was one of the rare occasions they figured in agricultural work and also features in many autobiographical

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<sup>82</sup> BLARS, OR 1370-1381. See 1376 which covers the years 1835-1850.

<sup>83</sup> BLARS, Z 600/2.

<sup>84</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Evidence to Culley's report, p.466.

<sup>85</sup> Tansley, 'On the straw plait trade', p.71.

writings. One resident of Wooton remembered 'Scores of women folk' walking from Wooton to glean, obtaining 'enough to keep them in the winter time in flour'.<sup>86</sup> Grey similarly writes:

The gleaning season was made the most of by many of the cottage women, for the flour obtained as a result of this wheat gleaned was a great asset to the food supply of the household during the autumn and early winter...The number who did so, together with the boys and girls, was quite considerable. I should think perhaps that this time of the year must have been somewhat slack as regards plaiting, for I cannot recollect seeing very much of it being done during this period.<sup>87</sup>

In the absence of women workers, jobs labelled as 'women's work' in Norfolk and the East Riding - cleaning operations such as weeding, stone-picking and hoeing, the cultivation of root crops and haymaking - were performed by men and boys. The labour of boys in Bedfordshire was substantially utilised and female child labour was virtually unknown. In Table 5.1 the expenditure for all farms on child labour is accounted for by male children. Moreover, in most cases the percentage of annual expenditure on male children is a considerable under-estimate of the true extent of their labour. This is because the wages of boys employed on the same farms as their fathers were paid to the head of the family group and has been included in the male total in the calculations. For example, at Manor farm, Upper Stondon in 1862 'Whitbread and his three sons' were employed year-round, but the sum was always paid in total to the father.<sup>88</sup> The same happened at Eversholt in 1811 where 'Valentine and boy' worked year round, and at Podington in 1795 where 'Brown and 2 sons' were also paid as one unit.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Fraser-Newstead, B., Bedford Yesteryears: The Rural Scene, (Dunstable, 1994), p.103.

<sup>87</sup> Grey, Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village, pp.118-119.

<sup>88</sup> BLARS, X 159/3.

<sup>89</sup> URL, BED P245/1; BLARS, OR 1370.

Boys were expected to attend lace or strawplaiting schools until the age of eight when they became 'permanently attached to the staff of farms' as plough boys or teamboys, their services required year-round. Surviving daily diaries of work done and numbers of men and boys employed on the Woburn estate highlight the reliance on the labour of boys in that area. In 1806-7, Park farm employed 26 male labourers, rising to 31 at harvest. 22 boys worked alongside them, with 28 employed in August. No women worked on this farm.<sup>90</sup> Woburn Park farm was one instance where Culley reported a gang of boys still employed year round in the 1860s and points to the heavy reliance on male child labour in the county across the decades.<sup>91</sup> This is also evident from the Podington Manor farm accounts where in 1841 up to 10 ploughboys were employed year round, with extra boys used in May and June to weed and gather twitch, and in July for haymaking.<sup>92</sup> At Upper Stondon, Robert Long kept a farm diary detailing daily work completed in the 1860s and this also indicates how men and boys were utilised in the absence of women. This is particularly clear in entries from the spring and early summer months when men and boys were engaged in weeding, hoeing and haymaking tasks alongside their other jobs. On May 3rd 1862 for example he wrote, 'The men have been hoeing in Debditch since the Dung carting was finished...', on 31st May, 'The men have been hoeing the winter beans again, and the Mangold Wurzel and two day weeding the wheat in Chibley Meadow...'. In June the men and boys 'when not at the Hay have been hoeing the Beet plants in Rye close...' and on July the 12th 'The

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<sup>90</sup> BLARS, R3 2114/264-316, Woburn estate accounts. Park farm, Priestly farm and Speedwell farm, daily diaries of work done, 1806-1808.

<sup>91</sup> The employment of child labour in gangs was limited however. The absence of large, isolated farms and sparse population settlements which perpetuated the system in Norfolk, meant that gang labour was not as necessary to the agricultural process in Bedfordshire.

<sup>92</sup> BLARS, OR 1376.

company of men and boys have been hoeing out the weeds between the Beans this week since finishing the Beet...'.<sup>93</sup>

However, there are two possible ways in which women were employed in agriculture in the county. Firstly, women may have assisted their husbands and families in piecework operations. Assistant Commissioner Mr. Druce argued in his report to the Royal Commission on the Depressed Condition of Agricultural Interests that women in Bedfordshire were,

rarely employed on the farms in this county. The few that are employed help their husbands or male relatives in the harvest field or assist in the haymaking.<sup>94</sup>

Bear similarly argued that few women worked in the fields, 'unless in assisting their husbands or fathers at piece-work'.<sup>95</sup> As in Norfolk and East Yorkshire, this may disguise much work women did in the fields in tasks such as hoeing, weeding, haymaking and harvesting. Secondly there is some evidence to suggest that women were being employed in the market gardening districts of Bedfordshire in the second half of the period. There was an increase in the number of gardeners and acreage of gardening land in the early nineteenth century, but it was after the opening of the Great Northern Railway in 1851 that the industry began to assume extensive proportions, based particularly around the Biggleswade and Sandy regions.<sup>96</sup> Quicker journeys to London - an already established market - were made possible, new markets were opened up in the Midlands and north of England and vast quantities of horse manure were able to be transported from London to Bedfordshire by train. The depression in

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<sup>93</sup> BLARS, X 159/1-3. See X 159/3 for the years 1861-1887.

<sup>94</sup> PP, 1882, XV, Royal Commission on Depressed Condition of Agricultural Interests. Report by Mr. Druce on the East of England, p.9.

<sup>95</sup> PP, 1893-4, Report by Bear, pp.19-20.

<sup>96</sup> Beavington, F., 'The development of market gardening in Bedfordshire, 1799-1939', Agricultural History Review, 23 (1975), 23-48 (p.31).

corn prices after the 1870s contributed to a shift in resources to market gardening and statistics show an increase from 3,885 to 7,997 acres of land being used for this purpose between 1885 and 1896.<sup>97</sup> In addition, market gardening was more labour intensive than arable farming and although the horsedrawn plough had replaced the spade, hand labour still dominated the industry.<sup>98</sup> Culley reported in 1867 private gangs of women and children being employed for eight to twelve weeks in the summer peeling onions for the market gardeners in the neighbourhood of Biggleswade, women earning from 1s. to 1s. 6d. a day and children of 12 years and above making around 6d. a day.<sup>99</sup> Bear also found a 'few women' at work in the pea fields and fruit picking around Toddington in the 1890s<sup>100</sup>, and in the Poor Law union of St. Neots, he discovered 'a good many regular workers in market gardens among the women...In Eaton Socon 14 or 15 women, I was told, work regularly in market gardens all year round'.<sup>101</sup> Such work certainly figures in the reminiscences of local people in the late nineteenth century. At Stotford for example:

The pea-picking was in late June and early July, this was done by hand. The women would get up at four o'clock in the morning and arrive at the field with their small stools and lunches. They were paid piece-work for the number of weighed bags.<sup>102</sup>

And at Broom at the turn of the century:

At harvest time, the onions were first hand-hoed with one blade, then pulled up and laid in rows to dry. This was done by men, local women and school-children in their summer holidays. The onions were then loaded into carts, brought back to Manor Farm where women from Biggleswade, Stanford, Clifton, Southill, Shefford,

<sup>97</sup> Beavington, 'Market gardening in Bedfordshire', p.33.

<sup>98</sup> Beavington, 'Market gardening in Bedfordshire', p.39. Bear commented in 1892 that a market gardener 'has more men in proportion to his acreage than a large farmer employs'. PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.17.

<sup>99</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.126.

<sup>100</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.19.

<sup>101</sup> PP 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Mr. William Bear upon the Poor Law Union of St. Neots, p.38.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Smith, C., ed., Stotford Reflections (Bedford, 1993), p.72.

Langford (all walked, no bicycles) and Broom, peeled them...The women collected the onions from the yard, then carried them inside in big round tins...They loaded the trays with onions, balanced on their knees, and peeled away, putting the peeled onions in small barrels filled with water...At 4pm a bell was rung and the women formed a queue when the weighing commenced...For each peck and pint brass tokens were given, these were collected and come Friday at 4pm the women queued at Broom House Farm to be paid according to their tokens collected.<sup>103</sup>

Archival records from this time also indicate the presence of female labourers for certain tasks. At Parsonage farm, Shillington, in 1894 for example, women worked 'charlocking' in June<sup>104</sup>, 'pulling peas' in August and weeding in September.<sup>105</sup> They were aided by girls at certain times, one of the few instances of female child labour being recorded in the account books of the county in the nineteenth century. Similarly, records from Willington nursery in the first decade of the twentieth century record the employment of women between June and November in weeding, pea-picking and onion work.<sup>106</sup> Although the total annual expenditure on women workers at Shillington in 1894 was just 2% and at Willington in 1910 4%, these do indicate a trend in female employment at the end of the century and highlight one of the few instances where women were to be found working in Bedfordshire agriculture.

#### **5.4: Women's employment in the domestic industries, 1840-1900**

The lace and strawplait trades in the second half of the nineteenth century in Bedfordshire were frequently described as depressed and declining trades. The depiction of lacemaking as an industry in irreversible decline by the 1830s is common

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<sup>103</sup> Bedfordshire Federation of Women's Institutes, *Bedfordshire Within Living Memory*, (Newbury, 1992), pp.164-165.

<sup>104</sup> Charlock was a wild mustard, a weed with yellow flowers.

<sup>105</sup> BLARS, X 230/6.

<sup>106</sup> BLARS, X 342/5, Willington nursery records, 1910.

and the argument has been drawn upon by modern historians. Deborah Valenze for example, contends that decline of the handmade lace industry 'was nearly complete by the 1830s...'.<sup>107</sup> George Boyer similarly argues that the 'prosperity of these domestic industries was short-lived'.<sup>108</sup> Yet female employment in both trades actually increased across the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In the 1840s and 1850s the price and demand for lace reached their highest since 1815, with a large market in America, and continued to strengthen into the 1860s.<sup>109</sup> According to census figures, the number of female lacemakers (of all ages) in Bedfordshire peaked in 1861 at 6,714 and remained stable until 1871, when the figure was recorded at 6,051. This is shown clearly in Fig 5.1. White records this trend in his 1863 report:

In some parts the pillow lace employment has much declined, and as it seems permanently, probably, from the improvement of machine-made lace; in all it is depressed from the state of fashion and temporary causes. Still the number of persons employed, and the amount paid for labour, are very large. One manufacturer alone employs 3,000 people, and others spoken of as in the same rank of business.<sup>110</sup>

When Culley visited Bedfordshire in 1867 the straw trade was 'very "bad"', and many families were in consequence in great distress'.<sup>111</sup> However in better years the trade was still attractive enough to employ both men and women, who were still able to 'earn higher wages than persons of the same sex employed in agriculture'.<sup>112</sup> The number of female plaiters in Bedfordshire as a whole peaked in 1871 at 20,701. The trade was still

<sup>107</sup> Valenze, D., *The First Industrial Woman* (Oxford, 1995), p.121.

<sup>108</sup> Boyer, G., *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990), p.40.

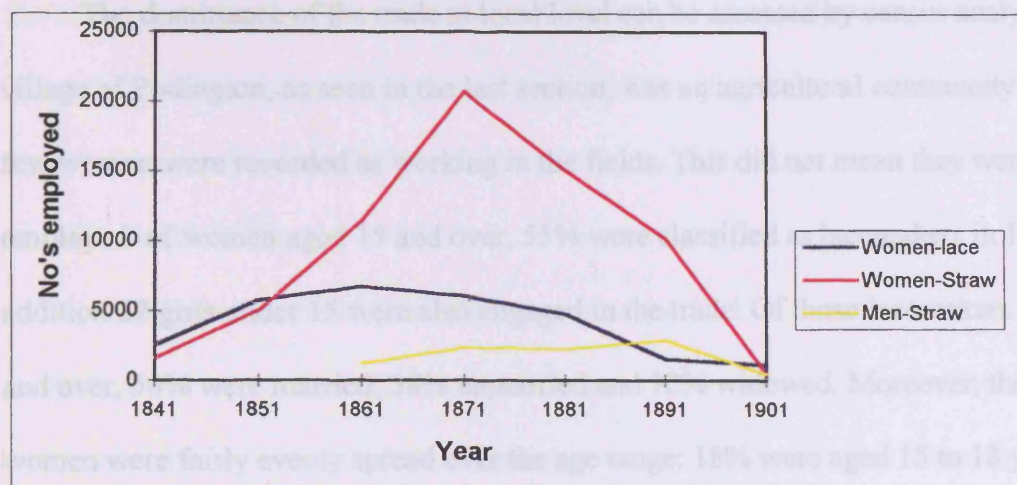
<sup>109</sup> Spencerley, G., 'The English pillow lace industry, 1840-1880: a rural industry in competition with machinery', *Business History*, 19 (1977), 68-87 (p.71).

<sup>110</sup> PP, 1863, XVII, Report by White, p.125.

<sup>111</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.124.

<sup>112</sup> PP, 1867-8, XVII, Report by Culley, p.124. Tansley for example, writing seven years earlier, found the earnings of a good plaiter, after deductions, to be 5s. to 7s. 6d. a week 'in a good state of trade'. He too argued that 'a well-ordered family will obtain as much or more than the husband who is at work on the neighbouring farm'. Tansley, 'On the straw plait trade', p.72.

**Fig 5.1: Numbers employed in lacemaking and strawplaiting  
in Bedfordshire, 1841-1901**



Sources: Census Reports of Great Britain: Population Tables: PP 1841, XXVII, Occupation Abstract, (1844); PP 1851, LXXXVIII, Ages and Occupations, vol 1 (1852-3); PP 1861, LIII, Abstracts of Ages, Occupations and Birthplaces of People, vol 2 (1863); PP 1871, LXXI, Ages, Civil Condition, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1873); PP 1881, LXXX, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1883); PP 1891, CVI, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 3 (1893-4); PP 1901, CVIII, Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces, vol 1 (1904).

prosperous enough to employ over two thousand men in the county until the 1890s. The number of men recorded in the census as lacemakers was tiny however. In 1851 only 32 males were classified in this occupation, and 19 of these were under 15 years of age. It is interesting to note that census enumerators were much more likely to record women employed in the domestic industries of Bedfordshire as engaged in an occupation in official census returns, than enumerators in the purely agricultural parishes of Norfolk and the East Riding who omitted the employment of women in agriculture from the official record. Lacemaking was a year round occupation yet strawplaiting, like agricultural employment for women, was seasonal and tended to fluctuate widely over



the course of the year. However, both lacemaking and strawplaiting were linked to the household and therefore more likely to be viewed as a 'suitable' occupation for women.

The dominance of the trade at local level can be assessed by census analysis. The village of Podington, as seen in the last section, was an agricultural community but few women were recorded as working in the fields. This did not mean they were not employed: of women aged 15 and over, 55% were classified as lacemakers in 1851. In addition 27 girls under 15 were also engaged in the trade. Of those lacemakers aged 15 and over, 50% were married, 38% unmarried and 12% widowed. Moreover, these women were fairly evenly spread over the age range: 18% were aged 15 to 18 years; 28% between 19 and 30 years; 26% between 31 and 49 years and 28% aged 50 and over. Thus the trade was still attractive to women of all ages in 1851 and there is little indication that younger women were seeking alternative trades in this village in the mid nineteenth century. The majority of married women lacemakers in Podington were betrothed to agricultural labourers (76%), but others were married to tradesmen such as shoemakers, carpenters, sawyers and woodmen. One female lacemaker, Sussanah Knowlton was married to the parish clerk and Sarah Tye's husband was returned as a farmer. No boys or men were classified as being involved in the lacemaking industry in this village. The availability of remunerative employment in the home is reflected in the high number of households with older children still living at home: in nearly a quarter of such homes the residing children were aged 16 and over. The composition of labouring households in Bedfordshire therefore stood in contrast to the East Riding where the majority of children left home at 14 years of age to go into service.

Podington was not a unique parish in Bedfordshire. Osamu Saito has analysed census returns for the village of Cardington and found a similar concentration of

employment. Moreover the existence of a population listing in the parish for 1782 has made analysis over time possible. Saito found the proportion of Cardington women in the labour force hardly changed between 1782 and 1851, and argues the effect of lacemaking on the labour force participation profiles of females was remarkable and maybe unique, with around 65% of married women in the village occupied in the trade in 1782 and 1851.<sup>113</sup>

A similar concentration of employment was to be found in the plaiting villages of south Bedfordshire in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Upper Stondon the number of women engaged in strawplaiting in 1861 was remarkable. Although only a small parish, 55% of women aged 15 and above were classified as plaiters. The only alternative employments recorded were house servants at the two village farms. Again this exercise begins to explain why women were not engaged in agriculture in the parish as highlighted in the previous section. The age range of women engaged in strawplaiting in 1861 shows a slight concentration in the older age groups: 33% were aged 20 to 39 years and 42% aged 40 years and over. This parish does not show a predominance of child plaiters as Sharpe found in Essex in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>114</sup> 58% of female plaiters in Upper Stondon were single women. These, Tansley argued, being 'skilful and quick, earn the most', but a third of women were married and despite the burden of domestic responsibilities still 'contrive to do pretty well' by the trade.<sup>115</sup> These high female employment rates in plaiting villages

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<sup>113</sup> Saito, O., 'Who worked when: life-time profiles of labour force participation in Cardington and Corfe Castle in the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries', *Local Population Studies*, 22 (1979), 14-29 (p.25). The listings for Cardington have been utilised by other historians. See in particular, Scofield, R., 'Age-specific mobility in an eighteenth-century rural English parish', *Annals de Démographie Historique*, (1970), 261-274; Barker, D., 'The inhabitants of Cardington in 1782', *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society*, 52 (1973). The list is reprinted in full in the latter text.

<sup>114</sup> Sharpe, 'The women's harvest', p.138.

<sup>115</sup> Tansley, 'On the straw plait trade', p.72.

have also been uncovered by Nigel Goose in his analysis of the 1851 census for the Berkhamstead region of Hertfordshire. There, 57% of women aged 15 and over were employed in the strawplaiting trade. 35% of married women were engaged in the work. Thus strawplaiting provided more work for married women than the cotton manufacturing towns of the north-west, where only 26% of married women worked in 1851.<sup>116</sup>

Despite the remarkable fluctuations in prices in the lacemaking and strawplaiting trades, up to the 1870s both industries were still attractive enough to draw local women into them in large numbers. Until the 1870s straw work was still a viable option for women to earn money and 'usually paid much better than farm work for women'.<sup>117</sup> Even lacemaking still paid 'sufficiently well to keep a number of women employed at it'.<sup>118</sup> Although the women employed at Podington in the 1840s could earn up to 1s. 4d. a day in agricultural work, the very casual, sporadic nature of the work meant that across the course of the year as a whole, wages earned by plaiting straw or making lace could be substantially more profitable to women workers. Moreover, both trades employed women at all stages of the lifecycle. The reasons for this are not hard to pinpoint. For young single women, they offered more freedom and independence than service or farmwork. Strawplait in particular could be made outdoors, and groups of young women and children congregating in the village lanes was common. Lacemaking, although more confining, was a social occupation also. In the summer months women would sit outdoors in groups, talking as they worked at their pillows and in winter,

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<sup>116</sup> Goose, N., Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851: The Berkhamsted Region, (Hatfield, 1996), p.36.

<sup>117</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.20.

<sup>118</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.20.

partly to economise on candles, they would work together indoors. For married women with children, both occupations - unlike agriculture - could be fitted around the daily routine of household chores and tasks such as feeding the animals. Work could also be arranged around other economic activities such as taking in washing. Grey describes the flexible work patterns of women engaged in plaiting:

The housewife could, when wanting to go on with other household work, put aside her plaiting, resuming it again at any time. She could also do the work sitting in the garden, or whilst standing by the cottage door, enjoying a chat or gossip with her neighbours. The mother also could rock the cradle with her foot, whilst using both hands at the plaiting, and also in the summer time when strolling in the lanes or fields they would most often be plaiting. I've often seen groups of women and girls gathered in little groups round the cottage doors or on the commons, talking and laughing and all busy plaiting.<sup>119</sup>

Similarly Emma Thompson of Cardington describes how she could complete all her housework chores before bringing out the lace pillow:

Well in those days it didn't take long to make Jam and marmalade as we couldn't get the sugar, neither did it take long to clean our furniture, as we only got a round deal table and about three chairs and an old stool or two, and no grates...I can tell you I used to get all done and ready for the lace pillar at nine o'clock.<sup>120</sup>

It is aspects of female employment such as sociability and personal choice which are often overlooked in purely socio-economic analyses but which gave women workers some agency and should not be forgotten amidst the need to uncover the economic contribution rural women made to family income in the nineteenth century.

It was only after the 1870s that a complete collapse in wages and numbers of women employed in the two trades occurred. Between 1871 and 1891 the number of

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<sup>119</sup> Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*, pp.69-70.

<sup>120</sup> BLARS, CRT 150/121, 'The good old times', *Bedfordshire Times*, April 1910.

plaiters in Bedfordshire fell by 50%, and by 1901 just 485 women were classified as being engaged in the trade. The number of recorded lacemakers in the county had declined by 75% between 1871 and 1891 when 1,524 women were employed in the industry. At the close of the century both trades are depicted as pauperised and only carried out by the oldest women of the village who could turn their hand to little else. C. Channer and M. E. Roberts wrote in 1900, 'There are hundreds of women between sixty and ninety years of age quite unfit for any other kind of work who keep themselves by it in independence...'.<sup>121</sup> The lowly wages gained from work in the domestic industries were still appreciated by village women in the late nineteenth century, as the testimony of Mrs Thompson highlights, and explains the persistence of such employment after the 1870s:

Well I am so glad there is still a laceman, as I am sure poor people were Glad of a laceman when I was a child, and since I have been a woman we were almost starved and we should have been quite if there hadn't been a laceman.<sup>122</sup>

As the century wore on, younger women began to hold employment in the decaying lace and straw trades in contempt and began to move into service, a complete reversal of sixty years earlier. This was particularly the case in the lace districts of north Bedfordshire where few alternative opportunities existed. Thomas Lester, one of the main lace manufacturers of the county, gave evidence to the 1863 Children's Employment Commission and noted the beginning of this change. 'There are as many young girls employed upon lace in this district as there ever were', he contended, 'though the pay is much lower and consequently more of the bigger girls leave lace to

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<sup>121</sup> Channer and Roberts, Lacemaking in the Midlands, p. 62.

<sup>122</sup> BLARS, CRT 150/121.

go into service...'.<sup>123</sup> Mrs Carter, who lived at Clapham, also highlights this shift in attitude in young women in the second half of the century:

I made lace often eight hours a day... We used to have boiled onions almost every night to eat with our potatoes instead of meat, for there was eight of us to live, and I know I was glad enough to go off to a farm house at Riseley to get a good living in a farm house.<sup>124</sup>

In the plaiting districts, young single women were recruited into the more lucrative employment of sewing bonnets and hats in Luton and Dunstable. The population of Luton trebled between 1841 and 1861.<sup>125</sup> By 1871 there were 125 females to every 100 males in Luton and Dunstable. The bulk of the sex disproportion in these two towns was in the age groups 15 to 30, and especially 20 to 25, where females outnumbered men by two to one.<sup>126</sup> The changing pattern of female employment in the late nineteenth century is well summed up by Grey who writes,

It seemed quite a natural change over that most of the young women who were engaged in the making of straw plait should at the decline of that industry have come on to straw hat making...to the hat factories in the village, or maybe by train to one or other of the numerous factories in Luton and St. Albans...But all were not factory hands; some clothes shop assistants etc.,...some few of the younger plaiters also entered domestic service, but they were in the minority; many of the married women bordering on middle age, and the active of the middle age, gradually finding work as charwomen, laundry work, etc., at the many villa residences now springing up, while quite a number of the able-bodied elderly women went to work on the farms at certain seasons...<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> PP, 1863, XVII, Report by White, p.262.

<sup>124</sup> BLARS, CRT 150/121.

<sup>125</sup> Law, 'Luton and the hat industry', p.337.

<sup>126</sup> Hooson, D. J. M., 'The straw industry of the Chilterns in the nineteenth century', East Midland Geographer, 4 (1968), 342-350 (p.344).

<sup>127</sup> Grey, Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village, pp.227-229.

### **5.5: Conclusion: the significance of alternative employment opportunities**

The work of women in the domestic industries of rural Bedfordshire in the nineteenth century is often depicted as marginal or secondary to the main business of agriculture in the county. Charles Freeman argues lacemaking was ‘a picturesque if sweated industry whose earnings supplemented the meagre wages of the farm population’<sup>128</sup>, and Joyce Godber states that lacemaking and strawplaiting were the ‘traditional “standbys”’ of the wives of agricultural labourers.<sup>129</sup> Yet it is clear from an analysis of census material, contemporary literature and farm records that these industries formed a dominant part of village life in the county and the notion of a ‘by-employment’ for rural women is misleading. Up to the 1870s both trades were still profitable enough to engage thousands of village women in Bedfordshire, accounting for the absence of women from agricultural employment in the county as a whole. Modern writers tend to place the death of the industries in the 1830s. But whilst the prosperity of the Napoleonic Wars period was never replicated, it has been shown in this chapter that both remained important employers of rural women into the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the period under examination it was customary for women in Bedfordshire not to work in the fields. There were complaints from local farmers, particularly in the early nineteenth century that they could not find women willing to engage in agricultural work, suggesting that farmers did find female labour attractive in theory. However, the issue of women’s agricultural labour as a whole in the county, in contrast to Norfolk, seemed to have aroused little controversy. Contemporary observers reserved their comments for women engaged in the domestic industries, but few

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<sup>128</sup> Freeman, *Pillow Lace in the East Midlands*, preface.

<sup>129</sup> Godber, J., *History of Bedfordshire, 1066-1888*, (Bedford, 1969), p.479.

suggested that women, particularly married women, should seek alternative employment in agricultural work. Moreover, it is by no means clear whether women themselves would have chosen to engage in agricultural work had the opportunity arisen. The lacemaking and strawplaiting industries almost certainly did not employ only those women and children who could not find work in the fields, implying an element of conscious decision making on the part of women. Whilst, as Grey argues, there were always some women who 'did not care' for plaiting (or lace) work, preferring 'outdoor work', there is no evidence to indicate women themselves wished to engage more in agricultural work. Despite the long hours and unhealthy repercussions of lace and straw work, employment in both still compared favourably to agricultural work as the evidence of Charlotte Humhries, a lace worker interviewed in 1843 shows:

Been in the trade all my life...I have four children in the work, and consider it as healthy as any other; think it as healthy, yes, sir, more so than picking stones and working in the fields.<sup>130</sup>

Bear, reporting in the 1890s, certainly understood 'why it has not been customary in the past for women to work on the land' in Bedfordshire, as 'they had something better to do'.<sup>131</sup> However, he was more perplexed by the fact that women still refrained from farm work at that time, when the domestic industries were 'utterly unremunerative and nearly extinct':

...very few women do anything in the hayfield, and none in the harvest, I believe...It struck me as very remarkable that I did not see a woman working in an allotment during my visit....This is not to be regretted, as far as women who have families are concerned, as they have quite enough to do in attending to their house duties, but there are many who could well spare time to do occasional work on their husbands' or fathers' allotments. Women are not commonly even employed as dairymaids. Men do the milking and usually turn the

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<sup>130</sup> PP, 1843, XIV, Report by Burns, p.48.

<sup>131</sup> PP, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, p.20.



churn, while farmers' wives or daughters generally make the butter.<sup>132</sup>

The existence of two established domestic industries opened up opportunities for work which were not present in Norfolk or the East Riding. During the French Wars the employment prospects for women in Bedfordshire were exceptional due to the boom in strawplait. Although wages reached their zenith in the early nineteenth century, both trades continued to employ women in great numbers. This is reflected in the high recorded level of female activity in Bedfordshire census returns into the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The recording of occupational designations to female domestic workers in Bedfordshire contrasts to the enumerators treatment of women fieldworkers in the purely agricultural counties of East Yorkshire and Norfolk. Thus whilst women engaged in lacemaking and strawplaiting were viewed as 'occupied' in official returns, female agricultural work was overlooked or omitted totally from the records. The high level of female participation in the Bedfordshire workforce suggests that employment in the domestic industries was more attractive to women of all ages than alternatives such as fieldwork or service. It is only after the final collapse of wages for women engaged in lacemaking in the 1870s and those making strawplait in the 1880s that women began to seek other employment options. For single women this meant either migration to the bonnet making towns in south Bedfordshire or a move into domestic service. Older women tentatively clung to the domestic trades, combining them with a range of tasks which were an extension of their household activities, such as charring and taking in washing. A further option was available to women in the market gardening districts of eastern Bedfordshire and the significance of women's work in alternative husbandry,

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<sup>132</sup> pp, 1893-4, XXXV, Report by Bear, pp.19-20.

whilst remaining regionally specific in the county, was to increase in importance during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Thirsk, J., Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day, (Oxford, 1997).

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **6.1: The informal economy: how did rural women 'make shift'?**

This thesis has explored the issue of labouring women's employment in rural England across the nineteenth century. The representation of female employment patterns from official printed sources provided the background to regional investigations in East Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire. Women's paid work in the formal economy of rural England has formed the main focus of debate due to the nature of surviving sources for the study of women who lived and worked in the countryside. However, evidence from the three counties under examination has also hinted at the importance of women's work and earnings within the informal economy of the nineteenth-century countryside. Whilst it is difficult to probe the mechanisms of informal channels of work and exchange, an assessment of these is relevant to an understanding of women's work patterns as a whole. Indeed, the significance of the informal economy may have a direct bearing on the ways we study women's employment patterns in the formal labour market.

Women's access to economic resources in the nineteenth-century countryside did not always readily translate into wages or formal employment. Women gleaned, took in washing, ran errands, looked after the sick and elderly, helped with the upkeep of gardens and allotments, tended animals, and gathered fruit, fuel and other valuable resources. In the household they cooked, cleaned, made and mended linen and clothing, took in lodgers, minded children and took charge of domestic budgeting. Few of these tasks are readily measurable in terms of monetary value. Nor is it easy to assess how far they helped to contribute to the rural labouring family's income across the nineteenth

century. What is clear however, is that women were central to these survival strategies. Clearly a much broader definition of 'employment' and 'earnings' is vital when researching the lives of rural women.

The informal economy was of great significance to women in areas where their access to employment in the formal market was essentially restricted to seasonal, casual and intermittent labour. Historians are now beginning to recognise this: Peter King has considered the importance of gleaning to the labouring family in the period 1750 to 1850, Jane Humphries has looked at women's access to common rights in the same period, whilst Penelope Lane has highlighted crime as being centrally important to the informal economy of women in eighteenth-century Leicestershire.<sup>1</sup> Women's contributions to rural household budgets by more informal methods have been incorporated into the three counties studied in this thesis. The existence of these informal means of 'making shift' are hinted at in official parliamentary reports and other contemporary writing. The regional incidence of gleaning has been plotted using the 1834 Poor Law Report and the positive effects of tending allotments, cottage gardens and keeping animals is a recurrent theme of nineteenth-century printed literature. However diaries, autobiographies and rural reminiscences have provided the best means to explore the informal economy in the nineteenth-century countryside. Such writings offer an alternative view of rural life and begin to fill in some of the gaps in our understanding of the daily patterns of rural women's working lives. There is a much greater depth of information to be exploited from this material than has been

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<sup>1</sup> King, P., 'Customary rights and women's earnings: the importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850', *Economic History Review*, 64 (1991), 461-476; Humphries, J., 'Enclosures, common rights and women: the proletarianisation of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *Journal of Economic History*, 50 (1990), 17-42; Lane, P., 'Work on the margins: poor women and the informal economy of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Leicestershire', *Midland History*, 22 (1997), 85-99.

possible to utilise in the three county-centred chapters of the thesis however. A reconstruction of the broader aspects of women's working lives from autobiographical writing drawn from all over England will therefore be attempted in this section.

Seven ways rural labouring women contributed to the running of the household have been identified. These cover a range of pursuits. Firstly household tasks associated with being a wife and mother - washing, sewing, laundering - were performed for other people. Secondly domestic labour - cooking, making and mending clothes, baking - performed for the family in the home, were central to women's efforts to manage the domestic budget. Thirdly the supervision of children at work in the informal economy was the responsibility of women. Next, women were involved in the gathering of food, fuel and other vital resources for the household and for sale. Gleaning has to be considered separately from other forms of food gathering as it was central to women's work in many rural areas. The sixth contribution concerned the management of animals, gardens and allotments belonging to the family. Finally, women took part in a whole range of mutual aid tasks including minding children, nursing the sick, running errands and exchanging food and commodities with neighbours. Many of these categories were interconnected and point to the complexity of the informal village economy in the nineteenth century. Other strategies were available - begging, theft, prostitution - but have been excluded from this analysis as no information is recorded on the more criminal activities in the autobiographical works consulted. This is not surprising, as John Burnett points out, because many autobiographers were concerned with representing the ideal of working class respectability in their texts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Burnett, J., ed., Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s, (London, 1982), p.58.

The first way women contributed to the rural family income was to sell their domestic skills in return for money. Whilst women were recorded in official census returns as charwomen, washerwomen and laundresses in the second half of the nineteenth century and such work could therefore be considered part of the formal economy, the informal operation of these tasks in rural areas suggests they belonged more to the makeshift economy of women. Fred Kitchen's widowed mother 'being a good needlewoman, soon found plenty of work from the big houses...' in his late nineteenth-century south Yorkshire village.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Arch's mother contributed to the 'common family fund' by washing. He writes, 'We should have been in a very bad way if my mother, by her laundry earnings, had not subsidised my father's wage'.<sup>4</sup> In Alfred Williams' late nineteenth-century Wiltshire village, the wife of the local shoemaker combined all three tasks to 'eke out enough to supplement her husband's earnings'. Thus she 'went out washing and charring, and did sewing as well; from early morning till late at night. She was toiling and toiling to earn an honest shilling'.<sup>5</sup> Cast-off clothes and food items were also administered as part payment for such tasks. These were often as valuable as cash payments. Hannah Mitchell's grandmother received milk in addition to 1s. a day for washing.<sup>6</sup> Albert Granger's mother also earned 1s. a day washing in Northamptonshire houses and was often given meat such as duck to take home 'by the ladies'.<sup>7</sup> Lucy Linnett's mother, who washed for the local butcher in Great Billing,

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<sup>3</sup> Kitchen, F., Brother to the Ox: The Autobiography of a Farm Labourer, (Horsham, 1981), p.36.

<sup>4</sup> Arch, J., Joseph Arch. The Story of His Life, (London, 1898), p.31.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, A., A Wiltshire Village, (London, 1912), p.180.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, H., The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel, (London, 1968), p.46.

<sup>7</sup> Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NtRO), Village Memories, Burton Latimer by Albert Granger, pp.2-3.

Northamptonshire, was given 1s. a day, 'her dinner and half a pint of stout for her lunch...'.<sup>8</sup>

Inside the home, the wife was in charge of the household budget. Her efficiency and ingenuity in overseeing this was crucial to the economic survival of the family. Her domestic labour for her own family was therefore crucial. The skill and self sacrifice of the mother is often a central theme in rural autobiographies. Roger Langdon writes,

...I know my mother had to struggle hard against wind and tide, as one might say, to keep us six great rollicking boys tidy, and how she did it as well as she did, with the scarcity of materials at her command, I really cannot conceive; but I do know that she many times went without food, so that we might have our fill.<sup>9</sup>

David Barr's mother battled with 'poverty and the many difficulties involved in rearing a large family' in mid nineteenth-century Warwickshire by exercising 'the most rigid thrift and economy'.<sup>10</sup> George Hardy described his mother's domestic accomplishments as 'the daily miracle'.<sup>11</sup> Lord Snell, who rose from humble beginnings in a Nottinghamshire agricultural village to the Cabinet, similarly explained:

Even more striking than the patient endurance of the farm worker, was the constant industry and careful planning of his wife. She had to practice a financial austerity such as a British Chancellor of the Exchequer have long since forgotten. The expenditure of the family had to be kept within closely calculated limits, lest over-spending during one week should involve under-feeding throughout the next.<sup>12</sup>

Women made and mended clothing for all the family as ready-made clothing was too expensive to be bought out of weekly incomes. Alfred Ireson noted that the 'tiny needle was the great industry of industry in the homes' of the rural labouring poor in the mid

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<sup>8</sup> NiRO, *Village Memories*, Great Billing by Lucy Linnett, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Langdon, R., *The Life of Roger Langdon* (London, 1909), p.18.

<sup>10</sup> Barr, D., *Climbing the Ladder: The Struggle and Successes of a Village Lad* (London, 1910), p.19.

<sup>11</sup> Hardy, G., *Those Stormy Years* (London, 1956), p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Snell, Lord., *Men, Movements and Myself* (London, 1936), p.11.

nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> According to Lord Snell, 'Waste of any kind was almost unheard of; the worn clothes of the men and elder children were cut down and remade for those who were younger'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly Edwin Grey, writing about the Hertfordshire village of Harpenden, noted that 'If the mother was handy with the needle, which the great majority were, she would make her little ones' clothes herself...'.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the century the introduction of the sewing machine into some rural labouring homes aided women in this task. 'With the help of Jane's treadle sewing-machine in the front room - bought from Aunt Lizzie', Michael Home recalls his mother making 'many of our clothes' although 'there would be constant darning and mending' to do in addition.<sup>16</sup>

Women baked much of the family's food and washed the laundry. Neither were easy tasks given the primitive nature of some cottage homes in the nineteenth century. Indeed, autobiographical material often highlights the broader circumstances which affected labouring women's lives such as the state of cottage accommodation or the lack of running water in the home. Kate Taylor describes the co-operation of neighbouring women in her Suffolk village which was essential for the smooth operation of household tasks such as cooking and washing:

The Mill Cottages were really four cottages under one roof. Each cottage had a living room and two bedrooms with one backhouse between the two cottages. This backhouse contained one large washing copper, and a large brick oven. The women took turns in using both the copper and the oven. Father cut bush faggots each winter specially for heating the oven.<sup>17</sup>

Domestic ovens were often not big enough in which to cook large Sunday dinners and villagers utilised Bakehouses for this purpose into the twentieth century. Mrs Sargeant

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, p.83.

<sup>14</sup> Snell, *Men, Movements and Myself*, p.11.

<sup>15</sup> Grey, E., *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*, (St. Albans, 1935), p.110.

<sup>16</sup> Home, M., *Winter Harvest: A Norfolk Boyhood*, (London, 1967), p.37.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, p. 290.



of Rothwell, Northamptonshire argued that 'most people' in her village used the Bakehouse 'for their Yorkshire Puddings and Pastries up to 1910':

Roasting meat was placed in a large greased tin and the pudding batter poured around it. On Sundays we took this to the Bake-house on our way to Chapel, calling for it on our way home. The charge used to be 1½ but increased to 4d. as wages increased.<sup>18</sup>

The skill of the housewife was especially called for at pig killing time. This was the 'great event in the domestic life of the year' according to Walter Rose. 'All other duties were held over for it. No woman was ever heard to complain of the work it involved. It was accepted as a challenge, a decisive test of her position in the village as a capable wife'.<sup>19</sup>

The care and supervision of children fell to mothers. From a young age children were an integral part of the domestic economy in nineteenth-century rural England and carried out important functions in the household. Boys and girls were appointed different tasks, segregated along gender lines. Boys tasks tended to revolve around outdoor work in the garden and allotment, whilst girls helped their mothers indoors. Arthur Tweedy's recollections reflect this division of labour. 'We all had jobs to do before and after school', he writes. 'My job was gathering sticks for the fire and weeding the huge garden. My sisters had to clean the house and even bake...'.<sup>20</sup>

The supervision of children extended into other non-monetary tasks in the nineteenth century. In particular, the gathering of food resources and gleaning the harvest fields were carried out by women working alongside their children. The acquisition of sticks and dead wood for fuel is often referred to. Grey writes, a 'good

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<sup>18</sup> NtRO, Village Memories, Rothwell by Mrs G. Sargeant, p.6.

<sup>19</sup> Rose, W., Good Neighbours: Some Recollections of an English Village and Its People, (Cambridge, 1942), p.65.

<sup>20</sup> Tweedy, A., 'Recollections of a farm worker. Part 1', Bulletin of the Cleveland and Teesside Local History Society, 21 (1973), 1-6 (p.2).

deal of fallen wood was also collected for the fires, for after a storm or gale, the women and children would go “wooding”<sup>21</sup> George Bourne, writing on turn of the century Surrey, noted that ‘On the road...women were, and still are, frequently noticeable, bringing home on their backs faggots of dead wood, or sacks of fir-cones, picked up in the fir-woods a mile away or more’.<sup>22</sup> Similarly in Easton Maudit, Northamptonshire women ‘often went sticking too and would come down the lane with arms or aprons full of sticks’.<sup>23</sup> Blackberries, cowslips, elderberries and dandelions were all collected to make wine. Beer was also still brewed in the home by rural women. Snell remembered the ‘harvest ale was brewed at home, and wine was made from blackberries, red currants, coltsfoot, cowslips and dandelion flowers...’.<sup>24</sup> Miss Faulk of Pottersbury, Northampton similarly recalled that ‘large quantities of home made wine were made from cowslips, dandelions, sloes, potatoes, elderberries, plums etc...When friends called a glass of wine was always offered’.<sup>25</sup> For those living in coastal villages, as Bob Cooper’s family did, ‘prawns, winkles, shrimps and the odd lobster from the foreshore, each in their season’ were used to add variety to the diet of labouring families.<sup>26</sup> Such foodstuffs were also procured to sell in the market place and therefore provided a further income-generating source. Barr recalls his Warwickshire childhood, where,

Excursions were made for the purpose of gathering mushrooms, hazel-nuts, cowslips and anything else that might be lawfully appropriated. These were sent to market and converted into cash, partly to help the maternal exchequer and partly as a perquisite for the children.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*, p.54.

<sup>22</sup> Bourne, G., *Change in the Village*, 1st edn 1912, (London, 1955), p.23.

<sup>23</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Easton Maudit by K. Essam, p.21.

<sup>24</sup> Snell, *Men, Movements and Myself*, p.11.

<sup>25</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Pottersbury by Miss Faulk, p.8.

<sup>26</sup> Cooper, B., *A Song for Every Season: A Hundred Years of a Sussex Farming Family*, (London, 1971), p.54.

<sup>27</sup> Barr, *Climbing the Ladder*, p.20.

Jack Bowden similarly recalled being 'up in the dark' as a child in North Yorkshire at mushroom time, selling the load collected by him and his siblings at Masham before returning in time for school. Three to four shillings was made by this means.<sup>28</sup> In many respects, the money children gained in this way was recognised as part of women's earnings because of her vital role as carer and supervisor. The autumn acorn harvest was also important: In Hertfordshire 1s. a bushel was paid 'so the women and children gathered as many acorns as they possibly could'.<sup>29</sup> William Clift of Bramley recalls some families picking up to 100 bushels to sell at 1s. per load in the mid nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Acorns were also useful as feed for cottage pigs. Indeed as a child Taylor gathered acorns for the miller's pig to pay for the grinding of gleaned corn. Thus no money was formerly exchanged in this transaction.<sup>31</sup>

Gleaning was a very profitable non-monetary activity and the contribution women made by this task could be very significant to the labouring budget in the months following the corn harvest. It was shown in chapter two that this work was regionally specific and was widespread in East Anglia and Essex but virtually unknown in northern counties. Indeed this pattern was confirmed by research at county level. Thus Norfolk women participated in this customary task in large numbers, whilst in the East Riding of Yorkshire, gleaning was rarely entered into. Autobiographies further reinforce this pattern and can be used to reveal the extent to which gleaning was central to many individual labouring households outside the East Anglia region also. In Warwickshire, Barr assisted his mother and siblings in this task, as did Snell in Nottinghamshire,

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<sup>28</sup> Bowden, J., 'Recollections of a farm worker', *Journal of the North Yorkshire County Record Office*, 1 (1975), 35-39 (p.35).

<sup>29</sup> Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*, p.93.

<sup>30</sup> Clift, W., *The Reminiscences of William Clift of Bramley*, (Basingstoke, 1909), pp.65-66.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, p.290.

Williams in Wiltshire and Linnett in Northamptonshire.<sup>32</sup> All recall how wheat gleanings were used for baking bread, while barley, oats, beans and peas were fed to the cottage pig. Rose argues that it is 'impossible to over-estimate the value of that gleaned corn to the very poor'.<sup>33</sup> Williams' family considered 'our harvest a poor one if it did not total fifteen or sixteen bushels of threshed grain'<sup>34</sup>, whilst J. W. Botterell of Northamptonshire recalled that some families in his village could glean as much as 13 to 14 bushels of wheat for grinding.<sup>35</sup> Once again the supervision of children by women in the gleaning fields was vital and could have a bearing on the total amount collected from the gleaning fields.

The keeping of animals was considered vital to the well-being of the rural family. Poultry provided eggs for the family diet. Duck breeding for the London market was often done by the labourer's wife in Rose's Hertfordshire village and 'some folks saved enough by it to buy their own cottages'.<sup>36</sup> Bees were also kept as an income generating exercise. According to A. M. Wilson, one woman in his village 'never failed to provide a large share of the rent' through her bees.<sup>37</sup> Similarly in early twentieth-century Gloucestershire, 'Many villagers kept bees...The rent of a cottage was about £4 or £5 a year and the bees were kept to pay the rent'.<sup>38</sup> Most references to animal keeping in the nineteenth century relate to pigs however. As Rose maintains, 'Life without a pig was almost unthinkable. To have a sty in the garden...was as essential to the happiness of a

<sup>32</sup> Barr, Climbing the Ladder, p.20; Snell, Men, Movements and Myself, p.17; Williams, Wiltshire Village, p.270; NtRO, Village Memories, Great Billing, p.18.

<sup>33</sup> Rose, Good Neighbours, p.30.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, Wiltshire Village, p.270.

<sup>35</sup> NtRO, Village memories, Eye by J. W. Botterell, no page numbers.

<sup>36</sup> Rose, Good Neighbours, p.73.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, A. M., Friends of Yesteryear, (London, 1907), p.32.

<sup>38</sup> Gloucestershire Federation of Women's Institutes, 'I Remember': Social Life in Gloucestershire Villages, 1850-1950, (Gloucester, 1961), p.14.

newly married couple as a living room or a bedroom'.<sup>39</sup> Cottagers often kept two pigs, one being killed for home consumption and the other sold at market. The proceeds would go on rent or towards purchasing the next two pigs. The task of feeding domestic animals often fell to the wife or older children, whilst men cleaned out the sty's. The dung was used as manure on the garden or allotment. Gardens and animals therefore tended to sustain each other. The memoirs of K. Essam of Easton Maudit, Northamptonshire, indicate how village women often participated in these non-monetary tasks as an interesting aside to household work:

Some women of the village took great pride in doing things other than their everyday duties of cooking, mending washing and cleaning. Some gathered cowslips, dandelions or elderberries for wine...gleaning doing odd jobs in the allotment park or garden.<sup>40</sup>

Many of these non-monetary forms of work suggest an intricate and self-sustaining village economy in which women played a central role. This is further corroborated by evidence which reveals a network of mutual-aid arrangements between friends, kin and neighbours. These revolved around nursing the sick and elderly, delivering babies, minding children, and running errands. Mrs George of Yardley-Hastings, Northamptonshire, recalls her grandmother taking care of village children under three years of age to enable their mothers to work.<sup>41</sup> According to G. Deacon of Stoke Albany in the same county, there was 'Nanny Atkins, Mrs Dodson, Mrs Walls and many other kind neighbours who could bring the baby into the world, care for the mother, cope with the washing, cook for the husband and family and run their own homes in addition'.<sup>42</sup> Gifts of food and drink were also exchanged between neighbours.

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<sup>39</sup> Rose, *Good Neighbours*, p.58.

<sup>40</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Easton Maudit, p.21.

<sup>41</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Yardley-Hastings by Mrs G. George, p.1.

<sup>42</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Stoke Albany by G. Deacon, p.25.

Fred Gresswell remembers that families provided each other with 'pig-cheer' after the annual pig killing. Pig's fry, which consisted of sweetbread, liver and pork, was sent round to relatives and friends 'who would repay the compliment in due course'.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly at Milton in Northamptonshire, neighbours would save scraps of food to feed their friends' pigs and when killing time came 'the neighbours who had helped feed the pigs, would receive as their reward, a nice plate of fry'.<sup>44</sup>

Small sums of money were exchanged for helping friends and neighbours on occasions. Eliza Freeston remembers her family owned one of the few large wooden mangles in her Northamptonshire village in the late nineteenth century. So 'other villagers brought their clean washing and mother allowed them to use the mangle for a small charge of I believe 1d'.<sup>45</sup> In Hertfordshire, women who nursed their neighbours during childbirth charged from 2s. 6d. to 6s. for their time.<sup>46</sup> However most of these exchange networks were based on reciprocity and no money was traded. Thus in Hertfordshire whilst some women charged for their midwifery skills 'now and again they got nothing but a promise'.<sup>47</sup> The system is well summed up by Mabel Ashby. Her grandmother earned money in the harvest fields, but most of her income was generated by,

using her skill and intelligence in others' emergencies. She wrote letters for her neighbours, helped them to cut out shirts, to whitewash ceilings. Sometimes she would sit up at night with the sick. Little money passed but her services were meticulously paid for. Her garden was dug, vegetable and rabbits brought, faggots of wood were stacked against her wall.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Gresswell, F., *Bright Boots: An Autobiography*, (Newton Abbott, 1956), p.74.

<sup>44</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Milton by Mrs Florence Turner, p.8.

<sup>45</sup> NtRO, *Village Memories*, Blisworth by Eliza Freestone, no page numbers.

<sup>46</sup> Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*, pp.162-3.

<sup>47</sup> Grey, *Cottage Life in Hertfordshire Village*, p.163.

<sup>48</sup> Ashby, M. K., *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, 1859-1919: A Study of English Village Life*, (Cambridge, 1961), p.5.

Ellen Ross argues that working class women in pre-1914 London had a pivotal role in their neighbourhoods, determining the relationships their household formed with neighbours, shopkeepers and charity workers. This 'could do as much as husbands' wages to determine how comfortably their families lived...'.<sup>49</sup> Evidence from nineteenth and early twentieth-century autobiographies shows that the same argument should be applied to life in rural areas. The work of women in the informal economy is often considered as peripheral to the male wage in the nineteenth-century countryside but such activities were actually vital to rural labouring households. Women were central to many forms of transactions in the informal economy and an investigation of these reveals the extent to which women were still active participants in the late nineteenth-century rural economy. Women's methods of 'gnawing it out' have been overlooked in traditional agrarian texts which concentrate on men's working lives, but should be considered important in any assessment of rural living standards and employment patterns in the past. An expansion of this area of research would further augment our knowledge of the formal and informal economies, the ways they interrelated in the nineteenth-century countryside and the processes by which women moved between them.

## **6.2: Economic, social and ideological change: women's work in the formal economy of the nineteenth-century countryside**

Turning to the formal economy, a number of issues central to women's employment in the nineteenth century have been investigated. Continuity or change in women's

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<sup>49</sup> Ross, E., 'Survival networks: women's neighbourhood sharing in London before world war 1', History Workshop Journal, 15 (1983), 4-27 (p.4).

employment patterns, the sexual division of labour, lifecycle transformations and the impact of changing attitudes to women's work have emerged as important themes. In addition, many wider questions surrounding the working lives of labouring families in the nineteenth-century countryside and the ways historians can investigate these have been assessed. The final section of the study will attempt to draw together the main strands of this research and point to future areas of enquiry.

One of the main underlying themes of the thesis has been the general pattern of rural women's work across the nineteenth century. How widespread was women's employment and how did this change over the course of the century? Is continuity or change the best description of women's work, or were work opportunities more complex and regionally specific than this simple dichotomy suggests? The model of women's employment has been approached from two angles: a reading of printed material on a national basis and an investigation of archival sources at the local level. The patterns of rural women's work which emerge are not as straightforward as previous historians have suggested.

Chapter two attempted to unravel the pattern of rural female employment across England as portrayed by a number of contemporary works. These included parliamentary reports, census statistics, journals, pamphlets and books. The general trends emerging from this printed material indicate that women's opportunities to work in rural England remained stable, and perhaps increased in some sectors, in the period 1790 to 1835. The exception to this was the case of spinning work, which began to decline irrevocably in the second half of the eighteenth century. This material pointed to great regional variations in women's employment opportunities across the country. However statistical analysis of the budgets collected by David Davies and Frederick



Eden in the 1790s and material on earnings printed in the 1834 Poor Law Report shows (married) women's ability to contribute to the family economy appeared to endure up to the 1830s at least.<sup>50</sup> There is little evidence of a decline in terms of women's contribution to the incomes of agricultural labouring families. Whilst women's formal earnings were not central to the labouring family's subsistence, they remained important throughout the period c.1790-1835. This model of women's rural employment from printed sources generally corresponds to the industrial pattern proposed by historians such as Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson. They argue that economic change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries increased opportunities for women to work in particular regions and sectors.<sup>51</sup> Textiles was the key dynamic sector, with cotton manufacture leading the way in employing high proportions of women, although other textiles such as stocking knitting were also significant in this process.

Printed sources imply that the number of rural women in work as agricultural labourers, farm servants and workers in domestic industries peaked in the mid nineteenth century. The representation of women's work in the second half of the century is one of decline. The depiction of women withdrawing from the rural labour market is advanced by census returns, parliamentary investigators and other commentators. According to census returns for example, the number of women employed as agricultural labourers in England and Wales peaked in 1851 at 70,899. Between 1851 and 1871 the number of women employed declined by 40%, and by

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<sup>50</sup> Davies, D., The Case of Labourers in Husbandry, Stated and Considered, (London, 1795); Eden, Sir F. M., The State of the Poor, 3 vols (London, 1797); PP 1834, XXX, Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws. Appendix (B.1). Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts. Part 1.

<sup>51</sup> Berg, M., The Age of Manufactures, 1700-1820: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain, 2nd edn, (London, 1994), ch. 7; Berg, M., and Hudson, P., 'Rehabilitating the industrial revolution', Economic History Review, 65 (1992), 24-50.

1891, women accounted for just 3% of the total number of agricultural labourers and farm servants employed in England and Wales. A handful of voices note the continued presence of women workers in some regional occupations in the late nineteenth-century countryside however. This pattern of rural women's work in the nineteenth century has been extensively adopted by historians and the notion of a decline in women's work in the nineteenth-century countryside is firmly entrenched in the historiography of agrarian England. Yet the county studies which have formed the core concern of this thesis have shown that women's labour in arable eastern England displayed complex regional variation which cannot be easily compressed into an all-inclusive paradigm. This research has also revealed the limitations of census material, especially in relation to female agricultural workers: most women who worked on the Norfolk and East Yorkshire farms investigated in this study were given no occupational designation by census enumerators in the second half of the nineteenth century. Research has shown that the census returns for the Norfolk parishes of Flitcham in 1851 and Hoverton St. Peter in 1871, and the East Yorkshire parish of Laxton in 1881, consistently under-represented the agricultural work performed by women on farms in these localities. The economies of different rural regions both limited and provided opportunities for women to work across the century and the connection between economic change and women's work needs to be understood at the local level before generalisations can be advanced.

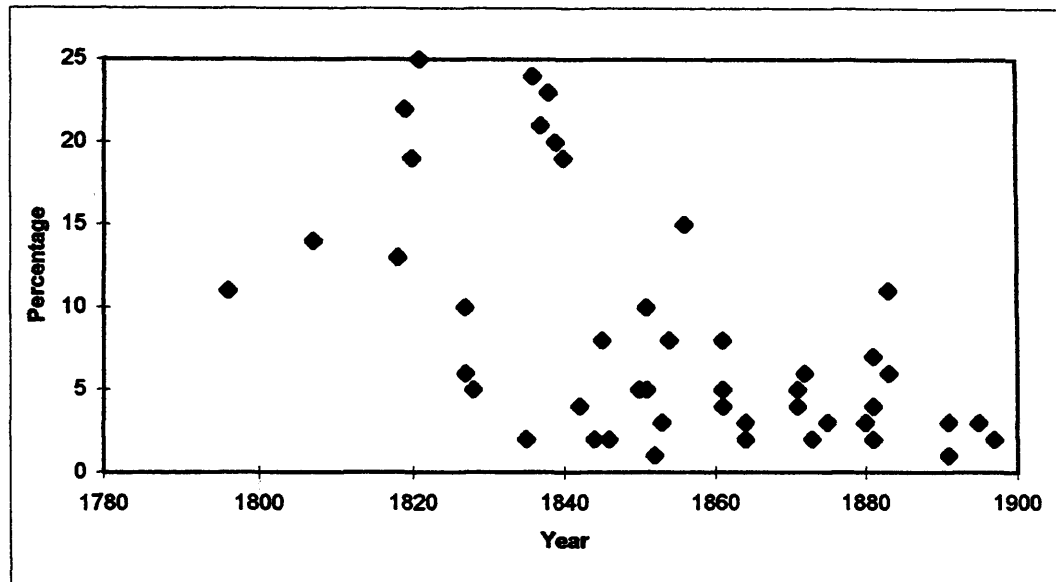
Assessing the archival material at the local level, sources from East Yorkshire and Norfolk reveal the most about women's agricultural employment in the nineteenth century. Farm accounts from these two counties show some continuities in women's employment patterns and some changes. Perhaps the most coherent way to exhibit all the available archival material is by scattergraphs. These can be used to indicate the

general trends in men's and women's agricultural employment in the two counties across the whole century. Fig 6.1 is a scattergraph of the percentage of annual labour payments to female day labourers on Norfolk and East Riding farms for all the years where figures were available. Overall, this indicates a growth in women's agricultural employment in the early nineteenth century, peaking in the 1820s and 1830s. Thus in the Napoleonic War years, c.1790-1815, average farm expenditure on women day labourers across the two counties was 13%. Between 1815 to 1840 this grew to 15% of expenditure. The local archival evidence therefore seems to corroborate the early nineteenth century trend in rural women's work which has emerged from the analysis of printed sources. It is possible to categorise the period c.1790-1840 as one of stability, and even growth in women's employment opportunities in the countryside. This would seem to counter Keith Snell's thesis that annual female participation rates and potential earnings capacity were dwindling at this time.<sup>52</sup> Women's agricultural employment in the mid nineteenth century period shows considerable decline from the early decades of the century. Fig 6.1 suggests that in some circumstances there was a slight rise in women's agricultural employment in the 1840s and 1850s. This may indicate that more stringent conditions of relief after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act compelled the wives (and children) of agricultural labourers to seek additional employment to supplement family incomes as William Hasbach, Ivy Pinchbeck and Alan Armstrong have argued.<sup>53</sup> However, the general trend shows that women's employment in the mid

<sup>52</sup> Snell, K., *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Agrarian England and Social Change, 1660-1900*, (Cambridge, 1985), ch.1.

<sup>53</sup> Hasbach, W., *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, 1st edn 1894 (London, 1966), p.225; Pinchbeck, I., *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850*, 2nd edn (London, 1981), pp.84-86; Armstrong, A., *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History, 1770-1980*, (London, 1988), p.79.

**Fig 6.1: Labour payments to women day labourers in agriculture  
in Norfolk and East Yorkshire in the nineteenth century**



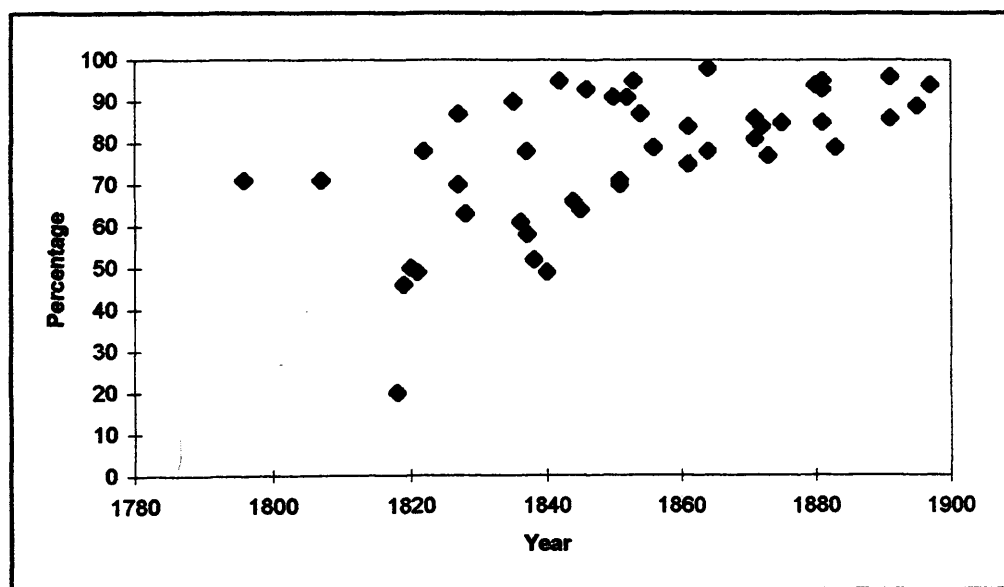
Sources: Brynmor Jones Library, DDLA 34/8; DDJL 5/1-2; DDSQ (3), 21/19-21; DDEV 56/331; DDLG 43/5-15; East Riding Record Office, DDSA 1219/1-2; DDSA 1203/1-6; DDSA 1067; Norfolk Record Office, MEA, 3/27-51; MC, 561/47; MC 3/89,466x; WKC 5/248-255,400x; Accession 15.3.1972; BR 126/3; MC 527/71-74; BR 134/1; MC 825/1,797x1; MF 3/1; MC 299/28; Accession 4.7.1966; BR 108/58; BR 111/29; University of Reading Library, NORF P429/1-4; NORF 11/4/1; NORF 9.1/1-75; NORF 10/1/1; NORF 3.3/1; Private collection of R. Fiske, Spurrell records. See bibliography for full references.

Victorian years did not reach the same proportions as the early decades of the nineteenth century. In the last thirty years of the century, according to Fig 6.1, annual expenditure on women day labourers had fallen to 4% of farm outgoings. So in this analysis women's labour force participation peaked in the period following the French Wars. This patterns suggests that increased arable cultivation in the early nineteenth century could offer women more opportunities to work in agriculture. Improvements which required large inputs of cheap, flexible labour for manual tasks such as hoeing, weeding, mucking, planting and harvesting root crops were central to this phase of investment.

Fig 6.2 shows the percentage of annual labour payments which went to male day labourers on all farms in the two counties over the nineteenth century. This shows a steady increase in annual farm expenditure on male day workers and seems to confirm the opinion that the workforce altered over the course of the century to a core male one, with few casuals employed. As the agricultural depression took hold in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the casual labour of women was dispensed with as an economy measure and male workers were engaged on a more secure, year-round basis.

The overall pattern of women's work is subject to a number of qualifications however. Firstly, the majority of accounts are from the period after 1830 and very few survive for the early nineteenth century. The early nineteenth century accounts may be

**Fig 6.2: Labour payments to male day labourers in agriculture in Norfolk and East Yorkshire in the nineteenth century**



Sources: See Fig 6.1.

from exceptional farms which relied to a great extent on female labour and could therefore skew the results. Secondly, the majority of accounts from East Yorkshire come from the larger estate farms. Even in Norfolk, where most accounts come from mid and east Norfolk - away from the lighter lands and very large farms of west Norfolk - the bulk of farms in the sample still covered 300 acres or more. According to Robert Allen, larger farms employed fewer women and children per acre than smaller ones and so the preponderance of surviving records from the larger enterprises may again affect the overall results.<sup>54</sup> Finally, it is clear that accounts from individual farms in different counties depart significantly from the general pattern. If we look at a few individual examples of the farms studied, the contradictions and complexities emerge.

At Earsham Home farm in Norfolk, the number days female labourers worked fell significantly after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Between 1807 and 1837 the number of days women were employed on the farm fell by 15% : in 1807 women carried out 25% of total labour days but by 1837 they accounted for only 10%. The notion that increased arable cultivation in the early decades of the nineteenth century provided more work for women does not seem to fit the evidence from this farm. In the East Riding of Yorkshire other accounts indicate continuities across periods. In the south-west region of Howden, women day labourers were extensively employed at Saltmarshe in the years 1819 to 1821 and 1836 to 1840. On this farm there was no decline in the number of days worked by female labourers between 1820 and 1840. Moreover accounts from the neighbouring parish of Laxton in the early 1880s show that the employment of women on the land was still substantial in that region. Thus away

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<sup>54</sup> Allen, R. C., 'The growth of labor productivity in early modern English agriculture', Explorations in Economic History, 25 (1988), 117-146, (p.130).

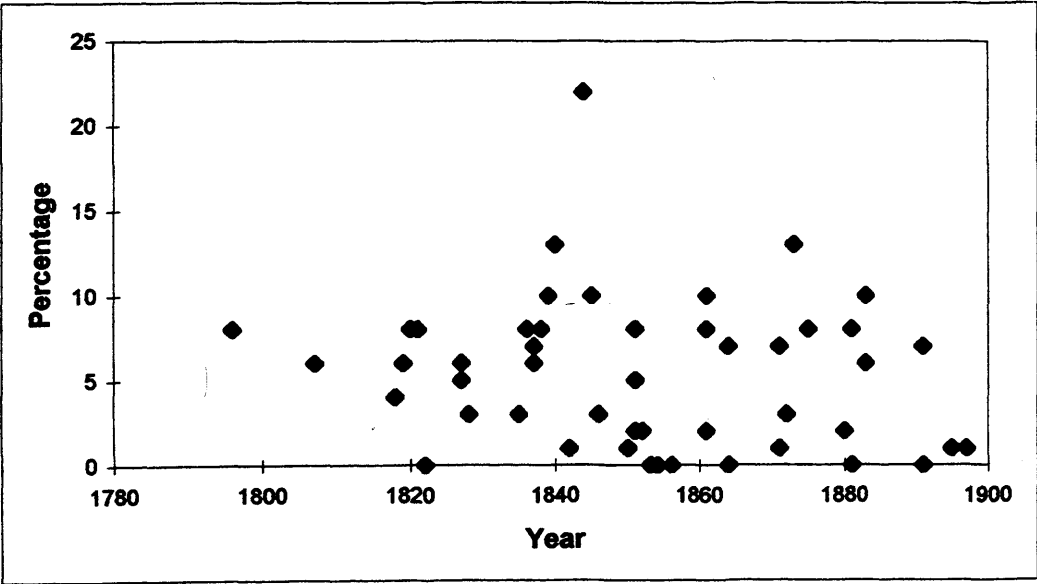
from the pure corn lands of south-east England, Snell's theory that women's agricultural employment had declined significantly by the early nineteenth century does not necessarily stand up. In this region of East Yorkshire, where potatoes were grown in large numbers, archival evidence indicates that women workers were still utilised as a significant part of the agricultural workforce across the century.

Other individual accounts which span the decades of the second half of the nineteenth century suggest that the decline in women's agricultural labour was emphatic. In the Holderness region of East Yorkshire farm accounts from Sewerby show a steady decline in the utilisation of casual female workers from the mid nineteenth century, so that by the 1890s only three or four women worked a few days in the hay and corn harvest fields. Similarly, at the Old Hall farm, Hoverton St. Peter in Norfolk, the employment of women day labourers fell considerably between 1861 and 1891. In 1861, women accounted for 12% of days worked on the farm. By 1891 they carried out just 1% of days worked. Thus by 1891 women played little part in the agricultural work on the farm. This evidence suggests that the decline in female participation in the formal agricultural economy of the late nineteenth century as proposed by census figures may be a correct guide in some circumstances. Clearly the census cannot be seen as an accurate statement of the number of women workers in the nineteenth-century agricultural workforce. However because the census was consistently under-estimating women's agricultural work throughout the period, the decline census figures denote is suggestive of the actual trend on some nineteenth-century farms.

The archival records have also exposed a great deal of interesting information on child labour on nineteenth-century farms. The utilisation of female child labour on

farms in both Norfolk and East Yorkshire has been shown to be unusual. Although girls were found to be part of the workforce for seasonal tasks on certain farms, their presence was much more limited than some contemporary commentators suggested. In contrast the employment of boys, particularly older lads working year-round, was substantial on most farms studied. Moreover, the high participation of male children remained fairly stable across the nineteenth century. Fig 6.3 shows the percentage of annual labour payments made to child labourers on all farms studied. This does not differentiate male and female children, although in most cases the bulk of payments went to boys. Even after the 1870 Education Act, boys and older lads were still employed in large numbers. Children were still an integral part of the farm labour force in the final quarter of the

**Fig 6.3: Percentage of annual labour payments to child workers in Norfolk and East Yorkshire in the nineteenth century**



Sources: See Fig 6.1.



century: their labour was attractive to farmers because it was relatively cheap and any money they procured was still important to the family budget despite the rise in male wages.

The three counties chosen for this study were selected because they all lay in eastern England and were dominated by arable farming. The forces influencing agriculture - enclosure, conversion to arable, engrossing of farms - all affected the three counties in turn, yet they retained a certain distinctiveness in terms of hiring patterns and female employment opportunities throughout the century. The regionality of work opportunities is therefore a significant factor in determining women's work in the nineteenth-century countryside. The persistence of female farm service in East Yorkshire offered single women the opportunity to leave home and enter the paid workforce in a secure working environment. In Norfolk, the institution of service in husbandry disintegrated in the first half of the nineteenth century and women of all ages formed part of the casualised workforce of the county. The decline of spinning work in this county also had an incisive impact on rural women's work opportunities in the first half of the century. In Bedfordshire, the loss of work opportunities through the decline of spinning and service in husbandry was eased considerably by the existence of two additional domestic industries: lacemaking and strawplaiting. Indeed, during the Napoleonic Wars women's ability to earn money in these occupations was exceptional. Even though the boom war years were never replicated, these trades continued to offer Bedfordshire women a viable, attractive employment opportunity across the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The existence of these industries meant women played little role in the agricultural work of the county. In the East Riding, the prosperity of mid-Victorian farming induced farmers to increase their workforce of

servants to ensure maximum cultivation of the land. The same prosperity in Norfolk underpinned the evolution of the gang system, although the employment of adult women in this organised form of work was probably much smaller than some contemporaries believed. Opportunities for married women to work in the formal economy of both East Yorkshire and Norfolk were dominated by agriculture, although security of employment was more evident in the northern region. Thus a major paradox of women's work is exposed: where the labour market was overstocked and wages low as in Norfolk, women's work was the most needed, yet was most marginalised.

This thesis has revealed the nature of the sexual division of labour in the English countryside. In agriculture there was a rigid division of labour, although this was not identical or unchanging in the counties studies. As servants in husbandry in the East Riding, women's work centred around the farmhouse and the dairy. They were also expected to assist in the fields at certain seasons such as haymaking and harvest. Men were contracted to work with animals and perform the year-round agricultural operations of the farm. Whilst the domestic nature of women's work as servants strengthened in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the interconnection between their indoor and outdoor employment persisted. Thus Ann Kussmaul's contention that by the mid nineteenth century most female yearly servants were 'domestic' workers serving the lifestyle of the rural middle classes and not 'productive' workers engaged in the farm economy, does not apply to the East Yorkshire female servant workforce.<sup>55</sup>

Women employed as day labourers in agriculture also experienced different working patterns from their male counterparts. In Norfolk and East Yorkshire women were utilised for a number of specific agricultural operations. These were mainly

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<sup>55</sup> Kussmaul, A., Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England, (Cambridge, 1981), p.4 and p.9.

associated with cleaning the land by weeding, stonepicking and hoeing, and in planting and harvesting root crops such as potatoes, swedes and turnips. In both counties women were employed in haymaking. There were other specialist crops which women tended such as flax. The employment of women at corn harvest was regionally specific and more widespread in the northern county where women's role in gleaning was virtually unknown. Women laboured alongside men on some of these tasks, particularly when they were let by the acre. But even in situations where families laboured together, the division of tasks persisted. Thomas Hatchliff, wrote about the division of family labour in the harvest fields of Nottinghamshire in the 1870s:

When the first corn field was ready...the sicklemen or scythemen with the gathers and binders were at the field. The gatherers of the sheaves and binders were generally the wives and children of the men, and the whole work of the harvest was of the nature of a family outing...the reapers or mowers fall in one by one behind the leader, the women and children as gatherers and binders following in their wake.<sup>56</sup>

Other agricultural operations such as ploughing, hedging, ditching and taking care of livestock were specifically male jobs in the two counties in the nineteenth century. In Bedfordshire however, because women played little role in agriculture throughout the century, tasks typically labelled as 'women's work' in other arable counties were performed by men and boys.

Much evidence points to the persistence of task allocation throughout the nineteenth century. Women were still engaged to perform weeding, hoeing, planting and stonepicking in the late nineteenth century as they were in the late eighteenth century. However, other evidence signifies changes which did strengthen the

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Morgan, D. H., Harvesters and Harvesting, 1840-1900: A Study of the Rural Proletariat, (London, 1982), p.25.

agricultural sexual division of labour. Records from Norfolk in particular - the classic corn growing region of the nineteenth century - seem to corroborate Snell's proposition that increased sexual specialisation took place in arable agriculture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>57</sup> The best evidence of this comes from Earsham Home farm in north Norfolk. Farm accounts covering the first forty years of the nineteenth century show women's work was increasingly concentrated in the spring and summer months and by the 1830s they found little, if any, agricultural work in the winter months. Even in the East Riding of Yorkshire where the employment of women remained significant on some farms into the last quarter of the nineteenth century, changes in harvest technology also had an impact on women's work. Increased mechanisation of this task - the replacement of the sickle by the scythe, followed by the introduction of the reaper and reaper-binder - relegated women's harvest work to the subsidiary tasks of gathering and tying. Although this process was slow and uneven, it did substantially curtail women's role in harvest operations. Thus whilst men monopolised new technologies as they were introduced into nineteenth-century agriculture, women continued to be employed in manual tasks.

Women agricultural workers were sought for their nimble fingers, their ability to concentrate on tedious jobs, their docility and cheapness. The same arguments were applied to rural women employed in the Bedfordshire domestic industries. These attributes were not regarded as skilled in their own right and women workers were generally assigned a lowly status. Once again this rural model has parallels with the urban, industrial prototype. Historians have shown how mechanisation in many sectors of industrial employment re-established and strengthened gender division of labour in

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<sup>57</sup> Snell, *Annals*, ch. 1.

factory settings.<sup>58</sup> Men defined their work as skilled and that of women as unskilled, creating a solidarity which extended beyond the workplace.<sup>59</sup>

According to Nancy Grey Osterud, gender divisions of labour in urban sectors of employment provided the basis for a customary wage to be paid to women workers at a lower level than the male wage. 'The development of a social category of women's work', she argues, 'was accompanied by the emergence of a socially defined women's wage'.<sup>60</sup> Thus, female knitters were paid half the wage of their male counterparts in Leicester hosiery factories of the late nineteenth century. The wage gap in nineteenth-century agriculture followed a similar pattern. Wage data from the General Views of Agriculture show that average female servants in the 1790s earned a third to a half of their male counterparts. Similarly, female day wages in agriculture were shown to be between a third and a half of men's at the same period.<sup>61</sup> This wage gap persisted into the second half of the nineteenth century as Frederick Purdy's tabulation of agricultural earnings in 1860 suggests.<sup>62</sup> Archival sources from Norfolk and East Yorkshire confirm this trend. In both counties the agricultural wage gap endured. There were some regional differences in day labour rates between the two counties however: women workers at Felbrigg, Norfolk in 1844 earned a third less than their northern counterparts working at Breek's farm, Seaton Ross in 1851. Women employed at Laxton in the 1880s received a quarter more than Norfolk women employed in the parish of Ingham in the same period.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Grey Osterud, N., 'Gender divisions and the organisation of work in the Leicester hosiery industry', in John, A. V., ed., *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England, 1800-1918*, (Oxford, 1986), pp.45-70; Hall, C., 'The home turned upside down?: the working class family in cotton textiles', in Whitelegg, E., et al., eds., *The Changing Experience of Women*, (Oxford, 1982), pp.17-29.

<sup>59</sup> Berg, *Age of Manufactures*, p.156.

<sup>60</sup> Grey Osterud, 'Gender divisions and the organisation of work', in John, ed., *Unequal Opportunities*, p.62.

<sup>61</sup> See chapter two, pp.63-71.

<sup>62</sup> See chapter two, pp.96-98.

<sup>63</sup> See chapter three, p.153 and chapter 4, p.207.

It can be argued that much women's work has been essentially omitted from the records as a result of the patriarchal structure under which they worked. This was most evident in the case of family labour. Farm records show that even on the large, arable dominated farms of eastern England, families still worked together as a unit on certain task work operations. This thesis has indicated that much work women undertook with their family in the harvest fields and at other task work has been disguised because wages were mostly paid to the male head of the group. This practice was widespread in Norfolk and East Yorkshire and suggests that the nature of productive labour relations in the nineteenth-century countryside obscured much agricultural work performed by women. Even in Bedfordshire, where women's agricultural labour was less significant, the use of family groups for certain tasks is likely to have included the presence of labourer's wives and daughters, although their labour is not recorded in the surviving accounts.

The lifecycle dimension of women's lives has emerged as a significant factor in determining employment patterns. It has been shown that the different stages of the female lifecycle had a bearing on when and how women worked in the nineteenth-century countryside. Whether women remained single, the age they married, the number of children they bore and the age at which surviving children left home were all relevant to when women could enter the labour market. In East Yorkshire the dichotomy between married and single working women was fixed. The persistence of yearly farm service provided an opportunity for girls to leave home by the age of fourteen and establish themselves as independent wage earners.<sup>64</sup> In Bedfordshire, the presence of thriving domestic industries also enabled single women to earn large sums of money,

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<sup>64</sup> Although they were likely to send their wages home to their mother for the first year or two of work.

especially in the early nineteenth century. However, girls who worked in these industries were less likely to leave home at an early age, which contributed to overcrowding in labouring households.<sup>65</sup> Economic specialisation in nineteenth-century Norfolk agriculture meant there were few opportunities for single women to find permanent and skilled work in the region. This contributed to a drift into domestic service for young women in the county in the second half of the nineteenth century. Married women's economic participation was influenced by the number and age of their children, although it has been shown that it is very difficult to condense individual women's family circumstances and working patterns into an 'average' trend. For widowed women or women who never married, the obstacles to maintaining a livelihood in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century countryside were extensive and the informal economy of 'multiple-makeshifts which permitted some kind of existence...' may have been especially significant to them.<sup>66</sup>

Wider social and ideological changes in the nineteenth-century countryside also had an impact on women's employment and often worked in tandem with economic change to affect female labour patterns. The ideal of the family wage in urban areas further legitimised low wages paid to women and was embraced by some male trade unions. Protective legislation also restricted when and how women worked in certain industrial trades such as textiles and mining. Did these sanctions have an impact on women working in rural England? The only government legislation which was specifically aimed at curtailing women's agricultural employment in the nineteenth

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<sup>65</sup> This is shown by Nigel Goose's analysis of the 1851 census returns for the Berkhamstead region of Hertfordshire. See Goose, N., Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851: The Berkhamstead Region, (Hatfield, 1996), p.45.

<sup>66</sup> Hufton, O., 'Women without men: widows and spinsters in Britain and France in the eighteenth century', Journal of Family History, Winter (1984), 355-376 (p.363).

century was the Gangs Act of 1867. Karen Sayer argues that this Act had a significant effect on female labour.<sup>67</sup> The impact of this statute is debatable however. By the late 1860s it has been shown that women's employment in agricultural gangs was very small and in Norfolk was confined mainly to the large farms situated in the west of the county. Moreover farmers could overcome the law by substituting public gangs with private ones which were not covered by the legislation. Sayer stresses the role of the state in reducing the involvement of women in nineteenth-century agriculture, and by doing so underplays the agency of women themselves.<sup>68</sup>

How far did the ideology of the family wage permeate into rural society? The National Agricultural Labourers Union, formed in 1874 under the leadership of Joseph Arch, officially excluded women from their membership although this did not mean that women did not participate in union strikes and activities.<sup>69</sup> However, as Alun Howkins has pointed out, the preclusion of women may have reflected the growing belief among male agricultural trade unionists that 'respectable' women should not work in the fields.<sup>70</sup> The NALU argued women should not be employed in agriculture on three grounds: it kept women from their domestic and motherly duties in the home; it depressed male agricultural wages as women were cheap labour, and it reduced the number of jobs available for male workers in agriculture. The family wage was

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<sup>67</sup> Sayer, K., Women of the Fields: Representation of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century, (Manchester, 1995), p.68.

<sup>68</sup> Sayer writes for example, 'By 1900 women had largely passed from view as casual farm labourers. The state had intervened, they had been disciplined...'. This ignores the wider economic changes in the late nineteenth century which had an impact on women's work, and also suggests that women themselves had no say in when they sold their labour in the formal rural economy. Sayer, Women of the Fields, p.137.

<sup>69</sup> See Howkins, A., Reshaping Rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925, (London, 1991), pp.186-193; Sayer, K., 'Field-faring women: the resistance of women who worked in the fields of nineteenth-century England', Women's History Review, 2 (1993), 185-198.

<sup>70</sup> Howkins, Reshaping Rural England, p.186.



promoted in articles published in the union's mouthpiece, the Labourers Union

Chronicle. In 1873 one author was looking forward to the day,

when clothing clubs will be things of the past, because each labourer's wife, being no longer a drudge in the fields, but a managing, economical housewife, will be enabled by her husband's earnings to provide all that is necessary in clothing and otherwise for decency and comfort.<sup>71</sup>

Arch also stresses the need for respectability and domesticity in his autobiography. He argues that women who worked in agricultural gangs were those 'who could get no decent indoor work, or who were rough and coarse and bold'. Such women, he contends, 'should have been minding their houses, or should have been in domestic service, or working in some trade suited to women'.<sup>72</sup>

Does this evidence reflect an assimilation into rural society of the domestic ideal?

Did rural women welcome the family wage and use the increase of real wages as a opportunity to withdraw from the labour market? Did labouring men and women increasingly consider women's place to be in the home? This was certainly the view of the majority of parliamentary investigators and contemporary middle class observers in the second half of the nineteenth century, as was shown in chapter two. However, evidence from the rural working classes - where it exists - is contradictory.

Autobiographical material indicates that housewifery skills were held at a premium in rural cottages, as families strove towards respectability.<sup>73</sup> Alfred Ireson, who was born in Oundle in 1856, writes for example:

Village life during this period was a time of trial and difficulty. The agricultural workers had long hours, the pay barely enough to keep body and soul together...Rough food and clothes; everything depended

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Sayer, Women of the Fields, pp.125-126.

<sup>72</sup> Arch, Joseph Arch, p.250.

<sup>73</sup> Burnett, Destiny Obscure, p.58; Vincent, D., Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography, (London, 1981), p.55.

on the skill and character of the mother...The struggle for respectability!<sup>74</sup>

Single women engaged as farm servants in East Yorkshire displayed an increasing desire to be employed as domestic servants in towns and evidence from labouring women indicates that they wanted their daughters to work as servants rather than in the fields. The growth in the second half of the nineteenth century of domestic service for young women, and the employment of other women as laundresses, washerwomen and charwomen may have cultivated a more pronounced outlook of domesticity among rural women. Flora Thompson maintains that 'Victorian ideas...had penetrated to some extent, and any work outside the home was considered unwomanly'.<sup>75</sup> Similarly Bourne wrote in 1912:

Field-work...has diminished, and at the same time the arrival of "residents" has greatly increased the demand for charwomen and washerwomen. The women, therefore, find it worthwhile to cultivate a certain tidiness in their persons, which extends to their homes...'.<sup>76</sup>

However, Bourne was quick to point out that the middle class domestic ideal, far from 'setting cottage women on the road to middle-class culture of mind and body', had merely turned them into working drudges, 'so that other women may shirk these duties and be "cultured"'.<sup>77</sup> Although male agricultural wages increased in the late nineteenth century and the price of provisions fell, labouring budgets were still extremely inflexible. The ideal of the family wage also remained just that: an ideal. Thus, whilst it is important to remember that women often displayed ambivalence to their work and were often active in withdrawing themselves from the formal labour market, any intermittent earnings women procured could still make a significant difference to an

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Burnett, ed., *Destiny Obscure*, p.83.

<sup>75</sup> Thompson, F., *Lark Rise to Candleford*, 1st edn 1939 (Harmondsworth, 1984), p.114.

<sup>76</sup> Bourne, *Change in the Village*, p.159.

<sup>77</sup> Bourne, *Change in the Village*, p.160.

individual family's survival. So any aspirations rural labouring men and women held to emulate an urban, middle class lifestyle of gentility and domesticity, were severely undermined by the realities of continuing poverty and struggle in the nineteenth-century countryside.

The notion that women's economic participation throughout the nineteenth century was small but vital has emerged as a recurrent motif throughout this thesis. This worked on two levels. Firstly women made a significant contribution to the formal earnings of the family through paid work. The impact women's formal earnings had on individual family incomes has been highlighted through an examination of a number of sources: the budgets of labouring families collected by Davies and Eden in the 1790s, estimates of family earnings made to the 1834 Poor Law Report and a reconstruction of agricultural family earnings from later nineteenth-century farm records and census material. Women's earnings often made the difference between deprivation and subsistence. Moreover there are grounds for speculating that women's involvement in the formal rural economy was actually wider. It has been shown that women's labour as part of the family group on task work often went unrecorded as payments were made to the male head of the family.<sup>78</sup> Women's work on smaller, family-run farms also tends to be overlooked as few records from such businesses have survived. It is also impossible to know how far women workers moved between farms in the same locality looking for employment. The fact that a woman was only very casually employed on a farm for a few weeks during the summer does not mean she was not working at all for the remainder of the year.

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<sup>78</sup> This practice may also disguise much child labour on nineteenth-century farms.

The second means by which women contributed to the rural family household was by an undoubtedly large (but incalculable) involvement in the informal, makeshift economy of the nineteenth-century countryside. The centrality of the informal economy to women's survival strategies suggests that female activity in the nineteenth-century rural economy was broader than official printed and archival sources imply. The position of the female worker has to be considered in the wider context of her family situation, her age and marital status, the economic structure of the region she lived in, local male work patterns and ideological constructs. Women's work opportunities in rural areas were dominated by agriculture, service and in some regions domestic industries, but beyond these a whole range of other tasks, both paid and unpaid, underpinned the household economy. It is only when formal work patterns are considered alongside participation in the whole range of casual, seasonal and part-time work in the informal economy, that the full extent of women's employment opportunities in the nineteenth century can be established.

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#### **VI. Theses**

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