RURAL WOMEN WORKERS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND: GENDER, WORK AND WAGES

Nicola Verdon

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GENDER, WORK AND WAGES

Nicola Verdon
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Introduction

Rural women workers: the forgotten labour force

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 housework to do, washing cooking mending, and all the other jobs which come along when there is a big famely to do for, and famelys mostly were big in them days.¹

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.²

These two contemporary autobiographical accounts from the Fens offer us a rare glimpse into the reality of life for many women living in the English countryside in the second half of the nineteenth century. Those women who were married with a family were confronted with the familiar – and recognisably modern – dilemma of balancing domestic and childcare responsibilities with contributing financially towards the meagre household income. For many other groups of women – for example, those not yet married or those already widowed – the economic choices they encountered on a day-to-day basis could be even more stark. The ways women could earn a living in

the nineteenth century clearly depended on many considerations: the area of the country in which they lived, their age and marital status, the number of children they had and local custom regarding female labour were especially significant. In addition, long-term changes in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy also profoundly affected women's movements in and out of the nineteenth-century rural labour market. What do we understand about the impact of these variables on the daily lives of rural women workers? Surprisingly little, despite the impressive ascent of both women's history and agrarian social history as established academic disciplines since the 1960s. The roles performed by women living and working in rural England still remain obscure. This book therefore aims to make a contribution towards filling a substantial and important gap in the history of the nineteenth-century English countryside.

My research on women's employment in the nineteenth-century rural economy does not stand alone. It has been guided and framed by a number of other scholars working in the field. Indeed, while acknowledging the relative dearth of studies on rural labouring women, this is not to deny that there has been a marked escalation of academic interest in the subject in the late 1980s and 1990s. In 1995 Pamela Sharpe called for historians of agricultural labour to

Build up a corrective picture at the local level by developing new sources, in which, as far as is possible, we can discover the feminine aspect. What women actually did needs to be established from the bottom up, paying attention to localised differences and to such factors as seasonal change, age-specificity, and marital status.\(^3\)

In many ways this plea has been heeded. Detailed studies of farm labour books and other archival sources by Joyce Burnette, Mary Bouquet, Judy Gielgud, Celia Miller, Pamela Sharpe and Helen Speechley on different English counties have begun to unravel the complex regional diversity in rural women's employment opportunities and wage-earning patterns in the period after 1700.\(^4\) Such research has stimulated a more focused and perceptive


recognition of the impact of gender, age, locality and custom on the agrarian workforce in past centuries and they serve as examples on which to build. However, our knowledge of women’s employment in the nineteenth-century countryside is still far from complete. As Sharpe has recently pointed out, ‘we still have little idea of where and when women worked on farms’ and ‘only further local research, which considers both economic explanations and less quantifiable aspects of human experience in tandem, can take us beyond this necessarily sketchy picture’.5

My interest in the subject is underpinned by the belief that it is impossible 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. While few historians today would deny this, there are still serious omissions within the current literature on women’s work in nineteenth-century rural England which this book aims to rectify. On a simple level this study sets out to write women into the historical record of the English countryside: it is an empirical investigation into the types of labour rural women were employed to perform on a day-to-day basis. The practice of work – or lack of work – was one of the defining features of the lives of the rural labouring poor in nineteenth-century rural England, although the work of women is rarely seen in such terms and has too often been relegated to the sidelines of the male experience. While research on women’s work – particularly agricultural work – has proved a relatively popular and fruitful avenue of investigation, no study has yet attempted a detailed analysis of the wide range of occupations rural labouring women participated in.6 Therefore the main structure of this book is constructed around an examination of the key pursuits open to women in the formal rural labour market. Chapter 2 reappraises the usefulness of a range of contemporary printed material to the study of rural women’s work. This provides an overview of the formal published account of female labour patterns in the nineteenth-century countryside. The remainder of the book offers a thematic discussion of certain productive activities: Chapter 3 looks at the incidence of female farm service, Chapter 4 focuses on women who worked as agricultural day labourers, and Chapter 5 is concerned with the involvement of women in rural domestic industries. However, it is now widely recognised that narrow econometric definitions of ‘work’, ‘occupations’ and ‘earnings’ significantly

6 The one exception to this is Pamela Horn’s Victorian Countrywomen (Oxford, 1991). She looks at the occupations women from all classes participated in. While this book includes much interesting material, it lacks a detailed analytical and theoretical approach to the evidence.
affect the way we measure women’s economic activities. Chapter 6 therefore highlights the more informal ways women contributed economically to rural labouring households. These included the exploitation of common rights such as gleaning, the cultivation of allotments and cottage gardens, taking in washing, rearing animals and nursing sick and elderly neighbours. Such an approach allows the interaction between the informal and formal economies – and the way women moved between them – to be more fully explored.

This methodology – writing a history of women’s work to parallel those already completed for male rural workers – is entirely appropriate considering the paucity of published research on female labourers in the nineteenth-century countryside. However, in many respects the more important project is to conceptualise the nature of rural women’s labour within the broader theoretical debates on women and work. How the processes of industrialisation and technical change in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transformed patterns of female labour in urban, industrial enterprises has been extensively discussed. The consequences for female labourers of government legislation aimed specifically at containing their hours and places of work has also been analysed. The ways ideological constructs of working women altered over the period, and the extent these exerted influence on the types of work women sought, forms another major strand of research. Chapter 2 will explore these themes in more detail. So far, however, few of these theoretical arguments have been transferred to women employed in the rural labour market. Changing technology in nineteenth-century agricultural work – especially harvest work – and the subsequent impact on women’s work has been examined. Recent research has also begun to explore the nature of the sexual division of agricultural labour, the male–female wage gap and continuities and changes in the utilisation of female workers across time and space. (The current state of scholarship on rural labouring women will also be appraised in Chapter 2.) Despite this, our comprehension of these issues is still in its infancy. A number of key questions will therefore be addressed throughout the following chapters.

First, the importance of region is central: what regional differences and similarities are discernible in women’s work across rural England, and how can we account for these? The research for this book is based on detailed analysis of local archives from a limited number of English counties, mainly

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East Yorkshire, Norfolk and Bedfordshire. In order to overcome this narrow concentration, other regional studies have been incorporated, where appropriate, to broaden the geographical scope of the book. This method enables a unique comparative overview of female labour patterns across the regions of England to be realised. The sexual division of labour in the nineteenth-century countryside forms the second major theoretical concern. Was there a rigid division between men’s and women’s work across rural England, or were boundaries more fluid and regionally specific? Was women’s employment in rural England uniformly low paid and labelled as unskilled, or were there times when female labour was attractive and highly sought after? How much were women paid for their labour, and why was a male–female wage gap a persistent feature of the rural labour market? The issue of continuity and change in patterns of women’s work is also significant: how did the types and amount of work women were engaged to perform change over the course of the century? Is the notion of a decline in women’s economic participation applicable across all rural regions and occupations? This book 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 broad impact of shifting economic forces and technological innovations over the course of the century will be detected.

Other themes have been incorporated. It is important to assess the influence that lifecycle variables had on women’s work patterns: how far was women’s labour dependent upon their marital and age specificity? What impact did children have on the family economy? While the labour of women forms the central axis of the book, the complex and changing relationship between male, female and child workers has to be considered and the importance of kinship networks – both in the formal and informal economies – discussed. Finally the role of ideology is assessed: how did attitudes towards female labourers change over the course of the nineteenth century, and in what ways did this affect women’s access to employment? Were concepts such as separate spheres, domestic ideology and the family wage relevant to the everyday reality of rural labouring families?

I am conscious of the omissions in this book. A holistic and systematic analysis of the whole range of tasks undertaken by rural labouring women in the nineteenth century has not been possible. I have not looked at domestic service or at localised industrial employment opportunities. Nor have I examined the criminal activities of women which some historians would view as belonging to the legitimate economic activities of poor rural women in the past. This book concentrates on certain regions of England: future analysis of local records from other counties may lead us to different conclusions.

However, these gaps should not detract from the primary concerns of the book. It is hoped that this study will bridge the divide between economic history, rural history and women’s history, and rescue rural women from their relative invisibility in the historiography. The omissions leave plenty of scope for future studies.
The aim of this chapter is to present a historiographical account of research on women’s employment in the nineteenth century. This will provide a framework for the following chapters. My approach is certainly not novel: many historians have furnished their accounts of gender, work and industrialisation with a similar grounding. However, it is worth reiterating the main stands of this historical debate in order to locate the subject of rural women’s employment within the broader context of research on women and work in the nineteenth century. This chapter does not discuss the protracted and complex path taken by economic history towards becoming more sensitive to the implications of gender. Nor does it assess the subtle divisions between the approaches taken by women’s history, gender history and feminist history. Katrina Honeyman has recently provided an excellent account of economic history’s tendency to marginalise women and recent efforts to mainstream gender history within the context of industrialisation, as well as the broad developments in feminist history. Instead, the following section appraises the key themes and debates that have resulted from scholarly research on women, work and industrialisation in the past thirty years or so. This will be followed by a consideration of the major arguments that have dominated recent agrarian history and a review of new endeavours designed to write women into the rural historiography. The chapter will close with an analysis of sources for the study of rural women’s work, highlighting the uses and limitations of material on which the book is based. Overall it is my intention in this chapter to bring together the foremost scholarship on investigating and interpreting the economic position of nineteenth-century women in an accessible and informative forum.

1 Katrina Honeyman, Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700–1870 (Basingstoke, 2000): see ch. 1, ‘Feminist history and the historiography of the industrial revolution’. 
Women, work and industrialisation in England: the key debates

There is a general dearth 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. Although it has been difficult to break down the gender blindness of some stands of economic history, the importance of gender to economic analyses is now generally recognised. This has resulted in a steady move away from studies that concentrate on the male experience of labour in the formal economy of paid work outside the home. As Honeyman argues, research on the work of women (and children) has resulted in a revised perception of industrialisation, producing 'some of the most stimulating reinterpretations of the Industrial Revolution period'.

The debates on the impact of industrialisation in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England are vast and complex. It is not within my scope to document them here. But if we concentrate on the specific issue of women’s work and industrial change, it is possible to pinpoint the key theoretical controversies which have engendered debate. First, the effects of

2 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.

3 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. Pat Hudson, ‘Women and industrialisation’, in June Purvis, ed., Women’s History: Britain, 1850–1945. An Introduction (London, 1995), pp. 23–50 (pp. 25–6).

4 Honeyman, Women, Gender and Industrialisation, p. 8.

technological innovation and changes in the organisation and site of labour on female workers have been pivotal concerns. In relation to this, the questioning of the pervasiveness of the separation of home and workplace has been central. Second, historians have debated how various ideological constructs impacted on working women. These included not only the formal state-sanctioned legislation aimed at women in the workforce, but also the ubiquitous social definitions and images of womanhood and femininity that were reworked and repackaged in the nineteenth century. Another primary concern has been the processes by which notions such as skill, domestic ideology, patriarchy and male breadwinner were reformulated at this time. In addition, the wrangle over whether continuity or change best defines the working experiences of female labourers underpins much of the literature that is concerned with women’s economic history.

In simplistic terms, historical assessments of the impact of industrialisation on women’s employment patterns and standards of living are polarised: ‘optimistic’ or ‘pessimistic’, ‘evolutionary’ or ‘revolutionary’.6 With regard to female employment the ‘optimistic’ view argues that the industrial revolution presented women with wider job opportunities, leading eventually to their emancipation. R. M. Hartwell, Ivy Pinchbeck, Neil McKendrick and Edward Shorter have all been labelled as ‘optimists’.7 The ‘pessimist’ account suggests that industrial development reduced women’s employment options, leaving them increasingly confined to a narrow range of low-paid and low-skilled jobs which, in turn, reinforced their dependency on men.8

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8 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
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 the phases of proto-industry and factory production. Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson have been especially successful at exposing the unique role performed by female workers during the early stages of industrialisation: they argue 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. 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. Berg highlights how cheap women’s labour was utilised in conjunction with technical and organisational innovation to yield higher profits than were possible under earlier manufacturing result of the rise of capitalism. Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, 1st edn 1919 (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. Eric Richards, ‘Women in the British economy since about 1700’, *History*, 59 (1974), pp. 337–57. Marxist feminists also espouse a pessimistic view of industrialisation, arguing that the oppression of women was necessary for the operation of industrial capitalism. See Michele Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today* (London, 1980); Thomas, ‘Women and capitalism’, p. 536.


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. By the mid-nineteenth century however, the integral role of female and child labour was beginning to decline: the proto-industries were 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. It was these heavy industries which became increasingly important to British manufacturing prosperity as the century wore on. In this scenario then, 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 and visible changes in the type and processes of women’s employment. However, while 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. The vast majority of women continued to work in their homes, in small workshops, in the sweated trades and in domestic service. For these women, the technological advancements that underpinned the conversion of female labour in cotton textiles had little meaning. 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’.

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. This loss was devastating for rural women. In some regions it significantly curtailed their wage-earning potential

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15 Michael Fores argues that between only 10 and 12 per cent of the British population were employed in factories ‘by the time the “revolution” was meant to be over’. Michael Fores, ‘The myth of a British industrial revolution’, History, 66 (1981), pp. 181–98 (p. 191).
and the contraction of spinning work in the English countryside forms a dominant theme in much contemporary writing in the early nineteenth century. The significance of this decline will be explored further in Chapter 2.

A number of received wisdoms on the nature of female labour have come under attack. The once-dominant assumption of the increasing separation of home and family has been questioned by recent research. According to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, the period 1780 to 1850 witnessed the removal of middle-class women from active participation in business, withdrawing to the family-centred world of home.\(^\text{18}\) However, this transition did not necessarily affect women of the working class in the same way. The continued interaction of employment and family in the nineteenth century in some regions and industries is now recognised. Similarly, the persistence of the household as a site for waged work into the twentieth century is generally acknowledged. Sally Alexander, for example, has shown how the high price of rent and fuel in London meant that 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. Instead, the supply of cheap female labour favoured the development of sweated outwork. Thus, the work women did, Alexander argues, was either transference of domestic skills to the formal labour market (for example, cooking and cleaning), or work that had traditionally been done by women as part of domestic manufacture.\(^\text{19}\) Sonya Rose has shown how the requirement for women to do homework as seamers actually expanded during the transition to factory production in the Nottinghamshire framework knitting industry. This increased demand was a result of changes in the methods of manufacture.\(^\text{20}\) 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.\(^\text{21}\)


Women's history has enhanced our understanding of the industrial revolution by inaugurating new ways of looking at the processes of industrialisation. As part of this shift it is now widely accepted 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 prohibitions and proscriptions 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 outlooks and social constraints. The definition of skilled labour and the idea of patriarchal power were reconfigured in the new industrial environment, while concepts such as the family wage and male breadwinner, and opinions about the 'proper' place of women, were extended and popularised.

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'.

Similarly, technological change in the later stages of industrialisation did not significantly affect 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 mechanisation may have been expected to create new openings for women in previously male dominated areas of work. This was because 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'.

The meanings attached to the notion of 'skill' were ideologically constructed, and new types of skill networks and labour hierarchies emerged in factory settings. 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

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23 Ibid., p. 229.
outside the home into the factory. This move created gender-defined work which provided the basis for a customary woman’s wage, paid at a lower rate than the male wage. Hall’s research also highlights how the sexual division of labour was reworked in cotton textiles as changes in technology and location of work occurred. Although women in the Lancashire cotton industry were better paid and shared more equality with men than women working in most other industries, men monopolised mule spinning in the factories and the newly formed male unions operated limitations on entry to the trade as a protective measure.

The concept of the family wage – whereby a male worker was paid a sufficient amount of money to be able to support his family without his wife having to work – legitimised the continuation of low female wage levels as women were seen as working only to augment the male wage. The perception of ‘work’ as the occupation of a family shifted to ‘work’ as the waged labour of an individual in the nineteenth century. This had the effect of elevating and prioritising the male wage. Women were viewed as depen-
dants, supported first by their fathers, and after marriage, by their husbands. Men 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, introduced from the 1830s, defined women as a group requiring special protection, further reinforcing the belief that women's roles should be confined to the domestic sphere. This placed injunctions on when women could enter the workforce and the nature of the waged work they could perform.  

Notions such as the male breadwinner and the family wage became instruments of power in the nineteenth century. The impact these ideas had on most working-class families is debatable though. None the less, they remained important ideological tools, and they 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. 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. It is within this context that especially elaborate expressions of women's 'proper' place were articulated. The domestic ideology affected many prevalent attitudes towards female work – and female workers – in the nineteenth century. Again, we have to question how far women themselves actually colluded with this outlook. Elizabeth Roberts has suggested that many working-class women expressed ambiguous attitudes towards their work. This meant that women tended to perceive their liberation in terms of a move back into the home, not into paid employment outside the household. We can comprehend this attitude, Roberts writes, 'when the strength of the domestic idyll is appreciated and the nature of the double burden of work carried by full-time working women is understood'.  

Historians such as Judith Bennett have employed the concept of patriarchy to explain women's subordinate position in the nineteenth-century labour

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30 Catherine Hall, ‘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 Amanda Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 383–414, which is a critical review of the two concepts.

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 one form of legitimisation that holders of patriarchal power adopt’. Thus, scholars such as Lown claim that the action of patriarchy forms a ‘central axis of historical and social change’. In her work on the Courtauld silk factory in Halstead, Essex, Lown highlights how patriarchal family relations were reformulated in the factory setting. There, 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.

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. One of the ways scholars have approached this question is to analyse the broad trends in female participation rates in the workforce. This is not an easy undertaking. It is virtually impossible to be certain about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female labour rates. Reliable statistics for the eighteenth century are uncommon and there are many drawbacks involved with using nineteenth-century census figures as confirmation of female occupational trends. (These will be discussed later in this chapter.) While acknowledging the problems of the source, Roberts has used the census as a rough indicator of women’s involvement in the labour force, and suggests that industrialisation had little impact on women’s participation rates. These, she argues, remained static in the nineteenth century at around 30 per cent. Roberts’ arguments are framed by the earlier

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34 Lown, ‘Not much a factory’, p. 35.


36 However, there are two sets of pre-census listings for Cardington, Bedfordshire in 1782 and Corfe Castle, Dorset in 1790 that provide interesting information on occupational structures. See Osamu Saito, ‘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), pp. 14–29.

work of Louise Tilly and Joan Scott. In their seminal text *Women, Work and Family*, Tilly and Scott contend that industrialisation did not change the type of work women did in any significant way, nor did it increase greatly the percentage of women in work over the course of the nineteenth century. The lack of dependable statistics means that the overall effect of industrialisation on women’s labour force participation remains unresolved.

The debate over continuity or change 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. Bridget Hill meanwhile claims 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. The issue is complicated still further by the fact that processes of industrialisation and the transition to new forms of work and workplaces were regionally and occupationally specific. Such diversity of experience tends to be masked by studies that adopt a broad overview. The manifesto for selecting a regional and occupational approach to the study of gender, work and industrialisation has been outlined by Horrell and Humphries, who contend that accounts of women’s and children’s contributions to family incomes must be conditional on their occupational and regional identity, which limits ‘grand theories’ of the causes of women’s marginalization. Theories that depict women, whatever their circumstances, as undifferentiated victims of allied economic and ideological forces must give way to detailed analysis of institutional changes at occupational and regional levels.

It is through this more nuanced regional framework that future advances in the understanding of the changing nature of work and gender structures during industrialisation will come to fruition. In addition, it is evident that

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38 Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 1st edn 1978 (London, 1987), p. 77. Peter Earle’s research on women’s work in London also backs up this proposition. He shows 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’. Peter Earle, ‘The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries’, *Economic History Review*, XLII (1989), pp. 328–53 (p. 342).

39 Bennett, ‘Women’s history’.


social, cultural and ideological factors also have to be incorporated into the economic history of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to provide a clearer analysis. As Pamela Sharpe maintains, by doing this, ‘we no longer need be hampered by overarching narratives of “continuity” versus “change”, leading us to an understanding of individual experiences within the broad framework of the economic past’.  

Agrarian history and women’s history: the debate on rural women’s employment

Writing on rural England falls into two camps: that on the mechanics of farming, and other research on the wider social and cultural aspects of the countryside. One factor uniting the two groups is their gender blindness. As a result there has been relatively little written on the role of women workers in the nineteenth-century English countryside.

A dominant theme in agrarian history has been the timing of the ‘agricultural revolution’. Early accounts stressed the influence of technological change and new crops in the century between 1750 and 1850, and the role of the ‘Great Men’ who enacted them. Lord Ernle is a leading pioneer of this view. Changes in the institutional structure of farming are seen as aiding the implementation of fresh products and processes. Thus parliamentary enclosure was pivotal to the success of agrarian changes as it swept away common property rights, an inhibitor to innovation and advancement. This perspective remained the consensus opinion on the agricultural revolution until the 1960s when it was undermined by a wave of new scholarship. J. D. Chambers and Gordon Mingay led the way, arguing that 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. Eric Kerridge pushed the parameters back further, situating the revolution between 1560 and 1673, while E. L. Jones contended that the period 1650 to 1750 witnessed the zenith of agricultural change. Thus, by the 1970s, the period of the agricultural revolution had been stretched from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. However, the current consensus, based on fresh insights gained from new sources and innovative databases, has reinstated the

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43 Sharpe, ‘Continuity and change’, p. 364.
case for the agricultural revolution taking off in the period after 1750. Mark Overton argues that it was not until after 1750 that the dramatic and unprecedented improvements in output, land yield and labour productivity – along with equally dramatic changes in husbandry – were underway on a broad scale.\textsuperscript{47} An analysis of over 300 farm records by Michael Turner, John Beckett and Bethanie Afton has resulted in similar confirmation. Farm records indicate that yields began to increase significantly in the first half of the nineteenth century, placing the location of the agricultural revolution ‘firmly within the period from about 1800 to 1850’.\textsuperscript{48}

What were the effects of these revolutionary processes on men and women who lived and worked 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. This book was published in English in 1908 and charts the progress of the labouring class from the Black Death to the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{49} Hasbach argued that loss of common land during enclosure led to the demoralisation of rural labourers – whom he called the ‘agricultural proletariat’ – a situation they endeavoured to overturn during the remainder of the nineteenth century. J. L. and Barbara Hammond in The Village Labourer, carried this critique of agricultural improvement forward.\textsuperscript{50} This book presents us with a picture of an efficient common land system that was destroyed by enclosure. Consequently the 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, the Hammonds claim, a bitter outburst of rioting – or the ‘Last Labourers Revolt’ – shook southern England in the early 1830s.\textsuperscript{51}

A critique of the Hammonds’ view of enclosure as a catastrophic event for the English countryside is central to Chambers and Mingay’s account of

\textsuperscript{47} Mark Overton, Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500–1850 (Cambridge, 1996).
\textsuperscript{50} J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer (London, 1911).
\textsuperscript{51} See Hammond and Hammond, Village Labourer, ch.11 and ch.12.
the agricultural revolution.\textsuperscript{52} 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 Hammonds exaggerated the costs of this change, and enclosure meant ‘more food for the growing population, more land under cultivation and, on balance, more employment in the countryside’.\textsuperscript{53} Yet this revisionist perspective itself has not gone unchallenged. 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.\textsuperscript{54}

Leigh Shaw-Taylor’s more recent work has added extra impetus to the enclosure debate, which rumbles on.\textsuperscript{55}

The impetus which has bolstered renewed thinking about the effects of enclosure – especially the changes wrought on the labouring poor – has been provided by the revival of social agrarian history since the 1960s. Other areas of rural research have been invigorated by this trend towards history ‘from below’, and new, innovative ways of viewing and understanding the nineteenth-century countryside have resulted. In books by A. J. Peacock, George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm, the social history of the rural labourer is viewed through a particular episode: the ‘Bread and Blood’ riots in East Anglia in 1816 and the Swing riots in south-eastern England in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{56}


\textsuperscript{53} Chambers and Mingay, Agricultural Revolution, p. 104.


An impressive body of research on rural crime and social protest has followed. Barry Reay’s *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers* concentrates on the uprising of Kent labourers in 1838, while John Archer’s ‘*By a Flash and a Scare*’ focuses on the wider incidence of incendiarism, animal maiming and poaching in nineteenth-century East Anglia. The history of union activity among agricultural labourers has also emerged as an 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.

Amidst this reformation of rural history there has been little place for women. It has taken many years for rural women – and their roles as workers, rioters, family members and agents of social change – to materialise as topics worthy of academic interest. This exclusion is puzzling given that the founders of *History Workshop* had identified the invisibility of women in working-class history back in the 1970s. Sally Alexander, Anna Davin and Eve Hostettler, writing in 1979, pointed to the outmoded generalisations which were used to describe rural working women, and by doing so offered a way forward for future research. ‘Both married and single women worked in agriculture for the greater part of the nineteenth century’, they claimed, ‘and most textbooks on agricultural history say they disappeared from the rural labour force after 1870. This bland assertion conceals great diversity of...”

