

# The female labour market in English agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: expansion or contraction?\*

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## Abstract

This article reviews some of the recent literature on women's farm work and adds evidence from sources such as Marshall's *Review* and farm accounts to consider patterns of expansion and contraction in the demand for female labour from the capitalist sector of English agriculture over the period 1700–1850. The amount of work available to women, the sexual division of labour and female wage rates are discussed. It argues that although generalizations regarding the causes of increase or decline in female work and wages are not easily made, the final impression is that both before and during the Industrial Revolution, the demand from agriculture for female labour was limited.

Thomas Hardy describes Tess of the d'Urville's slavery to the threshing machine thus;

For some probably economical reason it was usually a woman who was chosen for this particular duty, and Groby gave as his motive in selecting Tess that she was one of those who best combined strength with quickness in untying and both with staying power ...<sup>1</sup>

While by some accounts, Tess' labours were anachronistic by the 1880s, this article considers the extent to which English women carried out farm work from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Were female farm workers 'economical' to employ? Did their aptitudes suit agricultural labour? Research and writing in social and economic history has been concerned with patterns of women's work, particularly since the 'new wave' of women's history from the 1970s, but we still have little idea of where and when women worked on farms. Widening our knowledge of the female labour market enables us to develop our understanding of the 'release' of labour from the land to mills and factories (for the main Industrial Revolution labour force was female) as well as to local cottage industries. Nevertheless we cannot assume that expanding opportunities for women in agriculture would have been welcome if more attractive work were available in other sectors of the economy. More generally, historians

\* I gave early versions of this article as a seminar paper in Cambridge, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Bristol. Later versions were presented at the Social History Conference and Local Population Studies Annual Conference in 1996 and at the conference on 'Wage Systems and Industrialisation in Europe, eighteenth-twentieth Centuries' in Les Treilles, Provence, in 1999. I am grateful for all the comments received. For remarks on the written text, I thank Pat Hudson, Ad Knotter and the anonymous reviewers for this journal.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbilles* (1891, 1985 edn), p. 406.

still disagree on whether or not capitalist agriculture meant more or less work for women. The issue of when and where women worked on farms is considered in Section I. Inextricably connected to this question is the extent to which women's work in farming became more specific in terms of the type of work women undertook. To what degree work was gender segregated and whether this was more rigidly applied over time is explored in Section II. Section III will review wage rate evidence and Section IV will examine the 'female marginalization' thesis in more detail.

The current differences of opinion between historians mainly concern areas of developed capitalist farming, so that this discussion will tend to concentrate on the east and the Midlands rather than smaller farms of the west and uplands which, until recent times, employed more family labour. The focus will not be on live-in farm servants (unmarried young women) but on day- or piece-workers (wives or widows). Feminist historians have taken exception to the term 'family labour', with its implicit devaluing of the contribution of members other than the (male) household head, but a close examination of the identity of female workers in farm accounts shows that they are usually related to the farm labourers who worked on the same farm. Their wives and children found periodic employment, as did adult daughters (some of whom seem to have been women who had illegitimate children and perhaps found themselves excluded on the grounds of respectability from domestic service), and widows of former farm workers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, at this stage it is easier to review some of the debates and difficulties rather than aiming to produce a definitive view. Ultimately, exploration of the regional context of women's work will provide a fuller and more nuanced picture.

## I

An impressionistic overview suggests that in the eighteenth century at least, female farm work was less common in England than in other European countries. As Peter Mathias has recently held, 'Judged against other societies, perhaps the unusual thing is that women's role in agriculture was so limited in England'.<sup>3</sup> Only a cursory glimpse at the writings of late eighteenth-century agricultural observers is sufficient to suggest that they saw a lack of work for women and children in rural areas, especially in the cereal growing areas of south-east England, and connected this to soaring levels of poor relief.

Some recent research on the history of farm labour in England suggests that agrarian capitalism led to a decrease in the work possibilities for women. Robert Allen has pointed out that

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Sharpe, 'Time and wages of West Country workfolks', *Local Population Stud.* 55 (1995), pp. 66–8.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mathias, 'Labour and the process of industrialisation in the first phases of British Industrialisation' in Peter Mathias and J. A. Davis (eds), *Enterprise and Labour from the eighteenth century to the present* (1996), pp. 41–2. More research appears to have been carried out on women's farm work in Scotland and Continental Europe than in England. For Scotland see T. M. Devine,

'Women workers, 1850–1914' in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Farm servants and labour in Lowland Scotland* (1984), pp. 98–123. Deborah Simonton, *A history of European Women's work, 1700 to the Present* (1998), provides an excellent summary of the literature for European regions. Much of what we do know for early modern England is provided by Anne Kussmaul, *Servants in husbandry in early modern England* (1981), but the evidence for women is scanty.

larger, capitalized, arable farms were likely to employ fewer women and children.<sup>4</sup> This echoes Arthur Young's observations on his *Northern Tour* (1770) that 'great farmers do not keep near the proportion of servants, maids and boys that smaller ones do. Their superiority ... lies totally in labourers'.<sup>5</sup> Burnette's recent research collates wage data for the country as a whole and shows a growing wage gap between males and females over the period of industrialization. She suggests that this was due to a declining demand for women's skills.<sup>6</sup> Her detailed study of a farm near Sheffield shows that work opportunities for female labourers fell between the 1770s and 1830s and it appears that generally increasing agricultural productivity led to a decreasing demand for women workers.<sup>7</sup> The theoretical basis for 'female marginalisation' with the development of capitalism is also well established in sociological texts. Ever since Engels published *The origin of the family, private property and the state*, it has been argued that women have been progressively excluded from productive activities as economies develop.<sup>8</sup> Esther Boserup, in her important empirical work on comparative economic development, also argued that women's status was high where they had a full role in production and tended to decline with progressive economic development and specialisation.<sup>9</sup>

The argument for women's declining involvement is at odds with Ivy Pinchbeck's classic work on the Industrial Revolution written in 1930. By drawing on parliamentary reports and a wide variety of other evidence, Pinchbeck produced a detailed picture of what women actually did on farms. She argued, for the country as a whole, that 'whenever new crops were grown and improved methods adopted, the employment of women as day labourers rapidly increased' and that as 'capitalistic farming developed, and with it the desire to lower the cost of production, women's labour was increasingly in demand'.<sup>10</sup> From a situation where women had only intensively worked in agriculture at haytime and harvest, Pinchbeck argued that the conditions of the late eighteenth century forced women to take on more agricultural labour.<sup>11</sup> Inadequate male wages and falling alternative opportunities, particularly in spinning, coincided with more work suited to the perceived skills of women. Large farms and improved methods meant a more intensive seasonal demand for planters, hoers, weeders and harvesters of intensively grown crops. Pinchbeck was mistaken in her emphasis on the novelty of turnip cultivation in the century after 1750, but evidence from large farms in Essex, an area of advanced, commercial agriculture in the eighteenth century, confirms the role of both women and children in setting

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman. The agricultural development of the south Midlands, 1450-1850* (1992); *idem* 'The growth of labor productivity in early modern English agriculture', *Explorations in Economic History* 25 (1988), pp. 117-46.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by W. A. Armstrong in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VI, 1750-1850 (1989), p. 673.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce Burnette, 'An investigation of the female-male wage gap during the Industrial Revolution in Britain' *Economic History Rev.* (hereafter *ECHR*) 50 (1997), pp. 257-281.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Burnette, 'Laborers at the Oakes. Changes in the demand for female day-laborers at a farm near Sheffield during the Agricultural Revolution' *J. Economic*

*History* 39 (1999), pp. 41-67.

<sup>8</sup> F. Engels, *The origin of the family, private property and the state* (1884; 1972 edn). For sociological approaches see Alison MacEwan-Scott, 'Women and Industrialisation. Examining the "female marginalisation thesis"', *J. Development Stud.* 22 (1986), pp. 643-680. A comprehensive introduction to historical and sociological approaches is Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work* (1989).

<sup>9</sup> Esther Boserup, *Women's role in economic development* (1970).

<sup>10</sup> Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (1930, 1981 edn), pp. 66, 100.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 53-66

crops, stonepicking and weed gathering, and as the main workers employed to deal with specialist crops, such as medicinal herbs for the London market, in seed growing, in commercial vegetable production and on fruit farms.<sup>12</sup> On the point that women were a cheap source of labour and capitalist farming methods needed low costs of production, Pinchbeck argued that had women and children not been available 'it is probable that much of the work demanded by the new cultures would have remained undone, or that the expense of employing extra men would have deterred many from adopting new methods'.<sup>13</sup> Recent detailed research on Somerset supports the Pinchbeck view.<sup>14</sup> Helen Speechley finds a rise in the proportion of women employed on farms over the period from the seventeenth to the era of 'high' farming, with a rapid decline before the agricultural depression of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Until the mid-nineteenth century, female agricultural labourers constituted an average of 20 per cent of the annual day labour force in Somerset. Women's employment declined only in line with the overall trend in agricultural employment in the course of the nineteenth century.

Keith Snell argued for women's reduced role in agriculture in the eighteenth-century south-east of England in his *Annals of the Labouring Poor*.<sup>15</sup> His data, drawn from seasonal patterns of work and wages recorded in settlement examinations, suggested that women's work in predominantly arable counties such as Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire became more confined and less well paid as the eighteenth century advanced. Whereas in the early modern period through to the early eighteenth century, the patterns revealed a reasonably equitable sharing of tasks and the involvement of women in multifarious farm jobs, Snell showed that a sexual division of labour developed in the second half of the century. Women no longer worked in harvest operations, and indeed by the mid-nineteenth century had very little involvement in farm work at all. The pastoral west of England presented a different pattern because of female work opportunities in dairying that may have, in fact, increased in the nineteenth century. Snell's views have become widely influential, being recounted in textbooks on women's history, and more widely in general works of economic and social history.<sup>16</sup> Yet Snell himself readily acknowledged that the explanations for his results were tentative.

The broad patterns of women's work are unclear until the onset of the French Wars. We must balance Snell's trend of declining female participation in the cornlands against the evident areas of growth identified by Pinchbeck. The French Wars (1793–1815) are thought to have created more work for women, leading to reports of 'petticoat harvests' in some parts of the country.<sup>17</sup> Can this be substantiated? If we turn to Essex, farm account books show an increase

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism. Working women in the English economy, 1700–1850* (1996), pp. 92–9.

<sup>13</sup> Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 66. Pinchbeck's view is adopted by Armstrong in *Agrarian History VI*, p. 684.

<sup>14</sup> Helen V. Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural day labourers in Somerset, c. 1685–1870' (University of Exeter PhD thesis, 1999), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor* (1985).

<sup>16</sup> Most recently Mark Overton cites the story of declining participation in his *Agricultural Revolution in*

*England. The transformation of the agrarian economy, 1500–1850* (1996), p. 188. Bridget Hill, *Women, work and sexual politics in eighteenth-century England* (1989) follows Snell's line of argument. For examples of more general textbooks, see R. Brown, *Society and economy in modern Britain, 1700–1850* (1991), pp. 321–2; J. Rule, *Albion's people* (1992), pp. 190–1.

<sup>17</sup> C. Emsley, *British society and the French wars* (1979), p. 111; *Agrarian History VI*, p. 684.

in women employed on farms in the first few years of wartime conditions. As the cost of living soared, some cottage industries collapsed and, with many men away on service, there is little doubt that women would have been actively seeking farm work. Demographic conditions of early and near universal marriage, and a high birth rate from the end of the eighteenth century, make it obvious that the supply of family labourers increased. But so did the glut of male farm workers, with farmers using the poor law to subsidize the practice of maintaining agricultural labourers through low points of the year to meet peak seasonal labour demands.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the incomparably high prices and profits may have meant that farmers placed a premium on expert harvesters. Farm accounts for Essex show that as the wars progressed, harvests were brought in by contracted labour, or sometimes the militia on large farms, while women continued in the areas seen as traditional 'women's work' such as weeding, stonepicking, haymaking, and turnip singling.<sup>19</sup> Rather than employing more women in threshing, the wartime saw the first use of threshing machines. Other positive evidence of women working in Essex during the wars comes from the prizes provided by agricultural societies to women workers. Such measures, and the indications of women and children 'dibbling' wheat rather than sowing broadcast, seem more like efforts to reduce the poor rate by artificially creating work for labourers' families than proof that women's agricultural work was plentiful.<sup>20</sup> Poor relief evidence also casts doubt on a picture of bouyant work opportunities for women. For example, in the typical grain growing parish of Terling in Essex, women's earnings from agriculture were very small. The poor women on listings were only able to earn a third of their livelihood from farm work and many of them were listed as doing 'nothing'. The Terling vestry investigated the situation in 1811 and resolved that they must introduce measures to employ labourers' families.<sup>21</sup> Even in the low-lying area of south Essex, which experienced labour shortages in normal conditions, the exigencies of wartime do not seem to have been met with increased casual female labour. This district seems to have maintained live-in farm servants for longer than the claylands. The surviving accounts of Skinnerswick Farm in Tolleshunt d'Arcy do show wives predominating in sowing and haymaking, but the harvest workforce was supplied by professional reapers who hailed from villages in north Essex and Suffolk.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever the level of female employment in wartime, the demand for women workers seems certain to have shrunk in the agricultural depression from 1815 to 1835. There are grounds for arguing for a revival in women's work between 1835 and 1850, particularly in the cornlands. On the demand side, this was because some farmers diversified away from wheat into other cereals or livestock.<sup>23</sup> On the supply side, the stipulations of the New Poor Law seem to have propelled more women – particularly single women and widows – towards farm work. Although women agricultural workers formed only 1.2 per cent of agricultural labourers in Essex in the 1851 census, there was an increasing barrage of middle class condemnation against women participating in field work in the mid-nineteenth century. The invective against women's agricultural

<sup>18</sup> See George Boyer, *An economic history of the English Poor Law, 1750–1850* (1989).

<sup>19</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to capitalism*, pp. 38–70.

<sup>20</sup> A. Armstrong, *Farmworkers. A social and economic history* (1988), p. 51. See also Anon, *An account of the Essex society for the encouragement of Agriculture and Industry*

(Bocking, 1793, a copy held by the Essex Record Office, hereafter ERO).

<sup>21</sup> ERO D/P 299/12/4–5; D/P 299/8/3, 30 Dec. 1811.

<sup>22</sup> ERO D/DU 623/183.

<sup>23</sup> A. R. Wilkes, 'Adjustments in arable farming after the Napoleonic Wars', *AgHR* 28 (1980), pp. 90–103.

employment ran alongside the factory and mine legislation of the 1830s and 1840s and expressed the conflict between women's work and their domestic role. The Commissioners on Women and Children's Employment in Agriculture reported in 1843 on the notorious gang system in operation in East Anglia, although such gangs continued into the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>24</sup> But factors such as higher male wages and male unionisation, agricultural depression in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, mechanisation of agricultural processes and compulsory education for children only went so far towards changing the position of women and children as a large reserve pool of casual labour which fed the capitalist farming system. Oral reports from twentieth century Essex still mention forms of women and children's rural work which had gone virtually unchanged for centuries, work such as weeding, bird scaring, stone-picking, collecting acorns to feed pigs, clover turning, potato picking and singling of root crops.<sup>25</sup> Women found little work in cereal production, but vegetable cultivation could keep them in sporadic work through the summer. As a result, Steve Hussey's recent oral history might be describing the seventeenth century: work was sex specific, men worked alongside women but in different, more skilled occupations.<sup>26</sup>

This section suggests that given the constraints on comparability of evidence and the ebb and flow of work for women over time, perhaps the existing views of historians are differences of degree rather than being directly contradictory. Pinchbeck describes expanding demand for female labour in the improved sectors of the economy. Snell's evidence reflects female unemployment in localized areas where former servants in husbandry were now cast off in an increasingly casualized and seasonal farming regime. A modern chronology might also suggest that some of the labour intensive production described by Pinchbeck emerged as early as the seventeenth century. Estimates of overall labour productivity rise during the mid-seventeenth century because convertible husbandry led to greater land preparation by ploughing and harrowing and more time spent on pruning and hoeing. De Vries' recent formulation of an 'industrious revolution' preceding the Industrial Revolution suggests that much of this new work reflects a greater input of women and children's labour galvanized by the stirrings of an emergent consumerism.<sup>27</sup>

Comparability over time is vexed by the fact that the reference points for the rise or decline of work availability all lie in the nineteenth century. Except for the few farms which kept comprehensive records, there is no way of measuring the extent of female participation in an earlier period. Many interpretations of decline in women's employment in the nineteenth century have been influenced by census figures. Eric Richards, for example, drew up a U-shaped curve of female labour participation in the industrialising period, drawing on the declining census trend.<sup>28</sup> But Edward Higgs has recently argued that the censuses massively underestimate

<sup>24</sup> Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, pp. 80, 96.

<sup>25</sup> ERO T/Z 25/241 (Old People's essays, 1961).

<sup>26</sup> S. Hussey, 'Out in the fields in all weathers. Women's agricultural work in north Essex, 1919-1939', *Essex J.* (Autumn 1993), pp. 48-58. Hussey suggests that the sexual division of labour in field work may be the result of the mechanization of cereal operations, but I would argue that it had a much longer history.

<sup>27</sup> Jan de Vries, 'Between purchasing power and the world of goods. Understanding the household economy in early modern Europe', in J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds) *Consumption and the world of goods* (1993), pp. 85-132.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Richards, 'Women in the British economy since about 1700: an interpretation', *History* 59 (1974), pp. 337-57.

women's agricultural work in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Celia Miller had earlier compared farm accounts for Gloucestershire with the enumerator's records for the 1871 and 1881 census.<sup>30</sup> She found that women were employed in a wide range of farm work as cheap labourers, even as harvesters, but they were not noticed in the census as participating in work. This lack of firm information on the numbers of female workers leads us to explore other avenues to secure a picture of female labour participation.

## II

Although the supply of female labour available to farmers increased after 1750, women's work depended on the sexual division of labour. The thrust of Burnette's recent argument for 'occupational crowding' is that work was not rigidly gender-segregated in agriculture, but that differences in strength between males and females affected the allocation of tasks.<sup>31</sup> Regarding the sexual division of labour, Snell argued that 'There is abundant supportive evidence for a very wide range of female participation in agricultural tasks before 1750 in the south-east, when their work extended to reaping, loading and spreading dung, ploughing, threshing, thatching, following the harrow, sheep shearing, and even working as shepherdesses'. Indeed, he claimed that there was then 'a traditionally fuller and more sexually equal participation in agriculture' than what was to follow.<sup>32</sup> He did not provide much 'abundant' supporting evidence, however, referring readers to writers on women's work in the early modern period, such as Alice Clark. Clark's book sees the seventeenth century as an era in which women participated in a wide range of work hitherto closed to them, and, she believed, this conferred them with a certain equality in family relationships which subsequently declined.<sup>33</sup> More recent research questions the extent to which work was in fact, carried out as a partnership, and suggests that in urban areas at least, both male and female contributions to the household might be wages from completely different sorts of employment.<sup>34</sup>

Farm accounts can give us a comparable, detailed picture for the countryside, even if there tends to be a bias towards the survival of larger and more capitalized farms where accounts were more likely to be kept and which provide more detail.<sup>35</sup> A. Hassell Smith's research on the late sixteenth century account books of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey in Norfolk is suggestive.<sup>36</sup> He found women's farm work to be complementary to men's, but not the same. Certain tasks

<sup>29</sup> Edward Higgs, 'Occupational censuses and the agricultural workforce in Victorian England' *EcHR* 48 (1995), pp. 700–716. See also his 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth-century censuses', *History Workshop J.* 23 (1987), pp. 59–80.

<sup>30</sup> Celia Miller, 'The hidden workforce. Female field workers in Gloucestershire, 1870–1901', *Southern Hist.* 6 (1984), pp. 139–161.

<sup>31</sup> Joyce Burnette, 'Testing for occupational crowding in eighteenth-century British agriculture', *Explorations in Economic History* 33 (1996), pp. 319–345.

<sup>32</sup> Snell, *Annals*, pp. 52, 56.

<sup>33</sup> Alice Clark, *Working life of women in the seventeenth century* (1919, 3rd edn, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Earle, 'The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', *EcHR* 42 (1989), pp. 328–353. Pamela Sharpe, 'Literally spinsters. A new interpretation of local economy and demography in Colyton in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' *EcHR* 46 (1991), pp. 46–65.

<sup>35</sup> The main difficulty is locating such accounts. They now mainly reside within collections of private papers in county record offices. However, more research could be carried out on the large collection at the Rural History Centre, Reading University.

<sup>36</sup> A. Hassell Smith, 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England. A case study from North Norfolk', *Continuity and Change* (1989), 4, pp. 11–52, 367–394.

seem to have always been women's work, especially spring weeding and stone-picking. On Bacon's estates, women did not take part in ploughing, hedging and ditching, reaping or threshing, which were distinctively male tasks. Henry Best's farming and memorandum books for Elmswell, Yorkshire, in 1642 give some of the richest descriptions of farm organisation available for the early modern period. In Best's world there was a strict gender division of labour, farm tasks were not interchangeable, and their allocation depended on age, strength and its application to the soil, or prevailing weather conditions.<sup>37</sup>

On the Antony estate in Torpoint in Cornwall in the seventeenth century, the range of women's employment was much wider. Although they did the planting and cleaning operations, they also winnowed barley and threshed oats.<sup>38</sup> Carol Shammass' study of Swarthmoor Hall in Lancashire in the seventeenth century also revealed gender-specific employment patterns in day labour.<sup>39</sup> Women were involved in harrowing and haying in the arable fields but not in weeding. They were weeders in the garden and flax fields. On the Thornborough estate in Yorkshire studied by Mrs Gilboy, in the third quarter of the eighteenth century women were employed in 'shearing' or reaping, but they took no part in mowing, threshing, hedging, ploughing or stubbing.<sup>40</sup> Considered together, these various case studies suggest that there were important regional and local differences in the gender-specificity of employment.

Another source, William Marshall's *Review and abstract of the county reports to the Board of Agriculture* made between 1787 (Norfolk) and 1815 (Cornwall), is well trodden.<sup>41</sup> Here the historian relies on whether or not the reporters considered women to fall into the category of 'workpeople'. As their *raison d'être* demanded, the authors of the county reports were concerned with the efficiency of the workforce and the degree to which new farming methods had been adopted, and as a result often comment only on particularly good or bad practice. Moreover, the reports were compiled over a thirty-year period, during much of which there was a wartime economy. The shortcomings are obvious, but, nevertheless, the information which Marshall's *Review* can provide on women's employment has not been given adequate attention. Regional specificity is apparent throughout these reports, but the broad patterns show men's involvement with mowing corn, ploughing, and hedging and ditching; women were concerned with poultry, sheep, weeding, planting and any husbandry which was garden-like such as flax-pulling, hemp cultivation, orchards, vegetables or herb growing.<sup>42</sup> The most distinctive difference was the primary association of women with the dairy and men with arable, but even this was not universal. Men were reported as milking in Buckinghamshire.<sup>43</sup> In other areas, women were reported to be ploughing, as in Berkshire where the Mole Plow was 'drawn by one horse, and

<sup>37</sup> Donald Woodward (ed.), *The farming and memorandum books of Henry Best of Elmswell, 1642*, British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, ns 8 (1984).

<sup>38</sup> Sharpe, 'Time and wages'.

<sup>39</sup> Carol Shammass, 'The world women knew. Women workers in the North of England during the seventeenth century' in R. S. and M. M. Dunn (eds), *The world of William Penn* (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 99–114.

<sup>40</sup> E. W. Gilboy, 'Labour at Thornborough: an eight-

eenth century estate', *ECHR*, 1st ser., 3 (1932), pp. 388–398.

<sup>41</sup> William Marshall, *The review and abstract of the county reports to the Board of Agriculture* (5 vols, York, 1808–1817).

<sup>42</sup> Marshall, *Review*, IV, pp. 66–7; V, p. 130. For Welsh women working in market gardens around London, see J. Williams-Davies, 'Merched y Gerddi: a seasonal migration of female labour from rural Wales', *Folk Life* 15 (1977), pp. 12–23.

<sup>43</sup> Marshall, *Review*, IV, p. 505.

TABLE 1. Descriptions of English women's work in Marshall's *Review*

<i>South-East</i>	Norfolk	wheat dibbling. Reaping is unusual and day labourers wages do not mention women
	Middlesex	fruit, market gardening
	Surrey	hoeing turnips
	Kent	weeding, dairy, domestic work
	North-East Essex	women as servants mentioned
	South Essex	house servants
	Cambridgeshire	service for women stressed
	Suffolk	no tasks given for women
<i>South-West</i>	Herefordshire	sheep shearing, fruit work
	Worcestershire	harvest, dairying
	Gloucestershire	haymaking, harvest
	Somerset	weeding, common work
	Devon	shortage of women's employment
	South Wiltshire	getting in harvest and gleaning
	Hampshire	dairymaids and cooks
	Cornwall	harvest work, weeding corn, hoeing turnips, potatoes, tending threshing machines
<i>Midlands</i>	Oxfordshire	haying, reaping in harvest
	Buckinghamshire	dairymaids difficult to get
	Bedfordshire	little
	Hertfordshire	strawplait only
	Berkshire	reaping, dairy, plough, planting
	Leicestershire	common work and hay time
	Northamptonshire	hay harvest
	Rutland	little employment except in summer
<i>North-East</i>	Northumberland	harvesting, hoeing turnips, haymaking, scaling and weeding corn, reaping
	Durham	weeding, haying, reaping
	Yorkshire N. Riding	dairy, harvest, weeding corn, haymaking, manuring, same work as men
	Yorkshire E. Riding	men and women day labourers hired
<i>North-West</i>	Lincolnshire	dairying but women lazy
	Cumberland	haymaking, harvest
	Westmoreland	carting dung, driving harrows or ploughs
	Cheshire	dairying

Source: William Marshall, *The review and abstract of the county reports to the Board of Agriculture* (5 vols, York, 1808-17).

sometimes by women, as occasion requires'.<sup>44</sup> In Westmorland female servants were 'toiling in the severe labours of the field, they drive the harrows or ploughs ...' and also carried dung on their backs to the fields.<sup>45</sup> In general, women did a wider variety of farm tasks in the north and western areas of the country, particularly where male labour was needed in industry. For instance, in Northumberland, 'Most of the corn is cut with sickles, by women; seven of whom, with a man to bind after them'; the picture was similar in the North Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>46</sup> In Cornwall, 'The women, everywhere in the county, perform a large share of the rural labours, particularly in the harvest work, weeding the corn, hoeing turnips, potatoes etc., attending the thrashing machines; by the latter business they have more employment in the winter than they formerly had'.<sup>47</sup> An overview of the regional patterns of women's work evident from comment in Marshall's *Review* can be gained from Table 1. Broadly, a highland/lowland contrast is evident, with far less farm work reported for women in the lowlands to the south and east of a line drawn from the Wash to the Severn.

For Snell, the crucial change in the south-eastern arable lands towards male labour took place in harvesting. Drawing heavily on the research of Michael Roberts but making more of the late eighteenth century evidence than Roberts, Snell argued that women's progressive withdrawal from farm labour in arable areas was connected with the replacement of the sickle by the scythe in corn-growing regions, the scythe being less physically manageable for women.<sup>48</sup> But there is little wholesale evidence for the replacement of the female reaper by the male mower, or for any other determinative technological change when we examine farm accounts such as those available for some Essex farms. The two technologies could, and did, co-exist and were used when most appropriate for the crop mix and the weather. As E. J. T. Collins has written, 'the exact tool mix in any one season [was] determined by labour supply and crop condition'.<sup>49</sup> Farmers could strike a balance between speed and care in cutting. In Marshall's *Review* we read in Northamptonshire of 'wheat reaped with sickles, barley, oats and beans mowed with a scythe'. In Berkshire in 1794 'the usual practice of the county is to let the harvest work by the great; and many of the women are employed in reaping, as well as the other labour necessary for getting in crops'.<sup>50</sup> Scythes may have been used mainly by men, but the argument is inadequate to substantiate a wholesale change in labour practices happening in the late eighteenth century. The corn scythe may have become established in southern England during the medieval period: the 'revolution' in adoption of heavier tools in the rest of the country was delayed until 1835-70. Overton suggests that whereas in 1790 some ninety per cent of the wheat harvest was cut with a sickle, by 1870 it was twenty per cent.<sup>51</sup> Not only does this suggest a slow transition in the

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, V, p. 84. This was as used by Mr Loveden of Buscot Park and the footnote comments on 'the magic of invention, drawn by one horse, - and even by women!' It is notable that development economists have drawn attention to the fact that ploughing is almost always a male job in agrarian systems worldwide.

<sup>45</sup> Marshall, *Review*, I, p. 234.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, I, pp. 73, 474.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, III, p. 538.

<sup>48</sup> M. Roberts, 'Sickles and Scythes. Women's work and men's work at harvest time', *History Workshop* J. 7

(1979), pp. 3-28.

<sup>49</sup> E. J. T. Collins, 'Harvest technology and the labour supply in Britain, 1790-1870', *ECHR* 22 (1969), p. 462.

<sup>50</sup> Marshall, *Review*, IV, p. 356; V, p. 56.

<sup>51</sup> Collins, 'Harvest Technology', pp. 456-7, 463; see also the discussion in Chris Middleton, 'The familiar fate of the *famulae*. Gender divisions in the history of wage labour', in R. E. Pahl (ed.), *On Work. Historical, comparative and theoretical approaches* (1988), p. 34. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution*, p. 124.

nineteenth century rather than a late eighteenth century transformation, but it seems that in areas where women already formed the bulk of harvest workers, as in the Borders, the scythe was unlikely to be adopted at all.

Marshall commented on a broad contrast between the north-west and the south-east of England at the end of the eighteenth century. In the North harvesting was mainly in the hands of women, but this was certainly not evident in the counties of the south-east.<sup>52</sup> For Essex, it is the case that descriptions of harvest work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are male-orientated. Harvest operations were invested with a great deal of symbolic importance. Boys became men when they first took their place in the line of harvesters. On some farms, the first cut was taken by the oldest male villager present. However, the evidence not only suggests that the role of women was limited at the end of the eighteenth century, but that this had long been the case. In the extant sixteenth and seventeenth-century Essex farm accounts, such as those of the Petre family, the largest landowners in Essex, women were mainly involved in spring weeding and haymaking. Women's work in the harvest was confined to raking oats.<sup>53</sup> It might be argued that these documents are providing an early view of the 'Allen effect'. However, the accounts of Thomas Cawton, who was farming on a much smaller scale in Wivenhoe and Great Bentley in eastern Essex in the early 1630s, give a very similar picture. As in the Petre accounts, most of the workers are in family groups. The women were spring weeders, sometimes working with their husbands. Again many women were involved in haymaking. For the grain harvest, however, women's role was relatively marginal with a limited involvement in the oat harvest alongside their husbands. Women had the additional jobs of gathering up the wool from sheep shearing in Great Bentley and picking seed rye in Wivenhoe. Just as Hassell Smith found, all the winter work of ploughing, hedging, ditching and threshing was done by men.<sup>54</sup> Evidence from this local economy suggests another significant change due to alterations in the crop mix. In the sixteenth century, hops were grown in almost every parish in Essex and provided an intermittent amount of work for women, from tending the plants through to meticulous harvesting from March to late September.<sup>55</sup> When economic circumstances favoured grain production, hops were judged to be too liable to crop failure and demanding of manure, and their acreage shrank on the Essex heavy clays in the late eighteenth century. The result was a substitution of male for female labour.

In summary, close analysis of the sexual division of labour does not give as straightforward view as Snell and those who have repeated and extended his arguments have maintained, and would lead us to eschew a view of technological change explaining female expulsion, in favour of a more nuanced approach which gives greater weight to local variations due to geography, regional culture and time-honoured patterns of customary work. Despite the availability of more labour by the end of the eighteenth century, we can argue that there is evidence of a long-standing sexual division of labour on capitalist farms in the south-east. While an explanation based on technology transfer may be too limited, it is possible that a drive for efficiency may have excluded less productive parts of the labour force, except in specific, limited ways. It

<sup>52</sup> Marshall, quoted in Gilboy, 'Labour at Thornborough', p. 391.

<sup>53</sup> ERO, D/DP A18-22, A57.

<sup>54</sup> ERO, TA287.

<sup>55</sup> C. Shrimpton, 'The landed society and the farming community in Essex in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' (University of Cambridge Ph.D thesis 1965, pub. New York, 1977), p. 306.

was also the case that as the nineteenth century advanced, a growing sense of domestic ideology encouraged married women to move away from the more strenuous types of outdoor work. We should not underestimate the fact that like labouring men, poor women, especially those who were single, could and did exercise considerable mobility, both geographically and in terms of shifting occupation.<sup>56</sup> Back-breaking labour, low pay, and long-standing customary practices which relegated women to the most degrading and monotonous tasks would not be endured if alternatives were available.

### III

Turning to wage rates, Snell accumulated a large amount of evidence of declining female wage rates, comparing the south-east of England with the south-west, to support his view of a declining participation rate and increasing gender division of labour in the south-east. Burnette by contrast, has recently argued that agricultural work was not well defined by gender, but that women's lack of strength and relative productivity had an impact on the low wages offered for farm work.<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that she assumes women's farm labours were unskilled and therefore substitutable, but this is not borne out by Pinchbeck's assumption that women's dexterity made them the best workers to carry out new agricultural tasks, or by evidence such as Valenze's regarding the expertise necessary for dairying operations. There are also, of course, very many problems in assessing female farm worker's wages, not least the prevalence of wives doing task work for a family wage.<sup>58</sup> However, the evidence from both farm accounts and Marshall's *Review* is that female day labourer's wages show little movement or variability, being normally 6d. a day. This rate was 'sticky' through the year and between regions from the seventeenth century onwards. This is demonstrated if we revisit the Cawton farms in eastern Essex and examine the case of a single labourer and his wife in the 1630s. Thomas Toball of Wivenhoe joined his wife and some other women for a week's weeding in June. They were both paid 6d. *per diem*. By July they were both still employed in weeding but Mr Toball was paid 8d. while his wife still received 6d. a day. At the end of July he had a shilling a day 'for makeing the stake of hay'. Goodye Toball, along with the rest of the women, still received 6d. a day. At the beginning of September, when rye, oats and barley were harvested, Toball bound the oats at a shilling a day while his wife stayed at 6d. for 'makeing of bandes for the oates' for three days and then 'for layeing of oats for the binding'. He went on to stack the 'brank' (buckwheat) at a shilling a day whereas his wife raked up at the usual 6d. she had been paid all summer.<sup>59</sup> Following Burnette's argument, this payment may be a true reflection of Mrs Toball's productivity. It is possible that wives started work much later in the day than their husbands, perhaps well after daybreak, and that this explains the lower wage rate. Perhaps it

<sup>56</sup> See Bengt Ankarloo, 'Agriculture and women's work. Directions of change in the West, 1700-1900', *J. Family Hist.* 4 (1979), pp. 111-120 for speculations on this in the European context.

<sup>57</sup> Burnette, 'Testing for occupational crowding'.

<sup>58</sup> As reported in the 1843 Report of Women and Children in Agriculture for Kent, Surrey and Sussex, cited by Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, p. 91.

<sup>59</sup> ERO, D/DA A3.

TABLE 2. Female wage rates given in Marshall's *Review* (1780s–1810s)

	<i>Day Work</i>	<i>Harvest</i>
Northumberland	6d.	1s.–1s. 3d.
Durham	6d.	2s.–2s. 6d.
Cumberland	8d.	10d.
Herefordshire	6d.	
Worcestershire	6d.–8d.	
Warwickshire	1s.–1s. 6d.	
Somerset	6d.–8d.	
Cornwall	6d.–8d.	
Suffolk	6d.	
Leicestershire	6d.–8d.	9d.–10d. haying
Oxfordshire	1s. 2d.	
Berkshire	6d.–8d.	
Kent	8d.–10d.	

Source: William Marshall, *The review and abstract of the county reports to the Board of Agriculture* (5 vols, York, 1808–17).

is, in effect, a sort of piece rate.<sup>60</sup> Another factor is that women's unpaid labour within the rural community was of vital importance to the well-being of labouring families. Women were the main procurers of fuel and water, they prepared the meals for the men after their long hard days of work, and they managed the informal exchanges of farm products to which historians are now paying more attention, for example, trading eggs or vegetables to the large farms in the district. Time spent on these tasks would have been weighed against that allocated to the labour market for those with some land or produce of their own.<sup>61</sup>

Alternatively, perhaps women's wages contain a large customary element and the rate paid may bear little relationship to the task carried out. This explanation is rejected in Burnette's work, but the endurance of 6d. a day across geographical areas and time is striking particularly when compared to changing male wage rates. From Best's Yorkshire in 1642, to the Spindlestone,

<sup>60</sup> The suggestion of a later start is made by Judy Gielgud 'Nineteenth-century farm women in Northumberland and Cumbria: the neglected workforce' (D. Phil thesis, University of Sussex, 1992), p. 459. Mark Overton commented to me that 6d. may have represented a certain agreed amount of work. Speechley 'Female and child agricultural day labourers', p. 113 argues that the discrepancy with male wage rates 'was not only due to the higher daily wage rates for men but also because they [men] worked more days per year, they were more likely to receive higher harvest wages, and, they were more

frequently employed in piece rate work, which could bring in higher wages'.

<sup>61</sup> See M. Reed, 'The peasantry of nineteenth-century England: a neglected class?' *History Workshop* J. 18 (1984), pp. 59–60 and D. R. Mills, *Lord and peasant in nineteenth-century Britain* (1980). For the endurance of family labour on small farms, see M. Winstanley, 'Industrialisation and the small farm. Family and household economy in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Past and Present* 152 (1996), pp. 157–195.

Northumberland farm account for 1676 analysed by Gielgud, to the eighteenth-century Cornish barton farms studied by Pounds, the rate was 6d.<sup>62</sup> Table 2 shows, for the counties for which evidence is available in Marshall's *Review*, the prevalence of 6d., sometimes rising to 8d. in summer, for female day labour. So despite their multifarious activities noted in the *Review*, in Cornwall 'The women have from 6d. to 8d. per day'.<sup>63</sup> The exceptions were only two in number, both of which show that the market certainly had some effect. Firstly, women were paid more when they did more specialized work, as with reapers in northern England who might be paid 1s. a day. Secondly, in areas where there was competition for their labour, their wages could be double, as in Warwickshire agriculture due to the effect of the Birmingham and Coventry trades. But even within living memory in Essex, the rate had risen to only 8d. for female day labourers. It is startling to note that this rate, including food, was paid to women in 1377!<sup>64</sup>

Looking at this in more detail, however, some differences are apparent. Going back to the sixteenth-century Petre farms in Essex, we detect a difference between women.<sup>65</sup> It seems to have arisen because wives were paid less than widows. A widow was paid 5d, but a woman working alongside her husband was only paid 3d, less than a girl who had 4d. The women involved in these operations were usually the relatives of agricultural labourers, sometimes accompanied by children, and this suggests the payment of a family wage to widows must be seen within a context of local paternalism. It is, of course, possible that farmers felt they were maintaining the stability of the male workforce by employing married women. Unless, in fact, widows were able to work longer hours, this suggests that there was a 'social' element to women's wage payments which cannot be entirely explained by economic theory, or indeed, fully comprehended given only the limited detail of bare figures recorded on the pages of farming accounts.

It is also clear that lower wage rates for women were justified by the Bible. Leviticus 27: 3-4 suggests that women should receive three-fifths of the male rate, which is precisely the rate they did receive in many recorded cases.<sup>66</sup> Burnette's argument that women's wage rates reflect the actual work they carried out also fails to explain comments like that made by Frederick Eden in his survey of the poor of the parish of Bromfield (Cumberland);

The wages of man-servants employed in husbandry, who are hired from half-year to half-year, are from 9 to 12 guineas a year, whilst women, who here do a large portion of the work of the farm, with difficulty get half as much. It is not easy to account for so striking an inequality; and still less easy to justify it.<sup>67</sup>

In summary, we need to know much more about the social history of wage entitlement, especially for women, before we can draw any significant conclusions about labour demand and supply

<sup>62</sup> Woodward (ed.), *Henry Best*, pp. 45, 60; Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-century farm women', p. 129; N. J. G. Pounds, 'Barton farming in eighteenth-century Cornwall', *J. Royal Institution of Cornwall* 7 (1973), pp. 55-75. I am grateful to Mark Overton for drawing my attention to the latter reference.

<sup>63</sup> Marshall, *Review*, V, p. 538.

<sup>64</sup> ERO, T/Z 25/63; Penn, 'Female wage earners', p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> ERO, D/DP A18-22, A57.

<sup>66</sup> See Donald Woodward, *Men at work. Labourers and building craftsmen in the towns of northern England, 1450-1750* (1995), pp. 112-14 for further justification for a customary wage.

<sup>67</sup> F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor* (3 vols, 1797), II, p. 47.

from patterns of wage movements. However, there is every justification for Pinchbeck's view that female labour would be used where possible on capitalist farms because it lowered the costs of production. Yet there is no firm basis for the belief that this was a post-1750 development.

#### IV

If low wages and a sexual division of labour were not new in the south-east, are there alternative explanations for the current view that women were marginalized in the eighteenth century? Snell's debate with Norma Landau concerning the function of the settlement examination has, if anything, diverted attention from the interpretation and explanation of the patterns which Snell has drawn from them.<sup>68</sup> To prove that female farm employments were changing in the south-east, it must be clear that we are considering farm servants, rather than domestic servants or industrial workers. Data on domestic servants can tell us very little about changes in the type and timing of women's agricultural work as the moments at which they were likely to find themselves unemployed might have only a limited relationship to agricultural imperatives. In Essex (and probably in other areas of capitalist agriculture where farm sizes were large), indoor and outdoor service would seem to have been well-defined. Maids who did domestic work were not farm workers, except for perhaps tending the garden and poultry. Moreover, some of Snell's settlements for Essex are drawn from urban areas and these are likely to have formed a higher proportion of female settlement examinations, especially as unemployed women gravitated towards towns to find work. Further, if hiring fairs and the institution of farm service were waning in the south-east at the end of the eighteenth century, it is not clear that the Snell sample could contain many farm servants anyway. As a result, it is not evident that Snell's evidence encapsulates only the rural labour market.

While Snell provides unemployment patterns for yearly servants, we know from the writings of contemporaries that the supply of female farm workers was affected by the prevalence and prosperity of alternative forms of employment. In some regions there was an inverse relationship between the female labour supply for farming and the availability of other types of work. Of Marton (Westmorland), to take a negative example, David Davies commented in 1795; 'There is no kind of manufactory carried on in this neighbourhood, for which reason women and children earn little, except in hay and corn harvest'.<sup>69</sup> 'Spring' unemployment would have been alleviated in many of the south-eastern counties by the development of London-based fashion trades and services with their production closely related to the London Season. Not only were employments a draw in London itself, but fashion industries created work for women in the countryside, such as lace-making and straw-plaiting, which pulled women away from service or farm work.<sup>70</sup> This was the type of work in which women were perceived as having a

<sup>68</sup> N. Landau, 'The laws of settlement and the surveillance of immigration in eighteenth-century Kent', *Continuity and Change* 3 (1988), pp. 391-420; Keith Snell, 'Pauper settlement and the right to poor relief in England and Wales', *Continuity and Change* 6 (1991), pp. 375-415; Landau, 'The eighteenth-century context of the laws of settlement', *ibid.*, pp. 417-439.

<sup>69</sup> David Davies, *The case of the labourers in husbandry*

(1795, repr. Fairfield, New Jersey, 1977).

<sup>70</sup> Pamela Sharpe, 'The women's harvest. Straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c. 1793-1885', *Rural History* 5 (1994), pp. 129-142; Sharpe, *Adapting to capitalism*, pp. 38-70. Eden, *State of the poor*, II, pp. 1-28 comments on this for straw plait in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

comparative advantage. Snell has presented us with a distribution of cases, so that a factor creating employment can be just as significant as one reducing employment. In fact, the greatest economic change in the eastern counties like Essex (but also Suffolk, Norfolk and even parts of Cambridgeshire) was the decline in spinning opportunities in the late eighteenth century. Indeed the fall off in women's 'work', which contemporaries such as David Davies wrote about, is undoubtedly the collapse of spinning rather than agricultural work. This is likely to have had the most marked effect on Snell's wage rates. Part of his argument for the increasing sexual division of labour concerned the failure of women's wages to move in tandem with male wages, which he used to prove that women were an increasingly devalued part of the agricultural labour force. But given a year-round alternative employment, farmers would have to compete with clothiers for female labour. When spinning ceased to be viable, it is not surprising that the effect was the stagnation of female wage rates.

There is another explanation for why women were not participating in the labour market at harvest time. Women's customary role was in gleaning, picking up the waste or leftover crop after the harvest. Gleaning was probably seen as the married women's and widow's main role in the harvest, and is, in fact, sufficient of itself to explain why women did not engage in cutting the crop. As a reporter describing women's employment in August in the Stowmarket area of Suffolk in the 1840s said 'when gleaning comes in they are all engaged in that and will not leave it'.<sup>71</sup> From medieval times gleaning was seen as beneficial to the farmer as a cleaning operation.<sup>72</sup> Added to the evidence that weeding and stonepicking were women's jobs, this further aspect of clearing the ground may have had almost symbolic importance. Jane Humphries has written of the importance of common rights as an area of women's 'self-employment' and their erosion in the late eighteenth century as private property was vigorously defended and gentry farms consolidated.<sup>73</sup>

Gleaning is an exception to this because the activity was one way in which capitalist farming enhanced the potential of common rights, for gleaning was far more profitable in areas where there was specialisation in cereal production and higher grain yields. Where farms employed a crop rotation, peas, beans, barley and wheat might all be gleaned in one village in a single season. Peter King, using evidence from Essex court cases, has pointed to the importance of gleaning to the eighteenth-century labouring family.<sup>74</sup> Once threshed, the gleanings could provide a household with flour for the year and could account for from an eighth to a tenth of total labouring family income. For women on their own, such as widows, this could be especially beneficial, providing for about a quarter of their annual income. Gleaning was particularly important after the decline of spinning, when all labouring families, but widows in

<sup>71</sup> BPP, 1843, XII, *Reports from the Commissioners: Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 229.

<sup>72</sup> W. O. Ault, 'By-laws of gleaning and the problems of harvest', *EcHR* 14 (1961), pp. 210-17.

<sup>73</sup> Jane Humphries, 'Enclosures, common rights and women. The proletarianisation of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *J. Economic History* 50 (1990), pp. 17-42. See also Jeanette Neeson,

*Commoners. Common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820* (1993).

<sup>74</sup> Peter King, 'Customary rights and women's earnings. The importance of gleaning to the rural labouring poor, 1750-1850', *EcHR* 44 (1991), pp. 461-76. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, pp. 56-7 recognized the importance of gleaning but confused the issue by believing it was only worthwhile on open fields.

particular, were increasingly dependent on the poor law. From the overseers' point of view, gleaning was an effective form of self-help for the poor.<sup>75</sup> King found that most gleaners were married women, a quarter were widows, children or single women. Gleaning was being increasingly regulated by the late eighteenth century as farmers resisted trespassing on private property, but the common right was sustained, if regulated.<sup>76</sup> The importance of gleaning to the family budget and women's primary role as providers of family subsistence largely explain why women did not work as harvesters. Gleaning started in a field as soon as the harvesters had carted the grain out of it and moved on to another one.<sup>77</sup> Gleaning and working in the harvest are then not strictly compatible activities and, in themselves, reinforce a sexual division of labour at harvest time. The persistently low wage for women, with no change over the year, unlike that paid to men, may also suggest why women did not do reaping in the south-east. It was more profitable to glean than to harvest.

It is, then, possible to provide several explanations for declining female labour market participation in rural areas and the associated fluctuations in wage rates in the early industrial period without arguing that this was entirely the result of the expansion of capitalist farming. Alternative employment opportunities for women remind us that while some of the characteristics of rural women's work may not have changed over centuries, taking rural and urban labour markets as a whole, the overall picture of the female labour market was dynamic rather than static as it has often been portrayed.

## V

Alun Howkins has recently argued in this *Review* that our picture of farmworkers – and he is considering both female and male workers – is dominated by the traditional concerns of economic history.<sup>78</sup> As a result, they are seen as factors of production, and it is their contribution to a distinctive English model of development which is seen as important. There is no denying that the approach taken here does not escape these criticisms. At the same time, the intention has been to bring into play some of the more 'immeasurable' aspects of women's work. Howkins draws our attention to the importance of regional and local cultures.<sup>79</sup> Agrarian historians obviously have to weigh the differences between arable and pastoral areas or the Highland and Lowland zones. We need to unravel the role of custom at the level of the micro-economy.

<sup>75</sup> Roger Wells, 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700–1850', *J. Peasant Stud.* 6 (1978–9), pp. 115–139. In 1795 Terling overseers restricted gleaning to widows who had to give notice of their intentions and inform on trespassers (ERO, D/P 299/8/2 1/7/1795). Those who contravened this faced a reduction in their bread allowance. In the 1820s, however (ERO, D/P 299/12/7) they supplied bread and cheese to women gleaners.

<sup>76</sup> Peter King, 'Gleaners, farmers and the failure of legal sanctions in England, 1750–1850', *Past and Present* 125 (1989), pp. 116–150; *idem*, 'Legal change, customary

right and social conflict in late eighteenth-century England. The origins of the Great Gleaning Case of 1788', *Law and History Rev.* 10 (1992), pp. 1–31.

<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Fell Smith, 'In harvest time', *Essex Rev.*, 48 (1903), p. 246.

<sup>78</sup> Alun Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers. The marginal workforce in British agriculture, c. 1870–1914', *AgHR* 42 (1994), pp. 49–62.

<sup>79</sup> Alun Howkins, 'The English farm labourer in the nineteenth century. Farm, family and community', in B. Short (ed.), *The English rural community. Image and analysis* (1992), pp. 85–104.

Despite the emphasis on efficiency on capitalist farms, there is evidence for the importance of cultural factors outweighing rational, economic decision-making. Celia Fiennes, for example, noted on her visit to Cornwall at the end of the seventeenth century that the harvest was put onto yokes on horses that were led by women and supported by two men. She wondered why they did not use carts but commented 'the common observation of a custom being as a second nature people are very hardly convinc'd or brought off from, tho' never soe inconvenient'.<sup>80</sup> Some 150 years later the 1843 Poor Law Commission drew its reader's attention to the 'habits of narrow localities ... The women of one village have always been accustomed to reap whilst to those of another in the immediate neighbourhood, the practice is unknown. Turnip hoeing is by no means an uncommon occupation for women, yet in many villages they never undertake it'.<sup>81</sup> The point here is not only should we be mindful of local distinctiveness, but also that our explanations may be flawed if we assume that only economic rules held sway.

By taking both *la longue durée* and a regional view of what we know about women's involvement in farm work in the period of industrialisation, it is apparent that at this moment, we are actually better informed about the type and amount of work women did in the medieval period, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, than we are for the long eighteenth century. The manorial and micro-community basis of much research in medieval economic and social history has provided us with a detailed picture. Judith Bennett, for example, found that in Brigstock in Northamptonshire, women looked after small animals, tended fruit trees, cultivated herbs and vegetables, and grew hemp and flax. Their work complemented that of their husbands in the more specialized production of grain.<sup>82</sup> For the second half of the nineteenth century, Karen Sayer charts the change in attitudes in artistic representations of female farm workers, from their taking centre stage as part of a rural idyll to becoming a despised part of the labour force.<sup>83</sup> Criticism of women's agricultural employment started from the mid-nineteenth century with Parliamentary Commissions which expressed the conflict between women working and their domestic role. Nevertheless, Eve Hostetler and Judy Gielgud have considered the work of a distinctive group for whom demand increased over the nineteenth century, the female bondagers of the farms of the north-east of England.<sup>84</sup> In fact, comparing arable areas in the north-east and the south-east of England during the same time period produces two contrasting views of female participation in the agricultural labour market. While Snell found women's employment narrowing and becoming more acutely seasonal into the nineteenth century in the south-east, Judy Gielgud, in her recent dissertation, shows the opposite pattern for the north-east with women moving from a traditional work pattern of

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Morris (ed.), *The journeys of Celia Fiennes* (1947), p. 265.

<sup>81</sup> BPP, 1843, XII, *Reports from Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 3, cited in Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p. 82.

<sup>82</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the medieval English countryside* (1987), p. 117. See also Middleton, 'Familiar fate'. An impressive, detailed analysis of medieval women's rural work is Simon A. C. Penn, 'Female wage-earners in late fourteenth-century England', *AgHR* 35 (1987), pp. 1-14.

<sup>83</sup> Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields. Representations of rural women in the nineteenth century* (1995). See also Pamela Horn, *Victorian Countrywomen* (1992) and Jennie Kitteringham, 'Country work girls in nineteenth-century England' in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Village life and labour* (1975), pp. 75-138.

<sup>84</sup> Eve Hostetler, 'Women farm workers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Northumberland', *North East Labour History* 16 (1982), pp. 40-1; Gielgud 'Nineteenth-century farm women'.

haymaking and harvesting to a wider involvement throughout the year.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, whereas Snell saw the position of the dairymaid of the western counties becoming enhanced in the nineteenth century, Deborah Valenze argues that the expertise of dairying was increasingly being seen as the province of men.<sup>86</sup> Although it may go against the grain of feminist projects which seek to rescue women from invisibility in the historical sources, it may be apposite, as the quote from Mathias suggested, to accept that women are simply invisible because they are not part of the workforce and that locating areas in which women did not participate in the labour market is a valuable exercise in itself.<sup>87</sup> There are also temporal considerations inherent in making comparisons. Conflicting pictures from different regions suggest that we should be analyzing cyclical, not linear, patterns of women's work and questioning how they fit together between sectors and geographical areas.<sup>88</sup> A useful study would also give attention to the life-cycle of female farm workers, perhaps by linking farm records to parish reconstitutions or listings to establish work patterns through the life course.<sup>89</sup>

This article has argued that in trying to take early steps to fill a gap in our knowledge of women's farm work on capitalist farms in the early industrial period, little evidence has been found of a change in the sexual division of agricultural labour over time. The types of farmwork women did in the south-east at least, was not much different in the nineteenth century from the sixteenth century. Keeping regional differences and parish peculiarities in mind, in this area women's day work was probably always relatively limited in arable agriculture on large farms. If anything, the amount of work in weeding and planting increased in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, as Pinchbeck suggested. Before that, however, coupled with population rise, the lack of work suggests an avenue for the early release of labour from the land to go into industry or service sectors of the economy. It can be linked with the female migration of women from rural areas to towns and cities which was such a marked feature of late seventeenth and eighteenth-century England. As a result, this is a direct route by which the 'agricultural revolution' fed the 'consumer revolution'. Women who moved to towns formed a labour supply for the proliferating fashion industries and services of the urban milieu. As research on other European countries finds fieldwork to have a depressing effect on both fertility and survival of infants, it may be possible to link low participation in fieldwork with population rise in the English regions where female farm work was relatively minimal and seasonally short-lived.<sup>90</sup> The 'labour release' is less clear for other parts of England, particularly highland areas, where there is little evidence that women's participation had fallen by the end of the eighteenth century, and in some areas it may have increased.

<sup>85</sup> Snell, *Annals*, pp. 15–66; Gielgud, 'Nineteenth-century farm women', p. 168.

<sup>86</sup> Snell, *Annals*, p. 40; Deborah Valenze, 'The art of women and the business of men. Women's work and the dairy industry, c. 1740–1840', *Past and Present* 130 (1991), pp. 142–169, reprinted in her *The First Industrial Woman* (1995).

<sup>87</sup> A point made by Michael Anderson, 'What can the mid-Victorian censuses tell us about variations in married women's employment?' *Local Population Stud.* 62 (1999) pp. 9–30

<sup>88</sup> See the analysis of Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (1992), p. 231.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, the life-cycle analysis carried out by Helen Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural labourers', pp. 124–141.

<sup>90</sup> W. R. Lee, 'Women's work and the family. Some demographic implications of gender-specific rural work patterns in nineteenth-century Germany', in P. Hudson and W. R. Lee (eds), *Women's work and the family economy in historical perspective* (1990), pp. 50–75.

Turning to wages, it is the case that, as Snell found, female wages did not keep pace with male wages over the course of the eighteenth century. For Essex, the wages for female agricultural workers lie at the bottom of the scale of wage payments for women's work by 1800. Whereas they had been between a half and three-quarters of the male rate in the seventeenth century, they were now between a third and a quarter, or even less, because they did not change. As Charles Feinstein has demonstrated for England as a whole in his recent pessimistic, quantitative summary of the standard of living in the Industrial Revolution, taking benchmarks of 1778–82 and 1846–52, all female agricultural workers ended at a lower level than they began. The ratio of the female to male wage showed an initial decline from 50 per cent in 1770 to 40 per cent in the 1820s and was then stable.<sup>91</sup> An element of the female wage was certainly 'sticky' and governed by custom rather than the market. As a result, a clear connection between work opportunities and wage rate movements is questionable. Falling female wages do not necessarily reflect declining labour participation in that there may be no proportionate difference in the amount of work they represent. Industrial work increased for women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century whilst their wages fell because employers wanted cheap, docile, nimble-fingered labour and had a labour surplus economy to draw on.

This takes us to the heart of current research in women's economic history which considers how women's position changed with capitalism. Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries drew on wage rates in their collection of budgets for married women to argue that women's opportunities declined.<sup>92</sup> They found that women generated five per cent of family incomes in high wage and twelve per cent in low wage agricultural counties and that women's share fell over time. They argue that 'women were losing what employment opportunities they had through the commercialisation of agriculture and the decline in outwork activities ... The high proportion of households still engaged in agriculture largely ameliorates the increased participation of women found in other occupations'. The problem here is deciding whether we should see falling wages as indicating reduced opportunities, or rather accept that women carried a large burden in supporting an economy in transition. This is not to suggest that custom rules entirely as the market had some effect. For example, in Essex in the French Wars, there was a noticeable rise in payments to women of up to 10d. or a shilling per day. After 1800, Helen Speechley's Somerset farms also show the first noticeable rises in female wage rates for two centuries.<sup>93</sup> If female marginalisation with capitalism does apply, we need to see its effects operating from far back in time and encompassing a much longer time span than that traditionally associated with the Industrial Revolution. The suggestion made by Beneria and Sen, when reviewing Boserup's *Women's role in economic development* (1970) was that 'capitalist accumulation can have a variety of effects on women's work depending on the specific form accumulation takes in a particular region'. Perhaps this is more apposite to the case of English

<sup>91</sup> Charles Feinstein, 'Pessimism perpetuated: the standard of living during and after the industrial revolution', Tawney lecture at the Economic History Society conference, University of Oxford, March 1999.

<sup>92</sup> Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male-bread-

winner family, 1790–1865', *EcHR* 48 (1995), pp. 89–117, reprinted in P. Sharpe (ed.), *Women's work: the English experience, 1650–1914* (1998), pp. 172–204, quotation on p. 195.

<sup>93</sup> ERO D/DJN E5; Speechley 'Female and child agricultural labourers', p. 107.

rural labour than a unilinear pattern of female marginalisation.<sup>94</sup> Overall, in comparison with other countries, work for women in agriculture does seem limited and this surely is the other side of the coin for an explanation of women's exclusive involvement in other economic sectors. 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.

<sup>94</sup> L. Beneria and G. Sen, 'Accumulation, reproduction and women's role in economic development: Boserup revisited', *Signs* 7 (1981), p. 288.