

WOMEN AND WORK IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND

Edited by
Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY



ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY

WOMEN AND WORK IN
PRE-INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND

WOMEN AND WORK IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND

Edited by
LINDSEY CHARLES AND LORNA DUFFIN

Volume 10

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1985

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1985 Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-53409-3 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10425-5 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62301-8 (Volume 10)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10415-6 (Volume 10)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

WOMEN AND WORK IN PRE- INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND

Edited by
Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin



CROOM HELM

London • Sydney • Dover, New Hampshire

©1985 Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin
Croom Helm Ltd, Provident House, Burrell Row,
Beckenham, Kent BR3 1AT

Croom Helm Australia Pty Ltd, Suite 4, 6th Floor,
64-76 Kippax Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010, Australia

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Women and work in pre-industrial England.

1. Women – Employment – England – History

I. Charles, Lindsey II. Duffin, Lorna

331.4'0941 HD6136

ISBN 0-7099-0814-8

ISBN 0-7099-0856-3 pbk

Croom Helm, 51 Washington Street, Dover,
New Hampshire 03820, USA

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Women and work in pre-industrial England.

Includes index.

1. Women – Employment – England – History – Addresses,
essays, lectures. 2. Women – England – Economic
conditions – Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Home
labor – England – History – Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Charles, Lindsey. II. Duffin, Lorna.

HD6136.W66 1985 331.4'0942 85-14950

ISBN 0-7099-0814-8

ISBN 0-7099-0856-3 (pbk.)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

CONTENTS

Preface

Lorna Duffin

Introduction

Lindsey Charles

1

1 Women and Work in Fourteenth and Fifteenth
Century London

Kay E Lacey

24

2 Women in Fourteenth Century Shrewsbury

Diane Hutton

83

3 'Churmaids, Huswyfes and Hucksters':
The Employment of Women in Tudor and
Stuart Salisbury

Sue Wright

100

4 'Words they are Women, and Deeds they
are Men': Images of Work and Gender in
Early Modern England

Michael Roberts

122

5 Women's Labour and the Transition to Pre-
industrial Capitalism

Chris Middleton

181

The Contributors

207

Index

208

PREFACE

Lorna Duffin

This collection of papers originated as a series of seminars convened under the auspices and with the financial support of Oxford University Women's Studies Committee. The editors are most grateful to the members of the committee for their support, to all those who attended the seminars and contributed to the discussions, and to Queen Elizabeth House for providing the venue. The work of the contributors in first presenting the seminar papers and subsequently revising them for publication deserves our generous thanks.

Lindsey Charles had the main responsibility for organising the seminars, and took on the task of academic editor. Lorna Duffin prepared the manuscripts for publication and was given substantial and much appreciated assistance by John Corlett.

This book is the eighth in the Oxford Women's Studies series.

INTRODUCTION¹

Lindsey Charles

'To the Victorians', it has been said, 'belongs the discovery of the woman worker as an object of pity'.² This goes far towards explaining why the bulk of historical research on women's work concentrates on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To begin with, the extensive investigation and legislation which arose from this concern for women workers engendered considerable material for use by historians. In addition, the position of the woman worker in modern industrial society is the subject of continuing historical and sociological debate, thus the nineteenth century woman worker is a natural object of attention and interest.

By contrast, women's work in earlier periods has been relatively neglected and described by one historian as the 'least well-explored area of women's studies'.³ The reasons are not hard to find: empirical data is scarce and what there is presents considerable problems of interpretation and methodology. While some important pioneering work has been done in this field, most notably Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, there has until recently been little subsequent debate.⁴ This volume is intended to contribute to this growing debate. Its concern is with English society before its transition to industrial capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period of economic transition has been chosen as an end point because it is often argued to have radically changed female work patterns and established the norms of women's work today. Whether it was industrialization or pre-existent capitalist organization which affected such changes is not always clear, and one of the points made here by Chris Middleton is that the analytical framework within which such arguments are formulated requires critical scrutiny. Whichever is the case, we hope that the time span of this volume will prove long enough to allow useful comparisons of women's work patterns across

Introduction

several phases of economic and social organization.

The starting point for our period was more difficult to determine. 'Pre-industrial', it has been pointed out, is a 'somewhat negative label'⁵ which can subsume many different eras and forms of economic organization. The choice of a starting date of 1300 is largely pragmatic since the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries mark the appearance of more adequate written sources and records through which women's work can be explored. Thus the collection straddles the two customary historical categories of medieval and early modern and encompasses fundamental and far-reaching social and economic change.

Some brief outline of these changes might be useful here.⁶ English society at the turn of the fourteenth century could still be called feudal in that there was still a large body of unfree labour rendering dues in kind or labour service to the seignorial class, and that manorial organization and jurisdiction continued to be strong, even over the towns. But money rents were becoming increasingly common. This was partly due to land hunger caused by a rising population which led to the reclamation of new land without the attachment of customary dues and the sale of old land at an inflated value requiring cash payments as well as traditional dues. As a result, by the time of the Black Death (1348) 'the whole situation was extremely fluid ... The scramble for land, together with commutation had somewhat blurred social status, villein and freeman often working side by side on land for which they paid a money rent.'⁷ Taking advantage of the rising prices often associated with population pressure many lords took to farming their demesne lands for profit, selling their surplus to other parts of the country and, in many cases, abroad, where it formed part of the swelling tide of English exports. Trade in general had increased during what is often seen as the economic expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and with it towns had grown in number and size. As their economic strength grew they began to slough off the social and political control exerted by the baronage.

Over the following 200 years the manorial system suffered increasing dislocation and although the vestiges of villeinage lingered until the seventeenth century (when the last legal bondman died) the society in which it had flourished had long since disappeared. By 1600 many of the descendants of medieval barons were still holding very large estates, but their tenantry was free and usually paying money rent, and their legal jurisdiction over the locality had dwindled to nothing. Nor were they the only group of substantial landowners as, with the exception of the church, they had been in the fourteenth century. The

gentry class was now an affluent and influential social group, and had acquired an importance, local and national, in the countryside almost equal to that of the aristocracy. Below the gentry there was the nearest thing England ever seems to have had to an independent, prosperous peasantry⁸ in the shape of the yeoman class - small scale, largely owner occupying farmers, rivalling, at their wealthiest end, the poorer gentry. Alongside these were cottagers with more precarious leasing arrangements over their land and wage labourers who were often either landless or supplementing the products of an inadequate land holding.

Several reasons have been adduced for these changes. There was, to begin with, the dramatic disruption of the Black Death and subsequent plague outbreaks which reversed the population rise of the previous two centuries and in so doing may well have had some far reaching social consequences. There was now a land surplus and labour shortage and this is frequently argued to have been to the advantage of the smallholder who could get better terms of hiring and service and cheaper land. Town dwellers also invested increasingly in land. During the fifteenth century the baronage further weakened their position as a class in the prolonged internecine strife of the Wars of the Roses. This reduced their numbers, stretched their purses and considerably reduced their political power when the Crown eventually succeeded in asserting more control than ever before over its great peers. Their control over the local countryside was also quietly undermined by lesser sorts buying up the land of impoverished barons or gaining influence in local affairs during the prolonged absences of warring lords. The final major factor in the change in the balance of landed power was the sixteenth century English Reformation and the accompanying sale of monastery land. The purchase of such land by prosperous middle class families, urban and rural, helped to create the solid gentry class which was politically so much in evidence in the seventeenth century.

Changes in the trading and manufacturing sectors of the economy during this period were also extensive. English trade at the beginning of the fourteenth century, both internal and international, was brisk and expanding. Marketing and exchange took place at all levels: from the local sale of peasant surpluses to raise money for dues or the purchase of commodities not obtainable from land holdings (for example, salt, fish and iron implements), to large landowners selling the produce of their farms and mines to central and southern Europe and Scandinavia. The staple of English exports however, was wool. English wool was in demand throughout Europe, particularly in

Introduction

the northern cloth making centres of Flanders, Brabant and Holland. Its export reached a peak in the early fourteenth century and remained at a high level throughout the 1300s despite the disruption of the Hundred Years War with France. Since it was inevitably a prime target for Crown taxation it was fiscally more convenient to channel exported wool through one centre abroad – the Staple, which became fixed at Calais from 1392. By the mid-fourteenth century this was dominated by a small group of large English merchants known as Merchants of the Staple or Staplers, who by the mid-fifteenth century controlled about four-fifths of the English wool trade. They included, as Kay Lacey shows, at least two women in their numbers in the fifteenth century.

This trade in raw wool was, however, increasingly challenged by the growing export of woollen cloth. This increased thirtyfold between the mid-fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries and by the seventeenth century constituted over 92% of all woollen exports and 80-90% of exports as a whole. It retained its importance until outstripped by cotton at the end of the eighteenth century. Behind this expansion in the cloth trade was the development and expansion of the English cloth industry. A cloth industry there had always been, producing for the home market, but it was not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that English cloth started to compete with fine Flemish products in the European markets. This was partly due to influxes of Flemish refugees from the Low Countries who were particularly influential in establishing the 'New Draperies' in East Anglia. Technological change such as the introduction of the 'fulling mill' in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, may also have been an important factor. By the seventeenth century the manufacture of cloth was being deliberately encouraged by the government at the expense of raw wool exports since it had greater pay-offs in terms of employment as well as fiscal revenue. On a number of occasions the export of raw wool was banned and in 1617 the Staple was disbanded.

Woollen cloth, then, for much of our period was centrally important to the British economy both as a staple export and as a major manufacturing activity, a fact which explains its prominence in this collection. Many towns and areas were involved in its manufacture at some time and their fortunes waxed and waned with those of the particular types of cloth they made. The cloth industry was both urban and rural. In towns it was usually based on a network of cottager outworkers organized by middle-man clothiers. Sometimes the two interlinked in that urban masters also organized rural work, especially spinning, which was never gild organized

and always undertaken by outworkers, whether urban or rural. So, for example, the fourteenth and fifteenth century worsted industry in Norwich was closely integrated with its suppliers of yarn in surrounding villages. But in other regions urban and rural cloth manufacture was unconnected and even, at times, in competition. One of the major early cloth towns, York, was in decline by the fifteenth century while around it the rural West Riding industry was thriving. This largely independent rural cloth industry is often seen as being one of the first industries to experience large scale organization, resting as it did on the employment and coordination of numbers of workers carrying out different and specialized processes: spinning, weaving, fulling, dyeing and so on.

Other industries were also growing in importance, however, as demand for their products increased, both at home and abroad. Iron work of all sorts, pottery and coal were chief amongst these. During the seventeenth century, as English trade networks began their rapid expansion to take in Africa, Asia and the Atlantic, and goods were increasingly carried, with government encouragement, in English ships (as opposed, for example, to Dutch carriers) shipbuilding and fitting also became a major industry. By the end of the century such mercantile activity had become at least as important in English overseas trade as the cloth trade. Cloth still comprised by far the largest export in terms of volume, but other commodities of less bulk sold into new and unpredictable markets had disproportionately large returns. England had also evolved a system of re-export and monopoly supplying with its colonies, particularly in the New World, which proved lucrative until blown apart by the American revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century. Undertaking or investing in risky but potentially profitable ventures overseas became a living in itself, despite the occasional speculative disaster, and London became the commercial capital of the world.

It was perhaps the spoils of this trading empire and the opportunities it offered in terms of raw materials and markets which contributed to the industrial development of the late eighteenth century. Changes in agricultural organization, combined with growing population, have also been singled out as contributory factors. By the end of the seventeenth century 'the movement towards the Great Estate was beginning',⁹ at the expense of smaller farmers and landholders. These were increasingly pushed out by dispossession by consolidating and enclosing landlords or neighbours or by overwhelming competition from the great estates which, it is argued, were frequently created and expanded for the very purpose of allowing increased

Introduction

efficiency. By the mid-eighteenth century a widening gap had opened up between substantial farmers and large landowners on the one hand and virtually landless wage labourers on the other. This, combined with accelerated population growth in the later eighteenth century is traditionally argued to have provided the pool of surplus labour required for industrial development. At the same time, capitalist agriculture created surplus capital which could be invested in industrial development and the technological innovations which enabled it to happen. Capitalist organization is frequently argued to have been well established in many sectors of the economy by this time – for most Marxist historians the seventeenth century forms the watershed between feudalism and capitalism. The mix of causes and the weight each should carry in an explanation of eighteenth century industrial change is the subject of prolonged and heated dispute.¹⁰ What is clear is that the last years of the eighteenth century with their large, capital intensive cotton factories (albeit still dependent on wooden machinery and water power) heralded the massive changes in manufacture which by the late nineteenth century had transformed the English economy into an industrial one and the English population to a predominantly urban one, working for wages on an increasingly specialized and mechanized basis.

Such, then, is the general social and economic background to the study of women's work. What picture has emerged from such study to date? For the earlier part of the period, up to the seventeenth century, some common features emerge from the existing literature. It is generally agreed that women, while on the whole virtually excluded from public life, played an extremely active economic role. This was expected by contemporaries: 'husband and wife were then mutually dependent and both supported their children.'¹¹ The exact nature of this role is difficult to define. There was, it is argued, far more to be done in the way of production for consumption by the household – 'the spinning of thread and weaving of cloth, the making of clothes, and the preparation of foods.'¹² – which was largely undertaken by the women of the household. But women also undertook remunerative work. They appear to have participated to some extent in most craft guilds. Many carried on a craft or trade independently, and a handful, particularly in the upper reaches of society, were successful and prominent in their field. On the whole, however, women's involvement in guild organized crafts was through their participation in their husbands' or fathers' trades. These, it must be remembered, were frequently carried on in the same premises as the household's living quarters, and it is argued that the women of the house assisted in them

almost as a matter of course. There was also, however, a range of occupations undertaken by women outside gild organized crafts, many of which were almost exclusively female. The most common of these were spinning, brewing, retailing and general provisioning. Rural women, by far the most numerous but most forgotten group, worked the land and tended livestock. In cloth manufacturing districts, both men and women frequently drew part of their livelihood from out-work for entrepreneur clothiers: spinning generally seemed to fall to women, while men looked after the looms.

It is generally assumed that female activity was largely determined by the demands of the household and the fortunes of its male workers. Hence Eileen Power, a pioneer in the study of medieval women argued that 'it was necessary for the married woman to earn a supplementary wage'¹³ in whatever way she could, and designates many wives' occupations as 'bye-industries' - sidelines rather than full time occupations. This view also emerges from more recent literature - Sally Alexander, for example, argues that a woman's work in the home was 'allocated between domestic labour and work in production for sale, according to the family's economic needs.'¹⁴ Further, it is often argued that 'these were often trades which related directly to the work of women in the household because at this stage domestic and industrial life were not clearly separate. Women thus carried on food, drink and clothing production.'¹⁵ For the most part women's work is also seen in the context of marriage and widowhood since it is generally assumed that the demographic balance between the sexes was more even than in the past 200 years and that most women married at some time.¹⁶ Only Power maintains, on somewhat shaky evidence, that there was a 'surplus' of single women who had to support themselves.¹⁷ Overall, women's labour is seen as determined by, and subordinate to, the demands of husband, household and family. On the whole they were also legally subordinate to their husbands and their economic activity was in theory closely confined by legal incapacity, which affected, amongst other things, their right to own and dispose of property. This, however, was not as incapacitating as the legal subordination of women in the nineteenth century, partly due to loopholes arising from conflicting and overlapping jurisdictions which at times allowed even married women considerable legal independence.¹⁸ One further important characteristic of medieval women's work which has been generally identified is the low level of female wages. In examples where these can be compared with those of men - in field labouring or servant, work, they appear to be considerably lower.¹⁹

Introduction

The picture of women's work generally presented for the earlier part of this period is a somewhat static one. Few have identified any movements for change in women's work over time.²⁰ This is in contrast to the seventeenth century and onwards, which, as described above, is generally seen as a period of radical social and economic transformation and where research focusses on how this affected women's labour. The most substantial and thorough research on women in 'pre-industrial' England to date deals with these later years. Most important are Clark's *Working Life* and another early pioneering work by Ivy Pinchbeck: *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850*.²¹ Both see similar changes taking place in women's work during the period c.1650-1850, but differ about their cause and timing.

The chief changes identified by both are the disappearance of many traditional female occupations, the growth of a class of idle women in more affluent social groups and the resort by their poorer sisters to waged labour outside the home. Clark attributes these developments to the growth of capitalism (although she confounds capitalism with industrialization) and places their beginnings in the late seventeenth century. In agriculture capitalist development led to large scale farming which eventually dispossessed the descendants of many of the small independent farmers prized and encouraged by the Tudors and forced them, male and female alike, to turn to waged labour. In industry capitalist development edged out small craftsmen and led to the concentration of increasing numbers of workers in workplaces away from home. Taken together, these developments deprived women of their opportunities to share their husbands' work. For wealthy women this led to the parasitism described by Olive Schreiner,²² for the poor, increasing exploitation at the hands of wage-paying capitalists. The increasing amounts of capital required in business combined with new skill specializations from which women were effectively excluded prevented the vast majority of women from carrying on their own business. Pinchbeck attributes far more responsibility in this process to increasing industrial mechanization, although her analysis of the effect of large scale agricultural development is similar to that of Clark's. The growth of factories in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the destruction of handicraft industry and the separation of home and work. It also gradually removed many of the tasks of household production formerly undertaken by women to mass factory production. Her view of these changes is less gloomy than Clark's since it maintains that female wage earners in factory industry were no more exploited than those previously working at home on out-work for capitalist

employers and middlemen - an aspect of early capitalism of which Clark takes little account.²³

These interpretations, most of them established early in this century, of the effects of industrial capitalism, have on the whole been accepted with little modification since and form the basis of much of the theoretical debate on the determinants of women's work in modern industrial society.²⁴ What historical modification there has been has usually been to the view of nineteenth century women's work - it has been pointed out, for example, that out-work, home-work and handicraft work, much of it involving women, survived into this century.²⁵ Even the concept²⁶ of the idle middle class wife has been challenged. But the picture of the antecedent conditions sketched above remains largely intact. Apart from its theoretical conveniences, one reason for the lack of modification to this view may well be the scarcity of sources available and the formidable methodological problems they present in use. Before examining the particular contribution of the papers in this collection to the field outlined above, a survey of the raw material available and its limitations will be useful.

One of the staple sources for the history of the earlier part of our period is court records (rolls). The most important here, in a collection of papers heavily biased towards urban life, are those of royal, ecclesiastical and borough courts. Surviving rolls are quite extensive and are made up of a mass of depositions, presentments, allegations, decisions and orders. They are perhaps the most systematically and regularly kept records, especially at the level of national judicial circuits. Year books, which were notes on the proceedings of cases, apparently by aspiring lawyers, can also be illuminating. Rarer, but also well kept, are taxation records. Again, these are best at a national level where, for example, the lay subsidies and poll taxes levied by the royal government in the fourteenth century provide a fairly comprehensive and hence valuable coverage.²⁷ Another important source is gild records and regulations - the nature and extent of these depends on the locality. In addition to these types of data, there is a variety of material to be found at local level. Household listings, baptismal registers, the 'Easter books' used by Sue Wright are examples of official records kept occasionally in individual towns.

Other important and widely used sources are personal records in the form of wills, testaments and inventories which can shed light on everyday life, inheritance customs, family relationships and so on. Personal papers become more extensive as our period progresses as diary-keeping became more common and

Introduction

correspondence more frequent due to higher standards of literacy and a more stable political environment.²⁸ Finally, there are literary sources, which also become more extensive in the later part of the period due to easier access to printing presses and, again, increasing literacy. Books and pamphlets of advice, warning and exhortation on a range of subjects appear in growing numbers as well as the more artistic works of fiction: plays, poetry, satires and, eventually, novels.

All these sources present fundamental problems in use, especially for historians studying women. Women, as is often pointed out, tend to be 'invisible' as far as many historical sources are concerned, rarely appearing, or doing so only fleetingly. This is due largely to their subordinate legal and political position which means that they were rarely householders, litigants or gild members. This is particularly so for married women whose rights and identity were largely subsumed under their husbands' and who present the added complication of a changing surname which makes them very difficult to trace, especially through remarriages. But the actual position of women who do appear in the records can be very difficult to ascertain. Take, for example, gild records, where women are occasionally recorded as members. It cannot be unquestioningly assumed that such women actually carried on a trade or enjoyed the same gild privileges as men. It seems clear that there were different types of membership.²⁹ To begin with, many gilds had social and religious functions which were as important as their role in regulating and protecting trade. Women might participate fully in the religious and social aspects of a gild while having only a limited role in its economic life. Moreover, within that economic life there could be different levels of participation: for example, someone might enjoy the privilege conferred by the gild to trade without having the right to participate in the governance of the gild. When this happened, women were probably usually in the former category. The sheer diversity of gild traditions add to the complications of determining the position of women within them.

Women, particularly widows, did, however, have one unique role within the gilds in that they could offer a way to membership for outsiders. Membership was often extended to the widows of craftsmen, but was transferred to their new husband if they married a man working the same trade. This raises the further important problem of how far female gild members actually carried on a trade themselves and how far it was in the hands of male relatives and employees - particularly if they were widows (a question explored here by Sue Wright). This in turn raises the question of the type and extent of the expertise

acquired by the wives and daughters who frequently seemed to have assisted master craftsmen without official recognition. It also presents an interesting problem in those cases where husband and wife are found pursuing different gild crafts or trades or when gild privileges are granted to both husband and wife - examples of both have been uncovered by Diane Hutton and Kay Lacey.

Even such apparently straightforward aspects of gilds as their regulations cannot be taken at face value. For our purposes here, those regulating the employment practices of masters are most interesting. For example, from time to time there were prohibitions on the employment of women by masters except for their own wives and daughters. This throws interesting light on the employment of women in the trades concerned, and on the position of wives and daughters. But it also raises the problem of the reasons for the prohibition and its effect. It must have been enacted in response to what was perceived as an unacceptable level of female employment in the trade. But was this higher than formerly, or were economic conditions and male unemployment getting worse? Was it perhaps due to political pressure from male apprentices and journeymen prompted by their own precarious position? And why was female labour seen as unacceptable anyway? Frequently this must have been due to the threat of undercutting presented by female labour since women's rates of pay then as now tended to be lower than men's. This raises larger questions of the sexual division of labour and differential wage rates to which we shall return later.

Difficulties similarly arise with that even richer source - court records. Here the problem of typicality has been recognized for some time and not just in this period or in 'women's history'. It is obviously difficult to get a balanced view of a community and its life from court or police records. One of the many problems is judging the prevalence of a particular crime or misdemeanour at any one time: a flood of prosecutions for an offence could mean that its incidence had risen, or it could simply indicate more efficient policing or increased public concern about it for some reasons. Thus, for example, women prosecuted for illegal retailing could be part of a rising trend or could be the victims of a particularly vigilant town corporation. Moreover, it is difficult to assess how widespread the offence was: the authorities may have swooped successfully on all such lawbreakers or they may have been struggling in vain against a major problem, in which case even a large number of prosecutions may represent only the tip of the iceberg. Records of prosecutions and the like therefore have to be used very carefully and in close conjunction

Introduction

with other data about the life of the community as a whole.

However, court records are not confined to reports of cases heard and decisions and penalties given. As David Vaisey has pointed out, much useful incidental information can often be gleaned from the statements of witnesses, the comments of clerks and what were to contemporaries unimportant incidental circumstances of a case: 'the most valuable nuggets are to be found in the most unlikely-sounding cases.'³⁰ Thus a source which has been well worked over in conventional ways might, with a little imagination and a lot of thorough tooth-combing, be made to yield new insights.

The sources which are perhaps most obviously fraught with problems of use and interpretation are literary ones. Whether overtly polemical or not, they obviously offer a highly subjective view of the world and it is extremely difficult to determine how far and how accurately the norms of contemporary society are reflected therein. However, such sources still have valuable potential, provided that their limitations are recognized. Thus, they cannot be relied on to give concrete information on the nature and extent of women's employment but may give some idea of the way in which it was perceived, by women and others, of the status it enjoyed and so on. In addition, the very appearance of such tracts or other forms of literature, may have its own sociological significance. Michael Roberts shows here how literary sources, when carefully handled, can yield images and ideals which themselves reflect important facets of and changes in the society of a particular period.

This, then, is the background of source material and general methodological considerations against which the papers collected here, with their specific foci and varying approaches must be set.

We begin with a study by Kay Lacey of the legal context of women's work in fourteenth and fifteenth century London. This is a central issue as terms of trading, ownership of land and goods, right to prosecute for debt, in short, everything necessary for economic activity was affected by law, whether it be parliamentary statute, common law or borough regulation. Lacey threads her way through the mass of complex and often conflicting law governing women's work in London during this period to determine what women's legal capacities may have been in theory. She then compares their theoretical position with what can be discovered about their actual work in London at this time, and shows that the two frequently did not coincide.

Diane Hutton puts women in roughly the same period

but a different town - Shrewsbury - under the microscope. She tries to ascertain the typicality of the few women appearing in the records and to reconstruct the working lives of women in general, examining the differences between the types and patterns of male and female work. She points out the need also to consider the work done by women without financial returns for the maintenance of individual households and families in assessing their overall contribution to the economy.

Sue Wright takes us on to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with a detailed examination of women's work in Salisbury during this period. She discusses women's role both inside and outside the formal gild sector of the town's economy, trying to assess the extent of their participation in all areas, and the typicality and exact roles of the isolated examples which surface in gild and court records. She too discusses whether and how fluctuations in the town's economic fortunes affected the position of working women.

The last two papers move from the local study to the national overview. First, Michael Roberts gives us a different and little explored perspective on women's work in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He presents five views of women's work, drawing largely, although not exclusively, on literary sources. Using these, he shows the ideological uncertainty and ambivalence surrounding women's work, and indeed work in general, during this period. He then relates these various and sometimes conflicting views to the economic reality of women's position and the changes probably taking place in it due to the development of capitalism and the first stages of industrialization.

A contrasting treatment of the effects of capitalism in its various stages of development follows in Chris Middleton's paper. He seeks firstly to evolve a clearer and more rigorous theoretical perspective on what pre-industrial capitalism comprised. He then argues that many of the characteristics of women's work which can be discerned under pre-industrial capitalism pre-date its development. In so doing he challenges many of the arguments frequently advanced about the reasons for sexual divisions of labour. He draws parallels over time, referring forward to the present as well as back to feudal society, to point up the similarities and continuity in women's work experience as well as the differences.

Women's work during this period, then, is viewed from a number of contrasting angles in this collection. There are, however, a few common themes and problems which occur throughout the papers and which may be drawn together briefly here and compared with other

Introduction

findings to date on the subject.

One of the most important of these is the association between home and work in this period. As seen above, this is often identified as a key difference, certainly for female labour, between pre- and post-industrial society. It would be impossible to deny that this theory has much in its favour. 'Pre-industrial' trade and manufacture was usually carried out in close proximity to domestic life, whether in the cottages of rural workers producing cloth or yarn under the putting out system, or in the shop or workshop of urban traders and craftworkers which was usually in the same building as a family's living quarters. It is also clear that members of the same family often pursued or assisted in the same economic activity. The example of this which arises most frequently in these urban-oriented papers is the one cited earlier of wives and daughters assisting in craftsmen's work. It was recognized that family and work relations were closely intertwined - hence the right of widows to inherit and continue their dead husbands' trade, or pass on his gild status to a new husband.

Furthermore, many household activities overlapped with commercial ones. For example, it is likely that many housewives still made bread, ale and homespun clothes for their households, but these were also produced for sale - Power's by-*industries*. Often, as with bread and textile manufacture, these crafts had reached a fairly advanced degree of organization, and thus what counted as a standard female occupation within the household had become a trade in its own right outside it. But the lines were often blurred - ale was frequently made by housewives, for example, hence the name 'alewife' and 'brewster'. How well defined this activity was for the woman concerned, that is, whether it constituted a distinct occupation rather than a sideline in surplus from ale made routinely for the household is difficult to say, not least because it doubtless varied with each case.

It is, however, possible to overdraw this identification of home and work, for both male and female labour. Many, possibly most, men worked away from their living quarters. Journeymen and apprentices, for example, worked on their masters' premises and were supposed to live as part of his household. But many journeymen were married, and for them there was a clear separation of home and work. It also, as Diane Hutton points out, ruled out family participation in their craft and put their wives in a quite different position to those of master craftsmen. For the far greater numbers working the land a similar case could probably be made. It has been pointed out elsewhere that the male population were frequently out of the household 'sowing, ploughing,