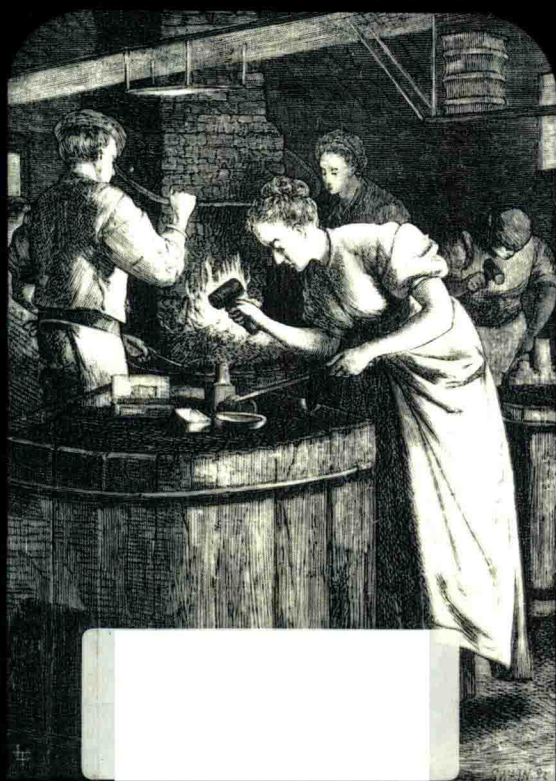


HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION STUDIES

Women in an Industrializing Society: England 1750-1880



JANE RENDALL

Women
in an Industrializing
Society: England
1750–1880

Jane Rendall

Basil Blackwell

Copyright © Jane Rendall 1990

First published 1990

First published in USA 1991

Basil Blackwell Ltd

108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell, Inc.

3 Cambridge Center

Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

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

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rendall, Jane, 1945—

Women and industrialization in England, 1750–1880/Jane Rendall.

p. cm. — (Historical Association studies)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0–631–15303–9

1. Women—Employment—England—History. 2. Home economics—England—History. 3. England—Industries—History. 4. Work and family—England—History. 5. Middle classes—England—History.

I. Title. II. Series.

HD7024.R46 1991

331.4 '0941 '09034—dc20

90–261
CIP

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Ehrhardt
by Setrite Typesetters Ltd, Hong Kong

Historical Association Studies

Women
in an Industrializing Society:
England 1750–1880

Historical Association Studies

General Editors: *M. E. Chamberlain and James Shields*

China in the Twentieth Century

Paul Bailey

The Agricultural Revolution

J. V. Beckett

Class, Party and the Political System in
Britain 1867–1914

John Belchem

The Ancien Régime

Peter Campbell

Decolonization

The Fall of the European Empires

M. E. Chamberlain

Gandhi

Anthony Copely

The Counter-Reformation

N. S. Davidson

British Radicalism and the French
Revolution 1789–1815

H. T. Dickinson

From Luddism to the First Reform Bill
Reform in England 1810–1832

J. R. Dinwiddy

Radicalism in the English Revolution
1640–1660

F. D. Dow

Revolution and Counter-Revolution in
France 1815–1852

William Fortescue

The New Monarchy

England, 1471–1534

Anthony Goodman

The French Reformation

Mark Greengrass

Politics in the Reign of Charles II

K. H. D. Haley

Occupied France

Collaboration and Resistance 1940–1944

H. R. Kedward

Secrecy in Britain

Clive Ponting

Women in an Industrializing Society:

England 1750–1880

Jane Rendall

Appeasement

Keith Robbins

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Michael Simpson

Britain's Decline

Problems and Perspectives

Alan Sked

The Cold War 1945–1965

Joseph Smith

Bismarck

Bruce Waller

The Russian Revolution 1917–1921

Beryl Williams

The Historical Association, founded in 1906, brings together people who share an interest in, and love for, the past. It aims to further the study and teaching of history at all levels: teacher and student, amateur and professional. This is one of over 100 publications available at preferential rates to members. Membership also includes journals at generous discounts and gives access to courses, conferences, tours and regional and local activities. Full details are available from The Secretary, The Historical Association, 59a Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4JH, telephone: 071-735 3901.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the Historical Association's editors and readers and Jenny Tyler for their comments and suggestions. I should also like to thank Angela John for kind permission to reprint the table on p. 56.

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
1 Women's Paid Employment 1750–1830	11
Women in the Countryside	13
Urban Women: The Old Trades and the New Industries	26
2 Women, the Family and Economic Change 1750–1830	33
The Working-Class Family: Conventions and Change	36
Middle-Class Women and the Shaping of the Pre-Victorian Family: Domestic Ideology	44
Domestic Practice in the Middle-Class Family	49
3 Women's Paid Employment 1830–1880	55
Women in the Textile Trades	58
Women's Trades and the Growth of the Sweated Trades	64
New Jobs for Women	71
4 Domestic Life and Labour	79
Housing in an Industrial Age	81
The Labour of Housework	85
Motherhood	90
Domestic Service	98
References and Further Reading	103
Index	108

Introduction

There are a number of familiar and appealing images which tend to dominate any discussion about Victorian women: the 'angel in the house', the 'factory girl', the domestic servant. These images offer a series of simple interpretations of women's lives in the changing society of the nineteenth century. Yet our 'Victorian' views of nineteenth-century women seem to be based on the artificially constructed dates of a reign. We need to look at a longer and more gradual pattern of changes affecting the relations between women and men in a developing industrial society. Historians have recently suggested that the pattern we see should be a far more complex one, drawing in the profound differences that existed between different classes in society and between different regions of England. Our popular images may contain some aspects of this more complex picture, but may also confuse more than they help.

There is, first, the ideal of the 'angel in the house', the 'leisured lady'. These two terms are not of course identical, though they are often used as if they were. Both, however, emerged from the assumption of an absolute separation between the inner sanctum of the home and the outer masculine world of business, politics and public affairs in the nineteenth century. Such a separation can be contrasted with the involvement of the urban woman of the pre-industrial past in her husband's business or the family enterprise. The new, confined domestic

sphere could imply a life of idleness and frivolity for the middle-class woman with such good fortune. But more often, the 'leisure' purchased through the employment of a large household of servants was to be put to uplifting uses. The term 'angel in the house' comes from a poem by Coventry Patmore written in 1854 at the height of mid-Victorian sentimentality. This suggests a life withdrawn from the mundane realities of the everyday world, a life which implied confinement to a domestic sphere. The spiritual rather than the practical aspects of such domesticity are emphasized when describing such a Victorian woman. The 'angel' was required to be pure, asexual, submissive yet morally superior and capable of preserving within the home those moral values which might be in danger outside it.

This ideal had been for many years fostered by those, both men and women, who wrote the advice manuals or prescriptive literature addressed to women. For instance, Hannah More in the 1790s, in the early years of the evangelical revival in the Anglican Church, had called for women to focus their influence within the domestic sphere:

A woman sees the world, as it were, from a little elevation in her own garden, whence she makes an exact survey of home scenes, but takes not in that wider range of distant prospects which he, who stands on a loftier eminence, commands. (1818, p. 29)

Evangelical writers of different denominations continued to spread such ideas for the next fifty years or more. Mrs Sarah Ellis wrote a whole series of works, entitled *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843) and *The Mothers of England* (1843). Hannah More and many later writers conceived that once established the superior influence of women should be spread far beyond the domestic hearth, uplifting the moral condition of society more generally by example, by the education of children and through philanthropic good works. Another writer, Sarah Lewis, in *Woman's Mission* (1839) wrote of a missionary role

for women. There was nothing new in such ideas at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837. Indeed they were a part of the assumptions and the language of middle-class men and women, and strongly influenced their reactions to working-class women's lives.

Yet it is too easy to take such prescriptive works as indicating the realities for middle-class women. Clearly many read such works and heard such messages in their churches and chapels. Yet 'leisure' required a substantial income, and a number of servants. Only the wealthier sections of the middle classes could afford to live in that way. Most middle-class women retained the daily responsibilities of running a household — and their lives were not necessarily 'leisured'. As middle-class homes consumed and become the showplaces for the new products of an industrializing economy — stoves, carpets, curtains, china — the tasks of shopping for, cleaning and maintaining the home became more rather than less complex. Not all middle-class women lived in households as separate from the public world as is implied by the ideal suggested. Family lives and business affairs might be closely interwoven for much of this period. The close connections between the industrializing economy of the nineteenth century and the private domestic worlds of the middle classes have to be explored carefully. Only then can we fully understand the meaning of that separation of the spheres of women and men in the middle classes of Victorian society — a separation which had profound consequences for women and men of all classes.

The second image which tends to dominate thinking about women in nineteenth-century England is that of the 'factory girl' — usually implying a worker in one of the Lancashire cotton mills. It is this figure which seems to symbolize the dramatic changes which industrialization brought working-class women. In the pre-industrial economy, it is sometimes argued, single and married women alike worked within their families, taking on a range of tasks, especially those connected with the production of wool, cotton and silk. The factory system ended that flexible, familiar pattern of work, and in separating the workplace from the home subjected women as

well as men to new forms of labour. Such labour required women and girls to work very long hours, poorly paid, in often appalling conditions, and by separating them not only from their home but from their family responsibilities fragmented family life. The powerful images conveyed by mid-nineteenth-century novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell reflected the social concerns of reformers and parliamentarians, voiced above all in the great parliamentary enquiries of the 1830s and 1840s. They were concerned at the moral dangers existing for women and girls working outside the home, at the absence of domestic care and domestic training for families this entailed and at the extent to which the authority of fathers might be undermined. Those who have looked at these issues from a twentieth-century viewpoint, however, have tended to ask whether our sources on these questions do not themselves reflect a particular bias: the bias of a middle class which saw the working-class family through its own spectacles, and stressed the dramatic and catastrophic impact of industrialization.

The factory and the factory girls were symbols of the new economic order, and as symbols they dominated debate. Yet even in the 1840s women working in factories were a minority. Other forms of production, some of which retained the old family form of manufacture, were still of great importance. Women's involvement in manufacturing *work* was not a product of the early nineteenth century. Of course working-class women had always worked in early modern England, though they normally received significantly lower wages than men. And the eighteenth century had seen a steady expansion of women's involvement in domestic manufacture, both in their homes and in small workshops. Technological development did gradually change that work; but only in a few regions and industries was that change dramatic. The overlap between home and work continued to be one theme of women's work, as the old domestic manufacture of the countryside, still flourishing in the early nineteenth century, gave way to the 'sweated trades' of the great urban centres. In an expanding economy, entrepreneurs looked for the most profitable way to organize their businesses, whether through the use of new

technology or by employing the cheapest labour. Women and girls — already recognized as cheaper labour — might be most profitably employed in cottage, workshop or factory. Industrialization did not necessarily mean a dramatic or immediate shift to factory production.

There are other kinds of questions which historians now put about women's involvement in industrial change which do not draw their inspiration from the concerns of the mid-nineteenth-century reformer. These are questions relevant not only to the cotton mills, but to the hosiery industries of the East Midlands, the metal workshops of Birmingham and the potteries in the Black Country. Technological change brought with it a clearer division of labour between women and men: such a division had always existed within the family, though probably there was a degree of flexibility and interchangeability. Now the line between 'men's work' and 'women's work' was to be much more sharply drawn, in the home, the workshop and the factory. Skilled work was a masculine domain: women's work was unskilled or semi-skilled, paid at much lower rates. How — and on what basis — were these distinctions between the work of men and women, of girls and boys and of girls and women drawn? How far did a view of women as wives and daughters, with family responsibilities and at the same time subject to the authority of husbands and fathers within the family, influence their place within the world of work?

The third familiar image is that of the Victorian domestic servant, living in the world 'below stairs' serving the leisured middle classes, and in the aristocracy's great town and country houses. Victorian household manuals like Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) tell us of the expectations of such servants' work. Domestic servants, according to the census figures of the second half of the nineteenth century, were the largest single group of women workers. Yet the majority of servants did not work in aristocratic or wealthy households or even in households where there were other servants. Mainly they worked as general servants in the households of tradesmen, shopkeepers or artisans, or in the new suburbs. So they were likely to do the hard domestic work of the small household

without companionship and for little reward.

There are more problems for any student of domestic service. Our understanding of it tends to be drawn primarily from the census figures, yet these figures are unreliable: contemporaries did not always distinguish between servants and family members. And the world of domestic labour has been neglected and undervalued by historians. We need more studies of the kind of work performed by servants, which we cannot always clearly grasp if we rely on twentieth-century concepts of domesticity.

This review of some familiar figures has already suggested new questions about the changes in women's lives in the nineteenth century. Social and economic historians have for some years come to suggest a rather different picture of the process of industrialization, seeing it as less dramatic, more gradual and more diverse than the term 'industrial revolution' might imply. Women were a part of, influenced by and influencing, that process. That is why the period discussed here is a different, and longer, one from that addressed by Ivy Pinchbeck in her classic work, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (1930). In that work Pinchbeck assumed that dramatic changes in women's lives were due to industrialization. The fundamental question she asked was this: 'was industrialization a good thing for women?' This is still a matter for debate among historians. In the past, much attention was paid to the 'factory girl' and to the 'opportunities' offered by factory production and new technologies for women's employment. Ivy Pinchbeck argued:

In the case of the single working woman, the most striking effect of the industrial revolution was her distinct gain in social and economic independence. In industries in which a family wage prevailed, women scarcely knew the extent of, or had any opportunity of handling, their own earnings, and among women who earned an individual wage, few earned sufficient to give them any real sense of independence. Under the new regime every woman received her own earnings as a matter of course. (1981, p. 313)

To Pinchbeck, industrialization brought benefits both to the married woman — who for the first time, she suggested, was expected to give her sole attention to the care of home and children — and to the single woman, who experienced a new sense of economic independence.

Pinchbeck's work is still of great importance, and for the moment remains the major survey of the impact of industrialization on women workers in Britain. Most modern historians would see her interpretation, however, as unduly optimistic. They would suggest that she paid too much attention here to the gains of the 'factory girl', too little to the majority of working women, and also too little to the continuing work of married women; even for the 'factory girl' the benefits may seem exaggerated for the period under discussion. A longer perspective than that taken by Pinchbeck and one which is not based on assumptions of an industrial 'revolution' can be more useful in determining what really happened to women. So, for instance, historical work is gradually revising our understanding of the ways in which women were actively involved in eighteenth-century industry and agriculture. We can trace the transition from such involvement to the apparently sharper divisions between the worlds of women and men that seem to mark the mid to late Victorian period. We shall find more continuities than earlier historians such as Pinchbeck did; we may also find new ways of looking at the importance of these changes brought about by industrial development, most obviously and most critically the separation of the home from the workplace.

The study of women's history has expanded greatly since Pinchbeck wrote, especially over the last ten to fifteen years. It has prompted some new ways of looking at women's lives, moving away from older stereotypes, increasing our knowledge of continuities as well as changes. The major landmarks of our history — the Renaissance, the Reformation, the industrial revolution — have not necessarily affected women in the same way as men. There are four questions which can be picked out for our discussion of the impact of industrialization on women.

First, what was the *meaning* of the word 'work' to nineteenth-century women (and men)? In the censuses of the early nineteenth century it is never clear whether it is the work of

households or of individuals which is being counted. Even later, the census figures may often confuse when paid and unpaid domestic work can be identified: women may not have thought of themselves as workers if, for instance, they took in laundry or sewing, or did a little hawking, selling goods in the streets. The shift from the idea of work as the occupation of a family to work as the waged labour of an individual presents us with particular problems in relation to women – did they see themselves as individual waged workers, or in relation to a family's earning power?

Second, there is the interaction between the family lives of women and their working lives. The study of paid employment in the nineteenth century cannot be separated from the study of the family, in both the middle classes and the working classes. The marriage of a middle-class young woman might be of great importance to the family business. Working-class women and men would find the nature of their work influenced how long they waited to get married, how many children they had and whether a married woman was likely to work for money outside the home. It is important also to look at the structure of authority within the family. Both legally and by custom, husbands and fathers exerted very great powers to exact obedience from wives and daughters: how far were those powers extended to the world of paid employment outside the home?

Third, any study of women's lives has to reinstate the importance of all forms of domestic labour, paid and unpaid, in middle-class and working-class households. Manufacture carried on within the home remained of importance throughout most of this period. Changing patterns of housing, of sanitation and of domestic technology meant new conditions of labour, of shopping, cooking and washing. Depending on a person's income level, new industrial products brought aspirations towards forms of domesticity. New demands on mothers in the task of childcare could be made by the medical profession and by reformers.

Finally, the nineteenth century was a period which saw sharpening divisions between the worlds of women and of

men, though these divisions did not always take the same forms. In the middle classes, the strength of the ideal of separate spheres – of different domestic and public worlds – was clear, though it obscured the real interconnections of those worlds. For working-class women and men, economic changes brought different forms of separation – in the kind of work done within the factories and workshops, and ultimately in the separation of home and work. These processes brought new definitions of the appropriate division of labour for men and women. It is important to note that these new definitions might themselves vary and were by no means uniform throughout the country. They might be described as ‘natural’, yet arose out of particular sets of economic and social assumptions. Here is an example of one such differing set of views, in an exchange between Lord Manners, a Leicestershire MP serving on the 1854 select committee on hosiery manufacture, and Richard Muggeridge, who had studied and come to share the views of local Leicestershire framework knitters:

Lord Manners: Speaking generally from your experience, and with the knowledge you possess of the labouring classes, are you of the opinion that it is a beneficial thing, with a view to the management of a family and the domestic economy of a cottage, that the female head of that family should be employed . . . in manufacture?

Richard Muggeridge: No, certainly not. I do think that the mother of a family ought always to find enough to do without being employed at frame work. There are many things which she might do to assist the family, such, for instance, as seaming, which is quite a woman’s work. (Quoted in Osterud, 1986, p. 53)

Here the questioner, Lord Manners, assuming that domestic economy and paid work were incompatible, expected a rather different answer from the one he received. Male Leicestershire framework knitters *did* see it as the married woman’s responsibility to do paid work – as long as it was done within the

household. In Leicester, the division of labour between men and women in the hosiery industry had become established: framework knitting had moved into workshops by mid-century but seaming remained a task normally performed at home in the 1850s. Unfortunately we have very little evidence of the views of working-class women themselves.

Here we shall look not so much at the benefits and disadvantages of industrialization for women's lives but at the new light which has been thrown on the subject through the advances in women's history and social history over the last ten to fifteen years. The new perspectives have been prompted by a desire to understand the historical forces which shaped women's lives, and especially the interaction between economic changes and the world of the family. It is an issue of considerable importance not merely to the understanding of nineteenth-century England. A grasp of the shape of the changes of the nineteenth century may lead to a far better knowledge of the sexual division of labour of late-twentieth-century England. And our awareness of how industrial growth may affect the relationship between women and men may be relevant to the study of other industrializing societies, both of the past and of the present.