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# VICTORIAN COUNTRYWOMEN

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*Pamela Horn*



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# Victorian Countrywomen

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PAMELA HORN

Basil Blackwell

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## Victorian Countrywomen

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Pamela Horn

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She had the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which is in  
the sight of God of great price.

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*Epitaph in All Saints Old Church, Nuneham Courtenay,  
Oxfordshire, of Christiana Williams (d.1845), a daughter  
of the rector of the parish, who died aged twenty-five*



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## Introduction: Women in the Village Community

That which seems most to lower the moral or decent tone of the peasant girls is the sensation of independence of society which they acquire when they have remunerative labour in their hands either in the fields, or at home . . . All gregarious employment gives a slang character to the girls' appearance and habits, while dependence on the man for support is the spring of modest and pleasing deportment. . . . [T]he desolate appearance of the homes where the busy self-important women care nothing to please, and are anxious to sell every minute, is remarkable.

*Seventh Report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council, Parliamentary Papers 1865, Vol. XXVI, 'Inquiry on the State of the Dwellings of Rural Labourers by Dr H. J. Hunter'.*

To outward appearance the world of the Victorian village was essentially masculine. Although females formed more than half the total population (in 1901 there were 3.75 m. of them living in rural districts, compared to 3.71 m. males), most visitors strolling along the lanes and byways saw merely the menfolk, labouring in field, forge and workshop, or travelling the highroad with horse and cart or delivery van. Only at the busiest seasons of the farming year – at haysel and harvest – did women work on the land in any numbers in most parts of England and Wales. Edwin Grey, in a typical comment, noted of his childhood home near Harpenden, Hertfordshire, during the 1860s that except when 'something out of the ordinary occurred,

or on a Saturday or Sunday night, one saw little of the womenfolk about the place . . . So far as I can recollect, the housewives spent most of their time within doors, busy with their work.'<sup>1</sup>

This apparent male dominance of country life was particularly obvious in the economic sphere. Most of the land and many of the businesses were owned by men – a position which the lack of effective married women's property legislation reinforced for much of the period. Women rarely occupied responsible positions within the community, and it is significant that out of about 224,000 farmers in England and Wales in 1901, fewer than 22,000 were women; and most of these were doubtless the widows of farmers who had carried on after their husbands' deaths.<sup>2</sup> A mere one in six were spinsters. Women in fact formed a smaller proportion of the total labour force in rural areas at that date than they did in England and Wales as a whole. In 1901 they comprised under a quarter of the workers in country districts compared to almost a third of the total in the nation at large.<sup>3</sup>

The one significant area where female employment did advance in rural communities during the Victorian era was in school teaching. The heads of village schools were able to achieve a level of financial reward and a status available to few other working-class or lower middle-class girls at that time. One commentator claimed in 1872 that they had 'a sphere of Christian influence' as great in its consequences as that of the parochial clergyman.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the century about three-quarters of all elementary teachers were women, compared to just over half who were female in the mid-1870s. Nevertheless, gender differences persisted, with the most lucrative headships going to men – a situation examined in more detail in chapter 8.

But teaching apart, in most villages there was a growing tendency to stress the undesirability of women taking up any kind of employment outside the home. As Margaret Hewitt pointed out more than thirty years ago, it was with the spread of industrialization in the early nineteenth century and the consequent decline in domestic production that women workers in the countryside became the subject of comment and criticism.<sup>5</sup> For this two reasons can be advanced. First the long hours of toil in crafts and trades at home were easily ignored by society in the obscurity of a cottage in a way that proved impossible in large-scale factory production. At the same

time, the industrial revolution itself, by marginalizing or destroying many of the women's former craft skills, also reduced their importance in the eyes of contemporaries. It is a token of changing attitudes that whereas the population censuses up to 1881 had included in the 'occupational' category such groups as shopkeepers' wives, shoemakers' wives, farmers' wives and innkeepers' wives, thereby signalling that wives were seen as sharing in the running of the business, from 1881 that disappeared. Instead women without a specific occupation of their own were classed as 'unoccupied', with 94 per cent of all married or widowed women in rural areas so categorized by the 1911 census.<sup>6</sup> Even among *unmarried* girls and women aged ten and above, only 46 per cent in rural districts were classed in 1911 as employed. Admittedly, some part-time workers, especially in agriculture, may have failed to report their occupation to the census enumerator, but evidence from wages books and personal reminiscences indicates that even when these have been taken into account, the female work force in the countryside was shrinking.

The second factor to be taken into account was the technological change which occurred in agriculture as a result of mechanization and alterations in harvesting techniques. In consequence, the importance of women's contribution to land work was reduced and this made it easier for farmers to dispense with their services.

Yet, ironically, whilst these changes were under way, the passage of the stringent 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, curtailing outdoor relief to the able-bodied and emphasizing the 'less eligibility' principle for recipients of parish assistance, increased the pressure on women to work in order to supplement an inadequate family income and avoid the stigma of pauperism. This was especially true up to the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Hence, despite middle-class reservations, during the early Victorian period, the general stress on family self-dependence caused reluctant acquiescence to be given to female employment. Typical of this dichotomy of view was the comment of an assistant poor law commissioner on women land workers in south-west England in 1843:

I believe it would be much better for their husbands and children, if [they] were not engaged in such employment . . . but

... upon the fullest consideration, I believe that the earnings of a woman employed in the fields are an advantage which, in the present state of the agricultural population, outweighs any of the mischiefs arising from such employment. All direct interference in the employment of women in agriculture must be deprecated at present.<sup>7</sup>

At a time when male labourers in these counties earned around 8s. to 10s. a week, the 3s. to 5s. which a wife or daughter could secure made an important contribution to total family income.

Twenty years later a very different philosophy applied. Now the large-scale employment of married women was deplored as conflicting unacceptably with prevailing opinion that wives should remain at home to look after house and family. There was what Margaret Hewitt has called a 'deification of the home'.<sup>8</sup> As the purchasing power of most labouring families modestly advanced compared to earlier years and as middle-class social values became ever more pervasive, doubts about the validity of women's work outside the home strengthened. The proliferation of government reports and parliamentary debates on the subject in the 1860s is testimony to the mounting unease. One critic, writing of women land workers in East Anglia, claimed that the work 'almost' unsexed them, 'in dress, gait, manners, character, making [them] rough, coarse, clumsy, masculine'.<sup>9</sup> To another witness, agricultural labour was 'the certain ruin of the female character . . . They become bold, impudent, scandalmongers, hardened against religion, careless of their homes and children.'<sup>10</sup>

It was to counter such alleged deficiencies that agricultural and labourers' improvement societies began to offer prizes to householders who kept their homes in a spotless condition. They included the Romsey District Association for the Encouragement of Meritorious Labourers, set up in 1854. It offered annual prizes of £1 10s. to married couples who had maintained their cottages in a neat and clean condition. A winner in 1867 was Moses Silence 'and his wife'; ironically the wife, who presumably had been responsible for their winning the prize, is not even mentioned by name!<sup>11</sup>

In the final decades of the nineteenth century such attitudes were to be further strengthened. The general report of the 1871 population census caught the popular mood, when it observed that wives and mothers had 'a noble and essential occupation'. On it, 'as much as on

the husband's labour and watchfulness depend the existence and character of the English race'. The 'most useful of all [female] occupations', it concluded, was that 'of wife, mother, and mistress of a family'.<sup>12</sup>

Not all contemporaries, however, agreed with this exaggerated emphasis on domesticity. The barrister and diarist, Arthur Munby, who carried out his own interviews with mid-Victorian working women, angrily denounced the 'Mollycoddlers' who were trying to stop women exercising a free choice as to their employment.<sup>13</sup> In his accounts of meetings with female land workers he stressed the pride which many felt in their skills. And in a poem entitled 'Woman's Rights' (published in 1865) Munby expressed his opposition to the would-be reformers:

Women, whose powers are so vast,  
Are children, after all!  
They mustn't give, as men may give,  
Their sweat and brains, nor freely live  
In great things and in small:  
They must be guided from above,  
By quips of patronizing love,  
To do or not to do.<sup>14</sup>

This was a theme to which he returned on other occasions.<sup>15</sup>

George Sturt, writing in the 1890s, similarly applauded the strength and independence of many of the women in his hamlet of The Bourne, near Farnham in Surrey – women like old Sally Turner, who at the age of seventy-three supported herself by running a small laundry. 'She had been the equal of men all her life', wrote Sturt. 'She belonged (as I think of her) to two places: her cottage garden where the clothes were aired, and the high-road along which she took them home.' He contrasted her self-dependence with 'the typical old cottage woman of a certain order of books, who studies her Bible, keeps her spectacles among the geraniums on the windowsill, . . . and . . . can curtsey to her betters in a way to turn good children green with envy.'<sup>16</sup>

But such robust views on the female role in village society were already at a discount in the 1860s, and they became still more unpopular as the century drew to a close. Even working-class families

themselves came to share the prejudice against female employment, especially on the land. Flora Thompson has recorded how, in her north Oxfordshire hamlet in the 1880s, the unsavoury reputation of earlier female agricultural gang members had given 'most country-women a distaste for "goin' afield"'.<sup>17</sup> A decade earlier the newly established agricultural trade union movement also declared its opposition to women on the land, regarding them, in part, as undermining the wages and employment prospects of the men.<sup>18</sup>

So strong had the reaction against outdoor employment become in parts of southern and midland England on the eve of the First World War that a researcher from the Women's Industrial Council referred to the 'morbid' seclusion which countless village women experienced as they sought to 'keep themselves to themselves'. She also pointed out that contrary to popular belief, the children of women who worked were healthier than the offspring of those who stayed at home, because a higher family income meant they were better fed.<sup>19</sup> But her findings had little effect. The majority of wives seemingly accepted the 'separate spheres' argument and saw their role as a domestic one, caring for husband and children.

Yet, despite the growing doubts about the desirability of female employment, throughout the nineteenth century women were expected to help on the land at the busy seasons of the farming year in most rural communities. However, outside a few selected areas, such as Northumbria, Cumbria, North Yorkshire, parts of East Anglia and Wales, the number so occupied on a permanent basis was relatively small. It was in being housewives, domestic servants and cottage craft workers that their main importance lay. This is confirmed by female employment patterns derived from mid-Victorian census returns. (See appendix 1.)

As appendix 1 indicates, opportunities for women to engage in employment on their own account were apparently greatest in villages where a predominant craft existed. The implications of this for the day-to-day lives of the women concerned will be examined in detail in chapter 7, when the cottage industries are analysed more closely. Suffice it here to point out that the economic independence thus bestowed was of major importance both to the financial security of the family and to the status of the women themselves. At Ivinghoe, Buckinghamshire, where there were thirty-one male agricultural



labourers and a groom recorded as unemployed in 1871, eighteen belonged to families where plaiting by the female and child members was apparently the only source of income. Alongside these were widows and mothers of illegitimate children who relied on plaiting for family support, while six single women living alone were also plaiters. Similarly at Stonesfield, Oxfordshire, at least five households seem to have been kept by the wife's earnings as a gloveress, while four elderly widows maintained themselves from the trade. Overall about three-quarters of the married women in this village were glovemakers. In both Ivinghoe and Stonesfield, therefore, the earnings of a wife either kept her family from pauperism or, where the husband and other male adults were at work, gave a valuable boost to household income. This was a bonus, since there is little evidence that male wage rates were lower in the handicraft communities than in those neighbouring parishes which were without a trade.

The outlets for personal employment also encouraged greater self-confidence and independence of outlook among the women concerned. 'Many a house was bought on gloving', declared a present-day worker from Leafield, Oxfordshire, an important glovemaking village, and she was clearly proud of that record.<sup>20</sup>

Also important was the fact that where cottage industries flourished there were opportunities for women not engaged in the main handicraft to take up other occupations, perhaps providing services the craft workers lacked the time to supply for themselves, or which they could afford to buy. Dressmaking, laundrywork and shopkeeping were often carried out by women in villages where there was an important cottage industry.

Finally, many workers valued the companionship they gained when they pursued a communal craft. At Cottisford in north Oxfordshire, where there were nineteen lacemakers out of a total female population of 125 in 1851, Flora Thompson recalled, years later, her conversations with one of them, whom she called 'Old Queenie', but whose real name was Mrs Eliza Massey. The old woman described how in the winter she and her fellow workers met together in one of the cottages, each bringing a faggot or a shovel of coal for the fire. There they sat gossiping through the day as their nimble fingers produced the delicate fabric. In summer they sat outside in the shade of the houses, and each year they sold their