

The Hidden Workforce: female field workers in Gloucestershire, 1870–1901

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The nineteenth century female agricultural workforce consisted basically of three distinct groups: farmers' wives and female relations on small farms; farm servants who were hired by the year and usually boarded at the farmhouse; and day labourers who were hired by the day, week or piece as the need arose. Much research is needed upon all three groups, but the concern of this paper is solely with female day labourers. It is an accepted part of the current historical view of the participation of women in agriculture that there was a clear shrinkage of employment opportunities for them during the nineteenth century and a consequent decline in the size of the female agricultural workforce after 1851.¹ The only real debate has been around the origin and timing of the growth of 'sexual specialisation' in agricultural work and its impact upon the employment of women. It has recently been suggested that the origins of sexual specialisation and the consequent growth of sexual inequality in employment opportunities in the grain-growing areas of the south and east of England may, in fact, lie in the last half of the eighteenth century and owe more to 'seemingly autonomous changes in the structure of the economy' than to changes induced by 'Victorian attitudes to femininity' in the last half of the nineteenth century.²

Whilst there is debate in this area, few historians would argue that the decline in the numbers of women in agriculture in the last half of the nineteenth century was anything but dramatic and substantial, a premise firmly and logically grounded upon the figures printed in the census reports of 1851–1901. It has given rise to a fairly uniform view of the structure of the agricultural labour force in the last years of the nineteenth century and is typified by statements such as: 'By the end of the nineteenth century women had almost ceased to be employed as wage earners in agriculture',³ and: 'the general tendency of the later nineteenth century years was towards . . . a more stable labour force consisting almost exclusively of adult males'.⁴ This 'voluntary withdrawal of female and child labour' was classed with 'other beneficial changes such as the fading away of poaching gangs' by E.L. Jones in his

survey of developments in English agriculture between 1815 and 1873.⁵ So far, only one voice has been moved to protest that the male stereotype of the agricultural labourer thus created is an erroneous one: 'Never mind that women worked in fields, barns and dairies throughout the whole period covered by Jones: it is their obliteration which, knowingly or not, is the image perpetuated in our history books'.⁶

This obliteration has been aided by the census figures, which record a fall in the numbers of female agricultural workers (excluding farmers' wives and female relations) after 1851:—

Table 1

*Female Agricultural Labourers and Farm Servants
in England and Wales 1851–1901*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Agricultural Labourers</i>	<i>Farm Servants</i>	<i>Total</i>
1851	44,319	99,156	143,475
1861	43,964	46,561	90,525
1871	33,513	24,599	58,112
<i>Agricultural Labourers, Farm Servants and Cottagers</i>			
1881			40,346
<i>Agricultural Labourers and Farm Servants</i>			
1891			24,150
1901			11,951

From Table 1 it is only too easy to see how the accepted view has arisen. The census data and the results of other official enquiries relating to female field workers have not so far been seriously questioned.⁷ However, detailed study of some contemporary farm labour accounts, wage books and ancillary material does reveal evidence concerning the extent of female day labour in agriculture which gives rise to some doubts about the accuracy of the census returns. The purpose of this paper is to examine and compare the evidence of both types of source material in the county of Gloucestershire, to assess the extent of any discrepancy and consider how it could have arisen, and to discuss the implications of the findings.

Gloucestershire was usually classed as a western grassland county in the last half of the nineteenth century,⁸ despite the fact that as late as 1895 depression-induced changes in the arable : pasture ratio had not succeeded in reducing the number of farms under wholly arable or mixed cultivation below 64 per cent of the total number of farms in the county.⁹ In reality, only the western portion of the county bordering upon the Severn (the Vales of Berkeley and Gloucester) could accurately be described as being largely under grass in the last half of the nineteenth century. The north-western portion of the county, the northern Vale bordering on the Vale of Evesham, and the south-east of the county, were areas of mixed arable and pasture farming; whilst more or less the whole of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds were given over to the classical system of farming, with stock playing a minor role in corn production.

These distinctions are important where any assessment of the female labour force in the county during the latter part of the Victorian era is concerned, for grassland farming had less to offer in the way of employment opportunities for women than mixed arable and pasture farming.¹⁰ Classical mixed farming, with its acute seasonal inflation of labour demand absorbed surplus labour regardless of sex or age at work peaks. The cultivation of corn, root, and green crops also demanded a large workforce outside the harvest work peaks: hoeing and singling of the crops in the spring, continued summer hoeing of root crops, and the cleaning and topping of roots for animal fodder in the winter. The continuation of this type of farming in Gloucestershire after the late 1870s meant that the demand for labour continued, although on a reduced scale. The size of the female labour force after 1871 is closely linked with the continuity of this demand, but official sources frequently give an inaccurate picture of the way in which it was met. It is hoped that the following examination and comparison of the evidence contained in official sources and farm accounts will indicate the degree of the inaccuracy in Gloucestershire.

In this particular context, official sources consist of the occupational statistics contained in the censuses of population taken between 1871 and 1901, and the information contained in the *Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture*, 1867¹¹ and the *Royal Commission on Labour*, 1893.¹² The census figures are a basic starting point and they show an apparently dramatic decline in the number of female agricultural labourers in Gloucestershire between 1851 and 1901:—

Table 2
*Female Agricultural Labourers and Farm Servants
 in Gloucestershire 1851-1901*

Year	Agricultural Labourers	Farm Servants	Total	Decline (%)
1851	2,897	1,607	4,504	
1861	2,555	887	3,442	23.6
1871	1,615	392	2,007	41.7
<i>Agricultural Labourers, Farm Servants and Cottagers</i>				
1881			1,150	42.7
<i>Agricultural Labourers and Farm Servants</i>				
1891			530	54.0
1901			182	65.1

The decline was consistent after 1851, but was proportionately greater after 1861. It is unfortunate that it is impossible to separate the numbers of agricultural labourers from those of farm servants after 1871, since we are not here concerned with the fate of farm servants, only with that of day labourers. The inclusion of cottagers in the 1881 census figures further confuses the issue and renders comparison even more difficult. But the combined figures of 1881, 1891 and 1901 do seem suspiciously low in a county where farmhouse cheese-making was still carried on, despite a switch by many farmers to liquid milk production only. It seems logical to assume that numbers of dairymaids and milk-maids were still employed in those years and it is tempting to suggest that the census figures record their numbers alone.¹³

However, the census figures are complemented by the findings of the other official sources. Fraser found that although female field labour was still extensively used and much in demand in the arable and mixed farming areas of eastern and northern Gloucestershire in 1867-8, the female agricultural workforce was less than one-fifth of the size it had been twenty-five years previously, owing to the fact that women were less inclined to take agricultural work.¹⁴ In 1893 Richards found that the decline had continued in Cirencester union, although he did come to the conclusion that the employment of female field labour was more common in the Cirencester district than in comparable areas of the other counties he had investigated.¹⁵

The occupational census was studied by contemporary and later commentators, usually perfunctorily in the case of female agricultu-

ral labourers, and some discrepancies were found. Charles Booth was puzzled by the apparent loss of adult females to the agricultural labour force of the United Kingdom between 1851 and 1881, but satisfied himself with the explanation that the loss corresponded exactly with the numbers added to the occupied in this class between 1841 and 1851. This, he said, must have indicated either an error in the enumeration of 1851, or a sharp reaction from the causes which had brought so many women into the fields during that decade.¹⁶ Lord Eversley, writing in 1907, thought that the discrepancies in the census figures for female agricultural labourers were largely attributable to the fact that casual female labourers were included in the figures prior to 1881 but were omitted in the 1881 and subsequent censuses. He concluded that the census figures 'must be considered as satisfactory rather than the reverse', and that 'in comparing the conditions of employment in agriculture at the different censuses, it is safer to omit all references to women'.¹⁷

The census data, the findings of official sources, and the views of contemporary commentators have led to an almost completely uncritical acceptance of the position of female day labourers in the agricultural labour force during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, the current historical view is that the female day labour force in agriculture contracted greatly between 1871 and 1901, although women were still employed on a casual and, therefore, unrecorded basis at various brief seasonal work peaks. But there is farm wage book evidence which shows that, in Gloucestershire at least, the employment of female day labourers continued at a substantial level during these years.

Farm wage and account books of the Victorian era are a relatively rare manuscript source in Gloucestershire. The extant material covers fairly short periods of time and most of the books are incomplete in some respect. But they do contain sufficient detail to permit in-depth analyses of the days worked by a farm labour force during a specific year. The main virtue of these books as primary source material is that they give facts unadulterated by Victorian opinion or selection. Five of the extant Gloucestershire farm wage books covering the years from 1870 to 1891 have been analysed, one from Dymock in the north-west of the county,¹⁸ and four from the Cotswolds and Cotswold fringe areas: Fairford,¹⁹ Hailes,²⁰ Snows-hill,²¹ and Little Washbourne.²² The wage books relating to the Vale area show that few women day labourers were employed, except for brief periods at work peaks, thus bearing out the opinion of the official sources that there was little day labour for women in grassland areas. An analysis of the days worked by the day labour

force (as distinct from the hired labour force) on each of the above farms during specific years is contained in Appendix A.

The Dymock example provides an immediate contradiction to the 1871 and 1881 census figures. In 1872, out of a total day labour force of twenty-two people working for 1,609 $\frac{3}{4}$ days plus piecework, six women worked for 193 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework, none of them working for more than 100 days during the year. In 1879, out of a total day labour force of twenty-five people employed for 2,094 days plus piecework, nine women worked for 469 $\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework, two of the women working for more than 100 days during the year.²³ On this farm, then, the female day labour force *increased* in size between 1872 and 1879, and performed a greater proportion of the day work on the farm than it had in 1872. According to the census figures, the female agricultural labour force in Gloucestershire *decreased* by 42.7 per cent during the eighteen-seventies.

The Cotswold and Cotswold fringe examples illustrate the varying degrees to which female labour was employed in agriculture in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. At Hailes in 1870–71 twenty-three day labourers were employed for 2,136 days plus piecework. Of these labourers four were women, working for 383 $\frac{1}{2}$ days, but three of the four worked for more than 100 days during the year. The Fairford example of 1870–71 shows a much heavier use of female labour. Of the thirty-eight ordinary day labourers employed for 5,569 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework, fifteen were women who worked for 1,785 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework. Nine of the women worked for more than 100 days during the year and five of the nine worked for between 202 and 238 $\frac{1}{2}$ days. The Snowhill example of 1890–91 shows that the trend continued into the last decade of the nineteenth century, for of the twenty-eight ordinary day labourers employed there for 4,120 days plus piecework, eleven were women who worked for 1,371 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework. Six of the eleven women worked for an average of 203 days each during the year, plus piecework in five months out of twelve. The Little Washbourne example of 1890 is similar. There, sixteen ordinary labourers were employed for 2,207 $\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework and four of them were women who worked for 484 days plus a little piecework. Three of these women worked for between 109 and 178 $\frac{1}{2}$ days each, plus a small amount of piecework in May.

Perhaps the clearest way of presenting this evidence is to list the percentage of the day work performed by women day labourers on the five farms during the specified years:—

Table 3

Year	Farm	Percentage of day work performed by women
1870-71	Fairford	32.0
1870-71	Hailes	18.1
1872	Dymock	12.0
1879	Dymock	22.4
1890	Little Washbourne	21.9
1890-91	Snowshill	33.3

It then becomes clear that a very substantial proportion of the day work on these farms was being performed by female day labourers. Around one-third of these women were working on a casual or semi-casual basis (under 100 working days per year), but the rest were working for one-third or more of the working year. On two farms: Fairford in 1870-71 and Snowshill in 1890-91, one-third and slightly more than one-half respectively of the female day labour force were working for more than two-thirds of the working year. In other words, they had the same allocation of work as the regular male day labourers, most of whom worked for between 150 and 250 days per year plus piecework.

The censuses of 1871, 1881 and 1891 appear to have ignored most of these women. According to the census, the female agricultural labour force in Gloucestershire fell from 2007 in 1871 to 1150 in 1881, and 530 in 1891.²⁴ But in view of the numbers of women revealed in the five farm examples quoted above, it seems reasonable to suppose that the census figures are a gross under-estimate of the real size of the female labour force on Gloucestershire farms between 1871 and 1891. The farm account and wage books used to make the calculations are random survivals and are, in effect, a random sample from different areas of the county. The only common factor is that they were all mixed arable and pasture holdings of medium to large size, therefore providing a substantial amount of the types of work upon which farmers commonly employed women. The amount of female labour employed seems to have increased in proportion with the size of the farm and the importance of the arable acreage in the management system. The examples used represent only five farms out of a total of 2001 holdings in excess of 100 acres in the county in 1895. Of these, 502 consisted of more than 300 acres, and 1499 of between 100 and 300 acres. The vast majority of them were under mixed pasture and arable or wholly arable cultivation.²⁵

The great advantage attached to dealing with a primary source such as farm wage books, as opposed to sources such as parliamen-

tary papers and printed census figures, is that individual workers are named. It is therefore possible, where there is a reasonable degree of contemporaneity, to cross-check named individuals in the wage book against entries in the appropriate census enumerator's book. The results, for those wage books it was possible to check, are listed below:-

Fairford 1870-71. Sources: Census Enumerator's Book, Fairford 1871, P.R.O. RG10/2648; Fairford, G.R.O. D1070/1/173.

1. Anne WESTBURY: age 60, husband William, agricultural labourer on the same farm. Worked for 221½ days plus piecework, no occupation returned.
2. Harriet PASH: age 60, husband Charles, labourer. Worked for 238½ days plus piecework, no occupation returned.
3. Ann WHIPP: age 40, husband James, labourer. Worked for 216½ days plus piecework, no occupation returned.
4. Charlotte WINSTONE: age 54, husband John, labourer. Worked for 113 days plus piecework, no occupation returned.
5. Mary Ann WINSTONE: age 20, daughter of the above. Worked for 49½ days, returned as unemployed.
6. Jane TOVEY: age 50, husband Richard, labourer. Worked for 120½ days plus piecework, no occupation returned.
7. Mary HEWER: age 52, widow and head of household. Worked for 47½ days plus piecework and washing, returned as 'labourer'.

Dymock 1872. Sources: Census Enumerator's Book, Dymock 1871, P.R.O. RG10/2609; Dymock, G.R.O., D3208/3.

The workers named here were also employed on the farm in 1871.

1. Eliza HALFORD: age 28, husband Thomas, agricultural labourer on the same farm. Worked for 25½ days plus piecework between June and October, no occupation returned in 1871.
2. Elizabeth (Betty) JONES: age 68, husband James, labourer on the same farm. Worked for 84 days plus piecework, returned as 'farm labourer' in 1871.
Her daughter, Elizabeth, age 21, was also returned as 'farm labourer', so either of these two women could be the Betty Jones of the wage book.
3. Jane WINTER: age 49, husband George, labourer on the same farm. Worked for 49 days plus piecework, returned as 'labourer' in 1871.

4. Hannah HOLMES: age 62, husband William, farm labourer. Worked by the piece only (October), returned as 'farm labourer' in 1871.
5. Esther JONES: age 65, husband Benjamin, farm labourer. Worked for 22 days haymaking. No occupation returned in 1871.
6. Mary Ann MANNS: age 32, husband Samuel, agricultural labourer on the same farm. Worked for 13 days in July, returned as 'agricultural labourer' in 1871.

Hailes 1870-71. Sources: Census Enumerators' Books, Winchcomb sub-district 1871, P.R.O., RG10/2656; Hailes, G.R.O. D2163/3.

1. Emma SEABRIGHT: age 52, husband George, agricultural labourer on the same farm. Worked for 136½ days, no occupation returned.
2. Mary HUGHES: age 49, husband Isaac, agricultural labourer. Worked for 140½ days, no occupation returned.
3. Susan RANDALL: age 35, husband William, labourer on the same farm. Worked for 103½ days, no occupation returned.
4. Sarah MARTIN: age 31, husband George, agricultural labourer. Worked for 3 days in August, occupation returned as 'charwoman'.

Two points emerge from this exercise. Firstly, that a number of women who were employed for one-third or more of the year were omitted from the occupational record. Secondly, that there was a degree of inconsistency between parishes, either in the enumerator's treatment of the completed census form, or in the completion of the form by the head of household in the first instance, since in Dymock most of the women concerned were returned as employed but in Hailes and Fairford they were not.

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from this evidence is that the census of 1871 and, by implication, the censuses of 1881 and 1891, greatly understated the size of the female agricultural labour force in the arable and mixed farming areas of Gloucestershire. There can be little doubt that the type of field work performed by women continued to be economically viable from both labourers' and farmers' viewpoints after 1871. Female labour was much cheaper than male labour where time-consuming and repetitive work such as hoeing, stone-picking and root-cleaning was concerned. At Hailes in 1870 the daily wage rate for women was 8d., rising to 1s. during the harvest period, whereas for men it was 1s. 8d. per day, rising to 2s. Piecework rates showed a similar differential.²⁶ This trend continued through to 1890,

for at Snowhill the average daily male rates were 1s. 8d. or 1s. 10d. rising to 2s., but the average daily female rate was 8d. plus an extra lump sum of £1 for the harvest period.²⁷ At Little Washbourne in 1890 the average male rates were 1s. 6d. or 1s. 8d. per day plus lump sum payments of £1 and £2 for haymaking and harvest, whereas the female rate was 8d. per day rising to 1s. per day.²⁸ Female labour was, therefore, always an attractive proposition to the farmer for at least half of the working year. During the years of agricultural depression after the mid-eighteen-seventies it seems logical that competition for this cheap labour should become more, rather than less intense, as farmers had a much greater incentive to lower their unit costs regardless of the under or over-supply of male labour.

From the married adult male labourer's point of view the labour of his wife continued to be a vital factor in the stability of the family budget during the eighteen-eighties and nineties, especially since the 1876 Education Act increasingly removed the labour of his younger children, except at harvest time. In all the wage books analysed the majority of the women employed by farmers were the wives of the hired men and day labourers of the farm. The examples of wage rates quoted above show that there was hardly any movement in the basic male day labour rates between 1870 and 1890 in Gloucestershire. Simple addition of the wife's earnings to those of the male breadwinner clearly demonstrate their continuing importance:-

Table 4

*Joint earnings of husband and wife
on sample Gloucestershire farms 1870-1890*

Year	Name and occupation	Average earnings per week	wife's earnings	Joint average earnings per week
1870-71	G. Seabright ²⁹ labourer	10s. 7½d.	£4. 19. 1½d.	12s. 6d.
1878-9	S. Manns ³⁰ labourer	12s. 6½d.	£7. 0. 1½d.	15s. 2½d.
1880-81	G. Smith ³¹ carter	11s. 8d.	£9. 5. 0d.	15s. 2d.
1890	J. Court ³² shepherd	13s. 3d.	£5. 14. 0d.	15s. 5½d.

Having established that female day labour continued to be used on a significant scale in the fields of Gloucestershire during the eighteen-seventies and eighties because it made economic sense to all the

parties concerned, we are left with the need to establish a reason for the omission of these women from the occupational census. There are two avenues of exploration: the instructions given to registrars and enumerators, and the wording of the census schedule issued to householders, for it seems as though the origin of the error must lie in one of these stages.

Examination of the general reports on the 1871 and 1881 censuses, the instructions issued to local census officials, and the census schedules issued to householders reveals no obvious change in policy. The general report on the 1871 census³³ does not mention female agricultural workers or women working on a casual or part-time basis, neither do the instructions issued to registrars and enumerators.³⁴ The booklet issued to the clerks who abstracted the occupational information from the enumerators' books in 1871 was very explicit and stated that, apart from the wives of innkeepers, shopkeepers, publicans, farmers, shoemakers, and butchers, only those wives 'who are returned as following an independent occupation' were to be included in the occupational abstract.³⁵ The instructions issued to the head of the family in the household schedule stated that in the case of women and children, 'the occupations of those who are regularly employed from home, or who follow any business at home, is to be distinctly recorded'.³⁶ This instruction remained the same in 1881,³⁷ while the instructions issued to officials were probably less explicit than they had been in 1871. Registrars and enumerators were given no more information relating to the employment of women than was contained in the household schedule.³⁸ The booklet issued to the clerks making the occupational abstract had much less to say on the subject of women than it had in 1871, merely stating that: 'those females only are to be abstracted who are returned as following some specific occupation'.³⁹ The general report on the 1881 census makes no mention of any change in the treatment of women beyond reiterating that only women employed on a 'definite' basis had been included in the occupational abstracts.⁴⁰ There would therefore appear to be little difference in treatment between the two censuses.

Yet the comments of Booth and Lord Eversley indicate that there was a change in the treatment of part-time female workers in 1881. Booth stated categorically that partially-employed wives were excluded from the 1881 and subsequent censuses, whereas they had previously been included. Lord Eversley thought that much of the decline in the number of female agricultural workers after 1871 was attributable to the fact that female casual labourers were included in the census figures before 1881 but were definitely omitted thereaf-

ter.⁴¹ But neither of them cites an authority for his claim. If such an authority did exist it may have been in the form of a verbal or unofficial instruction and, since both men had a long-standing association with the taking of the census, this is not altogether impossible. But the point remains that in the absence of any actual evidence to the contrary, there appears to be no significant change in the treatment of partially-employed wives between the censuses of 1871 and 1881. Indeed, the fact that a proportion of both fully and partly-employed wives were excluded from the 1871 census would seem to strengthen this argument.

The real reason for the omission may well lie in the wording of the instructions given to the enumerators and the enumerated. For although these were specific and made it clear that only those women working on a 'regular', 'definite', 'specific', or 'independent' basis should be returned as occupied, some confusion might have arisen over the interpretation of these words in the context of agricultural employment. The fact that a wife followed the same occupation as her husband (that is, agricultural labourer) could have led to the assumption on the part of enumerators that she was not following an 'independent' occupation, merely occasionally assisting her husband in his occupation. Additionally, apart from dairymaids and farm servants, very few female farm workers were employed for 312 working days during the year. In fact, owing to the seasonality of agricultural work many male farm workers were not employed for every working day during the year. But in the case of women, this could have caused doubts about the 'regularity' of their work. On balance, it may well be this confusion over the nature of female employment in agriculture which led to the visible inconsistencies in the 1871 examples cited at Dymock, Fairford and Hailes and to unintentional concealment of the continued existence in Gloucestershire of a significant portion of the female workforce. The sting lies in the tail of this argument, for its ramifications may well extend over the whole of the last half of the nineteenth century. The occupation column of the household census schedule was worded in virtually the same way in 1851 and 1861,⁴² which would seem to indicate the existence of the same confusion over the exact nature of female employment in agriculture. If this is the case, then the concealed element in the female agricultural workforce must have been present from 1851 onwards, although it would be necessary to complete a similar analysis for 1851 and 1861 before this idea could be tested with any degree of accuracy.

The omission of numbers of female field workers from the census has wider implications than the simply numerical. It also has bearings

upon hypotheses recently advanced concerning the growth of sexual specialisation in agriculture and the social acceptability of field work for women in the last half of the nineteenth century. The development during the eighteenth century of a sexual division of labour, that is the relegation of women from the major summer and autumn work peaks such as harvesting and ploughing to the minor spring and early summer work peaks such as spring weeding and haymaking, has been advanced as a reason for the decline of female participation in agriculture.⁴³ In the eastern and southern counties of England during the early years of the nineteenth century 'the concentration of women in a few specific tasks was accompanied by a tendency for them to be excluded from a traditionally fuller and more sexually equal participation in agriculture'.⁴⁴ But surviving archive material indicates that this was not the case in Gloucestershire, even in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Some farmers kept detailed accounts of their daily deployment of labour and it is survivals of this type which make it possible to specify with confidence the types of work upon which women were employed. Appendix B lists the work performed by women on a farm at Hailes in 1870 and a farm at Snowhill in 1896. Both examples show quite conclusively that women were employed on a wide range of work, including manure spreading, hoeing, dock-pulling, reaping, and threshing, as well as spring weeding and haymaking. They also show that the peak of activity extended not only over the spring and early summer but right over the late summer harvest work peak as well. On both farms women undertook reaping work and it is quite obvious that they were not completely relegated to the subsidiary role of tying and shocking, but were employed in a primary role. It therefore seems that on some farms in the Cotswold and Cotswold fringe areas of Gloucestershire the sexual division of labour was still incomplete in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

This being the case, perhaps we ought to question whether the Victorian concept of femininity, the ideal of 'genteel uselessness', really did exert 'a pervasive influence beyond the middle classes'.⁴⁵ The upper and middle echelons of Victorian society had an ambivalent attitude towards working-class women in employment, for while working women were criticised for their apparent refusal to conform to the ideal of wife and mother, at the same time they were used as a convenient reservoir of cheap labour in field, factory, shop, and home. There is a good deal of material which indicates that the prevailing Victorian attitude to female field workers in particular was one of undisguised disapproval. Field work was physically hard and, worse still, 'not only does it almost unsex a woman, in dress, gait,

manners, character, making her rough, coarse, clumsy, masculine; but it generates a further very pregnant social mischief, by unfitting her or indisposing her for a woman's proper duties at home'.⁴⁶ But there is very little material to indicate that farmers or farm workers actually shared these sentiments or, indeed, paid any attention to them. Some male farm workers did see the cheap labour of women as injurious to their own interests: 'Farmers will send women to winnowing, to dung cart, and even to plough, and they get for this 7d. or 8d. a day, but if a man does it he gets 20d. a day', and for this reason advocated the curtailment of female employment.⁴⁷ It is noticeable that social mores and ethics did not enter into the argument. The continued, if largely unrecorded employment of women on Gloucestershire farms right into the eighteen-nineties indicates that middle-class notions of social acceptability were not all-pervasive, although it does endow the concealment of their employment with the appearance of wish-fulfilment.

In conclusion, analysis of the sample Gloucestershire wage books shows that on some arable and mixed farms in the county women were performing between 12 per cent and 33 per cent of the day work of the farm in the eighteen-seventies, eighties, and early nineties, and that about one-quarter of these women were working on a basis similar to that of their male counterparts. On the other hand, the figures extracted from the censuses taken between 1871 and 1901 probably indicate little more than the numbers of female farm servants and dairymaids in the county, with the addition of a small number of female day labourers. The weight of the evidence points to female labour being employed on a substantial scale on Gloucestershire farms at a time when it was supposedly being withdrawn from the agricultural labour market. These women were almost certainly omitted from the census because they worked on a basis which did not conform with the definitions contained in the official instructions. Despite the statements of Booth and Lord Eversley that casual female day labourers were definitely excluded from the 1881 and subsequent censuses, there is nothing in the existing official evidence to indicate that there was any change in treatment between 1871 and 1881. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that Booth and Lord Eversley may have had access to material which no longer exists, but the real reason was more likely to have been the failure of the Registrar General's office to understand the irregular nature of agricultural day labour and piecework, or to appreciate the size of the female labour force involved.

Whatever the reasons, on the basis of the evidence presented, the census cannot be taken as a true record of the size of the female

agricultural day labour force in Gloucestershire between 1871 and 1901 and, by implication, between 1851 and 1871. It is difficult to believe that the experience of one county was unique in this respect and it is tempting to speculate that research along similar lines in other counties with a high proportion of arable and mixed farms would show similar results. If this should prove to be the case then the total size of the agricultural labour force in those years must also have been under-stated. But the fact that this hidden labour force may well have been omitted from the census prior to 1871 renders it unlikely that the rate of contraction in agriculture's share in total employment during the last half of the nineteenth century would have been significantly affected.

The Gloucestershire evidence also suggests that there was a greater degree of regional variation in the growth of sexual specialisation in agriculture. Whilst it is recognised that in areas of northern England and Scotland equal sexual participation in many types of agricultural work persisted throughout the nineteenth century, it seems to be generally accepted that women elsewhere in England were relegated to a comparatively minor role at some point after the mid-eighteenth century. But in some areas of Gloucestershire it does seem that women still had a major and equal part to play in many aspects of farm work. The survival of this active female role in agriculture in the late nineteenth century indicates that Victorian middle-class concepts of socially acceptable types of women's work were unimportant, or irrelevant, to working-class agricultural families.

Notes

¹ For instance, Eric Richards, 'Women in the British Economy since about 1700: An Interpretation', *History*, LIX (1974), pp. 345-349.

² K.D.M. Snell, 'Agricultural Seasonal Unemployment, the Standard of Living, and Women's Work in the South and East, 1690-1860', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XXXIV, III (1981), pp. 423-436.

³ I. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (2nd edition 1969), p. 110.

⁴ R. Samuel, 'Village Labour', in *Village Life and Labour*, ed. R. Samuel, (1975), p. 21.

⁵ E.L. Jones, *The Development of English Agriculture 1815-1873* (1973), p. 32.

⁶ Eve Hostettler, 'Gourlay Steell and the Sexual Division of Labour', *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), p. 100.

⁷ The census returns of 1851 and 1861 have been examined and some discrepancies revealed, see: P.M. Tillott, 'Sources of Inaccuracy in the 1851 and 1861 Censuses', in *Nineteenth Century Society, Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data*, ed. E.A. Wrigley, (1972), pp. 118-121.

⁸ The *Agricultural Returns* series of Parliamentary Papers adhered to Caird's 1851 classification of the county, for which see: James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, (2nd edition 1968), p. 522.

⁹ The majority of farms in the county (53.3 per cent) were, in fact, under part permanent pasture/part arable cultivation: *Returns as to the Number and Size of Agricultural Holdings in Great Britain, 1895* P(arliamentary) P(apers) 1896, (C.8243)LXVII.501.

¹⁰ In predominantly pasture districts there was little work suitable for female day labourers, although brief casual spells of ground-dressing, manure-spreading, haymaking, and fruit-picking were common.

¹¹ *Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture, 1867*, Report by Assistant Commissioner Reverend James Fraser on Cirencester, Thornbury and Newent Unions, P.P. 1868, (C.4068) XVII.I.; and Appendix Part II to First Report, Evidence from the Assistant Commissioners, P.P. 1868, (C.4068-I)XVII.237.

¹² *Royal Commission on Labour, The Agricultural Labourer*, Vol. I England Part IV, Report by Assistant Commissioner R.C. Richards on Cirencester and Monmouth Unions, P.P. 1893-4, (C.6894-IV)XXXV.493.

¹³ In 1867 three women could be employed full-time on dairy work on a 100-150 acre farm in the Vale of Berkeley: *Commission on Employment, 1867*, P.P. 1868, (C.4068-I)XVII.237, p. 122. Dairymaids were usually farm servants, hired by the year, but milkmaids could be hired by the year or employed on a weekly or daily basis. Of the 182 female agricultural labourers and farm servants enumerated in Gloucestershire in 1901, 71 were described as 'in charge of cattle', and were probably milkmaids.

¹⁴ *Commission on Employment, 1867*, P.P. 1868, (C.4068)XVII.I., p. 18.

¹⁵ *R.C. on Labour*, P.P. 1893-4 (C.6894-IV)XXXV.493, p. 9. Cirencester was the only Gloucestershire union investigated by Richards.

¹⁶ Charles Booth, 'Occupations of the People in the United Kingdom 1801-81', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, XLIX, II (1886), p. 326.

¹⁷ G.J.S. Lefevre, baron Eversley, 'Decline in the Number of Agricultural Labourers in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LXX 1907, p. 271.

¹⁸ G(loucestershire) R(ecord) O(ffice), D3208/3, Farm Account Book of Guy Hill, Dymock 1871-80, hereafter cited simply as Dymock.

¹⁹ G.R.O., D1070/1/173, Farm Labour Account Book, Park Farm, Fairford 1869-72, hereafter cited simply as Fairford.

²⁰ G.R.O., D2163/1, Farm Account Book of Thomas Smith, Irely Farm, Hailes 1789-1872; and D2163/3, Labour Account Book 1868-72, hereafter cited simply as Hailes.

²¹ G.R.O., D2267/A8, Farm Account Book of George Hyatt, Snowhill Farm, Snowhill and Park Farm, Stanway 1878-96, hereafter cited simply as Snowhill.

²² G.R.O., D2079/114/E15, Farm Account Book, probably relating to Little Washbourne Farm, Little Washbourne, hereafter cited simply as Little Washbourne.

²³ A full working year consisted of 6 days x 52 weeks = 312 days.

²⁴ Table 2 above.

²⁵ *Returns as to the Number and Size of Agricultural Holdings, 1895*, P.P. 1896 (C.8243)LXVII.501.

²⁶ G.R.O., D2163/1, Hailes 1870.

²⁷ G.R.O., D2267/A8, Snowhill 1890.

²⁸ G.R.O., D2079/114/E15, Little Washbourne 1890.

²⁹ G.R.O., D2163/1, Hailes 1870-71.

³⁰ G.R.O., D3208/3, Dymock 1878-9.

- ³¹ G.R.O., D2267/A8, Snowhill 1880-81.
- ³² G.R.O., D2079/114/E15, Little Washbourne 1890.
- ³³ *Census of England and Wales 1871*, Vol. IV, General Report, P.P. 1873 (C.872.1)LXXI.II., p. 138.
- ³⁴ P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice), *Census Returns*, associated papers, RG27/4.
- ³⁵ *ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Census of England and Wales 1871*, Vol. IV, General Report Appendix B, P.P. 1873 (C.872.1)LXXI.II.I., p. 168.
- ³⁷ *Census of England and Wales 1881*, Vol. IV, General Report, P.P. 1883, (C.3722)LXXX.I., p. 116.
- ³⁸ P.R.O. RG27/5.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Census of England and Wales 1881*, Vol. IV, General Report, P.P. 1883 (C.3722)LXXX.I., p. 29.
- ⁴¹ Booth, *J.R.S.S.*, XLIX, II, 1886, p. 349; Lefevre, *J.R.S.S.*, LXX 1907, p. 271.
- ⁴² *Census of Great Britain 1851*, Vol. I, P.P. 1852-3 (1631)LXXXV.I., Report p. cxxxviii; *Census of England and Wales 1861*, Vol. III, General Report, P.P. 1863 (3221)LIII.I., p. 76.
- ⁴³ Snell, *Ec.H.R.*, 2nd ser. XXXIV (1981), pp. 423, 426, 429.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 429.
- ⁴⁵ Richards, *History*, LIX (1974), p. 350.
- ⁴⁶ *Commission on Employment, 1867*, First Report, P.P. 1868 (C.4068)XVII.I., p. viii.
- ⁴⁷ *Gloucester Journal*, 27 April 1872. The man, David Lafford of Quenington, was speaking at an early union recruiting meeting at Fairford.

APPENDIX A

Analysis of the number of days worked by female day labourers on some Gloucestershire farms 1870-1891.

1. *Old Rock Farm, Dymock*

This was a mixed arable and pasture farm of 460 acres.

Source: G.R.O. D3208/3, Farm Account Book of Guy Hill. (The 1871 census lists Guy Hill as the occupier of Old Rock Farm and Charles Hawkins as the occupier of Callow Farm, 230 acres. But the cover of the account book proclaims that it belonged to 'Guy Hill, Callow Farm, Dymock'. The 1881 census, however, lists the two men as occupying the same farms as in 1871.)

1872 (January-December)

Hired labour force: 5 men, 4 boys.

Day labour force: 22 labourers employed for $1,609\frac{3}{4}$ days plus piecework

Men: 15 for $1,361\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework

Boys: 1 for 55 days

Women: 6 for $193\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework:—

1 on piecework only (hoeing in October)

1 for 13 days } haymaking

1 for 22 days }

1 for $25\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework (June-October)

1 for 49 days plus piecework (July-November)

1 for 84 days plus piecework

1879 (January-December)

Hired labour force: 4 men, 2 boys

Day labour force: 25 labourers employed for 2094 days plus piecework

Men: 16 for $1,624\frac{3}{4}$ days plus piecework

Boys: None

Women: 9 for $469\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework:—

1 for 12 days (harvest)

1 for $12\frac{1}{2}$ days (harvest)

1 for 15 days (haymaking)

1 for 22 days }

1 for $40\frac{1}{2}$ days } haymaking and harvest

1 for 67 days plus piecework

1 for $76\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

1 for $104\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

& 1 for $119\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework.

2. *Irely Farm, Hailes*

This was a mixed pasture and arable farm of 324 acres.

Source: G.R.O. D2163/1 and D2163/3, Farm Account Book and Farm Labour Book of Thomas Smith.

1870-71 (1 October-30 September)

Hired labour force: 2 men

Day labour force: 23 labourers employed for 2,136 days plus piecework. This does not include an unidentifiable number of casual harvest workers.

Men: 14 for 1,079 $\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework

Boys: 3 for 669 $\frac{1}{4}$ days

Women: 4 for 383 $\frac{1}{2}$ days:-

1 for 3 days (August)

1 for 103 $\frac{1}{2}$ days

1 for 136 $\frac{1}{2}$ days

1 for 140 $\frac{1}{2}$ days

3. *Park Farm, Fairford*

This 483-acre holding was farmed in conjunction with at least one other holding, but the total working acreage is unknown. The number of workers employed would seem to indicate a total acreage of about 1,000 acres, mainly under arable rotations.

Source: G.R.O. D1070/1/173, Farm Account Book of Alexander Iles.

1870-71 (1 October-30 September)

Hired labour force: 6 men, 6 boys

Day labour force: 38 labourers employed for 5,569 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

Men: 18 for 2,846 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

Boys: 5 for 937 $\frac{1}{2}$ days

Women: 15 for 1,785 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework:-

1 on piecework only (bean and pea hoeing March and April)

1 for 1 day (August)

1 for 14 days (May)

1 for 47 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

1 for 49 $\frac{1}{2}$ days (October to January)

1 for 78 $\frac{1}{2}$ days (October to February)

1 for 113 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

1 for 120 days plus piecework

1 for 120 $\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

1 for 153 days plus piecework

1 for 202 days plus piecework

- 1 for 210 days plus piecework
- 1 for $216\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework
- 1 for $221\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework
- 1 for $238\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

4. *Snowhill Farm, Snowhill and Parks Farm, Stanway*

This was a two-farm unit of around 700 acres of mixed pasture and arable, with arable predominating.

Source: G.R.O. D2267/A8, Farm Account Book of George Hyatt 1878-96.

1890-91 (1 October-30 September)

Hired labour force: 6 men

Day labour force: 28 labourers employed for 4,120 days plus piecework

Men: 8 for $935\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework

Boys: 9 for 1,813 days plus piecework

Women: 11 for $1,371\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework:-

1 for $9\frac{1}{2}$ days (October and February)

1 for 15 days (October and November)

1 for $20\frac{1}{2}$ days (October and November)

1 for 43 days plus piecework (July to September)

1 for 63 days plus piecework (June to September)

1 for $197\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework*

1 for $199\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework*

1 for 200 days plus piecework*

1 for $200\frac{1}{2}$ days plus piecework*

1 for 209 days plus piecework*

1 for 214 days plus piecework*

* Piecework in October, December, January, February, and September

5. *Little Washbourne Farm, Little Washbourne*

The acreage of this farm remains unknown, but it consisted of mixed pasture and arable.

Source: G.R.O. D2079/114/E15, Farm Account Book, probably relating to Little Washbourne Farm, Little Washbourne.

1890 (January-December)

Hired labour force: 2 men, 2 boys

Day labour force: 16 labourers employed for $2,207\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework

Men: 10 for $1,615\frac{1}{4}$ days plus piecework

Boys: 2 for 108 days

Women: 4 for 484 days plus piecework:-

1 for 39 days (July to October)

1 for 109 days plus piecework (May, hoeing)

1 for 157½ days plus piecework (May, hoeing)

1 for 178½ days plus piecework (May, hoeing)

APPENDIX B

*Work performed by women on Gloucestershire farms, 1870 and 1896*1. *Irely Farm, Hailes*

Source: G.R.O. D2163/3, Farm Labour Account Book of Thomas Smith 1868-72.

1870

<i>March:</i>	Sorting potatoes, planting potatoes (2 women, 19 days)
<i>April:</i>	Potato planting, gardening, wheat hoeing, ground dressing, sundries (3 women, 54 days)
<i>May:</i>	Wheat hoeing, bean hoeing, pea hoeing, ground dressing, threshing, gardening, sundries (3 women, 47½ days)
<i>June:</i>	'among the clover', threshing, haymaking, gardening, picking up tussocks, loading tussocks, picking up manure, sundries (4 women, 62½ days)
<i>July:</i>	Haymaking, gardening, bag mending, threshing, pea cutting, reaping, serving thatcher, sundries (4 women, 81½ days)
<i>August:</i>	Reaping, raking beans, serving thatcher, rick-making, gardening, lifting potatoes, sundries (4 women, 56 days)
<i>September:</i>	Fruit picking, raking up clover, potato picking, sundries (2 women, 34 days)
<i>October:</i>	Fruit picking, cider-making, 'among the clover', sundries (2 women, 31 days)
<i>November:</i>	Threshing (2 women, 4 days)

2. *Snowshill Farm, Snowshill*

Source: G.R.O. D2267/E24, Farming diary of George Hyatt 1896.
 1896 (The number of women employed in this year is unknown, but eleven were employed in 1890-91, see Appendix A.)

<i>January:</i>	Swede cleaning (at piece rates, 6s. 6d. per acre), threshing
<i>February:</i>	Swede Cleaning
<i>March:</i>	Swede cleaning

<i>April:</i>	Swede cleaning
<i>May:</i>	Mangold cleaning, stone picking, hoeing vetches
<i>June:</i>	Squitching (clearing couch grass), dock pulling, this- tle cutting, cocking (hay)
<i>July:</i>	dock pulling, thatching hay ricks, mangold hoeing, turning vetches, swede hoeing, hoeing rape and turnips, cutting oats, weeding, bag mending.
<i>August:</i>	Cutting wheat, rick making, rick thatching, tying up oats and wheat, turning oats, straw drawing
<i>September:</i>	Turnip hoeing, thatching wheat ricks, dock pulling, straw drawing, cutting barley, threshing, winnowing
<i>October:</i>	Threshing wheat, rick thatching, straw drawing, fruit picking, mangold cleaning
<i>November:</i>	Dung spreading, swede cleaning, dock pulling
<i>December:</i>	Threshing, swede cleaning