

WORK

Getting a living involved a range of varied activities at different social levels. Women's work is not easily separated into paid and unpaid work, nor were their occupational identities always distinct. Certain work could be for pay or not, depending on a woman's status. Cleaning, for example, might be part of the duties of a servant, an occupation for older women in cities, or the expected task of wives. Much of the paid work of married women was combined with childcare and housewifery.⁵ Over their lifetimes, labouring women might be independent wage earners during their teens and early twenties. After marriage, they were responsible for housewifery and childcare, and in old age still required to labour at poorly rewarded tasks such as spinning. Those who depended upon poor rates could be forced into unpleasant work, such as searching bodies, as the price of their continued relief.

Women's self-identification as workers was stronger than many contemporary labels suggest. The courts might describe women by their marital status, as 'wife' or 'spinster', but women themselves spoke of their art or profession; a cheese-maker's wife described herself as 'a butterwoman by profession'.⁶ Those most likely to be able to establish an occupational or professional identity were usually in the middling levels of society. Their occupations included midwifery, medical practice, teaching, and nursing. Many of these were pursued also by poorer women, but they have been separated because wealthier women were more likely to have a professional identity than their poorer counterparts. Cultural areas, such as painting, singing, the stage, and even writing, were opening up for women after the Restoration in 1660, but around the same time middling women were being challenged in traditional areas, such as midwifery, by professionalising men. In trades such as brewing, ale-wives were being marginalised by larger-scale brewers.⁷ The multiple occupations of poorer women militated against contemporary recognition of female work identities.

Social class influenced women's housekeeping and housewifery. While women of the elite did not themselves labour, they supervised their servants who performed the tasks of maintaining their households. Possessions were more numerous higher up the social scale. Gentlewomen might therefore need skilled and specialised servants to look after their possessions. Ladies employed other women for time-consuming and delicate tasks such as the washing of silks and lace.

As Chapter 4 shows, the majority of women experienced relative and absolute poverty at some stages of their lives. Furthermore, sexuality and reproduction impacted on women's working lives. Heterosexual activity in young women servants could lead to pregnancy, dismissal, and punishment for bastardy; wives bore a baby roughly every three years.⁸ Poverty meant malnourished babies too, making the work of rearing children even more difficult.

Since so much of women's work was invisible, taken for granted by their contemporaries, it is not easy to find records which document female labour. We have selected a variety of documents to illustrate the possibilities of reading apparently unprepossessing material to reveal details about women's working

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lives. The documents have been grouped thematically. Many of these documents require a different kind of reading from those in other chapters: more deduction is needed, and information about work is often in the incidental detail. Further relevant sources may be found in Chapter 4, 'Poverty and Property'.

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3.1 Advice for servants in larger households: Hannah Wolley, 1675

Most young women worked as domestic servants from their early teens until their mid-twenties, living in the households of their employers, and subject to their masters' commands. The majority of households employed at least one general servant, but in larger households there were several, many of whom had specialised tasks. Young women might begin in a lowly capacity, rising through the ranks as they learnt more and grew older. Hannah Wolley (see 1.10) advised about a range of different kinds of employment and cautioned young women against sexual temptation.

Hannah Wolley, *The Compleat Servant Maid*, London, 1677, pp. 110, 157-8; *The Gentlewoman's Companion*, London, 1675, p. 214.

Directions for such who desire to be Nursery-Maids to persons of honour or quality, or else to gentlewomen either in city or country.
If you intend to fit your self for this employment, you must naturally incline to love young children . . .

Directions for such as desire to be dairy maids.

Those who would endeavour to gain the esteem and reputation of good dairy maids must be very careful that all their vessels be scalded well, and kept very clean, that they milk their cattle in due time, for the kine by custom will expect it though you neglect, which will tend much to their detriment. . . . I look upon it to be altogether needless, for to give you any directions for the making of butter or cheese, since there are very few (especially in the country) that can be ignorant thereof.

Instructions for under-cook maids

It behoves you to be very diligent and willing to do what you are bid to do; and though your employment be greasy and smutty, yet if you please you may keep your self from being nasty, therefore let it be your care to keep yourself clean. Observe everything in cookery that is done by your superior, treasure it up in your memory, and when you meet with a convenient opportunity, put that in practice which you have observed; this course will advance you from a drudge to be a cook another day.

Every one must have a beginning, and if you will be ingenious and willing to learn, there is none will be so churlish or unkind as to be unwilling to

At a vestry lawfully warned and holden the 24th day of September 1592. There was called before the parish, these persons hereafter following that have weekly pension out of the parish for their relief, To say, Axton's widow, Bristowe's widow, Jonne Abowen, Elizabeth Chaulkeley, Elizabeth Foxe, Ralph Brokefield his wife for her husband's pension, Katheren Crye, and Annys Tysse, and these being thus called to choose amongst them 2 persons to be the viewers of the dead corpses of such as should die in this parish, and to give true knowledge unto the clerk of such as should die of the plague. There was chosen Annis Tyse and Katheren Crye and they to take their oath before the deputy concerning that charge according to the order in that behalf provided, etc.

And for provision for the payment of the said 5s. a week to both our viewers, it is ordered that there shall be gathered of every man in the parish so much as they seized at in the collectors' scroll that is gathered for the hospital for one month, and to be gathered by Humphery Lydall and James Hill, and delivered to the churchwardens, and they to pay it and be accountable for the same.

3.12 Lying-in services: Margaret Jackson, 1609

As an extension of their own housekeeping, many women made a living by taking in lodgers, or caring for children, the sick, or the old. Here a midwife provided the service of looking after mothers of illegitimate children when the man-midwife refused.

Bridewell Hospital Records, Guildhall Library, BCB 5 (microfilm), fo. 366, 19 July 1609.

Margaret Jackson brought in by warrant from my lord mayor. She is the midwife which the wife of the said John Barnes undertook last court day, to bring in. Examined, she saith she brought two women to bed at Barnes his house, and the child of the first lived about four days and then died and was not christened at all, but was buried at Stepney. That the last was still-born, and buried there also: She brought in one Helen Redgrave a widow dwelling in Fetter Lane, to testify that the last child was still-born, which Helen Redgrave accordingly testified, and that it was dead in the womb, a whole day before it was born. Further the said Redgrave saith she doth dwell in Fetter Lane, and there hath dwelt four years and that she was sent for to the travail of her that had the last child in the morning but did not come until about six of the clock at night and within two hours after her coming the woman was delivered (the man midwife having before been with her and had refused to undertake the business) and that the child was dead and black long before it was born.

She [Helen Redgrave] further saith she was the means to the said Margaret Jackson the midwife to place the said woman in some house where she might lie and be delivered of her said child, because, by means of the examine's brother, the mother of the said child had helped the examine to do busi-

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ness in her kitchen in the Terms¹ and had laid open herself to the examination and confessed to her that she was with child. The said midwife having formerly told the examinant . . . that there was many more people dwelling about her, and many escapes were there helped both of merchants' maids and others who were there delivered, and did well after. The said Margaret Jackson the midwife further examined denieth that she ever said any such matter to the said Redgrave. But saith the said Redgrave had a mischance in her house, one of the maids being gotten with child, whereupon the said Redgrave dealt with Mr John Hayes a neighbour of the examinee's to receive and harbour the said servant, who did so and her said servant being in travail was brought through London to Stepney to his house, when the examinee brought her to bed of a woman child which is yet living and christened at Stepney. And the said Redgrave and her brother gave bonds to discharge the parish of the child.

3.13 Prostitution in London: Frances Baker and Elizabeth Hoer, 1598-99

Elizabethan London saw a series of campaigns against prostitutes, bawds, and clients. The first case documents the hazards of sex-work. Elizabeth Hoer (was this truly her name?) was punished with a whipping and sent to St Thomas's hospital 'to be cured of the foul disease'. The second case suggests the importance of dress: in a society where social status was meant to be clearly marked by dress, the right clothes could be used to represent or impersonate gentility. The case also gives details of how women were moved to different places. Mrs Hibbens admitted her offence, and was ordered to pay £30 (a large sum) towards the relief of the poor, to depart from London before 24 June 1599, and to be of good behaviour. She had previously been ordered to leave the city at least once, nine or ten years earlier.

Bridewell Hospital Records, Guildhall Library, BCB 4 (microfilm), fos 46v., 64.

[11 Nov. 1598] Elizabeth Hoer being this day re-examined saith that about three quarters of a year now past, one Captain Pettfield brought her this examinant to Mistress White's house in Elbow Lane, and there the said Mistress White brought this examinant and the said Pettfield into her chamber and shut the door to them, and there the said Pettfield had the use of her body, and the said Mistress White had 12d. for her pains and she further saith that the said Mistress White told this examinant that she looked through the wall and saw the sayd Pettfield use the body of this examinant, and further saith that she did pay 3s. a week for her lodging besides her diet and that she was spoiled² in one Mistress Barlett's house in Duck Lane by a man whose name she knoweth not . . .

1. The law terms?

2. Probably, the loss of her virginity, but could also mean that she contracted the pox.