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Submission to Local Population Studies

(Research in Progress/ Sources and Methodology)

Women's Work in Rural England, 1500-1700: A New Methodological Approach

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In the autumn of 1556, Wilmota Rogers, a servant maid working in the village of Ilsington in the county of Devon, was called before the church courts to provide testimony in a case investigating allegations of adultery on the part of her master. Wilmota told the court that:

the week before St Peters day, at midsummer last past, this respondent then being the servant of one Richard Stone ... was pitching hay up unto the said Richard, he being upon his hay loft, [when he] induced by all the means possible this respondent to adultery and desired this respondent to run up unto him and he would give her money and purchase a living for her with many [other] fair promises...¹

What came of such promises we will never know, but in the process of providing this testimony Wilmota Rogers did something that thousands upon thousands of deponents did before the English courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: they told the court what they were doing at the time they witnessed, or were party to, an incident under investigation. Such instinctive scene setting—for this information was only occasionally *formally* asked for by the court—provides us with countless examples of people going about their day-to-day activities, and in many cases, as in this one, they reveal people at work: we know that Wilmota Rogers was 'pitching hay up' to her master on his hay loft.

¹ Devon Heritage Centre (hereafter DHC), Chanter 855, 37. Thanks to Charmian Mansell for photography of the Chanter cases referenced in this piece.

Our new project aims to make use of these incidental references to work activities in court records to provide valuable new insights, both quantitative and qualitative, into women's work in rural England between 1500-1700. Our focus will be on the South West of England, and our data drawn from the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Hampshire, Somerset and Wiltshire. The project is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and based at the University of Exeter, and is running from January 2015 to the summer of 2018, with Professor Jane Whittle as Principal Investigator, Mark Hailwood as Research Assistant, and Imogene Dudley as a PhD student.² The problem we hope to be able to address by using this type of material is a significant one: that the most common form of women's work in early modern England, unpaid work undertaken within the context of rural household economies, is one of the least well documented by historians.³

Of course, the majority experience of women's work is particularly difficult to access, especially if we adopt the methodologies conventionally used to study men's work. The recovery of occupational descriptors for instance—which has been the focus of much important work by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure—is of limited usefulness as a window onto women's work as occupational titles were so rarely accorded to women in early modern records.⁴ Wage data has been another valuable source of information for historians of men's work—and a significant recent article by Jane Humphries and Jacob Weisdorf has now produced a wage series for women from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries—but the

² We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of our database designer Mark Merry.

³ See, for example, M. McIntosh, *Working women in English society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge, 2005). Whilst an excellent and illuminating study its focus is on the urban context, and on women's explicit engagement in the market economy, and it therefore overlooks unpaid and rural work.

⁴ For CAMPOP's myriad publications on occupational structure see L. Shaw-Taylor et al, 'List of publications arising directly from the Occupational structure of Britain c.1379-1911 project' <URL: <http://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/occupations/publications/>> [4 February 2016].

majority of women's work was not waged.⁵ We need, then, to adopt another approach, and for this our project has drawn inspiration from what has been called the 'verb-oriented' approach, first pioneered by Sheilagh Ogilvie in her study of early modern Germany and currently being developed by Maria Ågren's 'Gender and Work' project on pre-industrial Sweden.⁶ The central principle here is to use records that contain evidence of people *doing* work activities: not to try and assume these activities from occupational titles or wages paid, but to uncover specific references, such as the example I started with, of people actually engaged in various types of work. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows us to try and build an understanding of historical work patterns out of the most basic unit of work: the individual task.

The records that can be used to identify 'verb-phrases' pertaining to work activities are many and varied, ranging from court records of various types (Ogilvie used prosecutions for sabbath-breaking, for instance), to account books, petitions and diaries. Importantly, these types of records tend to provide much better coverage of women's lives than do wage data or occupational records. Court records in particular, as social historians of early modern gender have long since shown us, very often involved women as plaintiffs, defendants and witnesses.⁷ For our project we are looking at three main types of record that are particularly abundant in the English context. The first are quarter sessions examinations, which are essentially witness and defendant statements taken for criminal cases at the county level courts, and usually arise from instances of theft, assault and other petty crimes. The second are church court depositions, which are again witness statements but taken in these courts which dealt with moral offences such as adultery and defamation, as well as matrimonial and tithe disputes. The third are coroners' reports, which provide accounts of accidental

⁵ J. Humphries and J. Weisdorf, 'The wages of women in England, 1260–1850', *The Journal of Economic History*, 75:2 (2015), 405-447.

⁶ S. Ogilvie, *A bitter living: women, markets, and social capital in early modern Germany* (Oxford, 2003); R. Fiebranz, E. Lindberg, J. Lindström, and M. Ågren, 'Making verbs count: the research project 'Gender and work' and its methodology', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 59:3 (2011), 273-93.

⁷ J. Kermode and G. Walker, *Women, crime and the courts in early modern England* (London, 1994).

deaths and what people were doing at the time, for example drawing water from a well when they fell in and drowned.⁸

Each type of record has its inherent biases: they do not necessarily give us a representative view of the range and frequency of work activities people undertook. Coroners' reports over-represent dangerous forms of work; church court tithe disputes are overwhelmingly about arable agriculture as the amount of grain due to the church is often what is under dispute; quarter sessions cases over-represent activities that have a connection to criminality. We have ways for trying to deal with the most obvious examples of certain sources over-representing certain activities, which I'll come back to, but we hope that by using a range of different records, and a range of types of cases within each court, that we will capture a wide variety of different work activities. We will also be in a position to compare the results we produce from each type of source and to identify just how strongly the sources are dictating what we find.

What exactly, then, are we looking for in these sources? First of all we have had to adopt a definition of 'work'. Here, again, we wanted to be careful to avoid using a definition that would exclude unpaid work within the household economy. The criteria used by the Gender and Work project is 'time-use, the purpose of which is to secure a living for one or several persons', but we were not sure that the 'purpose... to secure a living' would include all of the activities we would wish to include as work, especially various forms of 'domestic' work.⁹ Instead, our definition is based on the 'third party criterion' idea, developed by economist Margaret Reid, in her 1934 book *Economics of Household Production*, in which she was concerned to account properly for work undertaken within the household. Reid argued that any activity that could be substituted with purchased goods or services should be considered 'productive' and part of the economy, and therefore as work. Thus

⁸ We are particularly grateful to Steve Gunn and his 'Everyday life and fatal hazard in sixteenth-century England' project for supplying us with their coroners' data.

⁹ R. Fiebranz, E. Lindberg, J. Lindström, and M. Ågren, 'Making verbs count: the research project 'Gender and work' and its methodology', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 59:3 (2011), 276.

sleeping, eating and leisure would fail to qualify under the third party criterion, as they lose their purpose if undertaken by someone else, while in contrast child-care, cooking and home maintenance do qualify and are considered productive activities even if undertaken as unpaid work within one's own home.¹⁰

Another way in which our criterion for what we are recording differs from that adopted by the Gender and Work project, and other 'verb-oriented' approaches, is that we are only focusing on verb phrases pertaining to work *tasks*. For instance, within the definition of 'time-use with the purpose of making a living', the Gender and Work project would include verb-phrases such as 'working in service', or 'running a farm' as examples of 'service' or 'farming'. But these examples provide little direct evidence about the types of tasks an individual actually engaged in, and in the latter case may tell us more about ownership status than the day-to-day work activities engaged in by the farmer. For us, these are essentially forms of occupational descriptor, and come with many of the same problems as a guide to work actually undertaken by individuals. We want evidence that catches individuals actually doing work activities. So, our basic criterion for recording an entry in our database is:

(a) a specific individual (b) professing to have done or observed doing (c) a specified work activity

Each of these components comes with some additional criteria. Part (a): as a minimum requirement for an individual to be recorded we need a gender. Any other information (names, age, etc) is recorded but not essential (it is worth pointing out here that we are recording both women's and men's work, to allow us to compare the two). It must also be clear that that individual has engaged in the work act themselves, not potentially employed someone else to do it for them (for instance, a farmer may talk about 'growing oats on his land', but that would not be sufficient evidence that he himself either sowed or harvested the same, as he could possibly have paid others to do all of these

¹⁰ M. Reid, *Economics of Household Production* (New York, 1934).

tasks). Part (b): the crucial thing to note here is that we are not looking for definitive proof that an individual did an activity, only that their story is plausible. For instance, in many court cases an individual will claim to have bought a sheep they are accused by other witnesses of stealing. We do not want to try and second guess the 'truth' of these claims, so where a plausible account of a work activity is provided we will record it, adopting what we might call—following Natalie Zemon Davis—a 'fiction in the archives' approach: it must have needed to be plausible if it was going to convince the court.¹¹ For instance, in 1598 Thomasine Weather was accused of having stolen a sheep, but claimed that she could not have done so because at the time of the crime she had been elsewhere. She deposed that

upon Thursday was fortnight about five of the clock in the afternoon, she went forth from her mother's house to fetch a burden of wood, who went for the same to one Henry Burnard's ground called the Butte Moore about a quarter of a mile off, and then returned home again about six of the clock in the same night, and after that stayed in her mother's house all night.¹²

True or not, we would record this as a plausible account of a work activity: fetching wood.

Part (c): here we include anything that comes under the 'third party criterion' I've already discussed, whilst relating to a specific task—such as spinning, mowing—rather than being a more general description such as 'service' or 'labouring' that could encompass any range of work activities. There are also some exclusions here though, designed to eliminate certain activities that would otherwise swamp the database. One is criminal activity itself, especially theft. This is not because we don't consider it as a form of work, but because it would end up accounting for 90 per cent of our entries given its prominence in the quarter sessions in particular. Another exclusion is the preparation of tithe corn for collection, and said collection, as this again would end up being

¹¹ N.Z. Davis, *Fiction in the archives: pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France* (Cambridge, 1987).

¹² DHC, QS/4/Box 5/Examinations.

significantly over-represented by tithe cases. The principal, as much as possible, is to try and record activities that are incidental to the case itself, rather than the central subject of it. Another illustrative example might be useful here. This is the deposition of Alice Kingston, of Exeter, Devon, given in a church court tithe case in 1634, who said that

[she] did live with Mr Street late of St Edmund's parish three years and half or thereabout ended now about a year since, and in that time the said Mr Streete did keep three milk kine [cows] which commonly all the summer time did pasture upon the grounds of the articulate Joanes in every the said years, and saith that sometimes they did pasture below the bridge in the grounds called the Shillowes and sometimes in the Bonay and sometimes in other grounds adjoining there called the shooting marsh which lieth all at common within what parish this deponent knoweth not ... and saith that this deponent hath divers times in the said years milked the said kine in the grounds called the Shillowes.¹³

What would we record here? Well, we record Alice Kingston as a specified individual, professing to have done a specific work activity, milking cows. We would not record anything else: Mr Street may have helped to 'secure a living' by 'keeping three milk cows', but there is not enough evidence here to say what activities, if any, he was involved in as a result. He may simply have owned them, and paid others, such as Alice Kingston, to do the specifics of 'keeping' them.

In addition to recording activities as our basic unit of data, we are also recording as much contextual detail as we can about the individuals involved and the context in which the activity took place. Where it is provided—and almost all of the following categories are unevenly recorded across our sources—we are recording the name, age, marital status, and parish of residence of our actors. We are also recording any occupational or status descriptors accorded to them, something that will allow us to compare occupational titles with the work activities an individual actually engaged in. With regards to the activity we are recording the day, month and year, the time it took place, and any information about its location or duration. We are also recording information about

¹³ DHC, Chanter 866.

employment relations: for instance when a work task has clearly been undertaken for another person, and where there is clear evidence whether it was paid work, or done as part of service, and so on. We are hoping, then, that this information will allow us to analyse the ways in which both women's and men's work was structured by age, by seasonality, by space, and so forth, as well as by gender.

Significant results on all of those questions are some way off yet, but we have made steady progress so far and some preliminary results are emerging. At the time of writing we have recorded 1000 work activities from across the three source types, of which 259 were done by women (we are hoping to gather a total of 5000 activities by the end of the project). The largest category of women's work activities so far is 'commerce'—mostly buying and selling of goods—which accounts for 22 per cent of women's activities, followed by 'food processing'—including brewing, baking, animal slaughter, but excluding cooking—which accounts for 19.3 per cent. What we might think of as traditional domestic activities—cooking, cleaning, washing and childcare—account for only 11.2 per cent of women's work activities, which is striking given that economic historians assume that the majority of women's time was taken up with these tasks. We are also finding some suggestive data about the time distribution of work activities across the day, with the vast majority of activities taking place between 8am and 4pm—in both summer and winter—which could point to a rather shorter working day in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than is generally assumed. All of these results are highly provisional at this stage, but hopefully they can give readers some idea of the type and range of results this project is aiming to produce. In the meantime you can follow our progress via our website and blog (<https://earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com/>) or indeed via our twitter account (@womensworkexe).