

Jane Whittle: Keynote Lecture at Women's History Network Conference, 3 Sep 2021

Please do not quote without permission: j.c.whittle@ex.ac.uk

Women's work in English agriculture and food processing 1500-1750

The extent and range of women's work in English agriculture in the past remains under debate. The period before 1750 has been presented by historians such as Alice Clark and Keith Snell as a vague 'golden age' when women were actively involved in a wide range of agricultural tasks, while on the other hand, for instance, Pamela Sharpe has argued that wage accounts reveal little change between 1500 and 1800 and women's participation was low throughout, while Ivy Pinchbeck suggested the range of tasks undertaken by women actually increased after 1750.¹ These arguments matter, because agriculture was the dominant form of employment in England in this period, and in that sense agriculture stands for women's work more generally. Did women provide a significant part of England's labour force or not during the period 1500-1750? What types of work did they do, and in what contexts? These are the questions I want to focus on today and my aim is to present a lively picture of the involvement of many types of women in many aspects of agriculture and food production combined with statistics that demonstrate the extent of those experiences. I begin with evidence from court records that offers an overview, before moving on to look in turn at examples of women as day labourers, servants, housewives and businesswomen – all engaged in aspects of agriculture and food processing.

An overview, using court records

Early modern court records – particularly witness statements, confessions or accounts of crimes or mishaps – contain vignettes of everyday life, including agricultural work. Thus coroners' reports reveal that in 1592 Agnes Parker of Chilton Cantelo in Somerset, was 'crossing a bridge over a stream between certain pasture closes with a measure of hay on

¹ Alice Clark, *Working life of women in the seventeenth century* (1982 [1919]); K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: social change and agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985); Pamela Sharpe, 'The female labour market in English agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: expansion or contraction?' *Agricultural History Review*, 47 (1999), pp.161-81; Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women workers in the industrial revolution, 1750-1850* (1969 [1930]).

her head and a pot for milking in her hand' when a gust of wind blew her off the bridge, causing her to drown in the stream below: a tragic tale of over-ambitious multi-tasking, combined with heavy woollen clothing.² In a tithe case from the church courts in Devon, it is recorded that two married women, Anne Josse and Wilmot Smallridge, 'did shear ... yearly 50 sheep' in Holcombe Burnelle, three years in a row from 1632-34.³ In another tithe case, this one from 1551, Margaret Parsons of Western Zoyland in Somerset gave evidence that she 'being then servant ... did both help to plough ... & sow ... with barley... [and] reap the said corn' in a seven acre field owned by her employer.⁴ On the other hand, a testamentary case over disputed jointure from Devon in 1686, recorded that one Mrs Wood of East Anstey was 'not entrusted nor did concern herself with the management of her husband's estate or outdoor affairs, only with the necessary affairs of housekeeping incumbent on a wife to look after, as the taking care to provide meat & other necessaries for a family, and the making of butter and cheese and such like'.⁵

These cases provide snapshots of particular women's lives and show the range of tasks women might (or might not) undertake in the agricultural economy. But they can be misleading. Out of a total dataset of 4300 examples of work tasks from early modern court documents, Margaret Parsons was the only women who was recorded ploughing. On the other hand there were 11 instances of women shearing sheep from five different court cases, four from Devon and one from Somerset. Some quantitative analysis of this evidence is therefore clearly helpful. The evidence I'm presenting here comes from SW England, and dates from between 1500 and 1700.⁶ It allows us to observe the gender division of labour (that is, the proportion of particular activities undertaken by women as compared to men) in a wide range of work tasks. I shall first show you the evidence, and then say a bit more about the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Table 1 shows the data for tasks associated with agriculture and land management.

² Coroners' records from Steven Gunn's project: 'Everyday life and fatal hazard in sixteenth-century England', <http://tudoraccidents.history.ox.ac.uk/>. (WWRE database deposition ID 59).

³ Devon Record Office, Chanter 866, pp.22-3.

⁴ Somerset Church Court depositions (WWRE database deposition ID 1734).

⁵ Devon Church Court depositions (WWRE database ID1194, case 945).

⁶ The data from court records is from Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, 'Gender division of labour in early modern England' *Economic History Review* 73:1 (2020); see also for more details on the methodology.

Table 1: Agriculture and land

	Total	Male	Female	%	%
	examples			Female	Female
					adj.
Animal husbandry	296	205	91	30.7	51.7
Collecting fuel	35	25	10	28.6	51.0
Farm transport	118	113	5	4.2	9.6
Field work	395	331	64	16.2	31.8
Gardening	3	2	1	33.3	50.0
Gathering food	60	21	39	65.0	81.7
Hedging	16	16	0	0.0	0.0
Hunting and fishing	86	86	0	0.0	0.0
Wood husbandry	68	65	3	4.4	9.7
Total	1077	864	213	19.8	37.3

We can see from this that there were some activities that were never or only very rarely done by women, such as hunting and fishing, hedging, and farm transport. But there are other activities, particularly those that are most commonly recorded, such as field work and animal husbandry, in which women's involvement was substantial. Field work and animal husbandry were core farming activities, so it worth looking at these in more detail. Table 2 shows the data for field work.

Table 2: Field work

	Total	Male	Female	%	%
	examples			Female	Female
					adj.
Prepare ground	103	96	7	6.8	15.0
Sowing	14	9	5	35.7	57.1
Weeding	14	1	13	92.9	96.9

Hay harvest	71	57	14	19.7	37.4
Grain harvest	181	158	23	12.7	25.8
other	12	10	2	16.7	33.3
Total	395	331	64	16.2	31.8
Ploughing	46	45	1	2.2	4.3
Mowing	37	37	0	0.0	0.0
Reaping	38	31	7	18.4	35.4

Again, we can see that the picture is mixed, but women were not absent from any of the main activities. It is only when we turn to particular processes (shown at the bottom of the table), that we see a more distinct division of labour. As I have already noted, women rarely took part in ploughing, but they did undertake other ground-preparation activities such as breaking clods of earth, or sowing peas and beans. Women never (or only very rarely) mowed – that is, cutting hay or corn with a scythe; but they did harvest corn with a sickle. The weeding of crops was dominated by women. Overall, women seem to have undertaken around one third of field labour.

Table 3 shows the work tasks involved in animal husbandry.

Table 3: Animal husbandry

	Total	Male	Female	% Female	% Female adj.
Milking	56	3	53	94.6	97.7
Cattle: other	46	40	6	13.0	25.9
Horses	28	22	6	21.4	38.9
Sheep: keeping	44	44	0	0.0	0.0
Sheep: shearing	47	36	11	23.4	42.9

Sheep: marking	23	22	1	4.3	8.3
Sheep: other	25	21	4	16.0	32.3
Pigs	5	2	3	60.0	77.8
Dogs	4	3	1	25.0	40.0
Poultry	9	5	4	44.4	66.7
Bees	5	3	2	40.0	62.5
Providing fodder	4	4	0	0.0	0.0
Total	296	205	91	30.7	51.7

Women's participation was higher in activities relating to the care of livestock than in field work, at around 50%. Women dominated milking, and did most activities relating to the care of pigs and poultry. As we have seen, it was not uncommon for women to shear sheep, and women were also involved in a range of other activities relating to the care of cattle, horses and sheep.

Table 4: Food processing

	Total	M	F	% F	% F adj.
Butchery	168	148	20	11.9	24.4
Dairying	7	0	7	100.0	100.0
Threshing	42	40	2	4.8	11.1
Winnowing	16	4	12	75.0	87.9
Milling	11	8	3	27.3	46.7
Malting and brewing	36	13	23	63.9	80.9
Storage and preservation	18	12	6	33.3	53.8
Tobacco preparation	3	3	0	0.0	0.0
Total	301	228	73	24.3	43.6

Food processing was closely related to farming, but involved a distinct set of activities that prepared farm produce for sale or consumption, as shown in Table 4. Many of these activities were dominated by women, including dairying (that is making butter and cheese), winnowing grain, and malting and brewing. In contrast, men dominated butchery and threshing.

The strength of using evidence about work tasks collected from court documents in this way is the range of activities recorded, and the fact it allows us to observe work whether it was paid or unpaid. No other source can provide quantitative data about the unpaid work activities undertaken by family members on small and medium sized farms. However, all approaches have weaknesses as well as strengths.

For our purposes, the most significant of these is the fact that court cases under-record women's activities. Overall 29% of the work tasks we collected were undertaken by women. It is very unlikely that this means women only did 29% of work tasks, particularly as we included housework and child care as forms of work in our dataset. Instead, it is a consequence of the predominance of male witnesses in the courts. Only 27% of witnesses giving evidence were female, and our data shows that men were more likely to describe men's work, and women women's work. To compensate for this bias, the tables also show adjusted figures. To calculate these, we assume that at least 50% of all work tasks were undertaken by women. This means multiplying the female total by 2.41. Thus to create the adjusted figures, each of the totals of female tasks recorded was multiplied by that number.

I would argue that the multiplier creates a more accurate reflection of the real situation than the unadjusted figures. To take the unadjusted figures at face value would be to assume that men did more work than women: that is, that women had more leisure time than men. Yet all available evidence suggests women worked just as many hours, if not more than men. Another way of checking the reliability of the data is to compare it with other types of evidence about women's work. In the rest of the lecture I use a range of sources to look in turn at the activities undertaken by female labourers and servants, and then housewives and business women.

Labourers

The wage-earning workforce on early modern farms was made up of labourers and servants. Labourers were paid by the day or task and lived in their own homes. Servants were employed on longer contracts, often a year at a time, and lived with their employers. Servants tended to be young and unmarried, while female labourers ranged from young girls to elderly widows. Household and farm accounts provide evidence of wage labour, and indicate that the employment of female labourers in agriculture was seasonal, largely concentrated in the summer months, and dominated by three main tasks: weeding in arable fields and kitchen gardens, which took place between March and September (but involved most labour in May and June); haymaking, largely in late June and July; and the grain harvest from late July to August, sometimes stretching into September.

Henry Best's *Farming Book* was written in the early 1640s as a guide for his son in running their large East Yorkshire farm.⁷ It describes the series of processes needed to secure the hay crop, essential in providing winter fodder for livestock. First hay was cut or mowed with a scythe. On Henry Best's farm in 1641 they began mowing on 7 July. Haymakers then tossed and spread the cut hay to allow it to dry, before later raking and cocking it into hay cocks in the field, where it dried further. Finally the hay was 'led', or transported, to the farmyard where it was stored in large stacks until needed. Best calculated that two haymakers were needed for every one mower. Mowing was men's work and was well paid at 10d a day. Henry Best does not state the gender of his haymakers, but they were paid 4d a day, which was typically a woman's wage.

Detailed farm accounts for Thomas Smyth's household at Ashton Court just outside Bristol, records the hay harvest in 1632.⁸ In the week before Saturday 21 July, he employed four men to mow hay: John Setchfield, John Morgan, Lawrence Selfe and Edward White. They each earned a shilling (12 pence) a day for their work. In contrast, the haymakers were all women: Goodwife Setchfield, Sarah Setchfield, Goodwife Price, and Meg Marten, and they

⁷ Henry Best, *The Farming and Memorandum Books of Henry Best of Elmswell 1642*, ed. Donald Woodward (Oxford, 1984).

⁸ Thomas Smyth's farm accounts: Bristol Archives AC/36074/72. Many thanks to James Fisher for transcribing these.

each earned 6d a day for their work. However, the accounts for other weeks show that Smyth also employed men to make hay on other occasions. For instance, in the previous week not only had the Setchfield women and Meg Marten been employed as haymakers, but also Robert Setchfield, John Wall and Ned Austen. The men received 8d or 9d a day compared to the women's 6d.

The Setchfields offer a good example of a labouring family steadily employed by a wealthier farmer in the 1630s. John or Goodman Setchfield is recorded working for the Smyths steadily over the year, in 40 weeks out of 52 in 1632, undertaking a wide range of tasks including cutting wood, mowing, threshing and hedging. His adult son Robert also worked year-round, recorded in 42 different weeks, often driving a cart to transport wood, stone and crops on the estate. Goodwife Setchfield, almost certainly John's wife, worked throughout the summer months between late April and mid September, and was paid wages in 20 weeks out 52, working at weeding and hay making, with one day's work in the grain harvest and two payments for helping with the laundry. Sarah Setchfield, who was probably her daughter, as she often appeared working alongside Goodwife Setchfield, appeared in 10 different weeks across the same period: she did no weeding, but was paid to help with the milking and to make hay.

Although farm accounts consistently indicate that women did less paid labour than men, this does not mean women worked less overall. They may have worked for wages less often than the men in their families, but this was almost certainly because they were occupied with other tasks. Many labourers owned smallholdings and livestock in this period, and women were busily occupied caring for these. As we have seen, the work task data from court records, records women engaged in a much wider range of work tasks than wage labour accounts kept by wealthy farmers such as Thomas Smyth.

The diversity of activities in labouring households can be demonstrated by combining evidence from wage accounts with that of probate inventories, which record the moveable goods owned by people when they died. Richard Wixe of Heacham in Norfolk was a village

thatcher.⁹ When he died in 1628 the moveable goods of his household and farm, listed in his probate inventory, were valued at the relatively small sum of £11 12s. Wixe had worked regularly for the Le Strange family of neighbouring Hunstanton who kept household accounts recording that labour. He earned 6d a day as a thatcher, and when there was no thatching to be done, was paid 4d a day for agricultural work, such as hay making and threshing corn. For instance, in 1619 he did 86 days labour for them earning a total of £2 1s 2d. He was certainly employed elsewhere in the locality, so this was only a portion of his wage income. It has been estimated that labouring men such as Richard Wixe typically earned between £9 and £15 a year. The Le Stranges also occasionally employed Richard's wife, Anne Wixe. She was paid 11s 4d for knitting hose and stockings in 1619, and did one day's agricultural labour in the harvest for 3d. The Wixes' young son earned wages too, working regularly for the Le Stranges in 1620. He earned 2d a day for bird scaring and other agricultural tasks, working a total of nearly 90 days that year and earning 14s 11d.

The inventory reveals that the Wixe family lived in a small house of two rooms and a loft, with a single hearth, which was simply but adequately furnished. Interestingly, they seem to have had land and farmed on a small scale. In the winter of 1628 Richard Wixe had 10s worth of unthreshed barley stored in his house, and he and his wife owned two cows, a bullock, a calf, eight pigs, and poultry. It is very likely that Richard and Anne shared the work of caring for their livestock. It is also likely that Anne earned part of her income from spinning: the inventory recorded wool and hemp worth £1 stored ready for her to work on; and that she made the butter and cheese listed, which she could have sold locally at Heacham market. In other words, the tasks Anne performed for local employers were only a small element of her work routine and sources of income, which included knitting, spinning, field work, caring for livestock and dairying.

⁹ The discussion of the Wixe household first appeared in Jane Whittle 'The house as a place of work in early modern rural England' *Home Cultures* 8:2 (2011); see also Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in an Early Seventeenth-Century Household* (OUP, 2012) for a wider discussion of the Le Strange household accounts.

Farm servants

One reason for the narrow and seasonal range of tasks undertaken by women as wage labourers for large farmers, was that their work was supplementary to the year-round labour provided by female farm servants who lived with their employers. Most paid labour employed by farmers was provided by servants, not labourers. For instance, in the 1760s it is estimated there were 1.5 servants for each labourer employed on farms, and the proportion of servants to labourers was certainly higher in the preceding centuries.¹⁰ Many servants employed on farms were female. Ann Kussmaul found that 45% of servants in farmers' households were women, while my research using evidence from bequests in wills showed that smaller farms in pastoral areas were more likely to employ women than men as servants between the fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while large arable farms employed more men¹¹.

Unfortunately, wage accounts rarely record exactly what tasks particular servants did on the farm. However, Robert Loder's account book from the 1610s does allow a reasonably detailed reconstruction of his female servants' work tasks.¹² Robert Loder had a large arable farm in Berkshire. His account book is particularly concerned with assessing the cost and efficiency of various activities on his farm. He employed two female servants each year, and considered malting (that is processing barley grain into malt, ready for brewing) to be their most profitable task. Loder sold over £120 worth of malted barley each year for transport down the Thames to London brewers: and this was a large slice of his overall farm income. A careful reading of Loder's accounts, however, shows that the female servants contributed to farm work in other ways as well. Each year Loder recorded that they made hay and helped with the grain harvest. One year they picked and sold cherries from the orchard; in other years they sold them, while other women were hired to pick them. In 1619 Loder calculated that one of his maids, named Mary and Nine, spent twenty-one days selling cherries, travelling to market with a horse each day. A maid was also responsible for selling

¹⁰ Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness* (CUP, 2011) p.223.

¹¹ Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 4; Jane Whittle, 'Housewives and servants in rural England, 1440-1650: evidence of women's work from probate documents', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 15 (2005).

¹² *Robert Loder's Farm Accounts 1610-1620*, ed. G.E. Fussell (Camden Society, 3rd series 53, 1936) (hereafter *Loder's Farm Accounts*). This discussion originally appeared in the chapter by Jane Whittle in *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400-1900*, ed. Maria Ågren and Amy Erickson, Ashgate (2005).

apples. In 1618 Loder decided to run a dairy on a commercial scale. He hired extra milkers by the day, but commented that his own maids, Mary and Alce, helped with the milking. Notes of cheese and butter made on the farm in previous years indicate that some dairy cattle had been kept before this date, although the labour expended on caring for these animals and processing the milk is never described.

Another approach to examining the female servants' work is provided indirectly by Loder himself. One of his concerns was the difference in cost between providing board and lodging for his servants, or paying them to live elsewhere. This led him to analyse his household's consumption patterns. His notes make it clear that not only was cheese made on the farm, but wheat was consumed, presumably as bread; malt and hops were consumed, presumably in beer; and hogs were fattened for ham and bacon. The majority of the household's consumption needs were met directly by the farm itself. His costings made no allowance for labour, however. Presumably someone baked the bread, brewed the beer, fed the pigs and preserved and prepared their meat. We can assume that the food processing and preparation was done by Loder's wife and the two female servants, although this is never stated, nor is the value of their labour in these tasks calculated. The very fact that Loder bothered, on occasion, to hire day labourers to milk cows and pick cherries, suggests that his female servants already had their hands full, with vital tasks around the house and farm.

Housewives

Service was largely the work of women before marriage, while day labouring was a supplementary form of work for less wealthy women at all stages of the life-cycle. I want now to turn to married and widowed women, who either ran households jointly with their husbands, or headed the household economy themselves. This was the majority experience for early modern women, but has been neglected in comparison to studies of labourers and servants. Too often, it is assumed that married women did little work beyond child-care and housework. Careful consideration of the evidence suggests that this was rarely the case, and instead historians have imposed modern ideas about married women's work roles onto the past. In particular, historians have often misunderstood the meaning of the terms housewife and housewifery in early modern England.

Before the twentieth century, housewife meant the female manager of a household, and in farming contexts, the housewife was the female equivalent of the male farmer. Advice books addressed to housewives demonstrate the wide range of tasks they undertook. Table 5 lists the most common types of activities described in twenty-three practical advice books published between 1573 and 1780 that had the words ‘housewife’ or housewifery’ in their long titles, showing how often particular tasks were mentioned.¹³ Many of these books were very popular and were reprinted multiple times.

Table 5: Advice books for housewives 1573-1780

Type of activity	Number of books mentioned in
Raising calves or pigs	7
Keeping poultry	6
Milking cows/sheep	5
Keeping bees	5
Vegetable gardening	7
Growing & processing flax & hemp	3
Processing wool/spinning	3
Making malt	3
Making beer/cider	8
Making bread	4
Making butter & cheese	9
Preparing and administering medicines	16
Cookery	18
Preserving foodstuffs	12
Distillation	10
Making cosmetics	6
Caring for textiles	7
Shopping for foodstuffs	4
Total number of activities: 19	Total number of books: 23

¹³ This analysis and the discussion of Robert Furse are taken from Jane Whittle ‘The housewife in early modern England’, an article currently under review (2021).

The most common tasks on which advice was offered were cookery and the preparation of medicines. These were the only tasks to appear in the majority of the books published. However, other common activities were preserving fruit and vegetables, distillation, making butter and cheese, and brewing beer or cider. The sheer range of tasks is striking, as is the way they were combined in the same volumes. While modern scholars draw distinctions between farming advice books, cookery books, and medicinal advice, in early modern publications these distinctions were blurred. For instance, most books addressed to housewives that offered advice on raising calves, pigs and poultry also offered cookery recipes. Over half of the books offered advice on six or more of the listed activities.

Thomas Tusser's book, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry united to as many of Good Huswifery*, published in 1573, was one of the most comprehensive works, and is summarized in table 6. Agriculture and food processing figure prominently, and are combined with tasks we might associate with modern housewifery, such as cookery and child-care. Wendy Wall has argued that advice books of this type offer an image of a self-sufficient farming household, which was obsolete even at the time it was published. I disagree, as plentiful evidence can be found of this wide range of tasks being carried out in rural households. Nor were these activities necessarily associated with self-sufficiency. In many cases they offered women a means of generating their own income by raising crops and animals or producing saleable foodstuffs. We should not expect all housewives to have carried out all these activities (clearly some required access to land and other resources), but books of this type do show the range of tasks that it was acceptable for women to pursue within the household and farm economy.

Table 6: Housewifery tasks listed by Thomas Tusser

Farming tasks	Cooking, cleaning and care of possessions
Raise calves, piglets and chickens	Clean house
Feed cattle, pigs and chickens	Cook and serve meals
Milk cows and ewes	Wash laundry
Grow herbs and vegetables (in garden)	Mend household textiles and clothing

Grow and harvest flax and hemp	Wash dishes
Processing tasks	Lock doors & protect possessions from theft
Process and spin flax and hemp	
Spin and card wool	Child-care
Make malt	Breastfeed babies
Brew beer	Teach young children
Bake bread	
Make butter and cheese	
Make candles from tallow	
Make medicines	

What is more, rather than being 'just a housewife', it is clear that a woman could gain status via their skill in a range of work tasks and in the management of house and farm. The remarkable family memoir of Robert Furse, a wealthy Devon yeoman, was written just before his death in 1593.¹⁴ It is primarily a record of the family's landed wealth, tracing the land bought, sold and accumulated by generations of relatives spread across the county of Devon and stretching back to the fourteenth century. However, it is also about people, and recounts the history of particular ancestors. This was in part to demonstrate the pitfalls that might undermine a family's fortunes such as idleness, misjudged marriages, vexatious lawsuits and ruthless stepfathers; but also to highlight what could be done well. Among the positive traits that Robert Furse emphasizes is good housewifery.

Furse is particularly striking in the way he complements only certain women for their skills as particularly good housewives, implying that these were not commonplace. His family history names and describes over a hundred of his ancestors, but he reserves the complement of perfect or excellent good housewife for three exceptional women. Annes Furse (nee Adler) was his paternal great-grandmother, who died in 1540 at the age of 80. She was a widow for thirty years after her husband's death and according to Furse

¹⁴ Robert Furse, *A Devon Family Memoir of 1593* ed, Anita Travers (Devon and Cornwall Record Society 53, 2010).

'maintained a very good house ... and was a woman of great wealth'. Robert Furse writes 'she was in her lifetime a very wise and discrete woman and a perfect good huswife and a careful woman for her business'. He approvingly lists a series of property leases she had arranged during her widowhood.

The second was Nicole Moreshead (nee Sparke), his maternal grandmother. Her husband had a difficult relationship with his father. Furse notes that it would have been 'much to his hindrance if his wife had not been for her painfulness, great labour and wise behaviour, did many time pacify the old man's anger'. He notes that in her youth Nicole was 'a great labourer' and 'a very beautiful woman decent in her apparel and a perfect good housewife'. Like Annes, she ended her life with a long widowhood and 'lived until she was near 100 years of age'.¹⁵

The third and perhaps most interesting woman was Johan Rowland, his wife's mother. Furse described her as follows:

This Johan was a wise woman and decent in her apparel, an excellent good housewife and careful, a perfect woman to do anything with her needle, to knit, to make bone-lace. She was a fine cook and well esteemed of all people, she was much bent to fast, pray and give alms to the poor....

Yet Johan did not lead the life we might expect of 'an excellent good housewife'. Her first husband died in 1560 and she lived another thirty-three years. In 1561 she made a disastrous second marriage, which lasted nineteen years, to a minor gentleman who quarrelled with her, 'forsook her company', 'misused her and put her in great danger of her life' and wasted her wealth and goods.¹⁶ She obtained a legal separation and spent the rest of her life circulating between the households of her married children, including that of Robert Furse.

¹⁵ Furse, *Devon Family Memoir*, pp.32-3, 68-9.

¹⁶ Furse, *Devon Family Memoir*, pp.136-7.

Furse's assessments of these women makes it clear that he valued above all the housewife's ability to manage a farming household, both in terms of work tasks and rights to property; her care of husband and children was of lesser significance. These views meant that he saw not only hard work, but intelligence and skill, as essential qualities of a good housewife.

Businesswomen

In the final section of the lecture I want to explore the occupations of married women and widows, and the degree that these focused on agriculture and food processing. The evidence is taken from probate inventories. The goods recorded in probate inventories provide evidence of the work activities. By matching 75 pairs of inventories of a husband and his widow, I was able to compare the household economy of the married couple (at the time of husband's death from the man's inventory), and that of the widow alone (at the time of her death from the widow's inventory).¹⁷ For each household I made a judgement about their main form of income generation. Judgements of this type were made during the early modern period by individuals who chose to describe themselves with an occupation in their will, and by inventory-appraisers who assigned occupations to the deceased. 42 of the married men in the selection had occupational or status labels recorded in their will or inventory, but only one of the 75 widows – who was described as a shop-keeper. Using evidence from the inventories, and applying, as far as possible, the criteria of early modern contemporaries, occupational descriptions were given to the remaining men and widows, as shown in table 7 (columns showing assigned occupations).

¹⁷ This analysis and the discussion of particular 'enterprising widows' first appeared in Jane Whittle 'Enterprising widows and active wives: women's unpaid work in the household economy of early modern England' *The History of the Family* 19:3 (2014).

Table 7. Main occupations, from inventories 1534-1699

	Men's occupational labels	Men's occupations (assigned)	%	Widow's occupations (assigned)	%
Gentleman/rentier	4	5	6.7	6	8.0
Yeoman	17	25	33.3	6	8.0
Husbandman	7	18	24.0	14	18.7
Smallholder	-	2	2.7	11	14.7
Craft/specialism	6	7	9.3	-	-
Weavers/shearmen	2	6	8.0	4	5.3
Food processing	2	4	5.3	9	12.0
Inns/taverns/victualing	2	3	4.0	3	4.0
Retail	2	2	2.7	-	-
Money-lending	-	3	4.0	10	13.3
Retired	-	-	0	12	16.0
Total	42	75	100	75	100

While descriptions such as 'weaver' or 'inn-keeper' are clearly occupational, other common descriptions combined occupation with status. 'Gentleman' denoted status, but also implied the ability to live on an income from rents. 'Yeoman' and 'husbandman' were farmers, but yeomen were wealthier and typically had farm servants in their households; husbandmen farmed on a smaller scale. Some extra categories had to be created for the purpose of the exercise. Men were never described as 'smallholder', 'money-lender' or 'retired' in inventories in early modern England. Smallholders were typically described as 'labourer' (i.e. wage earner), but as probate inventories provide no evidence of waged work, that was not appropriate here. In early modern documents retired people were typically described by their former occupation; where this information was not given, 'retired' is used here instead. Money-lending did not appear as an occupational descriptor in wills or inventories, despite evidence of the activity. Here, it is assigned to individuals when the inventory

recorded significant amounts of money out on loan and there was no other obvious source of income.

It is worth stepping back to consider the evidence presented in table 7. The fact women were described as single-woman, wife or widow in early modern documents, rather than being given occupational labels, has encouraged historians to overlook women's work activities. Women are often assumed to lack occupations and to do something vaguely described as 'domestic work'. Yet the evidence from probate inventories is that many women did have occupations. A substantial proportion of widows farmed on the same scale as men described as yeomen and husbandmen. The cloth trade, food processing and what might be described as the 'hospitality trade', all occupied women working independently from men. Although no female retailers appear in table 7, we know there were female shopkeepers too, particularly in the later seventeenth century. At least one woman had shop-keeping as her occupational label, although her main occupation was actually farming – an example that I will discuss in a moment. It is likely many women had engaged in these occupations during marriage as well as in widowhood. Table 7, therefore, reveals the hidden face of women's occupational profile in early modern England.

Let's look at a few of these women in more detail. Ellen Bramall alias Swindell of Walton near Chesterfield in Derbyshire was widowed in 1598. She and her husband had no children and Ellen was made sole executor of her husband's estate. He made bequests to two male and two female servants in his will, and Ellen also made bequests to her servants when she died in 1607, indicating they both relied on hired farm labour. Ellen maintained and enhanced the farm and household during her widowhood: her inventory was valued at £174 compared to James's £145.

Mary Mills of Stratford-upon-Avon, like her husband Thomas, combined trading in malt with farming. Thomas had £100 worth on malt listed in his inventory in 1617. At her death in 1624, Mary had £72 worth of malt and barley, in a household that combined farming, dairying, brewing, baking, and money lending. Mary's inventory was valued at £268 in comparison to Thomas's £204. Another woman who combined food processing with farming was Margaret Greaves. Thomas Greaves of Chesterfield was a wealthy tanner and

farmer with his own tan-yard when he died in 1620 leaving six children under the age of 21: he left all his property to his wife Margaret. When she died 15 years later, she was a baker with '65 dozen of bread and simnels' worth £3 6s listed in her inventory, and was perhaps also running a victualing house. Margaret also kept livestock and brewed, and had £23 owing to her on bond.

My final example is from Minster in Thanet in Kent. Nicholas Ridgen was a prosperous yeoman farmer and shopkeeper. When he died in 1685 he had £253 worth of corn in his barns and goods in his shop worth £97; he was owed debts of £60. His inventory was valued at £583. When his widow, Joanna, died nine years later in 1694 her inventory also, unusually, gave her the occupational label of 'shopkeeper' and showed that she too was a farmer. She had scaled back the enterprise somewhat. Her shop goods were worth only £3, and the corn in her barns £29, but her livestock was valued at £83 and she had invested £25 in a share of a 'sea vessel' – perhaps one of the boats that plied the coastal trade carrying grain from Thanet to London: in total her moveable goods were worth £206 10s.

In this case, Nicholas Ridgen's probate account survives as well as his inventory, and reveals more details about his business and his relationship with Joanna. Nicholas was heavily in debt when he died. He owed £251 in rent and £233 to five different London suppliers - a cheesemonger, soap-boiler, grocer, draper and tallow chandler - for goods to stock his shop. With all his debts and costs paid, Joanna was left with only £22.

A note appended to the account states that when Joanna married Nicholas only four years before his death, she was already a widow and 'possessed of ... and entitled unto diverse goods, chattels, ready money, debts, household stuff and shop goods to the value of £400'. Nicholas Ridgen had signed a pre-marital agreement with Joanna that 'did amongst other things covenant, grant and promise that [he] ... would not at any time during their coverture give or sell away alter exchange or divest' her goods and wealth. Yet that is exactly what he did, and she claimed a loss of at least £300. The inventory for Joanna's previous husband, Nicholas Pay, also survives. He too was described as a yeoman and shopkeeper and lived in the same village. Dated 1681, the inventory was valued at £279, and included goods in his shop worth £69, and crops, livestock and agricultural equipment worth £122. Widows tend

to be seen as continuing their husband's businesses or farms, but this string of probate documents raises the possibility that the shop, and even the farm, had been Joanna's enterprises all along: she was certainly the one who provided the continuity. She had the skill and tenacity to recoup the losses from her unfortunate marriage to Nicholas Ridgen and to die a prosperous farmer.

Summing up

I have used a range of different documents today to try and reconstruct a rounded picture of women's involvement in agriculture and food processing in early modern England. These range from witness statements in court cases, to wage accounts, advice books addressed to housewives, probate inventories, and even a family history. I have presented statistics which I hope offer a convincing picture of women's widespread participation in these forms of work, but have also given examples of particular women who worked as labourers, servants and householders to show how this played out at the level of personal experience.

All forms of evidence present difficulties. Both court cases and wage accounts record less evidence of women's work than men's, but nonetheless provide clear documentation that particular women did particular types of work. Advice books and probate inventories record the range of activities women might undertake, but not exactly who did what. Family histories are rare and quirky survivals that tell us something about how women's contribution to farming households was regarded. The types of work women did in agriculture and food processing, as in other areas of the economy, varied according to women's level of wealth and the region, locality and household in which they lived. It also undoubtedly varied according to individual skills and inclination. These difficulties and variations perhaps sometimes cause us to overlook the basic fact that agriculture and the provision of foodstuffs could not have functioned in early modern England without women's input. The evidence from our work task data suggests women performed between a third and a half of labour in these sectors which together dominated the economy in this period; probate inventories and advice books indicate that women not only 'helped', but took charge of many activities and businesses centred on agriculture and food processing.