

GOLDEN JUBILEE PRIZE ESSAY

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‘... subjects deserving of the highest praise’: farmers’ wives and the farm economy in England, c. 1700–1850

by Nicola Verdon

Abstract

The farmer’s wife remains one of the most elusive figures in agrarian history. Her labour on the farm (and in the farmhouse) was largely unpaid, and therefore unrecorded. Historians have acknowledged the contribution made by farmers’ wives, but no attempt has yet been made to examine in detail the whole range of tasks usually undertaken by them and the value attached to this work. This article seeks to redress this neglect. Using a range of agricultural literature (farming manuals, encyclopaedias, journals and tours), it will be argued that the position of the farmer’s wife depended on status and region, and whilst some women had withdrawn from active participation in the farm economy by the early nineteenth century, this trend should not be overstated.

It is common practice among them, on marriage, to give to their wives what is called *pin-money*: this consists of poultry, pigs and the whole produce of the dairy; with which supply the wife is expected to clothe and (exclusive of bread, corn and other vegetables) support the whole household: and here it is but common justice to say, that the industry and attention to business of the farmers’ wives and daughters ... are subjects deserving of the highest praise.¹

In recent years women’s work has emerged from the margins of agricultural history. Several studies examining the work performed by female day labourers and farm servants in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been produced.² But despite this upsurge in

¹ Charles Vancouver, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Devon* (London, 1808), p. 112.

² See for example, Joyce Burnette, ‘Laborers at the Oakes. Changes in the demand for female day-laborers at a farm near Sheffield during the Agricultural Revolution’, *JECH* 39 (1999), pp. 41–67; Judy Gielgud, ‘Nineteenth-century farm women in Northumberland and Cumbria: the neglected workforce’ (DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 1992); Celia Miller, ‘The hidden

workforce: female fieldworkers in Gloucestershire, 1870–1901’, *Southern Hist.* 6 (1984), pp. 139–161; Pamela Sharpe, ‘The female labour market in English agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: expansion or contraction?’, *AgHR* 47 (1999), pp. 161–181; Helen V. Speechley, ‘Female and child agricultural day labourers in Somerset, c. 1685–1870’ (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 1999); Nicola Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth-century England: gender, work and wages* (2002).

interest, a group of women workers who carried out a wide range of tasks on the farm and in the farmhouse remain elusive: the wives of farmers. Was the farmer's wife the frivolous character caustically condemned in the 1820s by William Cobbett as the 'Mistress within', delighting in the showy decorations of her newly refurbished parlour and overseeing the education of her children into 'young ladies and gentlemen'?³ Or was she a business partner, directing certain departments of the farm economy with 'so large a portion of skill, of frugality, cleanliness, industry, and good management ... that without them the farmer may be materially injured', as one of Cobbett's contemporaries proposed?⁴ In reality, her productivity spanned the whole spectrum from the tirelessly hard-working companion to the genteel, leisured spouse. Farmers' wives were, and remain, a remarkably diverse group in rural society. The scale and character of their labour in the period 1700 to 1850 was influenced by many factors: status, income, farm size, location and type were all important. These need to be understood in much more detail before the enduring generalizations about farmers' wives can be dismantled and remodelled. The intention of this article then, is to open a debate on farmers' wives, and point to future areas of research.

The labour of the farmer's wife has not received the same attention as other rural women workers, but it has not been entirely neglected. Overviews of gender and work in England since 1700 include sections on the farmer's wife, although analysis of her work is rather cursory. Bridget Hill highlights the changing role of the farmer's wife as farms became larger and began specialising in corn production after the mid-eighteenth century. Increasing distaste for manual labour and its association with necessity encouraged farmers' wives to distance themselves from direct involvement in the farm business and cultivate an urbane lifestyle and outlook. According to Hill, this process occurred earlier in the south and east and 'only later' permeated the northern counties.⁵ Robert Shoemaker also examines how shifting agricultural practices (such as the decline of farm service and the increasing commercialisation of dairying) 'largely eliminated' key activities undertaken by farmers' wives, although he also warns that as most of the evidence for this shift comes from the south and east 'we should not exaggerate this change'.⁶ Both authors draw upon Ivy Pinchbeck's pioneering 1930 study of the impact of the industrial revolution on women's work. Pinchbeck cites farmers' wives as a classic example of rural women who lost their productive functions over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On large farms in south-eastern England, which increasingly turned to profitable arable production, the dairy was no longer run as a business concern, farmers' wives turned domestic duties over to indoor servants and thus 'tended to withdraw from an active participation in affairs'.⁷ On the large dairy enterprises of the south-west, Pinchbeck believed that the farmer's wife was no longer willing to take on the laborious work involved, resulting in dairies being let to specialised dairymen. '... the control of what had hitherto been entirely a woman's trade', she argues, 'began to be transferred to men'.⁸

³ William Cobbett, *Rural rides* (1830, 1985 edn), p. 229.

⁴ J. C. Loudon, *An encyclopaedia of agriculture* (sec. edn, London, 1831), p. 1036.

⁵ Bridget Hill, *Women, work and sexual politics in eighteenth-century England* (1989, 1994 edn), p. 52.

⁶ Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English society, 1650–1850: the emergence of separate spheres?* (1998), p. 157. For similar views see Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds between:*

historical perspective on gender and class (1995), ch. 5. Pamela Horn also draws attention to the continuing importance of the labour of farmers' wives throughout the nineteenth century in many areas of England. See Pamela Horn, *Victorian Countrywomen* (1991), ch. 5.

⁷ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (1930, 1981 edn), p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Dairying, of course, has a separate literature of its own, and although much of this concentrates on structural and technological change at both the national and local level, the position of women in the industry has also received attention.⁹ Deborah Valenze sees the dairy as a contested area of power in the late eighteenth century. On large dairy farms capital investment in machinery changed the balance of the workforce and eroded the traditional role performed by the farmer's wife. For Valenze, the withdrawal of women from the dairy was not instigated by women's distaste for work, but by the increasing commercialization of the industry. As male managers and factors assumed control over the industry 'authority came from above and the autonomy of women was clearly circumscribed'.¹⁰ Sally McMurray, in contrast, finds 'a substantial element of continuity' in women's participation in cheese making in England. She argues that farmers' wives were closely involved in the cheese making process throughout the nineteenth century. Even where assistants were hired, farmers' wives 'supervised production scrupulously'. Moreover, because these activities were economically valuable, the farmer's wife was afforded an elevated status in the farm household and wider community.¹¹

Dairying though was just one facet of work for the farmer's wife. No detailed recent study has attempted to analyse the whole range of her activities on the farm and in the farmhouse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rural sociologists, agricultural economists and feminist geographers have produced much insightful and stimulating work on the gendered nature of farm relations and identities in Britain, North America and the Antipodes in the late twentieth century, but historically the farmer's wife remains an obscure and fragmentary figure.¹² Lack of documentary sources accounts for this neglect. Because female farm servants and day labourers were engaged and paid by an employer, records of their employment contracts, work patterns and wage rates have survived, enabling historians to reconstruct their daily working lives. But the work carried out by farmers' wives is left largely unrecorded. Although it is generally recognised that the farmer's wife made an important economic contribution to the farm business through her work, because it was mostly unpaid, assessing the quantity and value of that work is very difficult.

Farm records offer little insight into the labour input of the farmer's family. Labour and wage account books were often kept to record information about the paid workforce employed on large farms. Farms which hinged on the unpaid labour of various family members (with only

⁹ G. E. Fussell, *The English dairy farmer, 1500–1900* (1966); David Taylor, 'The English dairy industry, 1860–1930', *EcHR* 29 (1976), pp. 585–601; David Taylor, 'Growth and structural change in the English dairy industry, c. 1860–1930', *AgHR* 35 (1987), pp. 47–64; Charles F. Foster, *Cheshire cheese and farming in the north-west in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (1998).

¹⁰ Deborah Valenze, 'The art of women and the business of men: women's work and the dairy industry, c. 1740–1840', *Past and Present* 130 (1991), p. 166.

¹¹ Sally McMurray, 'Women's work in agriculture: divergent trends in England and America, 1800 to 1930', *Comparative Studies in Society and Hist.* 34 (1992), pp. 252, 257.

¹² See, for example, Berit Brandth and Marit Haugen, 'Rural women, feminism and the politics of identity',

Sociologia Ruralis 37 (1997), pp. 325–344; Ruth Gasson, *Farm work by farmers' wives* (1989); id., 'Roles of women on farms: a pilot study', *J. Agricultural Economics* 32 (1981), pp. 11–20; Jo Little and Patricia Austin, 'Women and the rural idyll', *J. Rural Studies* 12 (1996), pp. 101–111; Carol Morris and Nick Evans, '"Cheese makers are always women": gendered representations of farm life in the agricultural press', *Gender, Place and Culture* 8 (2001), pp. 375–390; D. Symes and T. Marsden, 'Complementary roles and asymmetrical lives: farmers' wives in a large farm environment', *Sociologia Ruralis* 23 (1983), pp. 229–241; Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather, 'Farm women in Canada, New Zealand and Australia redefine their rurality', *J. Rural Studies* 12 (1996), pp. 1–14; Sarah Whatmore, *Farming women: gender, work and family enterprise* (1991).

occasional outside assistance) had little need to keep similar records.¹³ Few farmers' wives left diaries. Moreover, those diaries that have survived vary widely in their content and utility. Whilst the Norfolk journal of Mary Hardy, covering the years 1773 to 1808, is a valuable description of the work carried out by Mary, her husband, their labourers and servants, the most famous and well-read late eighteenth-century account, *The Diary of Anne Hughes*, is likely to be fictitious.¹⁴ Of more immediate use is the wide range of agricultural literature produced in the period after 1700. This took several forms including practical farming manuals, tours and views of the different farming regions of the country, encyclopaedias and dictionaries of farming and rural affairs, as well as agricultural journals.¹⁵ This evidence is of variable quality and does not offer a complete representation of the farm business. Nor is it possible to claim that these sources are new and undiscovered by historians. Pinchbeck, Valenze and McMurray all use this material to reinforce their arguments. But surprisingly these sources have not been systematically analysed. They remain one of the few avenues available to reconstruct the work performed by farmers' wives over a long time-span. They also reveal, implicitly and explicitly, information about contemporary attitudes towards the work of farmers' wives. The evidence presented in this article establishes the types of labour normally undertaken by farmers' wives in the eighteenth century. This work was crucial to the farm economy. How far the nature and value of this labour changed over time will then be assessed. This will show that women did experience major dislocation in their working lives, but that the removal of farmers' wives from farm productivity by the mid-nineteenth century has been overstated. Indeed, it is the continuities in the work patterns of farmers' wives between 1700 and 1850 that are striking.

I

A number of advice manuals printed in the eighteenth century were aimed specifically at the farmer's wife (or country housewife). Part one of Richard Bradley's *The Country Housewife and Lady's Director* was first published in 1727 as an accompaniment to his tract of the previous year, *The Country Gentleman and Farmer's Monthly Director*. It follows the pattern of a monthly digest, outlining 'what is necessary to be done every month by the mistress of a farm'.¹⁶ William Ellis' *The Country Housewife's Family Companion* appeared in 1750, and in 1780 an anonymous publication entitled *The Farmer's Wife: or Complete County Housewife* was issued, containing 'full and plain' instructions to 'teach the farmer's wife, with satisfaction, how to love the happy

¹³ M. E. Turner, J. V. Beckett and B. Afton, *Farm production in England, 1700–1914* (2001), ch. 2.

¹⁴ Basil Cozens-Hardy (ed.), *Mary Hardy's diary* (Norfolk Record Soc., 37, 1968); Anne Hughes, *The diary of a farmer's wife, 1796–1797* (1981). This journal was first published in the *Farmers Weekly* in the 1930s. The material was arranged by Jeanne Preston from Anne Hughes' 'boke', which was read to Preston in childhood by an elderly acquaintance. The original manuscript has not survived. For reviews which question the authenticity of the diary, see G. H. Bunting, 'Did Anne Hughes exist?', *Local Historian* 14 (1980), pp. 168–9; Marghanita Laski,

'Down on the farm', *County Life*, 28 Aug. 1980, pp. 726–7; 'Another diary of a nobody', *Private Eye*, 4 Dec. 1981, p. 25.

¹⁵ Nicholas Goddard, 'Agricultural literature and societies' in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VI, 1750–1850 (1989), pp. 361–83.

¹⁶ Richard Bradley, *The country gentleman and farmer's monthly director* (London, 1726), p. 101; id., *The country housewife and lady's director* (1736, 1980 edn). Parts I and II were first published in 1727 and 1732 respectively, and brought together as one edition in 1736.

country life'.¹⁷ These works had particular audiences in mind. Bradley's intended readers were prosperous and ambitious farming families. He believed that a farmer generating three to four hundred pounds a year 'may have everything about him, and live as elegantly as a gentleman of eight hundred pounds a year, if he does but know the use that may be made out of every thing under his care'.¹⁸ Ellis based his writing on a wider remit, drawing upon the current practices of 'the country gentleman's, the yeoman's, the farmer's, the labourers' wives' of his native Hertfordshire, whilst *The Farmer's Wife* was directed specifically 'to the use of the wives of our honest country farmers', although the author imagined that the advice contained within would also be helpful to 'women who move in other spheres of life'.¹⁹ Other writers such as John Mortimer, Thomas Hale and Arthur Young, whilst offering practical advice on farming operations and livestock management in general, also include suggestions for those departments of the business run by the farmer's wife. Whilst this evidence is empirical and partial, taken together it provides a useful way to analyse the range of pursuits carried out by the farmer's wife in the eighteenth century.

The labour performed by husbands and wives on farms in the eighteenth century was complimentary but distinct. In the introduction to his *Country Housewife* Bradley describes the division of male and female tasks as follows:

The art of oeconomy is divided ... between the men and the women; the men have the most dangerous and laborious share of it in the fields, and without doors, and the women have the care and management of every business within doors, and to see after the good ordering of whatever is belonging to the house.²⁰

Women were not narrowly confined to the farmhouse however, as those sections that 'belonged' to the house, and therefore the wife, included the kitchen garden, the dairy, and the farmyard. The range of activities covered in the *Country Housewife* can be generally divided into three elements. Firstly, the types of seasonal foodstuffs that could be easily grown on the farm and useful methods for pickling, preserving and cooking them, or making wine from them, are detailed. Secondly the manufacture of butter and cheeses in the dairy, and finally, rearing of pigs, hens and other poultry in the farmyard, and the ways their produce could be used, are described.

Most space is devoted to food processing, a subject which is also covered in great detail in other texts. This underlines the importance of the wife's duty to manage the farm household. She would have spent much of her day preparing provisions for the kitchen table, not only to feed the family but also any servants and labourers that were housed or fed on the farm. To do so from as much homegrown produce as possible was considered sound housewifery. Bradley argued that it was possible for a farmer to have 'everything at home, and set out a table fit for a prince, without being beholden to the markets'.²¹ Similarly Ellis believed that buying bread, bacon or pickled pork was 'ill housewifery' when they could be conveniently produced at home. Ellis extended his concept of good housekeeping to the brewing of beer at home 'where

¹⁷ William Ellis, *The country housewife's family companion* (London, 1750); Anon., *The farmer's wife; or complete country housewife* (London, c. 1780), quote taken from frontpiece.

¹⁸ Bradley, *Country gentleman*, p. 102.

¹⁹ Ellis, *Country housewife's companion*, frontpiece; Anon., *Farmer's wife*, preface.

²⁰ Bradley, *Country housewife*, pp. vii–viii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

convenience will allow it'.²² *The Farmer's Wife* also included full details on brewing beer, although the author understood that it was not the 'immediate business' of the farmer's wife to preside over the process of domestic brewing by that time. However, it was considered 'highly proper that she should be qualified to give ample direction to her servants'.²³ Arranging and supervising the daily work routines of servants was a key aspect of the wife's management skills and could, as Ellis puts it, influence the profits of the farm, 'for according to their management they may be made either serviceable or unserviceable'.²⁴ David Henry warned that female farm servants 'required no less attention in hiring than the men', and should not be hired if they had previously worked in gentlemen's or tradesmen's houses as 'they will always be complaining of the hardships she meets with ... tho' the farmer's business will be but half done'.²⁵ Finally, as part of the self-sufficiency of the farm household economy, the farmer's wife was also expected to possess knowledge of basic medicines and remedies. This wisdom was valuable to families and neighbours alike and suggests the wider benevolent village role accorded to some farmers' wives. 'This piece of good housewifery in many of the abler sort of good women', Ellis writes, 'is happily experienced, not only by their own families, but also by many of their poor neighbours, who are unable to provide such cordial remedies'.²⁶

The connection between the farmer's wife and the dairy was seen as central and natural in the eighteenth century. Ellis thought that to ignore the advantages of keeping dairy cows in a book entitled the *Country Housewife* would render him a 'preposterous author' because the production of 'milk, cream, butter, cheese, and the management of them, generally belongs to and comes under the woman's province'.²⁷ The authority and specialist abilities acquired by farmers' wives in the dairy were widely acknowledged. Indeed John Mortimer, whose *Whole Art of Husbandry* was first published in 1707, presumed women's knowledge in this area to be innate; he thought it unnecessary to 'mention anything about the making of butter and cheese, because most good housewives are acquainted with the way of doing it'.²⁸ This attitude had shifted by the time Bradley was writing. Although female skills were still recognised, it was argued that products could be improved, and profits enhanced, if dairy procedures were reported and followed more widely. Bradley wrote in defence of including instructions for the dairy in his work:

... many farmers might have twice the benefit from their dairies, if the articles of butter and cheese were consider'd in a rational way, and the old custom could be broke through; and, moreover, if the best rules for managing of the dairy were known, and put into practice, the whole country would be the better for it, every one might have the benefit of good things: whereas for want of knowledge among some farmers, their goods are of small value, and the people are also dissatisfied.²⁹

²² Ellis, *Country housewife's companion*, p. vi.

²³ Anon, *Farmer's wife*, preface. Judith Bennett argues that as brewing became a specialised trade in the seventeenth century, men usurped the previously dominant position of women. Women's role in domestic brewing may have persisted longer however, as these eighteenth-century texts suggest. Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, beer and brewsters in England: women's work in a changing world, 1300–1600* (1996). My thanks to Jane Whittle for this

information.

²⁴ Ellis, *Country housewife's companion*, p. vii.

²⁵ David Henry, *The complete English farmer* (London, 1771), p. 69.

²⁶ Ellis, *Country housewife's companion*, p. viii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

²⁸ John Mortimer, *The whole art of husbandry* (London, 1707, fourth edn, 1721), p. 228.

²⁹ Bradley, *Country housewife*, p. 88.

The Country Housewife therefore offers advice on regulating the temperature of the dairy, the correct way to make rennet, curd and a variety of English cheeses, and on making butter. Later writers expand on Bradley's short instructions. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the directions provided by Hale for the successful running of the dairy are comprehensive, with dairy work being viewed as complex, skilled and laborious. Like Bradley, Hale did not presume to 'take up her time' in familiarising farmers' wives with the routine procedures of the dairy, but he was keen to 'acquaint her how she shall do it to the greatest advantage'.³⁰

On farms where the dairy was small and an adjunct to the farmhouse ('generally some cool part in the lowest apartment of the house'), the farmer's wife herself was expected to perform all the usual labour of the dairy.³¹ The produce would have been mainly for home consumption, but any surplus goods would have been sold to neighbours or taken to market. This can be seen in diary entries made by the Lancashire clergyman and farmer Peter Walkden. Four cows were kept on his 40-acre farm and their milk was utilised to feed the household of eight. Walkden's wife Catherine took any excess butter to market in Preston. In February 1733 for example, he notes, 'Set my Love, and son John out towards Preston with a pot of butter, on ye mare, and I gave my Love 1s. 6d. in silver with her to buy what she had occasion for, if she sell no butter'.³² It was generally agreed that one woman could milk and process the liquid of up to ten cows. If a larger herd was kept, help was required. Dairymaids were employed on long-term contracts to assist with the production of butter and cheese. They were also expected to milk, although on some farms day workers, both male and female, did the milking. The size of dairy herds grew over the course of the eighteenth century. William Marshall considered a 20-cow farm 'middling' size in late eighteenth-century Warwickshire, with up to 50 cows being kept on some farms in the county.³³ Larger dairies though were found in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Cheshire. Specialisation also increased. Milk dairies were situated on the outskirts of large towns. Dairies near London began specialising in butter production for the metropolitan market, whilst cheese dairies were found in western counties. Spacious accommodation was constructed for these dairies.

On large dairy farms the role of the farmer's wife became supervisory, although it was not unusual for her to assist with the customary work of the dairy alongside the servants. Marshall described this practice in 1789:

The management or immediate superintendence of a large dairy, especially one of which cheese is the principal object, is not a light concern. It requires much thought and much labour. The whole of the former, and much of the latter necessarily falls on the immediate superintendent; who, though she may have her assistants, sees or ought to see herself, to every stage of the business; and performs, or ought to perform, the more difficult operations.³⁴

The control and management skills of the farmer's wife were therefore the decisive factors in securing the prosperity of a large dairy. Arthur Young believed that unless a farmer 'has a very diligent and industrious wife, who sees minutely to her dairy ... he will assuredly lose money

³⁰ Thomas Hale, *A compleat body of husbandry* (London, 1756), p. 562.

³¹ Henry, *Complete English farmer*, p. 23.

³² Chipping Local History Society (trans.), *A Diary from January 1733 to March 1734 written by the Reverend*

Peter Walkden (2000), p. 4.

³³ William Marshall, *Rural economy of the Midlands counties* (2 vols, London, 1790), I, p. 349.

³⁴ William Marshall, *Rural economy of Gloucestershire* (2 vols, Gloucester, 1789), I, p. 263.

by his dairy'.³⁵ Cleanliness, diligence and industry were also of primary importance inside the dairy. These were seen as feminine attributes, but dairy work was far from easy. Excessively long hours (especially during the peak months of May, June and July) and heavy manual labour (notably turning and pressing heavy cheeses weighing up to 120lbs) turned the dairy into 'a manufactory – a workshop – and, in truth, a place of hard work'.³⁶ Although men fed, tended and maintained the dairy herd, the farmer's wife was also expected to possess knowledge of the stock and its management. Hale urged the farmer's wife to have 'in her mind in the purchase' the amount of milk a cow was likely to produce and 'whether she be gently and kind'. If the cow were of an 'unruly disposition' Hale believed its value could be halved.³⁷

Is it possible to put a price on the work of the farmer's wife in the eighteenth-century dairy? Hale calculated that a cow could, on average, yield a gallon and a half of milk per session, enough for one quart of cream or a pound of butter. 'It will not be difficult, from this modest estimate', he contended, 'to compute what the industrious and careful housewife will make of a good number of cows'.³⁸ An observation on the profits of dairy cows from the 1760s offers a more precise estimate. In 1763 it was shown that a cow produced milk, butter and cheese for family use totalling £2 6s. 2d. in market prices. Cheese for sale worth £1 17s. 1½d. was produced, along with two yearlings and two suckling cows sold at 17s. 6d. and 3s. 10½d. Altogether a cow's produce was worth £5 4s. 8d. per year, although expenses for feed and management of £1 1s. 7d. had to be deducted.³⁹ This experiment was conducted by an agriculturist with a small herd of four cows. Interestingly he believed that 'a notable farmer's wife would have made £5 per cow', and was conscious of the difference between a dairy 'kept merely for convenience' and a farmer's dairy, where 'their wives are constantly at the elbow of the maid'.⁴⁰ Similar accounts of the profits from specialist cheese and butter dairies from the 1790s confirm that high levels of returns could be made, although these also underplay the constant care, labour and superintendence needed of the farmer's wife to make a success of these enterprises.⁴¹

Pigs were considered a profitable appendage to the dairy, and therefore came under the jurisdiction of the farmer's wife. There were regional differences in the number of hogs kept on farms. On his tour of northern England, published in 1770, Young found that on average ten cows maintained three hogs, whilst in the eastern counties he discovered that at least one pig per cow was kept.⁴² Pigs were seen as a beneficial addition to the farmyard because they could be fed on waste products from dairy, kitchen and barn. Ellis explains,

³⁵ Arthur Young, *Farmer's kalendar* (London, 1771, 1973 edn), p. 164. Both Young and Marshall thought an experienced dairymaid was capable of this role, but supervision should not be left to common servants.

³⁶ Marshall, *Gloucestershire*, I, p. 273.

³⁷ Hale, *Husbandry*, p. 555.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 557.

³⁹ 'An Answer to *Ruricola Glocesteris* in which is contained an estimate of the expenses and profit of a dairy of four cows by "Y"', *Museum Rusticum et Commerciale*, (6 vols, 1763–66), IV, pp. 274–287.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁴¹ Profits from Mr Aby's butter farm at Epping were

£8 6s. 0d. per cow, whilst a dairy of 20 cows in 1797 (mainly producing cheese) made a profit of £252 10s. 0d. or £5 13s. 5d. per cow. Both accounts are reported in R. W. Dickson, *Practical agriculture* (2 vols, London, 1807), II, pp. 528, 543.

⁴² Arthur Young, *Six month tour through the north of England* (4 vols, London, 1770), IV, p. 316; Arthur Young, *Farmer's tour through the east of England* (4 vols, London, 1771), I, p. 294. In late eighteenth-century Cheshire the number of pigs kept was very small as whey, butter-milk and fleetings from the dairy was given to servants and cottagers. Thomas Wedge, 'Butter and milk in Cheshire', *Annals of Agriculture*, 28 (1797), p. 17.

As there is one or more sows generally kept in a farm yard, I think it may be said the inspection and care of her belongs to our county housewife when she has pig'd ... as she makes wash from her kitchen, skim milk from her dairy, and grains from her brewings, she has here an opportunity for putting them to a profitable use by feeding her sow with them, and fattening her pigs with the greatest expedition.⁴³

As has already been mentioned, the meat products of pigs were an essential element of the farmhouse diet. Hogs were usually fattened on buckwheat or peas, ready for killing in the winter. As their flesh could be salted and pickled by the farmer's wife, it 'may be eat in the spring when other meat is at the dearest'.⁴⁴ Like dairy produce, pig flesh was also a marketable commodity and an income-source for farmers' wives: at the end of the eighteenth century estimates of the profits per cow made by maintaining hogs range from 18s. *od.* to 25s. *od.*⁴⁵

Writers in the eighteenth century were also keen to promote the advantages of bee keeping.⁴⁶ Whilst Bradley encouraged farmers to keep bees so that their wives could make mead from the honey, the author of *The Farmer's Wife* supposed that the management of bees fell 'more immediately within the province of the country housewife'.⁴⁷ The work involved in tending these insects required 'considerable attendance' on the part of women, 'in order to make them turn to the best account', and it was advised that beehives should be constructed near the farmhouse so 'that it may be convenient' for the wife 'to pay proper attention to them'.⁴⁸ Although it is difficult to estimate the profits attainable from bee-keeping, according to Hale, the produce of bees – wax and honey – were 'always marketable, and always bear a considerable price', as well as being useful to the family.⁴⁹

Despite the value pigs and bees could bring to the farmhouse economy, the animal which is most often connected with the work of the farmer's wife, and which has the most space devoted to its management in the eighteenth-century literature, is the domestic fowl. As Ellis put it, 'Poultry and their eggs come more immediately under the care and management of our country housewife, than any other outward part of the farmer's business'.⁵⁰ Instructions on poultry-keeping are copious and show that farmers' wives were expected to have an understanding of the construction of hen-houses, which breeds to purchase, how to encourage breeding and laying, feeding and setting, caring for hatched birds, fattening for market and identifying common diseases of birds. Hens were seen as the most undemanding fowls for farmers' wives to keep, 'feeding at the best upon the scatterings of the barn, with little assistance'. Hens were therefore a stock 'the poorest may keep and such as the richest need not to neglect', whereas turkeys were bred with difficulty, ranged in the open country, laid their eggs in hedges and fields and neglected their young.⁵¹ Geese though, with enough land and water, produced little trouble or expense, and were 'productive of three different kinds of profit, viz. that of their

⁴³ Ellis, *Country housewife's companion*, p. 124.

⁴⁴ Mortimer, *Husbandry*, p. 247.

⁴⁵ See Dickson, *Practical agriculture*, pp. 528, 543; Thomas Brown, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Derby* (London, 1794), p. 26.

⁴⁶ See, for example, William Ellis, *The modern husbandman, or, the practice of farming* (4 vols, London, 1744), IV, p. 178; Young, *Farmer's kalendar*, p. 170; Wil-

liam Hogg, *The new complete English farmer* (London, c. 1780), p. 86.

⁴⁷ Anon., *Farmer's wife*, preface.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ Hale, *Husbandry*, p. 255.

⁵⁰ Ellis, *County housewife's companion*, p. 152.

⁵¹ Hale, *Husbandry*, p. 233.

feathers, their flesh and their grease'.⁵² Ducks, pigeons and doves were also recommended, but swans, peacocks, pheasants and partridges were seen as too 'troublesome and chargeable' for the farmer's wife to keep profitably, and were more suited to country gentlemen for amusement rather than gain.⁵³ Like other produce, eggs and poultry meat furnished the farmhouse kitchen and was sold at market. In 1756 Hale advised those farmers' wives who lived within easy distance of London to rear as many fowls as possible as there was 'a constant and good market throughout the whole year, for one kind or other ...', but those who resided in more isolated regions should only keep enough birds for family use and to sell to neighbours.⁵⁴ Although the remuneration generated through poultry rearing is not specified in these texts, that these earnings formed an important part of the farmer's wife's purse is axiomatic:

... many farmers think it their interest to let their wives have all the profit of their eggs and poultry, for raising money to buy what we call common or trivial necessities in the house ... which piece of encouragement engages our housewife and her maid-servants to take special care of feeding her poultry in due time, setting her hens early, and making capons at a proper age.⁵⁵

Other tasks performed by the farmer's wife feature less prominently in the sources, but this does not mean they were any less important. Hale includes instructions for carding, greasing and spinning wool, as the 'mistress of the house naturally undertakes the office of preparing the wool for her family clothing'.⁵⁶ Female servants were also expected to undertake 'carding, spinning and other housewifery business' after their usual duties in the dairy, farmhouse or fields were completed, under the watchful eye of the farmer's wife.⁵⁷ However, agricultural literature is clearly not all-inclusive in its exposition of the duties of the eighteenth-century farmer's wife. Although some texts devote many pages to food preparation, they have little to say about other everyday domestic duties: cleaning the farmhouse, washing the clothing and linen, nursing and minding the children. Instead, diaries can sometimes reveal the more varied enterprises undertaken by the wives of many small farmers. In 1733 for example, Catherine Walkden stacked hay and sheared oats alongside her husband in July and August and fetched the wheat flour from the local miller in December, as well as her usual duties in the home, dairy and at market.⁵⁸ Mary Hardy, who lived with her husband and three children on a 50-acre farm and brewery in Norfolk, picked fruit, set peas and beans, made cheese, directed parts of the brewing industry, surveyed the crops with her husband and washed, cooked and baked alongside her female servants.⁵⁹ The hiring and firing of these servants also fell to Mary. In January 1779 she 'Turned both the maids away for raking with fellows and other misde-meaners', whilst in May 1797 her servant Hannah Dagliss was dismissed for 'leaving the back house door unbard for the chimney sweep and then was saucy'.⁶⁰ Mary often fed the labourers in the farmhouse, including a Christmas dinner for all workers and their wives.⁶¹ She also

⁵² Anon., *Farmer's wife*, p. 19.

⁵³ Mortimer, *Husbandry*, p. 265; Hale, *Husbandry*, p. 245.

⁵⁴ Hale, *Husbandry*, p. 234.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *Country housewife's companion*, p. 152.

⁵⁶ Hale, *Husbandry*, p. 591.

⁵⁷ Thomas Wedge, *General view of the agriculture of the county palatine of Cheshire* (London, 1794), p. 60.

⁵⁸ Chipping Local History Society (trans.), *Walkden Diary*, pp. 186, 215, 356.

⁵⁹ Cozens-Hardy (ed.), 'Mary Hardy's diary', pp. 52, 15, 87, 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 95.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7, 63–4, 91, 105–7, 109, 113–5, 121.

entertained friends and callers, took an active part in social activities, went on holiday and attended church. Mary Hardy was certainly not an isolated, ill-informed or idle farmer's wife.

The daily work-round of an eighteenth-century farmer's wife varied according to status, means and locality, but her activities – be they supervisory or manual – were seen as indispensable. On small farms, the farmer's wife undertook a wide range of jobs indoors, in the farmyard and fields, as well as at market, as illustrated by the examples of Catherine Walkden and Mary Hardy. On the larger, wealthier farmsteads, such as those Bradley writes about, wives were still required to possess knowledge of the dairy, poultry and pigs, and show culinary expertise in the farmhouse kitchen. However, during the 1780s and 1790s commentators perceived a conspicuous new trend, with farmers' wives becoming increasingly reluctant to take part in key productive tasks. This apparent desire on the part of women to disengage themselves from the farm business was most visible on large dairy and arable farms, where farm income was healthy enough to maintain a non-working wife.

II

By the turn of the nineteenth century, some areas of England traditionally associated with dairying began to abandon this venture in favour of more profitable enterprises. In Warwickshire farmers had given dairies up 'finding they can make more of their pastures by feeding cattle and sheep, than by keeping cows for making cheese and butter, and rearing young cattle'.⁶² Similar changes were underway in other counties, but they were more firmly linked to the growing reluctance of farmers' wives to perform their regular roles. On the large dairy farms of the south-west, the practice of letting dairies to specialist dairymen was much discussed by observers.⁶³ Although this was not a new phenomenon, late eighteenth-century writers viewed it as such, believing it was a novel solution to compensate for the withdrawal of farmers' wives from dairy work. By 1812 William Stevenson could write about Dorset:

The dairy and cheese-making processes are too servile employments for the wives of the large farmers, and indeed it would be absurd to suppose the wives or daughters of a man possessed of property to the amount of £10 or £15,000 would engage in the drudgery of the dairy. Some of the farmers let as many as a hundred dairy cows to three or four dairy men; and in the last century it is probable that the labour of such a dairy was performed by half a dozen farmers' wives who deemed it no drudgery, while they were permitted to consume a part of the produce.⁶⁴

In Middlesex dairying had made way for grazing and suckling calves, as the farmer's wife no longer had the 'inclination, industry, nor skill, sufficient for the management of a dairy'.⁶⁵ This state of affairs was blamed on 'the present mode of educating young women who are to be farmers' wives', an education that placed precedence on domestic and musical accomplishments. This entirely disqualified women for 'the labour and attention necessary to the well-managing

⁶² Adam Murray, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Warwick* (London, 1815), p. 134.

⁶³ See for example, William Marshall, *Rural economy of the west of England*, (2 vols, London, 1796), II, p. 150.

⁶⁴ William Stevenson, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Dorset* (London, 1812), p. 387.

⁶⁵ John Middleton, *View of the agriculture of Middlesex* (London, 1798), p. 327.

of a dairy' and instead of being fit to be a farmer's wife, 'miss dashes into the world a lady's maid'.⁶⁶ On the large-scale arable farms of southern and eastern England dairy production had also become 'troublesome to the mistress' and was discarded by many farmers in the late eighteenth century.⁶⁷ Female servants were engaged in increasing numbers to perform the jobs usually associated with the farmer's wife: dairymaid, laundrymaid, kitchenmaid and nursemaid. The increasing reluctance of farmers to hire and board yearly farm servants in the early nineteenth century was also connected to his wife, who no longer wished to share her living quarters and dining table with farm workers. Cobbett famously denounced this new style of living in the English farmhouse:

Every thing about this farm-house was formerly the scene of *plain manners* and *plentiful living*. Oak clothes-chests, oak bedsteads, oak chests of drawers, and oak tables to eat on, long, strong, and well supplied with joint stools. Some of the things were many hundreds of years old. But all appeared to be in a state of decay and nearly of *disuse*. There appeared to have been hardly any *families* in that house, where formerly there were, in all probability, from ten to fifteen men, boys, and maids: and, which was worst of all, there was a *parlour*!⁶⁸

By the turn of the nineteenth century then, the nature of farm labour was seen to have changed, with farmers' wives no longer a crucial component in the efficiency and profitability of the business. Rather than connecting this shift to wider agricultural and economic conditions, writers placed the responsibility firmly on the farmer's wife. But how widespread were these changes? Was the non-working, leisured lifestyle observed by Stevenson and Cobbett, the typical experience of the farmer's wife by the beginning of the nineteenth century?

III

The trend towards large farms covering several hundred acres or more, concentrating on arable production and employing a casualized labour force was most in evidence in eastern counties such as Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. This eroded the necessity of, and allowed the withdrawal of farmers' wives from their customary labour. Much of our evidence for the removal of farmers' wives from the farm economy comes from these counties. But other areas of large-scale arable farming such as East Yorkshire and Northumberland experienced different conditions. They continued to rely on farm servants, and although service survived in several forms, on many farms in northern England the farmer's wife continued to feed, house, supervise and manage both male and female servants.⁶⁹ The retreat of the farmer's wife on large, corn-growing farms was not uniform across England. Moreover, although the size of

⁶⁶ Middleton, *Agriculture of Middlesex*, p. 338; Richard Parkinson, *The experienced farmer* (2 vols, London, 1798), II, p. 225.

⁶⁷ Thomas Batchelor, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Bedfordshire* (London, 1808), p. 581. This led to complaints about the lack of butter and cheese in the markets, as large arable farms were no longer producing such items for sale. See The Old Fashioned Farmer, 'Some proofs why adding farm to farm is detrimental to

the nation in general', *Museum Rusticum et Commercial*, IV, p. 2; Nathaniel Kent, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Norfolk* (London, 1796), p. 132.

⁶⁸ Cobbett, *Rural rides*, pp. 226–7.

⁶⁹ Service persisted in other counties in the nineteenth century, in the south-east and south-west, as well as more northerly counties. See Alun Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers: the marginal workforce in British agriculture, 1870–1914', *AgHR* 42 (1994), pp. 49–62.

the average farm in England increased between 1750 and 1850, the small farmer did not vanish. In fact at the end of the eighteenth century farms of 100 acres or less predominated in several regions including the north-west (Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire and Cheshire), the Midlands (Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Worcestershire and Rutland), the south-west (Cornwall), and they were not unusual in the North Riding, Hampshire, Devon, Kent and Sussex, and the Welsh borders. In 1830, nearly half of all English farmers employed little or no outside labour, and even in 1851, 45 per cent of farms were still tilled and managed by family labour.⁷⁰ The industrious farmer's wife remained vital on these farms well into the nineteenth century.

In 1840 the *Penny Magazine* discussed the wide range of activities still undertaken by the wives and daughters of farmers in the hill and valley districts of England. They carded and spun indoors and assisted in outdoor tasks such as haymaking, harvesting, loading dung, taking corn to the mill and driving carts to market. In addition they attended to 'sundry other matters of a similar masculine character, all of which, in those parts of the country where agriculture has made the greatest progress, are now considered as belonging to the male part of our population'.⁷¹ William Howitt noted the same point. Addressing the views of Cobbett, he reminded his readers that farmers came in all 'ranks and grades', and whilst the gentleman farmers and their families aped the lifestyle of the wealthy classes, the small farmer (who he classified as those farming 50 to 100 acres) continued 'to work hard himself; his children, if he have them, assist him, and his wife too, who also is a manager and a worker'.⁷² Thus, whilst commentators were observing the growth of a more segregated workforce on large arable farms in the south-east, they also highlighted the persistence of family dependency on small-scale farms. Farmers' wives continued to work in the farmhouse, the dairy, the farmyard and fields, producing goods for the household and also for the market, just as their forebears had done.⁷³ Henry Tremenheere's report on Westmorland and Cumberland in the 1860s suggests that farmhouse produce was in such demand that

It is not uncommon for a farmer's wife with her cartload of poultry, butter and eggs, to be stopped on her way to market by a middleman from Manchester or some other manufacturing town, and the whole contents purchased by the roadside.⁷⁴

In the eighteenth century poultry keeping was ideally suited to small-scale production for local markets. This continued to be the case, although as Tremenheere's quote implies, an expanding urban market for poultry meat and eggs increased demand. Thus the possibilities of farmers' wives raising money from the produce of poultry actually increased over the course of the nineteenth century. Efforts to regulate the industry in Britain and Ireland failed

⁷⁰ J. H. Porter, 'The development of rural society', in Mingay (ed.), *Agrarian history*, VI, pp. 853–4.

⁷¹ *The Penny Magazine*, 29 Feb. to 31 Mar. 1840, p. 122.

⁷² William Howitt, *The Rural Life of England* (London, 1844, 1971 edn), p. 104.

⁷³ This is confirmed by Michael Winstanley's research on small-scale farming in late nineteenth-century Lancashire, which reveals the enduring significance of the labour of farmers' wives in domestic duties,

household production for market and field work. Michael Winstanley, 'Industrialisation and the small farm: family and household economy in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Past and Present* 152 (1996), pp. 157–195.

⁷⁴ BPP 1868–9, XIII, *Second Report on the employment of children, young persons and women in agriculture*, report by Mr Henry Tremenheere on Westmorland and Cumberland, p. 143.

and it remained female-controlled work on the farm.⁷⁵ The development of the transport network in England, especially the railway from the 1840s, meant produce could be easily conveyed over large distances. Thus by 1848, the 'regularity and speed with which poultry are now conveyed by means of the railroad' aided the transportation of produce from counties such as Devon to markets in London.⁷⁶ The demands of the metropolitan market could push up prices substantially: in 1851 it was estimated that fowls raised for the table would fetch between 1s. 2d. and 1s. 6d. in northern areas such as Northumberland, whereas around London the price for a fowl could be double or treble this.⁷⁷ Rearing birds for eggs could be even more profitable. In the early 1830s the profit from the eggs of an average layer was calculated at between 6s. 8d. and 7s. 3d. per fowl; by the early 1850s the income gained per fowl had risen to 9s. 10¹/₄d. (despite eggs then selling at the 'very low' price of 11d. per score).⁷⁸ As a result, several mid-nineteenth-century commentators – such as Samuel Copeland – urged farmers to pay more attention to this female branch of productivity and not dismiss poultry keeping as a trifling or subsidiary aspect of the farm economy:

However insignificant the smaller denizens of the farm may appear in the eyes of an English farmer, who numbers his oxen by the hundred and his sheep by the thousand, they are far from being contemptible as an object of profitable calculation if properly managed, and on a scale consummate with the size of the farm ... there is every inducement for the British farmer to direct his attention to this branch of rural economy, and to give to the business of rearing and fattening fowls that place in the ordinary management of the farm, to which its importance entitles it.⁷⁹

On small dairy farms the labour of the farmer's wife continued to be indispensable in the nineteenth century. In turn-of-the-century Somerset, John Billingsley found that wives on small dairy farms (those having an income of £60 to £70 a year) undertook the whole management of the cows, which released their husbands for daily paid labour on neighbouring farms.⁸⁰ He welcomed 'the arduous domestic labour and incessant employment' which such farms required of 'the female part of the farmer's family', and was adamant that were he 'a gentleman of fortune, I would never let an estate to a farmer, whose family was too proud, or too indolent to undertake the management of the different departments thereof'.⁸¹ Several decades later, the dairy farms of the south-west continued to operate under a similar system. Alfred Austin visited the dairying regions of Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire in the early 1840s and found that where the farms were small, the continuous, fatiguing and laborious work of the dairy was

⁷⁵ Winstanley, 'Industrialisation and the small farm', p. 184. For the Irish perspective see Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to housewifery: women, economic change and housework in Ireland, 1890–1914* (1993); Anne O'Dowd, 'Women in rural Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: how the daughters, wives and sisters of small farmers and landless labourers fared', *Rural Hist.* 5 (1994), pp. 171–183.

⁷⁶ Henry Tanner, 'The farming of Devonshire', *JRASE* 9 (1848), p. 483.

⁷⁷ William Trotter, 'Essay on the rearing and

management of poultry', *JRASE* 12 (1851), p. 169.

⁷⁸ Joseph Russell, *An improved system of agriculture* (Kenilworth, 1840), p. 283; Trotter, 'Rearing and management of poultry', p. 169.

⁷⁹ Samuel Copeland, *Agriculture ancient and modern* (2 vols, London, 1866), I, p. 433.

⁸⁰ John Billingsley, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Somerset* (third edn, London, 1798), p. 34.

⁸¹ Id., *General view of the agriculture in the country of Somerset* (first edn, London, 1794), pp. 112, 150.

performed not by servants, but by the farmer's wife.⁸² Fifty years after Billingsley's report, Thomas Dyke Acland toured the same marsh district of Somerset and found little had altered. Limitations on space and capital had impeded the implementation of technology into the small dairies and the work remained physically arduous:

It is true that men see the cows milked at a very early hour in the summer, and have some trouble with them in the winter, but the real hard labour falls on the women; and very active and industrious they are; but it is a sad sight to see a man standing by doing nothing, while his wife or daughter is turning many time in the day a weight of above half a hundredweight.⁸³

Whilst Valenze accepts that some small farms 'persisted in utilizing chiefly wives and daughters' in dairy work, the distinction she draws between these farms and large-scale dairying is firm. The latter, she claims, invested in new labour-saving machinery 'which warranted the employment of several dairymaids, while obviating the need for farmer's wife's traditional role'.⁸⁴ Yet many treatises continue to recommend that the farmer *and* his wife should carefully manage the daily operations on the large dairy farm in the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ On the Gloucestershire cheese farms of the 1860s for example, 'The farmer's wife superintends the dairy work; in fact, as one gentleman remarked, "A man without a wife has no business with a dairy"'.⁸⁶ Farmers' wives continued to direct, inspect, and supervise work on large dairies, as well as market the produce. Their expertise and experience were crucial: it was only on arable farms where dairying had been subsidiary and was then relinquished, that the farmer's wife was relieved of these roles. On his mid-century tour of the farming regions of England, James Caird found the dairies of northern and western Wiltshire to be 'exceedingly clean and well managed', which in large part was due to 'the industry and skill of the farmers' wives, to whom exclusively this important department is entrusted'. Similarly, after visiting the cheese-making farms of Cheshire, he considered the farmer's wife to be

the most important person in the establishment; the cheese, which is either made by her, or under her directions, forming the produce of two-thirds or three-fourths of the farm; the remaining fraction of which comprises the business of the farmer.⁸⁷

It was generally agreed that the profits acquired from a well-managed dairy were usually 'greater than what can be obtained by any other mode of husbandry', with cheese the most remunerative product of the dairy.⁸⁸ At the end of the eighteenth century, Marshall had calculated that the average cow produced three hundredweight of cheese a year, selling at 30s. per hundredweight.⁸⁹

⁸² BPP 1843, XII, *Reports of special assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the employment of women and children in agriculture*, report by Mr Alfred Austin on the counties of Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset, p. 5.

⁸³ Thomas Dyke Acland, 'On the farming of Somerset', *JRASE* 11 (1850), p. 706.

⁸⁴ Valenze, 'Art of women', p. 166.

⁸⁵ See for example, Rev W. Gooch, *General view of the agriculture of Cambridge* (London, 1811), p. 268; Loudon, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 1035–6; Rev. John M. Wilson (ed.), *The rural cyclopedia* (4 vols, Edinburgh and London,

1847–9), II, p. 3; William Rothwell, *Report on the agriculture of the county of Lancaster* (London, 1850), p. 100.

⁸⁶ BPP 1867–8, XVII, *First report on the employment of children, young persons and women in agriculture*, evidence to Rev James Fraser's report on Norfolk, Essex, Sussex, Gloucestershire and parts of Suffolk, p. 123.

⁸⁷ James Caird, *English agriculture in 1850–51* (London, 1852, 1968 edn), pp. 78, 252–3.

⁸⁸ A Farmer, *Rural recreations, or modern farmer's calendar* (London, 1802), p. 65.

⁸⁹ Marshall, *Midland counties*, I, p. 361.

By the 1850s, the price for the same weight of cheese had risen to 50s. The popular proverb ran 'the pail pays the rent'.⁹⁰ However, the method of sale, which increasingly involved factors and middlemen as dairy size increased, was not necessarily advantageous for women. In Cheshire, for example, the verbal contracts made between factors and dairymen was criticised for depreciating the value of female labour:

The business of the dairy is, in general, admirably well attended to, by a laborious and careful set of women, who are the support, and ought to be the pride of the country: their husbands degrade themselves, are ungrateful, in undervaluing the produce of *their* toil and care, and but too often injure themselves and families, in compliance with the foolish custom ...⁹¹

Valenze claims that women's work in the dairy came to be increasingly criticised in treatises of the late eighteenth century, with their customary labour being associated with backwardness and ineptitude. As authors attempted to activate standard practices and procedures, they increasingly turned to the authority of men.⁹² There is evidence to reinforce this argument. John Morton's *Cyclopedia of Agriculture*, which was published in the mid-nineteenth century, makes no mention of women in its 24-page section on 'dairy management' and draws entirely on the expertise of men.⁹³ But changes in the industry were slowly implemented and the close association between women and dairy work persisted. Complaints that farmers' wives used non-standardised processes and skills in their dairies were still frequent in the 1850s and 1860s. One observer in Gloucestershire commented in 1850 that 'Almost every mistress of a dairy has some secret, peculiarity, or mystery, fancied or real, which is often studiously kept from her equally clever neighbour'.⁹⁴ A decade later, the remonstrance was familiar: 'In no branch of rural economy would theoretical knowledge be of more service than in the dairy, yet dairy practice is perhaps less enlightened by science or aided by scientific appliances than any other'.⁹⁵ The displacement of farmers' wives from the dairy, large and small, was far from complete by the mid-nineteenth century and the retreat into the parlour was simply not an option for many farmers' wives.

IV

The position of farmers' wives in England between 1700 and 1850 varied according to region, farm size, income and type. Contemporary commentators gave prominence to the retreat of farmers' wives on large dairy and arable farms at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the departure of the economically-active wife was partial. Even on the large, wealthy farms of East Anglia – where evidence for the non-working wife is most compelling – it is unlikely that women were ever totally divorced from the business of the farm. On the surface Elizabeth Cotton, who lived with her husband and six children on their 400-acre farm in Suffolk in the

⁹⁰ Acland, 'Farming of Somerset', p. 705.

⁹¹ Wedge, *General view of Cheshire*, p. 61.

⁹² Valenze, 'Art of women', p. 162.

⁹³ John C. Morton, *A cyclopedia of agriculture* (2 vols, London, 1855), I, pp. 603–26.

⁹⁴ John Bravender, 'Farming of Gloucestershire',

JRASE 11 (1850), p. 153.

⁹⁵ James Fulton, 'Essay on recent improvements in dairy management', *JRASE* 21 (1860), p. 73. Fussell argues that inventions in dairying made little impact until the second half of the nineteenth century. Fussell, *English dairy farmer*, p. 170.

1850s and 1860s, would seem a typical representation of the refined farmer's wife. She oversaw the renovation of the farmhouse, employed a dairymaid and housekeeper and engaged fully in the social activities of near-by Ipswich. Yet she still attended to business callers, opened her kitchen to labourers, was expected to take charge of the farm in her husband's absence, supervised the dairy and had to deal with the transgressions of her light-fingered maid.⁹⁶ Farmers' wives continued to take responsibility for the dairy, poultry, pigs, garden and kitchen, either performing the work herself or superintending the labour of others. Although her labour generated profit, the farmer's wife was not formally paid for her work. As a result it is largely hidden in the sources. Between 1851 and 1871 however, the census did recognise that wives who assisted their husbands in certain family enterprises (such as farming) but received no formal payment for that work, should be included in the occupational tables.⁹⁷ In 1881 they were permanently removed. Despite their invisibility in the official occupational statistics, the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a crucial period for the farmer's wife. Did the progression of large-scale commercial dairying eventually remove the farmer's wife from production? Does the same development in poultry rearing in the late nineteenth century imply that the market for farmhouse goods produced on a small scale also declined? Were farmers' wives therefore more likely to take paid jobs away from the farm to supplement income, becoming more disengaged from farm production? Or, as Mary Bouquet suggests for Devon, did farmers' wives turn their hand to alternative money-making activities on the farm when their traditional roles diminished?⁹⁸ These are important questions that await further research.

⁹⁶ Shelia Hardy, *The diary of a Suffolk farmer's wife, 1854–1869: a woman of her time* (1992), pp. 26, 58–9.

⁹⁷ In 1851 there were 164,420 farmers' and graziers' wives (aged 20 and over) recorded in the census; in 1861

the figure was 163,498, and in 1871 187,029.

⁹⁸ Mary Bouquet, *Family, servants and visitors: the farm household in nineteenth and twentieth-century Devon* (1985).