

Young women, work and family in inter-war rural England

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Abstract

While previous studies of youth have concentrated on urban, commercial leisure developments, this article scrutinises young women through the prism of their labour. It argues that young women's paid employment and domestic labour were crucial to the family economy of the rural poor in inter-war England. However, they were also subject to profound social, economic and cultural changes. In 1918 domestic service was the largest employer of these women, offering limited income and leisure. Twenty years later, an increasing number were entering industrial work in urban areas, prompting the decline of domestic and farm service and forging a new pattern of migration from the countryside.

Over the last two decades, women's work and, more recently, their leisure, have been brought into the limelight by historians of inter-war England.¹ However, the experiences of rural women are, in this respect as in so many others, still greatly neglected. This gap in the existing studies represents a serious omission, not only because it neglects a substantial group of women, but also because it prevents a satisfactory analysis of two important trends in twentieth-century social and economic development: the decline of domestic and farm service and rural depopulation. This article attempts to fill that gap by examining young rural women's labour force participation in inter-war England, paying particular attention to the changing role of employment in domestic and farm service and to migration patterns. It also highlights important aspects of the oft-neglected relationship between town and country in inter-war England and stresses the importance of the life-cycle, as well as gender and social class, in shaping life in rural communities.

The few existing studies of women's work in inter-war England have concentrated on urban areas.² Part of the reason for this is the strong sexual division of labour in many rural areas throughout this period, with married women's labour force participation being lower than the national average in many rural communities.³ While the increase in historical research on rural

¹ S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', in Alexander, *Becoming a woman. Essays in nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist history* (1994), pp. 203–24; E. Roberts, *A woman's place* (1984), pp. 39–80; A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: Manchester and Salford, 1900–1939* (1992); C. Langhamer, *Women's leisure in England, 1920–1960* (2000).

² See for example, Roberts, *Woman's place*; id., *Women's work, 1840–1940* (1988); M. Glucksmann, *Women assemble* (1990).

³ L. Tilly and J. Scott, *Women, work and family* (1978); J. Lewis, *Women in England, 1870–1950. Sexual divisions and social change* (1984); D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty* (1989), p. 8.

women's work over the last decade has demonstrated that it is a worthy subject for inquiry, the inter-war period remains neglected, frequently being perceived as the 'long weekend' when women returned to 'home and duty' following the First World War.⁴ However, this neglects the importance of young, single women within the inter-war workforce, as breadwinners within rural working-class households, and also as migrants into towns, who had an influence on socio-economic trends in urban as well as rural areas. Young women between the school leaving age – 12 prior to 1921, 14 thereafter – and 24 years of age constituted over 45 per cent of the female workforce throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In this article, young women are subdivided into 'girls', denoting juveniles under 18 years of age, and young adult women, aged between 18 and 24, a division evident in contemporary records, including the Census. The average age of first marriage among women never fell below 25 throughout the period – the reason why it forms the upper age limit of this study – and consequently paid work was a distinguishing characteristic of youth for many women.

Despite the gradual expansion of industrial, clerical and retail employment for young women after the First World War, the largest occupation for this group remained domestic service into the 1930s. This actually increased its share of the young female workforce slightly between 1921 and 1931, when it accounted for 24.3 per cent of them.⁵ Domestic service was a particularly large employer in rural and semi-rural areas: the largest concentration of servants was in East Sussex, where 36.4 per cent of juvenile girls were thus employed in 1931, and 30.8 per cent of all women above the school leaving age.⁶ These figures highlight the significance of young countrywomen in the development and decline of domestic service, a decline which, this article will argue, was greatly accelerated in the 1930s. A similar trend can be traced in farm service, which employed a far smaller proportion of young rural women.

In this paper a wide range of sources is used to examine young rural women's participation in the labour force. The occupation tables of the Census of England and Wales for 1921 and 1931 are the richest datasets available, despite ambiguities in the classification of servants which we shall consider later. Most contemporary social surveys were urban in focus but the *New Survey of London Life and Labour* and the *Social Survey of Merseyside* offer some insights into the migration and employment patterns of young women from rural districts. Reports on youth employment and unemployment, compiled by the Ministry of Labour and by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) supplement the Census data. Finally, this article draws on 24 testimonies from women who grew up in inter-war rural England which have either been collected by oral historians, or are published.⁷ These sources suggest that older children, identified by Verdon as essential to the nineteenth-century family economy in many rural areas, remained important

⁴ Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, p. 4.

⁵ *Census of England and Wales, 1921*, Occupation Tables, 1924, table 3; *Census of England and Wales, 1931*, Occupation Tables, 1934, table 3.

⁶ *Census of England and Wales, 1931*, Occupation Tables, 1934, table 18.

⁷ The 'personal testimonies' used here are drawn from three published autobiographies and 21 recorded and transcribed interviews. The recordings were located through the ESRC qualidata archive and held in the

following archives: East Sussex RO, Lewes in Living Memory collection (hereafter ESRO, Lewes); Modern Records Centre (hereafter MRC), University of Warwick, Coventry Women's Work collection; Nottingham Local Studies Library, Making Ends Meet oral history collection (hereafter NLSL, MEMC); Tameside Local Studies Library, Manchester Studies collection (hereafter TLSC, MSC); Lancashire RO, North-West Sound Archive (hereafter LRO, NWSA).

as household breadwinners in the inter-war period.⁸ Their economic significance varied, shaped by household composition and the local labour market, but in many areas it increased, rather than diminished, as a result of high male unemployment. Young rural women's experiences thus qualify optimistic assessments of the working class standard of living in the inter-war period. They also undermine the image of inter-war rural England as an unchanging, static society, for while continuity in employment trends is evident across the 1920s and early 1930s, the later 1930s witnessed an expansion of labour demand in the retail, tertiary and industrial sectors which led to changes in young rural women's employment patterns, and encouraged their migration to urban areas. Youth thus emerges as a distinct and memorable life stage for many rural women, although it was shaped by paid work and migration, rather than by the commercial leisure consumption which historians of urban areas have seen as characterising this stage of life. Their employment and migration patterns meant that these young women were at the forefront of social and economic changes in the countryside.

The remainder of this article is in three parts. The first uses Northumberland as a case study to examine the effect which the household and local labour market had on young women's employment patterns. The continuing importance of domestic service as an employer of this group is highlighted. The changes within, and decline of both domestic and farm service are then analysed in section two. Young women's growing desire to avoid or leave residential service was fuelled by and in turn shaped industrial expansion in the 1930s, the subject of section three. It is argued that young rural women, particularly those who experienced unemployment, were particularly important in shaping the new industrial workforce, and were thus significant in the changing relationship between town and country in the inter-war period. The evidence presented here supports Saville's assertion, strengthened by Hill's research, that women were instrumental in rural depopulation, as employment opportunities expanded for them in urban areas, and their own socio-economic aspirations rose.⁹ However, it pinpoints the 1930s as particularly significant in this regard, and highlights the centrality of young, single women as a social and economic group distinct from their male peers and older women in their employment and their aspirations.

I

Northumberland is not presented here as 'typical' of rural districts, for local labour markets in rural as well as urban areas continued to vary significantly through the inter-war years as Howkins' recent study illustrates.¹⁰ However, a brief case study of the county highlights the importance of local labour demand and household employment patterns in shaping young rural women's labour force participation. Moreover, a larger proportion of women were employed in agriculture in Northumberland, including in farm service, than in any other area of the country. Family hiring, whereby a male worker was hired on condition he would provide

⁸ N. Verdon, 'The rural labour market in the early nineteenth century: women's and children's employment, family income, and the 1834 Poor Law Report', *EcHR* 55 (2002), pp. 299–323.

⁹ J. Saville, *Rural depopulation in England and Wales,*

1851–1951 (1957), pp. 31–7; B. Hill, 'Rural-urban migration of women and their employment in towns', *Rural Hist.*, 5 (1994), pp. 185–94.

¹⁰ A. Howkins, *The death of rural England. A social history of the countryside since 1900* (2003), pp. 77–8.

at least one female labourer when necessary, was a longstanding characteristic of the county, since young male workers were likely to be able to find more lucrative employment in the mining industry. This tradition was supported by the demands of the family economy, since the low wages paid to male labourers required supplement.¹¹ This system of hiring was in decline by the inter-war period, in part due to agricultural depression, which reduced labour demand. This, and the post-war and early 1930s industrial depressions, which also hit Northumberland hard, help explain why the county reflected the national increase in domestic servants between 1921 and 1931, but also exhibited increasing outward migration through the 1930s.

In rural districts, limited local employment for women frequently increased reliance on male breadwinners. Many Northumbrian communities remained heavily dependent upon either mining or agriculture for adult employment: in 1931, 34 per cent of men were employed as miners and 10 per cent in agriculture. Traditionally, miners enjoyed relatively high wages, and this, together with a lack of alternative local industrial employment, had increased reliance upon male breadwinning; just seven per cent of women were engaged in paid employment in 1931. Unfortunately, the County Tables of the Census do not provide a full disaggregation of the working population by age and gender, but data of this kind is recorded for juveniles, and shows that 43 per cent of girls were in paid employment in Northumberland in 1931 compared with 78 per cent of boys.¹²

In such communities, maintaining a daughter at home denoted respectability, a variable concept which in this localised context signified adult men's ability to support their families. Figure One shows that in 1931 43.5 per cent of Northumberland girls were unoccupied, as Linda McCullough Thew recalled:

I remember one father saying of his daughter who left the secondary school at 14 because he wasn't going to have her worry herself into an early grave with all that 'book stuff'. 'With three men working, it's a pity if we can't keep one lass at home without her having to work'.¹³

This practice of keeping a daughter, often the eldest daughter, at home was evident in households headed by skilled manual workers elsewhere in rural England, as Gittins and Roberts have shown.¹⁴

Absence from the labour market did not denote a life of leisure, however; the practice was partly a response to a maternal need for domestic help in large households, a characteristic of mining communities.¹⁵ A daughter maintained at home was important in sustaining wage-earners, helping their mother to make or mend work clothes and to prepare meals, and relieving the maternal domestic burden by caring for younger siblings and undertaking housework. In rural areas self-provisioning activities, through the maintenance of a garden, or some

¹¹ P. Horn, *Victorian countrywomen* (1991), pp. 157–9.

¹² It is impossible to provide a meaningful comparison with juveniles' participation rates in 1921, since the definition of juvenile in the 1921 census included a large number of children of compulsory school-age, although the proportion of those unoccupied is included in the table presented here for both years.

¹³ L. McCullough Thew, *The pit village and the store* (1985), p. 124.

¹⁴ D. Gittins, *Fair sex* (1982), p. 70; Roberts, *Woman's place*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁵ C. V. Butler, *Domestic service. An enquiry by the Women's Industrial Council* (1916), p. 74; Gittins, *Fair sex*, pp. 116–88.

TABLE 1. Occupational distribution of girls, Northumberland, 1921 and 1931

Occupation	1921		1931	
	No. girls (14–17 yrs)	% girls	No. girls (14–17 yrs)	% girls
Agriculture	685	2.32	287	2.05
Textiles	104	0.35	54	0.39
Textile goods	1124	3.81	150	1.07
Old industries	0	0.00	34	0.24
New industries	498	1.69	76	0.54
Transport and communication	716	2.42	171	1.22
Shop assistants	2243	7.59	1086	7.77
Domestic service	4033	13.65	2950	21.12
Other personal service	640	2.17	373	2.67
Professional, commerce, entertainment	306	1.04	75	0.54
Clerical	1334	4.52	445	3.19
Labourers/unskilled	451	1.53	215	1.54
Total occupied	12797	43.32	5916	42.35
Scholars	1877	6.35	1862	13.33
Unoccupied	14864	50.32	6089	43.59

Source: *Census of England and Wales, 1921, County Table for Northumberland* (HMSO, 1923), table 18; *Census of England and Wales, 1931, Occupational Tables* (HMSO, 1934), table 18.

poultry, could also be crucial domestic tasks.¹⁶ A daughter's domestic help could grow in value when other family members were unemployed, especially if the local labour market offered her no opportunity to earn a wage. A range of social surveys found that self-provisioning activities became extremely important in households experiencing long-term unemployment, or which were subject to the household means test, implemented in 1931.¹⁷ Evelyn Haythorne grew up in a South Yorkshire mining village. Her father was unemployed in the mid-1930s. After the Parish Board reduced her family's benefit entitlement due to their maintenance of a vegetable garden, Evelyn helped her mother to sell pie and pea suppers at the weekend:

every available space was filled with meat pies. I looked at them and was a little apprehensive because I knew for certain that if she didn't sell we would have to eat them. Shortly after tea, however, to my amazement and delight, several people came down the path ... My mother and I stayed up very late that night, because most of the people wanted their supper after the pubs had turned out.¹⁸

¹⁶ M. Spring Rice, *Working Class Wives* (1981), pp. 163–4.

¹⁷ W. Hannington, *The problem of the distressed areas* (1937), pp. 88–9; Trade Union Congress General Council, 'Organisation of youth', memorandum, 16 Oct. 1935, TUC Archive, MRC, MSS 292/69/18, p. 2; Pilgrim

Trust, *Men without work* (1938), p. 191; C. M. Moehling, 'Women's work and men's unemployment', *JECH* 61 (2001), pp. 928–9.

¹⁸ E. Haythorne, *On Earth to make the numbers up* (1991), pp. 67–8.

The continued presence of unwaged young women in Northumbrian households through the inter-war period demonstrates the value placed upon women's unpaid labour in communities offering them few employment opportunities.

Yet while the inter-war period has been represented as one of increased reliance on male breadwinning, as women returned to 'home and duty',¹⁹ agricultural and mining households could not afford to support a large number of non-earners. This had greater consequences for older children's labour force participation than married women's. Boys could find local employment as miners (34 per cent in 1931), agricultural workers (12 per cent) or messengers and delivery boys (11 per cent), but their wages were not high enough to support their sisters, whose migration to domestic or farm service employment was consequently often essential to the social economy of the rural poor.²⁰ This movement is partially captured by Table one, although not fully, since the 1921 Census does not provide an age disaggregation of the number of women employed in agriculture by age and county, preventing a comparison of the two Census years. However, across England, farm service accounted for the majority of girls employed in agriculture in both 1921 and 1931, although the proportion of girls thus occupied dropped slightly from 0.5 per cent to 0.4 per cent between these years, and it seems unlikely that Northumberland would have bucked this trend. Of greater importance was residential domestic service. Again, the data presented in Table one are partial, since many residential servants would have been recorded at the household of their employer, and if this was outside their home county they would not have been enumerated by the local census. By providing board and lodging, residential domestic service, like farm service, reduced spatial and financial demands upon overcrowded households. The importance of this during periods of high male unemployment, and the continuing demand for domestic servants, is demonstrated by the decline in the proportion of unoccupied girls and corresponding increase in domestic service employment between 1921 and 1931.

II

As the preceding discussion suggests, the slight increase in domestic servants nationally between 1921 and 1931 was largely accounted for by young rural women workers responding to the needs of the family economy. Contemporary middle-class anxiety over the lack of domestic servants, which was voiced from the early 1920s, suggests that post-war female urban unemployment did not prevent demand for servants outstripping supply.²¹ The expansion in retail and clerical work for young women in urban areas during the 1920s – in Coventry, for example, the proportion of young women employed in retailing increased from 2.0 per cent in 1921 to 6.4 per cent ten years later, while the proportion who were clerical workers rose from 9.9 per cent to 15.0 per cent, increases which were not unusual for more prosperous urban centres – meant that young rural women still constituted a significant proportion of the urban domestic service

¹⁹ Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, pp. 48–88; J. Giles, *Women, identity and private life in Britain, 1900–50* (1995), pp. 4–5, 48–9.

²⁰ On the long-term importance of young women's wages to the rural family economy, see S. Horrell and

J. Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male breadwinner family', *ECHR* 58 (1995), pp. 89–117 and Verdon, 'The rural labour market', pp. 299–323.

²¹ *Women's Leader*, 5 Mar. 1924, p. 6.

workforce. Over 70 per cent of Llewellyn Smith's *New Survey of London* 1929 sample of female servants, for example, had been born outside Greater London.²²

The continuing supply of young rural women for domestic and farm service employment testifies to household need for their wages, and a lack of alternative employment. In the Midlands and south-east of England a socio-economic division opened during the inter-war years, and particularly during the 1930s, between prospering urban centres and large pockets of rural poverty. Even in northern counties, rural labour markets often contrasted unfavourably with those of urban areas, particularly for young workers, who were not as susceptible to long-term urban unemployment as their fathers. Elizabeth Roberts has suggested that by the early twentieth century, former domestic servants in urban Lancashire were determined that their daughters would secure different, higher status employment, although choice was still extremely limited.²³ But in rural areas, alternative job opportunities remained scarce into the 1930s. Recruitment to domestic or farm service was automatic in many areas throughout the 1920s. One woman from Oxfordshire who entered employment in the early post-war years recalled that, 'on the last day at Goring school the local gentry came round and offered jobs. My first job was as a between maid'.²⁴ Kinship was extremely significant in occupational recruitment. Mothers were particularly influential in finding and, despite the paucity of vacancies, vetting jobs for their daughters. Mrs Hevness, who grew up in a Nottinghamshire village, began her working life as servant to the local shopkeeper's family.²⁵ Mrs Cleary, who grew up in a village outside Manchester, benefited from post-war economic expansion in the city by obtaining a job as a confectioner, but at the age of 15, in 1922, ill-health cost her this job. Subsequently, her mother found her a post as a domestic servant by asking the family doctor.²⁶ Some mothers viewed domestic service as a secure and respectable occupation. Marion Kent, who grew up in a Derbyshire village, could have travelled daily to a local town for factory employment, but her mother considered this 'rough', and was keen to have her daughter placed in a large country house which would offer respectable, secure employment with scope for promotion.²⁷ The paternalistic nature of domestic service was demonstrated by employers' widespread requirement that prospective servants were accompanied to interviews by their mothers, so that their social background, trustworthiness and cleanliness could be assessed.²⁸ Married women's role as household managers in rural districts was more wide-ranging than previous assessments have suggested, with the family, but particularly the mother, being instrumental in shaping daughters' labour force participation.

The traditional career path which Marion Kent's mother desired for her daughter was declining by the 1920s, and continued to do so over the inter-war years. Demand for very young servants diminished during the 1920s, with the number of servants under the age of 16 falling

²² H. Llewellyn Smith, *New survey of London life and labour* (9 vols, 1930–5), II, p. 429.

²³ Roberts, *Woman's place*, pp. 64–5.

²⁴ Oxfordshire Federation of Women's Institutes, *Oxfordshire within living memory* (1994), p. 145.

²⁵ NLSL, MEMC, A78/a-c/1, interview with Mrs Hevness.

²⁶ TLSL, MSC, tape 28, interview with Mrs Cleary. See also ESRO, Lewes, AMS 6416/1/6/13, interview with Joan Whitfield.

²⁷ LRO, NWSA, 1988.0060, audio-cassette recording of interview with Marion Kent.

²⁸ LRO, NWSA, 1988.0060. See also TLSL, MSC, tape 28; TLSL, MSC, tape 26, interview with Mrs Hughson.

from 82,014 in 1921 to 73,789 in 1931, a decrease of over 10 per cent which cannot be entirely explained by the raising of the school leaving age from 12 to 14 in 1921, nor by the availability of alternative employment for school leavers. In 1923 a Ministry of Labour investigation found that:

There is evidence that a large number of girls of 14, especially in rural areas, are desirous of taking up domestic service ... but that very few employers are prepared to engage such young, inexperienced girls, with the result that they drift off into other occupations, become accustomed to the conditions of industrial life, and at 16 or 17 it is very difficult to redirect their thoughts to domestic work.²⁹

The London Advisory Council on Juvenile Employment found the same preference for girls aged sixteen or older among employers in the late 1920s, and this continued to be noted throughout the 1930s.³⁰

This demographic change was largely due to changes in labour demand for servants. The decline of the landed gentry, and the type of service work Marion Kent's mother wished her daughter to enter, was matched by increasing demand for servants by smaller, urban middle-class households. By the 1930s, the most common form of employment for servants was in such households which, as the *New London Survey* found, employed a single maid of all work and preferred, for this reason, women in their mid or later teens to younger girls.³¹ Consequently, while kinship remained an important means of occupational recruitment, employment agencies, and state-run Juvenile Employment Bureaux, established in 1910, were increasingly used to obtain jobs distant from home and outside kinship networks.

Simultaneously, farm service was declining as an employer of young rural women. In 1921, agriculture employed 1.2 per cent of the young female workforce; ten years later, that figure had dropped below one per cent. In East Sussex, where agriculture employed 20.8 per cent of men and 17.8 per cent of juvenile boys, only 0.6 per cent of girls were thus employed in 1931. Almost 50 per cent of young women employed in agriculture were categorised as farm servants in 1931, a total of 9101. This figure is probably an underestimation, since the wide variety of work demanded of farm servants meant that many in rural counties like Sussex were likely to be recorded under other agricultural occupations, or outside the sector altogether, as domestic servants. In 1930, Winifred Foley was employed as a 'domestic' servant on a mid-Wales farm, but she also helped the farmer, his wife and nephew to run the business.³²

Familial recruitment was still very significant in agricultural work. Howkins has pointed to the continued importance of family hiring in the Border regions of England and Scotland, including Northumberland, into the inter-war years. Of even greater, and more general, importance was the hiring of near and distant relatives to work on the farm.³³ In 1921 5420 young women were recorded as farmers' relatives, accounting for 18 per cent of those employed in agriculture; ten years later, this number had fallen to 4077, but they now accounted for

²⁹ Ministry of Labour, *Report of the committee appointed to enquire into the present conditions as to the supply of female domestic servants* (1923), p. 12.

³⁰ London Advisory Council for Juvenile Employment, *A guide to employment for London boys*

and girls (1928), p. 103. On the 1930s, see R. Strachey, *Careers and openings for women* (1935), p. 110.

³¹ Llewellyn Smith, *New survey*, VIII, p. 315.

³² W. Foley, *The Forest Trilogy* (1992), pp. 146–9.

³³ Howkins, *Death of rural England*, pp. 78–80.

22 per cent. This sometimes represented a continuation of 'classic farm service', particularly in some northern and Welsh counties, whereby young workers, frequently the children of farmers themselves, were hired for a long period of living-in, frequently taking meals with the farmer's family and undertaking a wide variety of tasks. However, this form of service was already declining by the late nineteenth century.³⁴ Of greater significance as an explanation of the notable proportion of female agricultural workers who were related to their employer in the 1930s is agricultural depression. Farmers were increasingly unable to afford to employ non-family members during the inter-war years. The proportion of hired workers to family members continued to fall through the 1930s, when the agricultural workforce declined faster than in any previous decade, and by 1939, almost 44 per cent of agricultural holdings did not employ regular workers.³⁵ The decline of farm service and of domestic service within wealthy, rural households and farms meant that the ties which Edward Higgs traced in late nineteenth century between domestic and farm service, based upon familial connections between servant and employer or upon a supportive network of other servants in the household, had almost entirely disappeared by the later 1930s.³⁶

These changes contributed to a reduction in both demand for and supply of young female farm servants. In southern England demand for farm servants had been sharply declining since the nineteenth century: family hiring was infrequent by the beginning of the twentieth century in many southern counties, and fruit and vegetable production, increasingly common in the south-east, did not demand the services of residential farm servants to the extent that was true of larger cereal or dairy farms further north. In some northern counties young women continued to find employment as farm servants, on year-long contracts, at hiring fairs. However, the system of family hiring was sharply declining by the 1930s, reducing the incentive for girls to remain in the parental home after leaving school, and for parents to maintain them there. Moreover, the effect of agricultural depression, in reducing demand for long-term farm servants in those northern areas where this form of employment had survived the First World War, made such employment increasingly unattractive to young women and their parents. Domestic service, by contrast, could offer secure work with some promotion prospects.

Information about the working conditions of servants is limited, since their employment was not regulated and therefore not subject to the scrutiny of Ministry of Labour investigations into wages and working hours. The particular paucity of data on farm servants reflects the urban and industrial focus of most contemporary studies. While the Agricultural Wages Board set wages between 1917 and 1939 (1921–4 excepted), wages were not nationally uniform even if the minimum was paid.³⁷ Consequently, personal testimonies are the most valuable source of information, although it is impossible to generalise from these, since farm servants' hours and conditions clearly varied greatly. Most, like Winifred Foley, seem to have worked from dawn until late evening, although their workload could vary according to the season.³⁸ Seasons did not significantly affect domestic servants in non-farming households, but their workload was

³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 78–9.

³⁵ J. Martin, *The development of modern agriculture: British farming since 1931* (2000), p. 21; A. Armstrong, *Farmworkers: a social and economic history, 1770–1880* (1988), p. 201.

³⁶ E. Higgs, 'Domestic service and household production', in A. V. John (ed.), *Unequal opportunities: Women's employment in England, 1800–1918* (1986), pp. 133–6.

³⁷ Howkins, *Death of rural England*, p. 83.

³⁸ Foley, *Child*, pp. 145–6.

also heavy: the *Social Survey of Merseyside* found that servants' weekly hours ranged from 57.0 to 68.5 hours, with a median of 62 hours per week.³⁹ As Winifred Foley commented, most employers 'needed a creature that would run on very little fuel and would not question her lot'.⁴⁰ Junior maids often worked the longest hours: Marion Kent's first job required her to work almost continuously between 6.30am and 10pm. However, the conditions of servants in wealthy households employing large staffs seem to have been slightly better regulated than those of young women working in smaller, single servant households. Marion Kent did benefit from a proper teatime, and from a weekly half-holiday, and this seems to have been typical of servants in larger households.⁴¹ Mrs Halliday, who was expected to act as children's nurse, as well as cleaner and cook, to the country doctor's family for whom she worked in Yorkshire in the early 1930s, is representative of many servants in smaller, single-servant households.⁴² The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) admitted that the long working hours and limitations to workers' liberty were compelling disadvantages for domestic workers.⁴³

Domestic servants' wages were consistently lower than those of industrial or clerical employees. A survey of juveniles' wages undertaken by the Ministry of Labour in 1929 indicated that young women aged between eighteen and twenty could expect to earn about 20s. per week in an office or factory, while boys could expect about 22s. Yet the *Social Survey of Merseyside* and the *New London Survey* found that in the early 1930s, the average weekly wage for domestic servants between 18 and 20 years of age was 11s. 6d. on Merseyside and for servants aged between 18 and 21 in London.⁴⁴ Wages tended to be higher in large, wealthy households than in smaller farming households or middle class urban homes. Marion Kent earned just under 10s. 0d. per week in her first job as a 16 year old maid to a wealthy Derbyshire family in 1933,⁴⁵ while Mrs Halliday, who took up her first post in a smaller, middle-class household at the same age and time, earned half this,⁴⁶ as did Nora Holyroyd.⁴⁷ Wages were, however, supplemented by board and lodging, and it was this which made the occupation suitable for young women from rural communities unable to offer them local employment.

Entering employment marked the beginning of financial independence for young women. While young workers were generally expected to hand over their wage packet to their mothers as a contribution to the family economy, most received a small proportion of weekly spending money in return. Historians have pointed to this as evidence of young wage-earners' increasing ability to engage in commercial leisure pursuits, as cinema and dance hall provision increased.⁴⁸ While servants' wages were small, many exercised some personal autonomy over their pay. The continuance of 'living in' meant that young women tended to leave the parental home far earlier than their brothers in those rural areas, such as Northumberland or the Forest of Dean, where there were few opportunities for female employment. The degree of personal

³⁹ D. Caradog Jones, *Social survey of Merseyside* (3 vols, 1934), II, p. 316.

⁴⁰ Foley, *Child*, p. 140.

⁴¹ LRO, NWSA, 1988.0060. See also J. Rennie, *Every other sunday* (1955), pp. 31–2.

⁴² LRO, NWSA, 1999.0088.

⁴³ Quoted in J. Gollan, *Youth in British industry* (1937), p. 114.

⁴⁴ Caradog Jones, *Social survey*, II, p. 311, and Llewellyn Smith, *New survey*, II, p. 468.

⁴⁵ LRO, NWSA, 1988.0090.

⁴⁶ LRO, NWSA, 1999.0088.

⁴⁷ LRO, NWSA, 2000.0651A, recorded interview with Nora Holyroyd.

⁴⁸ D. Fowler, *The first teenagers* (1995), p. 1.

independence that this offered them was enhanced by a change in payment methods: while in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employers of domestic and farm servants had often sent their workers' wages directly to their parents, giving the servant a few pennies for weekly pocket money, by the 1920s, servants were usually responsible for sending their wage packet to their mother themselves, after deducting an appropriate amount of pocket money from it.⁴⁹

Yet despite this, residential servants had extremely limited financial independence. The level of young workers' spending money was determined by their wages and the demands of the family economy; the poverty experienced by many rural households left little extra cash for personal spending money. Economic recovery meant that in 1936, Bowley calculated that the average income of working-class families was 76s. *od.*, including a margin of 20s. *od.* for non-essential expenditure, which increased leisure and luxury consumption.⁵⁰ This was not, however, the case in rural districts. In 1937 Rowntree calculated that a rural family with three children would require 41s. *od.* per week for bare subsistence, but the weekly wage of ordinary agricultural workers was just 35s. 3*d.*⁵¹ Consequently, many households continued to rely on the contributions of young wage-earners to meet basic needs right up until the eve of the Second World War. Commercial leisure consumption, and the development of a commercialised youth culture, were, then, largely confined to urban areas. Frances Fuller, who grew up in Lewes, East Sussex, recalled that:

I used to roam the hills ... because I had no money. I was the eldest and when I first went out to work my mother took all the cash, so I had nothing. And read. Belonged to a library and read.⁵²

This had significant consequences for gendered roles in rural society. While gender did not significantly fracture youthful leisure consumption in urban areas, young rural women often experienced far more limited financial and social independence than their brothers in areas where young men could obtain industrial work while young women aided their mothers with domestic duties, or entered poorly paid residential service. The non-cash benefits of service employment partially compensated for this; some servants, like Edith Edwards, saw the provision of board and lodging and their limited access to leisure as an advantage, noting that they were able to save more than other young workers.⁵³ This trend dated back to the nineteenth century, and enabled them to offer more help to the parental home, or to save for marriage.⁵⁴ It encouraged these young women to look to marriage, rather than to their leisure consumption, as a means of personal fulfilment.

But while some important continuities in employment patterns and household relations can be traced between the pre- and post-First World War decades, significant changes were also

⁴⁹ See for example NLSL, MEMC, A78/a/1, p. 4.

⁵⁰ A. L. Bowley, *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom since 1860* (1937), p. 39.

⁵¹ B. S. Rowntree, *The human needs of labour* (1937), p. 106.

⁵² ESRO, Lewes, interview with Frances Fuller, AMS 6416/1/7/45.

⁵³ TSL, MSC, tape no. 607, interview with Edith Edwards.

⁵⁴ B. Lemire, "Manly character" and "practical wisdom": saving and social discipline in nineteenth-century England', paper presented at the Economic History Society Annual Conference, 6 Apr. 2002.

occurring. Changes in labour demand exacerbated young women's migration from rural areas, although patterns varied according to locality. The high proportion of young women employed as domestic servants in Sussex testified to the large number of elderly, relatively wealthy householders, and private schools and nursing homes in the county. Furthermore, suburbia and commuting were beginning to change the composition of rural communities in the south-east and to provide 'places' for young women close to home by the 1930s.⁵⁵ As the borders between rural and urban communities became increasingly blurred in such areas, so young women's horizons expanded beyond their village, or even the local county town. Yet in other areas, such as Northumberland, or South Wales, long-distance migration increasingly characterised the employment pathways of young women whose local employment opportunities were extremely limited. Young rural women were, then, important in social and economic developments within the countryside, but also in rural depopulation, examined in more detail in the following section.

However, by the later 1930s, demand for young, residential servants was declining. By the mid-1930s, small households, offices and institutions were increasingly recruiting older women to undertake daily, part time cleaning jobs, rather than younger, full-time servants.⁵⁶ While the Census does not distinguish between residential and daily servants, a substantial rise in the number of charwomen and cleaners was recorded between 1921 and 1931; only 6 per cent of them were aged between 14 and 24 in 1931. The period 1918 to 1939, but particularly the 1930s, thus witnessed the decline of the occupation which had characterised the youth of many rural women for more than a century. The impact which the emergence of alternative forms of employment had upon this trend, and upon young women workers' own aspirations, is the subject of the final section of this article.

III

While the decline in the importance of domestic and farm service as occupations for young women was partly due to changes in labour demand, it was also caused by their own determination not to enter service if alternative work was available. Expanding labour demand in the retail and industrial sectors facilitated mobility out of poorly paid domestic and farm work by the mid-1930s. Retail employment was particularly significant for young women in or near country towns or larger villages. In 1911 190,124 women accounted for 36.6 per cent of all shop assistants, but by 1931, 394,531 women were so employed, constituting almost 50 per cent of all assistants, and 258,497 young women, almost 10 per cent of young women workers, were thus occupied. Trade depression in the early 1930s, which particularly affected shopkeepers in rural and mining areas, led many to cut wage costs by employing young women, rather than men who would be eligible for a higher wage. While gender differentials in juvenile wages appear to have been very slight, they became significant from the late teens. In addition, young women were likely to give up full time paid work when they married, and were thus unlikely to be employed on the full, adult women's wage rate for very long.

Girls welcomed the opportunity for local, relatively well paid employment which these

⁵⁵ Howkins, *Death of rural England*, p. 93.

⁵⁶ Llewellyn Smith, *New survey*, VIII (ii), p. 315.

changes offered. Linda McCullough Thew, who became a shop assistant in her home town of Ashington after leaving school in the early 1930s, was aware that just ten years earlier domestic service would have been the only employment open to her, and welcomed the additional freedom but also her ability to make a substantial contribution to the family home from her wages.⁵⁷ The economic recovery of the mid-1930s increased local opportunities for retail work, and for clerical employment in urban areas within daily travelling distance, raising the value of young women to the household. Edith Edwards, who grew up near Macclesfield, had no choice of occupation except domestic service in 1929, but her sister 'was 10 years younger than me, and times had changed by the time she left school – and – she went into a shop in Knutsford'.⁵⁸ Joan Perry, who lived in the rural town of Lewes, Sussex, also became a shop assistant when she left school in 1939, and felt more fortunate than her older sisters, who had entered domestic service 'because that was the only thing then, you had to go'.⁵⁹ Domestic service remained the largest employer of Northumberland's young women until the Second World War, and this was also true of many other rural areas, but employment patterns were gradually changing from the beginning of the 1930s, stimulated by depression and then by economic expansion.

This gradual exodus from domestic and farm service in and around England's growth towns meant that demand for servants greatly outstripped supply from the late 1920s as middle-class women's magazines and periodicals testify. This shaped the government's treatment of young women's unemployment. Little attention has been paid to youth unemployment by historians, but it in fact greatly affected a small but significant minority of young women in depressed, rural areas. Throughout the inter-war years, the depressed areas of north-west England's textile communities and the coalfields of Wales and north east England accounted for over three quarters of the juvenile unemployed. In 1930, 1.8 per cent of 16 and 17 year old insured girls and 3.8 per cent of insured boys in London were unemployed, but the comparable figures for north-east England were 7.8 per cent and 6.8 per cent.⁶⁰ These figures are probably an underestimate. Young people under the age of sixteen were ineligible for benefit prior to 1934, and thus lacked any incentive to register as unemployed. After a 1922 ruling by the Court of Referees, those young women who were otherwise eligible for benefit were rendered ineligible if they refused to take up a position in domestic service. In addition, entering domestic service rendered workers ineligible for future insurance contributions and meant that many former domestic servants did not register as unemployed.

By the late 1920s, increasing concern to remedy a regional mismatch of labour demand and supply led the Ministry of Labour to make labour mobility a central element of youth unemployment policy. Consequently, juveniles and women were included in an official labour transference scheme established in 1928.⁶¹ While this scheme has often been seen as a new departure, it in fact relied on the existing migratory pattern of young rural women, whose employment in residential domestic service had long meant that many left home at the age of fourteen. It also extended a policy approach first utilised in the immediate First World War

⁵⁷ Thew, *Pit Village*, pp. 123–4.

⁵⁸ TLSL, MSC, tape no. 36.

⁵⁹ ESRO, Lewes, AMS 6416/1/7/51, interview with Joan Perry.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Labour, *Report on juvenile employment*

for the year 1934 (Cmd 4861, 1934–5), p. 10.

⁶¹ Ministry of Labour, *Memorandum on the shortage, surplus and redistribution of juvenile labour in England and Wales during the years 1930–1938* (1931), p. 4.

years. Attempts to broaden the recruitment of domestic servants had been initiated through the Central Committee for Women's Training and Employment (CCWTE), funded by the Ministry of Labour, from 1921. In 1921–22 over 10,000 women and girls, a large proportion from the north-east coalfield, were given training to assist them to return to or enter residential domestic service, or to prepare them for transition from worker to full time housewife;⁶² similar numbers were trained in subsequent years until the mid-1930s. Ministry of Labour officials were clearly less concerned with the skills young women learnt in domestic service than with reducing unemployment as quickly and easily as possible. The scheme to send rural women into domestic service was a relatively easy means of achieving this without interfering greatly in the operation of the labour market.

The labour transference scheme introduced in 1928 had different aims to this earlier policy. While the CCWTE initiative was primarily intended to reduce the number of unemployed women without tampering very much with the relationship between labour and capital, the labour transference scheme aimed to speed up and increase the transference of young people, and in so doing to ease and subsidise industrial growth. It was chiefly aimed at transferring young people and juveniles from the coalfields and agricultural districts of South Wales, Durham, Lanarkshire and Northumberland to towns in the south and midlands of England. While adult men constituted the largest group of transferees, juveniles and women (usually under 25 years of age) constituted 54 per cent of transferees between 1928 and 1938, and more girls than boys were transferred, particularly during the early 1930s. Each participant was guaranteed a job with 'prospects' of permanent employment, wages not below the local juvenile average, lodgings, and 'after care'. Little welfare provision was made for young adults, although all transferees were guaranteed one return fare home.⁶³

This scheme exacerbated existing migratory patterns. By 1934, 77.1 per cent of young women transferees came from the north-east of England and Wales, with only a small proportion coming from the north-west, largely because of the prevalence of short time and underemployment, rather than unemployment, in the latter region, but also because of the longer tradition of young women's migration from the north-east and Welsh coalfields and rural districts. Some existing migration patterns were utilised; for example, a large number of young women from Welsh villages were sent into domestic service in Oxford and Bristol.⁶⁴

While the labour transference scheme clearly played a significant role in supplying subsidised labour to growth industries, thus lowering their production costs, the experience of young women transferees indicates that this was not its only consequence. Despite the promotion of opportunities in the new industries by Ministry of Labour publicity, young women were not transferred into industrial work until 1931 and 87 per cent of girls transferred between 1928 and 1935 were placed in domestic service positions.⁶⁵ All adult women transferred – usually young and single – were placed in domestic service. The labour transference scheme was clearly prompted not only by a concern to match labour supply with demand in the new industries, but also to reduce

⁶² Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment, *Second interim report for the period ending 31st December 1922* (1923), p. 8.

⁶³ A short outline of the scheme is included in Ministry of Labour, *Report on juvenile employment for*

the year 1934 (Cmd 4861, 1935), p. 11.

⁶⁴ Bristol Advisory Committee for Juvenile Employment, *Annual report for the year 1930* (1931), p. 5.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Labour, *Annual report for the year 1933* (Cmd 4860, 1934–5), p. 55.

the unemployment figures by supplying domestic servants to households in those areas where local young women were increasingly taking up better paid factory employment. Prior to the mid-1930s, it sustained a declining occupation characterised by low pay and low status.

This government scheme failed to fill the demand for servants with young rural women. It was not until 1936 that more girls were placed in industrial work than domestic employment,⁶⁶ reflecting slow industrial growth. However, the labour transference scheme indirectly encouraged the existing movement from domestic service to retail, clerical or waitressing work. Increasingly, entering domestic service in a large urban area was viewed by young women as a temporary stop-gap while they found more lucrative and congenial employment in factory, shop or café.⁶⁷ As a commercialised youth culture began to develop in Britain's cities, and employment opportunities on farms or in rural households declined in number and security, the attraction of migrating to the cities grew. This trend was already discernible between 1921 and 1931, when the decrease in the number of domestic servants aged under 16 corresponded with a rise in the number of waitresses of this age, from 1242 in 1921 to 1833 in 1931, a rise of 47.6 per cent, and of shop assistants from 27,618 to 31,141, an increase of 12.8 per cent. Social surveys indicate that this trend accelerated in the 1930s. In Liverpool, for example, servants increasingly transferred to retail employment from the late 1920s.⁶⁸ By the mid-1930s this pattern of mobility was well established. Winifred Foley, for example, eventually became a chambermaid in a London guest house in the mid-1930s, which allowed her more freedom than residential service in a private household, and she subsequently became a waitress.

This represented an acceleration in the migration patterns of young rural women, which had begun to attain significance prior to the First World War. The evidence presented above supports Hill's assertion that young, single women constituted an extremely important group of rural migrants in modern England.⁶⁹ Young women migrated at an earlier age than men, and the gender differential in outward migration from rural districts increased over the inter-war years. As Savage's data on 1911 and 1951 highlight, the female/male ratio began to diverge from the national norm from the age of 15. In 1911 the ratio for England and Wales for 15–20 year olds stood at 102, but at 86 in rural districts, a marked drop in the ratio for school-age juveniles. In 1951 this trend had increased, with the ratio recorded as 105 for England and Wales, but 71 for rural areas.⁷⁰ This reflected the growing significance of young women as a proportion of migrants from rural areas, a movement which the evidence above has demonstrated did not simply reflect the immediate consequences of the two World Wars, but rather developed over the inter-war period. While job opportunities were increasing for young women in rural areas by the mid-1930s, the attractions of urban life were clearly also being heightened by employment expansion and the growth of commercialised leisure. The decline of domestic service as an employer of young, rural women in inter-war England thus marked the beginnings of new patterns of migration, rather than its cessation, and denoted a new development in the relationship between country and town.

⁶⁶ *Ministry of Labour Gazette* 46 (1936), p. 418.

⁶⁷ P. Scott, 'The State, internal migration, and the growth of new industrial communities in inter-war Britain', *English Historical Rev.*, 115 (2000), p. 345.

⁶⁸ Caradog Jones, *Merseyside*, II, p. 302.

⁶⁹ Hill, 'Rural-urban Migration', p. 186.

⁷⁰ Saville, *Rural Depopulation*, p. 116.

IV

The employment experiences of rural young women in inter-war England qualify existing representations of inter-war youth, which are largely based upon urban communities. Youth was differentiated by location, and in rural areas the 1920s and 1930s was less markedly a period of affluence and leisure. This was largely because of the depressed rural economy, which maintained young women's importance as household breadwinners throughout the inter-war years. The economic value of supplementary earners in fact escalated in those rural communities hit hard by male unemployment. The rise in domestic service employment in the late 1920s and early 1930s indicates that young women's labour force participation was governed by familial need, and could be crucial in preventing a family falling below the poverty line. Servants did not, on the whole, experience the decline in working hours, and consequent greater access to leisure time, which workers in other sectors benefited from during the 1930s. The experiences of these young women thus qualify optimistic assessments of the inter-war period as one of smooth economic growth.

However, young women were also agents of socio-economic change in inter-war rural communities, and as such provide an insight into the changing relationship between town and country in inter-war England. They were in demand as single servants among middle-class householders in suburban areas, and increasingly in the retail sector which expanded to cater for the needs of the communities developing on the outskirts of towns and cities. This diminished the supply of domestic servants, and meant that young women were the constituency most likely to bring elements of commercialised leisure and youth culture into rural communities, providing a market for retail services, cinemas and dance halls. These young women were also the section of the community most likely to migrate to urban districts. It was not until the mid-1930s that economic expansion was sufficient to offer young rural women industrial employment away from home. More significant was the expansion in retail and waitressing employment in urban communities as young women resident in towns and cities increasingly left these low-paying jobs to work in better-paying factories and offices. The difference in commercial leisure consumption between town and country contributed to a perceived cultural difference between the two which heightened the attraction of urban living for young workers. While a labour transference scheme facilitated this change in young women's migration patterns, it is also evident that young rural women's own determination to leave the long hours, low pay and limited independence of domestic and farm service shaped a transformation in their employment patterns, and the composition of rural communities. However, the attraction of these young women for employers across the increasingly varied range of jobs they entered remained their low cost and disposability. Consequently, their employment continued to reinforce their position as dependants upon, if not within, the parental household, limiting the social and financial independence with which youth was increasingly becoming associated.