

Married with children: the family status of female day-labourers at two south-western farms*

by Joyce Burnette

Abstract

While female factory workers and agricultural servants were primarily young and single, female agricultural labourers were more likely to be middle-aged, married mothers. This paper examines the female labourers at two south-western farms and finds that middle-aged married women account for the majority of days worked. Widows and mothers of illegitimate children account for only a small fraction of the workforce. While evidence from the Bragg farm suggests that some mothers worked when their children were still infants, evidence from the Estcourt farm suggests that women reduced their labour force participation when their children were young. Child care was available for mothers who worked outside the home, but it was expensive.

We tend to think of the working mother as a modern invention, and imagine that in the past women ceased working outside the home when they were married, or at least when they had their first child. However, the participation rate of married women has fluctuated over time, and only certain periods fit this description. In the early twentieth century, only a few married women worked; in English towns only 10 per cent of married women were in the labour force.¹ However, such low participation rates seem to have existed for only a brief moment and were reached only after a long period of decline in the nineteenth century. According to the census, the participation rate of married women declined from 25 per cent in 1851 to 10 per cent in 1901.² No comprehensive measures of participation rates exist for the early nineteenth century, but the measures of participation among working-class married women suggest decline. Using family budgets, Horrell and Humphries found that the participation rate among working-class wives was about two-thirds at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but had fallen to 45 per cent by the middle of the century. Even after controlling for male income, female wages, and fertility, there was still a downward trend in female labour force participation.³ Participation

* This paper is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant 0213954. Conclusions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

¹ Timothy Hatton and Roy Bailey, 'Women's work in census and survey, 1911-31', *EcHR* 54 (2001), pp.87-107.

² Hilary Land, 'The family wage', *Feminist Rev.*, 6 (1980), p.61. Hatton and Bailey conclude that the censuses of the early twentieth century provide accurate female participation rates, so if the 1851 census

understates female participation, the decline was even greater than these numbers suggest.

³ Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male-breadwinner family, 1790-1865', *EcHR* 48 (1995), pp.89-117.

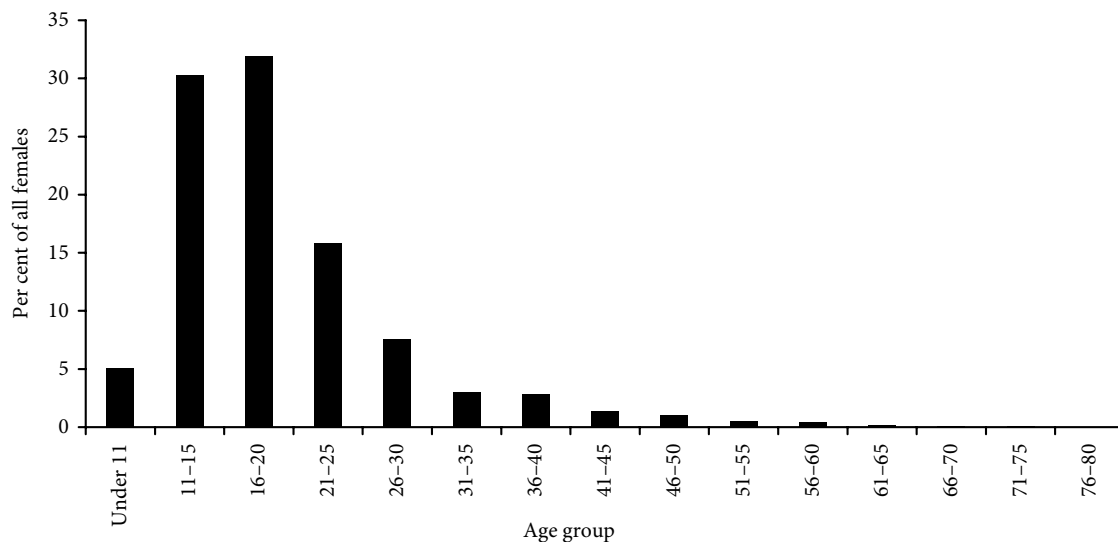


FIGURE 1. Age distribution of female factory workers

Source: 'Report from James Mitchell to the Central Board of Commissioners', BPP 1834 (167) XIX.

rates, though, varied greatly from one region to another. Berg found that the participation rates of married women in the late eighteenth century were under ten per cent in Corfe Castle, Dorset, but were much higher in Cardington, Bedfordshire, where two out of every three married women were employed.⁴

If half to two-thirds of working-class wives were in the labour force, where were they working? In spite of Engels' claim that 'large-scale industry has transferred the woman from the house to the labour market and the factory, and makes her, often enough, the bread-winner of the family', very few married women worked in factories.⁵ Female factory workers were overwhelmingly young. Figure 1 shows the age distribution of female factory workers from an 1833 survey that covered seven industries.⁶ Two-thirds of female factory workers were 20 years old or younger. Given this age structure, it is not surprising that only 10 per cent were married.⁷ The high participation rates of married women in the early nineteenth century were not caused by the advent of the factory. Instead, married women worked in more traditional sectors of the economy. Large numbers of married women were employed in cottage industries, which allowed women to work from their homes, and in household services such as house cleaning or

⁴ Maxine Berg, 'What difference did women's work make to the Industrial Revolution?', *History Workshop J.*, 35 (1993), pp.38, 40.

⁵ Frederick Engels, *The origin of the family, private property and the state*, repr. in K.Marx and F.Engels,

Selected Works (New York, 1986), p.508.

⁶ 'Report from James Mitchell to the Central Board of Commissioners', BPP 1834 (167) XIX.

⁷ BPP 1834 XIX; Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women workers and the Industrial Revolution*, (1930), p.198.

laundry services. Alternatively they made clothing or food for others.⁸ This paper will examine another important employer of married women: agricultural day-labour.

Women participated in agricultural work in many different ways. Women contributed as wives and daughters of farmers, or as farmers in their own right. (Seven per cent of the farmers and graziers in the 1841 census were female.⁹) Poorer women were also engaged in various forms of independent agricultural production when they were fortunate enough to have access to commons, cottage gardens, or allotments.¹⁰ Women worked as agricultural employees, either as indoor servants or outdoor labourers. The 1851 census suggests that about 32 per cent of servants and 5 per cent of labourers were women, but the number of females in both categories was underestimated.¹¹ Female servants were generally younger than female labourers. Examining data from the 1851 census for Somerset, Speechley finds that the vast majority of farm servants were in their teens or twenties, whilst the distribution of female labourers was fairly uniform between ages 20 and 70, with lower levels of employment for those aged under 20 or over 70.¹² Whilst the age distribution of indoor servants looked much like the age distribution of factory workers, outdoor labourers were older and more likely to be married.

The 1843 report on *Women and children in agriculture* suggests that female labourers were mostly married women. Alfred Austin, reporting on the south-west, concluded that 'The ages at which women are employed vary from 15 to 70, or even older ... the majority of the women who work in the fields are above the age of 30; and perhaps I may add, that they are generally married, and [are] sometimes widows with children.'¹³ Other regions gave similar reports. In his report on Yorkshire and Northumberland, Sir F.H. Doyle concluded that 'it is not the system for women to work in the fields till they are married, and as young wives are commonly employed in attendance upon their children, the main body of agricultural women workers is composed of widows and matrons.'¹⁴ A Sussex farmer reported that 'Married women are more frequently employed than single.'¹⁵ However, contemporary observers may not always have reached the right conclusions. Both the investigators and their witnesses in the 1843 report were concerned about the 'moral effects' of allowing single women to work in the fields with men, and their comments may have been attempts to allay such fears and justify the employment of women. We know that Austin reached an erroneous conclusion about allotments in

⁸ On the importance of household services as a female occupation in London, see Peter Earle, 'The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', repr. in Pamela Sharpe (ed.), *Women's work: The English experience, 1650-1914* (1998), pp. 121-49.

⁹ BPP 1844, XXVII.

¹⁰ For a discussion of how women used commons, see Jane Humphries, 'Enclosures, common rights, and women: the proletarianization of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,' *JEcH* 50 (1990), pp. 17-42.

¹¹ On the undercounting of female farm servants, see Edward Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth century censuses,' *History Workshop J.*,

23 (1987), pp. 59-80. On the undercounting of female labourers, see Joyce Burnette, 'The wages and employment of female day-labourers in English agriculture, 1740-1850,' *EcHR* 57 (2004), pp. 664-90.

¹² Helen Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural day labourers in Somerset, c.1685-1870' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 1999).

¹³ *Report from Special Poor Law Commissioners on women and children in agriculture* (1843), p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 293-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203. In Carbrooke, Norfolk out-door work was 'generally done by married women and children,' *Ibid.*, p. 243. Reports from Castle Acre, Norfolk, suggest that most of the women in work gangs were young and unmarried, *Ibid.*, p. 277, but gang labour was not typical.

Somerset.¹⁶ This paper checks the claims that female labourers were mainly middle-aged married women against records from two south-western farms, and finds that in this respect the conclusions of the report seem to be accurate.

Previous work on the family status of female agricultural labourers is limited, and does not provide a uniform picture. For a much earlier period (1593–4), Hassell Smith finds approximately equal numbers of married and single women at a Norfolk farm (15 unmarried women, 16 married women, and 5 widows).¹⁷ Amongst recent writers on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Pamela Sharpe finds that female day-labourers on a Devon estate in the 1790s were single women in their twenties who were the daughters or sisters of the male labourers, and that ‘most of them had had illegitimate children, or went on to have them in the future’.¹⁸ In this case the female labourers were not a cross-section of working women, but a select group of women who had few alternatives. Nicola Verdon, studying four different farms, reports a different demographic: she finds that nearly all of the women working at these farms were married.¹⁹ Helen Speechley provides the most detailed description of the demographics of female labourers in her dissertation on female and child workers in Somerset agriculture. She reports that most of the women working at the Dunster Castle Farm in 1848 had children, though few had young children. Out of 13 women, all but two had had children, though only seven had children aged under 16 at the time.²⁰

This paper will examine female outdoor farm labourers working on farms at Shipton Moyne (Gloucestershire) and Thorncombe (Dorset, formerly Devon) and will show that most of these women were married and had children. While census records are used for demographic information, I do not rely on census records to identify which women were labourers because it is well known that the census did a poor job of recording the employment of females in general and female farm workers in particular. Miller, Speechley, and Verdon have all documented cases where women who worked substantial numbers of days as farm labourers were not recorded as farm labourers in the census.²¹ Instead, I use the wage books of the two farms to identify female labourers, and the census enumerators’ books and parish registers to determine the age, marital status, and childbearing history of these women.

¹⁶ Austin claimed they were uncommon in that county, but Burchardt finds enough evidence of allotments to contradict this conclusion. Austin’s error probably results from the fact that he visited only one region in Somerset. Jeremy Burchardt, *The allotment movement in England, 1793–1873* (2002), pp. 56–8.

¹⁷ A. Hassell Smith, ‘Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk’, *Continuity and Change* 4 (1989), p. 30.

¹⁸ Pamela Sharpe, ‘Time and wages of West Country

workfolks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, *Local Population Stud.* 55 (1995), p. 67.

¹⁹ Nicola Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth-century England* (2002), p. 128.

²⁰ Speechley, ‘Female and child agricultural day labourers’, ch. 7.

²¹ C. Miller, ‘The hidden workforce: female field workers in Gloucestershire, 1870–1901’, *Southern Hist.* 6 (1984), pp. 139–61; Speechley, ‘Female and child agricultural day labourers’ and Verdon, *Rural women workers*.

I

First I examine the female labourers working at a farm owned by Thomas G.B. Estcourt in Shipton Moyne, Gloucestershire, between 1828 and 1849.²² Estcourt was a large landowner who rented out most of his land, but kept a farm in Shipton Moyne in hand. He lived in Devizes, so he did not manage the farm directly, but left it in the charge of his steward, Thomas Marshall. The wage accounts used here were kept by Marshall, and were checked periodically by Estcourt. As an MP and a member of the 1843 Select Committee on the Labouring Poor, Estcourt was not a typical employer, but I do not expect his status to influence the demographics of the female labourers that Thomas Marshall hired to work on the farm.²³

The Estcourt farm was about 250 acres, and was a mixed farm, though mainly pastoral. The main products sold off the farm were sheep, cattle, wheat, and barley. Over the period 1828 to 1849, only 16 per cent of the farm's sales came from grain, while 34 per cent came from sheep and 19 per cent from cattle. Pigs were also sold, and occasionally potatoes or other vegetables. The farm's cows were rented out, so none of the workers at this farm were doing dairy work.

This farm hired a relatively large number of female day-labourers. For England as a whole, women were about 13 per cent of agricultural day-labourers, but provided 20 per cent of all days worked at the Estcourt farm.²⁴ Table 1 shows the total number of days worked by men, women, boys, and girls at the Estcourt farm. Since the wage books do not contain information on the age of workers, children are distinguished from adults by their wages. Males who earned half the median male wage or less are considered to be boys, and females who earned three-fourths of the median female wage or less are considered to be girls.²⁵ Wage profiles estimated from this farm suggest that boys who earned half the median wage or less were 16 years old or younger.²⁶ Girls who earned less than 75 per cent of the adult female wage were probably 14 or younger. However, less than one per cent of all days worked at this farm were worked by girls. This supports the conclusions of the 1843 report on *Women and children in agriculture*, which suggested that females started to work as agricultural labourers at the age of 15 or 16, and that younger girls were engaged at home in housework or cottage industry, or sent to work as domestic servants.²⁷ Boys, on the other hand, were a substantial part of the labour force, contributing 19 per cent of all days worked, or approximately the same amount as women.

The wage accounts of the Estcourt farm contain the names of 71 different female workers between 1828 and 1849. Many of these women appear in the wage books for only one season, but others worked over several years. Counting each year as a separate observation for the women who worked multiple years, there are a total of 158 woman-year observations. Some of

²² Gloucestershire Record Office [hereafter GRO] D1571, vols A40–A50.

²³ Estcourt was a supporter of allotments. In 1793 his father had implemented what was probably the first allotment system in England. Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 28, 101.

²⁴ Burnette, 'Wages and employment', p. 683.

²⁵ I do not follow this rule in the case of Sarah Beasant, who earned less than three-fourths the normal

female wage, but whom I know to have been in her 70s when she worked at the Estcourt farm.

²⁶ Joyce Burnette, 'How skilled were English agricultural labourers in the early nineteenth century?' *ECHR* 59 (2006), pp. 688–716. One drawback of this method is that I may confuse very old workers with children.

²⁷ *Report on women and children in agriculture*, pp. 6, 74, 82.

TABLE 1. Per cent of days worked by men, women, boys, and girls at the Estcourt Farm in Shipton Moyne, Gloucestershire

<i>Year</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1828	68.6	14.5	16.9	0.0
1829	61.9	17.5	20.6	0.0
1830	68.7	17.0	12.9	1.4
1831	62.6	17.8	19.5	0.0
1832	68.3	23.5	8.2	0.0
1833	67.0	17.0	16.1	0.0
1834	56.5	20.3	23.2	0.0
1835	53.6	18.1	28.4	0.0
1836	62.2	16.9	20.1	0.9
1837	64.1	21.8	14.1	0.0
1838	58.1	21.2	20.7	0.0
1839	49.3	27.3	23.2	0.1
1840	50.4	27.9	21.6	0.0
1841	51.5	25.8	20.9	1.6
1842	56.6	27.0	16.4	0.0
1843	61.5	18.6	19.8	0.0
1844	57.9	17.7	22.1	2.3
1845	59.1	19.4	19.4	2.1
1846	63.6	19.7	16.6	0.2
1847	59.1	18.5	22.4	0.0
1848	62.5	19.6	17.9	0.0
1849	62.7	17.5	19.5	0.3
Average	60.3	20.2	19.1	0.4

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40–A50.

Note: Piece-work is included; piece-work payments are converted into days using the average wage for the appropriate type of worker.

the female agricultural labourers worked regularly, and others only casually. Even the regular female workers, though, did not work as many days as the male labourers. A number of the male labourers worked six days a week for 52 weeks, a total of 312 days per year and possibly more if they worked Sundays as well. No women worked 312 days in a year, but Elizabeth Bicknell fell only one day short of this in 1842. At the other extreme, the smallest number of days worked was one day, and it was fairly common for women to work only a few days during haymaking or harvest. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the number of days worked in a year. The most common number of days worked was between 21 and 40 days in a year, or about four to six weeks. This reflects the fact that many women were hired only for haymaking and harvest.

Casual workers are distinguished from regular workers by drawing an arbitrary line at 60

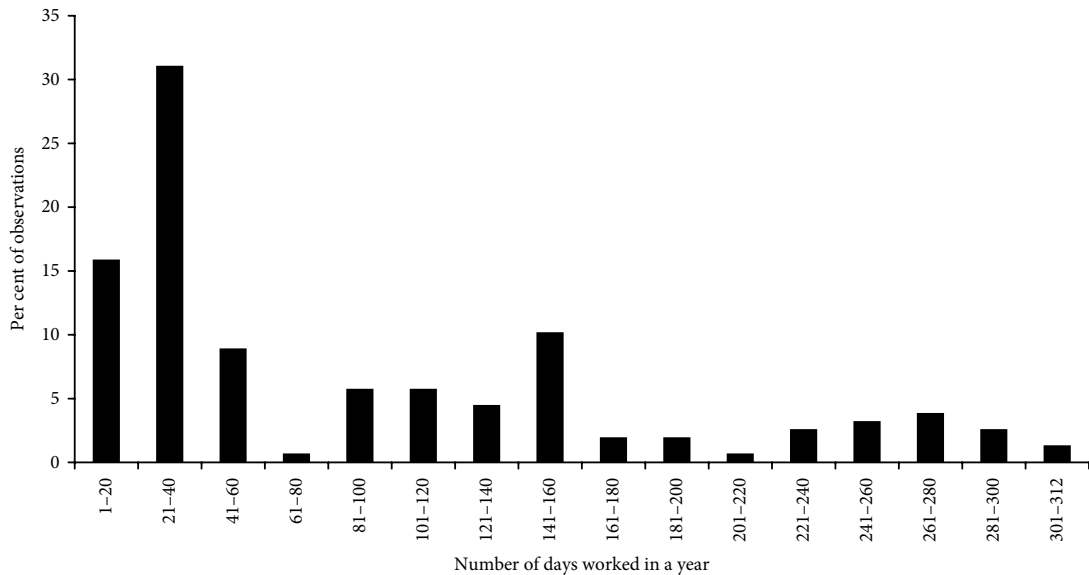


FIGURE 2. Distribution of days worked per year by female labourers, Estcourt Farm

Note: Between 1828 and 1849, 71 women worked an average of 2.225 years each, so there are 158 observations.

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40–A50.

days of work. Women who averaged more than 60 days per year for the years that they were employed are identified as regular workers, and women who averaged less than 60 days per year as casual workers. Table 2 lists the number of days worked by all twelve of the regular workers in at this farm. Elizabeth Bailey and Elizabeth Bicknell were the most regularly employed female labourers. Both of them worked 19 out of the 22 years, and averaged over six months of work per year. Most of the other regular workers appeared in the wage accounts for only a few years between 1828 and 1849.

A shorter run of wage records from a farm at Thorncombe, Dorset was also examined to check whether the results from the Estcourt farm are representative.²⁸ This farm was owned by John Bragg of Thorncombe and was also managed by a bailiff. Wage records for this farm are available for only two complete years, 1838 and 1839, during which time eleven different females were hired. The farm was most probably a dairy farm. Detailed records of farm output are not available, but the accounts for 1831–7 include the purchases of two cows and six ewes, and the sale of six cows and £55 worth of hay.²⁹ One of the women working at Bragg's farm, Mary Langford, earned substantially more than the other women (14*d.* per day rather than 8*d.* or 9*d.*) probably because of her skills as a dairy woman.³⁰ She also worked a full 312 days per

²⁸ Dorset Record Office [hereafter DRO], D83/22.

²⁹ DRO, D83/21.

³⁰ Elsewhere we observe women being paid relatively high wages for dairy work. In earlier years the Estcourt farm had been a dairy farm, and in 1821 Marshall paid £3 14*s.* 3½*d.* to 'Jos. Wilcox for his wife attending the Dairy,

7 weeks.' (GRO, D1571, vol. A36). Even assuming that she worked seven days per week, Mrs Wilcox earned more than 18*d.* per day for this work, which was substantially greater than the 7–10*d.* that the female labourers were earning that year.

TABLE 2. Regular female workers at the Estcourt Farm in Shipton Moyne, Gloucestershire

<i>Name</i>	<i>Years Worked</i>	<i>Total Days Worked</i>	<i>Average Days Per Year</i>
Elizabeth Bailey	1828, 1831–45, 1847–49	3315	174
Elizabeth Bicknell	1829–47	3281	173
Sarah Bicknell	1837–44, 1847–49	1620	147
Elizabeth Boulton	1845–49	1428	286
Olive Box	1829–1837	933	104
Elizabeth Heaven	1846–49	379	95
Harriet Bicknell	1840–42	335	112
Ann Bicknell	1828–1829, 1831–32	330	83
Harriet White	1847–49	301	100
Mary Grey	1829, 1835, 1847	276	92
Hannah Bailey	1843, 1849	189	95
Sarah Beasant	1844, 1845	173	87

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40–A50.

TABLE 3. Per cent of days worked by men, women, boys, and girls at the Bragg Farm in Thorncombe, Devonshire

<i>Year</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1838	63.5	20.7	10.1	5.7
1839	60.1	20.5	12.9	6.5
Total	61.7	20.6	11.6	6.1

Source: DRO, D83/22

year, which was unusual for female workers. Bragg's farm also hired a relatively large amount of female labour; 26 per cent of total days worked by day-labourers were worked by female labourers. Table 3 gives the percentage of total days worked by men, women, girls, and boys, using the wages to distinguish children from adults as in Table 1. The Bragg farm employed approximately the same portion of adult men and women as the Estcourt farm, but more girls and fewer boys. If we considered labourers in just three categories, men, women, and children, then both farms hired these groups in approximately equal proportions (60 per cent men, 20 per cent women, 20 per cent children).

Eleven different females worked at the Bragg farm in 1838 and 1839, five of them working in both years, so there are a total of 16 annual observations. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the number of days worked in a year. In this case there is a clear division between regular and casual workers. An unusually high number of women (5 of 16 observations) worked more than 300 days in a year. The other peak in the distribution is at 21 to 40 days per year, or approximately four to six weeks of work.

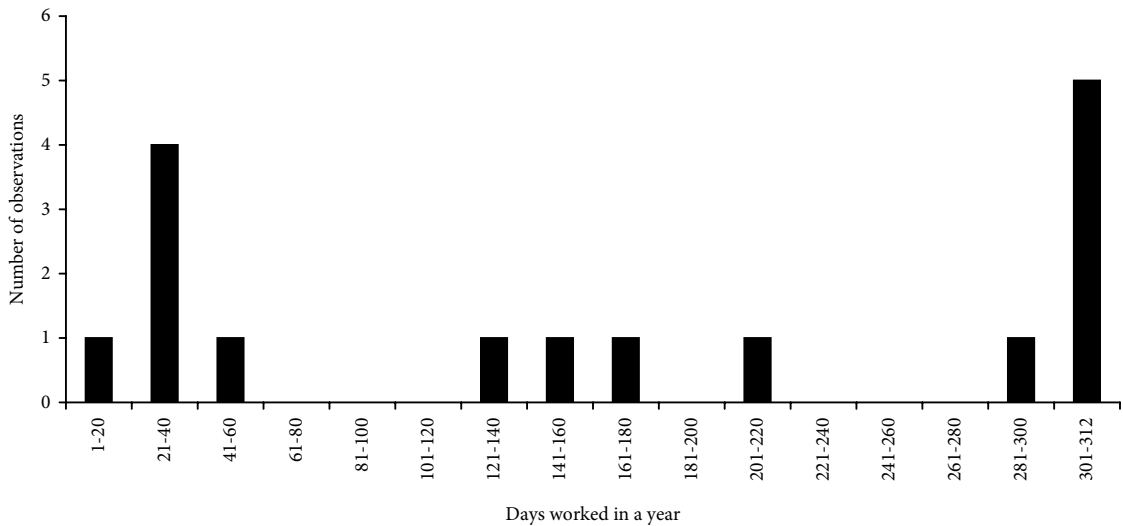


FIGURE 3. Distribution of days worked per year by female labourers, Bragg Farm

Source: DRO, D83/22

II

The census enumerator's books and parish records from Shipton Moyne, Gloucestershire and Long Newton, Wiltshire, for the Estcourt farm, and from Thorncombe, Dorset, for the Bragg farm, were drawn on to collect information on the age, marital status, and childbearing history of as many women as possible. This section will examine the age of the labourers, the next their marital status, and the following section their childbearing and family size.

At the Estcourt farm I was able to establish the ages of 35 of the 71 workers, accounting for 93 of the 158 woman-year observations. Some individuals could not be identified because their names did not appear in any of the records, and some could not be identified because their names appeared multiple times. For example, there were two different Sarah Bicknells in Shipton Moyne, and another one in Long Newton.³¹ All three were married, so I counted the Sarah Bicknell the labourer as a married woman, but I could not determine her age or the number of children she had because I could not determine which of the three Sarah Bicknells appeared in the wage accounts. For the Bragg farm I was able to identify the ages of seven of the eleven workers, accounting for 11 of the 16 observations.

Female labourers at the Estcourt farm spanned a wide range of ages, but were mostly middle-aged. The youngest worker identified was 14, and the oldest 77. This range closely matches the range of ages reported by Alfred Austin in 1843. Austin also adds that 'the majority of the women who work in the fields are above the age of 30'.³² This was also true of the women

³¹ The spelling of the name is 'Bicknell' in the wage book and 'Bignall' in the census records. Whenever there are variant spellings I use the spelling from the wage

book.

³² *Report on women and children in agriculture*, p. 6.

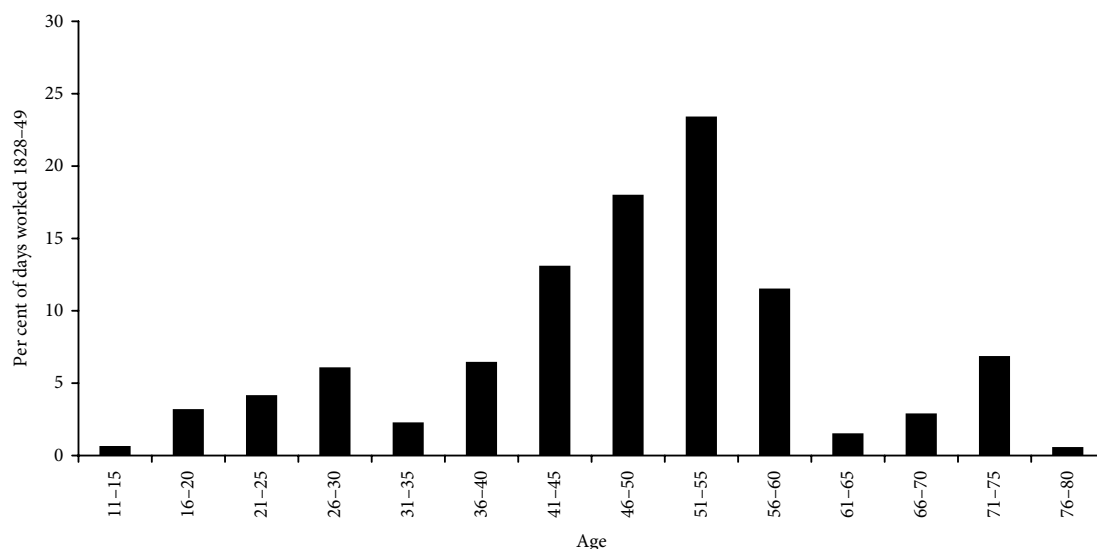


FIGURE 4. Age distribution of female agricultural labourers at the Estcourt Farm

Note: For women who worked multiple years, days of work are categorized according to the age of that woman at the time those years were worked. So, if a woman worked 100 days in the year she was 40 and 100 days in the year she was 41, then the first 100 days count towards the 36-40 total and the second hundred days count towards the 41-45 total.

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40-A50.

working at the Estcourt farm. Figure 4 shows the distribution of days worked across various age groups for the female labourers at the Estcourt farm. Two-thirds of all days worked by female labourers were worked by women who were in their 40s and 50s. Some of the female labourers, but only a small fraction, were young. Teenagers account for only 4 per cent of all days worked, and women aged 30 or younger accounted for only 14 per cent of all days worked. If we separate regular and casual labourers, we find that regular workers tended to be older than casual workers. The median regular worker was 50, while the median casual worker was 23. Among casual workers, 60 per cent of days were worked by women under age 30, while among regular workers only 8 per cent of days were worked by women under age 30.

Female labourers at the Bragg farm were younger than female labourers at the Estcourt farm; they ranged in age from 11 to 43, and the median age was 27. Figure 5 shows the distribution of days worked across various age groups for female labourers at the Bragg farm. Middle-aged workers still account for the bulk of the work (half of the days worked were worked by women aged 36 to 45), but girls aged 11 to 15 also contributed a significant share.

The age distribution at the Estcourt farm, shown in Figure 4, is more heavily skewed towards the 40-60 age group than is the distribution based on the 1851 census presented by Speechley.³³ This may be due to the fact that Elizabeth Bailey and Elizabeth Bicknell dominate the sample, together accounting for 46 per cent of all the days worked by females over the 22-year period.

³³ Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural day labourers', Fig. 7.1.

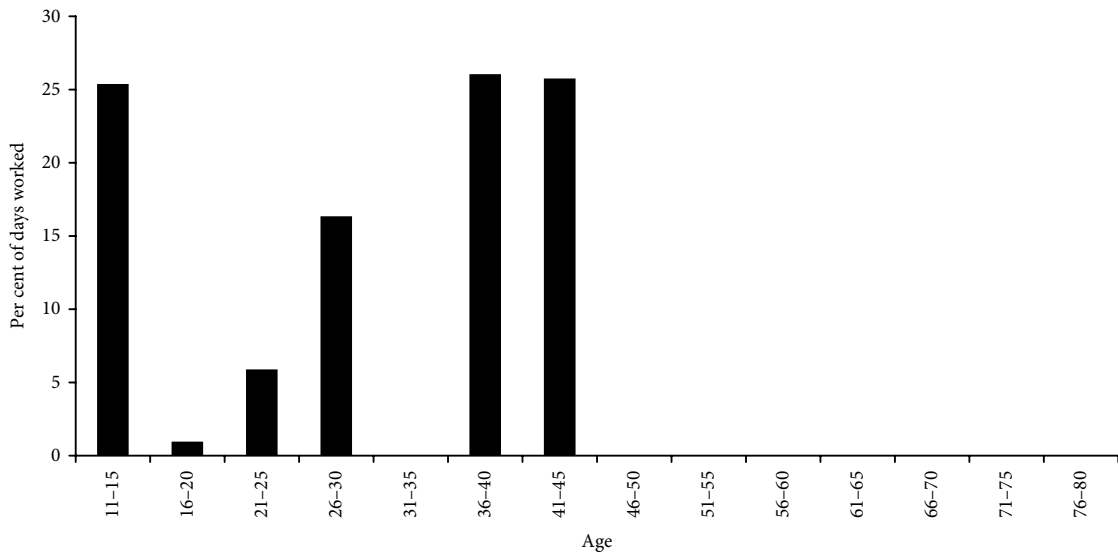


FIGURE 5. Age distribution of female agricultural labourers at the Bragg Farm

Note: as Figure 4.

Source: DRO, D83/22

Labourers at the Bragg farm were younger, so I cannot reject Speechley's finding that female labourers were spread uniformly across the age groups. Even so, the age distribution of female agricultural labourers was completely different from that of either female servants or female factory workers. Female factory workers were overwhelmingly young; they ranged in age from 6 to 84, but most were in their teens or twenties.³⁴ Only 9.5 per cent of factory workers were over age 30, while female labourers over age 30 worked 86 per cent of days worked by females at the Estcourt farm, and 52 per cent of days at the Bragg farm. Female farm servants were also younger than agricultural labourers. Speechley reports that in 1851 slightly more than half of all female farm servants were younger than 20, and another third were in their twenties, so that only about fifteen per cent of farm servants were over 30 years of age.³⁵ Factory work and indoor farm labour employed similar segments of the female workforce, girls and young women. Outdoor day-labourers, on the other hand, were much more likely to be older than 30.

III

Given this difference in age, it is not surprising that female agricultural labourers were also much more likely than female factory workers or female farm servants to be married. The large majority of women working in factories were single. About ten per cent of all females working in factories, or 27.5 per cent of those of 'marriageable age' were married.³⁶ Indoor farm servants, who boarded with the farmer, were also primarily single. Agricultural day-labour, on the other

³⁴ 'Report from James Mitchell'.

³⁵ Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural day

labourers,' Fig. 7.1.

³⁶ Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p.198.

TABLE 4. Marital status of women workers at the Estcourt Farm

A. Number of individuals

	<i>Regular Workers</i>	<i>Casual Workers</i>	<i>All Workers</i>
Single	0	17	17
and had an illegitimate child	0	2	2
Married	9	12	21
Widowed	1	3	4
Total, marital status known	10	31	41
Marital status unknown	2	28	30

Note: One of the casual workers is counted as both wife and widow, because she works both before and after her husband dies.

B. Per cent of days worked

	<i>Regular Workers</i>	<i>Casual Workers</i>	<i>All Workers</i>
Per cent of all days worked			
Marital status known	95	61	91
Marital status unknown	5	39	9
Per cent of days worked by those with known marital status			
Single	0	52.5	4.6
and had an illegitimate child	0	3.5	0.3
Married	98.5	32.7	92.8
Widowed	1.5	14.8	2.6

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40–A50.

hand, was dominated by married women. Table 4 shows the number of workers in each marital status category, and the percentage of days worked by women in each category for the Estcourt farm. Nearly all of the regular workers were married; none were single, and only one was a widow. Because the regular workers did most of the work, and all but one of the regular workers was married, married women worked 93 per cent of all days worked by females at the Estcourt farm. Even among the casual workers, who were younger, one-third were married. In 1843 the vicar of Witheridge, Devonshire, reported that women agricultural labourers were 'Almost without exception married, or widows with families'.³⁷ This is an accurate description of regular workers at the Estcourt farm, though single workers were common among the casual workers.

A few widows worked at the Estcourt farm, but they were only a small portion of the workforce. Of the 41 women for whom marital status is known, only four were widows. One of the widows, Sarah Beasant, was in her 70s. She counts as a regular worker because she averaged

³⁷ *Report on women and children in agriculture*, p. 98.

87 days per year during the two years that she worked at the farm. The other widows worked only casually for one or two years. Sarah Smart was a married woman when she worked at the farm in 1831, but her husband, a carpenter, died in March 1833. Sarah worked 56½ days in the summer immediately following her husband's death, but did not appear in the farm accounts again. Because these widows worked for only short periods, overall widows worked for only 2.6 per cent of the days worked by women.

While most female labourers were married, they were not necessarily the wives of the farm's male labourers. Less than half of the married women labourers were married to men who also worked at the Estcourt farm.³⁸ Of the two most regularly employed women, one was married to a man regularly employed at the Estcourt farm, and one was not. Elizabeth Bicknell was the wife of Daniel Bicknell, who was employed six days a week, 52 weeks a year, as the shepherd. Elizabeth Bailey's husband, Richard Bailey, was listed in the census as an agricultural labourer, but must have worked for a different farmer because he does not appear in the Estcourt wage records at all between 1828 and 1849. None of the widows had been married to a man who worked at the Estcourt farm, and the single women were not necessarily related to the male labourers either. Less than a third of the single female labourers at the Estcourt farm were daughters of male labourers employed at this farm.³⁹ Donna Ulyatt found that half of the women and girls working at William Dixon's Hall Farm in Lincolnshire from 1801 to 1817 were either wives or daughters of male labourers at that farm, but I find fewer women related to male labourers at the Estcourt farm.⁴⁰ I am able to identify seven women as wives of labourers and four as daughters of male labourers; this is only 15 per cent of the 71 female labourers at the farm, but it is 31 per cent of the 35 females I was able to identify.

Pamela Sharpe found that most of the female labourers at the Shute Barton estate in the 1790s were mothers of illegitimate children.⁴¹ At the Estcourt farm, however, I find only two mothers of illegitimate children, and they each worked only a few days, so that together they account for less than one per cent of all days worked by women. The Shipton Moyne baptismal register reports the baptism of 'Peter illegitimate son of Hannah Kirby' on 3 January 1836. Peter died as an infant, and was buried on 24 March 1836, at the age of 3 months. Hannah Kirby appears in the wage accounts only once: she worked six days in June, 1844, eight years after her son died. The other mother of an illegitimate child was Mary Trinder, who baptized her son David on 5 June 1825.⁴² In the 1841 census we find David living with his mother in Shipton Moyne. Mary Trinder appears in the wage accounts only in 1848, when she worked a total of 34 days in July and August. While mothers of illegitimate children were not entirely absent from the Estcourt labour force, they certainly were not the typical worker.

Because the Bragg farm employed younger women, it also employed more single women.

³⁸ Forty-four per cent of the married women labourers had husbands who also worked at the Estcourt farm. Of days worked by married women, 41 per cent were worked by women married to men working at the Estcourt farm.

³⁹ Even if we restrict the pool to single labourers aged 20 and under, only 37.5 per cent were daughters of male labourers at the Estcourt farm.

⁴⁰ She identifies 19 wives and 16 daughters out of 70 women and girls. Donna Ulyatt, 'Female agricultural labour on the Dixon estate, Lincolnshire, 1801-17', *AgHR* 54 (2006), p. 83.

⁴¹ Sharpe, 'Time and Wages', p. 67.

⁴² The Long Newton baptismal record simply notes that the Mary was a 'single woman'.

TABLE 5. Female labourers at John Bragg's Farm in Thorncombe, Devon

<i>Name</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Days Worked</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Ages of Children</i>
Anne Baker	1838	306	42	Married	none
	1839	311	43		
Sarah Bagg	1838	140	22	Single	none
Anne Clarke ^a	1838	26		Married	
Susan Dean	1839	152	17	Single	none
Mary Hawker ^b	1838	59			
Elizabeth Jeffrey ^a	1839	23.5		Married	
Mary Langford	1838	312	37	Married	16, 13, 11, 7, 4, 1
	1839	312	38		17, 14, 12, 8, 5, 2
Louisa Lintern	1839	15.5		Married	1
Jane Phelps	1838	281	14	Single	none
	1839	304	15		
Marianna Phelps	1839	23	11	Single	none
Mary Powell	1838	173	27	Married	5, 2, infant
	1839	218	28		6, 3, 1

Notes:

^a Two different women with this name were located in the census, both of them married.

^b Mary Hawker is unmatched because the 1841 census for Thorncombe contains five different individuals with this name.

Source: Dorset RO, D373/2. Census and parish records of Thorncombe, Devon.

Table 5 lists all eleven women who appear in the Bragg accounts. Marital status is known for all but one of these workers. Six out of ten female workers were married, and married women worked 71 per cent of all days worked by females. The relatively high portion of single women working at this farm is a direct result of the relatively high portion of teenagers. Only one of the women over age twenty was single. None of the women working at the Bragg farm were widows or mothers of illegitimate children.

IV

Female labourers were not only married, but also had children. The majority of female labourers at the Estcourt farm, and the majority of female labourers over age 20 at the Bragg farm, had children. Using baptism registers and the census, I was able to track the birth histories of 33 women employed at the Estcourt farm, and eight women employed at Bragg's farm. Unfortunately the baptismal records give only the date of the baptism and not the date of the birth, but baptism usually followed birth by only about a month.⁴³

⁴³ Wrigley and Schofield find that the median interval between birth and baptism in 1800 was 30 days. E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541-1871* (1989), p. 289.

TABLE 6. Distribution of female labourers by number of children, Estcourt Farm

	<i>Children aged 16 and under</i>		<i>Children aged 5 and under</i>		<i>Children aged 2 and under</i>	
	<i>Per cent of annual observations</i>	<i>Per cent of days worked</i>	<i>Per cent of annual observations</i>	<i>Per cent of days worked</i>	<i>Per cent of annual observations</i>	<i>Per cent of days worked</i>
0	38.2	31.7	68.5	77.0	84.3	87.6
1	11.2	17.3	13.5	10.8	12.4	9.1
2	12.4	12.3	12.4	8.4	3.4	3.3
3	16.9	17.1	5.6	3.9		
4	9.0	8.5				
5	4.5	6.2				
6	6.7	5.4				
7	1.1	1.4				

Note: This table is based on 89 annual observations of 33 different women for whom I have child-bearing histories. A woman provides an 'observation' for each year that she works. The same woman will appear in different family size categories as her children age or as she gives birth to new children. Family size is calculated from baptismal and census records. Children who appear in the burial records are removed, but other children are assumed to remain in the family from their baptism until age 16.

Table 6 shows the distribution of the Estcourt women by the total number of children age 16 or younger for each woman.⁴⁴ Some of the casual women workers were young and unmarried, and had no children. Other women were old enough that all of their children had grown. Overall about a third of the female labourers had no children. The median woman had two children, but a significant minority of women had much larger families. Nearly one-fifth of women had four or more children. While the majority of the women labourers had at least one child, it was much less common for them to have young children at home. In only 32 per cent of the cases did the female labourer have children aged five or younger at home, and in only 16 per cent of the cases did the women have children age two or younger at home. These results match the pattern that Speechley found for women working at the Dunster Castle Farm in Somerset, where the median woman had children at home, but only a minority of the female labourers had young children. At this farm, out of 13 women, seven (54 per cent) had children aged 16 and under, three (23 per cent) had children aged five and under and two (15 per cent) had children aged two and under.⁴⁵

At the Bragg farm, only three of the eight women with identifiable family histories had children, but since three of these eight women were younger than 20, sixty per cent of the women aged over 20 had children.⁴⁶ Sarah Bagg, aged 22, was still single and had no children, while Anne Baker seems to have reached middle age without bearing children. The other three

⁴⁴ Outside of the census years I cannot tell which children are actually living with their mother. Children who appear in the burial records are removed from the family; otherwise I assume that a child survives until age 16.

⁴⁵ Speechley, 'Female and child agricultural day labourers', Table 7.1.

⁴⁶ Anne Clarke cannot be definitely matched, but both possible Anne Clarkes had children. Including her would raise the number of women with children to 4 out of 9.

women aged over 20, Mary Langford, Louisa Lintern, and Mary Powell, all had families of varying sizes. Louisa Lintern had just given birth to her first child, Mary Powell had three children, and Mary Langford had six children. Unlike the mothers at the Estcourt farm, mothers at the Bragg farm had young children; all three mothers had at least one child aged two or younger.

In 1843 a Devonshire vicar reported to Alfred Austin that 'Most women who are constantly employed in agriculture have ceased child-bearing. They cannot bear the fatigue whilst suckling an infant'.⁴⁷ The child histories for female labourers at the Estcourt and Bragg farms offer a chance to examine whether women were less likely to work when they had young children. I conclude that all of the mothers working at the Bragg farm had young children, but that the presence of young children does seem to have reduced the labour supply of mothers at the Estcourt farm.

Young children do not seem to have prevented women from working full-time at Bragg's farm. Mary Langford, already the mother of five children, baptized her sixth child, William, on 26 March 1837. Farm records are available for part of the year 1837, and suggest that Mary returned to work when William was quite young. The records begin on 13 May 1837, and Mary is not paid that week. She is, however, paid for a full week's work on 20 May. Since 20 May was a Saturday, Mary probably began working on 15 May, seven weeks after William was baptised. We do not know how old William was when he was baptised, but assuming a lag between birth and baptism of about a month, William would have been about eleven weeks old when his mother returned to full-time work. Another worker at this farm, Mary Powell, was away from work for a total of five months when her son Thomas was born. She worked regularly from March to October 1838, worked only eight days in November, and then stopped work completely until the end of March 1839. Thomas was baptized on Christmas Day 1838, and was between three and four months old when Mary returned to work in the week ending 30 March 1839. Mary then worked full-time, averaging $5\frac{3}{4}$ days per week for the next 38 weeks. Louisa Lintern did not return to work as quickly; her daughter was at least 17 months old when Louisa first appears in the wage book.⁴⁸

At the Estcourt farm, however, few women worked when they had newborn babies at home. Among the women for whom child histories can be established, there are five cases where the mother begins or resumes work less than 12 months after the baptism of a child, and in all but one of the cases, the interval is at least seven months. The closest interval between baptism and birth occurs after the birth of Martha Bicknell in 1833. Elizabeth Bicknell baptized her ninth and last child, Martha, on the 19 May 1833. She was paid for 12 days of work on 6 June 1833, so the interval between baptism and the date she resumed work was probably less than a week. Unfortunately it is not possible to say exactly when Martha was *born*, so we don't know how quickly Elizabeth went from confinement to the fields. Elizabeth Bicknell worked until the end of September in 1832, and began work again in April 1833, so if Martha was born during this interval and her baptism was delayed, she may have been as much as six months old when Elizabeth returned to work, but it is unlikely that she was any older. Elizabeth Bicknell did work fewer days in 1833 than in either 1832 or 1834, so the birth seems to have reduced the number of

⁴⁷ *Report on women and children in agriculture*, p.98.

⁴⁸ Mariana Lintern was baptized on 21 Jan. 1838.

Louisa Lintern first appears in the wage book in the last week of June 1839.

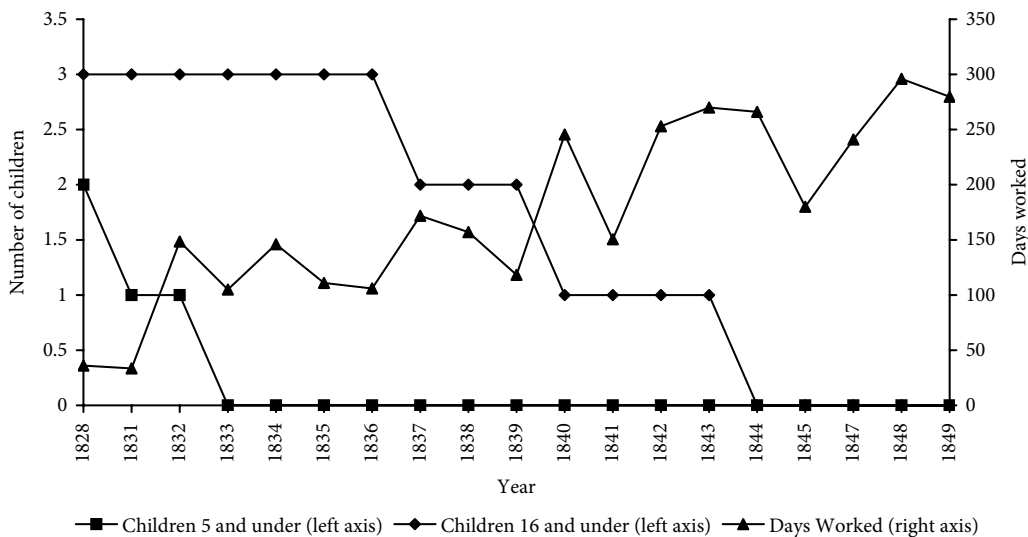


FIGURE 6. Work history of Elizabeth Bailey

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40–A50.

days that she worked, but it did not prevent her from working entirely. However, she is the only mother at the Estcourt farm who worked when her child was less than six months old.

There were four other cases where the mother returned to work less than a year after baptizing a child. The next smallest interval between baptism and birth was seven months, and this occurred twice. In both cases the mother was a casual worker. Prescilla Prior baptized her daughter Sarah in December 1833, and worked six days in July 1834. Elizabeth Young baptized her son Edwin in January 1842, and worked 23½ days in July and August 1842. The next smallest interval between baptism and birth was nine months; Prescilla Prior also worked 34½ days in the summer of 1832, nine months after the baptism of her daughter Mary in September 1831. Elizabeth Heaven waited almost a year to begin work; she worked at the Estcourt farm in the first three months of 1847, baptized her daughter Mary Anne on 18 July, and resumed work 11 months later in late June 1848.

Among the women whose childbearing history could be established, I observed 38 baptisms between 1828 and 1848. Of these 38 baptisms, there are only five cases where we observe the mother working at the Estcourt farm less than a year after the baptism. There are three cases where the mother worked between one and two years after the baptism, and five cases where the mother worked between two and three years after the baptism (including one where a younger sibling had already been born). In a majority of these cases, then, the mother did not work at the Estcourt farm in the first three years of the child's life. The evidence from the Estcourt farm suggests that most women waited until their children were no longer toddlers to return to work.

If we look at the careers of the two most regularly employed women, we observe that they worked less when their children were young and more as their children grew older. Elizabeth

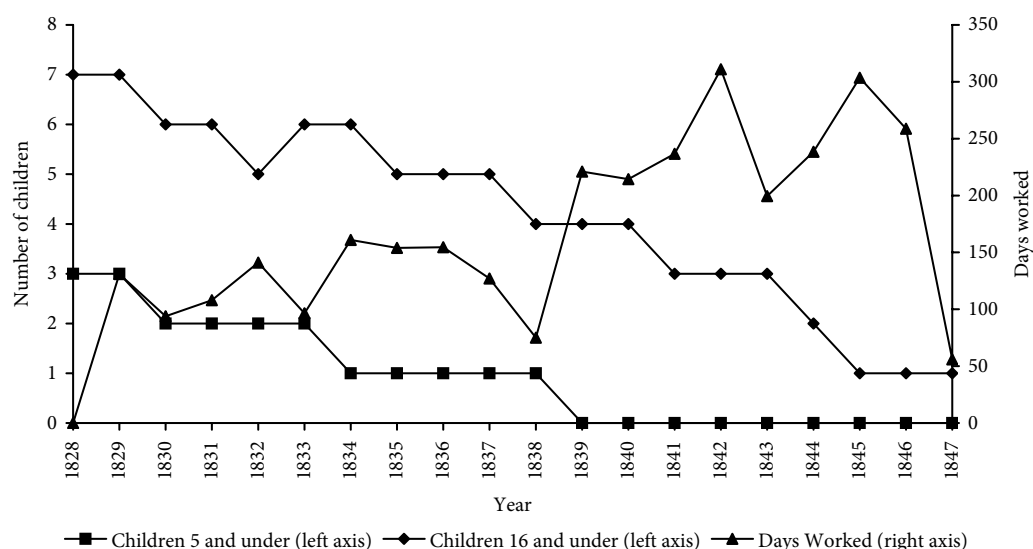


FIGURE 7. Work history of Elizabeth Bicknell

Source: GRO, D1571, vols A40–A50.

Bailey worked every year from 1828 to 1849. Figure 6 shows the number of days she worked in each year, along with the number of children in her family. Elizabeth Bailey worked fewer days per year when she had young children, and her employment steadily increased as her children grew older. When she had children aged five and under, she averaged 73 days of work per year. When she had children under 10, but no children under five, she averaged 128 days per year. When she had children under 16, but no children under 10, she averaged 199 days of work per year. When all her children were over 16 years of age, she averaged 253 days of work per year, which today would be considered full-time year-round employment.

Elizabeth Bicknell was also employed every year between 1829 and 1847. She did not work in 1828, when her son Charles was an infant. Charles was baptized on 20 January 1828, so he was more than a year old when his mother began work in February 1829. However, Elizabeth did work in 1833, the same year that her daughter Martha was baptized. Figure 7 plots the days worked by Elizabeth Bicknell between 1828 and 1847, along with the number of children in her family. Elizabeth Bicknell clearly increased her days of work when she no longer had children aged less than five. Between 1829 and 1838, when she had children aged five or younger, Elizabeth worked an average of 124 days per year, or about five months of full-time work. Between 1839 and 1847, when Elizabeth still had children under age 16, but did not have any children less than six, Elizabeth averaged 227 days per year, or not quite nine months of full-time work.

Though they were not the majority, some of the women working as agricultural labourers had small children. At the Estcourt farm, ten per cent of women had children aged two or younger,

and a third had children aged five or younger. At the Bragg farm, three out of eight workers had children aged two or younger. What happened to these children while their mother was at work? The farm wage accounts do not give us any answers to this question, but we can find detailed information about childcare arrangements from the women interviewed for the 1843 report on *Women and children in agriculture*. Alfred Austin's report on the south-west included interviews with female labourers, and these give us a chance to hear how the women themselves described their childcare arrangements.⁴⁹

The women interviewed by Austin reported the use of different types of childcare arrangements, including older siblings, other relatives and hired carers. Sometimes older children were entrusted with the care of younger children. Mrs Britton of Calne (Wiltshire) explained how 'I have worked in the fields, and when I went out I left the children in the care of the eldest boy'.⁵⁰ Other relatives were used as well. Mrs Smart, also from Calne, told Austin 'Sometimes I have had my mother, and sometimes my sister, to take care of the children, or I could not have gone out'.⁵¹

If no family members were available to take care of the children, the alternatives were less attractive. A girl could be hired, but this was expensive. Mrs Sumbler, also a Wiltshire labourer, thought that when she worked the net gain was small:

I do not think a great deal is got by a mother of a family going out to work; perhaps she has to hire a girl to look after the children, and there is a great waste of victuals and spoiling of things; and then working in the fields makes people eat so much more.⁵²

Mrs Sumbler was correct in noting that the cost of hiring a girl to look after the children could be a significant deduction from earnings. Austin reported that 'Where a girl is hired to take care of the children, she is paid about 9d. a-week and her food besides, which is a serious deduction from the wages of the woman at work'.⁵³ Mrs. Sumbler reports that her normal wage was 8d. per day, so the girl's cash wage would have been 19 per cent of her weekly earnings, and paying for food as well must have at least doubled this.

Some women did not pay for care but instead left their children alone. Mary Hunt, a labourer from Studley (Wiltshire) seems to have worried a great deal about the safety of her children when she went out to work.

I have always left my children to themselves, and, God be praised! nothing has ever happened to them, though I have thought it dangerous. I have many a time come home, and have thought it a mercy to find nothing has happened to them. It would be much better if mothers could be at home, but they must work. Bad accidents often happen.⁵⁴

Other mothers were less fortunate. A farm bailiff from the area noted that 'I know of two or three cases of deaths from burning of children, since I have been in the neighbourhood'.⁵⁵ The

⁴⁹ Austin interviewed 15 women labourers, and his report was unusual in this respect. Reports by Mr. Vaughn and Sir F.H. Doyle contain no interviews with women, and Mr. Denison interviewed only three women. *Report on women and children in agriculture*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 67-8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁵ Evidence of Mr. Henry Phelps, agent of the Marquis of Lansdowne, *Ibid.*, p. 63.

dangers were great enough that some women did not consider leaving children on their own to be an option. Mrs. Smart reported that she 'could not have gone out' without the help of her mother or sister. The fact that some women paid more than one-fifth of their earnings to hire childcare also suggests that they too did not consider leaving the children alone an acceptable risk.

Mary Collier, in her poem of 1739, 'The Woman's Labour', suggests that a mother might take her nursing infant into the field while working:

Our tender Babes into the Field we bear,
An wrap them in our Cloathes to keep them warm,
While round about we gather up the Corn;
And often unto them our Course do bend,
To keep them safe, that nothing them offend.⁵⁶

There is evidence in the 1843 report that this did happen. Mrs. Britton notes that, when going to work in the fields, she 'frequently carried the baby with me, as I could not go home to nurse it'.⁵⁷ An earlier Poor Law report also mentions the practice, suggesting that 'the custom of the mother of a family carrying her infant with her in its cradle into the field, rather than lose the opportunity of adding her earnings to the general stock, though partially practiced before, is becoming very much more general now'.⁵⁸ This type of childcare, though, was only used for infants.

Childcare was available, but for women who could not rely on family members, it was expensive. Some women had so much trouble finding childcare that they left their children alone, even though they feared for the children's safety. The lack of adequate affordable childcare may explain why Elizabeth Bailey and Elizabeth Bicknell worked fewer days when their children were young, and more days as their children grew older.

VI

Female agricultural day-labourers were unlike women working as farm servants, domestic servants, or factory workers. All three of the later occupations employed mainly young, single women, and a concentration on these occupations may give the impression that older married women were not an important part of the labour market in the early nineteenth century. However, not all working women in the early nineteenth century were young and single. Agricultural day-labour is an occupation in which female workers were mainly older married women, many of whom had children at home. Marriage and children did not prevent women from working outside the home, but young children do seem to have made working outside the home more difficult, since the women most regularly employed on the Estcourt farm worked fewer days when their children were young, and more days when their children were older.

⁵⁶ Mary Collier, *The Woman's Labour* (1739, repr. 1985).

⁵⁷ *Report on women and children in agriculture*, p. 66.

⁵⁸ Second Report of Poor Law Commissioners, BPP, 1835, XXIX, p. 221, quoted by Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 85.