THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE STRAW PLAG IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

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For much of the nineteenth century straw plaiting was a major cottage industry in Buckinghamshire. Although less widespread than the county’s other home industry—lacemaking—it nevertheless provided a valuable supplement to family income for the wives and children of many agricultural labourers, especially in the central and south-eastern portion of the county. As late as the 1871 Census of Population there were over three and a half thousand male and female workers officially recorded as employed in the trade—and very many others clearly worked on a part-time or casual basis. One estimate for 1871 gives a figure as high as 30,000 for straw plaiters “in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury alone”.

The production of straw plait for making up into bonnets and hats probably commenced in Buckinghamshire some time during the second half of the seventeenth century—although the trade’s main centre was (and remained) in Bedfordshire. Nevertheless as early as 1689 the villagers of Edlesborough joined with some of their Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire fellows in protesting against possible legislation “to enforce the wearing of woollen hats at certain times of the year”.¹ Twenty years later Buckinghamshire plaiters were likewise involved in a petition against the importation of “chip plait from Holland and straw hats from Leghorn and other places”.²

During the next few decades the industry expanded steadily, but it was only following the outbreak of war with revolutionary France in 1793 that the greatest progress was made. During the war, imports of fine plait from Leghorn in Italy were cut off, while in 1805 protective duties were levied on imported plait; these duties were further raised in 1819.³ And as this action was taken to safeguard the English home market, so methods of production in the industry were improved, particularly by the development of the straw splitter from around 1800. Prior to the use of this simple machine straw had been split with a knife, but this was not only a tedious process but also one which made it very difficult to produce the uniform size of splints essential for good and even plait. But with the advent of the splitter, a straw could be separated into as many as nine equal-sized splints, and fine plait could, therefore, easily be obtained.⁴ Furthermore, although the first splitters were often made of bone and were very expensive—costing one or two guineas each (£1.05 or £2.10) in some cases—they were soon imitated in iron and in brass, and their price fell sharply as production increased. By about 1815 they were selling for approximately 6d. each.
In these circumstances the plaiting work force expanded, with women, children and even men becoming involved in the trade. Women and children, in particular, preferred straw plaiting to working in the fields, and in 1813 it was noted that while they could earn “7s. to 30s. per week” making lace or plaiting straw, “it can scarce be expected they would undertake work in the field at such a rate as the farmer could afford to pay”. One agriculturist subscribing to this view was Mr. William Howard, a landowner from Buckland—a community which later became a considerable centre for plait. (See Appendix B.)

However, with the ending of the French Wars some of this early prosperity was lost. The price of English hats had to be lowered as cheaper and finer quality Leghorns reappeared and by 1834 the price of plait had fallen to only about 20 per cent of the level ruling at the beginning of the century. But even at that rate it was still a worthwhile occupation for many cottagers, an adult woman “having no very young child to attend to” perhaps obtaining about 2s. or 2s. 6d. a week. And at Chofesbury in the early 1830s it was estimated that a woman and three children (aged 14, 11, and 8) could expect to earn around £11 1s. per annum (£11.05). Given that married male labourers in the village only earned 7s.-10s. per week basic wages during the summer months, and 7s.-9s. 6d. during the winter, it can be seen that the contribution of plait to the family income was no insignificant one.

Of course, the earnings of workers obviously varied very much according to their personal skill and according to the type of plait produced. Then, too, those nearest to Dunstable or Luton, the major outlets, could expect to earn more than those who were some distance away and were forced to sell their work to local dealers or to itinerants who visited the various communities at regular intervals. Thus, in 1838 one observer thought that women employed in making the Tuscan or Leghorn plait might secure 5s. a week if they were some distance away from Luton, while if they were within easy reach of that market, perhaps 7s. or 8s. might be earned. This same witness considered that an “average plaiter” would make “three score or three score and a half” of plait per week—a “score” being twenty yards. On the other hand, later witnesses have suggested a very much higher level of output and obviously the degree of intricacy of the plait itself had some bearing on the situation. Indeed, at one extreme, in the late nineteenth century or the early twentieth at Aston Clinton “an exceedingly clever and industrious plaiter made 20 score in one week, and the quality being high it fetched 1s. a score, a very good price. To enable her to do this she used to sit up in bed at 4 o’clock on a summer morning and plait for an hour or two before rising”. This level of output could, however, obviously not be kept up indefinitely and something under ten score per week was probably a more typical figure.

In view of these doubts as to the “normal” level of output, assessments of “average” weekly income are also difficult to make. As Dony points out, between the 1830s and the 1860s “estimates . . . show a variation from 2s. 6d. to 12s. (12½p to 60p) per week; but the figure mentioned most frequently is 5s., which was probably a good average over the whole period” for the adult woman worker.
Furthermore, if the industry had already lost some of its earlier prosperity by the time that Victoria succeeded to the throne, another blow was struck five years later when the high import duties on foreign straw plait were reduced in 1842; they were finally repealed in 1860. Yet although imports of plait increased from an average of 25,244 lbs. per annum in 1830-35 to 138,267 lbs. in the period 1865-70, there was at least some compensation on the side of exports, especially to the U.S.A. Whereas at the earlier date only 1,983 lbs. per annum of straw plait had been exported, by the later period the figure was 128,556 lbs. Nevertheless in a trade such as this, which was affected not only by foreign competition but also by the vagaries of fashion, the fortunes of the plaiters tended to fluctuate increasingly. Whereas in 1862-63 it was noted that “for the last two or three years plait has gone pretty well”, by 1867, the “trade was . . . unusually depressed, and the earnings of plaiters of the ordinary stamp were reduced for girls over 16 years to about 2s. 6d. a week for 10 or 11 hours’ work per day; and for girls of 12 years to from 1s. to 1s. 6d. . . .” In these cases it can be seen that the earnings suggested in the later 1860s were similar to those recorded for Cholesbury in 1834.

But the final decline of the plaiting trade materialized only after 1870, when competition was faced not merely from cheaper Italian plait but also from a new source—China. In the 1890’s the Japanese entered the market too, thereby undermining prices still further. Nor was this the sole problem. The longer lengths of plait produced abroad—Chinese plait was of a standard length of 60 yards, for example—proved more suitable for the sewing machines which were now being used in the bonnet trade. The practice of the poorest English plaiters of “selling plait in lengths of five or ten yards rendered their work most unsuitable for the machine and useful only for the rapidly declining work in hand sewing.” At the Census of Population in 1901—the year of Queen Victoria’s death—there were only 173 female and 3 male straw plaiters officially recorded in Buckinghamshire; ten years earlier the figures had been 515 and 27, respectively.

Given, then, the basic outline of the straw plait trade within the county, it is proposed to examine what this meant in human terms and also to consider the methods of production employed.

The production process commenced with the purchase of straw from a farmer by a straw dealer, who would normally “make an offer for an unthreshed wheat stack.” (In 1860 1 cwt. of agricultural straw was estimated to cost 3s.) After the ears of grain had been removed, the straw was combed “with a small iron-toothed rake to get rid of haulm” and then each of the resultant strands was cut “into about four lengths of six inches apiece”. These were then made up “into bundles of 56, 80 or even 112 lbs.”; the bundles might be sold as they were, or else the straws would be stripped and bleached, and some might be dyed. “After bleaching, or colouring, the straw had to be graded”, and only when this operation had been completed was it ready for sale to the cottager. 

Although straw plaiting remained a trade dominated by the labour of women and children throughout the nineteenth century, at least in the early part of the century there were a number of men so employed in some of the
more important plaiting villages, and even as late as the 1851 Census of Population whole families were engaged in making plait—like the Herbergs, the Biertons and the Dyers of Northall. Indeed, in the Dyer family there were seven members involved ranging from the father (aged 34) down to the youngest boy, aged 5. Only a two-year-old child was exempt. This sort of situation was mirrored in other communities, and in its most extreme form it might even mean that the father had no other regular employment; instead he often relied upon the labour of his wife and children for the means of subsistence. At Toddington in Bedfordshire the Assistant Commissioner in connection with the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture noted in 1868: “a large portion of the male population of so-called catch workmen expect the female plaiters to maintain them throughout a great portion of the year.” But because the plait trade was “very bad” in the later 1860s they had been forced to rely instead upon parish poor relief. Consequently, at the time of the Assistant Commissioner’s visit “one-third of the entire population of the parish was receiving relief, and it seemed altogether to puzzle the relieving officer to account for the manner in which one half of the remainder lived.” Even if Buckinghamshire villages and hamlets did not reach quite this pitch of dependence upon plait, many like Edlesborough, Ivinghoe Aston and Northall showed a considerable degree of reliance.

Of course, the more important centres of the trade often specialized in a particular type of plait, so that Ivinghoe concentrated on “narrow Twist . . . and Rustic and mixed Coloured Plaits”, and Chesham on Devons, fine split, and brilliant (which owed its name to the sparkling effect of its uneven surface). Indeed, around Wisthwaite, Marsworth and Cheddington even in the early twentieth century “a little brilliant (was) still made . . . and a little whipcord at Edlesborough.”

Since the basic processes involved in making plait were fairly simple, children were usually taught the rudiments of the trade from an early age. They would normally receive initial instruction at home from their mother and would then be sent “usually at 4 years old, some at 3½” to a so-called plait school, which was often little more than a child-minding institution set up in a nearby cottage. Although the “mistress” herself would usually be able to plait, there are examples where she could not. In these cases her sole function was to “keep the children at work, or to see that they accomplished the task required of them by the parents . . . .” As one mistress admitted: “The children have so many yards to do, and then their mothers sell the plait. Though my place is called a school, I do not teach plaiting, but merely keep the children to their work, and see that they do the number of yards set to them by their parents, which is according to their age and the kind of plait they are taught by their friends before they come to me. I used to teach them some reading, too, but found that too much, and do not do it now.” It was noted also that “about 30 yards seem counted the most proper day’s work, to take the bigger ones; the straw cuts their fingers and their mouths, too, as they draw it through their mouths because it breaks off if it is not damp.” Great care had to be taken to ensure that the fingers were kept clean, so as to pre-
serve the brightness of the plait, while it was ominously observed that “the mistresses who get the most work out of (the children) are most patronized.”

In these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that many plait schools contained “formidable looking sticks”, which the mistresses would use if they suspected a child of slacking at its work. There is little doubt, however, that the strict discipline did help to maintain output at a high level, while the encouragement given to the children to compete with one another “to see who could plait the most” also served the same purpose.20

Furthermore, if the children did not complete their allotted task at school, they would be required to finish it at home anyway, and one of the characteristics of the plait trade was that it would be carried on whilst the plaiter was either sitting or walking about. As a critic noted in the early 1860s: “... it has the disadvantage that a child can be kept almost constantly employed, as much on the way to and from school or meals, as when at school. In passing through the country villages, whether about meal-times or in the evenings it is rare to see a girl out of doors without her plait in her hand, and working away busily as she walks, no doubt to get on with the task set by her mother. Young boys, too, may be seen plaiting out of doors, but not to the same extent.”

In addition, even the very youngest children, who were too small to plait, might be involved in other ways. In some of the plait schools “infants of two, three and four years old” were employed in clipping off the loose ends of straw from the plait, “with their scissors tied to their bodies...”21 Many plait schools, in fact, openly combined the function of plaiting with that of baby-minding, thereby relieving mothers from care of their youngest children and allowing them to get on with their own plaiting without distractions. For a child’s attendance at these schools the parents normally paid 2d. or 2½d. per week, with a little more during the winter months, to cover the cost of candles.

Unfortunately, however, since the plaiting mistresses often relied upon this income for their own subsistence, they naturally sought to obtain as many pupils as possible, so as to maximise their earnings. This situation, coupled with the fact that the “schools” were normally conducted in small cottage rooms (usually “not exceeding 12 feet square, sometimes less, ... and in some cases little more than six feet high”) rapidly led to grave overcrowding. For example, at a plait school in Edlesborough, during the 1860s, there were said to be thirty children in attendance in one small room. Again, at Ivinghoe, one of a group of cottages built inside a local chalk pit was likewise used as a plaiting school. Here the room involved was about 10 feet square; there was “no ventilation at the back of any of the cottages whose doors open(ed) into the pit.” Sixteen of the twenty-four cottages in the pit shared a “common midden”, so the sanitary conditions here are not difficult to imagine! And at Great Missenden, similarly, a Mrs. Hall admitted that she had on occasion had as many as “30 or 32” children in her school.2 These are, of course, random cases and many similar ones could be quoted.

Inside the schools the children were seated on stools or forms, and during the winter months there were often so many of them in the room that they
PLATE VII. Women plaiters in Akeman Street, Tring, in the late nineteenth century. The straw plait market which was held in Tring each Friday was widely used by women from nearby Buckinghamshire who wished to sell their produce.
encroached upon the fireplace and made it impossible for a fire to be lit. Consequently, as in the contemporary lace schools, each worker would provide herself (or himself) with a small reddish earthenware pot, known as a dicky pot, which would contain hot ashes or burning charcoal. This would then be placed beside the feet of the worker to provide warmth. Unfortunately, in these circumstances the atmosphere became extremely close and stuffy both from the overcrowding and from the “carbonic acid gas emitted from the coal pots.” Furthermore, since warmth was deemed essential to ensure “sufficient suppleness of the fingers” of the workers, “in cold weather every breath of air (was) carefully excluded from the little cottage kitchen where 30 or 40 children (were) packed together as closely as they (could) sit.” Not surprisingly, many of them suffered from “bronchial catarrh and inflammation of the bronchial surfaces”.

However, there was a brighter side to the question. During the summer time the young workers were normally allowed to plait out-of-doors at least for part of the day, and Mr. Hodgson, a Chesham surgeon, thought that this “in those of good constitution, (was) sufficient to wipe out the effects of the winter confinement . . .”

The hours worked were, as already indicated, very long. Even the younger children (those aged around 4-6) would remain at the plaiting school from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., but when aged about 7 years and above they would often return at 5 p.m. and work until 8. Indeed, sometimes the hours would extend beyond this to 9 p.m. or later. And at very few of the schools was any attempt made to give instruction beyond that relating to the trade itself. Thus at Chesham, where there were twenty-one plaiting schools in the mid-1860s, at only two were reading and writing even claimed to be taught. At Great Missenden, Mrs. Hall taught her pupils “the lessons for next Sunday”, and this was also done at a second school within the village. However, in most plait schools this sort of “education” degenerated into the mere repetition of a few verses from the Bible, which “they all (knew) by heart”.

In other cases children might attend the ordinary village school for one or two days per week, to learn reading and writing, and would then spend the rest of the week at the plaiting school. This was the compromise adopted by one labouring family interviewed at Little Missenden in 1868, for example. Again, at Aston Clinton the children attended the parish school from three to five half-days a week so that they might “qualify for Lady de Rothschild’s clothing benefit”, while spending the remainder of the week at the plaiting school.

The reason for this neglect of formal education was, of course, the poverty of most labouring families. In these circumstances the main aim of parents was to set their children to work as quickly as possible. Thus, at Chesham it was noted in the 1840s that “repeated attempts have been vainly made to establish schools; parents will not send their children to places where in lieu of gaining anything they are obliged to pay something”, i.e. the small fees of 1d. or 2d. per week normally charged in the ordinary day schools. At Hawridge, likewise, the incumbent confided to the Bishop of Oxford the problems he had faced in seeking to establish a day school in his plaiting community.
In the end he, too, had decided on compromise: “I have now engaged a roomy cottage and a Plaiting Mistress; and those Parents who choose to avail themselves of it, can send their children to a good Plaiting School, and at the same time secure for them 2 hours daily (Saturday excepted) instruction from myself...” At Cheddington, similarly, the rector supervised a “plaiting school” as well as a “daily mixed school for boys and girls and one Sunday school”. And the situation in the nearby parish of Ivinghoe was much the same. Here the incumbent regrettfully recorded in 1854 that even his attempts to set up evening classes were thwarted by straw plait: “Straw-plaiting occupies too much of the people’s time to allow them to come, and in fact forms a principal part of the occupation at our day school. Without offering it we should not have any scholars...” This seems to have remained the position, indeed, until the elementary school was reorganised in the early 1870s.

The attitude of many of the clergy was probably summed up by the curate of Little Brickhill in 1857: “I felt obliged to start this (plaiting) school as the children learnt so much evil in the schools kept by the poor and they were confined in small dirty rooms—never learnt reading. I require their attendance at the National School for reading—and in addition to this the girls attend one afternoon to learn needlework...”

These examples of the conflict between straw plait and the ordinary processes of education were reflected in the experience of other Buckinghamshire villages within the plaiting area. Not surprisingly, therefore, by the 1860s concern was being felt both in official circles and elsewhere that many children—especially girls—were growing up “without any education”. The need for a change in the position seemed increasingly urgent.

The first steps towards solving the problem were in fact taken in 1867 with the passage of a new Factory and Workshop Regulation Act which prohibited the employment of any child under the age of 8 in a handicraft. In addition, children between the ages of 8 and 13 were required to attend an approved elementary school for at least ten hours per week and each Monday were to produce a certificate stating that the previous week’s attendances had been made, before they could again be employed.

In the early days of the Act it had also been hoped that its workshop provisions would be applied to the plait schools themselves, but in fact, because the “mistresses” only supervised the children’s work and did not employ them directly, this was not the case. Soon after the Act was passed the incumbent of Wing (who was also a magistrate) raised the matter with the chief constable of Buckinghamshire, and the whole affair was eventually considered at Government level. But in the end it was decided that “if the... object be simply to have the child instructed in the art of straw plaiting”, then the child would not be “employed” under the terms of the Act, nor could the room in which the instruction was given be classified as a workshop.

In the light of this decision, the factory and workshops inspectors, whose duty it was to ensure observation of the legislation, found great difficulty in carrying out their task. They nevertheless made repeated efforts and during the six months ending 30th April, 1871, for example, visited several of the plaiting schools in the villages round Dunstable, cautioning the mistresses
against allowing children under eight to be in attendance and warning that those between the ages of 8 and 13 must make ordinary school attendances as well. However, the situation was aggravated by the fact that in some villages there were still no day schools other than the plaiting establishments. This was true of Cholesbury, for example, as late as 1872. Secondly, the poverty of the parents made them willing to risk breaking the law, and even incurring the 20s. fine provided for breaches of the 1867 legislation. And the straw plait mistresses (who were often “only kept from the parish by their occupation”) were equally prepared to take risks for the small fees paid by their pupils, until directly warned. Thus at Cheddington, Mrs. Tooley confessed that “before the policeman came (she) had five or six (children) under 8.”

Thirdly, breaches of the Act were encouraged by the belief that only with continuous practice from a very early age could children become really proficient plaiters. This view was even accepted by some of the factory inspectors, and as late as the 1920s it was believed that “unless (plaiters are) taught as children the wonderful facility which gives rapid and accurate work cannot be acquired, and the modern Education Acts do not exactly encourage anything which affects their curriculum.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, in the late 1860s and early 1870s evasions of the Act were widespread; “children would slip out through the back door when anyone in authority called at the (plaiting) school, while the number plaiting at home was too great to be dealt with by the factory inspectorate or the police.” Only with the wider provision of elementary education following the passage of the 1870 Education Act, and with the introduction of compulsory education for all children at least up to the age of ten, in the year 1880, were these problems concerning child labour slowly solved. The declining prosperity of the plait trade itself also undoubtedly helped to achieve the same end.

And these general trends can, of course, be traced within the individual plaiting communities. For example, at Ivinghoe the school log book reveals that as late as January, 1875, the “greater number of attendances” at the village school were by “half-timers”, i.e. those attending for ten hours only per week; unfortunately, they took their educational duties very lightly. In November, 1876, it was recorded that the factory inspector had been to the school to check up on attendances, but the master’s pious hope that this would “do good” was soon shattered; six months later it was necessary for the inspector to come again to visit “the homes of the irregular ones.” Once more the result was disappointing, and a third visit was paid to the school in December, 1877. Not until 1878 does the position gradually seem to have changed. Then, under the direction of a new master, an effort began to be made “to try to get those who have only been attending school half-time to come full-time.” Although initially the master’s endeavours met with little success, his persistence and the decline in the plaiting trade eventually effected the necessary improvement.

In the days before legislation was introduced, however, young people usually remained at the plait schools until they were aged about 13 or 14, and then it was considered that they could be left to their own devices. Many
therefore secured an early independence from their parents, merely paying them a small weekly sum to cover board and lodgings, but in other respects going their own way. In some cases, indeed, quite young girls left home and went into lodgings with neighbours so that they could enjoy greater personal freedom. At Ivinghoe the vicar condemned the influence of straw plait on family life because “it makes children independent. It makes parents afraid of offending their children, who thus become hardened and intractable . . . How to remedy it, I know not.”

Furthermore, although during the winter months a small group of adult plaiters would usually work together in a room for warmth and for company, during the summer they were able to work at their cottage doors or even to walk in the fields and lanes, plaiting as they went. Where members of both sexes plaited this gave rise to considerable scandal, and plaiters were widely castigated by the more “respectable” members of society for their immorality. Thus at Oving, the incumbent noted in 1866, that he had been “credibly informed that nearly 40 women old and young have had illegitimate children, and there are 3 cases of families of illegitimate children . . .” (The population of Oving at this time was about 436.) At Stewkley and Linslade, likewise, the “evils” of straw plait were condemned, while at Aston Clinton the incumbent considered that one of the factors inhibiting his pastoral work was the early independence of the plaiters “of their parents, leading to very early marriages, and worse . . . Buckland Common has been long notorious for its immorality, though I have a faint hope that it is mending . . .”

The official view was similar. Straw-plaiters were regarded as of “very low moral” condition; “fornication (was) lamentably frequent” among them, and for this reason they made bad domestic servants. Nor did they usually wish to become servants anyway: “They prefer plaiting, even . . . when the trade is so low, to the restraints of service; and having an extreme fondness for dress, they no doubt often resort to prostitution as a means of adding to their scanty earnings; and this they could not readily pursue in service”. Even towards the end of the 1860s the same criticisms were expressed, and the Assistant Commissioner in connection with the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, condemned the tendency for “male and female plaiters to go about the lanes together in summer engaged in work which has not even the wholesome corrective of more or less physical exhaustion.” There seems to be some truth in these allegations. Thus, in 1865, when the rate of illegitimate births in the country as a whole was 62 per 1,000 births, in the Leighton Buzzard Union of Bedfordshire it was 65; and in the Luton Union, 93. On the other hand, the views of some of the severest critics seem exaggerated; for example, the baptismal registers for the plaiting community of Edlesborough reveal that during the period 1850-1860 inclusive there were only 21 illegitimate children baptised—out of a total of nearly 430. Admittedly, some of the children may not have been baptised, but even taking this into account the picture is scarcely as alarming as it has been painted.

Furthermore, for most of the married women these claims were wide of the mark anyway, and plaiting was merely a way of adding to the scanty family
income. It had the merit that it could be pursued indoors during the winter months and was regularly available, unlike fieldwork. In addition, while trade was booming it yielded satisfactory returns.

When completed the plait was normally sold in lengths of 20 yards (a "score") either to itinerant dealers or else to a local agent. Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire for both 1869 and 1887 names twelve straw dealers in Aston Clinton and Buckland alone, and there were straw-plait dealers as far apart as Ivinghoe Aston, Newton Longville, and Chesham; Chesham had as many as three in 1887.

In some cases, however, the plait was sold in local plait markets. Thus at Ivinghoe there was in the 1860s a small weekly market held on Saturdays "for the sale of butcher's meat, garden produce and straw plait . . ." On occasion at Ivinghoe as much as £300 to £400 would be paid out weekly by the plait dealers. Edlesborough also had its weekly market, as did Tring, where each Friday the plaiters from the villages around took their wares and "lined the street in front of the church . . . opposite to the present Rose and Crown. The dealers then came round and bought the plait, or paid for it if it had been ordered beforehand". The market was officially opened at nine o'clock by the ringing of a bell, and it lasted for two hours. While it was in progress an inspector appointed by the plait dealers went round with his yard-stick and tested "one score or half-score in a bundle. If it proved short in length a similar shortage was assumed in all the other scores or half-scores of that bundle, and a deduction was made by the dealer at the time of payment".

Of course, the main straw plait market was held at Luton each Monday. In the early 1860s here, too, women would bring in their plait for sale and "cheerful matrons and smart lasses would stand quietly on the pavement, each with their scores of plait hooped on their arms". But in 1869 their open-air plait market came to an end when official plait-halls were erected.

Nevertheless, if sale at one of the markets or to a regular dealer was the most usual method of disposing of the plait, not all workers were sufficiently wise or well-endowed to do this. Instead they sold in "little quantities at a time", thereby obtaining a poorer price for it—perhaps one-sixth below the normal level, "Sometimes they take a piece to a shop two or three times a day, e.g. at dinner and tea time, to get paid for it . . ." But happily only a few of the more unlucky or improvident were forced to adopt this unsatisfactory practice.

There is little doubt, then, that in its hey-day the straw plait trade of Buckinghamshire—as elsewhere—provided a much-needed additional income for the families of many local labourers. At the same time it also led to serious social ills. The education of children was often neglected, as they were kept at their plaiting instead of being sent to an ordinary elementary school, while the woman's constant need to be at work prevented her from looking after her home. Straw plaiters were notoriously poor housewives. They were said to be utterly ignorant of such common things as "keeping their houses clean, mending their own or their children's clothes, and cooking their husbands' dinners". And sad to relate, too, despite their endeavours these plaiting families
often lived but poorly. In the 1840s many were said to exist on bread and butter, or bread and lard, eked out, perhaps, with a few onions or radishes from the garden; "but few of those . . . examined got meat more than once or twice a-week".\textsuperscript{49} Over twenty years later their position had improved a little, but then came the final disastrous phase in the history of English straw plait. The process of decline was frequently very painful, and even in the last decade or so of the nineteenth century women could apparently be found who “plaited eternally from morning till night, for a wage of about one and threepence a week”\textsuperscript{.50} But according to at least one band of hostile observers, their situation was aggravated by the fact “that the dealers (formed) a ‘ring’ in whose hands the poor workers (were) absolutely helpless. . . .”\textsuperscript{51}

In the new century they had few successors. By 1922, indeed, one writer on Buckinghamshire plaiting could conclude that it was “the exception rather than the rule, other than in the immediate vicinity of Luton, to find an old dame still busy with the plait”. In these circumstances, “the output (was) easily gathered up on his fortnightly round by the single merchant in Luton who still (dealt) exclusively in English plait . . .”\textsuperscript{52} The plaiting trade had finally ceased to be a Buckinghamshire cottage industry in any meaningful sense.

\textbf{APPENDIX A}

\textbf{FEMALE STRAW PLAITERS IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND BEDFORDSHIRE—1841-1901}

These figures are taken from the relevant Census Returns but they probably under-estimate the actual numbers involved, since, for example, those plaiting on a casual or part-time basis probably did not declare their employment to the enumerator.

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<td>1891*</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>10,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In this census under the definition of “straw-hat” bonnet, plait manufacture.


\textbf{FEMALE STRAW PLAITERS AGED 5-9 INCLUSIVE}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bucks.</th>
<th>Beds.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1841 Census</td>
<td>not available</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>1,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>837</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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APPENDIX B

Numbers and Ages of Female Straw Plaiters in Buckinghamshire at the time of the 1851 Census of Population in seven selected communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>Total females in parish</th>
<th>Total female straw plaiters</th>
<th>Female straw plaiters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>5-9 incl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheddington</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northall</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cublington</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckland</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingrave</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivinghoe</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivinghoe Aston</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers and Ages of Male Straw Plaiters in Buckinghamshire at the time of the 1851 Census of Population in seven selected communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>Total males in parish</th>
<th>Total male straw plaiters</th>
<th>Male straw plaiters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>5-9 incl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheddington</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northall</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cublington</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckland</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingrave</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivinghoe</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivinghoe Aston</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Information derived from Census Returns at Public Record Office: reference no. H.O.107. 1756 for Cheddington, Northall, Ivinghoe and Ivinghoe Aston; reference no. H.O.107.1722 for Cublington, Buckland and Wingrave. Each of the above communities (except for Cublington) had its own straw or straw plait dealer; Buckland, for example, had about six.)

REFERENCES

2 Ibid.
4 T. G. Austin, *The Straw Trade* (Luton, 1871), p. 16.
6 John G. Dony, op. cit., p. 50, quoting from *The Pioneer*, 26th April, 1834.
7 Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, 1834. Parliamentary Papers, 1834, Vol. XXX, p. 33a. A similar state of affairs existed at Amersham, where children under 16 could earn from 1s. to 2s. 6d. per week plaiting, while the wages of adult male labourers averaged 11s. per week, with beer. (p. 30a). In 1833, incidentally, poor rates at Cholesbury are said to have exceeded 30s. in the pound, so that all the land was forced out of cultivation and parochial bankruptcy was caused.
8 Minutes of Evidence before Select Committee on the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1838, Parliamentary Papers, 1837-8, Vol. XVIII, Part 2, Q.8155 and 8163.
10 John G. Dony, op. cit., p. 70.
11 Ibid., p. 53.

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13 John G. Dony, op. cit. , pp. 86-87.
14 G. Eland, op. cit. , p. 96. A very full description of the processes is also given by Ada B. Teetgen, "Plaiting in Bucks" in *Empire Review*, November, 1922, p. 369. According to T. G. Austin, op. cit. , p. 17, one cwt. of agricultural straw would produce about 40 lbs. of plaiting straws worth in around 1860 "from £1 to 18/-, according to season and quality."
26 Ibid., p. 536.
28 Ibid.
33 1867-68 Report, p. 548.
34 G. Eland, op. cit. , p. 101. Sub-Inspector Striedinger noted in 1876 that: "There is a great force in the arguments so often made use of by the advocates of light labour of young children, that certain manipulations requiring nimbleness of fingers, if not learnt and mastered at a tender age, cannot be learnt at all." He was referring to the pillow lace and straw plait trades. Report of Commissioners on the Factory and Workshop Acts, Parliamentary Papers, 1876, Vol. XXIX, Appendix C, No. 37, p. 86.
35 John G. Dony, op. cit. , p. 84.
36 See School Log Book of Ivinghoe School at Buckinghamshire County Record Office, E/LR/116/1. During the "half-time" period the Ivinghoe plaiters attended school in the mornings during some weeks and in the afternoons during others. At the morning sessions the half-timers apparently arrived at 9.45 a.m., since this enabled them to fulfill their statutory obligations, and their late arrival naturally disturbed the work of the other children. In November, 1876, the master tried to encourage these late-comers to arrive at 9 a.m. instead of 9.45 but ruefully admitted failure; "in one or two cases have received insolent messages from the parents...",
39 Ibid.
41 1867-68 Report, p. 135.
42 John G. Dony, op. cit. , p. 71.
43 Edlesborough Baptismal Registers at Buckinghamshire County Record Office, PR 69/116.
46 T. G. Austin, op. cit. , p. 35.
47 Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, 1864, Parliamentary Papers, 1864, Vol. XXII—Evidence, p. 204. This was the evidence of Mr. Horley, postmaster of Toddington in Bedfordshire; however, the practice he describes was not confined to this county.
51 English Land Restoration League—*Red Van Report for 1893*, p. 15.
52 Ada B. Teetgen, loc. cit. , p. 368.
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