’By her Labour’: Working women in Victorian Oxford 1851-1891

Student Dissertation

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Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.000143a8

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Abstract

Oxford’s population doubled during the second half of the nineteenth century. The coming of the railways, university reforms, the growth of industries such as printing and a burgeoning service industry, alongside the decline in employment opportunities in the surrounding countryside, were some of the principal reasons driving men and women to the city in search of employment. This study will investigate women’s contribution to Oxford’s economy, as employees and business proprietors/entrepreneurs during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Much has been written about Victorian women and the retreat from the public into the domestic sphere. The notion of the ‘angel of the house’ was upheld as the ‘ideal’ that Victorian women were actively encouraged to emulate. However, the reality for many women was very different. This study will build on recent historiography that challenges the doctrine of separate spheres. It will contribute to our understanding of women and work in smaller provincial towns and cities that have been largely neglected by historians, and to our knowledge of women and enterprise, a more recent area of historical scholarship.

This study examines the nature and type of work that women participated in, what might have motivated them to do so and the extent to which women ran their own or their families’ enterprises. This thesis will draw primarily on census data for Oxford. This includes aggregate data for the city alongside a detailed analysis of three streets across the different censuses to assess the nature and extent of women’s work. Other sources such as oral history, ephemera and trade directories have also been used to analyse women’s economic activity in the city.

This dissertation will conclude that women played a vital role in the economy of Oxford. Women followed a wide variety of occupations, although mostly in more conventional feminine trades. They also took full advantage of the opportunities to become small business owners in areas such as millinery, laundry work and lodging houses. Whilst women were primarily driven by economic necessity, other motivations such as independence were also a key factor.
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Personal statement

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it for a degree at the Open University or any other university or institution. Part of this dissertation builds on work I submitted for assessment as part of A825.
Map of Oxford City c. 1911. Henry Taunt.
1. Introduction

Miss Procter ran her Millinery, mantle and Dress Rooms. Her business, based in St Giles, was evidently successful, running from the 1870’s until the late 1890’s.¹ In 1870, she advertised for a ‘Light Porter’.² In March 1874, Miss Proctor advertised a show of ‘Millinery and Mantles from French Models, for the coming season’.³ Her other specialisms included wedding trousseaux, India Outfits, ladies underclothing and family mourning. Miss Proctor provides us with a tantalising glimpse of the type of enterprise run by women in the city. A glimpse into any of the trade directories for the city during this period showed a significant number of entries for women and their businesses, including Miss Proctor and her Millinery, Mantle and Dress Rooms.⁴

The aim of the dissertation is to establish the extent of women’s contribution to the character and success of the economy in Victorian Oxford, through their employment, but also their involvement in family enterprises and running their own businesses, for example lodging houses. A study of working wives in Victorian Salisbury, a city of a similar size to Oxford called for further studies like this as ‘women in smaller provincial town and cities have been largely neglected by

¹ The John Johnson Collection; Advertising Flyer 1888. [http://johnjohnson.chadwick.co.uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/search/displayitem.do?ItemNumber=226 accessed August 2021]
In terms of chronology, the focus of the study will be 1851 to 1891, a period when Oxford saw significant growth and development. Much of this was due to the university’s expansion and reform and improvements in communication e.g. the coming of the railways. Apart from the growth of the city, another reason for choosing this chronology is that it is a manageable time period for a study of this size and is long enough to provide an indication of the nature and type of work that women were involved in.

The dissertation will include an assessment of the type of work undertaken by women across different social classes, how much of that work was based on significant economic need, and to what extent women were involved in their own or their family enterprises. The classification of different social classes and the issues associated with census classifications will also be discussed and debated.6 The study relates primarily to the ‘Families’ theme and specifically the often contentious historiographical debate around separate or public and private (domestic) spheres for men and women.7 The study will explore the extent to which the only acceptable status for women was considered to be marriage, and that the role of women in marriage was to look after their husbands and children and be the keeper of their physical and moral wellbeing.

The impetus for this study was an article by Howells in New Directions in Local History which detailed a study that she had undertaken in Salisbury, a town of

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similar size to Oxford. She uses a variety of primary sources to demonstrate the nature and extent of women’s work and enterprise in the city during the Victorian era. Howells calls for further studies of this kind in smaller towns and cities because they have been largely neglected by historians. She states that ‘an accumulation of similar studies elsewhere would contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of women’s lives during this period’.  

This study will examine the debates around the ideas of the ‘family economy’ in Britain before industrialisation and how it forms our understanding of pre-industrial women’s work and whether or not women had more influence on both the family and wider community than they did after industrialisation.

There are also historical debates around how work is actually measured and defined. Historians such as Higgs challenged the notion that economic participation can only be measured by money and that there is such a thing as a dual economy comprising the family economy and the external capitalist market. Women often moved between the two and the work of women in the home is often neglected because it is not seen as an economic activity such as wives looking after lodgers who provided a source of income for poorer families.

The debate around separate spheres will also be critical. During the Victorian era, the notion of separate spheres was based around biological determinism and

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assumed that men and women were naturally suitable for different roles because of their biological and genetic makeup. The historiographical debate around the nature and extent to which women actually experienced exclusion from the public sphere and work by historians such as Davidoff and Hall\textsuperscript{10} and Vickery\textsuperscript{11} are central to this, for example, the importance of wives in family enterprises.

Much has been written about women’s work, but one area that has been largely neglected are women who ran their own enterprises or who were actively involved in their families’ businesses. Historians such as Kay and Phillips have attempted to define what is meant by female enterprise and entrepreneurship.\textsuperscript{12} The debate will be outlined in this thesis and used to frame the discussion around the extent of female entrepreneurship in Oxford. There is a chapter devoted entirely to this topic as it became apparent during the research phase how crucial enterprise was to many women’s livelihoods. This chapter focuses on two areas where women were particularly active – laundry work and lodging house keeping. They were selected because there were sufficient primary sources readily available – for example oral history relating to laundresses in Headington Quarry.

Central to the research has been the census. Aggregate census data for Oxford from 1851 to 1891 has been used to explore the nature and extent of women’s

\textsuperscript{10} Leonore Davidoff & Catherine Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850} (Oxfordshire, Routledge 1987).


work in Oxford. A discussion of the advantages and shortcomings of this primary
source material is covered in chapter 2, along with the social classifications of
occupations which were not value free. The differing assumptions that individual
enumerators made about what constituted an occupation must be taken into
account when assessing any data.

This study has also sampled the same three streets across each of the censuses in
different enumerator districts to extract data around occupations for men and
women from different socio economic groupings.

Although the census has been central, local trade directories such as Kelly’s, along
with ephemera such as trade cards found in the John Johnson Collection online and
articles and classified advertisements in the local press. This has enabled some
limited cross referencing to establish up a picture of the nature and extent of
women’s work and enterprise in Oxford. Where possible, case studies have been
used to try and tease out how much women were involved in their family
enterprises - for example Frank Cooper Ltd, whose wife Sarah created the recipes
and, although the records available in the local archive are patchy, there are letters
from former members of staff who provide testament to her more direct
involvement in running the business.
2. Women and work – a historiographical review

‘But even the bare assertion with regard to women that their activities are confined to the management of things domestic though generally, is by no means absolutely true. Many wives are, as well as their husbands, actual breadwinners, hiring out the labours of their hands and contributing daily or weekly pay to the family income.’¹

This chapter will focus on some of the historiographical thinking around women and work in the Victoria era. There is plenty of debate around the notion of separate spheres for men and women and the prominence of that ideology during that period in particular. Historians disagree about whether or not the transition into the industrial age and modernity deprived women of their freedom and economic agency.² The quote from the ‘Working Man’ above, would also suggest that even during the Victorian era, there was extensive debate about women and work and their contribution to the family income. Historians argue that the traditional family economy thrived up until the 1800’s and the industrial era, where the whole family, men, women and children contributed to the family economy. Once the industrial age began and the economy became more focused on waged work outside the home, the argument is that this notion of the family economy was lost, and women in particular lost their agency and ability to contribute their labour. Mechanisation and the modern factory was responsible for permanently dividing the home and place of work. In a relatively short period of time from the mid nineteenth century, the middle-class household transformed into an almost mythical world populated

by idealised versions of the mother, father and child. These notions are reinforced both by images and literature at the time, as well as the media. John Ruskin’s lecture ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ in 1865 is a prime example of the prevailing beliefs present at the time of the distinction between women’s ‘passive’ nature and role in the home and men’s active role within the public sphere. Ruskin talks about the fact that true happiness can only come from the differences between the sexes that complement each other. He describes the man as ‘eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender, [] his energy for war and conquest’. Women on the other hand were ‘for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. Her great function is praise: she enters into no contest. {} By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation.’

It is generally understood that as the nineteenth century progressed and the industrial revolution took hold, the new capitalist man needed a wife at home in a subordinate, mostly domestic role, and that the roles of men and women became much more defined than in previous generations. The ideology of public and private spheres emphasised the private sphere as a women’s place and that it was her responsibility to maintain and manage the domestic or private sphere. Davidoff discusses the evangelical movement which coincided with the emergence of the professional middle classes and their emphasis on the special role that women had in nurturing and holding social and religious virtues, but that this was only possible

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4 *Sesame and Lilies*. P. 147.
if women were protected from the competitive and cruel public world of work that men inhabited.\(^6\) The ideology of the public sphere as it emerged during the nineteenth century reflected the fact that the workplace for men increasingly meant them selling their labour for wages outside the home. During the nineteenth century, there were many commentators, particularly from the middle classes who proselytised the message the ideal that a woman’s proper place was in the home and the man should be the main breadwinner.\(^7\) The Victorians idealised marriage and motherhood for women as their true vocation. However, the ideology didn’t necessarily match reality. Anderson cited in Parkinson estimates that 1.8 million adult women in the 1851 census were either unmarried or widowed. This equates to some 9 per cent of the population surviving without a husband.\(^8\) Certainly some of these women, particularly middle-class women would have been left with a comfortable nest egg when widowed, but the majority must have sought some sort of employment either by running their own enterprises or taking on other work in order to survive.

The idea that women largely retreated into the home and the marketplace during the Victorian era was an argument put forward by Pinchbeck (1930) and Clarke (1919). They maintained that increasing industrialisation, the development of the market economy and division of labour, meant that men worked largely outside of the home in the waged economy and women retreated into the home and away

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\(^8\) Parkinson, Alison. 'Marry - Stitch - Die - or Do Worse': *Female Self-Employment and Small Business Proprietorship in London C.1740 - 1880*. Oxford University, UK, 2002, p.6.
from economic activity.\(^9\) This was particularly true of the middle classes who wished to carve out a separate identity i.e., the distinction of separate spheres and separation of work and home from other classes, particularly the working classes. This model has become amongst some historians the prism through which they examine Victorian women and work, and this ideology masks a much more complex and fascinating reality for many women of all classes. As Vickery points out, this public and private separation can stand as a loose description of the longstanding differences between men and women that go back much, much further than the nineteenth century, but did not suddenly become a rigid dichotomy between the sexes during the nineteenth century.\(^10\) There is also very little agreement amongst historians about what is meant by ‘public and private’ within this context as well. It may have been a middle-class ideal held up by writers such as Ruskin, but as for reflecting reality during the nineteenth century, it does not stand up to proper scrutiny. To quote Vickery, ‘At a very general level, eighteen and nineteenth century women were associated with home and children while men controlled public institutions, but then this rough division could be applied to almost any century and culture’\(^11\) Vickery also goes on to point out that when historians look at specific groups or individuals rather than social theories like separate spheres which limit them, women in the nineteenth century generally emerge as no less proactive and capable individuals than women in previous centuries.\(^12\)


\(^11\) Vickery, p.413.

\(^12\) Vickery, p. 384.
When we start to properly examine the role of women by looking at their economic roles within specific towns and cities like Oxford, what emerges is a rich picture of women who were prominent in the economic sphere, often publicly. What emerged during the research phase of this project was strong evidence of women who were involved in their own enterprises and were not necessarily economically dependent on their husbands.

Certainly, research into this area, particularly in smaller provincial towns like Oxford has been limited, not least because of the adherence to the ‘separate spheres’ model or ideology, which has led many historians to overlook the role of women and business particularly in the service economy for example care work, food and drink and laundry work. Indeed, Howells in her study of Salisbury, a similar town to Oxford argues that women who ran their own enterprises, even if they were sole proprietors, or were employed often within the service sector as part of the economy have by and large been given ‘scant attention’ by historians. There has been a tendency to focus on industry, particularly mechanisation and large scale industrial production in the regions where they took place and mostly using quantitative data as part of their analysis. Berg and Hudson argue particularly that historians of the industrial revolution have tended to ignore the interdependence of the different sectors across the economy including the services industries, the continuity of traditional structures in many industries and trades and underestimated the number women and children in the workforce.

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chapter which covers women and enterprise in Oxford, one area of focus is the laundry trade which women were predominant in. This was an area that came late to mechanisation e.g., the shift to steam laundries around the start of the first world war.¹⁵ This meant that this trade was labour intensive, and women in particular found it a useful way of earning money and it was an activity that could be done from home.

We do know that the process of economic change during the Victorian era resulted in a greater separation between the workplace and the home which affected women directly, particularly in towns like Oxford and Salisbury. There was a general movement away from domestic activities in the home, particularly for the middle classes. Richards talks about activities such as laundry, dressmaking and nursing in particular.¹⁶ Women largely carried out these tasks and the demand for these services continued to increase, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century... in most places, including many provincial towns, ‘demand for the services of independent, commercial laundries, schools, milliners and dressmakers increased’.¹⁷ This offered many economic opportunities for women in smaller towns and cities like Oxford.

In recent years, historians have been re-assessing the role of women and entrepreneurship/enterprise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More

traditional views on female entrepreneurship have focused on a decline in women involved in their own enterprises compared with the eighteenth century. Again, the ideology of separate spheres i.e., women retreating away from economic agency and into the home has been a significant influence.¹⁸

Aston and Martino have argued that in fact women were actively involved in their running their own enterprises. Historians have analysed primary sources such as advertisements, directories and bankruptcy records and demonstrated that women did not disappear from running their own enterprises after the eighteenth century but were still actively involved in the urban economy in the UK throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁹ They also argue that there is much less agreement on the size and nature of these enterprises and the risks taken. Many authors like Kay argue that most female enterprises were generally small and informal, usually family based and treading a fine line between entrepreneurship and respectability.²⁰ This meant that women tended to focus on more traditionally feminine trades.²¹ Other historians have argued that women were generally less conservative in their choice of trade or industry i.e. some were engaged in what could be classed as more ‘masculine’ industries. Aston describes women such as s boot and shoe

¹⁹ Aston and Martino. P.840.
manufacturer run by two sisters in the High Street, Birmingham and Ann Corbett who ran a temperance hotel in the city after the death of her husband.\textsuperscript{22}

Katrina Honeyman (2007) takes a different view. She argues that whilst women played an important part in British business and enterprise, we need to focus on the fact that women were operating in a male dominated environment where profit was king.\textsuperscript{23} She argues that gender analysis – how society defines male and females’ roles and characteristics is helpful in understanding how and why women were limited in the type of enterprise they could engage with. Honeyman argues that the differences between male and female enterprises have been largely overlooked and asks why women tended to choose businesses/enterprises that were largely rooted in the service sector and mostly in the realm of care and service to others. Was this a deliberate choice? Were other opportunities in the economy closed to them? She also argued that prevailing attitudes towards women and what was ‘acceptable’ behaviour for their gender pushed them towards specific activities which would be considered more ‘appropriate’ for their socially determined position.\textsuperscript{24} This debate will be explored in relation to Oxford and the nature of both enterprise and paid work that women undertook in the city during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

\begin{flushleft}


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Methodology

The main methodology is the use of the census for Oxford. This study, as outlined in the introduction, has made use of aggregate census data for Oxford in the late Victorian era to explore the classification of occupations in Oxford and the percentage of men and women who have a recorded occupation to assess the nature and extent of women’s work in Oxford.

As part of the study, three streets in different parts of the city were chosen. Data from the Census Enumerator Books (CEB’s) for those streets were then logged from each of the censuses from 1851 to 1891, the period covered in this dissertation.

There has been much debate amongst historian about the limitations of the census in relation to the reliability and validity of the enumeration of women’s occupations in the census. Higgs for example reports that this was particularly common when it came to the nineteenth century home which was often a place of production and often, the domestic work of women in the family home was either directly or implicitly excluded from the census. However, in later research, he and Wilkinson used asylum records from four hospitals in East Anglia and Essex where women’s details including age, addresses, family details and occupations were then compared to the relevant CEB’s. In general, the percentage of instances where the patient information and the various censuses were the same was high. One example is Ipswich in 1881 where 100 per cent of the details given by women in

both sets of records matched.26 Higgs and Wilkinson’s detailed research paper gives us a good indication that the census is a useful resource to enable us to explore women’s occupations in the nineteenth century with some confidence - ‘There appears no good reason why historians should not make full use of this extraordinary source for reconstructing the social and economic roles of women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century England and Wales.’27

Occupational classification schemes have been widely debated, with different systems being developed in varied contexts. Drake and Finnegan28 discuss various methods, and for the purposes of this study, Armstrong’s methods have been used as his study of York had similarities with Oxford at the time29. There are some obvious problems e.g. class three size which captures a diverse range of occupations. This occurs partly because the defined boundaries are vague and partly because the level of skill in women’s occupations is less defined than for men’s. 30

Although the census has been central, local trade directories such as Kelly’s, Valters and Hunt have been used, along with ephemera such as trade cards and advertisements found in the John Johnson Collection online and articles and classified advertisements in the local press. Where possible, I have used small case

27 Higgs and Wilkinson. P.35.
29 M. Drake and R. Finnegan, pp. 48-49.
studies around relevant local businesses to try and tease out how much women were involved in the enterprise.
3. Working women in Oxford


‘Women in smaller provincial towns and cities have been largely neglected by historians’. ¹ Jane Howell’s contention was the inspiration for this dissertation and the city of Oxford, whilst larger and more populous than Salisbury (the focus of her research), shares some common characteristics. Like Salisbury², Oxford in the mid-nineteenth century the city lacked any single major industry and there was an emphasis on the service sector including food and drink, clothing, and printing.³ This chapter will examine the nature and extent of women’s work in Oxford and what might have been their motivations for working and how much that might have strayed from economic necessity. This will include women’s involvement in their family businesses, as well as an examination of women and enterprise in the city.

Comparisons will also be drawn with Howells’ work on working women in Salisbury

to establish if there are patterns to women’s work in these two provincial cities during the late nineteenth century.

Oxford is an ancient city and is mostly known as a university town or the ‘city of dreaming spires’. However, it was a well-established county town by the eleventh century, long before the foundation of the university. There have been numerous studies of the city and university in terms of its archaeology and architecture, but less about the residents of the ‘town’ and their everyday lives, particularly during the later Victorian era. Much has been written about the significant impact of the industrial revolution on cities such as Sheffield or Manchester, but less about smaller provincial cities like Oxford which until the twentieth century, did not have any major industry, largely because the lack of raw materials was a barrier to industrial development.

However, the arrival of the railways and the significant expansion of the university during the 1860’s led to a sustained period of population growth. Between 1851 and 1891, the population of the city grew from 28,843 to 45,742. This had a positive impact on people seeking employment opportunities. Oxfordshire is a rural county and over the same period there was a significant decline in employment and other opportunities in the countryside. Men and women were leaving rural communities because of a lack of demand for farm labour and the loss of the domestic production of crafts to factory mass production and poor pay

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4 Matthew Arnold, 1861.
7 1851 & 1891 Census of England & Wales, Area, Houses and Population Areas and Sanitary Districts, Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire History Centre, 0312.
levels.\(^8\) This made Oxford an attractive proposition for those who were struggling and in need of work.

Despite the fact that Oxford lacked any significant industry, there were some important employers such as the Oxford University Press, Halls and Morrell’s Brewery and the railways. In terms of industry, there were only a small number of significant employers including the railway, two clothing factories - Hyde’s and W.F. Lucas. However, even when these employers are taken into account, the University remained the city’s largest generator of employment, but also a significant consumer of goods and services such as building and domestic services such as laundry as we shall see in the chapter examining women and enterprise in Oxford.\(^9\)

Overall, the city’s economy relied on transport and building, the supply of food and clothing and domestic services. The building trade was important to the city, employing 10% of the male population of Oxford in 1851. The clothing trade was dominated by tailors, along with shoemakers and milliners. In terms of food and drink, distributive trades were significant, numbering seven hundred and five in 1851.\(^10\) These include confectioners and bakers, butchers, grocers and drapers. Retail was another significant area of employment. For example, R.J. Spiers and Son, a dealer in china and glass in the High Street and Ellison and Cavill, drapers in Maudlin Street. Many of these areas offered women in Oxford employment and enterprise opportunities – particularly in the service industries, an area in which

\(^9\) Crossley, Ed., p. 214.
\(^10\) \textit{1851 Census of England & Wales, Area, Houses and Population Areas and Sanitary Districts, Oxfordshire}, Oxfordshire History Centre, 0312.
women made a significant contribution. Historians like Honeyman argue that although women did have economic agency, there are questions around the differences between men and women’s choice of enterprise i.e., that women tended to choose work or enterprise that was rooted in the service or care sector.\textsuperscript{11}

There is no doubt that women were central to the economic success and character of mid to late Victorian Oxford. The 1851 census lists a diverse range of occupations that women were involved in – 108, compared to just over 280 for men. This included retail trades such as shopkeeping and millinery, hospitality – for example inn keeping and lodging house keeping, along with domestic services, dressmaking, and laundry work.\textsuperscript{12} In 1851, 8,039 males were employed in the city, compared to 4,613 females, but women still made up around thirty-six per cent of the workforce, rising to thirty nine percent in 1901.\textsuperscript{13} The figures are strikingly similar for Salisbury, where Howells notes that in 1851 a third of the working population were women, both as employees and running their own enterprises.\textsuperscript{14} As with Salisbury, men tended to dominate in some parts of Oxford’s economy, notably building and construction along with transport in particular.\textsuperscript{15} There were exceptions to this

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{1851 Census of England & Wales, Population Tables, 1851, Part II. Ages and occupations. Volume 1, Report, England and Wales, I-VI., Appendix.}
\textsuperscript{13} Census of England and Wales 1901. (63 Vic. C.4.). Summary tables. Area, houses and population, also population classified by ages, conditions as to marriage, occupations, birthplaces and infirmities. Paper no. 1523. UK Parliamentary Papers [accessed October 2021]. The 1881 and 1891 census only include aggregate figures for Oxfordshire and do not provide a detailed occupation list for men and women for Oxford city specifically. The 1901 census figures, whist outside the chronological parameters of this dissertation, have been used here to demonstrate the modest growth in the number of women working during this period.
general picture with six women listed as ship builders and house decorators and one carriage maker, and two copper miners. However, these more traditionally masculine occupations taken by women in 1851 were the exception rather than the rule.\(^{16}\)

Whilst domestic service occupied the largest proportion of women, particularly younger unmarried women during this period, women mainly worked in areas such as the care, production and sale of clothing, the provision of food and drink such as licenced victuallers and inn keepers, shopkeeping other than food provision such as grocery and in what could be considered caring roles such as nursing and education as can be seen in the summary occupation table below for Oxford City.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s Occupations(^{17})</th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1871</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>1,183</td>
<td>1,273</td>
<td>1,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry work</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and drink</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Again, the similarities with Salisbury during this period are striking. As with Oxford, apart from domestic service, clothing is one of the main categories of employment for women followed by laundry work and food and drink. For example, in 1851, 467 women worked in clothing, 218 in laundry and 97 in food and drink.  

Occupations under clothing in Oxford, consisted of milliners, dressmakers, seamstresses and straw hat and bonnet makers. Women also worked in the leather trades as well, specifically boots and shoes. Occasionally, they were identified for their own skill for example, a female shoe binder who in 1851 lived at 51 George Street with her husband, a wine merchants porter and three lodgers. However, most often they were known as ‘Shoemakers Wives’ – 185 in 1851, 163 in 1861 and 138 in 1871. The importance of laundry work and food and drink to women’s employment is also in evidence from these aggregate figures – a reflection of a busy urban environment and the fact that laundry was largely outsourced by middle and upper-class families during the Victorian era. The university in particular generated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1871</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shops</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building &amp; Furniture</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board &amp; Lodging</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Service</td>
<td>1,376</td>
<td>2,225</td>
<td>1,571</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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a great deal of work for laundresses as we shall see in chapter 4.\textsuperscript{20} In terms of food and drink, in the 1851 census, twenty eight women are listed in their own capacity as shopkeepers; in 1871 that had risen to forty eight in total.\textsuperscript{21} From the raw data in the Census Enumerator books for St. Giles Street, George Street and St. Thomas’s Street, the majority of women appear to have been widows presumably continuing their husbands business to keep a roof over their heads for their families as well as some independence. For example, at 29 George Street in 1851, the head of the household is listed as a widow and Greengrocer. Her sister also lives there and is listed as a laundress and her daughter who is listed as an ‘assistant’, presumably in the family green grocers.\textsuperscript{22} In St. Thomas’s Street in 1861, at number fifty, a female butcher also listed as a widow, and a greengrocers in the same street at number eight who is listed as a Greengrocer and employs her two daughters as Grocers Assistants.\textsuperscript{23} In addition to this, in the aggregate census data for 1851, 9 women are listed as inn keepers and 19 as lodging house keepers in their own right.\textsuperscript{24} These occupations had the advantage of providing women with an income and also a home. The demand for these types of services over and above the

\textsuperscript{21} Figures extrapolated from the census reports for Oxford 1851 and 1871. https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/parlipapers/result [accessed September 2021]
university was driven by commercial travellers and tourists. For example, Charlotte Timms at 41 St. Thomas’s Street ran a lodging house. At the time of the census in 1851, there were fifteen people listed as lodgers, including labourers, plasterers, commercial travellers and two musicians from Italy.25

Education was another area in which women had a visible presence. They were teachers and governesses, but some were involved in running seminaries and other private educational establishments for young women. In Kelly’s’ Directory 1890, there are thirty separate private seminaries, schools and colleges listed that have women at the helm.26 One of the largest on Felstead Road, known as Oxford Training College, was run by Selma Simpson who is listed in the census as ‘Lady Principal’. Her sister, Sarah Simpson is a widow and listed as Matron. They employed six staff and were responsible for the education of 27 young women aged 19 to 22, some who are from Oxfordshire and neighbouring counties, but also Middlesex and Hampshire.27

‘Wife of…’ is a term used in the census and applied to a significant number of women – for example 184 ‘Shoemaker’s Wife’, 20 ‘Innkeeper’s Wife’ and 28 ‘Shopkeeper’s Wife’ in the 1851 census for Oxford City.28 According to Higgs,

Enumerators were instructed to only apply this designation to farmers and from 1851 those women who employed in or at home, with the exception of domestic duties needed to have their occupations recorded. The term ‘Wife of...’ was clearly used much more widely by census enumerators in a way that wasn’t originally intended, but it is a challenge to ascertain from the census records the extent to which women were actively involved in their husband’s occupation. We can assume that it was more likely for wives without dependent children to have a greater involvement as they would have had fewer domestic responsibilities. For example, in 1871, The Shoulder of Mutton pub in St Thomas’s Street lists the Innkeeper as ‘Head’, with his wife designated as ‘Innkeepers Wife’. There are no dependent children listed in the entry, but the couple were not only managing the pub, but also catering for six lodgers, so it is reasonable to assume that his wife would have a significant involvement in their business.

How accurately applied the term ‘Wife of...’ is questionable. In researching the Census enumerator books, there were several entries where the male Head was listed as running a business such as a lodging house, but he was listed as having other employment. For example, in St. Thomas’s High Street in 1851, at number 51 the head is listed as a Mason & Lodging House Keeper; at number 120, a Boat Builder and Victualler. Both has wives, no dependent children and each

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accommodated a significant number of lodgers.\(^{31}\) If the male head was working outside the home on a regular basis, we can assume that the wife was most probably active in helping to run the family enterprise.

Perhaps one of the best known company to be associated with Oxford is Frank Cooper Ltd. initially making marmalade in the latter half of the nineteenth century and then later processing locally grown fruit in the Spring and Autumn to make other preserves.\(^{32}\) The business grew gradually and by the 1930’s, the factory employed around one hundred staff. Whilst existing archive records for the company are largely incomplete and mostly consist of advertising material, there are the existing recipe books from Frank Coopers wife, Sarah Jane Cooper including different marmalades and jams which were used by the company to produce their preserves.\(^{33}\) In addition, there are records of correspondence with retired employees of Frank Cooper Ltd. from a researcher called Frank Lloyd who was asking them for memories of their time working for the company. A letter from the sister of a former employee, Marjorie Scott dated 10 January 1975 is intriguing in terms of the light it sheds Sarah Jane Cooper’s involvement in the company:

‘I can remember that some years later, my sister telling me that when Mrs Cooper died, no one would bother with the business. She also mentioned that Mrs. Cooper

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\(^{33}\) Oxfordshire History Centre, Frank Cooper Ltd., B3/PRO/A1/1-7, Handwritten recipe books by Sarah Jane Cooper, 1874-1912.
and her family, the Gills had largely funded the business from the outset and that Sarah had significant control of it until she died.\textsuperscript{34}

Whilst the Frank Cooper archive records are patchy and mostly incomplete, there are glimpses in the correspondence of significant involvement of a wife in a family enterprise, not only in terms of her recipes but also in financing the business and managing it, even if the company is in her husband’s name.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the prevailing separate spheres model of the Victorian era assumed that the only acceptable objective in life for women was marriage and the domestic sphere; their primary role to care for their husband and children whilst the husband was the breadwinner. However, for many families, particularly amongst the working class this was an impossible ideal. For most women whose husbands work was erratic, seasonal and casual in nature such as porters and labourers, women needed to work to keep the family afloat. This was especially true in a city like Oxford where the university are significant employers and work out of term time drops off significantly when the students have gone down.\textsuperscript{35} A summary snapshot of the aggregate data collected from three streets in Oxford; St. Giles, St. Thomas’s High Street and George Street in 1861 which compares wives and husbands professions reveals some interesting patterns.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} Oxfordshire History Centre, Frank Cooper Ltd., B3/AD/C3, Correspondence with retired employees relating to their memories of work at Frank Coopers including interviews with them and correspondence.
Armstrong’s social classification system has been used here as a way of assessing the status of individual occupations:\(^{37}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Wives</th>
<th>Husbands</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Form this snapshot, it would appear that the types of occupations held by working wives were of a higher social classification – thirteen women had occupations that sat within the class three social classification in this sample and of those, the majority of husbands were in occupations of equal or lower status – mostly labouring, gardening and portering in this case. Although this is just a sample, it does suggest that it could be that wives were more likely to have husbands in lower status jobs than themselves. This demonstrates the importance of working wives and the significant contribution that they make to the family economy, especially when their husbands’ occupation was more erratic or of lower status.

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As for wives, their roles vary, but their occupations appear to include a degree of flexibility and possibly enterprise as well. Examples include laundresses and dressmakers – both occupations which can be undertaken at home and can be fitted around domestic responsibilities. There are some exceptions to this however such as husbands and wives working together. For example, in George Street in 1861, there are two couples listed as shoe binder (wife) and bootmaker (husband).38

As established in the previous chapter, historians have been reassessing the role of women and entrepreneurship in the nineteenth century. The current debate has moved on from the traditional view that women involved in their own enterprises declined in the nineteenth century. This view was influenced by the ideology of separate spheres and the retreat by women away from economic agency and into the home and domestic sphere. Historians such as Aston and Martino however, argue that women were in fact actively involved in their own enterprises throughout the nineteenth century.39 Chapter four showcases two particular areas of female entrepreneurship and enterprise in Oxford – Laundresses and Lodging House keepers, but it is worth exploring here what other entrepreneurial activities women were involved in.


From the evidence presented in this chapter, we have some idea of the extent to which women were involved in their family enterprises. For example, wives of lodging house keepers. However, there is evidence in the census and in directories of the period that indicate that there were women managing and running their own enterprises independently and contributing significantly to Oxfords expanding economy. Much of this growth was based around the service sector and what could be described as non-essential goods such as millinery and confectionary, which were indicative of a population with disposable income which would enable them to buy such things. Women in Oxford certainly took advantage of these opportunities and although most of them tended to be in the more predictably ‘feminine’ trades, it is likely that they did so because single women were generally considered to be a ‘problem’ by contemporary Victorian society and so this was one way of remaining within ‘respectable’ boundaries.40

It has been challenging to match the census with the directories to try and track individual businesses over the year as there are inaccuracies in the census especially around house numbering. Not all enumerators listed them and if they did, they were not necessarily accurate. However, there were some that are worth mentioning here. In the Oxford Directory, 1866, Elizabeth Grace was listed at 32 St. Giles Street as a Confectioner.41 Tracking her back to the census records of 1881 and 1891, she was unmarried, not a widow and employed a Confectioners Assistant from the census records in 1881 and 1891.42 Mary Wotton was listed as a

Stationers and Newsagent.\textsuperscript{43} Like Elizabeth Grace, she was listed in the census 1891. There is no evidence of any other family members or of a husband.

One particular activity which took off in the mid-nineteenth century was embroidery on canvas using coloured wool, otherwise known as Berlin Wool Work. According to Parker, it was the ‘century’s most successful commercial embroidery venture’.\textsuperscript{44} It was so popular that the 1861 included a specific category for this activity. As with Salisbury, which listed three female suppliers in the town in 1862,\textsuperscript{45} Kelly’s Directory of Oxford, 1890 listed five Berlin Wool repositories in Oxford City, all run by women and listed as ‘Miss’.\textsuperscript{46} In the Oxford Directory of 1861, Miss Clarke had a half-page advertisement for her ‘Berlin Wool Repository & General Fancy Business’ in Market Street. She had also branched out into other activities such as lessons in wax flower work and French Paper, as well as selling medicinal tea and ‘arrow root, as imported from the South Sea Islands’.\textsuperscript{47} What is evident from these examples is that women successfully managed and ran enterprises in Oxford City over a significant period of time and did so in ways that exploited the disposable income of the wealthier elements of the population.

\textsuperscript{43} Oxford History Centre, Directories OXFO 1866, The Oxford Directory 1866, p. 221.
\textsuperscript{46} Oxford History Centre, Directories OXFO 1890, Kelly’s Directory of Oxford and Neighbourhoods 1890-91, p.348.
\textsuperscript{47} Oxford History Centre, Directories OXFO 1861, The Oxford Directory 1866, p. 46.
Research into the working lives of women in Oxford has revealed the wide variety of occupations pursued by women in Victorian Oxford. They were not only actively involved in their own family enterprises, but they also took advantage of the opportunities that the city economy presented to enable them to run small enterprises as part of the public sphere. It is a challenge to establish women’s individual motivations beyond the obvious economic ones, but we can surmise that for many of the women who did work other for themselves or on behalf and for their families, there must have been a satisfaction in having some independence and money of their own.
4. *Some money of my own*’

*Working women and ‘enterprise’ in Oxford in the late Nineteenth Century.*

'We go on talking as if it were still true that every women is, or ought to be supported by her father, brother or husband....we are (probably to a man) unaware of the amount of business of life in England done by women; and if we do not attend to the fact in time, the knowledge will be forced on us in some disadvantageous or disagreeable way'.

Much has been written about women’s work by historians, but this often excludes women who provided either for themselves or their families by running or managing their own enterprise such as lodging houses. Various authors such as Kay and Phillips have attempted to define what is meant by historical female entrepreneurship or enterprise. Phillips defines women in business as ‘any females, whether in partnership or alone, who owned any independent unit of production or service. This definition includes those who were independently self-employed and those who were involved in partnerships with other men and women.’ Kay extends this further by saying that historical female entrepreneurship is not necessarily about being an inventor or capitalist but is someone who ‘gets things done’ in pursuit of economic aims. She argues that women were marshalling their own resources, usually personal ones such as their homes, their households and their

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skills to bring in customers.\textsuperscript{5} Lieshout, Smith, Montebruno and Bennett also argue that entrepreneurship was not confined to large enterprises, but also many smaller businesses often with a sole proprietor who displayed many of the same skills such as client acquisition and management along with anticipating supply and demand and taking responsibility and bearing the risks associated with that, whether financial or otherwise.\textsuperscript{6} Their article follows that inclusive approach to entrepreneurship and treats ‘all employers and sole proprietors working on their own account, essentially all self-employed’.\textsuperscript{7} This broad definition of what is meant by entrepreneurship will form the basis for the arguments put forward in this chapter, focusing specifically on lodging house keepers and laundresses in Oxford. During the nineteenth century, there were many commentators, particularly from the middle classes who proselytised the message the ideal that a woman’s proper place was in the home and the man should be the main breadwinner, maintaining his wife and children in the home.\textsuperscript{8} However, as we have seen in a previous chapter, it is important to separate out the ideology from the reality for many families and particularly married women at the time and to ask what people were actually doing. We do know that in an increasingly urban and cash dominated society, women still needed to find ways to earn a living in addition to any support


they might receive from a male head of household in order to maintain family finances. This reality meant that women were often self-employed and became proprietors of small enterprises like lodging houses or became laundresses. This was not just an activity relating to a particular class as lodging houses were, for example prevalent in both middle class and working class communities in Oxford.

In many historical discussions of women’s work during the Victorian era it is rare to find an assessment the role of women in business, especially in more ‘domestic’ enterprises i.e., those whose work was largely based in the home. The assumptions are that business tends to happen mostly in the public sphere which is masculine and largely dominated by men.9 Kay argues that ‘independence, limited options and domestic commitments were primary motivators for women setting up in business in the nineteenth century’.10 Historians like Kay provide evidence that women faced external barriers such as access to capital and the ideology of separate spheres which made it less acceptable, particularly for middle class women to work outside the home. However, there is also plenty of evidence that women did have economic agency which moves us beyond the assertions made by Davidoff and Hall that middle class women in particular would have brought shame on themselves and their family. 11 Aston and Martino illustrate this by using the examples from research in Birmingham and Leeds showing that women were using their own names in both in newspaper advertisements and in trade directories

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10 Kay. P.120.
throughout the nineteenth century. This challenges the notion that all women wanted and needed to hide their economic agency.

This chapter will focus on those women in Oxford in the late nineteenth century, who did not just run a business from their home but turned their homes into a business by managing or running lodging houses in the city of Oxford or as laundresses.

Oxford’s urban development was greatly affected by the university which owned much of the land available. The city remained within the confines of its city walls until the mid-nineteenth century which saw significant growth and development. Much of this was due to the university’s expansion and reform, relaxation around the rules for fellows which meant they could marry and a significant improvement in communication, specifically the coming of the canals and the railway in 1844. The population of Oxford grew accordingly from 13,000 in 1801 to 27,843 in 1851. This growth in population caused by large scale migration into nineteenth century cities like Oxford created a real need for suitable lodgings. In the mid to late nineteenth century, lodging house were found in almost every town and city, usually in one district or suburb. Travellers, such as entertainers and artisans were

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frequenters of such lodgings, alongside those migrating in search of seasonal or more permanent employment.\textsuperscript{16}

With the growth of the city, so came more employment opportunities for women and girls. The 1871 census shows that women and girls were primarily engaged in domestic service. Manufacturing occupied fewer working women in contrast at 24 per cent. In addition, dressmaking either carried on by outworkers or employed at various clothing factories, including Hyde’s in Queen Street Clothing Factory also provided significant work opportunities at 22 per cent of the total occupied female population.\textsuperscript{17}

In the census of 1881 and 1891, the number of people involved in board and lodging in Oxfordshire gradually increased, particularly amongst women.\textsuperscript{18} In 1881,\textsuperscript{19} 42 males were listed as Lodging, Boarding House Keeper, in contrast to females who numbered 212. Even amongst innkeepers, hotel keepers and publicans, whilst dominated by men at 526, females occupied in running such establishments numbered 138. These hotels were frequently advertised in local directories. One such establishment known as the ‘Alliance’ was promoted as ‘a Commercial and Family Temperance Hotel’. Based in St. Aldates, it advertised itself to ‘commercial gentlemen, tourists and bicyclists’ who will ‘find there every comfort and convenience at a moderate cost’.\textsuperscript{20} It was run and managed by a Mrs

\textsuperscript{16} Trinder, pp.33-34.
\textsuperscript{17} 1871 Census of England & Wales
\textsuperscript{19} See Chapter 3, footnote 14 about census figures for Oxford City after 1871.
\textsuperscript{20} Oxfordshire History Centre, Directories OXFO 1880, Valters’ Oxford Post Office Directory 1880, p.60.
Davidson. Kelly’s Directory of the same year advertises the Randolph Hotel with a Mrs L’Anson as the Manageress.\(^{21}\) Certainly, these aggregate figures from the census for Oxfordshire and ‘snapshot’ evidence from the directories demonstrate a level of active involvement by married women in managing and running their own enterprises. However, we can also see that women were more likely to be involved in running lodging houses and that this was a much more common occupation for women in Victorian Oxford working for themselves.

Oxford was a county town and was the centre of a network of Oxfordshire market towns each with a number of lodging houses. Oxford town had a particularly high number and most of these were located in the working class suburb of St. Thomas’, just west of the city centre, home to the Oxford brewing industry and boating and barging communities.\(^{22}\) The development of the Oxford Canal and latterly the railway close by attracted temporary workers such as bricklayers and railway labourers particularly in the mid nineteenth century when the London and North Western Line arrived in St. Thomas’.\(^{23}\) The parish was impoverished and overcrowded and for much of the nineteenth century, notorious as ‘the least reputable district of Oxford, in every sense of the word’.\(^{24}\)

Lodging houses in places like St. Thomas’ were set up by working class families and often these were run by and established by a woman acting on her own initiative.

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\(^{24}\) Oxford Journal, 2 February 1892, [www.britishnewspaperarchiveonline](http://www.britishnewspaperarchiveonline) [accessed July 2020]
Indeed, the 1851 census some 87 percent of those recorded as lodging house
keepers were female.25 However, as Davidoff reports:

‘The proportion of men listed as ‘innkeepers’ in the census throughout the
nineteenth century is 80 per cent, compared to 20 percent of women, while almost
exactly the reverse percentages of the sexes are listed as ‘lodging house keepers’.
While undoubtedly men found it much easier to obtain the licence and raise the
capital to become an innkeeper, it is possible that the sex of the householder may
have influenced the enumerators description’.26

Some of these establishment provided for better off lodgers and were very
different from common lodging houses which catered for one or two people. The
figures suggest that providing for lodgers was an occupation open to women at all
social levels. In researching St. Thomas’ in the 1891 census, only about 15 percent
of those listed as having lodgers were kept by female heads of households.
However, the majority of houses listed as having a lodger or boarder, almost all had
a male head who worked outside the home with a wife, usually with no occupation
against their name listed27. We can probably surmise from this that the wives
undoubtedly managed the lodgers and the facilities while their husbands were at
work all day, particularly where there were very young children or babies present.
What is striking is that wives contribution to the family economy by looking after
lodgers in the home is not acknowledged in the census. This sort of work in the
‘private sphere’ was largely unrecognised by society for the contribution that this

26 Leonore Davidoff, Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class (Cambridge: Polity
27 1891 census returns for St. Thomas’, districts, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, <www.ancestrylibraryedition>
[accessed July & August 2021].
labour makes to the family economy. It seems that for the smaller, common lodging
house that taking in lodgers was about supplementing household income.

In St. Thomas’, there are examples from the enumerators census returns for 1891
that illustrate the different establishments available in one small suburb of Oxford.
In district 18, Mary Ann Florey in Cripley Road was listed as a ‘Boarding House
Keeper’ and widow, aged 68. The enumerator has listed four lodgers; Charles
Harris, Alfred Jenkins and Sydney Stevenson (Clerks, mid-twenties), Corinthia
Castlemain (Milliner/Dressmaker) and her sister Agnes (no profession listed), both
late twenties.28 We can surmise that taking in lodgers like this for a widow would
enable her to maintain a level of ‘gentility’29 and earn much needed income in
order to support herself as there are no family dependents included in the
enumerator’s entry for this household. In Abbey Road, Sarah Hutt, who is listed as
Head of Household and (interestingly) a retired grocer. She has one other
household occupant listed, Mary Ann Neville who is her lodger.30 In contrast, on
Hythe Bridge Street, Alice McAllen is 25 and has 3 sisters and two brothers, aged
between 12 and 18. No profession is given for her dependents, but they still might
pick up work. One lodger is listed as Elizabeth Clare. Again, taking in a lodger here is
no doubt an important part of the family’s economy.

28 1891 census returns for St. Thomas’, RG13/1386 district 18, <www.ancestrylibraryedition>
[accessed July & August 2021].
29 Leonore Davidoff, Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class (Cambridge: Polity
30 1891 census returns for St. Thomas’, RG13/1386 district 18, <www.ancestrylibraryedition>
[accessed July & August 2021].
The lodging houses in St. Thomas’ run by women as head of household in Oxford was not a common occurrence. Researching the different districts shows a pattern of households with lodgers where the head of household is normally male whose occupations vary from Bricklayers, General Labourers, Hawker, Grocers’ Porter, Kitchen Assistant, Waiter & Shopkeeper. Under Armstrong’s Social Classifications, these occupations sit mostly in the socio-economic groupings 3, 4 and 5 and were therefore unlikely to be bringing in a significant or even a regular income. We can therefore assume then that hosting lodgers was all part of maintaining what Higgs calls the ‘family economy’:

‘A dual economy can be discerned, comprising of the family economy and the external market. The former is generally ‘manned by women, and the latter dominated by men. If not applied too rigidly, this model of a dual economy is very useful for understanding the dynamics of social reproduction’. 

Married women in poorer households in St. Thomas’ were therefore likely to be involved in managing this part of their family economy whilst their husbands are out at work all day. This fits with Kay’s definition of female entrepreneurship as ‘getting things done with an economic aim’.

A few had listed occupations and overwhelmingly they were ‘laundresses’ or ‘washergirl’. Although some laundresses worked outside the home in small laundries, often the work would be ‘taken in’ and done in the home, often with the

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34 Kay.
help of the daughters in the family. In Church Street for example, James and
Susan Smith who is listed as a laundress, also had 3 daughters aged 14 to 18 years
of age. Perhaps they helped their mother in her trade as a laundress as well as
helping out with their two lodgers?

In Oxford, it wasn’t just those married women in the poorer suburbs of the city who
were involved in lodging-house keeping. Although the ideology of separate spheres
for men and women, particularly amongst the middle classes was prevalent, in the
latter part of the nineteenth century that consensus was beginning to break down.
Commentators like Elizabeth Kingsbury increasingly recognised the need for middle
class women to work. She suggested that women could undertake the management
of houses that provided wholesome food, decent accommodation and an ensured
‘atmosphere of refinement’ which only ladies could bring. She argued strongly
that it was a women’s duty to:

‘Save the masses from the too great strain that is put upon them, by taking their
fair share of the worlds labour on herself. It is her glory to renounce the position
of receiver and to claim the nobler place of the giver’.

However, even though there was more focus on encouraging women to work, this
was tempered by the fact that any undertaking must not detract from their

38 Ibid. p. 185.
respectability. Commentators such as Milne emphasised the need for women to gain a means of subsistence ‘fitting to her station in life’.\(^{39}\)

Although middle class women were urged to get involved with their own enterprise and establish lodging houses of their own, there was a paradox at work as gentility was associated with privacy. \(^{40}\) As Davidoff observes;

‘Privacy was necessary for genteel status because it kept ‘the family’ free from the taint of the market-place. If family relationships became commercialised, there would be no way of maintaining the careful façade of strict sexual divisions and, by extension no way of enforcing sex and age hierarchies.\(^{41}\)

The relationship between lodgers and landladies is problematic in other ways. Often women in this position were expected to provide personal services. This could include cleaning, emptying slops and running errands. There was a particular ambiguity in accepting payment for services which would be provided by mothers, wives and other female relatives.\(^{42}\)

It would seem then that for middle class women, running and maintaining a lodging house would appear to be a ‘necessary evil’.\(^{43}\) In Oxford, lodging houses were prevalent in suburbs throughout the city to accommodate the transient population including Oxford University students. A newspaper article in Jackson’s Oxford Journal in 1876 reports on the plans put forward by the university to enable

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\(^{42}\) Ibid, p.160.

\(^{43}\) Ibid. p. 157.
undergraduates to live out of college. The article covers proposed rules and conduct for lodging houses and how proprietors of lodging houses might obtain licences in future.\(^4^4\) They had not been permitted to live out of college until 1879 when the university relented and allowed them to live in university approved lodgings. Within two or three years of this decision, hundreds of new lodging houses were established. This again reflects the dominance of the university on Oxford’s economy and the employment and enterprise opportunities this presented for women and men.

In order to establish a sense of how many women were engaged in lodging-house keeping, a study of one of the key directories available at the time, *Kelly’s*. So that some comparison can be made, two years, 1883 and 1891 have been selected. Although the directories cover Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, the lodging houses situated outside Oxford City have not been included in the figures.

The 1883 *Kelly’s* Directory lists 241 lodging houses in Oxford and of those, 76 were listed as female proprietors, and 72 are listed as ‘Mrs’. That constitutes 32 per cent of lodging houses in Oxford.\(^4^5\) In 1891, that figure had grown. Of the 279 entries, 145 women were listed as lodging house keepers in the city – a staggering 52 per cent of entries.\(^4^6\) Again, almost all were listed as married. There is evidence here that women may have become involved in lodging-house keeping because it may

\(^{4^4}\) *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, December 12, 1876.
\(^{4^5}\) Oxfordshire History Centre, Directories OXFO 1883, *Kelly’s Directory of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire 1883*, pp. 766-768.
\(^{4^6}\) Oxfordshire History Centre, Directories OXFO 1891, *Kelly’s Directory of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire 1891*, pp. 830-831.
have gained more cachet in Oxford as proprietors had to be registered with the university and some legitimacy may have been gained because of this.

It has not been possible to trace links for all the directory entries back to the census to establish whether or not these establishments were run in partnership with or only by the wife. In addition, although many list themselves as ‘Mrs’, this would also need to be extensively checked against the census records. It is very likely that using the moniker ‘Mrs’ communicated an important level of respectability and reputational protection for a female lodging-house keeper and her accommodation,\(^{47}\) and also in all likelihood to meet the universities requirements around ‘morality’.\(^{48}\)

Ten records were cross referenced successfully with the census, all of whom were in the St. Giles district of Oxford. Of those sampled, eight were widows and two spinsters and their status ‘Mrs’ accurate against the census records. They were all listed as Head of House.\(^{49}\) There were a mixture of lodgers listed, for example scholars, clerks, book keepers and widows. It would be a valuable exercise to cross reference all of the records, but this sample at least gives us some idea of the makeup of these houses and their proprietors.

It would seem from this research, that women in Oxford during the late nineteenth century across all classes were actively involved in running and maintaining lodging


houses. For those in the working class district of St. Thomas, taking in lodgers was one way of managing and maintaining the family economy when their husbands work was likely to be poorly paid or unreliable. For middle class women, the relaxation of the university rules for students lodging outside college coincides with a significant growth in the number of married women offering lodging in the city at the end of the nineteenth century. University licencing was likely to have made it much more respectable for them to open up their homes in this way. It would seem then that even at the height of the Victorian ideal of domesticity and separate spheres for men and women, women in Oxford were actively engaging in running their own enterprises whether for family necessity and as a way of earning some money of their own perhaps in the absence of other available opportunities, particularly for the middle classes.

The Laundry Trade

‘Out of the steam comes mother’s face – pinkish purple, sweating, her black hair putting forth lank wisps that hang over her forehead and cling to the nape of her neck. “Christ!” she gasps and wipes the sweat from her face, and for a few moments rests her hands on the side of the washtub – hands unnaturally crinkled from and bleached from the stinging soda water. “Wash, wash, wash; it’s like washing your guts away.”’

Laundry work in the nineteenth century was a ‘late developer’ unlike other industries in terms of mechanisation. The extensive creation of steam laundries only took place well between the 1890’s and the first world war. This meant that up until that point, the trade relied extensively on intensive labour and because it was largely a domestic service, mostly women and girls were engaged in the work – for

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example the number of women and girls engaged in laundry work in the 1861 census was 99%.51 There were also a great deal of them – in 1861 there were 167,607 people employed as laundry workers and laundry work came out at number eleven in terms of the principle occupations at the time.52

There were specific reasons for the growth of the laundry trade during the second half of the nineteenth century. Malcolmson mentions Eliza Warren who in her domestic bible ‘How I managed my House on Two Hundred Pounds a Year’, talks about women budgeting ten pounds a year for laundry work.53 Much of it came down to the fact that many Victorian households had inadequate space, facilities and/or staff to undertake washing on their own premises. In addition, ‘the wearing of frequently washed and perfectly pressed linen, along with servants, carriages and public schools, had become part of the paraphernalia of gentility that was essential for those aspiring to upward social mobility.’54 The substantial growth in population of towns such as Oxford during the nineteenth century along with institutions like the university who dominated the town generated a great deal of demand for this work, especially during term time. Indeed, Malcolmson states that concentrations of laundry workers were found in four key areas – spa towns, ports, seaside and university towns such as Oxford. Indeed, the summary occupational data from the census for Oxford city for 1851, 1861 and 1871 shows that the third most populous occupation for women was ‘laundress’ after domestic service and

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dress and clothing. Laundry work was an attractive proposition for many women as peaks of laundry work tended to coincide with troughs in male employment, particularly that of labourers, whose employment was irregular. Women in university towns like Oxford took in laundry work to support their families when their husbands were out of work. For example, in George Street in 1861, at least five households have laundresses whose husbands are either labourers or bricklayers, both occupations that are likely to be seasonal and weather dependent. It also appears that where men’s work was irregular and they were underemployed, women stepped in to support and sustain their household. This very much fits in with Kay’s assertion that female enterprise was about getting things done for economic aims. In the case of families where the male breadwinner was underemployed, women kept the family show on the road by their own agency.

University towns generated large amounts of laundry during term time. In fact, it was sufficient to give work to almost all of the female work force in Headington Quarry, a small village just outside Oxford. By way of background, Headington’s primary industry was quarrying, once used extensively in university college


buildings. In the nineteenth century, there were three main quarry pits. With the development of the building industry in the latter half of the century to accommodate Oxford’s growth and improvement e.g. water supply, sewerage and the development of Oxford’s suburbs such as Summertown and New Headington meant that the labourers of Headington Quarry in particular were kept relatively busy. 59 According to the census, labourer was listed as the main occupation in Headington Quarry in 1861 and 1871.60 Much of the labouring work was intensive manual labour, with very little use of steam power or machines. The work was arduous whether splitting stone by hand in the quarries or as building labourers or well diggers. What united all of them though was the seasonal nature of the work – most of the outdoor work took place during the summer and if it was a particularly bad winter then most of the men would be stood down/laid off and there would be no money coming into the family coffers.61

Apart from labouring, taking in other people’s washing became a significant industry in Headington towards the end of the nineteenth century. The 1891 census


60 1861 Census Headington Quarry. District 4 Ref RG9/890
https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/8767/images/OXFRG9_888_892-0337?ssrc=&backlabel=Return (accessed September 2021);

1871 Census Headington Quarry. District 4 Ref RG10/1494

tells us that 126 women and girls were working in home laundries or one in five households.  

There are several reasons why there was such a concentration of laundresses in Headington. The village although only a short distance from Oxford, was out in the country where there was more space in terms of gardens and a lack of pollution from chimney smoke which was much more prevalent in the city where the housing was denser. In addition to this, they were close to a university city with numerous colleges and therefore plenty of laundry. ‘Nearly everyone possessed a large stretch of garden which could be used as a drying ground, and it was no difficult matter to find plenty of washing from the colleges of Oxford’.  

For many of these women, poverty was one of the key drivers for laundry work and (with the exception of service), there were very few options in terms of work for women and girls, particularly in the country. Certainly, outdoor work was not considered suitable at the time and there are only two women listed in the 1891 census as ‘agricultural labourers’. 

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64 P1/MS/10/12 – The Laundry Trade at Headington Quarry. Nancy Horwood. Oxfordshire History Centre Archives.  

Married women formed the largest number and category of laundresses, especially in the 1891 census. There were sixty one of them in total, nearly equal to all of the laundresses put together. Almost all of these women were married to labourers and they simply did not earn enough to support their families and as we have seen the nature of the work was seasonal and precarious. To quote one of them ‘The wife’s laundry work counted for more than whatever odd jobbing her husband was able to find’

Boo Copick also talks about the women in the laundry trade in Headington. ‘Nearly all the women in the quarry used to take in laundry work cos half of their husbands didn’t take any money home, they’d had that ion beer, they used to sub that in beer whilst they was at work – women had to do laundry work to keep the family going’.

When the weather was poor, most of the men were laid off. However, the laundry work continued as the women could simply bring the washing indoors to dry.

Not all laundresses enjoyed similar status. In the 1891 census, four women described themselves as employers, with forty one neither employer or employed and seventy six who considered themselves employed. Of those who described

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68 P1/MS/11/19 – Laundry at Headington Quarry/Laundry Carriers. Anon. Oxfordshire History Centre Archives

themselves as ‘employed’, it is likely that they would have worked for some of the larger laundry enterprises in Headington, especially in homes that had the space to accommodate larger volumes of washing, or they may have been taking in small amounts of washing as a sole enterprise from a particular family or person.\(^\text{70}\) There was plenty of work to be had from middle class homes in Oxford as well as colleges, hotels and churches. The suburbs of Oxford were expanding rapidly during the mid to late nineteenth century, especially in North Oxford where married dons were moving out and setting up home.\(^\text{71}\) These different enterprises run and managed by women even if they were the sole worker are solid examples of what Leishout, Smith, Montebruno and Bennett define as entrepreneurship as employers and individuals ‘working on their own account’.\(^\text{72}\) We also know from some of the oral evidence presented here that many of the wives would employ their idle husbands as laundry carriers – fetching the dirty laundry from their clients in the city and returning it when laundered.\(^\text{73}\)

Although laundry work was an economic necessity and the main driver for these women to become laundresses, it does not necessarily mean that it would have been unpleasant work. It is likely that many of these women would have enjoyed


\(^{73}\) P1/M5/13/4 - Laundry at Headington Quarry/Laundry Carriers. Anon. Oxfordshire History Centre Archives
the relative freedom of being their own boss and not having someone else telling
them what to do. It also enabled them to continue with their childcare
responsibilities more easily. For some of the women, it was a long-term
proposition. Certainly, twenty-six of the laundresses in the 1891 census had been at
the same trade for ten years as they are listed as laundresses in the 1881 census. 74
There is also evidence of pride in their work. In the 1891 census, two of them
describe themselves as ‘retired laundresses’ when they were not required to list an
occupation at all. 75

This chapter is a snapshot of two areas which women in Oxford successfully utilised
to earn money and support themselves and their families, especially when their
husbands work was sporadic or unreliable. They exploited the need for particular
services generated by a university city such as Oxford, marshalling their own skills
and resources – largely personal ones such as their homes, to establish and run
their own enterprises, small and large.

74 1881 Census Headington District 6 Ref. RG11/1496
https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/7572/images/OXFRG11_1496_1
500-0021?ssrc=&backlabel=Return (accessed September 2021)
1891 Census Headington. District 3 Ref. RG12/1163
https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/6598/images/OXFRG12_1161_1
164-0326?ssrc=&backlabel=Return (accessed September 2021)

75 1891 Census Headington. District 3 Ref. RG12/1163
https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/6598/images/OXFRG12_1161_1
164-0326?ssrc=&backlabel=Return (accessed September 2021)
5. Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation was to discover the nature and extent of women’s contribution to the economy of Victorian Oxford, through their employment, but also in their involvement in family enterprises and running their own businesses in the city, large and small. Although there has been extensive research into women and work in larger industrial towns and cities, women in smaller provincial towns and cities without significant industry like Oxford and Salisbury have largely been ignored by historians.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Oxford’s population doubled due to the coming of the railways, and the expansion of the university, which led to more employment opportunities, particularly in the service industries, whether as employees or involvement in enterprises of varying sizes. It is evident from the research carried out that women of all classes in Oxford exploited the opportunities afforded to them in areas such as laundry work, food and drink, along with caring roles such as education. One third of women in Oxford in 1851 were recorded as having some sort of occupation in the census, but it is likely that many more were involved in the local economy. For example, male lodging house keepers who were listed in the census as having another profession and who had wives without a listed occupation. If the husband was out working, then the wife was very likely actively involved in managing the family business even if they are not listed as doing so in the census.

Men continued to dominate some occupations such as construction and transport, but both men and women were involved in certain trades such as shopkeeping and the drinks trade. As outlined in chapter two, some of them would be running such enterprises on
their own account, or jointly with their husbands. This would certainly indicate that the family economy was alive and well in the latter half of the nineteenth century and that women remained influential and active in this area just as they had prior to the nineteenth century, in spite of the ideology around separate spheres.

Non-essential goods and services such as millinery and confectionary were also popular commercial opportunities for women, in a city where there must have been sufficient disposable income amongst the population of the city to support such enterprises. These activities also enabled women to exist in the public sphere but participate in what would be considered to be ‘respectable’ activities for women at that time.

It quickly became apparent during the research phase for this study that a significant number of women in Oxford in the mid to late nineteenth century were involved in their own enterprises, whether large or small or in their family businesses. Many of these entrepreneurial activities were in more conventional female trades such as dressmaking, laundry work and hospitality. What is also apparent is the extent to which women were quite public about their work as evidenced by the numbers advertising in the directories at the time or through other forms of advertising. Chapter four outlines two areas in particular – laundry work and lodging house keeping as significant examples of women in Oxford exploiting the opportunities offered to them. These areas of work gave women the opportunity to utilise their domestic setting, continue to undertake their domestic duties such as childcare and make a significant contribution to the family economy. This was especially true when their husband’s employment was seasonal and unpredictable. Although only three streets were sampled for this study, when you compare husbands and wives’ occupations using Armstrong, there is evidence that wives were more likely to have husbands in lower
status jobs than themselves. This demonstrates the importance of working wives and the significant contribution that they make to the family economy.

This study also set out to try and establish women’s motivations for working beyond economic need. This was very challenging to establish as although we have quantitative data in the form of the census and names and addresses in directories, what we don’t have is access to women’s voices at the time which would have given us a much more nuanced understanding of their motivations beyond putting food on the table. Certainly, working on their own account i.e. their own enterprises must have afforded women some independence financially and offered them the chance to manage and run their own affairs and not be dependent on an employer.

The time period for this dissertation was necessarily limited by the topic which is broad. It made sense to focus on a time when Oxford itself was growing significantly. Given the lack of research into women and work in smaller towns and cities, there is scope for a much larger study of women and work in Oxford, particularly in terms of female entrepreneurship and enterprise perhaps in comparison with another similar town. This study however, has provided us with an intriguing snapshot of a particular period of time, but is limited by necessity given the scope of a dissertation.

This thesis has, with its limitations shown us that women were key to the success and character of Victorian Oxford. Whilst their occupations tended to be in the more traditional and acceptable feminine trades such as dressmaking, they were proactive in exploiting the economic opportunities that the city offered them. This study amply
demonstrates that women in Oxford did not retreat into the home and domestic sphere as the ‘angel of the house’, surrendering their economic agency. In fact, there is plenty of evidence here to say that the exact opposite is true.
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