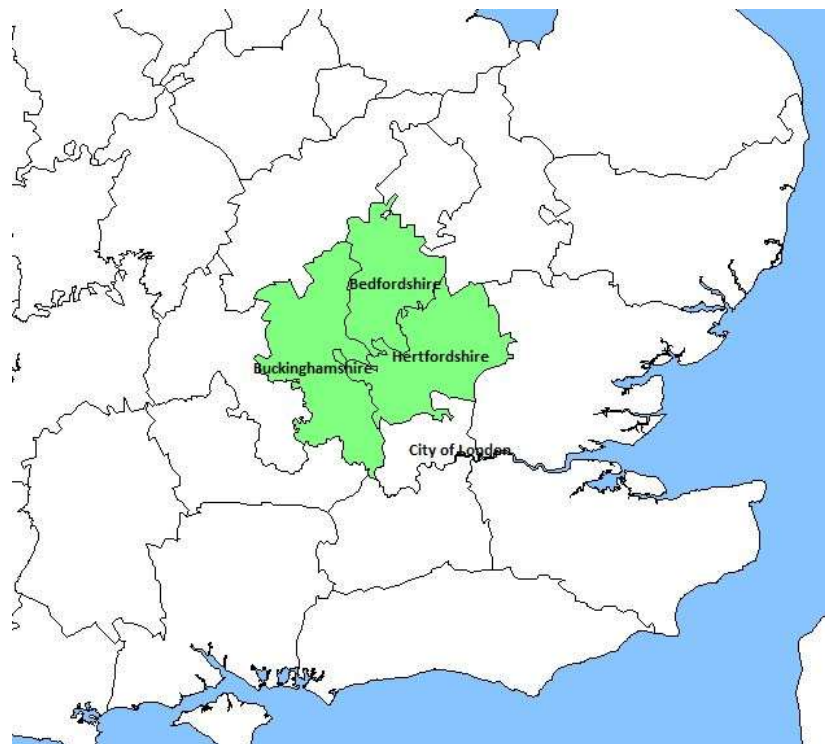


## Over One, Under Two: straw plaiting

Employment opportunities for women were limited by their need to also run the household and look after the children. For this reason, many females worked from home in cottage industries, which were conducted on a piece work basis. The usual procedure was for the raw materials to be delivered to the workers' homes each week and the previous week's finished items would be collected and paid for. In the largely rural counties of Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, in England, the principal home industry was the creation of lengths of plaited straw, which would subsequently be sewn into straw hats. Although there are instances of men being engaged in this work, it was predominantly an occupation for women and girls. There is evidence for the trade as early as the seventeenth century; straw bonnets are mentioned in Samuel Peyps' diary in the 1660s. In 1689, straw plaiters petitioned in protest against a proposed law that would have required the wearing of woollen hats at certain times of the year. This petition

spoke of the 'fourteen thousand persons at least', whose livelihood would be threatened by this measure. Early in the eighteenth century there were further protests against the importation of plait from the Netherlands.



**Map showing the main straw plaiting areas**

Map drawn using Genmap from Archer software<sup>i</sup>

The chalk soil of the Chiltern Hills, in this area of central southern England, made it easy to grow the strains of wheat straw that were particularly suitable for hat and bonnet manufacture. There was also a plentiful supply of manure, for the fields, from the many stables in nearby London. European straw, notably that from Leghorn in Italy, continued to rival the straw grown in England, so the English trade was boosted by the blockades on foreign imports during the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. In the 1870s, straw hats makers were using cheap Chinese and Japanese plait, making it difficult for the English plaiters to compete. As fashions changed, straw hats were no longer popular and by the twentieth century, the trade was reduced to a handful of workers.

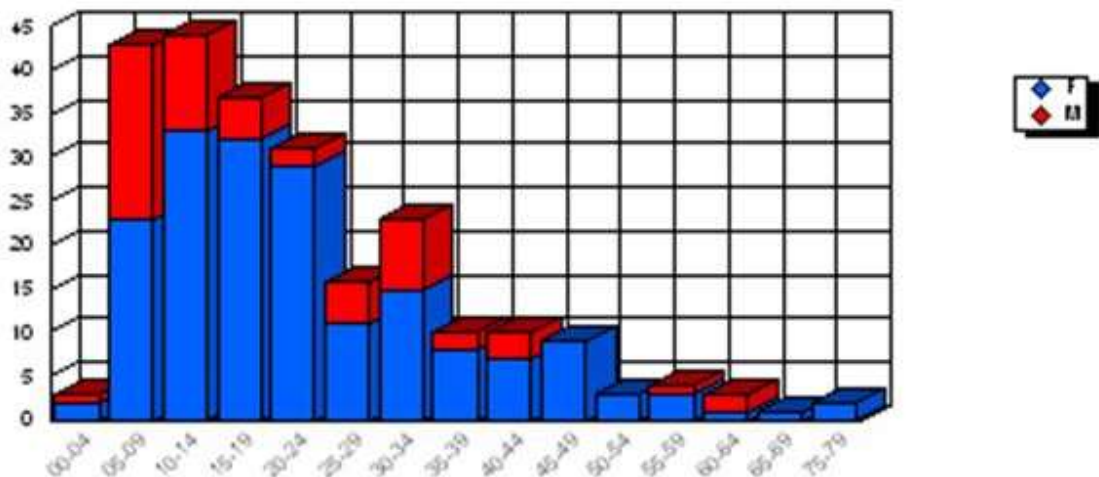
Plaiters would be brought supplies of straw by the plaitman and paid by the yard for what they produced; the more complex patterns commanding the highest rate. A plaiter might finish 60-70 yards (approximately 65 metres) of plait each week; it was usually sold in 20 yard lengths. In common with other home industries, children would be expected to aid in the production process and girls as young as three might contribute to the family income by making simple plaits.

The centre for the trade was Luton in Bedfordshire and at its peak, in the 1870s, over 20,000 women were employed in Bedfordshire alone. In 1851, 4% of the female population of Buckinghamshire were involved in the plait trade, yet in some villages the figure was as high as 58%.<sup>ii</sup>For these communities therefore, plaiting might be a source of employment for the majority of the women and some of the men. In the 1851 census for Aston Clinton, Buckinghamshire, Ann Stratford was listed as being a straw plaiter. She was one of 118 females aged between 5 and 25 in Aston Clinton, 59% of whom were involved in the plait trade. Often, whole families were involved in straw plaiting. Ann Stratford's father, Richard, was a straw dealer, as was her older brother Peter. Another brother, Henry, was a straw drawer, preparing the straw for plaiting.

The graph below shows the age and gender distribution of the 239 plait workers in Aston

Clinton in 1851; they made up 41% of the workforce in the parish. The vast majority of them were female and between the ages of 5 and 25.

Few, Martha unpublished, untitled essay for The Open University course A173 (2008).



### **Inhabitants of Aston Clinton in 1851 who were involved in the Plait Trade<sup>iii</sup>**

There were various health problems that arose from straw plaiting. Until the straw splitter came into general use at the beginning of the nineteenth century, straw was split using a knife, to produce flat strips suitable for plaiting. The use of sharp knives in dark cottages, particularly by young girls, was not a safe activity. The straw had to be wet in order to be manipulated without breaking, so one end was put in the corner of the women's mouths, leading to sores and rotten teeth. Callouses also developed on the thumbs. Sitting hunched over the work was bad for the posture and weaving intricate patterns in poor light was injurious to the eyesight. Plaiting was an improvement on some other cottage industries as it was also possible to plait standing up or on the move.

Plait schools were set up where young girls might learn their craft. The girls were crowded together and heating was provided by means of a 'dicky pot', a form of earthenware hot water bottle, containing charcoal or ash instead of water, which was hidden under the skirt. Each girl

might have one of these and as they gave off fumes, it created a very unpleasant stuffy atmosphere, which exacerbated chest complaints. In many cases, 'school' was a misnomer as tuition was not given. Instead, the role of the plait mistress was merely to supervise the children as they worked. Parents usually paid two pence a week for a child to attend the school and they also had to supply their daughters' straw. They hoped that the plait mistress would ensure that production was of sufficient quality and quantity to make a profit. Poor quality plait that could not be sold was known as 'widdle waddle'. In some cases, children attended a conventional school part time and plaited for the remainder of the week but as the height of the plaiting trade was prior to the introduction of compulsory education, more often, plaiting was full time. The emphasis on plaiting was to the detriment of acquiring domestic skills or undertaking any other form of rudimentary education. The very youngest children would work for seven hours a day, perhaps returning home for a mid-day meal but those aged seven and over might work for another three or four hours each evening. Even when walking to and from the school, children would continue to plait as the greater the output, the higher the earnings. These schools gained a reputation for being 'places of child exploitation amid exceptional squalor, and even cruelty'.<sup>iv</sup>

The 1867 Factory and Workshop Regulation Act made eight the minimum age for employment in any handcraft industry, of which straw plaiting was one. The same act also regulated the hours for older children. In theory, this did relieve the very youngest children from plaiting in schools but it was impossible to regulate what was happening within private homes. In addition, a loophole was that the plait mistress could be said to be teaching or supervising her pupils, rather than employing them, therefore the schools were exempt from the legislation. Plaiting could be a social activity and groups of women would gather outside their cottages to gossip while they plaited. This had the additional advantage that the light was better. The ability for the whole family to plait straw and the fact that, unlike agricultural work, there was no winter slump, meant that plaiting families might be better off than their peers, who had no such home industry to boost the household economy.



**Plait-School**  
**Image George Washington Brownlow in the public domain**

An experienced plaiter might bring in a higher weekly wage than her agricultural laboring husband. This meant that many families did not need to seek help from the overseers of the poor; thus keeping the poor rate down, to the delight of the ratepayers. There were however suggestions women's ability to earn money of their own from plaiting had an adverse effect. Those who worked in the straw plait trade, like those in some other home industries, gained a reputation for immorality. Ecclesiastical Visitations and Parliamentary Papers of the mid-nineteenth century spoke of prostitution, fornication and the problems of young straw plaiting girls leaving their families at a young age. The girls were also accused of wearing showy clothes, thus attracting the wrong sort of attention. As it was possible to plait whilst walking, young people were accused of wandering the fields whilst plaiting in mixed sex groups, which was seen as an invitation to immorality. In 1867/8, The Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture was scathing about the girls engaged in plaiting straw, complaining of their 'great want of chastity'. A number of researchers have investigated levels of illegitimate births to straw plaiters and it seems that there is little evidence that they were significantly more likely to give birth out of wedlock than the general population.

There were various styles of plaiting, of different levels of complexity. For the simple pattern, the plaiters would chant, 'Over one, under two, pull it tight and that will do.' English Pearl plait was accompanied by the rhyme, 'Criss-cross patch and then a twirl. Twist it back for English Pearl'. All in all, the opportunity to plait straw gave the women who lived in the counties where it was popular a chance to supplement the household income, to their family's advantage. Our modern sensibilities balk at the idea of very small children working in this way and indeed the conditions in some of the plait schools were unsavoury. We must remember however that, if they weren't plaiting straw, these young girls would have been expected to contribute in some other capacity, such as agricultural work, housework, minding younger children or going into service. So, in the context of the time, those who benefitted from the income from plaiting might be in a better position than some of their contemporaries.

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### **Further Information**

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This article first appeared in the In-depth Genealogist Magazine in March 2017.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.archersoftware.co.uk/genmap01.htm](http://www.archersoftware.co.uk/genmap01.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> Grof, Lazlo L., *Children of Straw*, Baron (2002).

<sup>iii</sup> Few, Martha unpublished, untitled essay for The Open University course A173 (2008).

<sup>iv</sup> Grof, Lazlo L., *Children of Straw*, Baron (2002) p. 65.