

Female Wage-Earners in Late Fourteenth-Century England¹

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HISTORIANS are becoming increasingly aware of the role played by women in the economy of medieval England. Their involvement in the cloth industry, for example, particularly as spinners and weavers, has long been recognized as has their participation in the brewing and selling of ale.² More recently, attention has been extended to the presence of women as retailers, not only of drink, but also of food and clothing within both small and large towns of the period.³ A greater appreciation of women's economic role in medieval urban society, however, has not been matched by a similar reappraisal of their involvement in rural work. Recent discussion of women's work at harvest time, for example, has tended to concentrate on the situation that existed after 1450. By and large, studies have emphasized the limitations upon female involvement in such activity. Thus, although it is shown that women worked in the early modern period as harvesters and farm labourers, the opportunities for such work and the rewards to be gained from it were restricted. It has been argued, for example, that the allocation of harvest work was made on the basis of strength. Consequently, women rarely reaped and almost never handled the scythe to mow. Moreover, even when women did help with the harvest labour, they appear to

have been paid less than their male counterparts. The general impression is that whilst women did indeed play a part in the harvest their involvement was largely restricted to the relatively unspecialized and lower paid tasks such as gathering and binding the sheaves.⁴

Certainly a cursory glance at the medieval evidence suggests that similar restrictions were in force. Limitations upon the range of work available to women seem to have existed amongst the full-time wage-earners who comprised the demesne *famuli* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The opportunities for employment open to females were far fewer than those open to males, women only appearing in any numbers amongst the ranks of servants, cooks and dairymaids. Thus, not only did women have fewer jobs from which to choose but they appear to have been employed largely in unspecified service roles, the more specialist tasks such as ploughing and mowing being reserved for the men. Of course, the fact that we are seldom told exactly what sort of work servants were expected to do means that one should not over-stress these apparent limitations upon the work experience of female members of the demesne labour force. Certainly, however, women's labour appears to have been more expendable than that of men. In the thirteenth century women were obliged to rest on certain days

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² E Power, *Medieval Women*, Cambridge, 1975, pp 65, 66-7.

³ See for example, R H Hilton, 'Lords, burgesses and hucksters', *Past and Present*, 97 (1982), pp 10-11; 'Women traders in medieval England', in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism, Essays in Medieval Social History*, 1985, pp 205-15.

⁴ On female labour in general see A Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England*, 1981, pp 15, 34, 37; on harvest labour in particular see M Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes: women's work and men's work at harvest time', *History Workshop*, 7, 1979, pp 7, 9; M F Roberts, 'Wages and wage-earners in England: the evidence of the wage assessments, 1563-1725', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1981, pp 184, 185.

whilst the adult males were to continue work as usual.⁵

Was the extent of female involvement within the sphere of rural wage-earning in the fourteenth century similarly limited by such considerations? Thorold Rogers certainly felt that women's work in the fields was limited to a great extent by their duties in the home. Thus, in the winter when dairy work was light, the dairywoman would probably have winnowed the corn but apart from that the female role appears to have been very much a secondary one – planting beans, binding and stacking the sheaves, reaping and gathering the stubble after the corn had been cut or bedding and cocking the hay following mowing.⁶ However, Christopher Middleton sees a clear distinction between the lack of work opportunities open to women amongst the permanent demesne labour force and the less restrictive situation which appears to have existed amongst the reserve of seasonally hired labourers, where women are found to be involved in a whole host of agricultural activities.⁷ Certainly this assertion of widespread female involvement in rural work as hired labour is one that is borne out by contemporary sources. Village by-laws of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, for example, reveal that women were not only following the harvest as gleaners but indeed that the able-bodied amongst them were to be prepared to help with the reaping if required to do so.⁸ Manorial accounts of the period are even more informative as regards the use of hired female labour. In addition to the recognized

female tasks of planting beans, binding sheaves and gathering stubble, women are found to be employed in a variety of agricultural tasks: cleaning wheat for seed; hoeing; weeding; hay-making; reaping; threshing; winnowing; carrying the corn; and following the plough. Rodney Hilton's study of Leicestershire estates even suggests the employment of women as mowers, though it has been asserted that they may have been using a sickle to cut barley rather than handling a scythe.⁹

Doubtless further research into manorial records will help to strengthen this image of women working alongside men in the fields, and often performing the same tasks. Such sources, however, can only tell us so much about female participation in agricultural work. One can certainly discover something of the range of jobs available to women and, in many cases, the wages which they received, relative to those paid to men. On many aspects of female employment, however, the manorial records remain largely silent. One glean little information, for example, on the proportion of women employed in the fields in relation to men. Nor does one normally get any indication of the periods of time for which women were being employed. Were female harvest workers, for example, working for the duration of the autumn, or simply at certain times during the harvest period when additional family labour was needed? Similarly, one does not know the extent to which women were moving around the countryside in search of such work. Studies of nineteenth-century female labourers reveal that women were often highly flexible when it came to field work, moving from one place to another performing a variety of jobs for a number of different employers.¹⁰

⁵ C Middleton, 'The sexual division of labour in feudal England', *New Left Review*, 113–114, 1979, p 160; M M Postan, 'The famulus: the estate labourer in the XIIth and XIIIth centuries', *Econ Hist Rev*, supplement 2, 1954, Appendix II, p 47; B Harvey, 'Work and festa ferianda in medieval England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXXII, 1972, p 291.

⁶ J E Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, I, 1866, pp 261, 266, 272–3, 281.

⁷ Middleton, 'The sexual division of labour', pp 160, 161.

⁸ W O Ault, 'By-laws of gleaning and the problems of harvest', *Econ Hist Rev* 2nd ser XIV, 1961, p 211; *Open-field farming in medieval England – a study of village by-laws*, 1972, pp 82, 84, 87, 92–3, 110, 120–1.

⁹ Eg W Beveridge, 'Westminster wages in the manorial era', *Econ Hist Rev* 2nd ser VIII, 1955, p 34; Power, *Medieval Women*, p 71; R H Hilton, *The Economic Development of some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries*, Oxford, 1947, pp 145–6; Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', p 6.

¹⁰ See for example, Jennie Kitteringham, 'Country work girls in nineteenth century England', in R Samuel (ed) *Village Life and Labour*, 1975, p 93.

One needs to discover more about the continuity and flexibility of female employment and about the mobility of the women themselves if one is to gain a better understanding of female wage-earning in medieval England.

I

Fortunately, for the second half of the fourteenth century at least, one is able to draw upon evidence other than manorial records for information on wage-earning women. Indictments brought under the Statute of Labourers of 1351 provide a wealth of information on wages and employment during the half-century or so following the Black Death of 1348-9. During this period of severe labour shortage the Statute, and the Ordinance of Labourers which preceded it two years earlier, attempted not only to control wages but also to restrict the mobility of the labourers themselves. In particular, the Statute laid down specific maximum wage rates for various occupations, special concern being shown at the provision of food and drink in addition to a cash payment. Certain conditions of employment were also stipulated; servants, for example, were not to work by the day but only on longer term contracts. Prices charged by craftsmen for their various wares were also regulated.¹¹ The surviving indictments are therefore concerned with such matters as the receipt of excessive wages, the refusal of workers to serve by the year or other terms, and the movement of individuals from one place to another in search of greater salary. The majority of such cases of infringement of the labour laws are recorded in the assize rolls and ancient indictments in the Public Record Office.¹² These rolls include proceedings of two types. Prior to 1359, proceedings were held before Justices of Labourers, specially

appointed to hear cases relating to the receipt of excessive wages. From the 1360s, however, presentments of Statute offenders were made at the county quarter sessions of the Justices of the Peace.¹³ In both sets of records women appear, often in substantial numbers, amongst those indicted.

Despite the weighty evidence relating to wages and conditions of employment contained in these rolls the sources themselves have certain limitations. In the first place, the extant rolls probably represent only a small proportion of sessional proceedings held during the period. By the end of the century, in particular, the incidence of labour cases being dealt with before the Justices of the Peace becomes progressively less. As earlier historians have noted, this would appear to coincide with the permanent sitting of King's Bench at Westminster which meant that it was no longer necessary for sessional rolls to be produced.¹⁴ Moreover, even those rolls which were produced in preparation for a visit by King's Bench and have thus survived, contain records of undetermined indictments only. Many offences are likely to have been determined in session and were not, therefore, recorded on the rolls themselves.¹⁵ The coverage of the surviving peace rolls is also limited geographically; the majority of detailed labour cases relating to counties to the south and east of the country, Essex, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. The dearth of recorded labour offences in other parts of the country may be due merely to the fact that, as in Gloucestershire for example, such business having already been completed did not need to come before King's Bench. Alternatively, a lack of wage-earners presented in particular areas could reflect the predominantly pastoral, as

¹¹ *Statutes of the Realm*, I, pp 311-13.

¹² Classes JI.1 and KB.9.

¹³ For details of the administrative background to the enforcement of the statute of labourers see, B H Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers during the First Decade after the Black Death*, New York, 1908, pp 7-17.

¹⁴ Eg B H Putnam, *Proceedings before the Justices of the Peace in the 14th and 15th Centuries - Edward III to Richard II*, 1938, pp ixv-lxix.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp cxii-cxxiv.

opposed to arable, basis of certain regional economies.¹⁶

It has also been argued that the peace rolls themselves are unreliable when it comes to specific factual information such as the dates of certain cases. More serious, in the light of the present discussion, is the added assertion of 'selective' presentments by presenting juries. Up to now this has been put down to some form of class interest. In particular, J B Post has argued that members of the gentry were above all else safeguarding their own interests in their role as presentment jurors, often concentrating on offences committed against themselves.¹⁷ Such a purely class bias in the presentment of statute offenders, however, should not be over stressed. Many wealthier peasants were themselves employers of labour and, as has been shown recently, they too were to be found at the forefront of Statute of Labourers enforcement on a local level.¹⁸ Indeed, in the light of some of the evidence to be discussed presently, one should not disregard the possibility that in addition to some sort of class bias a certain amount of anti-female prejudice may also have been at work.

Despite these limitations, the sessional rolls are an invaluable source for examining the extent of female wage-earning in late fourteenth-century England. There is wide variation in the amount of detail provided in the surviving indictments. The earlier records of the 1350s normally consist simply of presentments of Statute offenders, usually by the village or by the hundred, to the Justices of Labourers. The name and sometimes the occupation of each offender is recorded, but details of wages or other terms of employment are rarely provided. These

rolls do, however, give a rough indication of the proportion of female wage-earners in certain areas, and the jobs at which they were habitually employed. The later sessional rolls of proceedings before the Justices of the Peace, however, provide much more information not only on the tasks performed but also on the place and period of employment, the mobility of the wage-earners themselves and the wages which they were said to have received. These latter rolls can thus be studied to throw much incidental light upon the precise terms of female employment during the period.

II

As indicated above, surviving records of proceedings before the Justices of Labourers often reveal the number of women presented for infringements of the Statute in certain areas, compared with the number of men. During this period of labour shortage one should probably expect to discover greater importance being credited to female labour. In some cases, however, the proportion of women is very small. Of seventy-nine individuals presented for taking excessive wages in Morleston wapentake, Derbyshire in June 1357, for example, only eight were women. Two of these were described as servants, whilst a third, Alice le Baxter of Long Eaton, had taken excessively for baking bread. In the same roll, on the other hand, out of a total of seventy individuals similarly presented by the Allestree Jurors in December of the same year, no less than thirty were women. Three of these were presented along with their husbands and another seven described as weavers.¹⁹ Such a large difference in the number of women presented from these two regions of Derbyshire obviously presents a problem. It is unlikely that the relatively small proportion of women presented from the Morleston region is a consequence of any

¹⁶ E G Kimball (ed), 'Rolls of the Gloucestershire sessions of the peace 1361-1398', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 62, 1940, p 47. For reference to the argument that labour unrest in Shropshire at this time was slight due to the importance in that county of cattle-raising, see E G Kimball, (ed), *The Shropshire Peace Roll, 1400-1412*, The Salop County Council, 1959, p 47.

¹⁷ J B Post, 'Some limitations of the medieval peace rolls', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 4, 1973, pp 635-8.

¹⁸ L R Poos, 'The social context of statute of labourers enforcement', *Law and History Review*, 1 1983, pp 34-37.

¹⁹ PRO, JL.1/170 mm. 2, 3d; Putnam, *Enforcement*, pp 163-4.

positive discrimination against the employment of women in that particular area. On the contrary, the fact that few women are actually named could reflect a certain lack of interest on the part of the jurors there in the sex of those indicted. In the same way, the high proportion of women presented by the Allestree jurors may indeed suggest that women were more frequently employed in that area. However, it is more probably the case that, for whatever reason, those particular jurors were making a concerted attempt to pick out female offenders. The possibility of selective presentments of females, as against males, must be borne in mind throughout this discussion. As shall be seen later, such a possibility is of particular importance when one goes on to consider the significance of the actual wages paid to female offenders.

Where details of the actual wage-earning activities are cited more consistently in these lists of presentments, one can build up a clearer picture of the type of work in which women were involved. A surviving Somerset roll for 1358-60 is particularly full. At a series of sessions held before the Justices of Labourers, jurors from each of the county's hundreds and some of the more important towns are found presenting individuals for taking 'excessively' against the Statute. The name of each offender is cited in the roll, together with the amount which he or she was fined and, most importantly, the activity concerned. The roll thus provides a unique view of the occupational structure of the county as a whole.

At sessions held before the Justices of Labourers at Wells on 19 February 1358, jurors from thirty-eight hundreds, the four towns of Axbridge, Bridgwater, Langport and Wells and from the City of Bath presented recalcitrant workers. A total of 466 offenders are listed, together with the activity in which they had been involved and the amount of which they were fined.²⁰ Of

these, 345 (74 per cent) were men and 121 (26 per cent) women. A breakdown of those named, both by occupation and by sex is given in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Workers presented before Justices of Labourers in
Somerset, 19 February 1358

<i>Occupational grouping</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
Common labourers and spinners	85	33	118
Brewers	62	20	82
Common labourers	43	21	64
Weavers, spinners and labourers	12	11	23
Weavers	15	7	22
Bakers	20	1	21
Cobblers	20	—	20
Spinners	1	15	16
Weavers and spinners	1	11	12
Brewers, labourers and weavers	12	—	12
Brewers and spinners	8	2	10
Carpenters and wheelmakers	9	—	9
Masons	7	—	7
Carpenters	7	—	7
Glovers	7	—	7
Fishermen	6	—	6
Tailors	6	—	6
Brewers and Labourers	6	—	6
Butchers	6	—	6
Coal sellers	4	—	4
Smiths	3	—	3
Threshers and mowers	3	—	3
Saddler	1	—	1
Cellar	1	—	1
Total	345	121	466

It is immediately apparent from this list that many of those named were being lumped together under multiple occupational headings. This may either suggest that those concerned were involved in more than one activity or, as is more likely in this case, that certain jurors (or perhaps the clerk who compiled the roll) did not deem it worthwhile to distinguish between certain groups of workers from particular regions. Turning to the sexual differentiation of work, the evidence by and large reveals the women to be involved in traditional female activities. Thus, although women figure quite prominently as brewers, they are

²⁰ PRO, J1.1/773 mm. 1-4.

conspicuous by their absence from the ranks of leather workers and building craftsmen. Female involvement in the cloth industry is also apparent. Seventy-two (59.5 per cent) of the women named are listed in those occupational groupings, embracing spinners, whilst women can also be seen to be involved in weaving. We shall return in a moment to the evidence contained in this roll of female 'labourers'.

Village-by-village presentments, where they survive, also suggest this widespread involvement of women at various stages in the manufacture of cloth. An assize roll for Herefordshire for 1355-6 is particularly informative on the range of female occupations in a number of small towns and villages throughout the county. Their dominant role as spinners and weavers of cloth is clearly apparent. Thus, all of the seven spinners from Norton near Bromyard who were presented for receiving more for their work than they used to do before the Black Death were women. Similarly, at Pembridge near Leominster, out of forty-seven individuals presented, ten were women, comprising all of those described as 'weavers, spinners and servants'. Of the seven weavers and dress-makers (*shepsters*) presented from the village of Almely, five were women, whilst the four spinners and weavers of nearby Brobury, similarly presented, were also women.²¹

In the first place, therefore, such cases serve to confirm the existing impression of the large-scale participation of women in the earliest stages of cloth manufacture. The absence of comparable evidence for the pre-Black Death period makes it difficult to be certain whether such a widespread female presence as rural cloth workers was a purely post-plague phenomenon or if women had already been involved in such work before the epidemic struck. The researches of Power and others certainly suggest that the situation revealed in these rolls was nothing new and that spinning, weaving and also

brewing had long been carried out by women. There is, however, a more fundamental problem with this evidence. Although the individuals presented are said to have taken excessively, they may not in fact have been wage-earners pure and simple. As in the towns, many of these female cloth workers may have been part of a 'self-employed' family workforce into which they had been born or married, and to which they were contributing during a period of labour shortage, charging excessive rates for their trouble. Similarly, the brewers and victuallers cited in the sessional rolls may be simply small-scale retailers fulfilling a like role to that carried out by the wives and daughters of urban households.²² Such evidence alone, therefore, probably tells us very little about the true wage-earning woman, let alone of her participation in agricultural labour.

III

Fortunately, however, these early rolls also indicate female involvement in agricultural work. Some of the evidence is highly suggestive. Over a third of those listed in Table 1 as 'common labourers and spinners' were women. It is of course possible, if not probable, that many of these women named were spinners alone and were simply being grouped together with male labourers for administrative convenience. It is therefore of some significance to find that nearly a half of those described simply as 'common labourers' were also women. Unfortunately, this particular roll does not go so far as to tell us the precise nature of the work that these female labourers would have been involved in. Other records, however, are more informative. The returns of an inquest for Highworth and Cricklade hundred in the northern tip of Wiltshire in 1352-3 reveal sixteen women amongst the total of fifty-five individuals presented for taking excessive wages. The occupations of thir-

²¹ PRO, J1.1/312 mm. 3, 5d.

²² Hilton, 'Women traders', pp 205-15.

teen of these women are given. Eight of them are described as brewster and another two as pedler. The other three women, however, are presented along with one of their husbands and another two men with having taken *5d* each day with courtesy 'in the autumn'. The implication is that these women were helping with the harvest. That this was almost certainly the case is made clear in a similar return for Chippenham hundred in the north-west of the county. No less than fifty-one, or more than half, of the 101 individuals presented there for taking excessive wages were women. Of these, twenty were brewers, twenty spinners, two servants and one a linen-maker. The remaining eight women, however, are each described as a 'harvester'. What is perhaps even more surprising is the fact that only four men are thus described.²³ Although details of the actual tasks that these female harvesters were performing is not given, this evidence is significant in suggesting, at least on a general level, the large-scale employment of women in the fields at harvest time.

This evidence alone does not take us very far in estimating the exact nature of women's work during the autumn. It may well be that the Wiltshire women discussed above were largely employed in the more menial tasks associated with bringing in the harvest, the reaping and the mowing being left to the men. In cases where more precise details are given of the actual tasks involved, however, women are often found to be performing the same work as men. Once again the Herefordshire roll of 1355-6 is particularly revealing. Although women do not appear in the village presentments as threshers or mowers, they dominate the ranks of reapers. Thus, all four reapers presented from the village of Cradley, and all five from Kinnersley, were women. In numerous other cases it is clear that the women

concerned were combining reaping with some other wage-earning activity, normally one associated with the cloth trade. In Lyonshall, for example, from where eighteen labourers were presented, the four women named are described as reapers and spinners (*mestrices et filatrices*). This same designation is also applied to no less than sixteen women from the two southern settlements of Ross-on-Wye and Weston under Penyard, presented for taking excessive wages. At Much Cowarne, in addition to four female reapers a further four women described as reapers and spinners were also presented. Four female reapers and weavers (*mestrices et textrices*) were presented from Upton Bishop whilst of the nine labourers from Canon Frome similarly described, five were women.²⁴

As suggested above, one should clearly be aware here of the possibility of selective presentments. Not only were the authorities probably focusing their attention on harvest workers in general because of the difficulties of recruiting labour during the autumn from an already depleted labour force, but it is possible that they regarded the wage demands of women, given their social prejudices, particularly offensive. However, even if this was the case and that subsequently the proportion of female reapers in Herefordshire is thereby exaggerated, it does not disguise two important facts. First, that women were actively involved in the fields at harvest time, being employed as reapers, and that secondly, this work represented some form of seasonal employment which supplemented income to be gained at other times of the year by, for example, spinning or weaving.

IV

Even if it is assumed that, in some parts of the country at least, women were being employed in a variety of jobs at harvest time, does it necessarily follow that they were also

²³ E M Thompson, 'Offenders against the statute of labourers in Wiltshire, a.d. 1349', *The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, XXXIII, 1904, pp 386-90.

²⁴ PRO, J1.1/312 mm. 6d, 5d, 7, 6.

being paid the same wages as men? Previous work on the sexual differentiation of wages in medieval England has tended to point to two general conclusions. In the first place it would appear that women were usually employed in particular types of work and paid at rates lower than in those jobs traditionally dominated by men. On the other hand, evidence suggests that where women did do the same work as men, they were usually paid at the same rate.²⁵ Thus, one would not expect to find the sort of discrimination against hired female labour which one sees, for example, in the wages paid to women employed during the grape harvests in Toulouse.²⁶ Indeed, during a period of severe labour shortage such as that which followed the Black Death it would seem that the less well paid labourers, including women, were in a far better bargaining position when it came to both the type of work which they were required to do, and the wages which they received for it. One of the major findings to come out of Beveridge's work on prices and wages is that this period witnessed a significant closing in the differential between the wages paid to skilled and unskilled workers.²⁷

For details of the wage rates of female harvest workers one must turn to the records of the county quarter sessions of the Justices of the Peace. Extant rolls from the 1360s include many cases of men and women being presented together for working in the autumn at excessive rates. On many occasions the women are presented along with their husbands. Thus, at sessions held at Pocklington in the East Riding of Yorkshire in May 1363, John de Repynghale and two married couples were presented to the Justices for having received 4d and their

board (*mensam*) for each day's work during the autumn.²⁸ Similarly, Thomas Heruy of Kilnwick, who was also employed in the district as a thatcher, was presented at the same time along with his wife Agnes. The record states that each of them had taken separately 4d per day with food (*esca*) from Robert of Fenton for working in the autumn.²⁹ It is possible that, as in later periods when husband and wife are found working together in the harvest field, the man was actually doing the reaping and mowing whilst his wife was employed as a 'gaveller', whose job it was to rake the corn into rows ready for carting.³⁰ At other times when large numbers of labourers are presented together, familial links are less in evidence. In March 1364, a group of nine recalcitrant labourers was presented before the East Riding Justices for having received 5d and lunch (*prandium*) each day for their work during the autumn. Two of them, John and Emma Hambald of Huggate are stated to be man and wife. However, Alice, wife of Richard Buterum is presented without her husband, whilst for the other three women named there is no evidence of any family ties with their fellow workers.³¹ Although it is clear, therefore, that some of the women harvesters employed in the fields were working alongside their husbands this was obviously not always the case. That many women were being employed as independent labourers during harvest time is also suggested by the numerous occasions when women were presented before the Justices, either individually or in pairs.³² What is even more significant is that in all those cases where women are presented for taking excessive salary during the autumn, whether they be listed alone, alongside their husbands or within a larger group, there is

²⁵ See for example, Beveridge, 'Westminster wages', p 34; R H Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages: the Ford Lectures for 1973 and Related Studies*, Oxford, 1975, pp 102-3; Middleton, 'The sexual division of labour', p 161.

²⁶ E Perroy, 'Wage labour in France in the later middle ages', in S L Thrupp (ed), *Change in Medieval Society, Europe North of the Alps, 1050-1300*, New York, 1964, pp 240, 241.

²⁷ Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices*, I, pp 266, 274, 282; Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', p 15; Beveridge, 'Westminster wages', p 33.

²⁸ B H Putnam (ed), *Yorkshire Sessions of the Peace, 1361-1364*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, 100, 1939, p 59.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp 75, 76.

³⁰ G E Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, 1956 - 1983 edition, p 87.

³¹ Putnam, *Yorkshire Sessions of the Peace*, p 72.

³² *Ibid*, pp 59, 60, 72.

never any difference in wage rates based on the sex of the labourer. Although the term 'autumn' work could embrace virtually any aspect of harvest labour, it is clear that whatever the actual task involved, the women were being paid at the same rate as the men.

Sometimes the sources take us a stage further by specifying the actual work involved. Such cases not only confirm that women were engaged in the same harvest tasks as men, but that they were also at times receiving the same pay. During a session held at Pocklington on 23 May 1363, a total of thirty-three reapers were presented for whom rates of pay are given. Only two of these were men, who were charged with receiving 4d plus their board for each day's work during the autumn. Of the women, twenty-one were charged with having taken the lesser amount of 3d and board for each day's reaping during the same period. The other nine, however, were all paid at the same rate as the men, ie 4d and board each day.³³ Whatever the reason for this differentiation in wages paid to these Yorkshire reapers it was clearly not based solely on sex. It may be, for example, that the higher rate was being paid to those men and women who were being taken on as supplementary harvest labourers at a period of exceptional demand. A Wiltshire roll of the following year reveals a similar lack of concern in discriminating between the sex of the reapers. Once again women appear in some numbers alongside men as reapers, employed for short periods of time during the harvest weeks. In Wiltshire the remuneration for this work was more likely to be in kind rather than in cash; payment by

sheaves being the norm. This may well have been a legacy of earlier medieval harvest practice in which the labour of reaping was often rewarded with sheaves of corn.³⁴ In cases where this particular method of payment was still adopted in late fourteenth-century Wiltshire there remains no sign of any discrimination against the women. Thus, Nicholas Danyel and Christina his wife, who were both presented by the jurors of Selkley hundred for reaping wheat for six days during the autumn, received sixteen sheaves. This was reckoned to be worth 1d each in excess of that which they should have taken.³⁵ This particular entry is followed in the actual roll by the presentment of further women, some with their husbands, some individually, who are all stated to have 'done similarly'.³⁶ Some of the Wiltshire women were paid at an even greater rate for their reaping. One woman, for example, was similarly presented for taking sixteen sheaves, but this time for only three days' work during the autumn. Another was alleged to have received as much as twenty sheaves for six days' work.³⁷

Whether they were being rewarded in cash or in kind, many female reapers in the years following the Black Death appear not to have been discriminated against when it came to the wages they were being paid for their work. Once again, however, the possibility of selective presentments needs here to be taken into account. It could be argued that those women who were receiving the same wages as men were simply more liable to presentment, and that the majority of women were in fact being paid less than their male counterparts for similar work. Lacking, as we do, precise details of the proportion of male and female labourers in certain areas this is of course impossible to tell. What is more, the fact that

³³ *Ibid.*, pp 50, 52, 53, 54, 60. It is not possible to make a direct comparison between these rates and the statutory rates for reaping. The statute of labourers (1351) merely states that reapers of corn were to be paid 2d in the first week of August, 3d in the second week, 'and so till the end of August, and less in the country where less was wont to be given, without meat or drink or other courtesie' (*Statutes of the Realm*, I, p 311). The implication from these Yorkshire presentments at least is that it was the provision of board in addition to a money payment which was deemed to go against the statute, and not the value of the cash payment itself.

³⁴ A Jones, 'Harvest customs and labourers' perquisites in southern England, 1150-1350; the corn harvest', *Ag Hist Rev*, 25 part I, 1977, pp 14-15.

³⁵ Putnam, *Enforcement*, p 231*.

³⁶ PRO, KB.9/131 m. 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

the sessional rolls record anyway only those workers who were in receipt of excessive wages means that an unknown proportion of the labour force, both men and women, who may have been taking wages according to the Statute, remain totally hidden from view.

Certainly other peace rolls where available confirm a general parity of wages for the harvest labour of men and women. Where family labour is being used in the harvest fields, the rate of pay for man and wife in specific areas is invariably the same. In Suffolk, William Chetilber and Johanna his wife were presented for having taken 3*d* and board a day each, for the whole of the autumn of 1363.³⁸ Fourteen years later, John de Anneme and his wife Margaret living in Pudding Norton, Norfolk, were similarly presented together for working during the autumn. On this occasion the two of them had each received 8*d* and food for each day's work.³⁹ Wages paid to those women seemingly employed at harvest time on an individual basis are also on a par with those paid to men. In peace sessions held at Braintree, Essex, in June 1378, Isabella Rouge, the daughter of a recalcitrant labourer, was presented to the Justices for receiving 4*d* a day and her food (*cibum*) for working in the autumn, for which she was fined 18*d*. This was the same rate as that prevailing for men working during the same period – labourers such as Nicholas Thresher, for example, also receiving 4*d* and food a day in the autumn, in addition to his 2*d* a day plus food which he was being paid during the winter and summer.⁴⁰ In some cases, although the labour of a number of people seems to have been drawn upon, a single payment appears to have been made to the senior male member of the workforce. An enquiry in Hampshire in August 1391 states that William Coluerdene of Winchester had been employed by a certain Thomas Doppyng at Swanmore for ten days

during autumn time. However, although William alone is presented, the record states that the remuneration for this work amounted to 4*d* a day plus food and drink (*cum sibo et potu*) 'each', implying a number of other labourers paid at the same rate. That these extra labourers consisted of his wife and servant is suggested in the statement that William had thus taken excessively 'for his wife and his servant' (*pro se uxore sua et famulo suo*).⁴¹ Thus, although William alone was receiving the payment, the record implies that his wife and another labourer were also working and that they were being paid at a rate no lower than the one prevailing for William himself.

The evidence of cases brought under the Statutes of Labourers suggests, therefore, that female harvest workers were often being paid at the same rates as men. This is particularly clear from the abundant evidence provided in the sessional rolls of female reapers. Women were not only actively involved in reaping the corn in many parts of the country, but on the evidence of the statute cases, were also being paid at similar rates to men. There was clearly no physical impediment to women using the sickle or reaping hook. Their ability to wield a scythe, however, as Roberts has suggested, may have been a different matter.⁴² No positive evidence of female mowers has been discovered from the sessional records, implying a lack of active female involvement in the hay harvest. In some areas, at least, this absence of women from the ranks of mowers would also mean that some of the highest paid harvest work remained inaccessible to female labourers. In the Lindsey district of Lincolnshire during the 1370s women were clearly being employed as reapers, earning 4*d* and lunch a day for working during the autumn. The highest rates amongst the harvest workforce in that particular district, however, sometimes as high as 8*d* and lunch for each day's work, were those paid to the

³⁸ Putnam, *Proceedings*, p 376.

³⁹ PRO, KB. 9/80 m. 19.

⁴⁰ E C Furber (ed), *Essex Sessions of the Peace 1351, 1377-1379*, Essex Archaeological Society, occasional publication 3, 1953, p 158.

⁴¹ Putnam, *Proceedings*, p 213.

⁴² Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', pp 7, 9.

mowers, and they were always men.⁴³ Thus, even though it can be shown that women were employed as reapers, often at the going rate, their absence from the ranks of hay mowers means that they were still not able to attain some of the highest rates for harvest work.

Apart from mowing, therefore, it would appear that women were taking an active part in bringing in the harvest during the second half of the fourteenth century. The labour cases suggest that, as with most harvest workers, the majority of these women were being employed for short periods at a time; a number of days or weeks at the most. The implication is that agricultural labourers were highly mobile, moving around the countryside from one employer to another performing various jobs on short-term contracts. Earlier by-laws forbidding the use of outside labour during the harvest suggest that this was not a new development.⁴⁴ After 1351, however, statutory control of such mobility, and cases arising therefrom, enable one to gauge with more certainty some idea of the nature and extent of such movement. In essence, the Statute of Labourers merely deemed it illegal for servants to leave the county in which they lived in search of work.⁴⁵ The Statute of Cambridge of 1388 was more specific, forbidding movement outside the 'hundred, rape or wapentake' unless the person concerned carried a letter patent authorizing such travel. Only if a servant had another employer to go to was he or she free to leave employment at the end of the agreed term.⁴⁶ In order to appreciate more fully the continuity of female employment at harvest time it is necessary to consider the extent to which they appear amongst those labourers presented for infringements of the Statute clauses relating to mobility. This is of particular importance in the light of previous

work which suggests that a high proportion of those people moving from one place to another in search of work at this time may have been women.⁴⁷

V

An examination of the sessional rolls does indeed reveal, not only that a substantial number of women were moving around the countryside in search of work, but that such mobility was particularly prevalent at harvest time. In some cases, the record gives only a very indirect indication of such mobility, stating, for example, the refusal of women to work within a certain village during the autumn.⁴⁸ Normally, however, the evidence is more explicit, the women concerned being presented for withdrawing 'from the district at autumn', or moving from one village to another in search of higher wages.⁴⁹ On some occasions these women were moving with their husbands. Thus, in the autumn of 1394, Walter de Gernetoft and Johanna his wife of Sloothby in Lincolnshire, left the village with other labourers and took higher wages elsewhere.⁵⁰ Usually, the women appear to have been part of a group of transient harvest labourers. In April 1352, for example, four women and two men were indicted before the Justices of Chester Palatinate for breaking the Statute and departing from the region.⁵¹ Five years later, in Derbyshire, Richard and Alice Baxter together with a further two women and three men were presented for withdrawing from service during the autumn.⁵² Similarly, in Lincolnshire, a married couple along with three women and one man, although ordered by the constable of Barton to serve

⁴⁷ Eg, Hilton, *The English Peasantry*, pp 106-7.

⁴⁸ Eg, Sillem, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, pp 34, 42.

⁴⁹ Eg Putnam, *Enforcement*, p 147*; Sillem, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, pp 36, 118.

⁵⁰ E G Kimball (ed), *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire, 1381-1396*, Lincoln Record Society, 56, 1961, p 237.

⁵¹ Putnam, *Enforcement*, p 146.*

⁵² *Ibid*, p 164.*

⁴³ R Sillem, (ed), *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire, 1360-1375*, Lincoln Record Society, 30, 1936, pp 25, 61, 91.

⁴⁴ Eg, Ault, *Open-field Farming*, pp 86, 90.

⁴⁵ *Statutes of the Realm*, I, p 312.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* II, p 56.

the abbot of Bardeney there during the autumn of 1374, refused to work and instead left the village to receive greater salary. The abbot was clearly an undesirable employer as the same autumn witnessed a similar refusal to work for him by a further twelve labourers, four of them women, who also left the village to work elsewhere.⁵³

Quite often female labourers alone were presented before the Justices, suggesting that they were moving very much on their own initiative. Surviving rolls for Lincolnshire are particularly full of cases of women, including married women, who were withdrawing from their villages during the autumn to work elsewhere for higher wages.⁵⁴ On some occasions the women concerned were absent from their villages for even longer periods. Agnes, the wife of Robert Cartere of Stainton and Johanna, wife of Roger Wrighte of Willingham are both said to have been unwilling to work in their respective villages, not only during the autumn, but during the summer as well, at which times they were returning to the surrounding countryside to work for higher wages.⁵⁵ Female reapers appear to have been particularly mobile. Proceedings before the Chester Palatine Justices in 1359–60 include a number of cases of reapers, men and women, presented for moving from one area to another in search of work.⁵⁶ This is a situation which is revealed in greater detail in other country presentments. In Warwickshire, in 1357, for example, Christiana, wife of Roger Ferst, was presented at sessions held in Coventry for moving to another village during the autumn after being ordered to reap in the village in which she lived.⁵⁷ In 1362, Justices in Suffolk heard that Agnes de Bradewell of Beccles, reaper of corn, had withdrawn from the village to work elsewhere for twelve days

at a daily rate of 4d and food.⁵⁸ The following year a similar case presented to the Justices in the East Riding of Yorkshire concerned Alice Tretard and Richard and Isabella Chappeman who together refused to reap corn in Wressell during the autumn but instead left the village in order to receive 4d and their board each day for working elsewhere.⁵⁹ Similarly, in Lincolnshire during the autumn of 1373, Alice, the servant of William de Scampton of North Carlton, was ordered by the constable of that village to reap corn for the abbot of Barlings. She too refused and left the village in order to receive higher wages elsewhere.⁶⁰

It is clear from the cases recorded in these rolls that female harvest workers, particularly reapers, were joining in fully in the post-Black Death movement of labourers around the countryside in search of higher wages. Sometimes the sources reveal the distances that these women were travelling. Table 2 gives details of those women presented for infringements of the Statute clauses relating to mobility, for whom distances travelled can be ascertained.

The evidence cited below, fragmentary though it is, suggests that journeys of a couple of miles or more in search of work appear to have been usual for these female harvest workers. Although such cases imply that these women were leaving their native villages for the duration of the autumn it is more likely that they were going out to nearby villages, where labour was short, on a daily basis and returning home each night. Unfortunately, the labour laws relating to mobility do not distinguish between daily commuting and the more permanent withdrawal of labour on a weekly or seasonal basis. Consequently, it is not possible to identify with any certainty the type of movement with which we are dealing. However, it would certainly seem likely that where greater distances are

⁵³ Sillem, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, pp 69, 70.

⁵⁴ Eg, *ibid* pp 33, 34, 38, 42, 47–8, 57, 101; Kimball, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, p 15.

⁵⁵ Sillem, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, p 92.

⁵⁶ Putnam, *Enforcement*, pp 148–9.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp 224–5.*

⁵⁸ PRO, KB.9/115 m. 17.

⁵⁹ Putnam, *Yorkshire Sessions of the Peace*, pp 77.

⁶⁰ Sillem, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, pp 25–6.

TABLE 2
Geographical mobility of women in search of work during the second half of the fourteenth century⁶¹

Date	Name(s)	Occupation/ type of work	County	From	To	Distance (miles)
1353	Elizabeth, daughter of Henry of Screffington (and five other women)	autumn work	Rutland	North Luffenham	Barrowden	2
1362-3	Margareta, wife of John le Bere of Wantisden	reaping	Suffolk	Wantisden	Ilketshall	20
1363	Matilda Chanardeby	autumn work	Suffolk	Great Livermore	Great Fakenham	3½
1363	Alice, wife of Peter Chauntrell	reaping	Yorks (ER)	Pocklington	Tibthorp	10½
1373	Alice Treu	autumn work	Lincs	Croxby	Swallow	3
1374-5	Alice Milner	—	Lincs	Heckington	Sleaford and Burton	4 2
1377	Matilda Gosse	autumn work	Norfolk	Buxton	Burgh-next- Aylsham	2½

involved one is observing a more permanent mobility in which the women concerned were probably being provided with some form of basic accommodation during the autumn period, together with other members of the harvest workforce.

VI

One must re-emphasize the limitations of the sources upon which this discussion is based. Unlike the wages cited in manorial accounts, for example, those quoted in the peace rolls were not necessarily paid. It is merely alleged that they were. However, the evidence thus provided does allow one to observe comparable rates of pay for men and women for particular types of work in certain areas. Where such evidence is available it is clear that those female harvest workers who were actually being indicted were being paid at very much the same rates as men. Secondly, one should be aware of the possibility that presenting juries were

concentrating to an undue extent upon female labour and that consequently the proportion of women amongst the harvest workforce in certain areas is thereby exaggerated. Even if this was true, however, it does not detract from the fact that women were an essential part of the harvest labour force in the period immediately following the Black Death. Their contribution was not restricted to the secondary tasks but also included the reaping of the corn itself, something which is confirmed by contemporary illustrations.⁶² In addition, many women were clearly in a position to move around the countryside at will in search of the most remunerative rates for the task at hand. Women's work was far from being restricted to supplementing their husbands' labour in the fields surrounding their native village. There is no doubt that this was an exceptional period in which an acute labour shortage served to enhance the importance and value of female labour. However, even if

⁶¹ The sources for the data listed in Table 2 are Putnam, *Enforcement*, p. 198*; PRO, KB.9/115 mm. 2d, 5d; Putnam, *Yorkshire Sessions of the Peace*, p. 58; Sillem, *Records of some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, pp. 34, 206; PRO, KB.9/80 m. 25.

⁶² Women alone are shown doing the reaping in the mid-fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter. Interestingly, this same source depicts the stacking of the bound sheaves being carried out by men: *The Luttrell Psalter*, additional manuscript 42130 in the British Museum, 1932, f. 172b; Pl. 97; f. 173; Pl. 98.

it is true that this represented only a very short-term gain for female harvest workers,⁶³ the evidence discussed above is significant in revealing the lack of obstacles, physical, institutional or otherwise, to female involvement in such work.

On a general level, therefore, cases brought under the Statute of Labourers help to extend further our knowledge of the working role of medieval peasant women. As intimated earlier one should be wary of emphasizing too greatly the significance of the evidence provided in these records of women's wages, as we may be dealing here with a highly distorted sample. However, the real significance of the evidence discussed in this paper lies in its revelation, not simply of wage rates, but of some of the choices and decisions available to female workers during this period. Because many women were able to try their hand at more than one task, reaping and weaving for example, they had an element of choice of what work to do and when to do it. The fact that they were not necessarily restricted to a specific geographical location means that they were also able to choose where to work, and to move if they so desired. Moreover, in revealing the continual failure of employers to enforce long-term service in any one particular place, the evidence suggests the extent to which women were able to strike a balance between work and leisure by choosing to take highly remunerative jobs on short-term contracts.

Of course, the nature of this particular documentation means that we are only informed of the work women were involved in when they were being paid for it. One presumes, however, that women were also carrying out similar jobs as part of their contribution to the household economy, and not just for wages. One needs of course to consider other sources for confirmation of this. Barbara Hanawalt's use of coroners' rolls, for example, has shown the extent to which the children of peasant households

were often neglected because both of their parents were out at work.⁶⁴ This brief study of wage labour does suggest, at least, the sort of work that the mothers may have been involved in. Just as in the towns, women were able to contribute to the family budget through their involvement in some form of craft activity or retailing, so too in the villages, wives and daughters were clearly in a position to add their earnings to those of the male members of the household through their involvement in agricultural work.

However, this discussion has still wider implications. Many of the women discussed above seem to have been free from any familial restrictions. They appear as independent labourers, moving from place to place in search of work, responsible alone for their own well being. The independent female already being recognized within pre-industrial towns, working by and for herself, was present in rural society also.⁶⁵ Indeed, research continues to establish the independence of peasant women in medieval society. The evidence discussed in this short paper, for example, seems to strengthen recent assertions that many female peasants did indeed have their own careers and incomes and that consequently they tended to marry once their financial independence had been secured.⁶⁶ Widespread female involvement in rural work in the second half of the fourteenth century may therefore have implications not only for the work experience of the women themselves but, in the long term, for marriage patterns and even subsequent demographic trends.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ B A Hanawalt, 'Childrearing among the lower classes of late medieval England', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VIII, 1977-8, pp 1-22.

⁶⁵ For perhaps the most impressive recent indication of independent working women in pre-industrial urban society, see Merry Wiesner Wood, 'Paltry pedlars or essential merchants? Women in the distributive trades in early modern Nuremberg', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 12 1981, pp 3-13.

⁶⁶ J M Bennett, 'Medieval peasant marriage: an examination of marriage license fines in the 'liber gersumarum'', in J A Raftis (ed), *Pathways to Medieval Peasants*, Toronto, 1981, pp 193-246.

⁶⁷ For a summary of some of the possible reasons for continued population decline into the fifteenth century, for example, see J Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy 1348-1530*, 1977, pp 55-62.

⁶³ Roberts, 'Sickles and scythes', p 15.