

‘His footmarks on her shoulders’: the place of women within poultry keeping in the British countryside, c.1880 to c.1980*

by Karen Sayer

Abstract

The exact nature and extent of women’s involvement in agriculture, at all levels, but especially on family farms, has remained largely hidden in the numerical data relating to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is especially true of a quintessentially female activity, poultry keeping. To focus entirely on the large-scale intensive producer, and adhere to the narrative of change laid down by the industry, is to obscure the continuities that have existed and still exist within that industry. Specialist publications and the farming press, ranging from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through to the late 1970s, are therefore used to assess the possible shifts in the long-standing association between women and poultry keeping. It is suggested that this association was strong enough for women’s involvement to continue at all levels into the post-war period, if not beyond. It appears that women remained involved as producers, as well as labourers, especially on smaller-scale and within family-run enterprises, which themselves survived longer than we might expect.

British farmers, Joan Thirsk argued, only began to specialize in poultry farming in the late nineteenth century. In the previous century, whilst poultry production was of increasing note within continental agriculture, especially in France and Denmark, it was perceived in Britain as being of little consequence.¹ But, worried by rising imports of eggs and looking to lead agriculture out of depression, the government became increasingly concerned to improve domestic production, distribution and marketing, and British poultry production became a worthy subject of enquiry. Henry Rew reported on the poultry rearing and fattening industry of Sussex in 1895 as part of the Royal Commission on Agriculture, and suggested that farmers in other counties might learn from the management and marketing practices of Heathfield. Then, in 1909, a committee was established to look at poultry breeding and egg marketing in Scotland; this committee observed that the domestic demand for eggs had outstripped supply in the UK since the 1870s, and that this demand had increased steadily since. Attempts to improve methods of production and distribution in Scotland had largely come to nothing; this,

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Women’s History Network Conference, 2005. My thanks to delegates there, and to the *Review’s* referees for their constructive comments. The quotation in the title comes from W. Brett, *Poultry-keeping to-day: pictured and explained* (1938), p. 137.

¹ J. Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture: a history from the Black Death to the present day* (1997), pp. 189–91.

the committee argued, should be tackled via centralized action, education and organization in order to benefit small farmers and crofters.² As B. A. Holderness observed, one contributor, Edward Brown, 'wrote and preached tirelessly to the indifferent and sceptical, and expressed a clear conviction that the large import bill for poultry produce could be significantly reduced with the benefit of organization'.³ However, at the national level the changes effected were initially uneven; as the same committee noted, 'the poultry industry has made a much greater advance in England and Ireland than it has done in Scotland'.⁴ After the First World War the government took a greater interest in egg production. In 1926 it published a report on egg marketing in England and Wales, which focused on distribution. A National Standard was proposed, to address difficulties in marketing and supply, as was a system of stamping, but on a voluntary basis.⁵ In 1928 the Imperial Economic Committee believed that voluntary preference, alongside increased domestic production, could be exercised to address the shortage in domestic production, as the Empire supplied only 3 per cent of egg imports into the UK in 1926. It too suggested that standard grades and packing be introduced with the UK and the Empire, but no national standard was adopted until the British Egg Marketing Board (BEMB) was set up in 1957.⁶ It is worth noting that until campaigns to improve the sale of eggs from the Empire emerged during the Interwar period, the only significant advertising for eggs was for dried egg powder manufactured by companies like Nooeg and, during the First World War, War-Eggo.⁷

In 1939, 'eggs and chickens' were referred to in a parliamentary debate on the Agricultural Development Bill as 'the third major agricultural industry ... at a total value of some £25,000,000 a year'.⁸ However, as more and more new producers began to specialize in poultry following the First World War, and early forms of large-scale and intensive production started to become popular, so there was also increasing official concern about the spread of disease among fowl.⁹ Disease began to peak in the 1930s and in 1935 the voluntary registration of breeders was introduced in an attempt to improve the quality of the stock supplied to specialized poultry farmers.¹⁰ During the Second World War feed was rationed and poultry numbers (and production) inevitably fell. Post-war, following the Agriculture Act of 1947, production picked up again and specialist commercial producers once more began to build up large-scale flocks, despite continued feed rationing. By 1952–3 there was an estimated national

² BPP, 1895, xvi, Royal Commission on Agriculture; BPP, 1909, xxxvi (409), Departmental committee on poultry breeding in Scotland.

³ B. A. Holderness, 'Intensive livestock keeping', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 vols, 2000), I, p. 494.

⁴ Departmental committee on poultry breeding in Scotland, para. 10.

⁵ *Report on egg marketing in England and Wales* (MAFF, Economic Series 10, 1926).

⁶ BPP, 1928, x, Imperial Economic Committee, Marketing and Preparing for Market of Foodstuffs: Sixth Report: Poultry and Eggs.

⁷ E.g., History of Advertising Trust Archive, Rav-eningham, Norfolk (hereafter HAT), OM (5) 15, South

African Poultry Association Advertising Department, London, S.A. Eggs 1930; 'British and Best, and Best Sellers', an advert for South African eggs, *The Grocer*, 4 Oct. 1930.

⁸ Parliamentary Debates (hereafter PD), Lords, fifth ser., 114, 24 July 1939, col. 418.

⁹ W. Boyd, 'Making meat: Science, technology, and American poultry production' *Technology and Culture* 42 (2001), pp. 640–3. As Boyd recounts, new diseases also emerged in the 1960s and some established diseases wiped out whole flocks in the USA and UK in the 1960s and 1970s.

¹⁰ L. Robinson, *Modern poultry husbandry* (1948), pp. 1–4.

gross output of 125 million hen eggs, equating (with the value of slaughtered fowls added) to 12.5 per cent of national gross agricultural and horticultural products, or a fifth of livestock products, with an additional £37 million-worth of eggs and meat from fowls in domestic flocks and in flocks kept on less than an acre. However, the new commercial egg industry began to struggle and, by 1955, a detailed analysis of post-war production by D. H. Lloyd came to the conclusion that 'a point has been reached where the margin of profit on egg production is fine'. He observed that many farmers were reluctant to stop producing eggs, but argued that the industry needed 'either reduced costs or ... firmer markets'. Greater restrictions on supply to increase prices at the point of sale, or increased demand, were the only ways forward.¹¹ The answer came in the form of the establishment in 1957 of the BEMB, which was given the pre-war (voluntary) national mark to manage and which set out to stimulate domestic demand. The essential drive when it came to eggs was, officially, to intervene at the national level, and this continued throughout the BEMB's existence.

Until this time patterns of poultry keeping throughout Britain had remained highly localized and were differentiated by producers' responses to the demands of the regional marketplace. Within England, for instance, as Holderness noted, the counties of Lincolnshire and Cumberland were known, before the 1890s, for their egg production by smallholders.¹² Brian Short has outlined the rise and fall of the 'cramming' business on the Sussex Weald between 1850 and 1950, while Michael Winstanley has shown that small farms, at least in Lancashire, continued to be economically viable until the Second World War in part by answering local demand for eggs along with dairy produce.¹³ This was all relatively small-scale production, but the evidence points towards the emergence of relatively small numbers of comparatively large flocks. At the moment, though, it is hard to pin down the exact chronology of change because the available evidence on flock sizes is known to be unreliable. In 1961, the BEMB's statistics division carried out its first producer survey, which revealed the average flock size to be 200 birds, although 10 per cent of the eggs that went through their packing stations were supplied by producers with laying flocks of at least 2000 birds. Subsequently, BEMB data published in 1968 revealed that 'small holders own an estimated 11½ million layers (contrasted with 44.3 million others which are recorded in the June census) ... Two-thirds of all producers have flocks of less than 200 birds ... [and] produce nine per cent of all eggs'.¹⁴ It is therefore clear that, despite the increase in large-scale production and emergence of large flocks of over 10,000 birds, many smaller flocks remained and that, although they were responsible for the minority of eggs, they nonetheless still constituted the majority of flocks. The transition to increased production is also associated with the specialized breeding of the birds, which began

¹¹ D. H. Lloyd, 'The economics of the commercial egg production industry of the United Kingdom', *J. Agricultural Economics* 9 (1955), pp. 242–3, 258–9.

¹² Holderness, 'Intensive livestock keeping', pp. 491–2.

¹³ Brian Short, "'The art and craft of chicken cramming': Poultry in the Weald of Sussex, 1850–1950", *AgHR* 30 (1982), pp. 17–30; M. Winstanley, 'Industrialization and the small farm: family and household economy in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *Past and*

Present, 152 (1996).

¹⁴ HAT, OM (L) 21, 'Table 1: British Egg Marketing Board, 1961–64, advertising portfolio and BEMB information advertisement', *Financial Times Supplement*, Dec. 1961; Jean Tester, 'British industry shakeup yields fewer flocks but more birds', *Poultry International* 6 (Jan. 1967), pp. 59–60; W. P. Blount, 'Statistics: stock and stockmen', in W. P. Blount (ed.) *Intensive livestock farming* (1968), p. 347.

in the early twentieth century, but really only took off from the mid-1950s. Though Walker *et al.* note that earlier records often just flag up the achievement of individual birds rather than performance by flock, following S. H. Gordon and D. R. Charles, they estimate production at 150 eggs per bird in 1898, rising to 300 per bird in 1999.¹⁵

According to the type of progressive account produced by the industry's apologists, for example that by Gordon and Charles, the history of poultry production can be broken down into the following three periods, based on the technologies and methods adopted: a) the 'historic' period, before the First World War; b) the 'traditional' period, after the First World War, through to 1953–4 (when poultry feed rationing ended); and c) the post-war 'conventional' period that followed.¹⁶ However, what this model does not reveal is that the changes were much debated and far from uniform. The small-scale producer remained numerically significant in the UK, as did those who employed deep-litter and extensive production methods, until the mid-1960s. In 1963, 56 per cent of birds were kept in litter or barn systems and 17 per cent were free range; by 1966 this had fallen to 25 per cent and 8 per cent respectively, as shown in Table 1. Producers were also, as will be shown, highly gendered. Post-war, farming sought to find what Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson have called a complete 'integrated industrial solution to agricultural production', and, what they called 'appropriationism', defined as a 'truly industrial alternative to the rural, land-based organisation of agricultural production', came to dominate.¹⁷

Historians have become increasingly interested of late in the history of twentieth-century British agriculture. Within the broader history of the sector, the history of poultry keeping, which has mainly focused on the very striking rise of poultry meat production and consumption, has been taken as emblematic of the rapid rise of industrialisation and intensification within farming post-war, and of the impact on it of science and technology.¹⁸ As Andrew Godley and Bridget Williams rightly argue, looking at the business history of poultry meat in the UK, what allowed intensification to take place initially were new developments in disease control, nutrition and management. But, as Abigail Woods has contended using the case study of innovation within British pig farming, it is crucial to avoid too linear or teleological a narrative when it comes to the history of agriculture in the twentieth century.¹⁹ Following the history

¹⁵ A. Walker, F. Short and M. G. Macleod, 'Limits to the performance of poultry', in R. Sylvester-Bradley and J. Wiseman (eds), *Yields of farmed species: constraints and opportunities in the twenty-first century* (2005), pp. 519, 521–2.

¹⁶ S. H. Gordon and D. R. Charles, *Niche and organic chicken products: their technology and scientific principles* (2002), pp. v–vi. The terms draw on definitions 'agreed by a [DEFRA-funded] study group', p. iii; this periodization is used by Walker, Short and Macleod, 'Limits'.

¹⁷ David Goodman, Bernardo Sorj and John Wilkinson, *From farming to biotechnology: a theory of agro-industrial development* (1987), p. 123.

¹⁸ E.g., A. Howkins, *The death of rural England: a social history of the countryside since 1900* (2003); Nicola

Verdon, 'Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women's work in inter-war England and Wales', *Historical J.*, 52 (2009), pp. 109–130; Abigail Woods, 'Rethinking the history of modern agriculture: British Pig production, c.1910–1965', *Twentieth-century British History* 23 (2012), pp. 165–91.

¹⁹ Boyd, 'Making meat', pp. 631–64; W. Boyd and M. Watts, 'Agro-industrial just-in-time: The chicken industry and post-war American capitalism', in D. Goodman and M. J. Watts (eds), *Globalising food: Agrarian questions and global restructuring* (1997); A. Godley and B. Williams, 'Democratizing luxury and the contentious "invention of the technological chicken" in Britain', *Business History Rev.*, 83 (2009), pp. 267–90; J. Dixon, *The changing chicken: Chooks, cooks and culinary culture* (2002); Woods, 'Rethinking'.

TABLE 1. Changes in egg production systems: percentage of total egg production

Year	Cage systems	Litter or perchery (barn) systems	Free-range
1946	–	–	98
1951	8	12	80
1956	15	40	45
1963	27	56	17
1966	67	25	8
1976	94	2	4
1980	95	4	1
1986	93	2	5
1990	85	3	12
1993	85	3	12
1995	87	2	11
1996	86	3	11

Source: Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Report on the welfare of laying hens* (1997), available at <http://www.fawc.org.uk/reports/layhens/lhgre007.htm>, accessed 16 Sept. 2013.

of egg production, we see that there was also, as with pigs, much greater complexity within British agriculture than any simple account of modernization and progressive industrialization might suggest; and, most significantly, failure to address this complexity results in women's invisibility within farming.

The quantitative data describing the participation of women in agriculture in general and poultry in particular is poor, but, as will be demonstrated, there are ample qualitative sources available. Indeed, it has been widely argued that to understand women's position within agriculture, it is essential to use the qualitative material, because, as sociologists as well as historians have argued for the twentieth century, 'one is faced with statistical conventions' within the quantitative sources 'which render women themselves and their work marginal or invisible'.²⁰ Sources of official advice, books written to advise farmers like Leonard Robinson's seminal *Modern Poultry Husbandry* (first edition, 1948), material from the British Egg Marketing Board (BEMB), government enquiries, general farming publications such as *Farmer's Weekly* and *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, publications produced by poultry organizations and specialist periodical literature such as *Poultry World*, however, all provide a valuable record of British agriculture and agricultural debate on this topic throughout the period. As geographer Brian Ilberry has suggested of the American experience, farm magazines, 'the most important source of information for farmers' in decision making, show how 'the geography

²⁰ P. O'Hara, 'Out of the shadows: Women on family farms and their contribution to agriculture and rural development', in M. van der Burg and M. Endevelde (eds), *Women on family farms: Gender research, EC policies and new perspectives* (Dutch Network on farm and rural women's studies, Circle for rural European studies, Wageningen Agricultural University, The Netherlands, 1994), p. 50; Verdon, 'Agricultural labour', pp. 110–11.

of agriculture is created, and how patterns of production might be reinforced or altered'.²¹ The same is true of the UK. As Nicola Verdon has observed of 'the printed farming press' in the inter-war period, it is 'a rich and varied source ... which has yet to be fully exploited by historians'.²² To do so, Verdon has argued, it is important to recognize the different eddies and currents of strategy, opinion and reaction 'at play' in these publications.²³ As Abigail Woods has demonstrated with reference to pig production, figures, photographs, job adverts, articles, feed and machinery adverts, news, and letters can provide evidence of the ideas, attitudes and arguments within farming in general.²⁴ Here, qualitative material from the turn of the nineteenth century through to the late 1970s, will be used to demonstrate that the long-standing association between women and poultry keeping was sufficiently strong that their involvement in the industry, at all levels, continued well into the post-war period, if not beyond. As agricultural historians begin to investigate the twentieth century, this demonstrates that it is crucial that they aim to capture not only what Wood has called 'key changes that do not fit into [the] general trajectory', but also the continuities for a full and accurate picture of post-war British agricultural production.²⁵

I

'Poultry in general and fowls in particular', as Holderness outlined, 'were traditionally the avocation of the farmer's wife'.²⁶ In 1904 Sir Walter Gilbey, a practical agriculturalist, horse breeder, and prolific author on art and animal subjects who had published an acclaimed biography of Stubbs, felt that it was perfectly appropriate to preface his *Poultry-keeping on small farms and small holdings* with Stubbs's much older 'Going to market: the farmer's wife and the raven', originally an illustration for Gay's *Fables*, in which we see the farmer's wife taking her eggs to market in panniers (see Figure 1). (In the fable, as the farmer's wife's blind horse, 'Ball', stumbles, so the eggs are broken and all her dreamed-of profits lost. She blames the raven for his ill-omened call, but he blames her for failing to choose her much more sure-footed horse, 'Dun', for the task at hand.)²⁷

In Britain throughout the so-called 'historic' period, both poultry keeping and the marketing of eggs were thought of as women's work. This ensures their invisibility in the census record.²⁸ If we look at the nineteenth-century decennial censuses for example, 'poultry keepers' – alternatively 'poultry farmers, breeders and rearers' – was a category which first appeared in the list of occupations in 1861, but was subsequently moved, with 'poultry feeders and fatteners', into the larger category of 'Dog, bird, animal keeper, dealer', only to be moved again in 1901 to the even more general heading 'Farmers and Graziers', where it broadly

²¹ B. W. Ilbery, *Agricultural geography: social and economic analysis* (1985), p. 77.

²² Nicola Verdon, "'The modern countrywoman': farm women, domesticity and social change in interwar Britain', *History Workshop J.*, 70 (2010), p. 87.

²³ John J. Fry, cited by Verdon, "'Modern country-woman'", p. 90.

²⁴ Woods, 'Rethinking', p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ Holderness, 'Intensive livestock keeping', p. 490.

²⁷ Sir Walter Gilbey, *Poultry-keeping on small farms and small holdings* (1904), frontispiece; *id.*, *Life of George Stubbs*, R.A. (1898); ODNB, 'Gilbey, Sir Walter, first baronet, (1831–1914). For the picture, R. D. Altick, *Paintings from books: art and literature in Britain, 1760–1900* (1985), p. 386.



FIGURE 1. George Stubbs, 'Going to market: The Farmer's Wife and the Raven' (engraved 1788), reproduced as the frontispiece of Walter Gilbey, *Poultry-keeping on small farms and small holdings* (1904), depicts a farmer's wife travelling to market to sell her eggs, which are carried in panniers. Baskets of broken eggs were commonly used allegorically by artists to represent misfortune, but such images also unwittingly reproduce the commonplace practices of marketing.

remained in 1911. This category, under Agricultural Occupations, also included 'fruit farmers, growers and potato growers, and hop growers'; 'poultry feeders and fatteners' being removed at the same time to 'others engaged in/connected with agriculture' such as peat cutters.²⁹ Following increased official interest in the trade, poultry farming acquired its own census sub-headings in 1921, though the resulting occupational data remained subsumed within

²⁸ In 1861 there were 352 egg merchants/dealers, 90 of whom were women, while of 2796 poulterers and gamekeepers 576 were women. 1861 Census for England and Wales, II, Table XVII, and III, Table XIX; General Report, p. 36. But the nineteenth-century census record has been shown to underestimate women's formal and informal participation in the agrarian economy. On this point, see E. Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth century censuses', *History Workshop*,

J. 23 (1987); C. Miller, 'The hidden workforce: female field workers in Gloucestershire, 1870–1901', *Southern Hist.*, 6 (1984); A. Howkins, *Reshaping rural England, A social history, 1850–1925* (1991), and id., 'Labour history and the rural poor', *Rural Hist.* 1 (1990), p. 118; N. Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth-century England: gender, work and wages* (2002).

²⁹ BPP 1914, 1911 Census of England and Wales, Occupations and Industries, Part I, Table 25.

the broader categories: 'Chicken Farmer', 'Hen farmer', 'Poultry Breeder, Farmer', 'Rearer' within category 011, 'Farmers'; and 'Chicken Fattener, Feeder, Plucker', 'Poultry Attendant', 'Poultry Boy, Feeder, Man, Manager' within 039, 'Other agricultural occupations'.³⁰ And, because poultry keepers and their like were of little official consequence in Britain until the early twentieth century, and even then remained hidden within the other agricultural employment data in the occupational tables, it remains very hard to determine how many people, and of which sex, worked with poultry. However, by 1900 women's ostensible dominance was beginning to be challenged. As Thirsk put it, 'the work of women was only briefly acknowledged, if not contemptuously dismissed'.³¹

In line with Gilbey's doom-laden frontispiece, the Departmental Committee on Poultry Breeding in Scotland, reporting in 1909, was particularly critical of women's methods of handling poultry and eggs. 'The management of poultry', it observed, 'is generally relegated to the women members of the family, and the methods adopted are, in the majority of cases, very antiquated'.³² Such a statement unwittingly demonstrates that in Scotland the majority of poultry keepers were women (and though of necessity they had to be skilled, the use of the word 'relegated' shows that they were perceived as unskilled), that the methods of managing the birds were long established and that the government was attaching a new significance to this element of agricultural production. As this was an industry that sought information at the international level, it is therefore worth noting that much the same opinions held sway in early twentieth-century America and Canada. 'Contemporaries', as Margaret Derry argues with particular reference to chicken breeding in North America:

linked female control to inferiority, and by extension were inclined to view lack of a specialization emphasis in poultry breeding as a characteristic, or even an outcome, of that linkage. Both women and men were blamed for this situation: women because of the type of bird they preferred, and men because they took no interest in the breeding of their wives' chickens.³³

It was not universally assumed that women could or should no longer handle poultry in Britain. Edward Brown, as Thirsk observed, appears to have been quite critical of British farmers' disinterest in poultry keeping, something that he attributed to their disregard of women's work in this field as being simply for 'pin money'. He believed, too, that British farmers could therefore learn much from the French, who valued women's handling of the poultry, left them to manage it and profited in so doing.³⁴ It was also suggested in some quarters that girls might usefully be trained up in the latest methods of poultry keeping. In 1880, for instance, W. B. Tegetmeier had included a section on 'poultry keeping' in his *Manual of domestic economy* (1880), a textbook addressed to 'female students in training institutions, and to the elder classes in girls' schools'.³⁵ Moreover, Charles Curtis declared in *Estate Management: a*

³⁰ Census 1921, Classifications of Occupations, 'Classified List', 1924, pp. vi, 14, 15.

³¹ Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture*, p. 194.

³² Departmental Committee on poultry breeding in Scotland, para. 23.

³³ M. E. Derry, *Art and science in breeding: creating better chickens* (2012), p. 161.

³⁴ Edward Brown's testimony to parliamentary Commissioners on the agricultural depression, cited by Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture*, pp. 194–95.

³⁵ W. B. Tegetmeier, *Manual of domestic economy: with hints on domestic medicine and surgery* (Eleventh edn, 1880), p. 1; Preface to the tenth edition, pp. 120–24, ch. XIV, pp. 115–27.

practical hand-book for landlords, agents, and pupils (1895) that '[p]oultry thrive better as a rule with women than with men,' and that therefore this 'department, where possible, should be left to the bailiff's wife, dairy-maid, or, failing this, to the bailiff's housekeeper'.³⁶ But, though the 1909 Committee suggested that 'the servant girl class' ought to be educated in the new methods in order that 'poultry-keeping on the larger farms ... be extended and improved', it associated rational, profitable management and good business practice – something that it wanted to encourage – primarily with the 'farmers and crofters themselves', who it believed were indifferent to the possibilities. In other words, until the men could be persuaded that it would pay, the industry would not evolve.³⁷

The work done by the Irish Department of Agriculture for the Improvement of the Poultry Industry in Ireland was noted positively by the Committee on Poultry Breeding in Scotland and was drawn on in its research.³⁸ And, as Joanna Bourke has discussed, much the same argument was made in Ireland. 'Rearing poultry' Bourke observes:

was one of the most important occupations of the farm woman. Indeed, despite the impassioned debates and controversial decisions concerning the poultry industry from the 1890s, one thing was agreed: for better or (more commonly) for worse, the poultry industry was dominated by women.³⁹

This, as Bourke says, was something that eventually those who wanted to intervene in the industry in Ireland had to accommodate via the use of female instructors; though Bourke argues that, as the new methods developed after the First World War involved moving the birds away from the farmhouse, Irish farm women found it increasingly difficult to participate in the management of poultry, it is quite striking that even in 1937 all of the county poultry instructors in the Irish Free State were women.⁴⁰

In fact, the involvement of women in the British poultry industry during the inter-war period, like the trade itself, varied widely by region. Whereas in 1937 all of the county poultry instructors in the north of Scotland, as in the Irish Free State, were women, in the West of Scotland they made up 60 per cent of the instructors, in Wales about 50 per cent and in England 27 per cent.⁴¹ It is nevertheless possible to see women's continuing involvement in the sector throughout this period and, in 1921, reportedly, 33 per cent of The National Utility Poultry Society's members were women.⁴² A number of women who were breeding poultry published adverts in the *Feathered World Year Book and Poultry Keeper's Guide for 1937*, edited for over 30 years by Mrs O. Comyns Lewer, while others were listed in its Who's Who section.⁴³

³⁶ Charles E. Curtis, *Estate management: a practical hand-book for landlords, agents, and pupils* (1895), p. 227.

³⁷ Departmental Committee on poultry breeding in Scotland, para. 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 7.

³⁹ J. Bourke, 'Women and poultry in Ireland, 1891–1914', *Irish Historical Stud.* 25 (1987), p. 293.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 289, 310.

⁴¹ *Feathered world year book and poultry keeper's*

guide for 1937, pp. 11–14.

⁴² Miss E. G. Maidment, 'Women's sphere in the poultry world', *Papers and communications, Trans. First World's Poultry Congress at the Hague-Scheveningen* (2 vols, 1921), I, p. 147.

⁴³ This was 'a practical poultry journal devoted to "the business side"'; advert for *Feathered Life: the utility poultry journal* in the Official Report of the Second National Poultry conference, Reading, 1907, advertisements, p. xvii.

On 15 November 1938 the *Farmer's Home Supplement* to the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, which was aimed at 'working farmers' wives and families',⁴⁴ included in a photo spread an image of a woman surrounded by young birds entitled: 'Feeding-time on Miss Harrison Bell's Poultry Farm, where 8,000 chicks are being reared'.⁴⁵ British women (in some cases, unmarried) who worked commercially with large flocks, were recognized as expert participants within the poultry world at least until the Second World War, and were feted as such by the farming press. Responding to rising demand, women increased their production and sale of eggs. Therefore women's management of the farm's poultry remained economically significant throughout the inter-war period, at least in those regions where there was a market. By the 1930s, Winstanley notes, '14 per cent of all hens in England on holdings of one acre or more were to be found in Lancashire'.⁴⁶ In cases of small-scale specialization such as this, farmers' wives continued to be involved in the marketing as well as the production of perishables; eggs along with milk and vegetables were sold off farm carts and at local markets.⁴⁷ And, Winstanley suggests, in Britain the success of these small farms involved taking on board many of the new methods that came in the end to be associated solely with large-scale, commercial poultry farming.

It is important to recognize that the circulation of knowledge at this point was undergoing considerable change, in line with the increasing complexity and extent of scientific and technical research associated with agriculture. As Colin Holmes has observed with reference to the Provincial and County Advisory Services, at least half of farmers read general farming publications like *Farmer and Stockbreeder* (which began publication in 1889) and *Farmers Weekly* (first edition June 1934), and most of them the local press. Verdon says that at least a third of the British 'farming population' would have accessed *Farmer and Stockbreeder* in the inter-war period, in part because of its low price. Meanwhile *Farmers Weekly* attracted the notice of the larger tenant farmers most interested in progress.⁴⁸ There was also advice on offer from agricultural colleges, expert salesmen, and, as in America, in 1910 in south Wales, a 'poultry demonstration train', in this case run by The Agricultural Organisation Society and Edward Brown's National Poultry Organisation Society.⁴⁹ Though, as Holmes says, initially 'little use was made of films, radio, and publications in agricultural advisory work in [pre-war] Britain', the advisory services did engage in 'farm visits', 'lectures', and 'classes', while MAF used 'advisory leaflets and pamphlets'.⁵⁰ To this may be added other forms of advice literature such as Robinson's text or *The Feathered World*, and the meetings of poultry societies. Specialist trade journals and magazines continued to expand internationally: by 1978 there were 21 'major farm magazines' relating to 'poultry and poultry products in the USA alone'.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Verdon, "Modern countrywoman", p. 88.

⁴⁵ Supplement to the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 15 Nov. 1938, p. 16.

⁴⁶ Winstanley, 'Industrialization and the small farm', p. 180.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 175–8.

⁴⁸ Colin J. Holmes, 'Science and the farmer: the development of the Agricultural Advisory Service in England and Wales, 1900–1939', *AgHR* 36 (1988), p. 82; Verdon, "Modern countrywoman", pp. 88–9.

⁴⁹ P. Brassley, 'The professionalisation of British agriculture?', *Rural Hist.* 16 (2005), p. 241; K. J. Cooke, 'From science to practice, or practice to science? Chickens and Eggs in Raymond Pearl's Agricultural Breeding Research, 1907–1916', *Isis*, 88 (1997), p. 86; 'Egg and poultry demonstration train' *J. Board of Agriculture* (Aug. 1910), pp. 394–5.

⁵⁰ Holmes, 'Science and the farmer', p. 82.

⁵¹ Brunn and Raitz (1978), cited in Ilbery, *Agricultural geography*, p. 77.

Winstanley argues that dissemination of practical agricultural and scientific information was achieved from the 1890s largely via the local press and courses run by county councils (which in Lancashire were mostly attended by farmers' daughters).⁵² Alongside this, as Holmes has argued, by the end of the '1930s, farmers were probably receiving more information from the sales and technical staff of the large feed and fertilizer manufacturers than from the advisory services'.⁵³

The impact of this is hard to assess in any direct way. For instance, because the methods of recording egg production have changed, for instance, it is hard to compare performance over time, and the agricultural record is far from clear as it relates to production.⁵⁴ What is clear is that the number of eggs produced annually per laying hen rose steadily in Britain from the late nineteenth century. Tegetmeier, a regular correspondent of Charles Darwin's, who employed close scientific observation of the birds and whose influence among poultry keepers extended to the United States until the 1930s, suggested in 1880 that those keeping poultry should expect between 140 to at most 200 eggs to be laid per year, depending on the breed of the bird. The average was 180.⁵⁵ Robinson, in *Modern poultry husbandry* (1948), recorded the average as still standing at just over 180 per laying bird in 1937–38. His account of the period then shows that this dipped to around 176 eggs per laying bird in 1939–40, at the outbreak of the Second World War, but rose again to just over 196 per laying bird by 1944–5 as producers sought to address the loss of imported eggs and answer demand for staple foodstuffs.⁵⁶

It is also clear that, from the late nineteenth century through to the inter-war period, a number of economically successful women ran their own concerns – breeding fancy and other birds – worked in colleges and on poultry farms, and participated at the national and international level in the debates then emerging about the best forms of management of poultry. Miss Edwards, for instance, ran a farm at Coaley, Gloucestershire, for 26 years from 1894, exported breeding stock to South Africa and the USA, and established the first school of instruction in poultry keeping for women in England. Another, Mrs Hindson Hall of Cumberland, hatched 4000 chicks in 1920–1, sold £50 11s. 6d.-worth of eggs wholesale in January 1920, and won Gold and Silver medals and a First Class Certificate in the Harper Adams Large Flock Competition in 1919.⁵⁷ Harper Adams already had an established record in poultry education, as a specialist poultry department had been established there in 1909. Subsequently, it set up a National Institute of Poultry Husbandry in 1926 and, as Heather Williams has observed, the first Harper Adams student to be awarded the National Diploma in Poultry Husbandry was Helen Crawford. Indeed, as Williams says, there were a 'large number of women on poultry

⁵² Winstanley, 'Industrialization and the small farm', pp. 180, 182–3.

⁵³ Holmes, 'Science and the farmer', p. 83.

⁵⁴ Holderness, 'Intensive livestock keeping', p. 491; Walker, Short and Macleod, 'Limits', p. 522; this was typical for the sector, in this period there was little standardisation in agricultural data collection, or survey methodology. Holmes, 'Science and the farmer', p. 80.

⁵⁵ Tegetmeier, *Manual of domestic economy*,

pp. 122–3; Gilbey, *Poultry-keeping*, p. iii; M. A. Jull, *Poultry husbandry* (1930), p. 28; K. Sayer, "'Let Nature be your Teacher": W. B. Tegetmeier's distinctive ornithological studies', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35 (2007), pp. 589–605.

⁵⁶ Robinson, *Modern poultry husbandry*, p. 5, Table showing 'Average egg production per bird at the national laying test, 1937–38–1944–45'.

⁵⁷ Maidment, 'Women's sphere', pp. 142, 146.

courses' of all types.⁵⁸ Whether this suggests that there was plenty of scope for the employment of qualified women in this field, or for the education of women – including farmers' female relatives – in new 'rational' methods, would require further research. However, as we have seen, expert women were certainly involved as county instructors in disseminating the new methods being circulated at this time. Mrs Rawson, for many years the Secretary of the National Utility Poultry Society, who specialized in breeding pedigree birds on her farm in Kent, apparently trained the wives of soldiers blinded during the First World War in poultry management, which was 'of the greatest assistance to the many blinded men who took up poultry keeping'.⁵⁹

Women, including Miss Edwards, were committee members, and both attended and presented papers at the Second National Poultry Conference, held at Reading in 1907. Miss Edwards presented on 'Opportunities for women in poultry breeding', and a Miss Galbraith on 'The keeping of fowls permanently on arable land'.⁶⁰ Others went to the First World Poultry Congress in 1925; for instance, Miss E. G. Maidment, who spoke on the diversity and wide-ranging experience of women in the field, and Miss N. H. Bell, who delivered a paper on 'Poultry-keeping as a home-industry for women'.⁶¹ In 1925, Miss Maidment, who had travelled to France, America, Canada, Southern Rhodesia, Britain and Ireland for her research on poultry farms, and who focused in particular on winter egg production, argued that women 'are now keenly alive to the fact that it is an industry which they can handle with success and ease'.⁶² She listed the jobs then being taken up by women in the industry as:

- (1) Farm Poultry Workers. This is by far the largest side of the poultry industry and almost entirely in the hands of women – and we hope for continued development;
- (2) Breeders of pedigree stock and owners of Commercial Egg Farms;
- (3) Suburban poultry Keepers;
- (4) Egg Laying Competitions;
- (5) Heads of Training Colleges;
- (6) County Instructors;
- (7) Editor of Poultry Paper;
- (8) Secretarial Work.⁶³

Looking at this evidence for women's participation, it therefore seems that during the inter-war period women were expected to manage and work with poultry in a skilled and knowledgeable way, and that women might not only be recognized for their expertise, but also contributed to the professionalization of this new branch of commercial agriculture through competition, education and publication. Jane Adams has said much the same of women's management of poultry in America: 'as market demand increased, women increased their production of the two agricultural products that in most regions of the country they controlled, first dairy

⁵⁸ Heather Williams, *The lure of the land: a century of education at Harper Adams* (2000), p. 103.

⁵⁹ Maidment, 'Women's sphere', pp. 147–8.

⁶⁰ Miss N. Edwards, 'Opportunities for women in poultry breeding'; Miss Galbraith, 'The keeping of fowls permanently on arable Land', both in E. Brown (eds), *Second National Poultry Conference, Reading, 1907*,

Official Report (1907).

⁶¹ Maidment, 'Women's sphere'; Miss N. H. Bell, 'Poultry-keeping as a home-industry for women', both in *Papers and Communications, Transactions of the First World's Poultry Congress*, I, pp. 139–150, 156–7.

⁶² Maidment, 'Women's sphere', p. 150.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.



FIGURE 2. Feeding fowl at Swanley Horticultural College in Kent, 1933

Reproduced by courtesy of the Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading, P DX281 PH3/410.

(churned into butter) and poultry'.⁶⁴ In the 1920s and 1930s, she says, farm women increased their 'flocks into almost entirely market-oriented enterprises'. And, that market, though specialized, rational and focused on production, remained relatively stable until the end of the Second World War.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the photographic evidence from the colleges, such as that at Swanley in Kent, offers additional evidence of the practical training in the management of poultry that was being received by young women by the 1930s as well as of the application of the modern extensive methods and use of single-breed improved single-purpose utility stock set out in key texts like Robinson's (see Figure 2).⁶⁶

⁶⁴ J. Adams, "Modernity" and U.S. farm women's poultry operations: Farm women nourish the industrializing cities, 1880–1940', paper delivered to The Chicken: its biological, social, cultural, and industrial history: from Neolithic middens to McNuggets, 17–19 May 2002, Yale University Program in Agrarian Studies (http://www.dgorton.com/farmsite/chickens_modernity/adams-pg_1.html, accessed on 23 Sept. 2013), p. 6.

⁶⁵ Adams, "Modernity", p. 12; also see Derry, *Art and Science*, pp. 68–73.

⁶⁶ 'Feeding poultry at Swanley Horticultural College in Kent: female student at work', Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading (MERL), P DX281 PH3/408; http://www.rhc.rdg.ac.uk/olib/images/Voysey/livestock/ph14_374.jpg, accessed 12 Aug 2005; and see also Robinson, *Modern poultry husbandry*, pp. 532–38, 113–14.

II

As Thirsk suggested, once the industry began to take off it ‘gave scope to some notably successful women’.⁶⁷ But, it is unclear to what extent women continued to be involved in it. By the 1930s, the wide range of roles available to anyone seeking employment in what was, by this point, an expanding industry, was reflected in the decennial censuses. In 1931 the Classified List under Order II – Agricultural Occupations – included ‘Chicken Farmer’, ‘Hen Farmer’, ‘Poultry Breeder, Farmer, Rearer’ within ‘Farmers’; and ‘Poultry Attendant’, and ‘Poultry Boy, Feeder, Man, Manager’ and also ‘Poultry Keeper (own account), in ‘Other Agricultural Occupations’.⁶⁸ But, as with the earlier census data, it remains difficult to determine exactly how many women fell within each occupation. As Verdon has argued with reference to women’s employment in agriculture in this period, the conventions of official data collection continued to render women’s work all but invisible.⁶⁹ In the case of their involvement in poultry production, this would seem particularly so. It is therefore important to use alternative sources to assess the degree, and more importantly perception and nature, of women’s continuing involvement in poultry keeping. There were many images in the specialist press of women working within the industry in subsidiary roles, such as egg packing.⁷⁰ Walter Brett’s *Poultry-keeping to-day: pictured and explained* (1938), a widely-read text aimed at ‘the commercial man [and] the “private” man’, also includes illustrations that show women as well as men handling chickens skilfully and carrying out a range of poultry operations.⁷¹ To take one: ‘Common Causes of Breeding Failures’ shows a woman clipping a hen’s feathers to aid mating. These were tasks deemed to be necessary within the modern form of the industry, adapted in this case to the small farm, and they show how, in the inter-war period, as Verdon has argued more generally, women’s involvement in agriculture at this time was both traditional and new.⁷² As Verdon has said:

poultry work, even as it expanded and training became more formalized, continued to be viewed as a particularly appropriate job for women as they were in possession of a number of essential ‘feminine’ attributes crucial to success in the industry. These included diligence, a keen sense of observation, and a natural empathy with their charges.⁷³

This could be a selling point at the time. The fact that, before the ‘conventional’ period, despite the emerging technologies and government-sponsored voluntary schemes, eggs were not, or could not be, supplied reliably meant that a company such as A. Wander Ltd., which manufactured Ovaltine in the UK from 1909, took care to secure its fresh egg supply by building its own specialist egg farm in 1929 at Kings Langley, Hertfordshire. A product that was sold on the basis of its health-giving properties, it was aimed at children and nursing mothers as a ‘tonic food beverage’ and those experiencing ‘mental and nervous

⁶⁷ Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture*, p. 189.

⁶⁸ Classified List, Census, 1931, Classification of Occupations, (1934), p. 14.

⁶⁹ Verdon, ‘Agricultural labour’, pp. 111–15.

⁷⁰ E.g. *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, June 1936; ‘Workers grading and sorting eggs at the Thames Valley Egg Packing Station’, MERL, P FS PH1/K13725, [http://www.](http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/research/countrysideimages/merl-PFSPH1_K13725.aspx)

[reading.ac.uk/merl/research/countrysideimages/merl-PFSPH1_K13725.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/research/countrysideimages/merl-PFSPH1_K13725.aspx), accessed 5 Nov. 2012; ‘British industry shakeup yields fewer flocks but more Birds’, *Poultry International*, Jan. 1967, p. 58.

⁷¹ Brett, *Poultry-keeping to-day*, p. x.

⁷² Verdon, ‘Agricultural labour’, pp. 115, 116–17.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

FIGURE 3. Women tending birds being reared in the innovative 'sun parlours' at the Ovaltine Egg Farm, c.1930.

Image courtesy of RES Group Ltd.



exhaustion'.⁷⁴ In Britain, Ovaltine was drunk, initially at least, almost exclusively by the middle classes. As the Labour Co-op member for Sheffield Hillsborough, Mr A. V. Alexander, put it in a Commons debate in 1938, 'I was brought up among the working class ... They do not have the variety of beverages that the rich have, they do not have Ovaltine at night'.⁷⁵

The Ovaltine Egg Farm provides an excellent example of the complexity of the early British egg industry as it relates to women's employment. Built to an Arts and Crafts design, modern yet evocative of tradition, the farm could accommodate up to 100,000 birds, reared in horse-shoe-shaped 'sun parlours', farmed extensively across the c.350-acre site (where barley and milk were also produced).⁷⁶ Though Wander Ltd could not have sourced all of the eggs it needed to manufacture Ovaltine in this way, this level of integration and consequently its ability to control the environment in which its ingredients and products were handled was treated as a key selling point in its advertising. Moreover, the company sought prizes for its birds at specialist shows, and made its success in animal husbandry another selling point. The 'modernity' of the farm, the cleanliness, the efficient use of space, the healthfulness of the birds in their 'sun parlours' reared out of doors, cared for by young women, was highlighted within its advertising (see Figure 3).⁷⁷ As Verdon has suggested, women were capable of symbolizing

⁷⁴ *An introduction to health food and drinks* (1935), Oxford, Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Food 13 (60), p. 35, in *The John Johnson Collection: An archive of printed ephemera*, <http://johnjohnson.chadwyck.co.uk> (accessed 25 Oct. 2012).

⁷⁵ Hansard, Commons, fifth ser. 335, 3 May 1938, col. 823.

⁷⁶ By the 1970s the farm had become a local landmark: Mr. Geoffrey Dodsworth in Hansard, Commons,

fifth ser., 917, col. 907, 'I have learned this week that borings are being taken on the line of route 2, the preferred route, across the land known picturesquely as the "Ovaltine Farm", under the instructions of the Eastern Road Construction Unit'.

⁷⁷ See also the Ovaltine advert, Supplement to the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 28 Oct. 1935, p. 2; photo-spread, Supplement to the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 25 Oct. 1938, p. 16.

‘a new “modernity” in agricultural work’, something that was ‘promoted by the rural women’s organizations and sections of the national farming press’ in the inter-war period.⁷⁸ Ovaltine demonstrated that this had commercial value beyond agriculture.

Women continued to be recognized as skilled employees within the specialist industry until the post-war period. In 1948, three of Robinson’s 259 plates in *Modern poultry husbandry* showed a woman working alongside a man engaged in the detailed and ‘exacting’ task of pedigree recording.⁷⁹ The book remained a leading text through the 1950s (the fourth edition of 1957 included over 290 figures), and continued to carry those images. In Britain, ‘experienced’ women were also sought alongside men during the 1950s and 1960s as specialist, that is skilled, labourers on commercial poultry farms, in the ‘Situations Vacant’ adverts in the *Farmer’s Weekly*.⁸⁰ And, an article in *Farmer and Stockbreeder* in 1950 records a Miss Roberts as being ‘in charge of poultry oversight’ on Mr E. E. Pottow’s 135-acre farm in Wiltshire, which is said to have 1250 accredited birds.⁸¹ There is also evidence in the farming publications of farming in their own right. A 1955 article in the *Dairy Farmer* by George Henderson, based on a ‘tour of Wales and marginal farms’, describes Miss Ruth Ruck of Carneddi Nantmor. Henderson was a small farmer who had already gained widespread recognition for his book, *The farming ladder* (1946). Ruth Janette Ruck had been one of his pupils, and subsequently she wrote *Place of stones* (c.1961), based on her farming experience at Carneddi, and for which Henderson provided a foreword. In the article she is described as a ‘pioneer for making silage’, and, though it principally describes her sheep and cattle, it is made clear that ‘poultry make a very important contribution to the success of the holding’.⁸² This demonstrates the continued economic significance of poultry on mixed farms in the mid-1950s. There is also evidence in the general farming press at this time of women who remained in the specialist poultry business as managers and owners. The 1956 Poultry Section of the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* (which, tellingly, immediately preceded the ‘Farmer’s Homes’ section in the periodical) carried at least two adverts for chicks and pullets produced by established breeders who were women: Miss M. V. Larkworthy of Cooper’s Bridge, Liphook, Hants., and Mrs S. Ikin, Druids Heath Farm, Aldridge, Staffs.⁸³ At this time, women like Marjorie Elaine Foster and Blanche Badock also ran poultry businesses in partnership at this point.⁸⁴ Finally, it should be noted that two women – Mrs Sue Richardson of the University of Manchester (dates unknown) and the Polish geneticist-zoologist Laura Kaufman (1889–1972) – were significant contributors to the scientific and economic development of the poultry industry, on the world stage, and women continued to deliver papers at the World Poultry Congress.⁸⁵ Though the exact numbers involved are not

⁷⁸ Verdon, ‘Agricultural labour’, p. 130.

⁷⁹ Robinson, *Modern poultry husbandry*, p. 262.

⁸⁰ E.g. *Farmer’s Weekly*, 8 July 1960, p. 14, col. C.

⁸¹ A. K. Speirs Alexander, ‘Hens and Cows in Wiltshire’, *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 23 May 1950, p. 1595.

⁸² George Henderson, *Dairy Farmer*, 2 (2), (Feb. 1955), p. 23.

⁸³ Poultry Section, *Farmer and Stockbreeder* (northern edn), 23–4 Oct. 1956, pp. 120–1. Both Miss Larkworthy and Mrs Ikin had also advertised in 1952; Poultry Section, *Farmer and Stockbreeder* (northern edn), 2–3

Dec. 1952, p. 112.

⁸⁴ ODNB, ‘Foster, Marjorie Elaine (1893–1974). The two women met during the First World War and ran their poultry business in Frimley, Surrey from the end of the war until Blanche Badcock’s death in 1957.

⁸⁵ E.g., Richardson argued for and achieved the ‘The establishment of a world secretariat for the compilation of international egg statistics’, First World Egg Marketing Conference, Sydney, 1962; her work was cited in *Poultry World*, ‘Review of 1971’, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 8, col. B. For more details about both of these women, see the

clear from the statistics, there is therefore ample evidence for women's continued involvement in commercial, 'modern' poultry production in the immediate post-war decade.

III

However, moving into the late 1950s and early 1960s, though women were still assumed by general farming publications like *Farmer and Stockbreeder* to be among those interested and engaged in poultry keeping, the articles in question also assumed that such women were either employees or farmers' wives, not breeders or independent traders.⁸⁶ A very specific understanding about women's participation at the level of ownership also began to emerge within the industry: such an involvement was to be seen exclusively at the level of the small-scale, general, or family farm. In Britain, this association had its own consequences for the historical record. We can see an example of this practice by considering the bulletin for producers issued on 3 November 1960 by the British Egg Marketing Board (BEMB). To benefit from the BEMB national mark, the producer had to send their eggs to registered packing stations, clean, fresh, in good condition and conforming to standard weights.⁸⁷ The BEMB therefore published regular bulletins for producers to help them achieve this. On this occasion, a two-page spread, published in journals such as *Poultry World*, discussed issues of supply and demand, provided advice and passed on information about BEMB plans and campaigns. The bulletin also carried a profile entitled 'Two producers who look to the future'. These producers were both modernizing and planning ahead, and both were characterized as being involved in commercial egg laying, but they represented, as the piece explained, two 'distinctly different types' of British production. Where 'Mrs G. Buckley [had] 224 birds in deep litter ... sending between 90 and 100 dozen eggs to the packing station each week', 'Mr M. F. Benjamin [had] just under 3000 birds' in batteries.⁸⁸ The article continued:

The first thing you see driving up to Mrs. Buckley's front door at Garden Cottage, is the large serviceable poultry house which her husband built in his spare time after they were married last March, using just his ingenuity, a hammer and a saw ...

Over at the headquarters of Broad Oak Poultry ... Mr Benjamin is working on a rather larger

Note 85 *continued*

World's Poultry Science Association's International Poultry Hall of Fame, 1988, http://www.wpsa.com/organization/iphf_members/1988_iphf.html (accessed 5 Nov. 2012); 'Papers Listed in the Program of the XIth World Poultry Congress', *World's Poultry Science J.*, 14 (1958), pp. 268–77; e.g. Helen Nagra of the State College of Washington, Pullman, USA (Igor L. Kosin, Iwane Sato and Helen Nagra, 'Studies on parthenogenesis in the domestic turkey and chicken'), Ruth Renner of the University of Alberta, Canada (D. R. Clandinin, Ruth Renner and A. R. Roblee, 'Factors affecting the nutritive properties of rapeseed oil meal'), and Elsie H. Dawson of USDA (Elsie H. Dawson and Farth Clark,

'Household use of poultry and eggs in the United States of America').

⁸⁶ E.g. see *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, Mar. 1956: image 'Woman collecting eggs in a basket, possibly Mrs York-King, Price Review Tour', MERL, P FS PH1/K58321.

⁸⁷ Its aims: 'to sell more eggs; to speed their journey from the farm to the shopping basket; to encourage high quality production', two-page BEMB information spread, July 1957, run in *British Farmer*, *Farmer's Journal*, *Ulster Farmer*, *Poultry Field*, *Farming Leader*, *Poultry World*, *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, *Poultry Farmer*, etc. HAT, OM (S) o8.

⁸⁸ HAT, 14480/1, 'Two Producers Look to the Future' 3 Nov. 1960.

scale ... After training at Harper Adams College, he came to Broad Oak to rear broilers, but decided after three years that there was a better future for him in eggs.

When he had broilers he conscripted his wife to do his secretarial work, but now he has been able to retire her!⁸⁹

At the time there was still considerable diversity among egg producers in Britain, in terms of both scale and preferred method of production, and, as the BEMB intended, the two producers represent this diversity. The debates that began to arise at the time about production were (and still are) often represented, Watts has observed, as traditional *v.* intensive agriculture.⁹⁰ However, articles like this one, published by the BEMB, show the ways in which the emerging technologies and science surrounding poultry and egg production continued to be adopted and adapted in practice: there was no simple binary at work.

As Thirsk argued, in the early days poultry keeping 'was specially suited to the circumstances of small farmers'.⁹¹ This was because, as Miss Maidment had stated in her assessment of it in 1925, it 'requires less capital than any other branch of agriculture and the labour question can be solved by [the women's] own exertions'.⁹² As the BEMB article suggested, this largely continued to be true. But, what is striking is that, where Mr Benjamin was represented by the BEMB very much as an individual, a professional and college-trained specialist who ran his growing, large-scale unit full-time (with, the article explains later, the 'help of one boy'), Mrs Buckley was quite clearly presented to the reader as a newly-married wife who turned to her husband for practical help.⁹³ Any economic autonomy or independence that Mrs Buckley might have had was erased. Not only was she represented as having relied on her husband's 'ingenuity' and manual skill to establish her business, it was not she who sent the eggs to the packing station, but 'they', i.e. Mr and Mrs Buckley, who did so, though it is to be assumed that Mr Buckley was employed full-time elsewhere, given that he did the building work in his 'spare time'. This contrasts quite starkly with Mr Benjamin, who had not only retired his wife from the enterprise, her newly leisured position being treated as a mark of success, but was represented as making all of the business decisions. Aiming at 'a better future for *him* in eggs' [my italics], he was presented as participating in a rational assessment of all of the information to hand; he judged the quality of, and where necessary drew on, external expertise. In a nod to the feed suppliers, the article stated that 'Mr Benjamin is a fair man. [He] stressed the help he had had from the feeding stuffs manufacturers' representatives who, he said, really knew their jobs'.⁹⁴ The accompanying plates similarly showed Mr Benjamin in an active and equal discussion about 'his prospects' with Mr J. K. Hay-Reid, the BEMB's Producer Relations Officer inside the converted broiler house, whereas Mrs Buckley was pictured standing alone outside her much smaller if 'serviceable' 'home-made poultry house'.⁹⁵ Here, the family farm is defined as small-scale, based on shared labour and adaptation; the larger concern is quite opposite.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Michael J. Watts, 'Afterword', in C. Philo and C. Wilbert (eds), *Animal spaces, beastly places: new geographies of human-animal relations* (2000), p. 301; R. Harrison, *Animal machines: the new factory farming industry* (1964).

⁹¹ Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture*, p. 189.

⁹² Maidment, 'Women's sphere', p. 150.

⁹³ HAT, 14480/1, 3 Nov. 1960.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

POULTRY HOUSE NIGHT LIGHTING

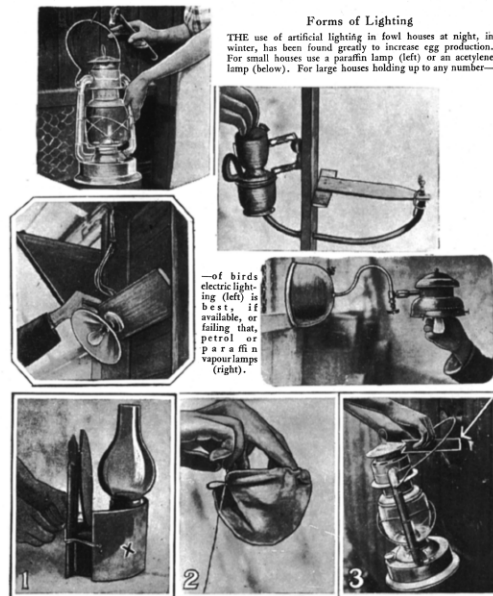


FIGURE 4. 'Poultry house night lighting', from Walter Brett, *Poultry-keeping to-day: pictured and explained* (1938), p. 120.

There was a long-standing association in the literature between women's involvement and adaptation. Pre-war, Brett's *Poultry-keeping to-day*, included the figure 'Poultry house night lighting' which showed women's hands using the older forms of lighting technology and men's hands using the newer forms (see Figure 4). Though women at this point remained very much present, and were still depicted as skilled, they were frequently associated with the more low-road solutions available to the farmer than were the men; the most technologically adept poultry producer and the one with access to scarce or costly resources like electricity was, it was assumed, male.⁹⁶ This association between female small-scale production and low-road adaptation, and the expectation that they operated as the farmer's wife, was, in the long run, problematic in an industry that focused on progress, the individual, rapid change and large-scale growth.

IV

During the 1950s and '60s, the industry as a whole was said, by the leading journals of the day, to be undergoing rapid and major structural change, manifested in a mixture of oversight and regulation by the BEMB (from 1957 to 1971), significant individual investment, the benefits of scale that might be gained by co-operation, vertical integration, and the

⁹⁶ Brett, *Poultry-keeping to-day*, p. 131.

increasing dominance of national (over regional) markets.⁹⁷ A company like Deans Brothers, for example – an egg marketing business that began in Hertfordshire – originated in 1938 as a small family concern, then became Deans Farm Eggs, which grew rapidly. Dalgety (a global concern) bought the company in 1969 as part of a larger process of vertical integration, linked to Sainsbury-Spiller egg packing and production, so that by 1970 Deans had become a participant in the national networks of egg distribution in the UK.⁹⁸ Short suggests that by 1950 the family-led, low-input businesses of Sussex had lost ground relative to the national marketplace, as the local environment became less significant with the uptake of artificial methods of management, the knowledge and contact base widened, and the rise of motorized transport, ‘freed the producers of poultry and eggs from their nineteenth-century locations’.⁹⁹ In a 1954 article on the subject of change in the poultry industry for the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, Rupert Coles, Chief Poultry Advisory Officer of the National Agricultural Advisory Service 1945–1970, predicted ‘in the near future a complete alteration from its pre-war prototype of the pattern of British poultry keeping’.¹⁰⁰ Whereas he calculated that 80 per cent of British agricultural holdings had kept poultry in 1948, the majority of them had had fewer than 100 birds. After that date, the number of large flocks and their contribution to the egg supply began to increase.¹⁰¹ When Coles returned to the subject in the *JRASE* in 1961, he argued that ‘trends have continued ... Increases in numbers of stock and expansion in size of operation are apparent in all three main sections of the industry, viz. breeding, table poultry and egg production’.¹⁰² In fact, Britain became an exporter of eggs for the first time in 1965.¹⁰³ The push in the specialist literature was for reduced labour costs, greater quality control and increased profits.¹⁰⁴ This was a period of rapid consolidation, when agricultural cooperatives were merging and many of the largest farmers, such as John Eastwood – of JB Eastwood Ltd – were looking to establish integrated concerns, emulating developments that had already taken place in the USA. Though there were grave concerns expressed in Britain at the time about overproduction being stimulated by state subsidy, the adoption of high-yielding intensive methods became commonplace among specialist egg producers like Eastwood. When the company sought to establish a two-million-bird egg-laying unit in Lincolnshire, fears were expressed that it would put 50,000 farmers – a seventh of all producers – out of business. As it turned out, planning permission was refused, but Eastwood nonetheless supplied almost a tenth of the domestic market from the 1960s until the business was sold to Imperial Tobacco in 1978 for £40 million.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ Co-operation had been proposed as a way forward for the small producer from Brown’s time onwards. See Holderness, ‘Intensive livestock keeping’, p. 490.

⁹⁸ Competition Commission, *Clifford Kent Holdings Limited and Deans Food Group Limited; a report on the completed merger of Clifford Kent Holdings Limited, parent company of Stonegate Farmers Limited, and Deans Food Group Limited* (2007), pp. 82–3. Dalgety sold them back into private ownership in 1991.

⁹⁹ Short, ‘Art and Craft’, pp. 29–30.

¹⁰⁰ R. Coles, ‘Changes in the pattern of poultry keeping’, *JRASE* 115 (1954), p. 69; Coles was elected

President of World’s Poultry Science Association in 1954. WPA International Poultry Hall of Fame, 1988 (cited above, n. 85).

¹⁰¹ Coles, ‘Changes’, p. 70.

¹⁰² R. Coles, ‘Current Developments in the Poultry Industry’, *JRASE* 122 (1961), p. 39.

¹⁰³ *Poultry International*, Jan. 1965, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Sykes, *Poultry: a modern agribusiness* (1963), pp. 89–101.

¹⁰⁵ *Poultry International*, July 1964, p. 20; Obituary, Sir John Eastwood, *The Independent*, 4 Oct. 1995.

In the analysis he presented in 1961, Coles held that, in the period 1948–57, producers had sought principally to raise output (in response to declining profits immediately following the War). The consumption of imported eggs fell as a consequence from a third of eggs consumed in 1939 to 2 per cent in 1960. However, at that point, he argued, demand did not increase, and retail prices (and therefore, from 1957, the guaranteed price), fell.¹⁰⁶ While some producers (mainly, he argued, those who engaged in technical innovation) continued to expand, Coles believed that others ‘for the first time since 1954, are withdrawing from the business of egg production’.¹⁰⁷ Towards the end of that article he made the following striking observation:

For the first time since the 1930s the numbers of really small-scale poultry-keepers are declining. These flocks, which until recently, supplied about one-third of the country’s eggs, are rarely costed and consist of units of under 100 layers or so. Generally, their continuance depends on the reaction of the farm wife to the income received either from packing station or farm gate. If the amount seems reasonable the flock is continued, whether or not it is making a profit. The fact that the number of such flocks is now definitely declining can be taken to imply that the farm wife is no longer satisfied with the return for her efforts.¹⁰⁸

Coles assumed that the farmer’s wife would never be interested in rational commercial practice. The BEMB, which knew that it had to serve the interests of the full range of its suppliers, was less critical of small producers. In the rest of the article the (commercial) producer was assumed to be male, whether the size of flock was thousands strong, or ‘middle-sized’, i.e. ‘several hundred birds’. And, Coles held out little hope for ‘the small or moderate-sized independent egg producer ... unless he is highly skilled in stockmanship’. There had been some public ‘criticism’ of these changes, he noted, but ‘the criticism may be wish-fulfilment by disgruntled, traditionally minded poultry-keepers’.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the changes he described were contingent and negotiated. But, this was not something that fitted the story of progress that Coles told, and within this narrative women’s participation in modern farming practice began to fall away.

It is from this time that there seems to have been a shift in the specialist literature, whereby women gradually ceased to be recognized as having the authority, capital, expertise or requisite technical skill to participate within the new industry.¹¹⁰ Just as in the turn-of-the-century literature, their long-standing association with poultry keeping as farmers’ wives was read in this context as ‘traditional’, that is, not only small-scale, but also uninterested in improvement. Women were at this point finally dismissed by the rising industry, and came to be seen as incapable of answering the altered conditions of modern, commercial egg production. This association led to their subsequent invisibility, as the progressive story of the ‘conventional’ period took hold.

¹⁰⁶ Coles, ‘Developments’, pp. 39–41, 42–3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹⁰ Or, in Brassley’s terms, professionally determining ‘uncommon skills’. Brassley, ‘Professionalisation?’ pp. 238–42, 248–9, 247.

V

As the work of sociologists such as Ruth Gasson in the 1980s demonstrated that at that time, the majority of British farmers' wives were still very much involved in the day-to-day business of farming.¹¹¹ They were definitely among the readers of the general farming press, as is clear from the letters pages. Of six letters to the editor in one edition of *British Farmer*, two were from women: a Mrs Somerfield and Mrs Richardson. The latter represented herself as 'Chairman of the Cheshire NFU public relations committee'. Nonetheless the salesmen on the ground assumed that 'The Boss' was the husband.¹¹² Indeed, the advertising within these publications also suggests that most breeders, feed manufacturers and other specialists selling to British egg producers in the 1960s assumed that their customer was male. A campaign by Crosfields, advertising both its feed and its advisory services in 1961, included a full-page advert in the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, in which a man who has been looking at his hens, turns to camera at the words: 'Egging them on, Mr Ash?'¹¹³ This was also the case in the specialist trade literature, as indicated by an award-winning campaign run during 1967 in *Poultry International*, on behalf of the Canadian company Shaver, which focused in each instance on what the individual (male) farmer would be able to buy for his family with his enhanced profit. Each farmer clearly has a family, is a father and a husband, but these are not family farms. This campaign was about progress through consumer capital, where the breadwinning farmer, regardless of where he might live, became a purchaser not only of an authenticated commercial breed, within an international marketplace, but also of 'the better things in life', such as (in Ghana) an education for his son, (in Sweden) a yacht for his wife, or (in Ireland, as shown in Figure 5) a (push-)bike for his daughter. (It might be noted that the Irish farmer's son had a *motorcycle*).¹¹⁴

Five years later, *Poultry World* (published in the UK and aimed solely at intensive egg and meat producers) carried a full-page advert for Thornbers – 'the international livestock and equipment specialists' – entitled 'How'd you fancy living with one of these birds for the next 18 months?' under a three-quarter-page image of six human female models (one being Raquel Welch) and three hens, one of which – the Thornber 909 – was the product for sale. 'Naturally', the text went on, 'you're spoilt for choice. Well, to save you getting too hot under the collar, Thornbers have ... made the choice for you. We've chosen one of the three most popular birds in Britain', and then played extensively with the idiomatic and literal meanings of 'bird' and 'chick' to get its message across.¹¹⁵ This was clearly an advert aimed quite literally, if with tongue-in-cheek rhetoric, at egg *men*, in a publication with an implied readership that was, without question, male.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, when these campaigns ran, specialist poultry farming had

¹¹¹ See R. Gasson, 'Roles of farm women in England,' *Sociologia Ruralis* 20 (1980), pp. 165–79; and ead., 'Farm wives: their contribution to the farm business', *J. Agricultural Economics* 43 (1992), pp. 74–87.

¹¹² Mrs Somerfield, Letters to the Editor, *British Farmer, J. National Farmers' Union*, 5 Apr. 1969, p. 74.

¹¹³ The *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 4 July 1961, p. 52.

¹¹⁴ Kingsley Smith, 'The history of Shaver Breeding Farms' (2010) [http://www.hendrix-genetics.com/en/About-Us/History/Institut Selection Animal BV ISA/~media/Files/ISA/History/History of Shaver Breeding Farms Ltd Canada.ashx](http://www.hendrix-genetics.com/en/About-Us/History/Institut%20Selection%20Animal%20BV%20ISA/~media/Files/ISA/History/History%20of%20Shaver%20Breeding%20Farms%20Ltd%20Canada.ashx) accessed 19 Apr. 2013, pp. 55–7. For more on the history of Shaver, see Derry, *Art and Science*, pp. 189–97.

Shaver® Starcross 288. Highest net income.
(U.S.D.A. 63-64/64-65)

A bird that came from Shaver put an Irish lass on wheels.

Kitty O'Hara's father is an egg producer in Ireland. His flock? Shaver Starcross 288. The result? His profits have increased sufficiently to buy Kitty a new bike, his son a new motorcycle, and his wife a new washing machine. And that's not just the luck of the Irish. In more than 50 other countries around the world the Shaver 288 is a proven money-maker. Regardless of climate. Through the years, Random Sample Tests show Shaver 288 has had the most consistent high performance of any competitive bird. Shaver Starcross 288, a better layer, helps provide the better things in life.

SHAYER
PULTRY BREEDING FARM LIMITED
41 JOE HALL, GASTING, CANBERRA, ACT 2601, AUSTRALIA

FIGURE 5. Shaver advert, 'A bird that came from Shaver put an Irish lass on wheels', 1967.

Reproduced by courtesy of *Poultry International* and Wattagnet.com.

come to be linked to the continuing attempts to raise yields supported by commentators such as Coles. That is, linked to the large-scale, profitable management of the birds, and therefore also with what was perceived to be the more progressive (the technological, mechanized and intensive) element of the agricultural sector as a whole.¹¹⁵ A report for the Agricultural Economics Research Institute detailed that production had risen to nearly 202 eggs per annum per bird by 1965–66, while the DEFRA records for 1973–2003 demonstrate that this continued to rise steadily and had reached 290 by 2000.¹¹⁷ Adverts like those run by Shaver, and its competitors such as Thornbers and KimberCHIKS, (in which the egg producer is addressed directly in the text, under photographs of a typical poultry-man) focused on the results of their research and development, and the qualities most likely to produce profitable results: 'more large eggs', thick shells that resulted in fewer breakages, a lengthier laying season, and more efficient feed conversion.¹¹⁸ Structured on a business footing and therefore with money to spend on new technologies such as 'stimulighting' and other environmental controls, it was

¹¹⁵ Thornbers advert, *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ See David Goodman, Bernardo Sorj and John Wilkinson, *From farming to biotechnology*, for the characteristics of agricultural production at this time.

¹¹⁷ K. E. Hunt and K. R. Clark, *Poultry and eggs in Britain, 1966–1967* (1967), p. 55; Table showing 'Utilisation of total home production of shell eggs – United

Kingdom; Hen Eggs 1973 to 2003', in DEFRA, *Agriculture in the United Kingdom* (2004), Table 6.19 available online at <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/evidence/economics/foodfarm/reports/> (accessed 23 Sept. 2013).

¹¹⁸ KimberCHIKS advert, *Poultry International*, Jan 1967, p. 33.

the large-scale commercial British egg units that were targeted by feed manufacturers, such as those entertained by Mr Benjamin, and by international breeders like Shaver, KimberCHIKS and Thornbers.¹¹⁹

Derry has argued that Kimber and other breeders who came to prominence in early twentieth-century North America preferred large-scale units and single-purpose breeds – especially, at that point, the Leghorn, in order to cash in on the profit to be made from eggs – whereas in both America and Canada the press assumed women preferred dual-purpose birds and small-scale units and that women were uninterested in the finer points of quality and breeding. Later, post-war, she argues that when meat production took off, though North American women still worked with poultry, few led economically significant specialized poultry concerns.¹²⁰ This pattern is not quite born out in Britain, as will be seen, but if that was the assumption, based on the local US market, made by Kimber, then it goes some way to explaining their targeting of the male producer. Strikingly there is one advert showing a woman in *Poultry International*, and that is of a woman who has made a decision to buy the product in question (a Chore Time feeding system, from Belgium) with her husband, i.e. in a different context for producers of agricultural machinery.¹²¹

Post-war, Adams suggests with reference to the USA, as poultry became one of the first agricultural products to increase in scale and, in effect, move onto an industrialized footing, some women ‘entered the wage labor force, while others became assistants to their husband, the farmer’.¹²² Was this also the case in the UK? The official data remains unhelpful here. The census classifications changed in 1951, to some extent reflecting the altered conditions of agriculture post-war, so that the heading ‘Farmers’ in 1931 was expanded to ‘Farmers, Farm Managers’. However, all those working within the poultry business were enumerated as before, with the addition of ‘Chick-sexer’, and ‘Poultry Expert’ under ‘Other Occupations Ancillary to Agriculture’. In 1961, the broader classification was expanded again, this time to ‘Farmers, Farm Managers, Market Gardeners’, and as the percentage of all those employed in agriculture contracted, fishing was added. In 1971, category 002 ‘Farmers, farm managers, market gardeners’ also included ‘Persons managing (either on their own behalf or for an employer) farm or market gardens ... [or] keeping bees or poultry’. Within category 003, ‘Agricultural Workers N. E. C. [not elsewhere classified]’ were ‘Persons tending crops or animals, insects, etc. (including those in zoos, circuses, research establishments, etc.)’. The specific tasks, such as ‘chick-sexer’, ‘egger and washer’ or ‘poultry man,’ were listed in the index, but were returned within the broader agricultural categories.¹²³ Moreover, in Britain and Europe, as Patricia O’Hara has argued, official ‘statistics ... continue to ignore women’s involvement in subsistence production, in the informal sector, and their domestic and volunteer work’.¹²⁴ It therefore

¹¹⁹ Coles, ‘Developments’, p. 43. For the history of artificial lighting regimes in the UK see K. Sayer, ‘Battery Birds, “Stimulighting” and “Twilighting”: the ecology of standardised poultry technology’, *Hist. of Technology* 28 (2008), pp. 149–68.

¹²⁰ Derry, *Art and Science*, pp. 159–62, 173–4, 207–8.

¹²¹ Core Time advert, *Poultry International*, Aug. 1972, p. 105.

¹²² Adams, “Modernity”, p. 13; she notes that this varied by region, n. 6.

¹²³ Census of 1951, Classification of occupations, (1956), Classified List, p. 14; Census 1961, England and Wales, Occupation Tables (1966), Table 1, Occupation by Status; Classification of Occupations, 1970 (1970), Appendix D, Occupation Unit Groups (with Short Descriptions).

¹²⁴ O’Hara, ‘Out of the shadows’, p. 61.

remains necessary to draw on other source material to assess the level of women's involvement within agriculture as a whole.

VI

As Brassley *et al.* have discussed, following their analysis of the Farm Management Survey and interviews with farmers, the late 1970s were often the point at which farmers felt that they either had to put their farm onto a large-scale commercial footing or abandon poultry production altogether, as they increasingly found that it was only possible to modernize the production of a single commodity given the capital investment required.¹²⁵ We might therefore expect women to vanish from the picture at this point. And, looking at the situations vacant pages, the positions advertised by the specialist press (for 'careers in poultry') were by the mid-1970s already aimed predominantly at men. Nevertheless, in 1973, *Poultry World* carried a job advert for a 'conscientious poultry man *and his wife* ... for work with broiler breeders'.¹²⁶ The previous year *Poultry World* had reported on three women – Mrs K. Jarvis, Miss G. Seals, Miss D. Willis – receiving long-service awards (five years) from the then managing director at Shaver, Mr Jim Ingram.¹²⁷ So, by the mid-1970s, after the BEMB had closed and the point at which British farmers often seemed to find eggs in particular harder and harder to market, women had still not quite vanished from sight within the poultry industry as a whole, nor had shared family labour. Further research would be needed to establish this for certain, in particular interviews with those who had hands-on experience of the industry, which as Derry has established, are essential for understanding the poultry industry at this point in its development.¹²⁸

Despite this continued presence at all levels of the industry, however, the management and ownership of commercial egg production came to be treated almost entirely as masculine pursuits.¹²⁹ In W. P. Blount's *Intensive livestock farming* (1968), in a discussion about the value and wages of well-trained 'stockmen', only the wages for male agricultural labourers are given.¹³⁰ Women came to be seen more often within the specialist press solely as undertaking the low-paid, unskilled work (such as grading and egg packing) associated with the mass production of eggs produced via battery and other intensive systems.¹³¹ In a 1972 *Poultry World* news item about the introduction of metric egg grades, as British packers and producers geared up for entry to the EEC, we therefore see a woman working at a grading machine surrounded

¹²⁵ Paul Brassley, 'Technical change in agriculture, 1935–85: the evidence from southwest England', paper delivered to BAHS Spring Conference, Apr. 2013.

¹²⁶ Situations vacant, *Poultry World*, 20/27 Dec. 1973, p. 31, [italics added].

¹²⁷ *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 17 col. A; note that their jobs were not specified.

¹²⁸ Derry, *Art*, p. 9

¹²⁹ For a related discussion on the depiction of women in specialist farming publications after 1976, see Carol Morris and Nick Evans, 'Cheesemakers are always women: gendered representations of farm life in the

agricultural press', *Gender, place and culture* 8 (2001), pp. 375–90.

¹³⁰ W. P. Blount, 'Statistics: Stock and stockmen: agricultural statistics related to intensive livestock farming', in Blount (ed.), *Intensive livestock farming* (1968), p. 357.

¹³¹ HAT 25934, BEMB, '(2) How an egg earns its lion stamp', A special series of advertisements for the *Grocer*, final proofs 8 Nov. 1963, for publication Nov. 1963 to Jan. 1964; advert for Keenco 'A'-Line Automatic Cage System, *Poultry International*, May 1967, p. 10; *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, pp. 12, 33.

by managers from the manufacturers Ben Nevis. 'Ben Nevis directors with Bernard Mallett, chief executive of the Eggs Authority (right), and Mr M. Bartlett, manager Sainsbury Spillers' Kenninghall packing station (second right), watch a case of Standards being fed onto the company's 2/20 machine'; the woman's name is not given, nor the fact that it is she who is feeding the eggs 'onto the ... machine'.¹³² The same is also true of the specialist literature at this time. Take here, as an example, Figure 36 in Blount's study, entitled 'A 4½ cwt. Electrically operated feed truck which travels down a 100 ft length of Grossmith static cages, filling three feed troughs on the way down and the others on the return journey'.¹³³ This depicts a woman (with her back to the camera) at work within a battery system. In instances such as this, all human labour (male or female) entirely disappears, while the technology is writ large, and the hand subsumed within the mechanism of production. This is not to say that women had left poultry farming, rather that the structures and focus of the industry makes it difficult to track them within its literature.

By the mid-1970s, there was one visual record in which women persisted, and that was in the merchandising and consumption of the product. This is important, because, as Pamela Sharpe has established, 'within the broad framework of the economic past' women are clearly economically significant as consumers, not just potentially as producers.¹³⁴ The industry was well aware of this. In fact, in 1973, when the British industry was still adjusting to the recent closure of the BEMB, *Poultry International* ran a special edition on egg marketing, which stated that 'the industry must learn to merchandise eggs, a term which covers all aspects of packaging and promotion ... and being prepared to employ every available gimmick that will tempt the housewife to leave the supermarket with more eggs in her shopping basket than she originally intended to buy'.¹³⁵ This was key at a time when 'the "free" market was [proving] a difficult animal to handle'.¹³⁶ That merchandizing more often than not involved using a romanticized image of the farmer's wife keeping a mixture of birds in the old 'antiquated' way.¹³⁷ Picking up on established and commonplace associations of small-scale production and the convention of women as poultry keepers, this image remained profitable and effective through its creation of a message of tradition, reliability, authenticity and Englishness: trust. Trust had also been at the heart of the BEMB's campaigns; that is, both at the heart of the campaigns directed at the consumer and those directed at the producer, so that the consumer's requirements for high-quality fresh eggs could be met year-round.¹³⁸

By 1960, when the BEMB published its article on Mrs Buckley and Mr Benjamin, the idea of woman as 'expert' on poultry and eggs had already largely metamorphosed into the figure of 'the housewife', and saleswoman because, 'after all, it's women who do all the buying!'¹³⁹ From

¹³² 'April start for change to metric egg grades?' *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 12.

¹³³ M. J. Gaisford, 'Battery cage egg production', in Blount (ed.), *Intensive livestock farming*, p. 212.

¹³⁴ P. Sharpe, 'Continuity and change: Women's history and economic history in Britain', *EcHR* 48 (1995), p. 364.

¹³⁵ 'Nest Egg', *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 12, col. D; *Poultry International*, Mar. 1973, p. 6.

¹³⁶ 'Mixed Year for eggmen but better returns for

1972', *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 18.

¹³⁷ E.g. a woman holding a basketful of eggs on a Deans Farm box, MERL, 76/216/1-6.

¹³⁸ Sayer, 'Battery Birds', pp. 157-8.

¹³⁹ HAT, 23160/1, BEMB, 2 page advertisement for 'Self service and supermarket' Feb. 1963. In this particular advert they represent women as marketing experts: the BEMB made a splash of hiring 13 women '(and only one man!)' as their regional sales promotion team, in an information ad for the trade in 1963.

the marketer's point of view it was materially more effective to concentrate on the (house-) wife who would buy the eggs, than on the (farmer's) wife who produced them. And, within the British industry, the long-standing correlation between the farmer's wife, poultry keeping and the small-scale, or family-run, farm, even if described to some extent as 'forward-looking' and 'commercial' as in the BEMB article, nonetheless linked their work intrinsically with what came to be seen post war as 'old-fashioned' mixed farming. Women's continuing and very real association with the smaller-scale unit, the family farm and even with adapted modern poultry keeping was, in this context, damning. Where, in Thirsk's words, 'poultry were foreseen as having a bright future on a mixed farm' in the 1880s, following the 1947 Agriculture Act, the family farm was itself coming to be seen as obsolete in texts such as Viscount Astor and Seebom Rowntree's key *Mixed farming and muddled thinking*.¹⁴⁰ Thus, notwithstanding their productive and clearly expert participation, women like Mrs Buckley, who managed poultry concerns on the smaller scale, were increasingly dismissed both at the level of their involvement as decision-makers on the farm when written up by the British industry, and became less visible within the international commercial press (in an industry that had always drawn from the world-wide circulation of ideas), because small-scale, mixed, and family farms were themselves dismissed.¹⁴¹

The BEMB had from its beginnings funded research.¹⁴² It also had its own statistics division, which carried out a producer survey for the first time in 1961.¹⁴³ At that point the average flock size was 200 birds, but 10 per cent of eggs were supplied by producers with laying flocks of at least 2000 birds.¹⁴⁴ Blount, using BEMB data, subsequently reported in 1968 that roughly:

3½ per cent of all households in Great Britain keep poultry, two-thirds of which are not covered by the Ministry's data relating to holdings over 1 acre. Between them these small holders own an estimated 11½ million layers [contrasted with 44.3 million others which are recorded in the June census] ... Although two-thirds of all producers have flocks of less than 200 birds, these only produce 9 per cent of all eggs.¹⁴⁵

The large producers within the industry were increasingly hostile to the small producers. During the 1971 fowl pest epidemic, they accused them of failing to vaccinate against the disease; small flocks were seen as a 'threat'¹⁴⁶ by the big producers, who were coming to determine how the industry overall was perceived. Given that this data was focused on the extent, productiveness and size of the flocks, not the details of their human managers, it would take further work to untangle the full extent of women's involvement in poultry keeping during this period, especially their continued participation in managing egg production on

¹⁴⁰ Thirsk, *Alternative agriculture*, p. 190; Viscount Astor and B. Seebom Rowntree, *Mixed farming and muddled thinking: an analysis of current agricultural policy*, ([1945]), pp. 81–2.

¹⁴¹ Sayer, 'Battery Birds,' p. 150.

¹⁴² E.g., 'Egg cleaning methods and their effect on quality', a paper delivered by N. R. Knowles, British Egg Marketing Board, London, England, to the Fifth Section, Economics and Marketing, of the XIth World's Poultry Congress, 1958, and listed in the conference

programme, p. 277. In 1967 the BEMB funded a two-year postdoctoral fellowship undertaken by Jack Pearce into 'nutritional biochemistry in poultry'. *British Poultry Science* 43 (2002), p. 641.

¹⁴³ HAT, OM (L) 21, Extract of BEMB Annual Report and Accounts, published *British Farmer*, Jan. 1962.

¹⁴⁴ HAT OM (L), 21, BEMB information advert, *Financial Times Supplement*, Dec. 1961.

¹⁴⁵ Blount, 'Statistics', p. 347.

¹⁴⁶ 'Review of 1971', *Poultry World*, 6 Jan. 1972, p. 8.

small, family and general farms, which by their very nature were less noteworthy and therefore less recorded than the large, specialist units.¹⁴⁷ But, turning this around, or shifting the focus, the majority ('two-thirds') of poultry keepers in 1968 were still handling small flocks of under 200 birds, and it is likely that many of these smaller-scale concerns were managed by women independently, or that the flocks were part of larger, general, family concerns.

VII

Poultry keeping, egg collecting and marketing were predominantly female occupations, to at least the end of the nineteenth century in Britain, and considered low status and unprofitable in part because of that association. As commentators and officials sought to stimulate production, get British farmers to answer British consumer demand for eggs and thereby reduce imports, so the link between women and poultry keeping however appears to have continued, but now on a business footing. In Britain, a number of women engaged profitably with poultry keeping as it developed through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s; as expert commentators, as instructors and advisors, as egg producers, as breeders, and in the marketplace. At both the regional and national level, women were involved with the emerging 'modern' form of the trade. In each instance, the new methods of production were adopted and adapted to local conditions and farm resources. Women's participation continued on into the 1950s and 1960s. However, post-war, a shift took place whereby, as production intensified in response to the 1947 Agriculture Act, so women's long-standing association with poultry as farmers' wives, on general and family farms, meant that they dropped out of the industry's progressive picture. Despite their work with the new systems they were once again, as in Edward Brown's day, associated with antiquated methods, and seen as uninterested in profit.

By looking at the evidence of women's participation in poultry keeping, in a policy and business context that favoured the development of large-scale, specialist operations, the evidence from the specialist literature and commercial trade press of the 1960s suggests that, on the larger, commercial farms, as egg production came to be modernized and professionalized, so the mixed or general farm, the small-scale (indeed, even middle-sized) farm, and the family farm all fell out of favour, and therefore out of sight. At this point, the new large-scale, specialist poultry concerns became the focus of attention, paralleled by a story of modernity and progress. The visual record for this period at the national and international level shows that trade advertisers, themselves drawing on the dominant narrative and, in the case of international operations like Kimber, assuming that women were not interested in specialization, targeted men when selling birds, feed and equipment to the industry. There was no expectation that a woman would manage or own such a unit; meanwhile those selling the industry's products constructed their consumer as 'the housewife'. But, these accounts do reveal British women working within the specialized model of poultry farming as labourers:

¹⁴⁷ It should be noted that the poultry industry remains a significant employer in the UK. In 2006 it was estimated that 10,000 people were employed in egg production and 13,000 in related industries including poultry meat. 'Facts and Figures: BEIS Facts and Figures', Egg Industry Council <http://www.britisheggindustrycouncil.com/WhatistheBEIC/FactsandFigures.asp> (accessed 3 Sept. 2008).

delivering carefully-balanced bulk-bought feeds, in environmentally-controlled intensive systems; or handling, sorting and packing eggs; and working within established methods and procedures with standardized birds.¹⁴⁸ This seems contradictory until we consider that it may be possible to extend to agriculture Ellen Jordan's classic argument that in those industries which had previously employed women, 'either as independent producers ... or as part of a proto-industrial family' employers accepted that such manufacture, or parts of it, were "women's work" and therefore included women in the factory workforce'.¹⁴⁹ This goes part way to explaining women's continued presence as employees in the new industry; the growth of the specialized, large-scale commercial units continued to offer women opportunities for employment in a sector that had always been associated with women's work.

Beyond this, though, change within poultry production was also uneven, even in this, one of the most technologically advanced parts of the sector, and it appears that women were also involved as poultry keepers, that is, as producers, especially on smaller-scale and within family-run enterprises. The exact nature and extent of this requires further investigation, because women's involvement in agriculture, at all levels, but especially on family farms, was largely hidden. It is as true in Britain as it is in the rest of Europe, and of the historical as it is of the contemporary, that the 'gaps in our knowledge [of women's participation in family farming] are immense – ranging from conventions in official statistics that obscure women's work in production and their labour force identity to ignorance of household decision-making'.¹⁵⁰ In terms of the historical record, the only way to address this is through qualitative research and, latterly, oral testimony, while to focus simply on the large-scale intensive producer, and adhere to the narrative of change laid down by the industry, is also to obscure the continuities that have existed and still exist within that industry. By implying that women were gone, the new poultry industry (large-scale managerial farming) cemented the myth of progress in the face of continuing small-scale and family-farm production. However, looking for the women reveals that the complexities already being observed by historians with reference to inter-war British agriculture, such as the adaptability of small, mixed and family farming to 'modern' methods, continue to be applicable in the post-war period, at least until Britain joined the EEC, and perhaps beyond.

¹⁴⁸ See D. Fitzgerald, *Every farm a factory: the industrial ideal in American agriculture* (2003) for a related discussion of farm labour in the USA.

¹⁴⁹ E. Jordan, 'The exclusion of women from industry

in nineteenth-century Britain', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), p. 296.

¹⁵⁰ 'Out of the shadows', pp. 50–1, 61.