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**FEMALE EMPLOYMENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
IRONWORKING DISTRICTS: MERTHYR TYDFIL AND THE
SHROPSHIRE COALFIELD, 1841-1881**

AMANDA JANET MACDONALD MILBURN

Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

2013



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Abstract

This thesis examines female employment in the two ironworking districts of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield between 1841 and 1881. Historians have previously suggested that women were practically absent from the workforce in industrial areas. Examination of female employment in the study districts, however, demonstrates not only that women did work, but that they did so in strikingly diverse occupational settings. Evidence drawn from the census, newspapers, parliamentary papers and local manuscript sources will be used to show that their work was vital to the functioning of their local economies, and by consequence, the national prosperity of nineteenth-century Britain. The endemic gendered ideologies of the period undoubtedly influenced the employment opportunities open to these women, yet their work cannot be explained with reference to ideology alone. Analysis of employment patterns in the concentrated geographic settings of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield demonstrates that, in many cases, wider economic fluctuations and localised industrial, urban, and social developments had more of an impact on women's work than contemporary discourse.

Declarations and Statements

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

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Abbreviations

GRO	Glamorgan Record Office
IGA	Ironbridge Gorge Museum Library and Archives
NLW	National Library of Wales
PRO	Public Record Office
SA	Shropshire Archives
TNA	The National Archives of the United Kingdom

Introduction

This thesis examines female employment in the two ironworking districts of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield between 1841 and 1881. Historians have suggested that local economies dominated by heavy industry had few opportunities for female employment, and that as a consequence women were practically absent from the workforce.¹ Examination of women's work in the study districts, however, demonstrates not only that women in heavily industrialised districts did work, but that their work was vital to the functioning of their local economies, and in consequence, the national prosperity of nineteenth-century Britain. The endemic gendered ideologies of the period undoubtedly influenced the employment opportunities open to these women. However, it would be overly simplistic to explain the work women did with these ideologies alone. In-depth analysis of female employment in the concentrated geographic settings of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield demonstrates that, in many cases, localised industrial dynamics, urban and social developments, and wider economic fluctuations, had more of an impact on women's work than contemporary discourse.

The 40 year period between 1841 and 1881 was critical for female employment. Middle-class gendered ideologies were firmly entrenched in British society as the norm all women should follow by the time this study begins in 1841.² The following year, the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act, the first gender specific act of parliament, which banned women from working underground, was passed. The remainder of the century was awash with protective legislation that aimed to control and reduce female employment. Nevertheless, even in the face of these attempted restrictions, work opportunities for women both increased and diversified remarkably on a national level throughout the period. The narrow geographic focus of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield allows for detailed analysis of how and why

¹ Ellen Jordan, 'The Exclusion of Women from Industry in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31 (1989), p. 276; Jane Humphries and K.D.M Snell, 'Introduction', in Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K.D.M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600-1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 3; Andrew Walker, 'Pleasurable Homes'? Victorian Model Miners' Wives and the Family Wage in a South Yorkshire Colliery District', *Woman's History Review*, 6 (1997), p. 331; E.H. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 3; Maxine Berg, 'What Difference Did Women's Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), p. 29.

² Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 75; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 11.

these changes were manifested in two comparable urban and industrialised communities.

The communities of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield shared a multitude of features in their nineteenth century heyday. The very existence of each district was influenced by iron and coal. Each area contained all of the raw materials necessary to produce iron, including ore, coal and limestone, and use of these materials in each vicinity has been traced back to the Dark Ages.³ The extensive work needed to process these raw materials sustained large populations, between 30,000 to 50,000 over the period, with adult males always a majority.⁴ The Shropshire Coalfield also contained a number of potteries important to the local economy that offered alternative industrial employment prospects, many owned by iron companies.⁵ The influence of the heavy industries on both districts was pervasive, and encompassed the local economies and cultures until well into the twentieth century.

Simultaneously, extensive urbanisation in line with wider British trends as the period progressed meant iron and coal were not the districts' only reason for existence.⁶ Merthyr rapidly developed over the period from an area solely dominated by iron into a town with various civic institutions and other amenities.⁷ Black's *Picturesque Guide to Wales*, published in 1881, described Merthyr as:

A populous town which, with astonishing rapidity, has sprung into existence was, until lately a shapeless, unsightly cluster of wretched dingy dwellings; but has in recent years undergone much improvement as well as extension. It now contains some regular, well-built streets, a court-house, a market-house,

³ Ivor J. Brown, 'Underground in the Ironbridge Gorge', *Industrial Archaeology Review*, 3:2 (1979), pp. 159, 163; Catherine Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge* (Bath: Bath Press, 1993), p. 22; John Randall, 'Industries', in William Page (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.1 (London: Constable, 1908), p. 416; Shropshire Archives (SA): A Description of Coalbrook Dale Iron Works and the Environs, 1834-1850, pp. 6, 42, 1987/64/6.

⁴ Bill Jones, 'Inspecting the 'Extraordinary Drain': Emigration and the Urban Experience in Merthyr Tydfil in the 1860s', *Urban History*, 32:1 (2005), p. 101; Barrie Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, 3rd edition (Bath: Phillimore & co, 2000), p. xvi; PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III (Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birth-places)*, p. 16; *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 24 July 1841.

⁵ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, pp. 86-90.

⁶ R J Morris and Richard Rodger, 'An Introduction to British Urban History 1820-1914', in R J Morris and Richard Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian City: A Reader in British Urban History, 1820-1914* (London, New York: Longman, 1993), p. 8.

⁷ Jones, "Inspecting the 'extraordinary drain'", p. 101; Andy Croll, *Civilizing the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c.1870-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 1; Neil Evans, 'The Urbanization of Welsh Society', in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds.), *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 16; Neil Evans, 'As Rich as California...': Opening and Closing the Frontier: Wales 1780-1870', in Gareth Elwyn Jones and Dai Smith (eds.), *The People of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1999), p. 132.

several elegant private residences, a large number of respectable shops, four churches, and no fewer than thirty-six dissenting chapels.⁸

At the same time, there were developments in class demographics, with a rising middle class emerging by the end of the period, largely found in the local 'shopocracy'.⁹ The Shropshire Coalfield was 'couched in a far more variegated industrial and agricultural setting' than Merthyr Tydfil in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ Commercial mercantile centres in the heart at Ironbridge, Madeley and Dawley developed in importance throughout the period.¹¹ Again, there was growth over the period in civic institutions and amenities throughout the coalfield, reflecting the influence of the rising middle class.¹² Clark indicates the new buildings: 'a police station in 1862, the Madeley Union Workhouse at the top of the hill in 1874, as well as a dispensary, several new schools and two gas companies' as evidence of this trend.¹³ Nevertheless, by the end of the period Merthyr was the more economically diverse and developed of the pair.

These corresponding industrial and urban characters of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield led to a very similar socio-economic makeup. Both districts had a largely working-class, nonconformist population, an emerging middle-class shopocracy as the century progressed, and ironmasters who were inextricably linked with various urban developments.¹⁴ These similarities make the districts ideal for

⁸ Black's *Picturesque Guide to Wales*, quoted in Evans, 'Urbanization of Welsh Society', p. 28.

⁹ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, pp. 40-41; Keith Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil, Iron Metropolis: Life in a Welsh Industrial Town* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), p. 20.

¹⁰ Chris Evans, 'Merthyr Tydfil in the Eighteenth Century: Urban by Default?', in Peter Clark and Penelope Corfield, *Industry and Urbanisation in Eighteenth Century England* (Leicester: The Centre for Urban History: 1994), p. 15.

¹¹ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, pp. 155-156, 218; W. Grant Muter, *The Buildings of an Industrial Community: Coalbrookdale and Ironbridge* (London: Phillimore in association with Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, 1979), p. 8; Neil Cossons, *Ironbridge: Landscape of Industry* (London: Cassell, 1977), p. 16; A. J. L. Winchester, 'Dawley', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.11 (Oxford: Oxford U.P. for the Institute of Historical Research, 1985), p. 111.

¹² G. C. Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.11 (Oxford: Oxford U.P. for the Institute of Historical Research, 1985), p. 22; P. A. Stamper, 'Benthall', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.10 (Oxford: Published by Oxford University Press for the [University of London] Institute of Historical Research, 1998), p. 271.

¹³ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 118.

¹⁴ J.H. Morris and L.J. Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry, 1841-1875* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), p. 246; Bill Jones, 'Banqueting at a Moveable Feast: Wales 1970-1914', in Gareth Elwyn Jones and Dai Smith (eds.), *The People of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1999), pp. 157-158; Noel Gibbard, 'Religion', in *Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community* (Cowbridge: Merthyr Teachers Centre Group, 1981), p. 445; Richard Hayman and Wendy Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide* (Stroud: Tempus, 1999), p. 100; Richard Morgan, 'Political History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community* (Cowbridge: Merthyr Teachers Centre

research into how localisation affected female employment trends in the nineteenth century.

While Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were very similar in many ways, they were different types of settlement. Merthyr was the largest town in Wales until 1871.¹⁵ In the 1851 census population tables report, it was described as a municipality ‘sustained by special circumstances for special purposes’, having acquired ‘an adventitious but extraordinary importance and magnitude’.¹⁶ Although a charter of incorporation was not granted until 1905, the district had its own administrative centre with definite boundaries.¹⁷ Conversely, the Shropshire Coalfield comprised of many, smaller settlements, without a central administration or a distinct perimeter. While it cannot be defined as a town, it was undoubtedly a distinct region, recognised as unique within the surrounding rural neighbourhood by contemporaries.¹⁸ Barrie Trinder has indicated that while the geographic make-up of the Shropshire Coalfield is not easily defined, its industrial characteristics led to economic and social distinction, and that, most importantly, the inhabitants identified themselves as a separate and unique community.¹⁹ For the purposes of this thesis, the ‘Shropshire Coalfield’ is defined as the districts of Madeley, Coalbrookdale, Ironbridge, Broseley, Benthall, Greater Dawley, Wombridge, Lawley, Ketley, and Hadley. These smaller districts were indisputably within the geographic boundaries of the Coalfield, dominated by industrial activity, and forming a cohesive community regardless of the individual employments of the inhabitants.²⁰ Other areas that are sometimes labelled as part of the Shropshire Coalfield due to the extensive nature of the coal seams, such as Lilleshall and Shifnal, are not included in the present study because of their lack of geographic and social proximity. The pervasive influence of

Group, 1981), p. 240; Joe England, ‘Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists: the Middle Class in Victorian Merthyr’, *Welsh History Review*, 23:4 (2007), p. 36; Chris Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames: Work and Social Conflict in Early Industrial Merthyr Tydfil* (University of Wales Press, 1993), p. 2; Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, ‘Merthyr Tydfil in 1850’, in Stewart Williams (ed.), *Glamorgan Historian*, volume IV (Cowbridge: D. Brown, 1967), p. 34; Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 15; Baugh, ‘Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge’, pp. 67-69; Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 183; Shropshire Archives (SA): A Description of Coalbrook Dale Iron Works and the Environs, 1834-1850, pp. 26, 35, 1987/64/6; *Salopian Journal*, 16 June 1841.

¹⁵ Evans, ‘As Rich as California...’, p. 114

¹⁶ PP, (1852-3) LXXXV.1, *Population Tables, 1851, Part I. Number of Inhabitants in 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831, 1841 and 1851. Volume I. Report, England and Wales, I-VII; Area and Population*, p. xlvii.

¹⁷ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 216.

¹⁸ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. xv.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. xviii, 1, 158, 218.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1.

the heavy industries and the unmistakable sense of community in both districts (as defined) means the difference in settlement type is no barrier to a comparative framework for analysis of female employment.

Study of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield is vital to reach a full understanding of British economic and social history during the nineteenth century. Both districts stand as examples of the changes in society prompted by the industrial revolution, and both also made a vital contribution to this industrialising process. The importance of iron and coal to the British economy at this time was tremendous. In 1869, a visitor to Merthyr Tydfil described Dowlais, the largest ironworks, as a place 'where dirt is coined into gold'.²¹ In 1837, upon seeing the extent of industrial manufactories in the Shropshire Coalfield, a visitor to the area, Charles Hubert, described it as 'the most extraordinary district in the world'.²² Like contemporaries, historians have never failed to use 'immoderate terms' when describing the importance of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield before their decline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³ In 1977, Neil Cossons described Ironbridge, the centre of the Shropshire Coalfield, as 'a place of outstanding significance', standing with 'ancient Egypt, Athens and Rome'.²⁴ At the turn of the current century, Andy Croll argued that the present need for histories of Merthyr Tydfil is as great 'as it ever was in the era of Charles Wilkins'.²⁵ This thesis answers these calls for further study by focusing on an often neglected yet still important group of residents: women.

As Joyce Burnette pointed out in 2008, thanks to the work of feminist historians, the value of studying female as well as male employment no longer needs justification.²⁶ Following the women's movement of the 1970s, the historiography of female employment has shifted from the odd footnote or index listing in labour history focusing predominantly on men to encompass a wide variety of scholarship. The majority of historians contributing to this wide body of work over the past 40

²¹ F. Vaughan, 'Some Aspects of Life in Merthyr Tydfil in the 19th Century', in *Merthyr Historian*, volume 3 (Merthyr Tydfil: Merthyr Tydfil Historical Society, 1980), p. 93.

²² Charles Hubert, quoted in Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 112.

²³ R.A. Mott, 'The Shropshire Iron Industry', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society*, 56 (1958), p. 81; Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames*, p. 1; Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 11; R.A.

²⁴ Cossons, *Ironbridge: Landscape of Industry*, p. 10.

²⁵ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 222.

²⁶ Joyce Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. xi.

years have focused their attention upon the gendered ideology of the nineteenth century, which coupled femininity and domesticity. Emphasised as the most important factor affecting attitudes towards female employment in the nineteenth-century, multiple studies of these discourses exist. How they were established, perpetuated and developed by the middle class, their increasing internalisation by men and women of both classes, and their impact upon employment legislation have all been analysed at length.²⁷ These discussions of how nineteenth century contemporaries perceived and more importantly, attempted to control female employment are extremely useful and provide the essential starting point for any study of women's work at this time.

More recently, however, emphasis has shifted away from explanations of discourses to in-depth examinations of the actual economic activity of women. While acknowledgement that female employment did not always correspond with these gendered discourses has always been made, investigations into precisely how these differed are gradually emerging. As Burnette has indicated, what people thought

²⁷ Pat Hudson and W. R. Lee, 'Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective', in Pat Hudson and W. R. Lee (eds.), *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 4; Leonore Davidoff, 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Case of Hannah Cullwick and A.J. Munby', in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 114; Andrew August, *Poor Women's Lives: Gender, Work, and Poverty in Late-Victorian London* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 143; Catherine Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', in Sandra Burman, *Fit Work for Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 15; June Purvis, *Hard Lessons: the Lives and Education of Working-Class Women in Nineteenth-Century England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 70; June Purvis, "'Women's Life is Essentially Domestic, Public Life being Confined to Men" (Comte): Separate Spheres and Inequality in the Education of Working-Class Women, 1854-1900', *History of Education*, 10:4 (1981), p. 227; Catherine Hall, 'The Home Turned Upside Down? The Working Class Family in Cotton Textiles 1780-1850', in Elizabeth Whitelegg [et al] (eds.), *The Changing Experience of Women* (Oxford: Blackwell in association with Open University, 1984), p. 18; Carolyn Malone, 'Gendered Discourses and the Making of Protective Labor Legislation in England, 1830-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 37 (1998), p. 167; Carolyn Malone, *Women's Bodies and Dangerous Trades in England, 1880-1914* ([London]: Royal Historical Society; Woodbridge; New York: Boydell Press, 2003), p. 1; Hannah Barker, 'Woman and Work', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850: An introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 134; Jane Mark-Lawson and Anne Witz, 'From 'Family Labour' to 'Family Wage'? The Case of Women's Labour in Nineteenth-Century Coalmining', *Social History*, 13:2 (1988), p. 151; Philippa Levine, 'Consistent Contradictions: Prostitution and Protective Labour Legislation in Nineteenth-Century England', *Social History*, 19 (1994), p. 19; Marjorie Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body: the Politics of Women's Health and Work in Early Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 38; Anna Clark, 'The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language and Class in the 1830s and 1840s', *Journal of British Studies*, 31:1 (1992), p. 62; Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 173; Sian Rhiannon Williams, 'The True "Cymraes": Images of Women in Women's Nineteenth-Century Welsh Periodicals', in Angela V John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Essays in Welsh Women's History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 69-70; Patricia Zekreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1-2; Hall, *White, Male and Middle-class*, p. 75.

women should do and what they actually did are distinct questions with very different answers.²⁸ Women were not limited to only a few jobs. Even the 1841 census, which under-recorded women's paid employment, accounted for their participation in over three quarters of the occupations listed.²⁹ The need for further work investigating actual employment trends has been highlighted by historians as especially necessary if we wish to fit the work of women into the wider historiography of labour history.³⁰

Those seeking to place female employment trends within the framework of nineteenth century gendered ideologies have emphasised that local research is necessary for complex analysis.³¹ Social processes relating to the employment of women in the nineteenth century have been highlighted as 'regionally and occupationally specific', with considerable variation dependent on geographical placement.³² These variations ranged widely, from attitudes to women's work to local economic trends and demographic make-up. Geographically focused studies, historians argue, avoid the generalisation of female experience by demonstrating the multifaceted nature of women's work in the nineteenth century.³³ In addition, as

²⁸ Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 61.

³⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Treating the Male as "Other": Redefining the Parameters of Labor History', *Labor History*, 34:2-3 (1993), p. 192; Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 10; Nigel Goose, 'Working Women in Industrial England', in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 27.

³¹ Leigh Shaw-Taylor, 'Diverse Experiences: the Geography of Adult Female Employment in England and the 1851 census', in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 50; Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790-1865', *Economic History Review*, 48:1 (1995), p. 105; Jane Humphries, 'Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State and Working-Class Men: the Case of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act', *Feminist Review*, 7 (1981), p. 8; Nicola Verdon, 'Hay, Hops and Harvest: Women's Work in Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Sussex', in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 76; Jane Lewis, *Women in England - 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions & Social Change* (Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 149; Pamela Sharpe, 'The Female Labour Market in English Agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: Expansion or Contraction?', in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 52; Joy Parr, 'Disaggregating the Sexual Division of Labor: A Transatlantic Case Study', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), p. 522; Roberts, *Women's Work*, p. 27; Goose, 'Working Women in Industrial England', p. 16.

³² Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge; Rochester, N.Y: Boydell Press, 2002), p. 17.

³³ Arthur J. McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 177; Sharpe, 'The female Labour Market in English Agriculture', p. 52; Roberts, *Women's Work*, p. 28; Verdon, 'Hay, Hops and Harvest', p. 76.

Long points out, the localised discourses and trends found in this type of research can be placed alongside regional and national processes to form a comprehensive picture of the economic role of women.³⁴ By drawing extensively upon the wide range of historical research already undertaken and adopting a comparative approach, local studies can avoid any dangers of generalisation and provide ‘the micro-study to complement the macro-framework’, in the words of Sharpe.³⁵ This approach, adopted throughout the thesis, has already been used successfully to demonstrate female employment in areas historians had previously assumed as dominated by men, as well as raising questions regarding the importance of contemporary middle-class attitudes towards female employment in determining whether women worked.³⁶

The employment of women in ironworking districts, however, is still a neglected topic. Areas dominated by heavy industry have been sidelined by historians as having no opportunity for female work, leading women to be practically absent.³⁷ Mining and ironwork in particular, Angela John points out, have been almost completely ignored by historians researching female employment, although a handful of examples have consistently highlighted this as an area ripe for further study.³⁸ Historians examining the industrial, urban and social developments of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, however, have drawn some attention to

³⁴ Jane Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Northumberland* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1999), p. 5.

³⁵ Pamela Sharpe, ‘Continuity and Change: Women’s History and Economic History in Britain’, *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), p. 358; Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York; London: Routledge, 1989), p. 76; Janet Thomas, ‘Women and Capitalism: Oppression or Emancipation?’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), p. 540; Gertjan de Groot, ‘Foreign Technology and the Gender Division of Labour in a Dutch Cotton Spinning Mill’, in Gertjan De Groot and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Women Workers and Technological Change in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p. 52; Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 4.

³⁶ Carol E. Morgan, ‘Work for Girls? The Small Metal Industries in England, 1840-1915’, in Mary-Jo Maynes, Brigitte Søland, and Christina Benninghaus (eds.), *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750-1960* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 85; Ian Pincombe, ‘Bobby Dazzlers: Women’s Involvement in the South Wales Confectionery Industry in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, *Llafur*, 8:4 (2003), pp. 31-33; K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 66.

³⁷ Jordan, ‘The Exclusion of Women from Industry in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 276; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 3; Berg, ‘What Difference did Women’s Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?’, p. 29; Walker, ‘Pleasurable Homes’, p. 331; Humphries and Snell, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

³⁸ Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 11; L. J. Williams and Dot Jones, ‘Women at Work in the Nineteenth Century’, *Llafur*, 3:3 (1982), pp. 25, 26; Sharron P Schwartz, ‘“No Place for a Woman”: Gender at Work in Cornwall’s Metalliferous Mining Industry’, *Cornish Studies*, 8 (2000), p. 71; Gail Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising in South Wales in the 1860s: Tredegar Patch Girls’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, 7:2 (2006), p. 11; Evans, ‘As Rich as California...’, pp. 115-116.

female employment. Keith Strange in particular has given close attention to women employed in the ironworks of Merthyr, concluding that not only did women in the town work, they undertook a variety of jobs.³⁹ In addition, wider histories of Merthyr Tydfil indicate the importance of dominant discourses of gender in affecting female employment in the town, including the centrality of the ‘angel in the house’ discourse to nonconformist thinking and perpetuation of femininity through the local education system.⁴⁰ Female employment in a variety of occupations also receives brief mention in many studies of the Shropshire Coalfield, although little analysis of women’s role or how gendered ideologies impacted the district is undertaken.⁴¹ These works demonstrate the viability for examination of female employment in the study districts. Further, in-depth investigation is necessary to provide a comprehensive understanding of the gaps between ideology and reality and the importance of local variations to women’s work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

In order to avoid the common pitfall of conflating ideology and reality detailed above, this thesis analyses both quantitative and qualitative sources throughout. Quantifiable information regarding female employment trends in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield has been gathered using the original enumerator’s books of the Census of England and Wales undertaken in 1841, 1861 and 1881. For each individual woman over the age of 14 living in both study districts in these years, the following data was collected: name; age; marital status; occupation; family size; relationship to her head of household; employment of her head of household; number of minor children; and lodgers residing within her household. The age 14 was chosen as many women were likely to undertake employment at this point, and crucially, contemporaries did not consider their work child labour. This extensive database is the backbone of the thesis. It provides concrete evidence of female employment in the study districts and makes it possible to distinguish between ideology and reality. Although both areas had low levels of

³⁹ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Tydfil Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil Union in Victorian Times: Based on a Study of Original Documents* (Cardiff: Glamorgan Archive Service, 1992), p. 103; Jones, ‘Banqueting at a Moveable Feast’, p. 157.

⁴¹ G. C. Baugh and R. C. Hill, ‘Agriculture, 1750-1875’, in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.4 (Oxford: Published by Oxford University Press for the [University of London] Institute of Historical Research, 1989), p. 225; Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, pp. 135-136, 153, 168-171, 136, 225; Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, pp. 31, 58, 76 95-96; Muter, *The Buildings of an Industrial Community*, p. 44.

female employment relative to national trends, this micro-study on the level of individual women in a comparative framework allows for a complex picture of employment patterns to emerge.

The inherent problems of using census data as an analytical tool for accessing female employment must be acknowledged. Historians have pinpointed the 1841 census as particularly unreliable in this respect.⁴² Enumerators of this first extensive census were given the following instructions: 'The profession, &c., of wives, or of sons or daughters living with their husbands or parents, and assisting them, but not apprenticed or receiving wages, need not be set down.'⁴³ Consequently, a number of women who were economically occupied were excluded from the returns. In particular, as Higgs indicates, female employment that was 'based on household forms of production' was likely to be underestimated in 1841.⁴⁴ This omission led *The Times* to conclude during discussion in 1844 that 'a few hundred thousand' women should be reclaimed from the 'swampy residue'.⁴⁵

The fact that women's work in a number of occupations was under-recorded in 1841 has proved problematic for historians, and many have dismissed the viability of this census as a record of female employment levels. This is especially frustrating given the importance of the early 1840s to the history of both industrial and rural communities.⁴⁶ During discussion of the under-recording of women's work in this census year, however, *The Times* pointed out that while rural enumerators were likely to ignore women's work, 'the town enumerators [...] returned every woman, every boy, every girl, with the smallest pretence to a classification'.⁴⁷ Regardless of the veracity of this statement, whether under-recording was as large of an issue in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as elsewhere is questionable. The results generated for female employment in the heavy industries in particular are consistent with other records. No such corresponding evidence exists for the variety of other

⁴² Jane Humphries, 'Women and Paid work', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945: An Introduction* (Bristol, Pa: UCL Press, 1995), p. 89; Williams and Jones, 'Women at Work in the Nineteenth Century', p. 20; Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation', p. 94.

⁴³ PP, (1843) XXII.1, *Abstract Return pursuant to Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Enumeration Abstract, 1841)*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Edward Higgs, 'Household and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses of England and Wales', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 11:3 (1990), p. 74.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 12 September 1844.

⁴⁶ P. M. Tillott, 'Sources of Inaccuracy in the 1851 and 1861 Censuses', in E.A. Wrigley, *Nineteenth-Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (London: C.U.P. [for] the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, 1972), p. 82.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 12 September 1844

occupations undertaken by women in the two areas. However, a sample of two enumeration districts from each region, undertaken to test the validity of the 1841 census by comparing the results of 1841, 1851, and 1861, demonstrated a progressive increase in female employment overall.⁴⁸ This steady growth was in line with the local economic situation, and does not suggest that women's work – even in many of the occupations carried out outside of the market economy – was dramatically under-recorded in Merthyr and Shropshire in 1841. This may have been linked to the demographic status of the majority of women workers in the study districts: married women's employment was the most likely to be under-recorded in 1841, and these women were very unlikely to work at all in the two areas over all the years surveyed. Nevertheless, it is clear that the 1841 results must be viewed with caution. In particular, large increases in female employment between 1841 and 1861 in some occupational sectors appear to be more apparent than real, especially when the census figures are taken in conjunction with other evidence. Indication and discussion of this pattern has been inserted throughout the thesis where appropriate.

In subsequent census years, the instructions given were changed, and enumerators were directed to collect occupational data from both men and women, regardless of where the work was carried out.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, female employment in particular was still subject to under-recording. Census schedules requested 'occupation', rather than 'work', and women undertaking casual or part-time work, again, especially that carried out in the home, were less likely to define themselves by their employment.⁵⁰ When householders were illiterate, common in predominantly working-class communities like the study districts, enumerators filled out the schedule on their behalf, which could lead to inaccuracies.⁵¹ The general reports of the 1881 census described the collection of occupational data as 'the most laborious, the most costly, and after all, perhaps the least satisfactory part of the census'. The consequent warning to 'those who may purpose to make use of the tables relating to these occupations' to be 'fully aware of the difficulties that beset such a tabulation' in order that they might 'form a just estimate as to the degree of accuracy to be fairly expected in so complex a matter' is just as relevant to historians

⁴⁸ The results of the sample can be found in Appendix One.

⁴⁹ PP, (1852-3) LXXXV.1, *Population Tables, 1851*, p. cxlvii.

⁵⁰ Edward Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), p. 68; Edward Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census: Victorian Censuses and Historical Research* (London: HMSO, 1996), pp. 97-98; Roberts, *Women's Work*, p. 19.

⁵¹ PP, (1852-3) LXXXV.1, *Population Tables, 1851*, p. xiv.

using the census today as it was to those analysing the figures at the time.⁵² Additionally, census data from 1841 for Dowlais, an area of Merthyr Tydfil, is missing, presumed destroyed.

In spite of these varied issues, the census as a whole still stands as a viable and valuable source for those seeking to investigate female employment in the nineteenth century. Historians researching women's work have on the whole concluded that the constraints of census data can be both annoying and frustrating, but that this does not impede conclusions being drawn.⁵³ The enumerator's books are a veritable mine of information that was not recorded in any other source. The statistical data that can be extracted from them illuminates the realities of female employment in a way no other source can. The likelihood that regular work undertaken by women outside the home was under-recorded has been acknowledged as slim.⁵⁴ In addition, acceptance that the documentation of women's work found in the census was lower than existed in reality only serves to bolster the conclusions of this thesis that female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was far more significant than previously assumed.

A number of methodological approaches have been used to overcome broad issues impacting the effective analysis of census data from this period. Economic historians on the whole have concluded that census data can be used judiciously to indicate broad trends in female employment, rather than exact figures.⁵⁵ At all points throughout the thesis, both the figures collected and the wider trends signified are presented in conjunction with one another. The 1841 general census report stressed that 'great care must be observed in using [the reports] as a test of the comparative increase of different trades or pursuits in the various localities', an important reminder which applies to each of the years surveyed.⁵⁶ The issue of comparing data over time and between areas has been resolved by use of the original enumerator's books (instead of the occupational abstracts produced at the time) and subsequent grouping of occupational data by the same categories for each year surveyed, a

⁵² PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III*, p. 25.

⁵³ Bridget Hill, 'Women, Work and the Census: a Problem for Historians of Women', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), p. 80; Williams and Jones, 'Women at Work in the Nineteenth Century', p. 25.

⁵⁴ Shaw-Taylor, 'Diverse Experiences', p. 39.

⁵⁵ Sydna Ann Williams, 'A Study of Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century Anglesey', *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society & Field Club*, (1993), p. 90; Jordan, 'The Exclusion of Women from Industry in Nineteenth-Century Britain', p. 277.

⁵⁶ PP, (1843) XXII.1, (*Enumeration Abstract, 1841*), p. 7.

method promoted by Higgs.⁵⁷ Any inaccuracy caused by human error made during data manipulation in the nineteenth century is also avoided.⁵⁸ The comparative framework of investigation is ideal for this analytical approach to employment patterns.⁵⁹

Finally, as Hill suggests, other historical evidence is used to supplement census data at all points throughout the thesis.⁶⁰ This is especially important given the nature of female employment. In many cases, as Sharpe and other historians have indicated, a broader definition of what 'work' actually was is necessary for analysis of female employment.⁶¹ Unwaged (but not unpaid) work carried out in the home was likely to be under-recorded in the census, but details can be found in other sources. In addition, unremunerative philanthropic activity carried out by women is not present in the census whatsoever, but it has also been demonstrated as having the productive value nineteenth century economists deemed necessary to be called work.⁶² The other sources used provide insight here.

Parliamentary papers have been drawn upon extensively. The Victorian establishment paid a great deal of attention to women's work, and multiple employment commissions, select committees and parliamentary debates were dedicated to the topic over the period. In addition to providing further evidence of female employment, these publications demonstrate how gendered ideology impacted upon the representation and subsequent legislation of women's work.

⁵⁷ Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census*, p. 134.

⁵⁸ E. A. Wrigley, 'Introduction', in E. A. Wrigley, *Nineteenth-Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (London: C.U.P. [for] the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, 1972), p. 1.

⁵⁹ Tillott, 'Sources of inaccuracy in the 1851 and 1861 censuses', p. 83; Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census*, pp. 141, 152.

⁶⁰ Hill, 'Women, Work and the Census', p. 94.

⁶¹ Sharpe, 'Continuity and Change', p. 356; Margaret Hedley, 'Hannah: a Woman of the Durham Coalfield in the 19th Century' *North East History*, 37 (2006), p. 56; Pamela Sharpe and Harriet Bradley, 'Gendering Work: Historical Approaches', *Labour History Review*, 63:1 (1998), p. 2; John Benson, 'Work', in John Benson (ed.), *The Working Class in England - 1875-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 71-72.

⁶² Helen Meller, 'Gender, Citizenship and the Making of the Modern Environment', in Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (eds.), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) p. 14; Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 21, 137; Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth, 'Introduction: Making Space and Re-making History', in Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (eds.), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 5; Laura L. Frader, 'Engendering Work and Wages: The French Labour Movement and the Family Wage', in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 148; Anne Anderson and Elizabeth Darling, 'The Hill Sisters: Cultural Philanthropy and the Embellishment of Lives in late-Nineteenth Century England', in Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (eds.), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 34.

Employment commissions in particular carried out extensive interviews with women, allowing for witness evidence not found elsewhere. As Verdon points out, accessing the attitudes of working-class women towards employment during this period is almost impossible, and the various employment commissioners who visited the study districts and spoke to the local women provide valuable examples of these attitudes in their reports.⁶³

Local newspapers have also proved to be an inimitable source. Their role in providing commentary as events unfolded mean that happenings are illuminated in fuller detail than in other primary source material. The assertion of the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* in 1871 that newspapers had ‘marvellous comprehensiveness’ with regard to local news was true.⁶⁴ In Merthyr, the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* (1845-1874), *Merthyr Express* (1864-) and *Merthyr Telegraph* (1855-1881) all published a weekly edition of news, discussion and correspondence regarding events in the study district and further afield. Similar locally focused papers: *Eddowes Journal* (1843-1891), *Wenlock Express* (1875-1882) and the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* (1869-1875) were also published weekly in the Shropshire Coalfield. A comprehensive inspection of each individual newspaper issue published in the study areas between 1841 and 1881 was not possible. None of the local newspapers named above have been digitalised. The nature of women’s history means that even if they were, detailed examination would still be necessary as many important details are hidden within unrelated reports. Due to these issues, the newspapers listed above have been examined extensively in (or as near as possible to, dependent on publication dates) the census years. A brief survey of national newspapers was also undertaken: most notably, *The Times*, the voice of the establishment. The *Morning Chronicle* surveyed female employment in heavy industry in Merthyr Tydfil in the late 1840s and 1850s, and provided detailed descriptions of this. In addition to providing further concrete evidence regarding female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, newspapers demonstrate the extent to which national gendered discourses permeated the lives of those residing within Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Such incidental details and unwitting testimony contained within the pages of newspapers form the basis for local explanations of the quantitative data collected from the census regarding female employment.

⁶³ Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, p. 39.

⁶⁴ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 8 April 1871.

Other manuscript sources have been used to determine and explain female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Ironworks records in particular contain information on the women employed in heavy industry, as well as evidence on their position in the study districts. In Merthyr, Dowlais was the largest ironworks in Britain throughout the period, and much of our evidence of women's employment in this sector comes from the company files. As William Menelaus, manager of the works, acknowledged in 1866, Dowlais 'may be taken as a fair sample of the South Wales Iron Works generally'.⁶⁵ Sadly, the majority of ironworks records from the Shropshire Coalfield were destroyed during pit closures, although valuable evidence has been drawn from the Darby family's household and business accounts. Various other archival material also provides insight into female employment in the study districts. In many cases, these primary sources have been read against the grain. The absence of women in some of this material is telling in itself, and will be highlighted throughout.

The thesis will progress as follows. Chapter one demonstrates the ways in which pervasive gender ideologies influenced perceptions of female employment, and directly impacted upon work opportunities for women in Britain during the nineteenth century. Drawing extensively upon parliamentary debate and examination of women's role carried out in the press, it examines the progression of protective legislation over the period. The ways in which various groups, including working-class men, the women's movement, and employers, used gendered discourses to further their own aims is also considered. This chapter provides the necessary background for consideration of the gap between ideology and reality for women workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

Chapter two examines female employment, occupational diversity and the typical woman worker in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Data gathered from the census will be used to show how many women worked, what they did, and who they were. These patterns will be explained with reference to national and local economic fluctuations, as well as urban and social developments in the study districts. Most importantly, this chapter will show that thousands of women participated in the urban and industrial economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the

⁶⁵ Glamorgan Record Office (GRO): Report on the Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works of South Wales; containing details of the number of persons in the employ of the Dowlais Iron Co.; by W. Menelaus, May 1866, alterations by G.T. Clark, 1866, p. 1, DG/C/5/15-16.

Shropshire Coalfield. They did so in variegated occupational settings and hence made important contributions to their respective localities. This chapter provides a broad picture: the remainder of the thesis will look at each occupational sector in detail, providing further explanations of female employment trends in the study districts based on geographically-specific evidence.

Female employment in the industrial primary and secondary sectors is discussed in chapter three. In-depth examination of women's work in the various occupations associated with iron and coal demonstrates that not only did many women work, but their work was vital to the functioning of the industries, and consequently, to British economic success. Employment in the pottery and pipe-making sectors is also considered. Analysis of employment patterns is undertaken with reference to contemporary discussion of women's work in this sector, and shows that women continued industrial employment even in the face of extensive middle-class disapproval. Localised economic dynamics and urban developments are used to explain this. Throughout, the chapter demonstrates that these forces had far more of an impact on female employment in industry than ideological perceptions of their work.

Unlike women's work in iron and coal, women's work in the non-industrial primary and secondary occupations of agriculture, sewing and production cannot be categorised as a distinct employment sector. Nevertheless, chapter four groups these for the sake of analysis. These women workers were not viewed with the same disapprobation as their industrial counterparts, and their work often relied on skills and attributes that were perceived as feminine. The role of ideology was not all encompassing, however, and the character of each study districts impacted upon female employment patterns. In addition, as the chapter will show, the proportion involved remained at a lower rate than seen in industrial work for the majority of the period, again calling into question the effects of discourse on reality.

Chapter five considers women's work in the tertiary sectors of service and sales. Female employment in domestic service, charring, washing, lodging provision, prostitution and retail are all examined, demonstrating once again the diversity of female employment in the study districts. The ways in which women employed in these occupations made important contributions to the local infrastructure is highlighted, and the chapter shows once again that ideologies were not ultimately determining to female work patterns. The importance of individual women's

circumstances to the types of work they participated in is also demonstrated throughout.

Finally, chapter six examines tertiary professional employment. Many of the women considered in this chapter were middle class. While their work opportunities increased as the period progressed, those participating in employment remained at a far lower proportion than their working-class counterparts. Discussion of the traditional professions, medical and teaching sectors, along with consideration of female philanthropists, will explain this. Many women were employed in these occupations, paid or otherwise, precisely because of their gender. Yet, as discussion of individual occupations will show, it was the wide variety of diverse local and national social, economic and urban developments that resulted in diversification and availability of this work over the period. At the same time, this chapter will show that geographic character of the study districts meant that some employment opportunities that opened up for professional work elsewhere in Britain were not present, regardless of their gendered suitability, further underlining the importance of local research.

This thesis demonstrates not only that women in districts dominated by heavy industry worked, but that they did so in wide-ranging, variegated occupations that were vital to their local economies. While gender ideology undoubtedly impacted upon work opportunities for women in the nineteenth century, diverse, geographically-specific social, economic and urban trends were also highly influential. Placing this localised evidence alongside regional and national processes provides a richer examination of the developments related to women's work, and contributes to our understanding of female employment throughout Britain across the century.

Chapter I

Gender ideology and female employment in nineteenth-century Britain

Throughout nineteenth-century Europe, ideologies that implicitly placed women in the private sphere were almost universal. By 1841, these dominant gendered discourses had already been inaugurated by the middle class, given formal status in official documents, and held up as the norm that all women should follow.¹ Men and women were perceived as naturally opposed, with the feminine, passive, dependent and emotionally nurturing side of human nature unsuited for paid labour.² Contemporaries continually emphasised the suitability of the home for the female disposition, and this private domain was seen as a binary opposition to the evils of industrialisation and the male world of work.³ Crucially, too, in many cases debates regarding female employment were not only influenced by gendered ideologies, but played a critical part in their cultural dissemination. These constructions influenced perceptions of female employment, and directly impacted upon work opportunities for women during the period.

This chapter considers the various ways in which contemporary examination of women's role in society was imbued with gendered ideologies, and how this affected female employment. Brief discussion of the 'male breadwinner' and the 'angel in the home' provides a useful starting point. Contemporaries drew upon these dual discourses in a wide variety of ways throughout the period, most notably during parliamentary debate and in the national and local press, demonstrated here and throughout the chapter. The fears that subversion of gendered norms were harmful to society were endemic, and this unease prompted numerous employment commissions and subsequent legislative interference in female labour, starting in

¹ Hall, *White, Male and Middle-class*, pp. 75, 176 Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', p. 15; Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, p. 70; Purvis, "'Women's Life is Essentially Domestic, Public Life being Confined to Men" (Comte)', p. 227; Hall, 'The Home Turned Upside Down?', p. 18.

² Sonya O Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 14-15; Karin Hausen, 'Family and Role-division: The Polarisation of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century – an Aspect of the Dissociation of Work and Family Life', in Richard J. Evans and W.R. Lee (eds.), *The German Family: Essays on the Social History of the Family in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 54; Barbara Franzoi, *At the Very Least She Pays the Rent: Women and German Industrialization, 1871-1914* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 60; Meller, 'Gender, Citizenship and the Making of the Modern Environment', p. 13.

³ Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, 'Introduction: Gender and the Reconstruction of European Working-Class History', in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 12.

1841 and continuing into the twentieth century. Extensive examination of the progression of commissioners' reports and associated protective legislation throughout the period will reveal that acts were passed almost solely on 'gendered moral grounds'.⁴ While the focus shifted from concerns about female morality to health and maternity over the period, contemporaries remained concerned with the operation of separate spheres (keeping women in the home) and maintenance of gender roles, rather than simple workplace regulation.⁵ This importance of gender norms to contemporary perceptions of female employment will also be shown through discussion of various occupations carried out by women that were not subject to legislation, owing to their compatibility with femininity and domesticity.

The chapter also considers how different groups were able to use gendered ideology to further their own aims. Working-class men in particular campaigned in favour of protective legislation to protect their own interests in the workplace. The women's movement emphasised to employers the advantages of employing women and utilising their feminine attributes, and later on, promoted female involvement in the political arena using the same tactic. Similarly, employers throughout Britain took advantage of the cheap labour of women, simultaneously justifying it with reference to the necessity of feminine skills for the positions they offered, along with the docility and likelihood to leave upon marriage, creating a synthetic turnover of staff to ensure male promotion, necessary in many emerging occupations in the late-nineteenth century. Here, and throughout the chapter as a whole, the pervasive nature of gendered discourse in nineteenth-century society, with regards to women workers in particular, is firmly established. Whether this was reflected in reality will be considered in the remainder of the thesis.

The male breadwinner ideology was one of the most important discourses affecting attitudes towards female employment throughout the nineteenth century. The perception that it was the right of men to work and provide for their family grew in importance throughout the period, in line with the growth of domestic ideology, and was encoded in political and legal systems.⁶ Standing in binary opposition to the

⁴ Barker, 'Woman and Work', p. 134.

⁵ Mark-Lawson and Witz, 'From 'Family Labour' to 'Family Wage'?', p. 151; Levine, 'Consistent Contradictions', p. 19; Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body*, p. 38.

⁶ Duncan Bythell, 'Women in the Workface', in Patrick K. O'Brien and Roland Quinault (eds.), *The Industrial Revolution and British Society* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 42; Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: a Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 8; Laura L

male breadwinner was the inextricable link between the feminine and the home, again a consistent feature of contemporary thought. Regulation of female employment was implicitly linked with marriage and the domestic throughout the period. This continual underlying assumption that women would and should marry was consonant with a framework representing femininity and the private sphere as synonymous, with domesticity continually emphasised as essential in a way that work, for females at least, was not. Middle-class contemporaries feared that women would choose work and reject marriage, a disruption of gender norms viewed as undesirable and damaging to society.⁷

Owing to this perception, nineteenth-century contemporaries continually emphasised the superiority of marriage, both in the debates surrounding female employment and elsewhere. An article from the *Saturday Review*, published in 1859, illuminates the prevalent perception of marriage:

Married life is a woman's profession, and to this life her training – that of dependence – is modelled. Of course by not getting a husband, or by losing him, she may find that she is without resources. All that can be said of her is that she has failed in business, and no social reform can prevent such failures.⁸

Marriage was literally presented as women's profession in the same way work was for men. Additionally, concern over how single women should support themselves surfaced multiple times throughout the period, with marriage always offered as the

Frader, 'Doing Capitalism's Work: Women in the Western European Industrial Economy', in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, Susan Stuard (eds.), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 307; Leonore Davidoff, 'The Role of Gender in the 'First Industrial Nation'', in Rosemary Crompton and Michael Mann (eds.), *Gender and Stratification* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p. 213; Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), p. 24; Mary Murray, 'Property and "patriarchy" in English history', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 2:4 (1989), p. 322; Bill Jones, "'We Will Give You Wings to Fly': Emigration Societies in Merthyr Tydfil in 1868', in *Merthyr Historian*, volume 13 (Merthyr Tydfil: Merthyr Tydfil Historical Society, 2001), p. 29; Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, 'Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution' *Economic History Review*, 45:1 (1992), p. 37; Sonya O Rose, 'Gender Antagonism and Class Conflict: Exclusionary Tactics of Male Trade Unionists in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, 13:2 (1988), p. 208; Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', in Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (eds.), *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1986), p. 2; Deborah Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society: Gender, Skill and Identity from 1700* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 199; Paul O'Leary, 'Skill and the Workplace in an Industrial Economy: The Irish in South Wales', in John Belchem and Klaus Tenfelde (eds.), *Irish and Polish Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2002), p. 74; Frader, 'Engendering Work and Wages', p. 143.

⁷ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 162.

⁸ *Saturday Review*, quoted in Alison C Kay, 'Small Business, Self-Employment and Women's Work-Life Choices in Nineteenth Century London', in David Mitch, John Brown and Marco H D Van Leeuwen (eds.), *Origins of the Modern Career* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 191.

ultimate solution. This perception was not limited to the press. The 1851 census reports stressed that 'entering the married state' was the ideal for all women'.⁹ Even fiction did not provide alternatives for women who remained single, instead promoting marriage as bringing, as Mitchell argues, 'a satisfactory place in the social system'.¹⁰ In 'The Secret Marriage: A Tale of Mystery' a serial story published in the *Merthyr Express* in 1871, for example, two gentlemen discussing a ballet dancer's wedding ring conclude she must not be married, on the grounds 'any man that could afford it would keep his wife out of such a life'.¹¹

While marriage was perpetually touted as the ideal, it was not possible for all women. In 1851, the uneven sex balance of the population meant nearly a million women were unable to marry.¹² The fact that one in three women had no 'natural protector' or 'natural sphere of duty' worried *The Times*, and while their assertion in 1870 that 'women with nobody to work for them must work for themselves' allowed for female employment, it also made clear what they saw women's true role as.¹³ Emigration, for work and marriage, was encouraged on these grounds. In 1860, it was suggested in an editorial in *The Times* that the Employment of Women Society, rather than '[blocking] up still more the home labour market' should instead encourage emigration to colonies where unmarried men outnumbered unmarried women.¹⁴ The 1871 Census reports described these colonies as 'a most fruitful field for such of the sex as are willing to play a part in the foundation of the great States of the future', explicitly aiming this at 'those who seek to extend the sphere of labour for women'.¹⁵ Women who travelled abroad were able to perform jobs that would have been perceived as unfeminine at home without censure, but this appeared to be a case of out of sight, out of mind.¹⁶

The importance contemporaries placed upon the household duties of married women to both individual families and to society generally can be seen in the

⁹ PP, (1852-3) LXXXV.1, *Population Tables, 1851*, p. xxxi.

¹⁰ Sally Mitchell, 'The Forgotten Woman of the Period: Penny Weekly Family Magazines of the 1840s and 1850s', in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 42.

¹¹ *Merthyr Express*, 26 August 1871.

¹² Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993), p. 153.

¹³ *The Times*, 28 May 1870.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 24 July 1860.

¹⁵ PP, (1871) LIX.659, *Census of England and Wales 1871. Preliminary Report and Tables of Population and Houses enumerated in England and Wales, and Islands in British Seas*, p. xxiv.

¹⁶ Anna Fenton-Hathaway, 'Charlotte Brontë, Mary Taylor, and the 'Redundant Women' Debate', *Bronte Studies*, 35:2 (2010), p. 138.

inclusion of discussion regarding domestic labour in official government reports. The 1881 census reports described domestic labour as ‘the most important of all female occupations [...] namely, the rearing of children and the management of domestic life.’ These women, according to the reports, could ‘only be called unoccupied when that term is used in the limited sense that it bears in the census returns’, on the grounds that ‘unoccupied’ women, even unmarried, were engaged in domestic duties, or assisting male relatives in ‘details of business’.¹⁷ Domesticity here was presented as both natural and important to society, while married women’s employment outside the home was synonymous with domestic neglect, a point regularly noted by employment commissions throughout the century.

Fears regarding the subversion of gender divisions that married women’s work could cause were also significant. Lord Ashley was vocal on this topic. A nineteenth-century parliamentarian, he sought ‘national social and moral improvement’ and took an active part in various campaigns to limit female employment, most notably during the protective legislation of the 1840s.¹⁸ His declaration in 1844 that ‘the consciousness of the women and children that their earnings are the chief dependence of their husbands and fathers’ could lead to ‘insubordination’, calling for a remedy in the form of a reduction of female labour and restoration of women to their ‘conjugal and maternal duties’ was a viewpoint shared by many.¹⁹ A Mrs. Bayley reported to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1861 that ‘the wife and mother going abroad for work is a fine example of a waste of time, a waste of property, a waste of morals and a waste of health and life and ought in every way to be prevented’, again a reflection of this official standpoint.²⁰ While there were circumstances where married women could work outside the home without censure, these were based on unique circumstances. In 1854, for example, *The Times* asserted that ‘it would be injudicious in the extreme to maintain [soldiers’ wives] in idleness’ on the grounds ‘many are

¹⁷ PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III*, pp. 29, 49-50.

¹⁸ “Cooper, Anthony Ashley-, seventh earl of Shaftesbury (1801–1885),” John Wolfe in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6210> (accessed March 11, 2013).

¹⁹ *The Times*, 16 March 1844.

²⁰ Mrs. Bayley, quoted in Roberts, *Women’s Work*, p. 44.

perfectly able to support themselves by work, if they could meet with suitable employment', with male absence from the home key in the acceptability of work.²¹

Due to the emphasis on marriage and assumed subsequent removal from the workplace, female employment was often viewed as a 'stepping stone' in place between girlhood and marriage, frequently stressed as of a 'strictly provisional, intermediate, and temporary character' in contemporary publications throughout Europe.²² Indications that the potential for marriage contributed to the inferiority of female labour were made in an 1873 editorial in the *Western Mail*, which argued apprenticeships should only be provided for spinsters. The work of those who expected to marry did not in 'quantity and quality' equal that of men as, according to the author, women themselves viewed their work as temporary on these grounds.²³ The perceived necessity for such work to be suitable because of this potential for marriage can be seen in a *Times* editorial published in 1870: 'a woman waiting to be married will not make a better wife when the time arrives from being put on the footing of a man in the interval'.²⁴ While female employment was not always temporary in reality, this perception undoubtedly impacted upon work opportunities for women.²⁵

While women's ideal place was the home, the nineteenth-century man belonged in the public sphere, most notably, in the workplace. In the eyes of contemporaries of all classes, to start work was to become a man, yet girls only became women once they married.²⁶ The perceived disparity between the physical and intellectual strength possessed by men and women, in which the 'superiority of men' was 'undisputed' was used in an editorial in *The Times* in 1862 to support the assertion that 'the two sexes can never compete in the labour market on equal terms', and that 'for one man that studies music or cookery there are twenty or thirty women that do so, yet who ever heard of an eminent female composer or an eminent female cook?' The point was made that men always out performed their 'weaker rivals' in the world of work due to their masculine nature as workers, regardless of the work

²¹ *The Times*, 2 May 1854.

²² *The Times*, 18 November 1878; *The Times*, 9 June 1862.

²³ *Western Mail*, 7 June 1873.

²⁴ *The Times*, 28 May 1870.

²⁵ Angela V. John, 'Introduction', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 2.

²⁶ Patricia Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 18.

itself.²⁷ In addition, the male breadwinner was thought to provide stability to society by ensuring that working-class men were committed to a job.²⁸ Ultimately, the employment status of men was seen as more important than the employment status of women, as being a man and being a worker were viewed as one and the same.²⁹ There was never any expectation that sole female workers with dependents were entitled to a family wage in the same way as a man in the same position, mainly because of this viewpoint.³⁰

For most families, though, this ideology was not realised. Charles Booth, a contemporary philanthropist and social investigator, demonstrated in the late nineteenth century that only 30 per cent of families relied on a male wage.³¹ However, as Gray points out, the male breadwinner ideal did not necessarily place men as the only wage earner, simply the principal one, a convincing argument in the face of evidence relating to female employment.³² It is clear we should treat the construction of the sole male wage earner as a myth at worst, and ‘an imperfectly realised demand’ at best.³³ Nevertheless, the male breadwinner ideology cemented perceptions of women as dependents of men, and thus their own elevated position in society.

The gendered ideologies described above were very influential upon the protective legislation of the nineteenth century. Broad concerns regarding the role of women and female employment were enshrined in official debates and legislative efforts in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, it was not until 1842 that the first gender specific Act of Parliament was passed, the Mines and Manufactories Act, which banned women and children from working underground. The 1842 *Reports of the Royal Commission into the Employment of Children in Mines and Manufactories*, hereafter referred to as The Children’s Employment Commission,

²⁷ *The Times*, 9 June 1862.

²⁸ R.E. Pahl, ‘Historical Aspects of Work, Employment, Unemployment and the Sexual Division of Labour’, in R.E. Pahl, *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 13; Jane Lewis, ‘The Working-Class Wife and Mother and State Intervention’, in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 100.

²⁹ Maria Bottomley, ‘Women and Industrial Militancy: The 1875 Heavy Woollen Dispute’, in J.A. Jowitt and A.J. McIvor (eds.), *Employers and Labour in the English Textile Industries, 1850-1939* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 171; Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 52.

³⁰ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 199.

³¹ Charles Booth, quoted in Rose, *Limited Livelihoods*, p. 78.

³² Robert Gray, ‘Factory Legislation and the Gendering of Jobs in the North of England, 1830-1860’, *Gender and History*, 5 (1993), p. 60.

³³ Mark-Lawson and Witz, ‘From ‘Family Labour’ to ‘Family Wage’?’, p. 155.

was originally organised only to investigate the employment of children.³⁴ However, popular agitation meant the commissioners expanded their inquiry to include women.³⁵ While, in reality, the number of women thrown out of work was likely only a few thousand, the impact of the 1842 Act was manifold.³⁶ It formalised and legitimised femininity as inherently dependent, and female morality as a valid basis for government intervention. Women and children became the same legal category, and recommendations for the latter category began to implicitly include the former.³⁷

Contemporary debates regarding the 1842 Mines and Manufactories Act were deeply influenced by the polemic of female dependence. This was not new. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, for example, embodied dependent femininity and assumed all women had a male breadwinner.³⁸ The *Shropshire Conservative* in 1841 depicted women as ‘that sex whose weakness is their charm and ought to be their protection’, one of many newspapers to do so. In contrast, the description of the male role: ‘Every manly heart is “in arms and eager for the fray” whenever a woman is attacked. Every manly feeling rises in opposition to injury or injustice inflicted upon a female’, was almost a binary opposition.³⁹ This dependence of women was represented throughout Europe as the natural order of being, a positive aspect of femininity, and directly influenced concrete action in the form of legislation throughout the nineteenth century. Newspaper discussion in 1842 was shaped by this discourse, and used it to justify the need for legislative interference. *The Times*, for example, pointed out that, ‘labour is of course the portion of man’, during an editorial discussing the Act.⁴⁰ Additionally, descriptions of the women and children working underground as ‘helpless’, the ‘weakest part of the community’ with ‘no control over their own actions’, ‘unfortunate’ and in need of ‘rescue [...] from their

³⁴ PP, (1842) XV.1, XVI.1, XVII.1, *Royal Commission on Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories. First Report (Mines and Collieries)*.

³⁵ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution: 1750-1850* (London: Routledge, 1930), p. 244.

³⁶ Angela V. John, ‘Colliery Legislation and its Consequences: 1842 and the Women Miners of Lancashire’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, LXI (1978), p. 80; Hunt, *British labour history*, p. 18.

³⁷ PP, (1864) XXII.1, 319, *Royal Commission on Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Second Report; Third Report*, p. xiv.

³⁸ Leonore Davidoff, ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England’, in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 151; Krishan Kumar, ‘From Work to Employment and Unemployment: the English Experience’, in R.E. Pahl, *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 151.

³⁹ *Salopian Journal*, 6 January 1841.

⁴⁰ *The Times*, 11 July 1842.

degradation' all appeared in the newspaper during 1842.⁴¹ The views of the women undertaking the labour were dismissed without question.

The representation of women as naturally dependent was also present in the local press of the study districts. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* and the *Shropshire Conservative* both presented Lord Ashley as a quasi-messianic figure due to his role in promoting the ban on women's work underground.⁴² The description of him in the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 'it is his office to seek and save those whom the world appeared to have forsaken', positioned women as subjugated and exploited, unable to protect themselves and in need of rescue. The following account of females working underground was clearly directed to provoke an emotional response based on this discourse of helplessness:

Who, indeed, with a heart in his bosom, could hear without a shudder of women crawling on their hands and knees, and dragging coals along passages scarcely larger than common sewers, through water, vapour, and almost perpetual darkness, in the midst of a poisoned atmosphere, and exposed to every vice and ferocity of natures rendered desperate by a life of toil scarcely human.⁴³

This work was unsuitable for women, and without protection they were seen as powerless, unable to extract themselves from their subjugation. In many cases, too, newspapers drew comparisons between these women workers and slaves.⁴⁴ The press gave women no choice, no agency, and no ability to protect themselves, and urged legislative interference on these grounds.

The feminisation of the working class during the debates surrounding the Children's Employment Commission was also unmistakable. The legislature, according to *The Times*, aimed to '[improve] their character' by undertaking what they were unable to and withdrawing 'their' women from this employment.⁴⁵ The *Shropshire Conservative* argued similarly: 'some women from long habit, being brought up from infancy in mines &c., care but little, if anything, for their debased position', concluding 'it is no criterion because men and women may be found to approve of their present degraded state, that the country is to tolerate it'.⁴⁶ To be working-class and a woman provided a double dependency based on gendered

⁴¹ *The Times*, 5 July 1842, 16 July 1842, 26 July 1842.

⁴² *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 18 June 1842; *Shropshire Conservative*, 18 June 1842.

⁴³ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 18 June 1842.

⁴⁴ *Shropshire Conservative*, 14 May 1842; *Shropshire Conservative*, 9 July 1842.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 5 July 1842.

⁴⁶ *Shropshire Conservative*, 23 July 1842.

ideology, further justifying the need for intervention in the eyes of middle-class contemporaries.

While feminine dependence was an important facet prompting legislation, the primary focus of the Children's Employment Commission was female morality. According to the report, 'all classes of witnesses [bore] testimony to the demoralising influence of the employment of females underground'.⁴⁷ While the implication that disapproval of female employment underground was universal is misleading, it is true that the moral implications of the work and working conditions of women employed underground were subject to extended discussion, both in the Children's Employment Commission and in the contemporary press. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* printed a selection of extracts from the Commissioners' reports, prefacing these quotations with the statement 'a more heart-sickening catalogue of heathenish ignorance, of vice, profligacy, indecency and cruel sufferings was never presented to the public eye than these reports furnish', sensationalist language making their position on underground work for women clear.⁴⁸ The potential threat to morality caused by the alleged sexualised behaviour of women workers received far more attention than the heavy physical labour undertaken by females employed underground.⁴⁹ One commissioner, Stanhope, argued that the employment of girls under 13 was 'the most free from objection', illustrating the importance of morality over physicality to those seeking to ban women's work in mines.⁵⁰ The two most shocking details uncovered by the commissioners – minimal clothing, and the mixing of sexes at work – had unfortunate implications.⁵¹ The 'half-naked state' of young people working underground caused alarm and concern that 'passions were excited early' on the part of middle-class contemporaries.⁵² That 'sexual intercourse [occurred] decidedly frequently in consequence', leading to bastardy, was taken for granted by commissioners and newspaper reporters, and was a key factor influencing the ban on women underground.⁵³ The press emphasised that while the 'gross ill-usage' of boys was 'sufficiently revolting', the 'brutality of subjecting females to

⁴⁷ PP, (1842) XV.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 256.

⁴⁸ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 4 June 1842.

⁴⁹ Jane Humphries, 'The Most Free from Objection...' The Sexual Division of Labor and Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century England', *Journal of Economic History*, 47:4 (1987), p. 938; John, 'Colliery Legislation and its Consequences', p. 83.

⁵⁰ Humphries, 'The Most Free from Objection...', p. 942.

⁵¹ PP, (1842) XV.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 256.

⁵² *Examiner*, 14 May 1842.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

similar degradation' should be met with horror, especially given the 'particular hatefulness to such an employment of the female sex.'⁵⁴

Concerns regarding marriage and maternity also directly impacted on the legislation. Fears that these women workers were not able to gain 'any knowledge of the domestic economy' necessary for marriage were common.⁵⁵ The Earl of Devon's remarks in 1842 that it should be 'the desire of Legislature to encourage [domestic duties]' indicated a willingness to interfere in the private sphere, albeit indirectly, due to its importance to society.⁵⁶ *The Times* argued that colliers 'have now learned that a respectable wife, and a comfortable and tidy home, though supported at the expense of more continuous work for themselves, are better worth having than the 14 or 15s a week which they used to gain from the labours of an oppressed and perhaps corrupted drudge'.⁵⁷ Domesticity was almost given monetary value, but it was respectability that appeared as paramount. Once again, discourses of dependence were drawn upon to make the point. The female as a victim in the workplace can be seen in the article's conclusion: 'we trust the legislature will before long save them the responsibility, to which they seem so unequal, of having any choice in the matter'.⁵⁸ This view of women workers continued throughout the century.

Following the 1842 Mines and Manufactories Act, the floodgates opened, and subsequent protective legislation focused on the regulation of female employment in factories. The 1833 Factory Commission had found no medical reason to halt female employment in factories, yet 'regret' that women and children were employed in factories was expressed in the 1841 census reports eight years later.⁵⁹ The moral justification first used in 1842 made it possible to interfere with female employment elsewhere, and commissions continued to express fear over the impact blurred gender roles within the workplace could have outside it. In 1844, the first Factory Act limited women's work in factories to twelve hours per day, the same limit placed

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 17 May 1842; *Bristol Mercury*, 14 May 1842.

⁵⁵ PP (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 509.

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 15 July 1842.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 17 May 1842.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Barbara Harrison, 'Women's Health or Social Control? The Role of the Medical Professional in Relation to Factory Legislation in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 13:4 (1991), p. 471; PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Abstract Return pursuant to Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841) Volume III*, p. 16.

on ‘young people’ (those over 13) since 1833.⁶⁰ While the expedience of placing women and children in the same category was questioned in Parliament, this was dismissed.⁶¹ Given the acceptance of gendered legislation after 1842, this Act was passed without controversy.⁶² In 1847, the hours for women and children, again, now seen as one category, were further reduced to ten hours per day, and in 1850, the times women and children were allowed to work were specified (between 6am and 6pm in the summer and 7am and 7pm in the winter).⁶³ From 1844 to the turn of the century, more and more workplaces came under the definition of ‘factory’, and in 1867 a Factory Act was passed to include all factories and workshops employing more than 50 people under this definition.⁶⁴

Contemporary discussion of the early Factory Acts consistently drew on the conception of females as inherently dependent in the same fashion as 1842. *The Times* in 1846, for example, asserted that ‘women and minors are the wards of the state [...] not considered capable of fighting their own battle in the rough war of interests’. To support this point, other conceptions of femininity, both positive, such as propensity to self-sacrifice, and negative, including weakness and folly, were noted. The article concluded that as women and young people could not combine in the same way as men to protect their own interests, legislative defence was necessary.⁶⁵ Similarly, in 1857, an employment commission described women as ‘helpless’ with ‘comparative fragile constitutions’ in need of ‘protective guardianship’ through regulation of trade.⁶⁶

While feminine dependence was often noted by contemporaries, concern over the sexualisation of women workers was still at the forefront of discussion. Worries

⁶⁰ PP, (1844) II.149, *Bill for regulating Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Factories*, p. 4.

⁶¹ *The Times*, 16 March 1844.

⁶² Harrison, ‘Women’s Health or Social Control?’, p. 471.

⁶³ Sonya O. Rose, ‘Protective Labor Legislation in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Gender, Class, and the Liberal State’, in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 196; Malone, ‘Gendered discourses’, p. 168.

⁶⁴ PP, (1845) I.227, *Bill to regulate Labour of Children in Calico Print-works of Great Britain and Ireland*, p. 1; PP, (1856) I.381, *Bill to regulate Hours of Labour of Women and Young Persons in Bleaching and Dyeing Works*, p. 1; PP, (1861) III.39, *Bill to place Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children in Lace Factories under Regulations of Factories Acts*, p. 2; PP, (1863) I.187, *Bill to amend Act for placing Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children in Bleaching and Dyeing Works under Regulations of Factories Acts*, p. 1; PP, (1867) III.121, *Bill for regulating Hours of Labour for Children, Young Persons and Women employed in Workshops*, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *The Times*, 28 April 1846.

⁶⁶ PP, (1857) 151 XI.1, *Select Committee to inquire into Employment of Women and Children in Bleaching and Dyeing Establishments in England, Scotland and Ireland. First Report, Minutes of Evidence*, pp. 16, 125.

over the unchaste nature of the workers was key to the first debate in the 1840s, and the fear that mixing of the sexes in the workplace impacted negatively on female morality remained a focus for over twenty years.⁶⁷ Peter Gaskell, a contemporary observer writing in 1833, described factories as ‘hotbeds of lust’, where ‘unbridled indulgences’ could take place.⁶⁸ *The Times* in 1841 described women working in factories as ‘altogether unfitted for the occupancy of the domestic position’, unable to ‘make a shirt, darn a stocking, cook a dinner, or clean a house’ incapable of fulfilling the ‘true duties of woman’.⁶⁹ A Chartist circular published in 1842 argued that female employment ‘[deprived] the poor man of a virtuous wife’ and ‘degraded and contaminated’ female workers.⁷⁰ In 1847 the Reverend P.M. Richards argued mixing of the sexes in the workplace caused women to become ‘bold, impudent, and wantonly vicious and sing the vilest songs and publicly behave in the most indecent manner’.⁷¹ Women visibly working, either outdoors or even simply away from the home (thus travelling to work unescorted) were commonly represented by contemporaries as subverting their femininity, and thus as a corrupting influence on the streets.⁷² Regulation was carried out on these grounds, and contemporaries again focused on the sexual and moral implications of work outside the home, including demoralisation and lack of domestic knowledge, rather than physical aspects of gender.⁷³ The fear that women would become unsexed due to their lack of morality was justification enough to prompt extensive legislative interference.

⁶⁷ Nigel Goose, ‘How Saucy did it Make the Poor? The Straw Plait and Hat Trades, Illegitimate Fertility and Family in Nineteenth-Century Hertfordshire’, *History* 91:304 (2006), pp. 534-535; Malone, *Women's Bodies and Dangerous Trades*, p. 11; PP, (1862) I.141, *Bill to prevent Employment of Women and Children during Night in Operations connected with Bleaching by Open-air Process*, p. 1; PP, (1857) 151 XI.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Bleaching and Dyeing Establishments*, pp. 16, 40; *The Times*, 16 March 1844, 31 January 1846.

⁶⁸ Peter Gaskell, quoted in Malone, ‘Gendered Discourses’, pp. 166-169.

⁶⁹ *The Times*, 30 December 1841.

⁷⁰ Clark, ‘The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity’, p. 83.

⁷¹ Reverend P.M. Richards, quoted in Val Lloyd, ‘Attitudes to Women's Work at North Wales Coalmines 1840-1911’, *Llafur*, 5:2 (1989), p. 10.

⁷² Linda Mahood, ‘The Wages of Sin: Women, Work and Sexuality in the Nineteenth-century’, in Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach (eds.), *The World is Ill Divided: Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 32; Peter Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales. Industrial Society* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 150; Erna Olafson Hellerstein et al, ‘General Introduction’, in Erna Olafson Hellerstein et al (eds.), *Victorian Women: a Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 3; Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising’, p. 12; Levine, ‘Consistent Contradictions’, p. 29.

⁷³ Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England*. (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 62; Rosemary Jones, ‘“Separate Spheres”?: Women, Language and Respectability in Victorian Wales’, in Geraint H Jenkins (ed.), *The Welsh Language and its Social Domains 1801-1911* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 189; Rose, ‘Protective Labor Legislation’, pp. 201-202; Davidoff and

The early agricultural commissions also criticised female employment on the grounds of resultant immorality. In 1843, the *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture* described children left 'unrestrained in their houses' while mothers worked as resulting in their growing up in 'ignorance and idleness', and their exposure to 'contamination of all kinds'.⁷⁴ The language used here was very similar to that found in a select committee investigating 'Criminal and Destitute Children' in 1852, which also placed much of the blame on working mothers, although here the Poor Law was blamed for failing to support women and safeguard the 'moral well-being' of families, instead obliging them to work and leave their children to be contaminated.⁷⁵ Criticisms of the bondager system, too, where single women in the north of England and Scotland were employed by a 'hind' in exchange for accommodation with them, were based around the immorality of living with a man, rather than the hard physical labour undertaken by women.⁷⁶

Agricultural work itself, however, did not always receive a great deal of criticism earlier in the period. The 1843 reports and surrounding debates in the press emphasised the health and morality of outdoor labour in this field.⁷⁷ The housekeeping skills of agricultural women workers were also praised. This can be linked to the time allowance made for domestic labour: in many cases, female farm helpers were not expected to start work until later than males, to allow for domestic work.⁷⁸ Concerns over the 'fatiguing' nature of dairy farming and the effects it could have on female health were also prevalent in this period, although on the whole dairy work was considered as acceptable owing to its implicit links with femininity.⁷⁹ It was these high levels of gendered specialisation in agricultural work which

Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', p. 2; Levine, 'Consistent Contradictions', p. 22; *The Times*, 31 January 1846.

⁷⁴ PP, (1843) XII.1, *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 26.

⁷⁵ PP, (1852-3) XXIII.1, 567, *Select Committee on Treatment of Criminal and Destitute Children. Report, Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, Index*, pp. 24, 40.

⁷⁶ Barbara W. Robertson, 'In Bondage: The Female Farm Worker in South-East Scotland', in Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach (eds.), *The World is Ill Divided: Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 129.

⁷⁷ PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, pp. 9-10, 23; *The Times*, 7 January 1843.

⁷⁸ PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 5.

contributed to the lack of restriction.⁸⁰ Such positive representation did not persist in the face of increasing emphasis on total domesticity, though.⁸¹

By 1860, the principle of women as unfree agents requiring protection across multiple employment sectors was ‘too late to combat’, as noted in *The Times*.⁸² However, while legislation of female employment continued into the latter half of the period, the focus of contemporary concern shifted from morality to health and maternity. Why this happened is still debated by historians. Edge argues that it was because ideologies of bourgeois femininity were used to cement the new social order of the middle class. While this class system was in its infancy in the 1840s, by the 1870s it was fully established, and the need for consolidation of power through signification of difference was no longer necessary.⁸³ Alternatively, Clark, perhaps cynically, argues that discourses placing women as positive in the home were ‘more convincing than misogynistic insults against women workers’.⁸⁴ Either way, the shift in contemporary concentration towards the health and maternity of women workers meant that they began to be represented solely as vulnerable, child-like, unfree agents, rather than sexualised and in need of regulation.⁸⁵ The dependent nature of femininity was drawn upon more fully and consistently than ever before.

Nevertheless, in the case of mining, this shift in focus was not clear-cut. In his reports for the 1843 Midland Mining Commission, deployed to research general circumstances affecting the social position of miners, for example, Tancred paused in a description of the countryside to interject ‘though my enquiry does not extend to them, I may here remark that the custom of men, women and small children working together in the small nail shops without superintendence or regulation produces a frightful extent of sexual immorality, great improvidence, and ignorance’.⁸⁶ Once again, demoralisation was at the forefront of concerns. In 1881, an article entitled ‘Sir Robert Peel and Female Miners’ which looked back to the days of female underground work and described ‘the dirt, disease, and immorality such employment fostered’ was printed in the *Wenlock Express*, and congratulated the Conservatives

⁸⁰ Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸² *The Times*, 23 March 1860.

⁸³ Sarah Edge, ‘The Power to Fix the Gaze: Gender and Class in Victorian Photographs of Pit-Brow Women’, *Visual Sociology*, 13:2 (1998), p. 42.

⁸⁴ Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1995), p. 199.

⁸⁵ Gray, *The Factory Question*, p. 34; Levine, ‘Consistent Contradictions’, p. 26.

⁸⁶ PP, (1843) XIII.1, *Midland Mining Commission. First Report. South Staffordshire*, p. v.

for undertaking legislation against it.⁸⁷ Yet, aside from unease that women's work underground 'continued into the very last stages of pregnancy', the original commission was far more concerned by morality than health, and even after women were banned from working underground in 1842, contemporary concern regarding the decency of female employment at coal and iron mines remained prevalent.⁸⁸ The female surface worker, as Angela John has pointed out, was seen as 'the remnant of an undesirable past which had been rightfully swept away', and concerns regarding her morality were always at the forefront of any discussion, even later in the century.⁸⁹ The fear that this work was a detriment to the 'womanhood' of females undertaking it remained prevalent.⁹⁰

Campaigns to ban female employment on the banks of mines resurfaced multiple times throughout the century, and continued to draw upon the alleged demoralisation of those undertaking this employment. It was recommended that the Factory Acts be applied to 'blast furnace, rolling mills and forges, and miscellaneous metal trades' in the early 1860s on these grounds, although this did not come to pass until a wider extension later in the century.⁹¹ At the Miners' Union Conference in 1863, fears that women, 'created and designed for a much nobler sphere of action' would lose 'everything modest' while working on the pit bank, were highlighted by delegates.⁹² Miners from the north of England appealed to parliament to ban female surface work in 1865, arguing that 'the practise of employing females on or about the pit banks of mines and collieries is degrading to the sex, leads to gross immorality, and stands as a foul blot on the civilisation and humanity of the kingdom'.⁹³ Further campaigns were made to prohibit the practice in Lancashire and south Wales over the following years. Mr Higson, a coal mine inspector, recorded in 1865 that 'nearly everybody would like to see females employed only on indoor work, but nobody seems capable of showing how and by what process the change is to be made'.⁹⁴ A national petition objecting to the employment as 'degrading and leading to immorality' was presented in 1867.⁹⁵ In 1872, a debate in the House of Lords led by

⁸⁷ *Wenlock Express*, 5 March 1881.

⁸⁸ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 28 May 1842.

⁸⁹ Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 12.

⁹⁰ Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life* (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1980), p. 52.

⁹¹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 27 December 1864.

⁹² *The Times*, 12 August 1867.

⁹³ Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 52.

⁹⁴ PP, (1867) XVI.515, *Reports of Inspectors of (Coal) Mines, 1865*, p. 45.

⁹⁵ Roberts, *Women's Work*, p. 14.

Lord Ashley sought to draw attention to the 'moral and physical degradation of the women employed at the pit bank', although intervention was again dismissed.⁹⁶ As late as 1880, an editorial in the *Graphic* argued that 'although public opinion has gone beyond that legislative enactment, and discourages the employment of females above mines, as well as in them, there are yet in Great Britain many thousands employed', describing this employment as 'unfeminine', 'unsexing', 'unsuitable' and 'laborious'.⁹⁷ Contemporaries used the same arguments and ideologies in the late nineteenth century as were drawn upon previously during the 1840s, demonstrating the continuation of some aspects of gendered discourse. Nevertheless, while official investigation was undertaken in 1867, ultimately it was concluded that 'indecent or immorality were not established by the evidence'.⁹⁸ Legislative interference was dismissed on these grounds more than once.⁹⁹

While contemporary discussion of women involved in mining processes sustained a primary focus on morality, this was not the case elsewhere. Around the 1870s, debate surrounding factory legislation decisively shifted away from demoralisation to concerns based around time spent away from home, health of women workers, and the effects of work on maternity. In 1874, the time women and children were allowed to work was further reduced to nine hours per day (or 56 ½ hours per week) in textile factories only.¹⁰⁰ The 1878 Factory Act, while limiting all factory work for women to 56 hours per week, also banned women under eighteen from dangerous parts of lead processing.¹⁰¹ The 'simple reduction' in hours worked by women rather than an outright ban on their labour, Morgan and Malone point out, suggests women's 'prolonged absence' from the domestic arena as the main issue.¹⁰² The limited hours to allow for labour in the home reinforced feminine domesticity without removing them from the workplace.¹⁰³ In this respect, it appears that contemporaries saw female employment as tolerable, but only when time was

⁹⁶ *The Times*, 24 July 1872.

⁹⁷ *Graphic*, 7 October 1880.

⁹⁸ *The Times*, 12 August 1867.

⁹⁹ Baylis, 'Visual Cruising', p. 12; Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁰ Malone, 'Gendered discourses', p. 167.

¹⁰¹ Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms*, p. 60.

¹⁰² Carol Morgan, 'Gender Construction and Gender Relations in Cotton and Chain Making in England: a Contested and Varied terrain', *Woman's History Review*, 6 (1997), p. 372; Malone, 'Gendered Discourses', p. 166.

¹⁰³ Carol Morgan, 'The Domestic Image and Factory Culture: the Cotton District in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 49 (1996), p. 38; Morgan, 'Gender Construction', p. 372; Harrison, 'Women's Health or Social Control?', p. 485.

allowed for the familial interaction and domestic labour associated with womanhood.¹⁰⁴

Working-class men played an important part in campaigns to implement the later factory legislation. In the 1850s and 1860s, petitions issued by Short Time Committees, concerned with domestic life of females who spent the majority of their time working, called for their hours to be cut.¹⁰⁵ In many cases, they used gendered ideology to promote their own aims, campaigning for shorter hours for women while knowing they would benefit from the reduction.¹⁰⁶ These men undertook 'manipulation of dominant discourse' in targeting their use of gendered ideology to gain middle-class support for their own aims.¹⁰⁷ The description of this activity given by Rose 'from behind the women's petticoats' seems apt.¹⁰⁸ They sought to defend both their place at work, and in the labour hierarchy itself.¹⁰⁹ In the competitive labour market of the nineteenth century, as Rowbotham indicates, men had an 'obvious interest' in excluding women from work.¹¹⁰ Some men feared the overall dilution of their labour, seen in the textile districts where female employment was high.¹¹¹ Others were concerned with the lower wages that could result due to women's inclusion in the world of work, traced in many workshop based trades.¹¹² The fear of economic competition, rooted in the male breadwinner ideal and domestic rhetoric, also led to trade union action of blocking apprenticeship and membership to women, in both the Short Time Committees, and elsewhere.¹¹³

¹⁰⁴ Meg Gomersall, *Working-class Girls in Nineteenth-Century England: Life, Work and Schooling* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ Malone, 'Gendered Discourses', p. 167; Rose, 'Protective Labor Legislation', p. 196; Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁶ Sonya O. Rose, 'From Behind the Women's Petticoats', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 4:1 (1991), p. 37; Robert Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830-1860* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5; Gray, 'Factory Legislation', p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ Clark, 'The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity', p. 64.

¹⁰⁸ Rose, 'From Behind the Women's Petticoats', pp. 37, 45.

¹⁰⁹ Pat Hudson, 'Women and Industrialization', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945; An Introduction* (Bristol, Pa: UCL Press, 1995), p. 38.

¹¹⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against it* (London: Pluto Press, 1973), p. 59.

¹¹¹ Katrina Honeyman, 'Gender Divisions and Industrial Divide: the Case of the Leeds Clothing Trade, 1850-1970', *Textile History*, 28:1 (1997), p. 53.

¹¹² Carol E. Morgan, 'Women, Work and Consciousness in the Mid Nineteenth-Century English Cotton Industry', *Social History*, 17:1 (1992), p. 27; Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, 'Reforming Work: Gender, Class, and the Printing Trade in Victorian Britain', *Journal of Women's History*, 16:1 (2004), p. 109; Camilla Townsend, 'I am the Woman for Spirit': A Working Woman's Gender Transgression in Victorian London', in Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (eds.), *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 216; Malone, *Women's bodies*, p. 21.

¹¹³ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), p. 96; Deirdre Busfield, 'Skill and The Sexual Division of Labour in the West

Contemporary discussion of women's work in factories during the 1870s also consistently cited the dangerous implications to maternity. In 1872, Thomas Maudsley, secretary of the Nine Hours Movement Committee, stated that 'the prolonged absence from home of the wife and mother caused an enormous amount of infant mortality and it must cause the elder children to be more or less neglected. It deadened the sense of parental responsibility'.¹¹⁴ In the 1873 Factory Commissioner's report, over 100 doctors surveyed agreed that female employment increased infant mortality.¹¹⁵ A factory surgeon interviewed in 1873 argued that, 'I regard the mother's return to the mill as almost a death sentence to the child' and 'I believe if married women were kept at home to attend their houses, nine tenths of the evils in the factory districts would be removed'.¹¹⁶ In 1879, Factory Commissioners argued that arm movements made in the course of work churned milk in the breast, and that 'it [was] not decent'.¹¹⁷ No legislation resulted before the end of the period, however, with regulation of the 'return to labour of women after their confinement' an 'object greatly to be desired', but dismissed as impractical at this point.¹¹⁸ By the 1890s, though, labour in trades seen as 'especially dangerous' to women was subject to extensive regulation, and women were banned from working in factories for four weeks after childbirth.¹¹⁹

The physical dangers of work itself to women, especially in cases where femininity and machinery were juxtaposed, were also subject to extensive commentary during the later factory legislation.¹²⁰ The failure of the feminine body to cope with employment, especially conditions such as high temperatures and constant movement, became important and was continually highlighted until the end of the period.¹²¹ By 1876, industrial work including chain making and wheeling heavy barrows was noted by employment commissioners as not just 'unfit' and

Riding Textile Industry, 1850-1914', in J.A. Jowitt and A.J. McIvor (eds.), *Employers and Labour in the English Textile Industries, 1850-1939* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 161; Morgan, 'Gender Construction', p. 370.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Maudsley, quoted in Malone, 'Gendered Discourses', p. 166.

¹¹⁵ Malone, *Women's Bodies*, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Malone, 'Gendered Discourses', p. 172.

¹¹⁷ PP, (1876) XXX.1, *Royal Commission to inquire into Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, with view to Consolidation and Amendment Volume II. Minutes of Evidence*, p. 68.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 37.

¹¹⁹ Malone, 'Gendered Discourses', p. 167.

¹²⁰ Gray, 'Factory Legislation', p. 73; Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance*, p. 174.

¹²¹ PP, (1857) 151 XI.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Bleaching and Dyeing Establishments*, pp. 11-12.

inappropriate for women, as previously suggested, but 'far too hard', physically.¹²² In both cases, biological and scientific viewpoints were drawn upon, either in signifying physical difference and suitability for work between men and women, or simply indicating the responsibilities women had based on their ability to become mothers.¹²³

Even during this period, not all proposals for regulation of female employment in factories were passed, usually because the work could not be demonstrated as harmful to women and gendered ideologies were not challenged. An 1852 bill to ban women's factory work on Sunday did not pass.¹²⁴ In 1873, a bill to extend factory regulations of women to shops was dismissed.¹²⁵ Opposition to adding laundries to the 1867 Factory Act was strong, and it too was quashed.¹²⁶ At the same time, the ways in which women's behaviour was regulated at work indicates that fears regarding female immorality were still present. Physical separation between male and female workers, termination of employment for those who engaged in immoral behaviours, and strong supervision of women workers have all been traced in various factories in the latter half of the period.¹²⁷

Contemporary investigations of female employment in agriculture also began to concentrate on health and maternity later in the period. Mothers working in rural or agricultural jobs in 1867 were described as 'slatternly, careless about their domestic duties, indifferent as to the conduct of their children'.¹²⁸ Mixing of the sexes at work was presented as negative, leading to demoralisation, with leisure activities such as drinking, and accommodation in mixed sex cottages given the

¹²² PP, (1876) XXX.1, *Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, with view to Consolidation and Amendment*, p. 84.

¹²³ Malone, 'Gendered Discourses', p. 168; Humphries, 'The Most Free from Objection...', p. 935.

¹²⁴ PP, (1852-3) III.401, *Bill to limit Hours of Labour of Women, Young Persons and Children in Factories of United Kingdom; and to provide for more perfect Inspection of Factories*, p. 2.

¹²⁵ Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 53; PP, (1873) V.141, *Bill to provide for regulating Hours of Labour of Children, Young Persons and Women in Shops for Sale of Goods, and to extend and amend Workshop Acts*.

¹²⁶ Patricia E. Malcolmsom, *English Laundresses: a Social History, 1850-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 49.

¹²⁷ Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work: 1700 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 139; Judy Lown, *Women and Industrialization: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 110; Gray, *The factory question*, p. 197; Morgan, 'Work for Girls?', pp. 86-87; Davidoff and Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', p. 2; Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', p. 34; Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, p. 30; Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, p. 86; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 139.

¹²⁸ PP, (1867) XVI.67, *Royal Commission on Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Sixth Report*, p. 84.

blame as causing moral injury.¹²⁹ Agricultural gangmasters were blamed for not providing ‘proper control over [women’s] conduct and conversation’ reflecting the perceived lack of feminine self-determination.¹³⁰ Demoralisation was presented as insidious, polluting morality in the neighbourhood, although women were again represented as victims, rather than instigators of immorality. Moral concerns were joined by fears regarding infant mortality due to neglect and administration of opiates to allow for mother’s work, as well as some concerns over the health of women workers.¹³¹ The dress of female agricultural labourers was criticised for its revealing nature, both on the grounds of immodesty, and the health issues associated with exposure that were seen to lead to disease and a shortened life span.¹³² In 1867, a Commissioner described the employment of women in agriculture as ‘hideous’, with ‘ill effects’ on ‘physical, social, economical, moral, intellectual’ life.¹³³ It was these concerns in particular which led to the 1867 Gangs Act, the only legislation aimed at women’s agricultural work, even in the face of multiple Commissions.¹³⁴ There were some continuities, however: descriptions of the husband as a ‘sufferer of the wife’s absence from the home’ on the grounds of this neglect, including ‘no fire or dinner waiting’ due to her late arrival from work appeared in Agricultural Commissions in 1843 and 1868, twenty-five years apart.¹³⁵

While criticism of agricultural labour was not uncommon, the overarching perception of this employment as morally sound was key to lack of legislation. One employment commissioner concluded in 1867 that field work did women no harm, given that their cottages were clean and tidy.¹³⁶ In 1869, *The Times* reported: ‘it would require a very strong case to warrant the Legislature in restricting them from gaining an honest livelihood in such way as they please.’¹³⁷ An editorial in 1870 in

¹²⁹ Ibid, pp. 2, 83.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

¹³¹ PP, (1867-68) XVII.1, 237, *Royal Commission on Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. First Report, Appendix (Evidence from Assistant Coms.)*, p. xxiv; PP, (1864) XXII.1, 319, *Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Second Report; Third Report*, p. vi.

¹³² PP, (1867) XVI.67, *Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Sixth Report*, p. 83.

¹³³ PP, (1867-68) XVII.1, 237, *Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. First Report*, p. xi.

¹³⁴ Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, p. 110.

¹³⁵ PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 27; PP, (1867-68) XVII.1, 237, *Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. First Report*, p. xiv.

¹³⁶ PP, (1867-68) XVII.1, 237, *Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. First Report*, p. xiii.

¹³⁷ *The Times*, 2 December 1869.

the *Pall Mall Gazette* agreed, emphasising the injustice in closing to women a healthy, 'harmless employment' in a time when so many were 'unable to obtain work' and indicating the 'healthy' nature of out-door labour. The necessary assistance of women, coupled with the fact that many labourers at the time argued 'that the best wife for a farm-labourer is a woman who is able and willing to do farm-work', was also used to justify a lack of restriction. Even so, the newspaper agreed with commissioners that threshing in particular was unsuitable for women, on account of the necessary dress to undertake it.¹³⁸

The complex nature of this shifting perception and representation of femininity in regards to work can be seen in the changing explanations used by contemporaries promoting protective legislation. Mort argues that the 'angel in the home' discourse led to a dual view of working-class women as both 'immoral pollutants' and simultaneously 'agents of moral reform': for moral order to be restored, working-class women must return to the home.¹³⁹ In this respect, women workers have been presented by historians as 'neither-nor' figures, seen as 'victimised and threatening, sexually attractive and socially repellent'.¹⁴⁰ Each representation, as Hamilton points out, led to similar results. Whether women were victims or active participants in immorality, need for protection or regulation would result in similar outcomes regarding the view of their work as unsuitable.¹⁴¹ In addition, each of the concerns that surfaced throughout the period were unequivocally linked to conceptions of gender.

The importance placed upon gender to legislation can also be illustrated through consideration of employments that were not subject to extensive discussion or legal regulation. Domestic servants, although physically overworked and underpaid, were ignored by contemporaries because they fitted into accepted ideals of femininity.¹⁴² This work could in many cases be more physically demanding than

¹³⁸ PP, (1867-68) XVII.1, 237, *Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. First Report*, p. xviii; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 January 1870.

¹³⁹ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Kristina Huneault, *Difficult Subjects: Working Women and Visual Culture, Britain 1880-1914* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 212.

¹⁴¹ Sophie Hamilton, 'Images of femininity in the Royal Commissions of the 1830s and 1840s', in Eileen Janes Yeo, (ed.), *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 79.

¹⁴² Sheila C. Blackburn, "'Princesses and Sweated-Wage Slaves go Well Together': Images of British Sweated Workers, 1843-1914", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 61 (2002), p. 27; Sally Alexander, 'Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London; A Study of the Years 1820-50', in

that undertaken on the pit bank, and hours were often far longer than the average female employed in a factory, yet the domestic nature of the employment meant contemporaries viewed it as suitable for women.¹⁴³ The 1841 Census Reports described vital attributes necessary for the job as ‘steady industry’, ‘economy’, ‘attention to the maintenance of good character’, and congratulated the women who undertook it for developing these characteristics.¹⁴⁴ This positive viewpoint remained consistent throughout the period. An 1876 *John Bull* article emphasised the work as ‘thoroughly appropriate’ for women, calling for promotion of the profession, with their supervision by female employers.¹⁴⁵ This was also the case with many forms of home work, including needlework and laundry. These jobs notoriously exploited many women involved, yet there was no attempt to protect them on the grounds it was carried out in the private sphere.¹⁴⁶ While discussion of other types of female employment in government publications and the press raised concerns about neglected domestic skills throughout the century, service was praised for providing women with an opportunity to learn these.¹⁴⁷ Contemporaries also emphasised the necessity for servants to have a good moral character. ‘Demoralised’ agricultural and factory workers were sometimes placed in the same category as female convicts ‘incapable’ of service, said to ‘seldom obtain’ such employment, with ‘wealthy and middle classes’ reluctant to engage them.¹⁴⁸ Institutions such as the workhouse encouraged young women to undertake ‘respectable service’ over other employment, and working-class parents too were often keen to secure domestic service as an employment for their female children.¹⁴⁹ In his 1862 essay ‘Why are women redundant’, W.R. Greg concluded that ‘[domestic servants] fulfil both essentials of a

Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth [etc.]: Penguin, 1976), p. 63; Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women: 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 23; Mary Lynn Stewart, *Women, Work, and the French State: Labour Protection and Social Patriarchy, 1879-1919* (Kingston; London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), p. 8; Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 43; Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body*, p. 26; Hall, ‘The Home Turned Upside Down?’, p. 18.

¹⁴³ John, ‘Introduction’, p. 4; Roberts, *Women’s Work*, p. 30.

¹⁴⁴ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841 Volume III*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁵ *John Bull and Britannia*, 28 April 1860.

¹⁴⁶ Simonton, *A history of European Women’s Work*, p. 174.

¹⁴⁷ PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁸ PP, (1867) XVI.67, *Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Sixth Report*, p. 84; *The Times*, 30 December 1841; *Standard*, 2 August 1879.

¹⁴⁹ PP, (1852-3) XXIII.1, 567, *Treatment of Criminal and Destitute Children. Report* p. 383; PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 6.

woman's being; *they are supported by, and they minister to, men*', illustrating neatly why Victorian society approved of women's employment in service.¹⁵⁰

For similar reasons, contemporaries showed a lack of interest in legislating against the majority of female employment that involved needlework. The 1841 Census Reports described lace making, and pointed out that the 'touch of a female hand [was] preferred in a material so fragile and delicate', a viewpoint applicable to almost all work based around sewing throughout the period.¹⁵¹ The implicit feminine nature of this work was key to lack of contemporary interest in legislation: even the 'labourer's daughter' was described as commonly hemming 'a dozen towels before she can go through the alphabet'.¹⁵²

Other emerging employments also conformed to dominant gender ideology, and were therefore not subject to extensive unfavourable discussion or legislation. Contemporaries encouraged middle-class female participation in the emerging office work not already undertaken by men, partially due to the ability to pay low wages to women who saw their employment as temporary, and it was perceived as suitably feminine due to its lack of necessity for physical strength, need for patience and cleanliness.¹⁵³ Light shop work was also suited to feminine skills – 'showing off a piece of silk or muslin, or unrolling a round of ribband' – and allowed time for domestic labour due to shorter hours of work, contributing to its acceptance as a female employment by the end of the period.¹⁵⁴ In 1857, *The Times* argued that the employment of men in these arguably feminine positions led to a scarcity of labour in masculine occupations, and, in addition, that the 'thus unemployed female sex' were 'an excrescence upon society, instead of a useful portion of the whole' in consequence.¹⁵⁵

Lack of legislative constraints, however, did not mean contemporaries always regarded such employments positively. As early as 1843, *The Times* questioned the treatment of dressmakers, noting 'their prolonged hours of labour, the unremitting nature of their employment, the derangement of the whole physical system, the

¹⁵⁰ W.R. Greg, quoted in Ellen Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 62.

¹⁵¹ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841 Volume III*, p. 17.

¹⁵² *The Times*, 2 January 1850.

¹⁵³ *Lady's Newspaper*, 18 December 1858; *The Times*, 2 June 1871; *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 16 September 1871.

¹⁵⁴ *The Times*, 21 September 1857; PP, (1876) XXX.1, *Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, with view to Consolidation and Amendment Volume II*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁵ *The Times*, 21 September 1857.

frequent faintings, heralds of more conformation disease, the blindness and consumption, the dark terminations of their cheerless existence'.¹⁵⁶ Seven years later, their morality was also questioned: 'too many women are driven to the needle through the moral or physical unfitness for superior employments'.¹⁵⁷ An 1864 Commission emphasised the need for protection for dressmakers, stating that it was inevitable that 'great temptations and opportunities for immorality should exist' amongst groups of young women living at their work premises and away from their parents.¹⁵⁸ The Commissioners feared that attempts to regulate this sector would create new problems, leading to the removal of young women 'from the care and superintendence they receive in the houses of their employers, and [exposing] them to the evil of passing through the streets at late hours'.¹⁵⁹ In 1864, women undertaking lace manufacture, were described during an employment commission as unfit to 'undertake the care of a family' due to 'neglect of early education', with infant mortality raised as an issue.¹⁶⁰ Other work, including straw plait making and midwifery, also received censure in this report, even though the work was feminine.¹⁶¹ These examples serve to demonstrate that in many cases, employment itself was viewed as unsuitable, even if the work did not breach gender norms.

According to *The Times* in 1877, the focus of commissioners' reports exposed the public to 'the degrading barbarity' of various female employments, uncovering how women had been 'employed under conditions utterly incompatible with the maintenance of the least respect for the decencies of their sex.'¹⁶² In 1879, another *Times* editorial celebrated the fact that 'a long series of measures has gradually fenced round children and even adult women with safeguards against their own recklessness and the greed of others holding them to various relations of trust.'¹⁶³ Across the period, legislation of female employment deemed women as unable to govern themselves on the basis of their femininity, and continually emphasised that they were suited only for domesticity and maternity.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ *The Times*, 20 March 1843.

¹⁵⁷ *The Times*, 2 January 1850.

¹⁵⁸ PP, (1864) XXII.1, 319, *Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Second Report; Third Report*, p. lxxiv.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. lxxiv.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. xl; *Western Mail*, 9 March 1870; *Liverpool Mercury*, 10 June 1868.

¹⁶² *The Times*, 7 February 1877.

¹⁶³ *The Times*, 1 January 1879.

¹⁶⁴ Rose, 'Protective Labor Legislation', p. 194.

Throughout Europe, protective legislation followed the British pattern, focusing on work that was perceived as unfeminine and ignoring that which was not. Groot called England ‘not only the workshop of the world, but also the first exporter of the gender division of labour’.¹⁶⁵ This can be seen in the similar progression of these legislative endeavours throughout the continent, often a few decades behind Britain.¹⁶⁶ In France, an 1874 Act banned work underground, and an 1892 Act limited the work of women to 11 hours a day and banned night work, extended to permit only 60 late evenings per year in 1900.¹⁶⁷ In Germany, an 1878 labour code banned work underground as well as instituting compulsory maternity leave of three weeks.¹⁶⁸ This was expanded to six weeks in 1891, along with a night work ban and new daily labour limit of 11 hours per day.¹⁶⁹ In Italy, a 1902 Act limited daily work hours, banned night work and the participation of women and children in ‘dangerous’ occupations.¹⁷⁰ These Acts were all connected to concerns regarding gender and the social order. Conversely, in Belgium, female labour was accepted as strong cultural tradition and work tended to be viewed as ungendered. Here, female workers could gain respect through masculine abilities, and no protective legislation was put in

¹⁶⁵ Groot, ‘Foreign Technology and the Gender Division’, p. 63.

¹⁶⁶ France: Judith DeGroat, ‘Virtue, Vice and Revolution: Representations of Parisian Needlewomen in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, in Beth Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 211; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 118; William M. Reddy, ‘The Moral Sense of Farce: The Patois Literature of Lille Factory Laborers, 1848-70’, in Steven Laurence Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp, (eds.), *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 367-368 Frader, ‘Engendering Work and Wages’, p. 150; Stewart, *Women, Work, and the French State*, pp. 3, 20;

Germany: Kathleen Canning, *Languages of Labor and Gender Female Factory Work in Germany, 1850-1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 2, 103; Jean Quataert, ‘Team work in Saxon Homeweaving Families in the Nineteenth Century. A Preliminary Investigation into the Issue of Gender Work Roles’, in Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres and Mary Jo Maynes (eds.), *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: New Studies in Social and Literary History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 1122; Kathleen Canning, ‘Social Policy, Body Politics: Recasting the Social Question in Germany, 1875-1900’, in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 215; Franzoi, *At the Very Least She Pays the Rent*, p. 62;

Russia: Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 34, 214.

¹⁶⁷ Marilyn J. Boxer, ‘Women in Industrial Homework: the Flowermakers of Paris in the Belle Epoque’, *French Historical Studies*, XII (1982), pp. 401-422; Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, p. 85; Stewart, *Women, Work, and the French State*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁸ Robyn Dasey, ‘Women’s Work and the Family: Women Garment Workers in Berlin and Hamburg Before the First World War’, in Richard J. Evans and W.R. Lee (eds.), *The German Family: Essays on the Social History of the Family in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 222; Canning, ‘Social Policy, Body Politics’, p. 218.

¹⁶⁹ Canning, ‘Social Policy, Body Politics’, p. 224.

¹⁷⁰ Francesca Bettio, *The Sexual Division of Labour: the Italian Case* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 148.

place, although women were still expected to be responsible for all domestic chores.¹⁷¹ For most countries in Europe, though, a similar pattern of legislation of employments viewed as unfeminine, along with shifting associated fears from morality to health and maternity and emphasis on the superiority of marriage over work, can be traced.

Running parallel to discussion in the press regarding women and marriage, women and work, and protective legislation, were legal regulations that indirectly dealt with the earnings of wives. For most of the nineteenth century, married women, as dependents, were not able to own property themselves. The principle of coverture, a legal doctrine relating to married women, was part of the common law of Britain. Under this doctrine, a married woman legally had to gain consent from their husband in order to enter a contract, serve as a witness in court, and own property or even have rights over her own earnings. While legal provisions could be put into place to aid rich women about to marry, this was not possible for the working classes.¹⁷² Legally, all earnings made by a working-class married woman belonged to her husband. The wording of the various Factory Acts was such that a woman's husband could be subject to a fine if her work exceeded the set hours, on the grounds that he derived 'direct benefit from the labour'.¹⁷³ Lord Ashley blamed husbands for the overwork of women, again drawing on discourses of dependence.¹⁷⁴ The male breadwinner ideology was clearly influential here.¹⁷⁵

Women did not passively accept this legal precedent, and many fought against it. Throughout 1856 various petitions signed by thousands of working and middle-class women were presented to parliament asking for protection for women's earnings.¹⁷⁶ The following year, a bill proposing the division of marital property between spouses, however, was not passed.¹⁷⁷ It was not until 1868 that another bill

¹⁷¹ Patricia Penn Hilden, *Women, Work, and Politics: Belgium 1830-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 4-5, 16-17, 58, 89; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 162.

¹⁷² Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 72.

¹⁷³ PP, (1867) III.133, *Bill for regulating Hours of Labour for Children, Young Persons and Women employed in Workshops (as amended by Select Committee)*, p. 3; PP, (1845) I.227, *Bill to regulate Labour of Children in Calico Print-works*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁴ Rose, 'From Behind the Women's Petticoats', p. 41.

¹⁷⁵ Rose, 'Protective Labor Legislation', p. 199; Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, p. 97; Davidoff and Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', p. 2; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 140

¹⁷⁶ Lee Holcombe, 'Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law, 1857-1882', in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 10; Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁷ Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p. 73.

was introduced, on the grounds that the existing law was unjust towards working-class women especially.¹⁷⁸ After this point, women officially had the right to own money and property earned through their own work, as well as that received through various other conditions.¹⁷⁹ Not everyone agreed with this change. One *Western Mail* correspondent lamented the successes of the Married Women's Property Bill on these grounds. He argued that feminine nature had 'far less capacity for work, less stable tempers, less calm judgement, less strength of brain as well as of body', and that the 'dependence of women' made previous marital laws necessary.¹⁸⁰ While legislation aimed to prevent what it saw as the worst excesses of female employment, it also acknowledged and provided for its existence.

The pervasive nature of the assumed discourse of feminine dependence and other discourses relating to femininity, and how this sometimes diverged from reality, can also be seen in the Women's Movement that emerged in the latter part of the period. While the use of the term 'women's movement' is symbolic as a signifier of political campaigns for universal suffrage, in this period it indicated a primarily economic movement. This women's movement began mid-century in London, and individual feminists campaigned for further opportunities for female employment throughout the 1850s. Barbara Leigh Smith, for example, founded the publication *Women and Work* in 1857, giving advice to women seeking employment.¹⁸¹ SPEW, or the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, was established by these women in 1859.¹⁸² They published the *English Women's Journal*, aimed at all women who undertook employment.¹⁸³ As Vicinus has pointed out, while suffrage was an important symbolic issue, at this point, employment opportunities for women

¹⁷⁸ Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), p. 148; Rose, *Limited Livelihoods*, p. 63; PP, (1867-68) VII.339, *Select Committee on Married Women's Property Bill. Special Report, Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, Index*, pp. iv, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Holcombe, 'Victorian Wives and Property', p. 20.

¹⁸⁰ *Western Mail*, 31 July 1869.

¹⁸¹ Joyce Senders Pedersen, 'Victorian Liberal Feminism and the 'Idea' of Work', in Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson (eds.), *Women and Work Culture: Britain c.1850-1950* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2005), p. 27.

¹⁸² Rosemary Feurer, 'The Meaning of "Sisterhood": the British Women's Movement and Protective Labour Legislation, 1870-1900', *Victorian Studies*, 31:2 (1988), p. 235.

¹⁸³ James D. Young, *Women and Popular Struggles: a History of British Working-Class Women, 1560-1984* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1985), p. 75; Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class*, p. 175; Feurer, 'The Meaning of "Sisterhood"', pp. 233, 235; Pedersen, 'Victorian Liberal Feminism', p. 30.

were a crucial economic need for many.¹⁸⁴ Emma Paterson, for example, left the Women's Suffrage Association in 1873 on the grounds that promoting work for women, and better working conditions, were more important than political representation at that time.¹⁸⁵ After her departure from the suffrage association, she established the Women's Protective and Provident League with an aim to establish trade unions for women.¹⁸⁶ These female campaigners acknowledged that women themselves wanted work, a fact usually ignored by the press during debates and discussions regarding female employment. *The Treasury of Literature and the Ladies' Treasury*, for example, published in 1874 reported that "'Give us work to do!" [was] the almost universal cry of women of the present day, gently nurtured or otherwise. In most of the public papers and magazines the cry goes up from all quarters.'¹⁸⁷ The same year, an article in *Women and Work* condemned the conception of women as unfree agents, pointing out that many were unhappy with loss of hours and being forced into lower paid occupations.¹⁸⁸

While the women's movement encouraged female employment, it did so within the already established framework of gender norms. During a speech at the Social Science Congress in 1863, Emily Faithful, a women's welfare activist, stated she did not wish to encourage work that involved 'anything intrinsically detrimental to distinctive womanhood [...] we do not want to turn women into men, nor see them doing men's work'.¹⁸⁹ Bessie Parkes, a prominent feminist and campaigner for women's rights, stated that 'no sane person will tolerate the notion of flinging girls into those very temptations and dangers which we lament and regret for boys'.¹⁹⁰ She also disparaged heavy labour as unsuitable for women: 'In Staffordshire they make nails [...] black with soot, muscular, brawny - undelightful to the last degree'.¹⁹¹ Octavia Hill, a social reformer, encouraged education for middle-class women, but made no such provision for the working-classes, assuming they should remain in the

¹⁸⁴ Martha Vicinus, 'Introduction: New Trends in the Study of the Victorian Woman', in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. xv.

¹⁸⁵ Tusan, 'Reforming Work', p. 101.

¹⁸⁶ Davidoff and Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', p. 14.

¹⁸⁷ *The Treasury of Literature and the Ladies' Treasury*, 1 May 1874.

¹⁸⁸ *Women and Work*, 20 June 1874.

¹⁸⁹ Emily Faithful, quoted in Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 50.

¹⁹⁰ Bessie Parkes, quoted in Kay, 'Small Business, Self-Employment and Women's Work-Life Choices', p. 196.

¹⁹¹ Bessie Parkes, quoted in Jordan, 'The Exclusion of Women from Industry in Nineteenth-Century Britain', p. 288.

private sphere.¹⁹² These women internalised gendered ideologies themselves, in most cases ceasing involvement in the movement once married, although sometimes coming back once their children were grown.¹⁹³ They saw work as necessary only for women who could not marry, or had not yet done so.¹⁹⁴ In many cases too, they argued that employment was justified as it taught important skills that could be used once married.¹⁹⁵ Domestic discourse was used to promote their aims: in the majority of cases, females were able to enter new roles because of this emphasis on femininity, rather than any challenge to dominant ideologies.¹⁹⁶

The ways in which female involvement in the political arena were described by contemporaries also demonstrates the extent to which gendered ideologies impacted upon official legal action, and the ways in which ideology and reality were not always congruent. The incompatibility of femininity and the public sphere was emphasised continually in legislation and discussion relating to female employment, but this was not the only aspect of the public arena represented as unsuitable. Disqualification of women from political citizenship, justified by gender discourse, was present throughout the century.¹⁹⁷ Those seeking to exclude women from the political sphere employed the perceived negative characteristics of femininity, contrary to positive domestic discourses. In an 1869 *Western Mail* article, discussion regarding the continued use of a partition in the ladies section of the House of Commons, designed to block MPs from seeing women, demonstrates the fear and apprehension of female interaction with the public sphere: 'If ladies once gained admission to the House even of the qualified sort which is granted to "strangers" and

¹⁹² Octavia Hill, quoted in Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 32.

¹⁹³ Vicinus, 'Introduction: New Trends in the Study of the Victorian Woman', p. x.

¹⁹⁴ Jane Lewis, 'Introduction: Reconstructing Women's Experience of Home and Family', in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 2; Moira Maconachie, 'Women's Work and Domesticity in the *English Women's Journal*, 1858-1864', in Sally Alexander, (ed.), *Studies in the History of Feminism 1850s-1930s* (London: Information Office, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of London, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁹⁵ Gill Burke, 'The Decline of the Independent Bal Maiden: The Impact of Change in the Cornish Mining Industry', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 181.

¹⁹⁶ Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 30; Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Introduction: Some Paradoxes of Empowerment', in Eileen Janes Yeo, (ed.), *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 8; Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, pp. 140-141; Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 15; Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 106; Poovey, *Making a Social Body*, p. 43.

¹⁹⁷ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. x.

reporters, who could tell where they would stop; whether, in fact, they would stop at all, until they got possession of the Speaker's chair?'¹⁹⁸

In May 1871, when the House of Commons undertook discussion regarding votes for women, many of the same arguments used by exponents of women's employment were articulated. Mr Eastwick, MP, in favour of the extension of the franchise, noted that 'the possession of the municipal and educational suffrages had not impaired the position of women as wives and mothers'. Gladstone too, argued that:

The number of absolutely self-dependent women was increasing year by year, especially in the great towns of the country, and it was found not only a matter of necessity, but of practice, that no day passed when, as a girl approached womanhood it did not become the duty of the father to remind the girl she must begin to think for herself, and set about providing for herself. The increase in the number of self-dependent women was a serious fact, because they were assuming the heaviest burdens of man, while they approached the task under much greater difficulties than men [...] We scarcely ever saw in the hands of women employment that properly belonged to men, but we constantly saw in the hands of men employment that might more advantageously and more economically be in the hands of women.

Still, he ultimately opposed the bill on the grounds it involved the personal presence of women at elections. Mr Bouverie, MP, argued that 'to mix up women with the scenes which occurred at a contested election would be contaminating a sex whose honesty and purity we were bound to protect' emphasising dependence as an inherent characteristic of femininity, and Mr James, MP, argued that women's 'sympathetic nature' made them unsuitable for the political sphere. The Bill was rejected by a majority of 69, which was 'received with cheers'.¹⁹⁹ While women emphasised their ability to participate in the political arena on the grounds that they too had expertise, such as in 'educating children', this did not always help their cause during the period.²⁰⁰ Instead, gendered constructions of dependence were once more used to block female involvement with the public sphere.

Nevertheless, some women were able to enter the political arena. Rose Crawshay, an iron master's wife and key female philanthropist in Merthyr Tydfil, for example, in a speech during a female suffrage demonstration at Merthyr in 1873, referred to legislation concerning women workers, including the 'Shop Hours

¹⁹⁸ *Western Mail*, 12 July 1869.

¹⁹⁹ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 6 May 1871.

²⁰⁰ *Western Mail*, 9 April 1875.

Regulation Bill' and the 'Nine Hours Factory Bill'. She was reported in the *Western Mail* as remarking 'If Mr Mundella and Sir J Lubbock [both politicians who supported the Factory Acts] would only bring in a Bill in the interests of the ladies no one would complain. But they objected to the proposal to legislate for women as though they were children', receiving calls of 'hear, hear'.²⁰¹ Her argument was similar to a viewpoint presented in a letter to the *Leeds Mercury* by Arthur Munby, a diarist deeply interested in female employment, in 1866. He criticised the '[lumping] together' of women and children, and hoped that in the future 'the right of full-grown women to absolute freedom of work and wage, will not be any further infringed by an assembly in which their sex is not even represented at all'.²⁰² These examples, however, were very much the exception to the rule.

Why women were employed at all, given dominant discourses that consistently presented femininity and work as incompatible, is a good question. Employers often used gendered ideologies to justify their need to employ women. Some jobs required what were seen as feminine attributes. Light and delicate work was seen as fitting with feminine dexterity and lightness of hands: an 1834 employment commission considering children's work, for example, argued 'young hands were better at performing the delicate tasks', and extended this to women, too.²⁰³ Even ironworks justified female employment by stating that women's innate dexterity was required to carry out many necessary tasks.²⁰⁴ For the new service employments that opened up at the end of the century for middle-class women, 'quickness of eye and ear, and the delicacy of touch' were key factors, identified here by Frank Scudamore in 1871 during discussion regarding the transfer of the telegraph service and introduction of female telegraphists.²⁰⁵ Feminine manner and personal presentation were also important attributes sought in potential employees in these middle-class jobs.²⁰⁶ Stitcher, a sociologist, has pointed out that this dexterity

²⁰¹ *Western Mail*, 15 October 1873.

²⁰² *Leeds Mercury*, 24 February 1866.

²⁰³ *Report on Employment of Children in Factories 1834*, quoted in Neil Raven, 'A 'Humbler, Industrious Class of Female' Women's Employment and Industry in the Small Towns of Southern England, c. 1790-1840', in Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K.D.M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600-1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 175.

²⁰⁴ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 28.

²⁰⁵ Frank Scudamore, quoted in Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 12.

²⁰⁶ Ellen Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: the Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Gender & History*, 8 (1996), p. 66.

was a skill derived from prior training in domestic labour, rather than an innate ability, a fact ignored by contemporary employers.²⁰⁷

In many cases, this alleged feminine dexterity was secondary to the most important reason women were employed: the low cost of female labour.²⁰⁸ The nature of industrial concerns meant employers were often at the mercy of market cycles and institutional changes, with differing amounts of workers necessary at different times.²⁰⁹ Women were seen as a 'reservoir [...] of cheap labour power', able to undertake these positions.²¹⁰ Many employers established businesses in areas with a high female population to take advantage of this. In Essex, for example, entrepreneurs established silk and lace factories precisely because of the high female population and thus the presence of cheap labour.²¹¹ Some employers even discouraged industrial development, on the grounds it would reconstitute jobs as skilled, and necessitate male employment.²¹² In addition, women were viewed by contemporary employers as being easily disciplined and compliant, willing to carry out the routine and monotonous work that men were reluctant to undertake.²¹³ They were also believed to be less likely to combine for better conditions or higher wages, as in the case of men, due to exclusion and non-continuous participation in the labour

²⁰⁷ Sharon Stichter, 'Women, Employment and the Family: Current Debates', in Sharon Stichter and Jane Parpart (eds.), *Women, Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour* (London, 1990), p. 17.

²⁰⁸ Eve Hostettler, 'Gourlay Steell and the Sexual Division of Labour', *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), p. 95; Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan [etc.], 1975), p. 10; Raven, 'A 'Humbler, Industrious Class of Female'', p. 176; Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p. 82; Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, p. 29; Frader, 'Doing Capitalism's Work', p. 297.

²⁰⁹ Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 40; Pamela Sharpe, 'Introduction', in Pamela Sharpe (ed.), *Women's Work: the English Experience, 1650-1914* (London; New York: Arnold, 1998), p. 3; Sylvia Walby, 'Theories of Women, Work, and Unemployment', in Linda Murgatroyd et al (eds.), *Localities, Class and Gender* (London: Pion, 1985), pp. 146-151; Sonya O. Rose, "'Gender at Work': Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism", *History Workshop Journal*, 21 (1986), p. 115; Marguerite Dupree, 'Women as Wives and Workers in the Staffordshire Potteries in the Nineteenth Century', in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 140; Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover, *A Hidden Workforce: Homeworkers in England, 1850-1985* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Education [New York, N.Y.]: Distributed in the U.S.A. by New York University Press, 1989), p. 5; Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 68.

²¹⁰ Alexander, 'Women's Work', p. 78.

²¹¹ Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p. 38; Raven, 'A 'Humbler, Industrious Class of Female'', p. 177.

²¹² Jane Gray, 'Gender and Uneven Working-Class Formation in the Irish Linen Industry', in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 44; Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 13; Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, p. 66; Pennington and Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, p. 36.

²¹³ Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 43; Busfield, 'Skill and The Sexual Division of Labour', p. 163.

market.²¹⁴ In some sectors, too, the employment of women was used to reinforce men's elevated position in the workplace hierarchy. The alleged inherently feminine lack of ambition and improbability that women would expect promotion directly influenced the choice of new, office-based companies to employ females later in the century.²¹⁵ Additionally, as women were likely to leave when they married, employers were able to create a synthetic turnover of staff, allowing male employees to progress in their own distinct job hierarchy.²¹⁶

Employers who were not influenced by these advantages and avoided hiring women were not necessarily influenced by 'humanitarian concern' for women influenced by gender ideologies.²¹⁷ Instead, many chose to reinforce the ideal of male breadwinner, because it was a stabilising force that encouraged hard work and commitment from men. Barrett and McIntosh argued that this was the main reason many employers were involved in protective legislation.²¹⁸ Conversely, those who objected to legislation were usually fighting against government interference rather than for the protection of women.²¹⁹ Many of these employers profited from female employment, but were unwilling to admit that this was the case.²²⁰ By offering low wages, Rowbotham argues, they were able to state that they were not tempting women out of the home.²²¹

It is clear that where the female employment question was concerned, complex gendered ideologies were used and manipulated in a variety of ways over the period. However, while pervasive gender ideology meant women's work was often defined as abnormal and improper throughout the period, even in the face of

²¹⁴ Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), p. 109; Heidi Hartmann, 'Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex', *Signs*, 1 (1976), p. 149; John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 22; Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, p. 111; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 196; Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, p. 29; Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 53.

²¹⁵ Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 43.

²¹⁶ Meta Zimmeck, 'Jobs For The Girls: The Expansion of Clerical Work for Women, 1850-1914', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 159; Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential', p. 69; Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p. 60; Lown, *Women and Industrialization*, p. 49.

²¹⁷ Pahl, 'Historical Aspects of Work', p. 13.

²¹⁸ Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'The 'Family Wage'', in Elizabeth Whitelegg [et al] (eds.), *The Changing Experience of Women* (Oxford: Blackwell in association with Open University, 1984), pp. 73-74.

²¹⁹ Wanda Fraiken Neff, *Victorian Working Women: an Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions 1832-1850* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1966), p. 65; Lown, *Women and Industrialization*, p. 4.

²²⁰ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 27.

²²¹ Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, p. 29.

extensive legislation, women's work was a largely accepted feature of society by the turn of the century. Queen Victoria was reported in *Women and Work* in 1874 as approving of the fact that 'new branches of industry are opened to the female portion of her subjects'.²²² This fact alone calls into question the potency of ideological agitation upon the realities of female employment. The suitability of various types of work for women, however, continued to be a matter for extensive discussion. Female employment was accepted, and even encouraged, only if it allowed women workers to conform to gender norms. *The Times* in 1860 lamented the 'prejudice' against women's employment, noting that:

Ladies themselves prefer shopmen to shopwomen. Very few women are ever seen in a counting house. They are almost excluded from railway employments. Many thousands of dame schools have disappeared under the new and grander systems of education. Even in the case of female amateurs in any of these provinces the stronger sex meets them with harsh criticism and insulting suspicion. Bluestockings, female artists, authoresses, lady teachers in charity schools, lady visitors among the poor, lady nurses, are all stigmatised as poachers, and warned off the manor.²²³

Similarly, in a *Western Mail* article published in 1874, married women assisting their husbands in business, and single women undertaking feminine employment in the arts were praised. Conversely, female agricultural workers were described as 'burdened and toiling in the fields, as women were once found toiling underground in English mines', and the list of jobs women were excluded from, including 'certain walks of athletic life [...] the church, the law, and medicine' was given without question.²²⁴

As Sandra Burman has indicated, 'there is a close correlation between what is thought fitting for people to do and what they are thought capable of doing'.²²⁵ This interconnection can clearly be seen in contemporary debates regarding women's work in the nineteenth century. Alleged dependence and lack of agency was one of the most important facets of femininity continually highlighted in the nineteenth-century press, protective legislation and associated debates, the women's movement, and by middle-class employers, for their own varying aims. The extent to which these reflected reality, however, is difficult to ascertain. Some evidence appears to

²²² *Women and Work*, 25 July 1874.

²²³ *The Times*, 2 November 1860.

²²⁴ *Western Mail*, 27 March 1874.

²²⁵ Sandra Burman, 'Introduction', in Sandra Burman, *Fit Work for Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 9.

reinforce the stereotype. William Menelaus, manager of Dowlais, for example, described the necessity of employing women and children at the blast furnace on a Sunday in 1866. He argued that banning this labour would be detrimental on the grounds that occasional hands were difficult to find, especially at the weekend when men were likely to 'idle and spend'.²²⁶ Women, on the other hand, did not have a choice, and needed to take employment when it was offered, regardless of their own preferences. Even discussions of the necessity for employment draw upon the characteristic of dependence. In 1860, *The Times* highlighted the plight of women who wished to procure 'food and clothing for themselves and for those who depend on their dependence', using chivalric symbolism to conjure an image of a damsel in distress, in need of a 'patron'. The conclusion, 'why do not men do for women what women cannot do for themselves, and open new opportunities for the beings who are forbidden to seek their own fortunes?', makes clear their stance on women's capabilities.²²⁷ Women may have founded their identities around the home in the face of legislation removing them from the workforce.²²⁸ However, we cannot extrapolate from these and other examples that helplessness was indeed an inherent feminine characteristic during the period, as evidence from the two study districts will show.

The conflicting nature of domesticity and femininity with the world of work was at the heart of the ultimately middle-class condemnation of female employment throughout the nineteenth century.²²⁹ Whether this formalisation of separate spheres that appeared in the resulting legislation reflected or influenced reality is an important consideration.²³⁰ Given the importance placed upon femininity and the private sphere, the very existence of female employment was often labelled as destabilising by many contemporaries in positions of power, yet it increased in significance over the period.²³¹ As Goose points out, one of the most important questions historians of women's work need to answer is 'how large was the gap between ideology and reality?'²³² In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, as the remainder of the thesis will demonstrate, the two were often dichotomous.

²²⁶ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 7 DG/C/5/15-16.

²²⁷ *The Times*, 2 November 1860.

²²⁸ Humphries, 'Women and Paid Work', p. 100.

²²⁹ Sharpe, 'The Female Labour Market in English Agriculture', p. 57.

²³⁰ Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p. 128.

²³¹ Morgan, *Women Workers and Gender Identities*, p. 78.

²³² Goose, 'Working Women in Industrial England', p. 27.

Chapter II

Female employment, occupational diversity and women workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, 1841-1881

The historiography of female employment indicates that during the nineteenth century, heavily industrialised areas were dominated by men, with few work opportunities for women.¹ Female employment rates in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, however, show a different picture. This chapter will use occupational data gathered from the census to demonstrate that while female employment was certainly less visible in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield than elsewhere in Britain, it was not 'virtually absent'.² Thousands of women participated in the urban and industrial economies of these two ironworking districts, in a wide range of occupational settings. Their work made a vital contribution to the urban economies of the two districts, and to the national industrial prosperity of nineteenth-century Britain.

This first half of this chapter gives a broad picture of female employment trends in the study districts: the patterns displayed will be looked at in far more detail in conjunction with different occupational groupings as the thesis progresses. The proportion and number of women workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield will be presented in conjunction with national employment trends to demonstrate that while female employment in the districts was lower than the national average, it was still significant. The patterns displayed call into question the impact of gender ideology on female employment, which will instead be interpreted with reference to economic fluctuations, social changes, and urban developments. Subsequently, illustration and discussion of the occupations undertaken by women workers in the study districts will demonstrate that they participated in a diverse range of jobs, and made important contributions to local economic and community life. Evidence drawn from sources including parliamentary papers, ironworks records and newspapers indicates that, as with broad employment trends, national and local social, economic and urban trends heavily influenced occupational patterns. In addition, wide-ranging and multifaceted factors impacted upon specific occupational opportunities, given detailed attention in the remainder of the thesis.

¹ Humphries and Snell, 'Introduction', p. 3; Walker, 'Pleasurable Homes', p. 331; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 3.

² Jordan, 'The Exclusion of Women from Industry in Nineteenth-Century Britain', p. 276.

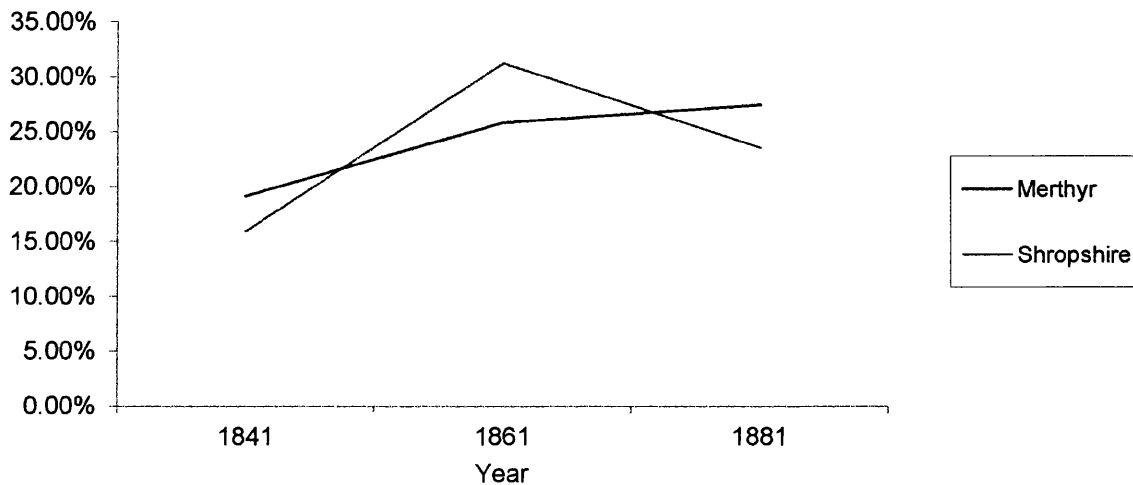
Following examination of broad employment and occupational patterns, who the typical woman worker in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was will be discussed in detail, again drawing upon quantitative data from the census. The evidence found here also contributes to an understanding of broad female employment patterns. Marital status, for example, was the most influential factor determining whether a woman would work or not in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period. Married women made up the largest proportion of women in both study districts, and were also the least likely to work. Similarly, the high fertility rates of the industrial districts meant there were a large proportion of women, married, widowed and single, with children, who were equally unlikely to be employed. These factors alone explain the low proportion of women workers in comparison to national female employment patterns. The demographic profile of the typical woman worker in the study districts corresponded with contemporary gender discourse, yet as with occupational patterns, realisation of ideological norms was not the sole explanation. Again, evidence found in national and local newspaper reports, parliamentary papers, ironworks records and Poor Law documentation will be used to demonstrate that various national and localised factors not directly associated with gender also affected whether or not a woman would work.

Throughout, this chapter demonstrates that female employment patterns in the study districts cannot be explained by discourse alone. Urban, social, and economic developments in wider British society and in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in particular were all equally consequential. Here, and in the remainder of the thesis, the importance of examining geographically-specific evidence in order to fully explain women's work in the nineteenth century is made clear.

Female employment and occupational diversity

Examination of female employment and occupational diversity in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield demonstrates that women's work cannot be fully explained with reference to gender ideology. Cyclical trade cycles, increased urbanisation, and changes in social structure, along with national and local developments specific to individual occupational groupings, were all important.

Figure 1. Proportion of women employed in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), Public Record Office (PRO): Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Merthyr Tydfil. HO107/1415/4-13, Broseley. HO107/928/2-5, Dawley Magna. HO107/904/5-9, Madeley. HO107/928/12-5, Wellington 7-13. HO107/907/4-6, Wombridge. HO107/907/10; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1861. Merthyr Tydfil. RG9/4050-62, Broseley. RG9/1859, Dawley. RG9/1855-56, Madeley. RG9/1857-8, Wellington 8-10, 13-15. RG9/1858-9, Wombridge. RG9/1900; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1881. Merthyr Tydfil. RG11/5308-18, Broseley. RG11/2639, Dawley. RG11/2635-6, Madeley. RG11/2637-8, Wellington 8-14. RG11/2679-80, Wombridge. RG11/2682.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of women over the age of 14 in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield who, according to the census, engaged in paid employment in the years 1841, 1861, and 1881. In Merthyr Tydfil, there was a progressive growth over time. Women workers increased from 19.12 per cent of total females in the district in 1841 to 25.75 per cent in 1861, and finally, to 27.37 per cent in 1881.³ In the Shropshire Coalfield, an increase from 15.9 per cent in 1841 to 31.17 per cent in 1861 was followed by a decline to 23.48 per cent in 1881. The most important trend indicated above was that in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, the proportion of women employed was higher at the end of the period than at the beginning. This overall increase corresponded with national female employment patterns, shown in Table 1.

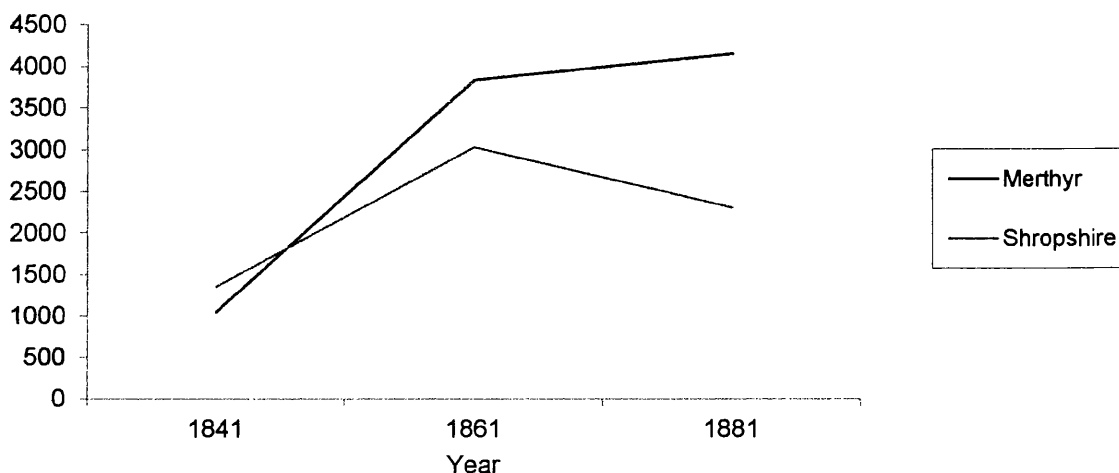
³ It is worth noting again that the percentage of females employed given for Merthyr in 1841 could actually be higher, given the missing census data for Dowlais, an area in close proximity to a large ironworks.

Table 1. National female employment rates 1841-1881.

Year	Total (%)
1841	19
1861	31
1881	26

Source: PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Abstract Return pursuant to Act for taking Account of Population of Great Britain (Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841)*, p. 297; PP, (1863) L.III, *Census of England and Wales 1861: General Report; Summary Tables, Abstracts of Ages, Occupations and Birthplaces of People, Division I. to Division III*, p. xl; PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III. (Ages, Condition as to Marriage, Occupations and Birthplaces)*, p. vi.

Figure 2. Number of women employed in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Table 1 includes women of all ages. In 1841 and 1861, the census abstracts also presented statistics of female employment by age: in 1841, 24 per cent of women over 20 worked, increasing to 41 per cent in 1861.⁴ These figures underline the point that female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was consistently lower than the national average. This does not mean it was insignificant, however. In each year surveyed, a multitude of women worked, and this increased over the period. In Merthyr Tydfil, the number of women employed grew between 1841 and 1861 from 1050 (of 5429) to 3834 (of 14892), increasing

⁴ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841*, p. 297; PP, (1863) L.III, *Census of England and Wales 1861: General Report; Summary Tables, Abstracts of Ages, Occupations and Birthplaces of People, Division I. to Division III*, p. xl.

again to 4145 (of 15142) in 1881, shown in Figure 2. In the Shropshire Coalfield, an increase between 1841 and 1861 from 1349 (of 8482) to 3029 (of 9717) was followed by a decline to 2304 (of 9811) by 1881.⁵ Many more may have taken part in casual, remunerative work that was not always recorded by the census enumerators.

The female employment patterns shown in Figures 1 and 2 immediately call into question the impact of gender discourse on women's work in the study districts. In spite of increasing castigation of female employment by middle-class contemporaries, it increased over the period. Perhaps more importantly, it grew dramatically between 1841 and 1861. It is worth noting that census enumerators were reminded in the years following 1841 to record the regular occupations of all women, which may have impacted upon the figures somewhat. Nevertheless, this is not enough to explain the large increase, as will become apparent throughout the thesis. The 1840s was an era of widespread discussion and legislation of female employment, shown in chapter one, yet these ideological campaigns did not appear to have had a discernible impact on women's overall participation in the workforce, either in the study districts or nationally.

The significant increase in female employment over the first half of the period, and subsequent decline that still left employment higher at the end than at the beginning of the period, can instead be partially explained by national and local economic conditions. Historians have indicated that while 1841 and 1881 were years of depression and mild prosperity respectively, a comparative economic 'boom' between 1851 and 1861 meant more jobs were available.⁶ Economic fluctuations were especially influential to employment rates in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, as they were both dominated by industries that were 'dependent on highly capitalised undertakings, thus exposed to market forces' at a higher level than those in other areas.⁷

Cyclical expansions and contractions in trade were pronounced in both districts, and these affected employment opportunities for both sexes. Between 1830

⁵ As the period progressed, the disparity between the number of individual women employed in the study districts became larger. This can partially be attributed to population size: by 1881, Merthyr had far more inhabitants than the Shropshire Coalfield. To avoid any obscuration, proportionate employment patterns will also be given throughout the thesis where necessary.

⁶ Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole (eds.), *British Economic Growth, 1688-1959: Trends and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 171; John McKay, 'Married Women and Work in Nineteenth Century Lancashire: the Evidence of the 1851 and 1861 Census Reports', *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), p. 33.

⁷ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 218.

and 1860 the production of pig iron in the Shropshire Coalfield doubled, yet this growth halted by 1867.⁸ By the end of the period, mining in the district was in decline, industrial closures were widespread, and unemployment was rife.⁹ The iron industry's misfortune led to widespread furnace stoppages and closures in the district.¹⁰ In Merthyr Tydfil, too, industrial expansion and prosperity can be traced until the 1860s.¹¹ As seen in Shropshire, the subsequent trade depression also prompted furnace closures.¹² By 1881, economic stagnation pervaded both study districts. The effect of industrial fluctuations on female employment in the study districts will be considered in far greater detail in chapter three. Needless to say, the impact of these trade cycles meant job security was unlikely for either sex. In addition, evidence suggests that throughout Britain, this insecurity was far more pronounced for women workers than their male counterparts.¹³

Even in the face of industrial stagnation, female employment was higher in 1881 than at the start of the period in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. This can partially be attributed to the extensive urbanisation that took place in both districts over the period, already outlined in the introduction. Urban development throughout Britain, and in the study districts in particular, created many non-industrial jobs that were undertaken by men and women of all classes. Urbanisation can also be linked to the increase of the middle class in both study districts, a socio-economic shift that contributed to an expansion of work opportunities for women.¹⁴ The impact of urban and socio-economic developments on a variety of occupations undertaken by women in the study districts will be

⁸ Ibid, p. 112; Barrie Trinder, 'Ironbridge: The Cradle of Industrialisation', *History Today*, 33:4 (1983), pp. 30-34, p. 30.

⁹ D. C. Cox, 'Little Wenlock', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.11 (Oxford: Oxford U.P. for the Institute of Historical Research, 1985), p. 78; Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 35; Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 135.

¹⁰ Emyr Thomas, *Coalbrookdale and the Darbys* (York: Ironbridge Gorge museum trust, Ebor Press, 1999), p. 178; Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 30; *Wenlock Express*, 22 January 1881, 7 May 1881, 30 July 1881, 3 September 1881.

¹¹ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 7.

¹² Barry Brunt, 'Economic Development in the Merthyr and Rhymney Valleys 1851-1913. a Comparative Study', in *Merthyr Historian*, volume 4 (Merthyr Tydfil: Merthyr Tydfil Historical Society, 1989), p. 139; Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 29; Morris and Williams, *South Wales Coal Industry*, p. 90; Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 118; Jones, 'Inspecting the 'Extraordinary Drain'', p. 101.

¹³ Ellen Jordan, 'Female Unemployment in England and Wales 1851-1911: an Examination of the Census Figures for 15-19 year olds', *Social History*, 13:2 (1988), p. 176; Evans, 'As Rich as California...', pp. 115-116; Humphries, 'Women and Paid Work', p. 100; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 70.

¹⁴ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 41; Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 22.

analysed in chapters four and five. It is worthy of note here, though, that differing patterns of female employment over time in the study districts, seen in Figures 1 and 2, can also be partially explained by urbanisation: by the end of the period, Merthyr was the more diverse and developed of the pair, and further non-industrial job opportunities were open to women as a result.

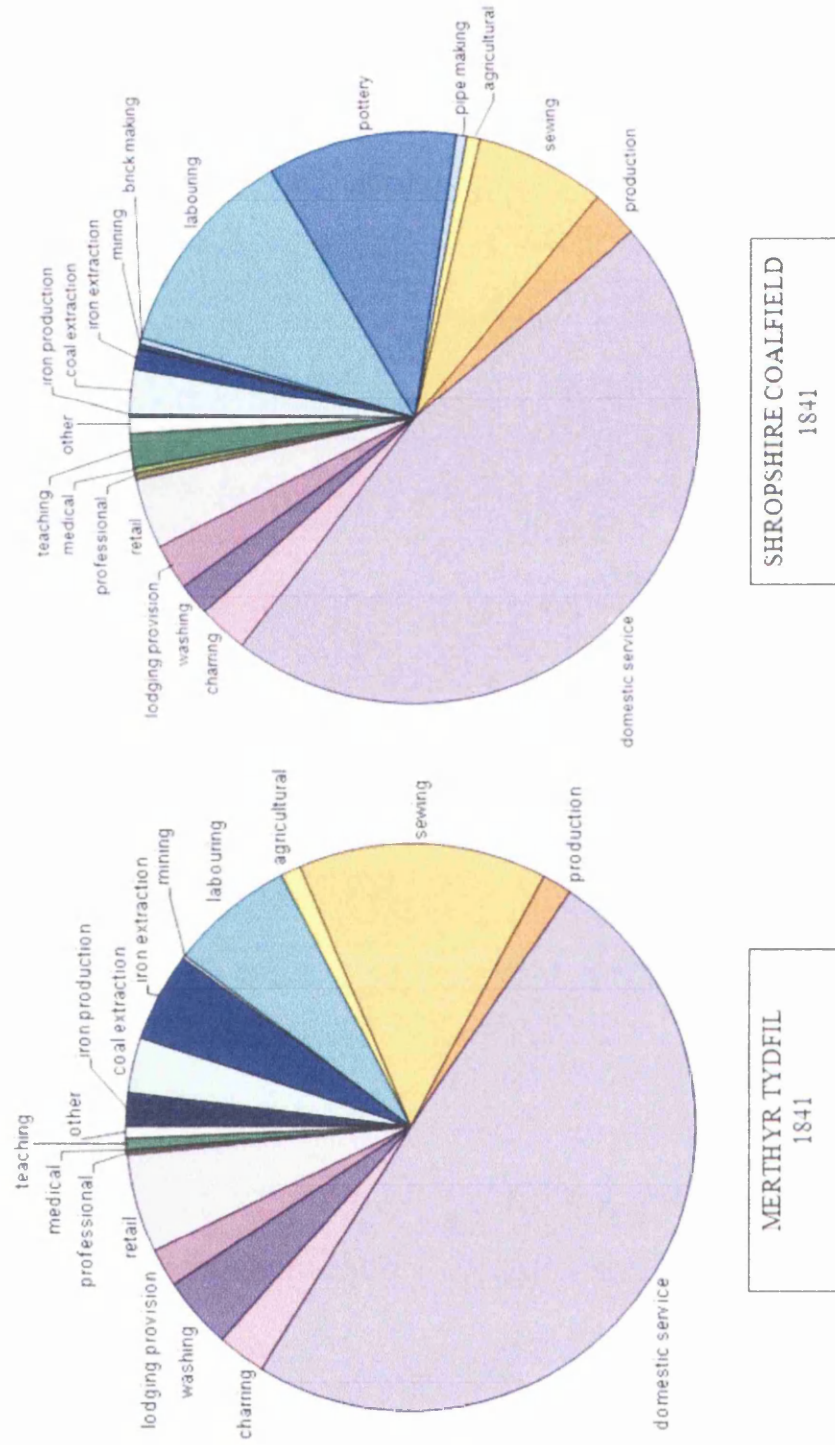
Employment patterns can also be explained with reference to the types of work women did. Women workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield participated in a wide range of occupations during the period, shown in Figure 3. Classifying the hundreds of individual occupations recorded by enumerators in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was a complex undertaking. While the General Census Reports of each year allocated individual job descriptions under one heading, this was structured around the materials worked with, rather than the type of work engaged.¹⁵ In addition, these changed yearly, making comparison nigh on impossible. For the purposes of the present study, historiographical trends and consideration of types of work were used to create categories that facilitate comparison.¹⁶

As Figures 3, 4 and 5 show, not only were women workers very much present, they participated in wide-ranging, variegated occupations. The work women did in these diverse occupational settings was crucial to the economic life of the study districts. Contemporaries may have viewed female employment in the heavy industries as subsidiary, but the number of important processes these women undertook in the various settings of the ironworks and coalbanks were vital to production. Other women may not have sorted coal or smelted iron, but they still made a fundamental contribution to the communities of the study districts. Women of all classes provided lodgings for the vast workforce necessary to man the ironworks. They carried out the necessary domestic labour other women were unwilling or unable to do. They educated the future generations. They participated in the developing urban service economies of both districts, through paid and voluntary work, contributing to local urban growth. This has important implications for our

¹⁵ Higgs, 'Household and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses of England and Wales', p. 74.

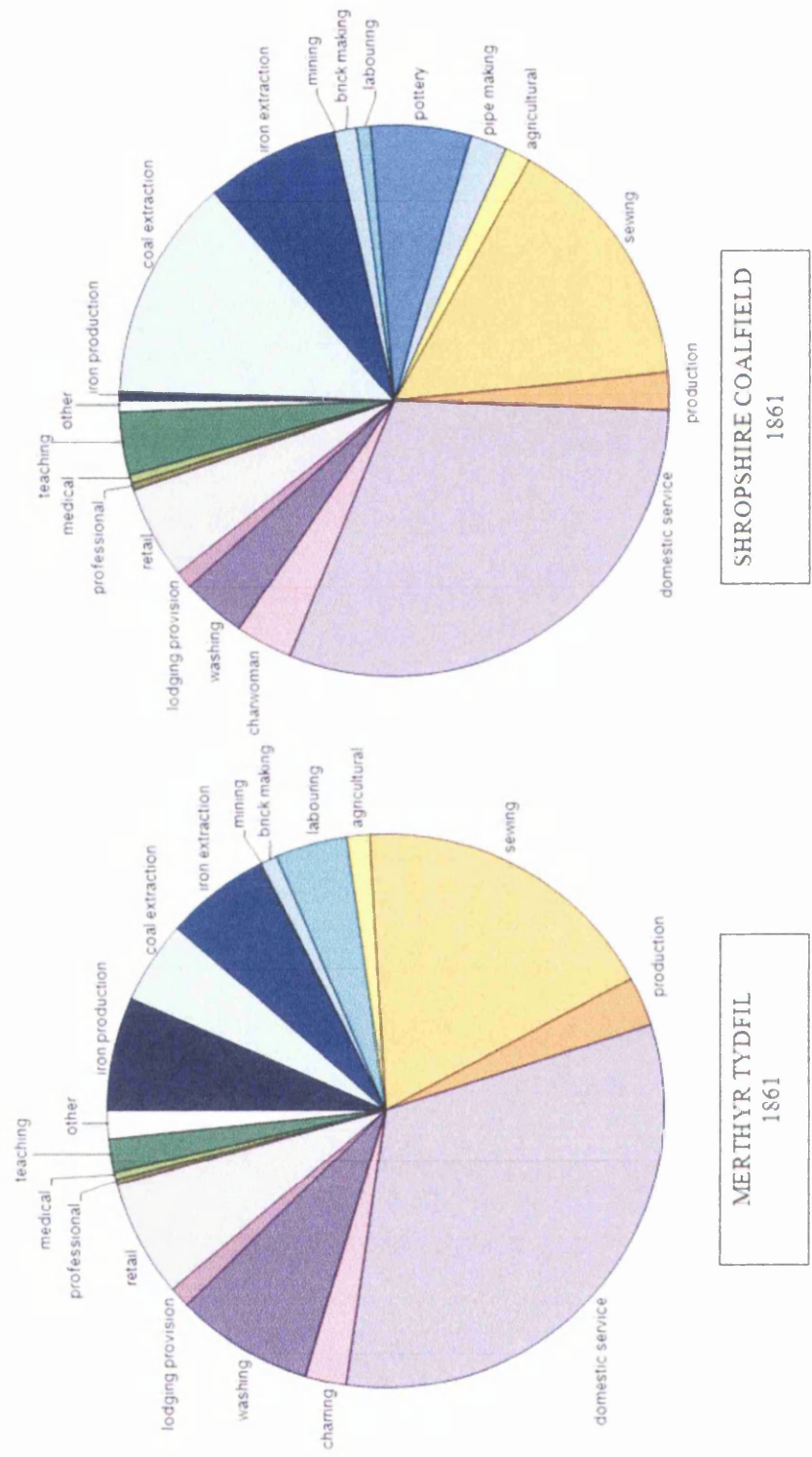
¹⁶ In the case of women whose occupation was not clear (assistants, for example), they were allocated to the occupation held by their head of household. If this was not possible or clearly incorrect, they were placed in the category of 'other'.

Figure 3. Occupations of females employed in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in 1841.



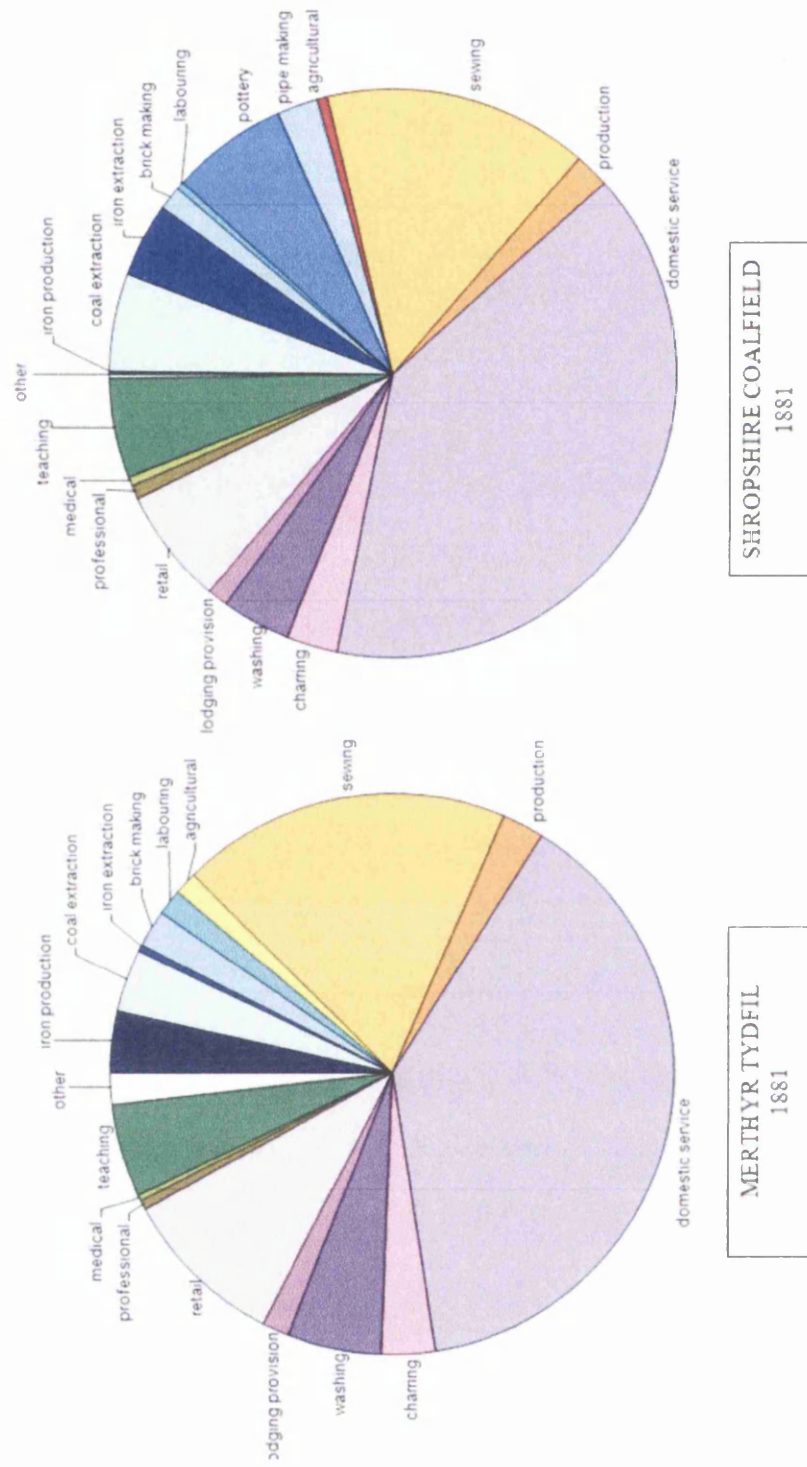
Source: As Figure 1.

Figure 4. Occupations of females employed in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in 1861.



Source: As Figure 1.

Figure 5. Occupations of females employed in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in 1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

understanding of female employment: even in two districts where it was relatively low in comparison to national trends, women workers were involved in almost all aspects of local economic and community life.

The occupational categories shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5 have also been divided into four broad groupings for the purpose of analysis: industrial primary and secondary occupations; non-industrial primary and secondary occupations; tertiary service and sales occupations; and tertiary professional occupations. In-depth consideration of each of these four divisions, including examination of overall patterns, occupational sectors, and individual jobs, will be undertaken in chapters three, four, five and six in turn. These four occupational groupings warrant separate examination, and patterns found in each can be attributed to a range of both very similar and strikingly distinct factors. Yet, as the remainder of the thesis will demonstrate, considered in conjunction with one another, these analyses contribute to a comprehensive understanding of female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

In addition to the remarkable occupational diversity found in the study districts, three other overarching trends are displayed in Figures 3, 4 and 5. These will all be examined in far greater detail, and in conjunction with qualitative evidence from the study districts, in the following four chapters. The first pattern of interest can be found in the industrial sector. While small, it accounted for a significant number of women workers in the two areas given the slant of the current historiography. This proportion was not stable, however, and fluctuated over the period. Proportionate female employment increased between 1841 and 1861, subsequently decreasing to lower levels than seen at the start of the period by 1881. Again, this trend calls into question the impact of gendered ideology, given that industrial work in particular was subject to extensive criticism and legislation in the earlier part of the period, before the increase. It is of course important to note that increasing urbanisation and wider job opportunities in non-industrial occupations may have impacted upon the proportion of women workers who participated in industrial occupations. This does not fully explain the variations over time, however. As chapter three will demonstrate, trade cycles and commercial shifts within the iron and coal industries directly affected work opportunities for women in related occupations. These economic developments were far more influential than

ideological campaigns for women working in heavy industry in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

Another trend displayed in Figures 3, 4 and 5, the gradual increase in the proportion of women participating in tertiary professional work, will be given closer attention in chapter five. This steady growth reflected British and European trends that culminated in changed attitudes to the work of single middle-class women in particular, those most likely to undertake professional employment. At the same time, the local character of the study districts, as well as developments within them, were also influential. The middle class expanded notably in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period. As the proportion of these women living in the districts increased, it comes as no surprise that their presence in the professional workforce became more noticeable. This alone does not account for the overall increase, however. Local urban expansion was also key, and contributed to the creation of more opportunities in professional occupations. At the same time, the distinct local economies of the study districts meant many of the new occupations that emerged elsewhere were simply not available to women living in the study districts, explaining why this grouping remained relatively small.

Finally, the patterns displayed in Figure 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate that the vast majority of women working in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield participated the tertiary sector, providing services rather than producing goods. The majority of the individual occupations in this sector, too, were either labelled as inherently feminine and thus suitable for women to undertake by contemporaries, or at the very least, accepted as not breaching gender norms. This was in line with national expectations. Instructions given to enumerators in 1851, for instance, gave the following examples of female 'rank[s] and profession[s]':

Countess of ____, Peeress; Landed Proprietor. Gentlewoman; Annuitant.
Lodging-house Keeper. Seamstress. Dressmaker (apprentice). Milliner.
Midwife. Nurse.¹⁷

While these occupations, along with the majority of those shown in the Figures above, were suitably feminine in the eyes of contemporaries, this was not the sole reason for their preponderance. As the remainder of the thesis will show, developments specific to individual occupational categories were of the utmost importance. Numerous, multifaceted factors unrelated to gender, ranging widely

¹⁷ PP, (1852-3) LXXXV.1, *Population Tables, 1851*, p. cxlvii.

from industrial demand to an increased number of schools, changes in fashion to housing provision, to name but a few, directly impacted upon employment opportunities for women living and working in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

While female employment levels in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield may have been lower than the national average, they were still significant. A multitude of women in the study districts worked, in a wide variety of occupational settings. While in many cases their work was in line with contemporary expectations, this cannot be explained by ideology alone, and we must look beyond gender discourse. As demonstrated here and in the remainder of the thesis, urban, social and economic trends were equally influential to female employment patterns over the period. These patterns can also be explained with reference to who the typical woman worker in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was.

Women workers

The typical woman worker in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was young, single, and childless, in line with contemporary expectations based on gender discourse and with national patterns. It would be foolish to dismiss the impact of ideology completely. However, as with broad employment and occupational patterns, this was not a blanket explanatory factor, and localised trends not always directly linked to gender discourse were often equally as important. Relatively high male wages; the heavy domestic responsibilities of industrial workers' wives; potential internalisation of gendered expectations by women; high charitable contributions to widows; and changes in children's employment legislation all impacted heavily upon the likelihood that women of a variety of personal circumstances would work.

Age and employment

In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, women aged 14-29 were the most likely to undertake employment, and consistently accounted for two thirds and three quarters of all females employed in both study districts in each year surveyed.¹⁸ This

¹⁸ As Figure 1

Table 2. Number and proportion of women in each age range employed in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.¹⁹

	1841	1861	1881
14-19	382/987 (39%)	1393/2615 (53%)	1627/2849 (57%)
20-24	288/929 (31%)	934/2203 (42%)	890/1997 (45%)
25-29	118/798 (15%)	409/1896 (22%)	385/1748 (22%)
30-34	57/655 (9%)	261/1826 (14%)	224/1556 (14%)
35-39	40/437 (9%)	177/1418 (12%)	170/1339 (13%)
40-44	45/410 (11%)	167/1220 (14%)	164/1178 (14%)
45-49	23/298 (8%)	150/1095 (14%)	139/1010 (14%)
50-54	27/275 (10%)	99/765 (13%)	147/993 (15%)
55-59	22/209 (11%)	66/594 (12%)	119/706 (17%)
60-64	18/209 (9%)	81/523 (15%)	119/674 (18%)
65-69	8/106 (8%)	35/301 (12%)	81/502 (16%)
70-74	11/88 (13%)	37/245 (15%)	44/311 (14%)
75-79	9/49 (18%)	13/118 (11%)	23/137 (17%)
80+	1/41 (2%)	11/98 (11%)	13/132 (10%)

Source: TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Merthyr Tydfil. HO107/1415/4-13; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1861. Merthyr Tydfil. RG9/4050-62; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1881. Merthyr Tydfil. RG11/5308-18.

Table 3. Number and proportion of women in each age range employed in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

	1841	1861	1881
14-19	473/1521 (31%)	1118/1715 (65%)	802/1558 (51%)
20-24	307/1180 (26%)	685/1398 (49%)	425/1017 (42%)
25-29	126/1033 (12%)	281/1077 (26%)	227/946 (24%)
30-34	91/915 (10%)	181/976 (19%)	147/948 (16%)
35-39	53/705 (8%)	149/804 (19%)	103/851 (12%)
40-44	66/738 (9%)	117/774 (15%)	112/927 (12%)
45-49	41/502 (8%)	109/678 (16%)	102/774 (13%)
50-54	39/500 (8%)	105/610 (17%)	100/710 (14%)
55-59	30/300 (10%)	84/486 (17%)	81/579 (14%)
60-64	44/370 (12%)	84/477 (18%)	75/495 (15%)
65-69	33/265 (12%)	58/303 (19%)	73/413 (18%)
70-74	28/214 (13%)	33/198 (17%)	35/311 (11%)
75-79	9/105 (9%)	16/121 (13%)	13/154 (8%)
80+	6/120 (5%)	9/100 (9%)	9/128 (7%)

Source: TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Broseley. HO107/928/2-5, Dawley Magna. HO107/904/5-9, Madeley. HO107/928/12-5, Wellington 7-13. HO107/907/4-6, Wombridge. HO107/907/10; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1861. Broseley. RG9/1859, Dawley. RG9/1855-56, Madeley. RG9/1857-8, Wellington 8-10, 13-15. RG9/1858-9, Wombridge. RG9/1900; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1881. Broseley. RG11/2639, Dawley. RG11/2635-6, Madeley. RG11/2637-8, Wellington 8-14. RG11/2679-80, Wombridge. RG11/2682.

¹⁹ Those women whose age was not recorded have been excluded from the calculations.

high proportion of young women workers mirrored European trends.²⁰ The average age of women workers was not only extremely similar in the two study districts, but remained remarkably consistent throughout the period. Nevertheless, as Tables 2 and 3 show, women of all ages were more likely to participate in the workforce as the period progressed, in line with increasing female employment as a whole.

Two other significant patterns relating to age and employment can also be traced in the study districts. Firstly, the declining likelihood of employment as women reached 30 remained consistent, even as the proportion of women workers in each age range increased. Secondly, as women reached 55 and above, the probability of employment tended to increase slightly. Both can be explained by marriage, which influenced the removal of women from the workforce over the period as a whole. The majority of women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield stopped working once they wed, and only returned if financial necessity, most often upon being widowed.

Marital status and employment

The impact of a woman's marital status on her experiences of work was dramatic, as shown in Figure 6. Although the 1841 census did not record marital status, use of Higgs' method of approximation demonstrates that single and widowed women were far more likely to work than their married counterparts in this year, too.²¹ Over half of all single women and around a third of all widowed women were employed in each year surveyed, yet married women's work over the period never surpassed 7 per cent. While married women were the least likely to hold remunerative employment throughout Europe, especially in areas dominated by heavy industry, the percentage of married women working in Britain across the century has been estimated at between 13 and 25 per cent.²² The levels seen in the study districts were therefore

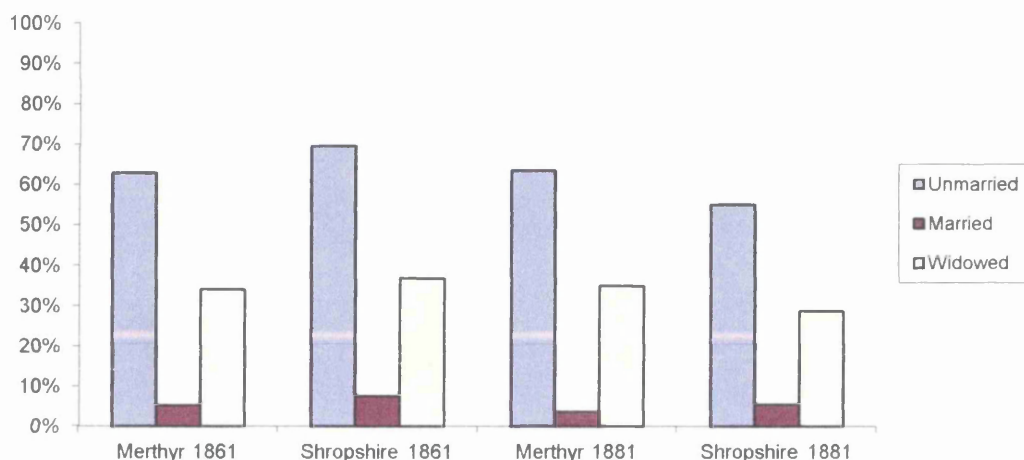
²⁰ Joan W. Scott, 'The Woman Worker', in Genevieve Fraisse and Michelle Perrott (eds.), *A History of Women in the West: Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, iv, (Cambridge, Mass. 1993), p. 401; Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, p. 87; Frader, 'Doing Capitalism's Work', p. 305; Dupree, 'Women as Wives and Workers', p. 147; Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 9; Walker, 'Pleasurable Homes', p. 330.

²¹ Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census*, p. 75.

²² Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, 'Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500-1900', *Economic History Review*, 44:4 (1991), p. 615; Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, 'Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe', in Alice H. Amsden (ed.), *The Economics of Women and Work* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 96; Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 32; Baylis, 'Visual Cruising', p. 11; Franconi, *At the Very Least she Pays the Rent*, p. 5;

low even in comparison to national trends: Merthyr Tydfil had the lowest rates of married women's employment in Great Britain as a whole in this period, and the Shropshire Coalfield was not far behind.²³

Figure 6. Female Employment by Marital Status in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, 1841-1881.



Source: TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1861. Merthyr Tydfil. RG9/4050-62, Broseley. RG9/1859, Dawley. RG9/1855-56, Madeley. RG9/1857-8, Wellington 8-10, 13-15. RG9/1858-9, Wombridge. RG9/1900; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1881. Merthyr Tydfil. RG11/5308-18, Broseley. RG11/2639, Dawley. RG11/2635-6, Madeley. RG11/2637-8, Wellington 8-14. RG11/2679-80, Wombridge. RG11/2682.

The effects of this incompatibility of marriage and work were especially dramatic due to marriage rates in the study districts. While some fluctuations can be seen, the percentage of married women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield remained slightly higher than in England and Wales as a whole, in keeping with trends seen in coalfield areas throughout Britain.²⁴ These married women were least likely to work, and there were more of them.

Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body*, p. 152; McKay, 'Married Women and Work', p. 27; Pennington and Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, p. 8.

²³ Angela V. John, 'Introduction', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Essays in Welsh Women's History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 5. While the correlation between marriage and employment is indisputable, no clear association between husbands' and wives' occupations in the study districts has been found. This could possibly be due to the low number of married women workers in the years surveyed and consequent low sample size.

²⁴ As Figure 4; PP, (1863) L.III Pt.II.1, *Census of England and Wales 1861: Population Tables Volume II. Abstracts of Ages, Occupations and Birthplaces of People, Division IV. to Division XI.; Isle of Man and Channel Islands; Indexes*, p. 117; PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III*, p.3; Nigel Goose, 'Cottage Industry, Migration, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England', *Economic History Review*, 61:4 (2008), p. 799.

Evidence that marriage and work were seen as incompatible can be found in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, in line with national perceptions of the employment of married women as inappropriate, unnatural, and damaging to society. In this respect, gender ideology and the realities of female employment patterns matched with regards to marital status and work in the study districts. Interest in the subject of femininity and women's role in the home was as active in the local press of the study districts as in national publications, and did not dwindle as time went by. Concepts of femininity and the private sphere permeated numerous articles, including fictional tales which aimed to amuse rather than instruct. The poem 'Good Wives', printed in the *Merthyr Express* in 1881, is just one example of many:

Good Wives. Should resemble three things, which three things they should not resemble. (Taken from the cover of a copy book) "Good Wives to snails should be akin; Always their houses keep within; But not to carry (Fashion's hacks); All they are worth upon their backs; Good Wives, like city clocks should be; Exact, with regularity; But not like city clocks, so loud; Be heard by all the vulgar crowd; Good Wives, like echo, should be true; And speak but when they're spoken to; Yet, not like echo, so absurd; To have for ever the last word."²⁵

In this, and other publications, the implicit assumption that women were defined by the private sphere, and interactions with their male relatives, as seen throughout Europe, was common.²⁶

Another poem, reprinted in the *Merthyr Express* in 1871 from *Toledo Blade*, an Ohio newspaper, demonstrates the importance placed on women's role in the home, and the ways in which this could be directed at women in the study districts:

Write it on the paper, lawyer, the very first paragraph; Of all the farm and live-stock, that she shall have her half; For she has helped to earn it, through many a weary day; And it's nothing more than justice that Betsey has her pay; Give her the house and homestead, a man can live in a room; But women are skeery critters, unless they have a home [...] And if ever a house was tidy, and ever a kitchen clean; Her house and kitchen was tidy as any I've ever seen.²⁷

The poem was written from an agricultural perspective, and yet its significance to the largely industrial audience of Merthyr where wives would often be unable to assist in their husband's employment can be seen in the clear implication that women's work in the home was equally important. The private sphere of the home was emphasised

²⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 16 July 1881.

²⁶ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 45

²⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 10 June 1871.

as not a subsidiary arena but the focal point of life, and one that needed a feminine influence. Married women's participation in the workplace was a threat to this.

This feminine presence in the home was presented by local commentators as important not just to the individual household, but to the wider communities of the study districts. Charles Wilkins, contemporary postmaster and historian of Merthyr described John Guest's (ironmaster of Dowlais until his death in 1852) 'best and happiest projects', those concerned with 'moral and mental elevation', as chiefly influenced by his wife, Lady Charlotte, who 'excelled' in 'all that he was deficient'.²⁸ In 1870 the *Merthyr Telegraph* emphasised the importance of a 'loving wife' to comfort the 'poor labouring man' through sickness and health, in order to ease the burden on the Poor Law Guardians and the workhouse.²⁹ A *Daily News* correspondent's article, reprinted in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, criticised married women on the grounds of their spending, lack of variety in dinners, and boring nature. This letter satirised the amount of work women, even those in the middle class, were expected to carry out in order to uphold the sanctity of the home.³⁰ All of these examples reinforced the idea that women belonged in the home, rather than the public sphere.

For working-class women in particular, domestic labour was also routinely emphasised as the principal duty of married women. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent attested that the majority of men in south Wales preferred ex-servants as wives due to their superior domestic knowledge, but that they were all too often forced to marry industrial workers. The results of this, he argued, were 'too often traceable in the drunkenness and profligacy of the husband, the apathy or wretchedness of the wife, and the premature deaths of neglected offspring'. The correspondent's conclusion: 'elevate the character of these poor overworked and unsexed females, and you will speedily have a more temperate, regular and thrifty class of workmen than you have under the system which now prevails', makes clear the importance of female domesticity as a vital cog in the industrial machine. The ability to run a home was represented as a learned skill. Later, the correspondent made this explicit, pointing out that household accomplishments were 'not

²⁸ Charles Wilkins, *The History of Merthyr Tydfil* (Merthyr Tydfil: J Williams and Sons, 1908), p. 214.

²⁹ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 8 October 1870.

³⁰ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 7 January 1871.

intuitive'.³¹ This was contrary to many other representations placing women as naturally having 'more administrative power and economical sense than the stronger sex', as printed in *The Times* in 1860.³² Conflicting views of femininity here reflected the wider contradictions and complexity associated with gender ideologies. Ultimately, though, the underlying concern was that 'if a man's home be, owing to a bad wife, cheerless and neglected, what wonder that he flies while he can to the beer-shop and the public house!'³³ Similarly, a *Merthyr Express* article published 20 years later discussing 'washing day' implied that bad wives led to drunken husbands, describing men finding their home uncomfortable and flying to the public house for 'refuge'.³⁴ While the aim of this particular piece was to encourage the establishment of public wash houses, and not criticise the women in question, it also warned of the danger to both the family and the wider community if the home was not kept sacrosanct. While no corresponding evidence was found in the Shropshire Coalfield, it is likely that similar views prevailed, considering both the similarities of the districts and the preponderance of such ideas throughout Europe.

The above examples all reflected an ingrained, gendered conception of women which assumed their ideal place was the home, especially once they had married. However, this is not enough to explain why married women in the districts were so unlikely to undertake paid employment. The ideologies outlined above were prevalent not just in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, but throughout Britain and Europe, yet female employment rates were much lower in the study districts than elsewhere. This dichotomy can be explained with reference to the reality of the male breadwinner ethos in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, and the heavy domestic responsibilities faced by the wives of industrial workers, a significant group.

Examination of the local press suggests that the male breadwinner model was a reality for many families in the study districts, rather than an unfulfilled ideology. In Merthyr, men were summoned to court for 'not maintaining' their wives,

³¹ Jules Ginstwick, (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851: the Letters to the Morning Chronicle from the Correspondents in the Manufacturing and Mining Districts, the Towns of Liverpool and Birmingham, and the Rural Districts, Vol. 3, the Mining and Manufacturing Districts of South Wales and North Wales* (London: Cass, 1983), pp. 34-35.

³² *The Times*, 2 November 1860.

³³ Ginstwick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 57.

³⁴ *Merthyr Express*, 30 September 1871.

especially when this caused them to become chargeable to the Union.³⁵ In the reports of a prosecution for assault in Ironbridge in 1871, equal weight was given to the violence carried out against Ann Milner by her husband, and his intermittent abandonment, 'leaving her and the family without food or money'.³⁶ During the prosecution of Margaret Adams for burning an illegal fire in her home in Merthyr the same year, the presiding judge gave her a small fine on the grounds the 'hardship' of a larger fine would 'have to be borne by [her] husband' as she did not have her own income.³⁷ Advertisements appeared in the *Merthyr Express* throughout the period indicating the unwillingness of husbands to be held to the debts of their wives. One announced that, 'I hereby give notice that I will not hold myself responsible for any Debts which my wife, Elizabeth Evans may contract after this date, and parties are cautioned against giving her credit in my name'.³⁸ In all of these examples, the implicit assumption that wives were supported financially by their husbands is clear.

In addition to the family wage, the low employment levels of married women in the study districts can be explained by the high level of domestic labour wives of industrial workers were expected to undertake. While the contribution this domestic work made to individual homes and to the national economy was not always explicitly acknowledged by contemporaries, it was influential in both representation and reality. A *Salopian Journal* article published in 1841, for example, demonstrated how manufacturers advertised for widows and their families, arguing that they did so because the woman could be 'usefully employed in mending, washing and cooking for her orphan offspring' who would thus be able to spend more time at work.³⁹ This unremunerated industrial input persisted throughout the period. Direct evidence of this labour in the districts is unavailable, yet assumptions can be made regarding the amount of work and its necessity. While sociologists and historians disagree over whether domestic labour can be classified as productive work, the reality was that the continual labour women were expected to undertake in the home required a great deal of time.⁴⁰ Present day sociological studies of developing nations indicate heavy

³⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 8 July 1871.

³⁶ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 1 July 1871. The defendant was sentenced to 21 days hard labour.

³⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 7 Jan 1871.

³⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 30 September 1871.

³⁹ *Salopian Journal*, 15 September 1841.

⁴⁰ Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 141; E.H. Pleck, 'Two Worlds in One: Work and Family', *Journal of Social History*, 10:2 (1976), p. 182; Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, p. 53.

domestic responsibilities as a large influence limiting career development.⁴¹ This was and is especially the case for the wives of industrial workers, a large proportion of married women in the study districts.

Dot Jones' seminal study, 'Counting the Cost of Coal', illustrates the unwaged contributions of married women to the mining industry of the Rhondda in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴² Jones indicates a 'heavy burden of domestic [labour]' that was both physically and mentally challenging, causing a 'total integration of home and work' for the miners' wife.⁴³ The lack of adequate water supply or waste disposal caused a large time burden, waiting for water in the street.⁴⁴ Coupled with the high proportion of men per household, 'the demands of servicing the coal mining industry were relentless', with this service determining the household schedule.⁴⁵ She also discusses the work of Elizabeth Andrews, a pioneer of the labour movement, who gave evidence at the Commission on the Coal Industry in 1919.⁴⁶ During the commission, Andrews highlighted the physical strain of lifting 'tubs and heavy boilers', which led to high maternal mortality for coalminers' wives, as well as the damp caused by drying pit clothes, which resulted in poor health for all inhabitants, including children.⁴⁷ In her autobiography, Andrews also discussed the 'endless' household tasks carried out by her own mother, a coalminer's wife living near Aberdare: tasks which sometimes kept the female members of the family up until 'the early hours of the morning'.⁴⁸ Little evidence of this sort exists for the study districts, but a similar level of domestic labour by industrial wives can be assumed. The wives of industrial men in both districts generally had a high number of children, adding to the domestic load. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent recorded that in Merthyr, collecting water alone could have been almost a full time job for many women: 'women and children resort in crowds, often waiting hours before their turn comes round. In summer when the drought cuts off the water [...]

⁴¹ Sharon Stichter and Jane Parpart, 'Introduction', in Sharon Stichter and Jane Parpart (eds.), *Women, Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour* (London, 1990), p. 6.

⁴² Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal: Women's Lives in the Rhondda, 1881-1991', in Angela V. John (ed), *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939* (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 2011), p. 110.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 111, 115.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 116-117.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 118, 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2006), p.28.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 10-11.

women then wait their night through.’⁴⁹ In addition, while financially dependent on her husband, the wife as intermediary was vital to the industrial community. During the 1871 south Wales miners’ strike, for example, an article in the *Merthyr Express* stated ‘unless the workman receives his wages at the office his wife cannot pay her grocer and draper, and these tradesmen in their turn will be unable to meet their commercial obligations.’⁵⁰ With these various responsibilities left to industrial wives, it comes as no surprise that the vast majority of them did not work. Indeed, industrial workers’ wives were even less likely to work than women married to middle-class men.⁵¹ As chapters four and five will show, those married women who did work were likely to do so only when they could continue with this heavy domestic burden simultaneously.

Whether women in the study districts internalised perceptions of themselves as domestic, influencing their participation in the workforce, is difficult to assess. Examination of the education systems in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield suggests a framework placing women in this particular position from birth onwards. The call for industrial schools to ‘teach ordinary domestic duties of washing, cooking, cleaning, needlework &c’, in order to prepare women for their ‘future duties of wives and mothers’ was repeatedly made in official government publications, with ‘ignorance of domestic economy’ feared.⁵² Lord Aberdare was reported by the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent as asserting that ‘the welfare of society depends upon good wives – good wives provide comfortable homes and make good husbands’, using this to emphasise the necessity for an industrial school for girls in Merthyr, a viewpoint that continued throughout the period.⁵³ In 1870, the Merthyr Poor Law Guardians discussed the education of females in their care. One Guardian, Mr Simons, bemoaned the ‘strict educational examination’ enforced by the government on the grounds it made it practically impossible to give a ‘good industrial education’, noting the lack of sewing undertaken by pupils.⁵⁴ Early the following year the Guardians were concerned that ‘the same attention was not paid to

⁴⁹ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ *Merthyr Express*, 24 June 1871.

⁵¹ As Figure 1.

⁵² PP, (1867-68) XVII.1, 237, *Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. First Report*, p. xvii; PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 25.

⁵³ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 82.

⁵⁴ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 9 April 1870.

the training of the girls as to the boys'.⁵⁵ The resulting adoption of a female 'industrial' trainer with the aim to 'add much to the efficiency of the girls for household duties', in place of a second schoolmistress, illustrates the expected future role of these young women.⁵⁶ Defending the ragged school from closure to the School Board that year, the Rector of Merthyr was reported as stating: 'some 23 girls were in good service in the town, and others were scattered about; some had died, but, he repeated, a good account could be given of the majority'.⁵⁷ Between March 1879 and March 1881 the various schools of the Merthyr board spent £86 7s on materials for sewing, although £28 14s 6d was recouped through selling articles made.⁵⁸

Similar views of female education were found in the Shropshire Coalfield. Description of an exhibition entered by the Madeley National Girls' School in 1871 illustrates this activity. Needlework, 'including making, mending, darning, and knitting, of every useful variety' was displayed, as well as 'the ornamental, as cushions, sampler, tatting in very chaste designs', all undertaken under a female schoolmistress, Miss Johnson. The boys, in contrast, 'executed maps, and contributed specimens of composition, arithmetic, spelling, and writing'.⁵⁹ In 1881, girls of the Broseley National Schools were examined in needlework, with the prize of 'a very handsome work-box'. The boys instead earned prizes (unnamed) for examinations in 'geography, grammar, arithmetic, dictation, spelling, drawing, and marks for good conduct and punctuality'.⁶⁰ The 'Boys' and Girls' column, a regular feature in the *Wenlock Express* throughout 1881 advised girls to 'learn to darn stockings neatly', arguing 'every girl should make the simple articles of clothing' and recommending that they looked over this business daily, in order to promote an 'independent feeling', and ensure they had skills needed for marriage.⁶¹ Independence was not usually presented as a feminine attribute, yet autonomy inside the confines of the home was here represented as a positive. These examples from both study districts suggest that education was in many cases viewed purely as a device to make women

⁵⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 21 Jan 1871.

⁵⁶ Industrial was used here to mean work of any kind, in this case usually sewing.

⁵⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 10 June 1871.

⁵⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 1 October 1881.

⁵⁹ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 4 March 1871.

⁶⁰ *Wenlock Express*, 31 December 1881.

⁶¹ *Wenlock Express*, 1 January 1881.

better housewives.⁶² Women were primed to view themselves as future housewives from an early age, and it would be unsurprising if some began to see themselves as such, influencing their decision to enter the workforce.

Other evidence suggests that this may have been the case. A description of Welsh women in the 1842 Children's Employment Commission hints at internalisation of domestic values. They were praised for being particularly industrious and clean, 'remarkable for their attention to warm clothing' and 'anxious for their husbands and children', washing them daily.⁶³ This emphasis on emotional connections to their families and adamant cleanliness shown by women suggests that for some, their imputed role was an indisputable part of their identity.⁶⁴ In the Shropshire Coalfield, the diaries of Adelaide Darby, daughter of ironmaster Francis Darby, provide our only glimpse into the mind of a woman on this subject. Her wish in April 1836 'to be a man' in order to 'taste thoroughly the excitement of business' shows an understanding of her gendered position in the private sphere and inability to participate in the world of industry.⁶⁵ This muted acceptance was not always clear, though. Darby later wrote in 1842 of her refusal of a marriage proposal, stating 'I will not marry him though I should have to subsist into a temporary 500 per annum' suggesting an unwillingness to blindly accept her gendered position as wife.⁶⁶ However, her £500 per year was a luxury not afforded to working-class women. For many, even most, this choice to marry, and therefore undertake a large domestic burden precluding employment, simply did not exist.

It is also worth noting that the low employment of married women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield affected how single women in the workplace were perceived and represented. In Shropshire, the words of William Canning, a 15 year old ironstone carrier interviewed by the 1842 Children's Employment Commission. He declared that 'it is thought more respectable to leave off working on the bank when they [women] marry'.⁶⁷ While such examples are fragmentary, they probably represent deep-rooted attitudes that may have limited employment options available to single women. The pervasive view of single women as temporary

⁶² Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, p. 225.

⁶³ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 481.

⁶⁴ This was especially so in a report that was notorious portrayed women negatively.

⁶⁵ Emyr Thomas (ed.), *The Private Journal of Adelaide Darby of Coalbrookdale from 1833 to 1861*, Transcribed by Rachel Labouchere (York: Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, 2004), p. 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 130.

⁶⁷ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 86.

employees, waiting for marriage, undoubtedly affected their experiences in the workplace, and even unmarried employed women were affected by the connections made between femininity and the home.⁶⁸ For example, the Brick and Tile works in Broseley dedicated time to domestic training. Females were said to 'have an opportunity of acquiring a more extensive knowledge of a practical kind in the essential duties of housekeeping, such as knitting, sewing, cooking, baking, washing and getting up linen', represented as sorely necessary in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*.⁶⁹ In addition, while younger girls began work later than boys, due to 'their usefulness in the house to assist their mother in cleaning, scouring, nursing and fetching water, which latter is a heavy and fatiguing part of a girl's duty', once they started remunerative employment these tasks were not stopped.⁷⁰ Numerous young women interviewed during the 1842 Children's Employment Commission in Merthyr participated both in heavy industry, and in domestic work, including cleaning, washing, knitting and sewing.⁷¹ Their complaints that they worked 'hard when home', and had 'not much rest' due to having to assist in domestic duties seem justified, especially when we consider they were also working 'seven days or nights of 12 hours each'.⁷² It was not only married women who were affected by the heavy domestic burden.

Widowed women, unable to draw upon husbands' wages and often with a lighter domestic burden than their married counterparts, were more likely to undertake employment than their married counterparts, as seen in Figure 6 (p. 68). The majority of widowed women in both districts lived alone, and were not supported financially by a breadwinner. Those who lived with a relative were far less likely to work than those living alone. Of these, widows who lived with a male, presumably breadwinning, relative in both districts were much less likely to work than all others at every point over the period.⁷³ Financial necessity, then, was clearly an important factor influencing whether widows re-entered the workforce.

⁶⁸ Belinda Westover, 'To Fill The Kids' Tummies': The Lives and Work of Colchester Tailoresses, 1880-1918', in Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (eds.), *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1986), p. 74; Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 52; Lown, *Women and Industrialization*, p. 176.

⁶⁹ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 25 November 1871.

⁷⁰ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 482.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, pp. 504, 505, 513.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 504, 505.

⁷³ As Figure 1.

While widowed women throughout Britain were more likely to work than their married counterparts – without a husband, the ‘family wage’ was immediately smaller – conflicting representations of this fact persisted.⁷⁴ Widows who worked were blamed for any harm that came to their children in the same way as married women, and yet those who remained in the home were equally criticised as ‘inferior types’ and ‘professional widows’.⁷⁵ In many cases, the assumption that widowed women would work was seemingly ingrained. That they had ‘no one to depend upon but themselves for support’ put them in a category of their own when contemporaries considered female employment.⁷⁶ The idea that ‘it would be simply cruel to prevent them following any employment which they think suits them’, printed in various newspapers early in the period, was common.⁷⁷ Nationally, some factories refused to employ married women, but made an exception for widows.⁷⁸ Widowed women could also undertake work usually viewed as masculine if previously carried out by their deceased husband.⁷⁹ Conversely, treatment of widows under the Poor Law came under criticism in *The Times* in 1841, especially due to the assumption that women with children should ‘earn [...] towards their subsistence’.⁸⁰ Widows were in an ambiguous position throughout the period: both disparaged for not working to support themselves, and criticised if their work interfered with their still natural femininity.

These views influenced the fact that widowed women, especially those with children, were given the most charity and relief throughout Britain and in the study districts, explaining why the proportion of widows who worked did not return to the rates seen pre-marriage.⁸¹ Poor Law Guardians in both study areas appeared more likely to prescribe outside relief and supplementary monetary support to widows than to any other group. Ironically, there is an example of a widow in the Shropshire Coalfield, described by the Guardians as ‘wholly disabled by nervous affections and old age’ refused relief on the grounds she was supported by private charity, although

⁷⁴ Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising’, p. 11; Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body*, p. 152; Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 33.

⁷⁵ Perkin, *Victorian Women*, p. 146.

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 19 September 1845.

⁷⁷ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 January 1870.

⁷⁸ Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 141.

⁷⁹ PP, (1863) L.III, *Census of England and Wales 1861: General Report*, p. xxxi.

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 28 January 1841.

⁸¹ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 167.

this is an isolated example.⁸² Individuals, too, were more than willing to donate money to widows. Compassion for widows was often displayed through newspaper reports.⁸³ A description from *Eddowe's Journal* in 1861 illustrates the common perception of widowed women:

Doubtless there are cases where a half-famished mother looks with agony upon her nearly starving children, with no friendly hand to relieve her in her misery, and she is constrained by a dire necessity to part with article after article, her poverty not her will consenting, in order to provide one scanty meal a day.⁸⁴

With this viewpoint prevalent in the study districts, it comes as no surprise that many were willing to contribute to the financial needs of these women.

An 1841 *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* article, concerning one Catherine Harris, is illuminating. She was described as 'levying contributions from the charitably disposed' by telling the following untrue tale:

She says she is the widow of a cabinet and furniture maker, in Merthyr Tydfil; that she employed a person to manage the business after her husband's death; that being in ill health she went to Swansea with a view to her recovery, but that during her absence her overseer sold off all her property for a trifle and ran away, leaving her in a state of destitution. She shows a paper of subscriptions, containing a number of names of respectable parties who have been imposed on by her artful tale, and induced to subscribe to her relief.⁸⁵

The article itself aimed to draw potential contributors' attention to the untruthfulness of her statement, but it indicates that not only was such a story of destitution feasible, but that people were ready and willing to contribute under such circumstances. In the Shropshire Coalfield, between 1827 and 1849, Francis Darby personally donated £28 10s 3d to widows.⁸⁶ Charitable subscriptions also existed. Following an accident at Penyarden in 1841, the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* called for a subscription for the 'benefit of the wives and families of the deceased workmen' on the grounds that 'the wants of the widow and orphans are urgent – winter is coming on and great

⁸² SA: Relieving officer's records: Abstract of application and report book, 1846-1848, p. 167, PL10/90.

⁸³ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 2 October 1841; *Eddowe's Journal*, 2 January 1861; *Wenlock Express*, 24 December 1881.

⁸⁴ *Eddowe's Journal*, 2 January 1861.

⁸⁵ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 30 Jan 1841.

⁸⁶ Ironbridge Gorge Museum Library and Archives (IGA): Green calf-bound ledger with title in ink on cover: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1827-1846, Lab/FD/1; 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1847-1850, Lab/FD.

distress will exist'.⁸⁷ This call was taken up in the community by workers and employers alike over the course of at least a month.⁸⁸ At a Broseley Local Board Meeting in 1881, members of the board personally arranged to pay the rates owed by Mrs Legge, a widow, on the grounds her tenants had not paid her fully and she had 'five grandchildren to keep'.⁸⁹ For these widows at least, the monetary support offered, either through the Poor Law or charity, negated the need to undertake employment.

Widows' eligibility for financial maintenance, both official and charitable, was often determined by their perceived adherence to feminine ideologies. An 1861 *Merthyr Telegraph* report, 'Caution to the Benevolent' highlights this. Mary Mahoney, a widow whose house had burnt down through no fault of her own, leaving her and her family with nothing, was found in a 'beastly state of intoxication'. Concluding from this that 'under these circumstances she can no longer be a deserving object', Henry Ween, the superintendent, took back the certificate stating the fire was not her fault, and published the report in order to 'prevent her obtaining any future subscriptions'.⁹⁰ This lack of sympathy is striking, indicating correct, feminine behaviour as necessary to gain public support.

Conversely, in other cases widows were given special treatment on the grounds of their position. Martha Thomas, charged with selling beer without a licence in 1841, defended herself on the grounds that she was 'without the least means of supporting herself, her husband having lately died, leaving her with a young child', leading the magistrates to forgive her the crime (and associated costs) and arrange for parish relief.⁹¹ Emily Wiltshire, summoned for being drunk and disorderly in 1871, was discharged with a caution on the grounds that 'she had been working hard, was weak, in great trouble, and had been overcome with a couple of glasses of beer', and was 'a generally respectable woman, and got her living by washing'.⁹² In both of these examples the women's inherent femininity and willingness to attempt to support themselves was seen as justification for their unwomanly actions. Class was also an important factor in determining the perceived necessity for support. Francis Darby's donations largely consisted of shillings given

⁸⁷ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 2 October 1841.

⁸⁸ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 6 November 1841.

⁸⁹ *Wenlock Express*, 22 January 1881.

⁹⁰ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 27 April 1861.

⁹¹ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 30 Jan 1841.

⁹² *Merthyr Express*, 17 June 1871.

to numerous women he described only as 'poor widow' in his cash books.⁹³ However, those from a higher class were given more. Mrs Griffiths, a tailor's widow from Shrewsbury, was given £5 in 1847, and Mrs Charlotte Anslow, in a similar position with 'five small children', £6 the following year.⁹⁴ Not all widows were perceived as equally deserving of support. Those who were not would certainly have found taking employment necessary.

In addition, not every widow who headed a household was in need of financial support. While Darby's donations to widows with children (between 10 shillings to over a pound, dependent on number) were much larger than to those without, suggesting his wish to support the families of these unfortunate women, in some cases the existence of children could improve the financial position of a widow.⁹⁵ Evidence of widowed women sending their minor children to work in order to support their family can be found in both study areas throughout the period. Sophie Lewis, a 12 year old labourer interviewed by the 1842 Children's Employment Commission in Merthyr, stated 'Father is dead. Mother sends 3 of us to work here [...] we give the money to mother, who keeps house', just one example of a widow continuing her previous role as housewife.⁹⁶ In the Shropshire Coalfield, the Poor Law Guardians' relief books recorded widows given relief during their minor children's illness, or until their children were old enough to undertake employment, demonstrating official acknowledgement that children would often support their widowed mothers.⁹⁷ In addition, a variety of elderly, widowed women were refused relief on the grounds their children could support them.⁹⁸ The ages of these women, usually in their 70s and 80s, suggests adult children were expected to continue to provide financial sustenance, regardless of their own living situation. The description in a *Merthyr Express* article printed in 1871 of many widows as '[eking] out an existence by the trifling earnings' of their children reflected the reality for many in

⁹³ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1827, 1836, 1839, 1839, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846, pp. 14, 182, 263, 271, 273, 305, 339, Lab/FD/1; IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1847, 1848, 1849, pp. 8, 12, 38, 72, Lab/FD.

⁹⁴ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1847, 1848, pp. 32, 38, Lab/FD.

⁹⁵ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1827, p. 9, Lab/FD/1.

⁹⁶ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 511.

⁹⁷ SA: Out-Relief: Relief Order Book Madeley District, 28 December 1860, 5 April 1861, 3 May 1861, PL10/33.

⁹⁸ SA: Relieving officer's records: Abstract of application and report book, 1839-1841, pp.124, 125, PL10/86.

the districts.⁹⁹ As so many widows appear to have been supported by their children, the increasing prohibitions on child labour as the period progressed partially explains the broad increase of widowed women working.

Although subscriptions and charity existed, and relief was often available, this should not be overstated. The relief books of the Shropshire Coalfield demonstrate that in the majority of cases, there was a time limit for relief, for example, continued for 12 months following a husband's decease, implying another form of financial sustenance was necessary after this date.¹⁰⁰ It was also unusual for widows to be given monetary assistance. Instead, there were often given packs of flour, in varying amounts dependent on family size.¹⁰¹ Those who were offered money usually only received it on short-term basis. One Fanny Moseley, widowed mother of 4 children, for example, had her relief changed from 1/- a week to a pack of flour in July 1851.¹⁰² Again, this was given only as a stop-gap until the woman in question was able to work, and support in kind was often temporary.¹⁰³ Multiple examples exist of female headed families being offered small amounts ($\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ a pack) of flour for 2 weeks only then expected to enter the workhouse.¹⁰⁴ In addition, many of the examples of special treatment given to widows emphasise their willingness to support themselves. Charity Row in the Shropshire Coalfield, for example, housed the widows of former employees of the ironworks, yet the women who lived there undertook regular employment too.¹⁰⁵

For the remaining widows, those without financial support from relatives, minor children, institutions or charities, employment was a necessity. However, this was not always achievable. The case of Ann Cook, as reported in the *Merthyr Telegraph* in 1861, provides insight into the hardships faced by working widows in this period. Cook, a tinman's widow in her late 60s, requested an audience with the magistrate. Described as previously occupying a 'good social position' based on her manner of speech, she explained her predicament, which was reported in the paper:

⁹⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 14 Jan 1871.

¹⁰⁰ SA: Out-Relief: Relief Order Book Madeley District, 22 February 1861, PL10/33.

¹⁰¹ SA: Relieving officer's records: Abstract of application and report book, 1846-1848, p. 166, PL10/90.

¹⁰² SA: Out-Relief: Relief Order Book Madeley District, 25 July 1851, PL10/30.

¹⁰³ SA: Out-Relief: Relief Order Book Madeley District, 28 January 1870, 25 February 1870, PL10/37.

¹⁰⁴ SA: Out-Relief: Relief Order Book Madeley District, 25 February 1870, PL10/37; SA: Out-Relief: Relief Order Book Madeley District, 27 June 1861, PL10/33.

¹⁰⁵ Muter, *The Buildings of an Industrial Community*, p. 44.

Since she had been a widow she had earned her livelihood by working for the shops of ready-made tailors, but owing to the introduction of sewing machines she was not able to obtain much work now from them. Latterly she had been engaged in making shirts for the shop of Mr Barnett the pawnbroker, but, as the payment was only 4d for making each shirt, and even at this remuneration she had not enough of employment, she was reduced to very great poverty [...] She could satisfy his Worship, if that were needed, that her character was irreproachable, and that she had always striven to support herself. Her employment was now irregular, and even when she had sewing work her earnings were very trifling, both owing to the remuneration and her sight having become defective.¹⁰⁶

Refused by the Guardians with no reason given, Cook wished to be given remunerative work by the parish in order to avoid becoming a pauper, which she described as ‘a duty she owed to herself and the public’ on the grounds ‘she had always earned her living’ and ‘was able to do so now’. After hearing her petition, the magistrate ‘kindly gave her substantial proof of his generosity’.¹⁰⁷

This difficulty in finding employment, and negative treatment experienced while working, also highlighted in the *Shropshire Conservative*, which throughout 1841 described factories as preying on and oppressing widows, taking advantage of ‘the poor bereaved beings’, paints a pessimistic picture of life for widowed women.¹⁰⁸ *The Times*, discussing the ban on female employment underground, was concerned that:

Those who are considerably advanced in life will find it all but impossible to learn a new trade; and we are disposed to think that it might have been just and reasonable to have allowed exceptions in favour of women of a certain age, especially widows with no one to depend upon but themselves for support.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, work was certainly available for some of these women in the ironworks. Menelaus, manager of Dowlais, indicated that there was in Merthyr ‘a large class of women unmarried or widowed, mostly of middle age, who are dependent on the works for support’, and that any interference with the current system would lead to these ‘strong and independent’ women seeking relief.¹¹⁰ As the following chapters will show, these women, like many others, also managed to participate in the urban economies of the study districts in a variety of ways.

¹⁰⁶ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 12 October 1861.

¹⁰⁷ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 12 October 1861.

¹⁰⁸ *Shropshire Conservative*, 10 April 1841; 15 September 1841.

¹⁰⁹ *The Times*, 19 September 1845.

¹¹⁰ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 16 DG/C/5/15-16.

Motherhood and Employment

As already seen in contemporary discussion of marriage, the pervasive ideological notion that motherhood was, or should be, the natural role of women was promulgated continually in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield throughout the period. Women were prosecuted for deserting their children, with the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian's* description of such behaviour as 'Unnatural Conduct' indicative of expectations of female behaviour.¹¹¹ Even discussions unrelated to motherhood reflected this feminine ideal. A Coalbrookdale workman's publication, *Food Versus Famine!*, on the effects of free trade, declared that 'the good wife's nine arguments (in the shape of nine hungry children) against protection, and in favour of free trade, would no doubt be very forcible', just one of many examples of how the assumption that women were defined by their motherhood could be ingrained.¹¹² Contemporary discussion regarding the morality of working mothers in the study districts often mirrored that aimed at working wives. In the words of the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent, 'a bad wife is ever a bad mother'. The perceived consequence, 'that a race of children spring up who, neglected or misused by the parents, are exposed to the many physical and moral evils which beset infant life in this densely populated neighbourhood' reflected fears regarding motherhood and work throughout Europe.¹¹³

Infant mortality was also a key concern to those discussing working mothers, throughout Britain and in both districts. The 1842 Children's Employment Commission indicated 'extraordinary mortality during infancy' in the Shropshire Coalfield, placing the blame on mothers supplying their children with gin, or even opium, to keep them quiet, and leaving them in the care of young children, in both cases so they could work.¹¹⁴ The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent wrote that in Merthyr Tydfil, '[mother's] milk [was] unhealthy because they [were] unhealthy, due to the fact that they worked in the ironworks when younger'.¹¹⁵ The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* reported in 1842 that work in the district was 'continued into the

¹¹¹ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 14 August 1841.

¹¹² Coalbrookdale Workman, *Food Versus famine! Being Plain Facts for Plain Folks/by a Coalbrookdale Workman* (Ironbridge: Joseph Slater pr, 1852), p. 4.

¹¹³ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 34.

¹¹⁴ PP, (1842) XV.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, pp. 38, 162.

¹¹⁵ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 68.

very last stages of pregnancy', although whether the horror this was met with was due to interest in the health of the mother or the infant is unclear.¹¹⁶ Censure was not limited to mothers working in industry; cases of washerwomen using Godfrey's Cordial to keep their children quiet while they worked were highlighted.¹¹⁷ The *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* reported in 1871 that:

The other day a woman named Cookson, living in Blisser's Hill Row, left a little boy in the charge of his sister whilst she went haymaking, and the girl not taking proper care of her brother he went to sleep on the hearth, and a spark fell upon him and set fire to his clothes, burning him very severely, so much so indeed that his life is despaired of.¹¹⁸

This criticism of not only the boy's mother, but his sister too, also demonstrates expected behaviour dependent on gender, regardless of age. While contemporaries clearly linked women's work and their children's health, evidence suggests that, in reality, there was little correlation between female employment and infant mortality.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, this assumption strongly influenced the perception of mothers who worked.

Table 4. Mothers (with children under 13 living at home) undertaking paid employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
Merthyr	Shropshire	Merthyr	Shropshire	Merthyr	Shropshire
94 (4.01%)	160 (4.41%)	506 (7.58%)	386 (9.84%)	424 (6.96%)	282 (7.23%)

Source: As Figure 1.

In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, the proportion of mothers with children living at home who worked was very low, shown in Table 4. This was consistent with patterns seen on a national level throughout the period: women with children were less likely to work than their childless counterparts. As Dyson points out, high fertility levels reinforce and maintain traditional gender roles.¹²⁰ However, as with the low proportion of married women who worked, whether this was due to

¹¹⁶ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 28 May 1842.

¹¹⁷ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 39.

¹¹⁸ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 15 July 1871.

¹¹⁹ Eilidh M. Garrett, 'Was Women's Work Bad for Babies? A View from the 1911 Census of England and Wales', *Continuity and Change*, 13:2 (1998), pp. 281-282; Eilidh Garrett, and Alice Reid, "'Satanic Mills, pleasant lands': spatial variation in women's work, fertility and infant mortality as viewed from the 1911 census', *Historical Research*, 67:163 (1994), p. 163.

¹²⁰ Tim Dyson, *Population and Development: The Demographic Transition* (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 178.

the internalisation of ideologies is questionable. Instead, the employment patterns of children prove illuminating. Throughout Britain, married women with children tended to retire from employment as soon as their eldest child was able to take their place, if not earlier.¹²¹ Historical demographers have indicated that working-class families in particular purposefully engaged in ‘high fertility strategies’ for economic reasons, as children were able to earn more than their mothers.¹²² This trend toward intentional fertility for financial purposes was especially pronounced in coal-mining districts. The nature of industrial labour meant a shorter adult working life, with families likely to depend upon the financial contributions of their younger generation as time progressed.¹²³ Some examples from the study districts demonstrate this. According to the 1842 Children’s Employment Commission, both areas had a high number of children working in comparison to elsewhere in England and Wales, starting employment at early ages in both cases.¹²⁴ Mary Price, a 17 year old unloader in Merthyr reported in 1841 that although her work was hard she was ‘used to none other’ as she was ‘taken below the ground when seven years old to keep trap doors’, one of many Children’s Employment Commission interviewees who started work at a young age.¹²⁵ Children’s wages, recorded in 1841 as between 2s6d and 10s per week dependent on age in both Merthyr and Coalbrookdale, would obviously have been important to the family economy.¹²⁶ Again, interviews in Merthyr illuminate this importance. Sophia Lewis, a 12 year old labourer, revealed that she

¹²¹ Jane Humphries, and Carmen Sarasua, ‘Off the Record: Reconstructing Women’s Labour Force Participation in the European Past’, *Feminist Economics*, 18:4 (2012), p. 56; Jane Humphries, ‘“Because They Are too Menny...” Children, Mothers and Fertility Decline’, in Angelique Jassens, (ed.), *Gendering the Fertility Decline in the Western World* (Bern; Oxford: Lang, 2007), pp. 114, 126-30; Elizabeth Roberts, ‘Working Wives and their Families’, Theo Barker, and Michael Drake, (eds.), *Population and Society in Britain 1850-1980* (London: Billings and Son Ltd, 1982), p. 143, 146; R. Burr-Litchfield, ‘The Family and the Mill: Cotton Mill Work, Family Work Patterns and Fertility in Mid-Victorian Stockport’, in Anthony S. Wohl (ed.), *The Victorian Family* (London; Croom Helm, 1978), p. 191; Jona Schellekens, ‘Wages, Secondary Workers, and Fertility: a Working-Class Perspective of the Fertility Transition in England and Wales’, *Journal of Family History*, 18 (1993), p. 3.

¹²² Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen, ‘Women’s Work and European Fertility Patterns’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6:3 (1976), p. 472.

¹²³ John Cleland, and Christopher Wilson, ‘Demand Theories of the Fertility Transition: An Iconoclastic View’, *Population Studies*, 41:1 (1987), p. 16; Dov Friedlander, ‘Demographic Patterns and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Coal-Mining Population in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 22:1 (1973), p. 45; Schellekens, ‘Wages, Secondary Workers, and Fertility’, p. 2, 4, 7.

¹²⁴ PP, (1842) XV.1, *Children’s Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, pp. 9, 20.

¹²⁵ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children’s Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 513.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 40, 154, 158.

and her 3 siblings' wages were given to her widowed mother, 'who keeps house'.¹²⁷ Jane Davies, another 12 year old, started her employment of dram wheeling at ten, replacing her labour '[fetching] the water for mother to wash clothes with' with 14s per week which was presumably used to supplement the income from washing.¹²⁸ Industrial work was not the only way children contributed to the family economy: domestic servants' wages, too, were often sent directly to their parents.¹²⁹ These contributions meant women who may otherwise have been compelled to work were able to stay in the home. Simultaneously, children, especially those who worked in heavy industry, were likely to contribute to the high levels of domestic labour expected, discussed previously.¹³⁰

Table 5. Number and proportion of women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881 with children under 13 living at home.

1841		1861		1881	
Merthyr	Shropshire	Merthyr	Shropshire	Merthyr	Shropshire
2342 (42.64%)	3625 (42.74%)	6678 (44.84%)	3922 (40.36%)	6093 (40.24%)	3899 (39.74%)

Source: As Figure 1.

Again, as with marital status, the effect of the uncongenial relationship between motherhood and paid work found in the study districts was pronounced, simply due to the proportion of women who had minor children, shown in Table 5. This is unsurprising. Throughout Britain, women living in coal mining areas were far more likely to have children than women living elsewhere.¹³¹ Table 6 demonstrates how striking this difference could be. The high fertility levels shown here were very similar across industrial districts, and were particularly pronounced between 1821

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 511.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 513

¹²⁹ National Library of Wales (NLW): Merthyr Tydfil in 1860: A Scripture Reader's Journal, 19-24 March 1860, MS/4943B.

¹³⁰ Walker, 'Pleasurable Homes', p. 319; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 3.

¹³¹ Philip Jones, *Mines, Migrants and Residence in the South Wales Steamcoal Valleys: the Ogmore and Garw Valleys in 1881* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1987), p. 10; M. Lin Lee, and David Loschky, 'Interdependency between Fertility and Real Wages in England, 1541-1871', *The Journal of European Economic History*, 27:1 (1998), p. 126; Michael R. Haines, 'Occupation and Social Class during Fertility Decline: Historical Perspectives', in John R. Gillis, Louise A. Tilly, and David Levine, *The European Experience of Declining Fertility, 1850-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 203; Michael R. Haines, 'Social Class Differentials during Fertility Decline: England and Wales Revisited', *Population Studies*, 43:2 (1989), p. 307; Friedlander, 'Demographic Patterns and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Coal-Mining Population', p. 39.

and 1871.¹³² The trend could operate on a micro-level: within the study districts, for example, the wives of men working in industrial occupations were more likely to have children than the wives of men working in non-industrial occupations, shown in Tables 7 and 8. Consistent evidence of high fertility in similar areas has even been treated by demographers as ‘a priori grounds’ for inclusion of coal mining families as a fertility variable in their analyses.¹³³

Table 6. Decentennial rates of population growth in England and Wales and in Glamorganshire.

	1841-51 (%)	1851-61 (%)	1861-71 (%)	1871-81 (%)
England and Wales	13	12	13	14
Glamorganshire	35	36	24	28

Source: data adapted from Dov Friedlander, ‘Demographic Patterns and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Coal-Mining Population in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 22:1 (1973), p. 41.

Table 7. Number and proportion of married women with children under 13 living at home in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881 by husband’s occupation (when given).

	1841	1861	1881
Industrial	1442/1952 (74%)	4149/5721 (73%)	3364/4812 (70%)
Non-Industrial	686/1071 (64%)	1725/2618 (66%)	1963/2989 (66%)

Source: As Table 2.

Table 8. Number and proportion of married women with children under 13 living at home in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881 by husband’s occupation (when given).

	1841	1861	1881
Industrial	2172/2925 (74%)	2354/3326 (71%)	2320/3353 (69%)
Non-industrial	1019/1584 (64%)	1170/1967 (59%)	1181/2051 (58%)

Source: As Table 3.

One explanation demographers have offered for high fertility in coal mining areas during the nineteenth century is that paid work for women in these districts was

¹³² Dov Friedlander, Jona Schellekens, and Eliahu Ben-Moshe, ‘The Transition from High to Low Fertility: Cultural or Socioeconomic Determinants?’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 39:2 (1991), p. 339; Friedlander, ‘Demographic Patterns and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Coal-Mining Population’, p. 40.

¹³³ Michael S. Teitelbaum, *The British Fertility Decline: Demographic Transition in the Crucible of the Industrial Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 161.

unavailable.¹³⁴ The fact that the Lancashire textile areas had a very high proportion of women workers and a very low fertility rate has been used to bolster this claim.¹³⁵ Given the conclusions that will be presented in the remainder of the thesis, however, this is not an entirely convincing explanation for mothers' employment trends in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. It is possible that, as Roberts contends, a woman's job was not so likely to affect her fertility rate as her fertility was to affect her decision to undertake paid employment.¹³⁶ The financial attractions of children, as detailed above, could well have been a more important factor in the study districts. Either way, the tendency towards motherhood and associated economic inactivity in the study districts clearly contributed to low overall levels of female employment over the period as a whole. It is also clear that for many women, as seen in Tables 7 and 8, the effects of marriage and motherhood combined to make work outside of the home even less likely.

Change over time demonstrated in Tables 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 – the proportionate number of women with children decreased over the period as a whole while the proportion of mothers who worked increased – can also be explained by children's work patterns. Crafts has argued that explanations of nineteenth-century fertility rested almost solely on 'changes in the family economy'.¹³⁷ The expansion of protective legislation coupled with the development of the education system contributed to a decline in children's employment throughout Britain.¹³⁸ Newspapers in the study districts mainly represented this change as positive, although there were some exceptions.¹³⁹ According to the *Merthyr Express*, the Education Act 'closed the

¹³⁴ N.F.R. Crafts, 'Duration of Marriage, Fertility and Female Employment Opportunities in England and Wales in 1911', *University of Leeds School of Economic Studies Discussion Paper Series*, (1988), p. 8; Margaret Dupree, 'The Community Perspective in Family History: the Potteries during the Nineteenth Century', in A.L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim, *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 553.

¹³⁵ Jutta Schwarzkopf, 'Bringing Babies into Line with Mothers' Jobs: Lancashire Cotton Weavers' Fertility Regime', in Angélique Jassens, (ed.), *Gendering the Fertility Decline in the Western World* (Bern; Oxford: Lang, 2007), pp. 310-11; Morgan, 'The Domestic Image and Factory Culture', p. 40.

¹³⁶ Roberts, 'Working Wives and their Families', p. 154.

¹³⁷ Humphries, "'Because They Are too Menny...'", p. 114.

¹³⁸ Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006), p. 159; Anne Digby and Peter Searby, *Children, School and Society in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 5, 19; Joanna Bourke, 'Housewifery in Working-Class England, 1860-1914', *Past & Present*, 143 (1994), p. 496; C. Miller, 'The Hidden Workforce: Female Field Workers in Gloucestershire, 1870-1901', *Southern History*, 6 (1984), p. 149; Ittmann, *Work, gender and family*, p. 200.

¹³⁹ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 29 January 1870; *Shropshire Conservative*, 10 April 1841, 23 July 1842; *Salopian Journal*, 30 June 1841.

thousand channels of employment that not so long ago existed for child labour, and the whole burden of supporting the family is now thrown upon the father'.¹⁴⁰ In this example, motherhood and work were not even considered as inclusive options. Some concern that changes to children's employment would encourage mothers to work, however, appeared in the *Merthyr Express* in 1871: 'How will it fare with them to compel the attendance of the children, at school, thus withdrawing their small but important contributions to the common domestic fund; and throwing all upon the widows' shoulders?'¹⁴¹ Throughout Britain, the subsequent decreased contribution of children to the family economy caused by these changes led to a gradual increase in the number of women with children undertaking paid employment.¹⁴² Nevertheless, the effect was not as dramatic in the study districts as elsewhere. For poorer families in particular, children still worked later in the century. An 1866 report by Menelaus, manager of Dowlais ironworks, stated that 'well to do parents provide for their children without sending them to be employed in the works' and that 'there are no girls under ten and the few boys nine in all are the sons of very poor parents to whom their earnings are of importance'.¹⁴³ However, he also indicted that 'there are still very many parents who have not the power, and often not the will, to provide for the girls, in which cases it becomes necessary for the girls to take an independent course, and care for themselves'.¹⁴⁴ Financial necessity was again key: in many ways, too, this statement could apply to all women without external support in the study districts.

Conclusion

Female employment patterns in both study districts call into question the influence gender ideologies had over women workers. Over this period, legislation formalised and legitimised a view of women as subordinate to, and dependent on, men, which

¹⁴⁰ *Merthyr Express*, 2 September 1871.

¹⁴¹ *Merthyr Express*, 14 Jan 1871

¹⁴² Joanna Bourke, 'Working Women: the Domestic Labor Market in Rural Ireland, 1890-1914', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 21:3 (1991), p. 496; Burr-Litchfield, 'The Family and the Mill' pp. 181, 183; Tilly, Scott, and Cohen, 'Women's Work and European Fertility Patterns', p. 474; Schwarzkopf, 'Bringing Babies into Line with Mothers' Jobs', p. 323; Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation', p. 112; Davidoff and Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', p. 13; Rendall, *Women in an industrializing society*, p. 59; Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 63; Miller, 'The Hidden Workforce', p. 149; Barrett and McIntosh, 'The 'family wage'', p. 72.

¹⁴³ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, pp. 2, 15DG/C/5/15-16.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

had significant implications for their employment opportunities.¹⁴⁵ Despite these factors, women worked in a multitude of diverse occupations, and the number of women working increased over the period as a whole. Evidence suggests that economic, social, and urban customs, expectations and developments all had an effect on the employment trends that have been traced in the study districts. The typical woman worker may have been young, single, and childless, yet this cannot be explained by ideologies alone. Again, both national and local trends were influential. Further consideration of the types of work these women participated in, undertaken in the remainder of the thesis, illuminates the multifaceted interplay between broad national trends and complex localised factors that affected female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

¹⁴⁵ Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class*, p. 176.

Chapter III

Primary and secondary occupations: female industrial workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, 1841-1881

The economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield originated with iron and coal, and each district remained heavily influenced by the industries throughout the nineteenth century. However, while many historians have assumed that in areas like the study districts, little capacity for female work meant women were not employed in these sectors, this was not the case. This chapter will demonstrate not only that females employed in the study districts worked in industrial occupations, but that their work was essential. They made vital contributions to the wide variety of processes necessary for iron production, and in the Shropshire Coalfield, to the local potteries. Consequently, women were integral not only to the economic life of the study districts, but to national financial prosperity.

Women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were involved in all aspects of the iron and coal trades: iron production; raw material extraction, including coal and iron mining; and the subsidiary processes of brick making and labouring. Women in Shropshire were also employed in pottery and pipe-making factories. Analysis of female employment patterns in the industrial sector as a whole demonstrates that there was little correlation between the contemporary disapproval of this work and participation in the sector. Examination of each occupational group listed in turn explains this further. Evidence from the census, iron company records, parliamentary reports, local and national newspapers and accounts of industrial growth and developments drawn from the historiography will be used throughout to demonstrate that the needs of the ironworks were the paramount determinant of occupational opportunity in heavy industrial work for women in the study districts. Differing levels of contemporary disapproval of this work and associated attempts to control and reduce it can be found in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, yet in both districts, regional economic dynamics and urban developments had far more of an impact on female employment than the ideological viewpoints of the middle class. Consideration of the Shropshire potteries also demonstrates the importance of local forces over ideology.

Women working in the industrial sector can be found in multiple, variegated occupations, which will be discussed and analysed throughout the chapter. The 1842

Children's Employment Commission and the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent's reports in particular give us copious, detailed descriptions of this. Consideration of these adds to our knowledge of female employment, as historians of women's work have given little attention to the participation of women in heavy industry. Contemporaries, too, often seemed to assume women were not present. Charles Wilkins, local postmaster and historian, for example, detailed the paternalistic role of ironmasters in Merthyr, yet in conjunction with this only ever mentioned the men they employed, never the women. Reading his works, one might assume that women did not work at all in Merthyr Tydfil, let alone in heavy industry.¹ Statistics of the Merthyr Medical District of the Dowlais Works in 1860 made no mention of any women using the medical care provided.² The correspondence of the Monmouthshire and South Wales Collieries Association did not mention women, only ever describing masters and men.³ These are just a handful of examples of an ongoing trend. This chapter, however, demonstrates that while contemporaries and historians have perceived and represented heavy industry and female employment as antonymic, the reality was quite different.

Figure 7 shows that women workers in industrial employments decreased between 1841 and 1881 as a proportion of total females employed in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. In Merthyr, an increase from 17.43 per cent of total females employed in 1841 to 22.72 per cent in 1861 was followed by a decline to 11.24 per cent by 1881. In the Shropshire Coalfield, women employed in industrial work accounted for 27.87 per cent of total women employed in 1841, increasing to 31.63 per cent in 1861, and declining by 1881 to 20.7 per cent. The vast majority of these women in both areas, with the exception of those participating in the pottery industry, were under 30, single, and childless.⁴

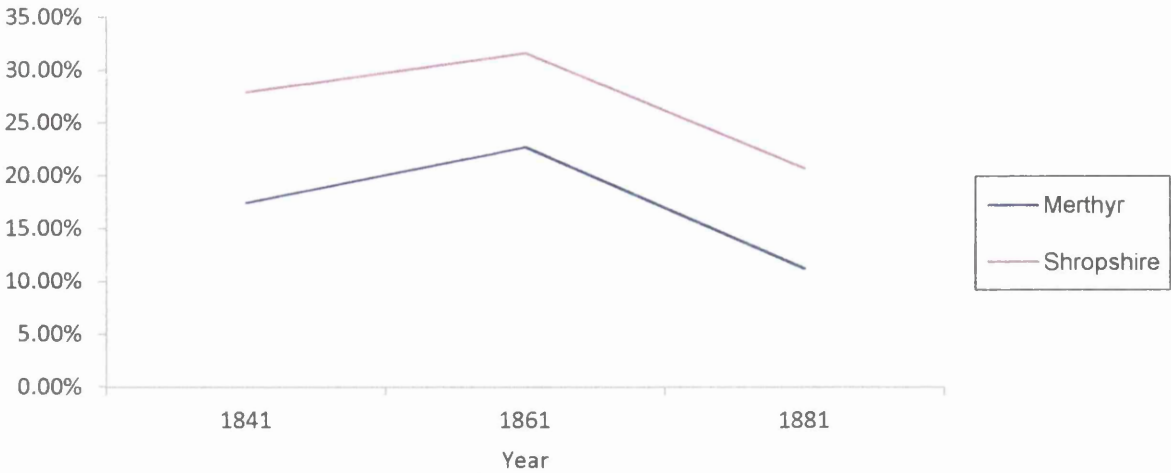
¹ Charles Wilkins, *Wales Past and Present* (Merthyr Tydfil: printed and published by Harry Wood Southey, 1870), p. 335.

² GRO: Statistics of the Merthyr Medical District of the Dowlais Works, 1860, DG/C/8/7/1-4.

³ GRO: Monmouthshire and South Wales Collieries Association Correspondence, May 1877, DG/D/1/18/1-32.

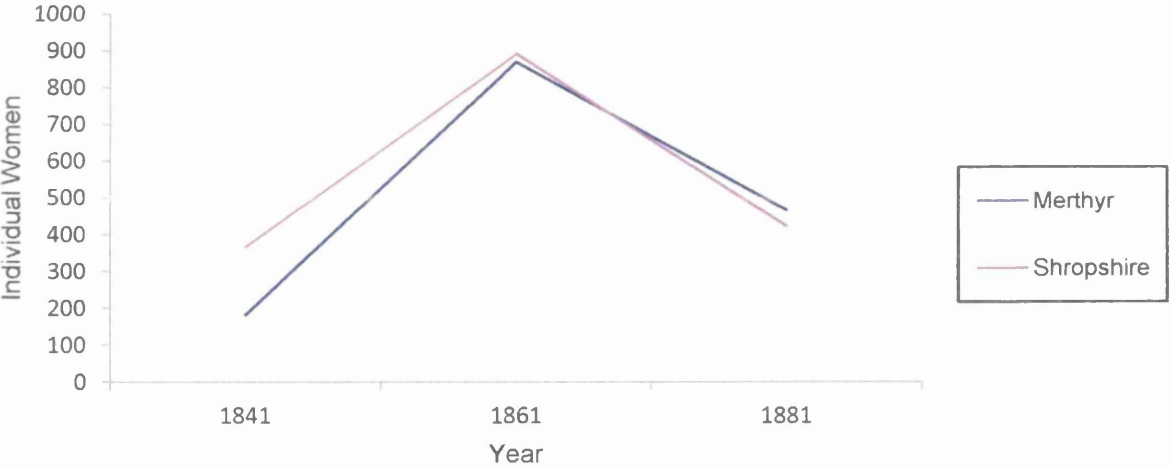
⁴ As Figure 1.

Figure 7. Female employment in industrial occupations in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Figure 8. Number of women in industrial occupations in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Female employment in the industrial sector may have fallen as a proportion of total women workers in the study areas, but as Figure 8 shows, the number of individual women working in industrial occupations in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield underwent a small increase over the period. In Merthyr, the number of women working in this sector rose from 183 individuals in 1841 to 871 in 1861, before declining to 466 in 1881, still higher than that seen at the beginning of

the period. In the Shropshire Coalfield, a starting point of 376 individual women rose to 958 in 1861, before decreasing to 477 by 1881. Between 1841 and 1861, the number of industrial employees necessary in both districts to sustain increased industrial activity had increased dramatically. After this point, the iron industry went into stasis, the most important factor influencing the decline between 1861 and 1881.

Differences between the two study districts were predominantly due to female employment in the pottery and pipe-making industries in the Shropshire Coalfield, an industrial option that did not exist in Merthyr Tydfil. Figure 9 excludes females employed in the Shropshire Coalfield potteries and pipe-making factories to demonstrate the similarities in female employment in the iron and coal sectors. 16.53 per cent of total women workers in the Shropshire Coalfield participated in heavy industry in 1841, (223 individual women), 23.61 per cent (715 individuals) in 1861 and 11.72 per cent (270 individuals) in 1881. The almost identical proportionate pattern in the two districts displayed here reflects the fortune of the iron industry over the period. As already discussed in chapter two, female employment in the industrial sector was undoubtedly impacted by economic fluctuations found in heavy industry.

Figure 9. Female employment in heavy industry in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Historians have used the ideological campaigns waged by middle-class contemporaries over the period to explain changes to female employment in heavy industry. However, the large increase in women employed in the industrial sectors between 1841 and 1861 suggest this is overly simplistic. Formalisation of the concept of separate spheres may have appeared in the legislation passed throughout the 1840s, but this separation did not always appear in reality.⁵ The 1842 Children's Employment Commission Reports drew attention to, and legislated against, female employment in the iron and coal trades, yet female participation in industry, both nationally and in the study districts, actually increased after this date. A far more convincing explanatory factor for these changes can be found not in ideologies, but in the national and local economic fluctuations and urban developments. The various components of the iron industry were likely to absorb and discard unskilled casual workers, many of whom were women, but this was predominantly based on need, not gender. Correlation between female employment and industrial prosperity can be seen in each of the individual employment sectors in which women worked.

Iron production

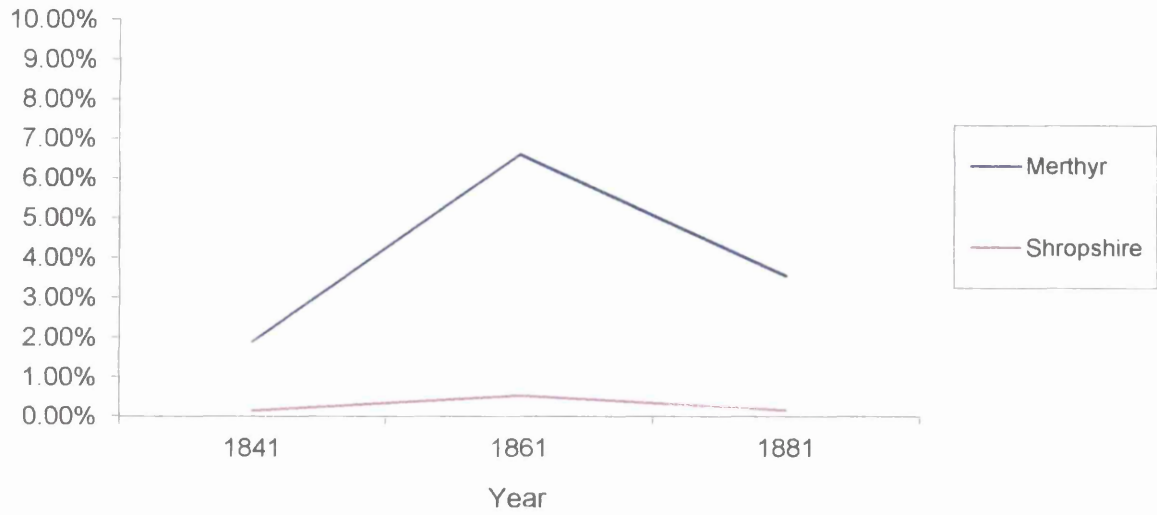
The iron industry was an equally important commercial enterprise to both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. This was not reflected in the participation of women workers in the actual production of iron, however. It was a far more significant occupation for women in Merthyr at all points throughout the period. The 1841 Occupation Abstract estimated less than 2 per cent of iron manufacture workers in England and Wales were women, yet this was much higher within Merthyr.⁶ Ten per cent of workers employed by the Dowlais Company in 1866, for example, were female, although this did include children and those working in the collieries and iron ore pits.⁷ The differences seen in the iron production sector between the two districts can be attributed to geographic factors, demonstrating the importance of local forces to female occupational trends.

⁵ Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p. 128.

⁶ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841*, p. 18.

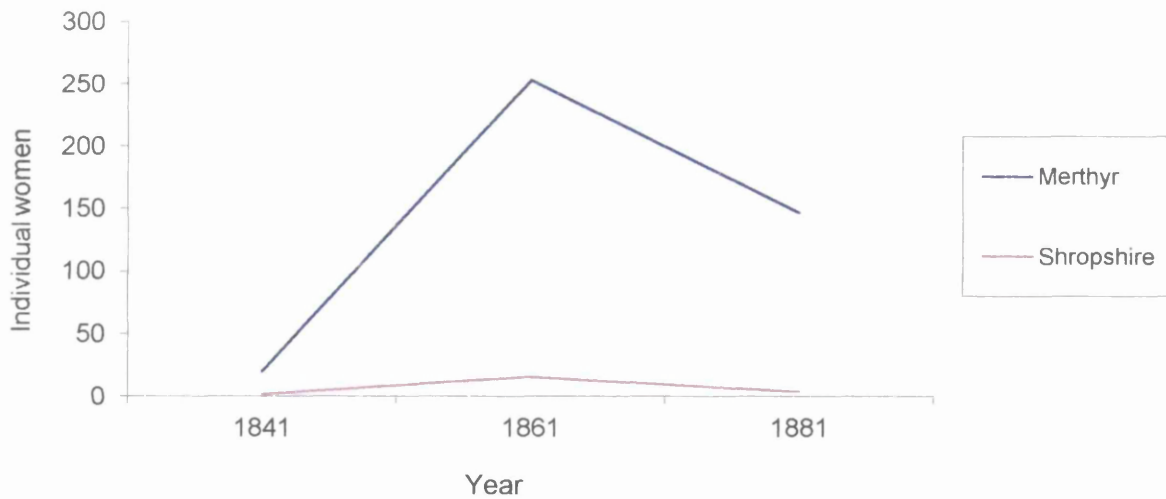
⁷ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 1 DG/C/5/15-16.

Figure 10. Female employment in the iron production sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Figure 11. Number of women employed in the iron production sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

As Figure 10 shows, there was a significant increase in Merthyr Tydfil between 1841 and 1861 (from 1.9 per cent of total women workers to 6.6 per cent) followed by a contraction by 1881 (to 3.55 per cent), leaving figures higher at the end than at the start of the period. Numerically speaking, this was a large increase from 20 to 253 women, with a fall to 147 individual participants, shown in Figure 11.

The missing data for Dowlais, the enumeration district in closest proximity to the largest ironworks in the world, also means that the number (and thus proportion) of women working in this sector in 1841 was probably higher than displayed above. However, based on population it is unlikely any deviation would have been large enough to affect the general pattern seen. Conversely, in Shropshire, the proportion of women recorded as working in the iron production sector never rose to more than 0.5 per cent, with only a handful of females in this sector in each year: 2 in 1841, 16 in 1861 and 4 in 1881. Even in 1861, with industrial output at a high, women in the Shropshire Coalfield were very unlikely to participate in this sector.

The dissimilarity seen in the participation of women in iron production in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield can be explained by the differences between the industries in each district. Reliance on furnaces built in the eighteenth century meant ironworks in the Shropshire Coalfield were unable to compete with production levels seen elsewhere.⁸ Instead, the companies focused on foundry iron, hollow-ware and casting, becoming world renowned for their high quality in this type of work from an early date.⁹ A *Shropshire Conservative* article published in January 1842 discussed the recent improvements in Coalfield and its iron companies. The production of iron goods that were ‘neater, more elegant in form, stronger and more durable than those of former times’ was linked to the ‘triumph of human intellect’. The Coalbrookdale Company in particular, with its ‘splendid warehouse’ was said to produce goods better than all competitors, ‘whether in taste of design, perfection in execution, or the magnitude of their understandings’.¹⁰ This foundry production was also used to support the pottery industries in the area, often owned by the iron companies: the Coalbrookdale Company, for example, produced fireplaces with ‘slip-out tile frames’, encouraging purchase of the latest decorated tiles.¹¹ The processes undertaken by workers at all points along these processes, from pattern making to mould filling, were classified as highly skilled. As seen elsewhere in

⁸ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 113.

⁹ Barrie Trinder, *The Darbys of Coalbrookdale* (London, Phillimore & Co, 1978), p. 61; Charles K. Hyde, *Technological Change and the British Iron Industry, 1700-1870* (Princeton, Guilford: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 128; Mott, ‘The Shropshire Iron Industry’, p. 69; Cossons, *Ironbridge: Landscape of Industry*, p. 43; Randall, ‘Industries’, p. 467; Baugh, ‘Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge’, p. 51; Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames*, p. 40; Emyr Thomas, ‘Introduction’ in *The Private Journal of Adelaide Darby*, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Shropshire Conservative*, 29 January 1842.

¹¹ Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 87.

Britain, these positions were therefore reserved for men.¹² The higher demand for female labour in iron mining in the Shropshire Coalfield, and in coal extraction in 1861, provided an alternate employment for female industrial workers. Conversely, in Merthyr, while the ironworks made a variety of products, these were predominantly for industrial use.¹³ Dowlais outputs between 1851 and 1852 included 'Common Sizes, Rods and Squares, Flats, Nail Rods, Rail Iron, Sheet Iron, Hoops', and 'Tramplates'.¹⁴ Here, and at the other ironworks in the district, wrought, or bar iron, was the main output.¹⁵ The forge was undoubtedly more important than the foundry. There was therefore a higher call for casual, unskilled labour, positions that were often filled by women.

While this explains the larger number of women working in the sector in Merthyr, it does not account for the fluctuations. The trade depression and economic slump seen in the iron industry as a whole from the late 1860s onwards affected production levels in Merthyr, and many families moved to other districts in order to mine coal.¹⁶ As will also be shown with regards to the coal sector, the demand for iron production heavily depended upon the fortunes of other industries.¹⁷ The establishment of railways in particular had a huge impact on the iron trade.¹⁸ By the end of the period, the railway network in Britain was 'almost complete'.¹⁹ This, coupled with a simultaneous general economic recession, led to a decline in the demand for iron. In addition, following the introduction of the Bessemer process, steel rose in importance as an industrial product, yet few ironworks within the study districts took up this mantle.²⁰ In 1866, William Crawshay, ironmaster at Cyfarthfa,

¹² O'Leary, 'Skill and the Workplace in an Industrial Economy', p. 72; Cossons, *Ironbridge: Landscape of Industry*, p. 31; Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames*, p. 50.

¹³ Hyde, *Technological Change and the British Iron Industry*, p. 129.

¹⁴ GRO: Accounts of output of material, and uses, 1851-1852, DG/C/4/3.

¹⁵ Michael Atkinson and Colin Baber, *The Growth and Decline of the South Wales Iron Industry 1760-1880: an Industrial History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1987), pp. 10, 66.

¹⁶ Brunt, 'Economic Development', p. 139; Jones, 'We Will Give You Wings to Fly', p. 29.

¹⁷ A.J. Taylor, 'The Coal Industry', in R.A. Church and E.A. Wrigley (eds.), *The Coal and Iron industries* (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 137.

¹⁸ R.A. Church, 'Introduction', in R.A. Church and E.A. Wrigley (eds.), *The Coal and Iron Industries* (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. x; Donald N McCloskey, *Economic Maturity and Entrepreneurial Decline: British Iron and Steel, 1870-1913* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 42; Hyde, *Technological Change and the British Iron Industry*, p. 180.

¹⁹ Atkinson and Baber, *The Growth and Decline of the South Wales Iron Industry*, p. 71.

²⁰ B R Mitchell, *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 2; McCloskey, *Economic Maturity and Entrepreneurial Decline*, p. 45.

described 'the star of the iron trade' as 'fast setting'.²¹ Two years later, Menelaus complained that the Merthyr iron trade 'was in a desperate condition'.²² This condition continued to the end of the period.

The cyclical nature of the iron trade already meant job security among iron workers was limited, especially for the unskilled.²³ The number of men and women working in the ironworks in Merthyr constantly fluctuated.²⁴ Women, a reservoir of cheap labour within the district, were traditionally taken on during production upswings.²⁵ This 'elastic labour force' of women existed in industrial districts throughout Britain, and was key in supplying fluctuating industries.²⁶ The opposite was true too, and with male unemployment common towards the end of the period in both study districts, it is unsurprising that demand for female labour dropped by 1881.

The fact that female employment levels in iron were higher in 1881 than 1841, however, indicates that some opportunities for women in the iron making sector remained. In 1866, Menelaus justified women's work in the iron industry on the grounds a 'scarcity of labour, owing to emigration' already existed, and to lessen this labour pool further 'would be very mischievous if not ruinous to the Iron Trade in South Wales'.²⁷ The 1871 Census Reports noted that 'the influx of immigrant workpeople into the mining districts does not equal the efflux of emigrant Cambrians'.²⁸ While similar conditions existed in the Shropshire Coalfield, a long tradition of not employing women for iron production means we cannot see any effects.

The jobs undertaken by women in the iron sector in the Shropshire Coalfield tell us very little about general trends, given that they account for so few individuals. Interestingly, though, while Hayman and Horton suggest that in the Shropshire Coalfield, women worked in iron production coking coal for the furnaces, there is little evidence of this in the census returns.²⁹ Descriptions of women involved in the coking process in the Shropshire Coalfield also appear in the 1842 Children's

²¹ William Crawshay, quoted in Morris and Williams, *South Wales Coal Industry*, p. 90.

²² William Menelaus, quoted in Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 29.

²³ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 170.

²⁴ PP, (1847) XXVII, *Royal Commission of Inquiry into State of Education in Wales*, p. 21.

²⁵ Evans, 'As Rich as California...', pp. 115-116.

²⁶ Rose, "'Gender at work": Sex, Class and Industrial capitalism', p. 115; Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 31.

²⁷ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 18 DG/C/5/15-16.

²⁸ PP, (1871) LIX.659, *Census of England and Wales 1871. Preliminary Report*, p. xix.

²⁹ Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 31.



Employment Commission Reports: 'of making coke [...] in preparing the heaps for being burnt, women, girls, boys and young persons are employed. The work is wholesome, being carried out in open air, and is not laborious'.³⁰ The absence of these jobs in the census returns could suggest that this employment in particular was under-recorded, possibly because it was undertaken on a casual basis. A handful of women were described as 'coker's wife', or 'coker's daughter' in the census, implying this job was not solely a feminine one.³¹ There is also the possibility that the women in this sector referred to as undertaking 'iron work', or as unclassified labourers, undertook this employment. Whatever the case, female ironworkers in Shropshire appear to have been anomalous.

In Merthyr, however, women were recorded as working in a wide range of jobs in the ironworks, taking part in the various and diverse processes necessary for iron production, as displayed in Table 9. Even here, there may have been underreporting of the number of women workers in this sector. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* printed a report written by Francis Wishaw in May 1842, claiming that at that time there were '4,500 men, 3,000 women and 3,000 children dependent on these works for their subsistence', although it is unclear whether wives and children of industrial workers were included in these figures, or whether coal mines were considered.³² Either way, a long tradition of female employment in the iron production sector was evident in Merthyr. Women had worked at Dowlais since the late eighteenth century, performing similar tasks to that seen in our period.³³ Unlike many other jobs, we know a great deal about the work undertaken by women in iron production. The 1842 Children's Employment Commission Reports described it in great detail. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent also detailed this work. He identified the main jobs undertaken by female ironworks employees as 'Pollers, Limestone girls, Coke-girls, Brick-yard girls, Tippers and Pilers'.³⁴ In addition, as Menelaus indicated in 1866, 'many of the girls [were] employed at odd jobs'.³⁵ Greater accuracy of census enumeration techniques meant that more detail was

³⁰ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 44.

³¹ As Table 3.

³² *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 7 May 1842.

³³ John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 85.

³⁴ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 31.

³⁵ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 10 DG/C/5/15-16.

Table 9. Iron production sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.³⁶

1841		1861		1881	
	No. (%)		No. (%)		No. (%)
coke filler	2 (10.00%)	bellin in the mill	1 (0.40%)	blast furnace filler	4 (2.27%)
coker	1 (5.00%)	blast furnace filler	15 (5.93%)	carrying oil	1 (0.68%)
iron piler	7 (35.00%)	cinder filler	7 (2.77%)	cinder filler	2 (1.36%)
iron roller	1 (5.00%)	coal filler	5 (1.98%)	coal filler	2 (1.36%)
iron work	1 (5.00%)	coal racker	1 (0.40%)	coke filler	3 (2.04%)
limestone breaker	3 (15.00%)	coal setter	1 (0.40%)	coke unloader	1 (0.68%)
mine peter	1 (5.00%)	coal stoaker	3 (1.19%)	coker	1 (0.68%)
mine poller	2 (10.00%)	coal unloader	2 (0.79%)	discharging wagons	1 (0.68%)
puddler	2 (10.00%)	coke cleaner	2 (0.79%)	iron filler	6 (4.08%)
TOTAL	20 (100.00%)	coke filler	3 (1.19%)	iron piler	15 (10.20%)
		coke heaver	1 (0.40%)	iron work	89 (60.54%)
		coker	4 (1.58%)	limestone breaker	2 (1.36%)
		feeder of crushing machine	1 (0.40%)	limestone burner	1 (0.68%)
		filler	4 (1.58%)	mills	3 (2.04%)
		finer	4 (1.58%)	oiling trams	2 (1.36%)
		fire work	1 (0.40%)	puddler	1 (0.68%)
		following mine	1 (0.40%)	puncher	1 (0.68%)
		forge labourer	4 (1.58%)	rail straightener	1 (0.68%)
		iron burner	1 (0.40%)	road sweeping	5 (3.40%)
		iron coker	1 (0.40%)	rolling mills	1 (0.68%)
		iron filler	6 (2.37%)	rougher	1 (0.68%)
		iron heater	1 (0.40%)	sandstone cutter	1 (0.68%)
		iron piler	90 (35.57%)	unloader	2 (1.36%)
		iron work	45 (17.79%)	water carrier	1 (0.68%)
		lime cleaner	1 (0.40%)	TOTAL	147 (100.00%)
		lime kiln labourer	1 (0.40%)		
		limestone breaker	9 (3.56%)		
		limestone burner	8 (3.16%)		
		limestone filler	1 (0.40%)		
		mine poller	15 (5.93%)		
		mine stocker	1 (0.40%)		
		moulder	2 (0.79%)		
		refinery	1 (0.40%)		
		rubbish filler	3 (1.19%)		
		sand girl	1 (0.40%)		
		sweeper	2 (0.79%)		
		tipper	3 (1.19%)		
		water carrier	1 (0.40%)		
		TOTAL	253 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 2.

³⁶ These listed occupations have been simplified somewhat for the sake of brevity, here and throughout the thesis. For example, in Merthyr Tydfil in 1861, enumerators' recorded iron pilers as the following: 'iron piler', 'piler', 'piler in forge', 'piler in iron works', 'piler of iron', 'piling', 'piling in the works', 'piling iron', 'piling iron in iron works', 'piling iron in mills', and 'rail piler'. The above table records only 'iron piler', as the meaning is the same.

supplied in these returns over time. For example, only 3 jobs dealing with coking were described in 1841, while 10 appeared in 1861, yet the processes involved in the job itself had not changed significantly during this period.

We know a great deal about the individual occupations undertaken by women working in the iron production sector in Merthyr Tydfil. Coking, for example, was almost solely a female preserve.³⁷ One 24 year old coke girl working at Penydarren, described her labour to the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent, stating ‘I work in all weathers – rain, snow or frost. I stand the rain and wind often all day long, because we must work’. This necessity was financial, as she pointed out ‘without the assistance of my father and mother [she] could not live’ on the five shillings a week she earned.³⁸ The wage may have been representative of unskilled labour, but the work was not. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent noted in parentheses that stacking and lighting the coal required ‘considerable skill, or the mass will not burn evenly or make good coke’.³⁹ Coke itself was a necessary reducing agent in the iron smelting process, and so its production was very important to the industry as a whole. The low wage therefore can be attributed at least in part to the gender of the employees.

Limestone breaking, again mostly undertaken by women, was also an important part of the iron making process. Limestone provided the necessary flux to remove impurities from the iron and to ensure the liquid iron did not gob, but flowed well.⁴⁰ The work, smashing limestone with heavy hammers, was described in the 1842 Children’s Employment Commission reports as ‘very severe labour’, undertaken 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 7 shillings.⁴¹ Mary Williams, a 15 year old limestone breaker paid 5 shillings a week, complained to the employment commissioner in 1841 that ‘the work is very hard’, citing her long hours of 12 hours a day, seven days a week and lack of rest due to having ‘to assist in house cleaning when home’.⁴² Later in the period, limestone girls interviewed by the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent described their work as ‘hard and trying’. They were, however, described by the journalist as ‘well-clothed and cleanly’, demonstrating the

³⁷ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 27.

³⁸ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 27; Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 74.

⁴¹ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 478.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 505.

importance placed upon feminine cleanliness and appearance by contemporaries, even for female industrial workers.⁴³

Piling was another job undertaken mostly by women in Merthyr.⁴⁴ Pilers worked 12 hour days, either day or night shifts, piling iron bars for the puddlers.⁴⁵ Their wages did not increase based on experience, indicating that the job was viewed as unskilled.⁴⁶ Their work was unpleasant and arduous. A 19 year old piler interviewed by the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent explained that ‘we have to lift up the pieces from the ground as high as my middle. Sometimes the iron is very hot, and we can’t take hold of it without thick leathers. I have burnt my hands shockingly, and so have the other girls who do the same work’. She also indicated the heavy physical labour necessary: ‘When the mills are working ‘rails’, two other girls and myself pile on an average 35 tons a day between us’, all for 4 or 5 shillings a week.⁴⁷

Females employed at the ironworks also undertook polling. A 21 year old ‘Poll-girl’ interviewed described her work (additions in parentheses made by the commissioner):

My duty is to take ‘the mine’ (iron ore) from the trams, to separate the rubbish from it (stone shale) and then to pile it ready for the furnaces. I work eleven hours a day in the open air, and am paid by the ton. My earnings come to 3s 9d per week – not more. I clean and stack about four tons of mine a day. The mine is often so flinty that it cuts my hands.⁴⁸

Payment by quantity encouraged hard work, which this girl certainly undertook. Economic necessity was presumably the main draw of this kind of heavy labour, and paramount to the choice of employment. This poll-girl claimed she had begun work at a very young age in order to help her parents, including her father, who was a miner in the district.⁴⁹

Evidence of processes undertaken in other work also exists. Wheelers transported iron bars, or drams of coal, to the men.⁵⁰ Tippers assisted in ‘cleaning the trams of their loads of burning cinder’ and were paid a very low four shillings a

⁴³ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 32.

⁴⁴ Revel Guest and Angela V. John, *Lady Charlotte Guest: an Extraordinary Life* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), p. 130; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 505.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 512.

⁴⁷ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, pp. 33-34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁵⁰ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, pp. 511, 514.

week.⁵¹ The 1842 Children's Employment Commission linked the 'peculiar' dress and 'personal strength' indicated by the appearance of women working on the cinder tips to their 'coarse occupation' and hard labour.⁵² This work 'followed in all weathers and in very exposed situations' and required contact with men.⁵³ Mary Evans, a 19 year old blast furnace filler in Cyfarthfa described her employment to the Children's Employment Commissioner: 'I help to fill the blast furnace with iron and limestone; the work is very hard, and the rest short. I work the seven days or seven nights, as there is no cessation of labour on the blasts'.⁵⁴ Catherine Hughes, a 14 year old water carrier, was also interviewed: '[I] carry water on the hill to the men who char the coal for the blast furnaces, work seven days or seven nights; less work on Sundays, 12 to 13 hours on other periods'.⁵⁵ In all cases, the work undertaken by females in iron production, even that carried out exclusively by women, was not in keeping with contemporary ideas of femininity or suitable work for the fairer sex, yet this did not stop women in the study districts from participating.

In addition to these commonly female, yet not feminine, employments, there are, admittedly rare, examples of women working in jobs traditionally seen as exclusive to men. Two women in 1841, and one in 1881, were returned as 'puddler' in the Merthyr Tydfil census.⁵⁶ The historian Chris Evans has described this as an employment requiring 'Herculean exertion'.⁵⁷ These particular women had managed to break into a male dominated employment, although little evidence exists to suggest why they were able to do so. In two cases, they were married to men who were also puddlers, suggesting a possibility of joint marital employment.⁵⁸ On the whole, though, women undertook unskilled positions throughout the works during the period. Nonetheless, their labour was vital to the functioning of the works, and thus to the iron industry and the various industries it supplied.

Even given the importance of their labour, women's work was a sensitive issue for spokesmen for the ironworks. Strange suggests that ironmasters were sometimes reluctant to disclose the numbers of women working for them due to the

⁵¹ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 33.

⁵² PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 479.

⁵³ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 504.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 505.

⁵⁶ As Table 2.

⁵⁷ Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames*, p. 41.

⁵⁸ As Table 2.

sensitivity of the topic, even to the extent of fabricating lower numbers.⁵⁹ During the 1842 Children's Employment Commission, various ironworks managers interviewed by the commissioner presented conflicting views of female labour in their works. Kirkhouse, overman to Cyfarthfa collieries and ironstone mines simultaneously justified and condemned female employment in the industry. He pointed out that 'the main roads are made as easy as the work will allow, by iron rails being run to the ends of the workings', but also admitted that 'this does not alter the nature of the employment', labelling it 'unfit for women', causing them to be unable to get 'after-employ at labour of domestic kind', predominantly on the grounds of 'the liberty it gives'.⁶⁰ John Jones, overman to the Cyfarthfa blast furnaces, made similar statements. The work done by furnace fillers and limestone breakers was described by Jones as 'constant, hard, and [requiring] close application for the whole seven days or seven nights, whatever shifts they labour upon'. While he described these women as 'clean in their habits and industrious', he too stated that they were 'unfitted by the labour for domestic service'.⁶¹ William Williams, overman to Cyfarthfa ironworks, was direct in his criticism of female employment.

Many girls assist at wheeling and piling iron [...] Girls ought not to be allowed to labour at such work, as it unfits them for domestic service, is far too fatiguing and heavy, causes too frequent intercourse with men, as the young women work on the night work as well as that of the day.⁶²

Unlike Kirkhouse, he did not attempt to defend the actions of Cyfarthfa in employing women. As middle-class men, these managers deplored the employment of women, yet as ironworks managers they were unable to turn down the advantages such employment brought to their establishments.

Contemporaries also questioned the morality of female industrial workers in Merthyr Tydfil. Reverend Owen Evans, an Independent chapel minister in Merthyr interviewed during the 1841 Children's Employment Commission, stated 'I do not think women ought to be employed in the works'. He gave two reasons. Firstly, he argued that such women 'never make good servants; they find the restraint too much'. He linked this to the alleged 'great difficulty' in finding a good domestic servant in the district. Secondly, he highlighted the behaviour of the female ironworks employees. According to the Reverend, 'when they have finished work

⁵⁹ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 27.

⁶⁰ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 503.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 503-504.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 503.

they wash and dress themselves, meet their sweethearts, and spend the evening in some public house'.⁶³ Such unfeminine actions had clear negative implications, especially for this nonconformist minister, who was likely to propagate the importance of the private sphere. Reverend Williams, curate of Merthyr Tydfil, agreed: 'The employment of girls in the works tends greatly to their demoralisation. They get habits of intemperance, and indeed all sorts of vice [...] the girls, I am told, are generally at the public house'.⁶⁴ Fiction throughout the period also emphasised the unstable, sometimes sexualised nature of the typical industrial worker, given her lack of suitable feminine employment and supervision.⁶⁵ However, in all cases it was the liberty granted by work in the industrial sector, rather than the actual labour undertaken in the workplace, that contemporaries tended to highlight as the main problem.

This independence was viewed positively by the industrial women workers themselves: in 1866, Menelaus argued that 'the girls as a rule prefer working out rather than become household servants, they feel more free and independent' and that there was no other employment for them than these two.⁶⁶ In 1842, the fact that 'the freedom from restraint after labour in the large works induces young girls to labour in the iron and other works in preference to entering domestic service' was blamed for the difficulty of finding suitable domestic servants.⁶⁷ According to Thomas Howell, overseer to Graig colliery, domestic servants personally chose to leave their positions in order to undertake industrial work when it was available. He claimed they did so on the grounds 'it [was] less restraining, and more money [was] gained'. He went on to say 'it acts much to their injury, as amongst the mining men they acquire the habits of swearing and drinking, and soon lose that character for sobriety which this part was characterized for centuries'.⁶⁸

Fears regarding the knowledge of domestic economy, or lack thereof, caused by working in iron production were also continually emphasised by local contemporaries. J. C. Woolrige, cashier to Plymouth works, argued during his

⁶³ Ibid, p. 506.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 506.

⁶⁵ Emma Liggins, "'Women of True Respectability?'" Investigating the London Work-girl, 1880-1900', in Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson (eds.), *Women and Work Culture: Britain c.1850-1950* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2005), pp. 90-91.

⁶⁶ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 14 DG/C/5/15-16.

⁶⁷ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 482.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 513.

interview with the 1842 Children's Employment Commission that it would 'be very desirable if some more suitable employment could be found for [women], as the vulgar habits acquired in the work destroy, to a great extent, their self respect, and prevent them from gaining any knowledge of domestic economy'.⁶⁹ Echoing wider criticism of female employment in industry, he appeared to justify it on the grounds that other employment was unavailable. The failure to learn feminine skills in other, more suitable employment was the focus, rather than consideration of the work women actually undertook. This viewpoint was not necessarily solely middle class. During the 1847 inquiry into the state of education in Wales, a survey of the home-life of the labouring classes in Merthyr Tydfil was undertaken. Concerns were raised regarding the role of wives:

The workmen and their families eat and drink to excess; their cookery being at the same time of the most wasteful and greasy description [...] When the husband comes home he does not find a meal ready for him, with his family to share it [...] he is therefore more ready to resort to a public house. It is a general complaint that the workmen's wives know nothing of housekeeping. "If ever I do marry", said a collier, "I will marry a cook, for she will have something ready for me when I do come from work" implying that such a person was not to be found among the females of his own class.⁷⁰

Both the middle-class commissioner, and the collier he interviewed, blamed female industrial labour before marriage for problems during it.

In reality, women carried out 'unfeminine' paid work in industry in conjunction with their own domestic labour. There are numerous examples of women following this pattern in the 1842 reports. Mary Price, a 17 year old unloader, argued 'the work is very hard, but I am used to none other, as I was taken below the ground when seven years old to keep trap doors'.⁷¹ Jane Davies, a 12 year old dram wheeler began work at age ten, stating 'never did any kind of work before, except fetch the water for mother to wash clothes with [...] I earn 14s a month'.⁷² However, the pattern of being employed in industry at a young age and moving up was not universal. Mary Evans, a 19 year old blast furnace filler in Cyfarthfa only started this work at 16, previously 'helping mother at home [...] at house cleaning and at washing'.⁷³ Susan Davies, a 17 year old piler had only been employed for a year,

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 509.

⁷⁰ PP, (1847) XXVII, *Royal Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*, p. 35.

⁷¹ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 513.

⁷² Ibid, p. 513.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 504.

previous keeping house 'for mother' and nursing the children. She stated 'mother taught me to knit and to sew my clothes, which I do after I get home'.⁷⁴ Susannah Davies, another 17 year old piler brought to work by her Father, a forge worker, at 14, described herself as '[working] hard when home'.⁷⁵ Sarah Davies, a 14 year old piler had only been employed for 2 months when interviewed.⁷⁶ In addition, in the 1842 Children's Employment Commission Reports, it was indicated that girls generally only began paid labour around eight or nine years old. The commissioner pointed out 'their usefulness in the house to assist their mother in cleaning, scouring, nursing and fetching water, which latter is a heavy and fatiguing part of a girl's duty' as a reason for their staying at home longer than was typical for male children.⁷⁷ Contemporary concern over the ability of female industrial workers to undertake domestic labour upon marriage, then, appear to have been largely based in ideology, rather than reality.

The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent also made judgements on the femininity of female iron workers due to their occupations. Coke-girls were described as being in a 'pitiful condition'. His description of their work in bad weather ended with a description of 'the rain literally running off their coal-bedaubed petticoats over their boots, in black streams, to the ground'.⁷⁸ The work of pilers as 'scattered about amongst the men, and surrounded by ponderous machinery in rapid motion' paints a dangerous picture. In addition to these evocative descriptions contrasting femininity and industry, he argued plainly 'they have often to endure intense heat, and their work is very hard'.⁷⁹ An article published in the same newspaper in 1850 described the necessary qualities for 'the successful accomplishment' of ironworking as 'physical courage, strength and endurance, and above all, a fair degree of practical skill', qualities associated with masculinity.⁸⁰ Manual labour was a clear challenge to femininity as far as the commentator was concerned, especially when carried out in such a masculine environment.⁸¹ Again, this perception did not appear to impact demonstrably upon employment levels.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 505.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 504.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 505.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 482.

⁷⁸ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

⁸⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, 18 March 1850.

⁸¹ Evans, 'As Rich as California...', p. 141.

Justification of female labour was necessary on the part of ironworks employers, given the low esteem it was held in by middle-class contemporaries. In 1866, Menelaus defended industrial labour for women in Merthyr, arguing that men were unsuited to the work of piling, on the grounds 'the frequent stooping and rising wearies them', with women on the other hand 'being shorter and more active, get through with comparative ease', thus having a 'particular aptitude for piling'.⁸² Dexterity was presented as feminine quality, rather than a learned skill, throughout the nineteenth century, and these women were paid less due to their sex, even though they were considered better at the job than a man would be.⁸³ This type of argument was not unique to Merthyr Tydfil, nor was it new. In the 1834 *Report on Employment of Children in Factories*, the descriptions of young hands as being 'better at performing the delicate tasks' could also be applied to women.⁸⁴ Ease of repetition was also identified with women's work throughout Britain.⁸⁵

Menelaus also sought to defend the re-introduction of female night labour at Dowlais, following the previous ban in 1850, which was spearheaded by Lady Charlotte Guest.⁸⁶ He argued that any further interference with the work of women at night would be detrimental to the works.⁸⁷ Menelaus' support of female employment at Dowlais is revealing. He cited scarcity of labour, concluding that 'if the women and young persons were to be stopped working on Sundays it would practically lead to their dismissal from the works', implicitly acknowledging the necessity of their labour. He also argued this work was unpopular with men, who would refuse to work at night or on a Sunday.⁸⁸ Women were presumably not afforded a choice. Handwritten corrections made to the document by G. T. Clark, manager of the Dowlais Iron Company, move discussion of this inability to employ men from its own separate paragraph to that justifying employment of women.⁸⁹ The implication that Clark wished to link the two is clear.

⁸² GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 11 DG/C/5/15-16.

⁸³ Judith G. Coffin, 'Consumption, Production and Gender: The Sewing Machine in Nineteenth-Century France', in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 125.

⁸⁴ Raven, 'A 'Humbler, Industrious Class of Female'', p. 175.

⁸⁵ Carol E Morgan, *Women Workers and Gender Identities, 1835-1913: the Cotton and Metal Industries in England* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 83.

⁸⁶ Guest and John, *Lady Charlotte Guest*, p. 130; John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 92.

⁸⁷ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, pp. 10-11 DG/C/5/15-16.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Defence of women's work did not mean female labour in the ironworks was completely accepted by the late 1860s, however. Arthur Munby, Victorian diarist, recorded in 1861 a Merthyr foreman referring to female industrial workers as 'strong as men'. Although Munby noted that the foreman emphasised there was 'no ill-conduct', such work was still viewed as incongruous with femininity by the men in charge.⁹⁰ In 1869, *Good Words*, a weekly periodical aimed at nonconformists, described women processing iron after it had been formed into cakes:

When the cakes have cooled, a man and a woman – the woman doing the harder work – hook them on to a two-wheeled frame, and haul them out, to be smashed by a hammer so heavy that its two handles, sticking out like horns, have to be wielded by two men.⁹¹

This mixing of the sexes at work was common, and although criticised by the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent, seemed largely accepted by locals. A court case in June 1871, whereby two hauliers for the Dowlais company were prosecuted for leaving their work without permission, concluded that 'in consequence of defendant's conduct nine men and three girls were kept idle a whole afternoon', citing a loss of 50s.⁹² The work of men and women together was discussed in 'matter-of-fact' fashion, and did not show any of the disapproval so evident previously in the century.

Examination of the iron production sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield demonstrates the importance of geographically-focused factors on female employment. These two districts were very similar in a multitude of ways, yet women's work in this particular occupational setting differed dramatically. This was not due to gender ideology present on a national level, but to variation in the local iron-making establishments in each district. Additionally, while national and local disapproval of women's work in the sector was found throughout the period, changes in employment levels can be correlated with industrial fluctuations, rather than the efforts of the middle class to criticise and even halt female employment in iron production. Nevertheless, the perception of these workers in the eyes of the

⁹⁰ Arthur Munby, quoted in Baylis, 'Visual Cruising', p. 5.

⁹¹ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

⁹² *Merthyr Express*, 24 June 1871.

managers and owners was still influenced by gender, evidenced by their low wages in comparison to other occupations within the ironworks.⁹³

Raw material extraction

The extraction of coal and iron ore was an important part of the iron production process, and many women in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were employed in these customarily female, yet not feminine, occupations. Contemporary concerns about femininity, appearance and morality generally only gave consideration to the acts undertaken during employment when they directly related to, or contradicted, gendered discourse. Many sources must therefore be assessed in the framework of raw material extraction as a whole, rather than associated with iron or coal individually. As such, this section will consider coal and iron extraction, and then discuss surface work in general. Once again localised industrial developments are demonstrated as a key factor influencing female employment patterns, rather than the enduring disapproval of the middle class. Evidence suggests that these women workers also sought to emphasise their own femininity at the same time, implying they may have been impacted by these middle-class perceptions, but that they still worked and saw themselves as feminine simultaneously.

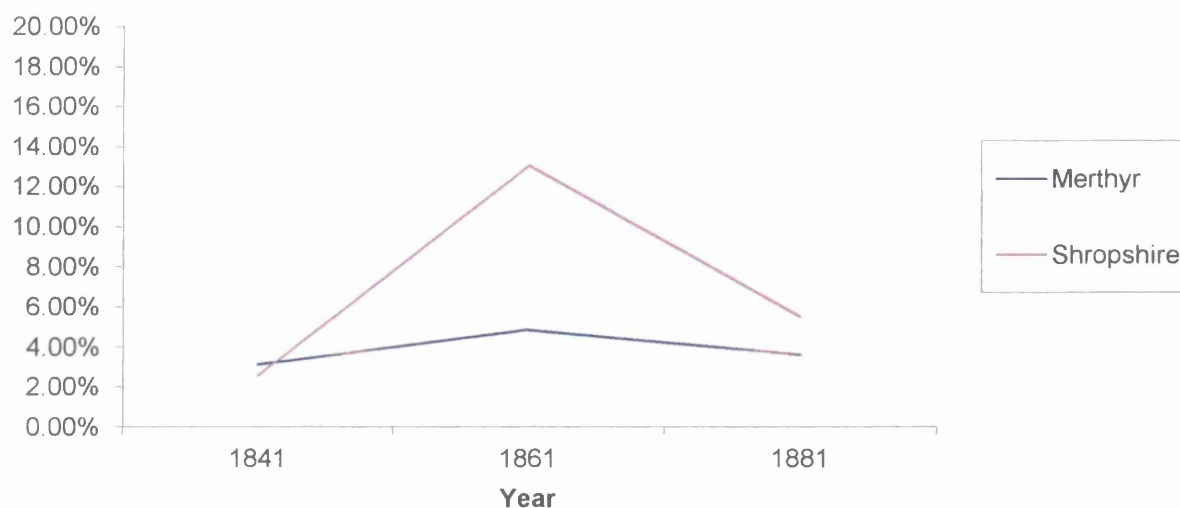
Coal Extraction

Historians and contemporaries have defined coal mining and the surrounding processes as a particularly masculine employment, even a purely male preserve.⁹⁴ Like female employment as a whole, this overriding perception of the coal sector as masculine was not reflected in reality within the study districts. The number and proportion of females employed in the sector increased, even after women were banned from working underground. Employment patterns were correlated with various industrial fluctuations and evolutions specific to each study district, rather than gender discourse. Hundreds of women were involved in this sector over the period, drawn upon when necessary and discarded when not.

⁹³ GRO: Details of rates of labour at Cwmavon, Dowlais, Ebbw Vale, Penydarren, Rhymney, Sirhowy, Tredegar and Victoria ironworks, and comparative tables of pay, October 1857, 1857, DG/C/5/5/1-39.

⁹⁴ Bradley, *Men's work, women's work*, p. 104.

Figure 12. Female employment in the coal sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Female employment in the coal sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield displayed the same patterns both in terms of proportion of total women employed, and the number of individuals participating in the employment, although differences can be seen in the trends seen in each study area. As shown in Figure 12, in both study districts there was a considerable increase in female employment in this sector between 1841 and 1861, followed by a decline by 1881. At the beginning of the period, female participation in the coal sector accounted for only 33 women in Merthyr Tydfil and 35 in the Shropshire Coalfield, equating to 3.14 and 2.59 per cent of total women workers in the districts respectively. According to the 1841 Census Occupational Abstract, only 1.56 per cent of coal sector workers were women.⁹⁵ Historians have estimated the total as a little higher, around 6000 individuals.⁹⁶ Either way, the number of women working in the coal industry nationally was not high. By 1861 the coal sector had increased to 4.88 per cent of total women workers in Merthyr Tydfil, accounting for 187 individuals. In the Shropshire Coalfield, this increase was even more pronounced, with 13.07 per cent of females employed working in the coal sector, 396 women in all. The subsequent drop to 3.64 per cent, or 151 individuals in Merthyr, and 5.51 per cent, or 127 individuals in Shropshire by

⁹⁵ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841*, p. 18.

⁹⁶ Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 80; John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 25.

1881 still left both the proportion of total women workers and individual women participating in the sector higher than at the start of the period.

The changes seen in female employment in the coal sector were again predominantly due to economic fluctuations in demand associated with the coal and iron industries in the study areas, and developments in the industry in both districts. The coal industry provided fuel for both the iron industry and many other manufacturing processes, as well as for personal consumption and transport systems across the world.⁹⁷ The 'cyclical fluctuations' caused by this reliance on other industries directly impacted upon female employment in the sector.⁹⁸ At the beginning of the period, coal in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was mined almost solely for the benefit of the ironworks, which needed constant fuel.⁹⁹ This extraction was extensive: over a five week period in May and June 1847, for example, Dowlais ironworks spent almost as much 'coal getting' as they did 'mine raising'.¹⁰⁰ By the mid-nineteenth century, firms in both districts began to conspicuously mine coal for sale, as well as for use in the production of iron, expanding the trade further.¹⁰¹ William Menelaus, manager of Dowlais from 1855 onwards, produced a landmark report in 1861 arguing that iron companies should enter the coal trade.¹⁰² He explained: 'now while the coal owner finds difficulty in getting rid of the small from his screens at 1s per ton, we can use it in the works where it is worth upwards of 2s. 6d. a ton'.¹⁰³ Able to both sell and produce, in times of iron trade depression the profits of the iron industry became linked to the sale of coal.¹⁰⁴ The coal sorting undertaken by women was therefore not only 'essential to

⁹⁷ Mitchell, *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry*, p. 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁹ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 23; Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 22; Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ GRO: Costs of material and iron made at Dowlais, November -December 1845; April 1847-May 1848; October-November 1851; and August-September 1852, 1847, DG/C/4/2.

¹⁰¹ C. Thomas, 'Industrial Development to 1918', in *Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community* (Cowbridge: Merthyr Teachers Centre Group, 1981), pp. 299-300; Morris and Williams, *South Wales Coal Industry*, p. 82; Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 29; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 181.

¹⁰² John Williams, 'Menelaus, William (1818-1882)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/48056>, accessed 13 Feb 2013].

¹⁰³ William Menelaus, quoted in Morris and Williams, *South Wales Coal Industry*, p. 88. Coal screens were used simply as a large sieve to sort larger pieces of coal, which could be sold for fuel, from smaller pieces of coal, which were worth far less. The collieries of ironmasters sent this 'small' to the works, where it was used in iron production, reducing waste.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, 'Industrial Development to 1918', p. 285.

the economy of the mine', as Burnett has pointed out, but to the economy of the ironworks, too.¹⁰⁵

In addition, the number of industries that needed coal to function increased throughout the period, and this was met with highly increased outputs.¹⁰⁶ Exports became key, with demand for British coal emerging across the world.¹⁰⁷ In 1851, coal mining as an overall source of employment in Merthyr stood at 20 per cent, increasing to 46 per cent by the end of the century.¹⁰⁸ In Great Britain as a whole, outputs rose from around 42 million tons in 1841 to 164 million tons in 1883.¹⁰⁹ The output of coal in south Wales rose from 4.5 million tons in 1840 to 16.5 in 1874.¹¹⁰ The second half of the nineteenth century has been described by Croll as 'the second phase of Wales' industrial revolution'.¹¹¹ Coal became the lifeblood of Wales in the same way iron was previously.¹¹² However, the majority of this extraction was undertaken in the nearby Rhondda valleys, rather than Merthyr Tydfil itself. The vast increase seen in the coal sector in Wales as a whole was therefore not entirely reflected in Merthyr.

The extraction of coal for sale had longer traditions in the Shropshire Coalfield than in Merthyr. As early as 1842, before the shift to coal production can be seen, the Children's Employment Commission described the Shropshire Coalfield as 'the source of a supply of fuel for a great part of the vale of the Severn, and the country to the West of it, to the borders of Wales'.¹¹³ Clod coal in particular was exhausted at the start of the nineteenth century, and so this tradition dwindled in importance in the first decade of the period. By the 1850s, however, new sources of steam coal were discovered. Coal mining, both for sale and for use in the works became extensive once more, and coal began to make up a large part of the profits of

¹⁰⁵ Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ Mitchell, *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry*, p. 329.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 4; M.W. Kirby, *The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946: a Political and Economic History* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Brunt, 'Economic Development', p. 148.

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Morris and Williams, *South Wales Coal Industry*, p. 77.

¹¹¹ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 27.

¹¹² John Davies, *The Making of Wales* (Stroud: Alan Sutton/Cardiff: Cadw Welsh Historic Monuments, 1996), p. 116; John A Owen, 'Merthyr Tydfil Industrial Development 1870-1918', in *Merthyr Historian*, volume two (Merthyr Tydfil: Merthyr Tydfil Historical Society, 1978), p. 23; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 181; Morris and Williams, *South Wales Coal Industry*, p. 77; Brunt, 'Economic Development', p. 131.

¹¹³ PP, (1842) XV.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 6.

the iron companies throughout the Coalfield.¹¹⁴ This production reached a peak in 1873 with over one million tonnes of coal produced, but declined thereafter.¹¹⁵ Women in Shropshire were not heavily involved in iron production, although they did play an important role in the mining of iron ore. The expanded opportunities in the coal sector would therefore have been popular amongst female industrial workers seeking work, as they were not able to gain employment in the iron production sector. This partially explains the much larger increase seen in the coal sector in the Shropshire Coalfield than in Merthyr, where a wider variety of industrial employments were available for women mid century.

The needs of the ironworks, at a peak during the mid-nineteenth century, affected the number of positions available in the coal sector for women seeking industrial work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. The increase can also be linked to the general economic situation. In 1841, an economic recession affected British industries.¹¹⁶ Between 1851 and 1861, however, a 'mid-Victorian boom' meant more jobs were available in all areas, including the coal sector.¹¹⁷ In addition, the implementation of plans to mine coal in order to sell it for profit rather than simply for use in iron production was also significant for female employment in the study districts in particular. In 1881, even in the face of extensive industrial closures, the number of women participating in the coal sector was significantly higher than in 1841. The new practice of mining coal for sale, which sustained coal production at a time while iron production was low, explains this.

The impact that ideological standpoints taken against women's work in the coal sector throughout the period had on levels of female employment is questionable. The 1842 Mines and Manufactories Act banned women from working underground, and yet participation in coal extraction by women increased in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield after this date. According to the 1842 Children's Employment Commissioners, female employment underground was

¹¹⁴ P. A. Stamper, 'Broseley', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.10 (Oxford: Published by Oxford University Press for the [University of London] Institute of Historical Research, 1998), p. 257; Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 60; Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 33; Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 51.

¹¹⁵ David Coxill and Kelvin Lake, 'Coalbrookdale Coalfield', in Adrian Pearce (ed.), *Mining in Shropshire* (Shropshire: Shropshire Books, 1995), p. 37.

¹¹⁶ Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation', p. 91.

¹¹⁷ McKay, 'Married Women and Work', p. 33.

common in South Wales.¹¹⁸ This may not have been true in Merthyr Tydfil, and is not reflected in Figure 12. While the missing census figures for Dowlais, a ward in close proximity to many collieries, may affect this, other evidence suggests underground labour in Merthyr was not necessarily the norm. Even before the ban, it was rare for women throughout Britain to work in coalmines after puberty, yet the employment of female children was not uncommon.¹¹⁹ This appeared to be the case in Merthyr, too: the only mention of female labour underground in Merthyr, by Robert Franks, Employment Commissioner, was in relation to children's labour. He described 'air-door girls' who opened and closed the trap doors controlling air flow through the mines. However, he went on to state that in the town, females would be given employment at eight or nine years old, 'either a tip girl or piler in the ironworks' ignoring underground labour as a possibility.¹²⁰ Contemporary descriptions of female work in Merthyr Tydfil, including during interviews undertaken by the 1842 Children's Employment Commission with colliery management and women employees themselves, predominantly discussed their work on the coal banks.¹²¹ In the Shropshire Coalfield, too, there was a strong antipathy to the idea of women working underground, and complaints that the presence of women in the pit was wrong appeared as early as the seventeenth century, although female employment on the pit bank was not viewed as being in the same category.¹²²

The ban on female labour underground did not appear to cause a multitude of individual women in the study districts to lose employment. Most importantly, the new, formalised ideological standpoint that censured female employment in the coal industry did not negatively impact other female employment opportunities within this sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent himself pointed out this dichotomy:

When women were not prohibited by law from working in the mines, the number is stated to have been only 182 – whereas in three out of the four great ironworks at Merthyr only, now that women are excluded from the underground labour, there are at present employed, as the returns supplied to me show, no less than 545 in and about the works; an increase in the face of a

¹¹⁸ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 36.

¹¹⁹ Peter Kirby, 'Child Labour, Public Decency and the Iconography of the Children's Employment Commission of 1842', *Manchester Papers in Economic and Social History*, 62 (2007).

¹²⁰ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 482.

¹²¹ Ibid, pp. 474, 503.

¹²² D. C. Cox, 'Ketley', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.11 (Oxford: Oxford U.P. for the Institute of Historical Research, 1985), p. 269; Hunt, *British Labour History*, p. 23.

reason for a decrease, which cannot be accounted for by the extension of the trade.¹²³

The figures he cited referred to both coal and iron extraction and iron production, illustrating that the increase between 1841 and 1861 in the industrial sector as a whole was steady. Clearly, there was no real reluctance in either Merthyr Tydfil or the Shropshire Coalfield to employ women in the coal sector, although not underground. Angela John has previously suggested that the 'tradition' of female employment in this sector had a 'profound effect on attitudes towards their work'.¹²⁴ In both Merthyr and Shropshire, female involvement in mining of either coal or iron, on the pit banks in particular, was indeed customary. As early as 1780, according to Charles Wilkins, iron ore in Merthyr was 'collected from the bed of the river by the women of the village'.¹²⁵ At the turn of the nineteenth century, women working for the Crawshays, ironmasters of Cyfarthfa, oversaw the conveyance of coal to Cardiff, supervising three or four horses or mules.¹²⁶ Later campaigns against female surface work, detailed in chapter one, may appear to have been correlated with falling female employment rates in the sector. However, this correlation was largely coincidental, with industrial fluctuations a far more influential factor.

The occupations undertaken by females employed in the coal sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, shown in Tables 10 and 11, did not appear to change much following the 1842 Mines and Manufactories Act. The increase in jobs described appears to be due to an increase in detail by census enumerators. The majority of occupations related to work undertaken on the banks of the coal pits. Nationally, surface work involved sorting and transporting coal, and this was no different in the study areas.¹²⁷ This work was predominantly female, and was also essential to the functioning of the mine.¹²⁸

¹²³ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 9.

¹²⁴ John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 19.

¹²⁵ Charles Wilkins, *The History of the Iron, Steel, Tinsplate and Other Trades of Wales: with Descriptive Sketches of the Land and the People during the Great Industrial Era under Review* (Merthyr Tydfil: Joseph Williams, 1903), p. 61.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹²⁷ Louise A. Tilly, 'Paths of Proletarianisation: Organisation of Production, Sexual Division of Labour and Women's Collective Action', *Signs*, 7:2 (1981), p. 411; Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, pp. 106-107; Guest and John, *Lady Charlotte Guest*, p. 123; John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 85.

¹²⁸ Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 25.

Table 10. Coal sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
	No. (%)		No. (%)		No. (%)
coal filler	13 (39.39%)	coal bank	29 (15.51%)	cleaning coal	2 (1.32%)
coal keeper	1 (3.03%)	coal carrier	9 (4.81%)	coal bank	72 (47.68%)
coal merchant	1 (3.03%)	coal discharger	1 (0.53%)	coal filler	11 (7.28%)
coal tipper	3 (9.09%)	coal filler	39 (20.86%)	coal lander	8 (5.30%)
coal unloader	2 (6.06%)	coal lander	11 (5.88%)	coal loader	1 (0.66%)
coal weigher	4 (12.12%)	coal loader	2 (1.07%)	coal miner	4 (2.65%)
coal work	6 (18.18%)	coal miner	12 (6.42%)	coal thrower	2 (1.32%)
drammer	1 (3.03%)	coal poller	1 (0.53%)	coal tipper	6 (3.97%)
haulier	1 (3.03%)	coal thrower	10 (5.35%)	coal unloader	6 (3.97%)
oiling trams	1 (3.03%)	coal tipper	13 (6.95%)	coal washer	10 (6.62%)
TOTAL	33 (100%)	coal unloader	13 (6.95%)	coal weigher	2 (1.32%)
		coal weigher	22 (11.76%)	coal work	13 (8.61%)
		coal work	18 (9.63%)	collier	1 (0.66%)
		collier	1 (0.53%)	cropping in coal mine	1 (0.66%)
		haulier	2 (1.07%)	haulier	9 (5.96%)
		haulier underground	1 (0.53%)	oiling trams	1 (0.66%)
		hitching under balance pit	1 (0.53%)	stanking on incline	1 (0.66%)
		incline roller	1 (0.53%)	timber unloader	1 (0.66%)
		oiling trams	1 (0.53%)	TOTAL	151 (100%)
		TOTAL	187 (100%)		

Source: As Table 2.

Table 11. Coal sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
	No. (%)		No. (%)		No. (%)
coal bank	24 (68.57%)	coal bank	316 (79.80%)	coal bank	101 (79.53%)
coal work	1 (2.86%)	coal filler	1 (0.25%)	coal filler	2 (1.57%)
collier	10 (28.57%)	coal jagger	1 (0.25%)	coal loader	7 (5.51%)
TOTAL	35 (100%)	coal loader	23 (5.81%)	coal miner	5 (3.95%)
		coal miner	9 (2.27%)	coal mistress	1 (0.79%)
		coal picker	5 (1.26%)	coal picker	3 (2.36%)
		coal work	40 (10.10%)	coal work	7 (5.51%)
		coke filler	1 (0.25%)	haulier	1 (0.79%)
		TOTAL	396 (100%)	TOTAL	127 (100%)

Source: As Table 3.

The only indication of a woman working underground in Merthyr Tydfil in 1841 was Catherine Davies, a 15 year old described as a 'haulier'.¹²⁹ Even this was not conclusive evidence, as while women were not usually depicted in this fashion when transporting coal on the surface, it would still have been a valid description.

¹²⁹ TNA, PRO: Census Returns 1841, HO107/1415/7, f. 49, p.14.

Some evidence also exists of women working underground following the 1842 ban. Whether this was entirely accurate or due to enumeration mistakes is unclear, although one might assume that women committing illegal underground work would have been unlikely to admit this to a government official. In 1861 in Merthyr Tydfil, Martha Harris, a 24 year old married woman, was returned as 'haulier under ground'. Her husband was a baller in the ironworks.¹³⁰ Although they had no children, their relative employments would still have been highly unusual, and raise questions about the enumerator's accuracy. In the Shropshire Coalfield in 1841, too, ten women were described as colliers, a term usually used by the census enumerators to signify those working underground.¹³¹ Thereafter, no indication was given of anything but surface work.

The possibility that women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield might have participated in illegal underground mining without being noticed or noted must be acknowledged. In 1858, *The Times* reported an inquiry that was to take place regarding the illegal employment of women underground in Wales, stating: 'It is understood that in the district of Merthyr the law is daily violated in regard to the employment of girls and young women in the mines and coal levels.'¹³² Needless to say, with over two thousand collieries throughout Britain and only a handful of inspectors, evasion would have been quite possible.¹³³ In Bolton, following a colliery explosion in November 1846, for example, the three women killed had been 'taken into the pit dressed as boys'.¹³⁴ An article in *The Times* in 1850 indicated management as key to discovering deception: 'the manager in one company in South Wales' had turned out '70 women and girls' from his mine the previous year, although he had not discovered their presence for some time, and 'he had no doubt that since then many had from time to time gone back again'.¹³⁵ In other cases, supervisors may have chosen to ignore suspicious behaviour, or even encourage it. In Lancashire, following the 1842 Act, several collieries placed ladders at the shaft

¹³⁰ TNA, PRO: Census Returns 1861, RG9/4050, f.42, p.14.

¹³¹ As Table 3.

¹³² *The Times*, 14 January 1858.

¹³³ Oliver MacDonagh, 'Coal Mines Regulation: The First Decade 1842-1852', in Robert Robson (ed.), *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in honour of George Kitson Clark* (London: George Bell, 1967), p. 68; Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 82.

¹³⁴ *The Times*, 28 November 1846.

¹³⁵ *The Times*, 9 August 1850.

entrance.¹³⁶ This sort of subterfuge is near impossible to trace, and whether it occurred in the study areas or not is uncertain.

Some evidence does suggest that illegal working may have been ongoing. In the study districts, the women who worked in the sector were even sometimes ignored by their own employers. The Rules and Regulations of the Dowlais Collieries, 1855-1857, described the job of the Head Lander: ‘The Head Landers shall not allow any one, except those employed underground, to descend the shaft, or remain on the bank, without the permission of the Manager.’ Only men could legally be employed underground at this point, and no mention of female pit bank workers, of whom there were many at this time, was made.¹³⁷ However, women also worked on the balance pits at the surface of coal banks. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent described this particular, unnamed employment:

As soon as the loaded tram reaches the mouth of the pit, these girls drag it away; two of them then step on the platform which supported the tram, and haul at a line passing a pulley over-head, which by a valve lets off the water from the tram at the bottom of the pit. In doing this one foot of the girl on the open side of the pit’s mouth is often suspended over the abyss. One of these girls sets the drum in action, regulating the velocity of the ascending and descending frame, by a “break” acted upon by a pulley.

The work was technically illegal according to the 1842 Mines and Manufactories Act, as pointed out by the correspondent, yet no move to stop this occurred.¹³⁸ Women involved would have been likely to refer to themselves as bank or pit workers, given the location of the employment. Conversely, the title of a police court report about women stealing coal in Merthyr in September 1871, ‘Colliers in Petticoats’, implies that by this period, the idea of women working underground was unusual and novel, and that illegal activity was not implicitly accepted, raising questions about the likelihood of this true underground activity in the study districts.¹³⁹

Like iron workers, women from Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield appeared to prefer work in the coal sector to other forms of employment. Katrina Honeyman points out that women in the 1840s may have viewed mine work with antipathy, but that they certainly preferred it to unemployment.¹⁴⁰ In the study areas,

¹³⁶ John, ‘Colliery Legislation and its Consequences’, p. 105.

¹³⁷ GRO: Rules and Regulations of the Dowlais Collieries, 1855-1857, p. 19, DG/D/1/4.

¹³⁸ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 33.

¹³⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 16 September 1871.

¹⁴⁰ Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 81.

this preference was over other, more domestic, forms of employment. While discussion of their jobs by female coal workers was rare, one example from the districts does exist. Charlotte Chiles, a 19 year old lander and weigher of coals, explained her decision to undertake industrial employment when interviewed during the 1842 Royal Commission:

I was kitchen maid at Lord Kensington's, near Carmarthen. I prefer this work, as it is not so confining, and I get more money. My wages are 40s a month, and as servant I only earned 60s to 70s for the year's service. I cannot save money now; but I can get more dress and more liberty. I work twelve hours daily [...] The work, though very hard, I care nothing for, as I have good health and strength.¹⁴¹

The higher wages and freedom of dress and behaviour, so often feared by those condemning industrial employment, were the very things Charlotte liked about her employment. Throughout the rest of Wales, women told employment commissioners they preferred this industrial work to domestic service on the grounds of pay and independence.¹⁴²

Good Words, the nonconformist periodical, suggested that financial need was the main reason women in South Wales chose to undertake industrial labour rather than other, more suitable employments, noting that:

If they threw it up, they could only take their choice between farm labour and domestic service, neither of which is remunerative in Wales. A servant, in every respect as handy and as useful as many who are getting £10 or £12 a year in London, can be hired for 5s the lunar month in Merthyr.¹⁴³

It is true that, throughout Europe, industrial employment of wives and daughters was vital to many working-class households to avoid poverty.¹⁴⁴ However, the *Good Words* article went on to state: 'it is strange to see them so merry over it', suggesting that money was not the only reason women undertook industrial labour.¹⁴⁵ Independence felt by coal workers was also in evidence in the Shropshire Coalfield. Female coal sector workers migrating to London from the district brought 'high wages, fine clothes and an element of sexual freedom' with them, all offensive to the middle class who considered domestic service as a more suitable employment.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 514.

¹⁴² Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p. 109.

¹⁴³ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

¹⁴⁴ Raven, 'A 'Humbler, Industrious Class of Female'', p. 188; Berg, 'What Difference did Women's Work make to the Industrial Revolution?', p. 37.

¹⁴⁵ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

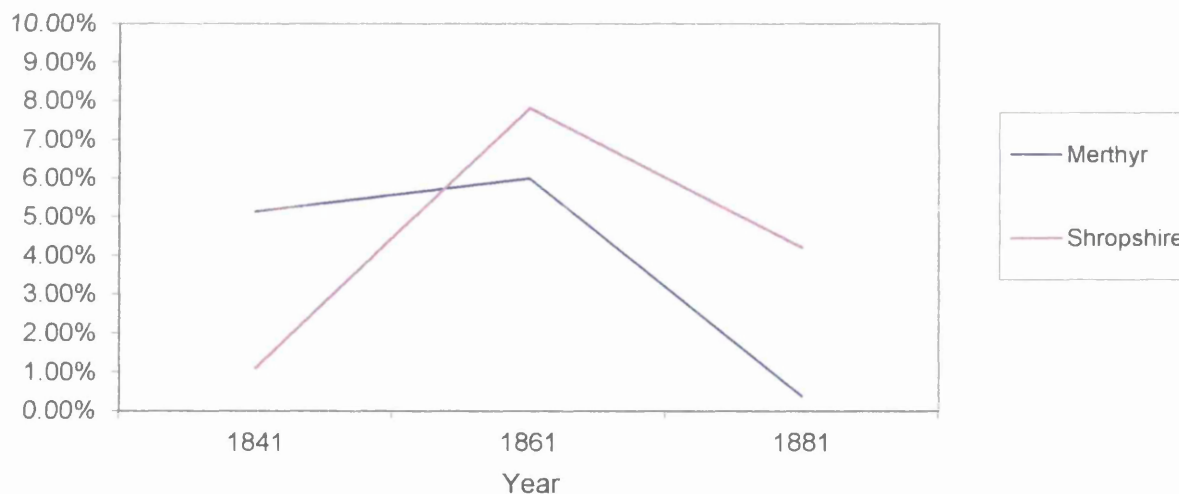
¹⁴⁶ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 225.

Women were presumably aware of the low esteem their work in the coal sector was held in by middle-class contemporaries, yet continued to undertake it anyway. Their agency must not be overlooked when explaining employment figures.

Iron ore extraction

According to the 1841 Census Occupational Abstract, 5.29 per cent of iron extraction workers in Britain were women, far higher than that seen in the coal sector.¹⁴⁷ This differential was not reflected in the study districts, however. Additionally, female involvement in the extraction and beneficiation of iron ore differed considerably in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. This was attributable to a combination of differing industrial fluctuations, as seen previously, and specific topographical factors.

Figure 13. Female employment in the iron extraction sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

In both districts, the proportion of women workers involved in the sector increased between 1841 and 1861, shown in Figure 13. In Merthyr, the proportional increase was slight, from 5.14 per cent (54 individual women) to 6 per cent (230 women). In Shropshire, there was a larger increase from 1.1 per cent to 7.82 per cent

¹⁴⁷ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841*, p. 18.

of total women workers, and a growth from 15 to 237 individual women participants. This increase can be very easily explained by the increase in iron production in both districts between these dates. After this point, however, patterns in the study areas diversified. In the Shropshire Coalfield, the proportion of women working in the iron sector declined to 97 women (4.21 per cent) in 1881. Given the pronounced fluctuations in the iron trade between these years, this is unsurprising, and was congruent with national trends.¹⁴⁸ In Merthyr Tydfil, however, female participation in iron extraction and surrounding processes underwent a much more dramatic decline to only 16 women, 0.39 per cent. This cannot be explained simply by decline in the production of iron.

At the beginning of the period, industrial districts throughout South Wales hired more female surface workers than anywhere else in Britain. Many of these worked in ironstone mines, and yet by 1890 the number of women working in this sector in Wales had halved.¹⁴⁹ This was not attributable to any ideological campaign to remove women from pit banks. Rather, the geographic factor of iron ore exhaustion was to blame. Between 1856 and 1865, Welsh iron ore output declined over threefold, even though iron production levels remained the same.¹⁵⁰ This exhaustion, described as 'inevitable' by Hyde due to the huge amounts of ore used in pig iron production, occurred in various iron districts throughout Britain.¹⁵¹ The dwindling supply in Merthyr was coupled by use of new, cheap imports of iron ore, leading to a vast reduction in extraction within the district itself.¹⁵² In addition, the new steel processes used at Dowlais from 1865 onwards required non-phosphoric iron ore, which did not exist in the vicinity.¹⁵³ Ironmasters chose to import ore from Spain rather than running ironstone mines, a practise that continued well into the twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ In 1857, Menelaus complained that iron mine was becoming difficult to 'get' in the district.¹⁵⁵ He also stated that 'if we confined ourselves to

¹⁴⁸ PP, (1887) LXVI.663, *Return of Number of Women and Girls, Men and Boys employed in Mines, 1873-86*.

¹⁴⁹ John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 71.

¹⁵⁰ Hyde, *Technological Change and the British Iron Industry*, p. 188.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁵² *The Story of Merthyr Tydfil: An Introductory History to the County Borough of Merthyr Tydfil* (Cardiff: Merthyr Teachers' Association N.U.T, 1932), p. 161; Thomas, 'Industrial Development to 1918', p. 299.

¹⁵³ Atkinson and Baber, *The Growth and Decline of the South Wales Iron Industry*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas, 'Industrial Development to 1918', p. 285; *The Story of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 164.

¹⁵⁵ GRO: Wm. Menelaus on general state of the Dowlais Works, 14 November 1857, p. 18 DG/C/8/5.

Welsh ore, owing to its great expense, the works would be shut up'.¹⁵⁶ As a result, very few iron mining positions existed for women or men in Merthyr by the end of the period.

Evidence given to the *Commission to inquire into Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, 1876* regarding female labour in the industrial sector in the Shropshire Coalfield paints a similar picture to the justifications given by Menelaus in 1866. Thomas Wynn, Esq (government inspector of mines for North Staffordshire, Cheshire and Shropshire), argued that the mines in Shropshire 'would not be worked if it was not for the women', and that 'it would make 7s a ton difference on some of the ironstone, owing to the difference between female labour and men's labour'.¹⁵⁷ Female labour kept down costs, a vital consideration.¹⁵⁸ The price of female workers, as well as their inherent skills, were clearly important factors to their employers.

Table 12. Iron extraction sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
	No. (%)		No. (%)		No. (%)
iron mine work	16 (29.63%)	banker	4 (1.74%)	iron mine work	1 (6.25%)
ironstone breaker	3 (5.56%)	iron mine tiller	1 (0.43%)	iron stone miner	1 (6.25%)
ironstone burner	1 (1.85%)	iron mine work	26 (11.30%)	ironstone breaker	1 (6.25%)
ironstone cleaner	6 (11.11%)	iron stone miner	1 (0.43%)	ironstone filler	10 (62.50%)
ironstone dresser	1 (1.85%)	ironstone cleaner	74 (32.17%)	ironstone thrower	1 (6.25%)
ironstone filler	24 (44.44%)	ironstone dresser	2 (0.87%)	ironstone tipper	1 (6.25%)
ironstone loader	3 (5.56%)	ironstone filler	100 (43.48%)	ironstone unloader	1 (6.25%)
TOTAL	54 (100%)	ironstone haulier	1 (0.43%)	TOTAL	16 (100%)
		ironstone poller	1 (0.43%)		
		ironstone thrower	1 (0.43%)		
		ironstone tipper	12 (5.22%)		
		ironstone unloader	5 (2.17%)		
		ironstone weigher	1 (0.43%)		
		pit lander	1 (0.43%)		
		TOTAL	230		

Source: As Table 2.

¹⁵⁶ William Menelaus, quoted in Atkinson and Baber, *The Growth and Decline of the South Wales Iron industry* p. 29.

¹⁵⁷ PP, (1876) XXX.1, *Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, with view to Consolidation and Amendment*, p. 563.

¹⁵⁸ Baylis, 'Visual Cruising', p. 11.

Table 13. Iron extraction sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
	No. (%)		No. (%)		No. (%)
iron mine work	9 (60.00%)	banker	111 (46.84%)	banker	48 (49.48%)
ironstone picker	5 (33.33%)	iron mine work	16 (6.75%)	iron mine work	7 (7.22%)
ironstone sorter	1 (6.67%)	iron stone miner	9 (3.80%)	iron stone miner	5 (5.15%)
TOTAL	15 (100.00%)	ironstone filler	7 (2.95%)	ironstone carrier	4 (4.12%)
		ironstone loader	25 (10.55%)	ironstone loader	7 (7.22%)
		ironstone picker	67 (28.27%)	ironstone packer	1 (1.03%)
		ironstone sorter	1 (0.42%)	ironstone picker	24 (24.74%)
		running relic iron miner	1 (0.42%)	ironstone sorter	1 (1.03%)
		TOTAL	237 (100.00%)	TOTAL	97 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2.

In both study districts, as shown in Tables 12 and 13, women working in iron extraction worked predominantly on the surface, as seen in the coal sector. The types of work these women engaged in involved picking and cleaning iron ore, and loading it for transport.¹⁵⁹ However, the relatively low number of women participating in iron extraction in the Shropshire Coalfield in both 1841 and 1881 indicates that, contrary to Trider's suggestion, picking ore was not one of the only occupations undertaken by young women in the Shropshire Coalfield.¹⁶⁰

Contemporary evidence of women working in iron extraction specifically does not compare to the abundant and detailed narratives of individual occupations carried out by women in the iron production sector. Nevertheless, some description exists. John Prestwich, a fellow of the Geographical Society and author of a paper on Coalbrookdale, described female employment on the iron pit bank during an interview for the Children's Employment Commission in 1841:

Girls are employed to separate the ironstone from the shales. It is hoisted up from the mine, and emptied out on a mound. The girls kneel on the edge of the mound and pick out the ironstone, and put it in baskets placed before them: and when the basket is full the girl places it on her head and carries it to the heap or stock of iron-stone. The shale they throw behind them down the slope of the mound.¹⁶¹

He concluded that these workers seemed 'cheerful and contented', and noted that they worked in company with other women.¹⁶² Customarily female, this work was

¹⁵⁹ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 45.

¹⁶⁰ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 169.

¹⁶¹ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 78.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, p. 78.

not generally subject to the same censure as other forms of industrial labour. James Mitchell, the 1842 Commissioner for Shropshire, was keen to emphasise that while many women were 'engaged in preparing the iron ore on the bank', none were involved 'in any kind of under-ground labour in the coal mines', making clear the distinction between these two types of work.¹⁶³ He also argued:

It has been stated by one medical gentleman that the loads which they took upon their heads were too heavy for them, and caused injury; but if so that might easily be remedied by giving to the smaller girls baskets of a less size: and besides this, it is their own fault if they load them more than they find agreeable.¹⁶⁴

No moral approbation can be sensed, and the women were viewed not as victims, but with agency. This was very much the exception to the rule, as discussion of surface work in general will show, but the reason why Mitchell did not perceive women workers in the same way as the other employment commissioners is uncertain.

Similarly, concerns seen nationally and in Merthyr Tydfil regarding marriage following industrial labour were not visible in the Shropshire Coalfield. Indeed, a Mr William Lloyd, 'an old miner', argued that female pit bank workers 'would make far better wives for miners' than domestic servants:

They had their own liberty after their day's work; and on Sundays they might dress in the morning, and go about where they pleased. They were not spoiled, like women in a gentleman's family, by seeing extravagance which a miner could not afford. Their notions of things agreed better with those of the miner, and when they married they studied economy, and if they had no families they would go out to the bank to work without a murmur.¹⁶⁵

The Commissioner concluded, 'in all this it was very probable that the old miner was right'.¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the deviation in female employment figures in this sector was not attributable to the differing perceptions of women. If anything, this demonstrates that these ideological judgments were not important: female employment in the sector declined in the Shropshire Coalfield due to industrial instability, even though it was represented in a positive light. Geographical factors were again the key explanatory factor.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 36.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 78.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid p. 41.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 41.

Surface work

Ideological discussion and proposed legislation did not always concern itself with the industrial sector surface work was associated with, and so this cannot be considered in conjunction with the individual coal and iron extraction sectors. This lack of differentiation is telling in itself: the product of the work undertaken was of less interest for contemporaries than the health, morality and femininity of the women in question. The negative representation of female surface workers did not impact their opportunity to participate in this employment throughout the period, though. While contemporary concern can be traced throughout the nineteenth century, no legislation aimed at female surface workers was passed until 1887. Even then, women over twelve were still permitted to work at the pit bank, and thus those under the remit of this study were unaffected.¹⁶⁷

Nationally, contemporaries continually questioned the femininity of surface workers throughout the period, describing their labour as both dirty and immoral.¹⁶⁸ Representations of these women workers as 'hard Amazons' due to these perceptions were widespread in Europe during the period.¹⁶⁹ Women working on pit banks throughout Britain were criticised in the 1842 Children's Employment Commission. 'Patch girls', helping to wheel and 'otherwise assist' on the bank were described as leading 'a sort of half-savage life'.¹⁷⁰ Their femininity was called into question due to the heavy labour they undertook and conditions faced: 'hardy, and exposed to all kinds of weather, they work as hard as the men, from whom they differ but little in dress, and quite equal in grossness'.¹⁷¹ Even their manner of dress was used as an indicator of their unsexed nature. During the National Association of Coal, Lime and Ironstone Miners of Great Britain Conference in 1863, miners questioned women's immorality in complaints about their participation in the industry.¹⁷² In 1866, Longe, an employment commissioner examining trades not regulated by law, concluded that working on the pit bank was 'injurious to the female character'. He went on to argue that employing men in their stead would result in 'the withdrawal of women and girls from an occupation which tends to lower the female capacities and character'. He

¹⁶⁷ John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, pp. 135, 208.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 11-12; Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 150.

¹⁶⁹ John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, pp. 218-219.

¹⁷⁰ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 474.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p. 474.

¹⁷² Edge, 'The Power to Fix the Gaze', p. 51.

stated that his proposed replacement of female with male workers would also lead to increased productivity, presumably drawing on the conception that men were automatically more efficient than women when it came to industrial labour.¹⁷³

Unlike other industrial employments, however, female surface labour was not generally reported as detrimental to women's health. Mr Dickenson, a mine inspector reporting on pit bank girls in Lancashire in 1861, described their 'trowsers and curtail dress' positively, indicating that it allowed for 'free use of their arms and limbs' and ultimately concluding 'they seem healthy and strong'.¹⁷⁴ Women workers themselves, who drew attention to their strength and health, shared this viewpoint.¹⁷⁵ Even when accidents happened, they were not used as a reason to halt such work. The case of Ellen Hampton is a good example. Ellen, a 12 year old killed at Moss House Colliery Lancashire in 1866, was employed 'to separate dirt and shale from the coal, to load the railway trucks, and to move them to and from the screens' (large sieves used to separate small and large coal), in a similar fashion to other female pit bank workers throughout Britain. Her death, being crushed by a railway truck, illustrated the danger of the environment. Even so, Peter Higson, government colliery inspector, concluded that this was an 'exception', and that 'the labour of females above ground [was] not altogether excessive'.¹⁷⁶ Little evidence of this type of discussion exists for the study districts, however.

The majority of descriptions of female surface workers in Merthyr, however, tended to represent their work in a pessimistic fashion. While the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent's description of 'an old Irish woman', 'wheeling small coal for stratifying with the ore' and paid 5 shillings and 6 pence a week, indicated her clothing as warm and thus suited for the job, attention was also drawn to the fact it was a dirty employment.¹⁷⁷ *Good Words* described tip women jumping into trams, in order to 'settle themselves down in a heap to enjoy a quiet pipe before they get to work', a decidedly unfeminine activity.¹⁷⁸ In October 1871, a resolution was passed at a national Miners' Conference held in Merthyr condemning the employment of

¹⁷³ PP, (1866) XXIV.1, *Royal Commission on Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Fifth Report, Appendix*, p. xiv.

¹⁷⁴ PP, (1862) XXII.293, *Reports of Inspectors of (Coal) Mines, 1861*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁵ John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, pp. 175, 179.

¹⁷⁶ PP, (1866) LX.23, *Report of Inspector of Collieries on Death of Ellen Hampson, killed at Moss House Colliery, Lancashire*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁸ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

women on pit banks, although no further move was made.¹⁷⁹ Many working-class men throughout Britain displayed resentment towards female surface work on the grounds that, as heavy labour, this should be offered to men.¹⁸⁰ Whether this was the case in the study districts given the wealth of opportunity for masculine labour within the iron industry is questionable. On the whole, though, discussion of female surface labour in Merthyr largely conformed to national viewpoints, representing the work as unfeminine and thus unsuitable. At the same time, female surface workers did not appear to be marginalized within working-class communities in the district. Throughout the 1870s, for example, these women participated in ‘Y Cor Mawr’ singing group along with women who could be described as lower middle class.¹⁸¹

Conversely, as already indicated, contemporaries presented female employment on the coal and iron banks in the Shropshire Coalfield in a largely positive manner. In the 1842 Children’s Employment Commission reports, pit bank workers in the district were described as ‘always smiling, laughing, and singing, and when observed at their work manifest a consciousness of how well they would appear if in better attire’, with no mention of unsexing or lack of femininity made by the commissioner.¹⁸² An 1866 Select Committee also heard evidence from the Shropshire Coalfield. Mr Enoch Onions, a miner from Wellington, described surface workers in the district: ‘when it is raining they are bemired with dirt and smudge, so that you can hardly know them’. He went on, though, to emphasise that the women wore ‘frocks and petticoats in our part of the country’, describing it as ‘a decent style of dress’.¹⁸³ The same Select Committee analysed photographs of pit bank women in order to determine whether their dress was immoral, showing the importance of this evidence.¹⁸⁴ The Committee also interviewed Edward Jones, a mining engineer. He argued that the work produced ‘very healthy women and very strong women’ in the Shropshire Coalfield. He also said that female ‘quickness and aptitude’ was necessary for the types of labour undertaken, and that boys would be unable to carry

¹⁷⁹ *The Times*, 7 October 1871.

¹⁸⁰ Angela V. John, *Coalmining Women: Victorian Lives and Campaigns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 13.

¹⁸¹ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 117.

¹⁸² PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 41.

¹⁸³ PP, (1866) XIV.1, 557, *Select Committee to inquire into Regulation and Inspection of Mines, and Complaints in Petitions from Miners in Great Britain Report, Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, Index*, p. 175.

¹⁸⁴ Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising’, p. 12.

out the work due to lack of discipline.¹⁸⁵ He agreed with the committee that it would create ‘almost a panic’ in the Shropshire Coalfield if women surface workers were banned, due to their importance to the process of iron ore extraction.¹⁸⁶ A similar argument was used to justify female labour in Merthyr Tydfil by Menelaus in 1866, who emphasised that women were ‘dependent on the works for support’, and that banning this labour would ‘probably throw these women, who are strong and independent, on the parish, as there is no other employment open to them’.¹⁸⁷ Wynn, a royal commissioner, also defended the health and morality of female industrial workers in 1876, arguing the fact that pit bank work was ‘the common women’s industry of the Shropshire coal district’ was not objectionable on the grounds of their sex and did not deteriorate the race, cause immorality, or lead to disorderly and untidy homes. Instead, he argued that although these women were ‘somewhat rough in their appearance’, they still made good wives, and that the work, being in the open air, was actually favourable to morality.¹⁸⁸

The customary nature of such work was acknowledged by Jones, a commissioner for Wolverhampton, who described Shropshire as ‘where the great majority of pit bank women are employed’ in 1875.¹⁸⁹ Once more, though, this does not explain why a similar tacit approval of female employment was not found in Merthyr Tydfil. In 1843, the Midland Mining Commission visited coalfields around Staffordshire, although they never made it as far west as the Shropshire Coalfield. Female labour in the industry was described in moralistic tones.

As far as it goes, I have no doubt that the intermixture of the sexes, both during working hours and on pay days, which results from it, is prejudicial to female modesty, not to speak of the hard out-of-door labour to which it exposes females, taking them from their domestic duties, which are consequently never properly learned.¹⁹⁰

This description has far more in common with the discussions of female labour that occurred in relation to Merthyr than to the far closer Shropshire Coalfield. Geographically influenced judgements on women’s work clearly operated on a very local level. Whatever the reason, the ideological viewpoint of female surface workers

¹⁸⁵ PP, (1866) XIV.1, 557, *Regulation and Inspection of Mines*, pp. 450-451.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 451.

¹⁸⁷ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 16 DG/C/5/15-16.

¹⁸⁸ PP, (1876) XXX.1, *Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, with view to Consolidation and Amendment*, p. 563

¹⁸⁹ PP, (1876) XXX.1, *Working of Factory and Workshop Acts, with view to Consolidation and Amendment*, p. 555

¹⁹⁰ PP, (1843) XIII.1, *Midland Mining Commission*, p. xxix.

was clearly greatly dependent on locality. Yet, the multifaceted representations of female surface workers do not appear to have made any real impact on their work patterns in the study districts and, in general, middle-class contemporaries involved in this discussion did not appear intent to make any real changes to legislation. Economic conditions and industrial fluctuations, already discussed, were undoubtedly more important in determining the opportunity for work.

Like women working in iron production and coal extraction, these women appear to have preferred this work. In 1866, they were said to prefer ‘outdoor labour to indoor service’ ‘because of the liberty they have under it’.¹⁹¹ As Roebuck, a British MP, pointed out in 1844: ‘contrast the girl in the factory with the servant of all work in the towns; or the factory workman with the agricultural labourer; and it would be found that factory employment had the advantage in pay, in moderation of toil, in clothing, and in lodging’.¹⁹² It is unsurprising, then, that so many would rather work on the pit surfaces.

The extent to which these women internalised ideologies regarding their domestic role, and whether this impacted upon their work choices, is difficult to assess – the very nature of the private sphere makes it near impossible to determine – especially given difficulties ascertaining the impact of choice and necessity.¹⁹³ The lack of popularity among working-class women of domestic magazines, women choosing to live as lodgers outside of the reach of domesticity, and dislike of domestic service throughout Britain can all be used as examples of the tendency to reject domesticity on the part of many working-class women.¹⁹⁴ In Merthyr Tydfil, the failure of *Y Gymraes* provides some evidence that this may have been the case. The domestic periodical, aimed at working-class women, had a very low circulation rate, with an estimated half of all issues paid for and read by men.¹⁹⁵ Female industrial workers were largely ignored, and the home was emphasised as ideal

¹⁹¹ PP, (1866) XIV.1, 557, *Regulation and Inspection of Mines*, p. 450.

¹⁹² *The Times*, 16 March 1844.

¹⁹³ Jordan, ‘Female Unemployment in England and Wales 1851-1911’, p. 190.

¹⁹⁴ Pamela Sharpe, ‘“The Barking Ladies”: Migrant Female Labour and the Abbey Jute Mill 1866-91’, *London Journal*, 22 (1997), p. 61; Lynn Jamieson, ‘Rural and Urban Women in Domestic Service’, in Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach (eds.), *The World is Ill Divided: Women’s Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 130; Edward Higgs, ‘Domestic Service and Household Production’, in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women’s Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 145; Horn, *The rise and fall of the Victorian servant*, p. 24; Pennington and Westover, *A hidden workforce*, p. 8; Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising’, p. 8; Williams, ‘The True Cymraes’, p. 77.

¹⁹⁵ Williams, ‘The True Cymraes’, p. 77.

instead.¹⁹⁶ While these women workers may have undertaken domestic labour in the home, they did not define themselves as solely domestic due to this. Internalisation of ideological norms is also questionable when we consider evidence regarding leisure activities. Robert Franks, reporting on amusements in Merthyr Tydfil, stated in 1842 that ‘the working man after labour has no resort but the beer shop, his boy accompanies him, his daughter often passes the evening there. It is unnecessary to pursue this further’.¹⁹⁷ Acceptance of men resorting to the beer shop did not extend to women. The lack of necessity for any discussion of why this was not tolerable speaks for itself when considering constructions of femininity. However, this is a clear example of disconnect between ideology and reality. Femininity may have been viewed as unsuited to the public sphere, but the fact remains that enough women in Merthyr Tydfil participated in these masculine spaces to make passing comment worthwhile.

While the perceptions of middle-class contemporaries did not directly impact upon female employment opportunities or choice to partake in this labour, surface work was unquestionably dirty and evidence exists that women undertaking it did not wish to be seen in this way. Illustration 1 shows a picture of a ‘tip girl’, a colloquial term for a female surface worker, taken in south Wales in the 1860s. This woman was dressed for work, yet her clothes were impeccably clean. Sadly, further information about this photograph other than the estimated date it was taken does not exist. It is impossible to know whether the woman wished to present herself as clean and feminine, or whether the photographer dressed and posed her this way. Baylis’ exposition of photographic records of women’s work provides interesting analysis which could be applied to this particular image. She argues that such photographs: ‘set up an interrogating gaze, the anatomising of the woman worker’.¹⁹⁸ Edge, too, discusses this type of photography, pointing out that ‘signs of her dirty and dark occupation work to signify her immorality by placing her in direct opposition to the light, clean and morally superior site of the bourgeois home’.¹⁹⁹ Lord suggests that this was not just an issue of gender, but one of class, with both male and female mineworkers viewed with curiosity by middle-class contemporaries.²⁰⁰ The outward

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 77; Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising’, p. 8.

¹⁹⁷ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children’s Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 482.

¹⁹⁸ Baylis, ‘Visual Cruising’, pp. 2-3.

¹⁹⁹ Edge, ‘The Power to Fix the Gaze’, p. 46.

²⁰⁰ Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 152.

emphasis of femininity on the part of these women workers is very difficult to trace. Little other evidence exists, and that which does, like above, can be subject to a number of conflicting interpretations.

Illustration 1. A tip girl, c. 1860.



Source: GRO: A tip girl c. 1860, copied c. 1970, 1860, DG/PH/4/2.

Dress, Angela John points out, was 'one of the defining characteristics of respectable womanhood', explaining the concern over women's appearance by contemporaries.²⁰¹ Industrial workers were instantly recognisable by their dress in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. The author of 'a Scripture

²⁰¹ John, 'Introduction', in *Unequal Opportunities*, p. 21.

Reader's Journal' recorded in March 1860: 'she said that she was working at the Dowlais forge and her dress indicated as much'.²⁰² The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent offered a number of conflicting views regarding the appearance of female industrial workers. On one occasion, pit bank girls' dress was described as 'black, coarsely clad, and repulsive' in contrast to what they wore when at Adult School, where they appeared 'clean, orderly and well-dressed'.²⁰³ His surprise at this suggests the original conclusion drawn on the basis of what these women looked like, and their character, was not tempered by any consideration of the sort of work they had to undertake. This is especially interesting considering earlier descriptions of women workers, which appear to take this factor into account:

Numbers, too, of girls, clad in a rather tightly fitting canvas dress, with sleeves, reaching from the bosom to bellow the knees, gathered in round the waist, and worn over a woollen petticoat, are also on their way to the works, where twelve hours of heavy labour, lifting and piling iron, loading and unloading trams, stacking coal at the coking pits, or making fire bricks, are before them. A small bonnet of coarse black straw (flattened at the crown from the habit of carrying home coal for firing, and other burdens on the head), beneath which, and with a corner pendant over the back, is worn a handkerchief of some bright colour, black woollen stockings, and thick quarter boots, complete the costume of these hard working females.²⁰⁴

This detailed description followed a brief sentence on the appearance of male workers, presumably not as interesting to the newspapers' audience given that it was seen as natural for men to undertake heavy labour. *Good Words* in 1869 also emphasised the masculinity of female industrial workers' appearance in Merthyr, both in their costume and face.²⁰⁵

Another description given by the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent of women at the pit bank seemed to emphasise their femininity:

Seven or eight young women in coarse, sleeved pinafores, handkerchiefs tightly bound over their heads, battered hats, bristling with frayed feathers, blue stockings, and, in some instances, masculine overalls.²⁰⁶

The health of the women was also considered, and the correspondent concluded 'some of the women were even rosy, as far as the colour could be seen through a

²⁰² NLW: Merthyr Tydfil in 1860: A Scripture Reader's Journal, 27 February - 3 March 1860, MS/4943B.

²⁰³ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 78.

²⁰⁴ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 18.

²⁰⁵ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

²⁰⁶ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

coating of black'.²⁰⁷ Observations made by Arthur Munby, described by Davidoff as 'one of the most assiduous students of gender and class in the period', following his visit to Wales in 1870 emphasised the natural femininity that could be seen by contemporaries in even the hardest female workers.²⁰⁸ Munby wrote in his diary of the 'soft Welsh voice and pretty accent which all such girls have, however big and coarse they be'. He, too, detailed the appearance of the pit bank workers:

Their smocks are very short and hide all the frock beneath... above the head kerchief they wear that... and peculiar little straw hat with berries in front, and they are cleaner than the others, or rather they look so in the gaslight [...] I noticed one tall ironworks girl, who looked exactly like a carter or plough man, as she strode down the street [...] But she and her comrade, a smaller girl, were feminine enough in their tastes, to judge by their interest in drapers' windows.²⁰⁹

While these women may have appeared masculine, their internal feminine nature was represented by Munby as immutable. Munby, however, was not a typical nineteenth-century gentleman, and his views were not shared by everyone. Taken in conjunction with the previous statements, however, it appears that women in Merthyr, both at the pit bank and in the ironworks itself, attempted to feminise their necessarily masculine dress in the small ways they could, including brightly coloured handkerchiefs and customisation of their hats with feathers, beads and ribbons.²¹⁰ This type of decoration occurred throughout Britain. Female ironworkers decorated their hats with feathers and beads, bondagers were said to replace 'functional' clothing with 'frills and flounces', and before the 1842 ban even women working underground were reported as wearing colourful earrings and beads.²¹¹ Similarly, Scottish weavers, Gordon argues, always wore a hat and gloves to work as 'an outward manifestation of femininity'.²¹² These women may have rejected domesticity, but this was not indicative of rejected femininity. Whether this was due to their own desire to constitute themselves as feminine, or to emphasise this need in the face of criticism, remains unclear.

²⁰⁷ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 23.

²⁰⁸ Leonore Davidoff, 'Introduction', in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 5.

²⁰⁹ GRO: Extracts from the diaries of A.J. Munby describing Wales, 3-9 October 1870, DXGC136/4-8.

²¹⁰ Baylis, 'Visual Cruising', p. 8.

²¹¹ Baylis, 'Visual Cruising', p. 8; Long, *Conversations in Cold rooms*, p. 23; Pinchbeck, *Women workers*, p. 249.

²¹² Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*, p. 160.

Conversely, descriptions of the appearance of female industrial workers in the Shropshire Coalfield were again largely positive. Women in 'warm flannel dresses and great coats like those of the men, with handkerchiefs round their necks, with hats or bonnets on their heads', were not criticised for their masculine appearance in the 1842 Children's Employment Commission Reports, but instead the protection their clothing offered from the weather was praised. That they were 'always smiling, laughing, and singing', suggestive of ideas of femininity, was used to support the assertion that 'when observed at their work [they] manifest a consciousness of how well they would appear if in better attire'.²¹³ The mention of better attire does acknowledge that their dress was not ideal, but it was still represented as feminine. A joke printed in the *Wenlock Express* in May 1881 highlights the dirty nature of the employment, although no real censure can be seen: 'The worst thing about kissing a Stafford girl is that you carry the marks of the coal dust about your nose and other features till you reach the nearest pump'.²¹⁴ Evidence from the period of women outwardly drawing attention to their femininity through dress does not exist in the Shropshire Coalfield. However, one pit girl who began work in the Shropshire Coalfield at the turn of the century later reminisced over the print bonnet she received to wear on the route to and from work.²¹⁵ This implies appearance was a matter for concern later, and so may very well have been the case in the nineteenth century.

Women's work in raw mineral extraction was a customary feature of both study districts. While contemporary perception ranged from acceptance to outright condemnation, this had no real effect on female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, even following the 1842 ban on women working underground. Instead, patterns were directly correlated with the commercial developments and prosperity of the iron and coal industries, along with the geographically specific changes to topography.

²¹³ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 41.

²¹⁴ *Wenlock Express*, 28 May 1881.

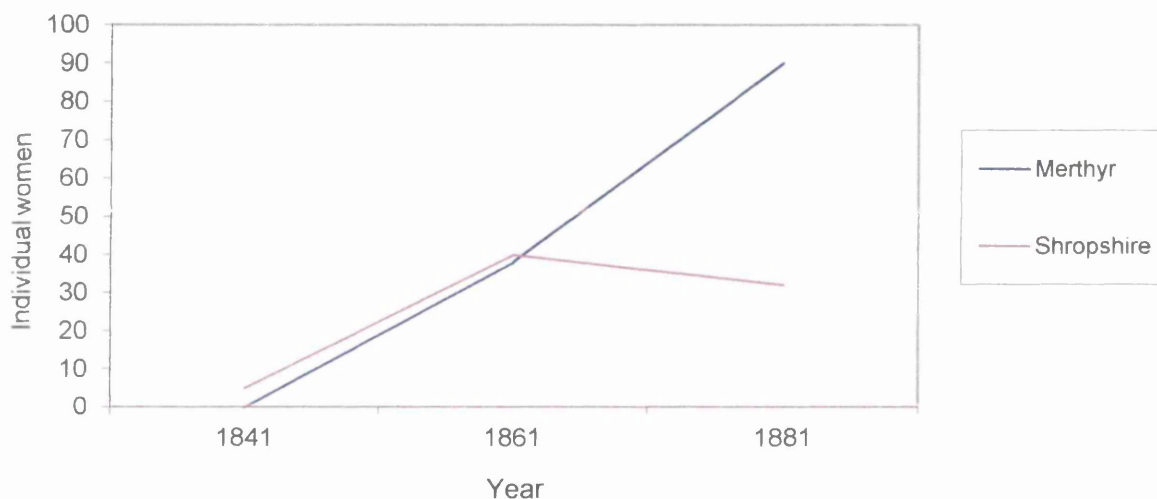
²¹⁵ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 169.

Subsidiary Processes

Brick Making

Brick making was another industrial area in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield connected to the iron industry. Although the numbers of female participants were low in comparison with direct interaction with iron and coal, examination demonstrates that, once more, geographically specific industrial dynamics impacted heavily upon female employment patterns.

Figure 14. Number of women employed in the brick making sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Brick makers as a proportion of total women workers in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield remained low across the period, never accounting for more than around two per cent of women workers at any point. While in both districts the number of women participating in brick making was small, the developments in each area were dissimilar. In Merthyr, both the proportion of brick makers in relation to total women workers increased a little over the period as a whole, as did the numbers of individual women participating in the sector, from 38 in 1861 to 90 in 1881, shown in Figure 14. Conversely, in the Shropshire Coalfield, while brick makers as a proportion of total women workers also increased very

slightly over the period as a whole, the number of individuals fell between 1861 and 1881, from 40 to 32.

This disparity can largely be explained by the difference in the brick making industries in each district. In Merthyr Tydfil, brick making was almost solely connected to the iron industry. 'Brick girls' were employed at the ironworks to make firebricks for kilns and furnaces. This work was nearly exclusively undertaken by women, so any increase in need would lead to an increase in female workers.²¹⁶ In other sectors within the iron and coal trade, casual women workers were more likely to lose their positions than men during stagnation and recession, but as few men participated in the brick making sector in Merthyr, female employees were able to avoid dismissal. Even in the face of a local depression, the number of women participating in the sector increased.

Brick making in the Shropshire Coalfield also supplied the iron industry at the beginning of the period. Trading the excess, however, proved so successful that it became an industry in its own right, supplying to domestic and commercial interests.²¹⁷ Multiple brickworks appeared from the 1850s onwards throughout the district, to the extent that by 1900 brickworks were the principal interest of the Coalbrookdale Company.²¹⁸ Designated as a primary, rather than secondary industry, and thus linked to skill, hiring men might have seemed more suitable to employers. In addition, local economic conditions impacted upon female employment opportunities. Males who became unemployed from the ironworks near the end of the period were likely to have sought the physical labour available in the brick making sector. Similar patterns have been traced elsewhere. In the Black Country, brick making was also women's work, as men were steadily employed in heavier industries, whereas in Lancashire, where the textile industry was dominant, it was designated as male work, and thus was not available to women.²¹⁹

Individual brick makers were involved at almost all points of the brick making process. The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent described the work undertaken by female brick makers in mid-century Merthyr Tydfil:

²¹⁶ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 27; John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 85.

²¹⁷ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, pp. 33, 64; Trinder, *The Darbys of Coalbrookdale*, p. 51.

²¹⁸ Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 82; Thomas, *Coalbrookdale and the Darbys*, p. 170; Randall, 'Industries', p. 444; Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 53; Trinder, *The Darbys of Coalbrookdale*, p. 65.

²¹⁹ Goose, 'Working Women in Industrial England', p. 18.

The clay is ground in mills by steam power, and the women then saturate it with cold water in a smaller shed opening by a door from the main building. They next temper it with their bare feet, moving rapidly about, with the clay and water reaching to the calf of the leg. This operation completed, they grasp with both arms a lump of clay weighing about 35 pounds, and supporting it upon their bosoms, they carry this load to the moulding table, where other girls, with a plentiful use of cold water, mould it into bricks.

Such employment was undertaken 12 hours a day, although Sunday was given as a rest day for school.²²⁰

While the brick making sector may have been almost exclusively female in Merthyr Tydfil, this did not mean it was perceived as feminine by contemporaries, nor accepted as a traditional form of women's work. The manufacture of fire bricks by women was described by the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent as a 'humiliating and uncongenial occupation for the sex', more so than any other industrial position. The work was criticised as unhealthy, with the shed in which the bricks were made described as 'having no windows or opening for the admission of light'.²²¹ Brick making in the Shropshire Coalfield was described in an 1866 Commission as 'very dirty, very laborious [...] very hot and exhausting work', but more concern was focused on the morality of such labour:

The evil of the system of employing young girls at this work consists in its binding them from their infancy, as a general rule, to the most degraded lot in after life. They become rough, foul mouthed boys before nature has taught them that they are women. Clad in a few dirty rags, their bare legs exposed far above the knees, their hair and faces covered with mud, they learn to treat with contempt all feelings of modesty and decency. During their dinner hour they may be seen lying about the yard asleep, or watching the boys bathing in some adjoining canal. When their work is over they dress themselves in better clothes and accompany men to the beershops.²²²

The concern regarding the lack of femininity seen in such industrial workers, who themselves admitted they would rather work in this than in 'low' domestic service, is clear. Their participation in an employment that subverted their gender roles led their morality to be questioned, and even time spent at work was connected to improper sexuality. The writer went on to conclude that 'the nature or even necessary results of

²²⁰ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 30.

²²¹ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 29.

²²² PP, (1866) XXIV.1, *Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Fifth Report*, p. 152.

a system like this on the character of the lower working classes of the district can be easily inferred' implying a risk of moral contamination.²²³

The general disapproval of female work in the brick making sector from contemporaries in the study districts was shared nationally. Employment in brickyards throughout Britain was described in 1866 by Longe as 'more objectionable and less excusable' than the employment of females in the iron mines and furnaces, on the grounds that while women undertaking employment in the iron industry were driven by economic necessity and a lack of other feminine employment, those employed in brick-making were likely to have been so from an early age, thus 'deprived' of 'all chance of obtaining a more appropriate and feminine occupation.'²²⁴ Baker, a factory inspector, made similar statements the previous year, ultimately damning the employment as 'absolutely cruel' and causing complete 'degradation of female character'. He wrote:

I have seen females of all ages, nineteen or twenty together (some of them mothers of families) undistinguishable from men, except by the occasional peeping out of an ear ring, sparsely clad, up to the bare knees in clay splashes, and evidently without a vestige of womanly delicacy, thus employed, until it makes one feel for the honour of the country that there should be such a condition of human labour existing in it.²²⁵

This contrast of femininity with the dirt and heavy labour of brick making would no doubt have made a nineteenth-century audience uncomfortable, but disapproval did not deter women from undertaking it nationally across the period. Once again, industrial dynamics and economic variations were key.

Labouring

Labouring appears to decrease in importance over the period: declining from 7.05 per cent of total women workers (74 women) in Merthyr Tydfil in 1841 to 4.15 per cent (159 women) in 1861 and 1.50 per cent (62 women) in 1881, and from 12.01 per cent (162 women) in the Shropshire Coalfield in 1841 to 0.83 per cent (25 women) in 1861 and 0.43 per cent (10 women) in 1881.²²⁶ This, however, can be attributed to enumeration accuracy. As we know, as the period progressed enumerators became

²²³ Ibid, p. 152.

²²⁴ Ibid, p. 152.

²²⁵ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 14 April 1865.

²²⁶ As Figure 1.

more exact in their descriptions of women's work. Labouring women who were attached to the ironworks, coal and iron pit banks, or brickworks, were far more likely to be described as such by the end of the period. This key employment, undertaken by impoverished women in particular, did not actually decline.²²⁷

Potteries

Unlike the geographically widespread iron and coal mines, furnaces and forges, employment opportunities in the pottery industry were found only in the southern portion of the Shropshire Coalfield: potteries in Benthall, porcelain factories at Madeley, and decorative tile factories in Coalbrookdale.²²⁸ The industry itself was already in place by the time the first Abraham Darby came to Coalbrookdale in 1708.²²⁹ It remained of secondary importance to the iron-dominated local economy, yet was a significant employment sector for women workers in the Shropshire Coalfield. While the factory setting of the pottery sector means it could be defined as industrial, contemporaries did not view female employment in the industry with approbation, nor was the work itself defined as unfeminine. Once again, the impact of gender ideology on female employment patterns in this sector is questionable: instead, geographically specific trends were more influential.

Female employment in the pottery sector as a proportion of total women workers showed some variation over the period. In 1841, 10.75 per cent of total women workers in the Shropshire Coalfield were employed in the pottery sector. This decreased to 5.88 per cent in 1861, with an increase to 6.64 per cent in 1881. Numerically speaking, however, participation remained fairly static. 145 individual women worked in the pottery sector in 1841, rising to 178 in 1861 and decreasing slightly to 153 in 1881.²³⁰ The fluctuations in proportion can therefore be largely attributed to the high influx of female employees in the heavy industries, which influenced the total number of women workers.

²²⁷ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 66.

²²⁸ J. F. A. Mason, 'Parliamentary Representation 1832-85', in G. C. Baugh (ed.), *Victoria History of the Counties of England. A History of Shropshire*, Vol.3 (Oxford: Oxford U.P. for the Institute of Historical Research, 1979), p. 340; Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, pp. 87-89.

²²⁹ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 15; Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 86.

²³⁰ As Table 3.

Nationally, the gendered division between workers in the pottery industries was fairly even, and the Shropshire Coalfield was not an exception.²³¹ The stability of this industry even in the face of economic fluctuations elsewhere meant it remained important to the local economy, and for female employment in the district. However, the availability of other forms of work had no discernible effect on the proportion of women who worked in the industrial sector. The pottery sector was not an alternative employment for women who would otherwise have worked in the heavy industries. The assertion that manufacturers of pottery, bricks and decorative tiles filled the employment gaps left by the decline of the iron industry in the Shropshire Coalfield does not appear to be true, for women, at least.²³²

Throughout Britain, women working in the pottery industry were most likely to work 'finishing' the product, a trend that can also be seen in the Shropshire Coalfield, demonstrated in Table 14.²³³ 'Finishing' included the various processes surrounding decorating: glazing, polishing, painting, burnishing and transferring. This work was feminine, and whether contemporaries perceived it as skilled is questionable. On the one hand, the china painters in this area held an international reputation for their ability and artistic quality of their goods.²³⁴ Throughout Britain, Bradley asserts, painting was seen as skilled, even when women undertook it.²³⁵ The pottery industries were held in high esteem locally, with female employees seen as having greater aptitude than those working in heavy industry.²³⁶ However, in the potteries of the Shropshire Coalfield, the 'masculine culture of the painting room', meant the decoration of special pieces was often reserved for men.²³⁷ Gilding, one particularly skilled occupation, was usually a male employment. Although there existed a handful of women undertaking this role, females generally carried out the less skilled job of burnishing the gold only after it was placed on the pottery by a

²³¹ Jane Humphries, "'Lurking in the Wings. . .': Women in the Historiography of the Industrial Revolution", *Business and Economic History*, 20 (1991); Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, p. 170; Dupree, 'Women as Wives and Workers', p. 146.

²³² Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 9.

²³³ Dupree, 'Women as Wives and Workers', p. 146; Bradley, *Men's Work, women's Work*, p. 121.

²³⁴ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 52.

²³⁵ Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p. 122.

²³⁶ Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 58.

²³⁷ Trinder, *Industrial Revolution in Shropshire*, pp. 170, 225.

male gilder.²³⁸ This is reflective of trends seen in a variety of occupations nationally, with women placed in a secondary role due to their gender.

Table 14. Pottery sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
	No. (%)		No. (%)		No. (%)
burnisher	36 (24.83%)	below grinder	2 (1.12%)	burnisher	26 (16.99%)
china manufacture	23 (15.86%)	biscuit cleaner	1 (0.56%)	china manufacture	12 (7.84%)
colour grinder	3 (2.07%)	burnisher	37 (20.79%)	china washer	1 (0.65%)
gilder	2 (1.38%)	china manufacture	25 (14.04%)	clay tile bearer	1 (0.65%)
indliner	1 (0.69%)	chipper	1 (0.56%)	colour grinder	2 (1.31%)
painter	77 (53.10%)	cleaner	1 (0.56%)	decorator	1 (0.65%)
potter	1 (0.69%)	colour grinder	7 (3.93%)	gold grinder	1 (0.65%)
transferer	2 (1.38%)	dampner	2 (1.12%)	gold polisher	1 (0.65%)
TOTAL	145 (100.00%)	ground layer	3 (1.69%)	ground layer	1 (0.65%)
		lathe turner	3 (1.69%)	painter	50 (32.68%)
		looker over	1 (0.56%)	potter	8 (5.23%)
		packer	1 (0.56%)	print cutter	1 (0.65%)
		painter	60 (33.71%)	setter	1 (0.65%)
		placer in kiln	1 (0.56%)	spout maker	1 (0.65%)
		potter	2 (1.12%)	tile maker	29 (18.95%)
		slip maker	3 (1.69%)	transferer	8 (5.23%)
		tile maker	2 (1.12%)	warehouse	9 (5.88%)
		tile polisher	1 (0.56%)	TOTAL	153 (100.00%)
		transferer	8 (4.49%)		
		warehouse	16 (8.99%)		
		wheel turner	1 (0.56%)		
		TOTAL	178 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 3.

Female employees in the Shropshire Coalfield also participated in the actual manufacture of pieces. This was one area where changes can be seen. This employment, again viewed as skilled, rose as a total percentage of women workers in the pottery sector. Evidence from the Staffordshire Potteries suggests men as unwilling to accept female employees, in one case forbidding women to use the armrests they used for comfort while manufacturing, in another forcing female tile makers to stop work if they appeared to be out-producing their male colleagues.²³⁹ There is no indication of this reservation in the Shropshire Coalfield. The presence of the iron industry, a large employer of men, could explain this. With employment

²³⁸ PP, (1863) XVIII.1, *Royal Commission on Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law. First Report, Appendix*, p. 7.

²³⁹ Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 41; Benson, 'Work', p. 75.

opportunities elsewhere, there were no attempts to force women out of the pottery industry to create positions for men. The other surrounding processes were mainly unskilled, including warehouse labouring and cleaning the products.

While the pottery industry was a vital part of the economy of the Shropshire Coalfield, local contemporaries gave it little attention throughout the period. The majority of information discussing female employment in the industry is found in the First Report of the *Royal Commission on Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law*, published in 1863, and even here, evidence given was conflicting. While J. T. Arledge, Senior Physician to the North Staffordshire Infirmary, stated in the report that ‘the potters as a class, both men and women, but more especially the former, represent a degenerated population, both physically and morally’, this was not necessarily representative of how this trade was seen in the Shropshire Coalfield.²⁴⁰ Porcelain manufactories were said to have ‘strong and well-educated boys of 13 and 14’ employed, implying a higher class of workers, although female employment was not necessarily represented in the same fashion.²⁴¹ Young girls, largely employed in the finishing branches, were judged upon health grounds. Scouring, papering and brushing the fired china, was stated as ‘the most pernicious branch of the manufacture’ by F. D. Longe, commissioner.²⁴² Elderly female scourers interviewed at Coalport stated that ‘they had not suffered from their work, except that their breathing was affected’, implying an expectation of this injury.²⁴³ Longe argued that these particular employments were ‘the most injurious in the trade’, worrying that ‘many young women [were] tempted to sacrifice their health for the sake of the high wages which this employment affords’.²⁴⁴ This mention of high wages is incongruous with evidence found for the Staffordshire Potteries, implying either that women were paid more highly for this particular employment in the vicinity of the Shropshire Coalfield, or that female pottery workers had higher wages simply in comparison to industrial workers.²⁴⁵ On the whole, these health concerns were not given the same urgency as the anxiety of

²⁴⁰ PP, (1863) XVIII.1, *Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law. First Report, Appendix*, p. x.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. xii

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 39

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi

²⁴⁵ Jacqueline Sarsby, ‘Gender and Technological Change in the North Staffordshire Pottery Industry’, in Gertjan De Groot and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Women Workers and Technological Change in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p. 123.

morality seen in other employment reports, and appear to have borne little upon the lives and work of female employees in the sector.

The marital status of women working in the pottery sector shifted somewhat over the period, and single and widowed women became a more important part of the workforce as time progressed. Even with this shift, however, a far higher percentage of married women, between 25 and 50 per cent in each year surveyed, worked in the pottery trades than seen in the heavy industries.²⁴⁶ This also helps to account for the higher number of married women workers in the Shropshire Coalfield as a whole compared to Merthyr Tydfil. The percentage of women workers over 30 in this sector also increased over the period, partially explained by the high number of widows participating in the sector.²⁴⁷ However, it might also suggest that older single women, seeking careers, began to undertake this employment. Divergence from trends seen in the heavy industrial sector in both marital status and age again indicates the pottery sector was not an alternative to industrial work. The figures seen are especially interesting given that in the Staffordshire Potteries nearby, 75 per cent of the workforce was under 30, and according to Dupree, only 14 per cent of married women worked in the industry.²⁴⁸ The urban character of Staffordshire explains this. Although the area contained coalmining and iron industries, women were predominantly only employed in the potteries.²⁴⁹ Conversely, in the Shropshire Coalfield, a large proportion of young, single women worked in these industrial sectors. There was therefore a larger opportunity for older, married women to undertake employment elsewhere.

Pipe-making can also be defined as a sub-set of the pottery industry in the Shropshire Coalfield. It displayed very distinct trends, however, thus warranting separate consideration. Clay pipe making had long roots, and although the first factory was not introduced until the early nineteenth century, previous to this small-scale production was common in the district.²⁵⁰ This sector illustrates the importance of local trends to female employment. The proportion and number of female employees was very low in 1841, with only 8 women, or 0.59 per cent of total females employed. An increase in 1861 to 65 women, or 2.15 per cent and a slight

²⁴⁶ As Figure 4.

²⁴⁷ As Table 3.

²⁴⁸ Dupree, 'Women as Wives and Workers', p. 147.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 143.

²⁵⁰ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 53.

decline to 54 women, or 2.34 per cent, in 1881 can be traced in the Shropshire Coalfield.²⁵¹ The work, though skilled, received remarkably little attention from contemporaries, and so the relatively large increase given the lack of developments in the industry itself is hard to pinpoint, perhaps suggesting under recording in 1841.

While the actual numbers participating were small in terms of proportion of total women workers, the number of pipe-makers in the district has been pinpointed between 50 and 100 throughout the nineteenth century.²⁵² This was a predominantly feminine occupation from 1861 onwards, albeit geographically specific. Women were thus involved in all stages of the process, from moulding to trimming to glazing. In 1861, 89 per cent of female pipe-makers in the Shropshire Coalfield lived in Broseley, with the remainder in the directly bordering areas of Madeley and Benthall. By 1881, this number had decreased to 77 per cent, although the remainder again lived in bordering areas.²⁵³ Broseley, a small village just south of Ironbridge, contained three clay pipe factories, as well as a tradition of undertaking clay pipe work, both as a sole occupation and a seasonal by-employment.²⁵⁴ Geographic location was clearly the most important factor influencing female employment in this sector.

The demographics of women workers in the pipe-making sector were similar to that seen in the pottery sector. Married women accounted for around a third of females employed in the sector.²⁵⁵ Pipe-making was contracted out, in addition to being carried out in factories, partially explaining this. Some women were able to carry out the work in their homes. The percentage of women over 30 was directly correlated with marital status, as was the proportion of those with minor children.²⁵⁶ Financial necessity, coupled with the ability of women to carry out both this work and their own domestic labour, can be pinpointed as a major explanatory factor.

Women's work in the pottery industries of the Shropshire Coalfield again highlights the importance of geographically specific trends to female employment. This work was not heavily criticised by contemporaries in Shropshire, contrary to discussion seen elsewhere, although whether lack of negative attention had an impact

²⁵¹ As Table 3.

²⁵² Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 54; Stamper, 'Broseley', p. 280.

²⁵³ As Table 3.

²⁵⁴ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, pp. 51-53.

²⁵⁵ As Table 3.

²⁵⁶ As Table 3.

on employment is questionable. The local economic environment, however, was very important.

Conclusion

While contemporaries and historians have represented the heavy industries and women workers as antonymic, this was not reflected in the employment patterns seen in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Women not only worked, they worked in a great variety of employments that were vital to the iron and coal trades, and in the Shropshire Coalfield, the potteries, and thus to the British economy as a whole. Comparison between the study districts demonstrates how important local industrial trends were to female employment. At the same time, industrial fluctuations mirrored wider economic trends and developments in the industries themselves.

The importance of women's contribution was never fully and openly acknowledged during the period. Managerial men in both study areas, however, recognised that without their labour, production within the heavy industries would suffer inordinately. As the period progressed, employers of women in the industrial sectors were no longer able to gloss over female employment, but instead sought to justify it. This was due to a multitude of factors: the long traditions of their work within the study areas as customarily female; the use of specifically feminine skills in many individual occupations; and, perhaps most importantly, the cheapness of their labour, a key factor associated with women's work throughout Britain.

Branca has pointed out that while women's work was crucial to the British economy, this 'does not mean it was equal and it certainly does not mean that it was pleasant or rewarding'.²⁵⁷ In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, women preferred industrial employment to other work. This evidence alone raises questions about the extent to which women in the study district internalised domestic ideology. In addition, while contemporary discussion increasingly condemned female employment in industrial work throughout the period, the number of women participating increased. These women workers were often subject to heavy criticism by the contemporary middle classes, and yet they continued to participate in labour

²⁵⁷ Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 18.

viewed as unsuitable. Once again, commercial developments and prosperity were key.

Chapter IV

Primary and secondary occupations: female non-industrial workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, 1841-1881

The local economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield may have been heavily influenced by iron and coal, but industrial employment was not the only form of primary and secondary work open to women living in the study districts. This chapter will consider female employment in the agricultural, sewing, and production sectors. As discussion of these somewhat disparate occupations will show, women working in non-industrial primary and secondary jobs were perceived and represented very differently by contemporaries than their industrial counterparts. Nonetheless, the number of women recorded as working in these occupations was similar to that seen in the industrial sector for the majority of the period, casting doubts upon the impact of ideology upon employment patterns. Instead, as evidence from the census, local newspapers, parliamentary papers and the Darby family records will show, the characters of and fluctuations in the urban economies of the two study districts were once again influential.

In Merthyr Tydfil, female participation in non-industrial primary and secondary occupations increased from 16.95 per cent of women workers (178 individual women) in 1841, to 22.33 per cent (856 women) in 1861 and 22.63 per cent (938 women) in 1881. In the Shropshire Coalfield, a similar increase (from a lower starting point) between 1841 and 1861, from 10.9 per cent (147 women) to 18.95 per cent (574 women) was followed by a slight decline to 17.66 (407 individuals) in 1881. The patterns displayed in both study districts between 1841 and 1881 were similar to those seen in female employment overall, and were influenced by economic fluctuations and subsequent opportunities, as this chapter will demonstrate. It is important to note that the vast majority of women who participated in non-industrial primary and secondary work were occupied in the sewing sector, and so the overall trends displayed in non-industrial primary and secondary occupations relate closely to those seen in this sector, examined in detail below.

Non-industrial female employment in the primary sector

Agricultural

The only non-industrial primary sector occupation women participated in, agricultural activity stood at the periphery of life in the two study areas, both geographically and figuratively. Inhabitants of both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were more likely to be involved in industrial, urbanised occupations, regardless of gender. The proportion of women involved in the agricultural sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield therefore remained very low throughout the period. In Merthyr Tydfil, 1.14 per cent of females employed, 12 individuals, worked in the agricultural sector in 1841, steadily increasing to 1.33 per cent, 51 individuals, in 1861 and declining proportionally almost imperceptibly to 1.3 per cent, 54 individuals, in 1881. In the Shropshire Coalfield, an increase from 0.74 per cent, 10 individuals, in 1841 to 1.49 per cent, 45 individuals, was followed by a decrease to 0.56 per cent, 13 individual women.¹ No real extrapolation of general trends can be taken from these very low figures. Nevertheless, it proved an important work opportunity for some women living in the study districts. The casual nature of many of the occupations in this sector meant they could be undertaken by women during times of financial necessity, even though this was not necessarily recorded in the census.

The fact that the proportion of employed women working in agriculture remained at similar levels throughout the period emphasises the importance of local factors to female employment. Historians have indicated a sharp national decline in agricultural employment over the period. Increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of society were the main contributors to this trend, and decreasing employment opportunities affected women more than men.² Developments in domestic ideology from the 1850s onwards on led to new condemnation of female agricultural workers, predominantly due to the conflict between this work and their natural role in the home, although never to the extent of the criticism seen of the

¹ As Figure 1.

² Hudson, 'Women and Industrialization', p. 30.

industrial sector.³ This sharp decline cannot be seen in the study areas, however, and a numerical increase can even be traced. This could indicate some under-recording in 1841. In addition, the very small sample size alone explains this disparity with national trends, rather than indicating geographically-specific factors influencing female employment in agriculture in the study districts.

Table 15. Agricultural sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
agricultural labourer	7 (58.33%)	agricultural labourer	10 (19.61%)	agricultural labourer	4 (7.41%)
cow keeper	1 (8.33%)	cow keeper	2 (3.92%)	chaff cutter	1 (1.85%)
farm servant	1 (8.33%)	dairy maid	20 (39.22%)	cow keeper	7 (12.96%)
farmer	2 (16.67%)	farm servant	7 (13.73%)	dairy maid	16 (29.63%)
hay maker	1 (8.33%)	farmer	9 (17.65%)	farm servant	15 (27.78%)
TOTAL	12 (100.00%)	hitching maid	1 (1.96%)	farmer	10 (18.52%)
		horse keeper	1 (1.96%)	horse keeper	1 (1.85%)
		poultry feeder	1 (1.96%)	TOTAL	54 (100.00%)
		TOTAL	51 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 2.

Table 16. Agricultural sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
agricultural labourer	4 (40.00%)	agricultural labourer	30 (66.67%)	agricultural labourer	7 (53.85%)
farmer	6 (60.00%)	dairy maid	3 (6.67%)	farm servant	2 (15.38%)
TOTAL	10 (100.00%)	farm servant	6 (13.33%)	farmer	4 (30.77%)
		farmer	6 (13.33%)		13 (100.00%)
		TOTAL	45 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 3.

The work undertaken by women working in the agricultural sector in the study areas, shown in Tables 15 and 16, appears markedly different. In the Shropshire Coalfield, little diversity in description can be seen, with the vast majority of females working in the sector returned as either 'agricultural labourer', or 'farmer'. In Merthyr Tydfil, it appears that there was a much wider variety of agricultural jobs. An assortment of occupations, both pastoral and agrarian, were recorded. Other sources suggest this variation between the study districts was likely to have been due to disparity in enumeration techniques, rather than differences in

³ Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 25; Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, p. 110; Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 17; Sharpe, 'The Female Labour Market in English Agriculture', p. 57.

the actual work undertaken. Francis Darby's Cash Book provides insight into the work undertaken by female agricultural workers in the Shropshire Coalfield. Amelia Edwards, a regular employee paid both for individual tasks and on account, carried out a wide range of activities between 1827 and 1832. This included rearing a calf, cleaning meadows, sweeping paddocks, washing saddle cloths and working in the field.⁴ Between 1845 and 1850 she was given various sums ranging between 2s and £1, although whether this was a form of charity for an ex-employee or in exchange for labour is unclear.⁵ Other women were paid various amounts for similar activities, including hay making (one task never carried out by Amelia). Aside from Amelia Edwards, all were paid for individual tasks.⁶ While female day labour may have reached its 'high point' in the 1830s and 1840s, the period this data was taken from, the likelihood that those described as agricultural labourers in the census would have continued to carry out a range of tasks, as seen elsewhere in Britain, is high.⁷

Advertisements published in 1851 in *Eddowe's Journal* also indicate the actual work undertaken by agricultural workers in the Shropshire Coalfield. A 'Gentleman's family' looking for a dairymaid stated they would prefer 'a woman of steady age', with any candidate needing to 'thoroughly understand her business in both capacities'.⁸ Another advertisement in the same issue advertised for an 'Upper Servant' who 'thoroughly understands brewing, baking, and the general work of a dairy'.⁹ Domestic servants attached to farms clearly participated in agricultural activity in the district. In addition, agricultural work was described in respectable terms, indicating its acceptability in the district.

In both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, married and widowed women made up a relatively high proportion of those involved in agricultural activity.¹⁰ Married women participated in the agricultural sector in conjunction with their husbands. The description of an Agriculture Commissioner in 1843 of dairy

⁴ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1827, 1828, 1829, 1830, 1832 pp. 4, 7, 16, 33, 46, 84, 94 Lab/FD/1.

⁵ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1845, p. 289, Lab/FD/1; 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1847, 1849, pp. 6, 20, 82, 86 Lab/FD.

⁶ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1828, 1830, 1831, 1833, 1836, 1844, pp. 24, 60, 68, 108, 174 273, Lab/FD/1; 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1848, pp. 40, 44, Lab/FD.

⁷ Nicola Verdon, 'A Diminishing Force? Reassessing the Employment of Female Day Labourers in English Agriculture, c. 1790-1850', in Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K.D.M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600-1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 191.

⁸ *Eddowe's Journal*, 8 January 1851.

⁹ *Eddowe's Journal*, 8 January 1851.

¹⁰ As Figure 4.

managers: 'a person of corresponding importance in his household' due to their crucial role in ensuring the 'prosperity' of the farm is telling when we consider such employment was only made when the farmer was unmarried, with this position carried out by his wife otherwise.¹¹ In both districts, too, a relatively high percentage of widowed women participating in agriculture would suggest that single women were likely to seek employment in the works instead. Some widowed women would have inherited farms, influencing this trend. The marital status of women who participated in casual, unrecorded employment in agriculture is not clear.

The casual nature of employment in agriculture, as seen in Darby's cashbooks, also raises questions regarding the accuracy of enumeration. The common practice of paying agricultural labourers by the day or even by the task may have declined in popularity, but the casual nature of the employment continued. Female agricultural workers were under-recorded in the census across the period, due to this informal nature and seasonality of their work.¹² This would have been especially so in 1841 for wives and daughters who participated as part of a family economy. Miller's work on field workers in Gloucestershire refers to these invisible women as 'the hidden workforce', indicating that the decrease of female employment in agriculture mid-century was not as defined as previously indicated in the historiography.¹³ This casual labour would have been ideal for women in times of financial necessity. At the same time, while the possibility that the number of female agricultural workers may have been larger than seen through census reports must be acknowledged, the likelihood of any adjusted figures making any concrete difference to analysis of female employments in the two study areas is slim, given the heavily industrialised nature of the two communities.

Non-industrial female employment in the secondary sector

Sewing

The sewing sector was on average the second largest employer of women over the period, both in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, and in Europe as a whole. Sewing itself was classified as inherently feminine by contemporaries, in keeping with gender ideology, and these skills were used by women of all ages and

¹¹ PP, (1843) XII.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 5.

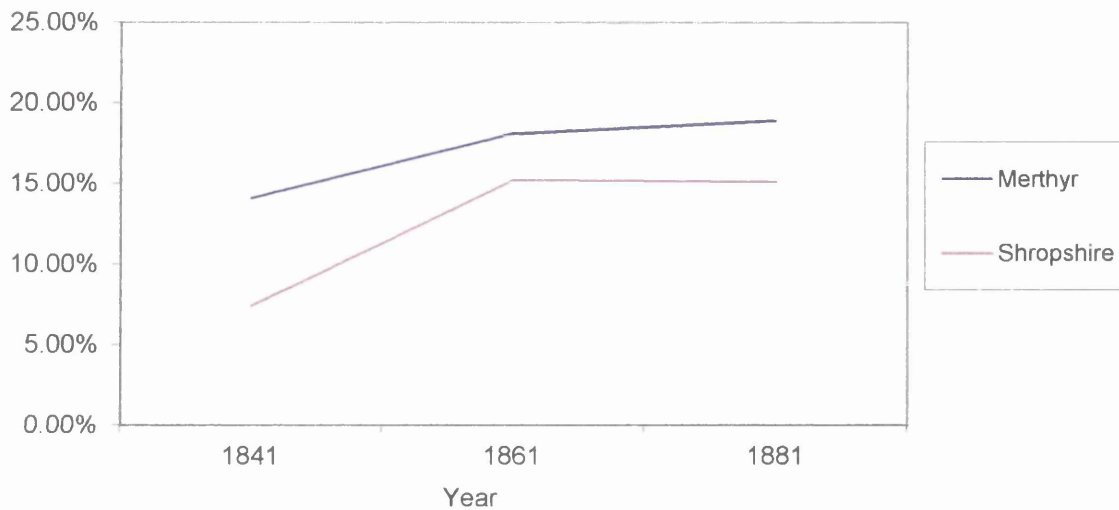
¹² Verdon, 'Hay, Hops and Harvest', p. 78; Miller, 'The Hidden Workforce', pp. 147-150.

¹³ Miller, 'The Hidden Workforce', p. 153.

classes in their own homes, as well as during employment. This suitability meant that the employment was encouraged and directly promoted by the middle classes. Women of all backgrounds were able to participate, although the vast majority doing so in the study districts appear to have been working class. Compatibility with gender norms was not the only reason the sector was so large, however. The majority of sewing occupations could be carried out in the home, in conjunction with the heavy domestic workload faced by many women living in the study districts. Changes in nineteenth century fashion and the wide introduction of ready-made clothes also prompted increased opportunities. Wider market alterations along with localised circumstances were undoubtedly important.

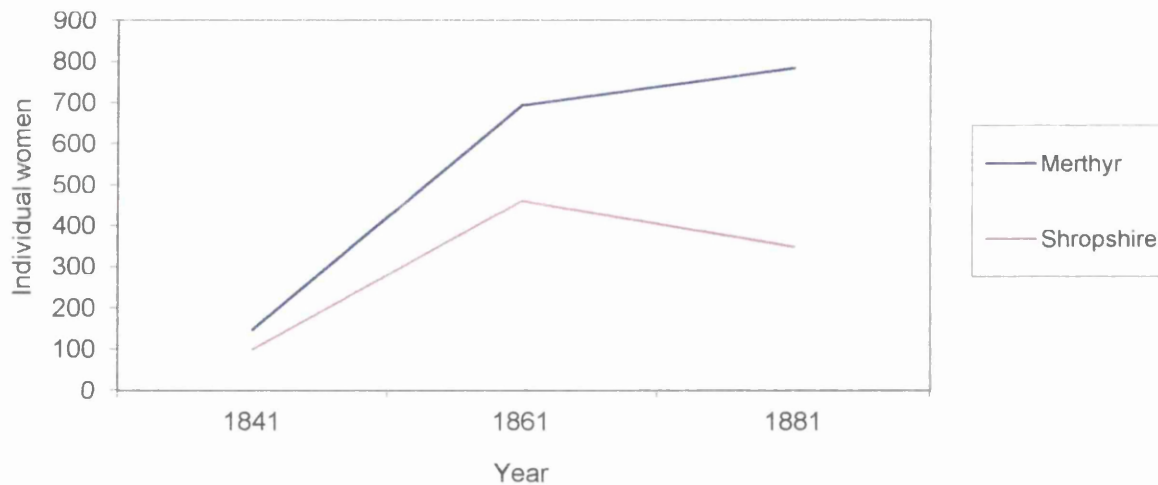
In Merthyr Tydfil, the proportion of females recorded as participating in the sewing sector steadily increased, shown in Figure 15. In 1841, the sewing sector accounted for 14.1 per cent of total women workers. This rose to 18.1 per cent in 1861, and 18.9 per cent in 1881. This recorded increase is even more pronounced in terms of individual women workers, with the numbers participating rising from 148 women in 1841 to 694 in 1861, and 784 by 1881, shown in Figure 16. In the Shropshire Coalfield, a slightly different pattern can be seen. A starting point of 7.41 per cent of total women workers put the sewing sector behind the labouring and pottery sectors in the district. The recorded rise to 15.22 per cent in 1861 and stabilisation around this proportion at 15.10 per cent in 1881 meant it became and remained the second largest employer of women, as seen in Merthyr. Numerically, the number of women recorded as participating was lower, from a starting point of 100 individual women in 1841 that increased to 461 in 1861, and decreased again to 348 by the end of the period. It is important to note here that the dramatic increase of women participating in the sewing sector between 1841 and 1861 indicated in Figures 15 and 16 was highly likely to have been more apparent than real. Female employment in domestic-based industries in particular was under-recorded in the 1841 census. As consideration of the study districts will demonstrate, the majority of women who participated in the sewing sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield later in the century did so in their own homes. It is plausible that this was also the case in 1841, and that many women who sewed for remunerative purposes were not recorded as occupied in this year.

Figure 15. Female employment in the sewing sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Figure 16. Number of women employed in the sewing sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Sewing sector occupations were accepted and encouraged by middle-class contemporaries. Sewing, described by Harris as ‘the ultimate female act’, was a symbol of femininity.¹⁴ Married women in the districts and throughout Europe

¹⁴ Beth Harris, ‘Introduction’, in Beth Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 6.

sewed, serving the needs of their families.¹⁵ This fact implicitly linked the employment to domestic labour carried out in the home. Such work was respectable, and thus could be, and was, carried out by women regardless of status without impacting upon their femininity.¹⁶ A 1849 *Times* editorial outlined why this was the case, echoing a viewpoint commonly held by contemporaries of various classes throughout the period:

They are not a trade, or a craft, or a calling; for all these terms imply an express education for the employment, and a virtual monopoly arising from the difficulty of the art, or the capital, the stock, the apparatus, or the connexions it requires. In England every woman is a needlewoman. Every labourer's child is handy at her needle before she is six years old, and has learned all kinds of mysterious stitches before she is twelve. Unmarried women were formally called spinsters; they might now with greater propriety be called sempstresses, for all are sempstresses, and spinning is obsolete, except with the aid of steam. When a woman takes to needlework, it is for want of other employment. She is falling back upon her simplest, commonest, and most childish accomplishment.¹⁷

The editorial legitimised the work of women in sewing trades by emphasising both its femininity and separation from the world of male work. At the same time, however, it dismissed any skill needed and used by such women, instead emphasising the simple, even 'childish' nature of the work. Sewing skills were often seen as 'natural', rather than acquired through practice, partially explaining the low wages associated with this sector, but also why women were able to participate so freely.¹⁸ Another comment by the same paper, 'when the category of domestic service is exhausted, to what but their needle can they look for support?' linked the feminine aspects of the two employments, suggesting they were the only ones available to many women.¹⁹

¹⁵ Lynn Mae Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens (OH): Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 4; Jean H. Quataert, 'The Shaping of Women's Work in Manufacturing: Guilds, Households and the State in Central Europe, 1648-1870', *American Historical Review*, 90:5 (1985), p. 11; Judith G. Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: the Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 13.

¹⁶ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 190.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 8 December 1849.

¹⁸ Gertjan de Groot and Marlou Schrover, 'General Introduction', in Gertjan De Groot and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Women Workers and Technological Change in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p. 6.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 15 July 1856.

The sewing sector was represented by contemporaries as isolated from industrialisation, and was actively promoted by the contemporary middle class.²⁰ Development of sewing skills began at a young age for many women, nationally and in the study districts. In Merthyr, schools for girls taught both plain and ornamental needlework as a matter of course, dedicating a portion of each day to the exercise.²¹ Advertisements for tenders for the Madeley Union workhouse also implied that the inmates were encouraged to use and develop these skills regularly. One advertisement, 'Flannel for Petticoats, Grogram or Linsey for Gowns, Grey cloth for coats, Cloth for sheets', repeated over a period of forty years, suggesting that women in the workhouse might have been provided with the materials to produce their own clothes and sundries, common throughout workhouses in Britain.²²

As with other occupations classified as feminine, detailed further in the following chapter, sewing still received some negative attention throughout the period. The overcrowding of all types of needlework led to a reduction in the price paid for labour, causing many women to be underpaid. *The Times*, in one of many comments on the subject, in 1849 blamed this overcrowding and subsequent underpayment on the fact 'women have far fewer trades in which they can engage than men', later suggesting more shops should take on female assistants to solve the problem.²³ The long hours expected, especially from apprentices in dressmaking and millinery houses, also received comment, labelled 'English Slavery' by the paper in 1853.²⁴ In addition, male tailors through Europe were concerned about the increase of female dressmakers and resultant decline in skill perception and monetary opportunities for their own work.²⁵ While Lord Shaftesbury actively championed the cause to reduce sewing work to 12 hours per day, this did not amount to much, predominantly due to the feminine nature of the work and the fact much of it was carried out in the private sphere of the home.²⁶ One *Wenlock Express* editorial

²⁰ Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation*, p. 2.

²¹ *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 148.

²² Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: Wales and Colonial Prejudice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 160; *Salopian Journal*, 8 September 1841; *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 18 March 1871; *Wenlock Express*, 19 March 1881.

²³ *The Times*, 6 December 1849, 15 July 1856.

²⁴ Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, p. 33; *The Times*, 25 March 1853.

²⁵ Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work*, p. 59.

²⁶ Nicola Pullin, "'A Heavy Bill to Settle with Humanity': The Representations and Invisibility of London's Principal Milliners and Dressmakers", in Beth Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 221; Sheila Blackburn, "'To Be Poor and To Be Honest... Is the Hardest Struggle of All': Sweated Needlewomen and Campaigns

published in 1881 and criticising conservatism argued that, earlier in the century, ‘woe, betide the starving seamstress who, to keep the spark of life from going quite out, pawned, till pay day, a portion of the ill-remunerated work doled out to her by the shoddy warehousemen of Manchester and Birmingham.’²⁷ This, however, is the only example of these debates reaching the either study district and there is no evidence employment was affected on these grounds.

Illustration 2. Photograph of sewing class, at draper's Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil, c.1880.



Source: GRO: Photograph of sewing class, at draper's Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil, c.1880, D401/4.

Illustration 2, a photograph of females sewing in Merthyr Tydfil, demonstrates the perceived respectability of sewing as an occupation for women. This photograph of a sewing class, c. 1880, shows six women ‘holding a cloth bearing the inscription ‘JS Davies & Son/General Draper/Outfitters/Milliners & Welsh Flannel/Manufacturers/[?] High St Dowlais’. Their dress, though formal,

for Protective Legislation, 1840-1914’, in Beth Harris (ed.), *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 245.

²⁷ *Wenlock Express*, 1 January 1881.

gives little clue of their class, and whether this was a leisure activity or employment training is unclear. The archives report 'the names of the drapers and photographers have not been found in the census returns for 1871, 1881, and 1891, and in a sample of trade directories for the period 1871 to 1897' making the identities of the women, too, a mystery.²⁸ One possible explanation is a sewing school. Evans has demonstrated that these were established by middle-class women in cotton trade areas during economic depressions to provide instruction for working-class women who could not find employment elsewhere.²⁹ Nonetheless, the contrast between these women and photographs of female industrial workers from the district in the same time period is striking. They may not have been firmly middle class, yet their outward respectability cannot be questioned.

The perceived femininity and subsequent view of sewing as suitable for women can be clearly be linked to gender discourse. On a national basis, the sector attracted women from a wide variety of socio-economic conditions, including 'respectable' middle-class women who would not usually have worked.³⁰ This was not the only, or even primary reason the sector was so large, however. As stated previously, sewing was an employment that could be (and often was) carried out privately, in the home.³¹ In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, between 15 and 25 per cent of women participating in this sector across the period were married, far higher than seen in any other occupational grouping in the districts.³² This was predominantly because the work could be carried out on a part-time basis in conjunction with the heavy workload of domestic labour expected of many women in the study districts. The slightly higher proportion of married women in employment in the Shropshire Coalfield as a whole can be attributed to the sewing sector, as the proportion of married women was higher, and a large number of women participated. Nationally, throughout the nineteenth century 80 per cent. of dressmakers were under 35, making the assumption they left the occupation upon marriage likely.³³ In the study districts, the pattern was slightly different. Around 30 per cent of women in the

²⁸ GRO: Photograph of sewing class, at draper's Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil, c.1880, D401/4.

²⁹ Clare Evans, 'Unemployment and the making of the Feminine during the Lancashire Cotton Famine', in Pat Hudson and W. R. Lee (eds.), *Women's work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 259, 263.

³⁰ Zekreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour*, p. 21; Boxer, 'Women in Industrial Homework', p. 407; Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation*, p. 1.

³¹ Zekreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour*, p. 21.

³² As Figure 4.

³³ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 9.

sewing sector were over 30 and either married or widowed in both study districts in each of the years surveyed, and around 20 per cent had minor children.³⁴ Again, this would suggest that the majority of employments carried out in this sector were able to be undertaken in the homes of women living in the study areas, a major reason it was so significant. It also indicates once again that the dramatic increase recorded for the sewing sector between 1841 and 1861 was likely to have been overstated: married women who were occupied were most likely to have been under-recorded in 1841, owing to the instructions given to enumerators.

One example illustrates the position of women in this sector. A *Merthyr Express* correspondent calling themselves 'One of the Suffering Assistants' wrote in 1881 of 'the drapers closing nuisance', complaining that dressmakers, who could 'easily' do their shopping early in the day, instead waiting until the shop was about to close, extending the hours of those working there.³⁵ This is revealing for two main reasons. Firstly, no aspersions were cast upon the character of these workers, a usual practice for those wishing to criticise women, thus implying their femininity and acceptability was firmly intact. Secondly, the ability of dressmakers to decide their own hours of work, presumably due to the execution of their employment within their own homes, is highlighted.

Changes in the way people dressed might also have impacted upon female employment in this sector. Nationally, ready-made clothing rose in importance, with female dressmakers and seamstresses taking over work that would previously have been undertaken by male tailors.³⁶ While this cannot explain the dramatic increase between 1841 and 1861, it does suggest that under-recording was not the only reason female involvement was recorded as higher in the latter year. The commercial nature of each district was important here: more extensive urbanisation in Merthyr may have resulted in additional opportunities for female dressmakers, milliners and seamstresses, also reflected in Tables 17 and 18.

³⁴ As Figure 1.

³⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 25 June 1881.

³⁶ Harris, 'Introduction', p. 5.

Table 17. Sewing sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
bonnet maker	13 (8.78%)	assistant	1 (0.14)	bonnet maker	5 (0.64%)
dress maker	87 (58.78%)	bonnet maker	19 (2.74%)	dress maker	639 (81.51%)
mantle maker	8 (5.41%)	dress maker	558 (80.40%)	glover	1 (0.13%)
milliner	15 (10.14%)	glover	1 (0.14%)	knitter	6 (0.77%)
seamstress	25 (16.89%)	knitter	10 (1.44%)	machinist	26 (3.32%)
TOTAL	148 (100.00%)	lace maker	5 (0.72%)	mantle maker	7 (0.89%)
		mantle maker	9 (1.30%)	milliner	48 (6.12%)
		milliner	53 (7.64%)	quiltor	4 (0.51%)
		seamstress	30 (4.32%)	seamstress	38 (4.85%)
		slipper maker	1 (0.14%)	stay maker	2 (0.26%)
		tailor	1 (0.14%)	tailor	1 (0.13%)
		tailoress	6 (0.86%)	tailoress	7 (0.89%)
		TOTAL	694 (100.00%)		784 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2.

Table 18. Sewing sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1881	
bonnet maker	6 (6.00%)	assistant	2 (0.43%)	bonnet maker	2 (0.57%)
cap maker	2 (2.00%)	bonnet maker	15 (3.25%)	dress maker	273 (78.45%)
dress maker	72 (72.00%)	dress maker	353 (76.57%)	machinist	5 (1.44%)
glover	1 (1.00%)	mantle maker	1 (0.22%)	milliner	34 (9.77%)
mantle maker	1 (1.00%)	milliner	36 (7.81%)	seamstress	25 (7.18%)
milliner	6 (6.00%)	seamstress	46 (9.98%)	tailoress	9 (2.59%)
seamstress	10 (10.00%)	stay maker	2 (0.43%)	TOTAL	348 (100.00%)
tailor	1 (1.00%)	tailor	1 (0.22%)		
tailoress	1 (1.00%)	tailoress	5 (1.08%)		
TOTAL	100 (100.00%)	TOTAL	461 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 3.

‘Sewing’ itself was a broad umbrella covering a range of different employments. The needlework required in every individual employment meant that the actual work undertaken would have been very similar across categories, regardless of title. According to an 1864 Parliamentary Commission, in general those returned as dressmakers and milliners carried out their employment ‘in the premises of the employer’ while seamstresses and other members of the sewing workforce, far more likely to be working class, carried it out in their own homes.³⁷ As dressmakers accounted for by far the highest percentage of females working in this sector, increasing throughout the period, one might assume that the majority were employed

³⁷ PP, (1864) XXII.1, 319, *Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not regulated by Law Second Report; Third Report*, p. xlvii.

in a traditional sense, and thus were predominantly middle-class women. However, the number of dressmakers' shops in each district makes the likelihood of each of these women working on their employers' premises a near impossibility. If we consider the familial status (determined by the head of household) of dressmakers and milliners specifically in the study districts, shown in Table 19, we can see that many of the individual workers came from industrial, working-class backgrounds.

Table 19. Familial status of dressmakers and milliners in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.³⁸

	Merthyr Tydfil			Shropshire Coalfield		
	1841	1861	1881	1841	1861	1881
Lived alone	62 (50.41%)	155 (23.96%)	156 (22.00%)	37 (41.57%)	79 (19.04%)	64 (20.13%)
Industrial family	18 (14.63%)	237 (36.63%)	310 (43.72%)	21 (23.60%)	169 (40.72%)	123 (38.68%)
Non-industrial family	43 (34.96%)	255 (39.41%)	243 (34.27%)	31 (34.83%)	167 (40.24%)	131 (41.19%)
TOTAL	123 (100.00%)	647 (100.00%)	709 (100.00%)	89 (100.00%)	415 (100.00%)	318 (100.00%)

Source: As Figure 1.

A considerable number of dressmakers and milliners were returned as living alone, either as heads of households, or as lodgers. This would suggest a career aspect to their work, rather than a life-cyclic employment. The decrease here over the period could suggest that more women were entering the sector as a way to bridge the gap until marriage, concurrent with trends in other sectors. It is also possible that this was simply reflective of under enumeration of women's work in this sector 1841, as women who lived alone would have been more likely to have their occupational title noted. Regardless of changes, however, this was the only employment in which women from various backgrounds could participate. This larger pool of possible employees to draw from also helps to explain the increase seen in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

Other trends can be seen in Tables 17 and 18. While the number of seamstresses recorded was small in comparison to the number of dressmakers, the casual, part-time nature of this work means it, in particular, could very easily have been under-recorded in the census across all years surveyed. We are also able to identify other minor patterns. Machinist as a job title emerges from the mid-century

³⁸ These figures include those whose occupational titles can be unequivocally classified under either description.

onwards, with the advent of new technology. The small number recorded here could be indicative that modern machinery did not necessarily reach the study areas. Alternatively, the fact that job itself did not change dramatically, even with mechanisation, could lead women to return themselves simply as dressmakers or seamstresses regardless of how they undertook the job. Other, more specialised roles – e.g. stay maker, slipper maker - account for only a small number of women in each case, implying a career pattern. Finally, there are also examples over the period in both districts of women described as ‘tailoress’, or even ‘tailor’ a distinction that placed them firmly in the public sphere, indicating skilled employment, or at the least the wish of these particular women to represent themselves in this way.

The sewing sector was also one of the only employment sectors in which femininity and machinery were not seen as conflicting. Sewing machines were developed for use by women due to the links with femininity, seen in their ergonomic design.³⁹ From the 1850s onwards, sewing machines were produced in vast quantities for use in industry and in the home.⁴⁰ In Shropshire, an 1861 *Eddowe's Journal* article stated ‘there is scarcely a manufacture in which the needle was formerly used which does not now employ these machines; and there is scarcely a household in which it does not drudge for the family welfare.’⁴¹ As the machine was used in the household for personal aspects of family life, use in employment was not castigated. This also suggests that use of the machine was not always explicitly stated in the census, as mentioned previously. These women may have used their sewing machines both for domestic labour necessary to their own household and for remunerative work, highlighting the complexity of female employment during this period.⁴² This modernisation was not necessarily a positive thing for the women in question, making competition between seamstresses and resultant low wages stronger.⁴³

The sewing sector reveals how ideology and economic trends can be juxtaposed to explain female employment patterns in the nineteenth century. In the case of workshops employing females, which eventually came under the umbrella of

³⁹ Pennington and Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Barbara Burman, ‘What a Deal of Work there is in a Dress!’: Englishness and Home Dressmaking in the Age of the Sewing Machine’, in Christopher Breward and Becky Conekin (eds.), *The Englishness of English Dress* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 79.

⁴¹ *Eddowe's Journal*, 3 April 1861.

⁴² Coffin, ‘Consumption, Production and Gender’, p. 112.

⁴³ Perkin, *Victorian Women*, p. 141.

the Factory Acts, special dispensation was given when it came to sewing. Permission was given to Philips and Evans, Mercers in Merthyr Tydfil, to employ young women for 14 hours, for the month of February, 1871, 'in case of special mourning orders', for example.⁴⁴ This permission was not uncommon, and in the case of outworkers, not even necessary. This particular example mirrors the trends seen in the sector as a whole: while gender ideology may have been influential, market forces were also key.

Production

Female participation in production, defined here as small scale industry, or the secondary processing or manufacture of goods of all kinds for sale outside of an industrialised setting (with the exception of sewing, considered above), was relatively low in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield throughout the period. It remained below 3 per cent of total women workers at all points. In Merthyr Tydfil, a slight increase in proportion of total women workers participating in this sector between 1841 and 1861 from 1.71 per cent to 2.9 per cent was followed by a decrease to 2.41 per cent in 1881, leaving levels slightly higher than at the start of the period. In the Shropshire Coalfield, a slight proportional decrease over the period can be traced, from 2.74 per cent in 1841 to 2.24 per cent in 1861 and finally, 2 per cent in 1881. Numerically, in Merthyr there was an overall rise from 18 to 100 individual women over the period, and in Shropshire, a slighter increase (with a higher starting point) from 37 to 46 individuals.⁴⁵ It is important to acknowledge that the actual figures were likely to be somewhat higher, over the century and in 1841 in particular, given the propensity of wives and daughters to assist their male relatives in production.

The types of work these women did, shown in Tables 20 and 21, is illuminating. The production and preparation of food, a task that mirrored women's role in the home and needed little training, accounted for a high proportion of women in this sector over the period. Excluding food and drink, patterns seen in the study

⁴⁴ PP, (1871) LIV.75, *Cases of Permission given by Secretary of State, under Factory and Workshop Act, 1871, for Employment of Young Persons and Women*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ As Figure 1.

Table 20. Production sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
baker	4 (22.22%)	bag mender	1 (0.90%)	baker	15 (15.00%)
broom maker	1 (5.56%)	baker	19 (17.12%)	basket maker	1 (1.00%)
butcher	1 (5.56%)	blacksmith	3 (2.70%)	blind maker	1 (1.00%)
confectioner	1 (5.56%)	bobbin winder	1 (0.90%)	book binder	5 (5.00%)
leather cutter	2 (11.11%)	book binder	1 (0.90%)	bottle washer	2 (2.00%)
mailer	2 (11.11%)	book manufacture	1 (0.90%)	bottling ginger beer	1 (1.00%)
shoe binder	1 (5.56%)	butcher	15 (13.51%)	brewer	1 (1.00%)
woollen factory bobbin maker ⁴⁶	1 (5.56%)	carpenter	1 (0.90%)	butcher	20 (20.00%)
woollen factory piecer	3 (16.67%)	confectioner	8 (7.21%)	carder	1 (1.00%)
woollen factory spinner	1 (5.56%)	dyer	1 (0.90%)	confectioner	9 (9.00%)
woollen manufacture	1 (5.56%)	flannel manufacture	1 (0.90%)	finisher	2 (2.00%)
TOTAL	18 (100.00%)	fuller	1 (0.90%)	pipe maker	2 (2.00%)
		horse mail maker	2 (1.80%)	printer	2 (2.00%)
		shoe binder	30 (27.03%)	rivitter	2 (2.00%)
		shoe maker	2 (1.80%)	saddler	1 (1.00%)
		spinster	12 (10.81%)	shoe binder	6 (6.00%)
		upholsterer	1 (0.90%)	shoe maker	11 (11.00%)
		woollen factory worker	1 (0.90%)	silk dyer	3 (3.00%)
		woollen spinner	2 (1.80%)	silk winder	1 (1.00%)
		woollen weaver	6 (5.41%)	spinster	1 (1.00%)
		woollen winder	2 (1.80%)	umbrella maker	1 (1.00%)
		TOTAL	111 (100.00%)	upholsterer	1 (1.00%)
				weaver	1 (1.00%)
				webster	1 (1.00%)
				woollen factory worker	9 (1.00%)
				TOTAL	100 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2

Table 21. Production sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
baker	5 (13.51%)	baker	4 (5.88%)	baker	10 (21.74%)
basket maker	1 (2.70%)	book binder	2 (2.94%)	boot tip maker	1 (2.17%)
blacksmith	1 (2.70%)	brewer	1 (1.47%)	box maker	1 (2.17%)
brewer	2 (5.41%)	confectioner	11 (16.18%)	brewer	5 (10.87%)
butcher	2 (5.41%)	crumpet maker	1 (1.47%)	butcher	3 (6.52%)
confectioner	7 (18.92%)	nail maker	2 (2.94%)	confectioner	6 (13.04%)
dyer	1 (2.70%)	pork pie maker	1 (1.47%)	crumpet maker	1 (2.17%)
shoe binder	4 (10.81%)	printer	1 (1.47%)	nail maker	9 (19.57%)
shoe maker	1 (2.70%)	shoe binder	37 (54.41%)	rivet maker	1 (2.17%)
spinster	11 (29.73%)	shoe maker	1 (1.47%)	shoe binder	4 (8.70%)
weaver	1 (2.70%)	spinster	2 (2.94%)	shoe maker	4 (8.70%)
wheel turner	1 (2.70%)	thimble maker	1 (1.47%)	upholstress	1 (2.17%)
TOTAL	37 (100.00%)	upholstress	2 (2.94%)	TOTAL	46 (100.00%)
		weaver	2 (2.94%)		
		TOTAL	68		

Source: As Table 3

⁴⁶ While this job title implies industrial work, there was no woollen factory in Merthyr Tydfil. The women returned in this manner lived in the same enumeration district, suggesting a local workshop.

districts reflected national trends: craft production throughout Britain declined during the nineteenth century, with factory production replacing the home workshop.⁴⁷ Why this occupational sector remained so small in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield is unclear. Historians have suggested that during trade depressions, people were far less likely to buy manufactured goods, choosing instead to go without or simply fabricate the necessary items themselves.⁴⁸ In the Assistant Poor Law Commissioners Report in 1842, Robert Gee, a manufacturer from Stockport, was reported as complaining 'the operatives who are, on the whole, our best customers are in a state of severe distress and cannot possibly purchase the same quantity of clothing as in prosperous times'.⁴⁹ However, were this the case in the study districts, one would expect that resultant sales patterns would affect the retail sector, and, as the following chapter will demonstrate, this was not evident.

While they were few in number, over the period as a whole, most of the women working in the non-food based production in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield used 'feminine' skills. Feminine skills are defined very simply here as those using either needlework or specifically feminine dexterity as defined by contemporaries. The 'good eyes and swift fingers' required by textile industries across Europe meant this work was perceived as suited to women. In areas without factories, like the study districts, this work was carried out in the home, making it even more suitable.⁵⁰ Shoe binding, or sewing uppers, was also a predominantly feminine employment throughout Europe, carried out largely as out-work in the home or in family workshops, which also appears to be the case in the study districts.⁵¹ Based upon the inherent female ability to sew, detailed above, this was viewed as unskilled and remunerated as such.⁵² The protests of shoemakers elsewhere in Britain regarding the incursion of low-paid women into their trade did not make their way to Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, mainly because

⁴⁷ Harold Carter and Sandra Wheatley, *Merthyr Tydfil in 1851: a Study of the Spatial Structure of a Welsh Town* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982), p. 8, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁸ Bourke, 'Housewifery in Working-Class England', p. 179.

⁴⁹ Robert Gee, quoted in David Gadian, 'Class Formation and Class Action in North-West Industrial Towns, 1830-50', in R. J. Morris (ed.), *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth Century Towns* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), p. 43.

⁵⁰ Tessie P. Liu, 'What Price a Weaver's Dignity? Gender Inequality and the Survival of Home-Based Production in Industrial France', in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 59; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 162.

⁵¹ Sonya O. Rose, 'Gender Segregation in the Transition to the Factory: The English Hosiery Industry 1850-1910', *Feminist Studies*, 13:1 (1987), p. 169; Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p. 64.

⁵² August, *Poor Women's Lives*, pp. 76-77.

the number of women actually taking part in these trades was very low.⁵³ Similar proficiency with the needle was required in book manufacture, with binding, or sewing the books, regarded as unskilled, subsidiary, low paid women's work throughout Europe, albeit with relatively high status.⁵⁴ Given the feminine status of these individual occupations, one might expect more women to participate. That they did not can be attributed to the local economy and lack of opportunity.

Some diversification in the types of production undertaken by women can also be seen throughout the period in both districts. A handful of women participated in manufacture that was perceived as masculine. The mascot of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners may have been a naked woman, but this was an undoubtedly male trade.⁵⁵ This fact did not stop Elizabeth Davies, a 70 year old married woman living in Merthyr Tydfil in 1861, assisting her husband in his work as a carpenter while also looking after their granddaughter.⁵⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth Tart, a 15 year old girl, assisted her father with his blacksmithing business in the Shropshire Coalfield 20 years earlier.⁵⁷ It appears from this that women were able to participate in male jobs when it involved assisting their husband, again in keeping with the domestic service paradigm. Nail making, however, a relatively large employment for women in the production sector in the Shropshire Coalfield in particular, was largely confined to single women. Bessie Parkes' description of Staffordshire nail makers as 'black with soot, muscular, brawny - undelightful to the last degree' makes clear the gendered connotations of this manufacture.⁵⁸ Prohibition of this labour was pushed nationally by male nailmakers on the grounds of low wages caused by unskilled female workers, although again, this was not present in either study area.⁵⁹ Morgan's study of Birmingham suggests nail making as popular particularly in times of depression, when alternate employment opportunities were

⁵³ Townsend, 'I am the Woman for Spirit', p. 216.

⁵⁴ Felicity Hunt, 'Opportunities Lost and Gained: Mechanization and Women's Work in the London Bookbinding and Printing Trades', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 75-76, 87; Tusan, 'Reforming Work', p. 109; Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 122; Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance*, p. 23; August, *Poor Women's Lives*, p. 82; DeGroat, 'Virtue, Vice and Revolution', p. 204.

⁵⁵ Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, p. 87.

⁵⁶ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1861, RG9/4052, f.43, p. 7.

⁵⁷ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1841, HO107/904/10, f.43, p. 29.

⁵⁸ Jordan, 'The Exclusion of Women from Industry in Nineteenth-Century Britain', p. 288.

⁵⁹ Malone, *Women's Bodies*, p. 21.

not available, reflecting trends seen in the Coalfield, with this employment emerging only as the iron industry began to decline.⁶⁰

While there were large fluctuations in terms of the marital status of women working in the production, the number of married women and women with children in each year was, like sewing, higher than seen in many other occupational sectors.⁶¹ Again, a major contributing factor here was the existence of out-work, or sending work home with women, for many of the employments, again allowing women to undertake domestic duties and remunerative employment simultaneously. The number of married women working here could have been much higher over the period as a whole. Even official government documentation acknowledged the unpaid work of wives and daughters in craft and food production as important.⁶² Other, less positive examples acknowledging equally the work of women in their male relatives' business also exist. Two butchers selling 'unwholesome meat' at Dawley market in May, 1851, were charged and fined. Their wives, and one daughter, also involved in the sales, were fined the same amount (£3 8s 1d, a not inconsiderable sum).⁶³ In the eyes of these magistrates, they all shared equal responsibility. Nevertheless, wives assisting their husbands were often returned as unoccupied in the census, under the assumption that any help here was classified as domestic, not commercial. Even when not participating fully in the business, 'sidelines', as described by Simonton, were often undertaken by daughters and wives of businessmen throughout Europe. She indicates as 'sewing on buttons in a tailor's shop', 'making sausages in a butcher's shop, or making chocolates and decorating pastries in a confectionery' as examples of this.⁶⁴ It remains clear, however, that on the whole, this was a limited occupational opportunity.

Conclusion

The women considered in this chapter not only utilised traditionally feminine skills in their labours, but were often able to do so in conjunction with domestic work. This juxtaposition between employment, the home, and feminine skills, affected not only

⁶⁰ Morgan, *Women Workers and Gender Identities*, pp. 98, 105.

⁶¹ As Figure 1.

⁶² PP, (1867) III.121, *Bill for regulating Hours of Labour for Children, Young Persons and Women employed in Workshops*, p. 2.

⁶³ *Eddowe's Journal*, 16 July 1851.

⁶⁴ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 72.

the ability of these women to carry out paid work, but the way in which they were seen and represented by contemporaries. Indeed, a higher proportion of married women worked in the non-industrial primary and secondary sectors than in the industrial sectors. Although their participation in the workforce ran contrary to pervasive ideologies regarding marriage and female employment, they were not viewed with the same approbation, nor criticised to the same extent. While this may have impacted upon employment patterns, it is also clear that the character of both study districts, coupled with market forces, influenced female employment opportunities in this sector. The importance of local studies to a comprehensive understanding of women's work is once again emphasised. Far more evidence of the impact of local economic character and trends on employment patterns can be found in investigation into female tertiary work, covered in the following two chapters.

Chapter V

Tertiary occupations: female service and sales workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, 1841-1881

The vast majority of women workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield worked in tertiary sectors of service and sales. They did so in a wide range of occupations, from work under the umbrella of the domestic service paradigm, comprising of domestic service, charring, washing and lodging provision; to prostitution; to retail. As this chapter will show, even when not involved in primary or secondary occupations, industrial or otherwise, women in the study districts participated in a variety of jobs that contributed to their local economies and were necessary to support their local environments. Again, the census, parliamentary reports, and most importantly, local and national newspapers, provide vital evidence, along with the Darby family records.

This chapter will begin with presentation of the broad patterns of female employment in the tertiary service and sales sector as a whole, demonstrating that this was the largest overall grouping of women workers, and also that a negative correlation between working-class women's participation in the industrial sector and the tertiary service and sales sector can be traced in the study districts. Analysis of individual occupational sectors will be undertaken to explain these patterns. As discussion of these occupations will show, the majority of tertiary service and sales occupations women were involved in were fully accepted by contemporaries, precisely because they did not transgress gender norms. In some cases, explicitly feminine occupations were encouraged and even actively promoted by the middle class, creating jobs for women. Yet, as already seen in the previous chapter, this was not the only reason opportunities for women to participate in these occupations existed. Diverse national and geographically-specific urban, social and economic developments were also influential to female employment patterns, even in casual occupations.

The complexities of female agency with regards to work will also be demonstrated in this chapter. While evidence discussed in chapter three suggests that many women living in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield preferred industrial work to other forms of employment, partially explaining the negative correlation found between women's work in the two groupings, this was not always

reflected in female employment patterns. Localised economic fluctuations and subsequent availability of employment were often far more influential than personal choice. Additionally, consideration of individual occupations will demonstrate that the circumstances of individual women affected not only whether they would work, but the sorts of work they did. Whether they actively chose their employment, or simply took advantage of what was easily available, it is clear that these women made important contributions to Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, and that, once again, they cannot be dismissed as absent from the workforce.

Female employment in tertiary service and sales occupations accounted for both the highest proportion and the largest number of women workers in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period as a whole. In 1841, 64 per cent of total women workers in Merthyr Tydfil, and 57.75 per cent in the Shropshire Coalfield were employed under this broad occupational umbrella. A decrease in 1861 to 50.63 per cent in Merthyr and 44.21 per cent in Shropshire was followed by an increase to 58.02 per cent and 54.38 per cent in Merthyr and Shropshire respectively. In terms of individual workers, the pattern was somewhat different. In Merthyr Tydfil, 672 women worked in this sector in 1841, increasing to 1941 in 1861 and finally 2405 in 1881. In Shropshire, too, there was an overall increase over the period as a whole, from 779 in 1841 to 1339 in 1861, followed by a slight decrease to 1253 in 1881 which still left numbers higher than 1841.¹

The possibility that some forms of work discussed in this chapter were under-recorded in 1841 must again be acknowledged. Charring and washing in particular were, like sewing, casual employments carried out in a domestic setting. Women occupied in the retail sector often did so as part of a family economy, and these individuals in particular were explicitly excluded in the instructions given to enumerators in 1841.² That under-recording may have impacted upon change over time in individual sectors is indicated where necessary throughout the chapter. Nevertheless, little evidence of under-recording in 1841 in these three occupational sectors was found in the 1851 sample. In addition, the numerical increase seen in all three sectors was in line with economic and urban changes in the study districts, and stood at levels one might expect given these market developments.

¹ As Figure 1.

² PP, (1843) XXII.1, *Enumeration Abstract, 1841*, p. 3.

In both study areas, proportionate recorded employment levels in this grouping were very similar, and the pattern of a decrease between 1841 and 1861, followed by growth by 1881 that still left levels lower than at the start of the period was juxtaposed with a numerical increase in the number of women participating in tertiary service and sales jobs. In both study areas too, the proportionate decline in female involvement in these occupations in a year when their overall employment increased can be explained with reference to the industrial sector. As already discussed in chapter three, work opportunities for women in iron and coal were relatively high in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in 1861. Coupled with this, evidence suggests that many women in the study districts preferred industrial employment to other, domestic, jobs that made up the vast majority of the tertiary occupations considered here. The implication that some women may have purposefully selected their work based on their own preference, when this option was available, is clear. On the one hand, this calls into question the demonstrable effect of the relentless ideological push for women workers to engage in the acceptably feminine occupations that make up the bulk of discussion in this chapter, rather than other, less suitable employment. At the same time, the fact that the vast majority of women workers participated in these arguably less popular jobs indicates that, for many, there was no choice.

Tertiary service workers and the domestic service paradigm.

The vast majority of tertiary service work carried out by women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield - domestic service, charring, washing and lodging provision – can, like sewing, be classified under what Anne Summers has labelled ‘the domestic service paradigm’.³ While not every occupation grouped under this umbrella answered W.R. Greg’s calls for women to be ‘supported by [...] and minister to, men’, they all employed skills that were also used by wives and mothers operating in the private sphere.⁴ As such, they were labelled by contemporaries as suitable for women to undertake, and sometimes even actively encouraged. In other cases, women’s work that did not conflict with gender norms was simply ignored.

³ Anne Summers, ‘Public Functions, Private Premises: Female Professional Identity and the Domestic-Service Paradigm in Britain, c. 1850-1930’, in Billie Melman (ed.), *Borderlines: Gender and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930* (London, 1998), p. 353.

⁴ W.R. Greg, quoted in Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 62.

Either way, on the whole these occupations were consequently not subject to direct legislative restriction during the period. It is, however, also necessary to look beyond the conformity of this work to gender discourse to explain the trends found. Numerous factors unrelated to gender were also important: local demography, urban and social culture, the familial situation of women workers themselves, and even the availability of industrial work all influenced employment patterns.

Domestic service

In both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, domestic service was by far the largest occupational sector of women workers in all years surveyed, both proportionally and numerically. This was not unique to the study districts. The female domestic servant was undoubtedly a key figure in nineteenth-century life.⁵ Domestic service throughout Europe was the largest occupational grouping of the total labour force for both sexes.⁶ It steadily increased until the First World War, and always accounted for at least one-third of all employed women.⁷

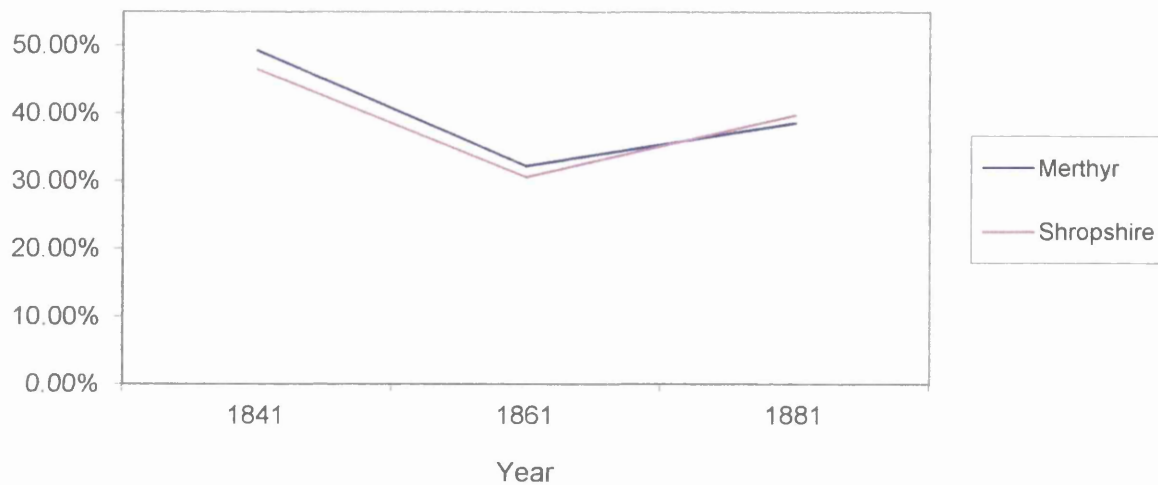
Gender ideologies undoubtedly impacted directly upon employment opportunities in domestic service for women seeking work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Middle-class contemporaries saw this work as befitting women's position, actively promoted it, and even purposefully created jobs. Some women, too, may have consciously taken advantage of these opportunities for their own purposes. Nevertheless, discourse was not the only reason this sector was so large. Many women avoided domestic service when possible, due to bad treatment and lack of independence, yet it remained the largest employer of women. National socio-economic shifts, as well as those specific to the study areas, were influential. Most importantly, for many women, service was the only option.

⁵ Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p. 102.

⁶ Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p. 13; Blackburn, 'Princesses and Sweated-Wage Slaves', p. 27.

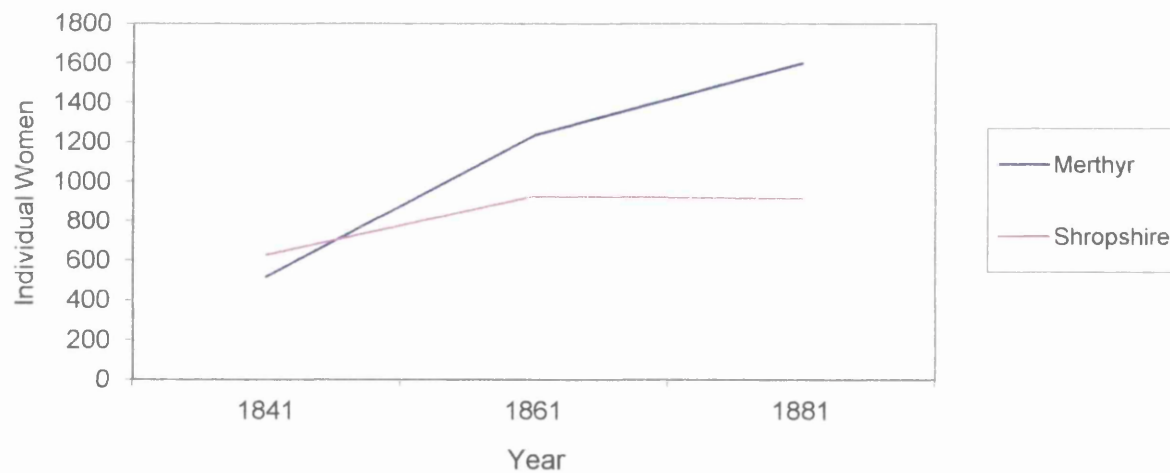
⁷ Eric Richards 'Women in the British Economy since about 1700: an Interpretation', *History*, 59:3 (1974), pp. 337-357, p. 348; Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 22; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 97; Hudson, 'Women and Industrialization', p. 28; Summers, 'Public Functions, Private Premises', p. 354; Deane and Cole, *British Economic growth*, p. 141; Kumar, 'From Work to Employment and Unemployment', p. 160.

Figure 17. Female employment in the domestic service sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Figure 18. Number of women employed in the domestic service sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

In Merthyr Tydfil, 518 individual women worked as domestic servants in 1841, rising to 1,235 in 1861 and 1,601 in 1881, shown in Figure 17. In the Shropshire Coalfield, an increase from 628 individual women in 1841 to 927 in 1861 was followed by a slight decrease to 916. Proportionally speaking, a different pattern of change over time emerges, shown in Figure 18. In Merthyr in 1841 49.3 per cent

of total women workers, almost half, were employed in the domestic service sector. This declined to 32.2 per cent in 1861, before increasing again to 38.6 per cent by 1881. A strikingly similar pattern can be seen in Shropshire. 46.5 per cent of total women workers were domestic servants in 1841, decreasing to 30.6 per cent in 1861, and finally rising to 39.8 per cent by 1881.

It is important to note that domestic service was sometimes over-enumerated in the census, as relatives were occasionally mistakenly included in this category.⁸ It was not unusual for servants throughout Britain to carry out additional, non-domestic duties, especially when working for shopkeepers, and this was not always noted in the census. Only a single case of this was traced in the study districts, however.⁹ Moreover, for these women, domestic tasks would usually have been the predominant focus of their work. While other cases of incorrect enumeration under domestic service in the study districts could exist, any minor adjustments to numbers would not affect the following general conclusions. In addition, in order to avoid over-enumeration of wives into the domestic service sector, those described as housekeeper by the census enumerator were only counted as participating in service if they were specifically noted as a servant or non-family member, a method promoted by Higgs.¹⁰ Even taking these issues into account, it is clear that domestic service was the most significant employer of women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

Both the overall numerical increase and the declining proportion of female involvement in domestic service in the study districts can be explained by complex, somewhat contradictory factors. The pattern seen in Figure 17 is directly correlated with the overall employment trends seen in the industrial sector. Women of a similar demographic profile - young, single, childless - were the most likely to be employed in the disparate occupational areas of industrial labour and domestic service in the study areas and throughout Britain.¹¹ Valenze has highlighted that in factory districts, industrial work was an alternative before 'the last resort of service', a trend also seen

⁸ Edward Higgs, *Domestic Servants and Households in Rochdale, 1851-1871* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), pp. 26-50; M. Anderson, 'Mis-specification of Servant Occupations in the 1851 Census: a Problem Revisited', *Local Population Studies*, 60 (1998), p. 59.

⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 6 May 1871. An 1871 Police Court case reported in the *Merthyr Express* stated that the wife and daughter of Mr A. Jones, grocer, served a customer who later turned out to be a thief. In the census of the same year, Mary J. Jones, the daughter in question, was returned solely as 'general servant'.

¹⁰ Higgs, *Domestic Servants and Households in Rochdale*, pp. 32-37.

¹¹ As Figure 1.

in the study districts.¹² Again, this suggests that some women who would otherwise have worked as domestic servants in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield would have instead engaged in industrial occupations when the opportunity was available. This has important implications for our understanding of female employment: not only did some women prefer not to work as domestic servants, at some points and for some women at least, they had a choice.

Nevertheless, domestic service was by far the largest occupational sector of women during all years surveyed, and the number of individual women participating in this work increased dramatically. This increase can be linked to socio-economic developments in the study districts. Throughout Britain in this period, and in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in particular, urban developments led to an expansion of the middle class, who were very likely to employ domestic servants.¹³ As shown in Table 22, the urban middle classes - including those involved in retail - in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield employed a high proportion of domestic servants. Although the 1841 census did not record relationships to the head of household, assuming that those women recorded as servant who did not share the name of the rest of the family were live-in servants produces a similar pattern. Given that the study districts both had a relatively low proportion of middle class inhabitants, this was significant.

Table 22. Employment of live-in domestic servants' head of households in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

	Merthyr Tydfil		Shropshire Coalfield	
	1861	1881	1861	1881
industrial	137 (16.25%)	132 (14.49%)	96 (15.56%)	84 (15.27%)
professional	120 (14.23%)	173 (18.99%)	118 (19.12%)	117 (21.27%)
retail	270 (32.03%)	327 (35.89%)	161 (26.09%)	148 (26.91%)
other	316 (37.49%)	279 (30.63%)	242 (39.22%)	201 (36.55%)
TOTAL	843 (100.00%)	911 (100.00%)	617 (100.00%)	550 (100.00%)

Source: As Figure 1.

At the same time, the number of industrial households in the study districts employing domestic servants was also high. In the majority of manufacturing

¹² Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 91.

¹³ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 41; Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 22.

districts throughout Britain, the proportion of women working in domestic service was lower than the national average, as their predominantly working-class inhabitants were less likely to employ servants.¹⁴ In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, this was not the case, and working- as well as middle-class families engaged domestic servants. The high proportion of women working in this sector can be linked to the additional job opportunities created by this trend. It must also be noted that the middle classes were probably more likely than their working-class counterparts to employ the live-in servants included in Table 22. A good proportion of domestic servants did not live with their employer in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. While their employers' identity is thus impossible to ascertain, it is highly likely many of these, too, were working class, further supporting the point.

Domestic service was continually highlighted and promoted as an appropriate employment for working-class women by middle-class contemporaries, which also directly impacted employment opportunities. This perceived suitability was due to the feminine skills servants employed while at work, as well as the domestic setting the work took place in, a sharp contrast to industrial labour. The 1841 census occupation abstract, reporting on employment trends and women's work, stated: 'it must be matter for congratulation that so large a number of females as 908,825 should be comprehended in a class in which habits of steady industry, of economy, and of attention to the maintenance of good character are so necessary as that of domestic service'.¹⁵ The habits mentioned were not necessarily specifically feminine, although they become so when placed in a domestic setting. In the eyes of contemporaries, domestic servants were feminine in light of their fulfilment of womanly duty, in the same way as wives and mothers.¹⁶ The work itself was carried out in the private sphere, and thus did not 'contaminate' women in the same way industrial labour could.¹⁷ The contribution to the 'culture of domesticity' by servants was key to the acceptance of their position as workers.¹⁸

¹⁴ Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p. 27.

¹⁵ PP, (1844) XXVII.1, *Occupation Abstract, Part I. England and Wales, 1841*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 62; Perkin, *Victorian women*, p. 162; Alexander, 'Women's Work', p. 63.

¹⁷ John Field, 'Wealth, Styles of Life and Social Tone amongst Portsmouth's Middle Class, 1800-75', in R. J. Morris (ed.), *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth Century Towns* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), p. 96.

¹⁸ Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman*, p. 158.

This representation of domestic service as an ideal occupation for women was especially prevalent in Wales, following the blanket condemnation of female morality in the 1847 commission of inquiry into the state of education, also known colloquially as Brad Y Llyfrau Gleision, or the Treachery of the Blue Books.¹⁹ The final report, which attested that Welsh women were immoral, unchaste, lacking in domestic skills, dirty, and intemperate, caused a great deal of controversy.²⁰ Multiple refutations of these allegations were published by commentators wishing to defend Welsh women, most notably by Ieuan Gwynedd, a nonconformist minister.²¹ These supporters, too, operated within a framework of gendered ideology. Jones argued that females were the victims rather than the perpetrators of immorality.²² *Y Gymraes*, the Welsh women's periodical he founded in response to the 1847 commission, was aimed at 'faithful maids, virtuous women, thrifty wives and intelligent mothers', making clear the ideal role of women.²³ The publication continually presented domestic service as 'the ideal opportunity for women to exhibit their natural feminine instincts of service and deference', the same instincts that would be used in their own homes.²⁴ As noted in chapter three, though, this was not necessarily a popular read for working-class women.

Involvement in domestic service was also seen as an ideal preparatory tool for marriage throughout Britain. Servants were able to save the necessary money while also practicing the domestic skills necessary to run their own household once they became wives.²⁵ This was possibly the most important reason domestic service was accepted, yet it was not always stated explicitly. The lack of explicit mention could actually demonstrate how ingrained this viewpoint was in nineteenth-century society, and it appears that some women used work in service as an opportunity to develop their domestic skills. In Merthyr Tydfil, the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent indicated that domestic servants were 'eagerly sought as wives by the

¹⁹ Jane Aaron, 'A National Seduction: Wales in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing', *New Welsh Review*, 27 (1994-95), p. 36.

²⁰ PP, (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 33-6, 114-5

²¹ Evan Jones, *Facts, figures and statements, in illustration of the dissent and morality of Wales: an appeal to the English people* (London: Benjamin L. Green, 1849); Evan Jones, *A vindication of the educational and moral condition of Wales, in reply to William Williams* (Llandovery: William Rees, 1848).

²² Jones, *Facts, figures and statements*, p. 33.

²³ Evan Jones, quoted in Williams, 'The True Cymraes', p. 69.

²⁴ Williams, 'The True Cymraes', p. 77.

²⁵ Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society: England, 1750-1880* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 79; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 99.

workmen and miners'. He elucidated: 'the practise of housekeeping can only be acquired in service or at home'.²⁶ The collier interviewed in 1847 by the state of education in Wales commissioner who declared: 'If ever I do marry [...] I will marry a cook, for she will have something ready for me when I do come from work' clearly agreed with this conclusion.²⁷

Women themselves may have been aware of this male viewpoint and aimed to take advantage of it. An editorial in *The Times* discussing emigration in June 1848 emphasised that domestic servants 'of good character' would be sure of finding not only a situation, but a husband.²⁸ Simonton points out that some European women purposefully chose this employment as a strategy for finding a husband at home, a scheme which could have influenced women in the study districts too.²⁹ This possibility can be supported with reference to the demographic profile of the typical domestic servant. The 'cultural consciousness' throughout nineteenth-century Europe that service and singlehood were synonymous was reflective of trends in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.³⁰ In both 1861 and 1881, where marital status was explicitly recorded, over 90 per cent of all female domestic servants were single, and the remainder slightly more likely to be widowed than married.³¹ Those under 30 accounted for between 83 and 86 per cent of female domestic servants at all points in time in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.³² On the whole, it is clear from the far higher numbers of young, single, childless women in this employment that domestic service was principally related to the female life-cycle, filling the gap between girlhood and marriage for many women.³³ In the interim, they were able to develop their domestic skills through the occupations listed in Tables 23 and 24.

²⁶ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 35.

²⁷ PP, (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 35.

²⁸ *The Times*, 20 June 1848.

²⁹ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 58.

³⁰ Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 99.

³¹ As Figure 4.

³² As Figure 1.

³³ Edward Higgs, 'Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England', *Social History*, 8 (1983), p. 137.

Table 23. Domestic service sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
general servant	515 (99.42%)	chambermaid	2 (0.16%)	chambermaid	4 (0.25%)
house keeper	2 (0.39%)	cook	34 (2.75%)	companion	2 (0.12%)
nurse	1 (0.19%)	general servant	1043 (84.45%)	cook	38 (2.37%)
TOTAL	518 (100.00%)	house keeper	36 (2.91%)	general servant	1369 (85.51%)
		house maid	72 (5.83%)	house keeper	52 (3.25%)
		kitchen maid	2 (0.16%)	house maid	79 (4.93%)
		ladies' maid	3 (0.24%)	inn servant	1 (0.06%)
		nurse	40 (3.24%)	kitchen maid	7 (0.44%)
		parlour maid	1 (0.08%)	ladies maid	3 (0.19%)
		scullery maid	1 (0.08%)	nurse	42 (2.62%)
		wet nurse	1 (0.08%)	pantry maid	1 (0.06%)
		TOTAL	1235 (100.00%)	parlour maid	2 (0.12%)
				scullery maid	1 (0.06%)
				TOTAL	1601 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2.

Table 24. Domestic service sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
cook	1 (0.16%)	companion	4 (0.43%)	companion	7 (0.76%)
general servant	615 (97.93%)	cook	43 (4.64%)	cook	50 (5.46%)
house keeper	9 (1.43%)	farm house servant	1 (0.11%)	general servant	734 (80.13%)
nurse	3 (0.48%)	general servant	737 (79.50%)	house keeper	30 (3.28%)
TOTAL	628 (100.00%)	house keeper	31 (3.34%)	house maid	45 (4.91%)
		house maid	57 (6.15%)	kitchen maid	2 (0.22%)
		kitchen maid	3 (0.32%)	ladies maid	4 (0.44%)
		ladies maid	3 (0.32%)	nurse	40 (4.37%)
		nurse	42 (4.53%)	parlour maid	2 (0.22%)
		parlour maid	3 (0.32%)	pitch maid	1 (0.11%)
		scullery maid	2 (0.22%)	sewing maid	1 (0.11%)
		under maid	1 (0.11%)	TOTAL	916 (100.00%)
		TOTAL	927 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 3.

The seeming diversification in the types of work undertaken by domestic servants shown in Tables 23 and 24 was almost certainly a result of changes in the enumeration process, rather than any changes to the job itself. The 1841 census instructions gave the abbreviation f.s. to be used when noting female servants, making further description of the actual employment undertaken under this umbrella unlikely. In 1861 and 1881, when no such shorthand was given, a more detailed account was made. The very small number of highly specialised roles, for example,

ladies' maids, accounting for only one or two women in each year, can be attributed to the few richer families, usually ironmasters, in the districts. Nursemaids and cooks accounted for around 40 women in 1861 and 1881 in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, all employed by professional middle-class families in each district. Even with increased details, it is clear that the majority of females in domestic service worked as general servants. The lone maid was far more typical, both in the study areas and throughout Europe, than a cast of servants.³⁴

Local newspaper advertisements also provide evidence of the expected attributes and likely duties of domestic servants in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Advertisements commonly requested a 'good general servant'. One *Merthyr Express* in 1871 advert sought someone 'able to wash, iron, and do plain cooking', presumably in addition to other tasks.³⁵ Another in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* the same year was for someone 'about 15 years of age, accustomed to children'.³⁶ This generality of work was a common feature. For example, while the duties of male servants to the Darby family were written out in detail in December 1856, the duties of female servants were not.³⁷ This implies that these were well-understood, implicitly linked to expected feminine skills and attributes, and thus needing no description. Only one advertisement from the study districts in the years surveyed: 'wanted, a good strong girl as housemaid' appeared to acknowledge the heavy nature of domestic labour belied in its feminine visage, with the remainder glossing over this fact.³⁸ The majority of activities undertaken by domestic servants were feminine by the sole nature they were carried out in the home, and would indeed be useful skills for young women wishing to run their own household in the future.

Advertisements for domestic servants, in addition to outlining the expected skills of applicants, often highlighted moral requirements. One example, published in *Eddowe's Journal* in 1851, illustrates this:

Wanted, in the county of Salop, an Upper Nurse (where two are kept), a respectable middle aged person, whose experience in the Nursery has been gained in families of acknowledged respectability, She must be an active and cheerful person, a good needlewoman, able to read, write and converse well,

³⁴ Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 102.

³⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 11 Feb 1871.

³⁶ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 16 September 1871.

³⁷ IGA: A statement of the duties of servants, 26 December 1856, Lab/HD/9.

³⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 18 Feb 1871.

and possessed of good personal appearance and manners. Her references must be unexceptionable.³⁹

Qualities referring to character and disposition took precedence over the actual skills required to undertake the employment. 'Good character indispensable', while not always explicitly stated in the same way as advertisements in the *Merthyr Express* and *Wenlock Express* in 1881, was a common theme.⁴⁰ This need for respectability was a universal consideration on both sides. Many advertisements requested a 'respectable' servant, regardless of the work itself, with dairymaids, cooks and general servants all subject to this requirement.⁴¹ Women advertising their services in both areas often highlighted their respectability through mention of excellent references and their wish for a respectable family to work for.⁴² A humorous piece in the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, published in 1842 listed the expected qualities of 'An Angelic Housemaid': 'Is she clean? Sober? Steady? Good-tempered? Willing to be taught? An early riser without being called? Not inclined to gossip and idle her time? And has she any followers? Does she well understand waiting on table? And cleaning plate? Is she quick? And can she sew neatly?' The article concluded that such 'virtuous and good qualities' were unlikely to exist in 'the poor scourer of floors', and that such a woman would be 'a phoenix'.⁴³ However, it illustrated the importance placed upon the moral character of domestic servants, a key aspect to their perceived femininity.

It is also worthy of note that the slight disparity between age and marital status trends, mentioned above, implies that single women who did not find husbands were able to continue in service to support themselves, reflected in the types of work domestic servants undertook. Women over 30 working as servants were much more likely to hold specialised positions.⁴⁴ This suggests that, for these particular women, domestic service was a career choice rather than a temporary employment option. This is even more pronounced if we consider that the vast majority of positions were general, not specialised. The extent to which these women chose not to marry because of their employment, or gained this employment simply because they were

³⁹ *Eddowe's Journal*, 16 April 1851.

⁴⁰ *Merthyr Express*, 15 January 1881; *Wenlock Express*, 26 November 1881; *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 4 November 1871.

⁴¹ *Eddowe's Journal*, 2 July 1851; *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 4 February 1871, 16 September 1871.

⁴² *Merthyr Telegraph*, 11 May 1861; 18 June 1881. The *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* charged one shilling for this service in 1871, implying that those using it had at least some financial means.

⁴³ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 9 April 1842.

⁴⁴ As Figure 1.

unable or unwilling to find a husband, is questionable. Simonton indicates that throughout Europe, women from a slightly higher social class than other servants carried out many of these specialised positions, but whether this was the case in the study districts is unclear.⁴⁵

Some other common contemporary perceptions of domestic service cannot be directly traced in the study areas. However, given their prominence, one can assume they did occur but were simply unrecorded. Live-in domestic servants in particular were often treated as in need of protection and control. Both in the viewpoint of contemporaries and in reality, lack of independence was ingrained in the position.⁴⁶ The resultant dependence of servants was perceived as both feminine and respectable as it mimicked the family unit, rather than the masculine paid workforce.⁴⁷ The various legislative efforts relating to female employment throughout the nineteenth century ignored domestic servants completely on these grounds. While this group often carried out heavy manual labour for long hours and low pay, they remained overlooked.⁴⁸ Angela John points out that: 'The work of a domestic servant carrying heavy buckets of coal in large houses might be more demanding than some of the sorting jobs performed by the Lancashire pitbrow woman at the colliery'.⁴⁹ The average maid in 1873 worked for 13 hours a day, more than factory women and industrial workers were allowed to undertake.⁵⁰ Such work clearly contradicted medical concerns seen elsewhere, yet the private, domestic nature of the employment carried out by females fulfilling their womanly role meant there was no concern.⁵¹ As this work was carried out in the private sphere and was thus not visible to government officials, it would have been difficult to legislate, although no real move was made to do so in any case.⁵²

These perceptions of domestic service as a feminine occupation were also reflected in the demographic make-up of the sector as a whole. 86 per cent of

⁴⁵ Deborah Simonton, 'Birds of Passage' or 'Career' Women? Thoughts on the Life Cycle of the Eighteenth-Century European Servant', *Women's History Review*, 20:20 (2011), p. 216.

⁴⁶ Humphries and Snell, 'Introduction', p. 6; Davidoff and Westover, 'From Queen Victoria to the Jazz Age', p. 2; Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, pp. 30-32.

⁴⁷ Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', p. 26; Davidoff, 'Introduction', p. 3; Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ Blackburn, 'Princesses and Sweated-Wage Slaves', p. 27; Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p. 45; Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 43; Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 113.

⁴⁹ John, 'Introduction', in *Unequal Opportunities*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Women's Work*, p. 30.

⁵¹ Hall, 'The Home Turned Upside Down?', p. 18; Levine-Clark, *Beyond the Reproductive Body*, p. 26; Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 23.

⁵² Goose, 'Working Women in Industrial England', p. 4.

servants in Britain in 1881 were female.⁵³ The tax on male servants, fixed at 15 shillings a head in 1869, may have contributed to an unwillingness to employ men in this position for all but the richest families.⁵⁴ This legitimisation of the position as women's work only served to bolster the viewpoint of such employment as degrading to men.⁵⁵ Male domestic servants were the last men to receive suffrage, an exclusion based on their dependence, a feminine quality.⁵⁶ The choice made by men to avoid such work, not always an option for women, further perpetuated the view of the employment as feminine, and its resultant acceptability and promotion.

This promotion often transcended the realms of discourse and ideology. The education provision for young working-class women and girls throughout Britain predominantly trained them for service, both through directed industrial training, and simply undertaking the domestic tasks required by the institution.⁵⁷ For poorer women supported by the parish, this encouragement was even more pronounced. Workhouses commonly placed young inmates in positions as domestic servants, with many girls offered little in the way of remuneration.⁵⁸ Instead, their employment served to lessen the need for parochial support. Those continuing to live inside the house were also subject to domestic obligations. In Merthyr Tydfil workhouse in 1881, for example, of the 77 female inmates, three quarters were described either as 'domestic servant', or 'charwoman', implying household labour carried out in or outside the workhouse.⁵⁹ Even women given poor relief without the expectation to live in were sometimes expected to undertake domestic labour inside the workhouse.⁶⁰ The education of younger women was also firmly directed to this end. Guardians in Ironbridge and Madeley were empowered to pay school fees for children, although academic achievement was not always the primary focus when females were concerned.⁶¹ While the Merthyr Board of Guardians periodically recorded the number of boys receiving industrial training in shoemaking, farming and tailoring, with results published in local newspapers, girls were not recorded.

⁵³ PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 4 November 1871.

⁵⁵ Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', p. 27.

⁵⁶ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 199.

⁵⁷ Gomersall, *Working-Class Girls*, p. 100-101.

⁵⁸ Higgs, 'Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England', p. 201; Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 100.

⁵⁹ TNA, PRO: Census Returns 1881, RG11/5313.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 113.

⁶¹ Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 73.

This indicates not only that their training was perceived as less important, but also that in many cases it was carried out informally, inside the house.⁶² The Guardians themselves admitted that girls were expected to do domestic labour instead of academic work.⁶³ Girls attending the industrial school for Merthyr and Aberdare, established in 1877, spent 18 hours a week on academic work, with the remainder on domestic and needle work.⁶⁴ Many schoolmistresses employed for the Union school did not possess qualifications, with the ability to teach domestic skills given higher standing than academic capability.⁶⁵

Even with this active conscription of women into service roles, the alleged problem of finding good servants in the Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was a regularly debated topic. This was not confined to the study districts, with regular discussion on the topic occurring throughout Britain, too. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* reprinted the poem 'Did you ever?', originally published in the *Comic Almanac*, in January 1841. Containing humorous observations on a number of professions, it included the line 'did you ever know a housemaid who, on your discovering a fracture in a valuable china jar, did not tell you, it was "a long time ago", or that it was "cracked before"?'⁶⁶ The Reverend Owen Evans, an Independent chapel minister in Merthyr, stated during an interview with the Children's Employment Commissioner in 1841: 'I have great difficulty in getting a good common domestic female servant here', blaming the ironworks and arguing that women previously employed there 'never make good servants; they find the restraint too much'.⁶⁷ During the 1875 South Wales colliers' strike and lock out, the Poor Law Guardians acknowledged that 'a great deal of distress existed among the women who worked ordinarily upon the coal and cinder tips'. The 'scarcity of domestic servants in the town' gave rise to the assertion that 'these women might stand a fair chance of getting into service'. It was also contended, however, that these women 'were unfitted for domestic service, and what was more unfortunate still, numbers of people were discharging some of their servants on account of the lock-out, so that there would be no scarcity of properly qualified domestics'. Ultimately, it was decided by the guardians that any women seeking relief could be employed in the

⁶² *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881.

⁶³ Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 96.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95; *Merthyr Telegraph*, 9 April 1870.

⁶⁶ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 2 Jan 1841.

⁶⁷ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 506.

workhouse, presumably in a domestic position, which was at that time 'inadequately supplied with female labour'.⁶⁸

Attempts to remedy this perceived lack of suitable servants were also sometimes made. In June 1871, 5 out of 16 domestic servants sent out by the Merthyr workhouse were returned. Mr Thomas Williams, Poor Law Guardian, described these women as unfit to 'satisfactorily perform the work of domestic servants through deficient training'. Ultimately, it was decided to appoint a female 'industrial trainer' in order to ensure the girls become 'useful and efficient domestic servants'.⁶⁹ Her wage was the same as the male industrial trainer, indicating the importance placed on the skills she taught.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, efforts to entice more women into domestic service were not always successful, mainly because many working-class women in the study areas not already employed in the sector preferred other employment, when it was available. Ann Tucker and Elizabeth Evans, teenage sand sellers living in 'China', a notorious district of Merthyr Tydfil, told the recorder of the Scripture Reader's Journal that they would rather gain their sustenance through domestic service.⁷¹ This, however, was unusual. On the whole, working-class women living in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield appear to have viewed domestic service negatively. *John Bull*, a national newspaper, printed an editorial in 1876 concluding that women preferred work in the industrial sector because of the independence offered.⁷² We already know that Charlotte Chiles, a 19 year old industrial worker in Merthyr Tydfil, agreed.⁷³

Industrial work was not the only occupational sector favoured over domestic service. An 1841 *Shropshire Conservative* article commented on the 'disgust' felt for service by young women, who would instead 'rather become tailoresses, printers, bookbinders, or work at a manufactory, than degrade themselves by 'living out''.⁷⁴ In 1871, an article reprinted in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* from the *Daily News* stated that many young women rejected domestic service as an 'unknown evil',

⁶⁸ *The Times*, 10 February 1875.

⁶⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 3 June 1871.

⁷⁰ *Merthyr Express*, 28 Jan 1871.

⁷¹ NLW: Merthyr Tydfil in 1860: A Scripture Reader's Journal, 23-28 January 1860, MS/4943B.

⁷² *John Bull*, 22 April 1876.

⁷³ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 514.

⁷⁴ *Shropshire Conservative*, 15 May 1841.

instead preferring to work in trades connected to the family livelihood.⁷⁵ Four years later, the same newspaper printed an editorial emphasising that women would rather ‘labour under most unhealthy conditions’ in a wide variety of employments ‘in preference to becoming domestic servants; and it may almost be said that it is only the riff-raff of the lower classes who do consent to labour in the houses of middle-class people’.⁷⁶ The author blamed this on the loss of liberty and low wages faced by domestic servants. Female opposition towards servitude was also present throughout Europe.⁷⁷ By the end of the century, with new employments emerging, it became more difficult to recruit domestic servants nationally from within the urban districts. This was mainly due to dislike for these restrictions and preference for other, freer work.⁷⁸ Yet, many women continued to participate in this sector in the study districts. For the ‘riff-raff of the lower classes’, limited industrial work opportunities meant that their becoming a domestic servant was often the easiest option for women facing financial necessity. Those seeking to better themselves were possibly more likely to undertake this ideologically acceptable employment, too.

The fact that many domestic servants were reportedly treated badly explains why this might have been a reluctant employment choice for many women. While no legislative efforts were made to protect domestic servants, discussion of their experiences at work surfaced intermittently in national newspapers throughout the period. An editorial in *The Times* in 1857 highlighted the condition ‘of what are called servants of all work’, along with other groups of women including seamstresses and shoebinders. The editorial questioned, ‘can we wonder that the streets are nightly crowded with unfortunates?’ The implication that some women would rather become prostitutes can be seen when we consider their discomfort over the lack of ‘honest employment’ for these ‘women by the million’.⁷⁹ Three years later, an article in *John Bull* stated that, ‘the present condition of domestic servants is radically wrong’. While also describing many servants as ‘fully alive to the evils of excessive dress, giddy conduct, and culpable neglect of their employer’s interest’,

⁷⁵ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 29 April 1871.

⁷⁶ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 29 May 1875.

⁷⁷ Simonton, *A history of European women’s work*, p. 110.

⁷⁸ Lynn Jamieson, ‘Rural and Urban Women in Domestic Service’, p. 130; Higgs, ‘Domestic Service and Household Production’, p. 145; Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p. 28; Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 190.

⁷⁹ *The Times*, 13 April 1857.

this was, according to the newspaper, matched by 'frequent disregard by their mistresses of their comforts'.⁸⁰

While no legislation was passed protecting domestic servants, discussion of their working environment was undertaken in an official capacity. In an 1857 Select Committee discussion regarding extending the twelve hour maximum day to female bleach and dye workers, Garstang, a surgeon giving evidence, mentioned domestic servants. His argument that work lasting no longer than 12 hours for this particular employment 'would be most advisable' was discredited by the questioners, who evoked field labourers, beer shops, hedgers and ditchers as examples of professions, along with domestic service, that needed to be carried out in an irregular pattern.⁸¹ No legislation followed. Two bills relating to domestic servants were brought forward during the period. An 1851 bill sought to ensure that the employer of any young person under 18 'must provide food, clothing or lodging', based on position.⁸² The 1863 *Bill for Protection of Young Persons under Age of Sixteen engaged as Domestic Servants and Apprentices* laid out the necessity of relieving officers to visit young women engaged in service 'twice a year' to 'ensure they have enough food and are not treated cruelly'. It extended to those employed from the workhouse.⁸³ The possibility of bad treatment was recognised here, yet age appeared to be more important than gender in prompting the legislation.

Whether individual domestic servants in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were in need of protection is difficult to ascertain. The work was carried out in the private sphere, and as such there are no employment records. No commissions were carried out to investigate servants, and so we lack the frank interviews that exist for industrial employees. However, re-printed national articles in local newspapers suggest that wider concerns regarding domestic servants were of interest to those living in the study areas. An 1875 article in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* article was reprinted from the *Liberal Review*. In addition to blaming mistresses for expecting too much, it too noted lack of independence as a key factor

⁸⁰ *John Bull and Britannia*, 28 April 1860.

⁸¹ PP, (1857) 151 XI.1, *Employment of Women and Children in Bleaching and Dyeing Establishments*, p. 41.

⁸² PP, (1851) I.97, *Bill for better Protection of Young Persons under Care and Control of others as Apprentices or Servants; and to enable Guardians and Overseers of Poor to institute and conduct Prosecutions*, p. 1.

⁸³ PP, (1863) II.15, *Bill for Protection of Young Persons under Age of Sixteen engaged as Domestic Servants and Apprentices*, p. 2.

impacting on the sector, stating that women did not wish to become domestic servants as 'they lose their liberty and are continually tied to the mill'. The article concluded that "'helps" will have to be considered and treated as if they are something more than machines, which may be made to do drudgery which some persons are too delicately constituted to think of doing for themselves' and called for higher wages.⁸⁴ The 'strict scrutiny' and 'constant surveillance' servants were subject to, indicated by Beal, may have been the reason many women did not wish to work in the sector, but this was actually viewed as positive by middle-class contemporaries.⁸⁵

Limited direct examples of servants undergoing bad experiences at work have been found in the study districts, illustrating why this occupation was disliked and why women may have preferred to seek employment elsewhere. On the 22 October 1870, Mary Davies, a 'young woman' working as a domestic servant, was 'removed in the dead of night and taken to the workhouse infirmary' on the grounds she had scarlet fever. She was described by David Evans, an auctioneer who witnessed the events, as begging, 'with tears' to be allowed to stay at her employers until the following morning, on the grounds she 'had money, and friends, and [...] might get into private lodgings.' Evans wrote to the Board of Guardians: 'I was not aware that it was the duty of officials of the Poor Law Board to assist gentlemen in easy circumstances to get rid of servants supposed to be suffering from contagious diseases'. Discussions of the Board the following week agreed that the 'the relieving officer should not have removed her at night' on the grounds that individuals did not have the right to get rid of their servants in this fashion.⁸⁶ However, no censure or punishment was given to any of the parties involved, nor was the welfare of the removed woman questioned further. In November of 1881, the committee of the Merthyr Board of Guardians removed Bridget Riley, a domestic servant, from her placement on the grounds 'she had not been well treated by the party to whom she had been hired'.⁸⁷ Most did not have this additional layer of protection. A 'Notice to correspondent' published in the *Wenlock Express* in August 1881 stated 'a domestic servant, under notice to leave her situation, has no legal claim to an allowance of

⁸⁴ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 29 May 1875.

⁸⁵ Suzanne Beal, 'Changing the Reading of Victorian Maids', in Antoine Capet (ed.), *The Representation of Working People in Britain and France: New Perspectives* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), p. 75.

⁸⁶ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 5 November 1870.

⁸⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 26 November 1881.

time to seek other employment. It is usual, however, to make a reasonable concession of this sort'.⁸⁸ While this implies a tradition of allowing servants to find new employment, it also demonstrates that, legally, employers could throw their servants out of work at any time.

Many servants were unable to protect themselves against such happenings. One domestic servant, 'Jemimer Jane' wrote to the *Merthyr Express* in July 1881, complaining about her position.

A Qwestyun for local hoppshunistes [...] I'm a pore servent gel that is often trubbled and skolded for sins wich she knows no more on than the child what is unborn this minit [...] [Missis] says I takes drinks from the jug on the slie every time as she sends me for the dinner beer and the beer for supper, which, in course, I denies tetotal, and in other ways besides.⁸⁹

Not a usual correspondent for the paper, one can assume the girl in question was incensed enough to write. Her experience of being accused of dishonesty and treated badly may have been familiar to many servant girls. Most would not have been able to write and complain, and may have feared for their position even if they could.

There are some examples of domestic servants in the study areas being treated in a positive manner by their employers, however. Francis Darby invested his servants' wages for them, and passed along the interest and sum total when they left his employment.⁹⁰ He also recorded that he gave monetary bonuses as large as a pound for 'good conduct'.⁹¹ In one case, in 1848, Ann Hart, housemaid, was given 1s for 'finding spectacles glass'.⁹² The Darby family was also recorded as taking interest in their ex-servants' children's education.⁹³ In Merthyr, Charles Wilkins described John Guest's nurse when he was a child as '[rubbing] through life in happy ignorance', able to both look after Guest and have the freedom to run her own business raising a flock of turkeys.⁹⁴ However, working in a large house was not typical for servants, and certainly some of these experiences would not have been either. It does, however, illustrate that for some domestic servants at least, employment could be a positive experience.

⁸⁸ *Wenlock Express*, 6 August 1881.

⁸⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 30 July 1881.

⁹⁰ IGA: Typed transcript of the diary of Francis Darby, 8 November 1830, Lab/FD/15/1; 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1838, p. 249, Lab/FD/1.

⁹¹ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1849, p. 82, Lab/FD.

⁹² IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1848, p. 60, Lab/FD.

⁹³ IGA: Notes re the Webb Family (a cook in the Darby household), no date, Lab/ASSOC/46.

⁹⁴ Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 209.

Given the possibility of poor treatment and preference for industrial employment, why so many women worked as domestic servants in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield is a key question. The positive view of the employment by the middle classes cannot be the only reason. While some evidence suggests that women may have purposefully chosen to participate in domestic service in order to prepare for marriage, the negative experience and lack of independence associated with domestic service meant that many viewed it as a last resort. Simply put, both in the study districts and throughout Europe, there were few other stable options for many women. National calls for expanded female employment throughout the century acknowledged that service was often the only consistent means of earning a livelihood, especially for working-class women.⁹⁵ Unlike other occupational sectors where specific skills were required, domestic servants were able to rely on their innate femininity in order to gain a position. Their sex qualified them immediately, as long as they conformed to expected moral behaviour. The increased opportunity for this work therefore had a dramatic impact upon employment levels in the domestic service sector, even when the work itself was unpopular.

Charring

Like domestic servants, charwomen generally undertook household labour in the homes of others. Contemporaries often placed charring under the umbrella of domestic service, and as with domestic service, it was encouraged on the grounds that it was compatible with women's perceived natural role.⁹⁶ Where charwomen and domestic servants differed, however, was in terms of employment. While domestic servants were employed by one family, either living on site or coming in everyday, charwomen often had multiple employers, cleaning or undertaking household jobs on a daily or even hourly basis. The word charwoman itself has etymological roots in the term chare or chore woman, specifically referring to 'odd jobs of household work'.⁹⁷

Separate consideration from domestic service is thus warranted: this distinction made a difference to developments in the types of work available, how it

⁹⁵ *The Times*, 2 April 1856.

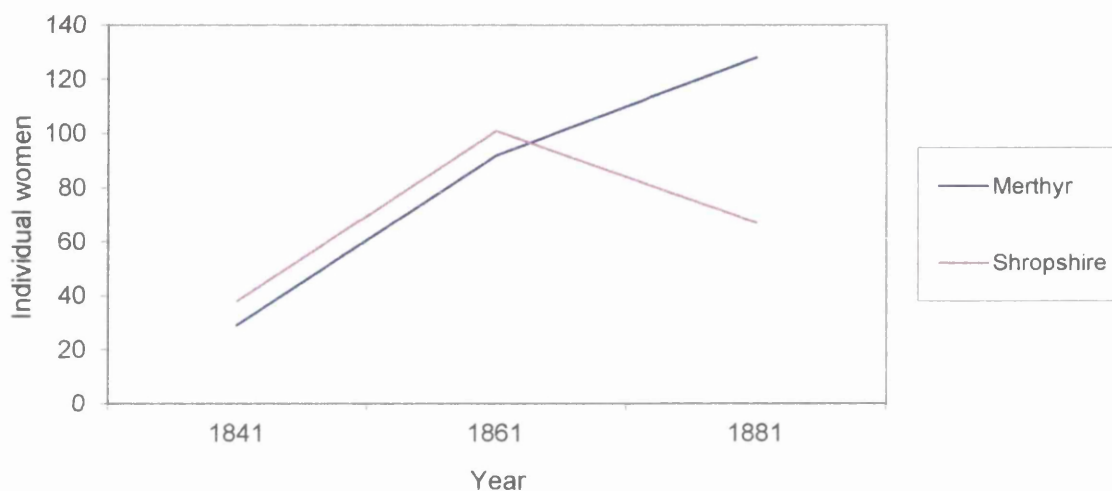
⁹⁶ Anderson, *Family Structure*, p. 71; Pennington and Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, p. 4.

⁹⁷ "charwoman, n". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30845?redirectedFrom=charwoman> [accessed February 13, 2013].

was viewed, and the sort of women who undertook it. Along with the shifting demographic character of the study districts, urban developments led to increased opportunities for charwomen, and the sector was also directly influenced by the availability of industrial work for women generally. Localised factors were once again of primary importance.

Figure 19. Number of women employed in the charring sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Charwomen remained static proportionally in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period, accounting for around 3 per cent of total females employed in each year surveyed. In terms of individual women, this was of course an increase, displayed in Figure 19. The number of charwomen working in Merthyr rose steadily from 29 to 128 between 1841 and 1881. In Shropshire, an increase from 38 women in 1841 to 101 in 1861 was followed by a decrease to 67 in 1881, still higher than earlier in the period.

While the numerical increase could have been linked to under-recording in 1841, it is more likely that it can be attributed to three major factors. Firstly, the urban diversification in the study districts. In 1841, all women working in this sector in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were described broadly by the title of charwomen by enumerators, seen in Tables 25 and 26. In 1861, additional descriptions of the location of their work was given in both study districts: from engine houses to libraries, offices to schools. This non-domestic charring appears to

be more pronounced in Merthyr. By 1881, 20 per cent of charwoman in this district worked in locations outside of the home. In the Shropshire Coalfield, this sub-sector never reached any higher than 5 per cent. However, the accuracy of enumeration must also be acknowledged. Some of those enumerated simply as 'charwoman' in Shropshire may also have participated in cleaning outside of the private sphere. Regardless, it is clear that these urban developments led to new opportunities for women seeking cleaning work outside of the home in both study districts.

Table 25. Charring sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
charwoman	29 (100.00%)	charwoman	84 (91.30%)	charwoman	103 (80.47%)
		cleaning beer house	1 (1.09%)	cleaning chapel	7 (5.47%)
		cleaning chapel	5 (5.43%)	cleaning colliery engine houses	1 (0.78%)
		cleaning office	2 (2.17%)	cleaning engine station	1 (0.78%)
		TOTAL	92 (100.00%)	cleaning library	1 (0.78%)
				cleaning office	8 (6.25%)
				cleaning school	6 (4.69%)
				cleaning works (dusting)	1 (0.78%)
				TOTAL	128 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2.

Table 26. Charring sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
charwoman	38 (100.00%)	charwoman	99 (98.02%)	charwoman	63 (94.03%)
		cleaning chapel	1 (0.99%)	charwoman at china works	1 (1.49%)
		cleaning office	1 (0.99%)	cleaning chapel	1 (1.49%)
		TOTAL	101 (100.00%)	cleaning office	1 (1.49%)
				cleaning school	1 (1.49%)
				TOTAL	67 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 3.

The second factor explaining the numerical increase seen in the charring sector is economic fluctuations. The increase in the number of charwomen in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was not steady over the period. In Merthyr, the increase between 1841 and 1861 was much larger than that seen between 1861 and 1881. In Shropshire, a large increase between 1841 and 1861 was actually followed by a decline by 1881. This pattern mirrors that of total female employment, both throughout Britain and in the study districts. While this could be

linked to under-recording in 1841, in 1861, as already shown, a larger number of women entered the industrial workforce than at any other point, some of whom would have been unemployed otherwise. The domestic labour these women would otherwise have carried out would presumably still have been necessary. Charwomen filled a need in these years, explaining the correlation between figures.

The final reason for the numerical increase in individual women undertaking charring as an employment was changes in population. An increased population meant more families, thus further opportunities for work that predominantly occurred in the homes of others. The shifting demographic make-up of the study districts which occurred alongside the increase was equally important. The rising middle class, faced with a lack of suitable domestic servants, whether this was real or imagined, would be arguably more likely to employ charwomen. The fact that charwoman could have serviced multiple families means their labour would have filled a significant gap. Again, localised trends were an important factor influencing fluctuations in female employment levels.

In both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, young women were less likely to undertake charring as an employment than in other employment sectors. Those who were attracted to domestic jobs were far more likely to undertake domestic service, a steady, full-time employment. As these younger women were also more likely to be without dependents, they had little need for the extra time for their own household chores that attracted married and widowed women to the employment. However, in Merthyr, approximately 10 per cent of charwomen were married in each of the periods surveyed. The figure was both higher and more variable in Shropshire, ranging between 10 to 20 per cent, but still low in comparison with national trends.⁹⁸ Charring was an occupation dominated by married and widowed women throughout Britain.⁹⁹ They were able to participate in this employment without censure due to the domestic setting. Given this, it seems surprising that more married women in each district did not participate in this sector. Married women's heavy household responsibilities due to the industrial work of their husbands and sons, may have been to blame for this. Even an accepted, casual employment like charring presumably took too much time away from their own

⁹⁸ As Figure 4.

⁹⁹ Patricia E. Malcolmson, 'Laundresses and the Laundry Trade in Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 24:4 (1981), pp. 439-462, p. 445.

household requirements, given that it needed to be carried out outside of their own home. Conversely, widowed women, likely to have the greatest economic need, increased in both districts to over half of charwoman over the period. In many cases, this was the only employment they were qualified to undertake, drawing on skills learned from their marital duties. Such an activity would allow them to fulfill their own domestic chores and also earn money, when opportunities were available. Once again, domestic ideology and market forces can be juxtaposed to explain female employment patterns.

Washing

The washing sector bears strong similarities to the charring sector. It too, was an occupation harmonious with conceptions of femininity. The vast majority of those participating in this sector were described as ‘washerwoman’ or ‘laundress’, feminine terms with no masculine equivalent.¹⁰⁰ So pronounced was this gendered view of washing that any contact with employers was likely to go through the women of the family, as men involving themselves in washing would be viewed as strange, even ‘extraordinary’ by contemporaries.¹⁰¹ An article published in the *Wenlock Express* in 1881 presented a description of a woman’s son turning the mangle as an amusing snippet from that year’s census.¹⁰² These depictions mirrored reality. In England in 1861, for example, 99 per cent of those working in this sector were female.¹⁰³ Nationally, washerwomen were often paid in kind, affecting conceptions of their labour as remunerative employment, and resulting in little contemporary discussion.¹⁰⁴ Reformers largely ignored the sector, and no legislation of the trade was made until 1895.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, enough evidence exists of the washing sector in both study districts to draw some, albeit limited, conclusions. While conforming with gender discourse, washing was not always praised by contemporaries, nor was it actively

¹⁰⁰ As Figure 1.

¹⁰¹ Summers, ‘Public Functions, Private Premises’, p. 357.

¹⁰² *Wenlock Express*, 16 April 1881.

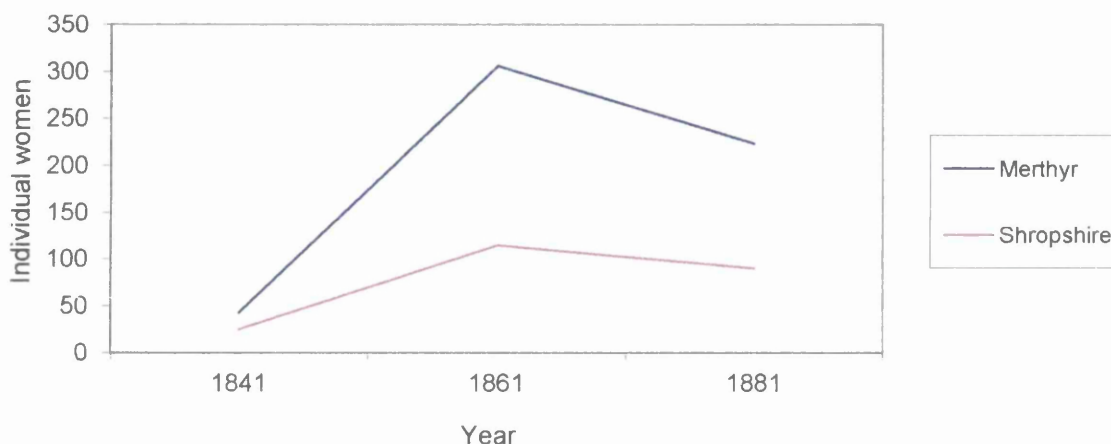
¹⁰³ Malcolmson, ‘Laundresses and the Laundry Trade in Victorian England’, p. 440.

¹⁰⁴ Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, p. 63; Penelope Lane, ‘A Customary or Market Wage? Woman and Work in the East Midlands, c. 1700-1840’, in Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K.D.M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work, and Wages in England, 1600-1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 114.

¹⁰⁵ Alexander, ‘Women’s Work’, p. 63; Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, p. 44.

promoted, as seen with regards to domestic service and sewing. Instead, explanations for employment patterns in the study districts rest with wider emphasis on health and cleanliness, and once again, demographic shifts and industrial employment trends in the local vicinity.

Figure 20. Number of women employed in the washing sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

Changes in the proportion and number of individual women undertaking employment in the washing sector were present in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period. In Merthyr, an increase in washerwomen from 4.1 to 5.38 per cent of total women workers occurred over the period as a whole, with an unsustainable spike to 7.98 per cent in 1861. In numerical terms, shown in Figure 20, this accounted for 43 individual washerwomen in 1841, 306 in 1861 and finally 223 in 1881. In the Shropshire Coalfield, a slightly different pattern can be traced. In 1841, 1.85 per cent of total women workers, or 25 women, worked in this sector. In 1861, this rose to 115 women, 3.8 per cent of total women workers, with a slight rise to 3.91 per cent of total women workers, but only 90 individual women (given the lower overall number of females employed). In both cases, an increase over the period as a whole is evident. Additionally, it almost goes without saying that this occupation, often carried out on a casual basis, in the home, was likely to be

under-recorded in the census, possibly more so in 1841.¹⁰⁶ This casual nature is illustrated if we consider women often undertook it in conjunction with other jobs: Francis Darby, for example, recorded in 1839: 'Paid the washerwoman near Little Wenlock for Ducks bought of her £1'.¹⁰⁷ The number of women participating in the washing sector could therefore have been even more pronounced in reality.

The work of washerwomen and resultant contemporary discussion provides some good examples of the complex, often contradictory nature of gendered ideologies relating to female employment. The actual work undertaken by washerwomen, like other occupations under the domestic service paradigm umbrella, was viewed as feminine even though it could be physically laborious. Bourke cites an agricultural labourer in Sussex, 1867, who stated: 'Farm labour isn't so hard as the washtub'.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately no direct evidence of this exists for Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, although assumptions can be made given the national commonality in washing procedures. While servants undertaking laundry for the Darby family throughout the period had help in the form of an odd job man, who carried the coals, water, and turned the mangle, this was not usual.¹⁰⁹ Most women would have to undertake this heavy physical labour themselves. The preponderance of advertisements in the newspapers of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield for new washing machines that claimed to do the hard work reflect this pool of women, although very few would have been able to afford this new technology.¹¹⁰ In Merthyr, Ann Jenkins, described by the Scripture Reader in 1860 as 'ex-washerwoman turned prostitute' belied that while washing was perceived as feminine, it was not always enough to fulfil economic necessity.¹¹¹

Washing was usually carried out by women in their own homes, and evidence of disapproval of women working in this sector usually only appeared in the study districts when this was not the case. In 1842, The Children's Employment Commission Reports castigated washerwomen in the Shropshire Coalfield, on the grounds they were likely to dose their children with Godfrey's cordial in order to go

¹⁰⁶ McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1839, p. 251, Lab/FD/1.

¹⁰⁸ Bourke, 'Housewifery in Working-Class England', p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ IGA: A statement of the duties of servants, 26 December 1856, Lab/HD/9; A statement by a servant at Broomhall House, 8 December 1822, Lab/HD/10.

¹¹⁰ *Wenlock Express*, 1 January 1881.

¹¹¹ NLW: Merthyr Tydfil in 1860: A Scripture Reader's Journal, 27 February - 3 March 1860, MS/4943B.

out washing.¹¹² The description of a young unmarried woman giving birth in a cab in Merthyr Tydfil following her gaining of her 'livelihood by washing at different houses' after the death of her parents paints her as 'unfortunate'.¹¹³ The complexity of conceptions of femininity, and the castigation of women working outside the home even in jobs befitting their gender, is clear. The case of Mrs Salter, workhouse laundress, in 1881 demonstrates the importance perceived moral character could have even for women working in seemingly feminine employments. A committee employed by the Board of Guardians advised that she should be given notice to quit, on the grounds that she was 'an intemperate woman', and that the matron said 'she [was] not required in the place'.¹¹⁴ The following week, Mrs Salter requested an audience with the Guardians, wishing to vindicate herself. She requested her letter be published in the *Merthyr Express*, which it duly was, but the Guardians declined to grant her an interview.¹¹⁵ While the facts of the case are obscured, Mrs Salter's anxiety over the newspaper reports would not have been unfounded, as they could have affected her future employment opportunities.

While, as with charring, the washing sector nationally was seen as married women's work, a 'penny capitalist' activity chiefly undertaken by wives in their homes, this was not reflective of trends in the study districts.¹¹⁶ In Merthyr in particular, washerwomen were more likely to be single or widowed than married. In Shropshire, there was a higher percentage of married female participation in the sector, but this was never a majority.¹¹⁷ Again, this lack of married women even in an employment that could be undertaken in the home implies it was not the desire to follow gendered ideologies, but the depth of their household responsibilities, linked to the industrial work of male relatives, that stopped them from doing so. Nationally, washing was a common employment choice for widowed women with children, given the ability to undertake it in the home, meet financial necessities and not worry about childcare.¹¹⁸ This trend was also reflected in both of the study districts.

¹¹² PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 39.

¹¹³ *Merthyr Express*, 29 October 1881.

¹¹⁴ *Merthyr Express*, 22 January 1881.

¹¹⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 12 February 1881.

¹¹⁶ Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, p. 11; Benson, 'Work', pp. 71-72; August, *Poor Women's Lives*, p. 100.

¹¹⁷ As Figure 4.

¹¹⁸ Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, p. 18.

Unlike domestic service, changing employment levels cannot be explained by active promotion of this work by middle-class contemporaries, nor by the presence of women from a variety of backgrounds and statuses, as seen in the sewing sector. That women may have been under-recorded in 1841 is also not enough to explain the increase over the period. Instead, three major factors explain the numerical and proportional increase of washerwomen in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Firstly, the greater concern placed on health and cleanliness as the century progressed, which meant that a larger group of people were willing to invest in the services of washerwomen. A *Merthyr Express* advertisement in January 1881 called for a laundress to undertake ‘Two or Three good Familie’s [sic] washing’ does not give any information about who placed the advert, but the grouping together suggests the possibility that they could have been working class, newly interested in cleanliness, and pooling their resources.¹¹⁹ The second factor, industrial developments, has already been discussed with regards to the charring sector. Correlation can be traced between the number of industrial workers and number of washerwomen in the study districts. In Lancashire Mill towns, women workers were likely to send out their washing, as they had no time to do it themselves.¹²⁰ This purchasing of services by women was an urban phenomenon which increased in importance throughout the century.¹²¹ Throughout Britain, in areas where young women were likely to participate in capitalist waged employment, older women undertook employment providing their household needs, including charring and washing, and this could certainly have been the case in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, too.¹²² Indeed, Hayman and Horton point out in their history of Ironbridge that ‘poorer women or elderly widows were often obligated to ‘take in’ laundry from other working women’.¹²³ Given this factor, the higher number of washerwoman in Merthyr can therefore be partially explained by the higher number of women working generally. Finally, the growth of the urban middle class in both study districts. This development throughout Britain led to more demand for washerwomen nationally, and was also present in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire

¹¹⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881.

¹²⁰ Evans, ‘Unemployment and the Making of the Feminine’, p. 256.

¹²¹ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, p. 179.

¹²² Jane Humphries, ‘Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1 (1977), p. 249.

¹²³ Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 96.

Coalfield.¹²⁴ In the washing sector, as with other casual labour undertaken by women in the study districts, geographically specific developments must be considered to fully explain employment patterns.

Lodging Provision

The industrial economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield meant that a large proportion of the population in each area was made up of young, single men. Attracted to the district for the employment opportunities, these men would invariably seek accommodation. Whether in licensed boarding and lodging houses, inns, or private residences, women in the study districts played a large part in offering this necessary housing. Study of the lodging provision sector, like the charring and washing sectors, demonstrates that while many women did not necessarily receive wages in the traditional sense, they were still vital to the urban economies of the study districts.¹²⁵ As with the washing sector, their work, while befitting their femininity, was not always seen through this lens, and no efforts to encourage women to consider this as an alternate employment to industrial labour were made by contemporaries in the study districts. Instead, geographically specific housing trends in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, and the fact that women participating in this sector were able to simultaneously carry out their own heavy domestic workload, are the primary explanations for female employment patterns in lodging provision.

In both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, the proportion and number of women officially returned in the census as involved in lodging provision was low. In both districts, it accounted for between 1 and 2 per cent of employment women at each point surveyed.¹²⁶ These figures, however, do not give the full picture. The actual descriptions of those returned in this sector, shown in Tables 26 and 27, demonstrate that the majority of women officially recognised as participating in lodging provision did so in a professional capacity. 'Common lodging houses', or licensed lodging houses, were subject to regulation following the Common Lodging

¹²⁴ Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, p. 7.

¹²⁵ Hedley, 'Hannah: a Woman of the Durham Coalfield', p. 56.

¹²⁶ As Figure 1.

Houses Act, 1851, and the extension of the Sanitary Act in 1875.¹²⁷ Lodging house keepers were required to report the number of lodgers in their establishments, as well as regulating sanitary conditions.¹²⁸ For these women, the necessity of following official procedures, as well as the professional nature of their establishments, meant they would have considered themselves, and been considered by outside observers, as occupied, and thus returned as such in the census.

Only those described as 'lodger keeper' and 'landlady' would have usually provided lodgings in their own homes, and this accounts for a very small number of women returned. This can be explained by the nature of the census questions. While those who owned lodging houses were likely to return themselves as occupied, in the majority of cases lack of employer or wage would preclude those providing lodgings from viewing themselves as employed, although it was certainly remunerative. The Merthyr Board of Guardians regularly used female landladies to take in the children of paupers, if they were seen as respectable, yet no evidence of this particular employment is given in the census, for example.¹²⁹ This under-recording was a problem nationally, as although throughout Europe around one third of urban women took in lodgers, female heads were often returned as unoccupied in families that did so.¹³⁰

Table 27. Lodging provision sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
inn keeper	8 (34.78%)	boarding house keeper	1 (2.13%)	boarding house keeper	8 (12.50%)
keeping public	2 (8.70%)	inn keeper	16 (34.04%)	hotel keeper	2 (3.13%)
lodger keeper	2 (8.70%)	lodger keeper	9 (19.15%)	inn keeper	18 (28.13%)
lodging house keeper	2 (8.70%)	lodging house keeper	7 (14.89%)	landlady	3 (4.69%)
publican	9 (39.13%)	publican	14 (29.79%)	licensed lodging house keeper	1 (1.56%)
TOTAL	23 (100.00%)	TOTAL	47 (100.00%)	lodger keeper	2 (3.13%)
				lodging house keeper	13 (20.31%)
				publican	17 (26.56%)
				TOTAL	64 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2.

¹²⁷ PP, (1874) IV.557, *Bill to amend and extend Sanitary Laws: (as amended in Committee)*; PP, (1851) II. 123, *Bill for well-ordering of Common Lodging-Houses: as amended by Select Committee*.

¹²⁸ Barrie Trinder, *The Market Town Lodging House in Victorian England* (Leicester: Friends of the Centre for English Local History, 2001) p. 4.

¹²⁹ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 19 November 1870.

¹³⁰ Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 32; McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain*, p. 28; Humphries, 'Women and Paid work', p. 91.

Table 28. Lodging provision sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
hotel keeper	1 (2.86%)	boarding house keeper	3 (9.68%)	boarding house keeper	1 (3.70%)
inn keeper	14 (40.00%)	inn keeper	12 (38.71%)	hotel keeper	2 (7.41%)
lodging house keeper	6 (17.14%)	lodger keeper	1 (3.23%)	inn keeper	11 (40.74%)
publican	14 (40.00%)	lodging house keeper	9 (29.03%)	lodger keeper	4 (14.81%)
TOTAL	35 (100.00%)	publican	6 (19.35%)	lodging house keeper	7 (25.93%)
		TOTAL	31 (100.00%)	publican	2 (7.41%)
				TOTAL	27 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 3.

Table 29 indicates the percentage of women in the study districts who took in lodgers. Even taking into account the duplication in the case of multiple women living in the same household, it is clear that lodging provision was an important sector of female employment in the study districts, a fact belied by the occupational returns. These figures represent far more women involved in keeping lodgers than returned as occupied as such in the census. It is plain to see that the census here is woefully misleading when recording female lodger keepers. If we consider lodging provision is the only casual, private employment that can easily be traced, implications for other employments of this nature are also clear.

Table 29. Women living with lodgers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

	Merthyr Tydfil	Shropshire Coalfield
1841	1733 (31.55%)	1703 (20.08%)
1861	3183 (21.37%)	1287 (13.24%)
1881	2538 (16.76%)	746 (7.60%)

Source: As Figure 1.

The reason so many women participated in lodging provision in the study districts is simple. There was a large market of single men and women seeking accommodation that could easily be filled simply by opening up a room in the home. Throughout Britain, married women often took in lodgers when in need of extra money, and this was especially common in mining districts.¹³¹ In keeping with the

¹³¹ Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life', p. 32; Jones, *Mines, Migrants and Residence*, p. 56.

domestic service paradigm, such employment could be seen as a simple expansion in the natural daily tasks of women, and practically speaking, it was carried out inside the home.¹³² In Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield in particular, women married to industrial workers were unlikely to be able to work outside of the home. While providing lodgings did add to the workload, women throughout Britain were able to build this into their usual daily tasks.¹³³ In this respect, as Hedley and Trinder point out, female lodging providers added to their own family budget and contributed to their local economies by providing housing for the workforce.¹³⁴ In addition, women of all classes were able to participate: lodging providers did not have to work in public, making such employment possible even for the wives of respectable men who did not want to lose status.¹³⁵

Table 29 also shows a difference in the percentage of women involved in lodging provision in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period. This difference is not easily explained. The demographic character of the inhabitants due to the prevalence of the heavy industries was similar, and young, single men, those most likely to undertake lodging, outnumbered women in both districts. In Merthyr, this certainly led to rooms necessary and secured, with lodgers the only source of income for many, especially female, often widowed, heads of households.¹³⁶ In both districts, population and immigration decreased from the mid-century onwards. One possible explanatory factor rests in the housing stock of each district. In the Shropshire Coalfield, rambling cottages, easily extended to allow for multiple generations to inhabit, were built throughout the district during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Later still, those living in these cottages tended to be secure. Successive generations would not have wanted for somewhere to live, decreasing the need for lodgings.¹³⁷ The remainder often lived in accommodation provided by employers, again meaning the existence of lodgers would be lower, as those usually in need of it would have housing provided.¹³⁸ In

¹³² Pennington and Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, p. 4.

¹³³ Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal', p. 120.

¹³⁴ Hedley, 'Hannah: a Woman of the Durham Coalfield', p. 52; Trinder, *The Market Town Lodging House*, p. 7.

¹³⁵ Davidoff, 'The Separation of Home and Work?', p. 168.

¹³⁶ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, pp. 43, 66.

¹³⁷ Trinder, 'Ironbridge: The Cradle of Industrialisation', pp. 31-34.

¹³⁸ IGA: Statements of the Lilleshall Co.'s Estates at Priorslee, Snedshill, Wombridge, Wrockwardine Wood, Hadley, Lilleshall, Pave Lane and Wenlock, 1877, DLIL/3 659 a-b; Small red bound notebook, with title in ink on cover 'Income' and the years, 1830-1850, 1830, Lab/FD/2.

Ironbridge, the average two bedroom house would be expected to accommodate six people, a smaller number than expected if lodging was common, given the average large families of industrial workers.¹³⁹ In addition, family ties and knowledge of the area could well preclude lodging. In Merthyr Tydfil, however, rapid immigration in the first half of the century, predominantly from rural Wales, meant lodging provision was certainly necessary.¹⁴⁰ The decline in this form of immigration is reflected in the declining necessity for lodging provision apparent in the figures.

The 1842 Children's Employment Commissioner described lodging provision in Merthyr Tydfil: 'in lodging houses it is part of the bargain that the lodger should be washed every night previous to retiring to rest; a point which, by the way, is strenuously insisted on by the housekeeper'. He used this as part of a justification of the cleanliness, and thus femininity, of Welsh women.¹⁴¹ This positive depiction was not always the case, however, and contemporaries did not always necessarily regard lodging provision as inherently feminine. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* reprinted the poem 'Did you ever?', originally published in the *Comic Almanac*, in January 1841. Containing humorous observations on a number of professions, it included the line 'Did you ever know a lodging house landlady who would own to bugs?'¹⁴² The same paper the following year called for lodging houses to be 'required by law to take out licences in the same manner of public houses' on the grounds of 'the tendency of the degraded accommodation to degrade the classes of the population who have recourse to it', a criticism implying contamination, whether moral or actual.¹⁴³ This, of course, did pass into law ten years later. In 1871, Mary Fleming, an Ironbridge resident, was charged with keeping an unregistered lodging house in 1871. PC Cooper, the presiding officer, described one bedroom containing seven lodgers, not all related. Fleming was fined 15 shillings including costs.¹⁴⁴ Not all women undertaking lodging provision were honest, either. In March 1861, in Merthyr Tydfil, Catherine Morgan accused her landlady, Mary Lewis, of having illegally pawned her clothes. A debate over the money owed followed, with Morgan claiming she agreed 'to work two days a week for her, instead of paying for the

¹³⁹ Hayman and Horton, *Ironbridge: History & Guide*, p. 95.

¹⁴⁰ Gareth Hopkins, 'Population', in *Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community* (Cowbridge: Merthyr Teachers Centre Group, 1981), p. 377.

¹⁴¹ PP, (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 481.

¹⁴² *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 2 Jan 1841.

¹⁴³ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 5 November 1842.

¹⁴⁴ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 1 July 1871.

lodgings'. This informal method of payment for lodgings was not presented as surprising in court, with the case ultimately undecided.¹⁴⁵ On the whole, however, these were rare examples of criticism, with the largely private nature of lodging provision as an employment precluding any comment whatsoever.

Lodging house keepers in the study districts returned in the census were likely to be older widows, a high proportion of whom had minor children.¹⁴⁶ While married women were a low percentage of those professionally working in the lodging provision sector, in the sector as traced through women living with lodgers as returned in the census, they were the primary participants. This is because, as already discussed, lodging provision was the one employment women were able to undertake while simultaneously carrying out the high levels of domestic labour required of industrial workers' wives in the study districts. Once again, localised trends in the study districts were important in determining who participated in lodging provision, as well as wider trends in the sector as a whole.

To conclude, women's work in occupations classified under the domestic service paradigm as a whole did not disrupt gender norms. Contemporary perceptions were therefore principally positive, to the extent that these positions were encouraged and promoted. This was not the only reason these occupations accounted for such a large proportion of women workers in the study districts, however. Urban, social and economic developments, both at the national and local level, all impacted heavily upon employment trends.

Prostitution

Prostitution, unlike other tertiary service occupations carried out by women in the study districts, was unequivocally regarded as immoral and unsuitable. Even so, it was an important employment opportunity for many women. While, according to the census, there were only 11 prostitutes over the entire period in Merthyr Tydfil, and none in the Shropshire Coalfield, this was not entirely accurate.¹⁴⁷ The omission of prostitution from the census was a problem throughout Britain, and other evidence

¹⁴⁵ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 9 March 1861.

¹⁴⁶ As Figure 1.

¹⁴⁷ As Figure 1.

from the study districts shows this figure as a vast underestimation.¹⁴⁸ Of these eleven, two would have had no choice in reporting themselves. 21 year old Mary Ann Griffiths in 1861 and 20 year old widow Ellen O'Neil in 1881 were a prison and a workhouse resident respectively.¹⁴⁹ For the remainder, all unmarried, living alone or as lodgers, ranging in age between 22 and 40, whether this occupation was recorded against their will is unclear. Presumably women were not always keen to return themselves as prostitutes. Nevertheless, further evidence of prostitution in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield exists in contemporary discussion.

Strange argues that in the 1840s there were at least 60 prostitutes in 'China', a notorious district in Merthyr Tydfil, alone, and evidence from newspapers and nonconformist records indicates this high number continued over the period.¹⁵⁰ The commission of inquiry into the state of education in Wales described 'China' as 'a mere sink of thieves and prostitutism', with 'gangs of young men and women' who drank and 'kept up the most riotous orgies all night long' common.¹⁵¹ The Merthyr Board of Health was called on to suppress houses 'of ill-fame', with 'disgusting and disgraceful scenes' attributed to them as late as 1881.¹⁵² Lists of disorderly prostitutes, named and shamed, appeared periodically in local newspapers.¹⁵³ One, Elizabeth King, was an immigrant to Merthyr from Ironbridge, although whether she fell into this occupation upon her arrival, or moved specifically to undertake it, is impossible to know.¹⁵⁴ George Redfern, keeper of Birmingham prison, argued that many of the prostitutes in the city came from Shropshire, originally as female servants.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, R. H. Horne, a commissioner reporting upon the town of Wolverhampton blamed the 'stream of prostitutes' found in the town on 'importations from Shrewsbury and Shropshire' in 1843.¹⁵⁶ A similar assertion was made in the same year by Mr Castle, Chief Superintendent of Police in Wolverhampton:

¹⁴⁸ Shaw-Taylor, 'Diverse Experiences', p. 30.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, PRO: Census Returns 1861, RG9/4053, f. 43, p. 8; Census Returns 1881, RG11/5313, f. 123, p. 7.

¹⁵⁰ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 159.

¹⁵¹ PP, (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 115.

¹⁵² *Merthyr Express*, 20 August 1881.

¹⁵³ *Merthyr Express*, 10 June 1871.

¹⁵⁴ *Merthyr Express*, 15 July 1871.

¹⁵⁵ PP, (1843) XIII.307, *Royal Commission on Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories. Second Report (Manufactures), Appendix*, p. 172.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 111.

My stick has been the cause of much improvement since I have been here, which is five years and a half, and a great many women have been committed for disorderly conduct. I find most of them come from Shropshire, from about Wellington, and Dawley Green. I dare say our loose characters go to other places also.¹⁵⁷

All of these examples suggest prostitution as far more ubiquitous than the census figures would allow.

Similarly, during his report concerning the employment of women and children in the iron works in 1866, Menelaus argued that Merthyr, and Welsh ironworking towns in particular, had little prostitution. The handwritten additions of G. T. Clark to the original manuscript are illuminating. While the original sentence as written by Menelaus claimed simply 'little prostitution', Clark redrafted this to state 'little 'native' prostitution 'in proportion to the population'', perhaps suggesting more than Menelaus wished to admit.¹⁵⁸ Menelaus went on to blame the evils of prostitution on the 'low Irish', stating that these girls were 'too lazy to work and drawn from a lower class'. Again, Clark's additions prove interesting. He crossed out 'unfortunate' in reference to these prostitutes, perhaps making a judgement on their integrity.¹⁵⁹ The arguments contained in this report appear to be more concerned with protecting the reputation of Merthyr, and its female population, than in accurately recording the level of prostitution occurring.

While contemporaries tended to focus upon morality during discussion of prostitution, the reality was that again, for many women involved, there was little choice. Financial necessity was the main reason women became prostitutes throughout Britain, and evidence suggests that trends in the study districts mirrored this.¹⁶⁰ For many women, the job security and decent wages offered to prostitutes could not be found elsewhere.¹⁶¹ As Strange points out, a 'young and pretty girl' choosing prostitution could earn far more than a 'respectable' women in a much shorter time frame.¹⁶² R. H. Horne, discussing prostitutes from Shropshire with the 1842 commissioners, admitted 'this circumstance is, I think, more attributable to physical causes than to any moral restraints'.¹⁶³ Jane Davies, a prostitute interviewed

¹⁵⁷ PP, (1843) XIII.1, *Midland Mining Commission*, p. xlvi.

¹⁵⁸ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 14 DG/C/5/15-16.

¹⁵⁹ GRO: Employment of Women and Children in the Iron Works, May 1866, p. 15 DG/C/5/15-16.

¹⁶⁰ Blackburn, 'Princesses and Sweated-Wage Slaves', p. 26.

¹⁶¹ Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 159.

¹⁶² Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 160.

¹⁶³ PP, (1843) XIII.307, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories. Second Report*, p. 111.

by a Scripture Reader in May 1860 in Merthyr Tydfil gave the excuse that ‘she had no shoes to wear to work’, to explain why she engaged in sex-work rather than seeking employment at the ironworks.¹⁶⁴ An 1881 *Merthyr Express* correspondent described ‘a young woman of ill-fame’ weeping upon being implored by the Rector of Merthyr to mend her ways. His offer of a situation, if she wished ‘to lead an industrious and honest life’, presumably as a domestic servant, implicitly accepted another economic arrangement was necessary.¹⁶⁵ Whether through choice or necessity, these women unquestionably subverted the ideologies that placed them as dependent, feminine creatures, yet their work continued throughout the period.

Retail

In both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, hundreds of women participated in the retail sector, making up part of a ‘great army of shopkeepers’, a distinct social group in both towns that made important contributions to the urban community.¹⁶⁶ Historians of Merthyr Tydfil have labeled this group the ‘shopocracy’, pointing out that while members would not necessarily have been considered middle class elsewhere in Britain, they were able to involve themselves extensively in the political process in the town.¹⁶⁷ The group may have been small, but it was not unimportant, and grew over the period both in number and influence.¹⁶⁸ Although still a minority into the twentieth century, the ‘shopocracy’ was an established part of the socio-economic character of the town by the 1860s.¹⁶⁹ Similar hierarchies were common in other industrial districts.¹⁷⁰ Hall indicates that rapidly growing towns provided a platform for the high street traders who became respected members of their community, entering the middle-class sector.¹⁷¹ Koditschek’s study of class formation in industrial Bradford uncovers an ‘urban

¹⁶⁴ NLW: Merthyr Tydfil in 1860: A Scripture Reader’s Journal, 21-26 May 1860, MS/4943B.

¹⁶⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 30 April 1881.

¹⁶⁶ R J Morris, *Class, Sect, and Party: the Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 325.

¹⁶⁷ Morris, *Class, Sect, and Party* pp. 25, 325; Gwyn A Williams, *The Merthyr Rising* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 56; Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁸ England, ‘Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists’, p. 56.

¹⁶⁹ Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁰ Carter and Wheatley, *Merthyr Tydfil in 1851*, p. 8.

¹⁷¹ Catherine Hall, ‘The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestickmaker: the Shop and Family in the Industrial Revolution’, in R. J. Morris and Richard Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian City: a Reader in British Urban History, 1820-1914* (London, New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 308-309.

service economy', in which the production and distribution of goods and services both created and reinforced class divisions, creating a distinctive social grouping.¹⁷² While no detailed discussion of class structure has been undertaken as regards the Shropshire Coalfield the similar spatial and social organisation means these conclusions can be extrapolated for both study areas.

The shopocracy in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were recognized as a distinct - middle-class - group by outside observers. Lingen, the Glamorgan 1847 State of Education commissioner noted the growth of shopkeepers in Merthyr, stating that, 'these are only an offshoot: the works themselves contain no middle class'.¹⁷³ Similarly, G. T. Clark's complaints in the 1850s that there was an absence of 'middle class persons of independent means and position: resident in the town but above the interests of industry and commerce' may have been disparaging, but again defined the shopocracy as part of the middle class, albeit the lower portion of the ranking.¹⁷⁴

The historiography of women's work, however, indicates some divergence on this issue. On the one hand, women running shops have been described as middle class, able to use entrepreneurial skills gained through education and capital from relatives to cement their position.¹⁷⁵ Conversely, others have argued that smaller shopkeepers in particular were rather members of the 'respectable' working class, with only high-street traders able to live the same lifestyle as the professional middle classes.¹⁷⁶ Geographic variations were, as ever, key, and the distinct social structure of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield must be taken into account. What may have been referred to as the respectable working class elsewhere would often have been perceived as lower middle class by local contemporaries.

¹⁷² Theodore Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban-Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 105-106, 116-117, 179.

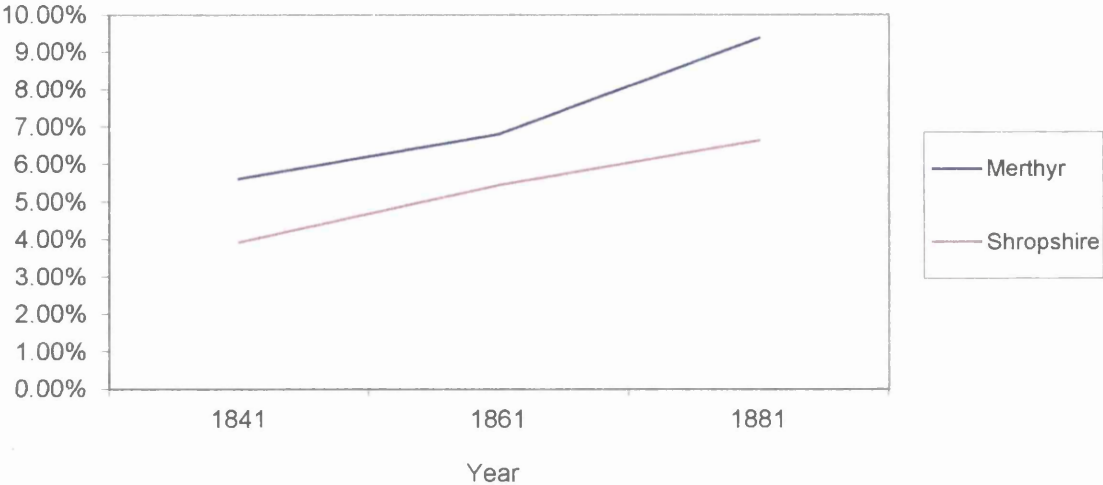
¹⁷³ PP (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁴ England, 'Unitarians, Freemasons, Chartists', p. 36.

¹⁷⁵ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 60; Perkin, *Victorian Women*, p. 164.

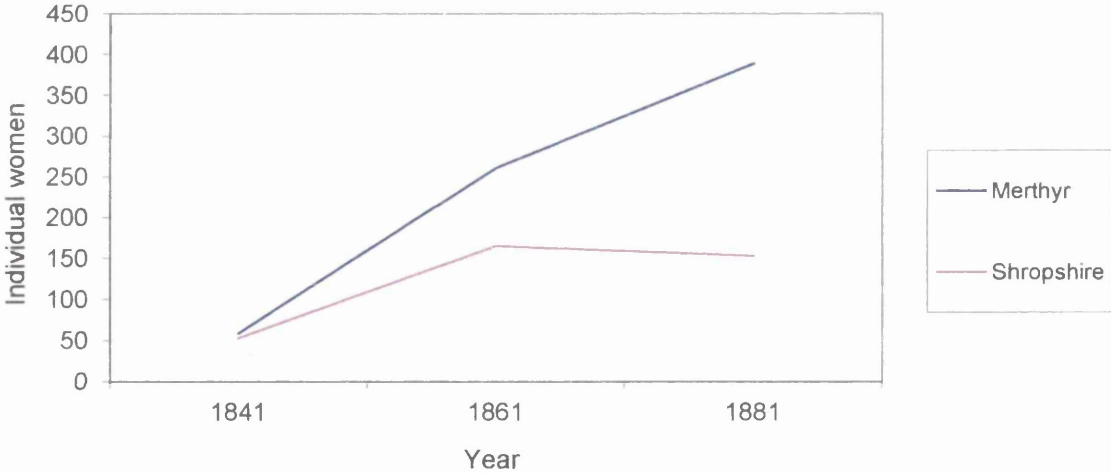
¹⁷⁶ Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class*, p. 109.

Figure 21. Female employment in the retail sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1

Figure 22. Number of women employed in the retail sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1

In Merthyr Tydfil, the proportion of women recorded as employed in the retail sector rose from 5.6 per cent of total females employed in 1841, to 6.8 per cent in 1861 and 9.38 per cent in 1881, shown in Figure 21. This proportion accounted for a significant number of women, shown in Figure 22: 59 individuals in 1841, increasing to 261 in 1861, and finally to 389 by 1881. In the Shropshire Coalfield, a corresponding progressive proportionate growth was recorded, with women working in the retail sector increasing from 3.9 per cent to 5.5 per cent between 1841 and

1861, and another increase to 6.6 per cent by 1881. While the steady growth was similar, the proportions were slightly lower, also seen in the number of individual women workers. An increase from a similar starting point of 53 individual women in 1841, to 165 in 1861 was followed by a slight decline to 153 by 1881. In both districts, it is possible that the increase between 1841 and 1861 could have been partially due to under-recording in 1841, especially of those women who participated as part of their family economy. At the same time, however, the growth seen in the sector was congruent with increased opportunities linked to local and national urban and retail developments.

Local variations in urban development were a key factor influencing female employment in the retail sector. There were differences in the development patterns of the two study districts, which directly impacted on female employment patterns. By the 1860s, Merthyr Tydfil had a distinct municipal character, illustrated by extension and modernisation of general amenities and various retail establishments throughout the town.¹⁷⁷ In the Shropshire Coalfield, the key urban hubs of Ironbridge, Madeley and Dawley developed similarly into prosperous commercial centres with a wide range of businesses.¹⁷⁸ However, other settlements throughout the Coalfield had little in the way of commerce, lacking the variety of retail premises seen elsewhere.¹⁷⁹ In addition, even in the commercial centres, business activity remained small scale throughout the period.¹⁸⁰ This alone explains the larger proportion and number of women participating in retail in Merthyr Tydfil. Differences aside, it is clear that growth was present in both study districts, and that a proportion of the resultant employment opportunities were undertaken by women.

¹⁷⁷ Evans, 'As Rich as California...', p. 132; Evans, 'Urbanization of Welsh Society', pp. 16, 28.

¹⁷⁸ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, p. 115; Cossons, *Ironbridge: Landscape of Industry*, p. 16; Muter, *The Buildings of an Industrial Community*, p. 15.

¹⁷⁹ Clark, *Ironbridge Gorge*, pp. 42, 115.

¹⁸⁰ Barrie Trinder, 'The Shropshire Coalfield', in Peter Clark and Penelope Corfield, *Industry and Urbanisation in Eighteenth Century England* (Leicester: The Centre for Urban History: 1994), p. 36.

Table 30. Retail sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
barmaid	1 (1.69%)	outfitter	1 (0.38%)	barmaid	37 (9.51%)
beer house keeper	1 (1.69%)	fish seller	1 (0.38%)	barn vendor	1 (0.26%)
beer seller	4 (6.78%)	barmaid	16 (6.13%)	bath house keeper	2 (0.51%)
chemist/druggist	1 (1.69%)	basket shop	1 (0.38%)	beer house keeper	4 (1.03%)
china/earthenware dealer	3 (5.08%)	beer house keeper	8 (3.07%)	beer seller	1 (0.26%)
draper	1 (1.69%)	beer seller	3 (1.15%)	bookseller	1 (0.26%)
flannal merchant	1 (1.69%)	china/earthenware dealer	6 (2.30%)	boot shop	1 (0.26%)
green grocer	5 (8.47%)	draper	5 (1.92%)	butter dealer	1 (0.26%)
grocer	8 (13.56%)	eating house	2 (0.77%)	chemist/druggist	2 (0.51%)
hawker	10 (16.95%)	flannel dealer	2 (0.77%)	china/earthenware dealer	3 (0.77%)
huckster	12 (20.35%)	fruit seller	6 (2.30%)	clothier	1 (0.26%)
pin seller	1 (1.69%)	general shop	9 (3.45%)	cockle seller	1 (0.26%)
shop keeper	10 (16.95%)	green grocer	65 (24.90%)	costermonger	1 (0.26%)
victualler	1 (1.69%)	grocer	36 (13.79%)	draper	48 (12.34%)
TOTAL	59 (100.00%)	hardware dealer	2 (0.77%)	fancy shop	1 (0.26%)
		hawker	7 (2.68%)	feather dealer	1 (0.26%)
		huckster	33 (12.64%)	fish seller	3 (0.77%)
		jeweller	1 (0.38%)	florist	1 (0.26%)
		leather dealer	1 (0.38%)	fruit seller	3 (0.77%)
		licenced victualler	3 (1.15%)	furniture dealer	2 (0.51%)
		marine dealer	2 (0.77%)	general shop	24 (6.17%)
		matchwoman	2 (0.77%)	green grocer	63 (16.20%)
		milk seller	17 (6.51%)	grocer	37 (9.51%)
		nail dealer	2 (0.77%)	hawker	35 (9.00%)
		pawnbroker	1 (0.38%)	huckster	19 (4.88%)
		peddler	1 (0.38%)	ironmonger	1 (0.26%)
		rag dealer	3 (1.15%)	jeweller	1 (0.26%)
		sand seller	5 (1.92%)	licenced victualler	11 (2.83%)
		spectacles seller	1 (0.38%)	manageress	
		stationer	2 (0.77%)	refreshment rooms	1 (0.26%)
		tea dealer	4 (1.53%)	marine dealer	14 (3.60%)
		toy dealer	2 (0.77%)	milk seller	19 (4.88%)
		victualler	7 (2.68%)	news vendor	5 (1.29%)
		waitress	2 (0.77%)	pawnbroker	6 (1.54%)
		wine and spirit seller	2 (0.77%)	peddler	5 (1.29%)
		TOTAL	261 (100.00%)	poultry dealer	1 (0.26%)
				rag dealer	2 (0.51%)
				sand seller	11 (2.83%)
				selling barm	3 (0.77%)
				selling meat	2 (0.51%)
				stationer	3 (0.77%)
				sweet shop	1 (0.26%)
				tea dealer	1 (0.26%)
				tobacconist	1 (0.26%)
				toy dealer	1 (0.26%)
				waitress	7 (1.80%)
				TOTAL	389 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2

Table 31. Retail sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
beer house keeper	1 (1.89%)	barmaid	32 (19.39%)	barmaid	15 (9.80%)
beer seller	1 (1.89%)	beer house keeper	7 (4.24%)	beer house keeper	3 (1.96%)
cabinet dealer	1 (1.89%)	beer seller	5 (3.03%)	beer seller	4 (2.61%)
chemist/druggist	1 (1.89%)	china/earthenware dealer	4 (2.42%)	book seller	1 (0.65%)
china/earthenware dealer	4 (7.55%)	draper	13 (7.88%)	china/earthenware dealer	5 (3.27%)
cow heel seller	1 (1.89%)	fish seller	2 (1.21%)	draper	13 (8.50%)
draper	4 (7.55%)	fruit seller	3 (1.82%)	fancy business	1 (0.65%)
greengrocer	1 (1.89%)	furniture seller	1 (0.61%)	fruit seller	1 (0.65%)
grocer	21 (39.62%)	general shop	13 (7.88%)	general shop	20 (13.07%)
hawker	7 (13.21%)	glass dealer	1 (0.61%)	green grocer	3 (1.96%)
hosier	1 (1.89%)	green grocer	6 (3.64%)	grocer	46 (30.07%)
huckster	2 (3.77%)	grocer	44 (26.67%)	haberdashery	2 (1.31%)
pot seller	1 (1.89%)	haberdashery	1 (0.61%)	hawker	7 (4.58%)
rag dealer	1 (1.89%)	hawker	5 (3.03%)	hosier	1 (0.65%)
shop keeper	3 (5.66%)	hosier	1 (0.61%)	huckster	2 (1.31%)
toy dealer	1 (1.89%)	huckster	6 (3.64%)	ironmonger	1 (0.65%)
victualler	2 (3.77%)	licenced victualler	5 (3.03%)	licenced victualler	9 (5.88%)
TOTAL	53 (100.00%)	milk seller	1 (0.61%)	milk seller	4 (2.61%)
		newsvendor	1 (0.61%)	pawnbroker	1 (0.65%)
		pipe seller	1 (0.61%)	pedlar	1 (0.65%)
		pitcher dealer	1 (0.61%)	shoe/boot shop	3 (1.96%)
		rag dealer	2 (1.21%)	stationer	4 (2.61%)
		sand hawker	1 (0.61%)	waitress	2 (1.31%)
		sells meat	1 (0.61%)	sells meat	2 (1.31%)
		shoe shop	2 (1.21%)	rag dealer	2 (1.31%)
		spirit seller	1 (0.61%)	TOTAL	153 (100.00%)
		stationer	1 (0.61%)		
		toy dealer	2 (1.21%)		
		victualler	2 (1.21%)		
		TOTAL	165 (100.00%)		

Source: As Table 3

The overall increase in participation in the retail sector in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield between 1841 and 1881 can also be linked to national trends. Retail was a very important area for female employment throughout Britain, and women had always been involved in the distribution of goods in a wide variety of ways.¹⁸¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, however, this involvement increased dramatically, even in areas without sustained urban and commercial growth.¹⁸² Holcombe argues that this was the result of changes in the conditions of shop-

¹⁸¹ Alexander, 'Women's Work', p. 107.

¹⁸² Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p. 77.

keeping. Until the mid-Victorian period the retail sector was largely made up of small-scale traders working in a skilled but relatively non-competitive atmosphere. Under such circumstances, there was no room or necessity for shop assistants, either male or female. Once these conditions changed and retail establishments began to operate on a larger scale, with products prepared in advance of purchase, both men and women were able to participate in the retail sector in far larger numbers.¹⁸³ These national changes in the buying and selling of goods would certainly have affected the study areas too. In Merthyr, for example, a weekly market was replaced by businesses that were permanently open, providing further employment opportunities.¹⁸⁴ This can be demonstrated by the considerable expansion in the types of work women in the retail sector did between 1841 and 1881, shown in Tables 30 and 31, a pattern that reflects the various, increasingly diversified trades that appeared nationally throughout the nineteenth century.

In both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield retail was an accepted employment for women, and they were able to participate in a wide variety of ways. A recurring advertisement in the *Merthyr Express* in 1881 called for ‘one energetic Canvasser – man or woman – to sell the Hon. Wirt Sike’s new and most attractive book, “Rambles and Studies in Old South Wales”’, indicating the perceived suitability and acceptable nature of women undertaking such work.¹⁸⁵ The same year, the Merthyr workhouse meat contract was taken by Mrs Rowlands, Aberdare, and the supply of potatoes tendered by a Miss Harriet Owens.¹⁸⁶ The Merthyr and Dowlais Coffee Tavern Company specifically advertised for a female to run the Dowlais Branch, requesting age and experience to be detailed by any applicants.¹⁸⁷ In the Shropshire Coalfield, Francis Darby’s diary records payments to a wide variety of retail traders very early in the period. These payments were often made to women, including to Mrs Jane Bowdler for silverware; Mrs Williams for confectionary; Mrs Ellis for drapery; Ann and Harriet Davies for building goods; Mrs Smart for fish; Mrs Reynolds for wine and spirits; Mrs Scoltock for wax lights; Sara Buckley and Mrs Jones for farm goods; Mrs Knowles for meat; Jane Jones for

¹⁸³ Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales, 1850-1914* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973), pp. 103-104.

¹⁸⁴ Carter and Wheatley, *Merthyr Tydfil in 1851*, p. 1.

¹⁸⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 12 November 1881.

¹⁸⁶ *Merthyr Express*, 14 May 1881; *Merthyr Express*, 23 July 1881.

¹⁸⁷ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 25 March 1881.

leather goods; Mrs Eddowes for newspapers; and Mrs Lewis for books.¹⁸⁸ Of these, Mrs Eddowes and Mrs Knowles worked in conjunction with their husbands, and Mrs Bowdler in conjunction with her son, with the remainder heading the businesses on their own accounts.¹⁸⁹ At 'The Christmas Show' in Ironbridge, 1881, the *Wenlock Express* reported that 'various tradesmen' exhibited their wares. These 'tradesmen' included Mrs S Wilcox, of Madeley Wood, who displayed 'three fatted beasts from the Salop auction; five large sheep; and three fine home-bred pigs'. Various other women were mentioned by name, showing goods ranging from grocery to drapery. The drapers' show was described by the paper as 'of course a matter of unlimited pleasure to the female mind', with half of those mentioned as taking part women.¹⁹⁰

Retail activity was also not limited to women who owned their own establishments. Throughout Britain, women took part in 'penny capitalist' activities, including selling food and drink on the streets and opening parlour shops, another form of participation in retail that often went unrecorded.¹⁹¹ The *Morning Chronicle* correspondent described huckstering, selling small articles in the street, as 'a common practise' in Merthyr Tydfil. He cited the example of a collier's wife, who sold 'apples, gingerbread, herrings, bacon, and a few other articles which did not require a licence'.¹⁹² These sales were not always limited to the street, either. The description of an 1881 court case in the *Merthyr Express*, titled 'Assault in a Beerhouse' detailed the complainant, a single woman, Mary Powell, as one 'who sells sand about the place'.¹⁹³ Selling items that did not require a licence kept such employment casual, making the likelihood of recording slim.¹⁹⁴ Huckstering and industrial labour were not incompatible in the Shropshire Coalfield, where young women working on the iron and coal pit banks regularly travelled to London in the spring, working in the market gardens, although this was rarely recorded.¹⁹⁵ There are also examples of women breaking the law regarding the sale of alcohol in both study districts. Florence O'Sullivan, publican at The Bird in Hand, Dowlais, was

¹⁸⁸ IGA: 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1827, 1828, 1830, 1831, 1832, 1833, 1836, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842, 1844, 1845, pp. 1, 9, 16 50, 64, 74, 80, 86, 88, 104, 108, 120, 164, 255, 257, 259, 263, 265, 271, 277, 279, 281, 299, 305, 307, 317, Lab/FD/1; 'Francis Darby's Cash Book', 1847, 1848, 1850, pp. 12, 32, 36, 66, 102, Lab/FD.

¹⁸⁹ IGA: Typed list of traders that Francis Darby dealt with, no date, Lab/FD/15/2.

¹⁹⁰ *Wenlock Express*, 24 December 1881.

¹⁹¹ Benson, 'Work', pp. 71-72.

¹⁹² Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 54.

¹⁹³ *Merthyr Express*, 16 July 1881.

¹⁹⁴ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851*, p. 54.

¹⁹⁵ PP (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 42.

summoned in January 1871 for her disregard of prohibited hours.¹⁹⁶ Discussion of these restrictions in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* four months later described the vast majority of women who broke this law as ‘poor’, ‘old’ and helpless’, suggesting financial necessity as a factor.¹⁹⁷ The complexity of defining occupations in the study districts by their socio-economic status is clear.

Women who were unequivocally middle class, however, also undertook informal participation in the retail sector. Parlour shops in particular were often opened by these women as an attempt to support themselves respectably. A description of the practice in the *Merthyr Express*, printed in 1881, illustrates this.

This is the season when lots of ladies give tea parties on their own account, and “invite their friends” by tickets at a fixed price [...] Now the eating commenced in real earnest, and without exaggerating, it made me excessively uneasy when I thought of the poor widow’s profits. I thought it would never be over.¹⁹⁸

Women providing these tea parties did so for economic reasons, that much is clear. However, they were able to retain their genteel respectability. They did not define themselves as employed, nor would they have been seen as such by outside observers.

Even women who were openly defined as employed in the retail sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were usually perceived as respectable by local contemporaries. Throughout Britain, many women participating in retail did so to assist and support male family members, implicitly linking this occupation to the domestic service paradigm.¹⁹⁹ Some evidence also hints that the work itself was seen as naturally feminine. A description of the Merthyr Market in *Good Words*, published in 1869, related ‘the Carmarthenshire women, in their Mother Hubbard hats, full-bordered caps, checked shawls and scarlet whittles, who preside over the dairy-produce stalls, give a piquantly foreign eye-spice to the scene’ as a common feature of the market.²⁰⁰ The later, negative descriptions of female industrial workers noted in chapter three demonstrate this journal can certainly not be described as pro-women’s work, yet this depiction of female traders is positive, with the feminine

¹⁹⁶ *Merthyr Express*, 14 Jan 1871.

¹⁹⁷ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 6 May 1871.

¹⁹⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881.

¹⁹⁹ Jill Liddington, ‘Gender, Authority and Mining in an Industrial Landscape: Anne Lister 1791-1840’, *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (1996), pp. 59-86, p. 82; Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, p. 305.

²⁰⁰ *Good Words*, 1 January 1869.

dress of the women in question discussed in detail. A Mrs Margaret Jenkins, who owned a millinery shop, advertised in the *Merthyr Telegraph* for two ‘respectable young females’ to serve as apprentices in April 1861. Her description of her customers as ‘kind friends’ in an advertisement regarding her change of residence implies a level of propriety, and possible similarity in class basis, required of applicants.²⁰¹

In many cases nationally, businesses traded on images of ‘exclusivity and intimacy’, both attributes which could be helped by a feminine presence, and which can also be seen in the above example.²⁰² In 1859, the *English Women’s Journal* even suggested that certain individual occupations were explicitly feminine, yet were ‘usurped’ by men: ‘Why should bearded men be employed to sell ribbon, lace, gloves, neck-kerchiefs, and the dozen other trifles to be found in a silk-mercier’s or haberdasher’s shop?’²⁰³ The easy interaction with goods for sale, for example, ribbons handled by one who might wear them, meant that from the 1850s onwards, some shops employed women specifically because of their femininity, also contributing to the overall increase of female employment in the sector.²⁰⁴ That this work was harmonious with gender norms also influenced legislation: an 1873 Bill to add shopwork to the definition of the Factory Acts and limit the labour of women and children was not passed, and legislators were generally unconcerned with women’s work in the retail sector.²⁰⁵

Unlike many of the other occupations undertaken by women living in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, the retail sector was not predominantly staffed by young and single women. In all years surveyed, the majority were over 30, and many of the female participants were married or widowed with minor children.²⁰⁶ This can be attributed to a number of factors. Nationally, female business owners tended to be older, as they had spent time in informal training.²⁰⁷ Widows in particular were often able to carry on their husbands’ trade on the grounds they had

²⁰¹ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 6 April 1861.

²⁰² Stana Nenadic, ‘Gender and the Rhetoric of Business Success: the Impact on Women Entrepreneurs and the ‘New Woman’ in Later Nineteenth Century Edinburgh’, in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women’s Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 283.

²⁰³ Maconachie, ‘Women’s Work and Domesticity in the *English Women’s Journal*’, p. 10.

²⁰⁴ Bradley, *Men’s Work, Women’s Work*, p. 177.

²⁰⁵ Branca, *Women in Europe since 1750*, p. 53.

²⁰⁶ As Figure 1.

²⁰⁷ Nenadic, ‘Gender and the Rhetoric of Business Success’, p. 274.

learned how to do so by assisting them while they were alive.²⁰⁸ The marginal person thesis, outlined by Kay, posits that those individuals who find themselves insignificant in the occupational structure are the most likely to become involved in business, a definition that applies to married and widowed women living in the study districts.²⁰⁹ Scott and Tilly have linked management of household budgets to management of business accounts, another factor that could have been influential.²¹⁰

Perhaps the most important reason why this sector contained so many married and widowed women in comparison to other occupations, however, was the opportunities it afforded for household labour. While this may not have been as arduous as the domestic work carried out by the wives of industrial workers, it was still an important consideration for many. Working hours were likely to be shorter in retail than in industrial labour. Informal work in particular could be carried out when free from other responsibilities. Many retail occupations fit easily around household work, especially when carried out in a setting attached to the family domestic premises, making the sector a popular choice for females looking to earn money without entering the traditional full-time workforce. Williams' study of women workers in Anglesey, for example, indicates that women were far more likely than men to be charged for hawking without a licence, an activity that could be carried out simultaneously with domestic work.²¹¹ One example from Merthyr in particular demonstrates the expectation of household labour for women working in the retail sector. In March 1881 the death of Mary Davies was reported in the *Merthyr Express*, with the woman in question described as 'a well-known stallkeeper at the Merthyr Market'. She died after 'arranging her stall for the coming Saturday', proceeding home and going with 'her daughter upstairs to make the beds'.²¹²

It is also worthy of note that many more married woman may have participated in the retail sector than were returned as doing so by enumerators.²¹³ In nineteenth-century Wales, Williams and Jones argue, wives assisting their husbands would account for more than 10 per cent of employed women if counted separately, a

²⁰⁸ Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages*, p. 65; Perkin, *Victorian Women*, p. 141.

²⁰⁹ Kay, 'Small Business, Self-Employment and Women's Work-Life Choices', p. 193.

²¹⁰ Scott and Tilly, 'Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe', p. 106.

²¹¹ Williams, 'A Study of Women's Work', p. 88.

²¹² *Merthyr Express*, 5 March 1881.

²¹³ Andrew August, 'How Separate a Sphere?: Poor Women and Paid Work in Late-Victorian London', *Journal of Family History*, 19 (1994), p. 289.

percentage largely made up in the retail sector.²¹⁴ This figure may be slightly inflated in terms of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, yet we must acknowledge that many women here may have gone undocumented.

Even after changes in enumeration instructions in 1861 which requested that wives who assisted their husbands were returned as such, under-recording in this respect remained common. In many cases, these women appear only by chance in other records. A Merthyr Police report published in January, 1841, for example, stated that a 'Miss Sarah Davies, who was there keeping a stall for her father' witnessed a theft of beef.²¹⁵ The only Sarah Davies matching this description was returned as unoccupied.²¹⁶ Another Police Report twenty years later reported Mrs Goodman, wife of Joseph Goodman, pawnbroker, Merthyr, as stating, 'I received these things from prisoner yesterday afternoon'.²¹⁷ This again indicates female involvement in the business, and yet, again, the woman in question was given no employment or occupation by the census enumerator.²¹⁸ Casual assistance was even less likely to be recorded. The Merthyr Assessment Committee in 1881, as reported in the *Merthyr Express*, met with a number of women seeking reduction on behalf of others: Mrs Mary Hitchings, appearing in conjunction with Mr Watkin J. Thomas, her landlord, applied for a reduction of the assessment of the Greyhound Inn, Ynislwyd Street [...] Mrs Jane Scourfield applied for a reduction of the assessment upon a draper's shop owned by her son.'²¹⁹ Both Mary Hitchings and Jane Scourfield were returned with no employment or occupation in the census, yet we know they assisted in these businesses, even if only once.²²⁰ While all these cases concern individuals, they display that there was a class of women, unacknowledged, involved in the running of various retail establishments across the period.

Conversely, there were many cases in which the involvement of wives was fully acknowledged. For example, advertisements for a dress showroom owned by Mr M Samuel in Merthyr Tydfil regularly indicated that his wife had 'returned from London' with new items of fashion.²²¹ While implicit links between femininity and

²¹⁴ Williams and Jones, 'Women at Work in the Nineteenth Century', p. 21.

²¹⁵ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 23 Jan 1841.

²¹⁶ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1841, HO107/1415/10, f. 64, p. 36.

²¹⁷ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 12 October 1861.

²¹⁸ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1881, RG11/5313, f. 3, p. 4.

²¹⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 25 June 1881.

²²⁰ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1881, RG11/5311, f. 115, p. 6, RG11/5309, f.26, p. 23.

²²¹ *Merthyr Express*, 7 Jan 1871, 27 May 1871.

fashion could be a motivating factor, concerned more with advertising than acknowledgement, this does indicate the work of wives was not necessarily seen as something to be hidden. The case of a Catherine Manning, summoned for 'Offence against the Pedler's Act' after hawking in Penydarren in January, 1881 without a certificate is also illuminating. Manning was described as admitting the offence, but justifying it on the grounds that 'her father, who was duly licensed, was too ill to pursue his ordinary calling that day, and that she had thought it no harm to go the rounds with his certificate'.²²² That the case was dismissed with a caution on these grounds shows an implicit acknowledgement that females were entitled to involvement in relations' businesses, in the same way widows were able to take on the employment of their deceased husband.

Not all women married to men in the various trades acknowledged above participated in them, however. A humorous tale published in the *Wenlock Express* regarding a husband and wife arguing in Ironbridge indicates so:

It appears that a marine store dealer lets out a donkey and cart for hire in the collection of his ware. Yesterday morning some misunderstanding arose about the disputants being a well-known character of trade and his wife. The man was walking off with the "moke" and cart, when his wife (their interests being separate) came upon the scene and claimed that she had hired the concern. "Tommy" however, loudly protested that he was the bailee, and the poor animal had a lively time of it, for as fast as the woman pulled the poor creatures head one way, the man would pull it the other; the scene lasted for over half an hour and was at last settled by the owner putting in an appearance and declaring in favour of the woman, who marched off in triumph after this struggle for her "right".²²³

While clearly published as a tale to amuse, and possibly shame the said couple, that the husband and wife had separate business interests was so unremarkable it received no comment. Women working in retail were fully accepted, and their contribution became an increasingly important part of the local communities of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as the period progressed.

Conclusion

The vast majority of women workers living in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield participated in the tertiary service and sales sector. From domestic service

²²² *Merthyr Telegraph*, 28 January 1881.

²²³ *Wenlock Express*, 26 March 1881.

to prostitution, women undertaking these occupations all contributed to their local economies in a wide variety of ways. The very existence of these women workers demonstrates once again that female employment in heavily industrialised areas was indeed present, and that it was diverse.

Most of these occupations were customarily carried out by women, did not contravene gender norms, and as such were perceived by middle-class contemporaries as suitable for women to undertake. This positive perception sometimes went beyond the realms of ideology, and jobs were promoted and even created. This undoubtedly affected female employment patterns. Nevertheless, we must look beyond discourse to truly understand women's work in the study districts. As already seen in the primary and secondary occupational sectors, wider economic trends, coupled with those specific to Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, were highly influential. Work opportunities for women were also heavily impacted by geographically-specific urban and social developments.

This chapter also demonstrates the importance of women's individual circumstances to female employment patterns in the study districts. The extent of female agency is ambiguous: while evidence suggests women preferred industrial work, employment patterns tell a different story. Some women may have deliberately selected their occupation, but for others, there was no choice. The majority of the occupational sectors detailed in this chapter attracted women at a specific point in their life-cycle. Those who were older, married, or widowed were far more likely to undertake employment that did not conflict with their own domestic responsibilities. Financial necessity must also not be overlooked. Regardless of individual status, however, while these women may not have sorted coal, smelted iron, or produced various goods, they still made a fundamental contribution to the industrial economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

Chapter VI

Tertiary occupations: female professional workers in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, 1841-1881

In addition to service and sales, women working in the tertiary sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield participated in professional occupations. This chapter will examine female professional employment, focusing on the 'traditional' professions, medical, and teaching sectors. While teaching and nursing (or wider involvement in medicine) were the 'nurturing' branches of professional occupations, these were both viewed as unique employments by contemporaries and had distinct trends linked to specific societal changes.¹ They have therefore been considered separately. Once again, a wide-range of evidence will be drawn upon throughout, including the census, local and national newspapers, parliamentary papers and Poor Law records. Contemporary perception appears to have had a larger impact on female employment patterns in professional work than seen in other occupational sectors; the jobs these women undertook were almost always accepted as feminine and respectable, especially important given the status of many of these women, and they were often purposefully employed on these gendered grounds. Again, ideology was not the only factor influencing employment patterns. Consideration of individual occupational sectors will demonstrate that a variety of national and local urban, social and economic developments contributed to diversification of the types of professional work available. At the same time, the geographic character of the study districts meant that some occupations continued to have limited availability, explaining the relatively low number of participants in comparison to the other employment sectors addressed previously.

The wide-ranging, unpaid philanthropic activity carried out by women living in the study districts will also be discussed in this chapter. While female philanthropy in Britain has been demonstrated as making important contributions to society, it is not usually classified as work, nor considered in an economic framework. Examination of female philanthropy in the study districts, however, demonstrates that this activity often had an economic element. The women involved used similar skills to professional women workers in order to raise money for a variety of causes,

¹ Barker, 'Woman and Work', p. 140; Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages*, p. 68.

arrange a multitude of events, and influence the lives of others living in their local communities. Female philanthropists, like other women undertaking various remunerative employment, made significant contributions to Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

It is important to note here that the definition of profession is complex, and the traditional classification of only those with formal professional status, for example doctors and lawyers, is ineffective for this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, the socio-economic structure of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield meant individuals with these qualifications were few and far between. Secondly, women tended to be excluded from the education and training necessary to gain such official professional status, even when participating in the work itself. In his work on spatial and class patterns in the Ogmore valley, Philip Jones decided to stretch the description of professional 'to its utmost' on the grounds that comparative economic status is the most important factor while analysing social relationships.² His model has been imitated in this chapter.

Women's work in professional occupations accounted for a steadily increasing proportion of overall female employment in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield between 1841 and 1881. In Merthyr, an increase from 0.95 per cent of total women workers in 1841 to 2.69 per cent in 1861 was followed by a further increase to 6.3 per cent in 1881. In the Shropshire Coalfield, there was an increase from 2.59 per cent in 1841, to 4.59 per cent in 1861, and finally, to 7.03 per cent in 1881.³ The number of individual women participating also steadily over time: in Merthyr Tydfil, from 10 in 1841 to 103 in 1861 and finally, 261 in 1881, and in the Shropshire Coalfield, from 35 in 1841 to 139 in 1861 to 162 in 1881.⁴

In each of the study districts, both the proportion and number of women working in these professional occupations was far lower than seen in the parallel tertiary service and sales, and in the primary and secondary sectors. The jobs discussed in this chapter were predominantly undertaken by middle-class women, yet the populations of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were principally working-class. This undoubtedly influenced the lower proportion of these occupations seen in both districts, as well as growth over the period as the small

² Jones, *Mines, Migrants and Residence*, p. 81.

³ As Figure 1.

⁴ As Figure 1.

middle class increased somewhat. The increased professional female employment found in the districts also mirrored wider national trends, again linked to socio-economic status. Throughout Britain, the growth of the middle class was matched by an increasing proportion of middle-class women engaging in paid work.⁵ This is especially interesting given the importance placed by many middle-class contemporaries on domestic ideology. Historians have suggested that attitudes towards the labour of single middle-class women softened by the end of the period as long as the work they undertook could be defined as respectable, a shift partially attributable to the work of the Women's Movement.⁶ In 1881, for example, the *Girl's Own Paper*, a periodical aimed at young and single middle-class women, stated that a 'woman who works [...] is nowadays held more admirable than she, who [...] spends her days in domesticity'.⁷ This admiration was only possible due to the forms this work took, also seen in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Socio-economic trends were not the only contributor to the employment patterns women in professional occupations in the study districts, however: extensive urbanisation and the increase in civic amenities in both study districts were also highly influential.

Traditional Professions.

Female involvement in the traditional professions, defined here using Jones' definition of all employments involving any degree of paperwork in addition to all those defined as professions within the census occupational reports, was very low in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period.⁸ This can be attributed almost entirely to the specific urban and economic development of the study districts, which did not display the rapid tertiarisation seen elsewhere in Britain.

In both study districts, less than 1 per cent of women workers were involved in this sector in each year surveyed. In Merthyr, the number of individual women participating expanded from 2 in 1841, to 12 in 1861 and 23 in 1881. A similar, small increase can be seen in the Shropshire Coalfield, from 5 women in 1841, to 12

⁵ Scott and Tilly, 'Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe', p. 93.

⁶ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 84.

⁷ Emma Liggins, *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT : Ashgate Pub., 2006), p. ix.

⁸ Jones, *Mines, Migrants and Residence*, p. 81.

in 1861 and finally 18 in 1881.⁹ This was partially reflective of national trends: contemporary feminists pinpointed the lack of education and training opportunities available to women as the main reason women were unable to engage in professional employment throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The unequal access women had to the resources necessary to claim professional status undoubtedly affected career opportunities, yet this does not fully explain the extremely low figures in the study districts.¹¹ Nationally, women made vast in-roads into many professional occupations by the 1880s, a trend which cannot be seen in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.¹²

As Tables 32 and 33 show, the types of work undertaken by professional women in the study districts can be broadly split into two categories: artistic and administrative, and each requires separate consideration. It was administrative, usually office-based, work in particular that noticeably expanded from the start to the end of the period throughout Britain. The increase in employment positions for women in the new large-scale offices nationally over the period was dramatic, from around 2,000 in 1861 to over 150,000 in 1911.¹³ Between 1851 and 1911 women increased from 2 per cent of clerical workers to 20 per cent, in an industry that was itself expanding.¹⁴ A similar increase in female employment occurred in public administration.¹⁵ Contemporaries accepted these administrative employments as suitably feminine by the end of the period, and employers justified the necessity for female employees upon the same 'feminine submissiveness' and 'toleration of repetition' that managers in heavy industry presented as justification for female employment.¹⁶ Due to the dominance of heavy industries in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, however, large scale offices were not present. This sort of work, then, was uncommon for both men and women in the districts. As an example, in 1881 there were three female telegraphists in Merthyr Tydfil, and one female telegraphist in the Shropshire Coalfield.¹⁷ While at first this seems a low number

⁹ As Figure 1.

¹⁰ Kay, 'Small Business, Self-Employment and Women's Work-Life Choices', pp. 191-192; Rowbotham, *Hidden from history*, p. 24.

¹¹ Anne Witz, *Professions and Patriarchy* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 192.

¹² Liggins, *George Gissing*, p. xii.

¹³ Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Zimmeck, 'Jobs For The Girls', p. 154.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Scott, 'The Woman Worker', p. 415.

¹⁷ As Figure 1.

given the expanding popularity of the telegram service, the size and socio-economic character of the districts meant further opportunities for this work did not exist.

Table 32. Professional sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
musician	1 (50.00%)	actress	1 (8.33%)	artist	2 (8.70%)
painter	1 (50.00%)	apistant	1 (8.33%)	book keeper	2 (8.70%)
TOTAL	2 (100.00%)	artist	2 (16.67%)	clerk	2 (8.70%)
		curate of dowlais	1 (8.33%)	matron	2 (8.70%)
		matron	1 (8.33%)	music teacher	2 (8.70%)
		office books bearer	1 (8.33%)	musician traveller	3 (13.04%)
		office keeper	1 (8.33%)	number taker	1 (4.35%)
		photographic artist	1 (8.33%)	office keeper	3 (13.04%)
		professor of music	1 (8.33%)	photographic artist	1 (4.35%)
		rent collector	1 (8.33%)	pianiste	1 (4.35%)
		secretary to railway company	1 (8.33%)	post mistress	1 (4.35%)
		TOTAL	12 (100.00%)	telegraphist	3 (13.04%)
				TOTAL	23 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2

Table 33. Professional sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
actress	2 (40.00%)	actress	1 (8.33%)	author	1 (5.56%)
letter assist	1 (20.00%)	matron	1 (8.33%)	matron	1 (5.56%)
matron	2 (40.00%)	organist	1 (8.33%)	music	1 (5.56%)
TOTAL	5 (100.00)	post mistress	3 (25.00%)	organist	3 (16.67%)
		theatrical	1 (8.33%)	photographer	1 (5.56%)
		letter carrier	5 (41.67%)	post mistress	7 (38.89%)
		TOTAL	12 (100.00%)	travelling show	1 (5.56%)
				letter carrier	2 (11.11%)
				telegraphist	1 (5.56%)
				TOTAL	18 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 3

A similar explanation can be applied to the number of female post office workers. During this era, the postal service expanded rapidly in conjunction with the new penny post and rail service, and the number of letters sent doubled every 20 years, reaching 1.2 billion by 1880.¹⁸ Understandably, new positions were created, with many of these filled by women. At the start of the period, before this expansion,

¹⁸ Duncan Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post: The Authorised History of the Royal Mail* (London; Penguin, 2011), p. 44.

women working in the postal service in the study districts tended to gain their position through male relatives. For example, the Postmaster of Merthyr between 1840 and 1850 was a woman, the widow of Mr. Williams Milbourne Davies.¹⁹ By the end of the period, it appears that women began to undertake these positions in their own right, instead of through male connections. Indeed, an official marriage bar implemented in 1876 meant these women were by necessity single or widowed.²⁰ Elizabeth Sherman, for example, a 16 year old post office assistant working in the Shropshire Coalfield in 1881 was occupied as the live-in employee of Sarah Slater, a 57 year old widowed postmistress employing 4 men and 6 boys (previously mentioned for her stationery business).²¹ Even in the face of this increasing acceptance and expansion, though, the number of women undertaking the employment remained low. Again, this can be partially attributed to the economic character of the study districts. Given this, that even a handful of women participated in the sector shows that national trends were perhaps influential.

This shift in the type of woman participating in the traditional professional sector can also be seen in the typical age and marital status of professional women, linked to the types of work available. In both 1841 and 1861 in both districts, the sector was largely made up of older married and widowed women. By 1881, however, young, single women grew as a proportion and accounted for around half of the females participating in professional work.²² In the earlier part of the period, many professional women gained their positions as part of a couple. Workhouse matrons, for example, would usually have been married to the master. Theatrical pursuits were often taken up by couples, too, as were positions in the postal service, as outlined previously.²³ The new clerical appointments that appeared by the end of the period, however, tended to employ only single women, and, as noted, other organisations previously open to women instituted marriage bars.

Another factor explaining the low number of professional women in the study areas can be seen in the problems highlighted by the Merthyr Board of Guardians in finding employees for the workhouse. The Poor Law Guardians were reported in the *Merthyr Express* in 1871 as saying ‘they found generally that there was a feeling

¹⁹ Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 500. She does not appear in the above figures for 1841 as she resided in Dowlais.

²⁰ M. J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London; Althone Press, 1985), p. 220.

²¹ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1881, RG11/2637 f. 89, p. 9.

²² As Figure 1.

²³ As Figure 1.

against living in a workhouse. They did not get the best people either as nurses, or schoolmasters, or schoolmistresses. They did not like coming'.²⁴ Middle-class women were presumably unwilling to live in a workhouse when there were better offers, both monetarily and otherwise, elsewhere. This wish to attract solidly middle-class women for professional positions can also be seen nationally. Frank Scudamore, the head of the telegraph service, in a report to Parliament published in 1871 argued that 'wages [...] will draw female operators from a superior class [in comparison to the standard of men they would attract]', as well as listing the feminine attributes suited to such activities, noted previously.²⁵ In an advertisement for a Matron for Madeley Workhouse, published in *Eddowe's Journal* in 1851, no information regarding the job was given except that the matron 'will be expected to reside in the Workhouse, and devote the whole of her time to the duties of the office'. The requirement for applications to be made personally implied that character was an important consideration in the selection process.²⁶ Even in the face of problems finding suitable women to fill these positions, though, employing those from a lower socio-economic class did not appear to be considered. Employers seeking women for professional positions were clearly influenced by class.

The artistic professions, including music, writing, photography, and performance also accounted for a number of women in the professional sector in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. These artistic pursuits received some attention in the contemporary press. The advertised lecture of Marianne Farningham, a visitor to the district, at Hope Chapel, Merthyr in January 1881, and description of her as a 'celebrated authoress' and anticipation of a 'very full audience' indicates an interest in female writers and their work.²⁷ Similar interest and approval can be seen during a Poetry competition for women in September of the same year. Ellis Wyn, the adjudicator, was reported in the *Merthyr Express* as stating: 'the female had not yet had her proper place among them [Welsh poets] and if Wales was to be raised, it must be by the very good influence of her daughters, and he hoped that the advantages now prepared for the girls would be appreciated'.²⁸ Attitudes towards women working in music and theatre were also largely positive. Descriptions in local

²⁴ *Merthyr Express*, 7 Jan 1871.

²⁵ Frank Scudamore, quoted in Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Eddowe's Journal*, 8 June 1851.

²⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 15 January 1881.

²⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 3 September 1881.

newspapers of events at the Drill Hall, Merthyr, often focused on female performers. The entertainer Emma Stanley was described in 1871 as a 'highly gifted and versatile lady'.²⁹ Similarly, in the Shropshire Coalfield, a female soprano, Rachel Farrar, performing at a concert in Madeley was referred to as a 'great success'.³⁰ While these entertainments drew in crowds who were willing to pay – the Merthyr Drill Hall periodically charged between 2s and 6d per seat – this did not necessarily make its way to the performers, with the choice to undertake such employment presumably not made solely for financial reasons.³¹ The agency of these women should not be underestimated, yet the limited opportunities for such work, even for those who felt their vocation was in the arts, is clear. Indeed, it was these limited opportunities in traditional professional occupations for all sexes living in the study districts that were the most influential in restricting female involvement in this sector overall.

Medical

While men working in the medical sector would undoubtedly have been defined as part of the traditional professions, female involvement was a separate phenomenon. The contemporary perception and actual work of these women compared to both other professional occupations and to men undertaking medical work were distinctive, warranting separate consideration. Very little information exists about women working in the medical sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. What little there is, however, coupled with national discussion, is enough to draw some broad assumptions regarding work in this sector. National trends, the specific socio-economic character of each study district, and local urban developments all impacted upon female employment patterns in medical occupations.

Like the other traditional professions, very few women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield worked in medical employments over the period: less than 20 individuals, or 0.5 per cent of total women workers, in each year surveyed.³² Even in the face of an increasing population and a sharp rise in the number of women

²⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 18 March 1871.

³⁰ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 21 January 1871.

³¹ *Merthyr Express*, 8 April 1871.

³² As Figure 1.

workers, there was no real increase in the number of women participating in the medical sector over the period.

It is important to acknowledge that the wives of medical men were also involved in the medical sector, although they were usually unrecorded and are therefore not represented in the above figures. Eliza Dyke, for example, a Merthyr resident described by Charles Wilkins as having ‘the care of the sick’ in tandem with her husband, Dr Dyke, was returned in the 1881 census as simply ‘surgeon’s wife’ - not one of the employments in which wives were usually acknowledged as participating in their husbands’ business, rendering her unoccupied in the eyes of the establishment.³³ Their inclusion would not impact general conclusions regarding low participation in the medical sector in the study districts, however, simply because the number of men involved was also relatively small.

The pattern found in medical occupations can, like many other specific employment patterns, be linked to national trends. Unlike other professional occupations, as the century progressed and medicine became more closely regulated, women began to be excluded from the medical sector throughout Britain.³⁴ The 1858 Medical (Registration) Act excluded women from professional training and consequently from the profession itself.³⁵ Medical men upheld this exclusion throughout the period, justifying it with reference to gender. A meeting of the Medical Council in 1875 produced a list of the qualities necessary for the ‘practise of the medical profession’ incompatible with femininity: ‘bodily strength, nerve, and endurance to face much toil, anxiety, responsibility, perplexity, and danger’. They concluded that women were not ‘by nature’ constituted in this manner, and therefore unsuited to work in medicine.³⁶ On these grounds, the council recommended that the barriers to women wishing to enter the medical profession should not be removed. Some members also highlighted the ‘peculiar hindrances, moral and physical, to the successful pursuit of medicine by women’ and the fact that ‘if it be admitted that women should enter the medical profession, the existence of an equal fitness in women for other professions must be assumed’, indicating the perceived danger of a

³³ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1881, RG11/5312, f.107, p. 14; Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 487.

³⁴ Witz, *Professions and Patriarchy*, pp. 73-75.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 73.

³⁶ PP, (1875) LVIII.301, *Correspondence on Medical Registration of Women*, p. 9.

‘slippery slope’ in female employment.³⁷ The Council’s letters to the Lord Privy Counsellor in 1875 determined that in the event of females being allowed to enter medical school, ‘in the interests of public order, both the education and examination of female students should be segregated from that of men’, providing further insight into unwillingness to allow female doctors: mixing between the sexes, as seen in all classes of employment elsewhere.³⁸

In addition to women who may have wished to train as doctors, midwives in particular were also excluded from national medical societies on gendered grounds. In 1875, the Medical Council argued that ‘a much more limited and less expensive education might be afforded to women, who after due examination might, as midwives, render valuable service to the community, and supply a deficiency long felt and expressed’.³⁹ However, the very same year the Obstetrical Society stated women were ‘not by nature qualified to make good midwifery practitioners’ because of their ‘lack of physical and mental stamina’.⁴⁰ By the 1870s, obstetrics as a discipline had been taken over by men in an official and formalised capacity.⁴¹

While female doctors and midwives were subject to censure from medical contemporaries nationally, nursing was regarded as a ‘thoroughly appropriate’ female occupation.⁴² In the 1881, the medical profession consisted of more females than males, simply due to the ‘large number of sick-nurses’, but medical men did not view this with disapproval.⁴³ A *Times* correspondent, S.G.O., writing in November 1855, outlined why nursing was accepted.

A hospital nurse, as a rule, should not be younger than 25: she should have a strong constitution and a good share of bodily activity and strength. Her moral qualifications should be good temper, a spirit of perfect submission to authority, great patience, a natural quickness to perception, an amount of education sufficient to enable her easily to acquire from oral, ocular and other teaching that amount of knowledge which is necessary to her success in her business.⁴⁴

³⁷ Ibid, p. 4

³⁸ Ibid, p. 3

³⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Owen Davies, ‘Female Healers in Nineteenth-Century England’, in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Local Population Studies, supplement) (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), p. 228.

⁴¹ Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages*, p. 69.

⁴² Summers, ‘Public Functions, Private Premises’, p. 357; *John Bull*, 22 April 1876.

⁴³ PP, (1883) LXXX.1, *Census of England and Wales 1881 Volume III*, p. 32.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 17 November 1855.

The skills nurses required were feminine in character, and the requirement for morality and education meant women, even from the middle-class, could participate with impunity.

Table 34. Medical sector occupations listed for women in Merthyr Tydfil 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
midwife	1 (100.00%)	daily nurse	1 (6.25%)	district visitor	1 (7.14%)
TOTAL	1 (100.00%)	dry nurse	1 (6.25%)	hospital matron	1 (7.14%)
		head nurse	1 (6.25%)	hospital nurse	2 (14.29%)
		midwife	11 (68.75%)	midwife	8 (57.14%)
		monthly nurse	1 (6.25%)	monthly nurse	1 (7.14%)
		sick nurse	1 (6.25%)	workhouse nurse	1 (7.14%)
		TOTAL	16 (100.00%)	TOTAL	14 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 2

Table 35. Medical sector occupations listed for women in the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.

1841		1861		1861	
leech applier	1 (25.00%)	midwife	7 (46.67%)	district visitor	1 (8.33%)
midwife	3 (75.00%)	monthly nurse	6 (40.00%)	head nurse	1 (8.33%)
TOTAL	4 (100.00%)	sick nurse	2 (13.33%)	hospital member	1 (8.33%)
		TOTAL	15 (100.00%)	midwife	6 (50.00%)
				monthly nurse	1 (8.33%)
				sick nurse	1 (8.33%)
				workhouse nurse	1 (8.33%)
				TOTAL	12 (100.00%)

Source: As Table 3

As Tables 34 and 35 show, low female participation in the medical sectors of the study districts can be linked to national trends. There were no female doctors in either study district during the time surveyed, for example. Rose Mary Crawshay supported allowing women into this profession. She argued in 1873 that ‘the innate modesty of woman will rebel, and not in vain, in making men the depository of sorrows which could be more easily whispered in a sister’s ear’, using gendered discourse to support her aims. At the same time, she also bolstered her argument with ‘in some places they did, until recently, help in the mines’, emphasising the capability of women to undertake seemingly masculine employment.⁴⁵ However, her viewpoint was a minority, and the call for this type of female involvement in

⁴⁵ *Western Mail*, 7 June 1873.

medicine was not answered in either study district during the period. This could be linked to the effect of lack of formal training for women throughout Britain.

It is also clear that the local character of each study district was also important. While female midwives were equally excluded from positions throughout Britain, they still existed, especially in working-class districts like Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, accounting for the majority of women recorded as working in the medical sector in both districts. This can be attributed to the socio-economic character of both populations. For the highly fertile working-class population, employing doctors to attend births was financially prohibitive, and many would instead rely on midwives. Older female family members or neighbours experienced in childbirth often filled this role when births were uncomplicated, although they would not have defined themselves by this informal activity, and so are not included in the above figures. Furthermore, the legitimacy of midwives in the study districts was drawn not from professional training but from experience as wives and mothers: every individual midwife in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period was either married or widowed.⁴⁶

In addition to the higher proportion of midwives in the study districts than seen throughout Britain, very few women were returned as nurses in the study districts, even though this was the most common form of participation in the medical sector nationally.⁴⁷ A poem, called 'The Nurse', was printed in the *Merthyr Express* in 1881, demonstrates the possibility that nurses were seen differently locally than the description given in *The Times*, above. The tagline, 'The nurse sleeps well – hired to watch the sick, whom, snoring, she disturbs' implies a lack of professionalism on the part of those undertaking this role, also implied by the informal language and working-class dialect used by the nurse in the poem. The questions asked by the nurse to her patients: 'What d'ye say is the youngster's name? – How's the mamma? – and how'es the baby?' link the tasks of nursing to femininity. Description of the nurse as 'thou candle queen, of tresses grey' emphasises her as elderly, and the following question 'Say, by what title shall I call ye?' implies an ambiguity of the status of the worker. The final lines: 'Your earnest look appears to say; "Please drop

⁴⁶ As Figure 1.

⁴⁷ This figure could actually have been slightly higher: the term 'nurse' was generally used to apply to domestic servants throughout the period, and many have been allocated to this sector. Again, it is unlikely this would affect general conclusions, as the majority were live-in servants and it can be assumed they were working in a domestic capacity.

a trifle in my “mawley”; Both day and night you’re wide awake; Nor e’er complain of being weary; But, doubtless, now and then you take; A drop of coniac to cheer ye’ at first seem to praise the nurse for her hard work, but ultimately make her a figure of fun, predominantly due to her age and unprofessional nature.⁴⁸

Urban developments were more important than fictional representations. The building of workhouses and hospitals in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield and their surrounding areas post-1841 created positions that were not available at the start of the period. In Merthyr, for example, although the general hospital was not built until 1888, the workhouse built in 1853 housed an infirmary, and two voluntary hospitals were opened in 1860 and 1877.⁴⁹ In both districts, though, only a handful of jobs were created, so variegation did not lead to a dramatic increase in the number of women working in the medical sector, particularly those working as nurses.

Contemporary discussion of these new positions provides some insight into the sort of women who took them up. From its construction in 1853 until 1871, the Merthyr Workhouse employed nuns to oversee the sick, on the grounds that ‘from mere motives of charity, and with a saintly contempt of sordid pelf, [they] would watch over the sickbeds of the poor’.⁵⁰ In 1871, however, the Poor Law Guardians decided to employ lay nurses, largely on the grounds of religious unease. The first proposed salary was increased by the Board of Guardians after comments from Mr Rhys, specifically in order to get a ‘good’, ‘respectable’ woman, specifically from ‘a superior class of ladies’, that is to say, middle class.⁵¹ Only a specific type of woman could participate: advertisements for Merthyr workhouse nurses in 1871 specified applicants ‘must have no family dependent on them’.⁵² This necessity continued throughout the century. An advertisement for a head nurse in 1881 called for ‘a single woman, or a widow, without encumbrance’.⁵³ Even for women who met these strict guidelines, though, positions were few and far between, the most important factor influencing low participation in the medical sector in the study districts over the period as a whole.

⁴⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 2 July 1881.

⁴⁹ Joseph Gross, ‘Hospitals in Merthyr 1850-1974’, in *Merthyr Historian*, volume two (Merthyr Tydfil: Merthyr Tydfil Historical Society, 1978), pp. 80-84.

⁵⁰ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 12 March 1870.

⁵¹ *Merthyr Express*, 15 July 1871.

⁵² *Merthyr Express*, 15 July 1871.

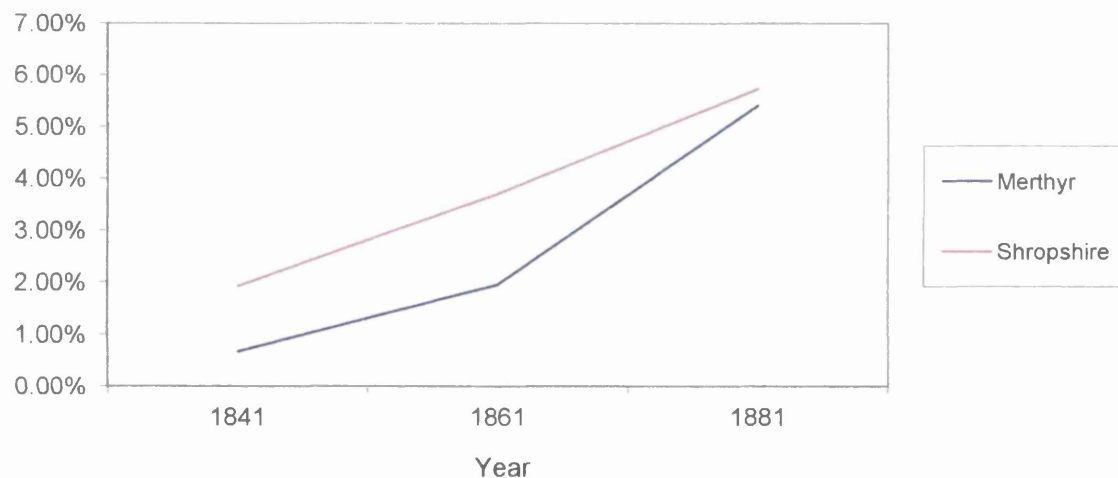
⁵³ *Merthyr Express*, 3 December 1881.

Teaching

Female involvement in the teaching sector increased progressively over the period, and showed the largest proportional increase of any employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Nationally, middle-class women workers throughout the period were mainly found in the teaching sector, a trend partially reflected in the study districts.⁵⁴ The conspicuous expansion seen in this sector can be attributed jointly to national and local educational developments, along with the perceived necessity for feminine skills in many of the new positions that opened up over the period.

As a proportion of total women workers in Merthyr, the teaching sector rose from 0.7 per cent in 1841, to 2.0 per cent in 1861, and 5.4 per cent in 1881. A similar pattern can be seen in the Shropshire Coalfield over the same respective periods, rising from 1.9 per cent in 1841 to 3.7 per cent in 1861, and finally to 5.7 per cent in 1881, shown in Figure 23. In terms of individual women workers, the increase was even more striking. In Merthyr, the number of female teachers rose from 7 in 1841 to 75 in 1861 and finally 224 in 1881, and in Shropshire from 26 in 1841 to 112 in 1861, finishing with 132 in 1881, shown in Figure 24.

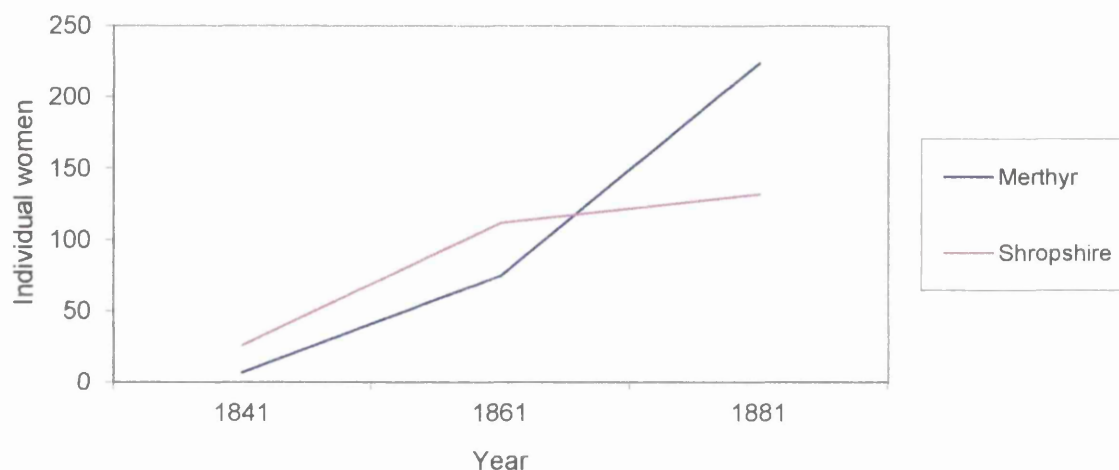
Figure 23. Female employment in the teaching sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield as a proportion of total women employed 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

⁵⁴ Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work*, p. 34.

Figure 24. Number of women employed in the teaching sector in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield 1841-1881.



Source: As Figure 1.

These trends are attributable to a number of factors. The middle-classes were more likely to send their children to school, and this group increased in both districts as the period progressed.⁵⁵ In both areas, too, an increasing interest in the education of all classes can be traced throughout the period. Nonconformist churches in particular were heavily involved in educational provision, and established many subscriber-funded schools in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.⁵⁶ Ironworks also oversaw educational provision for the children of workers.⁵⁷ This regional interest in education was coupled with national developments. The Education Act of 1870 mandated the establishment of School Boards throughout Britain, which took over the running of existing schools and started new ones.⁵⁸ Education was not made compulsory until 1880. Other legislative endeavours, however, already discussed in chapters one and two, increased the minimum age at which children were allowed to work and decreased the hours they were able to do so, resulting in more time for schooling for many children. The increased educational

⁵⁵ Winchester, 'Dawley', p. 134.

⁵⁶ Baugh, 'Madeley including Coalbrookdale, Coalport and Ironbridge', p. 72; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 147; Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 103.

⁵⁷ GRO: Statements of accounts and related papers 1852- concerning doctors' fund, sick fund, schools, workmen's room and library, with memorandum of arrangements for providing medical assistance, sickness relief and education for workmen's children, 1853-67, DG/E/8/110-122.

⁵⁸ Jill Barber, *Children in Victorian Times* (London: Evans, 2006), p. 23.

provision linked to these assorted trends led to the subsequent creation of jobs for teachers in the study districts. These developments in education were also reflected in the types of work undertaken by women in the teaching sector: the proportion of governesses in both districts fell dramatically, and by the end of the period the vast majority of female teachers worked in a school.⁵⁹

Changes in the demographic profile of a typical female teacher reflect these developments in the education system. In 1841, the vast majority of female teachers in both Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were over 30. Of these, over 60 per cent in Merthyr Tydfil and over 70 per cent in the Shropshire Coalfield lived independently, either in their own homes or as lodgers.⁶⁰ This was reflective of a time when small, privately owned schools were the main educational provision available, and implies that women, usually unmarried, chose teaching as a career to support themselves indefinitely. By the end of the period, the demographic status of the typical female teacher was almost opposite to that seen at the beginning, with less than 10 per cent of female teachers over 30 and/or living independently in Merthyr, and less than 25 per cent in the Shropshire Coalfield.⁶¹ Increasing interest in education provision on both a local and national level made teaching a viable, short-term employment option for young women in the study districts. As seen in other occupational sectors, many women left the sector, and the workforce altogether, when they married.

While new teaching opportunities became available for both men and women in the study districts, whether each individual position was undertaken by a man or a woman was usually dependent on the type of teaching entailed. Nationally, women represented over half of all elementary school teachers by 1875, reflective of trends seen in the districts.⁶² This trend can be connected to the perception of teaching as feminine. The sector was always recognised as suitable work for women, even before the industrial revolution.⁶³ Perceived by contemporaries as a 'nurturing' position, an extension of the female role due to links with domesticity and childrearing, women of all classes were able to participate without compromising their femininity.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ As Figure 1.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rendall, *Women in an Industrializing Society*, p. 75; Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages*, p. 68.

⁶³ Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ W Gareth Evans, 'The Gendering of the Elementary and Secondary School Curriculum in Victorian and Early Twentieth Century Wales', in Sandra Betts (ed.), *Our Daughters' Land* (Cardiff: University

Evidence of middle-class women being encouraged to join the profession can be seen in the Shropshire Coalfield in particular. On more than one occasion mid-century, advertisements purporting to be placed by 'The friends of a Young Lady' seeking either a family placement or further education in teaching appeared in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*. The 'respectable connections' and 'unexceptionable [references]' were highlighted, with the desire to improve the lady in question emphasised.⁶⁵ While governessing was seen as particularly appropriate, given its similarity to the feminine 'norm' of motherhood, and as such had a higher status than other forms of teaching, the absence of a large upper middle class who would educate their children at home meant very few positions were available in the study districts, with other forms of teaching, still feminine, far more likely.⁶⁶

Because teaching was perceived as an innate feminine skill and linked to motherhood, women throughout Britain were able to undertake this employment without formal training.⁶⁷ This made part-time teaching an option for those in financial need. A 'Miss Crook', describing herself as 'Late Organist of Wesley Chapel' advertised music lessons in Merthyr in January 1881, and was returned in that year's census as 'teacher of music'.⁶⁸ Her qualification for teaching rested upon her knowledge of music, rather than any experience in education. In the early 1850s, both schoolmistresses attached to the Merthyr Tydfil Workhouse did not possess any qualifications whatsoever.⁶⁹ At the Madeley Poor Law Union School, the Matron acted as teacher from 1849 to 1851, eligible for this position due to her sex.⁷⁰ The few women who did have qualifications sought to draw attention to them. Miss House, advertising her school in the *Merthyr Express*, described herself as 'a Student Certificated by the University of Cambridge, late of St. Mark's College, London'.⁷¹ This was rare, however, again due to the socio-economic character of the study districts: in Glamorganshire in 1847, for example, only 14 of 223 female teachers

of Wales Press, 1996), p. 88; Barker, 'Woman and Work', p. 140; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 293; Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 60.

⁶⁵ *Eddowe's Journal*, 6 August 1851.

⁶⁶ Deirdre Raftery, 'The Nineteenth Century Governess: Image and Reality', in Bernadette Whelan, *Women and Paid Work in Ireland, 1500-1930* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), p. 60; Poovey, *Uneven developments*, p. 127.

⁶⁷ Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 24.

⁶⁸ TNA, PRO: Census Returns, 1881, RG11/5313 f. 53, p. 3; *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *Poor Relief in Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 95.

⁷⁰ Stamper, 'Broseley', p. 291.

⁷¹ *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881.

had undergone training.⁷² While women may have been barred from other traditional professions due to lack of access to relevant instruction and necessary qualifications, this exclusion was not present in the teaching sector.

The femininity of these unqualified women was key to their appointment as teachers. A discussion of the Merthyr Tydfil Board of Guardians in April 1870 concerning the workhouse schoolmistress is revealing in this respect. Miss Moseley, the mistress, had previously been accused of neglecting the children's industrial education (here, meaning simply work of any kind) and not keeping their apartments clean, a slight large enough to cause her to tender her resignation, although she later withdrew it. The Guardians' discussion of her largely concerned her character. Mr Simons pointed out that not only did she treat the children kindly, she was young, and therefore 'rather impetuous', a trait implied to die down with time. Ultimately, it was decided on the grounds of her character to give her another trial.⁷³ Similarly, in the Shropshire Coalfield, newspaper articles discussing appointments and departures of female teachers emphasised their character rather than any qualifications. Miss Boden, a new teacher for Broseley Undenominational School in 1871 was described in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* as having a 'practical character'.⁷⁴ In a presentation to Miss Jessie Banks upon her departure from a Hadley School in November 1881, she was reported as having a 'kind and amiable disposition', faining 'the esteem and affection of all connected with the school'.⁷⁵ This esteemed view of female teachers was common, again linked to the feminine character of the women involved. In Coalbrookdale, the resignation of schoolmistress Mrs Hughes upon her marriage in July 1871 prompted a presentation of 'a handsome photographic album and musical box combined, a Coalport china toast-rack, a plate and cup and saucer bearing Mrs Hughes's initials, and a plate and cup and saucer bearing the initials of her husband, in gold'.⁷⁶

Feminine appearance was also perceived by contemporaries as important for women working in the teaching sector, although many walked what appeared to be a fine line. During the 1842 Children's Employment Commission, the commissioner visited the Sunday School at the Methodist Chapel in Wombridge. His remarks, 'on

⁷² PP (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 96.

⁷³ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 9 April 1870.

⁷⁴ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 15 July 1871.

⁷⁵ *Wenlock Express*, 12 November 1881.

⁷⁶ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 8 July 1871.

the female side of the school the girls, more particularly the elder ones and the teachers, understood how to show themselves off to the best advantage', appear positive.⁷⁷ However, 20 years later, an *Eddowe's Journal* report emphasised the dangers of taking this too far. Following a report of schools in Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire in 1860 by the Reverend J. P. Norris, simplicity of dress was encouraged. The article stated:

The serious importance of simplicity in dress, on the part of schoolmistresses and their pupil teachers, cannot be too earnestly impressed upon them. Such as the teacher is, such will her hundred scholars be, more or less. If she is dressy, they too will be dressy; but with this difference – she is dressy to please her fancy, they are dressy to their rain. If a dressy teacher could see with her mind's eye all the consequences of her example, beginning with the admiring glances at her flounces or ribands, and then the pause before the shop window, the squandering of the hardly won or (it may be) ill-gotten sixpences and shillings, the awakened vanity, the courting of attention, the street flaunting, and worse – if all this could be brought before the young schoolmistress as in a vision, she would understand the full meaning of these words, "whoso shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about this neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea".⁷⁸

The importance placed upon female teachers as feminine role models for the girls they taught is clear.

The appointment of female teachers can also be explained by the education provision aimed at girls in particular, already discussed in chapter two. Schools for all classes throughout Britain aimed to encourage femininity in their female pupils, teaching either the accomplishments required for a successful marriage, domestic labour needed for service, or both.⁷⁹ This was no different in the study districts. In the Dowlais schools, for example, girls sewed for three quarters of an hour every day, bringing their own needlework from home on Fridays.⁸⁰ These feminine skills were considered the purview of women, and so they were employed to teach them.

The necessity for feminine abilities and esteem female teachers were held in, however, did not always translate into perception of their work as skilled, or resultant higher earnings. The state of education in Wales commission stated the position of teacher was 'coveted as a distinction', 'the first prize to which the most proficient

⁷⁷ PP (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 39.

⁷⁸ *Eddowe's Journal*, 29 May 1861.

⁷⁹ Evans, 'The Gendering of the Elementary and Secondary School Curriculum', p. 90; Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p. 35.

⁸⁰ PP (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 151.

pupils in the parochial school look'.⁸¹ Simultaneously, it concluded it was one of the 'worst remunerated' employments, and that 'the miserable pittance which they get is irregularly paid'.⁸² The subjects taught by female schoolteachers were sometimes perceived throughout Britain as having an inferior value to those taught by men, seemingly justifying the lower wage.⁸³ Nationally, teaching declined in status as it became feminine, and lower wages were reflective of this.⁸⁴ The average 6 monthly wage of a Dowlais Night School female teacher in 1858 was just over two pounds, in contrast to the higher almost 5 pounds earned by the male teachers.⁸⁵ On the contrary, the yearly payment of ten pounds made to male and female pupil teachers made no distinction by sex.⁸⁶ This suggests that the later training afforded to men meant their resultant work was perceived as more skilled, and thus deserving of higher pay.

Other women aimed their trade at middle-class pupils specifically, and were able to charge, and therefore earn, more. These were part of a larger group using their class and femininity as economic tools: in Glamorganshire in 1847, for example, 123 private schools were run by women, compared to only 59 run by men.⁸⁷ Miss Sadler's School at Bell Vue Cottage, near Merthyr, charged £30 per year (inclusive) for pupils above 12 years of age, and £27 for those under.⁸⁸ Mrs Smith, mentioned above, charged £4 4s per year for those over 10, £3 for those between 7 and 9, and £2 for those under 7, although this was a day school.⁸⁹ Women running or owning schools in Merthyr Tydfil used newspaper advertisements to draw attention to re-opening of schools after holidays, and encourage new pupils, throughout the period. 'Miss Sophia William's School' in 1841, the Canal House school run by 'The Misses Harrison' in 1842, Mrs Smith's 'Establishment for Young Ladies' in 1870, Miss Evans' 'School for Young Ladies' and Miss Houses' 'Rotherfield College',

⁸¹ PP (1847) XXVII, *Royal Commission of Inquiry into State of Education in Wales*, p. 5

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 55.

⁸³ Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages*, p. 103.

⁸⁴ Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M Offen, 'The Adult Woman: Work: Introduction', in Erna Olafson Hellerstein et al (eds.), *Victorian Women: a Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 284.

⁸⁵ GRO: Dowlais Night Schools Teachers Salaries Six Months ending 31st March 1858, 1858, DG/M/2/4.

⁸⁶ GRO: Pupil Teachers yearly payment 1857, 1857, DG/M/2/14.

⁸⁷ PP (1847) XXVII, *State of Education in Wales*, p. 101.

⁸⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 7 Jan 1871.

⁸⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 7 Jan 1871.

both in 1881, all advertised in various local newspapers.⁹⁰ These women were able to gain a good income by using their feminine skills as entrepreneurs as well as teachers. Like other women who participated in the teaching sector, they took advantage of the increased need for schooling provision while retaining their femininity and class status.

Philanthropy

In addition to the professional occupations recorded by census enumerators, women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield participated in philanthropic activity. As contemporary feminists were keen to point out, participation in philanthropic causes was equivalent to professional work, using similar skills and abilities.⁹¹ Such was the expectation for 'Good Women and Good Work' nationally that it was satirised in *Punch*, which in 1868 implored its readers to 'pull out [their] purses' to assist 'ladies [...] doing much good work'.⁹² While these ladies were personally unpaid, their exertions often had economic elements. They raised money for local and national causes in a wide variety of ways, as well as distributing goods and services to the needy. Involvement in this arena allowed many women to influence political causes for the first time, and opened the pathway into the public sphere.⁹³ Consideration of female philanthropy in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield makes it clear that these women used their skills to good effect, and that they, like remunerated women workers, made important contributions to their local communities.

The female relations of ironmasters in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were heavily involved in philanthropic activity. Indeed, Evans has suggested that the paternalistic practices of industrialists in iron working districts throughout Wales so often highlighted by historians were really carried out by their female relatives.⁹⁴ This can certainly be seen in the study areas, and contemporary residents of the districts appeared to be aware of this trend. 'A Samaritan', for

⁹⁰ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 9 Jan 1841, 15 January 1842; *Merthyr Telegraph*, 8 January 1870, 1 October 1870; *Merthyr Express*, 8 January 1881.

⁹¹ Pedersen, 'Victorian Liberal Feminism', p. 36.

⁹² *Punch*, 19 September 1868.

⁹³ Simonton, *Women in European Culture and Society*, pp. 94, 206, 211; Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, p. 222.

⁹⁴ Evans, 'As Rich as California...', pp. 131-132.

example, writing to the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* in 1841 suggested that in order to effect the establishment of a doctor's fund 'promptly and permanently', application should be made to 'the benevolent ladies of the Iron Masters'.⁹⁵ This sort of application was not rare, and resultant improvement of the lives of many working-class people in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was often forthcoming. Two individual women in particular, Lady Charlotte Guest and Rose Mary Crawshay, demonstrate how important this female philanthropic influence could be.

In *The Story of Merthyr Tydfil*, commissioned by the Merthyr Teachers' Association in 1932, one finds the assertion that 'on the scroll of Merthyr's eminent men and women, few names are worthy to rank higher than that of Lady Charlotte Guest'.⁹⁶ It would be difficult to find any reason to oppose this statement. John Josiah Guest, ironmaster of Dowlais from 1807 until his death in 1852, has been described as 'ably seconded' by his wife Lady Charlotte, who played a key role in the functioning of the works.⁹⁷ During her husband's lifetime, Charlotte assisted him with the business, undertaking secretarial work and record keeping.⁹⁸ Following his death, she oversaw the works until her remarriage in 1855.⁹⁹ During her time as ironmistress of Dowlais she played an instrumental role in banning the night work of females in the works for altruistic reason (although this was later overturned).¹⁰⁰ In addition, she was involved in various social improvements to the town of Merthyr Tydfil.¹⁰¹ In 1835, for example, she established the Dowlais Benevolent Institution 'for the relief of sudden accidents and rare infirmities'.¹⁰² She also extended the educational system established by John Guest dramatically to include children and adults of all ages, subsequently providing many new job opportunities for men and

⁹⁵ *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 16 October 1841.

⁹⁶ *The Story of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 282.

⁹⁷ Angela V. John, 'Beyond Paternalism: The Ironmaster's Wife in the Industrial Community', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Essays in Welsh Women's History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 44.

⁹⁸ Gwyneth Evans, 'Eminent People', in *Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community* (Cowbridge: Merthyr Teachers Centre Group, 1981), p. 425.

⁹⁹ Angela V. John, 'Schreiber, Lady Charlotte Elizabeth (1812–1895)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24832>, accessed 13 Feb 2013].

¹⁰⁰ Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849–1851*, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Claire Louise Thomas, 'The Public Life and Image of Lady Charlotte Guest, 1833–1852' in *Merthyr Historian*, volume 8 (Merthyr Tydfil: Merthyr Tydfil Historical Society, 1996), p. 175.

¹⁰² Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 76.

women.¹⁰³ Lady Charlotte was not employed in a traditional sense, and yet she played a key role both in the industrial sector, and in the formation of the civic community of Merthyr Tydfil.¹⁰⁴

Rose Mary Crawshay, wife of Cyfarthfa iron master Robert Crawshay, built upon Lady Charlotte's work.¹⁰⁵ Rose lived in Merthyr Tydfil from her marriage in 1846 until Robert's death in 1879 and, like Charlotte, contributed a great deal to the local community. She established multiple free libraries in the town, as well as funding regular literary entertainment for workers in a room in her home, Cyfarthfa Castle.¹⁰⁶ During the 33 years between 1846 and 1879, she personally organized for the surplus food from the Cyfarthfa kitchens to be made into soup and distributed to the poor three times each week.¹⁰⁷ In 1871, she was elected to the first Merthyr School Board, a popular candidate second only to G. T. Clark, giving her influence over education in the town.¹⁰⁸ The *Merthyr Express* stated it was 'a score of gratification to us to see Mrs Crawshay so well returned', reflecting community views.¹⁰⁹

Rose also made no secret of her feminist views with regards to women's work. In a speech addressed to various middle-class women in June 1873, she argued:

You know not the wrongs of your poorer sisters, or you would give them a helping hand in the only way in which they can really be helped, viz, in improved education, leading to improved earnings; thus releasing them from the bondage of soul and body to some men in every lucrative profession, who, by the present distribution of employment, buy white slaves, with or without the additional bribe of a wedding ring [...] Why must woman, because she is physically weaker, be elbowed out of all paying occupations and have her natural physical weakness increased by deprivation of the comforts, nay, necessities, of life, unless she will stoop to unholy means of attaining them?...¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Angela V. John, 'Schreiber, Lady Charlotte Elizabeth (1812–1895)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24832>, accessed 13 Feb 2013].

¹⁰⁴ Gwyn A. Williams, 'The Merthyr of Dic Penderyn', in Glanmor Williams (ed.), *Merthyr Politics: the Making of a Working Class Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Evans, 'As Rich as California...', pp. 131-132.

¹⁰⁶ Evans, 'Eminent People', p. 432.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Stewart Taylor, *The Crawshays of Cyfarthfa Castle: a Family History* (London: Hale, 1967), p. 90; Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor, *The Crawshays of Cyfarthfa Castle*, p. 127; *Merthyr Express*, 25 March 1871.

¹⁰⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 25 March 1871.

¹¹⁰ *Western Mail*, 7 June 1873.

While she later spoke out against legislating for women ‘as though they were children’, her representation of working-class women in the district was clearly maternal.¹¹¹ However, while in many cases throughout Britain female philanthropists imposed strict domestic identities upon working-class women, she continually called for further means of employment.¹¹² Her concerns regarding the provision of female employment resulted in her pioneering a ‘lady help’ scheme that aimed to provide respectable work for unemployed middle-class women. She not only employed five such individuals in Cyfarthfa Castle, but also financed an agency costing ‘£200 a year’ dedicated to this form of employment until 1880.¹¹³

The female members of the Darby family also played a key philanthropic role in the Shropshire Coalfield. Like Lady Charlotte and Rose Crawshay, these women involved themselves in local education, financially supporting various schools throughout the district over the period.¹¹⁴ Miss Adelaide Darby gave a plot of land in Ironbridge for the building of a new parish church in June 1851.¹¹⁵ Lucy Darby presented Deeds of Settlement to a number of single women in 1858, presumably family friends or Church relations, and donated £170 to the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1871.¹¹⁶ This type of activity had long roots for the Darby family: women’s meetings held in the Shropshire Coalfield in the latter part of the eighteenth century and participated in by the family collected and contributed money to women for clothing and rent, as well as approving marriages within their Quaker religion.¹¹⁷ Again, while these women were not paid, they made important economic and social contributions to their locality.

Ordinary women in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield may not have been able to exert the same influence over community life as Lady Charlotte, Rose Crawshay and the Darby family women. However, many were heavily involved in philanthropic activity. The monetary contributions women raised and made to

¹¹¹ *Western Mail*, 15 October 1873.

¹¹² Purvis, “‘Women's Life is Essentially Domestic, Public Life being Confined to Men’ (Comte)”, p. 227.

¹¹³ John, ‘Beyond Paternalism’, pp. 57-58; Evans, ‘Eminent People’, pp. 432-433; Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 276.

¹¹⁴ PP (1842) XVI.1, *Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories*, p. 40; IGA: Letter headed Liverpool to Alfred from his brother, Abraham IV, re an urgent order for a Mr Ratcliffe, tonnage of iron and rails, and a ‘peculiar situation’, 31 March 1853, Lab/ABDIV/4/2.

¹¹⁵ *Eddowe's Journal*, 17 December 1851.

¹¹⁶ IGA: Copy of a Schedule of Gifts made by Lucy Darby by Deed of Settlement, showing which of the Donees are married Ladies, 7 April 1858, Lab/FD/9; IGA: Letter and a cheque for £170..1s..8d; A legacy to the British and Foreign Bible Society from Lucy Darby, 1 June 1871, Lab/FD/11.

¹¹⁷ IGA: The Women's Meetings, 1794, 1798, 1799, Lab/MISC/22/1.

benevolent causes in both districts over the period were extensive. This mirrored national philanthropic trends: throughout nineteenth-century Britain, charitable giving was a key source of support for the poor.¹¹⁸ Economic contributions were not limited to wealthy women. A Ball held for the Children's Hospital, Merthyr in January 1881 took a variety of donations from women of varying socio-economic backgrounds: patrons included Lady Aberdare, Mrs Hussey Vivian and Mrs W. T. Crawshay, as well as multiple members of the shopocracy, and the final financial contribution given to the hospital totalled £93 6s 1d.¹¹⁹ Lady Aberdare's 'kind donation' of £3 3s was given special mention in the *Merthyr Express*, suggesting one possible motivating factor for such philanthropic involvement.¹²⁰ Other women were also involved in the venture, donating not only money, but time and goods. The *Merthyr Express* pointed out that 'no labour was paid for which could be got from volunteers of both sexes'.¹²¹ Mrs White, manageress of the Merthyr Coffee Tavern, for example, provided the food for the event.

Similarly, a Soup Distribution Society in Ironbridge and Coalbrookdale, although organised by men, received large subscriptions from both married and single local women. These donations ranged from modest contributions under 5 shillings to over 3 pounds, and were listed by name in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* in January 1871.¹²² The Soup Kitchen ran for over a decade, with 'several influential ladies' presiding over preparation of the soup in 1881.¹²³ The *Wenlock Express* described one women's donation in 1881: 'one lady friend, whose heart never fails in the time of need was, true to her character, to the front with a cheque for £5, accompanied with words of sympathy for the poor.'¹²⁴ A clear link was made between charity and femininity by the newspaper. In January 1881, the treasurer of the society commended Mrs Ketley of Oak Inn for her hard work in preparing the soup, even though 'she was not overpaid for it'.¹²⁵ Although not strictly philanthropic, her involvement could have been influenced by charitable notions, given the suggestion of lower pay than usual.

¹¹⁸ Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, p. 21.

¹¹⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 15 January 1881, 29 January 1881.

¹²⁰ *Merthyr Express*, 29 January 1881.

¹²¹ *Merthyr Express*, 15 January 1881.

¹²² *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 7 January 1871.

¹²³ *Wenlock Express*, 22 January 1881.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

In addition to assisting in the organisation of larger events, women were involved in raising smaller amounts of money for local causes, sometimes even producing rather than simply organising. The High Street Chapel Dorcas Society in Merthyr Tydfil produced 150 items of clothing in 1880, selling these for below cost price to paupers. While the women involved were not remunerated, they used the same skills drawn upon by other women during traditional employment. The activities of 'ladies committees', often attached to local churches, were reported repeatedly throughout the period in newspapers of in the Shropshire Coalfield, again using these skills to raise money for benevolent causes. Various groups of women organised multiple exhibitions of Christmas trees, usually reported as raising between 40 and 90 pounds for church societies, schools, and the poor.¹²⁶ A 'Grand Wesleyan Bazaar' held in the Chapel Street Schoolroom in Dawley on 25 May 1871 raised £285 to provide a house for the minister. The 'ladies' involved had, according to the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, been making and collecting the goods on sale for months, as well as organising the bazaar itself.¹²⁷ The Ironbridge Ladies' Work Society, provided wearing apparel to the poor for over a decade. In 1871, almost 200 items, funded and made by society members were donated, again, using feminine skills.¹²⁸ A similar society in Madeley Wood advertised for 'orders for work from friends of the movement' throughout the 1870s.¹²⁹ All of these examples show direct involvement with economic activity, and can often be linked to female skills already discussed at length: household organisation; sewing; the arts. Other women were able to use personal funds to champion personal causes and impact upon the lives of other local residents: in Broseley, for example, Mrs Mary Cotton left £300 to be divided between 40 widows in 1838, and Miss Mary Anne Pritchard left £100 to be invested in warm clothing for widows in 1882.¹³⁰

Various non-fundraising events were also organised by female philanthropists in both districts. While not all women could boast the same influence as Rose Crawshay, many were involved in the local education system, their involvement justified through the use of feminine skills. The managers of the Dawley National Schools thanked the 'Committee of Ladies' in 1881 for their interest in 'girls' sewing

¹²⁶ *Eddowe's Journal*, 2 January 1861, 16 January 1861; *Wenlock Express*, 1 January 1881, 31 December 1881.

¹²⁷ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 27 May 1871; 17 June 1871.

¹²⁸ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 25 November 1871.

¹²⁹ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 10 June 1871, 21 October 1871.

¹³⁰ Stamper, 'Broseley', p. 293.

and the infants', registering a 'debt of gratitude'.¹³¹ In both study areas, women regularly organised 'school teas'.¹³² Women also made important contributions to the social side of local communities in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. At a 'Merthyr Library Soiree' in November 1881, decorations were provided by female volunteers, including the wife of the Library President.¹³³ Women in Merthyr Tydfil organised prize giving ceremonies to the Merthyr rifle volunteers, with a presence at the ceremony.¹³⁴ In Ironbridge, Mother's Meetings were commonly organised by a society of the same name, giving working-class women the chance to enjoy refreshments and socialise, and sometimes even take part in trips to neighbouring towns.¹³⁵ On one occasion in 1881, tea and bread was given to over 100 widows in Dawley, organised by a 'Mrs Wanstall' and friends.¹³⁶ A Miss Rye was praised in the *Ironbridge Weekly Journal* in June 1871 for 'making a decent provision for the children of our workhouses' by spearheading emigration schemes, although no description of this activity was given.¹³⁷ These activities cannot be described as employment in the traditional sense. However, the associated organisational and fundraising skills necessary to their arrangement demonstrate that women in the study were able to find an avenue for their abilities during the period, even when it was unremunerated.

Contemporaries often made either explicit or implicit reference to the contributions made by women to philanthropic causes and the compatibility of the skills they used with gendered ideology. During the school board nomination period in 1871, local newspaper correspondents in Merthyr praised Rose, and emphasised her ability to undertake a position on the School Board. These commendations were usually made with regards to her femininity. In February 1871, 'Argus', a *Merthyr Express* correspondent, argued that Rose's presence on the board would be ideal as 'questions affecting girls and their treatment are under consideration'.¹³⁸ A 'looker on' writing to the same paper the following month agreed. He stated 'where so many girls as well as boys will be under tuition, one lady at least should occupy a seat at

¹³¹ *Wenlock Express*, 16 April 1881.

¹³² *Merthyr Telegraph*, 9 February 1861; *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 15 April 1871; *Wenlock Express*, 17 September 1881.

¹³³ *Merthyr Express*, 12 November 1881.

¹³⁴ *Merthyr Express*, 29 January 1881.

¹³⁵ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 4 February 1871, 26 August 1871; *Wenlock Express*, 22 January 1881.

¹³⁶ *Wenlock Express*, 8 January 1881.

¹³⁷ *Ironbridge Weekly Journal*, 17 June 1871.

¹³⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 25 Feb 1871.

the board', concluding that it was on these grounds that 'general satisfaction [was] expressed throughout the neighbourhood of Merthyr at the kindness of Mrs Crawshay in allowing herself to be nominated for election as a member of the School Board'.¹³⁹ This general viewpoint was shared throughout Wales. The *Committee to inquire into Condition of Intermediate and Higher Education in Wales*, held in 1881, concluded that 'it should be required that a fair proportion of the members of the governing bodies [of girls' schools] shall be women'.¹⁴⁰ Other ventures were also seen as in need of feminine skills. The High Street Chapel Dorcas Society in Merthyr Tydfil, for example, had a female president, Miss Lewis.¹⁴¹ Her organisational skills were praised by the *Merthyr Express*, who when reporting on a clothing sale held in December 1880, stated that it was 'undoubtedly due to her untiring activity and perseverance that the society is in such a flourishing condition'. This perception of organisation as a feminine skill, often learned in the home, was a major factor influencing the acceptability of female involvement in philanthropic causes.¹⁴² The 'noble band of industrious and sympathetic ladies, who meet week after week to ply the busy needle in preparing warm and comfortable clothing for the old and needy widows of the church, and for the poor and thinly clad children of the poor' were also commended by the paper.¹⁴³ Although this transition of feminine skills was 'born from a profound gender stereotyping', in the words of Anderson and Darling, it did allow middle-class women to enter the public sphere.¹⁴⁴ In many cases nationally, middle-class women outwardly emphasised their femininity as justification for this involvement, although little evidence of this exists for the study districts.¹⁴⁵

Recognition of female philanthropic activity as feminine was not always completely clear cut, however. A *Merthyr Express* correspondent wrote to the paper in January 1871 to promote Jemima Duncombe, a local resident, as a good choice for the new school board. The female writing argued that 'her social position, her celibate condition, her masculine intellect, and her notorious sympathy with all

¹³⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 11 March 1871.

¹⁴⁰ PP, (1881) XXXIII.1, 115, *Committee to inquire into Condition of Intermediate and Higher Education in Wales. Report, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix*, p. lxii.

¹⁴¹ *Merthyr Express*, 1 January 1881.

¹⁴² Anderson and Darling, 'The Hill Sisters', p. 39.

¹⁴³ *Merthyr Express*, 1 January 1881.

¹⁴⁴ Anderson and Darling, 'The Hill Sisters', p. 39.

¹⁴⁵ Yeo, 'Introduction: Some Paradoxes of Empowerment', p. 8.

movements having for their object the advancement of our sex to their true position in the forefront of civilisation' all made her perfect for the position. While her interest in female rights was highlighted, her 'masculine' qualities were also used to imply that most women would not in fact be suited for the job. The emphasis on her 'celibate condition' is also interesting given that married women were often involved in this form of philanthropic activity in particular: married women were not excluded as in other employments as their 'maternal influence' was deemed an advantage in this voluntary work, especially when childcare and education were in question.¹⁴⁶ While Jemima Duncombe did not gain a place on the board, the resounding success of Rose Crawshay and associated praise juxtaposes with this discussion to demonstrate once again the complexities of gendered ideologies.

Although their work almost always took place in the public sphere by necessity, local contemporaries usually held women involved in philanthropic activity in high esteem. While female philanthropists elsewhere in Britain sometimes faced criticism of their involvement in charitable committees, including 'facetious' treatment, negative comments aimed at this sort of involvement were very rare in the study districts.¹⁴⁷ Charles Wilkins, local historian, praised Lady Charlotte Guest and Rose Mary Crawshay on many occasions, indicating that they had many admirers during their lifetimes and into the following decades.¹⁴⁸ Even when speaking of the controversial topic of female suffrage in 1870, Rose Crawshay met with a positive reception. This led the Merthyr Telegraph to conclude that 'she [would] not lose in public esteem by taking a prominent part in the important questions of the day'.¹⁴⁹ While explicit discussion of ordinary middle-class women's philanthropic activity was not undertaken in the study districts, it was almost always reported positively in local newspapers.

When female philanthropic work was not met with praise, this appeared to be based on the activity itself rather than the gender of the participants. Correspondence from 'a charter master' regarding 'the Madeley soup kitchen' to the *Wenlock Express* in 1881, for example, criticised this establishment on the grounds that distress was

¹⁴⁶ Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms*, p. 168; Jordan, *The Women's Movement*, p. 106; Morris and Rodger, 'An Introduction to British Urban History', p. 36; *Merthyr Express*, 14 Jan 1871.

¹⁴⁷ Long, *Conversations in Cold rooms*, p. 169.

¹⁴⁸ Wilkins, *History of Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 220, 223, 276; Wilkins, *History of the Iron, Steel, Tinplate and other Trades of Wales*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁹ *Merthyr Telegraph*, 11 June 1870.

not bad enough to warrant it.¹⁵⁰ However, the intentions of the committee were never criticised, nor any members in particular, and this was a rare example of scrutiny of philanthropic activity. A *Merthyr Express* correspondent discussing criticism of the Sunday libraries set up by Rose Crawshay stated: 'are there any of the thousands about this place and elsewhere who know Mrs Crawshay, who will dare to say, or even think, her object is not good?'¹⁵¹ This statement could in many ways stand for all female philanthropists in the two districts. The wide-ranging 'petticoated benevolence' carried out by these women, while unpaid, undoubtedly impacted on the economic and social lives of many individuals living in the communities of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.¹⁵²

Conclusion

Female involvement in professional work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield increased steadily between 1841 and 1881. The jobs undertaken by these women in the study districts all drew upon feminine skills and attributes: specifically domestic skills were often highlighted as necessary. Many of the women discussed in this chapter, too, were middle class. The suitability of middle-class female employment in the eyes of contemporaries was founded in gender ideology: as Zekreski has pointed out, only jobs perceived as 'semi-domestic' could provide respectable employment for middle-class women.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, the increasing significance of this group of women cannot be attributed to ideology alone. Many of the skills used in the traditional professionals were linked to femininity, yet the number of women participating remained low simply because these opportunities did not exist for men or women in the study districts. Once again, the importance of geographically-specific trends to female employment patterns is clear.

Professional work may have accounted for a small proportion of female employment in the study districts, but it was still significant. From supplying goods to other inhabitants to educating future generations, raising money for benevolent causes to assisting with medical care, the work of the women involved proved an important feature of community life. Whether they were employed due to financial

¹⁵⁰ *Wenlock Express*, 19 February 1881.

¹⁵¹ *Merthyr Express*, 10 June 1871.

¹⁵² Strange, *Merthyr Tydfil*, p. 76.

¹⁵³ Zekreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour*, p. 8.

necessity, or simply chose to volunteer their time, they made important contributions to the local economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield over the period 1841-1881. While many historians have represented heavily industrialised areas as providing few work opportunities for women, examination of the study districts suggests otherwise. Female employment may have been lower than elsewhere in Britain, but it was not insignificant. Thousands of women in the study districts participated in remunerative work, in a wide range of occupations, simultaneously making vital contributions to their respective local economies. The historiography continually highlights nineteenth-century gender ideologies as the most important factor affecting female employment in this period. Evidence found in the study districts, however, suggests otherwise. Analysis of women's work in the concentrated geographic settings of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield demonstrates that wider economic fluctuations and localised industrial, urban, and social dynamics and developments were just as influential and, in many cases, had far more of an impact than contemporary discourse. Investigation of these variegated, complex, sometimes contradictory factors that impacted upon women's work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield increases our understanding of female employment in the nineteenth century, and contributes to the wide body of scholarship already in place.

Gendered ideologies were an omnipresent feature of nineteenth-century British society. Femininity and the home were regarded as synonymous, and the male breadwinner ideology linked masculinity and work. These dual discourses impacted directly on work opportunities for women: middle-class contemporaries condemned female employment on the grounds that women belonged in the home, and attempted to block women from entering the public sphere through multiple legislative endeavours throughout the period. Married women in particular were castigated for their supposed domestic neglect if they worked outside the home. The employment of single women was consistently represented as inherently temporary, a stepping stone in between girlhood and marriage. Even this temporary labour was only viewed as acceptable and suitable for women to undertake if it mirrored the domestic labour women were expected to undertake in their own homes. Work which did not fit this mould, or which transgressed gender norms, was perceived by middle-class contemporaries as unsuitable and destabilising. These ideologies undoubtedly

permeated Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, both districts with a relatively high proportion of women working in positions perceived as inappropriate. Nevertheless, women's work as a whole, and in these employments in particular, increased over the period. The gap between ideology and reality with regards to female employment must be acknowledged.

The typical woman worker in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield was young, single, and childless, working in a feminine industry. This profile was broadly congruent with national trends, as well as ideologies that represented the home as the focal point of life for wives and mothers. Nevertheless, localised factors had a large impact. The number of married women who undertook remunerative employment was far lower than elsewhere in Britain, predominantly due to the domestic demands of heavy industry and increased fertility rates. Multiple employments that were deemed suitable for married women nationally had a low level of participation in the study districts because of this heavy domestic burden. In addition, far more women in the study districts were married than nationwide. This fact alone explains why Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield had lower levels of female employment than seen nationally. Married women were the least likely to work, and there were far more of them.

The women who did work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield were most likely to undertake employment that fit the restricted view of what it was considered suitable for women to be doing. In some cases, this work was actively encouraged and promoted by middle-class contemporaries, creating new job opportunities. Domestic service, for example, was consistently indicated as ideal work for women, sanctioned by officials in both study districts. It was carried out in the private sphere with no risk of moral contamination, used feminine skills, and most importantly, afforded good preparation for marriage. Between one third and one half of women workers in the study districts in each year surveyed worked in this sector, congruent with national and international trends. Other employments carried out by women, including sewing, charring, washing, and lodging provision, fit into the 'domestic-service paradigm', employing skills that were also used by wives and mothers in the private sphere. Work undertaken in the retail and professional sectors, was also consistent with this paradigm. This is unsurprising, given the status of many of these women and the importance the middle class placed on domestic ideology. Teaching, for example, involved childcare in addition to the perceivedly feminine

attribute of nurture, as did much of the unremunerated philanthropic work carried out by women.

Nevertheless, just because these positions were congruent with gendered ideologies does not mean these discourses were the main factor influencing women's work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield. Geographic factors distinct to the study districts were just as important in influencing employment trends in these feminine positions, sometimes even more so. Lodging provision was directly influenced by the types of housing available and demographic character of inhabitants in the study districts. Urban developments led to a diversification and subsequent increase in female participation in the retail sector, along with further opportunities for women who sought casual domestic labour inside and outside their own homes. Teaching only became a significant employer of women in the study districts once child labour decreased and education provision rose in importance, even though it was always accepted as suitably feminine. The number of females employed in a variety of domestic positions increased dramatically in conjunction with the rise of the middle classes, who were likely to employ these women. In all of these cases, employment patterns were heavily influenced by economic fluctuations, the local character of the study districts, and various urban and social developments, rather than middle-class attempts to remove women from unsuitable work and provide alternative employment opportunities.

Female involvement in the heavy industries of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield also demonstrates the importance of wider economic fluctuations, unrelated to gender, to women's work. Female employment in iron and coal increased over the period, even as the middle class sought to remove women from these positions. Correlation between female employment in this sector and industrial prosperity was present in all years surveyed, regardless of the strength of ideological disapproval. The fortunes of the iron industry directly impacted upon work opportunities for women in all industrial occupations. Specific local characteristics were also important. The disparate production aims of the brick making and iron making industries in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield affected the types of work available, and subsequently the number of women employed. Expansion in coal production provided many new positions for females seeking employment in both districts. Iron ore exhaustion in Merthyr impacted dramatically upon work opportunities for all sexes. These examples also demonstrate

the necessity of adopting geographically focused research to explain fully female employment rates in the nineteenth century.

Localised characteristics and developments also affected female employment across a wide variety of occupational settings. In both study districts, the proportionate decline in women undertaking feminine work in a year when female employment as a whole and industrial labour in particular increased suggests women preferred to avoid the domestic where possible. In the Shropshire Coalfield, women were mostly unable to participate in iron production, and thus were more likely to undertake employment in the coal sector. Many of the new professional employments open to women nationally did not reach the study districts owing to their industrial character. This examination of the multiple avenues of female employment in a geographically specific framework not only allows for assessment of interaction between industries and avoidance of fragmentation, but for further explanation of general trends. Married women's employment levels, for example, rose slightly over the period, and they were consistently higher in the Shropshire Coalfield. This, however, can be accounted for by just two industries: sewing and retail, both occupations that allowed time for domestic labour, and is not indicative of any concrete difference or change in occupational opportunities.

The extent of female agency in the study districts with regards to their employment is still highly questionable. Women who were older, married or widowed, with domestic responsibilities, were more likely to undertake employment that was perceived as feminine, if at all. Domestic service was the most common female employment, yet it was often criticised by the women undertaking it owing to the lack of freedom and dependent nature of the work. This was not necessarily indicative of a lack of choice, however. While wives of industrial workers were unlikely to have the opportunity for employment, given their heavy domestic burden, they may not have chosen the option of paid work even if it had been possible. The framework of education in the study districts taught women to regard themselves as domestic from an early age, and it would be unsurprising if some of them internalised this. This in particular explains the possible influence of gender ideologies on the professional sector, occupations usually undertaken by middle-class women who were perhaps most likely to accept this discourse. Women may also have purposefully chosen employment which utilised these taught, 'feminine' skills, as a means of drawing on expertise they already had. In years of industrial

prosperity, too, many of these women availed themselves of the readily available opportunity for industrial labour, ignoring middle-class criticism. They themselves did not necessarily see their work as unsuitable or indeed, unfeminine. In many cases, it appears that women may have rejected domesticity where possible, but that they simultaneously asserted their own femininity. Regardless of individual choice, women participated in almost every aspect of the local economies of Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield, and the contributions they made were crucial.

The scale of the present study has precluded in-depth analysis of a number of avenues, and there is far more potential in the census data collected than has been explored throughout the thesis. The interrelationship between female employment and familial situation in particular deserves further attention. Examination of the likelihood of employment based on the wage earning status of other members of the household; the relevance of the occupation of male (and female) head of households to the occupations of female members of the same household; and the significance of paid work to one-person households would all illuminate female employment patterns in the study districts further. Systematic consideration of the link between employment patterns and demographic characteristics in individual occupations could also prove fruitful in this respect, as might attempts to trace the circumstances of individual women across years and through their life cycles. Another important topic to be explored in further research is the quantitative economic contribution of women workers to both their family and local economies. The results of such an investigation would conceivably serve to underscore the vital nature of women's work, and also prove relevant to wider historical debates on labour. Finally, expansion of the comparative framework to include other regional and local studies, particularly those focused on areas with high female employment, could prove beneficial. The viability of further research and analysis of female employment trends in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield is clear.

This examination of female employment in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield between 1841 and 1881 has far-reaching implications. The unequivocal presence in the study districts of a multitude of women workers participating in diverse occupational sectors demonstrates the viability of future studies into female employment in districts currently assumed as dominated by men. In some cases, the geographically specific evidence found in the study districts can be integrated into the wider, macro-framework of female employment trends on an

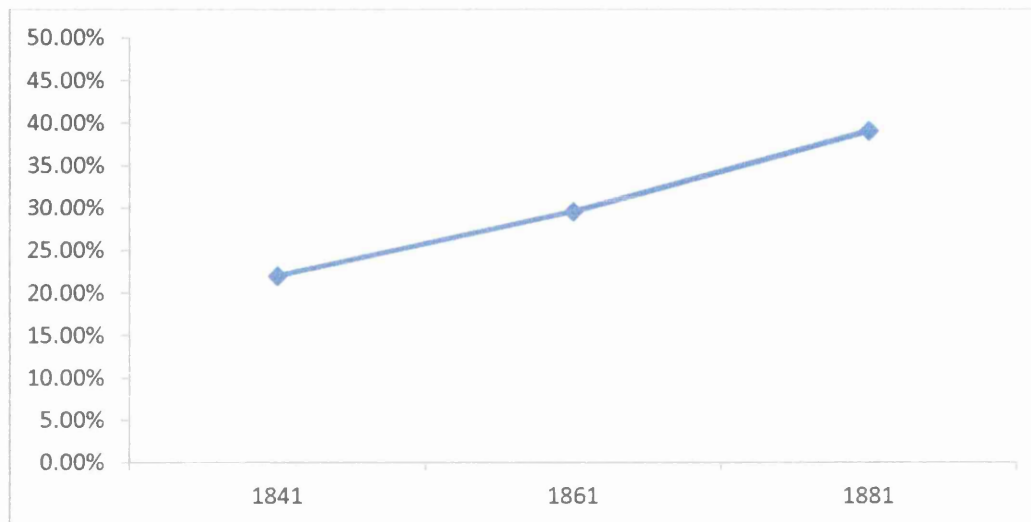
international level throughout this period, providing further evidence of overarching patterns applicable to differing communities and occupational sectors. While, in other cases, we cannot extrapolate localised trends to explain national patterns, the benefits of geographically focused research are still clear. Most importantly, though, the examination of women's work in Merthyr Tydfil and the Shropshire Coalfield carried out in this thesis contributes to the varied, complex, yet still incomplete picture of female employment in nineteenth-century Britain.

Appendix 1 1851 Census Sample

SHROPSHIRE COALFIELD: MADELEY

This enumeration district comprised of the Shropshire ironmasters' houses, the residences of professional men and their families, and some works housing. ¹

Female employment in Madeley: change over time.



	1841	1851	1861
Total women	195	216	207
Women workers	43	64	81
Proportion	22.05%	29.63%	39.13%

Female employment in Madeley: breakdown by sector.

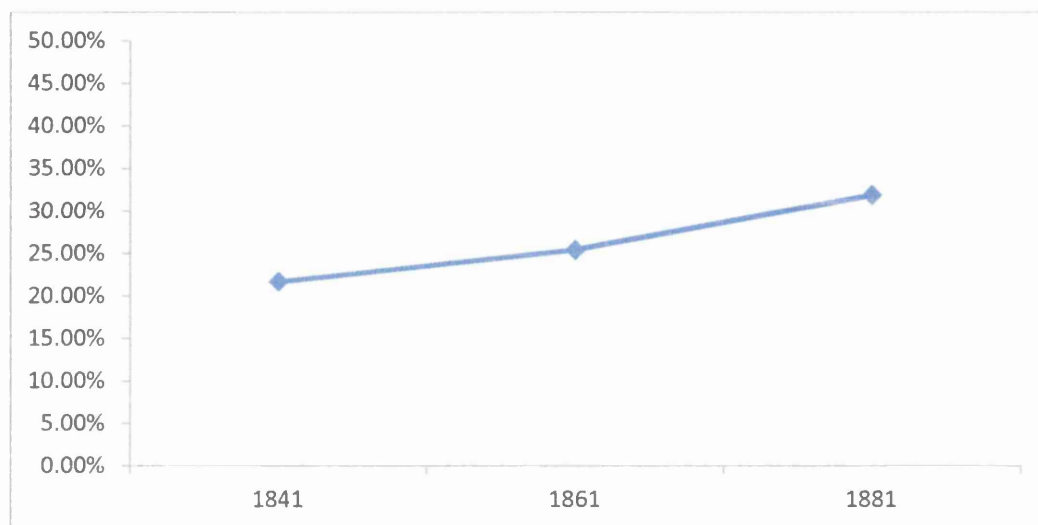
1841			1851			1861		
labourer	1	2.33%	pottery	1	1.56%	charwoman	3	3.70%
retail	1	2.33%	servant	44	68.75%	medical	1	1.23%
servant	35	81.40%	sewing	6	9.38%	other	3	3.70%
sewing	2	4.65%	teaching	6	9.38%	production	1	1.23%
teaching	3	6.98%	washing	7	10.94%	profession	1	1.23%
washing	1	2.33%	TOTAL	64	100.00%	retail	4	4.94%
TOTAL	43	100.00%				servant	46	56.79%
						sewing	11	13.58%
						teaching	4	4.94%
						washing	7	8.64%
						TOTAL	81	100.00%

¹ TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Madeley 1, HO107/928/12; Census Returns of England and Wales 1851, Madeley 3a, HO107/1989; Census Returns of England and Wales 1861, Madeley 4e, RG9/1857.

SHROPSHIRE COALFIELD: BENTHALL

This enumeration district, the distinct parish of Benthall, included potteries, mines (coal and iron), limeworks, and farms. The adjunct area of Broseley also contained pipe-making factories, ironworks, and a commercial centre.²

Female employment in Benthall: change over time.



	1841	1851	1861
Total women	184	161	166
Women workers	40	41	53
Proportion	21.74%	25.47%	31.93%

Female employment in Benthall: breakdown by sector.

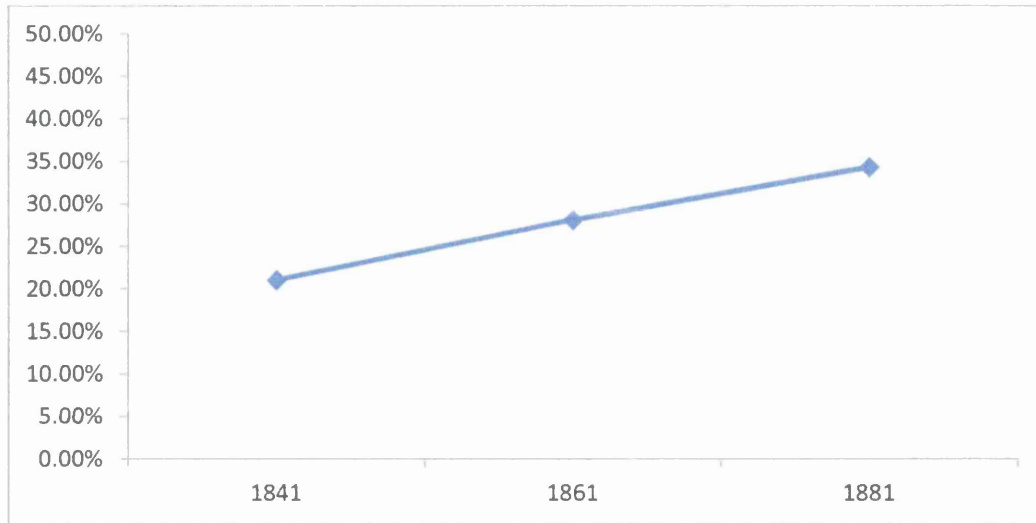
1841			1851			1861		
agriculture	1	2.50%	agriculture	3	7.32%	agriculture	2	3.77%
coal	1	2.50%	lodgings	1	2.44%	charwoman	1	1.89%
iron production	1	2.50%	other	1	2.44%	lodgings	1	1.89%
labourer	1	2.50%	pipe making	4	9.76%	other	1	1.89%
other	2	5.00%	pottery	4	9.76%	pipe making	6	11.32%
pottery	4	10.00%	retail	3	7.32%	pottery	9	16.98%
production	1	2.50%	servant	13	31.71%	production	1	1.89%
retail	2	5.00%	sewing	11	26.83%	retail	2	3.77%
servant	22	55.00%	washing	1	2.44%	servant	15	28.30%
sewing	3	7.50%	TOTAL	41	100.00%	sewing	14	26.42%
washing	2	5.00%				washing	1	1.89%
TOTAL	40	100.00%				TOTAL	53	100.00%

² TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Broseley 9, HO107/928/2; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1851, Broseley 6, HO107/1989; Census Returns of England and Wales 1861, Benthall 1, RG9/1859.

MERTHYR TYDFIL: PENYDARREN

This enumeration district comprised of part of the area surrounding Penydarren ironworks.³

Female employment in Penydarren: change over time.



	1841	1851	1861
Total women	237	206	192
Women workers	50	58	66
Proportion	21.10%	28.16%	34.38%

Female employment in Penydarren: breakdown by sector.

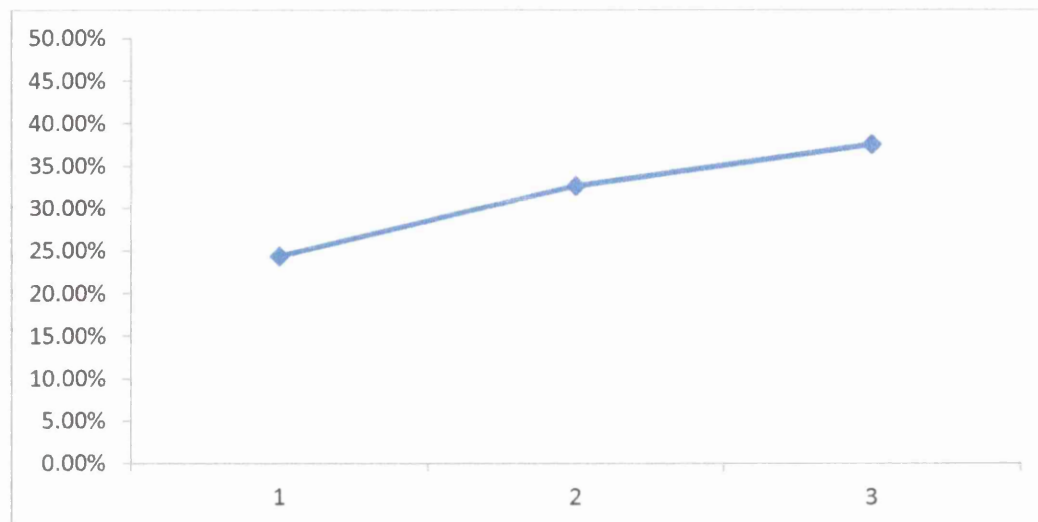
1841			1851			1861		
charwoman	3	6.00%	charwoman	2	3.45%	coal	10	15.15%
coal	14	28.00%	coal extraction	14	24.14%	iron making	11	16.67%
iron production	5	10.00%	iron mining	18	31.03%	iron mining	16	24.24%
iron mining	15	30.00%	iron production	12	20.69%	labourer	2	3.03%
labourer	1	2.00%	retail	1	1.72%	other	4	6.06%
retail	1	2.00%	servant	5	8.62%	retail	2	3.03%
servant	6	12.00%	sewing	2	3.45%	servant	6	9.09%
sewing	3	6.00%	washing	4	6.90%	sewing	7	10.61%
washing	2	4.00%	TOTAL	58	100.00%	teaching	2	3.03%
TOTAL	50	100.00%				washing	6	9.09%
						TOTAL	66	100.00%

³ TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Merthyr Tydfil 3, HO107/1415/7; Census Returns of England and Wales 1851, Merthyr Tydfil lower 9, HO107/2458; Census Returns of England and Wales 1861, Merthyr Tydfil lower 10, RG9/4052.

MERTHYR TYDFIL: VILLAGE

This enumeration district comprised of part of the main commercial centre of Merthyr Tydfil and nearby residential streets.⁴

Female employment in Merthyr Tydfil village: change over time.



	1841	1851	1861
Total women	356	424	266
Women workers	87	142	100
Proportion	24.44%	32.72%	37.59%

Female employment in Merthyr Tydfil village: breakdown by sector.

1841			1851			1861		
lodgings	4	4.60%	brick making	2	1.41%	coal	1	1.00%
production	2	2.30%	charwoman	1	0.70%	iron mines	2	2.00%
retail	10	11.49%	coal extraction	1	0.70%	iron production	2	2.00%
servant	61	70.11%	iron mining	2	1.41%	lodgings	3	3.00%
sewing	10	11.49%	iron production	1	0.70%	production	2	2.00%
TOTAL	87	100.00%	lodgings	5	3.52%	profession	3	3.00%
			medical	1	0.70%	retail	11	11.00%
			other	2	1.41%	servant	55	55.00%
			production	2	1.41%	sewing	12	12.00%
			professional	1	0.70%	teaching	1	1.00%
			retail	5	3.52%	washing	8	8.00%
			servant	81	57.04%	TOTAL	100	100.00%
			sewing	27	19.01%			
			washing	11	7.75%			
			TOTAL	142	100.00%			

⁴ TNA, PRO: Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841, Merthyr Tydfil 11, HO107/1415/10; Census Returns of England and Wales 1851, Merthyr Tydfil lower 17, HO107/2458; Census Returns of England and Wales 1861, Merthyr Tydfil lower 18 RG9/4053.

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