Marital status and economic activity:
interpreting spinsters, wives, and widows in pre-census population listings[1]

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The extent of women's participation in the labour market prior to the twentieth century is a very longstanding but unresolved question, which affects estimations of national productivity[2] as well as sectoral changes over time,[3] and also issues of personal identity (it has been suggested that male identity was occupational while female identity was marital). Such macro calculations depend on micro interpretation of the sources. This paper considers an apparently small-scale issue which has implications for quantifying female labour force participation: the linguistic ambiguities in the English language between female marital status and occupational status, and confusion over conventions of occupational attribution. The complications of marital status and occupational status in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are explored here through a close reading of local population listings (the name given to pre-census local house-by-house surveys) and original census returns from the first half of the nineteenth century where they survive.

The use of marital status in the historical record to identify a woman as single, married or widowed is commonly interpreted by historians as a sign of economic inactivity -- or at least a sign that she was not gainfully employed, however much unpaid work she may have undertaken at home. The assumption is that if she was ascribed a marital rather than an occupational status then she must have been her father's or husband's dependent – even as a widow – unless otherwise noted.

An exception is made for the poor: it is assumed that poor women had to work *because* their male kin could not earn enough to support them. Censuses of the poor and lists of workhouse inmates, where they record labour, include the waged work of both women and men, appearing to reinforce the assumption that poor women worked, whereas other women did not.[4] In contrast, listings of whole

1 I am indebted to Leigh Shaw Taylor, John Styles, Tim Wales, and Jacob Field for discussions on the issues presented here.
2 See Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation and the transition to the male bread-winner family, 1790-1865', Economic History Review 48 (1995), 89-117.
3 Leigh Shaw Taylor, 'The occupational structure of England and Wales c 1700-c 1850', paper presented at Economic History Society conference 2010, Durham.
4 The best known is the 1570 Norwich census of the poor which Margaret Pelling used in 'Nurses and nursekeepers: problems of identification in the early modern period', and 'Old age, poverty and disability in early modern Norwich: work, remarriage and other expedients', in her The Common Lot: Sickness, Medical Occupations and the Urban Poor

populations generally only record the occupation of the household head, and these often refer to a *few* female household heads by occupation and most by marital status or by no designation at all. This pattern again appears to reinforce their absence from the labour market by suggesting that if most female household heads had been gainfully employed then they too would have been identified by an occupation, like the few women who were. I will examine the assumption that the presence of a marital designation indicates an absence of labour market activity by looking at each stage of the marital life-cyle in turn, and then return to the question of calculating female labour force participation.

SINGLEWOMEN

The unmarried woman is referred to today in 'technical' language as a spinster. (Rarely encountered in common parlance, this is still how a never-married woman is designated in her marriage certificate.) In the fourteenth century, 'spinster' bore both occupational and marital connotations, and might be used by (male) enumerators in either context.[5] It has been read by historians in later eras as a designation of marital status, since it became in the seventeenth century the principal identification of a never-married woman, to establish her legal rights (to marry, to inherit, to bring a lawsuit, etc).[6] I will argue that whereas 'spinster' acquired its new meaning of an unmarried woman in the later middle ages, it did not lose its older meaning of a woman who spun, and it could retain that occupational sense until at least 1801.

Where population listings created separate columns for marital status and occupation, as they did in Dorset, the meaning of spinster is clear. In the 1790 population listing of Corfe Castle (261 households), there is a column labelled 'Condition', by which is meant marital status, and all men *and* women were designated as single (male)/spinster (female), married or widowed. Thus those women described as 'spinsters' were further designated in the occupational column as a baker, a shopkeeper, dairywomen, and (mostly) knitters.[7] The 1801 census for Melbury Osmond (65 households) is similar, and the enumerator helpfully used 'spinster' as the marital status and 'spinner' to describe women who spun.[8]

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in Early Modern England (London, 1998).

5 Cordelia Beattie, Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England (Oxford, 2007).

6 At the end of that century it also acquired its pejorative meaning. Amy M. Froide, Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England (Oxford, 2005), ch.2.

7 See Osamu Saito, 'Who worked when? Lifetime profiles of labour-force participation in Cardington and Corfe Castle in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in Women's Work in Industrial England, ed. Nigel Goose (LPS, 2007).

8 Spinners lived in 38 of the parish's 65 households, making them even more common than labourers in husbandry (26). A similar layout appears at Sturminster Newton in 1801. All population listings are photocopies in the Archive at the Cambridge Group for Population History.

But in population listings elsewhere in England, which gave only one column for 'trade or occupation' and that column included statuses like 'gent' or 'widow', the picture is complicated. Sometimes a scribal pattern can help to determine the usage of 'spinster', as in the 1767 listing for Winwick, Lancashire,[9] which recorded nearly 800 catholics. (The 1767 Return of Papists was the first attempt at a nationwide census, albeit only covering catholics.) In the early pages of the listing, the enumerator referred consistently to 'spinners', but he shifted to 'spinsters' part of the way through and then back again to 'spinners'. Since it is unlikely that all of the women spinning occurred at the beginning and end of the list and the never-married women in the middle, this distinctive pattern suggests that he meant the two words as synonyms, and that all women designated 'spinster' (and it was the most frequently occurring designation) should be regarded as spinners (since 'spinner' has never indicated an unmarried woman).

There is also a surviving enumeration from the first national census in 1801 for Winwick with Hulme (one quarter of the parish of Winwick).[10] Like the Return of Papists, there was no column for marital status in the first census. In 1801, 'spinster' occurs in the 'trade or occupation' column 23 times. However, one 'wife' and one 'widow' also appear in that column, so it is not impossible that spinster could have been used here as a marital designation (leaving aside the question of why only 25 women would be maritally designated in a total population of 573, in 104 families). The descriptor 'inmate' also occurs, even more often, in the 'trade or occupation' column, and that is obviouly not an occupation, but a household position. However, it can be seen by comparing the two listings 34 years apart that 'spinster' in Winwick in 1801 was used in an occupational sense as it had been in 1767. We can see this, first, where women who appear to have been married are recorded as 'spinster'. So in the page from the 1801 census illustrated below, family number 17 consists of Betty Wright (age 64), spinster, and her granddaughter (age 7). It could be argued that Betty Wright may never have married and that her child, who produced the granddaughter, was illegitimate. But the 1767 Return of Papists recorded a catholic Betty Wright married to a protestant butcher. They had a 10-year-old daughter, so the catholic Betty would have been at least 30 in 1767, making her 64 in 1801. It is likely this is the same person, who in 1801 is not never-married, but spinning for her living.

The proof that 'spinster' was used in the 1801 Winwick census as an occupational designation is not limited to catholics who can be matched with the earlier listing: there is also internal evidence. The instructions for the 1801 census directed the enumerator to determine 'What number of persons in your … place are chiefly employ'd in agriculture, how many in trade and manufactory or handicraft

9 The parish was reallocated to Cheshire in the twentieth century.
10 The population in this listing was 573 in 96 families.

and how many are not comprised in any of the proceeding [i.e., preceding] classes.'[11] But whereas in most surviving 1801 returns the enumerator ascribed entire households to agriculture or manufacture, the enumerator in Winwick disaggregated individuals within the household into columns for agriculture and manufacturing (he chose to omit the 'other' column that was requested).[12] Spinsters were counted in the column for those engaged in manufacture. So the household of Betty Wright and her 7-year-old granddaughter have one family member (of necessity, Betty) in manufacture. In the illustration, household number 19, consisting of only Jane Marsh, spinster, age 48, is also classified as in manufacture.

It is possible that the use of spinster in its occupational sense was especially associated with the northwest of England. The other listing where the practice is clearly visible is in the 1787 Westmorland 'census', which recorded at least 37 women with the household position of 'wife', along with a handful of widows, as 'spinsters' by occupation.[13]

11 From handwritten instructions attached to the Winwick with Hulme return.

12 The enumerator of the much larger town of Liverpool in 1801 made the same individual attributions, but unfortunately because he did not specify the ages, it is impossible in Liverpool to identify which members of the household were in paid employment. That is, children under age 10 cannot be ruled out.

13 There were also five spinsters in the household position column, but this appears to be limited to two of the 13 enumerators of the census. 'Singlewoman' appears once, in Brough, and the medieval term 'sola' is used twice in Askham to designate not an unmarried woman, but a single-person household.

Families	Names of the Inhabitance with the Head of each Family.	Respective Ages	Males	Females	Total No. of each Family	Trade or Occupation which Each Inhabitant follows	Agriculture	Manufactory	No. of Families
	Am.t Bro.t Soward		56	43	99		35	12	
16	George Clogg	43	1			Weavor			26
	Cathorine D.o	43		1					
	Cathorine Woods	7		1	3	Inmate		3	27
17	Betty Wright	64		1		Spinster		1	
	Nancy D.o Grand D.r	7		1	2	Inmate			
18	Joseph Walton	51	1			Laboror			
	Ellon D.o	54		1					
	Mary D.o	17		1	3	Spinster		3	
19	Jane Marsh	48		1	1	Spinstor		1	28
20	James Howard	41	1			Farmor			
	Hannah D.o	45		1		D.o			
	Gonny D.o	39		1	3	D.o	3		
21	John Hall	33	1			Farmor			
	Susannah D.o	32		1					
	William D.o	10	1						29
	Joseph D.o	1	1						
	John D.o	½	1						
	Phoby Brooks	21		1	6	Servant	4		30
22	Aaron Brown	22	1			Pavor			
	Amey D.o	21		1					
	Pheby D.o	5 Mth.s		1	3				
23	Wm Millns Jun.r	27	1			Farmor			
	Hannah D.o	26		1					
	Esther D.o	3		1					
	Mary D.o	2		1					
	William D.o	¼	1						31
	Mary Moos	11		1	6		3		
24	William Millns	65	1			Inn-Keeper			
	Esther D.o	70		1	2		2		
25	Fanny Winson	32		1				1	32
	John D.o	11	1					1	
	Richard D.o	7	1						
	Henry D.o	5	1						
	Thomas D.o	3	1		5				
			71	62	133		47	22	

MARRIED WOMEN

The first point about the identification of married women is that the prefix 'Mrs' often misleads historians because for the last 150 years it has been used to designate marital status. An abbreviation of 'mistress', Mrs designated a woman's social or economic status *only* until the mid-nineteenth century. A woman designated Mrs was either of gentry status or a businesswoman, and thereby mistress of at least one and possibly several servants. It was not infrequently written out and possibly pronounced as 'Mistress' through the eighteenth century. The proof of these points lies in literary sources, and I have elaborated them elsewhere, but they have ramifications for economic historians.[14]

All heads of household could be referred togenerally as 'masters and mistresses of households', as they were sometimes in the 1801 census enumerations. But only a select few individuals were titled 'Mr' and 'Mrs'. So in the listing for Denham, Buckinghamshire in 1745 (166 households), Mr and Mrs were reserved for some – but not all – of those couples farming land worth more than £50 p.a. In the Bocking, Essex listing of 1793 (643 households), 'Mr' was applied to clerics, attorneys, large farmers, and prosperous businessmen (victuallers, millers, printer, maltster). 'Mrs' was applied in the same way to 23 relatively wealthy women heading their own households, including the town's linen draper and grocer, a cardmaker, two weavers, two of the three mantuamakers, three farmers, all five of the women who ran public houses, and the blacksmith at Bocking Hall. The schoolmistress was the only woman designated Miss -- another abbreviation of 'mistress' which had been introduced in the mid-eighteenth century specifically to designate socially superior never-married women.

There was no column for marital status in the Bocking listing, but it is very unlikely that all of the women called Mrs were married or widows. Nearly two thirds of them had no minor children in their households. This is by no means a good measurement of singleness, but it is the only one possible in the Bocking census, and it is a rate of 'childlessness' considerably higher than we might expect from a collection of women who had been married at some point. In the 1836 listing from Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire 'Mrs' was still reserved for women with capital, without any marital connotations: it was applied to a dressmaker, a shopkeeper, and three women of independent property, among 102 female household heads. None of these women had children in the household. 'Miss', marking the unmarried woman of status, was applied to one shopkeeper and one woman of independent means.[15] So the use of Mrs in documents prior to the mid-nineteenth century designates not marital status, but the possession of capital, just like the use of Mr.

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14 See further A. L. Erickson, 'A short history of the Mrs; or, mistresses and marriage' (forthcoming).

15 The majority of female household heads in Chilvers Coton were merely referred to as 'widow' (68 of 102) or with no designation at all (27).

The second point about the identification of married women is the widespread absence of occupational descriptors for them. Historians regularly note the relative lack of occupations given for married women in the later nineteenth-century censuses, whether they think that lack is real or a case of under-reporting. The presence of the husband's occupational designation for the entire household is taken to imply a wife's lack of gainful employment. Winwick in 1801 is again instructive here, because it is possible to identify those who are not ascribed a named occupation but who *are* attributed to one of the columns designated agriculture or manufacturing.

So, in the illustration above, household number 18 is the family of Joseph Hatton, labourer, his probable wife Ellen (no occupation), and their probable daughter Mary, spinster. The Hatton family has three members in the manufacture column. This means that not only the spinster and the male labourer, but *also the woman with no occupational descriptor*, were working in (textile) manufacture.[16] The same situation is found in agriculture. At household number 21, the husband, the wife, their 10-year-old son, and the 21-year-old female servant are all recorded as being in agriculture, although the only occupations recorded are the husband as farmer and the servant. At household number 23, consisting of the farmer William Millns, his wife Hannah, three very young children and an 11-year-old maidservant, the three members of the family in agriculture are perforce William, Hannah, and the maidservant. At number 24, the elderly William and Esther Millns were both in engaged in agriculture, although William's occupation is listed as inn-keeper. Household number 25, the apparently widowed Fanny Urmson and her four sons, bears no occupational descriptors at all, but Fanny and her eldest son were involved in manufacture. Married women were sometimes included and sometimes excluded from the 'agriculture' and 'manufacture' count of the household, indicating specific attention to individual families.

Why did the Winwick enumerator in 1801 omit married and widowed women's occupational descriptors when he clearly knew not only that they were in employment, but also the type of employment it was? This listing recorded no married woman's occupation, even when the enumerator knew she was in gainful employment. In the 1767 Return of Papists for Winwick, only one apparently married woman was ascribed an occupation.[17] The Dorset listings exhibit a variation on this pattern.

16 In Winwick, the enumerator appears to have understood 'manufacture' to mean textiles: blacksmiths, carpenters, millers, shoemakers and so forth do not appear in the manufacture column. It is possible that he limited 'manufacture' to cotton textiles specifically, which may explain why two of the 24 spinsters and two of the 34 weavers were not included in the 'manufacture' column, if they may have been working in wool rather than cotton. On the other hand, these may have been errors of omission, since one fustian manufacturer (a fabric of flax and cotton) also does not appear in the manufacture column. Agriculture and (cotton) manufacture employed an equivalent number of people in Winwick with Hulme (118 and 119, respectively).

17 That one was a farmer like her apparent husband, but it is possible they were rather brother and sister. They also appear as family no. 2 on the list. Did the enumerator change his mind on recording practice?

Corfe Castle recorded a few wives' occupations, all of which were different from husbands', or where the husband was absent. In Melbury Osmond only one married woman was in the same trade as her husband (a weaver); the farmer's, the baker's and the miller's husbands had different trades. In Sturminster Newton, too, if a wife was ascribed an occupation, it was different from her husband's. This convention may be the same as that glimpsed in earlier London apprenticeship records, where the occupation of a married woman taking a girl apprentice from Christ's Hospital was *only* specified if it was *different* from her husband's. If her occupation was the same as her husband's, then it was not repeated for her.[18]

In 1851 and 1861, the Census Office believed that the wives of certain men – innkeepers, farmers, small shopkeepers, shoemakers and butchers – were so much a part of the family business that they should be reported as following their husbands' occupations. Historians are inclined to dismiss this injunction, and suggest that those women so designated should be subtracted from the total in employment.[19] But the evidence from Winwick in 1801 supports the Census Office assumptions: all but one of the 14 male farmers' wives were recorded as 'in agriculture'. (Unfortunately, we cannot check the other occupations that the Census Office specified because these were not counted in Winwick as either agriculture or manufacture.) On the assumption that at least some husbands and wives must have worked together, if no or virtually no wives are recorded as in employment, then there is an under-recording problem. The 1801 Winwick enumeration makes explicit a convention that males took occupational descriptors and females – most especially married ones – did not, regardless of whether they were actually in gainful employment. In some areas, (Dorest and London, at least) this habit was modified to the extent that married women might be ascribed an occupation but only when it was different from their husbands. This convention of omission is particularly significant because it has been suggested that it is precisely in the employment of married women (ie, those with children to care for) that communities may have differed, depending on the type of work available.[20] Waged labour was more likely to be affected by childcare responsibilities than piece work or self-employment.

A quite different problem of the representation of married women – one which might be called over-recording – is evident in the Westmorland census of 1787. Rather than an absence of occupational descriptors, Westmorland contains descriptors whose meaning has changed since they were written down. There, married women's occupations are much more regularly recorded, and they include

18 A.L. Erickson, 'Married women's occupations in eighteenth-century London', Continuity & Change 23/2 (2008), 284.
19 Peter Tillot, 'Sources of inaccuracy in the 1851 and 1861 censuses', in E.A. Wrigley, ed., Nineteenth-Century Society (Cambridge, 1972, republished 2008), 122.
20 Saito, 'Who worked when?', 219-20, on Cardington, Beds and Corfe Castle, Dorset..

housewife and housekeeper. Michael Anderson has argued with reference to the Lancashire 1851 census that where a 'housewife' or 'housekeeper' was married to the head of household, this should be 'corrected' to eliminate all those who were the wives of the head of household, on the grounds that they were involved in productive but not gainful employment.[21]

That depends on what we think housewifery was. As with 'spinster' and 'Mrs', there is a tendency to read a twentieth-century usage into the past. In its original sense, the housekeeper was the head of the household or the couple who headed the household (it was used this way in the Corfe Castle listing in 1790). So too in Westmorland, a housekeeper or housewife was the woman who kept the house, and many of them were married to the head of household. Around 1800 in a rural context, as it had been in earlier centuries, housewifery was still the counterpart of husbandry, that is, all things pertaining to the management of the household, whether agricultural or 'manufacturing' and whether for household use or for sale. It is significant that many of the Westmorland 'housewives' in 1787 were married to men described as 'husbandmen'. Husbandmen no longer exist in England but the word has retained its original meaning of small farmer, whereas the complicated cultural status of the housewife over the twentieth century has almost completely obscured the earlier meaning of housewifery as female small-holder. The idea that housewife/housekeeper was an occupation and not a position is supported by the fact that it was done by servants, daughters, and sisters of the head of household, as well as by wives in Westmorland.

The degree to which production was still household-based in the eighteenth century is illustrated not by population listings, but by the household and farm account books of larger estates which purchased – on a weekly or fortnightly basis from women who were not shopkeepers – items like honey, treacle, poultry (chicken, ducks, turkeys, geese, and pigeons), mops, brooms, starch, soap, herbs, rabbits, butter, eggs, cream, yeast, starch, mead, soap, hemp seeds, mustard seed, nuts, licorice, and fruit.[22] No one, male or female, is ever recorded in a population listing as a butter or broom or egg or honey or poultry seller. ('Poulterer' is a town trade only, and it is likely that they only bought up the local production and retailed it.) But because we know these commodities were bought, we know someone locally had to produce and sell them, and that is likely to have been the housewives. The same housewives who are *not* recorded in any population listings outside Westmorland. (In Winwick, Lancs. in 1801, the only 'housekeeper' was a woman who kept house for a widowed man and his

21 Michael Anderson, , 'What can the mid-Victorian censuses tell us about variations in married women's employment?', in Women's Work in Industrial England, ed Nigel Goose (LPS 2007), 198-9.

22 For example, Elizabeth Bridger's Accounts, 1702-29 Essex Record Office SHR 1364; Lowther Household Accounts for the Store Room, 1765-6, and for the Cook, 1763-66, Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle D/LONS/L3/4/314 and 317. Lady Paget's household account book, 1783-5, Staffordshire Record Office D603/R/5. Anne Brockman's Account Book, 1700-9, British Library Addl MS 45,208, Brockman Papers vol CLXI. This type of account is rare because most surviving accounts were made by men, who in their accounts recorded regular lump sums 'to my wife for housekeeping'

children, in the more modern sense of the word.)

So there are three complicating factors in identifying married women's employment. The first factor – that Mrs designated the possession of capital and not marital status – affects a small proportion of women, but specifically business owners. The second factor – that wives' occupations were not recorded except in some places where these were different from their husbands' occupations – affects a much larger number of women. Accepting that this habit was a recording convention, rather than a reflection of local economic reality, will be difficult for many historians. Yet the convention is clearly visible in the 1801 Winwick listing, where the enumerator did not record women's occupations even when he knew they were in gainful employment and what that employment was. The third complicating factor for married women's occupations is understanding the gainful as well as the productive elements of the work of the housewife.

WIDOWS

Like married women, widowed household heads were likely to be called merely 'widow' without an occupational attribution. But it would be unwise to conclude from an entry simply reading 'Widow X' that she was economically inactive, either a pauper or living on unearned income left her by her husband. In view of the omission of married women's occupations (and I will deal shortly with simply missing, as opposed to omitted, occupations), it is likely that the same problem affected widows. An economic role for widows is supported by the fact (evident from population listings) that they did not normally relinquish headship of the household to adult children, male or female. Widows were much more likely to head their own household than to be resident in another household.

However, it is noticeable that only some widows in any location were identified as such. For example, in Westmorland in 1787, only 42 of 852 adult women were designated 'widow', which cannot possibly account for all widows in the population. At Chilvers Coton in 1836, most female household heads were identified as 'Widow', such as Widow Millington the brushmaker, but others were listed with only their christian name and family name, even where they had minor children and appear to have been widowed. Even enumerators who gave men's marital status, as at Denham, Bucks in 1745, did not always identify women's: Denham's female household heads were mostly widows, some spinsters, but many (with children) were blank. In Bocking, Essex in 1793, both Mrs Daniels (no occupation specified) and her neighbour Mary Spurg, a baker, were almost certainly widows by the presence of minor children, but neither was identified as such.

All listings exhibit the same pattern: some female household heads are designated widows but others

who give every household sign of being widows (one or more minor children with the same last name) were listed with only their christian name and family name. What is the difference between those heads of household listed as 'Widow' and those who were not identified as such? The meaning of widow beyond a woman whose husband was dead remains obscure, but regional disparities in late medieval usage are salutary reminders of the possibility of regional variation or possibly individual enumerator variation: in late medieval Southwark, 'widow' designated high economic status, but in Derbyshire 'widow' appears to have been used in its biblical sense of deserving poor.[23] It remains unclear how 'widow' was used in eighteenth and nineteenth-century population listings, except that it was not automatically used for all women who had been married.

RATES OF LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

The Table below shows the proportion of recorded occupations among adult women in ten listings dating from 1745 to 1836, showing household-head listings first (where only the household head was named) and then individual listings (where all adults at least were named). The proportion of women identified as in employment varies between 8% in Bocking in 1807 and 92% in Denham in 1745.

Table: Proportions of recorded occupations among adult women 1745-1836

Population listing	Date	Number families	Number adult females	Female Household Heads		Women ascribed occupation	
				%	No	*%*	*No*
Denham, Buckinghamshire	1745	166		*23*	39	*92*	*36*
Barlborough, Derbyshire	1792	142		*20*	29	*83*	*24*
Bocking, Essex	1793	634		*16*	103	*67*	*69*
Bocking, Essex	1807	553		*17*	95	*8*	*8*
Smalley, Derbyshire	1801	115		*10*	12	*33*	*4*[24]
Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire	1836	518		*20*	102	*81*	*83*[25]
Westmorland	1787		852			*83*	*708*
Sturminster Newton, Dorset	1801		479[26]			*58*	*280*
Melbury Osmond, Dorset	1801		116			*49*	*57*[27]
Winwick, Lancashire (occupational descriptors only)	1801		194			*33*	*64*

23 Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*, 87-9.
24 Two paupers, a baker and a schoolmistress.
25 The most frequent occupations were weavers and winders, both also male occupations.
26 Excluding workhouse population.
27 Spinners 39; servants 7; weavers 6; spoolers 3; warper 1; mantuamaker 1.

Winwick, Lancashire (with Agric, Mfr columns)	1801		194			*70*	*136*

The confusions over designating women by marital status, and the conventions of recording ever-married women's occupations, warn us against interpreting these figures as accurate representations of local female labour force participation. In Winwick in 1801, the difference between counting only occupational descriptors among the 194 adult women (over the age of 14) and counting the additional columns of agriculture and manufacture more than doubles the percentage of women in gainful employment, from 33% to 70%. Among the (apparently) married women the employment rate rises from zero to 55% (36 of 65). And the 'total' figure of 70% does not include women in trade or services because the enumerator did not include a column for 'other' types of economic activity so they are excluded.

Take the case of Bocking which, like Winwick, has consecutive population listings. In 1793,[28] 67% of Bocking's female household heads were ascribed an occupation, the most frequent of which was spinner. In the 1807 listing, that proportion had fallen to 8%: a cardmaker, a farmer, a publican, two schoolmistresses, a shopkeeper and a turnpike keeper – but no spinners. The textile industry was at the tail end of a very long decline in this period but the complete disappearance of spinners is not explained by decline of the woollen textile industry in the area.[29] In 1807 there were still at least 61 (male) weavers in Bocking.[30] Over 350 spinners would have been required to keep that number of weavers in yarn. In 1793, 170 of the household heads in the town were weavers (ten of them female). This number of weavers would have required over 1000 spinners,[31] whereas the census only recorded 39 heads of household as spinners. There were not enough women in the whole of Bocking to keep the weavers in yarn. Some of their yarn was sourced from surrounding villages, but a considerable number of the married women – and the adult women living in others' houses – were probably also spinning. (The households of weavers contained a particularly high proportion of extra female labour.)

28 The creation of a census in Bocking in August 1793 probably had something to do with the founding of the Essex Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Industry on 30 September 1793. An Account of the origins of that body was printed at Bocking in 1793 and two of the most prosperous clothiers/farmers, Nottidge and Savill, subscribed one guinea p.a.; it gave awards to the best male and best female servant in husbandry.

29 That decline is described in A.F.J. Brown, *Essex at Work* (Chelmsford, 1969), ch.1 and Tom Sokoll, *Household and Family Among the Poor: The Case of Two Essex Communities in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Bochum, 1993), but neither addresses the issue of the disappearance of spinners over the period.

30 Seventy-two men were identified as weavers, but one was in the almshouse and in 11 cases the head of household appears to be absent by the headcount. Sokoll, *Household and Family*, 193, counts 69 weavers in Bocking in 1807 and Brown 59.

31 I use Craig Muldrew's ratio of 1 weaver to 6 spinners, but Brown uses a ratio of 1:5 (*Essex at Work*, 6) and Sokoll uses 1:6 (*Household and Family*, 187, 191). It is quite possible that there were more than 170 weavers in Bocking, since only household heads' occupations were listed and many weavers had extra adult labour in their households, both male and female.

So when the 1807 enumerator recorded no household head as spinning, this is unlikely to be the real situation. Given the occupations he did report, he appears to be deciding to report only the better off women.

Bocking provides a good illustration not only of what a difference an enumerator makes, but also makes possible the identification of other missing occupations because we know the major employers. In 1807 there was a hemp manufacturer, but no one is recorded as being employed by him, or producing hemp or spinning hemp; there was a straw hat manufacturer but no employees or straw gatherers, curers or plaiters. The fulling mill would have required the collection of fuller's earth, urine, soapwort and teazles, but no one is reported as a collector or cultivator these products. Someone with a different occupational descriptor, or with no occupational descriptor, must have been doing these jobs.

Missing occupations can also be identified by comparing listings in different places. In Denham, Bucks (1745) and Barlborough, Derbyshire (1792) the most frequently occurring occupation of female household heads is chairwoman, or charwoman (28% in Denham; 38% in Barlborough)[32] – that is, a woman who does household tasks like washing, cooking, cleaning, scouring, polishing, ironing, fire-building, childminding, spinning, knitting, threshing hempseed, sorting thistles. In short, whatever household task, whether strictly domestic or agricultural or manufacturing, needed doing. A charwoman was a servant on a daily rather than a live-in basis. Account books again make clear the amount of 'charring' that was hired in by the day. Yet not a single charwoman head of household appears at all in Bocking or Winwick, which seems distinctly implausible: both parishes contained substantial estates and inns which were unlikely to rely wholly on live-in labour. In the 1767 Return of Papists for London, the most frequently occurring title was 'day labourer'. Perhaps that was used as a synonym for charwomen. Outside the capital it is extremely rare to find a female 'day labourer', but it is hard to imagine that that is because they did not exist.[33]

The Sturminster Newton, Dorset listing in 1801 is, like the Return of Papists, an individual rather than a household head listing and more than half of the 479 adult women were ascribed an occupation (with the proviso that no married woman was ascribed the same occupation as her husband if he were the head of household[34]). It must have been a very prosperous town, with 13 mantuamakers and 10

32 A high proportion of charwomen heads of household suggests impoverished communities, but this is belied insofar as the second most common occupation in Barlborough was farmer (21%).

33 See Anderson, 'Variations', 206 for a dismissal of the idea that labourers' wives worked for pay in the nineteenth century. His assumptions cannot be checked for 1767 because the London Return of Papists did not record marital status.

34 Married inmates or married servants might both be described as servants.

schoolmistresses,[35] despite the fact that nearly three quarters of all women identified as in employment were spinners. Another 19% were servants – almost entirely to gentry, shopkeepers and farmers. But there is a distinctive entry in the 'Occupations' column in Sturminster Newton which appears six times: 'no profession'. It appears to be a mark of high status, since it was awarded to two wives (of an esquire and a butcher), three widows (one whose son was a victualler, one who let rooms to a schoolmistress, and one who lived with a female servant), and a singlewoman living in a married grazier's household with her own servant. Another enumerator might have recorded these women as 'Independent'. The implication is that those women for whom the 'Occupations' column was left blank (42% of the total) were not entitled to the description 'no profession'. They had to work for a living but for some reason the label charwoman, used so frequently in Denham and Barlborough, did not present itself to the enumerator of Sturminster Newton. The fact that there were only two 'washers' in a population of over 1000 people seems distinctly unlikely.

Another paid employment for poor women in this period, which is highlighted in the records of overseers of the poor, is the care, personal and clothes washing, cleaning, feeding, clothing and mending for parish paupers who were ill or infirm.[36] It is almost certain that some women would have been paid for this work in Bocking in 1807, when times were so hard that 42 households with a named male head (almost one in ten) in fact contained no adult male, probably because they had left the parish looking for work.[37] Even in less impoverished times, no woman was ever listed as undertaking this type of work in a population listing. Even 'nurse' is very rare. The identification of missing labour might be extended to occupations like midwife, but this is difficult in small communities, which might have been served by a midwife living in a different parish. This is more easily done in regional listings like that for Westmorland in 1787, where it seems unlikely that the one named midwife, who might have handled 150 births per year, could serve 853 adult women.

Missing occupations become clear by comparing different listings, by noting recorded employers without employees, and by considering the work that we know from other sources had to be done, but no one is credited with doing it. In view of marital occupational conventions, missing occupations and the hidden gainful elements of housewifery, it appears that labour force participation rates even of 60,

35 Only two men were identified as schoolmasters, but the clergymen may also have taught. Mantuamakers and schoolmistresses both trained in their professions, which training required a premium and good clothes. See Erickson, 'Elinor Mosley and other milliners in the City of London Companies, 1700-1750', *History Workshop Journal* 71 (2011), 147-72.

36 Samantha Williams, 'Poor relief, welfare and medical provision in Bedfordshire: the social, economic and deographic context, c. 1770-1834', Cambridge PhD, 1998, 216-29; now published as *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760-1834* (Royal Historical Society, 2011).

37 *Essex Pauper Letters*, ed. Thomas Sokoll (Oxford, 2001), 129-30 contains examples from neighbouring Braintree in the 1820s and 30s, although any Bocking letters appear not to have survived. Of these 42 head-less households, 41 contained an adult female.

70 and 80% (Sturminster Newton, Winwick, and Westmorland, respectively) are underestimations. Most population listings only list the occupation of the household head, if they list the occupation of anyone. Listings where many residents are ascribed occupations can lull historians into thinking that they are getting a full occupational profile of the population. They are not: married women's work in particular is under-recorded.

Studies of London's female labour force in the eighteenth century have found that the great majority of married women appeared to be in employment,[38] but there is a reluctance to extrapolate from London to anywhere else, on the grounds that there may have been a great deal more employment for women in cities in general, or in the capital specifically, than in the countryside and towns. This review of rural population listings suggests that London was at least not dramatically different from the rest of the country. Economic historians tend to think that marriage was a major discontinuity in women's working lives.[39] I have suggested that this is a mistake, for three reasons: first, there is an over-emphasis on marital status due to a failure to recognise that spinster and Mrs were also occupational designations; second, the absence of occupational descriptors for women, and especially married women, has been taken at face value, rather than recognised as a recording convention; and third, population listings have been read without thinking about the ancillary employment entailed by the recorded occupations, as well as about the work that all communities required which was not recorded.

I do not discount the considerable labour required of women, especially but not exclusively married women, for domestic and childrearing responsibilities. But future calculations of female labour force participation rates from listings or censuses should be made in light of the three types of misreading that I identify here. Marital status is not what it appears to be on the surface of the written record: 'spinsters' are not necessarily unmarried; a woman called 'Mrs' may well be never-married; and the 'widows' identified in a listing are not all the widows in that population. The absence of an occupational descriptor does not necessarily signify a lack of employment: the occupation of many married women and widows, especially those following the same occupation as their husbands, were omitted by convention, regardless of their employment and even if the enumerator was personally familiar with them. I suggest that as a first step, the possibility of spinster as spinner should always be investigated first, and that historians should accept for an earlier period the 1851 census conventions

38 Erickson, 'Married women's work', *passim*; Peter Earle, 'The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', *Economic History Review* 42/3 (1989).

39 For example, Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000), 309-10.

that certain male occupations almost invariably depended on the participation of a wife. Thereafter, we could examine in more detail the work that population listings don't tell us about, both by interrogating the listings more closely and through sources like household accounts that illustrate consumption. Accurately calculating proportions of female labour force participation has the potential to alter our estimations of productivity, of sectoral change, and of personal identity, and can only enhance our understanding of economic activity.