

FAMILY FORTUNES

*Men and women of the English
middle class, 1780-1850*

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for 1850
from 1850
for 1850

Gender & the Rise of
the Bourgeoisie

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6 'The hidden investment': women and the enterprise

... 'tis evident that men can be their own advisers and their own directors, and know how to work themselves out of difficulties and into business better than women.

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 1722

Women's identification with the domestic and moral sphere implied that they would only become active economic agents when forced by necessity. As the nineteenth century progressed, it was increasingly assumed that a woman engaged in business was a woman without either an income of her own or a man to support her. She already shared with the men of her class the spiritual stumbling blocks to active pursuit of business. But unlike a man whose family status and self-worth rose through his economic exertions, a woman who did likewise risked opprobrium for herself and possible shame for those around her. Structured inequality made it exceedingly difficult for a woman to support herself on her own, much less take on dependants. But beyond the negative effects on women who openly operated in the market, the construction of domestic ideology and the lure of new patterns of consumption offered attractive alternatives.

At a time when the concept of occupation was becoming the core element in masculine identity, any position for women other than in relation to men was anomalous. In the 1851 census, the Registrar General introduced a new fifth class, exclusively made up of women:

The 5th class comprises large numbers of the population that have hitherto been held to have no occupation; but it requires no argument to prove that the *wife*, the *mother*, the *mistress* of an *English family* – fills offices and discharges duties of no ordinary importance; or that children are or should be occupied in filial or household duties, and in the task of education, either at home or at school.¹

This conception had been developing over a long period. In the late seventeenth century, for example, trade tokens used by local shopkeepers and small masters carried the initials of the man and woman's first name and the couple's surname, but by the late eighteenth century only the initials of the man were retained.² This serves to confirm a contemporary's view (born 1790) that whereas his mother had confidently joined in the family auctioneering business, the increased division of the sexes had seen the withdrawal of women from business life within his own lifetime.³

The resulting picture of what middle-class women were actually doing

and how they survived is fragmentary. Local records inevitably favour men's role in both enterprise and market relations. While in both the urban and rural areas women made up just over 50 per cent of the middle-class population, they were only 28 per cent of testators leaving wills and 20 per cent of household heads in the census sample. Information on women's occupations where they were not a household head is so unreliable as to be almost useless, and, by definition, married women were not considered heads of households. In the census sample, 69 per cent of female household heads were widows and 21 per cent single women, and by default the discussion of women's occupations must centre mainly on these groups. For women, marriage was indeed a 'trade' and as economic actors they appear as shadows behind the scenes of the family enterprise.

Alice Clark for the seventeenth and Ivy Pinchbeck for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have outlined the slow shift from women's active participation in commerce, farming and other business pursuits. From their work it is clear that the consolidation of textile production in the market, the first sector to be so organized, had already had a strong impact on women's by-employments such as spinning which had been carried on in even quite prosperous families.⁴ The loss of opportunities to earn increased the dominance of marriage as the only survival route for middle-class women as illustrated by the metamorphosis of the term 'spinster', from one who spins to an unmarried woman. By the nineteenth century, the courtesy title, *Mrs* (shortened from mistress), which included single women who had reached middle age, fell into disuse. 'Spinsters' were given this somewhat perjorative label throughout their lives. By the second half of the nineteenth century, a woman's own first name came to be used only when she was single or widowed, while the convention of designating a married woman by both her *husband's* first and surname, prefixed by *Mrs*, became the common practice and was seen as a form of respect paid to middle-class rather than working-class women.

A number of developments fostered the contradiction between women's perceived and actual relation to the economy. One of the most important was the growth of scale, creating divisions between larger and smaller operations. The 26 per cent of Suffolk farms where only family labour was employed would be a vastly different setting for the farmer's wife and female relatives than for a woman like Jane Ransome Biddell whose husband farmed over 1000 acres, and where numerous servants including a housekeeper were employed, releasing her to take part in the cultural and intellectual life of nearby Ipswich.⁵ In manufacturing, the cannibalizing of modest independent workshops by larger, better financed concerns, spelt the doom for many female entrepreneurs. As such enterprises were drawn more heavily into the regional or even national market, the tendency was to specialize, to produce for agents or middle men who would consolidate products. The shift to arable farming, for example, meant that in Essex and Suffolk subsidiary activities like dairying sharply declined, precisely the area of farm work which had been traditionally women's work. Cheese making, which had taken place on almost every farm over a certain size, where the farmer's wife used her own labour augmented by her daughters, nieces, sisters or living-in dairymaids, shifted to centralized production in

other parts of the country. By 1843, when the Royal Commission on Women and Children in Agriculture made its investigation, it was announced that the patience, skill and strength needed to produce cheese made this work unsuitable for women.⁶ The preferred activities of corn growing and cattle fattening 'give but little trouble to the housewives of the present generations' according to an Essex commentator.⁷

The general trend to supersede craft training and experience was particularly disadvantageous for women, compounded by their exclusion from a more scientific culture. In farming, for example, the introduction of both hand and steam powered machinery, and the use of chemistry for fertilizers increased impediments for women farmers.⁸ Larger units of production with more rational work flows implied a larger workforce increasingly made up of day labourers, most of whom no longer had a chance of becoming independent producers, thus destined to remain social inferiors. There was a growing feeling that genteel women, particularly the young and unmarried, should be removed from contact with such a workforce both by physical separation and psychological barriers. With a predominantly male workforce, it was even more difficult for women to wield authority. This is sharply illustrated by changes in farming practice. For a variety of reasons, since the mid eighteenth century, there had been a gradual displacement of female labour from the fields, except for casual seasonal tasks.⁹ The suitability of field work, indeed any outdoor work for women, was almost always discussed in moral terms, thus turning attention from the practical questions of directing labour. According to a Suffolk social commentator,

Our inquiries have convinced us that it (field labour) is a bad school of morals for girls and that the mixing up with men on whom poverty and ignorance have encrusted coarse and vulgar habits, tends to greatly uncivilise and demoralize women of maturer years; single women whose characters for chastity are blemished, work in the fields, the topics of conversation and the language that is used amongst the men and women are described as coarse and filthy.¹⁰

Such attitudes multiplied the problems already faced by farmer's wives who no longer acted as house-mistress overseeing the men's domestic life. Supervision of field work on far-flung acreages meant riding horseback, often alone, to deal with the labourers. While this may have given added status and authority to male farmers, thus 'elevated above their work force',¹¹ it ran contrary to notions of feminine propriety.

These factors bore particularly heavily on women operating in their own right. As long as their economic contribution remained within the family they could continue to be active. It was external relations which raised more acute difficulties. In addition to dealing with a wage labour force, there were also clients, bankers, solicitors and agents. These would be men with increasingly fixed expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour. Many of these men, while willing to act as protectors and intermediaries for dependent women, would neither expect nor countenance their independent economic action.

Within this pattern, certain activities became more closely associated with one or the other gender. Some of these connections stemmed from previous male monopolies through the gild system, even where it had faded to a

remnant. The exclusion of women from the ranks of the building trades – joinery, wheelwrights and smiths – had serious consequences since it was from these crafts that engineering, surveying and architecture developed. Other gender typing was of more recent origin. The equation of outdoor activity with men, and the indoors as the setting for respectable femininity affected the division of labour in a myriad of ways from farming, as above, to the expectation that within an enterprise women could do preparation of products and services or finance as long as these activities were kept out of sight.

An effort was made to have certain tasks performed by the expected gender. If a family failed to produce the requisite boy or girl, man or woman, the wider kinship or friendship network could be tapped to make up the deficiency. Among the better off, hired labour of the correct age and sex could be substituted. In lesser establishments, tasks usually assigned to one gender might have to be undertaken by the other, at least behind closed doors. This crossing of such a significant boundary, if made visible, could be taken as a sign of social inferiority when social status was crucial to building a picture of creditworthiness. The equation of women with domesticity came to be one of the fixed points of middle-class status. Yet the development of the market did offer some enticements for women to use their skills if not their capital. It may, indeed, be argued that the concerted attack on any display of female *sexual* independence may have much to do with fears about new opportunities for their *economic* activity.

Women and property

As Ann Whitehead has succinctly argued, property forms indicate relationships between people mediated by the disposition and control of things.¹² The middle class in this period, far from taking the opportunities afforded by the move away from land as the main form of property, continued to build on the principles of patrilineality, and patriarchy. Middle-class women continued to be on 'the margins of ownership' in a manner analogous to the restraints often imposed on working-class women (particularly when married) who had to or wished to sell their labour power within artisan culture.¹³ Intense fears surrounded the 'impertinent' independent mill girl who refused the paternalistic discipline of domestic service or even the oversight of the parental home, and who might also, it was felt, refuse to fit the role of respectable working-man's wife. A similar if less often expressed alarm surrounded the idea of middle-class women using their skills or property to establish independent careers. It could, in fact, be argued that much of the concern about women working in mines and fields expressed in the 1840s was a transplanted discussion of deep seated uneasiness about the middle class itself. Although he was proud of his daughter who ran a successful school, a Quaker farmer solemnly warned her that she would never marry if she was known 'only as a School Mistress'.¹⁴

The relationship of women to property had never been made explicit. While John Locke had directly linked the concept of property ownership to independence, both he and Thomas Hobbes did not clarify how women's control of property and their expected subordination within the family

Women could only operate property through kinship networks which, by definition, included both sexes. There is some evidence from the wills and census sample that sisters, and to a lesser extent, aunts and nieces, shared property as well as ways of making a livelihood in all-female households, but this was a mainly unmarried minority. The limitations on women's control of property, then, had not only serious implications for individuals but more generally for the ties of women to each other and the possibility of creating any but the most ephemeral alliances to support their mutual interests.³¹

Women's contribution to the enterprise

In the earlier part of the period when household and enterprise were so intermingled there was only a narrow line between the prohibition on married women acting in a business capacity and their encouragement to pledge their husband's credit as a housekeeper. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, the view hardened that female relatives were and should be dependants. The move to separate family affairs from business was a potent expression of these changes. The same forces which favoured the rise of the private company and ultimately the business corporation, the development of public accountability and more formal financial procedures also shifted the world of women ever further from the power of the active market.

Within this context, it is not surprising that the transformation of honorary positions into salaried posts which has been observed for men is scarcely discernible for women. There was no precedent for female access to a post such as parish clerk, for example, which became secularized in the nineteenth century. The parish clerk had derived from the clerical assistant to the priest, described in an Essex parish as 'a man who is able to make a will or write a letter for anyone in the parish . . . the universal father to give away brides, and the standing god-father to all new born bantlings'.³² Women had to wait until the late nineteenth-century establishment of bureaucratic positions based on meritocratic principles for which they could prepare themselves and to which they could appeal.

A second consequence of economic dependency has been the overshadowing of women's contribution to the enterprise. Recent sociological studies have had to rediscover the vital part played by wives in small businesses and the support systems they provided for many male occupations, the recognition of women as a 'hidden investment'.³³ But in the nineteenth century female involvement in the enterprise was widespread, not just wives but also daughters, sisters, nieces, mothers, aunts, cousins and occasionally unrelated female 'friends'. First, there is abundant evidence for the direct contribution of women's capital to the family enterprise. The son of an Essex farmer whose brothers had all become farmers was able to combine his self-education with £800 brought by his wife at marriage to start a successful boys' school. When her father died leaving £600 the school was expanded into purpose-built premises.³⁴ Among the lower middle class, women were constantly used as sources of small sums to start off a business or as credit. In 1831, an Ipswich baker, facing a series of heavy financial

demands, borrowed £4 from two of his sisters-in-law to pay off his flour supplier.³⁵

This is a story repeated many times over. George Courtauld borrowed lump sums from his sister and a female friend in the early days of the Essex silk mill. When he married, he and his new bride, Ruth Minton, used her marriage portion to live on so that all profits could be re-invested in the mill. She saw this as part of her contribution along with keeping house. She wrote to a friend: 'I am no longer that useless, unconnected being who lived only for herself, a burden to her Friends.' When George later went to America leaving their eldest son, Samuel, in charge, Ruth Courtauld gave up her house which was mortgaged so that Samuel could start free of debt. She went to live with him at the Mill House paying £30 into the household expenses as well as acting as his housekeeper. Samuel acknowledged that this aid in money and kind carried the business through a critical period. In return, his mother gained both a home and livelihood, although at a lower standard. She also felt she had played an active role in the family establishment.³⁶

The combination of women contributing resources and gaining a place was common. Dorothy Wordsworth when in her early 20s, lived as a 'mother's help' with her elder brother, a Suffolk vicar. After she had inherited her share of the family property (£1800 invested at 4 per cent), she and her brother William were able to set up housekeeping and later she helped care for William's children.³⁷ There was a variety of ways in which women made financial contributions to the enterprise. A sister asked no interest on a loan of £150 for the first three years of a manufacturing enterprise as well as keeping house and helping in the business.³⁸

The skills and contacts women brought could enrich male careers. In food manufacturing businesses it was the recipe provided by a sister or a wife which became the secret of success.³⁹ Some women who had been in domestic service had access to employers' good will. A quondam master might stand guarantor or even give a legacy. A Birmingham bookseller's prosperous business was based on the batch of books given to his sister when she left service.⁴⁰ Service gave young women wider horizons and specialized skills. An Essex woman, having been an upper servant in a town family, returned to marry a man from a farming family who had descended to being a wage-paid team man. Marriage to this 'remarkable woman' who was able to do dressmaking as well as help run the farm, restored the family to independent farming.⁴¹ Women like these sometimes provided one of the leading elements in commercial success, literacy. A contemporary who admired the wealth and position of an illiterate Birmingham auctioneer noted that:

Providence had given him a help-meet who conducted his correspondence, superintended his books, graced his hospitable board, and otherwise, by the ease and unaffected politeness of her demeanour, and the use of good, sound common sense, had contrived to make his name respected and his acquaintance deserved by men of all grades and people of all denominations.⁴²

It has been recognized that personal contacts played a central role in the functioning of both household and enterprise. Men took a keen interest in

these affairs, their letters and diaries are filled with gossip about family and friends and their attendance at social gatherings. Nevertheless, women held a special place in building and maintaining relationships. Sisters, aunts, grandmothers and female cousins were ardent matchmakers. They arranged visits for their offspring and themselves paid long visits to relatives. They gave and received gifts. It was the farmer's wife who provided the Christmas goose to be dispensed to patrons and kin. A mill owner's wife admitted that she wrote letters more often than her husband for 'he considered it more my province to keep up a correspondence with our distant relatives and friends'.⁴³ The fact that women more often designated people by name when leaving their small properties at death – a locket to a niece, a petticoat to a sister – emphasizes the importance of personal contacts in their lives.

Women's contribution to the enterprise was centred above all in the creation of its personnel. The marriage of sisters and daughters was a prime source of partners. But beyond this, women bore and raised the next generation of sons and nephews, the future partners and entrepreneurs. This task must, indeed, have consumed much time and energy for mothers and the other women involved, particularly as the physical and moral care of children had become a serious and self-conscious issue. The average of seven plus children borne to a family absorbed the married woman's life span from her late 20s (average age at birth of first child was 27.3) to her 40s (average age at birth of last child was 40.6), with birth intervals of fourteen to twenty months.⁴⁴ Aunts and older sisters also played a prominent part in raising children. They, like mothers, provided the orderly, disciplined framework which was the basis of the serious Christian household. These women saw moral and religious training as the core of their educational function. They also recognized the importance of understanding the natural world, often seen as an adjunct of the Creator's great design. Even the youngest children were started on the path to habits of self-discipline, fitting for both a commercial and religious future. The daughter of a farmer married to a bank manager looked back in late middle age on the problems of child-rearing. She emphasized the need to arrange the day in a regular pattern of activities with time periods allotted to each. Even for a toddler sitting at a table stringing beads, 'there should be a degree of perfectness and even something approaching to business habits, encouraged and expected even in these little amusements to give a worth and interest to them. Perfect play is the anticipation of perfect work'.⁴⁵

In later childhood, boys were encouraged in their exposure to a working environment. An Essex woman ensured that her eldest son was taught the family foundry business from the bottom up, overseeing his instruction by a foreman and applauding his first efforts at casting a plough.⁴⁶ For girls, it was more a question of informal apprenticeships in the duties and skills of the household, although at times these overlapped with work for the enterprise. Primarily, however, their efforts were directed to servicing the household and manpower of the enterprise. Women trained not only their own daughters but nieces and other female relatives and friends. In the 1800s, a farming household took in the 15-year-old daughter of a distant relative, also a farmer, whose wife had just died leaving a family of younger

children. The girl was taught to run a farmhouse so that she could bake and generally take over the household for her father.⁴⁷

Women played an important role in caring for pupils, shop men, apprentices as well as nephews, nieces and their younger siblings or those of their husbands who might be resident in the household. In addition to providing meals, clean linen and tidy rooms, women were responsible for the moral and emotional development of these young people. An advertisement for an apprentice in a local Birmingham paper assured its readers that the successful applicant would be treated as one of the family.⁴⁸ How much provision of either a material or psychological kind was actually given depended on the resources of the family and the personality of the women in charge. Memoirs do indicate, however, that a young aunt, a schoolmaster's wife and others in similar positions could have a strong influence on some boys in their commercial, intellectual or religious development.

Next to wives, daughters and sisters were the most important group in providing these services to households. They took over the care of children left motherless through death in childbirth; they followed their brothers to other towns or villages when they went to set up a new business. In 1822, a corn merchant who had been supporting his mother and seven younger siblings since he was a very young man came to Birmingham, accompanied by his sister as housekeeper. She remained with him in this capacity since his wife died within a year. It was only after his sister's marriage in 1846 that he married again.⁴⁹ The organizing and running of these households could reach the proportions of many commercial establishments. A Witham grocer's household included eight children and five male assistants, while establishments of up to a dozen were not unknown.⁵⁰ Clergymen who took in pupils or ran small schools regularly catered for from half a dozen to twenty pupils, the average number of resident boys in schools in the two areas being fifteen.⁵¹

Even unrelated women friends or female relatives not living in the household could play a part in middle-class youths' development. Henry Crabb Robinson, who later became a well-known man of letters in London, was the son of a Bury St Edmunds tanner. His education and general cultural development was taken in hand by Catherine Buck a woman friend of the family, half-a-dozen years his senior. Her own intellectual accomplishments must have been of a high order since she later became the close friend of Dorothy and William Wordsworth and the wife of Thomas Clarkson, philanthropist and anti-slavery advocate. She was instrumental in introducing Crabb Robinson to the London literary world, although she remains unpublished and unknown.⁵²

These instances may support the contention that, in a broad sense, women contributed cultural as well as monetary capital to the economic life of the middle class. Both these forms, however, were more indirect than the use of women's labour. Where property and educational resources were more limited, there is abundant evidence that women were working at a wide variety of tasks within the family enterprise. Their general usefulness was recognized in the advice given to young Samuel Courtauld by a business associate of his father: 'if a good wife fell in your way I would take her as an assistant even though she may not be rich in the World's wealth'.⁵³

Occasional or even continuous use of wives', daughters' or sisters' labour was easier when living quarters were near or in the working space. As late as 1854, a letter from the wife of an Essex tradesman assumed the combination of household and commercial tasks: 'In settling into my new home and duties here in the business-house, I have earnestly desired to fill my situation rightly, to be enabled to walk before our household in the fear of the Lord.'⁵⁴ In some cases, the wife would run a business next door to and often related to that of her husband, thus in the directories are found husband and wife teams of a clockmaker and tea dealer, a grocer and pork butcher. In villages, the wife or daughter/sister of a farmer might use the front room as a small shop. At a more elevated level, James Bisset, who was a Birmingham manufacturer of some standing, enjoyed a hobby of collecting to the point where he turned his house into a commercial museum run by his wife.⁵⁵

Some enterprises were premised on the steady use of female family labour. Schools were jointly run not only because women serviced the boarding pupils, but because they also taught, if only knitting and needlework to the girls. Many salaried positions for men encouraged or even required a female adjunct. Under the terms of an Essex charity, the schoolmaster was paid £32 a year to teach thirty poor boys while his wife, unpaid, was responsible for the forty girls.⁵⁶ Retail trade, in particular, enabled women of the household not only to help out but often to be the *de facto* means of providing a livelihood. A Quaker who inherited his uncle's drapery shop 'depended much on his young wife for its effective management'. Her involvement in the shop was recalled by a family story that, when suddenly called away to a customer, she popped the then baby (there were nine children) into an open drawer and forgot where she had put it.⁵⁷

Within the family business there were diverse roles women could play. Emma Gibbins held dinner parties for the partners after meetings of the Digbeth Battery Works conveniently located next door to the house.⁵⁸ The wives and daughters of several Witham solicitors regularly witnessed wills, which implies that they may also have copied documents and performed other clerical tasks. An Essex estate agent was proud of his daughter's business ability as she copied all her father's large correspondence.⁵⁹ A draper's wife represented her husband at an important funeral – an unusual step for a women – when he was 'all alone in the shop' and could not go.⁶⁰ Women might step in when husband, father or brother were ill or absent. They took messages, fended off importunate clients or creditors and ordered supplies. During harvest, if not raking hay or stacking corn, women provided the extra baking and brewing for the field workers. Even the rather flighty 17-year-old whose mid century diary is filled with genteel visiting and hints at attachments with young men, breaks off in June to record that she and her two sisters 'have been working at hay making in the Mill Fields' which prevents her visiting but, 'I don't dislike it half as much as I thought'.⁶¹ Female family labour was called in to cope with specific problems or crises in the enterprise, and many such a success story must have resembled the coach proprietor who built up a business from a small beginning through 'downright industry and a systematic application to business in which the female members of the family were called to

assist'.⁶² The implication is that once a modest level of prosperity had been reached, the female members could withdraw.

The extreme case of women's labour used to make up for the absence of male support was widowhood. The pattern of widows as temporary incumbents of an enterprise discerned in the wills is confirmed from more qualitative sources. Frequently the sequence followed the story of the Woodcock family of High Street, Colchester. William Woodcock had run a watch, clockmaking, goldsmiths and jewellers business. When he became ill, his wife, Ann, added an agency for the East India tea company. He died soon afterwards and she carried on the business with the aid of a journeyman. In 1828, her son married and took over the business which his mother had been holding for him and she retired, now aged 51, to a cottage at the rear of the shop with her three unmarried daughters.⁶³ It was not unknown for the widows of bankers, merchants and other highly placed families to play a similar part. The widow of Samuel Alexander directed the influential Ipswich bank during the interim before her son took over, while Boulton and Watt of Birmingham continued to deal with the widow of their London banker for many years.⁶⁴

Some young men benefited from this arrangement where their mother (step-mother, aunt) provided an enhanced patrimony by the time they came of age. Maria Savill, the young widow of an Essex builder, despite her responsibility for ten children and two step-children, built up the family business as a spring board for her son to become a successful architect and surveyor and founder of a family firm prominent among Chartered Surveyors for the rest of the century.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the social and business climate made it difficult for a widow to do more than hold her own economically, and many must have either chosen or been forced to settle for small incomes supplemented by traditional women's expedients such as taking in lodgers. Their children would almost certainly lose out in the economic stakes.

Women were expected to move in and out of positions directly supporting the family enterprise. They were accustomed to earning small sums of money in the interstices of household management. Farmer's wives and other female relatives were kept busy smoking, pickling and preserving food as well as daily cooking and baking. Not only did these finishing processes feed the household but 'keeping a good table' was part of their claim to respect in the rural community. It was possible to combine these activities with selling a few goods or services, although records tell us very little about the extent and variety of such income. How much, in fact, did the wife of an Essex farmer benefit from her cow keeping as reported in her husband's diary: 'Total amount for the two Alderney's made in the Year, £50=6=6. My wife took for her hard labour in managing the two cows £5=0=0 and I received £45=6=6 like all other lazy persons for doing nothing.' He also paid his daughter-in-law small sums for rearing puppies for him and his married sister one penny each for ducks she had raised.⁶⁶

Dressmaking, plain sewing and other tasks related to domestic needs would be the most obvious ways of making extra cash, but writing and teaching were also commonly fitted into a household routine. There were more unusual possibilities: Ann Constable, John's eldest sister, bred dogs.⁶⁷

Such sidelines provided goods for the household, brought in a little extra cash or in some cases were a pastime for the women of the family. The common factor in many women's activities in households at all levels, however, was that they were seldom paid as individuals. A sister working in her brother's shop, daughters working for their parents, wives with their husbands, seldom had a regular or fixed wage. A woman who had entered a clergyman's household as a religious disciple and unpaid mother's help began to supplement the family income by teaching in the evening, but found that her pupils' parents paid the minister for her services.⁶⁸

As long as the household was able to support its members, the lack of individualized income was not serious. It should be kept in mind that an individual wage did not yet have the symbolic identification with personal worth which it acquired in the twentieth century. But when women were left without support, often also without a home and social place, they might be particularly vulnerable. Often they were left with partial income such as an annuity, too low to support a respectable lifestyle no matter how circumscribed. Such women were forced to move from one relative or friend to another, caring for children, nursing the sick, giving a hand in the shop, acting as companion to an elderly aunt or uncle. The suspicion that even married women might be contributing more than their share to the household establishment and selling short their own interests was seldom voiced. But the wife of a businessman who had retired at 60 with barely enough to maintain a respectable lifestyle and nothing much to occupy his time did have reservations. She had married him to escape the drudgery of school teaching and despite a devout commitment to the values of domesticity she had a sharp eye for women's position. 'The wasted hours of most men would do almost half the work of women', she wrote to a like-minded friend.⁶⁹

In 1809, the *Ipswich Journal* ran an advertisement for a schoolmistress whose most important skills included good manners and correct conduct: 'Any lady of reduced fortune possessing the above accomplishments and being less desirous of a salary than of obtaining an eligible situation, will meet with kind and liberal treatment from the principal of the school.'⁷⁰ Such a proposition reveals that women, with some education and culture, were regarded as being able to enhance the reputation or at least give a tone of respectability to an establishment, whether a school or their own household. The appearance and behaviour of the mistress, especially when on display at church or chapel or at public events, proclaimed the respectability of the enterprise as clearly as her bonnets or dresses indicated its spending power. An Essex agent for many large estates noted in his diary how pressure from many landlords favoured Anglican communicants. He also noted that wives were almost always consulted about leases; their sobriety, sense and experience could make a difference as to whether leases would be granted, the terms and renewals.⁷¹

In their capacity as status bearers for their households, adult women faced a number of contradictory pressures. They were expected to be seen at specified public functions and often had to go from home to pay visits, if not buy household supplies or do errands for the family business. But over the period there was increasing social derogation for women who

openly walked or rode horseback except for non-utilitarian recreational or health reasons. In the eighteenth century, a prosperous farmer and brewer's wife thought nothing of riding on horseback the 20 odd miles from her village to the market town to transact her business.⁷² But with the growing emphasis on the protection of women, light-wheeled vehicles came to be their acceptable mode of transport, although more expensive to maintain than riding horses. Lack of access to means of mobility and the risks of losing status by being seen in many public places, particularly alone, was a serious disadvantage to a woman doing business.

Such obstacles to physical and social mobility were part of the way status considerations encouraged women to play down selling themselves or their products. Three sisters left in a precarious financial position by the bankruptcy and death of their father, manager for a Suffolk shipping company, turned to writing popular history books. Despite the urging of their guardian and trustee, they often refused payment for their work.⁷³ For farmers, the various corn, cattle and produce markets were their club where 'gossip of the countryside could be exchanged', particularly information about prices, turnover of farms and new farming practices. Not only were such markets off limits for women with pretensions to gentility, but their adjunct, the public house market day 'ordinary' was hardly a venue for women. By the 1830s, a Suffolk man commented on the notoriety of a female cattle dealer who sat with other dealers at The Swan, drinking and smoking a pipe and locally known as 'The Duchess', by that date considered an eccentric.⁷⁴ The change to formal marketing with its male ambience, from the financing by boards of trustees to the convivial dinners held in their spacious halls, was a serious disincentive to women.

The contributions to the enterprise through women's labour were contradicted by her role in displaying rank through the appearance of a non-working lifestyle. This contradiction was related to the more general conflict between achieving a commodious lifestyle and the more religious or cultural emphasis on education and learning, despite protestations that a religious commitment was compatible with a comfortable home life. This latent controversy was often played out by women who were particularly associated with setting the tone of the family lifestyle. Those groups whose claims were solidly based on property – the manufacturers, tradesmen and farmers – were able to build their material 'plant' in a way which was often hard to match for the spokesmen of middle-class values, the clergy. In the countryside, where farmers and clergy formed the backbone of the middle class undiluted by other groups, farmers' female relatives came in for particular criticism for their status pretensions. The wives and daughters of clergymen had seen themselves as leaders of refinement, but nevertheless looked uneasily over their shoulders as wartime prosperity raised the position of their uncultivated neighbours. There was less friction where farmers' families found themselves in areas without resident clergy and playing a leading role against superstition, folk belief and what was viewed as rural ignorance and apathy. Against this they pitted both their intense conversionist religion, commitment to scientific modes of thought and conceptions of respectable behaviour. The less educated or well travelled among the farming group might take an intermediate position on issues

such as beliefs in ghosts but on the whole they enthusiastically supported more modern ideals. In the early nineteenth century, a Quaker farmer's wife, recently moved to an extremely remote area in Suffolk and acting as the sole 'lady' of the village, took on such a role when she deliberately exposed her young children to smallpox after having them vaccinated to demonstrate the efficacy of the new frightening procedure to the villagers.⁷⁵

While all groups were deeply committed to the concept of domesticity and women's sphere within it, the explicit statement of these values seems to have been somewhat greater among the households of professional men: army officers, medical men and above all the clergy. It may have been that they were more frequently left without means of support than among those whose livelihood stemmed from more solid property. Their education and background emphasized literacy and, furthermore, their direct contribution to the professional man's earning capacity was more problematic.⁷⁶ Mary Ann Hedge, a committed spinster parishioner of the Evangelical William Marsh's church of St Peter's Colchester, wrote books for children, moral tales and novels. In one of these, her heroine was of high degree but her husband had been 'reduced' to acting as land agent to an earl. This female paragon not only does all the household cooking but draws and paints so that when her husband falls ill, she pleads to finish some sketches due for his employer. Mary Ann Hedge's approval is echoed in the husband's acknowledgement that 'the World has admired *as mine* works which were the effort of conjugal affection'.⁷⁷ This view effectually conceals the actual economic position of women within the household by presenting the wife's actions in terms of affection and moral duty. Hedge's notion of a wife's role is expressed in language suitable to a scion of a clock manufacturer's family: a wife is to be 'the grand-spring that sets in motion all the machinery of domestic comfort in regular and harmonious motion'.⁷⁸ Similar pressures were brought to bear on daughters. For example, the preparation of goods for sale could take place in back premises where the daughter with aspirations to gentility could be shielded from being seen in public but their labour might also be needed to serve customers. The balance between helping out the family enterprise by cheerfully undertaking such duties and an anxiety about maintaining the family's social standing is a constant theme in the literature aimed at young women as we have seen in Jane Taylor's novel, *Display*.

Nowhere were the contradictions and their consequences for individual women more evident than in the attitudes towards widows and their livelihood. Having proved their feminine commitment through marriage, widows were given legal and customary sanctions to enter the market. Indeed, they were often expected to be able to support themselves and their dependent children in a reversal of their acknowledged dependency within marriage, a position sometimes brutally thrust upon them. However, they were not expected to aspire beyond self-support. At a time when the unrestrained pursuit of business by men was still a questionable virtue, it was abhorrent in a woman. The Suffolk poet, George Crabbe, celebrated the wife and mother who died young, her place in the garden, the fireside chair, the church pew were hallowed by reverent memories. She is contrasted with the surviving widow, her head full of accounts, ruling her

household with a rod of iron, whose sons long for her death.⁷⁹ Few widows had the option of remaining in active business with high incomes. Realistically a widow's chances of operating near that level were remote and above all such ambition ran against the grain of feminine propriety. The bankers, solicitors and agents as well as fellow (*sic*) traders, merchants, farmers or manufacturers with whom she would have to deal would have been men with firm ideas of proper feminine behaviour. For those widows who could, it was easier to retire on to a fixed income. In the 1790s, Matthew Boulton wrote to his partner about the sale of an iron manufactory, reporting that the 'assigned reason for selling is that many of the company are females, who do not find it convenient to carry on such extensive concerns'.⁸⁰ By mid century inconvenience had changed to social catastrophe.

Widows faced a range of difficulties. For example, as farming became more rationalized and profit oriented, those landowners who had invested heavily in improvements sought tenants who would be 'intelligent and enterprising',⁸¹ not the received stereotype of a widow. George Eliot, an estate steward's daughter, described a fictional case of the farmer's widow whose husband's dying wish had been for her to carry on the farm. When she goes to plead her case with the landlord she is dismissed in just these terms of an appeal to both the supposed capacities and right conduct of femininity. 'You are about as able to carry on a farm as your best milch cow. You'll be obliged to have some managing man, who will either cheat you out of your money, or wheedle you into marrying him.' The landlord goes on to predict that the farm will run down and she will get in arrears with the rent. She argues back that she knows 'a deal o'farming an' was brought up i' the thick on it' and that her husband's great-aunt managed a farm for twenty years and left legacies to her 'nephys an' nieces. Phsa! a woman six feet high with a squint and sharp elbows, I daresay - a man in petticoats; not a rosy cheeked widow like you'. This widow knows that once all the stock have been sold and debts paid she will have hardly anything to live on. Since this is fiction, the secretly benevolent landlord arranges to have a cottage let to her at low rent with a plot for a cow and some pigs where she will be able to live in suitable retirement.⁸²

However, landlords in the real world, while subscribing to a similar view of women's place, were not as helpful or were often unable to be as liberal. John Oxley-Parker, the agent for a large number of landowners in mid Essex in the 1830s, was called in to negotiate the lease of a widow who had kept on a farm after her husband's death. Along with her neighbouring farmers and her brother-in-law, he urged her to give up the attempt. He noted in his diary in connection with this case how important it was for tenants to have both character and capital. The questions he asked himself about a prospective tenant were: 'Was he an energetic farmer? Did he know his job and use his initiative in doing it?' Oxley-Parker finally urged the widow to throw herself on the mercy of the landlord, a member of a wealthy Colchester banking and farming family, but to no avail and she had to leave the farm with no compensation.⁸³

For many women, however, a release from the drudgery and anxiety of economic activity was a realistic ambition, not to be dismissed simply as status striving. The prosperous farmer dressed in white buckskin trousers

and beaver hat riding over his acres, directing his men, attending market was 'working' but very much in a managerial capacity. So too the farmer's wife aspired to be freed from heavy manual tasks. A farmer's daughter who remembered the work involved in the hot dinners with boiled beef and, at Harvest, special cakes and home brewed beer, was not surprised that 'farmer's wives were glad when the men boarded themselves and all their wage was paid in money' although it 'snapped some of the ties which bound the servant and master as fellow creatures'.⁸⁴

The majority of women knew that they would have to work within the household if not the enterprise. It was rather the way their contribution was defined which was significant. The evolution of the concept of work in relation to women's activities is suggestive here. Catherine Marsh, Rev. William Marsh's daughter, growing up first in Colchester and then Birmingham as part of an Evangelical household, was held up as a model of feminine behaviour as she helped her father in his ministerial duties. She wrote letters, saw callers and ran the house after her mother's death. Her friend and biographer recalls that Catherine was always busy, always 'working'. She defined this term: 'Fine needlework in young days and when there was a later fashion for crochet bonnets she quickly made 27 for her friends.'⁸⁵ 'Berlin wool work' first made its appearance in Colchester in 1796 and was seen as initiating the vogue for amateur needlework and 'useless' crafts, characteristic of nineteenth-century middle-class women's definition of work.⁸⁶

Women, then, did not necessarily conceive of themselves as 'working', but they did have a stern conception of duty, the moral imperatives which made them ever ready family aids. They expected and were expected by others to be on call to help family and friends. After his wife's death, the childless shopkeeper, John Perry, made constant calls on the support of his relatives. Among others, his unmarried niece came to stay to help him 'in the department of looking over my linen'.⁸⁷ Yet some of the more prescient seemed to have been aware of their vulnerable position. The daughters of a silk merchant tried to educate themselves, partly for enjoyment but also, as one wrote, they had 'early seen how precarious was the tenure of wealth derived from business with its incessant fluctuations'.⁸⁸

The education of women and its effects

Like men, women's first duty was to train themselves for a religious life. But for women this could also be the central aim of education. When Jane Taylor, as editor of a religious youth's magazine, was consulted about a young lady's education she answered: 'The grand end which we ought to propose to ourselves in every intellectual study is *moral* improvement' (her emphasis).⁸⁹ Learning was to be used in the service of others. The young sister of a Colchester Independent minister struggled against ill health to 'gain more knowledge to enable me to become an agreeable and suitable companion' to her beloved elder brother.⁹⁰ But in addition, since women were regarded as central to the image of family status, their training was directed to that end. The arts, drawing, piano playing, knowledge of French which became the staple, and much derided, fare of female

accomplishments, were deliberately paraded as being the opposite of business duties. A tradesman's daughter whose experience had been in teaching young boys tried to obtain a position as a schoolmistress. She could offer a sound grounding in grammar, geography and arithmetic but every advertisement, even for farmer's families in the country required music, French and the various accomplishments of what was called a 'genteel education'.⁹¹ Catherine Hutton recalled in later years that when she was growing up in the Birmingham of the 1770s there were no boarding schools for girls. The day school she went to provided an education limited to spelling and reading from the Bible plus a little needlework.⁹²

Given these restricted facilities, what went on in the family was central to girls' development. Some more progressive parents like the members of Birmingham's Lunar Society taught their daughters in the same mode as their sons. One of the society, Erasmus Darwin, published *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* in 1797, a most enlightened document. Not only did he argue for the importance of girls being educated at school rather than at home, he also wanted science and mathematics in the curriculum.⁹³ A modest Birmingham manufacturer was ready to sacrifice his dining room furniture for the education of his children, both his sons and daughters.⁹⁴ Thus a minority of middle-class girls, especially those from professional families, were exposed to a general liberal education. The aims of that education, however, were specifically non-vocational. Unlike their brothers, such young women were not expected to add vocational training. Even the occasional high standards achieved in painting, music or languages were contained within an amateur framework.⁹⁵ In 1805 a girl from a Unitarian Essex family, who had been taught Latin by her father, carefully copied a maxim attributed to Arthur Young into her commonplace book:

The conversation of men not engaged in trifling pursuits is the best school for the education of women.⁹⁶

Undoubtedly where there was an intellectually inquiring atmosphere in the home and men were committed to the education of their daughters and sisters, young women had a better chance of a broad exposure to a variety of subjects than in the confines of girls' schools. Home education was also preferred since girls' moral and physical development could be more closely supervised and the centrality of the family enhanced.

Most middle-class girls were excluded from the staple fare of the reformed grammar schools as well as the new boys' academies. The original foundation of many grammar schools had been for the respectable poor of both sexes, but had long been appropriated for middle-class boys. Of the 593 adult males in an Essex village at the turn of the century, fifty-six had had a free education at the local grammar school, almost all sons of farmers and tradesmen but also a few 'mechanics'. A handful of these boys, including the two sons of the vicar, took up the annual free place at Christ Church, Cambridge offered through the grammar school.⁹⁷ None of these opportunities would have been possible for local girls. Basic Latin and Greek, the ticket for entry into law, medicine and the Anglican clergy, were effectively closed to girls as well as the newer commercial and scientific subjects,

although the latter were sometimes offered in a watered down version. Botany, for example, was rewritten for young women with the sexual classification of plants expurgated.⁹⁸ Natural history subjects were offered for their moral and religious analogies as much as scientific potential. 'The study of nature leads us to nature's God' wrote Mary Ann Hedge, in a book on the training of girls.⁹⁹

Parents, making a realistic expectation of economic returns from their children's education, invested more heavily for boys. Girls were expected to make do with the teaching of unpaid kin and friends. It was at the margins that these decisions were especially significant, as when a small farmer sent his sons to school but refused to let his daughters go since they needed only to milk, sew, cook and bear children.¹⁰⁰ When girls attended school, their commitment might be less than their brothers. A newly opened seminary for Young Ladies and Gentlemen in Ipswich in 1809 offered reduced prices for 'Young Ladies whose other engagements allow them to attend only half days.'¹⁰¹ Girls could expect their schooling to last only a year or two or to be interrupted by family demands. The daughter of the manager of a small town gas works was brought back from boarding school to help in the house since no servant was kept.¹⁰² Boys, too, would be recalled to enter the family business, if necessary, but the disjunction between the content and form of their education and their subsequent business life was not as great. Home education could be even more easily set aside if parents or older siblings who were teaching had other demands on their time. The regime of the governess and visiting master was only employed by the wealthiest already committed to a general education for their daughters. For the others, their lessons often had to be fitted in around general household schedules and the distractions of the family business.

Emily Shore was the daughter of a rural clergyman who also boarded half a dozen pupils. A bright child, she was taught Latin and Greek by her father and English and history by her mother. Even at an early age she was teaching her younger siblings. In 1831, at age 13, she wrote a sketch, 'The Interruptions', illustrating the impossibility of reading an extract of history to her mother as the housemaid, cook and nursemaid wanted directions, callers came to the door, a thimble was lost and the younger children wanted attention. Emily Shore's routine included afternoon calls with her mother, visits to the poor and Sunday school teaching, all regarded as equally if not more important than her intellectual development. Undirected, she veered between a passionate, and somewhat guilty love of poetry and a self-imposed heroic programme of reading and rote learning complete with wall charts, a not unusual combination for girls with such tastes. Such an agenda had no aims and no end, either in its own terms or in recognition from external bodies or in leading to an occupation. Often such preoccupations looked odd if not selfish or even immoral. In her mid teens, Emily experienced a breakdown which she interpreted as having 'overtaxed my strength with study' and turned to learning housekeeping which she had previously despised but which now made her feel useful.¹⁰³

Girls from wealthy and cultured homes, such as the Galton and Moilliet banking families of Birmingham, were educated by mothers who themselves were freed from involvement in the enterprise and who had enough help

in the household to take their daughters' training seriously. This was supplemented by special teachers coming in for music, languages and dancing plus the odd year at boarding school.¹⁰⁴ In homes with a good library and encouragement to use it, some women in the upper echelons were able to reach high levels of literary and even scholarly achievement. These young women were also likely to be offered at least a limited form of travel within Great Britain if not abroad, a favourite theme in their travels being literary excursions, as, for example, the visit of an Ipswich girl to the setting of Scott's novels.¹⁰⁵ These were the young women who also benefited from long visits to the homes of relatives and friends which widened their horizons. Jane Ransome Biddell, born 1782, was the Quaker daughter of a wealthy Ipswich manufacturer. Both before and after her marriage to an equally wealthy Anglican farmer, through her education and cultural activities she had entry into the upper echelons of the town. She was an admiring friend of local elite families like the Cobbolds, owners of a local brewing firm who themselves had produced a group of clergymen and women who helped to set the tone of Ipswich society. A woman like Jane Ransome Biddell had a housekeeper to aid her management of the household of nine children. She might well have had more time for cultural pursuits than her busy husband who was immersed in the farm and surveying business. She wrote poetry, some of which was published in local newspapers.¹⁰⁶

Continued self-education was permitted to women like Jane Biddell. It was rather the women in the middle and lower ranks who were culturally most disadvantaged. Their sole avenue of mental cultivation was the Sunday school. There were no facilities beyond the lending libraries which often gave limited access to women. The Mechanics Institutes and Literary and Philosophical Societies which were so important for their male equivalents were usually closed to young women. They might only be admitted to selected public functions or borrow books to read at home; occasionally to use the reading rooms at prescribed times. The Colchester Literary Society only allowed women to use the rooms after 5 p.m. in the later nineteenth century when subscriptions were falling.¹⁰⁷ In most cases, women were excluded from both regular meetings and discussion groups or managing committees. Lower subscriptions and admission fees for women reflect both their secondary status and less ready access to cash. At the Ipswich Mechanics Institute in the 1840s, the novelty of a woman lecturing on women's issues received full press coverage but little local support.¹⁰⁸ The Book Clubs, Debating Societies, and Natural History Field Clubs which were heavily used by apprentices and shopmen were for the most part off limits to young women. Only Quaker and some nonconformist circles encouraged semi-formal outlets for both 'youths and maidens'.

The effect of such a regime on the lives of young women, particularly among those not elevated enough to benefit from a liberal education or lowly enough to take a full part in making a living, was to promote a concept of respectability which began to close off knowledge of the world outside family, friends and co-religionists. Bowdlerized reading matter and lack of experience combined to create a real need for male protection, not least in financial affairs. An exclusive interest in the home, either as the site

of a status-enhancing lifestyle or a religious commitment for themselves and their children, reinforced the disinterest in business affairs being put forward in the prescriptive literature. Undoubtedly there were many discrepancies between the aphorisms and ideals copied into girls' commonplace books and the circumstances of their own lives. But to underestimate the effect of such literature would be foolhardy, particularly when it was combined with property forms which reinforced dependence. The preponderance of historical records from men and the shadowy forms of many women's lives makes the interpretation of this problem even more acute. It is almost impossible to know how a woman like Elizabeth Gardner, wife of a brewer and wine merchant in a small Essex town, was regarded or how she saw herself in relation to the family business. The firm was run by her husband from an office in the house next door to the brewery. In the 1840s their income was enough to employ a nurse and two maids to help with the six children, leaving Mrs Gardner free for local philanthropic ventures such as penny readings as well as a social life including friendship with the vicar. She was, however, also intimately connected to the brewery to the point where she was able to take over when her husband died and the business became known as E. Gardner and Son.¹⁰⁹

Women as teachers

Official sources only allow a detailed knowledge of the occupations of widows and spinsters. By far the largest group of these women, 63 per cent, were listed as 'independent'. Of women in active occupations, the category of professional was most common; undoubtedly mostly schoolmistresses either owning their own schools or employed by others. Professionals were followed by trade and then by innkeeping and farming. In part, the occupations of women, as of men, depended on the area. In 1851, female headed households in farming predominated in the villages, for example, while the highest proportion of salaried female heads were found in central Birmingham.¹¹⁰ In all areas, however, when women were called upon to contribute income or become the sole support of a household, as Mrs Gaskell's little Miss Matty knew, 'teaching was, of course, the first thing that suggested itself'.¹¹¹ As the period neared mid century, teaching became the only occupation in which middle-class women could preserve something of their status. By 1851, women made up 64 per cent of the teaching force in Essex and 79 per cent in Birmingham.¹¹²

A variety of factors attracted women to teaching in addition to its relatively high status. Teaching was seen as an extension of childrearing which was being given special emphasis within serious Christianity. It needed few resources and little training to enter. Changes in the location and methods of instructing the young were making teaching into a more recognized activity, less casual and more formal but not to the point where women were forced out. As with many other activities, to be a schoolmaster or mistress was not necessarily a fixed occupation, although there were moves in that direction. Teaching could be taken up as a by-employment by women running households or engaged in a different family business.¹¹³

Like other enterprises, too, schools were embedded in the local economy,

were in trade in the two areas were nonconformists of some variety (see Tables 1 and 2). Women were more visibly active in retail trade than almost any other family enterprise. They also had a greater part to play in the affairs of the local chapel than in the hierarchically organized Anglican church. It is possible that a combination of these factors contributed to the special concern over the status of women in trade. Whatever the reasons, owning or working in a shop, which might have been the height of ambition for the working-class woman, could represent the depths of degradation from the perspective of the upper middle class.

The marginal place of women in the economy

Women had been active in the early days of manufacturing enterprises when the scale was small and linked to direct sales. Birmingham women in the eighteenth century were known to be manufacturing in workshops, sometimes with male relatives or, as widows, on their own. George Holyoake's father had moved from being an independent bucklemaker to working as a skilled engineer in a foundry. His mother continued the button workshop she had started, before her marriage; the marital home fronting on the shop where she employed several work people. As her son recalled:

She received the orders; made the purchases of materials; superintended the making of the goods; made out the accounts; and received the money besides taking care of her growing family. There were no 'Rights of Women' thought of in her day, but she was an entirely self-acting, managing mistress. The button business died out while I was young, and from the remarks which came from merchants, I learnt that my mother was the last maker of that kind of button in the town.¹⁵⁵

Respectable married women did start their own small businesses, for example Mrs Clark who went into the Birmingham fancy trade. However, when her husband prospered through his invention of a machine for winding cotton, she withdrew into domestic exclusion in Ladywood, not necessarily losing caste for her excursion into the business world at this date.¹⁵⁶

But even without the enticement of domesticity or the possible loss of status entailed in having run a business, women were increasingly hampered by the growth in scale of manufacturing enterprises. They faced the increased problem of maintaining authority over a larger, more distanced workforce, the need to take a more active part in the formal market, the requirement for heavier capital input and for scientific and technical knowledge. As in farming, women in manufacturing and retail families took on a diversity of semi-employments, some of which were directly absorbed in the enterprise such as the jam made for sale by a grocer's wife and daughters. The Mrs John Bright, who acted as agent for Bright's custard powder in an Essex town in 1845, is representative of the women who acted as agents for a variety of goods and services,¹⁵⁷ as much as the refined spinster who took in convalescent patients and ran a high-class home for the genteel mentally disturbed.¹⁵⁸ Women whose main resource was some education, turned to writing popular books for children, moral tales and tracts and also history, biography and science with titles such as *The*

Observing Eye or *What is a Bird* produced by a farmer's daughter.¹⁵⁹ The daughter of a clergyman living on the outlying Essex coast, like her brothers, gained a certain reputation as a composer of hymns. She was not unusual for a considerable proportion of nineteenth-century hymns were written, translated and composed by women (classics such as 'Nearer my God to Thee' and 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' among many others).¹⁶⁰ A Suffolk Independent minister based his successful second career as a choir master on a system of notation invented by a female Sunday school teacher, who, with her sister, had perfected a system of training choirs.¹⁶¹

From cases like the above, a pattern emerges of women able to take part in, even to make money from, activities which were seen as primarily part of a family-based avocation, skills which were sometimes used as the basis of a family business. Not without reason did Isaac Taylor call his collective memoir, *The Family Pen*. Within such an enterprise, women were able to establish a niche in the less public part of a field. They etched the engravings and hand tinted the prints, rather than creating the originals. It was more acceptable to them as well as to others to translate than to write under their own names, particularly outside the more acceptable areas of children's literature, religious works and fiction. Catherine Winkworth, related by marriage to the Shaen family in Essex, and a friend of Mrs Gaskell and James Martineau, made fairly substantial sums by her translations from the German for which she has gained a lasting reputation. However she was doubtful about the suggestion that she write her own material:

You can see with half an eye that that would be a very different affair from simply translating a work all ready to hand. The latter would only require a competent knowledge of German and some fluency and taste in English composition, but the former would require *judgement*, literary and historical, and an immense amount of information.¹⁶²

In addition to these subsidiary activities, women contributed to family welfare by acting as part of a team. They entered the salaried positions available to men, some of these resulting from the growth of state and voluntary institutions. However, within these posts, women's position almost invariably reproduced their domestic role. An Essex parish which had to staff its new workhouse required the governor to 'write a good hand and be something of an accomptant' as well as supervising the male inmates. His wife, as governess, in addition to supervising the females, was to attend the sick and organize lodging, food and clothing. A family enterprise then emerged as the daughter became a teacher in the girls' school attached to the workhouse which was subsequently run by an aunt while the son became master at the boys' school.¹⁶³

With most residential posts, the major difference between a man and a woman was that the former brought his family with him, often to supply domestic help, while the latter was mainly in charge of domestic arrangements for the institution no matter what her subsidiary duties. In these positions, women were often forbidden to bring dependants. A Birmingham Unitarian foundation, the Protestant Dissenting Charity School, advertised in 1836 for a governess who 'must be a single woman or a widow without a family, and about the middle age'. One applicant was refused since she

wished to bring an adopted child. The spinster who was appointed later was allowed to have her widowed mother living with her but only after a meeting of the ladies' committee had considered her long service and provided that the arrangement in no way interfered with her duties and there was no financial loss to the school.¹⁶⁴

The Essex and Colchester Hospital, founded 1820, made a sharp contrast between the men and women in their employ. The trustees, a committee of management and physicians (non-stipendary) were all male and drew up the conditions of service. The resident apothecary was required to be over 35 years of age and trained to dispense drugs. It was his duty to supervise the male patients, including leading their prayers morning and evening. He was provided with board and lodging without restrictions on any family and a salary of £50 a year. The matron was the only woman at staff level. She, too, had to be over 35, but was also required to be a spinster or widow with no dependent children. In addition to supervising and praying with the female patients, she took charge of household goods, kept accounts of provisions and overlooked the wards for cleanliness and order as well as organizing the female nurses and maids. Her rewards in kind were the same as the apothecary but the salary was £30. The nurses, maids, and male orderlies and groundsmen were 'to be to the Apothecary as their master and the Matron as their Mistress', thus reproducing a family model with a sexual division of labour.¹⁶⁵

In the local records Mary Merryweather was one of the few women in a salaried white-collar post. She had been imported from London to help in Courtaulds' mill where she acted as social worker and disciplinarian for the predominantly female workforce. Her title in the 1851 census is 'Moral Missionary Amongst Factory Hands' and the fact that she boarded nine factory girls in her home shows how closely her position stressed the feminine type of duty.¹⁶⁶ There are examples of less highly placed women adding to family income and sometimes also receiving housing by acting as a gaoler (although this was forbidden by law in the 1830s), and librarians for small private or voluntary societies which were springing up in provincial towns. The Castle Library in Colchester paid its librarian (who was wife of the town gaoler), 11 gns a year or 4s. 6d a week, not enough to survive on even at the lowest middle-class level.¹⁶⁷ On closer inspection many librarians were more involved in keeping the premises clean, lighting fires and providing refreshment at the meetings of the male subscribers, than dealing with books.

A comparison of the activities of a farmer's wife in the late eighteenth century and one in the 1820s illustrates the shift. Both women were married with children but the woman in the earlier period spent her time helping to manage the farm and work people, travelling extensively on horseback to markets and the provincial town to shop, visit the theatre or consult her lawyer. She speaks of 'doing my brewing' and records drawing bills of credit and the sale of 'my turnips'.¹⁶⁸ The woman of the later period is caught up in renovations in the farmhouse, including new kitchen equipment and adding a parlour. Her world is confined to church going, social visits, a little church related philanthropy and family affairs, subjects which

the earlier diary certainly does not overlook but which form only a part of its interests.¹⁶⁹

The same forces which relegated women's economic activity to these shadowy areas, have affected the historical sources. When family status could be tarnished by acknowledging that its womenfolk worked for an income, it is likely that much went unrecorded. Women's marginalization increased as the economy itself became defined as part of the public domain. A sample from the directories for Birmingham, for example, does not list a single female merchant after 1800, yet as late as the 1830s evidence from only a sample of wills produces a bone, timber and marble merchant who left instructions for their wives to take over the business. The pattern is well defined by the field of medicine. Much eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century health care, particularly in the countryside, was still in the hands of women who gathered and grew the herbs which were the basis of most remedies. With enclosure of common lands, sources of supplies were cut back. At the same time, male apothecaries began to make drugs, while the increasing manufacture and sale of commercial cosmetics tended to be run by men. Professional medicine with its specialized training and scientific rationale was closed to women, both in its earlier form based on a knowledge of the classics and the later development of experimental method. But women were not excluded from health care. On the contrary, middle-class wives and mothers were seen to have an important, if sharply circumscribed, role as responsible for the fitness of their family through the provision of a healthy home and diet, and careful home nursing in illness. The Birmingham doctor, Pye Henry Chevasse, made this division of labour explicit in his popular books, *Advice to Wives on the Management of Themselves during the Period of Pregnancy, Labour and Suckling* and *Advice to Mothers on the Management of Offspring*; works which increased both his purse and his reputation, locally and nationally.¹⁷⁰

Some women continued to practise herbal medicine at least for their poorer neighbours, but middle-class taste was turning to the more expensive and prestigious male doctors favoured by the women in both local studies. The struggle over medical territory was particularly centred around childbirth and childcare. The Suffolk poet, George Crabbe, himself trained as a doctor, portrayed the change in the fate of the village midwife, originally recipient of respect from both rich and poor until a young farmer married a townswoman who called in a doctor for her confinement.

Fame (now his friend) fear, novelty and whim,
And fashion, sent the varying sex to him. . . .

The doctor gained the custom of the rich, leaving the poor to the midwife:

'Nay', said the Doctor, 'dare you trust your wives,
The joy, the pride, the solace of your lives,
To one who acts and knows no reason why,
But trusts, poor hag! to luck for an ally?—
Who, on experience, can her claims advance,
And own the powers of accident and chance?

A whining dame, who prays in danger's view,
 (A proof she knows not what beside to do;)
 What's her experience? In the time that's gone,
 Blundering she wrought, and still she blunders on:-
 And what is Nature? One who acts in aid
 Of gossips half asleep, and half afraid.
 With such allies I scorn my fame to blend,
 Skill is my luck and courage is my friend;
 No slave to Nature, 'tis my chief delight
 To win my way and act in her despite:-'¹⁷¹

Women, men and occupational identity

Medicine is a striking instance of the general way men's occupations have been shaped by the structure of sexual inequality. This point is often overlooked by studies which concentrate only on women's work, and ignored in general studies of work which usually focus on men without explicitly saying so. It is instructive to look at a range of activities from the local records which encompass both masculine and feminine experience especially in the earlier stages of a person's career. It should also be remembered that young men, too, were at times constrained into positions which were uncongenial to their tastes. Such a young man had to be reconciled to his duty by being reminded of his 'natural' destiny. If he proved restive, these expectations would be made explicit in the sermons he heard, in the moral tales he read and most effectively by his loving relatives and friends. Young Samuel Courtauld was not too eager to join his father in the silk mill for he longed to play the violin and at one point toyed with the idea of entering the Unitarian ministry. His mother wrote to him in 1809:

Consider, dear boy, that the comfort of your old mother and young brothers and sisters may yet depend on your care and industry. I assume this Idea will act as a sufficient stimulus. . . .¹⁷²

It did, and Samuel threw himself into mill management with some enthusiasm.

Middle-class men were expected to be active economically, they had access to patronage, education, training, contacts, experience and legal forms which enhanced these expectations in varying degrees.¹⁷³ In the expanding opportunities of the early nineteenth century, some men were able to build careers on previous training and skills. A young man who had been apprenticed to a miller found little difficulty in being taken on to the management of an engineering business, having picked up relevant skills while acting as a millwright.¹⁷⁴ Others started in the related crafts of carpenter and wheelwright. From such a base, virtually a male monopoly, large-scale building operations were mounted where sons or grandsons in several local families became surveyors, estate agents or architects.¹⁷⁵ Through their building interests, these men were also in a position to acquire property and become a powerful presence in the local community, sealing their arrival by marriage into high status families.¹⁷⁶

One reason why women found it so difficult to operate in these areas

was the prohibition on manual skills (outside the domestic) which was so closely tied to their feminine status. The 'common-sense' attention to tools and materials which created an area of mutual interest for many men, from skilled artisans to highly educated scientists, had no female counterpart. Nowhere was this more evident than in the subject of horse culture, a rapidly expanding field. In the eighteenth century, the care and use of horses was steeped in tradition, often allied to the knowledge of 'cunning men' and 'wise women' and it remained so in some isolated rural areas.¹⁷⁷ But with the development of new stock breeding and more valuable animals, the trade of 'farrier' came to be a masculine specialism which in the second quarter of the nineteenth century was evolving into veterinary science.¹⁷⁸ In a small village on the Essex/Cambridge border, a family of labourers who began to specialize as horsemen produced one member who, through informal training and knowledge, set up as a veterinary surgeon. His sons became, respectively, a doctor and a professor of physiology at Cambridge.¹⁷⁹ Occupations connected to the sea provided another sphere of opportunities for middle-class men. Women occasionally were found as merchants or managing wharfing facilities. However, they could never move back and forth between these functions and going to sea themselves, either as a ship's officer, or to carve out a career in the Royal Navy (more open to talent than the Army at this period).

The occupations so far surveyed were based on activities traditionally closed to women. But there were areas from which women had not been excluded. Middle-class girls were positively encouraged to draw and paint and, where resources permitted, were given training in developing their artistic talents. Some reached high standards, even exhibiting locally and nationally. Like their brothers, some of the more accomplished had been trained in the studios and workshops of their fathers. Unlike their brothers, however, what these women could not do, except in the most unusual circumstances, was to become professional artists with a commercial reputation in their own right.¹⁸⁰ High art implied a free floating individualism which ran counter to the modesty and willingness to divert energies to others, demands which were so central to femininity.

The opportunity to turn a knack for drawing into a livelihood was more important for the ordinary young person. In a town like Birmingham, designing for the metal trades might be combined with teaching, as with a man who set up a flourishing Drawing Academy, later run by his son.¹⁸¹ A Suffolk artisan's son was making £200 a year by mapmaking and surveying at the height of his practice.¹⁸² Birmingham and the market towns of Essex and Suffolk boasted several painters making a living producing portraits and decorative art for a middle-class clientele. A Colchester engraver of 'humble parentage' who had been apprenticed to a local printer, left his provincial origins and pursued his career in the metropolis, where he used his rural background to specialize in landscapes.¹⁸³ Many women did engraving, colouring and illustrating but they did so as part of a family. An artistic talent might set them to teaching the neighbourhood daughters or be an aid in obtaining more regular school teaching. However, many must have remained like the young Quaker woman who helped run the house at the farm and brewery of her parents and who did her flower

painting on silk by getting up before the household was awake. Her brother became a professional artist.¹⁸⁴

Middle-class men and women both had become keenly interested in gardening as well as the more theoretical branches of horticulture and botany. Humphrey Repton, who lived most of his life in Essex, had been apprenticed to a wool merchant but had a passion for botanical studies. As a young man he made a deliberate decision to turn this into a profession, inventing the term *landscape gardening* and passing on the speciality to his son.¹⁸⁵ Opportunities for such professional work were increasing with the creation of scientific bodies and specialist gardens.¹⁸⁶ Commercial nurseries were also an expanding sector for men with more practical gardening experience, and several seed firms such as Thompson and Morgan of Ipswich which were founded in this period have survived into the twentieth century. While undoubtedly many women were vital to the development of a family horticultural business, as a group they had lost their previous prerogative of the farmer and cottager's wife supplying seeds and propagating plants. Women's interest in both gardening and botany was rather guided into a hobby or to act as a healthful 'restorative'.

The lack of opportunity to exchange scientific and practical information, as well as the absence of public recognition for their work, was a special stumbling block for women with interests in botanical subjects as well as horticulture and gardening. Most botanical societies did not admit women, at least not to full membership. The papers they had written might be read out for them by a male member, but women remained isolated from the informal support so vital to building a professional image and expertise.¹⁸⁷ The young men who gathered to search for and study specimen plants and animals in the Natural History Field Clubs were often apothecaries' apprentices or shop men, some of whom later turned their hobby into employment. By the 1840s, the class composition of these associations covered a wide range from artisans to upper middle-class men, but no women were admitted to these clubs.¹⁸⁸ A few women from the local areas wrote and published on botany, natural history and horticulture, often for a juvenile audience. It was clearly more acceptable to express these interests in print from the confines of their own homes.

The experience of a set of twins from a wealthy Suffolk timber merchant's family well illustrates the differing expectations for young men and women. In his late teens, Samuel Scott entered the family business as junior to his uncle. His twin sister, Charlotte, after her education as a young lady was complete, returned to live at home where she developed an interest in botany. When she was about 19, her uncle, head of the family as well as her guardian, indulgently noted that Charlotte's botanical collection and greenhouse occupations 'seem at this time to occupy her greatest share of attention'. Two years later, Samuel had become established as a partner in the business with the prospect of eventually taking charge, while Charlotte's interests had become centred in a mysterious illness, a nervous complaint which gained her uncle's deep concern but which fixed her firmly in a career as an invalid and her botanical interests dwindled.¹⁸⁹ Not all middle-class women with such talents became invalids, of course. Charlotte Scott may have been especially disadvantaged by living in a remote village. Never-

theless, the trivializing of a genuine enthusiasm seems to have been at least as common as the flowering of upper middle-class women in the guise of recognized amateurs of distinction.

It is difficult to judge how women like Charlotte Scott reacted to their situation. Despite the blandness of the sources, there are hints that conflicts over resources within the family were not unknown, particularly between brothers and sisters. It has been seen how both Archibald Kenrick in Birmingham and Samuel Courtauld in Essex as young men starting out in business demanded a lion's share of the family property for their ventures in opposition to their mothers who specifically wished to protect their daughters' interests. The female family members had a difficult case to sustain, for as Samuel somewhat ingenuously explained: 'It is proposed that this money should be actively employed for the more immediate advantage of one individual [himself] but in a general view of the family collectively.' Although he admitted that the property would be 'somewhat endangered' if invested in the mill, like young Kenrick, he won his point since his sisters had in mind to open a school which would only have served for their own short-term support. As soon as the mill was solvent, Samuel gave his sister Sophia a larger allowance so that she could give up going out as a governess and be spared 'all the mortifications' of that position.¹⁹⁰

When family resources were stretched, it was expected that sisters would assist in educating brothers, if necessary to earn income to enable them to train and to generally underwrite the young men's economic ventures. A widow would often run a school with her daughters in order to give her sons a rudimentary education and have the means for their further training. As one brother later wrote to his sister: 'How you girls toiled that we boys might be well prepared for later life; for which I am ever grateful to you.'¹⁹¹ The expectation was that when the young man had reached his goal, he would support the mother, aunt or sister who had thus invested in his future. However, this did not invariably follow and some men felt uneasy about admitting that they had been dependent on a woman's work to support them. There exist a few bitter denunciations by sisters who gave support – financial, emotional and in doing all household tasks – only to later find that the brother despised them as ungentle when he had reached his professional or commercial goal.¹⁹² Others had to stand by and watch a brother lose the common patrimony through mismanagement or personal failure. The notion of female influence must have had an ironic flavour for the wife of a failed shopkeeper whose constant moves of living quarters along with the shop had made her ill with anxiety. Her husband feared losing her: 'so tenderly loved, despite little differences in worldly affairs' when she tried, '*I am sure to be my good Counsellor.*'¹⁹³

The restrictions on middle-class women were made up of a combination of forces, including subtle associations of places, activities and images which strongly defined femininity and masculinity. The association of men with the dynamic engine of the industrial age, manufacture, was particularly vivid and, for a variety of reasons already discussed, women's part in a manufacturing enterprise was usually limited. A woman manufacturer in her own right was regarded as an anomaly. The unmarried farmer's daughter who successfully ran a brick and tile kiln on a commercial scale was 6 feet

3 inches tall and had waived all claims to a customary feminine identity; she appears as an oddity in the family chronicle.¹⁹⁴ From childhood play with drawings, tools and bits of machinery indulged in by a boy, the association of masculinity with production persisted. Even where a girl showed an aptitude in that direction it was difficult to sustain. A Birmingham iron master who had made his fortune by improving an iron puddling process, had an eldest daughter with a gift for practical invention. According to a memoir by her son, she turned this to solving household problems. Having noted the wastefulness of the open fire place, from her own templates she cut a piece of iron and mounted it on bricks so reducing draughts and saving coal. As her son commented, 'she anticipated the slow combustion grate'.¹⁹⁵ What he did not add was that she did not turn this invention into a mass produced product which might have made another fortune.

Practical mechanical skills, the heart of the Birmingham metal industry, were clearly outside the rubric of the feminine sphere. But for women the canons of scientific thought were also limited to private affairs and, ultimately, to non-utilitarian ends. The solid education and training in science and rational thought which was given to the daughters of men in groups such as Birmingham's Lunar Society, could be used only within the confines of the household or in female philanthropic ventures. Two grandsons of Lunar Society members were the cousins, Francis Galton and Charles Darwin who both carried the tradition of ordering and classifying their world into their scientific work and through which they gained world-wide recognition in the later nineteenth century. One of Francis Galton's aunts had been raised in a similar atmosphere but lived out a quiet domesticated existence in Birmingham. She applied a systematic world view closer to home. She is recorded as possessing:

a triple inkstand with three coloured inks, triple penwipers and pens; every conceivable apparatus for writing; printed envelopes for her various banks and business correspondents; printed questions for her grooms, 'Has the mare had her corn' etc; a dozen or more cash boxes, elaborately arranged to receive in square labelled compartments each kind of coin from each type of her property. The apparatus for the instruction and relief of the poor – tracts, ounces of tea and sugar, worsted stockings, bundles for mothers' aid etc. etc. were arranged in separate indexed presses, with records of all transactions relating thereto. The crockery ware of the store-room and housekeepers' room was all lettered and all metal articles, pans and pots were duly labelled, as were the garden tools, and there were corresponding labels on the pegs on which they were hung. As many as 100 painted labels have been counted in a flower bed of hers of 12 square feet.¹⁹⁶

How did women survive?

In both rural and urban areas and over the whole period, women made up between 5 and 15 per cent of the economically active population listed in the directories. However, by mid century the range of their activities had noticeably narrowed. In the 1790s their occupations included gaoler, whitesmith, plumber, butcher, farmer, seedsman (*sic*), tailor, saddler. Even in the first decades of the new century, male curtain ring, pipe, gun and

varnish manufacturers specifically instructed in their wills that their wives should carry on the business. By the 1850s, dressmaking, millinery and teaching were by far the main occupational groupings listed for middle-class women.¹⁹⁷

The result was a predictable massive overcrowding, and low wages symbolized by the fate of the governess in both fact and fiction. The presence of unpaid family female labour primed with just these skills and waiting in the wings to take over if income did not run to paying for professional services was a constant threat to any attempt at monopoly which women in these occupational groups could muster. In that most egalitarian group, the Quakers, the women of the 1780s and 1790s had run shops and schools and roamed the countryside as lay ministers, but by the next generation they were transmuted into respectable domesticity. Lucy Greenwood, born in the 1820s, had a mother active in the Quaker ministry who aided the wholesale/retail business that laid the foundations of her son's successful business career. Lucy, however, took no part in such activities but spent her life voluntarily organizing and running the Halstead Industrial School for girls. She never married and lived on the school premises, where for over thirty years she was as absorbed in its daily life as any owner of a proprietary school, but far from making a living from her work, she spent her patrimony lavishly in its service.¹⁹⁸

By mid century, whenever family finances would permit, the energy, organizational skill and sense of commitment which middle-class women had put into economic activity were deflected into domestic affairs. They managed a set of servants or themselves undertook domestic tasks and organization which set a standard of personal services unknown before (or since). Occasionally women were able to turn these formidable skills and energy into publicly recognized philanthropy using organizing techniques and business routines picked up from their close association with the family business and various male relatives and friends. The scale of charity affairs, like bazaars organized and run by women, gives a glimpse of this hidden world. As their chronicler, Prochaska, has written, 'philanthropic enterprise was, in a sense, *laissez-faire* capitalism turned in on itself'.¹⁹⁹

From this study, the appropriate question to be asked may not be what occupations were held by middle-class women in this period, but rather how were these women surviving? The brief answer must be: as part of a family or household enterprise, whether working entirely on the domestic side, contributing behind the scenes, engaged in part-time paid work, living on and contributing investment income or more likely a combination of any of these options. Even a crude indicator like the 1851 census shows 109 daughters over age 30 living with parents compared to fifty-eight sons in the local areas. The census sample from both areas contained 296 widows, 200 or 68 per cent who were household heads. Of the remaining widows who were not in a position to head a household, 55 per cent were living either as mothers or mothers-in-law, that is with adult children. Just under a half of these dependent widows were in the homes of married men. Another 21 per cent were living with other widows who headed the household, an example of female kin and friends pooling resources.

The women who were in occupations needing little capital and much

energy included a high proportion of younger widows. 43 per cent of female household heads in trade were widows in the 25–55 age range. Of those in professional occupations (overwhelmingly teaching) almost all were in the same group and 60 per cent of these were widowed. Older widows predominated in occupations requiring some property; they were the majority in farming and innkeeping. Many of these widows would be holding the inn or farm for a son to take over. However, by far the largest group of female household heads in the census sample was of 'independent' means. Edgbaston was peppered with households such as number 16 Hagley Road where Sarah Green, age 75, lived on the rental of house properties and provided a home for four middle aged children, a sister and an unmarried nephew, all without occupations and in receipt of rents and annuities. At number 18 on the same road, were two spinster sisters in their late 60s, existing on a combination of landed property and investments. With a house at a rateable value of £23 a year and two female servants, they were comfortably off, but by no means had the resources to move in the highest Edgbaston circles.²⁰⁰

Two-thirds of female household heads living on 'independent means' were widows, but they were considerably older – 67 per cent were over 55 (and one-quarter actually over 70). This pattern was even more marked for upper middle-class women of independent means and, in any case, the upper middle class made up 83 per cent of all independent female household heads. In Edgbaston, virtually all the upper middle-class female household heads were over 40, as were almost all in the town centres of Essex and Suffolk. This contrasts with the position in central Birmingham where a large group of female household heads were in trade at a modest level, 25 per cent, and another 15 per cent were innkeepers mostly in the younger age band.

From the local studies it is evident that women's decision to enter the market depended on their control over family property. As the discussion has emphasized, the form of property – whether in land, building, investments, skill or individual income – was an important element. Professional men made up only 5 per cent and salaried men only 1 per cent of those even making a will, although they were 20 per cent and 13 per cent respectively of the middle class in the census sample.²⁰¹ The widows or orphaned daughters of these men, who had access to enough house room, could replace income by taking in pupils, lodgers or boarders. Another expedient was to let the home, with or without shop premises, and live at a more modest level using the rent as income, a course easier to follow if the house was owned but quite possible under sub-leasing.

These strategies confirm that the major identity of most middle-class women was undoubtedly familial rather than occupational, whatever *tasks* they were actually doing. Of the women over the age of 25 in the census sample who were not households heads, two-thirds were wives living with their husbands, and the other one-third were female relatives. Of these, the largest single group, as may be expected, was unmarried daughters followed by sisters (see Tables 6 and 7, Appendix 3). Prescriptive literature about the desirability of sisters being companions to their brothers who would support them is confirmed by numerous cases in the local records.

From the census sample, it appears that men took on the support of sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law in addition to adult daughters and their own sisters, while female headed households were more likely to contain mothers, aunts and nieces as well as sisters and daughters. In many of these cases, women contributed both labour and income, whatever the expected direction of support might have been. Helping with housekeeping and childcare or sick nursing was the preferred existence for a single woman or widow and might bring some of the authority and privileges of being mistress of a household. Many of the numerous female visitors found in middle-class households on census night could well have been acting in such a capacity for friends; a quarter of all widows who were not themselves household heads were listed as visitors. However, women's position in these households was vulnerable. Not only were they exposed to the same vicissitudes as men within the family enterprise, they were also ultimately dependent on the capacity and good will of relatives and friends, not to speak of the emotional and psychological dependency they might have built up over the years. A minority of women seem to have spread the risks by combining resources with other women. The chances of an adult unmarried woman living as a relative in a household headed by a woman were almost double what would have been expected if adult female relatives had been randomly distributed among all households in the census sample.²⁰²

For a middle-class woman of the early nineteenth century, gentility was coming to be defined by a special form of femininity which ran directly counter to acting as a visibly independent economic agent. Despite the fact that women could hold property, their marital status always pre-empted their economic personality. The ramifications of this fact for their social and economic position were profound. It can be argued that nineteenth-century middle-class women represent a classic case of Parkin's distinction between property as active capital and property as possession, in this case enforced by coverture. Absence of property as capital has been seen as the most powerful element in 'social closure', that is exclusion from control over one's own life chances.²⁰³ This conception lay at the heart of women's sexual and political dependency, a situation recognized by early feminists whose first aim was reform of married women's property. While material circumstances differed widely, all strata within the middle class operated within the same legal and customary framework. The forms of property and inheritance they practised were not significantly different. The reading material offered, the sermons preached and, most of all, their own experiences, offered few alternatives to the conventional view of female respectability with all its contradictory consequences. Many of these contradictions flowed directly from the dominant upper middle-class conception. Mrs Ellis expressed this view with chilling finality:

gentlemen may employ their hours of business in almost any degrading occupation and, if they but have the means of supporting a respectable establishment at home, may be gentlemen still; while, if a lady but touch any article, no matter how delicate, in the way of trade, she loses caste, and ceases to be a lady.²⁰⁴