‘Buy logs, never, not in a hundred years, we’d never buy logs.’
Women and the rural economy, Oxfordshire c. 1945-1970

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In this paper I will investigate how women in postwar Oxfordshire contributed to the family income through their labour both inside and outside the home, with traditional means such as growing vegetables, keeping livestock, wooding and gleaning, and domestic service both continuing and being by augmented by the increasing opportunities for paid labour. The paper is based on oral history interviews with ninety-two women from different locations in Oxfordshire. These were the villages of Benson and Ewelme in south Oxfordshire; the Wychwood villages in west Oxfordshire; the twenty-four square miles near Banbury in north Oxfordshire covered by the Country Planning (1944) survey; Oxford city centre; and the contrasting suburbs of Cowley and Florence Park, and North Oxford and Summertown. Women with a variety of educational backgrounds were selected, from minimum age school leavers to graduates. The aim of the research is to see how locality, education, and class influenced women’s experiences. The women chosen were aged between their late fifties and their nineties, allowing change and continuity over time to be examined. Oral history, the methodology for this research, provides objective information about women’s lives, but also reveals their thoughts and feelings through the subjectivity of their accounts. Oral history can therefore complement and sometimes even challenge the evidence of contemporary surveys and records. The case study approach was chosen in order to investigate how variations in women’s experiences related to issues of locality; geographical, social and economic contexts; and housing and community structure. In the paper I will demonstrate that while it is clear that women were still contributing to the family income and rural economy in significant ways during the postwar period, women at this time showed a tendency not to think of themselves as workers, prioritising home and family in their accounts.

In his 1913 survey How the Labourer Lives Seebohm Rowntree found that average weekly earnings for agricultural labourers in Oxfordshire were the lowest in country at fourteen shillings and eleven pence. However Rowntree also found that subsidiary earnings by other members of the family and produce from gardens and allotments helped to supplement the male worker’s income. With reference to the village of Headington Quarry, Raphael Samuel has described the extent to which all family members contributed to the family living before World War One. Families continued to supplement the male wage after World War One. Recalling her childhood growing up in the village of Ducklington between the wars, Mollie Harris writes:

Everybody had big allotments as well as their gardens. Both men and women toiled on these; into late evenings they would work, growing enough potatoes and other vegetables to last all the year round. Children, too, helped their parents with picking up potatoes, hoeing, and weeding.

\[1\] The interviews and transcripts are held by the author. Pseudonyms have been used.
\[3\] Ibid., p. 32.
There were also other ways of adding to the family’s income, such as poaching, wooding, and gleaning. Harris explains:

I really do not know how some of the families in the village would have managed to survive in those days without a bit of poaching. And although our Mother did not encourage Bern or Bunt to go, she was really quite glad when Denis, the youngest, took it up.  

While women’s employment in field-work was in steady decline (in 1911 there were 94,700 females employed in agriculture, in 1921 there were 83,100, but by 1931 this fell to 55,700) they still added to the family’s earnings. Discussing women’s contribution to the family economy in the village of Headington Quarry, Samuel argues:

housekeeping itself depended on her own efforts rather than the amount of his allowance. The children’s clothes, for instance, depended upon her skills with the needle and thread…Pig-keeping was the joint responsibility of the husband and wife…When the pig was killed, the woman of the house was involved in a whole series of manufacturing activities…Pickling vegetables was another species of manufacturing activity which, in the autumn, took up a lot of the woman’s time.

All members of the family contributed to their income and they did so in various ways. Although this way of life was changing, elements of the rural economy continued into the postwar period for working-class families, notably this supplementing of the male wage. Madge was born and brought up in Shipton-under-Wychwood moving to the neighbouring village of Milton-under-Wychwood upon marriage. She had five sons between 1940 and 1948. When describing how she and her husband coped with the financial strain of having this number of children born so close together she explained that villagers produced much of their own food: ‘of course we had big gardens and we grew a lot, everybody. We had a big garden and we used to keep some hens as well.’ Gloria was born and brought up in Benson. She said as a child her parents instilled in her that was important to be ‘self-sufficient’. In adulthood Gloria put this education into practice and she and her husband ‘got an allotment, we grew a lot of our veg, which was again that’s following on, that’s from his parents and from my parents which will still do, we still grew our own veg.’ Gloria also proudly explained how she and her neighbour used to go wooding, stating, ‘Buy logs, never, not in a hundred years, we’d never buy logs.’ Poaching was also referred to as a way of contributing to the family economy, particularly in times of financial hardship. Doris, another Benson resident, told an anecdote about her husband who had been caught poaching as a child and his parents’ reaction. Her husband’s father was ill with tuberculosis and as a result ‘money was tight’. Her husband went out poaching rabbits, but he was caught and had to go to court. When he got home his father ‘gave him a good hiding’. Her husband asked ‘what was that for?’ and his father replied ‘for getting caught’. Doris’ sister-in-law Tina told a story about her husband who had gone out poaching when they were married. He had been redundant from the Cowley car factory and was unemployed so he used to go out poaching pheasants and rabbits to feed the family.

It was often assumed in the postwar decades that growing affluence meant fewer women had to take jobs in order to support their families and that those who did were working in order to afford luxuries rather than necessities. However a substantial number of working-class mothers interviewed

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6 Ibid., p. 181; See also Sheila Stewart, Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land (Charlbury: Day Books, 2003).
9 Madge, WY8, pp. 13-4.
10 Gloria, BE14, p. 23.
11 Doris, BE2, p. 58.
12 Tina, BE3, p. 58.
in Oxfordshire needed to engage in paid work outside the home for financial reasons. Peggy, a resident of Middleton Cheney, had four children between 1951 and 1965 and explained how she had to take a job throughout her children’s upbringing. While her husband was employed he spent most of his wages in the pub and she had to make up the shortfall in order to support her family. She said, ‘I’ve always had to work, I’ve never had a time that I could sit back and say, “Well I don’t have to work”…I’ve waited a long time, but I’ve got it at last.’\(^\text{13}\) Peggy felt she was forced to work. She implied that it was not something she wanted to do and she would have preferred to remain at home. Not all the women who worked enjoyed doing so and several recalled feeling they had missed out through not being at home with their children when they were young. Lily, who lived in Ewelme, had five children between 1946 and 1961. Although she had left work when her first baby was born she had to return after first husband died. She stated: ‘I had to go back to work. First of all there used to be a honey factory in the village…I went there for two years. I can’t say that I thoroughly enjoyed it but it helped.’\(^\text{14}\) However while paid work could be a necessity for women rather than an active choice, many women did take pleasure in their jobs. Rita also had to find employment after she was widowed. She was happy to resume her work as a seamstress which she had left upon the birth of her first child. In part her satisfaction derived from the flexibility her trade brought her as she could work from home. In consequence she did not feel her ability to care for her children was compromised.\(^\text{15}\) Paid work could remain supplementary to Rita’s role as mother and she did not have to challenge contemporary perceptions of womanhood.

Another group of women who had to work were farmers’ wives as their labour was crucial to the farm economy. While census statistics have shown the number of female agricultural workers had been in sharp decline over the first half of the century, it was clear from the interviews with Oxfordshire farmers’ wives that they were still engaged in farm work. Women’s work in rural areas was probably under-recorded in the postwar decades, perhaps due to the fact that farm work was not seen as a suitable job for a woman at this time. Furthermore, as highlighted by Hilary Callan in *The Incorporated Wife*, the work undertaken by wives assisting their husbands in professions such as farming was taken for granted. The ‘hidden services’ wives provided only became visible when they were withdrawn.\(^\text{16}\) Maud reported that as a farmer’s wife she was expected to care for the prisoners of war stationed on her husband’s farm during World War Two.\(^\text{17}\) While she told this as a humorous story, recalling having to quickly learn how to cook pasta, she also spoke of the arduous work it caused. Daisy and her husband bought a smallholding in Shipton-under-Wychwood in the early-1950s on which they were required to keep chickens and pigs. Her husband worked full time so she was responsible for the animals and recalled, ‘I had two children to look after and chickens and pigs so I tell you it was quite tough really.’ Running the smallholding was associated in Daisy’s mind with hardship and she highlighted this by telling a traumatic account of an incident when her son was attacked by one of the pigs. In 1955 she and her husband took on a milk-round because they were struggling to pay their mortgage and needed a new source of income. Again Daisy was left in charge of this as her husband still worked outside the village. She explained: ‘I had to take the little boy of three…and he had to sit in the van whilst I delivered milk.’\(^\text{18}\) Daisy clearly felt this responsibility was a burden to her rather than an exciting employment opportunity. Even in the 1960s farmers’ wives were still playing an important role. Alice was twenty-two when she married a farmer in 1961. When asked what she did on the farm Alice replied, ‘Oh driving tractors, I used to do most of the hay and straw-bailing in the summer…I’d work at school in the morning then go home pick up some sandwiches, take them up the fields and probably stay up there the rest of the day.’\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{13}\) Peggy, BA9, p. 14.
\(^{14}\) Lily, EW6, p. 7.
\(^{15}\) Rita, BA6, p. 3.
\(^{17}\) Maud, WY4, p. 6.
\(^{18}\) Daisy, WY9, p. 3, 4, 10.
\(^{19}\) Alice, WY2, p. 14.
notable from the interviews that for these farmers’ wives work was conceived of as part of life. They described it as their duty rather than something they did for their own satisfaction.

Women did not enter the labour market on equal terms to men, however, because their domestic role was considered to be of paramount importance. Dolly Smith Wilson suggests that ‘men and women existed in two separate labour markets, one for men, considered the real workers, the other for women, considered low-paid auxiliaries working on the side, unrelated to their real role as wives and mothers.’ The women interviewed in Oxfordshire did give precedence to their domestic role in their narratives. Although all of the respondents had been engaged in some kind of paid or voluntary work after their children were born they constructed their identities as mothers rather than as workers. It was common for women to say they had not worked after having their children when initially asked, but then later in their narratives to reveal that they had. In part this may have been a legacy of the lack of emphasis on careers they received at school, which meant they had grown up expecting to become full-time mothers. It may also have been due to the lack of status ascribed to women workers. Women who had their children at the end of the period were more concerned with identifying themselves with work outside the home, but all the women interviewed regarded being a mother as their primary identity.

The interviewees were aware they were living through a reconceptualisation of women’s work, but they had ambivalent attitudes towards working mothers just as contemporary commentators had done, and this was clearly seen in their attitudes towards their daughters’ generation. While paid work was viewed as offering a means of subsistence, a degree of financial independence, or a break from domesticity, few interviewees conceived of employment in terms of a career. They also displayed an interesting tendency to not think of themselves as members of the labour force, even if they had been employed outside the home, and they prioritized family in their accounts. However, perhaps influenced by the discourses of second-wave feminism, women spoke of their desire to gain independence through work, whether this was inside or outside the home. It is interesting that the women interviewed thought that both paid work and motherhood were ways in which autonomy could be gained for women in the postwar world.