

Women's Work



Hop Tally Basket Early 20th century

Hop-picking was a source of seasonal income for many urban women. Once gathered, hops were measured using a hop tally; this example held 5 bushels or 181 litres. As the women were paid by the volume picked, they sometimes used tricks to make baskets seem full.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Potato picking basket 1939-45

Potato picking was backbreaking work, usually done by poorly paid women as a seasonal job. Seasonal farm work was often not recorded in the census or other official sources, but was vital to family budgets.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Measuring hops with a 'tally' basket c1940

Hops are being measured into soft sacks using the tally basket. The man on the right is probably noting the amount picked by each worker.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Riddle similar to those used for potatoes c1900

Potatoes picked out by hand were shaken in large sieves or 'riddles' like these in order to remove stones and mud.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Women cleaning potatoes after picking c1920

These women are shaking dirt from potatoes using a riddle like the one on display. In spite of mechanisation, this work continued well into the 20th century, and was one of the least popular tasks carried out by civilian volunteers during World War Two.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Box for shipping butter Early 20th century

Dairy products were important sources of income for farmers, especially after the establishment of railway networks linking country and town. This box was used to ship butter made by Mrs Stavley of Clintsfield Farm near Wennington, Lancashire. However the name on the side is that of her husband.

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University of Reading



Butter churn with crank Early 20th century

Churning butter took time and physical effort, so improved butter churns were worthwhile investments. All dairy implements had to be thoroughly cleaned every day.

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The dairy at Mrs Arkwright's farm, Warwickshire 1936

This dairy has been fitted with tiled walls for ease of cleaning, and has the latest equipment including mechanical cream separators and butter churns. The uniformed dairywoman is probably an employee rather than a family member.

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Watering can, galvanised iron c1920

Gardening as a paid occupation was traditionally a male trade, but during World War One and Two women's work in paid agriculture and in 'victory gardens' was vital to keeping the nation fed. Since the 1980s the demanding work of tending and harvesting food and decorative plants has increasingly been taken over by low-paid migrant workers.

Private collection



Woman working a box mangle 1950

Mangling - squeezing out the water - was one of the most physically demanding tasks in hand laundry. Women who owned a roller mangle (for clothes) or a box mangle (for sheets) could make money by mangling neighbours' laundry. A nineteenth century box mangle like this was an expensive investment.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Harvesting daffodils in the Scilly Isles c1960

The Scilly Isles were known for their mild winter climate, which allowed them to produce early spring flowers for export. In this image the female greenhouse worker is packing daffodils into boxes for posting.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University



**Washtub, galvanised iron
c1920**
**Scrubbing board, glass
with wood frame
c1920**
**Laundry iron
c1900**

Until the 1950s, the majority of British households did not own a powered washing machine. Clothes were washed in metal tubs filled with water heated in a 'boiler' or on the stove, scrubbed against a washing board to remove stains, then wrung dry. For women in paid work, finding the four to eight hours required for laundry was a major problem. This small washtub held 20 litres of water and weighed 22kg when full. Metal irons were heated on a stove or open fire, and weighed at least 2.5kg.

Private collection



**Dinner ladies serving
school children c1970**
Catering kettle 2010
**Catering-size saucepan
2010**
Catering teapot 2010

School canteen workers occupy an ambiguous position, expected to combine food preparation with supervision of children. The physical effort of preparing food for large numbers has often been disregarded in evaluations of catering jobs. This large saucepan weighs 7kg when full of water, the teapot weighs 6kg and the kettle weighs 4.5kg.

Photo: TUC Library Collections,
London Metropolitan University
Kettle, saucepan, teapot: Private
collection



**Charwoman cleaning
steps c1950**
**Galvanised metal bucket
c1920-50**

A charwoman cleaning the steps of a London County Council building. Cleaners of national and local government buildings have sometimes been privately employed and hence paid below the minimum wage. In 1978 this practice prompted a cleaners' strike in government offices. Metal buckets were developed in the nineteenth century but were still being sold in the 1950s. When full, they held 10 litres and weighed about 12kg.

TUC Library Collections,
London Metropolitan University
Photograph by Brian Worth
Bucket: Private collection



**Making hot cross buns,
Lyons factory c1935
Baking tin 1980s**

By the 1930s, food production in Britain was becoming increasingly industrialised, led by the Co-operative Wholesale Society and by chains of teashops like Lyons'. These offered consumers standardised goods at competitive prices, made under hygienic conditions. Baking tins made from sheet metal were introduced for bread in the nineteenth century, making it possible to mass-produce identically sized loaves.

Photo: TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University
Baking tin: Private collection



**Glede basket used
by chain makers
c1900**

Basket for transporting 'breeze' or 'glede' (small pieces of coke) to fuel the fires of chain makers. Coke, derived from coal, burns with an intense heat.

Black Country Living Museum



**Hammer and small chain
from Cradley Heath
Chain Makers c1900**

Hammer used by a woman chain maker to forge links of chain. The wooden shaft has been partially worn by repeated use, leaving behind the indent of the woman worker's fingers. Some chain makers worked at the trade for forty years or more.

Black Country Living Museum

**Sample book of
hand-forged chains**

Sample book with lengths of fine hand-forged chains similar to those made in Cradley Heath. Fine chains were easier to handle than heavy ones, but were more demanding and slower to make.

Black Country Living Museum



**Slaves of the Forge, the
women of Cradley Heath
1906**

This article describing the lives of women chain makers was reprinted due to popular interest. Chain makers demonstrated their work at the Sweated Industries Exhibition in London, where middle class visitors found it hard to believe that such work could be done by women.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan Un



**Membership Certificate
1890**

Women made up a large proportion of workers in the cotton industry, particularly in the 'card room' where material was prepared for spinning. The Amalgamated Association of Card and Blowing Room Operatives was launched in 1886 and recruited women, who earned a third less than male card room workers.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University



Weaver fitting bobbin into shuttle Shuttle c1945

By 1900 weaving, - originally a highly paid man's job - had become a female specialism. Weavers were expected to oversee six or even eight looms at once, all of them controlled by a central engine working at top speed. Weaving shuttles needed to be constantly checked to ensure that the thread was running freely; 2km of weft thread might be needed per square metre of fabric. In addition to the strain of standing, there were health risks from inhaling fibres, industrial accidents, and the deafening noise of the machines.

Photos:
TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University
Shuttle: Private collection



Presser in a garment factory c1980 Sleeve board 2000

In the 19th century, pressing wool garments into shape was a male specialism. As the irons used were no heavier than laundry irons the distinction was based on pay scales. As the clothing trade has become progressively more automated, and costs have been driven down, many of these demarcations have evaporated. This woman is showing pressing jacket sleeves on a specially shaped board.

Photo: TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University,
Photograph by Judy Harrison
Sleeve board: Private collection



Woman doing tailoring outwork 1975

The distinction between commercial and domestic sewing has always been fuzzy, and affordable sewing machines in the late nineteenth century blurred it further. For women limited by childcare or by lack of language skills, sewing at home has been one of the few available work options.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University,
Photograph by Laurence Sparham



Sewing machine 1959

This sewing machine was given to Mrs Valentine who used it to make maternity clothes, children's clothes and soft furnishings while living in Cuba and afterwards in Britain.

Private collection



Mrs Irene Henry, shoemaker 1957
Women's shoes

Women's shoes are difficult to stitch, needing precise handling of three-dimensional shapes in leather and heavy fabrics. Mrs Irene Henry from the British West Indies was one of the workers at the Co-operative Wholesale Society shoe factory in Leyton, London in 1957. She is shown working on the 'lining reducer' machine.

Photo: TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University
 Photograph by Brian Worth
 Shoes: Private collection



Woman decorating plates c1940
Banded cake stand c1940
Banded vase c1940

A woman decorating fired plates with coloured fired plates with coloured bands using a 'banding wheel'. The colour could be put on in solid lines or shaded bands by manipulating the brush. A high degree of consistency was needed to hand-paint sets of matching dishes. The cake stand and the vase would allow the purchaser to update her table setting without the expense of a new set of dishes. Hand-painted pottery did not wear well so was best used for occasional pieces like this.

Photo: TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University
 Cake stand and vase: Private collection



Cardboard box making from the catalogue of the Sweated Industries Exhibition 1906

Making cardboard boxes of all sizes was often done at home before 1914. Workers were paid 2d per gross (144), and all family members had to join in.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University



Bryant & May matchbox c1880-1900

This box for large matches was made for Bryant & May, whose workers led a groundbreaking strike in 1888. The term 'safety matches' meant that they would not ignite spontaneously; they were far from safe for the workers, as they contained highly toxic phosphorus.

Private collection



Gypsy flower seller c.1939

Gypsies and Travellers have often used street and door-to-door selling as a source of income. This photograph shows a Gypsy flower seller about to set off on her rounds, at Smith's Camp, Malvern Link, Worcestershire.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Flower seller's basket 1940-60

This basket is made to a traditional pattern used by street flower sellers, with a compartment in the base for keeping flowers fresh, and loops to display bunches for sale.

Museum of English Rural Life,
University of Reading



Salon hair dryer 2000

This hairdryer was used in the salon run by Michelle Emmans, who started her apprenticeship in the late 1970s, taking day-release courses to gain a City & Guilds qualification. She opened her own salon in 2000, spending about £4000 on equipment; since 2010 she has operated a mobile hairdressing service.

Private collection



Street vendor's money pocket 2000 Market trader, Winchester 2011

Street selling has often been a female enterprise, as it requires little set-up capital. But it is physically demanding and brings uncertain rewards. Karen Hook has sold fruit and vegetables from a market stall for over 30 years.

Private collection



Behind the counter, Linens Department 1954

This photograph is one of a set taken at the Colindale branch of the London Co-operative Society to show the work of members of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. The space behind the counter is narrow and cluttered and Mrs Fagan has taken her shoes off to rest her feet.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University



Ticket machine c1950

Rotary ticket machines were developed for use on buses, and helped the conductor to calculate fares accurately. They also enabled bus companies to check ticket sales against takings. This Gibson brand machine is relatively lightweight at 2kg.

Private collection



Female bus conductor issuing tickets c1950

Women have worked on buses since 1915, both as conductors and as drivers. Conductors were expected to help passengers in difficulties as well as selling and checking tickets, carrying a heavy ticket machine and cash bag.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University
Photograph by Dr H Zinram



Banner of the National Association of Women Civil Servants 1932

The Civil Service had separate sections for male and female employees until 1959. Women's pay structure and promotion prospects were much worse than their male colleagues', and the NAWCS played an important role in campaigns for parity of treatment.

The Women's Library, London
Metropolitan University

A Dictionary of Employments Open to Women 1898

This covers the whole range of jobs done by women, from chopping firewood to professional posts such as factory inspectors. It was published by The Women's Institute of London, an employment advisory service.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University



Typist's hands at work c1950

From the 1880s, women started to enter offices as clerical workers. It was said that their 'nimble fingers' were especially suited to the new typewriting machines. These transformed a role formerly viewed as a skilled male job into an 'unskilled' female one.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University
Photograph by Brian Worth

Typewriter 1920s

Early mechanical typewriters needed careful handling to produce a regular text. Women were taught to type along to music to keep their strokes even.

People's History Museum,
Manchester



Frozen food company telesales staff c1970

Direct marketing by telephone to businesses and individuals has increased with improvements in telephone networks since the 1970s. Staff may be put under pressure to sell, but given limited information about the products they offer, especially in international call centres.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University
Photograph by Chris Davies

Adding machine 1930s

Adding machines performed simple calculations mechanically, taking over some of the skilled functions of book-keepers and clerks. They were attractive to employers as they deterred fraud, and were quicker to check than hand calculations.

People's History Museum, Manchester

Phone with switches 1930s

From the 1880s, women were employed as telephonists both by telecommunications firms and within organisations. The ability to deal simultaneously with two callers required tact and quick thinking.

People's History Museum, Manchester



Office with word-processor Computer keyboard c1980

The introduction of new technology in the form of word-processors required clerical staff to retrain, but did not change the gender dynamics in offices, as this publicity photograph makes clear. Older women trained as typists might be replaced by younger 'digital natives', or sidelined by the tendency for professionals to produce their own documents.

Photo: TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University
Keyboard: Private collection



TUC Library in Transport House c1938 Library filing cabinet 1960s

The Librarians of the TUC, Miss Mitchell, Miss Crowther and Miss Young, surrounded by box files, papers, and filing cabinets for index cards. The card index needed to be carefully maintained in order to keep tabs on the documents and artefacts to which it referred.

Photo: TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University
Filing cabinet: The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University



Infant school teacher and class c1980

When the state school system was set up in the 1870s, the youngest children were classed as 'infants' and taught by women. Infant and Primary schools in Britain are still overwhelmingly staffed by women.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, Photograph by Judy Harrison



Nurse and doctor on the ward c1980

While nurses had their own training and promotion structure, the highest grade, Ward Sister, was still subordinate to doctors. The dynamic between the sister managing the day-to-day care of the patient and the doctor prescribing treatment are summed up in this image of the ward round.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, Photograph by Judy Harrison



Midwifery badges worn by Sister Vivien Haxby 1974-85

Vivienne Haxby worked at hospitals in Keighley, Bradford, Nottingham, Dundee and Leicester, rising to Sister in charge of the Special Care Baby Unit. The silver belt buckle was bought to wear when she qualified; this was the one personal item allowed with the uniform.

Private collection



Technical drawing student 1988

A young woman learning technical drawing at Hackney College. This was a skill previously dominated by men.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, Photograph by Jenny Matthews



Technical drafting board 1960s Technical drafting instruments 1980s

Before computerised systems were developed, hand drafting required skill, care and meticulous calculations to produce accurate working drawings. This drafting board has a sliding rule to help in setting out drawings and is hinged for repositioning.

Private collection



Electronics assembly c1980

Women have been used to assemble electrical goods since the 1930s. They have been favoured for having smaller hands than men; useful for working with tiny components.

TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, Photograph by Derek Speirs



**Women carpenters
c1980
Carpenter's tool box
c1980**

Christine Wall was a humanities graduate who retrained as a carpenter in 1978. As part of her apprenticeship she made this box for storing her working tools. On the last day she was expected to walk out with it over her shoulder: in fact it was so heavy that she had to take some of the tools out the day before so she could lift it.

Private collection

**Nurse's uniform
Cleaner's overall
Catering overall and hat
Scientific overall
Technical overall
Business suit
Waitress' dress and apron
Beautician's overall
Bib and brace overall
2010**

The ranges of corporate clothing produced for women show the variety of women's work today: medical, scientific, technical, managerial, catering, housekeeping, beauty trades and manual.

Alexandra Workwear,
www.alexandra.co.uk

Digital slideshow

**With Women's Hands
Exhibition
1962
The Garment Worker
Seven Chances for
Women to Show their
Skill
Miss Personality Girl
contest**

In 1962, the TUC organised an exhibition in Congress House, London to celebrate the role of women in modern industry, and to encourage women to join trades unions. There were over twenty stands with women demonstrating a wide variety of trades from agricultural work to light engineering. There were competitions to 'show the creative and cultural activities of which working women are capable'. This exhibition of workers' leisure pursuits followed a tradition going back to the 1840s. Many of the unions represented at the exhibition discussed it in detail in their members' newsletters. There was a 'Miss Personality Girl' contest judging entrants on their commitment to their union and their co-workers.

TUC Library Collections, London
Metropolitan University

Film

**To Be a Woman
1949**

In 1949-51 the pioneering film-maker Jill Craigie was funded by the Equal Pay Campaign to make a documentary, 'To Be a Woman'. It included footage of women working in a wide variety of occupations, from charwomen to bus conductors to architects. These are all the more remarkable in the 'back to home and duty' ethos of the post-war years.

The Women's Library, London
Metropolitan University