

Title of Paper

How much did English Women earn in the past?

Female wages from before the Black Death through the Industrial Revolution

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Abstract

This paper presents a wage series for unskilled English (and some Welsh) women workers from 1260 to 1860. The series is bookended by some familiar secondary sources compiled by authors such as Thorold Rogers (for the medieval period) and Joyce Burnette (for the nineteenth century). Data extracted from less well-known sources, including a number of estate and household accounts, supplements the established material and bridges several gaps in the series. The series can be compared with the authoritative series for men compiled by Clark (2007) and Allen (2001). It can also be subdivided into a series based on daily or weekly wages, which were by and large earned by married women and annual wages, which were by and large the reserve of single farm and household servants. The series casts light on long run trends in women's agency and wellbeing but also informs several recent debates in economic history. First, the series bears on the question of whether "the golden age of the English peasantry" allegedly inaugurated by the Black Death included women, and more particularly whether demographic disaster and the resulting shift to animal husbandry advantaged women whose wages and opportunities increased. This has subsequent ramifications for secular growth since, as argued by De Moor and van Zanden (2010) and Voitlander and Voth (2012), women who spent time as servants, delayed marriage and reduced fertility. The resulting Northern European Marriage Pattern (NEMP) raised incomes and promoted further growth. Second, the series enables the relationship between the age at marriage and women's relative wages to be explored in a long run context. Did a relatively high female wage deter marriage by raising the opportunity costs of childbearing as the seminal paper by Galor and Weil (1996) suggests? Third, the series informs recent interest in whether female celibacy was influenced by women's ability to maintain themselves and so remain unmarried, see Froide (2007).

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