PIERCERS, PRESS GIRLS, AND PENNY CAPITALISTS

WOMEN AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BIRMINGHAM ECONOMY

Tom Gidlow

Image Courtesy of: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

South-West Prospect of Birmingham, 1829, by Frederick Calvert.

Small Shop, big Impact

At a time when the British economy moved towards the development of large factories employing thousands, Birmingham's economy, save in a few cases, was largely defined by small businesses producing a single product. In the Jewellery Quarter, for example, it was rare for firms to have more than 150 employees.

Within the city of a thousand trades, women played diverse roles. During the industrial revolution demand for labour had increased and women were affected by this process, earning individual wages, sometimes as part of a family income.[1] The nature of Birmingham's small business economy allowed women to integrate further into traditional male roles than elsewhere. Moreover, married women had to balance domestic management with participation in the wider economy. 'Women' is not a catch-all term, and although it is being used here for descriptive purposes it should be underlined that using the term on its own ignores other definitive categories such as age or class.

Apprentices

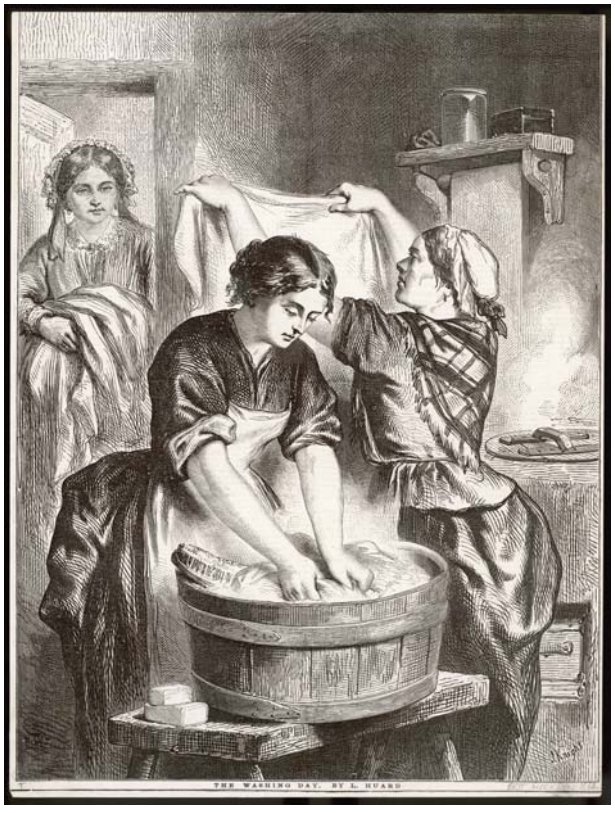
In their modern form apprenticeships are formal contracts leading to recognised qualifications. Although formal recognised qualifications are a recent concept, the skills an apprentice learned in historic apprenticeships were recognised by law, and when a contract was signed with a master, it was a binding legal document.

In nineteenth-century Birmingham, male apprentices were usually legally bound from their early teens. In the metal trades boys were normally bound at fourteen, for seven years,[2] whereas Hardman and Co. glassmakers would bind from thirteen.[3]

From the medieval period females were less likely to be formal apprentices, and by the nineteenth century this was almost unheard of. Some girls, however, with enough funds and connections still had the option to enter into an apprenticeship. For girls this was informal, and historians therefore have fewer records to work with than with boys, but like the boys, girls would work with a skilled craftsperson in order to gain skills in a trade, often in traditional female crafts such as dressmaking.

Image Courtesy of: Archives, Heritage and Photography, Library of Birmingham

Straw Hat Maker, from *The Book of Trades or Library of the Useful Arts, part 3*, 1805.



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Three women on washing day, 1864, L Huard in *British Workman*.

Penny Capitalism and Prostitution

At times when the economy was at its weakest, men's hours and wages went down, as did a family's ability to survive. As the manager of the home, frequently alongside formal employment, this gap in income was often plugged by the woman of the house. A common way this happened was through 'penny capitalism'; however, women sometimes had to turn to crime or prostitution.

'Penny capitalism' was a term first used by the historian John Benson, and refers to many small and unofficial transactions which may or may not have constituted an official business. This is distinct from business ownership, which is discussed later. 'Penny capitalism' allowed many women to keep their families afloat during tough times. Women engaged in domestic work such as washing clothes, taking lodgers, or selling food and drink in a make-shift shop in the home. Although these women would often not have considered themselves business people, the money made through these unofficial means probably played a significant part in the Birmingham economy.

Some turned to crime. For young girls, particularly in the low-paying button, screw, spoon, and pen industries, this would often be theft.[4] However, some women also engaged in prostitution, an occupation which always increased when the economy was weak. One police officer recounted during a recession in 1843 that there were 118 brothels and 42 'houses of ill fame' within a fifteen-minute walk in one Birmingham district.[5] The youngest prostitutes were around the age of fourteen, but prostitution was by no means confined to young and unmarried women, as lack of income could push wives and mothers towards other means of securing income.[6] Both 'penny capitalism' and prostitution were unofficial at the time and have often been ignored by historians since, but they were ways in which women survived financially.

Wages and Conditions

Women's unequal access to education in comparison to men meant that they tended to be less technically skilled. This, combined with a negative view of female ability, meant women often earned less than men on average. This wage gap started at an early age, and continued through adolescence and adulthood.

In 1843 the government commissioned a report on the state of children's employment nationwide. This 1,894-page document provides a lot of detail on individual men, women, and children. It found that in Birmingham over a variety of trades, girls between seven and thirteen years old made 2s 5d (2 shillings 5 pence) per week. This was 8d less a week than the boys. Between thirteen and eighteen years of age, girls on average made 4s 9d weekly, which was 7d less than boys of the same age.[7]

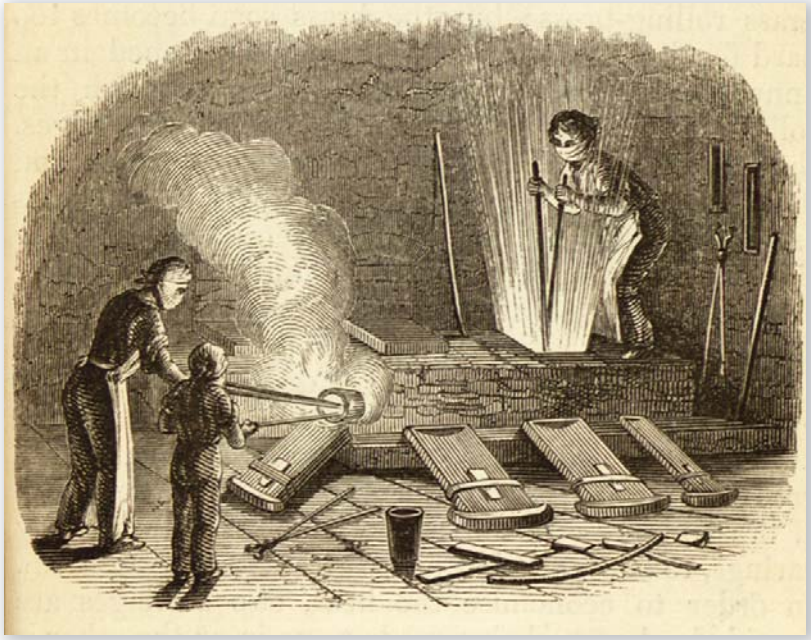

Image Courtesy of: Archives, Heritage and Photography, Library of Birmingham

Brass making from *The Useful Arts and Manufactures of Great Britain, Vol 2*, 1861.

Whereas children of both sexes could often do similar jobs, by adulthood the discrepancies in technical education and the expectations of each gender pushed men into higher-paying roles. For example, in the brass trade of mid-nineteenth century Birmingham, men could make up to 50s a week in skilled occupations and at minimum 15s in unskilled labour. In the same industry even skilled women would struggle to make more than 10s per week.[8]

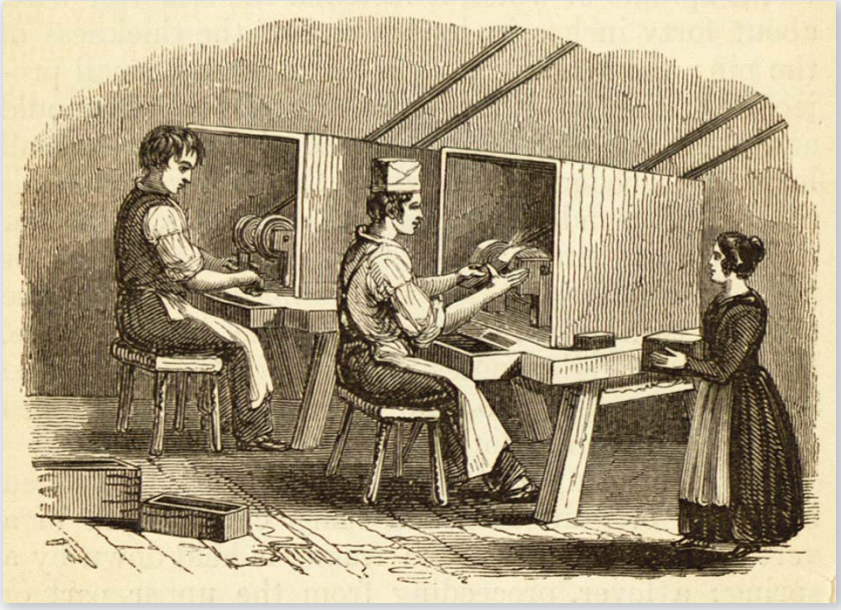

Image Courtesy of: Archives, Heritage and Photography, Library of Birmingham

Women and men working together in the button industry, from *The Useful Arts and Manufactures of Great Britain, Vol 2*, 1861.

Moral Reactions and Gendered Expectations

Cultural attitudes to work and home reflected a gendered approach to what men and women were expected to do. Male trade unionists feared that a female presence in the economy could undercut men, and reduce men's wages. Others feared that women in work would abandon their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers.

A nineteenth-century historian, W. C. Aitken, believed that women who left their children to go to work calmed their infants with opiates, causing nerve damage.[9] Equally the 1843 government report argued that working women lacked domestic skills, which caused their children to be sick and drove their husbands to the ale houses.[10] In reality, women were all too often driven by circumstance to return to work very soon after pregnancy ended, sometimes to the detriment of their own and their child's health. Even relatively progressive commentators such as Harriet Martineau believed women earning money was pointless, as they had to spend income on items such as clothes that traditionally would have been made in the home.[11] The blame placed on women for alcoholism and infant mortality is an example of misogyny at the time.

In the workplace there was also concern that unmarried women mixed with men on shifts and some worried that this led to prostitution.[12] For others the fear was that women would become less feminine. In the Sedgley nail-making industry, girls would 'smoke, swear, throw off all restraint in word and act, and become as bad as a man'.[13] The fear of loss of feminine modesty also partially materialised from sharing toilets at work. Anne Peers, a 39-year-old worker in the screw-making industry, stated 'it is an unpleasant thing for women to have to go to the privy while men are about'.[14]

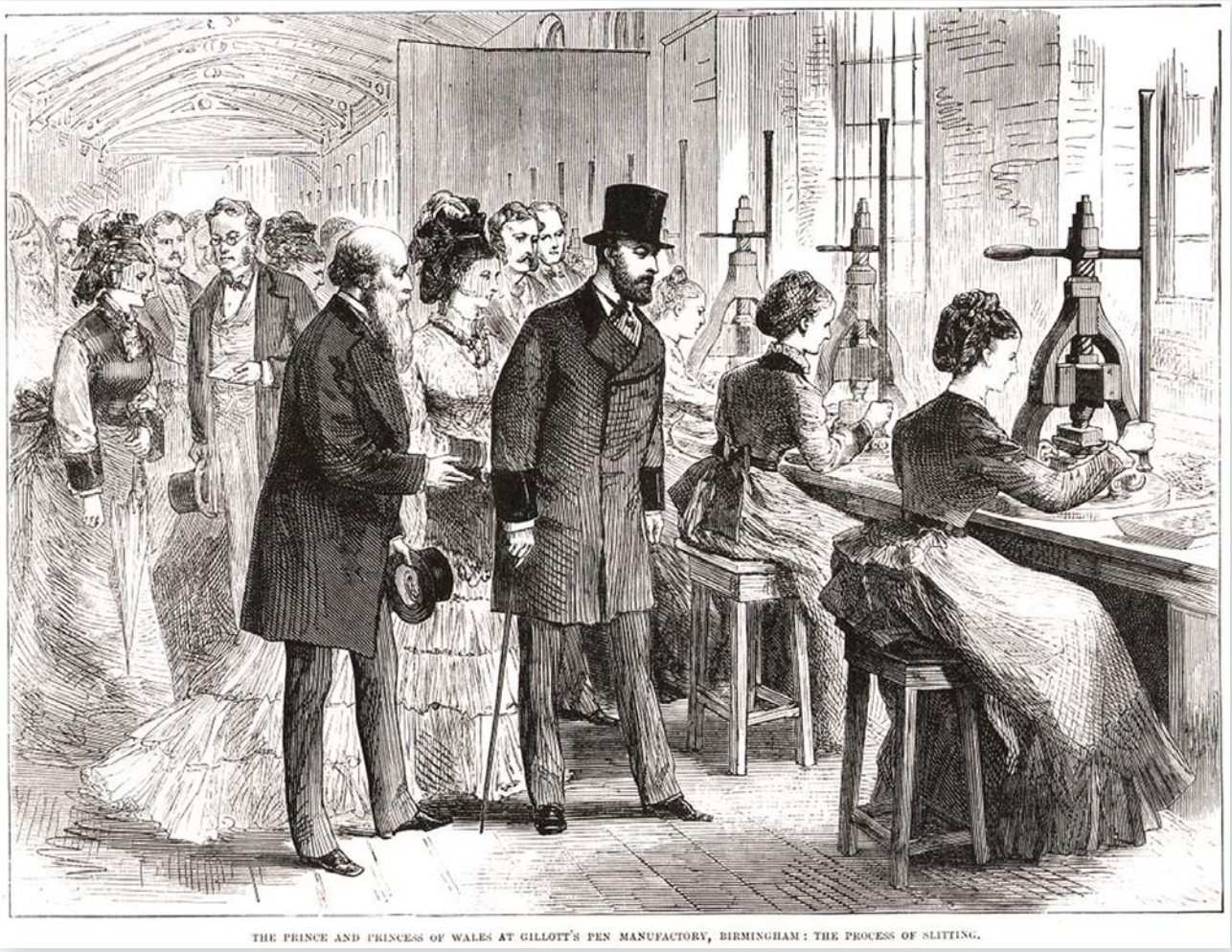

Image Courtesy of: Birmingham Museums, Think Tank

Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, and Princess Alexandra at Gillott's Victoria Works, 1874.

Where Women Worked

Women were more likely to be employed in some industries and jobs than others. Button-making, for example, relied very heavily on female labour, but in contrast few women worked in the glass industry. At Chance's glassworks in the 1800s women worked predominantly at collecting up shards of broken glass and in decorating glass. Decorating could be dangerous, however, as it could require the use of strong acid.[15]

Both the brass and glass industries relied on the small hands of young girls to feed thin wires into moulds.[16] Birmingham's brass industry employed 725 girls under twenty in 1861, and 1,713 females in total. This meant that across the industry females made up around 21 per cent of the workforce.[17] Although much of women's work was unskilled this was not true of stamping and piercing, where adult women operated all types of press, including the large ones usually assigned to skilled men.

Skilled and semi-skilled work did not necessarily mean good treatment. Women operating presses to make pens were often subject to dismissal or fines for breaking strict rules: one factory fined workers 3d for singing at work.[18] Younger women more often used smaller presses to cut smaller pieces.[19] In the case of John and Daniel Smallwood's factory these young press girls would often be employed for only a few months, sometimes getting work through family members who already worked there.[20] If a firm employed a lot of children it would usually also engage a female overlooker to tend to them. Although this appears to be a caring maternal role, the overlooker could beat children to keep them working.[21]

Image Courtesy of: Archives, Heritage and Photography, Library of Birmingham

Manufacture of buttons from *The Useful Arts and Manufactures of Great Britain*, by Charles Thomlinson, Vol 2, *c* 1820-50.

Button-making

The making of buttons was big business in nineteenth-century Birmingham. Jobs were predominantly unskilled, and this affected the ratio of males to females. When Harriet Martineau visited Allen and Moore's button manufactory in 1852 she saw 'hundreds of women, scores of children, and a few men'. Buttons at this time were most often iron, brass, or copper, and the small shapes had to be punched out of sheet metal. Martineau was impressed by the speed at which the women could operate the presses. She wrote: 'The number cut out and pushed aside in a minute is beyond belief.' [22]

The rise of the electro-plating industry, in which Elkington's was especially important, sparked a decrease in demand for iron, brass, and copper buttons. Although there was comparatively high female ownership due to low capital start-up, this market fragility meant that often female-owned businesses were short-lived. A conservative estimate of female ownership is around 5 per cent of all button factories between 1850 and 1950, higher than some trades.

Although the metal button trade was increasingly replaced by electro-plating, the production of pearl buttons remained steady. When interviewed in 1843 Mary McCiachlan, a 14-year-old working for Mr. Aston's pearl button factory, claimed that the pearl dust created by drilling did not negatively affect her health. Yet her co-worker Anne Tibbits, twelve, suffered from constant headaches due to the heat in the factory during her eleven-hour days.[23]

The presence of females in the workplace did not sit well with everybody. In the same year Joseph Corbett, an employee at Turner and Sons button factory in Snow Hill, complained loudly about the mixing of the sexes. He believed that 'a young female, of pleasing face and person' who had been exposed to the vulgarities of men 'is now put in the certain path to ruin and seduction'.[24] Although a misogynistic statement by modern standards, it should be noted that there was a higher rate of prostitution and crime among girls and women in the button trade, a trade where men and women mixed. However, the police at the time attributed this to the low wages and uncertain employment of this type of work, as well as to the mixing of the sexes.[25]

Women in Charge

Women owned businesses: they were not only employees. Prominently named at the head of the list of manufacturers in *Bisset's Magnificent Guide* is a female manufacturer: Abigail Robinson, Gold Watch Hand, Pendant and Toy Manufacturer of 21 Price Street.

Recent work by historians Katharine Jenns and Jennifer Aston has shown the presence of substantial numbers of middle-class women who owned businesses. Typically, women inherited a business as a widow or daughter of a male owner and not only in socially acceptable trades such as drape making or grocery.

This transition from male to female ownership was assisted by Birmingham's economy: firstly because it consisted of a vast array of trades, and secondly because there was no established guild system, which tended to block women's entry into ownership. Birmingham manufactories were often small and based at home, meaning women became involved in the running of the firm unofficially before taking over.

Women found it harder to amass finance than men, and banks were much more reluctant to lend; this meant that when a woman started her own business from scratch it was often in an industry that did not need a lot of start-up capital. In Birmingham between 1849 and 1900 between 4.3 and 9 per cent of businesses were owned by women. Research has shown that male and female business owners operated in similar ways: in the use of advertising language and interaction with the legal system, for example. ●

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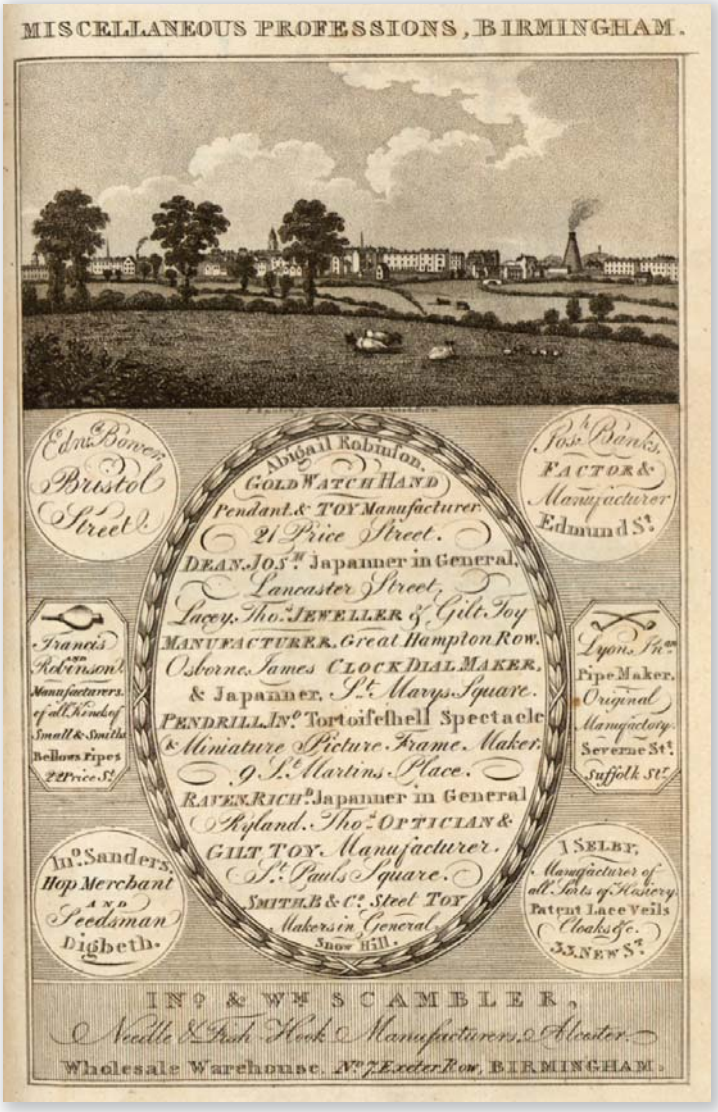

Image Courtesy of: Archives, Heritage and Photography, Library of Birmingham

View of Birmingham from Aston Wharf with names of various businesses, from *Bisset's Magnificent Guide or Grand Copper Plate Directory for the Town of Birmingham*, 1808.

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