Women at Work in Victorian Worcester: Gloves, Service and Trade

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Introduction

Female labour was a central part of Worcester's economic life between c.1820 and 1880. The clearest evidence of this lies in the glove-making industry, Worcester's "principal trade", where women were essential as glove-sewers and outworkers.[1] However, women also contributed through domestic service, retail and small trade, even if much of it was poorly recorded in census returns. These sectors mattered in different ways, but together they show that female labour was an essential aspect of Worcester's economic life.

The glove trade

One of Worcester's most economically important industries was the glove trade, where women played a major role, especially through sewing work that transformed cut materials into finished gloves.[2] Turner states that the fine hand-stitching on Worcester gloves was done by "women and girls", showing that women were responsible for this stage of production.[3] This is significant because it links female labour to the making of the finished glove, not to a minor role within the industry. Sidenius strengthens this point by stating that there were far more women employed in the industry than men, with up to fifteen female sewers working at home for each male cutter.[4] Parliamentary evidence from 1832 points in the same direction, describing the glove industry as "giving employment to 30,000 or 40,000 persons, a great proportion of whom were women".[5] This shows that women performed an essential stage of production and made up a substantial share of the workforce in one of Worcester's largest industries.[6]

Additionally, their importance is clear in the scale of employers' dependence on them. A newspaper report on Worcester glove manufacture in 1873 stated that Dent, Allcroft and Co. employed 700 workers inside the factory and 5,000 outside.[7] Although centred on one firm, this evidence shows that a major Worcester glove manufacturer depended on labour beyond the factory, including sewing work, which was predominantly female.[8]

1. S. Lewis, Worcestershire General and Commercial Directory, for 1820 (Stourbridge: Printed for the Proprietor, by J. Heming, 1820), p. 19.
2. Bill Gwilliam, 'The Glove Trade', Worcester People & Places, 15 January 2025. Available at: https://www.worcesterpeopleandplaces.org.uk/news/708/146/The-Glove-Trade.html?utm [Accessed: 23 April 2026]; S. Lewis, Worcestershire General and Commercial Directory, p. 19.
3. Francesca A. Turner, 'A Quintessentially English Glove Legacy', The International Human Sciences Review, 1 (2019), 59-67 p. (62)
4. Jean H. Sidenius, A Woman's Place in the Village: An Oral History Study of Working-Class Women's Lives between 1890 and 1940 in and around Broadway, Worcestershire (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1993), p. 264.
5. Hansard, HL Deb, 9 March 1832, vol. 11, p. 8, 'Glove Trade'.
6. Jacqueline Banerjee, 'Industry, Religion and Self-Help in Mrs. Henry Wood's Mrs Halliburton's Troubles', The Victorian Web, 9 December 2013. Available at: https://victorianweb.org/authors/wood/industry.html [Accessed 29 April 2026].
7. The Worcester Glove Manufacture', The Sydney Morning Herald, 13 January 1873, p. 3.
8. Turner, 'A Quintessentially English Glove Legacy', p. 64; Sidenius, A Woman's Place in the Village, p. 264.

Littlebury's 1879 Directory of Worcester stated that the glove trade "furnishes to the poor female population easy, clean, and profitable work at their own homes" and listed firms such as Fownes Brothers & Co. and Groves & Partington among Worcester's glove manufacturers.[9] This suggests that reliance on female home-based sewing was not confined to a single firm but formed part of the broader organisation of Worcester's glove trade. Worcester manufacturers' dependence on large numbers of female outworkers therefore demonstrates that women were important to the glove trade and, because it was one of the city's main industries, to Worcester's wider economic life.[10]

However, female labour was not the only important element in Worcester's glove trade, since male cutters, masters and other workshop workers were also necessary for production and distribution.[11] Yet women occupied one of the largest and most labour-intensive parts of the process through sewing and outwork.[12] A further consideration is that the full scale of women's involvement is difficult to measure. Across the 1841 and 1851 censuses for Worcestershire, women in glove work appeared under the different terms "glove-sewers", "glovers", "glovemakers" and "gloveress", making their total contribution to the glove-finishing stage harder to measure from census records, since women performing similar sewing work were recorded under different labels rather than one consistent category.[13]

Female labour, therefore, mattered not simply because women were present in glove-making, but because Worcester's "principal trade" relied on a labour system based on large numbers of female outworkers whose total contribution may have been even greater than census records suggest, helping to sustain one of the city's main sources of employment, production and income.[14]

Domestic service and household work

Domestic service shows a second way in which female labour contributed to Worcester's economic life. Although less connected to large-scale production than glove-making, it still mattered to Worcester's economic life because it provided paid employment for women and supplied the cooking, cleaning, washing and household management that supported workers, employers and commercial premises across the city.[15] Churchley's analysis of Victorian census evidence suggests that local women were heavily involved in domestic service.[16] The 1871 Worcester census supports this: Emma Caswell of 56 High Street was listed as a "Servant Domestic", Jane Carwardine of 2 The Cross as a "Servant Domestic", and Jane L. Shergold and Georgina Hockins of St Swithin's Street as "General Servant Domestic".[17]

9. Littlebury's Directory & Gazetteer of Worcester & District (London: Littlebury & Co., 1879), pp. 50, 117, 120.
10. Banerjee, 'Industry, Religion and Self-Help in Mrs Halliburton's Troubles'.
11. Gwilliam, 'The Glove Trade', Worcester People & Places.
12. Hansard, HL Deb, vol. 11, p. 8, 'Glove Trade'; Turner, 'A Quintessentially English Glove Legacy', p. 64; Sidenius, A Woman's Place in the Village, p. 264.
13. 1841 Census returns for Worcester, Worcestershire, accessed via The Genealogist Census Records; 1851 Census returns for Worcester, Worcestershire, accessed via The Genealogist Census Records.
14. S. Lewis, Worcestershire General and Commercial Directory, p. 19; Banerjee, 'Industry, Religion and Self-Help in Mrs Halliburton's Troubles'.
15. Pamela Horn, The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant, 2nd edn (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), pp. 58, 81, 83, 144, 147.
16. Richard Allen Churchley, Differing Responses to an Industrialising Economy: Occupations in Rural Communities in the Heart of England from the Restoration to the Railway Age (c.1660-c.1840) (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010), p. 353.
17. Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service, Transcription of 1871 Census for Worcester (Worcester: Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service).

These women were not making goods for sale like glove-sewers, but their labour sustained homes and premises essential to Worcester's wider economy, enabling employers and businesses to function effectively.[18] Additionally, Higgs notes that women's multiple activities were not always fully captured in census records. Domestic servants performed many tasks, yet could appear under a single label, suggesting their full economic contribution may have been greater than the records indicate.[19] Domestic service, therefore, demonstrates that female labour was important not only in Worcester's main industries but also in the everyday running of the city. At the same time, its full contribution may be understated in census records.

Retail and dressmaking

Retail and small trade provide a third way in which female labour mattered to Worcester's economic life. Economic life depended not only on production and domestic services but also on buying, selling and making goods for local customers. Women played an important part in this sector. Lewis's 1820 directory lists Martha Davies, Elizabeth Webb and Miss Seagar as milliners and dressmakers, and Sarah Skyrme as a hatter and hosier.[20] These women contributed directly to local trade by supplying clothing and other goods to Worcester's market. The 1871 census shows the same pattern: Amelia Lang was a dress-maker's assistant, Mary J. Richards a draper's assistant, Sarah Howse a jeweller's assistant, and Emma Bastin a "Hatter and Hosier".[21] While less central to Worcester's economy than glove-making, this evidence still demonstrates women's visible and valuable role in the city's local economy.

Local newspapers reinforce this pattern. Advertisements in Berrow's Worcester Journal in 1877 promoted dressmaking, corsets and spring fashions in Worcester.[22] This shows female-centred goods and services were visible enough to be marketed publicly, highlighting the commercial importance of female-centred clothing trades in the city. Taken together, this evidence strengthens the argument by showing that female labour was economically significant within Worcester not only through glove-making or domestic service, but also through women's role in local commercial activity.

Conclusion

Overall, female labour was a central component of Worcester's economic life between c.1820 and 1880. The strongest evidence comes from glove-making, where women's sewing and outwork helped sustain one of Worcester's main sources of employment, production and income. However, domestic service, retail and small trade also helped keep households, business premises and trade functioning across the city. Female labour was not marginal to Worcester's economic life but a central and vital part of its daily functioning and continued long-term success throughout the nineteenth century, and surviving sources may understate its full scale.

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20. S. Lewis, Worcestershire General and Commercial Directory, pp. 92, 191.
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