



News and events

- Our next meeting will be on **Wednesday 19 June** when David Thorold, Curator Pre-Historic to Medieval at St Albans Museums, will talk about **The Archaeology of Wheathampstead**.
- The exhibition **Women doing everything, everywhere, all at once** is open until 4 July at the Verulamium Museum in St Albans. For information about two related talks, by Philippa Walton and Mary Beard, go to <https://tinyurl.com/3yjvzcub>.

Straw Hat Day

It is not widely known that today, May 15, is “Straw Hat Day”, at least in the USA. In the early 20th century, it was considered proper etiquette for men to start wearing a straw hat for the summer on May 15 each year and change to their autumn/winter hat on “Felt Hat Day”, September 15. There were riots in New York in May 1922 when gangs of young men attacked men wearing straw hats after the due date. The straw hats in question were known as a “boater”.



The Luton Straw Boater

In 1922, it was likely that the straw plait from which the hats were made came from China whereas 50 years earlier the peak production of straw hats and the straw plait from which they were made was in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire where this cottage industry dated from at least the 18th century. A report in 1804 suggested that some women plaiters in St Albans could earn up to 5 shillings a day, compared with an agricultural labourer’s typical wage of about 10 shillings a week.

From the early 19th century, hat-making began to move into factories, particularly in St Albans, Dunstable and Luton (hence ‘The Hatters’).

See Dianne Payne’s book *The Folly; a Celebration of Community* for a description of the hat factory at The Folly.

Straw plaiting continued as a cottage industry in the home, the work being done almost entirely by women and girls as young as four years, and was a significant, sometimes crucial, source of the family income.

In Wheathampstead in 1851, 31% of the total occupied population were straw workers, nearly all of whom were plaiters, only 28 being described as hat-makers or sewers. Of the 57 residents of East Lane, 33 were plaiters, 16 were agricultural workers, and only nine were otherwise occupied with just two described as “scholar”. All the smaller beerhouses in the parish included at least one plaiter in the household (<https://rb.gy/9a48d8>)

In 1871, just over 12,000 women and girls in Hertfordshire were described in the census as “straw plaiter”. The industry then went into steep decline with only 681 so described 30 years later as cheaper imports, mainly from China and Japan, took over supply to the hat factories.

Plait schools

For much of the 19th century, many children attended “plait schools”, producing plait to be sold by their parents who paid as little as a penny a week for their plaiting “education”. Conditions in the schools were harsh. A 10-year-old was expected to make about 30 yards of simple plait in a day. There was very little “education”.



Straw plait school

A combination of the decline in the industry and the introduction of compulsory education from 1870 ensured the gradual disappearance of the plait schools though the St Helen’s School logbook entry for the week May 31 to June 4 in 1875 records “The irregularity of the girls this year is much greater than usual in previous years. Accounted for by the briskness of the straw trade ... the mothers keep them at home to assist, especially in the afternoons.”