

Straw Plaiting in Hertfordshire

A cottage industry succumbs to market forces

Elizabeth Buteux

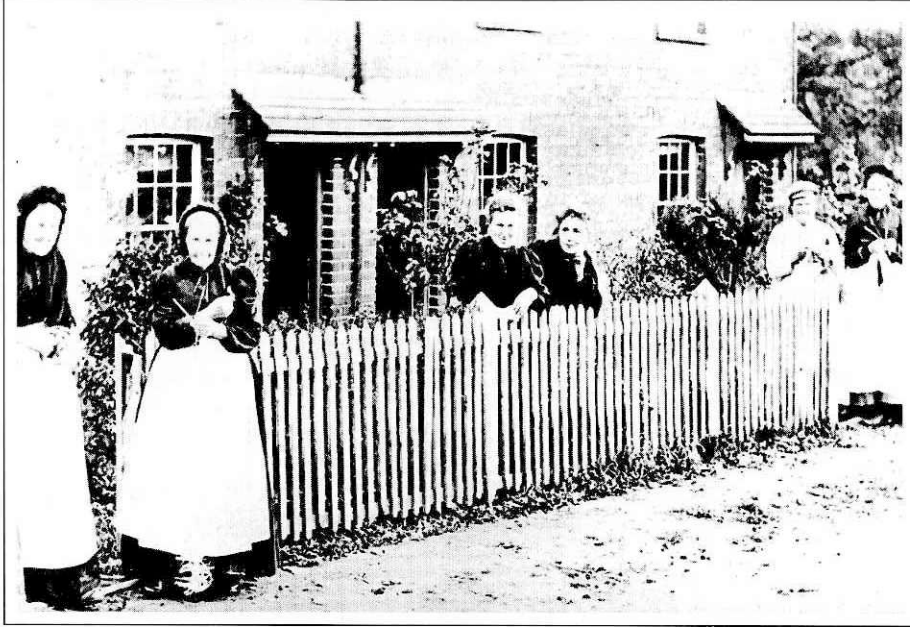
Straw plaiting was an important income supplement for the labouring poor of north and west Hertfordshire in the nineteenth century. Free education and free trade, however, brought the industry and its reliance on child labour to a timely end.

The Commissioners for, "The Report on Women and Children in Agriculture 1867-1868" observed that the occupation which gave employment, however poorly paid, to so many women and children, was straw plaiting. This industry which became a significant feature of local commerce in the nineteenth century was closely connected with agriculture in Hertfordshire.

Apart from Hertfordshire straw plaiting had been practised in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire since the early seventeenth century, and by the eighteenth century straw hats worn mainly by country people became fashionable for everyone. When the French Wars stopped the import of foreign plait, the straw hat industry of Luton, Dunstable and St Albans became dependent on local home plaiters. The chalky soil of the Chiltern fields was the most suitable to grow the tall, straight, thin straw which was ideal for plaiting. Farmers in the plait areas of Hertfordshire could get a good price for their straw, and even after the introduction of mechanical reapers, the fields were cut by hand. Modern wheat, by comparison, is unsuitable for plaiting. However, it was the members of the Waller family, who were plait merchants in Luton, who claimed the great improvement in the quality of English Plait

Bundles of straw weighing 56 pounds were bound ready for sale to the dealer, who would remove the joints and cut the straw into suitable lengths. The straw was then sorted into different thicknesses. Sorting was done by means of a wooden trough fitted with metal circles, each gridded with wire. This would allow straw of a different size to pass to the tray beneath. Bleaching and dying developed into a major urban industry as the nineteenth century passed, but a home made bleach box was used in the villages. The straw was placed round the edge of a box or barrel with a tin of hot charcoal in the centre of which had been sprinkled brimstone or sulphur. The lid was clamped down and covered with cloth and then left for several hours. The sulphur also preserved and fumigated the straw. Until the 1850s, straw dying was impractical as the colours would run if the hat got wet. In England, however, aniline dyes revolutionised the process for coloured plait, but as this involved the use of toxic ingredients it could lead to sickness and even death, especially when bleaching and dying was done in people's back yards. All these activities could be carried by one or two persons, sometimes a farm worker and his wife, but during the nineteenth century the middle men grew few in number. Each stage was then carried out by a separate person, the dealer, drawer, stripper, sorter,

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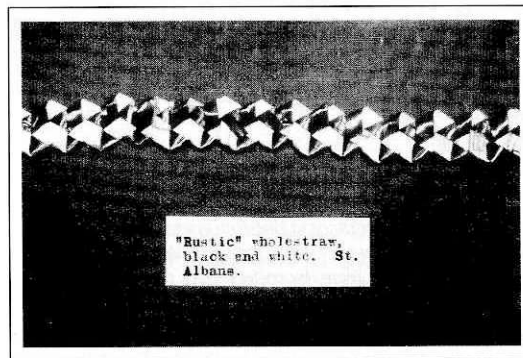


*Straw plaiters at Wigginton in 1897,
photographed by the famous Berkhamsted photographer J.T.Newman
(Photo courtesy of Jean Davis, from the collection of the Dacorum Heritage Trust)*

bleacher and so on, until the straw was ready for the plaiter. Women and children plaited straw to supplement the meagre family income. Even when the price of plait fell in the middle of the nineteenth century, a woman aided by her children, could add 12s. (60p), a week to the family income, more than the agricultural wage of 9-10s (45p-50p). Women much preferred the work to service, which led Arthur Young to complain in 1804, that plaiting, "makes the poor saucy, and no servants can be procured." Perhaps it was the independence of the plait workers that earned them a bad reputation, for a Factory Inspector's Report in 1870 associated plaiting with, "vacant minds, dirty cottages, neglected children." As a cottage industry, straw plaiting was easily carried out in the home, and unlike lace making it could be done anywhere, walking down the street or gossiping with the neighbours. The industry required only three simple and inexpensive tools, a straw splitter, a splint mill and a yard measure. The main factor in making English plait competitive with fine Italian plait was the effective way of splitting straw into narrow splints, which worked up into a fine and delicate plait. Previously, a knife had been used, but by 1800, various machines or 'sheens', as they were called, had been invented. One idea was the use of a central cone behind which radiated a set of cutters which was pushed into the straw splitting it into a number of equal pieces. A later development

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of these simple spits, or 'sheens', was the Austen cutter, first made by the Austin family of Tabernacle Yard, off Akeman Street, Tring, Hertfordshire. This cutter consisted of a pear shaped wooden frame supported on a square base. In the frame were two to ten holes which contained the metal cutters and these splitters also offered a choice of splint sizes. The straws, or splints as we should call them now, had to be dampened to stop them cracking, but if immersed in water too long they became limp. Next, the dampened splints were passed several times through a wooden mangle, a splint mill, to make the straw flexible. This wooden mangle with boxwood rollers would be screwed to a door post. After the plait was made it was dampened again and then passed through another mangle. Sometimes the plaiters made do with the same mangle, for some had adjustments to these enabling them to be used for both purposes. The plait was then measured into lengths of scores (20 yards or 18.3 metres), the unit by which it was sold to market. Three main forms of plait were produced - Plain, Pearl and Brilliant, with several variations being produced from them, some by using coloured straw.

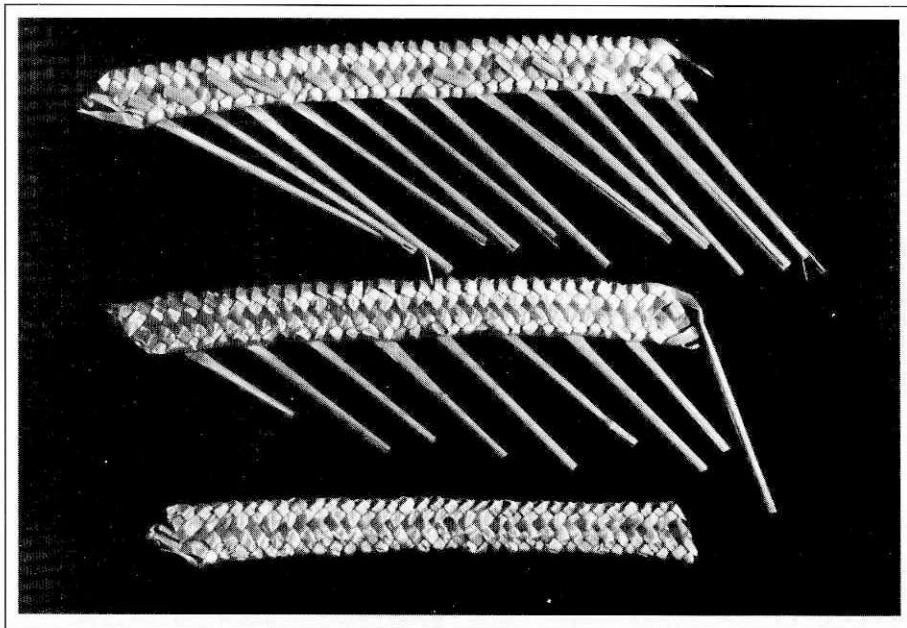


*'Rustic' black and white wholestraw plait, St Albans
(Courtesy Buckingham County Museum)*

Because of the availability of the basic raw material, the industry flourished throughout Hertfordshire, and entries from the 1851 Census show just how much people depended on plaiting for employment. In St Albans, the 1851 Census reveals a large number of people employed in the plait industry. Taking St Peter's parish, with a population of 612, as an example, it would appear that every stage of hat manufacturing was carried out by 110 people, from straw splitters to the straw plaiters, to the bonnet makers and trimmers. These adults assisted by children, probably did piece work at home for the two hat and bonnet manufacturers, father and son, Thomas and William Richardson, living at 35, St Peter's Street. In Hertfordshire towns, such as Hemel Hempstead, the 1851 Census Returns for High Street, Hemel Hempstead, show the trade 'plaiter' against the names of nearly all the women, most of the children over ten, with several younger children included. Apart from the better-off trades, shopkeepers and innkeepers, nearly every family

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had members who plaited. Entries from the 1851 Census also show the importance of straw plaiting as a means of employment in villages, such as Norton, near Hitchin, where 60 women and 3 men are listed as 'platters' (as spelt by the enumerator). Twenty children, both boys and girls aged between 5 and 16 years of age are also recorded as plaiters, out of a population of 399.

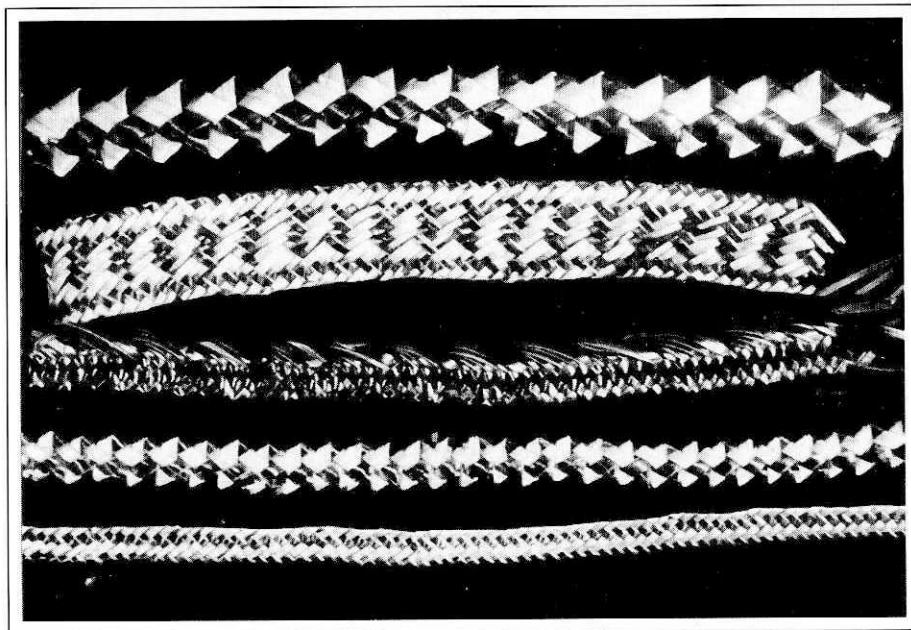


*Three stages in making whole-straw plait
Top and Middle: before trimming. Bottom: finished plait
(Courtesy Buckingham County Museum)*

There were probably many more involved in the plait trade, but here we run in into difficulties with our source. The 1851 Census was the first in which children were listed as 'scholars' in the occupational returns, and one of the qualifications was of daily attending school. Thus in the village of Norton, as an example we have 22 children recorded as 'scholars' within the same age group as the child 'plaiters', eight of whom come from plait families. As there are two school mistresses listed, one with the added qualification of 'platter', we may assume that she ran the plait school and the other the village school. Subjective guesses, of course, should not be made from the Census, but if we look at the supporting evidence it is not difficult to see which school would have been most favoured by parents, even if they were not

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employed in the trade themselves. We have to remember that the parents were members of the labouring poor, that education was not compulsory and most could not afford it. The parents provided the straw and paid a fee ranging from 1d. to 3d. a week. It was rare for any other subject to be taught as most of the keepers of plait schools were illiterate, and some as Elizabeth Watts, who had a school at Hemel Hempstead, were both illiterate and unable to plait. The yard stick by which parents



*Five examples of Brilliant plait
(Courtesy Buckingham County Museum)*

judged a teacher's efficiency was the success with which she wielded her osier stick to make the pupils produce plait. Professor P.E. Hair claims in his paper, 'Children in Society 1850-1930', that contrary to preconceived ideas on Victorian child labour, very few children under the age of 10 were employed in, "any regular gainful employment", and claims that most were employed in agriculture. However, the misery of the long hours and the crushing discipline for the children attending the plait schools is revealed by the Children's Employment Commission of 1864. Mrs. Wimbush, who had a plait school in Northchurch, near Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, states in her evidence that the children worked all the year round from 9am to 8pm with an hour off for dinner at 1pm. In busy times however, the children were expected to work until midnight or at least until 10pm. The children

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started at the age of four, as perhaps the four year old boy listed as a 'scholar' in Norton. The lot of those entrusted to a plaiting mistress was a pitiful one, for Mrs. Wimbush also admits to caning the children. The over-crowded plait schools were usually held in small squalid cottages for, again looking at Mrs. Wimbush's evidence, 40 children plaited in a room 10 feet square. Mrs. Wimbush also admitted that sometimes the room held 60 children. Because the plait had to be kept damp for plaiting, no fires were allowed in the schools. To keep warm in the winter, glowing embers of charcoal were put in earthenware pots. The girls sat on stools and put the pots under their long skirts. Copied from the lace makers, these pots, known as 'dicky-pots' were an effective way of heating. However, it was also a dangerous one, for a girl in Chesham died when her petticoat caught fire. This is thought to have happened to Hester Smith from Potten End, near Berkhamsted. Her burial is recorded on 12 January, 1836. The little plait girl, it seems, was "burnt to death". She was only five years old.

The schools resembled sweatshops rather than places of learning. The youngest children, both boys and girls, some only three years old, began by clipping off the ends from older pupils' plait. The children were then taught to plait with both hands whilst moistening the next straws in their mouths, which led to unsightly cracks at the corner of their mouths. The next supply of straw was held under the left arm, leaving many children with a hunched left shoulder. Lack of exercise led to stunted growth, sore mouths. Catarrhal infections and crooked fingers were also common complaints amongst the plait children. The 1867 Factory Act should have closed the plait schools but a loophole in the Act allowed them to carry on. The Act prohibited the employment of children under the age of 8 in a handicraft and required those between 8 and 13 to attend elementary school for at least ten hours a week. However, the plait schools were not classified as workshops; further, the plait mistress only supervised the children, she did not employ them. Eventually, the test case of *Beadon v Parrot*, 1871, heard in the Queen's Bench Division, brought the plait schools to notice and within the scope of the Act. Children under the age of 8 could now no longer work in a plait school. The Act also limited children between the ages of 8 and 13 to six and half hours work a day. It was very difficult to enforce legislation as the members of the 1876 Commission on the Factory and Workshop Act were to discover. Any Government official had great difficulty in finding the plait schools because the existence of the plait schools were more often than not concealed. If the schools were found, they would be deserted just before the arrival of the inspectors.

The irregular attendance of the 'half timers', the plait children who attended school for the compulsory 10 hour week, could cause great problems. Truancy remained high at the board and village schools, even after the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880, made elementary education compulsory. The log book at Potten End Village School, for example, contains numerous complaints about absent children, usually kept away by their parents in order to plait. Thus the plaiting areas, particularly in West Hertfordshire, were educationally the most backward in the county.

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On market days the plait children were expected to accompany their mothers to sell the finished plait which would be wrapped in a cloth or piled on a pram. In St Albans, for example, the plaiters would attend the large plait market held in School Lane. In other parts of the county, in villages such as Norton, the plaiters and their children would walk the four miles to the famous Plait Mart, held in Back Street, Hitchin. Although Berkhamsted had a weekly market, the plaiters from outlying districts, such as Frithsden, Potten End, and Bovingdon, preferred to walk to Hemel Hempstead, where the market was a great feature of the town.

The market was the place where the best bargains could be made, trading times were strictly controlled, and children were not allowed to sell plait. As the plaiters walked to market, the dealers in their covered wagons often met them on the way to try to buy the best plait at the lowest prices, and this was called forestalling. Restrictions on forestalling were introduced in Hemel Hempstead in 1809. The Bailiwick By-Laws insisted that transactions must take place at the market on Thursdays, and no bargains could be made in the selling of plait until the market bell rang.

On market days the women would line the pavement holding the plait looped over their arms. Settlements were usually made in the nearest inn. Short measure of plait was a constant problem for dealers and manufacturers. The formation of the Straw Hat Manufacturing Association and its resolutions published in 1852, aimed to provide, "An effectual check at once to the evil of short measure." Spot checks were made after 1852 by an inspector with a yard stick to protect merchants from short measure. The dealers then sold the plait to the straw hat manufacturers at Luton, Dunstable and St Albans. By the late 1870s, in towns such as Luton in Bedfordshire and Hitchin in Hertfordshire, several plait halls were established, as open air markets were unsuitable for quality plait. But by the time these plait halls were built the days of the home produced plait were numbered. The nineteenth century was not only a century of industrialisation, it was also a century of Free Trade. This allowed cheap plait to be imported from Italy, and later, from China and Japan. Plaits that had sold for a shilling a score in 1838, were only fetching 3d. in 1893, and by the 1870s, an experienced plaiter's earnings had dropped to about 4s a week. This led to the decline of the plait industry.

Free Trade, therefore, was one of the two reasons for the closure of the plait schools, and the other was that in 1891, education was not only compulsory, it was also free.

Straw plaiting provided a much needed income for the labouring poor, and gave an opportunity for the aged and widows not to become a burden on the parish. The craft, and the way of life of the plaiters, together with their independent spirit has endured in local memory. Indeed, in many places in Hertfordshire, such as the city of St Albans, and the towns of Hitchin and Hemel Hempstead, together with the surrounding villages, the plaiters descendants remember them with pride.

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Straw hats are still worn today, but, wherever we wear a straw hat, perhaps we should remember the plight of the plait children of the last century. As they worked long and miserable hours of straw plaiting, they sang:

*Work, work and always poor.
I'll leave my work and I'll work it more.
I'll work my fingers to the bone,
And then I'll leave my work alone.*

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Abbreviations

DBCA Dacorum Borough Archives
DHT Dacorum Heritage Trust
HRO Hertfordshire Record Office

Documents

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