

Omitted from History: Women in the Building Trades

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INTRODUCTION

The building industry was one of the first, together with agriculture, where wage labour emerged and became firmly established in Britain. It was one of the main industries where labour was regulated by statute, the most prominent being the 1349 Statute of Labourers and the 1562 Statute of Artificers. Even today it maintains a strong tradition of apprenticeship, being the only industry with an industrial training board and a statutory levy. And yet it remains an almost exclusively white male preserve, the most segregated sector in the economy. These are peculiarities of the building industry, too often little recognised, especially the latter. Indeed it is salutary to read the many books on the history of the building trades, guilds and unions that make no reference at all either to this male exclusivity or to those women who have succeeded in participating (e.g. Alford and Barker 1968; Hilton 1963; Postgate 1923; Wood 1979). The omission is that much more serious when we discover that there have been periods in history when women have had a not insignificant presence in the building trades. This paper seeks to disclose these periods and to explain why and how women were included or excluded.

WOMEN AS BUILDING ARTISANS V. WOMEN AS WAGE LABOUR

There were two routes from feudalism for building wage labour and each implied a different involvement of women. The first was through artisan production associated with the town corporations. The second originally stemmed from the commutation of statute labour and labour on the 'demesne' and went with the concomitant rise in wage labour in the countryside, so critical to the introduction of the Statute of Artificers in the sixteenth century. Each was associated with a different system of regulation and a different means of entry and skills acquisition.

In general the guilds and chartered town corporations were exclusive of women, though not always explicitly and not to the extent that women had no involvement at all. 'Social convention reinforced by superstition and taboo' was sufficient to keep women from the masonry, roofing and carpentry trades (Clark 1919). The masons of the fourteenth century and London carpenters did address 'systeren and bretheren' but such references to women are likely to have been to the not insignificant number of mistresses who took over as widows from their husbands. Apprenticeship was the only means of entry to the building trades and was a male institution, controlled by a master who enrolled the apprentice with the trade company for a period of up to seven years. The apprentice was apprenticed to be a master in the trade concerned, which was in turn related to the

different materials that the company had the royal privilege to sell (Clarke 1999; Derry 1931, 67-8; Alford and Barker 1968, 22, 30, 70). Even more exclusive appears to have been the situation elsewhere in Europe, such as in the craft guilds of Brittany and those in Germany (Musgrave 1993; Wiesner 1981).

There were important social reasons for preserving apprenticeship as a male institution. Male apprentices were not allowed to marry; as late as 1670 William Smith was threatened to be disenfranchised from the London Tylers and Bricklayers company if there was sufficient evidence that he had married within the term of his indenture (Bell 1939, 44). This was because, as Simonton has explained:

Apprenticeship was a period when the role of the male apprentice moved from lad to man; it was a transitional period that meant far more than “learning a skill”. The close identification of apprenticeship with sexual development helps to identify the role of the institution in defining masculinity and conversely femininity and in excluding females from the system.
(1999, 34)

More than this, as Sheridan points out:

The exclusion of women from apprenticeship contracts was therefore an integral part of a closed guild system which ensured that the transfer of property and power remained with the privileged group.
(1992, 52)

This association of the feudal apprenticeship with entry into a property relation was critical. The common law of marriage from the late thirteenth to the late nineteenth centuries deprived women of the right to their own personal property and associated legal status (Kenrick 1981, 178). Patriarchal control was thereby embedded in common law and married women had no separate wage, all women’s earnings being paid to the male head. In this way, in 1556 Harry Weller, a Chester bricklayer, was paid 8d per day for himself and 2d for his wife ‘for carrying water and sand’ (Woodward 1995, 87). As the centuries progressed this patriarchal control became more pronounced and women were restrained from being too involved in their husbands’ trade.

The exception in this rule of property was the woman trader or ‘femme sole’ who had the same rights as a man and who was quite common in the building trades. She was either a mistress working on her own account or a widow who took over the trade workshop from her deceased husband. She was allowed to become a member of the company, though she did not have equal status and usually could not advance in the hierarchy (Woodward 1993, 86). In late mediaeval London many such mistresses are to be found in the company records, paying quarterage for themselves, apprentices and journeymen and being allowed to engage extra labour (e.g. Lacey 1985, 45-6). Alice Clark tells a story of one such, a painter’s widow, whose apprentice had served

seven out of nine years and alleged that she refused to instruct him, though she insisted that she had provided competent workmen to do so and that he was now able to give good service (Clark 1919, 188). And Lane found that in the eighteenth century women were numerous amongst plumbers and glaziers, such as in Coventry, with three women in partnership with men and three widows out of a total 31 masters (Lane 1996, 146). Simonton reports that Kingston, Southampton and Oxford at this time all limited trading women to widows and allowed them apprentices only as long as they remained unmarried and continued to practise only their husband's trade (Simonton 1999, 38).

Such restrictions – here as elsewhere – did not mean that women did not participate in the building trade companies in the towns but that their role was mostly as assistants to husbands or fathers (Kenrick 1981, 181). Attempts to restrain women as independent traders were even more pronounced across the Channel in Brittany in the workshop-based craft guilds of the major towns, which offered privileged entry to journeymen who married masters' widows and which by the seventeenth century denied women access to apprenticeships or entry as independent workers (Musgrave 1993, 43, 46). Marriage to the daughter or widow of a master conferred a dowry and the right to enter the guild at a reduced rate (*ibid.*, 38). In spite of such attempts female participation rates in the guilds of Brittany were as high as 10% (*ibid.*, 51).

In the English countryside, outside the control of town corporations, female wage earners are to be found in building from the fourteenth century, though the building crafts such as carpentry and thatching remained invariably male (Bennett 1987, 117; Penn 1987, 6). They might often be found doing heavy work, such as carrying sand and lime, gravel and mortar or using a 'great crane of iron' (Salzman 1952, 71; Airs 1975, 154). They were, however, paid less than men, estimated at between 50% and 70% of the male wage, as laid down too in the Statutes for 'women labourers' (Bennett 1994, 62; Bardsley 1999, 29).

The Statute of Artificers of 1562-3, regulated through Justices of the Peace (JPs), had the effect of transforming local trade company practice in town and county throughout the realm by integrating the growing army of wage labour and binding it to a locality, thereby stemming vagrancy (Deakin 1991; Clarke 1992, 44-7). The Statute was revolutionary in many respects: in the application throughout the countryside of a contract of services for all hired labour; through setting a framework for wage assessment and for the parish apprenticeship system; in its extension to many occupations not associated with the old trade company system; but above all for our purposes in that it was not gender specific but referred to apprentices as 'persons' and to 'boys and girls', 'masters and mistresses' (5 Elizabeth I c IV and c XVII (1562; Davies 1956, 164, 172, 223, 259). Under the parish apprenticeship system boys were bound until they were 24 and girls until they were 21 or were married. As a result in the southern counties of England between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, as Snell discovered, 34% of parish apprentices were girls, who were apprenticed in 51 occupations including as bricklayers, carpenters, joiners and shipwrights (Snell 1985, 278). They normally completed and practised their trade and were especially numerous in the

eighteenth century. George, for instance, discovered the 1741 indentures of a female parish apprentice 'to be taught the art and mystery of carpenter' (1925, 231). Pinchbeck gives evidence of a wide range of trades to which women were apprenticed, such as stonemasons and furniture makers (Pinchbeck 1930). Fewer than 10% of those apprenticed by their families were however female and after 1800 no cases have been found. Snell has documented female participation not just in parish but in non-parish apprenticeships, where he found a wide range of occupations for females in the first half of the eighteenth century, including ironmonger, carpenter, bricklayer, butcher and blacksmith (1985, 291). As a consequence, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries journeywomen are to be found in all kinds of trades. A similar situation is reported by Seybolt across the Atlantic in New England: 'Girls were admitted into the crafts under the same conditions as regulated the practice for boys. It is not an uncommon thing to find women and girls enrolled as members of crafts where one would least expect them, such as ... carpenters' (1917, 15).

This extension of the apprenticeship system significantly weakened municipal trade company control, as evident in London in 1673 when a girl claimed admittance to the carpenters' company by right of apprenticeship (Derry 1976, xxiii). Unlike the earlier period, after the Statute took full effect - in London, country and provincial towns and in the parish guilds - girls were to be found bound to men in the building trades throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including amongst the London carpenters in the eighteenth century (Dunlop and Denman 1912, 150-1; George 1925; Leeson 1979, 27; Snell 1985, 298; Jupp and Pocock 1887, 161-2). There were also numerous female traders recorded, most notably Mary Lacy, apprenticed originally as a shipwright disguised as a boy, who by the 1770s is recorded building houses under the name Mary Slade in Deptford in London (Guillery 2000). Of the 531 building firms recorded in London at the time, some had female proprietors, including Elisabeth Harrison 'carpenter' in Drury Lane and Mary Grayson 'bricklayer' in Billiter Lane (ibid, 68; Hewlings 2000). A stronger female presence was evident however in brick manufacturing, a sector outside trade company regulation and critical to the development of wage labour in the building industry. In the brick searches around London in the 1720s, for instance, attempting to ensure that bricks conformed to company regulations, Mary Fish, a prominent brickmaker from Hagerstone, was presented to the Court of Assistants of the Company of Tylers and Bricklayers and fined six times, whilst Mary Tunstall, a brickmaker from Brentford, appeared before the Masters and Wardens and was fined four times (Tylers and Bricklayers Company 1724-1727).

Wage labour, as opposed to artisan, craft or peasant labour bound to the workshop or to land, assumed dominance in the system of building production in England from the seventeenth century, as symbolised by the removal of company restrictions in the rebuilding of London after the 1666 Great Fire (Clarke 1992, 45-6; Janssen 1986). But it remained a system with strong artisanal characteristics and even as a wage earner a woman under the Poor Law inherited her husband's settlement, earned less than a man, had no local right to relief, and could be sent back to his parish (Kenrick 1981, 180; Woodward 1995, 111). This was found also over the water in Brittany where in

1760 female wage labourers in building earned 6 sous in winter and 8 in summer whilst the rates for men were 10 and 12 respectively (Musgrave 1993, 50).

The gender division of labour was also further reinforced with the increasing split between home and the place of production and the weakening of the statutory system, as JPs lost control of apprentice regulation so that the Statute of Artificers was eventually repealed in 1814 (Derry 1931, 74-81). Henceforth there were 'no longer statutory or legal formularies or instructions binding upon masters or journeymen in the matter of apprentices' but a 'free' agreement between the master, on the one hand, and the apprentices, his parents or representatives on the other (Howell 1877, 842). Without the protection of regulation, women were increasingly excluded.

THE EXCLUSION OF WOMEN UNDER CAPITALIST WAGE RELATIONS

It is remarkable that as the division of building labour changed in the early nineteenth century from the old feudal divisions between master/journeyman/apprentice/ labourers or servants to the early capitalist division between foreman/skilled or craft worker/semi-skilled/apprentice/and labourer, so women were excluded to a far greater extent than before. As Snell discovered, between 1841 and 1861 virtually all 'male' trades became more male dominated, including carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, glaziers, painters, paviours and masons (1985, 290). Conversely, female trades became more heavily female, including gloves, dressmakers and ribbon makers. At the same time the range of occupations open to women declined dramatically, along with the number of female apprentices (ibid. 278). Only five out of 75 trades in Middlesex between 1803 and 1822, for example, were mixed, the remainder being totally segregated (ibid. 285). This is evident from the Census of 1841, the first to record in detail occupations by gender (*Table 1*). For example, of the 408 females in the category 'plumbers, painters and glaziers' only 27 or 6.6%, representing less than 1% of the work group, were under 20 years old. In contrast, of the 1,143,000 domestic servants nearly 80% were women and of these 38% were under 20 years old. Nevertheless, the proportion of women recorded in the construction trades, whilst low in 1841, is higher than in subsequent years. Female carpenters and joiners represent 0.3% of those in the trade in 1841, but only 0.1% in 1861, 1871 and 1881, though rising to 0.2% in 1891. Female plumbers, painters and glaziers fell from 0.8% of those in the trade in 1841 to 0.6% in 1861 and to 0.5% by 1881.

Table 1. Men and women in building trade occupations 1841-1891

Occupation		1841	1861	1871	1881	1891
Builder	Total	9,188	15,757	23,300	30,699	37,815
	Female	81	99	171	135	194
	% female	0.9	0.6	0.7	0.4	0.5

Occupation		1841	1861	1871	1881	1891
Carpenter, joiner	Total	162,984	177,869	205,824	235,233	221,009
	Female	459	151	200	216	348
	% female	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
Bricklayer	Total	39,806	79,158	99,945	125,140	130,446
	Female	107	35		85	66
	% female	0.3	0.04		0.1	0.05
Mason, paviour	Total	82,650	81,133	95,199	97,540	84,717
	Female	188	31		108	123
	% female	0.2	0.04		0.1	0.1
Slater, tiler	Total	6,348	5,266	6,079	7,483	6,789
	Female	25	4		14	
	% female	0.4	0.08		0.2	
Paper hanger	Total	1,076	2,318	3,442	4,272	
	Female	12	18		95	
	% female	1.1	0.8		2.2	
Plasterer	Total	13,238	18,557	24,575	28,841	
	Female	83	25		41	
	% female	0.6	0.1		0.1	
Plumber	Total				37,400	46,873
	Female				240	226
	% female				0.6	0.5
Paper hanger, plasterer, whitewasher	Total					29,408
	Female					183
	% female					0.6
Painter, glazier	Total				100,130	123,829
	Female				454	710
	% female				0.5	0.6
Plumber, painter, glazier	Total	48,207	74,619	103,912		
	Female	408	447	530		
	% female	0.8	0.5	0.5		
Total female		<i>1,363</i>	<i>810</i>	<i>901</i>	<i>1,388</i>	<i>1,850</i>
% female		<i>0.4</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>0.3</i>

Notes:

Categories of occupations change in 1881 so that *plumbers* and *painters, glaziers* are counted separately and *plasterers* are counted with *paper hangers*.

All totals include workers in all age groups.

Data taken from the Occupation Tables of the Census for Great Britain 1841, 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 published by HMSO.

Increased gender segregation went together with the development of capitalist production, rendering problematic traditional ways of reconciling work with familial control and responsibilities such as breastfeeding (Humphries 1987, 930; Clark 1919; Snell 1985, 407-37). The effects of this in terms of female dependency were especially apparent from the fall both in the average age of marriage, from 27 years in the late seventeenth century to 24 years by the 1820s, and in the proportion of women never marrying, from 25% in the late seventeenth century to 6% by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Snell 1985, 311).

In the absence of statutory restrictions, the early trade unions and master associations tended to rely on custom and practice and to fall back on artisan rules and procedures particularly in their attempts to control entry into the industry through apprenticeship. The General Union of Carpenters and Joiners set up in 1827, the Friendly Society of Bricklayers in 1829 and the Operative Stonemasons in 1831 all formed 'non-exclusive unions of non-society men' and sought to preserve apprenticeships through imposing age restrictions, a seven year term, limitations on numbers and application only to traditional trades (Postgate 1923). Apprenticeship was now invariably confined to men and thus acted as the key means of exclusion and control. The early trade union view was that women should not enjoy the status of artisan and that in effect 'skill' was an essentially masculine quality or 'property' (Clark 1995, 119; Hobsbawm 1978, 132). As Simonton interprets the situation: 'Skill and training were not the root cause of exclusion in the workplace but notions about masculinity and femininity and their relationship to the meanings of work were' (1988, 35). This is nowhere more symbolised than in the emblem of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners in 1866 with the carpenter Joseph of Nazareth at the top, men at work in the middle and the draped female figures of Industry and Art, Justice and Truth (**Fig. 1**). Women represented a 'threat to the rates and conditions given' and 'as a class, the most dangerous enemies of the artisan's Standard of Life' (Webbs 1898, 497).

By the 1840s women's access to jobs had been delimited and the family wage was openly espoused as a wage paid to a married male worker adequate to raise a family, so emphasising 'patriarchal control of the productive resources' (Kenrick 1981, 186; Pinchbeck 1930; Humphries 1987). Many women were left in a precarious position, constituting the majority of paupers from 1834; by the 1890s nearly 80% of able-bodied paupers on outdoor relief were women (Thane 1978). The Ladies Committee of the position of women 'grievously and unjustly intruded upon by the other sex ... confined most frequently to a few scanty and unproductive kinds of labour' (Pinchbeck 1930, 304). In the progress of the nineteenth century this sexual division of labour sharpened and reinforced. In 1867 for instance the Gangs Act outlawed the employment of women or girls in gangs in which men worked. In building the one area where women had a significant presence was building materials production, though this was by no means uniform. The proportion of women employed in wood occupations dropped from 22% in 1851 to 11% by 1911, despite a 54% increase in employment (*Table 2*). The proportion of female brick and tilemakers however only dropped from 7% to 5.3% in the same period, though in 1871 the proportion in South Wales was 43% and in

Staffordshire 25%; in brick occupations as a whole too the proportion rose from 17% to 23% (Jordan 1989; 295).



Figure 1. Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners emblem certificate 1866

Table 2. Proportion of women employed in building materials production

Occupation	1851		1871		1881		1891		1911	
	Total 000s	% female	Total 000s	% female	Total 000s	% female	Total 000s	% female	Total 000s	% female
Building	429	0.2			765	0.3			947	0.1
Wood	184	21.6			180	10.6			284	10.6
Brick	83	16.8			128	18.7			174	22.5
Brick and tilemaker	30	6.9	39	7.0			44	6.1	52	5.3

Source: Jordan E. (1989) 'The Exclusion of Women from Nineteenth Century Britain' in *Contemporary Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, No. 2., April, 273-296.

Building production also lost certain artisanal characteristics by the end of the nineteenth century as the wage system became hourly and time based, daily working hours were reduced to nine, overtime was abolished and building labourers were organised into the Navvies Union and the National Union of Labour and Federated Building Labourers. But the 72 building trade unions, local and national, and the 13 local federations that existed by 1911 remained as exclusive as the industry itself, as apparent from Census figures for 1911, which reveal even fewer women (572) working in the industry than in 1891 (1,850), representing 0.07% of the workforce. A similar exclusivity is evident on the continent, though in Denmark, with 'the first wave of feminism' 33 women were to be found as painters (0.7% of painters) in 1901, including Karen Hansen and Asta Annadóttir (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Karen Hansen and Asta Annadóttir painting in Copenhagen 1912

POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY IN THE WARS

This exclusivity was threatened by the severe labour shortages caused by the First World War. Despite inspiring photographs shot for government propaganda purposes, women were not welcomed into the building industry or into any skilled work traditionally done by men (see photos). Employers were initially reluctant to take them on and the trade unions were highly resistant to the idea. Recruitment was initially aimed at munitions production and the trade unions concerned added the proviso that women were allowed to do only *parts* of a skilled job customarily done by a man; thus semi-skilled men were promoted to skilled jobs and women taken into semi-skilled jobs (**Fig. 3**) (Braybon 1981). This ensured that women remained in subordinate positions, could not earn a fully skilled wage and, like all those recruited into jobs where entry was formerly via an apprenticeship, were regarded as ‘dilutees’. Despite these constraints there was very soon widespread publicity praising the speed with which women learned manual skills, their diligence, productivity and the high quality of their work.



Figure 3. Women in the building trades in World War I (Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive)

In 1917 the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions staged an exhibition of photographs of women at work. This was reviewed by *Building News* under the title ‘Women as Constructors’, revealing the surprise that men experienced at the sight of women doing building jobs:

... women architects, even before the war, we knew, but that women bricklayers, carpenters, woodworking machine operators, and, indeed, workers in almost every branch of the building trades, would have attained in a couple of years to a skill unsurpassed by men...was a development which few would have predicted.

(*Building News and Engineering Journal*, 28th March 1917, 268)

But women's achievements were not celebrated by the building trade unions (Briar 1997). In some cases women were successfully doing jobs after short training courses that had previously required a full apprenticeship while employers were paying them merely a third of male wages. In general, there was little support from men, despite the fact that the TUC had supported equal pay since the 1890s.

The presence of women working in the building trades was brief; the Restoration of the Pre-War Practices Act, passed in 1919, saw the majority of women ejected from their jobs and directed back to traditional employment – at this time mainly in domestic service, shop work and clerical jobs (Briar 1997). Thousands of auxiliary members and 'dilutees' were, for instance, thrown out of the electrical industries and, though they had no prospect of returning, were entitled to draw unemployment benefit. Once this benefit was exhausted, they drifted too out of the Electrical Trades Union (Lloyd 1990, 275).

Although women's presence during WW1 was brief it was considerable. Ministry of Labour figures record that the numbers of insured female workers in building between 1914 and 1918 increased from 7,000 to 31,400 (PRO, CAB 21/1527). For most of the twentieth century reliable statistics for employment in the building industry are rare and there is no systematic gender breakdown. Census records do nevertheless indicate general occupational trends and show that some women did succeed in staying in the industry, particularly as painters and decorators, who numbered 2,863 in 1921 and whose numbers had only dropped to 2,564 by 1931 (*Table 3*). However, female carpenters numbered only 49 in 1931, down from 401 in 1921. The total number of women in all building trades remained as high as 3,527 in 1931, having dropped from 5,007 in 1921.

Table 3. Men and women manual workers in the construction industry 1931-1971

Occupational division		1931	1951	1961	1971
Carpenters and joiners	Total	246,856	244,929	261,300	294,120
	Women	49	716	1060	920
	% female	0.02	0.3	0.4	0.3
Bricklayers	Total	692,898			
	Women	775			
	% female	0.1			
Labourers	Total	172,491	289,506	2434,160	266,700
	Women	139	607	750	1620
	% female	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.6

Occupational division		1931	1951	1961	1971
Painters and decorators	Total	206,323	308,954	306,320	241,050
	Women	2,564	10,388	11,920	5,180
	% female	1.2	3.4	3.9	2.2
Total in all building trades	Total	1,318,568	1,684,647	1,326,030	
	Women	3,527	12,494	14,230	9,330
	% female	0.3	0.74	1.1	0.7

Source: Census returns for 1931, 1951, 1961 and 1971.

1. Data for all years from Occupation Tables. Between 1951 and 1961 there was a complete change in the classification of occupations making comparisons between years difficult. For example in 1951 category XIV (Workers in Building and Construction) included Foreman, Gangers; Clerks of Works; Builder's Labourers; Bricklayers; Bricklayer's Labourers; Other workers (mainly navvies). In 1961 navvies were included under the new occupational category XVIII (Labourers).

A very similar story is true for the experience of women in the Second World War. Building occupations were not reserved in the early years of the war and many thousands of men signed up so that by 1941, although the schedule of reserved occupations had been amended, the industry was short of 50,000 building workers (Kohan, 1952). This shortage became acute with the entrance of the USA into the war at the end of 1941 when a vast amount of building work became necessary to provide accommodation for American troops and build the airfields needed in preparation for the invasion of Europe. As war contracts for factories, workers' housing and airfields increased, so did the need for both skilled and unskilled labour (PRO CAB 21/1527). In October 1941 the National Joint Council for the Building Industry, consisting of representatives of employers and employees organisations, agreed the terms on which women would be employed in the industry 'during the period of the war' (TUC/HD 6661 B9):

- Before introducing any female labour into a shop or onto a job, the Employer shall consult with the local or district organiser of the Trade Union catering for the workmen normally carrying out the process in question.
- Before women are actually engaged on the particular process, the appropriate Trade Union official shall be given an opportunity of meeting the requirements of the Employer by supplying additional male labour of the appropriate class.
- No man shall be discharged in order that his place may be filled by a woman; and, if at any time the Trade Union concerned can supply the Employer with male labour of the appropriate class, the number of women may be correspondingly reduced. (TUC/HD 6661 B9)

The Ministry of Labour and National Service noted that these conditions on the engagement of women, in practice only possible through the relevant trade union, would result in very few women

entering building employment (PRO LAB 8/464). The agreement also specified, that the basic rate of wages for women engaged on craft processes was one shilling and sixpence (1s 6d.) per hour: 20% less than the corresponding male rate. Despite these restrictions, in 1939 there were 15,700 women employed in the industry and by 1945 this had risen to 24,200, giving a participation rate of 3.8% of the total construction workforce (Hall 1948, 82).

In contrast to the restrictions on women's employment found in the building industry, the agreement for shipbuilding appeared to support equal pay for women who were over 21, had worked for eight months and were able to "perform the whole of the duties of the displaced male employee without extra assistance" (TUC HD 6137). The Ministry of Labour also published recruitment literature aimed at encouraging women into manual jobs in shipbuilding, in a style very different from that produced for recruitment into the building trades. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. World War Two recruitment posters, TUC Library Collection

There was criticism of the discrepancy in earnings between men and women, often working side by side on the same job (Labour Research Department, 1942). In 1943 the NJC Building Agreement was amended in line with that in shipbuilding so that where a woman did the job of a craftsman 'without special guidance assistance or supervision' she was eligible for the same rate of pay (Hooks, 1944:29). In practice however women, in both industries, were largely kept in semi-skilled positions and this was reflected in their earnings, almost half those of men (Table 4). Very few women were sent to government training centres to learn manual trades and acute labour shortages resulted in some employers, Bovis, for example, setting up their own training schemes for women (Cooper 2000).

Despite the recent upsurge in interest in the history of the Home Front published photographs of women building workers are rare. The Imperial War Museum photographic collection contains over a hundred images and **Fig. 5** shows women making prefabricated timber huts and women labourers clearing bomb rubble in Islington. Both groups were likely to be classed as semi-skilled and earning wages well below the craft rate.

Table 4. Average weekly earnings of men and women employed in selected industries in July 1943

	Men	Youths under 21	Women 18 years and over	All workers
Building, contracting, etc.	108s 4d	46s 10d	61s 5d	100s 4d
Metal, engineering and shipbuilding	138s 3d	50s 9d	69s 10d	108s 3d
Woodworking	102s 3d	37s 8d	56s 9d	79s 4d

Source: Ministry of Labour Gazette, 1943, HMSO.

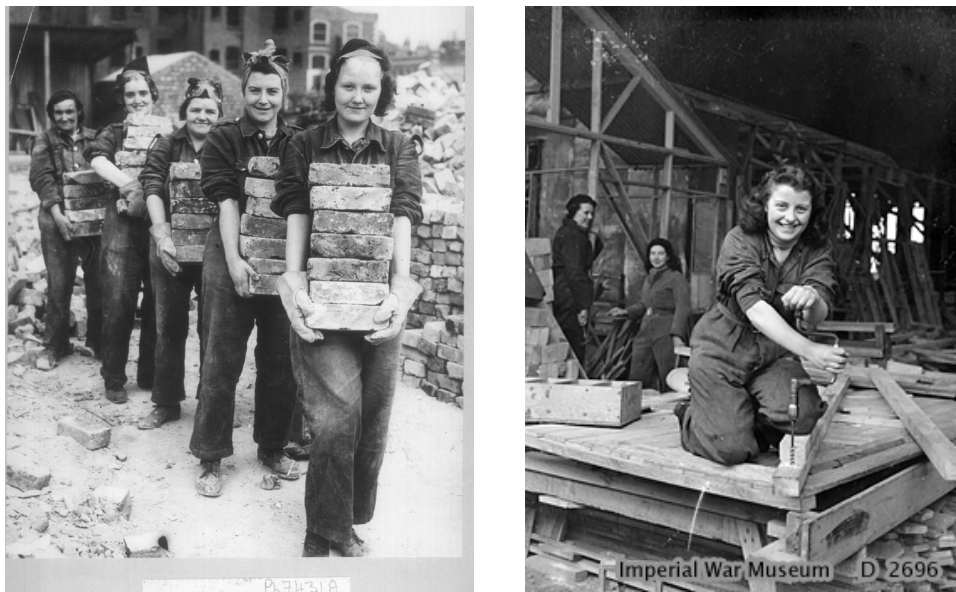


Figure 5. Women building workers WW2, Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive

The industry journal *The Builder* also omitted to document women's participation during the war years, apart from one short item in 1944 that reported on a conference entitled 'Women in the Building Industry' (*The Builder* 1944, 452). Here, one of the speakers described how, even though she had been 'born and bred' in the building industry, it had been extremely difficult to persuade her father to let her train and work as a builder. The conference resolved unanimously that, in the light of the looming housing crisis, the government should provide training for women in the building trades and that trade unions should introduce the necessary changes to their rules and practices to enable the employment of women trainees.

This call from women already working in the industry was ignored. At the end of the war and facing an acute labour shortage, the Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, demanded that all men up to the age of 60 with any experience of building register for reconstruction work and refused to recruit any women into the skilled trades, despite their recent war experience (Briar, 1997, 84). Once again women were directed into jobs deemed suitable for their gender (Boston 1980, 242).

Union leaders appear to have downplayed women's role on the home front during the Second World War. For instance, Richard Coppock, Secretary of the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives (NFBTO), President of BINC (Building Industry National Council), Member of the Central Council of the Ministry of Works and Planning, and present on practically every committee and sub-committee during the war years that had anything to do with employment and training in the building industry wrote in 1948:

Over the last twenty years the number of women in the building and public works contracting industries barely exceeded one per cent of the total personnel; it seems therefore that there will need to be drastic change in custom if women are to make any substantial encroachment into what has so far been a preponderantly masculine sphere. There is no sign of any such invasion yet. (Coppock and Heumann 1948, 23)

In the early 1950s the NFBTO's own magazine, *The Operative Builder*, began publishing industry statistics including records of women employees. In 1953 there were 31,680 women working in the building industry in Britain, in 1960 they numbered 69,000 representing 3.1% and 4.9% respectively of the total workforce: considerably higher than Coppock's estimate (TUC HD6661). These records end when the *The Operative Builder* ceased publishing in 1962. The Census returns echo these numbers showing that some women did indeed manage to retain their jobs in the industry (Table 2). These were predominantly women painters and decorators who managed to stay on for another three decades before they finally gave up their paintbrushes. They numbered 10,388 in 1951 and as many as 11,920 (3.9%) in 1961, although falling to 5,180 (2.2%) in 1971. In contrast, in Denmark from this period the number of female painters begins to rise dramatically as apprenticeships were opened up to women following research showing the large number of painters

with brain damage due to high levels of exposure to white spirit: by 1985, 7.2% of painters were women and numbers continued to rise, reaching 25% in 2001 (Frydendal Pedersen 2004) (**Fig. 6**).



Figure 6. A gang of female and male painters in Denmark in the 1950s

MIXED POST-WAR EXPERIENCES

A post-war skills crisis had been anticipated and an investigation into the supply and training of labour for the construction industry was undertaken by G.D.H. Cole as part of the Nuffield Reconstruction Surveys in 1942. Cole's proposals were radical: he emphasised the importance of a broad general education, the regulation of the institution of apprenticeship, and a formal system of training resulting in a recognised register of skilled workers (PRO LAB/8/518). His proposals were not heeded and the 1943 Training Act defined the terms that continue to distance apprenticeship from mainstream education:

apprenticeship training ... will not be provided and paid for by the State and the various questions which arise in controlling apprenticeship are traditionally settled by the industry itself. (Cmd 6428)

The White Paper endorsed the traditional view that apprenticeship training was 'the recognised method of training in employment and of entry into the ranks of the skilled workers', but conceded that it needed reviewing. This was to be through the establishment of the Building Apprenticeship

and Training Council (BATC), consisting of employee and industry representatives together with members of various government departments (BATC, 1943). This body sought to systematise and standardise apprenticeship training but there was no attempt to transform and broaden out apprenticeship to include provision for girls. After the BATC disbanded in 1956, training was again left in the hands of the industry itself where 'custom and practice' masked the ingrained prejudices of both trade unionists and employers. Training for the industry remained in a state of crisis and there followed a hiatus lasting nine years when there was no central co-ordinating body at all for construction training until the Construction Industry Training Board was established in 1964 (CITB, 1966).

Not surprisingly, Census returns show the total number of women in the building industry declining in the post-war decades to only 971 in 1971, almost back to the low level at the beginning of the century. Although this period coincides with a period of relative union strength, women's employment was not noticeably on the building trade unions' agenda (Wood 1979, 84). The craft trade unions still adhered to a nineteenth century notion of apprenticeship and refused to recognise anyone attaining the status of skilled worker outside the apprenticeship route, thus barring all those trained in Government Training Centres, and effectively, all women (MRC MSS. 78/BO/UM/4/1/18-30). Only in the electrical industries, determined not to repeat the experience of the First World War, was the union especially organised to take in women. The Electrical Trades Union set up a war emergency section for those never in the industry before and in 1943 a female section with about 5,000 members, mostly 'dilutees' in semi-skilled positions. In 1954 alone altogether 2,836 women were recruited into the union in a special campaign on the basis that 'craft sectarianism has never protected the skilled man' and in 1961 6% or 15,000 of the nearly 250,000 membership were women (Lloyd 1990, 326).

It was not until the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) that a third period of women entering construction began. This piece of legislation, which made it illegal to discriminate against anyone on the grounds of their sex in employment or education, had no immediate and direct effect on the employment of women in the construction industry. It did, however, provide the lever for women to access training in government training centres on TOPS (Training Opportunity Programme) courses (Payne 1991). These were six-month, intensive training courses in Skillcentres under industrial conditions at the end of which the trainee emerged with a full set of tools, as an 'improver' (Clarke 1991). After 18 months continuous employment and/or attaining a City and Guilds Certificate they were then classed as skilled workers. This route proved revolutionary for women, this being the first time that the acquisition of craft skills was possible without the patronage of an employer through the apprenticeship system.

The actual numbers of women who succeeded in training on TOPS courses was small and in the early 1980s a number of local authorities, in response to grassroots campaigning by the feminist movement, funded the setting up of women-only training workshops to provide initial trade

training, which included provision for childcare. Close links were maintained with the local authority building departments known as Direct Labour Organisations (DLOs) and many women went on to adult training schemes run by their local councils. For example by the mid 1980s Hackney DLO was running one of the largest training schemes for building workers in Britain, backed by the construction union UCATT (Union of Construction and Allied Technical Trades), with all trainees experiencing work on new-build sites, the best possible training environment in that trainees can experience the totality of the building process rather than being confined to only one aspect. Throughout the time that Hackney ran its new-build training scheme over 50% of the adult trainees were women.

This challenge to the entrenched segregation of the construction industry was, however, short lived. In the late 1980s successive pieces of legislation curbed the autonomous functioning of local authorities, including their power to build new houses. The effect on the DLOs was devastating and many ceased to exist; those that remained curtailed their activities to repair and maintenance operations only and the adult trainee schemes collapsed. The operative workforce of DLOs was reduced from 238,000 in 1970 to 86,000 by 1995, with tradeswomen suffering ‘last in first out’ redundancy policies in exactly the same way as after the two world wars (DoE annual). In a survey conducted in 1997 there were only 231 tradeswomen found employed in 93 DLOs in England and Wales (Michielsens et al. 1997).

Nevertheless, the legacy of the systems set up in the 1980s survived, albeit in reduced form. The DLOs have continued to address the very low numbers of young women applying for apprenticeships by creating links with the local schools careers services (Beck et al. 2003; Housing Forum 2004). Many DLOs are highly proactive in their recruitment, stressing the importance of positive female images in recruitment literature and advertising, a range of advertising outlets and having women form part of the recruitment team (Clarke et al 2006). Targeted advertising using positive female images has also been at the centre of the Construction Industry Training Board’s (CITB) efforts to attract women into the private construction industry, where the proportion of women remains even lower, at 0.3% in 2003, similar to the levels in the nineteenth century (CITB 2004a). Higher proportions of women are evident in painting and decorating at 0.8%, but for bricklayers, plasterers, scaffolders, plumbers and civil engineering no more than 0.1% were found to be female in a survey of 2001 (CITB 2002). Overall, female first-year trainees constituted 3% of all construction trainees in 2004, down from 4% in 2000 (CITB 2004b). The vast majority is to be found in full-time further education college courses (where they represent 7% of all trainees) rather than as Modern Apprentices dependent on obtaining a placement with an individual firm.

Today there remain outstanding examples of DLOs employing tradeswomen (**Fig. 7**). For example, of the 283 apprentices appointed by Leicester DLO between 1985 and 2002 84 or 30% were women (Clarke et al 2006). In 2003 the workforce was 480, 40 or one in 12 of whom were women,

employed in all the trades including as carpenters, electricians, plasterers, painters and decorators, bricklayers, heating and ventilating engineers, gasfitters and metal workers.



Figure 7. Jacky Clarke, carpenter for Hackney DLO

Besides the public sector DLOs there are other initiatives today in Britain to open up the private construction industry to women. These include schemes run by the CITB, London-based contractors and housing associations, and Women and Manual Trades. Such schemes have been given political support initially following the government-supported Latham report, which led to the setting up of a working group on women in construction (Latham 1994; Construction Industry Board 1996).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have highlighted those periods and places where women have succeeded in working in the building industry. As an important part of the growing army of waged labour in the countryside, women were embraced by the 1562 Statute of Artificers to be recognised as wage labour in their own right and taken on as parish apprentices in the different building trades. This

was in contrast to their position in the chartered towns where, until the universal application of the Statute, they might be tolerated as widowed mistresses but rarely taken on as apprentices by the different building trade companies and hence rarely found as journeypersons. As capitalism developed and with it new relations of production associated with manufacturing, however, so the Statute ceased to be implemented and with its demise by the end of the eighteenth century went women's participation in the building industry. Throughout the nineteenth century their presence remains minimal, as gender divisions were sharply reinforced under capitalism and control of apprenticeship was applied by employers and trade unions alike to exclude women from entering and to preserve the male 'property' in skill of the building craft worker.

Under the more regulated conditions applied during the twentieth century world wars some women were allowed into the building trades, only to be largely excluded once the wars had ended. Traditional notions of apprenticeship adhered to by both employers and trade unionists contrived to exclude women from the craft trades. Inspired by the feminist movement women succeeded in accessing training in the 1970s. But only under the more regulated conditions of the public building sector, the local authority DLOs, do we see them entering in significant numbers, usually supported by specially set up training schemes. With the gradual run-down of the DLOs many women have again been excluded, though there are outstanding exceptions such as Leicester.

What we discover from this search is, first, how specific gender divisions are to different social relations of production, whether feudal or capitalist. Thus, when feudal relations of production generally prevailed, women entered building as wage labour under statutory regulation. Under capitalism it was through the systems of production applied under the public control exercised during the two world wars or through the local authorities. These were very different from the unregulated free enterprise system of the private sector. Second, we can see how critical the system of training is to entry, whether the parish apprenticeship system of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Skillcentres of the 1970s and 1980s, or the DLO training schemes. Conversely, it is through apprenticeship as applied in the private sector from the nineteenth century that control over entry and hence male exclusivity has been largely maintained. The implication is that only with a transformation in the system of training and greater regulation of employment and social relations in the industry will women be successfully integrated.

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