

# Luton: Hat Industry

## 1750 to 2000



**A Local History Resource Pack**  
Luton Museum Education Service

## Luton and The Straw Hat Industry

For many years Luton was synonymous with hats. The impact the growth of the industry had on the town is explored in our Local History Resource Pack, Luton: Straw Hat Boom Town. This collection of resources delves more deeply into the industry. Through photographs, drawings, extracts from contemporary sources, news cuttings and oral testimony it aims to explain the development and demise of the hat industry and to create a picture of what it was like for the many people who worked in its various branches.

# Contents

---

## 1: Teachers Notes

### Introduction

### Bibliography

### Suggestions for using the resources

### Plait Instruction Sheets

Instructions for making some basic plaits using artstraws.

### Luton and the Hat Industry Timeline

This timeline illustrates key points in the development of Luton's hat industry and the town itself.

## 2: Straw Plaiting

### Straw Plaiting Area Map

This map illustrates the area where straw plaiting was a major cottage industry.

### Petition to Parliament, 1719

The original is included here with a transcript. It is one of the earliest records of the straw plaiting industry in this area.

### Straw Manufacture, 1807

This is an early description of the process of straw plaiting. It comes from a publication by The London and Dublin Societies for Bettering the Condition of the Poor.

### Engravings and Description of Straw Plaiting, The Queen, 1861

The Queen was a magazine aimed at wealthy ladies. This is an extract from an article from November 9th 1861. It gives a description of a plaiter at work and a sense of how readers viewed their less fortunate sisters.

### Engraving of a Plait School, 1882

This engraving was published in Cassells Family Magazine in 1882. It offers a romantic picture of plait schools when compared with the descriptions given by factory inspectors. The quotations come from a paper on the local trade delivered by Alfred J Tansley in 1860 and the Good Words Family Magazine, 1869.

**The Employment Commission, 1867**

In 1862 Parliament set up an Employment Commission to look into the employment of children in unregulated industries. These extracts come from the investigations into child labour in the straw plaiting industry.

**First Hand Accounts**

These extracts are taken from interviews collected for Employment Commission in 1867 and other similar reports.

**Plait Girls Beware - A Ballad**

This ballad is typical of popular song in the English tradition. It offers a humorous warning to innocent young plaiters.

**Exhibition of English Straw Plaits and Plaiting, 1885**

This exhibition was an attempt to revive the local straw plaiting industry, which had declined hugely with imports of cheaper plait from the Far East. The quotation comes from an article about the exhibition published at the time.

**Plaiting at Barton Cottage, c.1900**

By the beginning of the 20th century the numbers of people plaiting had dropped considerably. Eventually only the older women knew how to do it.

**Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village by Edwin Grey, 1935**

In these extracts Mr Grey remembers straw plaiting in Harpenden when he was a boy in the 1870s and 1880s.

### 3: The Market

**Dunstable Plait Market, The Queen, 1861**

This description and illustrations are taken from an article in the ladies' magazine The Queen. It was published in November 1861.

**George Street Plait Market, 1860s**

The photograph shows the last open air plait market to be held in Luton. It is one of the earliest photographs of Luton the Museum has. The plait market was held on a Monday. This description of market day is taken from an article by Charles Knight, published in the British Almanac in 1861.

**Market Day in the Plait Halls, 1871**

The new Plait Halls in Luton were opened in January 1869. They were a major investment in the industry and were open for business every week day. The engraving comes from the London Illustrated News, which reported the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1878. The description is taken from The Straw Trade by Thomas George Austin.

**Nicholls' Stall in Plait Halls, c.1900**

This picture shows the quantity and variety of plait sold by merchants in the Plait Halls. Even the lettering on this stall is made from straw plait.

**Girls Selling Plait to Dealers, c.1870**

Many plaiters would come into town to sell their plait. The girls stand plaiting with the finished plait hooped on their arms just as described in the extract from The Queen article. The quotation from T.G. Austin's 1871 History of the Plait Industry describes the same happening outside the Plait Halls.

## 4: Hat Making

### Scenes from Luton Hat Factories, 1870s

These illustrations were published in the London Illustrated News in 1878. They show the processes carried out in hat factories. They also illustrate the work's gender divide, women doing the sewing and men the shaping and stiffening.

### The Straw Hat Maker, 1806

This illustration suggests these women are living rather comfortably by making up hats, although the article suggests that there is more money to be made at plaiting. Both the article and the quotation come from a publication by The London and Dublin Societies for Bettering the Condition of the Poor.

### Illustration of Hat Factory, c.1840

While Luton had a few large hat factories most manufacturers in the town worked from smaller establishments that formed part of their homes. This illustration shows Welch and Son's hat factory, Cheapside, Luton. The company had moved from London to Luton in the early 1800s.

### A Hat Factory in the 1820s

This description was published in the 1890s. It comes from Joseph Hawkes' Recollections of Old Luton which appeared as a series of sketches in a local newspaper.

### Hat Manufacture in the 1860s

This extract is taken from an article by Charles Knight contained in the British Almanac of 1861. It describes the work of Luton hat factories in a time of great expansion and change.

### Amongst The Bonnet Sewers, 1884

This is an account of a visit made by the writer to a un-named hat sewing room. It was published in the girls' magazine The Quiver in 1884. The illustration shows women and girls sewing hats by hand in a small workshop as described in the article.

### Extracts from The Employment Commission Report, 1867

In 1862 Parliament set up an Employment Commission to look into the employment of children in unregulated industries. These extracts are taken from their report into hat making.

### The Bonnet Sewers' Complaint

The introduction of hat sewing machines began in the 1870s. This poem was published anonymously in a local paper. It bemoans the lot of the hat sewer and probably reflects the mood amongst bonnet sewers at the time.

### Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry

This review of the new hand stitch hat sewing machine is from the Hatters' Gazette in 1888. Examples of these and other machines can be seen on display at Luton Museum.

### The Visit of the Prince of Wales, The Graphic, 1878

This article recounts the visit of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) to Luton. By 1878 hat sewing had become increasingly mechanised. The engravings of the Prince's visit to Welch and Sons' factory show the sewing room and blocking room. The illustration of Welch & Sons factory in Upper George Street comes from a later brochure cover.

**Engineers Advert, 1880s**

The growth of the hat industry supported the development of engineering in the town. Firms sprang up to make, service and repair all the machines needed by the hat manufacturers. The quotation is one collected by Luton Museum as part of its Oral History Project. Geoffrey Farr's family ran a very successful firm of hatters' engineers.

**Blocking Room, 1890s**

Here the men are using steam heated blocking machinery. However box irons can still be seen on the bench on the right of the picture. Men have traditionally done the pressing and blocking work.

**Trimming Room, 1911**

These women and girls are sewing the linings and ribbons on to straw boaters in a Luton factory. Although the plait was stitched by machine there were still jobs that were done by hand. This type of work was almost exclusively done by women.

**Flyer of Straw Hat Workers Union, c.1920**

The Luton hat trade had never been unionised. This meeting offered musical entertainment as an added incentive. The lack of unions in Luton generally was a real attraction for new companies moving to the town at this time.

**Hat Factories in the 1930s**

This description is another collected by Luton Museum as part of its Oral History Project. It describes some of the many small hat factories in the town at the time.

**Sewing Rooms in the 1930s**

These women are sewing plait into hats. The machines they are using had changed little from those first used in the 1870s. The descriptions are recollections of women who once worked in rooms such as those pictured. They were collected as part of Luton Museum's Oral History Project.

**Sewing Room in the 1990s**

Although there are now far fewer hat factories in the town their interiors have changed little. Sewing is still predominantly done by women.

**Graphic from the Luton Hat Manufacturers Association, 1964**

This graphic was used in the souvenir brochure produced when Luton gained County Borough status in 1964.

**Acknowledgements**

This resource pack was produced for Luton Museums Education Service by Eleanor Markland, Keeper of Education with the assistance of Marian Nichols, Principal Museums Officer (Collections), Veronica Main and Elizabeth Adey, Keeper of Local History. Layout and design by Shaw Design Associates.

Front cover: Sewing Hats Near Luton by Carleton A. Smith, 1891



# 1: Teachers' Notes

## Luton and the Straw Hat Industry

During the 1800s Luton grew from a small market town to a large industrial centre. The main driving force behind this change was the hat industry. Although the impact on the town was evident the hat factories of Luton depended on the surrounding countryside for their raw material. This was straw plait, the manufacture of which played a large part in the rural economy of south Bedfordshire and north Hertfordshire.

Straw hat making began in this area long before the great hat factories of Luton made it an industry. It is difficult to pin down when plaiting straw became a local skill. Some accounts suggest it was introduced by Mary, Queen of Scots in the 1500s. However, this seems to be rather a romantic view, since there has been no historical evidence found to support the idea. Nevertheless, there is evidence that from the mid 1600s people were plaiting straw and making straw hats in the Luton area.

By the late 1600s straw plaiting and hat making had become an important part of the local economy. In 1689 the straw plaiters of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire were confident enough in their industry and its importance to petition Parliament. The petition of 1719 included in this pack protests against imported plaits and hats. This was to become a problem for many generations of plaiters and hatters.

During the 1700s fine straw hats became very fashionable. At that time the fashionable elite were a tiny proportion of the population, and their hats would almost certainly have been imported from abroad – adding to the luxury. Locally produced hats were coarser and probably only served the lower end of the market. This changed with the French Revolution (1789) and the subsequent Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1789 - 1815). The wars interrupted the supply of imported plait and hats as most European ports were blockaded and so home production was the only option.

One of the attractions of the imported hats was the fine and lightweight Italian plait from which they were made. At the time English plait was made from whole straw, which made it coarse and heavy. However the pressure to make the most of the opportunity the wars had provided led to innovation. It was found that by splitting the English straw, and plaiting with the sections or 'splints', a plait comparable to the Italian could be produced.

Bedfordshire was not alone in making the most of this opportunity and Luton had not yet begun to dominate the national industry. Although the war ended in 1815, with the victory at Waterloo, the very high duties imposed on imported goods still favoured the home industry. Straw plaiting flourished in the villages and more and more hat factories were set up in towns. Luton's plait market was the largest in the area, but they were held in all the towns of the region. Hitchin, Dunstable and St. Albans all had flourishing plait markets as did some of the smaller towns such as Shefford, Tring, Ivinghoe and Hemel Hempstead.

It was in the years between 1820 and 1840 that Luton began to take the lead. There was plenty of land for sale in the town at that time as large estates were being broken up. Building development was not controlled and people did not need much money to set up in the hat business. Most factories were small workshops in or behind houses and nearly all the work was done by hand, mainly by women and children.

With the number of hat factories in the town increasing, demand for plait was high. The plaiting workforce was largely made up of women and children, although when trade was good men would plait after finishing their normal day's work. A ten year old child was expected to make about 30 yards a day if the plait was a simple one. Intricate plaits could fetch high prices but took longer to make. Plait was usually sold by the score which was 20 yards. An average week's earnings from plaiting was five shillings.

Most plaiters learnt their skill at plait schools, which they attended from the age of three onwards. Run by village women, these were usually held in overcrowded cottage rooms. Thirty or more children would be squeezed into a space often no bigger than 10 feet square from 9.00 to 5.00. Older children also went back to school in the evening. The plait mistress made sure that the children made the amount of plait set for them by their parents; any other teaching was minimal.

In earlier times straw plaiting had been recommended as appropriate work for the poor. In 1724, a "very skilful woman" was employed at Luton's workhouse to teach plaiting and bonnet sewing. The accounts of other workhouses in the area also mention the cost of straws for plaiting. One writer considered that plaiting was "without doubt of very great use to the poor" and though it caused some inconvenience to farmers, "good earnings are a most happy circumstance." However as the trade became more widespread in the mid 1800s concern was expressed at what was seen as the lack of discipline it caused. The problem was that straw plaiting could be done almost anywhere, in the house or outside, sitting still, walking about, or gossiping over the garden gate. This was thought by some to be a threat to the plaiters' morals.

One possible threat to the virtue of the plait girls were the travelling plait dealers. The highest prices for plait were obtained at the markets, but it would often mean a long journey on foot and a day's plaiting lost. So most plaiters sold to dealers who travelled round the villages, buying the plait from the plaiters and selling it on to the hat manufacturers. The ballad included in this pack tells the sad tale of one young plaiter who fell for such a plait dealer.

Those who chose to take their work into Luton's plait market were likely to find it very busy. The market was held in George Street, but by the 1860s it had grown so large that the town's Board of Health intervened. In January 1869 the purpose-built Plait Halls were opened to bring the market indoors. Nearly all trade at the new market was in the hands of the dealers and fewer individual plaiters came to the Plait Halls to sell their goods. The straw dealers were consigned to a basement beneath the Corn Exchange, while the poorest plaiters were relegated to the entrances of the Halls.

However, even as the Luton Plait Halls opened in 1869, there were indications that the local straw plaiting industry was beginning to decline. In 1842 the high import duties imposed after the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) were reduced and then finally repealed in 1861. The first regular imports of plait from China began in 1869 and from then on the imports increased rapidly. These plaits were generally of inferior quality but high quality plaits produced in Italy and Switzerland were also more affordable once they were no longer subject to high taxes.

These increased plait imports coincided almost exactly with the development of hat sewing machines. Until the 1870s plait had been sewn into hats by hand but the new sewing machines enabled hats to be made much more quickly and therefore cheaply. The local plaiters were unable to meet the increased demand for plait. Hat manufacturers turned to the cheaper imported plaits.

In 1894 it was estimated that English plait cost twice as much as Italian and six times as much as the Chinese. In 1891 Japanese plait had started to arrive in considerable quantities, also at a much cheaper price than English. It was impossible for the English plaiting industry to survive in the face of such competition and prices plummeted. Plaits which had fetched a shilling a score in the 1840s were fetching 3d in the 1890s, and from that a penny or more had to be found for the straw. Few women could afford to work for that and many turned to other forms of employment, either in factories, on the land or in domestic service.

At the time, many people blamed the decline of plaiting on the closure of the plait schools after the 1870 Education Act. However, although a factor, this was not the major cause. There were various attempts to revive the industry, in schools and elsewhere. A major exhibition was held in the Luton Plait Halls in 1885 to encourage and display the skills of the plaiters, but to no avail. By 1900 only 2% of the plait used in Luton was produced in England.

During the boom years the hat manufacturers of Luton had realised that it was too risky to depend wholly on straw. They were supplying a market dictated by fashion, and if straw hats fell out of favour they could lose everything. Felt hats had been made in the town since the 1870s to follow changing fashions. However after the First World War the town produced more women's hats made from felt and fabric than from straw.

Some plaiters continued to work up until the 1920s and 1930s, fulfilling the very small demand for English plait, mostly for boater making. But the younger generations were not learning the skills and by 1939 the craft had almost totally disappeared after dominating life in the south east midlands for nearly 200 years.

During most of the 20th century hat making continued to be an important part of Luton's economy. Most of the jobs it provided were done by women and Luton became known as the town where the women kept the men. However the engineering skills that had been nurtured by the need for machines used in the hat trade were one of the attractions for the many new companies who set up in the town. The 20th century would see Luton become as famous for cars as it once was for hats.

In recent years the number of hat manufacturers in Luton has declined. But most of the town's large hat factories have been demolished or converted to other uses. A small number of companies remain and there is one firm of hat block makers and one firm of bleachers and dyers. Many people may now wonder why Luton Town Football Club are nicknamed The Hatters.

## Bibliography

Thomas George Austin, *The Straw Trade 1871*, P. O'Doherty, 1871

Edwin Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village*, Fisher Knight, 1935

John Dony, *A History of The Straw Hat Industry*, Gibbs Bamford, 1942

Charles Freeman, *Luton and The Hat Industry*, Luton Museum Service, 1953

Stephen Bunker, *Strawopolis, Luton Transformed 1840-1876*, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1999

Luton Museum Education Service, *Luton, Straw Hat Boom Town 1850-1910*, Luton Borough Council, 2003

## Using The Resources

For any groups studying the hat industry a visit to the Luton Life galleries at Luton Museum is a must. Displays cover the growth and development of the industry, its support industries and the lives and conditions of workers. In addition there is a large display of men's and women's hats ranging from the 1830s to the present day.

The Museums Education Service also offers a taught activity session on the hat industry. Following the process from straw to straw hat pupils can handle some of the objects seen in the museum's displays and pictures in this pack. For more details contact the Museums Education Service on 01582 546740.

The following suggestions could be used as preparation for, or follow up to, a visit.

## Straw Plaiting

- Try out plaiting using artstraws following the instructions in the pack.
- Create a flow chart that illustrates the processes of plaiting.
- Petition to Parliament.  
Consider the vocabulary. Underline all the archaic words and phrases.  
Make the same petition in modern English.  
Consider how the concept of a petition has changed.  
Use the archaic words and look for others to make a piece of writing sound old-fashioned.
- Measure out a space to the dimensions given in the quote from the Employment Commission report, sit the whole class in it while you try to plait.
- Compare the Employment Commission evidence to the illustrations of plait schools.
- Create a drama about a plait school on the day the commissioners visit. Think about what the children will be thinking, what the teacher and commissioners might be thinking.
- Read through the extracts from the Employment Commission report. Highlight in different colours facts and opinions. What do the opinions show about the attitudes of the commissioners?
- Listen to some traditional folk songs then write a tune for the ballad Plait Girls Beware.
- Using the story of the parson's daughter write a prose narrative from her point of view or retell the tale in newspaper front pages.
- Contact Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service and ask for copies of the 1800s census returns from the 1800s for your area. If you live in or around Luton you are likely to find people who were employed in the plait or hat industry. The contact number is 01234 228833.
- 1885 Industry Exhibition  
Compare this programme to a similar modern one. Consider similarities and difference in the design and layout, content, vocabulary etc.  
Imagine that an exhibition promoting Luton's hat industry were to be organised today. Consider all the arrangements; venue, celebrities, entertainment etc. Draw up and design a programme of events  
Look at how the posters indicate the most important celebrities. What does it tell you about the event that these people are coming?

## The Market

- Read the descriptions of the outdoor markets and look at the illustrations. Write an account of market day from the perspective of a village plaiter, a small factory owner, an importer of foreign plait or a buyer for a large company.
- The new Plait Halls were built with private money. Write a letter from the development company to persuade local businessmen to contribute.
- Discuss how each of these people might feel about the new Plait Halls; a village plaiter, a small factory owner, an importer of foreign plait, a buyer for a large company.
- In the illustration of the Plait Halls several people are shown having conversations. Write or act out what you think those conversations might be.
- Use the resources to explain how the hat industry grew in the 1800s and then shrank in the 20th century.

## Hat Making

- Describe what is happening in each the London Illustrated News illustrations of hat making.
- Compare the pictures of sewing rooms at different periods. Note the similarities and differences and discuss what they might show.
- Design an advert for a new hat sewing machine or other piece of equipment for publication in the Hatters Gazette.
- Using the poem A Bonnet Sewer's Complaint, write a list of the bonnet sewers' grievances and illustrate them in pictures or drama.
- Create a play around the story of the poem. Think about the what the buyers might say to the hat sewers.
- Look for information about similar modern situations - cocoa growers in Africa, carpet weavers in the Far East etc.
- Use Joseph Hawkes' description of a hat factory to draw a plan of the building.
- Compare Joseph Hawkes' description to that of Charles Hill. What differences and what similarities are there?
- Using the resources for information create a flow diagram illustrating the processes through which the straw plait must go to become a straw hat.
- Find out about the hatting firms that are still trading in Luton. The local business directory would be a good start. If you have the Local History Pack Luton: Straw Hat Boom Town you could compare this to the directories for 1850 and 1898.

## 3-end Plait

### Setting up

Take two straws.

- Hold one straw horizontally. Take the second straw and put it in front, 3cm from the end left-hand end of the horizontal straw.
- Adjust the second straw so that it is pointing diagonally from 2 o'clock to 8 o'clock and then move it upwards, so that it is off-centre.
- Fold the lower end of the second straw up, behind the horizontal straw. *Figure 1.*

### Plaiting

The three longer ends should be different lengths and are the plaiting ends. The short left-hand end of the horizontal straw is not plaited. Turn the straws so that the three longer ends point upwards.

**Step 1)** Take the outside right-hand straw and fold it into the centre to lay beside the left-hand straw. *Figure 2.*

**Step 2)** Take the outside left-hand straw and fold it into the centre to lay beside the right-hand straw. *Figure 3.*

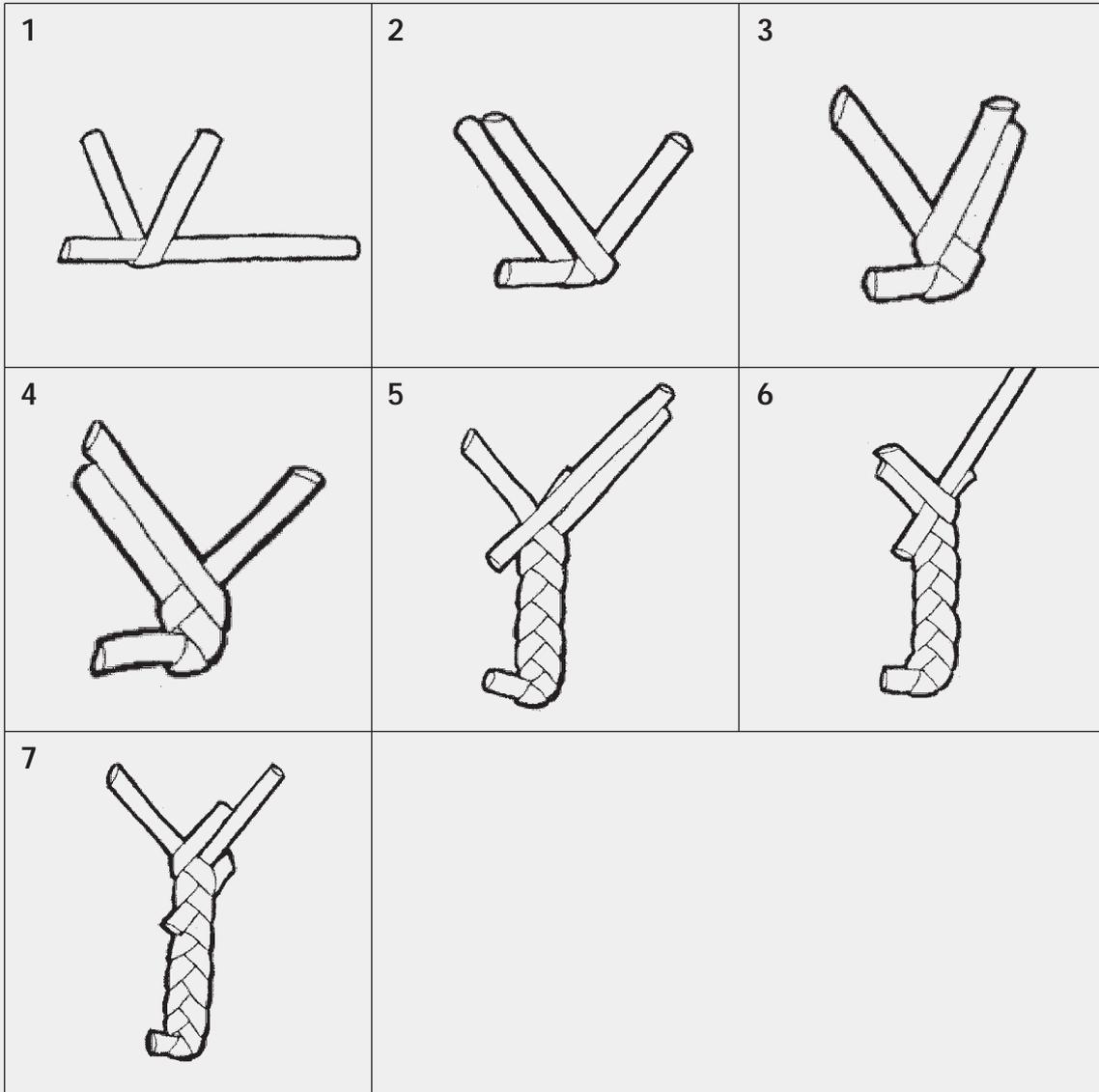
Continue plaiting by repeating step 1 and then step 2.

### Joining

Join at step 2, when there are two straws on the right; the short end is in the centre, and pointing to the right.

- Lay the new straw on top of the old short end, leaving 2cm of the new straw protruding from the left-hand edge. *Figure 5.*
- Repeat step 1 (*Figure 6*) and then step 2. At the next move, step 1, leave the old end of straw behind.

Continue plaiting (*Figure 7*) joining as necessary.



## 7-end Plait

Plaiting rhyme: Over one, under two, pull it tight and that'll do.

### Setting up

Take two straws.

- Hold one straw horizontally. Take the second straw, put it in front, set it off-centre.
- Adjust the second straw so that it is pointing diagonally from 2 o'clock to 8 o'clock and then move it upwards, so that the ends above and below the horizontal are different lengths.
- Fold the lower end of the second straw up, behind the horizontal straw. *Figure 1.*

Take a third straw.

- Place it diagonally behind all the other straws, laying it inside the right-hand arm of the 'V'. Fold the lower end upwards in front of the horizontal to lay to the outside of the left-hand arm of the 'V'. *Figure 2.*

Take a fourth straw.

- Put it diagonally behind the group of straws so that it lays inside the right-hand arm of the 'V'. Adjust the straw so that only 3cm protrudes beneath the horizontal straw. *Figure 3.*

### Plaiting

The seven plaiting ends should be different lengths. The short end of the fourth straw is not plaited.

**Step 1)** Take the outside right-hand straw and fold it diagonally over the adjacent straw and under the remaining two straws, so that it lays inside the left-hand arm of the 'V'. *Figure 4.*

**Step 2)** Take the outside left-hand straw and fold it diagonally over the adjacent straw and under the remaining two straws, so that it lays inside the left-hand arm of the 'V'. *Figure 5.*

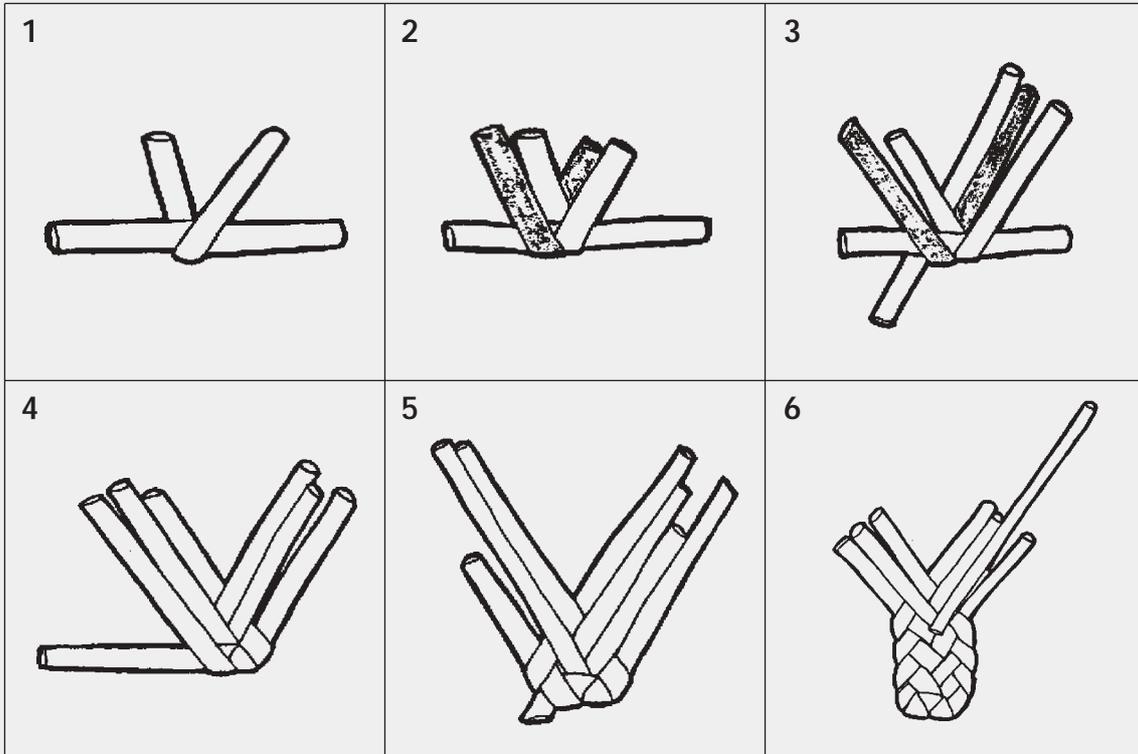
- Continue plaiting, repeating step 1 and then step 2.

### Joining

Join at step 2 when the straw to be joined is second from the outside of the right-hand group of four.

- Lay the new straw on top of the old short end, leaving 2cm of the new straw protruding from the plait. *Figure 6.*
- Repeat step 1 and then step 2. At the next move, step 1, leave the old end of straw behind.

Continue plaiting, joining as necessary.

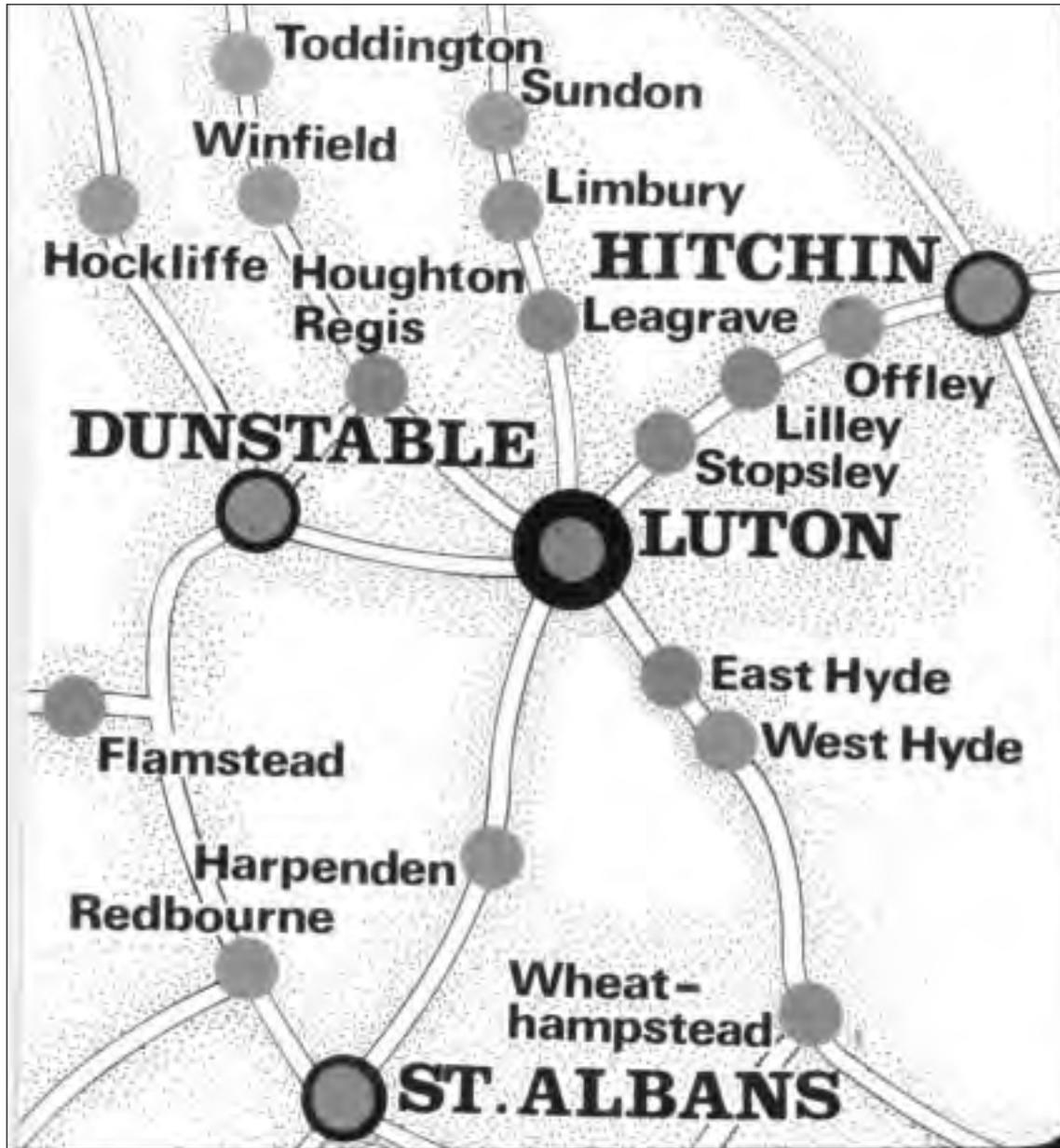


## Luton and The Hat Industry - Key Points in the Timeline

1700s	<b>Luton is a market town</b>	People from the countryside and villages around meet to buy and sell. Hat making is not very important yet.
1748	<b>Plaiting and bonnet sewing at Luton's workhouse</b>	A woman is appointed to teach straw plaiting and bonnet sewing to the inmates of Luton's workhouse
late 1700s - early 1800s	<b>Transport links improve</b>  <b>Development of the straw splitter</b>	New roads, bridges and a cutting have been built. A river has been diverted and a canal dug not far away. New coach services make it easier to get to villages and towns like St. Albans, Hitchin, Dunstable, and Bedford.  The straw splitter enabled thick English straw to be easily split and so be used to make plaits as fine as those from Italy.
early 1800s	<b>Hat makers from London come to Luton</b>  <b>Many new houses are poorly built</b>	Now that local straw can be split to make fine straw plait, firms like Munt and Brown, Welch and Sons, Willis and Elliott, and Vyse move to Luton to be nearer their raw material.  They have been built round small courtyards which are dark and dank. The houses are cold and damp. Water pumps and toilets are outside.
1800s	<b>Market day</b>	Every Monday, boards and trestles are set up along George Street. People come from all around to buy and sell straw plait. Plaiters from the villages walk into town. There are plait markets in other towns on different days.
1842	<b>Import tariffs are removed</b>	Import tariffs were taxes on straw bought from other countries. It made straw grown in this country cheaper which helped the farmers. It made hats made in Luton cheaper than hats from abroad and this helped Luton's hat makers. However even though the tariffs have gone the industry continues to grow.
1850s	<b>Many houses have extensions built to use as work rooms</b>	Many houses made into hat factories have two large rooms built on at the back. In the ground floor room heavy work like blocking and stiffening was done. The room above was used for sewing the hats. These are still being built as late as the early 1900s.
1856	<b>Thousands of women and girls come to Luton</b>	Between February and May they come to work in the hat factories to make hats ready for the new season. Some come from the villages and go home at weekends; others stay in lodging houses which they have to share. The houses are often crowded and dirty.
1858	<b>The railway finally comes to Luton</b>	A railway is finally opened between Luton and Dunstable. Some cottages have to be knocked down to build the station at the top of Bute Street.

1860	<p><b>The railway is extended to Welwyn</b></p> <p><b>New ways of working</b></p>	<p>It is now possible to travel to London by train without changing trains. This shortens journey times.</p> <p>Instead of hat makers doing everything themselves, there are new firms which do only one part of hat making - like making blocks, machine blocking, and dyeing and bleaching. New buildings have been built for them.</p>
1867-1868	<b>Luton gets a mainline railway</b>	The Midland Railway has built a line from Bedford to London, through Luton. Now goods and passenger trains can run to London, the Midlands and the North. The hat industry was growing anyway but this will help.
1868	<b>Overcrowded houses</b>	The rows of terraced houses increase. "Probably one half of the town" is made up of small workshop cottages where young girls work from ten in the morning until late at night. This is a claim made by some large hat factories to the Board of Health. They want the Factories Act to be enforced on the small hat workshops.
1869	<b>New Plait Halls are opened</b>	The straw plait is bought and sold here. This used to be done in the market on George Street - but it was getting very crowded, and it could be cold and wet outside. The Halls are in Cheapside and Waller Street.
late 1870s	<b>The first sewing machines are used to sew hats</b>	Often only big factories can afford to buy machines. But smaller factories and hat makers can hire sewing machines cheaply so people can still make hats in their homes.
late 1800s	<p><b>Land for sale</b></p> <p><b>Big hat factories are built</b></p> <p><b>Hat making helps the town grow</b></p>	<p>There is lots of land for sale, much quite cheaply. New houses are built and the town grows.</p> <p>The big factories are mainly in the town centre. Some buy hats from the smaller cottage workshops - which is called the counter trade.</p> <p>Other new buildings spring up: hat block workshops, bleaching and dyeing works, and warehouses for storing hats. There are brickworks and limeworks in the town making bricks and cement for all this building.</p>
1900s	<b>Luton attracts new businesses to the town</b>	Worried that the town is too dependent on the hat industry, Luton works hard to attract new firms. Vauxhall Motors is just one of many who relocate here.
1920s & 1930s	<b>Luton prospers and grows</b>	The hat trade provides plenty of work for women. They can work from home once they have children. Many men find jobs with the new engineering companies. Luton expands still further.

## Map of Straw Plaiting Area



*It was in this relatively small area that the majority of straw plait was produced during the 1800s.*

# The Case,

Of the POOR *Straw-Hat-Makers*, in the Counties of Hartford, Bedford, Buckingham, &c.

1719  
**T**HE Making of Straw Hats, Bonnets, Baskets, and ~~divers~~ other things out of Wheate-Straw, hath been an Employment time out of mind, for the poor People both Men, Women and Children, from Four, to Fourscore Years of Age in the aforefaid Counties and other Places, by which many thousands have gained a Comfortable Subsistence and kept themselves and their Families from being Chargable to the Parishes,

The Farmers Wives, Children and Servants, do at their spare Hours Earn, some 10, some 20, and some 30*l. per Annum* By Manufacturing there own *Straw*, which is a good Article towards paying their Rent.

That by Six Penny worth of *Straw*, bought of the *Farmers*, the Poor People can make by their Industry and work, Eight, Nine, and oftentimes Ten Shillings.

That when so wrought up and Manufactured, they carry every Week to Market, for which they have ready Money, without any Deduction, Stoppage, or Obligation to take part in Goods, or even so much as to Deal with those that Buy their Hats &c.

But it hath so fallen out of late Years, that by the Importation of great Quantities of a sort of Chip, or Shaving from *Holland*, which is Platted, and a sort of Platt and Hats from *Legborn*, and other Places (the Duties of which amounts to but an Inconsiderable Sum) yet it hath proved almost and will prove if permitted to be ~~introduced~~ the Total Destruction of the said Manufacture, which hath been so extremely Beneficial to the Poor, of the said Counties.

Therefore, *It is humbly requested, that the Honourable House of Commons taking this our Poor distress'd Case into their Consideration, will by such ways as the Honourable House, shall seem meet, put a stop to the growing Inconveniences that will prove the Total Destruction of so useful and beneficial a Manufacture, as the Straw-Ware of our own growth and produce is, and prevent the said Counties from becoming chargeable to the Parishes, having no other way to Subsist, &c.*

## The case of the Poor Straw-Hat-Makers, in the counties of Hertford, Bedford, Buckingham, etc.

### Petition to Parliament, 1719

The Making of Straw Hats, Bonnets, Baskets, and divers other things out of wheat straw, hath been an employment time out of mind, for the poor people both men, women and children, from four, to fourscore years of age in the aforesaid counties and other places, by which many thousands have gained a comfortable subsistence and kept themselves and their families from being chargeable to the parishes.

The farmers wives, children and servants, do at their spare hours earn, some 10, some 20 and some £30 per annum, by manufacturing their own straw, which is a good article towards paying their rent.

That by six pennyworth of straw, bought of the farmers, the poor people can make of their own industry and work, eight, nine and oftentimes ten shillings.

That when so wrought up and manufactured, they carry every week to market, for which they have ready money without any deduction, stoppage or obligation to take part in goods or even to so much as to deal with those that buy their hats etc.

But it hath so fallen out of late years that by the importation of great quantities of a sort of chip or shaving from Holland, which is plaited and a sort of plait and hats from Leghorn and other places (the duties of which amounts to but an inconsiderable sum) yet it hath proved almost and will prove if permitted to be imported the total destruction of the said manufacture which has been so extremely beneficial to the poor of the said counties.

Therefore, it is humbly requested that the honourable House of Commons taking this our poor distressed case into their consideration will by such ways as the honourable House shall seem meet put a stop to the growing inconveniences that will prove the total destruction of so useful and beneficial a manufacture as the straw ware of our own growth and produce is and prevent the poor in the said counties from becoming chargeable to the parish having no other way to subsist.

## Straw Manufacture, 1807

*This quotation comes from a publication by The London and Dublin Societies for Bettering the Condition of the Poor.*

There are few manufactures in the kingdom in which so little capital is wanted, or the knowledge of the art so soon acquired, as in that of straw plaiting. One guinea is quite sufficient for the purchase of the machines and materials for employing 100 persons several months.

The straw is cut at the joints, and the outer covering being removed, it is sorted of equal sizes, and made into bundles of eight or ten inches in length and a foot in circumference. These are then to be dipped in water and shaken a little, so as not to retain too much moisture; and then the bundles are placed on their edges, in a box which is sufficiently close to prevent the evaporation of smoke. In the middle of this box is an earthen dish containing brimstone broken in small pieces; this is set on fire, and the box covered over and kept in the open air several hours.

It will be the business of one person to split and select the straw for fifty others who are braiders. The splitting is done by a small machine, made principally of wood. The straws, when split, are termed splints, of which each worker has a certain quantity, on one end is wrapped a linen cloth, and they are held under the arm and drawn out as wanted.

Plaiters should be taught to use their second fingers and thumbs, instead of forefingers, which are often required to assist in turning the splints and facilitate very much the plaiting; they should be cautioned against wetting the splints too much.

A good plaiter can make three score a week and good work will always command a sale both in winter and in summer. The machines are small; and may be bought for two shillings each and will last for many years.

## The Queen, November 9th 1861

This is not a good season of the year to be straw plaiting – the hands become numbed with cold, and plaiting near the fire injures the straws. The splints have to be worked moist, and the poor plaiter's occupation, sitting away from the heat and plaiting damp straws with numbed fingers, is not an enviable one. Their only holiday is at harvest time, and the best time for work is in the spring and summer, when they can sit out at the cottage doors or under the shadow of the trees or hedges in the country lanes...

...let us watch one of the straw plaiters for a few minutes and we shall soon see how rapidly straw plaiting can be effected with practice. First, she splits the straw with the 'machine' and then moistens each of the splits (this is mostly done with the mouth), in order to make them more pliable. The plait is begun at the end nearest to her, and soon the braid starts to form in her nimble fingers. The rapidity with which the work is done depends very much on the number of straws required in the plait. The Plaiter whom we are watching is working a very pretty plait with thirteen straws.

In the outset she fastens all the straws neatly together at the top, and then divides them in to two portions – six straws being turned to the left and seven to the right, so that the two portions of straw are at right angles to one another. Now she takes the seventh or outermost straw on the right hand, and turns it down with her finger and thumb under two straws, over two and under two. There are now seven straws on the left and six on the right side. Now she takes the seventh, or outer, straw on the left hand, and turns it down under two straws, over two and under two, and so continues, the outer seventh straw always turning in a similar way.

But while we have been trying to describe the process, Phillis has completed a whole length of plaiting. In order to earn the magnificent sum of 7s, even if she gets the highest price, poor Phillis will have to make fifty yards of that plait which we think so little of in the crown of a bonnet. Seven shillings!

Some idea of the amount of straw plait made may be formed when we state that it is computed that no less than 200,000,000 yards of straw plaiting are made annually in England, by above 80,000 women and children.



From Cassells Family Magazine, 1882

### From On The Straw Plait Trade by Alfred John Tansley, 1860

In most villages there is a plaiting school, which is generally conducted by an elderly dame, who receives from each scholar, 2d or 3d a week. The children are some time before they can plait so as to earn anything, but after a year or two they contrive to obtain 6d to 1s 6d per week, after the plait is disposed of by their parents... These young persons, when first at school, are not looked after as regards the proper attainment of the very rudiments of knowledge, except in those cases where the schools are under careful visitation by the minister of the parish, or by persons in the neighbourhood.

The difference between visited and unvisited schools is of a marked character; the comfort, health and education of the children, as well as their plaiting, being attended to, and as a consequence, they are more healthy and their minds more active and vigorous than those at schools which are uncared for. It may be safely affirmed of the greater number of these schools, that the children taught within them are altogether lost sight of by the wealthy and other classes around them.



*A Plaiter's Home from The Queen, 1861*

## From Good Words, July 1st 1869

In a Buckinghamshire Parish with a population of 800 the majority of women can neither read or write (the men are not much more accomplished), and the schoolmistress has only 35 pupils – the eldest not more than twelve years of age. 'Plaiting,' said the schoolmistress, 'is not as profitable as it used to be, and the big girls would be glad to find places as servants, but they cannot take them, because they do not know how to do even plain sewing. The plaiting school is the only school they have been at. Little things not much more than twelve months old go to the plaiting schools. When they can hardly toddle, you see them with bits of straw in their hands, trying to twist them in and out.'

As to these plaiting schools, however, accounts differed. I was told, on one hand, that the parents received their children's earnings; on the other, that they constituted half the income of the mistress. By an informant who held the latter view I was told that he lived close by a plaiting school, 'and the little uns love it – they're always at the door before time. They'd far rather go there than to a National or British School, where half their time is spent in idleness. Bless you, they are taught reading at the plaiting schools, and writing, too, sometimes I think.' According to this authority, no child was admitted under eight.



*Plaiting School from The Queen, 1861*

## Straw Plaiting and The Children's Employment Commission, 1867

*In 1862 a Children's Employment Commission was set up by Parliament 'to enquire into the employment of children and young persons in trades and manufactures not already regulated by law'. The commissioners looked into the work done by children in all manner of trades across Britain, including straw plaiting and hat sewing. As a result this report was published in 1867. Below are extracts from the report on Straw Plait Manufacture by Mr J E White.*

The straw plait district has been described to me, by persons acquainted with it, as extending over a great part of Hertfordshire, excepting the part adjoining Middlesex, and spreading on the east across the northern part of Essex nearly to the coast, and round by the edge of Cambridgeshire, over a large part of Bedfordshire and into the eastern part of Buckinghamshire. The plait is made chiefly in the villages scattered over a great part of the district, and, in the thickest seats of manufacture, in almost every cottage.

Children generally plait in schools, a task of so many yards being set to them by their parents, and the duty of the mistress is to act the part of an overlooker in a factory, and see that the proper amount of work is done. A person who makes this her business can attend to many at a time, and enforce an attention which the mother, who has other engagements, might be unable to secure. Girls leave plait schools when they get big enough to work steadily without constant supervision, usually at about 13 or 14, after which they work at home.

Boys are brought up to plaiting as well as girls, and continue at it usually only until they are of sufficient age to obtain more suitable employment. In some schools which I visited apparently about a third were boys, but most of these were mere children. In some places even men plait.

### Age at which Children and Young Persons are Employed

Children begin straw plaiting work at a very early age indeed, so early that it seems impossible to believe that their employment can be thought of any real value. It seems worthy of notice chiefly as showing the general disposition of parents to turn their children to account at the earliest age physically possible...I have seen children of only three years old...set to work, and it is stated by several witnesses that children usually begin plaiting...at four years old, and some younger, as at three or three and a half.

### State and Place of Work

The crowded state of the plait school strikes me...as the worst feature of this manufacture. A school is usually a small cottage room, not exceeding 12 feet square, sometimes less, of the usual height of cottage rooms, and in some cases little more than 6 feet high. The better the mistress, i.e. the more successful she is in enforcing work, the more popular will her school be, and the greater the danger to health.

In a room little more than 10 ½ feet square, and between six and seven feet high, the number of children attending on the day of my visit was 41 and there have been 60. The air space would be 18 ½ cubic feet for each of the 42 persons, or with the larger number only 12 ¾ for each, or less than half a child would have if shut up in a box three feet each way.

**Nature of Employment**

Plaiting employs the fingers only, and can be done apparently equally well standing or walking about as sitting. In one way this makes it more beneficial, as it makes it less confining. I found a young child of five years old standing up plaiting in a school as a rest. On the other hand it has the disadvantage that a child can be kept almost constantly employed, as much on the way to or from school as when at school. In passing through the country villages...it is rare to see a girl out of doors without her plait in her hand, and working away busily as she walks, no doubt to get on with the task set by her mother.

**Hours of Work**

Some plait schools are only day schools, i.e. from breakfast to dinner, and from dinner to tea, but some have an evening school also from 6 to 8, or 6 to 9. The youngest children as a rule do not go in the evening, but some as young as seven, and even five, do.

**Treatment**

In several plait schools I noticed formidable looking sticks, which the mistresses say they are obliged to keep, and sometimes to use. It appears that formerly much severity has been used, but I did not find any cases of bad treatment. A room, however full of very young and fidgety children, to be kept at work, sometimes with infants to be kept quiet also, must be (as some mistresses have told me it is) and as I judged from the anxious manner of one who kept one of the larger schools, very trying to the temper; and if a stick a yard long, as it often is, is at hand, blows seem a not unlikely result.

**Wages**

The younger children earn, of course, very little at plaiting and few have any idea what they do earn, or seem to understand whether they earn anything, knowing only the fact that 'mother sells the plait'. It appears, however, that some children can earn 3s a week or so, according to age and quickness, and many, of course, earn from that down to nothing.

**Influence of Employment upon Physical Condition**

As regards the straw plaiters, I have obtained but little evidence as to the effect of their employment upon their physical condition, and I have made but few inquiries. Bad effects are attributed to the habit of drawing the straws through the mouth to moisten them, e.g. excoriated mouths. Many of the workers are too young to give answers of any use on points of health...The small amount of air space, however, usual in plait schools, seems plainly inconsistent with a fair chance of health for tender children.

*J. Edward White, Lincolns Inn, August 1864.*

## Evidence to the Employment Commission

*With his report Mr White also submitted a large amount of evidence consisting of accounts of visits he had made to plait schools in the region and interviews with plait mistresses and pupils. He also collected evidence from local gentlemen. Below are some extracts.*

### **Mrs Wimbush's, Straw Plait School, Northchurch**

[The room] was nearly square, measuring 10 feet 6 inches the shortest way and 6 feet 9 inches high. Though it was a bright hot summer day the window was shut, but the door open. The air was, of course, close and heavy, with a strong smell, as I found particularly when stooping close amongst the children to talk to them.

Mrs Wimbush – My usual number of children is about 40, boys and girls, and their ages from 4 to 14. I have had 60 in this room, but would rather have 40 than 60. All the year round they come at 9am and leave at 8pm, going away an hour for dinner at 1, and an hour for tea at 4. People reckon to set children down to plait at about four years old, or soon after. I have one that is more like a baby than anything, you would not think her three years old; but she only comes for an hour now and then; it would be too much for her to sit all the while. Another, Theresa Seir, between four and five years old, only comes for the morning and afternoon school, not after tea. After about 12 or 18 months they come three times in the day. I keep them to work, and have to learn them too when they first come. That is the hardest work that I have, and almost wears my patience out. They have the stick at first. This little boy, now eight, who has been here four years is the worst, and wants the stick very often. If he has not done his proper work I keep him from dinner, and he has to eat it here. Plait is not fit for boys' work, and they don't like it at all. I tell them it is only till they are big enough for other work. The children have so many yards set them to do, and their mothers sell the plait. Several do two score a day, I don't care if they will do that. Out of 1s that they earn, about 3d goes for the straw. Each pays me 3d a week.

In winter we are obliged to keep that door into the outer room shut, because if the children's fingers are cold they cannot work. We took this house with the purpose of keeping a school, instead of having the children, as most people do, just in their own room.

Sarah Wellin, age 8 ½ – [I] have been here since five years old. [I] did three score (yards) yesterday, 1 ½ of them at home after school. [I] do not know how much my mother gets from my plait. [I] do not know A or B. [I] do not go to Sunday school.

**Mrs Poulton's, Straw Plait School, Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire**

The room is in the middle only 6 feet 5 inches wide, but has two shallow recesses, it is 11 feet 2 inches long and 8 feet high. The children had not all returned from dinner at the time of my visit. Of 12 girls and 4 boys present, none of the boys and only 3 of the girls had ever been at week day school, though all went to Sunday School.

Mrs Poulton – Though my place is called a school I do not teach plaiting, but merely keep the children to their work, and see that they do the number of yards set to them by their parents, which is according to their age and the kind of plait. They are taught by their friends before they come to me. I used to teach them some reading too, but found that too much, and do not do it now. The youngest that come are usually about 5 or 6 years old, but I have one now who is under 5, and some do learn as early as that. There are both boys and girls, but more of the latter; about 30 altogether when I am full. I do not think there have been as many as 36, as the boy said, here at the same time. They are ill and away so much. As many as thirty can sit in the room at once, but some have to sit quite close to the fire... I am obliged to make them sit pretty close, and I always tell them it is the best way. They are sure to fall out more if they do not.

They come from 9am till 5pm, going away for an hour or a hour and a half for dinner and in the winter half year they come again from 6 till 8pm, but the little ones don't come in the evening, as it is so late and cold. About 30 yards seems counted the most proper day's work, to take the bigger ones. Few stay older than 13. My boy there, aged 9, gets only 4d a score, but most would get 5d or perhaps a penny or two more earlier in the year when the trade is better. About 10 years old I dare say that some would manage 3s a week. The straw cuts their fingers and mouths too, as they draw it through their mouths, because it breaks off if it is not damp.

David Goswell, age 6 – [I] came here last August (it is now July) and plaited at home before. [I] can do a score a day, and have done a score and a half. [I] have sat plaiting until 7 pm at home. [I] never was at the reading school on a week day. [I] know what prayer is, Mother taught me 'Our Father' and I can say it all through.

Mary Robins, age 7 – Sarah, my sister here, will be 5 in a month or two, and she plaited at home before she came here. She can do 'ten' in a day. My finger is bleeding from being cut with the splint.

Caroline Gifford, age 13 – [I] have done eight score in a week. Sometimes [I] plait for two hours at home in the evening, after coming home from school. [I] go home for an hour for dinner. [I] never was at the reading school. [I] can read. (Only the shortest monosyllables. J.E.W.)

**Mrs Turry's Plait School, Edlesborough**

The children in my school, about a dozen, are from 3 years old up to 11. Some begin plaiting a few weeks before they are 4, but 4 is the age of most for beginning. They come here from 8.30 till 12 and from 1 or 1.30 till 4, and those who have more to do till 5. The little ones do not have work to do before and after school worth mentioning; it would make them ill. There is no place drove like this for plait. The children just get a run to stir their legs, and are at it again. My daughter Mary, now 14, plaits from 9 a.m. till 10 p.m. That is about the regular thing in the place for girls of her age. She clears about 4s. a week. She does about six score in a day, and the straw cost her 2d or 3d a score. She will not be much quicker when she is 20.

## Evidence to the Commission

### **Ruth Stombridge, Eaton Bray**

I began plaiting when I was 3 years old; know I did because mother says so. At the plait school that I am at now I go only from 8.30 till 12, and from 1 till 4.30, but mother sets me the same to do as I did at a school where I stayed till 9 o'clock, 30 yards, 10 in each of the three school times. I have just left the school because the man had the smallpox two doors off, but other girls stay on. There were 30 girls there, some about 4 years old. We sit very screwed at school. I get 10d a score, and dare say I clear about 5s a week after paying for straw. I have two sisters younger and a brother older than I am who plait. He goes to the writing school in the day, and does 10 yards afterwards, which takes him till 10 o'clock at night.

### **Sarah Ann Meagher, Berkhamstead, age 7**

I go to Mrs Scott's plait school three times a day, from 8.30 to 12, from 1 to 4 and from 5 to 8pm. Mother sets me five yards to do in each school, one yard at dinner and one at teatime. Often I have to get up in the morning at 7 or 6.30 and begin work, because I have so much to do. If I do five mother says I am a good girl; she doesn't hit me, the mistress does sometimes.

### **Rev. John Clegg, Rector of Toddington**

I have been resident here for two years, and, so far, have been quite unable to get anything like a moderate attendance at our National School. The parents of the poor children only send their little ones to school when there are few orders that the plait dealers...In order that they may become plaiters, they are sent to plaiting schools at a very early age, about 5 or 6. There is no attention paid to their education in any other way. The plaiting mistress is frequently as illiterate as the children, and in many cases bears such a dubious character as to render it most inadvisable for young girls and boys to be put under her management. Children are crowded into these plait schools, which consist generally of a small, badly ventilated room. It is necessary there should be a considerable amount of heat for them to work the straws with their hands. The health of the children is not improved, though I do not consider the injury to health anything to be compared to the injury to morals.

### **Rev. Richard Gee, The Vicar of Abbots Langley**

Plait is not the unmixed evil which some of my neighbours consider it. It is preferable to the field work, as less unfeminine and to the lace work as more prosperous... It is not unhealthy nor is it even sedentary. It saves the family much pressure when the husband (say in winter) is out of work. I write thus because I believe these advantages are often overlooked. As diocesan Inspector I am aware of some of the difficulties it presents in the way of education... I am sensible of the evils, or rather the dangers, of plait. They may, most of them, be traced to the disinclination which it causes in young women to go into domestic service. They stay at home, independent of their parents as regards earnings, and therefore control. They put what they do earn on their backs, and become vain and over-dressed.

## Ladies, Beware the Plaitmen of ----shire

There was a blooming damsel  
So handsome young and fair  
She was a parson's daughter  
Who lived in Buckinghamshire.  
They use to sing together sweet  
And shake each other's hand,  
He used to buy the ladies' plait  
And was a married man.

In Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire  
Mind maidens what you're at  
And shun the naughty married men  
Who deal in ladies' plait.

To Dunstable and Hempstead  
And Luton he would go,  
He dearly loved the ladies  
And could whistle, high gee wo!  
He with the parson's daughter  
Dumb motions he could play.  
Yes, with the parson's daughter,  
One night he ran away.

He used to tell her that he loved  
Her dearer than his life;  
The naughty, naughty man  
Although he had a wife.  
When courting with dumb motions,  
They knew what they were at,  
He made a resolution,  
For to steal the ladies' plait.

This damsel was but twenty-two,  
Oh, what could she be at,  
She loved his carrotty whiskers,  
And she knew he dealt in plait.  
They both sang, oh! be joyful!  
Upon the Sabbath day,  
He bought his love a ladder,  
And they bolted then away.

Oh! Yes, this couple bolted  
And it caused a deal of strife.  
He has got the parson's daughter  
And forsook his lawful wife:  
Some say they're in America,  
Some say they don't know where,  
Some say that he enlisted  
For a rifle volunteer.

When together they sang sweetly  
Which was early and late,  
Their voices used to echo,  
For they could sing first rate;  
And they could make dumb motions,  
They knew what they were at,  
And all the villain wanted  
Was to prig the ladies' plait.

Now if they catch Mr Plaitman,  
And the ladies he gets nigh,  
They will pull his carrotty whiskers  
Bawling 'There's another guy',  
And serve him right, he had a wife  
Who loved him so dear,  
He'll rue the day he cut away  
With his plait in Buckinghamshire.

Oh night and day, you maidens gay  
Mind well what you are at  
Beware of all the naughty men  
Who deal in ladies' plait.  
They will strive for to deceive you  
Like the parson's daughter, gay,  
Then 'twill be, who'd have thought it  
If you chance to cut away.

Now if they should be taken  
And there is no doubt of that  
They will crop his carrotty whiskers  
And wallop him with the plait.

## Straw Plaiting Exhibition, 1885

*This exhibition was organised to promote the English straw plaiting industry. It was held at the Plait Halls in Luton. A number of famous people attended the opening day, and it was officially opened by a princess. This is how the event was reported in a national newspaper. The programme for the exhibition can be seen on the following pages.*

Luton today will be enlivened by the promised visit of Prince and Princess Edward of Saxe-Weimar and a large and distinguished company, including the Marchioness of Salisbury, the Earl and Countess of Rosebery, Lord Charles Russell and M. De Falbe, the Danish Minister whose wife is Lady of the Manor and a great benefactress of the town and district. It is in large measure due to the interest which Madame De Falbe takes in the straw plaiting industry that the three day exhibition, which is due to be opened this day by Princess Edward of Saxe-Weimar, starts with so fair a prospect of success.

Everyone knows that the clean, busy Bedfordshire town, set in the green enamelled country which is framed by wood-crowned hills and the sweeping outline of the Chiltern range, is the centre of this ancient art and mystery. The times indeed have altered and the straw-plait trade has altered with them...

Mr. John J Kershaw, president of the Straw Hat Manufacturers' and Plait Dealers' Association and treasurer of the exhibition committee, plainly asserts what few will question, that 'the art of straw plaiting in England is at the present time in a depressed condition'. It is necessary to separate, here, the manufacture of straw hats and bonnets from the production of the plait, for which no machinery yet threatens to displace hand labour. Skill in plaiting can only be acquired by commencement at an early age; and it is of course pitiable to see a life-long practice thrown away. 'This industry,' as Mr Kershaw says, 'formerly provided lucrative employment for thousands of women and children in the villages throughout Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Essex, but of late years the barest pittance has been earned even by the most expert hands'. The exhibition of English plaits and plaiting, and process of manufacturing straw hats and bonnets, in the plait halls of Luton today, tomorrow, and on Friday, has therefore been organised under the patronage of the Princess Mary Adelaide and the Duke of Teck, Prince and Princess Edward of Saxe-Weimar and other distinguished persons already mentioned.

**EXHIBITION**  
—OF—  
**ENGLISH STRAW PLAITS & PLAITING**  
—IN+THE—  
**PLATT HALLS, LUTON,**  
—ON—  
**WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, AND FRIDAY NEXT,**  
**19th, 20th, AND 21st AUGUST, 1885,**

UNDER THE DISTINGUISHED PATRONAGE OF  
**H.R.H. PRINCESS MARY & THE DUKE OF TECK,**  
*Their Serene Highnesses Prince and Princess Consort of Wales-Widow.*  
HIS EXCELLENCY M. DE FALHE, AND MADAME DE FALHE (LADY OF THE MANOR).  
THE MARQUESS OF SALISBURY.  
THE EARL AND MOUNTRESS BOSHERY, AND LORD CHARLES RUSSELL.

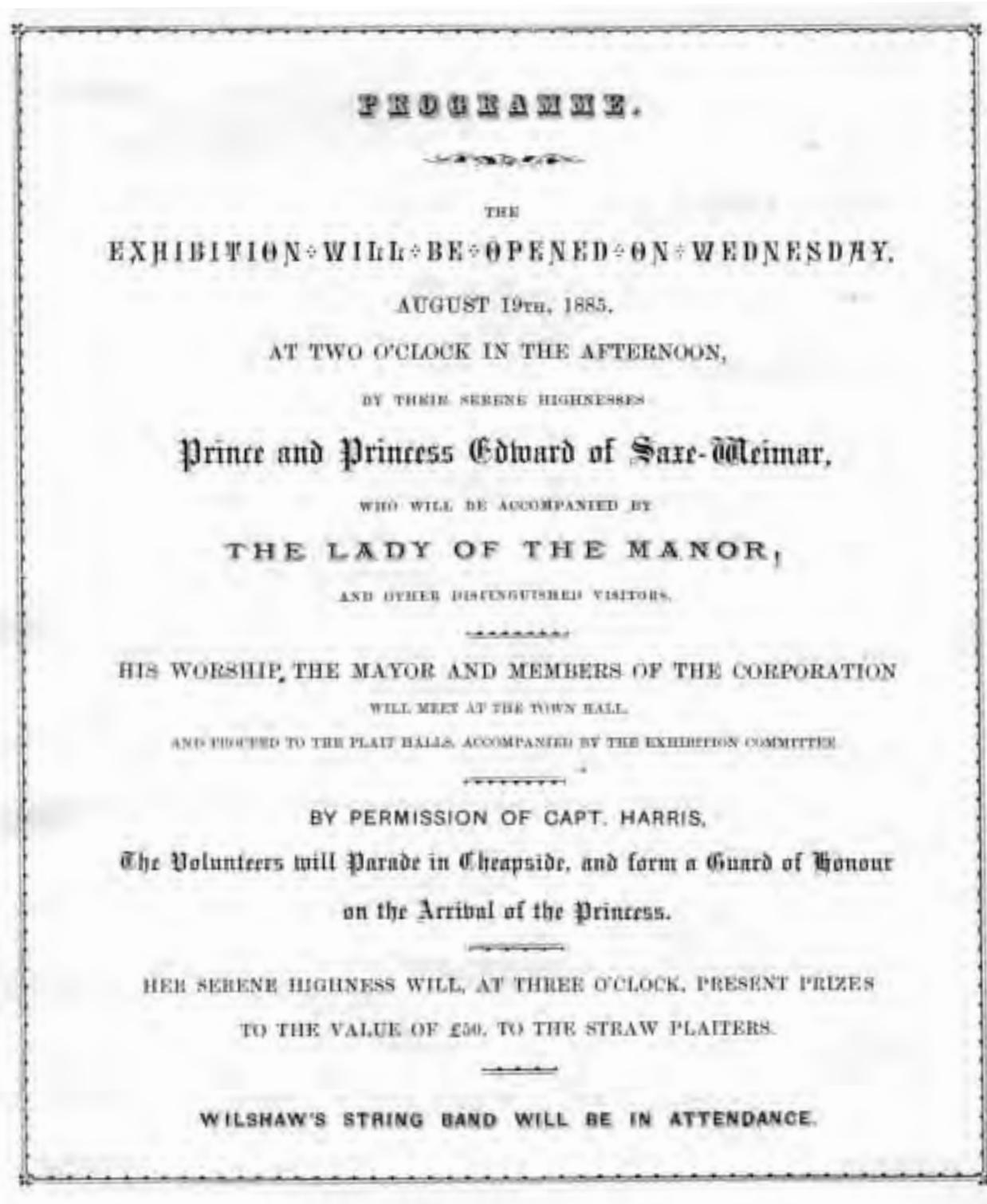
THE ENTRANCE TO THE EXHIBITION WILL BE FROM CHEAPSIDE.  
ON THE RIGHT-HAND-SIDE OF THE HALL WILL BE FOUND A  
**MODEL ENGLISH VILLAGE, IN WHICH THE PROCESS OF PLAITING WILL BE CARRIED ON.**  
THE EXHIBITION OF ENGLISH PLAITS WILL ALSO BE SEEN IN THIS HALL  
**IN THE WALLER STREET HALL**  
THERE WILL BE MACHINERY IN MOTION,  
AND A COMPLETE EXHIBITION OF THE PROCESS OF MANUFACTURING STRAW HATS AND BONNETS,  
INCLUDING SEWING, BLACKING, BLOCK MAKING, TIP STAMPING, &c.  
ALSO A FINE DISPLAY OF ENGLISH STRAW GOODS FROM LOCAL MANUFACTURERS

**ADMISSION**  
ON WEDNESDAY, 19th, from Two to Five, 2d. (LADIES AFTER FIVE 1s.)  
— THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, 20th AND 21st, 1s. (LADIES AFTER FIVE, 6d.)  
SEASON TICKETS (SEE TRANSPORTS) WHICH WILL BE SENT TO DESIRED PERSONS,  
2s. 6d. each.  
Tickets may be obtained of Mr. J. J. ROSSIGNOL, George Street; Mr. F. BRISTOLMAN,  
"Times" Office, Cheapside; "Herald" Office, Park Street, and Members of the  
Committee.

**For Programme of Proceedings see next Page.**

G. WALLER, PRINTED, LUTON.

1885 Straw Plait Exhibition. A page from the official programme



*1885 Straw Plait Exhibition. A page from the official programme*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20<sup>TH</sup>,

THE EXHIBITION WILL BE OPEN AT TWO O'CLOCK, WHEN THERE  
WILL BE A COMPETITION FOR VALUABLE PRIZES  
FOR SEWING HATS AND BONNETS.

---

Wilshaw's String Band will attend during the Afternoon and Evening.

---

AT 7.30, P.M., THERE WILL BE A  
**VOCAL AND INSTRUMENTAL CONCERT,**  
IN THE  
CHEAPSIDE HALL,  
WICK,  
**MISS JESSIE ROYD, AND MADAME POOLE,**  
OF LONDON,  
WILL SING SEVERAL SOLOS, AND DUETS.

---

FRIDAY, AUGUST 21<sup>ST</sup>,

THE EXHIBITION WILL BE OPENED AT TWO O'CLOCK, AND THE  
PRIZES FOR SEWING HATS AND BONNETS WILL BE  
DISTRIBUTED AT FOUR O'CLOCK.

---

Wilshaw's String Band will again be in attendance from Two till Ten o'clock.

---

AT 7.30, P.M.,  
**MISS JESSIE ROYD AND MADAME POOLE,**  
WILL SING SOME FAVORITE BALLADS.  
AND  
**MR. PRITCHARD,**  
A DISTINGUISHED MUSICAL HUMORIST, FROM LONDON, WILL GIVE  
A NUMBER OF MUSICAL SKETCHES.

---

Chairs will be provided at the Concerts, on Thursday and Friday, at 6d. each.

---

REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SUPPLIED IN BOTH HALLS. A TEA AND LADIES' CLOAK ROOM  
IN THE WALLER STREET HALL.

1885 Straw Plait Exhibition. A page from the official programme



*Plaiting at Barton Cottage c.1900*

## Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village by Edwin Grey

*Edwin Grey grew up in Harpenden in the 1860s and 1870s. He published his memoirs in 1935.*

The cottage industry of straw plaiting played a very important part in the village life these days. Very many of the women and girls were engaged in it: some of the men and the lads were also good at the work, doing it at odd times, or in the evenings after farm work, but this home industry was looked upon really as women's work, and although there were men and also lads who were wonderfully good at it, yet their plait hardly ever came up to the standard of that made by the women...

This industry had many good points about it, so making the work excellent for the cottage homes; firstly, it was of a clean nature, and then again the housewife could, when wanting to go on with other household work, put aside her plaiting, resuming it again at anytime. She could also do the work sitting in the garden or whilst enjoying a chat or a gossip with her neighbours. The mother could also rock the cradle with her foot, whilst using both hands at the plaiting...I've often seen groups of women and girls gathered in little groups round the cottage doors or on the common, talking and laughing, all busy plaiting...

Most of the plaiters had become so clever that they could do the work very quickly, setting in their straws or splints and finish of same with hardly a glance at it, for they could tell by the feel of the fingers when a new splint was required for insertion, in fact they could plait equally well by the light from the fire or by dim candle light...

Before the straws could be used they had to be split into strips (excepting those used for whole straw plait). For this purpose a small tool termed a 'splitting machine' was used...the strips so obtained being called 'splints'. These handy little tools were called 'cheens' by the cottagers; 'please will you lend mother a four cheen or a six cheen', as the case might be, was a phrase often heard when a child was sent by the mother to borrow one of these splitters from a neighbour...

Before the splints could be used they had to be passed through a little wooden affair, something like a miniature mangle, called a 'mill'...In every plaiter's home, fixed behind one or other of the doors, would be found one of these wooden mills. Everyone engaged in plait making, carried a bunch of these splints under the left arm, pushed up close to the armpit, the elbow having to be kept fairly close to the body to retain the bunch in place.

The starting was a somewhat tricky business, but once started the experienced hands moved their fingers very rapidly, turning the splints in and out, over and under, with a moment's pause now and then to 'set in' a new splint; this insertion was always spoken of ... [as] singular...whereas it should have been...plural, for there were always a pair used...the glazed or glossy sides being outward, so that in the plait itself, only the glazed side was seen...To ensure the two splints were kept evenly together...they were...passed between the lips lengthways and lying flat, and so in this position drawn along...the mouth, the saliva of which moistened them, and also caused a slight adhesion sufficient to keep the pair of splints in position...

This moistening trick had to be done with care, or a cut lip or tongue, or perhaps both, would be the result...I have known some children, whose lips and tongues received nasty cuts, when they were beginning to plait properly, but these cuts soon made them exercise care, and they soon learned the knack of moistening their splints with safety.

## Dunstable Plait Market, 1861

...A visit to the quaint, old-fashioned, straggling, little town of Dunstable on a market morning is very entertaining. No place can be more suggestive of old world England than this quiet little town, with its long irregular street, its antique houses with gable ends turned towards the road, and its numerous inns with their swinging sign-boards. Usually the place is as dull and lethargic as any other inland country town, but on a market day there is bustle and activity to be seen everywhere, and a crowd of booths springs up in the market-place. The first object that strikes the visitor is the predominance of straw on every side; all the inhabitants seem more or less connected with straw. The landlady of the inn behind the bar is busily engaged in plaiting straw; so are the wives of the grocer and the butcher, in their respective shops; the women in the open air, with bundles of straw braid under their arms, are all plaiting; and so are all the children in the schools and the old dames who teach them. It is market morning and the buyers and sellers from the country come trooping along to the town, either walking in clusters or jolting along in their marketcarts filled with bundles of cut straw. Here come the straw factors – you will know them by their billy-cock hats and embroidered smock-frocks. These men purchase the straw from the farmers while it is still in the stacks. They carefully cut off the ears of corn and leave them with the farmers, and remove the stalks to their own houses, where they are prepared for the market by boys. Each stalk is cut into two lengths and bleached by exposure to the fumes of burning brimstone. When finished, the cut straws are made up into neat bundles, and are ready for the market.

The dealings of these factors are entirely with women and children. It is one of the principal features of the straw trade that it is a perfectly domestic manufacture. No straw plait is made in the factories; it is principally produced by the wives and children of workmen. Enter one of the schools and you will see children, - little rosy-cheeked boys and girls, from three and four years upwards – all plaiting or learning to plait. In fact, this part of their education is considered quite as necessary as reading and writing. After a year or two these children are all enabled to earn from 6d to 1s 6d per week. On leaving school they can mostly earn 4s or 5s and, if expert plaiters, they can soon earn 7s per week. Among the women the advantage of straw plaiting is, that it does not interfere with any household work that leaves the hands at liberty. They can watch or even carry the baby; see that the pot does not boil over; or carry the water jug on their heads, and still keep on plaiting to their heart's content. Even blind people plait straw. And yet the payment for this work seems very little when we consider the amount of labour. The highest price paid for plait is 8s for twenty yards, while some kinds of plait only realise 2d for the same length.... Every market morning, however, at eight o'clock in summer and nine o'clock in winter, the plaiters are in the market place ready to buy the little bundles of straw, and carrying their week's work of plait under their arms to the highest bidder.

But let us return to the market place, where the women are both buyers and sellers. Here they are haggling with the straw factors, and buying the bundles of cut straw at prices varying from a half-penny to a shilling a bundle; but still continuing to plait on. A minute lost is money lost. Here and there in the crowd you will distinguish the 'young gentlemen' who act as agents for the bonnet and hat manufacturers. The women carry their own work about with them, and agents inspect it and give the highest price for the best work. But of course the 'highest' is made as 'low' as possible. Each seller looks out for herself, and there is plenty of rivalry and competition. But the best workers are well known. When the purchase is concluded the agent gives the woman a ticket, and the commercial transaction is concluded at the close of the market at some regular place of meeting, probably in the parlour of one of the neighbouring hostelries with the swinging signs.



*Dunstable Plait Market, The Queen, 1861*



*Selling Plait*



*Buying Cut Straw*

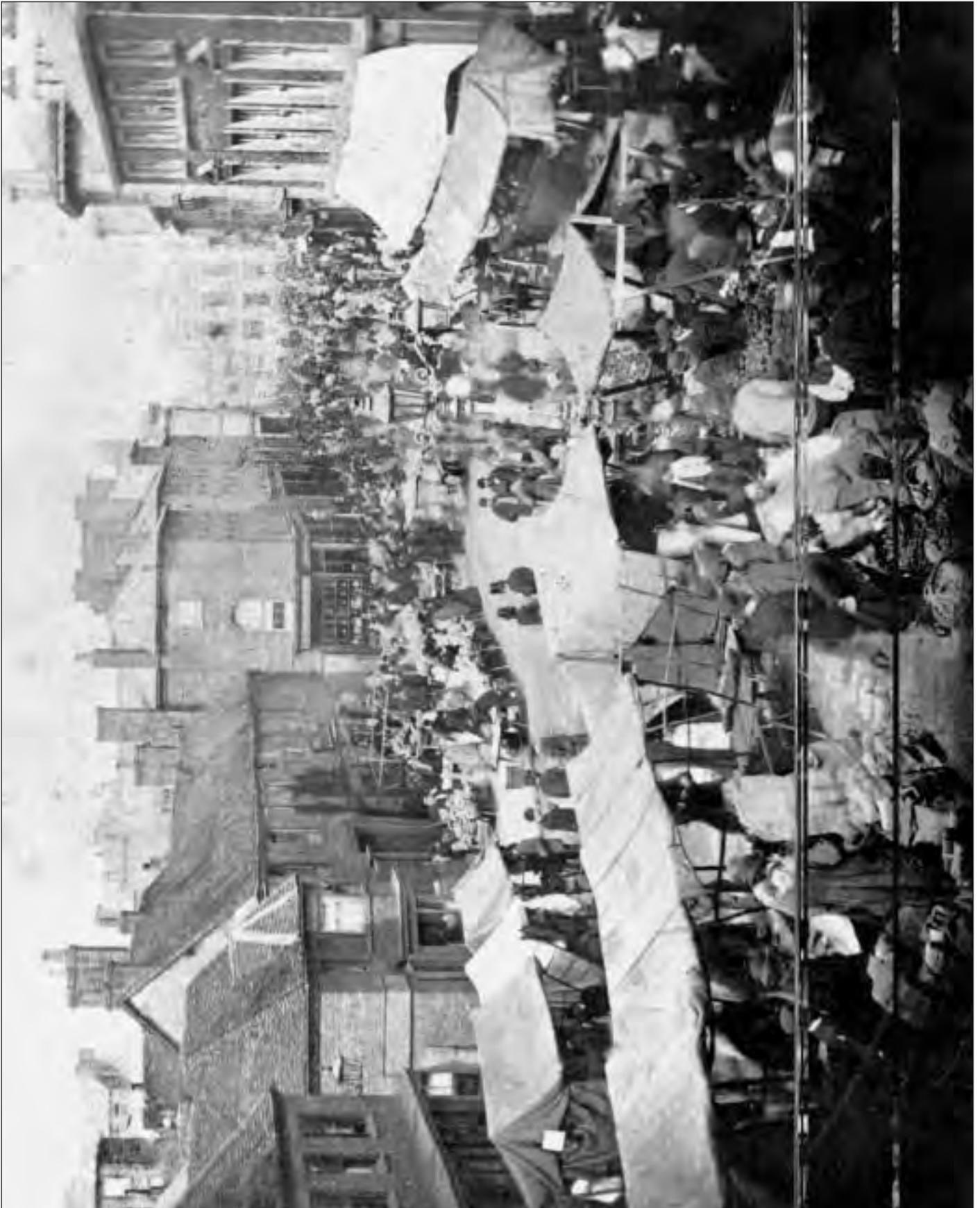
## Luton Plait Market, 1861

*Luton Plait Market was held in George Street, the town's main street. This description is by Charles Knight and was published in the British Almanac and Companion in 1861.*

The Straw Plait Market of Luton is held on every Monday throughout the year, and 8 o'clock from Lady Day to Michaelmas, at 9 from Michaelmas to Lady Day. It had been described to me as a scene combining many features of the picturesque, such as a painter would delight in, if he beheld it on a bright summer morning, when crowds from the country would hilariously display the golden plait on stalls set out from one end to the other of a long street; and cheerful matrons and smart lasses would stand quietly on the pavement, each with their scores of plait hooped on their arms. It was my misfortune to see this assemblage on a morning when the rain came down with a settled determination that destroyed all the gaiety of the scene. Nevertheless the street was crowded with sellers and buyers, and every gateway that could give shelter, was filled with poor women who brought their week's work to a certain market.

At nine o'clock the market bell rings, and the traffic begins. My attention is first attracted by the dealers in straws prepared for plaiting. These come from neighbouring hamlets, in which they are employed in the selection of straw..., in sorting it into different degrees of fineness, in cutting it into a regulated length; in bleaching it by exposure to sulphur fumes; and in making it up for sale in little bundles. The straw plaiters come to the market to buy this straw; as they also come to sell their plait. Those women whose goods have not been collected by a middle-man stand in rank, their small dealings being principally confined to the private makers of bonnets at their own homes, who chaffer with the plaiters for a score or two of the plait. The dealers are opening their bags upon the stalls. The commodity will sustain no material damage from the rain; and so the trade goes forward, as if all were sunshine. The buyers here are the agents of the great houses. They rapidly decide upon quality and price; enter the bargain in their note-books; the bags are carried to the warehouses;...and in an hour or two the street is empty.

*Charles Knight, The British Almanac and Companion', 1861*



*George Street Plait Market, Luton, 1860s*

## Market Day in the Plait Halls, 1871

*Luton's new Plait Halls opened in 1869. This description was written in 1871 in The Straw Trade by Thomas George Austin.*

Instead of the rickety old trestles and stalls, exposing the goods and the people to all weathers in the open street, we now find the same old familiar faces housed in two large interconnecting halls, called the Plait Halls. These are in Cheapside and Waller Street, close to the centre of town.

In these Halls we find substantial wooden counters or stalls ranged, in the Cheapside Hall transversely in rows, while round three sides of the hall are distinct shops, let to various dealers in the trade; and in the Waller Street Hall the sides are fitted with a kind of horse-box stall, each comprising a counter and plait rack; while along the middle is a double row of most convenient counters.

We entered at half-past 8, on market morning, under difficulties, we might add, for we got nearly wet through in getting to the Halls, and then we found we were half an hour before time... We found about 30 people there, with perhaps half as many bundles of plait, and a solitary policeman.

A few minutes before 9 o'clock we encounter an old friend...and with him repair to the halls again, arriving just in time to see the town crier announce with his bell that buying and selling can legally begin.

The number of people has, during our absence, increased from a few dozens, to 700 or 800, but by the time we leave the buildings, i.e. half-past 9, not less than 2000 people could have been assembled, all possessed with the same burden of 'plait on the brain', either as buyers or sellers.

Scores upon scores (or miles upon miles) of plait are now to be seen, throughout the Halls, each stall being tended by a dealer who has brought the plait, which he or she has spent the whole week in accumulating...

The particular classes of plait in demand are soon appropriated by the bigger firms who are seen hurrying from one stall to another... To seize a bundle, ask the price, make a bid, close a bargain, yea or nay, and if bought affix their private mark on the ticket which each bundle bears, is the work of very few moments, and thus we can account for the assemblage of so many people and the changing-hands of so many thousands of scores of plait being all over in the course of a couple of hours.

At the Waller Street entrance of the Halls stand rows of poor plaiting women who hoop upon their arms the week's labours of themselves and their children, patiently waiting till the first rush of business is over or some casual glance at their stock, in passing, attracts a customer.



*Inside The Plait Halls, from the Illustrated London News, 1878*



*Nicholls' Stall in the Plait Halls, c.1900*



*Girls Selling Plait to Dealers, c.1870*

At the Waller Street entrance of the Halls stand rows of poor plaiting women who hoop upon their arms the week's labours of themselves and children, patiently waiting till the first rush of business is over or some casual glance at their stock, in passing, attracts a customer.

*From The Straw Trade by Thomas George Austin, 1871*

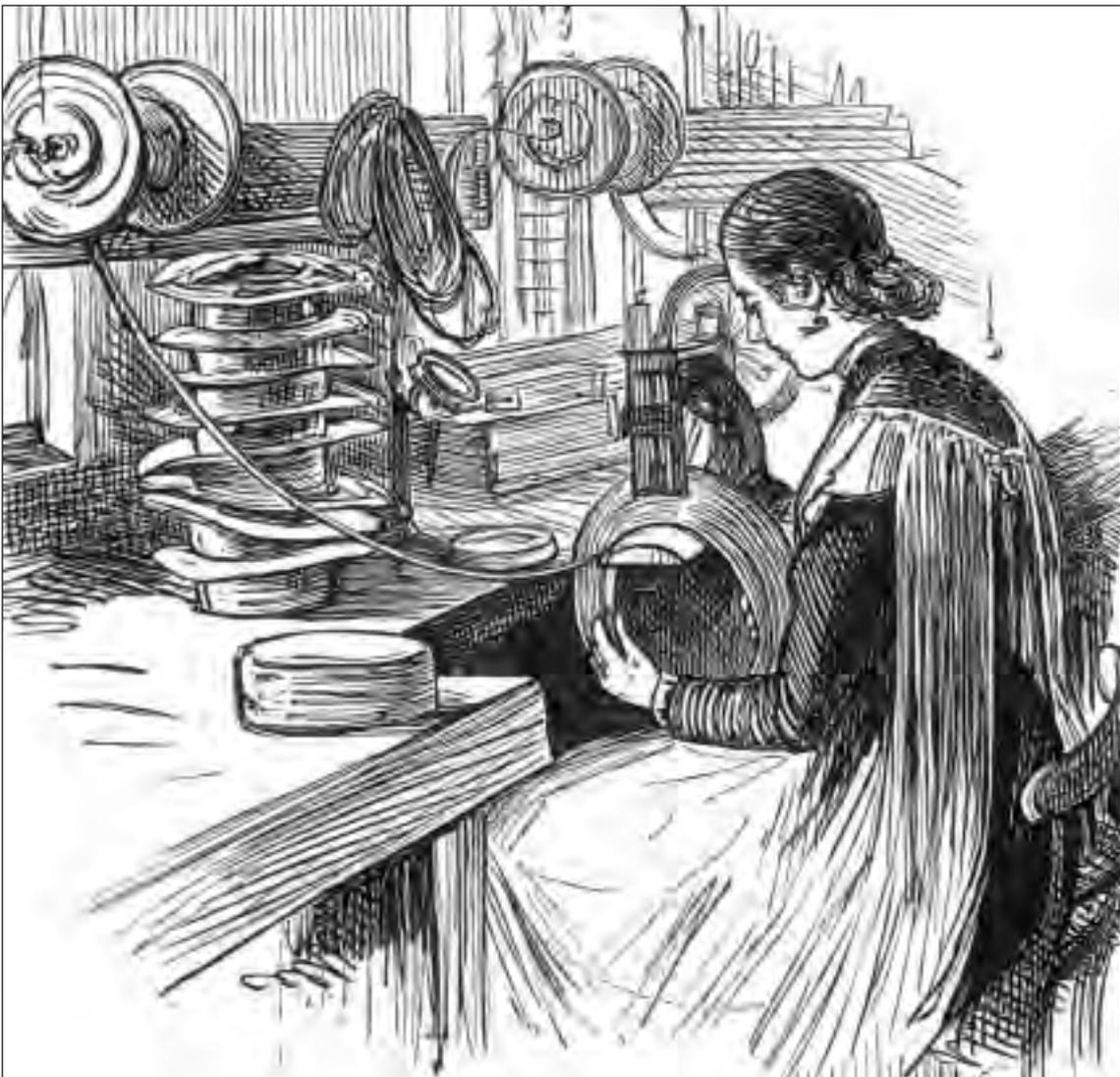
Scenes from a Luton Hat Factory, 1870s



*Joining The Plait*



*Blocking by hand*



*Machine Sewing*



*Blocking*



*Sewing by hand*

## The Straw Hat Maker, 1806

When the straw is plaited it comes into the hand of the person represented in the plate, who sews it together into hats, bonnets etc. of various sizes and shapes, according to the prevailing fashions. They are then put on wooden blocks for the purpose of hot pressing; and to render them a more delicate white they are ...exposed to the fumes of sulphur. Persons who make up these hats will earn half-a-guinea a week; but braiders or plaiters, if very expert will earn much more.



From *The Straw Hat Maker*, 1806



Welch and Sons' Hat Factory c. 1840

## A Straw Hat Factory in the 1820s

*This description was published in about 1895 in a local newspaper. It was written by Joseph Hawkes who was remembering the Luton of his childhood.*

Next [along George Street] was Mr William Bolton's, straw bonnet manufacturer and plait merchant. The warehouse was a few steps up from the pavement. The large store-room included the whole of the front first floor, the living apartments being at the back. At the bottom end of the premises was the bleach house with drying-loft, steam-chests and dome copper with safety valve and steam pipes. The bleaching was done by the man who also acted as groom. The store-room for the manufactured goods was on the first floor in the front, which was fitted with open racks and partitions in an enclosed room. The different sizes and kinds of bonnets were packed in upright rows of a few feet in height, such as girls', maids', small women's and women's. The bonnets were in very plain shapes – flat top and straight poke brims. The plaits principally used were double (seven straw), plain whole straw, whole and split pearl, broad and finer Devonshire, and as time progressed Tuscans were added. The goods were manufactured at private houses, the plait being given out to the family makers and the goods being taken in on certain days, while the pay was for the workmanship – including the stiffening, blocking, lining and wiring. The work season for stock began about October and the sales a few months after. In those early days a considerable trade was done in supplying plait to country bonnet makers. Mr Bolton a few years later removed to premises at the corner of Wellington-street and George-street. He occupied two houses – one with the entrance in Wellington-street for business, and the other with entrance in George-street as a residence.

## Hat Manufacture in 1861

*This description was written by Charles Knight for The British Almanac in 1861*

A straw-plait manufactory employs no straw-plaiters within its walls. There are large warehouses in which every variety of plait is kept in spacious receptacles – English plait and foreign plait; dyed plait, and plait called 'rice,' the white inner part of the straw being worked outwards. The variety of skilled labour is manifest in these productions. I was shown a bundle of the most exquisite fineness, worked by a dame of eighty; as well as the commonest plait worked by very young girls, who sit at their cottage doors in the sunny days, or wander about the green lanes, playing as it were with their pretty work. The bonnet-sewing and hat-sewing process is exhibited in spacious rooms, in each of which sixty or eighty young women are busily plying their needle. Their work demands a more than mechanical attention; for they have to fashion their bonnet according to the scale of proportions; altering with every eighth of an inch in the size of the head. The chief material of straw is now varied by the introduction of silk, plaited hair, and cloth. In other rooms the sewn hat is stiffened with gelatine; moulded into the exact shape with hat irons; lined; and then packed up for the wholesale warehousemen in London, Manchester, Dublin and other British and foreign marts. The ornamentation of the bonnet is the work of the milliner. One of the oldest established manufacturers told me that when he was foreman to Mr Waller, who was the chief instrument of bringing the trade to Luton, the manufacturers used to receive orders at Michaelmas for the spring bonnets. The fashions now are changing every week, and drawings of the last Parisian shape are sent down by the London houses. The dealers in bonnets from the great towns, who used to make their periodic visits quarterly or half-yearly, now come weekly; and even the dealers from Dublin are in Luton every fortnight, all asking for the latest novelty.

## Amongst The Bonnet Sewers

*This is an account of a visit made by the writer to a un-named hat sewing room, published in the girls' magazine The Quiver in 1884.*

Last spring it was our lot to stay for a few weeks in a little village in the midst of bonnet-sewing country. Perhaps some of our readers, who know as little as we did about this particular industry, which gives employment to so many hundreds of girls and women in Bedfordshire, may be interested in a short account of our experiences amongst them...

'They are very fond of being read to at their work,' said a friend of ours. 'Suppose you go up to one of the rooms; you will find them only too delighted to see you.' So the very next morning we sallied forth on a voyage of discovery, armed with a book of pleasant tales.

There were six or seven large rooms in our village, and in these from fifteen or twenty to perhaps forty or fifty women work. Each room has a mistress, who receives the plait and the orders from a shop or master in one of the large business towns, sees the work properly done, and pays her hands on Saturday.

The rooms are large and well built enough. They have ventilators and plenty of windows, but there exists amongst their occupants an invincible objection to fresh air, or 'a draught' as they call it. Consequently the windows are seldom open and the atmosphere, to any one coming in from the fresh spring breezes outside, is almost unbearable. I suppose they get inured to it, because if you ask they tell you 'they don't feel it.' In the first room we visited, there were about thirty workers of all ages, from little girls of thirteen or fourteen, to old married women of fifty.

Our friend was not wrong in saying that they would be delighted to see us. Never anywhere, I think, have we met with such a cordial welcome. Poor things! Anything must be a break in the long, monotonous day... 'We do love a tale!' they say. 'There was a lady used to come to us long ago but she has left off. It passes the time you see.' And through the whole of our story, we were listened to with breathless attention....

There were many differences in them, besides their ages. There were some pleasant faced tidy-looking matrons, and pretty fresh-faced girls; but others, again, were hopeless down-trodden looking poor drudges, or bold slatternly young women; but one and all, their needles were going in a way that made our eyes ache even to watch. It seemed such dreary and monotonous work, round and round, sewing the plait into shape or fitting it onto the block, no variety but the welcome arrival of a fresh shape, a new fashion or a different coloured plait.

'Ah! Sewing is not what it used to be,' says one anxious-looking woman. 'When I was a girl we could make a'most as much in a day as we can now in a week. There's so much foreign plait, that's where it is. This is all foreign, every bit of it.'

'Don't you get tired of it sometimes?'

Well, you see ma'am, we're used to it. There ain't no use in being tired. I only wish we had enough of it, I do; we never speak of being tired. But it will be a'most over now by Whitsuntide, and nothing again until Christmas, except a bit of plait, and that's scarce worth doing.... How many hats would you make in a day, is it ma'am? Well, that depends on how quick workers we was, and what kind of straw it was too. You see, coarse works quicker than fine; there's not so many stitches in it; and again some shapes is quicker than others. No, we're not paid by the day; we're paid by what we do. I don't count myself a very fast worker; there's many faster; but then there's some slower. But I know it would take me a very close sitting, from six in the morning until ten at night, to make these hats like this. And how much are we paid? Well that depends too.

If it's a coarse hat, a very coarse hat, say, we'd get no more than three-half-pence; we get fourpence-half penny for these we are at." ...

'I'll have to bid you good afternoon now, ma'am,' says one fine-looking neatly dressed woman. 'I have to go home a bit earlier to get my husband's tea; and thank you kindly, and I hope you'll come again soon.'

'How do you married people manage that have got children?' we asked, when she was gone. They all laughed, much amused.

'I don't suppose we hardly know ourselves how we manage,' said one. 'That lady that has just gone out...has ten children; but you see some of them are out to work, and the eldest girl is of an age to mind the baby. She keeps a good comfortable home as far as her means go, she do...I've had thirteen of 'em miss; Page here, has eight. We're forced to manage the best way we can, that's about it, but it's a hard struggle sometimes. You see, wages is low in this part and it ain't to be expected that a man can keep a family, not if he's ever so steady, out of his own money. It's the wife's place to do a little something too.'

That was our first visit of many to these rooms and everywhere we went, whatever we brought to read, we met with the same attention. Numbers of them cannot read. 'You see,' they will tell you, 'when we were girls there were no schools like there is now. All the children went to plaiting school, and learnt the straw work in place of reading and writing.'...

Poor things! With all their many good qualities, their industry, their cheerfulness, their kindheartedness, we are sorry to speak of their faults – to say that the standard of purity, even of ordinary morality, is lower amongst the poor bonnet sewers than anywhere...we have ever been...the language used, songs sung in the rooms of an evening are often disgusting in their coarseness... 'They're a wild bad lot, them bonnet-sewers,' says our landlady, with a virtuous shake of her head. 'No use your speaking to them.'

But are we doing our duty to these poor girls simply by shaking our heads over the evils of their lives and passing by on the other side? Rather this would seem to us to be specially a work for ladies, women amongst women, girls amongst girls. In every country parish there are some ladies with leisure, money, accomplishments. To such we say, why not try what you can do amongst your less fortunate sisters?...In your safe sheltered homes think of these poor bonnet sewers, hard at work from morning until night, in their stifling overcrowded rooms. Think of how few pleasures, how few interests, how many temptations they have, and try as far as in you lies to do something for the purifying and brightening of their lives.



*A Hat Sewing Room, The Quiver, 1884*

## Hat Making and The Children's Employment Commission, 1867

*In 1862 a Children's Employment Commission was set up by Parliament 'to enquire into the employment of children and young persons in trades and manufactures not already regulated by law'. Its commissioners had looked into the work done by children in all manner of trades across Britain, including straw plaiting and hat sewing. As a result this report was published in 1867. Below are extracts from the report upon Bonnet Manufacture by Mr J E White.*

Plait is sewn by children at home, and in some cases under small employers, and also in schools but in regular bonnet factories or warehouses no children, and but a very few young persons, appear to be employed. In these all but a very small portion are females. Several of these establishments are of considerable size, employing 200 or 300 persons. One employs 350 females. I was, however, unable to obtain accurate returns owing to the fact that the time of my visit to the district unfortunately fell just after the end of the season, when the large hat factories had to a great extent ceased work and dismissed the greater part of their hands for the few dull weeks of the summer.

From the last census [1861]...it appears that of the total 16,489 females of all ages in England and Wales engaged in straw hat and bonnet making, 7563, or towards half, are furnished by Bedfordshire alone, and 1,874 by Hertfordshire...The Luton district alone, which includes Dunstable, contains 4,150 female straw hat and bonnet makers of 20 years and upwards, or more than a fourth part of all the female straw hat and bonnet makers of all ages in England and Wales.

In summer, at the end of the season, large numbers of females go home into the country districts, as many probably as 1,000, it is estimated, thus leaving the town of Luton in one week. The effect of this large importation of females is of course important in its bearing upon their physical and mental condition when away from their place of work. The overcrowding of lodgings from this cause is spoken of by the town surveyor of Luton as an evil they cannot reach.

The factories and warehouses in Luton, where I visited some of different classes, are clean looking, roomy and comfortable, and all the larger workplaces there are spoken of as such by the town surveyor. The Board of Health in Luton appears creditably active in exerting itself to secure a proper state of workplaces of all kinds, as well as dwelling places, in the town. A general look of comfort prevails, which is quite pleasant to see, and the health of the town stands very high. The prosperity of the town and the high wages no doubt contribute considerably to this result.

The sewing of bonnets is done with the hand, and is said to be hard work, and, as I was told by workers, to make the back ache. Sewing machines cannot be used for sewing the plait, but are, in one or two cases, for sewing linings etc. In some cases part of the work consists of trimming with ribbands etc.

The usual hours in the factories, warehouses, and sewing rooms are from 8 or 9 in the morning till 9 in the evening, or in the busy three months till 10. But the workers are paid by the piece, and the demand for labour being great, and wages good, they are said to be very independent, both as to the hour of coming to or going from work, and the time at which they take meals. It appears that work is occasionally considerably later in some of the smaller establishments. It is liable to sudden pressure from changes of fashion, season and accidental circumstances, such as a general mourning etc. and for completion of orders.

Sewing plait is regarded as a higher employment than plaiting, and the wages are remarkably good, many young women earning £1.00 a week, and some considerably more; and good hands at one good house average 18s. Indifferent workers and those at small workplaces appear to get as much as 10s or 12s.

## Evidence to the Commission

### **Mr Hunt, Manager at Messrs. Munt and Brown's Straw Bonnet and Hat Manufacturers**

I have been in the trade quite 30 years, and am thoroughly acquainted with it. It has increased very much of late, and is becoming each year more and more a foreign trade, goods being sent largely to foreign markets, such as Australia, Cuba etc. This town has grown very much in consequence, and buildings are springing up very fast. In 1841 the population was 9,000; in 1861 17,000; and is now probably near 20,000. Probably three-fourths of it are engaged in the trade in one way or other, as the population consists almost entirely of the trading and working classes. The work done in the town by females is sewing plait; the blocking is done by men, and a few boys are employed in tying up and in odd ways. It may be taken as a rule that 250 females keep 20 men employed in blocking; etc.

There are a number of large manufactories in the town, all conducted on much the same system and with the same hours as our own. We employ on the premises about 200 females and 15 men and boys. We are able to do with a smaller number of men because we use steam machinery for pressing, which enables two men to do the work of 20 without it.

On the whole I believe there is no class of work so suitable for females and so healthy, or in which they get such good wages as in that in bonnet manufactories here...The number of females who come to live in the town for the sake of the work is very great. They lodge in the town, and many people let apartments for the purpose. Perhaps 500 such females will leave the town this week (early in July), and 1000 next, and will come back in August. At the last census [1861] there were, I believe, nearly two females to each male in the town.

### **Mr W. Tapley, Straw Hat Maker of Back Street, Luton**

There are a great number of persons in the town, several hundreds I should say, who like myself employ a few females in making hats and bonnets. We sell to the warehouses, and are called 'makers up'. Some employ only three or four, others five or six, others more. I employ about a dozen females, from 10 years old up to young women. About a dozen is a common number. I stiffen and iron the hats myself. In addition to sewing the plait, there is the lining, trimming with chenille, ticketing etc. The sewers' workroom generally forms part of the dwelling house, as mine does, or is attached to it. It is often a room over the washhouse, and men do the ironing below. In this part of town in particular, which is a poorer part, there are a great number of such small employers. Some of them send out work into the country by carrier, to be brought back next week sewn, but not stiffened. I should say that every cottage in this street, right and left, makes up so. Even tradespeople's wives and children do it, and it is of great assistance to them.

## A Bonnet Sewer's Complaint

The Luton Straw work is very bad,  
Which makes us feel quite down and sad;  
We sit and work from morn to night  
For a penny a hat! Now is it right?  
The buyers they do crush us so,  
They want the hats so very low,  
So if it does not better come,  
I cannot think what will be done.  
When Monday comes we pledge our clothes  
To buy our plait, and then begin to sew;  
When down the street we take them, as before,  
And sell for three and a farthing, or a little more.  
And since machines have had the run,  
The work has been much cheaper done,  
For a penny farthing hats are sold  
To the Luton buyers, I am told.  
Then to the "Bell" and "George" they go  
To take their wine for lunch, you know,  
And there they sit, and laugh, and talk,  
And say how cheap some hats we've bought!  
And then to the seaside they go,  
To recruit their health! Isn't it so?  
While we poor slaves are working here,  
To help them on another year,  
For out of our hard labour comes  
Their luxuries and splendid homes!  
And everyday we feel it more -  
Stitching until our limbs are sore  
And ache. But they don't care  
For our empty cupboards, I can swear!  
But what we want is a medium price,  
To buy more food, and something nice.

*E.N. in The Luton Reporter*

## Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry

*From The Hatters' Gazette October 1st 1888*

Within the short space of twelve years the good old-fashioned method of sewing straw hats by hand has been almost swept away by the straw sewing machines. The most exquisite productions, however, in straw which are worn by the leaders of fashion, are still made by hand-sewing. The outside stitches which appeared on the surface of the machine-made goods were always objectionable, and although accepted by the general public, yet there has ever been a dislike to the dull and dead appearance given to the straw by the cotton stitching. The aim of every inventor of straw machines for twenty-five years has been to imitate hand-sewn goods.

The simple and practical machine placed on the market by the Wilcox and Gibbs Company in 1875 was defective in its principle of outside stitching, but its increased speed over all other methods, with the ability to produce a dozen hats in the same time as one by hand-sewing, appeared to be so great an advantage that for the time it outweighed all other considerations. The large quantities of Chinese plaits, at desperately low prices, when sewn enabled manufacturers to export hats to every available market in the world. Through the ease by which a girl could be taught the making of a hat by machine lay its advantages, and with the enormous expansion and development of the trade, which resulted from rapid production and cheapened goods, Luton and district bid fair to become the wealthiest places in the kingdom.

But the simplicity of the machine presented the same advantages to the foreigner and centres of straw hat making are now flourishing in France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Holland and in other parts of Europe. The people who were the best customers of the English manufacturers can not only supply themselves, but in many cases have become competitors in the foreign and home markets.

The necessity for improvements in the first machine were recognised by the inventors from the first, and in two or three years another one on the same lines was constructed, with much finer needles and cotton. This was a marked improvement, but the refusal of the leaders of fashion to wear outside stitch goods, however fine they may be, had gradually spread amongst the well-to-do middle classes. It became almost imperative that a concealed stitch machine should be invented to supply a better class of manufactured goods.

The machine of Mr Wiseman almost compassed the difficulty; it produced an exact imitation of hand-sewing from which the quality of the work could scarcely be distinguished, but was limited to the sewing of very fine plaits, and the coming indications of change in fashion were for broad plaits with fancy borders or edging, which compelled a general return to the slow methods of hand-sewing unless a new hand-stitch sewing machine could be constructed.

To obtain such a machine has been the desire of every manufacturer from the first introduction of a straw hat machine, but the mechanical problems which stood in the way of a concealed stitch machine baffled every straw machine inventor. The Wiseman machine, however, led the way to the final solution of the difficulty. By the united efforts of the two most practical and experienced hat machine inventors of England and America, who experimented for eight years, the most perfect sewing machine which has ever been constructed is now placed within the reach of every straw hat manufacturer. It will in fact sew any and every kind of plait. The quality of the work cannot be distinguished from the choice hand-sewn goods. With such a really splendid machine, the straw trade everywhere will largely increase their trade and profits, for the goods made by the Wilcox-Gibbs new hand straw hat machine are far superior to anything yet produced, without a fraction more cost in their production. With such advantages, we see nothing but increased popularity of straw goods, and continued prosperity for the straw hat industry.

## The Prince of Wales at Luton

*From The Graphic, December 14th 1878*

On Thursday last week H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, who had been the guest of Mrs. Gerard Leigh at Luton Hoo Park, paid a visit to the town of Luton, which is celebrated as the seat of the straw plait industry, the introduction of which dates from the time of James I. The town was gaily decorated, [with] triumphal arches and other designs, which were composed of straw plait. Accompanied by his hostess, the Earl and Countess of Dudley, and other ladies and gentlemen, the Prince drove through the streets amid the cheering of the inhabitants, received addresses from the Corporation, and the manufacturers and merchants of the town, and visited the Plait Halls, and Messrs. Welch and Sons Manufactory, and, before leaving, gave a donation of twenty-five guineas to a fund for the benefit of the poor, which had been started by Mrs Leigh with 100 guineas.

The straw plait trade is now much fallen in to decay, owing to the introduction of Chinese and other foreign plaits, which, though much lower in price, is said to be of inferior quality. The work is done chiefly by women and girls, and is of a most curious and interesting character, the various processes increasing the value of a hundred-weight of the raw material from 3s. to from 23l. to 45l. [£], which is the wholesale price of that weight of straw bonnets or hats when completed. The straw grown in the district around is more suitable than that from other places on account of the silicates in the soil, but even there a wet season spoils the crop by splitting the straw. The first selection takes place in the farmers' barns before the wheat is threshed, those which are considered fit being severed from the ears and tied up in bundles. Arrived at the factory, they are further examined by boys and girls, who test each straw singly, and denude it of its outer sheathing and all knots. The chosen straws are next damped with water and bleached by sulphur fumes. They are then split, and the splints being flattened and made more pliable by passing through a mill, are then ready for the plaiters, to whom they are sold in the Plait Halls or Markets, where the plaited straw is also bought and sold. This traffic was carried on in the open street until 1869, when the first Plait Hall was opened.

There are two classes of plaiters, those who are employed in factories, and those who work in their own homes, and the latter far outnumber the former. They may be seen on market days, standing in the Plait Halls, with their week's work in coils upon their arms, waiting for purchasers. The straw-plait, after being sewn together and stiffened with gelatine, is blocked into shape, lined, wired and labelled, and is then ready for sale as hats or bonnets. Both sewing and blocking is now sometimes done by machinery. The average earnings of the straw-plaiters, when trade is fair, is from 5s. to 7s. 6d. per week, but at present they earn little more than half that sum. The bonnet sewers sometimes earn as much as 16s. weekly, though they are now making only 10s. or 12s., the machine hands get about the same amount.



The Prince visits the Sewing Room at Welch's Hat Factory



*The Prince visits the Blocking Room at Welch's Hat Factory*



*Welch's Luton Factory, 1899*



**JANES BROS., ENGINEERS.**

**THE "STANLEY" PLAIT MILL.**

**ADVANTAGES :**

*DUPLICITY*—*Both capacity of Fine and Steel*  
*ADJUSTABILITY*—*Any width of Plait and Band*  
*EASE*—*All Rows are Plait with Steel Rollers*  
*SPEED*—*Rolls over 24 inches in a revolution*  
**NO CLIPPING TO GET OUT OF ORDER.**

**WE** respectfully call the attention of Straw Hat Manufacturers to the following Testimonials we have received from purchasers of our "Stanley" Plait Mill. We have endeavoured to meet a long-felt want in the trade for a Mill that will stand the heat of the factories without splitting and the wear and tear of the hard Plait now used, and also one that can be adjusted to mill Plait of all sizes, from the finest to the coarsest. We therefore ask your consideration of the opinions of our customers as to how far our Mill is a success.

**TESTIMONIALS.**

I believe your Mill to be the very best ever made; at any rate, I have never seen a better or one so used. It does its work well and is very durable.  
 MR. HURNAGE, Winkley Street.

I can confidently recommend your "Stanley" Plait Mill. I have never used one that has given me such satisfaction.  
 MR. RAISES, Upper Gosport Street.

I consider your Plait Mill to be the very best ever made. I have used it continuously for 12 months, and I would not part with it and use the old Mills for 10.  
 MR. PECK, Bayle Street.

In reply to your inquiry I am happy to inform you that your Mill gives me every satisfaction. It only requires to be known to be generally used.  
 MR. J. BARRITT, 121 Bedford Road.

I have never used or seen a better Mill than the one you supplied me with, and I can heartily recommend it to all who want a good, durable, and general Mill.  
 MR. PECK, High Town Road.

I am very well pleased with your Mill. I consider it is the best Mill that has yet been introduced in the trade. My workmen ladies are all well satisfied.  
 MR. A. DAVY, Holly Walk.

*All who have purchased one of our Mills speak in similar terms.*

**PRICE - £2 : 5 : 0.**

JANES BROS., HIGH TOWN, LUTON.

ALL KINDS OF STRAW-HAT MACHINES REPAIRED AND RE-ADJUSTED.

W. STALKER, PRINTER, LUTON.

Engineers' Advert, 1880s

## Memories of the Hat Trade – Geoffrey Farr

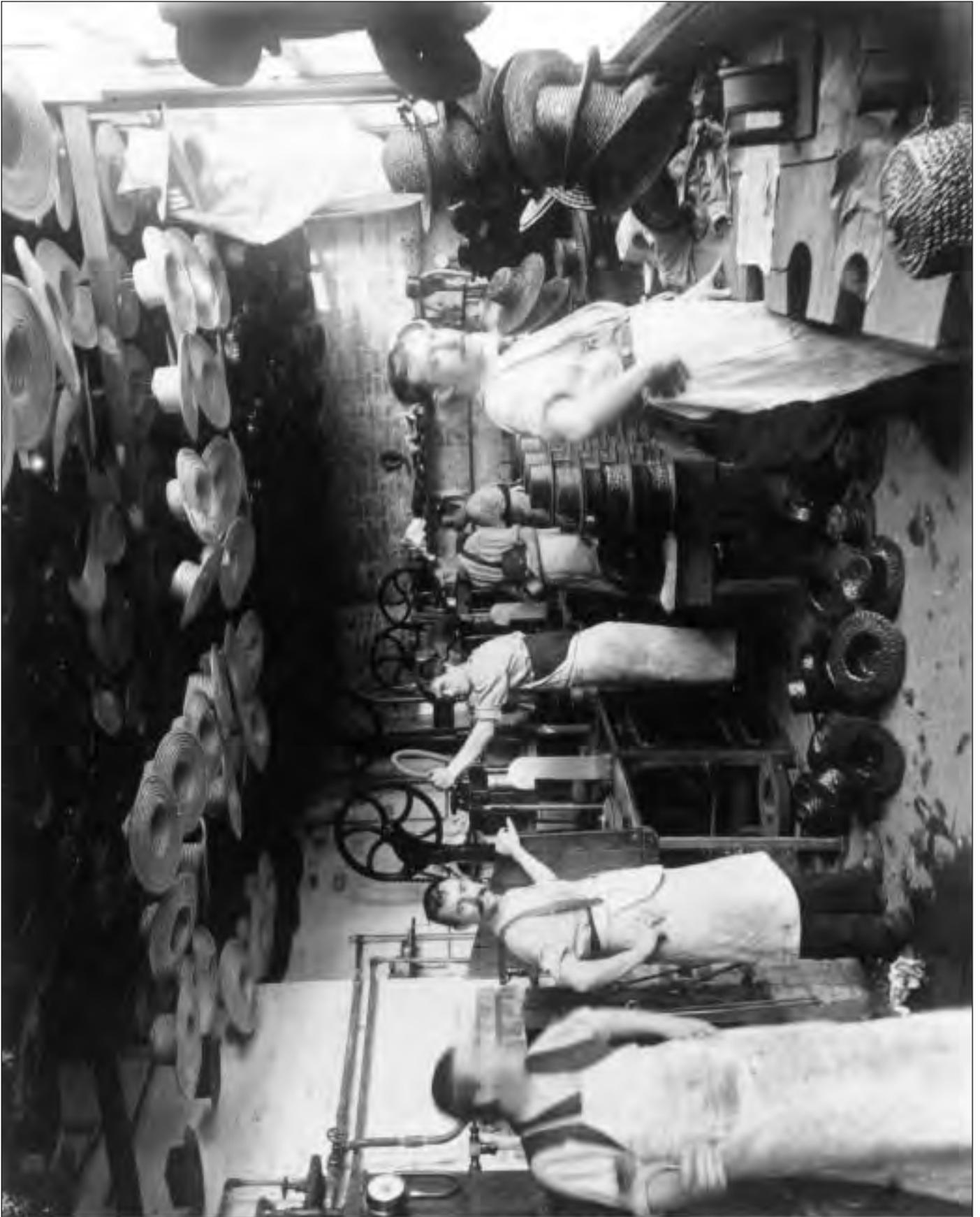
*In 1909 Geoffrey Farr's grandfather founded one of Luton's most important firms of hatter's engineers. The company eventually made a very wide range of machines for the hat trade. They had customers throughout the world and at one time exported their products to over fifty countries. This is an extract from an interview Mr Farr gave to the Luton Museum Oral History Project.*

Immediately after the First World War the straw trade realised the market wasn't there, the market wanted something different. The straw hat had lasted for the last 80 years or something and people wanted something different, and new styles. And the blocking machines for blocking the straws could be used for blocking felt as well, so that was the first job that they did. And then grandfather, he brought out a whole new range of machinery for taking the hood right from stage one, blocking it, proofing it, putting shape into it, putting sheen on it, everything worked right from there.

And of course it was all on pulley-operated machinery in those days, with the old gangs of pulleys and belts and so on, it was all belt-driven machinery. That changed then to motorised machinery in the interwar years and as you got into the late '30s, and then self-enclosed machinery after the War. Suede machines, polishing machines, proofing machines for doing all the jobs.

Then, my father looked after what I call all the outside things – he used to visit all the hat factories and get orders and advise them on different areas of work when new hats or new finishes came in. We used to have a demonstration room with all our machines in and people used to come in and we used to show them how to get suede finishes or peachbloom finishes on the hats and how that could be achieved, and by using different materials on the machines – sandpapers and sharkskin – all sorts of different materials to get different blooms on the hats. So my father was the expert on doing that and then my uncle sort of ran the engineering works.

So that built up the staple diet of the firm, basically, and then the whole hatting industry changed. When the motor car came in in the '50s men stopped wearing hats, men stopped wearing hats to go on the trains to London, women stopped wearing hats because it wasn't fashionable, and the trade just shrank globally, right across the world.



A Blocking Room in the 1890s



A Trimming Room, 1911

# Straw Hat Workers of Luton.



*Remember, a Moment of Forethought is better  
than a Century of Afterthought.*

## The Workers' Union is Your Society.

Because it is looking after your  
interests.

# WHY?

Because it is THE UNION of  
the present and THE UNION  
of the future.



Because the Local Officials  
know what is needed in the  
Trade.

## Straw Hat Workers are Rolling in.

### JOIN NOW, DON'T WAIT.

*The Stewards will be pleased to give you any information,  
and present you with enrolment forms. Try them.*

Flyer of Straw Hat Workers Union, c.1920

## Hat Factories in the 1930s

### Charles Hill

*Charles Hill left school in 1937 and went to work for F.H. Eve, a firm of hatters' engineers. The company supplied and repaired machinery used in the hat trade. Charles' work took him to various hat factories around the town. This is an extract from an interview Mr Hill gave to the Luton Museum Oral History Project.*

There were so many little tiny hat factories – Hazlebury Crescent and the roads off North Street – they were all houses with the little hat factories at the back. You went round the back of the house, entered a door and on the left as you went in there was the little boiler to produce steam for the blocking machines. And then in the next little room, were the blocking machines. Now, with these you had a base shaped like a hat and they put the felt hoods that had been made with this velour finish, stretched them over this block, and they were all the various designs of hat, each one different. And then there was a great metal shape above with a steam tube coming from it. They'd bring this down over the hat, lock it, open a valve and the steam would come in and steam the hood into the shape of a hat and it was fixed. And then they'd lift it up and there was the shape of the hat.

Then in the next room there were the velour machines, the little drums with the sharkskin finishes to make it look like velvet, and then further along still there was a big open space and there were people, they'd got flat boxes – boxes, flat – they were fitting them up and stapling the sides to make hat boxes, so when the hats were finished they'd go into these hat boxes and then go off to the warehouses in London.

Upstairs, when you went upstairs there were the sewing machines, a row of sewing machines, and along one wall there were racks with all different coloured trimmings – ribbons and feathers and all sorts of hat trimmings. And the girls sat at these machines, and when the hats – the shaped hoods – came up, they would trim the excess felt off, then they'd sew ribbons round the headband, and all the trimmings on, and sew on the linings. So they'd come from the blocking machines right the way through upstairs, and at the end the last girl would have the finished hat. And there was a little chute down, and when she'd finished it she'd slide the hat down the chute, and then the chaps making up the boxes, they would be there gathering them and packing them in the boxes.



*A Sewing Room in the 1930s*



*Hat Machinists in the 1930s*

## Sewing Rooms in the 1930s

*These interviews were collected as part of the Luton Museum Oral History Project*

### Doris Green

*Doris Green started her apprenticeship in the hat trade in 1930. She became a skilled trimmer.*

I was so anxious to start work that I left school one day and started work the next! And that was my job in the hat trade, that was when I began my hat trade. It was at a firm in Guildford Street called F.E. Shoosmith and Son, a very stark grey building, not very welcoming really. It didn't look very big from the front but there was an awful lot of rooms at the back.

The first day I went there, up these stone staircases – oh, dear dear dear, it was a worry. Anyway, I was met by the forelady and taken into this room where I would be working. Huge room, very high ceilings, low lights, and there was about four long tables, really long tables, with the ladies sitting either side trimming hats. And I thought, oh dear, oh dear, I don't know whether I'm going to like this. But anyway I was introduced to them and shown round. There was the forelady's room, the hat designer's room, all on this floor, and then you'd go up another flight of stairs and there was the blocking room, where they shaped all the hats. And then there was the cutting-out room where all the work was got ready, and then going back downstairs to the ground floor was the packing department.

That was the first day, really, but then the second day I thought I would be into doing things, but it wasn't like that. You was at the beck and call of everybody because you was the newest one. Take this to the block room, take this to the packing, I'm a ribbon short, will you go to the cutting-out room. So I didn't really do much the first week or two except fetch and carry, really. Then I started on linings – just putting linings in – and then I started on bows. Well, I thought a bow was a bow, but there was pleated bows, tied bows, pig's ear bows, all sorts of bows. And when you was up to the standard that she thought you should be, then you went onto something else. It was ages and ages before I trimmed a hat.

### Joyce Ward

*Joyce Ward entered the hat trade when she left school in 1929. Here, she describes her time as an apprentice milliner at A. T. Nash of King Street.*

It was quite an airy room, most of the women there were of course much older than I was, but they were quite good to get on with. As far as I can remember I never had any bother at all. And I'll give her her due ... Mrs. Dawson owned the place – she was a Mrs. Nash but she'd remarried so she was a Mrs. Dawson then – and Wally, her husband, he worked there as well. She was a very very big woman, tall and big built, and if she was upset you heard her from top to bottom of that factory. And she used to yell, 'Wal !' at the top of her voice, and out of his office he used to come, get up those stairs as quick ...

She was a so-and-so, but she was a stickler for work. Nothing escaped her eye at all, and she knew everyone on that firm, knew them by name, and she spoke to you when you went in and that. I say I came out of there a milliner which I probably wouldn't have done if she'd have been slack at all. But she got every penny out of us and that was a six and a half day week for half a crown, and when they were busy I used to have to run like mad from King Street to Park Square to catch the twenty five to ten bus, and I'd been there since half past eight (in the morning).

## Violet Vernon

*Violet Vernon started in the hat trade as an apprentice machinist in the mid 1920s. She became very skilled and did a lot of highly paid specialist work.*

The atmosphere was absolutely superb – I miss it. Everybody knew everybody else and everybody talked to everybody else. We used to sing – I went out with one boy before I met my husband and he used to go by the factory in the job he was doing, and he'd say, 'I often used to stand outside and hear you lot singing!'. All the fashionable songs that were about in those days, all of them. That is something that has died out, because you don't often hear young people singing, do you? But we used to sing every song that you could think of.

We used to sing a lot of American things, you know, those sort of things we used to sing a terrific lot. And once we'd sung one, somebody else would start off with something else and so we'd keep on. And then every song that was heard – somebody had heard it on the wireless or something like that, and they'd sing it and everyone else would soon know it, you see. Because everybody was working while they were doing it, so it didn't matter.



*A Sewing Room in the 1990s*

*From the World . . . . . To the World*

MATERIALS IMPORTED FROM:—

- SWITZERLAND
- ITALY
- FRANCE
- CHINA
- JAPAN
- GERMANY
- AMERICA

HATS EXPORTED TO:—

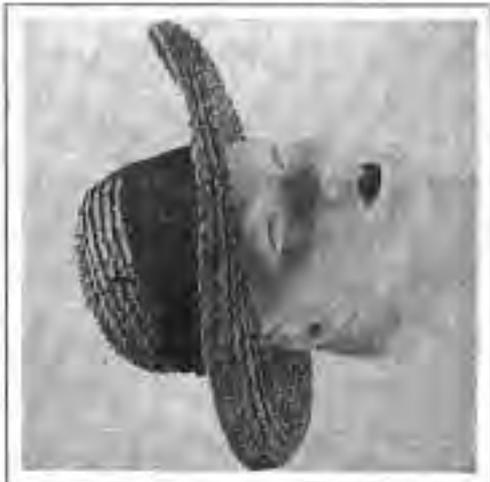
- AUSTRALIA
- BENELUX COUNTRIES
- CANADA
- GERMANY
- NEW ZEALAND
- SCANDINAVIA
- SOUTH AFRICA
- AND OTHER COUNTRIES



# LUTON

The  
HAT MANUFACTURING  
CENTRE OF THE WORLD





Announcement by Members of the Luton Hat Manufacturers' Association

From the Luton Hat Manufacturers Association, 1964