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‘The Gloucestershire handloom weavers: Family division of labour, gender, and wages, 1838-40’

This paper revisits N.J. Smelser’s (1959) ideas on the family division of labour in the mature period of the industrial revolution and provides a snapshot of life for handloom weavers in Gloucestershire, 1838. Using a dataset of 195 shoploom weavers in Gloucestershire constructed from British parliamentary papers, parish data and surveys one can see that even by 1838 traditional family structures in the handloom wearing industry had changed in a gendered way, although distinct to the theory laid down by Smelser. While Smelser discussed the cotton industry, this paper takes into account the wool industry, at a much later time period to Smelser. The “traditional” mode of parent training and supervision of children at home had changed, but instead the father, wife and child were employed by the same factory master, albeit in distinct and different occupations. Weavers, both men and women were in turn affected by their loss of autonomy and outwork as is reflected in surveys on satisfaction levels. Despite the Factory Acts of 1838 reducing their working hours, children took on preparatory processing roles and were no less significant, in some cases contributing one third of total wages. Gloucestershire, being one of many proto-industrial nodes is a region with a long history of domestic textile production which on the whole supplemented agricultural income (De Lacy Mann, 1971). While it may have lost out eventually to West Riding, Yorkshire, it proves fruitful as a case study of family decline, resilience and the family division of labour. The income of wives and children to the total family budget corroborates the findings of Sarah Horrell and Jane Humphries (1995), in addition to JS Lyons’ (1989) hypothesis for Lancashire and provides supplementary evidence on changing gender roles and the creation of the male breadwinner (See Minoletti [2015]). The research is nearing completion and could benefit from a GIS map of Gloucestershire parishes as well as other images. It will need to be reduced in length to fit the word length specified.