

## The occupations of people in Lavenham in 1851: straw-plaiting.

by Christopher Bornett

The [Census Returns for Lavenham in 1851\\*](#) provide a comprehensive statistical source for the detailed investigation of the local economic and social structure of this large village particularly in relation to OCCUPATIONS.



*Plaiting School*

Despite the problems associated with the use of 19th century data which have been closely examined by Edward Higgs in his book, "Making Sense of the Census Revisited" (2005), the Returns provide us with detailed evidence on the nature of work in Lavenham over 150 years ago. It was a surprise to me that straw-plaiting among women and children was so prevalent.

Betterton and Dymond have already briefed us about some of the features relating to men, women and children's work in their book, "Lavenham: industrial town" (1989) Chapt. 6. An excerpt from their book about the straw-plaiting industry is well worth quoting:

*... in Water Street in 1844 lived Benjamin Gillingham, described as "a straw-plait and hat-manufacturer and leather-cutter". His wife and two daughters were makers of straw bonnets, and the 1851 census listed ten others in Lavenham similarly employed. However, the preparations of lengths of plait, carried on in the home, provided employment for hundreds of women and children during the greater part of the century...*

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*... Splitting the selected and bleached straw with a specially designed tool, making the plait with a specially designed tool, making the plait and pressing the 20-yard lengths were skilled operations.\*\* Therefore, "plaiting schools" were established, where for a small fee quite young children learned to become efficient at the craft. Cottages in Church Street and Prentice Street are known to have housed such "schools". The finished plait was bought back by the straw dealers, and then found its way to local bonnet makers or to the hat factories in Luton. The wife of a labourer could, with sufficient skill and energy, thereby earn as much as her husband, to say nothing of the children's contribution....*

[My own analysis of the 1851 Lavenham Census](#) reiterates the importance placed on straw-plaiting at this time but also provides a specific example of how use of the raw data needs to be

treated with caution.

The parish was divided up into three districts for counting purposes with three different counters or enumerators. One of the enumerators did not record women's work at all. Nor did he list the "scholars" which the other two enumerators had done. So his district had no straw-plaiters listed. The other two districts listed a total of 180 straw-plaiters working in Lavenham at this time. This was 25% of the total working population.

So when assessing the totals, other sources have to be brought into play which is presumably what Betterton and Dymond did to get a total of 300 straw plaiters.

It would be interesting to plot where the staw-plaiters lived on a map of Lavenham and to try and fix where the plaiting schools were actually situated. It would also be of some interest if local first-hand accounts could be unearthed, perhaps from newspapers reporting on the industry at the time

\* Searchable online \*pdf file. Use CTRL+f if necessary for search.

\*\* See Philip Wray's excellent [webpage on "straw-plaiting" processes and tools in Preston, Hertfordshire.](#)