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To cite this article: Amy Louise Erickson (2022): Wealthy businesswomen, marriage and succession in eighteenth-century London, Business History, DOI: [10.1080/00076791.2022.2036131](https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2022.2036131)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2022.2036131>



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Published online: 11 Mar 2022.



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Wealthy businesswomen, marriage and succession in eighteenth-century London

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ABSTRACT

Research on eighteenth-century female entrepreneurs has not been widely acknowledged beyond specialists, despite repeated calls in the literature on business for more attention to the family and to women. This article employs a new source – trade or business cards, which were themselves new in the eighteenth century – together with a range of other sources, to create biographical sketches of wealthy businesswomen in luxury trades, in order to examine the relationship between business, marriage, and succession for women in highly skilled, highly capitalised trades. Despite legal restrictions on married women, marriage did not mark a hiatus in the careers of these women, who appear to have maintained their businesses regardless of marital status. As widows, they maintained proprietorship decades beyond their sons' majority. The normality of eighteenth-century women in business has implications for the history of women, of business, and of work more broadly.

KEYWORDS

luxury; business;
trade cards; women;
eighteenth century

Introduction

In their recent analysis of the census data for England and Wales between 1851 and 1911, Carry van Lieshout et al. (2019, p. 450) found that at least 30% of the total number of entrepreneurs, or business proprietors, were female. For an earlier period, historians studying the 'long eighteenth century' have found businesswomen in trade directories, insurance policies, and newspaper advertisements for the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in insurance policies, family papers, and court records during the earlier eighteenth century. Fire insurance was introduced just before 1700, and the vast and unindexed archives of insurance policies have been sampled between 1726 and 1850. Generally not more than 10% of policies were taken out by women (Earle, 1989, p. 168; Hunt, 1996, p. 133; Kay, 2009, p. 52; Phillips, 2006, chs 6 and 7; Schwarz, 1992, p. 21. For a summary of the literature, see Doe, 2017). Trade directories between 1747 and 1861 have also shown up to 10% of all businesses owned by women (Barker, 2006, p. 56; Burnette, 2009, pp. 28–33; Corfield, 2012, p. 21, pp. 34–36; Haggerty, 2006, p. 176; Kay, 2009, ch. 3; McGeevor, 2014, p. 496).¹

The full census data, therefore, seem to show that female entrepreneurship in the later nineteenth century was at three times the level evident for the eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries. However, the earlier sources are less representative of the whole population than the censuses. Insurance policies and trade directories represent larger businesses. Previous research found that women were more likely to insure lower values, and by implication smaller premises, often domestic (Kay, 2009, p. 41). This does not mean that women in the nineteenth century did not run large companies: some certainly did (Aston, 2012; Aston, 2016, Aston & di Martino, 2017; Gordon & Nair, 2000; Aston & Bishop, 2020 for a global perspective). The censuses from 1851 onwards show that most proprietors of *either* sex ran small businesses, employing only themselves (van Lieshout et al., 2019, p. 448). The censuses also include women of all marital statuses, whereas insurance policies especially and trade directories to some extent represented never-married or widowed women: under the legal fiction of coverture married women could not make a contract, so an insurance policy, and perhaps a directory entry, would have been taken out in a husband's name.

At least in theory, the rule of coverture severely restricted married women's control of assets and ability to take legal action until legal reform in the late nineteenth century. All of a woman's movable property became the absolute property of her husband under common law, although there were ways to modify that circumstance by private contract (Erickson, 1993, chs. 6–8; Phillips, 2006, ch. 1). Legally, any business of a married woman belonged to her husband under coverture. Although London observed the custom of 'feme sole trader' that enabled a married woman to trade *as if* single, it remains unclear exactly how this custom was used or upheld (McIntosh, 2005; Phillips, 2006, ch. 2; for the case law, Pearlston, 2009). While the great majority of women married at some point in their lives, at any point in time only around half of the adult female population was married and under the influence of coverture (Froide, 2002).

Although the past three decades have seen numerous studies of eighteenth-century women in business, the significance of this research remains underappreciated (Barker, 2006, 2017; Collinge, 2014, 2019; Erickson, 2008; Phillips, 2006; Sanderson, 1996; Sharpe, 2001; Wiskin, 2006; Wright, 1989). Even an eighteenth-century specialist can still claim that only 'occasional women succeeded in the luxury trades' (Vickery, 2020, p. 5). And a business historian can suggest that eighteenth-century women writers chose that means of making a living 'at a time when few other occupational alternatives were available to them' (Yeager, 2015, pp. 763–764). The absence of women or a consideration of gender from business history more broadly was noted in Honeyman [2007] and Durepos et al. [2017, p. 1261].

Studies of two prominent London industries over the eighteenth century have identified by name at least 165 women registering their own marks as silversmiths and 250 women in the printing industry (calculated from the appendix in Glanville and Goldsborough [1990] and Barker [1997, p. 90]). It has been estimated that more than 500 women traded as millinery proprietors (Erickson, 2011, p. 158). These are only three of nearly 100 trades represented by guilds and listed in the mid-eighteenth-century guides which advised parents on the likely costs and benefits of children's apprenticeship in the various London trades (*A General Description of all Trades*, 1747; Campbell, 1747; Collyer, 1761; and a cut-price version of Collyer, Kearsley, 1768). These silversmiths, printers and milliners are only those who traded in their own names, since those who worked with a husband and predeceased him were hidden under coverture. A marital business partnership is visible usually only in retrospect, when a widow took over 'her husband's' concern and ran it for decades, suggesting that she had been deeply involved with it during marriage too.

It has long been observed that the family was central to pre-industrial business, especially in relation to inheritance and succession (Barker & Ishizu, 2012; Daunton, 1988; Owens, 2002; Tweedale, 2013). Recently, a call has been made specifically for attention both to family firms, 'often transmitted from father to son', and to women, particularly in the context of restrictive property laws (Gelderblom & Trivellato, 2019, p. 235, 239). In focusing on marriage, the present study pinpoints the fulcrum of the family. Marriage was both the principal way to acquire capital for investment, particularly for men, and the means of producing successors to the firm.

This study explicitly focuses on the wealthiest businesswomen in London, for whom entrepreneurship was not 'a choice thrust upon them by necessity' as it may have been for the majority (van Lieshout et al., 2019, p. 466). These wealthy businesswomen have been identified first through their trade cards – the ornately engraved predecessor of the modern business card. In combination with other sources, trade cards are then used to create biographical sketches of a cohort, with particular attention to marriage, to partnerships, and to succession. This elite is not meant to be representative of women's businesses more broadly. It is selected for three reasons: first, the implications of these women's careers for the employment of a wide range of other women; second, for the models of behaviour of what was possible and acceptable that these women set for those of lesser means in London commerce; and third, for the relative ease with which their marriages, their business and its succession can be traced. After discussing the new source, I address first the identification of marital status, then the establishment of partnerships, and finally issues of longevity and succession, to establish the business practices of these very wealthy London tradeswomen. In conclusion, I consider the implications of these findings for the history of work more broadly. This study aims to change the picture of pre-industrial business, to advance business history through attention to women, and to advance women's history through attention to business (Perriton, 2017, p. 203).

Sources

Trade cards have hitherto been used illustratively or for advertising history. The most extended treatments are Kay (2009, ch. 4) and Berg and Clifford (2007). The largest collection of more than 15,000 cards is in the British Museum and images are online. These are not all of the trade cards ever printed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and there is no way of knowing if they are a representative sample, but nor is there any known bias.² Trade cards specify only a name, an address, and the products sold. No year of printing appears on the trade cards, although some have receipts written on the reverse with a date. A variant on the trade card is the billhead (receipt), and these also named customers, which is valuable since no shop books for female-owned businesses in eighteenth-century London are known. The style of a trade card also helps to date it, and addresses listed as pictorial signs generally pre-date 1770, as street numbering was introduced in the 1760s in the City of London and Westminster (White, 2010, pp. 101–103). Approximately 40% of trade cards indicate the sex of those advertising, by the use of a first name or occasionally, from the later eighteenth century, a title: Mr, Mrs, and more rarely Miss.³ 'Mrs', an abbreviation of 'mistress', indicated only that a woman had status and capital as an employer. It bore no necessary marital connotation until the late nineteenth century (Erickson, 2014).

Of those where sex is identifiable, only 5% of businesses were in a female name, even less than the female proportion in insurance policies and trade directories. Trade cards certainly did not represent businesses generally, but nor did they necessarily represent all large concerns. Several women who headed influential, long-running businesses appear never to have printed a trade card, including the silversmiths Hester Bateman (1708–1794) and Louisa Courtauld (1729–1807), the silk designer Anna Maria Garthwaite (1688–1763?), the printer Mary Lewis (c.1705–1791), and the type founder Elizabeth Caslon (1730–1795) (Eatwell, 2004; Clifford, 2008; Ginsburg, 2008; Glanville & Goldsborough, 1990; Maxted, 2004; McNaught). The businesses which printed trade cards were a different subset of all businesses from that subset which paid for an entry in a trade directory, since few of those with trade cards appeared in a directory. Still other proprietors, like the printer and fan-maker Martha Gamble (active c.1710–c.1750), advertised in newspapers but no trade card or directory entry for Gamble has been identified (Hassard, 2019). Correlating trade cards with directories, newspapers, and insurance policies, in order to establish differences in the representation of each of these sources, would require many years and substantial funding.

The only fairly reliable ways to search the British Museum collection are by name or by street, and to a lesser degree by occupation. A search on the 20 most common female first names produced 145 London trade cards. From this group I selected those located in the most exclusive shopping districts of the capital, principally the Cheapside area of the City of London and the Haymarket in Westminster. This geographical selection ensured that these businesswomen were the wealthiest, either renting or owning prime real estate, with high stock values, the most modern shop fittings, and employing the best class of shop assistants.

Within the City of London, guild membership and civic freedom were prerequisite to running a business, regardless of sex. Unmarried women could acquire freedom through apprenticeship to a master or mistress for seven years, or through patrimony in their father's guild. Married women under the rule of coverture were not free in their own right but could trade by virtue of their husbands' freedom (Erickson, 2011, pp. 152–153). Girls were apprenticed through the London guilds from the later seventeenth century (Birt, 2021; Gowing, 2016). When these wealthy businesswomen took apprentices for seven years through the London guilds, training them to run similar establishments, they charged premiums of £50 or more. This was four times higher than the median premium (Justman & van der Beek, 2015, p. 1184), and at least five times the annual wage of a labouring woman fortunate enough to be employed year-round (Humphries & Weisdorf, 2015, p. 417).

Their businesses, like most in the eighteenth century, were generally located on the ground floor of the owner's residence. But these women were not just retailers: they were also manufacturers and wholesalers. For example, the shoemaker Ester Glover (Figure 1) advertised to 'marchants or country chapmen'. Chapmen distributed goods to sell in rural areas door to door (Spufford, 1981, ch. 5). Anne Askew (Figure 2), another shoemaker, in 1725 advertised goods for export by 'merchants trading to the plantations'. The milliner Edith Ridout (Figure 3) also offered a long list of 'ready-made goods for exportation' overseas. Millinery shops, run by men as well as women in the eighteenth century, made and sold high quality clothing and accessories. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did millinery come to mean hat-making (Erickson, 2011, pp. 154–155). These women were not small artisans: they were running highly capitalised concerns.



Figure 1. Trade card of Esther Glover, shoemaker, © Trustees of the British Museum.

The careers of 26 businesswomen are discussed here, their trade cards supplemented by parish registers, tax records, wills, guild records, and specialist secondary literature. Those with more unusual names were of course the easiest to trace.

Identification of marital status

A businesswoman's marital status was rarely specified in insurance policies or trade directories, and women in these sources have been assumed to have been never-married and widowed, in view of the legal restrictions of coverture. Trade cards too very rarely specified the marital status of the business owner. So, only by their wills can it be determined that Esther Glover was a widow and Anne Askew a singlewoman.⁴ The billhead that Elizabeth Bowen used for receipts simply identified her as a whalebone seller (Figure 4). The entry on 'whalebone men' in *A General Description of all Trades* (1747) classed them as 'top dealers ... esteemed very reputable and genteel'. Like the other trades examined here, apprenticeship to a whalebone seller cost £50 or more, and to set up shop required at least £500, comparable with goldsmiths (*A General Description of all Trades*, 1747, p. 221, p. 139, p. 110). Nothing else has been located to identify Elizabeth Bowen, although she must have been selling to petticoat makers and stay makers, since whalebone (actually baleen) was used to stiffen stays and skirt hoops from the 1740s (Sorge-English, 2005).

The whale's oil was used for lamps, sold for domestic use by wax chandlers like Hannah Jones (Figure 5). That Jones was a widow can be inferred not from her trade card but only by implication from a billhead of 1749 on which 'Hannah' was inserted by hand over the



Figure 2. Trade card of Anne Askew, shoemaker (1735), © Trustees of the British Museum.

crossed-out printed 'Thomas.' Hannah Jones' status in the supply of lighting and sealing wax is indicated by her trade card appropriating the arms of the City of London and her shop's location in the Poultry near the Mansion House, residence of the Mayor of London. She was included in a 1766 business directory (presumably 17 years after her widowhood) as one of two wax chandlers in London.⁵ Her customers are known to have included the banker Sir Richard Hoare, on the receipt illustrated here, as well as the Duke of Bedford through the 1750s and Magdalene College, Cambridge in 1778.⁶

Occasionally, a trade card with only a last name can be identified as belonging to a woman. The proprietor of 'Coade's' (Figure 6) was the best-known businesswoman of the eighteenth century. Eleanor Coade (1733–1821) manufactured artificial cast stone that was impervious to weather at a much lower price than carved real stone. She never married, worked with all the leading architects and is the epitome of an eighteenth-century entrepreneur (Kelly, 1990, 2004; Wiskin, 2006. For the architectural context of Coade stone, see Stanford, 2015). Women as well as men also used a surname with the extension '& Co.' The card advertising the milliners Sandys & Co (Figure 7) can be confirmed as the business of Mrs Susan Sandys because she appeared in 1759 as head of a household in the parish in which the shop was located.⁷ Mrs Susan Sandys was either single or widowed, since the head of a married woman's household was her husband.

The most familiar pattern of women in business is that of women who helped in a husband's business, perhaps learning the trade from him, and then 'took over' the marital



E. RIDOUT.

Edith Ridout, MILLINER,
Removed from the Lamb, near Christ Hospital Gate
To the Lamb, lower down the Cloysters, near Westsmithfield
L O N D O N.
Sells Wholesale & Retail.

Flowerd Silk & Gauze Capuchins	Quilted & Dimity Bed Gowns	Mechlin Lace
Velvet & Silk Cloaks	Womens & Childrens Waistcoats	Bath Lace
Cloth & Duffel Cloaks	Childrens Stays	English Lace
Satten & Silk Quilted Coats	Childrens Coats & Frocks	Black Lace
Callico & Russel Quilted Coats	Childrens Flannel Coats	Stripd & Plain Muffin
Callimanco & Stuff Quilted Coats	Small Shoes & Stockings	Cumbrick & Lawns
Whalebone & Cane Hoops	Childrens Velvet & Silk Caps	Work Handker. Aprons & Bows
Duffel & Flannel under Coats	White & Black Feathers	Readymade Linnen
Dimity Upper & Under Coats	Ladies Riding Caps	Fans Muffs & Tippets
<i>A L S O</i>	Mens Night Gowns & Jocky Caps	Ribbons Flowers & Muffatees
Child bed Linnen	Damask & Diaper Night Caps	Silk & Thread Fringes
Quilted Satten Baskets	Quilted & Dimity Caps	Parisnet Cyprus & Gauze
Pincushions Rolers & Chimney Pipes	Black Velvet & Silk Hoods	Black & Coloured Velvets
Blankets & Mantles	Black Silk & Velvet Bonnets	Black Silk & Allamodes
Satten & Dimity Robes	Silk & Gauze Handkerchiefs	Cardinals &c.

NB. Merchants may be supplied with the above Ready made Goods for Exportation.

Figure 3. Trade card of Edith Ridout, milliner, © Trustees of the British Museum.

enterprise as a widow, like wax chandler Hannah Jones. But business skills could also be acquired through apprenticeship as a teenager. Although only a tiny proportion of all London apprentices were female, that amounted to more than one thousand young women over the eighteenth century. Susannah Passavant (c.1711–1790) was born into a Huguenot family of jewellers and apprenticed in 1728 to George Willdey, one of the principal London ‘toymen’, or makers of expensive trinkets for adults. Of Willdey’s fifteen apprentices, more than half were women. Passavant obtained the freedom of the City of London that enabled her to trade in her own right in 1735, and managed the Willdey shops from 1737. In the

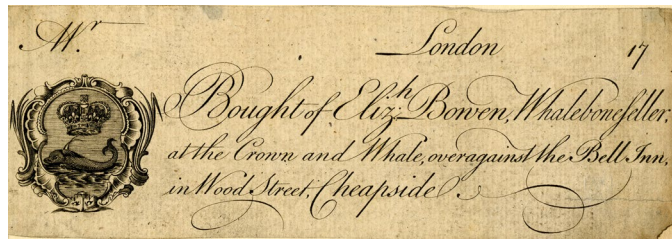


Figure 4. Billhead of Elizabeth Bowen, whalebone seller, © Trustees of the British Museum.

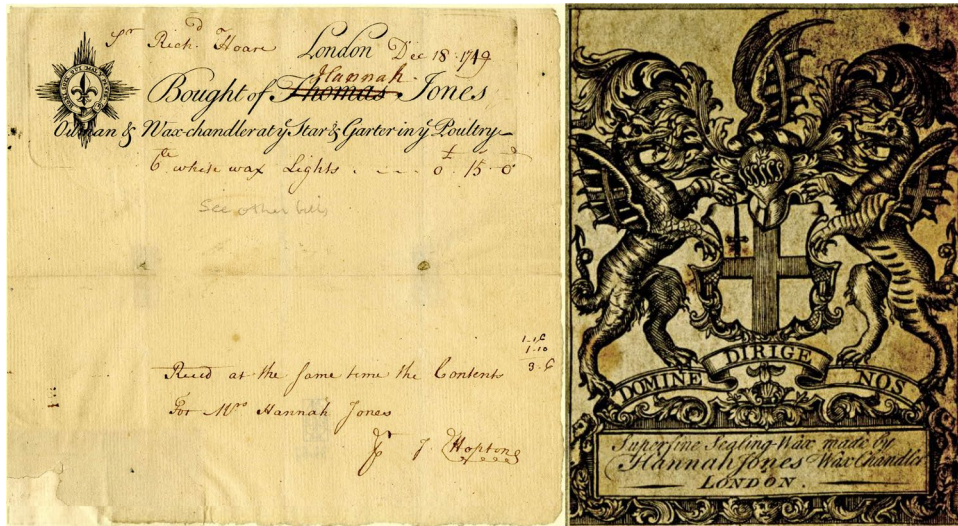


Figure 5. Billhead (1749) and subsequent trade card of Hannah Jones, wax chandler, © Trustees of the British Museum.

early 1750s she opened her own shop (Figure 8), where her clients included George and Martha Washington. She took her first apprentice in 1753 with a premium of £100. Passavant married in her forties, and continued trading under the surname of her husband (Beet, 2003; Brouwer, 2011. See also citywomen.hist.cam.ac.uk).

Formal apprenticeship was not necessary if a parent trained a daughter. The sisters Martha Sleepe (1717–after 1773) and Esther Sleepe (1725–1762) were trained by their mother and took the freedom of the city by patrimony in their father’s guild, the Musicians’ Company – under whose auspices their mother also traded as a married woman under coverture. In 1747 Martha and Esther printed their cards (Figure 9) as fan-makers (Erickson, 2018, p. 16). The eldest Sleepe sister, Mary Sansom (1715–after 1773), created a trade card in an unusual joint format with her husband, a turner and handle-maker (Figure 10), although the card does not specify that they were a married couple. Because she had lost the name recognition when she married, Mary Sansom’s card indicated that she was ‘from Mrs Sleeps’ – that is, that she had trained with her mother in the art of fan-making – to establish her craft pedigree (Erickson, 2018, pp. 16–19).

The best evidence to date remains slim but suggests that at the level of skilled entrepreneurs taking apprentices in London in the first half of the eighteenth century, about



Figure 6. Trade card of Coade's artificial stone manufactory (1769), © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 7. Trade card of Sandys & Co., milliners, © Trustees of the British Museum.

half of married couples shared a business, like the Joneses, and the other half ran separate businesses, like the Sansoms (Erickson, 2008, p. 287). When Esther Sleeppe married a musician in 1749 she simply reprinted her trade card as Esther Burney (Figure 11) in a different location, still in the format of first name and surname with no indication of marriage. Her marital status can be identified only because of her previous card, and because she became the mother of the novelist Frances Burney, about whom there is an extensive secondary literature (almost none of which deals with her mother) (Erickson, 2018).

With less well-connected women, internal evidence in the trade cards suggests marriage even where it cannot be confirmed in other sources. Ann Flight (Figure 12) at the



Figure 8. Trade card of Susannah Passavant, toy merchant, © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 9. Trade cards of Martha Sleeppe and Esther Sleeppe, fan-makers (c.1747), © Trustees of the British Museum.

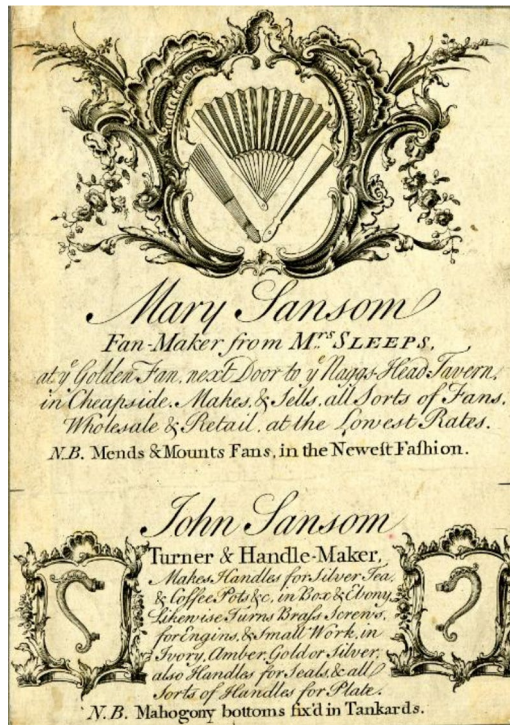


Figure 10. Trade card of Mary Sansom, fan-maker, and John Sansom, turner and handle-maker (c.1743), © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 11. Trade card of Esther Burney, fan-maker (after 1749), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 12. Trade card of Flight, billhead of Ann Flight, and trade card of Anne Barnard, tea dealer, © Trustees of the British Museum.

'Grasshopper' sold tea, coffee, chocolate, and snuff. Her card used only her surname, but the billhead gave her first name. The card of Anne Barnard at the 'Tea Warehouse' is extremely similar in lettering, ornament, and the list of goods sold. It seems likely that Ann(e) Flight married a Mr Barnard and continued to trade, or alternatively that Anne Barnard married a Mr Flight. In either case, she continued her own trade and the only difference that marriage made to her business was the change of surname. That surname change upon marriage – a practice linked to coverture and peculiar to England and her colonies until the late nineteenth century, when other European countries adopted it – makes tracing married women over their lifetimes particularly difficult (Erickson, 2005, p. 11).

Women like Ann Flight/Barnard and Esther (Sleeppe) Burney, whose cards made no reference to a husband, give the impression that coverture was irrelevant to their business. But there was an opposite extreme. The card of Benjamin Cole (Figure 13), advertising fine fabrics and lace in the 1720s, shows a shop interior with three female customers being served by two women behind the counter. Cole is better known as a printer and engraver; this shop was actually run by his wife, Martha, under his name (they had married in 1723). Later, when



Figure 13. Trade card of Benjamin Cole (1720s), © Trustees of the British Museum; trade card of Martha Cole and Martha Houghton, Victoria & Albert Museum.

Martha went into partnership with another woman, Benjamin apparently agreed to print their trade card as Martha Cole & Martha Houghton (Birt, 2020). This case has been studied in detail, but how many businesses in a man's name were actually run exclusively by his wife in a similar manner is impossible to tell (there are more examples in Doe [2017, p. 347]).

Since half of married citizen couples shared the same business, we might assume that half of all businesses in a man's name were jointly run with his wife. But no card has yet been identified in which a woman's and a man's name on a trade card *in the same business* were a married couple. Widows appear to be 'taking over' their deceased husbands' business precisely because their names never appear *together with* their husbands in joint businesses on trade cards or in any other source. Elizabeth Godfrey (c.1700–1771), whose card identifies her only as 'E. Godfrey', was the daughter of two silversmiths and was married to two silversmiths in succession. She was registered in her own name only on her first widowhood in 1731, and again in 1741 on her second widowhood, when she advertised as 'Goldsmith, Silversmith and Jeweller to his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland' (Figure 14) (Glanville & Goldsborough, 1990, p. 139, and for her mother Mary Pantin, 151). But it is implausible that Godfrey ceased to work in the business in which she was trained for the duration of her two marriages. Her parents' business was her business and her husbands' business.

The cabinetmaker Grace Mayo (by 1670–1735) likewise 'took over' her husband's workshop when he left her everything on his death in 1701.⁸ As a mistress, she was responsible for completing the final two years of training her husband's apprentice. In 1704 she moved into the fashionable premises of St Paul's Churchyard, and in 1708 married her former apprentice – at which point Grace Mayo's business became John Coxed's. At his death 10



Figure 14. Trade card of Elizabeth Godfrey, goldsmith, silversmith, and jeweller (after 1741), © Trustees of the British Museum.

years later, John Coxed left Grace her half of the estate by London custom, but additionally specified bequests of nearly £4000, putting his household at the top of the middle class.⁹ He left his business (not costed in the will) to Grace, in partnership with his brother-in-law, T. Woster. Coxed & Woster (Figure 15) produced the largest single group of labelled English case furniture surviving from the first half of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ The firm continued until Grace's death in 1735. In a career of at least 34 years running a cabinetmaking workshop, 24 of those years were as a widow. She can hardly have ceased trading during the decade of her second marriage when her name was not on the door.

On the face of it, it may appear logical that the husband's name alone appeared on the card for a business *shared* with his wife, since under coverture her business belonged to him and he was liable for her debts. But legal liability cannot explain the custom, because a married woman running a *different* business from her husband – such as Esther Burney – might print her card with no indication that she was married, and so who was legally liable.

The question of legal liability was tested in the case of Jane (Holt) Cox (c.1728–after 1803). The daughter of a Doncaster linen draper, she was apprenticed in the London



Figure 15. Trade cards of G. Coxed and T. Woster, and of Elizabeth Bell, cabinet makers, © Trustees of the British Museum. The wear on these cards is due to their being pasted inside furniture.



Figure 16. Trade card of Jane Cox, milliner (c. 1763), © Trustees of the British Museum.

Clothworkers' Company in 1745. In 1755 she began trading as a milliner, taking on her own apprentices, in shops near the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange (Collins, 2013, 72–73). At the end of the seventeenth century, nearly half of all the shop space within the Royal Exchange itself was rented by women. Many of these shops were devoted to millinery and other textile businesses.¹¹ Jane Holt married first in 1763 (age c.35), to a hatter, and printed her trade card as Jane Cox (Figure 16). The following year her husband was declared bankrupt, and his creditors seized her goods. Her own creditors objected, and in a

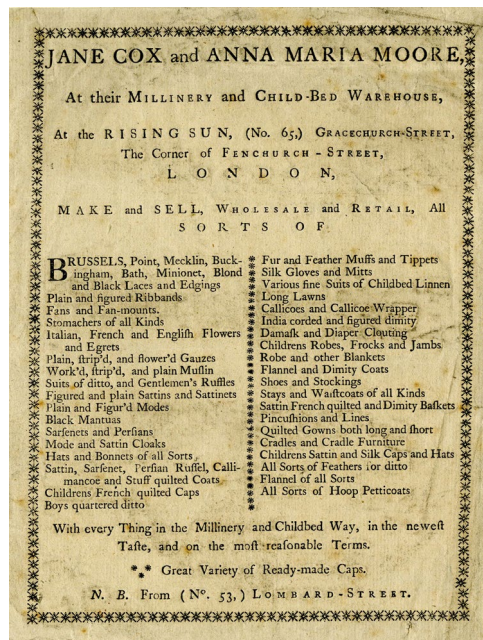


Figure 17. Trade card of Jane Cox and Anna Maria Moore, milliners (c.1772), © Trustees of the British Museum.

protracted legal case that coincided with the births and deaths of her first two children, Jane Cox was declared a *feme sole* (unmarried woman) for business purposes: her business assets were separate from her husband's, and she was liable for her own debts but not his. She began trading again the same year and taking more apprentices, with premiums of £70. Rebuilding commercial credit in that way can have been no small task. By 1772 Jane Cox was in partnership with a former apprentice Anna Maria Moore (Figure 17). At the end of that year Cox, after 18 years trading in the fashionable heart of the City, remarried and left London, her business activity thereafter unknown (Collins, 2013. For another feme sole trader case, see Hunt, 1996, pp. 140–141).

Partnership

Unlike marriage, tracing business partnerships through trade cards is relatively easy. Jane Cox formed a partnership with her apprentice. Other women created partnerships with kin. Sisters in partnership are obvious in cards such as that of 'Martha Wheatland and Sister' (Figure 18), who traded as elegant milliners and haberdashers in 1761. Sisters can also be established by biographical work on better known families. Mary and Ann Hogarth (Figure 19) had their brother William engrave their card in the late 1720s when they moved locations within Smithfield. They manufactured and sold children's clothes in partnership for 20 years until Mary's death in 1741. Ann and John Boyer (Figure 20) were the children of a silk dyer who first trained his eldest daughter. When Ann Boyer (1728–1784) obtained the freedom of the City in 1753, her father turned over to her all of his current apprentices including her own brother John. In 1757, Ann took her brother into a partnership which they



Figure 18. Trade card of Martha Wheatland & Sister, milliners and haberdashers (1761), © Trustees of the British Museum.

maintained for at least 20 years in Ivy Lane (now underneath the London Stock Exchange). John died first and Ann's will left her married sister a bequest including their brother's portrait, but her executrix – who would have received the business if it still existed – was a singlewoman of Islington.¹²

The Huguenot watchmaker to Queen Caroline in 1734 left his business to his widow, Marie Anne Viet, whom he had married in 1696.¹³ She went into partnership with one Thomas Mitchell (Figure 21), who later married her daughter. But in her will, probated a decade later when she was at least 70, Marie Anne still described herself as a watchmaker.¹⁴ Martha & Hilton Wray (Figure 22) were in-laws. Robert Turlington patented the cure-all 'Balsam of Life' in 1744 and was exporting it to the American colonies by 1750 in partnership with William Wray. But when both men died in 1766, Turlington left the business to two nieces: Martha Wray (Turlington's sister's daughter and William Wray's widow) and Mary Sopp (Turlington's wife's brother's daughter). In 1773 they were joined in partnership by Hilton Wray (Martha Wray's brother-in-law) and in 1774 Mary Sopp left the partnership and married. Mary Sopp is the only example I have found of a woman marrying and apparently leaving a business, although she may also have moved away or into her husband's business. The company advertised under multiple names: Medicinal Warehouse; M. and H. Wray; Messrs. Wray and Co.; Wray's Medicine Warehouse; Wray and Co. Only this billhead dated 1784, and a lengthy posthumous court case, identify the proprietors as Martha and Hilton Wray. After Martha's



Figure 19. Trade card of Mary & Ann Hogarth, children's clothing makers (c.1727), © Trustees of the British Museum.

death in 1788 the business survived until Hilton's bankruptcy in 1804 (Jones & Vegotsky, 2016. TNA: PROB 11/1170/109).

Widows took their sons into partnership. The upholster or upholsterer Elizabeth Hutt (Figure 23) traded in partnership with her son. She also took five apprentices between 1734 and 1745, both female and male, including Jane Cox (Figure 16).¹⁵ The billhead illustrated here came from the Duke of Norfolk's accounts and is signed by an apprentice or shop assistant.¹⁶ Another widow in partnership with her son was stationer Sarah Smith (Figure 24), trading near the Royal Exchange from the 1750s, in partnership with her son by 1771, but continuing in business until at least 1792. She traded for some 40 years as a widow in addition to an unknown number of years as a wife.¹⁷ Long-term partnerships between widow and son were not uncommon, but the widow's name remained first on the business.¹⁸



Figure 20. Trade card of Ann and John Boyer, silk dyers (after 1757), © Trustees of the British Museum.

All of the partnerships here lasted for at least a decade, and they usefully illustrate the range of possible business partners. But the most common business partnership, between a husband and wife, was never advertised.



Figure 21. Trade card of Marie Anne Viet & Thomas Mitchell, jewellers (c. 1738), © Trustees of the British Museum.

Longevity and succession

Martha Wray (Figure 22) spent more than 20 years (1766–1788) in the medical warehouse business, both domestic and export. The wax chandler Hannah Jones (Figure 5) traded for more than 30 years as a widow (1749–1780), judging by surviving receipts, in addition to an unknown number of years as a wife. Elizabeth Godfrey (Figure 14) spent 50 years as a silver-smith (c. 1720–1771), of which more than 30 were as a widow. Frances Sleeppe, the mother

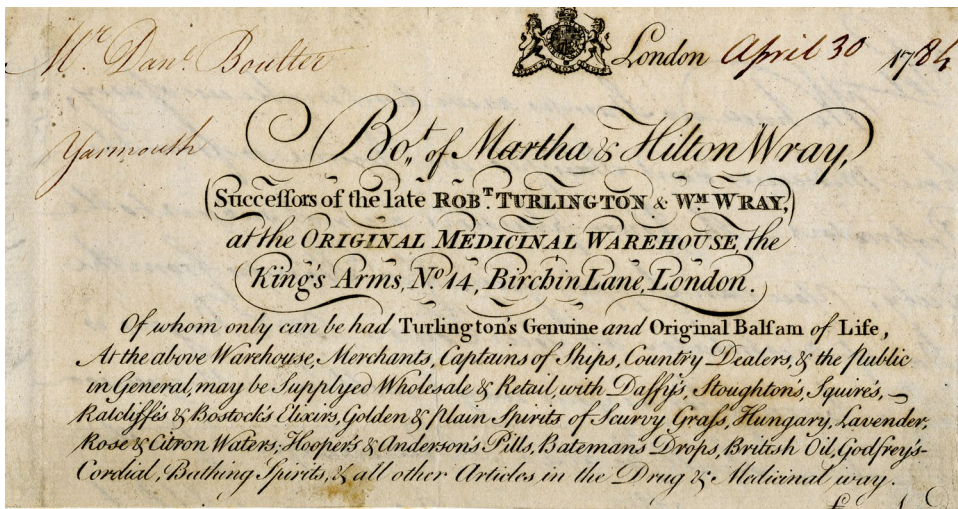


Figure 22. Billhead of Martha and Hilton Wray, medicinal warehouse (1784), © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 23. Billhead of Elizabeth Hutt & Son, upholster (1741) and trade card of John Iliffe, upholster (after 1756), © Trustees of the British Museum.

of Mary Sansom, Martha Sleeppe, and Esther Burney (Figures 9–10), was trained in fan-making by her father and made and sold fans for more than 50 years (1722–1773), the first 38 while her husband was a musician in the City band, and then as a widow (Erickson, 2020). The stationer Elizabeth Fielder (Figure 25) succeeded her husband William by 1763, and spent more than 50 years in the business as a widow until her death in 1820. She bequeathed her business to her ‘esteemed friend’ Mr William Jones, who lived with her and had been in her service for 30 years (Barker, 1997. TNA: PROB 11/1636/116). Almost all of the widows discussed here who shared their husbands’ business spent much longer in charge of the business than their husbands had.

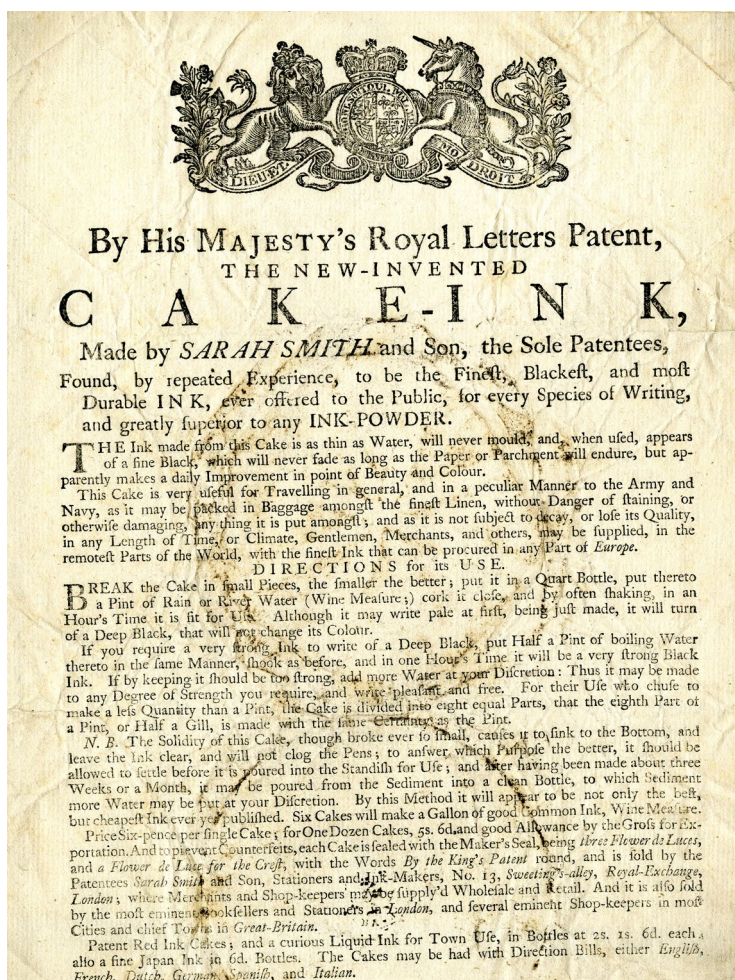


Figure 24. Trade card of Sarah Smith & Son (after 1771), © Trustees of the British Museum.

Business succession usually depended either on a marriage or on an apprenticeship – or both, as in the case of cabinetmaker Grace Coxed who married her former apprentice in 1708. After his death, she continued the business for another 17 years until her own in 1735, when her shop was taken on by (her and) her husband's former apprentice. But that man's widow Elizabeth Bell (Figure 15) succeeded him only four years later in 1740. Bell probably trained her then 12-year-old son and later took him into partnership. But he did not take over the business from his mother until 1768, when he was over the age of 40.¹⁹ In the 80 years of this cabinetmakers' business at the sign of the White Swan in St Paul's Churchyard, its ownership transferred four times by marriage (three times from husband to wife and once from wife to husband), once by apprenticeship, and once from mother to son. For 49 years there was a female name on the door, but for all 80 years there was a mistress in the workshop (Bowett & Lindey, 2003, p. 98).

There is no evidence that wealthy women only entered business in a care-taking capacity, in the interstice between husband and son, no widow in business followed by a son in his



Figure 25. Cuttings from trade cards of stationers William Fielder (before 1763) and Elizabeth Fielder (1763-1820), © Trustees of the British Museum.

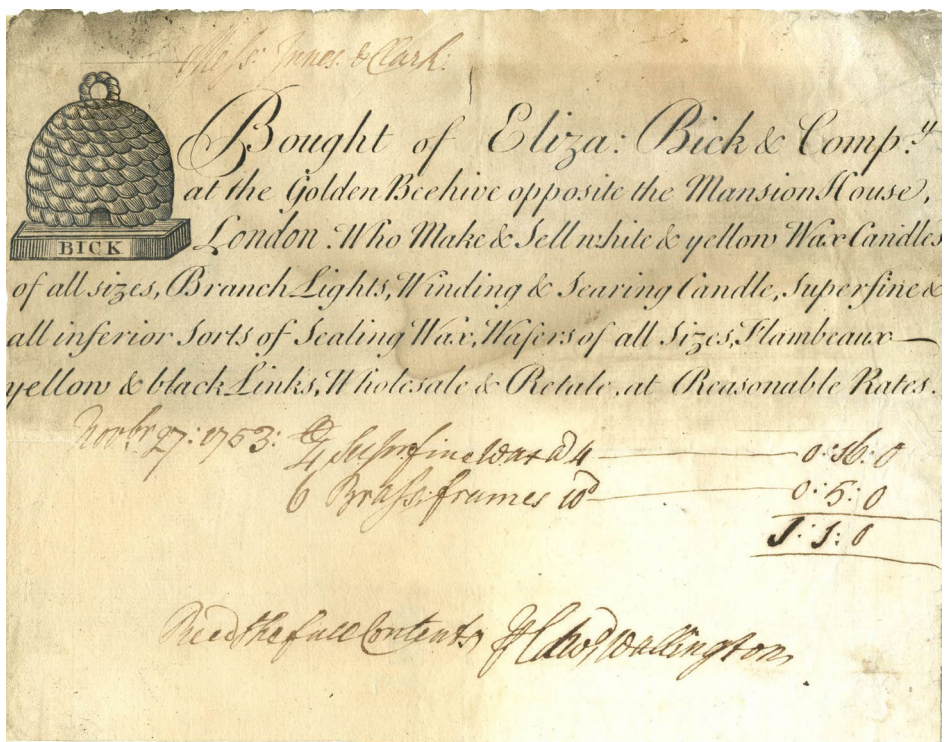


Figure 26. Billhead of Elizabeth Bick & Co. (1753), © Trustees of the British Museum.

mid-20s has been found. (In London, civic freedom and charge of a business was obtained at 24.) It is possible that a widow intending to hand over to a son at his majority would not print a trade card, but that remains to be shown in other sources. The common pattern was that of cabinetmaker Elizabeth Bell, who first trained and then partnered with her son but did not retire until old age made continuing to work impossible for her or death. Wax chandler Elizabeth Bick (Figure 26) had succeeded her husband by 1753, when her son was 18 years old. He almost certainly worked with his mother, but the business did not appear in his name until 1777 when he was over 40. Elizabeth Bick appears to have actively retired, unlike Viet, Fielder, Coxed, and Wray, who died possessed of their businesses at advanced ages.²⁰ Silversmith Elizabeth Godfrey's 1770 will named five adult children by her first marriage: three sons, including one jeweller trading at another location, and two daughters. But Elizabeth was still active aged at least 70, and left her stock in trade and her house and shop to her unmarried daughter, who may also have been a jeweller although she has not been traced further.²¹

The children of these businesswomen also married or bought their way into the gentry. Upholsterer Elizabeth Hutt's 1754 will referred to her son, with whom she had been in partnership in 1741, as 'Esquire' of the Isle of Wight, deceased. Hutt died in 1756 and her apprentice John Iliffe took over her business as 'Successor to Mrs Elizabeth Hutt' (Figure 23).²² The will of stationer Elizabeth Fielder (Figure 25) described her widowed son-in-law as 'gentleman' of Essex and left large but unspecified amounts in public stock and government funds to his seven children.²³ All of the wills of these women were probated in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, indicating that they held property in more than one jurisdiction.

Successful business proprietorship sometimes postponed marriage for women past the usual mid-twenties age, as in the cases of Susannah Passavant and Jane Cox. This left them less likely to produce children, which could be an advantage in managing the business. On the other hand, children did not necessarily prevent successful business proprietorship either. Watchmaker Marie Anne Viet (Figure 23) bore 13 children between 1696 and 1719, although it is not clear how many of them survived.²⁴ Fan-maker Frances Sleepe (by 1685–1773) bore 15 children, of whom only five certainly survived to adulthood, while running a luxury business and training four of her children (Erickson, 2020). Feats like this were only possible with the services of wet-nurses for the first two years of a child's life.

Business succession planning for men involved women, primarily their widows but also their daughters – and even more extended kin as in the case of medicinal proprietor Robert Turlington who chose his sister's daughter and his wife's brother's daughter to succeed him. And for women in business, trade cards make clear that training and succession planning involved daughters as well as sons, and sometimes apprentices.

Conclusion

Women, like men, used all forms of business titles on trade cards: full name, initials plus surname, surname only, and 'Surname & Co.'. There is no evidence that women avoided the full-name format in order to obscure their sex. On the other hand, it appears that married couples in business together – as interpreted by the widow 'taking over' on the husband's death – were invariably represented by his name alone. But a married woman running a business *different* to her husband might commission a trade card without any reference to

him. Perhaps not mentioning a husband was an indication that he would bear no legal responsibility, although whether such a defence would have stood the test of a court is unclear.

Whether women favoured one format over another could only be ascertained on a painstaking case-by-case basis to establish who was behind surname-only and '& Co.' formats. At present, both of these formulations support the misinterpretation that such businesses were male-owned and operated. A more extended study could also test whether the surname-only format was more likely to be used by married couples in business together than the husband's first name and surname. If that proves to be the case, then the format 'Surname & Son' would indicate partnership/succession of *parent* and son, rather than *father* and son as it is commonly interpreted.

Partnerships were formed by single, married, and widowed women, with their apprentices and with their kin. For widows, this included their sons, but these were long-term partnerships. In the cases so far examined there is no evidence of a widow handing over to her son at his majority. Indeed, the business management of the widows profiled here lasted longer than their husbands' proprietorship.

The lack of indication of marital status on trade cards, and the continuity in women's businesses through different marital conditions, suggest that a highly trained young woman with a business in London was not likely to give it up if she married. Skills were transmitted from mothers (as in the Sleepes) as well as from fathers (as in the Boyers), to daughters as well as to sons. For successful business families, the risks of marriage as an economic plan must have been obvious: a husband might become ill, die, fall into debt, or turn sour. Skill and business provided a much surer means of support for daughters. The working hypothesis must be that, at a highly skilled and highly capitalised entrepreneurial level, family business concerned the whole family and not just the males with an occasional widow.

The wealthy businesswoman complicates the image of middle-class female capital supporting male enterprise through marriage.²⁵ Neither trade cards nor any other source yet identified can be used to ascertain what proportion of young women in highly skilled, highly capitalised entrepreneurial families themselves managed a business. But the historical significance of the wealthiest businesswomen is not just about entrepreneurship and agency, still less about equality. Their role as employers requires a rethinking of the history of work as well as the history of business (Magnusson, 2014). These women took live-in female and male apprentices, they hired journeywomen as well as journeymen, and dealt with suppliers and employed subcontractors of both sexes. The number of female entrepreneurs producing goods for wholesale distribution and even export, as well as retail, suggests a much larger range of employment for women in manufacturing those items often dismissed as being of little economic significance, like clothing and fashion accessories, than has been recognised to date. At the same time, women running luxury businesses also made extensive use of female labour in domestic service to run their households, and in wet nursing.²⁶

The great majority of women, like the great majority of men, worked throughout their lives from sheer economic necessity. If even some of the women in highly skilled, highly capitalised entrepreneurial families took on a business role and maintained it over their lifetimes, that suggests that the vast majority of all urban women were engaged in market-oriented labour, and that therefore, women and men engaged in the labour market at comparable levels. That should change our idea of work as well as our idea of business in the long eighteenth century.

Notes

1. One new study shows a higher rate among those imprisoned for debt, most of whom were business people: 20% were women for most of the eighteenth century, although the frequency declined at the end of the century (Wakelam, 2020, pp. 69–70).
2. This collection was amassed by two people: Sarah Sophia Banks (1744–1818) who collected social history as her brother Joseph collected natural history; and Ambrose Heal (1872–1959), heir to Heal's furniture store.
3. This estimation derives from a 2% random sample of the total (300 cards). I am grateful to Annette Mackenzie for research assistance on this point and for card identification.
4. The National Archives (TNA): PROB-11-840-493 (Glover 1758); PROB-11-622-91 (Askew 1728).
5. In *The Young Man's Universal Companion*, 4th edn of 1766, reissued the following year as the *Universal Pocket Companion*.
6. British Museum: Heal 33.65 for the receipt to Magdalene College, with a note in Ambrose Heal's hand of the receipts to the Duke of Bedford.
7. London Metropolitan Archives: Ms 781/1: St Vedast Foster Lane Precinct Book.
8. TNA: PROB-11-462-451. They appear to have been childless after a decade of marriage: John Mayoe married Grace Clarke October 1689 in St James, Clerkenwell (via familysearch.org).
9. Will of John Coxed, TNA: PROB-11-566-409. The middle class were estimated to have fortunes of £500 to £5000 (Earle, 1989, p. 15).
10. British & Irish Furniture Makers Online: bifmo.history.ac.uk/entry/coxed-john-and-g-and-woster-thomas.
11. Muncaster (2003). This type of prosopographical study of a single urban location, like that which Barker (2006) undertook for streets in Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield, is only possible here because the Mercers' Company was the landlord of the Royal Exchange and kept the rental books. The proportion of women in this expensive location was double that in the less salubrious booths of St Bartholomew's Fair, where 22% of licensees between 1709 and 1732 were women. Wohlcke (2014, p. 153, calculated from table).
12. Apprentice information from Jessica Collins, Clothworkers' Company Archivist; TNA: PROB-11-1112-215.
13. Will of Claude Viet, 1734. TNA: PROB 11/664/80.
14. It is possible that the Marie Anne Viet who took over in 1734 was the daughter rather than the mother. A Marie Anne was apprenticed to her father in 1714 (www.clockmakers.org/the-clock-makers-museum-library/clockmaker-masters-and-apprentices/). But in the elder Marie Anne's will the principal beneficiary was her 22-year-old daughter Susanna Mitchell, wife of Thomas, who was probably herself also involved in the business. TNA: PROB 11/733/116 and Susanna Viet's birth (familysearch.org).
15. Apprentice information from Jessica Collins, Archivist of the Clothworkers' Company.
16. Information on the Duke of Norfolk from Heal's notes on the card mounting. The Mrs Howard to whom the receipt is made out would have been a kinswoman, an agent or upper servant of the Duke.
17. After her death, her son formed a partnership as Smith, Warner & Co. which in 1808 advertised 'Permanent Water & Oil Colours in Cakes' and become an innovator in the manufacture of colours. The link between Sarah Smith and Smith, Warner & Co (for which see <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/directory-of-suppliers/s/>) is the address: 13, Sweeting's Alley.
18. A similar pattern of widows in business in the long term, sometimes in partnership with sons, was found in lower status trading families in northern cities (Barker & Ishizu, 2012, p. 234). van Lieshout et al. (2019, p. 466) found that one third of women in the later nineteenth-century censuses had adult sons in the same business trading separately.
19. Philip Bell born to John and Elizabeth Bell in December 1727, St Botolph without Aldgate, London (accessed via familysearch.org).
20. Birth of Edmund registered to Edmund and Elizabeth Bick in Feb 1734/5 in St Luke, Old Street (via familysearch.org). Edmund Bick admitted to Company of Wax Chandlers July 1747. Edmund

- Bick [jr] admitted to Wax Chandlers November 1772 (waxchandlers.org.uk/origins/). The entry of Edmund Bick, wax chandler, in 1777 Directory is recorded by Heal on Elizabeth's billhead at BM: Heal 33.15. Burial of Elizabeth Bick 1787 in Clerkenwell (via familysearch.org).
21. Will of Elizabeth Godfrey. TNA: PROB 11/965/87. The children were all from her first marriage so were aged at least 40 at her death.
 22. TNA: PROB 11/825/437. Hutt's son had a different last name so may have come from a previous husband, or he may have married an heiress on condition that he adopt her name, a common practice where the bride was significantly wealthier and of higher status than the groom.
 23. TNA: PROB 11/1636/116.
 24. Births identified via familysearch.org, supplemented by apprenticeship at www.clockmakers.org/the-clockmakers-museum-library/clockmaker-masters-and-apprentices/.
 25. Classically represented in Davidoff and Hall (2002), but fostered in a myriad of other academic and popular history contexts.
 26. Wet nursing is woefully under-researched but must have provided employment for significant numbers of women in urban and peripheral areas. It can be deduced where a mother's birth intervals averaged one year, instead of the average of two years for breastfeeding women (Newton, 2011). On the decline in wet nursing in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, see Davenport (2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Inspiring London Fund, City of London Corporation; Arts & Humanities Impact Fund, School of Humanities & Social Science, University of Cambridge.

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