

Imports, Mechanisation and the Decline of the
English Plaiting Industry: the View from the
Hatters' Gazette, Luton 1873-1900

Catherine Robinson

Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the degree of MA by Research

June 2016

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the kindness, encouragement, help and support of Sarah Lloyd and Julie Moore from the History Department at the University of Hertfordshire.

I would like to thank Veronica Main who was the Significant Collections Curator during my research time at Luton's Wardown Park Museum, for all her help and support; it was Veronica's suggestion to research the decline of the plaiting industry. Veronica shared her passion for the straw hat and plait industries with me, welcomed me into the museum, facilitated my research of the *Hatters' Gazette*, showed me the collections and shared her immense expertise. Being at Wardown Park Museum and reading the 19th century *Hatters' Gazette* and being able to see and study the hats and plaits themselves, was a truly remarkable experience and one that I shall always treasure.

I would also like to thank the staff at Wardown Park Museum for making my time researching not only fascinating but also so enjoyable. I would like to thank Elise Naish, Museums Collections Manager, for allowing me to research the *Hatters' Gazette* at the museum during a very busy time for staff. I would like to thank Mary Miah for all her help – from getting the volumes of the *Hatters' Gazette* out ready for my research, to scanning old documents and photographing images to be used in this research, to sharing her work space – thank you Mary. I would also like to thank Chris Grabham, Local Collections Assistant, for putting together the wonderful CD of straw hat and plait images.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband Steven, and children Angus and Sarah for all their support and encouragement during my research.

Abstract

Between 1870 and 1900, the straw plaiting industry changed from being one that substantially contributed to local rural and family economies, to one in irrevocable decline. Researching the reasons for this decline is historically important because it gives insight into the practical working reality facing English plaiters during the period when the straw hat manufacturing industry sought new opportunities and experienced rapid expansion.

There has, however, been little in-depth exploration of the relationship between this decline and the concurrent and rapid industrial revolution in the straw hat industry. Other studies have considered the social and economic history of the plaiting industry and have concluded with an acknowledgment that the industry declined in the 1870s. The often brief reasons given for this decline have focused on the impact of straw plait imports and mechanisation in the hat industry.

This study aims to move the discussion of decline forward by clearly linking the shape of the plaiting industry's demise to industrial expansion in the straw hat industry. This has been attempted by researching a contemporary hat industry trade journal for the years 1873 to 1900. *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Journal*, provides insight into the concurrent processes of decline and expansion, and is from the view point of the straw hat industry itself. This reveals a story of divergence between the fortunes of those working with straw. The rapid expansion of the straw hat industry created wealth in Luton, especially during the 1870s and 1880s and this threw the English plaiting industry into decline. However, it was the plaiters' responsiveness to changes in demand for labour from the hat industry, which appear to have facilitated the hat manufacturers' and plait dealers' ability to meet the explosion in demand for straw hats. South Midlands rural workers were an on-tap supply of skilled straw workers. Many of these workers reacted to Luton's industrial revolution by adapting; by moving between plaiting and hand-sewing according to demand and by traveling or migrating to become straw hat machinists in Luton's myriad of small workshops.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

List of Illustrations

List of Maps and Tables

	<u>Page Number</u>
Introduction	1
1. Methodology: the 19 th Century Trade Press and the <i>Hatters' Gazette</i>	26
2. An Eastern Tale; the Story of Straw Plait Imports from 1870	59
3. Mechanisation, Luton and the Revival of the Straw Plaiting Industry	107
Conclusion	151
Appendix	159
Bibliography	169

<u>List of Illustrations</u>	Page Number
1. Gray and Horn plait stall.	6
2. A card containing thirteen examples of intricate Italian plait.	22
3. Two examples of Chinese plait and one of Italian plait.	65
4. E B Thompson standing in front of a bale of imported plait.	81
5. Nicholls plait stall.	91
6. Edmund Wiseman.	119
7. An example of broad plait with a fancy border.	120
8. An example of dyed plait.	124
9. Painting of Dolly Varden	126
10. An example of a hydraulic press.	127
11. A dye shade card for plait from Lye.	129
12. Ashworth's season cotton sewing thread colours for 1878.	130
13. Staged scene of dealers collecting plait for market.	144
14. Straw bonnet.	158

Maps

	Page No.
1: Map of China showing key places mentioned in the <i>Hatters' Gazette</i>	68
2: Map of Japan showing key places mentioned in the <i>Hatters' Gazette</i>	97

Tables

	Page No.
1: Plaiters in the Bedfordshire straw trade	2
2: The rateable values of Luton and St Albans at the end of the 19 th century.	4
3: Report from the Consul-General in China, showing, 'the most remarkable increase of any commodity sent from China'.	67
4: Approximate equivalent of 19 th century Chinese place names in the <i>Hatters Gazette</i> .	69
5: Board of trade statistics and straw plait imports.	70
6: Chart showing Board of trade statistics and straw plait imports	71
7: Imports of straw plaiting from certain ports for 1898 and 1899.	89
8: Chart showing the trend to declining plait imports at the end of the 19 th century.	89
9: Exports of straw plaiting from certain ports.	90
10: Chart showing the late 19 th century trend to increasing exports of straw plait of foreign manufacture.	90
11: Exports of braid (straw plait) from Shanghai to Britain	94
12: Shanghai's falling straw braid export between 1894 to 1898.	94
13: 1885 report on straw plait (braid) in Japan for the past three years.	95
14: Imports of straw plait in lbs, with China and Japan in bold.	102
15: Chart showing decline in Chinese plait and growth in Japanese plait.	103
16: Numbers of males and females working in the plait and hat trades in 1861.	123
17: Weight and destination of British exports of foreign made straw plait.	131
18: Chart showing the comparison in the monetary value of plait imports and exports from 1894 to 1900.	132
19: Census return numbers of persons employed in straw plait and hat manufacture in England and Wales for 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, as reported in the <i>Hatters' Gazette</i> .	142

Introduction

Plaiting whole or split straw into patterned lengths to be sold and then sewn up into straw hats was an economically important cottage industry in the 19th century agrarian South Midlands and North Essex.¹ This work, mainly done by women and children, was slotted in and around daily lives and was a vital contribution to the family economy. Within the considerable geographical area of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and North Essex, plaiting straw was ubiquitous. By 1899, with the straw plaiting industry in the final throes of decline, the trade journal for the hat industry, *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Journal*, reported on the key ‘straw’ villages and towns surrounding Luton.² Luton was the centre of the straw hat making industry and had manufacturing importance and influence.

Here is “Strawopolis,” and a circlet of villages all within fifteen miles of Luton, is the district where the straw hats are made which adorn the heads of our sisters, and which give a sense of airy freedom to the masculine wearer as well...Although Luton is the *entrepôt*, there are other places in the district which depend solely upon the staple industry of the town for their livelihood. The “straw circle” embraces Sandy and Potton, in Bedfordshire, on the north-west, and Dunstable, containing a population of 4,513, east of Luton, on the Great Northern Railway. Just inside Hertfordshire is St. Albans (with a population of about 13,000), Redbourn, and Harpenden, perhaps less progressive than the other villages.³

The expansion of Luton’s straw hat industry directly impacted the decline of the straw plaiting industry and the *Hatters’ Gazette’s* focus upon the town gives researchers the opportunity to view the decline of the plaiting industry from the perspective of Luton’s straw hat trade.

¹ In this dissertation, the South Midlands is understood to comprise of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, see for example, J.G. Dony, *A History of the Straw Hat Industry* (Luton, 1942), p.19, and the endpaper map.

² *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular* hereafter referred to as the *Hatters’ Gazette*

³ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘The Luton Straw Industry’, January, 1899.

Table 1: Plaiters in the Bedfordshire straw trade⁴

Date	Plaiters
1861	21,126
1871	23,058
1881	17,316
1891	3,500

A lack of alternative employment in the south of England rendered crucial the role played by straw plaiting in shoring up lives of rural poverty frequently caused by inadequate agricultural labouring wages and work.⁵ Therefore, the decline of such a widespread and financially necessary industry during the last third of the 19th century had significant economic impact during a period when falling back on the poor law meant either outdoor relief or the workhouse.

The English plaiting industry was a supply industry for straw hat manufacturers and, as such, the fortunes of the straw hat industry directly impacted the fortunes of straw plaiters. A collision of political and international circumstances during the late 1860s, gave Luton the opportunity to expand and develop its straw hat industry. This opportunity, which involved importing cheap straw plait from China, was one which Luton grasped, and the straw hat industry's subsequent rapid expansion directly and adversely affected the English plaiting industry. Two key reasons given in the literature for the decline of the English plaiting industry are imports and mechanisation within the straw hat industry.⁶ This dissertation aims to contribute to historical research by studying how imports and mechanisation in Luton affected the rural plaiting industry and the straw hat industry's reaction to the decline. To this end, this

⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Luton Plaiting Industry', April, 1891, p.192.

⁵ Pamela Horn, *Labouring life in the Victorian Countryside* (Gloucester, 1976), p.117.

⁶ See Dony, *History*, pp.86, 114; Pamela Sharpe, 'The women's harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c.1793-1885', *Rural History*, vol.5, (1994), p.138; Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700 – 1850* (London, 1996), p.62; Nigel Goose, 'The straw plait and hat trades in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire' in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), p.100; Pamela Horn, 'Child workers in the pillow lace and straw plait trades of Victorian Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire', *Historical Journal*, vol.17 (1974), p.782.

research uses the *Hatters' Gazette*, a primary source that gives the straw hat industry's views concerning the decline of the plaiting industry. The literature clearly acknowledges that the plaiting industry declined following imports and mechanisation after 1870, but the details and shape of this decline have yet to be fully researched, with Nigel Goose calling in 2007 for a social and economic study of the straw plaiting industry: 'There are other reasons for the marginalisation of the straw plait and hat trades, prominent among which is the fact that a modern economic and social history of the industry remains to be written.'⁷ This study hopes, in some small way, to offer a contribution through exploring how and why imports and mechanisation in Luton's straw hat industry resulted in the decline of the 19th century English plaiting industry.

Although the *Hatters' Gazette* trade publication covers a variety of different types of hat trades, this research has focused solely on the articles and notes pertaining to the straw hat trade. Following its initial publication, which appears to have been in 1872, the journal seems to have been consistently referred to as the *Hatters' Gazette*, and, following in this tradition, the source will also be referred to as the *Hatters' Gazette* throughout this dissertation.⁸ This research considers the effect of economic change on the English rural plaiting industry from the perspective of the *Hatters' Gazette* and Luton's straw hat trade. This gives insight into the driving forces behind the straw hat industry's determined quest for imported straw plait and mechanisation. A consequence of these imports and mechanisation was Luton's rapid urban growth and industrial expansion, so that by the end of the 19th century Luton was larger than other neighbouring established towns. This growth is shown in the following table which indicates that Luton changed from being a small mid-nineteenth century market town, to being

⁷ Goose, 'Straw plait and hat trades', p.98.

⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, June, 1897, p.334.

an urban centre with a larger population and greater rateable value than its ancient neighbour St Albans.

Table 2: The rateable values of Luton and St Albans at the end of the 19th century⁹

<u>Town</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Rateable Value (£)</u>
Luton	1876	23,000	69,000
Luton	1888	>30,000	101,000
Luton	c. 1899	c. 32,000	>125,000
St Albans	c. 1899	c. 13,000	nearly 48,000

In the 19th century Dunstable was synonymous with quality straw hat making and was the centre of the industry until the late 1860s, and St Albans, too, had a hat industry, yet the *Hatters' Gazette's* focus is Luton. This is, in itself, indicative of the huge impact that Luton's Chinese straw plait imports had upon the straw hat industry as a whole and how quickly the consumer market for cheap, mass produced straw hats, expanded. Luton was at the epicentre of this new trade direction, a direction away from quality, expensively produced straw hats and towards manufacturing at minimum cost with maximum production.

A constraint when reading the *Hatters' Gazette* is understanding the scope of the term 'the straw trade'. Initially there seems to be a clear separation in the reports and articles in the *Hatters' Gazette* between straw hat manufacturers and plaiters; there is, however, ambiguity surrounding the role of plait dealers. Their role changed between the years 1873 and 1900, and for some it was beyond all recognition. It changed from being journeyman work dealing with

⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Luton Straw Industry', January, 1899. With the dates for Luton in 1876 and 1888 taken from the Mayor's statement of Luton's rateable value, see *Hatters' Gazette*, March, 1888, p.129.

village plaiters into that of international dealer buying plait from the Far East, trading at the London docks and organising re-exports. In this light, it seems clear that plait dealers comprised a separate trade category and job description, however, it is at times unclear when the *Hatters' Gazette* is referring to them, or when they are included in a description along with straw hat manufacturers. Plaiters too, during the period studied, changed in role from the view point of the *Hatters' Gazette*. During the heyday of Luton's straw hat manufacturing expansion, a period stretching from the very start of the 1870s to the mid-1880s, the decline of the plaiting industry seems to have been but lightly acknowledged in the *Hatters' Gazette*. However, from the mid-1880s onwards, during a period which coincided with Luton's many small manufacturers swamping the straw hat market with low class goods, there were considerable efforts to revive the plaiting industry as a viable business.¹⁰ These endeavours were reported in the pages of the *Hatters' Gazette*, both in detail and as they evolved. The hat manufacturers leading the straw plaiting revival attempted to change the pattern of English plaiting away from the more common or standard plaits and towards those with a more intricate, embellished and fashionable design. It was thought that this change would enable English plait to once again become an integral part of the straw hat trade. The term 'straw trade', has been used in this research when it is unclear as to whose view – manufacturers, dealers or, perhaps even plaiters linked to the revival - was being expressed. In April 1885, the Mayor of Luton gave a speech to straw manufacturers and he stressed the importance of fashion over practicality and the need for good commercial practice. In his speech, he emphasized that the straw trade was dependent upon these business approaches, but it was not clear which sections of the trade were included:

¹⁰ These efforts focused on creating a profitable, modern plaiting industry and seem not to be linked to antiquarian attempts at craft revival.

The more difficult the trade becomes to cater for the fashions, the better chance to get a profit; the public pay ten times more for effect than they do for utility. The prosperity of the straw trade depends upon it, and this is the element that should be studiously sought after and developed in every way possible. It is this special study that has made Paris the mistress of the world of fashion, and has brought to the city a fabulous amount of wealth.¹¹

Whether straw hat manufacturer or plait dealer, Luton's straw trade sought business success and profit, and that was dependent upon having an 'up to the minute' understanding of how customers wanted their straw hats to look.



©Luton Culture

Fig. 1. Gray and Horn plait stall, 19th century, LM215 These plaits on display were dyed many different colours and plaited into different patterns.

¹¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, Mayor of Luton's speech to straw goods manufacturers, April, 1885, p.217.

As well as information on the expansion of Luton's straw hat industry, the *Hatters' Gazette* holds within its pages practical information on the English plaiting industry. In the 1870s and 1880s this often took the form of price comparisons with Chinese straw plait which was known as Canton plait, 'Canton plaits show a slight tendency to decline in price. English plaits are cheap and are selling in fine twist, whole straws, and hutons.'¹² The straw trade industry's thoughts on why English plait declined are represented in the trade journal and they cover imports, sewing machines, the Education Acts, fashion and the plaiters own reticence in the face of change. The importance of the role of plait schools both as workshops for plait production and as factories churning out the next generation of plaiters, is underlined in the *Hatters' Gazette*. Reports and articles consistently mention the negative impact of the closure of plaiting schools on English plait production. A central tenet of the late 1880s and 1890s attempts to revive the plaiting industry, was to once again teach children the technical skill of plaiting. Having set out the nature of the *Hatters' Gazette*, the discussion will now move onto the historiography.

The aim of this study is to broaden the discussion surrounding the decline of the straw plaiting industry between 1873 and 1900 by studying the industry in its context as supplier to Luton's straw hat industry. There are four key straw plait industry authors; Goose, Sharpe and Horn, and J. G. Dony. Dony's seminal study of 1942 appears to have been studied by the other three authors, with Goose seeing Dony's work as the best social and economic history of the straw hat and plait industries.¹³ This section's aim is to consider the authors' different approaches to the study of the decline of the plaiting industry, its causes and effects, and some aspects of its

¹² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report Luton and District', April, 1878, p.496. Canton was the port that initially shipped straw plait to Britain. Hutons may have been another name for a type of plait. It could be an English corruption of the Chinese *hutong* which is a word for alley ways in Northern China.

¹³ Goose, 'straw plait and hat trades', p.98. Dony, *History*, p.87.

change over time. The general trend in the literature, has been to conclude that straw plaiting declined post 1870, and, with the exception of Dony, this path of decline has largely been left untrodden.¹⁴

Dony wrote *A History of the Straw Hat Industry*, in 1942 and it was based upon his PhD thesis, and his work is perhaps the most important secondary source of information on the straw hat and plait industries. Dony considers both the straw plaiting industry and the straw hat industry, and along with many other primary sources, the *Hatters' Gazette* is a key source of information for his work.¹⁵ His text is the main reference work on the straw hat and plait industries and, as mentioned earlier, is referred to by Horn, Sharpe and Goose. The fact that Dony's detailed analysis of Luton's straw hat industry includes the study of the straw plaiting industry, underlines that, although they were separate commercial entities, their economic health was linked. Dony's work was recognised by contemporaries in the straw trade as an accurate historical record and of benefit to the hat industry.¹⁶ The book considers the English straw plaiting industry between 1830 and 1875, and also has a short chapter on the decline of the plaiting industry, which includes the phrase, 'The cause of the decline has been much misunderstood and is not so simple as it first appears.'¹⁷ In it, Dony details the effects of imports upon the price of English plait and the attempts to revive the industry by bringing the teaching of plaiting back into schools, through the Board schools. The revival of the plaiting industry does not appear to have been covered in other key secondary literature sources. Dony's work contains useful numerical detail on imports and exports, some of which have been converted

¹⁴ Even so, Dony's chapter, 'The Decline of the Plaiting Industry', is only eleven pages long and is considerably shorter than some of his other key chapters. See Goose, Sharpe and Horn.

¹⁵ Dony, *History*.

¹⁶ Dony, *History*, Introduction by Sir Thomas Keens, Luton 1942, 'Mr. Dony has compiled a most useful History of the Straw Hat Industry, and I heartily commend his treatise to the trade in the hope that those now engaged in its direction will profit from this recital of the efforts of their predecessors and so shape their own policies so as to avoid what was unworthy and economically unsound in the past.'

¹⁷ Dony, *History* p.85.

into line graphs which visualise the overwhelming volume of Chinese imports and hint at the effect that these must have had on Luton's straw hat industry and the English straw plaiting industry. Apart from Dony, none of the other key authors appear to have referenced the *Hatters' Gazette* in their work, and this study hopes to bring to light the value of the *Hatters' Gazette* as a source for the study of the decline of the straw plaiting industry.

The decline of the straw plaiting industry, the view from the literature

This literature overview considers the effects of Empire and global imports, Free Trade, the growth of urban associations and Chambers of Commerce, the rural economy, and women and work. These will briefly provide some historical context to the decline of the straw plaiting industry. There is a strong sense of flow and connection between these five sections, and together they link the geographical extremes of global trade and cottage industry.

Luton's straw trade's international dealings and global imports during the second half of the 19th century took place alongside other British manufacturing industries' international trade. The straw trade reports in the *Hatters' Gazette* give no indication that it was in any way unusual for manufacturers from an initially small market town like Luton, to establish, maintain and grow successful global trading relationships. This may have been because many trades, including the British global textile trade were already international. The British textile industry sent the largest proportion of its goods to India and it tried to maximise its profitability gained from this export market by effecting changes to Indian export duties three times during the second half of the 19th century.¹⁸ This suggests that the expansion of Luton into a centre of international straw plait and hat trade during the last third of the 19th century, was naturally

¹⁸ Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow, 2005), p.75.

undertaken as part of a nationally outward looking mindset. Luton's economic wealth grew out of cheap plait sourced in Asia and was part of a national drive to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the British Empire. The Empire created business opportunities such as cheaper primary materials and a worldwide market place for the sale of British made goods. A renewed understanding of the national importance of economic success brought about by global opportunities took place on the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. The Queen's death brought to the fore national concerns about the decline of 'stability, progress and growth,' the very qualities that had coincided with and enabled Luton's growth.¹⁹ By the end of the 19th century the confident aura of Imperialism seemed to wane, with concerns – highlighted by Queen Victoria's death - growing over 'international competition, fears of national decline, and the war in South Africa.'²⁰ The importance of the role of empire was reflected in the choice of national monument to Queen Victoria. It was decided by those with decision making power, that London did not wear her imperialism conspicuously enough and hence the site for the Queen Victoria Memorial was to be outside of Buckingham Palace and the Mall was to be reworked to include an Admiralty Arch.²¹

The 19th century belief in Free Trade was linked to creating and sustaining global business opportunities. The then Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Gladstone, was a passionate believer in Free Trade and in 1853 he presented his first Commons speech for the budget, 'In reforming your own fiscal and commercial system you have laid the foundations of similar reforms – through every country of the civilised world.'²² As Matthew comments, the global

¹⁹ Tori Smith, "A grand work of noble conception': the Victoria Memorial and imperial London' in Felix Driver and David Gilbert, (eds.), *Imperial Cities, Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester, 1999), p.22.

²⁰ Smith, "A grand work", pp.21-22.

²¹ Smith, "A grand work", p.21.

²² Colin Matthew, *The Nineteenth Century Short Oxford History of the British Isles* (Oxford, 2000), p.9.

adoption of Free Trade did not happen and although Victorians firmly believed in the ideal of 'fair dealing,' by the end of the 19th century Britain stood alone as a Free Trade country. 'In the last quarter of the century, Victorians' self-doubt deepened while their empire expanded and diversified. Every country in 'the civilized world', including Britain's own settled dominions and India, introduced protection, leaving Britain the only wholly free-trading economy.'²³

Yet it was the policy of Free Trade which was behind Luton's manufacturing expansion, as it was Free Trade which opened up London ports to vast imports of Chinese straw plait. A reporter in the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1893 wrote that those working in the straw trade considered that a policy of protectionism would have the irredeemably adverse effect of stopping foreign buyers coming to Luton.²⁴ Between c1850 and c1875 free trade meant that the price of land fell due to imports of grain from abroad lowering the price of British grain. This made food and land cheaper. Free trade opportunity meant that Thomas Lipton, who started his working life as a grocer in Glasgow, could import cheaper basic supplies, such as tea, sugar, butter and bacon, which he then profitably sold in urban grocers.²⁵ The combined result of cheaper food and land was that as a nation, Britain experienced more migration of rural workers from the countryside into towns than, for example, France. The reduction in land prices also meant that it was possible to build better quality urban housing.²⁶ This opportunity for urban growth can be seen in the rapid expansion of Luton. Chinese plait imports were a key cause of the decline of the rural English straw plaiting industry, but they also created urban employment through the growth of hat sewing and manufacturing in Luton and its hinterland. This gave an

²³ Matthew, *Nineteenth Century*, p.9.

²⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Hat Trade', August, 1893, p.422.

²⁵ Martin Daunton, 'Introduction' in Martin Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume III 1840 – 1950* (Cambridge, 2000), p.40.

²⁶ Daunton, 'Introduction', p.31.

opportunity for those able to migrate into Luton, to move away from their declining occupations as labourers or straw plaiters.

The political policy of Free Trade removed agricultural trade protection and prompted a British farming future founded on increased agricultural production and decreased costs. This too, had the effect of encouraging rural migration towards urban areas.²⁷ Feldman comments that the decision to migrate was usually a family decision and could also be generational. He writes, for example, that handloom weavers in the 1840s migrated away from the countryside but that they were still handloom weavers. The point of their migration, was that their children would be able to take advantage of the availability of factory work.²⁸ The family economy was key in the quest to financially swim as opposed to sink in rural labouring households. Straw plaiting was a ubiquitous family economy activity in the South Midlands in the middle of the 19th century and the decline of the straw plaiting industry increased poverty and in some cases, prompted familial decisions to change employment or migrate.

Farmers and tradesmen were more likely to retain sons than daughters. Sons could be employed in the family concern, while the collapse of rural trades left girls unable to contribute to family incomes and they, accordingly, were forced by circumstances and by their parents to leave home. In this respect, it is significant that the greatest single contribution to the outflow of rural population were the young girls dispatched into service. This evidence suggests that the calculative element in migration operated at a familial not an individual level, and that the different employment opportunities

²⁷ David Feldman, 'Migration' in Martin Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume III 1840 – 1950* (Cambridge, 2000), p.191.

²⁸ Feldman, 'Migration', p.192.

available for different family members contributed to their different propensities to move.’²⁹

There was a tradition of resistance to domestic service amongst straw plaiters, however the *Hatters’ Gazette* does comment on the availability of work in Luton, work created by economic expansion. It is possible to imagine a collective rural family decision, perhaps influenced by the availability of rail travel, to encourage young girls to migrate to Luton and work in one of the many small hat manufacturers. The girls would perhaps remain in lodgings during the straw hat season in late spring and early summer. The workplace chosen may have been influenced by the existence of a relative, friend, or neighbour already in the town having created a link to the rural village they had left behind. Huge change was involved in moving from countryside to town. Dupree commented that, ‘Free trade policies promoted commercial prosperity and economic growth’ and this helped the poor living in towns to have agency and seek their own welfare protection. At the same time, Public Health Acts were helping to create cleaner and healthier urban spaces, and laws were passed to facilitate the work of voluntary societies and friendly societies.³⁰ These changes would have, to some extent, positively affected the migrants moving into Luton to escape the poverty of the countryside; a poverty no longer alleviated by a straw plaiting family economy and undermined by the introduction of mechanised farming.

²⁹ Feldman, ‘Migration’, p.192. (In this dissertation, see p.46 for an example of dress indicating rural poverty and p.137 for migration for work.)

³⁰ Marguerite Dupree, ‘The provision of social services’ in Martin Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume III 1840 – 1950* (Cambridge, 2000), p.365.

Free Trade was an important factor in the successful role of the Association of Chambers of Commerce, 'It helped the Association at this early stage of its existence that Free Trade enjoyed virtually unanimous support from the mercantile classes.'³¹ The Association believed that the Government should be working at promoting Free Trade amongst other countries and being vigilant concerning foreign countries trade agreements. The issue and impact of global trade agreements between nations is debated and considered in the *Hatters' Gazette*. It was also a nationwide issue, as Searle comments, 'Bradford Chamber, in particular, was incensed when the French began negotiating a series of trade agreements with other countries, including Belgium and the Zollverein, which put British exporters at a comparative disadvantage.'³² Searle comments that several Chambers of Commerce had become well established in regional areas by the middle part of the 19th century and that the Association of Chambers of Commerce was created in 1860 to facilitate the ability of trade to affect decisions made by those in Government and in Parliament, 'a new era in entrepreneurial politics had begun.'³³ It was during the following decade as Luton rapidly expanded as a commercial and urban centre that its own Chamber of Commerce was formed. Luton's Chamber of Commerce represented the views and needs of the straw trade to those in power and with decision making authority. The Chamber, for example, worked for several years to persuade Luton's School Board to introduce plaiting into schools to teach children the art of making competitive, market based plait. This was agreed in 1892, with clear information on the purpose of the request, 'It was explained that it is not proposed to compete with the cheap labour of China, the more expensive plaits from Italy and Switzerland being those which are to be attacked.'³⁴ The world represented by individual Chambers of Commerce was their own geographical region and as such they could

³¹ G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993) p.171.

³² Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics* p.172.

³³ Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics* p.166.

³⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw-plaiting Industry', November, 1892, p.579.

be a strong voice for their local trade.³⁵ The establishment of Chambers of Commerce in the urban arena was matched in the second half of the 19th century by the often urban focus of charities, cultural groups and ‘economic interest groups like the Chambers of Commerce’.³⁶ Matthew comments on the important role of group membership during the Victorian years and that these groups could be built upon religious, intellectual, voluntary or trade foundations. ‘At home, membership of a host of associations was looked to as a way of balancing the lonely life of the individual in the market-place ethos of a capitalist economy, whose regulation was at best minimal.’³⁷ In working alongside informal groups and associations such as religious or family networks, Chambers of Commerce were perhaps the most important institution in a range of officially recognised organisations which were created to ‘help provide a measure of control in an uncertain world’³⁸

This ‘economic interest’ is evidenced in the *Hatters’ Gazette* through the clear perception by the reader that the creation of Luton’s Chamber of Commerce brought a sense of purposeful direction to issues affecting the straw trade. The rapid expansion of Luton’s straw hat trade following imports of cheap straw plait, meant that it quickly changed from a small market town into an urban space replete with small family businesses. The many straw hat manufacturing businesses would have especially benefitted from the overarching guidance of a Chamber of Commerce:

³⁵ Richard Trainor, ‘The Middle Class’ in Martin Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume III 1840 – 1950*, (Cambridge, 2000), p.709. ‘...but they had behind them influential bodies such as Glasgow’s Chamber of Commerce, an important vehicle for regional interests in the thirty years preceding the First World War.’

³⁶ R. J. Morris, ‘Structure, Culture and Society in British towns’ in Class’ in Martin Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume III 1840 – 1950*, (Cambridge, 2000), p.410.

³⁷ Matthew, *Nineteenth Century*, p.10.

³⁸ David Reeder and Richard Rodger, ‘Industrialisation and the city economy’ in Martin Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume III 1840 – 1950*, (Cambridge, 2000), p.556.

Small, competitive family firms had weak internal managerial hierarchies, and relied on external bodies to provide training or marketing, to deal with labour relations and to cope with social welfare. As a result, a plethora of institutions developed, from Chambers of Commerce to civic universities, from Boards of Conciliation to voluntary hospitals. This myriad activity provided the basis for a strong municipal culture.³⁹

Industrialisation created new urban centres, a new manufacturing elite and population increase, all of which affected rural life in the second half of the 19th century. The nature of farming changed, becoming rooted in capitalism and needing to exploit the latest technological inventions to maximise income.⁴⁰ The nation's policy of Free Trade removed any price protection for British produce, and 'Free Trade, the logical policy of a triumphant industrialism, eventually brought disaster to farmers in the shape of unchecked imports of cheap produce.'⁴¹ The lower prices of food from 1875 onwards did help rural labourers to attempt to raise their standard of living. Agricultural labourers had no monetary links to the land and, 'For them cheap bread made sense, and unlike the farmers they had no wish to see free trade replaced by 'fair' trade.'⁴² Howkins comments on how changes in farming practices directly affected the availability of employment. Changes in the perception of necessary neatness on farms, for example, reduced the demand for casual labour for stone picking or weed pulling. This type of casual work was often done by women.⁴³

³⁹ Daunton, 'Introduction', p.25.

⁴⁰ G. E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England* (Stroud, 1998.), p.190.

⁴¹ Mingay, *Rural Life*, p.190.

⁴² Mingay, *Rural Life*, p.191.

⁴³ Alun Howkins, *Reshaping rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925* (London, 1991), p.167.

The combination of reduced income due to a decline in straw plaiting work and a reduced availability of casual farming work, would have made migration to a growing centre of manufacture, such as Luton, a realistic and attractive option. Mingay comments that those most willing to up sticks and change a rural existence for an urban one, were women. The hard labouring domesticity of rural life could perhaps be exchanged for a more exciting and hopefully less toiling life.⁴⁴ Changes in farming practice due to industrialisation meant that female field work was frequently reduced to part time hours and that traditional cottage occupations such as lace and glove making and straw plaiting had declined by the end of the 19th century.⁴⁵ Indications of female roles gleaned from the *Hatters' Gazette* make it possible to believe that the drive to move from rural Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire into the environs of either Luton or St Albans or a larger nearby village, may well have come from female family members. In June 1882, the *Hatters' Gazette* considered the influx of women into the Luton Plaiting Halls to sell their plait. This influx was because they and their families had left their rural way of life and moved into Luton, 'and although they might take to the sewing for a time and obtain better remuneration, they would do the plaiting during the dull time, and it would, therefore, be a benefit to them if the Council encouraged this part of the industry.'⁴⁶

Mechanisation affected the availability of work for agricultural labourers. Before 1870, threshing was practically the only mechanised farming task, and even this was not a universal practice.⁴⁷ Labour was initially cheaper to use than mechanisation, but as problems arose with the supply of workers there was a movement towards the increased use of machinery. Howkins notes that some rural hand craft industries survived for a considerable period of time, in particular, ones where women made up the majority of workers and where there was no

⁴⁴ Mingay, *Rural Life*, p.191.

⁴⁵ Mingay, *Rural Life*, p.191.

⁴⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Luton Plait Hall' June, 1882, p.295.

⁴⁷ Howkins, *Reshaping*, p.172.

opportunity for industrial mechanisation. In the light of this, he comments that Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire straw plait work survived for longer than other types of rural handicrafts. However, Howkin's conclusion is that in response to an increase in factory production, by the end of the 19th century the countryside was losing its industry. This was evident in the 1870s' South Midlands, in the decline of the plaiting industry and then in the decline of hand sewing, with both industries being powerless in the face of the combined forces of imported Chinese plait and the mechanised stitch.

In the preface to *Women's Work in Industrial England*, Goose stresses the necessary consideration of location when considering women's work, 'the whole volume is underpinned by insistence upon the crucial importance of the adoption of regional and local perspectives in any attempt properly to understand women's work in industrial England.'⁴⁸ Female agricultural labouring work in the agrarian South Midlands straw plaiting region, was often limited and seasonal. Additional income from straw plaiting was a necessary bonus and women were often the managers of their family economy. These family economies were usually gleaned through the varied combinations of an agricultural labourer's wage, straw plaiting money earned mainly by women and children, keeping lodgers and cottage economy work such as perhaps keeping pigs, bees and allotments.⁴⁹ These female 'family wage managers' were often, by the nature of their job, married. The repetitive characteristics of straw plaiting meant that it could be interrupted, and it was therefore an ideal occupation to be worked at within a multitasking home environment. However, if lengths of plait were needed to meet the plait dealers demands or to buy bread for tea, then domesticity was often put on the back burner and the plait became the priority.

⁴⁸ Nigel Goose, 'Preface' in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England : Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), p.XIII.

⁴⁹ Goose, 'Straw plait and hat trades', p.24.

Along with Dony, the three main authors of the plaiting industry, in chronological order, are Pamela Horn, Pamela Sharpe and Nigel Goose. All three authors have different emphases in their work, but they all consider the geography of the straw plaiting industry, the seasonality of the industry and assert that the industry declined in the 1870s, although none seem to fully consider the shape of the thirty year period of decline.

Horn wrote that the decline of the English plaiting industry was caused by imports of cheaper Italian, Chinese and Japanese plait from 1870 onwards, and not by mechanisation.⁵⁰ She comments that, although most consider competition and mechanisation to have caused the decline, some also believe that it was prompted by the 1867 Workshop Acts and the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880 which curtailed child labour.⁵¹ There is a positive note to Horn's interpretation of the decline, as she comments that it was only through the decline of English straw plaiting that child exploitation in the industry was stopped.⁵² The author also considers that plait length and a fashion change towards smaller sizes of hats and bonnets, contributed to the decline.⁵³ In her comparisons of the respective declines of the lace and straw plaiting industries, Horn wrote that, although both industries ultimately collapsed in the face of fashion change and competition, the decline of the straw plaiting industry was much more dramatic than that of the lace industry.⁵⁴

Sharpe presents the dates of the decline as the years between 1879 and 1885 and attributes its cause to the fact that cheaper Asian straw was better suited to mechanisation, and hence, mass

⁵⁰ Pamela Horn, *Victorian Countrywomen*, (Oxford, 1991), p.169.

⁵¹ Pamela Horn, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales* (London, 1984), p.147.

⁵² Horn, *Labouring*, p.116.

⁵³ For plait length, see, Pamela Horn, 'The Buckinghamshire straw plait trade in Victorian England', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, vol.19, (1971), p.44. For the reference to fashion change, see Horn, 'Child workers', p.781.

⁵⁴ Horn, 'Child workers', p.782.

production techniques.⁵⁵ Sharpe adds context by stating that other industries such as the silk, lace, tailoring and shoe industries were also, ‘overtaken by competition from Asia and southern Europe at the same time as the Workshop Act curbed their use of child labour.’⁵⁶ However, the straw plaiting industry, where plaiters were able to quickly pick up or put down their plait and therefore escape detection by an inspector, was able to avoid the Workshops Act for longer than other trades.

Goose argues that it was the imports of cheap straw plait from Japan and China which caused the dramatic decline in the plaiting industry, but, unlike Sharpe, does not appear to also link this to mechanisation.⁵⁷ He considers that bonnet sewing possibly gave some plaiters compensation for their declining industry but that those still plaiting by the end of the century were often poverty stricken.⁵⁸ Goose also concludes that the decline in the numbers of women working in Hertfordshire by the end of the 19th century was not due to a change in culture or law, but due to the decline in straw plaiting, ‘However, the withdrawal of women from the labour force in Hertfordshire in the later nineteenth century owed little to acceptance of the role of the male as breadwinner, still less to government regulation; it was simply a product of the decline of the plaiting trade under the influence of foreign competition.’⁵⁹

Horn’s work places straw plaiting within the context of exploitation, social ills and the educational disadvantage caused by cottage industry. Horn also studies the industry with reference to other 19th century domestic handicrafts, most notably lacemaking. Straw plaiting was an alternative occupation for lace makers facing unemployment following the

⁵⁵ Sharpe, *Capitalism*, p.62.

⁵⁶ Sharpe, *Capitalism*, p.69.

⁵⁷ Goose, ‘straw plait and hat trades’, p.100.

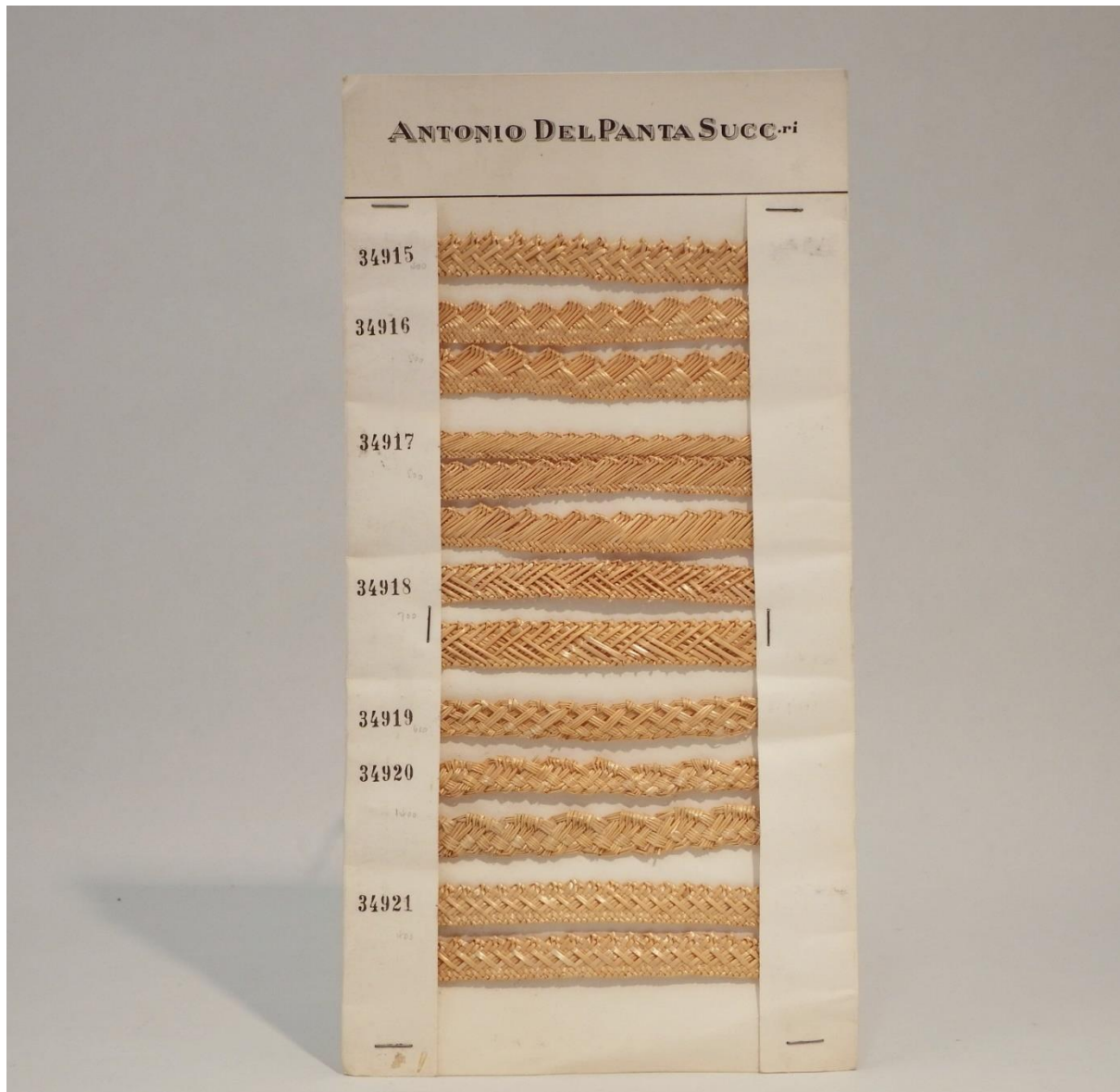
⁵⁸ Goose, ‘straw plait and hat trades’, p.101.

⁵⁹ Goose, Nigel, ‘Poverty, Old Age and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England: The Case of Hertfordshire,’ *Continuity and Change*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2005), p.378.

mechanisation of their own trade. After the Napoleonic Wars, Dunstable straw hats were fashionable and those seeking a cottage industry frequently turned to this work for income. A *Hatters' Gazette* reporter referred to an 1867 source and commented, 'this was the case with many lace makers, who, on the decline of the trade in pillow lace in 1830, betook themselves to straw plaiting as a desirable resource.'⁶⁰ The study of cultural and economic links between the lace and plait industries is an important area for research. Lace makers, for example, worked to master a pattern so that even though the work was intensely time consuming it could be completed as quickly and as accurately as possible. This working method of mastering a pattern to increase production was also at the heart of the English straw plaiting industry. Here, pattern, precision and speed were inculcated into children from a very young age, enabling them to rapidly and accurately plait. Following the decline of the industry, this entrenched working practice proved difficult to change and was criticised by those attempting to revive the plaiting industry. Those promoting change needed straw plaiters to be artistically flexible and to be able to react creatively to nuance and change in fashion. This demand for plaiting creativity to make English plait profitable was a direct attempt to compete with Swiss and Italian fine quality and 'novelty' plaits which supplied the fashion market with straw woven with other materials in the latest *à la mode* manner. There also appeared to be a link between the Buckinghamshire plaiters tradition of skilled lace making and their ability to transfer their skills into producing quality straw plait. An 1890 report in the *Hatters' Gazette* called for the revival of St Albans straw looms to be used by Buckinghamshire plaiters: 'Forty years ago one of the leading Buckinghamshire plait merchants selected and trained a number of the most

⁶⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Manufacture of Hats', January, 1901, p.31. 'We quote this article from "Tomlinson's Cyclopaedia," published in 1867. Some of the descriptions given are crude, and will cause a smile to hatters.' This small quotation from the *Hatters' Gazette* indicates the straw trade's view on how far they have commercially developed in thirty years.

skilful plaiters, and taught them to make fancy borders on chip and mixtures, with the best results. Where is the enterprise of our leading manufacturers?’⁶¹



©Luton Culture

Fig. 2. A card containing thirteen examples of intricate Italian plait, c19th century.

⁶¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The straw trade of Luton and district', July, 1890, p.376.

Sharpe focused her study on the North Essex straw plaiting industry, an industry which started as a charitable endeavour and then became a business.⁶² Here, the historian's straw plaiting emphasis seems to focus upon the economics driving the industry, the perspective of plaiting as a rural occupation creating an urban product, and the tension between the frequently negative cultural perception of straw plaiters by middle class male commentators and the plaiters' practical reality. The combined image of straw plaiting and rural idyll belied the reality of exploited labour and helped to hide the fact that sweated trades were not just an urban phenomenon. Sharpe's study of the economics of the plaiting industry includes the important roles played by women and children in creating and contributing to a working family budget.⁶³ Following the introduction in the 1870s of mass market straw plaits and the resultant quickening of the pace of change in fashion, plaiting income became directly linked to the latest fashions leading the straw hat market. One consequence of this was that the potential to earn money from straw plaiting was driven by constantly changing fashions and a style of plait could quickly become in or out of fashion, creating profit or pauper conditions. Reports in the *Hatters' Gazette* show that the straw trade was very aware of the effect of fashion upon their trade. The following quotation not only highlights this awareness but also appears to possibly be promoting fashionable change and perhaps prompting the purchase of new hats. 'Woman is an enigma. She will face a frowning world and cling to the man she loves through the most bitter season of trial and adversity, but she wouldn't wear a hat three weeks behind the style to save the Government.'⁶⁴

Sharpe writes about the high and low prices given for plait work and that this was, 'also a feature of the seasonality of the straw-plait trade and its dependence on fashion, neither of

⁶² Sharpe, 'Harvest'.

⁶³ Sharpe, 'Harvest', p.129.

⁶⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1890, p.423.

which are strongly represented in the literature.’⁶⁵ Sharpe notes that straw plaiting differed from other cottage industries in that it was both very seasonal and employed many more children.⁶⁶ The author also considers the effect of women and children plaiting upon male wages, noting that in the areas of high female work, male wages tended to be lower.⁶⁷ In addition, Sharpe considers the seasonality of the straw plaiting industry and how its timing, for three months in the spring, tended to clash with the agricultural calendar.⁶⁸ The writer notes that women would, through preference, avoid agricultural work and she moves historical debate on to consider the fact that it was not only men who were prepared to move for work, but that young, single women also moved.⁶⁹

The work undertaken by Goose is, amongst the use of many other primary sources, census driven, and he uses demography to analyse gender, household and locality in the straw plaiting industry. His use of statistics clearly shows that the number of married women in the straw plaiting industry was higher or equivalent to the number of married women working in the cotton districts, a traditional area of women’s work. ‘Straw plaiting, therefore, provided work for married women on a scale equal to or above that found in the cotton districts of the North or the industrial Midlands, areas that are more generally associated with new opportunities for female employment.’⁷⁰ His statistics also reveal that there may possibly have been more men working in the straw trade than previously thought.⁷¹ Goose brings to the cottage industry table the consideration that in areas such as straw plaiting localities, it was economically easier to be

⁶⁵ Sharpe, *Capitalism*, p.60.

⁶⁶ Sharpe, ‘Harvest’, p.139.

⁶⁷ Sharpe, *Capitalism*, p.59.

⁶⁸ Sharpe, *Capitalism*, pp.60-61.

⁶⁹ Pamela Sharpe, ‘The female labour market in English agriculture during the industrial evolution: expansion or contraction?’ in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women’s Work in Industrial England* (Hatfield, 2007), p.64.

⁷⁰ Nigel Goose, *Population economy and family structure in Hertfordshire in 1851. Vol. I. The Berkhamsted region* (Hatfield, 1996), p.37.

⁷¹ Goose, *Berkhamsted*, p.36.

an elderly woman than an elderly man. Elderly women were preferred as resident kin as they were generally more useful and could help – especially before the onset of the decline of the plaiting industry - with cottage industry work, or household care tasks to free up other family members to work. They also held priority position for almshouse vacancies and outdoor relief.⁷²

This study's aim is to move forward the discussion of the decline of the straw plaiting industry through clearly linking the shape of the industry's demise to industrial expansion in Luton's hat industry and through studying the views of the straw hat industry itself. This is attempted through three chapters. The first chapter considers the *Hatters' Gazette* within the context of trade press literature in order to understand the standard approaches and constraints of the source. The second chapter explores the story of straw plait imports between 1870 and 1900. It considers why Luton's hat trade initially sourced Chinese plait and the conditions that made these imports so successful. The third chapter addresses the mechanisation of Luton's straw hat industry and its impact, and also the straw hat industry's attempt to revive the plaiting industry. The *Hatters' Gazette* provides a unique opportunity to study the decline of the plaiting industry from the view point of Luton's rapidly industrialising straw hat trade.

⁷² Goose, 'Poverty', p.371.

Chapter 1. The 19th Century Trade Press and the *Hatters' Gazette*

Introduction

The *Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Journal* is this dissertation's primary source of information to study the impact of Luton's expanding straw hat manufacture upon the decline of the English straw plaiting industry.¹ This study hopes to bring to light some examples of the wealth of fascinating material contained within the pages of the *Hatters' Gazette*. There was, of course, no trade press for English plaiters. Plaiting was an overwhelmingly rural, female, part-time and seasonal occupation, which included a high proportion of child labour creating struggling literacy levels, and, as such, the industry was not in the market for a representative trade journal. If it had been, the plaiters may have shown consternation and, perhaps, even anger over Luton's imports of cheap straw plait from the Far East. However, without a trade focus, the plaiters were left to adapt and adjust to their new circumstances. The *Hatters' Gazette* reported the views of the straw hat trade, the trade with the closest links to the English plaiting industry. The expansion of Luton's straw hat industry during the second half of the 19th century coincided with a period of trade press growth, thus making the *Hatters' Gazette* a key contemporary primary resource.

To understand the importance of the 19th century trade press in general and of the *Hatters' Gazette* in particular, this chapter has three sections. The first section analyses the *Hatters' Gazette*, considers its published format, overviews its monthly coverage and then reflects on its value as a primary resource for researching the decline of the plaiting industry in conjunction with the expansion of Luton's straw hat industry. The second section studies the history and purpose of trade journals, followed by an explanation of their *raison d'être*. The discussion then turns to observations about why trade journals tend to be underused resources and argues

¹ *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular*, hereafter referred to as the *Hatters' Gazette*.

that the trade press is in fact an important 19th century primary resource. The third section addresses, in conjunction with the *Hatters' Gazette*, some considerations common to the periodical press. These are the identity of trade journal authors, the impact of trade associations and institutions, the tendency of trades to 'booster' their achievements, the information contained in bankruptcy reports and obituaries, and the role of advertising.

The *Hatters' Gazette*; its format, information and research value.

Research for this dissertation has been carried out using a run of copies of the *Hatters' Gazette* between 1873 and 1900 with the small caveat that four years in the run are missing; 1875, 1876, 1879 and 1884. Also, in some of the available 1870s editions, there does appear to be some pages missing which specifically contained information on the straw hat and plait industry. Despite this, the impact of straw plait imports and the mechanisation of the straw hat industry is still clearly visible within this run, revealing year on year through its pages the changing shape of Luton's straw hat industry and its effect upon the declining English plaiting industry. The clear advantage of using the *Hatters' Gazette* to study the decline of the plaiting industry is that this decline can be tracked against Luton's commercial trajectory; the *Hatters' Gazette* reported the gathering pace of Luton's new journey from the point of view of the straw hat trade itself. Local newspapers, the census and local history collections also contain evidence on the growth of Luton's straw plait imports, its mechanisation and the decline of the English plaiting industry. However, to understand the reasons behind the decline of the English plaiting industry, the view from the industry journal is an important perspective.

The full title of the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1873 was *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Journal*, and it appears to have first been published in 1872. Moss and Hosgood have written that trade journal titles frequently changed and the editor of the *Hatters'*

Gazette in 1873 was very keen to assert to the publication's readers that it was in no way associated with a previous title, *The Hatter*.

Editorial Notes, Ourselves. This does not designate that we intend giving an autobiographical sketch. It simply means that we wish to put ourselves right with our readers. We have reason to be satisfied with the reception *The Hatters' Gazette* has met with. The task of establishing this journal has not been under-estimated. We have, however, pleasure in rendering our thanks to those members of the trade who have given us suggestions and aid. These thanks are not conventional and the help referred to is not imaginary. Obstacles we have certainly met with, some of no mean character, but our greatest obstacle has been, and is, the feeling that *The Hatters' Gazette* is the late *Hatter* resuscitated. This bias was deeply rooted in the minds of many members of the hat trade upon whom we have called during the past month. Will each and all of our readers kindly take it for granted that there is not the slightest connection, in any shape or form, between the late journal and this present one? Not any single individual who was in any way financially interested in the last, has any pecuniary interest in the *Hatters' Gazette*.²

The *Hatters' Gazette's* deliberate insistence that there was no connection between the two publications, suggests that the view, scope and aims of the 'all new' *Hatters' Gazette* were, perhaps, very different to the previous journal. The editors of the *Hatters' Gazette* clearly inform the reader that they had great knowledge of the hat industry in all its forms but were not directly involved in its trade. In the introduction for the 1877 January edition of the *Hatters' Gazette*, it was noted that 'The proprietors would also state that while they are acquainted with the hatting trade in all its branches, they are neither hat manufacturers, retail hatters, nor trimmings' dealers, so that the *Hatters' Gazette* is a purely and thoroughly independent

² *Hatters' Gazette*, January, 1877, p.8.

journal.’³ This may not be quite how things were in reality, but it does suggest that the previous publication, the *Hatter*, had perhaps been directly involved in the trade and may therefore have had a more limited view and coverage of the hatting industry. It appears that other trade periodicals could be more directly commercially engaged with the trades they were representing. For example, Blake and Mckenzie in *Blake and Mckenzie’s English and Foreign Markets*, generally appeared to be much more involved with the trades represented in their journal.⁴

The *Hatters’ Gazette* was published monthly and the annual subscription in 1878 was 6s. 6d. per year or a single copy could be obtained for 7d. post free, or 8d. with postage. The trade press tended to be inclusive in its readership and therefore setting the right subscription price in order to increase circulation was important. *Blake and Mckenzie’s English and Foreign Markets* commented in July 1869 that, ‘Its annual subscription is now fixed at a price to bring it within the reach of all seeking information’.⁵ The *Hatters’ Gazette’s* trade circulation, whilst pertaining to the main industry of hatting, was also broad, aiming for a readership which included manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers, ‘Hat and Cap Manufacturers of every description, Wholesale and Retail Hatters, Umbrella, Portmanteau and Trunk Manufacturers, and Dealers, Warehousemen, Provincial Outfitters, Merchants and shippers, and Colonial Storekeepers, &c.’⁶ As well as trade circulation details, there is information on country circulation through the twelve month foreign subscription rates, ‘Australasia, Austria, Belgium, Brasil, Buenos Ayres, Canada, China, Cuba, Demerara, Denmark, France, Germany, Hamburg, Holland, India, Italy, Japan, Mauritius, Mexico, Norway, Monte Video, Portugal, Prussia,

³ *Hatters’ Gazette*, January, 1877, p.7.

⁴ *The English and Foreign Markets & Prices Current*, published by Blake and Mckenzie, June, 1869.

⁵ *English and Foreign Markets*, July, 1869.

⁶ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1878, p.907.

Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, United States, West Indies.’⁷ It was important to the trade press to gain as large a circulation as possible, as increased readership would increase the relevance and information of the journal and this would again increase readership. To this end the *Hatters’ Gazette* in December 1878 noted that January’s publication was to be five thousand and the copies which were not bought would be given away free across the globe to buyers of both hats and other merchandise.⁸ This appears to have not been an unusual policy as the *The Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review* informed its readers in August 1877 that it would give away five thousand copies of its first three issues to the china and glass trades and also send them to America and the colonies.⁹

Like newspapers, the success of the trade press was measured both in numbers of readers and the capture of necessary, up to date and interesting trade information. The *Hatters’ Gazette* held a variety of national and international trade and general news. Each issue had a standard format around which news items and interesting ‘snippets’ were placed. The following is a sample of the standard monthly content for the *Hatters’ Gazette*, this included an introduction, summary, our programme, editorial notes, month’s news, gossip, articles, general news, useful hints, notes of novelties, foreign notes, legal and magisterial, and correspondence.¹⁰ The following list of contents from *The Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review* reveals a trade journal which was perhaps less focused than the *Hatters’ Gazette* upon trade, reflecting perhaps that this publication was not only a trade journal but also a journal for the arts. ‘Our amateur’s Letter Box, Answers, Exhibitions, A Rudimentary History of Design in Painted Glass, Review, Ceramic Art of Great Britain, Trade Notes, etc. – Notes from France, Shipments of Pottery, China, Glass, etc., Patents, British and Foreign, Copyright of Designs, Trades and Show Rooms

⁷ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1878, p.907.

⁸ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1878, p.909.

⁹ *The Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review. A Trade and Art Journal*, August, 1877, p.1.

¹⁰ Selection taken from the *Hatters’ Gazette*, January, 1877.

Directory.’¹¹ These two examples of lists of contents show the different trade characters of the two journals, the fine art angle of the *The Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review* and the trade based *Hatters’ Gazette*.

The scope of the *Hatters’ Gazette* covers many branches of the hat trade and the focus of this research is on the area of the trade related to straw hats. Studying the *Hatters’ Gazette* to research the straw plaiting industry and to understand the impact of Luton’s straw hat industry upon its decline, has revealed the source’s immense range of information drawn from a wide variety of topics. Primarily the *Hatters’ Gazette* provided contemporary straw hat manufacturers with practical updated information about local and global situations affecting their trade. These ranged from commercial treaties with China affecting imports, to fashion, to the excessive railway charges for straw hat box transportation and to attempts to get unionisation in the straw trade.¹² The journal was specifically recommended to straw hat manufacturers by the 19th century local newspaper, the *Luton Times and Advertiser*,

All straw hat manufacturers should see this paper monthly. It contains trade articles, including special reports upon trade in Luton, with accounts of the leading styles; trade hints, trade news, and variety of other very serviceable and interesting trade information. From its special circulation among buyers of hats it is a splendid medium for Manufacturers extending their Home and Shipping trade.¹³

This shows the combined importance of the periodical press as contemporary trade resources, between these two sources, Luton’s straw hat trade would have had access to almost all available trade information.

¹¹ *The Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review*, June, 1879.

¹² *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘A Union For The Straw Trade’, January, 1892, p.22.

¹³ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, ‘The Hatters’ Gazette’, Friday 14 February, 1879.

International trade was key feature of the *Hatters' Gazette* for the straw plaiting industry. The publication's title; *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Journal*, might initially suggest a parochial outlook, but in fact a key feature of the trade journal's straw trade reports are the developments in international trade, especially including China and the Far East. This reflected the importance of straw plait imports to the trade. The *Hatters' Gazette* also provides insight and information into the European straw hat trade, primarily focusing on Italian straw hat and plait manufacture, then Swiss and other countries. The focus on European trade enables the researcher to understand how other countries reacted to the onslaught of cheap Chinese plait, and allows comparison with the approach adopted by the English industry. In fact the international references in the *Hatters' Gazette's* straw hat sections are not just concerned with China or the Continent, they are global. In March 1911, bankruptcy proceedings for William Stephen Baker, a Luton straw hat manufacturer, were reported in the *Hatters' Gazette*. William Baker's debt was £461 15s. 8d. and the accompanying comment was, 'the debtor attributed his failure to bad trade, ill-health, and loss of business owing to an earthquake in Jamaica, where he had previously done a large shipping trade.'¹⁴ This excerpt also shows how the *Hatters' Gazette* tried to anticipate and fulfil the needs of its readers. In January 1900, recognising that trade was being done with Jamaica, the *Hatters' Gazette* included a small paragraph on the recent Post Office changes on prepaid parcel postage to Jamaica, giving weights and cost, and confirming that, 'The postage on parcels from Jamaica for the United Kingdom is the same.'¹⁵

Beyond the realm of international trade, the pages of the *Hatters' Gazette* reveal a wealth of practical 19th century information ranging from hat manufacturers, to secondary suppliers,

¹⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, Bankruptcy proceedings Baker Wm. Stephen, trading and W S Baker, Kingston House, 104 Dunstable-rd. and 17, Peel-st., Luton straw hat manufacturer, March, 1911, p.169.

¹⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, January, 1900, p.32.

business and trade information and social and cultural insights. In November 1893, the straw trade report from Luton and district noted that there was much depression in the straw hat trade and that workers had been leaving hat factories during the morning due to lack of work. The article gives a glimpse into late 19th century society and culture through the statement that the men in Luton were often found talking about football as they had too much free time on their hands.¹⁶ The reason given for, ‘this most marked depression is undoubtedly the coal strike.’¹⁷ The effect of the coal strike was that fashion houses in the North of England were not buying their usual quantities of straw hats from Luton. Another example of the breadth of information in the *Hatters’ Gazette* and of the insight it gives the researcher into contemporary concerns and international mindsets, is a fascinating paragraph on the prospective uniform for the Transvaal police following the end of the Boer war. The police at that time were under the command of Major-General Baden-Powell and it was stated that the new police uniforms must not be reminiscent of British Troops’ uniforms in order that the Boers might soften to the British conquest.¹⁸ The following is an example of more local and trade based information, but it is one which conjures up the immediacy and reality of ‘nearly home time’ in Luton in 1900. In this short description, the *Hatters’ Gazette* leaves the reader with the image of horses champing at the bit waiting for the seven o’clock evening signal to take the day’s last consignment of hat boxes to Luton’s railway station, ‘This hour is locally notified by a powerful steam whistle at one of the factories, on the hearing of which the railway horses are as impatient as their drivers to hurry off to the station-yard. The rapid pace then adopted has

¹⁶ Luton Football Club, nicknamed ‘the *Hatters*’, was formed in 1885 and it appears that initially Luton’s women were as avid supporters as the men. In April 1893 (by 1891 Luton was the south east of England’s first professional football club) the straw trade report for Luton and district commented that Luton’s straw hat industries struggled to comply with the restrictive terms of the Factory Act, but that the occurrence of a football match was far more effective than the Acts in reducing Saturday labour as thousands of Luton men and women regularly watched the game. (Reference – *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Straw Trade Report for Luton and District’, April, 1893, p.206.)

¹⁷ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Straw Trade Report from Luton and district’, November, 1893, p.600.

¹⁸ *Hatters’ Gazette*, October, 1900, p.546.

recently given rise to an action at law for furious driving.’¹⁹ The *Hatters’ Gazette* also included snippets of information designed primarily to amuse rather than to seriously inform. These seem to have been an important addition to the trade press content and allows the researcher to pick up nuances and interpretations surrounding contemporary issues. Moss and Hosgood have written that ‘In terms of behaviour, the journals are equally pertinent, as they abound in literary allusions and amusements, part of their editors’ attempts to hold their readership, thereby providing insight into the Victorian character.’²⁰ An example of this was published in the *Hatters’ Gazette* in February 1916 during World War One, and appears in the ‘Trade Jottings’ section, ‘The Ministry of Munitions has forbidden the sale of platinum and goods made from platinum, and has called for a declaration of stocks. Of course, this does not apply to straw hats with plait in ‘em.’²¹

A key strength of the *Hatters’ Gazette* as a historical source is its direct insight into the opinions about, reactions to, and, direction of, Luton’s straw hat industry. The *Hatters’ Gazette* published Luton’s straw hat trade reports and articles over and above those from the already firmly established straw hatting towns of Dunstable and St Albans. This indicates the extent to which Luton dominated the new era of imports and mechanisation in the straw hat trade. This was, in itself, evidence of the huge impact that Luton’s Chinese straw plait imports had upon the straw hat industry as a whole, and how the retail market demanding cheap, mass produced straw hats had expanded. Luton was at the heart of this new trade direction, a direction towards cheap straw hats and this industrial scenario was one in which the rural straw plaiting family economy could not compete.

¹⁹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘The Straw Trade of Luton and District’, May, 1892, p.262.

²⁰ David Moss and Chris Hosgood, ‘Financial and trade press’, in J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel, (eds.), *Victorian Periodical and Victorian Society* (Toronto, 1994), p.201.

²¹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Trade Jottings’, February, 1916, p.79.

The *Hatters' Gazette* is quite possibly an unparalleled source of inside information about the expanding straw hat industry's response to the decline of its toppled supplier, the English plaiting industry. One example of specific information given, is that the straw hat trade was definitely a separate industry to that of straw plaiting. The relationship between the straw hat and the English plait industries was one of manufacturer and supplier with, therefore, no commercial obligation between either party. In June 1896, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported a conversation on a train and the conclusion drawn was, 'The mistake, no doubt, arises from confusing the straw *plait* trade with the straw *hat* trade. These are totally distinct and are worked under quite different conditions.'²² The confirmation of this industrial separation helps to explain why Luton's straw hat trade did not appear to show any initial consternation about the potential impact of cheaper larger volumes of foreign straw plait upon its supplier, the English plaiting industry.

Reclaiming 'lost worlds' of business through trade journals is important as it can inform current historical debate. In the 19th century world of business, where most workers were earning to live, the trade press needed to consider parochial issues that reflected local concerns which in turn affected readers' business and financial productivity.²³ Although the plaiter's voice is not directly heard, except in rare instances when it is quoted to emphasise a point within a paragraph, a considerable amount of the content of the *Hatters' Gazette* does give insight into the plaiting industry. Mechanisation directed the pull of the straw hat industry away from the countryside and hence contributed to the decline of the traditional female straw trade cottage industries of straw plaiting and hand-sewing. As plaiters or hand-sewers, women were key contributors to their rural family economy and as straw hat sewers in Luton's workshops

²² *Hatters' Gazette*, June, 1896, p.317. 'The mistake, no doubt, arises from confusing the straw *plait* trade with the straw *hat* trade. These are totally distinct and are worked under quite different conditions.'

²³ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.213.

women remained crucial to the straw industry, even if their voice was quiet. The detail of ordinary life in the straw hat industry reported in *Hatters' Gazette* hints at the important role played by women working in the trade. In November 1893, a straw trade report from Luton and district commented that there was much depression in the straw hat trade. It was noted that the many working women in the town were suffering,

In so many instances in this town girls and women are the chief stay of the home, and to those who wish to steer a straight course, deprivation of employment is most depressing. So acute is the necessity in some cases that employers are advancing small sums weekly to the most deserving, to be repaid when times are better. This is done in preference to making up goods for stock, as fashions in ladies' styles are so evanescent that the risk is too great.²⁴

In addition to bringing to the fore 'lost' local details, trade journals can also bring to life the people and their individuality behind the trades, 'the businessman and (much less frequently) woman'.²⁵ The details on women and work in the *Hatters' Gazette* provide not only balance to perceived contemporary opinion but also new information about the female role within the straw hat trade itself. Although the anonymity of the *Hatters' Gazette* contributors does, to an extent, limit analysis of the points of view reported in the journal, it is likely that those contributing were probably middle class and male. Straw plaiters were the subject of criticism by middle class male commentators for immorality linked to their ability to freely wander lanes and talk whilst plaiting.²⁶ Those criticising were frequently clergymen. However, the straw trade male writers for the *Hatters' Gazette*, appear to have had a much more practical and

²⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Trade Report from Luton and District', November, 1893, p.599.

²⁵ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.209.

²⁶ Nigel Goose, 'How saucy did it make the poor? The straw plait and hat trades, illegitimate fertility and the family in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire,' *History*, vol. 91, no. 304 (2006), p.534.

commercial view of the female straw plaiting workforce. Although the movement to revive the declining plaiting industry did bring up the issue of morals and straw plaiters, the context in the trade journal seems to be one of assuaging, rather than believing in, contemporary concerns. In 1896, there was a rare comment in the *Hatters' Gazette* which directly expressed concern over morals and the proposed revival of the plaiting industry, 'Miss Crouch thought girls should be encouraged to go to domestic service rather than idle about at their doors, plaiting, which led them to neglect their homes, and tended to immorality.'²⁷ In its lack of moral criticism, The *Hatters' Gazette* is a contrasting voice to other 19th century straw trade commentators. The consistent, placating tenor of those working for the industry's revival was that the revival of the plaiting industry would demand a completely different method of working:

Our young women of Bedfordshire are not going to earn an easy living by the exercise of a mere monotonous turning of the fingers, leaving the attention perfectly free for all other subjects. The work of the future is going to demand the whole faculties of the intellect, the eyesight, and manual dexterity of the highest extreme. There is no chance of their wandering about now if they are going to plait in future and carrying the beautiful fabrics they will have to make in the by-ways and lanes of this county, and there is no more chance of moral degradation in the plaiting of the future than there is if you set them all down to become water-colour draughtsmen, or any task of that kind.²⁸

In addition to apparently not colluding with contemporary concerns over the moral behaviour of straw plaiters, the *Hatters' Gazette* reveals the extent of female involvement in the straw hat

²⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Plaiting in South Beds', (Congress of Lady Representatives of the County met under the auspices of the Technical Instruction Committee of the Beds County Council. Duke and Duchess of Bedford present) January, 1896, p.26. (Miss Crouch may have been a member of the Congress of Lady Representatives of the County).

²⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Luton Chamber of Commerce, report from the annual banquet Wednesday January 16th', February, 1895, p.80.

industry. Women living in straw hat and plaiting locations tended to be economically, socially and culturally steeped in the industry. Therefore, when Luton started to rapidly expand following Eastern imports in the 1870s and the trade became mechanised, women and their in depth knowledge of the trade would have been crucial to the success of the small, family-based straw hat workshops. An illustration of the important role held by women in the straw industry is given in the *Hatters' Gazette* for April 1911 with the bankruptcy proceedings for John Bailey, a straw hat manufacturer aged 59 and living at Collingdon Street in Luton. John Bailey owed £187 3s. 1d. and 24 years earlier had begun his business by buying plait from the warehouses, sewing it into hats and then selling his hats back to the warehouses. His lack of financial awareness and book keeping meant that he was totally dependent upon his weekly payments from the warehouses to inform him of his monetary position. After further information about inadvertent mismanagement and ever present hopefulness that trade would improve, John Bailey commented that, 'His wife had been the mainstay of the business, and had been ill, but was a little better now. Several years ago he made money in the straw trade, but not within the last three years.'²⁹ Another example comes from an article in the *Hatters' Gazette* for August 1892; here the comment was that the felt trade was doing well, and that this was especially good news for male straw workers during the dull season:

This is fortunate, as those who should be the chief bread-winners become so in reality. Not that it is so always, or as often as it should be, as the straw trade is such that often, with the small manufacturers, the woman is really at the head of the business. Hence the careworn look of so many of the sex, who bear the chief responsibility both of the home and the factory. The spread of education is, however, diminishing this condition of things to an appreciable extent.³⁰

²⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, Bankruptcy proceedings – Bailey John Thomas 59 of Collingdon-st., Luton, Bedford straw hat manufacturer. Deficiency of £187 3s. 1d., April, 1911, p.225.

³⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The straw trade of Luton and District', August, 1892, pp.428- 429.

The role of women is again hinted at in the December 1891 report of a Luton straw trade union meeting. The evening meeting was held at the Cowper Arms Coffee Tavern. Although it had not been a sizable meeting, the comment was that, ‘on this occasion there were a number of female workers among the audience, some of whom did not fail to make their grievances known.’³¹ These grievances seemed to focus on bad commercial practices carried out by the main straw hat buyers in the town centre, with, ‘the speakers vigorously condemning the sweating practices which were said to exist among the George-street “buyers,” – not “manufacturers,” as one speaker explained.’³² Sharpe has written, ‘Indeed it is ironic that straw-plaiting should disappear just as union recognition slowly began to force wages up to a level where there was a glimmer of hope of a ‘family wage.’’³³

The history of the trade press and its value as a primary source.

This section places the *Hatters’ Gazette* in the broader context of the 19th century trade press. The origins of 19th century trade journals date back to the emergence in 16th century Europe of a financial and trade press. ‘This was mostly in the form of information sheets that provided shipping news, foreign exchange prices, and some stock reports, as well as advertisements.’³⁴ These information sheets were similar to the newspapers which were a key printed source for business and customer information and opinion during the 19th century.³⁵ The coverage gained through the medium of periodical print was crucial for the trade press’s purpose of becoming a forum of information for all those in trade, including those in the lower ranks of Victorian

³¹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Combination in the Straw Trade’. Meeting held at the Cowper Arms Coffee Tavern on Monday evening, December, 1891, p.649.

³² *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Combination in the Straw Trade’. Meeting held at the Cowper Arms Coffee Tavern on Monday evening, December, 1891, p.649. See also Chapter Three, Mechanisation, Luton and the Revival, pp.137 – 140.

³³ Pamela Sharpe, ‘The women’s harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women’s employment, c.1793-1885’, *Rural History*, vol.5, (1994), p.139.

³⁴ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.203.

³⁵ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.204.

society. Moss and Hosgood have commented that, ‘It is through the press, in all its forms, that the language of the marketplace becomes structured and translated into the common forms of a common culture.’³⁶ John North, whom Vann and VanArsdel describe as, ‘the scholar who probably knows more about this subject than anyone else’, has stated that the literature of the press reached a much greater and more varied audience than books in the 19th century.³⁷ Vann and VanArsdel note that ‘Nineteenth-century Britain was uniquely the age of the periodical.’³⁸ This was not only due to the rapid printing and technological advancements in industry and society, but because the periodicals’ short weekly or monthly production schedules kept their news up to date and therefore valuable: ‘The topicality of the newspaper and many weekly and monthly publications has always recommended them to the common reader’.³⁹ In January 1900, the *Hatters’ Gazette* included a small but distinctly marked paragraph stating, ‘The Man who Succeeds – The man who keeps up with the times, who thinks, reads, studies, adapts and uses good judgement, is the man who succeeds. The man who proceeds along the same line to-day as he did five years ago is a back number, and will surely be distanced by his hustling, wide-awake competitor.’⁴⁰ Thereby confirming that, as ever, the best information is the latest information.

One of the earliest of the 19th century trade journals was the *Wine Trade Circular* which was published weekly from 1852, but which only lasted for a very short time.⁴¹ According to Brake,

³⁶ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.200.

³⁷ J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, in J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (eds.), *Victorian Periodical and Victorian Society* (Toronto, 1994), p.3. (John S. North, *Newsletter*, Victorian Studies Association of Ontario, no 46 [Spring/Fall 1990], 7-10).

³⁸ Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, p.7.

³⁹ Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, p.7. ‘As Richard Altick noted many years ago, ‘The topicality of the newspaper and many weekly and monthly publications has always recommended them to the common reader’ (*English Common Reader*, 1957).

⁴⁰ *Hatters’ Gazette*, January, 1900, p.42.

⁴¹ Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, (eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent, 2009), p.634.

the true start of 19th century ‘trade journalism’ began with the *Bookseller* in January 1858 and by May 1859 *Morgan’s Monthly Circular* and the *Draper and Clothier* were published and practically all subsequent trade publications followed their layout and format. Industrial growth during the second half of the 19th century meant that there was a high demand for trade journals. *Morgan’s* took on a new title and became the *Ironmonger* just four months after it was first published, and within seven months, its number of copies had grown from 2,000 to 10,000. This success then led to the creation of the *Chemist and Druggist* and the *Stationer*.⁴² In setting out their ‘programme’ to their readers in 1877, the *Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review* confirmed the need for a trade press and noted its rapid expansion. ‘It has now become quite proverbial that trade is a science, and commercial history a philosophy; and were any proof of this needed it would be found in the extensive establishment of journals which are every day being started in the interests of mercantile classes.’⁴³ This suggests a focus shift towards trade and business during the second half of the 19th century.

The *raison d’être* of trade journals was to provide a range of up to date information designed to meet and anticipate the needs of those in Victorian society who were involved in or connected to industry. ‘These journals were true trade papers; most claimed to serve the interests of a trade where applicable, from manufacture, through the wholesaler and on to the retailer,’⁴⁴ This range of information seamlessly crossed county and country borders. Moss and Hosgood commented that the trade press was very skilled in their commentaries which included views and information on domestic and foreign matters.

Knowledge of the world outside the counting house or shop was considered to be essential in the successful pursuit of wealth. Very little was deemed beyond these

⁴² Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary*, p.634.

⁴³ *The Pottery and Glass Trades’ Review*, August, 1877.

⁴⁴ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.201

journals' compass, from political reform to hat styles, and the reading of events by their preferred spokesmen offers a perspective on middle-class attitudes which can be found nowhere else.⁴⁵

As well as providing geographically broad information, a significant amount of trade press content was also 'interdisciplinary' in its coverage. Vann and VanArsdel use agriculture as an example of this, commenting that it was, 'involved not just with the crops but also with the principles of farming, botany, economics, forestry, gardening, horticulture, and veterinary science.'⁴⁶ The press had to provide information that the trades person expected and hoped to find, but also impart useful knowledge not anticipated by the readers. It was in this manner that the circulation and sphere of influence of the trade press was maintained and increased. Moss and Hosgood commented that 'by 1900, journals were not only reporting but also directing the terms of many debates in the business community.'⁴⁷ This level of trade representation would have made the journals indispensable to manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers.

The role of the 19th century trade press went beyond providing a wide range of up to date information. The trade press also created a common trade identity and became the centre for specific trade communication. This message of trade unity through trade press is given to the readers of the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1877:

The present is an age for trade wants of every description being supplied. Attempts are also made to supply wants imaginary as well as wants real. We are convinced that one of the wants of every trade, or combination of trades, to-day, is a medium of communication between manufacturers and dealers, shippers and storekeepers, masters

⁴⁵ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.201

⁴⁶ Vann and VanArsdel, 'Introduction', p.5

⁴⁷ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.213.

and men, which shall be a faithful chronicler of events occurring in the trade, a ready means for the ventilation of disputes, and an impartial advocate between buyer and seller.⁴⁸

Similarly, Moss and Hosgood have written that the remit of the *Warehouseman and Drapers' Trade Journal* was to be a focus for the trade and a gathering point for 'information essential to the proper carrying on of business transactions'.⁴⁹ The aim of the *Grocer*, too, was to enable all in the trade to be knowledgeable and to be the trade's central link for all, whether their work was abroad in the colonies or in an English village.⁵⁰ One method of creating a common identity through the trade press was to include information about key trade figures. This could cover details such as how they had become successful and how they had forged their business, and this focus could lend the individuals 'fame' within the trade.⁵¹ The *Pottery and Glass Trades' Review* in their August 1877 edition contained an article on two great families of potters; the Hancock family and the Wedgwood family.⁵² This promoted the idea of a 'hierarchy' of individuals within the trade journal as a focal point and as a point of reference. Reading information about other workers and leaders active in a trade, could have promoted a sense of business community. Correspondence with the trade press also appeared to help create trade group identities. Brake commented that letters were a means by which the press could become a focus of communication and correspondence, and that this 'helped to create a common mythology for the trade and hence a common identity.'⁵³

⁴⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Introduction', January, 1877, p.7.

⁴⁹ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.208.

⁵⁰ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.208.

⁵¹ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary*, p.634.

⁵² *The Pottery and Glass Trades' Review*, August, 1877.

⁵³ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary*, p.634.

Historians have remarked more generally that the trade press has been underused. ‘Although a vast field employing enormous numbers of journalists, the field suffers from almost total neglect.’⁵⁴ Moss and Hosgood consider that it could be the very ‘everydayness’ of the ordinary 19th century business world that has limited its use by researchers. ‘The absence of glamour also undoubtedly explains the unfortunate truth that the business world remains one of the least understood components of society.’⁵⁵ They do, encouragingly, write that there has been a great increase in work carried out on the history of business and that it was no longer just a part of economic history, that ‘it has grown to become a subject worthy of separate study.’⁵⁶ This is important as trade periodicals give the detailed view from the trade itself, including social and cultural details surrounding and affecting 19th century businesses. In fact, details in the trade press about the lives of ordinary working people is one of its core strengths. Other, perhaps more visible, categories of worker have been studied, but the huge swathes of workers who kept the wheels of 19th century industry daily turning remain under-researched. Moss and Hosgood wrote that key industries had been studied and that, ‘social historians have rescued the ‘poor stockinger,’ yet despite the urging of a few, comparatively little is known about the flotsam and jetsam of shopkeepers, merchants, and wholesalers sandwiched between their more heroic compatriots.’⁵⁷ The authors continued, stating that trade journals are replete with vast quantities of detailed information, ‘a treasure-house of material covering every facet of life in a world that was seldom discussed openly because so much of it was commonplace.’⁵⁸ The trade press provides a window onto the ordinary detail of local trade and life, giving the reader direct and arresting access to, ‘this lost world of inherently parochial activity.’⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary*, p.634.

⁵⁵ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.199.

⁵⁶ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.199.

⁵⁷ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.199.

⁵⁸ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.200.

⁵⁹ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.200.

Trade journals are an important addition to 19th century research and add value to the study of Victorian businesses and they do this through three key areas. These comprise the trade and trade businesses themselves, the reality of life for those working in the trade, ‘and the institutional and associational world which emerged to influence much of the rhetoric and language of the business community.’⁶⁰ Many trades, if not all, were covered by the trade press, and by the end of the 19th century even the most specialised of trades tended to have their own periodical.⁶¹ The editors of *Victorian Periodical and Victorian Society*, wrote that a frequent comment from those writing the book’s individual chapters was surprise at the vast array of different titles contained under the trade press heading. John S. North, quoted in Vann and VanArsdel, wrote that, ‘The potential of Victorian periodicals is that they have as yet scarcely been touched.’⁶² Indeed a prime motivation for their book on the Victorian periodical and society was to raise the profile of the trade press amongst researchers.⁶³ Not only is the trade press factually fascinating in its detail but it also adds research value by allowing the researcher to read for themselves the many and varied issues considered to be important to Victorian businesses. One such area, is the division between working class and upper class societies: ‘In sum, an appreciation of these sources is long overdue: they can offer a welcome corrective to the polarity between working-class and intellectual elites that is so pervasive in recent interpretations of Victorian society.’⁶⁴ Moss and Hosgood have argued that there was a ‘profound change’ in business during the 19th century and that the trade press not only provides insight about the change itself, but also about reaction to that change.⁶⁵ Once such change over time was the national transformation from being a predominantly rural society to becoming an

⁶⁰ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.200.

⁶¹ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.201.

⁶² Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, p.3. (John S. North, *Newsletter*, Victorian Studies Association of Ontario, no 46 [Spring/Fall 1990], 7-10)

⁶³ Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, p.4.

⁶⁴ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.201.

⁶⁵ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.209.

urban one. This urbanisation can be linked to a rise in professionalism during the second half of the 19th century. Vann and VanArsdel maintain that the speed of change during the 19th century created a demand for professionalism as expectations rose following the ever increasing availability of new information and experiences. This new era of professionalism meant that the trade press needed to publish all the latest information in order to keep their readers, and therefore they had to change and adapt as their readership also changed and adapted.⁶⁶ Van and VanArsdel note that Victorian professionalism helped to create, ‘an important link between earlier, less sophisticated, less urbanised times and the modern technological era. Periodical literature helps to illustrate and document this change.’⁶⁷ A contributor to the 1893 *Hatters’ Gazette* article about a plait exhibition at the Luton Plait Halls, was able to express this transition from rural to urban life through the detail of female dress,

Their appearance was interestingly suggestive of an industrial change which is going on in this neighbourhood. Their dress and features showed that they were still associated, though in a constantly declining degree, with the soil. The smaller and more struggling farmers and farm labourers have not fared so well of late years, and they are neither able to keep their girls at home nor to find them careers, however modest, in their own immediate neighbourhoods.⁶⁸

This description, so evocative of its point in time, reveals to the researcher the contemporary visual impact of rural decline, a decline which was concurrent with Luton’s industrial expansion.

⁶⁶ Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, pp.6-7.

⁶⁷ Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, p.7.

⁶⁸ *Hatters’ Gazette*, January, 1893, p.31.

Reading the Trade Press

Despite the immense success of trade journals during the second half of the 19th century, the contributors tended to be unnamed. This anonymity does, to an extent, limit analysis of the points of view reported in the *Hatters' Gazette* as it is difficult to discern where a writer's trade experience lies, whether, for example, in straw hat manufacture or in plait dealing. This problem of lack of identity has been recognised by Moss and Hosgood:

Many were men of small means who appear in, and disappear from, the public eye with disconcerting suddenness. Often, they are not named or use pseudonyms, and it is only by tracking from one sheet to another that some clues to their origin and pedigree can be obtained. The extent of the problem may be appreciated when even contemporaries confused two relatively well known authors of newspaper articles, pamphlets, and letters.⁶⁹

The identification of the Luton commentators in the *Hatters' Gazette* could perhaps be aided by researching the *Luton and Times Advertiser*. The lack of author identification in the *Hatters' Gazette* does at times emphasise the contradictory nature of some reports. Up until the mid to late 1880s, the organisation of the straw hat trade sections in the *Hatters' Gazette* can sometimes appear ad hoc and contradictory. This unedited, scattergun approach leaves the reader with a strong impression of the raw, unpolished beginnings of an uncoordinated, emerging industry which was rapidly expanding in response to financial opportunity and growth. Knowledge of the extent to which Luton's unrestrained industrial development was caught up in a 'free for all' race for profit and growth, helps the reader to understand how the English plaiting supply industry could be so easily set aside. If Luton's straw hat industry was itself, to an extent, disparate and unclear on its direction, then it would have not been in a position to help the plaiting industry counter its own decline.

⁶⁹ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.202.

The *Hatters' Gazette*, reporting in January 1882, gave a couple of examples of some of these contradictory reports. A 'Review of the Straw Trade' mentioned that English plaiters ought to learn how to plait the Italian way, a method which would make their plait more remunerative. This was necessary because 'the prices are so low that it yields to the maker scarcely enough to keep hunger from the door.'⁷⁰ However, just a few pages later there was a long article on straw plaiting which hinted at a rural plaiting idyll combined with adequate income:

although the requirements of the Education Act will no longer allow the children to bask in the sun all day at their country cottage doors, while they do their task with their little fingers, yet it affords constant employment to crowds of young women who, if they pleased, could save money out of their earnings against the rainy day of ill-health, or the wants of a home of their own, which doubtless looms in their future hopes.⁷¹

This article may have given *Hatters' Gazette* readers the impression that there was a readily available workforce if new plaiting skills were to be brought over from Italy. An impression of a workforce that was able and willing to work, that would be interested in the new fashionable plait, would be clean and have nimble fingers capable of undertaking new more intricate work. However, in a later straw plaiting article in the same month, the *Hatters' Gazette* references J. E. Cussons' *History of Hertfordshire*. In this article, Cussons sets out the damage that straw plaiting caused to the health of the plaiters and stated that social reformers wishing to 'revive' the industry must not be ignorant of it. Through studying parish registers within twelve miles of Dunstable, Cussons asserted that he was able to prove that three generations of plaiters had produced children who were 'undersized and puny'. Cussons noted that boys would 'escape' to the plough aged ten to twelve years old, and that the best plaiters were girls aged from fourteen to eighteen years old. He also commented that the method of

⁷⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Review of the Straw Trade for 1881', January, 1882, p.23.

⁷¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw plaiting', January, 1882, p.27.

drawing straw through the mouth to make it damp and supple before plaiting, was very bad for the plaiters' constitution and resulted in sore mouths with irritated salivary glands. Plaiting, he wrote,

greatly weakens the health of the workers, already impaired by want of exercise, producing dyspepsia and other more serious evils. It is no matter of wonder, therefore that the children of such mothers should be wanting in stamina, and inferior in appearance to the population usually to be met with in country districts.⁷²

This information directly contrasts with the image painted just a few pages previously of children happily able to 'bask in the sun all day' whilst straw plaiting.

The movement away from contradictory reporting in the *Hatters' Gazette* appears to coincide with the emerging role of Luton's Chamber of Commerce. Luton's Chamber was created in 1877 and its role, as with all Chambers of Commerce, was to support and promote the town's business interests.⁷³ An example of this was reported in the *Hatters' Gazette* in May 1885, when members of Luton's Chamber of Commerce went to London's Mincing Lane sale rooms to meet the importers, brokers and buyers who convened there every two weeks. It was admitted in this report that the Luton Chamber was a young organisation that had found it hard to get a hearing there, however the Chamber reminded the traders at the meeting that it was the Chamber which had kept the French market open to the English straw trade. French manufacturers had wanted to put a duty on English straw hats which would have been twenty-five times higher than the existing duty. Otherwise, a representative of Luton's Chamber of Commerce argued, the French market would have been lost – a loss which would have affected

⁷² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw plaiting', January, 1882, p.27. (The article also mentions that J. E. Cussons clearly sets out health problems associated with straw plaiting in his work, 'History of Hertfordshire', and that any social reformer wanting to 'revive' the industry must not be ignorant of this.)

⁷³ See Martin Daunt, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951* (Oxford, 2007), p.79.

importers as well as manufacturers. At the end of the meeting the importers and brokers are reported as giving the Chamber credence. The traders commented on the improvement of trade with China, ‘we have had the satisfaction of seeing the resolution of the Chamber printed in the price list of an importer, which is circulated among the buyers in the Chinese districts of production, and we may expect an improvement.’⁷⁴ From the late 1870s onwards, Luton Chamber of Commerce started to influence the tone of the *Hatters’ Gazette*.

A key development during the second half of the 19th century was the growth of trade associations and institutions. The trade press is a crucial information source for these associations, not least because including them would increase the trade press circulation and the press’s trade information would be as up to date as possible.⁷⁵ Moss and Hosgood maintain that the issue with the representation of trade associations in the press was that their voice became too dominant, drowning out other, perhaps less forceful voices in the trade. This institutional ‘emphasis’ meant that the voices of a few dominated and gave the impression of a unified, considered trade. Moss and Hosgood further comment that, ‘It is tempting to accept both the apparent unity of thought and purposefulness of action in trades because of the sheer weight of journal verbiage indicating that they existed.’ They then question, ‘Is this appearance of trade homogeneity created by the journals illusory?’⁷⁶ This change from disparate contributions to apparent unity of voice can be seen within the pages of the *Hatters’ Gazette*. Contributions to the *Hatters’ Gazette* changed from being eclectic to generally appearing to be more centred, focused and unified as the *Hatters’ Gazette* increasingly included the straw trade

⁷⁴ *Hatters’ Gazette*, May, 1885, p.265.

⁷⁵ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.211.

⁷⁶ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.212.

views of Luton's Chamber of Commerce.⁷⁷ This was especially so in the straw trade's attempts to revive the English plaiting industry, a revival in which the Luton Chamber of Commerce played a key role.

Even though there was evidence of uncoordinated contributions offering conflicting views during the initial decades of Luton's industrialisation, there was also a consistent positive rhetoric about the benefits of expanding trade. Moss and Hosgood confirm that it was usual practice in the trade press for Victorian businesses to enhance or boost the impact of their trade: 'it remains the case that spectacular business advancement was a recurring theme in the popular culture of the late Victorian petty bourgeoisie. This dream was undoubtedly fuelled by an irrefutable fact of life: the vast majority of participants in business lived ordinary and decidedly unspectacular lives.'⁷⁸ In the *Hatters' Gazette*, this 'boosting' focused upon the benefits that could be reaped from the ability of cheaper foreign plait to expand the straw trade. The assertion was that, although times may have been hard for the plaiter, when taken as a whole, the expansion of the trade benefited many:

The net result of all this is, that while straw-plaiters were for a time terribly pinched, the number of persons now employed in sewing straw plaits and bringing them through many processes to the condition of fabrics, useful or smart, is out of all proportion greater than the combined total of those who used to plait, sew, shape, and finish in this place.⁷⁹

Industrial expansion meant increased money, and Luton's straw hat industry was growing rapidly at a time of national trade depression. 'There is every appearance of it being a bonnet

⁷⁷ Luton Chamber of Commerce was started in 1877 and the town had become a borough in 1876. (<http://www.localhistories.org/luton.html>)

⁷⁸ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.199.

⁷⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1885, p.509.

season; and seeing so many cards in the windows for good sewers wanted, we presume that trade is in a sound and healthy condition, in spite of the general depression throughout the country.⁸⁰ Luton's trade reports did cover, as would only be expected, the benefits accrued from their trade expansion; opportunities for work and wealth, with straw hat based work often paying more than straw plaiting.

There is no doubt that the immense quantities of Canton plait has for a time greatly injured our home productions, and inflicted serious losses on many, through the deterioration of stock, but on the other hand, it has been the means of extending the straw trade enormously. Hats have found their way into all parts of Europe to thousands, who have never before had the luxury of wearing straw, and it has thus laid a broad foundation for the future prosperity of one of the most beautiful branches of our national industries.⁸¹

The focus of the straw trade in the *Hatters' Gazette* was also on numerical information. Towards the end of the 19th century the *Hatters' Gazette* was regularly publishing statistics, often on a comparative monthly/yearly basis. This suggests that readers of the trade journal wanted to be aware of the business trends in plait imports and that the *Hatters' Gazette* was trying to statistically understand the direction of the trade.

Reports of a different kind, of bankruptcies in the *Hatters' Gazette* were, as for other trade journals, an important source of information. These reports gave contemporaries information on the health of the straw trade and they give latter day historians an understanding of the intricacy and fragility behind many 19th century small businesses. Bankruptcy reports were a balance to some of the, perhaps overly positive, accounts of trade activity in the press. Moss and Hosgood wrote, 'These bankruptcy records are important because they act as a partial

⁸⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report – Trade of Luton and District', March, 1878, p.444.

⁸¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable', February, 1874, p.41.

corrective to some of the more blatant boosterism that was such a staple of a trade journal's reportage.⁸² The inclusion of bankruptcies was a standard and important practice in the trade press: they informed manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers of traders who were not in good financial shape. The process of financial exposure appears to have been quite ruthless in practice:

While lists of bankruptcies were a special characteristic of trade journals – it was important to know who in the trade was credit-worthy – the *Draper and Clothier* also published the names of bankrupts' creditors, an unhelpfully humiliating practice criticised heavily by correspondents without effect.⁸³

In August 1877, the *Pottery and Glass Trades' Review* published a long list of forty creditors for J. M. May, Glass and China Importer, which included Vileroy and Boch of Maitlach-on-Saur, and The Great Northern Railway Company.⁸⁴ The public humiliation of bankruptcy was neatly captured in an 1879 trade press advert titled,

to the embarrassed. Bankruptcy may often be voided by taking time by the forelock; any person, therefore, who is unable to meet his engagements should at once write, or call after six p.m. on Mr. Thomas, ...when he will give advice gratis and at a fixed charge (payable by instalments, if required), endeavour to carry them through their difficulties.⁸⁵

Although sometimes bankrupts could be well known in the trade, Moss and Hosgood have commented that most of those facing bankruptcy were working at the bottom of the business ladder and that the reasons behind their bankruptcy were the, 'all too familiar stories of

⁸² Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.211.

⁸³ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary*, p.635. The *Draper and Clothier* folded in 1862.

⁸⁴ *The Pottery and Glass Trades' Review*, August, 1877, p.11.

⁸⁵ *The Pottery and Glass Trades' Review*, June, 1879, p.iii.

undercapitalization, lack of training, and/or personal shortcomings too numerous to detail.’⁸⁶ In July 1888 George Carter, a straw hat manufacturer of Regent Street, Luton, was reported in the *Hatters’ Gazette* as being bankrupt. He stated that he had known of his insolvency by the end of 1885 and the start of 1886, yet he kept his trade going, hoping for a better season, and had contracted debts. The article in the *Hatters’ Gazette* comments that,

This continuing to trade after knowledge of insolvency is a very frequent occurrence in cases of this description, and is no better than a system of gambling. The only way to put a stop to it is for creditors resolutely to refuse credit to such discredited traders. The debtor has kept no books, and has never taken a stock account or prepared any statement of his affairs.⁸⁷

The bankruptcy section of the trade press is full of poignant detail about ordinary 19th century life, revealing as it does, the collapse of individual effort, often following many years of struggle and involving life savings. ‘These personal reverses provide the persistent researcher with revealing and often detailed accounts of the reality of Victorian business life.’⁸⁸

The details hidden in bankruptcy trade journal accounts of ordinary working people also reveal information about the role of women in trade, a role which can be invisible in other accounts of 19th century business. The bankruptcy notifications in the *Hatters’ Gazette*, report the reasons given by the debtor for his predicament and this has at times included reference to the fact that trade started to go wrong when his wife, for various reasons, was no longer involved. Women were often the financial management hub of many straw plaiting and agricultural labouring families, ensuring that a low male wage was supplemented by an active and productive family economy. Women’s family economy skill set, exercised successfully in the

⁸⁶ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.210.

⁸⁷ *Hatters’ Gazette*, July, 1888, p.370.

⁸⁸ Moss and Hosgood, ‘Financial’, p.210.

arena of straw plaiting, was further extended through the ability of many women to switch between plaiting or hand-sewing in order to maximise the financial advantage of the work available. The impact of such ubiquitous and culturally stable cottage industries during the first half of the 19th century meant that women became very knowledgeable about the straw hat trade. It appears that following Luton's rapid industrial expansion, women continued to play a significant role in the management of straw hat manufacture, in the many small Luton hat making workshops.

Obituaries played a similar role in the trade press to bankruptcy proceedings, providing as they did, information on the person or people concerned, their work and their place and role within society: 'obituaries, if considered carefully, act as a valuable and often unique tool in reconstructing the position of individuals in both their trade and their community.' The significance of the value of the *Hatters' Gazette* as a source includes its business-like acceptance of women and work. The obituaries in the *Hatters' Gazette* are one area where the apparently key role of women in the straw trade is revealed. An obituary in the *Hatters' Gazette* suggests that the ability of women to work in the straw hat industry was in fact not just restricted to the realms of the smaller manufacturers, the 'small makers'. In June 1911, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported the death of Mrs. Ann Johnson, the wife of Mr. T. H. Johnson of the straw hat manufacturers T. H. Johnson & Sons of 'Kirkcaldie,' Hillside Road, St Albans. The firm had been founded in 1838 by the father of T. H. Johnson, and it was stated that, 'the deceased lady, after her marriage, took a very active part in the business for many years. In the capacity of traveller, she proved a very successful business gatherer, and was quite a familiar figure in straw hat circles in London.'⁸⁹ Mrs. Johnson clearly played a significant role in the family straw hat industry. Especially intriguing is her description as a 'business gatherer', a role that

⁸⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, June, 1911, p.320.

appears to have combined a knowledge of fashion with a knowledge of manufacture and included the ability to socialise and ‘network’ to further business opportunities.

Perhaps equal to all other aspects of the contents of the trade press was the role of advertising. The *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* gives a definition of the trade press as a body of work which provided focus and opportunity for the trade. ‘Trade Press. For the purposes of this *Dictionary*, the “trade press” refers to a subset of class journals that celebrates and forwards specific identities based on the production and distribution of particular classes of goods, almost always accompanied by abundant advertising.’⁹⁰ The 1869 stylish front cover of *Blake and Mckenzie’s English and Foreign Markets and Prices Current*, was covered in advertising and inside it was written that due to their large circulation, those advertising in the journal’s pages would reach a large potential market.⁹¹ The range and change of advertisements over a period of time allows the researcher to link industry change revealed through the journal’s text to visual changes in its advertisements. Vann and VanArsdel conclude that advertisements and illustrations are an untapped resource.⁹² The importance of illustrations was apparent in the *English and Foreign Markets* journal where the illustrations and trademarks had their own index.⁹³ The range of different advertisements in the trade press was vast and both domestic and international in character. The December 1878 *Hatters’ Gazette* included a double page of advertisements, revealing a gamut of trades, ranging from felt hat manufacturers, hat and bonnet boxes, newspaper advertisers, the *Monthly Record of Fashion*, and the *Luton Times and Advertiser* who’s advertisement stated, ‘The leading paper in the straw hat and bonnet district, of which

⁹⁰ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary*, p.634.

⁹¹ *English and Foreign Markets*, June, 1869.

⁹² Vann and VanArsdel, ‘Introduction’, p.4.

⁹³ *English and Foreign Markets*, July, 1859.

Luton is the centre; and the best medium for Advertisements addressed to the Trade.’⁹⁴ The advertisements continued with the *Clothier and Hatter* from New York, the *German Hatter* and shop fittings for hatters and outfitters. By 1900, advertisements were still a key component of the trade press as shown in the *Hatters’ Gazette*’s list of ‘Telegraphic Addresses and Telephone Numbers’ where the company name was listed for free if an advertisement was placed in the journal, otherwise the charge would be £3 3s. per year.⁹⁵

Conclusion

The 19th century trade press is a key primary source giving detailed insight into trades, businesses and the reality of Victorian working life. As a group, their various titles and subject matter would have provided those running Victorian businesses with a ready range of up to date business material. They contain local, national and international information which perhaps suggests an inherent acceptance and understanding of global situations that may not be otherwise perceived by the historian. The ease and confidence revealed in the *Hatters’ Gazette*’s reports of Luton’s international trade, suggests that the concepts of Empire and Colonialization were just a normal part of the psyche of the key Luton straw hat manufacturers and dealers and that their trading vision was genuinely global. The opportunity to research trade journals over a period of time, and perhaps especially if the industry is in its formative stages, allows the researcher to build up a clear picture of change over time. One example of this is in the change to the *Hatters’ Gazette*’s Luton straw hat trade reports. From the start of the journal in the 1870s, the *Hatters’ Gazette* chose to publish Luton’s straw hat trade reports and articles, over and above those from Dunstable or St Albans, a fact which was indicative of how the town had come to dominate the straw hat trade. However, by 1899, the journal’s

⁹⁴ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1878. It is interesting to note here that the newspaper offices were at 48 George Street, Luton, the same street that housed some of the most successful straw hat manufacturers.

⁹⁵ *Hatters’ Gazette*, January, 1900, p.48.

reporting style had changed and the emphasis was no longer on Luton as the sole representative of the local straw hat industry. Instead, trade report titles included St Albans, 'Luton and St Albans Hat Trade', a change which indicated that Luton may have lost some of its local commercial advantage and perhaps felt the need to move away from any potential manufacturing limitations inherent in the omitted word 'straw'.⁹⁶ In a report dated 1st of November 1899, the title is - The Luton Hat Trade, and the reporter continues stating that the word straw is deliberately not included in the title as straw is just one material.⁹⁷ Manufacturing change meant that trade publications were not static but were constantly changing and adapting to manufacturing and retail developments,

the persistent researcher is provided with a series of comprehensive reference works detailing the workings and, perhaps more important, the changes occurring within the specialist trades. Products, skills, forthcoming and current legislation, problems, frustrations, successes, complaints, protestations, and lamentations, all feature prominently.⁹⁸

The *Hatters' Gazette* is a key source for the study of the decline of the English plaiting industry through the trade growth and change in Luton's straw hat industry, an industry which was defined by the scale and price of its Chinese plait imports.

⁹⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Luton and St Albans Hat Trade', December, 1899, p.654.

⁹⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, November, 1899.

⁹⁸ Moss and Hosgood, 'Financial', p.208.

Chapter 2. An Eastern Tale; the Story of Straw Plait Imports from 1870

Introduction

The story of the decline of the straw plaiting industry is also a story about growth, the growth of Luton's straw hat industry. The effects of imports upon the English straw plaiting industry were generally positive until the onset of Chinese plait imports in the late 1860s. Imports of straw plait from abroad had been halted by the Napoleonic Wars and this boosted the English straw trade which, 'continued to thrive – despite periodic setbacks – into the third quarter of the nineteenth century.'¹ In 1842, tariffs on imported straw were reduced, causing trade depression, but the damage was not permanent, 'In the longer term, the English industry successfully weathered the storm of foreign competition through to the 1870s, producing a bewildering variety of new plaits that competed effectively with Italian imports despite the abolition of protective duties.'² In *St Albans and its Region*, Goose highlights the fact that in 1851, the straw plaiting industry was, 'thriving', unlike other cottage industries which were succumbing to the impact of mechanisation. He comments that it was the quality of the plait and its variation which, 'allowed it to compete successfully with foreign competition in the home market.'³ Dony commented that the South Midlands plaiting industry was in direct competition with imported Italian plait which was considered superior. Later, Swiss fancy plait was imported, as was plain plait from the Black Forest and Saxony. Foreign straw trade competition took the form of imported straw and imported straw plait. Between 1825 and 1832 Italian straw was imported into England and plaited into scores for the hat industry.⁴ There

¹ Nigel Goose, 'The straw plait and hat trades in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire' in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England : Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), p.99.

² Nigel Goose, *Population Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851. Vol. 1. The Berkhamsted Region* (Hatfield, 1996), p.44.

³ Nigel Goose, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire. Vol. 2. St. Albans and its Region* (Hatfield, 2000), p.70.

⁴ Pamela Sharpe, 'The Women's Harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c.1793-1885', *Rural History*, vol.5, (1994), p.133.

was a tendency for retrospective authors to assume that plaiting straw was not imported but that it was all grown locally, which was not the case.⁵

As a trade journal reporting the views of the straw hat trade, *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Journal*, recorded the advent and effect of imports. Through these reports, the impact of imported plait upon the English plaiting industry can be analysed. In November 1881, the *Hatters' Gazette* published a long article on straw hat making, which stated that the biggest problem for the Bedfordshire plaiting industry had been Chinese plait imports. 'It cannot be denied that the caprice of fashion causes it many an up and down, and perplexing revolution. This, however, is but a minor evil compared with the foreign competition which has sunk our Bedfordshire straw trade to a somewhat critical position.'⁶ This report in the *Hatters' Gazette* appears to have been one of the first reports alerting the straw hat trade to the circumstances of the beleaguered plaiting industry. This raising of awareness linked contemporary plaiting conditions directly to the effects of imported plait and prompted the straw trade to move on from merely acknowledging plaiters' suffering, to taking steps towards action, 'it behoves all concerned to spare neither pains nor skill in the production of English plaits, nor there may come a day when this beautiful branch of industry may entirely decline through the skill and low prices of Chinese plaits when compared with our own.'⁷ In order to fully assess the *Hatters' Gazette's* view of the role of imported plait in the demise of the English plaiting industry, this chapter has three sections. The first considers why the straw hat trade wanted to source Chinese plait imports and the second section analyses why and how

⁵ Sharpe, 'Harvest', p.137.

⁶ *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular*, hereafter referred to as the *Hatters' Gazette*, November, 1881, p.562.

⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw trade of Luton and District', November, 1881, p.556.

Chinese plait became central to Luton's industrial expansion. The third section analyses Chinese plait's fall from its pedestal and the emergence of Japanese plait imports.

Why did Luton's straw hat industry source Chinese plait?

Being able to trade with China was a primary British concern during the 19th century and to this end, Britain fought two Opium Wars, the first 1839 to 1842 and the second between 1856 to 1860.⁸ The purpose of these wars was to secure preferential trading rights for Britain and to open up China's interior to foreign import and export trade. Britain's industrialisation during the 19th century meant that it needed international trade to provide primary source materials and markets for manufactured goods. Britain's growth in wealth and power, meant that it had the naval power to fight it's cause,⁹ 'It needed two wars...before the truths of free trade became acceptable to the Chinese. Sometimes the logic of free trade needed a little political and naval emphasis, or even some colonizing.'¹⁰ Access to the huge trading opportunities held within China's interior were seen as vital to Britain's continuing economic health, and force was the means of persuasion: 'Victorian policy was driven by the same overarching concerns as that of the Elizabethans: the security of supplies and the expansion of export markets to maintain domestic employment.'¹¹ The importance of trade with China was revealed in Prince Albert's reaction to Lord Elgin's decision to authorise the complete destruction of Yuan Ming Yuan Palace, the old Summer Palace, 'Albert feared the emperor's humiliation would topple the

⁸ See: Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire from 1750 to the Present Day* (London, 1999), p.127; Niall Ferguson, *Empire* (London, 2004), pp.165-166; James L. Hevia, *English lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (London, 2003), pp.Part 1; Opium wars and treaties of peace, friendship, and commerce, chapters 2,3,4.

⁹ Roderick Floud, Jane Humphries, and Paul Johnson, (eds.) *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain: Volume 2, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2014), p.279; see also, Martin Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951* (Oxford, 2007), p.203.

¹⁰ Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: The economic history of Britain 1700-1914* (2001), p.273.

¹¹ Floud, Humphries, Johnson, *Economic History*, p.401.

Ch'ing Dynasty and usher in the anti-capitalist Taipings, with all the dire consequence that would have for British commerce.'¹²

According to the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1897, the connection between plaiting and China was made following the arrival of, 'some chests of tea which were received here from China were lined with torn fragments of straw hats of native production. The plaiting at once attracted the attention of our experts'.¹³ The impetus during the 1860s to consider China as a plait supply source in addition to English and Italian plait, appears to have stemmed from a period of depression in the straw hat industry.¹⁴ Looking back from the vantage point of 1885, the Luton trade reported in the *Hatters' Gazette* commented upon this.¹⁵ Italian straw had become too expensive to use profitably, and English plait, too, was expensive and limited in its supply.¹⁶ Despite this, English plait was in demand during the 1860s, and appears to have been flourishing. Goose confirms that despite the earlier removal, amidst plaiters' concerns', of protective import duties, English plait had been very successful up until the 1870s. During this time the English plaiting industry had managed to produce many different types of plait and were able to hold their own against imported Italian plait.¹⁷ By 1870, there were thousands of English plaiters, men as well as women, young and old, who plaited primarily to contribute to their own family economies. The result was a cottage economy environment which produced plaits of varying quality and varying price. However, the general impression from the *Hatters' Gazette* after 1870, is that the better class of English plait was generally superior to Chinese imports, a fact which should render it immune to decline.

¹² Saul David, *Victoria's Wars: the Rise of Empire* (London, 2007), p.402.

¹³ *Hatters' Gazette*, "'Straws.'" By a *Hatters' Gazette* Special Commissioner', June, 1897, p.334.

¹⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Luton and the Straw Plait Trade', July, 1885, p.403.

¹⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Luton and the Straw Plait Trade', July, 1885, p.403.

¹⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade of Luton and District', April, 1887, p 205. 'The new fancy Chinese plaits are selling most freely, and when dyed in the fancy colours are quite equal to the Italian make, which cost almost double.'

¹⁷ Goose, *Berkhamsted*, p.44.

For the depressed 1860s straw hat industry, trade with China meant trade expansion. This expansion was centred upon the working class demand for cheap straw hats. Dony noted that, ‘The chief virtue of the Chinese plait was that it was cheap and came at time when there was an increased demand for cheap hats.’¹⁸ The use of cheap Chinese plait, copied from more expensive English plait, allowed English straw hat manufacturers to offer, for the first time, a product at a price point that enabled the working class to purchase low cost but fashionable straw hats and bonnets. Before the ready availability of cheap mass produced hats, straw hats had been fashionable, high quality and expensive, as confirmed in an 1877 article titled, *Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade*, ‘Until within the last quarter of a century straw bonnets were the exclusive wear of the upper and middle classes.’¹⁹ Luton manufacturers had created an opportunity to profitably manufacture significantly higher volumes of straw hats to be placed onto an expanding market. This new market was advertised and promoted by the straw hat industry and, in 1873, the *Hatters’ Gazette* published an article positioning the marine straw hat as wearable by all women from all walks of life. No longer was the purchase of a new straw hat wholly dependent upon the financial superiority of the middle or upper classes.²⁰ The *Hatters’ Gazette* comment was that the beauty of a straw hat enhances all women; rich or poor, pretty or not so pretty, and around the hat floated wisps of national pride. The industry positioned the straw hat as a defining article for all English women:

A portion of its charm may be in the associations that throng about it, -pictures of happy childhood and unconscious girlhood, and of healthy country life, but the crowning association of all, consists perhaps in this – that the genuine broad brimmed straw Hat

¹⁸ J.G. Dony, *A History of the Straw Hat Industry* (Luton, 1942), p.87.

¹⁹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, March, 1877, p.70.

²⁰ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘*Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade*’, March, 1877, p.70. ‘Until within the last quarter of a century straw bonnets were the exclusive wear of the upper and middle classes.’

stamps the genuine Englishwoman – no other country can produce the Hat or the wearer.²¹

It was generally accepted that the quality of English plait tended to be better than Chinese plait, but due to industrial and commercial changes in the hat market, the ability to make better quality plait did not give English plaiters any advantage over their Chinese competitors. The quality of the plait used in Luton after 1870 only needed to be good enough for mass production. During the main years of Chinese imports, from the late 1860s to the 1890s, any difference in quality between Chinese and English plait was considered to only be perceptible to those with a working knowledge of the straw trade.²² By 1880, the wider populace was purchasing straw hats with an eye on value for money, ‘meanwhile though a connoisseur would decide at once in favour of a straw hat or bonnet made of Dunstable plait those who study comfort and economy will only be well pleased to secure the Canton at a third of the price.’²³ Not only was Chinese plait cheap and plentiful, but its quality was more than adequate for the low end hat market. An 1874 article stated that straw hats used to be a luxury but were now generally affordable, and all factory girls from Scotland to Europe and the colonies were wearing the *Dolly Varden*.²⁴ Indeed, the cheapness of imported Canton plait enabled exported hats to return a large profit margin.²⁵ The public wanted as much fashionable straw hat as they could get for their money and the straw hat manufacturers wanted to make the hats as cheaply as possible in order to realise their profit from the plait.

²¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1873, p.237.

²² *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Friday 2 January, 1880.

²³ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

²⁴ An early mass produced straw hat. *Hatters' Gazette*, ‘Trade reports – Luton and Dunstable’, February, 1874, p.41.

²⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, ‘Trade reports – Luton and Dunstable’, February, 1874, p.41.



©Luton Culture

Fig. 3. Two examples of Chinese plait (left – whole straw and middle- split straw) and Italian plait (right), c19th century.

International trade through imports and exports had been part and parcel of the straw hat and plait trade since the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Goose has observed that straw plaits were not just for local consumption, but also for export.²⁶ As a consequence, the straw hat trade had a global outlook during the 19th century, and, when faced with an industry problem, did not hesitate to consider finding a solution beyond British shores. The 1870s Chinese plait imports may initially have been just another example of trade development and adaptation, working alongside the existing plait and hat industries. In 1877, the *Hatters' Gazette* published an

²⁶ Goose, 'straw plait and hat trades', p.99.

article on the history of the straw industry which appears to provide historical context and justification for the recent expansion in the straw hat industry following Chinese imports. The article states that the English straw trade had rapidly developed following disruption to imported straw goods during the Napoleonic Wars, thus asserting that international trading had been, and was still, an integral part of the straw industry.²⁷ Nineteenth century hat manufacturers did, with equanimity, buy imported Italian straw and plait and use it alongside straw and plait from the South Midlands. Imports were actively sought by the straw hat industry as a means by which to develop and expand the trade. Thomas Waller, a founding merchant of Luton's straw hat industry, had visited Italy in the first half of the 19th century and arranged for Italian straw to be exported to Luton to benefit the English poor.²⁸ The poor would benefit by being able to plait the Italian straw as there was not enough English straw to plait. At this time, some English plaiters not only used Italian straw but also copied the Italian method of straw plaiting.²⁹ Italian leghorn hats were a very popular style and Italian pedal straw was considered to be the finest. It was in such a manner, with English plaiters working Italian straw and English sewers stitching the bonnets, that the English straw hat trade competed with the Italian market.

Chinese plait imports were important to hat manufacturers for three main reasons; their low price, large quantity and their acceptable and adaptable quality.

²⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Hats at Home and Abroad', October, 1877, p.240.

²⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Luton and the Straw Plait Trade, October, 1895.

²⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Hats at Home and Abroad, October, 1877, p.240.

Table 3: Report from the Consul-General in China, showing, ‘the most remarkable increase of any commodity sent from China’³⁰

Year	<i>Piculs</i>	value (£)
1871	7,011	£42,070
1877	20,802	£106,091
1885		£672,000*
1886		£1,100,000

*value in £ estimated by significant importer

The rapid increase in volume of plait from China was noted in the *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘It would seem, indeed, that as England depends on America for wheat for the daily bread of its people, so, ere long, manufacturers will have to rely for straw plait and its cognate materials on China very largely, and, in a lesser degree, on Switzerland, Italy, and parts of Germany.’³¹

These three reasons meant that London fashion houses could sell straw hats made from Chinese plait at one third of their previous cost.³² However, these three reasons also spelt the decline of the English plaiting industry. The need of Luton’s straw hat industry for additional plait was also a need for cheaper plait, and Chinese plait was incredibly cheap. Imports of cheap Chinese plait, were sold at remarkably low prices due to the remarkably low cost of Chinese plait production and this left English plaiters unable to compete in the same market. Chinese women and children, new to straw plaiting, had not previously been able to earn an income during winter months and they were, therefore, prepared to plait for a pittance. In December 1880, the *Hatters’ Gazette* reported on the regularity of straw plait imports from China, and that it was mainly produced in the ‘southern part of Chih-li, and

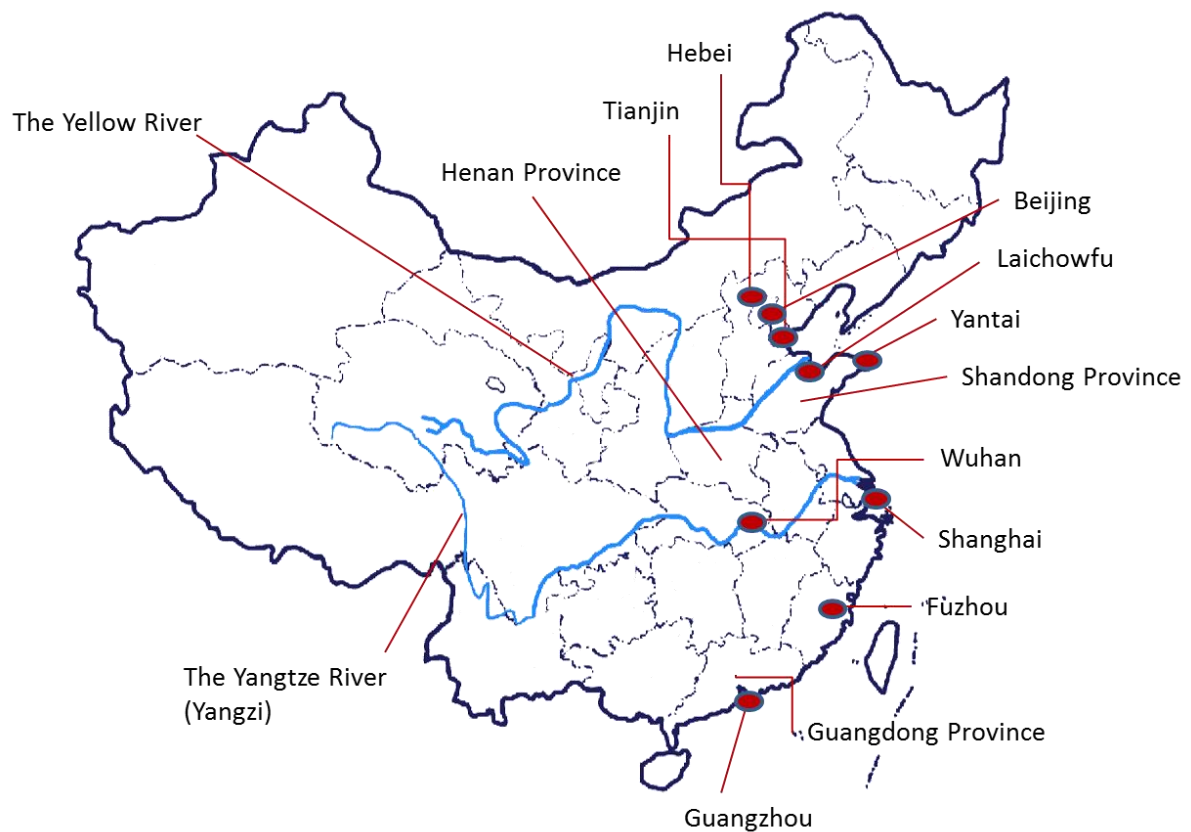
³⁰ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1886, p.682. The value for 1886 was taken from the *Hatters’ Gazette*, October, 1887, p.562. A picul was, ‘A measure of weight used in China and the East generally, equal to 100 catties, i.e. about 133 1/3 lbs.’ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford, 1973). (133.3lbs = 60.46kg)

³¹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, October, 1887, p.562.

³² *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

north-west of Shantung and north east of Honan, wheat here is main food'.³³ The plaiting was done by the wives and children of Chinese farmers, and as the *Hatters' Gazette* commented, 'The remuneration for such work is exceedingly small, although trained skill is required to do it, but as it is carried on indoors, when there is no occupation in the fields, an earning of two to five cents a day, therefore, is considered quite satisfactory by the people.'³⁴

Map 1: Map of China showing key places mentioned in the *Hatters' Gazette*³⁵



³³ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1880, p.615.

³⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1880, p.615.

³⁵ Chinamaps.org China blank map with Yangtze River and Yellow River.

Table 4: Approximate equivalent of 19th century Chinese place names in the *Hatters' Gazette*

Current	19th century
Yantai	Cheefoo
Guangzhou	Canton (city)
Guangdong	Canton (province)
Shangdong	Shan-tung
Wuhan	Hankow
Hebei	Chih-li
Henan	Honan
Fuzhou	Foochow
Tianjin	Tientsin
Beijing	Peking

In September 1888, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported, 'How the Chinese live is a mystery; it would be instructive and useful to get a leaf out of their cookery book.'³⁶ A newspaper report stated that Chinese labour was so cheap that a London house could sell a straw hat wholesale from 2.5d to 6d, 'an unheard of cheapness before Canton plait came onto the market.'³⁷ In 1874 Dunstable plait could be bought for 15d per twenty yards whilst White Canton cost a mere 15d per sixty yards.³⁸ Any too obvious defects in Chinese plait could be remedied through the additional processes of bleaching and dyeing in Luton. *The York Herald* commented in 1874, that Dunstable plait was better in texture, strength and workability than Canton plait, but if Canton plait was bleached on importation then the plait became comparable to homemade plait.³⁹

Although the quality of English plait could be much better than Canton plait, it was consistently trumped by the low cost of Chinese plait which made the end product, the straw hat, a very

³⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Trade of Luton and District', September, 1887, pp.516-517.

³⁷ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

³⁸ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

³⁹ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

profitable one for manufacturers and retailers.⁴⁰ By the 1870s, regular, reliable Chinese imports were secured. Although the table below contains import figures for all plait imported into Britain, not just plait from the China, the bulk of this plait would have been sourced in the Far East.

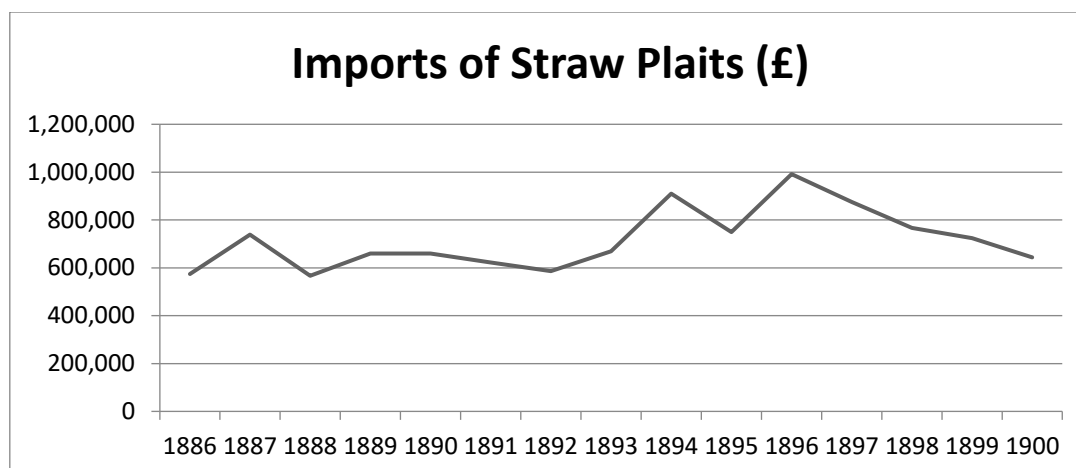
Table 5: Board of trade statistics and straw plait imports as reported in the Hatters Gazette ⁴¹

Year	Plait imports (£)	Plait exports (£)
1886	573,742	-
1887	739,365	-
1888	566,812	-
1889	659,870	-
1890	659,892	-
1891	622,097	-
1892	586,325	-
1893	668,674	-
1894	910,337	429,088
1895	749,421	404,832
1896	991,629	396,043
1897	874,857	346,223
1898	767,307	333,160
1899	724,239	361,702
1900	643,337	390,064

⁴⁰ Canton plait was the name commonly given to Chinese plait. Canton was the first port to export Chinese plait.

⁴¹ Up to and including 1895 the source is the *Hatters' Gazette*, April, 1897, p.194. The source for the period 1896 to 1900 is *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427.

Table 6: Chart showing Board of trade statistics and straw plait imports⁴²



The patterns used to make this imported Chinese plait appear to have been chosen by Luton’s straw trade. Indeed, Luton’s straw hat industry actively helped Chinese plaiters to copy, and therefore undercut, English plait. English plait tended to be superior and as Dony commented, ‘Chinese plait was not as good as the English of which it was only an imitation.’⁴³ However, following plaiting advice from English plait dealers, Chinese plaiters became excellent copyists. In 1880, the *Luton Times and Advertiser* reported, ‘But some dozen years ago John Chinaman found that the lissom fingers that had imitated every craft under the sun could plait straw too.’⁴⁴ They were adept at copying samples of English plait sent out to the Far East and were known to be able not only to imitate any design but to produce them in much higher numbers and at a much lower cost than the original. Reiterating a point made in April 1887, in August of that year a *Hatters’ Gazette* contributor wrote, ‘The Chinese only want the ideas given to them, and they can supply it at a price that would starve European labour.’⁴⁵ By March 1888, the *Hatters’ Gazette* commented that there really was no plait that the Chinese

⁴² Up to and including 1895 the source is the *Hatters’ Gazette*, April, 1897, p.194. The source for the period 1896 to 1900 is *Hatters’ Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427.

⁴³ Dony, *History*, p.87.

⁴⁴ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Friday 2 January, 1880. John Chinaman was a common 19th century name for Chinese workers. The caricature was used in cartoons such as *Punch* and was often drawn wearing a coolie hat and having a pig tail.

⁴⁵ *Hatters’ Gazette*, August, 1887.

could not imitate.⁴⁶ This placed any new English plait designs at risk of being sent out to China by the straw trade, copied by Chinese plaiters, and the newly copied designs sold back to English plait dealers who placed them on the market and reaped the financial gain. In fact, all English designs were constantly at risk of being copied and undercut in China. The following quotation gives a sense of the resulting economic impact of this and reveals a broader attitude towards China where the terms ‘John Chinaman’ or ‘Heathen Chinee’ seem to have been used according to the positive or negative tenor of the information.

Our straw plaiting industry is declining through competition with foreigners at starvation prices, not from want of skill; the best designs which human skill could invent, with the advantages of technical training and perfect systemization, would afford but the barest livelihood to our straw plaiters if they could be imitated by the Heathen Chinee.⁴⁷

Following the development of Chinese imports, the straw hat trade did not appear to consider any possible negative repercussions to the English plaiting trade, not even of the ability of Chinese plaiters to create single plaits of split straw. To make more delicate, intricate and thus higher quality plait, the pipe of a straw could be split. The first instance of Chinese plait meeting British technology was in the early 1870s. Straw splitters - small table top machines which produced a finer plait through splitting the whole straw into narrow splints – were sent to China. This was done to deliberately improve the quality of Chinese imported plait and to make it more directly competitive with English plait. ‘Some eighteen months since many hundreds of straw splitting machines were sent out to enable John Chinaman to compete with

⁴⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, March, 1888.

⁴⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, ‘Straw Trade of Luton and District’, March, 1888, p.142. See also Ross G. Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined*. Vol. 85. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2013), p.166. ‘Especially towards the end of the Victorian era, plays and music hall numbers recycled certain American stereotypes about the Chinese and naturalized aspects of Chinese-American identity – chop suey, hand-laundries, the “heathen Chinee,” and the like’.

our English plaiters, in fancy plaits, as well as double straws'.⁴⁸ The result was the arrival of the 'long-looked-for Chinese single plaits', but they were still considered inferior to fine English plaiting.⁴⁹ Chinese plait continued to develop throughout the last third of the 19th century. In September 1893, the straw trade report from Luton and District reported that Chinese plaiters had again breached plait production methods which had hitherto only been plaited by a European hand:

The heathen Chinees is again making an impression upon the local industry. After repeated failures, extending over many years, they have succeeded in making plaits from split straws. Either they have found a new kind of straw or more probably an improved method of treating their material, so that they are now sending certain classes of goods to the English market, which hitherto were exclusively of European production. Scarcely any of it has yet been used in this locality, as it has been purchased by American buyers.⁵⁰

The assertion that Chinese split straw would not negatively affect English plaiting could have been a deliberate political stance from the straw hat industry, adopted to encourage plait imports whilst discouraging negative press. However, there seems to be a general mood lifting from the pages of the *Hatters' Gazette*, that on the whole, Chinese plait tended to be inferior to fine English plaiting and as such would compete in a completely different market. 'The result proves, that their skill is equal to any demand that may be made, but there is a beauty and brilliancy about our English straw that places it first on the list, and at present, there is nothing

⁴⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable', February, 1874, p.41.

⁴⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable', February, 1874, p.41.

⁵⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Reports from Luton and District', September, 1893, p.488. For more information on language and attitudes to the Chinese in the 19th century see Forman, *China*, pp.58, 179 (John Chinaman), 194 (Heathen Chinees). See also Hevia, *English lessons*, chapter 8.

to fear either in appearance or price.’⁵¹ The trade’s assertion that the markets were separate and that quality high end English plait would protect plaiters from the effects of Chinese plait, proved not to be enough to protect the English plaiter from Asian competition. The immense quantity of Chinese plait and its unbeatable price coupled with the public’s demand for cheap straw hats, meant that the demand for the more expensive, better quality English plait, rapidly fell away. Luton’s straw hat industry responded to the market and the market wanted cheap straw hats. Any extra money paid to have quality English plait made into mass produced straw hats would neither pay dividends nor be recouped following the sale of the finished articles. It was, in fact, likely to incur a loss. In the early 1870s when Far Eastern imports were flooding the plait market, the *Luton Times and Advertiser* reported that the English plait industry was bound to struggle. This was because Chinese plait was either half or less than half the price of English plait and yet practically comparable in quality for ordinary straw hats. The report described the English plaits as being just a bit more ‘finished’ and ‘elegant’, not the qualities needed in a cheap, mass produced item.⁵² The straw hat trade passed comment, in 1874, that even though the colour of Chinese plait was not as good as English plait, and, that without machine crimping it was unattractive, its price was everything, ‘The price and appearance distancing all competition in home-made material.’⁵³ Consideration of the quality of Chinese plait came in a very poor second against its price and volume.

In fact, the straw hat industry supported and encouraged the Chinese industry to produce plait in direct competition with not just commoner types of English plait, but also the better grades. The view from the *Hatters’ Gazette* on the standard of English plait is sometimes contradictory, with the plait quality either improving or not being good enough, although some imported plait

⁵¹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable’, February, 1874, p.41.

⁵² *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Saturday 26 October, 1872.

⁵³ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Trade Report for Luton and Dunstable’, March, 1874, p.80.

too, may well have been of better quality than others. This variation in description is probably a reflection of the straw trade adjusting to the impact of vast quantities of imported straw. With demand for English plait dropping and initial opportunities for hand-sewing work appearing, there must have been limited consistency in both quality and price. In August 1877, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that 'Twist bead Canton will sell in straws, if the importation is sufficiently large to reduce the present rate. It bears favourable comparison with our finest English made plaits, and when dyed it is not easy to tell the difference.'⁵⁴ So not only were lower grades of English plait being out competed on price and quantity by Chinese plait, but also the supposedly less at risk, quality English plaits were being undercut. By October 1877, reports in the *Hatters' Gazette* indicated that the straw hat industry was aware of the considerable variation in quality and price of Chinese plait imports. 'Chinese straw plait, to the value of about 150,000*l* is now imported to this country, and ranges in price from 7*l* to 50*l* the bale of 240 pieces (each piece 60 to 100 yards). Hats have been manufactured from it and retailed at a price so low as 3*d* each.'⁵⁵ The *Hatters' Gazette* consistently reported on issues which impacted the immediate day to day and long term health of the straw trade, and this issue of trade with China was perhaps the most important one.

An advertisement showing different types of Chinese plait imported by Messrs. Munt, Brown and Co., of London, was placed in the December 1873 issue of the *Hatters' Gazette* in conjunction with an article on Chinese plait. This illustrated advertisement showcased twenty-one Chinese plait straw hats in the spring fashions for 1874, and appears to be deliberately focusing on the quality of the Chinese plait. The conclusion drawn in the article was that the examples of imported plait were of a very high quality, due in no small part to the lengthy

⁵⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report Luton and Dunstable', August, 1877, p.190.

⁵⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, January, 1878, p.330.

history and tradition of straw plaiting in China. ‘The plaiting is faultless, exhibiting great delicacy and skill. Indeed, Asiatics would appear to have a peculiar aptitude for this industry, which we need not remark is an ancient one in the Celestial Empire.’⁵⁶ The message was that not only was the quality of Chinese plait very good, but that it was considerably cheaper than English or Continental plaits and that its use would rapidly increase.

Luton straw hat manufacturers wanted expansion, and they wanted the best quality plait for the cheapest possible price.⁵⁷ The plaiting industry in China was vast and in 1878 the *Hatters Gazette* commented that ‘In the southern provinces of China, where in summer the population use no other head covering, and where the mandarins wear those umbrella hats with tremendously wide brims, the quantity of straw plaited is prodigious.’⁵⁸ This security of supply meant that the trade could safely invest in and rapidly expand straw hat production. However, a couple of years later, the *Hatters’ Gazette* indicated that the trade commentators were beginning to understand the hidden complexity in the plait and straw hat trade, the different opinions and equivocal views. In 1880, the consequence of the inability of English plait to compete with Chinese plait production was that straw hat manufacturers became increasingly dependent upon a single market - the Far East plait market - for its supply of ordinary straw plait. ‘One of the main causes of this increased demand and export is the falling off in the industry in Europe, which finds it impossible to compete with China. Hence manufacturers look more and more to China for their supplies.’⁵⁹ Slowly, the *Hatters Gazette’s* reports on the Chinese plait market start to include caution.

⁵⁶ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1873, p.367.

⁵⁷ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Trade Reports Luton and Dunstable’, August, 1877, p.190.

⁵⁸ *Hatters’ Gazette*, November, 1878.

⁵⁹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, December, 1880, p.615.

Why did Chinese plait imports play such a key role in Luton's industrial expansion?

The English straw hat industry was dependent upon the supply of plait - its 'raw material' - and the scale of Chinese plait imports does not seem to have been compromised by an immediate sense of industrial obligation or responsibility towards the straw hat trade's poorer, rural counterparts, the plaiters. This underlined the fact that they were, in fact, two distinct industries; a plait industry and a straw hat manufacturing industry.⁶⁰ The two crafts were however often worked together, before the decline of the plaiting industry, under the roofs of small rural cottage industries where families would source the straw, plait it and then sew the plaits into hats. In these small rural 'plait to hat' cottage family workshops, straw was plaited, sometimes bleached and or dyed, and then sewn together and perhaps hand blocked into a finished hat. However, it can still be argued that there was no organisational commitment between the larger urban hat manufacturers and the mainly rural plaiters. Plait dealers were the middle men and provided the supply chain link between them, dealing with both plaiters and merchants and eradicating any direct commercial contact or obligation on the part of the straw hat manufacturers towards plaiters, 'The plait dealers were the pulse of the industry'.⁶¹ Although if plaiters were able to side step the plait dealer and deal with a hat manufacturer, they could obtain a better plait price.⁶² Many English plaiters sold their plait to plait dealers, either at market, through their village shop or to dealers visiting their villages. This plait was then sold on, by the dealers, to the straw hat manufacturers. In this way, English straw plait, especially pre-1870, supplied local hand-sewing factories, in, for example, Dunstable or Luton. The fortunes of the straw hat industry directly affected the fortunes of the English plaiting industry.

⁶⁰ See Chapter 1, p.35.

⁶¹ Dony, *History*, p.63.

⁶² Dony, *History*, pp.61-65.

The plaiting industry in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and North Essex was vast, omnipresent and a crucial financial contribution to rural family economies. The sheer size of the straw plaiting industry and its vital role in so many rural homes and villages may have provided false reassurance that it surely was an industry which was too large and too well established, too much an accepted part of the rural landscape, to ever be negatively affected by Chinese imports. Evidence of an absence of worry over the English plaiting industry was combined with evidence of the international character of Luton's straw hat trade in a *Hatters' Gazette* report. This report positioned the straw hat trade as being proud to be able to come to the aid of the Chinese peasant. In an article, dated 1877 and entitled, 'straw hats at home and abroad,' a reporter commented on the burgeoning Chinese straw plait industry, and wrote, 'The manufacture furnishes a source of employment and profit to large numbers of the peasantry of Lai-chow-foo, occupying the central portion of the great promontory of Shan -tung (on the northern shore of which Che-foo is situated).'⁶³ There was no comment about employment and profit for the English plaiter.

Plaiters' previous concerns about European straw and plait imports, and the duties levied on them before 1870, were swept aside by the irrevocable impact of cheap and plentiful Chinese imports. There had been attempts to import Chinese plait in the early 1860s.⁶⁴ These initial import attempts were unsuccessful due to Far Eastern unrest hindering trade. However, in the late 1860s and early 1870s successful Chinese trading ventures did take place and resulted in significant plait imports. In 1880 the *Luton Times* reported that, 'the import of this plait is remarkable'.⁶⁵ In 1867, 1361 piculs were imported, in 1869 more than 3239 piculs, in 1872

⁶³ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Hats at Home and Abroad', October, 1877, p.240. The *Hatters' Gazette* for January 1878 contains a short article clearly stating that plaiting gave the peasants in Lai-chow-foo much work - *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Chinese Straw Plait', January, 1878, p.330.

⁶⁴ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

⁶⁵ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Friday 2 January, 1880.

16,445 piculs were imported and then, in 1879, 20,814 piculs were imported.⁶⁶ The significance and lasting impact of these early Chinese imports upon both the plait and hat trades was accurately glimpsed in 1874: ‘it is likely that a greater revolution than has yet been anticipated will take place in favour of Chinese labour in this field.’⁶⁷

In trying to analyse the damage from imports to the English plaiting trade, a contributor to the *Hatters’ Gazette* noted that there was no dependable information on the monetary value of imported plaits and that it would be just a guess to arrive at the financial harm done to the English plaiting industry.⁶⁸ However, his conclusion was that the decline in the English plaiting industry had been both quick and directly linked to the imports of Chinese plaits:

It seems from these figures that the rapid decline of this industry must have commenced immediately after the census of 1871, and we find that Canton about that time was imported in large quantities, and there can be no doubt that the introduction of this plait into our market has done much to cause the depression which year by year has grown more apparent...⁶⁹

Here was an admission that Chinese imports had negatively impacted the English plaiting industry, with the decline described as being ‘rapid’ but the resultant depression as emerging more slowly. The steep rise in imports in the late 1860s and early 1870s was immediate. The *Hatters’ Gazette* in December 1900 ran a retrospective piece on the straw trade, titled ‘Changes in the Straw Hat and Plait Manufacture Since 1861’. The article states that, ‘In 1869, for the first time, the import returns show that straw plait was being [sic] from china. The amount was very small, being only 27,000 lbs. in that year, valued at only 1,789*l*. In

⁶⁶ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Friday 2 January, 1880. A picul was, ‘A measure of weight used in China and the East generally, equal to 100 catties, i.e. about 133 1/3 lbs.’ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, (Oxford, 1973). (133.3lbs = 60.46kg)

⁶⁷ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

⁶⁸ Dony, *History*, pp.192-196.

⁶⁹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Luton and the Straw Plait Trade’, July 1885, p.403.

1870 the amount imported from China was 41,204 lbs., valued at 2,380l.⁷⁰ Following on from that time, the size of the Chinese imports rapidly increased.⁷¹

(Deliberately left blank)

⁷⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Changes in the Straw Hat and Plait Manufacture Since 1861', December, 1900, p.648.

⁷¹ See Dony, *History*, pp.193-195, for more information on straw plait import figures.



©Luton Culture-Luton News

Fig. 4. E.B.Thompson standing in front of a bale of imported plait, 19th century, 1986_8_140

In order to corner the market in mass produced straw hats, Luton's straw trade was focused and successful in its pursuit of Chinese trade, aided and abetted by Britain's national policy towards China. China was regarded by all countries as a source of potential wealth during much of the 19th century. In July 1898, the *Hatters' Gazette* underlined the importance of Chinese commerce for not just British, but for global interests: 'China is looked at with longing eyes by the commercial world as a vast field for development of trade.'⁷² The Chinese market was starting to open up in the middle of the 19th century as Britain repeatedly tried to resolve the 'Eastern Question', and China became a source of industrial expansion and development. Referring to the straw trade, the *York Herald* reported, 'There is little doubt that this is but one instance of successful Chinese competition in our labour market'.⁷³ This article noted that foreign countries had been claiming Chinese land but that the British Government was working to keep its own trade free from interference: 'the Government is willing to prevent trade from being baulked by Foreign Powers, and to secure "open doors" for British enterprise.'⁷⁴

Global export comments in the *Hatters' Gazette's* 'Review of the Straw Trade of Luton and District' for 1876 state that European goods were already entering China, for example Lucifer matches, woollen and cotton socks, mittens, watches and clocks.⁷⁵ The *Hatters' Gazette* also reported in 1877 that there had been a growing industry in the export of hats to China during the previous few years. 'The importation of hats from England to the country of the Celestials has grown to be a significant trade, especially during the last few years.'⁷⁶ This was despite trade with China being still somewhat hampered by unresolved conflicts, 'The continental

⁷² *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1898, P.240.

⁷³ *York Herald*, Monday 21 September, 1874.

⁷⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1898, P.240. The *Hatters' Gazette* reported in July 1900 that Chinese plait was sold in Mincing-lane, London, each bale had 240 lengths and each length was 60yards long - *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Chinese Straw Plait', July, 1900.

⁷⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, February, 1877, p.36.

⁷⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, February, 1877, p.36.

department has been kept back in some measure through the uncertainty of a peaceful solution of the Eastern Question, but there are several good orders in the hands of our manufacturers, both in Luton and Dunstable.’⁷⁷ This comment could suggest that Luton’s entrepreneurial straw hat trade was buying cheap straw plait from China, importing it into London, transporting it up to Luton and from there making straw hats to be sold, at a profit, back to the Chinese. For the straw hat industry, trade with China invariably led to profit through unbeatably cheap production. Luton’s capture of the Chinese plait market and its phenomenally low cost plait, combined with Britain’s lack of import duty, all gave Luton the lead on profitable low class straw hat exports.⁷⁸ Luton’s wealth grew rapidly during the initial decades following plait imports from China. Later comments from the *Hatters’ Gazette* suggest that wealth at that time was easily accrued without any special effort on the part of manufacturers.⁷⁹

Wrapping around the issue of Chinese straw plait imports and their negative effect upon the English plaiting industry was Britain’s Free Trade policy.⁸⁰ In 1850, Tory protectionists had still not come around to the concept of Free Trade: they considered that, ‘production and consumption would not automatically balance, and that the interests of domestic producers should be protected to achieve sustainable economic development.’⁸¹ However, the position changed in 1852 and free trade was accepted and by the late 1860s the Government’s national policy of Free Trade enabled Luton’s manufacturers to venture to the Far East in search of new sources of straw plait, secure in the knowledge that the lack of import duties in docks back home would increase their profit. As Stephen Bunker states, ‘Luton was unquestionably built

⁷⁷ *Hatters’ Gazette*, January, 1877, p.19.

⁷⁸ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry’, October, 1888, p.525.

⁷⁹ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘The Straw Trade Past and Present’, letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

⁸⁰ For free trade, Floud, Humphries, Johnson, *Economic History*, pp.20, 74; Mathias, *Industrial Nation*, pp.229-230, 280; Hobsbawm, *Industry*, pp.117/118, p.211.

⁸¹ Daunton, *Wealth*, p.202.

upon free trade'.⁸² The article 'Fortunes with Straw Foundations' in the 1898 February *Hatters' Gazette*, considered the impact that Free Trade had upon Luton's industry. The article stated that, although some imported straw plait went straight to the merchant warehouses, much more was kept in London at the docks. All Chinese and Japanese plait was brought into London docks because there was no duty placed on it, with just a very small amount of plait leaving China and being transported straight to America. The P. and O. passenger boats carried the less heavy bales in their holds and the heavier ones were sent by cargo ship. On the arrival of straw plait in London, the Luton plait dealers took small samples and sent them onto their customers, who were often international, and subsequently orders were received and the requisite bales sent abroad. Surprisingly, the most expensive part of the operation for the Luton manufacturers, was the expense of keeping bales in the docks and the expense of sending bales by railway up to Luton: 'the cost of conveying goods from London to Luton is as great as from Canton to London.'⁸³

In the *Hatters' Gazette* for January 1886, an article considered a leaflet on straw plait imports and Fair Trade. This leaflet asserted that both the Liberal Government and Free Trade had not been good for the labouring classes. This Free Trade,

has robbed the Straw Plaiting Trade of its prosperity by allowing the straw plait manufacturers in China to send it here free of duty to be made up for our own use, thereby causing a glut in the market and preventing our own manufactured plait from finding anything like a fair price for the thousands of women of our own country.⁸⁴

⁸² Stephen Bunker, 'Houses Built of Straw: The Influence of the Hat Trade in the Shaping of Luton', *Costume*, vol. 30, no.1, (1996), p.108.

⁸³ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Fortunes with Straw Foundations', February, 1898, p.75.

⁸⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Plait and Fair Trade', January 1886, p.34. A hand bill was distributed before the election in the Northern Division of Bedfordshire, titled: "What has the Liberal Government done for the labouring classes of this country by one-sided Free Trade?"

Charles Magniac, the new Liberal member of Parliament for North Bedfordshire, passed comment upon this Fair Trade leaflet and its implication that Chinese plait imports should be controlled through the application of customs duty. He wrote,

I have known Luton from boyhood. At its commencement I remember it a fair sized agricultural town - I might almost say village - in which the inhabitants found occupation in plaiting the straw grown in the neighbourhood. As they increased more straw was required, which was drawn from other parts of England. A further increase led to the importation of Italian straw, the price of which rose so as to be prohibitive. Then ensued the importation of straw plait from China. The population of Luton has increased during the period alluded to from hundreds to 30,000.

Charles Magniac stated that the meteoric rise of Luton, its vast trade expansion and the resulting benefits could not have happened without Free Trade.⁸⁵

The industry and energy of the inhabitants to which free scope was given by a system of Free Trade, has raised your town to a first-class position among the other manufacturing towns of the greatest manufacturing country in the world, and all this it is proposed to extinguish in the name of "Fair Trade".⁸⁶

English straw plaiters had for some time been wary of the adverse impact of pre-1870 imports upon their trade. Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, import duties fluctuated as the country adjusted to peace time commerce. Nearly twenty-five years later, a retrospective article in the *Hatters' Gazette* wrote about the straw hat industry's wider commercial perspective, commenting that in 1842, high import duties on straw plait were reduced and then

⁸⁵ Pamela Horn wrote that in 1842 high import duties on straw plait were reduced and were completely removed in 1860. Pamela Horn, 'The Buckinghamshire straw plait trade in Victorian England', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, vol.19, (1971), p.43.

⁸⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Plait and Fair Trade', January 1886, p.34.

completely removed in 1860.⁸⁷ In 1842 the duty was lowered to 7s. 6d. and further cut in 1853 to 2s. 6d. By 1861 there had been a complete repeal of import duty on straw plait.⁸⁸ In 1842, there had been concern in the straw plaiting trade about the potentially negative impact of decreasing import duties. At that time, Peel had proposed reducing the import duty to 5s. 0d. per lb, but he reconsidered after ‘receiving a deputation from Luton.’⁸⁹ Dony wrote that there was, however, nothing for the plaiters to worry about as, after just three years post reductions, the plaiting trade had expanded.⁹⁰ Goose confirmed that despite the removal of protective duties, the English plaiting industry had been very successful up until the 1870s, able to produce many different types of plait and to hold their own against imported Italian plait.⁹¹ By the end of the 19th century, the situation for the English plaiters had dramatically changed, and in 1896, the *Hatters’ Gazette* reported a plea for import duty on straw plait, but by this time, the horse had long since bolted from the stable. This request had come from the small town of Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire and was sent to the Government, requesting that Chinese plait imports were given ‘protective duty’ to protect the English trade. The *Hatters’ Gazette’s* response to this tariff proposal was simple, ‘Even if the prayer were granted, it would not induce the public to wear the old-fashioned patterns of English plait which are produced in that district. What is needed is invention rather than protection, and if English enterprise can produce a succession of novelties, they will command good prices, and become old fashioned in their turn before the Chinese can copy them.’⁹² Two key foundation stones of Luton’s industrial expansion were Chinese plait imports and Free Trade. The *Hatters’ Gazette* represented the views of the straw hat trade, and in November 1897, a writer vividly put Luton’s industry into the conundrum of the Free Trade debate. The writer stated that if imported plaits had been

⁸⁷ Horn, ‘Buckinghamshire’, p.43.

⁸⁸ Marian Nichols, ‘Straw plaiting and the straw hat industry in Britain’, *Costume*, vol.30, no.1, (1996), p.121.

⁸⁹ Dony, *History* p.85. in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 1845, Vol. II, p.475.

⁹⁰ Dony, *History* p.85.

⁹¹ Goose, *Berkhamsted*, p.44.

⁹² *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Straw Trade Report for Luton and District’, February, 1896, p.95.

given 'protective duty', 'Bedfordshire might now have been a wilderness; as it is, for a radius of ten miles round Luton, the Charing Cross of the industry, there is scarcely a more prosperous area to be found in the United Kingdom.'⁹³ Free Trade had provided Luton with financial wealth and a wealth of opportunity.

Evidence of success - The changing role of plait dealers, a reflection of scale

The influx of cheap plait from the Far East in conjunction with Free Trade caused irreparable damage to the health of the English straw plaiting industry. This decline affected the role of English plait dealers. Before the Chinese plait imports, plait dealers visited villages or markets to buy and sell plait and this activity declined along with the home plaiting industry. Dony confirmed that plait dealers often did move away from trading in home produced plait.⁹⁴ An article in the *Luton and Times and Advertiser*, used the role of plait dealers to lay bare the adverse effect of ever increasing Chinese imports upon the domestic plaiting industry, stating that, 'This has operated disastrously upon the home manufacture.'⁹⁵ For some plait dealers, the swiftly expanding manufacture of straw hats in Luton provided a remarkable opportunity to secure profit through dealing in vast quantities of imported plait:⁹⁶

The amount of Chinese, or 'Canton,' plaited straw imported into England has steadily and continuously increased since its introduction, till now I think I am within the mark in saying that more comes from China than from all the other parts of the world put together. In fact, it is not merely imported direct by the manufacturer, but is regularly dealt with in Mincing-lane along with other foreign produce.⁹⁷

⁹³ *Hatters' Gazette*, November, 1897, p.614.

⁹⁴ Dony, *History* p.89.

⁹⁵ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Friday 2 January, 1880.

⁹⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Plaiting of Straw Hats', July, 1890, p.371.

⁹⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Plaiting of Straw Hats', July, 1890, p.371.

Dony commented that the two Luton Plait Halls were soon no longer able to physically hold and therefore sell on the vast amounts of imported plait.⁹⁸ The Luton Plait Halls had been built in 1868 with much civic pride, but their near redundancy as a venue for holding imported plait for sale, is indicative of the scale of Chinese plait imports. As a consequence, plait dealers began to trade directly with manufacturers, as opposed to holding plait stock from which manufacturers to chose their plait.⁹⁹ During the last quarter of the 19th century an increasingly large percentage of straw plait imports arriving into London from the Far East were sorted at the docks for re-export to other countries, with the remainder being sewn into straw hats in Luton. In January 1882, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that the straw hat trade was encouraging the English plaiting industry to adapt and develop their trade to try to halt its decline. To this end, the trade called for help from those who 'govern and control the plaiting industry.'¹⁰⁰ This comment suggests that there may have been key industry plait emporium merchants working and dealing in imports and exports. By November 1893, the straw trade reported that Luton was becoming a foreign plait emporium, with plait being sent from Luton to hat manufacturers across the world.¹⁰¹ In June 1894, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that plait dealers had become a trade apart: 'this material is brought into the town by a distinct class of dealers in plait, who sell it to the manufacturers. At least one hundred and fifty thousand bales of Chinese plait now enter Luton annually, at least one-third of which is destined for re-exportation in the manufactured state.'¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Dony, *History* p.89.

⁹⁹ Dony, *History* p.89. The plait halls had been built in 1868 by the Luton Board of Health and were an imposing symbol of commercial success.

¹⁰⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Review of the Straw Trade for 1881', January, 1881, p.23.

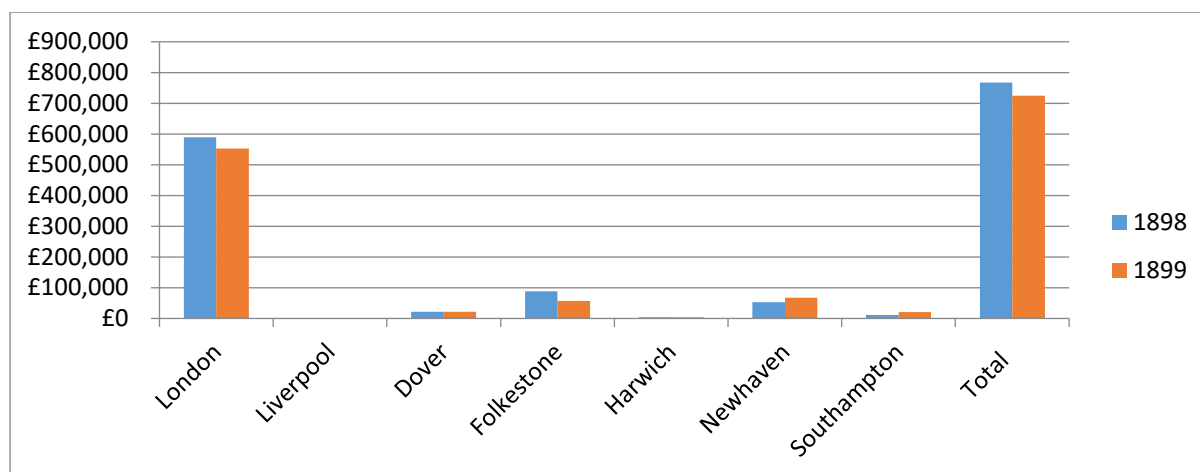
¹⁰¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Trade Report from Luton and District', November, 1893, p.599. A straw plait dealing company was mentioned in February 1892, - Mr Alfred Hucklesby of the Imperial Plait Company, Cheapside, Luton. *Hatters' Gazette*, February, 1892, p.82.

¹⁰² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw hat manufacturing in England, as it appears to an American', June, 1894.

Table 7: Imports of straw plaiting from certain ports for 1898 and 1899¹⁰³

Ports	1898	1899
London	£588,700	£553,197
Liverpool	£254	£10
Dover	£21,175	£21,481
Folkestone	£88,528	£57,239
Harwich	£4,118	£3,594
Newhaven	£52,997	£67,732
Southampton	£11,525	£20,986
Total	£767,307	£724,239

Table 8: Chart showing the trend to declining plait imports at the end of the 19th century¹⁰⁴



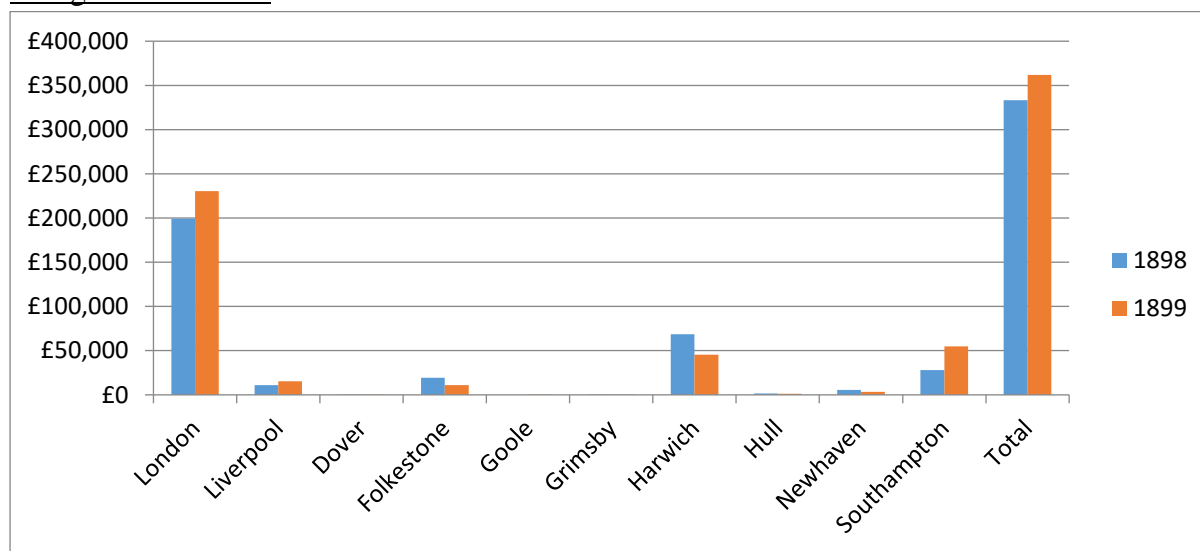
¹⁰³ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427.

¹⁰⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427.

Table 9: Exports of straw plaiting from certain ports¹⁰⁵

Ports	1898	1899
London	£199,156	£230,438
Liverpool	£10,937	£15,455
Dover	£58	£172
Folkestone	£19,466	£10,960
Goole	£0	£14
Grimsby	£136	£90
Harwich	£68,408	£45,348
Hull	£1,461	£1,156
Newhaven	£5,505	£3,344
Southampton	£28,033	£54,696
Total	£333,160	£361,673

Table 10: Chart showing the late 19th century trend to increasing exports of straw plait of foreign manufacture¹⁰⁶



The above two charts show the importance of Luton's role as a straw plait emporium towards the end of the 19th century. The commercial success of Luton's plait export business can be detected in the charts for straw plait imports in 1898 and 1899. Here it can be seen that straw plait imports had decreased in value, but that the export of plait, the vast majority of which was foreign manufactured plait, had risen in value.

¹⁰⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427.

¹⁰⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427.



©Luton Culture

Fig. 5. Nicholls plait stall, 19th century, LMS133_0_7

Trading issues with Chinese plait, the role of Japanese plait and European plait

Perhaps inevitably, after many long happy years of profit and growth, cracks started to appear in Luton's relationship with the Chinese straw plait trade. In 1874, at the start of the straw hat trade expansion, Chinese plaits, a source of such wealth and opportunity, were referred to as the work of John Chinaman. By 1888, in a report which described the straw hat industry's attempts to develop the abilities of English plaiters, 'John Chinaman' had become the demonised 'Heathen Chinees'¹⁰⁷. This change in descriptor appears to be directly linked to the

¹⁰⁷ See Forman, *China*; Hevia, *English lessons*, chapter 8.

falling quality of Luton's Chinese imports and to the fact that Luton's manufacturing system of small hat workshops had used Chinese plait to saturate the market with very low cost cheap straw hats. The reporter commented that the quality and care given by the Chinese to their plait, to its honest length and its packaging for the voyage to England, had plummeted. By the mid-1880s, imports of Chinese plait were no longer unproblematic. In 1885, a *Hatters' Gazette* reporter wrote about the 'trade evil' of short plait lengths being hidden inside Chinese bales. This practice lost Luton plait dealers money, for bales were either bought by home manufacturers or were exported to manufacturers abroad, neither of whom were content with a substandard product,

in a confused variety of lengths, which cause an immense waste of valuable time, and which sometimes are the very *casus belli* of disastrous claims from customers abroad. Luton loses yearly a lot of money under this head, and this loss can easily be avoided by giving the true length and measure...¹⁰⁸

Sea damaged plait was another cause for concern. There was a limit of twenty pieces of sea damaged plait allowed per bale, but often many more were included. In one instance, the *Hatters' Gazette* uncovered a bale containing seventy-two sea damaged pieces.¹⁰⁹ The straw plaiting trade was compared in the *Hatter's Gazette*, to the English tea trade. It was stated that English tea was now being imported from India and Ceylon where the quality was consistent, unlike the quality of Chinese tea. 'The Chinese tea trade is fast decaying, and will soon become a traffic not of primary, but of secondary, importance. So with the once promising and considerable straw braid export.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, April, 1885.

¹⁰⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, May, 1885, p.265.

¹¹⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, the quality of China straw plait - letter to the *Hatters' Gazette* editor. Extract from the North China Daily News of July 20. November, 1887, p.633.

In August 1899, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that Japanese plait was consistently high in quality, that the quality of Japanese straw was better than that of Chinese straw, and that, 'the conditions under which they work are much more practical and better regulated than any the Chinese care to try, in spite of all that is constantly and carefully pointed out to them'.¹¹¹ The report continues, stating that the Chinese are practically the best at straw plaiting and that their production costs are unrivalled due to the cheapness of labour and therefore:

they ought to have the trade in their own hands; but they sacrifice everything to their greed for gain. They will produce a few bales of a new pattern in almost perfect quality, for which they receive a good price, and realise a fair profit. This stimulates the production, without regard to quality, which deteriorates naturally, as they are too eager to get the goods forward and secure the profit. With the poorer quality comes a lower selling price, and so it goes on until the quality is so poor that no one will buy, and they, in the long run, no doubt lose, whereas if a standard had been kept to, as steady demand would have existed, and they would have had a smaller but a regular profit.¹¹²

Straw plait exports from Shanghai to Britain had been an increasingly important source of straw plait imports from the 1870s onwards and this is shown in the table below.

¹¹¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Braid Trade in China', August, 1899, p.415.

¹¹² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Braid Trade in China', August, 1899, p.415.

Table 11: Exports of braid (straw plait) from Shanghai to Britain¹¹³

Date	Piculs
1876	17,000
1877	20,000
1878	27,900
1879	23,000

However, in an 1899 article about the straw braid industry of Shanghai, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that the braid industry was declining year on year and the reason was the, 'want of care in selecting the straw, in plaiting, and to dishonesty in packing.' It was also reported that the Japanese plait trade had significantly grown, and that, 'They are careful to produce a uniformly good article, whereas Western consumers cannot rely upon the Chinese braid being of one quality throughout. The Chinese could easily get back their lost trade by producing an article which, good or bad, could be relied upon, but at present the temptation seems irresistible to introduce an inferior plait together with the good.'¹¹⁴

Table 12: Shanghai's falling straw braid export between 1894 to 1898¹¹⁵

Year	Bales
1894	101,800
1895	88,300
1896	71,300
1897	69,700
1898	57,100

In July 1900, political problems in China started to significantly affect the export of straw plait. Most plaits destined for the United Kingdom were shipped from the ports of Tianjin and Chefoo, but recent shipments had been very few and far between; a situation that seemed set

¹¹³ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1880, p.615. A picul was, 'A measure of weight used in China and the East generally, equal to 100 catties, i.e. about 133 1/3 lbs.' *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford, 1973). (133.3lbs = 60.46kg)

¹¹⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Braid Trade in China', August, 1899, p.415.

¹¹⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Braid Trade in China', August, 1899, p.415. A bale tended to contain 240 lengths with each length being mainly 60 yards (sometimes increasing up to 100 yards each)

fair to continue.¹¹⁶ This prospect of scarcity in Chinese plait, meant that dealers who had stock, could get higher prices for it. In August 1900, a reporter in the *Hatters' Gazette* commented that Tientsin was the centre of production of Northern Chinese straw plaits and that it was also at the centre of the troubles that were currently afflicting China. In addition to import and export troubles, the *Hatters' Gazette* commented that there had not been enough rain in China to grow enough straw, and an order was issued from China stating, temporarily, 'Cable advices just received from Tien-Tsin say "Suspend all import and export operations."'”¹¹⁷

Japan

In July 1885, the *Hatters' Gazette* ran an article headed, 'straw braid trade in Japan'; it contained information about the establishment of a new Japanese straw braid trade, a trade which had apparently been developing during the previous three years.¹¹⁸

Table 13: 1885 report on straw plait (braid) in Japan for the past three years¹¹⁹

Year	Lengths*
c1882	5,000
c1883	60,000
c1884	1,000,000

*Each length is approximately 60 yards long.

The production of Japanese plait may have been instigated by a Luton straw plait dealer trying to expand his straw plait supply and perhaps move his trade beyond reliance upon Chinese plait. This could have been a plait dealer who considered that the current negative import issues with Chinese plait were long term and that perhaps it was commercially time for Luton to have a new 'plait' direction and a new market opportunity. However, it could be more likely that

¹¹⁶ In the *Hatters' Gazette*, Tianjin was named Tientsin and Yantai was named Chefoo.

¹¹⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Trouble in China and Straw Braids', August, 1900, p.422.

¹¹⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1885.

¹¹⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1885, p.402.

Japanese plait was initially made for the American market and that Luton manufacturers saw the benefits of a new source of plait and negotiated some of Japan's plait export market. In 1887, the *Hatters' Gazette* ran an article taken from the German *Stohhut Zeitung* (Straw Hat Times), which stated that straw plait had only been made in Japan for a couple of years and that it was mainly made in and around Tekiho and Osaka. The article noted that the plait was made from wheat straw and that it was mainly exported to America.¹²⁰ In 1887, the *Hatters' Gazette* noted, 'A correspondent in Yokohama states that during the last few years the manufacture of straw plait has become an important branch of industry in Japan'.¹²¹ This correspondent considered that half of the plait made in Japan was used in Japan and sewn into hats and the other half was exported. Comment was also made that the first country that Japan exported plait to was America, but that now it also exported to France and Britain.¹²² By September 1888, Japan's export of straw plait equalled nearly one thousand bundles per annum with the plait having been created by about thirteen plait 'houses' in Yokohama.¹²³ The *Hatters' Gazette* reported that, 'This industry has been developed in direct competition with the Chinese, but the Japanese product is of superior quality.'¹²⁴ It may have been in response to Luton's monopoly in the Chinese straw plait trade that America perhaps decided to develop and support Japanese straw plait. Luton straw hat manufacturers and exporters evidently appreciated the quality and fineness of Japanese plait at a time when Chinese plait quality could be somewhat unreliable.

¹²⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1887, p.506.

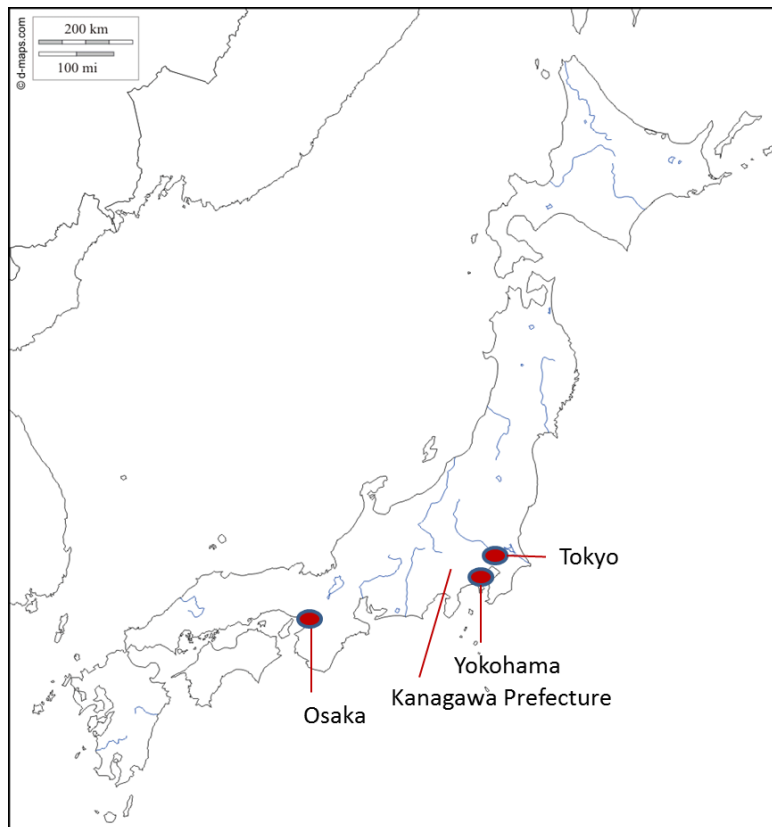
¹²¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1888, p.480.

¹²² *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1888, p.480.

¹²³ 'Houses' probably means companies dealing in the manufacture of straw plait.

¹²⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1888, p.480.

Map 2: Map of Japan showing key places mentioned in the *Hatters' Gazette*¹²⁵



*Tekiho is mentioned in the *Hatters' Gazette* in an article on Japanese Straw plait dated September 1 1887, p.506. Tekiho has here been taken to possibly mean Tokyo.

The timing of the production of Japanese plait seems to roughly coincide with the attempt by the Luton straw hat industry to 'revive' the English plaiting industry. The Japanese attributes of technique and skill were similar to those that some trade merchants were trying to develop in the home industry. This suggests that the drive to move away from sole manufacturing dependency on Chinese plait imports, to have an alternative supply of plait imports, was felt in the 1880s, to be a necessity. Seeing the ability of the Japanese industry to start up a successful, competitive and international straw plaiting industry, may have encouraged the hopes and

¹²⁵ Map: d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=359&lang=en Japan: free map, free blank map, free outline map, free base map: boundaries, hydrography (white).

dreams of those leading and supporting the revival of the English plaiting industry. Initially the production of Japanese plait was insufficient and lacking market led direction, however the Japanese followed the fashionable Italian plaiting system and were able to create an economically successful industry. The *Stohhut Zeitung* commented on Japanese plait, 'In 1886 this article likewise met with a good sale in London, the demand increasing to such an extent that the capital and labour engaged in the trade were alike found to be insufficient. Moreover, the diversity of requirements as to shape and colour were not to be properly supplied by the existing arrangements as to production.'¹²⁶ The Japanese response to this short fall was to change and adapt:

These circumstances induced some enterprising Japanese capitalists to organize at Kanagawa a large plaiting establishment upon the Italian system. About 300 of the most skilled plaiters were collected from all parts of Japan. There is a large work building and a bleaching department with the necessary appliances for producing and employing sulphurous vapours. It is reputed that this factory, known as Kakinuma Mugiwara Shokai (Kakinuma's Wheat Straw Company), has already received orders for 200,000 rolls of plait.¹²⁷

Japanese working methods, however, were very different to English methods. Before 1870, the advent of Chinese plait imports and the decline of the English plaiting industry, English plaiting appears to have revolved around the complete technical mastery of some general plait types along with other more specific plaits linked to and worked in specific villages. This English plaiting method of regimented rote learning began at an early age in 'plait schools', and was followed by constant, repetitive hard work to make enough plait to sell to contribute

¹²⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1887.

¹²⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1887, p.506.

to a family economy. An in depth knowledge of the required plait pattern would have readily helped the informal nature of the work. The ability to quickly and efficiently put down and pick up plait work in between household work and cares, would only have been possible through great technical confidence in the straw pattern. Japanese workers, however, appeared to thrive on pattern change, a fact which played to the European fashion market. Japanese plait was finely worked and imported at a cheap price:

It is well known that the Japanese are in a great many respects the exact opposites of the Europeans in their ways and manners of dealing. There is one respect certainly in which business orders as regards quantities differ very essentially. All European manufacturers like a “big order,” and of one pattern, and will be able to produce it at a lower price, because the workpeople, becoming accustomed to it, can run a larger quantity, and so are very often willing to take a lower price. Not so the Japs. An order for a thousand dozen of a pattern having been offered, a difficulty was at once suggested by the manufacturer. “For even a hundred dozen the price must be increased. My workmen dislike working too long from one pattern, and if I were to take from them the pleasure of constantly changing their designs, I should have to compensate them with much higher wages.” Certainly, European and Japanese ideas vary very widely.¹²⁸

The success of Japanese plait for Luton’s straw hat industry was epitomised in a rumour reported in the *Hatters’ Gazette* in 1899. Some years previously, five thousand Japanese girls were due to be brought to live and work in Luton so that Japanese plait could be made on the spot, thus eradicating the time delay caused by the distance between Luton and Japan. The *Hatters’ Gazette* reporter commented that this idea had been discussed amongst some straw manufacturers and that it had been plausible:

¹²⁸ *Hatters’ Gazette*, February, 1892, p.92.

Rumour reached such a height at last that many believed that not only were Japanese coming, but French, Swiss, and Chinese as well. These foreigners were to design and work up British-grown straw-plait artistically after the fashion of their native countries. Although seriously contemplated, the scheme proved unworkable for many reasons.¹²⁹

The natural quality of Japanese plait surpassed that of Chinese plait, being brighter, whiter and very neatly worked.¹³⁰ Plaiting was also a very beneficial occupation for the Japanese farming class, as the raw material was free and the labour was female.¹³¹ By 1885 the *Hatters' Gazette* noted that the Japanese plaiting industry, 'bids fair to develop into larger and larger proportions'.¹³² The differences between Chinese and Japanese plait were considered in November's 1895 issue of the *Hatters' Gazette*. The reporter stated that Chinese plaiters were very skilled at copying past European plait designs, Japanese straw plait, however, was plaited into unique, sought-after designs that fetched a higher price. 'The one gets the cream, the other the skim milk.'¹³³

Japanese straw plait imports were very successful, in ladies hats as well as men's boaters. In February 1900, a report from the Luton and St Albans hat trade commented that ladies' sailor hats were still very popular and that they were mostly made from Japanese rustic plait. 'A manufacturer of these goods recently stated to the writer that out of every thousand hats made by them 999 were rustic, and out of every hundred, ninety-nine were made from Japanese plait, and the remaining one from English.'¹³⁴ A contributor to the *Hatters' Gazette* wrote in January 1899 that he had gone to buy a boater and had fully intended to buy one made from English

¹²⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Luton Straw Industry', January, 1899.

¹³⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1885.

¹³¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, May, 1892.

¹³² *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1885, p.402.

¹³³ *Hatters' Gazette*, November, 1895, p.602.

¹³⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Luton and St Albans Hat Trade', February, 1900, p.93.

rustic plait. However, once in the shop, it became obvious that the boaters fashioned from Japanese rustic plait were much nicer. 'This has been the case in many instances that came to the writer's knowledge, for the Japanese excel both in material and exquisite design. The Chinese are clever, but unreliable on account of the amount of trickery to be contended against in dealing with them.' In November 1887 the *Hatters' Gazette* ran an article on the Chinese plaiting industry and the reporter concluded that if Japan was to compete with China in the straw plait trade, 'the trade will go to the land of the Rising Sun.'¹³⁵

In August 1899, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that the British Consul at Chefoo had provided information in 1898 that export of Chinese plait abroad had decreased by 2,034 bales. It was stated that this decline must be due to the rapid growth of the Japanese straw plait trade,

Undoubtedly the Japanese produced a splendid plait. This largely accounts for their keen competition in the trade, and there is apparently more guarantee of good quality in their products in this branch of industry. They are favoured with a better straw to begin with, and the conditions under which they work are much more practical and better regulated than any the Chinese care to try, in spite of all that is constantly and carefully pointed out to them. Chinese in the point of manipulating the straw to various patterns have few, if any, equals, and the cost of labour being so much cheaper, they ought to have the trade in their own hands; but they sacrifice everything to their greed for gain. They will produce a few bales of a new pattern in almost perfect quality, for which they receive a good price, and realise a fair profit. This stimulates the production, without regard to quality, which deteriorates naturally, as they are too eager to get the goods forward and secure the profit. With the poorer quality comes a lower selling

¹³⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Quality of China Straw Plait - letter to the *Hatters' Gazette* editor. Extract from the North China Daily News of July 20', November, 1887, p.633.

price, and so it goes on until the quality is so poor that no one will buy, and they, in the long run, no doubt lose, whereas if a standard had been kept to, as steady demand would have existed, and they would have had a smaller but a regular profit.¹³⁶

The following table shows that by the end of the 19th century Japanese imports were considerable and that Japan had become a key exporter of straw plait to Britain.

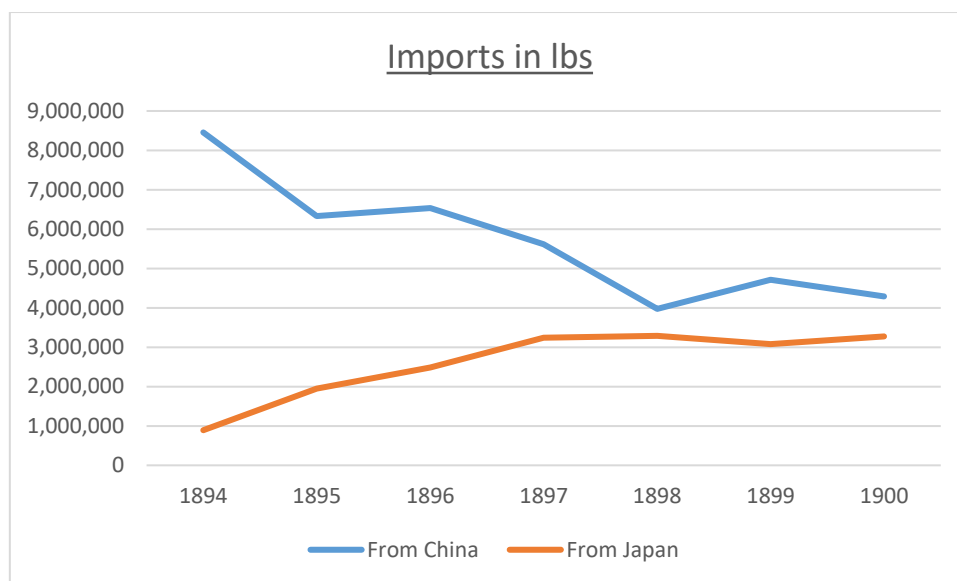
Table 13: Imports of straw plait in lbs, with China and Japan in bold¹³⁷

Countries	1894 (lbs)	1895 (lbs)	1896 (lbs)	1897 (lbs)	1898 (lbs)	1899 (lbs)	1900 (lbs)
From Germany	3,987	8,510	65,725	170,545	176,595	298,810	227,503
From Holland	1,328,219	1,070,247	598,260	8,023	21,833	6,070	2,709
From Belgium	140,100	114,047	328,810	1,721,142	2,557,690	1,392,571	1,211,932
From France	237,542	860,611	1,436,307	895,462	663,738	674,195	445,090
From China	8,455,323	6,334,530	6,536,935	5,616,030	3,974,290	4,712,965	4,292,658
From Japan	892,630	1,948,660	2,485,065	3,240,610	3,288,900	3,080,580	3,276,015
From USA	560,515	169,382	164,960	242,924	37,089	160,327	82,477
From Other Foreign Countries	6,926	160	3,470	35,626	14,960	53,930	7,020
From British East Indies:.....							
From Bombay	884	66,800	35,050	20,020	3,200	58,520	42,470
From Bengal	336	5,000	12,040	13,310	8,100	8,190	3,070
From Straits Settlements	-	-	500	27,590	-	6,960	-
From Ceylon	-	-	-	17,280	-	-	-
From Hong Kong	2,890	19,700	-	6,300	-	37,800	7,450
From Other British Possessions	-	1,150	2,680	720	-	-	4,320
Total	11,629,352	10,598,797	11,669,802	12,015,582	10,746,395	10,490,918	9,602,684

¹³⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.415.

¹³⁷ The source for imports of straw plaiting up to and including 1898 is the *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427. The source for imports of straw plaiting for 1899 and 1900 is the *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1901, p.416.

Table 15: Chart showing decline in Chinese plait and growth in Japanese plait¹³⁸



The view in the *Hatters' Gazette* was that straw hat manufacturers were no longer solely dependent upon Chinese plait:

Fortunately for the local trade, our consumption of these goods is only a fraction of what it was some years ago, the Japanese having successfully competed with their Chinese neighbours. There are large stocks of Japanese plaits on hand, with the probability of extensive shipments of such goods in the near future.¹³⁹

It was at this time, as the trade moved away from what had become a difficult relationship with the Chinese straw plaiting industry, that reports in the *Hatters' Gazette* moved away from employing the term 'Heathen Chinees' and reverted to the moniker 'John Chinaman'¹⁴⁰.

It is likely that John Chinaman will for some time to come find other things to occupy his time besides plaiting straw into braids for us. Stocks are sure to run low, and

¹³⁸ Source for straw plait imports up to and including 1898 – *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427. Source for imports for 1899 and 1900 – *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1901, p.416.

¹³⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1900, p.376.

¹⁴⁰ See, Forman, *China*; Hevia, *English lessons*, chapter 8.

consequently prices may be expected to rise. Japan, however, which already sends some good patterns, will doubtless meet the emergency.¹⁴¹

This change in name could be a result of the straw hat industry feeling less trapped by and dependent upon, Chinese plait and therefore being able to express themselves in less hostile manner.

Conclusion

When Chinese plait was first imported, perhaps as early as the 1850s, it must have initially co-existed with English plait in the same generally benign manner as pre-1870 Italian and Swiss plait imports. However, once consistent trading with Chinese plait began in the late 1860s, its threat to English plait magnified. This threat was aided and abetted by the English straw trade deliberately facilitating the Chinese plaiters ability to directly compete with standard non-specialist low end English plait. In response to the demand for cheaper mass produced straw hats, manufacturers seemed to immediately show a preference for cheaper Chinese plait instead of English plait:

If the Chinaman can thus compete with our artisans and working men in his native country, notwithstanding the many disadvantages which must attend the exercise there of his intelligence and strength, what will he not be able to accomplish when encouraged and taught to rival a foreign antagonist on his own ground, and at a more moderate rate of remuneration than the latter can afford to demand? Should matters go on as they are now doing in England, the labouring and manufacturing classes must not wonder if they find themselves ere very long displaced and distanced by the hitherto despised, but none the less practical, useful, and labour-loving Chinaman.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, September, 1900, p.495.

¹⁴² Walter Henry Medhurst, *The Foreigner in Far Cathay* (1872) in Forman, *China*, p.1.

Towards the end of the 19th century, following the emergence of trading standard problems with Chinese plait, Japanese plait started to be imported into Britain and it proved to be a reliable and fashionable source. The *Hatters' Gazette's* reports on Japanese plait imports appear, unlike the Chinese plait reports, to be only positive during the time period of this dissertation. This could perhaps be because Japanese plaiters and plait dealers had a different work and trading ethic to Chinese plait manufacturers. However, it could also be that the historical timeline of this dissertation, and the economic needs of Luton's straw hat trade during the period of Japanese plait imports towards the end of the 19th century, do not allow for the revelation of soured trading relationships in trade press reports.

By 1893, the public and straw hat manufacturers compulsion for cheapness had ultimately greatly reduced the straw plaiters' income:

At one time the families of agricultural labourers eked out existence by straw-plaiting. To such poor folk Canton has sent no boon across the seas. Imaginative optimism in its brightest, sweetest mood could not paint their lot a positive rose colour. Nor has the love of cheapness, with its continual effect of cutting down, spared the poor straw-plaiter who helps to maintain the home trade.¹⁴³

From the start of the 1870s, copious quantities of cheap straw plait were imported from China to Luton, and Luton became the global centre of production for the reduced cost, mass produced, straw hat. The straw hat trade grasped their opportunity to expand by using cheap bales of Chinese plait, this, coupled with the development of the straw plait sewing machine meant that Luton became the home of global straw hat exporters.¹⁴⁴ As global entrepreneurs; it seems probable that Luton straw hat manufacturers were the first to break into the Chinese

¹⁴³ *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1893, p.422.

¹⁴⁴ *Luton Times and Advertiser*, Friday 10 January, 1879.

straw plait export market, in a move that was sought as a solution to home trade depression. In so doing, they took full advantage of duty free plait imports into England and thus created their own trading monopoly. Despite the trade being low class, the volume of demand and the cheapness of the product was such that the returns were immediately very profitable. The combination of imported Chinese plait and straw sewing machines turned Luton into an international exporter of straw hats and a significant 19th century centre of British trade.

Chapter 3. Mechanisation, Luton and the Revival

Introduction

In February 1880, the *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular*, extolled the ‘marvellous development’ that had happened in the straw hat and bonnet trade and asserted that this was due to two factors. The first factor was the availability of vast quantities of cheap straw plait and the second was the adaptation of the sewing machine to sew straw. The writer of the article acknowledged that a supply of cheap plait was not enough for expansion; imported plait needed mechanisation to quickly and cheaply turn it into straw hats.¹ The first attempts to mechanically sew straw hats took place in 1865 and involved sewing the ends of lengths of plait together on a standard sewing machine.² Mrs Stratford, who was married to an agent for the Wilcox and Gibbs sewing machine company, managed in 1873 to machine sew a straw hat. Her domestic sewing machine had been slightly altered and Mrs Stratford had been able to sew from the top of the crown downwards towards the rim.³ As technology developed and quickened the pace of production, hand-sewing, like plaiting, started to be left further behind in the race for straw hat production. Hand-sewing being considerable slower than machine stitching, produced more expensive hats. Mechanisation provided the speed that enabled Luton’s straw hat manufacturers to capitalise on straw plait imports and to become the centre of production for mass produced straw hats. The view from the *Hatters’ Gazette* embraced manufacturing progress and modernity, and Luton’s entrepreneurial straw hat manufacturers moved with the times, seeking out the most profitable opportunities. ‘The world continually moves, and if we neglect the aids to cheapened production, we shall be left behind bewailing our condition.’⁴ Following fifteen years of reliable, large quantity straw plait imports and the

¹ *The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular*, hereafter referred to as the *Hatters’ Gazette*, *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘New Machinery in the Straw Trade’, February, 1880.

² Charles Freeman, *Luton and the Hat Industry* (Luton, 1953), p.25.

³ Freeman, *Luton*, p.25.

⁴ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Machinery and the Straw Trade’, January, 1882, p.44.

use of straw hat sewing machines, Luton became significantly industrialised. It was at this point that the straw hat trade turned its attention towards the declining plaiting industry, with a view to commercially revive it. To reflect these developments, this chapter has two sections. The first section considers mechanisation, the need for sewing machines and the two technologies of hat blocking and straw plait bleaching. These two processes pre-dated and then developed alongside straw sewing machines to create a complete straw hat manufacturing process. The second section studies the impact of mechanisation on Luton's industrialisation and the *Hatters' Gazette's* view of the straw hat trade's attempt to place the English plaiting industry back on a business footing.

Mechanisation and Luton's straw hat industry

The Elementary Education Act of 1870 gave school boards the power to decide whether to make education compulsory. The Elementary Education Act of 1880 was more rigorous in its insistence that children between five and ten went to school, and if children were working and less than thirteen years old, they had to be able to produce a certificate confirming that they had attained their school board's educational standard. The *Hatters' Gazette*, in an 1882 retrospective consideration of recent changes, cited the impact of compulsory education, following the 1870 Education Act, as a reason for the decline of the straw plaiting industry: 'The Educational Act of 1870 caused great consternation among these families and the children who would have been learning to plait were constrained to learn to read.'⁵ Goose has linked the Education Acts with a fall in the number of children employed in the plaiting industry.⁶

⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, "'Straws.'" By a *Hatters' Gazette* Special Commissioner', June, 1897, p.334.

⁶ Nigel Goose, 'The straw plait and hat trades in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire' in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England : Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), p.101.

The numbers of children plaiting in the three counties of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire were very high and stopping their ability to work would have seriously impacted levels of English plait production. The reliance upon child labour for plait production was very significant, with the employment levels for children in plaiting parishes being as high as for any other parish studied.⁷

It was at this time, with plait schools closing and the demand for English plait diminishing, that children turned in numbers to sewing straw hats from imported plait. So that straw hat manufacturers and plait dealers could realise the potential profit held in the imported plait, the plait needed to be quickly and cheaply sewn into hats. Through working at home, children could avoid official censure following legislation by sewing around the compulsory hours of education. The *Hatters' Gazette* acknowledged that in 1874, children were engaged in sewing a very popular mass produced hat made from imported Chinese plait.⁸ Plaiting for children had been a full day's work, and, as such, the industry had 'needed' plaiting workshops to drive their output. The impact of legislation closed plait 'schools' and the advent of imports obviated the need for children to plait, but many could, and did, take the family economy opportunity to sew hats in their spare time.

The recent imports of cheap Chinese plait gave former 'plait' families, especially those living near enough to a hat manufacturing town, opportunity to contribute to their family economy by hand-sewing.⁹ The skill of hand-sewing had tended to be considered an occupational step up from plaiting. The movement of many children from straw plaiting into hand-sewing may not only have compensated families for lost plait income, but have actually increased the size

⁷ Goose, 'straw plait and hat trades', p.105.

⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable', February, 1874, p.41.

⁹ Villages geographically closer to towns often had more employment options, for example out-sourced hand sewing and other straw hat trade work. See Nigel Goose, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire. Vol. 2. St. Albans and its Region* (Hatfield, 2000), p.83.

of financial contributions to the family purse. It could have been that at this specific point in time, at the very start of Luton's industrialisation when imported plait was creating and responding to a rise in demand for hats, that rural families exercised agency and made the positive choice to hand-sew rather than plait.

English plait had been in demand before 1870, and had supplied plait to the Dunstable and Luton hand-sewing factories. These factories, were regulated environments and able to produce standardised, quality hand-stitched hats. Before mechanisation,

sewing was to a large extent done at the houses of workers. Hat manufacturers preferred, however, as a rule, to have the better class of work done on their own premises and under their own control. In some of the straw hat manufactories in Luton as many as 200 and 300 persons were employed.¹⁰

However, the combination of child hand-sewing labour with cheap Chinese plait to fulfil the market demand for cheap straw hats meant that the better class straw hat factories were undercut on price.¹¹ 'The unlimited employment of child labour has inflicted a terrible loss upon the better class of manufacturers in Luton'.¹² Factories lost profit through combining quality hand-sewing to cheap plait; the market did not want to pay for quality stitching, it wanted a cheap product. The cost of Chinese straw plait hats was kept low by cheap child labour. Although the use of children to sew cheap straw plaits did lower production cost, the general poor quality of sewing did nothing to improve the sometimes general poor quality of the Chinese plait. Quality was the price paid for the financial advantage of low cost imports.

¹⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Changes in the Straw Hat and Plait Manufacture Since 1861', December, 1861, p.648.

¹¹ The production of the *Dolly Varden* when hand sewn in the large Luton factories was undercut by cheap, low cost examples sewn by children.

¹² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable', February, 1874, p.41.

In time, the impact of education significantly eroded the time available for children to sew hats and bonnets.¹³ There was still an increasing demand for sewing and with a limited pool of child labour, there was a financial need for low cost sewing. This was a problem that needed to be solved and may have prompted the development of straw sewing machines. Luton's quest to turn straw into gold was underway, but money was being lost.¹⁴ There were many orders for straw hats as imports of Chinese plait had either prompted, or responded to, the demand. This demand was crucial in helping to lift Luton's straw hat trade out of its 1860s depression. However, the slow speed of hand sewing was leaving orders and financial agreements unfulfilled. Machinery was needed to turn Chinese plait into profit and with increased demand, came an increase in the speed of change in fashion. The reduced cost of straw hats meant that the working classes could follow and dictate the latest fashions in straw. Although the new styles of cheap straw hats were not 'disposable', they were seasonally more 'replaceable'; straw hats were not necessarily designed for longevity, but to impart fashion and style. 'The great source of the wealth of the straw trade is the art principle – payment for effect, not so much for utility.'¹⁵ In January 1901, the *Hatters' Gazette* printed a straw hat poem. The poem's vocabulary – 'stiff crown', 'stiff rim' and 'The band' - suggests that the straw hat in question was a boater. Boaters were far less subject to the vagaries and dictates of fashion than ladies straws, however, even the boater could be past its best after a season.

¹³ The *Dolly Varden* seems to have been an early example of a mass produced hat and much of the sewing was cheaply done by children.

¹⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade', March, 1877, p.70.

¹⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade Past and Present, letter to the editor', August, 1888, p.423.

The Curfew

The hat of straw
By fashion's law
Has passed beyond its season;
Its shabbiness
As part of dress
Provides sufficient reason.

Way back in spring
'Twas just the thing,
Oft winning admiration;
For then 'twas white
And neat and light,
And loud was approbation.

When spring had passed
A yellow cast
Its rim and crown were showing.
But oft 'twas rubbed
And pressed and scrubbed,
And through the streets kept going.

The sun and rain
Increased the stain
The hue of ancient butter,
And oft a breeze
Would that hat seize
And roll it in the gutter.

The once stiff crown

Is battered down,
The once stiff rim is flabby;
The band once gay
Is in decay –
In short the hat is shabby.

No more in style
The old straw tile
Must now be relegated
To final rest,
Where none can jest
A hat so antiquated.¹⁶

In July 1877, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported on the fluctuating price of 'rough and ready' plaits caused by the fluctuating demands of fashion. The report noted that in 1874, 30,000 yards of plait were sent to New York. This plait had originally been bought for 6d and the addition of transport costs across the Atlantic had increased the plait price to 10d. In New York, the current fashionable demand in plait meant that the cargo would only sell for 7d, so, the dealer shipped the cargo back across the Atlantic to England where it sold for 2s.10d. per score. The pithy comment in the *Hatters' Gazette* is, 'Such is the caprice of fashion.'¹⁷ Speed of production was vital to keep pace with these sometimes seemingly slight but important seasonal fashion changes. The straw sewing machine made the use of cheap imported plait in straw hat manufacture a practical reality. Its regular mechanical stitch gave straw hats strength, along with a, 'greatly improved appearance'.¹⁸ As a reporter in the *Hatters' Gazette* commented, 'In

¹⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, January, 1901, p.27.

¹⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report Luton and District', July, 1877, p.162.

¹⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report for Luton and District', January, 1877, p.19.

this crisis, intensified by the operation of the Education Act, the sewing machine was adapted to the purposes of the trade; and with the two combined, goods are manufactured at marvellously low prices'¹⁹:

Sudden demands are frequently made upon his [straw hat manufacturer] powers of production, and the want has been long felt, for some auxiliary to aid him in times of emergency. Many valuable opportunities are lost on account of the utter inability to complete orders in a given time, and it is a matter of the highest importance to know if, by the aid of the sewing machine, this difficulty will ultimately be met.²⁰

It was met, and the change, instigated through the working combination of the straw sewing machine with Chinese plait, was revolutionary. 'The greatest impetus to this trade was given by the introduction of the sewing machine.'²¹ The straw sewing machine had capacity, speed and reliability, which coupled with its ability to work in tandem with imported straw plait, confirmed the value of Chinese imports to the straw trade and allowed the flood gates to open even wider and let huge volumes of Chinese plait pour in. The straw trade's decisive conclusion upon the application of machine stitching to Canton plait was that the 'outlook is most cheering'.²²

In an 1888 article, a writer for the *Hatters' Gazette* stated that, 'The aim of every inventor of straw machines for twenty-five years has been to imitate the hand-sewn goods.'²³ The *Hatters'*

¹⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, February, 1880. The *Hatters' Gazette* notes that 'motive power' was added to straw sewing machines. These would have been used in the factories, but most machines would have been rented, treadle driven and used in workers houses. In the *Hatters' Gazette* for February 1898, there is a description of a machine room with two lines of sewing-machines down the middle of the room that could be enabled and disabled by the sewer. Most of the machines were able to sew any type of plait using practically invisible stitches. 'In the hands of a good machinist such a machine will work up three miles of cotton in one day. Its cost is thirty-five guineas.' *Hatters' Gazette*, February 1898, p.75.

²⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade', March, 1877, p.70.

²¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, "'Straws.'" By a Hatters' Gazette Special Commissioner', June, 1897, p.334.

²² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade report for Luton and District', January, 1877, p.19.

²³ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525.

Gazette reported on three main straw sewing machine developments: the visible stitch machine, the concealed stitch sewing machine and lastly, the hand straw hat machine. General straw sewing improvements were made to the domestic sewing machine, most notably by two Luton mechanics Henry Keston and Henry Bland. Willcox and Gibbs, a sewing machine manufacturer, used these developments and placed the ‘visible stitch’ machine on the market for ten guineas in 1875.²⁴ This machine was known as the ‘visible stitch’ machine because it placed a long, unalterable stitch on the upper surface of the hat, a fact which made it unusable with fine quality plaits. This cotton ‘outside stitch’ tended to become quickly discoloured through contact with daily dirt and dust. This ‘discolouration’ effectively classified these straw hats as ‘working class’.²⁵ The upper reaches of society would not consider wearing a hat of such poor quality; and certainly not one that advertised its cheapness so visibly through its stitches. ‘The outside stitches which appeared on the surface of the machine-made goods were always objectionable, and although they were 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.’²⁶ Those with money to spend bought hand-stitched hats made with tiny concealed stitching that did not detract from the natural beauty of the straw. The development of the ‘visible stitch’ machine confirmed Luton’s commitment to mass produced low class hats.²⁷ Although the sight of outside stitches remained an issue for those wanting more from their straw hats than just fashion and a low price tag, this was not the case for the mass market. The ‘visible stitch’ could produce hats at speed and these machines successfully placed enormous volumes of hats onto the market for sale. This lucrative trading volume proved to be more important to straw hat manufacturers than the drawback of visible stitching. The ‘visible stitch’ machine’s ability to

²⁴ Freeman, *Luton*, p.26. This machine was known as the ‘10-Guinea’ machine, in a direct reference to its price.

²⁵ *Hatters’ Gazette*, May, 1882, p.250.

²⁶ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry’, October, 1888, p.525.

²⁷ *Dolly Varden*, perhaps if there had initially been a sewing machine capable of making a better quality stitch, then Luton may have followed more diverse routes to market.

sew a dozen hats in the time it took to hand-sew one, as the *Hatters' Gazette* stated, 'appears to be so great an advantage that for the time it outweighed all other considerations.'²⁸ Although the machine was restricted in its target market to the lower reaches of society, this market did expand rapidly and immeasurably within just a decade. The machine found much popularity with the many small, often family based, hat manufacturing workshops and by 1877 there were more than 1,500 in use. There was profit and growth to be made in matching cheap mechanical stitching with cheap imported plait. The *Hatters' Gazette* commented in 1877 that this would be an industry-changing combination, 'but the outside stitch showing so distinctly, and having such a marked appearance will ultimately condemn its use, except for the low class work in Canton and common materials for which it seems specially adapted, and must soon revolutionise that branch of the Straw Trade.'²⁹

Wealth came hard on the heels of low class volume and the winning combination of a straw sewing machine and cheap plait turned Luton into an international exporter of both straw plait and straw hats. Luton's early capture of the Chinese plait market with its phenomenally low cost plait and the lack of import duty, gave Luton the lead on profitable low class straw hat exports.³⁰ This match between product and market demand meant that Luton's wealth grew rapidly in the initial decades following plait imports from China. Later comments from the *Hatters' Gazette* suggest that wealth at this time was easily accrued without any special effort on the part of manufacturers.³¹ Straw hat demand was high, and the addition of sewing machines had made production costs low:

²⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525.

²⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade', March, 1877, p.70.

³⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525.

³¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade Past and Present', letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

Straw hats became popularized abroad, and laid the foundation for the straw hatting industry throughout Europe. 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.³²

The visible stitch machine was considered relatively easy to use as the straw plait was machined into shape from the centre of the crown outwards and downwards, as opposed from the outside edge inwards and upwards. This ease of use and speed, made it very productive, cost effective and popular. This simplicity of use did, however, mean that workers in other countries could also machine plait into hats, notably those in countries from whom Luton earned profit on the export of its own cheap low cost machine-sewn straw hats. ‘The people who were the best customers of the English manufacturers can now not only supply themselves, but in many cases have become competitors in the foreign and home markets.’³³

A couple of years after their visible stitch machine had been manufactured, its inability to sew hats that would sell across all markets prompted the inventors Willcox and Gibbs to try to improve it. The straw trade needed a machine that could sew fine plaits in a manner that imitated the ‘invisibility’ of a hand-stitch. Improvements were made, although the stitches could still be seen on the outside of the hat, and in 1877, Willcox and Gibbs’ launched the ‘17-Guinea’ machine.³⁴ The adjustments made did improve the value of the plaits sewn, but it still did not persuade members of the middle and upper classes to spend their money on straw hats with stitches that still showed on the outside: ‘the refusal of the leaders of fashion to wear

³² *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry’, October, 1888, p.525.

³³ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry’, October, 1888, p.525.

³⁴ Freeman, *Luton*, p.26. The name was not linked to the price but was to separate its identity from the 10 guinea machine.

outside stitch goods, however fine they might be, has 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.³⁵

The entrepreneurial drive behind the straw hat trade pushed at technical boundaries in order to improve the quality of machine stitching. The trade's aim was to combine quality and speed, two attributes which together could capture new markets. A 'concealed stitch' machine had been imported into Luton from America earlier in 1868 by the straw trade firm Vyse.³⁶ This machine did conceal the stitch on the outside, but the machine and its sewing method was difficult. This was because the stitch was concealed by starting the stitching at the edge of the hat and sewing inwards to the crown, contrary to the easier method of beginning at the very top of the crown and shaping the hat outwards.³⁷ In fact, it was stated that American women, in their ability to use this complicated machine, had an 'educational advantage.'³⁸ It was suggested in the *Hatters' Gazette* that an ideal machine would take the American concept of a concealed stitch but start the stitching from the crown, and, as a bonus, would cost between ten and fifteen pounds.³⁹ In 1875, a straw sewing machine, the 'Légat', was able to closely replicate straw hat hand sewing but its price made it prohibitive.⁴⁰ It took a Luton man to solve the problem. In 1878, Edmund Wiseman patented his 'hand stitch' machine, a straw hat sewing machine which again propelled the straw hat industry forwards. This machine could not only 'hand-stitch' fine plaits, but was half the price of the 'Légat'.⁴¹ The supplanting of hand-sewing with machine sewing in Luton was confirmed by the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1880:

³⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525.

³⁶ Freeman, *Luton*, p.25.

³⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade', March, 1877, p.70.

³⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade', March, 1877, p.70.

³⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines in Connection with the Straw Trade', March, 1877, p.70.

⁴⁰ Freeman, *Luton*, p.26.

⁴¹ Freeman, *Luton*, p.26.

‘straw plait sewing by machinery has now become not only an institution but a necessity in the trade.’⁴² The *Hatters’ Gazette* reported this concealed stitch machine as, ‘Wiseman’s Hand Stitch Machine’.



©Luton Culture-Luton News

Fig. 6. Edmund Wiseman, c19th century, 1986_8_65

It was a change in fashion that pushed the further development of the straw hat sewing machine. Tastes changed to broad plaits with fancy borders or edging and this necessitated a general return to the slow methods of hand-sewing unless a new hand-stitch sewing machine could be constructed which would be able to take any and every kind of plait which changing fashions might require.⁴³

⁴² *Hatters’ Gazette*, August, 1880.

⁴³ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry’, October, 1888, p.525.



©Luton Culture

Fig. 7. An example of a broad plait with a fancy border, c19th century

The new fashion for broad plait would have demanded a return to hand-stitching in order to make straw hats, but Edmund Wiseman's new machine, mentioned in the 1886 *Hatters' Gazette*, meant that this would not necessarily be the case:

Manufacturers will be interested to hear that Wiseman's new hand-stitch machine, which is to sew every kind of coarse plaits, however broad as well as the finest, and which has been built up in America, is completed, and will soon be in the town for inspection. It comes most opportunely with the demand for broad plaits, and will be an immense advantage to a manufacturer, now there is a reaction in favour of hand-sewing.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade of Luton and District', July, 1886, p.398.

The focus of the straw hat industry was on manufacturing profit. A return to hand-sewing may have benefitted the rural villagers around Luton, but it would have meant slow and high cost production. Following cheap straw imports and the application of machinery, Luton's straw hat market had changed; production costs were low and production speeds were high.

Following eight years of collaborative work between Luton and America, a new straw sewing machine was launched.⁴⁵ The *Hatters' Gazette* announced in July 1886, that Edmund Wiseman had developed an all new hand-stitch machine and that having been built in America, it would shortly be placed on the market.⁴⁶ In 1886, Willcox and Gibbs bought the rights to this, Wiseman's latest straw sewing machine - his 'Improved Hand-stitch Machine'.⁴⁷ This development was 'the most perfect sewing machine which has ever been constructed is now placed within the reach of every straw hat manufacturer.'⁴⁸ This machine, unlike the earlier American concealed stitch machine which sewed the straw hat from the edge inwards, did not need any special intelligence to use it: 'It could be worked by any girl of the most ordinary capacity': and it also negated the need to mill the plait before sewing, thus again increasing production speed.⁴⁹ This machine, now a 'Willcox Gibbs hand straw sewing machine' was not only able to mimic hand-stitching, but most importantly, in addition, it was able to sew all widths of straw plait and some mixed straw combinations which used additional, often fine materials. The following two verses from a poem published in the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1887 hint at the fashionable and artistic material development of the straw hat:

⁴⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525.

⁴⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade of Luton and District', July, 1886, p.398.

⁴⁷ Due to its shape, this straw sewing machine was referred to as the 'box machine'. Freeman, *Luton*, p.27.

⁴⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525. - the needle used for the stitching was curved.

⁴⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, *Straw Trade of Luton and District*, November, 1886, p.637.

The Straw Hat.

Woven, plaited, shaped by Fashion's

Rigid and unbroken laws,

A lady's hat is like her passions,

Faith, and fancies – built on straws!

But, beautified with silk and lace,

Nature is o'erlaid by Art,

Just as her coquettish grace,

Conceals from men the woman's heart.

-*Belgravia*.⁵⁰

Mechanical stitching of fine, quality plait to exacting hand-stitch standards meant that the market for better quality hats expanded to include the upper middle classes. This new standard of machine stitching would not only 'retain the patronage of the *Crème de la crème* of London society', but these 'same high-class goods will be within the reach of the middle class and the upper tens.'⁵¹ This new machine could even replicate the highest level of hand-sewing from Dunstable, a town which was well known for its quality hats. 'The work is equal in every respect to the skilled hand-sewing of the trained hands which Mrs. Elliott of Dunstable used to turn out, the work being as much prized to-day as ever.'⁵²

Pre-dating and then developing alongside the straw sewing machines were the manufacturing processes of hat blocking and straw plait bleaching and dyeing. The hydraulic blocking machine and Luton's technically skilled bleaching and dyeing works added practical and

⁵⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, March, 1887, p.149.

⁵¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Sewing Machines and the Straw Hat Industry', October, 1888, p.525. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, (New York, 1973), 'Upper ten, the upper classes; the aristocracy. Colloq. Orig. (U.A.) u. ten thousand.'

⁵² *Hatters' Gazette*, Straw Trade of Luton and District, December, 1888, p.653.

financial value to machine sewn imported plait. As Luton industrialised and rapidly grew during the second half of the 19th century, it became a source of entrepreneurial opportunity and employment. Although Luton was notorious for its high ratio of females to males, its industrial expansion also provided work for men. The table below shows that even as early as 1861, men working in the straw trade were concentrated in the hat making sector.

Table 16: Numbers of males and females working in the plait and hat trades in 1861⁵³

Years	M plait	M hat	Total		F plait	F hat	Total
5 < 10	677	4	681		1,594	103	1,697
10 < 15	673	64	737		4,257	1,267	5,524
15 < 20	221	209	430		4,420	3,272	7,692
20 < 25	127	283	410		3,639	2,839	6,478
25 < 45	283	863	1146		8,769	6,362	15,131
45 < 65	131	229	360		4,064	2,262	6,326
65 years plus	26	35	61		996	384	1,380
Total	2,128	1,687	3815		27,739	16,489	44,228

Men were needed in Luton, either as heads of small familial hat manufacturing workshops, or in one of the growing hat manufacturing support industries. Not only were there male jobs in straw hat manufacture, in jobs such as hat blocking and then taking the straw hats to be sold at the counters of the town's warehouses, but there was also work in the industries which existed to support the town's rapid expansion and industrial development. Engineering industries maintained and built equipment for the straw hat trade, and Luton's bleaching and dyeing industry also expanded. This latter industry included having to lift heavy, sodden plait, and these adverse contemporary working conditions were seen to demand male labour.

⁵³ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Changes in the Straw Hat and Plait Manufacture Since 1861', December, 1900, p.648.



©Luton Culture

Fig. 8. An example of dyed plait c19th century.

Once straw plaits were sewn up into hats and a stiffening solution had been applied, they were pressed or ‘blocked’ into shape. In 1860, hat blocking had been mechanised using screw presses and eight years later, hydraulic pressure was used. The *Hatters’ Gazette* brought the importance of the role played by the hydraulic blocking machine to the hat trade’s attention through its reports on the manufacturing of the *Dolly Varden* hat.⁵⁴ Machine blocking was used before the invention of straw sewing machines and it imparted strength to cheaply plaited and cheaply sewn hats, such as the *Dolly Varden*. The beauty of the *Dolly Varden* was compromised by its stitching quality as the vast majority of these hats were hand-sewn by children. Child sewing labour was cheap and kept down production costs but the inevitable

⁵⁴ The phenomenon of *Dolly Varden* was based upon a character in Charles Dickens novel *Barnaby Rudge*, set in 1780. *Dolly Varden* came to represent good, ordinary but beautiful working class lasses and there was a trend to wear the prettily coloured 1770s, 1780s style of dress re interpreted for the 1870s. The straw trade appears to have drawn upon this fashion and created a straw hat to complete the look. The hat was flat in shape and had ribbons or flowers as trimmings and was reminiscent of the 18th century *Bergère* straw hat.

low standard of stitching combined with the lower quality of Chinese plaits used, meant that *Dolly Varden* hats were lacking not just in stitch and plait strength, but also in ‘finish’. The addition of machine crimping compensated for this poor quality stitching and made the hat perfectly acceptable to the lower markets. The hydraulic blocking machine crimped the *Dolly Varden* and was key to creating a low cost, very pretty hat.

The *Dolly Varden*, having been hydraulically crimped, had a worldwide market; its low price made it accessible to all. ‘No trouble to sell them. Shippers sent them abroad into all the foreign markets, where they found a ready sale. Throughout Europe they sold prodigiously, in Australia by thousands’.⁵⁵ The *Dolly Varden* may well have been one of the first high demand, cheaply mass produced hat shapes which returned a high profit margin for the Luton straw trade. In February 1874, the *Hatters’ Gazette* reported that the previous year had been exceptional for the straw trade; the concept of mass produced cheap straw hats had proved very successful and perhaps none more so than the *Dolly Varden*. The *Hatters’ Gazette* commented that factory girls from Scotland to Europe and onto the Colonies were all wearing the hat.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘The Straw Trade Past and Present’, letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

⁵⁶ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Trade Reports – Luton and Dunstable’, February, 1874, p.41.



Fig. 9 Dolly Varden by William Powell Frith dated c1842-9, Tate collection.⁵⁷

The Chinese plait was a failure when sewn by hand; when sewn by machine it was better, but failed to sell. Pressed in one minute by hydraulic pressure in a crumpled Dolly Varden pan, it was a transformation which took everybody in the trade by

⁵⁷ Dolly Varden by William Powell Frith dated c1842-9, Tate collection. www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/frith-dolly-var-den-t00041

surprise. It was at once the most sightly and the cheapest hat that had ever been seen in the trade.⁵⁸



© Luton Culture

Fig. 10. Hydraulic press at J. Albert, 20th century,

The use of machinery with Chinese plait improved the appearance and strength of Luton's cheap straw hats, it was a financially winning combination. In the closing decades of the 19th century there were further technological developments which increased Luton's ability to maximise their Far Eastern import monopoly. The straw hat dyeing and chemical trades were

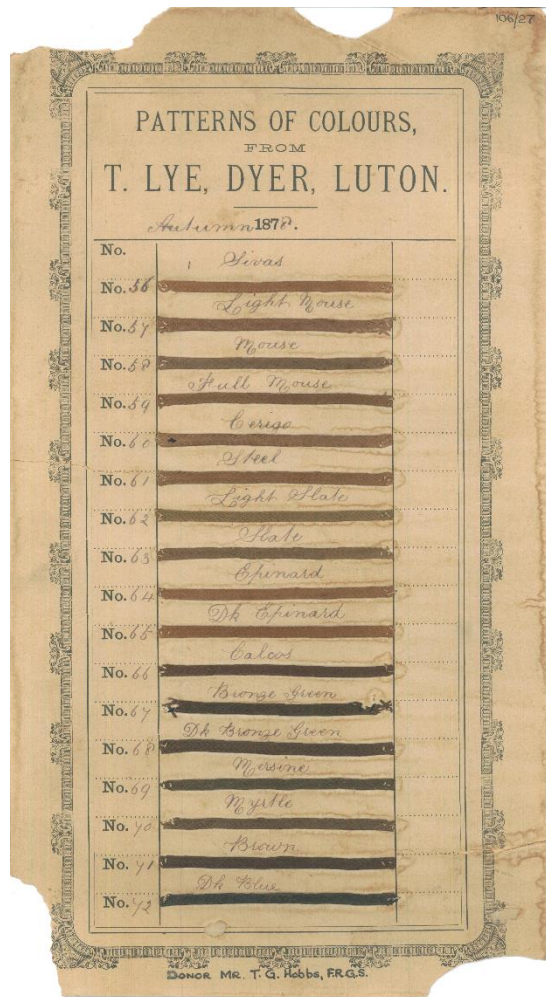
⁵⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade Past and Present', letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

key technological developments at this time, and their expertise expanded in response to the huge volume of lower quality overseas imports. Chinese plait could have unwanted and unfashionable colouration, and applications of bleach and dyes evened out these imperfections. By 1893, dyeing and bleaching works in Luton could scientifically and skilfully use chemicals to remove the mottled pattern in Chinese straw plait, thus making cheap plait more acceptable to the fashionable market. A method had been discovered, 'by which a dark-coloured, mottled Canton plait can be bleached to look equally as good as a high-priced Italian pedal.'⁵⁹ By 1916, the Gazette was confidently asserting the mathematical technical superiority of Luton's bleaching and dyeing trades. The report comments that thirty years previously, 'in olden times', the timings of bleaching was by 'rule of thumb' with either intuition being used to set the timing of the plait in the chemical solution or a certain number of repetitions of 'God Save the Queen':

For many years the Italians of Leghorn and district held the palm for bleaching; but now no one can beat our local bleachers in the manipulation of colour on all kinds of plaits any more than any straw boater manufacturers of the world can beat the products of the neighbouring towns of St. Albans and Luton.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, October, 1893, p.541. The *Hatters' Gazette* frequently reported scientific details concerning the art of plait dyeing and bleaching, see for example, *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Dyeing on canton straw braid', March, 1890, p.134. Here the article was reprinted from the *Textile Colorist*.

⁶⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Hat Trade in the St Albans and Luton District', October, 1916, p.455.



©Luton Culture

Fig. 11, Lye plait shade card, 19th century, 106_27 In November 1899, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported that Messrs. T. Lye and Son won a gold medal at the Paris Exhibition for their dyed straw plaits.⁶¹

⁶¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, November, 1889, p.447.



Fig. 12. Hobbs of Luton, representatives of Ashworth's cotton for the straw hat trade, shade card and letter, 19th century, 108_27 There was a range of trade supplies, such as cotton, stiffening, lining, and wire, which were needed by the straw hat industry. In June 1892, the *Hatters' Gazette*, commented on the cotton thread industry, 'When it is stated that a mile of cotton is often used in making a little over a dozen machine-made hats, and that the same number of fancy goods made by hand would take possibly only one hundred and fifty yards, it is easy to understand the far-reaching effects of changes in fashion.'⁶²

The technological developments in bleaching and dyeing works, were key to the emergence of Luton as a 'straw plait emporium' during the last quarter of the 19th century. By the 1880s, Luton straw hat manufacturers had flooded the market with cheap goods and countries to whom Luton had previously exported cheap hats were now using straw sewing machines themselves to make their own hats. As the century made its way to its close, an increasingly large

⁶² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade of Luton and District', June, 1892, p.319.

percentage of the straw plait imports arriving at the London Docks were not set aside for home manufacture, but were sorted for re-export to other countries. Early in 1894, in an article entitled, ‘straw hat manufacturing in England, as it appears to an American,’ a reporter commented that Luton’s plait dyeing was extremely specialised and famous. Some of the imported plait selected for re-export was sent from London to Luton, was ‘cosmetically’ improved and then exported onwards at a better price and for an increased profit. The following table shows the scale of the Luton’s plait re-exported to other countries to be used in their straw hat making industries. The total figure is relatively consistent over the six-year period, but there is significant fluctuation within the years for individual countries – fluctuation which could reflect contemporary political and commercial policy.

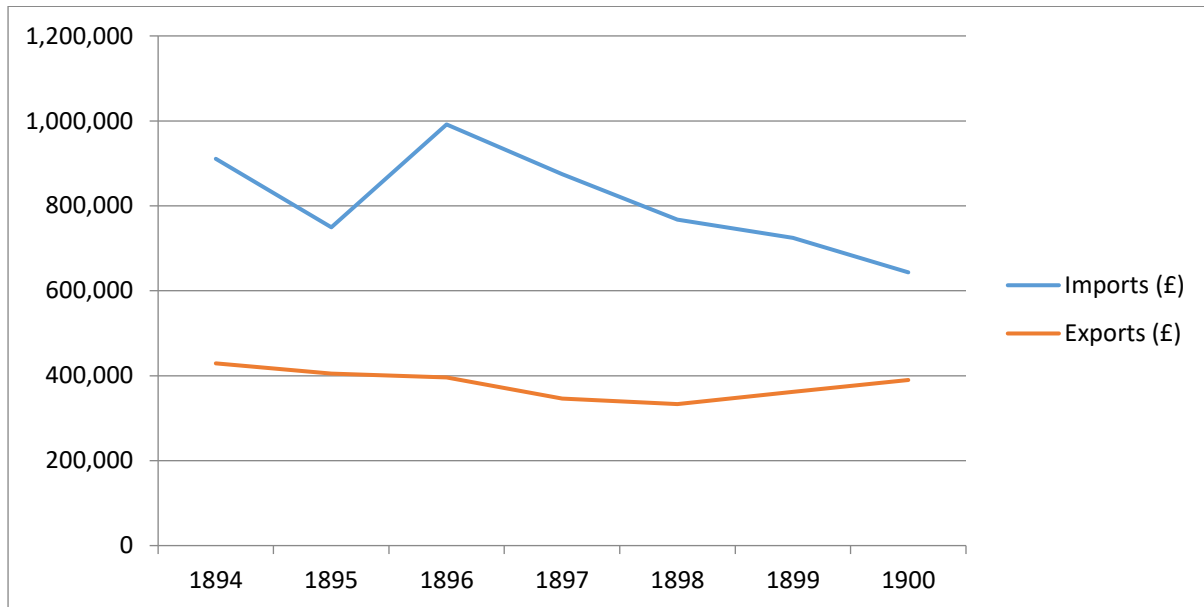
Table 17: Weight and destination of British exports of foreign made straw plait⁶³

Countries	1894 (lbs)	1895 (lbs)	1896 (lbs)	1897 (lbs)	1898 (lbs)	1899 (lbs)	1900 (lbs)
To Germany	1,290,067	1,303,628	1,537,710	1,668,524	1,348,543	1,290,585	1,411,061
To Holland	82,955	60,650	57,620	65,200	40,100	35,314	82,604
To Belgium	1,350,802	1,162,747	1,383,900	1,503,142	1,846,900	2,006,544	1,555,252
To France	1,243,197	953,020	952,800	804,800	642,459	881,814	1,269,665
To Italy	64,498	20,100	13,300	1,200	3,900	19,514	35,268
To Austrian Territories	723	9,730	79,500	117,400	104,900	57,390	8,576
To Greece	24,559	42,600	55,600	31,863	60,300	48,741	69,379
To United States of America	1,503,758	1,323,338	990,681	676,200	662,572	916,957	738,607
To Argentine Republic	19,304	5,774	12,229	800	2,477	1,911	3,300
Other Foreign Countries	73,272	38,192	47,606	48,438	90,946	122,854	145,508
To Australasia	9,052	20,276	26,140	15,100	25,500	27,360	49,500
To Canada	19,693	31,800	13,500	16,776	10,044	29,815	44,474
To Other British Possessions	-	100	-	300	300	100	-
Total	5,681,880	4,972,009	5,170,586	4,949,743	4,838,941	5,438,899	5,413,194

⁶³ For the years 1894 to 1898 – *Hatters’ Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427. For the year 1900: *Hatters’ Gazette*, August, 1901, p.416.

The stability and resilience of the plait re-export market as compared to the volatility of the import market at the end of the 19th century, is shown in the following chart.

Table 18: Chart showing the comparison in the monetary value of plait imports and exports from 1894 to 1900⁶⁴



The view from the *Hatters' Gazette*; industrialisation and revival

The view from the *Hatters' Gazette* was that cheap plait imports combined with the speed of sewing machines caused the industrialisation of Luton's hat industry. Detail in the *Hatters' Gazette* about the straw hat industry's imports and mechanisation brings to life the reality of their combined impact upon the straw plaiting industry. It also meant that Luton itself became a driving force in the restructuring of the straw hat trade and was central to the attempt to economically revive the English plaiting industry.

⁶⁴ The years 1894 to 1898 were taken from *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1899, p.427., and the years 1899 and 1900 were taken from *Hatters' Gazette*, August, 1900, p.416.

As well as keeping down the production cost of hats made from imported plait, the duality of mechanisation and imports forced down the price of ordinary English plait. The post-1870 commercial expansion and pull of Luton was such that not only did it cause the English plaiting industry to suffer and capitulate, but it also affected neighbouring straw hat industries. Before 1870, English plaiters had supplied plait for the straw hat trades in Dunstable, St Albans and Luton. Such was the impact, however, of Luton's industrialisation, that Dunstable, the hitherto lead straw hat manufacturing town, was forced to make changes. In 1887, a reporter for the *Hatters' Gazette* wrote that Dunstable straw hat manufacturers were known for their high class hats, but that the straw hat trade had become so Luton-centric that they had had to open new factories there. They 'have found themselves too far away from the main stream of commerce which flows through Luton, and most of them have established factories in our midst.'⁶⁵ St Albans, too, found that it needed to change and steered its own market away from manufacturing ladies' hats - which had become Luton's speciality - towards making boaters which were far less dependent upon seasonal changes in fashion.

Many rural working women seamlessly moved between plaiting and hand-sewing in order to catch the best employment opportunities. Sharpe noted that women were able to assume many different mantles and tended to adapt to whatever work was available, whether seasonal, part-time, or full-time. Before 1870, some women migrated into high volume plaiting districts in order to earn higher wages.⁶⁶ This shows that women were used to occupational movement; there was, however, a very restricted palette of female work in the agrarian South East. In addition, agricultural wages were low and there was not enough male work.⁶⁷ This suggests

⁶⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade of Luton and District', December, 1887, p.696.

⁶⁶ Pamela Sharpe, 'The women's harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c.1793-1885', *Rural History*, vol.5, (1994), p.139.

⁶⁷ Pamela Horn, *Victorian Countrywomen*, (Oxford, 1991), p.164.

that, following the decline of the plaiting industry, the movement from plaiting into sewing, if possible or available, may have been a necessity.

Before the sewing machine had been adapted to sew straw, cheap Chinese plait imports had created a huge demand for hand-sewing, work which was better paid than plaiting, and this trade consequently appears to have absorbed numbers of plaiters who, without hand-sewing, would have been struggling for work. As Goose commented, 'Bonnet sewing may have provided compensation in some localities.'⁶⁸ The advent of straw hat sewing machines caused a decline in hand-sewing labour and it was perhaps at this time of industrial change that the true impact and reality of the plaiting industry's decline for the labouring poor was understood. In the *Hatters' Gazette*, it seems to have been the decline of hand-sewing which drew back the curtains on the decline of the plaiting industry and brought its issues into the light. With the loss of hand-sewing, economic reliance was, for many rural women, initially placed back upon the declining plaiting industry.

During the fifteen to twenty years after 1870, Luton transformed into a global centre for straw hat making and workers were swept into Luton and its near district in its industrialising wake. Goose wrote that those villages and hamlets situated near to industrialising hat manufacturing towns tended to be economically successful as they were able to derive benefit from their rural urban connections.⁶⁹ This left those villagers living further away from urban manufacturing influence increasingly reliant upon earning additional income from the plaiting industry.⁷⁰ For those living beyond the spheres of influence of hat manufacturing towns, migration towards work was not unusual. This was especially so for the working classes living in Hertfordshire

⁶⁸ Goose, 'straw plait and hat trades', p.101.

⁶⁹ Goose, *St Albans*, p.33.

⁷⁰ Goose, *St. Albans*, p.83.

and Bedfordshire. Here, motivation was provided through the dual influences of Luton's urban expansion combined with the rural contraction of the plaiting industry. As the price for English plait decreased and the opportunity for alternative and, possibly, improved female income from straw hat manufacturing grew, villagers migrated to Luton. The evidence of rural depopulation highlights the importance of female income contributions to family economies in the agrarian south east; as straw plaiting income declined so did the possibility of practical family existence supported by a labouring wage. Female income seems to have been the key which could turn a poor agricultural income into a living wage. Following migration to Luton, the role of women in the urban straw hat industry, especially in the many small workshops, is little understood. However, the female role appears from the *Hatters' Gazette* to have been as key in an urban setting as it was in its rural setting. The role of women in managing the 'small maker' workshops in Luton was recognised by the *Hatters' Gazette*. In a comment which referred to the introduction of the felt trade in Luton, the *Hatters' Gazette* noted that male employment was doing well, including during the 'dull season':⁷¹

This is fortunate, as those who should be the chief bread-winners become so in reality. Not that it is so always, or as often as it should be, as the straw trade is such that often, with the small manufacturers, the woman is really at the head of the business. Hence the careworn look of so many of the sex, who bear the chief responsibility both of the home and the factory. The spread of education is, however, diminishing this condition of things to an appreciable extent.

⁷¹ Felt hood making had been brought into Luton to try and add some diversity to the town's trade and to help alleviate the financial effects of the straw hat season – where money could reliably be made for only around four months of the year, this led to financial 'tension' for many workers during the remainder of the year. When straw hat work declined due to the close of the season, so employment in 'felt' emerged. See *Hatters' Gazette*, April, 1883, p.188.

The effect of the movement of rural workers economically pulled into Luton and its surrounds, was described in the *Hatters' Gazette* in 1893:

This tends to the depletion of our villages, which is very patent in many outlying places, where whole rows of cottages, with their adjacent gardens, are hastening to decay. This tendency is checked to a large extent along the lines of railway, where the facilities for locomotion enabled many workpeople to go to and fro for their daily employment.⁷²

The *Hatters' Gazette* also commented that hundreds of workers who lived in Dunstable, the centre of the straw plait industry until the 1870s, used their railway season tickets to travel into Luton for work in the straw hat industry. This further highlights the impact of Luton's rapid growth and expansion following its production of cheap ladies' 'straws'. The view from the *Hatters' Gazette* is that not even Dunstable was able to economically weather the sea change caused by imports and mechanisation, a fact which underlines the complete inevitability of decline of the rural, female straw plaiting industry.

Following the 1870s imports, Luton's system of manufacturing hats developed. The numerous large hand-stitch factories reduced considerably in number and there was a rapid escalation in the numbers of 'small makers'. These 'small makers' were small hat workshops, that were often family orientated and set up in small cottages:

Luton is honeycombed with "manufacturers." Perhaps a man has his wife, two daughters, and a son to assist him. The son does the "milling," the strongest girl the "machining," the father the "blocking," and the mother and the other daughter finish off the hats by sewing in linings, ticketing, and so on. The father would probably have

⁷² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Trade Report for Luton and District', January, 1893, p.34.

a brass plait upon his door which would have his name and the word “manufacturer” engraved upon it.⁷³

This opportunity for families to be part of the market’s demand for cheap straw hats through hand-sewing, before the introduction of the sewing machine, may have set in stone Luton’s specific manufacturing organisational structure and the migration to or daily travel into Luton in order to work in one of the many small hat making workshops. In his commentary on Harpenden cottage life, Edwin Grey wrote that there were, ‘young people of both sexes on their way to the hat factories in the village, or maybe by train to one or the other of the numerous factories in Luton or St. Albans’.⁷⁴

Luton had the physical capacity to expand to accommodate this mass influx of workers. The town’s system of land tenure and its specific origins as a small market town meant that it had limited building restrictions and no restrictive input from local landholders or aristocracy.⁷⁵ There was also the ready availability of cheap credit. Luton’s growth in housing was commented upon in 1886 in the *Hatters’ Gazette*, where it was noted that by 1801 Luton had 612 houses and 3,095 people, by 1851 it had 2,415 houses and 12,787 people and in 1881 5,342 houses and 26,140 people.⁷⁶ The scale of Luton’s growth through straw hat manufacture was commented on in 1911 when a contributor to the *Hatters’ Gazette* wrote about the sound of the sewing machines thrumming through Luton’s many back streets, ‘every back street is full of straw hat factories, and though in these the majority of the machines are still driven by treadle power, the hum, although not so pronounced as when motor driven, is still loud enough to arrest

⁷³ *Hatters’ Gazette*, The Luton Straw Industry, January, 1899.

⁷⁴ Edwin Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village* (St Albans, 1935), p.228.

⁷⁵ See Stephen Bunker, ‘Strawopolis Luton transformed 1840 – 1876’, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, vol. 78, (1999).

⁷⁶ *Hatters’ Gazette*, ‘Manufacture of Straw Plait’. Pamphlet on Straw Plait Manufacture by Messrs. Willis, Nelson & Co., 32, Miller-street, Glasgow, July, 1886, p.403.

the attention of the passing stranger.⁷⁷ With a never ending supply of cheap imported plait, hats were sewn and blocked *en famille* or with additional hired labour. These were Luton's 'small makers' or the 'counter trade' and between them they produced thousands upon thousands of cheap straw hats which were mainly sold to the George Street buyers and manufacturers. By the mid-1880s, the market became saturated with cheap straw hats and the problems of Luton's specifically informal system of manufacturing became apparent as expressed in the following poem originally published in *The Luton Reporter* and reprinted in the *Hatters' Gazette* in June 1883:

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 till 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,

⁷⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Hat Trade in St Albans and District', March, 1911, p.166.

And there they sit, and laugh, and talk,
And say how cheap some hats we've bought!
And then to the sea-side 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 every day 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 *The Luton Reporter*⁷⁸

The abuses in the system revolved around a lack of contractual agreement for work between Luton's George Street buyers and the 'small makers'. The buyers would often specify tight and unreasonable delivery timescales, which they could then change at will. The small makers, who had often, in former lives, been rural workers with little or no formal education and almost certainly no book keeping or business skills, reacted by undercutting prices in order to win orders and sales:

The fact is, the Luton manufacturers have played into the hands of the buyers. It does not require much capital in order to become a manufacturer there. A man once said to me, anyone who has 7s. 6d. with which to buy straw plait can become a manufacturer. Credit is too cheap, and (say some) there is too much paper security about; and as in

⁷⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, June, 1883, p.291.

good times money is easily and quickly made, so it is too often quickly spent by employers as well as employed.⁷⁹

There were frequent reports in the *Hatters' Gazette* of 'small makers' selling their hats for less than the price of the plait bought to make them. The *Hatters' Gazette* published a very long article on the formation of a straw trade union, and the difficulty of persuading small straw hat makers to not sell for less than the cost price, was broached:

"If they formed a Straw Workers' Union, he hoped means would be taken to show people the inevitable result of selling for 9d. what cost 9 ¾ d. to produce." "He knew it was easy to say, "do not sell under cost," and that it might be replied there was the rent due and a Sunday's dinner to find, so what were they to do? and he admitted that it was a poser."⁸⁰

Rural families, unable to leave their village or change their employment, to migrate or travel daily, were left to face the poverty of a family economy supported by plaiting. The attempts by the straw hat industry during the 1880s and 1890s to revive the plaiting industry, were especially needed for villages at a distance from Luton and St Albans. These outlying villages did not benefit from the 'spill' of work opportunities from the towns. The 'double effect' of the cheaper plait imports rapidly increasing the production of hats and yet simultaneously causing the decline in the production in English plait, caused a 'dislocation of industry' in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. There were many reasons why families were left unable to benefit from Luton's growth and expansion; geographical distance, employment, poverty, family and kin, ill health or skill set. By the end of the 19th century, the price for English plait was so low that plaiting had become synonymous with poverty, and was

⁷⁹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Factory Inspector on the Straw Hat Trade', Mr Blenkinsopp – local inspector – report to the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, July, 1891, p.359.

⁸⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'A Union For The Straw Trade', January, 1892, p.22.

considered to be an occupation reserved for the elderly, widows or spinsters. The *Hatters' Gazette* acknowledged that the plaiting industry had been part of an overwhelmingly female family economy and that its decline spelt poverty to those trying to survive by it, on their own, without family or kin.⁸¹ In 1893, the *Hatters' Gazette* covered an article that had been published in the *Luton Times*. In it, Mr Elliot, who had sold boaters in the past, reminisced seeing women plaiters smiling and earning plait wages of 2 shillings to 2s. 6d. a day, but he confirmed that this was no more. Mr Elliot commented that, 'the smiling faces had become very long, and his sympathies went out to those unprotected females – widows and spinsters – especially the latter, who were obliged to eke out a dead-alive existence on half-a-crown a week.'⁸²

It was the Luton hat trade, not the plaiters themselves, which during the last quarter of the 19th century attempted to revive the English straw plaiting industry. The story of the revival chronologically unfolds through the monthly editions of the *Hatters' Gazette* and reveals both the significant efforts undertaken by Luton's straw hat trade to try help the plaiting industry to become a commercially successful trading entity, and the changes in approach over time. The decline in the straw plait industry is visible in the table below. The census returns as published in the *Hatters' Gazette* show a significant tailing off in the numbers working in the straw plait and hat trades from 1881 onwards. The fact that employment in the straw hat industry was known to be rapidly expanding during this time period indicates the steepness of the decline in English plaiting work. This table also shows the trade journal's interest in statistical analysis in order to understand the straw trade and perhaps anticipate or even influence its future direction.

⁸¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Teaching of Straw Plaiting in Buckinghamshire', January, 1893, p.38.

⁸² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Teaching of Straw Plaiting in Buckinghamshire', January, 1893, p.38.

Table 19: Census return numbers of persons employed in straw plait and hat manufacture in England and Wales for 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, as reported in the *Hatters' Gazette*.⁸³

Years	1861 M	1861 F	1871 M	1871 F	1881 M	1881 F	1891 M	1891 F
5<10	671	1,679	462	1,589	122	1,939	92	769
10<15	737	5,524	549	5,227				
15<20	430	7,692	381	6,787	418	4,243	475	2,218
20<25	410	6,478	381	6,685	370	3,835	527	2,288
25<45	1,146	15,131	1,229	15,366	1,305	10,583	1,441	5,634
45<65	360	6,326	513	7,577	688	5,985	770	3,207
65 plus	61	1,380	78	2,039	98	1,398	120	843
Total	3,815	44,228	3,593	45,270	3,001	27,983	3,425	14,959
Combined total	48,043		48,863		30,984		18,384	

By November 1881 there had been an early call in the *Hatters' Gazette* to help support the struggling English plaiting industry, ‘but it behoves all concerned to spare neither pains nor skill in the production of English plaits, nor there may come a day when this beautiful branch of industry may entirely decline’.⁸⁴ As perhaps befits a trade journal, this call for help was focused upon helping a disappearing industry as opposed to directly considering the workers themselves. However, in 1885, the *Hatters' Gazette* reported one of the first calls to revive the industry, ‘It will be a crime on the part of our leading merchants if they let this matter go to sleep, which concerns the welfare and happiness of so many of our peasantry.’⁸⁵

The revival started with a straw plait industry exhibition in 1885 which was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* and was designed to highlight the potential of English plait as a modern, fashionable material. In May 1886 Luton’s Chamber of Commerce was praised in the *Hatters' Gazette* for its new focus and practical delivery: ‘The Luton Chamber of Commerce seems to have taken a new lease of life, and the practical turn given to its recent discussions make it a

⁸³ *Hatters' Gazette*, ‘Changes in the Straw Hat and Plait Manufacture Since 1861’, December, 1900, p.649.

⁸⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, ‘Straw Trade of Luton and District’, November, 1881, p.556.

⁸⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, ‘The Trade of Luton and District’, January, 1885, p.34.

useful institution, and one deserving the countenance of all engaged in the straw trade.⁸⁶ It was also in May's contributions that information on bringing plaiting back into schools was mentioned. From this time onwards, the revival of the plaiting industry was a main subject of articles and discussion in the straw industry section of the *Hatters' Gazette*. The close involvement of Luton's Chamber of Commerce seems to have lent the attempts to revive the plaiting industry with industrial and social clout. Much effort, involving plait exhibitions, society figures, school boards, plait design competitions and practical commercial help, to name just a few examples, was given to help revive the English plaiting industry.

⁸⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Straw Plaiting in Schools', May, 1886, p.263.



DEALERS COLLECTING STRAW PLAIT FOR MARKET, August 1885 [LM 39]

This scene was created as part of an exhibition of English straw plaits and plaiting at the Luton Plait Halls in 1885. It included both plaiters at work and plait dealers collecting from them. The Daily Telegraph described it as 'the scenic semblance of a Bedfordshire village, ideally suggestive of peasant surroundings' (19th August, 1885). The Daily News was a little kinder in its account of the scene, describing it as pretty and interesting.

©Luton Culture

Fig. 13. Staged scene of plaiting and collecting plait from market, August 1885,

The start of the 1880s saw the *Hatters' Gazette* mention the need to help the plaiting industry, but it was from 1885 that the revival started to take shape. This seems to coincide with a growing commercial maturity in Luton's Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber had been

started in 1877, and by the mid-1880s its voice was clearly heard in the *Hatters' Gazette*. By the mid-1880s Luton's rush for profit seemed to be settling down and the view from the *Hatters' Gazette* was the appearance of a more considered, respectable, established and middle class Luton. It was at this time, for example, that there was an early mention of Luton having a commercial and industrial museum.⁸⁷ The straw trade, in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce, understood that Luton needed industrial diversification and also that there were latent plaiting skills in the rural districts surrounding the town. A plaiting industry revival, embracing new plaiting styles for the modern fashionable market, could, therefore, work to the benefit of both town and countryside.

The story of the revival traced through the pages of the *Hatters' Gazette* reveals the trade journal's understanding of the decline of the plaiting industry, the hat industry's view of plaiters and the plaiters perceptions of themselves. The *Hatters' Gazette's* view generally appears to have been practically compassionate towards the plaiters, describing them as not only being in need of help, but also being worthy of it. In January 1882, a contributor to the *Hatters' Gazette* commented that English plaiters should be taught to compete against Italian plaiters and to this end, two plaiters should be sent to Italy to learn their methods and then return home and pass on the techniques: 'If this were carried out successfully the plait market would be transformed into a scene of prosperous activity, the plaits would command a ready sale, and some hundreds of pounds would be circulating weekly amongst the most deserving and industrious of our rural population in Beds and Hertfordshire.'⁸⁸ This view from the *Hatters' Gazette* of support and respect for the hard working plaiters directly conflicts with the popular contemporary negative

⁸⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Luton Straw Trade', March, 1886, p.143.

⁸⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Review of the Straw Trade for 1881', January, 1882, p.23.

emphasis, usually given by middle class men, on the moral condition of straw plaiters.⁸⁹ The predominant view from the *Hatters' Gazette*, whilst accommodating frustrations at the plaiters' struggles to change their working practices, appears to be that plaiters were hardworking, capable and had a commercially valuable skill set. There was a firm belief in the technical ability of English plaiters to create fashionable straw plait:

It is a misfortune that amongst the hundreds of straw plaiters so few are able to adapt themselves to the requirements of the trade. The market is, at the present time, glutted with plaits not in demand, and the prices are so low that it yields to the maker scarcely enough to keep hunger from the door. Some organised method should be adopted to teach the plaiters the best mode of imitating the designs that are saleable. Surely, our English plaiters have as much ingenuity as the Italian peasantry.⁹⁰

The *Hatters' Gazette* recognised that the plaiting industry lacked organisation and direction, and the straw hat industry tried to provide this structure in their revival attempts. The straw hat trade hoped to create consistency in quality through changing the plaiting industry's family economy work culture to one based upon artistic responses to and anticipation of market demands. The *Hatters' Gazette's* column inches informing hat manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers of the considerable investment of time and effort to commercially revive and redirect the English plaiting industry, is in itself evidence of the value placed upon the industry by some of the leading lights in Luton's straw hat manufacturers.

Despite the energy, effort and priority given to reviving the English plaiting industry, by the end of the 19th century it had fallen by the wayside. There were many reasons for this, but one which perhaps the straw hat industry was not quite able to perceive, was the effect of cultural

⁸⁹ Nigel Goose, 'How saucy did it make the poor? The straw plait and hat trades, illegitimate fertility and the family in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire,' *History*, vol. 91, no. 304 (2006), p.534.

⁹⁰ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Review of the Straw Trade for 1881', January, 1882, p.23.

change during the last quarter of the 19th century upon the plaiters themselves. English plaiting, like the agricultural labourer's smock, became culturally strongly associated with rural poverty. Alongside the progress of the revival, were older plaiters in the villages, still plaiting the largely unfashionable styles learnt in their youth, thus confirming popular assumption that plaiting was synonymous with old age and rural poverty. It appears that those behind the revival were unable to persuade the new generation of young, modern, increasingly educated girls and women of the day to accept that straw plaiting could be *avant garde*. The practical result was that the *Hatters' Gazette*, a trade journal full of information about products, markets, quantities and prices, has little mention of a commercial demand for 'revival' plait.

Conclusion

By December 1877, the *Hatters' Gazette* wrote that the straw trade was undergoing great change. 'At present we are passing through what may prove to be an entirely new phase in the art of manufacturing.'⁹¹ Comments made included ones of surprise about the ease with which the straw sewing machine had entered into hat manufacturing work,

During the last two seasons the request for sewing machines and their almost universal acceptance has been surprising; the trade now can turn out (especially in common goods) a far greater quantity in a given time than it could possibly do when sewing by hand was the only means employed⁹²

This quick acceptance of the straw sewing machine by workers suggests that demand for straw hats had increased massively and with it, moneymaking opportunities for the working class, 'There was more wealth poured into Luton during those five years after the sewing machine got hold than at any time before or since.'⁹³ Luton's tale of industrial growth, as told by the

⁹¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report, the Straw Trade (from a Luton correspondent)', December, 1877, p.306.

⁹² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report, the Straw Trade (from a Luton correspondent)', December, 1877, p.306.

⁹³ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade Past and Present', letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

Hatters' Gazette, is one where priority was given to the benefits of expansion, new employment opportunities, and where large profits were easily reaped:

The introduction of the sewing machine in 1874 has been the means of revolutionizing every department of the straw industry; the powers of production have increased, and the wants of the public can be much better complied with than ever, but this should be no reason for the diminished rate of profit in a business which is unique out of all the branches of industry in the Kingdom.⁹⁴

Horn wrote that, 'The problems of the English straw plait trade came not from mechanisation but as a result of the importation of cheap foreign plaits from China, Japan and Italy from the 1870s.'⁹⁵ Goose also considered imports to be the main reason behind the industry's demise: 'it was the import of cheap straw plait from Japan and China that killed the plaiting trade, not mechanisation from within, and the impact was dramatic.'⁹⁶ The *Hatters' Gazette*, however, suggests a different view. In July 1890, the Luton straw trade reported an interview in the *Hatters' Gazette*, between a Luton straw hat manufacturer and a reporter from the *New York Herald*. In it, the newspaper reporter questioned Mr Thirkell of Vyse & Co. straw hat manufacturers, about the fact that plaiting was no longer carried out in the district, and that this was due to the fact that all plait was imported from China.

A statement, calculated to cause no little alarm to a good many people, was recently put forth to the effect that a productive British industry, namely, straw-plait making, was threatened with extinction by the competition of Chinese cheap labour. Quantities of straw-plait, the writer in question went on to say, are now sent over from China, instead of being made exclusively at Luton and Dunstable as hitherto.

⁹⁴ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade Past and Present', letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

⁹⁵ Horn, *Countrywomen*, p.169.

⁹⁶ Goose, 'straw plait and hat trades', p.100.

Mr Thirkell's calm and measured response was that decline within the plaiting industry had been ongoing for a long time and moreover that its decline was mainly due to the mechanisation within the straw hat industry. 'Mr. Thirkell, in fact, smiled when he read the paragraph, and evidently took much the same view of the fears expressed in it as Voltaire took of somebody's solemn warning that coffee was "slow poison." "Very slow," it will be recollected, was the philosopher's reply on that occasion.'⁹⁷ After stating that he himself had brought Chinese plait to Britain, Mr Thirkell noted that some of the plaiting industry's decline was due to imports, but he firmly placed most of the blame upon the introduction of the straw sewing machine, and its ability to be taken up by anyone and everyone who could raise the little capital needed. The competitive undercutting of the 'small makers' led, so, Mr Thirkell suggested, to a large reduction in the price of straw plait. 'The price of one bundle of plaited straw, which, twenty years ago, would have cost 4s. 6d., is now just 4½d.'⁹⁸ This was such a reduction in value that English plait was left unable to compete.

This 1890s assertion from the straw trade that the sewing machine was the main cause of decline in the English plaiting industry, must have been somewhat carefully positioned for the press and public. In general, however, the comments about the decline contained within the *Hatters' Gazette's* pages appear to a mixed bag, blaming either alternately or together imports and mechanisation. The impression given is that the success of the straw hat industry was founded upon the working combination of foreign imports and straw sewing machines. This successful combination also caused the decline of the English plaiting industry and its compatriot cottage industry, hand-sewing. Initial plait imports from the Far East may have started the decline in the plaiting industry, but, without the advent of machinery, rural plaiters

⁹⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Plaiting of Straw Hats', July, 1890, p.371.

⁹⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Plaiting of Straw Hats', July, 1890, p.371.

may have moved into an expanding hand-sewing industry. This may even have led to a moderation in the quantity of imports and allowed the English plaiting industry to develop in new directions. Moving beyond speculation into contemporary reality as portrayed by the *Hatters' Gazette* for those living in the outlying villages of 19th century rural Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, unable to migrate to Luton or travel to work within its industrialising sphere, the story of the English plaiting industry was one of decline, but it was also one of revival hope and investment confounded by commercial and industrial reality.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been to study the impact of imports and mechanisation on the decline of the English plaiting industry between 1873 and 1900 from the view of the *Hatters' Gazette*. During this period Luton rapidly industrialised and the effects of this expansion on the creation of new work opportunities in and around Luton, and the resulting flow and movement of people, has been considered. The entrepreneurial manner of Luton's expansion and the shape of the decline of the English plaiting industry were partly dependent upon the availability of building land in Luton. In the 1870s, Luton was a small market town, somewhat unrestricted by land tenure agreements and controlling aristocratic influence which enabled industrial growth during the period from 1870 to 1900. Larger manufacturers set up factories and warehouses in the centre of Luton and the availability of land meant that cottages, which were mainly used as combined living quarters and small hat manufacturing workshops, were built. These were rented by the many people migrating into Luton, eager to be part of the 'gold rush' that was the rapid production of mass market, low cost straw hats.

The methodology for this research has revolved around the study of the *Hatters' Gazette*. The wealth of information contained within its pages has brought to life, month by month, the thoughts and concerns of the straw hat industry. This has revealed the industry's change over time, from small scale manufacture into an industry built on international trade. Commenting from 1873, at the start of the trade's new commercial beginnings, the *Hatters' Gazette* shows how Luton's straw hat trade matured to become - amongst its richer more influential manufacturers - an increasingly centred, focused and united entity. This development appears to have coincided with several factors: the onset of trading difficulties with Chinese plait suppliers; the swamping of the domestic straw hat market with low cost products; the ability

of manufacturers in other countries to use straw sewing machines to manufacture cheap hats and, thus, to undermine the monopoly of Luton's straw hat export market; the creation of civic entities such as Luton's Town Council and its Chamber of Commerce; and, the attempt to economically revive the English plaiting industry through teaching plaiters new skills to enable them to create new products to compete in the European quality, fancy and novelty plait market. This latter development was an attempt to provide new English plait products for Luton's straw hat industry, potentially creating a new commercial direction through the production of quality fashionable ladies' 'straws'.

This research used the *Hatters' Gazette* to explore the statements in the literature that imports and then mechanisation, caused the decline of the English plaiting industry. In so doing, the conclusion reached has been that imports did cause the decline of the English plaiting industry, but that it was the combination of imports and mechanisation and the rapid expansion of Luton which cemented this decline and also the decline of the straw hat hand-sewing cottage industry in the districts surrounding Luton. Without the invention of the straw sewing machine, imports of straw plait from the Far East may have become limited to higher quality plaits and English plaiters may have had ample opportunity to work at the better paid occupation of hand-sewing hats. The increased rate of production caused by mechanisation demanded vast quantities of imported straw plait which could be of indifferent quality as they were given strength, structure and finish by the application of mechanical stitching. The growth of Luton and its system of small hat manufacturing workshops exerted an economic force which drew work opportunities in towards the town and away from the countryside.

The strength of the *Hatters' Gazette* as a historical source is its direct insight into the opinions, reactions and direction of Luton's straw hat industry, but there are caveats. Viewing the decline of the straw plaiting industry through the lens of the emerging straw hat industry naturally gives a narrower focus. Trade expansion meant money, and Luton's straw hat industry was growing rapidly at a time of national trade depression. 'There is every appearance of it being a bonnet season; and seeing so many cards in the windows for good sewers wanted, we presume that trade is in a sound and healthy condition, in spite of the general depression throughout the country.'¹ In the *Hatters' Gazette*, the emphasis from the Luton straw trade centred, as would only be expected, on the benefits accrued from their trade expansion; work and wealth. These new work opportunities, whether initially hand-sewing in villages or being part of one of the many small Luton mechanised hat making workshops, were, however, not accessible to all rural plaiters. Plaiters were limited by their circumstances which affected whether they were able to alter their lives and take up the challenge of change; many were limited by their distance from Luton, others by their own financial, practical and familial situations.

The literature on the decline of the straw plaiting industry tends to be limited to the assertion that the decline in straw plaiting happened following the 1870s imports, and that, thirty years later, those left plaiting were left plaiting in poverty. This misses, to an extent, the suggestion that seems to emerge from the *Hatters' Gazette*, that the decline of the plaiting industry was, to some degree, allayed by the flow of plaiters, and perhaps their families, moving towards Luton and the new opportunities to work in the urban straw industry. The influence of Luton's straw hat trade on the lives of former plaiters appears to have waned in direct relation to the plaiters distance from the town and the provision of train travel. The literature correctly states

¹ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Trade Report – Trade of Luton and District', March, 1878, p.444.

that plaiting was a poverty occupation by the end of the 19th century, but this does not take into account the economically sincere attempt by the straw trade to redirect and revive the English plaiting industry in order to create new quality and novelty product lines, details of which abound in the *Hatters' Gazette*. This revival also appears to have been an attempt to get the plaiting and hat industries to collaborate and work together. The resulting financial benefit would have been that English plaiters could create plait products which their hatting counterparts could immediately use. This would have eradicated any production delay caused by the necessary foreign transit time for imports, and would have therefore allowed the creation of the very latest fashions to be sold at a premium.

There is still much to be learned from the *Hatters' Gazette* on the decline of the straw plaiting industry in relation to Luton's straw hat industry: most notably, the attempts of the straw hat industry to revive and redirect the plaiting industry, the organisation of the plaiting industry and the organisation of Luton's straw hat industry – an industry full of 'small makers', and the, perhaps not fully understood, extent and acceptance of female involvement in the straw trade.

The view from the *Hatters' Gazette* was that it was the combination of imports and mechanisation and their development which created an irretrievable decline in the plaiting industry. In 1888, a contributor to the *Hatters' Gazette* commented:

If people point to the enormous expansion and development which has taken place within the past twelve years, that is in no way owing to any enterprise on the part of the middlemen. The invention of the sewing machine, the importation of Chinese plaits, the invention of the hydraulic blocking machine, and the art of crumping which was

scoffed at and kicked aside for twelve months, were the factors which brought wealth into the town, and put bread into the mouths of hundreds without much effort.²

This quotation perfectly describes the rapid, seemingly unstoppable industrial expansion in Luton that happened from the late 1860s onwards. The economic benefits of a growing industry to the wealth of Luton and its vicinity were unequivocal. However, this dynamic change also permanently and negatively affected the health of the English straw plaiting industry. In 1880, the *Hatters' Gazette* published figures showing the increase of straw plait imports from Shanghai and commented upon the inevitability of European plaiting decline in the face of such prodigious quantities of Far Eastern imports. 'One of the main causes of this increased demand and export is the falling off in the industry in Europe, which finds it impossible to compete with China. Hence manufacturers look more and more to China for their supplies.'³

In 1889, the *Hatters' Gazette* published a report on the Festival of Wettiner, which was a celebration of the eight hundredth anniversary of the principedom of Saxony. The festival included a celebration of the straw trade in Saxony where Saxonia was seated between six girls each dressed in National costumes of Italy, Switzerland, Japan, China, Saxony and the Black Forest and each plaiting in the different styles of these countries. English plaiting, once such a vast and skilled industry, was not represented. This suggests that by the 1880s at least some European countries considered the English South Midlands to be synonymous not with the

² *Hatters' Gazette*, 'The Straw Trade Past and Present', letter to the editor, August, 1888, p.423.

³ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1880, p.615. The value of trade with China was still strong by the end of the century – 'China is looked at with longing eyes by the commercial world as a vast field for development of trade.....the absorption of Chinese territory by Foreign Powers was regarded as injurious to the interest of British commerce.....the Government is willing to prevent trade from being balked by Foreign Powers, and to secure "open doors" for British enterprise.' *Hatters' Gazette*, July, 1898.

straw plaiting of England's yesteryear, but with the manufacture of straw hats.⁴ In December 1886, the *Hatters' Gazette* published an article which reported that Mr Wright had endeavoured to gain the school boards partnership with the Luton Chamber of Commerce to support a practical scheme to teach 'the knowledge of straw plaiting, as well as the conformation and harmony of colours.'⁵ Not only did Mr Wright consider that this would be good for the Chamber of Commerce, but that it would provide, 'benefit to all those districts which are suffering now from the want of labour in plaiting'.⁶ This 'revival' report on the proposed long term attempt to reposition English plait as a successful economic competitor to Italian and Swiss novelty plaits, was not without its Luton critics. One such critic was Mr Mees who firmly evinced his conviction that the time for an English plaiting industry had irretrievably passed. He asserted that Luton – and therefore the South Midlands - was now all about straw hats, and that it would be economically impossible to create a commercially successful plaiting industry able to compete with European novelty plait:

Mr. Mees observed that he did not object to the Board trying the scheme, but would say that as sure as they tried it would fail. There was no plait made in England or in Europe which could not be made in Italy. All the fancy plaits were being made there, and the prices would come down until people in England could not make them at all. The Chinese, too, could make any kind of plait. He did not make these remarks discouragingly, but Luton was a hat place; it never was a plait place, and never would be.⁷

By the last quarter of the 19th century Luton and its district was established as a straw hat manufacturing area dealing in foreign plait imports and exports. Any attempt to reinvigorate

⁴ *Hatters' Gazette, Strohhut Zeitung*, Festival of Wettiner. September, 1889, p.381. (*Strohhut Zeitung* means Straw Hat Times)

⁵ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1886, p.682.

⁶ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1886, p.682.

⁷ *Hatters' Gazette*, December, 1886, p.682.

the straw plaiting industry was destined to be, if not impossible, then needing the total support of not just a younger generation of potential plaiters and of straw hat manufacturers, but, crucially, of the plait dealers themselves.

The combination of foreign imports and mechanisation came together, at just the right point in time for the mass market, and a whole new retail world of low cost straw hats was created. The English plaiting industry - either through its own efforts, or in fact, through the organised, thorough and commercially considered efforts of the straw hat industry - was unable to compete in the face of Luton's opportunity.

This revolution in the straw industry, while, on the one hand, it shows a withdrawal of employment from thousands of villagers, shows, on the other hand, that the industry in itself has, under new conditions, increased enormously. Luton has become "*facile princeps*" in the production of straw hats and bonnets for the world.⁸

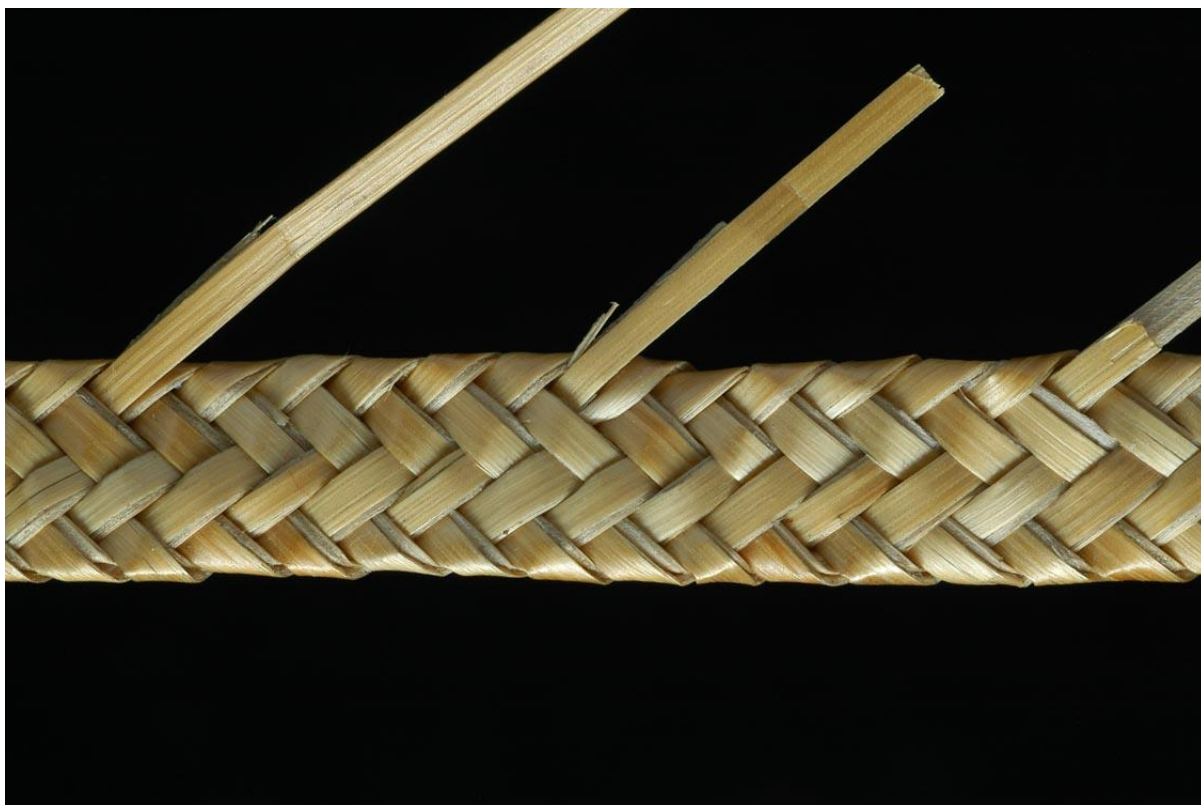
⁸ *Hatters' Gazette*, 'Episodes in the Straw Plait and Hat Industry', December, 1901, p.651.



Fig. 14. Straw bonnet, 19th century, from Luton museum

©Luton Culture

Appendix



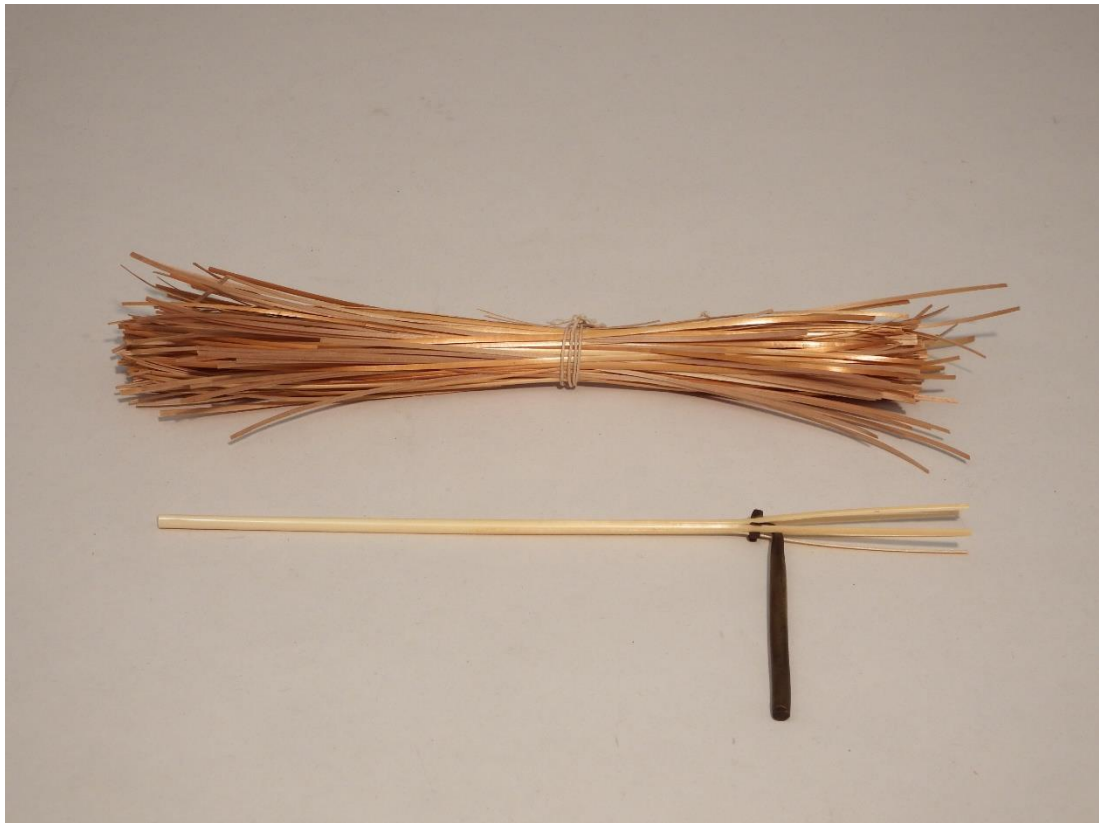
©Luton Culture

Plait with the ends of straws left to be cut off. These ends were called speelers and were left sticking out of the plait as new straw was added in. It would often be young child's task to carefully snip these ends off.



©Luton Culture

A length of straw plait curled round and pictured from above, showing the ends ready to be cut.



©Luton Culture

A bundle of split straws, known as splints, and a handheld straw splitter. This straw splitter had a bent over point at one end with metal cutting edges radiating out from this point, rather like the spokes of a tiny cartwheel. The end of the straw was placed over the point and the straw would be pushed onto the point and split. Handheld splitters could be bought with a variety of splitting edges which determined how finely the straw was split, thus affecting the type of plait to be plaited.



©Luton Culture

A table top straw splitter. The working principle is exactly the same as the handheld splitter in the previous picture. The difference is that the table top splitter provides a variety of splitting widths. This hints at the complexity of and demand for different types of straw plait.



©Luton Culture

Straw plait pattern book detailing the bright, delicate colouring of natural straw plait, intricately plaited with different edge designs.



©Luton Culture



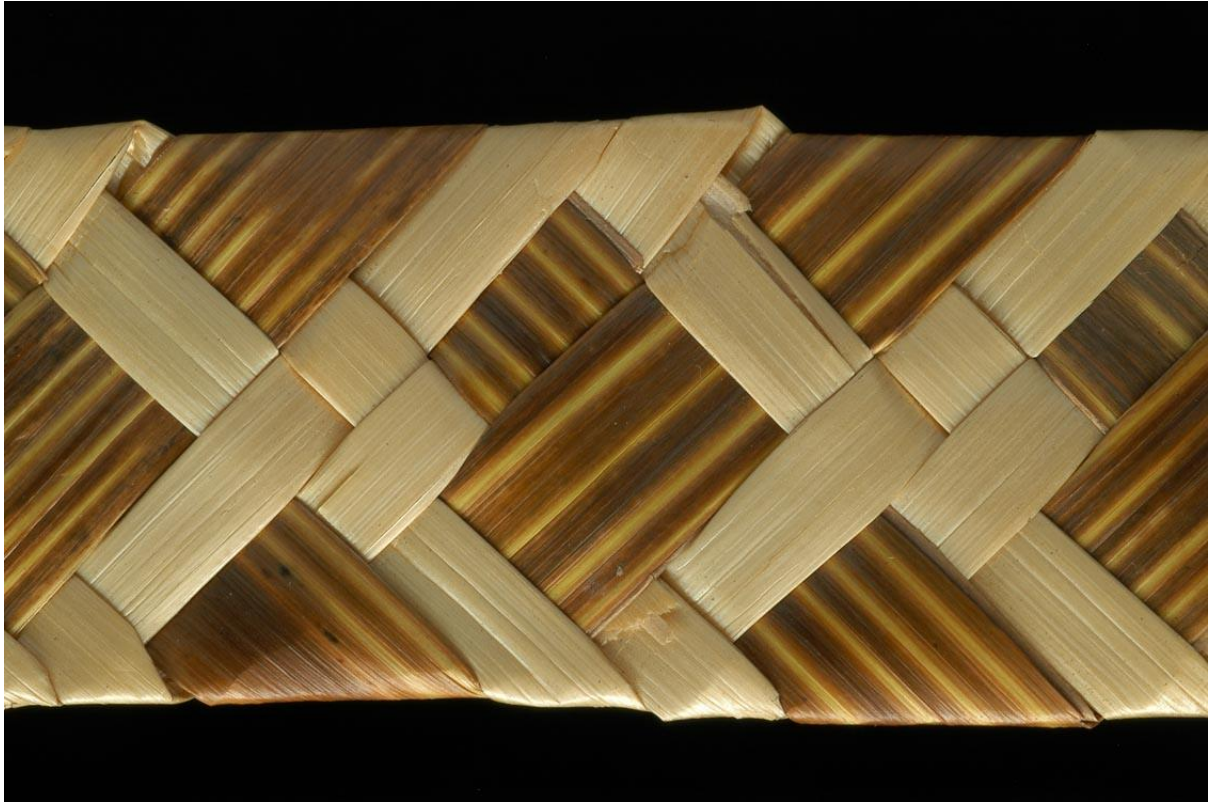
©Luton Culture

Two close up photographs showing the neat, tight twists and turns of plait.



©Luton Culture

Dyed plait with a straight and a twisted edge. Here it is possible to see where the ends of the finished straw have been cut back close to a weave in the plait. Note how the dye has taken on some parts of the straw and not others, creating gentle stripes.



©Luton Culture

The stripes in this photograph are more defined than in the previous photograph, and hence give a stronger, more deliberate effect. Here different widths of plait have been used to great effect. This style seems to reference Japanese culture and brings to mind the complex paper folds of origami.



©Luton Culture



©Luton Culture

These photographs show just two of so many different edge styles plaited for straw hats. The straight edges of these lengths of plait would be sewn together to make a hat, making a feature of the carefully twisted edge.



©Luton Culture

A straw bonnet, showing how dyed and natural straw could be combined to create specific shape and style.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Trade Journals

Blake and Mckenzie's The English and Foreign Markets & Prices Current

The Hatter and Umbrella Trade Circular; A Monthly Trade Circular

The Pottery and Glass Trades' Review. A Trade and Art Journal

Newspapers

Luton Times and Advertiser

York Herald

Secondary Sources

Brake, Laurel and Demoor, Marysa (eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent, 2009).

Bunker, Stephen, 'Houses built of straw: the influence of the hat trade in the shaping of Luton', *Costume*, vol.30, no.1, (1996).

Bunker, Stephen, '*Strawopolis: Luton transformed 1840 – 1876*' (Bedford, 1999).

Bythell, D., *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1978).

Cobbett, W., *Cottage Economy* (reprinted Oxford, 1979, 1st published 1822).

Curran, Joan, *Straw Hats and Bonnets* (Dunstable, 2003).

Daunton, Martin, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume 111 1840 – 1950* (Cambridge, 2000).

Daunton, Martin, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951* (Oxford, 2007).

David, Saul, *Victoria's Wars: the Rise of Empire* (London, 2007).

Davis, Jean, *Straw Plait* (Princes Risborough, 1981).

Dony, J. G., *A History of the Straw Hat Industry* (Luton, 1942).

Driver, Felix and Gilbert, David, (eds.), *Imperial Cities, Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester, 1999).

Ferguson, Niall, *Empire* (London, 2004).

Floud, Roderick, Humphries, Jane and Johnson, Paul, (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain: Volume II, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2014).

Freeman, C., *Luton and the Hat Industry* (Luton, 1953).

Forman, Ross, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (Cambridge, 2013).

Goose, Nigel, 'How saucy did it make the poor? The straw plait and hat trades, illegitimate fertility and the family in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire,' *History*, vol. 91, no. 304, (2006).

Goose, Nigel, *Population Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851. Vol. 1: The Berkhamsted Region* (Hatfield, 1996).

Goose, Nigel, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire, Vol. 2: St. Albans and its Region* (Hatfield, 2000).

Goose, Nigel, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire,' *Continuity and Change*, vol. 20, no. 3, (December, 2005).

Goose, Nigel, 'The straw plait and hat trades in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire' in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England* (Hertfordshire, 2007).

Grof, L. L., *Children of Straw. The Story of a Vanished Craft Industry in Bucks, Herts, Beds and Essex* (Buckingham, 1988).

Grey, E., *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village* (St Albans, 1935).

Hevia, James, L., *English lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (London, 2003).

Hobsbawm, Eric, *Industry and Empire from 1750 to the Present Day* (London, 1999).

Horn, Pamela, 'Child workers in the pillow lace and straw plait trades of Victorian Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire', *Historical Journal*, vol.17, (1974).

Horn, Pamela, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside* (Gloucester, 1976).

Horn, Pamela, 'The Buckinghamshire straw plait trade in Victorian England', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, vol.19, (1971).

- Horn, Pamela, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales* (London, 1984).
- Horn, Pamela, *Victorian Countrywomen* (Oxford, 1991).
- Howkins, Alun, *Reshaping rural England: A Social History, 1850-1925* (London, 1991).
- Main, Veronica, *Swiss Straw Work: Techniques of a Fashion Industry* (Great Britain, 2003).
- Mathias, Peter, *The First Industrial Nation: The Economic History of Britain 1700–1914* (New York, 2001).
- Matthew, Collin, *The Nineteenth Century Short Oxford History of the British Isles* (Oxford, 2000).
- Mingay, G. E. *Rural Life in Victorian England* (Stroud, 1998).
- Moss, David and Hosgood, Chris, 'Financial and trade press', in J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (eds), *Victorian Periodical and Victorian Society* (Hampshire, 1994).
- Nichols, Marian, 'Straw plaiting and the straw hat industry in Britain', *Costume*, vol.30, no.1, (1996).
- Roberts, E., *Women's Work, 1840-1940* (Cambridge, 1988).
- Searle, G. R., *Entrepreneurial Politics in mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993).
- Sharpe, Pamela, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700 – 1850* (London, 1996).
- Sharpe, Pamela, 'The female labour market in English agriculture during the industrial evolution: expansion or contraction?' in Nigel Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England* (Hertfordshire, 2007).
- Sharpe, Pamela, 'The women's harvest: straw-plaiting and the representation of labouring women's employment, c.1793-1885' *Rural History*, vol.5 (1994).
- Snell, K.D.M., *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985).
- Thompson, Andrew, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (Harlow, 2005).

Vann, J. Donn and VanArsdel, Rosemary, T., (eds.), *Victorian Periodical and Victorian Society* (Toronto, 1994).

Verdon, N., *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge, 2002).