



# Willing and capable: Women as farmers in late Victorian British Agriculture

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# Table 1: Farmers/Graziers in England and Wales, 1851-1901 (all ages)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>% female</i>	<i>Female Labourers</i>
1851	226,515	22,916	9.2	70,899
1861	226,957	22,778	9.1	43,964
1871	225,569	24,338	9.7	33,513
1881	203,329	20,614	9.2	40,316
1891	201,918	21,692	9.7	24,150
1901	202,751	21,548	9.6	4,254

Source: Census of England and Wales, 1851-1901

# Miss Katherine Courtauld

Ran the 243-acre Knight's Farm at Colne Engaine,  
Essex:

'People sometimes express surprise at a lady being able to keep such a "number of hands" all under control, but where a mistress is so thoroughly experienced in all farming matters as Miss Courtauld, there is no difficulty about it. The men are quick to recognise the quality of their leader, and no trouble is experienced with any of them at Knight's Farm'.

*(The Woman's Agricultural Times, Vol II, no. 4 Oct 1900, p.4)*

## 1867-70 Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture

137. *Mrs. Clarke*, widow of a freeholder.—I have 10 acres of my own, and I rent about 20 more. We all work it together, my two sons, three daughters, and myself. We don't often get help. My children do our hard work. Anno (16) has got a bad back, and can't do much: she got a cold in it at work last Martinmas. My other two daughters are 19 and 22. We've a pair of horses. Help is hard to get at potato time, but we want it then. My daughters used to go to school after Martinmas, and then we could spare them till March, perhaps, if it was stormy (frosty—F. S.).

# **Louisa Cresswell, *Eighteen Years on the Sandringham Estate* (1880)**

‘The opposition encountered when I first expressed myself willing and capable of undertaking the management of nearly nine hundred acres of land, twelve or thirteen hundred head of live stock, a large staff of labourers and other addenda, could hardly be considered unreasonable. It seemed a desperate attempt for a woman, and every possible argument was brought to bear against it’ (pp. 25-6)



# Legal disabilities

Farming was 'a healthful, easy, and natural profession for women who have been brought up in agricultural counties, and have thus been learning it from childhood'.

For single women with capital it could return good investments: 'It seems to me not a little hard that a woman possessing capital should be deprived of the privileges other capitalists enjoy, but it seems harder still that she should be robbed of her livelihood, simply because an anomalous custom has shut her out from such a privilege'. (Matilda Betham Edwards)

# Jessie Boucherett



'...an industrious and energetic woman, if possessed of country tastes, might lead a happy and useful life as a farmer.'

*(Englishwoman's Review, 1879)*

# Institutional disadvantages

THE FOLLOWING letter and paragraph has appeared in the *Field* of November 5.

SIR,—You make an appeal in last week's *Field* for the Royal Agricultural Society and ask, why do not farmers more generally support it? I ask, why does the Society reject women farmers as members? No woman takes to farming unless she has a vocation for it; whereas the dolt (man) of the family is generally considered good enough for a farmer. Therefore, I believe that although women farmers may be few in number, they bring in proportion more education and intelligence to the work than men; yet, because they are women, they must not participate in the advantages of the "Royal." Why, merely because I am a woman, should I be debarred from sending my "bones" or my guano to Professor Voelcker to be analysed? I may get prizes at shows; no one refuses to buy my corn; no society, except the "Royal," refuses my subscription. Perhaps it is considered indelicate for a woman to be a "Fellow." If so, then let us be "Fellowes." Let us have "Fellows" and "Fellowes"—any way please to get us admitted, and we will cheerfully pay our subscriptions.—

ONE WHO DOES NOT ADVOCATE THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN.

The farmers of England include a very considerable proportion of women amongst their number. These not only labour under

the disadvantages which are inseparable from their sex, but are most unjustly, not to say ungallantly, deprived of certain advantages which are enjoyed by their masculine competitors. The Royal Agricultural Society of England confers on its members certain valuable privileges. They can have their superphosphates and purchased fertilisers analysed at a nominal rate by the agricultural chemist to the Society. They are protected from imposition in the purchase of oilcake. Their soils can be carefully examined. They can exhibit at the annual meeting under more favourable conditions than strangers. These advantages, strange to say, are denied to those women who are farmers, and hence the letter which appears in our Farm columns of this week. But it may be said, "What business have women with farming?" It is nonsense to suppose a woman can farm successfully." In answer to this query, the report of the competition for the 100 guineas prize for the best managed farm in the central districts of England may be referred to. It is published in the last number of the *Royal Agricultural Society's Journal*. Twenty-one farms competed for the honour. It was awarded to the tenant of Ash Grove Farm, Ardley, near Bicester, as showing the best example of good general management, productiveness, suitability of live stock, and general cultivation with a view to profit. The farm is one of 890 acres, 820 being arable and 70 pasture. 1000 sheep and 70 cattle are wintered annually. Cake to the amount of 1200*l.* is purchased yearly. The labourers work by piece work as much as possible, and no beer is given. The judges said the farm was an exceedingly good example of a well-managed one. But, though the Royal Agricultural Society have awarded the tenant the first prize, they refuse to second the honour by the advantages of membership, for the simple reason that—she is only a woman.

# Prize Winning Women Farmers: Mrs Mary Elizabeth Millington

H. W. Keary, 'Report on the Farm Prize Competition',  
*JRASE, 1870, Vol. 6, 2nd Series*

- 'The advocates of the four-course rotation will find at Ardley that system carried out strictly, and in the best manner.' (p. 257)
- Only 'a series of years of high farming can produce such crops as those which Mrs Millington's farm this year exhibits.' (p. 257)

(890 acres: 820 arable, 70 pasture, 21 year lease from Duke of Marlborough, 6 years remaining).

# Mrs Birch, 242 acres, 1877

‘The judges were much struck with the high cultivation of this farm; and it did not require a very practiced eye to see that it had been for a long time under the best management. The fields did not wear the look of having put on holiday attire for a single year, but told a tale of the culture of years. During the occupancy of Mrs Birch and her late husband, 30 lineal miles of drains have been laid down... In 1848 the late Mr Birch was awarded a premium for laying 19 miles of drains, ... How pleasing would it be to this pioneer of agriculture could he now see the results of his labour. They tell of the honesty of the soil, which in time will always repay judicious outlay, and they also bear testimony to a system of hereditary tenure most honourable to the Sefton estate, and, above all, how gratifying to Mrs Birch to occupy the proud position she now holds, and to reap the reward of the enterprise and skill of her late husband, while she sees the fruits of them continue to improve under the management of her son!’  
*(JRASE, 1877, Vol. 13, 2nd series, p. 470)*

# Promoting farming for women

1. Women's magazines and periodicals (*The Queen, The Ladies Field, Women's Employment*)
2. Agricultural colleges for women (Swanley, 1891/1902; Studley, 1903)
3. Women's Agricultural Associations (Agricultural Association for Women, 1899; Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union, 1899)

# Why was farming deemed suitable for women?

1. The 'redundant' woman problem
2. State of the nation's health
3. Economic decline, rural depopulation and agricultural depression
4. The imperial imperative

# Gendered barriers: The 'lighter branches of agriculture'

'the field of labour in agriculture which is more specially the province of women than men ... the dairy, work in the garden and green house, supervision of market gardens, culture of fruits, management of poultry and bees'.  
(Lady Warwick)

# Strategies

- Used men – e.g. sons, or employed farm managers to manage farm
- Employed labourers & family members, as well as working themselves
- Used knowledge and experience gained from farming with fathers, husbands etc
- Used expertise/specialist knowledge e.g. Breeding
- Gained technical and practical education
- Maintained income by using business strategies such as high farming, or what we now call diversification
- Legally could inherit tenancies etc. & pass these on
- Within farming circles was much more the 'norm' than we might think, and this also allowed barriers to be bypassed.