

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
END OF AWARD REPORT**



For awards ending on or after 1 November 2009

This End of Award Report should be completed and submitted using the **grant reference** as the email subject, to **reportsofficer@esrc.ac.uk** on or before the due date.

The final instalment of the grant will not be paid until an End of Award Report is completed in full and accepted by ESRC.

Grant holders whose End of Award Report is overdue or incomplete will not be eligible for further ESRC funding until the Report is accepted. ESRC reserves the right to recover a sum of the expenditure incurred on the grant if the End of Award Report is overdue. (Please see Section 5 of the ESRC Research Funding Guide for details.)

Please refer to the Guidance notes when completing this End of Award Report.

Grant Reference	RES-000-22-3343		
Grant Title	London women and the economy before and after the Black Death		
Grant Start Date	1 February 2009	Total Amount	£95,984.71
Grant End Date	31 January 2010	Expended:	
Grant holding Institution	Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London		
Grant Holder	Dr. Matthew Davies		
Grant Holder's Contact Details	Address	Email	
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Co-Investigators (as per project application):		Institution	

1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Please provide below a project summary written in non-technical language. The summary may be used by ESRC to publicise your work and should explain the aims and findings of the project.

[Max 250 words]

The population of England grew rapidly throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, resulting, by the early fourteenth century, in high population density, labour oversupply, and low wages. It has been suggested by historians of British history that during this period most women, both as excess labourers and persons underprivileged at common law (under the guardianship, or 'coverture', of their spouse or father) enjoyed few personal freedoms and low status. In the mid fourteenth century successive outbreaks of epidemic disease, now called the 'Black Death', reduced the English population by 30 to 50 per cent over the years 1348-9 and 1360-1. As a result, it has been conjectured, labour shortages in urban and rural areas afforded women new opportunities as workers and increased their social standing, most particularly during the half-century of population stagnation which followed the major plague outbreaks. However, prior to this project, no substantial comparative study had been made of women in the pre- and post-Black Death eras. This project has used a variety of judicial records from pre- and post-plague London and the king's national courts at Westminster, contextualized by judicial records from other English and Welsh towns and villages, to assess the changing frequency with which women appeared as litigants and were associated with economic activities (e.g. trade) in these courts. The project found that, contrary to current thought, women were less well represented in courts after the Black Death, and that little evidence exists to suggest women were more frequently engaging in economic activities.

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

a) Objectives

Please state the aims and objectives of your project as outlined in your proposal to the ESRC.

[Max 200 words]

1. To establish the extent to which medieval women benefited as a result of post Black Death labour shortages, through the systematic interrogation of a range of documentary sources.
 - This entailed concise study of two focus periods (1320s and 1420s) using directly comparable records to measure social and economic engagement by women – e.g. levels of trade participation and proportional representation in the courts – applicable to London and elsewhere.
2. To measure women's participation in the London economy both against the economic backdrop of the city and the English economy.
 - British historians have conjectured that labour shortages after the Black Death of 1348-9 offered women workers an enhanced socioeconomic role and greater gender equality. The project was to yield pre- to post-plague data with which to gauge changes to London women's socioeconomic status against that of townswomen elsewhere.
3. To create two distinct benchmarks for locating London's women within the broader context of women European cities.
 - London was the only city in medieval Britain comparable in size to continental centres such as Paris and Cologne. This study of London women is to inform British and continental historians of London's relative value in understanding medieval urban women.

b) Project Changes

Please describe any changes made to the original aims and objectives, and confirm that these were agreed with the ESRC. Please also detail any changes to the grant holder's institutional affiliation, project staffing or funding. *[Max 200 words]*

Project research officer Dr. Matthew Stevens did not attend the 2009 Economic History Society Conference as planned, given the very small number of pre-modern papers presented and pre-modern historians attending. The financial resources intended for this conference, as well as monies saved as a result of the project workshop coming in under budget, approximately £500 in total, were diverted to the digitization and online publication (British History Online) of the Sheriffs' Court of London records re-discovered by the project; a key source for London women's history.

In the original application to ESRC Dr Stevens' existing short-term contract was to be extended, with him continuing on Level 7, point 30 with increment to point 31 due 1.6.09. Because of a delay in notification of the award, he had to be employed on a new contract and therefore started on point 31 with no increment within the 12 months of the project.

c) Methodology

Please describe the methodology that you employed in the project. Please also note any ethical issues that arose during the course of the work, the effects of this and any action taken. *[Max. 500 words]*

The project used the uniquely abundant judicial records of medieval London to directly compare the status of women and their role in the city economy of the 1320s, a period of labour-oversupply and low wages, to the 1420s, a period of labour shortage and high wages. This research took place in two phases. The first phase was quantitative, surveying the records of cases heard before London's principal central courts (the London Hustings of Common Pleas and London Sheriffs' Court) and records of those national courts most used by Londoners (the Westminster courts of Common Pleas and King's Bench) for each sample period in order to attain aggregate and proportional figures of how frequently London women came before the courts as plaintiffs or defendants, independently or in conjunction with a relative/spouse, and in what kinds of civil and criminal cases women appeared. This has indicated the capacity of women, in each decade, to access the courts as plaintiffs, and the degree to which others felt them financially worthwhile to litigate against, in mercantile and non-mercantile suits. It has informed us about the range and value of economic activities engaged in by London women, and how these informed their interactions with other Londoners and non-Londoners. The second phase was more qualitative, identifying and relating changes in the court profile of women in the 1320s versus the 1420s to changes in labour supply, prosperity, and the perceived role and status of women in the society and economy of London.

Sampling of court records was adapted to focus most strongly on the best data sources. Cases were extracted from the Westminster courts of Common Pleas and King's Bench, for both the 1320s and 1420s, in which either a Londoner was a litigant or the events disputed took place in London. This yielded around 30 cases involving London women from each Westminster court in the 1320s and around 200-300 cases from each court in the 1420s (due largely to an increase in the volume of judicial business). Sampling of the London city Husting of Common Pleas extracted all cases involving women litigants in

each sample period, yielding over 100 cases involving women in the 1320s, but markedly fewer in the 1420s. This source ultimately proved less useful than expected for pre- to post-plague comparisons due to the changing role of this court. However, the last principal source investigated, the city of London Sheriffs' Court, records for which were previously thought to exist only in isolated document fragments, proved exceptional. The project re-discovered a little known, and unique, Sheriffs' Court record of 1320 recording 538 cases, 38 per cent of which involved London women as litigants. In light of this discovery, research time originally intended for comparative examination of London women's wills was, in part, diverted to this document. London women's wills have been consulted but research has been focused on a smaller sample, of testators identified as litigants in court records. Lastly, comparable, published data on female participation in four other urban and rural courts was compiled and used to contextualize London data.

d) Project Findings

Please summarise the findings of the project, referring where appropriate to outputs recorded on *ESRC Society Today*. Any future research plans should also be identified. [Max 500 words]

Project findings fall into two categories: a) those concerning London women's changing socioeconomic position, from the 1320s to 1420s, relative to the changing position of women elsewhere Britain, and b) the changing position of London women in the London economy. Findings of both kinds will appear in a peer-reviewed volume of essays arising from the project-workshop (see Section 3a below).

a.) After compiling and comparing 1320s and 1420s data of female participation in both London courts and local courts elsewhere (e.g. Ruthin, Denbs.; Sutton-In-The-Isle, Cambs.; etc.) the project has found that, on a national level, women were less likely to be litigants in the 1420s than the 1320s. In London and elsewhere the proportion of local court cases involving female litigants declined from? around 20–25 per cent in the 1320s to about 15–20 per cent in the 1420s; and similarly, in the king's Westminster courts of Common Pleas and King's Bench the proportion of cases involving female litigants declined from about 24 percent to 20 per cent. This suggests that post plague labour shortages and increased female participation in the labour market did not result in greater 'equality' in the judicial setting, and, in fact, women in the 1420s were less likely to appear as either plaintiffs and or defendants in either criminal or civil litigation. This is directly contrary to what one might expect in context of the widely-read writings of Jeremy Goldberg and Caroline Barron, who have suggested that women experienced something of a 'golden age' of social and economic opportunity in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The implication of this finding is twofold. First, if, as has been previously assumed, women more often worked as labourers in the decades after the Black Death there was no corresponding betterment of their social position either allowing more independent court usage by female plaintiffs or rendering potential female defendants more often worth litigating against. Second, the change which took place between the 1320s and 1420s, leading to a reduction in the proportion of court cases featuring female litigants in the 1420s, was probably largely independent of prevailing economic conditions and strongly social in character.

b.) The project also looked more closely at the types of disputes to which London women were party in each decade, both in the Sheriffs' Court of London and in the king's Court of Common Pleas. In both venues in cases involving a London

woman as litigant, the proportion of those cases initiated on the broadly 'economic' complaints of debt, detinue and account (as opposed to broadly 'non-economic' pleas of trespass etc.) increased from the 1320s to the 1420s by roughly 10 per cent in each court. This finding, contextualized by the lower proportion of court cases involving women in the 1420s, is strongly supportive of the conclusion stated above: that is, economic opportunity in the post-plague period did not create a corresponding elevation of women's social position, at least in so far as can be detected in court records.

e) Contributions to wider ESRC initiatives (eg Research Programmes or Networks)

If your project was part of a wider ESRC initiative, please describe your contributions to the initiative's objectives and activities and note any effect on your project resulting from participation. [Max. 200 words]

This project was not part of a wider ESRC initiative.

3. EARLY AND ANTICIPATED IMPACTS

a) Summary of Impacts to date

Please summarise any impacts of the project to date, referring where appropriate to associated outputs recorded on *ESRC Society Today*. This should include both scientific impacts (relevant to the academic community) and economic and societal impacts (relevant to broader society). The impact can be relevant to any organisation, community or individual. [Max. 400 words]

The early impact of this project has been to stimulate a critical reconsideration of the oft-made assumption that increased female participation in the labour force can be directly correlated with an enhanced social position for pre-modern women. At the 2009 Leeds International Medieval Congress the project was publicised by the project research officer, Dr. Matthew Stevens, and connections were made with interested academics, contributing to the organization of a project workshop. Project findings were then presented at a one-day project workshop held at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, in September 2009. This workshop comprised papers by nine speakers, including leading professors of medieval women Jeremy Goldberg and Caroline Barron, and was attended to capacity (thirty participants). As a direct result of this workshop, the project research officer, Dr Stevens, is now co-editing with Dr Cordelia Beattie of the University of Edinburgh a volume of papers on *Medieval Women and the Law II: Coverture* (a follow up to the well received volume, N.J. Menuge, ed., *Medieval Women and the Law* (Woodbridge, 2000)). This volume includes a chapter of project findings as well as other chapters arising from papers presented at the one-day workshop, and is expected to be published as a peer-reviewed volume with Boydell and Brewer in 2011. Project findings were also disseminated on 27 January 2010 at the Institute of Historical Research's Metropolitan History research seminar.

A further impact of the project has been the re-discovery of an important, but little known, historical document: the only surviving London Sheriffs' court roll, dating to Trinity term (i.e. summer) 1320. This unique document details over 500 London civil

disputes, 38 per cent of which involve London women; making it an unparalleled early source for the study of ordinary, lower class, London women as well as an important early legal record for the city of London as a whole. This document has been transcribed and translated, and will be published in edited form on British History Online for use by the wider academic community and beyond.

b) Anticipated/Potential Future Impacts

Please outline any anticipated or potential impacts (scientific or economic and societal) that you believe your project might have in future. *[Max. 200 words]*

A summation of project findings will be presented in July 2010 in Durham at the 'Xth Anglo-American seminar on the medieval economy and society', a triennial conference designed to bring together leading North American and British scholars, through which the project conclusions will reach an international academic audience of attendees. The other main pathways to impact will be, first of all the publication of the project data on British History Online, which will open up some important medieval urban and central legal records to broader study both within and outside the academic community. Second, the publication of the edited volume *Medieval Women and the Law II: Coverture* in mid 2011 will ensure that the project's findings will be made widely available. Once published, it is anticipated that the project's findings will help to stimulate future comparative research on women and the economy in the pre- and post-Black Death eras.