



CHILTERN
OPEN AIR
MUSEUM

*Where buildings come
alive through history*

Victorian Cottage School



Location:

- Legrave Cottages

Practical Notes:

- There are photo opportunities throughout this activity.

Purpose and content of the activity session:

- During this session the children will be taught the history of straw plaiting in and around the Luton area.
- The Museum teacher will also discuss the basic conditions in which both girls and boys had to work and the social implications, based on the story of Caroline Woodward who lived and worked in the cottage in 1841.
- After a brief demonstration by the Museum teacher of straw plaiting techniques, your group members will be encouraged to produce a length of plait, from a suitable material (e.g. raffiene or art straws) according to their age and ability, which they will be allowed to take home with them.

The explanation will vary in emphasis having regard to the age and ability of your group.

Straw Plait - A Cottage Industry**A Thriving Cottage Industry**

The plaiting of wheat straw into strips to make up into hats and bonnets had been a country craft since the 17th century, although it is uncertain exactly when straw plaiting began in this country. The earliest records referring to the craft found so far only date back to the late seventeenth century, and although there is evidence that hats made of straw existed much earlier than this period it would seem that they were made using a different technique.

The actual origins of the craft are also uncertain, although as with many cottage industries and local skills, it may well have been brought over by refugees from the continent.

The major straw plait producing areas included Cornwall and Essex, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and East Buckinghamshire (including Chesham and the Chalfonts). With the exception of Cornwall the other major producing counties were those in a cluster around Luton. Luton became the centre of the English hat industry owing to its proximity to the London market.

Some plaiters made up their own hats but many poor people, mostly women and children, sold the lengths of plait to the straw-hat makers of Luton and Dunstable. However, the straw-hat trade in England had to compete with supplies of foreign plaited goods, mostly Leghorn hats from Tuscany.

The outbreak of war with France in 1793 changed all this as foreign supplies were cut off and there was a great demand for home produced plait. Straw plaiting rapidly became a thriving cottage industry, particularly in the villages of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Often whole families would work at plaiting. All the children would be employed down to the two year olds who would be taught to clip off the loose ends with a pair of scissors, the scissors being tied to their body.

Straw plait was very valuable (bearing in mind the low wages in those days and a straw plaiter's relatively high earnings) and so it had to be kept securely. There are records of people caught for theft of straw plait.

Types of straw plait

There are at least 40 types of straw plait, which can be divided into three categories: *Cord*, *Purl* and *Brilliant*. The straws, which in those days would have been the long straw of the old breeds of wheat, would be sorted out, and marked or bent pieces would be rejected. The straws were then split into 'splints' that would be used in combinations of seven splints up to approximately 22 splints at a time.

The most common form of plait before the invention and 'mass production' of the English straw splitter would probably have been the '*rustic*' made from whole straw. However the hat makers did not like this plait as much as finer types since it was difficult to stitch. This situation put the rural plaiting industry in a precarious position, and there was a risk that the finer products from the Flemish countries and Leghorn in Italy would overwhelm it, until a straw splitting device made a general appearance.

Purl plait used double splints in a combination of anything from seven double splints upwards to twenty-one. The double splints were joined dull sides together, often stuck with the saliva of the plaiter, and therefore the plait would only show the lustrous sides of the splint. *Cord* plait used single splints and would show both the lustrous side and the dull sides of the splints used. The *brilliant* was the most difficult and commanded the highest price as only a few people were skilled at producing this plait: examples of this type appear to be curved and therefore in length would be spiral type.

Although many brand new hats made of straw plait may still be found in shops or second hand from boot and jumble sales, unless the examples are exceptionally old they will almost certainly have been produced abroad, often in China, where straw plaiting, in some areas, is still a cottage industry. The plait designs favoured by other countries differ from those made in the Luton region, which were often given regional names such as Bedfordshire Twist, etc. The plait design, therefore, can be an indicator of place of origin and important centres of the trade often specialised in a particular type of plait

such as '*narrow twist*' and '*rustic*' at Ivinghoe or '*fine split*' and '*brilliant*' at Chesham.

Straw Plaiting

The straw had to be split into 'splints' before it could be plaited and this is a difficult job to do with a knife. Until the patent 'straw splitter' was invented, during the Napoleonic Wars, straw splitting must have been difficult and would have limited the production of fine plait. These new straw splitters were marketed in large numbers at a very cheap price (about 1d (½p) at one time) and were readily available to the plaiters. These made it quite easy to produce splints of a uniform size.

In the straw plaiting areas certain varieties of wheat straw were grown that were very suitable for plaiting. Many farmers would allow straw plaiters to glean straw from the fields before threshing occurred (as threshing would ruin the straw for this purpose). This straw was then cut into lengths free from knots. However cottagers could also buy their straw already cut into 6" (15cm) lengths in bundles from a straw dealer. Aston Clinton, one of the larger plaiting villages, had 12 straw dealers according to Kelly's Directory for 1869. Small supplies of straw could also be bought at the village shops.

Before being used the splints would be passed through a splint mill to flatten them and then the splints had to be soaked in water to improve pliability. Once in use by the plaiter the splints must not be allowed to dry out otherwise they would crack and break. Speed, therefore, was of the essence, and the ends of the splints would be kept damp while plaiting was in progress usually by putting two or three in the corner of the mouth. The right hand corner of the plaiter's mouth was often permanently scarred as a result.

As the plaiting progressed, the lengths would be roughly measured between chin and fingertip (about 1 yard or 90cm) and then fastened in a series of loops over the left arm. Once the plait was produced in great length (a minimum of 12 yards) it would be measured very carefully, quite often at the mantelpiece upon which nicks had been marked at 9" (22.5cm), 18" (45cm)

and 1 yard (90cm) apart for more accurate measurement. The plait would then be cut, leaving a length of plait with which to continue plaiting. By doing this the very difficult process of starting a plait need never be repeated as the plaiting was already established.

Photographs and records of straw plaiters suggest that new splints would be incorporated into the plait at regular intervals to continue the plaiting sequence, irrespective of whether the original splint length had been incorporated into the plait in full. This practice probably allowed a work 'rhythm' to be achieved and ruled out any necessity for the plaiter to look down at the work to check variable straw lengths. An experienced straw plaiter would not need to look at their work while plaiting. All these factors increased the speed of production.

A plaiter's earnings

The straw plaiting season was from December to May; a short season but relatively lucrative whilst it lasted. During this period a woman often earned far more than her husband, often a poorly paid farm labourer.

After the advent of the straw splitter the earnings of plaiters probably increased to the standard mentioned above. Plaiting therefore increased in popularity and superseded lace making, which traditionally had been the most common form of income for a rural female.

A plaiter could earn between seven and ten shillings (35p to 50p) a week in the 1830s. As the basic wage of a farm labourer at that time was two to five shillings (10p to 25p), the important contribution that plaiting made to the family budget is easy to see.

The finished work was sold by the score (20 yards or 18m) with about 3½ score (63m) required to make a bonnet. The average plaiter could produce 3 score (54m) a week. However, there were some who worked harder than others as witnessed by the following record of an Aston Clinton inhabitant in 1923 who remembered "*an exceedingly clever and industrious plaiter who*

made 20 score in one week and, the quality being high, it fetched a shilling a score, a very good price. To enable her to do this she used to sit up on bed at 4 o'clock on a summer morning and plait for an hour or two before rising." This woman made 360m of plait and sold it for £1.00 (modern equivalent).

Plaiting as a way of life

By 1834, however, in spite of protective duties levied on imported plait, Leghorn hats were again coming onto the market, but the Buckinghamshire plait industry was now a way of life for many cottage families and the numbers increased towards the end of the century. In the 1871 Census 3,500 plaiters in the Aylesbury area alone were officially recorded. However by that time straw plaiting as a cottage industry was already doomed as longer lengths of plait, more suitable for the newly invented sewing machines, were being imported from China and, by 1890, Japan.

People involved in the cottage industry in the 19th century petitioned Parliament to ban foreign imports of straw plait in order to protect an industry that was vital to the rural economy. It supplemented a meagre rural income and thus kept people from the brink of starvation. Legislation was eventually passed by Parliament, but only after many years of hardship had been endured by the rural inhabitants of the Luton surrounds.

The 1901 Census for Buckinghamshire lists only 173 female and 3 male plaiters. These few remaining plaiters "*plaited eternally from morning till night for 1s 3d [6p] a week*". By 1922 there was only a single straw-hat merchant left in Luton. He still made his fortnightly round of the villages to collect lengths of plait from the few elderly women still plaiting.

The craft of Buckinghamshire lace-making has managed to retain its popularity in spite of the accessibility of good quality but less costly machine-made lace. However, because of the decline of the straw hat in fashion and the availability of cheap foreign imports to satisfy what remained of the market, local straw plaiting by the 1920s was reduced to the production of

decorative table mats and subsequently had disappeared entirely from local craft industries and hobbies by the following generation.

One lady of middle age who lived in Chesham was learning how to plait straw because she found that her grandmother who lived in Waterside used to make it at one time. She said she felt obliged to relearn the craft because in just one generation since the 1920s it had become almost a lost art.

The local craft has been revived on a very small scale. Plaiting techniques have been relearned and studied by a few self-taught women, using examples kept in some museum collections, in a noble attempt to prevent the craft and its brief but fascinating history from slipping into total obscurity.

Plait Markets

The finished, cut plait would be coiled and placed overnight in a box that contained a special type of lime to bleach it, and it would then be ready to be purchased by the straw plait dealer.

The completed plait was sold to itinerant dealers (who would travel to outlying rural areas from Luton buying straw plait from the producers), local agents or the local plait market. There was an important market at Tring and the women would line up on the street in front of the church with their scores of plait looped around their arms hoping for a sale. At 9.00am the ringing of the bell officially opened the market. An inspector carried a yardstick to check the lengths and to make sure that there was no cheating.

Many women neglected their housework

Women and children dominated the straw plait trade although it was not uncommon for men to take to plaiting, especially when they were out of work. However, sometimes the men expected the women to support them as was reported in 1868 by a Royal Commission on Employment: *“a large portion of the male population of so-called catch workmen expect the female plaiters to maintain them throughout a great portion of the year”*.

One of the advantages of plaiting as a means of earning money was that it could be done whilst walking about or at any time of the day or night; consequently many women neglected their housework and were reported by the Commission as being utterly ignorant of such common things as *“keeping their houses clean, mending their own or their children’s clothes and cooking their husband’s dinners”*.

Unfortunately for the straw plaiters, they were branded by society as having loose morals, displaying vices such as heavy drinking and lewd habits. Alcohol abuse may have been a problem experienced by some straw plaiting families (as with families of other trades and professions), as the increase in disposable income from this cottage industry would allow the purchase of liquor.

The exceptionally bad reputation does seem to be unfair and unfounded. One explanation which may partly account for the low reputation these people were accorded is that both hands of the straw plaiter were involved in the production of straw plait and as many hours of the day were spent in this operation no other tasks could be performed. Standards of cleanliness and tidiness within a cottage therefore would be lower than convention expected and small children were not attended as well as they might have been had their parents been involved in a less consuming occupation. In fact, in the early days, plaiters would give their babies paregoric in water so that they would sleep for a long time and not disturb them. One lady in Ballinger remembers, *“Little Billy was a bit simple. It was said his mother gave him an overdose of laudanum when she was doing the straw plait and he slept for two days”*.

The poor reputation of the straw plaiters was probably caused by a case of ‘sour grapes’ and resentment expressed often by the men of the middle classes, who found recruitment of domestic staff in these areas difficult as the poor servant’s wages could not compete with the better pay and independence of straw plaiting.

Plaiting Songs and Rhymes

Many straw plaiting songs and rhymes must have existed particularly amongst the children, and some songs or rhyming couplets still exist in written records.

Here is a plaiting rhyme which the children would recite as they were learning:

*Under one and over two:
Pull it tight, and that will do.*

And another easy exercise for making Pearl Plait used for men's boaters:

*Criss-cross patch and then a twirl,
Twist and back for English Pearl.*

Cottage Schools

There were many cottage schools that flourished around the Chiltern Hills area during the Victorian period. These were not, in many cases, schools in the formal sense, but could be considered more as sweat-shop-cum-child-minding establishments. Accounts of children attending many of these schools have been well documented.

From the age of about four years old, children would attend a cottage school, which was usually a stuffy cottage room presided over by a 'mistress' who was often untrained and illiterate and so unable to teach reading, writing and arithmetic. For four to six year olds the school day was 9am until 1pm and 2pm until 4pm, with a minimum amount of work that needed to be done (this depended on the craft). At seven years old the children had to return to the cottage school and continue working until 9pm or even later.

Victorian Profiles

Job Title: *Straw plaiter—1851*

Name: *Caroline Woodward*

Title: *Mistress*

Address: *Apple Tree Yard,
Leagrave*

Date of Birth: *June 1847*

Place of Birth: *Leagrave, Bedfordshire*

Father's Profession: *Farm labourer*

Education:

I go to a straw plait school.

Reasons for taking up this job:

I need to earn keep my keep.

Responsibilities and Achievements:

I can plait a score each day.

I can keep the straw clean.

I can do different patterns now.

Interests and Hobbies:

I like going to Sunday School.

I like playing with my baby sister, Dinah.

Dislikes:

I don't like getting slapped when I do something wrong.

I don't like not having the fire on because I get cold.

Cottage Crafts and Vocational Skills.

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Access Statement:

Legrave Cottages:

- The 18th Century cottage does have a step going down into the building, but if the straw plaiting activity has been chosen, a more suitable location will be provided for groups with wheelchair users.
- Viewing the inside of the 1920s cottage is possible, as is moving through the cottage's garden (some paving is uneven), although the path is quite narrow.

Straw plaiting:

- This activity requires fine motor control with which most classes need significant levels of help from the accompanying adults. With structured help it can be a very successful activity for pupils with varying needs and abilities.
- For groups requiring wheelchair access an alternative venue for the activity will be provided.