

WORKING CHILDREN OF ST MICHAEL'S, ST ALBANS, 1851

Introduction

Peter Kirby, in his book 'Child Labour in Britain,' states that "very few children below 10 were ever engaged in productive labour", and he therefore focuses his book on 10-14 year olds.¹ Unfortunately, nineteenth century summary census data is only provided in 5 year age bands. Thus it is able to show that nearly 30% of 10-14 year olds and 2% of 5-9 year olds in England and Wales were recorded as employed in 1851,² but does not indicate the proportion for individual year groups.

A casual glance at the 1851 census returns for St Michael's shows that there were many children under the age of 10 who were working, some as young as 7, and that by age 12, the majority were working. This paper therefore focuses on 7-12 year olds, to determine the proportion of each year group who were working and the nature of their occupation.

It is based on the census returns for St Michael's urban enumeration district, which includes all the houses in the Parish and Borough, including part of Fishpool Street, St Michael's and Pound Field. In 1851 there were 224 households and 1091 residents.

Numbers of Working Children in St Michael's urban 1851

Table 1 shows the numbers and percentages of working children in St Michael's by year group. It can be seen that some boys and girls were at work by the age of 7, but that this was a minority. The majority of boys were working by the age of 11, and the majority of 10 and 12 year old girls were working (though slightly less than half of 11 year olds).

Table 1: Children aged 7-12, St Michael's urban, St Albans, 1851

	Boys working	Boy scholars	Girls working	Girl scholars
7 year olds	12.5% (2 out of 16)	87.5% (14 out of 16)	21.4% (3 out of 14)	78.5% (11 out of 14)
8 year olds	27.2% (3 out of 11)	63.6% (7 out of 11)	30% (3 out of 10)	60% (6 out of 10)
9 year olds	42.8% (6 out of 14)	50% (7 out of 14)	6.2% (1 out of 16)	87.5% (14 out of 16)
10 year olds	38.4% (5 out of 13)	61.5% (8 out of 13)	75% (9 out of 12)	25% (3 out of 12)
11 year olds	81.8% (9 out of 11)	18.1% (2 out of 11)	42.8% (6 out of 14)	50% (7 out of 14)
12 year olds	76.9% (10 out of 13)	23% (3 out of 13)	61.5% (8 out of 13)	23% (3 out of 13)
Total	44.8% 35 out of 78	52.5% 41 out of 78	37.9% 30 out of 79	55.6% 44 out of 79

Note: A few children had neither occupation nor scholar recorded

The importance of breaking down information by year group can also be seen. Summary census data for St Michael's urban states that 15.9% of boys aged 5-9 were employed.³ While true, this conceals what the above breakdown by year group reveals, ie that zero 5 and 6 year olds were working and that 42.8% of 9 year old boys were working.

Occupations of Children in St Michael's urban 1851

Table 2 gives the names and occupations of working children aged 7-12 in St Michael's urban by year group. It can be seen that hat making was by far the most common occupation. There were also a couple of children employed in occupations linked to hat making ie trimming weaver and grass opener. The second most common occupation was silk spinning.

Hat Making

In St Michael's urban in 1851, there were 28 girl hat makers and 22 boy hat makers, the youngest being age 7. This reflects the occupational structure of St Albans as a whole, where the straw plait and hat trade was a major source of employment, particularly for women and girls.⁴

Two things are notable about the situation in St Michael's urban in 1851. Firstly, the work was in hat making rather than straw plaiting, whereas in the rural districts of St Albans, including St Michael's rural, it was mainly straw plaiting.⁵ Secondly, almost as many male as female children under 12 were employed in hat making in St Michael's urban. However, whereas all but 2 of the girls in all year groups were hat makers, the boys show more variety of occupation, which increases with age, so that by age 12, 50% of boys were employed in something other than hat making.

There were several hat manufacturers in and around St Michael's at this time. Table 3 shows those that appear in the 1851 census for St Michael's urban and St Albans parish. A major employer was Thomas Harris of Chequer Street, a straw hat and canvas manufacturer who employed 300 people.

Silk Spinning

In St Michael's urban in 1851, there were 8 child silk spinners, all but one of whom were boys, the youngest being age 9.

Abbey Mill in Abbey Mill Lane, St Albans, was converted from a corn mill to a silk mill in 1804 and employed many children.⁶ Evidence to Parliamentary Select Committees on child labour in 1832 and 1843 did not mention Abbey Mill specifically, but showed that children in other Hertfordshire silk mills not only worked long hours but were badly treated, including being beaten.⁷ The 1844 Factory Act set a minimum age of 8 years in silk mills and limited the hours of 8-11 year olds to seven.⁸

The 1851 census records 201 people in St Albans as a whole as silk workers, of whom 68 (33.8%) were aged 10-14, and 18 (8.9%) under 10, all but 3 of whom were aged 9 or over.⁹

Table 2: Working Children, aged 7-12, St Michael's urban, St Albans, 1851

Name	Occupation	Name	Occupation
7 yr old Boys		7 yr old Girls	
HALSEY William	Hat maker	KIFF Betsy	Hat maker
BAIL Charles	Hat maker	NORTH Martha	Hat maker
		DAY Hannah	Hat maker
8 yr old Boys		8 yr old Girls	
STEPNEY John	Hat maker	TAYLOR Elizabeth	Hat maker
HULL James	Hat maker	HANNELL Eliza	Hat maker
GROVER John	Hat maker	EWER Emma	Trimming weaver
9 yr old Boys		9 yr old Girls	
BROTHERS William	Servant	COMPTON Eliza	Hat maker
WILSON Frederick	Hat maker		
HALSEY Thomas	Hat maker		
ATKINS William	Silk spinner		
WARE Charles	Hat maker		
KEYS Frederick	Errand boy		
10 yr old Boys		10 yr old Girls	
EWINGTON Frederick	Silk spinner	SEABROOKE Sarah	Hat maker
EWER William	Hat maker	FREEMAN Sarah	Hat maker
GROVER William	Hat maker	FREEMAN Mary Ann	Hat maker
PEARCE Richard	Hat maker	BLAKEMORE Harriet	Hat maker
STEVENS William	Grass opener	TOMLIN Emily	Hat maker
		HANDSCOMB Louisa Ann	Hat maker
		GOODGAME Charlotte	Hat maker
		HANNELL Mary	Hat maker
		CAWDREY Emily	Hat maker
11 yr old Boys		11 yr old Girls	
SHEPHERD William	Silk spinner	TAYLOR Emma	Hat maker
GENTLE Philip	Silk spinner	CURRANT Eliza	Silk spinner
WILSON Joseph	Hat maker	SIMMONDS Jane	Hat maker
GARNER Charles	Hat maker	KIFF Mary A	Hat maker
MANN Henry	Errand boy	JANES Eliza	Hat maker
GRACE David	Brazilian hat maker	KEYS Martha	Hat maker
BAIL William	Hat maker		
HILL George	Hat maker		
DAY William	Hat maker		
12 yr old Boys		12 yr old Girls	
SEABROOKE Charles	Hat maker	EWER Eliza	Hat maker
EWINGTON Edward	Silk spinner	BROWN Mary	Hat maker
BLAKEMORE James M	Hat maker	WREN Elizabeth	Hat maker

GREEN David	Hat maker	NORWOOD Mary A	Hat maker
STREADER Joseph	Horse keeper's boy	LEGG Louisa	Hat maker
ATKINS John	Silk spinner	COMPTON Ann	Hat maker
MADDOX Jonathan	Silk spinner	WESTLEY Martha	Hat maker
GOODGAME William	Hat maker	WESTLEY Mary	Hat maker
POTTON James	Assistant to father (coal dealer)		
HANNELL Francis	Hat maker		

Table 3: Hat Manufacturers, St Michael's urban and St Albans parish, 1851 census

Name	Residence	Business	Where born
	St Michael's		
MORRIS Joseph	Fishpool Street	Hat Manufacturer	Notts
DURLEY James	Pound Field	Straw Bonnet Manufacturer	Bucks
	St Albans		
HARRIS Thomas	Chequer Street	Straw Hat & Canvas Manf, employing 300 hands	St Albans, Herts
MORRIS Joseph	Verulam Road	Straw Bonnet Manufacturer	Middx
BURFORD Frederick	Back Street	Brazilian Hat Manufacturer	Beds
CORLEY Susan	Sopwell Lane	Trimming Manufacturer	St Albans, Herts
CORLEY William & Eliza	Sopwell Lane	Straw Hat Manufacturer	St Albans, Herts
JOHNSON William	Holywell Hell	Hat Manufacturer	Wheathampstead Herts
TOWERSEY Joseph	New England Place	Waterproof Hat Manufacturer	Bucks
JOHNSON Ruth	Fishpool Street	Hat Manufacturer	Redbourn, Herts
WEST Samuel	Fishpool Street	Hat Manufacturer	Surrey

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¹ Kirby, Peter, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, p4

² Ibid, p11

³ Goose, Nigel, *Population, economy and family structure in Hertfordshire in 1851. Volume 2, St Albans and its region*, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000, p97

⁴ Ibid, p72

⁵ Ibid, p41

⁶ Ibid, p75

⁷ Extracts from 'Evidence to Parliamentary Select Committee' 1832 & 1843 in Wallace, Eileen, *Child Labour in Nineteenth Century Hertfordshire*, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS) Resource Pack, undated

⁸ Kirby, Peter (2003), op cit, p105

⁹ Goose, Nigel (2000), op cit, p75