

Sphere Switching Polly.

Work/Life Choices and the 'redundant woman' in C19th London

Cries are heard on every hand that women are conspiring, that women are discontented, that women are idle, that women are overworked, and that women are out of their sphere. God only knows what is the sphere of any human being.

Barbara Leigh Smith, *Women and Work*

(1857)¹

In 1844, motivated by a lack of authentic life stories of working women, Mary Ann Ashford, known affectionately as Polly, penned her work/life memoir: *The Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*.² Her story is one of choices and purposeful changes. Born of the eighteenth century but vocal in the nineteenth, Polly was a woman at the juncture of changing attitudes to women's work. As Polly wrote her memoir, the Victorian vision of separate public and private spheres for men and women was already sweeping the literary landscape and seeping into the home. Through this lens, women were wives, daughters, and guardians of the home. However, marriage was not an option for many women, especially of the expanding middling classes. Furthermore, it did not always provide a lifetime survival route. There is a wide variety of evidence that many such 'redundant women', continued to work for their supper. Facing formal and informal barriers to their participation in the economy as paid employees; they turned to trade and small business.

Yet gender operated as an increasingly restrictive variable in the work choices available to women of the middling classes. This was especially true in the realm of trade, within which Polly had been born. She was a daughter of trade, a twice-married wife of trade and eventually she would ply her own trade. In sphere switching between the public world of work and the private guided-cage of home, marriage and motherhood, Polly exercised purposeful choices based not only on need but also on preference. Polly's choices were not un-constrained but for women like her, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, they were to become even more so. The Victorian lady reformers, distressed by some women's 'need to work', set about defining, reforming and creating the types of work women could be 'respectably' engaged in. Selected trades were deemed suitable such as hairdressing and watch making but many were not. Furthermore, the emphasis on working conditions that separated women from male workers and sheltered them from the hustle and bustle of the world outside the home limited women's 'respectable' choices. Acceptable employments were effectively assimilated into the feminine sphere, sedating any potential sphere-switching Polly's.

The middling classes of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century were a very broad social and economic group, stretching far up and down the income scale. It is generally conceded that in London they fell within three occupational groups: 1) The trades people and shopkeepers of the City of London and Westminster. 2) The manufacturing, carrying, and servicing trades based on the Port and the out-parishes of Surrey and Middlesex. 3) Belonging to the middling classes by reason of status if not always by income, professional men and artists.³ Polly belonged to the former. Born in October 1787, she was the daughter of victallers, Joseph Ashford and his wife Jane Gaderrer. Her parents had in fact inherited the City Arms, then number one Lombard Street, from Jane's mother, Polly's grandmother:⁴

My grandmother left a will, and bequeathed all she had to her only surviving daughter: the executor was a Mr. Tyce, a tobacconist, of Exchange Alley: and it was my grandmother's desire that the business should be given up, and everything sold, and the money placed to what she had in the bank; and her daughter to be put to some genteel business. But as the house was in full trade, and selling the goodwill had not then become a practice. Mr. Tyce did not trouble himself about it.⁵

However, by the year 1800, her parents lost the business through a combination of ill health and lack of management, despite the warnings of neighbours and relations. Within a year, Polly had lost both her parents and was left to face the world as an orphan, furnished with only a limited day school education.⁶

Her relations proposed to contribute as much money as would secure Polly a five-year, 'in-door' apprenticeship to a dressmaker or milliner.⁷ It seems Polly was not entirely convinced that this was the future she wanted. She quickly turned for advice to Mrs. Bond in St. Swithin's Lane, who she describes as 'an old friend and countrywoman of my father's'. Mrs. Bond warned her:

I'll tell thee what, Polly, that is all very well for those who have got a home and parents to shelter them, when work is slack; but depend upon it, many clever women find it, at times, a half-starved kind of life in those employments.⁸

Instead, she suggested that Polly, being a 'heartly, well-grown girl', would be better off in service. This, she said, was subject to the opinion of Polly's father's Aunt Margaret. Polly dutifully sought the advice of the latter and recalls the incident as follows:

This I very soon did, and told her they wished to place me out genteely. She said that was all very fine, but there was an old and very true proverb, that 'gentility without ability, was like pudding without fat', and she was of Mrs. Bond's opinion.⁹

Having no taste for needlework, Polly found Mrs. Bond and Margaret convincing advisors. Shortly afterwards she declared her intention of 'going to service' to her more 'genteelly' disposed relatives. Her decision met with 'utter astonishment' and a great deal of concern:

I was sent to a cousin of my mothers, whose husband was a clerk of long standing in the Bank, that she might talk with me: this she certainly did; and pointed out to me, in strong terms, the folly of opposing the good intentions of my friends. She said a great deal about injuring my future prospects, as I could not be introduced into society by her or any of my respectable friends if I was a servant.¹⁰

Polly admits to her readers that she was 'too young and too simple' to understand much about the dressing down, 'for it was almost like Greek and Latin to me'. However, she understood enough of her relatives' 'majestic oration' to know that should she ever be without a position in service that she would find herself homeless, as they would have nothing more to do with her. Mrs. Bond, her advice not to be outdone, responded that Polly could come to her at any time.¹¹ Finally, even after her first unsuccessful servant position, Polly writes:

I was again pressed to give up my intentions of going to service, but I remained in the same mind, and my relations gave up the contest and saved their money.¹²

Polly made her choice and kept to it, despite considerable pressure for her to choose differently. Her relatives perceived her 'going to service' as a step backward on the social ladder. A trade of her own, followed by marriage to a tradesman, or man of profession, was the more acceptable pathway. Other than distaste for needlework, Polly does not tell us why she rejects their offer of an apprenticeship. Perhaps this was reason enough and perhaps she regarded it as too precarious, too insecure and unstable. Her other advisors certainly made her aware of the drudgery of the dressmakers and milliners who had not the funds to set up a shop and remained the weary labour supply of the more prosperous. Instead, Polly would spend the next 17 years of her unsupported life in domestic service. Here too, she exercised her own right to choose and changed appointments whenever her working and living conditions became unsatisfactory.¹³

Eventually she would marry, first to a shoemaker and then to a tailor. However, neither marriage offered a secure survival route and she would be widowed twice. Michael Anderson has estimated from a sample of the 1851 census that some 1.8 million adult women, 8.9 per cent of the adult female population were surviving without a husband in the mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, this estimate does not include unsupported women below the age of 25.¹⁴ Clearly marriage did not provide an immediate survival route on leaving home or indeed at any point for many women, an assertion frequently repeated by nineteenth century commentators. The following is a quote from an essay by Elizabeth Wolstenhome:

It is assumed in the face of the most patent facts that all women marry and are provided for by their husbands; whilst nothing is more plainly to be seen by those who will open their eyes, than these three things: -1. That a very large minority of women do not marry. 2. That of those who do marry, a very considerable proportion are not supported by their husbands. 3. That upon a very large number of widows (more than one-third of the widows in the country), the burden of self-maintenance and of the maintenance of children is thrown.¹⁵

Polly, the licensed victualler's daughter, inhabited each of these categories as her lifecycle progressed. She remained in Wolstenhome's first category, one of the unmarried women, until she had seen her thirtieth birthday. In all this time, from the age of 13 upward, she had no father to support her.

Polly's first marriage was to a sergeant shoemaker in a residential army school she calls Fairy Land. She first entered what was in fact the Duke of York's School in Chelsea as a cook in the house of the clergyman in 1814. The school boarded some 1200 soldier's children, their officers and attendants. The boys of the institution made their own shoes and clothing under the instruction of sergeant tradesman. After a short time in Fairy Land, Polly was to lose her position, usurped by another servant whom her mistress preferred. The master shoemaker, whom she had seldom seen, offered her marriage as an alternative to seeking another position. Although taken by surprise by this turn of events, Polly accepted and was married that November 1817.¹⁶

Her first husband died eleven years later and Polly found herself among the ranks of Wolstenhome's third category - the unsupported widows. She was left with five surviving children (one had died) and a small sum of money. She writes:

I was advised by some who knew me to go into business, but as I was quite ignorant of everything of the kind, I was afraid to risk what was to bring my children up with.¹⁷

For the second time in Polly's life she was furnished with the means to begin in trade. She was clearly not convinced of her ability or likely success. She adds:

My husband had an excellent private connection, and had I been in a shop in the neighbourhood, and got a person who would have done me justice into my employ, I could have supported my family well; but that was out of the question.¹⁸

Polly is lamenting here that she has been left no business to continue. Neither does she seem to feel that obtaining a shop for herself is a possibility. Risk was certainly a threat which she did not wish to tackle but also she had in her charge five children, one of which was only six weeks old. Furthermore, it is unclear how much she had learned about the ways of trade during childhood, a great part of which she had

resided outside of the parental home and at the residence of her nurse, Mrs Long of East Street, Walworth.¹⁹ However, the downfall of her parent's victalling house no doubt provided her with lessons on the vagaries of business, perhaps accounting for her reluctant and cautious approach towards engaging in trade for herself.²⁰ Nonetheless, Polly needed to secure an income and sought a self-employment, small business opportunity. Through her contacts in Fairy Land, she learned of a victalling opportunity, supplying fruit and cakes to the boys therein. Obtaining a berth, she entered into the retailing arena and the public sphere. Polly soon discovered that competition was fierce. She laments:

Had I known the terms I was to have it on, I certainly would not have accepted it; as another person who was a maker of sweat-meats was admitted, and I stood no chance with such a competition.²¹

Polly found it a bitter pill to return to the army school and take up in the lower end of the retailing trade so late in life. She had served her time as a domestic servant, married and born six children and now was thrown back on her own resources once again. Her choices were limited. Domestic service was no longer an option, her property was insufficient to keep her and her children indefinitely. With much relief Polly accepted a second marriage of proposal, from the sergeant tailor in the school, an old friend of her former husband. Within fifteen months of her first widowhood she gave up the berth and was married again.²²

Now in her mid-forties, Polly had married a man aged seventy-seven. Within a short time, his failing health would plummet them into distress. Her husband forced to leave his position as the tailor of the army school, Polly now found herself inhabiting Wolstenhome's second category, that of the unsupported wives. Again, it was not possible to take over her second husband's business and she describes how she saw 'no other prospect than that of my own remnant of property being melted away, together with his own'.²³ She would spend a great deal of time and energy petitioning for an increase in her husband's paltry pension, ultimately securing it with the help of influential friends.²⁴

Polly makes little mention of the 'property' or capital that she had inherited from her first husband, the shoemaker. - The money with which she was advised to set up in business. It is left to the reader to infer that some part of it had been used for the purchase of the lease on a house. The house was subsequently 'let out in floors' to weekly lodgers and it is possible that this rental income helped to supplement Polly's purse to some degree, until taking up residence there herself on departing Fairy Land.²⁵ Clearly her property was not of an inconsequential amount. During her first widowhood, she made a loan to a person of high rank in the army school:

He borrowed some money off me for a certain time, and when that was up I made free to ask him for it; he paid me then, and a short time after asked me to lend him a much larger sum; I hesitated, he said I did not seem willing to oblige him. I observed,

that I did not wish to disturb my property; as, by doing so, I should lose my interest.²⁶

Living off the interest of inherited money was not uncommon and frustrated contemporaries often asserted that women were far too risk averse in deciding what to do with their money.

In the light of other evidence, it is hardly surprising that Polly's chosen foray into the public marketplace of victalling immediately met with competition. Women of varying ages and experiences found themselves unsupported. Occupying a marginal position in the occupational structure, with some amount of personal capital, however small, they could and often did turn to self-employment for their survival. An examination of other sources such as tradecards and insurance policies reveals multiple examples of other women plying their trade as best they could.

Until the 1760's the dominant item of shop publicity was the hanging signboard. But the obstruction it caused, and the danger it posed to pedestrians in stormy weather, led finally to its prohibition by law. Business proprietors then turned their energies to the production of trade cards, in many cases reproducing on it the sign they had been obliged to withdraw. Printed from plates engraved by local craftsmen, the trade card served as an aide-memoir for customers, an invoice, a receipt form and often a price list.²⁷ Whilst the existing collections of trade cards (Bank, Heal, and Guildhall) are dominated by examples from the eighteenth century and many are undated, it is possible to clearly identify examples from the nineteenth century.

In general, the trade cards are elaborately illustrated or contain detailed textual descriptions, with the female proprietors going to great pains to express the quality of their stock, the extent of their skill and breadth of their experience. However, the personal information available on the tradecard or billhead offers somewhat limited information to the historian. Nonetheless, insights as to the background and trade connections of women and examples of their successful existence are still to be found. For example, Sarah Emery, 'fruiterer and saleswoman at no.4 in Fleet Market',²⁸ Sarah Brendel, keeper of the Artichoke Tavern, Blackwall, who seems to have inherited the business from a C. Brendel²⁹ and also Elizabeth Debatt trading as 'Debatt - Cook & Confectioner' who utilised an elaborately illustrated tradecard providing an extensive list of her production repertoire: 'Soups, French Pies, Made Dishes, Savoury Patties, Jellies, Blancmanges.' And should her prospective customers still hold any doubts as to the breadth of her culinary skill, she adds: 'NB. Dinners & Turtles Dress'd at Home & ABROAD. Ice Creams, Soups sent out. Routs & Ball Suppers Served up in the Greatest Perfection.'³⁰ Also, unsupported women like Polly were not restricted to the food trades and many choose the textile trades she had rejected. For example, 'Widow Barber & Son', hatters and millinery cap makers,³¹ Mrs Hazell, a laundress from Pentonville offering 'mangling by baker's patent at 1 1/2d. per dozen',³² and Miss Sims, a French stay and elastic bodice maker.³³ Others operated in trades regarded as more traditionally masculine. For example, Julia Booth, an engraver and printer based at

Saint Andrew's Hill, Doctors Commons,³⁴ Hannah Cross, a copper plate seal engraver and printer from Leadenhall Street,³⁵ M.Green, 'widow of the late W. Green', who inherited a chimney sweeping venture,³⁶ and Eleanor Dodd who inherited her father's print selling business.³⁷

A more detailed source of information on women's trades and businesses are the head office, policy registered of the insurance companies. By the Victorian period it had become customary to take out fire insurance and according to Cockerell and Green, few private properties or business premises were left without any form of insurance. In London the habit of insurance was far more widespread than elsewhere and aggregate insured values had reached over £400 million by the 1860's.³⁸ Along with the Phoenix and the Royal Exchange, the Sun Fire Office dominated the London insurance market. Indeed, Schwartz has estimated that more than 10% of the population liable to take out insurance cover took out 'new' policies with the Sun Office in 1780.³⁹ Allowing for other insurance companies and taking routine renewals into account, his findings suggest almost universal coverage.⁴⁰

An examination of all Sun Fire, London policies taken out by women and 5 percent taken out by men for selected sample years, 1747, 1761, and 1851, reveals that women continued to be active in the 'public' sphere well into the nineteenth century. As table one illustrates, as a proportion of all policies taken out by women, just under 20 per cent covered business assets (stock, utensils and fixtures) in 1851. - A not insignificant figure. Given the legal and ideological restrictions of this period, it is unlikely that men are hidden behind these women.⁴¹ Rather, it is far more likely that more women than uncovered here are hidden behind male policyholders. As expected, the proportion for male headed policies in this year is much higher at 45 per cent. However, it is interesting to note that from 1747 to 1851, the proportion of policies covering business assets falls not just for women (by 20.9 per cent) but for men too (by 29.9 per cent).

(1) Business assets by gender

(As a percentage of total policies taken out by each gender)⁴²

Year	Female-Headed Policies	Male-Headed Policies
1747	40.0	74.5
1761	41.8	66.7
1851	19.1	44.6

The proportion of all policies covering business assets was declining over this period, regardless of the gender of the policyholder. The marketplace of the small business proprietor was a restricting and increasingly competitive one, with large-scale production and eventually department store retailing, squeezing this avenue of

independent activity. Self-employment and small business venture as an avenue for survival and economic independence for men or women was not without its limits.

The Sun Fire policies exhibit a shift over time in the types of sectors women most commonly operated within. As table 2 illustrates, the food, drink & hospitality sector which accounts for over a third of female-headed business policies in 1747 is overtaken by textiles & clothing in the nineteenth century.

(2) Breakdown of business policies by sector ⁴³

(As a percentage of policies covering business assets taken out by each gender)

(F) Food, drink and hospitality (%)

Year	Women	Men
1747	38.0	26.3
1761	31.1	42.7
1851	22.3	29.4

(T) Textiles & Clothing: Manufacture, sale & laundry (%)

Year	Women	Men
1747	18.0	10.5
1761	27.3	12.5
1851	36.1	9.8

(OR) Other retailing activities not included in (i) or (ii) (%)

Year	Women	Men
1747	16.0	10.5
1761	23.5	6.3
1851	21.3	16.9

(M) Miscellaneous i.e. guild trade or similar

E.g. wheelwright, carpenter, ironmonger, printer (%)

Year	Women	Men
1747	24.0	39.5
1761	15.9	32.3
1851	19.8	39.1

By 1851 it is the manufacture, sale and laundry of textiles, which has become the most common sector of activity for women. This is despite an increase in lodging house keeping which is often presented as one of 'the' nineteenth century female occupations. Insurance of business assets relating to retailing activities (not falling under the remit of the previous two sectors) accounted for an increasing proportion of both male and female policies, although the increase was far less dramatic than in textiles. Female activity in the miscellaneous sector, including such trades as coachbuilding and ironmongery, underwent a steady decline across the period. Nonetheless, accounting for just under 20 per cent of policies covering business assets in 1851, the number of women operating in such trades remains significant. When the chi-squared statistic is calculated on the distribution of these policies over business sectors, it is clear that gender was operating as an increasingly restrictive determinant of the types of trades and businesses in which women could operate.

1747	Male	e	F 12.5	T 5.6	OR 5.2	M 11.66	OT 3.02	
		a	10	4	4	15	5	
	Female	e	16.5	7.4	6.82	15.3	3.98	
		a	19	9	8	12	2	
	$\chi^2 = 6.12$							
	At 4 degrees of freedom:							
7.77944 at 0.100								
9.48773 at 0.050								
Can reject null hypothesis at 90% significance level								

1761	Male	e	F	T	OR	M	OT
		a	34.56	20.21	15.58	21.9	3.79
	Female	e	41	12	6	31	6
		a	47.47	27.79	21.42	30.11	5.21
		e	41	36	31	21	3
		a					
$\chi^2 = 26.78$ At 4 degrees of freedom: 7.77944 at 0.100 9.48773 at 0.050 Can reject null hypothesis at 95% significance level							

1851	Male	e	F	T	OR	M	OT
		a	47.19	43.38	35.27	53.39	4.77
	Female	e	54	18	31	72	9
		a	51.81	47.62	38.73	58.61	5.23
		e	45	73	43	40	1
		a					
$\chi^2 = 50.81$ At 4 degrees of freedom: 7.77944 at 0.100 9.48773 at 0.050 Can reject null hypothesis at 95% significance level							

Note: e = expected values / a = actual values

Indeed, the approved view of the world, that women of the middling classes ought not to have an 'economic situation' at all, took hold as the century progressed. However, the facts of life were all too obvious following the 1851 census, which indicated a plethora of women eking out their existence. The resulting efforts of the Victorians to reform the opportunities and working experience of the unsupported women of the middling classes would be intimately bound up with the women's movement generally, and especially the reform of the legal position of married women.

It was essentially a reform effort motivated by the 'benevolent consideration' of those ladies of the higher middling and upper classes who did 'not work for their livelihood'.⁴⁴ They sought a 'new sphere for their sex', one in which it would no longer be 'half a disgrace' to become an independent factor in any other post but that of a governess. Their writings tell us that they sought 'respectability' and 'desirability' for women to practice professions and business. However, it is clear that their methodology was one of actually defining and promoting what they regarded as 'respectable' and 'desirable' professions and trades.⁴⁵ Bessie Rayner Parkes writes that it is 'evident that the conditions of business life can never be identical for men and women, and hence that 'no sane person will tolerate the notion of flinging girls into those very temptations and dangers which we lament and regret for boys'.⁴⁶ She continues:

We should, therefore, exercise a little common sense in arranging all those workshops and offices in which girls work, and we should invariably associate them with older women; they should in all cases work in companies together, and not intermixed with men, and so long as they are young they must be under some definite charge.⁴⁷

Along with other 'Ladies of Langham Place' such as Barbara Leigh Smith, Matilda Hayes, Jessie Boucherett, Emily Faithfull and others, Bessie set about busily finding new, suitable outlets for female labour and promoting their conclusions. In March 1858, with Matilda Hays as joint editor, Bessie brought to life the *English Woman's Journal* (EWJ):

The necessary money having been collected from various good friends to the cause, in the form of shares in a limited liability company. Seven years elapsed, during which seventy-eight numbers were issued, at a cost of anxiety and responsibility far beyond what any merely literary journal could entail...⁴⁸

Relatively expensive at one shilling, the *EWJ*'s initial circulation numbered only a few hundred. However, the *EWJ* had created a focus for a wide and varied community of women whose energetic endeavours extended the *EWJ*'s influence well beyond its modest beginnings.⁴⁹

Prior to the establishment of the *EWJ*'s offices there was, as Parkes lamented, 'no centre of meeting, nor any one work' which could be said to have drawn together those women working for the reform of female employment, education and property rights.⁵⁰ But by the time Jessie Boucherett arrived in London in 1859 with the vague intention of 'forming some plan by which to promote the employment of women', she made her way directly to the *EWJ*'s offices, then on Princes Street, Cavandish Square. Within months her plan was a reality. She had inherited the *EWJ* register of women seeking employment and the *Association for Promoting the Employment of Women* had been founded, with Lord Shaftesbury as its first President and Emily Faithfull as its Secretary.⁵¹ Both the *EWJ* and the *Association* now abided under one roof - No. 19 Langham Place.

Concerned by the 'great want of employment' in England, and especially London, the *EWJ* announced that the newly formed *Association* had 'a plan for the prevention of this distress, and of the many evils arising from it'. It continued:

Let us then look round, and see whether men are never to be found occupying easy, remunerative places, that could be as well or better filled by women; places that originally belonged to them, and that they would have remained in possession of to this day, had not artificial means been used to displace them. We refer to those departments in the great shops, which are devoted to the sale of light articles of female attire. Why should bearded men be employed to sell ribbon, lace, gloves, neck-kerchiefs and the dozen other trifles to be found in a silk-mercantile or haberdasher's shop?⁵²

The *Association* proposed to set up a large school for 'girls and young ladies' in which they could be taught the appropriate skills, which would allow them to replace the bearded impostors:

...where they may be specially trained to wait in shops, by being thoroughly well instructed in accounts, book-keeping, etc.; be taught to fold and tie up parcels, and perform any other little acts, which a retired shopwoman could teach them. The necessity of politeness towards customers, and a constant self-command, will also be duly impressed upon them.⁵³

Such training, the *Association* argued, would provide girls with the capabilities of becoming clerks, cashiers, and ticket-sellers at railway stations. 'Other trades' would be taught in workshops in connection with the school. However, only vague reference is made to the types of trades girls might be taught. They are described simply as those 'well suited to women'. The only examples presented to the reader are printing, hairdressing, and 'possibly even watchmaking', although it is suggested that the range would expand as the coffers of the *Association* increased.⁵⁴ There is no mention in the article of what is to become of older women, those thrown back on their own resources out-with the time of their malleable girlhood.

The *Association* enlisted the co-operation of Lord Brougham's *National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* - 'The very parliament of social causes'. Supported by many distinguished public figures, it provided a valuable forum for these benevolent women to advance their cause and obtain a wider hearing than they could otherwise have achieved.⁵⁵ Through the *Association*, the *EWJ* and their countless speaking engagements, the 'Ladies of Langham Place' were determined to exert a 'moral influence' upon public opinion. It was hoped that through example, appropriate opportunities for working women would follow and multiply.

They also set in motion practical 'solutions'. Jessie Boucherett founded a bookkeeping school to train women in this 'new and suitable' field of employment. Similarly, Mary Rye started a law copyist's office and in 1861, frustrated by the number of women she was unable to help, she became the moving force in the establishment of the *Middle-Class Emigration Society*, facilitating the process of emigration by assisting women with loans and advice.⁵⁶ Emily Faithfull began *The Victoria Press* in 1859, employing and training female compositors. Within a year, it regularly printed the *EWJ*, the vast *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*, the *Law Magazine* and a host of other pamphlets and tracts. In 1863 it began the publication of *The Victoria Magazine*, a monthly organ of the women's movement within which its own conception lay.⁵⁷

By the 1880's the potential opportunities for women, as laid out in various guidance books for mothers and daughters, were somewhat different to those considered by Polly and her relatives. From the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, women and their guardians could glean knowledge of potential trades and employments from the plethora of trade reference books provided to school and the general reader. Examples included *A General Description of All Trades*, *The Young Tradesman; or, Book of English Trades*, *The Book of Trades or Circle of the Useful Arts*, and *The Book of Trades or Library of the Useful Arts*. Each was reprinted several times across the period and each contained trades explicitly presented as male, female, or with no gender specified.⁵⁸ Like Frances Jane Ellis, who inked her name in each cover of her copy of the three volumes of *Library of Useful Arts* (1806), either gender could consult the trade descriptions therein.⁵⁹

The second half of the nineteenth century presents a different story. Trade and employment books became specific to the gender of their readers, however young. The year 1855 saw the publication of *The Book of Trades, Arts, & Professions Relative to Food, Clothing, Shelter and Ornament; for the Use of the Young*⁶⁰. A schoolbook by Samuel Griswold Goodrich, penned under the pseudonym of Peter Parley, it contains no mention of dressmakers, milliners, or female haberdashers. The text and the accompanying engravings depict women as customers not proprietors. Similarly, *The Book of Trades* (1862), published on behalf of the *Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge*, also contains no mention of traditionally feminine trades nor suggests any possibility of women being active in any of the fields described within its pages.⁶¹

But it is after the *EWJ* and the *Association for Promoting the Employment of Women*, that we find what is probably the first guidance publication aimed

specifically at women needing to work. - Mercy Grogan's, *How Women May Earn a Living* (1880). In her introduction she writes:

This little book is written in the hope of directing their attention to some suitable and remunerative employments that are not universally known, and it is hoped it may prove useful to parents who are anxious to arm their daughters for the battle of life with a weapon no one can take from them. . . . a thorough knowledge of some remunerative employment would do more to make them independent of the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' than the possession of any amount of money, especially in these days of bank failures and general depression of trade.⁶²

The weapon that she arms them with is a knowledge of 'suitable' employments that would warm the hearts of the 'Ladies of Langham Place'. It includes: artistic employments such as china painting and art needlework; clerk based roles in the Post Office and law copying, telegraphy and bookkeeping; printing; the teaching of music and cookery; shop assistant work in linen draperies; becoming a school board visitor; the role of superintendent in laundries; concertina making; and hairdressing. The medical professions of nursing and pharmacy are devoted a chapter of their own. Ultimately, like Mary Rye of Langham Place, Mercy warns that:

Ladies who have never received any special training, and have neither time nor means to procure it, would probably do wisely to emigrate.⁶³

Published in the same year by Phillis Browne, author of *A Year's Cookery*, was *What Girls Can Do: A Book for Mothers and Daughters*. Expressing similar intentions to those held by Mercy in her preface, Phillis' book is on closer inspection more concerned with avoiding 'idleness'. The majority of the book is taken up by two sections called respectively *Work for Duty* and *Work for Pleasure*. Neither addresses remunerative employments but rather domestic duties and leisure pursuits. The final, rather small chapter is called *Work for Necessity*. It lists a narrow range of employments, limiting itself to art and fancy needlework, literary arts, lady doctors and nurses, clerks and what she refers to as la petite culture - 'the production of minor foods, such as eggs, poultry, honey, butter, vegetables, and fruit'.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Phillis was keen that her advice should not be regarded as prescriptive. She humbly reminded her readers:

I by no means presume to decide what is the best and wisest course to choose under given circumstances. That each girl must decide for herself, no one can take the responsibility of doing it for her. It is a matter of experiment for all of us to find out the particular career that is suited for us, and that we suit.⁶⁵

In conclusion, at different times in their lifecycle - pre-marriage, sometimes during marriage, and following the death of a spouse - women found themselves unsupported and turned to their own endeavours for economic survival. According to their differing levels of need, capital, opportunity and exposure to trading environments, these 'redundant women' switched from the domestic to the public sphere, and often back again. Like Polly, in selecting survival routes in this way they were exercising choice, albeit limited.

By the second half of the century women were still regarded as having choices. Nonetheless, it is clear that if they wanted to be regarded as 'respectable' they had to choose from the range of employments now deemed 'suitable' for women of their rank. This was not necessarily a new pressure. At the turn of the century, Polly's relatives certainly felt very strongly that she was choosing 'unsuitably'. However as the century progressed, such social preferences became even stronger. This was especially true from the late 1850's onwards when the 'Ladies of Langham Place' took it upon themselves to carry the yoke of securing 'respectable' employment for women. The consequent rise of the *EWJ* and the *Association for the Promotion of Female Employment*, facilitated the institutionalisation of existing social preferences and, to allow for the un-disguisable 'want of employment, expanded the perceived feminine sphere by assimilated remunerative activities which they deemed suitable for women. The increasing emphasis on 'respectability' was increasingly central to the identity of the middling classes and in turn this helped to secure the new sphere boundary. Together these forces operated as a substantial sedative for any potential sphere switching Polly's.

¹ B. Leigh Smith, *Women and Work* (London, 1857), p.5

² *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter. Written by Herself* (London, 1844), pp.20, 51

³ L.D., Schwarz, 'Income distribution and social structure in London in the late eighteenth century', *Economic History Review* 32 (1979), p.254

⁴ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp. 8-10

⁵ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.10

⁶ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.15-18, 11

⁷ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.19-20

⁸ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.20

⁹ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.20

¹⁰ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.21

¹¹ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.21

¹² *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.22-23

¹³ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.23,24,38,41,43,49,53

¹⁴ M., Anderson, 'The social position of spinsters in mid-Victorian Britain.' *Journal of Family History* Vol. No. 9, No.4 (1984)

¹⁵ E. C., Wolstenholme, 'The Education of Girls, its Present and its Future', in J.E. Butler, (ed.) *Women's Work and Women's Culture. A Series of Essays* (London, 1869), p.319.

¹⁶ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.50-61

¹⁷ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.73

¹⁸ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.72

¹⁹ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.11-12

²⁰ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.8-15

²¹ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.74

²² *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.76

-
- ²³ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.84
- ²⁴ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.80-90
- ²⁵ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, pp.72-73, 81
- ²⁶ *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, p.82
- ²⁷ M. Rickards, *Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (London, 2000), p.334.
- ²⁸ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Eag-Fet c.1800's
- ²⁹ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Bir-Bre 1839 (C.Brendel 1827)
- ³⁰ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Cra-Der. c.1800's.
- ³¹ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Bar-Bin, 1840
- ³² London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Han-Hep c.1820
- ³³ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - See-Sma 1801
- ³⁴ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Bir-Bre. 1824
- ³⁵ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Cra-Der. 1830.
- ³⁶ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Gra-Ham c.1800's
- ³⁷ London Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection, Box - Dat-Dys c.1800's
- ³⁸ H.A.L.Cocherell, E.Green, *The British Insurance Business. A Guide to its History & Records.* (Sheffield, 1994) p.40
- ³⁹ L.D. Schwartz, L.J.Jones, 'Wealth, occupations, and insurance in the late 18th century.' *Economic History Review* no. 36. 1983. p.366. The liable population is estimated at 6% of the total population of 1801, or 20% of the adult population. This is a crude approximation for a predominantly upper and middle class adult male insurance market.
- ⁴⁰ Schwartz and Jones., p. 367
- ⁴¹ This is a criticism likely to hold more truth after the Married Women's Property Act.
- ⁴² Sun Fire Office Policies, London Guildhall Library Manuscripts Repository, London. Series no.11,936.
- ⁴³ Sun Fire Office Policies, London Guildhall Library Manuscripts Repository, London. Series no.11,936.
- ⁴⁴ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* (London, 1865), p.159
- ⁴⁵ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* p.163
- ⁴⁶ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* p.157
- ⁴⁷ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* pp.158-159
- ⁴⁸ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* p.62
- ⁴⁹ P.A., Nester, 'A new departure in women's publishing...' p.95
- ⁵⁰ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* p.55
- ⁵¹ P.A., Nester, 'A new departure in women's publishing: The English Woman's Journal and The Victoria Magazine.' *Victorian Periodicals Review* Vol .15, No.3 (1982), p.96
- ⁵² *English Woman's Journal* Vol.4, September 1859, p.57
- ⁵³ *English Woman's Journal* Vol.4, September 1859, p.59
- ⁵⁴ *English Woman's Journal* Vol.4, September 1859, p.59
- ⁵⁵ P.A., Nester, 'A new departure in women's publishing...' pp.96-97 B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* p.64
- ⁵⁶ B., Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Woman's Work* pp.65-66
- ⁵⁷ P.A., Nester, 'A new departure in women's publishing...' p.97
- ⁵⁸ Campbell., *A General Description of All Trades* (London, 1747)
- Anon., *The Young Tradesman; or, Book of English Trades* (London, 1839), 12th edition
- Anon., *The Book of Trades or Circle of the Useful Arts* (Glasgow, 1837), 5th edition
- Anon., *The Book of Trades or Library of the Useful Arts* (London, 1806)
- ⁵⁹ Anon., *The Book of Trades or Library of the Useful Arts* (London, 1806) British Library, shelfmark 012806.de.11
- ⁶⁰ P.Parley., *The Book of Trades, Arts, & Professions Relative to Food, Clothing, Shelter and Ornament; for the Use of the Young* (London, 1855)
- ⁶¹ *The Book of Trades* (London, 1862)
- ⁶² M., Grogan, *How Women May Earn a Living* (London, 1880), pp.9-10
- ⁶³ M., Grogan, *How Women May Earn a Living* p.114

⁶⁴ P., Browne., (pseud. Sarah Sharp Hamer), *What Girls Can Do: A Book for Mothers and Daughters* (London 1880, reprinted 1885), pp.308-368, 360

⁶⁵ P., Browne., *What Girls Can Do: A Book for Mothers and Daughters*, p.6