

Research report: Female service in Early Modern England by Dr Charmain Mansell (Awarded 2016 WSG Bursary)

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A woman hard at work distilling. Illustration from J. S., *The accomplished ladies rich closet of rarities: or, the ingenious gentlewoman and servant-maids delightful companion* (1691).

Image courtesy Wellcome Library, London

As an Early Career Researcher, it is often difficult to access bursaries and grants for research. Visiting archives and undertaking other forms of research for the completion of articles, monographs and other publications that are so necessary to secure postdoctoral employment can therefore be extremely difficult. In December 2016, I was delighted to be awarded the Women's Studies Group 30th anniversary [bursary](#) for my research on female servants in early modern England. This was the first year that this £500 bursary had been awarded and I am pleased to hear that the group have been able to award two more grants this year.

The award was granted for me to undertake archival research for the preparation of my monograph, *Female Service in Early Modern England*, which is based on my doctoral thesis. This [thesis](#) explored the experiences of around 500 female servants recorded in the church court depositions of the dioceses of Exeter and Gloucester (covering today's counties of Devon, Cornwall and Gloucestershire).

These diocesan courts were charged with enforcing morality and discipline in early modern society. Witnesses from across the social spectrum were asked to provide evidence of what they had seen or heard in relation to illicit behaviour such as adultery and inter-party disputes including defamation and broken marriage promises. Their depositions are almost unrivalled in the detail they provide of both the everyday and the extraordinary. Few other sources allow the study of female servants' experiences, nor can they offer such rich detail of their lives. Through a female servant's account of the events she had witnessed, we learn details of her employment, her age and residence history as well as the type of work she performed, the spaces in which her life played out and the interactions she had with her employers, neighbours and friends.

Over the course of 2017, I made trips to the [London Metropolitan Archive](#) and [Somerset Archives](#) to gather additional source material from their collections of ecclesiastical court depositions (covering London and Somerset respectively). I am still analysing this new data but it appears that these two archives will provide snapshot information of approximately 250 additional female servants. Prior to receiving the bursary, I also collected data from the diocese of Winchester court (covering Hampshire and the Isle of Wight), amounting to an additional 126 female servants. Although the evidence is at times fragmentary, the monograph will explore the working and social lives of at least 800 English women employed in service between 1550 and 1650.



Church court deposition, Somerset Archives, SHC D\D/cd/64. Image taken by Charmian Mansell and used courtesy Somerset Archives.

The monograph breaks new ground by challenging several deeply-entrenched tropes within the scholarship of early modern female service. Analysing service from demographic, geographical, economic and social perspectives, this book demonstrates the variety of experiences of female service that extended across the life-cycle and challenges its conception as a rigid institution designed to regulate youth. It presents a richer, more textured picture of female service, moving beyond its conceptualisation as domestic. It highlights the various forms of work they performed and the range of relationships they forged beyond the household. The book demonstrates the important role that women in service played in the early modern community, makes an important intervention in early modern British social history and raises fundamental questions about how historians understand women, community and work.

Thank you, Charmian, for this WSG bursary report, and for the insight into the journey from PhD thesis to monograph. For more information on Charmian's job while she's writing up her book, namely the Women's Work in Rural England, 1500-1700 project at Exeter University, click [here](#).