

The Long Run

the EHS blog

The age of entrepreneurship: new insights into female business proprietors in Victorian Britain

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(<https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/driversofentrepreneurship/>))

This research will be presented during the EHS Annual Conference in Belfast, April 5th – 7th 2019. Conference registration can be found [on the EHS website](http://www.ehs.org.uk/events/annual-conference.html). (<http://www.ehs.org.uk/events/annual-conference.html>)





Snow Hill, Holburn, London 19th century. Available on [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:English_School,_19th_Century,_Snow_Hill,_Holburn,_London.jpg).

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popular notions of what a Victorian entrepreneur looked like. The research is based on the new British Business Census of entrepreneurs, created at the University of Cambridge as part of the project Drivers of Entrepreneurship under Professor Robert Bennett.

This database contains an extraction and reconstruction of the whole business population of England, Wales and Scotland, and will be made available through the UK Data Archive in 2019. A forthcoming book by the project team – The Age of Entrepreneurship – shows how the Victorian period was a golden age for smaller and medium-sized business.

Women formed a sizable part of this business population, owning 27-30% of all businesses between 1851 and 1911. This is considerably higher than current figures: statistics from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy shows that 21% of businesses were female-led in 2017.

While nowadays the sectors with the highest proportions of female involvement include education and the health services, where women constitute 50% of proprietors, in Victorian Britain the most female-dominated sectors were clothing manufacturing and personal services.

In 2017, manufacturing was one of the lowest sectors for female business participation at 12%, the same proportion as it was in 1901. While many Victorian manufacturing businesses ran by women were related to the textile industry, there were also many women running more traditionally masculine trades, such as Eliza Tinsley, who in 1871 owned a nail and chain manufacturing firm in Dudley, Staffordshire, employing 4,000 people.

‘Co-preneurship’ and ‘mumpreneurs’ played a similarly important role in Victorian Britain as they do today. While many women dropped out of the formal labour force after marriage and childbirth, for those who remained economically active entrepreneurship was an attractive option.

While roughly similar proportions of economically active single men and women ran their own businesses, after marriage, women were more likely than men to be business proprietors. In some cases, married women ran a business in partnership with their spouse, a common dynamic for grocers, for example. But in the majority of married female entrepreneurs’ households, the wife ran a business while her husband was a wage labourer.

Close to 30% of businesses in Victorian Britain were owned by women, according to our research, which I will be presenting at the Economic History Society’s 2019 annual conference.

Our analysis of UK census data between 1851 and 1911 shows that the population of female business proprietors was much larger than hitherto estimated, and challenges