

**Document 7: Edwin Grey, "Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village", 1934, p.79-80**

Before the straws could be used they had to be split into strips.... For this a small tool termed a splitting machine was used... [there was] a sharp almost needle-like point, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch of the tapered end being bent or turned downwards. The down-turned end, at about  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch above the sharp point, was encircled with a little frill of cutters; these cutters were from 4 to 8 in number, and so according to the fineness of the strips required, a splitter with more or less cutters in its frill was used, the strips so obtained being called 'splints'.

Before the splints could be used they had to be passed through a little wooden affair, something like a miniature mangle, called a 'mill'. These mills were entirely of wood, and were made up of two small rollers, one of which was provided with a spindle on to which the wooden handle for turning was fixed; a wooden screw for increasing the pressure when required. In every plaiter's home, fixed behind one or the other of the doors, would be found one of these wooden mills. The splints were now passed two or three times between the tightened-up rollers, some few at a time; this process made them much more soft and pliable for use.



**Document 8: From Cassells Family Magazine, 1882**

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**Document 9: Extract from the government report on straw hat manufacture, by J E White, published in 1867**

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*In a room little more than 10 ½ feet square, and between six and seven feet high, the number of children attending on the day of my visit was 41 and there have been sixty...*

*Some plait schools are only day schools, i.e. from breakfast to dinner, and from dinner to tea [often 8.30 – 12.00 and 1.00 – 4.30], but some have an evening school also from 6 to 8 or 6 to 9.*

*In several plait schools I noticed formidable looking sticks, which the mistresses say they are obliged to keep, and sometimes to use. It appears that formerly much severity has been used, but I did not find any cases of bad treatment.*



**Document 10:** “Happy Times - Straw Plaiting near St Albans” from *Illustrated London News*, 14 May 1853 (Artist William Lee)

**Document 11: Arthur Young, “General View of the Agriculture of Hertfordshire”, 1804**  
*The farmers complain of it as doing mischief for it makes the poor saucy and no servants can be procured or any field work done where this manufacture establishes itself... good earnings are a most happy circumstance, which I wish to see universal... straw plaiting is of very great use to the poor and has had considerable effect in keeping down rates, which must be far more burthensome without it.’*

**Document 12: Social conditions in Harpenden, 1858 – A report by W.L Rogers to Sir John Lawes**

*The women are extensively employ'd in the Manufacture of Straw Plait – In nearly every house from morn till night – from Aged Dame of four score years [80 years old] down to the child of four years of both sexes are thus employ'd – As soon as the child can learn the Art (which is very early) it is pressed into this work.*

*Numbers of children are sent to what is called 'Plaiting schools'.*

*There they pretend to combine Instruction with plaiting. This is a mere sham [trick] – The great aim appears to be 'what they can earn'. It was really painful to witness so many children of such tender years sitting close packed in heated rooms superintended by a Female urging them on with their work.*

*It was to me surprising how cleverly their little nimble fingers twisted and plaited the slender straws moistening them with their little lips – To confine children so young and so many hours without that healthful recreation so suited and needful for their years I felt was cruel.*

*I had with many of the Parents much serious converse over the evils of the system – the permanent injury done to themselves and children in depriving them of that invaluable treasure – Education – The indifference of many was surprising – Everywhere the Answer was the same "We can't help it Sir they must do it or we could not support them'. The children earn from 2/- to 5/- weekly and some times more (the parents assured me).*

**Document 13: Miss Vaughan, “Thirty three years at Harpenden”, 1893**

Miss Vaughan is remembering Harpenden in the 1860s

*The plaiting schools (so called) were really workshops, where boys and girls went daily to be supervised in the working-up of so many yards of plait, something like fifteen minutes being devoted to each child's reading in the Testament...Betsy Crane in Staker's Lane (now, alas! Station Road), Mrs Bruton, Church Green....and Mrs Farr on Kinsbourne Green, were the most popular of these plaiting-mistresses. Thoroughly and kindly did they do their duty to the children, but the monotony of the work, the long hours (quite those of modern school-life, with a couple of evening hours added, if the children paid for going 'nights' as well as 'days'), added to the closeness of the rooms, with no limit to the number at work there, made it a system impossible to regret. [she means that nobody would regret that the schools don't exist any more]*

## **Document 14: Edwin Grey, “Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village”, 1934**

Edwin Grey was looking back on his life in the 1870s

### **p.145**

*One saw more of the young women in the summer time, as they could plait equally as well out of doors as within, so that on nice warm summer evenings, little groups of women might be seen at cottage doors all busy plaiting, and at the same time enjoying a little gossip...*

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*This industry had many good points about it, so making the work excellent for the cottage homes: firstly, it was of a clean nature, and then again the housewife could, when wanting to go on with other household work, put aside her plaiting, resuming it again at any time. She could also do the work sitting in the garden, or whilst standing by the cottage door, enjoying a chat or gossip with her neighbours. The mother also could rock the cradle with her foot, whilst using both hands at the plaiting...*

## **Edwin Grey, “Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village”, 1934, p71-73**

*This school was kept by Betsy Crane, an old lady whose cottage school was in Staker's Lane (now Station Road). Her cottage was a little low-ceiled affair, the front door opening direct from the lane into the front or living-room; this same room also served for the school-room. If I remember rightly one had to take a step down into the room, the said step being inside, so that one had to take care when entering the house of you might miss the step and fall head first in.... There were other [plait] schools too...The workers were mostly young lassies... I've known some of the workers whose fingers become quite sore and bleeding through working so hard to get the required yards of plait finished. Happily these severe schools were the exception.... I never new any of these plaiting schools where writing or arithmetic was taught, probably for the simple reason that these old ladies knew nothing of it themselves; their method of imparting the reading lesson being no doubt the same as that by which they themselves were taught.*