



Harpenden History Society  
School Resource  
Upper KS2 / KS3

# How can we look inside Victorian Harpenden?



## TEACHERS' NOTES

The idea behind this lesson is how far we can see inside a working person's home. The children find out about the variety of sources that we can use to find out more about what was going on, and get experience of 'working like historians' – investigating the past through interrogating primary sources. However, they also experience the limitations that historians come up against when trying to understand or 'get inside' the experience of people in the past, particularly poorer people. The majority of written accounts here come from wealthier people visiting straw plaiting schools or homes of straw plaiters, and offering their own opinions of what they saw.

Straw plaiting was a major source of employment for women in Harpenden in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as statistics compiled from the 1881 census returns show. 626 women were recorded under "Straw – Hat, Bonnet, Plait manufacture" and 138 under "Hatter – hat manufacture"; these two categories combined provided jobs for just over 50% of the women listed as employed, and 32% of all women in Harpenden. By this point straw plait was already starting to be in decline (as cheaper foreign imports were available), so we can speculate that it may have represented a larger proportion of the female workforce at the time of earlier censuses.

Straw was a by-product of wheat growing in the area, and census returns show that it was common for the men in the family to be agricultural labourers whilst the women and children worked on straw plait. These families would have been amongst the poorer and less educated in the village, but straw plait was a valuable source of income. It provided (what we might now describe as) flexible self-employment for women with families – it could be done whilst walking around and minding children, and it was paid as piecework so there were no set hours. Nonetheless, the documents included in this lesson give some sense of the disadvantages; the relentless demands it placed on both children and women, and the crowded conditions in "plait schools" that children attended so they could be supervised in their work.

### External Links

[https://www.lutonculture.com/uploads/documents/1339774056\\_HatIndustry.pdf](https://www.lutonculture.com/uploads/documents/1339774056_HatIndustry.pdf)

This page provides a wealth of information and further documents on the straw plaiting and hat industry in Luton and more broadly in Hertfordshire.

[http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table\\_page.jsp;jsessionid=5C1498A063EBE20C4DA25EEE0A67CF5C?tab\\_id=EW1881AGE\\_M10&u\\_id=10549024&show=DB](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table_page.jsp;jsessionid=5C1498A063EBE20C4DA25EEE0A67CF5C?tab_id=EW1881AGE_M10&u_id=10549024&show=DB)

This is the table of occupation data from the 1881 census, compiled by the University of Portsmouth and others

## LESSON PLAN – LESSON ONE

### How can we look inside Victorian Harpenden?

#### Preparation

Print out documents and place in envelopes:

Envelope one <b>'Objects'</b>	<b>Documents 1 &amp; 2:</b> Photographs of straw mill and straw splitter
Envelope two <b>'Document'</b>	<b>Document 3:</b> Image of original copy of 1851 census for Stakers lane, with transcript on the back
Envelope three <b>'Photographs'</b>	<b>Documents 5 &amp;6:</b> Photographs of Straw plaiters from Dunstable and straw hats made in Luton

#### Starter activity

Show the students a map and photo (you could use Google Earth) of station road in Harpenden today. That is what it is like now. How do they think it would have been different in Victorian times? How could we find out – if they say books / internet ask them how the people who created these things found out. Guide them to wonder if there would be maps or photos from the time.

Show them the ordnance survey map (1877-8), and the photographs of station road from the history society's website (1880s and 1890s). Explain that in today's lesson, they are going to be trying to find out about the past by looking at evidence – things that remain from the past. They need to look carefully at things and see what they can find out.

[http://www.harpenden-history.org.uk/page\\_id\\_\\_211.aspx](http://www.harpenden-history.org.uk/page_id__211.aspx)  
<http://maps.nls.uk/view/102343322>

Pair and share: students discuss how Station Road in Victorian times was different from Station Road today. You could ask them whether they think it would have been called Station Road at the start of the period (it wasn't it was called Staker's Lane; its name changed in 1892, after the station was built in 1868.)

Emphasise that at the start of Victorian period Harpenden was still very much an agricultural village – farming provided the largest number of jobs in the village.

Then ask them to think about how we could find out what it was like inside one of the houses. They might respond with diaries or letters. Emphasise that a lot of the houses were for workers, many of whom wouldn't have been able to read at the time and would not have had the time or materials to keep written accounts anyway. It is also worth mentioning that a lot of private writing will have been destroyed.

### **Main activity one – envelope 1 (Documents 1-2) – looking at objects**

Tell them that each group will have an image of one of two objects that would have been found in many houses along Station Road, and in number 26. [These objects are from Harpenden although not specifically Station Road, but we know that they would have kept similar objects.]

Can they work out:

- What the object was used for?
- Who would have used it?

Emphasise that this is quite difficult!

Share their ideas.

### **Main activity two – envelope 2 (Document 3) – looking at the census**

If nobody has correctly identified the objects (which is highly likely, although they might have had good ideas), ask them how we could find out more. Might there be other evidence of what jobs people were doing inside the house?

Introduce the census – a survey taken every ten years from 1801 by the government. In Victorian times an enumerator would knock on every door and note down key information – who lived there, how old they were, where they were born, whether they were married, what job they did, whether they had a disability.

Students open envelope 2 (labelled “document”) and look at the scan of the census.

- What different jobs can they find people were doing in these times?
- What do they think these jobs were?
- Do you think rich or poor people lived on this road at this time?
- How well educated do they think the adults were likely to be?

Feedback –

- What do they know was going on inside these houses?
- What questions do they still need to answer?

Draw out their ideas about what straw plaiting might have meant, but don't clarify these yet – the photographs will help them to work it out further.

Depending on how far their thinking has got, you might direct them back to the objects in the previous activity to see if they have got any further / different ideas.

### **Main activity three – envelope 3 (Documents 5-6) – photographs**

Students now attempt to answer their remaining questions by looking at the photographs of plaiters in Dunstable and completed hats in Luton in the 1920s.

Feedback on what they've worked out now.

What are their final thoughts on what the objects might be?

## **Answering their questions – a final source**

As most of the people who took part in straw plaiting would not have been well educated, and would not have had the time or money to write accounts of their experience, we often rely on writings from wealthier people. However, we do have one account from someone who grew up in a poorer home, and although did not learn to plait himself, spent time watching his friends who did, and whose families were involved in straw plaiting. If we read his account, we can work out what the objects were used for.

Show the photos of the splitter and mill as you read out Document 7, Edwin Grey's account, clarifying how the objects would work as you read.

### **A final question to consider:**

Put up on the whiteboard, the image of the 1851 census of Staker's lane, **Document 4**. Draw their attention to Elizabeth Crane. What was her job? So how educated would you expect her to have been?

Now show them the 1841 census of Staker's lane. Can they find Elizabeth Crane? Is there anything surprising about the information recorded about her? [She is listed here as a school mistress.]

How can they explain this?

[They will discover in the next lesson that she ran a 'plaiting school' where parents paid for their children to be supervised learning to plait, then producing plait which the families would sell on.]

## LESSON PLAN – LESSON TWO

### Did straw plaiting improve or worsen people's lives?

#### Starter

Put up on the whiteboard the image of a straw plaiting school, Document 8. Students **discuss in pairs**:

- What do you think is happening in the image?
- What does the artist think of this place? Is she/he trying to make it look pleasant or unpleasant? How can you tell?

You could prompt them to think about how relaxed or tense the children look from how they are sitting, what their facial expressions suggest, whether the adult looks friendly or strict, whether the room looks cosy or overcrowded.

Feedback: Explain that this is an artist's image of a plaiting school – parents would pay a school mistress to teach their children how to plait straw, and then supervise them while they made plait which their parents could then sell. Children could be there 9 hours a day, and started as early as 4 years old. They would sometimes learn basic reading skills, but most of the time was spent plaiting. There were schools like this in Harpenden.

Does anyone know where there might have been one? (This might remind them of the census from the last lesson and the question over Elizabeth Crane.)

Do they think we can say we know what it was like in plaiting schools just by looking at this picture? Can we trust the artist's opinion? How could we test out whether all plaiting schools were really like this?

Explain that in 1862, the government decided to find out what work was like for children in different workplaces and one place they sent inspectors to was plait schools. You will read an extract from their report of 1867:

**Discuss as a class:** How does this give them a different impression of what it was like in a straw plait school?

*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.*

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

## **Main activity – individual or paired work**

The students will be using the remaining original sources (Documents 9–14), to try to deduce what straw plaiters would have thought of their employment and work out how far it benefitted them from their own perspective. They will fill in the worksheet to help them draw inferences from the documents and use this evidence to reach their own conclusions.

Ask them whether the sources they have looked at today were produced by straw plaiters themselves or other people who looked at straw plaiters and offered their own opinion. You could discuss why you haven't just looked at what straw plaiters themselves thought.

Remind them of the enquiry question. They are going to try to work out what people who did straw plaiting might have thought about it. They have to try to work this out from what other people said, as we don't have their own opinions written down.

Model the activity with one source with the students, before letting them work independently / with support through the activity.

## **Plenary - discussion**

Pair and share: Ask them to reach a judgement about how far straw plaiting benefitted the lives of those who did it, on a scale of -5 to +5: -5 being a totally negative experience, 0 being neutral and +5 meaning that straw plaiting only benefitted them.

Students could write this on whiteboards, or arrange themselves on a line in the classroom.

Discuss as a class, drawing out different ideas and then ask them to reassess their position after the class discussion.

<b>Description of source</b>	<b>What advantages of straw plaiting does it mention or show?</b>	<b>What disadvantages of straw plaiting does it mention or show?</b>	<b>What might a person doing straw plaiting think?</b>

## DOCUMENT LIST

Document number	Description
Document 1	Modern photograph of a Victorian straw mill
Document 2	Modern photograph of a straw splitter
Document 3	1851 Census, Staker's Lane (image of original)
	Transcript & glossary - 1851 Census, Staker's Lane
Document 4	1841 Census, Staker's Lane
Document 5	Photograph of straw plaiters in Dunstable (Victorian)
Document 6	Photograph of men carrying straw hats outside a factory in Luton, 1928
Document 7	Edwin Grey, "Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village", 1934, p.79-80 Summary of how straw splitters and mills used to make plait
Document 8	Drawing of a plaiting school, from Cassells Family Magazine, 1882 (reproduced by <a href="http://lutonculture.com">lutonculture.com</a> )
Document 9	Extract from the government report on straw hat manufacture, by J E White, published in 1867 (reproduced by <a href="http://lutonculture.com">lutonculture.com</a> )
Document 10	Drawing of straw plaiters "Happy Times - Straw Plaiting near St Albans" from <i>Illustrated London News</i> , 14 May 1853 (Artist William Lee) (reproduced by <a href="http://hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk">hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk</a> )
Document 11	Arthur Young, "General View of the Agriculture of Hertfordshire", 1804 (quoted in <a href="http://hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk">hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk</a> )
Document 12	Social conditions in Harpenden, 1858 – A report by W.L Rogers to Sir John Lawes
Document 13	Memories of plaiting schools in the 1860s, from: Miss Vaughan, "Thirty three years at Harpenden", 1893
Document 14	Description of the life of women straw plaiters, and description of Betsy Crane's plait school: Edwin Grey, "Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village", 1934