

# Medieval queens of industry

In the 150 years after the Black Death halved London's population, women enjoyed new economic power in the city. **Caroline Barron** asks whether this era truly was a 'golden age' for English women

In April 1349, as the Black Death swept through London, Mathilda de Mymys drew up her will. Her husband, John, had died the previous month, leaving his tenements to his wife and entrusting to her the guardianship of their daughter, Isabella. But the plague continued to ravage the capital, and Mathilda – wisely, as it transpired – decided to get her affairs in order. Shortly afterwards she was herself struck down.

John and Mathilda had run a business making religious images and paintings. Mathilda's will arranged for her apprentice, William, to continue his training with a monk in Bermondsey Priory, and bequeathed to him the tools he needed, together with one of her best chests in which to keep them. A brewery owned by Mathilda was to be sold to pay for prayers for her and John.

That will underlines the devastating impact of the Black Death on thousands of families across the country; indeed, the disease subsequently took Isabella's guardian. But the document also offers other insights – specifically, into opportunities that resulted from the soaring death toll.

In this instance, Mathilda clearly had wealth of her own, and the freedom to write such a will. She was briefly an early beneficiary of a period of relative economic power for women created by the sudden dearth of skilled and trained men – an era that has been dubbed a 'golden age'.



“When the **Black Death** struck, it sent London's **population plummeting down to 40,000** from a peak of **80,000** in 1300”

**These four mortuary crosses were placed on the body of a plague victim in London c1348. It was in the capital that the Black Death had the greatest impact on women's lives**

Even before the plague afflicted London, the capital's customary law offered women freedoms that they rarely enjoyed elsewhere in England, except perhaps in York. For example, a woman might enter into obligations on her own behalf, take on apprentices, run her own business, rent property, and sue (or be sued) for debt in the London courts. A woman – especially if she was a widow – could even write a will, as Mathilda de Mymys did.

But after the plague struck, sending London's population plummeting to 40,000 from a peak of 80,000 in 1300, these opportunities multiplied. In fact, the mayor and aldermen, alarmed by a chronic shortage of manpower, began actively to encourage women to exercise their new economic rights.

Eventually, the rights went further: from 1465, a widow of a citizen of London, who was living there with him at the time of his death, would be made 'free of the city' (a citizen) as long as she continued to live in London and did not remarry.

City authorities were especially anxious to encourage the widows of London merchants and craftsmen to continue to run their husbands' workshops or trading enterprises, to ensure that these businesses continued to contribute to civic prosperity and taxation. Thus it became compulsory for widows to train their late husbands' apprentices, or to make proper provision for them.

In the years following the Black Death, girl apprentices became prominent in

surviving records. Though this wasn't a new phenomenon – as early as 1276, Marion de Lymeseye was apprenticed to Roger Oriel, a paternosterer (maker of rosaries) – but in the half-century after the Black Death, from 1350 to 1400, numbers of female apprentices soared.

Fathers sometimes specified in their wills that their daughters should be apprenticed to learn a trade. Robert de Ramseye, a fishmonger who died in 1373, left 20 shillings to his daughter, Elizabeth – for her marriage, and for “putting her to a trade”.

Records are sparse – only 30 apprenticeship indentures from medieval London survive – but about a third of them relate to girls, many training in the craft of silkwork or embroidery. Their indentures, like those of boys, had to be recorded in the apprentice rolls kept at the Guildhall, and the terms of the indentures were the same, usually for seven years.

Why the rise in female apprentices at this time? For boys, a completed apprenticeship opened the way to the citizenship of London, with all its attendant political and economic advantages and responsibilities. For girls, though, this was not the case – citizenship did not follow an apprenticeship, and most went on to marry.

A female apprentice lived in the household of her master or mistress (not always the case with servants), and was placed almost completely under their authority. The master or mistress had specific obligations to feed, clothe and nurture the apprentice and, above all, to train her in the secrets and skills of her craft. An apprenticeship provided girls with patrons and business contacts, and secured their status within the working community.

So parents from gentry families outside London knew that apprenticing daughters would provide them with the means to earn a living, and to run an independent household should that prove necessary. Unsurprisingly, then, most girls were bound by their father or brother, though one woman from Sussex bound herself as an apprentice to another woman in London.

### Soletraders

Married women in London could choose to trade separately from their husbands as *femmes soles*. At the time when her husband, Thomas, was serving as an alderman, around 1380, Maud Ireland traded as a *femme sole* silkwoman. “According to the usage of the city [she was] bound to answer her own contracts,” and she was sued for a debt owed for white silk bought from an Italian merchant.

Women were expected to make a public declaration of their sole status. In October 1457, Agnes Gower stated to the mayor and aldermen that she practised the art of a

A French manuscript from c1327–35 depicts a woman forging nails. Though such opportunities did exist in London before the Black Death, they increased significantly afterwards





### Golden girls

These four women exploited the opportunities presented when the plague struck



#### Agnes Ramsey Mason

Agnes, who never used her husband's name, was the daughter of the famous architect and mason William Ramsey, who was killed by the Black Death in 1349. Though married to another mason, Robert Hubard, Agnes continued to run her father's business, entering into a contract with the dowager Queen Isabella, widow of Edward II, to build her fine tomb at the enormous cost of £100.



#### Alice Holford Bailliff

Alice took over the post of bailliff of London Bridge on the death of her husband, Nicholas, in 1433, and continued in office for over 20 years. The bailliff collected the tolls due from boats passing through the bridge, and from carts that crossed it into London. The task was a complicated one – charges varied according to the goods and the person transporting them – and Alice must have had some literacy skills.



#### Johanna Hill Bell-founder

On the death of her husband in 1440, Johanna took full charge of their bell-founding business till her own death in 1441. Seven of her bells still exist as far away as Ipswich, Sussex and Devon. Johanna continued to use her husband's mark – a cross and circle within a shield – but surmounted with a lozenge to indicate that the workshop was now under her authority.



#### Ellen Langwith Silkwoman

Ellen, who died in 1481, was a London silkwoman. When her first husband, cutler Philip Waltham, died she was left to train their three female apprentices. She later married a tailor, John Langwith, but continued with her own craft. She was recorded as buying gold thread and raw silk direct from Venetian merchants, and in 1465 supplied saddle decorations and silk banners for the coronation of Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV. She was courted by both the Cutlers' and Tailors' companies.

silkwoman and no other, and asked to be allowed to “merchandise” without her husband John, and to answer sole for her own contracts according to city custom. This was granted and recorded.

Some of these independent London women were doing business on a large scale. Agnes Ramsey, daughter of the noted architect and mason William Ramsey, ran her father's business after his death in 1349 (see sidebar, left). Mathilda Penne ran her husband's business as a skinner for 12 years after his death; she trained her own apprentices and employed male servants and, possibly, a female scrivener to keep the accounts.

Twice during the 15th century, the substantial bell foundry outside Aldgate was run by widows. The household and workshop of the bell-founder Johanna Hill, who died in 1441, comprised four male apprentices, two female servants, 10 male servants, a specialised bell-maker, a clerk and the daughter of a fellow bell-founder.

Other widows continued to run the financial side of their husbands' businesses, if not the trading or craft aspects; they pursued debtors, sorted out accounts and saw to the execution of their husbands' wills. These women were active in maintaining their households, bolstering the welfare of their souls and managing the upbringing of their children, as well as other endeavours. Another Agnes, the widow of Stephen Forster (mayor of London 1454–55), saw to the rebuilding and reorganisation of the prison at Ludgate.

#### Crafty women

These were remarkable women who made their mark in the commercial world of London and won respect within their social milieus. The records of the craft guilds and companies acknowledge the presence of women, but their role was not a formal one – rather, they shared in the religious, charitable and social aspects of company life.

However, several crafts and trades recognised the contribution of women workers. In the early 15th century, for example, one-third of all brewers paying dues to the Brewers' Company were women. Some of these were single, while others were widows or married women trading sole; one Agnes, whose husband Stephen was a draper, paid her dues independently throughout the 1420s.

Though women were seemingly marginalised within these organisations, limited to social and charitable roles, they were able to make contacts with other workers within their craft. They could also achieve recognition of their credit-worthiness and could share in, and contribute to, the material resources of their societies. To offset the imposed limitations of their role within guilds and companies, and

to supplement the formal craft relationships, many created important informal networks of friends, servants, apprentices, dependants and patrons.

However enmeshed women may have been in the social and economic networks of London life, their professional advancement was still constrained. For example, there is scant evidence of a woman holding any public office in which she might have been placed in authority over a man – such appointments would be vigorously resisted.

In 1422, the men of Queenhythe ward complained that John of Ely, the local

Women are shown weaving in a late-medieval illustration. Women were involved in a wide range of crafts in London at this time







A female sculptor at work is illustrated in a late 15th-century painting

“Rarely, women were delegated authority: Alice Holford was bailiff of London Bridge from 1433 to 1452”

measurer of oysters, had subcontracted his office to women “who know not how to do it; nor is it worship to this city that women should have such things in governance”. No doubt most Londoners shared the view of the men of Queenhythe; certainly, women never served as ward officers, common councilmen or, of course, aldermen. The delegation of authority to women was extremely rare, but it did happen: for more than 20 years following the death of her husband, Nicholas, in 1433, Alice Holford held the office of bailiff of London Bridge (see sidebar).

### Future gains

The century and a half between 1350 and 1500 could reasonably be considered a ‘golden age’ for women in London – but it was short-lived. As the population swelled once more, an acute manpower shortage was replaced by a glut, and women were pushed out of the labour market. In 1570, the Drapers’ Company refused to allow a member to take on a girl apprentice “for that they had not seen the like before”.

Women continued to work after that period, of course, but in largely informal and dependent positions. London merchants were transforming themselves into country gentlemen, and it was no longer suitable for their wives to be seen trading sole. Moreover, Protestantism created a specific role for women – as godly domestic teachers within the household.

Throughout the 15th century, English society remained deeply patriarchal. The opportunities that had been available to women had been purely economic: women had no handles on power and no way of influencing political decisions. So the ‘golden age’ was golden only briefly, and was most apparent in the economic capital, London.

Nonetheless, when given the chance, these women demonstrated their ability to do men’s work. In doing so they set an important precedent, to be followed by women in the two world wars of the last century, which led directly to the greater economic and political emancipation of women today. **II**

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