

Women's Work: Evidence for Women's Participation in Guilds and Trades in High Medieval York

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This is an abbreviated version of a paper I presented at An Tir's Kingdom Arts and Sciences Championship in March 2015. The full paper is available online:

<http://medievalyork.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/womenswork1.pdf>

Abstract:

Through an examination of archived medieval documents, this paper presents evidence for women in guilds and trades in York during the reigns of Edward I through III. I examined digital transcriptions of primary source documents, primarily the York Register of Freemen, extracting data about female names and occupations. By analyzing these data, I was able to compare my findings to those of other researchers who have written about women as workers in other areas of medieval Europe. Overall, I found that the situation for women in York was consistent with that for women in other medieval European cities: while women did participate (sometimes significantly) in wage-work, women's participation was typically limited to certain types of jobs in certain industries, and women rarely achieved full guild membership.

Source Material and Methodology:

Register of the Freemen of the City of York, Volume 1:

Also called the "Freemen's Roll," this is a record of those who were free citizens of the city of York. For the purposes of this research, I only examined names in volume 1, which was begun in 1272 (corresponding with the start of Edward I's reign). The Register contains a list of names of persons who became free citizens, entitled to practice trades or sell goods. The names were recorded yearly, as were the names of the mayors and (sometimes) the chamberlains for that same year, and split by reign. This record was copied from other documents, and at least the earliest section appears to be incomplete; for example, there are gaps between the 6th and 12th, 13th and 17th, and 21st to 22nd years of Edward I's reign. (*ibid*) The complete Register of Freemen was transcribed and published in 1897 in a multi-volume work edited by Francis Collins. The Collins' transcription was itself digitized by the Institute of Historical Research and the History of Parliament Trust; the full text is available online.

With some data entry help, I was able to convert the sections of the Register I was interested in into a spreadsheet, recording names, genders, occupations (if specified), and notes (if given) of each

entry. I sorted the data by gender and counted the number of definitively feminine names per reign. These and related raw counts were used for the analyses and data transformations reported here. I further broke down the female names from Edward III's reign (1327 to 1377) into roughly split pre- and post-plague categories and used these to test the hypothesis that women may have enjoyed increasing economic opportunities following the Great Mortality.

My completed spreadsheet can be viewed online: <<http://goo.gl/0P5nMg>>

Results in Brief:

Across the 105 years of records examined, a total of 6,152 names were recorded. Of these, 46 can be positively identified as female; female names represent less than 1% of the total names recorded (0.75%). This overall absence of women from guild records is in line with evidence from comparable medieval cities, and would tend to support the view that women were largely excluded from formal guild membership.

There appears to be an increase in women entering the Freemen of York during Edward II's reign; which corresponded to a period of significant economic instability. There are many possible explanations for the increase in female names during this period, including a greater number of women leaving rural areas for cities. By contrast, I found no evidence for an increase in female guild participation in post-plague York. In fact, the data would tend to suggest the opposite.

The majority of women who were entered into the Register do not have an occupation specified, which stands in contrast to male names. This would seem to support the general conclusion that medieval women were rarely if ever viewed in terms of a specific, recognized occupation the way that medieval men were.

Data and Graphs:

Table 1: Calculations and Comparisons of Names per Year and Percentage of Female Names

Reign	Duration of Reign (in years) (Y)	Total Recorded Names (T)	Female names (N)	% Female (N/T * 100)	Average total names per year of reign (T/Y)	Average female names per year of reign (N/Y)
Edward I	35	818	4	0.49	23.4	0.11
Edward II	20	986	17	1.72	49.3	0.85
Edward III	50	4348	25	0.57	86.96	0.5
Total:	105	6152	46	0.75	58.6	0.44

Table 2: Occupations of All Women in the Register

Occupation	Number	Percentage
Unknown	34	75.6
Brewer	2	4.4
Mason*	1	2.2
Merchant	1	2.2
baker	1	2.2
glover	1	2.2
pelter	1	2.2
spicer	1	2.2
cloth seller	3	6.7
Total:	45	100

Table 3: Percentage of Men with Unspecified Occupations; compare orange highlighted values.

For men:	Unknown	Out of	Percentage
Ed I	304	812	37.4
Ed II	221	965	22.9
Ed III	453	4317	10.5
Total	978	6094	16.0

Figure 1: Number of Total and Female Names Per Reign

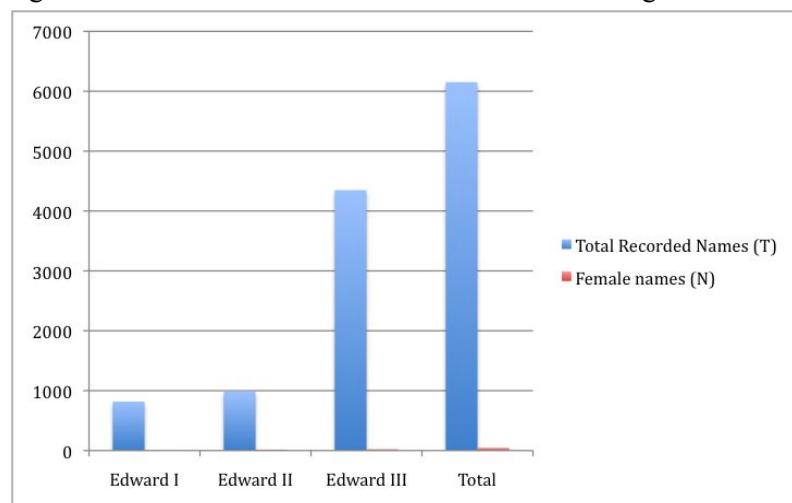


Figure 2: Percentage of Female Names by Reign

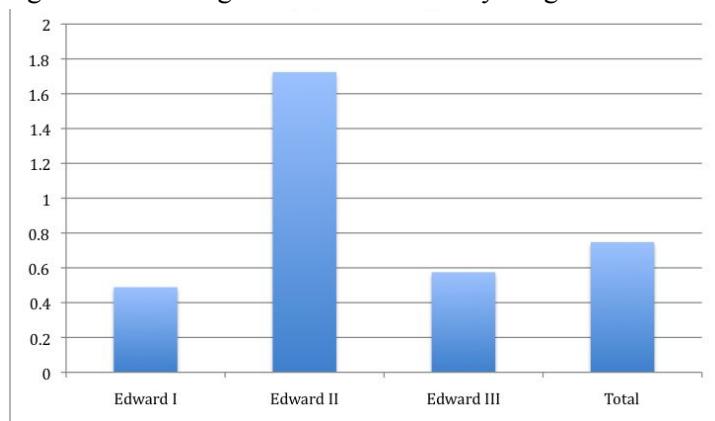


Figure 3: Total Names-Per-Year by Reign

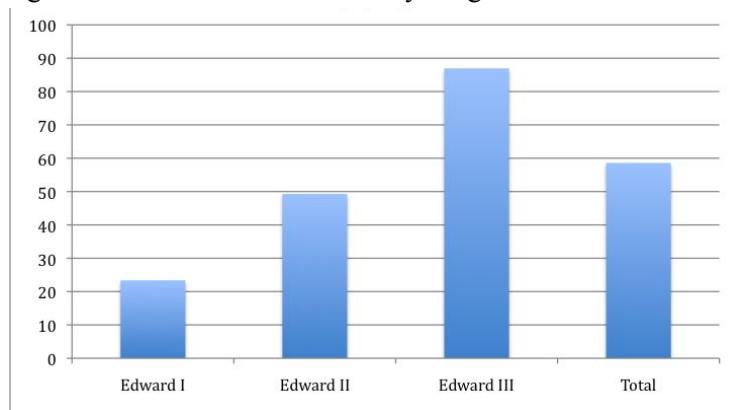
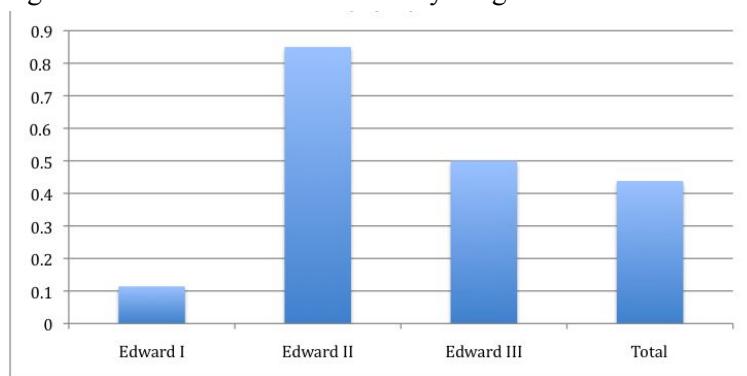


Figure 4: Female Names-Per-Year by Reign



Conclusions:

Overall, these findings are in line with general trends of women as workers in the medieval period. During a 100+ year period, over 6,000 individuals became citizens of York with trading rights; of these, fewer than 1% can be definitively identified as women. By their existence in this record, these women were exceptions to the norm. Indeed, not only is the number of freewomen of York markedly small, but these women typically do not have specified occupations (unlike their male counterparts). When taken in conjunction with some of the evidence from contemporary cities (particularly London), it is entirely possible that at least some of these guild “members” were widows receiving charity or wives given honorary membership with partial rights. Future study of regulations or additional records from York guilds could clarify these possibilities.

Given their lack of involvement (as far as can be determined) in the formal trade and merchant guilds, further research could uncover what types of wage-work or income earning activities women did practice in York. Work in London has uncovered evidence of women as laborers and income earners outside of guild membership. Similar evidence from York could be gleaned through taxation records, court cases, and wills. If women were taxed based on income, filing or defending against suits, and bequeathing or inheriting property, this could provide evidence of women’s economic status in the face of apparent guild restrictions. It is my hope that I and others might turn to such records to expand our view of women as workers in medieval York. Whether as wives, widows, or singlewomen, in general the women of York appear not to have made their living under the official coverage of a guild.

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