

Women's Lives on the Farm – Dr Janet Few

On a very hot Monday afternoon the Alde Valley Suffolk Family History Group welcomed online Janet Few, an experienced social historian who lectures regularly, and is author of books including the handbook, "Family Historian Enquire Within." Janet is President of the Family History Federation, and is passionate about encouraging young people to become interested in the past.



Janet's talk was about "Husbandry, Housewifery and Home Working - Women's Lives on the Farm." Using illustrations, Janet told us about women's work in the farmhouse, including butter and cheese making. These were made for family use and the surplus to be sold at the market. Butter was made in the spring when the milk was more creamy and was mainly used in baking. Cheese could be made all year round.

Before tea was affordable for most people, ale or beer were the main drink. Again the farmer's wife would make these, the ingredients being sourced from the farm.

Bread formed a staple food until potatoes became more commonly grown. The farmer's wife would have a small hand mill to grind her own grain, hence the "daily grind." Bread ovens were heated up with wood and when at the right temperature the ash

was scraped out. The loaf was put in and baked with other items as the oven cooled. The loaf would be gritty on the base so it was sliced horizontally, allowing the "upper crust" to be the best piece.



Pickling, potting and preserving were important to use the fruits and vegetables. Chickens were kept for their eggs, the eggs mainly used in baking, and to sell for pin money.

Spinning, weaving and dyeing of wool was another skill women turned their hands to. The only source of water would be from a pond, a well, or a spring – otherwise it required a walk to the village pump.



Cottage industries enabled women to work at home, so called "piece work." Glovers, buttoners, stockings, lace makers, and straw plaiters were very common skills, as villagers produced their own items of necessity. One member commented at the end of

Janet's talk that there were several plaiters known in Benhall and hat makers in Saxmundham.

Janet gave us a lot of interesting information to build a picture of the lives of women; often their occupation was not even recorded on census forms. Janet produced a helpful handout which can be downloaded from her website

<https://thehistoryinterpreter.com/talks-and-presentations/handouts/>

Jenny Mann



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