

Guilt and Poverty: Women's Gleaning in the County of Essex, 1830-1890



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This study examines the decline of women's gleaning practices in Essex, an agrarian county in southeastern England, between 1830 and 1890. Using courtroom records and newspaper reports from the Essex Standard and Essex Newsmen, it explores how legal, gendered, and economic forces reshaped this survival strategy. Essex, with its enclosure-driven land consolidation, mechanization, and rural poverty, exemplifies broader nineteenth-century shifts from customary rights to capitalist property regimes.

Three key processes drove this transformation. First, the legal status of gleaning became increasingly uncertain as courts wavered between customary rights and landowners' claims. Second, gender norms influenced judicial decisions: women gleaners faced moral scrutiny, with courts penalizing perceived "disorderly" behavior while acknowledging their economic hardship. Third, farmers restricted gleaning to employees' families, turning it into a controlled labor privilege rather than a communal right. This shift not only consolidated farmers' control over post-harvest resources but also heightened the criminalization of women outside formal employment.

By integrating legal records, gendered narratives, and labor dynamics, this study highlights how the erosion of customary rights reinforced class and gender hierarchies. It contributes to broader discussions on poverty, gender performativity, and the legal marginalization of informal economies in nineteenth-century Britain.

Biography:

Chenyu Qiu is a Master's student in Contemporary History at the University of Edinburgh, specializing in gender, labor, and colonial studies within a global historical context. Her research focuses on the intersections of social history and marginalized communities, with a particular interest in informal economies and gendered labor practices. She is currently working on a project titled *Guilt and Poverty: Women's Gleaning in Essex, 1830-1890*, which examines women's legal and socio-economic marginalization in rural England during industrialization. Chenyu has presented her research at academic conferences, including the Taofen Symposium, and has a strong background in archival analysis and historical methodology.