

Laundresses

Before 1900 most homes had no running water. Washing clothes took hours and was demanding physically. If households could afford to pay for someone to do their laundry for them, then they did.

Laundry work was often done by women – being a laundress was one of the few jobs open to married women and widows. The income could be vital to their families' survival. However, because laundresses had to be strong and were often poorly educated, people judged the work 'unladylike'.

Wimbledon had many laundresses. The 1881 census records 19 women on the High Street and Church Road alone. Some worked in commercial laundries, others in big houses, and a few would have taken in washing at home. The Wimbledon Laundry on Cranbrook Road was one of the largest. Another successful business was Beulah Laundry, run by the Burkitt family, who went on to open two more.

'Washerwoman's Corner' Watercolour by Hugh Arnold (1872–1915), landscape and stained-glass artist c. 1892

'Washerwoman's Corner' Watercolour by Evelina Druce (1861–1943), artist and Suffragist c. 1885–1895

Photography by Ian Skelton

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