

PEAS AND FERTILITY

A. Newman

Mrs. Anthea Newman, a graduate of St. Hugh's College, Oxford, spent the early years of working life in the then L.C.C. before her marriage. While her family was young, school teaching and local history kept the rust off the machinery. Now, after three years as a post-graduate at the University of Kent at Canterbury studying population, social structure and their inter-relation with the Old Poor Law in East Kent under the guidance of Dr. A. Armstrong, she is a lecturer at Christ Church College, Canterbury.

An English family reconstitution record – twentyone children born to one marriage in twentyfour years. This is the achievement of John and Ann Cook of Ash, married at the end of the 18th century. Although the prime purpose of family reconstitution as pioneered by French and English historians is to recover demographic statistics about average families rather than to discover the exceptional, a marriage which produced twentyone offspring is worthy of more careful study; in a sense it is grandly atypical, and demonstrates in a dramatic and compact form the probable implications of high fertility to an English family living in the early nineteenth century.

John Cook married Ann Sackett on 12 October 1797.¹ At the time John was nearly twentythree and his bride was twenty. He had been born in the parish of Ash-next-Sandwich in East Kent, where he also settled on marriage, but Ann came from Thanet,² though the marriage register shows her as a resident of Ash, probably as a servant in one of the households. Their first child, Elizabeth, was born seventeen months later. Thereafter children were born at frequent intervals; nineteen months was the longest gap until Ann was in her forties.

John Cook's father, Thomas, had founded the family's fortunes in Ash. Until the later eighteenth century the family do not appear to have had any connection with the parish, until Thomas and James Cook, who may well have been brothers, appear in the records.³ Both were cottagers occupying no land other than perhaps small domestic gardens, paying an annual composition for the maintenance of the parish's roads at a standard two shillings per head. James, after baptising one child, disappears from the records; Thomas however baptised two children, John and Thomas, and ten years after his marriage moved from the cottage at Paramore Street, one of the numerous outlying hamlets in the parish, to a small holding at Westmarsh valued at £10 by the parish rate collectors. The property was owned by one Mrs. Cleveland. It was a modest property of about 10 acres; however this soil is renowned for its fertility, and a considerable amount of market gardening is carried on.

Here Thomas Cook stayed until his death in 1805 aged 59. The burial register states: "A suicide, lunacy". One of his grandchildren also died insane.

The tenancy of the small-holding in Westmarsh was thereupon taken over by his son John Cook, who at that time, after eight years of marriage, had five children aged five and under. The other son, Thomas, married soon after his father's death and left the parish. Perhaps he had been living at home helping to run the farm for his parents; if so he was then ousted by his older brother. Of the death of the mother there is no record. At her marriage she came from Wingham, a neighbouring village, so it is possible she returned there when widowed, or that she was buried there.

The change in John Cook's fortunes caused no interruption in the regular sequence of Cook baptisms. When the eleventh was born, the Cooks had lost only one child, the first-born Elizabeth, who had died at the age of eleven. But from thenceforward infant mortality began to take a toll. The twelfth child, a boy, died at eight months. The fourteenth, another boy, at two months; the sixteenth, a girl, at three months. At the age of forty this remarkable woman had had eighteen children, of whom three had died in infancy and one as a child – fourteen were therefore still living and the oldest surviving was not yet nineteen when Samuel, the nineteenth, was born. Twentyseven months elapsed before Ann Cook, at the age of fortyfour finished her child-bearing with twins, Hester and Julia; Julia died at three months and Hester at ten months. In the meantime the couple had lost one more daughter at the age of twelve. When Ann reached fortyfive and her husband fortyeight they still had fourteen children living.⁴

The children of John and Ann Cook

Rank	Age of mother	Child	Birth interval months	Child deaths
1	20	Elizabeth		11½ years
2	21	Thomas	16	
3	22	John	16	
4	24	William	14	
5	25	George	19	
6	27	Ann	16	
7	28	Edward	14	
8	29	Stephen	12	
9	30	James	12	
10	31	Jane	14	12 years
11	32	Mary	12	
12	33	Henry	13	8 months
13	34	Charles	14	
14	36	Sampson	15	2 months
15	37	Vincent	14	
16	38	Sarah	12	3 months
17	39	Zecharia	14	
18	40	Charlotte	14	
19	42	Samuel	19	
20	44	Hester } Julia }	27	3 months 11 months

Source: Ash parish registers in the parish church.

Note.

With the exception of the eleventh and eighteenth children, all these children were born and baptised the same day. (The date of birth has been ascertained from the records of surviving members of the family).

How remarkable is such a family? In the numbers of parish registers reconstituted for the Cambridge Group none has produced a family with more than sixteen children.⁵ Furthermore Ann Cook did not achieve her numbers of children with multiple pregnancies – only one set of twins were born and then at the end of her child-bearing period, when the probability of twins is increased. Such a feat of reproduction has not been recorded amongst groups of people with quite exceptionally high fertility, like the Hutterites in North America, where the largest individual family size was sixteen,⁶ or the French-Canadians who underwent a demographic boom during the eighteenth century, but the largest family was eighteen children.⁷ Amongst these two groups it was not uncommon, as with Ann Cook, for a wife to have a child every year – it was the extended length of time in her case that was unusual. It is obvious that overall high crude birth rates may occur without any families as large as the Cook's and conversely that one such exception can occur when overall birth rates are low. However in fact the Cooks were not so isolated a phenomena – the crude birth rate in the parish of Ash was 38.1 per thousand in the decade 1801–10 and 44.2 in the decade 1811–20.⁸ In some way they were part of a demographic explosion.

Larger numbers of pregnancies have been reported, though how reliably it is hard to say. One British mother is alleged to have had thirtynine children (in the seventeenth century) and another fortyone in the same century. More reliably, the wife of a poor Viennese linen-weaver had thirtytwo children all but four of whom were born alive, though this was achieved in twentythree confinements.⁹ Ann Cook with twenty pregnancies resulting in live births must be near the maximum possible, and is certainly well-attested. Indeed the twentyone children are still remembered by her descendents so that "oral history" verifies the record.

This family showed a remarkable amount of ability and started a minor farming dynasty in Ash. Apparently on the death of Mrs. Cleveland, the owner of the small-holding, John Cook had had the opportunity to purchase it, for he appears from 1807 onwards as both owner and occupier in the parish records. In the parish tenant farmers were the rule, though in the hamlet of Westmarsh (later in the century to be elevated to the status of an independent chapelry), there were more owner-occupiers than elsewhere, a point of some historical interest which may well be linked with the period and method of colonisation of the marshland. In 1822 John Cook added a further small piece of land to his holding, and in 1826 purchased a cottage in which his own son, John, the first to get married, set up house. The move into his father's cottage took place three years after his marriage. Thence begins a process fascinating to observe of the establishment of Cook sons in independent holdings.

John Cook Junior lived in his father's cottage until 1829, that is for three years, and then he became the tenant of a holding of approximately fifteen acres, in the same part of the parish as his father. William followed, marrying in 1833 and simultaneously starting out independently as a tenant of a similar-sized holding. The following year saw Thomas, unmarried, the oldest of the family, set up in a much larger farm of fortyone acres, again as a tenant and in the same area, with his sister Charlotte as housekeeper. He never married. In 1835 James, also as yet unmarried, acquired the tenancy of the Charity School Farm at Guilton, on its vacation as the "parish farm" used for the employment of the surplus labourers, and with the

Poor Law Amendment Act considered superfluous. The farm, which had been given to the parish as the endowment for the school, was thirty acres; the farm-house is a most attractive brick and gabled house dated 1699 and still standing at the side of the road into Ash. This was a compact holding in which James and his son and grandson after him were to stay for the rest of the nineteenth century. Then in 1838 Charles married, but he only tenanted a very small holding; possibly the family capital had been exhausted, or else the resourcefulness of the sons.

Thus far the hard work of a large family, in true peasant style, produced enough capital to set up four sons in farming, and meanwhile two of the daughters were also married. None of the sons had purchased their farms. It must have been the labour input to John Cook's farm by all his sons that enabled him to prosper: the registers show his changing status as he brought his twentyone children to be christened, from "labourer" in the early days, through "gardener" to "fruiterer", and after his death his wife could describe herself as "landed proprietor".

Not all the children stayed in Ash; George and William who married two sisters, both moved away and are lost sight of. Edward, Zecharia and Samuel remained unmarried, living at home with their mother. John Cook senior died at the age of sixtynine,¹⁰ but Ann outlived her husband by twenty years and died aged eightynine in 1868. In the 1851 Census there were five Cook households farming in Ash, Charles (thirtythree acres) and Vincent (sixtyfive acres) and now married, were next door to each other, James (thirty acres) at the School Farm, Thomas (fifty acres) still single and looked after by a servant, and Ann Cook the widow, with Edward, Zecharia and Samuel, of whom Edward is stated to be farming only eight acres.

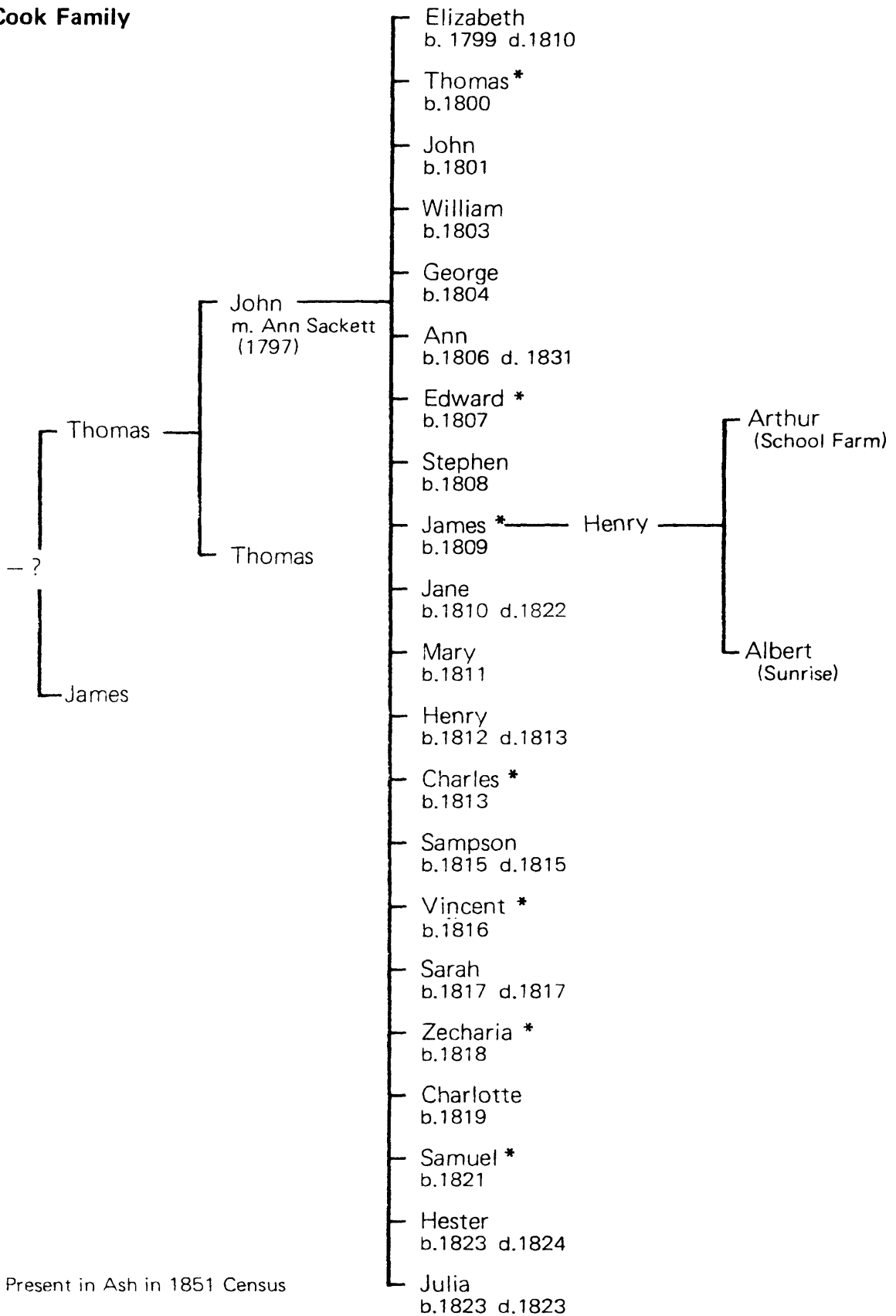
The strongest continuity for the family was provided by James at Guilton. There his son Henry gained fame for raising a fine early pea "Day's Early Sunrise". "He is naturally proud", wrote the Dover Illustrated in 1899 "of the fact that the cost of the comfortable house he has built for himself at Cop Street, and which he has called "Sunrise Cottage", has been entirely defrayed out of the proceeds of this particularly fine vegetable". The house is a gracious example of a miniscule Victorian country residence, with opposite it two labourers' cottages called "Sunset Cottages" in the same style. Moreover Henry's two sons, Arthur and Albert, continued the family tradition with soft fruit and vegetables which the Dover Illustrated assured its readers found a ready market in London, Canterbury and Hastings. Arthur Cook had succeeded his father at School Farm, Guilton, when Henry moved to Sunrise. Just as John Cook senior may have been given his chance while still young to run his own holding by the insanity and death of his father, so perhaps with Henry, for his father James spent many years in Chartham Asylum. Despite all the many children, however, no member of the family bearing the name of Cook still remains in the village of Ash, though some of their descendants do.

On a larger than average scale the Cook family demonstrates an explosive demographic trend in the early nineteenth century, the profits to be made in farming during the Napoleonic War period, and the restless shifting pattern of farm tenancies in the area. A family of this size and vigour is so striking that it may well exaggerate the large Victorian family in the popular imagination. Of all the families reconstituted for a period of 200 years in a parish of approxiamtely 1,500 to 2,000 people, the Cooks are the only one to exceed sixteen children and require two Cambridge Group forms. Their achievement is remarkable.

Notes

1. A family reconstitution of the registers of the parish of Ash-next-Sandwich, Kent, is being undertaken by a class in the village with the kind permission of the Vicar and with the support of the Cambridge Group for the history of Population and Social Structure. All the demographic information on the Cook family is drawn from the forms filled in by the class.
2. 1851 Census. Thanks to an energetic member of the Ash Local History Class and to Mr. D. Scurrall, the baptism of Ann Sackett at St. John the Baptist, Thanet, has been found. The date was 26 June 1777, thus confirming the accuracy of the age given in the Census.
3. Information from the rating lists of the parish in the parish church.
4. The pattern of increasing infant mortality and higher probability of twins in the later life of a woman are both well illustrated by this family.
5. Information from Roger Schofield.
6. J. Eaton and A. Mayer, "The social biology of very high fertility among the Hutterites", *Human Biology* XXV, 3(1953), 234.
7. J. Henripin, *La Population Canadienne au début du XVIIIe siècle* (France 1954), 50.
8. For the Hutterites the crude birth rate was 45.9 in the period 1946–50; for the French Canadians it was considerably higher, ranging from 47.3 in the decade 1681–90 to 65.2 in 1761–70.
9. *The Guinness Book of Records*, (1972), 17.
10. John Cook's will made provision for the estate to be sold by trustees and the proceeds to be evenly distributed between his children; so there was no particular feeling that the holding which had been built up in the family for some years should be retained. In a codicil a further provision relates to Zecharia whose share of the estate was to be administered for him by a trustee. It appears that in some way Zecharia was incapable. "The Cooks are all as mad as hatters!" is the local opinion. John also took particular care to stipulate that none of the children should live with their mother without her permission and without working for their own living. K.A.O./PRC/32/71/48.

The Cook Family



* Present in Ash in 1851 Census