

ORPHANS IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL TOWNS — THE CASE OF BRISTOL IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

J. R. Holman

John Holman now works for the Department of Health and Social Security. He studied economic and social history at the University of Bristol and subsequently spent four years researching the social history of Bristol in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

In a recent article in *LPS*, Mr Laslett has made public the results of his pioneer work on the extent of orphans in pre-industrial society.¹ This note is intended as a supplement to Mr Laslett's work, based on an analysis of the population of the city of Bristol according to the returns to the 1694 Marriage Act (6 & 7 Wm. & M c.6) for 1696. Although clearly one cannot make any generalizations purely on the analysis of a single community, the Bristol analysis does fill a gap in Mr Laslett's Table 3 — that of a large urban community, since the only representative of a large centre is that of St Peter Mancroft parish in Norwich, the records of which Mr Laslett himself states to be probably incomplete. Marriage tax assessments for the eighteen Bristol parishes have survived for various dates between 1696 and 1706, although only for 1696 is there a complete run for all 18 parishes; these assessments have been edited and printed, and have been used in conjunction with an analysis of the demographic, social and occupational structure of the city.³ The purpose of this act was according to its title to raise revenue 'for carrying on the Warr against France with vigour', and as such was one of several similar acts passed during the 1690s. The bill was introduced in Parliament in February 1694/5, received the royal assent in April 1695, and came into force on 1 May 1695 initially for five years, later being extended until 1706 by an act of 1696 (8 & 9 Wm. III c.20). The act imposed duties upon births, marriages, burials, bachelors over the age of twenty-five years and childless widowers, the level of tax paid varying according to one's social status. The basic rate upon burials was four shillings, on birth two shillings and on marriages 2s 6d. All bachelors and widowers were liable to one shilling per annum tax.

Lists of inhabitants were drawn up for each Bristol parish giving details of the rates at which each inhabitant was liable, and as far as can be ascertained these assessments list all persons resident in the city at the time of their compilation. The lists were set out in household groups, although because of large numbers of servants which follow family listings, it is not always clear where one household finishes and another begins. Except for the parish of St. Nicholas, the occupations of the male heads of each household are not usually given, although the qualifications 'gent' or 'esq' are sometimes used, as are the descriptions '600 li' or '50 li p.a.' signifying that the described had an estate assessed to be worth at least £600 or had an annual income in excess of £50. Those reckoned to be worth '600li' were charged an additional £1 above the standard rates on burials, births and marriages; bachelors and widowers being taxed at six shillings instead of the usual one. Esquires were assessed at an additional £5 above the usual rates. The highest rate

levied was on John Hall (Bishop of Bristol, 1691-1710), who was assessed at an additional £20. Those who were in receipt of alms were assessed at four shillings for burials only, although this was usually paid by the poor law authorities upon death.⁴ Regrettably only a few of these assessments have survived — for the City of London, Bristol, some parishes in Norwich, Southampton and Shrewsbury, and for a few rural parishes in east Kent, Derbyshire, Warwickshire and elsewhere.⁵ When utilized in conjunction with other sources these assessments can be used to produce what might be described as a 'reconstructed directory', predating by some years poll books which, when available, are usually the earliest surviving directory-type source material.

The Bristol assessments for 1696 being complete for all parishes provide the first really accurate information as to the population of the city. The population of the city in that year was 20,157, the size of the parishes varying from a mere 156 in the central business parish of St. Ewan to 2,897 in the vast peripheral parish of St. James, the boundaries of which extended beyond the city into Gloucestershire. Unfortunately the assessments are not clearly arranged by household, and whilst it is possible to distinguish households, this is not an easy exercise, although with the help of similar assessments (land tax, poll tax, window tax, poor rates, etc), this can be achieved with a reasonable degree of accuracy. In all some 4,560 households have been identified, of which 3,309 (72.6 per cent) are headed by a married couple. Some 881 (19.1 per cent) are headed by widows, a further 191 (4.2 per cent) by widowers, and the remainder (4.1 per cent) by bachelors, spinsters and others whose status cannot be readily decided. In only about half the cases does the assessment actually describe 'single' women heading households as widows, the remainder have been identified since children are subsequently listed, and/or their status has been confirmed from other sources. In the case of widowers, this description is never given, although they can be readily identified if their children are subsequently listed.

In all some 7,356 children are found listed in the assessments as belonging to those households headed by a married couple, a widow (or presumed widow), or a widower (or presumed widower). 5,594 children (76 per cent) belonged to married couple households, 1,762 (24 per cent) to single parent households. 2,289 of the 3,309 married couple households contained children (69.2 per cent), compared with 917 of the 1,062 widow/widower-headed households (86.3 per cent). Amongst those households headed by a married couple with children, almost one-third had only one child, 27.3 per cent had two children and 19.3 per cent three children. Only 2.1 per cent of households had four or more children, although 40.6 per cent of all children having both their parents lived in families with four or more children. The details are set out in Table 1 below.

Amongst single parent families, there were some 1,439 children having no recorded father and 323 with no recorded mother. Table 2 shows the detailed breakdown.

Of particular note is the large number of children dependent on a widowed mother. Whilst the average was 1.9 children, 23 per cent of widows with children had three or more children to feed and clothe which in 1696, a year of high food prices and trade recession, could not have been an easy task. When one looks at the 169 widowers with dependent children, the average number is similar at 1.9, with 27 per cent having three or more offspring. The situation of course varied somewhat from parish to parish, and one needs to relate the numbers of widows, widowers and orphans to the total population of the parish in order to get a realistic picture of the significance of single parent families as a cause of poverty in each parish. Table 3 below shows this breakdown by parish.

TABLE 1 No. of Children per household in Households headed by married couple, 1696

No of Children per household	Households		Total Children	
	No	%	No	%
1	744	32.5	744	13.3
2	624	27.3	1248	22.3
3	442	19.3	1326	23.7
4	274	12.0	1096	19.6
5	109	4.8	545	9.7
6	59	2.6	354	6.3
7+	37	1.6	281	5.0
TOTAL	2289	100.0	5594	100.0

TABLE 2 No. of Children per household in single parent households, 1696

No. of Children	Widows	Total Children	% of total Children	Widowers	Total Children	% of total Children
0	133	—	—	22	—	—
1	351	351	24.4	82	82	25.4
2	223	446	31.0	41	82	25.4
3	102	306	21.3	32	96	29.7
4	47	188	13.1	8	32	9.9
5	11	55	3.8	5	25	7.7
6	9	54	3.7	1	6	1.9
7+	5	39	2.7	—	—	—
TOTAL	881	1439	100.0	191	323	100.0

TABLE 3 No. of widows, widowers and orphans relative to total populations of each parish

Parish	Total Households	Widow/Widower-headed households		Total Children	Orphans	
		No.	%		No	%
All Saints	53	9	17.0	82	13	15.8
Castle Precincts	289	45	15.6	520	90	17.3
Christchurch	176	54	30.7	189	39	20.6
St Augustine	343	83	24.2	556	152	27.3
St Ewen	30	11	36.7	59	26	44.0
St James	685	163	23.8	1102	283	25.6
St John	195	39	20.0	324	53	16.3
St Leonard	70	19	27.1	97	27	27.8
St Mary Port	91	16	17.6	153	32	20.9
St Mary Redcliffe	358	94	26.3	648	151	23.3
St Michael	207	33	15.9	291	40	13.8
St Nicholas	288	54	18.8	432	69	15.9
St Peter	216	43	19.9	331	65	19.6
SS Philip & Jacob	358	86	24.0	610	173	28.3
St Stephen	442	123	27.8	682	191	28.0
St Thomas	317	59	18.6	597	144	24.1
St Werburgh	58	16	27.6	90	23	25.5
Temple	384	115	29.9	593	174	29.3
TOTAL	4560	1062	23.3	7356	1745	23.7

Looking first at the proportion of widow and widower-headed households to all households, one can see that there is quite a wide variation between the eighteen parishes, ranging from only 15.6 per cent in the relatively poor industrial parish of Castle Precincts to 36.7 per cent in the wealthy central parish of St. Ewen in which most of the city's merchants had their homes and offices. Ten parishes contained above the average percentage of households headed by widowed persons, of which four — Christchurch, St. Ewen, St. Leonard and St. Werburgh — were small central, semi-residential in nature, and the other six — St. Augustine, St. James, St. Mary Redcliffe, SS Philip & Jacob, St. Stephen and Temple — were all large, industrial and/or dockside parishes, in which one might expect a fairly high proportion of widows. Excluding the parishes of Christchurch and St. Ewen, St. Stephen, the main dockland parish, contained the greatest number of widowed households. Yet the expectation that dock parishes would contain a higher than average proportion of widowed heads of household does not prove universally true, since St. Thomas parish contained only 18.6 per cent of such households.

A similar parochial variation is also found when one looks at the ratio of orphaned children to the total child population of the city, the figures ranging from 15.8 per cent in the second smallest parish of All Saints to 44.00 per cent in the smallest parish of St. Ewen, the unrepresentativeness of which has already been mentioned. Excluding St. Ewen, eight parishes contained above the average percentage of orphaned children, the largest numbers being found in the industrial (textile) parishes of Temple (29.3 per cent) and SS Philip & Jacob (28.3 per cent), followed closely by the dockland parish of St. Stephen (28.0 per cent). This time the dockland parish of St. Thomas contained above the average percentage, 24.1 per cent of its children being orphaned.

Overall 23.7 per cent of the city's children were orphans, slightly higher than Mr. Laslett's figure of 20.7 per cent for the eleven pre-industrial communities (1599-1811).⁶ However, as most of these were rural communities, spread over a long period of time, it would perhaps be better for comparative purposes to look more closely at the urban cases and at those examples for the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. If we take the seven communities for which figures are available for the period 1686-1706 (i.e. Clayworth 1688; Norwich, St. Peter Mancroft, 1694; Lichfield, 1695; Harefield 1699; Stoke-on-Trent 1701; Monkton 1705 and St. Nicholas-at-Wade 1705), we get a figure of 21.8 per cent, which is slightly more comparable to the Bristol figure. However, if we look only at the two urban examples — Lichfield and Stoke-on-Trent — we get a similar figure — 21 per cent at Lichfield and 25 per cent at Stoke, which average 23 per cent, within one per cent of the Bristol figure. The Bristol figures, along with Mr. Laslett's figures for Lichfield and Stoke do, therefore, suggest that an overall figure may be higher than the 20.7 per cent found by Mr Laslett if larger industrial towns are included, and in particular if one were to include London.⁷ Indeed, Mr. Laslett himself says that 'we may believe that in fact a much greater number was in this plight'.⁸ Mr. Laslett also makes the point that actual urban figures may be even higher than the Bristol figures suggest, since it is very probably that appreciable numbers of orphans were not resident with their widowed father or mother as they had been bound out apprentice. To try to trace all orphan apprentices in Bristol in 1696 would be a time-consuming and complicated task, but it is possible to calculate accurately the number of orphan apprentices bound in that year, since the city's apprentice registers clearly indicate whether or not the boy's father was deceased. For the two years from 25 March 1695 to 24 March 1696/7, some 454 boys were bound apprentice in the city, of whom 135 were

fatherless. Assuming the normal apprenticeship period of seven years and that the number of apprentices bound each year did not fluctuate widely, one can make a crude estimate of the total number of orphaned apprentices resident in Bristol in 1696 as 473. If these are added to the 1,745 orphans recorded in the marriage tax assessments the total orphan population of Bristol rises to 2,218 out of a total child population of 7,356 or 30.2 per cent. It must be stressed that this figure can only be regarded as an approximation, nevertheless it seems very probable that the number of orphans in Bristol exceeded 30 per cent. This figure is in line with those found by Mr. Laslett in parishes with high quality data, eg. Clayworth 1676 (32 per cent). It is thus a fair generalization that one child in three living in Bristol in the late seventeenth century had lost one or both parents.

Notes

1. Peter Laslett, 'Parental Deprivation in the Past: A note on the history of Orphans in England', *LPS*, 13 (Autumn 1974), 11-18.
2. Elizabeth Ralph & Mary E. Williams, eds., *The Inhabitants of Bristol in 1696*, Bristol Record Society, XXV (1968).
3. See my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis, *Social & Occupational Structure of the City of Bristol, ca 1670-1730*.
4. Details of the operation of the act in Bristol are found in the introduction to Ralph & Williams, *op. cit.*
5. For a complete list, see D. V. Glass & D. E. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History* (London, 1965), 173 fn. The London assessments have been published in an indexed form as *London Inhabitants Within the Walls* by the London Record Society, Vol. II (1966). A learned introduction by Prof. Glass details the workings of the act and describes the importance of the assessments for historians. Details of other assessments can be found in R. E. Chester-Waters, 'A Statutory List of the Inhabitants of Melbourne Derbyshire in 1695'. *Derbyshire Archaeological & Natural History Society Journal*, VII (1885); Philip Styles, 'A Census of a Warwickshire Village in 1698'. *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, III (1951) and E. A. Wrigley, ed., *Introduction to English Historical Demography* (London, 1966), 174-8.
6. Laslett, *op. cit.*, 14.
7. Mr. Laslett includes step-children in his figures for orphans, whereas in my calculations they are, of necessity, included amongst the total numbers of children living in households headed by married couples. For this reason my overall figures for the proportion of orphans in Bristol and those of Mr. Laslett for various communities are not strictly comparable, although the absence of this component from the Bristol figures does underline the fact that one would expect the figures for large urban centres to be higher than those for small urban or rural communities.
8. Laslett, *ibid.*