NOTES AND QUERIES

COLLYHURST IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Becoming involved in local population studies, as an amateur, seems in many cases to be a matter of very gradual development, one thing leading to another (and doesn't it always, in history?) and in my case at least culminating in the wish to do a proper job on one particular aspect, with some skilled guidance. This opportunity I now have and it is with pleasure I recount a few details of work in progress.

I spent five years researching for and producing a local history of a completely neglected part of Manchester, the world's first industrial city. The part in question is Collyhurst, a triangular-shaped section coming close to the inner city; never a township but part of the Manchester township; not even a complete police district or registrar's district, and with boundaries as variable as the weather. I became very interested in the people of Collyhurst, partly because of the settlement figures I had discovered; 1690, twenty three people (Poll Tax); 1775, 136 (private census) and in 1820, about 32,000 estimated by various societies and the officer of health.

I started on a close examination of the whole of Collyhurst from the 1871 census and intended to do the same with 1861 or 1851, on a form of my own devising containing 144 classifications. The latter proved surprisingly easy to use but when I'd covered 2,000 houses I came into contact with the Cambridge Group (via Summer School, W.E.A.) and realised that I was simply not going about all this in the most logical way. What I was doing would not fit in with what was being done elsewhere by far more experienced people. Thus, even the dimmest muttonhead can learn.

Following much discussion with Group members and with help from the Department of Geography at Liverpool University, and members of the Extra-Mural and History Departments at Manchester, my course is now set.

I chose a portion of one enumeration district and proposed to examine censuses 1841, 1851, 1861 and 1871, and the rate books for every year 1841-1871. The discovery from Roman Catholic church records that in over sixty marriages in this small area of 151 houses, with only two exceptions every spouse and every witness came from within the area, led to a further talk with Richard Wall. Following my earnest declaration that I am interested in the residents primarily as people and not as statistics, he twisted my conscience in the nicest possible academic way and the area is now extended to take in two more streets — about another fifty houses, I think, because then the whole district will be surrounded by natural boundaries of a disused graveyard, industrial premises, the gas works, and a bigger road alongside the River Irk.
I had already produced these census and rate book statistics for one street in the area and this threw up many problems of house-numbering as the streets were not complete in 1841. Having done this, I feel better able to make a good job of the rest. There are eccentric enumerators, the 1861 census is particularly hard to decipher and for the moment some of the 1841 census pages are not available.

At the first glance it seemed that nobody in Silver Street had survived as a tenant from one census to another and this remains true but is misleading. In fact, a nine-year tenancy is possible on either side of a census year and whilst I have not found anybody who has survived 19 years, several have lived in the street up to eleven years and it seems that some have moved within the street. Evidence for this has come for the most part from the rate books, which in Manchester seem to be complete from about 1782 onwards. The writing is usually good though a trifle ornate. There are spelling hazards and phonetic reproduction of Irish accents to cope with — so we go from Thomas Royle to Reilly to Riley, Dermot Broyan to Brien to O'Brian, and so on.

Some of Silver Street houses seem to have had a different tenant every year and there is doubt about the actual dating of the books in two adjacent years.

Another six months should see the basic graft over. What then? Peter Laslett's talk at the Knuston Hall conference in July not only fired my imagination but got right under my guilty skin. I feel so responsible for these lower working class people, long gone. There is so much to be discovered from the family patterns; the role of the grandparents, the various lodgers, the boarded-out babies, nurse girls of nine, ten and eleven year olds; the children of school age not at school; the children of school age in factories; the age at marriage. Was there employment? What was the least distance they would have to travel to get work? With perhaps 75 per cent Irish, as these people were, a lot got into trouble and examination of court records will show it. The family travels shown in places of birth of children sometimes display an almost furious mobility; and neighbouring families can show such extreme variations in employment that they are impossible to ignore.

The R.C. burials registers, 1845-1858, show enormous numbers of deaths, many with a diagnosis of cause. The births register is useless as no addresses are given, though the burials register occasionally obliges in the case of infants.

This is obviously going to take a lot of time and patience, but I — and the Group — feel it's worth doing. I don't like to use the word hobby about it; doing this sort of work brings about a kind of dedication. It's only later it is realised that it isn't expensive, it is completely interesting, other people in the history business confer a certain amount of blessing; and friends and associates having no specific interest are nevertheless quite intrigued. Altogether a very satisfying spare-time occupation.