EMployment and migration: a study from civil registration records
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Introduction
This report illustrates the role of civil registers of birth for a study of local employment patterns and the related movement of families. It derives from the author's survey of Caldicot and Portskewett, two Gwent parishes, during the construction of the Severn Tunnel, 1872-1886.1 The difficulties experienced in using these records are discussed first; a brief summary of the main conclusions of the inquiry follows.

The Data
The civil registers of birth for Chepstow Registration District were searched for records of tunnel construction workers. The Registration District comprises thirty-two parishes. It is bounded on the south by the river Severn and, except for the Gloucestershire parish of Tidenham, on the east by the river Wye. The northern boundary extends up to twelve miles inland from the coast; the western boundary lies approximately ten miles to the west of the Wye.

Civil Registration of Births: Caldicot and Portskewett 1870-1890

![Graph showing birth registrations by occupation and year.]

Source: Civil Registers of Births, Chepstow Registration District
Figure 1 shows the annual distribution of births registered in the period 1870-90 by parents residing in Caldicot and Portskewett. The most labour intensive phase in tunnel construction, 1880-84, coincides with a marked peak in registrations. General labourers and men engaged in service trades became relatively more important after 1884 as the totals declined. Great Western Railway Company employees registered less than one third of the births in these parishes after 1884.

Two hundred and thirty-nine tunnel workers were positively identified from these records by a grade of employment specific to tunnel construction, viz., miner, miner’s labourer, shaftsman, brickmaker, etc., or by the suffix ‘employed at the Severn Tunnel Works.’ One hundred and six of these men were named in the registers on at least two separate occasions. Case histories were prepared for this group using the father’s occupation and address at specific dates. Eighteen case histories were further developed using entries from church baptism registers.

Limitations of the Civil Register data

The 106 case histories relate to a biased sample of tunnel workers: childless couples, those having passed out of the child-bearing phase of the family cycle, unmarried men, and young parents with incomplete families who lived in the area for a period unmarked by the registration of an infant, are excluded.

A minority of records are also deficient in detail with respect to job description and parents’ address. It is not known whether, on occasions, the registrar exercised his discretion and shortened the job description given by the father to match the allotted space on the printed register. This practice may account for the difficulty experienced when interpreting the entries made in the early 1880s for a number of general and unskilled labourers. The failure to identify these men with either local employers or the tunnel construction force is unfortunate and has led to their exclusion from further analysis.

Parents’ addresses were sometimes abbreviated. In cases where the home parish was particularly large, irregular in shape, and had a distribution of population known to be uneven, this raises additional complexities for a study of short distance migration. This situation is particularly frustrating in as much as 90 per cent. of all register entries for tunnel workers relate to the parishes of Caldicot and Portskewett; this latter statistic reinforces the impression given by T. A. Walker, the Severn Tunnel engineer, that the majority of his labour force resided near the construction site. Furthermore, the migration of families from the area cannot be accurately determined on the basis of these records. The ‘disappearance’ of a family from the registers may be attributed to migration; alternatively, it could indicate either the early completion of a family or natural movement from the fertile age bracket.

Analysis of the Data

Despite their limitations the civil registers of birth display certain advantages with respect to the number of entries, their continuity and basic detail. Using the available records on employment, the 106 case histories
are grouped into four separate categories, as indicated below:

**Category A:** The sequence of records begins before 1872 and continues into the construction period (eight case histories).

**Category B:** The sequence of records begins before 1872, continues throughout the period of construction, and ends some time after 1886. (seven case histories).

**Category C:** The sequence of records begins after 1872 and ends some time after 1886. (thirty-six case histories)

**Category D:** The sequence of records begins and ends within the period 1872-1886 (fifty-five case histories).

Ninety-one of the 106 case histories fell in categories C and D. The study of changes in employment and residence at the start of tunnel construction in March 1872 is therefore based on the fifteen case histories in categories A and B.

**Employment Pattern**

The tunnel labour force deployed from the Gwent shore increased considerably after 1881 and reached a peak of 1987 in 1884. The reconstituted case histories demonstrate the impact of tunnel construction on the local labour market; they also illustrate promotion achievements in the tunnel workforce. The incentive for local men to join the tunnel workforce has been clearly documented; the average weekly earnings of a shift-working miner were £1.18.0d., and those of a miner’s labourer £1.7.6d. These rates compare favourably with an average weekly agricultural wage in the Chepstow district of 12/- in 1871, 13/- in 1881, and 14/- in 1891.

**Table 1 Recruitment to the Severn Tunnel workforce**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous occupation</th>
<th>Miners</th>
<th>Labourer</th>
<th>Miner</th>
<th>Railway</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm labourer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire worker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railway permanent way</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 provides evidence on the direction of labour movement. It shows that a number of local men were recruited from unskilled and general labouring situations to the tunnel workforce and associated permanent way gangs after 1880; two men were also attracted from the wire works at Caldicot Pill.
Table 2 First employment post — 1885

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New employment</th>
<th>Tunnel Miner/ Miners labour</th>
<th>construction Railway permanent way</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labourer/general labourer</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railway: permanent way</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railway: pumping station</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shipyard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes case histories in categories B and C

It is likely that the gradual run down of the workforce in 1885 encouraged many workers to progress to construction sites elsewhere in Britain. Table 2 summarises the pattern of redeployment in the local area. Evidence collected from elderly villagers during a community survey in 1966 confirmed that some fitters, strikers and blacksmiths transferred to the tunnel pumping station at Sudbrook and that others were engaged at the adjoining shipyard commissioned by T. A. Walker in 1886. Several men grouped in the miscellaneous category returned to domestic building trades; a further five reverted to agricultural labouring.

**Family Migration**

General currents of family migration during the period 1870-1890 can be established from the 106 case histories. One important component of migration, however, that occurring within the boundaries of a parish, cannot be adequately gauged owing to insufficiently detailed records of address. The examination is therefore structured at a parish scale.

Inter-parish movements can be detected for forty-one of the 106 families: thirty-one had removed once, seven twice, two three times, and one on four occasions. Migration between adjacent parishes accounts for forty-one of the total of fifty-five recorded movements. Not one of the remaining movements exceeded eight miles, the majority occurring between next-to-adjacent parishes at a distance rarely exceeding four miles.

The drift of unskilled labour after 1880 into the new village of Sudbrook in Portskewett parish coincided with the peak period of construction activity. Eighteen of the twenty category D families had removed to Portskewett in the early 1880s. Eight families listed in categories A, B and C had also terminated their movement in the parish. A further ten families in these categories had resided in Portskewett parish at some time between 1880 and 1885. These movements invariably coincided with the father’s transfer to employment in tunnel construction work. The supply of family accommodation at Sudbrook explains, in part, the attraction of the parish.

Alternative employment in the tunnel pumping station and railway industry encouraged many families to remain in the village after 1886. There is also evidence that in the terminal phases of tunnel construction several unskilled workers reverted to agricultural and general labouring employ-
ment, this transfer being linked with removal from Portskewett to parishes elsewhere in south east Gwent.

**Conclusion**

On the basis of register records it has not been possible to identify distinguishing demographic features of the tunnel labour force nor to examine patterns of longer distance family migration. The analysis of local migration has also been restricted to a parish scale. Nevertheless, the registers are valuable in illustrating the changing employment pattern and local migration fields of families residing in south east Gwent during the construction period of the Severn Tunnel. Household information compiled in 1881 by the census enumerators will, in due course, provide an opportunity to extend this enquiry.

**NOTES**

3. Ibid., p. 140
4. Ibid., p. 175