'GONE FOR A SOLDIER': FAMILY BREAKDOWN AND THE DEMOGRAPHY OF DESERTION IN A LONDON PARISH, 1750-91

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Introduction

Over the past fifteen or so years social historians and demographers have subjected the institution of marriage and the patterns of family life in pre-industrial England to close and detailed scrutiny.[1] In the wealth of interpretive studies and minute dissections which characterise the literature there is, however, one notable lacuna. Virtually no systematic study has been made of marital failure, family breakdown and desertion. Snell, in his outstanding book on the living and working experiences of the labouring poor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, drew attention to the problem of the deserted family.[2] Yet the discussion of abandoned families was little more than a brief textual footnote to Snell's main purpose; his sample was relatively small and the period of review very long. Even so, he offered some stimulating insights into the characteristics of marital breakdown in the countryside but had to admit that 'it is not possible to show whether an urban environment was more conducive to break-up than a rural one'.[3] The purpose of this paper is to add an urban dimension to the line of enquiry initiated by Snell.

Deserted wives and families were a commonplace feature of pre-industrial England. Outhwaite noted how often 'deserted wives are ... encountered in the Poor Law records' and Stone used the example of a 1570 census of the indigent poor in Norwich, where 'deserted wives comprised over eight per cent of all women aged between thirty-one and forty', to show that desertion was common.[4] For the majority of the population absconding was the simplest way to escape from a marriage.[5] For the poor, divorce was out of the question for it required an act of parliament; even among the rich it was a rare event and there were only 317 divorces by Act of Parliament between 1539 and 1857.[6] Annulments and judicial separations could be arranged by the church courts but these too were expensive procedures far beyond the reach of most people. 'Desertion was the simplest escape route from marital responsibilities' and in the eyes of ordinary people, permanent abandonment was seen as a moral dissolution of a marriage which allowed the partners to re-marry irrespective of legality.[7] Among the labouring poor, common law marriages and divorces were widespread but because they remain largely hidden and unrecorded, the full extent of family breakdown and desertion is unlikely ever to be known.[8] The only substantial body of material which sheds some light on the problem is to be found in the Poor Law records, particularly the settlement examinations.

The material for this investigation has been drawn from the settlement examinations for the Westminster parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields.[9] Under the terms of the Settlement Act of 1662 and its subsequent amendments, applicants for parochial relief were examined to establish whether or not they had an entitlement to relief. Desertion by the husband and father was just one among many causes which brought people before the parish officers of St Martin's. Most of the related examinations conformed to a stylized format but their lack of spontaneity and revealing biographical detail was matched by a consistency of information. In nearly every case the deserted wife's deposition gave her name, age and current residence before identifying the errant husband by name and often by occupation. Further details included the place of marriage, how many years previously the marriage had occurred and the number, names and ages of the children. Since the primary purpose of the examination was to establish whether the woman was entitled to relief in the parish of St Martin's, it focused on the question of settlement and details were given of the parish of settlement and the justification for the claim. In some cases the activity and the location of the husband since his desertion were given but these were nearly always cases where the husband had 'gone for a soldier', joined the navy or had 'gone abroad'. Finally the document was usually endorsed by a signature or mark.

The settlement examinations for St Martin-in-the-Fields form an unbroken body of material from July 1750 to February 1795. Nine sample periods were selected, each of twelve months, at five year intervals between 1750 and 1791 and over 3,000 settlement examinations were scrutinised. The twelve-month period from July of one year to June of the next was chosen partly because the sequence of examinations began in July and partly because working people were more vulnerable to economic pressures in the winter months and it was expected that any evidence of seasonality in desertion was most likely to be revealed between November and March.[10] The winter period also has a climatic coherence which takes no account of the arrival of a new calendar year and it was more appropriate to have the unity of one winter season in each sample period than to draw on two, possibly very different, winters.

St Martin's was a densely populated parish. It was established in 1535 out of the northern parts of St Margaret's Westminster and by 1680 it was described as 'the greatest cure in England' with a population in excess of 40,000.[11] As the centre of fashionable London moved westwards to new developments around Leicester Fields, Golden Square, Hanover Square and Grosvenor Square, so St Martin's increasingly lost its genteel inhabitants and became a parish comprised mainly of working people. After various excisions between 1660 and 1724 to create four new parishes, St Martin's was centred on the crowded and decaying houses ringed by the Haymarket, Long Acre, Drury Lane, the Strand and Charing Cross. In its alleys retailers and craftsmen catered to the demand for goods and services of all kinds created by the fashionable occupants of the elegant squares to the west.[12]

Rates of desertion

Many women who were not supported by their husbands appeared before the parish officers of St Martin's but those whose husbands were involuntarily separated from their families were excluded from the study. Men who were imprisoned for crime or for debt or who were confined in an infirmary or an asylum had not intended to abandon their families and could not legitimately be regarded as deserting husbands. Also excluded were those women who, though separated from their husbands, had formed other relationships and who appeared before the examiners not to complain of their desertion but to record the birth of an illegitimate child naming a father other than the husband. The status of a deserted wife was determined by the presence of a phrase in her deposition which indicated the husband's deliberate intention to desert his family. The most commonly recorded phrases were 'gone from her', 'run away', 'absconded', 'gone to sea', 'gone for a soldier' and 'refuses to provide for her'. Although, in the eighteenth century, enlistment 'was the institutionally acceptable form of the family desertion', it is a mistake to assume that all soldiers and sailors deserted their families.[13] In this study enlisted men were classified as deserting husbands when their wives pronounced themselves abandoned in their settlement examinations.

Family break-up and desertion were much more common in the urban environment of St Martin's than in the countryside. Snell, in his analysis of nearly 5,000 settlement examinations drawn from many parts of southern England and Wales between 1700 and 1880, found 289 cases of desertion.[14] For the two periods which overlap this investigation, 1751-80 and 1781-1800, he revealed that a total of 150 abandoned wives constituted 4.0 per cent and 6.5 per cent respectively of all examinations. The rate of family break-up in rural England was relatively stable over nearly two centuries and showed through in the overall figure of 5.8 per cent of all examinations.[15]

Table 1 Desertions as a proportion of St Martin's examinations

Period Jul-Jun.	Number of examinations	Cases of desertion	Desertion as proportion (%)
1750-51	436	44	10.09
1755-56	477	87	18.23
1760-61	289	45	15.57
1765-66	392	36	9.18
1770-71	300	50	16.66
1775-76	351	25	7.12
1780-81	308	46	14.93
1785-86	423	41	9.69
1790-91	297	29	9.76
Totals	3273	403	12.31

Tables 2 Desertions into army and navy

Period Jul-Jun.	Service related desertions (n)	Proportion of examinations (%)	Proportion of desertions (%)
1750-51	2	0.46	4.54
1755-56	20	4.19	22.99
1760-61	16	5.54	35.55
1765-66	1	0.25	2.78
1770-71	4	1.33	8.00
1775-76	2	0.57	8.00
1780-81	10	3.25	21.74
1785-86	2	0.47	4.88
1790-91	7	2.36	24.14
Totals	64	1.95	15.88

Notes: Since this table excludes those recorded as 'gone to sea' and 'gone abroad' and is restricted to cases where the army or navy was mentioned specifically, it is possible that there could be a slight under-registration of desertions resulting from military and naval enlistment.

The results in table 1 show that the rate of desertion in this London parish was a great deal higher than in rural England and also was far from constant as a proportion of all examinations. For the period 1751-80 desertions accounted for 4.0 per cent of the rural examinations whereas in St Martin's, for a virtually identical period 1750-81, they made up 13.04 per cent. Desertion was, on these figures, three times more likely to occur in the urban parish than in the country.

The reasons for the generally high rate of urban family break-up are discussed elsewhere but it is appropriate at this point to identify the principal causes of the fluctuations in desertion rates shown in table 1. Desertions were more frequent when the opportunities for desertion, in the form of enlistment or naval service, were more available. This can be seen very clearly in table 2 where an analysis of desertions involving men who became soldiers or sailors shows the dramatic increase in desertion which occurred in times of conflict and, therefore, of intense recruitment.

In the years of little military activity, 1750-1, 1765-6, 1770-1, 1775-6 and 1785-6, desertions as a result of enlistment in the army and navy were relatively few in number and insignificant as a proportion of all examinations, ranging from 0.25 per cent to 1.33 per cent and generally forming less than one per cent. When Britain was either at war or preparing for war, as in 1755-6, 1760-1, 1780-1 and 1790-1 the service related desertions made up a much more significant proportion of all examinations with percentages of 4.19, 5.54, 3.25, and 2.36 for the respective periods. The real impact of war on family break-up, however, is seen in the figures for service related desertions as a proportion of all desertions. In the five peaceful periods surveyed, men who escaped into the army or the navy constituted 5.61 per cent of all desertions; in the four periods of conflict they made up 25.60 per cent.

Service in the army or navy offered an escape for those 'men who enlisted out of inability to manage their affairs'.[16] Many recruits were artisans and craftsmen in economic difficulties, and it has been estimated that distressed textile workers made up 20 per cent of the British army in America during the War of Independence.[17] In an era when voluntary recruitment was the accepted method of maintaining an army, enlistment offered a way out of domestic strife.[18] London, with its concentration of people, was always a particularly fertile recruiting ground; the population of the city, around 675,000 in 1750 or about eleven per cent of the total English population, rose to around 900,000 by the end of the century.[19] A recent historian of the military experience in the eighteenth century has suggested that mature artisans, which London had in abundance, were much sought after as recruits, for 'a well-set-up man in his thirties or forties had the advantage in endurance and health over a slightly built lad in his teens or twenties'.[20] By the time he reached his mid-thirties a Londoner had probably acquired a certain robustness and resistance to disease and, if he wanted to run away from his family, the army and navy recruiting officers were only too willing to help him.[21]

Apart from London's role as a major manufacturing centre, it was also the nation's principal port. Overseas commerce expanded steadily in the second half of the century and the Thames was crowded with vessels serving both coastal and international trade. The sea offered yet another escape route for the deserting husband. Almost as many husbands went to sea as enlisted in the army, and a few sailed away to a new life abroad. Table 3 combines those men who were recorded as having 'gone to sea' or 'gone abroad' with those who had joined the army or the navy. Opportunistic desertions which took advantage of intensified recruitment or London's maritime activity accounted for nearly one third of all desertions.

Table 3 Opportunistic desertions 1750-91

Reason	No. of cases	Proportion of all Desertions (%)
'Gone to sea'	41	10.17
'Gone abroad'	14	3.47
Enlisted in army	43	10.67
Joined navy	21	5.21
Totals	119	29.53

The settlement examinations tell us very little about the deserting husband. Apart from his name, the only thing which was recorded reasonably often was his occupation. Eighty-one different occupations were listed in 226 cases and the preponderance of manufacturing and processing occupations reflected the economic character of the parish. These occupations have been grouped into simple categories in table 4. Tailors and shoemakers, who were especially numerous in St Martin's, headed the list of deserting husbands. Twenty-nine

tailors and twenty-four shoemakers accounted for over 23 per cent of the deserting husbands whose occupations were recorded. Watermen, peruke-makers and carpenters were also well represented with twelve of each. No other occupation reached double figures and fifty were represented by a single example.

Table 4 Husband's occupations 1750-91

Categories	Number of Occupations
Manufacturing and processing	49
Service	9
Building	6
Transport	6
Retailing	6
Professional	5
Total	81

Causes of family break-down

It was suggested above that the settlement examinations contain far more information about the deserted wife than the deserting husband. Unfortunately, however, they tell us nothing about the causes of desertion or the stresses and strains which the marriage must have undergone before it was effectively ended in this way. The demography of desertion is, therefore, rather one-sided but a number of hypotheses relating to marital disharmony and family break-up can be tested.

It is generally believed that family break-down is more likely to occur when the parties are young at the time of the marriage.[22] The age of the deserted wife at her marriage was calculated by the simple method of first establishing the duration of the marriage, which was either mentioned in the deposition or could be reconstructed from a precise marriage date, and then subtracting that figure from her age at the time of the examination. This method is, of course, not as precise as the calculation of ages by family reconstitution for it relies on the woman having a reasonably accurate awareness of her age, the date of her marriage and the passage of time. Even with the possible margin of error involved in this method of calculating the age at marriage the figures in table 5 provide a clear indication of tendency.

The mean age at marriage of the deserted wives over the whole period was 24.43 years. Although the presence in the sample of a few older women who were deserted by their second or third husbands undoubtedly raised this figure very slightly, it is generally consistent with the downward movement of the mean age of women at their first marriage from 26.2 years in the first half of the eighteenth century to 24.9 years in the second.[23] It is interesting to note that

Table 5 Deserted wives' mean age at marriage

Period July-June	No. of cases	Mean age
1750-51	44	25.88
1755-56	74	24.37
1760-61	42	23.38
1756-66	35	23.88
1770-71	47	23.95
1775-76	23	24.00
1780-81	45	23.57
1785-86	37	24.51
1790-91	25	27.36
Totals	372	24.43

the mean age in the St Martin's sample, even though slightly inflated, was some six months younger than the national figure, and particularly revealing are the four periods where the mean was less than twenty-four years. Snell has suggested that the deserted wives he studied were generally two years younger at marriage than wives whose marriages endured.[24] In the metropolitan sample the difference between the overall mean for the deserted wives and the national norm was not so pronounced.[25] The greater difference in marriage ages detected by Snell might well be a reflection of his small sample and at this stage it is probably unwise to press any comparison too far.[26]

A more useful insight into the relative youthfulness of the deserted wives of St Martin's may be obtained by looking at their age at marriage in age cohorts. Table 6 indicates that a quarter of those wives whose age at marriage could be calculated had married before the age of twenty and almost 60 per cent had married before the age of twenty-five years.[27] This would suggest that the wives in this sample had a tendency to marry earlier than was normal.

Throughout history, economic difficulties have been a source of marital disharmony. Most families in the pre-industrial economy experienced fluctuating periods of relative prosperity and poverty which were directly related to the earning capacity of the family members. The poverty-cycle was usually at its most intense when the children were too young to be economically productive and the wife was more pre-occupied with child-rearing than with supplementing the family income.[28] This often occurred when a man was in his mid-thirties and not surprisingly this was when many husbands abandoned their families.[29] In the second half of the eighteenth century the dependency ratio rose as an increasing proportion of families felt the adverse effects of the poverty cycle generated by juvenile dependency.[30] The dependency ratio is based on the number of children and aged adults per thousand of population. Since the juvenile component of the population was always larger than the aged, the dependency ratio was especially responsive to the presence of children and it was bound to rise in periods of rapid

population increase such as the second half of the eighteenth century.[31]

Table 6 Deserted wives' age at marriage by groups 1750-91

Age Group	No. of Cases	Proportion of sample (%)	Cumulative Proportion (%)
Below 15 years	6	1.61	1.61
15-19 years	90	24.19	25.80
20-24 years	126	33.87	59.67
25-29 years	75	20.16	79.83
30-34 years	42	11.29	91.12
35-39 years	18	4.84	95.96
40-44 years	7	1.88	97.84
45-49 years	4	1.08	98.92
50-54 years	1	0.27	99.19
55-59 years	2	0.54	99.73
Over 60 years	1	0.27	100.00
Total	372		

Characteristics of deserted families

Because dependency-generated poverty was one of the major causes of desertion, (a fact noted by contemporary observers like David Davies and Arthur Young), attention must now be directed to the size of the abandoned families.[32] Although many deserted wives had dependent children, the surprising feature of table 7 is that 43.43 per cent of the sample were childless at the time of the examination. This figure is higher than might have been expected when it is remembered that nearly 80 per cent of them had married before the age of thirty and over 90 per cent before they were thirty-five. The level of childlessness might reflect low marital fertility or high infant mortality or a combination of the two; in the case of the older women it is also possible that they had children who were no longer dependent.

While the presence of children and the working of the poverty-cycle were likely to have been a stimulus to family break-down, it is possible that, in some instances, the reverse applied. Phillips, in his study of divorce in late eighteenth century France, noted that 'it is probable that divorced couples were more frequently childless than the general married population'.[33] A childless couple might have had fewer inhibitions about divorce since they had no need to consider the well-being of their children. In St Martin's it seems reasonable to infer that in the 43.43 per cent of cases where the family had no dependent children the decision of the husband to run away was made more easily and the consequences were less injurious. The absence of children may have been an encouragement to desertion.

In rural England 'families which broke up had larger family sizes than other families': the mean number of children left with the wife was 2.10 for the period 1750-80 and 2.30 for the years between 1781-1800.[34] While the St Martin's

Table 7 Deserted wives with children as a proportion of all desertions

Period July-June	No. of wives with children	No. of desertion cases	Proportion (%)
1750-51	25	44	56.82
1755-56	44	87	50.57
1760-61	24	45	53.33
1765-66	17	36	47.22
1770-71	32	50	64.00
1775-76	15	25	60.00
1780-81	27	46	58.70
1785-86	22	41	53.66
1790-91	22	29	75.86
Total	228	403	56.57

Notes: This table includes wives who at marriage were pregnant with their first child.

examinations contain insufficient cases of unbroken families to permit a comparison between deserted families and those which remained intact, it is possible to show that the families abandoned in the city were significantly smaller than similar families in the country. As table 8 shows, for the period 1750-91 the mean number of children in the family was 1.81 and most commonly the deserted wife had just one child. Less than twenty per cent of the deserted wives had more than two dependent children.

To examine the working of the poverty-cycle and show the mean number of children in families which became chargeable, Snell reviewed three regions at ten year intervals from the mid-eighteenth century. Of the fifteen calculations for the period 1750-1800 only one region in one period displayed a mean of

Table 8 Number of children with the deserted wife

Period July-June	No. of cases	Mean	Mode
1750-51	23	1.73	1
1755-56	42	1.87	1,2
1760-61	23	1.65	1
1765-66	17	1.52	1
1770-71	33	1.81	1
1775-76	13	1.92	2
1780-81	26	1.84	1
1785-86	21	2.09	2
1790-91	21	1.95	1,2
1750-91	219	1.81	

Notes: Analysing the entire period 1750-91 together, of the deserted wives with children, the proportion of deserted wives with one child was 44.8%; with two children 35.6%; with three children 13.7%; with four children 5.5%; and with five children 0.5%.

fewer than two children per family: the others ranged from 2.01 to 2.95.[35] In sharp contrast the St Martin's figures (nine calculations at five year intervals) show means consistently below two and only one instance where the mean was fractionally above that figure.

The significant difference in family size invites a number of speculations. Perhaps the poverty-cycle, when measured in terms of the number of children, was not such a potent factor in prompting urban desertion as it evidently was in rural cases. This, however, seems rather improbable. Perhaps the poverty-cycle was reached sooner in London than in the countryside and, if this were the case, the economic vulnerability of the urban artisans, tradesmen and labourers might explain why their abandoned families were so much smaller. Lastly, and perhaps most probably, the smaller families in the St Martin's sample might reflect a lower incidence of marital fertility and the consequences of a ferocious rate of infant mortality in the city.[36]

Marital fertility is obviously regulated by the number of years spent in the married relationship. Snell has suggested that in rural England the deserted wife married younger, bore more children and was married longer than her counterpart in an enduring marriage.[37] Age at marriage and family size have been touched on already: the duration of the St Martin's marriages, calculated as the period between the marriage date and the date of the examination, are shown in table 9.[38] The length of a marriage was sometimes precisely recorded ('three years and four months'), sometimes vague ('upwards of seven years') and sometimes had to be calculated from a specified date. The translation of vague statements into years and months is fraught with uncertainty and while this was unimportant for estimating the duration of marriages in broad time bands, it was more critical in attempts to calculate the mean.

Most women probably appeared before the poor law officers fairly soon after their husband's desertion but some did not. In a small number of cases the wife stated that her husband had been gone for a certain number of years. Where this occurred it was possible to establish the exact duration of the marital relationship, but there were too few of these instances to use for statistical purposes. What could be shown in the majority of cases, however, was the time

Table 9 Duration of marriages 1750-91

Duration in years	Number of cases	Proportion of desertions (%)	Cumulative proportion (%)	Rouen cumulative (%)
0-4	124	32.46	32.46	29.5
5-9	91	23.82	56.28	53.2
10-14	63	16.49	72.77	71.8
15-19	48	12.56	85.33	84.7
>20	56	14.66	99.99	100.0
Total	382			

Notes: Mean duration 10.08 years, modal duration 4+ years

which elapsed between the marriage and the examination. This allows us to see how many marriages had broken down within a given number of years. It may also be a guide to the actual duration of the marriages if the assumption was correct that most women were examined shortly after their husbands deserted.

Two things stand out in the analysis of the duration of marriages. The first is how shortlived most of them were; a third lasted less than five years and more than a half had ended within ten years. The mean length of time between the marriage and the examination was 10.08 years and this mean was undoubtedly raised by those marriages which lasted a very long time. Two lasted for forty years, seven between thirty and forty years and forty-seven between twenty and twenty-nine years. The second point of interest is the remarkable similarity between the duration of marriages ended by desertion and those ended by divorce in Rouen between 1792 and 1803 when legal dissolution of marriages was readily available to working people. The mean duration of marriages in the Rouen study was slightly longer at 11.2 years but this reflected the higher proportion of marriages which lasted more than twenty years.[39] The mean duration of 10.08 years in marriages where the husband abandoned his family is also very similar to the 10.69 years mean duration of marriages which ended in divorce in eighteenth century Massachusetts.[40]

The evidence of the St Martin's examinations indicates that wives were most vulnerable to desertion in their mid-thirties. Table 10 shows how the mean age of women at the time of their examination was fairly constant across the sample period. In the two overlapping sample periods 1751-80 and 1781-1800, Snell found a mean age at examination of 37 years and 30.5 years respectively.[41] The former is higher than any mean found in the St Martin's sample and the latter is correspondingly lower. The range between the means in the rural sample is 6.5 years, or more than twice the range between the highest and the lowest of the London means. Some doubt, however, surrounds Snell's figures; the sample for 1751-80 numbered only four cases and this must cast doubt on the value of any comparison between his periods or with the London data. The

Table 10 Mean age of wife at examination

Period July-June	No. of Cases	Mean age
1750-51	44	36.06
1755-56	86	34.33
1760-61	45	35.37
1765-66	36	33.52
1770-71	49	33.79
1775-76	24	34.66
1780-81	46	36.60
1785-86	38	35.23
1790-91	27	34.33
1750-91	395	34.87 years

sample for 1781-1800, based on twenty-two cases, is more useful and its indication of younger desertion might well reflect the increasingly desperate plight of the agricultural labourer in the 1790s. Further work on the period 1790-1800 may reveal a similar tendency in metropolitan desertions as first the French Wars and then economic contraction took effect.

Phillips, in his study of divorce in Rouen, noted that the difference between the mean age at marriage and at its dissolution ought to be the same as the mean duration of the marriage.[42] Applied to this sample, the difference between the mean ages at marriage and examination should also be the same as the mean duration of the marriage. With a mean age at marriage of 24.43 years and at examination of 34.87 years the difference is 10.44 years but the mean duration was 10.08 years. The discrepancy of 0.36 years, or a little over four months, is scarcely significant and is probably explained by the error factor involved in the method of establishing the deserted wife's age at marriage and the duration of the marriage.

Urban factors

The higher incidence of desertion found in the metropolitan parish of St Martin's probably reflects the anonymity offered by a city full of migrants. One of the characteristics of abandoned families noted by Snell in his analysis of rural desertion was that they 'were much more mobile than other families, being considerably further afield from the parishes where the partners were perhaps best known locally, that is from the parishes of settlement and marriage'.[43] It is assumed that local constraints operated to limit desertion while individuals remained in parishes where they were known whereas distance weakened the influence of family, friends and parish officials. In London, however, it seems likely that the sheer size of the city and the constant ebb and flow of migrants negated any local constraints, for a high proportion of the deserting husbands and deserted wives had a settlement in St Martin's. A place of settlement was indicated for 367 husbands and 67 wives and St Martin's was claimed for 185 of the men (50.41 per cent) and 35 of the women (52.24 per cent).

Most of the 185 husbands who were alleged to have a settlement in St Martin's derived that entitlement from some aspect of their employment. Claims based on apprenticeship accounted for 30.81 per cent and time as a yearly hired servant for a further 16.76 per cent. The largest category, 43.24 per cent, was based on the payment of rent and taxes on properties which were usually the husband's workplace as well as his home. Fewer than 10 per cent were stated to have a claim for settlement on the grounds that either the husband or his father had been born in the parish. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that local constraints were so ineffectual, depending as they did on a sense of local identity and reputation. For many artisans and tradespeople St Martin's was a place to conduct their business and the entitlement of a settlement which might accrue was largely incidental.

Proximity to or distance from the parish of marriage was similarly of negligible significance in urban desertion. Over one third of the broken marriages had

been contracted in St Martin's and the neighbouring Westminster parishes, and over three-quarters had occurred in London. A little under one third of the London marriages took place at the Fleet Prison, which was the most popular London venue for plebeian marriages in the early and middle years of the century until clandestine marriages were prohibited, under the terms of the Marriage Act of 1754.[44] Working men routinely accounted for more than 94 per cent of men marrying in the prison precincts.[45] In the sample period 1750-1 Fleet marriages were recorded in 59.09 per cent of cases and in 1755-6 they accounted for 52.43 per cent. In 1760-1 the Fleet was still the most recorded place of marriage with 31.11 per cent, though it fell steadily thereafter and in 1765-6, a little over ten years after the Marriage Act, it was mentioned in only 11.11 per cent of examinations. By 1780-1 the men and women who could have married at the Fleet were a diminishing proportion of the married population, and this was seen in the small number of Fleet marriages recorded in that sample (6.38 per cent) and the disappearance of such marriages in the last two sample periods. St Martin's and the other Westminster parishes took over from the Fleet as the most often recorded place of marriage from 1765-6. The immense popularity of the Fleet marriages and the later switch to convenient parishes indicate the preference of working people for cheap, quick, no-fuss marriages.[46] The chief attraction of the Fleet marriage was its anonymity and in such circumstances there was no reason why proximity to the parish of marriage should have acted as a constraint to desertion.

Historical demographers and historians of the family have demonstrated that there was a distinct seasonality in the timing of marriages.[47] This was particularly true in rural communities where the extra income earned in the higher-wage harvest period was used for setting up home. Harvest earnings were also a factor in rural desertion, which was 'most prevalent in September and around the period of the harvest' when good weather and some extra money helped the deserting husband to get well away.[48] The timing of the St Martin's desertions is displayed in table 11. In endeavouring to fix the month of desertion it was presumed that where no indication of the husband's earlier disappearance was given, the examination followed soon after abandonment. Where the duration of the husband's absence was precisely recorded the month of desertion was fixed by a count-back process. Two groups of women were excluded from this sample; those who were passed to St Martin's from another parish and had obviously been abandoned long before their examination, and those whose husbands had absconded so many years previously that it was impossible to fix a month with any certainty.

Table 11 suggests that, while it was not perhaps as pronounced as in the countryside, there was a tendency towards a seasonality of desertion in the city. Desertions occurred throughout the year but were much less frequent in the spring months of April and May than in the months of high summer and autumn. Instead of running away in the winter months, which were usually a time of reduced work for many artisans, the men of St Martin's appeared to prefer July, August, September and October. If the man intended to leave London it is possible that the availability of harvest wages in most parts of the country might have dictated the timing of his departure. The knowledge that

Table 11 Seasonality of desertion 1750-91

Monthly distribution	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
n.	23	24	31	17	15	26	40	32	36	41	20	22	327
%	7.0	7.3	9.5	5.2	4.6	8.0	12.2	9.8	11.0	12.5	6.1	6.7	8.3

Notes: The percentage given under the total column is the proportion of desertions per month one could expect if the number of desertions were evenly distributed.

employment was easily found in the busiest season in the countryside might have determined the seasonal concentration of urban desertions just as the receipt of harvest wages spurred the rural husband into flight.

Conclusion

This study has shown that in one London parish the rate of family break-down and desertion was considerably higher than in the countryside. In wartime, when enlistment provided an escape route, there was a further significant increase in the incidence of desertion. Many of the deserted wives seem to have married quite young and been abandoned in their mid-thirties after a fairly short marriage. While the poverty-trap of juvenile dependency is a likely explanation for many desertions, it is important to note that this did not apply in a significant number of cases. There is no evidence to suggest that local constraints had any effect on regulating desertion and, in fact, it seems likely that the urban environment made it easier.

St Martin's was a parish inhabited almost exclusively by working people engaged in manufacturing, processing and retailing activities. Such people were inevitably affected by the social and economic changes which were by-products of the evolving capitalist economy.[49] One of these was the erosion of the social and demographic controls which had previously regulated marriage.[50] The age at marriage fell with the proletarianisation of the work-force and youthfulness at marriage has a proven association with marital failure and family break-down.[51] The isolation of the family from a supportive network of family and friends, particularly in a large city, is another factor commonly associated with modern divorce. In eighteenth century London the nuclear family was already a reality and very vulnerable to the pressures which surrounded plebeian marriage. When economic pressures became intolerable, many men simply abandoned their families to the care of the Poor Law. Impulsive choice, short acquaintanceship and dissimilarity of background are also known to raise the probability of marital failure.[52] Migration into London made nearly everyone in some respects a stranger. At a time when most marriages in the countryside were intra-parochial and the participants well known to each other, many London marriages were made on relatively brief acquaintance and until 1754 the clandestine marriage centres made it easy to wed.[53] Inevitably in a proportion of these cases impulsive choice, short acquaintance and dissimilarity of background was bound to lead to desertion, for it seems reasonable that a marriage which was so lightly entered into could be abandoned just as easily.

NOTES

1. For example, L. Stone, **The family, sex and marriage in England 1500-1800**, London, 1977; J.R. Gillis, **For better, for worse: British marriages 1660 to the present**, Oxford, 1985; A. Macfarlane, **Marriage and love in England: modes of reproduction 1300-1840**, Oxford, 1986; R. Wall, 'The household: demographic and economic change in England 1650-1970', in R. Wall, J. Robin, P. Laslett (eds), **Family forms in historic Europe**, Cambridge, 1983; D. Levine, 'Production, reproduction and the proletarian family in England', in D. Levine (ed), **Proletarianization and family history**, Orlando, 1984.
2. K.D.M. Snell, **Annals of the labouring poor: social change and agrarian England, 1660-1900**, Cambridge, 1985, pp.359-64.
3. Snell, **Annals**, p.363.
4. R.B. Outhwaite (ed), **Marriage and society: studies in the social history of marriage**, London, 1981, p.8; Stone, **Family, sex and marriage**, p.38.
5. Stone, **Family, sex and marriage**.
6. B. Vincent, **Haydn's dictionary of dates**, 1873, p.211.
7. R.A. Houlbrooke, **The English family 1450-1700**, London, 1984, p.118; Stone, **Family, sex and marriage**, p.40.
8. For the variety of practices in self-marriage and self-divorce see Gillis, **British marriages**, pp.98-100, 190-228; Stone, **Family, sex and marriage**, p.41.
9. Westminster City Library, St Martin-in-the-Fields Settlement Examinations, F.O. 5041, 5047, 5051, 5055, 5058, 5059, 5062, 5063, 5066, 5067, 5070, 5071, 5073, 5074.
10. This assumption was proved to be incorrect. See table 11.
11. P. Cunningham, **Handbook of London past and present**, 1849, reprinted 1978, pp.316-7.
12. M. Reed, **The Georgian triumph 1700-1830**, London, 1984, pp.155-8; G. Rude, **Hanoverian London 1714-1808**, London, 1971, p.25.
13. Snell, **Annals**, p.362. Poor law officers often assisted the families of men in military service until they returned. I.R. Christie, **Stress and stability in late eighteenth century Britain**, Oxford, 1984, pp.113-4.
14. Snell, **Annals**, p.360.
15. Snell, **Annals**, p.361 table 7.8.
16. C. Duffy, **The military experience in the Age of Reason**, London, 1987, p.90.
17. Duffy, **Military experience**, p.91 citing S.R. Frey, **The British soldier in America: a social history of military life**, Austin, 1981.
18. R. Phillips, **Family breakdown in late eighteenth century France: divorces in Rouen 1792-1803**, Oxford, 1980, p.150; Duffy, **Military experience**, p.89.
19. Rude, **Hanoverian London**, p.4.
20. Duffy, **Military experience**, p.95.
21. M.D. George, **London life in the eighteenth century**, Middlesex, 1951, pp.110-11 drew attention to the puny physique of many Londoners. Such people would probably have been second or third generation city-folk and, as such, a small proportion of the population of London which was continually refreshed by immigration from the country.
22. W.J. Goode, 'A sociological perspective on marital dissolution' in M. Anderson (ed), **Sociology of the family**, Harmondsworth, 1971, pp.313-4; C.C. Harris, **The family and industrial society**, London, 1983, p.213; Phillips, p.66.
23. E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, **The population history of England 1541-1871**, Cambridge, 1981, p.255.
24. Snell, **Annals**, p.360.
25. The means established by Wrigley and Schofield were derived from a large sample in which, given the low rate of rural desertion, the majority of marriages would have been enduring.
26. Snell, **Annals**, p.361 table 7.8. The mean marriage age of 24.00 years for the period 1751-80 was calculated from three cases and the figure of 21.7 for 1781-1800 from nineteen.
27. Phillips, **Family breakdown**, p.65 noted that in Rouen 'divorced persons tended to be younger at marriage than those who were not divorced'.
28. H. Medick, 'The proto-industrial family economy', **Social History**, 3, 1976, pp.304-6.
29. Snell, **Annals**, pp.358, 363.
30. Wrigley and Schofield, **Population history**, p.444, figure 10.13.
31. Wrigley and Schofield, **Population history**, p.443.
32. Snell, **Annals**, p.360.
33. Phillips, **Family breakdown**, p.77.
34. Snell, **Annals**, p.360, table 7.8 p.361.
35. Snell, **Annals**, table 7.7 p.359.
36. J. Landers, 'Mortality and metropolis: the case of London 1675-1825', **Population Studies**, 41,

1987, pp.59-76. Landers suggested that the city had a much higher level of neo-natal mortality than was previously believed. It also had special epidemiological characteristics which showed up in the levels of infant and child mortality.

37. Snell, **Annals**, p.360.
38. The figures from Rouen are taken from Phillips, **Family breakdown**, p.72, table 2.12.
39. Phillips, **Family breakdown**, pp.72-3.
40. Phillips, **Family breakdown**, p.215 footnote 19 citing Nancy F. Cott, 'Eighteenth century family and social life revealed in Massachusetts divorce records', **Journal of Social History**, 31, 1976.
41. Snell, **Annals**, p.361 table 7.8.
42. Phillips, **Family breakdown**, p.74.
43. Snell, **Annals**, p.360.
44. R.L. Brown, 'The rise and fall of the Fleet marriages', in R.B. Outhwaite (ed), **Marriage and society**, pp.117-36.
45. Brown, 'Fleet marriages', , p.126.
46. Gillis, **British marriages**, p.187.
47. A. Kussmaul, **Servants in husbandry in early modern England**, Cambridge, 1981, pp.97-9; Wrigley and Schofield, **Population history**, pp.298-305; D.R. Mills, **Aspects of marriage: an example of applied historical studies**, Milton Keynes, 1980, pp.12-17; W.J. Edwards, 'Marriage seasonality 1761-1810: as assessment of patterns in seventeen Shropshire parishes', **Local Population Studies**, 19, 1977, pp.23-7.
48. Snell, **Annals**, pp.361, 363.
49. D. Levine, **Family formation in an age of nascent capitalism**, New York, 1977, pp.144-5; Phillips, **Family breakdown**, p.97, concluded that it was the collapse of the family economy and the separation of work and home which undermined the traditional 'corporate family ideology'.
50. Levine, **Family formation**, p.5.
51. Levine, **Family formation**, p.11.
52. Goode, 'Marital dissolution', pp.313-4.
53. J. Rule, **The labouring classes in early industrial England 1750-1850**, London, 1986, p.192.