

# KENT WORKHOUSE POPULATIONS IN 1881: A STUDY BASED ON THE CENSUS ENUMERATORS' BOOKS

David G Jackson

David Jackson has been employed in the pharmaceutical industry in Cheshire for 25 years. He was born and brought up in north Kent, and maintains his interest in that area by researching the history of his family and by carrying out small-scale population studies.

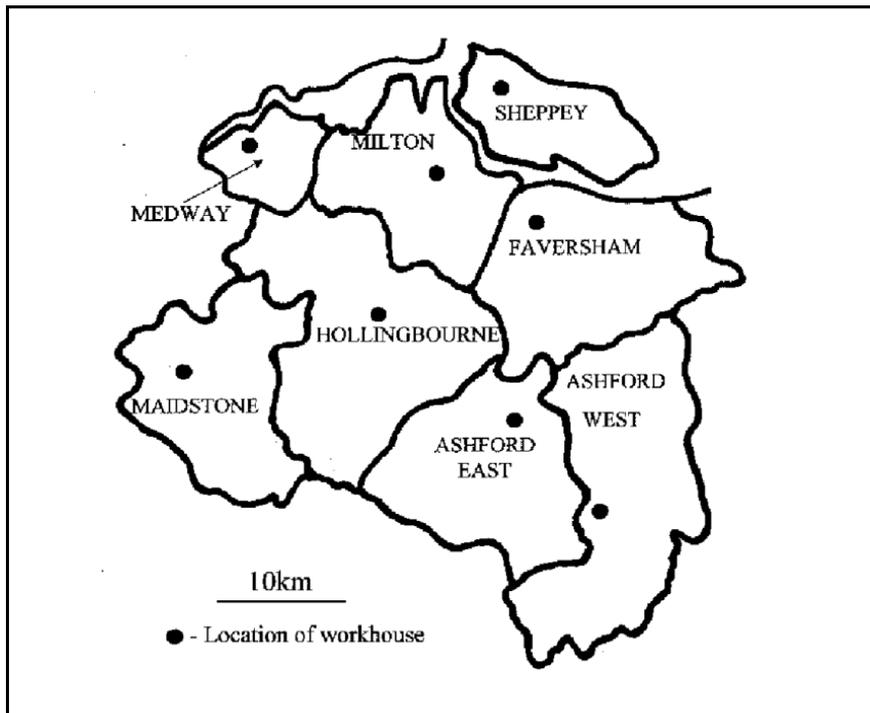
## Introduction

To the Victorian poor, the workhouse was the physical embodiment of the New Poor Law of 1834 yet, although much statistical data was generated in the *Reports of The Local Government Board*, contemporary sources provide little information on inmates prior to 1891. Study of the information on workhouse inmates provided by the Census Enumerators' Books (CEBs) can do much to correct this deficiency, but this rich source has been surprisingly neglected by historians, with the exception of studies of Hampshire in 1851 and 1861, Hertfordshire in 1851 and Leicester in 1881.<sup>1</sup> The aims of this article are therefore to present work on the 1881 CEBs for eight workhouses in Kent in 1881; to provide a comparison with the work on age, sex and marital status in Hertfordshire, Hampshire and Leicester; and to provide some analysis of the information available on birthplaces.

## The study area

Eight workhouses in north and central Kent were selected for study. These served the Unions of Ashford East, Ashford West, Faversham, Hollingbourne, Maidstone, Medway, Milton and Sheppey.<sup>2</sup> The selected workhouses served rural and urban areas, and areas in which the armed services were an important factor. The area studied is shown in Figure 1 and covers approximately 1200 sq. km. The total population at the time of the 1881 census was 219,090.<sup>3</sup> The study area includes the Isle of Sheppey in the north. Its mainland portion is bounded on the north by the coast between the Medway Towns (Gillingham, Chatham and Rochester) on the Medway Estuary in the west and Graveney, about 11 km. north west of Canterbury, in the east. The eastern boundary turns inland at Graveney, and runs about 25 km. to Brabourne, a village 10 km. east of Ashford. Here the border of the area turns to the south-west, touching the northern edge of Romney Marsh, before running north for a short distance. It then follows a line roughly westwards across the Weald to Yalding, 15 km. up the River Medway from Maidstone. The western limit of the area approximately follows the course of the Medway

Figure 1 The eight Poor Law Unions studied



as far as Maidstone. From Maidstone the border runs northwards to the Medway Towns.

Like the areas studied by Hinde and Turnbull and by Goose, the study area was predominantly agricultural.<sup>4</sup> Hops and cereals were common, and beans, peas and root crops were also grown. Other industries were carried on along the north coast and on the Isle of Sheppey, and at Maidstone. Milton and its neighbour Sittingbourne were noted for oyster fishing, boat building, brick and cement making, papermaking and for the export of local produce. Brickmaking was carried on in nearby parishes. Important aspects of the economy of Faversham included oyster fisheries, the manufacture of explosives, cement and bricks, brewing, a seaport, trade in coal, timber and agricultural produce and shipwrights' yards. On the Isle of Sheppey, the naval dockyard at Sheerness was an important employer, and the supplying of commodities to the vessels was an important factor in the local economy. In Chatham, the importance of the armed services is evident from the presence of the dockyard, barracks, military depot and military prison. A barracks was important in Maidstone, as were a market, prison, paper and oil mills, breweries, and manufacture of commodities including bricks, cement and agricultural implements. In the south-eastern part of the area, brewing,

brickmaking, and the manufacture of agricultural implements were carried on at Ashford, with the manufacture of bricks and tiles in a few other parishes in the south.

The study area, like other regions of Kent, benefited economically from its proximity to London and from the development of the railway. Agricultural produce, including horse fodder, corn, potatoes, fruit, dairy produce, wool and mutton, was in great demand in the capital, and access to the London market helped Kent farmers survive the agricultural depression of the 1870s.<sup>5</sup> Building materials were in demand in the expanding capital, with the London building cycle reaching a peak in 1881. Brickmaking was particularly important in the northern part of the study area, especially around Milton and Faversham. Barges were required for transport of bricks, and these vessels were built on the coastal border of the study area.<sup>6</sup> Employment in the locally important areas of agriculture and brickmaking was seasonal, with less work available and reduced demand for transport in the winter months. In periods when there was a genuine shortage of work, the poor would have been forced into the workhouse, and the deterrent effect of the institution would have been attenuated.

### **Poverty – the background**

Reform of the Poor Law became an issue in the 1830s, in the wake of the Swing Riots and increasing poor rates. The findings of The Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws led to the passage of The New Poor Law of 1834. Fundamental to the New Poor Law was the principle that relief of the able-bodied would be provided only in the workhouse (relief given in the workhouse was also called *indoor relief*). Benefits to those in work were to cease, and the principle of less eligibility meant that the poor would be deterred from applying for admission to the workhouse by the knowledge that their lot would be harsher and more disciplined than that of those outside the workhouse. *Outdoor relief* (that is, relief outside the workhouse) to the impotent was allowed but, with the exception of medical attendance, all relief to the able-bodied and their families was to be provided in the workhouse. Relief to children under 16 years of age was to be regarded as given to their parents. Control of the Poor Law by the Poor Law Commission through the agency of Assistant Commissioners was intended to enforce national uniformity, but day to day local administration, under the control of locally-elected Guardians, gave scope for wide variation.

The unit of administration was the union, comprising a group of parishes. Local variations in policy are exemplified by the failure of 18 unions to build workhouses in the first 20 years of the New Poor Law, the practice of disguising out-relief as sickness benefit, and giving assistance to the unemployed through the highway rate. The 1842 Outdoor Labour Test Order enforced the principle of less eligibility without recourse to the workhouse by allowing outdoor relief to the able-bodied in return for an unpleasant task, such as stone-breaking or oakum-picking. This order was followed by The Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order of 1844, which consolidated earlier General

Orders allowing outdoor relief to the able-bodied in emergencies and to widows with dependent children. In 1847, when the Poor Law Board replaced the Poor Law Commission as the central authority, most rural unions and much of the south of England were subject to the 1844 Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order. Nationally, about 20 per cent of unions were subject to the 1842 Outdoor Labour Test Order, and some of these made use of the 1844 Prohibitory Order as well. It is clear that the object of a nationally uniform system had not been achieved. In 1852 the Outdoor Relief Regulation Order attempted to restrict the form and duration of outdoor relief, but was extensively amended in response to local opposition.

In the 1860s Poor Law provision proved inadequate to deal with mass unemployment arising from the Lancashire cotton famine. The Public Works (Manufacturing Districts) Act of 1863 enabled local authorities to obtain cheap loans to employ laid-off (i.e. deserving) workers on such tasks as road digging. Concern about the adequacy of the Poor Law was increased when trade depressions led to large numbers of applications for relief, particularly in the poorer districts of London. There were fears about rising expenditure on Poor Relief, and there was also concern that when charity was used to help relieve the poor, duplication of effort was taking place. The Goschen Minute was written in 1869 by George Goschen, president of the Poor Law Board, in response to these fears. Goschen advocated the co-ordination of the Poor Law authorities and those administering charity, to avoid 'double distribution of relief to the same persons' thus ensuring that the available funds were efficiently used. Fundamental to the Minute was the view that relief under the Poor Law, which was a legal right of the destitute, should be reserved solely for the actually destitute and not for the simply poor. Relief of those whose wages were inadequate was to be the province of charity. This principle was to be applied to women, including widows with dependent children, who had previously been major recipients of out-relief. Goschen recognised that the system he prescribed 'appears to be harsh for the moment,' but he was strongly in favour of controlling expenditure on poor relief and encouraging self-reliance and thrift in the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Although detailed information on the lives of workhouse inmates for the period under study is lacking, the extensive national statistical information presented in the *Eleventh Report of the Local Government Board* provides much useful background information on the plight of the poor in the period 1871–1881.<sup>8</sup> The *Report* criticised those Poor Law Guardians who did not vigorously enforce the New Poor Law, but provided relief in money instead of in kind, as money was more susceptible to misappropriation by the recipient. The ratio of relief in money to relief in kind in 1880–1881 was 7:1. There was a sustained decrease in the mean number of paupers from 1,037,360 in 1871 to 790,937 in 1881. The ratio of total (indoor plus outdoor) paupers per thousand of the population fell from 46 in 1871 to 30 in 1881. In only one year (1880) were the total number of paupers and the ratio per thousand of the population higher than in the previous year. Over the same period, the number of outdoor paupers fell from 880,930 to 607,065; this decrease met with the approval of the Local Government Board, as it was considered to represent a saving in

expenditure on a group whose destitution was seldom satisfactorily tested. In 1871 the mean number of indoor paupers was 156,430, but in 1881 it had risen to 183,872. The total number of able-bodied paupers decreased from 172,460 (7.6 per thousand of the population) in 1871 to 105,000 (4.0 per thousand of the population) in 1881. Numbers of indoor and outdoor paupers both fell, but indoor paupers showed by far the greater decrease, reflecting the influence of the Goschen Minute.

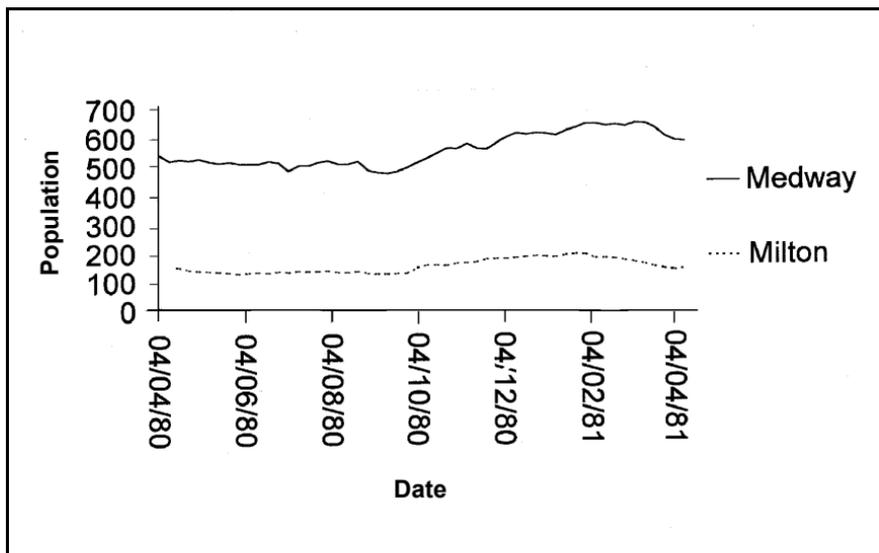
The national ratio of outdoor to indoor paupers relieved on 1 January 1881 was 3.2:1.<sup>9</sup> For the eight unions under consideration in 1881, ratios of relieved outdoor to indoor paupers varied from 1.5:1 for Faversham to 3.2:1 for Ashford West. For the eight unions the overall ratio was 1.9:1. Faversham had the lowest ratio of relieved paupers in the population (30/1000), while Hollingbourne had the highest (50/1000), but the figure for West Ashford was only marginally lower at 49/1000.<sup>10</sup> For the eight unions as a whole, the figure was 39/1000. The mean annual cost per pauper was calculated as £7 12s 1d in 1871 and £10 4s 10d in 1881. This increase resulted from fixed costs, including loans and officers' pay, which were less dependent on numbers of paupers than were variable costs.

Although workhouses were not intended primarily to provide care for the sick, there was a requirement that a doctor had to classify all paupers, to help determine their work and diet.<sup>11</sup> Although such a requirement was apparently to the paupers' advantage, there was no guarantee that an over-worked doctor would provide a satisfactory examination, and money for treatment might not have been available.

Most women giving birth in workhouses were unmarried. A total of 2,468 women gave birth in the workhouses of extra-metropolitan Kent in the period 1871–1880.<sup>12</sup> Seventy-five per cent of these were unmarried and the marital status of 12 per cent was unknown. The reasons for a mother's marital status being unknown are not clear. It is reasonable to suggest that unmarried mothers were more likely to conceal their status than were married mothers, but it is possible that in some cases no attempt was made to ascertain marital status. Whatever the interpretation, it is obvious that the great majority of workhouse births were to unmarried mothers. During the same period, 77 per cent of the national total of 86,447 women who gave birth in workhouses were unmarried and 6 per cent were of unknown status. In the 1850s, 90 per cent of births in the Winchester Workhouse were illegitimate, and it has been suggested that women entered the workhouse to make use of the lying-in facilities.<sup>13</sup> The *Eleventh Report of the Local Government Board* states that conditions for childbirth in the workhouse were at least as favourable to the mother as childbirth outside. 'Child-bed fever' was a notable cause of death after childbirth, and the simple precautions (isolation, disinfection and disuse of contaminated wards) saved many lives. While the lot of unmarried mothers could not have been happy, they did at least enjoy this advantage over their married counterparts.

Seasonal variations in the numbers of paupers are apparent from the bi-annual returns. On 1 January 1881 the total number of paupers relieved was 809,518. On 1 July the total had fallen by 4 per cent to 773,361. In percentage terms, the

Figure 2 Number of inmates in Milton and Medway workhouses, 1880-1881



greatest decrease (41 per cent) was shown in able-bodied indoor adult male paupers, indicating the increased availability of work in the summer months. The number of vagrants relieved increased from 6,215 on 1 January to 6,461 on 1 July, an increase of 4 per cent.

## Methods

Data for the eight workhouses was extracted from the transcript of the 1881 CEBs, distributed on CD-ROM by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.<sup>14</sup> The data was imported into databases (one database for each workhouse) for manipulation. Workhouse officers and staff were deleted from the databases, and the total number of inmates remaining for each workhouse was checked against the tabulated data for institutions in the 1881 Census report.<sup>15</sup> A small number (50) of inmates were returned as 'casuals', casual paupers, vagrants or tramps. These people were excluded from the main analysis, and are treated separately below. This approach was adopted because they were 'one rung below the able-bodied settled poor,' and the Poor Law guardians were under less stringent obligations to relieve them.<sup>16</sup> Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, the term 'inmate' should be taken to mean someone in receipt of indoor relief but who is not a 'casual', tramp or vagrant.

Figure 2 demonstrates, for the Milton and Medway workhouses, that the population had fluctuated over the year prior to the 1881 census, and emphasises the limitations of work based on the CEBs. There were marked variations over time in the numbers of inmates in both workhouses.

**Table 1 Age profile of workhouse inmates (%)**

Age group	Ashford East	Ashford West	Faver-sham	Holling-bourne	Maid-stone	Medway	Milton	Sheppey	Total
<b>All inmates</b>									
<15	24.6	28.2	38.8	28.7	36.8	33.8	25.9	49.7	34.5
15–29	7.0	8.9	7.3	9.8	11.1	7.7	10.8	10.9	9.1
30–59	26.3	23.4	20.1	17.7	16.7	22.6	23.7	15.2	20.3
60+	42.1	39.5	33.8	43.9	35.4	35.9	39.6	24.2	36.1
<b>Males</b>									
<15	20.5	29.3	33.6	25.7	34.9	39.0	21.1	44.0	32.9
15–29	6.8	6.1	4.7	7.3	9.4	5.9	8.4	10.7	7.3
30–59	17.8	19.5	17.2	14.7	14.5	16.0	21.1	15.5	16.5
60+	54.8	45.1	44.5	52.3	41.3	39.0	49.5	29.8	43.3
<b>Females</b>									
<15	31.7	26.2	46.2	34.5	39.2	29.5	36.4	55.6	36.4
15–29	7.3	14.3	11.0	14.5	13.2	9.1	15.9	11.1	11.3
30–59	41.5	31.0	24.2	23.6	19.6	28.2	29.5	14.8	25.2
60+	19.5	28.6	18.7	27.3	28.0	33.2	18.2	18.5	27.1
n	114	124	219	164	424	588	139	165	1,937

**Note:** The totals in the bottom line refer to *all* inmates.

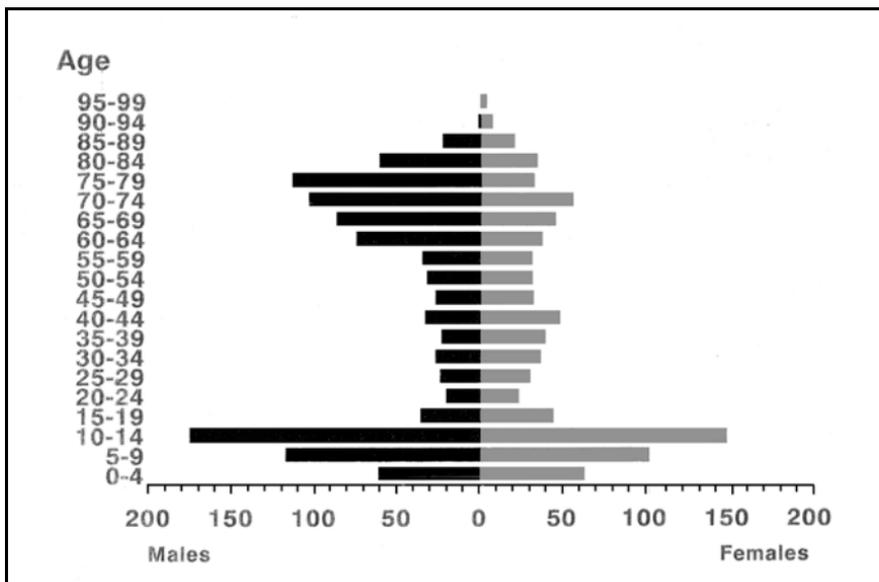
**Sources:** *National index to 1881 British Census and 1881 British census*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [CD-ROM] (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1999).  
*1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. II. Area, houses and population: registration counties*. BPP 1883 LXXIX, 31–2.

Nevertheless, the graphs for the numbers of inmates in the two workhouses show definite similarities, with numbers of inmates at their lowest in late August and in September, subsequently rising to a peak in February/March. These seasonal variations broadly reflect the national picture.

### The composition of the workhouse populations: age and sex structure

Table 1 shows the composition of the workhouse inmates of the eight unions by age and sex in 1881.<sup>17</sup> The view has long been held that elderly people and children constituted a significant proportion of workhouse inmates.<sup>18</sup> The age profile of male and female inmates by five year age groups is shown in Figure 3, which demonstrates a number of clear features.<sup>19</sup> At ages under five years, the numbers of males and females are almost equal, but thereafter males predominate up to age 14. From 15 to 49 years, females outnumber males, from 50 to 59 the numbers of males and females are almost equal, and then

Figure 3 Age-sex structure of the population of eight Kent workhouses, 1881



Source: *National index to 1881 British Census and 1881 British census*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [CD-ROM] (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1999).

males predominate until age 89. Thereafter, most inmates are female, but this is considered to be a reflection of the higher survival rate of women.

In the eight workhouses studied, there is a clear excess of elderly and a marked shortfall in the percentage of those of 'prime working age' (aged 15–59) compared with the percentages in the population of the eight unions as a whole. Children (aged under 15) account for 34 per cent, those of prime working age (aged 15–59) account for 29 per cent, and the elderly (aged 60 or over) account for 36 per cent of inmates. The population of the area as a whole was composed of 37 per cent children, 55 per cent of prime working age and 8 per cent elderly.<sup>20</sup> In the Hertfordshire workhouses in 1851, 34 per cent of inmates were children, 35 per cent were of prime working age and 32 per cent were elderly. The population of Hertfordshire comprised 37 per cent children, 55 per cent of prime working age and 8 per cent elderly.<sup>21</sup> In the Hampshire workhouses of Winchester and Basingstoke in 1851, 40–45 per cent of inmates were children, about 40 per cent were of prime working age and about 20 per cent were elderly. People aged 15–59 constituted about 46 per cent of the population of Hampshire.<sup>22</sup> In the Leicester workhouse in 1881, 28 per cent of the population was described as young and 38 per cent as elderly, leaving about 34 per cent of prime working age.<sup>23</sup>

It is apparent that in Kent, Hampshire and Hertfordshire, those of 'prime working age' were more heavily represented in the general population than in

the workhouse population. In Kent and Hertfordshire the elderly were far more heavily represented in the workhouses than outside, and the percentages of children in the workhouses were slightly reduced compared with the population as a whole. The population in the Leicester workhouse in 1881 was, like the other workhouses studied, dominated by the young and the old.

An attempt was made to identify family groups in the workhouses. The criteria for identification of a family were that the group should be enumerated together, the first member should be an adult of an age compatible with being the parent of the children, and that all children should be under fifteen years of age. The presence of a second parent was not mandatory.<sup>24</sup> Women headed 57 of the 64 identified family groups. Of these women, 29 (51 per cent) were unmarried. In only one case were two parents present: a male of 58 and a female of 38, with children aged 14 and 12. There was also a preponderance of families without a male breadwinner in Basingstoke and Winchester in 1851 and 1861.<sup>25</sup> Factors contributing to this paucity of families with a male head capable of work could include preferential employment of married men. If an adult male was admitted to the workhouse, the Guardians were required by law to admit his family as well, and would obviously be reluctant to take on this expense if other options, such as outdoor relief, were available. Family groups accounted for 65 adults and 204 children. The CEBs for the workhouses studied did not clearly identify orphans, so it is not possible, from a study of CEBs alone, to establish how many children were orphans and how many had been admitted for other reasons.

The elderly comprised 36 per cent of the workhouse population and 8 per cent of the total population in the current study, compared with 32 and 8 per cent in the Hertfordshire workhouses in 1851.<sup>26</sup> The sex ratio (males per 100 females) in the current study for workhouse inmates aged 60 and over was 199, compared with 94 for the population as a whole in this age group.<sup>27</sup> The current figures thus reinforce the view that workhouses held a disproportionate number of the elderly, and particularly of old men.<sup>28</sup> Reasons for the relatively high numbers of old male workhouse inmates include lack of family support, ineligibility for outdoor relief through sickness in the family, physical exertion required for many male occupations and the paucity of old men's domestic skills compared with those of women.<sup>29</sup>

Sex ratios varied markedly between different workhouses, with the overall figure for all eight workhouses standing at 125. When the entire population of the eight workhouses is considered, Medway had the lowest ratio (84) and Milton had the highest (216). The second lowest ratio was that of Sheppey (104). All other ratios were greater than 124. The low overall figure for Medway is mainly the result of extremely low figures for the 15–29 and 30–59 age groups, which stand at 55 and 48 respectively, although the Medway figure for the 60+ age group is 99. Sheppey had ratios of 100 and 108 for the 15–29 and 30–59 age groups respectively, and its ratios for the 60+ group (167) and the under 15s (82) were also low. Both Medway and Sheppey Unions were home to Royal Naval bases (Chatham and Sheerness respectively), and it

**Table 2 Marital condition of adult workhouse inmates**

Union	Males				Females			
	Unmarried	Married	Widowed	n	Unmarried	Married	Widowed	n
Ashford East	36.2	15.5	48.3	58	55.6	14.8	29.6	27
Ashford West	50.9	5.5	43.6	55	46.4	14.3	39.3	28
Faversham	40.5	16.7	42.9	84	35.6	15.6	48.9	45
Hollingbourne	43.4	9.2	47.4	76	50.0	17.6	32.4	34
Maidstone	37.6	12.1	50.4	141	30.3	15.2	54.5	99
Medway	42.8	23.9	33.3	159	33.8	20.2	46.0	213
Milton	31.9	14.5	53.6	69	34.8	26.1	39.1	23
Sheppey	57.1	2.4	40.5	42	32.3	16.1	51.6	31
All 8 unions	41.3	14.4	44.2	684	36.2	18.0	45.8	500

**Sources:** *National index to 1881 British Census and 1881 British census*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [CD-ROM] (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1999).  
*1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. II. Area, houses and population: registration counties.* BPP 1883 LXXIX, 51–2.

is suggested that this may have distorted the sex ratio, as the wives of seamen may have gone into the workhouse when their husbands were at sea. Although the trend seen in Figure 3 holds in general, Tables 1–3 show marked variations in sex ratios between different workhouses. Sex ratios for the combined populations of the Hampshire workhouses of Basingstoke and Winchester were 123 in 1851 and 121 in 1861, for the Hertfordshire workhouses in 1851 the sex ratio was 149 (varying from 105 to 215 for individual workhouses), and for Leicester workhouse in 1881 it was 144.<sup>30</sup>

### Marital structure

Table 2 shows the marital condition of workhouse inmates aged 20 years and over. Only 16 per cent of inmates (14 per cent of males and 18 per cent of females) were married, a figure in close agreement with the 15 per cent recorded for Leicester in 1881 and the 18 per cent recorded for Hertfordshire and Basingstoke in 1851.<sup>31</sup> Single inmates comprised 39 per cent of the total, lower than the 1851 figures for Hertfordshire (44 per cent), Basingstoke (48 per cent) and the 1881 figure for Leicester (53 per cent). Of the total population of the eight unions, 65 per cent were married and 26 per cent were unmarried.<sup>32</sup> The strong bias to the unmarried in the eight Kent workhouses is of a similar order to that for Hertfordshire in 1851, when 62 per cent of the total population were married and 28 per cent were unmarried. Reasons given for this bias in Hertfordshire, and also applicable to Kent, include lack of family support outside the workhouse, discrimination by employers, lack of eligibility for

**Table 3 Birthplaces of inmates**

Union	Total		Kent		Rest of England		Wales and Scotland		Ireland		Elsewhere	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Ashford East	114	108	94.7	6	5.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
Ashford West	122	109	89.3	13	10.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
Faversham	213	187	87.8	16	7.5	2	0.9	3	1.4	5	2.3	
Hollingbourne	160	149	93.1	8	5.0	0	0.0	1	0.6	2	1.3	
Maidstone	367	286	77.9	70	19.1	1	0.3	6	1.6	4	1.1	
Medway	522	355	68.0	115	22.0	6	1.1	30	5.7	16	3.1	
Milton	134	107	79.9	23	17.2	1	0.7	3	2.2	0	0.0	
Sheppey	161	122	75.8	31	19.3	0	0.0	7	4.3	1	0.6	
All 8 unions	1793	1423	79.4	282	15.7	10	0.6	50	2.8	28	1.6	

**Note:** The totals in this table do not match those in Table 1 as they have been reduced by removing from the count all inmates for whom a birthplace was not given or was unclear.

**Source:** *National index to 1881 British Census and 1881 British census*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [CD-ROM] (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1999).

almshouse accommodation, failure to become established in the community, and being considered less deserving than married or widowed people.<sup>33</sup>

Of the 464 unmarried individuals aged 20 or over, 294 (63 per cent) were aged under 60, compared with 77 per cent for Hertfordshire. Males comprised 53 per cent and females 47 per cent of unmarried inmates aged 20–59 years. These figures again are very close to those for Hertfordshire in 1851 (56 per cent for males, and 44 per cent for females). Thirty-seven married men aged 20–59 years were inmates, comprising a mere 1.9 per cent of the total number of inmates, a figure in remarkable agreement with Goose, who found that 2 per cent of Hertfordshire workhouse inmates fell into this category.<sup>34</sup>

### Birthplaces

According to the CEBs, 79 per cent of inmates were born in Kent (Table 3). When extra-metropolitan Kent as a whole is considered, 54 per cent of inhabitants enumerated in the county were also born there.<sup>35</sup> There is considerable variation between the eight workhouses, with the percentages varying from 68 per cent for Medway to 95 per cent for East Ashford. The figure for Leicestershire-born inmates of the Leicester workhouse in 1881 was

**Table 4 Numbers of vagrants**

Union	Number	% of total workhouse population
Ashford East	1	0.9
Ashford West	5	3.9
Faversham	3	1.4
Hollingbourne	8	4.7
Maidstone	8	1.9
Medway	18	3.0
Milton	7	4.8
Sheppey	0	0.0
All 8 unions	50	2.5

**Source:** See Table 3.

68 per cent. The workhouse populations of the eight unions and of Leicester showed a clear preponderance of inmates born in the same county.<sup>36</sup> Percentages of the total workhouse population born in Ireland and abroad were 2.8 and 1.6 respectively. The percentages of Irish inmates were higher for Medway (5.7 per cent) and Sheppey (4.3 per cent). The percentages of inmates born abroad were 2.3 for Faversham and 3.1 for Medway.

Five inmates of the Faversham workhouse were born abroad. Three of these were born in the USA – a 32 year old widow born in New York, her ten-year old son, born in Connecticut and an eight-year old boy whose birthplace was given as America. The other overseas-born inmates of the Faversham workhouse were born in Canada and The Channel Islands. How these people came to be in the Faversham workhouse is unknown.

Sixteen individuals born overseas constituted 3.1 per cent of the Medway workhouse population. Ten of these were aged 15 years or under. Their birthplaces were Africa, Bermuda, India, Malta and Singapore. Of the remaining six, five were women aged 31–70. Their birthplaces were the Channel Islands, Belgium, India and Malta. The remaining member of this group was a 75 year old man whose birthplace was given as 'Mount Sural'. Of the seven inmates whose birthplaces were given as India, four were scholars aged between 8 and 13 years and a fifth was a blacksmith aged 15. The remaining two were Emma Smith, an unmarried domestic servant aged 40, and Ann Marshall, aged 31, married, with no stated occupation. Four children named Marshall were identified in the Medway workhouse, and if the suggestion that they are all Ann's children is accepted, the extent of her travels becomes evident. She was born in India about 1831, she was in Malta in 1871, India in 1873, Malta again in 1875, and in the Medway area from 1876. Patrick and John Flannery, aged 15 and 13 years, were also born in India, but their mother was not identified in the workhouse. Ann and Caroline Miskinmon, aged 13 and 10 years, were born in India. Eliza Miskinmiss, aged 52, married, and born in Portsmouth, was identified in the workhouse and may be their mother.

**Table 5** Ages of vagrants

Age-group	Male	Female	Total
>15	7	2	9
15–29	4	1	5
30–59	22	11	33
60+	2	1	3
Total	35	15	50

**Source:** See Table 3.

Although more work on the family relationships of inmates born abroad is required, evidence from the CEBs suggests that women and children found their way into workhouses many miles from their countries of birth, and it is suggested that they may have been the families of servicemen, who were posted elsewhere and did not take their families with them, or who simply abandoned their families.

### Vagrants

Society was less tolerant of vagrants than of paupers in general. Crowther states that the Poor Law Commissioners regarded mendicant vagrants as lazy, dishonest and undeserving of public compassion. While this view was no doubt justified in many cases, the same author also cites examples of men classified as vagrants who were travelling in search of work. The treatment of vagrants was so harsh that some died after being refused relief, but guardians were subsequently ordered to supply relief to vagrants. This they did, but the facilities offered to vagrants were less comfortable even than those provided for the majority of paupers.<sup>37</sup>

Various terms were used in the CEBs to describe vagrants. The CEBs for the eight workhouses being studied contain 'vagrant', 'casual', 'casual pauper' and 'tramp'. In the case of Ashford West, the individuals were described as inmates in the separately-enumerated casual ward.<sup>38</sup> The term 'vagrant' will be used in this work to include all these descriptions.

Table 4 shows that 2.5 per cent of those enumerated in the workhouses were classed as vagrants, with variations from zero (Sheppey) to 4.8 per cent (Milton). The age and sex distributions of vagrants are shown in Table 5. In all age groups, males outnumber females by approximately two to one. Most vagrants are in the prime working age category (15–59), with only nine younger than 15 and three aged 60–62. Thirty per cent of vagrants, a total of 15, were born in Kent, a much lower percentage than that for non-vagrants. Thirty-four vagrants were born in the rest of Great Britain/Ireland, and one was born in the USA. For both sexes, the commonest industrial class was agriculture. For males, building and industrial service (general labourers) were the next two most common classes, while a third of females had no

reported occupation. Five vagrant families were identified, one in Ashford West Casual Ward, one in Hollingbourne Workhouse, two in Maidstone and one in Medway. (By family is meant one adult or two married adults with their children enumerated consecutively). The Hamilton family, enumerated in the Ashford West Casual Ward, had four members; parents James (a tailor) and Eliza (a tailoress) were born in Ireland and Scotland respectively, and their two children were also born in Scotland. The Smith family in Hollingbourne consisted of Frederick, an agricultural labourer, and Martha his wife who was described as a domestic servant, both aged 44, with their 14 year old son James. All three were born in Sudbury, Suffolk. The Edwards family, in Maidstone, consisted of William, labourer aged 41, his wife Harriett, aged 40, and their two children aged nine and one. William's birthplace was New Orleans, Harriett's was Canterbury, and the children were born in Essex. Also in Maidstone was Caroline Maguire, a 29 year old married woman with her three year old son. Both were born in London. Harriett Golby, a hawker aged 36 years, was enumerated in the Medway workhouse with her three children aged fourteen, ten and five. All were born in Chatham. Of the five families in the vagrant category, four clearly had origins outside Kent.

## Conclusions

Despite the chronological and geographical separation of Hertfordshire in 1851, Hampshire in 1851–1861, Leicester in 1881 and Kent in 1881, there are striking similarities between the results of this investigation and those of Goose, Hinde and Turnbull, and Page. The workhouse populations were composed predominantly of the young and the old. Percentages of children in the populations of all areas support the view that there was a either reluctance of large families to enter the workhouse or a reluctance to admit them. The sex ratio was biased towards males in the Kent, Hampshire, Leicester and Hertfordshire workhouses, although there were wide variations between individual Kent and Hertfordshire workhouses.

The marital structure was similar in the eight unions and in Leicester, Hertfordshire and Basingstoke, with married inmates comprising between 15 and 18 per cent of the workhouse populations in this and the three earlier studies. All workhouses showed a marked bias towards single people.

The highest percentages of inmates born abroad (including Ireland) were present in the Medway and Sheppey workhouses, and it is likely that these people were either naval personnel, dockyard workers, or their families. Overseas migrants would be unlikely to have relatives living locally, and would therefore be more dependent on the Poor Law in old age. In some cases, women and children went into the workhouse many (possibly thousands) of miles from their birthplaces. Most vagrants were male and of prime working age, as would be expected if they were travelling in search of work, but some vagrants were accompanied by their families.

Vagrants had, in general, migrated further from their birthplaces than non-vagrant inmates.

The workhouse populations of at least two of the workhouses studied (Medway and Milton) showed similar variations throughout the year from April 1880 to April 1881. The increase in numbers of inmates in the winter months reflects reduced availability of work.

In summary, this study of eight Kent workhouses in 1881 supports the findings of Goose, Hinde and Turnbull, and Page, who studied workhouse populations in Hertfordshire, Hampshire and Leicester respectively. In all workhouses, most inmates were single, and the populations were predominantly composed of males, children and the aged. Family groups were usually headed by women, except in the case of vagrant families. Variations in the populations of two of the Kent workhouses reflect seasonal fluctuations in the availability of work and in the demand for transport in an area heavily dependent on agriculture and brickmaking. Even proximity to the London market, while providing employment opportunities, was insufficient to insulate the poor from the effects of seasonal unemployment and the threat of destitution and the workhouse.

#### NOTES

1. N. Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century: the case of Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999), 52–69; A. Hinde and F. Turnbull, 'The populations of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851–1861', *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), 38–53; S. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse in 1881', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 63 (1989), 85–95.
2. Maidstone Union had a Workhouse School in addition to the workhouse. Children housed in the school were included in the analysis with inmates of the workhouse.
3. Calculated from figures in *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. II. Area, houses and population: registration counties*. British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP) 1883 LXXIX, 41.
4. E.R. Kelly ed., *Kelly's directory of Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (London, 1887).
5. G. Mingay, 'Agriculture', in A. Armstrong ed., *The economy of Kent 1640–1914*, (Woodbridge, 1995), 74–6.
6. J Preston, 'Industry, 1800–1914', in A. Armstrong ed., *Economy of Kent*, 113–5.
7. A. Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth century England*, (Basingstoke, 1999), 24–48. The Goschen Minute is reproduced in D. Englander, *Poverty and poor law reform in nineteenth century England*, (London, 1998), 104–5.
8. *Eleventh annual report of the Local Government Board 1881–1882*. BPP 1882 XXX, pt I, 1.
9. Calculated from figures in *Eleventh annual report of Local Government Board*, 252.
10. *Return of paupers in receipt of relief: January 1881*, BPP 1882 LVIII, 4.
11. M.A. Crowther, *The workhouse system 1834–1929*, (London, 1981), 163.
12. The term 'extra-metropolitan Kent' indicates the County of Kent excluding a small number of districts on the outskirts of London.
13. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Hampshire workhouses', 49.
14. *National index to 1881 British census and 1881 British census*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [CD-ROM] (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1999).
15. *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. II*, 90–91.
16. Crowther, *Workhouse system*, 247.
17. In the tables, percentages are expressed to one decimal place. In the text, percentages have been

- rounded to the nearest whole number, except for small percentages (less than ten) where rounding was considered inappropriate.
18. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 54.
  19. A discrepancy was noted in the census report for the total population for the Medway registration district. The stated total differed by 62 from the total calculated and checked by the author. The author's calculated total was used.
  20. Calculated from figures in *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. II*, 31–2.
  21. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 56–7.
  22. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Hampshire workhouses', 41.
  23. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester Workhouse', 88–9. Comparison with Page's figures is hindered slightly by a small inaccuracy in his Table III, in which two consecutive age ranges are 6–10 and 15–20.
  24. Initially, an attempt was made to sort members with the same surname who were not enumerated consecutively, into family groups, but the information available from the CEBs did not allow this to be done with certainty, so the attempt was abandoned. Such family reconstitution may be possible if CEBs are used in conjunction with admission and discharge registers.
  25. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Hampshire workhouses', 41.
  26. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 59.
  27. *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. III. Ages, condition as to marriage; occupations and birthplaces of people*. BPP 1883 LXXX, 31–2.
  28. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 59–60.
  29. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 61; Crowther, *Workhouse system*, 234.
  30. Hinde and Turnbull, 'Hampshire workhouses', 39; Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 57; Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester Workhouse', 89.
  31. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 62; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Hampshire workhouses', 41; Page, 'Pauperism in the Leicester Workhouse', 89.
  32. *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. III*, 51–2.
  33. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 62.
  34. Goose, 'Workhouse populations', 62.
  35. *1881 Census of Great Britain, Vol. III*, 72.
  36. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester Workhouse', 92–3.
  37. Crowther, *Workhouse system*, 247.
  38. According to the census report, six people were present in West Ashford Casual Ward, but only five were found when the census return was checked.