Research in progress

How people moved: researching the experience of mobility in the past

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Defining the problem

The migration history of Britain is reasonably well known. A number of original studies and broader surveys provide detailed evidence about where and why people moved, and about the characteristics of different groups of migrants. For instance, for the nineteenth century we know that most moves were over relatively short distances and usually took place within well-established migration areas: some 40 per cent of moves had both the origin and destination within the same settlement, and over 50 per cent of moves were less than ten kilometres in length. Most moves were undertaken as family groups, although those who moved over longer distances were more likely to travel alone. The most important reasons for residential migration were employment and marriage: in particular, movement for employment accounted for most longer-distance migration. This pattern changed relatively little in the first half of the twentieth century, although mean migration distances increased slightly and short-distance movement for housing and environmental reasons became relatively more important. However, while most migration research has focused on the spatial pattern of movement, its causes and its consequences, we still know very little about the actual experience of residential migration. From personal experience we know that moving home can be traumatic, but studies of migration in the past tend to take for granted that moves took place, without focusing either on how this was carried out or on the impact of the experience of relocation on individuals and families. This on-going research, still in its very early stages, is examining these neglected aspects of migration history.

There is always a tendency for social science history to emphasise the big picture and to ignore the mundane and everyday. In the context of migration, this has led to a focus on long-distance moves thought to be disruptive for the individuals and places involved, and to concentration on the impacts of migration on origins and destinations. The everyday

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experience of moving home, usually over a short distance, has been neglected even in studies of local history which have focused detailed attention on specific places. However, recent research has emphasised the role and significance of everyday practices in other walks of life, and there is a need to examine the practice and performance of migration as well as its causes and consequences. There are a number of reasons why the act of moving home is significant. First, it is undoubtedly a stressful experience for many people, with particular worries about the loss or breakage of possessions and the inevitable disruption to familiar routines. Second, and potentially more importantly, if people have negative memories of moving home, these may have an impact on future mobility. A bad experience when moving could reduce the propensity to move again, with significant consequences for the labour and housing markets. Third, and following from the above, reluctance to move may have social consequences for individuals and families as people find themselves in unsuitable accommodation or far from relatives, but feel that they cannot face the upheaval of a removal which could potentially improve the situation. It can thus be suggested that in the past, as in the present, consequences of the experience of moving can extend well beyond the act itself.

Migration and materiality

Many factors potentially influence the experience of moving home, and most have changed radically over the past 200 years. On the one hand, transport technology and, more importantly, access to different forms of transport, have changed significantly, in theory making moving easier. On the other hand, changes in housing tenure, particularly the rise of home ownership, could have made moving more problematic because of the increased difficulties of financing and negotiating the sale and purchase of a house. Other factors of potential importance include the distance over which a move is made (short distances ought to be easier); the purpose of the move (a forced move that is made reluctantly is unlikely to be a pleasant experience); and personal and family characteristics, including factors such as the presence of small children (usually difficult to move!), the availability of friends or kin to assist, and personal income (which affects the degree of assistance that can be purchased). All of these are much more personal and are unlikely to have changed over time in a consistent direction, although in the twentieth century most people have experienced rising real incomes (but with no reduction in inequalities).
One characteristic that has changed for most people, and which has a direct effect on the experience of moving, is the quantity of personal possessions that people own (and thus have to move). It can be argued that, in the past, most people had relatively few possessions and thus they were easily transported, but that as British society has become more acquisitive and materialistic—linked in part to increasing affluence but also to changed expectations—then the physical movement of belongings becomes much more difficult, and relocation raises greater concerns about potential loss or damage to those possessions. There has been extensive academic research on changing patterns of consumption and associated materiality, but rarely has this been linked directly to movement. Most research on materiality and movement focuses on the artefacts of travel: the development of travel infrastructure, of new transport technologies and, especially, the growth of mobile technologies that allow both virtual mobility and communication whilst on the move. There has also been research on the possessions that people use to remind themselves of their previous home environment, especially in circumstances of long-distance or forced relocation. However, the degree to which increases in personal possessions, and the development of a more materialistic society, have affected residential migration has not been examined, despite its obvious potential impact. This on-going research will attempt to fill this gap.

Problems of evidence

One good reason why this topic has not been extensively researched is that there are no readily available data sources. Moving home was a routine experience, rarely recorded in any detail beyond the fact that it occurred. Furthermore, the very fact that moving home is a time-consuming and potentially disruptive event means that few people would bother to record this in any way, beyond the necessity of informing key contacts of a change in address. Research on this topic must thus rely on discovering snippets of information embedded in other sources that could have been produced for a whole variety of reasons. The list of potential sources is almost unlimited, but some of the most likely starting places to look for material include personal diaries and life histories, some of which may give information beyond the simple fact that a move took place; oral history archives, where information on moving home may have been either directly or indirectly collected; newspapers, where a range of reports may include information on how people moved in the past; and business archives pertaining to removal companies. In addition to archival sources, of which there

13 For an example of a business history compiled from the archives of a long-standing removal company, see G. Turnbull, Traffic and transport: an economic history of Pickfords (London 1979).
are many more possible examples, some information may be gained (with care) from contemporary novels where moving may be an important part of the plot; and, for the most recent past, additional information may be collected from surveys of respondents about their recent migration experiences. All such sources do, of course, raise problems of representativeness. Diaries and life histories tend to be written by those with more education and leisure time; newspaper reports (for instance of court proceedings) focus on a particular sub-set of society that is considered to be newsworthy; oral evidence will be affected by memory; and literary sources are, by definition, fiction. Moreover, the researcher will only ever find a fragment of the potential information that is located in such sources, but the total population of information is unknown and thus the quality of the sample cannot be assessed. None of these problems is peculiar to research on moving home, but the ephemeral and fragmentary nature of the evidence make investigation particularly problematic. The remainder of this paper is used to provide selected examples of people’s experiences of moving home. There is insufficient evidence so far to draw any firm conclusions, but the examples do illustrate that data are available and that they can provide real insights into a neglected, but important, aspect of migration history.

Moving home in the past

In this section, four main sources are used to examine the process of moving home in the past: one personal life history; evidence from an oral history archive; coroner’s evidence reported in a newspaper; and extracts from two well-known novels. The life history of Henry Jaques provides one unusually detailed account of a residential move. Interestingly, this does not relate to any of the frequent moves that he undertook himself (he rarely recorded more than the fact that he moved) but rather to the move of a relative with which he assisted. In 1857 Henry helped his aunt to move some 45 kilometres from Islington (London) to the village of Shorne in Kent: while showing signs of Dickensian elaboration, his account is suggestive of many of the worst nightmares that some people might have about the transport of their valued possessions when moving home:

…it was thought that one large van would take all the goods and accordingly they were subsequently packed into one vehicle piled up to a great height. Soon after the disaster came. We had not proceeded 200 yards when one of the springs gave way, and most of the goods were toppled over into the road. The services of a wheelwright were called into requisition, the breakages made good, a small two wheel cart obtained which was filled with goods thus easing the van, and after a delay of three hours, and about 12 o/c midday a fresh start was made for our 30 miles journey.


One thing noted by me on the journey was the frequent stoppages at the road-side Inns and the condition of the driver in consequence. Progress was slow but at 1 o/c the following morning we entered the quiet village of Shorne, all was quiet, not a soul to be seen. The exact locality of the house was not known so we had to wake up some of the sleeping villagers to guide us to the Ridgeway. So about 2 o/c we drew up at the house ... The unloading was all over by 5 o/c by which time the village was all alive and we were regaled with a crowd of small children with open mouths wondering what it all meant.16

Such potentially off-putting experiences of moving home can also be found in other and much later sources: the Ambleside oral history archive has a number of relevant transcripts.17 One respondent recalled a move made in 1946 from the north east of England to Grasmere in Westmorland (now Cumbria). This quote clearly demonstrates a train of events in relation to the removal of possessions, starting with a probably wrong decision to take a cheap quote for the removal, through a removal that took longer than expected, to a house which was not ready to receive those possessions when they arrived.

So it was arranged that we would come in the October holiday [1946] and we booked in at the Moss Grove to start with whilst the removal was taking place. The removal was a nightmare. Because Jim got, I think, three estimates for the removal and the lowest estimate was from a local furnishing firm that also did removals and it was much cheaper than Pickfords or whoever the other one was so he contacted them again and said why was it so cheap, and they said because we have got a new extra big van. Right. So they would do it all in one do. By teatime on the removal day the van was full and they hadn’t got all the furniture on. They needed the van next day so they would have to come through to Grasmere and dump the furniture and come back with the other load overnight. So they decided to do that and we went and stayed with my sister in West Hartlepool for the night and came on the next day. Well, apparently what had happened was that everything wasn’t finished, the main work was finished but the house was not decorated. And there were two painters in and they had left all their painting materials in the front porch, all their pots of paint, and this van came in the middle of the night, it had to remove all their paints in order to get in and then they just dumped all the furniture and came back and got the next lot.18

Not all moves were as traumatic as the first two examples, but other, less spectacular, accounts can also reveal important details about the removal process. Another Ambleside respondent recalled a move made in 1919 over the relatively short distance of some 30 kilometres within what is now south Cumbria. This move took two days and relied on the local coal merchant to carry out the removal.

16 Life history of Henry Jaques (private collection).
17 Ambleside oral history archive: http://www.aohg.org.uk/search.html.
18 Ambleside oral history archive: Respondent HP; DoB 1909.
So father got the job see. And that was it, that was how we came over here in July 1919. Our furniture - our sticks as you might call it in them days, they were transported by a chap called Billy Lowther who was the coal merchant at Broughton-in-Furness, with a flat lorry and two horses. We loaded up as today, and all the furniture was to carry up on to the main road from the house, and Billy Lowther set off from Stonestar down to Broughton-in-Furness. I don't know what time it would be, but he would get his tea and bait his horses, and he was up at 5 o'clock next morning and he'd tramped through from Broughton-in-Furness to High Barn with our sticks. And that was how our sticks came from Broughton to High Barn.19

Reliance on local carriers, and especially coal merchants, to carry out removals is a theme that comes through in a number of other testimonies. Particularly in rural areas such as Cumbria, there were relatively few businesses that specialised in furniture removal in the early twentieth century, and any traders who owned appropriate transport could be used to carry furniture and effect a removal.20 Thus, coal and slate wagons had to be cleaned and made suitable for transporting furniture, and many carriers were happy to adapt their business to transport whatever was needed at the time. Such points are emphasised by two further examples from the Ambleside oral history archive:

Well my grandfather was a carrier and he had a business in Ambleside … I think my father had quite a lot to do with the coal side of it. And also a wagon would take slate from the quarries to Windermere Good's Yards and often come back with a load of coal. Things like that. Now they did do quite a trade with furniture removing. They took furniture all over England I am told.21

I. How far afield did you go [for furniture removals]?
R. More or less locally. I've been as far as Morecambe once or twice.
I. Langdale?
R. Oh yes, Langdale and Grasmere and……..
I. Hawkshead?
R. Hawkshead and Windermere, Coniston.
I. Coal wagon's a mucky job, did you have to clean it out for these folk?
R. Oh yes. It was clean, when they asked me to do a job. I did a lot of furniture removing, because there was no-one else, really.22

Unusual insights into the possessions that some people had, and the methods they used to transport them, can also be gained from newspapers and other contemporary publications. The following account, from the Burnley Gazette for 1881, is drawn from a report of a

19 Ambleside oral history archive: Respondent DX1; DoB 1910.
21 Ambleside oral history archive: Respondent EE; DoB 1922.
22 Ambleside oral history archive: Respondent IL; DoB 1913.
coroner’s inquest into a drowning in a canal. The story itself is tragic but, in passing, the report reveals both the limited possessions that one man had when he ‘flit’ his home, and the fact that—Dick Whittington-like—he carried them in handkerchiefs (which he returned to his wife before apparently falling into the canal).

Elizabeth Hargreaves, widow of the deceased, residing at 16 Lorne-st, said he came home drunk on Monday night week about a quarter to ten. She remonstrated with him about his conduct and some harsh words passed between them. The following morning she charged him with not maintaining himself and he said he would ‘flit’, packed up his clothes and left home. She saw him again on Monday night when he brought the handkerchiefs back in which he had packed his clothes.23

Fictional writing must be used with even more caution than other sources, but many contemporary writers have been shown to provide fictional accounts that were accurate reflections of contemporary society and environment.24 Two examples will suffice, both drawn from very well-known sources. Thomas Hardy’s account of the movement of agricultural labourers from one hiring to another on Lady Day emphasises the impact of weather on the process of moving. This was obviously especially significant in the past when possessions would mostly be transported on an open wagon, but even today most people dread wet weather when moving. Mrs Gaskell’s account of the Hale family’s move to Milton in North and South focuses on the equally universal fear of unpreparedness and dealing with the unknown. Even for an affluent family, such as the protagonists in this novel, moving was portrayed as a daunting task, quite possibly because they would have had substantial and valuable possessions.

It was a relief to Tess, when she looked out of the window that morning, to find that though the weather was windy and louring it did not rain, and the waggon had come. A wet Lady-Day was a spectre that removing families never forgot; damp furniture, damp bedding, damp clothing, accompanied it, and left a long train of ills.25

‘Why on earth has your father fixed on Milton-Northern to live in!’ …’And the furniture – how in the world are we to manage the removal! I never removed in my life and only a fortnight to think about it!’26

Next steps

This brief report on research in progress has highlighted the potential significance of moving home as an event, over and above other more commonly researched impacts that follow from residential change. It has focused on the ways in which, by definition, a residential move also

23 Burnley Gazette. 26/02/1881: Report of a coroner’s inquest. Thanks to Siân Pooley for drawing this example to my attention.
25 Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Chapter LII (first published 1891).
26 Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, Chapter V (various editions, first published 1855).
required the relocation of possessions (however meagre); it has highlighted the various means by which this process could be effected in the past; and it has discussed some of the problems that could arise. Sources consulted so far do not allow any firm conclusions to be drawn, but they do raise many questions for further investigation, only a few of which are outlined here. First, given changes in material possessions over time, and the fact that moving is often a time when people reappraise their possessions, how have migrants made decisions about what to take and what to leave behind when moving home? Second, we need to know more about who carried out removals at different times and how migrants made decisions about who to trust with their possessions. Third, there is potential to investigate the strategies that people have adopted to limit anxiety when moving home. Today we rely heavily on insurance to provide at least financial (if not emotional) recompense for the loss of valued possessions. How, if at all, did migrants seek to minimise such losses in the past? The fact that possessions were limited does not mean they were without personal value and, for many, replacing lost possessions in the past would have been much harder than today. Fourth, there is scope to examine the extent to which the circumstances of removal affected experience of the event itself. For instance, did people required to move at short notice against their will have very different experiences to those able to plan a move in more detail? Certainly, evidence presented above suggests that careful planning did not necessarily avert disasters. Fifth, at all times there have been some people with relatively mobile life-styles and others who are much more sedentary. To what extent does prior experience of mobility (daily as well as residential) influence the capacity of individuals to deal with the removal of their possessions to a new home? Finally, all these (and other) questions need to be investigated in the context of change and continuity. As personal possessions have increased, has moving home become more difficult and stressful, or have other changes such as the development of professional removal services, insurance for personal goods, greater affluence and longer formal education made the process less traumatic for most people?

To answer such questions there is need to collect a very much larger database of evidence on moving home, drawn from a variety of time periods and sources. This is where I need the help of readers of this journal. As the examples cited above demonstrate, information on moving home can occur in almost any source. It is rarely indexed or easy to find, and is usually discovered by chance while researching another topic more obviously related to the source in hand. If readers have in their possession, or come across by chance, information on the experience of moving home that relates to the topics outlined above (or to others I have not thought of), I would really like to hear from you. Please e-mail or post to me details of the source (with full reference) and of the relevant content.27 Building up a sufficiently large database to provide anything more than anecdotal evidence will be very time-consuming, but I expect to be able to add examples gradually from a range of time periods and locations in an attempt to begin to answer some of the questions outlined above. All contributions will be acknowledged and very gratefully received.

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