Prostitution in the Medway towns, 1860–1885

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century prostitution has been the subject of a number of regionally-focused historical studies, yet surprisingly little of this scholarly attention has been directed towards the ports, dockyards and garrison towns of Kent. Levels of prostitution were high in these districts due to the presence of large numbers of resident military personnel combined with a range of supply-side factors related to the local economy, which provided limited employment opportunities for women at this time. Surviving statistical evidence is scant, and tells only part of the story of the women who made a livelihood in this way. A fuller understanding can be reached by a process of nominal record linkage, allowing individuals to be tracked over time. The resulting partially-reconstructed life histories shed more light on questions such as prostitutes’ ages, backgrounds and ultimate outcomes, and their experience of regulation and control at the hands of the local authorities than can be ascertained from single records. Thus they add qualitatively to the evidence furnished by statistical sources, and enable a challenge to be made to the existing literature particularly with regard to the heterogeneous nature of prostitution at his time.

Introduction

The 1970s saw an upsurge of academic interest in the economic and social lives of women who worked as prostitutes during the nineteenth century. This interest in the world’s oldest profession was stimulated by the work of Judith and Daniel Walkowitz, who argued that prostitution was often seen as an inevitable and transitional part of life in the working class neighbourhoods of Plymouth and Southampton, where employment opportunities for women were limited. In doing so they challenged the Victorian stereotype that portrayed prostitutes as social outcasts.1 Instead they suggested that there was little differentiation between the social and economic identities of the women who worked as prostitutes and other people living in the working class districts of the towns.2

In a similar study Frances Finnegan drew on a variety of local sources to reconstruct the life-histories of some 1,400 prostitutes and brothel-keepers living in York between 1837 and 1887.3 Although Gail S. Clark argues that Finnegan’s study breaks few theoretical or methodological boundaries because it contains little in the way of quantitative evidence, it nevertheless offers an alternative viewpoint to the hypothesis that prostitution was a transitory stage through which many women in poorer districts passed when they were

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1 J. R. Walkowitz and D. J. Walkowitz, ‘“We are not beasts of the field”: prostitution and the poor in Plymouth and Southampton under the Contagious Diseases Acts’, Feminist Studies, 1 (1973), 73–106.
2 Walkowitz and Walkowitz, ‘We are not beasts of the field’, 73.
faced with economic uncertainty. Finnegan suggests that social conditions like alcoholism, disease and poverty created insurmountable barriers which prevented prostitutes from entering or occupying a more conventional place in society.  

It is evident that these studies reach very different conclusions about the nature of prostitution in two different geographical localities, albeit they both acknowledge the significance of poverty as a causal factor. More recently, in her study of prostitution in Ireland Maria Luddy, whilst making the general link between prostitution and financial hardship, has pointed specifically to the Irish economic structure as a significant feature, noting the lack of employment opportunities available to women in an economy in which industrialism played little part. Luddy shows a greater appreciation of the heterogeneous nature of women who took to prostitution than is demonstrated by either the Walkowitz or the Finnegan models, noting that ‘for some women prostitution was a way of life, but for others it was a casual occupation.’ 

Kent’s prostitution trade has received relatively little attention from historians. The only significant study of this kind was carried out by Brian Joyce in the late 1990s. Joyce’s survey concentrates on prostitution in the garrison and naval districts of Chatham during the later part of the nineteenth century and argues convincingly that the dockyards and garrisons dominated the local economy, thus limiting the employment opportunities open to women in the town. However, he also notes that the large numbers of servicemen stationed in the area provided prostitutes with a willing clientele, suggesting that prostitution in Chatham was driven by a combination of supply and demand factors. Joyce’s monograph clearly has its merits but since references to primary and secondary sources are not cited Joyce’s claims do not stand up to academic scrutiny.

This article goes some way toward filling the gap in the existing academic literature outlined above by focussing on prostitution in the Medway towns of Kent between 1860 and 1885. It has two main aims. The first is to explore the links between prostitution and the range of ‘supply’ factors associated with the local economic structure, financial hardship and the makeshift strategies adopted by women of the labouring poor, in the light of the findings of Walkowitz, Finnegan, Luddy and Joyce. Secondly, using the methodology of nominal record linkage, we investigate the personal circumstances of some of the individual women who resorted to prostitution for their livelihoods in the Medway basin at this time. This methodology allows individuals to be traced over time.

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5 Finnegan, Poverty and prostitution, 213.
6 M. Luddy, Prostitution and Irish society (Cambridge, 2007).
7 B. Joyce, The Chatham scandal: a history of Medway’s prostitution in the late 19th century (Kent, 1999).
8 Joyce, Chatham scandal. Also see The Local Population Studies Centre, Strood (hereafter TLPSCS): NAVAL Coll. Chat Dock CRA; J. D. Crawshaw The History of Chatham Dockyard Volume 1 (Newcastle upon Tyne, Isobel Garford, 1999).
and sheds some light on questions such as prostitutes’ backgrounds, ultimate outcomes and experience of regulation and control at the hands of the local authorities. The resulting composite profiles, supported by other sources such as Parliamentary Papers connected with the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 (CD Acts), add qualitatively to our understanding of the character of prostitution and of the means employed by the authorities to control the trade in the region.

By definition, attempts to examine and quantify levels of prostitution pose difficulties. Aside from the obvious problems associated with the ‘dark figure’ (the unknown total number of occurrences that went undetected and unreported), much of the documentary evidence that has survived (for example Petty Sessions records and local newspaper reports) is biased towards those women who passed before the benches of local magistrates. It should also be noted that many of the women worked under assumed names and thus records need to be approached with care. Nevertheless, a methodology of critical and systematic nominal record linkage between these sources and others (such as census materials and Poor Law Union records) that were created by routine bureaucracy enables us partially to reconstruct the lives of a large number of women who practised prostitution in the Medway area of Kent. By linking references to named individuals between sources and over time a combination of quantitative and qualitative data is produced, which in the absence of alternative detailed documentary evidence provides some understanding of a social sub-group that, by definition, had a vested interest in remaining as far as possible beyond the reach of officialdom and which might otherwise have remained largely unrecorded.

The local economy

In 1863 William Hughes gave some indication of the character of the Medway basin when he observed:

Kent is principally an agricultural county, excepting along its extensive seaboard, where commercial industry, in connection with maritime pursuits, forms the prevailing characteristic of its industry [...] Hops are extensively grown in some districts, particularly in the low grounds of Canterbury and Maidstone. Orchards are numerous, and cherries are an especial object of culture. The wheat and other grains are of the best description. 9

It is clear from these remarks that many of the inhabitants living in the region still depended on agriculture for their livelihoods during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to the 1871 census, 11 per cent of the Kentish workforce was employed in agriculture, compared with a national figure of 7.9 per cent.10

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discussed at length elsewhere, however, census data has limitations as a measurement of women’s seasonal employment. These figures, which record only 3,551 Kentish females as having been engaged in agricultural occupations, mask the fact that a workforce estimated to be between 80,000 and 150,000 was required each year during the hopping season, of whom women were prized as ‘excellent pickers’ due to their manual dexterity. The seasonal nature of this work meant, however, that hoppers were forced into vagrancy and into the towns during the winter months. Under these circumstances, prostitution may have offered temporary relief from financial hardship since, according to one contemporary observer, ‘formidable and rampant was the vice commonly practised by the hop-pickers’.

Population figures suggest that the three principal towns in the area—Rochester, Chatham and Maidstone—were vibrant urban centres. Expansion in the Chatham area was due largely to increased activity in the dockyards. During the 1850s and 1860s further growth occurred because the shipyard was enlarged and cement and paper manufacturers began to establish a presence in the region. Rochester and Strood saw their populations increase by nearly 20 per cent between 1871 and 1881. The expansion of industry in the Lower Medway Valley during the second half of the nineteenth century likewise led to an increase in the number of people living in the borough of Maidstone, by nearly 7,000.

One would assume the presence of so much industry had a positive effect on employment prospects in the region. However, it is clear from census reports that industrial activity was centred on heavy industry, such as shipbuilding, munitions and cement works, which offered employment opportunities predominantly to men. Kent had little light manufacturing industry and so, for the most part, women continued to be employed in low-paid occupations like domestic service, agriculture and the garment

13 Maidstone Journal, 6 February 1871.
14 Stratton, Hops and hop-pickers, 57.
16 F.G. Willmott, Cement mud and muddles a history of the A. P. C. M. Barges (Kent, 1977), 2–3.
19 J. Woolmer, Historical jottings of the parish of Snodland (Snodland, 1894), Preston, Industrial Medway, 65.
manufacturing sector. Opportunities offered by the latter were irregular and conducted on piece-working and out-working lines. The 1881 census recorded 233,007 of Kent’s females over the age of five years old (75 per cent of the total number in this age range) as having no occupation. Even where women were employed in the limited manufacturing sector, such as Maidstone’s paper industry, they were not well remunerated when compared with their male colleagues. The Turkey paper mill, for example, employed 263 women and 26 girls in 1865 (70 per cent and 7 per cent respectively of the total workforce), but these statistics mask the fact that women were largely engaged in low-paid occupations such as sorting, cutting, macerating and boiling rags whilst the more skilled tasks were performed by a small number of well-paid adult males.

Welfare provision and women’s employment

What, therefore, was the response of the authorities to the difficulties caused by the paucity of employment opportunities for women in the region? On first appearance, the poor law records appear to suggest that welfare provision was successfully addressing the problem of poverty. This is evidenced by the fact that the number of paupers who received assistance from the Medway Union was relatively low, in comparison to the number of inhabitants who lived within its bounds. For example, 1,364 paupers of all classes were assisted by the union in January 1861. At this time, more than 50,000 individuals were living in the seven parishes that made up the union.

Unfortunately, these early reports give no indication of the sex ratio or age of the population. Figures for the whole of the county, however, suggest males may have been in a slight majority. The figures therefore seem to suggest that a disproportionate number of able-bodied females were assisted by the Medway Union. In fact 99 able-bodied women, nearly twice the number of able-bodied men, were assisted inside of the

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20 1881 Census of England and Wales, III, Age, condition as to marriage, occupation and birth place, BPP 1881 LXXX.I [C.3722] (hereafter 1881 Census, III), 56, 63.  
22 This number represents all indoor and outdoor poor, including the insane, lunatics, vagrants, able-bodied, infirm and children. For more on this see Comparative Statement of Number of Paupers relieved, January: 1860 and 1861, BPP 1860 LVIII.183 [383B.1] (hereafter Comparative Statement, January 1860/61), 24–5  
24 In 1861, there were 368,450 males and 365,225 females living in the county. Whilst the population of Kent continued to expand into the 1870s, the sex ratio was less evenly distributed than it had been in earlier decades. Census reports show that women were now in a slight majority.  
25 Recent studies by Nigel Goose and George R. Boyer and Timothy P. Schmidle imply that the elderly poor were often the main recipients of any out-relief that was provided by poor law unions. Moreover, the records of the North Aylesford Union for the late 1840s suggest that relief outside of the workhouse often took the form of small doles of food items with little monetary value. For more on this see Goose,”Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire’, Continuity and Change, 20 (2005), 351–84. See also George R. Boyer & Timothy P. Schmidle, ‘Poverty among the elderly in late Victorian England’, Economic History Review, 62 (2009), 249–78. Also see, G/St AR11; (TLPSCS).  

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Figure 1  Indoor relief provided by the Medway Union to the able poor January 1861–July 1882.

Figure 2  Outdoor relief provided by the Medway Union to the able poor January 1861–July 1882.

Note: The datasets used in figures 1. and 2. were chosen for continuity purposes and to provide a more complete understanding of indoor/outdoor relief patterns for the Medway union between January 1861 and July 1882.

Source: Comparative Statements of Number of Paupers relieved: 1861–1882  
BPP 1860 LVIII.183 [383B.1]; BPP 1861 LIII.183 [324B.1]; BPP 1862 LXVIII.121 [307.B]; BPP 1862 LVIII.121 [307.B]; BPP 1862 XLVIII.183 [307B1]; BPP 1871; LIX.163 [140B]; BPP 1871; LIX.219 [140B.1]; BPP 1872 LIII.105 [126B]; BPP 1872 LIII.157 [126B.1]; BPP 1881 LXVIII.515 [60B]; BPP 1881 LXVIII.569 [60B.1]; BPP 1882 LVIII.395 [100B]; BPP 1882 LVIII.449 [100B.1].
workhouse in January 1861 (see Figure 1). The figures for outdoor relief were no less remarkable. Payments of one sort of another were made to 135 able-bodied females. In contrast, only 17 able-bodied males were assisted away from the workhouse during the same period.

As we have already seen, the population of the Medway basin continued to grow as new industries moved into the area. What is also certain, however, is that these industries offered few new employment opportunities for women. Again, this might go some way to explaining why many more women than men were relieved by the Medway Union. In January 1871, around one and a half times more able-bodied females than males were assisted inside of the workhouse (see Figure 2). Similarly, able-bodied women were in the majority when it came to outdoor relief. This particular class of female outnumbered their male counterparts by more than four to one.

This pattern continued into the next decade. In July of 1881 the population of the Medway Union stood at more than 61,000 inhabitants of whom 571 individuals were receiving assistance inside of the workhouse at Chatham. Those with some form of infirmity made up more than 54 per cent of this number. A third group representing vagrants and able-bodied children under the age of ten added another 26 per cent to this figure. While there was little difference between the number of males and females who were classified as ‘infirm’ or ‘not able bodied’, a closer inspection reveals that 79 of the 109 able-bodied adults who received indoor assistance were women.

A similar pattern emerges when the figures for outdoor relief are examined. Whilst only six able-bodied males received assistance outside of the workhouse, a total of 183 women were given some form of payment in the community. The ratio of male to female paupers who were classed as infirm was no less remarkable. Ninety-eight men were given some form of outdoor relief; in contrast, 433 women were assisted in this way. Of course these figures can be interpreted in a number of ways. On the surface it would appear that the Medway Union, in line with the New Poor Law more generally, had a punitive policy.
towards able-bodied males and that females were treated less harshly. A more likely scenario, given the structure of the local economy, is that women found it difficult to secure employment that enabled them to live independent lives.

Earlier, it was shown that nearly a quarter of a million women were registered as having no occupation in the county of Kent. It is also clear from the above figures that a disproportionate number of those who received relief from the Medway Union in the summer of 1881 were women. A different picture emerges when we look at the winter months. A total of 179 individuals classed as able-bodied were maintained inside the union workhouse in January 1882; of these 110 were females. Relief was also given to 194 able-bodied adults outside of the workhouse. It is clear that women and children received the bulk of this assistance; payments made to females outnumbered those given to men by more than sixteen to one, whilst able-bodied children under the age of 10 received more than two and a half times more relief than the total allowed for the able-bodied of both sexes. However, it seems unlikely that children were the sole

33 1882 Return of paupers in receipt of relief, January 1881 and 1882, BPP 1882 LVIII.395 [88.486], 13.
beneficiaries of these payments. Hugh Cunningham has suggested that parents often saw the poor laws as an additional resource, which could be used to reduce the financial burden of raising children.\footnote{Hugh Cunningham, ‘The employment and unemployment of children in England c. 1680–1851’, \textit{Past and Present}, 126 (1990), 115–150.}

Moreover, the summer and winter figures suggest the number of women who received relief outside of the workhouse remained fairly constant throughout the year. Unfortunately, these figures give little indication of the age or personal circumstances of individuals. The only way to improve this understanding is to supplement these records with other census material. For example the 1881 census records 61,644 individuals as living within the bounds of the Medway Union. The sex ratio was 32,107 males to 20,537 females.\footnote{1881 Census, III, 31.} Of these individuals, 26,424 lived in Chatham. Again men were in the majority (13,670 males; 12,754 females). The records also reveal that 1,207 females were aged between 15 and 20 years, whilst 3,952 were between the ages of 20 and 45.\footnote{1881 Census, III, 31–51.}

It is not possible to determine from these records how many single women lived in the town; however, information of this sort is available for the whole of the Union. The census shows that 2,637 single females aged between 20 and 45 were living within the bounds of the Medway Union in 1881. When widows in the same age range are included, this figure grows to 3,029.\footnote{1881 Census, III, 31–51.} What the records do not show is whether these women had any dependents.

There is of course little in the above figures to suggest how many of these women were vulnerable or needed assistance from the Union. Clearly, there is insufficient space in this article to investigate this concern further. However, our brief survey of poor law records shows that payments to women in the summer of 1881 outnumbered those made to men by a ratio of four to one. Similarly, the figures for the winter of 1882 show the Union was spending more than three and a half times more on women than men. It is also significant that single young females made up a large proportion of the population living in vicinity of Chatham at this time.

It is precisely this category of women that Walkowitz suggested may have turned to prostitution. She argued that economic necessity and occupational dislocation were major contributing factors behind the profession in Plymouth and Southampton.\footnote{Walkowitz, \textit{Prostitution and Victorian society}, 194–5.} Walkowitz noted that women in low paid occupations like dressmaking and domestic service rarely earned more than six to eight shillings a week. Moreover, she observed that,

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Much of this work was highly casual, structured around the demands of the local season and the provisioning trade. [...] Placed in vulnerable economic and
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social position, some women who could not rely on family, relatives, or lovers may have found the shorter hours and better pay of prostitution a temporary and relatively attractive solution to their immediate difficulties.39

Prostitution

In addition to supply-side factors the ports, dockyards and large military presence in the area contributed to high levels of prostitution. The 1871 census for Chatham, for example, lists a total of 4,654 resident army and naval personnel including 2,859 soldiers. This figure compares with the 19,508 total number of males aged 20 years and over (for Chatham combined with the adjacent City of Rochester).40 In Maidstone in the same year, military personnel numbered 528, relative to a male population of 7,071 aged 20 years and upwards.41

Clearly the link between prostitution and poverty is one of association rather than of cause and effect, and not all women made this particular choice. Attempts to quantify the problem of prostitution, for the reasons outlined previously, are fraught with difficulty. The few statistics that are available were compiled by the Metropolitan Police under the provisions of the CD legislation (in force from 1864 until suspended in 1883) and whilst these figures were generally believed by contemporaries to under-record the number of women making a living in this way, they do provide some indication of the size of the trade.42 The 1871 census recorded 6,099 single and widowed women between the ages of 15 and 45 in the Medway registration district, during which year 203 women were registered by police as prostitutes in the Chatham district (including Rochester and Strood).43 In Maidstone the corresponding figures were 5,387 and 40, in Dover 5,094 and 95, in Gravesend 3,212 and 40 and in Canterbury 2,176 and 42.44 Expressed as ratios the number of prostitutes in Chatham relative to the number of unsupported women aged 15 to 45 was therefore 1:30. In Canterbury the figure was 1:52, Dover 1:54, Gravesend 1:80 and Maidstone 1:134. Even allowing for inconsistencies between the geographical territories encompassed by the two sets of data, these figures do strongly suggest that levels of prostitution were exceptionally high in Chatham at this period when compared with neighbouring towns with military installations. One possible explanation, as suggested by Joyce, is the limited opportunities for domestic service offered by the

40 1871 Census, III, 88.
41 1871 Census, III, 88.
42 *Annual Reports of Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police on the operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts*, (hereafter *Annual Reports of Assistant Commissioner*), BPP 1875 LXI.337 [C.97]; 1876 LXI.33 [C.276]; 1877 LXIX.95 [C.255]; 1878 LXIII.675 [C.96]; 1878–1879 LX.405 [C.235]; 1880 LX.469 [C.231]; 1881 LXXVI.591 [C.140]; 1882 LIII.383 [C.291].
43 This register was kept in accordance with the Contagious Diseases Acts in ten Kentish ports, dockyards and garrisons.
44 1871 Census, III, 147; *Annual Report of the Assistant Commissioner 1878*.
structure of the local economy in Chatham. This hypothesis is supported by census data, which shows that the 726 domestic servants recorded in 1871 represents some 4.4 per cent of the female population aged 20 and above, compared with a figure of 12.2 per cent for the whole of Kent.

What, then, does the evidence reveal about the individual women who made up these statistics? As we have already seen, single sources reveal little personal detail. This is where record linkage or composite profiling comes into its own. The following examples, of Ann Kelly and of the Lucas sisters, demonstrate how partial life histories, reconstructed from a number of different sources, can add qualitatively to the evidence provided by raw economic and social statistical data.

In the case of Ann Kelly, registration records, census materials and local press reports combine to provide the following outline life story. Ann was born in Ireland some time in the late 1820s or early 1830s. It is not clear exactly when she arrived in Chatham, but she is said to have taken to getting a living ‘on the streets’ some time in the early 1850s. In 1861 she was lodging at the King’s Head public house in the notorious Brook district, a pub known to the local police as being ‘used for immoral purposes’. The census of that year recorded Ann as being without any occupation, as it also did three of her unmarried female co-lodgers. The following April Ann was convicted on a charge of being ‘drunk and riotous’, she was described in court as a prostitute and sentenced to one month with hard labour at Maidstone Gaol. Some time after this Ann moved lodgings to the Bell, another Chatham public house known to police as having links with prostitution. It was here that in early 1864 she was subjected to a violent physical assault and rape perpetrated by two soldiers who had lain in wait for her to return home. Appearing to give evidence at the Magistrates’ Court, Ann was described by the newspaper reporter as being bruised about the face and body and having two black eyes. The report of the case also reveals that Ann had a child, who was being minded by a neighbour on the night in question. Ann Kelly died the following year from exposure, having passed out in the snow on a cold February morning. She was reported to have been drunk and was dead on arrival at the Medway Union workhouse.

What can one woman’s history tell us about the widely heterogeneous group of women who practised prostitution in the Medway basin and the dockyards and ports of industrial north Kent in the third quarter of the nineteenth-century? It is clearly difficult

45 Joyce, *Chatham scandal*, 36.
46 1871 Census, III, 69, 92.
47 *Chatham News*, 27 February 1864.
48 *Return of number of public houses and beerhouses used as brothels or houses for immoral purposes in districts subjected to Contagious Diseases Acts 1865–1881*, BPP 1882 LIII.421.
49 1861 MSS Census, (RG9: 481).
50 *Chatham News*, 26 April 1862.
51 *Chatham News*, 27 February 1864.
52 Quoted by Joyce, *Chatham scandal*, 147.
to establish precisely how typical Ann Kelly’s story and circumstances were. What evidence has survived suggests that in a number of respects she was representative.

With regard to her Irish origins, however, Ann was unusual, since analysis of the birthplaces of 75 women known to have been involved in prostitution in Kent during the period in question and for whom the information can be ascertained reveals that 50 (66 per cent) had been born in the county. Of these, ten came from rural districts thus suggesting economic migration into the larger towns. A further 11 (8 per cent) had origins in London or the other Home Counties while eight (6 per cent) were born elsewhere in England, predominantly Devon and Hampshire. Significantly, these counties were both home to large naval dockyards. It is possible that young women attracted into Devonport and Portsmouth from surrounding rural areas subsequently followed naval personnel to the Kentish ports, following a ‘step migration’ pattern (whereby longer distance migration takes place by means of a series of intermediate steps).

In respect of her age, Ann Kelly was more representative. While there is some discrepancy between sources as to her precise date of birth it is clear that she was not exceptionally young at the time of her move into prostitution, having apparently taken to the streets some time in her early twenties. The alleged extreme youth of prostitutes was the subject of a good deal of controversy in the latter part of the nineteenth century but Walkowitz has questioned this notion, concluding that ‘the throngs of child prostitutes so highly advertised during the white-slavery campaign of 1885 must be dismissed as imaginary products of sensational journalism intended to capture the attention of a prurient Victorian public’.

Statistical evidence relating to the ages of Kentish prostitutes is scarce and contradictory and has to be used with care. Of the 590 women admitted to the Chatham Lock Hospital during the six months to March 1871, for example, only 35 (6 per cent) were under 20 years old. However, the ages of these women receiving treatment in the Lock Hospital are an unreliable indicator of prostitutes’ average ages. Given the nature of venereal diseases and the state of medical knowledge at the time, considerable intervals of time could pass between first exposure to risk of infection and diagnosable symptoms. The age of these hospitalised women would therefore necessarily be higher than the average. Likewise, statistics compiled by the Metropolitan Police in relation to women registered as prostitutes under the CD Acts must be used with a measure of caution. These show that of the 203 women registered during 1871 in Chatham, for example, the most common age group was between 21 and 26 (81 women representing 40 per cent of the total).

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53 Data collected from court records, newspaper reports and census materials.
55 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian society, 17.
56 Report of the Royal Commission upon administration and operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, BPP 1871 XIX.1, 29 [C.408], xiii.
However, contemporaries questioned the police statistics and in 1879 a petition was presented to parliament from 56 Maidstone residents casting doubt on their accuracy. Nevertheless, they do conform remarkably closely to central government judicial statistics compiled from local returns, which also suggest that the number of very young girls who practised prostitution was small. Of the 795 prostitutes known to local police forces in Kent in 1868, for example, 26 (3 per cent), were under the age of 16. The equivalent national figure was 5 per cent.

At the time of her death, Ann Kelly was described as having been involved in street prostitution for about 14 years. As we have seen, historians remain divided over the outcome of prostitution, debating whether for most women it was an entrenched way of life that was difficult to escape and which led inevitably to dissipation and destitution, or whether it was a casual and temporary occupation that was followed by rehabilitation into the ranks of the respectable poor. One measure of the temporal nature of prostitution is the average length of time that prostitutes spent on the streets. Evidence from Kent suggests that, for some younger women and girls, prostitution represented a transitional phase, and for others it was a step on a downward path. Some older women appear to have practised prostitution as part of an established, long-term mixed strategy of survival alongside, for example, periods spent in cohabitation and applications to the Poor Law Union. The Chatham Board of Guardians received numerous applications for welfare help from sick prostitutes including, for example, a 23 year-old woman who was described as being ‘in a dreadful state, and had been for several months.’ Another was apparently ‘almost dying from disease and starvation’ and the Board had been obliged to send a ‘conveyance’ to bring her to the Union, suggesting that she was too unwell to walk there.

Registration records provide evidence about the legal marriages of a number of women known to the authorities to have been living from prostitution, whilst census material and death records indicate that numerous women who had previously practised prostitution became inmates of, and often died in, either the county lunatic asylum or one of the union workhouses. Twenty-two of the 375 inmates (6 per cent) of the Kent County Lunatic Asylum, for example, were described as prostitutes in the 1881 census. Clearly, therefore, the outcomes for women who gained money from prostitution were varied.

58 Report from the Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts, BPP 1882 IX, 44.
60 Chatham News, 23 March 1861.
61 Chatham News, 3 May 1862.
62 Centre for Kentish Studies (hereafter CKS), Gravesend Poor Law Union death register 1871–1914 (G/G Wld) 10 Feb 1890; 1881 MSS Census (HO/107:978); General Register Office Death Indices (Vol. 2a) June 1881.
63 1881 MSS Census, (RG11:954).
Analysis of the interval of time between the first and last documented mentions in court and other records of nearly 100 named prostitutes from throughout Kent suggests how long each might have spent on the streets. Of this sample, 61 per cent appear in the documentary records within a time-frame of less than two years, suggesting that many left the life after a short period. However, 15 per cent of the sample were arrested periodically on charges of soliciting, drunkenness or disorderly behaviour over periods of longer than five years. Eliza O’Mally of Chatham, who seems to have achieved some notoriety in the courtroom having made over 100 appearances there, has been traced over a period of seven years, suggesting that her career lasted at least that long. O’Mally’s ultimate fate is unknown whilst Ann Kelly, as we have seen, experienced a premature and tragic demise. Although an extreme case, Kelly’s story indicates that Finnegan’s ‘demoralised creature treading the downward path’ stereotype did have some substance.

The case of Ann Kelly has illuminated a number of factors relative to the practice of prostitution in the Medway towns, but sources tell us little about the economic circumstances that may have driven her onto the streets. The life histories of Leonora and Clara Lucas are more revealing in this regard. The financial circumstances of the Lucas family were much reduced on the death of Robert Lucas who farmed in rural Boxley near Maidstone, following which his widow, Eleanor, moved into Maidstone with two of her younger daughters and took work as a charwoman. Leonora was already living independently of the family by this time and whilst it is not known at what age she entered prostitution, she was described in this way in the Maidstone Magistrates’ Court at the age of 26, when she was summoned on a charge of assault. Some time after this, her younger sister Clara took lodgings with fellow prostitute Elizabeth Cripps in Camden Street Maidstone, where she is captured by the 1871 census, her occupation being recorded as ‘dressmaker’. Clara was, however, convicted later that year of being a ‘disorderly prostitute’ under the Vagrancy Act, for which she served a seven day sentence. Clara died at the age of 31, and the following year’s census records Leonora living alone in Woollett Street in Maidstone, a location that was home to several prostitutes, her occupation also recorded as dressmaker.

The partially reconstructed life-stories of the Lucas sisters shed additional light on the experience of prostitutes in the Medway towns in a number of respects. Firstly, the

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64 Taken from Petty Sessions records and reports of magistrates’ court hearings in Kentish newspapers, 1856–1878.
65 Chatham News, 27 April 1861; 26 October 1867; 25 April 1868.
66 Finnegan, Poverty and prostitution, 8.
68 Maidstone Telegraph and Kent Messenger, 8 February 1866.
69 1871 MSS Census, (RG10: 944).
70 CKS Maidstone Petty Session records, minutes (PS/Md Sm 4, 5, and 6), 14 December 1871.
71 General Register Office Death Indices (Vol. 2a) September 1880; 1881 MSS Census (RG11: 931).
sisters were representative in that their father’s early death affected the family’s economic security. Historian Donald Thomas has noted that the ‘road to prostitution often began when the death or absence of a father quickly obliged the mother to go out to work’, and this would appear to have been true of the Lucases together with a substantial number of Kentish prostitutes. Orphaned and single-parent family status is a common factor amongst a group of 36 identified prostitutes from across Kent for whom parental status has been ascertained. Of this group 22 per cent had lost their mother, 22 per cent their father, and 6 per cent both parents by the age of 20. Thus only 50 per cent of the group identified by our research had both parents still living when they reached this age. The difficulties experienced by single parents, particularly widowed mothers in maintaining a family, are well illustrated by the Lucas example.

We have seen that the Lucas sisters were both described on census returns as dressmakers, despite being known to police as being involved in prostitution, thus illustrating Finnegan’s observation that very few women recorded their occupation as ‘prostitute’. It is unclear from the evidence whether either of these women did engage in any dressmaking or whether the term was used solely for appearance’s sake, but it is evident that women sometimes used prostitution to subsidise their earnings from more legitimate employment. Frederick Wheeler, a local philanthropist, believed that ‘in most cases, it is not that they are getting their living as much as supplementing ordinary wages by prostitution.’ Analysis of other types of employment associated with 49 Kentish prostitutes for whom the information can be ascertained gives some indication of these women’s socio-economic status. Of this group, 34 women (69 per cent) had worked as dressmakers, servants, laundresses or charwomen.

The prosecutions of Ann Kelly and Clara Lucas on charges of being ‘drunk and riotous’ and ‘being a disorderly prostitute’, and the custodial sentences with hard labour of one month and seven days they served respectively, tell us something about the regimes of regulation and control that were brought to bear on street prostitutes in the port and dockyard towns of Kent at this period. Streetwalking and soliciting were controlled in Kent with reference to a combination of both national and local statutory instruments, formulated to regulate behaviour in the streets and public highways.

Petty Sessions records suggest that it was the preferred practice of Maidstone magistrates, for example, to charge prostitutes under the 1824 Vagrancy Act for being riotous. When Chatham prostitutes Ellen Gladstone and Dinah Butcher were arrested, for example, PC Hibbard told the bench that their conduct had been of the ‘most

72 D. Thomas, The Victorian underworld (London, 2003), 86.
73 Finnegan, Poverty and prostitution, 14.
74 Quoted in Joyce, Chatham scandal, 48.
75 CKS, Maidstone Petty Sessions records, minutes (PS/Md Sm 4, 5, and 6), 14 December 1871, 10 July 1872.
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indecent kind’. This, it transpired, consisted of ‘calling to gentlemen as they passed down the street’. One of the gentlemen ‘insulted’ by the women in this way was a clergyman. Gladstone was sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment and Butcher to ten days.76 Furthermore, evidence suggests that known prostitutes were punished more severely than other offenders prosecuted for the same transgression, indicating that the judiciary used a wide range of street nuisance offences over and above those directly related to prostitution to curtail the activities of streetwalkers. In December 1861, for example, magistrates heard two unconnected cases of drunkenness that had occurred in Chatham on the same day. Elizabeth Brown, named in court as a ‘common prostitute’, was sentenced to 14 days with hard labour, whilst an un-named ‘young man from the country’, who had been found drunk and incapable, was discharged.77 Likewise when Julia Swift, described in court as an ‘unfortunate’, and Sophia Winn were arrested together for being drunk and disorderly in June 1867, Swift was sentenced to 21 days with hard labour whilst Winn, whose occupation was not mentioned, was fined five shillings.78 For many of the street prostitutes identified by this study, custodial sentences appear to have been a routine and integral part of a life on the streets. In 1860 prostitutes comprised 25.4 per cent of the total number of women prosecuted summarily and by indictment in Kent compared with a national rate of 24 percent, whilst the corresponding figures for 1875 were 19.1 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.79

Conclusion

The Kentish evidence supports previous historians’ findings concerning the nature of prostitution in other locations in a number of respects, including the close association with poverty as argued by Walkowitz and Finnegan. Evidence specifically points to the particular characteristics of the local economic structure, which offered limited and poorly paid employment opportunities for women, as a significant factor. Additionally, immigrant and single-parent family of origin status had a part to play in women’s recourse to prostitution, as illustrated by the Kelly and Lucas case studies. The link between poverty and prostitution is not a simple one of cause and effect, however, and we may never know what drove some women to make this choice, which, it could be argued, is an example of what Thompson called the ‘tenacity of self-preservation’.80

76 Chatham News, 15 April 1865.
77 Chatham News, 7 December 1861.
78 Gravesend and Dartford Reporter, 20 June 1867.
79 Returns of judicial statistics of England and Wales, BPP 1857-58 LVII.383 [C.2407]; 1859 XXVI.339 [C.2508]; 1860 LXIV.473 (C. 2692); 1861 LX.477 (C.2860); 1862 LXV.491 (C.3025); 1863 LXV.437 (C.3181); 1864 LVII.445 [C.3370]; 1865 L.445 [C.3534]; 1866 LXVIII.485 [C.3726]; 1867 LXVI.523 [C.3919]; 1867-68 LXVII.519 [C.4062]; 1868-69 LXVIII.513 [C.4196]; 1870 LXIII.525 [C.195]; 1871 LXIV.1 [C.442]; 1872 LXV.1 [C.600]; 1873 LXX.1 [C.871]; 1874 LXXI.1 [C.1055]; 1875 LXXXI.1 [C.1315]; 1876 LXXXI.1 [C.1595]; 1877 LXXXVI.1 [C.1871]; 1878 LXXXIX.1 [C.2154].
80 E.P. Thompson, The making of the English working class (Harmondsworth, 1968), 63
This article has additionally argued for a greater degree of heterogeneity than has hitherto been acknowledged in discussions of the category ‘prostitute’, thus contributing to the ongoing debate about whether prostitution should be viewed as a transitory phase in the lives of poor working women, or whether it led inevitably to destitution, disease and early decline. The chosen methodology, a process of reconstructing individual lives by nominal record linkage, throws additional light on the origins, careers and ultimate outcomes of a number of women who came to the attention of the authorities as living from prostitution since it enables individuals to be tracked over time. The findings suggest that Kentish prostitutes encompassed a wider range of circumstances in respect of age, length of time spent in prostitution and subsequent careers than is recognised by either of the Walkowitz or Finnegan models.

Moreover, nominal record linkage adds qualitatively to our understanding of prostitution by allowing wider research findings to be contextualised by individual life-histories. The case studies presented here were chosen from a much larger number on the basis that they illustrate a number of characteristics common to the women identified by research as having been involved in prostitution in the ports and garrison towns of Kent, including the Medway towns. Further research is clearly necessary to increase the database size to a level of statistical significance, which will allow firmer conclusions to be drawn about the degree to which Ann Kelly, the Lucas sisters and many others were typical or representative. In this way, we can come to a greater understanding of the women who resorted to prostitution in Medway in this period.

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