
LPSS Spring conference report, 2009

Household economies and household structures in Britain

The ninth annual Spring conference of the Local Population Studies Society was held at the Law Faculty, University of Hertfordshire, in St Albans on Saturday 18 April 2009, and was attended by 68 delegates, including ten free student places funded by a generous grant from the Economic History Society.

The three sessions were arranged chronologically with the first considering the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jameson Wooders, of the University of Reading, began with 'Production and consumption in English households, 1660–1740: a local view from rural Berkshire'. The economic changes which led to the development of capitalism have proved hard to define country-wide. *Overton et al* looked at probate inventories in Kent and Cornwall, but were unable to establish common trends. Prosperity in Kent led to diversification rather than specialisation, and Cornwall saw increased poverty linked to the mining industry. Other researchers have observed great economic diversity in small areas. Jameson therefore looked at the economies of the four ecological regions of Berkshire: the fertile White Horse Vale in the north, the sheep country of the central Downs, the mixed arable and woodland of the Kennet Vale in the south and west, and Windsor Forest in the east. The density of hearth distribution, in the Hearth Tax of 1663–1664, was highest in Windsor Forest, and lowest on the Downs, with the Vales in between. This distribution may relate to prosperity, there being more multiple-hearth houses in the Forest, and more one-hearth dwellings on the Downs.

Jameson's main dataset was derived from over 4,000 probate inventories, for 57 selected parishes. He showed that agricultural production was represented in over 60 per cent of all the inventories, with predictably less in the towns. Subsistence farming by cottagers and smallholders can be distinguished from commercial pastoral or arable farming. The inventories showed a decline in commercial agriculture and an increase in specialisation in south-west Berkshire, with a rising proportion offering no evidence of agriculture, and increasing numbers for labourers after 1700. In the east of the county, evidence for commercial agriculture also declines, but there is no rise in inventories showing no evidence of agriculture. Farmers may have survived here by subsistence or diversification. The largest herds of cattle were in the White Horse Vale area, and sheep flock sizes on the Downs increased after 1700. Farms in south-west Berkshire were apparently amalgamating into larger units, while in the north and east there was diversification into cheese making, baking and brewing, with some textiles in the Forest.

Consumption was highest in the east of the county, where larger houses had more servants and more specialised rooms. Inventories from the Forest and the eastern region show new furniture styles and luxury goods, although there are more clocks in the Kennet Vale. The situations observed in Cornwall and Kent were both present in Berkshire. In the west, increased poverty was linked to the emergence of large capitalist landlords, while in the east prosperity grew from diversification, perhaps related to the market demands of London. Most luxury goods were found in the east and in the towns, where visible status may have been more important. The older farming families of the south-west may have felt less need for display. The relationship between production and consumption needs further study, but it seems that the origins of capitalism should be looked for on a more local basis than the county.

Questions to Jameson established that although there were no clear local styles of inventory, they do become less detailed over time. Diversification in the Windsor Forest region may be linked to supply needs at the royal court, as well as London in general. It was also suggested that as inventories only list the personal goods at death of individuals, who may already have 'retired' from economic activity, arguments based on lack of reference in inventories to farming might need supporting evidence.

Our second speaker was Joanne Bailey, of Oxford Brookes University, who discussed 'Marriage and the household economy in eighteenth-century England'. Different roles for husbands and wives in the household were thought desirable but were not clearly defined, while being complicated by the emotional element. Both spouses were expected to contribute to the marital economy, and women put in both labour and income. Women also found ways of overcoming legal coverture, which in theory prevented them from entering into contracts. The qualitative evidence considered here looked at how the gender division worked in provisioning the household. It was derived from 1,500 cases of marital disputes in the consistory courts of north-eastern and southern England, involving all but the very poor and the very rich. Life-writing and prescriptive literature were also considered.

It appears that supposedly demarcated gender roles were far from distinct in everyday life. Court cases portray the wife's role as care giver, consumer and manager, subject to her husband's authority. Her work in household management could include keeping accounts and paying bills, as well as housework and childcare. Her economic value was in maintaining the stability of the household, and therefore its credit worthiness in local networks. The husband's role was as provider, as part of the expression of love, but also as a sign of economic independence. Studies have shown, however, that real relationships were not so simple. Married women regarded themselves as providers of household supplies and equipment. Disputes arose over the money contributed by women. Husbands might complain that a wife was extravagant, while a wife might claim to be prevented from working. Most people saw provision as a joint venture, and 'assistance' and 'contribution' were frequently used words. Some women portrayed child rearing as part of provisioning, including teaching household skills. Men sometimes portrayed themselves as willing

providers thwarted by illness or injury, which prevented them from caring properly for their children.

Management responsibility is not the same thing as overall control, which is assumed to have been retained by men. However, women extended their scope in the eighteenth century, and could at times effectively be the master or sole parent, entitled to respect. Such women were often contrasted in the court cases with an ineffectual husband or father. The emotional configuration of the marital economy should not be ignored. Husbands might be told that in law and religion they were the dominant partners, but in reality they knew that a good wife would help them to achieve credit and stability in the community, and to share the concept of care. Questions to Joanne found that the kind of marital complaints investigated were not locally specific, although the response of different Quarter Sessions might vary. Some judgements may also have been intended to offer social instruction.

Katie Barclay of the University of Warwick ended the session with her paper 'Negotiating the marital economy: the Scottish elite in the long-eighteenth century'. This was a qualitative study of correspondence between husbands and wives in the Scottish elite, ranging from aristocracy to merchants and professionals, although complicated by the clan system. Few of its members could draw enough income from their land alone, although most held land beside their industrial, professional, military or political incomes. There was therefore no stigma attached to trade, and many couples spent long periods apart for business reasons, generating much correspondence between travelling husbands, and wives managing households and farms and sending money to their spouses. Men were not at home setting the budget, yet both sexes accepted the divine ordinance of the subordinate woman, and wives rejected the idea of disobedience. The marital economy was negotiated in practice by tactical misinterpretation of a husband's instructions, with repeated requests for clarification, sometimes amounting to obstruction. Husbands and wives expected each other to be able to manage their affairs alone if necessary, yet both felt the need to justify their actions and explain funding decisions to the other.

During the eighteenth century attitudes changed, as it became more undesirable to take on the perceived role of a spouse. The principle that man was the provider and woman the manager was expressed more frequently, and mostly by men. The new idea of 'pocket money' for women was introduced. Men expected their wives to maintain an appearance which would command respect, rather than being frugal for economic reasons. Wives began to distance themselves socially from estate management, although there was not much change in practice. By the end of the century wives were still active managers, but their language put more emphasis on domesticity. This change seems to have arisen from an increased concern for individuals in society, moving away from older set models, and perhaps linked to the rise of nonconformist religion. Letters which in the seventeenth century were formally expressed and signed 'your obedient wife', were now signed with names and expressions of love. The mixed Scottish economy was, as always, open to new ideas.

Questions to Katie suggested that as this correspondence was the product of separation, the relationships it reveals may have been unusual. However, her evidence shows that wives had considerable understanding of household and servant management, whether the husband was at home or not. If he was present, tactics of interpretation might be less effective, but they were still used, wives sometimes resorting to writing letters from another room. Wifely management could be very independent indeed, such as among the families of exiled Jacobites, where the husband's authority had been removed. A strong mother could try to set a model for a child's marriage. The study looked at a small social group across all Scotland, but there were some regional differences between the more Presbyterian Lowlands, and the more Catholic Highlands, where the clan system was more active in constraining estate management decisions.

The second session focused on rural household economies and comprised two contrasting papers. The first by Nicola Verdon, senior lecturer at the University of Sussex, examined 'Farmers' wives and the farmhouse economy in England, c.1800–1939'. Nicola began by providing an historiographical overview. She argued, using a range of choice examples, that whilst the farmer's wife was traditionally recognised as an important and often decisive member of the family farm economy, by the nineteenth century she had become a figure derided for alleged affectation and indolence, having withdrawn from the economic life of the farm. Nicola then questioned these assumptions by focusing on sources from the early twentieth century, especially publications such as *Farmer and Stock Breeder* and *Farmer's Weekly*, that explored the range of productive functions on the farm and in the household that the farmer's wife performed. Far from being inactive, the domestic management of the farmhouse, the ability to exploit expanding markets and diversify into new income-generating ventures gave the farmers' wife a renewed importance at the centre of survival and regeneration during a period of national agricultural depression. We learnt that most farmers' wives performed multiple tasks such as home keeper, farm manager, unpaid labourer, food producer and entrepreneur, as well as playing key roles within the wider community. They also contributed significantly to farm income by caring for small animals such as rabbits, pigs and bees, producing and selling food such as ice cream or strawberries and by taking in paying guests or supplying teas for the burgeoning tourist industry.

The second paper in this session was delivered by Anne Beckett, a former student at Cambridge University, who talked about 'Contrasting household structures: miners and agricultural labourers families in County Durham, 1841–1901'. Whilst the previous paper had employed qualitative source material, Anne's was mainly quantitative and relied heavily on an analysis of the Census Enumerators Returns for the parish of Pelton, Durham, in the centre of what was the Great Northern Coalfield. The Durham region was industrialising rapidly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the opening of new pits caused in-migration and led to several periods of rapid population growth. Anne found that agricultural households tended to be smaller and included more of the elderly, possibly indicating that they lived longer. By comparison mining households were generally larger

and more youthful with a greater number of children, indicating a higher fertility rate. There were a large number of extended families in all sorts of permutations giving benefits to all parties concerned. The high fertility and the hazardous nature of mining meant that there were large proportions of young widows and widowers in the community. The residential situation of the widowed demonstrated that in nearly all cases they lived with relatives, who gave them support wherever possible. In questions at the end it was pointed out that useful comparisons could be made with other similar studies of mining areas.

After the LPSS AGM, our usual hearty lunch and a visit to the LPSS bookstall, the third and final session of the day focused on the struggles to make shift among working-class households. Jane Humphries, Professor of Economic History at All Souls College, Oxford, gave an informative and engaging paper entitled 'Industrious households: household economies and household structures', which examined the balance between breadwinning and parenting gleaned from working-class autobiographies written between the late seventeenth and the late nineteenth centuries. Quantitative analysis shows that while fathers were overwhelmingly the breadwinners in working-class families, they were emotionally distant parents. In fact, mothers appear as the central nurturing figure in autobiographies, while also performing a vital function in transforming their partner's wages into the means of subsistence, even if not contributing directly themselves. However, many fathers were missing or unable to contribute enough to keep the family functioning. This 'breadwinner frailty' was a strong contributing factor in the growth of child labour and reliance on the poor law, and illustrates the way that household economies can highlight the *functioning* of the poor family during the Industrial Revolution.

The theme of frailty was also picked up in the final paper, which was delivered by Emily Sandy, a third-year PhD student at Selwyn College, Cambridge. Her paper was entitled 'Lone motherhood in the late Victorian East End', and used census and poor law data to examine how widows with dependent children made shift in the working-class district of Poplar. These mothers were found in a range of household types, most commonly with some of their children, or with their own parents or unmarried siblings. Over time, however, household compositions shifted somewhat, so that widows became increasingly likely to live with older offspring rather than younger ones. Emily suggested that this was linked to falling fertility, falling male mortality (reducing the risk of widowhood at a young age) and the waning of live-in service for the young. Older children represented significant contributors to the household economy, making their co-residence a rational choice for the mother. The widowed mothers were also common welfare recipients from the poor law, but this trend also changed over time, again reflecting a slight decrease in vulnerability. This in turn promoted a more sympathetic response to the provision of long-term relief from poor law guardians, giving widowed mothers greater security.

The question period highlighted the range of common factors between the two papers, particularly the significance of older children's earnings to the household economy and the frailty of the unit when the father was absent. The speakers also stoutly defended the regional

and wider applicability of their findings when provoked by compere Professor Goose, illustrating nicely that both local and population studies are very much thriving among our members!

The conference then broke for further discussion over refreshments. Thanks must be given to Nigel Goose who once again proved to be an exemplary conference organiser, and to Nick Hawkes for administering the event. Peter Franklin and Terry Shaw organised the well-stocked bookstall which provided bargains spread over three tables. Thanks are also due to the administrative, catering and security staff at the Law Faculty for their support both before and during the day.

Chris Galley
Janet Hudson
Alysa Levene