

COMMENTARY

The Future of our Ageing Population: Lessons from the Nineteenth Century*

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Introduction

As an Economic and Social Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow researching the older-age population in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales, and having recently completed a PhD on the subject, I am interested in how my research may inform the future of our ageing population today. Providing a long-term perspective bridges the gap between the underexplored period of old age in the nineteenth century and the extensively documented situation in the twenty-first century. Based on this, a reassessment of old age, from the mid nineteenth century to the present, might be useful.

Over the last two centuries, the United Kingdom has experienced unprecedented demographic change through fertility decline and greater life expectancy resulting, it is estimated, in a higher number of people aged 65 years and over than aged under 14 years.² The landscape of ageing has also been transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The skew in older-age deaths, the strain put on care and social spending, and the reported rise in loneliness among older people has reinforced the perception of old age as a highly vulnerable stage of the life cycle. Even before COVID-19, reports on dependency ratios and care crises can create a ‘victimhood’ narrative of ageing. However, what local historians collate and analyse also contributes to the idea of older people as victims of society past

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2 According to data from the World Bank, it is estimated that in the United Kingdom there were 12,537,902 people aged 65 years and over in 2020. This is slightly more than the 11,881,832 aged between 0 and 14 years. Data on people aged 65 years and over: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.TO?end=2020&locations=GB&start=1960&view=chart> [accessed 29 November 2021]. Data on people aged between 0 and 14 years: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO?end=2020&locations=GB&start=1960&view=chart> [accessed 29 November 2021].

and present, as witnessed by articles describing the plight of older people in workhouses or on outdoor relief. However, we fail to consider, for example, the biographical testimony of historical older figures who may never have stepped inside a workhouse, but contributed to community life. An overemphasis on the vulnerability of older poor subjects in history can reinforce our prejudices towards older people today. Do any of us stop to think about old age outside the context of social care? Likewise, as local population historians, do we ever contemplate older people in history who were not pauperised? How can a study of the nineteenth century inform our blinkered perception of ageing and what does the Victorian past tell us about our future?

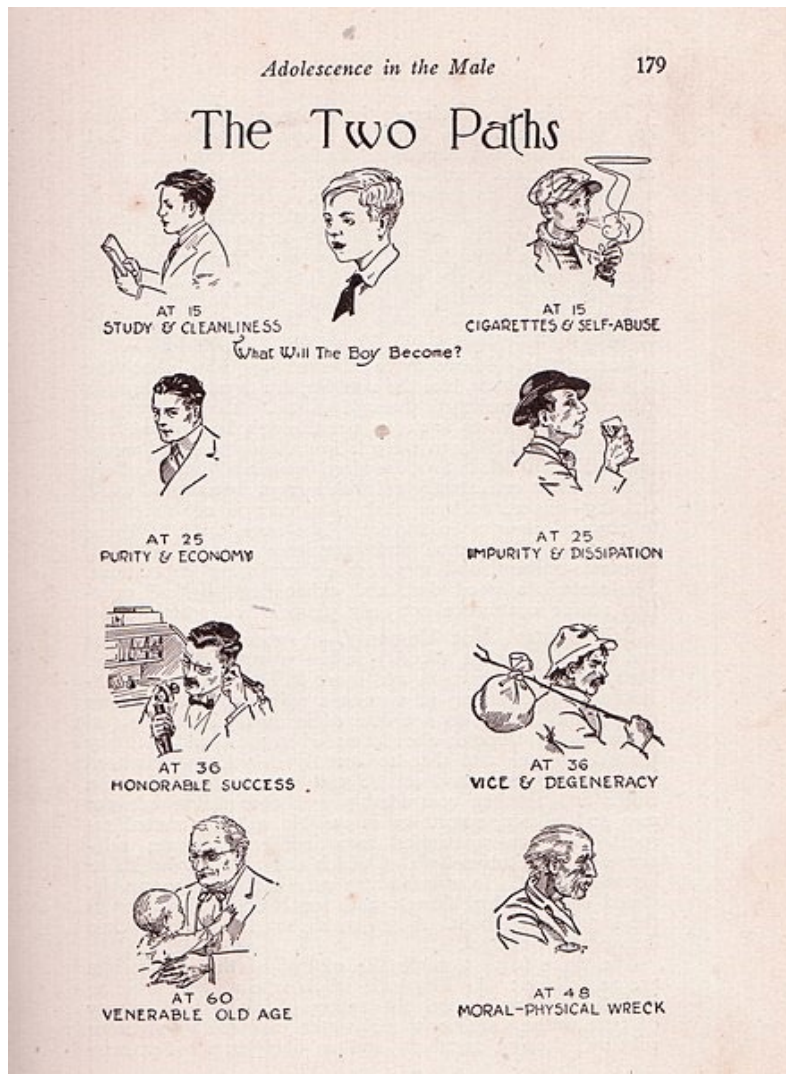
The nineteenth century gave us decennial population censuses, snapshots of the entire population on each census night. In 2013, there was the release of Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) data sets. These are digitised transcriptions the census enumerators' books for the 1851, 1861, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses.³ These provide much more data, and more easily accessible data, on outcomes in old age than were available to historians in the past.⁴

One way to use the I-CeM data is what I have called a 'two paths' approach to analysing older people in the past: comparing those that received welfare against those that did not. Consider a somewhat naïve example from a medical book on behavioural conduct produced in early twentieth-century America by B.G. Jeffries and J.L. Nichols (Figure 1). This distinguishes those who reached a period of 'venerable old age' at 60 years through success and prosperity from those perceived to be 'moral-physical wrecks' as a result of 'vice', 'impurity' and poverty. The age of the 'moral-physical wreck' is given here as 48 years, although some Victorians argued that poverty among those aged 60 years and over was brought about by a lifetime of irresponsibility and indolence. Of course, Charles Booth's breakthrough studies in the 1890s disproved the idea that poverty was always one's own fault, stressing wider economic conditions imposed on the poor, particularly the older-

3 K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-1>. A user guide and manual to the I-CeM data is available as E. Higgs, C. Jones, K. Schürer and A. Wilkinson, *The Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) Guide*, (Colchester, 2013). Further details on the I-CeM database together with a number of related resources are available from the I-CeM website at <https://www.essex.ac.uk/research-projects/integrated-census-microdata> [accessed 5 July 2022].

4 To those without academic addresses, the data are available via the I-CeM search facility website <https://icem.data-archive.ac.uk/#step1> [accessed 27 October 2021] and presented in graphical format on the University of Cambridge's Populations Past website <https://www.populationspast.org/imr/1861/#7/53.035/-2.895> [accessed 29 November 2021].

Figure 1 Illustration of 'the two paths': what will the boy become?



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Two_Paths.jpg
licence CC BY 2.0 [accessed 26 September 2021]. Originally from B.G. Jefferis and J.L. Nichols, *Safe Counsel, or, Practical Eugenics*, edited and completely revised by J.L. Nichols (Illinois, 1930), p. 179.

age poor. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why it was that so many older people were perceived to be ‘moral-physical wrecks’ and how was it that they came to be pauperised? Alternatively, why were other sectors of the older-age population recognised as reaching a ‘venerable old age’ and able to escape pauperism? In my PhD thesis, I explored these questions through a detailed comparative study of the older-age population in four selected counties in England and one in Wales: Cheshire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, parts of the Yorkshire West Riding, and Glamorganshire. The objective of this article is to inspire more local population research into older people as a group, especially those outside poverty, pauperism and workhouses.

Popular misconceptions about old age in the period 1851-1911

Consider this inherently Dickensian passage, from a piece entitled *Down the Mine at 89: Working Life of Elderly Victorians Revealed*, on the Ancestry website:

In the Victorian era, however, the concept of ‘retirement’ didn’t exist, and a lack of state pension or welfare funds meant that elderly people had no support unless they had financial help from relatives. For most working-class people, the only options were work or the workhouse, which forced many people into continued employment no matter how old they were.⁵

This passage illustrates three misconceptions. First, to say that ‘the concept of “retirement” didn’t exist’ in Victorian times is not true. ‘Retired’ as a descriptor is prominently recorded in the census enumerators’ books, especially in the later censuses of 1891-1911. It is often backed up with an occupation: examples include ‘retired farmer’ or ‘grocer (retired)’. The ‘retired’ were concentrated in selected occupations where there was a voluntary exit from the workforce via land, assets and capital. In 1891, between 18 and 22 per cent of older-age men in the coastal registration districts (RDs) of Christchurch and Portsmouth (then Portsea Island), Hampshire, were enumerated as ‘retired’.⁶ The proportion of men claiming poor

5 Ancestry Online, *Down the Mine at 89: Working Life of Elderly Victorians Revealed* [2014] <https://blogs.ancestry.co.uk/cm/down-the-mine-at-89-working-life-of-elderly-victorians-revealed/> [accessed 11 November 2021].

6 T.S. Heritage, ‘The elderly populations of England and Wales, 1851-1911: a comparative study of selected counties’, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Southampton, 2019), pp. 124-5. Unless specifically indicated, all remaining figures and data in this paper derive from this PhD thesis, which may be viewed at <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/444061/> [accessed 11 November 2021].

Future of our Ageing Population

relief in Christchurch was only 6.9 per cent, suggesting that the proportions retired at a local level were greater than those on welfare.⁷ Very few labourers, or those lacking capital, were described as ‘retired’.

Second, the idea that older people were ‘forced ... into continued employment no matter how old they were’ disregards the finding that the age at when one retired from the workforce varied by occupation. Of 187 ‘retired’ innkeepers in 1891, the average age was 69 years, although a sample of 181 agricultural labourers suggests that retirement was not reached until around 75 years.

Third, so far as ‘a lack of state pension or welfare funds’ is concerned, the majority of older people receiving welfare in the second half of the nineteenth century were granted outdoor relief under the New Poor Law. Based on data from parliamentary papers for five selected counties on 1 January 1861, among the ‘non-able-bodied’ population (taken as a proxy for older-age people), only 22.6 per cent of males and 6.2 per cent of females who were claiming poor relief received indoor relief (or workhouse accommodation). By 1901, these percentages had increased to 38.5 per cent of males and 11.9 per cent of females. The New Poor Law required ratepayers (or taxpayers) to provide funds towards the state-funded assistance of older people at home, not always in an institution.

Therefore it is not true that ‘[older-age] people had no support unless they had help from relatives’. It is estimated that, in the five selected counties, over half of older men and women co-resided with at least one offspring. However, not everybody received familial support, especially in the agrarian districts of southern England, where outdoor relief was strongest owing to the out-migration of offspring from the parental home. Among older-age women in 1891, slightly more were on poor relief (20 per cent) than were in a household being looked after by a relative (18 per cent). There was a greater retention of offspring in the northern RDs of Cheshire and the Yorkshire West Riding, based on the participation of families in pastoral smallholdings or family farms. Offspring who would have left the parental home to seek their fortunes elsewhere stayed to work on (and later inherit) their parents’ land, a feature lacking in Hertfordshire and Hampshire RDs in southern and eastern England. In fact, in Settle RD, Yorkshire West Riding, a significantly higher number of older-age men worked as farmers (31.4 per cent) than as agricultural labourers (4.6 per cent). This reduced the proportion of men claiming poor relief (5.2 per cent).

7 Christchurch was historically part of Hampshire; it was incorporated into Dorset in 1974.

Academic approaches to old age in 1851-1911

The first point to make is that the proportion of older people in the population of mid-Victorian England and Wales was small, at between 7 and 8 per cent. However, this masks strong local variations by region. While 4 per cent of people were aged 60 years and over in 1901 in Pontypridd RD, Glamorganshire, the proportion was 14 per cent in Royston RD, Hertfordshire, owing to agricultural depression. In 1894, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner Cecil M. Chapman reported to the 1893 Royal Commission on Labour, in Buntingford, near Royston: '[t]he young men of intelligence have left the country, and nothing but oldish men, or men hampered by their circumstances, are left behind'.⁸

Second, we are all aware that not all older people in the past were poor, but without the data, fallacies remain in the received wisdom, notably our tunnel-vision approach to old age pauperism and a belief that most old people were pauperised. This may owe something to Charles Booth's influential study, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales*, which contributed to the granting of old age pensions to older people from 1908 instead of poor relief.⁹ In the five counties outlined above, the majority of older people were not pauperised. Proportions range from 19.3 per cent to 11 per cent for men between 1861 and 1911, and from 33.5 per cent to 14.3 per cent for women in the same period.

Third, research has tended to focus on workhouse populations, primarily because they form part of census data. Coverage of those who received relief outdoors in the census is poor, and outdoor relief application and report books which provide more detailed information are rare. Where they do survive for selected districts, they challenge the idea that allowances for older people were relatively meagre. In Ripon Poor Law Union in the West Riding of Yorkshire, in the early 1880s, allowances for older-age married couples reached seven or eight shillings weekly. This nearly matched the ten shillings prescribed to married couples two decades later as an old age pension. Although the purchasing power of seven or eight shillings may have changed over time, the price slumps taking place between the 1870s and 1890s would have provided a fairly comfortable means for older-age couples to get by.¹⁰ Consequently, the fortunes of the older-age poor

8 Royal Commission on Labour, *The Agricultural Labour, Vol. 1: England, Part II: Reports by Mr Cecil M. Chapman (Assistant Commissioner) upon Certain Selected Districts in the Counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Devonshire, Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire and Shropshire, with Summary Report Prefixed* (British Parliamentary Papers 1893-94 XXXV [C. 6894-II], p. 157.

9 C. Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (London, 1894).

10 M. Levine-Clark, 'The gendered economy of family liability: intergenerational relationships and poor law relief in England's Black Country, 1871-1911', *Journal of British Studies* 45 (2006), pp. 72-89, <https://doi.org/10.1086/497056>.

varied. It was by no means always the case that older people were incarcerated in workhouses, nor was it always true that they received a miserly pittance if granted relief outside an institution.

Fourth, our understanding of old age is generally based on a reading of southern England. For example, there is David Thomson's pioneering doctoral study on provision for older people in the mid nineteenth century, where the censuses of Devonshire, Middlesex and Cambridgeshire are consulted.¹¹ However, older people in Wales, or specifically Glamorganshire, shared many of the experiences and outcomes associated with counties to the north of England, such as Cheshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. In the five counties overall, between 76 and 81 per cent of older men were recorded as having an occupation in 1851, 1881 and 1891. However, the labour force participation rate of older men was greater in the three counties in the north of England and Wales than in Hertfordshire and Hampshire, based partly on the opportunities for older men to participate in the mining and metal industries (for example steelmaking was prominent in Sheffield RD, with older men participating primarily in cutlery and scissor making over the more dangerous tasks of smelting and founding). As for older women, the labour force participation rate was greater in Cheshire based on silk manufacturing and in sectors of the West Riding, such as Keighley RD, where worsted manufacturing predominated. The proportions that co-resided with offspring were greater in Glamorganshire, Cheshire and the West Riding. Up to 64 per cent of older women in Keighley RD co-resided with at least one of their offspring, particularly daughters who stayed in the parental home whilst employed in the textile mills nearby. Grandparents would assist with childminding duties while their offspring went to work. This contrasts with only 38 per cent of older women in Watford RD, Hertfordshire, living with offspring, a proportion associated with suburbanisation and the influx of young families. While historians have pointed out the 'north-south' divide in old age pauperism, characterised by the greater likelihood of poor relief in southern compared with northern England, my research shows that this divide extends to wider socio-economic factors, particularly occupational structure and household living arrangements.¹²

11 D. Thomson, 'Provision for the Elderly in England, 1830-1908' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1981).

12 On the 'north-south' divide, see for example G. Boyer, "Work for their prime, the workhouse for their age": old age pauperism in Victorian England', *Social Science History* 40 (2016), pp. 3-32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2015.79>.

What are the lessons from the nineteenth century?

The situation for older people in the nineteenth century is, in fact, more similar to that of recent times than is often supposed: I-CeM and more contemporary data invite comparisons over 150 years, based on, for example, changing occupational structures and living arrangements over time. We should take into account the fact that 80 per cent of older men and 20 per cent of older women were recorded as having an occupation between 1851 and 1911. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many older people had agency to decide how long to work and when to retire. There was no fixed age threshold of retirement in the past, compared with more recent times, when compulsory retirement at a certain age has (until recently) been common.¹³ Another lesson from the past is that, regardless of the debate over whether the family or the state should care for the older-age population, it is important for people to maintain and maximise their familial contacts.

The nineteenth century also provides a warning about recent developments surrounding ageing. In early 1860s Somersetshire, owing to a contraction in the textile industry and the resulting exodus of younger populations, the proportion of the older-age population increased significantly. With that came substantive proportions of older people on welfare. Up to 12 per cent of the population of Frome, Somersetshire were aged 60 years and over, 56 per cent of these successfully seeking help from the New Poor Law.¹⁴ This was accompanied by a higher number of older women reported in the 1861 census as living alone in Frome, compared with England and Wales. The events in mid-Victorian Frome serve as a foretaste of post-war circumstances surrounding the growth in ageing, the collapse of the nuclear family household structure and migration of the young. As the old age dependency ratio widens (defined today as the population aged 65 years and over divided by those aged 15-64 years), there will have to be more governmental investment in older people.

Finally, while historians offer various interpretations of when older people became assimilated into a category of 'structured dependence', its origins have been crystallised by the policies and practices of the mid nineteenth century. The subcategory 'aged and infirm' under the New Poor Law is little different from the

13 For example, the case of Oxford University academic Paul Ewhart, who was forced to retire in 2017 at 68 years, and who took his case to court. In 2019 he won his case and Oxford University was ordered to pay him £30,000 in compensation. BBC News, *Oxford University Don Forced to Retire to Get Job Back* [2020] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-54523884> [accessed 29 November 2021].

14 As well as the five selected counties outlined above, my thesis also touched on aspects of population change and the New Poor Law in 1860s Dorsetshire, Wiltshire and Somersetshire.

distinctive marker describing older people today: the ‘old age pensioner’. Both categories denote an economic vulnerability in one’s old age that is alleviated through state-funded welfare. The construction of the ‘old age pensioner’ is often weaponised against the older-age population generally. This is either as a means of diminishing their contribution and significance to society, or to reinforce generational tensions regarding the perceived economic benefits given to older people. This line of thinking, and the ‘welfarising’ of old age through the Old Age Pension Act, it can be argued, has origins in the New Poor Law’s marginalisation of older people in the nineteenth century.

An agenda for the future study of old age in history

We need to extricate ourselves from a monolithic and outmoded narrative of old age that was first consolidated under the New Poor Law. We need to look at the variety of experiences and outcomes of older people before 1908 to identify the socio-economic diversity of older people in the past. Old age is and was multifaceted, not monolithic. A geography of old age, where the actions and activities of older people are defined in relation to their regional environment, provides a fuller perspective than a ‘pathological’ outlook on old age, by which I mean a perspective that sees old age as a ‘pathology’. This is summarised through a framework that covers aspects of security and vulnerability in the older-age populations of the past (Figure 2). Aspects of security involve sources of provision that relate to relative degrees of comfort. Conversely, aspects of vulnerability capture older people in a precarious position through limited savings and familial assistance, hence their reliance on the New Poor Law. While the framework is crudely defined and can be debated, it encapsulates many experiences of historical old age populations that deserve a comparative analysis and not an overemphasis on one theme. As such, we can reapproach our thinking on old age today, by considering newer categories such as ethnicity, or geographical inequalities.

History offers access to a wealth of representations of older people, which generate ideas about reshaping ageing for today’s world. First, older people are recognised through their capabilities, not just their needs. Second, generational antagonisms between young and old can be dispelled through the contributions of older people to the economy, and the assistance they can give to the young. Third, empathy with older people is increased if we consider that older people were young once. They would have contended with the many advantages and disadvantages experienced by younger people past and present, such as job security, housing supply and migration. Making use of these representations, we can advance the

course of local population research in historical older-age populations, and perhaps start to rethink how our present society treats older people.

Figure 2 Descriptive framework of various themes regarding the historical study of old age, divided into two groups, concerning the 'security' and 'vulnerability' of older people.

