

Conference Report

Household and Family in Past Time Revisited*

Local Population Studies Society Autumn Conference 2022

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The Local Population Studies Society's (LPSS's) Autumn Conference 2022, entitled 'Household and Family in Past Time Revisited', was held on 12 November at the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge. For the first time we were able to offer a hybrid format with some 21 people attending in person and a further 25 or so attending online. We are very grateful to Alice Reid of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure who booked the lecture room and loaned LPSS a 'meeting owl', which is a device designed to make the experience of joining online more immersive, as it allows those participating remotely to see and hear both the speakers and members of the in-person audience.

The conference was conceived—following the suggestion of LPSS member and speaker at the conference Tom Heritage—as a celebration to mark 50 years since the publication of Peter Laslett and Richard Wall's edited volume, *Household and Family in Past Time: Comparative Studies in the Size and Structure of the Domestic Group over the Last Three Centuries in England, France, Serbia, Japan and Colonial North America, with further materials from Western Europe*.¹ To this end LPSS Vice-Chair, Kevin Schürer, had brought together speakers from a range of disciplinary perspectives to engage with the theme of Household and Family.

The collection of papers included in Laslett and Wall's volume arose from a conference which took place in Cambridge in 1969. The morning's first speaker, **Michael Anderson** from the University of Edinburgh had, as a young academic,

* <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps109.2022.2>.

1 P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds) *Household and Family in Past Time: Comparative Studies in the Size and Structure of the Domestic Group over the Last Three Centuries in England, France, Serbia, Japan and Colonial North America, with further materials from Western Europe* (Cambridge, 1972).

attended the original conference to present a paper entitled ‘Household structure and the industrial revolution; mid-nineteenth-century Preston in comparative perspective’. This eventually formed Chapter 7 (pp. 215-36) of *Household and Family in Past Time*. Mike remembered a somewhat fractious conference with a number of disagreements between some of the ‘large personalities’ present, most of them leaders in the field of social structure. One point of dispute was how to count households: should this be done from the perspective of the individuals living in a household, or from that of the household as an entity made up of a group of individuals? Was it more important that 62 per cent of households contained between two and five people, or that 54 per cent of individuals lived in households comprising six or more residents? Laslett’s methodology was challenged on several fronts, his use of the ‘mean of means’ coming in for particular criticism. He had, however, successfully conveyed his message: historic families, at least in England, tended to be made up of small nuclear households; they were not large and extended as many had previously believed. Several of the conference participants went on to write books of their own on the themes it addressed, including Anderson’s own book on *Approaches to the History of the Western Family 1500-1914*.² However, the collection of papers in *Household and Family in Past Time* set the benchmark for all that followed. It was great to hear Mike’s first-hand account of what turned out to be a landmark conference.

Due to ill health, the second speaker, **Maria Cannon** from the University of Portsmouth, was unable to join the conference in person. She was, however, able to deliver her paper via Zoom. In her discussion of ‘Becoming independent: childhood and youth in the early-modern family’. Maria used the analysis of letters and other documents written by older children to uncover the nature of the boundary between childhood and adulthood in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Excerpts from the letters very much brought history to life. The audience particularly appreciated one mother admonishing her daughter to ‘suffer not such moths quietly in your gown till they fret a hole in your nether garment’—she shouldn’t let her petty grievances fester. Many of the children writing the letters were married—one twenty-year-old author was living with his second wife—but had not yet come into their inheritance, so were often dependent on their parents for money. This position meant that they were expected to be obedient to their parents, or at least to put on an outward show of obedience. The letters also revealed the hierarchy within households; daughters came well below sons, and had to be obedient to their husbands as well as their parents. Nevertheless, related households were shown to be dependent on each other, with respect flowing both ways between parents and their married offspring.

The final paper of the morning was presented by **Tom Heritage** who considered ‘Old age and household structure in mid-Victorian England and Wales’.

2 M. Anderson, *Approaches to the History of the Western Family 1500-1914* (Cambridge, 1995).

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Using data from the Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) databases for 1851, 1891 and 1911 Tom examined whether Laslett's assertion of the dominance of the 'nuclear household' in England and Wales' past was true amongst those aged over 60. He also considered whether the national picture, on which Laslett focused in *Household and Family in Past Time*, hid regional and temporal differences. Comparison of data across the three censuses for the five counties of Cheshire, Glamorgan, Hampshire, Hertfordshire and West Yorkshire showed relatively little change over time: around 29 per cent of elderly women were living in extended households in 1851, and 26 per cent in 1891. For men the corresponding figures were 27 and 23 per cent. Tom was able to show, however, that there were considerable differences and change over time at the county level, largely driven by the fortunes of certain sectors of the economy, such as the textile and mining industries. When spatial differences were mapped for registration districts across the whole country in 1891 a strong north/south, industrial/agricultural divide in the living arrangements of the elderly became evident. He concluded that when one was able to look at the nationwide picture for the late nineteenth century, while the view that everyone in the past lived in extended households was definitely not true, a considerable proportion of the elderly did live in such households, particularly in the industrial areas of northern England and South Wales.

The first speaker in the afternoon was **Iain Riddell**, author of the *Digital Genealogy* website and *kinshipcollation.net* blog who examined and reflected on three decades of studies of kinship in the past.³ His paper was based on an extensive reading list which Iain has kindly made available via his website.⁴ Iain argued that who one lived with may not have been as important in industrialising Britain as 'webs of relatedness', a point which he expanded upon using material from his work on Aberdeenshire, based on a plethora of sources including wills, tax rolls and newspapers. These allowed him to identify kinship and family links between sets of individuals, such as 'female farmers in Savoich', building up a qualitative picture of how kin-based networks 'worked on the ground', rather than imposing theoretical classifications on family groups observed in sources where much 'relatedness' went unseen. Impressively, his sources allowed him to follow members of particular webs as they migrated across Britain and overseas, demonstrating the great distances over which ties of kinship could extend.

In her presentation on 'Family memory and Jewish identity', **Laura Baggioli**, from the University of Westminster, described how she and her colleagues had set out to collect 'intergenerational oral history' for an exhibition at the Jewish Museum

3 I. Riddell, *Digital Genealogy: the Outputs of Popular Genealogy Put to Use by Second-Wave Digital Humanities* [2023] <http://kinshipcollation.net> [accessed 11 January 2023].

4 See <http://kinshipcollation.net/index.php/about/blog/campop-lpss-12th-nov-bibliography> [accessed 11 January 2023].

of London. After giving a brief introduction to oral history she explained that giving a ‘voice’ to those people who were missed by other forms of history is becoming increasingly important within the museum and heritage sector. Laura then outlined the Armistice to Brexit Project which was designed to collect Jewish experience of life in Britain over the century between 1918 and 2016. She played excerpts from an interview conducted with one family, introducing the individuals involved and pointing out the dynamics between the different generations and the interviewers and interviewees before highlighting some of the lessons that could be learnt— not just about actual historical events and experiences, but also about how members of the kin group ‘remembered’ their history. Older memories attained ‘legend’ status, leading family members to perpetuate collective myths which were not necessarily based on fact. When the family shared memories of events, these could invoke quite diverse feelings for different members of the group. The interviewees also had a tendency to choose the stories they told, and how they told them, to fit what they felt their interviewers wished to hear.

The final paper of the afternoon was presented by Kevin Schürer, who had worked with both Peter Laslett and Richard Wall at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, and who is now using the I-CeM databases which he created with Prof. Eddy Higgs at the University of Essex, to extend the geographical scope of the quantitative investigation of kinship and family and to push it into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kevin’s paper set out to uncover ‘Regional variations in household and family structure’ across Great Britain between 1851 and 1901. Laslett had contemplated exploring geographical variations in these factors, but his methodology had led him to believe there were only minimal differences to be found in England and Wales. The maps of Great Britain showing the proportion of adults over the age of 65 living with adult children (those over the age of eighteen years), which Kevin was able to present suggested that the greatest variation was to be seen between Scotland, Wales and England north of a line drawn between the Severn and the Humber, and the remaining part of England to the south of that line. There were, however, changes within each of these two large divisions over the half century 1851-1901. Kevin then went on to apply analyses based on cluster models to tease out regions where particular combinations of household structure were to be found. Although he stressed that the work was still quite preliminary, the resultant maps indicated that there were indeed marked regional differences in household structure at the middle of the nineteenth century which then evolved over the next five decades. Wales and north-west Scotland looked very similar, and remained so over time, although changes over the study period meant that Scotland became increasingly distinct from England. The family forms found south of the Severn and Wash at mid-century were quite distinct, yet by 1901 were to be found across the whole of England and in the central belt of Scotland as, Kevin argued, the economy became more homogeneous.

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All the papers were very well presented, engaging and thought-provoking, as demonstrated by the lively question and discussion sessions throughout the day. The speakers challenged the findings and methods of those contributing to the volume they were celebrating without ever losing respect for the path-breaking work and ideas represented in its pages. Laslett, Wall and all the other contributors to *Household and Family in Past Time* would no doubt have been fascinated to see and hear where their pioneering work had led researchers over the intervening 50 years and each paper presented at the Conference was a fitting tribute to their efforts.

On behalf of all those attending the conference and the LPSS Committee I would like extend big thank you to the speakers; to Tom Heritage for suggesting the theme of the conference; to Alice Reid and Cambridge University for hosting the meeting, to Karen Rothery and Rowena Burgess for their work behind the scenes and particularly to Kevin Schürer for organising such a stimulating meeting. Those attending in-person would like to also compliment Kevin on the catering arrangements. Despite a number of hurdles we were treated to an excellent and very sociable lunch!

The conference proceedings were recorded and are available on the Local Population Studies Society web site and on YouTube (see <http://www.localpopulationstudies.org.uk/conference/household-and-family-in-past-time/> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_PcvCns6aE).