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# LPSS Autumn Conference Report, 2016

## Perspectives on Old Age and Ageing

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The Local Population Studies Society held its autumn 2016 conference on 12 November, at St Mary's College, Durham. The conference was introduced and largely chaired by its organiser, Andy Burn.

### **Ageing, work and community**

Colin Pooley chaired this first session because **Andy Burn** was our initial speaker; his title was 'Working into old age in an early industrial town: Newcastle in the seventeenth century'. Andy began by discussing later twentieth century scholars' views of old age in the early modern period. Mid-century scholarship suggested a 'golden age' for the old, with the relatively small number of old people having an honoured place in their extended families. This 'golden age' was later disproved and it is now accepted that the majority of older people continued to work, whether this was because they needed the income, because their families needed their support and/or because they wanted to continue making a useful contribution, particularly in the years when they were still physically able. Retirement was 'a slope not a cliff'.

There are however relatively few sources which indicate what work older people were doing. Where occupations or statuses are given to old people, did they reflect their present occupation or status or those they had when they were younger? Four parishes in central Newcastle provide the father's occupation in baptism registers during the seventeenth century: they show an increasing proportion of men in work involving coal, either as keelmen (the men who transported coal downstream from the mining areas to the ships which would transport it to London and elsewhere), as labourers or in other related work. Some keelmen owned their boats, others worked as crew. This was hard physical work which few would have been able to continue doing into old age. The numbers employed in the traditional manufacturing crafts were stable, but by the end of the century Newcastle was a port specialising in moving coal.

Andy was able link 241 fathers who baptised children to considerably later burial or probate evidence where an occupation was given. Around 75 per cent of these men retained the same occupational descriptor at burial, but this was more common amongst those who had been in artisan manufacturing trades where apprenticeship and then guild membership would have been the norm; some older workers would still have been active in their occupation, and trade guilds could provide support for their aged members who were unable to work. Whether or not men from the artisan trades were actually still doing their original work, most kept the occupational descriptor.

Amongst keelmen and labourers the situation was more varied: around 33 per cent of men had a different occupational description at their death. Andy found two groups amongst those who had been keelmen: the better off who had owned their boats and either had sons working them or had hired their boat to others were likely still to be called keelmen; others later described as labourers were likely to be doing casual work.

**Christine Seal** spoke about 'Social care of the aged miners and mariners in the North-East'. She had the almshouse survey undertaken by the Family and Community History Research Society; these were almshouses founded between 1584 and 1843 and intended for aged mariners, seamen, keelmen and their dependents. She later widened her study to include the 'Aged Miner Homes' which were opened in Durham and Northumberland between 1896 and 1934. Today there are seven homes for mariners in Northumberland and County Durham, and 146 sets of homes for aged miners.

The almshouses were all founded in coastal or estuary towns, and varied considerably in size, in the average age of occupants, and in the way they were funded. Most had income from a levy on, or voluntary contributions from, men working as mariners or keelmen, and some were part funded by ship owners. The almshouses housed more widows and children than men, partly obviously because of the dangers of seafaring. Two almshouses were specifically for master mariners and their dependants, the others for aged seamen of all types, their wives or widows. Most of the information about inhabitants comes from the nineteenth century censuses, but some other listings survive, as do some details of their foundation statutes or conditions for entry. It is evident that their administrators distinguished the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' poor, but it was usually unacceptable to have received poor relief. Christine has analysed the inhabitants in all the almshouses in 1881 and 1901; in 1881 the almshouses varied considerably in terms of the proportion of occupants who were female (from 53 per cent to 100 per cent) and the proportion aged over 60 (from 7 per cent to 80 per cent) and this variety continued in 1901. Married couples were more likely to be older, widows could be of any age and could have children with them. Overall under half of all residents were over 60.

Miners working in the pits of County Durham and Northumberland commonly lived in tied cottages which they had to leave when they could no longer work in the pits. Before the introduction of Aged Miner homes, many old or disabled miners had no alternative but the workhouse. The founder of the campaign for Aged Miner homes was 'trying to remove the aged from the taint of the workhouse'. Funding came from Miner Relief funds, members who paid 1s a week and from coal owners and others who donated land and/or materials. The large majority of men given a home had worked in the mines for sixty years or more. By 1900 there were Aged Mineworkers Homes Associations in both Durham (DAMHA) and Northumberland. The first homes opened in County Durham in 1896 and by 1910 there were 475 homes available, including 200 for married couples in that county. By 1923 DAMHA was housing 1600 people and two years later they had completed 1200 homes.

The third contributor to the morning session, **Tom Heritage**, spoke about 'The living arrangements of the elderly in the 1851 and 1891 census enumerators' books for Hertfordshire'. He wanted to focus on elderly people in domestic households rather than those living in institutions, and on those in a mainly rural area. In the 1980s David Thomson suggested that under 40 per cent of elderly people lived with one of their children, although other studies had found otherwise. Tom had analysed the living patterns of elderly men and women aged 65 or over in eight Hertfordshire communities: two dominated by rural industries, two mainly agricultural, two suburban areas and two small market towns. He also combined the results from the four more rural parishes and from the four more urban ones. Tom gave us data not easily summarised, so this summary just gives a flavour of his work.

His categories were:

- 1 Living with offspring only (sons, daughters)
- 2 Living with extended kin only (grandchildren, siblings)
- 3 Living with offspring and extended kin
- 4 Living in a household without offspring or extended kin (excepting the categories below)
- 5 Living as a lodger or boarder
- 6 Living as a servant
- 7 Living as a visitor.

Tom first gave us the results of his analysis for 1851. He had found wide variations (35 to 62 per cent) in the percentages of elderly men and women living in any household with a child (categories 1 and 3 combined). When results for the rural and urban parishes were compared, the rural parishes showed nearly 52 per cent of elderly people living with one of their children, 10 per cent higher than

that for the urban parishes. Amongst those living with extended kin only (category 2), the rural/urban analysis was important. In rural areas over 18 per cent of elderly women were in category 2, compared to around 8 per cent of men. In the urban areas this difference did not exist. There were also some gender and rural/urban differences amongst elderly people not living with kin (category 4).

When the results for 1851 were compared with those for 1891 the majority of parishes showed a decline in co-residence but two showed an increase; both of these were places where industry was prospering. The picture was mixed in more detailed analysis: for example there was overall a small decline in the proportion of elderly residents living with offspring (categories 1 and 3 combined), but the fall was more significant in the rural parishes (over 8 per cent) compared to just 1 per cent in the urban areas. The comparison of eight very different places in both 1881 and 1901, along with the comparisons across time, means that Tom's conclusions relate partly to changes in the local economies of the parishes, partly to changes in how poor relief was meant to be delivered.

### **Old age and the New Poor Law**

The first paper in the second session, 'The Elderly Poor of North-West Wales in the New Poor Law Era', was delivered by **Frances Richardson**. It was a study of the Llanrwst Union and how the concept of removal of outdoor relief was pursued in this area. It has been suggested that the Poor Law Commissioners regarded Wales as mainly free from many of the problems highlighted by the poor relief system in the southern England. Hence many of the Unions in Wales wished to preserve the previous system of poor relief, which they believed to be widely effective, without recourse to the high costs of building and maintaining a workhouse.

Prior to 1834 there were only three workhouses in the north of Wales. The Llanrwst Poor Law Union was formed in April 1837 and represented 15 constituent parishes. The new workhouse building was not opened until 1848, but, in the main, it was not used by the elderly population, except for medical purposes. The research presented was based on relief decisions from 1837–8 (the first year of operation) which totaled 1,403 decisions and related to nearly 900 paupers.

The relief available changed with age. Younger men were given a one-off payment, whereas women were provided with a more regular payment. Older women were still more likely to be in receipt of a more regular payment. Age was not a clear or a necessarily numerical criterion, but was often defined in relation to infirmity and illness. In relative perspective, the amount paid was low in comparison with England and not a sufficient level based on the recommenda-

tion of the 1837-8 Select Committee. The figure suggested was 25 per cent of the labourer's wage which, according to the speaker, could be as low as half of that provided in England.

One main change post 1834 was that rent could no longer be paid as part of a claim. Prior to this point 10 per cent received a rent payment and, although there were transitional arrangements, most lost around 6d a week. Continued work emerges as the main reason why regular allowances in the Llanrwst Union were not paid until an advanced age, especially for men, and even then, were very low. Many Unions regarded men if between the ages of 16 and 70 as able-bodied and, thus able to work, unless for reasons of permanent disability. The average age at which new pensions were granted in Llanrwst was 68 for women and 72 for men. The occupations of elderly male paupers mirrored those of younger men, two thirds being agricultural labourers and the rest mainly craftsmen.

Dr Richardson demonstrated that the opposition to the New Poor Law in Wales, especially in the north-west, was based on a well-founded belief among ratepayers and poor law guardians alike that workhouses were an expensive option for this area. They supported the payment of small family allowances and expected widows and the elderly to continue working for as long as possible, but were prepared to pay low outdoor relief allowances and to increase them as they became more infirm. Poor relief expenditure remained relatively constant in the period up to 1850.

The paper illustrated the need for a range of local studies to enable historians to comment on the range of support offered and provided by the Poor Law Amendment Act. The second paper in the session, which also considered the implementation and opposition to the new legislation, was presented by **Lewis Darwen** and arose from a project being undertaken with Andrew Gritt. Entitled 'Urban poverty, welfare and the elderly in the 1840s' the paper was based on documents relating to household budgets for the elderly in Nottingham from 1852. The research project aims to look at what people were spending their money on, the strength of kinship networks and the makeshift economy.

The material was collated in response to the 1852 Outdoor Relief Regulation Order, which was the first attempt to bring the larger, urban Union under the regulations created by the Poor Law Amendment Act, by extending the restrictions over the payment of outdoor relief to include those who were sick, aged or widows. However, a number of Boards of Guardians rigorously opposed these changes and a revised order was issued at the end of year, such that the restrictions and the conditions referred to the able-bodied male.

The Nottingham Board of Guardians decided to interview paupers on a pension (on outdoor relief) to ascertain the effectiveness of the system being employed. The resultant documentation can be found in MH12 in the National

Archives and comprised 170 cases of mainly elderly interviewees dealing with income, expenditure and other information relating to living arrangements. Some of the records are basic but others, like the example given for Elizabeth Ferguson, gives a weekly breakdown of her budget. Lewis presented some aggregated figures for 29 paupers' statements. They all purchased sugar, 93 per cent bought bread, 90 per cent tea, 69 per cent meat but only 7 per cent cheese.

Although there may be limited opportunities for comparison with similar material, the research, while still in the early stages, has posed some interesting questions regarding the supplementation of income, how typical were the diets indicated and what levels of bias may be contained within the surviving sample. It is hoped that this information may be of use to supplement other information available to historians of the period.

## Health and Culture

The final session featured two papers that provided a novel and entertaining view of the process of ageing. **Deborah Thorpe** (University of York) focused on the health problems that ageing medieval scribes suffered and the ways in which this could be discerned from their handwriting. Her paper on 'Disordered quills: ageing, neurological disorders, and the features of medieval handwriting' came from an interdisciplinary project that involved history, neurology, engineering and calligraphy and clearly demonstrated the benefits of cross-disciplinary collaboration. She first showed how some scribes lived well into old age, and explained the health conditions that could be produced by working long hours with a quill pen at a sloping writing table. These included hand cramps, stomach pains, back ache and mental tiredness. Apparently scribes complained that people thought their work was easy but actually it was hard labour. Careful analysis of handwriting from medieval documents allowed the team to identify the effects of ageing as a scribe's handwriting changed over time. In particular, it is possible to discern different forms of tremor and distortion and to link them to particular neurological conditions. Such conditions did not, however, prevent the scribes from working into old age and the long social memory that such scholars had was deemed important in medieval society. A lively discussion followed the paper: two issues that were raised were the effects of left-handedness on a tremor, and the importance of the context in which the scribe was writing. Being rushed, being tired at the end of a day or working in particularly cold conditions could all affect the handwriting.

The final paper was delivered by **Barbara Crosbie** (University of Durham) on "'Rebels against time": ageing votaries of fashion in eighteenth-century England'. Her paper focused on the cultural connotations of getting old in eighteenth-century England as seen through the prism of intergenerational relations, espe-

cially how an individual's youth affected their old age, how the elderly were viewed by the young and how attitudes towards the elderly changed towards the end of the eighteenth century. On the one hand the late-eighteenth century saw increasing interest in longevity, possibly stimulated by the passing of the century and the few remaining citizens that remembered back to the previous century. However, at the same time there was increased criticism of the elderly who were seen as a burden and were especially derided by younger contemporaries if they refused to grow old gracefully. Cartoons and satirical magazines especially mocked older women and men who adopted 'young' fashions in dress and behaviour. For men the changing use of wigs may have been important as in the later eighteenth century natural hair became more fashionable than a male wig, and thus one of the most visible aspects of male ageing (greying and thinning of hair) became much more visible. The paper argued that this contributed to increased adulation of youth and marginalisation of the elderly. Again there were plenty of questions, focused in part on the role of an expanding press of magazines and cartoons that provided a vehicle for such satire. Overall, this was a very successful conference that provided fresh perspectives on ageing in the past, reminded us of the ways in which ageing and views of the elderly are all relative to other aspects of culture and society, and introduced a variety of sources, some undoubtedly new to members of the audience. The conference was expertly convened by Andy Burn with convenient and comfortable accommodation in St Mary's College, Durham.