

# THE TABULATION OF OCCUPATIONS IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CENSUS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DOMESTIC SERVANTS

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The statistical abstracts contained in the parliamentary census reports are our principal source for reconstructing the occupational structure of Victorian society. As such they have been widely used by historians, sociologists and economists, and are a vital component of all statistical models of the economy of that period. However, despite the obvious importance of the source, very little work has been done to gauge its accuracy. With notable exceptions,<sup>1</sup> most students of the period have been content to accept the figures contained in the census reports at face value. The present article is not an attempt to measure the overall discrepancies in the occupational totals quoted in the census reports. It can merely suggest some ways in which such discrepancies may have occurred and to encourage others to undertake the local census studies which may allow such an evaluation to be made. An example of the problems involved in the interpretation of such published occupational tables will be given with reference to the employment of domestic servants in one northern district in the period 1851 to 1871.

When examining these statistics it is important to recognise that they are several stages removed from the reality of nineteenth-century society. They represent a series of interpretations of fact made in turn by the householders who filled in the original schedules, by the enumerators who collected these and copied them into their enumeration books, and by the clerks in the central Census Office who tabulated the results. Each would have interpreted the subtle distinctions between household relationships according to their own experience and values. When evaluating the reliability of this data it will therefore be necessary to look at the process of taking the census from the differing points of view of the individuals involved. It is also necessary to examine the assumptions underlying the interpretation of these statistics by modern historians.

These strictures certainly apply when dealing with terms such as 'servant' and 'domestic employment'. 'Service' in the nineteenth century was a

legal term rather than the description of an occupation, it related to a certain relationship between employer and employee, and could be applied equally to living-in farm labourers and to housemaids in aristocratic households. Thus in the nineteenth-century census schedules the term 'servant' could appear in the column reserved for information on an individual's relationship to the household head, as well as in the column giving occupations. On the other hand, 'domestic' occupations such as that of the housekeeper might not imply any contractual or legal relationship within the household, but rather a function carried out by a member of the family within the home. A housekeeper could merely be the keeper of the house, in other words, a housewife. But such a function could also be performed by a distant relative who in every social sense was regarded as outside the family unit, and who might even be paid on a contractual basis. Such subtle, but nevertheless important, distinctions would be difficult to communicate through a census form, and were easily lost in the process of transcription and interpretation which the compilation of the nineteenth-century census involved. In dealing with such matters it is necessary to distinguish between 'domestic service' as a description of a legal and social system, and the term 'housemaid' as a description of a person performing a set of duties in the home of their employer. In nineteenth-century usage however such distinctions were often blurred.

## II

The taking of a Victorian census for the whole of England and Wales, and the derivation of statistics from the results, was a considerable administrative task. After the passing of the necessary Census Act, the department in charge of taking the census (this was the General Register Office from 1841 onwards) established a temporary Census Office in London. This, staffed by temporary clerks, undertook the tabulation of the information compiled locally. Up till 1841 the census was supervised in the field by the overseers of the parishes, but with the establishment of civil registration in 1837 the district of the local Registrar of Births and Deaths became the local unit of administration. This official had to divide his district into 'enumeration districts', and to appoint an 'enumerator' for each.

The latter, also employed on a temporary basis, distributed household schedules to each householder, who filled them out on the night of the census. The enumerator had to copy these into books which were then sent to London for tabulation under various headings.<sup>2</sup>

Such an administrative system could only produce consistent statistical results if there was a clear policy on tabulation at the centre, and if the staff involved were properly trained and supervised. Since the Census Office was only a temporary institution none of these conditions could be adequately fulfilled in the nineteenth century. The Registrar General and his predecessors appear to have been too preoccupied with the establishment of the central Census Office, and its staffing, to give much time to the serious consideration of such policy. The temporary clerks employed were not of a high quality, and appear to have received little training in

methods of tabulation.<sup>3</sup> It was admitted in 1890 that these clerks could not be adequately supervised,<sup>4</sup> and this must have applied to an even greater extent to the local enumerators and to the householders who filled in the original schedules.

Given this administrative system modern researchers must be alive to the numerous difficulties in interpreting the statistics presented in the official census reports. We have no means of gauging how far Victorian householders could understand the census schedules, or how far the enumerators standardised the entries they copied into their books for dispatch to London. Nor do we know how the clerks working in the Census Office interpreted these schedules, or how they may have revised them. Such revisions certainly took place, as when double occupations were reduced to a single component for ease of tabulation. Thus in existent schedules the term 'farmer and butcher' is often reduced to 'farmer' or 'butcher' by the deletion of the other, complementary, occupation.

### III

More work needs to be done on the relationship between the enumerators' books and the tabulations in the published census reports, for which they formed the raw material. A limited contribution to this task has resulted from my own research into domestic servants and their employers in the Registrar General's District of Rochdale in the period 1851 to 1871. This work was based on one-in-four random samples of households containing domestic servants in the enumerators' books for this district in the censuses of 1851, 1861 and 1871.<sup>5</sup> Table 1, a stylised example of a household schedule from the 1851 enumeration books, shows that a 'domestic servant' could be defined in two ways, either by occupation or by 'Relationship to the Head of the Household'. In my own work a 'servant-employing household' was defined by occupation, that is, it contained an individual designated as a variation of the terms 'servant' and 'maid', or as a butler, footman, groom, coachman, gardener, governess or nurse.

**Table 1 An example of the schedules contained in the census enumeration books for the census of 1851**

No.	street	name	relation to head		age		occupation	birthplace
			head	condition	M	F		
100	N3 Drake St	Wm Smith	head	M	28		cotton operative	Lancs., Rochd
		Eliz. Smith	wife	M		29		"
		Jane Smith	daur	U		13	nurse	"
101	N5 Drake St	John Rogers	head	M	22		labourer	Yorks., Leed
		Ann Rogers	wife	M		21		"
102	N1 York St	Wm Clegg	head	M	38		cotton manufacturer	Lancs., Rochd
		Eliz. Clegg	wife	M		36		"
		Fanny Jones	servant	U		22	servant	Wales

As can be seen from Table 2, the sample of such households from the 1851 enumerators' books produced totals of persons aged twenty and over in the various servant occupations which, in general terms, were comparable to those found in the published census report.<sup>6</sup> The match was very close in the case of housekeepers. This led to the conclusion that the clerks in the Census Office merely summed the occupational entries in the schedules to arrive at the total number of domestic servants in the district.

**Table 2 Servants, aged 20 years or over, in the Rochdale district sample, 1851**

Servant types	total sample	true ** servants	Census * total (+4)
General (F)	217	158	244.75
Butler	1	1	0.00
General (M)	21	9	17.75
Coachman	3	1	0.25
Groom	4	0	0.25
Gardener	16	2	0.00
Housekeeper	66	10	65.50
Cook	5	5	8.75
Housemaid	18	9	13.25
Nurse	9	6	5.75
Governess	3	2	0.00
Ladies maid	2	2	0.00
Laundrymaid	1	1	0.00
Kitchenmaid	1	1	0.00
Footman	0	0	0.00
Companion	0	0	0.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>356.25</b>

\* PP 1852-3, LXXXVIII; pt.II. Published totals divided by four to make them compatible with one-in-four census sample.

\*\* For the definition of this term see section III above.

However a large number of these individuals in the sample were not enumerated as servants in relationship to the heads of the households in which they lived. Out of the total sample of 367 persons in servant occupations aged twenty years or over, 160, or over 40 per cent, were not enumerated as such, the vast majority of these being related by kinship to the household head (the term 'kinship' being used here in its widest sense to indicate any relationship by marriage or birth). In Table 2 the number of persons in particular servant occupations in the sample who were also servants in relationship to the household head are given in the second column under the heading 'true servants', the remainder being either lodgers or relatives.

These figures can be interpreted in several different ways. Such servants resident with kin may have been normally employed as living-in domestics but may have been temporarily out of work. This would, however, have represented a very high level of unemployment. Conversely this might indicate a large population of day-servants, who worked in the homes of their employers by day and who returned to lodge with their relatives at

night. A third possibility is that these 'domestics' not only lodged with their kin but also worked in their homes.

The Victorian Registrars General and modern historians have often tended to assume a dichotomy between life in the home and work in the outside world. Our conception of an occupation has tended to be conditioned by our expectation that 'work' is an activity carried on outside the home which can be measured by the money equivalents of wages or profits. Thus it has often been assumed that the number of persons in servant occupations in the nineteenth-century census tabulations represented the number of men and women working for board, lodging and wages in the homes of middle-class employers with whom they had some contractual arrangement.<sup>7</sup> There is some evidence however that many of the Rochdale householders who filled in their schedules on the night of the census saw 'service' as a set of functions which could be carried on within the family.

Thus, amongst the sixty-six 'housekeepers' of all ages found in the 1851 sample only ten were also servants in relationship to the head of the household in which they resided. Of the remaining fifty-six women, no fewer than twenty-three were the heads of the households in which they lived, and another fifteen were the wives of the head of the household.

Similarly out of the thirty-eight 'nurses' living with kin enumerated in the Rochdale district sample of 1851, eighteen were aged under ten and only three were not members of the nuclear family. Such children were probably part of that vast army of child-minders so familiar in nineteenth-century textile towns, where so many married women worked. Amongst the thirty-six households containing such 'nurses', 27.8 per cent contained three or more children aged under ten, compared with 16 per cent amongst a control sample of 201 randomly selected Rochdale households. Since we are dealing here with aggregate percentages drawn from samples we cannot be certain that they are a true reflection of the actual figures which would have been obtained from a study embracing all households or all servant employing households. However statistical theory allows us to estimate, at various levels of confidence, the degree to which sample proportions will deviate from the true figures in the underlying population. In this case we can be 80 per cent certain that this difference in the two proportions quoted was not caused by sampling error.<sup>8</sup>

Amongst the remaining eighty-eight female 'kin servants', who were neither housekeepers, nurses, nor specifically 'working at home', some, if not all, may have been 'day-servants' or temporarily unemployed. However, certain aggregate characteristics of the households in which they lived suggest that many may have been working at home. Thus, in 1851, out of sixty-nine households containing such servants thirty-one, or 44.93 per cent, contained a head who was widowed, compared with 17.9 per cent amongst the control sample.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, amongst the former group of households, 57.1 per cent contained five or more persons, compared with 46.3 per cent amongst the control sample.<sup>10</sup> Many of the households containing such 'kin-servants' were headed by persons of relatively high social status. Thus 34.3 per cent of these households were either retailers or

farmers, compared with only 16.5 per cent amongst the control sample.<sup>11</sup> These aggregate characteristics suggest that many of these women were probably working at home, often standing-in for absent wives, in fairly prosperous homes.

In addition, of these eighty-eight women, 43.1 per cent were not members of the nuclear family, compared with a mere 7.0 per cent amongst the 478 females in the control sample.<sup>12</sup> This indicates that such 'servants' were a feature of relatively unusual extended families.

None of these individuals can automatically be said to be misenumerated. However, the position of many of them within the households of their kin, and the aggregate characteristics of such households, suggest that a significant number will have worked at home as 'home-helpers'. As Professor Anderson has pointed out, in nineteenth-century Lancashire there was a heightened propensity for relatives to provide each other with support within the home, especially at times of family crisis.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which widows remained at home as 'housekeepers' whilst their children were at work, or children acted as 'nurses' for the babies of the female factory hands, and the manner in which other relations acted as proxy housewives during the widowhood of the household head, all reflect the importance of this tradition of 'huddling'. The fact that such relationships could be regarded as occupations reflects the recognition of their importance by such families.

This propensity of householders to interpret occupations in ways alien to our own preconceived notions can also be found amongst census enumerators. Thus, in 1861, out of 234 households in one enumeration district in the Castleton area of Rochdale, the enumerator described forty-nine housewives as 'housekeepers' in his copy of the original schedules. Similarly, in the same census, out of the 249 households in an enumeration district in Wardleworth, the enumerator described 141 housewives in the same manner. For these officials the term 'housewife' and 'housekeeper' appear to have been synonymous.<sup>14</sup>

How did the clerks in the central Census Office interpret the results of the census? The short answer is that we do not know. However, an examination of the census schedules for the Rochdale district and the census reports for the period 1851 to 1871, suggests that some attempt was made to compensate for the type of misnumeration mentioned above. The fit between the 1851 census sample and the tables in the 1851 census report had been close, but this was not the case in 1861. In that year the census sample gave a total of 628 persons (2 to allow for sample error<sup>15</sup>) aged over 19 in servant occupations, whilst the census report gave a total of 1,533 for the same age group, or 383.25 when divided by four to bring the figure in line with the one-in-four census sample.<sup>16</sup> The same report recorded 253 housekeepers of that age, although the census sample would have led us to expect no fewer than 968 (14). The inference to be drawn is that the clerks did not merely add together all the occupations to get the occupational totals. On the other hand they did not do so by adding up all those persons recorded as 'servant' in the column headed

'Relationship to the Head of the Household': An examination of all households in the 1861 Rochdale census reveals that this figure would have been only 1,321 for all servants of all ages.

An examination of the census reports for other areas over the same period suggests that similar attempts were made to rectify the 'mis-specification' of servant occupations. Thus, in 1851, the borough of Blackburn was recorded in the census report as having 733 persons employed as 'housekeepers', nearly 38 per cent of the entire servant population.<sup>17</sup> By 1861 the number of 'housekeepers' recorded had fallen to fifty-one, or under 3 per cent of the servant total.<sup>18</sup> Over the same period the number of 'housekeepers' in the borough of Oldham rose from 48 to 146.<sup>19</sup> It is evident that some alterations were being made to the raw statistics contained in the census schedules, but on what system and with what consistency we cannot tell.

Even assuming that the census reports accurately reflected the number of traditionally defined living-in domestic servants, it would still be unwise to use them uncritically to reconstruct changes in local occupational structures over time. Just as the term 'domestic servant' might represent the work of a woman in the home of her relatives, it might also cover other types of work which are today regarded as separate occupations. Thus, during the period 1851 to 1871, between a third and a quarter of all living-in servants in Rochdale worked for retailers. Most of these servants will have worked in the shop, a supposition confirmed by other local sources. The distinction between the servant and the shop-assistant is therefore an artificial one. Those who attempt to explain the decline of domestic service in the late nineteenth century by the rise of alternative employment, especially in shops, may be mistaking the cause for the effect. The decline of the domestic may not be linked to the 'rise' of the shop-assistant, rather to the change of nomenclature as the home-based, family shop was replaced by the lock-up shop and the chain store. As retailing ceased to be a domestic business so workers in this section of the economy ceased to be called domestic servants.

#### IV

If such mis-specifications were a general feature of the nineteenth-century census it might lead us to revise our views on the economic and social role of women in Victorian England and Wales. If we assume that all the 'servants' who lived with relatives in Rochdale worked at home, then out of 2,065 persons described as working in servant occupations in 1851, only 1,113, or 53.9 per cent, were properly enumerated. If such a discrepancy was found over the whole country then approximately half a million women may have been wrongly enumerated in the mid-nineteenth-century census reports. This may certainly be a gross overestimation but the precise level of this discrepancy can only be gauged by detailed studies of the role of 'kin-servants' in industrial and agricultural communities. It is to be hoped that the present paper has raised enough

questions about the mechanics of the Victorian census to encourage others to undertake such studies.

At the heart of the matter lies the definition of an occupation and work, and the relationship between the economic world and the home. Confusion between 'domestic' and 'business' activities may have existed in the homes of retailers, farmers, and in all small businesses where the help of the servant, wife or children was indispensable. Victorian ideology attempted to keep the two spheres of home and work separate, but we must not fall into the trap of believing that all Victorians shared these beliefs, or that such a division always existed in practice.

## NOTES

1. P. M. Tillot, 'Sources of inaccuracy in the 1851 and 1861 Censuses', in E. A. Wrigley (ed), **The Study of Nineteenth Century Society**, 1972, pp. 82-133.
2. **Report of the Committee appointed by the Treasury to inquire into certain Questions connected with the taking of the Census** ....., Parliamentary Papers, LVIII, 1890, Minutes of Evidence, p. 1,5(a).
3. **Ibid.** p. viii.
4. **Ibid.** p. viii.
5. Public Record Office H0107/2244-2247; RG9/3032-3051; RG10/4112-4132.
6. **Census of Gt Britain, 1851. Population Tables II**, Parliamentary Papers, LXXXVIII, 1852-3, pp. 636-47.
7. e.g. H. Perkin, **The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880**, 1969, p. 143; M. McLeod, **Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City**, 1974, p. 26.
8. This is done by calculating the difference between the two percentages involved and then comparing this with the likely magnitude of the statistical error given by the following formula:

$$\text{Sampling error} = t \text{ statistic} \cdot \sqrt{\frac{Ps_1(1 - Ps_1)}{n_1 - 1} + \frac{Ps_2(1 - Ps_2)}{n_2 - 1}}$$

Where:

$Ps_1$  = first sample percentage treated as a proportion of one

$Ps_2$  = second sample percentage treated as a proportion of one

$n_1$  = number of cases in population from which first proportion derived

$n_2$  = number of cases in population from which second proportion derived

The t statistic is a computed value which can be reduced in size to correspond to certain confidence levels. Thus if we wish to be 95 per cent certain that the difference between two proportions is statistically significant we multiply the results of the equation to the right of the t statistic in the formula by the value of t at 95 per cent, that is 1.96. If the resulting sampling error is smaller than the difference actually observed between the sample proportions then we can be 95 per cent certain that this discrepancy was not solely due to sampling error but represents a true difference between the underlying populations. In the case quoted above the difference is not significant at 95 per cent, but by reducing the t statistic to the 80 per cent confidence level we get a positive result. In other samples from the 1861 and 1871 censuses the differences between the analogous percentages were significant at the 80 and 95 per cent levels respectively.



9. Difference statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level.
10. Difference statistically significant at the 80 per cent confidence level.
11. Difference statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level.
12. Difference statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level.
13. M. Anderson, **Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire**, 1971.
14. Public Record Office RG9/3032-3051.
15. The sampling error being calculated by the formula:

$$P \pm t \sqrt{\frac{P(1-P)}{n-1}}$$

Where:

P = number of servants treated as a proportion of all servants

n = number of cases in the population of all servants

t = t statistic

16. **Census of England and Wales, 1861**, Parliamentary Papers, LIII, Pt II, 1863, pp. 634-47.
17. **Census of Gt Britain, 1851, Population Tables II**, Parliamentary Papers, LXXXVIII, 1852-3, p. 652.
18. **Census of England and Wales, 1861**, Parliamentary Papers, LIII, Pt II, 1863, p. 652.
19. **Census of Gt Britain, 1851, Population Tables II**, Parliamentary Papers, LXXXVIII, 1852-1853, p. 652. **Census of England and Wales, 1861**, Parliamentary Papers, LIII, Pt II, 1863, p. 652.