

## LOCAL POPULATION STUDIES IN SCHOOLS (2)

### A DEMOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO HISTORY IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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The history syllabus theme for my fourth-year class is **Georgians and Victorians** and I decided to approach the topic through the available parish registers and national census enumerators' returns. I decided upon such a statistical approach to history with my class of ten to eleven year-olds because that is my own approach to history, and I believe that an enthusiastic teacher will arouse the interest and enthusiasm of the class. I also saw in the project the opportunity for the children to gain experience in arithmetic and mathematics, geography, and art and craft; and as an additional bonus to the work the children would be presented with the opportunity of responsible, first-hand contact with the artefacts of history, principally the parish registers that have recorded life and death in their parish, for some 450 years. This method of study reached beyond the confines of their classroom textbook and the class were excited by the proposition that, since no history of Elm of this type had previously been written, they would have to write their own.

With these thoughts in mind I set about the task of organising work for the class that would be interesting yet within the capabilities of a group with a range from a reading age of 7.6 to a mental age of 15 years. The work would need to be comprehensive yet capable of completion in the available time, allowing for all the other academic, sporting and social demands made upon the children's time. But to a degree the work is open-ended and next year's class will be able to continue the study. Underpinning everything is the essential objective of awakening an interest in history, and my belief in the value of **first-hand** experience for children of this age range.

Having decided to undertake the project I needed to develop a pattern of organisation. Whilst the children's time was inevitably at a premium and as a class they were inexperienced in methods of research, I had the advantage of being free to organise my own timetable and the support in matters of administration of the headmaster. I was also fortunate in the help offered by the vicar of Elm and his wife<sup>1</sup> in allowing the class, as a class or in groups, to visit the vicarage, church and churchyard as often as necessary. In the event some children made three visits during the year, some as many as five or six. All the class were taken on introductory visits to see the registers, then subsequent visits were arranged for

specific groups as the need arose. The children who worked on a family tree found a constant need to refer to the registers as the answer to one question raised a further question.

The project was introduced to the children in the classroom and preparations for the visits to the vicarage were made. Visits to the vicarage to see the registers were organised on a group basis. The children were shown the registers and the need to work with care, and in pencil at all times, was emphasised. Throughout the whole project and especially when visiting the vicarage I have been impressed by the children's responsible behaviour and mature regard for the unique value of the registers. Yet one would be often amused by their rapid transition back to being **children** when the opportunity arose: when, during breaks from study, they were allowed on the climbing frame in the garden, or when the vicar's daughter was absent from school with a cold and allowed one group to play with her toy farm!

The purpose of these visits was to allow the children to read the actual entries in the registers, and then to begin to extract information from them. They were pleased to find that they were able to do so quite easily. After their introductory visits the children made their decisions as to what they wished to study. Baptism, burial and marriage statistics would be collected as a major part of the work. In response to the question 'What does it mean when it says "her mark"?' it was decided to examine evidence of illiteracy. Some children decided to compare a survey of Christian names in the registers with the names on the current school register. Another group wanted to record occupations. Inevitably the class was fascinated by causes of death when they were recorded. One child whose family had been local for many generations decided to compile a family tree and great excitement was caused when a forbear was found to have been buried with a note in the burial register 'inquest — manslaughter'. Arrangements are currently being made to inspect copies of local newspapers of the time. Whether or not all initial plans actually come to fruition does not of course really matter. What is important is that the children discover the sorts of questions which they can ask and try to answer on the basis of the registers.

Before the second visit to the vicarage the children prepared worksheets. Appropriate worksheets allowed the speedy but accurate extraction of the required information. Since one of the functions of the junior school is to develop basic skills I demanded a high standard and although it is not necessary that work produced should be flawless I was more than pleased and satisfied with the results. The children, in fact, set high standards for themselves; work was often started again because of errors in recording or presentation. The skills demanded were accuracy in recording, neatness in presentation and an ability to keep control of quite complicated work procedures, often involving extensive amounts of paper. The benefits, however, extend beyond work skills to social organisation within groups. The children have developed an increasing awareness of the past and a concern for the buildings and the people of our village, past and present. One pair produced a baptism graph but being dissatisfied with

the fluctuations went on to present a graph based on a five-year running mean. They also analysed their results and offered logical theories to explain a decline in baptisms revealed by the graph: subsequent investigation supported their explanation that the parish had been divided when another church had been completed in an adjoining village.

Within the classroom the work functioned through classwork, group work and individual work. When working with the whole class I used the blackboard a lot and much of the analysis was done in this way. The children provided information from their researches, but I was concerned that each group should know what other groups had discovered. I feared that I could too easily become the only one with a comprehensive picture of the work and the findings. Accordingly, when I felt it was appropriate we worked as a class on the analysis of group findings, and much of this work centred on the blackboard. The children were encouraged to take notes from the blackboard whether or not the particular analysis concerned their own group's work. Nevertheless, group activities were the main working method. The children were more or less allowed free choice in forming groups and since there is a tendency for junior children to choose work-mates of roughly the same ability level my class of twenty-four children became six or eight groups, each working separately and with a considerable range of ability between groups. The groups tended to vary slightly as children completed a task and then chose to work as pairs. Generally speaking very little time had to be given to the organisation of groups and very few children had to be directed into a group. It was in groups that the main tasks of reading the material and extracting the information were undertaken. The tally-mark system was employed in all groups, children worked in pairs and findings were bonded before graphs were produced. Children did not willingly choose to work alone, but were occasionally placed in situations where it was necessary to do so. As each group completed the extraction of information, for example, **each member** of the group was required to produce a graph of the results. This prevented anyone losing interest after the tally-marks had been made and ensured that each child understood how the information could be used. It also had the effect of producing enough copies for further use. Each child would have a piece of work which could be included in a folder of individual work. A good selection of material was thus available for display. Like all junior teachers I place enormous emphasis on the use of children's work for wall display.

During the term we began to watch a television programme for schools: **How we used to live**. During the course of the series we found many useful comparisons and discussion points which related to our parish register work. We now began as a continuation of our project an analysis of the 1851 census enumerators' returns for the village of Elm. We obtained a photostat copy of the census and I prepared one index card for each household, completing 401 cards in all. The class then copied my cards and we completed five copies of the original, to allow groups to work on the information at the same time. The task of copying was laborious but the children persevered and many took cards home to complete. I calculated that each child did an average of sixty-six cards, although some

did less and some did many more. Once again we discussed the information which might be used and the class decided which topics should be pursued. The popularity of names had proved fascinating, particularly to one group of girls, so further work was planned on the basis of the census. Likewise, occupations were to be continued as a subject of study. But now we could think about households, the number of lodgers, the number of servants, and so on. One group decided on a study of the ages of males and females. Another on the ratio of a farmer's acreage to labourers employed. The place of birth of the head of household was used as a guide to mobility. This was done by placing tally-marks on a chart calibrated in five mile distances from Elm. A group of girls proved very competent at handling this study and identified all sorts of problems. They were sometimes unable to locate birthplaces on maps and found this very frustrating. At the completion of their study they realised that some confusion had arisen in the use of the tally-marks and were gamely prepared to begin again. Time, however, defeated them and we intend to make this theme part of the project for next year's class. The children were, of course, very interested in what the census revealed about scholars. The school itself was built in 1860 and we have the school log book dating from 1862. This allowed us to look at reasons for absences from school, yearly inspectors' reports, and so on. This provided a valuable means of extending the range of the project beyond the census.

Before commencing work the children were given time to familiarise themselves with the form of the census so that they could work on the task of extraction as accurately and effectively as possible. But things frequently went wrong. 'I gave him the paper, but he can't find it; we'll have to start again'. 'We've finished our tally-chart but are not sure it's right; so we're going to start again'. 'I'll have to do this graph again because he lent me this felt-tipped pen and it's just run out, and I haven't finished the colouring'.

As with the parish registers the class worked in groups of their own choice, with minimum interference from me, on topics agreed upon by discussion. I had, of course, to assess the difficulty of the proposed topics and guide some groups towards appropriate choices. Broadly speaking my role became one of helping with the identification of tasks, providing resources and ensuring that each child was usefully employed within the group. As an analysis was completed by a group we discussed the implications of the findings together as a class. Some very good ideas came from individuals. 'Ninety-three servants were unmarried and only one was married, so it must have been a job for girls to do until they married'. 'Most men and boys in the parish were agricultural labourers, but farmers of less than five acres didn't employ any labourers at all, did they?' 'Most people worked in the village then, but it's different now, isn't it?' (We are, at present, completing a study of fathers' occupations). 'There's lots of scholars in 1851, but this school wasn't built until 1860, so perhaps they had another school building or they may have had school in people's houses, mightn't they?' (We are still not sure what the arrangements were before 1860 so here again is something to be followed up).

Here then was the evidence that I had sought that this work had been worthwhile with the class; they were analysing their results and beginning to appreciate that the evidence before them was of a life-style different from their own; evidence of their village but not of their time; of a social order that had once been, but was no more. They were writing their own village history and asking their own questions of the evidence. 'Although Victoria was Queen, there were very few girls named after her — was that because she wasn't popular?' 'Here is a man of seventy-six years working as an agricultural labourer — why wasn't he a pensioner?'

A year's work in a junior school had included many other subjects and had included diversions within the history work (we spent half a term studying slavery and its abolition since Thomas Clarkson was born in Wisbech, our market town). During the year we have also studied the geography and historical geography of the Fens. But the work on local population studies has been of immense value. It has created avenues of study for other classes to follow in their turn. I have had the opportunity of building a relationship with my class in demanding situations, and when I have had to make demands of the class they have not failed me. They have shown that eleven-year-olds are capable of a more demanding standard than the pages of their history text-books would suggest. At the end of it they have produced work which has been meticulously presented. Of this work few pieces are perfect examples of academic scholarship, but all represent very considerable effort on the part of top-juniors in

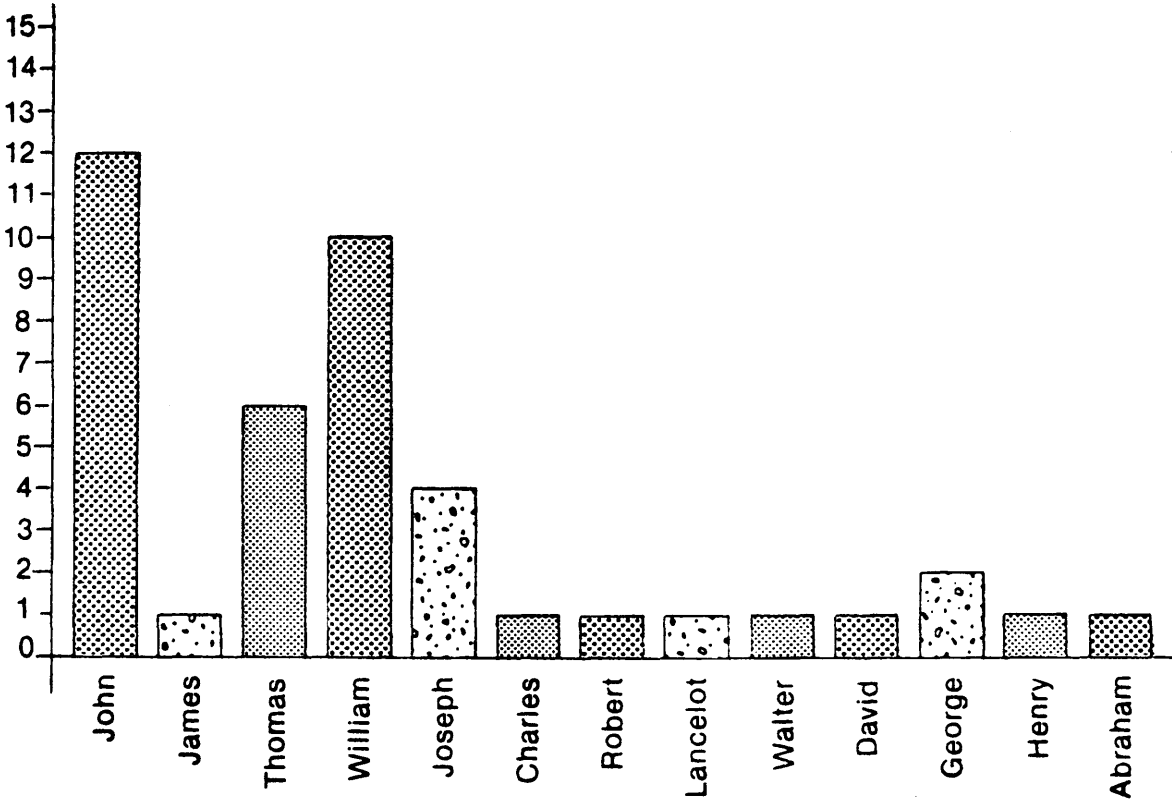


Figure 1: Number of boys named after their father: 1851 Census.

precise displays. The children enjoyed their work on names and as well as drawing graphs to illustrate the popularity of boys' and girls' names in 1851 and 1980 we tried some more sophisticated analysis which had an immediate appeal to the children: figure 1 shows what one boy produced to show the number of boys in the 1851 Elm census returns named after their fathers.

Some of the errors which appeared in the children's final charts indicated the difficulty which they sometimes found in reading the originals, and sometimes reading one another's handwriting during the various stages of preparation of the charts. At this stage I made no attempt to correct such errors; it was after all the children's own work and the errors often served to teach valuable lessons about the nature of the work. Figure 2 shows our graph of the number of children living in each house in Elm in 1851.

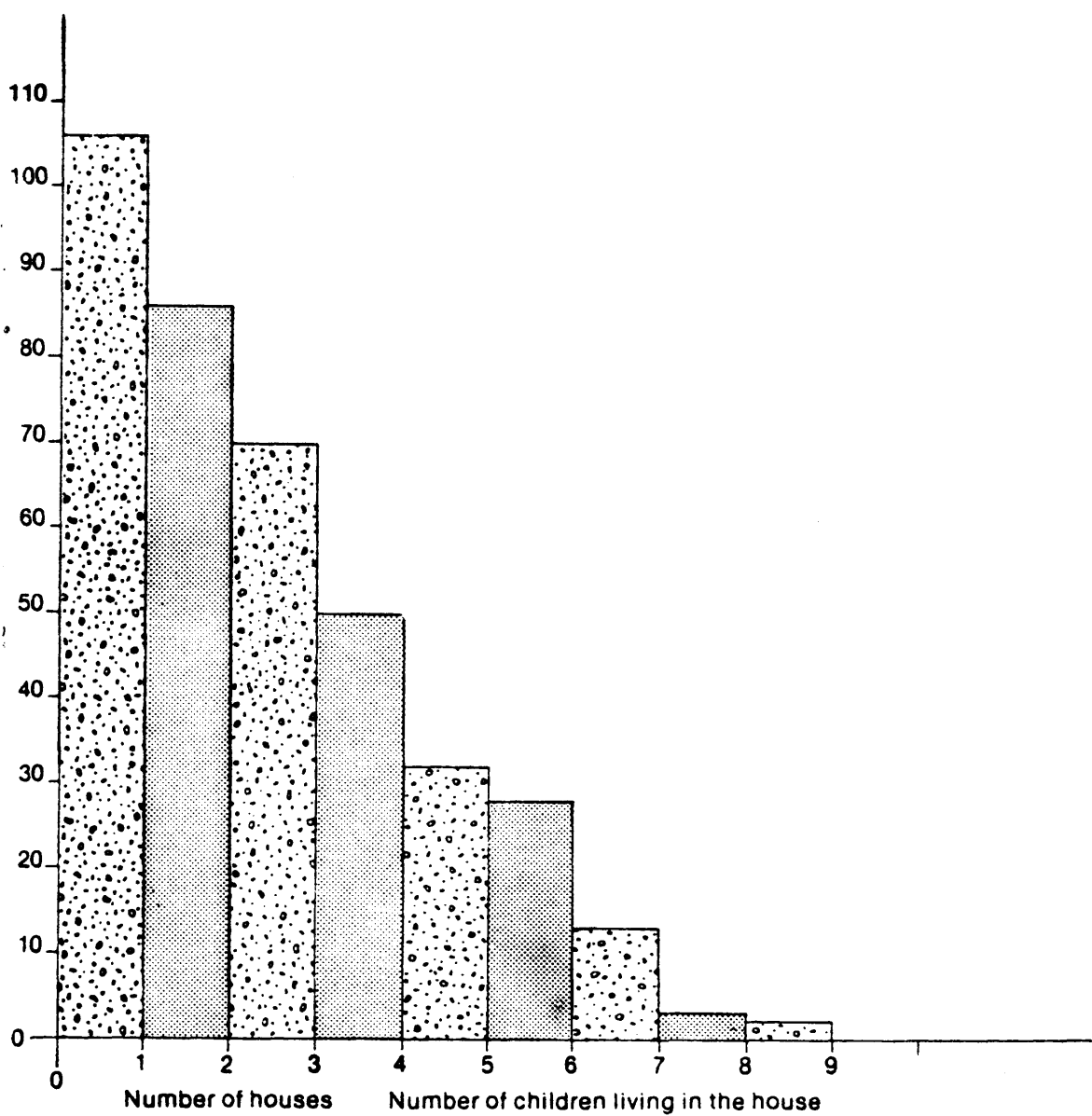


Figure 2: Number of children living in each house, Elm 1851.

This led us to discuss the idea of the large Victorian family, and to question the basis of our evidence. We accepted that we only had evidence of children living at home and had no way of knowing how many might have already left home. Our work on scholars from the 1851 census allowed the preparation of an age-sex pyramid of scholars which was quite a demanding task for ten to eleven year olds. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the 162 scholars we discovered in 1851.

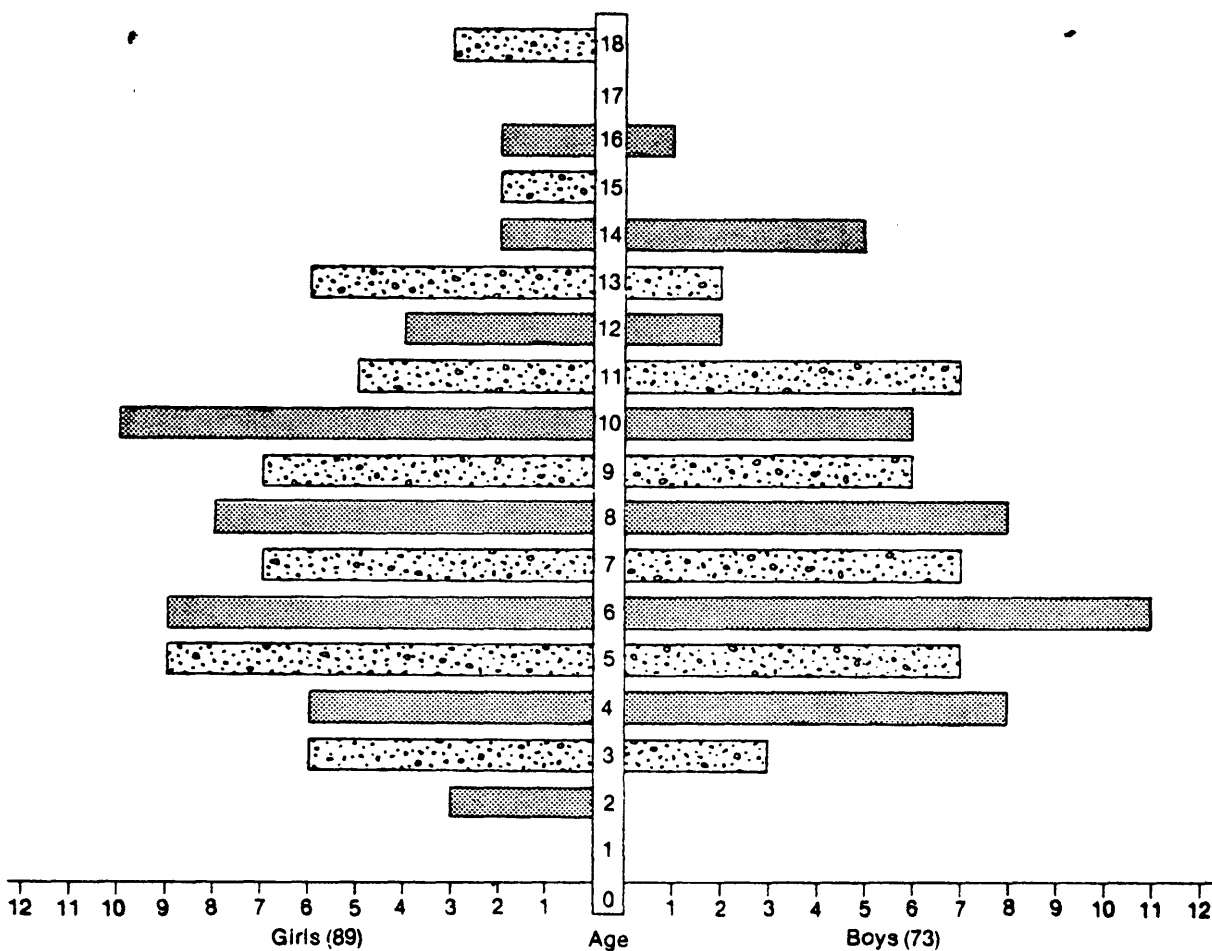


Figure 3: Scholars in Elm 1851.

The work on parish registers produced a wide variety of charts and it was clear that some of these top-juniors were well able to cope with presenting graphs of baptisms and burials such as appear in all works based on parish register demography. I hope the content is correct, of course, but it is much more important to note the way in which children were able to grasp the idea of such figures. As an example of one aspect of our work on parish registers, figure 4 shows one boy's presentation of information on occupations recorded in 1830.

Throughout all the statistical presentation, however, this remained a very human study. Nothing fascinated the class more than those instances

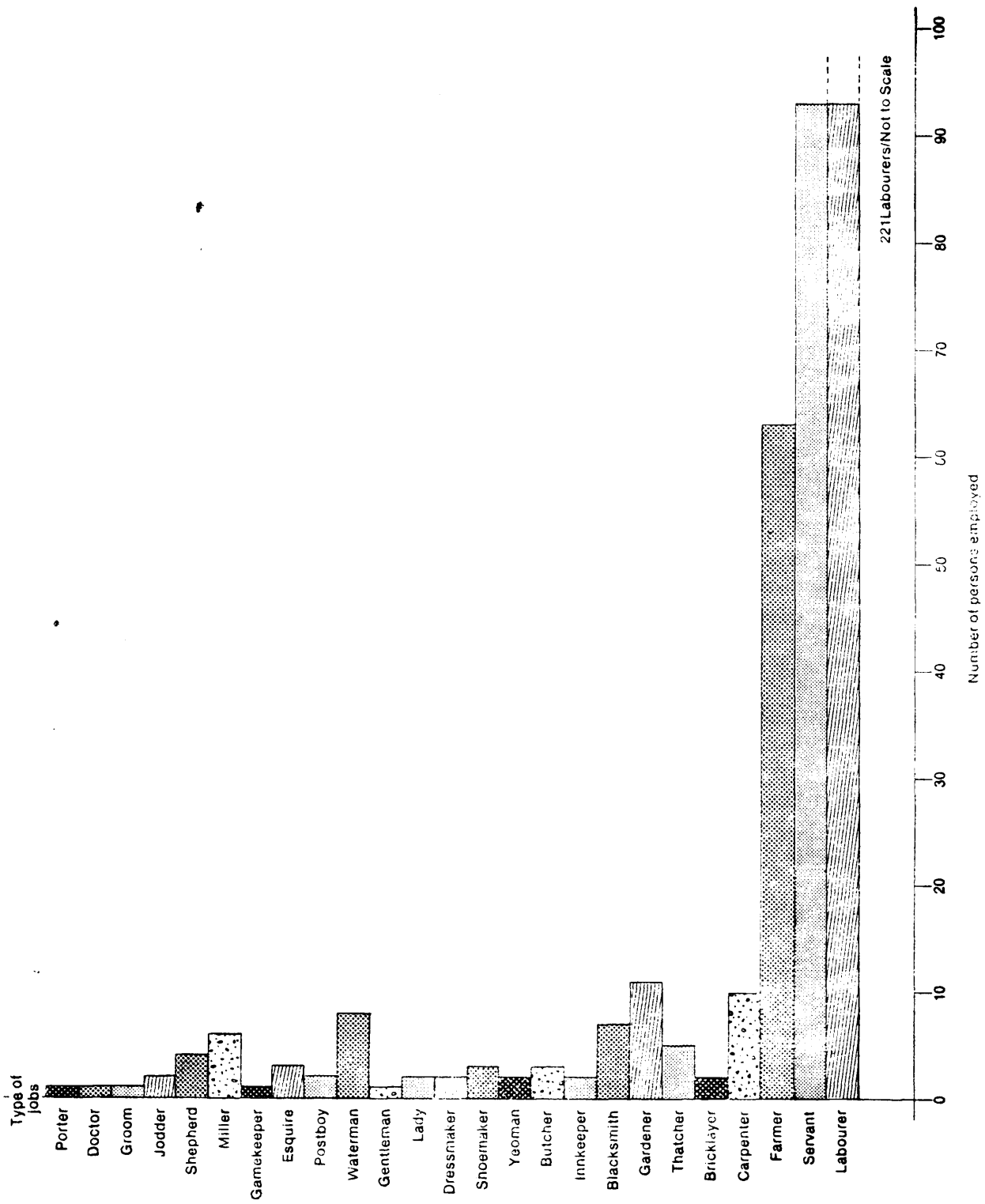


Figure 4: Occupations recorded in baptism registers, 1830.



where cause of death was recorded in the burial registers. Cholera and smallpox will lead to subsequent study of health and hygiene and link with study of the Third World as part of the Religious Education scheme. But the children found it strange that their forebears had been exposed to the same sorts of perils and accidents that they are warned about today. Between 1824 and 1852 six people were recorded as drowned and four as burned. Two had even been poisoned. Such detail had as much to do with creating in the children a feeling for the past as some of our more elaborate studies.

Finally, I myself learned much during this project. It played an important part in my relationship with the class as a whole, and with individuals. I was able to bring together demanding academic work, skills in presentation and the development of social relationships. Next year's class will not repeat this year's work but use it as a starting point for new work. But each class has a character of its own and much of the success of this sort of approach depends upon the degree of enthusiasm aroused. The final test will be whether demographic studies can be relied upon to win an enthusiastic response from all classes.

#### NOTES

1. Rev. and Mrs. J. P. Gilding have encouraged, advised and actively assisted me throughout this study, making their home and their time readily available to the class on many occasions. I owe them both my thanks.

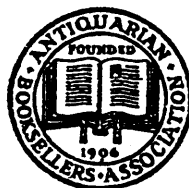
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