

# HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE, MARRIAGE AND THE INSTITUTION OF SERVICE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY RURAL ENGLAND<sup>1</sup>

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The aim of this paper is threefold: first, to present some data on household structure in two contrasting areas of rural England between 1851 and 1881; second, to provide an analysis of the changing institutions of domestic and agrarian service; and, third, to relate the history of marriage and household formation in late nineteenth-century rural England to the hypothesis put forward recently by Hajnal that in preindustrial north west Europe the institution of service acted as 'an essential part of the mechanism by which marriage could be delayed, with the result that population growth was under partial control'.<sup>2</sup>

As part of a more general study of marriage and fertility in nineteenth-century England I have transcribed, from the census enumerators' books, the complete populations of two small rural areas in the census years 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881. The first area is in central Norfolk, in the registration district of Mitford, and the second is in the registration district of Atcham in Shropshire.<sup>3</sup> They were deliberately selected to illustrate the contrast between the predominantly arable eastern counties and the mainly pastoral west. The average population of the Mitford study area over the four census years was 2,900, and that of the Atcham study area, 3,292.

## Household structure

The structure of households in the two areas in the census years from 1851 to 1881 is presented in Table 1, which also includes a set of figures taken from a sample of the enumerators' books for the whole of rural England in 1851 for comparison. Several features of this table call for comment. First, households were larger in Atcham than in Mitford. This was the result of a greater number of relatives and servants in the former area which more than offset a smaller number of members of the nuclear family. Second, the number of attached lodgers and others in the two study areas was small, except in Atcham in 1861, when a railway was being constructed through part of the study area and gangs of 'navigators' were lodging with local people. Finally, the mean size of the household declined over the thirty-year period by 12 per cent in Mitford and 8 per cent in Atcham. In both areas there was a punctuated fall in the number of relatives, but the primary causes of this decline were not the same. In Mitford, a gradual decrease in the number of offspring was largely responsible, but in Atcham a decline in the number of servants was most important.

**Table 1. Mean number of persons per 100 households: Mitford and Atcham study areas 1851-1881<sup>1</sup>**

Relationship to household head	Mitford				Atcham				Rural England
	1851	1861	1871	1881	1851	1861	1871	1881	1851
Head and spouse	175	177	175	171	166	164	170	169	171
Offspring	215	202	187	183	184	167	184	183	210
Relatives	35	24	32	27	47	48	38	36	33
Servants <sup>2</sup>	29	23	21	19	76	74	60	50	33
Subtotal	454	426	415	400	473	453	452	438	447
Attached lodgers	14	14	15	11	12	22	13	12	24
Others <sup>3</sup>	7	7	5	7	6	11	5	3	
Total	475	447	435	418	491	486	470	453	471
Number of households	631	668	654	630	695	702	668	661	2467

1. Excluding those stated in the census to be visitors.
2. Including apprentices.
3. 'Others' include those whose relationship to the head of household was not stated in the census, together with those stated in the column headed 'relationship to head of household' to be 'nursechildren', 'adopted children', 'foster children', 'scholars', 'inmates' and a small number whose precise relationship to the head of household was ambiguous or difficult to determine.

Sources: Figures for Mitford and Atcham from the census enumerators' books; figures for rural England 1851 taken from Richard Wall, 'The household: demographic and economic change in England, 1650-1970', in R. Wall, J. Robin and P. Laslett (eds), **Family Forms in Historic Europe**, 1983, Table 16.2, p. 497.

This contrast can be further illustrated by considering the relative contribution to overall population change in the two areas made by changes in the numbers of offspring, relatives and servants. In Mitford, the total population declined from 3,044 in 1851 to 2,661 in 1881. Offspring accounted for over half of this change (52.7 per cent), whereas relatives contributed only 13.3 per cent and servants 17.0 per cent. In Atcham, where the total population fell from 3,484 to 3,026 over the period, a decrease in the number of servants was the dominant contributor, accounting for 42.3 per cent. Relatives contributed 20.1 per cent, and offspring only 15.7 per cent. Returning to Table 1, the greatest difference between the two areas was in the number of servants, which was more than two and a half times as great in Atcham as in Mitford. In view of this, and the importance of service as an influence on mean household size in Atcham, I decided to analyse the structure of the institution more fully. Before considering service, however, it is interesting to look at the decline of the number of offspring in Mitford in a little more detail, in view of its accounting for more than 55 per cent of the total decline in mean household size, and the very close relationship between the latter and the mean number of offspring per 100 households.<sup>4</sup>

Table 2 shows that the decline in numbers was greatest in the age-group 0-4 years, but other ages contributed as well. The reason for the reduction seems, therefore, not to be simple. If it were due to a decrease in fertility we should expect the younger ages to show the greatest proportionate decline, whereas if it were due to

**Table 2. Mean number of offspring per 100 households by age: Mitford study area 1851-1881**

Age-group	1851	1861	1871	1881
- 4	60	54	54	47
5- 9	49	47	46	47
10-14	45	50	40	40
15-19	30	24	24	24
20-24	16	13	15	15
25-29	8	6	4	5
30 and over	6	7	6	4
All ages <sup>1</sup>	215	202	187	183
20 and over	31	26	25	24

1. The figures of all ages may disagree with the sums of the columns as a result of rounding errors.

Source: Census enumerators' books.

offspring leaving the parental home earlier, either to emigrate from the region or to establish new households themselves, we should expect the decrease to be concentrated in the older age-groups. At first sight, from the evidence in Table 2, both processes appear to have been at work, although the decline in fertility was probably the more important of the two. The total marital fertility ratio in Mitford went down from 6.736 in 1851 to 6.232 in 1881.<sup>5</sup> If, however, we follow cohorts, such as those aged 0-4 years in 1851, 10-14 years in 1861, and so on, we find that the exit rates of members of the various cohorts from the household in which they were born do not change much over the period, implying that the age pattern of leaving home amongst offspring did not alter greatly between 1851 and 1881.<sup>6</sup>

### **Changes in the institution of service, 1851-1881**

When considering the history of the institutions of service it is vital to distinguish between domestic, and agrarian or farm service, the former employing mostly females and the latter, males. In the mid-nineteenth century, domestic service was widespread, and would increase in importance nationally for some decades to come.<sup>7</sup> Agrarian service, in contrast, had been in decline for some time, and according to Kussmaul had virtually died out, in the south and east of England.<sup>8</sup> In the north and west, however, it was still an employer of considerable numbers of young men aged between fifteen and twenty-nine years.

In order to examine the different patterns of service between the two study areas, we considered those individuals stated to be servants in the column headed 'relationship to head of household' in the census enumerators' books. To distinguish between farm and domestic servants the occupational classification described by Armstrong was applied to the information given in the column headed 'rank, profession or occupation'. In the vast majority of cases, the category of service into which an individual fell was clear from that information.<sup>9</sup>

From Table 3 it can be seen that agrarian service in the Mitford study area was almost extinct, whereas in Atcham it was still firmly established, certainly in the earlier part of the period under consideration. The figures for Atcham in 1851 are

**Table 3. Numbers of domestic and farm servants per 100 households: Mitford and Atcham study areas 1851-1881 (M-males, F-females)**

Year	Mitford						Atcham					
	Domestic servants			Farm servants			Domestic servants			Farm servants		
	M	F	Total <sup>1</sup>	M	F	Total <sup>1</sup>	M	F	Total <sup>1</sup>	M	F	Total <sup>1</sup>
1851	4	19	23	2	1	3	11	34	44	28	2	29
1861	2	17	19	1	2	3	6	28	35	30	7	36
1871	1	17	19	1	1	2	6	28	34	22	2	24
1881	1	17	18	1	0	1	5	26	31	18	1	18

1. The totals may disagree with the sums of the individual sexes as a result of rounding errors.

Source: Census enumerators' books.

somewhat distorted by the failure of some enumerators to differentiate between the two types of servant, with the result that a proportion of the farm servants have been classified as domestic servants. The figures would probably be almost identical to those for 1861 were this to be taken into account.

To consider the change over time, it is evident that there was a decline in the prevalence of both types of service in both the study areas between 1851 and 1881, the decline being most noticeable for agrarian service in Atcham. It appears that a substantial part of the decrease in mean household size in the Atcham study area over the period can be attributed to the withering of the institution of agrarian service after 1861.

It is interesting to discover which age-groups of the population were most affected by this. Table 4 shows that the age-group twenty to twenty-nine years bore the brunt of the decline in both types of service, with the younger age-group ten to nineteen also suffering in the case of agrarian service. There is also evidence that agrarian service is becoming more exclusively the domain of males between 1861 and 1881, the number of female agrarian servants per 100 households declining from seven to one (the situation in 1851 is difficult to determine for the reason mentioned earlier).

**Table 4. Number of servants per 100 households by age and sex of servants: Atcham study area 1851-1881. (M-males, F-females)**

Age-group	Domestic servants								Farm servants							
	1851		1861		1871		1881		1851		1861		1871		1881	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
10-19	5	14	3	12	3	14	2	14	15	1	15	3	13	1	11	0
20-29	4	13	2	10	1	8	1	7	10	1	9	3	6	1	4	0
30-39	1	3	0	3	0	3	1	2	1	0	3	0	2	0	1	0
40 and over	1	4	1	4	1	3	1	3	2	0	3	0	2	0	1	0
Totals <sup>1</sup>	11	34	6	28	6	28	5	26	28	2	30	7	22	2	18	1

1. The totals may disagree with the sums of the columns as a result of rounding errors.

Source: Census enumerators' books.

## The relation between service and other demographic indicators

Hajnal has suggested that the institution of service, in particular agrarian service, was a crucial demographic mechanism in preindustrial north west Europe.<sup>10</sup> He maintains that it was only because of the widespread nature of service that the age at first marriage was high in these areas, which resulted, first, in what he terms the European marriage pattern of late and non-universal marriage;<sup>11</sup> and, second, in the operation of nuptiality, rather than marital fertility, as the principal demographic component which populations were able to alter in order partially to control population growth.<sup>12</sup>

The institution of service operated to delay first marriage because of the prohibition upon marriage which was a condition of employment as a domestic or farm servant in most cases. It has already been observed that those populations with a high proportion of their females employed as domestic servants, especially in urban areas, had a high mean age at first marriage in nineteenth-century England.<sup>13</sup> Table 5 gives the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) for both Mitford and Atcham in the census years from 1851 to 1881 and demonstrates that the prevalence of service is related to the age at marriage as would be expected.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, and although the relationship is by no means exact, the change over time in the SMAM roughly parallels the change in the prevalence of service. The relationship is least exact in Mitford between 1851 and 1861; this may be the result of changes in the age-structure, specifically a decline in the total number of females aged fifteen to twenty-nine years from 406 in 1851 to 357 in 1861.

**Table 5. Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) and percentage of population aged 15-29 years employed in service: Mitford and Atcham study areas 1851-1881**

Year	Mitford				Atcham			
	SMAM		Percentage aged 15-29 in domestic or agrarian service		SMAM		Percentage aged 15-29 in domestic or agrarian service	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
1851	26.8	25.5	9.1	24.9	30.8	28.4	39.5	40.7
1861	26.9	24.9	5.0	28.9	29.4	28.4	34.3	41.9
1871	25.8	24.3	2.3	26.3	28.9	27.0	33.8	35.6
1881	26.5	24.2	2.5	27.0	30.1	27.9	31.7	36.1

Source: Census enumerators' books.

The age-structure of the servant population, and in particular the proportions of the population at various ages which were servants, are important demographic indicators. This is because domestic and agrarian service tended to be a stage in the life-cycle for most people, rather than a form of long-term employment. It is likely that even when the percentage which those occupied as servants formed of the total population was fairly low, a much greater percentage spent some years of their lives in service. Table 6 provides an insight into the nature and development of life-cycle service in the Atcham study area between 1851 and 1881.

**Table 6. Servants as a percentage of the total population in each age-group: Atcham study area, 1851-1881<sup>1</sup>.**

Age-group	Males				Females			
	1851	1861	1871	1881	1851	1861	1871	1881
10-14	22.8	28.7	16.7	8.0	11.7	10.5	15.9	15.7
15-19	50.3	47.0	49.7	47.0	48.8	57.5	50.0	53.1
20-24	34.8	35.2	22.4	25.5	40.6	45.0	38.6	27.6
25-29	30.1	15.8	22.0	11.8	30.1	18.7	16.5	23.1
30-39	8.7	9.1	8.8	6.1	11.3	10.8	11.5	8.0
40 +	4.5	5.9	4.5	2.6	5.1	5.6	4.3	4.3
All ages <sup>2</sup>	15.6	14.8	12.1	10.0	14.3	14.8	12.9	12.0

<sup>1</sup>Servants in this table include a very small number of apprentices.

<sup>2</sup>i.e. the percentage of the whole population occupied as servants.

Source: Census enumerators' books.

Two points arising out of this table deserve mention. First, it reinforces the statement made earlier, in that the decline of service was felt mainly, for males, in the age-groups ten to fourteen and twenty to twenty-nine years, and for females in the age-groups twenty to twenty-nine years. Second, despite the decline of the institution in terms of total numbers, even in 1881 around 50 per cent of the population aged between fifteen and nineteen years was employed in either agrarian service (mainly males) or domestic service (mainly females). Rates of participation in service, therefore, declined substantially amongst those aged twenty or over, whilst they did not fall amongst those aged fifteen to nineteen. This may have been because young people left service earlier in life in 1881 than in 1851; this, however, is difficult to determine from census evidence.

## Discussion

The evidence from these two small but contrasting areas of rural England in the latter part of the nineteenth century appears to support Hajnal's hypothesis in principle. It does seem that domestic and in particular agrarian service acted as controls upon the mean age at first marriage and consequently upon the formation of new households. This control operated partly because of the prohibition upon marriage whilst in service, and partly because service provided a means by which to acquire the wherewithal necessary to establish a new household. Further evidence to lend weight to this claim can be provided by considering the percentages of males aged twenty to twenty-nine years which were heading households. Table 7 shows that, in the Atcham study area, this percentage nearly doubled between 1861 and 1881. This was concomitant with a decline in the percentage of males in the same age-group in service from 27.4 per cent to 19.1 per cent.

The low headship rates amongst males in their twenties in Atcham, together with the figures presented earlier, also show that an extreme form of the European marriage pattern lingered in the west of England for a considerable time after it had disappeared in the eastern areas.

**Table 7. Headship rates amongst males aged 20-29 years: Mitford and Atcham study areas 1851-1881**

Year	Percentage of males aged 20-29 years stated in the census to be heads of households	
	Mitford	Atcham
1851	34.2	15.6
1861	39.1	13.4
1871	42.4	21.1
1881	36.3	25.0

Source: Census enumerators' books

The figures in Table 7 can also be used when considering the question: what happened to those servants (and perhaps older offspring in Mitford) who disappeared between 1851 and 1881? It appears that in Atcham, and to a lesser extent in Mitford up to 1871, a considerable proportion could have formed new households in those areas. Nevertheless, the fall in the headship rate amongst males aged twenty to twenty-nine years in Mitford between 1871 and 1881 suggests that a number of these young people in their twenties may have left the countryside in favour of the attractions of urban employment. Emigration from the rural areas was proceeding apace in the late-nineteenth century: according to Lawton, between 1851 and 1911 the sum of the percentage net migrational change for each decade was a loss of between 75 and 100 per cent for the Mitford registration district and of between 25 and 50 per cent for the Atcham registration district.<sup>15</sup> The total population of the Mitford study area declined from 3,044 in 1851 to 2,661 in 1881, and that of Atcham from 3,486 to 3,026.

Important though emigration was, it should not be allowed to obscure the social and demographic changes which were taking place within the residual population in the countryside. Those who left agrarian service in the east of England prior to 1851 did not all move to the cities; most of them remained as day labourers on the land, augmenting the number of offspring in the average household. Despite the fall in total population in the study areas over the period, there was not a great decline in the number of agricultural labourers employed. In the Mitford study area, the number of household heads and male offspring aged ten and over stated in the census to be agricultural rose from 420 in 1851 to 471 in 1861, and only fell to 430 in 1881. In Atcham, the corresponding figures were 367, 329 and 337 respectively.<sup>16</sup>

In this paper, I have tried to show how an analysis of household structure can pose questions, the answers to which lead the researcher into a consideration of complex social changes which have yet to be unravelled. Moreover, the final collapse of the old, preindustrial demographic regime could not occur until the great secular decline in marital fertility of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries permitted the age at first marriage to fall. Marital fertility then took over from nuptiality the role of principal demographic control.

What we have observed here, therefore, are two contrasting rural populations at a time of fairly rapid social, economic and demographic change. The decline of the institution of service in Mitford before 1851 had weakened the links between household structure, marriage, and service there, whilst in Atcham those links appear to have remained until at least 1881.

## NOTES

1. I should like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for their research training awards L81/20299/G and G00428125299, and to express my gratitude to Dr Robert Woods, Miss Eilidh Garrett, of the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield, and Dr Richard Wall, of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, all of whom read and made helpful comments and criticisms on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. John Hajnal, 'Two kinds of preindustrial household formation system', **Population and Development Review**, 8 1982, p. 481. This article also appears in R. Wall, J. Robin and P. Laslett (eds), **Family Forms in Historic Europe**, 1983, pp. 65-104.
3. The Mitford study area includes the parishes of Beeston with Bittering, Kempstone, East and West Lexham, Litcham, Mileham, Weasenham All Saints and Wellingham. The Atcham study area includes the parishes of Acton Burnell, Church Preen, Cound, Cressage, Eaton Constantine, Harley, Hughley, Kenley, Leighton, Pitchford, Ruckley and Langley, Sheinton and Wroxeter. In the more general study, two further areas, in Derbyshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, are being examined using the census enumerators' books. The use of these in research is discussed in two collections of papers: E. A. Wrigley (ed.), **Nineteenth Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods in the Study of Social Data**, 1972; and Richard Lawton (ed.), **The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to the Nineteenth-Century Censuses for England and Wales**, 1978.
4. The ratio between the mean number of offspring per 100 households and the mean number of persons per 100 households was between 0.43 and 0.46 in all four census years (Table 1).
5. The total marital fertility ratio, as calculated here, is a measure of the number of legitimate children a married woman would bear in her life assuming she married when aged twenty and remained in the married state throughout her fertile period. This provides a useful estimate of completed family size, and is derived from a calculation of the numbers of own-children aged 0-4 years living with married women on the night of the census, by five-year age-groups of women from twenty to forty-nine years. From these, age-specific child-women ratios can be obtained, which can be converted into age-specific marital fertility rates by a method described in Wilson H. Grabill and Lee-Jay Cho, 'Methodology for the measurement of current fertility from population data on young children', **Demography**, 2 1965, pp. 50-73. The total marital fertility ratio is the sum of the age-specific marital fertility rates over the ages between twenty and forty-nine, multiplied by five to take account of the fact that five-year age-groups are used in the calculation. This method has been applied to the census enumerators' books for nineteenth-century England by Michael R. Haines, **Fertility and Occupation: Population Patterns in Industrialisation**, 1979, pp. 155-204, and by R. Woods and C. W. Smith, 'The decline of marital fertility in the late-nineteenth century: the case of England and Wales', **Population Studies**, 37 1983, see especially pp. 216-21, with a number of modifications.
6. I am indebted to Dr Richard Wall for pointing this out to me.
7. On domestic service in the nineteenth century, see Pamela Horn, **The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant**, 1975.
8. Ann Kussmaul, **Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England**, 1981, pp. 19-22.
9. There were a number of individuals for whom this was not the case, either because no description of their occupation was given, or because the description was too imprecise. Such individuals were classified as domestic servants. Only a small proportion of servants fell into this category, except in Atcham in 1851, where the column headed 'rank, profession or occupation' often only contained the unhelpful description 'servant'. For the occupational classification used, see W. A. Armstrong, 'The use of information about occupation', in Wrigley (ed.), *op. cit.*, in note 3, pp. 191-310.
10. Hajnal, 'Two kinds of preindustrial household'.
11. The European marriage pattern is described in detail in John Hajnal, 'European marriage patterns in perspective', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds), **Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography**, 1965, pp. 101-43.
12. Hajnal, 'Two kinds of preindustrial household . . .'
13. See, for example Michael Anderson, 'Marriage Patterns in Victorian Britain: An Analysis based on registration district data for England and Wales 1861', **Journal of Family History**, 1, 1976, pp. 55-78.
14. The method of calculating the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) is described in John Hajnal, 'Age at marriage and proportions marrying', **Population Studies**, 7, 1953, pp. 111-36. The SMAM is defined in H. S. Shryock and J. S. Siegel, **The Methods and Materials of Demography**,



(condensed edition by Edward G. Stockwell), 1976, p. 278, as 'an estimate of the mean number of years lived by a cohort of women before their first marriage.'

15. Richard Lawton, 'Population changes in England and Wales in the later nineteenth century: an analysis of trends by registration districts', **Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers**, 44 1968, 2, p. 59. On rural depopulation in general, see John Saville, **Rural Depopulation in England and Wales 1851-1951**, 1957.
16. In the enumeration district of Litcham, in the Mitford study area, in 1881, all agricultural labourers were described in the enumerator's book merely as 'labourers'. The figure of 430 agricultural labourers in the Mitford study area in 1881 is calculated assuming that all these individuals were, in fact, agricultural labourers. It is appreciated that this may result in the figure of 430 being something of an overestimate of the true figure. It is unlikely, however, that it is so much of an overestimate to affect the general observation that the number of agricultural labourers in the Mitford study area did not decline substantially between 1851 and 1881. A similar problem was encountered in the enumeration districts of East and West Lexham in 1881, and in the enumeration district of Cressage in the Atcham study area in 1851.