

THE CHILD POPULATION OF LADYWOOD AND EDGBASTON 1851

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Introduction

In the past children rarely formed less than a quarter of the population. Despite increased attention in recent years, given their numbers, the study of the position of children in past societies is still a much neglected subject. This study compares the household structure and family experience of children in two adjacent districts of mid-nineteenth century Birmingham. The process of rescuing children of the past from oblivion may be said to have begun with the work of Philippe Aries, which, as he had wished and intended, inspired further investigation. He can hardly have anticipated the range of disciplines which would be involved nor the many directions in which research would proceed: sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and art-historians with many others besides, have contributed to the debate.¹ Historians of the family have responded with the greatest zeal to Aries's challenge perhaps in recognition of his own appreciation of demographic research.

One could cite many examples of research which demonstrate the significance of the child population in the study of the household. In particular, David Levine and Richard Wall have linked the function of children to changing household structures amongst communities at different stages of proto-industrial and industrial development, and to the different occupational groups within communities.² These changes find expression in fertility patterns and the number of children retained at home. Studying less well documented sources for fourteenth century Halesowen, Zvi Razi has shown that prosperous peasants were distinguished from their poorer neighbours less by superior houses or material possessions than by the number of living-in servants drawn mainly from the children of the poorer peasantry.³ Thus the distinct role of children in the past has begun to emerge, no longer subsumed in the broad surveys of the family. Their contribution to the economy of both the family and the nation has been recognised and they are no longer studied simply as a facet of the quality of life debate.

Feminist history has drawn attention to new sources and approaches for the study of childhood. In much early work the emphasis on the ways in which the lives of women and children have been inextricably linked has, perhaps, obscured the importance of children in their own right. Such recent contributions as the essays edited by Steedman, Urwin and Walkerdine⁴ examine perceptions of childhood in the past through a study of the formative influence of words, language and text and help to re-focus attention on the separate sphere of childhood. Children now feature more prominently in school

text-books designed to meet the needs of the more student-centred approach of the schools' curriculum. Despite this new emphasis, it remains true that sources which provide an insight into the inner world of the child are rare, and studies which make the child the focus of the investigation are the exception.⁵

The most contentious areas in the debate on the history of childhood centre on the relationship of children to the rest of society. Some historians, notably de Mause and Shorter have presented the experience of children in earlier societies as an extended nightmare in which little progress in attitudes towards children may be discerned before the mid-nineteenth century when modern and 'enlightened' attitudes begin to emerge.⁶ The 'whiggish' nature of this approach has been challenged by, amongst others, anthropologists and zoologists drawing on their studies of primitive societies and primates. Linda Pollock suggests that the sources most readily available may tell us more about the history of child abuse than the everyday experiences of the young, yet still the work of Pollock attaches comparatively little significance to the social and economic context.⁷

The direction of the investigation was prompted by Peter Laslett's observation that in pre-industrial communities large numbers of children had been deprived by the loss of one or more parent. Laslett tentatively questions the commonplace assumption that the twentieth-century child is, to an unprecedented degree, deprived of an upbringing by at least one of its 'natural' parents as a result of separation or divorce. Laslett supposed that in pre-industrial society high adult mortality rates would just as frequently deprive a child of at least one parent, usually the father. The subsequent high incidence of second or even third marriages (or common law unions) produced a significant number of step-parents as well as children brought up by their grand-parents or kin.⁸

Anderson's extrapolations from the national returns of the 1851 census pursue many of the questions raised by Laslett. The significance of high adult male mortality is indicated by the fact that one in every nine family groups had a widow at its head. Lone parents were also likely to appear as secondary families. Only 45 per cent of those lone parents with a child under the age of ten were living as heads of their own households – 36 per cent of this category lived with relatives while 9 per cent lived as lodgers.⁹

It is not simply the parentless or one-parent families which are worth investigating, but also the range and variety of household situations which the Victorian child might have experienced. Anderson's findings for Preston indicate that elderly kin were taken into the household to care for small children whose parents both worked in textile mills. This taking-in of kin is linked to housing shortages, which in turn resulted in some children growing-up in the households of their grand-parents from which their own parents never managed to escape.¹⁰ Furthermore, the literature of the period (but most particularly the nineteenth century novel) is full of examples of children growing up outside the conventional nuclear family: Jane Eyre was brought up in the household of her socially superior aunt, Little Nell with her grand-father, and Pip by his elder sister. Eppie in *Silas Marner* and Oliver Twist become quite

separated from their kin, reared in the first case by a lone weaver somewhere between the social status of her two parents, and in the second reared in a fraternity of thieves. Children without the security of conventional family life were perceived by Victorians to face special problems and to act as vehicles of moral teaching: their lives often exposed the iniquities of the adult world. To what extent did this preoccupation reflect a reality of Victorian life?¹¹

Ladywood and Edgbaston in 1851

The 1851 census returns provided the earliest information which allows us to be precise about an individual's position within a household. Many of the problems encountered by family research for earlier periods are avoided; it is possible to distinguish those of childhood years (defined as fourteen and under) from those who are the offspring of their parents but may be adults and from those who were often included under the general category of servants. The 1851 returns were also chosen because David Levine has suggested that this is a significant point in time at which to study working-class family life. In various parts of the country industrial households co-existed with the much larger number of 'proto-industrial' families who had adapted to the rise in demand without experiencing mechanisation.¹²

An initial survey of the 1851 Census enumeration book for Ladywood, a district to the north-west of Birmingham town centre, confirmed that the majority of households were those of skilled and semi-skilled workers in traditional workshops. The wide variety of occupations included glass making and cutting, steel pen manufacture, iron moulding, button making and finishing, paper-box making, carpentry and employment in trades such as boat making associated with the nearby canal. A small number of clerks employed in retail firms were living alongside skilled and semi-skilled workers, but there was little to indicate a more elevated lifestyle than their neighbours: for example, they did not employ servants. It is not possible to ascertain from the census information whether or not heads of household were employed in workshops owned by others, or worked at home as their own masters. A builder of 11, Cambridge Street with two servants and another at King Alfred Place employing three occupational workers were exceptions and reinforce the impression of Ladywood as a district where incomes were low, but work was widely available.¹³

The residential district of Edgbaston lay adjacent to Ladywood but further from the centre of industrial Birmingham. It was distinguished by a significant number of business and professional households considerably more prosperous than their Ladywood contemporaries, yet modest by the standards of elites in other manufacturing towns.¹⁴ It should also be pointed out that Birmingham is well-known at this time for the large numbers of trades involving home-based workers.

The coverage of the survey

The investigation of Ladywood and Edgbaston reported in this article sought in the first place to discover the extent to which children lived in household environments other than the conventional nuclear family, defined as a two-generational household of children with their natural parents. The decision to match the Ladywood survey with one in Edgbaston was influenced partly by the observation that the fictional examples range across the social classes. The street chosen for the Ladywood survey was Sheepcote Street and parts of Islington Place, Nile Street and Cumberland Street in the area known as Christchurch. The chosen streets in Edgbaston were Calthorpe Street, Calthorpe Fields, George Street, Frederick Street, Grandigan Terrace, Church Road and Ampton Road which extend from approximately one mile from the centre of Birmingham to two miles beyond. In both cases the route chosen by the census enumerator was followed. No method of sampling was chosen; as the research was designed to explore the significance of children as workers and consumers, it seemed important to establish their numerical strength in the two fairly homogeneous communities, and also to see how representative were certain types of household containing children. The total number of households surveyed in each community was 177, yielding a total of 911 persons in Ladywood and 1022 in Edgbaston, a combined total of 1933.

The following information was collected for each household:

- The number of children of fourteen years and under
- Their relationship to the head of household
- Whether or not the head of household had a spouse present
- The number of adults who were related to the head of household
- The number of adults who were not kin
- The age of all occupants

The information contained in the census returns was, of course, liable to the deficiencies and inaccuracies discussed by Higgs¹⁵ and arose partly from the inadequate training of the recorders; there are many misspellings and amendments especially in the Ladywood returns. Where there is uncertainty about secondary families within the households identified by the enumerators, lodgers consisting of a man and wife (or woman identified as his wife) with or without children and not apparently related to the head of household, have been deemed to form a separate household. Single lodgers, whether or not kin, have been included in the family of the head of the household.

Results of the survey

The child population of the streets surveyed in Ladywood was 339, representing 37.2 per cent of the total. In the Edgbaston survey the child population was 252 representing 24.65 per cent, giving a combined child population of 591 or 30.57 per cent of the total. They suggest that Laslett's picture of the rural past where children might be found 'thronging the churches, for ever clinging to the skirts of women in the house and wherever they went and above all crowding round the cottage fires'¹⁶ had an urban and

Table 1a Household experience of children: Ladywood, 1851

Children living in or with	N. of households in category	% of households	N. of children	% of children
Two 'natural' parents with or without siblings	59	44.7	180	53.1
Two 'natural' parents plus servants	9	6.8	22	6.5
'Apparent' nuclear family with step-parents	4	3.0	10	3.0
Household of grand-parents	3	2.2	5	1.5
Household of uncle and aunt	6	4.3	6	1.8
Household of brother or sister	2	1.5	2	0.6
Two parent household plus adult kin	14	10.1	25	7.3
Two parent household plus lodgers with or without adult kin	17	12.3	46	13.6
One parent household no additional kin	10	12.3	32	9.4
One parent household plus lodgers or kin	7			
Living in household as servant	2	1.5	2	0.6
Living in household as scholar	—	—	—	2.6
Other experiences	5	3.6	9	2.6
Totals	138	102.3	339	100.0

Notes:

* = 11 females and 6 males.

The number of 'experiences' is rather higher than the number of households because some contained more than one childhood experience. The percentage expressed is the percentage of experiences.

industrial counterpart in mid-nineteenth century England. The much lower percentage of children in Edgbaston is accounted for by the presence of servants; all but two households contained at least one servant. Taking both communities together, 225 families representing 63.55 per cent of all households contained one or more children. The mean household size for families with children was 5.21 for Ladywood and 7.92 for Edgbaston. The larger households in Edgbaston are once again explained by the considerable number of servants.

Table 1b Household experience of children: Edgbaston, 1851

Children living in or with	N. of households in category	% of households	N. of children	% of children
Two 'natural' parents with or without siblings	2	2.2	5	2.0
Two 'natural' parents plus servants	53	57.0	149	59.1
'Apparent' nuclear family with step-parents	—	—	—	—
Household of grand-parents	2	2.2	4	1.6
Household of uncle and aunt	3	3.2	5	2.0
Household of brother or sister	2	2.2	5	2.0
Two parent household plus adult kin	16	17.2	45	17.9
Two parent household plus lodgers with or without adult kin	—	—	—	—
One parent household, no additional kin	6	9*	18	7.1
One parent household plus lodgers or kin	3			
Living in household as servant	5	5.4	5	2.0
Living in household as scholar	2	2.2	12	4.7
Other experiences	2	2.2	4	1.6
Totals	96	103.5	252	100.0

Notes: * = 3 females and 6 males. See notes to Table 1a.

The number of households below the mean household size is negligible; the several one-parent families in Ladywood most often contain lodgers or kin. In Edgbaston servants remain in residence in one-parent families, leaving those households well over the mean 4.74.

The results of the attempt to classify the family experience of children in the mid-nineteenth are contained in Tables 1a and 1b. Ten different childhood experiences have been identified besides that of living in a conventional nuclear family.

Comment and interpretation

In the case of Ladywood the conventional nuclear family is fairly well established as the norm, especially since children in households with single lodgers (as well as with both parents) may not indeed have experienced a childhood which was significantly different from those in households without lodgers. Yet the fact that seven of the seventeen one-parent households included lodgers or kin suggests that economic pressures led poorer families to make space for those who might contribute to the household budget or perhaps care for children while the remaining parent worked.

Different qualifications must be made in the case of Edgbaston. The majority of children lived in households with servants, but where both parents were present this closely resembled the conventional family. The range and variety of childhood experience within such a small community is nevertheless impressive. To obtain the number of parentless children (defined as those who have lost at least one parent) we should add to the thirty-two Ladywood children in one-parent households the children living with kin with no more than one parent. One such family group (included under 'other') lived with their widowed mother in the household of their great aunt. With the addition of step-children there were sixty children (17.76 per cent) in Ladywood and thirty-eight (15.17 per cent) in Edgbaston, giving an overall percentage of 16.58. The number of widowed householders with children under the age of fourteen was seventeen and nine for Ladywood and Edgbaston respectively, giving some indication of the extent to which Victorian children's lives were affected by adult mortality rates. Although Anderson found a much higher number of lone parents living within other households in his national survey¹⁷ in the case of Ladywood the availability of work which could be done by women within the household may explain this difference. The possibility of taking in a lodger who would contribute to the household income might also have made it possible for a widow to retain her own household. Ladywood seems to have been an area to which many young workers came to obtain work. However, we should note too that the figures given for widowed include widowers who would have found it easier to retain their own households. The figures for parentless children are, of course, unreliable since we cannot be sure that the children living in the households of kin were in every case parentless. We have already mentioned the possibility that grandchildren might be taken in to relieve the pressure on the parental household. On the other hand, the overall figure is almost certainly an underestimate. It is not possible, for example, to identify step-children with any certainty as there is no indication in the census returns of whether or not the head of household or his/her spouse had been married before. Where the wife of the household has children with a different surname or discrepancies of age are evident (a very young wife/husband married to a spouse with children who could not have been their biological parent) this was the most likely interpretation. In addition there were three 'nurse-children' in Ladywood, assigned to the 'other' category of Table 1a, about whose parents we have no information. Only one child, Jobs (Job?) Wall in an all-male household is positively identified as an orphan. It is possible that one or more of the six scholar-boarders in William Lead's school in Edgbaston were orphaned but they have not been included in the 'parentless' category. There is

some evidence here to lend support to Anderson's view that the most marked contrast between Victorian and modern childhood was the relatively large number of children not living with any parent at all in the past.¹⁸

Households with children who had siblings over the age of twenty may include a 'concealed' illegitimate child. It is possible that some of these unmarried adult offspring may have offspring of their own who were designated as the children of their grandparents, rather than their true parent, in order to protect the family from any stigma of illegitimacy. Whatever the realities of Victorian morality, concepts of respectability may have been strong in all classes and there is no reason to suppose that the families concerned should have admitted to the enumerator what they sought to conceal from the rest of the community. Certainly the child reared in a family with a wide age-range amongst the offspring is likely to have been supervised by three or more adults for much of its infancy, or perhaps given over to the special care of one adult sibling (usually a sister) and to have experienced an infancy and childhood significantly different from that of a child where there is no apparent discrepancy between the ages of the offspring. The unfortunate Jobs Wall and the three nurse-children appear to be severed from any kin but it is likely in the latter case that the separation was a temporary one. There is little evidence to suggest (as in Preston) a serious housing shortage - which would put pressure on a family to take in kin. Several houses were unoccupied. The occupations of the women in Ladywood are all those which might have been carried out in the home which may explain why there is no substantial evidence of kin living in to care for small children.

The tables display something of the variety of household experience but not the complexity. Joseph and Martha Robinson at 208 Nile Street in Ladywood lived with their widowed mother in the household of their grandparents which, in addition, contained their cousin Samuel Reader, one servant and five lodgers. The latter all described as 'boatmen' would presumably have been employed in their grandfather's boat-making business. This household contained one of the two child servants in Ladywood.

Clearly, no very satisfactory conclusions may be reached on the basis of so small and limited a survey. It is, however, impossible to catalogue the household of the past without being curious to find out more about the lives of children in the past than the glimpse which is presented by the census information. What is one to make of five-year old Jobs Wall, the only certain orphan in an all-male household, none of whom were related to him? Why were the six scholars sent to board with William Lead? Further research using record linkage, school records and personal accounts (much more likely for Edgbaston than Ladywood) might help to provide some of the statistics with personalities and enable us to be more precise about childhood experiences. But even where we can be more aware of their presence the 'something mysterious'¹⁹ about children of the past remains.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the direction of research since 1960 see A. Burton, 'Looking forward from Aries? Pictorial and material evidence for the history of childhood and family life' and M-F. Morel, 'Reflections on some recent French literature on the history of childhood', **Continuity and Change**, 4, 1989. Burton advises caution in the interpretation of works of art and other pictorial representations of children. Morel identifies the variety of contributions from different disciplines and draws attention to the limitations of work to date.
2. D. Levine, **Family formation in an age of nascent capitalism**, 1977 and 'Industrialisation and the proletarian family in England', **Past and Present**, 107, 1985, pp.168-203. R. Wall, 'Work, welfare and the family' in L. Bonfield, R.M. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds), **The world we have gained**, 1986, pp.261-94.
3. Z. Razi, **Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish: economy, society and demography in Halesowen, 1270-1400**, 1980.
4. C. Steedman, C. Urwin and V. Walkerdine (eds), **Language, gender and childhood**, 1985. It is refreshing to see contributions from primary school teachers whose discussions are informed by everyday contact with young children.
5. Morel, 'Reflections'. For a discussion of the general problems and shortcomings of the history of childhood, see also H. Hendrick, 'The history of childhood and youth: a guide to the literature', **Faculty of Modern Studies Occasional Papers No.1**, Oxford Polytechnic, 1981, p.5. Much additional work on children has been produced since this article, but its observations remain pertinent.
6. L. De Mause, **The history of childhood**, New York, 1977. E. Shorter, **The making of the modern family**, 1975.
7. L. Pollock, **Forgotten children**, 1983.
8. P. Laslett, **Family life and illicit love in earlier generations**, 1977, pp.161-4.
9. M. Anderson, 'Households, families and individuals in 1851', **Continuity and Change**, 3, 1988, pp.421-38.
10. See M. Anderson, 'Households, families and individuals' in **Family structure in nineteenth century Lancashire**, 1971. Conclusions concerning kinship reciprocation and the care of children are discussed on p.171.
11. Here I have been influenced by R. Wall, 'Mean household size in England from printed sources', in P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds), **Household and family in past time**, 1972, pp.159-203, which includes a discussion of fictional literature and shows the degree of correlation which exists between statistical and printed sources. This link with literature suggests an avenue to the 'sentiments' approach for which Flandrin has pleaded.
12. D. Levine, 'Industrialisation'.
13. On the basis of the occupation of the head of household most inhabitants of Ladywood may be classified as members of social Class IV, using W.A. Armstrong's classification of social groups for York in 1841 and 1851. See W.A. Armstrong, **Stability and change in an English county town; a social study of York, 1801-51**, 1974, especially pp.13-15.
14. For an analysis of the social character of Edgbaston in a slightly earlier period, see L. Davidoff and C. Hall, **Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle-class 1780-1850**, 1977, pp.36-69.
15. E. Higgs, **Making sense of the census**, HMSO, 1989.
16. P. Laslett, **The world we have lost**, 1965, p.104.
17. Anderson, 'Households, families and individuals', p.429. These figures are not strictly comparable, Anderson's lone parents being those with children under the age of ten rather than fourteen.
18. Anderson, 'Households, families and individuals', pp.432.
19. P. Laslett, **The world we have lost**, 1965, p.104.