

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

MAGIC, CUSTOM AND LOCAL CULTURE IN HERTFORDSHIRE 1823–1914 : AN EXERCISE IN NOMINAL RECORD LINKAGE

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The exploration of popular mentalities in England beyond the early modern period is a neglected field. In particular, little extensive work has been done to examine how magical beliefs affected social relationships in local contexts, and to what extent the function and relevance of magic and witchcraft was related to community structure, local economies and cultures. Work completed to date, with rare exceptions, tends to focus very heavily upon formal religious adherence.¹ Much more work is needed to further our understanding of the way people thought about the supernatural and customary rights, and how such beliefs and actions shaped their lives and their relationships. To achieve this, we must consider the extent to which different local environments and economies influenced the way such beliefs and activities manifested themselves.

The influence of local topography and environment on social behaviour, community structure, magical beliefs and customary activity has attracted some interest from early modern historians. David Underdown, for example, has tentatively explored the relationship between environment and regional customary behaviour, and Andy Wood's recent study of the Peak Country 1520–1770 has similarly attempted to root popular beliefs in local contexts.² Underdown's approach has been rightly criticised for its simplistic division of areas into arable/pasture or sheep-corn/wood-pasture cultures, and Sharpe's recent, detailed study of Colyton shows that even an apparently typical wood-pasture economy does not necessarily conform to a simple set of stereotypes.³ But the environmental approach to local cultures has the potential to provide considerable insight, as long as it shows awareness of the great diversity of both local environments and cultures. It is therefore necessary considerably to expand conventional typologies to include, among others, predominantly arable regions or localities, communities in different coastal areas, areas of cottage industry, fenland environments, upland areas, mining villages, dairying economies and urban satellite areas. The recent article by Andrew Blaikie in *LPS* 69 provides an example of what can be achieved through such an approach.⁴ The research in progress reported upon here forms part of a

larger study that, funding permitting, will examine popular cultural beliefs across a range of local and regional economic, social and environmental contexts. This pilot study, conducted with the support of The Leverhulme Trust, focuses upon the county of Hertfordshire.

Hertfordshire is one of the smaller English counties and in the nineteenth century was as 'typical' an arable county as one will find, yet it contained surprising diversity within its narrow boundaries, in the form of a flourishing network of small towns, a growing range of consumer and service trades, the early development of a well articulated economic infrastructure, besides well defined areas of cottage/small factory industry stimulated by the expansion of London. It also participated fully in the articulation of the retail and service sectors that must now be placed at the centre, not the periphery, of early industrial growth. Farming practice and productivity varied, with the lighter soils of the south of the county responding more rapidly to London demand. The south and west was notable for its thriving cottage and small factory industry in the form of the straw plait and hat trades. Additional industrial development took the form of silk production and paper-making, again towards the south, malt-making centred upon Ware, and the related development of substantial brewing concerns in a number of Hertfordshire towns, while the north of the county remained largely agrarian.⁵ But Hertfordshire was not chosen merely for its inherent interest: it was also a county with an agrarian economy that contrasted with pastoral Somerset already studied by Davies, and one that offered immense practical advantages too in the form of an extant computer database of the entire 1851 census for the county compiled by the University's Centre for Regional and Local History, and for which the survival of newspaper evidence was also very good.

The methodology upon which this study was based is a straightforward one. Various forms of popular cultural activity were firstly identified, including witchcraft and magic, cunning folk, medical cures, quackery and herbalism, fortune-telling, gypsy culture, wife selling, rough music and other forms of community action, unorthodox belief, impiety and general customary activity. For evidence of relevant beliefs and practices under these headings, a systematic survey was made of the *Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Chronicle* (1822–1829), *Herts, Huntingdon, Bedford and Isle of Ely Mercury* (1828–1833), *County Press for Herts, Beds & Bucks* (1831–1844), and *Hertfordshire Mercury* (1844–1914). Extensive searches of the *Herts and Essex Observer* (1862–) and *Herts Guardian* (1852–1902) were also conducted to ensure a broad coverage of countywide news reporting. Limited searches of other local papers were also conducted to assess the extent of localised coverage of petty sessions and news. All relevant cases found in the principal newspapers were followed up in local papers where possible. To assess patterns of reporting, and the potential for editorial bias influenced by local sensibilities concerning the publication of 'backward' or 'credulous' beliefs and activities, record was made of all reports concerning instances of witchcraft and magic from outside the county.

Once all relevant cases had been categorised and recorded in Microsoft Access and Excel, producing a database of 218 individuals across the years 1823–1914, the task of linking identified individuals to the nineteenth-century census returns was begun. Nominal record linkage is, of course, by no means a new idea, and can now boast a heritage that stretches back to the classic statements and procedures suggested by Wrigley, Anderson and Macfarlane, while continuing to provoke discussion among historians and demographers through to the present day.⁶ Recent studies by Barry Reay, Steve King and Pat Hudson, Pam Sharpe and Pat Howe have confirmed the potential of the procedure, despite the frustrations that difficulties in matching individuals and small linkable samples can provoke, and in the face of the scepticism that has been expressed in some quarters, especially in relation to urban contexts where populations tend to be particularly fluid.⁷ Given the relatively small sample of individuals to be traced in the present study, it was decided to attempt record linkage by manual rather than automated methods, a decision encouraged by the views expressed recently by Tilley and French, who have argued from their experience of record linkage in the Kingston Local History Project that a flexible approach, centred upon the human researcher rather than relying on computerised multiple pass algorithms, is the most effective.⁸ Matching was attempted using the two censuses for the county which have been fully computerised to date: that for 1851, held by the Centre for Regional and Local History at the University of Hertfordshire, and that for 1881, available from the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints or, in enriched form, from the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex.⁹

A simple, standard procedure for endorsing a match was adopted, requiring a basic number of matching predicates within a specified chronological limit, although the possibility of additional information providing an overriding consideration was kept in mind too. Those predicates, usually provided in newspaper reportage, were surname, forename and place of residence, used in conjunction with an acceptable chronological age for the participant at the time of the incident as indicated by the census. Given the possibilities of mobility and identical names, no match was considered if the gap between incident and census was over 30 years, while a gap of over 15 years was deemed to render a match 'weak', and these cases—relatively small in number—were effectively discounted. The application of these standard procedures reduced the number of matchable names from 218 to 190: 13 were ruled out on the grounds of the date of the incident, 8 through confusion caused by lack of forename and 7 because the place was unidentified or extra-county.

The cross-matching took six working days, using relatively simple spreadsheet sorting and filtering mechanisms. From the censuses of 1851 and 1881, 97 firm cross-matches were made from the sample of 190 names: a further 17 cases presented two or more equally plausible choices, 11 provided matches classified as 'weak', and 65 could not be matched at all, a fact that testifies to the degree of at least short range migratory movement within the life-cycle, confirmed recently for substantial areas within mid-nineteenth-

century Hertfordshire.¹⁰ Hence we were able to make firm linkages for 45 per cent of our total sample, and for 51 per cent of those that fell within an appropriate chronological range and for whom the necessary basic predicates were known. Although we have no control group to inform such a judgement, we were very satisfied with this level of success, which certainly produced a sample worthy of analysis and further examination.

For the purposes of the present report, the degree of success achieved in the process of record linkage between newspaper reports and two nineteenth-century censuses for Hertfordshire across this period is one of the main substantive conclusions we wish to present. In terms of results of historical substance, one of the key findings to date of this research is the relative absence of cases involving witchcraft, which were very few indeed compared with previous work on the county of Somerset.¹¹ A total of 35 individuals featured in the newspaper reportage were linked with alternative medicine, magic or fortune-telling. Only four cases were identified that indicated fear of witchcraft, one of which concerned Maria Briggs, rumoured to be a witch in 1881, who, as the census indicated, conformed to a commonly proposed stereotype: a widow, aged 60 years, living alone in Windmill Street, Cheshunt.

This number was dwarfed, however, by those engaged in 'rough music', which dominated the database with 27 instances involving 137 individuals.¹² The first point of interest about these incidents is their geographical spread, the vast majority occurring towards the south and, in particular, the south-west of the county. This was the region that was most heavily influenced by proximity to London, where transport was best developed, where the straw plait and hat trade flourished and where urbanisation (in the form of small towns) was most marked. Furthermore, many of the incidents, both major and minor, took place in towns: for instance St Albans 1832, 1834 and 1846, Hitchin 1843, Hemel Hempstead in 1855 and 1884, Watford in 1856 and 1868, Berkhamsted in 1869 and Hertford in 1878—all identified as specifically urban in published census reports. Other large villages or market towns involved included Wheathampstead, Baldock, Hatfield and Harpenden. In other words, these incidents took place in the most 'modern', in just about every sense of the word, regions of the county, and were relatively rare in the less developed areas towards the north and north-west.

Detail was extracted from the 1851 and 1881 censuses on a total of 71 of the 137 individuals involved in incidents of rough music. Both perpetrators and objects of rough music were overwhelmingly male: 52 of 61 perpetrators and 9 of 10 objects. The age of victims ranged from 19 to 61, with just four of the ten in their teens or twenties, whereas the perpetrators were very predominantly young: 38 per cent (23) were in their teens and another 38 per cent (23) in their twenties, which compares with proportions of 21 per cent and 16 per cent respectively in these age groups for the county as a whole. The occupations and therefore status of the 10 victims ranged across the social scale, and included a navy and two agricultural labourers at one end of the spectrum and a clergyman of the Church of England at the other. The perpetrators also

exhibited a variety of occupations, but with a clear bias towards more humble social groups. Of 53 whose occupations were identified, 10 were labourers and 20 were agricultural labourers, four more were involved at the lower end of the licensed trade and six worked in straw plait and hats. Only two were employers of men: a master butcher employing one man and two boys, and a wheeler/farmer, with just 10 acres but employing three men.

Further analysis of this data is proceeding, and individual cases have yet to be examined more closely. It does appear, however, that both the geographical concentration of these incidents and the age profile of the perpetrators would suggest that they were anything but the vestiges of bygone practice, that communal action retained its potency through to the 1880s (when it abruptly ceased), and that it retained a place in the culture of those places undergoing significant economic, social and administrative change.¹³ Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that those very changes may themselves have produced the normative differences and conflicts that rough music reflects. The possibility that adolescent behaviour contributed to these incidents also deserves further consideration.

This pilot study of popular culture in Hertfordshire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employing the information on popular cultural activity that can be gleaned from contemporary newspaper reportage and the economic, social, geographical and demographic information contained in nineteenth-century census returns, has shown quite clearly that nominal record linkage between these sources is viable and that manual linkage is effective and relatively economical in terms of research time. It has also made a small beginning towards revealing the relationships that existed between popular cultural forms and features of local and regional economy and society, in the case of rough music in Hertfordshire a relationship that might not have been wholly expected. Further analysis of the Hertfordshire evidence will be published in due course, and in the longer term we hope to be able to extend our study to incorporate a wider range and greater diversity of local societies and cultures.

1. Most notably K.D.M. Snell and P.S. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems: The geography of Victorian religion* (Cambridge, 2000). The key exceptions are J. Obelkevitch, *Religion and rural society: South Lindsey, 1825–75* (Oxford, 1976); D. Clark, *Between pulpit and pew: folk religion in a North Yorkshire fishing village* (Cambridge, 1982); O. Davies, *A people bewitched: witchcraft and magic in nineteenth-century Somerset* (Bruton, 1999); J. Rule, 'Methodism, popular beliefs and village culture in Cornwall, 1800–1850' in R. Storch ed., *Popular culture and custom in nineteenth century England* (London, 1982).
2. D. Underdown, 'Regional cultures? Local variations in popular culture during the early modern period' in T. Harris ed., *Popular culture in England* (London, 1995); A. Wood, *The politics of social conflict: The Peak Country 1520–1770* (Cambridge, 1999).
3. P. Sharpe, *Population and society in an East Devon parish: reproducing Colyton 1540–1840* (Exeter, 2002), 121.
4. A. Blaikie, 'Coastal communities in Victorian Scotland: what makes north-east fisher families distinctive?', *Local Population Studies*, 69, 15–31; also M. Smith, 'The demography of coastal communities', *Local Population Studies*, 70, 63–5.
5. L. Munby, *The Hertfordshire landscape* (London, 1977), esp. chapters 7–9; W. Branch Johnson, *The industrial archaeology of Hertfordshire* (Newton Abbot, 1970); N. Goose, *Population, economy and*

- family structure in Hertfordshire in 1851. Vol. 1 *The Berkhamsted region* (Hatfield, 1996); N. Goose, *Population, economy and family structure in Hertfordshire in 1851. Vol. 2 St Albans and its region* (Hatfield, 2000); S. Jennings, 'A ravelled skein: the silk industry in south west Hertfordshire 1790–1890' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hertfordshire, 2002).
6. E.A. Wrigley, *Identifying people in the past* (London, 1973); M. Anderson, 'The study of family structure', in E.A. Wrigley ed., *Nineteenth-century society* (Cambridge 1972), esp. pp. 71–3; A. Macfarlane, 'History, anthropology and the study of communities', *Social History*, 2 (1977), 631–52; A. Macfarlane, *Reconstructing historical communities* (Cambridge, 1977). Examples of recent discussions include S. King, 'Historical demography, life-cycle reconstruction and family reconstitution: new perspectives', *History & Computing*, 8 (1996), 62–77; C. Harvey, E.M. Green and P.J. Corfield, 'Record linkage theory and practice: an experiment in the application of multiple pass algorithms', *History & Computing*, 8 (1996), 78–89; R. Miller and G. Thorvaldsen, 'Beyond record linkage: longitudinal analysis of turn-of-the-century inter-urban Swedish migrants', *History & Computing*, 9 (1997), 106–21; P. Tilley and C. French, 'Record linkage for nineteenth-century census returns. Automatic or computer aided?', *History & Computing*, 9 (1997), 122–33; P. Tilley, 'Creating life histories and family trees from nineteenth-century census records, parish registers and other sources', *Local Population Studies*, 68 (2002), 63–81.
 7. B. Reay, *Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1939* (Cambridge, 1996); King, 'Historical demography'; P. Hudson and S. King, 'Two textile townships, c. 1660–1820: a comparative demographic analysis', *Economic History Review*, 53 (2000), 706–41; Sharpe, *Population and society*; P. Howe, 'Identifying nonconformity in late-seventeenth century St Albans', *Local Population Studies*, 68 (2002), 9–25; N. Goose, 'English pre-industrial urban demography: problems and progress', unpublished paper, Local Population Studies and the Local Population Studies Society 1st annual conference, St Albans, 7th April 2001: see 'Conference report', *Local Population Studies*, 66 (2001), p. 7.
 8. Tilley and French, 'Record linkage'.
 9. K. Schürer and M. Woollard (2002), 1881 Census for England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Enriched Version) [computer file]. Genealogical Society of Utah, Federation of Family History Societies [original data producers]. Colchester, Essex: History Data Service, UK Data Archive [distributor]. SN:4519.
 10. Goose, *The Berkhamsted region*, 56–60; Goose, *St Albans and its region*, 126–41.
 11. Davies, *A people bewitched*, 109–52.
 12. The seminal study of rough music is, of course, E.P. Thompson, 'Rough music', in *Customs in common* (Penguin edn., London, 1993, 1st published 1991), 467–538. For a recent local studies see J. Kennish, 'Rough music in Black Datchet', *Local Historian*, 31 (2001), 154–67, and P. Smith, 'Squalor and rough justice in Watford', *Historian*, 69 (2001), 22–6.
 13. In Watford in 1856 Peter Smith found that the incident of rough music occurred in a slum area called Ballard Buildings which, although some of the inhabitants were tradesmen, included a disproportionate number of agricultural labourers, as well as many temporary residents. The former might suggest that rural cultural practices had been transferred to an urban setting; the latter made it very difficult to trace individuals in the census: Smith, 'Squalor and rough justice', 24–5.