Conference Report
'Let's Talk of Graves': Mortality and Graveyards, *c.*1700–*c.*1950

Local Population Studies Society Spring Conference 2019

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The Local Population Studies Society (LPSS) held its spring 2019 conference on 13 April 2019 at the Wilson Carlile Centre in Sheffield. The theme of the conference was 'Let's Talk of Graves': Mortality and Graveyards, *c.*1700–*c.* 1950'. The meeting began on a reflective note as Kevin Schürer gave a short address to remember Roger Schofield, who had passed away, aged 81 years, on 8 April 2019. Roger was a member of the team who set up the LPSS; he edited *Local Population Studies* for many years and served on the editorial board for the first 58 issues. He also sought to encourage members of LPSS and others to undertake research into the history and demography of local populations by endowing the Roger Schofield Research Fund, which is still open to applications today. Kevin reminded those present of Roger's scholarship and enthusiasm for his subject, as well as his energy, wit, humour and his flamboyant taste in scarves and ties! Kevin concluded by asking those present to take a few minutes to contemplate their own recollections of Roger.

Session 1

The first session of the conference comprised two papers that would surely have been to Roger's taste. **Romola Davenport** (University of Cambridge) spoke first, reporting on work she had undertaken with Richard Smith, looking at 'Migrants, microbes and medicalization' with a particular focus on English urban mortality in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The audience was shown maps of the percentage of smallpox deaths which occurred to individuals aged 10 or over, a measure of the 'endemicization' of the disease. This demonstrated that adults in the North of England seldom died from smallpox, whereas in the South there were many more adult deaths. Davenport interpreted this as indicating that rather different strategies to control the disease were being deployed in different parts of the country. In the North smallpox circulated as a childhood disease whilst in the South transmission was controlled by local practices of avoidance together

with mass inoculations. Avoidance included the cancellation of markets, the isolation of victims in their houses and the use of 'pest houses'. This led her to argue that, while human intervention is important when considering mortality decline, the evolution of disease-causing pathogens and their mode and ease of transmission also plays a central role. As the population moved into towns and cities population density increased, making it easier for certain pathogens to be transmitted. If pathogens were too lethal they could remove all their hosts, and therefore would not survive. This may have encouraged some of them to evolve into less lethal forms, enabling mortality to remain stable, or even fall, despite increasing urbanization. This new way of looking at changes in morality could, Romola persuasively argued, be also used to explain changes in morality across the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

The second paper also looked at mortality, but this time in Scotland from 1900 to 1973. **Beata Nowok** reported on work being carried out by the *Digitisting Scotland* project at the University of Edinburgh, with a focus on spatial and seasonal patterns. The project is digitising the content of all of Scotland's birth, marriage and death certificates from 1855 to 1973 (the contents of all certificates from 1974 onwards have already been made machine readable). Nowok was able to present graphs showing the number of deaths *per day* over a variety of years. A general sigmoid pattern was observed with a winter peak and a summer trough, although the seasonality index was much lower by the 1970s than it was in the 1900s. Some individual 'mortality' events, such as the sinking of a single troopship close to shore at the end of World War 1, and the Clydebank Blitz stood out clearly. Interestingly there were more influenza deaths in Scotland in 1922 than there were during the notorious 1918–1919 pandemic. When the deaths were grouped by age of the deceased, interesting differences in the age profile of mortality during epidemic outbreaks emerged. Scotland suffered serious influenza outbreaks in 1900, 1918–1919, 1922, 1924 and 1929, but in 1900 the great majority of those affected were in the oldest age groups, whilst in the other epidemics it was both the oldest and youngest who succumbed. Nowok then went on to discuss geographical differences in the incidence of mortality, showing that differences in climate (or at least being in the far north or west of Scotland) were not necessarily the cause of excess winter mortality: urbanization and high population densities had a more significant role to play. Nowok reiterated that her talk was based on 'initial material' from the *Digitisting Scotland* project. It looks as though there are a great many interesting and path-breaking findings to come.

The next paper, by **Chris Galley**, was entitled, 'Some thoughts on nineteenth-century infant mortality'. Galley began by stating that, unlike the rest of the papers in the conference, he would not be presenting any new data. Instead, he provided a re-interpretation of patterns of infant mortality during the nineteenth century. He began by showing a classic graph of infant mortality rates, initially published in the Registrar General's annual report for 1906. This showed generally stable rates throughout the nineteenth century following by significant decline after 1900. However, by reanalysing data from the *Decennial Supplements* he showed that in nearly all districts rates declined throughout

the nineteenth century, apart from the 1890s when a series of hot summers caused rates to increase, and that the reason why the national rate apparently remained stable was that substantial urbanization occurred throughout the period, meaning that an increasing proportion of infants were being born into the unhealthiest environments. Placing this decline into perspective, he argued that the nineteenth century decline should therefore be viewed as part of a longer one that had begun in the eighteenth century. Indeed, in demonstrating this, he produced a graph that was almost identical to one that Davenport had showed earlier. Along with the reasons cited earlier by Davenport for the mortality decline, Galley added that some of the likely causes could be found in changes in infant feeding practices, the administration of purges immediately following birth and changes in infant care practices.

The final presentation of the morning was 'Not dead—just resting? Exhumation in early modern England' by **Jeremy Boulton** (University of Newcastle). Boulton's research is primarily based on faculty documents found in the London Metropolitan Archives. These documents were licences issued by the ecclesiastical courts to permit the exhumation of a body. They identify a wealth of information about the complex patterns of interment in early modern England. 'Exhumation' is a word which only entered into the English language in the late eighteenth century and has attendant legal processes. Unless it was a coroner digging up a body to determine cause of death, all exhumations needed permission from the ecclesiastical courts in the form of a faculty granted after a petition had been made to the court setting out the reasons for wanting to remove the body. Obtaining a faculty was an expensive process with attendant fees and undertakers' costs, so it was only available to the wealthy members of society. However, Boulton's research suggests it occurred with sufficient frequency for there to be formulaic petitions and standard undertakers' processes. Petitions were often raised and acted upon quickly when the request came for a deceased person to be exhumed and re-interred with a recently deceased family member, urgency being necessary so that the newly deceased did not remain unburied for too long. Exhumation for re-burial alongside a close relative was one of the major reasons for a petition being raised; young children might be exhumed for re-burial with their mother or father. Indeed, re-burial of an exhumed body became part of the funeral service. Other reasons for exhumation were cited in the faculties. In some cases the last wishes of the deceased had not been followed; for example, when executors discovered that the deceased had been buried in the wrong place. Petitions were also raised when families moved their principal residence and wanted deceased relatives re-buried in the new location. The construction of new family burial places and a wave of family vault building also contributed to these exhumation practices. The distance travelled by the exhumed corpse varied. Some simply moved within the same churchyard or parish, whereas some remains crossed the Atlantic Ocean for reburial. The final resting place of one man was delayed by the American War of Independence when the naval blockades necessitated a temporary burial in England before he was exhumed and returned to his homeland. The average time between first burial and exhumation was 8 years with the maximum time being

68 years. Finally, Boulton posed a question about the wider significance of exhumation practices. He suggested that there was little sign of religious motivation for the practice but there were signs of conspicuous consumption practices as the newly wealthy gathered their family together in death.

The Annual General Meeting of the LPSS then took place, followed by an excellent lunch. There was then just enough time peruse and purchase from the bookstall provided by Colin Merrony from O.N. Books, Sheffield who brought with him a wide range of historical and archaeological titles.

Session 2

Having dug up bodies in the morning, we returned to burying them in the afternoon when **Julie Rugg**, (Senior Research Fellow and leader of the Cemetery Research Group, University of York), presented a paper entitled 'Individuation, consolation and consumption: towards a theory of cyclicality in English funerary practice'. Rugg spoke about changing attitudes to funerary practice and changing practice over time in relation to three main themes: the search for consolation, the desire to protect the individuated corpse, and the ability to act as an active consumer in the burial marketplace. First, Rugg discussed sociologists' attitude towards death and mortality, the cycle of talking about death and the acceptance (or otherwise) of death; she argued that funerary practice is similarly cyclical. Moreover, she highlighted the scale of burial operations in the rural and urban environment. Cemetery records indicate that in some large urban cemeteries dozens of burials took place daily. Such practices offered neither space nor time for mourners to grieve and did not extend dignity and respect to the deceased. Rugg argued that it is the desire to console the living that underpins funerary ritual and that there is a spiritual element to burial which is important for the living. More significant still was individuation: the need to protect identity and individuality in death. Mass burial was viewed as undesirable at best, yet pressure on churchyards, especially in an increasingly urban environment, forced a switch to burial grounds and later to cremations. The worst possible outcome was for someone to be buried in a pauper's grave, as this left the deceased completely anonymous.

In a changing society, the bereaved became active consumers in the burial process as the church and burial ground owners began to 'marketize their burial offer'. Increased wealth and a desire to have a final resting place close to other family members encouraged the purchase of burial spaces. The churchyard was supposed to be seen as an idyllic resting place, but the early nineteenth century saw these final resting spaces beginning to be compromised. The church could no longer guarantee that the grave would remain undisturbed and new cemeteries offered graves which guaranteed a final resting place within a landscaped setting. But the vast numbers being interred in these new cemeteries created a rigid and regimented layout at odds with the rural idyll and a peaceful passage to the next life. Attitudes began to change. In the twentieth century the early adopters of cremation embraced this new technology as an alternative to burial, but as the numbers of

cremations increased so did the sense of death becoming a factory process. Crematoria can sometimes host up to 80 separate cremations per week and the practice of scattering ashes is now often replaced with the interment of ashes leading to further pressure on burial plots. To redress these issues there has been a rise in the practice of 'green burials'; burials in a rural setting, unhurried and calm and with no sense of mass interment. Rugg concluded by suggesting that whilst absolute numbers are important in understanding changes in funerary practice over time, the cyclicality of funerary practice constitutes a more satisfactory approach to the evolution of our churchyards and cemeteries.

The second speaker of the afternoon, local historian **Janet Ridler**, took us on a tour of 'Sheffield's hidden necropolis' with an in-depth look at the architecture and history of the Sheffield General Cemetery which first opened its gates in 1836. This was one of the first commercial cemeteries, planned and constructed at a time when increasing numbers of the new middle classes were non-conformists who did not want to follow the rites of the established church. Designed by Samuel Worth, the new cemetery was based on the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. On what was then the edge of the city, Worth created an Arcadian landscape with buildings designed in a classical style; structures included a classical gatehouse constructed over the River Porter to symbolise the crossing of the River Styx. The non-conformist chapel had both classical and Egyptian features, as did the novel catacombs, an unusual burial option which did not prove popular with the citizens of Sheffield. Ridler described the cemetery as offering an insight into the social history of the city of Sheffield with memorials to many of its most prominent residents among the 87,000 souls buried there. These include Mark Firth, the steel magnate and philanthropist who was Lord Mayor twice and Master Cutler three times, George Bassett of Liquorice Allsorts fame and Samuel Holberry, a prominent Chartist. However, as a business the cemetery did not thrive. Anticipated income from pauper burials in unconsecrated ground was not forthcoming following a change in the law and only ten of the premium catacombs were purchased in the first ten years. In the mid nineteenth century a separate Anglican chapel and burial ground were created on the site. A structure known as the 'Dissenters' wall' divided the two cemeteries. In 1972 the cemetery company was wound up and taken over by the city council. The Anglican side of the site was landscaped and made into a much-needed city centre park, but elsewhere the site fell into disrepair until volunteers began conservation and repair work. Now a heritage site where many of the original buildings are Grade II* listed, the site has been returned to the community and many of the buildings are being brought back into use. Local historians and volunteers have helped catalogue and conserve records for the site and they continue to develop the site for public use.

In the final talk of the day **Judith Pitchforth** took us to a smaller Sheffield site, that of Fulwood Parish Church to the west of the city. Her talk: 'Written in stone—family reconstruction from Fulwood graveyard (Sheffield)' described a local history project undertaken by a team of volunteers to transcribe and record the inscriptions on the graves of all those buried in the parish churchyard. Pitchforth explained how, when the church wanted to build an extension in 2014, it needed to find out who was buried in a particular

corner of the churchyard. The church was originally built in 1837, but the records of churchyard burials were fragmentary and incomplete. One clue to where people had been laid to rest were two partial plans of the grave plots drawn on pieces of silk. Using these burial records and sextons' invoices the volunteers began to produce a comprehensive database of who had been buried in Fulwood churchyard. In addition, Pitchforth and others had painstakingly transcribed and recorded the locations of all the gravestones. She brought along her trusty 'cemetery kit' which included brushes, water and a knife for removing dirt and debris from memorial stones. The process of cross-checking documentary records against the monumental inscriptions is nearing completion and the database has already proved helpful to family historians and church authorities trying to locate old family graves. The group plans to continue its work by researching and compiling a comprehensive database of the soldiers of World War One who appear on the local war memorial.

The LPSS Committee wishes to thank all the staff at the Wilson Carlisle Centre for being exemplary hosts. We hope to return to the Centre some time in the future.