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# Illegitimacy and its Effects on Marriage Prospects in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Rural England\*

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## Abstract

*All births, marriages and deaths that occurred in two rural parishes in south-west England in the period 1754–1914 were examined, using a wide array of source material. Records of individuals were linked together into large multi-generational family groups. There were 4,940 births, of which 319 were illegitimate. For the illegitimate cases, the rates of subsequent marriage of mothers and fathers were determined and compared with those for other people in the same parishes. Being the father of an illegitimate child did not impact the chances of subsequent marriage. Being the mother of an illegitimate child decreased the chances of subsequent marriage but only if the mother was co-resident with her children. Where the mother did not live with the illegitimate child(ren), her chances of marriage were similar to that of other women. Mothers of illegitimate children were more likely to marry their cousins and were less geographically mobile than other mothers.*

## Introduction

Research on illegitimacy in historical Britain has often focussed on causes (for example economic, cultural, social, or behavioural), patterns (for example regional or temporal) and consequences (such as mortality and poverty). One consequence that has not received a lot of attention has been the ability of the parents of an illegitimate child to marry after the birth of the child. This is of interest as marriage after the birth of an illegitimate child potentially allows the parents, or at least the mother, to reduce the consequences of the illegitimate birth. Even today, being born out of wedlock increases the chances of death in infancy, and the odds are worsened if the mother does not live with the father. For example, in England and Wales in 2004, a child born illegitimately was 40 per cent more likely to die in the first 12 months of life than was an infant born to married parents, and 59 per cent more likely to die in infancy if the mother lived alone.<sup>2</sup> Whilst today it is socially permissible in much of the developed world for unmarried parents to live together, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, marriage was the only socially acceptable mechanism to allow parents to raise their child together.

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2 Office for National Statistics, *Health Statistics Quarterly*, 24 (2004) available at <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20150905004546/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/hsq/health-statistics-quarterly/index.html> [accessed 1 December 2020], p. 69.

Recent years have seen an enormous rise in parish, census and other historical records becoming available online, with commercial genealogy companies offering literally billions of records to subscribers. This means that it is now more likely that parents of illegitimate children can be identified and their life courses traced, wherever they travelled, to an extent that was not possible just a few years ago.

This paper seeks to answer the question whether parenthood of an illegitimate child affected the marriage prospects of men and women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural England and, in the case of mothers, how the presence of the child affected their marriage prospects, who they married and where they lived.

An illegitimate birth is defined as one that occurred at a time when the biological parents were not validly married to each other. This may be a birth to an unmarried woman, a widow or a woman whose husband was legally married to someone else. The definition of illegitimate births includes ‘mantle children’, who were children born illegitimately but whose parents subsequently married each other. In the formal view of the Church of England, they were considered to be legitimate under the ‘mantle’ of the later marriage.<sup>3</sup>

Pre-nuptial conceptions were not examined here. These were common events and around 40 per cent all first births for women in England in the eighteenth century were conceived extra-maritally.<sup>4</sup> In Wiltshire in the early seventeenth century an average of 22 per cent of brides were pregnant on their wedding day.<sup>5</sup>

## Methods

The research area consisted of two rural English parishes, Stourton and Kilmington, which are situated in the south-western corner of Wiltshire in south-west England, adjacent to the county boundaries with Somerset and Dorset. Both were agricultural parishes with Anglican churches, Stourton also had a sizeable Catholic minority with its own chapel and Kilmington had a Methodist chapel. The populations in 1831, the mid-point of the research period, were 650 in Stourton and 580 in Kilmington.

The research period was 1754–1914. The starting date of 1754 was chosen as this was the year in which Hardwicke’s Marriage Act became effective.<sup>6</sup> From that year onwards, for a marriage to be valid in England or Wales, it had to be performed in an Anglican church, by an Anglican clergyman, between the hours of eight o’clock in the morning and noon, following the publication of banns or granting of a marriage licence. The only

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3 A. Macfarlane, ‘Illegitimacy and illegitimates in English history’, in P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R.M. Smith (eds) *Bastardy and its Comparative History: Studies in the History of Illegitimacy and Marital Nonconformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, the United States, Jamaica, and Japan* (London, 1980), pp. 71–85, here at p. 73, available at <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/TEXTS/bastardy.pdf> [accessed 1 December 2020].

4 P. Laslett, ‘Introduction: comparing illegitimacy over time and between cultures’, in Laslett *et al.*, *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, pp. 1–68, here at pp. 54–5.

5 M. Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 220.

6 An Act for the better preventing of clandestine marriage. 26 Geo. II c. 33 (25 March 1754).

## Illegitimacy and Marriage Prospects in Rural England

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exceptions permitted were for Quakers and Jews.<sup>7</sup> Before Hardwicke's Marriage Act, legally valid marriages included not only church weddings but also clandestine marriages (before a priest but with no other witnesses) and mutual declaration of marriage (not necessarily with witnesses) followed by consummation.<sup>8</sup> The latter case generally had no documentary evidence and was rare in England.

The end year of 1914 was chosen since the start of World War I caused enormous disruption to the lives of marriageable people and the subsequent marriage patterns were unlikely to reflect usual practice, before or after that time. In Kilmington there were no marriages at all during the First World War. In Stourton, a number of marriages were contracted between local women and men born as far afield as Australia and New Zealand. This had not occurred before the start of the War.

As part of a wider project on marriage patterns, I transcribed all church records (Anglican, Catholic and Methodist), poor law records, census records, school logs and a host of other written material that was created during the research period. I then created a database containing details of all people who were born, married or resided in the research area during the research period, manually linking individuals across a wide array of sources, thereby creating a multi-source parish reconstitution. This differs from single source (parish register) family reconstitution as used in some other historical demographic studies, as it covered all residents of the research area (not just those who were baptised, married or buried in Anglican churches) and used multiple sources, including sources from other parishes.

The ancestors of each individual were traced for a minimum of four generations (wherever possible), sometimes across multiple parishes, and the life courses of the residents were traced using multiple source records. The database contains records of over 23,000 people, linked into family groups of varying size.<sup>9</sup>

Illegitimacy was usually identified in parish records and in poor law records, and occasionally inferred from census or marriage records. In all cases, the mother and child were identified, but not necessarily the father. A variety of sources were used for determining the identity of the father of illegitimate children. The most reliable sources were Bastardy Bonds. These were bonds between the father of an illegitimate child and the overseers of the poor, to force the father to pay for the costs associated with the confinement of the mother, and for the upbringing of the child until the age of seven years. Quarter Session Rolls, which were used after 1834, also name the fathers of illegitimate children, along with detailed information about the conception of the children. In some baptism records, the father of an illegitimate child was explicitly named, along with the mother. This was at the discretion of the parson.

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7 G.E. Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions* (Chicago, IL, 1904), p. 458.

8 J. Teichmann, *Illegitimacy: a Philosophical Examination* (Oxford, 1982), p. 25.

9 C. Day, *Wiltshire Marriage Patterns 1754–1914: Geographical Mobility, Cousin Marriage and Illegitimacy* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), pp. 30–63.

For children who lived with their fathers after 1851, when family relationships were recorded in the census, the father could also be identified on the census records. Another source was marriage certificates after 1837, when both the bride and groom were explicitly asked to name their respective fathers. Wills in which fathers named their illegitimate children were occasionally useful.

If the father of an illegitimate child was not identified from other sources, and the mother married within 12 months of the birth of the child, it was assumed that the man whom the mother married was also the biological father of the illegitimate child. In cases where other data sources were available, such as poor law papers or census records, this assumption was validated at every occurrence. A possible future research project might use modern family history DNA evidence to test this assumption further. To date, anecdotal evidence is very encouraging, with each of a small number of cases using the DNA of descendants validating the assumption that a man who married the mother of an illegitimate child within the first 12 months of the birth of the child was actually the biological father of that child. This could be systematically tested by comparing the DNA of descendants of the illegitimate child with DNA of the descendants or relatives of the presumptive father, which would paint a reasonably accurate picture of genetic relationships within the last five to seven generations.

## Results

Of the 319 children born illegitimately in Stourton or Kilmington in the period 1754–1914, mothers were identified in every case, but fathers were identified in only 35.4 per cent of cases. Having established the pool of illegitimate births, the life histories of each parent were followed through until marriage, death or the age of 50 years, regardless of where they lived. Amongst identified parents of illegitimate children born in Stourton or Kilmington in the research period, only 14.5 per cent of mothers and 9.6 per cent of fathers could not be traced until their death, marriage or the age of 50 years. Between 1754 and 1914, a total of 4,934 infants were born in Stourton and Kilmington, of which 319 were born illegitimately, representing 6.5 per cent of births in the whole period. However, the ratio fluctuated over time, reaching 9 per cent in the 1860s and dropping to 0 per cent in the 1900s.

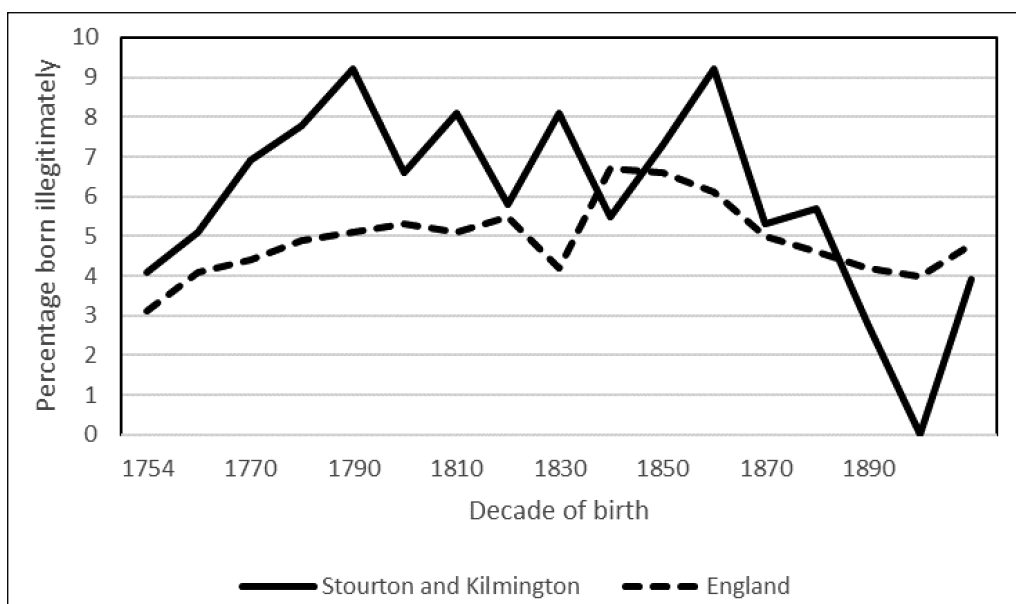
Figure 1 shows the illegitimacy ratio for the combined parishes of Stourton and Kilmington during the research period, as well as the illegitimacy ratio for England as whole. It indicates that for most of the research period, Stourton and Kilmington had a higher illegitimacy ratio than the average for England. Both plots show a rise in the second half of the eighteenth century. In fact, the illegitimacy ratio for England had been rising steadily since the 1650s when it was close to zero. The nadir of English illegitimacy was presumably as a result of Puritan influence. Following the restoration of Charles II in 1660, the illegitimacy ratio began to rise slowly, eventually peaking in the 1850s.<sup>10</sup> Figure 1

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10 P. Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 113. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511522659>.

## Illegitimacy and Marriage Prospects in Rural England

Figure 1 Illegitimacy ratio in Stourton and Kilmington 1754–1914



**Sources:** Parish registers of Stourton and Kilmington. These are searchable on-line at <http://findmypast.co.uk/>. CDs with complete downloadable files can be purchased from the Wiltshire Family History Society (<https://www.wiltshirefhs.co.uk>). Stourton registers are also available at <http://www.freereg.org.uk/> [accessed 7 January 2021]. England figures from P. Laslett, 'Preface and introduction', in P. Laslett, K.Oosterveen and R.M. Smith (eds), *Bastardy and its Comparative History: Studies in the History of Illegitimacy and Marital Nonconformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, the United States, Jamaica, and Japan* (London, 1980), p. 14; and K. Oosterveen, R.M. Smith and S. Stewart, 'Family reconstitution and the study of bastardy: evidence from certain English parishes', in Laslett *et al.*, *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, p. 106.

shows that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the illegitimacy ratio for Stourton and Kilmington rose more quickly than the average for England. At its peak in the 1790s, the illegitimacy ratio for Stourton and Kilmington was almost double the national average. It is not assumed that the figures for any two parishes would closely match the average for all of England, and it would be surprising if this was the result. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the reasons why a pair of parishes which were otherwise average in many demographic aspects would diverge suddenly, and to such a marked degree. The significantly higher levels of illegitimacy in the research area between the 1770s and 1810s may be an artefact of using multiple sources to identify illegitimacy, rather than relying solely on baptism records, as earlier studies were required to do. It should be noted that while the Bastardy Bonds for Stourton survive for the period 1728–1822, the early coverage is patchy. Two thirds of the Bastardy Bonds that survive are for births in the period 1786–1822, and this corresponds with the highest points of divergence between the Stourton and Kilmington illegitimacy ratio and that for England. In addition, the 1821

census for Stourton survives, which is highly unusual, and this also clarified some family relationships. It may be that the results generated in this study are a more accurate reflection of the actual level of bastardy in two rural parishes than that produced from single-source studies. The possible underestimation of illegitimacy has been acknowledged by Laslett and others, and their claim is that the general shape of the curves is accurate, but that they may represent underestimates of the actual levels of bastardy at the time.<sup>11</sup>

For Stourton and Kilmington, the large drop from an illegitimacy ratio of 9.2 per cent to 0.0 per cent in the period 1860–1900 coincided with enormous changes in rural society. The countryside was emptying out as urbanisation progressed relentlessly. There were fewer jobs available for women in rural areas.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the moral values now called ‘Victorian’ were trickling down from the middle classes to the working classes. It began to be felt that it was inappropriate for women to work outside the home, and agricultural work was seen as particularly inappropriate for women.<sup>13</sup> There was a feeling that immorality would be the result when women worked beside men in the fields, according to testimony before the Royal Commission into Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture in 1867. A common employment for young Wiltshire women, particularly in the north of the county, was working as a dairymaid, but by the 1860s Wiltshire had almost no dairymaids, cheese being made only by farmers’ wives and daughters.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the stigma of producing illegitimate children began to rise in line with ‘Victorian’ values. In Stourton and Kilmington, this was translated into a higher proportion of the mothers of illegitimate children eventually marrying during the nadir of illegitimacy in the parishes compared with times of higher illegitimacy. For example, in the period 1880–1900 when the illegitimacy ratio was falling swiftly, 90 per cent of the mothers of illegitimate children eventually married, compared to 65 per cent of women who had their first illegitimate child in the period 1770–1809, at the peak of illegitimacy in the region. More marriages meant fewer illegitimate infants and more legitimate infants. In Stourton and Kilmington, women who were able to have several illegitimate children and maintain their own home disappeared as it became progressively harder for women to find work in agricultural areas. Being the mother of an illegitimate child was becoming both less socially acceptable and less economically viable.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century when the situation was reversed, rural areas had much higher rates of illegitimacy than the cities.<sup>15</sup> The differences between the two rural parishes and the all-England rate demonstrated in Figure 1 also reflect a rural–urban divide.

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11 See Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love*, pp. 103–59.

12 E. Royle, *Modern Britain: a Social History 1750–1985*, (London, 1987), p. 91.

13 Royle, *Modern Britain*, p. 90.

14 A.R. Wilson, *Forgotten Labour: the Wiltshire Agricultural Worker and his Environment 4500 BC–AD 1950*, (East Knoyle, 2007), pp. 196–7.

15 Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love*. p. 146.

## Illegitimacy and Marriage Prospects in Rural England

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There was extreme regional variation in illegitimacy ratios throughout Britain, including a level of illegitimacy in Scotland twice that of England.<sup>16</sup> Wiltshire consistently ranked between 25th and 27th place out of 41 English counties in its illegitimacy ratio throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> As for many demographic variables, Wiltshire's illegitimacy hovered close to the average for all of England.

The changes over time in the illegitimacy ratio for Stourton and Kilmington were not due to a change in proportion of 'at risk' women. That is, there was no significant change in the proportion of unmarried women aged 15–44 in the villages. The most common age group for single women to bear illegitimate children was 20–24 years. In Stourton and Kilmington in the period 1821–1911 the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were unmarried on census night varied only between 88 per cent and 90 per cent. This did not change over the century and so cannot be an explanation for the rise then sudden decline in illegitimacy ratio.

The absolute levels of illegitimate fertility varied very closely with that of marital fertility throughout English history.<sup>18</sup> Female employment outside the home has also been suggested as a cause of bastardy and especially 'repeaterdom', where the woman has more than one illegitimate child.<sup>19</sup> This is supported by the observation that repeaterdom in Stourton and Kilmington declined when opportunities for paid employment declined in the late nineteenth century. No woman had more than two illegitimate children in Stourton or Kilmington after 1864. Amongst women who had illegitimate children, the average number was 1.6 in the peak period 1780–1819, when several women had four or more bastards. By contrast, the average number was 1.1 in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Illegitimacy levels in English historical communities have been linked to marriage age, economics, sleeping practices, courtship practices (including bundling, which was a traditional practice whereby unmarried couples share the same bed but remain fully clothed) and failure of social control.<sup>20</sup> There is persuasive evidence that much of the variation in illegitimacy levels over space and time was due to courtship practices, such as bundling and night courting.<sup>21</sup> However, night courting was not practised in England and bundling was not practised in the West Country.<sup>22</sup>

The 319 illegitimate children born in the research area had 221 mothers whose life courses were examined. In Stourton, 14 per cent of infants were baptised as Roman Catholics, but only 7 per cent of illegitimate infants were baptised as Roman Catholics.

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16 A. Blaikie, *Illegitimacy, Sex, and Society: Northeast Scotland, 1750–1900* (Oxford, 1993); R. Adair, *Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 51–63.

17 Laslett, 'Introduction', p. 34.

18 Laslett, 'Introduction', p. 20.

19 K. Oosterveen, R.M. Smith and S. Stewart, 'Family reconstitution and the study of bastardy: evidence from certain English parishes', in Laslett, *et al.*, *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, (London, 1980), pp. 86–140, here at p. 88.

20 A. Macfarlane, 'Illegitimacy and illegitimates', p. 84.

21 Laslett, 'Introduction', p. 54.

22 G.R. Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives: Peasants and Illicit Sex in Early Seventeenth Century England* (New Brunswick, 1979).

Illegitimacy was more common amongst Protestants than Catholics, and no Catholic widows produced illegitimate children in Stourton, whereas several Protestant widows did so. The lower level of illegitimacy amongst Catholic women may be related to their status as a persecuted minority. A greater commitment to their religion, and its doctrine of sexual purity and abstinence, was required to exist and thrive in a time when being a Catholic had so many disadvantages. Persecuted religious minorities tend to be more passionate about their religion. By contrast, many of the women designated as Anglicans may have been so in name only, with the baptism of their children or the receipt of charity being the only interactions they had with their church. Research in the nineteenth century identified an association between 'lack of religious duty' and illegitimacy.<sup>23</sup>

The marital experience of women who could be traced to marriage or the age of 50 years was then considered, with mothers of illegitimate children compared to women who were born in the research area in the period 1754–1914 and who were not the mothers of illegitimate children. Of the 53 mothers of illegitimate children who did not marry after the birth of the child, 13 died before the age of 50 years. These have been excluded from the analysis leading to the results which follow.

Women who produced illegitimate children had a lower rate of marriage than women who did not have illegitimate children. Overall, 136 out of the 176 mothers of illegitimate children eventually married (77.3 per cent), compared to 679 out of the 750 women who did not produce illegitimate children (90.5 per cent). In other English parishes in which bastardy was studied, between 13 per cent and 23 per cent of the mothers of illegitimate children stayed and married in the parish in which they had given birth and on the Isle of Skye the rate of marriage on the same island was 7 per cent in the late nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> The much higher rate identified in this paper is likely to be the result of using records from many parishes, not just the one in which the child was born, and aligns more closely with a study of nineteenth century Sweden, which showed that 85.8 per cent of mothers of illegitimate children in agricultural parishes went on to marry.<sup>25</sup>

However, the overall figures obscure the impact that the presence of the child had on marriage prospects. Many women did not live with their illegitimate children. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, illegitimate children had higher rates of infant mortality compared with legitimate children.<sup>26</sup> The proportions of infants born in the

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23 A. Leffingwell, *Illegitimacy and the Influence of Seasons upon Conduct: Two Essays* (London, 1892).

24 Oosterveen *et al.*, 'Family reconstitution and the study of bastardy', p. 106; A. Reid, R. Davies, E. Garrett, and A. Blaikie, 'Vulnerability among illegitimate children in nineteenth century Scotland', *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 111 (2006), pp. 89–113.

25 A. Brändström, 'Illegitimacy and lone-parenthood in XIXth century Sweden', *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 2 (1998), pp. 93–113.

26 General Register Office, *Thirty-Eighth Annual Report of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England for 1875* (London, 1877), pp. xlv–xlvi; A. Levene, 'The mortality penalty of illegitimate children: foundlings and poor children in eighteenth-century England', in A. Levene, T. Nutt and S. Williams (eds) *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700–1920*, (London, 2005), pp. 34–49. A. Reid, 'The influences on the health and mortality of illegitimate children in Derbyshire, 1917–1922', in Levene *et al.* *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700–1920*, pp. 168–189.



## Illegitimacy and Marriage Prospects in Rural England

**Table 1** Mortality among children born in Stourton and Kilmington, 1754–1914

	Children aged 0–2 years			Children aged 2–15 years		
	Total number	Number dying	Percentage dying	Total number	Number dying	Percentage dying
Legitimate	2,201	403	18.3	1,798	163	9.1
Illegitimate	165	44	26.7	121	19	15.7

**Sources:** Parish registers of Stourton and Kilmington; records of Catholic and Methodist churches; poor law records; census enumerators' books for Stourton and Kilmington; school log books. For full details, see C. Day, *Wiltshire Marriage Patterns 1754–1914: Geographical Mobility, Cousin Marriage and Illegitimacy* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), pp. 30–63.

research area in the period 1754–1914 who died as infants or children was calculated according to their legitimacy and the results are shown in Table 1.

There was a clear difference in the survival rates of children born legitimately and illegitimately, with 26.7 per cent of illegitimate children dying before their second birthday, versus 18.3 per cent of legitimate children, and 15.7 per cent of illegitimate children dying between the ages of 2 and 15, versus 9.1 per cent for legitimate children. Infancy was particularly hazardous for illegitimate children. The main cause was the environment in which illegitimate children were raised. Wiltshire labourers already had the lowest wages in the country and to compound this the lower wages for women, scarcity of paid women's work in rural areas and physical demands on a new mother, resulted in poor nutrition for an illegitimate infant.<sup>27</sup> Living arrangements were usually crowded and unsanitary. In England in the eighteenth century it was very rare for an unmarried woman to obtain independent accommodation and this was usually only possible if she was of the middle or upper classes.<sup>28</sup>

If they survived infancy, there were limited options for how illegitimate children would be raised. An illegitimate child could live with his or her mother, in an institution such as the workhouse, or with other relatives (typically grandparents). Mothers whose illegitimate children were born in Stourton or Kilmington in the period 1754–1914 were categorised by numbers of co-resident children: that is, the number of children living with them. If the child had died, been placed in the workhouse or was living with other relatives, it was categorised as being not co-resident with the mother. In all other cases it was assumed that the child was co-resident until 16 years of age. The marriage outcomes of the mothers were then compared (Table 2). Amongst women who had at least one illegitimate child, but none living with them, only 10.9 per cent did not marry after the birth of the child, which is close to the 9.5 per cent of women who were not the mothers of illegitimate children and did not marry. Of mothers of illegitimate children, but none co-resident, 78.2 per cent

27 R. Molland, 'Agriculture 1793–1870' in E. Crittall (ed.) *Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire*, Vol. 4 (London, 1959), p. 81.

28 A.M. Froide, 'Marital status as a category of difference: singlewomen and widows in early modern England', in J.M. Bennett and A.M. Froide (eds) *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800* (Philadelphia PA, 1999), pp. 236–69.

**Table 2 Marital outcome of mothers of illegitimate children, by number of co-resident children: Stourton and Kilmington, 1754–1914**

Co-resident children	Married the father		Married another man		Did not marry		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
0	6	10.9	43	78.2	6	10.9	55	100.0
1	33	42.3	30	38.5	15	19.2	78	100.0
2 or more	10	23.3	14	32.6	19	44.2	43	100.0
Totals	49	27.8	87	48.6	40	22.7	176	100.0

**Sources:** Parish registers of Stourton and Kilmington; records of Catholic and Methodist churches; poor law records; census enumerators' books for Stourton and Kilmington; school log books. For full details, see *C. Day, Wiltshire Marriage Patterns 1754–1914: Geographical Mobility, Cousin Marriage and Illegitimacy* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), pp. 30–63.

went on to marry someone who was not the father of the child. As the number of co-resident children increased, the percentage of mothers who remained unmarried also increased, with 44.2 per cent of mothers with two or more co-resident children not marrying subsequently. Table 2 therefore shows that, the more children who were co-resident with the mother, the less likely the mother was to marry.

Table 2 also shows that where no children were co-resident with the mother, only 10.9 per cent of mothers married the father of the child. If a man was not willing to marry his pregnant lover before the birth of the child, then there was clearly little pressure to marry her if the child died or if other relatives took responsibility for the child's upkeep.

The marital experiences of fathers of illegitimate children in the two parishes were then considered. A major data problem is to determine how many men were involved. There were 319 infants born out of wedlock to 221 mothers, with 82 fathers positively identified, so the total number of biological fathers must fall between 82 (every child was fathered by a man who was already identified, which is unlikely) and 288 (every child with an unidentified father was fathered by a different man, which is also unlikely). Of the 82 identified fathers, 84.1 per cent fathered only one illegitimate child with a further 11.0 per cent fathering two illegitimate children and 4.9 per cent fathering three or more. If these rates applied to the unidentified fathers, then the total number of unidentified fathers would be 151 fathers of 206 children. This figure is used in Table 3 for comparison. An attempt was made to trace all identified fathers to marriage, death or the age of 50 years, and only eight identified fathers could not be traced.

Table 3 shows that only one of the identified men who had fathered an illegitimate child remained permanently unmarried, and he was in a consensual union with the mother of his children, meaning that they lived together as husband and wife, but without formal marriage. This represents 1.2 per cent of identified fathers and is remarkably few compared with 22.7 per cent of mothers of illegitimate children who remained unmarried. In addition, amongst the identified fathers, 13.4 per cent were already married to someone

## Illegitimacy and Marriage Prospects in Rural England

**Table 3** Marital outcome of fathers of illegitimate children: Stourton and Kilmington, 1754–1914

	n	%
<i>Father identified</i>		
Married the mother	47	57.3
Married another woman	15	18.3
Already married	11	13.4
Did not marry	1	1.2
Untraced	8	9.8
 Total fathers identified	 82	 100.0
 <i>Father not identified</i>	 151	
 <b>Total number of fathers</b>	 233	

**Note:** The number of fathers who 'married the mother' includes three men who bigamously married the mothers of their illegitimate children.

**Sources:** Parish registers of Stourton and Kilmington; records of Catholic and Methodist churches; poor law records; census enumerators' books for Stourton and Kilmington; school log books. For full details, see C. Day, *Wiltshire Marriage Patterns 1754–1914: Geographical Mobility, Cousin Marriage and Illegitimacy* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013), pp. 30–63.

else and did not leave that marital union. For men, fathering an illegitimate child was not an impediment to marriage. Furthermore, 151 of the estimated 233 fathers of illegitimate children (64.8 per cent) were not identified in existing records, and presumably did not have their marital prospects curtailed. It would appear that the vast majority of fathers of illegitimate children suffered few marital consequences for their actions.

As part of the wider project from which these results were drawn, the question was asked whether mothers of illegitimate children were more or less likely to marry their cousins than other women. In order to compare like with like, I examined women who were married in the research area (not necessarily women who had given birth in the research area). The results showed that 4 out of 103 (3.9 per cent) of women who were mothers of illegitimate children married their first cousins, compared to 19 out of 1,080 (1.8 per cent) of women who were not mothers of illegitimate children. Although this represents a doubling of the rate of first cousin marriage amongst mothers of illegitimate children, the numbers are small.

Finally, the geographical mobility of mothers of illegitimate children was considered. In Stourton and Kilmington, 217 out of 319 (68.0 per cent) of illegitimate children born there had mothers who were born in the same parish as themselves. For legitimate children, the rate was only 35.8 per cent (1,653 out of 4,615), so the mothers of illegitimate children were less mobile than other women.

The pattern of greater immobility amongst mothers of illegitimate children has been shown in other studies. For example, in Rothiemay, Scotland in 1881, 73 per cent of unmarried mothers were born in the parish in which they were resident, compared to 19 per cent

of married women. Other parishes in the north-east of Scotland showed the same effect but not as strongly.<sup>29</sup> In one family reconstitution study of English parishes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the mothers of illegitimate children had higher rates of being baptised in the same parish as their child compared to married women.<sup>30</sup>

## Discussion

Women who had illegitimate children were usually able to go on and marry someone, but their choices and opportunities were limited by other factors. In south-west Wiltshire in the period 1754–1914, women who had illegitimate children who were co-resident with them were less likely to marry than other women. This aligns with research on widow remarriage. In a study of remarriage rates amongst widows, the number of dependent children that a widow had was directly proportional to the length of time before remarriage.<sup>31</sup> The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure looked at the remarriage intervals of widows with 0, 1, 2, and 3 or more children under the age of ten years, and found that the greater the number of dependent children, the longer the remarriage interval. For men, there was little association between remarriage interval and either age at widowhood or number of dependent children.<sup>32</sup> Using civil registration records, in Glasgow in 1855, 28 per cent of widows who remarried had no living children at the time of remarriage, and 17 per cent had never had any children. For men the figures were 25 per cent and 13 per cent. The widowers who remarried had more living children than the widows who remarried: 45 per cent of widowers who remarried in Glasgow in 1855 had three or more living children, whereas only 21 per cent of the widows had that many living children.<sup>33</sup> The evidence from both English parish reconstitutions and Scottish civil registration therefore points to the ages and number of dependent children as important factors for women, but not for men. It would be expected that similar factors would be at work in south-west Wiltshire.

The number of widows who remarried in 1851, relative to the total number of widows, can be calculated from census data and civil registration data for the same year to examine inter-county differences. For England and Wales as a whole, the rate was 109 widows remarried per 1,000 widows aged 15–44 years. This rate ranged from a high of 176 for Staffordshire to a low of 48 for Cumberland. The northern counties tended to have higher rates than the southern counties. For Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset the rates were 100, 88 and 79 respectively.<sup>34</sup> This places the research area roughly in the middle of the English experience of widow remarriage.

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29 Blaikie, *Illegitimacy, Sex, and Society*, p. 129.

30 See Oosterveen *et al.*, 'Family reconstitution and the study of bastardy'.

31 E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Davies, J.E. Oeppen and R.S. Schofield, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 177.

32 Wrigley *et al.*, *English Population History*, p. 178.

33 M. Drake, 'The remarriage market in mid-nineteenth century Britain', in J. Dupâquier, E. Hélin, P. Laslett, M. Livi-Bacci, and S. Sogner (eds) *Marriage and Remarriage in Populations of the Past* (London, 1981), pp. 289–96, here at p. 289.

34 Drake, 'Remarriage market', p. 294.

The same effect could be expected to operate with respect to the mothers of illegitimate children. A study of nineteenth-century Sweden examined the total number of illegitimate children produced by a woman, regardless of whether or not the children were co-resident, and found that the overall marriage rate decreased from 71.8 per cent for mothers of one illegitimate child to 63.5 per cent for two children and 48.8 per cent with three.<sup>35</sup> The more children a woman brought to a potential marriage, the lower her chances of marriage. This did not apply to men.<sup>36</sup>

Women who had illegitimate children were more likely to marry their first cousins and were less geographically mobile than other women. These factors may be related. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, responsibility for the maintenance of illegitimate children fell upon the parish in which they were born.<sup>37</sup> In order to avoid a financial burden, a parish which was not the permanent home of an expectant unmarried mother would force her to return to her own parish to give birth, thereby displacing the burden of upkeep of the child.<sup>38</sup> This meant that these women were more likely to reside in the parish of their own birth, making them less geographically mobile than other married women, who tended to reside in the parish of their husband's birth. There is a correlation between lack of geographical mobility and rate of cousin marriage, so the enforced immobility of mothers of illegitimate children may have contributed to the doubling of the rate of first cousin marriage.<sup>39</sup> In addition, consanguinity and illegitimacy may be related, since people who had crossed one social boundary were more likely to cross another. Although pre-marital sex was relatively common, producing an illegitimate child was an unwelcome event.<sup>40</sup> In her studies of incestuous unions in Somerset in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Morris observed that there was a connection between incestuous unions and bastardy, probably because '...sexual and marital irregularities were incorporated into a familiar pattern of family and social life'.<sup>41</sup> People observed the sexual and marital behaviour of other members of their own family and incorporated this into their own accepted behaviour.

The impact on marriage rates of men who fathered an illegitimate child appears much less than that of the mothers of their children, with 64.8 per cent escaping any formal identification in public records, and only 1.2 per cent of identified fathers never marrying. This aligns with social norms of the time which placed the burden of blame for illegitimacy on women.

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35 See Brändström, 'Illegitimacy and lone-parenthood'.

36 Wrigley *et al.*, *English Population History*, p. 177.

37 *The Compleat Parish Officer (1734)*, edited by R. Church (Devizes, 1996), p. 72.

38 See D. Gill, *Illegitimacy, Sexuality and the Status of Women*, (Oxford, 1997); and A. Cole, *Poor Law Documents Before 1834*, 2nd edn (Bury, 2000), p. 10.

39 H. Bras, F. Van Poppel and K. Mandemakers, 'Relatives as spouses: preferences and opportunities for kin marriage in a western society', *American Journal of Human Biology*, 21 (2009), pp. 793–804, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.20896>.

40 See P.E.H. Hair, 'Bridal pregnancy in earlier rural England further examined', *Population Studies*, 24 (1970), pp. 59–70; Wrigley *et al.*, *English Population History*, p. 421.

41 P. Morris, 'Incest or survival strategy? Plebeian marriage within the prohibited degrees in Somerset, 1730–1835', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2 (1991), pp. 235–65, here at p. 264.

## Conclusions

This article provides insight into the life experiences of parents of illegitimate children, at a time when this was non-conforming sexual behaviour. It indicates that the behaviour itself (extra-marital sex) was not the sole relevant factor in the life course of the mother, but that the product of that behaviour (the child) contributed in important ways to the mother's marriage prospects, but not the father's.

The research behind this article demonstrates the value of multi-source parish reconstitution in answering questions of historical demography and illustrates the opportunities opened up by commercial online genealogical services to trace whole life courses of individuals. It is hoped that readily available and cheap DNA testing, which is driven by the commercial family history market, may be utilised in future to further investigate questions of interest, including assisting in the identification of the vast majority of fathers of illegitimate children who escaped identification in public records of the time.