
Literacy and Locality in Two Midlands Industrialising Places, 1754-1812*

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Abstract

In their extensive research into early modern literacy rates, through the marriage partners' signatures, Roger Schofield and David Cressy alerted us to the potential variability of literacy by region and locality. Modern theorists of literacy have also denoted the desirability of more localised considerations. In an attempt to address that issue in combination with the development of modern society through industrialisation, this article investigates the ability to sign marriage registers (after 1754) as a nominal marker of literacy in two contiguous parishes in north-west Leicestershire, both going through the industrialisation process, but one with more diversity than the mono-industrial character of the other: Loughborough and Shepsbed. In addition, the analysis takes into consideration the ability to sign by witnesses to the marriage, as a separate cohort. The printed marriage registers introduced by the Marriage Act of 1753 (26 Geo. II, c. 33), which required signature or mark by two credible witnesses, coincided with the acceleration of industrialisation and thus have particular significance for some localities. In industrialising societies, the decision to attain literacy was also influenced by local social attitudes, such as whether illiteracy carried a social stigma or not.

Introduction

One of the original and still apposite approaches to the quantitative analysis of the progress of literacy in England focused on aggregate data at a national level, the criterion being the ability to sign post-1754 marriage registers from a large sample of parishes.² The assessment of literacy based on 'nominal' literacy, the ability to sign one's name, has become a standard, if not incontrovertible, measure of a minimum attainment of literacy. One of the fundamental tenets of this approach is that literacy was acquired in two stages: reading and then (if possible) writing, so that a minimum capacity to write reflected some

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2 D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980); R.S. Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England', in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 311–25; R.S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy in England 1750–1850', in H. Graf (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development in the West: a Reader* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 201–17; R.A. Houston, *Literacy and Society in Scotland and England, 1600–1850* (Cambridge, 1984). For the legislative background, see R.B. Outhwaite, *Clandestine Marriage in England, 1500–1850* (London, 1995); R. Probert, 'Control over marriage in England and Wales, 1753–1823: the Clandestine Marriages Act of 1753 in context', *Law and History Review*, 27 (2009), pp. 413–50; and R. Probert, *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century: a Reassessment* (Cambridge, 2009).

literate development.³ This approach has thus been deployed in, for example, assessment of literacy in early modern England on the criterion of the testators' signatures on wills and subscriptions to the Protestation Oath of 1641–1642.⁴

Approaches to the significance of literacy have emphasised different perspectives. Thomas Laqueur, for example, concentrated on its 'cultural ecology', a 'consumption good', an integral part of a 'culturally defined need to be able to read and write'.⁵ Modernist paradigms prefer to assess literacy as a 'development goal', not simply in industrialisation, but the wider remit of 'progress'.⁶ The controversy over the connection between broad education and the industrial revolution perhaps lies still unresolved.⁷ The extent of the ability to sign cannot answer that question, but it does illuminate whether that level of writing was necessary for the industrial workforce in the earliest phases of industrial development. That particular issue has been addressed by many commentators from the perspective of the skilling of the workforce, often with the conclusion that practical induction was paramount. A different consideration was suggested by David Mitch, that advancement in the workplace necessitated literacy, including writing. However, this suggestion is related to the later (Victorian) workplace, by then an institutionalised factory environment rather than the household of the earlier phase of industrialisation.⁸ The desirability of writing varied by time, place and individual circumstance.⁹

The research has nevertheless largely been conducted at an aggregate level in a national context.¹⁰ Indeed, in addressing their aggregative samples, Schofield and W.B. Stephens indicated the topological diversity, between regions and urban and rural areas. Relevant to the present context, the sample from marriage registers used by Stephens contained seven urban places in the Midlands, including Nottingham, for 1754–1762, 1799–1804, and

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- 3 For caveats, see J. Barry, 'Literacy and literature in popular culture: reading and writing in historical perspective', in T. Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England c. 1500–1850* (New York, 1995), pp. 69–94, here at pp. 75–6. For the implications, A. Fox, 'Words, words, words: education, literacy and print', in K. Wrightson (ed.), *A Social History of England 1570–1740* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 129–51, here at pp. 137–8.
 - 4 Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, pp. 62–103, 105–7. See also Cressy's study using depositions in the ecclesiastical courts: D. Cressy, 'Occupations, migration and literacy in east London, 1580–1640', *Local Population Studies*, 5 (1970), pp. 53–60.
 - 5 T. Laqueur, 'Toward a cultural ecology of literacy in England, 1600–1800', in D.P. Resnick (ed.), *Literacy in Historical Perspective* (Washington, DC, 1983), pp. 43–57; see also D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750–1914* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 96–104; and W.B. Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society, 1830–1870* (Manchester, 1987).
 - 6 G. Elwert, 'Society literacy: writing culture and development', in D.R. Olson and N. Torrance (eds), *The Making of Literate Societies* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 54–67.
 - 7 M. Sanderson, 'Literacy and social mobility in the industrial revolution', *Past and Present*, 56 (1972), pp. 75–104; E.G. West, 'Literacy and the industrial revolution', *Economic History Review*, 31 (1978), pp. 369–83; E.G. West, *Education and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1975).
 - 8 D.F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: the Influence of Private and Public Policy* (Philadelphia, PA, 1992), pp. 11–42 ('The benefits of literacy in the workplace'), which included Loughborough; see also D. Mitch, 'Education and skill of the British labour force', in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain. Volume I: Industrialisation* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 322–56.
 - 9 Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, pp. 1–2, 11–12.
 - 10 For example Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy', p. 206 (274 parishes).

1831–1837.¹¹ Whilst there have been examinations of the local evolution of literacy, further additions to the mosaic may be helpful.¹²

The location examined here is an early industrialising locality, the small town of Loughborough and the adjacent industrial village of Shepshed, in which the stocking industry expanded from the early eighteenth century.¹³ The status of ‘nominal’ literacy is analysed here in relation to this industrial process. The ability to sign or not can be associated, if imperfectly, with occupational status in early industrialisation, because the incumbent or the parish clerk included, if inconsistently, the occupation of the groom and bride.

The data

The first collection of information analysed is derived from 2,091 marriages registered in the parish of All Saints, Loughborough, the single ecclesiastical district of the small town and its rural hinterland, combined with information about the occupations of fathers at baptism, especially from 1782 to 1811.¹⁴ The data are divided for some purposes into two cohorts: 1754–1781 and 1782–1811. One of the reasons is the contingent recording of occupational information. Although some such information is provided between 1754 and 1774, it is laconic. From 1782, the register includes more comprehensive references to the occupation of fathers at the baptism of their children, a change associated with the succession of Joseph Webster as parish clerk after the demise of the longstanding previous incumbent of the office, Nicholas Webster. The cohorts thus also represent two temporal generations. To some extent there is an alignment with educational developments in the parish. In December 1786, a memorandum was entered in the register of baptisms and burials: ‘This Year Sunday Schools were first Instituted in this Town.’¹⁵

The personnel are not, of course, exclusive, with some featuring both before 1781 and afterwards, but the gross level of literacy in each cohort is only marginally affected. Homonymous entries are a problem, particularly for males, but have been reduced to a single person, so that the numbers are probably under-estimates rather than exaggerated by double counting. (‘Homonymous’ here refers to different people bearing the same forename and surname). In the marriages up to and including 1781, 23 per cent involved an exogamous partner, a groom or bride from outside the parish; most such partners were male (19 per cent grooms) but some female (4 per cent brides). After 1781, an exogamous partner subscribed to 20 per cent of the ceremonies (18 per cent grooms and 2 per cent brides). In the cohort to 1781, the Loughborough parties thus comprise 614 grooms and 733 brides; in the cohort from 1782 they comprise 1,096 grooms and 1,305 brides (Table 1).

11 Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society*, pp. 5–12.

12 D. Barton and M. Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (London, 1998) (Lancaster). Barry, ‘Literacy and literature in popular culture,’ p. 236, lists some local and regional studies.

13 D. Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism* (London, 1977).

14 Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (hereafter ROLLR) DE667/1–13.

15 For a reappraisal, see K.D.M. Snell, ‘The Sunday School movement in England and Wales: child labour, denominational control and working-class culture’, *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), pp. 122–68.

Table 1 Loughborough marriage data, 1754–1812

Period	Grooms	Brides	Witnesses
1754–1781	614	733	927
1782–1812	1,096	1,305	1,446

Note: Numbers of brides and grooms differ because exogamous partners are excluded.

Source: Records of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (ROLLR) DE667/1–13.

Educational opportunity for working people was transformed, it has been suggested, from the ‘1810s’, so the focus here is on that earlier phase of industrial activity.¹⁶

Information about the witnesses is inherently more complex. The names of a small component are illegible, but these are marginal in number. Some witnesses inscribed only the initial of their forename, equally marginal in number. In all these instances, the material has to be rejected, since gender is indeterminate and the witness cannot be associated with occupational data. In the first tranche of marriages to 1781, 927 different witnesses can be elicited, 75 per cent of whom were male and 25 per cent female. The second set of ceremonies was attested by 1,446 different witnesses, 72 per cent male and 28 per cent female. The complications of witnesses do not end there, of course. A significant number of marriage partners also witnessed other people’s weddings, not least those occurring on the same day. Even exogamous grooms attested others’ marriages. For the purposes of the analysis of the extent of literacy in the parish it is thus necessary to isolate how many witnesses did not appear as marriage partners, solely as witnesses. Accordingly, 379 males and 144 females attested marriages up to 1781 without appearing as marriage partners; thereafter, 570 males and 230 females were witnesses who did not appear as marriage partners.

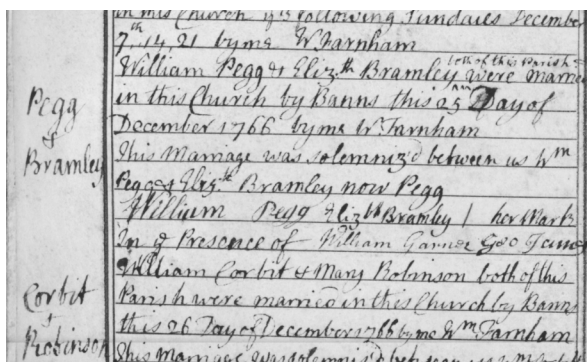
Secondly, 490 marriages from Shepshed between 1754 and 1791 have been subjected to the same sort of examination.¹⁷ Once again, exogamous partners have been excluded. Consequently, the data comprise information about 485 brides and 427 grooms. Additionally, a total of 479 individual witnesses were invoked, only 49 of whom were female. This proportion of just over 10 per cent of female witnesses in Shepshed contrasts strongly with the higher percentage of 28–29 per cent in Loughborough. Since Loughborough was expanding as an urban centre with a diversity of occupations, the explanations might involve the higher level of female literacy in the small town than in the large village, according to the predilection for literate witnesses in the urban place, or that patriarchal authority was stronger in the expanding village than the small town. In 1801, Loughborough had a population of 4,603 compared with Shepshed’s 2,627, but the difference obtained in occupational diversity as well as demographic size.¹⁸

16 E. Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn: a People’s History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2014 edn), pp. 173, 180; see also C. Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2013) (concerning Joseph Woolley, stockinger).

17 ROLLR DE610/7–9.

18 House of Commons, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns Made Pursuant to an Act, passed in the Forty-first Year of His Majesty King George III* (London, 1802), p. 180.

Figure 1 Extract from Shepshed register of marriages



Source: © Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR). Reproduced by permission.

The marriage registers of Shepshed are highly unorthodox, not being composed of printed forms, but entirely of manuscript entries (see Figure 1). There is, furthermore, confusion in the registration in 1781 and 1782, during the hiatus between parish clerks. In 1781 also, two marriages were registered with a single witness for each.¹⁹ The registers therefore seem to contain some defects, but the long generation of entries supplies a substantial sample for comparison with Loughborough; a comparison between an industrial village and a small town with an industrial base. The possibility of correlating literacy with occupation in Shepshed is more circumscribed. As in Loughborough, the registers transiently include occupations of fathers of baptised children, especially between 1754 and 1770.²⁰ Corresponding with the relative sizes of population, the number of individual father's occupations recorded for Shepshed is minimal (about 80 different individuals).

The perceived deficiencies of the signature have been rehearsed numerous times, from Schofield onwards.²¹ *Faute de mieux*, the signature offers a 'standard and direct' measure, of 'middle-range' quality.²² There is, it has been suggested, little evidence in these marriage registers that people alternated between the use of signature and mark; they were consistent in this regard.²³

The locality

During the late middle ages, Loughborough developed into the second largest urban centre in Leicestershire behind the county borough (Leicester). It was not only a market centre between three different *pays* (Soar valley, Charnwood Forest woodland, and upland Wolds);

19 ROLLR DE610/10. Chatterton = Hetherley (19 February) and Atkin = Gostelow (25 February).

20 ROLLR DE610/6.

21 Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy', pp. 321–3; Barry, 'Literacy and literature'.

22 Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy', p. 203.

23 See Barry, 'Literacy and literature'.

its role as an administrative centre expanded too. Consequently, by the early seventeenth century, it had attracted professional services in the law and ‘medicine’. More relevantly for the present purpose, during the late seventeenth century, the small town stood at the northern end of an industrialising region in the Soar valley, built around domestic hosiery manufacturing (especially of stockings), from north Leicester to Loughborough and the adjacent parish of Shepshed.²⁴ However it is defined, this type of industrialisation had already become a formative process in Loughborough by 1754.²⁵ Some description of the character of the small town of Loughborough in the eighteenth century is already available, with an emphasis on elite networks rather than this existing industrial workforce.²⁶

Unsurprisingly, industrial development in Shepshed and Loughborough was coeval. The initial evidence of industrial activity in the village (Shepshed) is mention of the ‘silkstocking weaver’ Thomas Trowell in 1655. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, four per cent of entries in the parish registers referred to framework knitters, which had increased to a quarter by 1730.²⁷ The incursion of industry in this local countryside had been enabled by the freehold landholding associated with a poor environment which resulted in the relative poverty of agrarian income. This combination fostered the expansion of framework knitting as a household economy, engaging the whole family. Local household structure consisted of ‘co-resident wage earners’, the largest households concomitant with framework knitting and the related textile processes (seamers). These family groups experienced a ‘culture of poverty’. The persistence of outdoor relief supplemented low wages and underemployment.²⁸

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- 24 Levine, *Family Formation*. For the southern extension below Leicester as another industrialising region, R. Carpenter, ‘Peasants and stockingers: socio-economic change in Guthlaxton Hundred, Leicestershire, 1700–1851’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1994); W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957; republished Chichester, 2008), pp. 227–9 (concerning Wigston Magna).
- 25 D.C. Coleman, ‘Proto-industrialization: a concept too many?’, *Economic History Review*, 36 (1983), pp. 435–48; P. Hudson (ed.), *Regions and Industries: a Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 24–68; and John K. Walton, ‘Proto-industrialization and the first industrial revolution: the case of Lancashire’ in Hudson, *Regions and Industries*, pp. 41–68; M. Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: an Economic and Social History of Britain 1851–1951* (Oxford, 2007). For the concept of proto-industrialisation, see P. Kriedte, H. Medick, and J. Schlumbohn (eds), *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1981). For a critical assessment, see R. Houston and K.D.M. Snell, ‘Proto-industrialization? Cottage industry, social change, and Industrial Revolution’, *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), pp. 473–92. For the initial approach to industry in the countryside, see J. Thirsk, ‘Industries in the countryside’, in F.J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 70–88; J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008); C. Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 2011); and E. A. Wrigley, *The Path to Sustained Growth: England’s Transition from an Organic Economy to an Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2016).
- 26 The earlier development is discussed by P. Clark, ‘Elite networking and the formation of an industrial small town: Loughborough, 1700–1840’, in N. Raven and J. Stobart (eds), *Towns, Regions and Industries: Urban and Industrial Change in the Midlands, c. 1700–1840* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 161–75.
- 27 Levine, *Family Formation*, p. 19.
- 28 Levine, *Family Formation*, pp. 27–32.

Spousal literacy

To commence with the raw numbers, first in Loughborough, 64 per cent of grooms had the ability to sign, compared with 44 per cent of brides. Conversely, 56 per cent of brides appended a mark by comparison with 36 per cent of males. In Shepshed, 58 per cent of grooms employed a signature, but merely 28 per cent of brides. A mark was deployed by 72 per cent of brides by comparison with 42 per cent of grooms. The ostensible difference here is the much higher proportion of young females in Shepshed who had not attained this level of literacy, but the total numbers for Shepshed are much lower and so the margin of error might have some significance. The extent of the contrast is so substantial (44 per cent signing against 28 per cent), nonetheless, that some consideration must be attached to the influence of the small urban society on levels of female literacy. The wider employment opportunities and social-economic mix in the small town encouraged greater female achievement compared with the industrial village. In the industrial village, the entire family was engaged in the productive process from the earliest opportunity.

Such figures must be placed further in their local context since Loughborough had developed as a small town and thus contained a variety of occupations, including a sector of an urban and rural middling sort.²⁹ Another caveat concerns the status of the marriage partners: their life-course stage. Although they had attained the age of majority (21 years) prescribed for marriage by banns under Hardwicke's Marriage Act, the partners were not yet fully socialised. Literacy was a process rather than a stage and the acquisition of literacy might have been effected through new household formation. For those reasons, occupational status and literacy in the context of the household are addressed further below. Similarly, the literacy of witnesses allows a wider perspective, for—although some witnesses were no doubt contemporaries—others represented an older generation, a later life-course stage during which literacy might have been acquired.³⁰

For several years after the introduction of the new registration process in 1754, confusion existed about the manner of referring to the bride as she subscribed in the register. Perhaps it is best illustrated from the contemporary marriage register for the adjacent parish of Shepshed, in which the clerk prescribed 'this Marriage was solemnizd (sic) between John Walker & Esther Walker late Esther Dennis' with the consequence that Esther signed the register as Esther Walker.³¹ All the entries in this register conform to this protocol down to 1760. Although this register is irregular in its format, the same situation obtained in the counterpart in Loughborough. The Shepshed register was not composed of printed sheets, the clerk entering the full text for the banns and the marriages in manuscript, spilling over on to the pastedowns. In contrast, the Loughborough marriage registers are entirely conventional, comprising printed forms. Even so, from the initial entries to May

29 S. D'Cruze, 'The middling sort in eighteenth-century Colchester: independence, social relations and the community broker', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800* (London, 1994), pp. 181–207.

30 For the later acquisition of education, see Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 166–73.

31 ROLLR DE610/7, p. 46 (1759).

1757, brides signed by their new married surname.³² The following number of examples might appear tedious, but they are intended to reflect the flexibility of brides in adopting a new signature. On officially conjoining with Colin Macphael, Anne (sic) Biddles signed the register as ‘Ann Mackphaell’; similarly, Anne Hutchings certified as ‘Ann Guttridge’ beside her groom Benjamin Gutteridge; Anne (sic) Wedgwood adapted to sign as ‘Ann Langdall’, Anne (sic) Hacker as ‘Ann Parkinson’, and Anna Brown as the more complicated ‘Anna Kirkland’.³³ These women had thus adjusted rapidly to a new form of signature, indicating a flexibility in ‘nominal’ literacy. Indeed, a few brides exhibited this flexibility in the Shepshed registers in late years: Sarah Yarwood as Kidger in 1770; Mary Jones as Morley in 1772; Elizabeth Gostelow as Mee in 1774; and Mary Moulton signed initially as Start, but cancelled that and replaced it with Moulton in 1775.³⁴ Even more refined, Mary Wale in 1772 inscribed herself as Berrington late Wale.³⁵ This transition is, of course, only visible in this gender-related context, but no doubt grooms had an equal facility. The signature was not a single trick.³⁶

The comparator for spousal literacy remains Schofield’s sample of 274 parishes, where the inability of brides to sign declined from 60 per cent in the middle of the eighteenth century to under 50 per cent by 1840, with a lower improvement for grooms, from 40 per cent inability up to 1795 to 33 per cent incapacity in 1840.³⁷ The comparative levels in Loughborough do not deviate too much from that national mean. The proportion of males with ‘nominal’ literacy in Loughborough was 64 per cent between 1754 and 1811. The bridal capacity over the same time approximated to 44 per cent, not out of line with the wider mean. In Shepshed, the male rate of ‘nominal’ literacy was slightly below the contextual mean, by two percentage points. More startlingly, female literacy on this measure was fundamentally low in comparison with the broader position, at 28 per cent being 12 points below the mean.

The specific context for this neglect of female education was the household economy of textile production. Whilst sceptical of Defoe’s assertion that he observed children as young as four at work in textile households, Cunningham does maintain that employment of children from the age of six years was normal.³⁸ Jane Humphries recites the example of William Farish who was put to the bobbin wheel at age eight years and then to the loom before age ten.³⁹ Engagement in household production was expected from children at an early age and release for any substantial education restricted.

32 ROLLR DE667/11, nos. 3–4, 12–14, 21, 23–26, 34–37, 42, 45–46, 48–50, 53, 58, 60–63.

33 ROLLR DE667/11, nos. 4, 25, 34, 45, 46.

34 ROLLR DE610/7 1 May 1770, 29 June 1772; DE610/10 30 November 1774, 30 November 1775.

35 ROLLR DE610/7 24 November 1772.

36 For the education of middling sort of women, see G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 161–73.

37 Schofield, ‘Dimensions of illiteracy’, pp. 206–8.

38 H. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow, 1995), pp. 85–6.

39 J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 214. See also R.A. Church, *Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town: Victorian Nottingham 1815–1900* (London, 1966), p. 317, on limited opportunities in education for textile households.

The literacy of witnesses

Legally, from 1754, matrimonial ceremonies required the presence of at least two witnesses ('two or more credible Witnesses') at the celebration of the marriage whose names were subscribed in the register.⁴⁰ In practice, however, some marriages in Loughborough, particularly by licence, but also by banns, attracted more witnesses, sometimes as many as half a dozen. Three witnesses were thus adduced for the marriage by licence of Robert Wilde and Mary Beeley and four to the wedding of Joseph Stanley and Sarah Sarson authorised in the same manner, in 1784 and 1785.⁴¹ When Francis Shaw and Hannah Martin married in 1788 by banns, three witnesses attended their ceremony.⁴² In 1793, the names of six witnesses were inscribed in the register on the marriage of Henry Clay, of Leicester, and Mary Cooper, of Loughborough, ostensibly by banns.⁴³ So too the wedding after banns between William Booth and Mary Quail, both of this parish, was certified by four witnesses in 1796.⁴⁴ These supernumerary witnesses did not occur until 1773.⁴⁵ From the 1780s, they proliferated in the Loughborough registers, with ultimately 92 ceremonies certified by more than two witnesses. A large proportion concerned exogamous grooms, but farming and retail partners also attracted more than the two stipulated witnesses. In Shepshed, the proliferation of witnesses was less pronounced, featuring in only nine marriages, commencing in 1784, seven of which involved three witnesses. Two which commanded four and five witnesses took place on the same day in 1786.⁴⁶

Marginally, some of the witnesses represented exogamous marriage partners, which is, for example, almost certainly the case in the inscription in the register of the signature of John Johnson on the marriage of Edward Johnson of Quorndon with Elizabeth Forman of Loughborough in 1780.⁴⁷ In other instances, the association might not be so obvious. Inevitably, some such witnesses have infiltrated into the analysis. Another type of impermanent witness resulted from the location of a significant barracks in the town, principally occupied by the Oxford Blues. Both the grooms and some of their witnesses may have been transient.

As indicated above, a proportion of the witnesses also appeared in the registers as marriage partners. Thus, in 1769, the conjoining of Benjamin Danby and Alice Skelson, both of this parish, was confirmed by the witnessing of Thomas Barrowdale and John Baradell, the former the marriage partner with Elizabeth Hurst in the following ceremony, attested by Benjamin Danby and Alice Danby (formerly Skelson). All four witnesses signed the register.⁴⁸

40 An Act for the better preventing of clandestine marriage. 26 Geo II. c. 33, s. xv. (1753).

41 ROLLR DE667/12 1784–5, nos. 150, 162.

42 ROLLR DE667/12, no. 283.

43 ROLLR DE667/12, no. 454.

44 ROLLR DE667/12, no. 608.

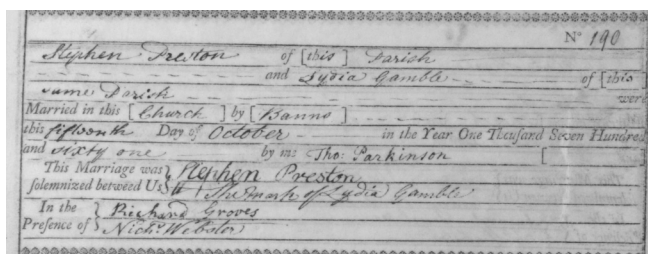
45 ROLLR DE667/11, no. 552.

46 ROLLR DE610/10 4 July 1786.

47 ROLLR DE667/11, no. 749.

48 ROLLR DE667/11, nos. 440–441.

Figure 2 The Loughborough register of marriages (including the signature of Nicholas Webster)



Source: © Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR). Reproduced by permission.

The count of witnesses is further complicated by the repetitive signing by parish officials, although their position is concealed in the register as only their signature was entered. From 1754 until his demise in 1782, Nicholas Webster, the parish clerk of Loughborough, signed as a witness to 404 marriages (Figure 2). Nicholas had in fact succeeded Joseph Webster in the role, the register recording that Joseph had been clerk on his burial entry on 20 May 1737.⁴⁹ Joseph himself had served in the office for about two decades: 'Joseph Webster Chosen Clerk/ By the <Reverend> Mr John Allin Rector of this Parrish' (25 March 1717).⁵⁰ Nicholas had indeed been selected as parish clerk on 29 May 1737: 'May the 29 1737 = Nicholas Webster was Chosen Clerk by the Reverend Mr John Alleyne Rector of this Parish'.⁵¹ On 20 June 1782, his burial was recorded: 'Nicholas Webster who was 45 Years Clerk of this Parish Aged 66'⁵²—the tender age of 21 years suggesting some degree of nepotism. In his will of 2 June 1781 (probate 4 December 1782), he described himself as engraver.⁵³ Almost immediately after his decease, his son, Joseph, already 37, was appointed as his successor: 'Memorandum That Joseph Webster was Chosen Clerk of this Parish By the Reverend James Bickham Doctor of Divinity & Rector thereof July the 6th 1782'.⁵⁴ In total, Joseph subscribed as witness to 879 wedding ceremonies up to 1812 (and many more thereafter as he continued as parish clerk until his expiration in 1829). The entry for his burial in 1829 recorded his position as parish clerk, aged 85 years.⁵⁵ In his will (8 March 1828), he considered himself a gentleman.⁵⁶

In Shepshed, the same dominance of the clerk as witness obtained. Here George James and William Lester signed as witnesses to respectively 142 and 157 marriages. The former attested to marriages from 1754 until his demise in 1781. In his will of 1780, he stipulated that '[a]ll the debts owing to me on account of my Clarkship shall go towards the defraying

49 ROLLR DE667/3.

50 ROLLR DE667/3.

51 ROLLR DE667/3.

52 ROLLR DE667/4.

53 ROLLR DE73 PR/T/1782/224.

54 ROLLR DE667/4 end of 1782; for his baptism as son of Nicholas Webster, clerk: DE667/3 13 March 1745/6.

55 ROLLR DE667/21, no. 2235.

56 ROLLR DE73 PR/T/1829/198.

of my Funeral Expenses.⁵⁷ Although describing himself as a tailor, he certainly also possessed real estate.⁵⁸

Ineluctably, therefore, this dynasty of Loughborough parish clerks informed, perhaps controlled, much of the protocol of registration and witnessing. These officials from the same kinship monopolised the position of parish clerk for 112 years or so. Their pen print pervaded the registers. Indeed, the end leaves and paste downs of two of the registers were arrogated by the monogram of Nicholas Webster.⁵⁹ Equally, however, it is possible that such longaevous clerks provided some sort of informal instruction to witnesses.

Less prolific in these authentications was Samuel Wood, a tailor, and sexton of Loughborough. He initially signed as a witness on 23 August 1791, with Joseph Webster, the same day as his (Wood's) marriage to Sarah North.⁶⁰ After a hiatus, he signed the register 25 times between 1798 and 1802, on five occasions with Webster. It might be considered here too that George Brookes, the farmer who attested multiple times, was also associated with Joseph Webster in signing at eleven marriages. The possibility is thus raised that Webster elicited some of the witnesses, which might explain the high level of their nominal literacy.

To recapitulate, in the first cohort of matrimonial entries in the Loughborough register, 379 male and 144 females attested who were not marriage partners during these years. Fully 88 per cent of the male witnesses signed the register. A comparable percentage of the females (86 per cent) also inscribed a signature. Of the similar (570) male witnesses in the second tranche, 85 per cent made a signature and of the females (230) 88 per cent. There may then have been some proclivity to invite witnesses who had nominal literacy to sign the register, perhaps for some social cachet. The consequence is, nonetheless, that an additional 459 nominally-literate persons complemented the nominally-literate marriage partners in the cohort of 1754–1781 and 684 in the second cohort to 1811. The repertoire of inhabitants with the ability to sign in the parish was thus considerably expanded.

Preponderantly, the witnesses, apart from the parish clerks, attested only once in the first cohort of marriages: only 29 per cent subscribed their signature more than once, mostly twice or thrice, including 23 female attestors. Although in the second cohort witnesses who attested multiple times did so mostly only on two or three occasions, the number of recurring witnesses increased dramatically, to 48 per cent, including more than 60 women. Although some repeated their signatures at four to six marriages, none equalled farmer George Brookes, who inscribed his signature at 27 marriages, perhaps a reflection of his social networks. After his first subscription in 1792, he appended his signature often between 1804 and 1809. For clarification, parish clerk's signatures relate entirely to their inscription as one of the two credible witnesses.

57 ROLLR PR/T/1780 5 January 1780.

58 *The Poll for a Knight of the Shire to Represent the County of Leicester* (Leicester, 1775), p. 61; for five sons of tailors and one actual tailor who applied for positions at the Bank of England see A.L. Murphy, '“Writes with a fair hand and appears to be well qualified”: the recruitment of Bank of England clerks, 1800–1815', *Financial History Review*, 22 (2015), pp. 19–44, here at pp. 29 (Table 4) and 33 (Table 5).

59 ROLLR DE667/2 and 3.

60 ROLLR DE667/12, nos 394–395.

Concerning Shepshed, 479 different witnesses appeared in the marriage registers, including those who also occurred as marriage partners, 85 per cent of whom signed. This illustrates again the predilection for witnesses with this degree of literacy and, concomitantly, the wider repertory of literacy. The most noticeable difference here is the small proportion of female testators, just over 10 per cent. Where female witnesses were elicited, they almost all had the ability to sign. There is here confirmation both of the desire for a nominally-literate person as a credible witness and the lower encouragement of women to attain this level.

To complete the pattern in Shepshed, 277 persons attested marriages who did not recur as marriage partners. The vast majority (87 per cent) appended their signature. The preference for witnesses with the capability to sign is evident. This premium on the ability to sign is perhaps illustrated by a quarter of the total (479) witnesses attesting more than once, exclusively those who signed. To account for the predilection or preference for witnesses with the ability to sign the register, reference must be made to the specification in the Marriage Act for *credible* witnesses. A signature validated the credibility of the witnesses.

Household and family

Since the transmission of 'nominal' literacy might be achieved within the household, consideration must be given to the literacy of the marriage partnership. The following discussion addresses those components through the combinations of: (1) grooms who signed with brides who signed (symmetrical literacy); (2) grooms who signed with brides who placed their mark (asymmetrical literacy); (3) grooms who appended their mark with brides who signed (asymmetrical literacy); (4) and grooms and brides who both resorted to a mark (symmetrical illiteracy). Combination (1) imputes a high propensity for the continuation of literacy in the household, whilst households in category (4) indicate a low potentiality for literacy, excluding external variables. The analysis rejects any marriage with an exogamous partner, as it is uncertain whether the couple remained in Loughborough or Shepshed. Households composed of two 'nominally'-literate adult partners comprised 34 per cent of all unions between 1754 and 1811. At the other end of the spectrum, households consisting of nuptial partners who both placed a mark accounted for 30 per cent of marriages. In between, households formed by a groom who signed and bride who used a mark, amounted to another 30 per cent. As might be expected, the smallest proportion (6 per cent) consisted of households where the groom placed a mark and the bride signed. It is evident that, *ceteris paribus*, just over a third of the households in Loughborough would probably transmit nominal literacy and just under a third would not have the same capability. In the intermediate categories, transmission of 'nominal' literacy depended on the relative instrumentality of groom (father) and bride (mother), and who within the household was most involved in the child's development.⁶¹

61 K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 30–1.

A further aspect of this capacity of Loughborough households to promote literacy pertained to a small increase in the marriages composed of groom and bride without ‘nominal’ literacy, category (4) above. Before 1801, 29 per cent of marriages exhibited this status, but after 1801 the proportion increased to 33 per cent, influenced by a pronounced upward drift from 1808. By the early nineteenth century, the demands of the textile household had an impact on literacy. Children in the textile household were expected to contribute to production.

Literacy in one family

Between 1756 and 1810, fourteen members of the Capp kinship in Loughborough signed the register, as brides, grooms and witnesses. None made a mark. Predominantly, the signatories were female, including just four males. The females acted equally as brides and witnesses. ‘Nominal’ literacy was seemingly attained by males and females in this kinship in the late eighteenth century.

This family belonged to that nucleus of longaevous parishioners variously described as ‘core families’, ‘focal families’ or ‘stable families’.⁶² Not only genealogically core (continuous), the kinship belonged to the influential farming sector which became the ‘middling sort’ in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.⁶³ Without reconstructing the precise genealogy, the signifiers of esteem of the family can be denominated. The progenitors of the family extend back into the middle of the sixteenth century in the parish, although their predominance became recognisable in the early seventeenth with James (1615–1656).⁶⁴ His successor, another James, was accorded the epithet husbandman, but probably in a euphemistic manner, as the title yeoman was rarely employed in Loughborough. By December 1688, Capp had been appointed high constable.⁶⁵ Moving into the early eighteenth century, when Elizabeth was baptised, she was described as the daughter of ‘Master Samuell Capp’.⁶⁶ Seven years later, Master George Capp was interred, followed five years after by Mistress Ellin Capp.⁶⁷ When William Capp was buried in 1746, he too was dignified as Master.⁶⁸ In the middle of the century, the registers allude variously to Master John Capp, farmer, John Capp, husbandman, and Master John Capp, husbandman.⁶⁹ Similarly, the clerk made observations to Master Samuel

62 For the synonyms, A. Mitson, ‘The significance of kinship networks in the seventeenth century: south-west Nottinghamshire’, in C.V. Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies, Cultures and Kinship, 1580–1850: Cultural Provinces and English Local History* (London, 1993), pp. 24–5.

63 H.R. French, *The Middling Sort of People in Provincial England 1600–1750* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 18–29. For genealogically continuous, M. Strathern, *Kinship at the Core: an Anthropology of Elmdon, a Village in North-West Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties* (Cambridge, 1981).

64 ROLLR DE667/1; DE667/2 11 December 1656.

65 ROLLR DE667/2 1 May 1680, December 1688.

66 ROLLR DE667/3 24 April 1717.

67 ROLLR DE667/3 16 May 1722, 18 April 1727.

68 ROLLR DE667/3 20 April 1746.

69 ROLLR DE667/4 14 July 1749, 8 April 1751, 3 August 1752, 5 December 1754.

Capp, husbandman.⁷⁰ On subsequent interments of James and John Capp, the designation Master was employed.⁷¹ Both John and James had qualified for the franchise of 40s. freeholders (of which there were a total of 62 in Loughborough) for Parliamentary elections.⁷² By the late eighteenth century, the farming branch of the family was represented by William Capp, alternatively described in the register as husbandman and grazier.⁷³ In the proprietors charged to the Land Tax in 1784, both James and William Capp appeared, William inscribed as Master.⁷⁴ So, too, Bridget Capp was accorded the title of Mistress in the enregistering of her burial.⁷⁵ Perhaps with some pretension, William intended his first two sons to have double forenames, unusual in the parish and locality at this time and, where deployed, more customarily associated with daughters, and then the fairly repetitive and unusual Mary Ann. On the first son he conferred the names Robert Hacker and on the second Thomas Hacker. Sadly, both died in infancy, the first just over a month from birth and the second at five months.⁷⁶ Perhaps these nominations reflected a desire to pretend to gentle status.⁷⁷ For the third son, William reverted to a more traditional single forename, Thomas, but this child survived only a few days.⁷⁸

This kinship exemplifies the association of literacy with middling-sort farming families, an ability distributed constantly through female as well as male members.

Occupations, status and literacy

In the absence of a comprehensive militia return, correlating the ability to sign with occupation presents considerable difficulty. With some certainty, it is possible to identify the occupation or status of some 638 males in the small town, both marriage partners and witnesses from 1754 to 1812, largely concentrated after 1781. Allocating them into occupational groupings is not uncomplicated. Although there was some fluidity in life-course occupations, the workmen usually remained within the vague categories of ‘skilled’ or ‘unskilled’. Thus, boatmen were recruited from amongst the labourers, ‘unskilled’. On the other hand, victualling extended across a range of activity, involving small-scale provisioning to middling-sort retailing. The most contentious consideration, however, concerns textile production, closely associated with the local conditions of literacy: particularly stockings or, in later designation, framework knitters. Accordingly, textile artificers have been assigned to a separate grouping, with sub-occupations.

70 ROLLR DE667/4 27 November 1751, 14 June 1754.

71 ROLLR DE667/4 23 September 1766, 18 March 1775.

72 *Poll for a Knight of the Shire*, p. 55.

73 ROLLR DE667/4 19 July 1785, 8 April 1787, 4 July 1788, 1 February 1790; DE667/5 17 January 1795, 3 October 1796.

74 ROLLR DE2517.

75 ROLLR DE667/5 12 December 1791.

76 ROLLR DE667/4 8 April 1787, 23 May 1787, 4 July 1788, 2 December 1788.

77 K. Leibring, ‘Given names in European naming systems’, in C. Hough (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Oxford, 2016), p. 208.

78 ROLLR DE667/4 1 and 6 February 1790.

Recognising those problems, the men have been allocated to four occupational or status categories: retail; craft (including construction); textiles; and labourers. Axiomatically, all those attributable to gentle status (esquire/gent), farmers, and professional status (clerks, excise officers, doctors, attorneys, schoolmasters and surgeons) corresponded to 100 per cent 'nominal' literacy, so they are excluded from the four categories above. Retailers with the capacity to sign comprised 87 per cent of all provisioners in Loughborough, complicated by 7 of 22 victuallers who placed a mark. In the craft category, this degree of pragmatic literacy was attained by 76 per cent; some joiners, masons, shoemakers, and tailors lacked the facility. The textile section is, as suggested, more complex. Overall, 59 per cent had acquired this element of literacy, but included the commercial element of seven hosiers and one lace manufacturer and an industrialist, a dyer. Surprisingly, all 13 combers had the ability to sign the register. Concentrating only on stockingers and (latterly) framework knitters, the capacity to sign descends to 49 per cent. Finally, the category of labourers contains generic labourers, chaise drivers, boatmen, gardeners, and concomitant activities. Among these men, only 38 per cent had acquired this 'nominal' literacy. For most categories, these numbers are highly contingent, since they do not comprehend the entire population of these trades, crafts and activities, but a random correlation where the information is available.

As indicated above, the information for Shepshed is minimal, but allows some deductions, mostly confirmatory. Retailers were uniformly 'nominally' literate. Most husbandmen had the capacity, but some apparently did not. With a couple of exceptions, labourers did not have the ability to sign. When the curate of Quorndon (the parish immediately south of Loughborough) celebrated a marriage in Shepshed in 1774 during a vacancy, the occupation of the groom was included, on just this one occasion: a stockinger who signed the register (whose bride also signed), following contemporary practice in Quorndon.⁷⁹ Interestingly, the stockingers (just under 40 in all) again were divided almost equally between signers and markers. There is another approach for Shepshed by relating the signatories to the Poll Book of 1775. Exactly 50 men with the franchise resided in the village, eligibility based on 40s. freehold for the county election. Of these, 33 subscribed in the marriage registers with their signature, all except one as witnesses. Two suppositions might follow: these proprietors, many of whom were probably smallholders, had acquired 'nominal' literacy; secondly, they were in demand for this ability to sign as witnesses to marriage.⁸⁰

Conclusion

One of the principal impediments to formal education of children was the opportunity-cost. Such a consideration was particularly apposite in industrialising locations, not least in

79 ROLLR DE610/7 Robinson = Caurah 1 August 1774; W.P.W. Phillimore and T.M. Blagg (eds), *Leicestershire Marriage Registers*, Vol. 9 (London, 1913), pp. 40-9 (1770-98).

80 *Poll for a Knight of the Shire*, pp. 60-1. For the fragmentary holdings in the village, see Levine, *Family Formation*, but also the survey and valuation of the parish of Shepshed in 1823: ROLLR DE2736/2.

early textile industries in which the whole of the family was engaged in domestic production. The cost extended to the diversion of income to school fees, even if the educational facilities were available. Access to education affected resources in two ways: loss of income through diversion of labour and diminution of resources through diversion of money. Child labour was a constant requisite in domestic textile production, not just a seasonal requirement.⁸¹ It is consequently of little point rehearsing the existence of schoolteachers in the small town and the industrial parish. The impact of even charity schools was probably immaterial in this respect.⁸² The occupational diversity of the two localities significantly affected levels of literacy. In Shepshed, the monolithic textile industry, which occupied the entire household in domestic production, resulted in lower literacy rates. By contrast, Loughborough, which also had a textile industry, had a more diversified economy as an urban centre, and so supported higher levels of literacy.

The cultural significance of the ability to sign was complex. Unlike in the middle of the nineteenth century, marriage partners appear to have retained a predilection for witnesses with the capacity to sign.⁸³ Part of the impetus might have derived from the legal requirement for *credible* witnesses. In the initial decades of the new legislation from 1754, this prescription might have induced a presumption of literacy as proper validation. That preference does not imply a cultural ‘distinction’ reflecting stigmatisation of the inability to sign.⁸⁴ Whilst a significant proportion of working people did not possess this facility, stigmatisation was abated. Stigmatisation depends on the opportunity to discredit, to depict imperfections, and to encode social information about defects.⁸⁵ ‘Nominal’ illiteracy did not at that time constitute a failure to conform to a norm. Working people had their own cultural expectations focused on skills and sociability. On the other hand, although practical induction remained the important means of transfer of occupational education, stockingers were divided in their engagement with ‘nominal’ literacy. Although not mandatory, the ability to sign in this group had become a question of personal cultural attainment, as Griffin has proposed.⁸⁶

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81 Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, pp. 54–5; M. Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 108.

82 Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 53; for the emphasis on comportment, W.M. Jacob, ‘The eye of his master: children and charity schools’, in D. Wood (ed.), *The Church and Childhood*, Studies in Church History 31 (Oxford, 1994), pp. 363–77; compare L. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 239–49.

83 Compare Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 31.

84 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by R. Nice (London, 2007), pp. 372–96 (‘the choice of necessity’); S.J. Charlesworth, *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 203–74 (‘culture of necessity’).

85 E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London, 1990), pp. 14, 58–64.

86 Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn*.