

RESEARCH NOTE

Strategies for Survival: Charwomen in Rural Berkshire*

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Abstract

Ciarán McCabe's appraisal of charwomen in early twentieth-century Dublin tenements revealed large numbers of widow chars maintaining independent households. This initial quantitative demographic study of a one fifth sample of rural Berkshire charwomen, using raw data from the 1911 census, finds similarities with contemporary Dublin. Charring was often a response to financial imperatives, and migration played little part in the life of charwomen.

Introduction

The much-maligned charwoman was a largely hidden but nonetheless important feature of household management. As early as 1850 *Punch*, in a satirical vein, described the charwoman as the 'hardest-worked servant of servants', and 'the lowest grade of domestic' who 'slaves, yet never gives satisfaction'. 'No lady talks of "her charwoman" any more than a gentleman breathes a word about "his pawnbroker"', whilst 'the nearest admission that is ever made to her existence is that "Mrs Grimes has come to assist"'.² Perhaps therein lies the reason for her role being totally ignored by *Mrs Beeton* in her eponymous work. Yet the piece highlights a peculiar combination of anonymity and ubiquity. Few willingly advertised themselves as carrying the lowly status of 'charwoman'. Chars were however often located through local gossip or tradesman's word of mouth, but once found, notwithstanding the casual nature of their engagement, were, as the contributor to *Punch* commented, indispensable with a reputation of being utterly reliable.

Charwomen, both nationally and locally, contrasted with other domestic workers in their demographic profile. Nationally there were over ten times as many

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2 'Nooks and corners of character: the charwoman', *Punch* 18, no. 447, 9 February 1850, p. 51.

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domestic servants as charwomen.³ The typical household domestic servant was young and unmarried: chars were predominately widowed and much older, with 57 per cent aged over 45 years.⁴ Of 126,061 charwomen nationwide in 1911, 560 (0.44 per cent) lived in Berkshire.⁵ This compared with a much higher density (0.97 per cent) of Berkshire's domestic servants within the national servant demographic.⁶ Berkshire chars therefore formed a significantly lesser element of the total county female workforce of domestics than nationally.⁷ This may be indicative of the type of work undertaken by charwomen, more required in urban commercial and residential settings. Yet it may also reflect censuses under-recording the role of some rural women resorting to occasional charring to meet modest neighbourhood demands for such services. Using raw data from the 1911 Census, this brief paper will seek to argue that charring was an inherently local phenomenon offering a valuable safety net to financially insecure women, and a welcome reserve of domestic labour to mistresses.

Mrs Beeton was not alone in overlooking the char. Unlike other domestics, charwomen remain largely invisible within the substantial historiography of domestic service. A notable exception is the study by Ciarán McCabe on Dublin charwomen at the turn of the twentieth century. As well as using literary and other sources, McCabe analysed the raw data from censuses of 1901 and 1911, each involving upwards of 1,250 women.⁸ He concluded that chars formed a key element

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- 3 The numbers were 126,061 charwomen and 1,335,358 female domestic servants: see Census of England and Wales, 1911, *Vol. X Occupations and Industries, Part 1*. British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP) 1913 LXXVIII [C. 7018], pp. xxvi and xxxi; Census of England and Wales, 1911 *Vol. X Occupations and Industries, Part 2*. BPP 1913 LXXIX [C. 7019], Table 13. Domestic service figures include those domestics employed in hotels, lodging and eating-houses.
 - 4 Nationally 28 per cent of charwomen fell in the age bracket 45-54 years. For 1911 and comparative 1901 figures of charwomen see Census of England and Wales, 1911 *Vol. X Occupations and Industries, Part 1*, p. xxxi. In a separate unpublished investigation using a sample of over one thousand female domestics in nine rural Berkshire communities, I established a mean average age for private household domestic servants of just under 27 years.
 - 5 Excluding the County Borough of Reading. Census of England and Wales, 1911 *Vol. X Occupations and Industries, Part 2*, p. 26.
 - 6 Census of England and Wales, 1911 *Vol. X Occupations and Industries, Part 2*, p. 26.
 - 7 Nationally chars formed 8.6 per cent of this combined workforce of domestic servants and chars, and in Berkshire 4.1 per cent.
 - 8 C. McCabe, 'Charwomen and Dublin's secondary labour force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Social History* 45 (2020), pp. 193-217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2020.1732128>. Published totals in the census reports of 1,493 and 1,296 charwomen respectively for 1901 and 1911 differed from McCabe's samples, illustrating the definitional challenges in fully and correctly identifying all those engaged in this type of work (see McCabe, 'Charwomen and Dublin's secondary labour force', p. 202).

in what he described as the informal economy of Dublin at the time, and that charring represented the most common remunerative work for widows and married women alike. In Dublin chars were integral parts of tenement life, numerically second to male labourers amongst occupational groupings of householders. Their financially precarious existence also led many to glean extra income from sub-letting or sharing meagre accommodation with lodgers. The limitations in censuses fully representing the sometimes-varied cocktail of female contributions to the household economy are well documented, and at society's margins this facet is perhaps most marked.⁹ Supplementary tasks such as running errands, occasional child-minding, laundry or casual dealing tend to evade systematic capture. This paper seeks to establish whether the economy of makeshifts that McCabe discovered hidden within the tenement life of a capital city could nonetheless also be discerned in village and market town Berkshire.

The study

The use of censuses to portray the continuum of family fortunes involves inevitable silences within the records, but it is possible to interpret these lacunae sympathetically to posit probable motivations and outcomes. This initial study involves a one fifth sample of Berkshire charwomen, being all those enumerated within five geographically different areas within the historic county. These comprise the upper Lambourn valley; the market town of Wallingford and its immediate surrounds; parishes at the north of the county centred on Abingdon; Wokingham and parishes to its south stretching to the Hampshire border; and finally an area centred on Sunninghill in the south-east of the county.¹⁰ Problems of nomenclature and definition were largely avoided by limiting the enquiry to those occupationally coded '020' (charwomen) by 1911 Census officials on the original household

9 Most notably in the works of Edward Higgs. See E. Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth century censuses', *History Workshop Journal* 23 (1987), pp. 59-80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/23.1.59>. Higgs's more recent views appear a paper co-written with Amanda Wilkinson: E. Higgs and A. Wilkinson, 'Women, occupations and work in the Victorian censuses revisited', *History Workshop Journal* 81 (2016), pp. 17-38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbw001>.

10 The precise extent of these selected areas was governed by practical considerations concerning sample sufficiency. Proper arguments could equally be raised to include Hurst St Nicholas with Wokingham or, separately, parishes around Maidenhead. The Abingdon area deliberately excluded the parish of Oxford St. Aldates which was practically part of the city of Oxford. The lesser density of charwomen within the general population in the most rural areas led to the slight enlargement of some country areas originally chosen for study.

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schedules remaining available for public inspection.¹¹ The study comprised 115 charwomen, of whom 26 were married, 24 single, and 65 widowed.¹² The proportion who were widows (56.5 per cent) reasonably reflected the county-wide statistic of 54.8 per cent, confirming the broad validity of the sampling methodology.¹³ Dublin's widows in turn comprised 54.4 per cent of the city's chars. The age distribution of the studied Berkshire chars and the comparable 1911 figures for Dublin produced by McCabe (applying his age-bands) are shown in Table 1.

Widows in rural Berkshire were on balance older than their Dublin counterparts, with the proportion of Berkshire chars aged between 61 and 70 years being three times the corresponding proportion in Dublin. Longer rural life expectancies may have contributed to this preponderance of Berkshire charwomen in the older age bracket. The proportion of householders that were female varied across the general demographic but, for example, in the largest Berkshire civil parish, Lambourn, it was a modest 13.4 per cent. In McCabe's Dublin 57.5 per cent of charwomen were householders, marginally exceeded by the Berkshire figure of 59.1 per cent. It might therefore be assumed that, notwithstanding the differing social environments, the desire to maintain an independent household was a key life choice in both village and city.

Census-based analyses of raw data distinguish neither financial dearth nor sufficiency. By 1911 a modest old age pension was payable only to those of good character aged over 70 years, the latter criterion restricting its impact to just a handful of our Berkshire charwomen (Table 1). Nor can the census identify charitable or poor law payments made to any of the char cohort. We do however know from A.L. Bowley's 1912 survey of Reading that contemporary unskilled male labour wages were insufficient to support a family of three or more children, the average income of males in full-time work then being 24s 6d. Wage levels in the

11 To avoid the resource implications of a full census transcription of one fifth of the county and its population of nearly 200,000, 'charwomen' were discovered by searches on a commercial internet genealogy site for 'char', 'charwoman', 'charring', and 'cleaner' within the parishes subjected to analysis. This also revealed some equivalent workers in specific industries that were coded according to their employer, such as those working in Post Offices, and these were excluded from computations, whilst their peers employed, for example, as school cleaners, annotated '020' were—for consistency—included.

12 Three of the married chars were clearly separated from their spouses.

13 County figures from Census of England and Wales, 1911 *Vol. X Occupations and Industries, Part 2*, p. 26.

county town were depressed due to locally low agricultural incomes.¹⁴ Coupled with the evidence of married chars gathered in the 1909 survey (conducted under the auspices of the Women’s Industrial Council by Clementina Black), the need to work longer hours, or otherwise supplement cleaning income through other family wage-earners or lodgers was critical to the household economy.¹⁵ In Black’s anonymised

Table 1 Age distribution of Berkshire and Dublin charwomen in 1911

Age range (years)	Berkshire		Dublin	
	N	%	N	%
0-20	1	0.9	26	2.1
21-30	3	2.6	136	11.2
31-40	22	19.1	336	27.8
41-50	26	22.6	335	27.8
51-60	23	20.0	208	17.2
61-70	36	31.3	130	10.8
71 and over	4	3.5	37	3.1
Total	115	100.0	1,208	100.0

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100.0 because of rounding.

Sources: C. McCabe, ‘Charwomen and Dublin’s secondary labour force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’, *Social History* 45 (2020), pp. 193-217, Table 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2020.1732128>; Census of England and Wales 1911.

14 A.L. Bowley and A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and Poverty: a Study in the Economic Conditions of Working-Class Households in Northampton, Warrington, Stanley and Reading* (London, 1915), pp. 166 and 173.

15 C. Black (ed.) *Married Women's Work: Being the Report of an Enquiry Undertaken by the Women's Industrial Council (Incorporated)* (London, 1915).

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Case 84, three or four hours in the morning and an hour and a half in the evening daily produced 12 shillings, whilst Case 35 yielded 13 shillings weekly for six-and-a-half hours' daily work.¹⁶ Financial imperatives increase with young children to support, when chars may also have needed to fund the cost of child-minding whilst at work. Taking lodgers had long been seen as a panacea for widows or women without any or sufficient regular income from spouses or other sources.¹⁷ Challenging ideals of separation of work and home, of distinctions between the public and the private, offering houseroom enabled women to undertake productive economic activity in a manner that could complement other responsibilities. It is unsurprising to find that nearly a quarter of the Berkshire householder chars would appear either to have taken lodgers or sublet rooms.

Within the Berkshire sample, we might reasonably presume that the 3 out of 26 married chars who were separated derived little if any financial benefit from their spouses. It should not be assumed, however, that married women who were living with their husbands were not induced to take up work as chars through financial necessity. Bowley found that the immediate causes of poverty in nearly half his Reading cases lay in husbands in regular work but with low wages, and 95 of 137 (69.3 per cent) of married charwomen in Black's survey themselves required to work to supplement spousal wages. A further 12.4 per cent of Black's sample worked because their husbands were ill, and the same percentage because a husband was out of work, with 5.1 per cent representing those separated from or deserted by their husbands. In Black's survey 43 women out of 180 charred because of widowhood, with the consequential loss of their late husbands' wages.¹⁸

We can recognise some of these situations from the Berkshire raw data. Sarah Gaines in Sunninghill, aged 56 years, had an invalid husband to support, and although they may have benefitted from some income from their teenage son, employed as a garden boy, they also kept two lodgers in their four rooms. Thirza King, aged 61 years, in North Hinksey, in the north of the county, had both a pensioner husband and an invalid son to support. Of the widowed chars successfully traced back to the 1901 Census as then-married women, 35 had no occupation, and doubtless relied upon spousal income. For some, significant child care responsibilities would have limited scope for gainful employment a decade previously.

Two apparently pressing cases of young widows compelled to char to support both a growing family and the cost of childcare were Emily Tidbury and Emily Taylor, both in their early forties, each with five children. As married women,

16 Black, *Married Women's Work*, pp. 110-3.

17 L. Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 178.

18 Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and Poverty*, p. 173; Black, *Married Women's Work*, p. 281.

neither was employed when the 1901 Census was taken. Widowed in Sunninghill only months previously, Emily Tidbury faced the future with her youngest child just four months old, whilst in adjacent Sunningdale Emily Taylor, whose youngest was now aged three years, had also experienced widowhood and childbirth in quick succession. At least the six children of the Sunningdale widow Ellen Scott included her 16-year-old daughter working in a laundry, potentially increasing the family income.

However, the study revealed another facet of the char demographic, namely a significant degree of local stability. This may reflect the irregular and sometimes uncertain nature of charwomen's work, offering little guarantee of an immediate consistent income flow in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, when opportunities for work may arise only through word of mouth after 'getting known'. This degree of local permanence differs from much of conventional domestic service, where Colin Pooley and Jean Turnbull found that domestics recorded above average migration distances.¹⁹

Table 2 shows the net lifetime migration distance of each of the 1911 charwomen from their respective birthplaces. It is noteworthy that over a quarter were apparently lifelong residents of their home parish or town, with a similar number in 1911 living within eight kilometres of their birthplace, a radius chosen as a suitable proxy for localism. These two rows, totalling 59.2 per cent of the entire sample, reflect the greatest aspects of local connectivity.

Not every char could be traced through all the preceding three censuses, even using disambiguation techniques, and others were away visiting when the enumerator called. However, with only 12 entries missing from 1901, a very substantial level of record continuity was achieved. Whilst unlikely, the possibility of unrecorded inter-censal movements cannot completely be discounted. Of the 103 chars traced back to 1901, 93 had remained local, 81 (78.6 per cent) being in the same community. Of our 1911 pool of 115 charwomen, only 35 could not be found in all three of the preceding censuses.²⁰ From these 80 remaining chars, 59 (73.8 per cent) had been living in the same local area for the previous 30 years, of whom 24 (30 per cent) remained within the same town or village.

Behind these statistics lie explanations that reinforce concepts of local connectivity and permanence. Geographic migration might ensue from changing

19 C.G. Pooley and J. Turnbull, *Migration and Mobility in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1998), p. 69. This 'average' masks considerable variations, as the writer's own unpublished research has revealed places and age groups more prone to local continuities.

20 One char was not even born at the time of both 1881 and 1891 censuses. In one instance children's birthplaces were used as a proxy for a missing census entry. Overall, however, tracing the residences of 70 per cent of all sampled charwomen through every one of the 1881, 1891, and 1901 censuses represented a high level of success.

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Table 2 Lifetime migration: residence of rural Berkshire charwomen in 1911 by reference to their birthplaces

Distance of birthplace from 1911 residence	N	%
Same parish or place	34	29.6
Outside birthplace but 8 km distant or less	34	29.6
9-16 km distant	15	13.0
17-40 km distant	16	13.9
41-80 km distant	8	7.0
Over 80 km distant	7	6.1
Unknown	1	0.9
Total	115	100.0

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100.0 because of rounding.

Source: Census of England and Wales 1911.

family dynamics, whether in personal relationships, in spousal employment, or by virtue of their early adult employment when single. Suggestions of independent working charwomen voluntarily moving from their home town or village or its immediate area are lacking. Whilst Cornish-born Asenath Mathews had spent her lifetime in the county, and had been the wife of a Cornish farmer, in widowhood she came to live with her son and family in Sunningdale, where she worked as a char. Perhaps significantly, after passing away in 1912, she was buried back in Bodmin. As a single young woman in her early twenties, Emily Dunsdon served as residential cook in Kensington, but hailed originally from Drayton near Abingdon, an area to which she returned, appearing in both 1891 and 1901 censuses as a married woman without any occupation. Perhaps her husband's income as a brickmaker became irregular or uncertain leading her, with her children no longer

a tie, to work in 1911 as a char.²¹ Kentish-born Elizabeth Reed, aged 45 years, widowed in 1909, cannot be located with certainty in earlier censuses, but in 1901 she was living with her coachman husband in Edenbridge. As her youngest son was born in Winkfield in November 1902, we can place her move to Berkshire in the 18 months after the 1901 census was taken and, without any other obvious connexion to Berkshire, it seems likely that migration resulted from a change in spousal employment. Louisa Sharpe was a naturalised German, recording by far the highest net lifetime migration of our sample, but a more typical picture is given by her subsequent role as wife of Winkfield-born plumber Charles Sharpe, seen in census records from 1881 to 1901. As a married woman she did not need to work, but in widowhood she became a char, remaining on the same street in Winkfield that had been her home for some 40 years.²²

Conclusion

Employment as a domestic servant in earlier life was not a pre-condition for working as a char, as only 13 of our cohort had been domestics on any previous census.²³ Cleaning could be undertaken without special skills or training.²⁴ Despite the hard physical aspects of their work, most charwomen were far from being in the first flush of youth. Although a more intensive study would be required to provide additional proof, it seems that a large percentage of women only took up charring in their neighbourhood in later life in response to external forces, most frequently the loss of financial support from, or the death of, their husbands. Discovering that many younger widowed chars subsequently found alternative and potentially more amenable financial security in remarriage, enabling them to cease charring, offers further confirmation that women rarely aspired to be chars. Within

21 Migration of single young women to take up posts as residential servants is reflected in the observations of Pooley and Turnbull and seen with the young women from the villages of Chaddleworth and Fawley (both within the current Lambourn grouping) where all girls born between 1889 and 1891 growing up in these villages and in employment in 1911 were found in residential domestic service over 88 kilometres distant from their home villages: see P. Jolly, 'Domestic service and migration: young girls leaving home in early twentieth-century rural Berkshire', *Local Historian*, 52 (2022), pp. 39-52, here at p. 49.

22 Her address in 1871 is described as Lovell Lane, thereafter as Lovell Road, Winkfield. Winkfield is a large civil parish partially encircling Sunninghill to the east, north and west.

23 These 13 chars represented 16 per cent of those fully traced and 11.3 per cent of the total cohort. Precise figures depend on the definition used for 'domestic servant'. Laundresses and a nurse at a boarding establishment have been excluded.

24 The derogatory terms used by the contributor to Black, *Married Women's Work*, p. 107 to describe the limited attributes needed to be a charwoman were distinctly uncomplimentary, and probably today unprintable.

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the next decade, four of the five youngest Berkshire widows in their thirties remarried, two producing sizeable second families, and in total over one third of the sampled widows aged 45 years and below remarried. None of these married women were chars in the 1921 census.²⁵

The results of this preliminary investigation suggest that for many women charring offered a financial safety net, employment that could fit with other commitments and responsibilities, at whatever level and on however temporary a basis. Charring appeared to represent part of a strategy for survival for women in need, as much in rural Berkshire as in Dublin's tenements. Investigations of the entire county's char population could usefully complement other local studies to determine the validity of these results across a broader demographic.

25 However, one widow, Emma Howard, born in 1876, married William Spurway on 2 January 1912, but was once more widowed by 1921. Her census entry of that year as the widow Emma Spurway (wrongly transcribed as Spuruca) states 'no occupation' but describes her as 'working on her own account'. This confusing entry may disguise charring, or reflect work done in providing lodgings, or a plethora of makeweights.