

The Working-Age Poor and the Workhouse, 1851-1911*

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Abstract

The working-age poor were the section of the poor who most preoccupied the Poor Law Commissioners and for whom the deterrent aspects of the union workhouses were designed. However, relatively little has been written about this group in the workhouse. This study analyses a sample of 3,390 workhouses, accommodating 752,272 inmates, for the censuses 1851-1861 and 1881-1911 (from the Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) database), representing up to three-quarters of the total population living in workhouses. It analyses the data by age, sex and geographical location. It finds that the proportion of the working-age poor who were in workhouses increased moderately, that there was a shift from a 'feminised' population to a more equal one, and that inmates were predominantly single and widowed. The 'crusade against out-relief' resulted in a shift from younger to older women. Likewise, the proportion of older middle-aged men increased, suggesting that work schemes and outdoor relief were insufficient to keep them all out of the workhouse. Problems securing work in domestic service, other 'domestic' work, and field work propelled women into workhouses in Cornwall, London and parts of Wales, and East Anglia. Although there were important social reforms in the early twentieth century, the workhouse remained an important site, as well as a symbol, of the state.

Introduction

The role of workhouses and how to relieve the working-age poor were issues at the heart of the reforms envisaged by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1834. Indeed, the Commissioners conceptualised the problem of pauperism in the early 1830s as almost solely one of outdoor relief to male able-bodied labourers. The Commissioners devoted the vast majority of the *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Administration and Practical Operation of Poor Laws* (hereafter the *Poor Law Report*) to the pernicious effects of the Old Poor Law, namely a range of make-

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work schemes and outdoor allowances to labourers, which had not only demoralized them but created severe problems for local labour markets and the mobility of labour.² In addition, through the provision of family allowances according to the number of children, poor relief had, they argued, in the Malthusian sense, created the very poor that such payments sought to relieve.³ Moreover, the corrupting effect of outdoor relief was cumulative and would reduce parish populations to idleness.⁴ Just 5 of the 200 pages of the *Poor Law Report* were devoted to other groups of the poor.⁵

The solution, proposed the Commissioners, was to ‘dis-pauperize’ the poor; all able-bodied persons and their families should cease to receive ‘all relief whatever ... otherwise in well-regulated workhouses’; this was the ‘workhouse test’.⁶ To motivate paupers into independence, the New Poor Law was to be run on the principles of ‘less eligibility’: this meant that relief paid to the outdoor pauper was to be less than the wages of the lowest paid independent worker, while for those inside the workhouse, this principle was to be achieved by the provision of work, strict discipline, and no luxuries (such as alcohol and tobacco).⁷ Although the operation of the workhouse as a deterrent was not new and had been a feature of some parishes from the sixteenth century, the Poor Law Amendment Act placed the workhouse at the centre of the new policy and sought to group 10,000-15,000 parishes into around 600 unions, each of which would be provided with a workhouse so that the workhouse test could be uniformly and consistently applied.⁸ By the end of the 1830s, 80 per cent of

2 Poor Law Commissioners, *Report of Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*. British Parliamentary Papers 1834 XXVII.1 [C. 44].

3 Poor Law Commissioners, *Report of Royal Commission*, pp. 11-24, 44-55, and 84-91.

4 Poor Law Commissioners, *Report of Royal Commission*, p. 31; see also S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland, ‘Introduction’, in S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland (eds) *The Poor Law Report of 1834* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 33.

5 Poor Law Commissioners, *Report of Royal Commission*; see also L.H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: the English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 141.

6 Poor Law Commissioners, *Report of Royal Commission*, p. 146.

7 M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: the History of an English Social Institution* (London, 1981), pp. 40-1.

8 Checkland and Checkland, ‘Introduction’, p. 43. On the workhouse before 1834 see M.A. Crowther, ‘The workhouse’, in T.C. Smout (ed.) *Victorian Values: a Joint Symposium of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the British Academy, December 1990 (Proceedings of the British Academy 78)*, (London, 1992), pp. 183-94; J. Boulton and J. Black, ‘Paupers and their experience of a London workhouse: St Martin-in-the-Fields, 1725-1824’, in J. Hamlett, L. Hoskins, and R. Preston (eds) *Residential Institutions in Britain, 1725-1970: Inmates and Environments* (London, 2013), pp. 79-92; J. Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2009); and T. Hitchcock and R. Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690-1800* (Cambridge, 2015).

parishes in England and Wales had been organised into 587 unions.⁹ The workhouse aimed to deter applicants—primarily the able-bodied—for relief by separating men, women and children, and the elderly and the infirm into different sections inside the house; by the provision of unpleasant task-work; and by adopting a strict timetable, punctuated by bells, and a disciplined environment.

Historians have long recognised that the Commissioners misdiagnosed the causes of poverty in the early nineteenth century and the reasons for the rapidly escalating costs of poor relief.¹⁰ Their preoccupation with the rural able-bodied male labourer meant that they failed to recognise that it was children, the sick, and the elderly who formed the majority of recipients and on whom the bulk of parish spending had been allocated.¹¹ Moreover, this was a rapidly urbanising society and the Commissioners' solutions for the rural poor were largely inappropriate for urban dwellers who experienced the boom and slump of trade cycles.¹² There were considerable continuities between the old and the new poor laws, the most important of which was the predominance of outdoor relief.¹³ Nevertheless, not only did the workhouse become a potent symbol of the new policy but significant numbers of the poor were accommodated within these institutions.

Poor law historiography is vast. There are studies of the New Poor Law in its entirety, many of which focus upon the adoption of the workhouse system and the building of workhouses.¹⁴ Other work has focused upon cities, including

9 S.A. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700-1850: a Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 227.

10 See Checkland and Checkland, 'Introduction'; M. Blaug, 'The myth of the old poor law and the making of the new', *Journal of Economic History* 23 (1963), pp. 151-84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700103808>; M. Blaug, 'The poor law report reexamined', *Journal of Economic History* 24 (1964), pp. 229-45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700060502>; G.R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990); K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London, 1981); S. Williams, 'Malthus, marriage and poor law allowances revisited: a Bedfordshire case study, 1770-1834', *Agricultural History Review* 52 (2004), pp. 56-82.

11 See Boyer, *Economic History*; King, *Poverty and Welfare*; L. A. Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law, 1500-1700* (Woodbridge, 2004); S.R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004); S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760-1834* (Woodbridge, 2011); A. Levene, *The Childhood of the Poor: Welfare in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2012); S.A. King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor, 1750-1834* (Manchester, 2018); J. Reinarz and L. Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the Workhouse* (Woodbridge, 2013).

12 J. Burnett, *Idle Hands: the Experience of Unemployment, 1790-1990* (London, 1994), pp. 92-98; Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*, p. 184.

13 K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 207-338.

14 See, for example, Crowther, *Workhouse System*; F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: the Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993).

London and Birmingham, and particular regions, such as East Anglia and Wales.¹⁵ More research has focused upon clothing and feeding workhouse inmates, their medical care, the casual (vagrant) wards, pauper punishment, workhouse scandals, and—most recently—the correspondence of inmates to the Poor Law Commission and the Poor Law Board.¹⁶ Of more specific relevance to this article are the quantitative analyses of indoor pauper populations, based primarily on the census enumerators’ books of residents on census night, many of which draw upon the snapshot of residents in a single census, typically 1851 or 1881, or a series of censuses, although only a few studies have taken a longitudinal approach over more than three censuses.¹⁷ A different approach has been to examine

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- 15 A. Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978); A. Croll, ‘“Reconciled gradually to the system of indoor relief”: the poor law in Wales during the “crusade against out-relief”, c. 1870-c. 1890’, *Family and Community History* 20 (2017), pp. 121-44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631180.2017.1369255>; M. Evans and P. Jones, ‘“A stubborn, intractable body”: resistance to the workhouse in Wales, 1834–1877’, *Family and Community History* 17 (2014), pp. 101-21, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1463118014Z.00000000034>; A. Tanner, ‘The casual poor and the City of London poor law union, 1837-1869’, *Historical Journal* 42 (1999), pp. 183-206, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X98008310>; D.R. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870* (Farnham, 2010).
- 16 V. Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2013); D. Brown, ‘Supplying London’s workhouses in the mid-nineteenth century’, *London Journal* 41 (2016), pp. 36-59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2015.1127696>; N. Durbach, ‘Roast beef, the new poor law, and the British nation, 1834–63’, *Journal of British Studies* 52 (2013), pp. 963-89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2013.122>; D.R. Green, ‘Pauper protests: power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses’, *Social History* 31 (2006), pp. 137-59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020600562934>; P. Carter, J. James, and S. King, ‘Punishing paupers? Control, discipline and mental health in the Southwell workhouse (1836–71)’, *Rural History* 30 (2019), pp. 161–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095679331900013X>; J. James, ‘Sophia Heathfield Of Hawnes, Bedfordshire: punishment victim or victor? A study of power and control in the workhouse under the New Poor Law (1853-1856)’, *Family and Community History* 21 (2018) pp. 202-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631180.2018.1555954>; J. James, ‘The women-floggers of St Marylebone: a study of punishment and abuse in the Victorian workhouse’, *London Journal* early view on-line (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2022.2031481>; S. Shave, ‘“Great inhumanity”: scandal, child punishment and policymaking in the early years of the New Poor Law workhouse system’, *Continuity and Change* 33 (2018), pp. 339-63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416018000231>; S. Shave, ‘“Immediate death or a life of torture are the consequences of the system”: the Bridgwater Union scandal and policy change’, in Reinartz and Schwarz, *Medicine and the Workhouse*, pp. 164-91; N. Carter and S. A. King, ‘“I think we ought not to acknowledge them [paupers] as that encourages them to write”: the administrative state, power and the Victorian pauper’, *Social History* 46 (2021), pp. 117-44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2021.1892301>.
- 17 N. Goose, ‘Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century: the case of Hertfordshire’, *Local Population Studies* 62 (1999), pp. 52-69; D.G. Jackson, ‘Kent workhouse populations in 1881: a study based on the census enumerator’s books’, *Local Population Studies* 69 (2002), pp. 51-66; S. Page, ‘Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse in 1881’,

workhouse registers and minutes, which give admissions and discharges. These studies have focused upon children, the elderly, unmarried mothers, and the sick.¹⁸ They have shown that the composition of workhouse populations varied considerably, even between neighbouring unions. Despite the intentions of the Poor Law Commission, diversity persisted at the level of the union; and local policy initiatives, as well as underlying economic circumstances, impacted upon the composition of workhouse inmates. For instance, in Lancashire in 1881 Andy Gritt and Peter Park report that there were marked distinctions in the profile of workhouse inmates between three broad settlement types—conurbation, urban-industrial, and rural—with women aged 15-45 years dominating in the conurbations, while elderly men predominated in the rural unions.¹⁹

This article explores the specific group of the working-age poor—those at whom the Poor Law Amendment Act was aimed—in the English and Welsh workhouse over the period 1851-1911, at both the national and the local levels. Several of the works reviewed above include information about this group, but no single study has focused solely on the working-age poor.²⁰ The research examines

Transactions of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society 63 (1989), pp. 85-95; A. Gritt and P. Park, 'The workhouse populations of Lancashire in 1881', *Local Population Studies* 86 (2011), pp. 37-65; A. Hinde and F. Turnbull, 'The populations of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851-1861', *Local Population Studies* 61 (1998), pp. 38-53; L. Darwen, 'Workhouse populations of the Preston Union, 1841-61', *Local Population Studies* 93 (2014), pp. 33-53, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps93.2014.33>; C. Leivers, 'Housing the elderly in nineteenth-century Derbyshire: a comparison of almshouse and workhouse provision', *Local Population Studies* 83 (2009), pp. 56-65; J. Purser, 'The workhouse population of the Nottingham union, 1881-1882', *Local Population Studies* 99 (2017), pp. 66-80, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps99.2017.66>; C. Seal, 'Workhouse populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions: a study based on the census enumerators' books, 1851-1911', *Family and Community History* 13 (2010), pp. 83-100, <https://doi.org/10.1179/146311810X12851639314075>.

18 A. Negrine, 'The treatment of sick children in the workhouse by the Leicester poor law union, 1867-1914', *Family and Community History* 13 (2010), pp. 34-44, <https://doi.org/10.1179/146311810X12710831260770>; A. Perkyne, 'The admission of children to the Milton Union workhouse, Kent, 1835-1885', *Local Population Studies* 80 (2008), pp. 59-77; F. Crompton, *Workhouse Children: Infant and Child Paupers under the Worcestershire Poor Law* (Stroud, 1997); L. Hulonce, *Pauper Children and Poor Law Childhubs in England and Wales, 1834-1910* (Kindle, 2016); N. Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire', *Continuity and Change* 20 (2005), pp. 351-84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416005005618>; Leivers, 'Housing the elderly'; S. Williams, 'Unmarried mothers and the new poor law in Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies* 91 (2013), pp. 27-43, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps91.2013.27>; A. Ritch, *Sickness in the Workhouse: Poor Law Medical Care in Provincial England, 1834-1914* (Woodbridge, 2019); J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010).

19 See Gritt and Park, 'Workhouse populations of Lancashire'.

20 Goose, 'Workhouse populations', pp. 54-62; Darwen, 'Workhouse populations of the Preston Union', pp. 45-7; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire

the proportion of indoor paupers who were of working age by age and gender, as well as mapping the sex ratio of working-age adults to assess its geography. The article starts with a review of the policy context between 1851 and 1911 and its impact on the working-age poor in the workhouse, followed by a description of the Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) data set and the sample workhouse data. It then turns to consider the results of the analysis of the workhouse data by age, sex and location.

Policy and practice in the Victorian and Edwardian periods

Despite the wishes of the Poor Law Commissioners, at no point were all able-bodied applicants for relief required to enter the workhouse to qualify for relief. While some able-bodied applicants were only offered the workhouse, others might be given outdoor relief for sickness or ‘sudden and urgent necessity’.²¹ There were important policy amendments to the New Poor Law that facilitated the continuation of outdoor relief to them. Snell has emphasised that ‘the dominant feature of welfare provision under the New Poor Law remained that of out-door or domiciliary relief’.²² Between 1851 and 1871 those indoors accounted for 12-14 per cent of paupers, but the difference narrowed with the ‘crusade against out-relief’—an attempt to reassert the ideals of the Poor Law Amendment Act—in the 1870s and the proportion rose to 22 per cent in 1881 and, at the end of the period (1911), to 35 per cent. The rates of those on all forms of poor relief halved, from 53.6 per 1,000 of the population in 1851 to 24.8 per 1,000 in 1911 (Figure 1).²³ There were, however, important differences based on period and place. London, for instance, offered significantly more indoor relief in more specialised institutions.²⁴ One of the main reasons that outdoor relief continued was cost. Workhouses were expensive: not only in their construction or alteration from existing buildings, but also for repairs, furniture, provisions, and the salaries

workhouses’, pp. 39-43; Jackson, ‘Kent workhouse populations’, pp. 57-60; Seal, ‘Workhouse populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions’, pp. 87-97; Gritt and Park, ‘Workhouse populations of Lancashire’, pp. 54-7; Page, ‘Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse’, pp. 88-9.

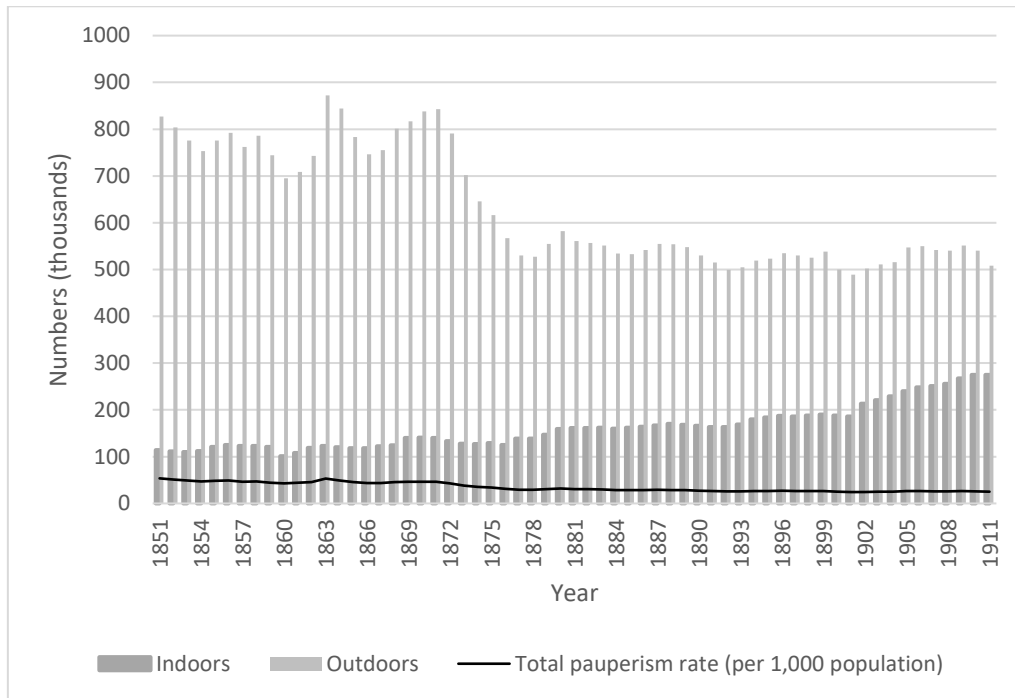
21 Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’, p. 353.

22 Snell, *Parish and belonging*, pp. 218, 225 and 333.

23 Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 158-62.

24 See Green, *Pauper Capital*.

Figure 1 Number of paupers relieved in the workhouse and outdoors in England and Wales, 1851-1911



Source: K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London, 1981), Table 4.5, pp. 158-63.

of officials; it cost between two and four times as much to relieve a pauper in the workhouse as to give him or her outdoor relief.²⁵

The period 1851 to 1911 is a long one in terms of poor law policy and the state's response to poverty. There were important shifts in policy with regard to working-age men and women before 1870 that might have affected their numbers in the workhouse. The Poor Law Commissioners developed formal mechanisms for the regulation of poor relief to the able-bodied, the most important of which were General Orders, issued to most rural unions, prohibiting outdoor relief to this class of pauper. These were consolidated in the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order of 1844, which required that the able-bodied be relieved only inside the

25 M. MacKinnon, 'English poor law policy and the crusade against outrelief', *Journal of Economic History* 47 (1987), pp. 603-25, here at p. 608, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700049020>.

workhouse unless they qualified as exceptional cases, such as persons in ‘sudden or urgent necessity’, those suffering from ‘sickness, accident or bodily or mental infirmity’, the bereaved, and widows with dependent children.²⁶ Due to widespread unemployment and opposition to the New Poor Law in the industrial north of England, which slowed the adoption and use of the workhouse, an alternative order was issued, the Outdoor Labour Test Order of 1842, which allowed outdoor relief to able-bodied men as long as they undertook a task of work, usually stone-breaking or oakum picking; women did not have to undertake this work.²⁷ A version of this Order was issued in 1852 as the Outdoor Relief Regulation Order to a large number of industrial and urban unions in the north, London, and central Wales. Thus, for the period covered in this article, many Boards of Guardians could give outdoor relief to this class of pauper in exchange for a task of work and Labour Test Orders were in operation in many areas. Felix Driver characterises this as ‘organised diversity’.²⁸ Of the lists of the able-bodied given outdoor relief, the majority were women, with a sex ratio (the number of males per 100 females) of 35 in 1850-1852, that became yet more feminised in 1900-1902 at 22.²⁹ Nigel Goose argues that ‘women had many more paths to relief’.³⁰

No more general orders on outdoor relief were issued in the 1850s and 1860s, but in the 1870s the ‘crusade against out-relief’ sought to discourage outdoor relief to the able-bodied; Karel Williams argues that the crusade was a policy of ‘brutal dispauperisation by every, and any means’.³¹ It aimed, in particular, to extend the workhouse test to women and was aimed at the wives of able-bodied men, single and widowed women without dependent children, deserted wives, and wives with husbands in prison or the armed forces.³² The nature of the workhouse was also changing: from the 1860s conditions improved for some

26 F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: the Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 48-52.

27 M.E. Rose, ‘The anti-poor law movement in the north of England’, *Northern History* 1 (1966), pp. 70-91, <https://doi.org/10.1179/nhi.1966.1.1.70>; N.C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834-1844* (Manchester, 1971).

28 Driver, *Power and Pauperism*, pp. 48-56, the quotation is at p. 53; A. Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 32.

29 Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’, p. 355.

30 Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’, p. 357.

31 Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, p. 102.

32 P. Thane, ‘Women and the poor law in Victorian and Edwardian England’, *History Workshop* 6 (1978), pp. 30-51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/6.1.29>; S.O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1992), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203167991>; M. Levine-Clark, ‘Engendering relief: women, able-bodiedness, and the new poor law in early Victorian England’, *Journal of Women's History* 11 (2000), pp. 107-30, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2000.0010>; Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, pp. 48-52.

classes of inmates, especially medical provision and hospital care, and vagrant wards and lunatic wards were authorised, as well as children's wards, homes or schools, but Martin Daunton argues that these changes were enacted at least in part 'in order to make the workhouse more of a deterrent for the able-bodied poor'.³³

Unemployment was 'discovered' between 1870 and 1914. The very terms 'unemployed' and 'unemployment' only came into general usage in the 1880s. There had been widespread unemployment during the 'hungry forties' and the Cotton Famine in the 1860s, but unemployment was now seen increasingly as a political issue, perceived as a problem distinct from poverty, caused by factors other than moral failings. There was public recognition of widespread distress due to lack of work and deserving of remedial action by the state, although the unemployed might be categorised as 'blameable', 'feckless', 'unemployables' or the respectable 'genuine' unemployed.³⁴ From 1886, during cycle downturns emergency funds were provided, either in the form of outdoor relief or charitable donations, and work schemes were set up.³⁵ There were important social reforms in the early twentieth century that 'redefined the relationship between work and welfare' and could have reduced the number of working men and women who might enter the workhouse.³⁶ Under the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905 'distress committees' were set up to provide work, and labour exchanges were established in 1909 to order to reduce frictional unemployment, while the National Insurance Act of 1911, provided sickness and unemployment insurance (although only to seven defined industries), although payments were not extended to dependents, and only 10 per cent of women workers were covered.³⁷ The National Insurance Act aimed to promote the physical efficiency of the male head of household and breadwinner in order to avoid pauperism.³⁸ Nevertheless,

33 M. Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: an Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 528-9; Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, pp. 52-8; A. Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 120-2; and see also Crowther, *Workhouse System*; Reinartz and Schwarz, *Medicine and the Workhouse*; and Ritch, *Sickness in the Workhouse*.

34 Burnett, *Idle Hands*, pp. 145-58, especially pp. 155-6. For rates of unemployment 1870-1913 see G.R. Boyer, *The Winding Road to the Welfare State: Economic Insecurity and Social Welfare Policy in Britain* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 107-17.

35 Boyer, *Winding Road to the Welfare State*, pp. 117-28; and see M. Levine-Clark, *Unemployment, Welfare, and Masculine Citizenship: 'So Much Honest Poverty' in Britain, 1870-1930* (Basingstoke, 2015).

36 D. Gladstone, *The Twentieth-Century Welfare State* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 12; and see in general pp. 12-14.

37 Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, pp. 135 and 140-3; Gladstone, *Twentieth-Century Welfare State*, pp. 12-14; C. Chinn, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity: the Urban Poor in England, 1834-1914* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 115-17; P. Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*, 2nd edn (London, 2006).

38 H. Jones, *Health and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1994), p. 27.

despite these changes the total number in workhouses increased from 186,000 in 1901 to 275,000 in 1911, from 27.5 per cent of the total on poor relief in 1901 to 35 per cent in 1911.³⁹

Unfortunately, the statistics collected centrally do not allow for easy analysis of inmates according to whether they were of working age; the annual reports of the Poor Law Commission did not provide figures of paupers by age before 1890.⁴⁰ Table 1 shows the number of ‘adult’ men and women (aged 15 years or over) in workhouses and the proportion they constituted of all paupers (indoor and outdoor), the proportion who were able-bodied, plus the sex ratio; the figures did not differentiate the working-age poor from the elderly. Those in workhouses returned as not able-bodied were either recorded as ‘not able’ or ‘lunatic’. These figures reveal that less than 22 per cent of adult men indoors were considered able-bodied, while the figure was initially almost double for women at 41 per cent at the beginning of the period but fell to around one quarter at the end. Many adults were not able-bodied due to physical and mental disability and illness and the infirmity associated with old age. At the time of the 1881 census, 76 per cent of the workhouse population was of adult age and 10 per cent of adult inmates were recorded with a physical or mental disability; it is clear, then, that the majority of those considered not able-bodied were so due to old age.⁴¹ Although there was no set age at which old age began, most historians of the new poor law consider people aged above about 60 years as elderly, although the aged poor were only relieved once they could no longer work.⁴² The increase in the proportion of men in workhouses rather than on outdoor relief after 1880-1882 is particularly striking (up to 62.5 per cent by 1900-1902), as is the shift in the sex ratio from 42 (meaning highly feminised workhouses) in 1860-1862 to 103 in 1900-1902, by which time workhouse populations were more equally divided

39 Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, pp. 158-62.

40 M.E. Rose, *The Relief of Poverty 1834-1914*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 1986), p. 20.

41 I am enormously grateful to Peter Higginbotham (peter@workhouses.org.uk) for access to the 1881 workhouse census data See www.workhouses.org.uk.

42 N. Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’; A.E.S. Ritch, ‘English poor law institutional care for older people: identifying the “aged and infirm” and the “sick” in Birmingham workhouse, 1852-1912’, *Social History of Medicine* 27 (2014), pp. 64-85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkt071>; C. Leivers, ‘Housing the elderly in nineteenth-century Derbyshire’; T. Heritage, ‘Elderly populations of England and Wales, 1851-1911: a comparative study of selected counties’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Southampton, 2019), p. 177. See also Boyer, *Winding Road to the Welfare State*.

Table 1 Numbers and proportions of able-bodied adults relieved in the workhouse, recorded 1 January and 1 July each year, 1850–1852 to 1900–1902, England and Wales

Period	Able-bodied men indoors	Percentage of all men relieved indoors and outdoors	Percentage able-bodied of adult men indoors	Able-bodied women indoors	Percentage of all women relieved indoors and outdoors	Percentage able-bodied to adult women indoors	Sex ratio (males per 100 females)
1850-1852	5,860	15.8	21.9	11,362	11.2	40.8	52
1860-1862	5,717	15.4	15.8	13,715	12.7	34.8	42
1870-1872	8,839	21.0	17.2	14,560	12.3	31.1	61
1880-1882	8,744	34.1	13.6	13,719	17.2	24.2	64
1890-1892	11,626	47.2	16.2	13,419	19.8	22.6	87
1900-1902	17,665	62.5	20.0	17,127	26.1	24.5	103

Source: N. Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire', *Continuity and Change* 20 (2005), p. 355, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416005005618>.

between men and women. The workhouses became less feminised, mostly due to the marked increase in the proportion of elderly men.⁴³

The Integrated Census Microdata data set

The Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) data set contains the transcripts of all the censuses for England and Wales for the censuses of 1851, 1861, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911.⁴⁴ The data were initially transcribed by FindMyPast, a genealogical web site.⁴⁵ The I-CeM project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to produce a standardised, integrated data set of most of the censuses of Britain.⁴⁶ The data are robust: although some original data are missing, the missing proportion is estimated to be only 2.0 per cent in 1851, 3.7 per cent in 1861, and 0.7 per cent in 1901. A more significant issue is the omission of the 1871 census. This is because FindMyPast did not transcribe key variables for England and Wales in 1871 (marital status, occupation, and birthplace) and so this census was not included into the I-CeM database.⁴⁷ Another potential historical problem is the timing of the census. It was usually taken in April, so the census will reflect who was inside the workhouse at that time of year. In rural unions, the greatest pressure was felt in the winter, when a greater number of agricultural labourers and vagrants sought admission indoors, and the numbers fell in the spring, and were lower in the summer. In contrast, seasonality made much less difference to admittance to workhouses in towns and manufacturing districts, where cyclical economic downturns and depression had greater impact.⁴⁸

43 See Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender'; Heritage, 'Elderly populations'; Boyer, *Winding Road to the Welfare State*.

44 K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2>. A user guide and manual to the I-CeM data is available as E. Higgs, C. Jones, K. Schürer and A. Wilkinson, *The Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) Guide*, (Colchester, 2013).

45 See <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/> [accessed 23 January 2023].

46 Further details on the I-CeM database together with a number of related resources are available from the I-CeM web site at <https://www.essex.ac.uk/research-projects/integrated-census-microdata> [accessed 27 January 2023].

47 C. van Lieshout, J. Day, P. Monteburano and R.J. Bennett, *Extraction of Data on Entrepreneurs from the 1871 Census to Supplement I-CeM*, Working Paper 12, Drivers of Entrepreneurship and Small Business, Department of Geography and Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, University of Cambridge (Cambridge, 2018), p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.27488>.

48 Goose, 'Workhouse populations'; p. 65; Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender', pp. 364-71; Darwen, 'Workhouse populations of the Preston Union', p. 38.

The study presented here extracted a large sample of workhouse populations from the I-CeM data set: 3,390 workhouses accommodating 752,272 inmates, accounting for an average of two thirds of the total workhouse population in the six censuses, with a low percentage of 45 per cent in 1861 and a high of 78 per cent in 1901. The study extracted data from general workhouses only and excluded workhouse infirmaries, schools, and vagrant wards. This was a deliberate decision, partly because the huge range of workhouse types were difficult to identify in the I-CeM database, and partly in order to have comparable data across period and place. In most of England and Wales, the majority of workhouses were of the general type as late as 1915: general workhouses accounted for 70.1 per cent of the total workhouse population, with 12.2 per cent in workhouse infirmaries, 13.9 per cent in children's homes, and just 3.8 per cent in institutions for the 'insane'.⁴⁹

There were problems in extracting the data for the workhouses. Not all workhouses were identified as 'workhouses' in the I-CeM database and thus could not be drawn out. In other situations, only part of a workhouse could be found because the enumerator did not record the entries as a 'workhouse' on every page that had made up the original census entry (these entries were omitted). This means that there are gaps of 'no data' on the choropleth maps. These are more problematic for 1861 and 1911 than for the other years. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the sample represents the largest study of its kind to assess trends in the populations of hundreds of workhouses in almost every decade between 1851 and 1911. The data can be consolidated at the national level or, using Geographical Information Systems (GISs), can be analysed at the level of the union by producing choropleth maps. Moreover, relatively little is still known about the Welsh workhouses, which are included in these data.⁵⁰

Characteristics of the indoor working-age poor

The findings of the analysis of this large sample of workhouses broadly confirm those by other historians about specific workhouses: populations were dominated

49 MacKinnon, 'English poor law policy', pp. 605-7; Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, pp. 55-8.

50 On Wales, see Croll, '“Reconciled gradually to the system of indoor relief”: the poor law in Wales'; G. Hooker, 'Llandilofawr Poor Law Union 1836-1886 : the most difficult union in Wales' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2013); F. Richardson, 'Rural change in north Wales during the period of the industrial revolution: livelihoods, poverty and welfare in Nantconwy, 1750-1860' (unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford University, 2016); P. Jones, 'The new poor law in Scotland, England and Wales: comparative perspectives', *Local Population Studies* 99 (2017), pp. 31-41, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps99.2017.31>.

by the young and the old.⁵¹ However, the percentage of children and adolescents resident in workhouses contracted from the later nineteenth century onwards, with many of them being boarded out with foster parents or their relatives, while others were sent to ‘cottage’ homes or separate district schools.⁵² Those aged 0-15 years fell from 35.3 per cent of workhouse inmates in this sample in 1851 to just 10.6 per cent in 1911, and the proportion in their late adolescence, aged 15-19 years, also contracted from 6.1 per cent in 1851 to 1.8 per cent by 1911. As children and adolescents left the workhouse, these institutions were increasingly accommodating the aged poor; in these data in 1851, those aged 60 and above were 26.5 per cent of inmates, but by 1901 they formed 51.0 per cent. They were heavily over-represented as the aged were only 7.4 per cent of the wider population in the 1880s.⁵³ Moreover, it was elderly men who came to dominate the workhouse.⁵⁴ Alternative forms of state welfare started to be provided for children and the elderly from the early twentieth century with the introduction of infant and maternal welfare centres, health visitors, and school meals and medical inspections in 1906 and 1907, and Old Age Pensions for those aged over 70 years in 1908.⁵⁵

It is not surprising that the proportion of the working-age poor also rose—though less dramatically than the elderly—as the number of children accommodated in the workhouse contracted. In mid-Victorian England and Wales those aged 15-59 years formed a fairly stable percentage of workhouse populations between 1851 and 1901 at 37-38 per cent, rising to 41 per cent in 1911 (Table 2), while those aged 20-59 years crept up from 32 per cent in 1851 and 1861, rising slightly to 34 per cent in 1881, 35 per cent in 1891, 36 per cent in 1901 and 40 per cent in 1911. This compares with the figures from other studies where those aged 15-59 years varied between low figures of 29 per cent in Birmingham in 1851 and Kent in 1881 and a higher proportion of 44 per cent in Cheltenham in 1851 and 45 per cent in Lancashire in 1881. Both Hinde and Turnbull for Basingstoke (39 per cent) and Winchester (40 per cent) and Goose

51 On these groups see, for instance, Perkyms, ‘Admission of children’; Crompton, *Workhouse Children*; Hulonce, *Pauper Children and Poor Law Childhoods*; Negrine, ‘Treatment of sick children’; Goose, ‘Poverty, old age and gender’; Leivers, ‘Housing the elderly’.

52 Hulonce, *Pauper Children and Poor Law Childhoods*, p. 9.

53 For data broken down by region, 1861-1908, see Boyer, *Winding Road to the Welfare State*, p. 141; E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: a Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 528-9.

54 S. Williams, ‘Poverty, gender and old age in the Victorian and Edwardian workhouse’, *Continuity and Change* (forthcoming).

55 See D. Fraser, *Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke, 2003); B. Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945* (Basingstoke, 2004).

Table 2 Proportion of working-age inmates in various workhouse studies and the workhouse sample, 1841-1911

Ages 15-59 years			
Census year and locality	%	Census year and locality	%
1841		1881	
Preston	36	Workhouse sample	37
		Lancashire	45
1851		Kent	29
Workhouse sample	38	Nottingham	37
Preston	38	Leicester	33
Hertfordshire	35	Belper	33
Hatfield	35	Cheltenham	33
Cheltenham	44	Birmingham	41
Belper	35		
Birmingham	29	1891	
Winchester	40	Workhouse sample	38
Basingstoke	39	Birmingham	42
1861		1901	
Workhouse sample	37	Workhouse sample	38
Preston	36	Birmingham	38
Birmingham	42		
1871		1911	
Birmingham	30	Workhouse sample	42
		Birmingham	37
Ages 20-59 years, workhouse sample			
Census year	%	Census year	%
1851	32	1891	36
1861	32	1901	36
1881	34	1911	40

- Sources:** Workhouse sample: K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2>. L. Darwen, 'Workhouse populations of the Preston Union, 1841–1861', *Local Population Studies* 93 (2014), pp. 33-53, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps93.2014.33>; N. Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire', *Continuity and Change* 20 (2005), pp. 351-84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416005005618>; C. Seal, 'Workhouse populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions, 1851-1911', *Family and Community History* 13 (2010), pp. 83-100, <https://doi.org/10.1179/146311810X12851639314075>; A. Ritch, 'English poor law institutional care for older people: identifying the "aged and infirm" and the "sick" in Birmingham workhouse, 1852–1912', *Social History of Medicine* 27 (2014), pp. 64–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkt071>; A. Gritt and P. Park, 'The workhouse populations of Lancashire in 1881', *Local Population Studies* 86 (2011), pp. 37-65; D.G. Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations in 1881: a study based on the census enumerators' books', *Local Population Studies* 69 (2002), pp. 51-66; J. Purser, 'The workhouse population of the Nottingham union, 1881-1882', *Local Population Studies* 99 (2017), pp. 66-80, <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps99.2017.66>; S. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse in 1881', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society* 63 (1989), pp. 85-95.

for Hertfordshire (35 per cent) found that the working-age poor were under-represented compared to the underlying population—either because they were deterred from applying or because they were given outdoor relief—but this is less likely for those workhouses with a higher proportion of working-age poor, such as Cheltenham.⁵⁶

The proportion of the indoor poor aged 15-59 years between 1851 and 1911 by sex and age is given in Table 3. In the first half of the period in the sample

56 Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', p. 41; Goose, 'Workhouse populations', p. 54.

Table 3 Percentage of working-age inmates in workhouses by sex, 1851-1911

Age-group (years)	1851		1861		1881		1891		1901		1911	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
15-19	3.0	3.1	1.8	3.0	1.4	1.8	1.2	1.4	0.7	0.9	0.7	1.0
20-24	1.9	3.4	1.4	3.6	1.4	2.5	1.2	2.1	0.9	2.1	1.1	2.2
25-29	1.5	3.3	1.3	3.3	1.5	2.5	1.5	2.4	1.3	2.3	1.4	2.6
30-34	1.4	2.9	1.3	3.1	1.8	2.6	1.8	2.2	1.6	2.3	1.8	2.5
35-39	1.3	2.2	1.4	2.6	1.8	2.3	2.1	2.3	2.0	2.4	2.4	2.5
40-44	1.7	2.1	1.7	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.5	2.2	2.5	2.2	2.7	2.3
45-49	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.8	2.2	1.9	2.7	2.1	3.0	2.1	3.3	2.2
50-54	1.9	1.7	1.8	1.7	2.6	1.9	3.1	2.2	3.6	2.2	4.1	2.1
55-59	1.9	1.4	1.8	1.5	2.6	1.8	3.1	2.1	3.6	2.1	4.8	2.3
Total	16.2	21.8	14.2	22.9	17.5	19.6	19.2	19.0	19.2	18.6	22.3	19.7
Total male and female	38.0		37.1		37.1		38.2		37.8		42.0	

Source: K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2>.

Of workhouses there were more working-age women, but from 1891 slightly more men were resident on census night. Alistair Ritch found a shift from a feminised to a masculinised working-age population in Birmingham workhouse after 1891.⁵⁷ In 1851 and 1861 there was more variation in the proportion of women in the workhouse by each five-year age group than for men. The proportion of working-age women reduced steadily over the life cycle and only rose again after the age of 60 years. This suggests that the workhouse was used more by single women, perhaps between domestic service positions or other forms of local employment, than it was by middle-aged married women. Another reason women entered workhouses was to give birth; as I have shown in a previous article in this journal, single, pregnant women and unmarried mothers were only offered relief inside the workhouse and the vast majority of births inside were of single women.⁵⁸ For men, in the early censuses their proportions were fairly similar between the ages of 15 and 59 years—apart from adolescent boys (15-19 years) in 1851—but after 1881 their percentages moved in the opposite direction to those of women and increased over the life-cycle, suggesting, at least in these data, worsening employment prospects as men grew older. After 1881 the proportion of women no longer fell over the life cycle but remained largely the same at all ages. This might have been due, in part, to the fall in the illegitimacy rate after 1850.⁵⁹ These findings can be compared with Goose's study of 11 Hertfordshire workhouses analysed for 1851. The picture for women was very similar to that found in the I-CeM data, with one of contraction over the life course. In contrast, there was more variation among men in Hertfordshire than in the I-CeM data: there were more men in the 20-24 year age group, contracting in the age groups 25-39 years, and thereafter increasing after the age of 40.⁶⁰ Findings differed in Preston, where Darwen found for the period 1841-1861 that women outnumbered men in their 20s and 30s and then men formed a greater share over the age of 40 years.⁶¹ Thus, there were more working-age men in the workhouse over the age of 40 years in Hertfordshire and Preston and, in these data, more notably so after the age of 45; these were not old men, but they

57 A. Ritch, 'English poor law institutional care for older people: identifying the "aged and infirm" and the "sick" in Birmingham workhouse, 1852-1912', *Social History of Medicine* 27 (2014), pp. 64-85, here at p. 75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkt071>.

58 Williams, 'Unmarried mothers'; and see S. Williams, *Unmarried Motherhood in London, 1700-1850: Pregnancy, the Poor Law and Provision* (Basingstoke, 2018).

59 P. Laslett, 'Introduction; comparing illegitimacy over time and between cultures', 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, North America, Jamaica and Japan* (London, 1980), pp. 1-68, here at pp. 14-18.

60 Goose, 'Workhouse populations', p. 55.

61 Darwen, 'Workhouse populations of the Preston Union', p. 42.

were nevertheless facing periods when they would have to rely upon the workhouse.

Analysis of the 1881 census indicates that the majority of inmates were either single (62 per cent) or widowed (19.5 per cent), and just 19.5 per cent were married.⁶² This confirms the findings of other studies of admission and discharge registers that most were single men and women, with relatively few families, while the majority of families who were inside were headed by unmarried or widowed mothers, with only a minority of couple-headed families.⁶³ There are three probable reasons for this. The first is that since many Boards of Guardians in rural areas were often both employers of labour and ratepayers, when work was scarce there would have been an incentive to keep on married men with families and let single men go.⁶⁴ The second is that outdoor relief (in terms of medical orders) could be given to an able-bodied man on account of sickness of himself or a member of his family.⁶⁵ Finally, the shame associated with male heads of households taking their wives and children into the workhouse often kept able-bodied men in work as long as possible or encouraged them to exploit all other sources of support first.⁶⁶ It is possible that some men managed to get outdoor relief in exchange for a task of work, but, given the sex ratio of male to female outdoor recipients, this cannot have happened on a large scale.⁶⁷ It also suggests that couple-headed families had more access to resources that kept them out of the workhouse than the single and widowed. This also undermines the enduring idea of the workhouse as a place full of families separated at the workhouse gates and of the emasculation of working-class husbands and fathers.⁶⁸

David Jackson's analysis of the registers for the Medway Union Workhouse found that the working-age poor were admitted more often than children and the

62 Data kindly supplied by Peter Higginbotham (peter@workhouses.org.uk); www.workhouses.org.uk. [accessed 26 January 2023].

63 Perkyns, 'Admission of children', pp. 64, 66, 67 and 70-1; Goose, 'Workhouse populations', pp. 52, 58 and 62-64; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations', p. 60; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', p. 42; Purser, 'Workhouse population of the Nottingham union'; Gritt and Park, 'Workhouse populations of Lancashire', pp. 59-60.

64 A. Digby, 'The labour market and the continuity of social policy after 1834: the case of the eastern counties' *Economic History Review* (1975), pp. 69-83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1975.tb01784.x>.

65 Digby, 'Labour market', pp. 72-3; Brundage, *English Poor Laws*, p. 98; S. Shave, *Pauper Policies: Poor Law Practice in England, 1780-1850* (Manchester, 2017), p. 201.

66 M. Doolittle, 'Fatherhood and family shame: masculinity, welfare and the workhouse in late nineteenth-century England', in L. Delap, B. Griffin and A. Wills (eds), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 84-108, here at p. 85. See also A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), p. 190.

67 Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender', p. 355.

68 Doolittle, 'Fatherhood and family shame'.

elderly and for short durations, with the most common length being seven days.⁶⁹ In St Martin-in-the-Fields in 1835 the most common duration for the working-age poor was admittance and discharge on the same day or the next day, with 23 per cent leaving within one week, which was more frequent than in Medway (at almost 14 per cent). The working-age poor were also admitted repeatedly, with 39 per cent of inmates being recorded as admitted between two and five times and 7 per cent between 20 and 40 times. Elizabeth Levett, for instance, was aged 44 years old and was recorded as being admitted to the St Martin-in-the-Fields workhouse 40 times.⁷⁰

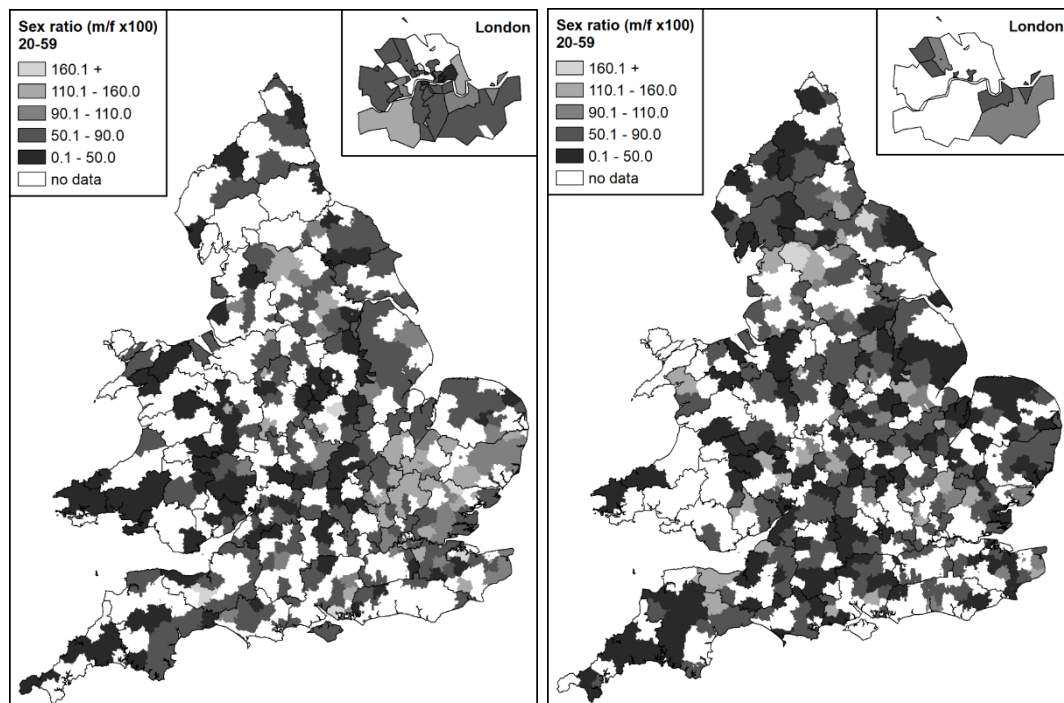
Sex ratio and geography

The sex ratio of working-age adults has been mapped to explore its geography (Figures 2-4).⁷¹ In 1851 and 1861 (Figure 2) it should not be surprising that many workhouses reveal a sex ratio that favoured women (below 90), given that there were more women than men in the workhouse, but by 1901 and 1911 (Figure 4) the maps had lightened, reflecting the general masculinisation of workhouses. By 1911 the map is far more a mosaic of female-dominated and male-dominated workhouses and those with more equal male/female working-age populations. There is no easy geography on display in these maps but there are some areas of striking gender differences, most notably more feminised working-age populations in workhouses in parts of Cornwall, Wales, and London, and with a smattering of feminised workhouses across the Midlands, East Anglia and some of the Home Counties. London had many feminised workhouses: particularly Stepney and Mile End in the East End, but also Hampstead and St Pancras to the north, Fulham and Kensington to the west, and all of the workhouses in Southwark and south and south-east London. In 1901 Cornwall's workhouses were still heavily feminised but this was less evident by 1911; the situation was similar in Wales and parts of Norfolk.

69 D.G. Jackson, 'The Medway Union Workhouse 1876-1881: a study based on the admission and discharge registers and the census enumerators' books', *Local Population Studies* 75 (2005), pp. 11-32, here at pp. 21-2; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', pp. 43-4.

70 London Metropolitan Archives WEBG/SM Castle Street Workhouse admission and discharge book, St Martin-in-the-Fields.

71 In Figure 2 the working-age population is taken to be those aged 20-59 years. It was decided not to include those aged 15-19 years because this age group behaved similarly as those aged 0-15, with dramatic reductions in their proportions over the period 1851-1911.

Figure 2 Sex ratio of working-age workhouse inmates, 1851-1861**(a) 1851****(b) 1861**

Source: K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2>

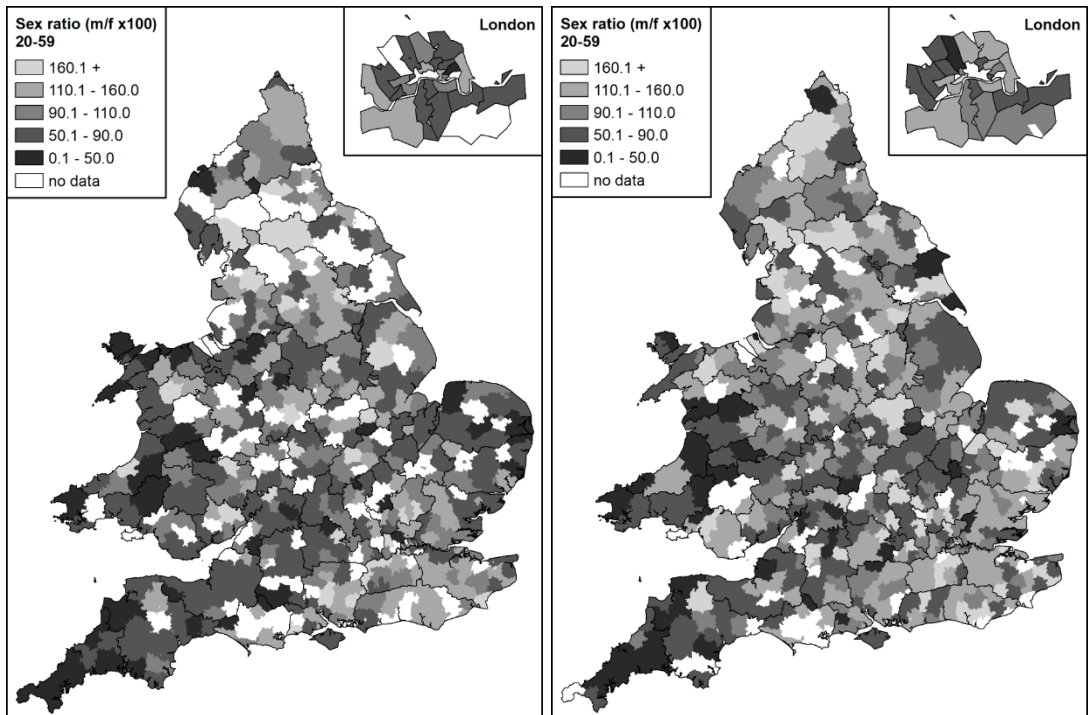
Across all these regions problems securing positions in domestic service propelled working-age women into the workhouse.⁷² In Cornwall and Norfolk women also found themselves without farm work. It is possible to explore the occupations of those admitted to the workhouse for 1881. In Cornwall, 78 per cent of working-age women in Helston workhouse had been employed in some

72 L. Shaw Taylor, 'Diverse experiences: the geography of adult female employment in England and the 1851 census', in N. Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), pp. 29-50, here at p. 45, and see especially figures 2.3 and 2.5; P. Sharpe, 'The female labour market in England', in Goose, *Women's Work in Industrial England*, pp. 51-75, here at p. 61.

Figure 3 Sex ratio of working-age workhouse inmates, 1881-1891

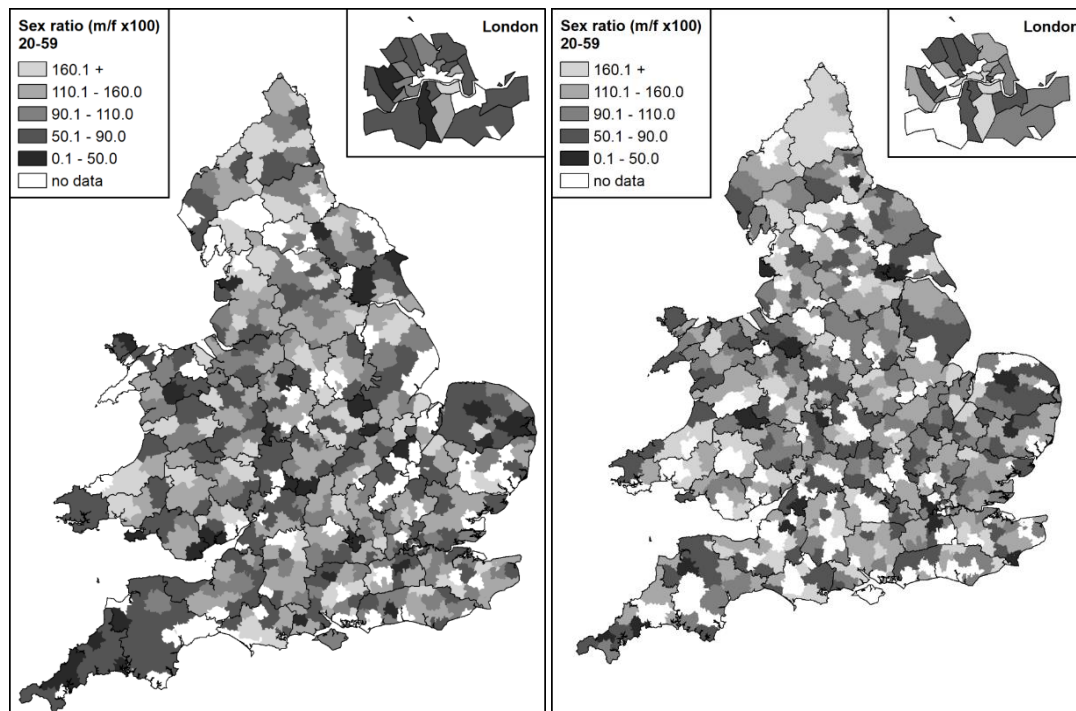
(a) 1881

(b) 1891



Source: K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2>

form of paid domestic work, including domestic service positions as well as charring, washing and laundry work, and ironing, while in Truro workhouse the figure was 56 per cent. Likewise, in Forehoe Union, Norfolk, 39 per cent of female inmates had been in domestic work. Agricultural work was another predominant form of employment for women and this was reflected in the occupations recorded in the census for workhouse inmates: in Truro Union almost a quarter of women were so occupied and the figure was 17 per cent in Forehoe. In Wales, farm work was even more prominent than elsewhere: there

Figure 4 Sex ratio of working-age workhouse inmates, 1901-1911**(a) 1901****(b) 1911**

Source: K. Schürer and E. Higgs, *Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM); 1851-1911* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2014. SN: 7481, <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2>

were equal proportions of women recording occupations in both domestic work and farm employment at 34 per cent in the workhouse in Haverford West, and in the small workhouse at Landilo Fawr there were twice as many women who had been in farm work compared to domestic employment.⁷³ Indeed, the workhouses of Carmarthenshire more broadly were often feminised.

There were, unsurprisingly, extremely high levels of women occupied in domestic service in London, with over 25 per cent so employed in 1851 across

⁷³ Data kindly supplied by Peter Higginbotham (peter@workhouses.org.uk); www.workhouses.org.uk. [accessed 26 January 2023].

the metropolis and over 30 per cent in Hampstead.⁷⁴ Employment among poor single, married and widowed women was common.⁷⁵ In 1881, 84 per cent of women aged 20-59 years in Hampstead workhouse were employed in some form of domestic work, while in the large workhouses of St Pancras and Kensington just over half of working-age women were in some form of domestic work in the former and 72 per cent in the latter. Domestic work was still the dominant form of employment in Mile End workhouse (the darkest shaded union in Figure 3a, 1881), but at a lower figure of 28 per cent of women. In London, needlework was also prominent, with 10 per cent so employed in Mile End, 13 per cent in St Pancras, and 9 per cent in Kensington.⁷⁶ The feminised workhouse populations of London, Cornwall, and parts of Wales reflected a more feminised underlying population, driven in part by employment prospects, but the picture is less clear cut for Norfolk, which was only feminised in the mid-Victorian period.⁷⁷

There was also a zone of male-dominated workhouses in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. These were areas associated with the availability of female employment in straw-plaiting, hat making, and (in Bedfordshire) lace-making, which provided earnings for women and girls that kept them out of the workhouses.⁷⁸ The plaiting and hat trades provided out-work that could be

74 Shaw-Taylor, 'Diverse experiences', p. 50.

75 A. August, 'How separate a sphere? Poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London', *Journal of Family History* 19 (1994), pp. 285-309, <https://doi.org/10.1177/036319909401900305>; 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>.

76 Data kindly supplied by Peter Higginbotham (peter@workhouses.org.uk); www.workhouses.org.uk. [accessed 26 January 2023].

77 The sex ratio is mapped for 1851-1911 at Populations Past – Atlas of Victorian and Edwardian Population, <https://www.populationspast.org/imr/1861/#7/53.035/-2.895> [accessed 4 January 2022]. Numbers of men and women aged 15-59 years in 1851 in London, Cornwall and Wales are available here: [http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20date\)/1851&active=yes&mno=30&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=368&zoom=5](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20date)/1851&active=yes&mno=30&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=368&zoom=5) [accessed 27 January 2023], [http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20date\)/1851&active=yes&mno=30&tocstate=expandnew&tocseq=18700&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=first-nonblank](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20date)/1851&active=yes&mno=30&tocstate=expandnew&tocseq=18700&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=first-nonblank) [accessed 27 January 2023]; and [http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20date\)/1851/Great%20Britain&active=yes&mno=31&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=293&page=PrinterPageBrowser](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20date)/1851/Great%20Britain&active=yes&mno=31&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=293&page=PrinterPageBrowser) [accessed 27 January 2023].

78 N. Goose, 'Working women in industrial England', in Goose, *Women's Work in Industrial England*, pp. 1-28; and N. Goose, 'The straw plait and hat trades in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire', in Goose, *Women's Work in Industrial England*, pp. 97-137; N. Goose, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851, vol. 1: the Berkhamsted Region* (Hatfield, 1996), pp. 34-46, N. Goose, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire*

combined with family life, and employment in some larger-scale workshops, particularly in Luton and Dunstable.⁷⁹ In 1841, 84 per cent of those occupied in plaiting in England and Wales were in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex and eastern Buckinghamshire, while in Hertfordshire these trades accounted for one third of female occupations.⁸⁰ The number of women and girls employed in these industries remained high until 1891.⁸¹ In contrast, these regions did not offer sufficient employment for boys and men, who were chronically seasonally under-employed. Older men, in particular, found themselves in these workhouses in large numbers.⁸²

Conclusion

The deterrent aspects of the workhouse dissuaded many of the working-age poor from applying for poor relief, while for many others the continuation of outdoor relief under various policy amendments meant that they could avoid entering workhouses. The provision of poor law task work, work schemes and distress committees must have kept many able-bodied men from applying to enter the workhouse, while for women it was always easier to qualify for outdoor relief, although policy was tightened up after the ‘crusade against outrelief’. Nevertheless, a substantial minority of adult men and women experienced a spell inside one of these feared institutions. With the ‘crusade against outrelief’ the number of workhouse inmates rose significantly, and outdoor relief, work schemes and distress committees failed to keep all of the destitute, distressed and unemployed out of the house.

The number of working age people in workhouses increased moderately, with more women in the early Victorian censuses, shifting to more men in the later period. There were important and changing differences by sex in the composition of working-age inmates over the life course, but a common pattern was of one of the increased likelihood of workhouse residence as one grew older. This

in 1851, vol. 2: St Albans, (Hatfield, 2000), pp. 47-9, 70-4, and 76-7; H. Cunningham, ‘The employment and unemployment of children in England c.1680-1851’, *Past and Present* 126 (1990), pp. 115-50, here at pp. 137, 140-2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/126.1.115>; N. Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2002).

79 Goose, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851, vol. 2: St Albans*, pp. 72-3; F.M. Eden, *The State of the Poor: or an History of the Labouring Classes in England*, Vol. 2 (London, 1797), pp. 1-4.

80 Goose, *Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851, vol. 2: St Albans*, pp. 70, 72.

81 L. Shaw-Taylor, ‘Diverse experiences: the geography of adult female employment in England and the 1851 census’, in Goose, *Women’s Work in Industrial England* pp. 29-50.

82 Williams, ‘Poverty, gender and old age’.

manifested itself slightly differently for men and women. In the mid-Victorian censuses, younger women were less able to keep themselves out of the workhouse than those who were older, most probably due to problems securing work in domestic service, other domestic tasks, and field work, but this pattern had disappeared in the later censuses when all age groups formed a similar proportion of inmates, most probably reflecting the change in poor law policy that meant that greater numbers of middle-aged women—the wives of able-bodied men, deserted wives, and childless single and widowed women—were forced into the workhouse. The opposite happened to working-age men. Initially men of all ages between 20 and 59 years accounted for very similar percentages, but in the later censuses younger men were more able to keep themselves out of workhouses while the proportion of men in the workhouse now increased steadily with age. This suggests that staying in work became increasingly difficult for older working-age men after 1881, with periods of unemployment or destitution meaning admittance to the workhouse, despite the provision of task work and other work schemes. Although there was no easy geography of the sex ratio of working-age adults, there were notable concentrations of women in workhouses in London, Cornwall, parts of Wales, and East Anglia, with unemployment in domestic service and other domestic occupations and in field work largely responsible (along with, to some extent, underlying feminised populations).

The census and workhouse admission and discharge registers make it clear that the working-age poor in the workhouse were largely single individuals and the widowed, thus reinforcing the picture that couple-headed families largely avoided the workhouse. However, it is likely that the relatively high number of children before 1891 were inside not only as longer-term inmates, but also as part of female-headed families (of unmarried or widowed mothers) who enjoyed shorter spells inside. The registers highlight that the working-age poor had a different experience of the workhouse, with shorter, but often repeated, stays. Destitution, illness, and unemployment propelled into the workhouse the working-age poor who were unable to make ends meet or obtain outdoor relief. As a reason for admission, unemployment was more commonly associated with men, while women were more likely to be described as destitute, either because a lack of part-time work for women was not recognised as a factor driving women into the workhouse, or because it was much easier for women to fail to make ends meet and tip into outright destitution, while unmarried pregnancy and desertion by husbands also impacted heavily upon their lives.

The workhouse was a potent symbol of state authority and, it could be argued, became more so with the large-scale withdrawal of outdoor relief after 1870. Moreover, despite a shift in attitudes to the unemployed after the 1880s and the introduction of the social reforms from 1905 which started to change the relationship between work, welfare, and the state, more than one third of poor

relief recipients continued to be relieved in workhouses, amounting to almost 300,000 people. On the eve of the First World War the workhouse remained an important site—as well as a symbol—of the state, despite the rise of the new Liberalism which started to dismantle the poor laws. This process started with the ‘deserving’ categories of poor and unhealthy children and the very old, but in its early stages only touched a small proportion of the working-age poor through the 1911 National Insurance for unemployment and sickness. It is no wonder that the workhouse remained a feared institution in the popular imagination even into the later twentieth century.⁸³

The I-CeM data set has provided an exciting opportunity to recover some of the characteristics of large numbers of workhouse inmates over a long time period. It would be possible to exploit it still further not only to consider the contraction in the proportion of children in workhouses, but also to chart some of the institutions into which they were moved: these can also be extracted from the wider data set. It is also possible to analyse further the proportion of the elderly outside general workhouses but within workhouse infirmaries, and then compare these populations with the populations of voluntary hospitals.⁸⁴ Indeed, the data set is ripe for exploration of the specialist workhouse services offered on a larger scale by the Edwardian period.

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83 P. Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: the Emergence of the Third Age*, 2nd edn (London, 1966), 23; S. Hussey, ‘“An inheritance of fear”: older women in the twentieth century countryside’, in L. Botelho and P. Thane (eds), *Women and Aging in British Society since 1500* (Harlow, 2001), pp. 186–206.

84 See Williams, ‘Poverty, gender and old age’.