
The Workhouse Population of the Nottingham Union, 1881–1882

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine and analyse the resident population of the Nottingham Union Workhouse during a 12-month period beginning on Lady Day 1881. Using data drawn from the workhouse admission and discharge registers this study analyses the seasonal pattern of admissions and discharges as revealed by the registers, and also considers how this pattern might be related to the local economy. The Nottingham region had been a beacon of good practice in the treatment of the poor in the years leading up to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, but soon became a centre of resistance to the New Poor Law. Local politics and the textile trade cycle not only prevented the legislation from being fully implemented after 1834, but also dictated the economic and social conditions which prevailed in Nottingham in the later nineteenth century. The population analysis is based not only on the relevant admission and discharge register data, but also includes a study of the workhouse census information for 1881. The incidence of birth in the workhouse is also assessed together with the use made of the workhouse by women for giving birth and ‘lying-in’.

Introduction

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was the beginning of the era of the union workhouse.¹ Under the New Poor Law, every parish in England and Wales was to be incorporated into a poor law union and each union had to provide a workhouse in which to accommodate those of its population who were destitute. Working people who were poor, but nevertheless employed, were encouraged to make best use of an ‘economy of makeshifts’, mutual aid and self-help.² Poverty, in itself, was not to be relieved since it was necessary to have a workforce, but destitution, as distinguished from poverty, was. Before the 1834 legislation it was asserted by political economists that a large proportion of outdoor relief was going towards subsidising idleness in a section of the working population termed the ‘undeserving poor’. The authorities sought to deter this supposed feckless behaviour. Thus the workhouse was intended to have a deterrent role and its

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- 1 A. Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700–1930* (Basingstoke, 2002); F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: the Workhouse System 1834–1884* (Cambridge, 2004); P. Wood, *Poverty and the Workhouse in Victorian Britain* (Stroud, 1991); K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London, 1981); N. Longmate, *The Workhouse* (London, 1974); M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834–1929: the history of an English Social Institution* (London, 1981); A. Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1999); K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006).
 - 2 S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law 1760–1834* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 6–7; Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, pp. 2–3.

purpose was to prevent applications for poor relief and not to become a ‘pauper palace’.³ The principle under which poor relief was administered became known as the principle of ‘less eligibility’ and the offer of the deterrent regime of the workhouse was known as the ‘workhouse test’, to which all applicants for poor relief should be subject. The principle of less eligibility was enshrined in the concept that conditions in the workhouse should be considered inferior to those experienced by the lowest paid worker or labourer outside the workhouse, but not so bad that the genuinely destitute would not accept the relief offered to them if there was no alternative. Thus outdoor relief was substituted by an offer of accommodation in the workhouse.⁴

The principle of less eligibility was closely connected with the prohibition of outdoor relief to able-bodied men and, to a certain extent, women.⁵ Yet, as Digby states, ‘the term “able-bodied” never received a precise definition from the central poor law administration, and in practice this group of paupers probably embraced all but those too obviously infirm or sick to earn a livelihood’.⁶ The position of women within the Poor Law and its use of the concept of ‘able-bodiedness’ as a measure of women’s qualification for aid was more complex and depended on whether they were considered as male dependents or whether they worked.⁷ Female able-bodied paupers such as deserted women with dependent children were at best given scant regard and at worst, ignored.⁸

Although this was the theory, in practice a uniform system of poor relief and administration using the workhouse test as the basis for offering relief was never implemented on the scale envisaged by the Poor Law Commission.⁹ Historians debate the extent of local and regional differences and the effects of the orders which dealt with the practices of local relief, particularly outdoor relief. Many are of the opinion that local opposition and the prevailing local economy together defeated the new relief policies of the 1834 Act.¹⁰

With the transcription and digitisation of key primary sources, notably the census enumerators’ books (CEBs) from 1841 to 1911, much research has been conducted into

3 Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, pp. 34–6.

4 A. Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978), p. 107; A. Hinde and F. Turnbull, ‘The populations of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851–1861’, *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), pp. 38–53 (here at p. 38); 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 p. 11); 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 (here at p. 98); L. Darwen, ‘Workhouse populations of the Preston Union, 1841–61’, *Local Population Studies*, 93 (2014), pp. 33–53 (here at p. 33).

5 Jackson, ‘Medway Union Workhouse’, p. 11.

6 Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, p. 110.

7 M. Levine-Clark, ‘Engendering relief: women, ablebodiedness, and the New Poor Law in early Victorian England’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 11 (2000), pp. 107–30 (here at pp. 107–8).

8 S. Williams, ‘Unmarried mothers and the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire’, *Local Population Studies*, 91 (2013), pp. 27–43 (here at pp. 27–30).

9 Jackson, ‘Medway Union Workhouse’, pp. 11–12; Darwen, ‘Preston Union’, p. 33.

10 Darwen, ‘Preston Union’, pp. 33–4; Hinde and Turnbull, ‘Populations of two Hampshire workhouses’, pp. 38–9.

workhouses as institutions and into the role they played within the poor law framework.¹¹ Recent studies using CEBs have indicated that individual pauper populations varied considerably; however, clear trends are also identifiable at the aggregate level. Essentially, workhouse populations came to be dominated by the young and the old with elderly men forming the largest sub-group of inmates, particularly towards the later decades of the nineteenth century.¹² The unmarried and widowed were far more likely to end up in the workhouse than their married peers.

Although important patterns in workhouse populations can be identified, research based on the CEBs results in findings that are only 'snapshots' in time, a point in time which occurs every ten years, and thus the turnover of paupers over shorter periods of time is unknown. However, using surviving admission and discharge registers, Jackson, Goose, and Hinde and Turnbull have demonstrated the significant fluctuations that could occur, particularly during the winter months.¹³

Admission and discharge registers are also an important source of data regarding births in the workhouse, recording the name of the child, date of birth, and very often the name of the mother and her age. From this data it is possible to ascertain whether the mother arrived in the workhouse a few days or even weeks before the onset of labour, or whether she was already in labour when she was admitted. From the corresponding information in the discharge registers it is also possible to calculate how long mothers remained in the workhouse for the 'lying-in' period following birth. Jackson concludes from his data on the Medway Union Workhouse that most of the women giving birth in the workhouse were very young and giving birth to their first child, with their offspring facing a consequently greater risk of early death.¹⁴ Women who had given birth in the workhouse were allowed to stay for up to three or four weeks.¹⁵ In her study of unmarried mothers and the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire, Williams found that many of the mothers stayed in the Hatfield Union workhouse for a traditional 'lying-in' month (17 between 1834 and 1860 and another 9 between 1861 and 1886). However, others stayed for a longer period, with 19 women resident in the house for up to a year between 1834 and 1860.¹⁶

This article presents a detailed study of the population of Nottingham Union workhouse for the 12 months between the Lady Days (25 March) of 1881 and 1882. The

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- 11 S. Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse in 1881', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 63 (1989), pp. 85–95; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', pp. 38–53; 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 Enumerators' Books', *Local Population Studies*, 69 (2002), pp. 51–66; Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', pp. 11–32; A. Gritt and P. Park, 'The Workhouse populations of Lancashire in 1881', *Local Population Studies*, 86 (2011), pp. 37–65; Darwen, 'Preston Union'.
 - 12 Seal, 'Workhouse populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions', p. 98.
 - 13 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 29; Goose, 'Workhouse populations', pp. 64–7; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', pp. 38–9.
 - 14 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', pp. 26–7.
 - 15 S. Williams, 'The experience of pregnancy and childbirth for unmarried mothers in London, 1760–1866', *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011), pp. 67–86 (here at p. 79).
 - 16 Williams, 'Unmarried mothers', pp. 39–40.

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primary sources used are the CEBs and the admission and discharge registers (which survive almost unbroken from 1856 to the early 1900s).¹⁷ The population as at 3 April 1881 (Census Day) is analysed and a detailed reconstruction of the workhouse population movements over the twelve months is undertaken. The incidence of births over the twelve-month period in the Nottingham Workhouse is also assessed.

Nottingham, in common with many northern unions, experienced an extended period of tension and political disagreement after the New Poor Law was introduced and implemented. Resistance to the New Poor Law was considerable in the early years, particularly in Yorkshire and Lancashire where Gilbert Unions continued despite the introduction of the New Poor Law, and local autonomy was prevalent where poor law unions continued to offer relief without recourse to rules or restrictions.¹⁸ In the agricultural areas of eastern and southern England, where work would be in short supply or even non-existent at certain times of the year, the deterrent effect of the workhouse was reduced because the poor did not have a realistic choice about whether or not to apply for relief.¹⁹ Steven King has argued for a national north/west and south/east divide, the former characterised by harsher attitudes towards the poor and lower levels of provision, and the latter by an increasing reliance on poor relief and thus rising levels of expenditure.²⁰

Politics, the New Poor Law, and the local economy of Nottingham

Prior to 1834 each of the three parishes in Nottingham had its own workhouse: St Mary's (which could house 150 inmates in 1777), St Nicholas (60 inmates) and St Peter's (60 inmates).²¹ In the early nineteenth century, at a time of high unemployment and depression in Nottingham, Absalom Barnett was appointed as full-time overseer of St Mary's parish. Barnett was to become a notable poor law reformer whose subsequent evidence to the Poor Law Commission contributed to the New Poor Law of 1834.²² When Barnett was appointed in 1819 he introduced a variety of draconian measures in the treatment of the poor in St Mary's parish. He was an advocate of the workhouse test and the able-bodied were offered relief only through entry to the workhouse, although the capacity of St Mary's Workhouse was very soon exceeded and work had to be offered instead.²³ The Nottingham Poor Law Union came into existence on 6 July 1836. The implementation of the New Poor

17 Nottinghamshire Archives (hereafter NA), Nottingham Union Workhouse Admission and Discharge Registers [Lady Day 1881 to Lady Day 1882], SO/PUO/2/1/11 1881 fiches 23 to 36 of 36 (160 images); and SO/PUO/2/1/12 1882 fiches 1 to 5 of 33 (56 images).

18 Driver, *Power and Pauperism*, p. 47.

19 Hinde and Turnbull, 'Population of two Hampshire workhouses', pp. 38–9.

20 S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: a Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 8–9.

21 P. Higginbotham, *Parish Workhouses*, Workhouses Website [undated] <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/parishes/> [accessed 20 June 2017].

22 J. D. Marshall, 'The Nottinghamshire reformers and their contribution to the New Poor Law', *Economic History Review*, 13 (1961), pp. 382–96 (here at p. 382).

23 M. Caplan, *In the Shadow of the Workhouse* (Nottingham, 1984), p. 5.

Law became embroiled in local politics and eventually became a test both of the determination of the Poor Law Commissioners who were appointed to administer the reforms, and the degree of the Whig interest in Nottingham's municipal and parliamentary elections.²⁴

Although the problem of poverty in early nineteenth century England was viewed primarily as a rural issue, the government needed evidence that the system of unions and workhouses set up after 1834 would work satisfactorily in urban, industrial towns.²⁵ The Nottingham case showed clearly that the key issue was the trade cycle, and fluctuations in the town's hosiery and lace trades made it almost impossible fully to implement the terms of the legislation. Framework knitting was an industry which was characterised by domestic manufacture and the knitters' homes were adapted to accommodate the framework knitting machines. Men worked at the knitting and women spun yarn and carried out the finishing work which required needlework skills. Wages for the knitters were generally very poor and consequently the entire family had to work in the industry out of necessity. The general condition of the framework knitters was very bad; they lived in extreme poverty and were poorly fed and clothed. In the early nineteenth century the Luddite movement formed a protest against the introduction of wider frames which had been developed so that more material could be produced by one individual using a single frame, rendering many smaller frames and their operators redundant. In 1812, after a petition to the government, an emergency relief committee issued knitters with tickets that could be exchanged for food.²⁶ By the 1830s the industry had become overpopulated with workers and the economic problems faced by the knitters continued to grow, thus contributing to pressures on local Poor Law provision at this time. Thus, hosiery and lace manufacture were characterised by the very low wages paid to the framework knitters, market instability, and periodic unemployment which resulted in widespread pauperism.²⁷

Following the introduction of the New Poor Law the Nottingham Union took over the existing St. Mary's Parish Workhouse which could by now accommodate up to 520 inmates. In 1836 there was again a slump in the hosiery trade and additional accommodation had to be found for children and old men in the former St Nicholas Parish Workhouse, bringing the number accommodated up to 700.²⁸ A key battle was fought over the decision to build a new workhouse. Barnett's methods did not meet with all-round approval in Nottingham, but the mainly Whig board of guardians supported Barnett and in the end, his views prevailed.²⁹ The Tories resisted the building of a new workhouse because they mistakenly believed that the three original workhouses would provide sufficient pauper

24 J. Beckett, 'Politics and the implementation of the New Poor Law: the Nottingham workhouse controversy, 1834–43', *Midland History*, 41 (2016), pp. 201–23.

25 Beckett, 'Politics and the implementation of the New Poor Law', p. 201.

26 D. Amos, *Framework Knitters*, Nottinghamshire Heritage Gateway [undated] <http://www.nottsheritagegateway.org.uk/people/frameworkknitters.htm> [accessed 28 January 2016].

27 J. Beckett, (ed.) *A Centenary History of Nottingham* (Chichester, 2006), pp. 231–36.

28 Beckett, *Centenary History of Nottingham*, pp. 231–36.

29 Beckett, 'Politics and the implementation of the New Poor Law', p. 203.

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accommodation, with men, women, and children being separately housed in one of each of the three buildings. The Tories were also not prepared to support the capital outlay required for a new workhouse building. The Whigs, on the other hand, were in favour of a new workhouse which would provide the additional capacity, up to 800 inmates, required during downturns in the trade cycle. Between 1836 and 1841, when the new workhouse was completed, the slump in the textile trades continued through varying degrees of severity with the Poor Law Commissioners variously suspending the rules forbidding out-relief to cope with the crisis, and then reinstating them when trade conditions improved and pauper numbers dropped.³⁰ In a few decades Nottingham reverted from being a town which was deemed to have a relatively effective system of poor relief, to one with a union riven by political differences which became a centre of resistance to the New Poor Law.³¹

The workhouse and its population, 1881–1882

By 1881 Nottingham was a sprawling industrialised city with many slum areas. The hosiery trade enjoyed a renaissance in the mid nineteenth century with the move to a factory system of production. Lace making was an allied trade to hosiery production but by 1876 factory production of lace began to overtake the attics, cottages and scattered workshops which existed in and around the city. At this time, although new industries were beginning to emerge, such as pharmaceuticals, the economy of Nottingham was dominated not only by the two textile industries, but also by the related industries of dyeing, bleaching, cotton spinning and textile engineering.³²

The population of Nottingham increased from approximately 11,000 inhabitants in 1750 to around 29,000 by the turn of the century, and to about 50,000 by 1831. There was another substantial population increase during the 1850s and by 1881 the population was 186,575 although about 100,000 of this total was mainly due to the 1877 Borough Extension Act which brought the suburbs within the boundaries of the town thus creating Greater Nottingham.³³ A large proportion of this population growth was the result of in-migration. One of the largest group of immigrants into Nottingham in the early nineteenth century was from Ireland. The Irish potato famine of 1845–1847 produced a huge wave of migrants. Migrants searched for work which capitalised on their marketable skills and, in the case of the Irish in Nottingham, this was exactly the case following the collapse of the Irish cotton and woollen industries after Britain dumped large amounts of cheap goods onto the Irish market during the 1830s. Dublin was renowned in the manufacture of stockings and gloves, and Irish workers in these industries would have gravitated to an area such as Nottingham.³⁴

30 Beckett, 'Politics and the implementation of the New Poor Law', pp. 207–11.

31 Beckett, *Centenary History of Nottingham*, pp. 231–6; Beckett, 'Politics and the implementation of the New Poor Law', pp. 201–15.

32 Beckett, *Centenary History of Nottingham*, pp. 317–33.

33 Beckett, *Centenary History of Nottingham*, p. 259.

34 P. Murphy, 'Irish settlement in Nottingham in the early nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire*, 98 (1994), pp. 82–91 (here at pp. 82–4).

Many previous workhouse studies have taken a single union, or group of unions, and examined the population in a single census year, the most typical years used being 1851 or 1881.³⁵ Page used the CEBs to study the Leicester Union Workhouse in 1881 and concluded that poverty was increasingly linked to local economic fluctuations, particularly as Leicester was, at that time, emerging as an important area for the production of footwear and hosiery and was therefore dependent on trade with national and international markets. Page's findings also highlight the problems caused by unemployment in an industrial workforce which results in overwhelming numbers of applications for poor relief.³⁶ The analysis of economic disparity and workhouse population composition is developed by Gritt and Park in their study of Lancashire workhouses in 1881. This study divided Lancashire into three types of settlement which were broadly rural, conurbations, and industrial/urban, and noted marked differences in the age profiles of the workhouse inmates for each type. Female adults under 45 years of age predominated in the conurbations and elderly men in the rural unions.³⁷ In Kent workhouses in 1881, and the Medway Union Workhouse study from 1876 to 1881 undertaken by Jackson, the age profile of inmates reflected national variations with numbers increasing in general over the period for the Medway study, and seasonal variations being present with numbers increasing during the winter months.³⁸

Observing the population in the Nottingham Union at the 1881 census, the age/sex pyramid of the 682 inmates clearly shows that they were dominated by the elderly (aged 65 years and over) at 37 per cent, and by the young (aged 14 years and under) at 20 per cent (Figure 1). At the age of 15 years, inmates were expected to leave the workhouse and enter the labour market, and at that point there was a drop in the number of inmates, both male and female, aged 15–34 years, particularly for males aged 25–29 years.

At age 35–39 years for males and 40–44 years for females the numbers of inmates began to rise again, increasing quite dramatically for males aged 60–64 years and females aged 65–69 years. Males outnumbered females in the 10–14 year age range and it is possible that this is a result of girls having left the workhouse to be employed in service or lace-making. The predominance of young and old in the workhouse is echoed in other Old Poor Law and New Poor Law workhouse studies. In Digby's study of East Anglian workhouses the extremes of youth and age were familiar features in the houses of industry of the Old Poor Law era.³⁹ This was also true in union workhouses after 1834, for example in the Leicester and Kent workhouses in 1881.⁴⁰

Admission and discharge registers reveal that seasonal variations in admittance to Nottingham Union workhouse were striking, not only in the monthly admissions but also

35 Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse'; Goose, 'Workhouse populations'; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations'; Gritt and Park, 'Workhouse populations of Lancashire'.

36 Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse', pp. 93–4.

37 Gritt and Park, 'Workhouse populations of Lancashire', p. 64.

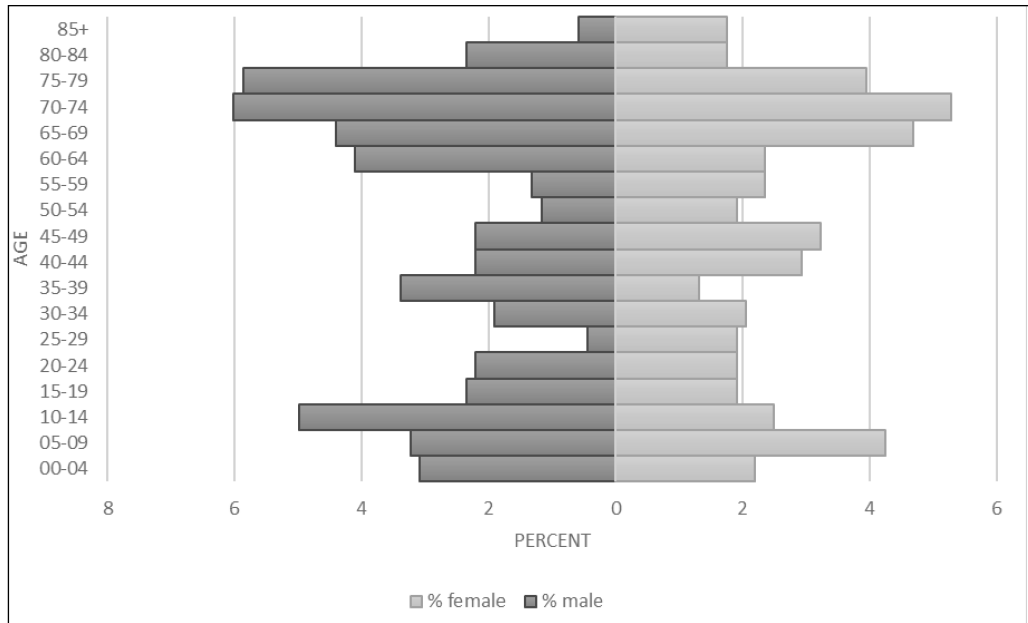
38 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', pp. 17–8; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations'.

39 Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, p. 37.

40 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 17; Page, 'Pauperism and the Leicester workhouse', p. 89.

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Figure 1 Age-sex structure of the population of Nottingham Union Workhouse, 3 April 1881



Source: Census enumerators' books, 1881 (The National Archives, RG 11).

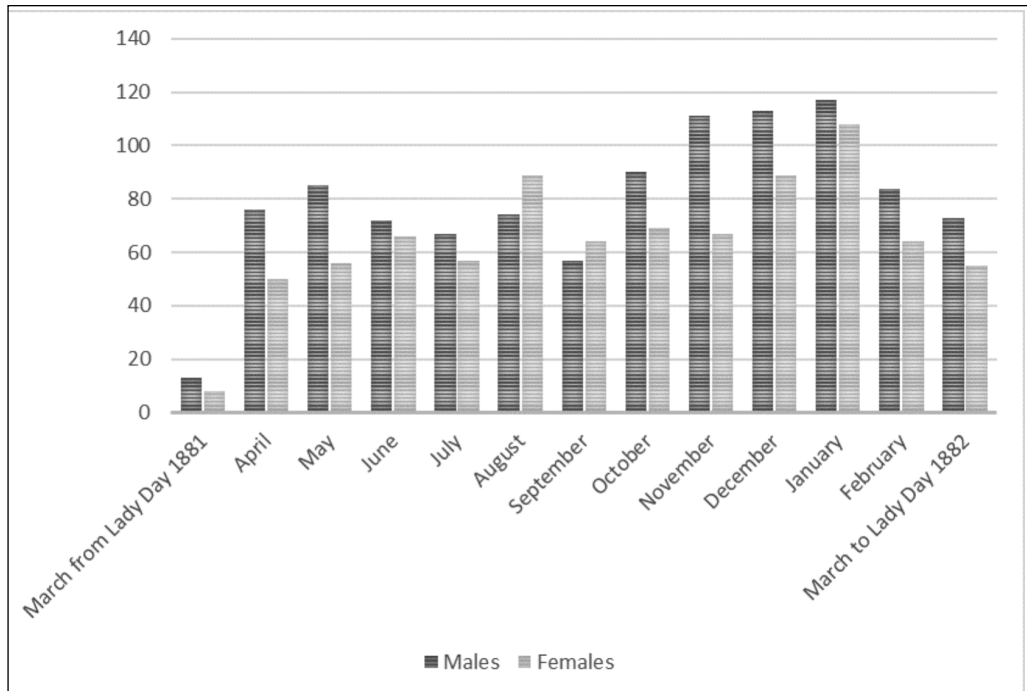
between males and females (Figure 2). The greater number of admissions in the winter, which were usually associated with more rural workhouses, was also evident for this urban workhouse with admissions reaching maximum levels between October and February for males and between December and January for females, with another peak for females in August.

Similar seasonal variations in workhouse populations can be observed in rural Hampshire in 1851 and 1861 and in Kent in 1881.⁴¹ This study, together with the Medway study, demonstrates that seasonal variations were not confined to rural, agricultural districts. If the summer minimum of male Nottingham inmates is compared with the winter maximum, a reduction of 58 per cent is evident. For females, the figures suggest that the summer minima did not fall below 79 per cent of the winter levels, taking into account the increase in numbers of admissions in August. There appears to be no obvious reason why female admission numbers should spike in August 1881 although on detailed examination of the data the majority of the able-bodied women admitted were lace workers, so it is possible that a lace factory had closed down.⁴² Male admissions outnumbered female admissions in every month apart from August and September, most notably in November.

41 Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', pp. 43–8; Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 17.

42 NA, PUO/2/1/11 1881 Fiches 29 and 30 of 36.

Figure 2 Nottingham Union Workhouse monthly admissions, 1881–1882



Source: Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham Union Workhouse Admission and Discharge Registers, 1881–1882, SO/PUO/2/1/11 and 12.

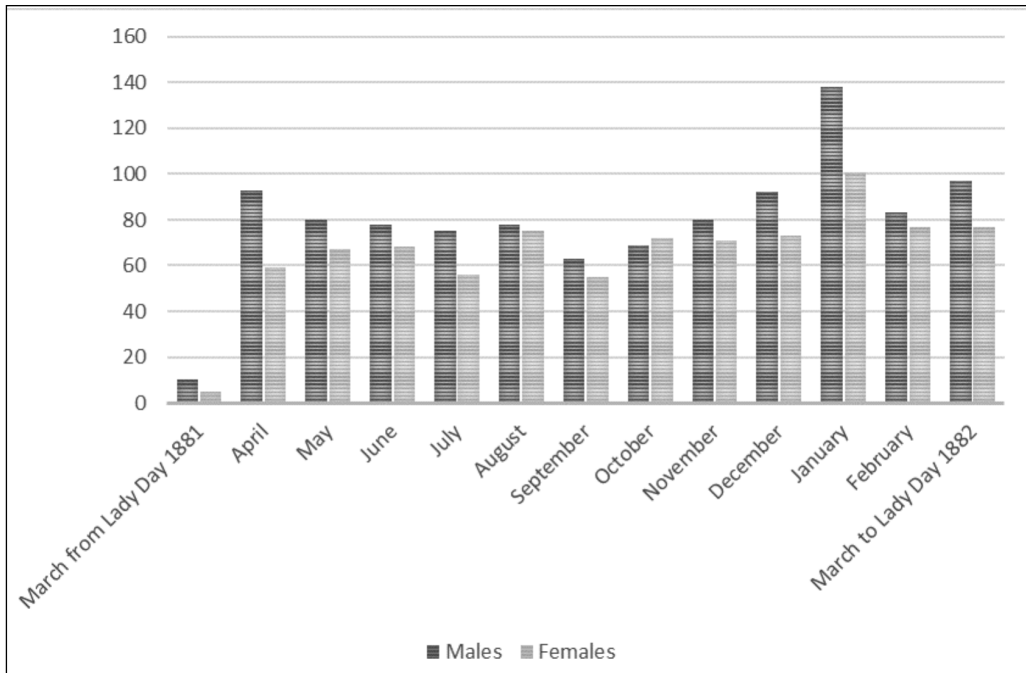
As has been noted previously, a substantial number of the male workhouse inmates were ‘labourers’; however, the male monthly admissions reduced in the summer months of 1881 and one reason for this might be the house building programme that was undertaken in Nottingham during this period. During the decade of the 1880s the housing stock increased by 16 per cent.⁴³ Of course ‘labourer’ is an imprecise term; however, if it is argued that the unskilled labourers were those workers who serviced the craftsmen of the construction industry such as stonemasons, bricklayers, and builders, then the summer months were the boom time for them. Monthly discharges (Figure 3) were similar to those of the monthly admissions with a lag. Male discharges outnumbered female discharges in every month except October, and then only marginally. Discharges tended to peak in the spring months as work became available and fell to a low point in the late summer and early autumn (September and October) rising again in the late autumn and winter months (November and December), peaking in January, particularly for males. During January 1882, of all the males discharged from the workhouse, 49 per cent were able-bodied in the age group 15–59 years.⁴⁴ It is possible that building trade workers were laid off prior to

43 Beckett, *Centenary History of Nottingham*, p. 269.

44 NA, PUO/2/1/12 1882 Fiches 1 and 2 of 33.

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Figure 3 Nottingham Union Workhouse monthly discharges, 1881–1882



Source: Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham Union Workhouse Admission and Discharge Registers, 1881–1882, SO/PUO/2/1/11 and 12.

Christmas only to be taken on again once work resumed in the New Year. Similar seasonal variations in discharges were seen in rural Hampshire in 1851–1861 and in the Medway area of Kent in 1881.⁴⁵

Although this seasonal variation was very characteristic of the agricultural areas in eastern and southern England where demand for labour slackened off during the winter months, it is quite surprising in an area of urban poverty such as Nottingham. There may be several reasons for this. One explanation could have been that the unmarried able-bodied were the majority using the house for poor relief and this is confirmed by the figures from the 1881 census data. Looking at the population pyramid for the workhouse residents constructed from the 1881 census data, it can be seen that the workhouse population on 3 April 1881 was dominated by the elderly. The data from the admission and discharge registers confirm that a larger number of men were admitted to the workhouse than census records would suggest. This disparity in numbers was the result of men forming the greater number of the short-term residents and who were thus less likely to be in the house when the census was conducted in April.⁴⁶ As Nottingham was one of the

45 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 18; Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', p. 44.

46 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 29; Goose, 'Workhouse populations', pp. 64–7.

'low' outdoor relief urban unions calculated as providing 55 per cent of relief as outdoor relief for the year ending Lady Day 1875, it can be deduced that the workhouse test was applied reasonably rigorously and that often destitute able-bodied men and women had to accept the house for poor relief.⁴⁷ The monthly admission figures would suggest that this policy was being initiated, particularly for able-bodied men since more men than women were being admitted to the workhouse.

A further possible reason is that during the summer months when earnings and wages were higher, it was possible for families to care better for elderly relatives who had been admitted to the workhouse in the previous winter months, thus some of the aged inmates would discharge themselves in the spring months but be re-admitted again in the following autumn months.⁴⁸ Goose's study of Hertfordshire reveals that poverty was different for elderly men and women. Whilst elderly women faced poverty due to marriage breakdown, being single or widowed and having limited work opportunities, the poverty of elderly men was caused by seasonal unemployment (whether agricultural or industrial) and an overstocked labour market. For men, particularly those single and widowed, the situation was more precarious and with the denial of out-relief, very often the workhouse was the only alternative. Many of the informal and kin-based support channels available to women were harder to come by for men.⁴⁹

Birth in the workhouse

Although births in Nottingham Workhouse were well documented in the admission and discharge registers, unfortunately no detail was provided as to whether the mothers were married or unmarried, although parents were diligently allocated to children. This problem of the identification of unmarried mothers and their children is highlighted by Williams in her study of unmarried mothers in the Hertford and Hatfield poor law unions after the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834.⁵⁰ Jackson also examined all pregnant women, married and unmarried, in his study of the Medway Union workhouse, 1876–1881.⁵¹

Many of the women who gave birth in Nottingham were very young: 29.3 per cent were in the 16–20 year age group and 41.4 per cent were in the 21–25 year age group: thus almost 71 per cent of all women who gave birth during the study period were aged 16–25 years (Table 1). In Jackson's study of the Medway Union workhouse, 32.5 per cent of women giving birth were aged between 21 and 25 years of age, whilst the age groups 16–20 and 26–30 years each accounted for another 22.8 per cent.⁵² It is probable that many young mothers were giving birth for the first time and equally probable that many of the children

47 Snell, *Parish and Belonging*, pp. 228–32. Snell notes that the unweighted union average was 71 per cent and the median percentage was 74, p. 234.

48 Hinde and Turnbull, 'Populations of two Hampshire workhouses', p. 45.

49 N. Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender in nineteenth-century England: the case of Hertfordshire', *Continuity and Change*, 20 (2005), pp. 351–84 here at pp. 351–363.

50 Williams, 'Unmarried mothers', p. 37.

51 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', pp. 26–7.

52 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 27.

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Table 1 Ages of women giving birth in Nottingham Union Workhouse, 1881–1882

Age of mother (years)	N	%
16–20	17	29.3
21–25	24	41.4
26–30	5	8.6
31–35	3	5.2
36–40	4	6.9
41 or more	1	1.7
Not known	4	6.9
Total	58	100.0

Source: Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham Union Workhouse Admission and Discharge Registers, 1881–1882, SO/PUO/2/1/11 and 12.

ere illegitimate. In Williams's study of Hertfordshire, in Hatfield Workhouse 87 per cent of births were illegitimate and in Hertford Workhouse the figure was 85 per cent.⁵³ Although outdoor midwifery services were sometimes available to married women, pregnant widows and single women were only offered them in the workhouse.⁵⁴ Hence the number of very young, probably single, women giving birth in the workhouse is evidence of the poverty associated with being a single parent and the lack of alternative support for unmarried mothers. Anne Digby describes how unmarried mothers in Norfolk workhouses in the 1830s had to wear a special and distinctive uniform, were excluded from celebration dinners, for example Christmas dinner, and were set to work in the workhouse laundry only days after the birth of their babies, a practice that continued at least to the end of the century.⁵⁵ In his study of Hertfordshire workhouses, Goose also suggests that there was a moralistic attitude towards unmarried mothers and their infants.⁵⁶

Many women entered the workhouse shortly before birth took place and were most probably admitted when in labour. In the Nottingham Union 32 per cent of women entered the workhouse either on the day of the birth or on the day before (Table 2). A further 9 per cent were admitted within a week of delivery so around two fifths of women were resident for only a short period of time before giving birth. A large percentage of the admissions of pregnant women in the Medway workhouse took place within a week of the birth, with many occurring the day before the birth took place or on the actual day of the birth.⁵⁷

A total of 59 births were recorded during the study period, including one pair of twins. Thirteen of the mothers could not be identified in the admission register, however, 8 of these 13 mothers gave birth between March and June 1881 and it is therefore possible that they were admitted before the start of the study period. There is no admission record for

53 Williams, 'Unmarried mothers', p. 34.

54 A. Perkyns, 'The admission of children to the Milton Union workhouse, Kent, 1835-1885', *Local Population Studies*, 80 (2008), pp. 59-77 (here at p. 67).

55 Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, pp. 152-3.

56 Goose, 'Workhouse populations', p. 58.

57 Jackson, 'Medway Union Workhouse', p. 27.

Table 2 Durations of pre-and post-natal periods spent in the workhouse, 1881–1882

Duration (days)	Pre-natal stay (%)	Post-natal stay (%)
0–1	32	0
2–7	9	0
8–14	11	41
15–21	4	28
22–28	0	7
29–35	11	0
36–42	9	7
43–49	4	0
50–185	20	17
Total	100	100
N	45	46

Source: Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham Union Workhouse Admission and Discharge Registers, 1881–1882, SO/PUO/2/1/11 and 12.

the other five. Eleven women admitted to the workhouse gave birth on the same day. In the case of Catherine Sullivan, aged 24 years, she was admitted and gave birth to twins Kate and Ellen on the same day. Both babies died two days later. On 26 January 1882, two women, Alice De Marroka (aged 21 years) and Mary A. Burrel (aged 32 years) were admitted and gave birth on the same day.

The picture of women giving birth either on the day of their admission to the workhouse, or having been admitted only the day before, is echoed in figures from the Hatfield workhouse study by Williams for the period 1861–1886 when five women were in this predicament.⁵⁸ Although a large number of women spent a very short time in the Nottingham Union workhouse before birth, a further 26 per cent were admitted within the five weeks before delivery and another 13 per cent within seven weeks of the birth. Longer pre-natal stays might have been connected with labour-related illness, or women who had been dismissed from service for being pregnant. However, it may simply have been that in the final weeks of pregnancy women were destitute and had nowhere else to go.

Other workhouse studies reveal that the majority of women who gave birth in the workhouse did not stay for an extended period after the birth. The traditional ‘lying-in’ period was one month, although the normal period spent in a lying-in hospital at this time was between one and two weeks.⁵⁹ In the Medway workhouse study 75 per cent of discharges took place within 28 days, but generally the range of the length of stay was very variable.⁶⁰ Table 2 shows that in the Nottingham Union workhouse 69 per cent of discharges took place within 21 days. A further 17 per cent of mothers spent more than seven weeks in the house after the birth of their baby, possibly due to labour-related

⁵⁸ Williams, ‘Unmarried mothers’, pp. 38–9.

⁵⁹ Jackson, ‘Medway Union Workhouse’, p. 27.

⁶⁰ Williams, ‘Unmarried mothers’, pp. 39–40; Jackson, ‘Medway Union Workhouse’, p. 27.

complications, or not initially having anywhere to go. In the study, 12 discharges of mothers were not identified. Six of these unidentified discharges were mothers who had given birth between February and March 1882 and were probably still resident in the house and still in their 'lying-in' period.

Nine babies who were born in the workhouse died during the study period. Although for most mothers included in the study period, confinement and birth appear to have been reasonably uncomplicated, the workhouse officials had to deal with some more difficult and protracted cases. Women entering the workhouse to give birth could expect to be offered food and accommodation in addition to medical care during what time remained of their pregnancy and when they were nursing their babies. Midwives were usually in attendance during labour and birth, with a medical officer or surgeon only required in cases of difficult or obstructed births or when a forceps delivery might be required.⁶¹

Conclusion

This article has examined the population of Nottingham Union workhouse which was situated in a late nineteenth century industrial city reliant mainly on one type of industry. There were similarities in the age and sex profiles of the inmates between Nottingham Workhouse and other later nineteenth century workhouses. Differences were due to various interpretations of local poor law policy and of differing economic structures, notably in Nottingham the opportunity for female employment in the textile industry. Economic factors exerted an influence in the shorter run due to fluctuations in the textile trade cycle, and to a smaller extent due to seasonal unemployment for male labourers, whilst in the long run the decline of cottage industry in favour of factory production for framework knitters also exerted an impact. The unbridled expansion of Nottingham during the nineteenth century, which resulted in slum conditions in the old town, was also a long-run economic factor.

Census data provide population information at specific points in time, while the admission and discharge registers detail the considerable movements in the workhouse population. The census data capture long term inmates but underestimate the numbers of individuals of prime working age who were resident in the workhouse for shorter periods of time. These do show up in admissions and discharge registers which, where they survive, are a source of great detail.

For unmarried and destitute pregnant women, and for a small number of pregnant married women of limited means, admission to the workhouse in late pregnancy was the norm with a number of women arriving already in labour. The length of post-natal stay was generally longer than the pre-natal stay with most mothers and babies resident in the workhouse for at least two to three weeks; for married women this might have been a longer 'lying-in' period than they would have got at home.

⁶¹ Williams, 'Unmarried mothers', p. 41.

Despite national poor law policy and local and regional interpretations of that policy, the workhouse became home to the most vulnerable members of society in the late nineteenth century. These people included children and young people, pregnant, young and often single women, and the frail and elderly, particularly men. The social and economic structures of their community combined to generate the poverty that they found themselves in, and which the workhouse epitomised.

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