

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Women and Domestic Life in Hull, 1920s to the 1960s

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NOTE ON MAPS

Various references are made to the geography of Hull throughout this thesis and a selection of maps has been included to aid clarity. A plan of Hull in 1906 is Appendix 5, on which many areas referred to can be found. Hessle Road – mentioned by several respondents – can be seen to the south west. A map of Holderness, countryside to the east of the city, is included as Appendix 6. On this, the town of Withernsea is on the coast, with the villages of South Frodingham (described by Mrs O) and Ottringham (described by Mr and Mrs T) three or four miles inland. Appendix 7 is a detailed map of the Hessle Road area, illustrating housing style and density. Appendix 8 shows Reform Street and Appendix 9, Day Street: these inner-city areas are described in detail by Mr and Mrs F. Appendix 10 illustrates the early development of one of Hull's first council estates, North Hull Estate, which is mentioned by several interviewees. All of these maps were copied from those at the Hull History Centre.

INTRODUCTION

History, according to June Purvis, was created as a professional discipline by ‘white, heterosexual, middle-class men’ who shaped the subject in their own image. ‘The field was defined as “man’s truth” so that women were “outside” of history, the unhistorical other.’¹ This is not to say that women had never studied history or that women’s history was not studied, just that women’s history had developed separately, and differently, from ‘History’ *per se*. A tradition of women’s history and feminist history arose in reaction to neglect by mainstream historians. It will be the first task of this introduction to sketch this tradition, for the idea of this thesis was conceived in that intellectual context.

From the mid 19th century there was some research into the lives of women. Initially, this was mostly about the lives of a range of women notable for particular achievements, either biographies or works intended to use famous women’s lives as examples of what could be achieved.² Another genre of women’s history, in the later 19th century, was written by feminist activists campaigning on a range of issues such as the franchise or the right to higher education. The aim was often to use history as an argument for reform. Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, for example, campaigner for women’s suffrage and member of the Rational Dress Society, wrote a history of women’s rights.³ Around this time, too, an interest in the lives of ‘ordinary’ people grew with the social surveys of the later 19th century. A strand of history developed that looked at the contribution that women had made to historically significant events.⁴

With the onset of the ‘second wave’ of the women’s movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the interest in women’s history grew alongside the women’s liberation movement.⁵ From this time, a division emerged between women’s history and feminist history. Women’s history was seen as history written about women by both women and men – feminist history as written by women feminists emphasising male oppression of women, sometimes about women and

¹ June Purvis, ‘From “women worthies” to poststructuralism? Debate and controversy in women’s history in Britain’ in June Purvis (ed.) *Women’s History: Britain, 1850-1945* (UCL Press, London, 1995) 1-22, p. 5. See also, Jane Lewis, ‘Women, Lost and Found: the Impact of Feminism on History’, in Dale Spender (ed.) *Men’s Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines* (Oxford: Pergamon Press Ltd, 1981) 55-77, p. 55.

² See, for example, Clara Lucas Balfour, *Working women of the last half century* (London: W. F. G. Cash, 1854); W. H. Davenport Adams, *Stories of the lives of notable women* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1882); E. F. Pollard, *Florence Nightingale, the wounded soldier’s friend*, (London: S. W. Partridge & Co.) n.d. For more examples and discussion of this see June Purvis, ‘From “women worthies” to poststructuralism?’

³ Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, *British Freewomen, their historical privileges* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1894) quoted in Purvis, ‘From “women worthies” to poststructuralism,’ p. 3.

⁴ This approach was included in, for example, Dorothy Thompson’s work on *The Early Chartists* (London: MacMillan, 1971).

⁵ See, for example, S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 years of women’s oppression and the fight against it* (London: Pluto Press, 1973).

sometimes about men and gender roles. By the mid-1970s, three main strands of feminism had emerged:

Liberal feminism is depicted as focusing on individual rights and on concepts of equality, justice and equal opportunities. Marxist feminism is seen as being concerned with women's oppression as it is tied to forms of capitalist exploitation of labour . . . Radical feminism is 'radical' because of its attempts to formulate new ways of theorising women's relationship to men. Men's control of women through various mechanisms is emphasized.⁶

'Patriarchy' was adopted as a model to explain the position of women. According to this, men dominated women through the whole of society, quite separately from the hierarchies of the class system. Patriarchy as an explanation of women's position has been widely, but not universally, accepted.⁷ Other concepts became influential, too, such as the notion that men and women, increasingly during the early 19th century, moved in 'separate spheres', thus restricting women's opportunities.⁸

By the late 1980s, the study of gender had expanded with an emphasis on masculinity as well as femininity and their social and cultural constructions (a trend illustrated by the start of the specialist *Gender and History* journal in 1989). June Purvis argued that this approach had its drawbacks for feminists in moving the focus away from women as a much neglected historical field towards gender and therefore men as well as women. Stressing the difference between women rather than what they have in common can lead to a fear of any generalization and therefore a reluctance to develop any theories about the position of women as a whole in society. As Purvis argued: '[B]y emphasizing the importance of studying men and masculinity, as well as women and femininity, we leave less space for the study of women; we also run the risk of "women" being subsumed, yet again, within a dominant male frame of reference.'⁹

Alongside this strand of socialist feminist and gender studies, a liberal strand of feminism grew in the 1980s.¹⁰ It was broadly in this genre that Elizabeth Roberts wrote her seminal study of working-class women.¹¹ Whilst acknowledging herself as a feminist, Roberts saw the

⁶ Mary Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three:" the development of feminist theory into the 1990s', *Women's History Review*, 14:3 (1995) 259-81, p. 260.

⁷ See S. Rowbotham, 'The trouble with patriarchy', 364-9, and S. Alexander and B. Taylor, 'In defence of patriarchy', 370-3, both in R. Samuel (ed.), *People's history and socialist theory* (London: Routledge, 1981).

⁸ Sue Morgan, 'Theorising Feminist History: a thirty-year retrospective', *Women's History Review*, 18:3 (2009) 381-407, p. 382. The concept was criticised by Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?'

⁹ Purvis, 'From "women worthies" to poststructuralism', p. 13.

¹⁰ See, for example, O. Banks, *Faces of feminism, a study of feminism as a social movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981); B. Caine, *Destined to be wives, the sisters of Beatrice Webb* (Oxford: OUP, 1986).

¹¹ Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

patriarchal model as unduly negative.¹² In addition to this strand of history, radical feminist writers (often with a background in other disciplines, such as sociology) began to consider history. From another perspective, black and lesbian feminists argued that their viewpoints had been ignored by mainstream feminism. Thus the women's movement in Britain became more fragmented in the 1980s, with different categories and sub-categories emerging.

In the 1980s, post-structuralism began to influence history in general and women's history in particular.¹³ A difficult concept to pin down, post-structuralism incorporates a range of ideas. Broadly, according to post-structuralists:

[N]o directly knowable reality exists . . . [and there is] no way of comprehending a reality which is independent of the language structures through which it is apprehended. All the social analyst can do, therefore, is to deconstruct the discursive practices through which the social world is portrayed.¹⁴

The very term 'woman', then, is no longer self-explanatory, but needs to be deconstructed. According to Joan Scott, we should move away from 'the things that have happened to women and men and how they have related to them', and concentrate on 'how subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed'.¹⁵ Denise Riley argued that, 'women' should be seen, 'as a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on'.¹⁶

However, some historians have perceived problems with the influence of post-structuralism on women's history. Maynard, for example, argued:

It is one thing to say that language mediates our understanding of the world and something altogether different to imply that nothing exists outside of language. The latter not only leads to complete solipsism, it is patently absurd. Not everything is sign or text, as any rape survivor, homeless person or starving child will testify.¹⁷

Maynard felt that the influence of post-structuralism was leading feminism to be 'theory about theory' rather than concentrating, as it should, 'on how gender operates to construct life chances differently for women and men'.¹⁸ Joan Hoff, too, was extremely critical of the influence of post-structuralism on women's history.¹⁹ According to Hoff:

¹² Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, pp. 2-3.

¹³ For example, Joan Scott, *Gender and the politics of history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); D. Riley, "Am I that name?" *Feminism and the category of "women" in history* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

¹⁴ Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three"', p. 269.

¹⁵ Scott, *Gender and the politics of history*, p. 6, quoted in Purvis, 'From "women worthies" to poststructuralism', p. 12.

¹⁶ Riley, "Am I that name?" p. 2, quoted in Purvis, *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three"', p. 272.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹⁹ Joan Hoff, 'Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis', *Women's History Review*, 3:2 (1994) 149-68.

[P]oststructuralism casts into doubt stable meanings and sees language as so slippery that it compromises historians' ability to identify facts and chronological narratives, and uses gender as a category of analysis to reduce the experiences of women, struggling to define themselves and better their lives in particular historical contexts, to mere subjective stories.²⁰

Hoff saw post-structuralism as an unhelpful concept to historians as, within post-structural methodology, 'historical agency – real people having an impact on real events – is both impossible and irrelevant. For poststructuralists, each historical moment is unique and does not necessarily relate to any other one.'²¹ Hoff saw the jargon of post-structuralism as elitist and lamented the distance from early women's history in the 1970s, which had 'gained the attention of historians in other fields with their straightforward language and compelling chronological narratives'.²²

Of course, not all historians agree with Hoff. Susan Kingsley Kent strongly disputed Hoff's view of post-structuralism as inherently misogynist, elitist or anti-historical.²³ Some interpretations of post-structuralism portray it as more positive for feminist historians. According to Sue Morgan,

Post-structuralists may be anti-representationalists (disavowing any direct correspondence between the world and representations of it which could be described as 'true') but they are not anti-realists . . . Feminist historians can reconstruct women's pasts with alacrity, therefore, while remembering that such re-presentations will always be incomplete and imperfect.²⁴

Indeed, she argued, the post-structuralists' emphasis on deconstructing the category of 'woman' can help in highlighting the experience of groups outside of the mainstream. This position derived from Judith Butler's and Joan Scott's argument that failing to examine the category of 'woman' critically enough could lead to the experience of certain groups of women being sidelined. Thus, the experience of women is assumed to be that of white, middle-class women, whilst poorer women or those from non-white ethnic groups can be ignored.²⁵

The position of feminist history by the late 1990s, then, was of a plethora of different strands, reflecting numerous different theories. This variety of views can be seen as positive.²⁶ To women outside the academic world, however, some of this theory could be impenetrable and off-putting. Feminism began to be widely seen as irrelevant as progress in the position of women

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 153.

²³ Susan Kingsley Kent, 'Mistrials and Diatribulations: a reply to Joan Hoff', *Women's History Review*, 5:1 (1996) 9-18.

²⁴ Morgan, 'Theorising Feminist History', p. 387.

²⁵ Introduction to Judith Butler and Joan Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London, Routledge, 1992) pp xiii – xvii, quoted in Morgan, 'Theorising Feminist History', p. 387.

²⁶ Morgan, 'Theorising Feminist History', p. 382.

led some to argue that the battles had been won. By the start of the new century, it had become a truism to assert that young women today are not feminists and not interested in feminism. Academic courses in Gender and Women's Studies began to close down.²⁷ However, the rise of the internet is giving feminism a new, very diverse, platform, with feminist blogs abounding and the movement enjoying something of a revival.²⁸ In many ways, feminism is strong today but still hard to define and some see equality for women as being as far away as ever. This variety is reflected in the position of women's history where a movement away from the more confrontational feminist history of the 1970s has been criticised as a failure to see how little has changed for women over time. This view was taken by Judith M. Bennett, who argued that women's wages in the 14th century were 71% of men's wages and have now, in the 21st century, risen only to 75%.²⁹

These developments form the intellectual and historiographical background to this thesis. I wished to take from post-structuralism an openness towards the category of 'woman', an unwillingness to assume generalisations apply. At the same time, I wished to avoid what Maynard referred to as 'theorising about theory'.³⁰ Affirming Maynard's assertion that: 'there is an increasing need to generate theory which is empirically grounded', I wished to study some aspects of the lives of a group of women which had not been studied very widely, as opposed to areas relating to the women's suffrage movement, or the widening opportunities available to middle- or upper-class women (in education, leisure and employment). Concerning the working class, it was generally the working lives of these women that had been considered in most depth. By contrast, domestic life had been neglected, and it seemed ideal in that I wanted to start from the view point of what had been important to the women I wished to study themselves.³¹ Wishing to examine the lives of working-class women in Hull, whose backgrounds I share, I was determined not to adopt unthinkingly an analysis devised for and by middle-class women. Taking the title, 'Women and domestic life', I intended to focus on 'women'. However, influenced by the field of Gender Studies, I did not want to preclude a consideration of men, as women clearly never operated in isolation. Therefore, I planned to focus on women as central to domestic life, whilst feeling free to comment on the role of men, insofar as they entered this domain (notably as husbands, fathers and sons).

²⁷ Angela McRobbie, 'Postfeminist Passions', *Guardian*, (25 March, 2008)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/mar/25/gender?INTCMP=SRCH>>

Gabriele Griffin, 'The 'Ins' and 'Outs' of Women's/Gender Studies: a response to reports of its demise in 2008', *Women's History Review*, 18:3 (2009) 485-96.

²⁸ Kira Cochrane, 'The third wave – at a computer near you', *Guardian*, (31st March 2006)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/mar/31/gender.uk?INTCMP=SRCH>>

²⁹ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: patriarchy and the challenge of feminism* (University of Pennsylvania, 2006) pp. 2; 5.

³⁰ Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three"', p. 276.

³¹ See discussion on 'woman-centred' history in Lewis, 'Women, Lost and Found', p. 60.

A major problem in looking at the domestic life of ordinary women is the shortage of appropriate sources. Oral history seemed the obvious answer to this problem since, unlike written sources, it allows selected groups to be targeted and specific questions to be asked of them.³² It can be argued that oral history is more useful in a project such as this than it would be in a study of a particular historical event.³³ An advantage of using oral history is that it can provide a new source of data pertaining to this field, thus making it possible to move away from the same few sources that tend to be cited by all historians in this area. In many ways, oral history seemed like a natural companion to women's history. As Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond commented: 'Each developed from a commitment to reveal and reverse, to challenge and to contest, what were perceived to be dominant discourses framed by gender and class.'³⁴ The aim of this study, then, was to consider the experience of women and domestic life, using Hull as a case study and a new collection of oral history interviews as a major source.

A range of views on women's domestic life were taken for my starting point. Young and Willmott, studying changes in the family, described a move away from a traditional, patriarchal family in which men were in paid employment and women in domestic life, towards a more equal partnership. They saw traditionally working-class communities as involving wider kin in family life, but the movement to the suburbs of separate, nuclear families as heralding a new closeness between husband and wife. In this model, smaller families enabled women to gain paid employment, leading to a more equal marriage.³⁵ A less optimistic view was offered by Ann Oakley, who saw the position of the housewife and mother in the 20th century as one of 'domestic servitude – labour exploitation'.³⁶ Oakley argued for the abolition of the role of housewife, along with the abolition of the institution of the family and an end to gender roles.³⁷ However, Elizabeth Roberts's oral history project in Lancashire led her to believe that working-class women in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries were highly regarded, and, far from being oppressed by men, held considerable power in their homes and communities. Carl Chinn went further than Roberts, suggesting that some working-class communities in Birmingham (between 1880 and 1939) could be described as 'hidden matriarchies'.³⁸ In Elizabeth Roberts's later study she

³² Robert Perks, *Oral History: Talking about the Past* (London: Historical Association, 1992) p. 5: '[F]or some topics, like personal and family relations, written sources based on individual experience are almost entirely absent.'

³³ Perks, *Oral History*, 'Repeated patterns of everyday life are often better remembered than single events.' p. 13.

³⁴ Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond, 'Women's History and Oral History: developments and debates', *Women's History Review*, 16:1 (2007) 19-39, p. 19.

³⁵ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family* (London: Penguin, 1973).

³⁶ Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London: Penguin, 1974) p. 91.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 222.

³⁸ Carl Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1988).

commented on ‘the ambiguity of progress’ in the minds of her working-class respondents and went on to speculate about negative changes in women’s ‘power, position and status’.³⁹ Martin Pugh, on the other hand, acknowledged advances in housework and improved housing conditions, but saw these as improving the status of women: ‘Many younger women, who had seen the near impossibility for their mothers of having a clean, attractive and comfortable home, in spite of their efforts, could now see the ideal being realised in part in their own homes . . . the greater reward increased their self-respect as managerial figures.’⁴⁰ The scope of my research, then, was to look at women and domestic life in Hull in the light of different historical interpretations. My decision to concentrate on oral history meant that my evidence-base varied in intensity according to the demographic of those interviewed. Thus, most material focuses on the period from the 1920s through to the 1960s. However, it would have been perverse to have refused to hear evidence concerning either earlier or later than this time frame so, where relevant, I include this.

It may be helpful to include here some background on Hull, where most respondents lived, in order to contextualise this study.⁴¹ Hull’s position, on the northern bank of the Humber estuary and surrounded by rural East Yorkshire, relatively distant and inaccessible from neighbouring cities, informed its identity and culture. Its isolation was what struck J. B. Priestley, who visited in the early 1930s, and viewed the city as: ‘by itself, somewhere in the remote east where England is nearly turning into Holland or Denmark’⁴². Hull became a city in 1897 and by 1911 was at the height of its prosperity. (A plan of Hull in 1906 is included as Appendix 5.) At this time, it was the third port in Britain (by the value of its trade) and the leading fishing port.⁴³ Imports of raw materials from Northern Europe had led to the establishment of various related industries – such as seed crushing, paint manufacture and flour milling. The city also served as an important commercial centre for the surrounding East Riding. The years leading up to the First World War saw a major redevelopment programme in the city, symbolised by a magnificent Guildhall, along with an improvement of Hull’s already extensive dock system. Municipal enterprises were begun in water, electricity, gas, tramways and telephones; its white municipal telephone boxes became an icon for the city. The demolition of housing resulting from the city centre improvements led to

³⁹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp. 21, 233.

⁴⁰ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain, 1914-1959* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1992) p. 221.

⁴¹ The main accounts of the recent history of Hull during this period are Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon, *A History of Hull* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1980; 2nd edition, 1989) and K. J. Allison (ed.) ‘Modern Hull’, *A History of the County of York East Riding: Volume 1: The City of Kingston upon Hull* (1969), 215-286 < <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=66776> > accessed: 19 June 2011.

⁴² J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (1934; 75th Anniversary edition, Ilkley: Great Northern Books, 2009) p. 300.

⁴³ David and Susan Neave, *Hull*, Pevsner Architectural Guide (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010) p. 20.

the building of a small number of early council houses.⁴⁴ Such enhancements demonstrated a new municipal ambition, which was partly prompted by intelligent philanthropy (especially exemplified by the Reckitt family's Garden Village of 1907-16). In many ways, then, Hull was progressing, though prosperity was enjoyed more by the city's relatively small middle class than its numerous unskilled and semi-skilled workers.⁴⁵ This period was the backdrop to the early years of many of my respondents – around half of whom were born before the end of the First World War (the rest in the years up to the 1930s).

The First World War and the years immediately afterwards were difficult for Hull, as elsewhere, especially since shipping was so disrupted by the war. Many fishermen and trawlers had been employed in minesweeping, causing the loss of both men and vessels. However, the interwar years saw a number of industries – such as marine engineering and ship-fitting – develop and flourish in Hull. Ship-building continued, although in decline. Hull suffered from the depression in the 1930s – local unemployment was mostly slightly above the national average at this time – but the fishing industry was expanding so some prospered. For those in work, standards of living rose between the wars.⁴⁶ During this time J. B. Priestley shrewdly observed that Hull had 'an air of prosperity'.⁴⁷ More and better schools were built, slums were cleared, new council estates were built and newly-built private houses, controlled by stricter byelaws, were of a higher standard. Facilities in the city were also enhanced. In a 1930s' job-creation scheme, Queen's Gardens replaced the original dock; a major, slum-destroying, city centre dual-carriageway, Ferensway, was developed; Ferens also gave a building and his name to an art gallery in 1927. Road improvements were a boon to the many cyclists encouraged by Hull's flat terrain: there were said to be more bicycles per thousand of the population in Hull at this time than in any other city.⁴⁸ Hull's University College was founded in 1927 and a large New Theatre opened in 1939. A number of institutions providing technical and vocational education developed, along with teacher-training provision.⁴⁹

The period from the start of the Second World War to the 1960s saw full employment and expanding opportunities in Hull. The city was one of the most heavily bombed in the country during the war: 94% of the housing stock was damaged, 1,200 people were killed and 3,000

⁴⁴ Allison, *VCH*, pp. 457-8.

⁴⁵ Keith Brooker, *The Hull Strikes of 1911* (Hull: East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1979) p. 2; Raymond Brown, *Waterfront Organisations in Hull, 1870-1900* (Hull: University of Hull, 1972) p. 10.

⁴⁶ Gillett and MacMahon, *A History of Hull*, p. 431; Neave and Neave, *Hull*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 300.

⁴⁸ Gillett and MacMahon, *A History of Hull*, p. 454.

⁴⁹ A history of education in Hull during this time is given in Allison, *VCH*, pp. 348-70; teacher training development is described in David Foster, *Unity out of Diversity: the origins and development of the University of Humberside* (London: Athlone Press, 1997) pp. 37, 39.

injured; many city-centre retail premises and factories were destroyed or needed repair.⁵⁰ Despite this wartime devastation, the economy may have benefited from the necessity of massive re-building afterwards. A development plan for Hull was produced in 1956 that involved building a number of industrial and residential areas around the city during the late 1950s and 1960s. Some of these houses were private but many more were council-owned, so that by the late 1970s, local authority homes comprised almost half of Hull's housing stock – increasingly in high-rise blocks, as elsewhere.⁵¹ Hull had a large number of level crossings which had caused long delays for road traffic, so the building of flyovers in their place was a significant improvement. City centre redevelopment of roads and retail buildings also took place in the 1950s and 1960s. New schools were built in the 1950s and early 1960s providing both grammar schools and vocational secondary education in art, commercial, technical and nautical schools and further education also expanded. Hull's University College became Hull University in 1954 and was an increasingly significant local employer. By the mid 1950s, Hull's reputation as a port declined as its facilities became dated and the port became increasingly plagued by trade union disputes.⁵² However, in an attempt to cater for modern usage, Queen Elizabeth Docks opened (in 1969) for container traffic, and Hull's importance as a ferry port also increased. Population increased steadily in the first three decades of the 20th century, from 278,000 in 1911, 287,000 in 1921 to 314,000 in 1931, reaching a peak of 321,000 in 1936. It fell to 299,000 in 1951, as bomb-damaged properties in the city centre caused population movement to adjoining East Yorkshire, rising to 303,000 in 1961 as other large estates were built within Hull's eastern and northern boundaries.⁵³ As can be seen in the table below, Hull's birth and death rates were almost always above the national average in the first half of the 20th century, as was its infant mortality rate. All of these can be seen as directly or indirectly reflecting the relative poverty of the city – though had municipal boundaries been extended to include the prosperous western suburbs the picture would not have seemed so stark.

⁵⁰ T. Geraghty, *A North-East Coast Town: Ordeal and Triumph. The Story of Kingston-upon-Hull in the 1939-1945 Great War* (Howden: Mr Pye Books, 1989) pp. 7, 78, 29, 31, 43, 45, 47, 49, 99.

⁵¹ Neave and Neave, *Hull*, p. 33.

⁵² Allison, *VCH*, pp. 279-86.

⁵³ Neave and Neave, *Hull*, p. 24; Allison, *VCH*, p. 215.

Table A: Birth, Death and Infant Mortality Rates in Hull and in England & Wales⁵⁴

	Birth rates – Hull	Birth rates – England & Wales	Death rates – Hull	Death rates – England & Wales	Infant Mortality rates – Hull	Infant Mortality rates – England & Wales
1911	28.5	24.3	16.6	14.6		
1921	25.8	22.4	13	12.1	95.6	83
1931	19.2	15.8	13.2	12.3	81	66
1941	17.1	13.9	19.1	13.5	75.79	60
1951	19	15.5	12.03	12.5	46	30

Overall, a study of the occupational structure of Hull between 1841 and 1948 found remarkably little change in male employment patterns.⁵⁵ That this was largely true of the first half of the 20th century can be seen in Table B (below), showing the proportions of workers in different fields according to the censuses of 1911, 1931 and 1951. Transport and communication employment was the most significant in the town, though its relative position fell from 29% to almost 22%. Dock workers, often unskilled or semi-skilled and employed only casually comprised the most numerous occupation in this category. Similarly, trades which depended on seasonal imports, such as seed crushing, suffered seasonal unemployment.⁵⁶ In both 1911 and 1951 the second most significant male occupational group was ‘metal manufacturers, machine makers and engineers’ including marine engineering and makers of specialist seed-crushing machinery. The American National Radiator Company drew on these skills when setting up in Hull in 1905; later, as Ideal Standard, it diversified into bathroom fittings.

⁵⁴ Birth/death rates per 1000 population; infant mortality rates per 1000 live births. National statistics up to 1936 are from B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) pp. 29, 37; from 1936 onwards, national statistics are from B. R. Mitchell and H. G. Jones, *Second Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971) pp. 21, 24. Hull data are from the City and County of Kingston-upon-Hull Medical Officer of Health Annual Reports, from 1911 to 1951.

⁵⁵ Joyce Bellamy, ‘Occupations in Kingston-upon-Hull, 1841-1948’, *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 4:1 (1952) 33-50, p. 44.

⁵⁶ Brooker, *Hull Strikes*, p. 4.

Table B: Percentage of male and female workers in Hull in various occupations according to census returns⁵⁷

	Males			Females		
	1911 Census	1931 Census	1951 Census	1911 Census	1931 Census	1951 Census
Fishermen	1.58	3.42	2.90	0	0	0
Agricultural workers	0.64	0.68	0.80	0.09	0.03	0.20
Mines & quarrying occupations	0.56	0.07	0.10	0.15	0.00	0.00
Workers in ceramics, glass, cement	0.57	0.14	0.20	0.02	0.01	0.00
Coal gas, etc., makers of, w'kers in chemicals	6.26	0.89	1.40	6.91	0.22	0.00
Metal manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	12.37	9.99	14.1	3.47	3.23	3.90
Textile workers	0.13	0.12	0.20	0.77	1.41	2.30
Leather workers, fur dressers	0.86	0.22	0.60	0.26	0.20	0.40
Makers of textile goods & articles of dress	2.21	1.11	0.50	15.20	6.16	3.50
Makers of foods, drinks, tobacco	6.03	2.01	2.50	9.37	3.35	3.00
Workers in wood, cane & cork	3.86	4.21	4.20	0.83	0.67	0.00
Makers of, workers in, paper; printers; bookbinders	1.13	1.05	0.90	2.90	3.28	2.60
Makers of products*	1.17	1.14	0.40	0.31	0.27	0.00
Workers in building	5.54	4.10	6.20	0.01	0.06	0.00
Painters & decorators	1.36	1.72	2.10	0.00	0.09	0.00
Administrators, directors, managers*	1.90	0.93	1.80	0.82	0.08	0.40
Transport & communication workers	29.44	27.37	21.90	0.45	1.22	1.80
Commercial, financial (exc. Clerical, inc. shopwk)	8.21	10.93	8.30	8.22	16.45	16.00
Professional & technical (excl. clerical)	1.44	1.83	3.40	6.60	6.71	6.70
Persons employed in defence services	0.09	0.12	2.50	0	0	0
Persons engaged in entertainment & sport	0.72	0.60	0.40	1.18	0.29	0
Persons engaged in personal services	2.52	2.81	2.50	39.12	35.51	23.10
Clerks, typists etc.	4.73	6.32	6.30	2.49	9.69	18.60
Warehousemen, storekeepers, packers	0.00	1.70	2.40	0	4.91	5.50
Stationary engine drivers, stokers etc.	0.87	1.22	1.70	0	0.03	0.00
Other undefined workers	0.49	1.72	0.90	0.40	1.07	2.80
Workers in unskilled occupations*	5.32	13.58	10.80	0.43	5.06	9.20
TOTAL:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

*not enumerated separately

A range of other concerns expanded Hull's industrial base, especially chemical-related industries in significant and iconic ways: Reckitts', famous for laundry products, and then pharmaceuticals (like 'Dettol' in the 1930s); Blundell's for paints and varnishes (whose raw

⁵⁷ Census of England and Wales: Occupation Tables for 1911, 1931 and 1951.

materials were imported from the Baltic); Rank's for flour-milling; the pre-1914 Saltend oil jetty which later hosted BP. Similarly, fishing was a key trade though the census showed fewer than 4% employed in it in these years (although this could be misleading as many were trawling the seas on census day).⁵⁸

Female employment in Hull changed far more than male, especially in the 20th century. Previously, women's jobs were concentrated in domestic service and dress manufacture. More than a third of working women were in some kind of personal service in 1911 and 1931, though the proportion was falling; by 1951, less than a quarter of women were so employed. Likewise, 'makers of textile goods and articles of dress' fell from 15% to 3% and 'makers of food, drink and tobacco' fell from 9% to 3%. Other opportunities for women arose in wholesale and retail trades of various kinds. Metal manufacture provided some work for women – notably at Metal Box. The production of surgical dressings (at Smith & Nephew), pharmaceuticals (at Reckitts) and sweets (at Needlers) also increased the diversity of female employment.⁵⁹ Unspecified unskilled women workers formed 9% of the workforce in 1951, having not figured at all in 1911. Similarly, jobs in stores and packing made up 5% of employed women by 1951 having been a negligible category in 1911. Professional women constituted only (a steady) 6% of the whole throughout this period. However, the proportion of clerks and typists soared from just over 2% in 1911, to almost 10% in 1931 and up to 18.6% in 1951.

In some ways, in spite of the vicissitudes of war and the economy, the period between the First World War and 1970 can be seen as a coherent whole when, overall, the fortunes of the people of Hull (and the country as a whole) were improving. However, from the time of the Second World War, a period of more universal prosperity was enjoyed, as full employment eased people's lives to a remarkable degree. The effortlessness with which people were able to move from job to job and between different industries struck me forcibly during interviewing. The results of this appear to have been a social mobility that we can only envy today. Between the Second World War and the 1960s, then, Hull provided extensive and various employment for its inhabitants. After then, however, Hull's fishing industry collapsed after the 'Cod Wars' with Iceland and the economy overall began to stagnate.⁶⁰ From this time, unemployment rose in Hull, as elsewhere.⁶¹ By the late 1970s, the growth in neo-liberalism, deregulation and a growing casualisation at work was leading to increasing social and economic inequality.⁶² Yet, the 1960s also hosted a range of social changes which endured through the subsequent decades, such as

⁵⁸ A point made by Bellamy, 'Occupations in Hull', pp. 38, 42.

⁵⁹ Bellamy, 'Occupations in Hull', p. 44.

⁶⁰ Gillett and MacMahon, *A History of Hull*, p. 460.

⁶¹ Neave and Neave, *Hull*, p. 35.

⁶² Leslie Hannah, 'Crisis and Turnaround? 1973-1993', in Paul Johnson (ed.) *20th-century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (London: Longman, 1994) 340-55, pp. 340, 348.

divorce reform, the availability of the contraceptive pill, legalized abortion, the legalization of homosexual acts, equal pay legislation and the women's liberation movement.⁶³ Collectively, they signalled a more permissive, more 'modern' society. In short, both economically and socially, the 1960s were a turning point. Both economic and social changes around 1970, then, point to this being a convenient point at which to stop as, for various reasons locally and nationally, it feels like the natural end of an era.

A brief comment should also be made on my use of the term 'working-class'. Most of my interviewees could be described unequivocally as 'working-class'. However, in some cases, respondents might be precluded according to stricter definitions since, occasionally, they bought their own houses, ran their own small businesses or even employed others. For these reasons, I initially planned to avoid the phrase altogether, considering it too ill-defined and contentious to be of much use. However, in the end, it was simply too useful to neglect, conveying as it does a range of economic, social and cultural assumptions quickly. I am aware that strict definitions of social categories have been attempted by researchers.⁶⁴ However, 'class' is acknowledged to be hard to pin down and is often used without strict definitions in place.⁶⁵ I therefore wish to clarify that I use the term 'working-class' in its broadest sense, to imply people who work for a living, in mostly manual and low-paid work, and their families. It seems to me that little harm can be done by taking what could be considered a sweeping approach; brief biographies of my respondents are given in Appendix 1, so that their social and economic circumstances can be assessed by the reader.

'Domestic life' is too broad an area to consider comprehensively within a study like this. So, issues within the themes were discussed as they were prompted by the findings of my interviews. The thesis is arranged into five chapters. The first outlines the background to the oral history project which forms the main evidence upon which it is based. It discusses the problems associated with oral history and its advantages, describes how the project was approached and how respondents were found. An assessment of the broad 'representativeness' of respondents is made, and the importance of this considered. The practicalities of the interviews are described (including their location, recording equipment used, my approach to transcription and details of the questionnaire on which interviews were based). A range of ethical issues arising from oral history in general, and this project in particular, are discussed, along with copyright implications. Some comment on how the oral history evidence was analysed and its reliability is then made.

⁶³ Pat Thane, 'Women since 1945', in Johnson, *20th-century Britain*, 392-410, pp. 392; 404-7.

⁶⁴ See, for example, David Rose and Eric Harrison (eds) *Social Class in Europe: An Introduction to the European Socio-economic Classification* (London: Routledge Taylor Francis Group, 2010).

⁶⁵ See, for instance, David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998) p. 165.

Chapter 2 considers housework, including cleaning, washing, cooking, shopping, gardening and household maintenance. Issues addressed include: the state of housing and how this affected housework; what was involved in completing housework (detailing cleaning, laundry and cooking) and how far improvements in technology changed the experience; how the skills involved were learned; how far certain tasks were split within families; and the experience of paid domestic work. In addition, the notion of the post-war period as seeing a retreat into domesticity is considered, looking at how far this was the case in Hull. It is argued that improved housing in the period up to World War II clearly eased the drudgery of housework, as did the increased use of electricity. Innovations in the technology of housework appeared to have made most impact in the area of laundry, with the advent of twin tubs, and automatic washing machines in the 1950s and 1960s. The notion that housework was ‘women’s work’ was largely supported by the evidence, with no discernible pattern suggesting that a more equal share of housework was more prevalent among the later-born respondents. There was an impression that higher status (‘upper’) working-class men were least likely to do housework. There was little to support the notion that women jealously guarded their domestic expertise. Also, there was little to suggest that women generally disliked housework; in fact, domestic work was a respected occupation and the opportunity to learn domestic skills was valued. Equally, there was little evidence of any obsession with domesticity, and Hull women appear to have been adept at seizing opportunities in other areas of life.

In the light of the high and growing popularity of marriage during the first half of the twentieth century, Chapter 3 examines how successful marriage was, how working-class marriages operated and how much they changed. Beginning with a brief summary of historical interpretations of marriage and the family, the notion of more distant, purely practical relationships between partners evolving into ‘companionate’ marriage from the mid-20th century is outlined. Young’s and Willmott’s influential study, discussing changes in the family in terms of a move away from a patriarchy involving a distant but intimidating father, and a home-bound mother and children, towards a ‘symmetrical family’ is addressed. This model saw improvements in housing, shorter working hours, higher wages, smaller families and a decline in the practice of sharing homes as all contributing to a more home-centred, equal marriage partnership. According to this view, the break-up of traditional working-class communities led to a lessening involvement of a wider kin and so to a growing closeness between husband and wife. An assessment of the validity of this model is made. The classic picture of working-class marriage is outlined, as a domestic arrangement rather than a romance, with each partner holding fixed and separate roles. The extent to which this operated in Hull at this time is then considered. The conclusion is that, broadly, it did not. Most interviewees saw their own marriages, and those of their parents, as

happy, with no exploitation apparent. Husbands and wives, however, did fulfil different roles. Women were mostly in charge of the home and made most domestic decisions; there was no evidence that this was resented by men. In most households, finances were controlled by women rather than men, or sometimes with each partner taking charge of different areas. Decisions affecting the whole family were often made jointly and household crises tended to be faced jointly, as a couple. Overall, the evidence in Hull most closely supported the model of companionate marriage. This appeared to change little over the period studied, so that the oldest couples interviewed (married in the first quarter of the 20th century) appeared to have marriages remarkably similar to the youngest respondents (marrying in the 1960s).

In Chapter 4, I consider how the lives of children, mothers and fathers in Hull were affected by a range of developments in the first three-quarters of the 20th century (such as changes in birth and death rates, better healthcare and changing views on childhood, childbirth and childcare). Beginning with some comments on pregnancy, I examine approaches to childcare, the increasing involvement of professionals in the field, the involvement of fathers and the relationship between parents and grown-up children. Issues addressed within these themes included differences in approach to pregnancy, especially the privacy in which it was regarded throughout the period of this study. The practice of ‘churching’ is discussed and its use in marking the end of the time of seclusion that later pregnancy and childbirth entailed. A summary of state involvement in the lives of children over this period is given and an outline of the changing advice of childcare experts. Hull’s Medical Officer of Health’s Annual Reports were used to consider the city’s attempts to improve the circumstances of mothers and babies and to disseminate what was seen as good practice. Then, the reaction of Hull mothers to official help and advice is assessed, concluding that mothers appeared to make use of facilities offered where they proved useful and rejecting others. Approaches to parenting and the experience of childhood as shown by the Hull oral history data are described, including some comment on the poverty that was widely experienced.

The conclusion is drawn that the prime importance of mothers (rather than fathers, or other family members) in bringing children up was widely agreed. However, the extensive involvement of fathers, amongst their own generation and that of their parents, came across in many interviews. Across the whole period, fathers were often more involved with children’s leisure than mothers were, especially older children. Insofar as fathers were less involved than mothers, this was generally felt to have been owing to employment commitments, and was accepted as part of the system of specialisation within families. However, in this sample at least, this arrangement rarely meant that women were involved solely with domestic tasks whilst men earned the money. Just as men were generally expected to fit aspects of childcare and housework

around employment where practical, women were often expected to fit some paid work (formal or informal) around *their* responsibilities. This is in contrast with the usual model presented, of distant fathers becoming more involved with their children in the years after the Second World War.⁶⁶ In studying the relationships between adult children and their parents, these interviews reveal a close involvement, with decisions on choice of career and where to live often influenced by parents. A strong sense of obligation towards parents was certainly apparent here. However, both Madeline Kerr and Young and Willmott commented on the closeness of mothers to their adult children, to the point where this appeared to come between husbands and wives. In Hull, however, I found a greater sense of husband and wife standing together against the demands of both sets of their parents.

Women's domestic life was not solely enacted in the private sphere of the home, but also within the locality, as part of the wider community. Chapter 5 considers how community life operated in Hull, emphasising especially the role of women. To begin with, the idea of community is discussed, looking at the views of a number of historians and especially at the notion of the classic 'working-class community'. The evidence from Hull is considered, looking at neighbours 'popping in' to one another's houses, street life, including that of children, neighbourhood helping, gossip, and the disadvantages of community life. A number of issues related to this topic are then discussed, such as how different types of housing affected life, communities on council estates, and changes that occurred throughout this period. A consideration of how far the evidence from Hull supports various interpretations of working-class community life then follows. Surprisingly few interviewees felt that their families had 'popped in' to neighbours frequently, with the practice apparently widely considered intrusive. Socialising on the street, amongst adults as well as children, however, was remembered as important. The notion that neighbours helped one another in times of trouble was confirmed by virtually all respondents. Customs arose to support others in times of grief or difficulty. Overall, community life was seen as very important, especially for poorer people and those living in older, city-centre streets or off Hessle Road. Respondents whose families moved onto the new council estates often appreciated the better housing conditions, but missed the old community.

Lastly, how far Hull appeared to fit various historians' interpretations of working-class community was addressed. The traditional working-class community closely reflected Hull's experience in many ways. My oral evidence supported the view that community life encompassed an attachment to a certain area, neighbours frequently knowing a great deal about

⁶⁶ This is a model developed by M. Young and P. Willmott, (*The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) and widely accepted still (for example, by Laura King, "I enjoyed their company as kiddies": Emotional relationships between fathers and children, c. 1918 – 1960', paper presented to the Historical Perspectives on the Family Conference, Sheffield University, 23rd April, 2010.

one another's business and helping one another in times of need. It also involved children playing together on the street and often adults socialising in the public areas. It did not necessarily involve neighbours visiting one another's homes, or developing their relationships beyond the superficial into friendships. Community was based on particular geographical areas, often quite small, although it cannot be sharply defined because it sometimes included people from outside the area. Carl Chinn's notion of a matriarchy amongst Birmingham's poor is considered, but no evidence was found to support this interpretation in Hull. Critics of the notion of the 'traditional working-class community' are addressed and some of their objections to the idea discussed. In conclusion, the notion of the 'traditional working-class community' was defended as showing the ability of working-class people to cope with poor housing, poverty and overcrowding in ways that can only be regarded as admirable. Strategies were developed to make living uncomfortably closely with neighbours bearable and reciprocal arrangements grew to provide help when needed.

To summarise my findings, throughout this period women were chiefly involved in domestic work and men in paid employment – thus family life superficially fitted the stereotype of a traditional working-class family. However, on closer inspection, the situation appeared much more nuanced. Whilst there was a consensus amongst my oral history respondents that mothers 'carried the burden' in both childcare and housework, the roles of husband and father were not insignificant. In contemporary discourse, fathers' involvement with childcare and housework can often be seen as a reflection of their reasonableness; uninvolved fathers are seen as poor fathers. Throughout this period, however, it was not so simple. Men's role was seen as primarily providing for the family and it was accepted that women did most of the childcare and housework. However, men generally did help in these tasks where they could fit it around their employment commitments, just as women often contributed financially where this could be fitted around childcare. Hull men appeared as happy to assist with this 'women's work' as they were to see their wives earning; in contrast to the experience in some parts of the country, their masculinity appeared threatened by neither. This system of specialisation was widely accepted throughout this period by both men and women and neither appeared to feel exploited by it. Housework *was* extremely demanding, especially where families were large, but most working-class men, too, worked long hours in jobs that often involved hard physical labour. The Hull oral history evidence suggests that it was usual for husbands and wives to pull together, within their specialisms, and there was little evidence of inherent conflict within marriages. The system in Hull then could fairly be described as neither patriarchy nor matriarchy. In short, the companionate marriage that is often posited for the 1950s onwards was discernible throughout this period in Hull.

Insofar as my finding did not accord with the generally accepted model, why is this so? It is possible that the differences were regional. Trevor Lummis, studying East Anglian fishermen between 1890 and 1914 also found little to support, 'the common stereotype of the drunken, brutal working-class father'. He concluded: 'working-class marriage was in fact more generally an affectionate partnership of caring partners jointly concerned with preserving the family'.⁶⁷ Perhaps, then, areas where fishing was prevalent fostered a different approach to marriage, which became accepted in that area. Thus, where men had to work away from home for long periods, it became acceptable for women to assume more control at home, and a more equal system of partnership arose earlier. This tentative suggestion seems consistent with the findings of Paul Thompson's study of Shetland fishermen.⁶⁸ Whilst emphasising the tremendous variations in family life between fishing communities in different parts of Britain (and, indeed, in different parts of the world) Thompson argued that fishermen learned 'self-sufficiency, including often basic domestic skills' while women were left with all the responsibilities of running a home alone much of the time. Therefore, 'paradoxically, while being pulled into separate worlds, both husband and wife have also acquired overlapping skills, a shared competence for domestic tasks and responsibilities, which make a married partnership a real possibility'.⁶⁹

In summary, then, women were central to domestic life in Hull during these years, but men were also very much involved. In the decision making of married life, in bringing up children, in housework and in the life of the neighbourhood, men tended to contribute where they could. Similarly, women saw it as their role to contribute financially whenever the possibility arose. Rather than firm conclusions, a range of questions arise from these findings. For example, how far did Hull differ from the mainstream? If it did: why? Was the influence of workers from a predominant industry important? If more companionate marriages had arisen from a change in working-class culture, when did this change occur? To answer these questions would be outside the scope of this study: further research is clearly needed.

⁶⁷ Trevor Lummis, 'The historical dimension of fatherhood: a case study 1890-1914', in L. McKee and M. O'Brien (eds) *The Father Figure* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982) 43-56, pp. 43, 44.

⁶⁸ Paul Thompson, 'Women in the Fishing: Power between the Sexes', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 27:1 (1985) 3-32, p. 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 15.

CHAPTER 1

Oral History Project

This chapter summarises the oral history project on which my thesis is based and its background. An outline is sketched of the development of oral history, the different approaches within the discipline and its theoretical basis. A discussion of the problems associated with oral history and also its advantages follows. I explain my approach in this project, going onto a description of the practical details, how respondents were found, how interviews were conducted and, lastly, how the resulting material was analysed.

It is worth noting that the initial research for this thesis, and therefore the development of the oral history project and all the interviewing, took place in the mid 1990s. The work was then shelved for a number of years owing to personal circumstances. The research was therefore sited in the methodological and theoretical background of 1990s' oral history, when a less qualitative approach was more common. Not only my methodology, but also my interview questions would have been different had I begun this research more recently. For instance, recent developments in the history of sexuality, notably Kate Fisher's oral history on birth control, would have been reflected in my questionnaire design.

The main impetus for my oral history research was the lack of available evidence for my research into domestic life in Hull so my aim at the start of this project was to create a source that could be drawn on for such a study. However, it was also decided to broaden the questionnaire, so that the material would be more generally useful in studying the social and cultural history of 20th-century Hull. It may be useful, at this point, to summarise the background to the use of oral history before considering my own approach.¹ For centuries, historians used oral history in the sense of gaining information about certain events from eye-witnesses many years afterwards. This became regarded as unreliable and therefore unfashionable in England from the late 18th century until the middle of the 20th century when local historians began to use the method again. During the 1930s' depression in the USA, the work-creation programme New Deal included a Federal Writers' Project which collected the oral history of ordinary Americans. In a different approach in the late 1940s, Allan Nevins of Columbia University began recording the memories of people who had been involved with significant historical events or who had been close to

¹ For a full account of the history of oral history, see Graham Smith, 'The making of oral history' (2008) in the 'Making History' section of the Institute of Historical Research website <www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html> accessed 10 September 2010. See also the introduction of Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010). This section was informed by both.

historically important figures. Both of these projects were immensely influential in the development of oral history around the world and these very different approaches have both become popular.

In Britain, oral history began to be used particularly for the recording of rural folklore and rural life, a trend which then spread to the collection of information from other people whose lives were not well-documented, in areas such as labour history and women's history. Two early examples were produced by freelance writers rather than professional historians. George Ewart Evans was famous for detailing the life of rural Suffolk in *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* (1956). Similarly, Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* (1969) described East Anglian rural life. Raphael Samuel was a key figure in the extension of this method beyond rural labour forces, and Elizabeth Roberts in the field of women's and family history.² This tradition developed in the 1990s with regard to black and ethnic minority groups and gay, lesbian and transgender oral history. Community oral history has also been important, sometimes resulting in museum exhibitions, sometimes popularised by television and radio broadcasts. In the 1980s, the publicly funded job-creation scheme Community Programme was widely used in England to create local oral history projects in the tradition of the American New Deal.

Two landmarks in the 1970s were the formation of the Oral History Society in Britain in 1973, supporting both community and academic historians, and the publication of Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* in 1977. Both were important in establishing the respectability of oral history. However, for many years (right up to the 1980s) it remained a minority interest among academic historians as many in the profession doubted its reliability. Its position on the sidelines led to its drawing upon other disciplines, such as sociology and psychology for inspiration and social survey techniques were adapted. In an attempt to convince sceptical colleagues, oral history's methodology grew more rigorous, with facts being checked against other sources and interviews scrutinized for internal consistency. Earlier works, such as Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* tended to be more literary renditions of oral history. For example, Blythe narrated the reminiscences of a farm worker about conflict with farmers thus:

These employers were famous for their meanness. They took all they could from the men and boys who worked their land. They bought their life's strength for as little as they could. They wore us out without a thought because, with the big families, there was a continuous supply of labour.³

² See the History Workshop series edited by Raphael Samuel: *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977). *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981). Elizabeth Roberts's main works comprise: Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families, An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

³ R. Blythe, *Arkenfeld*, (1969; London: Penguin Classics edition, 2005) p. 37. Quoted in Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* pp. 13-14.

In this way, the prose reads elegantly, without hesitations or repetitions, but we cannot be sure exactly what had been said. Increasingly, transcribing interviews word-for-word became the norm, including dialect, mistakes and repetitions; thus, meaning was thought to be conveyed more accurately. Emphasis was placed on the importance of oral history for recovering facts that were not available from other sources. Important contributions to this genre include oral history led by Paul Thompson at Essex University and Elizabeth Roberts's extensive oral history of women in Lancashire.⁴

Over time, as oral history began to be more established, its theoretical base expanded. The notion arose that striving for neutrality was futile, and that the subjectivity that is bound to occur in this context should be welcomed.⁵ Crucial to this process was the publication of Luisa Passerini's paper focusing on the inconsistencies in the responses of Italian workers living under Fascism.⁶ Passerini explained her findings by emphasising the subjectivity of oral sources, that interviewees' memories were influenced by their own political beliefs and personal experiences. In the same year another influential paper, by Alessandro Portelli was published which also emphasised the importance of subjectivity.⁷ In addition, Portelli highlighted the importance of orality and narrative form. From the acceptance of subjectivity there grew the concept of 'intersubjectivity' – the idea that the subjectivities of both interviewer and interviewee work together to contribute to the final product. The notion of giving voice to those who tended not to feature in mainstream history began to be seen as problematic, too, since the interviewing of the disadvantaged highlighted the imbalance of power between researcher and respondent.⁸ This was particularly emphasised in the 1980s by the radical Popular Memory Group.⁹ Partly to counter this problem, Michael Frisch developed the concept of 'shared authority' in the 1990s.¹⁰ Gradually, the role of the respondent as joint contributor with the interviewer has become accepted, along with the acknowledgement that the researcher (in choosing the questions to ask

⁴ From 1970 to 1973 Thompson undertook a national oral history project, 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918.' Publications from this included: Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Routledge, 1975) Some of this data is now available online: <www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians>. Elizabeth Roberts's work is cited above.

⁵ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 24.

⁶ Luisa Passerini, 'Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8:1 (1979) 82-108.

⁷ Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', reprinted in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds) *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2006) 32-42.

⁸ Tracy E. K'Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers, "'If I See Some of This in Writing I'm Going to Shoot You.'" Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian', *Oral History Review*, 34:1 (2007) 77-93, pp. 83, 84.

⁹ Based at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. See Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,' in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 43-53, p. 43.

¹⁰ K'Meyers and Crothers, 'If I See Some of this in Writing', p. 84.

and how to ask them) inevitably influences the outcome. It is common, now, for researchers to describe themselves and their approach in order to acknowledge their input.

Increasingly, in the 2000s, there was a focus on oral history methodology, rather than on its use for the retrieval of facts.¹¹ The importance of the orality of oral history – ‘the shape and rhythm’ of speech – was highlighted. The narrative nature of oral history was also increasingly acknowledged, along with the recognition that the respondent is choosing to present his or her story in a certain way, often dependent on the cultural traditions with which he or she is familiar. In addition, each oral history interview must also be seen as a performance, with the way in which respondents speak – their gestures and accent – being significant. The importance of memory in oral history, too, is crucial, the significance of what is remembered and what is forgotten.¹² Alongside this, the mutability of oral history, ‘its resistance to being pinned down’ makes it distinctive.¹³ Another day, another interviewer, could produce a very different result. The growing emphasis on subjectivity has led to a revived appreciation of the more literary earlier oral histories, such as Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield*.¹⁴ In this tradition, then, Lynn Abrams, increasingly critical of what she terms ‘recovery history’, questioned historians’ instinct to ask respondents to pinpoint the dates of various events, and suggested we ‘celebrate memory’s inconsistencies’.¹⁵ She recommended we: ‘move away from the approach that sees oral history merely as a means of answering our pre-prepared research questions’.¹⁶ In spite of this, ‘recovery’ oral history is still widely practised. Elizabeth Roberts, from a position of immense experience in the field, defended this approach, drawing attention to oral history’s essential similarity to other sources which are rarely treated with the same hesitancy. She argued:

[A]ll history contains bias, there are omissions, distortions and ambiguities in all primary historical sources, whether they are written or oral. There is also bias in the historian, because he or she has to select material and construct arguments, processes which are inevitably affected by her own experiences and preconceptions as well as by conscious choice.¹⁷

My own approach, outlined below, developed primarily from a study of the oral history work of Paul Thompson and Elizabeth Roberts.¹⁸ Various oral history ‘manuals’ were useful,

¹¹ Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond, ‘Women’s History and Oral History: developments and debate’, *Women’s History Review*, 16:1 (2007) 19-39, p. 26.

¹² Abrams, *Oral History*, pp. 19-23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Lynn Abrams, ‘Revisiting Akenfield: Forty Years of an Iconic Text’, *Oral History*, 37:1 (2009) 33-42.

¹⁵ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 29, 31.

¹⁶ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 29.

¹⁷ Roberts, *Women and Families* (1995) p. 3. A similar point was made by Paul Thompson *Voice of the Past* (Oxford University Press, 1978; Second edition 1988) pp. 118-128; also by Portelli, ‘What makes history different’ (1979) p. 37.

¹⁸ See Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*; also Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman’s Place* and *Women and Families*.

most notably, Trevor Lummis's.¹⁹ I also discussed my approach with experienced local oral historians (contacted through the Oral History Society) and undertook training in oral history methods, both in the mid-1990s.²⁰ Considering the type of research I was contemplating, Abrams's suggestion that we should 'privilege the narrators and their stories over the historian's interpretation' would have seemed unhelpful.²¹ In practice it is easier to see how this would work in the context of 'event history' where participants may have their stories ready to tell, having relived the events in their minds and thought them through over years. In the context of discovering details of day-to-day life, it is hard to imagine interviewees wishing to be 'privileged' in this sense. Certainly, ordinary people being questioned about domestic routines are unlikely to have a composed narrative ready to recite with confidence. In any case, whilst the presence of living witnesses who know things that historians wish to know continues, it is hard to see the use of oral history as a way of 'answering pre-prepared research questions' coming to an end. In practice, over the last few decades much oral history has been in the tradition of information gathering.²² American oral historian, Susan H. Armitage has denounced as 'academic self-absorption' the emphasis on 'the interviewing interaction and its difficulties' over 'what the narrator actually says'.²³ Even Lynn Abrams accepts:

Oral history today is a 'broad church' encompassing a huge diversity of practitioners . . . What all oral historians share is a commitment to best practice in conducting interviews, transcribing narratives and engaging with respondents . . . While some of the more arcane or philosophical interpretive trends might not engage attention across the entire spectrum of practitioners, there is a sense that both fact finders and theory baggers may be happily accommodated within the oral history community.²⁴

Despite the growing acceptance and increasing theoretical basis of oral history, some historians continue to be sceptical and so it still seems necessary to address its possible drawbacks head-on.²⁵ To some historians, these problems were so overwhelming as to undermine its value. A. J. P. Taylor, for example, commented: 'In this matter I am an almost total sceptic . . . Old men

¹⁹ Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: the authenticity of oral evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

²⁰ 'Getting it Taped: Fieldwork in Folklore and Oral History,' 20 May 1995, organised by the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield.

²¹ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 29, 30.

²² A point made by Bornat and Diamond, 'Women's History and Oral History', p. 31 and also Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 15. Both Elizabeth Roberts major works, cited above, fall into this category. (Also P. Thompson, T. Wailey and T. Lummis, *Living the Fishing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) and Lynn Abrams, *The Orphan Country: Children of Scotland's Broken Homes, 1845 to the Present Day* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1998).

²³ Susan H. Armitage and Sherna Berger Gluck, 'Reflections on Women's Oral History: an exchange', in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 73-82, p. 74.

²⁴ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 8-9.

²⁵ Many problems traditionally associated with oral history – such as the representativeness of interviewees, the reliability of memory and a supposed tendency to nostalgia – are still being cited. For instance, R. Kenneth Kirby, 'Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History', *Oral History Review*, 35:1 (2008) 22-38, p. 24.

drooling about their youth - No.²⁶ Such voices cannot be dismissed lightly and the value and drawbacks of oral history testimony in any particular project need to be carefully assessed. The main problems can be broadly summarised as follows. Firstly, people describing events long past may not remember very accurately. It is common, for example, for respondents who lived through both wars to mingle details from both in one account of wartime.²⁷ Secondly, people describing events in which they figured prominently may slant their accounts, even subconsciously, to portray themselves in a better light. In addition, painful memories may be suppressed and significant details that are considered, for various reasons, to be private or embarrassing, may be omitted. Possibly, too, elderly people, who could be lonely and in poor health, may look back on their earlier days with undue fondness, remembering them as a golden time, and describing events in this light. Lastly, people's values and attitudes change over time, gradually and imperceptibly, so that their old views can be completely forgotten. Some research on approaches to child rearing has indicated that it is practicalities that are remembered most clearly, and previous attitudes that are most effectively forgotten.²⁸

Some attempt must be made, then, to answer these criticisms. Problems associated with inaccurate or self-image driven memories are most frequently experienced in projects that involve interviewing subjects involved with a particular event. Experienced oral historians agree that it is in remembering details of everyday life, a regular pattern continuing in a similar way for years on end, that the memories of old people are most effective.²⁹ Indeed, some research indicated that the long-term memories of elderly people can be remarkably accurate, especially in remembering details that are personally interesting to them.³⁰ It would seem, therefore, that a project designed to study everyday life, looking at details of family and domestic life, childhood, employment and personal relationships, would have every chance of achieving reasonably accurate accounts. The possibility that respondents will see their youth as a happy time seems unlikely to lessen the accuracy of descriptions of day-to-day living. Concerning the final drawback (changing perceptions) it is true that respondents' descriptions of attitudes held many years ago should be treated with caution, but since the reported attitudes can be checked against detailed accounts of respondents' everyday actions, this should not necessarily be a major problem. For instance, retired men who may have come to believe that they *should* share the housework may find it hard to think themselves back to their early married lives when they might have felt differently. Questioning their attitudes to housework at the time, then, might be fruitless. On the other hand, they would be more likely to remember what they actually did around the house at different points

²⁶ Quoted in Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 70.

²⁷ Robert Perks, *Oral History: talking about the past* (London: Historical Association, 1992) p. 13.

²⁸ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 112.

²⁹ Perks, *Oral History*, p. 13; Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p. 136.

³⁰ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, pp. 113-116; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90.

in their lives and what they did with their children at different ages. It is generally acknowledged that narrators usually tell us what they believe to be a true reflection of their past and are unlikely to invent stories.³¹ Within this context, the, factual details become less important than the meaning of oral testimony. Thus, the assertion that a father *never* helped around the house does not become invalid because it is contradicted by one or two instances where he did. The interviewee's belief that he never generally helped remains useful.

Let us begin, then, with the practicalities of this project. I found respondents through personal contacts, and contacts of contacts, and interviewed anyone who would volunteer, the method used by Carl Chinn, and one widely advocated elsewhere.³² One contact in a nursing home led me to several volunteers. I interviewed fifty people who grew up in the Hull area, keeping going until I achieved as broad a cross-section of men and women from different occupations, income levels and districts as was practicable. In this way, I hoped to be able to discern trends that might be peculiar to different groups. Whilst interviewing people who were as old as possible (who would therefore be able to remember as far back as possible) I also interviewed some younger people. This was an attempt to pinpoint possible changes over time (so some, for example, would remember no earlier than the 1920s, some no earlier than the 1930s and others would have memories only from the 1940s onwards). Of course, only rough attempts at sampling could be made, the group could not be fully representative. It is not unlikely that people agreeing to be interviewed may be disproportionately self-confident or successful and that those surviving into very old age may be healthier and therefore slightly wealthier than average. It has been argued, also, that too much emphasis can be placed on the concept of 'representativeness' when studying women's history.³³ Interesting and illuminating material can emerge from interviewing people who are not, on the face of it 'representative'. That our narrators are likely to be, by definition, 'untypical' should always be borne in mind. In interviewing women, in particular, it is the 'survivors' – metaphorically as well as literally – who are interviewed. As Sherna Berger Gluck commented, narrators are:

the women whose families 'allow' them to speak, the women who are still alive. Those that have been battered, killed, silenced, or who have gone insane aren't around to tell us their stories. At a less dramatic level, the ones who don't volunteer, that is, agree to be interviewed, might also be among those whose coping skills didn't work.³⁴

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that each contribution is informative as an individual account, and is therefore useful in itself. As with any other source, oral history interviews must

³¹ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90.

³² Carl Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

³³ See Susan Geiger, 'What's So Feminist About Women's Oral History?' *Journal of Women's History*, 2:1 (1990) 169-82, pp. 171-173.

³⁴ Gluck, 'Reflections on Women's Oral History', p. 79.

be assessed on their own merits. Moreover, conclusions on their typicality can be made by comparisons with other interviews and with other contemporary sources.

In the case of this research, so much information was collected as to make meaningful comparison and analysis impossible within the scope of this study. Therefore, thirty interviews were selected on which to focus, twenty-two of which were with women. Some male perspective, in order to highlight differences, was required, so eight men were also included. As far as possible, given the reservations stated, respondents were chosen to be roughly 'representative', in background, of Hull at the time. Summaries of the life histories of respondents are attached as Appendix 1 in order to allow the reader to appreciate how far this might have been the case.

Some comment should be made about the differences apparent in interviewing women and men. Caroline Daley found, from her oral history work in New Zealand, that men's and women's perspectives were quite distinct even apart from their different experiences:

Female and male narrators construct themselves and their histories within a dominant gendered ideology . . . The women had stories to tell about home and family, religion and community, and presented themselves as home-loving, law-abiding, religious and tolerant citizens. The men, who were much more likely to talk in long bursts, saw themselves as the natural storytellers of the community, and tended to place themselves as the heroes of the tale. They were more forthcoming when asked about crime and disorder, alcohol and fighting, rather than chores around the house or familial relationships. Their past was full of adventure and bravado.³⁵

At first, I found it difficult to distinguish this gendered ideology from the obviously gendered differences in the patterns of my respondents' lives. Thus, women generally spent more time at home and men more time at work, so one would expect their stories to be situated in these areas. In any case, initially, I found little to support Daley's thesis in my interviews. Possibly a sample of eight men and twenty-two women was too small to draw many conclusions about patterns in female and male narrative. Perhaps Daley's focus on brothers and sisters was more likely to highlight such differences, since their contrasting perspectives were made clearer by the fact that they were describing the same parents and the same childhood incidents, but in very different ways. However, I did find the difference between her interviewees' perspectives and mine interesting. I heard no tales of masculine bravado at all; the nearest thing to this was Mr V's amused account of his boyhood disappointment that the war ended before he could join up, after enviously watching slightly older boys with 'a fancy uniform . . . and I want one! . . . And he's got a gun!'³⁶ Far from revelling in being part of a hard-drinking male culture, Mr V explained the poor terms he and his brothers were on with his father with: 'he was a bad man. He was a heavy

³⁵ Caroline Daley, "'He would know, but I just have a feeling:'" gender and oral history', *Women's History Review*, 7:3 (1998) 343-359, p. 345.

³⁶ Hull Transcripts: Mr V's interview, p. 62.

drinker'.³⁷ In fact, tales of 'adventure and bravado' appeared to be more prevalent in my sample amongst the women's narratives. For example, Mrs B appeared very much the heroine in her stories of colluding with her sisters and brothers in outwitting her drunken and sometimes violent father.³⁸ Likewise, Mrs M was the star in her description of her successful mission to retrieve her new husband's bankbook from the strict aunt with whom he had lived before marriage, an errand he asked her to attempt as, 'he was frightened to death of her'.³⁹

Neither was Daley's suggestion that men 'saw themselves as the natural storytellers of the community' borne out in my sample. If anything, women in general spoke more and gave more detail. Of course, this could be because they were more at ease speaking to another woman – although I never got the impression that the men I interviewed were uncomfortable talking to me. It could also be that my questions concentrated more on areas that women knew more about – although I did enquire about working, as well as domestic life. My impression was that the men of this community were slightly more taciturn and this impression was shared by at least one of my female interviewees, who memorably celebrated gender differences in the following terms: '[M]en, to be quite honest, are not social creatures. . . . Whereas we do make the effort, and I do think that this is a feminine thing. I think, if it wasn't for women, the language would go rapidly into decline and cease to be. Just be a series of grunts and nods and looks.'⁴⁰ Nevertheless, although my findings did not confirm Daley's conclusions that women saw themselves as 'law abiding' whilst men saw their pasts as 'full of adventure and bravado' I do feel, on reflection, that there were differences between men's and women's account that went beyond a concentration on the settings they mostly inhabited. Rather than displaying the 'dominant gendered ideology' that Daley found in New Zealand, the Hull women I interviewed were less conformist and more willing to see themselves as heroines. As Mrs F commented, 'I would say in a lot of working-class families like ours, the women were the stronger ones . . . they took the responsibility . . . when hard times came along I think it was the women who had to cope.'⁴¹

Anxious concern about the 'representativeness' of interviews would occur much less in oral history literature research today, as the practice has arisen of interviewing fewer people and then analysing their interviews in more detail – often involving the kind of narrative analysis developed in the study of literature.⁴² However, I remain unconvinced that all historians regard such considerations as irrelevant. With that in mind, I would justify the importance I attach to make some attempt to 'place' interviewees, in terms of age and social background.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr V's interview p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview pp. 11, 14, 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, p. 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs V's interview p. 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview p. 67.

⁴² Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 115.

As will be noticed from the table on the following page, my selected respondents were distributed fairly evenly in age, having been born between 1903 and 1936, with a slight concentration having been born in the years 1910 to 1920.

Table 1a: Age distribution of respondents

YEAR OF BIRTH	RESPONDENTS
1900	
1901	
1902	
1903	Mrs C
1904	
1905	Mr R
1906	
1907	Mr F
1908	
1909	
1910	Mrs N
1911	Mrs A Mrs M Mrs O
1912	Miss P
1913	Mrs F
1914	
1915	Mrs B Mrs R
1916	Mrs E Mr I Mrs J
1917	
1918	Mrs X
1919	Mrs I
1920	Mrs L
1921	
1922	
1923	Mrs H Mr Q
1924	Mrs G
1925	Mrs T
1926	Mrs K
1927	Mr T
1928	
1929	
1930	Mr V
1931	Mr U Mr W
1932	Mrs D
1933	
1934	Mrs S
1935	Mrs W
1936	Mrs V
1937	
1938	
1939	
1940	

Since many of the interview questions concerned childhood, it was felt that parents' occupations would be most useful to 'place' respondents economically and socially. The following tables show parents' occupations for all respondents where this was remembered.

Occupations were summarised into census categories and were compared with Hull census figures.⁴³

Table 1b: Percentage of females (respondents' mothers) in various occupations⁴⁴

	1911 CENSUS	1931 CENSUS	Average %	% in Sample	No. in Sample
Total of working pop. in paid employment	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	23
Fishermen					
Agricultural workers	0.09	0.03	0.06	0.00	
Mines & quarrying occupations	0.15	0.00	0.08	0.00	
Workers in ceramics, glass, cement	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00	
Coal gas, etc., makers of, w'kers in chemicals	6.91	0.22	3.57	4.35	1
Metal manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	3.47	3.23	3.35	4.35	1
Textile workers	0.77	1.41	1.09	4.35	1
Leather workers, fur dressers	0.26	0.20	0.23	0.00	
Makers of textile goods & articles of dress	15.20	6.16	10.68	17.39	4
Makers of foods, drinks, tobacco	9.37	3.35	6.36	8.69	2
Workers in wood, cane & cork	0.83	0.67	0.75	0.00	
Makers of, workers in, paper; printers; bookbinders	2.90	3.28	3.09	0.00	
Makers of products*	0.31	0.27	0.29	0.00	
Workers in building	0.01	0.06	0.04	0.00	
Painters & decorators	0.00	0.09	0.05	0.00	
Administrators, directors, managers*	0.82	0.08	0.45	0.00	
Transport & communication workers	0.45	1.22	0.84	0.00	
Commercial, financial (exc. Clerical, inc. shopwk)	8.22	16.45	12.34	13.04	3
Professional & technical (excl. clerical)	6.60	6.71	6.66	0.00	
Persons employed in defence services					
Persons engaged in entertainment & sport	1.18	0.29	0.74	0.00	
Persons engaged in personal services	39.12	35.51	37.32	47.83	11
Clerks, typists etc.	2.49	9.69	6.09	0.00	
Warehousemen, storekeepers, packers	0.00	4.91	2.46	0.00	
Stationary engine drivers, stokers etc.	0.00	0.03	0.02	0.00	
Other undefined workers	0.40	1.07	0.74	0.00	
Workers in unskilled occupations*	0.43	5.06	2.75	0.00	
TOTAL:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	23

*not enumerated separately

⁴³ A table showing actual occupations is included as Appendix 2. Averages were calculated from the Hull censuses of 1911 and 1931, since most narrators were born within this period.

⁴⁴ Census of England and Wales: Kingston-upon-Hull Census Occupation Tables for 1911 and 1931.

Looking at the data in the table detailing the respondents' mothers' different occupations, it must firstly be noted that seven of the sample of thirty interviewees were unable to say what employment, if any, their mothers had held; therefore, a small sample of 30 was reduced still further to 23. Obviously, then, one could not expect the group to be representative of women in Hull at this time as a whole. Nevertheless, in spite of this, it is remarkable how well the sample did reflect the average from the 1911 and 1931 censuses. In both, the biggest group comprised Personal Services. After this, two other large groups were employed as Textile workers and Commercial workers (including shopwork). Makers of foods, drinks and tobacco was the next comparable section in both groups (6.36% in the census average, 8.69% in the sample). The largest groups from the census average not reflected in the sample were the Professional and Technical category, at nearly 7% of the general population, and Clerks, Typists etc at 6%. Their non-appearance in this group may indicate that the sample interviewed was somewhat lower in the social scale than the average of Hull's population. This may be suggested, too, by the bigger proportion in the sample engaged in personal service (nearly 48% as compared to the census average figure of 37%).

All 30 of my respondents' fathers were employed at some point, so the table indicates employment patterns of 100%. This should not be taken to mean that none of the sample was ever unemployed – some certainly were, at times, just as some had jobs in different fields. However, it was felt sufficient to take the main occupation given for each man. This sample, too, is obviously too small to expect it to be representative. Nevertheless, as with women's employment, the sample clearly reflects Hull's population at large. In both groups, most men were transport and communication workers (30% in the sample, compared with 28% in the census average). The next largest category in both groups was Metal manufactures, machine makers, engineers (16.66% in the sample, 11.18% in the census average). Workers in unskilled occupations (6.66% in the sample and 9.45% in the census average) were also significant groups for both. The greater number of agricultural workers in the sample (6.66% as opposed to 0.66% in the census average) can be explained by the fact that two respondents came from the rural area to the east of Hull (not covered by the Hull census) rather than Hull itself. The only significant occupation not represented by the sample was the Commercial and financial category. It is possible that this category, in males, included the slightly better off, and may, again, indicate that the sample is slightly less well-off than Hull's average population.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For women, on the other hand, the Commercial and financial category contained some quite poorly-paid and low-status shop work.

Table 1c: Percentage of males (respondents' fathers) in various occupations⁴⁶

	1911 CENSUS	1931 CENSUS	Average %	% in Sample	No. in Sample
Total of working pop. In paid employment	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	30
Fishermen	1.58	3.42	2.50	6.67	2
Agricultural workers	0.64	0.68	0.66	6.67	2
Mines & quarrying occupations	0.56	0.07	0.32	0.00	
Workers in ceramics, glass, cement	0.57	0.14	0.36	0.00	
Coal gas, etc., makers of, workers in chemicals	6.26	0.89	3.58	6.67	2
Metal manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	12.37	9.99	11.18	16.66	5
Textile workers	0.13	0.12	0.13	0.00	
Leather workers, fur dressers	0.86	0.22	0.54	0.00	
Makers of textile goods & articles of dress	2.21	1.11	1.66	0.00	
Makers of foods, drinks, tobacco	6.03	2.01	4.02	0.00	
Workers in wood, cane & cork	3.86	4.21	4.04	6.67	2
Makers of, workers in, paper; printers; bookbinders	1.13	1.05	1.09	0.00	
Makers of products*	1.17	1.14	1.16	0.00	
Workers in building	5.54	4.10	4.82	6.67	2
Painters & decorators	1.36	1.72	1.54	0.00	
Administrators, directors, managers*	1.90	0.93	1.42	3.33	1
Transport & communication workers	29.44	27.37	28.41	30.00	9
Commercial, financial (exc. Clerical, inc. shopwork)	8.21	10.93	9.57	0.00	
Professional & technical (excl. clerical)	1.44	1.83	1.64	0.00	
Persons employed in defence services	0.09	0.12	0.11	0.00	
Persons engaged in entertainment & sport	0.72	0.60	0.66	0.00	
Persons engaged in personal services	2.52	2.81	2.67	0.00	
Clerks, typists etc.	4.73	6.32	5.53	3.33	1
Warehousemen, storekeepers, packers	0.00	1.70	0.85	3.33	1
Stationary engine drivers, stokers etc.	0.87	1.22	1.05	3.33	1
Other undefined workers	0.49	1.72	1.11	0.00	
Workers in unskilled occupations*	5.32	13.58	9.45	6.67	2
TOTAL:	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	30

*not enumerated separately

⁴⁶ Census of England and Wales: Kingston-upon-Hull Census Occupation Tables for 1911 and 1931.

Moving onto the practicalities of interviewing, respondents were interviewed in their own homes; interviews generally lasted between two and four hours in total (some longer interviews were conducted over more than one session). The interviews were then transcribed as closely as possible, leaving out any indication of identity, so that the contributions of all respondents were anonymous. It would now be usual practice to ask whether respondents wish to be anonymous, or whether they prefer to have their contribution recorded under their own name, a practice I would observe if interviewing today. However, at the time of conducting these interviews, according to anonymity as a matter of course was not unusual and since I felt that anonymity would be preferred no other option was given. This approach had its advantages and, on the whole, I feel that the interviews were less constrained than they might have been if anonymity had not been guaranteed. The knowledge that extracts from transcripts can be quoted anonymously does make the process of discussing and interpreting material easier, too.⁴⁷ My instinct is that, given the choice, most of my respondents would have opted for anonymity, which is what Elizabeth Roberts found in her study.⁴⁸

The interviews were structured around a detailed questionnaire. Being a Hull person with some knowledge of the locality and of local history gave me a good starting point with most interviewees. Also, coming from a background that was not dissimilar to most of them, too, appeared advantageous – a point of view recorded by other researchers (although not universally acknowledged).⁴⁹ Ken Howarth, for example, describing a local history project in Croydon, commented: ‘All the researchers felt that there were distinct advantages to be gained from being from the same background as the people they interviewed.’⁵⁰

The nature of a study of this scale demanded only basic recording equipment. At the time of these interviews (the mid-1990s) this comprised an ordinary cassette recorder. Experimentation demonstrated that sound quality was greatly enhanced by the use of external microphones, so these were used (clip-on lapel microphones – one for the interviewer and one for the interviewee). However, there was never any intention to use the recordings themselves, only the transcripts, so sound quality was important only in order to make accurate transcription possible. Perhaps, with hindsight, this emphasis on the use of transcripts was shortsighted. Indeed, researchers have been criticised for wiping cassettes after transcribing interviews, ‘thus destroying a primary source of potentially historical evidence’.⁵¹ In studying history, one is used to written sources, so it is difficult to see a sound recording as a main primary source. There are,

⁴⁷ A point made by Penny Summerfield, quoted in Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 165-6.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 241.

⁴⁹ Bornat and Diamond, ‘Women’s History and Oral History’, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Ken Howarth, *Oral History: A Handbook* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998) p. 133.

⁵¹ Howarth, *Oral History*, p. 175.

also, the practical difficulties of referencing tapes, losing sound quality through repeated playing of certain sections, even of tapes deteriorating altogether over time. Ultimately, this project could not command the funds for totally reliable recording equipment, and so the use of transcripts was felt to be a safer alternative.

All the interviews were fully transcribed as accurately as possible. Thus, pauses were indicated on the transcript (through punctuation) at the point these occurred in the interview and phonetic spelling was used to show local pronunciation or dialect.⁵² As mentioned above, some critics regard the shift in emphasis away from the recording itself as unfortunate. According to Alessandro Portelli: 'The transcript turns aural objects into visual ones which inevitably implies change and interpretation.'⁵³ Portelli went on to equate the transcript of an oral history interview with a translation of a literary work and argued that:

The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meanings and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing – unless, and then in inadequate and hardly accessible form, as musical notation . . . In order to make the transcript readable, it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks which are always the more-or-less arbitrary addition of the transcriber.⁵⁴

Whilst acknowledging that transcription is not an exact science, Portelli's view seems to me to be unnecessarily negative, as long as care is taken in transcribing to convey the orality of the interview. Punctuation can easily be used to show pauses within speech. There is, too, a long literary tradition of reporting speech in writing, with widely accepted conventions that can be used to convey verbal expression; using italics to indicate emphasis, for example, and capital letters to show increase in volume. Explanations in square brackets can be used to indicate non-verbal interventions, too, such as laughter, crying or sighing. In some ways, a transcript produced soon after the event could be *more* useful than the original recording (especially if the sound quality is not very good) since the interviewer's memory can also be drawn on if certain words are indistinct on the tape or if aural evidence is insufficient. For example, interviewees sometimes pointed in a certain direction to indicate a place relevant to a particular story, or used their hands to show the size of an object they were describing.

In the tradition of Paul Thompson and Elizabeth Roberts, the interviews were based around a detailed questionnaire. This was arranged into the following sections: background; education; health; child care; employment; housing and housework; money; relationships and family life; time off; politics; religion; community; the Second World War; after the War. The questions arose mainly from my initial reading on working-class women's lives, and were designed to

⁵² This approach is along the lines suggested by Raphael Samuel, 'Perils of the Transcript', *Oral History*, 1:2 (1971) 19-22.

⁵³ Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', p. 33.

⁵⁴ Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', p. 34.

uncover details of domestic and family life. In particular, I was intrigued by Elizabeth Roberts's suggestion of the status that women gained from their skills in domestic work and how this was lessening later in the century. Carl Chinn's notion of a hidden matriarchy, too, influenced the inclusion of a number of questions hoping to uncover whether this was apparent in Hull. Some questions were suggested by various sample questionnaires in oral history literature.⁵⁵ I tried to include as many open-ended questions as possible and I was not restricted by the questionnaire if anyone volunteered reminiscences that fell outside its range. However, I did try to cover all the questions with everyone (without pressing where a question appeared to be regarded as intrusive) in order to make comparisons between respondents' accounts easier, and to leave open the possibility of some kind of quantitative analysis.⁵⁶ Some personal biographical questions were included in order to clarify the chronology of respondents' lives (especially the main events – when they moved house, changed jobs, married and had each child). This was so that I could ask them to relate their memories to these events where necessary, making it easier to pinpoint more exactly the period about which they were talking. Some questions were included in order to place respondents socially. The full questionnaire is attached as Appendix 3.

Within oral history now, there is a move away from such emphasis on questionnaires as a basis for interviews. Lynn Abrams, for example, cites one of Paul Thompson's 'Edwardian' interviews as an example of set questions producing 'limited, non-narrative, rather staccato-style answers'.⁵⁷ Abrams contends: 'Nowadays, the preference is for the interviewer to give the greatest possible room to the interviewee to produce a narrative of his or her own.'⁵⁸ It seems unlikely to me that Paul Thompson would argue much with this assertion and I feel that the distinction between a traditional 'question and answer' approach and a 'new' encouragement of narration is rather exaggerated. Whilst examples can certainly be taken from earlier oral history that contain more question than answer, this result can hardly be assumed to have been the interviewer's aim. Certainly, my objective in starting with a detailed questionnaire was to use it as a prompt within the interview in the hope of encouraging lengthy responses. The kind of straightforward question that Abrams criticises can produce very different, often lengthy, responses, depending on who is being questioned. For example, the question in the example quoted, 'Did your father ever go to a club, or pubs?' led to an answer shorter than the question, 'No. He didn't drink. Nor smoked.'⁵⁹ Asked of a narrator whose father had been a regular in the local pub, whose social life was built around it, whose friends and relatives had drunk there, too,

⁵⁵ Especially those in: Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* and Roberts, *A Woman's Place*.

⁵⁶ See Sue Bruley, 'Women's History, Oral History and Active Learning: an experience from southern England', *Women's History Review*, 5:1 (1996) 111-27, p. 117 on personal questions in interviews.

⁵⁷ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 107.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

this same question might have led to a lengthy, detailed, rich and evocative response. Indeed, many of Paul Thompson's questions did lead to such narratives.

In using live people as sources, rather than documents or books, a range of ethical and social dilemmas arise that affect how research can be conducted. For instance, whilst it might have been preferable to conduct all interviews in precisely comparable circumstances, this was not always possible. Thus, whilst most interviews were conducted with individuals alone, occasionally, grown-up children were present. Where this occurred, it may have been at the request of the interviewee or, possibly, it was an understandable attempt on their offspring's part to protect an ageing parent from any possible exploitation. In all cases, any initial suspicion or reserve soon evaporated once respondents got into the stride of reminiscing. However, it has to be borne in mind that this may have affected some interviews. Where married couples were interviewed, this was usually together. This arose partly because this was clearly their expectation and preference, and could not have been avoided without implying that partners might have secrets from each other and so causing offence. However, it had the advantage of allowing couples to jog each other's memories and challenge perceived inaccuracies (there appeared little evidence from the interviews that respondents were reluctant to contradict their spouses). There is some evidence, too, that the presence of a third party can encourage the telling of narratives that would otherwise be omitted.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the narrative springs from the intersubjectivity of the conversation and the dynamics of a three-way interview will result in a different kind of narrative.

Another possible source of ethical dilemmas is in the probing of painful memories.⁶¹ To some extent, this is unavoidable when interviewing someone about their life, since most people have distressing episodes in their pasts that an interviewer can know nothing about until a seemingly innocent question can uncover them. For example, Mr R, reminiscing about his work as an air raid warden, described an incident in which he had heard of the door jamming in an air-raid shelter, trapping the family inside. He had found another shelter for them to use which had then, unfortunately, taken a direct hit, so that the family he had tried to help, with five young children, were all killed.⁶² This incident was mentioned more than once by Mr R and was clearly something that had distressed him over many years. However, sometimes, an incident that sounds traumatic has, over time, been accepted by the interviewee and no longer has the same power to upset. For example, Mrs F had three siblings who died as children, all of whom she remembered dying. Hearing about this, I commented, 'That must have been terrible!' Her response appeared

⁶⁰ Leonore Layman, 'Reticence in Oral History Interviews', *Oral History Review*, 36:2 (2009) 207-30, p. 221.

⁶¹ See David W. Jones, 'Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing', *Oral History*, 26:2 (1998) 49-56.

⁶² Hull Transcripts: Mr R's interview, p. 28.

to qualify her distress, as if she was reluctant to receive sympathy she felt to be unwarranted: 'It's a long way back, I mean, seventy something years, but I can vaguely remember it, yes.'⁶³

When painful memories are evoked, it is a dilemma as to how far these should be probed and questioned. On the one hand, one may wish, for the purposes of the research, to know more; on the other hand, one feels responsible for any pain caused, having uncovered memories that have, perhaps, been suppressed for many years. According to Jones,

If the experience does seem to be raw then you are in the realms of the therapeutic, the memory is likely to be shaped as it is being talked about. With experiences that seem more encapsulated it is probably much safer for someone to talk, as it has been practised into a presentable narrative. However, there might be danger in an interviewer challenging that narrative. This again might be entering the realm of the therapeutic which might not be appropriate in a research interview.⁶⁴

Some historians have seen this blurring as an advantage. According to Bridget Macey: 'This therapeutic dimension of oral history is in many cases considered to be more important than the accuracy of the "historical facts".'⁶⁵ However, it seemed to me that any straying towards an atmosphere of therapy was a straying away from my competence and was to be avoided. One study of the experience of being interviewed as part of an oral history project found an interviewee asserting that, although the oral history, 'gave me quite a few insights . . . I think it's a lot more dangerous than therapy'.⁶⁶ In the examples above, both Mr R and Mrs F had clearly related their tales before, probably on numerous occasions; certainly the listening spouse, in each case, was familiar with the story. While still clearly troubled by the incident, Mr R appeared to make sense of it as part of the inherent trauma of his wartime role, commenting at the end of his story: 'I've seen things a lot of people have never seen.'⁶⁷ Mrs F's tales of her siblings' deaths, too, had the air of well-rehearsed narratives: while describing the incident that caused her little brother's death she admitted that she 'caused' the accident but explained, 'I wasn't being careless'.⁶⁸ She had clearly thought deeply on the accident over the years and come to terms with her part in it, rationalizing that it had not been her fault.

Sometimes people may agree to be interviewed because they enjoy discussing their pasts and may well wish to discuss an incident, being glad of an interested audience; others may agree to be interviewed out of loneliness or a desire to be helpful and could be drawn to say more than

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Jones, 'Distressing Histories', p. 55.

⁶⁵ Bridget Macey, 'Social dynamics of oral history making: women's experience of wartime', *Oral History*, 19:2 (1991) 42-8.

⁶⁶ Wendy Rickard, "'More Dangerous than Therapy'?: Interviewees' reflections on recording traumatic or taboo issues', *Oral History*, 26:2 (1998) 34-48, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Hull Transcripts: Mr R's interview, p. 28.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 27.

they would have wished.⁶⁹ There is no easy solution to addressing these issues. Where sensitive or distressing subjects arose in these interviews, I took my cue from the narrator, probing where that appeared to be acceptable, sympathising and moving on where that seemed more appropriate. On a few occasions, respondents asked me to turn the tape off while they told me something that they felt was too sensitive to be recorded; usually, this was because a subject was regarded as taboo rather than traumatic. Of course, this can be frustrating when the information given would have been interesting and relevant on record. However, oral history is different from other forms of research and people demand a courtesy and respect that other sources do not.

Some historians have perceived a form of exploitation to occur as a consequence of the unequal relationship which exists between interviewer and interviewee.⁷⁰ Thus, while historians may benefit professionally from the publication of research based on oral history, the narrators gain little from the encounter. Ultimately, the power to decide what questions to ask and what interpretation to place on the answers remains with the researcher. Even if an historian's interpretation differs markedly from that of the narrator, only the historian's view is heard. This dilemma has been addressed by different historians.⁷¹ Katherine Borland disagreed with her grandmother in the interpretation of her narrative; K'Meyer and Crothers disagreed with their respondent over what was important to record as well as what interpretation should be put upon her account. Borland concluded that her interpretation was valid, arising from a different standpoint from that of her grandmother, but that such differences should be acknowledged. K'Meyer and Crothers came to similar conclusions, producing a document (to be held at the local library) that accorded with their interviewee's wishes, but feeling free to comment as they wished in academic publications.⁷² Daphne Patai argued against 'the fraud' of 'purported solidarity of female identity' claiming that 'in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research'.⁷³

In considering how these problems might apply, in practical terms, to my work, I concluded that my position as an interviewer was significant. Unlike some researchers, I was not arriving as an outsider from a separate, more privileged, culture. Similar to my respondents in class, ethnicity, geographical roots and background, there appeared no striking imbalance of power. As a post-graduate student, rather than a paid professional, too, the idea that some gulf existed between myself and my contributors made little sense.⁷⁴ There seemed to me to be a danger, too,

⁶⁹ See Jones, 'Distressing Histories', pp. 50-51 for a discussion of why people agree to be interviewed.

⁷⁰ Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory', p. 52.

⁷¹ Katherine Borland, 'That's Not What I Said: interpretive conflict in oral narrative research', in Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words – the feminist practice of oral history* (London: Routledge, 1991) 63-76; K'Meyer and Crothers, 'If I See Some of this in Writing'.

⁷² K'Meyer and Crothers, 'If I See Some of this in Writing', p. 85.

⁷³ from Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, pp. 144; 150.

⁷⁴ This is not to say that, in other circumstances, this possible imbalance of power might not hold real ethical dilemmas, simply that each situation would need to be considered separately.

that an assumption that an imbalance of power and therefore exploitation necessarily existed could be patronizing. The idea could imply that interviewees are not capable of making valid decisions about their lives, are not aware that researchers may advance their careers through resulting publications, or that academic debates may arise from the details of interviews with which they may disagree or simply find irrelevant. For the most part, I feel sure that my narrators were aware that some benefits would accrue to me from the research – that in this sense their consent to be interviewed was fully informed. In most cases, the enjoyment they gained from an audience in talking about their past lives was payment enough for the time they gave, since time was, for the most part, something of which they had plenty. In addition, my interviewees were clearly, in my view and theirs, doing me a favour. For those who were elderly, frail, in poor health or house-bound – in short, more used to accepting than giving – the opportunity to help someone out in this way may have been refreshing.

Yvonne McKenna also questioned the assumption of power always resting with the interviewer.⁷⁵ McKenna admitted that as a young, inexperienced researcher interviewing nuns (having been convent-educated) she felt nervous and sometimes intimidated.⁷⁶ On analyzing her interviews, she realised that her respondents *had* expressed nervousness about the situation and concern about the relevance of their comments and so she concluded that the interplay of power in interviewing was more complicated than often assumed.⁷⁷ My interviewees, too, sometimes exhibited normal social anxiety in experiencing a new situation (being interviewed, having their voices recorded, wearing a microphone). They, too, sometimes stopped in mid-flow to question whether I was really interested in what they were saying. However, like McKenna, I question the usefulness of the word ‘power’ in describing the dynamics experienced.⁷⁸

Issues of copyright appeared to me to present problems from the beginning of this research. From my initial reading, in the 1990s, it seemed to be common practice in oral history to require interviewees to sign over their copyright of the interview to the interviewer (or, more usually, the body overseeing the oral history project). This practice was based on an interpretation of the 1988 Copyright, Designs and Patents Act that saw copyright of the interviewee’s words as resting with the interviewee.⁷⁹ The specimen forms suggested for this process appeared to me to involve the kind of intimidating legalese that seemed likely to worry my elderly respondents, if not put

⁷⁵ Yvonne McKenna, ‘Sisterhood? Exploring Power Relations in the Collection of Oral History’, *Oral History*, 31:1 (2003) 65-72.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-71.

⁷⁸ McKenna, ‘Sisterhood,’ p. 70.

⁷⁹ See Alan Ward, *Copyright, Ethics and Oral History* (Colchester: Oral History Society, 1995): ‘the owner of the copyright in the words is the speaker’. p. 2.

them off the whole idea of being interviewed.⁸⁰ Even if I had simplified the phrasing of the form as far as possible, a request that all rights to the material be signed away in advance seemed likely to suggest that there was some intention to misuse it, or somehow to take advantage. I was also afraid that requests for the respondents' signatures might cast doubt on my promise of anonymity. In order to minimise these problems as far as possible, I hoped, at first, to begin each recording session with a brief and informal reminder of the intention of the research, recording their verbal agreement. Requiring further advice on this matter, the issue was raised on a related website. However, the replies were contradictory. Interestingly, it tended to be the historians who believed that the interviewees held copyright, and lawyers who argued that they did not. It seemed that, if copyright was held by the interviewee, written consent was advisable so, reluctantly, I decided that this would be the safest course. However, rather than requiring respondents to sign over their copyright wholesale, I simply requested that they agreed to the interviews being used 'for research and educational purposes'. The possibility of interviewees giving signed consent to certain listed uses of their interviews, rather than giving away their copyright wholesale, was suggested by Ward but my version was in a very much simplified format (included as Appendix 4).⁸¹ Decisions regarding copyright release forms were obviously made before interviewing took place, in the mid 1990s. Since then, it has become standard practice to regard copyright in his or her words as being held by the interviewee, and usual for copyright to be signed over. With hindsight, then, it probably would have been better to have asked respondents to sign a form relinquishing their copyright. However, my original objections to this course still appear to me valid and I am not sure that all my respondents would have agreed to their interviews being used on this basis.

It usually goes without saying that historical sources need to be evaluated to determine their reliability. However, the limited acceptance of oral testimony has traditionally meant that its assessment has to be more explicit. In this material, I hoped to be able to assess each interviewee's reliability by comparison with other interviewees and also with documentary sources. As well as this, I wanted enough material to make some kind of assessment of internal consistency; with this in mind, there was some overlap between different sections of questions. Many of these accounts contain descriptions that were confirmed by other interviews, as well as documentary evidence. For example, several respondents recounted descriptions of how much the task of laundry was hated before the use of automatic washing machines. Likewise, the fragility of gas mantles was mentioned by most who experienced them. An Easter tradition of

⁸⁰ See, for example, Alan Ward, *Manual of sound archive administration* (Aldershot: Gower, 1990) pp. 49-50; 53-58.

⁸¹ See, for example, Figure 3.4, which gives interviewees a range of options on what their interviews can be used for, and also the option of vesting their copyright with the institute involved or not.

skipping in the street – adults as well as children – was also mentioned by several interviewees. Such details, confirmed by more than one such source, are hard to doubt. By contrast, I asked all respondents when their families acquired various domestic appliances. Whilst most gamely attempted a reply, the vagueness and hesitancy of the answers led me to reject this data as unreliable, and so no attempt was made to tabulate it. This confirms the thesis mentioned earlier, that details of everyday life are more easily remembered than one-off events, such as the acquisition of a washing machine.

The evaluation process may be clarified by taking one interview as an example. Mrs D's interview contained no real inconsistencies. Where minor discrepancies occur, they were noticed and clarified by the respondent herself. For example, an earlier comment that, as a child, her family never tasted fresh bread was contradicted when the respondent remembered that her mother sometimes made her own bread. This contradiction was noted and explained with the comment that the family never actually bought fresh bread as it was more expensive. This interview was characterized throughout by the respondent's obvious desire for precision. For example, after commenting that, although she could not remember, it was probably her mother who decided to move house, she was asked, 'It was your mam who made those decisions?' Her reply, 'That sort of decision, yes,' was then clarified by the further comment, 'Household things, yes.' After receiving the transcript of this interview, the respondent wrote back to clarify various points. For example:

I said in the interview that my brother John was in the army towards the end of the war, but on thinking about it this was incorrect. He must have been eighteen in 1943, but instead of being called up for the army he was sent to the coalmines in Derbyshire. The lads who were chosen at random to do this were called Bevan boys as I believe the Minister of Fuel at that time was Bevan, but this must have been after the Labour government got in in 1945. I can't account for the difference in time.⁸²

The narrator's desire to get the story right is shown by her sending me this correction of her initial statement, which in itself lends credence to the rest of her testimony. Having forgotten (possibly owing to its prominent Conservative leader) that the wartime government was a coalition, she saw her account as inconsistent. However, rather than change any part of the story to fit in with her memory of the government, she simply reported it. This, to me, shows an absence of any desire to 'tidy up' her evidence, and adds more weight to her whole account. Despite her doubt, the background to the story is essentially correct (although Bevin rather than Bevan, as the Minister of Labour, was the politician in question).

The finished transcripts, then, were evaluated thoroughly in the way that any historical document might be evaluated, to assess internal consistency and factual accuracy. In addition,

⁸² Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 51.

however, various other approaches to assessing oral history have been developed. We are now encouraged to see oral history as performance, to consider how interviewees build a narrative that makes sense of their lives in a way with which they can be comfortable, a process known as ‘composure’. Their narrative can be informed by public discourse so that participants of historical events can be influenced by the way these are portrayed by the media. In addition to the influence of history as public discourse, narrators are also influenced by wider cultural forms in the stories they tell: they may see themselves, for example, in the roles of war hero or tragic victim. The self-sacrificing mother or the hard-working father, the bright child from a poor family succeeding against odds: all these may be roles adopted by narrators looking for composure, influenced by cultural motifs as well as personal history.⁸³ The cultural discourse which influences narrators will depend on their race, class and gender. According to Sally Chandler, it can also depend on their generation, with interviewees from slightly different eras drawing on slightly different cultural narratives.⁸⁴ Likewise, Chandler argues that the generational identity of the interviewer also affects the interview. Thus, younger interviewers may make assumptions about elderly respondents – that they are likely to be ‘set in their ways’, for instance, and that their views cannot be challenged without causing offence, deterring the interviewer from asking more probing questions and so shaping the interview in a particular way.⁸⁵ Detailed narrative analysis, however, is most suited to the close study of a small number of interviews.⁸⁶

We should see these interviews, then, as a product of intersubjectivity, a collaboration between interviewer and interviewee. In addition, we should consider how respondents draw upon ideas from their culture, as well as from their past, and also how they strive for composure within their narratives. The importance of the narrator’s meaning, rather than strict factual accuracy should be stressed. From this viewpoint, we can learn much from the narratives collected. For example, one of my respondents, Mrs V, was proud of her husband’s contribution in childcare, claiming, ‘I only ever made one bottle during the night with four children . . . and he was so tired he hadn’t heard the baby wake.’⁸⁷ This assertion does not have to be strictly accurate to convey its speaker’s meaning. So, if she actually made up two bottles during the night, or even two dozen, this does not change the basic meaning of the remark: that her husband was chiefly responsible for their children’s night feeds. Likewise, it may well have been that her decision to report this was influenced by the way she saw me, as her interviewer. Being familiar with the

⁸³ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 28; 64.

⁸⁴ Sally Chandler, ‘Oral History Across Generations: Age, generational identity and oral testimony’, *Oral History*, 33:2 (2005) 48-56, p. 49.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁶ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 115.

⁸⁷ Hull Transcripts, Mrs V’s interview, p. 23.

modern notion of a 'new man' and seeing me as the kind of young, educated 'modern' woman who would doubtless appreciate such a thing, it was this anecdote that she chose to tell. That this story was a product of intersubjectivity and influenced by ideas from wider culture as well as her personal history does not alter its deeper veracity. A different interviewer, on another day, may have heard an entirely different tale, but that does not make this one, essentially, any less true.

In summary, then, this project was conceived and begun within the tradition of 'recovery' oral history, following in the steps of practitioners such as Elizabeth Roberts and Paul Thompson and aiming to focus on the history of the least researched. The unplanned gap between its inception and completion has seen great changes in oral history methodology. In this unusual position, then, I have tried to hold on to the strengths of my initial approach, hoping that historians unfamiliar with oral history will appreciate its rigour. Thus, I attempted to choose respondents who were not untypical of the locality, to focus on areas which research has shown are most likely to be remembered accurately and to base interviews around a comprehensive questionnaire, used as a prompt to encourage a full narrative. I provided exact and complete transcription of all interviews. However, I have remained aware of the subjectivity of this evidence. In addition, I have drawn on a range of methods in analyzing the material created. Oral history is such a diverse field now that there can hardly be said to be 'right' and 'wrong' ways of doing it. Both in interviewing and in analysing resulting narratives, my approach (like that of many practitioners) has been eclectic, selecting methods that best suit my particular research and my personality. This source was used, above all, to inform and develop my ideas around women and domestic life, ideas which changed dramatically over the course of my research.

CHAPTER 2

‘All proud for her’: Women, Families and Housework

Housework must be seen as a significant part of the domestic life of women between the 1920s and the 1960s. Oral evidence from Hull confirms that women were primarily responsible for most aspects of housework and that it involved extensive skills that were valued by women themselves and by other family members. As one respondent commented on her mother’s skills in cookery: ‘She was real proud and we were all proud for her.’¹

In this chapter, I consider housework, excluding child-care, which will be discussed separately. In section I, I focus on the state of housing over this period and how this affected housework. I then look at what was involved in completing housework (section II details cleaning, section III laundry and section IV cooking). Section V covers the issue of how housework was learned and section VI looks at how housework was shared within households. Despite the fact that housework was chiefly women’s province, it was found that men were also involved, often with specifically ‘male’ tasks but, not infrequently, with a wide range of traditionally ‘female’ domestic tasks. Likewise, women’s domestic responsibilities did not prevent them from engaging in paid work, formal or informal, where opportunities arose. The extreme segregation of roles sometimes suggested was lacking.² The notion that women guarded their domestic expertise in order to retain control in this area found little support in Hull.³ In section VII, the impact of new household technology is discussed and reasons for the different rates of diffusion for different goods is considered, while section VIII looks at women in domestic service, considering suggestions that such lives were restricted by servility and social control. This was not found to be the case in Hull, where women often enjoyed domestic work and valued the opportunity to enhance their domestic skills. In section IX, the notion is considered that much of this period (the interwar years and the 1950s) saw a preoccupation by women with housework, as part of a retreat into domesticity.

¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs P’s interview, p. 40.

² Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 165.

³ Joanna Bourke *Working-class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 67-71.

I

Before looking at household tasks in detail, the importance of the houses concerned must be noted, since the experience of housework was very much influenced by the house itself. At the beginning of the 20th century, Hull's housing stock was dominated by small terraced housing, of which the newer variety was slightly improved by bye-laws regulating, variously: width of streets, ventilation, sanitation and water supply, provision of back entrances, bay windows and front gardens.⁴ Most houses were rented from private landlords but there was some philanthropically motivated housing (notably the Model Dwellings on Midland Street) and a small number of council houses (on Newbridge Road).⁵ Reckitt's Garden Village, built between 1907 and 1916, set higher housing standards, but affected only a minority.⁶ Typical working-class housing in Hull in 1908 is described thus:

The characteristic feature of housing in Hull is the prevalence of what is called the "terrace system". In Hull it denotes a short blind court usually 18 to 20 feet in width running out from the main street. The narrowness of the court and the practical absence of gardens back or front make it possible to have as large a number of people to the acre as is practicable without resort to tenements or back-to-back dwellings.⁷

Appendix 7, showing a plan of housing in the Hessle Road area, illustrates this style of building. High-density housing obviously had its problems, as Mr F, described: 'A lot of them had no backways out at all, they'd a backyard but no backway out. So in those days, everything had to come through the house, and you can imagine what it was like when the dustmen came, because there were no water closets in those days. They had to carry the stuff straight through the house.'⁸

After the First World War, a nation-wide shortage of houses combined with raised expectations that Britain should be 'a fit country for heroes'.⁹ Under Addison's Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919, local authorities were responsible for addressing the housing shortfall and government subsidies were given to this end. This led to 176,000 local authority houses being built with central government funding, 518 of them on the rural edge of Hull (in 'Gipsyville' – almost three miles to the west of Hull city centre and on Preston Road and Southcoates Lane – nearly two miles to the east). Hull's Medical Officer of Health estimated, in

⁴ Local History Archive Unit *Housing in Humberside* (Hull: Humberside College of Higher Education, 1989) pp. 10, 11.

⁵ Betty C. Skern *Housing in Kingston-upon-Hull between the Wars* (Hull: Hull City Council, 1986) p. 5.

⁶ Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon *A History of Hull* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1989) p. 434.

⁷ Parliamentary Papers, 'Cost of Living of the Working Classes', 1908, quoted in Skern, *Housing in Hull*, p. 6.

⁸ Hull Transcripts: Mrs F's interview p. 52.

⁹ The quotation originates from an election speech by Lloyd George, reported in *The Times*, 25 November, 1918: 'The task of the new government would be to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in. Millions of lives had been lost in the war, but there were millions more maimed lives due to atrocious living conditions. That must be put right . . . Slums were not fit homes for the men who had won this war.'

1920, that the absence of building in the war had led to a shortfall of 5,000 houses, that another 2,578 were needed so that people living in unhealthy areas could be re-housed and another 200 to replace other insanitary homes.¹⁰ Whilst Hull's housing stock was increased by council building, the poorest were not necessarily helped since they could not afford the rents. Hull's City Treasurer reported, in 1921: 'already some tenants are finding the rental beyond their capacity to meet, and, in consequence, they are applying for exchange with persons outside the estate who are able to pay the rent'.¹¹ In 1925, the first street of the Gipsyville council estate, Askew Avenue, housed only one labourer, but two plumbers, two policemen, two teachers and a merchant navy officer.¹²

The Chamberlain Act of 1923 allowed for the subsidy of private builders to build cheaper homes for sale, resulting in around 32,000 new houses nationally and 2,667 locally, mainly in areas to the west of the city centre.¹³ However, as the Medical Officer of Health said in 1925:

The houses erected by private builders are mainly of one type, viz: a "subsidy" house of 5 or 6 rooms with bath and hot and cold water, but as practically all the new houses are for sale, only those persons who can afford to advance a fairly large sum of money can hope to benefit from this type of house.¹⁴

Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that all homeowners were, by definition, middle-class. Owner occupation continued to expand in the 1930s, after the Chamberlain subsidies had ceased, and included a greater variety of people as building societies flourished by increasing the length of time allowed to re-pay a mortgage to twenty or thirty years and decreasing the deposit to as little as 5%. An East Hull street of new owner-occupiers in the 1930s included eleven clerks, six joiners, two forewomen, two bus conductors, two foremen, two electricians, two corporation employees, two shop managers, a bus driver, a motor driver, a butcher, a schoolmaster, a telephonist, a labourer and a flour miller.¹⁵

Under the first Labour Government, the 1924 Wheatley Act was intended to provide more encouragement for local authority housing, but still failed to ensure provision for the poorest. According to Hull's Medical Officer of Health in 1926, demand for such housing was low 'not so much because overcrowding in dwellings for the working class is disappearing, but because of the inability of a working man with a large or even moderately large family of young children, to pay the rent of a Corporation parlour house'.¹⁶ The large council housing development of North Hull

¹⁰ Skern, *Housing in Hull*, p. 7.

¹¹ Quoted in Skern, *Housing in Hull*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9.

¹³ For example, a number were built in Chanterlands Avenue, Lane, Perth Street, Pickering Road, Calvert Lane and Belgrave Drive, and also Southcoates Lane. (Skern, *Housing in Hull*, pp. 3, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Estate was begun at this time. (A plan of North Hull Estate in 1935 is included as Appendix 10.) Despite the higher rents, such housing was attractive to many in over-crowded inner-city locations. Later, the Greenwood Acts of 1930 and 1933 attempted to improve the situation for the very poorest by subsidising local authorities to rehouse people from slum clearance areas; 4,000 houses were built in Hull under these acts. Slum clearance was certainly a necessity in Hull, as this description from a 1934 *Hull Daily Mail* illustrates:

[W]here I live in a four-roomed tenement house in Blanket Row there are sixteen, and all have to use one w.c. and in parts of the yard you hardly ever see the sun, and in the room I occupy there are myself, the wife and three children, eating sleeping and sweltering these warm nights.¹⁷

Death rates, too, were notably higher in some wards.¹⁸ Slum clearance in Hull in the 1930s was a major undertaking, with thirty-four demolition orders affecting 10,578 people and 2,790 houses. These included large projects on Church Street, Reform Street and Canning Street, all in Hull City Centre, although it remained a problem that those displaced from slum housing were unable to afford rents in the new council houses.¹⁹ However, overall, the inter-war years saw a massive building programme of private and council housing.

Attempts to solve Hull's housing crisis were set-back by the Second World War. At its outbreak, Hull had had 92,660 houses but, during war-time bombing, 1,472 were destroyed and 2,882 seriously damaged. In addition, a further 82,361 needed some repair.²⁰ The housing shortage was exacerbated by the war-time break in house-building. As elsewhere, the immediate post-World War II shortage was tackled initially by the building of 'pre-fabs', a temporary measure which proved so popular that some tenants were sorry to have to leave when they were rehoused many years later.²¹ Council estates of more permanent housing were also built on the eastern outskirts of the city (Bilton Grange, Greatfield and Longhill). The amount of private building for owner-occupation also began to grow from the late 1950s.

In summary, then, Hull's housing stock over this period was gradually improving. Small terraced housing was very much in evidence throughout this time but the worst houses were demolished in the 1930s. Much new housing – both council and owner-occupied – was built in its place, although this mostly benefited the better-off working class and lower middle class. Graphic descriptions of housing conditions can be gleaned from oral history accounts and several

¹⁷ Quoted in Skern, *Housing in Hull*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17. A plan of the Reform Street area in 1928 (shortly before its demolition) is included as Appendix 8.

²⁰ Only 5,945 of Hull's 92,660 houses, therefore, were completely undamaged by the bombing – T. Geraghty, *A North-East Coast Town: Ordeal and Triumph. The Story of Kingston-upon-Hull in the 1939-1945 Great War* (Howden: Mr Pye Books, 1989) p. 78.

²¹ John Markham *The Book of Hull* (Buckingham: Barracuda Books Ltd, 1989) p. 119.

respondents remembered drawbacks to their early homes. For example, Mrs W, described her first house as follows: ‘Sort of terraced houses and doorsteps opening on to the pavement, and sort of high-ceilinged rooms with damp coming in at the corners, making shapes on the ceiling . . . Oh, and having an outside loo, and having to dash through the rain, you know, to get to the toilet out in the yard.’²² One feature particularly remembered by several respondents was having a front room that was rarely used. In Mrs D’s childhood: ‘we very very rarely went in the front room . . . As far as I can remember it was used to house the best furniture. I suppose occasionally, at Christmas and odd times like that.’²³ On being asked how her current house compared to the one she had lived in as a child, Mrs D also commented: ‘You can’t compare it. It was a bit smaller. It was SO COLD [laughs]. You just can’t imagine how cold it was upstairs. You just can’t. I mean, in the winter the windows used to ice over and you used to try and get dressed without getting out of bed.’²⁴ The worst housing conditions appeared to have been experienced by my respondents during their childhoods, housing having mostly improved by the time they grew up.

The services available in a home – such as water and electricity – also affected how demanding housework was. Access to clean water had improved in the second half of the 19th century, so that most people in towns had supplies by soon after the turn of the century.²⁵ Between the late 19th century and the mid 20th century, the number of households with private water supplies increased substantially so that, by the 1951 census, 80% of private households in England and Wales had them.²⁶ Thus, between 1890 and 1950, the amount of time that had to be spent fetching water for cooking, washing and house cleaning and, in large amounts, for laundry, was drastically reduced for most women. However, many homes had only cold water and no bath. Sanitation was often primitive at the start of the 20th century. Earth closets were widely used in Hull at this time, with limited tank-space meaning that men and boys had to urinate into a sink in the yard.²⁷ This necessity was mentioned by Mr I, who remembered that: ‘fellers . . . always weed in the sink’ otherwise ‘it made everything wet and overflowing’.²⁸ Gradually, sanitation in homes was upgraded and water closets installed, a conversion that was largely complete by the 1930s.²⁹

By the 1890s gas was widely available to the working class who could hire domestic appliances and pay on a ‘penny in the slot’ basis. However, gas appliances had many drawbacks.

²² Hull Transcripts: Mrs W’s interview, p. 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview p. 22. See also, Mr and Mrs V’s interview, p. 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 24.

²⁵ Caroline Davidson, *A Woman’s Work is Never Done* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982) p. 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ Gillet and MacMahon *A History of Hull*, p. 434.

²⁸ Hull Transcripts, Mr I’s interview, p. 9.

²⁹ Gillet and MacMahon, *History of Hull*, p. 435.

Gas lighting was not so easy to light or operate as electricity, was potentially more dangerous (especially where there were children) and was not so bright. Many housewives, too, were still using paraffin lamps.³⁰ The development of electricity, then, represented a major advance. Electric lighting had been available from the 1880s, but by 1918 it was still used only by wealthy households; initially, the lack of standardisation of electricity limited the production of electrical appliances.³¹ However, with the passing of the Electricity (Supply) Act in 1926, a Central Electricity Board was set up to oversee the standardisation of electricity generation and the creation of a national grid. Prices fell from then on, the development of appliances for a national market became a possibility and the number of households connected gradually rose. For lighting, electricity overtook gas in popularity by the early 1930s. In Hull, 20,000 houses had electricity in 1932, with numbers rising every year: in 1935 Hull was connected to the national grid.³² By 1949, gas was supplied to 79% of British households, electricity to 86% of households and both services supplied to 68%. Only 3% of households had neither gas nor electricity.³³ Access to bright electric light made housework more flexible, so that some tasks that had previously had to be performed during daylight could now be done in the evening, so cutting out the elaborate planning that had been necessary.

Many comments were made by my interviewees about the drawbacks of gas, for example, Mrs D, comparing electricity to gaslight: 'It was just more convenient. . . a switch. It seemed so much easier than lighting it with a match. And children could put electric lights on and off.'³⁴ Also, Mrs F, on electricity after gas lighting: 'Oh it was easier and cleaner and er . . . always gas houses . . . well, I suppose we didn't realise it then, but you realise it afterwards, they always seemed to have that gassy smell.'³⁵ Mrs V was one of many to mention how easily broken gas mantles were: 'the electric light was a lot better obviously. Cos if you broke the mantels of the gas, then you know you didn't have any light. They were very fragile.'³⁶

Conditions in rural areas were often worse than in cities. For example, Mrs O, one of the few country dwellers of this sample, living east of Hull in Holderness, described her early married life around 1930 in a house with no running water.³⁷ They used an outside pump, which often ran dry in the summer, leaving them dependent for water on the nearby farm, where she and her husband worked:

³⁰ Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, p. 109.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³² Gillet and MacMahon *History of Hull*, p. 435.

³³ Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, p. 43.

³⁴ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs V's interview, p. 29.

³⁷ Mrs O lived in South Frodingham, a hamlet near Withernsea on the east coast. This is shown on the map of Holderness, Appendix 6 (a couple of miles south-west of Withernsea).

I used to take the pram off the wheels and put the dolly tub on the wheels to go up to farm to get some water from the moat [a deep ditch surrounding the farm house] for washing and cleaning, and then she'd let us have a bucket or two from the house to use for food and that. And I'll always remember going up for one lot and she said, 'Oh be very careful what you take because it'll get to be that there'll be no water in time.' I thought, well, all that in the moat. . . . what's she talking about? And anyway, that's what we had to do. But one day when I had . . . Bren in pram and the next door neighbour, we were just talking on the road, and . . . I heard a trickling. When I went to look it was clear beautiful water. So I tasted it and it was good. But grass was all grown over it. So we filled our buckets and got all full up with water and I said, 'Don't dare tell anybody it's there, or else we won't be able to get it.' And do you know that kept us going all the dry season. We just used to go with our buckets. It took a while er . . . you know, before it got a bucket full. We used to put the bucket underneath and cover it with the grass and leave it while we knew it was full, and then take it in and put it in bowls and everything. [Laughs] We went on like that for ages and ages, and just went up to farm for the other thing full for scrubbing and doing.³⁸

More than sixty years after the event, her employer's perceived unreasonableness in begrudging sharing their large water supply was clearly remembered. Her delight in finding an alternative source was also very evident. The drudgery of having to walk backwards and forwards with a small child, waiting around for buckets slowly to fill and carrying them back to the house, strangely, appears to have left less impression.

The oral evidence showed ways people found to compensate for the inadequacies of their homes. For example, Mr F, describing bathing: 'Well, we very often went to the public baths for the wash, if it was too much bother to put the copper on. It was easier and quicker and it wasn't very expensive. Also, they did supply you with towels as well at the baths so they hadn't, they hadn't to be washed.'³⁹

Several of these respondents remembered moving to newly built council estates, and the changes this brought in their living conditions. Mrs F remembered, on moving to North Hull Estate, that 'the bathroom was one of the things that we really delighted in most' and also that 'there were three bedrooms . . . they seemed immense to us really. It was a great luxury.'⁴⁰ Mrs W also loved her new council house:

[I]t was a new estate . . . and I remember thinking this was absolutely delightful cos there was a copper, you know, that was part of the fixtures and fittings . . . The council houses were . . . like a dream, you know, my Mother was over the moon.⁴¹

II

Let us now consider the details of housework, beginning with the task of household cleaning, one of the most time-consuming jobs throughout this period. Whilst it has often been argued that

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs O's interview, pp. 28, 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 53.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs W's interview, p. 18.

improving domestic technology raised standards rather than saving time, standards achieved without technological help could be impressive.⁴² Mrs A's description, for instance, implied a cleanliness in excess of most modern standards: 'Started spring cleaning about the beginning of March, empty all the drawers and put clean paper in the bottom . . . We used to take the carpets up, put them out on the line and beat them, then bring them back in and wash them.'⁴³ Mrs E, too, showed the lengths to which people went to achieve satisfactory results: 'Not just the inside. The front paths had to be swilled . . . I can remember my mother . . . sitting doing the outside of the window, you know, me being terrified she fell off the sill.'⁴⁴ Mrs A commented: 'I even whitewashed the coal house, always, every spring.'⁴⁵ Mrs H certainly felt that standards had dropped:

And cleaning up! Oh. Cleaning up every week, at weekend. Everything was thrown out in the back yard: mats, furniture if you could get that out, and the floors were scrubbed . . . Everything what was wood was scrubbed, and like steps, were scoured. Everything was done properly. Not like today, with a squirt, squirt and a cloth. Nowt like that, at all. And all the pictures were taken off the wall and washed.⁴⁶

Of course, technology certainly took the drudgery out of much housework for those that could afford it; by 1948, only 40% of families with electricity had a vacuum cleaner.⁴⁷ The taking out of carpets to beat on the line referred to above must have been much harder work, physically, than running a vacuum cleaner around, to achieve only similar results. However, there is no technological advance that makes obsolete the tasks of swilling paths, replacing drawer lining or taking down pictures to wash them. If these are not so widely practised it is standards, or priorities, that have changed. Another time-consuming task that has been abandoned rather than mechanised is cleaning the front step. Mrs J, for example, described how: 'You used to have to do them with step stone, keep them clean . . . nearly every day they got done . . . People were proud of their doorsteps.'⁴⁸ Mrs V, too, commented: 'I used to scrub the front. We had a front way and a step. That was one of my jobs when I was younger and I did do that, and I loved it . . . from six or seven onwards . . . Some people used to swill it and leave it but I didn't. I used to get

⁴² See, for example, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956) p.28; Ruth Schwartz-Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Grace Lees-Maffei, 'Accommodating "Mrs Three-in-One": homemaking, home entertaining and domestic advice literature in post-war Britain', *Women's History Review*, 16:5 (2007) 723-54, p. 744.

⁴³ Hull Transcripts: Mrs A's interview, pp. 10, 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs E's interview, p. 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, p. 128.

⁴⁸ Hull Transcripts: Mrs J's interview, p. 26.

down on my hands and knees and scrub it, and I loved doing it. I used a donkey stone to get a nice edge, a white edge.’⁴⁹

The reasons for the very high standards of cleaning espoused by these women should be considered. To some extent, the poor quality of housing may have encouraged this approach. Thus, badly-maintained houses in poor areas may have been prone to infestations of mice if food waste was ever left uncleared.⁵⁰ In order to reach acceptable standards, so that a house would feel like home to its inhabitants, poorly-repaired houses with old, scruffy furniture, may have needed to be sparkling clean, to compensate for the grimness of the conditions. Victoria Kelley has recently commented on the high standards of cleanliness held by many working-class families in the years before the First World War.⁵¹ Referring to attempts to inculcate middle-class values of cleanliness, Kelley argued that there was already a deeply-held value of cleanliness in many working-class homes.⁵² She saw such standards as a response to better living conditions at the time, so that, ‘to a certain extent working-class women found their “widening sphere” within, rather than beyond, domestic life.’⁵³ This is an argument that could equally be applied to the inter-war years, when the possibility of improved housing and the growing availability of domestic appliances could allow them to enjoy, in Kelley’s words, ‘a more complete domesticity that had previously been denied them by poverty and bad housing’.⁵⁴

III

Laundry was also an important aspect of housework, and one which, many accounts show, was generally dreaded since it was such hard work and so time-consuming.⁵⁵ A copper would be used over the fire to heat water, which would then be transferred into tubs or pans. Clothes would be soaked in the tubs, soaped, then a dolly or passing stick would be used to beat them. Then they would be scrubbed by hand or on a ridged washing board. Blocks of soap would be used until the development of soap powder in the 1930s.⁵⁶ After this, the clothes would be returned to the copper and boiled.⁵⁷ After rinsing, clothes would sometimes be ‘blued’ (put through a final rinse of ‘blue’ to make them whiter); sometimes they were starched. A particular day was usually set

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 35.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, p. 20.

⁵¹ Victoria Kelley, ‘“The Virtues of a Drop of Cleansing Water”: domestic work and cleanliness in the British working classes, 1880-1914’, *Women’s History Review*, 18:5 (2009) 719-35, p. 720.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 728.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 719.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 731.

⁵⁵ See, for example, accounts in Davidson, *A Woman’s Work*, pp. 150-1 and R Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Christine Zmroczek, ‘The Weekly Wash’, in Sybil Oldfield (ed) *This Working-Day World: Women’s lives and culture(s) in Britain, 1914-1945* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994) 7-17, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Davidson, *A Woman’s Work*, p. 146.

aside for the laundry (usually Monday) but it was not always finished in this time. Washing was particularly time-consuming if mains supply water was not available, since water for each process had to be carried, sometimes some distance. Drying clothes, too, was a major job in overcrowded homes. Piles of dripping wet laundry would have to be hung from clothes lines overhead in cramped rooms. Some progress was made in the late 19th century with the development of a mangle that could wring clothes and smooth them; these remained very popular until around 1930.⁵⁸ However, mangles were so large that few homes contained suitable storage and they generally had to be kept in the yard or in a shed.⁵⁹ Flat irons were still used to smooth clothes but, from the early 1900s, electric irons were developed; these had rustproof bottoms and so did not have to be cleaned every time they were used, as the old type had to be. Eighty-six per cent of all homes with electricity had electric irons by 1948.⁶⁰ However, electric irons were sometimes seen as a mixed blessing. Mrs D, describing their first electric iron, bought in the 1950s: ‘It was very basic, this electric iron. It didn’t have a thermostat. You had to keep turning it on and off as you felt it was getting hot.’⁶¹ Mrs V actually preferred flat irons: ‘You wouldn’t believe it but they ironed things far better than an electric iron. It’s unbelievable. They do.’⁶²

Overall, the technology involved in washing clothes, in contrast to that of cleaning houses, has changed dramatically, as the use of automatic washing machines, along with more easily washed fabrics, colour-fast dyes and scientifically designed washing powders, have revolutionised the task. The physical drudgery that was involved was emphasised by Mrs B, who described how water had to be carried in from an outside tap to wash in the scullery and a fire lit to boil the clothes.⁶³ Mrs V elaborated:

We used to have a big copper in the kitchen. When the water was boiling then the white clothes went in there, didn’t they, first, because that was the hottest water. And all the washing was done er . . . group by group in that same water. The whites went in first and then the coloured, and as the water cooled you can add cold water and do things like woollies and you know, socks and what not. It was a full day’s job. And a very hard job as well.⁶⁴

Mrs C described mangling: ‘They all had to go through the mangle. And then we used to have to fold them, you know, when they were dry, fold them and put them through the mangle again, straighten them so that they didn’t take so much ironing.’⁶⁵

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, *A Woman’s Work*, p. 156.

⁵⁹ Zmroczek, ‘The Weekly Wash’, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Davidson, *A Woman’s Work*, p. 156.

⁶¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D’s interview p. 26.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 34.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, p. 26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 33.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs C’s interview, p. 22.

Although early washing machines had been available since the beginning of the 20th century, their technology was basic and they were extremely expensive. It was not uncommon for them to rust, leak, or even catch fire and the clothes inside could become very tangled. By 1938, only 4% of UK households possessed one.⁶⁶ Where new technology was used, progress could be limited, as shown by Mrs D, describing the washing machine her mother got in the 1950s: ‘it wasn’t a fully automated one like it is now. It had an electric agitator so that the clothes were moved about in the water so you didn’t have to use a posher. It took the hard work out. I mean the washing, the operation of washing would take as long but it wasn’t physically anything like as hard as it had been.’⁶⁷ Also, Mrs I, on washing and wringing: ‘I’d got what I thought was a nice modern wringing machine that fitted on the sink. And it didn’t work.’ Her husband temporarily took over the washing when she had a baby: ‘And he was so disgusted with it he threw it down the garden path. And he took me out the next day and he bought me an Acme Gas Washer. . . And it had an Acme wringer on which was marvellous, that Acme wringer.’⁶⁸

The idea that technological advances led to higher standards is much easier to support in the field of washing clothes than cleaning houses. New fabrics, such as viscose and rayon, started to be available in the 1920s and 1930s, although they did not always wear well when subjected to traditional laundry practices. One of Zmroczek’s interviewees remembered her new viscose slip disintegrating when left to dry near a gas flame.⁶⁹ Mrs D commented on how much more often clothes are washed now: ‘One reason is that . . . we’ve got washing machines. The other thing is that fabrics will wash. I mean, the fabrics we used to have, woollens, if you washed them, they would shrink up and er, a lot of warm clothes, I don’t mean just knitted jumpers, a lot of warm skirts and things were wool. They didn’t wash very well. And things needed starching and . . . it was harder to wash things. Fabrics are so easy to wash now, you might as well wash them.’⁷⁰

Washing appears to have been universally hated even by members of the household who did not actually do the work. Mrs V’s comments here are typical:

It was always on Monday. Everybody hated Monday. Even in me teens, I used to try to go to pictures on a Monday evening because of having to come back and see the fireguard full of wet washing round the fire. And in winter you couldn’t feel the heat from the fire, there was always washing. . . Even into the next day. And the place would be full of steam, and running down the windows. It wasn’t pleasant at all, wash day was hated.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Zmroczek ‘The Weekly Wash’, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁷ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D’s interview, p. 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs I’s interview, p. 64.

⁶⁹ Zmroczek, ‘The Weekly Wash’, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D’s interview, p. 30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 32.

IV

Cooking was another major household task. The difficulty or otherwise of this task was partly influenced by the facilities available – often fairly basic. However, the simplicity of their cooking arrangements did not necessarily make life easier. Cooking even the humblest meal in these circumstances required skill and experience to overcome obstacles, such as inadequate space over the fire (especially when more than one dish had to be ready at the same time), difficulty in controlling temperature and shortage of cooking utensils. Mr F, who visited all kinds of homes doing property repairs, recalled being offered, ‘a drink of tea that was made in a pan and offered in a basin because they’d no cups’.⁷² Cooking must certainly have been made much easier for most with the introduction of the gas cooker. Cooking with gas first began on a wide scale in the 1880s, accelerating in popularity, as mentioned above, with the introduction of hiring facilities and ‘penny in the slot’ payment. This major innovation meant that working-class women were no longer dependent on cooking on a fire that had to be lit before it was needed, and constantly tended and fed with bulky coal that had to be carried to the fire. The popularity of gas cookers grew so that, by 1939, three quarters of all families had one.⁷³ Electric cookers, too, began to be available during the 1890s, but did not become as popular as gas ovens until the 1920s when electricity supplies spread and the expansion in demand led to a fall in price.⁷⁴ Especially in the first quarter of the 20th century, then, some cooking arrangements left much to be desired, sometimes with terrible consequences, as Mrs F remembered, on being asked about the accident that caused the death of her three-year-old brother:

[T]he cooking facilities in those days were not very good. We had one of these fireplaces, with . . . an oven at the side, and the only extra cooking we had apart from that was a gas ring which was at the end of the table . . . And the children were sat there, and the table was there, and there was a pan of something boiling, vegetables or something, and I was setting the table. And the drawer was at that end and something stuck, you know how something sticks in a drawer, and I gave it a pull and it knocked the pan off and the water fell down his . . . all down one side. It was his left side. And I can remember, it was bonfire night, and I can remember them, you know, taking him to the . . . you took him yourself, put him in a pram and pushed him to the Children’s Hospital which was about, oh, just over a mile, maybe a bit more than a mile, taking him there and of course they kept him in. So he could have a doctor’s care, but there wasn’t anything they could do for him and he did eventually die.⁷⁵

This incident is obviously seared in her memory, with all the detail she included in describing it.

Several Hull respondents had vivid memories of the kinds of food they had eaten in times of extreme poverty, when diets were obviously more limited. For example, Mrs D (one of a family of 11 whose father was unemployed during the 1930s) described:

⁷² *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 89.

⁷³ Davidson, *A Woman’s Work*, pp. 67, 68.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁵ Hull Transcripts: Mrs F’s interview, p. 27.

[W]e always had stale bread with margarine scraped on, and margarine wasn't like it is now. Not at all as nice . . . my mam used to get a tin of tomatoes, which were cheap I think, and put them in the frying pan, and she used to dip slice after slice of bread in it. And we used to sit there eating slice after slice of bread and tomato. Well, you see, you wouldn't now give a family just a tin of tomatoes for their tea. Between them all.⁷⁶

Similarly, Mrs H recollected food items which made small sums go further: 'Sometimes she used to send us for a pennorth of bacon bits, with all the rind and bits of fat and all that, and you used to render em down and you had bread and dip.'⁷⁷ Mrs K recalled: 'Well you see, we used to have a Yorkshire pudding first, with gravy on it. And then the meat and vegetables came but you see the pudding filled you up. That's what I think is the idea of a big Yorkshire pudding plus gravy, so you tucked into that, so you didn't want as much meat, you see.'⁷⁸ Mrs S remembered trying to calculate whether home-made bread was cheaper: 'I thought it was . . . I worked it out and I thought, well, I'll get three loaves for the price of one when I added the flour and . . . when you bake bread, I found out that they eat more of it anyway, so sometimes I was left . . . and you got visitors who'd say, "Oh, I'll have a slice of that", and so sometimes I'd finish up making it twice in a day.'⁷⁹ Mr V remembered his diet as a child: 'We used to have sheep's head . . . And hearts. And tripe and onions . . . Oxtail. All the cheap cuts. Anything you could buy cheap. And we bought horsemeat.'⁸⁰ Two respondents remembered using a bake house for baking bread. Mrs B remembered paying 6d to use a bake house in Scarborough Street to bake bread, rather than pay for fuel at home⁸¹ Mrs H, too: 'I used to have to go to me Grandma's on the days when she made bread, and we had an old pram, and she used to put all the tins in and I used to have to go to the bakehouse and they used to bake 'em and then later on, they used to tell you what time to come back.'⁸² Noticeably, it tended to be the earlier generation that baked bread. Mrs A: 'Mother always baked her own bread when we were young. And auntie did, when we went to live with her, she baked her own. I never have baked bread but otherwise I baked.'⁸³

Working-class people were often criticised for their poor diet, especially for not eating vegetables. However, diet varied considerably over the country and there is some evidence that traditions of diet meant that northern women cooked more of the kinds of foods that were nutritious and cheap.⁸⁴ Elizabeth Roberts certainly found much evidence in Lancashire of a

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 28.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, p. 34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 32.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr V's interview, p. 39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 31.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 11.

⁸⁴ D. Allen, 'Regional variations in food habits', in D. J. Oddy and D. S. Miller (eds) *The Making of the Modern British Diet*, (London: Croom Helm, 1976) 135-47; Margery Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives: their health and conditions* (1939; London: Virago, 1981) p. 165.

varied, nutritious diet skilfully prepared.⁸⁵ This appears also to have been true in Hull, judging by the meals described above. One respondent remembered his father keeping rabbits to provide meat for the family and several remembered men working allotments to provide their families with vegetables.⁸⁶ Fish was also remembered as a staple in Hull. According to Mr U:

We lived on kippers, and herrings, soused herrings. But also the cod and haddock that came off the dock, and they, I mean each fisherman had what they call a fry when they landed. You used to get a bass of fish. Although in them days you had no way of keeping it cool so you had to eat it on the day, or you fried a lot of it. I remember me mother frying plates and plates of fish, cos once it was cooked then you could eat it cold for two or three days after.⁸⁷

Mrs W even remembered a special arrangement that her mother had for keeping fish smells out of the house: 'I remember them having a gas ring that you could connect and put in the yard and cook fish on.'⁸⁸

Amongst my respondents, cooking was often remembered as more elaborate than it is now. For example, Mrs A: 'I used to do soup, I had an oven. We used to put chicken bones, we used to put them in a big pan and in the oven and vegetables and that you know. I used to always cook a dinner, potatoes and all meat and everything and a pudding, steamed pudding.'⁸⁹ Immense pride was often taken in these skills. Mrs P, on her mother's baking: 'those little flat currant buns. She used to call them fat rascals . . . she'd do date squares, and er . . . oh of course, curd cheese cakes with real curd and er . . . oh, fruit cakes . . . when she'd finished, and she used to love to get everything all set out. She'd say, "Now doesn't that look nice?" She was real proud and we were all proud for her because, I mean, it was a hard job to do such a pile.'⁹⁰ Mrs D described her mother making wine from potatoes and beetroot.⁹¹ Mrs F recalled porridge being cooked for breakfast and both she and her husband remembered puddings being cooked daily, steamed puddings and jam 'roly-poly'. Rice pudding and semolina pudding were considered 'easy to cook' as 'you could put them in in the mornings and just leave them'.⁹² Some remembered delicacies being presented for Sunday tea, such as tomatoes or tinned fruit.⁹³

Not many respondents appeared to have found the lack of a refrigerator much of a problem, preferring to shop daily anyway. Mrs O, a country woman, didn't feel she needed one, 'Because I

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) p. 157.

⁸⁶ Hull Transcripts: Mrs G's interview, p. 9; Mrs J's interview, p. 12; Mr Q's interview, pp. 4, 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs U's interview, p. 28.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs W's interview, p. 18.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 11.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, p. 40.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 29.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Mr and Mrs F's interview, p. 59.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Mr and Mrs F's interview, pp. 59-60; Mrs H's interview, p. 9.

had a big dairy then, and it was cold, ever so cold.’⁹⁴ However, Mrs C, who had nine children, so must have had more food shopping to do than most, commented: ‘Oh, it was a nightmare, shopping. At Christmas it was an absolute nightmare. Cos you see, you couldn’t get your bread and put it in the freezer or anything like that. You’d to go out and the day before, Christmas Eve, was terrible. You used to go and queue at the shops for bread and meat and . . . Oh, it was a real trial, you know. I used to dread Christmas.’⁹⁵

Where technological improvements in cooking facilities were available, they were not always welcomed, as Mrs O described:

[W]e got a new fireplace in and I was thrilled to bits with it because it had a lot of bright parts to it, and it had a good big oven. I could get er . . . four bread loaves at the bottom and four on the second. That’s how big the oven was. But it was beautiful . . . And we hadn’t had it long, before he came in . . . ‘We’re going modern’, and he said, ‘You’re having electric so you can get yourself an electric oven.’ Well I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where to put all me pots, you know, and me plates and all that, you know, to warm. There was nowhere to put ’em. I was lost. . . I was real upset about that . . . And you see I was going across there to work. In the morning I just used to bank the fire and . . . turn me rug back and I knew it was all safe, and there was a lovely fire when I came home. And if I wanted dinner putting in, say I wanted a piece of beef, I’d slip across the middle of the morning push that in and at dinner time it’d be ready. No bother.’⁹⁶

V

The skills involved in housework were extensive, and their learning must have been a major undertaking. On being asked where they learned how to cook, surprisingly few claimed that their mothers had taught them. In some cases this was because mothers were ill or had died before their children were old enough to do much cookery.⁹⁷ Others were simply not allowed. Mrs R, for example, commented: ‘I didn’t learn anything at home cos Mother wouldn’t let us do anything at home.’⁹⁸ There is some evidence that women may have underestimated what they learned by watching and ‘helping’ as part of play. For example, Mrs E immediately denied when asked that her mother had taught her to cook, but went on to say: ‘I can remember the remains of the pastry. Shoving them in. They were grubby little things, going in tins in the oven. Not teaching me to cook, me just playing.’⁹⁹ Many claimed to have ‘just picked it up’,¹⁰⁰ a comment that could reflect having learned, unselfconsciously, through play. Only one woman, Mrs O, seemed to have been trained systematically in domestic skills by her mother. Born into rural East Yorkshire in

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 30.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs C’s interview, p. 23.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 30.

⁹⁷ Both Mrs B and Mrs C were in this position.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs R’s interview, p. 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs E’s interview, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs B’s interview, p. 28; Mrs C’s interview, p. 26.

1911, her early home appears to have been less well equipped than most of the urban homes described, lacking even running water. She described her mother teaching her to do housework:

[F]irst job that you ever started with, was to clean the toilet outside. And it had a wooden seat of course, and you had to learn to scrub that seat, and I always remember, the first time I scrubbed it, I scrubbed the seat and I said, 'I've finished, Mam.' And she came and said, 'You haven't done that corner, and that corner. Now do it again.' I thought, well, of all the cheek! Anyroad I scrubbed it again. So she came back. She said, 'It isn't really right, you know, you haven't got well into the corners, but that'll do for now. Now the door.' Well, it was only an old toilet . . . And so I'd to wash the door and then do the floor . . . she was teaching us . . . all us girls, that was our first job. 'Cos you see, if you made a mess, it was in the toilet. It wasn't in the house.¹⁰¹

All the women interviewed remembered the learning of domestic skills at school. Whilst education for domestic work at school has sometimes been dismissed as irrelevant to working women,¹⁰² most of this sample found it a positive experience, either enjoyable or useful or, sometimes, both. For example, Mrs C was quite dismissive of school generally, maintaining that she had learned nothing, but did find the training in domestic subjects useful.¹⁰³ Cookery was the only thing that Mrs B enjoyed doing at school, going with a group to different schools with special facilities to do baking and cooking and also the preliminary shopping. For some, lessons in domestic work were the highlight of their school lives, for example, Mrs L, describing domestic lessons at school:

They used to have a house in Melrose Street and we used to go there for a day and I used to look forward to that. It was really nice and we used to do cleaning. . . I was in me element there. I liked cleaning the house and things like that. . . And then of course we had cookery, a proper cookery thing in the school, where we learnt how to bake and do that and I quite enjoyed that. I like that sort of thing.¹⁰⁴

Even where the experience at school appeared to be a world away from home life, girls could benefit. Mrs W recalled domestic subjects at school glowingly:

[W]e did domestic science and that was lovely, you know. We had beautiful big kitchens . . . and all the proper utensils and you know, recipes . . . I used to go home . . . and show them what I'd made and my Mother and my Grannie used to . . . 'oh, well, you tell us', and we would have a go at making it, so it was quite . . . fun.¹⁰⁵

For most, domestic classes encompassed much more than cookery. For example, according to Mrs V, describing learning housework, including laundry, at Estcourt High School, 'it wasn't just a case of cookery. We had a flat and every class that had home-making and cookery cleaned

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs O's interview, p. 32.

¹⁰² Shani D'Cruze, for example in 'Women and the Family' from June Purvis (ed), *Women's History: Britain 1850-1945, an introduction*, (London: UCL, 1995) 51-83, p. 73, referred to 'initiatives such as domestic science in elementary schools, that had little relevance to their [working-class women's] lives'.

¹⁰³ Hull Transcripts: Mrs C's interview pp. 6-7.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs L's interview, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs W's interview, p. 8.

this flat and it must have been the cleanest place in Hull. We were shown how to look after furniture and how to clean a home. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.’¹⁰⁶ In addition to this: ‘We did sewing, all sorts of different needlework . . . Making clothes. We did cross thread work. We did smocking.’ On being asked if she found that useful after school: ‘Making clothes I did, definitely. And repairing. We was taught how to repair.’¹⁰⁷ Mrs W also recalled a range of domestic skills being taught:

[W]e learned how to wash and iron. [Laughs] And there was a little flat and we all had turns in cleaning this flat, and we were instructed on how to clean properly. And then we all took turns as well at cooking a lunch for the teachers, and they would sort of come in and we would serve them and we’d have our lunch, you know. I suppose it was lessons in gracious living! [Laughs]¹⁰⁸

On being asked if she found such lessons useful afterwards: ‘Well yes it was, you see, because I learnt ever such a lot of things that you . . . don’t know about if you come from a . . . well, dare I say, a working-class family where money’s tight and people don’t have those kinds of pretensions. [Laughs]’¹⁰⁹

Details were remembered of household tips given at school. For example, Mrs F, remembering learning to clean stair carpets at school: ‘they used to keep the tea leaves, and they used to put the damp tea leaves on the stair carpets, and then you used to brush them off. I suppose the idea was that the damp tea leaves stopped the dust from rising, you see.’¹¹⁰ Many women felt that they had learned useful lessons from school domestic classes.¹¹¹ On considering the breadth of experience that appears to have been offered in this field, one can believe that the teachers, as argued by Ann Marie Turnbull: ‘believed that the elevation, and if possible the professionalisation, of their traditional domestic skills would raise women’s social status’.¹¹²

VI

The issue of how housework is split within the household continues to be debated.¹¹³ Within my sample, virtually all respondents felt that their mothers had done the greatest share.¹¹⁴ Likewise, in most cases, female respondents followed suit when they themselves married whilst male

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs W’s interview, p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs W’s interview, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs F’s interview, p. 65.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs C’s interview, p. 26; Mrs R’s interview, p. 8; Mrs W’s interview, p. 9.

¹¹² Ann Marie Turnbull, ‘An Isolated Missionary: the domestic subjects teacher in England, 1870-1914’, *Women’s History Review*, 3:1 (1994) 81-100, p. 82.

¹¹³ See, for instance, John P Robinson and Melissa Milkie, ‘Back to basics: trends in and role determinants of women’s attitudes towards housework’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60:1 (1998) 205-18.

¹¹⁴ The only exceptions to this general rule occurred in cases where mothers had suffered long-term ill health or had died during respondents’ childhoods.

respondents remembered doing much less than their wives. The contribution of children varied more. Several had been asked to do little, and asked little of their own children.¹¹⁵ When asked whether boys and girls had contributed differently around the house, some felt that no distinction had been made.¹¹⁶ This appeared to be true amongst respondents and their siblings as children, and amongst respondents (once grown-up) and their own children. However, more felt that whilst both boys and girls had both helped, their contributions were very different. Mrs L, for instance, commented that her brother ‘had a paper round, like, and he used to sort of help mother that way’.¹¹⁷ Mrs N and her sister, as well as her two brothers, all had jobs to do around the house, although her brothers’ jobs tended to be ‘running errands’ rather than housework.¹¹⁸ When Mrs O was a child, girls in the house helped with housework but boys helped their father in the garden, growing vegetables: ‘you never bought anything in those days’.¹¹⁹ Mrs P’s brother ‘used to black the shoes, black the boots, do the windows, the high windows’.¹²⁰ On being asked what kind of jobs the boys and girls did around the house when he was young, Mr T commented: ‘the boys would be more manual like, and the girls did more domestic’.¹²¹ Whilst none seemed critical of their parents for creating this distinction, none continued it for their children, either claiming that all did little or all helped, regardless of their sex.¹²²

The vast majority of men did contribute in varying degrees (both fathers of respondents and male respondents or husbands of respondents). Mostly the tasks undertaken by men were separate from everyday housework, for example, decorating; carpentry; or polishing shoes.¹²³ Mrs W on being asked if her father did any housework answered: ‘Well he was the gardener.’¹²⁴ Gardening, specifically growing vegetables, was a common male task. According to Mrs G, her husband ‘more or less kept us in vegetables’ from his allotment, as did Mrs J’s father, Mrs O’s father and brothers¹²⁵ and Mr Q’s father - along with keeping rabbits for food.¹²⁶ Mrs N’s father’s contribution was to carve the Sunday joint and mend the family shoes.¹²⁷ Mr V, too, remembered

¹¹⁵ For example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs E’s interview, p. 48; Mrs J’s interview, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ For example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs C’s interview p. 12; Mrs G’s interview, p. 10; Mrs J’s interview, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs L’s interview, p. 15.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs N’s interview, p. 17.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 32.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs P’s interview, p. 23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Mr T’s interview, p. 19.

¹²² For example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs C’s interview, p. 12; Mrs D’s interview, p. 14; Mrs G’s interview, p. 10.

¹²³ Both Mrs A’s husband and Mrs K’s father helped with decorating (Hull Transcripts: Mrs A’s interview, p. 10; Mrs K’s interview, p. 30). Mrs G’s father did carpentry (Mrs G’s interview, p. 9.) Mrs E’s father’s polished shoes (Mrs E’s interview, p. 37).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs W’s interview, p. 19.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs G’s interview, p. 9; Mrs J’s interview, p. 12; Mrs O’s interview, p. 32.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Mr Q’s interview, pp. 3, 41.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs N’s interview, p. 28.

his father mending shoes, ‘Gibson Street, there was a man who sold leather purely for menfolk to buy to mend their families’ shoes.’¹²⁸ The undertaking of certain, household jobs was common even in the most strictly segregated traditions (where they would tend to be specifically ‘male’ tasks).¹²⁹ Mr and Mrs W’s approach to housework was fairly typical comprising, in his words: ‘demarcation . . . I’ve always done the gardening. I’ve always done the painting and decorating, house maintenance.’ And Mrs W: ‘And I do the general cleaning and housework, and cooking, ironing washing, all that stuff, you know. Whatever. Yes. Yes, I think I get off lightly, actually . . . we do what we like doing, don’t we?’¹³⁰

Although this demarcation model was the commonest approach to housework amongst these couples, men contributing in traditionally ‘women’s’ areas were not uncommon. For instance, Mrs B’s husband always did housework: ‘[M]e and Alf always mucked in together. Oh, he used to say, “I’ll do that” and I’d say, “Alright, you do that and I’ll do the other.”’ He even baked and decorated cakes, learning from a cookery book, just as she had. ‘Hot cross buns. And he’d a real light hand, with bread and everything, it was lovely.’¹³¹ This level of involvement was a little unusual, and Mr B’s ease with food preparation may have been connected to his starting his working life as a butcher. However, other men were also very involved in domestic work. For instance, Mrs M, on her parents spring cleaning together: ‘they used to start spring cleaning in April, finish in August. They did, honestly. They used to take these blooming Venetian blinds down, I can see my Dad now. They put ’em in the scrubbing tub that she used to scrub her clothes in, wash them, boil the tapes.’¹³² Her whole family cleaned the brasses together: ‘he would put the brass polish on, I would rub it off, she’d polish it up.’¹³³

Many men, too, had *some* involvement in ‘women’s work’. Both Mr R’s and Mrs E’s fathers cooked the family’s Sunday breakfast.¹³⁴ Mrs K’s father did the washing up as did Mrs S’s father when her mother was unwell.¹³⁵ Mrs M’s father ‘did all her shopping. Yes, she never did it. He used to go . . . to market on Saturday.’¹³⁶ Mrs T’s father did some shopping ‘he went to market on a Monday . . . He used to bring fish home.’¹³⁷ Mr F operated the sewing machine: ‘I think it was unusual for a man to do it. I don’t know why I started, but I did and it even got to the

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr V’s interview, p. 40.

¹²⁹ See, for example, Neil Penlington, ‘Masculinity and Domesticity in 1930s South Wales: Did Unemployment Change the Domestic Division of Labour?’ *Twentieth-Century British History*, 21: 3 (2010) 281-99, p. 286.

¹³⁰ Hull Transcripts: Mr and Mrs W’s interview, p. 21.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, p. 29.

¹³² *Ibid.*, Mrs M’s interview, p. 20.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Mrs M’s interview, p. 21.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs E’s interview, p. 37; Mr R’s interview, p. 37.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs K’s interview, p. 29; Mrs S’s interview, p. 30.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs M’s interview p. 23.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs T’s interview, p. 27.

state when Ethel, one of my sisters, when she was getting married I made her wedding dress. She pinned it together and I did the treadling.’¹³⁸ Mr F remembered that his mother did most of the housework, except when his father indulged his partiality for offal: ‘And he would cook it, ’cos me mother didn’t like cooking anything but the straightforward meat.’¹³⁹ Mrs B’s father, widowed when she was a child, would take herself and her sister to buy shoes and clothes although she never remembered him cleaning or cooking.¹⁴⁰

Men who appeared not to help at all or hardly at all, were in a minority and opinion was divided on how far this was acceptable. Some appeared to accept that domestic work was women’s business. For instance, on being asked if her husband helped much with the housework, Mrs C answered: ‘Not really with the housework. Well he had no need to, really. The girls were growing up and they helped, you know. There was no need for him to do any housework.’¹⁴¹ Mrs O, too, when asked if her mother ever asked her father to help with housework, replied: ‘No. My mother wouldn’t . . . it was a case of, he does his work outside, we do inside.’¹⁴² Mrs D, who did not remember her father helping much with housework, despite his long-term unemployment and their large family, was unsure that her mother would have welcomed his help on the domestic front. When asked if her mother had seemed to want his help, she commented: ‘I think she would have liked him to have done decorating and fixing shelves and things like that. She would definitely have liked that.’¹⁴³

Several respondents, on being asked about men’s contribution with housework, referred to the long hours they spent at work. Take Mrs G, on being asked if her husband did much around the house: ‘I mean, when we married, it was a forty-eight hour week, so therefore . . . and he’d been on the railway, he was a shiftworker, so he didn’t have a lot of time.’¹⁴⁴ In reply to the same question, Mrs O laughed, ‘Not Dad, no . . . Well, really . . . they used to have to work late hours.’¹⁴⁵ Mr Q, too, was quick to defend his father from a perceived suggestion of laziness, on being asked if his father helped much with housework: ‘Not that I know of. Only if she wasn’t well or anything like that . . . I mean, he didn’t go to the pub or anything. It was work, garden and home. I mean, even in wintertime he’d go to garden.’¹⁴⁶

In other cases where men did little housework, respondents explained that this was because they had never been taught or encouraged to help as children – leaving them quite useless. Mrs

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 55.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 60.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, p. 15.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs C’s interview, p. 26.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 33.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 27.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs G’s interview, p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 32.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Mr Q’s interview, p. 28.

M's husband, for example, never did housework, as his maiden aunt, who had looked after him, did everything for him: 'He was ruined before I met him, in that way.' When asked if she minded his not helping, she replied: 'No . . . Well, I'd all the time in the world, hadn't I?'¹⁴⁷ Mrs R, too, on being asked if her father helped much with housework: 'he never had chance to do anything like that 'cos my Grandmother carried him about.'¹⁴⁸ A few examples showed men unwilling to help even when asked. In their married life, Mrs F still did most of the housework, despite her complaints. She appeared particularly upset that he would not perform the accepted 'male' task of swilling the yard.¹⁴⁹ However, gradually, Mr F was prepared to take on more: 'I think I've matured with the years . . . I do all sorts of things now. Yes. I'll turn my hand to most things.'¹⁵⁰

There were several instances of women's reluctance to allow men to help around the house and the reasons for this are worth examining. Joanna Bourke suggested that it sprang from a desire to retain power and control in the house, relating a tale in support of this from early 20th-century Ireland. After the daughter of the house's success in the kitchen following a cookery course, the mother: 'suddenly lifted up her voice and wept. "Oh!" she lamented, wringing her hands, "After me cooking and slaving for you for 20 years! And now to have my own daughter put against me!" And she finished with a flood of tears.'¹⁵¹ Mrs W's description (related earlier) of her mother and grandmother gamely joining in the fun as she practised school recipes at home contrasts with this. Both incidents perhaps reflect more about the personalities of the women involved than attitudes to cookery in general. However, Bourke's contention that housewives attempted to keep others out of their 'specialist' areas of housework in order to consolidate their power found no direct support in my oral evidence.¹⁵² The extensive evidence of men's involvement in a range of domestic work that would traditionally be regarded as women's business also argues against this theory.

The occasions on which women were unwilling to see others performing their own skilled tasks can, then, be usefully examined. For example, Mrs O, commented, on her reluctance to let her son cook: 'Do you know, he does all sorts in the house now he's married, and he's ever so good at cooking. But I would never let him. When we were at farm, he wanted to cook, so at first I said no but Bren [her older daughter] being years older than him, oh, don't be mean Mam, let him have a go . . . Anyway, he did, and he's a lovely cook.'¹⁵³ When asked why she had been reluctant to allow him however, her reasons had nothing to do with control: 'Why, with him

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, p. 22.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, pp. 37, 38.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 61

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr and Mrs F's interview, p. 61.

¹⁵¹ Bourke *Working-class Cultures*, pp. 67-71.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Hull Transcripts: Mrs O's interview, p. 19.

messing about, getting under my feet.’¹⁵⁴ Such a view was understandable. At a time when cooking facilities were limited and food was a relatively major family expense, the risks of allowing the unskilled (either children or inexperienced men) loose in the kitchen were high. Horrendous accidents could occur in domestic kitchens (as in Mrs F’s account – above – of her brother’s death). Even minor spillages could be disastrous if precious food was wasted. Cooking in crowded kitchens, with limited facilities and no spare food must be stressful; having to do it whilst training raw apprentices must be worse. Despite her initial reluctance, Mrs O’s pride in her son’s eventual domestic achievements is evident. The following narrative of a woman’s reasons for preferring to manage without her husband’s help is also interesting:

[Father] was going to do the top in the sitting room, which was a big room . . . it was whitewash in those days and . . . Mother had got it all ready and everything was ready in the room for him . . . She even found him an old shirt to put on top of his . . . and a er dustcap, you know, on his bald head. Well, he looked a right Charlie. And anyway, poor man, he’d only been gone about ten minutes into the room, and there was a terrific crash, and then he came paddling back and he just opened the door a bit and he said, ‘Ma, I’ve had a bit of an accident’, and he’d knocked the whitewash from the top of the steps, and there was whitewash all over this floor, and Mary and I went with table spoons scraping it up! . . . Mother was very annoyed. ‘Oh no, can’t trust you to do anything. . .’ He never did another thing.’¹⁵⁵

On the face of it, this tale can be seen to illustrate a woman’s straightforward, practical reason for not wanting her husband to help – he was either incompetent or assuming incompetence with the aim of not being asked again. It was related by the couple’s daughter with the air of a practised narrative which has been told many times before and it tells us something of her attitude towards her parents. Her mother is strong, used to coping: it was she who decided that the room needed decorating, she who organised the undertaking, prepared the room and provided her husband with suitable clothing. Her father, on the other hand, is portrayed as a figure of ridicule, a ‘right Charlie’ who is barely on the job for ten minutes before knocking over the paint, wasting household resources and creating yet another job. It is interesting that he does not even clear up the mess he has made, it is left to the narrator and her sister to scrape it up with spoons, leaving one to wonder if the story is a parable with a deeper meaning of the *general* incompetence of men and the *universal* coping abilities of women. Her father is infantilised, helpless, not to be trusted to do anything. Of course, as discussed in Chapter 1, the story may not be literally true, word for word; an anecdote such as this, shaped over years to illustrate a father’s household incompetence may be exaggerated, and the memory of direct speech after so many years must be questioned. If the conversation is reported accurately, however, it seems that, in addressing his wife as ‘Ma’, he

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs P’s interview, p. 22.

is accepting the role he has been given as equivalent to another child in the household. The story reads like a scenario from *Coronation Street*, where stereotypes of strong working-class women and hopeless men abound. In Chapter 1, I discuss how respondents in oral history can be influenced by popular culture in shaping stories from their past. Considering how strong such stereotypes are in present-day soap operas, it is interesting how few similar tales I heard narrated. On the contrary, most men were portrayed as helpful and competent, undertaking their household tasks willingly and happy to assist with domestic work when asked.

VII

After considering the way in which housework was shared within the family, the impact of new household appliances may also be usefully examined. A range of such goods were increasingly widely available from the 1920s.¹⁵⁶ According to Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, the rate of take-up of consumer goods followed a general pattern. Initially, a small group of ‘innovating’ customers would buy a new product; with time, knowledge of the product grew and more consumers would buy it; eventually, market saturation would be reached, where virtually all potential customers had obtained the product, so sales would decline to replacement-purchase levels.¹⁵⁷ However, Bowden and Offer pointed to the fact that some consumer items became much more popular more quickly than others.¹⁵⁸ They attempted to explain the difference by categorising products into two distinct groups: ‘time saving’ (such as washing machines) and ‘time using’ (such as radios). Time-using appliances, they argued, sold much faster.¹⁵⁹ It must, then, they argued, have been more important for consumers to enhance the quality of their leisure time than to increase its quantity.¹⁶⁰

In fact, as mentioned earlier, time-saving appliances rarely led to a reduction in time spent on housework, in practice, but, rather, to higher standards.¹⁶¹ One survey of the average time spent by women on housework, indicated that it rose from 400 minutes a day in 1937 to 450 minutes a day in 1961.¹⁶² For working-class women, time spent in housework rose from less than 500 minutes a day in 1952, then fell to around 450 minutes in 1961.¹⁶³ For both working- and middle-class women, it has since fallen to 350-75 minutes per day in 1974/5, later rising

¹⁵⁶ Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, ‘Household appliances and the use of time: the US and Britain since the 1920s’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 47 (1994) 725-48, p. 725.

¹⁵⁷ Bowden and Offer, ‘Household appliances’, p. 726.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 727.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 728.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 732.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 734.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 734. For middle-class women, it almost doubled during this time, which possibly accounts, in part for this period’s association with domesticity.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 734. At which point it was the same as that for middle-class women.

slightly.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, no obvious link existed between the use of time-saving appliances and the amount of time spent doing housework; thus their benefits are not transparent. Also, time-saving appliances were likely to affect the lives only of the women using them, rather than other family members. Time-using appliances, on the other hand (such as radios or pianos) enhanced the lives of the whole household. These were also likely to be more visible – on show in the front room, for instance, rather than stored away in a kitchen cupboard, and therefore were more likely to confer status on the family.¹⁶⁵ Ben Fine questioned Bowden's and Offer's analysis, arguing that 'time saving' and 'time using' do not comprise distinct categories – some appliances, such as telephones, for instance, can both save and use time.¹⁶⁶ Certain consumer items that grew in popularity at this time, too – such as furniture – neither used nor saved time, but rather enhanced the environment.¹⁶⁷ According to Fine, time discipline is not particularly relevant within the home, where distinctions between work and leisure are not clear-cut, as many women might listen to the radio whilst doing housework, for instance.¹⁶⁸

The rate of diffusion of different household goods over time is worth considering. Peter Scott pointed out that most purchases for more expensive items – more than 70% by the 1930s – were funded by hire purchase.¹⁶⁹ He also noticed that such purchases among the working class were mainly of furniture, carpet, audio equipment, bicycles or pianos – with the exception of sewing machines, comparatively few labour saving household appliances were bought. According to Scott, this can be explained, in part, by the fact that married women were not able to enter into hire purchase agreements without their husbands' consent.¹⁷⁰ On balance, I agree with Fine that the distinction between 'time saving' and 'time using' appliances seems artificial and unhelpful in explaining the rate of diffusion of different consumer goods. It could well be that families chose goods that were more visible and, therefore, more status-enhancing. However, it could be simply that the rate of technological progress varied in different areas. It has already been noted, for example, that washing machines were slow to take off as they tended to be both expensive and basic. On the other hand, electric irons were owned by most homes with electricity by 1948.¹⁷¹ Scott's point – that the purchase of more expensive consumer items would have to be agreed by the man of the house – is worth noting. It is possible, then, that technology that

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 734.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 740.

¹⁶⁶ Ben Fine, 'Household appliances and the use of time: the US and Britain since the 1920s: a comment', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 52 (1999) 552-62, p. 553.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 554.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

¹⁶⁹ Peter Scott, 'The Twilight World of Interwar British Hire Purchase', *Past and Present*, No 177 (2002) 195-225, p. 198.

¹⁷⁰ Scott, 'Hire Purchase', p. 200.

¹⁷¹ Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, p. 156.

benefited women alone – such as washing machines – was a lower priority than technology that benefited that whole household – such as radios.

Another possibility could be that women, generally, have less interest in technology and are therefore less likely to be ‘innovators’ in this area.¹⁷² One of Zmroczek’s respondents pointed out, in discussing the reluctance to purchase domestic technology, that women ‘didn’t have time to think about it’.¹⁷³ Let us return, briefly, to an example cited earlier, in which Mrs I commented on her laundry facilities: ‘I’d got what I thought was a nice modern wringing machine that fitted on the sink. And it didn’t work.’ Mr I, who did some laundry after she had had a baby: ‘was so disgusted with it he threw it down the garden path. And he took me out the next day and he bought me an Acme Gas Washer. . . And it had an Acme wringer on which was marvellous, that Acme wringer.’¹⁷⁴ It could be assumed, from this example, that Mrs I’s desire for a functioning washing machine had been ignored, but that, as soon as her husband had to do the laundry, he immediately bought the latest technology. However, Mrs I does not appear to have perceived the need for a new machine; she already had what she considered to be a ‘nice modern’ wringer. Although acknowledging, in retrospect, that it ‘didn’t work’ she had not, at the time, been dissatisfied with it. Possibly her expectations of technology were lower, having been previously used to washing entirely by hand. In this example, then, it is not plausible to argue that the woman’s need for a labour-saving device was ignored: as soon as Mr I realised how limited the household’s laundry facilities were, he immediately bought a new washing machine, despite the fact that, ordinarily, laundry was not his job and he would be unlikely to be required to do it until his wife was indisposed again.

Notwithstanding these considerations, in discussing the development of household technology, especially in the inter-war years, its progress must not be exaggerated. Despite many innovations, poorer homes still operated with very basic equipment, as expressed by Mrs D, for instance, who was born in 1932 to a large family with an unemployed father. When asked if she remembered her family having any household appliances when she was a child she replied, ‘We had a sweeping brush.’¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² The notion that women are less likely to engage with technology is well documented. See, for instance: Timothy Teo, ‘Gender differences in the intention to use technology: A measurement invariance analysis’, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol 41, Issue 6 (Nov 2010) E120-E123; Rong Su, James Rounds and Patrick Armstrong, ‘Men and Things, Women and People: A Meta-Analysis of Sex Differences in Interests’, *Psychological Bulletin*, 135:6 (Nov 2009) 859-884; S. Hornig, ‘Gender differences in responses to news about science and technology’, *Science Technology and Human Values*, 17:4 (1992) 532-42.

¹⁷³ Zmroczek, ‘The Weekly Wash’, p. 14.

¹⁷⁴ Hull Transcripts: Mrs I’s interview, p. 64.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 23.

VIII

Another aspect of housework that should be considered is life ‘in service’. Some have argued that domestic servants were subject to rigorous discipline, social control and poor working conditions.¹⁷⁶ Whilst this may have been truer of live-in servants in larger, richer establishments, my respondents’ experiences of service appeared very different. Far from being a low-status job, Mrs B saw this work as highly desirable, despite her sister’s apparent resentment of her achievement: ‘I went into service because I was the lady of the house!’¹⁷⁷ She enjoyed being able to ‘dress nice’, commenting: ‘[I]t wasn’t a very big house, very nice though. I used to love housework then, you see, well I do now.’¹⁷⁸ Her employers were ‘so nice’ too, giving her free fish and chips from their shop daily.¹⁷⁹ Mrs O, too, went straight into service in a house with a new baby after leaving school at 13. She obviously saw her job as quite responsible, ‘I liked it because, you know, I took over there, and looked after the place there, and the family. It was lovely.’¹⁸⁰ It is possible that freer working conditions were increasing in the first half of the 20th century, especially immediately after the First World War. Judy Giles drew attention to Virginia Woolf’s 1924 comment on the changing relations between mistress and servant:

The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat.¹⁸¹

Giles criticised the social investigator Celia Fremlin, writer of a study of paid housework, for supposedly failing to grasp that ‘whatever the conditions of service and however kindly the mistress, helping another woman with her housework for wages involved an unequal relationship. By contrast, working-class women grasped this point very well and were becoming increasingly able to reject what, for them, would always be “servitude”.’¹⁸² However, the, admittedly, limited data I collected suggested that ‘service’ was not universally disliked and, where it was, the reasons were less ideological. For example, Mrs J simply found being a house maid at a theatrical boarding house very hard work: ‘I used to think to myself, I’m going to get out of this as soon as I can.’¹⁸³

¹⁷⁶ See, for instance, D’Cruze, ‘Women and Families’, pp. 67, 68.

¹⁷⁷ Hull Transcripts: Mrs B’s interview, p. 16.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, pp. 17, 20.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, pp. 18, 19.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 24.

¹⁸¹ From Virginia Woolf *Character in Fiction* (1924) quoted in Judy Giles, ‘Help for Housewives: domestic service and the reconstruction of domesticity in Britain, 1940-50’, *Women’s History Review*, 10:2 (2001) 299-323, p. 299.

¹⁸² Giles, ‘Help for Housewives’ p. 306, citing Celia Fremlin *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* (London: Methuen, 1940).

¹⁸³ Hull Transcripts: Mrs J’s interview, pp. 16, 17.

According to Selina Todd, social historians and sociologists between the 1960s and 1980s were, ‘preoccupied with whether “deference” or “defiance” shaped servants’ behaviour and actions’.¹⁸⁴ Todd suggested that being in service was a positive experience for many working-class women. Usually, being in service comprised a stage of life – from leaving school to getting married. It was often seen by women as useful ‘training’ for their domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers. For Todd, then, neither ‘deference’ nor ‘defiance’ but rather ‘detachment’ most accurately describes women’s feelings about being in service.¹⁸⁵ Thus, women in service might take tea in the drawing room when their mistress was out whilst at the same time expressing affection for her and appreciating good working conditions, yet feeling free to take alternative employment if it appeared more attractive.¹⁸⁶

Few respondents had any experience of employing domestic help. Mr U, whose father was a deep-sea fisherman and therefore relatively well-paid, remembered a teenaged girl, Gracie, helping on a casual basis, especially when his mother worked part-time in the ‘fish house’.¹⁸⁷ The impression he gave of the relationship was not one of servility and social control – rather, he saw her as a skilled woman bringing her own standards to the job. He remembered that ‘while Gracie was looking after us she used to give the house a good cleaning. Hah! My mother didn’t believe in cleaning.’¹⁸⁸ She did make some effort to clean the house when his father was due back from sea, ‘but then Gracie used to come and take charge of it’.¹⁸⁹

IX

It is often argued that women experienced a withdrawal into the home, a growing preoccupation, even obsession, with domesticity both between the wars and immediately after World War II. This is a notion worth exploring in considering women in domestic life during this period. In this section, therefore, I will consider the experience of women in Hull in this light: did they experience a greater focus on domesticity during these years? Deirdre Beddoe regarded the inter-war period as an ‘anti-progressive and reactionary’ era of British women’s history: ‘The single most arresting feature of the inter-war years was the strength of the notion that women’s place is in the home.’¹⁹⁰ Thus, women who had contributed massively in all areas of the war effort were unceremoniously returned to domesticity after the First World War. A new range of women’s

¹⁸⁴ Selina Todd, ‘Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain, 1900-1950’, *Past & Present*, 203 (2009) 181-204, p. 181.

¹⁸⁵ Todd, ‘Domestic Service,’ pp 182, 183, 196.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 182, 196, 197.

¹⁸⁷ Fish processing factories sited around the fish docks on Hessle Road were often referred to as ‘fish houses’.

¹⁸⁸ Hull Transcripts: Mr U’s interview, p. 22.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr U’s interview, p. 27.

¹⁹⁰ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989) p. 3.

magazines focused on the joys of home and family, and the media in general underlined the ‘portrayal of the housewife as the only desirable image a woman should adopt’.¹⁹¹ A culture of hostility to feminism and to the idea of women in paid employment grew, according to Beddoe.¹⁹² Elizabeth Roberts, in her 1890-1940 study, also argued that women’s place in the home became more fixed as increasing prosperity lessened the need for wives to engage in paid employment, even part-time.¹⁹³

This has been the mainstream view of women’s lives in the years between the wars. Indeed, in some contemporary accounts it is possible to discern an obsession with domesticity that bordered on the pathological. Many unoccupied middle-class women had long been suspected of imagining ailments as a way of passing the time. Growing working-class prosperity caused accusations of this disease to be targeted at them. An article in the *Lancet* in 1938 outlined the problem of ‘suburban neurosis’. Its author illustrated the problem in a sad little vignette describing the psychosomatic symptoms of an upper working-class/ lower middle-class woman living in a new suburban house that she and her husband can scarcely afford, isolated from family and friends and without enough to keep her busy. ‘Mrs Everyman’ suffers from vague ailments such as trembling, headache, backache, breathlessness, sleeplessness and weight-loss. When her husband is ill, she enjoys the luxury of being busy and indispensable (giving her, incidentally, the added advantage of being spared his sexual demands) and her symptoms disappear: ‘As long as the housework, the baby or the sick husband keep the young wife busy, all is fairly satisfactory. But once these cease to occupy her she is left with time on her hands and she starts to think, a process for which she is completely unadapted.’¹⁹⁴ The author comes close to identifying an obsession with domesticity as the problem.¹⁹⁵

This focus on domesticity was interrupted by the Second World War, during which working opportunities for women increased; as in the First World War, women were welcomed into jobs previously regarded as exclusively ‘male’. Afterwards, however, there was a return to domesticity and the culture of home was central to plans for post-war reconstruction.¹⁹⁶ During a time of danger, insecurity, dislocation and the absence of loved ones, a longing for home, security and domesticity is not surprising.¹⁹⁷ It was increasingly possible for everyone to aspire to the pleasures of domesticity: somewhere warm, clean and convenient, with a garden and an

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁹³ Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*, p. 203.

¹⁹⁴ Stephen Taylor, ‘The Suburban Neurosis’, *Lancet* 231:5978 (26 March 1938) 759-62, p. 760.

¹⁹⁵ Taylor, ‘Suburban Neurosis’, p. 760.

¹⁹⁶ Claire Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:2 (2005) 341-62, p. 345.

¹⁹⁷ Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home’, pp. 343, 344.

increasingly domesticated husband to lend a hand.¹⁹⁸ In-house entertainment by the fire was becoming nearly universal: whilst 4.3% of the population had a television in 1950, 81.8% had one by 1960.¹⁹⁹ More people experienced the nuclear family as more got married, and at a younger age, but fewer children and rising prosperity changed the nature of family life.²⁰⁰ A Mass-Observation Enquiry into People's Homes in 1943 found that most people wanted houses or bungalows with gardens, rather than flats.²⁰¹ This focus on privacy continued to be important, as Peter Willmott noted in his study of the council estate at Dagenham. There, a style of house that shared a porch with the neighbouring semi- caused real problems for many tenants and became very unpopular.²⁰²

In Hull, I found little evidence for a preoccupation with domesticity at any point during my period. In spite of Hull's growing suburbs, 'suburban neurosis' appears entirely absent. Concerning the notion of idealising the home that could be felt during war-time, this appears to have been particularly exemplified by Mr F, for instance, who had joined up in 1939, leaving his wife and baby son, and who was captured and held as a prisoner of war until 1945. He developed clear ideas of an imagined 'home' on his return, moving his family out to the market town of Pocklington. Unable to secure a smallholding, his first wish, they took on a small shop, offering similar independence for his family.²⁰³ It is possible that one reason why Hull women did not appear obsessed by domesticity was the fact that many of them were involved, to some extent, in paid employment. My interviewees mostly married and had their first child shortly before, during, or soon after World War II. During the inter-war years, then, many of their mothers were middle-aged women whose children were growing up. Of these, Mrs D's mother worked part-time, despite having a large family, taking in washing, braiding fish nets and charring.²⁰⁴ Mrs F's mother, a widow, went to work in a school canteen when her youngest child started school, staying there until her retirement.²⁰⁵ Mrs G's mother, whose father was in a mental hospital from her early childhood, worked full-time as a charlady: 'from the age of what, eight, nine, I was . . . a latchkey kid'.²⁰⁶ Mrs H's and Mrs J's mothers both used to take in washing, whilst Mrs O's mother worked part-time as a cleaner.²⁰⁷ It is hard to see these examples as likely to become victims of 'suburban neurosis'.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

²⁰² Peter Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community: A Study of Dagenham after Forty Years* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) p. 79.

²⁰³ Hull Transcripts: Mr F's interview, p. 2.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, pp. 17, 18.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 45.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs G's interview, pp. 1, 4, 11

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 19; Mrs J's interview, p. 10; Mrs O's interview, p. 24.

Of my female interviewees, too, almost all worked, at least part-time, when their children were at school. (They mostly had their last child starting school during the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s.) Of this group, too, many returned to the sort of work they had done before marriage – such as domestic, shop, pub, factory or office work. However, a significant proportion took up some other, more satisfying, job or career when their children were older. For example, of the twenty two in this sample, Mrs K trained as a nurse when her son was grown up and Mrs W trained as a teacher when her children were older. Mrs F, Mrs N and Mrs T all had their own shops as their children were growing, the independence giving them greater flexibility. Mrs I worked with her self-employed sign-writer husband, learning the trade from him as her four children grew up and Mrs D looked after the paperwork for her self-employed heating engineer husband. Rather than domestic work expanding to fit the time available, then, paid employment tended to fill the gap for Hull women once children were old enough to allow some free time. If Hull women were not obsessed with domesticity, it is unclear how far this was a local aberration since recent research has questioned the extent of increasing focus on domesticity between the wars. Adrian Bingham, for example, pointed to widening opportunities in leisure during this time, along with the liberation resulting from smaller families.²⁰⁸ Women, he argued, benefited enormously from the inter-war growth in youth culture and greater personal freedom – thus less restrictive and more fashionable clothing became more widely available.²⁰⁹ Bingham considered that the backlash against women by the media has been exaggerated, with many positive images of high-profile women in non-domestic roles presented, too – such as that of Hull’s own aviator heroine Amy Johnson.²¹⁰

X

This chapter has considered various aspects of housework, so what conclusions can be drawn? The first, most obvious point is how much easier it became. Hull’s housing stock immediately after World War I was, largely, very poor. Houses were often damp, inconvenient and lacking in basic services. By the 1930s, housing conditions had improved substantially with some slum clearance and with extensive building of both council estates and private houses that were, for the first time, attainable to buy for the better-off working class. Of course, the bombing of Hull during World War II caused housing shortages in the short term, but this was eased afterwards by

²⁰⁸ Adrian Bingham, “‘An Era of Domesticity’? Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004) 225-33, p. 227.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 230, 231.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 232; Robin Higham, ‘Johnson, Amy (1903-1941)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) online edn Jan 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34200>> accessed 9 July 2011.

more building and housing conditions, on the whole, improved. All the respondents describing very poor housing had experienced it in childhood, not in adulthood. Interestingly, some improvements appeared to strike people generally more than others. The innovation of electric lighting, for instance was commented on by almost everyone who had experienced it, since the irritation of fragile gas mantles constantly breaking was a widely shared memory.

Concerning the details of housework, it was generally perceived that standards had fallen in cleaning, and there were no comments on the ease brought by technological advance. Vacuum cleaners, which presumably must have made life easier, do not appear to have made much impact. Laundry, on the other hand, was seen by all as much harder before the introduction of automatic washing machines, an innovation that revolutionised the task. Even members of the household not directly involved in washing appreciated the improvement in lifestyle that washing machines brought. Advances in cooking equipment were regarded with more equivocation. Many respondents had fond memories of food they had eaten as children and no one commented on how much easier cooking is with modern conveniences; only one person mentioned the difficulties of life without a fridge.

The notion that housework was women's work was largely supported by all these interviews. Remembering their childhood, their mothers were felt to have done the bulk of the work if they were alive and well enough to do it. There appeared to be no discernible pattern suggesting that a more equal share of housework was more prevalent among the later-born respondents. In fact, tales of men having undertaken major household tasks were at least as common among the earliest born respondents. For instance, it was Mr R – born 1905 – and Mr E – born 1916 – who remembered their fathers' cooking the family's Sunday breakfast and Mr F – born 1907 – who sewed his sister's wedding dress. The evidence is necessarily impressionistic, but it did seem, too, that in general it was among the 'upper' working class that men were least likely to do housework. For instance, Mrs C, with nine children, was by no means wealthy, but her father and husband were in skilled trades and she had been an office worker before marriage. Her answer was typical of this class: her husband did not help – 'Not really with the housework. Well he had no need to, really.'²¹¹ The notion that women jealously guarded their domestic expertise, unwilling to allow men, or even other women, to 'interfere' was not supported by this evidence. There was little to support the idea that women generally disliked housework, indeed, paid domestic work was a respected occupation and the opportunity to learn domestic subjects

²¹¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs C's interview, p. 26.

was valued. Equally, there is little evidence of any obsession with domesticity and Hull women appear to have been adept at seizing opportunities in other areas of life.

CHAPTER 3

‘We never used to be the boss of one another’: Working-class marriage in Hull

A women’s magazine in 1938 commented: ‘Any girl who declares she prefers to stay single is only fooling herself. No matter how full of life she may be, it isn’t complete without marriage.’¹ This observation illustrates opinion held on this subject throughout all classes of society in the first half of the 20th century: it encompasses the views that marriage was the normal state for all adults, and that women in particular must be mentally and emotionally unsound to prefer being single. The great and growing popularity of marriage and the widespread acceptance of the view that everyone should marry would seem to indicate that the institution was highly successful. In this chapter I consider how far this was true, especially with regard to the working class: how did such marriages operate and how far did they change? Marriage is necessarily a private business and the relationships between partners in history are inevitably hard to fathom. This is especially true of working-class couples, who tend not to leave much in the way of letters and diaries that could shed light on the way in which they viewed their marriages. Despite the scarcity of evidence, various interpretations have been given to the development of marriage during this century and these will be considered. My oral history evidence from Hull suggests that, despite fulfilling different roles, couples generally appeared to love and support each other, to enjoy fairly equal status and to make decisions jointly. This was true for couples over the whole of this period, from those who married in the 1920s to those who married in the 1960s. Interestingly, many of those interviewed saw little difference in their parents’ marriages, too, with couples who married before the First World War also described as affectionate partnerships. This model of working-class marriage is very different from that usually portrayed.

Before considering alternative models of working-class marriage, I would like, briefly, to place these interpretations of marriage within the context of the wider debate concerning marriage: its development over the centuries alongside changes in the family, and its supposed disintegration in the later 20th century. In the 1970s, historians like Shorter and Stone saw early modern marriage as impersonal, affectionless, business-like arrangements involving little love.² At the time, these views were widely accepted by historians.³ However, they were not without

¹ *Woman’s Fair*, 1938, quoted in Cynthia L. White, *Women’s Magazines 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970) p. 109.

² E. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London: Collins, 1976) p. 5; Little affection was said to exist, too, between parents and children. Lawrence Stone, *The Family Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) pp. 55, 60, 81.

³ See Alan MacFarlane’s review essay on Stone’s book for a comment on how generally accepted his views were: *History and Theory*, Vol. 18:1 (1979) 103-26, p. 103.

their critics and Alan MacFarlane, in an extensive review of Stone's book, argued: 'there is abundant evidence, as far back as personal records have survived, that people did love their children and their spouses, and feel despair when they died'.⁴ A consensus is apparent that, by the middle of the 20th century, a model of marriage that could be described as 'companionate' had emerged.⁵ In this, couples may have different roles – with husbands as breadwinners and wives as housekeepers and carers – but marriage was essentially equal. Based on affection, it provided both partners with companionship, emotional support, sexual pleasure and intimacy. The notion of the companionate marriage, however, is not clear-cut. Elizabeth Roberts criticised the term for its lack of clarity and felt it did not describe the marriages she encountered in her study.⁶ According to some, the companionate marriage of the mid-20th century later evolved into something altogether more intimate and egalitarian from around the 1970s. This idea was expounded by Anthony Giddens, who described the 'pure relationship', entered into for its own sake, unencumbered by family bonds, based on the satisfaction of intimacy and sexual pleasure and lasting only as long as it gave mutual benefit. Such equal relationships, according to Giddens, are based on 'plastic sexuality', which is sexuality, 'enjoyed for its own sake and freed from the needs of reproduction'.⁷ The notion of a new 'pure relationship', however, is being questioned in current research by Andrew Bell, based on interviews with couples married between fifteen and 52 years. These marriages, according to Bell, demonstrate more in common with the companionate marriage than the 'pure relationship'.⁸

This intellectual context can be seen to inform the debate on working-class families in the early to mid-20th century, with some historians seeing marriage in a state of flux and others perceiving much more stability. Gillis argued (with Shorter, above) that relationships among the working class of the late 19th century lacked intimacy, a pattern that endured up to the 1960s.⁹ However, Lummis, in discussing the role of husband and father in East Anglia between 1890 and 1914, argued that the familiar image of the brutal, uninvolved working-class husband and father is misleading. His oral evidence indicated that men tended to be caring fathers and husbands, accepting a division of labour between the sexes, as women did, but helping with housework and childcare as far as their long working hours allowed. In short, 'working-class marriage was in fact more generally an affectionate partnership of caring parents, jointly concerned with

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵ Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 47.

⁶ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940 - 1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p. 96.

⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) p. 2.

⁸ Andrew Bell, 'Staying Together: an exploration of longer-term married relationships', PhD research at Edinburgh University, Centre for Research in Families and Relationships, ongoing, 2011. <<http://www.cfr.ac.uk/cfrphdstudents.html>> accessed 20 July 2011.

⁹ J. R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) pp. 258, 275.

preserving the family'.¹⁰ Lummis attributed the mistaken view of men as brutal and uncaring to an over-dependence on anecdotal evidence, which tends to conform to stereotypes.¹¹ It is Lummis's model that fits most closely the oral history evidence collected in Hull. Young and Willmott, in a very influential study, discussed changes in the family in terms of a move away from a patriarchy involving a distant and intimidating father and a home-bound mother and children, towards a 'symmetrical family'.¹² This optimistic model saw improvements in housing, shorter working hours, higher wages, smaller families and a decline in the practice of sharing homes as all contributing to a more home-centred, equal marriage partnership. According to this view, the break-up of traditional working-class communities led to a lessening involvement of wider kin and so to a growing closeness between husband and wife. Describing this view, Finch and Summerfield commented:

Looking at these studies from a distance of three or four decades, we have a niggling worry about the way in which all authors take for granted the desirability of this family model. One is bound to wonder how far the fact that they were enthusiastically seeking this phenomenon influenced the evidence which they found.¹³

Finch and Summerfield argued that the version of the companionate marriage that emerged, in any case placed more demands on women, requiring them to continue all their traditional responsibilities of housekeeping and childrearing, but also for each to become her husband's 'companion', to provide more sexual fulfilment and to take on part-time paid employment. According to this view, men retained, as the main breadwinners, the upper hand in the relationship.¹⁴ Some feminists, too, have seen marriage as inherently unequal, even exploitative.¹⁵

Clearly these interpretations contradict and I aim to consider them in the light of oral history evidence on working-class marriage over this period in Hull. Before looking at local data, it may help to consider the national picture. Therefore, in section I, I begin with a summary of quantitative changes in marriage patterns, along with a précis of various legal changes indicative of changing values (including divorce reform). This includes a flavour of the Establishment's attitude to marriage as portrayed by Royal Commissions. Overall, I found that, despite the increasing acceptance of divorce in some circumstances, marriage continued to be seen as very important. In section II, I consider how marriage appeared in the mass media, the

¹⁰ T. Lummis, 'The historical dimension of fatherhood: a case study 1890 -1914', in L. McKee and M. O'Brien, *The Father Figure* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982) 43-56, p. 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹² M. Young and P. Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) pp. 31, 32.

¹³ Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59', in David Clark (ed) *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne (1944-88)* (London: Routledge, 1991) 6-27, p. 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Penny Summerfield, 'Women in Britain since 1945: companionate marriage and the double burden', James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (eds) *Understanding Post-war British Society* (London: Routledge, 1994) 58-72, p. 66.

presentation of masculinity and femininity and some popular views of marriage as uncovered by contemporary studies and surveys. It is argued that a portrayal of women as passive and submissive, and of men as dominant, was enjoyed in fiction, whilst being seen as largely irrelevant to real life. It is noted that an emphasis on the importance of practical attributes in marriage partners in the mid-20th century – on housekeeping skills and kindness, for instance – did not preclude an expectation of love. Towards the 1960s, however, love, romance and sexual gratification were all increasingly seen as important. In section III, I consider how far changes in sexual practice reflected or affected changes in marriage. Here, extracts from letters written to Marie Stopes requesting birth control advice are presented and their significance considered. Other evidence – autobiography and oral history – is also examined and some attempt is made to discern what methods of birth control were prevalent, drawing particularly on the recent work by Kate Fisher.¹⁶ Conclusions concerning couples' sex lives must be tentative, given the nature of the evidence, but it is felt plausible that a greater degree of physical intimacy existed than has been assumed hitherto.

In section IV, I look at how working-class marriage was portrayed by contemporary sources nationally and how historians subsequently have interpreted their findings. Since my contention is that these marriages have often been misrepresented this is a substantial section in which various interpretations are discussed in some detail. Descriptions of working-class marriage at the start of the 20th century are touched on – often seen as patriarchal, lacking intimacy and sometimes violent. However, evidence for more equal, affectionate marriages at this time is also presented. I consider how far, and in what ways, styles of marriage changed. Looking at the portrayal of marriage in *Coal in Our Life*, I then go on to discuss in detail Elizabeth Roberts's evidence from her oral history projects in Lancashire.¹⁷ It is my contention that the typicality of the very patriarchal marriages presented by Dennis *et al.* has been exaggerated. Likewise, in Roberts's earlier study (covering 1890 to 1940) her emphasis on the separate gender roles in the marriages she studied has deflected attention from the equality of these partnerships and the extent to which men were often domesticated and women were often engaged in paid work. Roberts's findings (supported by other evidence) that more patriarchal marriages were more common among the better-off is noted. Roberts's later study (1940-75) is interesting in uncovering a lessening equality between couples that appeared to be following middle-class practice. This is very different from the usual portrayal of more equal, companionate marriages

¹⁶ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life: an analysis of a Yorkshire mining community* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1956); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) and Roberts, *Women and Families*.

filtering down from middle-class couples to the working class. In section V, I consider in detail the experience of married couples in Hull. My findings here do not reflect the common portrayal of patriarchal relationships without affection or intimacy. On the contrary, marriages were portrayed as equal and affection between spouses was clearly usual. Despite gendered roles often being clearly defined, men were usually involved in both housework and childcare, whilst women were often involved in some paid work. Whilst practicalities were often considered in planning marriage, the impetus for the decision to marry sprang from love. Both parties tended to be involved in making decisions, but wives tended to control all family finance. Finally, a consideration is given to the impact of changes in leisure patterns on married life. Within this, the decline in excessive drinking was felt to be significant, along with increased leisure time and a widening of opportunities to enjoy free time away from the pub. Whilst a move towards home-based leisure is acknowledged, I do not agree that leisure was exclusively domestic or exclusively shared. On the contrary, the examples I found of couples enjoying their free time separately seemed to point towards a certain freedom, for women as well as men, within the partnership.

I

There can be no conclusive evidence regarding variations in marital relationships: much is necessarily partial and impressionistic, so it may be helpful to begin with a summary of quantitative changes in marriage. Marriage became increasingly popular in England and Wales in the first three-quarters of the 20th century, following a trend begun in Victorian times of an increasing incidence of legal marriages.¹⁸ During this time, the average age of marriage began to fall, so that, whilst only 14% of women aged 15 to 24 years were married in 1901, 26% of women of this age group were married in 1951.¹⁹

Although society overwhelmingly approved of marriage over this time, attitudes were gradually changing. Changes in the laws regarding marriage and divorce, whilst primarily reflecting the views of the ruling classes, are some indication of changing attitudes in society more generally. An increasingly secular society was questioning previously strong religious views regarding marriage and divorce. At the beginning of the century, divorce was allowed only for adultery but, whilst men could divorce their wives for adultery alone, women had to show additional grounds (such as cruelty or desertion) as well. Divorce was not granted simply because both partners desired it, so that, if no adultery had occurred but both partners wished to end the marriage, couples were forced to fake adultery. In 1923, the double standard in divorce cases was

¹⁸ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, p. 231.

¹⁹ Calculated from statistics in B. R. Mitchell and P. Dean, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) pp. 15, 16.

abolished; 1937 saw grounds for divorce other than adultery allowed.²⁰ Nevertheless, divorce continued, at this time, to be a middle-class pursuit too expensive for most people to consider. Indeed, working-class women, as well as women from other classes, tended to disapprove of divorce reform, which threatened to erode the security of their positions.²¹ However, the introduction of legal aid in 1949 made divorce a more meaningful option. Nevertheless, as the following table shows, the number of couples divorcing was still very small throughout this period until the 1969 Divorce Reform Act came into operation in 1971, allowing divorce to follow from separation.

Table 3 Divorce rates per 1,000 married couples in England and Wales²²

1901	0.08	1931	0.44	1961	2.10
1911	0.09	1941	0.63	1971	6.00
1921	0.46	1951	2.60	1981	11.9

Despite the numerical insignificance of divorce, changing attitudes regarding it say something about attitudes to marriage. Generally, then, it was becoming less acceptable for women to be treated differently from men regarding the grounds for divorce. Divorce itself was becoming more acceptable, with fewer people having religious objections. However, the importance of marriage did not lessen at all. On the contrary, the growing acceptance of divorce reflected increasing expectations of marriage.

It was also recognised that the role of women in marriage had changed. The Royal Commission on Population in 1949 commented: ‘Unrestricted childbearing, which involved hardship and danger to women, became increasingly incompatible with the rising status of women and the development of a more considerate attitude of husbands to wives.’²³ Whilst the concern of other countries over the decline in the birth rate was said to have resulted in policies designed to return women to the home, in Britain, it was thought, this ‘would be a rebuking of the tide’.²⁴ The Commissioners applauded the fact that: ‘The modern woman . . . is not only more conscious of the need for outside interests but has more freedom to engage in them; and it would be harmful

²⁰ These were: wilful desertion for three years or more; cruelty; incurable insanity after five years’ confinement.

²¹ Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p. 399.

²² Statistics taken from Table 13.1, Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp. 435-6. Divorce rates for later years, to compare, are available at: Office for National Statistics:

<<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=170>> accessed 20 August 2011.

²³ *Report on the Royal Commission on Population* 1949, Cmd. 7695, para. 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 429.

all round, to the women, the family and the community to attempt any restriction of the contribution that women can make to the cultural and economic life of the nation.²⁵

This, then, is the background to marriage in the first half of the 20th century: although divorce was increasingly accepted (for extreme cases) as the significance of religion diminished for many, belief in the importance of marriage did not decline at all. Indeed, it was seen as important enough for much contemplation and discussion by state agencies. Fundamental views concerning marriage did not change at all over this period.

II

In order to consider how far the state's attitude to marriage was reflected by wider society, let us look at how marriage was portrayed by the mass media and contemporary literature. It seems that very similar ideas regarding masculinity, femininity and the importance of marriage were widespread in all classes, judging by the popular press. Such publications were designed to appeal to ordinary people and there seems little reason to suppose that they did not reflect such ideas. Indeed, sensitivity to the readers' values is indicated by evidence that experiments by some women's magazines into more radical areas were abandoned when they led to a drop in sales.²⁶ A culture that was increasingly common across all classes was growing, with the mass media, especially the cinema, becoming more important.

Especially before marriage, romantic and stereotypical views of the roles and characteristics of men and women (as portrayed in film) were common among both sexes. These views of femininity and masculinity were reinforced by the popular press. Thus, one magazine criticised anything resembling 'masculinity' in women, asserting: 'Miss Fluffy Femininity carries off the prizes.'²⁷ At a time when romantic novels such as *The Sheik* were portraying women as willingly submissive it seems unlikely that working-class women entirely neglected the image of helpless femininity – if only as part of their fantasy lives.²⁸ Neither were such images peculiar to women. Eleanor Rathbone identified the 'Turk Complex' which she believed affected men:

A man likes to feel that he has 'dependants'. He looks in the glass and sees himself as perhaps others see him – physically negligible, mentally ill-equipped, poor, unimportant, unsuccessful. He looks in the mirror he keeps in his mind, and sees his wife clinging to his arm and the children clustered round her skirts; all looking up at him, as that giver of all good gifts, the wage earner. The picture is very alluring.²⁹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 429.

²⁶ White, *Women's Magazines*, p. 112.

²⁷ White, *Women's Magazines*, p. 99.

²⁸ *A Woman's Place, 1910-1975* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975) p. 90.

²⁹ Quoted in J. Lewis, *Women in England, 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf Books, 1984) p. 67.

Few accounts of real life, however, indicate feminine helplessness as a common trait among working-class women. There appears, therefore, to have been a gulf between fantasy-inspired notions of femininity and masculinity and what happened in real homes. Although many women appeared not to lose touch with the dream, they never expected life to reflect it. Pearl Jephcott's 1940s study of a hundred adolescent girls from around the country supports this theory. Jephcott was convinced from her study that, although many of the girls were influenced by romantic novels and films, their attitudes (and those of their parents) to their own marriages were more pragmatic.³⁰ Similarly, in 1952, Ferdynand Zweig found that 75% of the couples he studied felt they enjoyed 'absolute or "near" equality' in their marriages.³¹

Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's survey of attitudes published in 1951 (based on answers to a questionnaire in the *People* newspaper) found that men mostly prized practical skills such as good housekeeping in their wives. Women, on the other hand, preferred husbands to be understanding and agreeable.³² Gorer summarised his findings as follows: '[I]t is marriage which is important, not, I think, love or sexual gratification; and marriage is living together and raising children.' However, Gorer also found that more than 90% of married people in this survey considered that they had experienced being 'really in love'.³³ Gorer's later survey (in 1969) showed that companionship, communication, love and sexual gratification appeared to be growing in importance.³⁴ A move, from the 1940s to the 1960s, towards a concentration on the importance of 'love' rather than 'marriage' can also be discerned in some women's magazines. A study of the problem pages of *Woman's Own* showed that women asking for advice concerning their own wartime affairs were told to end them, telling their husbands only if a pregnancy had occurred. Conversely, they were advised to forgive their husbands any affairs and also to consider if they had contributed to the problem in any way.³⁵ During the 1950s, single women were told that their affairs were doomed: married men would not leave their wives. Marriage guidance was increasingly suggested for couples with problems at this time. By the 1960s, advice reflected changing attitudes, with women sometimes advised to consider leaving unfaithful husbands and even occasionally, in some circumstances to leave husbands for lovers.³⁶ In 1975,

³⁰ Pearl Jephcott, *Rising Twenty: notes on some ordinary girls* (London: Faber, 1948) pp. 80, 75.

³¹ Zweig, *Women's Life and Labour*, cited by Penny Summerfield, 'Women in Britain since 1945', p. 59.

³² Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (London: Cresset, 1955) quoted in Claire Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (Autumn 2006) 86-115, p. 92.

³³ Claire Langhamer, 'Love and Courtship in mid-20th century England.' *The Historical Journal*, 50:1 (2007) 173-96, p. 173.

³⁴ Geoffrey Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today: a study of the views and experiences of the under 45s* (London: Nelson, 1971) quoted in Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England' p. 92.

³⁵ Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England', pp. 103-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Mary Grant of *Woman's Own* commented: 'Marriage is changing. These days it's more about needs and feelings than about the rules, rights and duties of being a husband and wife.'³⁷

III

In considering the relationships of married couples, their sex lives must be relevant. However, the nature of the subject means that evidence is slight. For married women in the first third of the 20th century, when reliable methods of birth control were still not widely available, sex was unavoidably tied up with childbirth. This inevitably coloured women's attitudes to it, as shown graphically in letters written by working-class people (mostly women) to Marie Stopes.³⁸ The impression from correspondence written in 1926 is that women regarded sex as a duty. For those who had had as many children as they could cope with or provide for, and the many who had pregnancy-related health problems, sex was inextricably linked with their fear of pregnancy, and so was something to be avoided. On the other hand, most of these women felt unable to refuse their husbands. For example, shortly after giving birth, one woman wrote of her 'dread' of the time when she would 'have to give way' to her husband again, 'although it is only natural for a man and what I deny him he will only seek somewhere else'.³⁹ In cases where women were particularly anxious not to have more children (women in very bad health, for example) it appears to have been common for couples to abstain for long periods of time. Although the Stopes correspondence gives the impression that the general pattern in married life was for men to want sex and for women to want to avoid it, this appears to be mostly because of the women's fear of pregnancy. This was naturally particularly strong in this sample of women since they were writing for advice on birth control. These women were probably unused to corresponding and certainly unused to discussing such matters with strangers but had overcome their diffidence; such a group was, therefore, likely to include women who were most desperate to avoid pregnancy. In cases where a woman already had a large family of young children to worry about and had very real reason to fear for her life should she become pregnant again, she was hardly likely to enjoy sex very much. According to Kate Fisher, examples of unreasonable men demanding sex regardless of the consequences were untypical.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the nature of the evidence available (mostly from women desperate to avoid pregnancy) inevitably presents a particular

³⁷ Summerfield, 'Women in Britain since 1945', p. 59.

³⁸ Marie Stopes, *Mother England* (London: John Bale & Danielsson, 1929).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁴⁰ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918 – 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). p. 193.

impression. In many cases, it is virtually impossible to separate women's views on sex from their fears of pregnancy, especially later in married life when they were likely to have been in poor health and already to have had more children than they could really cope with. The availability of contraception, therefore, may well have done much to improve marital relations more generally.

However, how far this happened and how far the sex lives of ordinary working people changed between 1900 and 1950 is very difficult to say, given the slight evidence. Of course, this does not stop historians speculating. Wally Seccombe, for example, argued of the 1920s and 1930s: 'whilst it is doubtful that non-coital sex play was commonplace in proletarian marriages, it is likely that such diversions would have been increasing in these decades.'⁴¹ There are, perhaps, indications that the first of his assumptions was true: the letters to Marie Stopes in *Mother England* imply the kind of desperate frustration which indicates that abstinence from intercourse amounted to abstinence from sex altogether. Letters from middle-class women at this time convey the impression that anything else in this line was seen as vaguely shameful and unnatural, and there seems little reason to suppose that working-class couples were any less inhibited.⁴² However, if this was true, how far such practices changed in the 1920s and 1930s must be entirely open to conjecture, given the absence of any supporting evidence. After extensive interviews, Elizabeth Roberts claimed that 'No hint was ever made that women might have enjoyed sex.'⁴³

Something certainly changed in the sex lives of working-class couples in the inter-war years, since the birth rate fell considerably, as the following table shows:

Table 4: Births per thousand of the population⁴⁴

1900-1909	28.4	1925-1929	17.1	1945-1949	18.0
1910-1914	26.7	1930-1934	15.3	1950-1954	15.5
1915-1919	24.3	1935-1939	14.9	1955-1959	15.9
1920-1924	21.4	1940-1944	15.5	1960-1964	17.9

Thus it can be seen that there was a steady (though not continuous) decline in the birth rate between 1900 and 1964, following on from a trend begun in the late 19th century (the mean birth rate of the period 1850-54 was 33.7). However, it is generally accepted that, whilst the decline in

⁴¹ Wally Seccombe, 'Starting to Stop: Working-Class Fertility Decline in Britain', *Past and Present*, 126 (1990) 151-88, pp. 159, 160, footnote 29.

⁴² Holtzman, 'The Pursuit of Married Love', p. 45.

⁴³ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, pp. 83, 84.

⁴⁴ Statistics calculated from Mitchell and Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* p. 30 (data up to 1938); and B. R. Mitchell and H. G. Jones, *Second Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) p. 21 (data from 1938).

the late 19th century and early 20th century was led by the middle class, the decline between the wars was led by the working class.⁴⁵ How this was achieved is not so clear. Whilst a detailed consideration of the relative importance of these practices would be outside the scope of this study, the method of birth control used is significant insofar as it sheds some light on the relationship of the couple using it. For instance, a heavy reliance on self-induced abortion as a means of avoiding childbirth could indicate that women were acting alone because they could not rely on their husbands' co-operation. Likewise, a high reliance on the withdrawal method could show that women and men were acting together to limit the size of their families. It is, therefore, worthwhile considering briefly the birth control methods used by the working class in the first half of the century, and what this might tell us about their relationships.

Letters written by such women in the first decade of the century indicate that birth control was often not used at all.⁴⁶ It is possible, then, that the adoption of contraception after this implies some change in relationship, possibly an increase in communication between couples. However, it seems at least as likely that the change reflected growing acceptance of birth control itself, rather than changing levels of intimacy between couples. As far as methods used are concerned, Lewis-Faning's survey indicated that, in the case of couples married before 1920 who attempted to limit their families, nine out of ten relied on withdrawal as a method. Of those marrying in the 1920s, more used barrier methods, but these were still less than one third; of this third, one half used female appliances.⁴⁷ According to Seccombe, data from clinics in Manchester and Salford support the view that withdrawal was used most frequently among the working class but that abstinence was also a common method.⁴⁸ These two methods also appeared to be the most popular among Elizabeth Roberts's respondents.⁴⁹ The data regarding abortion is, obviously, even sparser. Diana Gittins argued that abortion had been common in some areas of the country since the 19th century.⁵⁰ According to Marie Stopes, abortion was much more important than was generally realised.⁵¹ Her assumption was based on the high number of women who approached her clinics seeking advice on abortion, apparently without realising that it was illegal. The Inter-Departmental Committee on Abortion, whose final report was published in 1939, concluded that the use of abortion had been rising, ending an estimated 16-20% of all pregnancies.⁵² According

⁴⁵ Seccombe, 'Starting to stop', p. 152.

⁴⁶ M. Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Maternity: Letters From Working Women Collected by the Women's Co-operative Guild* (1915; London: Virago, 1978).

⁴⁷ Seccombe, 'Starting to stop', p. 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p. 95.

⁵⁰ Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1982) pp. 19, 111.

⁵¹ Stopes, *Mother England*, p. 183.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

to Gittins, abortion tended to be practised as a ‘desperate remedy’ by older women who already had several children.⁵³

Nevertheless, withdrawal appears to have been a popular method for younger couples married in the first half of the 20th century who wished to restrict their family size. Recent oral history research on sex and birth control confirms this, as well as shedding light on the relationships of the couples involved.⁵⁴ This preference was in spite of a growth in the manufacture of female caps and the development of latex condoms in the 1930s, and in the face of much expert advice on the use of these more ‘modern’ methods. Contemporary medical experts tended to assume that the use of withdrawal as a method of birth control sprang from an ignorance of alternative, safer and more efficient methods. However, oral evidence has disputed this. Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter interviewed men and women from Lancashire, born between 1905 and 1925, who mostly married for the first time in the 1930s and 1940s. They found that half of these couples used withdrawal as their only method of birth control; a further 30% used it in combination with other methods.⁵⁵ Despite the widespread condemnation of the method by contemporary experts, it has recently been shown to be as reliable as the diaphragm.⁵⁶ Many couples were perfectly well aware of other methods but, for a variety of reasons, found withdrawal preferable. Sometimes, objections to more modern methods amounted to squeamishness and a reluctance to trust to the unfamiliar. As Fisher and Szreter pointed out, the new contraceptive methods may have been more scientific, but were alien, messy and not obviously likely to be effective. For women very conscious of the risks of germs, and sometimes without access to an inside bathroom or toilet, caps could seem very unhygienic.⁵⁷ The use of artificial methods of birth control had to be learned; withdrawal, on the other hand, was intuitive.⁵⁸ Accidental conceptions were perceived differently, too, depending on the method of birth control used. If barrier methods failed, this tended to be viewed as a failure in the technology. Babies conceived while couples were depending on withdrawal as a method, on the other hand, were seen as ‘slips’ on the part of the couple, understandable and not wholly unexpected. Experts’ stress on the greater reliability of barrier methods also showed, according to Fisher and Szreter, a misunderstanding of couples’ aims. Often, they wished to *limit* their families to a reasonable size, to avoid having a ‘houseful’ of children, rather than plan the exact number. Therefore, using withdrawal, even intermittently, whilst accepting occasional accidents,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁴ Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter, “‘They Prefer Withdrawal’: the choice of birth control in Britain, 1918-1950”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34: 2 (2003) 263-291, p. 263.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 272, 279.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

suited their purposes.⁵⁹ Fisher and Szreter also found, contrary to previous assumptions, that men were primarily involved in birth control – finding out about different methods, making purchases where necessary or initiating withdrawal. Indeed, a deep-seated preference on the part of many women to leave birth control to their husbands could explain why methods of birth control which were initiated by females were so underused. The use of the cap would have meant women planning sex which was alien to the dynamics of many relationships.⁶⁰

Detailed oral history concerning methods of birth control is illuminating in uncovering the way in which marriages operated and the extent to which these men appear to have been involved is interesting. However, such evidence is hardly conclusive in determining how marriages worked. Kate Fisher was clear that men taking responsibility for birth control was ‘valued as gallant and considerate’.⁶¹ On the other hand, such responsibility did confer power, so could also be consistent with authoritarian husbands making unilateral decisions on family size.⁶² Without knowing more about the motives of the couples involved, it is hard to draw firm conclusions. Although Fisher felt that explicit discussion of different methods of birth control was avoided by couples, some evidence of a sharing of preferences was implicit in the narratives she presented.⁶³ For example, condoms were sometimes rejected on the basis that they reduced sensation and impaired pleasure – for women and men – taking the preferences of each into account. One man, for instance, stopped using condoms because his wife disliked them; he was quite clear that, ‘if she didn’t want it, she didn’t want it, that was it’.⁶⁴ Withdrawal was sometimes preferred because it allowed for spontaneity, with the preparations involved in other methods seen as lessening romance and enjoyment. Such considerations do imply a degree of intimacy. According to Fisher and Szreter, some respondents saw withdrawal as increasing their pleasure:

Their narratives stressed withdrawal as a sexual skill which, once mastered, created a mutually enjoyable sexual dynamic. Avoidance of ejaculation was presented as enabling prolonged and more enjoyable sexual experiences without fear of pregnancy. Regular withdrawal made sex ‘last longer’ to the satisfaction of both husband and wife.⁶⁵

In their later work, Szreter and Fisher argued that previous assumptions of sex lives in the first half of the 20th century having been hampered by repression, inhibition and sexual conservatism were inaccurate. Rather, they felt widespread sexual fulfilment that had been misunderstood by

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁶¹ Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage*, p. 226.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 228-9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Fisher and Szreter, ‘They Prefer Withdrawal’, p. 286.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

historians with very different cultural assumptions.⁶⁶ Neither did their findings support the notion of a greater sexual intimacy between middle-class couples. On the contrary, in comparing practices between classes, Szreter and Fisher found that dissension around birth control was more likely among the middle class. Middle-class men, they found, were less likely to accept responsibility for contraception and so less likely to agree to periods of sexual abstinence as a method of birth control.⁶⁷

Conclusions that can be drawn from a discussion on working-class sexual practices and birth control methods between the wars are limited. Withdrawal and abstinence may have been used by a growing minority of workers even before 1900. However, these methods seem not to have been used extensively until around the 1920s. From then on, abstinence and (especially) withdrawal seem to have been more widespread. Towards the Second World War (and increasingly after it) appliance methods were used by a growing minority. Abortion was probably used successfully by a few women (though it may have been attempted by more). It is clearly true that fear of pregnancy prevented any pleasure in sex for many women, probably for many couples. However, since much evidence of such sentiment came from couples desperate for information on birth control, it can probably not be regarded as typical. Oral history evidence regarding the sex lives and family limitation practices of couples – including working-class couples – who married in the 1920s and 1930s is illuminating. It suggests much more intimate and physically satisfying relationships than historians had assumed until very recently.

IV

In this section, I consider how working-class marriages appeared in various sources from the start of the 20th century to the 1950s, examining evidence for patriarchal, as well as evidence for more equal, styles of marriage. I focus on this period since, as mentioned above, a version of the companionate marriage is generally regarded as being common from the 1950s and my research supported this belief. However, in the first half of the 20th century, I argue that there is extensive evidence to support the notion that a style of marriage already operated in which couples enjoyed affection and a measure of equality, despite often specialising in different areas, a version of companionate marriage. Rather than emulating middle-class unions, as is often argued, these marriages had long been observable among poorer couples. In fact, more patriarchal marriages were more common among the better-off, and a lessening of equality could arise from the adoption of more middle-class styles of marriage. The importance of the way finances were arranged in determining power relations within marriage is also discussed. The working-class

⁶⁶ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 53-58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

system of wives being in charge of the whole family's money is seen to allow women more equality than the system of women being given a set allowance. Further, I outline the way in which women's choices in spending have been used to support the idea that they lacked household power and I consider a different way of looking at this issue.

I begin by focusing in detail at the most familiar model of early-20th century marriage. This has been portrayed by Ellen Ross, describing married life among the London poor in the years before the First World War. According to Ross, such marriages were generally not based on romance or intimacy.⁶⁸ Marriage tended rather to be a domestic arrangement in which both partners had fixed and separate roles. Men were chiefly breadwinners whilst women were responsible for managing the money to fulfil their families' needs (which could include casual earning herself where necessary). Such separate spheres were widely acknowledged by the whole family, so that children writing about their weekend activities spoke about fetching wood for 'mother's fire' or helping with 'mother's work'.⁶⁹ According to many accounts, women were also responsible for dealing with the outside world on behalf of their families, and the relationships they established with shopkeepers, pawn shop dealers, landladies and neighbours could be extremely important in hard times.⁷⁰ Men were regarded as 'good husbands' if they were kind, reasonably sober and gave the locally accepted proportion of their wages to their wives on which to run the house. Similarly, women were regarded as 'good wives' if they fulfilled their side of the bargain, spending wages efficiently, bearing and caring for children, doing the housework and providing palatable food (for their husbands at least).⁷¹ Within the household, mothers were usually particularly close to and influential with their children.

Ross found that marital violence was widespread amongst the London poor on the eve of World War I.⁷² She quotes an autobiographical description of a mother's regular Saturday night 'fierce questions and taunts' concerning her husband's use of his wages at the pub on a Saturday night: 'they would throw themselves to the floor and fight, scratching and punching like wild beasts, until the noise brought the landlady up from downstairs to separate them and enjoin peace'.⁷³ Such scenes were typical, Ross argued, and were not occasioned merely by alcoholic excess encouraging violence, but also by the wholly dissimilar aspirations of men and women and their consequent very different plans for the weekly wage: men who felt that they had earned

⁶⁸ Ellen Ross, "'Fierce Questions and Taunts': Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870-1914", *Feminist Studies*, 8:3 (1982) 575-602, p. 578.

⁶⁹ From T. E. Harvey, *A London Boy's Saturday* (Birmingham: St George Press, 1906) p. 12, quoted in Ross, 'Fierce Questions and Taunts', p. 583.

⁷⁰ Ross, 'Fierce Questions and Taunts,' pp. 576, 588.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 585.

⁷³ George Acorn (pseud.) *One of the Multitude: An Autobiography by a Resident of Bethnal Green* (London, 1911), quoted in Ross, 'Fierce Questions and Taunts', p. 582.

every penny of their wages wanted to relax in convivial surroundings with their friends; however, women, in charge of running the household and feeding and clothing its inhabitants found it hard to watch money being squandered in the pub.⁷⁴ For intimacy, companionship and love, women looked to sisters and mothers, neighbours and children rather than to husbands. Even in their sex lives, Ross argued that intimacy was minimal; in fact, for the most part, sex simply provided another opportunity for male domination.⁷⁵

It is difficult to say how far this description of marriage among the London poor typified working-class marriages in general before 1914. Aspects of it can be discerned in Maud Pember Reeves' account; the women in this study, 'spoke well of their husbands when they spoke of them at all, but it is the children chiefly who fill their lives'.⁷⁶ Various autobiographical accounts, too, support the view that Ross's description of working-class marriage before World War I was not unique, at least among the very poor.⁷⁷ Other commentators, then, accepted the view that working-class marriages in the early 20th century were not romantic attachments, but rather pragmatic partnerships, with little closeness between spouses. On the other hand, there is some evidence to the contrary. Lummis, in a study of the role of husbands and fathers in pre-1914 East Anglia, found men to be caring and domesticated. In reply to the interviewer's comment that men's helping around the home was considered by many to be a new phenomenon, one respondent replied categorically: 'No, not here. Because lots of them used to do things in the house, you know, to help the women out because they most all had families, five or six was moderate.'⁷⁸ According to Robert Roberts, the independence and autonomy that women enjoyed during the First World War made a real difference to the relationship of many married couples: '[H]usbands, home again, were less the lords and masters of old, but more comrades to be lived with on something like level terms. Women customers in the shop commented on this change time and time again.'⁷⁹ Descriptions of working-class marriages in the early 20th century varied considerably then.

From the end of the First World, accounts of marriage showing little closeness were still common. A. J. Jasper writing autobiographically about this period, failed to show much increase in closeness between couples. He described his parents' relationship, in which their constant disagreement over money led his mother to help herself whenever possible, and to both Jasper and

⁷⁴ Ross, 'Fierce Questions and Taunts', p. 582.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 580, 595.

⁷⁶ Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913; London: Virago, 1979) p. 16.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Roberts, *The Classic Slum* and A. J. Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood* (London: Barrie & Rockliff The Cresset Press, 1969).

⁷⁸ Lummis, 'The Historical Dimension of Fatherhood', p. 46.

⁷⁹ Roberts, *Classic Slum*, p. 215.

his sister taking money from their father on their mother's behalf.⁸⁰ Other accounts covering the second quarter of the 20th century, such as those of social researchers Pearl Jephcott and Madeline Kerr, paint similar pictures.⁸¹ According to Gillis, working-class habits remained stable from the late 19th century for a remarkably long time.⁸² He characterised family life as 'matrifocal', with a clear separation between the roles of men and women, and also between adults and children.⁸³ Even by the 1950s, Gillis argued that marriage was not seen by women 'as their only, or even primary, source of personal fulfilment. On the contrary, heterosexual intimacy remained a source of awkwardness and anxiety for most working-class young people . . . most found their relations with family and friends far more personally satisfying than those with their spouses.'⁸⁴ According to Gillis, then, working-class marriages changed little. Other historians writing more recently have taken similar views. Marcus Collins, for example, whose *Modern Love* focuses mostly on the middle class, dedicates one section to working-class marriage. This he portrays as brutal, calculating, often violent and lacking in affection and intimacy.⁸⁵

One well-known source supporting a very patriarchal view of working-class marriage and family life in the 1950s Yorkshire coal mining community of 'Ashton' is *Coal is our Life*.⁸⁶ In this account, couples' roles were strictly differentiated, with men as breadwinners and women firmly situated in the home, virtually solely responsible for looking after children.⁸⁷ Men tended to socialise with other men, spending little leisure time with their wives.⁸⁸ Even when men did involve themselves with more domestic activities, such as gardening or DIY, these were not pursued alongside wives: Dennis *et al.* argued: 'The point about all these and other activities is that in no case do they demand co-operation or encourage the growth of companionship between husband and wife.'⁸⁹ Most men gave their wives a set amount of money for housekeeping, often holding back large amounts.⁹⁰ An incident was quoted to illustrate typical marital relations, involving 'J.B.' and his wife, who shared a house with another couple.

On one occasion when J.B. returned from his work he was presented with a good meal by the other wife in the house, who had cooked it as a favour for his wife, anxious to go to Castletown for market day. J.B. boasted afterwards that he had no complaints about the

⁸⁰ Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood*, pp. 31, 40, 41.

⁸¹ P. Jephcott, *Rising Twenty*; and Madeline Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

⁸² Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, p. 258.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁸⁵ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in 20th-century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003) pp. 99-101.

⁸⁶ Dennis *et al.*, *Coal is Our Life*. Called 'Ashton' to accord its inhabitants anonymity, the location was actually Featherstone, West Yorkshire.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 174, 206.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 181, 183.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

food, but had thrown it “straight to t’ back o’ t’ fire,” and that when his wife arrived she was forcibly told that he had married *her* and he was going to have his meals cooked by *her* alone – and he stood over her while she cooked a dinner, three hours later!

Coal is our Life comprised a description of working-class marriage in the 1950s that is striking in its pessimism, standing out from other contemporary accounts: ‘As the years go by, and any original sexual attraction fades, this rigid division between the activities of husband and wife cannot but make for an empty and uninspiring relationship.’⁹¹

Elizabeth Roberts’s extensive oral history study is particularly illuminating in covering the years 1890 to 1970, over two major projects in Lancashire.⁹² Roberts’s emphasis on the very different roles inhabited by husbands and wives in working-class marriage has led some to see her evidence as supportive of the notion of ‘traditional’ working-class marriage. Claire Langhamer, for instance, contrasts the model of ‘companionate’ marriage with ‘the classic model of working-class conjugal separation’ which she saw as evident in Roberts’s earlier work.⁹³ My reading of Roberts’s work finds a different emphasis which sees her evidence as, in many ways, similar to my own and equally capable of supporting my argument. For that reason, I will need to discuss this in some detail. Roberts’s earliest oral history evidence (covering 1890 to 1940) portrayed marriage as a practical partnership, with men as breadwinners and women, primarily, as housekeepers and carers. Whether someone was a ‘good’ wife or husband depended on how far they fulfilled their respective duties. As one respondent commented: ‘The man who was considered not good would be a man that would be drinking his pay . . . The height of anyone’s life was how they looked after their family.’⁹⁴ However, despite the clearly separate roles, Roberts did not get the impression from her oral evidence that women were oppressed by marriage.⁹⁵ On the contrary, she stressed that women almost invariably controlled the family finances and had much power in their families. Unlike some researchers, Roberts did not find that ‘power relations’ within marriages were affected by whether – or how much – women engaged in paid employment.⁹⁶

Roberts did find a minority of marriages with ‘an all-powerful father, dominating, subjugating, even terrifying his wife and children’. Interestingly, these men tended to have ‘skilled supervisory jobs’.⁹⁷ The notion that men in higher status employment tended to inhabit more traditional gender roles was noted by Young and Willmott, who commented that fewer

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁹² Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*; Roberts, *Women and Families*.

⁹³ Claire Langhamer, ‘Adultery in Post-war England’, p. 91.

⁹⁴ Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*, p. 83.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118; see Gittins, *Fair Sex*, p. 181, for the opposite view.

⁹⁷ Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*, pp. 118, 119.

wives of higher status husbands were in paid employment.⁹⁸ Young and Willmott also noticed: ‘working-class men are less often deeply committed to their jobs. The compensation (as much for their families as for themselves) is that they have more energy left over for their wives and children.’⁹⁹ Richard Hoggart, too, contrasted the middle-class bread winner with the working-class husband who: ‘is a part of the inner life of the home, not someone who spends most of his life miles away earning the money to keep the establishment going’.¹⁰⁰

Elizabeth Roberts found distinct changes in the pattern of working-class marriage in her later study (looking at the period 1940 to 1970) perceiving that ‘role relationships’ became ‘more complex’. Earlier, Roberts felt that couples often inhabited very different roles but still shared equal power; later, she found ‘separate roles but unequal power’.¹⁰¹ Rather than being down-trodden, however, wives in such marriages were ‘cherished and protected’ in the style of earlier middle-class marriages. Roberts considered that this model of marriage had arisen partly as a response to fashionable media images of women as helpless and dependent. However, it was growing prosperity that made this middle-class model affordable, for the first time, among the working class.¹⁰² Roberts found examples of couples with dominant husbands, where partners had explicitly rejected their parents’ more equal style of marriage. Mr Warwick, for example, who was married in 1959, said: ‘I think there should be somebody who runs the place. I think if you start all this sharing you get into a hell of a muddle.’¹⁰³ His father, however: ‘wasn’t one of these chauvinists, you know. He couldn’t be, could he? She was the gaffer.’

Arguably, the way in which money was organised within marriage is a key indicator of the distribution of power within married relationships. This has been analysed by Margaret Williamson, looking at mining households in East Cleveland between 1918 and 1964.¹⁰⁴ Williamson found that her sample all used one of two methods: either the female whole-wage system (in which wives are given their husbands’ pay packets intact) or the housekeeping allowance (in which husbands give a certain amount to their wives).¹⁰⁵ Under the first system, wives returned a certain amount of spending money to their husbands; under the housekeeping allowance system, husbands got to keep whatever was surplus from their determined

⁹⁸ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) p. 119.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life, with special reference to publications and entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959) p. 37.

¹⁰¹ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 84.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰³ Mr Warwick, *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Williamson, ‘“The Iron Chancellors”: The Dynamics of the Domestic Economy in Ironstone-Mining Households, 1918-1964’, *Journal of Family History*, 28:3 (2003) 391-410.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 395. Pahl found five different allocative systems in contemporary households – see J. Pahl, *Money and Marriage* (London: Macmillan, 1989) – cited in Williamson, ‘Iron Chancellors’, p. 392.

housekeeping allowance. Williamson discussed the findings of Vogler and Pahl that inequality between spouses (both in terms of spending ability and power) was clearly greater under the housekeeping allowance system. However, even under the whole-wage system which, on the face of it, gave women far more freedom to spend as they wished and so more power within the relationship, Vogler and Pahl considered that husbands still retained more personal spending money and had a greater say in financial decisions than wives. They felt, therefore, that 'female control' in such households was 'more nominal than real'.¹⁰⁶ Williamson argued that, in spite of this, women fared considerably better under the female whole-wage system.¹⁰⁷ She agreed, however, that women's personal spending money was lower than men's; even where women earned money, this tended to become part of the housekeeping budget, whereas men's surplus wages became theirs personally.¹⁰⁸ In both systems, too, men often retained control over major household decisions. Williamson considered that men's position of main breadwinner gave them more power so that they were regarded as having more right to spend money that they had personally earned, and more right to make decisions in their households because they were funding them. In this way, in these mining households 'women were dominated by men'.¹⁰⁹

In 'mining households', however, it is generally acknowledged that women and men tended to hold more segregated roles and men tended to be more dominant. This model was not necessarily applicable in other areas. The notion that men's status as wage earner automatically gave them more power in a relationship has been questioned by Elizabeth Roberts, who also disputed the idea that men had the final say in major decision-making.¹¹⁰ Roberts considered, for example, that women, in their role of household managers, tended to decide whether a family could afford to buy a house, probably one of the most important household decisions.¹¹¹ I asked no specific questions about personal spending money between couples but my impression is that my narrators supported the general consensus that husbands appeared to have more of it than wives. Mrs D, for example, remembered her mother 'reluctantly' agreeing that her father should have his 'beer and bacca' money.¹¹² This woman clearly felt that her husband got more than his fair share of the family's money, and she was probably not unusual in this.

In the discussion above, a model of working-class marriage that was assumed to give women substantial power has been reinterpreted in a way that assumes them to have very little. I would like to offer a different interpretation. Where a woman was given her husband's wage

¹⁰⁶ C. Vogler and J. Pahl, 'Money, Power and Inequality within Marriage', *Sociological Review*, 42 (1994) 263-88, p. 283, cited in Williamson, 'Iron Chancellors', p. 395.

¹⁰⁷ Williamson, 'Iron Chancellors,' p. 396.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

¹¹⁰ Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p. 118.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹² Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 15.

packet intact she could surely, if she had wanted to, have taken more spending money, as much as her husband had taken in some cases. That she, generally, did not was, largely, a question of *choice*. A system in which a woman was free to take for herself whatever she felt to be surplus to her family's requirements as personal spending money may have seemed like a bad joke when the total wage was insufficient for the family's needs. However, this does not alter the fact that spending was within her control; to suggest, as Vogler and Pahl do, that this control was 'nominal' seems to me to deny her agency. There may have been many different reasons why women chose to prioritise household over personal spending. Buying a kitchen utensil rather than a magazine, for instance, could have decreased drudgery, if only slightly, on a daily basis. For someone whose main occupation was housework, spending in this area could increase job satisfaction: slightly more meat in a dish, for instance, might be noticed and appreciated by all the family, and so increase the satisfaction of cooking. The pleasure of giving treats to children who did not experience them often might have been greater than the pleasure of any personal treat. Most of these families were on low incomes on which it would be difficult to manage; every penny taken for personal spending money would make managing still harder so that choosing *not* to take much spending money could represent a logical choice where the pleasure of any personal treat was simply not worth the additional hassle of managing on even less. In addition, the line between personal spending money and household spending may not always have been entirely clear; new curtains, for instance, comprise household expenditure, but may have been personally enjoyed by a woman who saw them every day, and whose satisfaction in cleaning the room was enhanced by their presence. Possibly more pleasure could be had from them than from a trip to the cinema or new shoes. This is not to say that women never did choose to spend money on themselves. Mrs D's childhood, one of eleven children whose father was unemployed through much of the 1930s, was extremely poor. However, she remembered of her mother's preference for butter as: 'one little treat she would always have for herself whenever she could'.¹¹³ Mrs I's mother, too, 'always had fish and chips for her supper'.¹¹⁴ Just as women sometimes chose to spend money on themselves, men sometimes chose to go without for the sake of their families. Mrs K, for example, commented: 'We never was short of food in our house . . . I think if anything my Dad went without cigarettes . . . I think I got more butter. Dad wouldn't bother. He would maybe scrape a bit on and that would be it.'¹¹⁵ In many cases, women's priorities were *not* their own personal spending money. Mrs D remembered her mother choosing to get a part-time job so that the family could afford for the children to stay at school.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Mrs M decided on paid

¹¹³ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 33.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 67.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, p. 34.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 5.

employment and Mrs N set up a shop so that their children could continue in education.¹¹⁷

Women who controlled the family finances were in the best position to know what could and what could not be afforded: possibly their reluctance to take personal spending money sprung from their knowledge that it could *not* be afforded. Men, with less detailed knowledge of the family's needs and costs, and with different social pressures and expectations, may have chosen to take personal spending money (often within the constraints of their wives' agreement). That many women made a different choice from men did not make their choice invalid or their freedom to make it any less real.

V

Overall, then, whilst descriptions of working-class marriage in the first half of the 20th century vary, they usually have certain traits in common. Thus, a model is presented in which marriages lack intimacy, men hold the power, spouses look to family or workmates for companionship and husbands' and wives' aims and priorities are very different. However, this model seems to me much less universally applicable than it is often presented and much of the evidence can support a different interpretation. I came to this view after having realised how far, with some exceptions, my Hull interviews did not reflect the usual paradigm at all. Most interviewees appeared to have been happily married. Mrs V, for example, remarked: '[O]nce you get married, your best friend is your husband.'¹¹⁸ Mrs F, too, felt that from the time that she started going out with her husband-to-be: 'I didn't need anybody else, then, really.'¹¹⁹ This view does not support the idea that working-class wives valued the companionship of female relatives above that of their husbands.¹²⁰ Several considered that they had been particularly lucky in their partners. Mrs B, for instance, married for nearly sixty years, commented: 'I've had a good life with Alf, a really good married life. We never fell out . . . he was a really good husband.'¹²¹ Her view of a 'good husband' encompassed: neither drinking nor smoking, being generous and not interfering with her independence in going out dancing and even, sometimes, on holiday without him: 'We never used to be the boss of one another, you know, "You do this" and "You stop here." I think you get on a lot better when you're not like that.'¹²² She clearly saw her husband's acceptance of her decision not to have any more children after her son was born as a mark of his thoughtfulness: 'I said to Alf, "I don't want any more children," and he said, "You won't have any more." And we

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, p. 14; Mrs N's interview, p. 31.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs V's interview, p. 46.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 85.

¹²⁰ For example, Kerr quoted one woman in the 1950s thus: 'I couldn't get on without me mother. I could get on without me husband. I don't notice him.' Kerr, *People of Ship Street*, p. 40.

¹²¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs B's interview, pp. 5-6.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 42.

never did have. But that's how considerate Alf was with me.'¹²³ Mrs G, too, commented on how close she had been to her husband during 'a very happy marriage', even continuing to enjoy his company after his early retirement from work: '[A]nd my daughter said that in itself is unique because nobody can stick anybody for twenty four hours.'¹²⁴ Only one interviewee, Mrs E, admitted to having been unhappily married – twice, and twice divorced. This was caused by both husbands 'ill-treating' her and also, in the case of the second, gambling.¹²⁵

Most respondents, too, considered that their parents' marriages had been close.¹²⁶ Mrs P elaborated: 'They were like Derby and Joan . . . They neither of them were happy apart. The first thing my father always said when he came in, "Where's your mother?"'¹²⁷ Mrs S commented: 'if somebody had asked, "Who do you prefer, of your children or your husband?" I think it would have been a problem for my mother. 'Cos she really adored him.'¹²⁸ Mrs M, too, felt that her father 'adored' her mother: 'I should imagine we were one of the happiest little families in Stoneferry.'¹²⁹ Mrs I remembered her mother's reaction to the heavy physical work on the docks that her father was forced to take after a spell of unemployment: 'she wept when she saw his shoulders because . . . they were red raw'.¹³⁰ Even Mrs D, who acknowledged that her mother sometimes resented her father's spending at the pub, felt that they were: 'Surprisingly close actually, considering their differences. . . She wouldn't allow anybody to say a word against him . . . she must have thought a lot about him'.¹³¹ None of these memories accord with the usual perceptions of 'traditional', confrontational working-class marriages. Of course, happy marriages were not universal. Mrs A's parents were divorced and Mrs H's father was violent towards her mother.¹³² Mrs B, too, remembered the hardship caused by her father's drinking and how argumentative he became when drunk: 'They hadn't the money. Father earned it, but he used to go and booze it . . . me father was awful, he really was to her.'¹³³ However, exceptions aside, the overall impression was of happy marriages, in which neither partner appeared to feel exploited.

No direct questions were asked regarding reasons for marrying, but some respondents volunteered this. Mrs B, for instance, described how she and her boyfriend, Alf, had come to the

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs G's interview, pp. 40, 26.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs E's interview, p. 9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 30; Mrs D's interview, p. 33; Mrs E's interview, p. 57; Mrs K's interview, p. 28; Mrs O's interview, p. 38; Mrs P's interview, p. 22; Mr Q's interview, p. 40; Mrs S's interview, p. 35; Mr U's interview, p. 30.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, pp. 22, 45.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 14.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, p. 3.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 41.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 33.

¹³² *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 1; Mrs H's interview, p. 20.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, pp. 2, 5.

decision to marry when talking about her elder sister's insistence that she should work in the fish smoking works:

I was telling Alf about it, he said, "Ooh, fish house!" I said "I know, I don't want to go" I said, "The language is terrible!" He said, "Well, you won't like it" . . . I said, "I know what I'll do!" He said, "What?" I said, "I'll ask me dad if I can get married!"¹³⁴

Later, however, Mrs B clarified this seemingly unromantic proposition. She described how her mother-in-law had initially prevented their wedding by withholding her permission (as her fiancé was under 21) and later, whilst reluctantly agreeing, had taken revenge by telling people they were 'forced to get married'. Mrs B attempted to stop this rumour: 'I got my photos taken in the white frock to shut people's mouths'.¹³⁵ While contradicting her mother-in-law's accusation, Mrs B summarised their reasons for marrying then: 'I didn't want to work in the fish house and I wanted to get away from home. I was the youngest and everybody thought I should be running round after them.'¹³⁶ In her mind, however, these practical considerations simply hastened the inevitable, so they felt 'we might as well get married then instead of waiting'.¹³⁷ Mrs B also reflected on her decision to entertain Alf as a suitor at all, considering that he was 'from an awful family'. She was aware that his background was extremely poor as his father 'never worked' and the whole family gambled – so, as a child Alf was 'always in his bare feet' and 'mostly out of school running to the bookie' at his parents' behest. Mrs B clearly considered all this as less than ideal, but defended Alf as 'the best out of the family'.¹³⁸ Although clearly weighing up the drawbacks of his unfortunate connections, Mrs B loved Alf enough to overlook them.

Mrs C's account of her reasons for marrying also appears matter-of-fact. She returned to Hull after health problems prevented her becoming a nun, and visited her sister's widowed brother-in-law and his family: 'I saw these four children, sat round the table, and from then on we got together and I married him with his four children.'¹³⁹ Mrs F described postponing her marriage in order to stay at home and support her widowed mother: 'she was left with quite a family and she wasn't very strong, really . . . so that it wasn't until the two girls had got off to work, and then there was just the two little ones'.¹⁴⁰ This practical approach to deciding on marriage was also described autobiographically by Hull woman Mary Brine. Growing up in Hull after the First World War she heard her 28-year-old mother's discussion with her sister of a marriage proposal: 'I'm not sure I fancy marrying a forty-eight year old cripple. I'm not that desperate.' However, her suitor had his own home and business, had promised that his mother

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 17.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 48.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 48.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 48.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, pp. 9, 10.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 77.

would move out to live with an aunt, and was prepared to accept her illegitimate daughter as his own. On the advice of her sister ('given half a chance, I'd marry him myself. He sounds a lovely fellow') she decided in his favour.¹⁴¹ Despite the emphasis on practical considerations, affection for the potential spouse is apparently taken for granted and practical considerations did not preclude romantic attachment. Mrs E described her parents' long engagement whilst her mother was away in service, waiting for better circumstances for their marriage, as, for her father, 'everything had to be just right'.¹⁴² However, when the First World War broke out: 'Mother came dashing back to Hull of course, as they loved each other . . . So they got married then.'¹⁴³

Perhaps these reasons for marrying may strike us today as rather unromantic. However, a tension between marrying purely for love and a consideration of practicalities has long been apparent among all classes.¹⁴⁴ Underlying pragmatism need not disprove the existence of romantic love, as this honest and illuminating account from a woman contributor to Mass Observation illustrates:

I went to a party and was introduced to two men. Both seemed equally personable to me at first until I heard that one was a printer and the other was a medical student in his last year. I liked them both to begin with but am now in love with the student. At first it was because I liked the idea of being a doctor's wife better than a printer's – though the latter will probably have a better income. The doctor seemed to belong to a higher 'class' than the printer, though socially they move in the same circle. This I think was the fact that made me think more about the student, though now of course he genuinely means a great deal more to me than the printer.¹⁴⁵

In this case, this woman appears to have made a conscious choice to fall in love with the prospective doctor, as he fitted her notion of what she was looking for in a husband. This seems to have been a practical decision – with even the detail of his being a final year student – and therefore likely, shortly, to be earning – taken into account. In spite of this pragmatism, she clearly regarded herself as being 'in love'. For working-class people, at a time when welfare provisions were minimal, the necessity of marrying someone who would be of practical support through life – a husband who would work hard and consistently or a wife who would manage a household efficiently – were crucial considerations that it would be foolish to ignore. This clearly does not necessarily mean that love was not also a factor.

Some understanding of how marriages worked can be gleaned from considering how couples made decisions. Many Hull respondents felt that decisions tended to be made by

¹⁴¹ Mary Brine, *Hopwood Street to Wellington Lane* (Beverley: Highgate, 1988) p. 30.

¹⁴² Hull Transcripts: Mrs E's interview, p.4.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Mrs E's interview, p.4.

¹⁴⁴ A dilemma apparent in many novels by Jane Austen (see, for instance, *Sense and Sensibility*.)

¹⁴⁵ Mass Observation, A, 'Class', women no 1662, born 1917; quoted in Langhamer, 'Love and Courtship', p. 190.

women.¹⁴⁶ This did not appear to be resented; as one woman commented when asked if her father minded her mother's control: 'No, as long as everything was running smoothly, he didn't care what you did.'¹⁴⁷ These could be quite major family decisions. Mrs J, for instance, decided on moving her family in with her mother 'because she was on her own in this big house in Derringham . . . and I couldn't bear to think of her being on her own'. Despite her husband's reluctance, he 'fell in with my wishes . . . he wasn't a man to complain, bless him'.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, Mrs P's 'big hearted mother' offered to put up her sister and new brother-in-law in their already crowded home when they were unable to find a house of their own. Her father did not object, 'He was a smashing little man.'¹⁴⁹ Some interviewees, too, remarked that their mothers had made decisions because their fathers were away at sea.¹⁵⁰ If a number of respondents felt women were in charge, a similar number felt that decisions were generally made jointly.¹⁵¹ Mrs P, for instance, when asked which of her parents made the decisions, said: 'Oh, between them. Everything between them.'¹⁵² Some felt that decisions were made according to interest. Mrs D, for instance, commented, after being asked if her mother had made the decision when they moved house: 'That sort of decision yes. Household things, yes. . . Because he didn't really interest himself that much . . . his interests were outside the home.'¹⁵³ Some women appeared uninterested in politics and happy to follow the views of the men in their lives.¹⁵⁴ Mrs C, for instance, described her political affiliation as being Labour because her husband was Labour and, before then: 'I lived with a married sister and her husband was Labour. Very keen Labour. So I thought I was Labour.'¹⁵⁵ None of my respondents felt that the men had been in charge in their own households, but three felt that their fathers were in theirs.¹⁵⁶ Some felt that it was the personalities of the couple involved that decided which of them was more in charge. Mr F, for instance, said, 'I should say me father was more forceful than me mother. He'd be that used to running a business and as I say he was a big man on the RAOB so he'd decisions to make there.'¹⁵⁷ It could be significant that Mr F's father was one of the wealthier of the sample. With Mrs F's parents (who

¹⁴⁶ For example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 33; Mrs J's interview, pp. 3, 32; Mrs P's interview, p. 45; Mr U's interview, p. 30; Mr V's interview, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs J's interview, p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs J's interview, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, p. 7.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr U's interview, p. 30; Mr V's interview, p. 6.

¹⁵¹ For example, *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 47; Mrs K's interview, p. 35; Mrs L's interview, p. 25; Mrs M's interview, p. 25; Mrs O's interview, p. 38;

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, p. 7.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, pp. 1, 33.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, p.38.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 39. A similar point was made in Mrs K's interview, p. 38.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 36; Mrs S's interview, p. 35; Mr W's interview, p.26.

¹⁵⁷ Hull Transcripts: Mr F's interview, p. 66. (RAOB = Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes. This is a charitable organisation devised to protect the interests of its members, 'the Poor Man's Masons' according to the interviewee whose father belonged to it.)

were poorer): ‘I would think my mother was the most forceful personality really . . . I don’t think she could do exactly as she liked but I think she was the one who ruled really.’¹⁵⁸ The tendency of couples to take charge of decision-making in certain areas of life, reflects the view of marriage as containing separate spheres, with certain areas specifically ‘male’ and certain areas ‘female’. As discussed in other chapters, this model can be seen in approaches to both housework and childcare. However, this does not necessarily imply a lack of equality or a lack of closeness in the relationship.

Even decisions regarding what employment a man should follow, which must have profoundly affected his personal quality of life considering the long hours worked, were often made jointly, taking family needs into account. For example, Mrs A’s husband had given up his own boot repairing business when the Second World War started. Afterwards, ‘he didn’t go back to it. We contemplated it and then, with having children, it was better to have a regular job. So he went to Ideal Standard.’¹⁵⁹ Mrs G, too, commented that her husband left the navy that he loved because of his marriage.¹⁶⁰ Mrs K, describing her father’s attitude to employment, said his priority was: ‘to keep in work to provide for his family’.¹⁶¹ Mrs O remembered her husband’s drunken boss’s habit of sacking all his workers, then reinstating them when he was sober. One day, Mr O decided, ‘I’m fed up, I’m not going back . . . I’ll have another job.’ However, before making any final decision, he sought his wife’s opinion.¹⁶² Mrs C, too, described her husband’s reluctance to leave the security of working as a bus driver to return to shipbuilding during World War II, after having been made redundant from this industry during the Depression: ‘[H]e was loathe to do it, because he had a big family.’ On the other hand: ‘He said, just driving up and down the road was terrible. He liked creating something.’¹⁶³ In the end, Hull Corporation, who ran the buses, said he could return to bus driving if he wanted, after trying the job at the shipyard again so, with his wife’s persuasion, he returned to shipbuilding. The decision described involved close discussion between husband and wife, weighing up his personal job satisfaction in shipbuilding against the advantages of the security of bus driving, considering their large family. He was clearly willing to continue in a job he hated in order to give his family security; she was equally willing to take a risk in order for him to return to a job he enjoyed. This in no way displays the antagonism between husbands and wives portrayed in some accounts. Mr I, whose work as a sign writer often took him away from home, described how, during the school holidays, ‘I got to taking me family with me . . . ’cos I didn’t like going on a Monday morning till Friday

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs F’s interview, p. 66.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs A’s interview, p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs G’s interview, p. 40.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs K’s interview, p. 19.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, Mrs O’s interview, p. 22.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, Mrs C’s interview, p. 19.

without the family.¹⁶⁴ He also described how, when the children were older, his wife joined him, working alongside him, doing the more basic work, largely for companionship.¹⁶⁵

The management of money is another area that sheds light on a couple's relationship, as discussed above. There were some examples here of men controlling the family finances.¹⁶⁶ However, overwhelmingly in this sample, it was women who controlled the finances, both among the interviewees themselves and amongst their parents.¹⁶⁷ Mrs M commented on how poor her husband was with money: 'If I'd left it to him we would have been in a right state.'¹⁶⁸ Likewise, Mrs N felt that her husband would not have known how to start managing finances.¹⁶⁹ Mrs D, talking about bills said, 'We would both know they needed paying . . . I generally remembered to pay them.'¹⁷⁰ Mr R's reaction, too, on being asked if it was his mother who had managed the household finances implied the answer was self-evident: 'Yes. Oh me father never managed the money. He'd spend it.'¹⁷¹ Money was a sore point with Mr O, who had once accidentally ploughed all his wages into a field, so Mrs O took care of it in their household. Although she expressed annoyance at his always leaving it all to her, this appeared to amount to the social embarrassment of having to pay for both of them herself if they went out, rather than any more serious disagreement.¹⁷² The only real and recurring arguments about money described were between Mrs B's father and her older sister, who managed the household after their mother's death. Mrs B remembered being sent to Raynor's pub on Hessle Road to ask her father for housekeeping money before it was all spent.¹⁷³ No such dissension was described anywhere between husband and wife. Some felt that finances had been arranged jointly, sometimes with each partner taking care of certain areas.¹⁷⁴ Mrs N, for instance, remembered that her father gave her mother housekeeping money, whilst he paid for any extra items that were needed, such as furniture.¹⁷⁵

Accounts of household crises, too, often imply that these were faced jointly by couples. Mrs C, for example, described the bombing of their house when they had a large family of young children, including a three-week-old baby: '[E]very window was out, and every ceiling was down,

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 59.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 60.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs X's interview, p. 12; Mrs S's interview, pp. 33, 34; Mr and Mrs T's interview, pp. 29, 30.

¹⁶⁷ For example, *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 15; Mrs G's interview p. 22; Mrs I's interview, pp. 69, 72; Mrs J's interview, p. 31; Mrs K's interview, p. 33; Mrs M's interview, p. 26; Mrs O's interview, p. 37; Mr and Mrs R's interview, pp. 21, 41.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, p. 26.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p.33.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 31.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Mr R's interview, p. 21.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, Mrs O's interview, p.37.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, pp. 14, 15.

¹⁷⁴ For example, Mrs M felt that her parents, 'sorted everything out together.' *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, p. 13; Mrs O also thought her parents arranged finances together (Mrs O's interview: p. 36).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 19.

the house was full of rubble. Oh yes, it was awful. Me husband . . . had to have two or three days off work even to get the rubble out of the house. And then we had to go and find somewhere to live, we couldn't live in the house. It was condemned.'¹⁷⁶ Mrs S, too, remembered her father overstaying his compassionate leave from the forces when her family were bombed out of their house while her mother was heavily pregnant: 'And he stopped at home, over, to put all the windows back and ready for her to get confined so he finished up, I think they put him in the glass house for a week or so.'¹⁷⁷ Mr and Mrs F both suffered as Mr F was away for six years, first as a soldier, and then as a prisoner-of-war, between 1939 and 1945, missing the first years of his first child's life. After his return, according to Mr F: 'It took me a long while to adjust, because I'd been that long living in the wilds, in Prussia, that I couldn't get used to having people round me, and the noise of the streets.'¹⁷⁸ In order to help him deal with this adjustment, they decided together to move out of the city.¹⁷⁹

VI

Another area worth considering in determining the nature of marriage is leisure among men and women. At the beginning of the 20th century, the average manual worker spent fifty-four hours a week at work. Many, therefore, worked considerably more than this, sometimes more than seventy-two hours, often including all day Saturday.¹⁸⁰ Weekly working hours fell, on average, to forty-six by 1924, although conditions worsened again for some during the slump. The 1938 Holidays with Pay Act, whilst directly benefiting only a minority of workers, paved the way for improved conditions for many more, so that by 1938, 40% of workers had paid leave.¹⁸¹ Between 1945 and the 1970s, leisure time increased for most workers in various ways: average hours worked weekly were down to forty by the mid-1960s, with Saturday as leisure time for most; by 1955, virtually all workers had two weeks' annual paid holiday.¹⁸² For most working people, therefore, the opportunity arose to enjoy some leisure time away from work. At the same time, whilst the interwar years saw severe unemployment in some areas (including, for many, in Hull) real wages rose considerably for those in work.¹⁸³

This change in the quantity and quality of leisure coincided with a move away from a focus on the pub and the consumption of alcohol as exclusive leisure pursuits. Alcohol, especially beer,

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 43.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 54.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 94.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr and Mrs F's interview, p. 97.

¹⁸⁰ Douglas A. Reid, 'Mass Leisure in Britain', R. Moore and Henk van Nierop (eds) *Twentieth-Century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands* (Oxford: Berg, 2006) p. 137.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 140.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 141.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

had traditionally formed a large proportion of the British diet.¹⁸⁴ However, a range of factors led to a massive reduction in alcohol consumption, most significantly, for this study, among the working class. The 19th-century temperance movement was reaching its height of influence before World War I. The growing availability of other drinks provided an alternative to alcohol, too: tea was an increasing staple from the 18th century to the 1960s; also, the growing availability of pure drinking water and better distribution and marketing of milk were significant (both from the early 20th century).¹⁸⁵ From the later 19th century, as alcohol consumption peaked, various laws were enacted in attempts to lessen problems associated with heavy drinking: opening hours on Sunday were shortened; drinking by under 16s was prohibited; fines for drinking offences were increased; changes in tax led to a decrease in beer strength and children under 14 were not allowed to enter bars.¹⁸⁶ Crucially, 1915 legislation stemming from fears about alcoholism undermining the war effort led to restricted pub opening hours and rising beer duties; following on from this, many pubs were shut and off-licence sale of spirits at weekends was banned. During the week, spirits were sold during very restricted hours and in large bottles (so as not to be conveniently portable).¹⁸⁷ These measures led to rapidly declining beer consumption and a concomitant fall in convictions for drunkenness.¹⁸⁸ A sharp and immediate drop in alcohol-related deaths occurred, and rates of both suicide and infant mortality fell.¹⁸⁹ In Hull, pubs were demolished as part of slum clearance programmes and not replaced, so that the number of pubs in the city declined from the 1901 level of 452, to 288 in 1935. A decline in off-licences, too, meant that, overall, there were fewer drinking facilities in Hull than in comparable areas.¹⁹⁰ Prominent local historians, Edward Gillett and Kenneth MacMahon, commented:

There was a terrific struggle between drink and the temperance organizations for the soul of Hull; and though the temperance people often behaved with some absurdity and intolerance, no-one who had ever talked to survivors from Victorian Hull can be sorry that on the whole temperance came out on top.¹⁹¹

Increased leisure time along with higher real incomes for many led to a range of new leisure opportunities. Thus, various social clubs developed, along with cafés, restaurants and sports clubs, including cycling. Cycling was especially popular in Hull, with its flat landscape and there

¹⁸⁴ An estimated 400-500 k.cal. per person per day in the first half of the 18th century – one fifth of energy needs. From John Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: a social history of drink in modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 3.

¹⁸⁵ Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures*, pp. 24; 41.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Haydon, *Beer and Britannia: An inebriated history of Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001) pp. 219-29.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-1.

¹⁸⁸ Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures*, p. 132.

¹⁸⁹ Haydon, *Beer and Britannia*, p. 261.

¹⁹⁰ Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon, *A History of Hull*, (Hull: Hull University Press, 1989) p. 436.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

were more bicycles per person than in any other city.¹⁹² Nationally, dancing became more popular; eighteen million people attended the cinema weekly in 1935. Both day trips and annual holidays increased in popularity. The building of suburban houses with gardens, including council estates, as well as a growth in allotments, led to the adoption of gardening and DIY as hobbies. Homes became, gradually, more comfortable and the availability of hire purchase meant that owning wireless sets, gramophones and pianos became a possibility; leisure for men began to be more centred on the home and family, and more often shared with women.¹⁹³ New, larger pubs were built in the suburbs that aimed to attract more women and a more middle-class clientele; overall, they began to be seen as more respectable and it became more common for men to go to pubs with their wives. More than half of drinkers in pubs were men in the inter-war years; sometimes, depending on the type of pub, the vast majority of drinkers were men. However some, mainly older, women did visit pubs regularly during this time.¹⁹⁴ A movement towards ‘improvement’ from the early 20th century led to older pubs being refurbished, too, in an attempt to make them more respectable. Thus they began to serve food, provide better toilets and more (and more comfortable) seating and sometimes gardens and children’s play areas. Improvers disapproved of ‘perpendicular drinking’ (standing up, often around the bar) and preferred drinkers to be seated, sometimes with waitress service.¹⁹⁵ The effect of this trend was to decrease alcohol consumption; drinkers standing by the bar could re-order quickly, whereas waiting for waitresses, or leaving a seat to go and queue for a drink took more time.

For all these reasons, alcohol consumption nationally declined between the wars. During World War II, it rose again, owing, no doubt, both to increased wages and a reaction to the worry and distress of war. This increase was especially noticeable among young women involved in the war effort, such as women in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (the WAAF).¹⁹⁶ However, unlike during the First World War, drunkenness did not appear to become a problem. Rather, the government saw alcohol as crucial to morale so beer was not rationed.¹⁹⁷ After the war, alcohol consumption fell again during the 1950s and early 1960s,¹⁹⁸ though pub-going became increasingly popular among the young – men *and* women – in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹⁹

Overall, such changes in leisure patterns must have affected marriage and family life. In fact, the companionate marriage that appeared in Hull from the early 20th century would be hard

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 454.

¹⁹³ Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures*, p. 135.

¹⁹⁴ Claire Langhamer, ‘“A public house is for all classes, men and women alike”: women, leisure and drink in Second World War England’, *Women’s History Review*, 12:2 (2003) 423-44, pp. 424-5; 427.

¹⁹⁵ Haydon, *Beer and Britannia*, pp. 254-5; 262.

¹⁹⁶ Langhamer, ‘A public house is for all classes’, p. 437.

¹⁹⁷ Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures*, p. 136; Langhamer, ‘A public house is for all classes’, p. 429.

¹⁹⁸ Reid, ‘Mass leisure in Britain’, p. 148.

¹⁹⁹ Langhamer, ‘A public house is for all classes’, p. 437.

to imagine without some of these changes having occurred. Interestingly, Paul Thompson, in commenting on the ‘flexibility and gentleness of relationships both between men and women and between adults and children’ in the Shetlands, also mentioned the lack of pubs in the areas he studied.²⁰⁰ Since alcohol consumption is often seen as a big part of the excessively stereotyped working class, it is worth looking in detail at what part this played in the lives of my respondents. Drinking was a problem among a small minority of respondents’ fathers: only Mrs B and Mr U described their fathers as regularly drunk.²⁰¹ Mr V’s father’s drinking could also be a problem, especially owing to the amount of money that he spent in the pub.²⁰² Mrs D, too, whilst not describing her father as a ‘drunk’, considered that the amount he spent on social drinking was more than the household could reasonably afford.²⁰³ In retrospect, Mr V could sympathise with both his parents in their disagreements over his father’s heavy drinking:

I think he was missing his sea life that much. He used to spend a lot of time in the clubs. That meant spending money on beer. And when you haven’t enough money to buy the food, money on beer causes family frictions. . . she had three children to bring up and clothe and find shoes for.²⁰⁴

To Mr V, his father’s frustrations were typical of those experienced by many men at the time, finding out that the ‘land fit for heroes’ that had been promised after the First World War did not materialise:

He was unable to be what he wanted to be and he was finding . . . as so many men did in those days in dead-end jobs er . . . they were finding themselves in a situation they can’t get out of, and they think there should be something better out there. And of course that was the end of the war wasn’t it? “Come home and we will create a new world for you, where you will be somebody. There will be hope. You won’t just go back to your dead-end job for ever.” ’Cos that’s what they, you know, in the 1930s, all they had to look forward to. You went in the pit, you went in the steel mills, you went in the dock, you went where you were put, and that’s where you stayed. There was no advancement. You just earned your wages and that was it, and it was frustration and many men took to men’s company in the clubs and the pubs. Unfortunately that cost money.²⁰⁵

The majority of respondents did not perceive drink to have been a problem in their own marriages, or in their parents’. Mrs F, for example, recalled: ‘My father used to go and have his pint or so at the weekends after pay day.’ Similar comments were made about their fathers or

²⁰⁰ Paul Thompson, ‘Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power between the Sexes’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 27:1 (1985) 3-32, p. 26.

²⁰¹ No respondents admitted to a problem with drink; neither did their spouses or mothers appear to have had one. *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, p. 23; Mr U’s interview, p. 19.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, Mr V’s interview, p. 24.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 15.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Mr V’s interview, p. 24.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr V’s interview, p. 24.

husbands by numerous interviewees.²⁰⁶ Mr V's parents-in-law only ever went to the pub together.²⁰⁷ Several interviewees remembered that their fathers did not drink at all. Mrs B's husband 'didn't drink . . . didn't go in pubs . . . he was all for his home'.²⁰⁸ Similar comments were made by several others about their husbands²⁰⁹ and about their fathers.²¹⁰

It was not only men who went to pubs: the mothers of Mrs D, Mrs P and Mrs S sometimes joined their husbands for drinks, as did Mr V's mother-in-law.²¹¹ Mr U, a fisherman, recalled going out with his wife to celebrate after returning to port: 'when you'd landed your fish, got your money, that's when the fishermen were kings for the day'. Arranging a babysitter to meet the children from school: 'we'd stop out for a meal and probably wouldn't come home while ten o'clock at night'.²¹² Women also went out drinking without their husbands. Mr F recalled that his mother used to dress up and visit the local pub almost every night, either alone or, occasionally, with the lodger: 'I'll say this for her, she liked her stout but she never got drunk'.²¹³ Mrs H remembered a common practice after shopping with mothers on Saturdays: 'And then, most of them, they would say, "You run home with that and tell your father I won't be long." And they used to nip for maybe half a glass of stout or something like that.'²¹⁴ Mr U remembered going to visit his aunt at Christmas: 'by ten o'clock she always had the Christmas dinner cooked . . . then she was off to the snug at Halfway [the Halfway House, a local pub] while two o'clock'.²¹⁵

Where wives did not go to the pub, they sometimes had reasons of their own for making this choice. Mrs F's mother, for instance, 'was not a person who went into company. She was shy, really shy'.²¹⁶ Mrs P's mother would 'rather have one in the house'.²¹⁷ Mrs I, too, remembered going 'to the beer-off for a gill for Grandma' who 'did like a drink'.²¹⁸ A perception that they lacked suitable clothes could explain a preference for drinking at home among some women – such as Mrs D's mother.²¹⁹ Drinking at home would also avoid problems with

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 30; Mrs J's interview, p. 12; Mrs L's interview, p. 27; Mrs O's interview, pp. 20-21; Mrs P's interview, p. 17; both Mr and Mrs R in their interview, p. 50; Mrs S's interview, p. 16.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr V's interview, p. 51.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 40.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs G's interview, p. 26; Mrs J's interview, p. 38; Mrs O's interview, p. 37.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 70; Mr I's interview, p. 71; Mrs K's interview, p. 9; both Mr and Mrs T in their interview, p. 32; Mr W's interview, p. 28, Mr Q's interview, p. 29.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 39; Mrs P's interview, p. 52; Mrs S's interview, p. 16 and Mr V's interview, p. 51.

²¹² *Ibid.*, Mrs U's interview, p. 19.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, pp. 29-30; 68.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 8.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr U's interview, p. 25.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 46.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, p. 58.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 6.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 37.

childcare. Mr F remembered, ‘very often during the day you’d see a woman – nearly all the women wore shawls over their heads – going to the beer-off and coming back with a jug of beer underneath her shawl’.²²⁰

For various reasons, husbands and wives sometimes chose to enjoy some leisure pursuits separately. Sometimes, childcare problems encouraged this. As Mrs F commented, ‘When you’ve a big family . . . it is difficult for the man and woman to do things together.’²²¹ Sometimes, couples pursued different leisure pursuits because they had different interests. Mrs B, for example, went out dancing and even on holiday without her husband because he did not like dancing or travelling.²²² Mrs F’s father went out for a ‘pint or so at the weekends’ and her mother went out to the Mothers’ Union.²²³ Mr F’s parents socialised separately, with his father enjoying swimming, dancing and the RAOB, whilst his mother went out to the local pub.²²⁴ According to Mr F, his mother, ‘ran her own life’.²²⁵ There were many accounts of leisure activities engaged in apart from spouses. As described, many men visited the pub without their wives. Many also had allotments, which sometimes included social activities with other allotment users.²²⁶ Other male hobbies included doing the pools and going to football matches.²²⁷ Mr T’s father ‘had a lot of hobbies’ that mainly comprised making a range of items (including wirelesses, a canoe, a tandem and a garden swing).²²⁸ Making toys for children was mentioned elsewhere as a hobby: Mr I’s father, for instance, built him a large and elaborate train set.²²⁹

Women, too, engaged in leisure pursuits apart from their husbands. Mrs J’s mother used to go out with a friend from the same terrace: ‘They went to the Grand Theatre every week . . . They used to get dressed up that one night and have a night out, the two of them.’²³⁰ Although Mrs J remembered that her father could be ‘a bit jealous’ over these excursions, they do not appear to have caused any serious disagreements and her mother continued to go. Mrs J, too, regularly went out – playing in a darts team – while her husband minded the children.²³¹ Mrs L enjoyed evening classes in dressmaking, to which her husband drove her there and back: ‘he didn’t mind as long as I was happy’.²³² Mrs O’s mother was very much involved in activities around the

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 21.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F’s interview, pp. 69-70.

²²² *Ibid.*, Mrs B’s interview, p. 35.

²²³ *Ibid.*, Mrs F’s interview, pp. 30; 70.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, pp. 29, 30.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 68.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, Mr Q’s interview, p. 21; Mr U’s interview, p. 28.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr Q’s interview, p. 36; Mr V’s interview, p. 45.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr T’s interview, p. 20.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr I’s interview, p. 36.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr J’s interview, p. 34.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs J’s interview, p. 37.

²³² *Ibid.*, Mrs L’s interview, p. 8.

Methodist chapel, whilst Mr Q's mother used to go and watch the cricket.²³³ Mr Q was one of several interviewees who mentioned the practice of visiting Hull Market on a Saturday evening in order to buy meat more cheaply. His mother went weekly with a neighbour, an excursion that appears to have been social as well as practical.²³⁴ Sometimes women may have struggled to justify leisure activities to themselves in the face of demanding schedules. Mrs R, for example, remembered her mother visiting the cinema: 'I've known my Mother go perhaps on a Thursday night with a neighbour. If she hadn't enjoyed the picture . . . she's come home and she's said, "Oh, I could have done me windows and I could have done me brasses!" She begrudged sitting there, watching the picture.'²³⁵

However, most of the couples who enjoyed separate leisure pursuits also enjoyed leisure together. Mrs I remembered regularly going on outings with her parents and sister in her grandparents' car.²³⁶ Mr and Mrs I met at a cycling club and enjoyed cycling and youth hostelling, as part of a group, before they were married.²³⁷ Later, they took their children for daytrips or camping in the side-car of their motor bike.²³⁸ Mrs O and her husband, on the other hand, went out together sometimes, although she did not specify where.²³⁹ Mrs J used to go out with her husband, too, and had no problem in getting a babysitter as, 'My neighbour used to come in to watch the telly, 'cos they didn't have one.'²⁴⁰ Mrs H remembered: 'On a weekend, your Mam and Dad used to take you round the museums and to the pier . . . everybody used to go to the pier.'²⁴¹ The pier was remembered as a venue for outings with his parents by Mr V, too, along with Hessle foreshore.²⁴² Mrs K recalled her parents taking the family to Hull market each Saturday where they, too, took advantage of the cheap meat later in the day: 'It was a family thing. Buy us a few sweets.'²⁴³ Mrs O, when asked how her relationship with her husband compared with that of her parents, replied: 'Mother and Father didn't go out together a lot with having a big family.' She and her husband, on the other hand, had only two children, several years apart, so that for quite some time there were just the three of them and they: 'used to go everywhere together'.²⁴⁴ Mrs P remembered her family visiting a pub in the suburbs that had a

²³³ *Ibid.*, Mrs O's interview, p. 48; Mr Q's interview, p. 37.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, Mr Q's interview, p. 41.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, p. 52.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 16.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr and Mrs I's interview, pp. 23-4.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr and Mrs I's interview, p. 38.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs O's interview, p. 37.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs J's interview, p. 37.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 24.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, Mr V's interview, p. 23.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, pp. 4, 6.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs O's interview, p. 41.

garden for children.²⁴⁵ Mr Q's parents went together to watch Hull City play football and also, occasionally, to dances organised by the National Union of Railwaymen. Every Friday, they took the children to the cinema together.²⁴⁶ Mrs V's parents went cycling on a tandem, as did Mr and Mrs T.²⁴⁷

Despite the range of activities described above, most leisure time – for men and women – was spent in the home. Domestic leisure encompassed a range of activities. Mrs D felt that, for her parents, joint leisure amounted to 'sitting together, talking and listening to the radio'.²⁴⁸ The radio was mentioned by most interviewees, along with the gramophone and, for the later years, the television.²⁴⁹ Other pursuits included doing crossword puzzles together, gardening, playing games (especially card games), reading (especially library books) and sewing or knitting.²⁵⁰ Some interviewees remembered that it was common practice for parents to 'rest' on a Sunday while the eldest child took the other children for a walk, or sometimes to Sunday school.²⁵¹ A number of respondents remembered pets as a focus of family leisure, with dogs, cats, rabbits and various caged birds being fondly remembered.²⁵² Mrs H, for instance, recalled: 'We've had some good animals, though. And budgies . . . One that talked. Used to say to my husband, "What are you doing, Joe?" He used to say, "I'm minding me own business, what are you doing?"'²⁵³ Several respondents remembered regular gatherings at home during the evenings, usually with relations, but sometimes also including friends and neighbours. Sometimes these would be for playing cards or other games but more often involved music, either the piano or mouth organ. Mr I, for instance, remembered his uncle playing the piano for family parties: 'Thursday night was always sing-song evening and they all used to come down and get round the piano, singing.'²⁵⁴ Domestic leisure time could also be spent outside the house, as discussed in Chapter 5. Mrs F remembered summer nights in Reform streets: 'I can picture my Dad sitting on the doorstep, talking to people. And they'd be propping the windowsills up.'²⁵⁵

There is plenty of evidence of shared leisure among couples – both in respondents' lives and those of their parents. On the other hand, both men and women generally enjoyed some

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, pp. 22, 51.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs Q's interview, pp. 37, 43, 40.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs V's interview, p. 49; Mr and Mrs T's interview, p. 34.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 39.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, p. 36; Mr V's interview, p. 27; Mrs L's interview, p. 21; Mrs R's interview, p. 54; Mr U's interview, p. 29.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 51; Mrs I's interview, pp. 7, 18, 81; Mrs G's interview, p. 26; Mrs K's interview, p. 36; Mrs P's interview, pp. 51, 57; Mrs O's interview, p. 49;

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 80.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 9; Mrs P's interview, p. 7; Mr Q's interview, p. 44; Mr and Mrs R's interview, p. 51.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 39.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 22. Also, Mrs B's interview, p. 40; Mrs I's interview, pp. 18-19; Mrs O's interview, p. 42; Mr Q's interview, p. 45; Mrs R's interview, p. 53; Mr F's interview, p. 40.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 83.

leisure apart from their spouses and so I am certainly not arguing that couples in Hull always enjoyed exclusively joint leisure pursuits. Nor does this seem necessary for the kind of relationships I suggest: marriages can still be intimate where every free minute is not spent together. Margaret Williamson, in her study of couples in East Cleveland, found that some women felt pressurised by their husband into giving up individual leisure pursuits.²⁵⁶ Therefore, the fact that Hull offered examples of women who were able to enjoy themselves apart from their husbands could point to their having a greater degree of autonomy within marriage. Szreter and Fisher found that most couples in their study aspired to this model of leisure, with some activities shared and some separate.²⁵⁷

In addition, increased leisure time could still have contributed to a model of companionate marriage, even where it did not necessarily lead to couples pursuing leisure interests together, despite the emphasis some have placed on the significance of separate leisure pursuits within marriage. For instance, if women were able to go to the cinema with friends, while husbands looked after children, then this contributed to equalizing a situation where women looked after children while their husbands went to the pub. Dennis *et al.* emphasised the significance of men's leisure around the home being separate from women's.²⁵⁸ However, husbands choosing to garden in order to increase the amenity of the family's space or supplement their diet, surely implies a very different model of marriage from that in which husbands spent all their free time with their friends at the pub. In many cases, my oral history evidence gives the impression of mutually enjoyed shared time, even if it was spent at home rather than in organised leisure activities. Mrs M, for example, recalled of her parents: 'he never came home, that I remember, without bringing my mother something, if it was only an orange . . . I always say he courted me mother till the day she died.'²⁵⁹ Elizabeth Roberts appeared sceptical that watching television together amounted to 'conjugal companionship' but for couples exhausted from physically demanding work, this may have provided a welcome alternative to more active leisure, and would not necessarily preclude conversation.²⁶⁰

VII

Overall, then, what conclusions can be drawn about working-class marriages in Hull in the first three quarters of the 20th century? No evidence is entirely clear-cut and real-life couples tend to

²⁵⁶ Margaret Williamson, 'Gender, Leisure and Marriage in a Working-Class Community, 1939 – 1960', *Labour History Review*, 74:2 (2009) 185-98, p. 185

²⁵⁷ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, 'Love and Authority in Mid-Twentieth Century Marriages: Sharing and Caring', in *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 132-54, p. 138.

²⁵⁸ Dennis *et al.*, *Coal is Our Life*, p. 183.

²⁵⁹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs M's interview, p. 23.

²⁶⁰ Roberts, *Women and Families*, pp. 104-4.

be more complex than theoretical models suggest. Certainly, examples mentioned from my oral history transcripts could have been used to support the consensus view of marriage as lacking intimacy (the hard drinking and subsequent rows of Mrs B's father, for instance). However, the majority of evidence did not support this model. How, therefore, can the current consensus be explained? It is possible that the anecdotal nature of the evidence may have skewed findings, since tales of brutal fathers and saintly matriarchs may make better anecdotes and so are more widely propagated. Possibly, regional variations explain the difference and Hull is something of an exception. In some cases, the absence of husbands in the fishing industry may explain why wives had more autonomy. Possibly, traditions developed in this industry may have spread to the wider local community. This possibility is supported by similar models being uncovered in fishing areas by Paul Thompson and Trevor Lummis. Mrs S offered one interpretation of why marriages in fishing families were different. Her mother 'adored' her father, but Mrs S felt:

if he'd worked ashore she'd have got used to him, wouldn't she? But fishermen's wives, nearly all of 'em, well, they didn't spend much time with their husbands cos they were only home thirty-six hours in three weeks. So you just lived from one three weeks to the other.

In summary, then, to return to the discussion on marriage at the beginning of the chapter, the Hull evidence most closely supports the model of the companionate marriage. This appeared to change little over the period studied, so that the oldest couples interviewed (married in the first quarter of the 20th century) appeared to have marriages remarkably similar to those of the youngest respondents (marrying in the 1960s). My research does not go far enough back to determine when a model of companionate marriage developed in Hull. Such marriages may have been common in the 19th century; on the other hand, it was possibly the decline of widespread heavy drinking at the start of the 20th century that paved the way for them. Finch's and Summerfield's suggestion that the companionate marriage favoured men, likewise, found little support in this evidence, with women and men appearing to be equally happy with marriage in general. It is possible, however, that reservations posited regarding a worsening position of women within marriage (by Elizabeth Roberts as well as by Finch and Summerfield) may be more applicable to a period after my Hull research. Equally, I heard nothing to support Giddens's notion that the latter marriages were moving towards a 'pure' relationship. Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink and Holden concluded the history of the family revealed many 'continuities' sometimes over centuries – the Hull research would lead me to concur with this.²⁶¹ Different styles of, and approaches to, marriage exist today and this may well have been true in the past. Whilst some men, then, may have been dominant and some women may have been subjugated, other couples operated on a much more equal basis. This is not to say that no changes occurred. There is some

²⁶¹ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960* (London and New York: Longman, 1999) p. 20.

evidence for a growing emphasis on the importance of romance and sexual intimacy between couples from around the 1950s, for instance. No doubt improved housing, shorter working hours and smaller families all collectively led to significant changes for some couples. It is often thought that the model of more equal, companionate marriage began among middle-class couples and ‘trickled down’ to the working class.²⁶² However, it seems to me that this style of marriage, in some areas at least, developed among the working class independently of middle-class influence; indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that it was practised *more* among the poorest.

²⁶² Young and Willmott, for instance, thought that a more ‘symmetrical’ arrangement was spreading from the middle class (*The Symmetrical Family*, p. 84.)

CHAPTER 4

‘We looked after one another’: mothers, fathers and children

To recap my original thesis, I contend that the widely accepted notion that traditional, patriarchal families were common until the 1950s is not true for Hull at this time, where many working-class families had been more equal and supportive from at least the beginning of the 20th century. Within this chapter, I demonstrate that, although mothers were central to such families at this time, fathers were much more involved than previously thought. In addition, the idea that women tended to be closer to their mothers than their husbands was not borne out by my findings.

In the first half of the 20th century, various factors led to changes in family life. A fall in birth and death rates meant that children were increasingly likely to be born into comparatively small families, and increasingly likely to survive childhood with both parents (and even possibly some grandparents) also living. The expansion of schooling and the decline of child labour encouraged the viewing of childhood as a longer and more distinctly separate period of life. Mothering was also affected by a range of other developments: both childbirth and childcare began to be increasingly dominated by outside experts; aspects of housework that had previously been seen as inextricably linked with motherhood (such as cooking, cleaning and making and mending clothes) began to be less physically demanding; better healthcare minimised the nursing of sick children, previously an important part of mothering. Early in the century, the eugenics movement highlighted the notion of ‘improving’ working-class mothers and babies. As Freudian ideas began to be popularised, the view that women who were not maternal were ‘deviant’ became commonplace.¹

Feminism was another influence on how the roles of mothers and fathers were seen during the 20th century. Ann Taylor Allen has summarised the problem of what she saw as the ‘maternal dilemma’ which arose because the unequal burden of responsibility for children that fell on women led to the necessity of choosing ‘between motherhood and other forms of self-realization’.² According to Allen, the traditional belief that patriarchy was a natural state, universal over time and space, was questioned in the 19th century. By the early 20th century, many feminists argued that family structures were diverse, in history and around the world, and that matriarchy had also been widely practised. For most feminists, neither patriarchy nor matriarchy

¹ See Shani D’Cruze, ‘Women and the Family’, in J. Purvis (ed.) *Women’s History: Britain 1850-1945: an introduction* (London: UCL, 1995) 51-83, p. 74.

² Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890-1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 1.

was seen as the way forward, but equality.³ Others saw matriarchy as a more natural state, with families based around mothers and children, and mothers in control.⁴ Some feminists felt that women in paid employment would lead to a reduction in men's wages and therefore undermine the idea of a family wage that could support a couple and their children, freeing a wife and mother for housework and child care.⁵ They argued for the 'endowment of motherhood' through family allowances.⁶ Others regretted the economic dependency that arose from women concentrating on domestic, rather than paid, employment.⁷ However, many working-class feminists, for whom housework was particularly demanding, aspired to a more domestic role, and wished to be able to afford not to take on paid employment.⁸ Others resisted attempts to keep them at home, wishing to retain the independence of paid work.⁹

This, then, is the background to any study of parenthood and childhood in 20th century Britain. In this chapter, I consider some of these developments and how far they affected the lives of children, mothers and fathers in Hull. I begin with some comments on pregnancy and childbirth. I then examine approaches to childcare, starting with a summary of state involvement with children's lives and also changing fashions in childcare. I go on to consider how the input of professionals worked in practice in Hull and how far advice was followed. The involvement of fathers in their children's lives is examined next. The impact on family life of both falling birth rates and falling death rates is also addressed. The relationships between parents and grown-up children are then considered. Some assessment is made of the impact of feminism on parenthood and family life. The history of 20th-century parenthood and childhood cannot be attempted here in any comprehensive or systematic way. Rather, issues within the theme will be discussed as they were prompted by the findings of my interviews. Throughout, I consider my findings in the light of my original thesis.

I

Pregnancy and childbirth form the obvious approach to a discussion on parents and children, so I will begin here. In looking at pregnancy in the first half of the 20th century, it is striking to contemporary notions what a very private occurrence pregnancy was considered to be, even within a family. Of my thirty interviewees, five remembered their parents *not* telling them about

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

their mothers' pregnancies.¹⁰ Considering that eleven of the thirty were either only children or the youngest in the family, and therefore had no experience of the birth of a younger sibling, this is high proportion. The experience of Mrs R, for example, commenting on a younger sibling being born, when she was 14 was typical: 'You see, my mother never told me. I wasn't supposed to know. . . Well I knew 'cos I saw baby clothes in the drawers and things like, but . . . they didn't tell you anything you see. You didn't know.'¹¹ Mrs I saw the possibility of having to tell her mother that she was pregnant as a reason not to have sex before marriage: 'I mean, it was bad enough going and telling me Mother I was pregnant when I was married.'¹² According to Mrs S, this reluctance to discuss sex or related issues caused problems when trying to obtain information during her first pregnancy:

Well, when I was having me first, I wouldn't dare ask me Mother. I wanted to ask her how I would know when I started in labour; do you know what I mean? I didn't have the courage. Because you was brought up not to discuss things, you know. I went to ask me aunt. And all she said was, 'You'll know.' So it wasn't much help, was it, really?¹³

Such embarrassment could mean that real ignorance continued. For example, Mrs B commented: 'I knew nothing about children. I didn't even know where they came from. When I asked his mother [her mother-in-law] she said, "Do you want me to be rude?" I said, "No, I don't." 'cos I was crying.'¹⁴ The miserable experience that her ignorance exacerbated in labour appeared to contribute to this respondent's unwillingness to have any more children. This reticence appears to have been a widespread phenomenon, mentioned frequently in various sources nationally from 1915 to the 1950s.¹⁵

Although undoubtedly causing real problems for women, this modesty can be understood partly as an understandable view of pregnancy as women's business. It was not shameful in itself, but best kept between women – men and children did not need to know the details. In the same way, many women continued to prefer midwives (often traditionally trained, uncertified ones) to male doctors. According to Elizabeth Roberts, unqualified midwives continued to be popular for so long because they were more accommodating, more prepared to work with a woman's own female relations and less inclined to insist on intrusive methods.¹⁶

¹⁰ Hull Transcripts: Mrs R's interview, pp. 16, 17; Mrs S's interview, p. 14; Mrs T's interview, p. 15; Mrs V's interview, p.17.

¹¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs R's interview, pp. 16, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, pp. 12, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 13.

¹⁵ See, Llewelyn Davies, (ed.) *Maternity: Letters from working women* (1915; London: Virago, 1978). For example, letter 81, p. 106; letter 11, p. 30; letter 37, p. 64; also Madeline Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958) pp. 55, 56.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) p. 107.

Perhaps this embarrassment was one reason why I obtained little detailed information about child birth. However, in studying Margaret Llewelyn Davies's 1915 collection of letters from working women on the subject, one cannot fail to be moved and shocked by the terrible experiences that appeared to be the norm: health problems in pregnancy (such as swollen legs, extreme nausea); horrific confinements and serious long-term health problems were detailed here frankly, all often exacerbated by women doing too much during pregnancy or soon after childbirth.¹⁷ Considering my interviewees' openness in most other areas, even where directly probing questions were not asked, I cannot believe I would not have heard some such tales had these been usual. Neither questions about child birth nor questions about health elicited such responses. It may be that my interviewees' mothers experienced worse child births; if this was the case my interviewees may well not have known the details owing to the lack of openness on the subject already discussed. This possibility is hinted at by Mrs V (born in 1936 and married in 1958):

[M]y mother always feared childbirth, and I know that because of what she'd said to me before I had any of mine, before I was married even . . . She said to me, when I was born, she looked at me and she said, 'Oh, it's a girl, she's going to have to go through all this.'

Mrs V, on the other hand, had not experienced childbirth as quite so terrible. In fact, her view was typical of the impression that many of my interviewees gave on the subject: 'Childbirth isn't the best thing in the world but it's not the worst.'¹⁸

Something of women's attitudes to childbirth can be discerned from their acceptance of the practice of churching. This ceremony was insisted on by most women until well into the 20th century. This was despite the discouragement of the clergy, who recognised that the service, although it had religious roots as a thanksgiving for childbirth, was basically superstitious.¹⁹ It was generally seen as unlucky for women not to be churched, although the details of this varied (sometimes the ceremony was seen as preventing later miscarriages, sometimes women who left the house before being churched were thought to risk becoming pregnant again within a year or that any woman who visited would become pregnant). Mrs D, describing the practice when her mother was giving birth in the Hessle Road area of Hull in the 1920s and 1930s, commented:

It was a thing you had to do, you had to be churched. And I think, most women, I think it was like a superstition. They didn't go to give thanks . . . It was quite common that you wouldn't go in anybody's house until you'd been churched, and people wouldn't let you in the house until you'd been churched.²⁰

¹⁷ Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity*, letter 9, p. 28; letter 10, p. 29; letter 5, p. 24; letter 95, p. 119; letter 144, p. 173; letter 122, p. 153.

¹⁸ Hull Transcripts: Mrs V's interview, pp. 21, 22.

¹⁹ P Rushton, 'Purification or Social Control? Ideologies of Reproduction and the Churching of Women after Child birth', in *The Public and the Private* eds E. Gamarnikow, D.H.J. Morgan, J. Purvis and D. Taylorson (London: Heinemann, 1983) 118-31, p. 125.

²⁰ Hull Transcripts, Mrs D's interview, p. 53.

A local historian, Alec Gill, confirmed how deeply-rooted the practice was in this area of Hull, commenting: ‘There is a Hessle Road saying, “Before you go into anyone else’s house, you’ve got to go into God’s House.”’²¹ According to Gill, neither the approval of clergy nor any official ceremony was required for this: women were considered ‘churched’ if they slipped into a church at the end of any service; the custom was prevalent up to the 1960s.²²

According to Ellen Ross, unchurched women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were seen as being ‘in a kind of semi-pregnant state’.²³ On the face of it, this emphasis on churching, especially since it was widely seen as a form of purification after childbirth, can be seen as demeaning to women, a form of social control that set them apart.²⁴ However, this interpretation cannot be sustained in view of the fact that it was women themselves who kept the practice alive, insisting on it for their relations and neighbours as well as conforming to the custom themselves. Mrs D, quoted above, confirmed Gill’s opinion that it was ‘a women’s thing’ in which men were not concerned.²⁵ Churching can be seen, then, as a practice valued by women themselves as a way of setting apart their pregnancy and seclusion; family and female neighbours would see them but their public lives among the wider community (and especially among non-familial males) was suspended. This separation appears to have arisen because it was what women themselves were comfortable with.

It seems clear, then, that Hull women, like most women at the time, saw pregnancy and childbirth as very private areas. Children were rarely told of a new baby being expected, other women were preferred as birth attendants and customs arose to separate this phase from the rest of women’s lives. However, there is no evidence to suggest that any of this arose from a lack of interest from husbands and prospective fathers, or from any attempt to control women. Rather, intense privacy surrounded the subject, so that embarrassment occurred even between mothers and grown-up daughters in discussing it.

II

Let us now consider approaches to the care of young children. I begin with a brief background to childcare practices in the form of a description of state involvement in children’s lives and also the changing advice of childcare experts. Following on from this, I consider approaches to childcare among the working class, asking in what ways, if any, the advice of the pundits was observed.

²¹ Alec Gill, *Superstitions: folk magic in Hull’s fishing community* (Beverley: Hutton Press, 1993) pp. 26-27.

²² Gill, *Superstitions*, p. 26.

²³ E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1780-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 132.

²⁴ See P. Rushton, ‘Purification or Social Control?’ p. 124.

²⁵ Hull Transcripts, Mrs D’s interview; Gill, *Superstitions*, p. 26.

Since the 19th century, there had been a growing interest in the lives of children and it had become more acceptable for the state to become involved in their care, beginning with regulations on children's working conditions. Education, too, became more regulated and controlled from the first half of the 19th century; by 1919, it was compulsory and free between the ages of 5 and 14 (15 from 1947). It was a cause for alarm that infant mortality rose in the last quarter of the 19th century, while death rates in general were falling.²⁶ 'Schools for Mothers' were established in London, with advice given, subsidised food for nursing mothers and facilities for weighing babies.²⁷ Concern about the high number of men rejected as unfit to serve in the Boer War led to the setting up of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1903-4). This investigated a range of problems, including overcrowding and pollution in towns and poor working conditions, but focused mostly on the health and welfare of children. It rejected the notion that the race was 'degenerating' and advised various educational and environmental improvements.²⁸ The Committee criticised the ignorance of some working-class mothers, in areas such as the inappropriate feeding of infants. Lady Bell, too, described young babies being given assorted foods from adult plates, a practice much criticised at the time.²⁹ Worries about the health of infants as future inhabitants of the empire grew; improving child care became a form of patriotism. During the First World War, the recently instigated National Baby Week Council advised: 'It is more dangerous to be a baby in England than to be a soldier in France'.³⁰ Pressure to improve the lot of mothers and advice on child care proliferated.

A range of measures was enacted in the early 20th century, such as the training of midwives (1902), the provision of school meals for needy children (1906) and medical inspection of school children (1907). Voluntary organisations devoted to the health of the poor grew up in the later 19th century in some areas and, by the start of the 20th century, the use of paid health visitors was growing.³¹ According to Deborah Dwork, another measure that improved infant health was the 1906 Act enabling municipal corporations to make the notification of births to the local Medical Officer of Health compulsory within forty-eight hours of birth.³² This allowed help and advice to be targeted during a baby's most vulnerable first few days of life. The Children's Act of 1908 was also important in consolidating previous legislation regarding children and including various new measures intended to protect children's health and improve their legal rights. Also

²⁶ Deborah Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children: A History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England 1898-1918* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987) p. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁹ Lady Bell, *At the works: a study of a manufacturing town* (1907; Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1969) p. 211.

³⁰ M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1959* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) p. 17.

³¹ Dwork, *War is Good for Babies*, pp. 125-6.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

significant was the inclusion of a maternity grant in the 1911 National Insurance Act. The Milk and Dairies Consolidation Act of 1915 was aimed at saving infant life by protecting the milk supply. Calls for financial help for mothers (the ‘endowment of motherhood’) were made by various reformers (such as the Fabians).³³ Under the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act local authorities had to appoint committees for maternity and child welfare. Along with this, they were also free to give grants for home helps, lying-in homes, hospital treatment for young children and food for expectant and nursing mothers.

Aside from governmental action, mothers were increasingly being bombarded with instructions from child care experts. This counsel was anything but consistent: approaches to child care changed over time and advice to mothers altered correspondingly. The turn of the century saw a move towards more ‘scientific’ child rearing. From the late 19th century, books began to be published and organisations began to be formed to educate mothers in infant care.³⁴ However, knowledge was limited and although some causes of infant death, such as diarrhoea, were considered ‘preventable’ even experts did not agree on its main cause, with poor hygiene, contaminated milk, overcrowding and women in employment all seen as possible explanations.³⁵ The importance of cleanliness in preventing diarrhoea became more understood towards the 1920s, especially the significance of house flies in transmitting the disease.³⁶ Children’s clothing became less restrictive, and increasing emphasis was placed on the benefits of fresh air. Insofar as the psychological health of children was considered, the possibility of spoiling them was seen as the chief danger. Attempts to persuade working-class mothers to listen to, and act on, experts’ advice became more pressing. Whilst previously, mothers tended to do the best they could for their children but accepted their ill-health and even death as inevitable, they were increasingly encouraged to feel more personal responsibility for their welfare and to feel guilt when problems arose.

Some advice can appear rather judgmental to modern ears. A 1909 advice book written by a Durham health visitor, for example, declared: ‘A little baby overlaid by its mother, who had spent all her money on a showy mailcart instead of a cot, was just as much murdered as if its head had been cut off.’³⁷ The death or serious illness or accident of children had been such common occurrences, and had happened with such seeming randomness, that the idea of mother (rather than God or fate) being responsible had scarcely arisen before that time. Mothers’ being

³³ Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement*, p. 16.

³⁴ such as the Ladies’ Sanitary Association and the Infant Health Societies of Marylebone and St Pancras see C. Hardyment, *Dream Babies: Child Care from Locke to Spock* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1984) p. 113.

³⁵ Dwork, *War is Good for Babies*, pp. 35-7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁷ *Mrs Blossom on Babies* by Helen Hodgson, quoted by Hardyment, *Dream Babies*, p. 113.

responsible – for accident, illness or death in childhood as well as, increasingly, any psychological, emotional or intellectual short-coming in adulthood – was a novel idea. The notion contained some plausibility – the severe poverty, poor public health and housing and poor general health care that had made children’s health so precarious began to improve so that individual care could make more difference.

In the 1920s, concerns amongst experts shifted and the behaviourist approach to child care became fashionable. John B. Watson, an influential American proponent of this view, whose aim was to use stimulus-response techniques to grow more rational, independent people, wrote:

The sensible way to bring up children is to treat them as young adults . . . Let your behaviour always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug or kiss them. Never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight. Shake hands with them in the morning.³⁸

Watson argued for the importance of ‘nurture’ rather than ‘nature’.³⁹ Frederick Truby King advocated a similar stimulus-response approach, but to physical training. Truby King saw hygiene as very important and concentrated on this; he also advocated feeding babies according to strict four-hourly schedules; apart from breast-feeding, little emphasis was placed on physical contact. He was very critical of indulgent mothers. His approach was described by his daughter:

A real Truby King baby is completely breastfed till the ninth month . . . fed four-hourly from birth, with few exceptions, and they do not have any night feeds. A Truby King baby has as much fresh air as possible, and the right amount of sleep. His education begins from the very first week, good habits being established which remain all his life . . . He is not treated as a plaything, made to laugh and crow and ‘show off’ to every visitor to please his parents’ vanity; yet he is the happiest thing alive, gambolling with his natural playthings, his own hands and toes.⁴⁰

From the mid-1950s, expert advice changed with the new guru, Dr Spock, whose views supplanted the more rigid advice of Truby King (seen increasingly as unsympathetic to children and careless of their emotional needs). Spock advised mothers to trust their own instincts more and to do what they felt to be right for their child. Increasingly, the importance of a child’s relationship with his mother began to be stressed by advisors. Radio talks during the Second World War aimed at mothers underlined this point. Paediatrician and psychologist Dr D. W. Winnicott, talked about, ‘the care of the whole child, the child who is a human being with a constant need for love and imaginative understanding’.⁴¹ Observation of young children separated from their parents by the war convinced various experts that the mother’s presence was

³⁸ Hardyment, *Dream Babies*, p. 175.

³⁹ Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ Hardyment, *Dream Babies*, pp. 177-8.

⁴¹ A. Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: the Consequences of an Ideal* (London: Burnett Books, 1982) p. 82.

necessary for a child's psychological health.⁴² This approach was popularised by Dr John Bowlby in the early 1950s:

What is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment . . . A state of affairs in which the child does not have this relationship is termed 'maternal deprivation'. Partial deprivation brings in its train acute anxiety, excessive need for love, powerful feelings of revenge, and arising from these last, guilt and depression . . . Complete deprivation . . . has even more far-reaching effects on character development and may entirely cripple the capacity to make relationships.⁴³

Although Bowlby's research took place in institutions, where a close relationship with a mother was only one of many items missing from the children's lives, his conclusions were generally interpreted as applying to all children. The place of mothers as in the home with their children became more fixed. This view of mothers as all-important to children's healthy development went along with an idealisation of motherhood that was increasingly prevalent, as concerns rose about the comparatively low birth rate.

But how far was child-care advice followed by working-class mothers? In many ways, experts appear to have felt that their advice was ignored. This comes across in the example above concerning what was felt to be appropriate food for babies by experts on the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. It was often argued around this time, too, that working-class women tended to choose to bottle feed rather than breast feed infants, against expert advice. This belief is discussed and disputed by Deborah Dwork, who pointed to the findings of a survey in Salford around 1905 that only 9.8% infants were bottle fed.⁴⁴ Whether rates of bottle feeding increased as artificial milk improved, or whether middle-class observers continued to misread working-class practices, the notion that this advice was being ignored continued. According to Madeline Kerr, Liverpool slum dwellers in the 1950s often weaned their babies early, beginning to bottle-feed them shortly after returning from hospital. Similarly, despite official advice on the importance of regular feeding, mothers were generally observed to feed babies on demand.⁴⁵ Toilet training, too, appeared to be rather less controlled and systematic than was advised.⁴⁶ Concerning diet, Kerr felt, 'Mums often spoil the children over food. They will buy what the child wants rather than what would be nutritious.'⁴⁷

Although changing fashions in child care can be said to have affected the middle class most, working-class mothers were in fact increasingly amenable to expert advice, received mostly

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴³ Dally, *Inventing Motherhood*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ Dwork, *War is Good for Babies*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ Kerr, *Ship Street*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

through the agency of local clinics and professional midwives. Official advice to mothers and pregnant women increased over this period, and working-class women were often the main target of this advice. Its changing tone reflected changes in society and it is hard to believe that any mothers were unaffected. Elizabeth Roberts's second study (covering 1940-70) showed a move to more 'child-centred' families, and more awareness of children's emotional and psychological needs.⁴⁸ To some extent, fashions were directed by circumstances, so that the key developments of the early 1950s – greater emphasis on constant creative attention on the part of the mother to aid a child's cognitive development – would not have occurred had it not been for smaller families and increasing use of household appliances creating time for such indulgences. The fact that working-class mothers lagged behind the middle class in accepting these new trends in mothering could be explained by the fact that they lagged behind in gaining access to the services that made them practical. Even where working-class mothers may have wanted to follow expert advice, the practicality of this varied since provision varied over the country. A 1934 report on maternal mortality, discussing how far the guidelines in the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act were being followed, concluded, 'while some Authorities are using a large percentage of their powers, these being usually the more important and fundamental services, none are using them entirely'.⁴⁹ Comments by Medical Officers of Health from around the country were critical of working-class mothers: 'the weakest link is the lack of intelligent co-operation on the part of the mother and her friends'.⁵⁰ However, it was generally agreed: 'prejudice on the women's part is diminishing'.⁵¹

Looking specifically at Hull, attempts were certainly made by the local authority to improve the circumstances of mothers and babies and to disseminate what was regarded as good practice. For example, the 1918 Act referred to above required midwives to call for a doctor in an emergency and required the authority to pay the doctors' fees (which, for all but the poorest, could be recovered from the patient or her husband later). This requirement was followed in Hull. In 1920, out of 8,489 births in Hull, a doctor was called 757 times (for which the Corporation paid on 324 occasions).⁵² Attempts were made to move towards the use of qualified midwives.⁵³ A Municipal Midwife was appointed – but she stayed only six months 'owing to the arduous and depressing nature of the work', and her successors were similarly short-term.⁵⁴ In 1920, eleven

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: an oral history, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p. 141.

⁴⁹ Maternal Mortality Committee, *Report* (London, 1934) p. 11.

⁵⁰ Bath Medical Officer of Health, *Maternal Mortality Report*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Kent Medical Officer of Health, *Maternal Mortality Report*, p. 12.

⁵² City and County of Kingston-upon-Hull Annual Report or the Medical Officer of Health, 1920, p. 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 18; 1921, p.17 *passim*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1925, p. 105.

Health Visitors were employed in Hull, with more planned to meet the Ministry of Health target of eight visits to each child in its first year and more visits between one and school age.⁵⁵ The Corporation supplied ‘maternity bags’ – ‘for loan to poor mothers who are unable to provide the necessary bed linen and articles of clothing for use during confinement.’⁵⁶ A Corporation scheme for the provision of Home Helps – with means-tested charges – began in 1926. Health Visitors were also required to investigate certain illnesses (such as measles, polio, whooping cough and infant diarrhoea) and to work at Maternal and Infant Welfare Centres.⁵⁷ Three centres in Hull also provided daily ‘dinners to necessitous expectant and nursing mothers’ and also ‘Toddlers’ Dining Centres’ providing dinners for poor two to five year olds.⁵⁸ Hull had four Infant Welfare Clinics, each holding ante-natal clinics and infant consultations twice a week.⁵⁹ Infant Welfare Exhibitions were held giving out information on topics such as the most suitable foods for infants. Handy recipe cards were given out and ‘the information was eagerly sought’.⁶⁰ Increasingly, attempts were made to expand experts’ influence, attracting mothers of all pre-school children, not just babies, to Child Welfare Centres.⁶¹ In the 1920s, various talks aimed at mothers were held on a range of topics covering many aspects of child care, especially focusing on hygiene (with the dangers of dummies emphasised and the importance of cleaning bottles and avoiding house flies). The value of breast feeding was also stressed, along with health and safety advice concerning the risks of overlaying babies in bed, the importance of fireguards and first aid tips. Advice in dealing with diseases such as measles and summer diarrhoea was also given.⁶²

It was not just mothers who were targeted for childcare advice. Health Visitors went into schools to give lectures on child care, covering bathing, clothing and feeding babies and their general welfare and habits. Fathers, too, were included with a series of talks introduced in 1925, ‘with a view to securing their co-operation in carrying out the advice given to the mothers attending the clinics’.⁶³ It is sometimes argued that the hostility of fathers to official advice was exaggerated or entirely invented by mothers who had no wish to follow the advice.⁶⁴ Such strategies may go some way to explain the impression held by the middle class of working-class fathers and husbands as obstructive. Attempts were made to disseminate information as widely as possible. Hull’s ‘Health News’ pamphlet was sold or given away to anyone who could be thought

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1926, p. 97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 25; 1932, p. 131.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1925, p. 118.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1929, p. 133; 1937, p. 142.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1925, p. 119.

⁶⁴ Tim Fisher, ‘Fatherhood and the British Fathercraft Movement, 1919-39’, *Gender and History*, 17:2 (2005) 441-462, p. 445.

to have an interest, delivered free to houses and handed out to senior classes of school children.⁶⁵ An annual Health Week was instigated, in which stalls were set up giving out information on child care and health. Baby and mothercraft competitions increased mothers' involvement in the exercise.⁶⁶ Dried baby milk was supplied at cost price, or free to mothers who could not afford to pay.⁶⁷ Attempts were made to widen the appeal of Infant Welfare Centres. Hull's Medical Officer of Health acknowledged that these tended to be seen as: 'Places to bring an *ailing* but *not a well* baby and as *cheap or free food shops*' and concluded: 'We are doing our best to educate them to a better conception of an Infant Consultation Centre, but it is uphill work.'⁶⁸ A Maternity Home was established so that mothers and babies could receive medical attention at birth and afterwards. In 1920, unmarried women were allowed to use the Home, 'when special circumstance appears to justify help being given, but for first cases only'. It was found that '[T]he married mothers, who have shared the ward, have made no objection and no difficulty has been experienced in associating the two classes of women.'⁶⁹ During the 1920s, emphasis was increasingly placed on the importance of looking after pregnant mothers, as it was felt: 'The newer midwifery relies more and more on ante-natal work.'⁷⁰ It was acknowledged that, until the 1920s in Hull, ante-natal care had 'not been practised on a large scale', but it was hoped that, in future, 'every expectant mother should be seen and examined by a medical practitioner specially trained in ante-natal care'.⁷¹

After considering the dissemination of advice on baby and child care from the point of view of Hull's medical experts, it is interesting to note how this advice was viewed by some poor mothers. One respondent, from the North Hull Estate, certainly believed that experts were attended to:

Me mam was terrified . . . All the people, all the mothers on the Estate were in awe of these midwives who came when the babies were born.
Why was that?
 Well, they were professional women, you know, they were so clean and starched . . . And they had rules and regulations. I suppose at that time, in the thirties, it was the time when, you know, child health was beginning to be pushed a bit before the parents, mothers particularly, and these midwives knew all the answers. They were really frightened of them.⁷²

This woman felt that the experts' knowledge was respected, and that women would listen to them rather than to the other women on the Estate. Mrs L, too, preferred to 'ask the experts' rather than

⁶⁵ City and County of Kingston-upon-Hull Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health 1930, p. 218.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1924, p. 27.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 30.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1923, p. 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1920, p. 34.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1923, p. 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1923, p. 18.

⁷² Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 10.

her mother, who, ‘knew a few old wives’ tales and things like that. She used to frighten me sometimes with the things she said.’⁷³ Not all the official advice may have been always practical. According to Mrs D: ‘They used to give some daft advice that they were not able to follow, about sterilising things and all that.’⁷⁴ Of course, not all women listened to the professionals, even where their advice was practical; some preferred to take the advice of family or friends.⁷⁵ Some evidence suggests that working-class mothers accepted expert help only in so far as it fitted in with their accepted practices. For example, Mrs I was clear where to draw the line in accepting expert help in baby care during the Second World War:

We all went to the clinic because we got orange juice. During the war, we got the orange juice and the cod liver oil, and it was free and it was very useful . . . I don’t think the cod liver oil was, I don’t think we used the cod liver oil.⁷⁶

Another received orange juice from the clinic while she was pregnant and later went to have her baby son weighed.⁷⁷ Weighing babies was a function of the clinic that was often regarded as useful, since it was reassuring to know that a child was gaining weight, but it would be hard to ascertain this certainly or accurately without the clinic’s baby scales. Therefore, this was a neutral service, not intrusive as advice might be. Another mum, describing the 1930s, said that she went to her mother for advice on child care, but still attended the clinic as a social outing. ‘There were people like me, my age, that had gone to school [with me] and we had babies and we used to go to the clinic on a Tuesday afternoon.’⁷⁸

What do these reactions by working-class parents tell us? As already mentioned, the tone of some of the advice could be so patronising and harsh that one sometimes instinctively cheers its rejection. On the other hand, the argument by so many experts, over so many years, that the ignorance of working-class mothers regarding the most ‘scientific’ approaches was holding back improvements in child health can be compelling. However, it is impossible to look back on this kind of advice to mothers over the last century and assess how far the experts were right at any particular stage, since no consensus has yet been reached on many of these issues. Working-class mothers criticised for feeding babies on demand in the 1920s would find approval amongst many experts today.⁷⁹ Likewise, experts’ emphasis in the 1950s on the importance of the mother’s unique relationship with her child was seen by many 1970s’ feminists as a blatant attempt at keeping women in the home. Some of the advice was consistent, such as the preference for

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Mrs L’s interview, p. 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 10.

⁷⁵ For example, *ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 20; Mr V’s interview, p. 21; Mrs I’s interview, p. 34; Mrs M’s interview, p. 9.

⁷⁶ Hull Transcripts: Mrs I’s interview, p. 34.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs K’s interview, p. 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs M’s interview, p. 9.

⁷⁹ See, for example, advice on breast-feeding on the National Childbirth Trust website: <<http://www.nct.org.uk/parenting/feeding-0>> accessed 10 August 2011.

breast-feeding babies over bottle-feeding, or the importance of cleanliness in preparing food for young children. However it was always intermingled with changing opinions, often given equal weight. Overall, there is evidence that the practical day-to-day advice offered by female health visitors was approved of by women as helpful.⁸⁰ Mostly, advice was attended and followed where it appeared reasonable and practical; when working-class women most regularly ignored the advice of experts (which tended to be in areas such as feeding on demand or ‘spoiling’ children) there appears to be no real evidence that ‘experts’ were unequivocally right.

Whatever the extent to which experts were attended, it is still true that working-class attitudes to child care differed from those of the middle class and were very much dictated by circumstance. Among the working class themselves, ‘good mothers’ were efficient, practical managers, women who would ‘make do and mend’, who could provide nutritious meals on a tight budget, who kept the house clean and who were prepared to go without themselves in order to feed their families. This view of good mothering as being demonstrated almost solely by practical care comes across again and again in oral history evidence. One respondent, for example, replied to the comment, ‘Sounds like your Mum was a good cook,’ with, ‘She was a good mother, actually. She did everything. She cooked everything, like. When it was Christmas time, the table was full of mince pies and lemon curds.’⁸¹ In a situation where hunger and infection were grave concerns, children’s emotional and psychological needs were scarcely considered. As one respondent commented, when asked if she had been close to her parents:

Not particularly . . . there were too many of us and life was such a struggle for me mam that, er, I think personal relationships were low down of her priorities, really. She probably . . . probably they were important and she thought the best thing to do was to try and feed and clothe us and that’s how she er . . . tried to do her best.⁸²

Similarly, another respondent, in answer to the same question, said,

They were very careworn when they had big families. Their days were all taken up with cooking and cleaning and looking after children . . . I think she was close, close enough. She was a good mother, close enough . . . she never had time.⁸³

There is little evidence of working-class mothers adhering to the strict routines in child care advocated by the experts, despite their sometimes listening to aspects of their advice. However, this does not mean that they made no attempts to be good mothers. The extent to which these mothers were perceived by their children as too ‘careworn’ to spend much leisure time with their families must be noted when considering the importance of the notion of the ‘maternal dilemma’

⁸⁰ Dwork, *War is Good for Babies*, p. 216.

⁸¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs J’s interview, p. 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 32.

⁸³ *Ibid.* Mrs F’s interview, pp. 39, 40.

described by Allen. The impression is that many women found the struggle for family survival challenge enough without looking for other, more personal, goals to achieve.

Concerning the discipline of children, my interviews included some evidence of the use of corporal punishment in a minority of cases. According to Mrs H: '[I]n every house, without fail, there was hung a belt, and you got it.'⁸⁴ This practice was also remembered by Mrs N.⁸⁵ Mrs H's stepfather appears to have been more violent than was socially acceptable:

[I]f you was really bad, or they thought you was really bad, you got the buckle end. . . I've had the buckle end, only for being five minutes late. . . He brayed me that hard that the woman next door come in and stopped him.⁸⁶

As in these examples, corporal punishment was usually administered by men. Yet, Lynn Abrams's analysis of working-class life in Scotland argues that corporal punishment was avoided by many even if it was convenient for women to use the idea as a threat to control unruly children.⁸⁷ In Hull, Mrs K commented that the use of corporal punishment varied over different districts, explaining that some children were badly beaten in the area where she used to live in Egton Street, but not on her new council estate: 'Up there they were all good families. They wanted to better themselves in some way or other.'⁸⁸

It is almost impossible to discern whether expert advice was being followed, or whether child-care fashions of poor families and wealthy experts both simply reflected the zeitgeist since few people would know where their parents' approaches to child care originated. Perhaps some flavour of how approaches to child care changed can be discerned from comparing accounts of respondents born over the thirty years my cohort spanned. A certain lack of supervision, at least in older childhood, may be inferred from the emphasis on time spent playing in the street that was striking in many interviewees' accounts. For example, Mrs C (born 1903) remembered 'skipping, hopscotch, all those sorts of things'.⁸⁹ Mr F, a builder's son born in 1907, commented: 'We always played in the street . . . There was always a lot of bricks knocking about so we could build forts and play Cowboys and Indians. . . there'd be about twenty six or so in the small group.'⁹⁰ Mrs I, born 1919, remembered the play opportunities presented to children by the widespread use of horses rather than cars: 'the kids thought it was lovely to play with the droppings when it was

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Transcript: Mrs H's interview, p. 16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 16.

⁸⁷ Lynn Abrams, "'There was Nobody like my Daddy': Fathers, the Family and the Marginalisation of Men in Modern Scotland", *Scottish Historical Review*, 78:2 (1999) 219-42, p. 229.

⁸⁸ Hull Transcripts: Mrs K's interview, p. 27.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 32.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 20.

dry. . . It wasn't unpleasant. I mean, it sounds filthy but it wasn't.⁹¹ Mr I, born in 1916, also spent much of his free time playing in the street:

A craze would be for whip and top . . . And some of them would be racing tops, they would be shaped like a pear, and you'd whip 'em along the street. Now then, the ones that were for racing tops, we used to colour the tops with bits of chalk and as they spun round you got a kaleidoscope sort of effect.⁹²

Little appeared to have changed by the time of Mr V's childhood (born 1930):

Summer time I can remember going out and filling your time completely in the street . . . There'd be a season for cigarette cards. There'd be a season for marbles. There'd be a season for whip and top . . . And they'd come and go without any organisation! And so on. And this was accepted by all the kids . . . we would roam. Things happened. Somebody would say, let's go to Beverley. Or let's go to the baths. Or, better still, let's go down Barmston Drain and swim, cos the water's warm. Or ice skating. That's where I learnt to swim. In Barmston Drain, just down the way. Cos the power station used to put warm water down there. Any number of kids got drowned, but that was their problem, you know. You didn't think it was your problem. And we just jumped in. Didn't have any costumes of course. Nobody did. So it didn't make any difference. Nobody had costumes. You couldn't afford swimming costumes. So we just jumped in.⁹³

One reason for the amount of free time spent on the streets may well have been the lack of opportunities to engage in other activities, considering the poverty that most of my respondents experienced, to some degree, during childhood. Mrs D articulated this on being asked if she had belonged to any clubs as a child:

You don't appreciate . . . we couldn't have done. There wasn't even money for subs or for any kind of . . . you couldn't have been a Brownie. There was no question of Brownie uniform. There was nothing. It was just absolutely impossible. You didn't even think of it.⁹⁴

Mrs E drew attention to the differences she saw in how children were treated when she was small and today's approach:

I was a long time before I had real confidence in myself. I had no confidence in myself at all cos, I mean you were never told . . . I was at a friend's last Sunday and . . . the mother was saying, 'You really have pretty hair, Sophie, you really have.' And I thought, goodness, my mother would never have, my mother would never have told me I looked pretty. Or anything, in case I got a swelled head . . . She was a good mother, and she would have done anything for me . . . They were good parents according to the age that it was which is so different.⁹⁵

Some comment must be made about the idealised impression of some of these descriptions of childhood. To some extent, elderly people, possibly lonely and in poor health, could understandably look back on their childhoods as idyllic. To some historians, the experience of

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs I's interview, p. 57.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 55.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Mr V's interview, p. 47.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 40.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs E's interview, p. 25.

working-class children in the first half of the 20th century was imbued with a sense of the poverty, overcrowding and straitened life chances that they had brought upon their families simply by being born.⁹⁶ Judy Giles's oral history interviews with working-class women contained detailed accounts of the deaths of family members, 'mourned but simultaneously unmourned because it was one less mouth to feed'.⁹⁷ To Giles, her interviewees' numerous assertions that their childhoods were happy appeared contradictory:

There is a sense in all these accounts that people *ought* to be happy simply because they had survived . . . The repetition of the phrase 'but we were happy' functions almost superstitiously . . . It wards off retribution for any ingratitude expressed or felt towards the fact of mere existence. Perhaps the main lesson working-class children learned, before the services of the welfare state mitigated the worst aspects of industrial capitalism, was how unwelcome pregnancies were to their mothers . . . children must have understood that new babies were a burden and hence that their own existence might be less than welcome, that in a very real sense it would have been better if they had not been born . . . The psychological consequences of such a recognition might be a deeply internalised denial of their right to be born, a denial that could manifest itself in a deferential and self-deprecating endurance expressed as 'it was hard but we was happy'.

Whilst my interviews, contained a reasonable sprinkling of assertions of childhood happiness (like those of Giles) I cannot interpret these as she does. The relatively new science of happiness finds little correlation between happiness and wealth, beyond a basic minimum, and much unhappiness in poverty appears to derive from comparisons with much wealthier neighbours.⁹⁸ A working-class city such as Hull, then, in which most families' poverty was mirrored by that of their neighbours, would tend to militate against discontent. There seems to me, therefore, to be little reason not to take assertions of past happiness at face value – allowing for the exaggeration referred to above, that the weariness of old age may project onto childhood. In any case, my interviewees' belief in their past happiness was not universal. Mrs B, for example, reiterated the phrase 'I should hate that to come over again' in describing her own poor and motherless childhood with a drunken and sometimes violent father.⁹⁹ The idea that poor children automatically grew up feeling unwanted must be challenged, too, finding no support whatsoever in my evidence. Indeed, Mrs S, when asked if she thought her mother had wanted a large family, answered: 'Oh, me mother never gave it no thought, she was just madly in love with me father.'¹⁰⁰ Whilst such hearsay evidence is traditionally regarded as suspect, Mrs S would surely not have thought this if her mother had given the impression that more babies were unwelcome.

⁹⁶ See Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-1950* (London: Macmillan, 1995) p. 42; also Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays in Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Virago, 1992) quoted in Giles p. 42.

⁹⁷ Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life*, p. 43.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

⁹⁹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs B's interview, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 14.

III

The extent of fathers' participation in their children's lives is another area to be examined. Mrs N's view, that children's 'mothers mostly brought them up' was fairly typical.¹⁰¹ However the extensive involvement of fathers came across in many interviews. No interviewees remembered their fathers as being wholly unconcerned with their children. Similarly, men interviewed remembered themselves as active fathers, just as women tended to remember their husbands as happy to take on their share of child care. On being asked to compare their (or their husbands') involvement as fathers with their own dads' involvement, most saw little difference, although six felt their fathers had been less involved.¹⁰² Where they were less involved, their fathers were generally not blamed; according to Mr W, who was typical, he was 'more involved, because I'd more time'.¹⁰³ Only one, Mrs S, felt her father had been more involved than her husband.¹⁰⁴ Where men were seen as not very involved with their children, reasons (usually work commitments) tended to be given.¹⁰⁵

Several respondents commented on men's unwillingness to be involved with babies or very young children. Mrs F, for example (married 1937) said of her husband: 'men didn't bother with babies . . . when they got to the toddling stages and could be taken out . . . But not when they were all little, no. They were a mother's concern.'¹⁰⁶ Fathers were unwilling to be associated even with the trappings of babyhood, according to Mrs V, who commented: 'Fathers in those days did not wheel prams. They'd carry you anywhere but they would not be seen pushing a pram.'¹⁰⁷ Despite some respondents' views that men were not much involved in looking after babies, there were exceptions in this. Mrs D, for example, remembered her husband taking an equal share in staying up at night with crying babies.¹⁰⁸ Mrs V's husband, too, helped extensively with night-time baby care: 'I only ever made one bottle during the night, with four children . . . and he was so tired he hadn't heard the baby wake.'¹⁰⁹ Notably, these women were among the younger respondents, born in the 1930s, with children born in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Helping with older children appears to have been much more acceptable for fathers across the whole of this time. This might include taking them for walks or swimming, playing board

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 16.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Mrs G's interview, p. 10; Mrs I's interview, p. 37; Mrs J's interview, p. 11; Mrs L's interview, p. 14; Mr U's interview, p. 19; Mr W's interview, 13.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Mr W's interview, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p.17.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 11; Mrs D's interview, p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 38.

¹⁰⁷ Hull Transcript: Mrs V's interview, p. 21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs V's interview, p. 23.

games, reading to them, singing to them or making toys.¹¹⁰ These activities could involve considerable time and effort. For instance, Mr F (married 1937) described his attempts to help his daughter regain her health: ‘I walked for miles with my daughter, who’s disabled with polio . . . She had a trike and I had a walking stick and I made a special attachment on the back of the trike so I could push it or turn.’¹¹¹ Mrs S, too, remembered her father, a fisherman in the 1930s:

[H]e earned [sic] a living, a good living and then every summer, he would ask for the sack, so that he could stay at home when it was summer holidays. Because he thought that he should help, with us having a few [children] . . . he didn’t like leaving me mother with six or seven, whatever we had at the time.¹¹²

Interestingly, although respondents generally agreed that their mothers ‘brought them up’, some felt that they had spent more leisure time with their fathers than their mothers. Mr F, for instance, commented: ‘I should think me father spent more time with his youngsters than me mother did. Me mother, I would say, was not really interested. She was just there. You got fed, you got clothed, that was all.’¹¹³ Similarly, Mrs V remembered physical affection from her father but not her mother: ‘[Me] Mum cared for me, I was always well looked after. I can’t remember her cuddling me.’¹¹⁴ Mrs F, too, said: ‘I was very close to my father in lots of ways . . . you know, to talk to him. You know, he would play cards and things like that with us. Mother was always so busy, really.’¹¹⁵ Several interviewees, in discussing family relationships, blamed problems on long absences of a family member (almost always the father), either caused by the war (time in the forces or evacuation) or working away from home. Mrs V’s tale was typical:

[M]y father was in the forces and so there was an estrangement between my brother and my father, because John was three and a half . . . when me Dad came out of the war, and so this was a strange man coming in, and . . . he was taking Mum’s affections away, if you like, from him.¹¹⁶

Similarly, Mr V, when asked about his father’s involvement answered (in reference to his long, work-related absences): ‘Well, he was a stranger.’¹¹⁷ Mrs F, too, explained the difficult relationship between her husband and his eldest child thus: ‘[H]e was six four days after his father came back from the war, from being a prisoner, and he hadn’t seen him for six years.’¹¹⁸ Overall, twelve out of the thirty respondents commented on the adverse effect on family life and

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Walks: Mrs G’s interview, p. 9; Mrs D’s interview, p. 14. Swimming: Mrs F’s interview, p. 38. Board games: Mrs E’s interview, p. 29. Reading: Mrs X’s interview, p. 7. Singing: Mrs I’s interview, p. 35; Mr R’s interview, p. 21. Making toys: Mr I’s interview, p. 36; Mrs M’ interview, p. 11.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 38.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Mrs S’s interview, p. 16.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 41.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 24.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs F’s interview, p. 42.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs V’s interview, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr V’s interview, p. 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs F’s interview, p. 39.

relationships through the absence for long periods of a father. Even where fathers were not away from home, long working hours affected family life. Mr W, for example, remembering his childhood during World War II, said of his father:

I wouldn't say he'd take us out very much, he didn't have time to do that, anyway. I mean, war time, he would go out of the house about quarter to seven in a morning and he wouldn't get home while about nine at night . . . Saturday morning was normal working hours then.¹¹⁹

Overall, men generally appeared to do what was expected of them, according to the way that family life operated. According to Mrs N: '[T]hat was the job, to go out to work, the men, and the women to stay at home.'¹²⁰ Mrs C's answer, on being asked if her husband helped much with the children, was typical: 'Oh, he was a good sort, he would always help . . . but I mean, I never really wanted him to.'¹²¹ According to Mrs D, 'Me dad smoked and drank quite a bit . . . he wasn't a bad dad . . . He was quite a good dad really, but I think he wasn't a lot of help to me mam. He wasn't a support to her. She carried the burden.'¹²² Mrs F concurred: '[W]hen hard times came along I think it was the women who had to cope.' When asked what women had thought about this, she replied: 'I think the majority of women did accept it, yes . . . in fact, I think a lot of them wouldn't have liked the reins taken out of their hands anyway.'¹²³

Despite the fact that fathers were expected to work full-time to support their families whilst women were responsible for day-to-day childcare and housework, it was certainly not true that women were never in paid employment. Just as men were generally expected to fit aspects of childcare and housework around employment where practical, women were often expected to fit some paid work around *their* responsibilities. As mentioned in chapter 2, overwhelmingly, the women interviewed did return to work after they had had children. The only exception was Mrs R, who would have liked to work but her husband objected.¹²⁴ This may appear initially surprising, since this period is often associated with a lifestyle in which women led predominantly domestic lives. However, it is sometimes argued that married women's involvement in paid employment can be underestimated by official statistics.¹²⁵ Elizabeth Kiely and Máire Leane, for example, investigating women in Ireland using oral history, felt that, despite their acceptance of the rhetoric of women in the home, most were also involved, in varying degrees, in the labour market.¹²⁶ They argued that oral history: 'facilitates the compilation of a more nuanced account

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr W's interview, p. 13.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 16.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 12.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 31.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 67.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, p. 29.

¹²⁵ Elizabeth Kiely and Máire Leane, "'What Would I Be Doing at Home All Day?'" oral narratives of Irish married women's working lives 1936-1960', *Women's History Review*, 13:3, 2004, 427-45, p. 429.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

of women's working lives than that permitted by the quantitative data collected in large-scale census surveys'.¹²⁷ This is not to argue that married women's employment was universal and some areas of the country certainly had very different working patterns. Mining areas, for instance, were often characterised by their low rates of working women, both because of a lack of employment opportunities and because of more fixed views about men as breadwinners.¹²⁸ According to Margaret Williamson, studying women of the Cleveland mining community, married women often remained reluctant to enter the labour market even when the post-war economy presented opportunities and men, too, resisted this change.¹²⁹

Most women in my Hull study obtained work that was part-time and fitted around childcare. This could be shop work, domestic work, bar work, office work, factory work or teaching.¹³⁰ Interestingly, whilst many respondents reported that their mothers worked after having children, these jobs appear to have been more informal, often done at home or from home. For instance, four respondents reported that their mothers had taken in washing,¹³¹ one braided fishing nets at home,¹³² one helped to deliver babies and to lay out the dead,¹³³ and one would 'white-wash a ceiling for a shilling'.¹³⁴ I came across no examples of women who aspired to more satisfying work but had felt held back by domestic responsibilities in achieving this. Possibly this was because, in such a working-class city as Hull, paid employment was accepted as, largely, a hard necessity, and expectations of the joys of employment were lower. Pride was taken in one's ability to find work resourcefully around domestic commitments, some pleasure was taken in the social contacts that ensued, but satisfaction was more likely to be achieved from childcare and housework. This is not to say that these women disliked paid work; on the contrary, most appeared to relish their employment, although its primary aim was clearly to earn money. Apart from Mr R, no men appeared to have objected to their wives working – mostly simply appreciated the extra money.¹³⁵ It was striking how many women were able to find employers prepared to offer them some flexibility to work around their child care commitments.¹³⁶ This is probably the result of full employment in war-time and during the 1950s and 1960s. It is also

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

¹²⁸ Margaret Williamson, "I'm going to get a job at the factory:" attitudes to women's employment in a mining community, 1945-65', *Women's History Review*, 12:3, 2003, 407-22, p. 417.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 410-11.

¹³⁰ Hull Transcripts: references to shop work in Mrs L's interview, pp. 17, 18; Mrs N's interview, p. 31; Mrs T's interview, p. 20; Mr U's interview, p. 29. Reference to domestic work in Mrs O's interview, p.26; reference to bar work in Mrs J's interview, p. 18; reference to office work in Mrs D's interview, p. 19; reference to factory work in Mrs S's interview, p. 24; reference to teaching in Mrs W's interview, p. 4.

¹³¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, pp. 17, 18; Mrs H's interview, p. 19; Mrs J's interview, p. 10; Mrs R's interview, p. 24.

¹³² *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, pp. 17, 18.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 19.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, p. 24.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 26; Mrs N's interview, p. 33.

¹³⁶ For example, Mrs F's interview, p. 16.

interesting how many women from extremely poor backgrounds found routes into both satisfying and child-friendly occupations, such as running their own shops and primary school teaching, examples of social mobility that are still a little hard to imagine today.¹³⁷

In considering the role of fathers, one must compare this evidence with the more usual historical portrayal. Fathers' roles and experiences differed according to region, occupation and class and according to the availability of paid employment for women.¹³⁸ However, in so far as one can generalise, the evidence described above does not support the stereotype often presented of working-class fathers. Giles, for example, saw the experience of 'many families' as involving 'a brutal and violent father, or . . . a male breadwinner who simply upped and left'.¹³⁹ My findings are certainly not unique in not supporting such a view; Trevor Lummis's study of East Anglian fishermen in the period 1890 to 1914 questioned 'the common stereotype of the drunken, brutal working-class father'.¹⁴⁰ Lummis criticised researchers such as Young and Willmott and Zweig who saw a movement towards more domesticated fathers since the Second World War: 'In short, fatherhood in the past is presented as a Whiggish contrast to the present, with fathers becoming more domestic and humane as the present time is approached.' According to Lummis, 'working-class marriage was in fact more generally an affectionate partnership of caring parents jointly concerned with preserving the family'.¹⁴¹ Leaders of the British Fathercraft Movement, established to encourage fathers' involvement in their children's wellbeing, argued that their working-class supporters were 'not untypical' in their views.¹⁴² Lynn Abrams, studying fatherhood in Scotland, highlighted the presence of a long tradition of respectable domesticity among some sections of the working class.¹⁴³ According to her:

Careful analysis of a necessarily wide range of sources which do feature the father as a social actor, including oral histories, autobiographies and the records left by child welfare organisations, indicates that working-class fathers were as affective, indulgent and involved with their children as their middle-class counterparts appear to have been.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Reference to teaching in Hull Transcripts: Mrs W's interview, p. 4; Mrs D's interview, p. 20. Several respondents ran their own small shops (usually grocers): Mrs F's interview, p. 49; Mrs N's interview p. 31; Mrs T's interview, p. 23. Mr U's wife also ran her own grocer's shop with her sister: Mr U's interview, p. 29. Mrs K trained as a nurse after her son was grown up: Mrs K's interview, p. 24.

¹³⁸ see Paul Thompson *The Edwardians* (Hertford: Paladin, 1977); Lorna McKee and Margaret O'Brien (eds) *The Father Figure* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982) p. 19.

¹³⁹ Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁰ Trevor Lummis, 'The historical dimension of fatherhood: a case study', in Lorna McKee and Margaret O'Brien, *The Father Figure* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982) 43-56, p. 43.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁴² Tim Fisher, 'Fatherhood and the British Fathercraft Movement', p. 448.

¹⁴³ Abrams, 'There was Nobody like my Daddy,' p. 228.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

In spite of this, she felt, ‘the official perception of fathers as incapable, feckless and frequently absent’ continued.¹⁴⁵

This ‘traditionalist’ view of men has been supported on other grounds by Martin Francis.¹⁴⁶ Unlike Lummis, Francis did not argue that men have been ‘domesticated’ throughout this period but, rather, he argued that men ‘constantly travelled back and forth across the frontiers of domesticity, if only in the realm of the imagination’. They were attracted by the ‘responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood’ but they were also ‘enchanted by various escapist fantasies . . . which celebrated militaristic hypermasculinity and male bonding.’ – especially adventure stories and war films.¹⁴⁷ Francis’s study may well have resonance for the middle-class men on whom he concentrated. That I found little to support it among the working-class Hull men I interviewed is perhaps not so surprising. Traditional male working-class jobs, involving long hours spent exclusively with other men in physically-demanding and sometimes dangerous situations may well have satisfied all the longings for adventure and male bonding that anyone might experience. Coming home from deep sea fishing is very different from coming home from the office, and leading such lives may have left Hull men sufficiently secure in their masculinity to be able to enjoy children and domesticity without the equivocation of the better-off.

IV

One development that must have been important to family life and the role of the mother is the decrease in family size. According to Titmuss’s calculations, an average 20 year old woman in 1900 could expect to live another 46 years, spending one third of that time either pregnant or rearing children. Her counterpart in 1960 could expect to live another 55 years, spending only 7% of that time child bearing and rearing children.¹⁴⁸

Clearly, this development must have meant major changes in the average woman’s life. Having fewer children is likely to have improved the health of many women, as well as lessening the amount of physical work connected with child care, such as feeding, washing and dressing infants. As Mrs D commented: ‘All our neighbours had big families, like ours. I’m pretty sure Mam would gladly have settled for half a dozen less than the 11 children she bore . . . And this is another thing that has made my life so much easier.’¹⁴⁹ This impression of large families being a

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Martin Francis, ‘The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on 19th and 20th century British Masculinity’ in *The Historical Journal* 45:3 (2002) 441-62.

¹⁴⁷ Francis, ‘The Domestication of the Male?’ p. 637.

¹⁴⁸ Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*, p. 84.

¹⁴⁹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D’s interview, p. 52.

common experience in Hull is supported by the statistics. Hull's birth rate was higher than the national average in the 1930s; in 1931, only Liverpool, among comparable large towns, had a higher birth rate than Hull.¹⁵⁰ However, as with housework, a lessening in the quantity of work led to a rise in expected quality. Smaller families meant that child care became more intensive, so that more was invested in each child, and more was expected of mothers. In a family of two or three children, relationships are likely to have been different from those in a family of seven or eight children. Changing attitudes to family size is discernible from my interviews. Mrs B's father, despite fathering eleven children in the first few years of the 20th century, felt able to criticise his daughter, Mrs B's sister, for having a similar number in the 1920s and 1930s. Mrs B clearly saw her husband's acceptance of her decision not to have more than one child as a mark of his consideration.¹⁵¹ The following table shows family size among my interviewees, both their siblings and their own children. It is interesting that it broadly reflects the general decrease in family size over this time.

¹⁵⁰ Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon, *A History of Hull* (Hull University Press, 1989) p. 433.

¹⁵¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs B's interview, p.13.

Interviewee	Year of birth	Number of children	Year of marriage	Number of children
Mrs C	1903	14	1934	5 (+ 4 step-)
Mr R	1905	8		See Mrs R
Mr F	1907	5		See Mrs F
Mrs N	1910	6	1936	2
Mrs M	1911	4		
Mrs A	1911	3	1937	3
Mrs O	1911	9	1928	2
Mrs P	1912	4		
Mrs F	1913	9		3
Mrs B	1915	11	1923	1
Mrs R	1915	5	1943	2
Mrs E	1916	1	1944, 1950	0
Mr I	1916	2		See Mrs I
Mrs J	1916	9	1941	2
Mrs X	1918	1	1942	4
Mrs I	1919	2	1941	4
Mrs L	1920	6	1941	3
Mrs H	1923	3	1944	5
Mr Q	1923	1		0
Mrs G	1924	1	1944	2
Mrs T	1925	3	1952	3
Mrs K	1926	2	1951	1
Mr T	1927	4		See Mrs T
Mr V	1930	4		See Mrs V
Mr U	1931	9	1953	3
Mr W	1931	2		See Mrs W
Mrs D	1932	11	1963	2
Mrs S	1934	6	1953	7
Mrs W	1935	3	1958	2
Mrs V	1936	2	1958	4

Alongside changes in patterns of birth, changes in the death rate also affected family size and family relationships. Infant mortality fell substantially in the first half of the 20th century,

from 163 deaths per thousand in 1899 to 50 per thousand in 1942.¹⁵² The death rate for older children was always much lower than for infants and young children, but still declined markedly in this period. It could be argued that the death of a baby is less traumatic than that of an older child, so the decline in the death rate of older children may have affected more profoundly the way children were viewed within the family. The question of whether children's deaths were more accepted previously and whether parents were not so attached to children in the days of high infant and child mortality has been widely debated.¹⁵³ Some historians have been tempted to minimise the grief of parents too inarticulate to express it. However, it must be remembered that an unwillingness to verbalise such heartache does not prove its non-existence. Pember Reeves, describing a Lambeth woman's reaction to her baby's pneumonia in around 1910, contrasted her actions with her words: 'She sat up night after night and nursed him and did all the work of the house by day but all she said on the subject was, "I'd not like ter lose 'im now."' ¹⁵⁴ Ross argued that, although there is some evidence to suggest that infant deaths were welcomed in some situations (such as if the mother was unmarried or already had numerous children) there is, generally, little evidence to suggest that children's deaths caused less grief because they were more frequent.¹⁵⁵ References to babies' deaths within the *Maternity* letters certainly back this up.¹⁵⁶ Julie-Marie Strange, researching the late 19th and early 20th century, found evidence to contest: 'the perceived correlation between material insecurity and blunted sensibility'.¹⁵⁷ According to Strange, the rituals and customs surrounding death among the working class demonstrate non-verbal ways of expressing sympathy and grief.¹⁵⁸

Mrs D, one of a family of eleven children born in the 1920s and 1930s, mentioned her brother and two sisters who died as children. The dead children were not spoken of very often, graves were not visited, nor anniversaries marked. However, Mrs D's eldest brother (who died as a baby) was referred to as 'Sunny Jim' and her older sister Edith (who died at 12) was spoken of as a very clever child, whose school reports had been treasured by her parents long after her death. Since both of these children had died several years before Mrs D's birth, these details indicate that their memory had been kept alive in the family.¹⁵⁹ In this instance, then, the theory that dead children were soon forgotten in large families where death was not uncommon is not

¹⁵² Dwork, *War is Good for Babies*, p. 216.

¹⁵³ See, for example, Dally, *Inventing Motherhood*, p. 44; Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, 'Mother love and infant death, 1750-1920', *Journal of American History*, 73:2 (1986) 329-53; Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁴ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 167.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 190.

¹⁵⁶ Llewlyn Davies, *Maternity*, see, for example, Letter 128, p. 158 and Letter 156, p. 166.

¹⁵⁷ Julie-Marie Strange, "'She cried a very little": death, grief and mourning in working-class culture, c.1880-1914', *Social History*, 27: 2 (2002) 143-61, p. 144.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 54.

supported. It is interesting, too, that Mrs D spoke of the grief of both her parents, not just her mother. Strange mentioned the involvement in men as well as women in customs around death, as well as in supporting the bereaved by such practices as collecting for the family of a dead work mate, despite working-class men being traditionally inarticulate in such circumstances.¹⁶⁰ Strange commented, too, on attempts to manage grief by keeping mementoes and by sharing memories of deceased relatives within the family.¹⁶¹

V

Parents continued to influence their children's lives, to a greater or lesser degree, well into adulthood. Choice of career appears to have been strongly influenced by parental advice.¹⁶² This was apparently little resented and was usually based on a parent's greater experience of employment opportunities in the days before much formal careers advice at school.¹⁶³ For example, Mrs E described her parents' insistence that she train in office work, despite her wish to work in some area of art:

I remember Father reasoning with me . . . they didn't talk to you much in those days . . . They made the decisions and you abided by them. But I remember him sort of reasoning with me about this a bit and him saying, 'In any case dear . . . this isn't the right area. If we were somewhere else, probably in the West Riding . . . where they were designing textiles.'¹⁶⁴

Mrs P, on being asked if her mother resented having to leave school at 12 to work to support the family, in spite of wanting to be a teacher, replied: 'Oh I don't think so, because in those days you did what was expected of you.'¹⁶⁵ Sometimes, young people were directed towards a career in which a sibling had prospered.¹⁶⁶ In other cases, pressure was put on a child to leave school early, where the family was felt to need the extra income.¹⁶⁷ Or, daughters were sometimes prevented from going out to work by their parents, so that they could help at home.¹⁶⁸ Where parents' ideas for a career did not work out, changing to something more congenial was acceptable.¹⁶⁹

Where to live was another aspect of life closely influenced by parents. Mrs N and her husband, for example, decided to move near to her husband's mother after, 'a lot of persuading from me mother-in-law a few doors away, persuading my husband to move there'; Mrs J, Mr V

¹⁶⁰ Strange, 'She cried a very little', pp. 148, 155.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁶² Hull Transcripts: Mrs C's interview, p.16; Mrs F's interview, p. 49; Mrs K's interview, p. 12; Mr U's interview, p. 3; Mrs W's interview, p. 4; Mrs N's interview, pp. 20, 21.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, Mr U's interview, p. 3; Mrs C's interview, p. 16.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs E's interview, p. 34.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 16.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, pp. 20-21.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 49; Mrs K's interview, p. 14.

and Mrs W had similar experiences.¹⁷⁰ Mrs S commented on her mother's reluctance to leave the area that had family ties despite her father's wish to 'better himself': '[I]n the end he learnt to accept that she would never ever leave. She was born in Scarborough Street . . . she didn't want to leave it. Her mother lived down there, her sisters lived down there.'¹⁷¹ Mrs A, too, described *her* mother-in-law's influence on their living arrangements: '[S]he said she'd like to come to us for Christmas. She came to us for Christmas, for a fortnight, and she stayed 23 years!'¹⁷² Especially for daughters, taking children to visit their grandmothers on an almost daily basis was not uncommon.¹⁷³

In a range of different ways, an acceptance of the authority of parents comes across, even when offspring were grown up, married and had children of their own. Mr I, for example, talked about a feud in his family that meant he didn't speak to his grandmother or aunt: 'You see, looking at it now, when I'm old like, I think to myself, I ought to have disobeyed Father and . . . kept contact. But no-one disobeyed their Father, then, you see.'¹⁷⁴ Both Mrs P and Mrs R were confined to home-based war work on the insistence of their mothers.¹⁷⁵ Mrs N's father, similarly, tried to protect her from the impact of war, whisking her and her two-year-old daughter off to relations in Keighley to escape bombing: 'I didn't have any choice. He made me get ready and go.'¹⁷⁶ Mrs B described her mother-in-law as, 'an old witch, a bugger she was'.¹⁷⁷ However, in spite of their differences, Mrs B still felt obliged to agree to her mother-in-law's offer to attend the birth of Mrs B's child.¹⁷⁸

The sense of obligation towards parents, however, does not mean that they were idolised in any way. Mrs B showed little respect for her often drunk father, describing him leaving work:

[C]ome off the dock wet through wi' his working, coal heaving, and go straight into the pubs, come home on his hands and knees down the street. They used to say to me, 'There's your father coming down street.' And I used to stand there watching. They'd say, 'Aren't you going to help him?' I'd say, 'No, I'm not! He'll find the 'ouse'. And he always did! It didn't matter how drunk he was he used to find his way home.'¹⁷⁹

Whilst grown up children tended to show more respect and affection than this, I found no replication in Hull of the cloying relationships described in some areas of the country. The closeness of mothers to their adult children was commented on by Madeline Kerr in her study of

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 2; see also Mrs J's interview, p. 3; Mr U's interview, p. 7; Mrs W's interview, p. 4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, pp. 14, 15.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 9.

¹⁷³ See, for example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs J's interview, p. 32.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 14.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, pp. 33, 34; Mrs R's interview, p. 26.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 35.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 17.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 11.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 2.

the people of a poor area of Liverpool in the 1950s, quoting one husband thus: 'I couldn't take me wife to the pictures without taking me mother-in-law. I might as well have taken her to bed with me.'¹⁸⁰ In their study of 1950s' London, Young and Willmott found a similar pattern.¹⁸¹ A sense of husband and wife standing together against the demands of both sets of parents was what came across here. For example, Mrs W described her own and her husband's response to her mother's criticisms: 'Mother used to come round . . . and she'd say, "It's time you decorated . . . it's mucky!" And we just laughed.'¹⁸²

VI

In considering parenthood and childhood in Hull during this time, then, various conclusions can be drawn. To begin with let us return to the suggestion posited by Ann Taylor Allen that the 'maternal dilemma' dominated the 20th century for women: that is, the problem of achieving a personally satisfying life, despite the disproportionate demands of childcare for women.¹⁸³ I gained no impression from my interviews that this was a major consideration for the majority of women whose lives were being studied. In describing their own lives, their sisters, mothers and daughters, very few women appeared to be preoccupied by this dilemma at all. Of course, this is not to deny the existence of the maternal dilemma, simply to suggest that it was largely irrelevant for working-class women of the period in question. Feminism itself may not have been irrelevant, but the forms and preoccupations it took were developed by and for middle-class women. The problem of balancing personally satisfying employment with child care was as much a middle-class dilemma as the focus in the inter-war years on the 'servant question' had been. Consider this fairly typical description of a 'working woman's' family life in the early 20th century:

After that confinement, being so weak, I took a chill, and was laid up for six months, and neighbours came in and done what they could for me. Then there was my home and little ones and husband to look after, as he was obliged to work. . . After this I had a miscarriage and another babe in one year and four months. I got on fairly well with the next one, and then the next one which was the eighth, I had two down with measles, one two years old with his collar-bone out, and a little girl thirteen with her arm broke.¹⁸⁴

How would the maternal dilemma be relevant at all to a life like this? Clearly many working-class women did work – and not always from necessity – the opportunity to improve their family's standard of living and their own social lives were also factors. However, they were

¹⁸⁰ M. Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958) p. 13.

¹⁸¹ M. Young and P. Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957) p. 20.

¹⁸² Hull Transcripts: Mrs W's interview, p. 24.

¹⁸³ Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood*, p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity*, letter 1, p. 19.

rarely ambitious and tended to work part-time, seeing their role as primarily domestic.¹⁸⁵ Classic feminist works such as *The Feminist Mystique* looked at life almost entirely from the perspective of the educated, middle-class woman and had little relevance for most of the women of Hull.¹⁸⁶

Pregnancy was seen as a very private matter that was kept secret even from members of the family. It was widely accepted that pregnancy and childbirth were times of separation from the wider community and from the world of men. Pregnant women often stayed indoors as much as possible, childbirth was attended by other women and mother and baby often stayed in seclusion until churching marked the end of this phase. This practice was chosen by women themselves throughout this period, not imposed on them in any way.

In looking at the increasing involvement of the state in family life, it seems likely that benefits accrued from the expansion of provision in health care for pregnant women and children, in education and in some measures to alleviate poverty (such as meals for poor children). In Hull specifically, attempts to assist poor families were wide-ranging. Hull women appeared to make use of facilities offered where they proved useful, availing themselves of information, free orange juice, milk and baby scales, whilst feeling free to reject unwanted advice and cod liver oil.¹⁸⁷ In some respects, childcare appeared to reflect prevailing views. However, poor children generally were much less supervised than the middle-class pundits advised and street life was their main entertainment throughout this period. There is little evidence that either state help or the mushrooming of advice pushed families into more 'symmetrical' arrangements.

In Hull, as elsewhere, day-to-day childcare was provided by mothers. Families continued to be larger in Hull, on average, than in some parts of the country. In many cases, the physical demands of motherhood in large families meant that fathers appeared to be closer to their children and grieved equally if they died. It has been suggested that the idea of working-class men as hostile to helpful advice from outsiders concerning childcare partly arose because this was a useful excuse for wives not wishing to follow particular advice.¹⁸⁸ Likewise, the idea of men as disciplinarians was useful to mothers as a way of threatening disobedient children.¹⁸⁹ This practice of casting men in a certain light for convenience may go some way to explaining prevailing impressions. In Hull, however, despite the view that mothers 'carried the burden', fathers' importance cannot be dismissed.¹⁹⁰ In contemporary discourse, fathers' involvement with childcare (as with housework) can often be seen as a reflection of their reasonableness;

¹⁸⁵ Pearl Jephcott, *Married Women Working* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962) quoted in Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood*, pp. 221-3

¹⁸⁶ The women Friedan interviewed, for example, were all college-educated. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 136.

¹⁸⁷ Hull Transcripts: Mrs I's interview, p. 34.

¹⁸⁸ Fisher, 'Fatherhood', p. 445.

¹⁸⁹ Abrams, 'Nobody like my Daddy', p. 229.

¹⁹⁰ Hull Transcripts: Mrs D's interview, p. 31.

uninvolved fathers were seen as poor fathers. Throughout this period, however, it was not so simple. Men's role was seen as primarily providing for the family and it was accepted that women did most of the childcare. However, men generally did assist with looking after children where they could fit it around their commitments, just as women often contributed financially where this could be fitted around childcare. Hull men appeared as happy to assist with this 'women's work' as they were to see their wives earning; in contrast to the experience in some parts of the country, their masculinity appeared threatened by neither. On being asked if her husband helped much in looking after the children Mrs R encapsulated the general view: 'We looked after one another.'¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, p. 20.

CHAPTER 5

‘Quite a loving fellowship’: women as neighbours and community life in Hull

So far, I have considered women as wives, as housekeepers and as mothers. Women’s domestic life, however, was not solely enacted in the private space of the home, but also within the locality, as part of the wider community. In this chapter I consider how community life operated in Hull. The majority of my interviewees were Hull people, and accounts of community life are largely based on these, since the few rural respondents had little to say about this area of life.¹

To begin with, the idea of community is discussed, looking at the associations of the word and the views of a number of historians. Then, in section II, I consider the evidence from Hull, looking at: neighbours ‘popping in’ to one another’s houses; street life, including that of children; neighbourhood helping; gossip; the disadvantages of community life and residents’ sense of identification with their neighbourhoods. How networking operated in communities to assist in finding employment is considered in section III. I consider the impact of different styles of housing on community lifestyles in section IV and life on new suburban council estates in section V. Finally, a discussion of how far the evidence from Hull supports various interpretations of working-class community life follows.

In summary, my findings were that ‘traditional’ working-class community did operate in Hull. This could encompass attachments to particular areas, knowing neighbours intimately and helping one another during hard times. Much of everyday life was conducted in the public arena. Utilising what we might now see as ‘social capital’ working-class communities maximised their members’ chances of obtaining jobs and houses, as well as extending appropriate help and support when it was required. It seemed that many of these features of community life declined in Hull, but pockets of it remained. For women, many of whom were fixed in their localities with large families, community life provided a broader arena in which day-to-day life could be lived than would have been available in the limited space of their homes. In Hull, as in other locations, women were absolutely pivotal to community life. However, I did not find in Hull anything like the ‘hidden matriarchy’ observed by Carl Chinn. Rather, men involved themselves in community life in so far as it fitted around their long working hours.

¹ As Mrs T said: ‘[W]e hadn’t any neighbours . . . we were three fields down.’ (Hull Transcripts: Mrs T’s interview, p. 41.) This is not to say that there was no community in rural areas, simply that the sample here is too small to shed any light on it.

I

Before considering community, some comment should be made about the term itself.

‘Community’ is a widely discussed but hard to define concept. It can be used to describe a common group that is geographically spread (as in the Christian community); also, to describe people living in a particular locality (such as the Hessle Road community). Neither of these usages would imply that everyone in the community knew everyone else, just that they had something in common.

The extent to which the notion of ‘community’ has become politicised in recent years is worth mentioning here. The last two decades of the 20th century, for example, saw the development of communitarianism – a philosophy that values community engagement. One of its most prominent advocates was the American academic, Robert Putnam, who argued that there had been a decline in involvement in local communities, in civic engagement and in volunteering over the last four decades of the 20th-century in the USA.² Putnam used the term ‘social capital’ to describe connections between people and argued that this was largely a positive benefit, both for individuals and for the community at large. Thus, social capital in the form of ‘networking’ with those in similar fields of employment can lead to career advancement. Likewise, a lower crime rate can be the result of social capital for everyone in a neighbourhood if some people keep an eye on others’ houses.³ For Putnam social capital is largely positive, but not all researchers have seen it like this. For instance, Yaojun Li, Mike Savage and Andrew Pickles argued that poorly-educated people in working-class jobs were unlikely to have access to social capital – and women in these positions were least likely of all to benefit in this way.⁴ Communitarianism was influential in the early days of New Labour in Britain and recently the Conservative Party’s notion of ‘the Big Society’ appeared to build on similar ideas to communitarianism.⁵ In short, ‘community’ has become a potent political idea even though its practical reality has been called into question.

Working-class areas are often seen as having a very distinct community life, so it may be helpful to consider these ‘traditional’ working-class communities first. Richard Hoggart, as an important exponent, is a good starting point for considering these. According to Hoggart, a typical working-class community can be summed up by the following description:

One knows practically everyone with an intimacy of detail – that these people have a son who ‘got on’ or emigrated; that those have a daughter who went wrong or one who married

² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁴ Yaojun Li, Mike Savage and Andrew Pickles, ‘Social Capital and Social Exclusion in England and Wales (1972-1999)’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 54:4 (2003) 497-526, p. 506.

⁵ Speech by David Cameron, July 2010, transcript available at: <www.number10.gov.uk/new/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572> accessed 1 October 2010.

away and is doing well; that this old man living alone on his pension, shops at the horsemeat place in town and smokes a sixpenny mixture of herbs . . . This is an extremely local life, in which everything is remarkably near. The houses . . . open on to the street; the street itself, compared with those of suburbia or the new housing estates, is narrow; the houses opposite are only just over the cobbles and the shops are not much farther. For the things you want only periodically you may drop down two or three hundred yards to the shops on the main tram-route or go into town: day-to-day services are just over the road or round the corner, and practically every street has its corner-shop.⁶

High-density housing is sometimes seen as significant in creating suitable conditions for working-class communities to develop, along with a propensity to live and work in the same area.⁷

Another writer in the Hoggart tradition was Robert Roberts, brought up in Salford earlier in the century. He too saw working-class communities as being sections of a city, often quite small.

Every industrial city, of course, folds within itself a cluster of loosely defined overlapping 'villages'. Those in the Great Britain of seventy or so years ago [ie at the beginning of the 20th century] were almost self-contained communities. Our own consisted of some thirty streets and alleys locked along the north and south by two railway systems a furlong apart.⁸

Elizabeth Roberts's oral history interviews also gave her the sense that community, for most people, meant a very small area, sometimes less than a street, sometimes a few streets.⁹ In this tradition, then, a community is a group of people focusing on a small geographical area, an inter-related social network. Contemporary reports also demonstrate that the street was considered as part of a family's living space, and much activity took place there.¹⁰

Having completed two distinct studies of Lancashire working-class life covering the periods 1890 to 1940 and 1940 to 1970, Elizabeth Roberts is in a good position to chart the evolution of working-class communities.¹¹ Her oral history evidence supported the idea of a 'traditional' working-class neighbourhood, 'characterized by the provision of mutual practical help and social support'.¹² Other notable aspects, according to Roberts, were their close-knit relationships and their use of social control to enforce the group's norms (such as 'cleanliness, respectability and good behaviour'.¹³) She saw a decline of the 'traditional' neighbourhood in her later oral history

⁶ Richard Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life, with special reference to publications and entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959, 1st 1957) p. 53.

⁷ See Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1969: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 139.

⁸ Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) p. 16.

⁹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: an oral history, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 199.

¹⁰ H. James and F. Moore, 'Adolescent leisure in a working-class district', *Occupational Psychology*, 14:3 (1940) 132-45, quoted in Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-39* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992) p. 111.

¹¹ See Roberts, *Women and Families* for 1940-1970 and Elizabeth Roberts, *A Women's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1984) for the earlier period.

¹² Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 199.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

study as compared with her earlier work.¹⁴ Roberts put forward various reasons for this. In part, she saw working-class communities as becoming less stable partly owing to a rise in owner-occupation, which led to small terraced houses being seen as the first rung on the property ladder – and therefore occupied only briefly – rather than being seen as long-term rented homes.¹⁵ Attitudes to neighbours increasingly became that of ‘distant cordiality’, although, according to Roberts, ‘Neighbourliness and neighbourhoods were strongest in the poorest areas.’¹⁶ She also saw other factors implicated in the declining ‘traditional’ neighbourhood such as the acquisition of gardens and the increase in traffic leading to children being less likely to play on the street.¹⁷ An increase in home entertainment (such as television) led to people wanting to spend more time at home. Increasing material prosperity, too, lessened the need for neighbourly help. Roberts also pinpointed an increasing tendency for women to seek employment outside the home as a factor in loosening community ties. Likewise, the arrival of supermarkets in the 1960s, leading to the decline of the corner shop, lessened opportunities for neighbours’ social interaction.¹⁸

The timing of working-class community – when it developed and when it died, its changes and continuities – are areas of contention. According to Eric Hobsbawm, what became known as ‘traditional’ working-class life began around 1870 and lasted until the 1950s.¹⁹ From around the 1950s, writers have seen a move towards ‘privatism’ in the working class – that is, a move towards a domestic life centred more on the private home and less on the public community.²⁰ This thesis was argued by Michael Young and Peter Willmott. In their *Family and Kinship in East London* they contrasted working-class inner-London Bethnal Green with the new council housing estate to which the working-class residents were moving.²¹ In Bethnal Green they found large groups of residents who knew ‘everyone’ in the area through networks of extended families, friends and acquaintances.²² Especially strong ties were found between mothers and daughters.²³ On the council estate, by contrast, they found residents isolated, unconnected and geographically distant from wider kin.²⁴ Later, with Willmott’s study of the more established council estate at Dagenham, his views were somewhat tempered. He felt that Dagenham’s development as a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201. The term ‘distant cordiality’ was coined by Geoffrey Gorer in *Exploring English Character* (1955).

¹⁷ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 212.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) p. 164.

²⁰ John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer, Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge University Press, 1971) pp. 96-97.

²¹ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-24.

community was hampered by the design of the estate, the lack of facilities and the limited range of house sizes available. The fact that it had been built to house residents moving from the densely-populated inner London – and that therefore it was difficult for young people who had grown up on the estate to obtain houses locally – also created problems when extended families wished to stay together.²⁵ However, in spite of this, Willmott found that the ‘traditional’ working-class community that he had found in the older Bethnal Green area was, in many ways, replicated in the new estate of Dagenham when it became more established.²⁶ Later still, however, Young and Willmott went on to argue that traditional working-class community life changed as young families moved to the suburbs away from extended family. With more comfortable homes, smaller families and less community involvement, the ‘symmetrical family’ developed: more prosperous, inward-looking and home-centred.²⁷

Yet the concept of working-class community is not universally accepted, having recently been questioned by a number of scholars. The model of communal sociability followed by ‘privatism’ as a linear progression in working-class history was questioned by Ian Procter, who saw both sociability and privatism as ‘recurring features’.²⁸ Thus, the notion of respectable domesticity as valued by the 19th-century labour aristocracy is seen as a reflection of working-class ‘privatism’.²⁹ Likewise, the communal sociability which is often thought of as historical was uncovered in a study of a post-war suburb of Coventry, in 1987. Here, a stable population with a reliance on extended family, local friends and neighbours was evident.³⁰ Similar traits were found in a recent study of Cheadle.³¹ By contrast, Talja Blokland, considering a ‘traditional’ working-class neighbourhood of Rotterdam, pointed to the religious and social divisions that such areas had experienced, asserting that ‘community’ had been ‘imagined’.³² Joanna Bourke has also criticised the term, seeing it as too vague to be useful and often used with no precise definition.³³ She saw the use of the term ‘working class communities’ as lying within two distinct discourses, which she referred to as a ‘backward-looking romanticism’ and a ‘forward-looking socialism’. The first:

²⁵ Peter Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community: A Study of Dagenham after forty years* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) p. 109.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁷ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

²⁸ Ian Procter, ‘The Privatisation of Working-Class Life: A Dissenting View’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 41:2 (1990) 157-80, p. 160.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³¹ Mike Savage, Gaynor Bagnall, Brian Longhurst, ‘Local Habitus and Working-Class Culture’, in Fiona Divine, Mike Savage, John Scott, Rosemary Crompton (eds) *Rethinking Class: culture, identities and lifestyle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 95-122, p. 108.

³² Talja Blokland, ‘Memory Magic: How a working-class neighbourhood became an imagined community and class started to matter when it lost its base’, in Mike Savage *et al.* *Rethinking Class*, 123-39, p. 138.

³³ Bourke, *Working-class cultures*, p. 137.

has been fostered by working-class autobiographies and oral histories, where social relations are often recalled through a golden haze: conflict is forgotten in favour of doors that were always open: the neighbour who was never seen is neglected in favour of the neighbour who always shared; tiring workdays are ignored in favour of nearly forgotten games which diverted children even during difficult times.³⁴

For socialists, on the other hand, ‘the “community” represented the innate socialism of the workers’.³⁵ In support of this, Bourke invokes George Lansbury’s autobiography, extolling the “loving kindness” in an East End slum’.³⁶ According to Bourke, it is central to the concept of community that its members identify themselves as a group.³⁷ Bourke cited an example of 1950s inner-city slum dwellers in Oxford objecting to being re-housed as, ‘they expected that “community relations” would be more chummy in their slum than on the housing estate’.

However, Bourke pointed out, ‘when pressed, few could admit that they were actually friendly with the folks next door’.³⁸ Bourke’s inference is that the ‘chumminess’ of the slums was something of a myth.

Rogaly and Taylor, too, studying life on Norwich council estates between the 1930s and the present questioned the idea that living in close proximity necessarily led to a sense of community – stressing the importance, for this, of ‘people’s feeling of belonging in their place of residence’.³⁹ They highlight literature detailing the movement of working-class people to large suburban council estates from old, privately rented, more central housing. In this, the ‘apparent loss of community’ – with its strong support networks – was lamented.⁴⁰ However, they pointed to a Mass-Observation study from the 1940s which showed that people often used pubs or churches further away, rather than attending the nearest, suggesting that they ‘had networks of interests outside their apparently closed community’.⁴¹ Like Bourke, they were critical of the lack of definition of ‘working-class community’ by its users.

Having considered the debate around the idea of community, I would like to pause to comment explicitly on the position of women in this. Any discussion on community must implicitly include a discussion on women as they are almost invariably the bedrock of community

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

³⁹ Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p. 14.

⁴⁰ Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*, p. 15. They cite: M. Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); C. Rosser and C. Harris, *The family and social change: A study of family and kinship in a South Wales town* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); M. Tebbutt, ‘Women’s Talk? Gossip and women’s words in working-class communities, 1880-1939,’ in Andrew Davies and Steven Fielding (eds) *Workers’ worlds: cultures and communities in Manchester and Salford* (Manchester University Press 1992) 49-73; Young and Wilmott, *Family and Kinship*.

⁴¹ Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*, p. 16.

life and usually integral in building and nurturing social networks. The importance of women is a frequently mentioned aspect of this traditional working-class community. Jean Hartley described how the street community in Hull came to life every day: 'As soon as the men had gone to work in the mornings the women in pinafores, with infants clinging to their legs, would appear in the terrace to shake mats, lean on brooms and stand with arms akimbo, and the morning gossip would begin.'⁴² Large families left many women unable to go out to work and so fixed in their communities, whilst many men's employment took them outside of the neighbourhood during working hours. For many women, each week had a pattern, often the same in different homes, of washing on a Monday, ironing on a Tuesday and so on. Therefore, women had their working lives in common, creating a tie that could encourage closeness. The importance of women in working-class communities was emphasised, too, by Carl Chinn, who saw the communities he studied as matriarchal.⁴³ Elizabeth Roberts's respondents, in describing mutual help in neighbourhoods, also saw women as the agents in much everyday assistance, such as helping with childcare and sitting with elderly neighbours.⁴⁴ Robert Colls, remembering life in South Shields in the early 1960s, recalled: 'a hard knot of older women stood at the corner shop, talking calmly, all arms-folded except for one who, arm out straight, gently rocked a pram. Mothers like these held the streets from first morning message to last evening call.'⁴⁵

II

Let us consider, then, how far Hull's experience, as reflected in my oral history interviews, supported historians' views of working-class community. As Bourke noticed, accounts of working-class community life can sometimes portray a closeness and sociability, a propensity to 'pop in' to one another's houses and a willingness to help others out in times of hardship that can seem cosy and appealing. Where oral history accounts confirm such ideas, one can be left wondering whether nostalgia has lent a rosy tint to this aspect of life, now that so many people barely know their neighbours. However, a closer reading leads to a more nuanced view. Only one interviewee remembered that: 'Neighbours popped in and out all the time.'⁴⁶ Far more, whilst sometimes acknowledging that some people did behave like this, felt that their family, although perfectly friendly with neighbours, kept something of a distance: '[M]y mother didn't,

⁴² Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989) p. 9.

⁴³ Carl Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

⁴⁴ Roberts, *Women and Families*, pp. 201-202.

⁴⁵ Robert Colls, 'When we lived in communities: working-class culture and its critics', in Robert Colls and Richard Rodger (eds) *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain, 1880-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 283-307, p. 284.

⁴⁶ Hull Transcripts: Mrs J's interview, p. 9.

because she wasn't that type.'⁴⁷ Mrs A, whilst clear that, 'I wasn't one for going into other people's houses', saw no contradiction in asserting that she had always had good neighbours.⁴⁸ The lack of privacy that close community life could entail may have made such distance preferable to many and measures were taken to separate the home from 'public' life. Thus, where front doors opened directly onto the street from the living room, privacy was maintained by opening them only a few inches to callers.⁴⁹ It is worth mentioning that even quite close relationships with neighbours were often not regarded as friendships. Two of my respondents in particular, Mr F (born in Day Street) and Mrs F (brought up in Reform Street) gave detailed, evocative accounts of working-class community life in the older parts of Hull city centre. Plans of these streets are therefore included in order to contextualise these descriptions.⁵⁰ According to Mrs F, describing her mother's relationships with neighbours: '[I]t was a different sort of friendliness. Not of popping in, but you were always there if anybody was in trouble. You always knew if somebody was ill, or if somebody wanted something.'⁵¹ The tightrope that was walked between supporting one's neighbours and not intruding is illustrated by certain customs that arose to support members of the community in difficult times, without creating an unwanted closeness. For example, Mr F recalled:

If anybody died, the blinds would come down or the shutters would close, on every house in the area . . . Until after the funeral, and then they opened again . . . If you went down a strange street, you could tell if there'd been a death in the street because all the blinds'd be down.⁵²

Mrs F described the custom of keeping the body of any relative who had died in the house until the funeral for people to visit. On being asked if you had to know the person well to be expected to visit, she replied:

Well you knew them all well, you see, that's the point . . . I can always remember a little girl dying who lived just opposite to us . . . I would be maybe twelve, thirteen, fourteen, something like that . . . the lady beckoned me and said, 'You haven't been in to see her have you yet? She's all right, you can come in and have a look at her.'⁵³

In such ways, neighbours acknowledged one another's tragedies and showed respect without undue fuss. The regularity of such deaths no doubt allowed such customs to grow up so that in difficult situations people knew what was expected of them in order to give some comfort to

⁴⁷ Hull Transcripts: Mrs F's interview, p. 83. See similar comments at: Mr Q's interview, p. 52; Mrs L's interview, p. 31; Mrs B's interview, p. 37; Mrs C's interview, p. 31; Mrs I's interview, p. 78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 7.

⁵⁰ A map of Reform Street and the surrounding area is included as Appendix 8; a map of the Day Street area as Appendix 9.

⁵¹ Hull Transcripts, Mrs F's interview, p. 83.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, pp. 31, 32.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 32.

grieving relatives. Casual communal sociability during the daytime, including supporting rituals, was almost exclusively among women.

Whilst popping in to neighbours' houses seems to have been regarded by many as an invasion of privacy, approaching neighbours to chat in the public space was generally acceptable.⁵⁴ Many respondents were clear that community life was very important: 'Life in Reform Street, you know, was a communal life'⁵⁵ Another interviewee, describing his family as a child recalled that they: 'knew all the neighbours'. He continued: 'That was part of the street life . . . it was a big part of your life. You know, the gossip, the scandal.'⁵⁶ Even street furniture could form part of the entertainment, as Mrs K described: '[T]here was the lamplighter that used to come and we used to watch him with a taper, light the gas street lights. Which was quite an excitement really, because we had no television, we didn't have a radio.'⁵⁷ Mr F described a local Dutch couple:

Now he would come out very often on a fine night and he played a concertina, and of course all the kids used to hang around and in the outskirts you'd see a ring of adults as well, listening. Kids would be singing and such like.⁵⁸

Mrs B described a group of young men regularly playing cards in the communal area of the terrace, with one lad posted as look-out in case a passing policeman objected to illegal gambling.⁵⁹ Everyday life took place on the street in a way that seems incomprehensible today.

For example, Mr F remembered:

[W]e had a window tapper in the street, used to tap on various windows, especially for the shift workers. He'd come round with his bit of wire at the end of a pole. He had to tap on the window till the person came to the window. It was no good him shouting, 'I'm awake', he'd to come to the window.⁶⁰

Public spaces some distance away were used, such as Hull's market or a local park. Mrs A, for instance, commented: 'We went round West Park, walking round. That's how I met my husband.'⁶¹

Community life was often especially important to children and children's street play was widespread.⁶² Large gangs of sometimes twenty-six children might play together on the street.⁶³

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Mr U's interview, p. 37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, p. 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 89.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 44. The Hessle Road area is another (along with the city centre) in which community life appeared particularly strong. A map illustrating Hessle Road is included as Appendix 7. This includes Scarborough Street, on which Mrs B lived.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 86.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 38; Mrs C's interview, p. 32; Mr F's interview, pp. 20-21; Mr I's interview, p. 55; Mr V's interview, p. 47.

Since adults also used the street to socialise, they were often on hand to rebuke children (not necessarily their own) where this was felt to be needed.⁶⁴ However, some children, often of slightly better-off families, were encouraged to play in the garden rather than the street.⁶⁵ Only better-off children spoke of having school friends back to the house for tea.⁶⁶ Other children did enter one another's houses, especially if the weather turned bad whilst they were playing on the street, but this was not always encouraged by mothers.⁶⁷ A range of different street games were played, including skipping, chasing, hide and seek, kicking a tin can, hopscotch, whip and top, block, reallio, marbles and collecting cigarette cards.⁶⁸ Types of games would depend on the layout of the street and what opportunities were available. Mr F, whose father was a builder living in a house attached to the builder's yard, commented:

We always played in the street, but we were very lucky cos if it was wet weather we could play under our archway, cos we had an archway . . . There were always a lot of bricks knocking about so we could build forts and play Cowboys and Indians.⁶⁹

Occasionally, too, adults were directly involved in children's games; five interviewees remembered the custom of skipping in the streets at Easter: '[T]here used to be big skipping ropes, and the parents would be doing the handles.'⁷⁰ According to some accounts, adults would join in the skipping themselves, too.⁷¹

It is well documented that neighbours provided one another with all kinds of services, large and small.⁷² The idea that people were more willing to help others in times of need was supported with little equivocation by my interviewees. Help was usually, but not exclusively, given by women. Mr F was typical in declaring: 'If anybody was in trouble there was always somebody to help.'⁷³ When asked for details of this, a wide range of varied kinds of assistance was recalled. Mrs H, for instance, remembered: '[O]ne year, one Christmas . . . we hadn't anything at all, and next door brought a joint in and she halved it . . . I mean, can you see anybody now doing it?'⁷⁴ Mrs N commented: '[I]f anybody wasn't very well, they'd clean your step and sweep your

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 38.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 38; Mrs C's interview, p. 32; Mr I's interview, p. 55; Mr V's interview, p. 47 and Mrs V's interview pp. 46, 47.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 30; also Mrs H's interview, p. 2; Mr I's interview, p. 9; Mrs J's interview, p. 5; Mrs R's interview, p. 48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 9.

⁷² Described in detail, for example, by Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London before World War I', *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (1983) 4-27, pp. 5, 6.

⁷³ Hull Transcripts: Mr F's interview, p. 31.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 4.

front.⁷⁵ Mrs R recalled: '[M]y mother used to bake bread, she always made her own bread . . . And she'd say, take Mrs So and So a cake, I used to go round taking hot cakes and things like that.'⁷⁶ Mr V remembered during the Second World War: '[I]n one of the houses in Hopwood Street, the woman next door to us was deaf and dumb so she'd never hear the siren. So we all used to go in. She wouldn't lock the door. You didn't lock the doors, and you'd walk in and make sure she was . . . by sign language, you know, pointing to the sky . . . and she'd be off. She'd be down the shelter with you.'⁷⁷ Mr W also remembered his father helping neighbours during the war; too old to fight himself, he would assist neighbours whose husbands were away in the forces with household repairs and maintenance.⁷⁸

Of course, such closely-lived community life was not always seen as positive and there were a number of ways in which it could cause problems for its inhabitants. Not everybody, for example, enjoyed gossip, as Mrs R pointed out in recalling her father's discomfort in having to pass the doorway of their street's notorious gossip, 'Mrs News-of-the-World'.⁷⁹ Being too free with gossip could lead to trouble, as Mrs W laughed: 'Everybody knew everything about everybody . . . And my Mother used to be in the thick of it and she always used to get herself into trouble because she would tell everybody about everything.'⁸⁰ Melanie Tebbutt has studied the functions of gossip in bringing together the community, monitoring standards of respectability and relaying information.⁸¹ Although gossiping has traditionally been criticised as a waste of time – with gossips accused of neglecting housework in its pursuance, Tebbutt highlighted its positive side. She pointed out that research affirms that most people gossip in the sense of passing on information about mutual acquaintances; it is not necessarily malicious or negative.⁸² According to Tebbutt, gossip has been underestimated as a recreational activity, especially for women with few opportunities for other forms of leisure. For example, Tebbutt quoted Lady Bell: 'There are times when it is almost essential to unburden the soul and compare experience with someone else.'⁸³ Tebbutt interpreted gossip as one of women's strengths, pointing out that women's verbal skills, in a range of contexts, were a regular feature in accounts of working-class life.⁸⁴ According to Tebbutt, gossip could improve both women's self-esteem and community cohesion.⁸⁵ Communal life was eased, too, as one learned, through gossip, of rows among neighbours, and so

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 44.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, p. 29.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr V's interview, p. 61.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr W's interview, p. 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, p. 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs W's interview, p. 32.

⁸¹ Tebbutt, 'Women's talk?'

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

could avoid becoming inadvertently involved.⁸⁶ I found, in Hull, a certain amount of social control could be exerted on people in this way to enforce social norms. Mr F recalled the local midwife's disgust at a young mother feeding her baby black pudding. The tale 'went round the street, I mean, you heard it two or three times'.⁸⁷ Standards of housework, as well as childcare, were monitored by the neighbours. Mrs S remembered:

[T]hey'd talk about you if your cleaning didn't get done every Friday morning, and your windows and your step. Everybody was fussy about the steps then, and the washing, how white it was and things like that. They didn't judge you on what you had, but the way you was.⁸⁸

The knowledge that one's business would be the gossip of the street may well have influenced people's behaviour. However, there appears to be little evidence that anyone was really made to suffer, beyond becoming a source of their neighbours' entertainment, for breaking social customs.

Mr F commented:

A young girl got pregnant. Well, that was practically unknown. Well, everybody of course was telling the tale about this girl. But as soon as the child arrived, everybody was there: 'What do you want? What does it want?' That sort of thing. No problem at all.⁸⁹

This story highlights the benefits of gossip: without it, people wouldn't have known what help neighbours required. Of course, gossip could also have its disadvantages. The good will of the neighbours was not always taken for granted, even during very hard times, and the possibility that 'everybody knew everything about everybody' could be quite worrying. Mrs D described her mother's fear that neighbours might report her sideline during her father's unemployment:

She took in washing. She wasn't supposed to take in washing because it would have lost her benefits, her dole. And so it had to be done quite secretly, and my older sister used to take bundles of washing back and forth.⁹⁰

Sometimes neighbours' interventions were more straightforward than simply indulging in critical gossip. Mrs F, for instance, remembered:

[T]here was an Irish family further up the road that used to, every Saturday night, were out fighting, the husband and the wife would be fighting and the children would be parting them and . . . if things got too bad then neighbours would go and intervene and sort of do something about it and take one lot in.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of 'gossip' in working-class neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (Aldershot: Scolar Press) p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 89.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 52.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 89.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs D's interview, p. 16.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 31.

Similar instances of ‘Saturday night sports’ being calmed down by neighbours were remembered by Mrs H.⁹²

Residents’ identification with a particular place is often seen as typical of working-class communities. In Hull, this seemed to resonate most strongly with people who lived in the Hessle Road area to the west of Hull, traditionally the centre of the city’s fishing industry and a location that seems to have been known for its strong community life.⁹³ Mr U – who came from Hessle Road – mentioned the attachment to certain areas of the city and the avoidance of others: ‘[W]e never went to east Hull, that was a dockers’ area and merchant navy. We didn’t mix with them.’⁹⁴ Attachments to particular locations were also shown by the names residents used for them. Mr I, for instance, remembered that the newly-built housing on Preston Road (to the east of the city) was referred to as ‘Corned Beef Island’, named because: ‘[T]he people who lived there had to pay so much money rent that they could only supposedly live on corned beef.’⁹⁵ As he lived there himself, the joke demonstrated some pride in the sacrifices made for better housing, as well as an attachment to the area. At the other side of Hull, the same name was used for an area on North Hull Estate.⁹⁶

III

Many accounts of working-class communities highlight the ways in which members helped one another through a network of diverse and reciprocal assistance in all areas of life.⁹⁷ Assessment of the operation of working-class community networks has been made by considering how far inhabitants used ‘traditional’ job-seeking practices.⁹⁸ Dudley Baines and Paul Johnson highlight the fact that many characteristics of a traditional working-class community cannot be assessed quantitatively.⁹⁹ In order to focus on one aspect that can be analysed in this way, the authors studied data from the New Survey of London Life and Labour (1929-32) to see how many juvenile sons followed their fathers’ occupations.¹⁰⁰ Considering the importance of ‘traditional’ job-seeking practices seemed to me to be an interesting way of assessing the interconnectedness

⁹² *Ibid.*, Mrs H’s interview, p. 18.

⁹³ See, for instance, various books by Alec Gill, such as *Good Old Hessle Road* (Hutton Press Ltd: Beverley, 1991); and (with Gary Sargeant and Alan Bower), *Village within a City: Hessle Road Fishing Community of Hull* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1986). See also map, Appendix 7.

⁹⁴ Hull Transcripts: Mr U’s interview, p. 32.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr I’s interview, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Audrey Dunn and Alec Gill (eds) *The Quadrant and Little Greenwood Communities of North Hull: A Collection of Memories of the Residents in the Early Council Housing Estates, 1920s-1970s* (Beverley: Highgate, 2005) p. 33.

⁹⁷ See, for instance, Roberts, *Women and Families*, pp. 201-2.

⁹⁸ Dudley Baines and Paul Johnson, ‘In Search of the ‘Traditional’ Working Class: Social Mobility and Occupational Continuity in Interwar London’, *Economic History Review*, 52:4 (1999) 692-713.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 694.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 696-9.

of community life. However, focusing entirely on whether sons follow in their fathers' footsteps seemed to me unduly narrow a focus, since job-hunting can rarely have been so formulaic. Such an approach takes no account of the careers of girls, the assistance of wider kin and friends, nor of the personal preferences of the youngsters involved.¹⁰¹ Another possible flaw in this study is the fact that it considered occupations of *juveniles* – that is, boys between fourteen and twenty years old. It may well be, however, that entry-level jobs were not permanent. In my study, Mr I began his work as an errand boy, a post that had been advertised in the local newspaper, but he saw this as a temporary way of contributing to his family's finances whilst looking for something permanent. According to him, this was common practice: 'You'd take an errand boy's job but look out for a job that would last you, hoping, for the rest of your life. . . you didn't take dead-end jobs because you wanted to . . . it was a fill-in until you found something.'¹⁰² It seems to me, therefore, that a consideration of 'traditional' job-seeking practices focusing on qualitative rather than quantitative data may be illuminating. In this way, the careers of girls and boys as well as men and women, can be studied, focusing on the help and influence of wider connections, and looking at various jobs rather than just entry-level employment.

Let us consider, then, how far respondents in my Hull study used kin and community connections to find work and how far they used more formal methods. Not all interviewees remembered how earlier jobs had been found and several recalled that newspaper advertisements had been answered or that school teachers had recommended them (especially in technical/vocational schools or business colleges).¹⁰³ Occasionally, the Labour Exchange was mentioned as a means of obtaining employment.¹⁰⁴ Only a minority of boys followed in their father's careers – mostly in the building trade or in fishing.¹⁰⁵ However, virtually all interviewees remembered either themselves or other family members obtaining employment through informal contacts. Some girls obtained work at the firm where their fathers were already employed.¹⁰⁶ Mrs A's first job was looking after the children of some of her aunt's friends.¹⁰⁷ Mrs B went to work in the fish house on Hessle Road because her siblings worked there and arranged it for her.¹⁰⁸ Another job, working for a family who owned a fish shop, she heard about, 'with going for fish

¹⁰¹ Of course, Baines and Johnson were only able to measure father-son occupational continuity since the data they used did not include information on how posts were obtained or whether wider family or neighbourhood contacts were involved.

¹⁰² Hull Transcripts: Mr I's interview, p. 53.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 12; Mrs S's interview, p. 25; Mrs C's interview, p. 15; Mr V's interview, p. 8; Mrs V's interview, p. 9; Mr I's interview, p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ Mr F and Mrs C's brother followed their fathers into the building trade (Hull Transcripts: Mr F's interview, pp. 16, 46; Mrs C's interview, p. 1). Mrs S's two brothers and Mr U followed their fathers into fishing (Mrs S's interview, p. 121; Mr U's interview, p.3.)

¹⁰⁶ Both Mrs X and Mrs K's sister (Hull Transcripts: Mrs K's interview, p. 12; Mrs X's interview, p. 5.)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs A's interview, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 17.

and chips, you see, I got talking to 'em'.¹⁰⁹ Mrs H got one job through a distant family connection: 'me cousin got married, and his wife, his wife's father was foreman'.¹¹⁰ Mr I's second job was inherited from his cousin:

I became a page boy with fifty-five brass buttons down me uniform and a tippy cap. My cousin left that job to go to work at Reckitts because his father worked at Reckitts. He bettered himself after leaving this page boy's job. And he said if the uniform fits you, I'll recommend you for the job. And it fitted me.¹¹¹

Mrs K, Mrs P and Mr Q all found work through 'someone' they knew.¹¹² The friend who had recommended Mr Q for his post had originally been offered *his* (as an office boy for a local shipping insurance company) after his father had been washed overboard from a trawler and drowned.¹¹³ Mrs L's aunt got her a job at a jeweller's shop as she knew the owners and Mrs O's neighbour offered Mr O a job on hearing he had left his previous position.¹¹⁴ Mrs M got her first job at a market garden on the recommendation of a next door neighbour and a later job, when her children were older, by asking the local postmistress if she knew of anyone who needed domestic help.¹¹⁵ Mrs P got one job through the recommendation of the parish priest, who knew the firm involved, whilst her mother had got her first job at the lodging house of a distant relation.¹¹⁶ Mrs N's husband was offered his apprenticeship as a heating engineer as compensation after the boss's son had accidentally blinded him in one eye with an airgun.¹¹⁷ Mrs R approached the firm Paul's, with a friend, as she had 'heard about them setting women on' while Mr R found one job through 'the fellow next door'.¹¹⁸ Mrs T's first job was found because her employer's husband had been friends with her father, while her second job was secured through a contact of her mother's.¹¹⁹

Overall, then, by far the most usual way to obtain employment among these respondents was through informal contacts. Similar systems were reported by Young and Willmott in the 1950s, both for finding work and for locating suitable housing.¹²⁰ In Hull, these contacts were sometimes relatives (even very distant relatives) but could also be fairly casual acquaintances; both men and women appear to have been equally likely to concern themselves in assisting friends, neighbours and relations with their job searches. Young people, too, would regularly recommend members of their circle for jobs that they were moving on from. Sometimes, jobs

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Mrs H's interview, p. 14.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Mr I's interview, p. 51.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Mrs K's interview, p. 13; Mrs P's interview, p. 26; Mr Q's interview, p. 11.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Mr Q's interview, p. 14.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs L's interview, p. 16; Mrs O's interview, p. 22.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs M's interview, pp. 15, 16.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs P's interview, pp. 3, 26.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs N's interview, p. 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs R's interview, pp. 27, 30.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs T's interview, p. 22.

¹²⁰ Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, pp. 23-4, 73.

were given in return for favours, or as informal compensation, or out of kindness where someone's circumstances were seen as particularly unfortunate. Like Baines and Johnson, I found that boys whose fathers were in the building trade were more likely to follow in their footsteps. In my sample, this was where the fathers had been self-employed and therefore able to pass on a valuable and marketable skill to their sons. The other sons who followed their fathers were in the fishing industry. This could have been partly because fishing was seen very much as a whole way of life, dominating a geographical area of Hull and leading to a different lifestyle, with which these boys would be familiar. More than one respondent spoke of fishing being 'in the blood'.¹²¹ However, fishing was also regarded as being one of few reasonably paid jobs available to working-class men in Hull, so fathers with contacts to introduce their sons into the industry may have felt they were passing on an advantage.¹²² A similar pattern was uncovered by Young and Willmott, who felt that dockers (some of the 'highly regarded' jobs) were more likely to pass their skills onto their sons.¹²³

Baines and Johnson appear to see the influence of working-class communities as negative, describing it as a 'constraint' that led to limited 'economic and social aspirations'.¹²⁴ I found only one example in my interviews that appeared in this way, when Mrs B, after having obtained a job she liked herself, was forced by her sister to change: 'You're going to leave this job, and you're going in fish house where we all go!'¹²⁵ However, no long-term damage was done as Mrs B soon found something else.¹²⁶ Almost always, 'traditional' job-seeking practices appeared to have been seen as helpful by my interviewees. Sometimes, well-meaning relatives would push young people into jobs that did not suit them, but alternative employment was always found when something had been tried and not liked. Mrs F, for example, remembered: 'My Mum put me out to be a nursemaid because she thought the only sort of thing a girl should do was domestic work . . . But I only did it for six months because I grumbled all the time and my father was on my side.'¹²⁷

Since such a wide network of contacts was used to obtain employment, it was not as restricting as it might appear, and young people were free to make other choices where they had strong preferences. For instance, one of Mrs C's brothers chose to become a plumber rather than go into his father's building business.¹²⁸ Likewise, Mrs D got a job in a nursery because she wanted to work with children, despite having shorthand-typing qualifications that would have

¹²¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs S's interview, p. 21.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Mrs S's interview, p. 23; Mr U's interview, p. 24.

¹²³ Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, p. 75.

¹²⁴ Baines and Johnson, 'In search of the traditional working class', p. 692.

¹²⁵ Hull Transcripts, Mrs B's interview, p. 16.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs B's interview, p. 18.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 16.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Mrs C's interview, p. 17.

commanded a higher salary. Her mother ‘wasn’t delighted’, but nevertheless agreed.¹²⁹ Mostly, for a variety of reasons, the use of community networking was seen as the best option available to them. For women, asking around their local communities may well have presented more possibilities for part-time, flexible work that would be more likely to fit around domestic commitments. It may have been felt, with some justification, that a contact who knew something about an applicant was more likely to offer a job than an anonymous employer found through the *Hull Daily Mail* or the Labour Exchange. For the ambitious, there were opportunities for advancement, even within this system. Mr U remembered his determination to further his career at sea, to get off the deck and into ‘that nice warm wheel house’. His motivation was his mother’s encouragement, ‘You don’t want to be on deck all your life like your father.’¹³⁰ Mrs C, too, was able to move on from her first post to something more congenial. She began learning shorthand and typing on parental advice, after her sister’s success in this, but she was later able to persuade her employer to train her in book-keeping instead, which she preferred.¹³¹

Attitudes to work could be different among the very poor. Mrs D, whose disabled father was unemployed for much of the 1930s, described her parents’ feelings when he eventually found work during the War: ‘I mean, she knew, and he knew, that he had a better brain than doing a labouring job. But after all those years of not being in work he was, they were, just both of them glad that he had work.’¹³² When I queried whether her parents ever thought her father should be making better use of his brain by getting a better job, whether there had not been opportunities, Mrs D’s response was: ‘They wouldn’t have risked it. It was just, you know, once they had regular work they didn’t take any risks.’¹³³ This caution comes across strongly for the interwar years. Young people got any kind of work as soon as they could, leaving only when they had secured better employment and pursuing ambitions only where on-the-job training was available. Few interviewees aspired to professional careers. This may have been partly because they knew that this would take them out of their communities, where their local networks could not assist. For the most part, local work that was reasonably satisfying with congenial workmates and adequate pay was the goal. By the 1950s and 1960s when jobs were more plentiful, some were more ambitious. However, it appeared to be common to move on quite regularly, within similar work, simply for a change. Mrs H recalled: ‘I had about twelve or thirteen jobs altogether. ’Cos in those days if you didn’t like one you looked around until you got something else.’¹³⁴ In such circumstances, neighbourhood networking provided the necessary opportunities.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 19.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr U’s interview, p. 35.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, Mrs C’s interview, pp. 16, 18.

¹³² *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 17.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Mrs D’s interview, p. 17.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Mrs H’s interview, p. 21.

IV

What impact did styles of housing have on community life? The way people's lives were led depended, in part, on the layout and positioning of the housing. For instance, someone who lived on a corner could see their community as including more than one street, whereas someone living in the middle of a long road might rarely look beyond it. Likewise, some households made more use of back ways than others, and these people might come to be close to neighbours of the next street whose back ways adjoined. Mr F, for instance, commented that his family 'never saw' some neighbours because they habitually used their back ways, which went out onto another street.¹³⁵ The living of life outside, in the community, as well as within the privacy of one's home, was encouraged by the architecture and street layouts in some (especially older) areas of the city. Mrs F remembered life on Reform Street, one of the older, city centre neighbourhoods:

[Y]ou were sort of so compact in those streets, you'd no gardens, no front places. I mean, if you wanted to take the evening air people would be sitting on the front doorsteps. Or the men would be leaning up against the window sills. And they'd be talking, one to the other . . . summer nights, I mean people would be out on the streets, talking and laughing.¹³⁶

It is often striking, however, how small many people's communities were, sometimes smaller than one street, as explained by Mr F (who lived on Day Street, close to Hull City Centre):

[T]he street was about, say, a hundred and fifty yards long, but it was really split into three villages and we was in the centre village, so you'd just the children in that small part. . . You never thought of going beyond your boundary. A certain point, and that was your limit, and the same the other way. . . it was really a village on its own, was our part, because we had every shop imaginable in that short stretch. We had a boot repairer, green grocer, a newsagent, a butcher, a drapery store, a pork butcher, another shop that sold home-made pastry and sweets and across the road there was a beer-off shop which also sold sweets and such like and a public house, and another public house a bit further up, and another general grocers that made pork pies and such like. . . If you went two streets away you were in foreign country.¹³⁷

The fact that so many shops and services were available within a small area also aided community life, with many inhabitants living and working close by and seeing neighbours during working hours as well as at home, increasing social interaction within the group. This is illustrated by Mr F, recalling his neighbour – a midwife with a sideline in laying-out the dead. His family would hear 'the big arch door, clang shut in the early hours of the morning' and know that, amongst their neighbours 'somebody had either been born or somebody had died'.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 85.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 31. See map, Appendix 8.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, pp. 20-21, 29. See map, Appendix 9.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Mr F's interview, p. 28-29.

V

How, then, did community life differ on a new council estate? Life there, usually on the suburbs of a town, was very different in many ways from older working-class neighbourhoods. Hoggart commented that many working-class people moving from older areas found it difficult to settle into the new estates.¹³⁹ However, a Mass-Observation survey just before World War II found that 80% of those asked who lived on council estates were satisfied with their homes, compared with 62% in private rented homes.¹⁴⁰ They were generally lighter, more spacious and more convenient than older working-class houses, with the advantage of gardens.¹⁴¹ Despite valuing their new homes, some residents did miss their old communities. Mrs S, for instance, moved to Greatfield Estate in 1961 and enjoyed her 'lovely house' with 'a playing field in front for the bairns'. However: 'When I came on Hessle Road visiting I never wanted to go back.'¹⁴² An idea of the layout of houses on the new council estates, as compared to older streets, is indicated by Appendix 10, a map of North Hull Estate, a large and well-established council estate begun in the 1930s, and one mentioned by a number of respondents.

It is sometimes argued that the old communities were lost on the new estates, as networks of neighbours and families who had lived close together for many years were separated.¹⁴³ This was sometimes true, especially on post-war housing estates. However, earlier estates sometimes saw several family members moving together.¹⁴⁴ Mrs F had been keenly aware of the community in her city-centre home on Reform Street. When her family moved to a new council estate on the northern edge of the city, however, she felt 'community life disappeared'.¹⁴⁵ In comparing the two locations, Mrs F went on to say about North Hull Estate, '[Y]ou didn't have the same fellowship. It was fellowship I should say that was missing. Which was there. And it was quite a loving fellowship in a way, despite the fact that you were all different types of people.'¹⁴⁶ As has been mentioned, council estates were regarded as more respectable than the older, inner-city area. Tunstall reported one remark made by an ex-Hessle Roder, after moving to an estate, illustrating the lack of 'respectability' in his old neighbourhood:

A few years back I was walking down this street one Sunday. There were some other bairns playing in a terrace. The mother of one of them leaned out of a window and shouted at them: 'Hey you bairns, don't make so much noise. It's effing Sunday today!'¹⁴⁷

¹³⁹ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁰ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985*, (London: Methuen, 1986) p. 237.

¹⁴¹ McKenna, 'The suburbanization of the working-class population', p. 177.

¹⁴² Hull Transcripts: Mrs S's interview, p. 2.

¹⁴³ See Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*.

¹⁴⁴ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 156.

¹⁴⁵ Hull Transcripts: Mrs F's interview, p. 30.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Mrs F's interview, p. 31.

¹⁴⁷ Jeremy Tunstall, *The Fishermen* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962) p. 92.

The comparative respectability of the council estates was also mentioned by Mrs K. After explaining that some children were badly beaten in the area where she used to live (in terraced Egton Street, on the east bank of the Hull), she asserted that up on North Hull Estate, ‘they were all good families’ – ‘They wanted to better themselves in some way or other.’¹⁴⁸ It tended to be the better off rather than the poor or unemployed who moved there.¹⁴⁹ Whilst gaining fresh air, space, hot and cold water, bathrooms and gardens, new council estate residents had to accept higher rents, longer commutes and more expensive shops. Informal childcare from extended family was also less available, as family members were too far away, so fewer women were able to work on the new estates.¹⁵⁰ Sometimes the notion of increased respectability on the new estates was explicitly encouraged by the design, with council housing in Hertfordshire in the 1940s and 1950s including ‘anti-gossip’ walls in their gardens.¹⁵¹

The idea that community life died out on the new council estates is not, however, universally accepted. A collection of reminiscences of residents living on North Hull Estate, one of the city’s earliest suburban council estates paints a very different picture.¹⁵² A number of residents commented on how welcoming the area was. Ray Huitt, for instance, said, ‘The neighbourhood was very friendly and *everybody knew everyone else*.’¹⁵³ This impression was confirmed by the fact that several contributors were able to name numerous neighbours.¹⁵⁴ Mrs Spicer clearly did not feel that the gardens kept neighbours apart, commenting on her wartime experiences on the estate: ‘[W]e often used to have a little bit of gossip over the garden fence, which invariably covered the air raid of the night before and what we thought about the *bloody Germans*.’¹⁵⁵ Many descriptions appear reminiscent of old town community life, with gossip, extended families living nearby and the knowledge that people ‘helped if need be’ despite the poverty.¹⁵⁶ Norman Dyson remembered that when the pipes burst in his family’s house after the harsh winter of 1947: ‘The neighbours round and about . . . were magnificent. They all rallied round with the mopping up. They lent us bedding and essentials.’¹⁵⁷ Children running errands for older residents, too, were mentioned: ‘One neighbour in particular used to stand at her front gate as school came out to collar a child, as though hailing a taxi, to go to the shops for her.’¹⁵⁸ As in older working-class communities, one resident specialised in helping women in labour, laying out

¹⁴⁸ Hull Transcripts: Mrs K’s interview, p. 27.

¹⁴⁹ Hughes and Hunt, ‘A culture transformed’, p. 79.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁵¹ Tebbutt, *Social History of Gossip*, pp. 152-153.

¹⁵² Dunn and Gill *The Quadrant*. See also Appendix 10, a map of North Hull Estate.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, Ray Huitt, p. 9; similar comment made by Sylvia Spicer, p. 14.

¹⁵⁴ Dunn and Gill, *The Quadrant*, pp. 13, 19, 21, 54, 77, 84.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Mrs Spicer, p. 14.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Lily Weaver, p. 25. See also pp. 10, 17, 92.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

the dead and sitting with the dying: ‘She always refused money, but people would offer her flowers, or packets of tea or sugar, which was hard to purchase during the war.’¹⁵⁹

Descriptions of children’s games on the new council estates also make them appear remarkably similar to those in more ‘traditional’ areas. Barbara Bryston (born 1938) remembered playing outside ‘for hours’, where the infrequency of traffic meant they could skip across the road. ‘There were so many games to play: Reallio, tig, knocking off ginger, skipping, block, double-ball and hop scotch. We used to run with an old bike tyre as a hoop, pushing it along with a stick.’¹⁶⁰ Even for adults, street life continued on the estate, in a suitably respectable form: ‘An out door entertainment was the Salvation Army Band that played weekly under the street lamp.’¹⁶¹

Some of the earliest residents remembered the drawbacks of the estate when it was first being developed. Lawrence McIntosh, for example, who moved to the Quadrant from Hull city centre as a child in 1923, commented: ‘The roads were not even completed and were muddy tracks . . . The nearest shop was William Jackson’s on Beverley High Road. That was a good mile-and-a-half away from our house, so when mum went shopping she tried to remember all she needed.’¹⁶² Later residents, who moved into the estate when infrastructure was in place, had more positive initial impressions. Doreen Burks, for example, recalled:

The Quadrant was known as ‘the old village’ of North Hull Estate and within that, Marton Grove was referred to as The Inner Circle – it was lovely. The Quadrant had plenty of shops – the Co-op groceries; Fish’s fruit and vegetables; Dewhirst the Butcher; Stathers – known as Bukley’s Sweet Shop; Simpson’s Post Office and Drapery; Meadow’s Dairies; a cobblers; Welburn’s butchers; and Goodfellow’s – the cut price shop.¹⁶³

The location of the estate – on the edge of the countryside – was appreciated by many, too.¹⁶⁴ Lawrence McIntosh, for example, remembered his impressions on being first shown his bedroom at their new house on the Quadrant in 1923: ‘I looked out of the window and my breathing came to an immediate halt. There, outside our back garden, was a huge field with horses grazing in it. As far as my eye could see were fields and woods and a stream. What more could a boy ask for?’¹⁶⁵ Children ‘scrumped’ pears in a nearby orchard, picked brambles, collected conkers and firewood, had picnics, made dens, climbed trees, chased butterflies, learned the names of wild flowers and skated on the frozen drain (or fished there in summer).¹⁶⁶ Larger

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Barbara Bayston, describing her grandmother, p. 92.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁶¹ Dunn and Gill, *The Quadrant*, p. 94.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 110.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶⁶ Dunn and Gill, *The Quadrant*, pp. 12, 34, 35, 39, 40, 46, 110.

gardens encouraged the growing of fruit and vegetables and the keeping of chickens, ducks or rabbits.¹⁶⁷

There is, therefore, much evidence of an active community life in the early years of North Hull Estate, with the proximity of countryside being enjoyed and the disadvantages of the estate – its initial lack of transport and services, for instance – being endured for the sake of better housing. Some comment should be made, however, on the source used for this section. As outlined in Chapter 1, I accept the general accuracy of reminiscence and I have no reason to doubt the veracity of these contributors. However, the aim of the project was community development and the local writers collecting and editing these contributions clearly had positive views of North Hull Estate: ‘The houses and the estates were wonderful places to live. They were built to high standards with the best of materials. The rents were reasonable and the accommodation was excellent.’¹⁶⁸ It is likely, therefore, that a mood of ‘celebrating’ the locality was encouraged. Whilst the positive experiences outlined no doubt reflect the memories of many, more negative experiences may have been rejected as inappropriate to the spirit of this collection. These reminiscences, therefore, cannot necessarily be regarded as typical. Despite this caveat, positive experiences of moving to new council estates have been discovered throughout the country. Mark Clapson, for example, saw such moves as a largely ‘favourable experience for the majority of working-class women’, rejecting Young’s and Willmott’s earlier emphasis on the isolation experienced by some.¹⁶⁹ Considering a range of contemporary concerns around the negative impact of moves away from more established communities, where neighbours were well-known and relations close by, Clapson concluded that problems tended to be ‘transitional’.¹⁷⁰

VI

Let us now return to some historians’ views touched on at the start of this chapter and consider how far the example of Hull supports these. Carl Chinn studied poor, working-class communities in Birmingham between 1880 and 1939, focusing on the importance of women within these.¹⁷¹ He looked at the ‘almost fanatical devotion of a mother to her children and their equally zealous devotion to her’ within these neighbourhoods.¹⁷² Noticing women’s pivotal role in protecting their families from the worst effects of deep poverty, in maintaining their respectability and in advancing their families’ prospects, Chinn saw women as more important than men for their

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 46, 69, 76, 106.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. v.

¹⁶⁹ Mark Clapson, ‘Working-class women’s experiences moving to new housing estates in England since 1919’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, 10:3 (1999) 345-65, pp. 345, 352.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹⁷¹ Chinn, *They worked all their lives*.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

families' comfort.¹⁷³ Chinn identified as matriarchs several particularly strong women in such communities – often informal midwives, widely experienced and influential within their families and neighbourhoods, often with 'titles' (such as Mother Minton and Granny Carey).¹⁷⁴ According to Chinn, 'This hidden matriarchy . . . both balanced and superseded the open patriarchy of the slums.'¹⁷⁵ Much of Chinn's more general description of working-class community was reflected in my oral history evidence of Hull. For example, strong women whose efforts kept their families from feeling the worst effects of poverty, devoted mothers and sons and daughters who continued to be close to their mothers were all features of Hull life, too. My interviews, too, provided evidence to back up Chinn's assertion that: 'It was an almost unquestionable duty of all slum dwellers to help those of their neighbours who were in need.'¹⁷⁶ However, I found little to support Chinn's notion that there was a group of highly influential women within the community that amounted to a 'matriarchy'. Despite the strength and prominence of women in many of the narratives I heard, 'matriarchy' implies control or leadership and does not seem to me a very accurate reflection of the different ways in which these Hull women operated.

How far, then, is the 'traditional' working-class community a valid model for studying Hull during this period? How far did such life change or depend on the type of housing inhabited? My oral history evidence supports the view that community life encompassed an attachment to a certain area; neighbours frequently knowing a great deal about one another's business and helping one another in times of need. It also involved adults socialising in the public areas and children playing together on the street. It did not necessarily (although it could) involve neighbours visiting one another's homes, or developing their relationships beyond the superficial into friendships. Community was based on particular geographical areas, often quite small. However, this could not be sharply defined, because it sometimes included people from outside the area, such as the relations or workmates of inhabitants; it could sometimes include people from slightly further away, if they attended the same church or chapel. In fact, this kind of community would comprise slightly different people for each of its inhabitants, but the notion was no less meaningful in the minds of its people. Elizabeth Roberts may well be right that many features of these traditional communities gradually eroded over time. My evidence would seem to support this. However, one should be careful of interpreting community life as moving from a static traditional model to a 'modern' one in which people rarely know their neighbours. I would concur with Graham Crow that communities are dynamic.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁷ Crow, 'Thinking about families and communities', p.12.

In many ways, then, the ‘traditional’ working-class community *was* apparent in Hull, with women at its core. However, it was more nuanced, subtle and complicated than often portrayed. It seems to me that critics of the idea of working-class community have criticised a caricature rather than its reality. Joanna Bourke, for example, cited the community of a Bolton mill worker, Annie Hukin (paraphrased and subtly parodied by Bourke):

Girls played hopscotch, skipping rope, jacks and bobbers, shuttlecock and paddle, and ‘breezy’ bowls. Itinerant traders did a brisk trade in ice-cream and hokey-pokey, bears danced in the streets, German bands played for clumps of neighbours, and blind men sang for their living. Community life in working-class Bolton was alive and well.¹⁷⁸

However, Annie’s retrospective written description had been commented on by a neighbour who claimed that Annie ‘never had a childhood’ as she was so busy with housework and childcare. For Bourke, this added information, ‘destroys the friendly communal atmosphere’ and she concludes witheringly, ‘The “community” she eulogized existed in her imagination for over eighty years.’¹⁷⁹ Yet, on consideration, Annie’s household responsibilities do not prove that the community she described was not exactly as she described it: why should the existence of work (even hard work over long hours) preclude the existence of leisure or of community life? Even if an exploited Annie never herself played hopscotch, bought an ice cream or watched a street band, she could still be a witness to events through the window, have listened to the music as she worked. Both Bourke and Rogaly and Taylor use the word ‘nostalgia’ in their critique of the traditional working-class community, a loaded term implying that memories of good things in the past must be untrue.¹⁸⁰ My oral history interviews included many happy memories of the past, including glowing descriptions of traditional working-class communities, which it would be easy to dismiss as nostalgia. However, just as many accounts were of hard times, evoking bitter memories, sometimes bringing interviewees to the point of tears. Chapter 1 explains my reasons for accepting the oral history evidence as broadly reliable: why should one be less willing to believe happy memories than sad ones? Mrs B, whose account contained some evocative descriptions of working-class community life on Hessle Road, as one of a family of eleven, punctuated all such accounts with the refrain: ‘I should hate that to come over again!’¹⁸¹ Mr F’s evocative description of the Dutch concertina player entertaining neighbours whilst children sang finished with the matter-of-fact: ‘But the same fellow, now and again you’d to call the police because he was bashing his wife.’¹⁸² This was hardly an idealised memory. In any case, many accounts of community life are neither happy nor sad, simply neutral descriptions.

¹⁷⁸ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 136

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁸⁰ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 136; Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*, p. 15.

¹⁸¹ For example, Hull Transcripts: Mrs B’s interview, p. 2.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, Mr F’s interview, p. 89.

Other criticisms of traditional working-class communities centre on objections to a lack of precise definition.¹⁸³ Bourke, for example, asserts that a working-class community exists only if, ‘working-class individuals residing within a particular locality will grow to identify themselves *as a group*’.¹⁸⁴ However, it is not clear why this should be necessary and I would not see this as reflected in my oral history evidence. Bourke also cites both a higher spatial mobility than is often assumed in working-class areas and a desire to move even in settled inhabitants as arguments against the traditional working-class community.¹⁸⁵ However, a desire to leave on the part of many inhabitants does not seem to me to argue against the concept of the traditional working-class community. People will always consider the advantages and disadvantages of different situations in making decisions about their lives. The new council houses to which many of these people aspired were considerably more convenient, more spacious and easier to keep clean; the acquisition of a bathroom and a garden seemed like luxuries in comparison with their previous accommodation. The fact that people were prepared to forego the closer community feeling to attain such improved housing conditions does not prove that such communities did not exist or that they were not valued. Indeed, some respondents remarked on how much they had missed their old communities when moving to the new estates. Mrs S, for instance, who appreciated her ‘lovely house’ on the estate with ‘a playing field in front for the bairns’, still admitted that she missed Hessle Road.¹⁸⁶ Ann Hughes and Karen Hunt pointed to similar evidence of women missing ‘the closeness of the older communities’ on moving to council estates.¹⁸⁷ In the same way, better shopping and transport facilities and the nearness of work could be missed, but many people still chose the, then, relative isolation of the estates for the sake of vastly improved housing.

Just as Bourke laid down preconditions for working-class communities which she then sought to disprove, Baines and Johnson structured an entire article around the proposition that traditional working-class communities were homogeneous and involved participants engaging in ‘traditional’ job-seeking practices. So therefore the fact that most sons did not follow their fathers’ occupations (indeed some experienced real social mobility) was said to have disproved the existence of traditional working-class communities.¹⁸⁸ As discussed above, like Baines and Johnson, I found few sons following their fathers into their occupations.¹⁸⁹ However, virtually all

¹⁸³ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 137; Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*, p. 15.

¹⁸⁴ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, pp. 138-9.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-2.

¹⁸⁶ Hull Transcripts: Mrs S’s interview, p. 2.

¹⁸⁷ Hughes and Hunt, ‘A culture transformed’, p. 90.

¹⁸⁸ Baines and Johnson, ‘In Search of the ‘Traditional’ Working Class’, pp. 702, 712.

¹⁸⁹ Baines and Johnson, found a rate of around 7.6% father-son occupational continuity, ‘In Search of the traditional working class,’ p. 701. My sample cannot claim to be representative and is skewed by the high

my respondents had some experience of obtaining employment through networking within their communities – either personally or on the part of close family members. Having demolished the notion of traditional working-class communities, Baines and Johnson looked again at the original evidence for their existence, in search of weaknesses. They considered that Young and Willmott, along with the writers of other post-War sociological surveys, were methodologically flawed since they were based on geographical areas and thus underestimated the importance of other ties (such as those made through employment). They argued, therefore, that it was the disappearance of this particular research method that explained the ending of traditional working-class communities. Research methods are always developing and the possibility of certain approaches being more likely to produce particular results must be borne in mind.¹⁹⁰ However, the extent and depth of some of the post-war sociological surveys make it hard to dismiss them so lightly. Young and Willmott, for example, included questions designed to ascertain the extent of socialising with colleagues, so this would surely have been apparent despite the study's geographical focus.¹⁹¹ Similarly, autobiographical accounts of working-class communities written by academics with working-class backgrounds are dismissed as 'romanticised'.¹⁹² It is hard to argue with this, since it is largely a matter of opinion. However, close reading of many such accounts shows them generally to be well aware of the drawbacks as well as the advantages of community life. Hoggart, for example, whose slightly dated style of writing can read, today, as 'romantic' commented at one point: 'I avoid the word "community" at this stage, because its overtones seem too simply favourable; they may lead to an under-estimation of the harsher tensions and sanctions of working-class groups.'¹⁹³ Despite an awareness of the downsides of community life, those who experienced it are unanimous that working-class communities existed.¹⁹⁴ On the other hand, I know of no first-hand accounts denying the existence of working-class community. An approach that discounts the evidence of all witnesses, on the grounds that it is 'romantic' must surely be questioned.

Neighbourhood disagreements, objections to lack of privacy and the forming of relationships in other geographical areas have also been seen as drawbacks to the strength of community feeling. Bourke also drew attention to what she regarded as a 'lack of socialising in

number of women (who were unlikely to follow fathers' careers) but, for what it is worth, 6.6% of my respondents directly followed their fathers into jobs.

¹⁹⁰ See Paul Thompson and Brenda Corti, 'Whose Community? The Shaping of Collective Memory in a Volunteer Project', *Oral History*, 36:2 (2008) 89-98, for a discussion of the ways in which different research methods can produce different ideas of community.

¹⁹¹ For example, see Young and Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family*, Appendix 2: Interviewers' Instructions and Main Survey, question 79: 'If working full- or part-time – Are there any friends from your work who you've met socially during the last week, inside or outside the home?' p. 330.

¹⁹² Baines and Johnson, 'In Search of the traditional working-class,' p. 711.

¹⁹³ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 68.

¹⁹⁴ See Hoggart, Robert Roberts and many others.

established working-class residential districts'.¹⁹⁵ She cited Madeleine Kerr's findings that many Ship Street residents claimed to have few or no friends in the area, despite having lived there for many years.¹⁹⁶ She quoted, in support of this, Lulie Shaw, writing of working-class life in London in 1954: '[T]here was not much time or money left for social life with other people . . . Neighbourhood relations were on the whole, limited to "passing the time of day" and to helping in time of trouble.' However, Shaw went on to note that '[S]uch help as running in to light the gas under the dinner for a neighbour who was working was taken for granted.'¹⁹⁷ Such interaction between neighbours gives a different impression of the level of intimacy that existed than Shaw's initial dismissal of the idea of a social life. Perhaps such contradictions highlight the difference between classes in the concept of friendship and sociability. Middle-class researchers may assume from denials of friendship that 'community' was exaggerated. However, for working-class inhabitants of such communities, a resistance to 'friendship' may have been part of an aloofness that living very close to neighbours could make preferable; it clearly did not always imply a lack of intimacy. Like Rogaly and Taylor, Bourke cites the 1940s Mass-Observation survey showing that people did not always attend the nearest pub or church as an argument against working-class communities.¹⁹⁸ This does not appear at all conclusive to me. Members of any community are all individuals: why should some not prefer a particular style of worship, or a particular barmaid or brand of beer? Only the most purist definition of community can be spoilt by such aberrations. Rogaly and Taylor themselves pinpointed the lack of consensus they found on the boundaries of the housing estates they studied.¹⁹⁹ They also commented that families moving between different estates created 'webs of personal networks and intimate geographies that bind the areas together'.²⁰⁰ I found no evidence to contradict this: communities were not fixed, clearly-defined localities from which inhabitants never strayed. However, their lack of precision does not make the concept of community redundant.

Bourke argued further that: 'Focusing on the 'community' obscures both minority groups and individual action, and provides no mechanism by which we can know *who* at any one time belongs or does not belong to the designated group.'²⁰¹ According to Bourke, foreigners, the unemployed, wives who have left their husbands, the disabled, homosexuals and Roman Catholics may all be excluded.²⁰² My research, however, does not support this. Whilst there was plenty of evidence of dissension amongst the neighbours, there was no evidence of outright

¹⁹⁵ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 158.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁹⁸ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 144.

¹⁹⁹ Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*, p. 66.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁰¹ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 151.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

exclusion. The unmarried mother, after having been criticised and gossiped about, was eventually helped by the neighbours; the deaf woman was alerted to air raids and the Irish family's fights were refereed by neighbours. Several of my interviewees were Catholics and none reported or appeared to experience any discrimination.²⁰³ Hoggart recalled, from his childhood in 1920s' Leeds, a mother whose husband had left her being generally accepted in the neighbourhood, despite her supplementing her income as a tailoress with part-time prostitution. 'Most nodded at or talked to her as to anyone else . . . "After all, she's got to live," they used to say; they understood the pressure of the situation and could see how some people were led to this solution.'²⁰⁴ There was no requirement that a community should be homogeneous. Mrs F felt that Reform Street contained, 'quite a loving fellowship in a way, *despite the fact that you were all different types of people*'.²⁰⁵ Bourke's further objections to the idea of community: that it 'obscures . . . individual action' seems to me to reflect a needless emphasis on individualism. Indeed, one is reminded of Margaret Thatcher's 'no such thing as society' remark: the existence of individuals does not preclude any notion of 'community' any more than it disproves the existence of society.²⁰⁶

Robert Colls criticised the critics of working-class community (especially Joanna Bourke) in slightly different terms.²⁰⁷ Coming from a working-class area of Tyneside, which he left as a teenager in the 1960s, Colls recognised the 'traditional' working-class community from his own childhood.²⁰⁸ Rejecting the notion that such communities were necessarily homogeneous or universally friendly, Colls nevertheless insisted that the 'working-class community' he remembered was real.²⁰⁹ Colls saw Bourke's dismissal of the traditional working-class community as part of a trend of 'revisionism' on the subject.²¹⁰ He dismissed Bourke and the 'revisionists' as reducing 'community' to an unwritten contract – a calculated kind of reciprocity.²¹¹ He saw the idea of reciprocity as embedded in working-class culture, so that rejecting 'working-class community' as reducible to calculated reciprocity becomes nonsensical.²¹² Colls went on to explain how extreme poverty, at a time when the state had not formed satisfactory means of addressing it, led to working-class communities creating their own

²⁰³ Mrs C, Mrs P and Mr and Mrs V were life-long Catholics; Mrs D converted to Catholicism as an adult.

²⁰⁴ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 82.

²⁰⁵ Hull Transcripts: Mrs F's interview, p. 31. (My italics.)

²⁰⁶ In an interview with *Woman's Own* November 1987, Margaret Thatcher said: '[S]ociety? There is no such thing. There are individual men and women and there are families.'

²⁰⁷ Colls, 'When we lived in communities'.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 286-8.

²¹⁰ He cited Baines and Johnson, 'In search of the 'traditional' working class', as another part of this 'revisionist' strand.

²¹¹ Colls, 'When we lived in communities', p. 291.

²¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 293-4.

forms of self-help.²¹³ He cited a range of ways in which sections of the working class organised themselves for the advantage of the whole community: trade unions, friendly societies, sporting groups, brass bands and a range of voluntary bodies.²¹⁴ Colls portrayed the informal help offered within working-class communities as part of this structure of self-help. Perhaps, then, we can see women in the neighbourhood as mirroring the institutional support that was developed by working-class men. According to Colls, women: ‘kept clear the channels of communication. They knew who was who and where they lived and they drew on all this as common knowledge.’ Such ‘deep female networks’ allowed their beneficiaries to obtain jobs, houses, useful contacts and local resources.²¹⁵ In the 1980s, however, as trade unions were weakened, traditional industries declined, more women took on paid employment, older housing was demolished and traffic increased, working-class communities died.²¹⁶ Such analysis of working-class community brings to mind the notion of social capital. Seen in this light, informal networks among women in working-class communities were just as important as the more formal organisations that tended to build social capital among working-class men – such as sports clubs and trade unions. Perhaps, therefore, writers who have found that working-class women recently are least impacted by social capital tend to apply a narrow definition that focuses on formal interactions.²¹⁷ Informal interactions can be at least as productive, as the earlier consideration of traditional job-hunting practices showed. Similar reciprocal help – of childcare, food, time, attention and practical help – comprised the social capital that cemented communities together.

One way to achieve consensus is to do as Elizabeth Roberts did and avoid the loaded term of ‘traditional working-class community’ whilst still accepting much that went with this model.²¹⁸ Even Bourke acknowledged the importance of reciprocal help amongst neighbours, but saw this as ‘neighbourliness’ which she distinguished from ‘community’.²¹⁹ However, it seems unhelpful to me to ditch the term altogether, containing as it does so much that can be readily identified in poorer neighbourhoods throughout England. Surely few who have studied this field could agree with Bourke’s contention that, ‘The working-class community as it survived in the writings and in the political discourse of working-class commentators was a retrospective construction.’²²⁰ What the traditional working-class community showed was the ability of working-class people to cope with poor housing, poverty and overcrowding in ways that can only be regarded as admirable. Strategies were developed to make living uncomfortably closely with neighbours bearable.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 299-302.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298-9.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 304-5.

²¹⁷ Li, Savage and Pickle, ‘Social Capital and Social Exclusion’, p. 506.

²¹⁸ Roberts preferred the term neighbourhood. *Women and Families*, p. 199.

²¹⁹ Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures*, p. 149.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.169.

Reciprocal arrangements grew that alleviated hunger and need at a time when help from the state was minimal. Customs grew to comfort the bereaved and practices to assist the ill, elderly and new mothers. Arrangements may have been rough and ready, they may sometimes have involved conflict, hostility to strangers and perceived interference, and probably rarely included any kind of conscious shared identity. Inhabitants of such communities may well have been happy to swap their benefits for improved housing on the new estates when this was available and when their circumstances made rents affordable. However, this does not make the traditional working-class community any less real.

In conclusion, then, 'traditional' working-class community appears to me to have existed for many people in Hull for the first half of the 20th century. This involved an intimate knowledge of one's neighbours, a system of reciprocal help and attachment to particular areas. It tended to be better-off respondents who had least to say about community life, and whose social lives involved school and work friends more than neighbours.²²¹ Those whose accounts most closely matched the 'traditional' working-class community model tended to be older interviewees who had been brought up in poorer, inner-city neighbourhoods.²²² Those born on Hessle Road across this period, too, tended to have strong memories of community life with great involvement from extended families.²²³ Yet, those born as part of strong communities did not necessarily choose to continue this way of life. For example, Mrs B lived in a terrace off Manchester Street, Hessle Road, with her ten siblings and extended family nearby. However, after marriage, she 'never bothered with any of them', despite her son's being a similar age to three of his cousins.²²⁴ Level of community involvement seemed to depend much on the personalities involved. Women were linchpins in communities, crucial in building and maintaining social networks that were essential in providing support networks in times of poverty and in relaying essential community information. Hull's large families tied many women to their homes and their communities provided important opportunities for socialising and provided a wider arena in which domestic life could be lived.

A range of possible causes for the decline of community have been mentioned throughout this chapter and these may all have had some impact in some areas. Thus, newer styles of housing that included private gardens rather than communal outdoor spaces, increased traffic, a growth in the number of women being employed outside the home, changing retail practices leading to fewer small local shops may all have been significant. Likewise, rising prosperity, lessening the need for community help along with an increased professionalisation of health and

²²¹ Mrs A, for instance, whose father was a manager.

²²² Such as Mr F, born 1907 and brought up on Day Street and Mrs F, born 1913 and brought up on Reform Street.

²²³ Mrs B, born 1915 and Mrs D, born 1932, for instance.

²²⁴ Hull Transcripts: Mrs B's interview, p. 36.

social care are plausible factors in declining community life. It is impossible to pinpoint when traditional working-class communities died, since this appears to have varied depending on the interaction of factors in different localities; indeed, such communities appear to be thriving in some areas still. Certainly in some parts of Hull 'traditional-style' community life appears to have continued on the newer council estates. The personalities of residents of some areas could make a difference, too, with 'community' continuing in areas where it happened to be more valued by particular inhabitants. The notion that the sociability of such communities and the respectability of privatisation were recurring themes in working-class life appears plausible.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to consider the experience of women and domestic life between the 1920s and the 1960s using Hull as a case study and new oral history evidence as the principal source. Different aspects of domestic life – housework, marriage and parenthood – and also women's lives within the locality were considered in the light of various historical interpretations. In this section, I summarise my findings, compare them with those of other researchers and consider reasons for any differences. I attempt to show what my work contributes to the field and how it relates to the current historiography of domestic life.

Concerning housework, it is argued that improved housing and the development of electricity in the first half of the 20th century eased the drudgery of housework and enhanced amenity. After the Second World War, some improvements in household technology – especially in the area of laundry – also made life easier. The notion that housework was 'women's work' was largely supported by the evidence, although throughout the period men's assistance did occur, especially among the poorest. I found little to support the idea that women declined help in order to guard their domestic expertise. Likewise, I found little to suggest that women generally disliked housework; in fact, domestic work was a respected occupation and the opportunity to learn domestic skills was valued. Equally, I found no obsession with domesticity and most Hull women seemed to be involved, to some degree, in paid employment.

Turning to marriage, the classic model of working-class marriage – brutal, patriarchal and lacking in affection and intimacy – was not prevalent in Hull. Most respondents saw their own marriages, and those of their parents, as happy, and relationships as fairly equal. Such equality did not mean that roles were interchangeable, however. For the most part, husbands and wives did fulfil different roles with women mostly in charge of the home (including household finances) and men more responsible for earning. Family decisions tended to be made jointly and household crises faced together, as a couple. Generally, my evidence from Hull most closely matched the model of companionate marriage. This appeared to change little over the period studied, so that couples married in the first quarter of the 20th century appeared to have marriages remarkably similar to those marrying in the 1960s. Even the marriages of interviewees' parents appeared to follow this model.

Concerning parenting, the primacy of mothers in bringing children up was widely agreed, although fathers were also closely involved in childcare across the whole of this period (and this was true of my interviewees and their parents). Where fathers were less involved than mothers, this was generally felt to have been owing to employment commitments, and was accepted as part of the system of specialisation within families. Relationships between adult children and their

parents revealed a close involvement and a strong sense of obligation. However, in contrast to findings for some areas of the country, a greater sense of husband and wife standing together against the demands of both sets of their parents was uncovered.

The final area of study was community life. In this area, Hull fitted the model of 'traditional' working-class community, most especially in city centre districts and in the areas around Hessle Road. So, inhabitants tended to be very familiar with one another's lives and attached to particular localities; they socialised on the street and helped one another in times of trouble. Community did not always involve neighbours visiting one another's homes, or developing their relationships beyond the superficial into friendships, however, the notion of the 'traditional working-class community' was corroborated. In Hull, this worked to enable poorer people to find ways of coping with inadequate housing, poverty and overcrowding. Ways of comforting the bereaved and helping those in various forms of need were built into life, providing assistance that was not, at the time, available elsewhere.

In summary, then, the most widely accepted view – that this period saw a move away from a traditional, patriarchal family towards a more equal partnership – is questioned by this research. Although women were mostly involved in domestic work and men in paid employment – apparently fitting the stereotype of a traditional working-class 'patriarchal' family – on closer inspection, stereotypes disintegrate. Men were usually involved in both housework and childcare, fitting both around employment, just as women often fitted some paid work around their responsibilities. Despite fulfilling different roles, many couples appeared to enjoy equal status and decisions were often made jointly. In Hull, it seemed to be the most 'upper' working-class men who were least likely to do housework and most likely to operate in a more patriarchal way, undermining the suggestion often made that equality 'trickled down' from above. In marriage, equal and affectionate partnerships often existed among very poor couples. Focusing on neighbourhood life, the 'traditional working-class community' was apparent in Hull, demonstrating coping mechanisms to deal with poor housing, poverty and overcrowding. It was not found, however, that an active community life detracted from the importance of the nuclear family. In short, the companionate marriage that is often posited for the 1950s onwards was not a new development but was discernible from the beginning of this period in Hull.

It may be helpful at this point to consider possible reasons for my findings being different from the norm. In order to examine the impression that Hull marriages were far more companionate, far earlier, than marriages in other studies, in other geographical areas, it is worth looking more closely at the alternative evidence. Ellen Ross's evidence (discussed in chapter 3) focused mainly on the separate spheres operated by husbands and wives. This is consistent with my findings in Hull and not inconsistent with a model of companionate marriage. The prevalence

of domestic violence and the lack of intimacy between couples, however, point to a very different style of marriage. Yet, Ross was looking at the period 1870 to 1914 – before and at the very start of the period that I am considering. Robert Roberts saw the First World War as a watershed in marital relations: if he was right about this, perhaps less intimate, less equal and more violent marriages were more common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is consistent with the suggestion that the declining consumption of alcohol is significant in changing relationship styles. Even at this time, however, a more companionate model cannot be seen as unusual: Lady Bell did not see marital violence as common in 1907 Middlesbrough, and thought working-class marriages turned out ‘surprisingly well’. Elizabeth Roberts’s extensive evidence is more complex. In her earlier study (covering the years 1890 to 1940) Roberts did not regard the marriages she saw as companionate; nevertheless, in many ways they demonstrated traits consistent with this model and, in that sense, were similar to the marriages I saw in Hull. For instance, Roberts found some marriages to be ‘companionable’ even before the First World War, with couples enjoying leisure time together.¹ Although marital roles were sharply differentiated at this time, some men took on significant amounts of housework and Roberts felt that power was evenly shared between spouses.² However, I found no evidence of the unequal marriages Roberts discovered in her later study (covering 1940 to 1970) – where women experienced less power and status in marriage as they enjoyed greater prosperity.³ (This may have been because I studied a slightly earlier cohort than hers.)⁴

According to most accounts, brutal, unequal and distant marriages appear much less common later in the century.⁵ The evidence most strongly in support of this model by the mid-20th century is *Coal is Our Life*, the classic and widely cited account of life in a Yorkshire coal mining district. In this, men came across as selfish, unreasonable bullies. Married couples were not close and men spent their leisure time with other men at the pub. Mining areas are often seen as more likely to exhibit traditions of deeply segregated gender roles – however, it is notable that *Coal is Our Life* is often the *only* source cited in support of this model of marriage at this time.⁶

¹ Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p. 115.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 118.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴ Roberts’s later interviewees were born between 1915 and 1958 (Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940- 1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp. 241-248); mine were born between 1903 and 1936.

⁵ Although such traits are still mentioned, for instance, by Jephcott and Kerr (Pearl Jephcott, *Rising Twenty: notes on some ordinary girls* (London: Faber, 1948); Madeline Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

⁶ Ann Oakley cited only this source before asserting that this model of marriage was ‘normal’. (Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London: Allen Lane, 1974) pp. 62-64). *Coal is Our Life* was also used as the main evidence in support of this model of working-class marriage by (for example): Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) p. 5; Claire

Even other mining areas are not strictly comparable to the ‘Ashton’ of *Coal is Our Life*. Neil Penlington’s study of unemployed Welsh miners in the 1930s found highly differentiated gender roles it is true.⁷ However, some men *did* do housework *and* look after children and many contributed in other more acceptably ‘male’ ways such as working allotments, keeping chickens, catching rabbits, gathering coal and making or mending household items.⁸ Penlington also found, ‘an emotional closeness and parental love’.⁹ Similarly, Margaret Williamson’s research on another northern mining community (across the same period as the Ashton study) found a much more companionate model of marriage to be the norm.¹⁰ *Coal is Our Life*, then, is unusual in presenting this model of working-class marriage as late as the 1950s. How can this difference be explained? It is possible, of course, that regional variations comprise the best explanation and that, for whatever reason, ‘Ashton’ was different from other areas and thus marriages were conducted differently. Since such models of working-class marriage accorded with prevalent stereotypes, however, *Coal is Our Life* became a handy source to quote about working-class marriage in general, containing as it does some colourful and powerful descriptions and anecdotes, such as the ‘hurling of food in t’fire’ incident which became, for Ross McKibbin, a ‘well-known vignette’.¹¹ Even the authors of *Coal is Our Life*, however, conceded more ‘symmetry’ in marriages than would tend to be inferred from a reading of many references to it. The man described as throwing his dinner on the fire because it had not been cooked by his wife was later forced to accept a lower paid ‘pit-top’ job owing to increasing deafness, so his wife also began work, full-time. From this point, he contributed ‘in all manner of ways’ to the housework, even preparing meals for his wife after her return from work.¹² Dennis *et al.* highlighted the practice of miners giving their wives a set amount of ‘housekeeping’ and keeping the rest of their wages for themselves.¹³ This contrasts sharply with the custom described in chapter 3 of this thesis whereby women were given the whole pay packet – often intact – and returned some as spending money. Interestingly, Dennis *et al.* found that older miners were often critical of their

Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Post-War Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:2 (2005) 341-62, p. 357; Valerie Gordon Hall, ‘Contrasting female identities: women in coal mining in Northumbria’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 13:2 (2001) 107-31, p. 107.

⁷ Neil Penlington, ‘Masculinity and Domesticity in 1920s South Wales: Did Unemployment Change the Domestic Division of Labour?’ *Twentieth-Century British History*, 21:3 (2010) 281-99, p. 285.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 285, 287, 290, 291, 292, 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁰ Margaret Williamson, ‘Gender, Leisure and Marriage in a Working-Class Community, 1939-1960’, *Labour History Review*, 74:2 (2009) 185-98, p. 189.

¹¹ *Coal is our Life* is discussed above in chapter 3. Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is our Life: an analysis of a Yorkshire mining community* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956); Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 168.

¹² Dennis *et al.*, *Coal is Our Life*, p. 182.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-8.

younger workmates for keeping too much money back for themselves.¹⁴ By contrast, the greater poverty of the 1930s depression was seen to have led to more co-operation between spouses.¹⁵ Perhaps the model of working-class marriage portrayed in *Coal is Our Life* was not so ‘traditional’ after all. Rather, it could have been part of the trend towards more individualism within marriage highlighted by Elizabeth Roberts in her later study.

More recent research uncovering a ‘traditional’ model of brutal, unequal working-class marriage appears to me equally flawed. Marcus Collins, for instance, saw the husbands of what he referred to as the ‘unreconstructed working class’ as frequently violent, drunken brutes and their marriages ‘made not in heaven but out of bleak necessity’.¹⁶ The Family Welfare Records he used as his main source for this, however, seem to me limited as evidence for generalisations about working-class marriages for a number of reasons. Firstly, they concern only London – unique in so many ways as the capital – and so cannot be assumed to be typical of the whole country. Secondly, they can only give a partial view as they rely almost entirely on wives’ testimony, since men tended to be hostile to charitable ‘interference’ and therefore rarely involved in discussions.¹⁷ Thirdly, even if we take the records at face value, as accurate representations of the families they described, families requiring such charitable interventions were surely likely to be atypically dysfunctional. Collins admitted that his sample comprised the ‘rough’ and that a ‘fair number of them were also criminals’, surely making it unrepresentative.¹⁸ Finally, accepting these records as accurate representations even of this very limited group – very poor, semi-criminal, dysfunctional London families – seems to me problematic, since the hard-luck stories of people desperate for charity cannot necessarily be assumed to be entirely truthful. Women in this position were, surely, only too likely to have said whatever they thought the authorities wished to hear, to have presented whatever scenario seemed most likely to be considered sympathetically. Plausibility, in a situation like this, is more important than strict accuracy and to present oneself as a respectable, hard-working, efficient housekeeper – who just had the misfortune to be married to a drunken, idle, violent brute – may well have seemed an approach conducive to eliciting sympathy and therefore charity. Other reasons for needing financial help which may have been expected to be viewed less sympathetically – unemployment, poor wages, inadequate housing, large families, even inefficient housekeeping – were far less likely to have been stressed.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁶ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in 20th-century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003) pp. 99, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 102.

Collins criticised the reliance some historians have placed on oral history which he saw as being tainted by ‘hindsight and selective memory’.¹⁹ As discussed in chapter 1, there seems to me to be no evidence for dismissing oral history in this way; however, let us consider its supposed drawbacks for investigating marriage specifically. It is possible that the lonely and the widowed may idealise their past marriages and also that couples interviewed together may hesitate to air marital discord. Yet, as mentioned in chapter 1, respondents tend to tell the truth, as they see it, and examples presented should be seen in this light.²⁰ In my experience, couples interviewed together showed no signs of holding back in criticising their spouses. Mrs F, for instance, when asked if she had done most of the housework during her married life, firmly asserted that she had, turning to her husband for confirmation. His inability to even ‘think of getting a bucket of water’ to swill the yard was clearly a source of grievance. However, far from being reluctant to tell me about it, Mrs F appeared quite pleased to have someone to sympathise with her over her husband’s unreasonableness. His embarrassed defence that he had ‘matured with the years’ and would now ‘turn [his] hand to most things’ confirmed the veracity of her version of events.²¹ Clearly, some experiences would be unlikely to emerge from such joint interviews: marital violence, for instance. However, there seems to me to be no evidence that oral history generally produces misleading accounts of marriage. As discussed in chapter 1, interviewees draw upon a range of cultural references to make sense of their lives, in an attempt to reach ‘composure’.²² The chauvinistic, selfish, insensitive working-class man is a potent stereotype which could easily have been drawn on; being the strong, heroic wife of such a man, faced with bringing up children in spite of his unhelpfulness, would surely have provided sufficient validation. Similarly, seeing oneself as the supportive daughter (or son) of a mother in that position, could be an equally empowering way of reviewing one’s personal history. That so few interviewees chose this option – but rather portrayed their own and their parents’ marriages as close, equal and supportive – must surely be significant.

Returning to my findings, I am not claiming that they are unique, simply that they differ from what is generally seen as the mainstream view. It seems to me that various researchers have presented findings consistent with my own, albeit with different emphases, and that such representations seem to be a growing trend. In the early 1980s, Trevor Lummis was virtually alone in finding early 20th-century working-class marriage to be, ‘generally an affectionate partnership of caring partners jointly concerned with preserving the family’.²³ Such views are no

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁰ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 90.

²¹ Hull Transcripts: Mrs F’s interview, p. 61.

²² See above, p. 38.

²³ Trevor Lummis, ‘The historical dimension of fatherhood: a case study, 1890-1914’, in L. McKee and M. O’Brien (eds) *The Father Figure* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982) 43-56, pp. 43, 44.

longer so isolated.²⁴ Neither does my evidence in support of ‘traditional’ working-class communities stand alone: Robert Colls, for example, has written eloquently in support of the notion, just as Ian Procter has pointed to respectability as a recurrent feature of working-class life going back to the 19th century.²⁵ Thus, many features of working-class life that have been supposed to have filtered down from above may have been apparent, in pockets, for far longer than realised.²⁶ Concerning housework, Victoria Kelley has recently drawn attention to the high standards of cleanliness held by many working-class families: not, according to Kelley, as a result of the influence of the middle class, but as an integral part of working-class culture.²⁷

In marriage, Elizabeth Roberts found that a *lessening* of equality could arise from the adoption of a more middle-class approach among the working class.²⁸ Middle-class families were more likely to contain ‘bread-winning’ husbands and housebound wives. Young and Willmott noticed the more strictly gendered roles that operated among the better off. They also highlighted the greater ‘energy’ that working-class men had for their wives and families, a point rarely observed from their writing.²⁹ Recent research by Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher also touches on the longevity of the companionate marriage model, with aspects of it discernable among the working class from the early 20th century.³⁰ They, too, question the idea that the companionate model arose in the middle class and was gradually taken up by working-class couples.³¹ Szreter and Fisher found, among working- as well as middle-class respondents, a view of marriage as based on trust and a balance of caring for one’s partner and sharing.³² Thus, their findings cast doubt on assumptions that the story of 20th-century relationships is one of a linear progression from patriarchy and repression to companionate marriage and satisfying sex. To Szreter and Fisher, such a view is anachronistic, assuming contemporary perceptions of sex to be a universal norm. On the contrary, attitudes to sex before the ‘sexual revolution’ should be seen as different

²⁴ As noted by Marcus Collins, *Modern Love*, pp. 112-113.

²⁵ Robert Colls, ‘When we lived in communities: working-class culture and its critics’, Robert Colls and Richard Rodgers (eds) *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain, 1880-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 283-307; Ian Procter, ‘The Privatisation of Working-Class Life: A Dissenting View’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 41:2 (1990) 157-80, p.160.

²⁶ For a discussion of the notion that respectability arose independently in different classes, see F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: a Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900* (London: Fontana, 1988).

²⁷ Victoria Kelley, ‘“The Virtues of a Drop of Cleansing Water”: domestic work and cleanliness in the British working classes, 1880-1914’, *Women’s History Review*, 18:5 (2009) 719-35, pp. 720, 728.

²⁸ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 84.

²⁹ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) p. 119; a similar point was made by Richard Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life, with special reference to publications and entertainments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957) p. 37.

³⁰ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 197.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 201.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

rather than simply inferior (in the sense of demonstrating repression, inhibition or insensitivity). Their interviewees appeared to share a view of sex that celebrated privacy, monogamy and relative pre-marital innocence: ‘Turning the concept of liberated sex on its head, many articulated a version of sexual fulfilment based on private sexual creativity and mutual self-realisation behind closed doors.’³³ None of this is consistent with a view of working-class marriage as being without intimacy or affection.

Previous assumptions around working-class parenting, as well as marriage, have been questioned. Lynn Abrams, in her study of working-class fathers in Scotland, argued that men’s role in domestic life has been ‘marginalised’ in a field that has tended to celebrate the role of women in this area.³⁴ She pointed to the way in which working-class fathers have been consigned by historians and the popular media to the fringes of family life and argued that the focus of the ‘rehabilitation’ of fathers in history that began in the last decade of the 20th century was largely on the middle class. The working-class father, on the other hand, when he was not at work, was still, ‘placed by historians . . . in the pub, the working-men’s club, in the allotment or in the company of his pigeons rather than his children’.³⁵ However, Abrams found that, ‘[W]orking-class fathers were as affective, indulgent and involved with their children as their middle-class counterparts appear to have been.’³⁶ She pointed to work that found, ‘manhood and domesticity were interdependent’ among certain sections of working-class men from the 19th century.³⁷ Her arguments could apply to England as much as to Scotland.

It seems to me that the changing emphasis in research on working-class domestic and community life is significant, since the current orthodoxy in these areas has acted subtly to undermine working-class culture in history in a number of ways. Thus, working-class men have been seen as brutal, chauvinistic and unreasonable; women as downtrodden and, in the case of mothers, suffocating and manipulative.³⁸ Families were seen as stifling and intent on impeding the progress of their members.³⁹ Working-class communities were seen as fantasy. In short, everything positive that occurred among the working class was too often seen as, necessarily, originating from the middle class.⁴⁰ As outlined above, there is evidence to suggest that, in some cases, this was quite misleading. This denying of working-class community and caricaturing of

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁴ By historians such as Ellen Ross, Elizabeth Roberts and Carl Chinn.

³⁵ Lynn Abrams, “‘There was Nobody like my Daddy’: Fathers, the Family and the Marginalisation of Men in Modern Scotland”, *Scottish Historical Review*, 78:2 (1999) 219-42, p. 220.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³⁸ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. 174-5.

³⁹ Dudley Baines and Paul Johnson, ‘In Search of the “Traditional” Working Class: Social Mobility and Occupational Continuity in Interwar London’, *Economic History Review*, 52:4 (1999) 692-713, p. 692.

⁴⁰ Suggested, for example, for the model of the symmetrical family: Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) p. 84.

working-class family life appears to have arisen, in part, as a reaction to what has sometimes been seen as their romanticising. Thus, friendly, supportive neighbourhoods, where doors were never locked and people helped one another, are seen as intrinsically implausible. Similarly, close families in which ‘our mam’ is central are seen as necessarily claustrophobic and harmful.⁴¹ However, a certain tendency to romanticism should not be allowed to distract. A rich culture operated in working-class life in which support and affection between marriage partners and family members was usual. Communities operated to advance their members’ interests and to support one another through hard times and in many respects – from receiving advice about childcare to finding jobs or houses – people benefited from this culture.

⁴¹ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 174-5.

APPENDIX 1

Biographical Summaries of Oral History Respondents

Mrs A

Born in Hull in 1911, the youngest of three, one brother, one sister. Employment included looking after children and shop work. Married at 26; three children. Husband began work as a shoe repairer but later worked as a maintenance fitter at Ideal Standard.¹

Parents: her father was a manager at Ranks² but her parents divorced and she lived with her father's aunts. She didn't remember her mother working.

Mrs B

Born in Hull in 1915, grew up in the Hessle Road area. Youngest of a family of 11, four of whom died as children. Her mother died when she was 10 and was ill for some years before, so she was brought up mainly by her older sister. Married when she was 18, had one child and remained married until her husband died at 80. Her husband began his working life as a butcher, joined the army at the start of the Second World War and, after the war, became a painter and signwriter. She began work in service, then worked in the fish house, then did shop work.³

Parents: her father was a coal heaver who worked on the docks; she didn't remember her mother working.

Mrs C

Born in 1903 in Hull, youngest of 14 children (6 surviving childhood). Trained in shorthand and worked in the fruit trade for 14 years; entered a convent but left after two years owing to health problems. Married at 31; five children and four stepchildren. Husband a ships' plater until redundancy, then worked on trams.

Parents: her father a slater and tiler (but died when she was five); mother worked in a pub before marriage.

¹ Ideal Standard was (and is) a Hull bathroom fittings manufacturer.

² Ranks was a large scale flour millers, first based on Beverley Road in Hull in the late 19th century.

³ 'Fish houses' were fish processing works, mainly based in the Hessle Road area of the city, where fish was filleted, processed and sometimes smoked.

Mrs D

Born on Hessle Road in 1932, three brothers and four sisters (three other siblings died as children). Worked in offices. Married at 30, to a heating engineer; two children.

Parents: her father was a labourer, her mother worked in service before marriage, later braided nets part-time.

Mrs E

Born in Hull in 1916, only child. Married twice – first at 28 to an airforceman stationed nearby just after WW2, married six years then divorced and remarried but subsequently divorced again.

Both husbands 'ill-treated' her and second husband gambled. She was a shorthand typist but didn't work much of the time owing to ill health (rheumatoid arthritis). No children.

Parents: her father an electrician, mother in service before marriage.

Mr and Mrs F

She born 1913, he born 1907, both grew up in Hull; married when she was 24 and he 30. She came from family of 9 children (6 surviving childhood). She worked as nursemaid, then did shop work.

He came from family of 5 (2 died in infancy). He worked as a builder, continuing his father's business. They had 3 children.

Parents: her father was a joiner and mother was in domestic service; his father had his own business as a bricklayer.

Mrs G

Born 1924 in London, only child, moved to Hull in 1947 to marry, two children (a boy and a girl).

She was a dressmaker and her husband worked on the railway (finishing as an engine driver).

Parents: her mother worked as a charlady (full-time, even when her child was small) then later cooked school dinners; her dad was a stoker, then sold firewood, then worked as a night watchman

Mrs H

Born 1923. Married at 21 (husband 28, died at 35). Had five children. Married again. She had various jobs such as working in a Tin Works, making 'hair sachets' for perms, spray painting paint cards, selling chocolate and ushering at cinema; worked more than full-time after first husband died, leaving children with a baby sitter. Her first husband was in the army, the other in the navy. Parents: her father died so was brought up by other and violent stepfather. Mother in service before marriage, later did casual work such as taking in washing. Step father was a docker.

Mr and Mrs I

Couple, married 1941, four children.

He: born 1916, one younger sister. Lived in east Hull. He was a signwriter, eventually having his own business.

She: born 1919; one older sister. She passed the scholarship for Boulevard⁴, worked in offices and later helped her husband with his business.

Parents: her father a turner, mother a dressmaker; his father a bus driver, then storeman and also ran the family newsagent's shop for a while. His mother died when he was a child and his father re-married (his stepmother worked at Reckitts).⁵

Mrs J

Born in Hull, 1916, one of nine children (six girls and three boys); married, two sons.

Husband was in the navy then worked on the dredgers in the docks. She worked at a rope factory after leaving school, then as housemaid in theatrical boarding house, then in shopwork; worked at Blackburn's Aircraft factory during the war⁶. Left to have a baby but went to Metal Box when youngest was 11. Later did bar work. Parents: her father worked on the docks as a rulleman,⁷ mother worked in a twine factory before marriage and afterwards took in washing.

⁴ Boulevard was a Hull high school, built in 1895 as a higher grade school.

⁵ Reckitt & Sons was one of Hull's most successful businesses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Reckitts made laundry materials, such as starch and Reckitt's 'Blue' a whitening agent and also launched, in the 1930s, a successful pharmaceutical division. Reckitts was a big employer, with around half its workforce being women. A job at Reckitts was seen locally as: 'the proletarian equivalent of a place in the Indian Civil Service'. (Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon *A History of Hull* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1989) p. 412.

⁶ Blackburn's Aircraft Factory was based at Brough, west of Hull, and later became British Aerospace.

⁷ A rulleman was a cart for moving heavy loads, often pulled by a horse; a rulleman operated this, often looking after the horses.

Mrs K

Born 1926 in Egton Street, Hull; moved to North Hull Estate in 1934⁸. One sister, five years older. Married at 25, divorced at 27, one son. Worked in a grocer's shop after leaving school, then a market garden, then a nursing home, then shop work. Trained as a nurse when her son was grown up.

Parents: her father worked in a paint factory; her mother was a dressmaker.

Mrs L

Born 1920, Perth Street West, Hull, three sisters and two brothers. Married at 21, three sons. Husband a teacher, then had a smallholding but went bankrupt and then went to work at BP. She worked in shops before marriage and again part-time when youngest child was five.

Parents: her father a seaman for the Ellerman Wilson line⁹ and later worked for the Electricity Board; her mother worked in café before marriage.

Mrs M

Born 1911; oldest of two brothers and one sister. Married with children; husband a bricklayer; she worked in a market garden when she first left school, then in a hospital, later looking after children. When the children were older she did part-time domestic work and eventually became a school cook.

Parents: her father was a timber yard foreman; her mother was in service before marriage

Mrs N

Born 1910, Hawthorne Avenue, Hull. One sister and two brothers, all older, two more died as children. Married; two children, girl and boy; husband a heating engineer; she had occasional shop work, before opening a grocer's shop when she was 40.

Parents: her father worked in the railway office; she didn't remember her mother working.

⁸ North Hull Estate is a large council estate built in the 1930s.

⁹ Ellerman Wilson line was the biggest shipping line in Hull.

Mrs O

Born 1911 in South Frodingham (a hamlet near Withernsea, east of Hull). Four brothers, three sisters and one older brother died as a baby. Married at 18, two children. Husband worked on a farm. She left school at 13 to go into service, did part-time housework after marriage.

Parents: her father was a 'beastman' on a farm, also worked briefly in a shipyard, later as a chimney sweep. Her mother was in service before marriage and did casual part-time housework afterwards.

Miss P

Born 1912, youngest of four children. Unmarried, no children; worked in offices.

Parents: her father store and timekeeper at Broady's Engineering.¹⁰ Worked evenings as an electrician at the Grand Theatre in Hull. Mother in service before marriage.

Mr Q

Born 1923 in Hardy Street, Hull. Married, no children. He worked in offices (insurance for fishing industry and then the Electricity Board); his wife worked as a telephone operator for the GPO.

Parents: His father started off in farm work, went into railways and became a railway signalman. His mother worked in a guesthouse before having him.

Mr and Mrs R

Husband born 1905, wife born 1915. She eldest of 1 sister and 3 brothers. He one of 8 children (4 of each). Married when she was 26, he 36, 2 sons. She had various jobs (peeling oranges at the Co-op jam factory, selling eggs, packing tea, worked in paint factory, stamping soap). He began work at a flourmill in the stores. Continued at BOCM and Paul's packing.¹¹

Parents: her father was an iron moulder at Rose, Downs and Thompson; her mother worked in tooth powder factory and sugar mill.¹² After marriage 'she took washing in and white-washed a ceiling for a shilling'. His father was a rulleymen and his mother never worked (she married at 18).

¹⁰ Broady's Engineering, a specialist valve manufacturer in the shipbuilding industry, begun in Hull in 1902.

¹¹ BOCM (British Oil and Cake Mills) and Pauls both operated animal feed and seed crushing mills in Hull. Seed crushing in Hull began in the 19th century and was a major industry in east Hull in the inter-war years (declining after bomb damage in 1941).

¹² Rose, Downs and Thompson was a Hull engineering company that supplied equipment to seed crushing factories.

Mrs S

Born 1934, Hessle Road, eldest of family of six. Married at 19, 7 children. Her husband filleted fish; she worked in Lever Brothers office until her second child arrived and later worked in the Bird's Eye factory part-time.

Parents: her father was a fisherman; her mother worked at Metal Box until married.

Mr and Mrs T

Wife born 1925, in Ottringham (a village east of Hull) one sister and one brother. Husband born 1927 Hull, two sisters, brother. Married 1952, three daughters. He did farm work. She did cleaning, then shop work, then was in the NAAFI, then farmwork, then left to get married.

Eventually she had her own shop.

Parents: his father was a sheet metal worker; mother worked at Jackson's¹³ before marriage. Her father was a farmer, her mother a dressmaker (full-time before marriage, then part-time from home).

Mr U

Born 1931, Hessle Road. Family of seven boys and two girls (one died at six of leukemia).

Married, two boys and a girl. He followed his father into fishing. She worked at Smith & Nephew's¹⁴ until marriage and afterwards, ran a grocer's shop with her sister when the children were growing up.

Parents: his father was a fisherman; mother worked in fish house, travelled around following the herring before marriage, afterwards just worked occasionally in the fishhouse.

¹³ Jacksons is a local chain of grocers, later supermarkets.

¹⁴ Smith & Nephews began as a chemist but went into wound-dressing manufacturing and became a major Hull company

Mr and Mrs V

She was born in Hull (1936) Waterloo Street, moved to Bilton Grange at 11. Moved to Wellesley Ave when married, then Claremont Ave. One brother (6 years older)

He was born 1930, Walker Street, Hull, then Roslyn Road. Later moved to Hopwood Street, then to Freehold Street, then to Peel Street. Two sisters and a brother (one sister died at 2) Married when she was 23, husband 28; four children. He trained as a meteorologist with the Air Ministry, then worked as a sanitary inspector (later environmental health officer). She worked in offices before marriage.

Parents: her mother worked in a laundry before marriage; her father was a charge-hand at Blundell's¹⁵ varnish factory. His father a seaman; mother worked as 'domestic' in a relative's shop before marriage.

Mr and Mrs W

He was born 1931, Prescott Street, East Hull. Left as a child, moved to Preston Road Estate until marriage. One brother, 6 years younger.

She was born 1935 Linnaeus House (adopted). Adoptive family lived on Rosemead Street, East Hull with grandparents. They had lost two babies before adopting her in their 40s, no other children. Two daughters.

She worked in bank for 10 years until expecting first child. Later, trained as teacher. He was a builder, then clerk of works for Hull City Council.

Parents: His father was a fitter, first for Earles,¹⁶ then unemployed in the 1930s, then worked for Priestmans¹⁷. His mother never had a job as far as he knew (she suffered badly with asthma). Her adoptive father a docker until accident at work then long-term sick, then worked at Remploy¹⁸ making furniture.

¹⁵Blundell's was a local paint and varnish manufacturer.

¹⁶ Earle's Shipyard was a prominent shipbuilder in Hull from the late 19th century until the 1930s, using innovative methods to build ships for the navies of Britain and abroad, as well as merchant ships. Shipbuilding suffered during the inter-war depression and Earle's Shipyard closed in 1930. (Edward Gillett and Kenneth A. MacMahon *A History of Hull* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1989) p.432.)

¹⁷ Priestman Bros was an engineering firm based in East Hull

¹⁸ Remploy Hull was part of a national network employing disabled ex-servicemen and women after the Second World War, later expanding to cater for all people with disabilities, providing work and assistance in finding employment.

Mrs X

Born 1918; only child; married at 24 (husband 30) four daughters. Husband a window cleaner; she worked at Reckitts until marriage.

Parents: father a labourer, mainly on the docks; mother a machine knitter before marriage; taught knitting at Blind Institute after marriage when child at school.

APPENDIX 2: Respondents' parents' occupations

	Father's occupation	Census category	Mother's occupation	Census category
Mrs A	Manager	Administrators, Directors, Managers	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment
Mrs B	Coal heaver (on the docks)	Transport & Communication Workers	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment
Mrs C	Builder	Workers in building	Pub work	Commercial, financial, shop
Mrs D	Labourer	Workers in unskilled occupations	In service	Personal Services
Mrs E	Electrician	Metal manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	In service	Personal Services
Mr F	Bricklayer	Workers in building	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment
Mrs F	Joiner	Workers in wood	In service	Personal Services
Mrs G	Stoker	Stationary engine drivers, stokers etc	Charlady	Personal Services
Mrs H	Docker	Transport & Communication Workers	In service	Personal Services
Mr I	Bus driver	Transport & Communication Workers	Reckitts	Coal, gas etc, makers of, workers in, chemicals
Mrs I	Turner	Metal manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	Dressmaker	Makers of textile goods and articles of dress
Mrs J	Rulleyman on docks	Transport & Communication	Twine factory work	Textile workers
Mrs K	Paint factory	Coal, gas, makers of, workers in chemicals	Dressmaker	Makers of textile goods and articles of dress
Mrs L	Sailor	Transport & Communication Workers	Café work	Commercial, financial, shopwork
Mrs M	Timber yard foreman	Workers in wood	In service	Personal Services
Mrs N	Railway office	Clerks, typists etc	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment

	Father's occupation	Census category	Mother's occupation	Census category
Mrs O	Beastman	Agricultural workers	In service	Personal Services
Miss P	Store/Time Keeper-	Warehousemen, storekeepers, packers	In service	Personal Services
Mr Q	Railway signalman	Transport & Communication Workers	Guesthouse work (chambermaid/waitress)	Personal Services
Mr R	Rulleyman	Transport & Communication Workers	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment
Mrs R	Iron moulder	Metal Manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	Sugar mill	Makers of food
Mrs S	Fisherman	Fishermen	Metal Box	Metal manufacturers
Mr T	Sheet metal worker	Metal Manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	Jacksons	Commercial, financial, shopwork
Mrs T	Farmer	Agricultural workers	Dressmaker	Makers of textile goods and articles of dress
Mr U	Fisherman	Fishermen	Fishhouse work	Makers of food
Mr V	Sailor	Transport & Communication Workers	Domestic	Personal Services
Mrs V	Blundell's Varnishes	Coal, gas, makers of, workers in chemicals	Laundry work	Personal Services
Mr W	Fitter (Earles)	Metal Manufacturers, machine makers, engineers	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment
Mrs W	Docker	Transport & Communication Workers	Unknown/never employed	Not in paid employment
Mrs X	Labourer	Workers in unskilled occupations	Machine knitter	Makers of textile goods and articles of dress

APPENDIX 3

Questionnaire

Background

How old are you? Where were you born? Where have you lived? (Go through each place with dates). Why did you move house? Who decided on the move? Where were your father and mother born? If not in Hull, why did they come here? How did they meet? Do you know anything about their early lives, do you remember them talking about it? Where did your grandparents come from? What did they do? How many brothers and sisters did you have? Were they older or younger? Did you have any brothers or sisters who died as children? If so, do you know what they died of? When you were a child, did you ever share a home with any relations? If so, how long for? Do you know why you had this arrangement? Did your family have lodgers? How old were your father and mother when they died? How old were you? If either died when you or your brothers/sisters were little, what arrangements were made for looking after the children and supporting the family? How old were you when you got married? How old was your husband/wife? Was your husband/wife from Hull? If not, where was he/she from and why had he/she come here? How many children have you? When did you have them?

Education

What school did you go to? Did your brothers/sisters go to the same school? How old were you and your brothers/sisters when you left school? Did you enjoy school, or not? What did you like/dislike about it? Describe a typical day. What subjects did you study? Were any of them useful later? Did boys and girls always do the same things? What were the teachers like? Did your parents have much contact with them? How well did your parents get on with your teachers? Did anyone in your family go to the grammar school? Did you know anyone who went to the grammar school? Did you or anyone in your family ever go to night school? What did you/they learn? In what ways was your children's education different from your own? Did you see much of their teachers? Did you get on with them?

Health

Do you remember being ill as a child? Do you remember your brothers or sisters being ill? What was the matter? Were any home cures used? Was anyone ever in hospital? Was the doctor usually called if someone was ill? How was he paid? Did your family have insurance? Were the family insured for deaths/funerals? Were babies usually born at home or in hospital? Did your

mother have a midwife or a doctor attending? Did family or friends help? Do you remember about it? Were babies usually breast fed or bottle fed? Did your mother attend a child welfare clinic? Did you go to the dentist as children? Do you remember anyone having any problems with bugs or fleas? What diseases do you think your parents seemed most afraid of?

Child Care

Do you know if your mother ever attended an infant welfare clinic? Did you/ your wife? Where did you learn about looking after babies/children? (From welfare workers, family, friends, books?) Do you think it was different for your mother? Were you/your husband much involved with the children when they were babies? What exactly did you/he do? Do you think most men were the same? Was it different for your father?

Employment

What did your father do for a living? Did he always do the same job? Do you know how much he earned? Do you know what hours he worked? Do you know who managed the money (did your father give your mother an amount for housekeeping; who paid for the coal, gas and so on?) Did he seem to enjoy work? How did he get on with his employers? Was he in a union? Do you know if he ever went on strike? If so, why? Did he ever work part-time? Do you remember your father ever being out of work? Do you remember other people being out of work? How did they manage? Do you know what your mother felt about your father's work? Do you think she ever wanted him to do anything else? Do you know what work your mother did before she married? Did she always have the same job? Do you know if she liked it? Did she work full-time after she was married? Did she work full-time after her children were born? If so, who looked after the children? Some people thought that a mother should be at home with her children: do you think people ever said that to her? Did she ever work part-time? How many hours? Do you know what she earned? Did she just work for the money, or did she seem to enjoy work? Did she ever belong to a union? Did she ever have a job that she did from home? Do you know what your father felt about your mother's work?

How old were you when you started work and what was your first job? Did you give so much to your mother for your keep? And did most people do the same? How did you decide on this, was it what you wanted to do? Did your friends, parents, teachers advise you about work? How did you find the job? How did people usually find jobs, did they just apply, or was it through people they knew? Was it the same for boys and girls? Do you think boys had more opportunities, or not? Did you look forward to starting work? Did you enjoy it? Did you ever have a part-time job before this while you were still at school? What occupations have you had

since leaving school? Describe them. What were the hours and pay? Have you always worked just for the money or were there other reasons? Did you want to work? Did you ever have a choice? Were you ever influenced by your husband/wife in the kind of job that you did? If not, did he/she ever try to influence you? Were you in a union? Why? Have you ever worked from home? What jobs has your husband/wife had? What were the pay and hours? What did you think about his/her job? Did you ever try to influence him/her about it? How old were your brothers and sisters when they started work? What jobs did they do? As a child, did you usually live near where your father (or mother) worked? Have you usually lived near to where you worked? How did you get there? How did other members of the family get to work?

Housing and Housework

Describe the house you lived in as a child. How many bedrooms did you have? Where did the family sleep? What was each room used for? What furniture did you have? What domestic appliances did you have? Did the house have a bathroom? If not, how were baths taken? Who owned the house? How was the house lit? In what other ways was it different from your house now? Was it nearer to the town centre? Were the houses in your street well looked after? Near the shops? What was the rent? What was the landlord like? Who did the housework when you were a child? How was it organised? (eg was washing done on a Monday, ironing on a Tuesday etc) Did your mother (or whoever did it) ever complain about the housework? What happened if your mother was ill? Who has done the housework in your adult life? Do you think this is fair? How was the housework organised during your adult life? Did this change over the years? How has housework changed since you were a child? Do you remember when your family first got a washing machine? Vacuum cleaner? Electric iron? Fridge? Any other appliance? How has food/cooking changed? (eg Do you eat meat more? More convenience foods?) What kind of meals did you eat? How much food was made at home? What difference did modern conveniences make? Who did the shopping? Where did you shop? (The corner shop, co-op, market?) Did local shops give credit? Did you ever wear home-made clothes? Or second-hand clothes? Did you mend clothes? Are clothes washed more often now?

Money

Do you feel that you have always had enough money? Who controlled the money in your house? What was your parents' attitude to money? Did they value it more than you do? Were they more afraid of poverty? Where their priorities different – eg did they always pay burial insurance? How did they deal with poverty? (eg Did they use a 'club man'? Or a pawn shop?) Who

controlled the money in your parents' house? Do you remember how wages compared for men and women when you were younger? What did people think about this?

Relationships and Family Life

As a child, were you close to your parents and brothers and sisters? Did the family eat together? Did adults eat the same food as children? Did your parents eat the same as each other? Who made most of the decisions in your family – was it your father or your mother? Did they each make different kinds of decisions? If one parent seemed more in charge, do you think it was the same with most families? Who was the stricter with you and your brothers and sisters when you were children? What kinds of things were your parents strict about? Were you close to your parents and brothers and sisters when you grew up? Did other family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) live nearby when you were a child? Do you think your parents had a close relationship? Did they quarrel much? Did you have friends as a child whom you were closer to than family? Were they from school or were they neighbours? How important were friends from work when you started work? Have you usually been close to neighbours? Did you have friends from other places? How important were your parents, brothers and sisters when you left home? Did they help when you had children (babysitting etc)? Or were other friends more important? Do you have family living locally now? In what ways do you think your relationship with your husband/ wife was different from your parents' relationship? How do you think your relationship with family and friends differ from those of your children/ people nowadays? What friends did your parents have? (Were they mostly relations, neighbours, friends from work?) Did they have friends in common? Were people ever invited to the home? How often? Would they be offered anything to eat or drink? Did people call casually without an invitation? Do you think your parents thought of themselves as part of a particular class? (Working class? Middle class?) Do you think of yourself as any particular class? Did you mix with other people you think were of a different class?

Time off

What did you do in your free time as a child? Who did you play with? Did boys and girls play the same games? Did your mother take you and your brothers/sisters out sometimes? Did your father? Did you go out as a family? What did you do in your spare time as a teenager? When you first started work? Did you read? (If so, what?) Did you knit or sew? What did you make? Did you go on holiday? Did you visit other towns much? (Or, if you lived in the countryside, did you go to the town much?) What did you do on weekends? Did you go dancing? Did you go to the pictures? Did you go to the pub? Did anyone in your family go to the pub? How important

was fashion? Did you spend your leisure time at home more or did you go out? Did you eat out (even fish and chips)? How was leisure time different for men and women? (Did men have more/less free time? Did they spend it differently?) How did your parents spend their leisure time? Did they spend it together? Did your family take a regular newspaper or magazine? Who read it? Did you have a radio? Did anyone in the family smoke? Gamble? Did you keep pets? Did you ever belong to any clubs? Did either of your parents? What happened on birthdays? Christmas? Do you remember a funeral in the family? Wedding? (What happened? customs etc) Describe your own wedding. On what day of the week was it held?

Politics

Were you ever interested in politics? Were you ever involved in politics? Have your views on it changed? Have you ever been involved in any pressure group/campaign (for conservation, women's or educational issues etc)? Have you ever been involved in a trades union? Do you know what your parents' views on politics were? How did they differ from your own? Were they actively involved in politics? Have you ever talked about politics at home? Do you know if your parents voted?

Religion

Do you have a religion now? Have you always felt the same or have your views changed over the years? If you do, in what ways is it important to you? How does your husband/wife feel about it? Do you know what your parents' views were? How were they different from your own? Did your mother and father agree? Did you go to a church school or to Sunday school? Did you attend any social events connected with the church? Have you ever talked about religion at home? Was Sunday different from other days? Were there certain things that you weren't allowed to do? Were you taught to say prayers at night?

Community

Did your family know most of the neighbours when you were a child and as you were growing up? How important were they? Do you know your neighbours now? (As much?) Did neighbours help one another much? Were they in and out of one another's houses? When you were growing up, did you ever know a girl who had to get married? What did people think about this? Did you know any illegitimate children? How did people treat them?

The War

Do you remember the Second World War? Were you or members of your family in the forces? What were you doing at the time? Were you in Hull during the bombing? Were you or any members of your family bombed out? Was anyone in your family evacuated? What do you remember about shopping, rationing, travelling in the war?

APPENDIX 4

Clearance Form

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: LIFE IN HULL BEFORE 1960

I agree that this interview can be typed out and stored in a collection with other oral history interviews, and can be made available for reference, to be used for research and educational purposes. The interview, or parts of it, can be included in publications. I do not wish my name to be used.

Signature.....

Date(s) of interviews.....



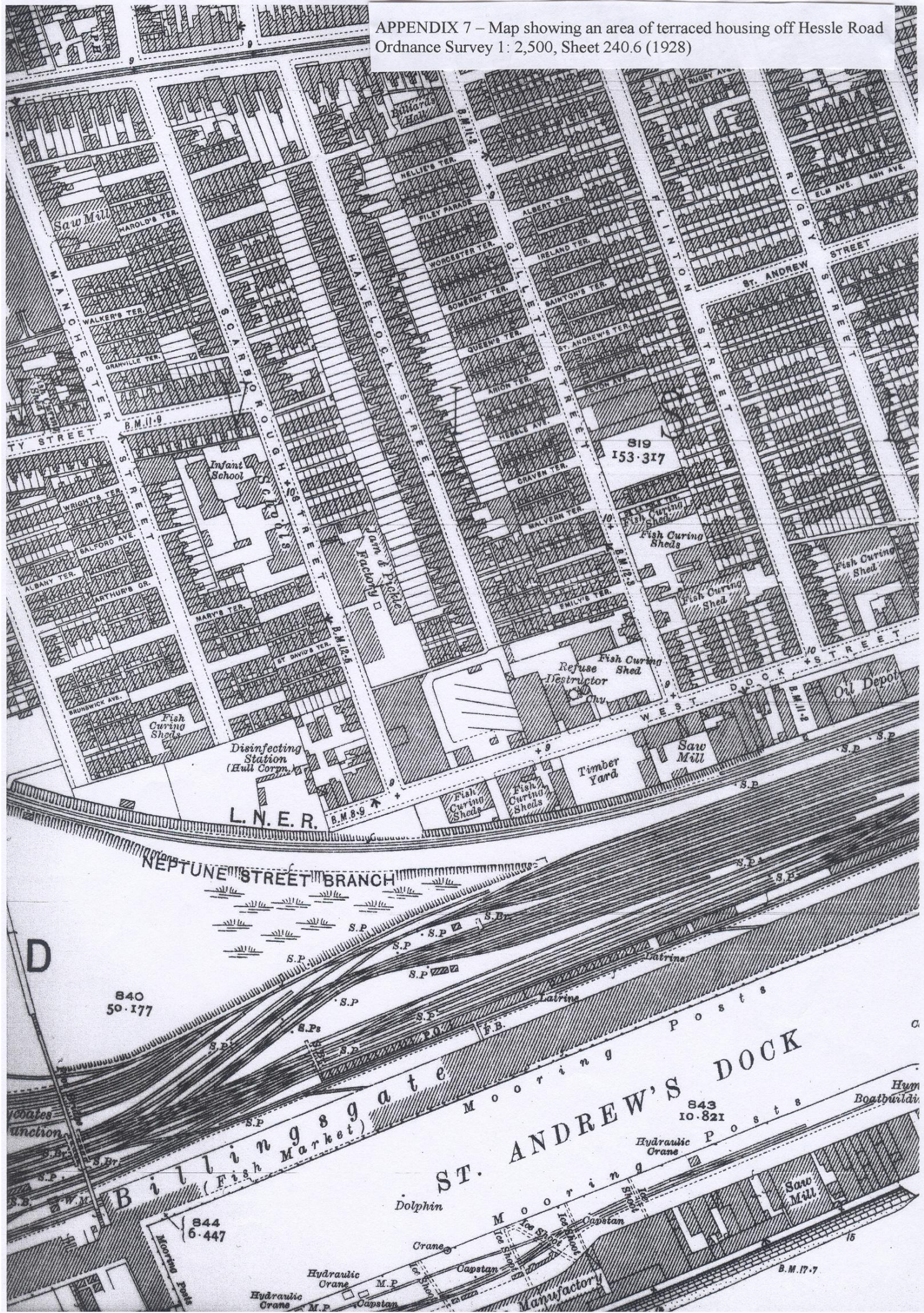
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1906 - BACON

BACON, 1906



APPENDIX 7 - Map showing an area of terraced housing off Hesse Road
Ordnance Survey 1: 2,500, Sheet 240.6 (1928)



APPENDIX 8 - Map showing Reform Street and surrounding area (Hull city centre)
Ordnance Survey 1: 2,500, Sheet 240.3 (1928)



APPENDIX 9 – Map showing Day Street and surrounding area (just west of Hull city centre)
Ordnance Survey 1: 2,500, Sheet 240.2 (1928)



APPENDIX 10 – Map showing North Hull Estate, one of Hull’s earliest council estates (around Greenwood Avenue).
From ‘Plan of the City of Kingston-upon-Hull’ by George Fryer, Hull (1935)
(M. Harland & Son Ltd Lithos, Hull)



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