

**The life-styles of young middle-class women in Liverpool in the 1920s and
1930s.**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the previously unexplored life-styles of young middle-class women in the 1920s and 1930s. Based upon oral evidence collected from a group of 20 women, all of whom grew up in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s, this study highlights the centrality of social class in shaping young women's life-styles in the phase of the life-cycle between leaving school and getting married.

Drawing upon the rich literature on young working-class women's life-styles, it has been possible to contrast the life-styles of young women from middle-class backgrounds with those of their working-class backgrounds. This thesis has revealed the profound differences which existed between these two groups' patterns of behaviour. However, in examining young middle-class women's life-styles, attention is also paid to the divisions which existed within the middle classes. This project has identified subtle, yet significant differences in the life-styles, aspirations and attitudes of young women from upper and lower middle-class backgrounds.

Oral evidence also suggests that young middle-class women tended to mix almost exclusively within their own social group. In the testimonies collected, there was a definite sense of 'keeping to one's own'. In particular, the extent to which young middle-class women came into contact with their working-class counterparts appears to have been severely limited: there was little evidence of 'rubbing shoulders'.

The main empirical chapters examine young middle-class women's educational experiences, their employment opportunities and their leisure activities both inside and outside the home. Attention is also given within these empirical chapters to patterns of storytelling in oral testimonies. When analysing the transcripts, I discovered that there was a tendency amongst my respondents to frame their life histories in a way which drew a contrast between 'then' and 'now'. In recounting their life-styles as young women, a recurrent theme emerged in which they drew contrasts between the 'good old days' and a corrupt present. Within oral testimonies, there was also a strong tendency for my respondents to emphasise their own respectability; this is particularly noticeable in their accounts of their leisure activities.

Acknowledgements

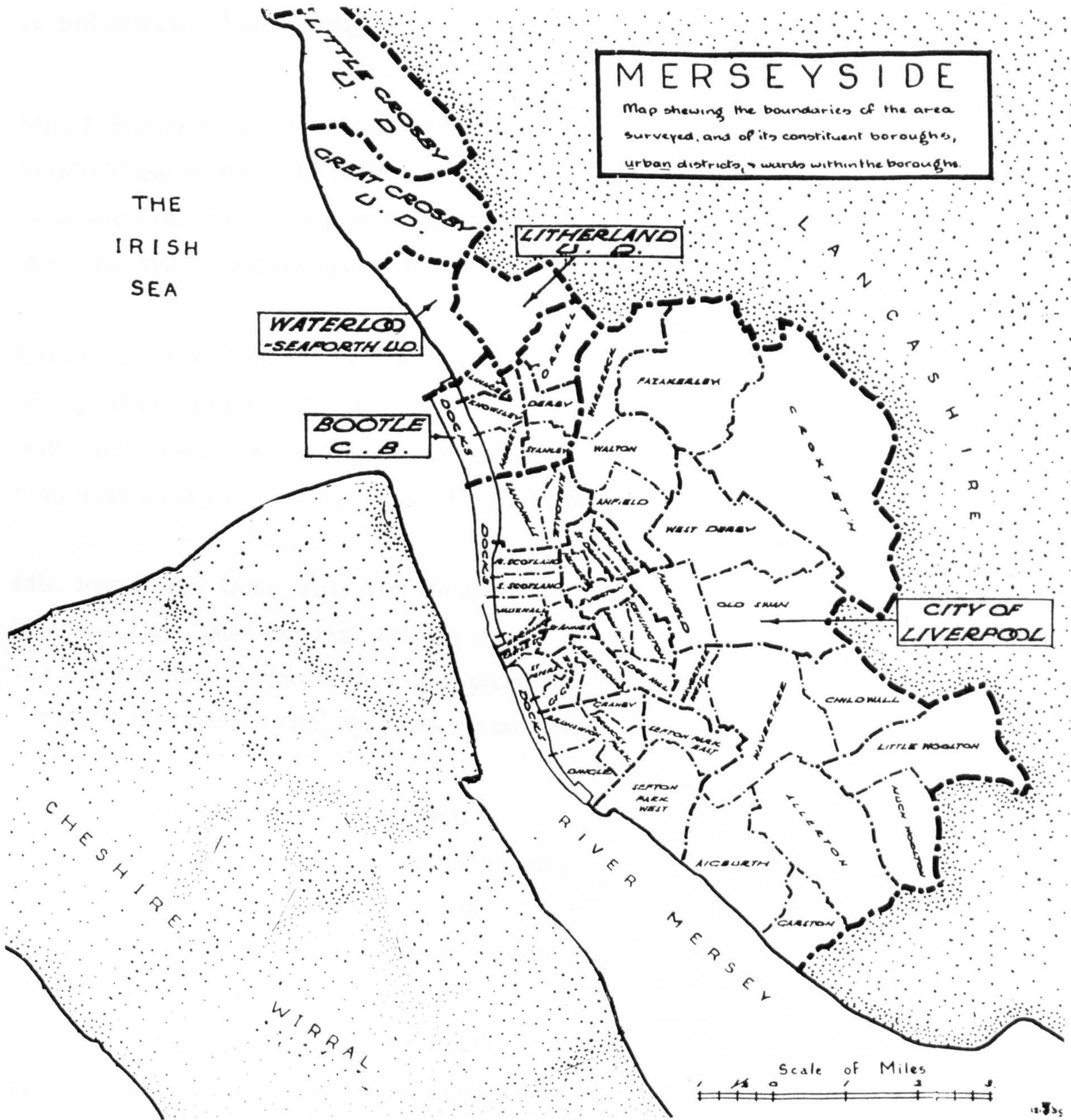
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Map showing the principal districts of Liverpool, 1934



Source: D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol. I* (Liverpool, 1934), Endpiece.

A Subaltern's Love-song

Miss J. Hunter Dunn, Miss J. Hunter Dunn,
Furnish'd and burnish'd by Aldershot sun,
What strenuous singles we played after tea,
We in the tournament-you against me!

Love-thirty, love-forty, oh! weakness of joy,
The speed of a swallow, the grace of a boy,
With carefulest carelessness, gaily you won,
I am weak from your loveliness, Joan Hunter Dunn.

Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn,
How mad I am, sad I am, glad that you won.
The warm-handled racquet is back in its press,
But my shock-headed victor, she loves me no less.

Her father's euonymus shines as we walk,
And swing past the summer-house, buried in talk,
And cool the verandah that welcome us in
To the six-o'clock news and a lime-juice and gin.

The scent of the conifers, sound of the bath,
The view from my bedroom of moss-dappled path,
As I struggle with double-end evening tie,
For we dance at the Golf Club, my victor and I.

On the floor of her bedroom lie blazer and shorts
And the cream-coloured walls are be-trophied with sports,
And westering, questioning settles the sun
On your low-leaded window, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn.

The Hillman is waiting, the light's in the hall,
The pictures of Egypt are bright on the wall,
My sweet, I am standing beside the oak stair
And there on the landing's the light on your hair.

By roads "not adopted", by woodland ways,
She drove to the club in the late summer haze,
Into nine-o'clock Camberley, heavy with bells
And mushroomy, pine-woody, evergreen smells.

Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn,
I can hear from the car-park the dance has begun.
Oh! full Surrey twilight! importunate band!
Oh! strongly adorable tennis-girl's hand!

Around us are Rovers and Austins afar,
Above us, the intimate roof of the car,
And here on my right is the girl of my choice,
With the tilt of her nose and the chime of her voice,

And the scent of her wrap, and the words never said,
And the ominous, ominous dancing ahead.
We sat in the car park till twenty to one
And now I'm engaged to Miss Joan Hunter Dunn.

John Betjeman, *Selected poems* (London, 1948).

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Introduction

This thesis explores the life-styles of young middle-class women in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s. Using oral testimonies, it examines the stage of the life-cycle between the minimum school leaving age and the average age of first marriage amongst middle-class women.¹ In her important contribution to our understanding of adolescent girlhood, based upon an analysis of young women's magazines, Penny Tinkler has argued for the centrality of social class in shaping young women's experiences.² However, while much is known about this stage of the life-cycle for young women from the working classes during this period, the conditions and experiences of young middle-class women remain largely undocumented. In this study, I wish not only to highlight gender as an important theme in the social history of youth, but also to demonstrate the importance of social class in all aspects of young women's lives. Central themes in my research are: home life; educational experiences; employment possibilities; and leisure activities both inside and outside the home.

Historical research into the emergence of the middle classes in nineteenth-century England has focused in some depth upon women's role in the formation of middle-class life and culture. This introduction begins with an overview of the literature which deals with middle-class women in Victorian and Edwardian England. This provides a contextual background to the account of the 1920s and 1930s which follows, in which it is argued that the inter-war period was a major turning point in the lives of women. I will then examine the main trends in the historiography

¹ The average age of first marriage amongst middle-class women in this period appears to have been between 25 and 30. The tendency for the middle classes to marry later than their working-class counterparts is demonstrated in *The social survey of Merseyside* through a comparison of the ages of first marriage in two districts of Liverpool: Exchange, a predominantly working-class area, and West Derby, a middle-class suburban area. Whilst 40.7% of women aged 20-24 in the Exchange area were married, only 18.0% of women in the same age bracket were married in West Derby. D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol. I* (Liverpool, 1934), p.102. My own oral evidence confirms that the majority of middle-class women married during their mid to late twenties.

² P. Tinkler, *Constructing girlhood: popular magazines for girls growing up in England 1920-1950* (London, 1995), p.3.

relating to young women in twentieth-century Britain, highlighting the relative paucity of the literature dealing with middle-class women. At the same time I shall demonstrate the enormous contribution made by the 'history from below' approach in furthering our understanding of the lives of young working-class women.³ I shall then outline and define the terms and definitions employed in this thesis, looking initially at what it meant to be middle-class in the inter-war period. I also intend to discuss the use of the terms 'girl' and 'young woman' in my analysis of this stage of the life-cycle. Finally, I shall provide a short contextual section outlining my choice of Liverpool as the location for this study.

'The angel in the house': middle-class women and 'separate spheres'

As a result of the flourishing interest in all aspects of women's history, a growing literature on middle-class women's lives in the nineteenth century has emerged.⁴ This literature is largely concerned with women's experiences within the home, and centres primarily upon married women. It has frequently employed the concept of 'separate spheres' as the principal organising category in the analysis of middle-class women's experiences.⁵ This section provides a review of the concept of separate spheres, its application to studies of middle-class women in Victorian and Edwardian England, and its validity in my own study of young middle-class women in the early twentieth century.

Central to the notion of separate spheres was the belief that whenever and wherever possible, men and women ought to inhabit their own 'spheres', each with

³ This literature is discussed more fully in a later section of this chapter.

⁴ Important contributions to our understanding of middle-class women's lives in this period include: P. Branca, *Silent sisterhood: middle class women in the Victorian home* (London, 1975), L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class 1780-1850* (London, 1987), J. Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: sexual divisions and social change* (Brighton, 1984) and M. Vicinus, *Independent women: work and community for single women 1850-1920* (London, 1985).

⁵ For example see: L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes*, C. Hall, *White, male and middle class: explorations in feminism and history* (Cambridge, 1992) and J. Lewis, *Women in England*.

their own responsibilities and privileges. Women were to be kept away from the market place and from all participation in affairs of the public world, and thus confined predominantly to the home. There, they were to bear and raise children, and ensure the smooth running of the home so as to establish a haven of tranquillity and morality in which their menfolk could shelter from the pressures and tensions of the public sphere.⁶ Much of the discussion on middle-class women in nineteenth-century England has looked at women in the private sphere and has concentrated on the construction of their role as 'the angel in the house'.⁷ The ideal middle-class woman was expected to be docile and submissive, decorous rather than educated. To prevent her from becoming too independent, she was to be kept ignorant of the affairs of the public world.⁸ Her life was to revolve around the home and the needs of her husband and children. Involvement in philanthropic work, a logical extension of her principal domestic role, was the only way in which a woman could extend her functions beyond the domestic sphere.⁹

Virtually all the major texts in this area have, to a greater or lesser degree, employed the category of 'separate spheres' in their analysis of women's experiences. Jane Lewis, in her work on middle-class women in the nineteenth century, has argued that the vast majority of middle-class Victorian women led generally isolated lives which revolved almost exclusively around the home. She noted:

The home was the centre of the middle-class woman's world and she bore sole responsibility for its management. The interests and concerns of middle-class

⁶ For a more detailed account of the Victorian ideal of womanhood see: J.N. Burstyn, *Victorian education and the ideal of womanhood* (London, 1980), L. Davidoff, 'Mastered for life: servant and wife in Victorian England', *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), pp.406-28, C. Dyhouse, 'Mothers and daughters in the middle-class home c.1870-1914', in J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour and love: women's experience of home and family 1850-1940* (Oxford, 1986), pp.27-47 and D. Gorham, *The Victorian girl and the feminine ideal* (London, 1982).

⁷ Indeed, L. Davidoff and C. Hall in *Family fortunes* have noted that the idea that a woman's place was in the home was a central defining point of the emerging middle classes.

⁸ The idea that women should not involve themselves in the outside world comes across in Katherine Chorley's autobiographical account of growing up in Manchester at the turn of the century. She recalls that women in her social circle were not encouraged to read newspapers or show any interest in current affairs. K. Chorley, *Manchester made them* (London, 1950).

⁹ J. Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*.

husbands and wives were on the whole profoundly different.¹⁰

In practice, of course, the characteristics and activities of nineteenth-century women did not always fully equate with the desired ideal. Even in upper and middle-class circles, where its hold was strongest, the ideal of the woman as the 'angel in the house' was frequently only partially realised.¹¹ However, what must be stressed is that research which is revisionist in its application of the separate spheres model is surprisingly limited. The view that the bulk of middle-class women were largely confined to the home continues to dominate the literature on nineteenth century middle-class women. For the majority of middle-class women before the First World War, employment outside the home was unusual, whilst formal education was regarded more as a means of improving domestic skills than of providing skills that would help women in the world outside the home. The notion of separate spheres therefore remains one of the major organising concepts in the history of middle-class women.

Amanda Vickery, in an article critical of the concept of separate spheres, has commented on its supremacy as an organising category within women's history and noted:

... the separate spheres framework has come to constitute one of the fundamental organising categories, if not *the* organising category of modern British women's history.¹²

Given the central place that this model has in our understanding of the history of middle-class women, it is necessary to look at the category in some detail: charting its origins, its place in the history of nineteenth century women, and its overall usefulness for our understanding of the lives of middle-class women. Firstly, the separation of spheres was closely linked to the formation of middle-class identity. Catherine Hall, in her work on the formation of Birmingham's middle class during

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.112.

¹¹ This is the main line of argument in Patricia Branca's work *Silent sisterhood*. In this work Branca has demonstrated that a great many Victorian women were able to break out of the confines of the home and take up paid employment.

¹² A. Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36, 2, (1993), p.389.

the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, has demonstrated the importance of this concept to middle-class identity:

Definitions of masculinity and femininity played an important part in marking out the middle-class, separating it off from other classes and creating strong links between disparate groups within that class - Nonconformists and Anglicans, radicals and conservatives, the richer bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie. The separation between the sexes was marked out at every level within the society -in manufacturing, the retail trades and the professions, in public life of all kinds, in the churches, in the press and in the home. The separation of spheres was one of the fundamental organising characteristics of middle-class society in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England.¹³

The concept posits a world divided between male and female attributes and activities, suggesting that women's lives were structured by the primacy of their reproductive role and their all important role as mothers while men inhabited the public world, that of business and public life, where they were to be active in the world as citizens and entrepreneurs. This is convincingly argued in Davidoff and Hall's *Family fortunes* where the notion of separate spheres is *the* fundamental organising concept in the history of the middle class. Despite their admission of the limitations of the concept, they argue that gender played a crucial role in the structuring of an emergent, provincial middle-class culture because it was the ideology of separate gender spheres which gave the middle class their distinctive way of life.¹⁴

However, the concept of separate spheres is rejected completely by Dina M. Copelman in her study of women teachers in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century London. Female teachers were drawn largely from the upper-working classes and lower-middle classes, who did not rigidly divide the world into male and female spheres. Copelman observed that:

Instead, they often prepared daughters for occupations and in general did not consider paid employment inappropriate for women. This meant that women from these strata did not view employment as the product of a feminist struggle, and the work that they did - while having to meet various criteria of

¹³ C. Hall, 'Gender divisions and class formation in the Birmingham middle class, 1780-1850.' in C. Hall, *White, male and middle class*, p.106.

¹⁴ L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes*.

respectability - did not have to be justified in terms of women's separate destiny.¹⁵

The notion of separate spheres will be closely scrutinised throughout this thesis, both in terms of the general validity of the concept and in particular with reference to its relevance to the single woman.¹⁶ Whilst opportunities for women to break free from the confines of the private sphere in Victorian Britain were certainly limited, they were by no means uncommon. The work of Martha Vicinus, exploring the lives of young single, middle-class women who were prominent in the public sphere in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, has shown how such women were active in the professions, in education and in nursing and social work.¹⁷ Certainly by the inter-war period there were increasing opportunities for women to bridge the public/private dichotomy, notably with the increased employment possibilities for young women. I will suggest that the model of separate spheres may well be unhelpful to our understanding of young middle-class women's lives in the inter-war context as it blinds us to the experiences of young, single women, who by the 1920s, were increasingly entering the public sphere. My own findings demonstrate that young, single middle-class women offer a strikingly different model of gender and class identity from the one constructed by historians of middle-class gender roles in the nineteenth century. By looking at single women it is possible to challenge overly-rigid applications of the separate spheres model. I shall examine the lives of young women in order to assess how far separate spheres were a reality in the lives of the young middle-class women in my study.

¹⁵ D.M. Copelman, *London's women teachers: gender, class and feminism 1870-1930* (London, 1996), p.xv.

¹⁶ It should be noted here that the concept of 'separate spheres' has largely been used as an analytical tool for the study of married women. Few historians have applied the concept to the experiences of young, single women.

¹⁷ M. Vicinus, *Independent women*.

The inter-war years: A period of transition for women?

The Great War acted as a catalyst for change, redefining the role of women in British society as well as remoulding popular attitudes towards them. The war certainly brought new opportunities to women; their contribution to the war effort gave women a new confidence as well as an acceptance of their capabilities amongst men. It is not my intention to assess in detail the overall impact of the war on women's position in society, but it is first necessary to consider some of the arguments which pertain to the situation of middle-class women. The overall impact of the war is clearly demonstrated in Vera Brittain's poignant description of the aftermath of the Great War, where she described how the narrow conventions of provincial Edwardian middle-class life were shattered.¹⁸ The impact of the war on the overall employment opportunities of women is assessed by Gail Braybon in her study of women workers in the First World War. Braybon has examined the legacy of the war in terms of women's continued participation in the labour force during the 1920s. Although cautious in her assessment of the long term effects that the war had on the general position of women, she has pointed out that the entry of women into the professions and clerical work was certainly encouraged by their work in these sectors during the war. In conclusion she suggested that the expanding employment opportunities for women may have had a strong class dimension. As she insisted, "single middle-class women did have a wider choice of employment, and had gained a greater degree of sexual and economic independence."¹⁹

These changes account for both the rise of the 'flapper', and the unprecedented discussion of women and feminine sexuality during the inter-war period.²⁰ The 'flapper', a thoroughly modern girl who earned her own living, bobbed her hair,

¹⁸ V. Brittain, *Testament of youth: an autobiographical study of the years 1900-1925* (London, 1933).

¹⁹ G. Braybon, *Women workers in the First World War: the British experience* (London, 1989), First published in 1981, p.221.

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of the flapper see, B. Melman, *Women and the popular imagination in the twenties: flappers and nymphs* (London, 1988).

smoked in public and danced wildly, came to symbolise the changes that were taking place in women's lives.²¹ Originally drawn from the ranks of the upper and middle classes, she was perceived as a high-spirited young woman, who shocked her old-fashioned parents with her desire to earn her own living and her independent life-style.

The immediate post-war period also saw major landmarks which were symbolic of the changes taking place in society. These changes allowed young middle-class women the opportunity to escape from the oppression of the Victorian home that had so typified their mother's lives. The first stage of female enfranchisement took place in 1918, whereby women over the age of 30 were granted the vote. However, it was not until 1928 that women were granted the vote on the same terms as men. The inter-war period also saw the passing of the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act in 1923, which was to allow women the opportunity to enter the professions. This legislation was widely perceived as representative of the new freedom of women, a freedom that sharply differentiated their experiences from those of their mothers. This new independence of women manifested itself in greater access to education, increasing employment opportunities and the opening up of new leisure activities, all of which made the experience of growing up in the 1920s very different to that of growing up in the 1890s. I intend to examine how far these changes affected the lives of young women from middle-class backgrounds.

Thus, the inter-war years were widely assumed by contemporary observers to be a period of emancipation for women.²² The Victorian ideal of the decorative woman in the home was being challenged, and increasingly, women were extending their activities beyond the private sphere. Young women were no longer being educated at home and were increasingly receiving an education which was not

²¹ The 'flapper' in the 1890s had meant a very young prostitute, but by the 1920s the word had come to mean any young woman displaying her freedom.

²² This is highlighted in the writings of S. Anthony, *Women's role in industry and home* (London, 1934), J. Beauchamp, *Women who work* (London, 1937), C. Hamilton, *The Englishwoman* (London, 1940), W. Holtby, *Women and a changing civilisation* (London, 1934), R. Strachey, *Careers and openings for women* (London, 1937) and R. Strachey (ed.), *Our freedom and its results* (London, 1936). These authors, writing in the 1930s, emphasised the point that women were inhabiting a new era and that the life-styles of the contemporary woman were very different to that of her Victorian counterpart.

dissimilar to that of their brothers.²³ This was an education which was to equip them for careers outside the home. Cicely Hamilton's *The Englishwoman*, written in 1940, noted the great strides that had taken place in the lives of women since 1918. She described the changes that had occurred in political life, home life, employment and education which had made "... the pre-war days now seem pre-historic."²⁴ Similarly, the inter-war feminist, Winifred Holtby, writing in the 1930s, noted that, "the impassable line of a man's place and a woman's place is being passed." She described those young women who were throwing themselves into work as "... fairly representative of the more serious and modern girl."²⁵

Probably the most dramatic way in which women from all social classes witnessed this change was in the increasing range of occupations open to single women. John Stevenson has remarked that, "Between the wars, freedom and independence were the watchwords of younger women, who could at least contemplate doing many of the jobs done by men and having most of the same liberties".²⁶ Although many women recruited for factory work during the Great War were displaced by men with the coming of peace, in the long term, the war permanently enlarged the number of women who went out to work. This continued a process of breaking down traditionally masculine areas of employment, a trend that had its roots in the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period. Opportunities in clerical work, teaching and within the medical profession offered the daughters of the middle classes possibilities to step outside the confines of the home.²⁷

However, the beneficiaries of these new employment opportunities were largely young, single women, as strictures against married women's work meant a lack of employment opportunities for women once married. Formal marriage bars existed in both teaching and the civil service in the 1920s, and the convention that women

²³ This notion is explored more fully in Chapter Four.

²⁴ C. Hamilton, *The Englishwoman*, p.12.

²⁵ W. Holtby, *Women and a changing civilisation*, p.5.

²⁶ J. Stevenson, *British society, 1914-1945* (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp.173-174.

²⁷ Similarly, for working-class women, retailing, clerical work and semi-skilled factory work in light engineering or food processing offered attractive alternatives to domestic service.

should leave paid employment on marriage was strictly adhered to. In the view of those who dismissed married women, it was perceived that they should be supported by their husbands and therefore were not in need of paid employment. This assumption was reinforced during the 1920s and 1930s as a result of high levels of unemployment.²⁸ The changes in material life were also marked by fundamental changes in popular culture. The 1920s saw substantial suburban expansion, the growth of a mass market for cheaply produced consumer goods and the flowering of forms of mass entertainment such as the cinema and the wireless. New dances and dance halls came to symbolise the new freedom of the 1920s, and dancing, which became the chief pastime of many of the young, was accompanied by a loosening of social constraints. By the 1920s, the custom of chaperonage had virtually disappeared, allowing young women the freedom to go out with boyfriends or girlfriends in their leisure time without attracting the hostile criticism and condemnation of fifty years before.²⁹ The degree to which young middle-class women took part in the expansion of mass leisure and consumption is a theme that will be explored more fully in Chapter Five.³⁰

The notion of the 1920s and 1930s as a period of change is echoed in general histories of the period. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge in their survey of the years between the wars, *The Long Weekend*, have observed the dramatic changes that were taking place in women's lives. The daughters of the middle classes were no longer staying in the home as their Victorian predecessors had done and were increasingly

²⁸ For a more general discussion of the marriage bar, see; A. Oram, 'Serving two masters? The introduction of a marriage bar in teaching in the 1920s', in London Feminist History Group (eds.), *Sexual dynamics of history: men's power, women's resistance* (London, 1983), pp.134-148. For more contemporary discussion on the effects of the marriage bar see: Winifred Holtby, 'The wearer and the shoe', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 January 1930; 'Fear and the woman who earns', *News Chronicle*, 9 March 1934 and Vera Brittain, 'The professional woman: careers and marriage', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 September 1928, in P. Berry and A. Bishop, *Testament of a generation: the journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London, 1985).

²⁹ J. Stevenson, *British society, 1914-1945*, p 173.

³⁰ Stephen Jones in his work, *Workers at play: a social and economic history of leisure 1918-1939* (London, 1986), argues that young working-class women with a degree of disposable income were one of the main beneficiaries of the new leisure services. This thesis will examine how far this was true of young women of the middle classes.

being expected to 'at least do something'. Usually, this took the form of a brief career, which filled the interval between school and marriage.³¹ Recent histories which do chart women's lives in the early decades of the twentieth century have, however, tended to play down the changes of the inter-war years, positing the Second World War as the point of departure.³² My thesis is designed to test the assertion that the inter-war years were a period of change for women, and in particular middle-class women. Whilst not ignoring the change that came with the outbreak of the Second World War, the thesis is designed to trace the processes of change that took place during the 1920s and 1930s in order to see how far the image of the 'flapper' was a reality for young middle-class women.

Young middle-class women: Uncharted territory

In contrast to the extensive literature dealing with the lives of married women in middle-class families during the nineteenth century, there are far fewer studies of girls and young women.³³ Jane Lewis, for example, having discussed the woman's role as 'angel in the home', noted only in passing that the middle-class daughter was largely confined to the lady-like pursuits of needlework, playing the piano and the elaborate rituals of 'calling'.³⁴ These were activities that were to help her secure a suitable husband. The most important contribution to our understanding of the lives of middle-class girls and young women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth

³¹ R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The long weekend: a social history of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London, 1940), p.41.

³² Those arguing along this line include: Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984); Carl Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England 1880-1939* (Manchester, 1988) and Andrew Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working-class culture in Manchester and Salford 1900-1939* (Buckingham, 1992).

³³ Some attention is given to the experiences of middle-class women in D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty: women between the wars 1919-1939* (London, 1989).

³⁴ *ibid.* p.114.

centuries is Carol Dyhouse's *Girls growing up in late Victorian and Edwardian England*.³⁵ In this work, Dyhouse has demonstrated the significance of both social class and gender for girls' experiences of family and education. It is interesting to note that she uses the term 'girls' rather than young women in her analysis, given that the stage of the life-cycle she is examining is very similar to my own.³⁶ Using sources which vary from autobiographies to school inspectors' reports, she has examined the socialization of young girls from both working and middle-class backgrounds. Her primary interest is the ways in which girls learned about femininity, specifically the ways in which the home and school interacted to reinforce certain ideals of what a young woman should be and how she should behave. Dyhouse shows how the middle-class 'girl' of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period was usually educated at home by a governess, receiving a social instruction that was designed to cultivate her feminine attributes rather than an academic education.³⁷ Many middle-class girls attended small private schools, where they received an education which focused upon the 'accomplishments' and was hardly designed to see them established in the world of paid employment. Such 'girls' were trained not for a career outside the home, but rather for the marriage market. In essence, the education they received both at home and school was a preparation for their role in the 'private' sphere, enabling them to, "... grow up as decorative, modest, marriageable beings."³⁸ Dyhouse's work has raised many of the themes addressed in this thesis, and one of my aims is to explore contrasts between the experiences of the Victorian 'girl' as described by Dyhouse and those of her inter-war counterpart.

³⁵ C. Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981)..

³⁶ Although Dyhouse does not actually define the parameters through which she came to define the subjects of her study as 'girls', she examines girls' experiences of home and school in much the same way that I intend. It would be difficult to apply exactly the same definitional parameters given the fact that during the period Dyhouse is concerned with young women typically did not go out to work. A more detailed discussion of the terminology employed in this thesis is given below.

³⁷ Chapter Two of Carol Dyhouse's *Girls growing up* demonstrates how the education of middle-class girls served to reinforce traditional ideas of femininity.

³⁸ *ibid.* p.43.

There is no single text that explores young, single middle-class women's life-styles in the early-twentieth century or which examines the extent to which their lives underwent a transformation in the years following the end of the First World War.³⁹ My research is intended to take up the story of young middle-class women where Dyhouse left off, in the first attempt at a broad study of young middle-class women in the 1920s and 1930s. Whilst a great deal of attention has been paid to the working classes within recent British social history, there has been far less concern with the middle classes, particularly in a twentieth century context.⁴⁰ This is in part a result of the source material. Contemporary social observers were far more interested in the impoverished plight of the working classes than the relative comfort of the middle classes. Subsequently, little is known about the latter's life-styles and aspirations. I hope to redress this balance somewhat in Chapter Two, providing a short overview of middle-class life-styles in Liverpool during the inter-war period. However, this neglect is not just a result of the lack of available source material. Jeffrey Richards has claimed that the neglect of the middle classes is a result of:

... a long tradition of intellectual despising and disparagement typified by T.W.H. Crosland's definition of the essence of 'suburbanism' as 'shallowness and dreariness and mediocrity and dullness and stupidity and snobbishness' in contrast with a perception of virtue, warmth, decency, hardihood and stoicism in a long suffering proletariat.⁴¹

Ross McKibbin's recent work, *Classes and cultures in England*, is exceptional in that it includes a lengthy discussion of the fortunes of the English middle classes in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴² McKibbin's study provides one of the most

³⁹ Insights into the lives of young upper-class women during the Victorian era are to be found in L. Davidoff's *The best circles: society, etiquette and the season* (London, 1973).

⁴⁰ The main published works which deal with the middle-classes in an historical context are: A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991) and R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998). However, one of the most detailed accounts of middle-class life during the inter-war period is to be found in D. L. North's unpublished thesis, D.L. North, 'Middle-class suburban life-styles and cultures in England 1919-1939', M.Phil, University of Oxford (1988).

⁴¹ J. Richards' review of A.A. Jackson's *The middle classes, 1900-1950*, *Social History Society Newsletter*, 18,1 (1993), p.34.

⁴² R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures in England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998).

comprehensive accounts of middle-class life in the early part of the twentieth century.⁴³ This work provides a chronological study of the middle classes, highlighting their changing size, composition and economic fortunes as well as providing a more detailed thematic account of middle-class life-styles. As far as women's experiences are concerned, however, only cursory attention is given to the life-styles and experiences of middle-class women; his comments are largely confined to a discussion of the effects of suburban isolation on the middle-class housewife.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this text provides a broad account of the lives of the inter-war middle classes, in which particular attention is paid to their homes and the increasing trend towards owner occupation; income and patterns of expenditure; sociability and social networks; and finally, attention is paid to their relationships with the working classes. The other important text in this field is Alan A. Jackson's *The middle classes 1900-1950*.⁴⁵ This largely impressionistic account of the twentieth century middle classes does address the lives of young middle-class women. Jackson described the 'longer leash for the unmarried woman', along with the new self-confidence that young women gained from their widening employment opportunities and increased access to leisure activities.⁴⁶

Other historical works do provide us with some insights into the lives of middle-class women in the inter-war decades, albeit indirectly. Carol Dyhouse, in her study of women and British universities, has provided us with some fascinating insights into the experiences of predominantly middle-class female students and their experiences of higher education.⁴⁷ Focusing upon the non-Oxbridge universities, she has provided an account of both female academics and students, examining a wide range of issues from institutional variations in admission procedures to supervisory arrangements for female students, including chaperonage. Whilst Dyhouse captured

⁴³ This text is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

⁴⁴ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, pp.82-84.

⁴⁵ A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991).

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p.124.

⁴⁷ C. Dyhouse, *No distinction of sex? Women in British universities 1890-1939* (London, 1995).

the excitement experienced by women finding new academic interests, professional opportunities and entering new social circles, she tended to focus upon the more restrictive practices of university life, including evidence of both gender segregation and a widespread assumption of female intellectual inferiority. The increasing acceptance of women into higher education reflected the widening spheres open to young women in this period. Their experiences *vis á vis* their male counterparts is a theme I will explore in Chapter Three.

Dina M. Copelman, in her work on London's women teachers, has situated them not only as figures in the history of education, but also as figures in the previously unwritten history of the lower middle class.⁴⁸ As independent women with some disposable income, teachers enjoyed new perspectives on metropolitan life and the expanding world of material culture. Copelman has explored the distinctive gender and class identities of lower-middle-class women, placing them within the growing ranks of the metropolitan 'New Woman'.

Young working-class women: The influence of the 'history from below' approach

Despite the lack of attention given to young women from the middle classes in the inter-war period, there is an established historiography that deals with young women from the working classes. Largely as a result of the 'history from below' tradition, a substantial literature on women from the working classes has emerged. Many of the themes and ideas on which this thesis is based have been drawn from the work of historians working within this tradition.⁴⁹ My own work aims to explore many of the themes raised in this historiography in order to identify how far young middle-class women's experiences differed from their working-class counterparts. The main works that I shall outline in this context are those of Elizabeth Roberts on women in the North West; Andrew Davies on working-class culture and community in Salford

⁴⁸ D. M. Copelman, *London's women teachers*.

⁴⁹ The most relevant contributions to my own area of research are, S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London: histories and representations since 1800* (London, 1989), pp.245-271; A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty* and E. Roberts, *A woman's place*.

and Manchester and Sally Alexander on young women growing up in London in the 1920s and 1930s. In the Liverpool context, Pat Ayers' work on the dockland community of Liverpool, although not primarily concerned with young, single women, offers an interesting point of comparison.⁵⁰

Elizabeth Roberts, in her work on women in the North West, has provided a path-breaking study into the lives of working-class women in Lancaster, Barrow and Preston.⁵¹ Roberts has less to say on the changes that were taking place in the lives of working-class women within the period 1890-1940, preferring to see the outbreak of the Second World War as the turning point in the lives of women. Of particular relevance to my own work is the attention given to the stage of the life-cycle described as 'youth', which highlights its distinctiveness in terms of young women's access to paid employment, leisure activities and courtship patterns. Roberts' work was also significant in pioneering the use of oral history as an important method of recovering the previously unwritten lives of working-class women.⁵² Within a wider study of working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, Andrew Davies has emphasised the importance of both gender and age in shaping young people's experiences, and in particular in determining their access to leisure activities. My own research builds on this work by highlighting the importance of this stage of the life-cycle, but adding a new dimension to this by demonstrating the centrality of social class in shaping young women's experiences.

Sally Alexander, in her article, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' has provided one of the most systematic accounts of the process of

⁵⁰ See P. Ayers and J. Lambertz, 'Marriage relations, money and domestic violence in working class Liverpool 1919-1939', in J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour and love*; P. Ayers, 'The hidden economy of dockland families: Liverpool in the 1930s', in P. Hudson and W.R. Lee, *Women's work and the family economy in historical perspective* (Manchester, 1990) and P. Ayers, *The Liverpool docklands: life and work in Athol street* (Liverpool, n.d).

⁵¹ E. Roberts, *A woman's place*.

⁵² Elizabeth Roberts has continued this work and the lives of working-class women in the post war period are documented in *Women and families: an oral history 1940-1970* (Oxford, 1995).

growing up experienced by young working-class women in London.⁵³ Alexander's work is central to that of my own, as unlike Andrew Davies and Elizabeth Roberts, she suggests that the 1920s and 1930s saw a transformation of life-styles and opportunities among young women.⁵⁴ She insisted:

In the 1920s and 1930s the sexual division of labour and women's sense of themselves - indeed what it meant to be a woman - were changing in significant ways, and the changes were nowhere more apparent than in London.⁵⁵

The rejection of domestic service and the widening opportunities for young women in factory work resulted in far-reaching changes in the lives of young women. These changes were intensified by the new forms of mass entertainment, the glare of advertisements and the new consumerism which all came to characterise the inter-war years. It was these changes that added a new dimension to the lives of young women and enabled them to imagine a life that was far removed from that of their mothers. The aspirations of young women changed largely as a result of a sense of escape facilitated by the cinema and the greater availability of cheap fashions which enabled them to feel that their lives were not going to be dominated by the chronic drudgery and want that characterised the lives of their mothers. They felt that they could escape "... the domestic treadmill of their mother's lives."⁵⁶

A number of discernible themes can be found in the work of Alexander, Davies and Roberts in their discussion of young working-class women's lives, including educational experiences, employment opportunities and leisure activities. My own work will focus on similar themes in order to examine parallel aspects of the lives of young women from middle-class backgrounds. Each of the above themes will be looked at in turn, in relation to the work that has been conducted on women from

⁵³ S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s'.

⁵⁴ This notion of the inter-war period as a period of change for women is also demonstrated in Jerry White's *The worst street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, between the wars* (London, 1986).

⁵⁵ S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', p.247.

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p.266.

the working classes. I hope that points of similarity and difference will be explored by testing my own findings against the established historiography on working-class women, in order to explore the relationship between gender and class in more detail. It should also be emphasised that my own work has been influenced by the work on working-class women, not least in my decision to adopt oral history as my principal research method. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

To summarise, this historiographical review has demonstrated that little has been written on the history of the middle classes looking specifically at the life-styles of young women, and there is virtually no research which evaluates the claims by contemporary observers that the inter-war years brought with them increasing independence for young middle-class women. This thesis is intended to offer a systematic study of young middle-class women's lives in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s, and thus to evaluate the claims made that this period brought greater independence for women. This will extend our understanding of the lives of young middle-class women and extend the work of Dyhouse for the late-Victorian and Edwardian period.

The middle classes during the inter-war period

Before looking in more detail at young-middle class women's life-styles, it is appropriate to clarify the terms and definitions used in this thesis. In the following section I propose to outline what I mean by the term 'middle-class', before looking in more detail at the use of the terms 'girls' and 'young women'. Finding a clear and concise definition of the middle classes is difficult. Indeed, historians and social scientists have sometimes claimed that it is impossible to offer a precise definition, there being no one generally accepted definition upon which researchers can agree.⁵⁷ However, I have followed the reasoning of Carr-Saunders, Caradog Jones and Moser. In *A survey of the social conditions of England and Wales*, published in 1958, they

⁵⁷ R. Lewis and A. Maude, *The English middle classes* (London, 1949). In their study of the English middle-classes of the 1930s and 1940s, they claimed that a satisfactory definition of this class had yet to be found. Any definition must take into account the continuous movement between classes that distinguishes almost every society.

noted, "While no single factor can serve as a sufficient indicator of social class, occupation probably serves better than any other".⁵⁸ However, it is important to note that I have categorised the women in my sample according to their fathers' occupations. This follows a standard practice among recent social historians, most of whom categorise families in class terms according to the (usually male) head of household.⁵⁹ This has the advantage of categorising my respondents according to the position of the households in which they were living prior to getting married.

Throughout this thesis I shall refer to the 'middle classes' rather than a middle class. I will argue that the inter-war middle classes were far from being a homogenous group and consisted of a wide variety of occupational groups.⁶⁰ This section asks the question: who were the inter-war middle classes? One of their principal defining characteristics was their involvement in non-manual occupations. This is noted by Alan A. Jackson who in his work on the inter-war middle classes, defined them as 'non-manual wage earners'.⁶¹ If one accepts the distinction between manual and non-manual work as marking the boundary between the working classes and the middle classes, then by the 1930s the middle classes comprised not only the professionals and businessmen at their higher levels, and the classic petty bourgeoisie of shopkeepers and small businessmen lower down, but also an increasing white-collar salariat of clerks, managers, lesser professionals and administrators. Moreover, as Ross McKibbin has noted, their middle-class status was further reinforced by the ways in which they were seen by the manual working class. Those who did not get their 'hands dirty' were regarded as 'pen-pushers' but were elevated to a higher social status.⁶²

⁵⁸ A.M. Carr-Saunders, D. Caradog Jones and C.A. Moser, *A survey of social conditions in England and Wales* (Oxford, 1958), p.115.

⁵⁹ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*.

⁶⁰ Ross McKibbin also notes that it is better to talk of the middle-classes rather than the middle-class because of the diversity within this group. In particular he notes the big differences in the style of life of the upper middle classes and the lower middle classes. See, R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p.101.

⁶¹ A. A. Jackson, *The middle classes*, p.14.

⁶² *ibid.* p.45.

Nonetheless, there was a great deal of diversity within this group. Indeed, it is better to use the term middle classes rather than middle class because non-manual workers formed neither a solid nor homogenous group. The lack of homogeneity within the experiences of young middle-class women is a major theme in this thesis. Considerable differences can be identified within the educational experiences, employment opportunities and leisure activities of young women from middle-class backgrounds.

The varying levels of income within the middle classes were noticed by David North in his work on the suburban middle classes:

... the breadwinner of a middle-class family earned between £200 and £600 per year. The average annual income of a salaried worker in national Government in 1932 was £288, and in insurance, banking and finance it was £326. Teachers earned on average £261, clergymen £324 and doctors £398.⁶³

Alan A. Jackson also recognised the diversity which existed within this social group. He described the middle classes as:

A large group, which does present some problems of definition, the British middle classes of these years formed not one tight-band, but a many layered conglomerate of sub-classes or categories, sharing some common attitudes and principles and mostly working for a living, although working in a way which clearly distinguished them from the proletariat. They stood between the upper classes of aristocrats and plutocrats... and the manual workers and the very poor.⁶⁴

Some of the more subjective differences within the middle classes have been discussed by Raphael Samuel in a series of articles on the middle classes between the wars. The sharp differentials within this group prompted Samuel to liken the inter-war middle classes more to a caste system than a social class. He highlighted the lack of homogeneity within this group and observed that:

The middle class between the wars was less a class than a society of orders each with its own exclusion rituals and status ideology, jealously guarding a more or less self-contained existence, and exquisitely graded according to a

⁶³ D.L. North, 'Middle-class suburban life-styles', p.23.

⁶⁴ A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes*, p.11.

hierarchy of ranks.⁶⁵

The divisions within this class were complex and determined more by petty snobberies and minor gradations of status than by income and class position; these divisions and pecking orders often bordered on the faintly ridiculous.⁶⁶

Perhaps the greatest division within the middle classes was that between the professions and trade. Those involved in trade were sometimes perceived by professionals as money-grabbers with no 'taste'. It would have been a rare occurrence indeed to see the vet's daughter out dancing with the daughter of a wholesaler.⁶⁷ Within 'trade', moreover, there were further divisions, the bank clerk with his bowler hat and briefcase commanded far higher prestige than the insurance salesman in his cheap suit, epitomised by the depressed Mr Bowling of George Orwell's *Coming up for Air*.⁶⁸ These gradations of class could involve quite an 'elaborate theatre' of symbolic categories such as one's ancestors, education, accent, dress and having a 'good' address. As Samuel argues: "Cultural divisions were, if anything, even deeper than those based on status and wealth".⁶⁹

The middle classes formed a growing group in inter-war Britain. Middle-class numbers continued to expand throughout the 1920s and 1930s, largely as a result of the expansion of white-collar occupations. However, rising material and social standards also increased the strength of the professions. The Registrar General recorded an increase in salaried workers from 597,700 to 767,500 between 1920 and 1938.⁷⁰ David North in his thesis on middle-class suburban life-styles noted the increase in this class during the inter-war decades:

Nationally the number of middle-class salaried workers is estimated as having

⁶⁵ R. Samuel, 'The middle class between the wars, part one', in *New Socialist*, Jan/Feb, (1983), p.30.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ G. Orwell, *Coming up for air* (Harmondsworth, 1939).

⁶⁹ R. Samuel, 'The middle class between the wars, part one', p.35.

⁷⁰ R. Samuel, 'The middle class between the wars, part three', in *New Socialist*, May/June, (1983), p.28.

middle classes were to change quite dramatically in the years following the Second World War.⁷²

My discussion of young women draws upon the social classification devised by Guy Routh.⁷³ In his analysis of the British social class system, Routh broadened the five social classes of the Registrar General into seven occupational classes. The first three broadly constituted the middle class (these are defined in Table 1.1). Given the already complex task of defining a social class, I faced the added difficulty of defining young women's social class. Whilst defining women's social class is a notoriously difficult area, for the purposes of my study, as noted above, I classified my own respondents as middle-class on the basis of their fathers' occupations, given that they were still living in the parental home at the stage of the life-cycle with which this thesis is concerned.

Table 1.1: The principal occupations within the middle classes

| Occupational group | Examples of occupation |
|---|---|
| <u>Professional group</u> 1A Higher professional | Architects, lawyers, engineers (professionals), clergy, scientists |
| <u>Business group</u> 1B Lower professional | Draughtsmen, librarians, teachers, nurses, musicians |
| 2A Employers and proprietors | Farmers, restaurant owners, retail traders |
| 2B Administrators and managers | In manufacture, trade transport and finance bankers, stockbrokers civil servants |
| <u>White collar group</u> 3 Clerical workers | Clerks, insurance clerks, typists |

Source: Guy Routh, *Occupation and pay in Great Britain 1906-1979* (London, 1980), p.6.

⁷² This change is discussed more fully in R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, pp. 62-69.

⁷³ G. Routh, *Occupation and pay in Great Britain 1906-1979* (London, 1980).

All of the women interviewed for the purposes of this thesis can be defined as middle class'. They all grew up in families headed by non-manual workers. The occupations I have defined as middle-class broadly correspond with those identified by Routh. These encompass three sub-categories of the middle classes: professional, business and white collar. Table 1.2 shows the varying occupations of the heads of households for my own respondents. This demonstrates the vast range of occupations which fall under the umbrella category of 'middle-class'. The occupations varied from professional accountants and engineers higher up the ranks of the middle classes to clerks and cashiers lower down. Whilst sharing some common characteristics, it is possible to identify considerable differences in the outlook and aspirations of the inter-war middle classes. Whilst members of this class shared a degree of affluence which distinguished them from the working classes, they nonetheless formed a diverse social group. Some contemporaries adopted an income criterion by which one could distinguish between the working and the middle classes, taking £250 a year as the amount where the middle class began and the working class ended.⁷⁴ This thesis will show, however, that income levels and cultural values alike varied greatly within the middle classes.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.44.

Table 1.2: The principal occupations of my oral history respondents' fathers.

| Name of respondent | Father's occupation |
|--------------------|--|
| Miss Arthur | Superintendent engineer |
| Miss Brown | Shipping engineer |
| Mrs Bennett | Hospital manager |
| Mrs Chambers | Chartered accountant |
| Mrs Davis | General contractor |
| Mrs Duncan | Headmaster |
| Mrs Dixon | Cotton broker |
| Miss S. Green | Timber merchant |
| Miss M. Green | " |
| Miss Howson | Headmaster |
| Mrs Hickey | Travelling salesman |
| Miss Jones | French polisher/antique furniture restorer |
| Mrs Luscombe | Town Clerk |
| Mrs Matthews | Commission agent |
| Mrs Morris | Cashier (in shipping) |
| Mrs Robb | Sea captain |
| Mrs Robinson | City electrical engineer |
| Mrs Sampson | Accountant |
| Mrs Stevens | Naval architect |
| Mrs Williams | Teacher |

The early decades of the twentieth century saw the middle classes enjoying new heights of prosperity and comfort. The period between the wars saw relatively low taxation, a lowering of prices, and a subsequent growth in middle-class disposable incomes and living standards. Ross McKibbin in his account of the economic fortunes of the middle classes has shown that the period 1923-1938 was one of relative prosperity. For almost all members of the middle classes there was a continuous rise in real income throughout the period, coupled with peculiarly low levels of taxation.⁷⁵ For the majority of the middle classes the period from the late 1920s through until the outbreak of the Second World War was something of a 'golden age'. The families of almost all of the respondents in this study appear to have been spared the worst ravages of the depression of the 1930s. Of my 20 oral history respondents, only two recalled that their families were affected by the economic difficulties of the 1930s.⁷⁶

To conclude this discussion of the inter-war middle classes, it is necessary to make two brief points. Firstly, it must be emphasised that the middle classes were not a homogenous group and throughout this thesis I shall demonstrate the diversity which existed within this section of society. Secondly, as the preceding section has demonstrated, the inter-war middle classes were experiencing a period of relative comfort and prosperity, despite the onslaught of the depression of the 1930s.

'Girls' or 'young women'?

My concern with the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood resulted in conceptual difficulties about how to define the subjects of my study. As John Springhall has noted in his important work on youth in modern Britain: "the central conceptual problem of any [such] historical study is how does one define and delimit

⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.59.

⁷⁶ Miss Green told me how her father's timber business had gone bankrupt during the depression and this had resulted in her family having to move from their home in Wallasey to a smaller house in Liverpool. Mrs Sampson also remembered that at some point during the 1930s her father's accountancy practice experienced difficulties, although she noted that this was never discussed at home.

that stage?"⁷⁷ In the following section I intend to outline this stage of the life-cycle and how I defined it. Elizabeth Roberts described this transitional period for young working-class women in the following terms:

The period... between the ages of about fourteen and twenty-five was distinctive for most girls, bridging as it did childhood and independent adulthood. More women worked for wages during this period than at any other time of their lives. It was also a time for enjoying leisure and of course for getting to know men and possibly finding a husband. But the girl/woman was not totally independent...⁷⁸

Certainly, for young working-class women, leaving school at 14 did generally represent a milestone in their lives, as Rose Gamble recalled in *Chelsea child*:

... when you left school at the end of the term after your fourteenth birthday, childhood ended. It was abrupt and final and your life changed overnight.⁷⁹

The vast majority of working-class women left school at the age of 14 and entered the world of paid employment. The end of schooling also brought with it more symbolic changes in young women's lives, none more powerful than the changes which occurred in dress.

For a young woman this transformation was marked by the putting up of her hair, a clear visual symbol to all that she was no longer a child.⁸⁰ Sally Alexander goes on to suggest that not only did dress mark the transition from child to adult but:

... it also carried the visual weight of sexual difference, and held too the promise of daydreams and drama. Images and identifications acquired and rehearsed in play as she was growing up were elaborated and sustained in the imagination of the young woman with every new pair of shoes or a different outfit.⁸¹

⁷⁷ J. Springhall, *Coming of age: youth and adolescence 1860-1960* (Dublin, 1986).

⁷⁸ E. Roberts, *A woman's place*, p.39.

⁷⁹ R. Gamble, *Chelsea child* (London, 1979), p.122.

⁸⁰ Boys as well as girls underwent this transformation. In Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (Harmondsworth, 1969), Harry Hardcastle's struggle to obtain a long pair of trousers demonstrates the symbolic importance for young men of the transition from boys' to men's dress.

⁸¹ S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', p.256.

These examples demonstrate the significance that was attached to young women leaving school. Similarly, marriage marked another great turning point in young women's lives, clearly ending their youth and conferring adult status which brought with it different responsibilities and aspirations. After marriage, young women's lives were to change dramatically, as shown in oral history interviews.⁸² For working-class girls at least, the period between leaving school and getting married was a distinct stage in their lives, the parameters of which were clearly demarcated by these two life events. However the parameters are not so clear-cut for women from the middle classes, as there was a propensity for them to remain in education until the age of 16, 18 or even 21 if they went on to college or university. Despite the more fluid school-leaving age amongst middle-class women, it still remained a defining point in their lives, and was brought out as a milestone in their subsequent recollections. In these recollections it is possible to see a very distinct change in young women's lives that occurred when they left school at 16 or 18. Leaving school symbolised the end of their childhood and they no longer perceived themselves as 'girls', from this moment onwards, but as young women.⁸³

I felt that it was important to use the terminology that my respondents used themselves. For this reason, I have chosen to use the term 'girl' to refer to the phase between the ages of 14 and leaving school at either 16 or 18.⁸⁴ During the phase between leaving school and getting married, I shall refer to my respondents as 'young women'. This is at variance with the terminology employed by Carol Dyhouse in *Girls growing up in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Dyhouse referred to young single women as 'girls' throughout her study. Similarly, Penny Tinkler, in her work on popular magazines, referred to the subjects of her study as 'girls'. Defending her decision to do so, she stated:

As the descriptions of *Peg's Paper* and *School Friend* reveal, girls' papers targeted a variety of groups including working-class and middle-class schoolgirls, and also young working women employed in factories, mills and

⁸² E. Roberts, *A woman's place*.

⁸³ This matches Alexander's terminology in *ibid*.

⁸⁴ In Chapter Three I have continued to use the term 'girl' to refer to middle-class women in secondary education.

commerce. The term 'girl', as this range suggests, was used quite broadly in periodical publishing, although it principally referred to the unmarried adolescent; wives and mothers were more usually described as 'women'.⁸⁵

My own decision to use the term 'young woman' is a result of my respondents' use of this term to describe themselves as well as its capacity to evoke the transitional nature of this stage of the life-cycle.

Liverpool as the location for the case-study

In this section I wish to discuss my choice of Liverpool as a case-study. It may at first sight seem somewhat surprising to select Liverpool as the location for a study of middle-class life given that existing histories of Liverpool have tended to focus upon the working-class elements of the city.⁸⁶ For the twentieth century at least, more is known about dockers than shipowners. Liverpool is commonly portrayed as a city characterised by casual employment, high levels of unemployment and acute poverty.⁸⁷ The following section will provide a very different account of the history of Liverpool by offering a brief social and economic overview of the city during the inter-war period, highlighting the position of the middle classes in particular.

The paucity of material dealing with Liverpool's middle classes has been noted by those writing on the history of the city. Tony Lane stated that whilst "...there is an abundance of information on the lives of Liverpool's dockland people... the evidence for employers is fragmentary."⁸⁸ This view is echoed by Ron Garnett who identified the tendency of histories of Liverpool to focus on the working-class elements of the city to the neglect of other social classes:

⁸⁵ P. Tinkler, *Constructing girlhood*, p.1.

⁸⁶ P. Ayers, *The Liverpool docklands*, J. Belchem (ed.), *Popular politics, riot and labour: essays in Liverpool history 1790-1940* (Liverpool, 1992), F. Neal, *Sectarian violence: the Liverpool experience, 1819-1914* (Manchester, 1988) and E.L. Taplin, *Liverpool dockers and seamen 1870-1890* (Hull, 1974).

⁸⁷ See: P. Ayers and J. Lambertz, 'Marriage relations, money and domestic violence in working-class Liverpool 1919-1939' in J. Lewis (ed.), *Labour and love*, pp.195-219 and P. Ayers, *The Liverpool docklands*.

⁸⁸ T. Lane, *Liverpool: gateway of empire* (London, 1987), p.54.

Liverpool white-collar society and work has not been given a proper emphasis in studies of the history of the city, despite the fact that Liverpool, after London, was the metropolis for clerical work and financial services mainly associated with banking, insurance and shipping from the late-Victorian age.⁸⁹

This section does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁰ The intention is to view the city from the perspective of the middle classes, providing a narrative that is largely missing from existing accounts.⁹¹

Liverpool's development was largely linked to her situation upon the river Mersey, and her importance as a port. It was upon this base that Liverpool's middle classes established themselves within the city. From the eighteenth century onwards Liverpool's port began to develop. Ships from the West Indies and the American colonies increasingly entered the port, bringing sugar and tobacco. It was this trade which made Liverpool an important trans-atlantic port.⁹² However, it was during the nineteenth century that Liverpool really prospered as a port. By 1851, Liverpool had become the first port of the Empire and was England's second city in terms of commercial importance.⁹³

As the twentieth century dawned, Liverpool remained one of Britain's most important ports. The growth of the port was mirrored by a corresponding increase

⁸⁹ R. Garnett, *Liverpool in the 1930s and the Blitz* (Preston, 1995), p.3.

⁹⁰ For accounts of Liverpool during the inter-war period see: S. Davies, 'Class religion and gender: Liverpool Labour Party and women 1918-1939' in J. Belchem (ed.), *Popular politics, riot and labour*, pp.217-246, S. Marriner, *The economic and social development of Merseyside* (London, 1982) and P.J. Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism: a political and social history of Liverpool, 1868-1939* (Liverpool, 1981).

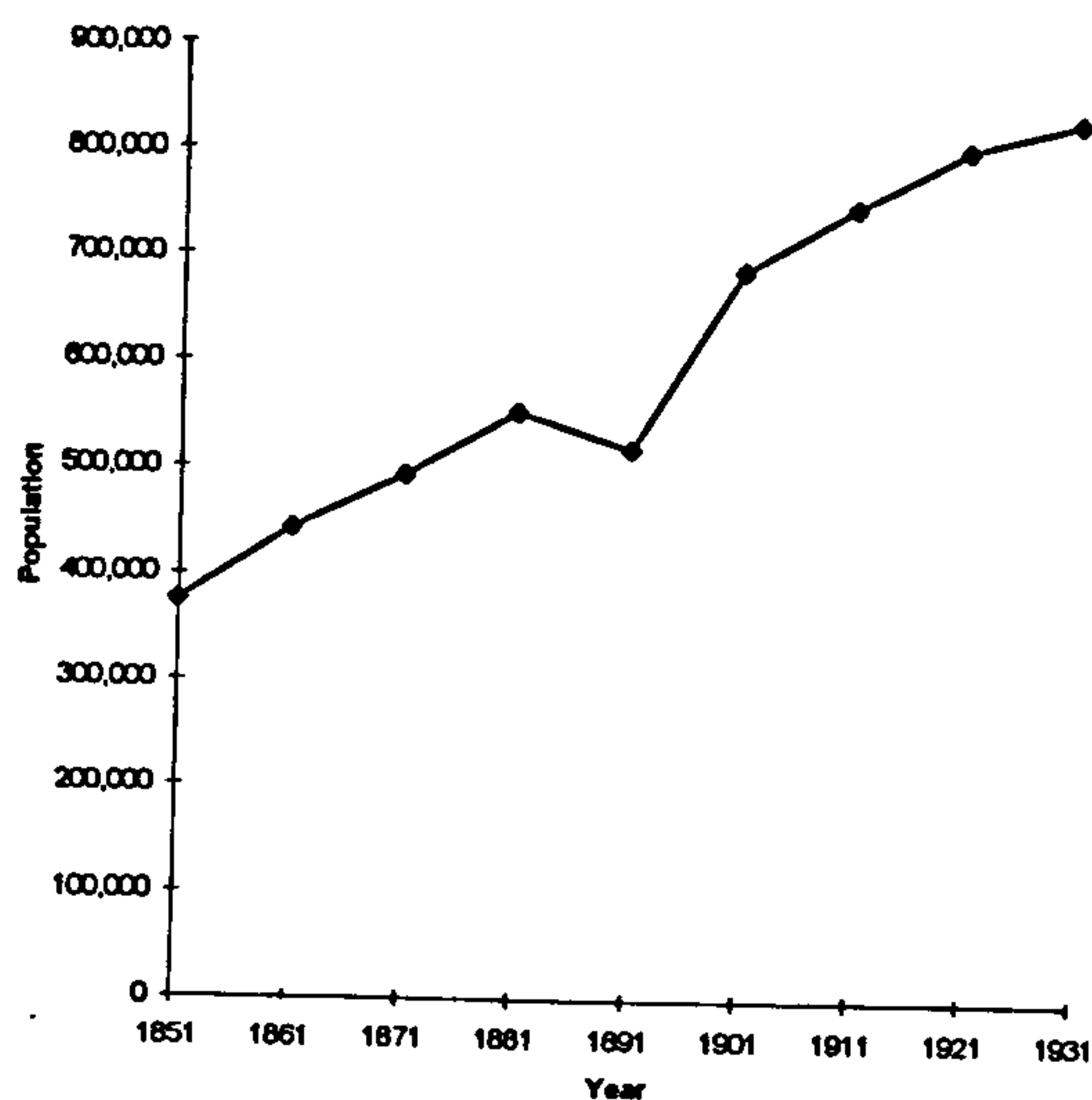
⁹¹ An important exception to this is G. Anderson's work on the service industry in nineteenth century Liverpool. G. Anderson, 'The service occupations of nineteenth century Liverpool' in B.L. Anderson and P.J.M. Stoney (eds.) *Commerce, industry and transport: studies in economic change on Merseyside*, (Liverpool, 1983), pp.77-94.

⁹² J. Langton, 'Liverpool and its hinterland in the late eighteenth century' in B.L. Anderson and P.J.M. Stoney (eds.) *Commerce, industry and transport*, pp.1-25 and M.J. Power, 'The growth of Liverpool' in J. Belchem (ed.), *Popular politics riot and labour*, pp.21-37.

⁹³ For a fuller discussion of the growth of Liverpool see, D. Caradog Jones, *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol. I*, pp.10-38.

in its population.⁹⁴ By 1931, the population of Liverpool had reached 830,517, forming one of the largest conurbations in Britain, stretching from the docks of Garston in the south of the city, to the more genteel suburbs of Waterloo and Crosby in the north. It should be noted here that the focus of this study is the city of Liverpool, and does not take into account the area referred to as Wirral on the opposite bank of the Mersey.

Figure 1.1: The Population of Liverpool, 1851-1931



Source: *Census of population. Figures for County Borough of Liverpool.*

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the city continued to support a great maritime and distribution industry. Its magnificent waterfront buildings provided eloquent testimony to Liverpool's status. Commercial distribution rather than manufacturing dominated Liverpool's economy: out of some 390,570 insured workers on Merseyside in 1932, no fewer than 195,130, or approximately half, were employed in industries associated with shipping, transport and distribution.⁹⁵ The docks were reputed to be amongst the finest in the world, and as late as 1927 they were still being extended.

⁹⁴ This increase is shown in Figure 1.1.

⁹⁵ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.II* (Liverpool, 1934), p.2.

The new Gladstone dock was opened in this year.⁹⁶ Alongside shipping there was also a wider commercial sector in Liverpool, centred on banking and insurance, making the city one of Britain's major financial and insurance centres.⁹⁷ The Royal Liver Insurance company remains testimony to this legacy. It was this Liverpool, based upon trade and commerce, which supported the middle-class population examined in this thesis. Around the 'city', the middle classes worked in shipping, finance and the professions, supported by a pool of clerical and administrative staff who poured in from the suburbs.

At the turn of the twentieth century Liverpool was the second port in Britain.⁹⁸ Despite Liverpool's commercial importance, the city lacked a significant manufacturing base, and industrial activity was mainly concentrated in processing imports such as sugar, tobacco and grain. Such dependence on trade meant extreme vulnerability to recession. By 1914, as Hyde noted, "the high peak of achievement had been reached and passed."⁹⁹ Liverpool's trade dropped both in real terms and from a 38% share of the U.K. total in 1914 to a 25% share by 1931.¹⁰⁰ The major reason for the decline of Liverpool *vis á vis* other British ports was largely her reliance on trade in, and processing of, staple commodities. Coupled with this was a loss of trans-atlantic passenger traffic. However, whilst Liverpool's pre-eminence as a port was under attack, the city's broader commercial base continued to support a relatively affluent local middle-class. Historians are generally agreed that the inter-war middle classes were largely sheltered from the worst effects of the inter-war depression.¹⁰¹ In fact Ross McKibbin noted that:

The *majority* of working men and women in the interwar years were at some moment in their lives genuinely unemployed. The *majority* of the middle

⁹⁶ F.E. Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey: an economic history of a port 1700-1970*, (Newton Abbott, 1971).

⁹⁷ See B.L. Anderson and P.J.M. Stoney (eds.), *Commerce, industry and transport*.

⁹⁸ F.E. Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey*, p.162.

⁹⁹ *ibid.* p.141.

¹⁰⁰ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.II*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁰¹ This is one of the central arguments in R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, pp.50-69.

classes never faced such unemployment at all.¹⁰²

By and large it seems that middle-class employment remained relatively stable on Merseyside, and that Liverpool's middle classes were not as adversely affected by the depression of the 1930s as the city's working-class population. Despite the onset of Liverpool's decline in the 1930s, the city's mercantile and commercial classes remained relatively prosperous. The local unemployment of the 1930s tended to hit those lower down the social scale first and it seems the middle classes were spared the worst horrors of the depression.¹⁰³ The majority of the respondents in this survey were drawn from families associated with shipping or businesses associated with the trade through the docks.¹⁰⁴ Others were drawn from the families of professionals and clerks in both the private and public sectors. Alongside the commercial middle classes were the professionals such as teachers, doctors and lawyers: these groups formed the backbone of Liverpool's inter-war middle classes.

In this thesis I intend to examine in detail the life-styles of young middle-class women during the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter One deals specifically with the methodology which I have employed to study young women's life-styles, central to which has been the use of oral history. Chapter Two provides a contextual account of Liverpool's inter-war middle classes within which the more detailed account of young women's lives may be understood. This chapter highlights the desire amongst the inter-war middle classes to 'keep to their own', a theme which runs throughout the thesis as a whole. Chapter Three considers the educational possibilities open to young middle-class women during the inter-war period. Chapter Four discusses their widening occupational opportunities. Chapters Five and Six are devoted to the leisure activities of the young middle-class woman. Chapter Five concentrates upon activities within the home and family, whilst Chapter Six is more concerned with those activities which took place outside the home. Overall, it is hoped that this thesis will

¹⁰² *ibid.* p.60.

¹⁰³ The effects of inter-war unemployment on Liverpool's labouring population are described in P. Ayers, 'The hidden economy of dockland families', pp.271-290.

¹⁰⁴ In my own oral history sample, a disproportionate number of my respondents came from households in which the head was employed in industries allied to the port of Liverpool. See Table 1.2.

provide a contribution to the previously neglected history of the twentieth-century middle classes.

Chapter One

Who's asking the questions? Using oral history to research young middle-class women's life-styles in the 1920s and 1930s.

In this chapter I propose to discuss the methodology that has been employed in this study of the life-styles of young middle-class women in inter-war Liverpool. Throughout the present study, as in the influential recent surveys of women's lives in working-class communities in the early-twentieth century, extensive use has been made of oral evidence.¹ I have conducted interviews with 20 middle-class women who grew up in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s. In the absence of an alternative pool of readily available source material, oral history has been of paramount importance in uncovering such women's lives and experiences.

The following discussion is divided into three sections. Section one charts the development of oral history from its inception in the 1970s, highlighting the enormous impetus it gave to women's history. Section two looks at the position of oral history in the 1990s, in particular looking at the changing ways in which this method has been adopted by historians, largely as a result of the debates which have emerged surrounding the role of myth in oral testimonies. This section also assesses the impact of feminist literature, both sociological and historical, which has questioned masculine paradigms for interviewing and suggested different techniques and approaches for women interviewing women. Section three details my own experience of interviewing in relation to my research on young middle-class women in inter-war Liverpool, highlighting how my own work fits into the existing framework of oral history and has been influenced by some of the more recent developments.

¹ Examples of such studies include E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984), S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis. London: histories and representations since 1800* (London, 1989), pp.245-271 and J. Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners: an oral history of women pottery workers at work and at home* (Milton Keynes, 1988).

Oral history, 'history from below' and women's history

It is only relatively recently that historians have begun to recognise oral history as a standard research method.² The institutional development of oral history in Britain took place in the 1970s as part of the wider development of the 'history from below' tradition within social history. A series of methodological books and articles appeared arguing for the enormous potential this method had to offer social history as a means of changing the focus of historical enquiry.³ It was asserted that oral history could be used to change the emphasis of traditional historical accounts, as the voice of the rank and file could now be juxtaposed against those in authority.⁴ It was also claimed that oral history offered a voice to the voiceless and had the potential for changing the whole focus of history, by opening up new areas of enquiry such as women's history, the history of childhood and youth and the history of ethnic minorities. Examples of the early work which adopted oral history demonstrate the powerful influence the method was to have in changing the focus of social history.⁵ One of the most important contributions to this field was Jerry White's study of 'Campbell Bunk', a notorious Holloway Street, between the wars.⁶ White's work not only highlighted the internal dynamics of a community characterised by poverty, but also emphasised the importance of the life-cycle in shaping life experience.

The development of women's history has received an enormous boost from the use of oral testimonies. Over the past two decades historians have embraced oral

² This is in direct contrast to the social sciences where the interview method has long been an important research tool.

³ For a fuller discussion of these issues see, P. Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history* (Oxford, 1984 ed.) and T. Lummis, *Listening to history: the authenticity of oral evidence* (London, 1987).

⁴ P. Thompson, *The voice of the past*.

⁵ Such work includes: E. Roberts, *A woman's place*, S. Humphries, *Hooligans or rebels? An oral history of working-class childhood and youth, 1889-1939* (Oxford, 1981) and J. White, *Rothschild buildings: life in an East End tenement block, 1887-1920* (London, 1980).

⁶ J. White, *The worst street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, between the wars* (London, 1986).

history as a means of integrating women's experiences into historical scholarship.⁷ Such an approach is demonstrated in Elizabeth Roberts' seminal work on working-class women's lives, *A woman's place*.⁸ This portrait of the everyday lives of women in three northern towns (Lancaster, Barrow and Preston) remains one of the most comprehensive oral history projects concerned with women's experiences. Not only does it provide a detailed account of the everyday lives of working-class women through childhood, adolescence, work, leisure, marriage and motherhood, but it also led to the establishment of oral history as a respected method through which to uncover women's experiences.

The close relationship between oral history and women's history has resulted in a vast literature on women's lives in the early-twentieth century. A series of texts could be mentioned in this context, all of which have furthered our understanding of women's lives and experiences. Without the use of oral history techniques, Melanie Tebbutt could never have created such a detailed and illuminating account of the role of gossip in women's lives.⁹ Jacqueline Sarsby's account of women in the potteries recounts, in the women's own words, what it was like both at home and at work in the pottery factories. Oral evidence also allowed her to explore in greater depth the importance of mother/daughter relationships in the never ending battle against poverty.¹⁰ Similarly, Carl Chinn's account of the poor of Birmingham gave new insights into some of the more subjective aspects of women's struggles against poverty which could not have been gleaned from the poverty surveys conducted at the turn of the century.¹¹ Through the use of oral testimony, Chinn, like Roberts, highlights the immense role that women had within the home, highlighting the

⁷ The relationship between feminist scholarship and oral history is clearly demonstrated in the editions of *Oral History* which have been devoted entirely to the subject of women's history. See *Oral History*, 5, 2 (1977), and 21, 2 (1993).

⁸ E. Roberts, *A woman's place*.

⁹ M. Tebbutt, *Women's talk? A social history of gossip in working-class neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (Aldershot, 1995).

¹⁰ J. Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners*.

¹¹ C. Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England 1880-1939* (Manchester, 1988).

tremendous control they exercised over both their families and the communities in which they lived.

Oral history has not only allowed historians to recapture the lives of women, but has also changed the focus of historical inquiry. Sally Alexander's work on 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' offered a clear example of this. When she first spoke to her respondents, Alexander asked only about their first jobs. It was only later, when transcribing the interviews, that she noticed "the insistent presence of dress, romance and leisure" in her testimonies.¹² This led her to highlight the importance of oral history in allowing historians to recover the more subjective aspects of women's experiences and in placing women's subjectivity and their own sense of themselves at the centre of historical inquiry.

Feminist historians have made women visible in many areas of history by re-examining existing evidence, but for the recent past oral evidence has extended the range of subjects which can be investigated as well as the depth of the conclusions. The use of oral history has enabled the historian to access aspects of women's experience which have not been recorded in documentary source material. Within my own project, the use of oral evidence allowed me to explore areas such as the importance of female friendships, which would have been extremely difficult to reconstruct from documentary sources. Oral history allows the women interviewed to shape the research agenda by articulating what is important to them, as well as the opportunity to participate in creating their own history by placing their individual life-stories within a collective pattern of women's lives. It also permits historians to explore the ways in which women construct their identities and make sense of the past. A concern to draw attention to aspects of women's lives that have previously been uncharted territory remains at the heart of my own research aims, as the history of middle-class women in the early-twentieth century remains largely undocumented.¹³

¹² S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', pp.245-271.

¹³ An exception to this is C.Dyhouse's, *No distinction of sex? Women in British universities 1890-1939* (London, 1995). However, this work focuses upon young women's experiences of university rather than their life-styles more generally. Some insights into the lives of middle-class women are also to be found in A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950*

The position of oral history in the 1990s

In the following section I intend to chart the ways in which oral history has developed in the 1990s. Over the past decade there has been a shift from the celebration of the method and justification of its potential to a more nuanced understanding of the processes involved in collecting oral testimonies.¹⁴ I intend to explore some of the newer approaches to the methodology which have come to assume a more central place in discussions of oral history.

At the forefront of the recent preoccupations of oral historians is the extent to which myth has a role in shaping oral testimonies.¹⁵ Oral life-stories are not unmediated accounts of the past. Memory selects, omits and distorts, and oral testimonies are remembered and told from the viewpoint of the present. Such testimonies make use of myth in order to shape and order experience. As Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson have observed in *The myths we live by*:

All recollections are told from a standpoint in the present. In telling, they need to make sense of the past. That demands a selecting, ordering, and simplifying, a construction of coherent narrative whose logic works to draw the lifestory towards the fable.¹⁶

Samuel and Thompson argue for the power of the subjective in individual testimonies which historians have tried to ignore for so long, despite the fact that myth is an important component of human thought. This focus on myth has led to an awareness of the way in which personal history is informed and shaped by symbolic and nostalgic images of the past. A good example of this is evident in the research conducted on urban slums. Often in reminiscences, these areas take on the character of an 'urban pastoral'. Here slums which were previously referred to as areas of acute poverty and deprivation are remembered with a great deal of affection. They

(Nairn, 1991).

¹⁴ This is reflected in the recent collection of essays which deal with oral history methodology. R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.), *The oral history reader* (London, 1998).

¹⁵ The role of myth in oral testimony is discussed more fully in R. Samuel and P. Thompson (eds.), *The myths we live by* (London, 1990).

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.8.

are described as warm and friendly neighbourhoods where everyone knew each other, helped each other in times of difficulty, and which were free of the modern evils of crime and drugs.¹⁷ Whilst historians should question the truth of such recollections and should be cautious in presenting an overly sentimental account of the past, they should also be looking at the importance of such memories and how they came to assume such significance in recollections of the past. However, in identifying myth, one should also be aware that a large proportion of the rich detail in oral testimonies remains objectively valid, and can be verified alongside other sources.¹⁸

In acknowledging the role of myth, historians have begun to rethink the ways in which oral testimonies are interpreted. As a result, the concerns of oral historians have shifted over recent years. As Samuel and Thompson have remarked, "When we listen now to a life story, the manner of its telling seems to us as important as what is told."¹⁹ Oral historians have developed a new sensitivity to their accounts: the manner in which a story is told, the nuances that go with it, and even what is not said, all have an importance in the interpretation of oral accounts.

Within social history as a whole, feminist historians have been at the forefront of the trend to look at oral testimonies more critically. Whilst acknowledging the enormous potential this method has to offer those committed to conducting research "by, about and for women", feminist historians have also highlighted many aspects of the interview process as problematic. As a result feminist historians who have embraced oral history have both adapted and modified the method to meet their own ends, arguing that traditional oral history methodology did not serve well the interests of women's history. Such an approach is exemplified in Sherna Gluck and Deidre Patai's *Women's words: the feminist practice of oral history*. In their introduction, Gluck and Patai argued that: "We have moved beyond celebration of women's experience to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of doing feminist oral

¹⁷ *ibid.* pp.8-9.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.6.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.2.

history."²⁰ Oral testimonies have been placed under scrutiny from feminist historians who have argued that in order to realise the full potential of the method, they need to be put under closer and more critical analysis. Feminist scholars have argued that in order to hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo in order to hear both the 'dominant and muted channels'.²¹ Indeed, feminist oral historians have tended to attach more importance within interviews to the subjective realm of meaning, whereas earlier oral historians were more concerned to question respondents merely on activities and events, ignoring the meanings behind them. As Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack have argued:

Realising the potential of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the process is on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint.²²

One of the major developments in oral history is, therefore, that historians have begun to listen more carefully to what is said and that the material is not just taken at face value. Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack highlighted this from their own experience of interviewing women. They point to the fact that we should listen as closely to what is not said as to the material that we are presented with:

We need to hear what women implied, suggested and started to say, but didn't. We need to interpret their pauses and when it happens their unwillingness or inability to respond.²³

Judy Giles in her work on women and domesticity between the wars has synthesised many of the points raised in the sociological literature regarding the unique position of women interviewing other women, as well as recognising the role of myth in her own testimonies. Giles suggested that as historians concerned with women's experience we need to look at oral testimonies in a way that places the subjective at

²⁰ S.Gluck and D.Patai (eds.), *Women's words: the feminist practice of oral history* (London, 1991), p.3.

²¹ K.Anderson and D.Jack 'Learning to listen:interview techniques and analyses' in S.Gluck and D. Patai (eds.), *Women's words*, p.11.

²² *ibid.* p.23.

²³ *ibid.* p.17.

the forefront rather than merely seeing oral testimony in terms of the collection of verifiable facts. She pointed out:

In reconstructing histories of women's 'private' lives in which subjectivity and consciousness are foregrounded it becomes imperative to read and hear the stories women tell us, but we need to do so in ways that locate those stories and the events of those lives firmly in the historical and social contexts that produced them... whilst we need to be aware that any historical reconstruction requires negotiation between the demand for myths and the demand for fact and truth, we should resist the impulse to seek resolution and synthesis in carefully balanced accounts.²⁴

In her work, she demonstrated how oral evidence can be used to explore the meanings attached to certain events or activities rather than merely to collect facts in order to verify them alongside documentary evidence. Her study is concerned with the meanings and experiences of home and privacy for women prior to 1950. In particular, she is interested in the ways in which women's understandings of themselves in relation to the home and private sphere shaped the versions of femininity available to them. In order to understand and explain the centrality of domesticity to women's experience, the subjective aspects of oral history become of central importance.

Judy Giles clearly demonstrated the way in which elements of myth became discernible in the oral testimonies she collected, noting that "A recurrent pattern of narration was to set up a contrast between a corrupt present and the 'good old days'".²⁵ She argued that whilst this was not selected consciously as a framework for remembering the past, its importance lay in establishing a means of recounting the past in a form that was understandable in the present. Myth also served to preserve respectability in women's life-stories. 'Respectability' was something that the women she interviewed went to great lengths to preserve, and adhering to the 'good old days' model of the past helped to signal their own adherence to respectable values. As Giles noticed:

The selective nature of the memory to 'forget' the inevitable moments of

²⁴ J. Giles, *Women, identity and private life in Britain, 1900-1950* (London, 1995), p.10.

²⁵ J. Giles, "'Playing hard to get": working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain 1918-1940', *Women's History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), p.244.

conflict, dissatisfaction, resentment, fatigue and boredom suggests the high level of investment in adhering to respectable values and the successful naturalisation of these 'negative' emotions as unfeminine, irresponsible and immature.²⁶

The approach adopted by Judy Giles is very similar to that used by Joan Sangster.²⁷ In her research into women's involvement in a major textile strike in Peterborough, Canada, in 1937, Sangster has emphasised the need for historians to take full account of issues which have been of long standing concern to other social scientists. In particular she believes, in much the same way as Judy Giles, that we need to pay much greater attention to processes of remembering and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past. As she pointed out:

Rather than seeing the creation of oral sources as biased or problematic, this creative process can become a central focus for our research: we need to explore the construction of women's historical memory.²⁸

Whilst my primary aim is to use my oral testimonies to provide a contribution to the previously neglected history of young middle-class women, I also hope to address some of these ideas and within each chapter I intend to provide a short section in which I consider elements of myth in my oral history testimonies. I also intend to identify recurrent patterns of story-telling within middle-class women's accounts of growing up in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s.

My own experience of interviewing

As stated earlier, my own decision to adopt interviewing as my principal research method stems from a recognition of the potential oral history offers to uncover women's experiences.²⁹ However, it should be pointed out at this stage that although oral history is the principal research method used in this thesis, it is used alongside

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ J. Sangster, 'Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history', *Women's History Review*, 3, 1 (1994), pp.5-28.

²⁸ *ibid.* p.6.

²⁹ Establishing my work within the 'history from below' tradition.

a variety of written sources. These can be broadly classified into two main groups: firstly, contemporary social surveys and journalism, and secondly, novels, diaries and autobiographies.

I have made extensive use of the three volumes of *The Social survey of Merseyside*.³⁰ Published in 1934, this provides an unrivalled account of life on Merseyside during the inter-war period. This includes a wealth of material on areas such as population distribution, homes and housing, educational opportunities, employment and unemployment, and leisure activities.³¹ Although primarily concerned with the lives of the working classes, references to middle-class life and culture may also be found. Throughout this thesis, frequent references are made to this work and its contribution to our understanding of the lives of young women on Merseyside cannot be under-estimated. Volume III, which dealt with the leisure activities of the Merseyside population, proved particularly useful in drawing a picture of the social lives of young women.³² Throughout this thesis considerable use has also been made of national surveys which detailed the lives of young women from the middle classes during the 1920s and 1930s.³³ The work of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby has been particularly useful in providing insights into the changing role and status of women in inter-war society.

Novels, diaries and autobiographies have also been examined to uncover details of middle-class life between the wars. Chapter Three provides a short overview of middle-class life during the inter-war period in which I have drawn upon contemporary novels, diaries and autobiographies alongside a series of extracts from my own oral testimonies. The fictional diaries of E.M Delafield and Mrs Miniver,

³⁰ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, 3 Vols* (Liverpool, 1934).

³¹ Vol.I deals with the geographical region and history, Vol.II examines employment and unemployment in the region and Vol.III looks at leisure and social life.

³² D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol. III*.

³³ Examples include: J. Beauchamp, *Women who work* (London, 1937), V. Brittain, *Women's work in modern Britain* (London, 1928) and R. Strachey (ed.), *Our freedom and its results* (London, 1936).

provide interesting insights into the everyday lives of the inter-war middle classes.³⁴ Although autobiographies written by members of the middle classes are relatively rare, it has been possible to locate several which deal specifically with the experiences of young women growing up during the 1920s and 1930s.³⁵ during the inter-war period. Such texts have proved useful in providing contemporary comment on the changing status of women in society.

However, written sources only provide a partial picture of the lives of middle-class women between the wars. Through the use of oral evidence I have been able to collect more detailed qualitative material which has enabled me to paint a much fuller picture of the lives of young middle-class women in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the retrospective interview is often the only source of information on the more private and subjective aspects of women's lives, and these are areas which are of central importance to my own research. Moreover, the use of oral history methods allowed the women interviewed to help to shape the research agenda by articulating what was important to them.

In the remainder of this chapter, I intend to provide an account of my own oral history methodology, detailing the principal stages of the research process from finding respondents through to producing the transcripts. I also intend to address some of the wider issues that have been highlighted in feminist sociological literature concerned with the processes of women interviewing women. In particular, I want to highlight those aspects of interviewing where I perceived there to be a lack of fit between the prescribed theory and my own practice in conducting interviews. If we are to 'listen more carefully' to our oral testimonies in order to address notions of subjectivity and myth in oral accounts then more attention needs to be paid to interview techniques, and a full and frank account of all stages of the interview process is required. This involves dealing with many issues that are not addressed

³⁴ E.M.Delafield, *The diary of a provincial lady* (London, 1984). First published in 1930, and J. Struther, *Mrs Miniver* (London, 1989). First published in 1939.

³⁵ Examples include, E.Whiteing, '*Anyone for tennis?*' *Growing up in Wallington between the wars* (London, 1979), F. Donaldson, *Child of the twenties* (London, 1986), E. Elias, *On Sundays we wore white* (London, 1978), M.V. Hughes, *A London family between the wars* (Oxford, 1940) and J. Wayne, *The purple dress: growing up in the 1930s*. (London, 1979).

in textbooks dealing with oral history methodology. This necessitates greater dependence upon the sociological literature which deals with some of the problems encountered when using interviews as a research method.³⁶

Selecting respondents and conducting the interviews

Twenty women were interviewed, all of whom grew up in and around Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s. I also spoke and corresponded with another six women, although not in quite so much depth.³⁷ Appendix 1 contains a list of my respondents and short biographical details for each of them. It should also be noted here that pseudonyms are used throughout the text. I had fairly broad criteria for selecting my respondents. Essentially, they can all be broadly classified as middle-class, largely on the basis of their fathers' occupations.³⁸ As I have demonstrated in the Introduction, the inter-war middle classes were a diverse group, which included a large range of occupations from high-ranking managers and professionals at its upper levels to clerks and cashiers lower down.³⁹ The thesis also draws upon two interviews conducted with women from working-class backgrounds. One of the initial aims of this thesis was to conduct a much broader study of the implications of class upon young women's lives. This proved to be too ambitious a project for a doctoral thesis and I decided to concentrate upon young middle-class women, using the 'history from below' literature as a point of comparison.⁴⁰ The respondents interviewed in this study were contacted as follows: four through advertisements distributed to various women's groups in the region; three through personal contacts; three through the old girls' associations of local schools; four through the University of Liverpool Alumni

³⁶ In particular I am referring to A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms' in H. Roberts (ed.), *Doing feminist research* (London, 1981), p.31.

³⁷ I have also made use of two interviews conducted with working-class women who grew up in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s.

³⁸ Details are provided in the Introduction.

³⁹ The diverse nature of my own sample is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

⁴⁰ The two interviews with young working-class women are discussed in the chapters on leisure.

magazine, and the remaining six through introductions by previous respondents.

One of the most common criticisms levelled at oral history is that not enough attention is paid to the question of sampling. Critics argue that more effort should be made to apply the more rigorous sampling techniques found in the social sciences.⁴¹ However, this is an area where textbook prescriptions quickly show themselves to be impractical. As Trevor Lummis has pointed out, unlike sociology, where samples can in theory be drawn from all sectors of the population, oral history can only draw its sample from the remaining living population, and in this respect no oral history sample can ever approach the random sampling techniques of the social sciences.⁴² Indeed, even Paul Thompson's research upon which *The Edwardians* was based, one of the most ambitious oral history projects to date, does not purport to be truly representative.⁴³ My response to this potential criticism would be that my own work does not profess to offer a definitive account of young middle-class women's life-styles, rather it aims to offer a detailed picture of the lives of a small group of women, with the aim of raising as many questions as it answers.

Having contacted women who met the stated criteria, I arranged a preliminary interview with each respondent.⁴⁴ In these first sessions I attempted to acquire an overall picture of their life histories and various important points in their life-cycles. This opening interview was of great importance in establishing the kind of relationship that fostered relaxed, semi-structured subsequent interviews. These

⁴¹ This is discussed more fully in T. Lummis, *Listening to history*.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ P. Thompson, *The Edwardians: the remaking of British society* (London, 1992), first published in 1975. This remains, to date, one of the largest oral history projects ever undertaken in Britain. It involved the interviewing of some 444 Edwardians born between 1872 and 1906. In order to select as representative a sample as possible of the Edwardian population, Thompson devised a 'quota sample' based on the 1911 census.

⁴⁴ All interviews were recorded on a Sony professional tape recorder, with a separate microphone. This is the equipment recommended for use by the Oral History Society. In order to make the interviews as informal as possible, I often avoided the direct use of the term 'interview'. I refrained from asking "Can I come and interview you?" Instead, I asked "Could I come and see you?" or "Would you be willing to meet me and tell me more about this?" I felt that this more informal language made my respondents feel more at ease and less apprehensive about the prospect of being "interviewed."

interviews were informed by feminist sociological literature which has dealt with the interview method. Understanding the intricate dynamics of the interview process has been a primary concern of British sociological literature, particularly that written from a feminist perspective.⁴⁵ Such literature is critical of 'hierarchical interviewing models' for women interviewing women and advocates a more reciprocal approach.⁴⁶ In particular, feminist sociologists have highlighted the gap between textbook recipes for interviewing and their own experiences as interviewers involved in social research. Ann Oakley in her methodological account of interviewing women as part of a study of women and childbirth suggested that masculine paradigms of traditional interviewing create problems for women researchers interested in women's experiences.⁴⁷ She argued that research reports tend only to document half of the story of conducting interviews, noting that:

Some issues on which research reports do not usually comment are: social/personal characteristics of those doing the interviewing; interviewees' feelings about being interviewed and about the interview; interviewers' feelings about interviewees; and quality of interviewer-interviewee interaction; hospitality offered by interviewees to interviewers; attempts by interviewees to use interviewers as sources of information and the extension of interviewer-interviewee encounters into more broadly-based social relationships.⁴⁸

Within this section I intend to address many of these issues as I feel that they are of immense importance in understanding the intricate dynamics of the process of conducting oral history interviews.

⁴⁵ Important contributions to these debates include: A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms', pp.30-61, J. Finch, '"It's great to have someone to talk to": the ethics and politics of interviewing women' in H. Roberts (ed.), *Social researching, politics, problems, practice* (London, 1984), pp.70-87 and P. Cotterill, 'Interviewing women: issues of friendship, vulnerability and power', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15, 5/6 (1992), pp.593-606.

⁴⁶ This is one of the central arguments in Ann Oakley's article, 'Interviewing women'.

⁴⁷ In referring to masculine paradigms, Oakley is describing an approach to interviewing in which the power relations are very strictly defined, a situation whereby the interviewer asks the questions and the respondent submissively answers them. Oakley argues that such an approach is unhelpful as a model for women interviewing women as it is not only easier but more productive to elicit information when the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is less hierarchical.

⁴⁸ A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women', p.31.

All of my interviews, with the exception of one preliminary interview, were conducted in the interviewees' own homes, where it is widely assumed that respondents will be most relaxed.⁴⁹ All of the women were interviewed alone. The husbands of married women were never present during the interviews.⁵⁰ The degree to which the presence of a husband would distort the interview content is disputable, but I felt that the one-to-one interview was the most relaxed and informal situation.

After the preliminary interview with each respondent I asked if I might conduct a second interview. This never posed a problem. I usually left a short time gap between interviews, which allowed me to transcribe and digest the material collected in the previous interview as well as allowing my respondents time to reflect on aspects of their lives that had perhaps lain dormant for many years. The second interview, usually spanning two or three hours, in almost all cases prompted another session of a similar length.

Whilst I was informed by Oakley's reciprocal approach to interviewing I still maintained overall 'control' of the interview. I guided the discussion using a list of prompts and attempted to retain the focus of the interviews throughout. These in-depth sessions took the form of semi-structured interviews in which respondents were encouraged to talk freely around my list of prompts rather than to give single answers to a list of questions.⁵¹ My own concern to learn more about the processes of change that were taking place in young women's lives during the transition to womanhood, as well as the more subjective aspects of this stage of the life-cycle, meant that the type of 'fact finding' interview techniques suggested by Thompson et

⁴⁹ See P. Thompson, *The voice of the past*, p.174 and T. Lummis, *Listening to history*, p.66.

⁵⁰ I was especially keen to interview all of my respondents alone as I felt the presence of a third party, particularly a husband, would seriously affect the dynamics of the interview. On one occasion a husband returned during the interview and joined us. From this point onwards, the interview changed dramatically, as he began to offer his own recollections and ultimately 'hi-jacked' the interview completely. For a fuller discussion of the presence of a third party in oral history interviews see Bridget Macey, 'Social dynamics of oral history making: women's experiences of wartime' in *Oral History*, 19, 2 (1991), pp.42-48.

⁵¹ Of central importance in creating a relaxed interview environment was placing the tape recorder in an unobtrusive position.

al. in the early oral history textbooks proved unhelpful.⁵² My respondents were asked open-ended questions about various aspects of their lives prior to World War Two. Topics covered included relationships with parents, schooling, early experiences of work, leisure and courtship.

I was more concerned to introduce themes and issues than to prescribe rigid questions. The advantage of this approach was to allow my respondents to guide me as to what was important to them. This occurred throughout the interviews. One such example included the material collected on young women's involvement in the Women's League of Health and Beauty, a subject which did not feature in my own initial list of prompts. I believed the kind of information I was seeking about perceptions, experiences and values was most likely to be gathered by allowing women the opportunity to select and tell their own stories.⁵³

When my respondents were first contacted, I sometimes received the response, "Oh I don't know if I can help you really, I don't remember much." They almost all expressed surprise that they could actually be 'of use', and that their memories were valid and worthy of recording. After hearing this on a number of occasions, I was ready to allay such worries by saying that all my respondents told me that and yet I never failed to spend less than two hours with them!

One of the major advantages of adopting a flexible approach to interviewing is the degree of informality it brings to the interviews. It also reduces the problem of reticence on certain subjects. Oral historians have noted the difficulties in obtaining information on taboo or sensitive issues, arguing that oral history is not readily designed to extract this type of information.⁵⁴ With this in mind, I anticipated difficulties in obtaining information on the more personal aspects of

⁵² P. Thompson, *The voice of the past*.

⁵³ The question of copyright has come to prominence amongst oral historians in recent years. It is now considered ethical practice to obtain consent from respondents to use their testimonies for the purposes of research and in the dissemination of research findings. The copyright form used in the course of my own project is reproduced in Appendix 2.

⁵⁴ See: P. Thompson, *The voice of the past*. Also, in *A woman's place*, p.97, Elizabeth Roberts noted with reference to information on abortion that the evidence she collected on this subject was entirely from her Preston sample, as the interviews in Barrow and Lancaster did not include questions on it and no information was volunteered.

sexuality and in particular on issues such as pre-marital sex. Through the use of informal, semi-structured interviews, I was able to lead my respondents to volunteer quite sensitive information which oral history textbooks suggest would normally be taboo. I found it relatively easy to raise these issues as they often arose naturally out of what was already being offered.⁵⁵

Who's asking the questions? Power and control in the interview

Amongst many leading oral historians, there is a strong notion that the researcher must be in control of the interview. This assumes that researchers will adopt the hierarchical approach to interviewing which I have already identified as being particularly unsuited to my own research aims. Feminist sociological literature dealing with the question of power and control when women interview other women sometimes assumes that a rapport develops which is based upon their shared identities as women.⁵⁶ This is clearly demonstrated by Janet Finch who suggested that women's shared position and gender socialisation reduces social distance and facilitates talk between them. Finch argued:

... being 'placed' as a woman has the additional dimension of shared structural experience and personal identification which is, in my view, central to the special character of the woman to woman interview.⁵⁷

The problem with Finch's analysis of interviewing is that while all women share important experiences as a consequence of their gender, these are not sufficient to over-ride structural barriers of race, class and age. It is too simplistic to assume that all women identify with each other on the basis of gender alone. From my own experience of interviewing, I found that age proved to be far more instrumental in determining my relationship with my respondents than the feeling of 'sisterhood.' I interviewed one very prominent figure in the local academic community, who had set

⁵⁵ In some instances this included information on sexual activity and lesbianism which has not been included in the thesis.

⁵⁶ Important contributions to this debate include: A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women' and J. Finch, "'It's great to have someone to talk to'".

⁵⁷ J. Finch, "'It's great to have someone to talk to'", p.78.

her own agenda for the interview and actually asked me more questions than I asked her. Her age and status allowed her to, at times, 'lead' the interview. On the whole, however, I felt that whilst age differences may have affected the dynamics of the interviews, they did not severely impede my ability to elicit information from my respondents. My role as a young student interested in learning more about young women in a past era enabled me to develop a relationship which, largely based around notions of 'then' and 'now' as my respondents attempted to recall their lives in their teens and early twenties, generated both interest and enthusiasm in my research questions.

In short, I do not feel that it necessarily followed that the 'best' information was elicited just because my respondents and I shared the same gender identity. Moreover, oral history will usually carry with it an age barrier, and it would be ludicrous to assume that this should deter researchers from conducting interviews. As long as there is some kind of empathy between the researcher and the respondent, the fact that they come from widely different social backgrounds should not affect value of the testimony collected, as long as the relationship is explored in depth so that the analysis can be assessed likewise.

While it is vital to strike up a rapport based around the research, how far should this go? As an oral historian, how much should one reveal about oneself?⁵⁸ I have always answered questions that I have been asked about my interest in the subject and given the reasons why I was doing this research, what gave me the idea for such a project and how it fitted into a wider historical literature. To have not answered these questions would have been counter-productive, if not impossible. I felt that I got more detailed responses from my respondents when I told them in detail what I was doing and why. It provided my respondents with a context for why I was visiting them and asking them questions, rather than merely placating them with some brief, but inadequate, explanation about wanting to 'learn about the past'. It also made me think more critically about what I was doing, and why. My respondents challenged me and made me think about my work in new and stimulating ways. I am

⁵⁸ Traditional accounts of oral history methodology advocate that the interviewer should reveal as little as possible about him or herself. This is certainly the position adopted by P. Thompson in *The voice of the past*.

certainly not convinced that this had a detrimental effect on the respondents' testimonies.

Within the sociological literature on interview methods, attention has recently been paid to the possibility of friendships developing between researchers and respondents. My final session with my respondents often caused some anxiety, particularly as I had done such in-depth interviews, often visiting as many as five times. Should we, as historians, have an obligation to think more about the way in which we walk into our respondents' lives, often in a very intrusive manner, and then just walk out again? Related to this is the issue of whether it is desirable to remain friends with our respondents. A common reply when I left a respondent's home was: "When are you coming back again?" When the final session with a respondent was over, this proved to be quite a poignant question for me. I was interested to know if other historians have had to wrestle with this issue, but found no mention of it in published works by oral historians. Again the sociological literature proved useful. Pamela Cotterill, through her research on relationships between women, found that in repeated interviewing:

... the personal relationship between interviewer and interviewee [develops] to a point where a private dialogue results and frequently leads to what Oakley calls a 'transition to friendship'.⁵⁹

Oakley's experiences related to conducting very intense interviews with women. The very nature of her research with women on their experiences of childbirth may have led her to form closer relationships than are usual, but she found that as the interviews progressed the boundaries between respondent and friend became blurred. She found her respondents often phoned her to find out when she was coming back again and some four years after the conclusion of her research project, she was still in touch with more than a third of the women she interviewed.⁶⁰ Through lack of time, I did not keep in regular contact with all of my own respondents, but there are a few with whom I do keep in touch, mainly through letters and postcards.

⁵⁹ P. Cotterill, 'Interviewing women', p.596.

⁶⁰ A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women', p.46.

Transcribing and analysing the interviews

Whilst the 'document' produced in an oral history interview is the recorded tape, most researchers work on transcripts of their interviews. One of the most important questions I had to consider when I started transcribing my tapes was whether to produce complete or edited transcripts. After careful consideration, it seemed sensible to produce fairly full transcripts which included almost everything that was said during the interviews.⁶¹ This ensured that material that I might not initially have considered to be relevant to my research could be assessed later. Only severe digressions were omitted from the transcripts. In transcribing the interviews the aim was to produce transcripts that were as authentic as possible, capturing the tone of the interviews and the nuances of the spoken word. Of course the spoken word does not have the same logical pattern as the written word. In natural speech there is much more repetition, sentences are grammatically incorrect and there are frequent digressions. The transcripts included colloquial phrases such as "you know" and "I said." Punctuation was governed by the flow of the speech rather than the conventions of written prose. Although such transcripts do not follow the conventions of written English they do capture more of the 'feel' of the interviews and the manner in which the stories were told. Pauses, whispers and laughter were indicated throughout the transcripts.

I began by reading each individual transcript in order to gain a clear understanding of the respondent's family background and class position. I also looked at the overall pattern of the respondent's life-history, identifying significant events such as starting work and getting married. I then sifted through each interview, picking out themes which could be incorporated within my empirical chapters on education, work and leisure. Having identified key themes I then drew together relevant passages from the full set of interviews in order to gain a fuller picture of each topic. I was then in a position to develop an analysis of the key themes present

⁶¹ The majority of the transcripts were done by myself and I felt that this enabled me to get to know my material in detail. However as this was a very time consuming and laborious task, I did have some help in this. A number of the tapes were transcribed by an audio-typist, which meant that I did not feel I knew those tapes as well. I felt that I had to listen to those again, to familiarise myself with the material.

in each chapter. I was concerned to identify both broad trends and elements of diversity within my data. For example, in the analysis of sporting activities in Chapter Six, it soon became clear that playing tennis was a popular pursuit amongst the women in my sample. However, the settings in which they played tennis, and the social relationships which this engendered, varied widely.

The bulk of my analysis is therefore concerned with mapping out patterns of behaviour among young middle-class women. However, in analysing the transcripts, I also looked for patterns of narration and elements of 'myth'. It became clear that throughout the testimonies that I collected, a powerful and recurring contrast was drawn between 'the good old days', in which morality and respect for others were secure, and the present, which was commonly characterised as disorderly and immoral. For example, in accounts of courtship a common claim was that young people were more 'chaste' in 'their day'. Similarly, almost all of my respondents told me that young women simply did not go into public houses during their youth. They were considered strictly 'taboo' for 'nice' young ladies at this time. These sweeping statements may in part reflect the desire among my respondents to contrast their own experiences with those of young people in the more liberal 1990s. In the same way as Judy Giles, I felt that this mode of storytelling was a means through which my respondents could confirm their own respectability by portraying the inter-war decades as an era in which young women behaved in a more respectable fashion.⁶²

By analysing the transcript of the first interview with each respondent I was able to ensure that any significant gaps in their life-stories were plugged in subsequent interviews. I was also able to refine my list of prompts to take account of new themes which emerged during the course of the first batch of interviews. This was a continuous process. My own sense of the key themes in my project was continually adapted in the light of my respondents' testimonies. I also found that as the rapport between myself and my respondents grew over the course of repeated interviewing, I was able to gather more detailed information on sensitive topics such as young women's use of public-houses. Further questioning revealed that some of my respondents did frequent public-houses prior to marriage albeit only when they were

⁶² J. Giles, 'Playing hard to get.'

accompanied by young men. Moreover, many of my respondents frequented roadhouses. These were effectively public-houses for motorists which spread in the 1930s as a result of the growing popularity of motoring. This topic is explored in more depth in Chapter Six.

Conclusions

To conclude, this chapter has demonstrated the close relationship which exists between oral history and women's history. This relationship illustrates the enormous potential oral history has offered (and continues to offer) our understanding of women's past experiences. Sheila Rowbotham, in her recent survey of the history of women over the past century, notes the close relationship that has developed between women's history and oral testimony:

The growth of women's history in the last twenty five years has fused personal memories and oral history, shifting the focus of interest and highlighting women's experience.⁶³

The relationship has not only been instrumental in opening up the field of women's history and uncovering women's experience, but it has also made historians look more closely at oral history methodology. Feminist historians have been at the forefront of the movement to problematise certain aspects of the method and in thinking about the ways in which we as historians can exploit the method to its full potential. I personally found the feminist sociological and historical literature which advocated the use of semi-structured interviews particularly useful in my own project. My intention within the empirical chapters of this thesis is to use oral history as an important contribution to the previously neglected experiences of young middle-class women in inter-war Liverpool. Certainly, the account of young middle-class women's lives which follows would not have been possible without the use of oral evidence. However, I also intend to draw upon the more recent literature which has alerted our attention to the ways in which, as oral historians, we might use oral history techniques to explore the construction of historical memory.

⁶³ S. Rowbotham, *A century of women: the history of women in Britain and the United States* (Harmondsworth, 1997), p.3.

Chapter Two

Liverpool's middle classes during the 1920s and 1930s: An overview.

In the Introduction to this thesis I provided a basic account of the inter-war middle classes, describing their composition, numbers and economic fortunes. This chapter is more thematic. It explores the life-styles of the middle classes more generally and considers the homes and communities in which they lived; their family lives and relationships; the extent to which they kept servants; and finally, the place of young single women within the homes of the middle classes. Alan A. Jackson has claimed that it is possible to identify a high degree of homogeneity within the middle classes in terms of their life-styles and cultural and social values.¹ My own research suggests that whilst it is possible to find some important common elements in middle-class life-styles, considerable distinctions nonetheless existed within this section of society. The home-centred life-styles of the inter-war middle classes and the exclusive nature of their social networks are recurring themes in this thesis. Nonetheless, the experiences of young middle-class women in inter-war Liverpool were far from uniform, and oral testimonies reveal the subtle yet profound differences within the middle classes, as well as highlighting their shared values.

This chapter will provide a backdrop to our understanding of young middle-class women's lives in inter-war Liverpool. By addressing themes such as the residential location of Liverpool's middle classes and the broad pattern of their cultural lives, this chapter demonstrates some of the most important shared characteristics of middle-class life-styles, such as the importance of home and family-centred activities and the common desire to socialise within predominantly middle-class circles or 'keep to one's own'.

¹ Jackson argues that the middle classes were distinguished not so much by income levels as by a common life-style and adherence to a set of shared attitudes, habits and tastes. A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991).

Defining communities

Before moving on to look in more detail at the nature of middle-class communities in inter-war Liverpool, it is first necessary to look more closely at the notion of 'community'. Attempts by historians to define the term 'community' have proved problematic. At its most basic level, the term has been used to describe a physical area such as a street or neighbourhood. However, it is commonly used to imply much more than just mere physical space. It is used to include elements of identification with a particular street or set of streets; a sense of belonging and of being a 'part of' an area. The notion of 'community' has become an integral part of the literature on working-class life and it is from this that much of our understanding comes.²

With all its connotations of sociability and neighbourliness, the term 'community' has almost taken on a second meaning. The faceless anonymity of the middle-class suburb has been placed in direct contrast with the warmth and gregariousness of working-class districts. Numerous texts have provided us with fascinating insights into the internal dynamics of working-class communities in the early part of the twentieth century. The work of Pat Ayers on dockland Liverpool provides us with a classic account of the 'warm and cosy' working-class neighbourhood, based upon mutual support networks. In her research on Liverpool's dockland community in and around Athol Street, Ayers pointed out that, "By the eve of World War I, a closely knit community had evolved, incorporating strong kinship and neighbourhood links".³

Similarly, in Andrew Davies' account of the working classes of Salford and Manchester one is immediately struck by the importance of the street as the focal point for all members of the community. In examining a variety of street activities, Davies concluded that they:

² J. Bourke, *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960: gender, class and ethnicity* (London, 1994).

³ P. Ayers, *The Liverpool docklands: life and work in Athol street* (Liverpool, n.d), p.8.

... together formed an important element of working-class culture, ranging from the spectacular to the mundane, from impressive displays of street theatre in the annual Whit walks to the everyday pastimes like 'sitting out' on the doorsteps and talking to the neighbours. Street customs were an important feature of the communal life of working-class districts, as neighbourhood ties were formed and maintained through socialising, in streets and street-corner pubs, as well as through women's mutual support networks.⁴

Such a description highlights the close-knit nature of working-class communities. It also highlights the importance of the street to working-class culture. It was this informal sociability offered through the street, based upon chance meetings with friends and neighbours, which was the dominant form of social life within working-class communities. However, assessing community life solely in terms of the street is inappropriate in an analysis of middle-class community life.

This is largely because in middle-class districts the street was not used as a recreational space in the same way that it was in working-class neighbourhoods. Neither was it possible to identify the same degree of informal networks and mutual aid systems.⁵ However, the absence, in middle-class districts, of the degree of close relations between neighbours found in working-class areas does not mean that we should view middle-class life-styles as drab and empty. It will become apparent as this chapter unfolds that middle-class communal life was of a very different character. Whilst it is possible to identify middle-class residential districts, defined in terms of streets and neighbourhoods largely populated by middle-class households, one can also see middle-class cultural life in terms of a wider community, in which club and associational life outside the immediate locality were of the utmost importance.

Middle-class districts: Where did Liverpool's middle classes reside?

Sociologists of the city have long noted the tendency of the middle classes to live in the outer-zones of the city and Liverpool's inter-war middle classes were no

⁴ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working class culture in Manchester and Salford, 1900-1939* (Buckingham, 1992), p.109.

⁵ These informal networks are discussed more fully in Ellen Ross' account of women's lives in London. E. Ross, 'Survival networks: women's neighbourhood sharing in London before World War One' in *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (Spring, 1983), pp.4-28.

exception. In 1934, the *Social survey of Merseyside* noted that:

The present tendency seems to be for the middle classes to move away from the city into the existing dormitory towns and into the semi-detached houses which ribbon the main roads.⁶

This statement suggests that Liverpool's middle classes lived geographically and socially segregated from the working classes. Indeed, social seclusion was central to the idea of middle-class life. The middle classes aspired to live surrounded by their social equals or slight betters, separated from all others. By the inter-war period Liverpool's middle classes had largely moved out from the city centre areas and were residing in the more secluded suburbs on the outskirts of the city. These areas may be identified in the map contained in the frontispiece. My own research into the middle classes of Liverpool suggests that they tended to be clustered in two distinct areas of the city. The districts from which my sample of respondents was drawn are identified in Table 3.1. As the table suggests, the sample was drawn firstly from those who grew up in the area to the north of the city, including districts such as Waterloo, Crosby and Blundellsands, and secondly those brought up in the newer suburban estates in areas such as West Derby, Allerton and Aigburth. It is interesting to note that only two of my respondents grew up in the grand Victorian villas which surround Sefton Park. This may, in part, be explained by the fact that after the Second World War, this area fell into sharp decline, with most of the previous middle-class residents moving out of the district, which made it difficult to trace the former occupants of the villas.

It would seem that the older, more established, middle classes, those largely connected with shipping and its associated industries, inhabited the districts to the north of the city. In fact, the further north one went the more socially exclusive the areas became, as the *Social survey of Merseyside* noted:

Farther north along the coast passing from Bootle to Seaforth and Waterloo, and from Waterloo to Crosby, the social atmosphere becomes more and more middle-class.⁷

⁶ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The Social survey of Merseyside, Vol. 1* (Liverpool, 1934), p.303.

⁷ *ibid.* p.56.

Table 3.1: Showing the major districts of Liverpool from which my sample of oral history respondents were drawn.

| Name of respondent | District of residence |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Miss Arthur | Aigburth |
| Miss Brown | Waterloo/Blundellsands |
| Mrs Bennett | Walton |
| Mrs Chambers | Blundellsands |
| Mrs Davis | Aigburth |
| Mrs Duncan | Allerton |
| Mrs Dixon | Wallasey/Blundellsands |
| Miss M.Green | Wallasey/Sefton Park |
| Miss S.Green | Wallasey/Sefton Park |
| Miss Howson | Seaforth (although moved to Bury) |
| Mrs Hickey | Waterloo |
| Miss Jones | Waterloo |
| Mrs Luscombe | Crosby |
| Mrs Matthews | West Derby |
| Mrs Morris | West Derby |
| Mrs Rob | Crosby |
| Mrs Robinson | West Derby |
| Mrs Sampson | Crosby |
| Mrs Stevens | Crosby |
| Mrs Williams | Knotty Ash/Broadgreen |

Areas such as Crosby and Blundellsands were characterised by large three-storey Victorian villas in spacious tree-lined avenues. These districts are shown on the map within the Urban Districts of Great Crosby and Little Crosby. The majority of the houses in these areas were large enough to accommodate a number of live-in servants. During the course of my oral history interviewing I was able to visit some of my respondents in their original homes and gained a first-hand picture of the houses in which they grew up. This enabled me to appreciate the huge differences in the housing occupied by the middle classes. One respondent was still living in the large three-storey Victorian villa, complete with back stairs for the servants (now converted into a separate flat), in which she had been brought up. This house was set back from the road, with a large garden.

The second area where the city's middle classes could be found was in the newer suburban developments on the perimeter of the city. Such developments were largely targeted at the rapidly expanding middle class.⁸ Throughout the 1930s, there was a boom in speculative building on the outskirts of the city. John Burnett has estimated that between 1919 and 1939 some 3,998,000 houses were built in England and Wales, of which 2,886,000 were built by speculative builders for private purchase.⁹ The inter-war years saw a huge increase in owner-occupation and the middle classes were at the forefront of this change. Ross McKibbin has estimated that by the outbreak of the Second World War almost 60% of middle-class families either owned or were in the process of buying their houses.¹⁰ Although a minority

⁸ It should be noted here that whilst almost every northern town had its area of new suburban housing, such as Roundhay in Leeds, the bulk of this new housing was located primarily in the South East and parts of the Midlands. In particular, suburban housing developments grew up in and around the Home Counties. For a more detailed account of this phenomenon see A.A. Jackson, *Semi-detached London: suburban development, life and transport, 1900-1939* (London, 1973).

⁹ J. Burnett, *A social history of housing 1815-1985* 2nd Edition (London, 1991), p.252.

¹⁰ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), p.73. McKibbin also notes that whilst the English have long had a rather curious attachment to the notion of the 'home', it seems that British tax laws made owner occupation an attractive form of investment. This may in part explain the increase in home ownership amongst the inter-war

of the families of the middle classes still rented, home-ownership, more than anything else, came to define the character of the English middle classes. However, as I shall demonstrate, differences within the types of housing owned by inter-war middle classes did exist. The *Social survey of Merseyside* noted the increase in building that was taking place in Liverpool at this time and the benefits for the middle classes in particular.¹¹

Indeed, one of the major attractions of suburban life was the possibility of escape from the working classes. The building boom of the inter-war period and the increasing tendency for the middle classes to purchase their own homes in the new suburbs meant that there was a gradual movement of the middle classes out to suburban areas such as West Derby, Allerton and Childwall. Such estates were part of a ribbon development facilitated by the construction of Queen's Drive, Liverpool's ring-road.¹² Such housing was typically characterised by the semi-detached villa situated in a newly developed suburban area.¹³ The inter-war suburbs exhibited semi-rural characteristics, with grassy verges, tree-lined avenues and generous gardens. The houses themselves were largely three-bedroomed, with bathrooms boasting hot and cold water and modern well-equipped kitchens.¹⁴

It would seem, therefore, that the residential location of Liverpool's middle classes demonstrate the familiar pattern of middle-class residential zoning, with a clear tendency for the middle classes to live in suburbs on the outskirts of the city. Having described the physical world of the middle classes, it is now necessary to examine the internal dynamics of middle-class communities. The following section will explore some of the major characteristics of middle-class cultural life.

middle classes.

¹¹ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.I*, p.295.

¹² S. Marriner, *The economic and social development of Merseyside* (London, 1982), p.147.

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of the homes of the inter-war middle classes see A.A.Jackson, *Semi-detached London*.

¹⁴ For a more detailed description of the average suburban home see J.Burnett, *A social history of housing*, p.275.

Middle-class cultural life

The stereotypical image of middle-class communal life is that of a socially-isolated world in which individuals kept themselves to themselves and contact with neighbours was rare. The middle-class suburb, it has been argued, with its emphasis on the private life of the home, offered little opportunities for collective life or informal sociability.¹⁵ This image has been placed in direct contrast to the more colourful working-class community in which everybody knew everybody else and was always willing to help a neighbour in times of hardship or distress. It has also been argued that the spatial character of the new suburban estates destroyed any communal solidarity, or sense of belonging.¹⁶ As a result, cultural critics such as George Orwell directed their antagonism at suburbia as it epitomised all that they despised in the middle classes in general. In his attack on the characterless state of the middle-class suburb, Orwell saw the spatial character of the new suburban estate as responsible for destroying any sense of communitarian feeling. In *Coming up for air*, he introduces the reader to the home of the main character George Bowling:

Do you know the road I live in - Ellesmere Road, West Bletchley? Even if you don't, you know fifty others exactly like it. You know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same. Long, long rows of little semi-detached houses-the numbers in Ellesmere Road run to 212 and ours is 191 - as much alike as council houses and generally uglier. The stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door. The Laurels, The Myrtles, The Hawthorns, Mon Abri, Mon Repos, Belle Vue...¹⁷

In this passage, Orwell epitomises much of the disdain which was directed towards lower middle-class suburban life.

Throughout the period under consideration the home did indeed remain the focal point of middle-class life. Contact between neighbours does appear to have

¹⁵ This is a major theme in the works of George Orwell which deal with the inter-war middle classes.

¹⁶ See C.F.G. Masterman, *England after war* (London, 1922)

¹⁷ G. Orwell, *Coming up for air* (Harmondsworth, 1962), First published in 1939, p.9.

been kept to the absolute minimum. In Eileen Whiteing's account of life in a London suburb, she does not recall her mother ever taking tea with either of her immediate neighbours in the 40 years that she lived there.¹⁸ Indeed, she described the middle-class world in which she grew up as "an unbelievably enclosed and exclusive one."¹⁹ The separation of the home and the outside world was physically and symbolically reinforced by fences, hedges and private driveways, all of which deterred casual social contact between neighbours. However, as I shall argue, middle-class cultural life did not necessarily revolve around contact with neighbouring families. Once the importance of club and associational life is fully understood, it is possible to break down stereotypical images of middle-class life as atomised and devoid of sociability.

In practice, it seems that the patterns of English middle-class life tended to conceal sociability. This may, in part, be a result of viewing working-class community life as the norm or as the benchmark against which the sociability of other classes should be measured. It is necessary to look beyond the idea of the street as the focal point of all cultural life. It is only when one appreciates the importance of club and associational life that the true nature of middle-class communal life can be appreciated, as the middle-classes relied upon these more organised forms of sociability. Middle-class life was characterised by a variety of cultural and sporting activities, many of which took place within middle-class districts. The middle classes also involved themselves in a variety of activities which took place beyond the immediate areas in which they lived. Many of the activities enjoyed by the middle classes took them into the city centre, or beyond the city altogether.

David North, in his research into middle-class suburban life-styles, set out to challenge the virulent indictment of inter-war suburbia.²⁰ He argued against critics who saw suburbia as isolating, faceless, devoid of any community feeling and obsessed with the trivialities of status. In so doing, he suggested that the sense of community, so often attributed to the working classes, was far from absent from

¹⁸ E. Whiteing, *'Anyone for tennis?' Growing up in Wallington between the wars* (London, 1979), p.25

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.57.

²⁰ D.L. North, 'Middle-class suburban life-styles and cultures in England, 1919-1939' M.Phil, University of Oxford (1988).

middle-class culture. Indeed, he argued that: "suburban family-centredness was never incompatible with a sense of community."²¹ In documenting the vibrancy of club and associational life within the suburbs, his research suggests that such districts were far from cultural deserts.²² Ross McKibbin, in noting the importance of associational life, concluded that this was a principal defining characteristic of middle-class culture:

What principally distinguishes the middle classes was formal associationalism: their obvious propensity to join clubs and associations by way of formal membership and direct subscription.²³

My own findings confirm the importance of club life to Liverpool's middle classes. *The Social survey of Merseyside* noted the importance of club life within the conurbation's middle-class districts, pointing to the sheer variety of clubs, which ranged from learned societies formed to promote the study of the arts and sciences, to the vast range of clubs offering sporting activities, such as tennis clubs, cycling clubs and rambling associations.²⁴ Liverpool also possessed over 50 amateur dramatic societies, situated largely within the middle-class districts of the city.²⁵ A number of my respondents recalled that their fathers belonged to a 'gentleman's club' or Masonic Order, which provided them with most of their leisure activities.²⁶ North, in his account of suburban life, found that during the 1920s, "Bridge clubs sprang up like mushrooms, usually admitting both sexes". Indeed, as North has shown, the British Bridge League, established in 1931, had some 4,000 members by

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p.87.

²⁴ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *Social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III* (Liverpool, 1934), p.307.

²⁵ *ibid.* p.307.

²⁶ Ross McKibbin discovered that the inter-war years saw an unprecedented growth in the number of Masonic lodges. Three thousand new lodges were established between 1919 and 1950. He estimates that 20% of all males of the middle and upper levels of the middle classes became members of such lodges. *Classes and cultures*, p.89.

1935.²⁷

The memories of people who lived in middle-class districts during the inter-war decades can give us a sense of the importance of associational life to their leisure time. As Mrs Luscombe recalled:

When I first married we had clubs, clubs were very much in vogue, clubs in the district, tennis clubs, walking clubs, people joined cycling clubs, they had club life, and they went about in groups, you would see a lot of people going about at weekends.²⁸

Similarly, Mrs Williams recalled a vibrant social life for women within the suburb into which she moved during the 1930s:

Well, my three aunts, my uncles' wives, they were left at home all the time. It was assumed that when you got married you gave up your job and quite soon you started having babies, but they went to the Townswomen's Guild and there was always something going on. The Townswomen's Guild was one afternoon, I don't know whether it was once a fortnight, but then there was the Keep Fit group and the Embroidery group and all the rest of it, that you could find something to do every afternoon if you were interested enough.²⁹

Sports clubs also flourished in the suburbs and the tennis club in particular was one of the most important social institutions within middle-class districts. The importance of the tennis club within young women's lives is an important theme in Chapter Six. Richard Holt discovered the wider social significance of the tennis club in middle-class districts:

Bridge parties and dances, picnics and smoking concerts, even elocution lessons, were part of the social life of the tennis club and its suburban constituency. Within the club there was room for more competitive play, especially for men at league and county level, but this rarely overshadowed the larger social purpose.³⁰

Blundellsands, one of Liverpool's more exclusive districts, boasted a tennis club and a golf club, both of which were within walking distance of the middle-class homes

²⁷ D.L.North, 'Middle-class suburban life-styles', p.343.

²⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

²⁹ Interview with Mrs Williams.

³⁰ R. Holt, *Sport and the British: a modern history* (Oxford, 1989), p.127.

they served.³¹

Middle-class associational life often revolved around the local church. Miss Jones grew up in Waterloo and her family were devout Methodists. Consequently much of her social life revolved around the church and church-based groups and societies. The following testimony demonstrates the diverse range of clubs which were organised through the church:

... in fact looking back, my life centred around church in every way. Because, when I look back I think Good Gracious! I went to church in the morning, Sunday school in the afternoon and church again at night... but all my friends were there and it was really quite a social place. We had a badminton club, we had a tennis club, as I grew older this was... and as I grew a bit older I was friendly with some people and he ran a Boys' Brigade company and I helped out with that and his wife looked after the small boys, they were called Life-Boys in those days, and when she married I took it over and I ran a club for quite a number of years...³²

Similarly, Mrs Robb, who also grew up in Waterloo, recalled that much of her social life revolved around her local Presbyterian church. She explained, "The church meant a lot to us growing up, all our entertainment in a way was through the church".³³ She recalled belonging to both a tennis and badminton club connected with the church:

The church I went to had its own tennis club with it in Waterloo Park and I played there. I wasn't very good, but still, I played, I enjoyed it.

At the tennis club were there any social events?

Not really, there were in the badminton club and we used to have a young people's club, we used to have debates, things like whether it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all!³⁴

More attention will be paid to club and associational life in Chapters Five and Six, which examine in detail the leisure activities of young middle-class women.

Evidence of middle-class cultural life within Liverpool during the inter-war period is further highlighted by the popularity of theatre-going in the city. Few of

³¹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

³² Interview with Miss Jones.

³³ Interview with Mrs Robb.

³⁴ *ibid.*

my respondents fail to mention the Playhouse Theatre in their accounts of their leisure time during this period. This clearly demonstrates that the city centre provided the venue for much middle-class socialising. During the 1920s and 1930s the renowned repertory theatre at the Playhouse was flourishing, with the likes of Wyndham Goldie and Diana Wynyard performing there regularly.³⁵ This point will be demonstrated further in Chapter Five which shows the popularity of the Playhouse Theatre among young middle-class women.

The fear of 'contamination'

An explicit desire to avoid contact with members of the working classes appears to have been profoundly important in shaping middle-class patterns of shopping and attitudes towards public facilities such as libraries and transport services. Certain shops were considered highly unsuitable by members of Liverpool's middle classes.

Mrs Chambers recalls:

My mother said "You're not going to Lewis", she was quite a snob, my mother, quite a big snob and I said "Why not?" And she said, "It's full of germs!" And of course Blacklers was just beyond the Pale. You must never go into Blacklers. Full of germs!³⁶

Attitudes towards public libraries were also shaped by fears of 'contamination', at least among members of more affluent middle-class families. Some of my respondents, largely those from the lower middle-class, did belong to public libraries. However, the upper middle classes viewed public libraries with grave suspicion. Mrs Chambers recalls that her mother only allowed her to become a member of the more select Boots' Booklovers Library. In Mrs Chambers' words: "... she would never ever, ever, ever let us go to the public library. It was full of germs."³⁷ Mrs Matthews similarly recalls that she was not allowed to use public libraries, but was able to borrow books from the local Boots library. She told me:

³⁵ G.W Goldie, *The Liverpool repertory theatre 1911-1934* (London, 1935).

³⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers. A number of my respondents recall that certain shops or cafes were considered 'unsuitable' largely because of fears of 'catching something'.

³⁷ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

You told me that you went to the Boots Library. Did you belong to the public library as well?

No, father thought you caught germs from the public library, so we weren't members of that, but we were allowed to be in Boots, I remember that.³⁸

Mrs Robinson recalls that while she was allowed to join a small fee-paying library based in a post office in West Derby, she was prohibited from joining the larger public library by her mother:

Did you belong to a library?

Yes, yes, the library down in Green Lane, it was down there, on the corner of Lister drive and Green Lane, the public library, and then there was another library in the post office in the back room of the post office, you went and got books from there, you paid for it as well, the public library was a much bigger one. I think in our day, mother didn't fancy us reading public library books, which she thought we might 'catch something' [from], I think that was the idea, I often look at them now and think, I wonder if this book is dirty or not.³⁹

Mrs Steven's recollections echo the same suspicion of borrowing public library books. While her father encouraged her to join the library, her mother was more sceptical:

... mother was horrified at me going to the library, when I came home with the books, she said, "You don't know where they've been, you'd better put them in the oven and bake them. Get rid of the germs!"⁴⁰

Similar fears of 'contamination' governed attitudes towards public transport amongst the families in my sample. Mrs Robinson recalls an incident in which she and her mother alighted suddenly from one of the city's regular trams:

I remember being on a tram one time, an ordinary tram and of course they were wooden seats, you know, they faced each other... and mother suddenly got hold of me and took me off the tram and I said, "We don't get off here mother, what are we doing?" And she said, "I've just noticed that lady in front there's a bug on her". Well I wouldn't know what a bug was, so we got off the tram quickly. They were pretty ghastly those trams...⁴¹

Other respondents recalled how their families insisted upon travelling on first-class trams. They would allow

³⁸ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

³⁹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

⁴¹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

'ordinary' trams to pass them by in order to travel on the more socially-exclusive vehicles.⁴²

The home: The centre of middle-class life?

In Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s, middle-class life-styles were characterised both by a strong degree of associational culture and by a firm attachment to home and family. Alan A. Jackson viewed the inter-war middle classes as leading largely home-centred life-styles: the home was, "... a principal status symbol, a matter deserving of financial sacrifice, carefully chosen in relation to the occupier's estimate of his present and potential social standing."⁴³ Indeed, the home represented all that was quintessentially middle-class:

It was seen as a refuge and sanctuary from the cares and stresses of the world outside, a place of security for wife and children, which symbolised the central importance of family and home life in the class ethos.⁴⁴

The privacy which it offered was of course indicative of the vision of the home as a means of withdrawal from the harsh realities of the outside world: it was also central to the notion of 'separate spheres'. The importance of the notion of separate spheres in the life-styles of the middle classes is discussed later in this chapter. Middle-class homes offered comfort and space, and were markedly different from the working-class homes in and around the dockland area of Liverpool described by Pat Ayers:

Houses were mainly two and three bedroomed terraces with cellars, small back yards and outside taps and toilets. When newly built each provided adequate accommodation for a single family. Soon though, population increase accompanied by a desperate demand for housing brought a rapid deterioration of conditions.⁴⁵

By the end of the inter-war period such houses had become very rundown, to some extent as a result of the impact of depression in Liverpool's trade and commerce. In

⁴² Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁴³ A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes*, p.34.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.34.

⁴⁵ P.Ayers, *The Liverpool docklands*, p.6.

fact some families still inhabited cellars right up to the Blitz. Despite the massive variations which existed in the types of houses occupied by the middle classes, there was a sharp contrast between the two classes in terms of housing quality.

Eileen Whiteing, in her autobiographical account of growing up in Wallington, South London, defines herself as middle-class solely in terms of the home in which she grew up:

Looking back I realise that we were unashamedly members of the comfortable middle class, living at the Myrtles in Park Lane, which was a detached house (covered by rosy Virginia Creeper) with four bedrooms, front and back hall, drawing-room, dining-room, kitchen, scullery, bathroom etc., plus a conservatory, aviary, tool-shed and outside lavatory for the gardener or visiting workman. The front garden was edged by privet hedges, with gravelled path and flower beds, and the back was largely lawn with fruit trees and a rockery.⁴⁶

Clearly, the home was taken as an important indicator of class position. The above description encapsulates many of the important features of the more prosperous middle-class home: it was spacious and carefully designed to safeguard the privacy of the household, by keeping both neighbours and visiting workmen at some distance from the occupants.

One of my own respondents described how she grew up in a turn of the twentieth century house in West Derby. During the 1920s, West Derby retained a distinctly rural feel and was commonly referred to as West Derby 'village'. The following description is indicative of the upper-middle class home:

It wasn't a big house really, there were five decent bedrooms, there was a hall that you went in and then there was a dining room and a butler's pantry which father had made into a pantry. Then there was this big lounge that overlooked the garden this side and a very big sitting kitchen with a fireplace in for the maids. And then there was the working kitchen and then there was a boiler house and outside lavatories of course, as the maids wouldn't dream of using the inside one, except she had to use the bathroom as we only had the one bathroom upstairs which was a very big room, there were two staircases, there was a back staircase and a front staircase, back staircase didn't have any carpet on it, it only had lino on it, it was awfully noisy and that came down into the back kitchen, I suppose the staff used that, they came down a

⁴⁶ E.Whiteing, *'Anyone for tennis?'*, p.25.

different way.⁴⁷

This description highlights a number of interesting features of the types of housing occupied by more prosperous sections of the middle classes. Firstly, it demonstrates the relative luxury in which they lived, their homes not only had a great deal of space, but also offered the benefits of indoor bathrooms, hot water and electricity. Secondly, it shows how the home was designed in such a way as to keep the lives of the middle-class occupants and their domestic staff largely segregated, with the servants' area spatially separated through the use of the back stairs. Oral evidence also suggests that there was a strict code concerning the use of lavatories. In more prosperous middle-class homes the family and the servants used separate lavatories. This it seems was largely due to widely held fears of 'catching something', or 'contamination' from the lower classes, and the use of separate toilets was widely observed in more affluent middle-class homes. Another important feature of the middle-class home was the garden. Almost all middle-class homes had gardens, many of which were large enough to require the services of a gardener. In the more prosperous, upper middle-class households, it was not uncommon to find a tennis court or croquet lawn in the garden. Mrs Luscombe told how her own family were fortunate enough to have their own tennis court:

... weekends were great fun, both summer and winter, summer especially, as we did have a tennis court at the back of the garden and as we were a big family, we attracted more people. And if it was fine we would have a tennis party...⁴⁸

The existence of such gardens and outdoor facilities not only highlights the relative affluence of the middle classes, but also had important repercussions for the more private, home-orientated nature of their leisure activities, a theme which is central to Chapter Five.

Of course, middle-class homes were by no means all quite so luxurious. Mrs Williams' family maintained a more modest middle-class life-style. Her father was a teacher, whose annual salary was £336, which placed them at the lower end of the

⁴⁷ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁴⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

inter-war middle classes. She moved into a new suburban house in Broadgreen during the early 1930s. She remembers:

... we bought ours, it was all of £900. It had quite a decent garden and quite a nice frontage, two big bedrooms and even the smaller one held a bed, a big chest of drawers, dressing table thing and a wardrobe. Downstairs there were two big rooms and the kitchen, quite a decent bathroom and separate lav... Yes, and it was the first time we had a proper bathroom, with regular hot water, and a nice garden at the back, which had been a field with a footpath across it...⁴⁹

However, the cost of such homes ensured that such areas remained largely middle-class. The following testimony highlights the type of people who moved into these new suburbs:

Well next door to us we had a chap from the Philharmonic [orchestra] and his wife, next door to them were teachers, opposite there was a chiropodist, that sort of person.⁵⁰

Inside the home: The importance of 'separate spheres' to the inter-war middle classes

In the Introduction to this thesis, I identified the vast body of literature which deals with the notion of 'separate spheres'. In this section I propose to examine how far this ideology was a reality in the homes of Liverpool's inter-war middle classes. Oral testimonies suggest that the notion of 'separate spheres' was very much in evidence within the households of Liverpool's middle classes. My own respondents recalled overwhelmingly that their fathers went out to work whilst, with the exception of two respondents, their mothers remained in the home looking after the needs of their families.⁵¹ The notion that the married women's place was within the home is further reinforced by the existence of marriage bars which prevented women from remaining in full-time employment after marriage. Marriage bars existed in a number

⁴⁹ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Mrs Williams' mother continued to teach and Mrs Davis, who came from a lower middle-class background, recalled that her mother assisted her father in his contracting business, doing book-keeping and clerical work.

of middle-class occupations such as teaching, office work and the civil service. Whilst the regulations governing married women's employment differed slightly they generally combined a ban on the appointment of married women to posts with a rule providing for the resignation of women upon marriage.⁵² Interesting insights into middle-class family life between the wars are made in E. M. Delafield's *The diary of a provincial lady*.⁵³ This witty account of day-to-day life in a Devonshire village highlights the major concerns and preoccupations of a married woman from the upper middle class. The principal character and her acquaintances saw their place firmly within the home. Their lives revolved around making and receiving afternoon calls, taking tea, occasional trips 'up to town' and dealing with the intricate details of their domestic routines.

Similarly, Mrs Miniver's life revolved around the needs of her home and family.⁵⁴ This column, which appeared in *The Times* shortly before the Second World War, recounted the everyday life of a fictional middle-class Chelsea family.⁵⁵ Mr Miniver was firmly situated in the public world, but Mrs Miniver's concerns did not extend beyond her domestic sphere. Mrs Miniver's preoccupations included the trials and tribulations of purchasing a suitable engagement book, the difficulties of hiring an efficient and reliable charwoman, and regular weekend breaks, either staying with friends, or at 'Starlings', the family's own Kentish retreat. This was a world that was soon to be displaced by the upheavals of the Second World War.⁵⁶

The idea that within middle-class households a woman's place was within the home is highly evident in my own oral testimonies. Mrs Robinson's recollections

⁵² For a more detailed account of how this operated within the teaching profession see, A. Oram 'Serving two masters?: the introduction of a marriage bar in teaching in the 1920s', London feminist history group, *The sexual dynamics of history: men's power, women's resistance* (London, 1983).

⁵³ E. M. Delafield, *The diary of a provincial lady* (London, 1984). First published in 1930.

⁵⁴ J. Struther, *Mrs Miniver* (London, 1989). First published in 1939.

⁵⁵ Jan Struther's account was partly autobiographical. She, her husband and three children also lived in fashionable Chelsea. They also owned country retreat similar to 'Starlings' in which the Minivers spent many of their weekends.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

clearly highlight the importance of separate spheres in the lives of the middle classes:

Did your mother ever work?

No... no she never worked, no she was meant to be sitting at home looking after father when he came in and looking after us.⁵⁷

Mrs Luscombe also recalled that women of her mother's generation did not go out to work. Her testimony demonstrates an awareness of social class in patterning women's lives:

My mother's generation in our social sphere didn't go out [to work] at all. Ones a little bit, I'm not sounding snobbish saying this, ones a little bit lower than that, women would go into shops, housekeepers, what else would they do? Nursery nurses, and below that, it was domestic work...⁵⁸

In general, the mothers of my own respondents appear to have seen their own place as being within the home. This idea was to come under attack during the 1920s, and Chapter Five examines the employment opportunities available to young middle-class women during the inter-war decades. However, the expanding opportunities for young women's employment sometimes led to conflict between mothers and daughters in middle-class households. Mrs Chambers notes her mother's displeasure at her decision to take up a secretarial career:

My mother didn't really like me going out to work, she thought that it was a bit below her dignity that a daughter went out to work.⁵⁹

'Cook generals' and 'tweenies'

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the employment of servants remained a lynch-pin of middle-class life-styles. Few middle-class homes were without the services of at least one maid. Although servants were neither as cheap nor as plentiful as they had been before the First World War, they were still comfortably afforded by all moderately prosperous middle-class households. Ross McKibbin in his research on the middle classes noted that in 1931 some 500,000 middle-class homes had one or

⁵⁷ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

more servants in residence, whilst the majority of households with an income of £400 or more employed servants either on a residential or daily basis.⁶⁰

E.M. Delafield, like so many other upper middle-class women of her generation, devoted much of her time solely to the demands of the home and family. Very detailed attention was given to the day-to-day running of the home and supervision of her staff. Such women would not have dreamed of doing the cooking and the housework themselves, and consequently employed an array of cooks, housemaids, dailies and nannies to assist in the running of the home. The following extract demonstrates just how much of her everyday thoughts were devoted to the management of servants:

August 3rd. Cook says that unless help is provided in the kitchen they cannot possibly manage all the work. I think this unreasonable, and quite unnecessary expense. Am also aware that there is no help to be obtained at this time of the year. Am disgusted at hearing myself reply in hypocritically pleasant tone of voice that, Very well, I will see what can be done. Servants, in truth, make cowards of us all.⁶¹

All of the respondents in this study recalled having some kind of domestic help at home, although this varied greatly between households. Despite the so-called 'servant problem' of the 1920s, it seems that Liverpool's middle classes had little difficulty in finding hired help. Whilst domestic service was unpopular amongst young working-class Liverpool women, there were always a plentiful supply of willing hands from rural North Wales and Ireland.⁶²

In highlighting the disparate elements of the inter-war middle classes, it is possible to identify differences in the level of servant-keeping within middle-class households. The variations in the extent of domestic help within middle-class households is highlighted in Philip Massey's investigation into the budgeting arrangements of a sample of middle-class families during the late 1930s. Within

⁶⁰ R.McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p.61.

⁶¹ E.M.Delafield, *The diary of a provincial lady*, p.97.

⁶² Evidence to support this is found within D. Caradog Jones (ed.) *The Social survey of Merseyside Vol.II*, p.301.

households earning between £250 and £350 per annum, the average weekly expenditure on domestic help was 1s.10d, whilst further up the ranks of the middle classes, those earning £700 and over, the weekly figure rose to 14s.9¾d.⁶³ In the larger, more prosperous, upper middle-class homes it was not uncommon to find live-in servants. These live-in servants, or 'cook-generals' as they were commonly described, were assisted by washerwomen on washing day as well as by supplementary cleaning staff. Added to this, such households were typically served by gardeners, and in the most affluent homes, by chauffeurs. Mrs Robinson recalls an army of domestic help in her home:

Did you have any domestic help at home?

Yes. A cook general she was called, and a housemaid, I don't really know what they had to do with only five bedrooms, and the daily, I think she came in more or less every day to do cleaning. I don't think the cook general did much except cooking. I don't know what mother did. I know the housemaids spoilt me as I more or less used to leave my clothes and she would pick them up and hang them up, which was quite pleasant, I wish that happened now...⁶⁴

Similarly, Mrs Chambers recalls having a number of servants in her home in Blundellsands:

In the house we always had three maids, a cook, a housemaid and a parlourmaid, and we always had a full-time gardener, chauffeur, which in those days was quite common, we thought nothing of it really.

Did the maids live in?

Yes. And they all wore uniforms, and I never went in the kitchen. We weren't allowed to go in the kitchen. My mother went into the kitchen to order the meals in the morning and that was it... my mother never did anything for him in the way of getting his [my father's] clothes together or anything like that, the maids always put two pairs of shoes out for him in the dining room for him to choose which pair of shoes to put on and he always had his breakfast ready for him when he came downstairs and they always had his chamois leather gloves and his trilby hat ready for him in the hall and the maid, the parlourmaid always used to see him out in the morning⁶⁵

Mrs Dixon, another upper middle-class respondent, recalled that her family were

⁶³ P. Massey, 'The expenditure of 1,360 British middle-class households in 1938-1939', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 105 (1942), p.184.

⁶⁴ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁶⁵ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

served by an array of domestic help:

Did your family have any domestic help?

Yes, yes, our parents did have live-in staff, gardeners who came more than once a week, chauffeurs, oh yes indeed and oh yes it was quite a different life we were brought up in.⁶⁶

Lower down the ranks of the middle classes it was more typical to find the household served only by the help of a 'daily', who came in on a daily basis to assist with cleaning and occasionally help out with the preparation of meals. Mrs Morris, who came from a more modest middle-class background, recalls the services of only one woman in her household:

Did you have any domestic help?

Yes there was someone called, I think she was called Mrs Hanratty, used to come, I'm not sure whether she, I think she was one of these who'd do anything, I don't think mother was so anxious to get her to do cleaning, but she would do mending and things like that, and once or twice when mother wasn't well, she used to get quinsy, you know swollen tonsils, Mrs Hanratty would be called upon, and she would sort of look after us and do the cooking.⁶⁷

Mrs Matthews remembered two 'domestics' in her home:

Did your mother have any domestic help then?

Yes, she had, really it was only one woman she had, oh and a woman to do the washing.⁶⁸

It is interesting to note that although young middle-class women in my sample were often of a similar age to many of their servants, friendships between them were rare. Miss Jones' comments would suggest that a huge gulf existed between herself and the daily in her household:

Did you ever get to know this daily who came in?

Oh probably because she would be having cups of tea no doubt, I know one of them was called Doris, she had dark hair, but that's as far as I can go.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁶⁷ Interview with Mrs Morris.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁶⁹ Interview with Miss Jones.

The fact that the daughters of middle-class households were addressed by their servants as 'Miss Nancy' or 'Miss Joan' also suggests that an enormous social divide existed between them.⁷⁰ This was a divide which Mrs Chambers was embarrassed to recall as she told me:

Also you see in those days, in the house, I'm quite ashamed to talk about this really, they never called you by your Christian names, the staff, they always called me Miss Nancy, always Miss Nancy.⁷¹

The preceding section demonstrates the varying degrees of domestic help which middle-class households employed. However, it also raises interesting issues about the home and young women's place within in it. The final part of this chapter considers young women's role within the middle-class family.

Young middle-class women and household duties

When one examines the degree to which young women helped out with household duties in the 1920s and 1930s stark differences emerge according to their backgrounds. For most young women from working-class backgrounds domestic duties were an expected and unquestioned part of home life. The extent of such duties often varied according to their position in the family, with younger members usually managing to get off more lightly. However, it was universally expected that young women would help out with a range of domestic tasks from child-minding to cleaning. Elizabeth Roberts noted in her study of working-class women that young women often assumed much of the responsibility for household chores, as well as care of younger siblings. Indeed, this was an unquestioned, though frequently resented, part of home life for young working-class women. Roberts notes: "Many girls simply assumed their role".⁷² In an article on young people's early socialisation, Roberts emphasised how young girls often played a quite considerable role in helping with domestic chores and

⁷⁰ Interviews with Mrs Chambers and Mrs Dixon.

⁷¹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁷² E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984), p.23.

minding children.⁷³

Certainly, for the majority of young women in working-class homes much of their time was devoted to household duties and childcare. By stark contrast, their middle-class counterparts appear to have been cushioned from household chores by the presence of domestic staff. My own oral evidence suggests that young middle-class women did very little in the way of domestic duties, which inevitably affected the way in which they perceived the home.

Mrs Chambers recollections are representative of those of a young woman from an upper-middle class background. When questioned about the role she played in the running of the household she recalled:

Did you have to help with domestic chores?

No. Never. Never did anything at all, there were always the maids you see... I never even washed a pair of stockings.⁷⁴

Coming from the upper ranks of the middle classes, she describes how the servants took responsibility for all the domestic tasks in the house even waking her up in the mornings:

And I used to lie in bed in the morning and the maid would come in, the housemaid, and say, "Morning Miss Nancy", light the fire, gas fire, as we didn't have any central heating, and draw the curtains and that was the beginning of the day, you'd get dressed and go downstairs and breakfast was all ready for you. Incredible, isn't it?⁷⁵

Indeed, on leaving school at the age of 18 her ignorance of domestic matters prompted her father to send her to a domestic science college for a year to undertake a housewifery course. She explained the reasoning behind his decision: "Oh well we had no experience of cooking or looking after a house, 'cause there were always the maids at home to do it".⁷⁶ Her recollections of the domestic training which she received demonstrate the extent to which performing such tasks was new to her:

⁷³ E. Roberts, 'Learning and living - socialisation outside school', *Oral History*, 3, 2 (1975), pp.14-28.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

We used to go up to Calderstones to the house out there where the students lived and we had to learn how to scrub the floor and how to scrub a table, you know the proper way, there are ways and means. In those days, how to clean windows, all those basic things that normally I wouldn't have known how to do.⁷⁷

In fact, she probably rarely scrubbed a floor herself as she employed a maid in her home after she was married. • Similarly, Mrs Bennett recalled how she was never expected to do any domestic work whatsoever:

Did you have any domestic help at home?

Oh bags, we never lifted a hand, waited on hand and foot... if you wanted something washing you would give it to one of the maids and have it back in an hour.⁷⁸

Mrs Robinson recalls a similar situation at home, again a far cry from the drudgery that many young working-class women experienced:

No, I didn't have to do anything. I used to drop my clothes on the floor and that was it and the housemaids had to pick them up. Didn't do any house-work.⁷⁹

The extent to which young middle-class women were spared from domestic duties within the home is encapsulated in the following oral testimony in which Mrs Dixon struggles to recall what she actually did do:

Did you have any domestic duties in the home?

No, I used to arrange a bowl of flowers occasionally, no, we didn't actually, we were expected to, there were things we did. I had to look after my dog, no there wasn't a lot else, we were supposed to keep our rooms tidy...⁸⁰

Lower down the middle classes, where live-in servants were not so common, young women appear to have held greater domestic responsibilities, as Mrs Matthews explained:

When you were still at home, did you have to help out with any chores?

Oh yes, oh definitely, yes. Helped with the washing up, helped with some of

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

⁷⁹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁸⁰ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

the cooking and baking, you know, "You make the pastry this week", Mother used to say, "You make the pastry, you make it the best".⁸¹

However, this was effectively the sum of her contribution to housework. Of course, this is a far cry from the range of domestic responsibilities faced by many young working-class women. Miss Jones, another of my lower middle-class respondents, similarly recalls undertaking only limited domestic responsibilities:

Did you have to do any domestic chores at home?

Yes, washing dishes, wiping dishes, tidying your bedroom, but as for actually cleaning, no, I don't remember, no, I used to Hoover, it was Electrolux in those days, perhaps on Saturday and I would go shopping, because in those days it was easy you went to shop, handed your order in and paid for it and went home and it was delivered...⁸²

Similarly, Mrs Stevens was allocated minimal duties within the home. Interestingly, however, she implies that she managed to avoid them:

Did you have to help with any domestic chores?

We were supposed to, but I hated it, Fay [my sister] was good at it. We were supposed to make our beds every morning and we were supposed to sort out our own clothes and put them in the laundry basket for the maid.⁸³

The preceding testimonies demonstrate two things. Firstly, they highlight yet again the variations within the middle classes. Secondly, the fact that typically young women from middle-class backgrounds had only limited domestic responsibilities, if any, raises an interesting point about the contrasting ways in which young women from different social classes viewed the home. It seems that young working-class women, who were invariably expected to help with a wide range of domestic chores, sometimes saw the home as a place of drudgery: by contrast young middle-class women with relatively few domestic responsibilities saw the home as a place of freedom, where they could relax or were free to study.

⁸¹ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁸² Interview with Miss Jones.

⁸³ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

Financial Independence

Household budgeting arrangements have been a primary theme in the work of historians such as Elizabeth Roberts, Andrew Davies and, more recently, David Fowler, who have studied the life-styles of young people from working-class families during the 1920s and 1930s.⁸⁴ Whilst they have disagreed about the extent of young people's disposable income, the question of financial independence has been a major preoccupation.⁸⁵ In working-class families, young people typically started work at 14 and handed their wage packets over to their mothers, receiving 'spends' in return. This usually gave them sufficient disposable income to enjoy visits to cinemas and dance halls and to keep up with the latest fashions.⁸⁶

A study of the life-styles of young middle-class women must likewise incorporate an assessment of the financial arrangements between young people and their parents. Whilst much is known about the financial arrangements between young working-class women and their mothers, little is currently known about budgeting arrangements within middle-class families. The fact that the majority of middle-class women were to remain in education until they were 18, or even 21 or 22, meant that they often relied on the financial assistance of their parents well into their twenties. In this section, I shall argue that the level of disposable income available to young women varied widely between middle-class households. There was no single pattern for allocating resources. Arrangements varied both between the upper and lower middle classes, and according to age within individual households.

⁸⁴ See: E. Roberts, *A woman's place*, A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty* and D. Fowler, *The first teenagers: the lifestyle of young wage-earners in interwar Britain* (London, 1995).

⁸⁵ Oral evidence collected by Elizabeth Roberts suggests that young people's wages were still of paramount importance to the family economy, and the custom of handing over unopened wage packets to their mothers meant that young women were kept in a position of semi-independence. David Fowler rather overstates the case of young wage earners' financial autonomy. In his attempt to argue for a distinctive 'teenage culture' during the inter-war period he tends to exaggerate the extent to which young people kept their wages.

⁸⁶ Only in their late teens or early twenties did some young people in working-class households start to pay 'board' to their mothers, keeping back a higher proportion of their wages for themselves. See A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*.

Whilst still at school, girls from upper middle-class households received pocket money up to the age of 16 or 18, as Mrs Robinson explained:

How did you manage your finances when you were at school?

Did I have an allowance then? I think I always had pocket money, but if I really wanted anything, I was certainly given money at one stage before I went to college I think to buy my own clothes, it didn't go far, but I was supposed to buy all the small things like stockings and the odd small things, but big things, like coats and dresses and things like that were bought by mother. But I did have pocket money allowance to buy the small things, I mean in those days if we went swimming say, I went swimming perhaps twice a week and I was supposed to pay for myself, and we stopped and bought a bar of chocolate or something to eat after swimming.⁸⁷

Girls at boarding schools likewise received pocket money, although this was usually allocated by their house mistresses:

Did you have pocket money when you were at school?

Yes, we were allowed... I think it was the house mistress that took it and would dole it out to you, there wasn't much you could spend it on, there was a school shop. There wasn't very much that you could spend it on there.⁸⁸

Upon leaving school young women from upper middle-class households usually entered into an alternative arrangement, whereby they received a 'dress allowance'. This allowance covered daily expenses, such as fares and lunches, as well as major items such as clothes. When questioned about her financial arrangements after leaving school, Mrs Chambers explained:

Oh, when I left school, [my father] said "I'm going to give you a dress allowance. I'm going to give you sixty pounds a year and you'll pay for all your fares to Liverpool and your lunches and your clothes and if you save at the end of the year, I'll put it up and if you don't save then you won't get", and I had an account book and I had to keep accounts as to how much I'd spent.⁸⁹

Mrs Dixon also received a dress allowance, but it is interesting to note that she received a much more generous sum than Mrs Chambers:

When you came back from school did your father give you an

⁸⁷ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁸⁸ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁸⁹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

allowance?

Yes I was given what was called a dress allowance, and that sort of taught you how to budget to a degree.

Do you remember how much it was?

I think it was two hundred [pounds] a year which went quite a long way. I used to be able to buy the most beautiful pair of plain dolis, court shoes for a guinea, and a Jaeger suit for about three guineas. I suppose a Jaeger coat would be about six pounds.⁹⁰

When Mrs Bennett left boarding school and began art school she was given a dress allowance by her father. Her recollections indicate the change in financial provision which took place when young middle-class women left school:

Did you get a dress allowance in those days?

Well that was what father would call it, that would be about 25 shillings a week, and then you had your tram fares to Liverpool and then I would very often take something at lunchtime like sandwiches and an apple, if you went out looking around Liverpool it was literally only pennies in your pocket...⁹¹

Some of my other upper middle-class respondents recalled that their parents held accounts with the prestigious department stores in Liverpool. When these respondents felt that they needed something, they would simply go and purchase it and it would be charged to the family account, which their fathers would settle at the end of the month. Mrs Luscombe described the arrangement in her own family:

Did you receive a dress allowance?

No, I got pocket money, but that was just for immediate spends, not for dresses, my father was a man very much in control, not that he was in any way mean, but his, right from getting married through all my life we had accounts with shops and that could be the big stores in Liverpool for clothes and materials anything you could go and put it on the account and the account came in at the end of the month and he'd pay it...⁹²

Mrs Luscombe further told how she would go to Liverpool city centre and obtain material by putting it on the family account so that she could make her own clothes:

I liked to make my own clothes. I could go to town, and I would say to father, "Can I go and get some material?" "Yes ok," and you'd buy your

⁹⁰ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁹¹ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

⁹² Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

material and I made a lot of my clothes.⁹³

Others, it seemed, merely asked for money when they needed something. Unsurprisingly, given the fact that their mothers had no independent incomes, it was usually their fathers whom they approached. Miss Mabel Green was keen to distance herself from the custom of receiving a couple of shillings as 'spends'. She told me:

Oh no, we didn't do that, if you were from the top drawer, you didn't get a couple of shillings back, you asked if you needed something.⁹⁴

Mrs Robinson's recollections of the financial arrangements in her home reveal yet another different custom. What is interesting in the description which follows is that she never contributed to her 'keep' at home, and even received an allowance from her father after she began working as a teacher:

While you were at school did your father give you an allowance?

Oh yes. Yes, he even gave me [money] when I was earning, dear, which was big money, fifteen pounds a month I got when I was first teaching, and father gave me money as well, especially on holidays, if we went on holidays he'd always give me extra money for holidays. I suppose fifteen pounds was worth quite a bit in those days.

And you didn't give any to your mother for housekeeping then?

Oh no.⁹⁵

Mrs Stevens came from a moderately well-off middle-class family and she remembered receiving pocket money throughout her years at school, up until the age of 18. The following testimony reveals the lack of financial autonomy that young middle-class women had in their late teens:

I only had about the equivalent of 25p a week, 5 bob a week, pocket money at school, yes that was all I had. Anything else I wanted in the way of clothes, I had to ask mother for, if you wanted new stockings or even when I reached my teens and I needed sanitary pads, you know, for menstruation purposes, I had to ask mother and it was put on mothers account in the shop where she got hers and anything else I needed, she had accounts at Waterloo in Passmore's, where you got undies and bras and things and if ever I needed anything I had to ask her and she would say, "Oh go along and charge it up", to [the family account] and then she had to get my father at the end of the

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Interview with Miss M. Green.

⁹⁵ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

month to write an overall cheque for that amount.⁹⁶

A similar pattern of receiving pocket money whilst at school existed amongst young women from lower middle-class backgrounds. As Mrs Davis explained:

Did you get pocket money whilst you were at school?

When we were very young we used to get a Saturday penny, and we always got excited on Saturday mornings, thinking about how we would spend our Saturday penny.

How about when you were at school?

Oh we got more than a penny then, I think when I was at the Grammar School I got a shilling, maybe even two.⁹⁷

Mrs Morris likewise received pocket money, but also remembers an arrangement whereby she was encouraged by her father to think about how to manage her limited disposable income:

...father had this scheme, when it was a birthday, not at Christmas, we all put in orders at Christmas and they saved up and did what they could. For our birthdays he always gave us a pound and we solemnly gave it back to him and he entered it down in the back of his diary so that pound, so he didn't want us to lose it, so every time we wanted anything we asked him for some, and he knew what we spent it on, I mean, we were all so innocent, I'm sure that was his idea that we wouldn't go and blow the pound, and he kept this going all the time we were children.⁹⁸

When she left school and entered university she no longer received pocket money, but was given a daily allowance to pay for her fares and lunches:

I didn't really get an allowance, my mother would just dole out what I needed, just daily, and really I would say if I got a shilling a day that would be it, and that was my bus fare, but you see it was on 3d to go to the pictures and you would cut practicals in the afternoons to go to the pictures, and you missed lunch and you spent your 3d on the pictures. I got a grant of 20 pounds a year, out of which I had to pay my breakage money.⁹⁹

Mrs Matthews, another lower middle-class respondent, began working in a local

⁹⁶ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

⁹⁷ Interview with Mrs Davis.

⁹⁸ Interview with Mrs Morris.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

government office when she was 18. Interestingly, it would appear that she did not initially contribute towards her 'keep':

How much were you earning when you started there?

I think it was a pound, or it might have been just under, but it was a fortune. To start work at a pound was marvellous.

A pound a week?

Yes.

And did you have to give some of that to your mother?

I don't think I did to begin with, I wonder about that, I don't think I did to begin with, I think she let me keep it then, but eventually as I got more, I paid her some.¹⁰⁰

A number of my lower middle-class respondents, when questioned about their financial arrangements after starting full-time employment, could not recall handing over a portion of their wages to their mothers. This is in marked contrast to the customary arrangements in working-class households. This represents a significant difference in the life-styles of young women from the middle and working classes.

Conclusions

Given the paucity of historical research on the inter-war middle classes, the purpose of this chapter has been to provide a backdrop upon which a more detailed analysis of young middle-class women's life-styles may be based. It has highlighted the importance of both the home and a broader associational culture and also highlighted the diversity of middle-class. This is a central theme in this thesis and will be developed throughout the empirical chapters which follow. From this analysis of the life-styles of Liverpool's inter-war middle classes, it also becomes clear that they sought to distance themselves from other social groups and the extent to which they strove to keep to 'one's own' becomes apparent. The notion of 'social mixing' and the extent to which young middle-class women 'rubbed shoulders' with young people from working-class backgrounds is explored more fully in relation to their educational experiences, their working lives and in their leisure activities.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

Chapter Three

The educational experiences of young middle-class women

This chapter is concerned with the educational experiences of young middle-class women during the inter-war period. Drawing upon oral evidence, it examines the educational opportunities open to young middle-class women in Liverpool from the age of 14 onwards.¹ In her study of girlhood in late-Victorian and Edwardian England, Carol Dyhouse identified considerable class differentials in the educational experiences of young women.² This chapter will show that these class differentials continued well into the early twentieth century.³ Whilst much is known about the educational opportunities, or rather lack of them, of young working-class women, less is known about the educational opportunities of young middle-class women in the inter-war period.⁴ This chapter provides an account of the educational experiences of young middle-class women and in so doing further attempts to highlight some of the differentials within the experiences of the middle classes.

As argued in Chapter Two, the inter-war middle classes were far from an homogenous group. Rather, they comprised several strata. Moreover, the distinctions

¹ In particular I will concentrate upon young women's experiences of secondary and further education.

² C. Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981).

³ D. Beddoe in her study of women's lives between the wars noted that: "The inter-war education system was shot through with class differences." D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty: women between the wars, 1918-1939* (London, 1989), p. 34. Further examples of the class differentials that existed in the education system during the 1920s and 1930s can be found in: J. Purvis, *A history of women's education in England* (Milton Keynes, 1991) and F. Hunt, *Lessons for life: the schooling of girls and women 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1987).

⁴ The main contributions to our understanding of middle-class women's education in the inter-war period are: D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, C. Dyhouse, *No distinction of sex? Women in British universities 1890-1939* (London, 1995), S. Hamilton 'Interviewing the middle class: women graduates of the Scottish universities c.1910-1935', *Oral History*, 10, 2 (1982), pp.58-67, J. Purvis, *A history of women's education in England*, and P. Summerfield, 'Cultural reproduction in the education of girls: a study of girls' secondary schooling in two Lancashire towns, 1900-50', in F. Hunt, *Lessons for life*, pp.149-170.

within the middle classes were by no means as neatly defined as those within the working classes, between skilled and unskilled.⁵ Although my findings are not based upon a systematic examination of a large sample of middle-class households during the period, through the use of in-depth oral history interviews it is possible to identify subtle differences in the educational experiences of young middle-class women. The most striking differences emerge between those young women from the upper middle-class households headed by higher professionals and the wealthy merchant class associated with shipping on the one hand, and those of lower middle class, represented by households headed by clerks, cashiers and travelling salesmen, on the other. The diversity of experience between these sections of the middle classes is a major theme in this chapter. It is also possible to identify considerable differences between the education received at girls' independent schools and at state grammar schools. Similarly, when one examines the post-school educational experiences of young women, diversities rather than similarities emerge.

Whilst the majority of young working-class women were forced to end their formal schooling at the age of 14, virtually all young middle-class women were able to continue their education to secondary level.⁶ There was a doubling in the percentage of girls who had received a full secondary education, from 19% in 1924 to 38% in 1929.⁷ Throughout the inter-war years secondary education was neither

⁵ For a more detailed account of distinctions within the working classes see: E. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of labour: further studies in the history of labour* (London, 1984).

⁶ The compulsory school-leaving age was raised to fourteen following the 1918 Education Act. Elizabeth Roberts' research on working-class women in the North West found that the number of young working-class women who stayed on at school after the age of fourteen was minimal, citing financial pressures as the major reason. Only thirteen working-class children in her sample of 160 remained at school after the age of fourteen. Of these thirteen, a mere four were girls. One became a pupil teacher at a local primary school; two became trainee secretaries and the third went to work in the family post-office. See E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984), pp.34-35. Similarly, Sally Alexander found that the majority of young women she interviewed who grew up in London in the 1920s and 1930s found that their formal education came to an abrupt end on their fourteenth birthday. See S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London: histories and representations since 1800* (London, 1989), p.249.

⁷ E. Edwards, 'The culture of femininity in women's teacher training colleges 1900-1950' *History of Education*, 22, 3 (1993), p.278.

compulsory nor free, and even state secondary schools charged fees. Scholarships remained few and far between and were reserved for the very brightest. Despite the planned major expansion of free-places in secondary schools, only a minority of working-class children benefited from them.⁸ Places might be free, or fees reduced, but there were the extra hidden costs of uniform, equipment and travel, not to mention the loss of potential earnings. These additional costs were simply too great for many working-class families to even begin to contemplate sending their children to secondary schools. Those girls from working-class backgrounds who accepted places at secondary schools often did so at considerable cost to their families. Phyllis Willmott, in her autobiography, describes the endless battle she fought to take up her scholarship place at the local grammar school and the subsequent rifts this caused within her family, where it was felt she was getting ideas above her station.⁹ On the whole it seems that for the majority of young working-class women, education was limited to the elementary sector and was largely designed to equip them for their roles as wives and mothers.

Throughout the inter-war period therefore, secondary education was largely the prerogative of the middle classes. Given the considerable costs associated with secondary education, it remained available only to those who could afford it. On Merseyside, the majority of children who went on to secondary schools were drawn from the professional and business classes or the clerical and minor commercial classes.¹⁰ All of the respondents interviewed for this study continued their education to the age of 18, although they did so in a variety of schools. Several more continued their studies well into their early twenties. The extent to which the inter-war middle classes sought to 'keep to their own' is a theme which will be explored throughout this chapter and, as I hope to show, young middle-class women's experiences of schooling provided few opportunities to mix with those from outside their own social class. Throughout the inter-war period secondary education was provided in a range

⁸ G. Sutherland, 'Education', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge social history of Britain, 1750-1950, Vol. 3: Social agencies and institutions* (Cambridge, 1990), pp.162-163.

⁹ P. Willmott, *A green girl* (London, 1983).

¹⁰ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III.* (Liverpool, 1934), p.179.

of schools. Penny Summerfield in her study of girls' secondary education in Lancashire noted the diversity which existed in secondary educational provision.¹¹ Under the heading 'secondary schools' existed a range of different types of school. The women interviewed for this thesis attended three main types of schools: boarding schools, independent day schools and state-run grammar schools. Even within the heading state-run grammar schools there existed a variety of types.

A number of my upper middle-class respondents were educated at girls' boarding schools. The experiences of Mrs Chambers and Mrs Dixon are representative of young women from upper middle-class backgrounds. They grew up in families headed by an accountant and a prosperous cotton broker respectively. Such families were financially secure and were in a position to send their daughters away to boarding schools. Mrs Chambers was educated at the extremely prestigious St. Leonards School in St. Andrews, whilst Mrs Dixon attended Wycombe Abbey School in Hertfordshire.¹² However, the bulk of my interviewees, including those from households headed by teachers and engineers, were educated at independent day schools. In Liverpool, there were two main independent girls' schools: Merchant Taylors' School for Girls in Crosby, attended by five of the women in my sample, and the Belvedere School (part of the Girls' Public Day School Trust) in Princes Park. The third type of secondary education open to young middle-class women on Merseyside was provided by grammar schools, such as St. Edmund's College, Holly Lodge and Aigburth Vale High School. The experiences of Mrs Morris and Mrs Matthews, both of whom were from lower middle-class backgrounds, tell us much about the schooling received in state secondary schools.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of the major educational trends which affected young middle-class women during the inter-war period. The second section looks at the construction of memory in oral

¹¹ P. Summerfield, 'Cultural reproduction in the education of girls.'

¹² These were both among the earliest girls' public schools. St Leonards was founded in 1877 and Wycombe Abbey in 1896. They were modelled upon the boys' public schools and adopted many of their distinguishing features such as the house system, the strong emphasis upon team games and an ethos which was designed to cultivate leadership qualities through character building. See G. Avery, *The best type of girl: a history of girls' independent schools* (London, 1991).

history accounts of school days. The third section examines young women's experiences of secondary education. Finally, section four provides an account of young women's experiences of college and university.

Educating young 'ladies' during the inter-war period: an overview

The educational experiences of young middle-class women in the Victorian and Edwardian era have received increasing attention from historians in recent years.¹³ However, with the exception of a number of important institutional histories of girls' schools, the literature which deals specifically with the educational experiences of young middle-class women during the 1920s and 1930s remains sketchy.¹⁴ This chapter opens by addressing some of the major trends in educational policy during this period and the repercussions they had on the education which young middle-class women received.

As the following section will show, the education received by young women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s was markedly different to that of their predecessors. Throughout the Victorian era the content of the education of middle-class girls tended to stress ornamental knowledge that might attract a suitor rather than rigorous academic grounding. Katherine Chorley grew up in Alderley Edge, a prosperous suburb of Manchester, in the early decades of the century, and her own education may be taken as typical of a young middle-class woman's education of that period.¹⁵ It was shaped by her parents' idea of what a proper 'lady' should be. She was taught by a governess, a Mademoiselle Dupuy, who was responsible for

¹³ For more detailed accounts of the education of middle-class women during the Victorian and Edwardian era see: C. Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, S. Fletcher, *Feminists and bureaucrats: a study in the development of girls' education in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1980), D. Gorham, *The Victorian girl and the feminine ideal* (London, 1982) and J. Purvis, *A history of women's education in England*.

¹⁴ The most important contributions to this area include: Gillian Avery's *The best type of girl* and C. Dyhouse, *No distinction of sex? Examples of histories of Liverpool's girls schools* include S. Harrop, *The Merchant Taylors' School for Girls, Crosby: one hundred years of achievement, 1888-1988* (Liverpool, 1988).

¹⁵ K. Chorley, *Manchester made them*, (London, 1950), Chapter 11.

instructing her in French, history and literature, whilst her father was responsible for her cursory introduction to mathematics. At the age of 14 she was sent away to a boarding school in Folkestone which was clearly tailored to the training of decorative future wives. The curriculum was characterised by an emphasis on subjects such as music, art, dancing and elocution. No science was taught, and newspapers and discussion of current affairs were frowned upon. To ensure that a ladylike posture was maintained, after midday dinner all girls were required to lie flat on their backs on the floor for ten minutes. This was intended to straighten and strengthen the spine so that girls were able to 'hold themselves well.'¹⁶ Katherine Chorley concluded that the school's overriding aim was that, "We should preside at our future husbands' dinner tables with grace and reasonable intelligence".¹⁷ As this chapter will show, girls' schools held very different aims after the First World War.¹⁸

The move towards the reform of middle-class women's education began to take off towards the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ By the time of the 1918 armistice, a number of significant developments had taken place in the educational provision for middle-class women. These developments were largely in response to wider social and economic changes. The Victorian ideal that young middle-class women were 'ladies', whose education was designed to inculcate the domestic ideal and provide them with a sound training in the social graces which would make them marriageable beings, came under attack.²⁰ By 1918, girls' secondary schools had

¹⁶ *ibid.* pp.204-205.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.209.

¹⁸ This applies to both the private and state sectors.

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the women's educational reform movement see: J. Purvis, *A history of women's education in England*.

²⁰ However, it should be noted that such an idea was largely class specific. Emphasis on the more academic subjects tended to be confined to the children of the middle classes. Influenced by contemporary eugenicist thinking, young working-class girls tended to receive an education designed to equip them as good wives and mothers. For more on the education received by working-class girls see: C. Dyhouse, 'Good wives and little mothers: social anxieties and the schoolgirls' curriculum, 1890-1920', *Oxford Review of Education*, 3 (1976), pp.21-35. For a more recent discussion on how the conflicting pressures of education and domestic training manifested themselves in the education of elementary school girls, see D. John, 'Educate or domesticate? Early twentieth century pressures on older girls in elementary school', *Women's*

adopted models of 'liberal education' and were increasingly committed to providing young women with a sound academic education which would enable them to pursue careers.²¹ Both independent schools and county secondary schools aimed to give girls a good academic education and prepare them for public examinations which would enable them to qualify for careers. Winifred Holtby, writing in 1934, noted that:

Today the standard of teaching in girls' schools on all subjects except mathematics, science and classical languages, is as high and sometimes higher than in boys'.²²

Indeed, Felicity Hunt found that during the 1920s and 1930s, girls' secondary education was frequently criticised for neglecting the 'feminine side of girls' development'.²³ Such schooling assumed that young women would take up careers. Preparation for marriage and motherhood was seen as of secondary importance.

Eileen Elias, who grew up in a middle-class home headed by a doctor in South London during the 1920s, remarked upon the progressive nature of the education she received, which included subjects such as mathematics and chemistry, and noted that an interest in current affairs was actively encouraged. This rendered the gulf between the education given to boys and girls less noticeable:

Weren't they always telling us on prize days how lucky we girls were to be receiving our education here and now in the Twenties, the same as our brothers - yes, a good sound education, with homework and satchels and all the trappings the boys enjoyed, even down to science lessons with real bunsen burners.²⁴

This was an education which enabled her to go on to study at Oxford in the late 1920s rather than an education to prepare a woman for marriage and home-making.

History Review, 3, 2 (1994), pp.191-218.

²¹ This notion of young middle-class women receiving a liberal education is argued persuasively in J. McDermid, 'Women and education' in J. Purvis (ed.), *Women's history: Britain 1850-1945, an introduction* (London, 1995).

²² W. Holtby, *Women in a changing civilisation* (London, 1934), p.58.

²³ F. Hunt 'Divided aims? The educational implications of opposing ideologies in girls' secondary schooling, 1850-1940,' in F. Hunt, *Lessons for life*, p.3.

²⁴ E. Elias, *Straw hats and serge bloomers* (London, 1979), p.5.

As she explained:

In the kind of society I belonged to, the girls' grammar school where you were supposed to be proud of receiving an education as good as your brother's, you drifted along unsure of yourself in a maze of lessons. Nobody told you how to be a woman, merely how to pass exams. There was no discussion about marriage and motherhood, no child-care class, no debate about relationships between men and women.²⁵

Penny Summerfield's research into secondary education in Lancashire discovered that the schools in her sample:

... stood for the idea that girls' intellectual capabilities were the equal of boys' and the possibility of female economic independence (even in the absence of equal pay for women) was part of the life-plan they advocated.²⁶

As a result of these far-reaching changes, young middle-class women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s received a very different type of education to that received by their mothers' generation. When questioned as to how different she felt her own education was compared to that of her mother, Miss Jones told me: "I think my mother's generation were expected to go out and get married and raise families and that was that".²⁷ As this chapter will show, marriage was no longer being advocated as the only goal for young women during the inter-war decades. Indeed, Miss Jones chose not to marry so that she could continue her career as a teacher.

The education received by such young women was largely progressive in its focus. Deidre Beddoe in her account of women's lives during the inter-war period noted that the "activities of girls' secondary schools did not accord with the 'back to home' movement of the inter-war years."²⁸ Such schools were determined to offer girls the same curriculum as boys as well as entering girls for the same public examinations as those taken by boys at grammar and public schools. Academic standards were high at these schools and the staff were of the highest academic standing: the majority had obtained university degrees. These were women who had

²⁵ *ibid.* p.239.

²⁶ P. Summerfield, 'Cultural reproduction in the education of girls', p.161.

²⁷ Interview with Miss Jones.

²⁸ D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, p.42.

been among the earliest to win university degrees and many of them felt it would be a betrayal of 'the cause' not to continue to strive for academic excellence.²⁹ The emphatically academic orientation of girls' secondary schools rendered domestic education of secondary importance. Efforts to include domestic subjects within such schools were fiercely opposed. Penny Summerfield's findings demonstrate the relatively unimportant place preparation for domesticity had in the curriculum.³⁰

In an autobiographical account of growing up in the 1930s, Jenifer Wayne recalls science being an integral part of her girls' school curriculum.³¹ This was also the case at the Merchant Taylors' School for Girls in Liverpool, which is discussed in more detail below. Girls attending such schools were encouraged to aim for the professions, notably teaching, in a direct challenge to dominant gender relations. By the 1920s, young middle-class women were increasingly receiving an education which was designed to equip them for a career outside the home, albeit for the short period before marriage. In the aftermath of the First World War, there was a feeling that daughters should be educated. The huge loss of life in the trenches meant that opportunities for marriage would be severely limited and young women needed an alternative to married life. The 1921 census showed that nearly one woman in three had to be self-supporting.³² Although the generation of women growing up between the wars were not directly affected by the imbalance of the sexes, this clearly had a lasting impact on the role of women in society. Oral evidence suggests that the First World War had a direct impact upon the aspirations of families for their daughters. As a result, the education of young women was seen as of vital importance. This was clearly the thinking behind Mrs Duncan's decision to study at Liverpool University:

Whose idea was it for you to go to university?

Oh it was my father's idea. We all had to go. There were two sisters, my two sisters didn't want to go to university, but they went to training colleges, so they did, but it was just the boys and I went. I think my father wanted us

²⁹ The vast majority of staff at the Merchant Taylors' School for Girls were university educated. See S. Harrop, *The Merchant Taylors' School for Girls*.

³⁰ P. Summerfield, 'Cultural reproduction in the education of girls'.

³¹ J. Wayne, *The purple dress: growing up in the 1930s* (London, 1979).

³² D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, pp.40-47.

all to be sure of being able to be independent, that was his main object in life, to make us all independent.³³

What is interesting in this extract is her father's desire to make both his sons and daughters independent. He was a headmaster, yet his salary would have not been sufficient to have kept three daughters at home until they reached marriageable age. The desire of parents to see their daughters established in respectable careers became an accepted part of life for middle-class families during the inter-war period, particularly amongst the lower middle classes, who could least afford to 'keep' their daughters until they married. This was particularly pertinent given the fact that the majority of young middle-class women were not marrying until their late twenties; thus leaving almost a decade between leaving school and getting married during which they needed financial support.³⁴ Mrs Stevens' recollections suggest that young women were increasingly being educated so that they might have careers:

They always hoped, oh yes, mother said, "I'd like you to have a career", both of them did, they would say, "We'd like you to have a career, if anything happens after you get married". They always expected me to get married, "so if anything happens to your husband or he's ill, or he leaves you, or if there's any tragedy and you're left to support a family, you've got a career and you've got something you can fall back on. No way are you not going to have a career. You've got to learn something, go on somehow and learn something" And of course, this art school was that...³⁵

Miss Jones took it for granted that she should have the same educational opportunities as her brothers, who attended the Merchant Taylors' Boys' School. She explained: "I think middle-class people expected their girls to be educated, just as they do today".³⁶

³³ Interview with Mrs Duncan.

³⁴ The career opportunities for young middle-class women are the focus of Chapter Four.

³⁵ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

³⁶ Interview with Miss Jones.

Remembering schooldays: the construction of memory

Before moving on to document the educational experiences of a group of middle-class women educated in Liverpool between the wars, I shall make some observations on the oral evidence upon which my assessment is based. As noted in Chapter One, recent literature dealing with oral history has indicated how we might use this research method as a means of exploring the construction of historical memory. In this section, I intend to highlight how the manner of storytelling may be significant in shaping the account of educational experiences given by my own respondents. I propose to explore the possible ways in which women's interpretations were shaped by their own expectations, both during the 1920s and 1930s and subsequently. Rather than seeing oral sources as biased or problematic, greater attention can thus be paid to the construction of historical memory. Furthermore, given that recent debates have alerted the oral historian to the role of the interviewer in shaping oral history testimonies, I intend to pay some attention to the ways in which I, as an interviewer, may have helped to shape the responses gathered on women's experiences of school and college.³⁷

It may be argued that even with the rigorous academic policies of the inter-war years, some of my respondents may have exaggerated the standard of their education through recounting them to a young academic researcher in the 1990s. In the case of my own respondents, I believe that the accounts given on educational experiences were partly shaped by their perceptions of me as a young woman who has been able to take advantage of the enormous educational opportunities open to women today. When I asked my respondents the question: *Do you think you and your brothers were educated differently?* the overwhelming response was 'No'.³⁸ Mrs Dixon's response is representative:

No, entirely parallel... we both went to very good prep schools and we both

³⁷ These developments are discussed more fully in Chapter One.

³⁸ Looking back over my transcripts, it was striking to note the tendency for my respondents to answer this question so categorically.

ended up at very different public schools. No absolutely...³⁹

Later in the same interview, she made a casual aside that her brother was constantly encouraged to work hard and go on to university, whereas she did not feel that she was pushed and she subsequently failed her matriculation examination. While they may have both been sent to equally prestigious private institutions, the aspirations surrounding their education were very different indeed. Mrs Luscombe's account of her secondary education contained a similar contradiction. She noted that both she and her brothers were given similar educational opportunities in so far as they were all sent to 'decent' Catholic schools in Liverpool. However, the following testimony reveals differences in the way in which their education was perceived by her parents:

My brothers were more important. Put it this way, I can remember my father having a drawer full of the boys' merit certificates and reports and that sort of thing. He never even asked for ours, girls didn't matter at all, as regard, had he known that we needed the exams to do what we eventually did do, he might have thought differently, but he never even thought of asking us for our reports, we just read them ourselves and then threw them away, and they weren't good, they weren't good, as we played most of the time, and that's the difference, but I know he must have been interested in the boys' progress because he kept all their reports, but ours he couldn't have cared two hoots about. But he paid up for it, as we had to get our exams, we had to have extra tuition to get our exams in order to get into colleges.⁴⁰

Similarly, the manner of story-telling may also have been influenced by the passing of time. In reflecting on their educational experiences, it is possible that the great advances which have subsequently been made in women's education may have directly influenced my respondents' narratives. Many of my respondents went on to talk about daughters and granddaughters who went on to university and this may coloured their own recollections. Also, given that so many women of this era went on to become teachers, it is entirely possible that their accounts of progressive education relate, not to their school days, but to their subsequent teaching experience.

In examining the process of memory increasing attention had been paid to the

³⁹ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

role of 'myth' in shaping oral testimony.⁴¹ A common style of story-telling emerges in which a contrast is drawn between the 'good old days' and the present world, where there appears to be a lack of morals and values.⁴² In this pattern of narration, stories of the past are constantly compared to the 'state of things today'. (This issue became particularly pertinent during my questioning on educational experiences. Many of my interviews were conducted in 1996 whilst the media was reporting 'near riots' in some urban schools, notably the Ridings School in West Yorkshire. Looking back to their school days, my respondents' stories were constantly shaped by an insistence upon their respect for authority and deference to teachers and adults alike. Mrs Dixon's recollections of her days at Wycombe Abbey are told in this fashion. I felt that her account of her schooldays was constantly overshadowed by her desire to recount the respect she showed towards her teachers and to her elders in general:

It goes back to what I always go back to, the difference in manners, the difference in standards, so that when you first of all went to school, you went to kindergarten, and then you went up into your five to six to eleven brackets, primary school, but you had such a respect for the mistresses ... Even now with your present generation you would never ever think of calling anyone Mr Brown, or certainly my brother's case, Sir, so in a way it was much easier, but now all this Christian names, I don't think my generation, we tolerate it, but will never get used to it. With this old formality went respect.⁴³

⁴¹ This was largely inspired by Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel's collection of essays, *The myths we live by* (London, 1990). More is said on the role of myth in oral testimonies in Chapter Two.

⁴² This is a key issue for Judy Giles in her work on working-class women and respectability in Birmingham and York. For a fuller discussion of how myth shaped the oral testimonies she collected see J. Giles, "'Playing hard to get": working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain 1918-40', *Women's History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), pp.244-245.

⁴³ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

Young women's experiences of secondary education

Independent day schools: a case-study of the Merchant Taylors' School for Girls, Crosby.

The Merchant Taylors' School for Girls was founded in 1888, and was the sister school of The Merchant Taylors' Boys' School, part of the John Harrison foundation of the seventeenth century.⁴⁴ It was an independent day school, situated in Crosby. Of my 20 respondents, five attended this school.⁴⁵ This section draws upon some of their recollections of their schooldays and demonstrates how the education received at this school reflected some of the wider educational trends described in earlier sections of this chapter.

Under the headship of Miss Emily Fordham (1922-1940) it is possible to identify a 'modern' educational policy in operation. Sylvia Harrop, in her account of the school under Miss Fordham, wrote, "The headmistress clearly regarded high academic standards and good examination results as one measure of her success, and set out to achieve them".⁴⁶ My own oral evidence confirms that academic achievements were at the forefront of the school's ethos. Girls were prepared to sit and pass examinations: the School Certificate (taken at 16) and the Higher School Certificate (taken at 18). All five respondents who attended Merchant Taylors' went on to take up careers: three became teachers, one went on to train as a physiotherapist, the other took up a series of creative jobs in London. The school stood for the idea that girls' intellectual capacities were equal to those of boys, and the possibility of female economic independence was advocated. Preparation for marriage and motherhood was largely overshadowed by these aims. Teaching was

⁴⁴ For a more detailed history of the school see S. Harrop, *The Merchant Taylors' School for Girls*.

⁴⁵ These were Miss Brown, Mrs Hickey, Miss Jones, Mrs Rob and Mrs Stevens.

⁴⁶ S. Harrop, *The Merchant Taylors' School for Girls*, p.89.

strongly advocated by Miss Fordham as a suitable profession for 'old girls'. Many of the staff at the school during this time were university educated, and the majority of them were unmarried 'career women'.⁴⁷

I now intend to present some of the oral evidence collected from old girls about their experiences of Merchant Taylors'. What is immediately striking when reading the transcripts is the sense in which my respondents were aware that they were firmly expected to take their academic studies seriously.⁴⁸ Miss Jones, for example was adamant that girls were expected to have careers:

What do you think Miss Fordham expected her girls to go on and do?

Teach. I mean such a lot of us did and she was very definite that we all had to have a career. She wasn't the kind of woman, I mean she was happy to have old girls back and see their babies, but she expected you to have a working life.⁴⁹

Mrs Stevens gave a similar response to the same question:

What do you think Miss Fordham expected her old girls to go on and do?

Oh university, always aim for university, university or college, teaching or the professions, particularly, law and the medical profession. A lot of them went on to be doctors, to read medicine, and academe generally or teachers and teaching college, or P.T., physical training college. They were quite keen on that, they were very keen on games.⁵⁰

Indeed, the education of young women at Merchant Taylors' was designed to prepare young women for careers. Mrs Stevens recalled this as one of the most important aspects of her time there:

Do you think that Miss Fordham expected her girls to go on and find careers?

⁴⁷ The extent to which the teachers at Merchant Taylors were unmarried career women is reflected in Mrs Hickey's recollections. In response to my question 'Were any of your teachers married?' She told me, "No, no. Not a single one. And we would have thought it rather strange if they were. Some of them had some very bosom friendships with other mistresses, one was a definite lesbian, the one who taught us English, but she was a wonderful teacher..."

⁴⁸ Some of my respondents became impatient with my constant questioning about whether they felt they were educated differently to their male counterparts. They definitely saw their educational opportunities as an unquestioned right.

⁴⁹ Interview with Miss Jones.

⁵⁰ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

Yes, definitely, she was definitely about making women independent and letting women have careers, handle their own money and be their own bosses. She was one of the first early feminists really, very much so, everything had to be done in a male fashion, and she was aiming at that. Of course she didn't always get it from everybody.⁵¹

However, it would seem that Miss Fordham's visions for her girls did not always correspond with what the girls themselves wanted to do. Mrs Hickey's recollections suggest that she did not wish to become an unmarried teacher:

What do you think Miss Fordham expected her old girls to go on and do?
Well she had wonderful visions of us all getting wonderful jobs, very few did, once, you see, well, we were women after all. She told us all that we were going to be headmistresses, and I pulled a face, I didn't want to be a headmistress and she stopped in her tracks and said "Oh yes you are!"⁵²

As Miss Jones confirmed, the education received at Merchant Taylors' was not designed to equip young women solely for marriage:

You don't think that you were being educated to just go out and get married?
No, that would be all right when you had proved yourself. You could go on and get married and have children.⁵³

Mrs Huxley, in a recently published account of her schooldays, remarked that "To admit to simply wanting to get married and produce a family - still the most likely fate - would have been considered unworthy".⁵⁴ The testimonies of these Merchant Taylors old girls appear to support the more general assertion, made in the Introduction to this thesis, that young women were expected to take up careers for the short period between leaving school and getting married, and were increasingly receiving an education to equip them for such careers.

The great emphasis which was placed upon academic standards at the school meant that young women were educated in much the same way as young men:

We had very good teaching because the Merchant Taylors' Girls' School had

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Interview with Mrs Hickey.

⁵³ Interview with Miss Jones.

⁵⁴ F.M. Huxley, *Tales out of school* (Banbury, 1997), p.14.

only started in 1888, so that it had only just got going, it only had between that period and during the World War things got a little bit difficult, it had only got started women's education, so by the time the war was over those teachers that had come through the war and from that Edwardian generation were determined they were going to be as near a boys' school as possible so the standard was very high, and they taught in the same manner that the boys' school were taught, and we had about an hour and a half homework a night, usually three subjects, the subjects that were that day set as homework, and it worked out about one and half a night... I think I was lucky. I hit the educational market at the right time, when it was really strict they were aping the boys' public schools and boys' grammar schools, the girls' side was.⁵⁵

Mrs Hickey went on to Liverpool University. She came from a more modest middle-class background, with her father working as a commercial traveller for a local flour mill. Her written recollections suggest that among the lower ranks of the middle classes, daughters were to be given the same education as their brothers:

My sister and brother and I were all at Merchant Taylors' school and it was because my sister and I were always at the top of our respective forms that it was assumed that we would become teachers and go to the university, admittedly an unusual idea to my mother, who had suffered a 'young lady's' education, over-weighted with deportment, callisthenics, French and piano playing.⁵⁶

What is also interesting in her comments is the extent of the gap between her own education and that of her mother. This confirms one of the central arguments in this thesis, that the world which young women inhabited during the 1920s and 1930s was drastically different to that of their mothers' generation.

Oral evidence collected from Merchant Taylors' old girls illustrates the relatively unimportant place of domestic training in the school's ethos. By the 1930s, only those in the lower streams were taking domestic science to School Certificate level. This became known as the 'domestic form' and was often looked down upon by the higher, more academically-orientated forms. It would seem that teachers often

⁵⁵ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

⁵⁶ Written recollections provided by Mrs Hickey, "A student at Liverpool 1927-1932" (to be deposited in the University Archives).

regarded such subjects as appropriate only for the less academically gifted pupils.⁵⁷

Mrs Stevens described how this operated during her time at Merchant Taylors':

There was a domestic class, but the only people that did domestic science were those who weren't going to be good at exams, usually the members of the 'B' class who weren't aiming at Matric or School Certificate, they usually were, they weren't in the 'A' class, it was those at the lower end of the 'B' class that had just scraped through the entrance exam... it was the lower end, half a dozen in each class that would do that, that weren't aiming at the exams, but those were the only people that did domestic science. They thought anyone with brains would be brainy enough to either find a job or marry a wealthy husband and get higher up the social scale, and employ servants, you wouldn't need it.⁵⁸

Miss Jones felt that she not only received the same opportunities as her brothers, who both attended the Merchant Taylors' Boys' School, but was expected to do as well as them. As she explained:

You mentioned earlier that you didn't think that your education was any different to your brothers?

No, I don't think so. I mean they'd passed the same exams as I had, School Certificate, Matriculation Certificate and Higher School Certificate, just like the girls did and there was no doubt that I should do the same thing.⁵⁹

Mrs Hickey, likewise, felt that she and her brothers received similar opportunities:

Do you think that the education that you had at Merchant Taylors' girls school was very different to that at the boys' school?

No, it was aping the boys' school all the time. I mean my brother was at the boys' school so I knew what was going on more or less. Actually my brother and I landed at the university together...⁶⁰

The experiences of young women at Merchant Taylors' were by no means unique. Mrs Robinson's recollections of her time at Belvedere School show a similar commitment to the education of girls on much the same lines as their male

⁵⁷ This appears to have been the case at Merchant Taylors' where until the late 1930s, the Upper Vth was divided into the examination and housecraft forms. See, S.Harrop, *The Merchant Taylors' School for Girls*, p.91.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

⁵⁹ Interview with Miss Jones.

⁶⁰ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

counterparts. The Belvedere school in Princes Park, Liverpool was part of the Girls' Public Day School Trust, founded in 1872 to offer an education 'such as is provided for boys at the great public schools'.⁶¹

So far I have argued that girls' secondary schools provided a largely undiluted academic education designed to prepare girls for higher education and entry to the professions. However, it should be noted that 'feminine' virtues were not left untouched. One of the greatest crimes at girls' secondary schools involved making contact with members of the opposite sex. Few Merchant Taylors' girls under the headship of Miss Fordham fail to mention her strict, almost draconian, policy on talking to members of the opposite sex. Talking to boys was considered to be a terrible crime.⁶² The Merchant Taylors' Boys' School was just a stone's throw away, but Miss Fordham's girls were under very strict instructions that they were, under no circumstances, to talk to the boys whilst in uniform. Miss Brown recalls the fate of a friend who was seen and reported:

We weren't allowed to speak to boys, not in uniform, although I used to go part way with one boy who lived opposite, who was going to his school, but nobody could have seen me and we were definitely not allowed to stop. My friend lived quite near to the school and one morning at prayers there was an announcement to say that the girl that was behaving so badly last evening at such a time, it was after school, was to go to Miss Fordham's office...⁶³

This friend evidently knew exactly who she was and took herself off to Miss Fordham's office where she was chastised and her parents informed of her crime. Mrs Hickey also remembers the great lengths that Miss Fordham went to in ensuring that none of her girls fell prey to the temptations of the opposite sex:

To ensure that our virtue remained intact, the headmistress would cruise around in a taxi in the evening, ostensibly to check that all 'her girls' were locked indoors doing homework. Any girl seen talking to a boy, even her

⁶¹ Quoted in A.A.Jackson, *The middle classes* (Nairn, 1991), p.177.

⁶² This is a major theme in Sylvia Harrop's chapter on the school under the headship of Miss Fordham.

⁶³ Interview with Miss Brown.

own brother, would be punished by suspension.⁶⁴

Going to the cinema during the week was severely frowned upon. Mrs Stevens told me how she would not have dared to go along to the cinema during the week, for fear of being spotted and reported.⁶⁵

State provision for secondary education

For the vast majority of the middle classes, the usual course was to send daughters to fee-paying grammar schools, or in a minority of cases, local authority secondary schools, although these were less socially acceptable.⁶⁶ State secondary education was provided in a vast array of schools.⁶⁷ The education given in all the publicly-financed secondary schools was with few exceptions primarily academic. Such schools aimed at academic excellence, providing pupils with a sound education along with preparation for School Certificate and Higher School Certificate examinations.

Mrs Morris attended Holly Lodge High School in Liverpool, a state grammar school, and went on to Liverpool University to study chemistry. She also recalls being pushed academically and encouraged to follow a career. She recalled that, "We had a very forward looking head, she was very good".⁶⁸ If one looks at the career paths which Mrs Morris' friends took, it is possible to gain an impression of the aspirations behind state secondary education for young women:

Odd ones did medicine, but not necessarily in my particular year, you know, a great many of them did teach, one or two did P.E., I don't think of anything outstanding.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Written recollections provided by Mrs Hickey, 'That three letter word'.

⁶⁵ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

⁶⁶ Local authority secondary schools, established by the legislation of 1902 and 1903, were maintained by county councils.

⁶⁷ A more detailed account of state provision for secondary education is given in D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III*.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mrs Morris.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

It also becomes apparent that many of these young women were actively encouraged to go to university:

Do you think by the time that you went up it was quite normal for women to go to university?

I think so, certainly that was the thing to do from my school anyway. I mean, quite a lot in the year above me at school were at the university, but mainly at Liverpool, they were the elder ones that went up, I don't think there were any doing science, it was only in my day that we had the right people to teach us I think.⁷⁰

Miss Arthur, who attended Aigburth Vale High School, also saw her decision to go on to university as largely unquestioned:

Oh I just automatically knew I'd go, knew I'd go to university... Well my mother died when we were children, but my father, he was quite happy for us to do what we wanted to do, and when I was in the sixth [form] at Aigburth Vale, I suppose it was quite a small sixth [form] in those days, schools weren't as enormous as now, I think most of us assumed that we'd carry on and go to the university...⁷¹

From the evidence presented here, it appears that among the lower middle classes in Liverpool, great emphasis was placed upon education. Oral evidence suggests that attitudes towards the education of young women were changing rapidly during the 1920s and 1930s. The reasons for this change are multifold. Economic pressures, particularly in lower middle-class households, may have resulted in fathers finding it difficult to keep their daughters at home. By contrast, as we shall see later in this chapter, within upper middle-class households it was still possible to see young women kept at home.

As I have already shown, secondary education during the inter-war period was largely reserved for the middle classes. Although some scholarships were available, the actual number of working-class girls taking up secondary school places remained negligible, thus making contact with other social classes rare. However, oral evidence suggests that young women from lower middle-class backgrounds came into contact with working-class girls at school. Mrs Williams attended St. Edmunds Grammar

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Interview with Miss Arthur.

School and recalled having a varied group of friends:

What kind of backgrounds did most of the pupils come from?

Very varied, because they were mostly scholarship girls and free place girls from all the places round. My best friend, her father was on the docks, and yet there were others who came from this side of the river, whose father was a dentist and things like that.⁷²

What is interesting is the fact that her best friend came from a working-class family. She went on to explain that in visiting her friend's house in the Dingle, a predominantly working-class area, she saw a side of life she had never seen before:

Yes, it was interesting, I mean we saw a side of life that we'd never imagined in Knotty Ash, over in Dombey Street, and yet they were such nice people.⁷³

However, this appears to have been an isolated example. Certainly, within the more prestigious independent day schools and boarding schools, girls were educated within closed social circles.

Convent education

Interesting differences emerge when one examines the type of education received at convent schools. Penny Summerfield suggested that the education received at convent schools was often considered inferior to that received at the girls' grammar schools.⁷⁴ Teacher training was the 'limit' for the convent school girls and it appears that academic standards were sometimes less rigorous. Marriage was also seen as a more acceptable goal given the central place of motherhood within Catholicism as a means of rearing the next generation within the faith.⁷⁵

My own evidence drawn from interviews with women who grew up in

⁷² Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ P. Summerfield, 'Cultural reproduction in the education of girls'. Also, Miss Jones told me how in her class at Merchant Taylors' there was one Catholic girl. She explained that her parents had decided to send her to Merchant Taylors' as they believed the education received at the local convent school was vastly inferior to that of Merchant Taylors'.

⁷⁵ P. Summerfield, 'Cultural reproduction in the education of girls', pp.161-62.

Liverpool would support this assertion.⁷⁶ Mrs Luscombe came from a large Catholic family and was educated at Seafield, a private convent school in Crosby. The following account of her schooldays suggests that the curriculum at this school was more concerned with manners and lady-like behaviour than with academic excellence:

I was just going to ask you, as you went to the convent school, what sort of curriculum did you have there?

Oh it was a very good school regarding education, very good. It was a very broad curriculum in so much as we had all the basic subjects, the ordinary subjects, included in it was singing, gymnastics, games, not dancing we went to dancing elsewhere, music, singing, you know it wasn't just the basics it was needlework, not domestic science, that came later, needlework. It was a big curriculum and we were very well behaved, we were no trouble at least not, we might have been behind the scenes, but in other words it was not strict but you respected what, you wouldn't dream of breaking a rule... we had big long corridors and stairways and the corridors were all polished by both lay people and some of the main nuns who were not teaching, they were doing the housekeeping if you like the cleaning, and these corridors were polished until they shone, when you went in, it was called there were cloakrooms we all had to change our shoes, I don't know if it was done elsewhere, but you changed your shoes to indoor shoes and woe betide you if you put your foot in your outdoor shoes on the polished floor! You committed the biggest crime that you could ever have committed, and it was wrong in so much as there was no discrimination in doing something really bad to what wasn't bad. I'm quoting that because we wouldn't do that and we wouldn't break a rule at all.⁷⁷

This account emphasises the importance of singing, dancing and needlework on the curriculum, subjects which were reserved for the less bright girls at Merchant Taylors'. Again, it is interesting to note the pattern of narration in which respect for elders is emphasised in the construction of an account of schooldays.

⁷⁶ The proportion of children leaving school on Merseyside without passing any examinations was highest amongst those who had attended Catholic schools. See D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol III.* p.173.

⁷⁷ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

Boarding schools

When one examines the educational experiences of young women from upper middle-class backgrounds, further differences emerge. My own evidence suggests that upper middle-class girls were far more likely to be sent away from home to be educated. As the following section demonstrates, the education received at boarding schools was less progressive in its focus, and the emphasis on educating girls for careers less evident. Boarding schools for girls, such as Roedean, Wycombe Abbey and St. Leonards, established in the late nineteenth century, had been modelled more or less on the boys' public schools. This was reflected in the fact that games became an integral part of the curriculum for young women.⁷⁸ Such schools were 'aping' the traditions of the boys' public school by encouraging competitiveness and academic rigour. However, Gillian Avery argues in her work on girls' schools that these high intellectual ideals had begun to wane by the 1920s.⁷⁹ Such schools were more concerned with the teaching of social skills and manners than with providing young women with a solid academic grounding. It would appear that academic standards were not top of the agenda at such institutions. As Avery has noted:

Indeed, to a degree the public schools evolved in reaction to the strained, bespectacled and anaemic bluestockings that the high schools were felt to be turning out. There was far more to education than cultivating brains; it should prepare pupils to make the most of their talents, to work and play hard, and to take a responsible place in the community.⁸⁰

It would seem that the upper middle classes preferred to send their daughters to schools which would create demure, well-spoken 'ladies' rather than unmarriageable

⁷⁸ During the interviews I conducted with women who had attended boarding schools, the importance of physical education soon became apparent. Mrs Dixon, who attended Wycombe Abbey, constantly referred to the high standards of both the physical training facilities and teaching during her time there. Similarly, Mrs Chambers, who attended St Leonards, recalled that cricket was compulsory.

⁷⁹ G. Avery, *The best type of girl*, p.12.

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.86.

'blue stockings'.⁸¹ It was rare to find the daughters of the upper middle classes being university educated. It may be inferred from Mrs Dixon's recollections that attending university would severely hamper a young woman's chances in the marriage market. When asked if she had ever considered going on to university, she told me, "... it still wasn't universal that a girl was expected to go to university. You were a blue stocking".⁸² Her subsequent description emphasises the unattractiveness of a blue stocking:

You were an academic... A blue stocking was somebody who swotted at school, worked hard and usually ended up going to university. I don't know the origin of it, I suppose they wore those horrible navy blue lyle stockings and didn't wear silk stockings.⁸³

It is interesting that she perceives 'blue stockings' as almost unfeminine as they did not wear silk stockings. It is possible that women like Mrs Dixon believed that studying hard was seen as undesirable as it may have led to being labelled a 'blue stocking'. According to this view, intelligent, bookish women in thick stockings were unlikely to marry. Thus, amongst the upper middle classes at least, academic brilliance may have been seen as socially undesirable and thought to hamper marriage chances. This may explain the attitude of Mrs Chambers's parents:

My parents hadn't the slightest ambition for any of their daughters to go to university. I had to fight like mad to get to do a secretarial course after I left school.⁸⁴

Attending schools such as St. Leonards and Wycombe Abbey meant that young women could enjoy genteel surroundings and make the right kind of friends whilst being gently exposed to social mores which would make them marriageable beings. In Gillian Avery's summary of the education offered by St. Leonards during the inter-war period she supports the assertion that the school was not trying to produce career women:

⁸¹ A 'blue stocking' was a derogatory term used to describe female academics.

⁸² Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Supplementary post-interview questionnaire, Mrs Chambers.

until the 1940s (except for a brief period during and just after the World War I), most girls had thought of no professional career; instead, conditioned by the school's message of service, they devoted themselves to voluntary work.⁸⁵

Interestingly, Mrs Chambers' recollections show that throughout her life she has been active in voluntary and charitable work.⁸⁶ Oral evidence confirms the view that the ethos of schools such as St. Leonards and Wycombe Abbey was quite different to that found at the independent day schools. It is also possible to see the differences in educational policy in terms of the differences in outlook between the upper and lower middle classes. The emphasis on service to the community rather than professional careers will become more evident when one examines the employment opportunities for young women from upper middle-class backgrounds.⁸⁷ It would seem that the upper middle classes, who were in a better position to support their daughters financially, did not place as much emphasis on their education. Parents of upper middle-class daughters hoped they would marry well and an education from one of the more prestigious boarding schools was intended to help them in that mission. This is in direct contrast to what we have seen in the experiences of those lower down the middle classes whose parents increasingly wanted their daughters to receive an education which would equip them for a career. One of the motives for parents to send their daughters to boarding schools was to ensure that they would be equipped with an education which would allow them to mix comfortably in the right circles, with greater emphasis being placed upon social graces and decorum. Mrs Dixon recalls the shedding of her Northern accent as one of the most prominent memories of her time at Wycombe Abbey:

So what was life like at boarding school?

It was very civilised, it was very interesting as I had never been out of the north and I got down there with a slight accent, and then sort of shut up for a week until I got rid of it. Our housemistress was a Miss Moire, and her

⁸⁵ G.Avery, *The best type of girl*, p.97.

⁸⁶ Aware of her privileged background Mrs Chambers told me how she was instilled with the belief that she should 'give something back'. She remained active in charity work throughout her life and even at the age of 85 was a prominent figure in a number of local charities.

⁸⁷ This is the subject of Chapter Four.

initials were J.E.M and everybody was talking about someone called the G.E.M, but it turned out it was the J.E.M. Nobody up here believes that I'm a northerner, but they knew jolly well that I was a northerner down south.⁸⁸

What is interesting is that today she sees the removal of her northern accent as an integral part of her boarding school education. It may also be taken as indicative of the fact that social values and mores were seen as more important than academic standards. There was also a sense that through sending one's daughters to such schools, they would be mixing with the same 'sort' or those from slightly higher social class. Mrs Chambers recalls her experiences at St. Leonards as very narrow:

It was only since I left school really, that I started to appreciate, you know, the differences between people's life-styles, because we were so cushioned and so blinkered.⁸⁹

The middle-class neurosis about contamination from the lower classes, already referred to in Chapter Two, was extended to the educational provision for daughters. Given the strict rules about leaving the school grounds, parents could be fairly confident that their daughters would not come across any 'undesirables' as they could only mix within the confines of the school. Mrs Dixon recalls that during her time at Wycombe Abbey she was only allowed to leave the school grounds when she reached the sixth form. Then it was only to purchase stamps from the post office.⁹⁰

Mrs Chambers' recollections of her time at St. Leonards indicate that the school assumed that she would not be in a position to need a career:

It wasn't expected that I should work. I think that if I had worked I might have done quite well. I think I had quite a good brain, but it was never expected that I should do anything...⁹¹

Indeed, when asked what she felt her headmistress expected St. Leonards' old girls to do after leaving school, she explained:

I think that most of us were expected to go home, enjoy ourselves, play golf,

⁸⁸ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁸⁹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁹⁰ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁹¹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

travel, socialise and then get married!⁹²

Further recollections suggest that her father was perceived to be in a position to keep her and there was no need for her to earn an independent income:

I think really and truthfully, if I had been told that I'd got to work, I might have done quite well, but nobody expected girls in those days to do anything, you know I wasn't encouraged to do anything... You had to be very dedicated, probably if you came from say a family of doctors, and your father was a doctor and you were a girl and you'd seen what he'd done, probably then you would feel that you would like to do it, but I think it had to be something definite like that.⁹³

Although only three members of my sample attended boarding schools, their testimonies suggest that those who did go on to follow professional careers were in the minority at this time. In the final section of this chapter I intend to examine the post-school destinations of young middle-class women. The majority of women in this study continued their education after leaving school. Again, one can see diversity in the type of education young middle-class women went on to receive. The main destinations for young women during this period were: teacher training college, secretarial college, domestic science college, art college and university.

Young middle-class women's experiences of college and university

Teacher training colleges

Teaching, as will become clear in Chapter Four, remained one of the principal occupations open to young middle-class women during the inter-war period. My own oral evidence suggests that throughout the period, students at teacher training colleges continued to be predominantly girls from lower middle-class homes who had received secondary education at maintained grammar schools.⁹⁴ Similarly, Elizabeth Edwards

⁹² Supplementary post-interview questionnaire, Mrs Chambers.

⁹³ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁹⁴ Of my twenty respondents, four went on to study at teacher training colleges.

in her study of women's teacher training colleges, found that the majority of students at Homerton college in Cambridge were from lower middle-class backgrounds.⁹⁵

Training during the inter-war years, for those wishing to become secondary school teachers, meant enrolling upon a three-year course at a certified training college.⁹⁶ Dina M. Copelman has demonstrated how elementary school teaching opened up opportunities for professional careers for lower middle-class women in London at the turn of the century.⁹⁷ However, all of the middle-class women in my sample who became teachers (with the exception of one) went on to teach in the secondary sector.

Attending a teacher training college often involved moving away from home. The independence from family life, which living in college necessitated, widened women's horizons and gave them a freedom to experiment which would not have been possible in the middle-class home. This was certainly the case for Miss Jones. In the following testimony she highlights both the freedom she experienced and the enjoyment she gained from her years at Southlands College in London:

Yes it was great fun and you made your own group of friends, I bet the people who lived on Parkside were very exclusive in those days got a bit fed up of these hordes of students wandering about, and we were allowed to go on the common... You could walk across the common to Richmond, we used to do that when we were broke, you could go down into Putney or we could go down into Wimbledon.⁹⁸

Domestic science colleges

Domestic science colleges make another interesting case-study through which it is possible to identify class differentials in the education of young middle-class women.

⁹⁵ E. Edwards, 'The culture of femininity in women's teacher training colleges 1900-1950', p.278.

⁹⁶ The alternative route into secondary school teaching was to obtain a university degree and then follow this up with a one year course in education.

⁹⁷ D. M. Copelman, *London's women teachers: gender, class and feminism 1870-1930* (London, 1996).

⁹⁸ Interview with Miss Jones.

A number of my interviewees continued their education at F.L. Calder College in Colquitt Street, Liverpool. This college offered courses in housewifery and domestic science. A detailed examination of the motives of young women attending it reveal subtle class differentials. There were two quite separate courses on offer. The first involved a three-year course in domestic science which enabled young women to teach domestic science in schools. The second was a more practical course in housewifery skills, designed to equip young women with all the necessary skills to run a home.

Mrs Luscombe left school at seventeen. Coming from a family of ten, there may have been added pressures upon her to go out to work. She took the three-year course which would enable her to teach:

Where did you go to college?

In Liverpool, it was called F.L. Calder, it had been going for many a year and it was up the top of Bold Street, and that was a three-year course which your parents paid for. There was no question of getting anything unless you paid for it in those days. For three years. So on top of my education and on top of educating ten children, still fees had to be paid, my father paid for them for three years. I came out, got my exams and got my job.⁹⁹

Similarly, Mrs Robb attended this college in order to obtain a teaching certificate. She had been in the domestic form at Merchant Taylors', yet was encouraged to go into teaching. She also notes that although she spent some time at home immediately after leaving school, there was no question of her being allowed to remain at home as a 'lady of leisure'. As she explained:

It was all settled that I should go to college you see, so there wasn't any question of me not going to college, and I enjoyed it and I had another friend and she was doing this housekeeper's course.¹⁰⁰

She completed a three-year course which qualified her as a domestic science teacher.

Although no-one in my own sample rounded off their education in a finishing school, it is possible to see some similarities in the educational focus of the finishing schools and the housewifery course on offer at F. L. Calder College. Women attending this college were instructed in household matters and in the art of

⁹⁹ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Mrs Robb.

entertaining. Those enrolled on such courses were overwhelmingly the daughters of the upper middle classes. Mrs Robinson came from one such family. Her father was Liverpool's city electrical engineer. She felt that her decision to train as a physical education teacher was quite unusual. She explained how the majority of her friends, who we may assume came from similar backgrounds, went on to do a housewifery course. She explained:

Most of them didn't do anything you see, just stayed at home. The odd one perhaps went into nursing or medicine, but not many of them had careers, what they did, usually they went to Colquitt Street which is a domestic science school in Liverpool and they did a year's course it, was called a housewives' course or something and they learnt how to do that, laundry and everything else... I don't think anyone really did get a job, it was quite unusual to go out and do a job.¹⁰¹

Such courses may be viewed as training for marriage. They taught young women who had no experience of domestic tasks how to manage a home and to cook and clean. As I have shown in Chapter Two middle-class women often had no experience of doing domestic tasks themselves. Few women from the upper ranks of the middle classes especially recall doing any domestic tasks within the home.¹⁰² This was certainly the case for Mrs Chambers. Her family did not expect her to go on and receive training which would prepare her for a career. Instead her father insisted upon her obtaining a basic grounding in household matters, to equip her for marriage. The following testimony reveals a very different motive for attending the college to that of Mrs Luscombe. Whereas Mrs Luscombe's training was to further her teaching career, Mrs Chambers' reasons for attending this Colquitt Street College were very different as she explained:

When I left school at seventeen years of age, I hadn't a clue what I was going to do, I just was expected to stay at home and help my mother do the flowers and play golf and so on. What my father said, which I think was pretty unique in those days, he said, "No daughter of mine is going to leave school and do anything else at all until she's had a years domestic science training". So each of the girls were packed off to do domestic science, so I did a year's domestic science at Colquitt Street, I went to F.L Calder College of Domestic Science. We only did a year, it was called the housekeeper's course, it was very basic

¹⁰¹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹⁰² For a fuller account of this see Chapter Two.

and extremely good training...¹⁰³

This is very different to the experience of those girls at Merchant Taylors' or at the state secondary schools, who were actively trained to follow careers. In fact the education received by Mrs Chambers was closer to that of an upper-class debutante. After completing her housewifery course, her father felt that travel was the best thing to finish her education:

When I left school, my father was a director of a sugar company in South Africa and he said, "Your education only started when you left school", and he thought travel was the best thing for your education and he took each of us to South Africa with him, he took each of us each year, so we went two or three times and then I went once on my own as well, and I think really that was really marvellous as we learnt such an awful lot in those days, and in those days we went on the Union Castle ships from Southampton and you know you dressed up for dinner every night, and you had about five or six evening dresses with shoes to match and I remember buying shoes in Bold Street in Collinson's, a guinea a pair and you were able to have them dyed to match your evening dresses.¹⁰⁴

The decision of Mrs Chambers' father to send her off travelling as part of her education appears more in line with the Georgian notion of the 'Grand Tour'. Certainly, it would seem that Mrs Chambers' father was more interested in developing her social education so that she might make herself more attractive in the marriage market.

Secretarial college

Mrs Matthews was the youngest of ten children and after leaving school it was decided that she should go to secretarial college in Liverpool. Her father was a commission agent, and her family background may be described as lower middle class.¹⁰⁵ The following testimony reveals that there were clear financial motives behind her obtaining this training:

¹⁰³ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Her father was a commission agent working for a bookmaker.

Why did you decide that you wanted to go in for secretarial work?

I don't think I decided, I think one of my sisters said, "We'll ring Marchant and Harpers up and you can go there". I really wanted to be a gym mistress, but my sister had trained and at that time, unemployment was bad then and jobs were very scarce, and father had paid for it all and father had paid for her training and she couldn't get a job. So I thought well I can't possibly expect him to pay for me so I just said, "No, I wouldn't go".¹⁰⁶

Mrs Dixon, whose father was a prosperous cotton broker, left Wycombe Abbey to continue her education at a prestigious secretarial college in Liverpool. In the following testimony it is interesting to note that she did not take this training seriously:

No, it was a laugh. I was going to be a journalist, which was frowned upon, so I was going to be a writer. I thought I would start off writing short stories and see how I got on, but I had a very lazy streak in me and the war came very conveniently, so I'm afraid my career never took off. I took the secretarial course. It was only about a six-month one to equip me to go into my father's office, he was a cotton broker in Liverpool, as some sort of war effort, that's really why I did it, that was a laugh.¹⁰⁷

For Mrs Dixon, going to secretarial college was merely something to fill her day. The fact that she twice refers to the experience as a 'laugh' indicates that she was never going to make a career of it. She was obviously aware that her father was in a position to keep her if needs be. This is another important example of how differences within the middle classes manifested themselves. Attitudes towards the education of daughters suggests that those in a position to keep their daughters at home placed little importance on their ability to earn an independent income. This is further emphasised by the fact that Mrs Dixon notes that becoming a journalist was frowned upon.

University

Academic research into the experiences of women within higher education has grown in recent years. Possibly the most comprehensive contribution to our understanding

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

of women's experiences of university life is Carol Dyhouse's *No distinction of sex?*¹⁰⁸ Dyhouse makes extensive use of archival sources to look at women's experiences of higher education. Using an 'equal or different' perspective as her main analytical framework, she argues that prejudice and hostility against women students lingered on not only at Oxford and Cambridge, but also at the new colleges and universities which admitted women, of which Liverpool was one. Further interest in women's experiences of university life is demonstrated in the focus on such women in recent doctoral research, some of which challenges Dyhouse's arguments.¹⁰⁹

University education was only available to the minority of young women who stayed on at secondary school until the age of 18 or 19 and acquired the necessary Higher School Certificate qualifications. Few scholarships existed, and there were no mandatory grants, so the majority of young women who took up university places during the inter-war period were either subsidised entirely by their parents or had signed a pledge whereby they promised to take up a career in teaching upon graduation, and received a small bursary in return.¹¹⁰ They were, consequently, almost all from middle-class backgrounds.¹¹¹ It is clear that grants for teacher training were a very significant source of funding for women attending university

¹⁰⁸ C. Dyhouse, *No distinction of sex?*

¹⁰⁹ S. Hamilton, 'Women and the Scottish universities c.1869-1939: a social history', PhD, University of Edinburgh (1987), J. Gibert, 'Women at the English civic universities 1880-1920', PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1988). Work in progress on the experiences of women students at the University of Liverpool includes that by Lynn Edwards and Sarah Aiston in the Department of Education.

¹¹⁰ In his work on Liverpool University, Professor Kelly pointed to the fact that by 1939 there were only 360 state scholarships awarded by the central Government and only 1,500 local authority awards. Mandatory LEA grants did not come into existence until after the Second World War. See T. Kelly, *For the advancement of learning: the University of Liverpool, 1881-1981* (Liverpool, 1981), p.181.

¹¹¹ Sheila Hamilton's work on women graduates of the Scottish universities notes that the majority of women entrants came from middle-class origins. However, while sharing common characteristics, it was possible to identify substantial diversities of experience. See S. Hamilton 'Interviewing the middle class'.

prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.¹¹² Of my 20 respondents, five went on to continue their education at the University of Liverpool.¹¹³ Significantly, none of them came from upper middle-class backgrounds. This is in line with the findings of Julie Gibert's research into women students at redbrick universities. She suggests that the civic universities were less likely than Oxford or Cambridge to draw students from the upper or professional classes, and correspondingly more likely to attract women whose backgrounds were " ... in less prosperous and prestigious social groups."¹¹⁴ Similarly, Carol Dyhouse found that it was more likely for female university students to be drawn from the lower ranks of the inter-war middle classes.¹¹⁵ Five of my own respondents studied for a teaching diploma at Liverpool university.

The history of the University of Liverpool is bound up with the growth of the new civic or 'redbrick' universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield. From their early beginnings, such universities were issuing prospectuses and promotional literature claiming that they made 'no distinction of sex' in matters of admissions or educational policy. Women were admitted to the University College Liverpool in 1881.¹¹⁶

During the inter-war period there was a steady increase in the numbers of

¹¹² For a more detailed discussion of university education and teacher training, see C. Dyhouse, 'Signing the pledge? Women's investment in university education and teacher training before 1939', *History of Education*, 26, 2 (1997), pp.207-223.

¹¹³ All of the five respondents who attended university took a pledge to teach after they had completed their studies. However, in the event only four of them actually went on to teach. Mrs Duncan and Miss Howson both came from families with teaching backgrounds: their fathers were headmasters. Mrs Morris' father was cashier for a shipping company, Miss Arthur's father was a superintendent engineer and Mrs Hickey's father was a travelling salesman.

¹¹⁴ J. Gibert, 'Women students and student life at England's civic universities before the First World War', *History of Education*, 23, 4 (1994), p.406.

¹¹⁵ Using the Hall-Jones classification system of seven social class groups, Dyhouse found 21.1% of female students came from the Professional and High Administrative category whilst some 34.5% came from the category Managerial and Executive and 20.4% from the Higher Non-Manual category. See C. Dyhouse, 'Signing the pledge?', p.211.

¹¹⁶ This is in marked contrast with the situation at Oxford and Cambridge where women were not accepted until 1921 and 1947 respectively. C. Dyhouse, *No distinction of sex?*

female students at Liverpool University. This pattern is broadly in line with the pattern of admission at other 'redbrick' universities. The vast majority of female students studied arts subjects and were destined for teaching. Also, it is significant to note that most of the students were drawn from the locality.¹¹⁷ The reasons for this are partly to do with the idea of the university being civic in sentiment and therefore being intended to serve the local community, but it is also likely that the absence of mandatory grants in this period prompted many parents to send their children to their local university.

As I have argued in the earlier sections of this chapter, young women in the inter-war period were increasingly expected to receive an education comparable to that of their brothers. University education was no exception. Miss Chapman, the warden of Liverpool University Hall for women, noted that:

After 1918, there was a great influx of students from the growing conviction of parents that in a changing world it was essential that daughters should be equipped for careers.¹¹⁸

Mrs Morris went up to Liverpool University in 1932. Having signed a declaration that she intended to teach, she had her fees paid and received a grant of £20 per year. Despite studying chemistry, as one of only two female students in her cohort, she felt that she was treated fairly by both the male staff and her male peers:

How were you treated by the male students?

No different from them no, it didn't make the slightest difference. The only thing was during that time we had a Chemical Society and they'd never had a woman President, if there were women in the year they always had a woman Vice President, which I was for a while.¹¹⁹

However, further questioning on her social life at university revealed that being a woman led to her being excluded from some of the more social aspects of university life. She recalled how the events organised by the Chemical Society often deliberately excluded women students:

¹¹⁷ T. Kelly, *For the advancement of learning*.

¹¹⁸ *University Hall Association 50th Anniversary Bulletin*, p.35, University of Liverpool Archives.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Mrs Morris.

We had this Chemical Society, I don't know what they do now. We had lectures and outings, some of the outings we went on they wouldn't take us. They went to a brewery and they wouldn't take us to the brewery, or trips to coal mines, things like that. I can't think there is anything else. I mean we could have joined sort of debating societies and you know dramatics societies, but we didn't. There really wasn't time, 'cause with science you've got a lot of work to do.¹²⁰

The preceding testimony is interesting as it not only reveals deliberate attempts to exclude female students from social activities, but also suggests that as female students in a predominantly male sphere of study, they felt their time at university was for studying, which meant they excluded themselves from the social side of university life. Carol Dyhouse in her work on female students argues that women students were often the subject of ridicule by their male peers. They tended to be segregated from male students and in many cases were excluded from certain university societies.¹²¹

Oral evidence does suggest that the experience of university often broadened young women's horizons, although it is unlikely that this extended to them mixing with people from outside of their own social class. Miss Arthur's recollections suggest that she felt university had widened her outlook:

Yes I think so, I got to know a wide variety of people and I was introduced to, well through playing badminton for the university I met masses of people as we played all the good clubs in Liverpool and, totally different circle than I'd been in before, oh yes, I do think you get a lot. More out of it, width of view and, reading French, I doubt whether I'd have been abroad as much. I mean, two things happened, one is the university, well Professor Egley introduced them to travelling, I mean I travelled a lot thereafter. You know I automatically wanted to travel, and Nat Watson introduced me to all the climbing things that I did here and in Switzerland and what not, two completely different sorts of things.¹²²

¹²⁰ Interview with Mrs Morris.

¹²¹ C. Dyhouse, *No distinction of sex*, p.238

¹²² Interview with Miss Arthur.

Conclusions

Whilst a number of commentators have acknowledged that educational provision was clearly stratified by social class, less is known about the ways in which it varied within social classes.¹²³ This chapter has attempted to highlight some of the more subtle differences which existed in the education of young women from the middle classes. Oral history continually serves to emphasise the complexity and diversity of middle-class experience, no more so than with regard to educational opportunities. The oral evidence presented here allows a distinction to be made between the quite different aims and ambitions of young women from upper middle-class backgrounds compared to those from lower middle-class backgrounds. This chapter has also shown how the inter-war education system tended to perpetuate class distinctions in society. There was very little evidence to suggest any social mixing going on between the classes. Mrs Williams was unique, amongst the women in my sample, in having a friend from a working-class background. Certainly at boarding schools such as St. Leonards there would have been almost no opportunity to 'rub shoulders' with members of the working classes.

The 1923 Board of Education report on *The differentiation of the curriculum of boys and girls in secondary schools* noted that while the ideal of the leisured young lady still survived, most families could not afford to support dependent adult daughters financially.¹²⁴ Such a comment supports my own assertion that, increasingly, young middle-class women were being educated so that they might take up some kind of paid employment for the short period between leaving school and getting married. The differences in educational experiences may, in part, reflect the differing aspirations of the upper and lower middle classes. The upper middle classes, financially secure and socially well-connected, appear to have been less concerned

¹²³ Sheila Hamilton has contributed to our understanding of this through her work on Scottish university students. S. Hamilton, 'Interviewing the middle class'.

¹²⁴ P. Tinkler, *Constructing girlhood: popular magazines for girls growing up in England, 1920-1950* (London, 1995), p.27.

with training their daughters for professional careers. However, lower down the ranks of the inter-war middle classes a different pattern emerges. Those in a more precarious position financially increasingly saw the need to equip their daughters for an independent career, and this meant obtaining a fuller education. It would seem that those higher up the ranks of the inter-war middle classes were slower to abandon the Victorian view of the daughter's place as being in the home. It is possible to directly contrast the boarding school experiences of Mrs Chambers and Mrs Dixon with the academically orientated experiences of the Merchant Taylors' old girls. As we shall see in Chapter Four, which looks at the career opportunities open to young middle-class women, further differentials may be found within the employment experiences of young women of the middle classes.

Chapter Four

Career girls: The employment opportunities for young middle-class women

I think my actual age group, and I'm 80 now, were about the first to expect to have to train for a job.¹

Unlike her Victorian and Edwardian counterparts, Mrs Dixon and many other young middle-class women like herself fully expected that they would go out to work after leaving school during the 1930s.² This was in direct contrast to the experiences of their mothers' generation. Ray Strachey noted in 1936 the changes that were taking place:

Daughters of the middle classes began to be restive and to fancy that they were wasting their time arranging flowers, playing tennis and looking out for a husband.³

Indeed, one of the most noticeable features of the inter-war labour market was the increasing participation of young middle-class women. In her manual offering career guidance for middle-class women embarking upon careers during the 1930s, Strachey observed that "... of recent years women's share in wage-earning has been increasing, particularly among the middle classes."⁴ The inter-war years offered new opportunities for young women in a variety of occupations. As a result, the stage of the life-cycle between leaving school and getting married became increasingly characterised by a period of paid employment outside the home for young middle-class women. This was certainly the case for the women interviewed in this study.

¹ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

² See V. Brittain, *Women's work in modern Britain* (London, 1928), W. Holtby, *Women and a changing civilisation* (London, 1934), R. Strachey, *Careers and openings for women* (London, 1937) and R. Strachey (ed.), *Our freedom and its results* (London, 1936).

³ R. Strachey (ed.), *Our freedom and its results*, pp.126-127.

⁴ R. Strachey, *Careers and openings for women*, p.17.

The effects of the First World War

The First World War both accelerated and intensified the expansion of job opportunities for women.⁵ Vera Brittain noted in 1928 that despite the setbacks to women's work which immediately followed the war "... the past nine years have seen the breaking of many barriers."⁶ During the war, women had taken over jobs previously done by men and filled new vacancies created by the war. The entry of women into the professions, clerical work and the retail trade was encouraged as a result of their war work. Despite the widespread dismissal of women in the years immediately following the Armistice, the war permanently enlarged the number of women who went out to work and continued the process of breaking down gender segregation in certain occupations.⁷ *The social survey of Merseyside* identified the expansion of job opportunities for women on Merseyside.⁸ The First World War was portrayed as a catalyst in transforming women's attitudes towards paid work and it was noted that women's "outlook was changed and it became almost universally fashionable for women to work for their living."⁹

The developments which were made in women's employment since the end of the war were noted by contemporaries. Strachey commented that: "By 1930 only thirteen out of every hundred girls of eighteen were living in idleness. The rest were already at work, or were preparing to undertake it".¹⁰ Whilst the war had the effect of changing ideas surrounding the desirability of employment of women from all social classes, it was women from middle-class backgrounds who most benefited from the changing employment structure. As Strachey noted:

⁵ For contemporary assessments of the impact of the First World War on women's employment opportunities, see J. Beauchamp, *Women who work* (London, 1937), V. Brittain, *Women's work in modern Britain* and R. Strachey, *Careers and openings for women*.

⁶ V. Brittain, *Women's work in modern Britain*, p.13.

⁷ See G. Braybon, *Women workers in the First World War* (London, 1989), Chapter 8.

⁸ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.II* (Liverpool, 1934).

⁹ *ibid.* p.20.

¹⁰ R. Strachey (ed.), *Our freedom and its results*, p.137.

The adventure of working and earning money had been a very new thing to this class of woman and its effects were more disconcerting. They had discovered in themselves quite new and rather exciting abilities, and they had thoroughly explored the joys of having money in their own control.¹¹

For young middle-class women growing up in the post-war period, horizons were widened beyond the sphere of the home. Many middle-class women who had been subject to the stifling restrictions of pre-war conventions were able to enjoy a degree of independence which their own income and a new environment brought to them and for the first time became more conscious of their widening employment possibilities.

These were women who had received an education which was to equip them for careers outside the home, and education would thus allow them to earn independent incomes.¹² Cecily Hamilton, observing the platform of a London railway station as the morning trains arrived from the suburbs during the 1930s, noted the changing composition of the workforce. Many of the workers arriving were women, and these women were no longer prisoners in their homes. She described the scene:

... you will see a veritable torrent of humanity pouring past the barriers and out into the streets; there to disperse to its daily labours in office and warehouse and shop. And that torrent will be largely composed of women; working women of all degrees, from the teashop waitress and the dressmaker's assistant to the manager of a flourishing business.¹³

She went on to note the propensity of the female labour force to be composed primarily of young women:

Many of them, you notice, are young, very young; in our world of today there is seldom any lack of employment for the youthful, and between the ages of eighteen and twenty some 80 per cent of our girl population is engaged in wage-earning work. That is the high-tide age of employment; as girls grow older, their working numbers drop and drop quickly.¹⁴

The prevalence of a desire for some occupation is discussed by Edith O. Mercer in her research into the occupational attitudes of a sample of 207 schoolgirls interviewed

¹¹ *ibid.* p.131.

¹² More is said on the education which young middle-class women received in Chapter Three.

¹³ C. Hamilton, *The Englishwoman* (London, 1940), p.23.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

at the close of the inter-war period.¹⁵ In answer to the question: "Do you really want to take up some definite work?", the overwhelming responses received were of the type: "Oh, I must do *something*", "I should hate not to have any definite work; I should get so bored", or "I'd like to do something useful". This led Edith Mercer to conclude that "... it was clear that an occupation of some kind was both expected and, subject to more or less exacting conditions, welcomed."¹⁶

However, the existing historiography on women's work during the inter-war period pays little attention to the employment opportunities of young middle-class women. By contrast, patterns of working-class women's employment have been well documented.¹⁷ Possibly the most important contribution to our understanding of women's work during the inter-war years is Miriam Glucksmann's account of women factory workers in the new industries.¹⁸ This important book charts the lives of women who worked in new factories associated with the burgeoning chemical and light engineering industries.

With the exception of Teresa Davy's work on female shorthand typists and Dina M. Copelman's study of teachers, both of which concentrate upon lower middle-class women's experiences, there is very little written on the working lives of middle-

¹⁵ E. Mercer, 'Some occupational attitudes of girls', *Occupational Psychology*, XIV, 1 (1940), pp.14-25. It should be noted here that the young women who were interviewed for this study were largely from middle-class backgrounds. This was deduced from the fact that the sample was drawn from high schools, county secondary schools, private schools and well-known boarding schools rather than elementary schools. They were described as "... people for whom choice of action was likely to be fairly free, and who were financially able to take the training of their choice."

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ For example see: D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty: women between the wars 1918-1939* (London, 1989), C. Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England, 1880-1939* (Manchester, 1988), J. Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: sexual divisions and social change* (Brighton, 1984), E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984) and J. Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners: an oral history of women pottery workers at work and at play* (Milton Keynes, 1988).

¹⁸ M. Glucksmann, *Women assemble: women workers and the new industries in inter-war Britain* (London, 1990).

class women in the twentieth century.¹⁹ As a result we know far more about the employment experiences of factory workers in the new industries or the plight of domestic servants than we do about secretaries or nurses.²⁰ There is no broad study of the employment patterns of middle-class women in general for the inter-war period.

My own research into the life-styles of young middle-class women in inter-war Liverpool is intended to contribute to our understanding of the employment opportunities open to such women in the 1920s and 1930s. The dramatic changes in attitudes towards women's work were to have a profound impact upon the women interviewed for this study and, as I shall show in this chapter, for those young women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s careers became of central part of their lives and their subsequent recollections. The three main occupations which were open to young middle-class women during the inter-war period were teaching, nursing and secretarial work. The tendency for women to be confined to a narrow range of occupations seen as traditionally 'female' is highlighted in Edith Mercer's research into the attitudes of young women seeking occupational guidance.²¹ Similarly, M. B. Stott's findings on vocational training and the young woman revealed the narrow range of possibilities open to young middle-class women seeking careers. She observed that:

The opportunities open to a girl nowadays, while greatly exceeding those open to her grandmother, are yet relatively small in number compared with those of her brothers. While parents for the most part are un-Victorian enough to expect their daughters to be independent financially, yet many still hesitate to give their daughters, in contrast to their sons, the guidance and training

¹⁹ T. Davy, "'A cissy job for men; a nice job for girls": women shorthand typists in London 1900-1939', in L. Davidoff and B. Westover (eds.), *Our work, our lives, our words: women's history and women's work* (Basingstoke, 1986), pp.124-144 and D. M. Copelman, *London's women teachers: gender, class and feminism 1870-1930* (London, 1996).

²⁰ *The social survey of Merseyside* contains a wealth of information on the wages, hours and working conditions of women from the working-classes. Detailed accounts are given of the lot of the domestic servant and the shop worker whilst only lip service is paid to teachers and nurses. See D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.II* (Liverpool, 1934).

²¹ E. Mercer, 'Some occupational attitudes of girls', pp.15-17.

necessary for achieving such a position.²²

In the more public arena of the workforce, documentary sources tell us little or nothing about the actual work experiences of women, the choices available to them or influences on their initial choice of occupation. The narrow range of occupations is demonstrated in Table 4.1, which shows the occupations of my oral history respondents. However, drawing upon the oral testimonies of a group of middle-class women, it is possible to create a detailed picture of the employment opportunities of young middle-class women - the career phase prior to marriage.

²² M.B. Stott, 'Vocational guidance and training for the girl', *The Human Factor*, XI, 5 (1937), pp.166-173.

Table 4.1 Showing the occupations of my oral history respondents prior to marriage

| Name of Respondent | Occupation prior to marriage |
|---------------------------|--|
| Miss Arthur | Personal secretary |
| Miss Brown | Physiotherapist |
| Mrs Bennett | Trained as art teacher, although never actually taught |
| Mrs Chambers | Personal secretary |
| Mrs Davis | Nurse |
| Mrs Duncan | Teacher |
| Mrs Dixon | Secretary |
| Miss M. Green | Secretary |
| Miss S Green | Never worked |
| Miss Howson | Teacher |
| Mrs Hickey | Teacher |
| Miss Jones | Teacher |
| Mrs Luscombe | Teacher |
| Mrs Matthews | Secretary |
| Mrs Morris | Teacher |
| Mrs Robb | Teacher |
| Mrs Robinson | Teacher |
| Mrs Sampson | Secretary |
| Mrs Stevens | Various art and design jobs |
| Mrs Williams | Teacher |

Unlike their working-class counterparts, young middle-class women did not begin their working lives until they were in their late teens or, more commonly, their early twenties. As the preceding chapter has demonstrated, the majority of young middle-class women continued their education at a variety of colleges or at university. By the 1920s educational policy was attempting to prepare young middle-class women for careers. Parents wanted their daughters to be equipped for some sort of occupation. Certainly the women who form the focus of this study had very different aspirations to those of their mothers. There was a definite feeling amongst virtually all of my respondents that they expected to go out to work, even if it was only for the short period prior to marriage. The expectation that they would go out to work comes across strongly in their oral testimonies.

Mrs Hickey told me how young women of her generation saw employment as an expected, almost natural part of their lives:

We did expect to have careers, but at the same time most of us would go into teaching I think or, one or two became doctors which was unusual in those days... Nursing and teaching were the only two professions open to women.²³

Mrs Luscombe became a domestic science teacher. The following testimony highlights how young women in her position felt that they were part of a new era in terms of women's employment possibilities:

... until it came to the time when you needed a career, girls were then at that age thinking of a job. Now some would go into secretarial work, some would go into shops, the big stores, many of them would be assistants, many of them would be assistant like in the big stores, John Lewis and any of the big stores, it was quite a big source of work for them there, it was recognised as quite a good job and you could get on, you could become a buyer and you could become a sales person and so on. The rest of us would go into the professions, being teaching, nursing, probably those two would be the main ones.²⁴

The severe loss of men during the First World War heightened the idea that women should seek an alternative to marriage. As Mrs Luscombe went on to explain:

²³ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

²⁴ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

My mother was very keen, she didn't want, we did have to work obviously, my oldest sisters, the males of that generation had been killed in the First World War and so marriage wasn't the be all and end all, you didn't just say "We'll grow up and we'll get married", because the men were not there, so you had to get a job, unless you were very wealthy, when I say very wealthy, I mean enough money not to, but my mother was very keen on that, and for that we've got to be thankful. She wanted the job to be, she was a bit of a snob to be quite honest, probably she was a bit of a snob, she wanted it to be above a shopkeeper, otherwise you were to get a career it was called, and two [of my sisters] went into nursing and became health visitors and myself and my other sister did housecraft and the fifth one stayed at home.²⁵

However, even as late as the 1930s, some upper middle-class families still held onto the idea that daughters should be kept at home until they were of marriageable age. It would seem that these women did not automatically assume that they would follow careers. Mrs Chambers went on to become a successful personal secretary, but she had to put up quite a fight at home as her father was firmly opposed to the idea of his daughter going out to work. This may be because he feared she would mix with people outside of her own social circle. She told me:

I had to fight, I had to fight really hard to get out, 'cause there was no need, you see we had plenty of money.²⁶

Mrs Chambers was quite sure she that wanted a career, and the following statement shows how she consciously rejected her mother's lifestyle:

I thought, "I'm not going to stay at home with the old girl, playing golf and just mooching around", which a lot of my friends did.²⁷

Was it still expected that fathers should be able to keep their daughters at home?

Yes, yes, until you got married.²⁸

Mrs Robinson, another of my upper middle-class respondents, went on to become a P.E. teacher, but recalls that her decision to do so was the exception rather than the rule. The majority of her friends stayed at home:

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

Not many of my friends had careers, mostly they either went to secretarial college or they went to Calder, which was domestic science and did that for a year, which was a housekeeper's course or something like that and they weren't really very serious with working, any of them, only a few of them.

Did you have friends that were kept at home?

Yes, yes, the majority of them really, they didn't really do a lot with it you know, with these things they did with the secretarial course or the domestic science, most of them, a lot of them went abroad to finishing school, Switzerland or something like that, I didn't think they did anything with it.²⁹

This expectation of not having to do very much in the way of working, was however, becoming restricted to a shrinking section of the wealthier middle classes.

Contemporary accounts of the inter-war female workforce tended to portray women as an undifferentiated mass. The images of the female labour market put forward by Hamilton et al. are not class specific. However, this chapter will show that the inter-war labour market was clearly stratified along class lines. Young middle-class women occupied very distinct niches within the labour market of the inter-war period. It is also possible to note some more subtle differences in the types of employment entered by the middle classes as a whole. This chapter will show that the types of work young middle-class women entered were closely guarded. Parents often exerted strong controls over the types of work which young women could enter in order to ensure that they were mixing with the 'right sort'. The extent to which middle-class women came into contact with their working and upper-class counterparts is explored within this chapter. This issue of the middle classes 'rubbing shoulders' with other social groups is one into which oral evidence provides fascinating insights. This chapter will examine how far young middle-class women's experiences of the workplace increased the degree of 'social mixing'. As this chapter unfolds it becomes clear that the degree of 'social mixing' varied quite dramatically with the different occupations which young middle-class women typically entered.

²⁹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

Remembering careers

Women's first-hand accounts of their forays into the world of work enable insights to be made into the social world in which they grew up, the perceived choices they faced and the complex relationship between individual choices and cultural expectations. As I have already demonstrated in previous chapters, in analysing my transcripts, I was concerned to examine both the pattern of storytelling and the construction of historical memory in the responses that were given to me.. In questioning elderly women on their early careers, I felt their recollections were coloured by their perceptions of the subsequent experiences of 'career women' and the increasing employment of married women which have been features of society since 1945.

An analysis of the transcripts revealed a pattern in the way in which accounts of my respondents' working lives were shaped. There was an overwhelming sense of pride and achievement in the accounts of their working lives. My respondents felt justly proud of the fact that felt they were among the "first women to go out to work" and how they were the first women in their own families and social circles to go out to work. They were very keen to tell me about their experiences as teachers, nurses or secretaries. However, when questioned about their attitudes towards marriage, and the marriage bar in particular, a contradiction began to emerge. On the one hand they were telling me of the importance of their careers within their lives and on the other, they were telling me that they were quite happy to give up work since marriage was their ultimate aim in life.

This contradiction may, in part, be explained by the fact that the memories of their careers were coloured by the increasing expectation that women should follow careers. I felt it is possible that they may have over-stated the importance of their own careers in the 1930s. This may have been further influenced through them recounting their past to me, a young woman whom they may have perceived as a 'career woman'.

Their accounts of marriage and its importance in their lives were frequently framed around notions of 'then and now'. The importance of marriage to their lives

was undoubtedly shaped by cultural values which saw the institution of marriage as being of utmost importance. Many of my respondents were keen to emphasise the importance of marriage in their lives, not only in terms of their individual choices and personal happiness, but also in terms of marriage as an institution central to the well-being of society. This led my respondents to emphasise the importance of 'family values' in 'their day'. It also allowed them to draw a contrast between 'then and now': they could contrast a society in which marriage was sacred and divorces rare with today's society, which they view as characterised by marital breakdown.

Teaching

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, teacher training colleges were the major destination of a large number of young middle-class women. Teaching was regarded as a particularly suitable profession for women at this time.³⁰ Its rising status at the end of the nineteenth century and the establishment of teacher training made it an increasingly attractive option for young middle-class women. Following the Education Act of 1902, secondary education was expanded and consequently more teachers were required. This clearly represents a significant career opportunity for women during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1928 there were some 120,000 women teachers in England and Wales compared to only 71,766 in 1914.³¹ By 1931, there were some 132,000 female teachers in Great Britain.³² Of the 20 women who were interviewed for this project, eight went on to become teachers. A further two trained as teachers, but never actually taught. Mrs Robb's recollections suggest that given the narrow range of occupations open to women during this period, teaching became a major area of employment for middle-class women. As she explained:

When did you decide to go into teaching then?

Well, I was expected to do something really, I won a scholarship at Merchants

³⁰ For a more detailed account of women elementary school teachers during the inter-war period see, A. Oram, *Women teachers and feminist politics 1900-1939* (Manchester, 1996).

³¹ V. Brittain, *Women's work in modern Britain*, p.59.

³² *ibid.*

[Merchant Taylors School for Girls] and I really should have gone to university, anyway I decided not to and I met some friends, somebody came and she was a domestic science teacher and she was telling me all about it and I thought that I would enjoy it and I did.³³

She spent some of her teaching career down in London, an experience she cherished in later life. Teaching, it seems, enabled her to make some good friendships which clearly added to her enjoyment of the job:

How long did you go to London for then?

Well I was very lucky really, I liked being there really, 'cause I met two other teachers, I was in very nice digs and we all came together, and it was almost like being at boarding school, you know, and I loved that.³⁴

It is interesting to note that during her time in London she was living and mixing with other teachers. Thus, her social horizons were unlikely to extend beyond the middle-class world of teaching. Mrs Robinson was educated at the Belvedere School, where young women were being encouraged to go on and follow careers, and teaching seemed the obvious option for her:

When you left school and decided to go and do teaching training was that your decision?

Yes, oh yes, I aimed for that. I'd always wanted to do P.E., life was P.E., I loved it and wanted to do anything to do with that, and I was quite interested in the physio side as well, but, you had to really take another option, which meant another six months, which wasn't for me, so I did the teaching.³⁵

Opportunities to teach in secondary schools were limited to those middle-class women who had stayed on at school and then had the opportunity to go on to teacher training college or university.³⁶ Of the eight respondents who became teachers, seven of them went on to teach in secondary schools. Oral evidence suggests that many middle-class women felt that teaching in an elementary school was rather below them:

If you studied at university and got your degree did you expect to teach in a

³³ Interview with Mrs Robb.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

³⁶ Of the eight women I interviewed who went on to become teachers, three completed their training at Liverpool University.

grammar school?

Oh yes, oh definitely, oh you didn't expect to teach in an elementary school. Oh we despised those people who had left school at 16, took two years and then went into teaching at the age of 18. They got certificates, but it was nothing like the amount of studying we had to do, and they weren't sort of qualified to teach things like chemistry, or even maths really...³⁷

Teaching in secondary schools was perhaps regarded as a suitable occupation for young middle-class women as it ensured that they would be mixing with 'their own'. Teaching in an elementary school did not offer the same guarantees. In any case, young middle-class women were highly unlikely to accept teaching posts in elementary schools. This clearly limited their social horizons within the workplace. As Dina Copelman has shown, by the 1920s a great number of elementary school teachers were drawn from the upper working classes, so if middle-class women had entered such schools as teachers they would almost inevitably have found themselves 'rubbing shoulders' with women from 'inferior' social backgrounds.³⁸

Mrs Williams went on to become a teacher as did her sister. Her mother was rather exceptional in that she had continued to teach for a spell after she married, but as the following testimony indicates her motives for doing so were clearly influenced by her family:

Was it always assumed that you would be a teacher?

Well yes, I think so, well Peg and I were always in and out of Mother's and Dad's classrooms, and we thought a classroom was our natural home and we'd got thousands of relations who were teachers, you see... and it was just assumed that teaching was what you were.³⁹

Miss Jones enjoyed her teaching post and again it seems that her family may have influenced her decision to enter teaching:

Did a lot of your contemporaries go into teaching?

Oh yes, I could name five or six girls, it was sort of the done thing, I had always wanted to, whether it was because of my aunts, I don't know. I always

³⁷ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

³⁸ D. M. Copelman, *London's women teachers*.

³⁹ Interview with Mrs Williams.

liked it.⁴⁰

During the 1930s it would appear that many women found difficulties in obtaining teaching posts. It seems that the government over-compensated for the previous lack of teachers and by the 1930s there were too many qualified teachers to fill the available positions. As Mrs Hickey recalled:

The thing was, when we emerged there were no jobs. What had happened was when my sister emerged, it was about 1924, there had been a shortage of teachers and so the Government had this grand scheme that they would give us this grant, if we promised to be teachers. But by the time I had emerged, in 1932 the depression was in full swing and so many people had taken advantage of this £20 a year thing that there weren't any jobs for us and all the old teachers, they wouldn't leave, they all stuck to their schools like mad. We just couldn't get jobs, two people in our education year got jobs in grammar schools when we emerged... and the rest of us either had no jobs or else they went into primary school, well they were called elementary schools then, and that pushed all the college trained people out of work, of course.⁴¹

In describing the first post that she took up, she highlights some of the difficulties facing newly qualified teachers during the 1930s:

Where was your first post?

It was in Runcorn, what was it called? It was like a secondary modern, only they were all leaving at 14 and I was employed to teach science and I had the best qualifications in the establishment, and there were three of us graduates and the headmistress was so jealous of us that she treated us like dirt, so in the end I left and again I was out of work and she refused me a testimonial because I cheeked her.

Had you really only taken that in desperation?

Well I really couldn't get anything else. I applied for all sorts of jobs and I had all sorts of interviews and one school was offering £50 a year, a boarding school, I thought, "No thank you". The older people wouldn't leave, they were stuck in their jobs, they were paid so little anyway.⁴²

Secondary school teaching remained an almost exclusively middle-class occupation throughout the inter-war period. This meant that the degree of social mixing the profession allowed was limited. The fact that young middle-class women were

⁴⁰ Interview with Miss Jones.

⁴¹ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

⁴² *ibid.*

reluctant to enter elementary schools further limited their chances of 'rubbing shoulders' with women from outside their own social circles.

Nursing

Nursing remained an almost exclusively female profession throughout the inter-war period. The First World War, with the influx of semi-trained VADs, (Voluntary Aid Detachment) drew attention to the anomalous position of trained nurses and led to the establishment of a clearly defined nursing profession.⁴³ The State Registration of Nurses which was granted in 1919 did much to raise the status of nurses and enhance their professional standing.⁴⁴ This act established the General Nursing Council which organised the profession on a new basis and formulated the rules to gain entry onto the register. This had the result of ensuring that all nurses applying to the register were not only of a high standard academically, but also of a higher social background than those previously. Throughout the inter-war period, a standard training of three years for general nursing was established, with further training required in the more specialised branches.

Nursing remained one of the largest employers of middle-class women during the inter-war years.⁴⁵ In 1921 there were about 111,501 female nurses, including mental nurses, and by 1931 the number had risen to 138,670.⁴⁶ The majority were young and single. In 1921 single women had risen to 84% of the total, and in 1931,

⁴³ D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, p.79.

⁴⁴ R. Strachey (ed.), *Our freedom and its results*, p.122.

⁴⁵ B. Abel-Smith, *The history of the nursing profession* (London, 1960), C. Maggs, *The origins of general nursing* (London, 1983) A. Rafferty, J. Robinson and R. Elkan (eds.) *Nursing history and the politics of welfare* (London, 1996). Studies dealing specifically with the development of nursing on Merseyside include: P. Starkey, 'Uncommon entrance? The recruitment of probationers to Merseyside hospitals 1919-1938', *International History of Nursing Journal*, 2, 3 (1997), pp.5-16 and also F. Trees, 'An oral history of nursing on Merseyside', *Medical Historian*, 8 (1995/1996) pp.3-14. This is a short account of a wider project funded by the Wellcome Trust on the history of nursing on Merseyside, 1919-1950, upon which the findings presented in the previous article are based.

⁴⁶ B. Abel-Smith, *A history of the nursing profession*, p. 117.

to 88%.⁴⁷ However, under the umbrella category 'nursing' there existed a highly stratified system. This is an area in which class distinctions played a pivotal role. Recent literature has shown that whilst nursing was largely a middle-class profession during the inter-war period, there were considerable differences between voluntary and municipal hospitals. Indeed, Pat Starkey, in her analysis of nursing probationers on Merseyside during the inter-war period, noted that a well-understood hierarchy existed within the local hospitals, with the voluntary hospitals at the top, and municipal hospitals below.⁴⁸

Brian Abel-Smith's analysis of the 1937 Athlone Committee shows that throughout the 1930s, nursing continued to be stratified along class lines. The number of probationary nurses with elementary education only was very small in the voluntary hospital sector. However, the proportion of probationers who were educated at an elementary school only was significantly higher in the municipal hospitals.⁴⁹ On Merseyside, this hierarchical system was especially marked, with the Royal Infirmary at the top of the local pyramid.⁵⁰ Young middle-class women were unlikely to accept positions within municipal hospitals. The majority of young middle-class women who took up nursing did so in voluntary hospitals.⁵¹ One respondent interviewed for a project on the history of nursing on Merseyside remarked, when asked if she would have trained at a municipal hospital: "I didn't think they were my type of hospital...I'd been to a first-class boarding school so I had to go to a first-class hospital."⁵² This comment may suggest that middle-class women sought to ensure they mixed with 'their own' through only training at the

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.118

⁴⁸ P. Starkey, 'Uncommon entrance?', p.6.

⁴⁹ Within voluntary hospitals, the percentage of probationers with elementary education only in 1929 and 1937 were 17% and 25% respectively. However, within local authority hospitals the figures for the same rates rose to 66% and 71%. B. Abel-Smith, *A history of the nursing profession*.

⁵⁰ P. Starkey, 'Uncommon entrance?' pp.5-16.

⁵¹ C. Maggs, *The origins of general nursing*, pp.146-147.

⁵² P. Starkey, 'Uncommon entrance?', p.13.

most prestigious institutions. Oral history suggests that the more prestigious hospitals tended to recruit from the more affluent middle classes. As one respondent remembered:

We'd a lot in common... they were very nice girls. They didn't take any Tom, Dick or Harry, you see. They had girls of your own standing... the other hospitals were a bit different to the old infirmary.⁵³

It is interesting that this respondent notes the importance of being with 'girls' of her 'own standing' which presumably meant young women of a similar social class. This again emphasises how the career chosen by young middle-class women was, in part, selected. This would diminish the risks of 'rubbing shoulders' with other lower social classes, although one can only speculate on the extent to which nurses mixed with hospital auxiliary staff, such as porters.

Of my own oral history respondents, two went into nursing. One became a nurse, the other became a physiotherapist. Mrs Davis trained as a nurse at Mill Road Hospital. Given the clear hierarchy which existed in Liverpool's training hospitals, it is interesting that coming from a lower middle-class background she received her training at this hospital, one which was scorned by many from the higher echelons of the middle classes. She left school at 16 and went on to evening classes before taking up her place at training college. She explained how she took up this place:

Where did you do your training?

Mill Road Hospital, which is now the maternity hospital... We had a friend, a Mrs Proctor, and she was on the City Council, and she was on the committee of the hospital and that's how I came to be introduced there, I had applied when there was a vacancy at Mill Road and took it and I was quite glad that I did, because it was a very good training school.⁵⁴

Despite training at a municipal hospital, her parents clearly believed that it was important that their daughter was trained for a 'profession'. This is at variance with the testimony received by women from upper middle-class backgrounds which is given later in this chapter. Mrs Davis recalled that this attitude was common amongst the lower middle classes:

⁵³ *ibid.* p.9.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mrs Davis.

They were white-collar workers more or less. And a lot of the children were trained in teaching, it seemed to be teaching, nursing or something of that kind that needed training, shorthand typists, yes. Several of my friends did shorthand typing, office work.⁵⁵

Nursing appealed to her because she believed it would give her greater independence:

Why did you take up nursing?

Because of my aunt, my Aunt Molly, I thought nursing was a great life. Because I could see that I could have more independence, I wasn't going to be attached, home was very happy, but I wasn't going to the one that was going to be pulled into home all the time. I had more opportunity of developing my own life by being a nurse, had I been a teacher or done an office job then I'd have lived at home, and I thought I've got to break out a bit, I don't have to be the one leading the way at home all the time, but I think that's the way that my mind worked, I don't know really, but I thought nursing was for me, it sounded great.⁵⁶

Miss Brown, coming from a more comfortable middle-class background, did her physiotherapy training at the Southern Hospital. This was a well-regarded teaching hospital, higher up the hierarchy of local hospitals. Nursing, it seems, may at first sight have offered great opportunities for social mixing, given its emphasis on dealing with people. However, as this section has shown, the hierarchy of training and appointments meant that opportunities for 'rubbing shoulders' were closely guarded. The stringent rules which governed the nurses' homes also indicate how, during their training, young middle-class women were closely supervised and prevented from mixing freely. As Mrs Davis remembered:

I lived in and we had a very strict timetable which my parents approved of, 10.30 was the time you had to be in, otherwise you got booked and had an evening off docked and that was that.

What kinds of things did you do on your evenings off then?

We only had one a week, one day and one evening and when I wasn't going home to another friend, to her home, then I would go home to my home and sometimes we would meet at the theatre, meet at the Playhouse. Days off, I always went home for those.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Interview with Mrs Davis.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

Secretarial work

Office work created a huge expansion in women's employment during the inter-war years.⁵⁸ The First World War not only accelerated the shift of clerical work from the sphere of men's work to that of women's but it also created greater opportunities for women in higher positions which had not been available prior to the war. This allowed men to enter other new careers which were being created by the specialisation of offices, as salesmen and commercial travellers, for example. Shorthand typing and telephonist work were regarded as women's work by the 1920s. It was asserted that the typewriter was analogous to the piano and therefore suitable for female fingers.⁵⁹ Oral testimony suggests that secretarial work did not carry the same respect and credibility which professions such as teaching carried. When I questioned Mrs Hickey if she had ever considered secretarial work, she told me:

Oh no, people did do secretarial work, yes, but that was considered, not really quite the thing, but an awful lot of people did, of course, and got on very well.⁶⁰

Her sentiments regarding secretarial work are interesting as she herself came from a lower middle-class background. It is probable that her parents hoped that if she entered the teaching profession she would be mixing with those a little higher up the social scale than those in office work.

The social survey of Merseyside noted the increasing feminisation of clerical work amongst offices in Liverpool: "Women have now taken over a great deal of office work, such as typing, book-keeping, invoicing, and accounting, previously done by men".⁶¹ All of this amounted to a feminisation of clerical work in the years immediately following the war, in both the nature of the work and the ideology

⁵⁸ The most comprehensive survey of women's role in clerical work is T. Davy, "A cissy job for men; a nice job for girls", pp.124-144. See also M. Zimmeck, 'Jobs for the girls: the expansion of clerical work for women, 1850-1914', in A. John (ed.), *Unequal opportunities: women's employment in England, 1800-1918* (Oxford, 1986), pp.153-177.

⁵⁹ T. Davy, "A cissy job for men; a nice job for girls", p.126.

⁶⁰ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

⁶¹ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.II*, p.326.

surrounding it. The Civil Service offered new opportunities for women and Local Government was expanding its workforce and employing increasing numbers of women. As an important commercial and transport centre Liverpool had a large clerical population, a significant proportion of which were women.⁶² Women clerks and typists formed 10% of Liverpool's clerical workforce in 1901. This figure rose to 17% in 1911 and by 1921 the figure had risen to 37%.⁶³ Clerical work was perceived to be particularly suitable for women since offices were clean and women were unlikely to mix with undesirable men. Men and women were physically segregated in the office. In all but the smallest offices, women were kept apart from men on women's floors or in women's rooms. Mrs Matthews worked in local government offices in Liverpool and recalled having very little contact with her male colleagues:

In your office, were the men and the women separated?

Oh yes, all the typists were together, yes, oh yes, we were.⁶⁴

Secretaries were also segregated according to their levels, the more senior typists and secretaries were segregated from the more lowly trainee secretaries:

So you were all in one room together then?

Well, yes, the juniors were in together and the senior typists were together, there would be four of you together, oh yes. Then the valuers they would ring for a typist, they'd ring through and you'd have to go and take shorthand in their office, not where you type, you would go to their office.⁶⁵

It may well have been the case that senior and junior typists were also divided along class lines with the senior typists largely coming from middle-class backgrounds, whilst the junior typists may have included young women from upper working-class backgrounds. It should be noted that office work included an enormous array of occupations from the personal secretary to the managing director of a large company down to the female clerk in a builder's merchants. This has consequently led to

⁶² The increase in female clerks on Merseyside is noted in *ibid.* pp.326-327.

⁶³ *ibid.* p.326.

⁶⁴ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

difficulties in identifying the social background of female clerical workers.

Teresa Davy has identified three grades of clerical workers: first, girls with superior education, both secondary and commercial, who were proficient in shorthand, typing and business practice, who usually worked as a secretary or personal assistant. Second, girls proficient in typing and copying who were found in the better-class typewriting and business houses. Third, young working-class women who entered office work straight from elementary school and received their training on the job.⁶⁶ This final category represented an expanding group. Angela Rodaway's experiences are indicative of this third category. She came from a working-class background and sought to better herself by joining the Civil Service.⁶⁷ Further insights into the social mobility of young working-class clerical workers is given by Kay Sanderson in her work on female Civil Service clerks in London.⁶⁸ By contrast, all of the women interviewed in the present study can be placed in the first two categories identified by Davy.

Using oral evidence, it was found that clerical work was a major employer of young middle-class women working during the 1930s. The women I interviewed who went into secretarial work had all received a secondary education and then gone on to secretarial college where they learnt shorthand and typing. However, the differing experiences of Mrs Chambers and Mrs Matthews highlight the diversity in the experiences of middle-class clerical workers during the 1920s and 1930s. Mrs Chambers came from an upper middle-class background. She took up a place at one of Liverpool's most prestigious secretarial colleges, known locally as Miss Fowkes'. Mrs Chambers describes her experiences:

I was thoroughly spoilt then and I was really frightfully bored at home then to be quite honest. I wanted to, my brain was being a bit inactive and I said to my father, "I want to do something". And he said, "You don't want to do anything, you don't want to work", And I said, "Yes I do, I'd like to train for secretarial work". I didn't want to be a nurse and I didn't want to be a

⁶⁶ T. Davy, "A cissy job for men; a nice job for girls", p.127.

⁶⁷ A. Rodaway, *A London childhood* (London, 1960).

⁶⁸ K. Sanderson, "A pension to look forward to...?" Women civil service clerks in London 1925-1939' in L. Davidoff and B. Westover (eds.), *Our work, our lives, our words: women's history and women's work* (Basingstoke, 1986), pp.145-159.

teacher and that was about all there was. So I went to Miss Fowkes, which was the top secretarial school in Liverpool and from then on my life took off it was absolutely fantastic. Because I did a nine-month course with her and then her secretary left and she said, "Would I like to take on the job of her secretary?" And I stayed with her for two years...⁶⁹

Her father was firmly opposed to the idea of his daughter going out to work. The following testimony highlights her father's sentiments:

My father used to say, "I can't understand you, I can't understand you now, you play golf and why can't you stay at home and just play golf, and play for the team and help your mother with the flowers and help her entertain these South Africans that come over?"⁷⁰

Mrs Matthews came from a more modest middle-class background. In her case, the choice of office work was based upon the needs of the family. Her father was a commission agent in a small Liverpool office and although she was the youngest child in a large family, there were nonetheless economic incentives for her to go out to work. She trained at a smaller, less prestigious college known as Marchant and Harpers. She recalled:

I took to it like a duck to water, the first day that I was there, I went home and I thought, "Well I'll never learn that double Dutch shorthand. I don't see how you can do it", but I did and I passed all the exams easily, speed exams.⁷¹

Her superior education and shorthand training stood her in good stead and allowed her to work her way up the office ladder:

... when I left the commercial college, jobs were very, very scarce, very scarce, they talk about now, but it really was bad then, you'd no financial support then from anybody, your parents had to keep you. However through the influence of my brother, there was going to be a revaluation, in those days they had a revaluation of property, it was every five years, they had this revaluation and everybody had to fill in a form and this was coming off so Charles spoke to the head of the department and I got in and from then on I was there all the time, and I seemed to fit in with them, in the end I was the

⁶⁹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

secretary to the boss.⁷²

Secretarial work, with its deeply hierarchical structure, appears to have been one career where contact with members of different social classes was virtually inevitable. Autobiographical evidence would suggest that within offices a huge gulf existed between the lot of the personal secretary such as Mrs Chambers and the typist working in the typing pool. Frances Donaldson came from an upper middle-class background and became the personal secretary in a large manufacturing company.⁷³ Her autobiographical account of her experiences as a secretary demonstrates the hierarchy of social classes that were employed under the umbrella category of office worker. The following testimony also reveals the gulf which existed between herself and the typists with whom she came into contact:

It was the first time I had come into close contact with working-class girls, and I was shocked by their conditions and touched by their lives. Typists were very badly paid in those days and extremely hard-worked. Two other women in the whole business earned as much as I did, and one of them, like myself, owed it to an upper-class personality. Other secretaries earned £3 or £3-10-0 a week, and the large pool of ordinary typists were paid twenty-five shillings. Most of them subsisted on buns and coffee or tea, and their clothes were few and poor.⁷⁴

What is fascinating is that this was her first real contact with the working classes. The gulf between herself and the typists in the typing pool is further highlighted as she recounts an incident in which she was asked by a senior figure in the firm to have a quiet word with the girls in the typing pool on the delicate matter of personal hygiene.⁷⁵

Oral evidence clearly shows how for some middle-class women, entry into the workplace was their first experience of mixing with people outside their own social circle. Mrs Chambers grew up in the middle-class suburb of Blundellsands and was educated at a boarding school in St. Andrews. Her entry into an architects' office in

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ F. Donaldson, *Child of the twenties* (London, 1959).

⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.137.

⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.139.

Liverpool brought her into contact with people outside her own social circle for the first time. As she explained:

I got a job as a secretary to an architect in Liverpool, Quiggens and Gee... and I had a wonderful time, it was absolutely super, wonderful office, it was tremendously good fun and the architects were good fun, we used to have good parties, I really enjoyed myself there, it was great, and there I met people who, if I'd stayed at home, I would never have come into contact with. We had an office boy in that office and he was a smashing little lad he was called Henry and really, he came from the depths, you know, he came from a really, really poor home and he was only about 14... when he was 16 they wanted to find him another job and the one of the partners rang up another firm that they worked for...he said, "You want a boy don't you?" and they said, "Yes", "Well, will you have Henry?" And they said, "Oh yes". And when they discovered that he was a Catholic, they wouldn't have him, there was a terrible amount of bigotry.⁷⁶

The above example illustrates the way in which entry into the labour market broadened her social horizons and brought her into contact with people from different social and religious backgrounds. Like many of my other Church of England respondents, contact with Catholics was extremely rare. Had it not been for her experience in the office, it seems unlikely that Mrs Chambers would have met any Catholics at all, as she explained: "There was a very big Catholic church, St. Joseph's, near where I lived, but I didn't know any of the people that went there".⁷⁷

Mrs Chambers' secretarial career also brought her into contact with people higher up the social scale. After leaving the architects' office, she obtained a job in London working as a secretary. The following testimony demonstrates how she then had the opportunity to 'rub shoulders' with the upper classes:

I got this job, and it was through Lady Frances Ryder... And she had an office in Cadagon Square in London and she was a registered charity and she ran a hospitality scheme for Rhodes scholars, all the Commonwealth people that came over to the UK, and I used to look after all the hospitality in London, there were a lot of very upper-class, very smart nobility people who used to say, "Will you send me four students for lunch on Sunday? And we will have so many people for tea on Saturday, or we'll take them to Ascot",

⁷⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

and we used to arrange that.⁷⁸

The experience of living in London also led her to meet a new social circle. Living away from home, her parents made sure that she was living in suitable accommodation. Whilst in London she lived in a very exclusive club, where she mixed with young upper-class women:

I lived in a club in Harrington Gardens with a lot of other what you might call upper-class girls, you know, they all had very upper-class boyfriends and boyfriends who would call for them in smart cars and things. It was alright. Have you heard of Lady Guinevere Tilney? She was a student there with me...⁷⁹

Mrs Chambers' experiences are very enlightening. Her entry into the world of work broadened her social horizons in a dramatic way. Her home background clearly restricted her opportunities to mix outside of the close social circle of Blundellsands and her educational experiences at St. Leonards similarly did little to broaden her outlook. In this respect, the world of work offered much greater opportunities for 'social mixing' than she had hitherto experienced.

Miss Arthur also completed her secretarial training at Miss Fowkes and then became the personal secretary to the Director of Owen Owen, a large department store in Liverpool. Her recollections indicate the degree of social mixing which was characteristic of office work, particularly in the retail trade:

But I thought being in the retail trade was a marvellous life, I like being with people really and you were permanently with people, 'cause you'd got all your management, all your staff, all your customers, you know you were permanently dealing with people. Plus using any administrative skills that you had 'cause it took a lot of organising, coping with a lot of crises and so on.⁸⁰

Working in the shop certainly widened her social horizons. She recalls taking part in the work social events on Wednesday afternoons:

We had a whale of a time with the social and dramatic society, athletics, and social and dramatic things. And a very good swimming club, and there was

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Interview with Miss Arthur.

hockey and football. Well, in those days the store was open six days a week, but you had a half day on a Wednesday and you closed at one, so everybody was off on a Wednesday afternoon, so everybody played in all the team games and went to all the social events and all the rest of it.⁸¹

She also took part in the annual excursion organised by the shop:

We used to take the staff up to the Lakes as well, two trains, two solid trains, Owen Owen and T J. Hughes staff, 1,200, we used to book these trains, special trains, well we closed at one on a Wednesday and the trains were half past one, twenty five to two, so there was a great stream of people rushing down to Exchange station. Then the drill was, nearly everybody went on along [the promenade] either walked or went in the open horse-drawn [carriage], and the only place that could cope with 1,200 of us for a sort of high tea, if you know what I mean, knife and fork tea, was at the Winter Gardens, and nearly everybody went back to the fun fair and went on all the things there.⁸²

Sheltered by a comfortable home life and private schooling, for many middle-class women, entry into the labour market was the first opportunity that they had to meet people from different social backgrounds.

Marriage: an alternative career?

Girls tend to look upon their work as a stop-gap occupation, to be carried on until they marry and in this they are encouraged by all the subtle influences of convention and literature.⁸³

Oral history indicates that the majority of young middle-class women still saw marriage as their major goal in life. Given the strength of the 'back to the home' movement of the inter-war years, this is hardly surprising. By the beginning of the 1930s women had greater opportunities to marry. The effects of the male war losses had decreased and more marriages were now possible. Deidre Beddoe, in her account of women's lives during the inter-war years, noted that:

In the inter-war years only one desirable image was held up to women by the mainstream media agencies - that of the housewife and mother. This single

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ R. Strachey, *Careers and openings for women*, p.51.

role model was presented for women to follow and all alternative roles were presented as wholly undesirable.⁸⁴

In her autobiography, Eileen Elias recalled that whilst careers were encouraged at her school, they were regarded as a stop-gap until marriage and that, "It was still taken for granted that our chief role in life was to be good wives and mothers..."⁸⁵ It would appear that many young middle-class women who anticipated challenging post-school careers still saw marriage as their ultimate goal. Edith Mercer's study of secondary schoolgirls confirms this attitude. In her survey of young women some 77% hoped that they would marry. Interestingly, in her study of the ambitions of the girls, 41% hoped that they would continue their careers after they married. However, as we shall see the imposition of marriage bars and further social and cultural barriers made this impossible in practice for all but the most determined women.⁸⁶

As I have shown, young middle-class women increasingly expected to go out to work. However, this phase of employment was commonly regarded as something to fill the time between leaving school and getting married. As the following section will demonstrate, the majority of young middle-class women saw marriage as a central part of their lives. In general, it would seem that few middle-class women saw full-time work as something they would undertake for the whole of their adult lives. Combining work and marriage was something that few women appear to have even contemplated during this period. Mrs Bennett's recollections demonstrate this:

*Do you think that yourself and all your friends hoped that you would marry? Hoped that I would marry, I think yes, yes, I think so. It was usual, you know, there weren't many girls that didn't get married, and you didn't expect to work.*⁸⁷

Mrs Robinson also explained how she did not mind giving up her job as a teacher after she married:

⁸⁴ D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty*, p.8

⁸⁵ E. Elias, *Straw hats and serge bloomers* (London, 1979), p.17.

⁸⁶ E. Mercer, 'Some occupational attitudes of girls', p.20.

⁸⁷ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

Were you quite happy to give up work when you married?

Oh yes, quite happy, yes, wasn't for that, in fact I think I gave up a term before, I think I said that I must have a term at home before I get married to get myself ready, and enjoy myself, well you see I didn't really need to work, but I enjoyed working, I suppose I enjoyed the discipline of it in some ways and some of the children were nice.⁸⁸

Mrs Robinson married just before the outbreak of war and could have continued to teach if she had wished. However, she was more than happy to give up her career to get married and start a family:

No, no, I could have taught, but I had no desire to. Quite content to stay at home and I had my first child in 1940, so that was all right.⁸⁹

Mrs Hickey's recollections also suggest that she was more than happy to give up her teaching career to get married. When I questioned her about her career, it seems that she did not see the unmarried career women who taught her at Merchant Taylors school as role models. Instead, it would appear that she was actively rejecting the path that these women had taken. Given that teachers were forced into a lonely existence due to marriage bars this is hardly surprising. Vera Brittain observed that:

Girls who come from homes with a high standard of comfort and social life are not likely to be persuaded to adopt a career when the only example of the professional woman constantly before them is the neglected and often dowdy conductress of their history or geography lesson.⁹⁰

Despite wanting careers, the majority of the women I interviewed hoped that they would marry. Throughout the course of my oral history interviews I discovered the importance of marriage to my interviewees. Although I was primarily interested in young women's lives prior to marriage, I noticed that my respondents frequently moved our conversations on to marriage and their early married life. Looking over the transcripts, the frequency of the references to husbands, engagements and weddings was quite striking. The following testimonies indicate the importance of marriage in young women's lives:

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁹⁰ V. Brittain, *Women's work in modern Britain*, p.67.

And you always hoped that you would marry?

Yes I think so, I couldn't... the thought of staying at home with mother filled me with horror.⁹¹

Did you and your friends always hope that you would marry?

Yes, I don't remember any of them not marrying, no they all married. That's all but one of them didn't, one of my bridesmaids didn't... but she was the only one that I knew of that didn't marry. All the others did, I mean that was the aim and object in life to get married.⁹²

Mrs Matthews, by contrast, who had a successful career as the secretary to one of the bosses in the local government offices, indicates that she had felt some slight ambivalence about getting married. However, she interjects to show that this was unusual amongst young women of her generation:

Did you always hope that you would marry as well?

No, I wasn't very keen on that, didn't bother me, getting married. I suppose that's why I didn't marry until late, I was in my 30s when I married. Much to everybody's surprise, I married someone that I had known all my life.

Did women think that they could have careers then, it was ok for you to...

Oh no, women wanted to marry, no, that was the thing, yeah.⁹³

Mrs Williams also hoped that she would marry. She explained:

Well we assumed we would get married sooner or later, it was just one of those things that you did, I mean, Ruth this friend who was clever but wouldn't go on with it, she said, "Well if you're not engaged by the time you're 22 you've had it!"⁹⁴

She went on to suggest that she only saw her teaching career as a temporary phase and the following testimony illustrates that women were forced to choose between husbands and careers at this time:

When you started out with your teaching did you see it as a temporary thing until you got married or...?

I wasn't particularly bothered, when I first started teaching I did have a boyfriend at that point, not the one that I married, but another one. I didn't

⁹¹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁹² Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁹³ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁹⁴ Interview with Mrs Williams.

think life was going to be totally limited by classrooms, but I thought sooner or later I'll probably get married.⁹⁵

Mrs Robb always dreamed of getting married and despite having a successful career as a domestic science teacher, she was quite happy to sacrifice her career in order to marry:

... you had to give up work when you married, you weren't allowed to go on, but we didn't want to, young people getting married, and we used to all get together. We never thought of working ...

Was it always expected that you would marry then?

Oh yes, you always hoped that you would get married, yeah.⁹⁶

Her desire to marry and the importance young women placed on the event is shown in the following testimony in which she describes meeting up with her friends after teaching to admire each other's engagement rings and chat excitedly about their forthcoming marriages:

When I was teaching in Wavertree it was quite handy to go into [town], some of my friends were at home, they didn't have jobs, I used to meet them after school, we used to go to Bon Marche and they had a very nice cafe there and mannequins going round. By that time I think we were all engaged, looking at the engagement rings, looking at the furniture that we might want!⁹⁷

The marriage bar

The inter-war years saw the implementation of marriage bars for women in a number of sectors, including the Civil Service, medicine and teaching. This meant that women were forced to give up work immediately upon marriage. Mrs Davis became a nurse and she explained that "... if we got married we were out, like teachers were, no married people in."⁹⁸ Mrs Luscombe married in 1937 and was forced to give up her teaching post:

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Interview with Mrs Robb.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Interview with Mrs Davis.

... this is still between the wars, when you got married in those days, that was the end of your job, you'll have heard of that before.

The marriage bar?

The marriage bar, no question of you ever staying on once you were married so you had to have enough money to keep two on, and a family, if it was necessary.⁹⁹

Mrs Hickey also went into teaching during the 1930s and explained how careers and marriage remained incompatible:

The attitude to young qualified women at the time was a feeling that their education was probably a bit of a waste, as their careers would have to be sacrificed to their husbands', in marriage. The fact that there was a severe depression lent force to this argument. In 1932, none of us could even start a career and even the teaching profession which would have given us a living wage, had a marriage bar. I don't think this had any effect on women choosing not to marry - very few would make that choice.¹⁰⁰

When interviewed she made it quite clear that she would never have considered sacrificing her marriage chances in order to continue her career:

You didn't think that you would like to carry on teaching?

No, it didn't worry me at all. I just accepted that once I was married I would have to give up. But I was deadly bored in the first year of my married life, oh deadly. I don't like housework anyway... I like cooking, but I don't like housework, it's such a dreary chore... nowadays it's much easier than it used to be, but you've still got to do the ironing...¹⁰¹

Interestingly, she also hinted that she did not see her unmarried teachers as role models. As she told me:

... in places like Merchant Taylors' we did rather think they [the teachers] were something special, but I don't think we wanted to emulate them... I mean we didn't like some of the teachers that taught us. I mean they must just have had their eye on a career only.¹⁰²

The commonly held view was that married women did not need to work and if they chose to, they were taking jobs away from men with families to support and single

⁹⁹ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

¹⁰⁰ Written recollections of Mrs Hickey.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

¹⁰² *ibid.*

women who needed to support themselves. This view gained added credence during the years of the depression when unemployment rates were high. However, following the outbreak of the Second World War, the situation changed:

Was there a marriage bar in operation...

...Oh as soon as you were married you were out! Then the war came you see, four years later, then they were only too glad to have anybody who would go back and teach boys.¹⁰³

Mrs Williams was a teacher and as a result of the marriage bar she was forced to give up teaching for a short period after she married. This was clearly a wrench for her. She desperately wanted to go back to work, and with the outbreak of the Second World War, the marriage bar was discontinued. She describes her feelings towards staying at home:

I got very fed up, that's why I joined the Townswomen's Guild and got myself into some of the organising of it, I used to take a group to the baths and I used to have a group who went and played tennis then I had this lecturing to do.¹⁰⁴

It seems that for some women who had been educated in order to take up careers and then had fairly demanding and fulfilling teaching careers, being forced to give up work upon marriage and spend their time at home as housewives led to much frustration. Mrs Williams clearly was unhappy at being a housewife:

...but I had nearly four years at home and at that time I was in the Townswomen's Guild, I used to run the keep fit group, and I had a nice little group of middle age'ish sort of ladies and I used to give a talk on keep fit for the housewife in this little demonstration group.

When was this?

... this was when I was first married. When I was free, I mean I had to find something to do, I mean I couldn't just stay at home and do housework.¹⁰⁵

It is interesting that she felt that she needed something more to do than just housework. Presumably, her experience of teaching made it very difficult to adjust to being at home all day.

¹⁰³ Interview with Mrs Williams.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

Post careers: early married life

As I have already noted, the vast majority of young women were forced to give up work upon marriage. Given the strength of the 'back to the home' ideology during the 1920s and 1930s, I was keen to explore how young women coped with the transition from an independent working life to being housewives. Also, it is interesting that when one looks at this stage of the life-cycle the continuing influence of 'separate spheres' ideology manifested itself. The life-style of the typical married middle-class woman was predominantly home-centred. This was reinforced by the fact that as servants became increasingly difficult to find, middle-class women were moving into smaller houses and, with the help of new labour-saving devices, becoming more directly involved in the running of the home. Oral evidence collected from my own group of respondents suggests that the notion of 'separate spheres' was still very much in evidence, although interview material also suggests that many women were frustrated with being at home after having followed fulfilling careers.

Mrs Chambers had worked as a personal secretary in both Liverpool and London. After marrying in 1939, she gave up work and set up home in a small flat in Blundellsands. Despite being happy and having all her family nearby, the following oral testimony does indicate some frustration with her new role as housewife:

I went to this, it was a maisonette, two floors, and it was very nice and I became a housewife, totally and utterly. Alastair was a very successful young dentist and he had a practice in Anfield, and also had one in Rodney Street, he was doing extremely well, and I started doing W.V.S [Women's Voluntary Service] in those days because it was 1939, and it was just starting, the drilling in those days and that's when I first started. Oh I threw everything at him in the flat in the first few months! Because he'd been a bachelor for so long and I'd been totally independent, and he never thought of coming in for meals on time, and of course I'd got all the meals ready and then he didn't turn up, you know, and all that, but basically I think we were extremely happy...¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

Being trapped inside the house all day, bored with her own company, was a far cry from her previous life-style which had involved a busy day in the office followed by a hectic social life.

After getting married, Mrs Hickey moved to London where her husband obtained a teaching post. She describes how she spent her days and the following testimony does indicate some unhappiness with her new lot in life:

How did you fill your days?

Well, shopping, I would go into London occasionally, into town, but not very often, and plenty of, I suppose I read, I didn't write much, I'm writing more now and painting more pictures and things now. It was difficult, it's awfully difficult to make friends in London, you can be very lonely.¹⁰⁷

Much attention has been paid to the impact of household appliances on the life-styles of women during the inter-war period.¹⁰⁸ However, given that my primary concern has been to explore the stage of the life-cycle between leaving school and getting married, it has not been possible to explore, in this thesis, the impact of these new labour-saving devices on the life-styles of the women interviewed. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some speculative observations on this subject. Despite the gradual decline in the numbers of live-in servants, it was still possible to employ the services of a 'daily'. Elizabeth Roberts' work shows the importance of such casual, informal work in the lives of working-class women in the North West.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, a number of my oral history respondents continued to receive domestic help in their marital homes. Mrs Robinson described her own situation after she married and moved into a little flat in Blundellsands:

...[my husband] used to give me back five pounds a week, of which three pounds was for food and £1.50 was for me and 10s for a maid, I had a little maid... I had a living-in maid until we came to the other house in Park

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

¹⁰⁸ See, C. Davidson, *A woman's work is never done: a history of housework in the British Isles, 1650-1950* (London, 1982) and S. Bowden and A. Offer, 'The technological revolution that never was: gender, class and the diffusion of household appliances in interwar England' in V. de Grazia and E. Furlough (eds.), *The sex of things: gender and consumption in historical perspective* (London, 1996), pp.244-274.

¹⁰⁹ E. Roberts, *A woman's place*, p.136.

Drive... I always had living-in help when I was first married.¹¹⁰

Mrs Robinson was fortunate enough to employ the services of a 'daily'. This meant that she had very few domestic responsibilities, which allowed her to spend her days playing golf:

During the day you always had something to do?

Oh yes, well of course I played golf, probably played golf every day that took three hours of your day, and then you had lunch or tea or something, I was a member of Formby as well as here... You see we'd play every day and that was half a day, by the time you had lunch and something. Life didn't alter that much, except for the better I think... I was pregnant just at the beginning of the war, 1940.¹¹¹

In the evenings she recalls having a more hectic social life with young couples similar to herself:

We had a lot of young married friends and we used to go round to peoples houses and we used to play a game called a Bonanza, quite often, a card game that was crazy. Drinks at people's houses and sort of meals, it was only that one year that I knew of before the war broke out.¹¹²

However, Mrs Robinson enjoyed a relatively privileged middle-class life-style. Other newly-married women, with less domestic assistance, led less care-free lives after marriage and felt a series of frustrations as a result.

Conclusions

Oral evidence collected with a group of middle-class women who entered the labour market during the 1920s and 1930s has revealed a contrast between the experiences of young women growing up in the inter-war decades and those of their mothers' generation. A discussion with Mrs Stevens about her relationship with her parents suggests that the new experience of going out to work and earning an independent income sometimes led to conflict between mothers and daughters. As Mrs Stevens

¹¹⁰ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹¹¹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹¹² *ibid.*

explained:

[my mother] was typical of her generation, but that infuriated me, because I was so different, we didn't, my mother and I, we didn't get on awfully well together, I was fond of her, oh she was very fond of me, but we argued, and we quarrelled an awful lot... I couldn't discuss things with her as she didn't know what I was talking about.¹¹³

Despite the substantial changes which took place in the inter-war period, it remained the case that women's wages were lower than men's and most women were employed on the assumption that they would ultimately marry and leave work. The majority of young middle-class women shared this assumption, viewing a brief period of employment as a stop-gap between school and marriage. More importantly, young women's ambitions did not centre on careers, but marriage, and this chapter has shown marriage continued to be the ultimate goal of the majority of women interviewed for this study.

The inter-war years were decades of contradictions for women. On the one hand, we can see increasing employment opportunities for women and the rise of the 'career woman'. Although the range of occupations considered suitable for young middle-class women was still quite limited, girls from middle-class backgrounds, increasingly equipped with good academic and vocational qualifications, staked out a significant place for themselves in the inter-war labour market. In doing so, they took on the image formed in contemporary observers' minds of the 'career girl': youthful, self-reliant, and a visible presence in the public sphere. However, while the 'career girl' may have seemed to contemporaries a being defined more by her generation than by her class, closer examination reveals a world of work for young women that was highly stratified on class lines. In some occupations, young middle-class women remained very much 'with their own kind', in others, there was more opportunity for social mixing; in all cases, however, class was a crucial determinant of women's experience of employment.

For all the increased employment prospects, however, there was at the same time a continuing notion that ultimately, a woman's place was in the home. Such a feeling was heightened during the mass unemployment of the 1930s when it was

¹¹³ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

believed that it was unpatriotic for women to take men's jobs away from them. What this chapter thus brings us back to is the undeniable importance of the notion of 'separate spheres' as an organising category in the lives of young middle-class women. While we have seen that women were able to break out of the confines of the home for a short period between leaving school and getting married, the vast majority of women ultimately returned to the home. This chapter has shown that this was not only dictated through legislation such as the 'marriage bar', but also by the fact that these women themselves saw marriage as the most important part of their adult lives.

Chapter Five

Leisure in the home and family

John Walton and James Walvin, writing in 1983, noted the 'persisting lack of research on women and leisure'.¹ However, as a result of the wider growth of 'history from below' and women's history since the mid-1980s, increasing attention has been given to the ways in which women have used their leisure time.² The existing literature focuses mainly upon the experiences of working-class women and is largely based upon oral history methods. This is exemplified in the work of Andrew Davies on leisure in Salford and Manchester.³ In *Leisure, gender and poverty*, Davies examined leisure activities from an explicitly gendered perspective. The central argument in Davies' work is that leisure activities were both patterned by gender and further shaped by the constraints of poverty. Based upon extensive oral evidence, Davies looked at a broad range of leisure activities with particular focus upon informal, street-based pursuits such as sitting on the doorstep gossiping, street corner leisure, street customs such as the annual Whit Walks and visits to Saturday night markets.⁴ Through an examination of this broad range of activities Davies also demonstrated the importance of the life-cycle in determining choice of, and access to, leisure activities.

Other work conducted within the 'history from below' tradition has also furthered our understanding of women's leisure activities in Britain. Of particular note here is Elizabeth Roberts' work on women in North-West England. In *A*

¹ J. Walton and J. Walvin (eds.), *Leisure in Britain, 1780-1939* (Manchester, 1983), p.5.

² For example see the work of: A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working-class culture in Salford and Manchester 1900-1939* (Buckingham, 1992), E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984), J. Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners: an oral history of women pottery workers at work and at home* (Milton Keynes, 1988) and J. White, *The worst street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, between the wars* (London, 1986).

³ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*.

⁴ *ibid.*

woman's place Roberts noted that it was mainly in their accounts of the stage of the life-cycle between leaving school and getting married that her working-class respondents talked about the importance of leisure in their lives.⁵ David Fowler's account of young wage-earners in inter-war Britain paid much attention to young people's use of leisure facilities.⁶ Jacqueline Sarsby's work on women in the Potteries emphasised the importance of the cinema, the dance hall and the 'monkey run' in enlivening young working-class women's evenings.⁷

Thus, largely through the use of oral history, the history of women's leisure now forms a growing area of historical study.⁸ However, it should be stressed that existing work has tended to approach women's leisure in two distinct ways. Firstly, almost all accounts of women's leisure in the twentieth century have concentrated solely upon the experiences of working-class women. There is very little work which focuses upon the recreational and cultural pastimes of the middle classes as a whole and less still which specifically deals with the leisure of middle-class women.⁹ As a result, we know far more about cinema-going and 'monkey parades' than we do about tennis clubs and bridge parties. Secondly, existing work has tended to concentrate upon organised leisure, such as cinema-going or dancing, to the exclusion of home-based, informal activities such as reading, handicrafts or socialising with friends and family. Andrew Davies' work has highlighted the importance of the

⁵ E. Roberts, *A woman's place*.

⁶ D. Fowler, *The first teenagers: the lifestyle of young wage-earners in interwar Britain* (London, 1995).

⁷ J. Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners*.

⁸ The increasing interest in this field of study is further emphasised through women's leisure activities being the focus of two recent doctoral theses: C. Langhamer, 'Women and leisure in Manchester, 1920-c.1960', PhD, University of Central Lancashire (1996), and L. Oliver, 'Liberating or restricting? Women's leisure in Bolton 1918-1939', PhD, Lancaster University (1997).

⁹ Important exceptions to this trend include the contribution made by D. Beddoe in her survey of women's lives in the inter-war period. See D. Beddoe, *Back to home and duty: women between the wars 1919-1939* (London, 1989). Alan A. Jackson's work on the middle classes gives some interesting insights into leisure patterns. See A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991). Liz Oliver's recent doctoral thesis also pays some attention to the leisure activities of middle-class women in Bolton. L. Oliver, 'Liberating or restricting?'

street as the focal point of much informal leisure activity within working-class communities and Melanie Tebbutt's work has further demonstrated that women's leisure is especially informal in its nature, with activities such as sitting out on the doorstep and gossiping playing a central role in working-class women's leisure.¹⁰ However, the tendency remains within the literature on leisure to focus upon institutional, organised, 'out of the home' activities. There is virtually no work which considers the importance of the home as a site for women's leisure.

The following two chapters explore the leisure experiences of young middle-class women in Liverpool during the inter-war period, thus bringing into focus a group whose leisure experiences have hitherto been ignored by social historians. In the first of these chapters, I intend to explore the extent to which young women's leisure activities took place within the home and family. As I have already argued in this thesis, home-based activities were central to the life-styles of the inter-war middle classes. Thus, Chapter Five looks specifically at leisure within the home, and in doing so, raises important issues surrounding the 'private' nature of young middle-class women's leisure. Chapter Six examines those activities which took place outside of the home. Initial attention is paid to the commercial leisure boom of the inter-war decades. However, after examining activities such as cinema-going and dancing, this chapter will stress the relative unimportance of the mass leisure industries in the lives of young middle-class women and highlights instead the greater importance which was attached to club membership, rambling and motoring. The key theme which runs throughout Chapters Five and Six is the extent to which young middle-class women's leisure activities effectively kept them apart from other social classes, and the importance attached to socialising with 'one's own' is a recurrent theme in both chapters. Attention will also be paid to some of the differences in leisure patterns within the middle classes.

¹⁰ M. Tebbutt, *Women's talk? A social history of gossip in working-class neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (Aldershot, 1995).

Leisure and the life-cycle

Before moving on to an analysis of young middle-class women's leisure activities, it is first necessary to define what is meant by the term 'leisure', particularly with reference to young middle-class women. The term 'leisure' is an ambiguous one, although historians have tended to define leisure in direct opposition to paid labour and have thus conceptualised it in terms of a 'reward' for that labour. Peter Bailey, in his influential work on leisure in Victorian England, defined leisure as: "The time which lies outside the demands of work, direct social obligation and routine activities of personal and domestic maintenance".¹¹ However, feminist sociologists have pointed out that this definition is problematic when applied to the experiences of adult women, especially working-class housewives. This group tended to enjoy little or no distinct leisure time, and often sought relaxation through activities which might be considered to be domestic 'work', such as sewing and knitting.¹²

Nonetheless, as historical studies of women in working-class communities have shown, the conventional notion of leisure as a 'reward' for paid labour is perhaps more appropriate when applied to women's experiences during the stage of the life-cycle between leaving school at 14 and getting married. Within studies of young working-class women, historians have shown that this stage of the life-cycle was one in which young women were relatively privileged as consumers of leisure.¹³ Prior to marriage, working-class women were usually in paid employment. Although most undertook some household duties, they nevertheless tended to enjoy clearly identified 'leisure' time as well as the disposable income and freedom of movement to enjoy it. In his study of leisure in Manchester and Salford, Andrew Davies persuasively argued

¹¹ P. Bailey, *Leisure and class in Victorian England: rational recreation and the contest for control, 1830-1885* (London, 1978), p.6.

¹² See R. Deem, *All work and no play? A study of women and leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1986), E. Green, S. Hebron and D. Woodward, *Women's leisure, what leisure?* (London, 1990) and E. Wimbush and M. Talbot (eds), *Relative freedoms: women and leisure* (Milton Keynes, 1988).

¹³ Elizabeth Roberts argued in *A woman's place* that these were the years when women were most likely to enjoy leisure, see p.39.

for the centrality of the life-cycle in determining young working-class women's access to leisure activities, and he clearly demonstrated how the leisure experiences of women differed dramatically before and after marriage:

Prior to marriage, young women enjoyed much greater freedom and financial independence, and for a spell in their late teens, they were relatively privileged as consumers of leisure.¹⁴

Similarly, David Fowler, in his study of young wage-earners in inter-war Britain, noted their importance as consumers of leisure goods and services.¹⁵ Although, disappointingly, he said little specifically about the leisure activities of young women, he clearly demonstrated the centrality of the life-cycle as a precursor to the enjoyment of leisure amongst the working classes.

This raises the question of the position of young middle-class women in this stage of the life-cycle. The notion of leisure as 'reward' for paid labour is less clear-cut for middle-class women. The vast majority of them remained in education much longer than their working-class counterparts, and even in the 1920s and 1930s, they did not necessarily undertake paid work on a continuous basis after they completed their education. Thus, understanding the concept of leisure in relation to young middle-class women is more complex.

It is possible to divide young middle-class women into three groups. First, those attending school, college or university usually had considerable leisure time, particularly as, in contrast to their working-class counterparts, they had few, if any, domestic duties. Second, those who entered paid employment prior to marriage also enjoyed clearly identified leisure time. They, furthermore, had a greater degree of disposable income than those still in education. Moreover, they also tended to undertake very few household duties, leaving them considerable time for socialising and relaxation. Third, there were some young middle-class women who, having finished their education, either did not take up paid employment of any kind, or else went out to work on an intermittent basis. Women in this third category, most of whom were from upper middle-class families, sometimes characterised this stage of

¹⁴ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*, p.81.

¹⁵ D. Fowler, *The first teenagers*.

the life-cycle retrospectively as one of undiluted leisure. As Mrs Chambers, who worked intermittently as a secretary, declared: "Oh, we were the leisured women, our lives were all leisure then!"¹⁶ In Mrs Chambers' case, she spent much of her time on the golf course and was able to enjoy extended spells of travel. This clearly differentiates the leisure experiences of young middle-class women from those of their working-class counterparts and highlights the more varied nature of middle-class women's experiences of leisure.

Chapters Five and Six examine a broad range of pastimes ranging from theatre-going and attending glamorous balls, to lavish home-based entertainment, to more mundane home-based activities such as reading. These chapters will show that the leisure activities of young middle-class women were more varied, and in many cases more luxurious, than those of their working-class counterparts, thus reflecting the relative affluence of the inter-war middle classes.

Home, family and respectability

Within the following two chapters I intend to provide an empirical account of the leisure activities of young middle-class women. However, as in earlier chapters, I also intend to look at patterns of narration within my oral testimonies. In Chapter One I outlined my decision to use semi-structured interviews, and also pointed out that by 'listening more carefully' to the accounts given by my respondents I was prompted to shift my line of questioning. When I began interviewing I found that the material collected upon leisure activities was severely limited. Informed by the existing literature on working-class women's leisure activities, my questioning had focused upon commercial leisure activities such as cinema-going. This, I later discovered, failed to elicit information on a whole range of activities which young middle-class women took part in. As I began to ask broader questions such as: *How did you spend your free time?* I began to notice my respondents' firm insistence upon

¹⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

the importance of leisure activities within the home.¹⁷ Given the lack of primary sources which document home life, oral evidence is crucial in exploring the importance of the home as a site for leisure amongst young middle-class women.

When analysing the transcripts, I discovered that there was a tendency amongst my respondents to frame their accounts of home-based leisure activities in a way which drew a contrast between 'then' and 'now'. In emphasising the home-centred nature of their own life-styles as young women, they drew a contrast between the 'good old days' and a corrupt present. In their accounts, in their younger days the home was seen as a happy place where time was spent with family and friends. By contrast, the present was perceived as a time when broken families and homes have destroyed this way of life. Mrs Luscombe's memories illustrate this:

It was family life, I'm back to this all the time, not only myself but everybody, was at home much more, home life was much more important... it was mostly staying at home, except if you had a club meeting or you had a club, there was more home life than there is nowadays, you did things together, for instance you would play cards together, young and old, you could have music together at home in the house, you'd have friends in.¹⁸

In recounting her leisure in such a fashion she draws a clear contrast between 'then' and 'now', and by emphasising the importance of family values and a stable home life in a morally stable past her own respectability is firmly asserted. However, in acknowledging that my own respondents stressed the importance of their home and family lives in order to assert their respectability, I would nonetheless maintain that much of the rich empirical material contained within the interviews is valid.¹⁹

In his study of the middle classes in the first half of the twentieth century, Alan A. Jackson drew a sharp contrast between middle-class leisure patterns and those of the working classes:

¹⁷ This demonstrates one of the advantages of using semi-structured interviews. I was able to allow my respondents to guide me to what activities were important in their lives.

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

¹⁹ By cross-checking my oral transcripts, and reading them in tandem with both contemporary social surveys and autobiographies, it was possible to discern clearly established patterns of behaviour amongst young middle-class women. This approach is in keeping with that advocated in R. Samuel and P. Thompson (eds.), *The myths we live by* (London, 1990), pp.5-11.

... unlike the working class whose overcrowded and uninviting homes prompted them to resort to the convivial and lively warmth of public houses and music halls, the more home centred middle classes preferred a quieter setting for most of their indoor entertainment.²⁰

Jackson argued that the inter-war years saw a growth of more family-orientated leisure pursuits among the middle classes, alongside an increased emphasis on the home as a site for leisure, reflecting in part the wider availability of radios and gramophones.²¹ In Chapter Two I have likewise argued that the inter-war middle classes led largely home-centred life-styles. The home was the centre of middle-class life; it was a private space which offered comfort and shelter.

However, middle-class leisure patterns remain under-researched. More work is needed to examine the leisure patterns of the middle classes, especially those of young single women, in more depth. Through the use of oral history it is possible to construct a detailed account of the leisure patterns of the middle classes. Oral history is also the ideal method to explore a line of enquiry which moves beyond the 'public' world of leisure and into the previously unexplored world of 'private' leisure.

The home-centred nature of young middle-class women's leisure is a theme that appears time and again in oral history testimonies. As Mrs Williams told me, "... when you were at home you were quite happy to be at home."²² Mrs Davis similarly recalled how the home was the major venue for her leisure: "It was all at home, all at home, or church, all my leisure was".²³ Socialising at home was a common feature in the life-styles of all sections of the middle classes, whether in the suburban homes of West Derby or the grand Victorian villas of Blundellsands, although it will be shown below it is possible to see some subtle differences in the styles of entertaining which took place. Socialising within the home appears to have offered the added advantage of allowing the middle classes to mix with 'their own'. Obviously, the home offered the ideal 'private' venue in which young people could

²⁰ A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950*, p.274.

²¹ *ibid.* p.274.

²² Interview with Mrs Williams.

²³ Interview with Mrs Davis.

socialise in exclusively middle-class circles. Mrs Duncan recalls that her leisure activities rarely took her into the public world:

Oh yes, it was all indoor, not outside, we never, we never went like they go now to drink in pubs and meet in pubs or anything like that. We met in each other's, either in my house or one of my friend's.²⁴

Similarly, Mrs Hickey's recollections illustrate the importance of the home as the principal venue for her leisure activities:

What kind of leisure activities did you do?

I think the thing which sticks in my mind most of all was, my mother was very hospitable and there were always people in our house... by the time I got home on Friday night there was nearly always someone waiting for me! And we used to play the piano and I had friends who played the piano, one in particular was brilliant.²⁵

In the account which follows, I shall look firstly at individual activities such as reading and sewing, before moving on to look at home-centred forms of socialising, such as parties and 'entertaining'.

However, a note of caution should be raised here. In arguing for the importance of home-based leisure activities in the lives of young middle-class women, one should be cautious in assuming that young working-class women did not spend much of their leisure time at home.²⁶ As a result, home-based activities such as reading and listening to the radio have been largely neglected by historians working in the 'history from below tradition'. This is an aspect of young working-class women's leisure that has been widely under-researched. The accounts by historians who have examined working-class communities may have underestimated the tendency for young women to socialise within the home. Such work has tended to argue that there was rarely the opportunity or the desire to spend leisure time in

²⁴ Interview with Mrs Duncan.

²⁵ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

²⁶ Although my own interviews with working-class respondents tended to confirm the view that little or no socialising took place within working-class homes. I did discover that one of my middle-class respondents regularly visited a friend from a working-class background (who had won a scholarship to Grammar school) This led me to be cautious in arguing that leisure within the home was solely the preserve of the middle classes.

cramped and overcrowded working-class homes and has concentrated upon those activities which took place outside of the home, such as cinema-going and dancing. I would suggest that young working-class women spent much of their leisure in the home, sewing and knitting. Interestingly, because of lack of money, working-class women may have more inclined to stay at home and make their own clothes.

Individual and peer-group activities

Reading occupied a major place in the cultural lives of the middle classes as a whole, and formed an important part of young women's leisure routines. Mrs Luscombe recalled the passion for reading amongst her own circle during the 1920s and 1930s:

Reading was very much a pastime, you always had a book... I always did like reading, but you discussed books that you'd read and recommended them, yes reading was a big pastime amongst both young men and women, perhaps nothing else to do in the evenings, you didn't always go out to parties, you'd have your book to read...²⁷

As Chapter Two has shown, the middle classes tended not to use public libraries, favouring private subscription libraries instead. Mrs Williams demonstrates the importance of reading in her leisure time, but was slightly unusual in that she did frequent a public library:

I was also interested to think about the leisure time that you spent at home, what kinds of things did you do?

Read mostly... Dad and I used to walk up to Knotty Ash library and we more or less read the same kinds of book, and you went through two or three books a week...²⁸

Books were more typically borrowed from private subscription libraries such as Boots and W.H.Smiths' which, according to *The social survey of Merseyside*, were "used mainly by the upper and middle classes."²⁹ Mrs Matthews recalled the Boots Booklovers' Library:

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Interview with Mrs Williams.

²⁹ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III* (Liverpool, 1934), p.301.

I belonged to Boots Library, it was a lovely little library, it was the thing to do, to belong to Boots Library, I think it was five shillings a year, and I always used to go, used to go down after the office and get a book.³⁰

Although reading may be seen as an individual activity, it also widely led to peer-group discussions and thus formed the basis of an important social activity. Miss Brown recalls her passionate interest in reading, but also demonstrates the pleasure she gained from discussing her favourite books with her friends:

Do you remember the Boots Booklovers' Library?

Yes, we used to go there... all these good books, for example *Rebecca* and *Gone with the Wind* and others they came out, well not all together, well intermittent, and everybody read those books you see, it was the talk. *Gone with the Wind* was something to discuss, and when you got the book you just couldn't put it down, so was *Rebecca*, and there were other books like that, *Good Companions*... anyway those were good books as well, they came out. They followed on one or two or three of those, and we all read those and I suppose there were plenty of other books, but these were the ones that were terrific interest.³¹

What is interesting in this account of reading is that it was not just the reading of these books that was pleasurable, it was the chance to discuss them afterwards. As Miss Brown noted, 'it was the talk'. Reading, it seems, provided an opportunity to meet with friends and discuss books and recommend titles to each other.

Magazine reading was also popular amongst young women in the 1920s and 1930s.³² Magazine reading was one area in which differences emerged within the different phases within the stage of the life-cycle between leaving school and getting married. My respondents frequently recalled reading girls' magazine and comics whilst still at school.³³ After leaving school such magazines, it seems, were rejected in favour of women's magazines concerned with marriage and home-making. Mrs

³⁰ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

³¹ Interview with Miss Brown.

³² A more detailed account of the magazine reading habits among young women is given in P. Tinkler, *Constructing girlhood: popular magazines for girls growing up in England, 1920-1950* (London, 1995).

³³ Interviews with Mrs Matthews, Miss Brown and Mrs Robinson. See also, K. Drotner, 'Schoolgirls, madcaps and air aces: English girls and their magazine reading between the wars', *Feminist Studies*, 9, 1 (1983), pp. 33-52.

Matthews' account shows how titles such as *Good Housekeeping* were highly popular amongst young middle-class women. She also suggests that discussion of the contents of magazines was an important part of their appeal:

Did you used to read any magazines then?

Oh yes, yes. We had a magazine club in the office, we used to each choose a magazine and then we'd pay so much a week and transfer them round and then each end up with one.

Do you remember which magazines you read then?

Well *Good Housekeeping* was one, and *Women's Journal*, is it? It's still going, and there was *My Home*, I know *Good Housekeeping* and *Women's Journal*, I think its called.

And you passed them round?

Yes, I think it was once a week we changed round and then at the end of the month, we all had one.³⁴

It is insightful to explore the types of magazines which young women favoured. The magazines mentioned by Mrs Matthews suggest that home-making was a central preoccupation in young women's reading. Given the importance placed upon marriage already noted in Chapter Four this is perhaps unsurprising. Romance also featured heavily in the magazines read by young women, as Mrs Robinson explained:

Did you ever read magazines back then?

Oh yes, yes, magazines, that was fine, that was right up my street.

Do you remember what magazines you used to read when you were younger?

Oh I can't remember I think it was *Woman* and *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Realm*. Those sort of things I used to read, light little stories in them you know.

Romantic stories?

Yes, that's right.³⁵

Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Own* were more likely to be read by women approaching marriageable age.

Needlecraft, knitting and embroidery also formed an important part of young women's routines within the home. Although such activities might be classified as domestic 'work', my respondents recalled taking considerable pleasure in their handiwork, and it should be noted that most young women in middle-class families

³⁴ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

³⁵ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

did not undertake such activities out of financial necessity, since they were usually in a position to buy their clothes from Liverpool's department stores. The majority of my respondents recalled enjoying handicrafts of some description. Spending evenings making items of clothing was a common activity, as Mrs Chambers remembered:

I think women in those days they did far more hand sewing and knitting. I made an awful lot of my own dresses and my own clothes, a lot of us did, I suppose that they looked pretty awful, but we always did an awful lot of home dressmaking.³⁶

Mrs Hickey remembered making her own clothes with her friends. Keeping up with the fashion emerges as an important factor:

We used to gossip you know, and knit and sew and crochet and all the other things, keep our wardrobes up to date.³⁷

Mrs Matthews also recalled making clothes for herself and knitting a great deal during her teens:

I used to do a lot of sewing for myself, knitting and sewing, I used to make my own dresses and skirts, I didn't make suits, but I did quite a lot of my own clothes and I knitted a lot.³⁸

As well as making clothes, young middle-class women spent time making things for their 'bottom drawer'. This was an activity which commonly took place as women entered their early twenties. A number of my respondents recalled how, when aged in their early twenties, they spent much of their time in the evenings embroidering tablecloths and place mats in readiness for marriage. Mrs Davis recalls:

Oh you didn't get wedding presents lavished upon you like today, you made things, I made an awful lot of things when I was nursing, we used to sit in the sitting room together and we would be sewing and embroidering away, making things for the bottom drawer.³⁹

³⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

³⁷ Interview with Mrs Hickey.

³⁸ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

³⁹ Interview with Mrs Davis.

Mrs Robb recalled a particularly interesting example of these preparations for marriage. She describes making a mat with her fiancé:

Oh when you got engaged, it was the done thing to make a mat, oh yes, we all made mats, for the front of the fire you see, and I never thought Leslie would make a mat but he did! Yes, it was something to do in the evenings, Leslie would come round to see me, and mother would be there and we would have the radio on, when we got engaged, we all bought mats, rugs, and we used to sit and make these together.⁴⁰

As this account suggests, handicrafts were frequently combined with another form of domestic leisure such as listening to the radio. However, as Mrs Robb points out, it was common for middle-class courting couples to socialise in their parents' homes, albeit under the supervision of parents. As well as highlighting the importance of marriage to young middle-class women, the preceding testimonies highlight the importance of the home in the leisure of the middle classes.

Friendship

Many of the domestic leisure activities enjoyed by young middle-class women were motivated by the opportunities they offered for socialising, and importance was attached to fostering female friendships as well as courtship. It would seem that friendship, and in particular time spent with a 'best friend', was an important dimension of young women's leisure activities. The importance attached to female friendships by young middle-class women comes across strongly in oral history interviews. Many of my own respondents spoke with fondness of friendships which they had made in their youth and had lasted throughout their lives. Visiting friends, chatting and gossiping were all important components of young middle-class women's leisure activities. Oral evidence suggests that chatting about boyfriends was a popular pastime in the 1920s and 1930s. Oral evidence points to the primacy of the home as a place where young middle-class women could meet together in relative privacy.

Mrs Williams remembered how Monday night was 'friends' night' in her circle. She and two of her girlfriends met together at each other's houses on alternate

⁴⁰ Interview with Mrs Robb.

weeks. She described how they spent such evenings:

And would you invite friends around to the house?

Oh yes, after I was teaching there were three of us who had been in college together and we met mostly at each other's houses on Mondays, always, Mondays was friends night and we used to do all sorts of things, like giving face packs and things.⁴¹

It would seem that 'friends' night' was an important part her of weekly routine and a time in which she and her friends could get together and chat:

Oh we tore all our [other] friends to pieces, and mother used to make lovely meals for us... she'd make lovely meals for us, oh and we used to play the piano and sing, it must have sounded awful to the neighbours as there were two members of the Philharmonic living next door, but they never banged on the wall so I assume it was alright.⁴²

Time spent with female friends was also used to practice the latest dancing steps. Mrs Williams remembers practising the Charleston with a friend in her kitchen. She explained, "I remember the Charleston came in about that time and we had a friend in Wavertree with a big kitchen and you practised first with a chair, you know that sort of odd leg movement".⁴³ Mrs Matthews also recalls practising dancing steps at a friend's house:

I remember I went to a friend's house, I used to go every Boxing night to this friend's house, she was a school friend too and the Charleston was coming in and we were all trying to do it and it was one of these things that it suddenly came to you and you could do it. The stairs they all had spindle things on them and we were all holding onto the spindles doing the Charleston, learning it.⁴⁴

Mrs Morris remembered having friends around for tea, both at school and at university:

I had two particular friends, one was a school friend, and one was the only other girl in my year at university... and I would go to tea with them and they

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

would come back to tea with me, we were always, at least once a week, well we saw each other a lot, we always went to each other's houses... I don't know what we did except talk and play cards and things like that, and go for walks, we didn't do anything exciting.⁴⁵

Although Mrs Morris characterised these occasions as mundane affairs, it is worth noting that they signified the relative affluence of middle-class households during the 1920s and 1930s. In working-class households, where diets were more meagre, such forms of entertaining were rare.⁴⁶

Parties and dances

It is possible to identify some important differences within the leisure activities of the middle classes. Although entertaining at home was common in the majority of middle-class households, oral testimonies suggest that holding parties and dances at home was largely undertaken by the upper-middle classes. Mrs Duncan recalls attending parties whilst she was at school. Her recollections also emphasise the close circle in which her entertaining took place:

Oh, well, we played all sorts of games. Certainly one of us could strum on the piano and we'd have sing-songs. And then of course we went on to some games, such as postman's knock and all these guessing games, and as we grew older, the games varied from somebody would have an idea, we'd have jumbled words, you see, we got on to competitions. We'd have just pen, paper and answer, you know, and there'd be little prizes. According to different parties that we went to. But we were generally the same group.⁴⁷

Such parties continued as young women grew older, although the games may have been replaced by dancing. Saturday night get-togethers were frequent occurrences, as Mrs Luscombe recalls:

... we would have a party on such and such a Saturday night and more people

⁴⁵ Interview with Mrs Morris.

⁴⁶ In working-class, exchanges of food were generally confined to relatives, or to moments of crisis, as housewives offered each other practical assistance in times of dire need. See R. Roberts, *The classic slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (Harmondsworth, 1973), and E. Roberts, *A woman's place*.

⁴⁷ Interview with Mrs Duncan.

would come and we'd have about 25 in a party and you had a party, because you were a big group, these occurred quite frequently, and we would say, "We're going to Molly's tonight, yes, we're all going to Molly's tonight", and it would go on like that.⁴⁸

Music and sing-songs were the order of the day at such parties as Mrs Luscombe explained:

... and when we weren't playing cards, we had a piano, one of our friends, not one of the family, was a pianist, and we sang round the piano and sang our hearts out to all the modern tunes and modern shows and at that period there were also some of the musicals that have still remained popular, the music from them... we would sing and play cards on a Saturday night, until the early hours of the morning, my parents would be upstairs, in their bedroom, I think they were glad in spite of the crowd that came to the house, to know where their ten children were, at least we were under that roof at least they knew what we were doing, so we were encouraged to bring our friends there, and there was plenty of room there and we had lots of winter parties on Saturday nights, beer flowed and light wines flowed, but not to get to the extent of anybody getting too much of it...⁴⁹

Mrs Luscombe was keen to stress that although alcohol was consumed, there was no drunkenness at such events. This represents another example of my respondents' insistence upon the respectability of their social lives prior to marriage. Her parents, it seems, were quite happy to have groups of young people descending upon them at weekends, possibly because they were able to exert a degree of control over their daughters and their guests. Also through allowing them to socialise within the home, her parents could ensure that their daughters were not out mixing with the 'wrong sort'. Nevertheless, despite being in the home, under the supposed watchful eye of her parents, there were still opportunities for romance to blossom, as Mrs Luscombe remembered:

... ordinary parties where people just came, we had a very nice stand around supper and I'm afraid there was an awful lot of sitting out down the back stairs, because we had two sets of stairs, you know, down into the kitchen premises, there was one set of stairs in the hall and they sort of went round in a sort of circle thing. Well, they were great fun as there was no light there and you found a partner there and there was a bit of canoodling there on the

⁴⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

back stairs, then you came back and you joined the party, but there was nothing nasty about it.⁵⁰

Similarly, Mrs Bennett recalls entertaining at home as her major form of leisure:

A lot of visiting of homes and it wasn't just something like this in front of the telly you know, it was really a meal and then we had a piano, my parents sang, my mother, my grandmother stayed a lot and she was very musical. You made your own things. My mother and my brother liked cards, bridge and so on, Dad and I didn't 'cause you had to be quiet and I liked to talk, we talked all the time. And we had great discussions, great arguments...

Did you often have friends around?

Oh often, crowds, my brother would, I know on Saturday night, my mother would always say we'd better have something hot on Saturday lunchtime in the summer, then we can have cold meat and a fry up because all the cricket team would be coming back, my brother was captain of the cricket team in Bootle and literally it would be crowded... and there wouldn't be much drink, not really, something like a Madeira which is very mild sweet wine and the boys would have glasses of shandy and things like that, mother would be making ginger beer...⁵¹

It is interesting to note in the preceding testimonies that alcoholic drinks were served at such parties. Whilst local public-houses remained strictly out of bounds for young middle-class women, there was no such taboo against drinking at home.

Dancing also took place within middle-class homes. The Green sisters recalled having parties at home in Wallasey:

(Mabel) Well we used to dance in the house in Wallasey, danced through the lounge through to the hall, and from the hall through to the dining room and back again. To a gramophone.

You had parties at home?

(Sybil) After tennis, the boys used to come back with us. Ours was always called an open house. New Year's Eve it was packed!⁵²

Dancing at home was also recalled by Mrs Williams:

When we lived in Knotty Ash, this great big cottage, if you tilted the table to one side there was room for a set of lancers, which were great fun, and for reels, and then mother could always be relied upon to produce some music.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

⁵² Interview with Sybil and Mabel Green.

Mother could play anything...⁵³

Dancing at home appears to have been popular within those households in which it was possible to move furniture to form an impromptu dance floor. These were more common in upper middle-class households, such as Mrs Robinson's:

Did you do a lot of entertaining at home?

Oh yes, a lot. A lot, I mean nearly always on a Saturday night, you always had Saturday night supper where you could bring in anybody, you know all the boyfriends and girls, all piled in, oh yes we did a lot of entertaining at home, Saturday nights, Sunday, quite often too for supper, not much mid-week really, I think I had work to do you know... we didn't do much mid-week really, it was mostly Saturdays and Sundays. We did quite a lot and actually in the house we had a parquet floor in the hall so that carpets and things were ripped up for dancing there too, which was quite fun, but that was to a gramophone. I remember we had one of the first ones, because father was a city electrical engineer, people sort of gave us things, you know.⁵⁴

Mrs Chambers also remembers having dances at home:

Would you often invite friends round to your house then?

Yes, we often had parties, my brother and I, my other two sisters always said that we had the best of the family life because he and I were very close together and he and I used to have parties together, his friends came and my friends came and we had a lovely big lounge at the back of the house in Blundellsands, with lovely stripped flooring, oak, and we used to take the carpets up there and have a radiogram and dancing and we had a barrel of beer down in the cloakroom, lots of people sitting on the stairs.⁵⁵

Playing cards was a popular pastime amongst middle-class families. Bridge, in particular, was immensely popular. Mrs Luscombe recalls playing cards with friends on a Saturday night:

... in the winter it was cards, we had a big, very big round table, a lounge table, it was enormous, you could put twelve round it. That wasn't in the dining room, that was in the lounge-cum-sitting room if you like. But because it was a big round table... we all played cards, gambling cards, pontoon, any of those gambling games...⁵⁶

⁵³ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁵⁶ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

Bridge parties were a popular leisure activity for young middle-class women, as Sybil and Mabel Green explained:

You dressed in your best black frock, pearls and ear-rings and everything and went to each other's houses for the evening. A game of bridge and coffee and cakes...⁵⁷

Another form of entertaining at home was the tennis party. The families of some of my upper middle-class respondents had their own private tennis courts. This is again indicative of the relative privilege of the inter-war middle classes. Throughout the summer months, private tennis parties formed regular social events. Mrs Bennett, whose parents were the managers of Walton Hospital, grew up living within the confines of the hospital and had access to a number of tennis courts which meant that she had no need to join a private club. She recalled going along to tennis parties with the hospital doctors:

Well I played at home, we had three or four courts and a hard court as well... the tennis frocks were washed and ironed and starched and everything was there and then the maids would bring put out the tea and strawberries and cream and cake, very nice.⁵⁸

Mrs Luscombe, whose family had a tennis court in their garden, enjoyed hosting frequent tennis parties in the summer months:

Weekends were great fun, both summer and winter, summer especially, as we did have a tennis court at the back of the garden and as we were a big family, we attracted more people to them, and if it was fine we would have a tennis party.⁵⁹

Mrs Robinson also recalls inviting friends round to play tennis at her house in West Derby:

We had a tennis court at home too, so that was always fun for parties and that sort of thing... I could bring in anybody in at anytime that I wanted to. They used to come and play tennis, we used to have tennis parties in the garden,

⁵⁷ Interview with Sybil and Mabel Green.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

which was nice. We had quite a good social life.⁶⁰

Entertaining at home also ensured that young people were mixing with 'their own'. The importance of mixing within the 'correct' social circles is a major theme in Chapter Six. Indeed, the desire to mix with 'one's own' emerges as a central theme throughout retrospective accounts of middle-class life during the 1920s and 1930s. Entertaining at home ensured that young women were subjected to the 'right atmosphere' in company of the 'right sort'.

The 'rack': "We simply didn't do that sort of thing!"

Recent studies of working-class leisure patterns in the 1920s and 1930s suggest that many of young women's informal peer-group activities took place on the streets.⁶¹ However, an examination of young middle-class women's activities suggests that the street played no such role in their social lives. It appears that peer-group activities frequently took place within the homes of the middle classes. The more 'private', restricted nature of young middle-class women's leisure is clearly highlighted by the contrast with the more 'public' leisure activities enjoyed by young working-class women. In the following section, I intend to emphasise this point using a case-study of 'promenading', a popular working-class leisure activity.

Promenades were known in some northern towns and cities as 'monkey runs' or 'monkey parades', and this custom, whereby young people promenaded along allotted roads on Sunday evenings, is well documented in studies of the life-styles of young working-class women in the early twentieth century.⁶² Its primary functions appear to have been as a meeting ground for young women and young men and as an arena for the display of the latest fashions. Indeed, Andrew Davies argued that, "The most notorious youth custom in Manchester and Salford was the 'monkey parade'.⁶³

⁶⁰ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁶¹ This point is emphasised in A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*.

⁶² See A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*, pp.102-108, E. Roberts, *A woman's place*, pp 71-2 and J. Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners*, pp.71-75.

⁶³ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*, p.102.

In Liverpool, a similar parade, known as the 'rack', took place on Sunday evenings in Sefton Park.⁶⁴ Some supplementary interviews conducted with working-class women in Liverpool elicited some fascinating recollections of the 'rack'. Mrs Price's description highlights the importance of courtship as a motive for taking part:

We used to go to the park and you'd walk... you'd walk along what they called the 'rack'. And you used to say, "Oh we'll see if we might click here", that's what we used to say, "We might click here", and we used to sit on the grass and we'd meet these chaps we knew and we'd sit there...⁶⁵

Mrs West remembered the 'rack' as the place "where all the young ones used to collect, all the young lads and the young girls, you know, trying to get off with them..."⁶⁶ She went on to explain its importance in meeting members of the opposite sex as she herself met her husband whilst out on the 'rack' with friends:

And on a Sunday, you used to get people sitting down on the grass opposite it, and walking up and down and trying to give the "aye-aye" to different ones (Laughs) and chatting along there...it was a very popular place years ago.

Just for young people?

Well, mostly on a Sunday it was, you know, get all the wolf-whistles and all that, two or three of you walking along (Laughs) ...yeah, it was very good.

Who did you go with?

Just a couple of us used to go, three of us used to go. I was introduced to my husband there, he was with a couple of his friends, standing there and that was in 1937.⁶⁷

Questions on the subject of the 'rack' usually elicited blank faces and confused expressions amongst my middle-class respondents.⁶⁸ Few had even heard of the

⁶⁴ As was common with other cities at the time a number of 'monkey runs' existed within the different districts of the city. The label of the 'rack' was commonly used in oral history interviews with working-class respondents. No explanations were offered as to the reasoning behind this label. The term the 'rack' might have been used to highlight the fact that young people were on display. Participants could look along the 'rack' for a likely suitor.

⁶⁵ Interview with Mrs Price.

⁶⁶ Interview with Mrs West.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ The lack of awareness of young middle-class women on this custom was brought to my attention during my undergraduate life. Whilst taking an undergraduate course on working-class culture and community, I became interested in the 'monkey run' and questioned an

'rack'. When asked whether they might have taken part in this, respondents were uniformly adamant in their denials.⁶⁹ This captures the profound gulf in the experiences of young women from the middle and working classes in Liverpool during the inter-war decades.

Mrs Williams was one of the few of my own respondents who recalled seeing the 'rack' taking place. She observed the custom during strolls around Sefton Park with a friend. When questioned if they had ever taken part, she replied:

Oh no, we wouldn't have gone on the 'rack', we used to walk past with a superior look... we just sort of thought, "this isn't us".

Who did go on the 'rack'?

Well, girls who'd just left school sort of thing and were into jobs. I can only call them jobs and they went there hoping to pick up a fella... Yes and we didn't need that sort of thing, we could find all the fellas we needed in our own [young people's] club.⁷⁰

Her comments reveal her distaste for the activity as well as her awareness of the social gulf between herself and the working-class women who promenaded there. Her comments also point to the importance of club life to the inter-war middle classes. The idea of going out for the purpose of casually 'picking up' a stranger was anathema to my respondents. Not only had most not heard of the 'rack', but my questions as to whether they might have taken part in such an activity met with derision. Their sense of themselves as respectable middle-class 'ladies' was offended by the mere suggestion that they might have taken part.

Mrs Matthews could not recall the 'rack' in Sefton Park but did remember seeing young people walking along Queen's Drive, an alternative venue for promenades in Liverpool on Sundays. However, as she succinctly explained: "... my mother didn't think it was very nice for young girls to walk along Queen's Drive, so

elderly middle-class woman on the subject. She also had never heard of the term 'monkey run'. However, when I described the custom, she recalled seeing the Aberdeen equivalent from a bus window as she returned from her home to university on Sunday evenings. A further interesting point she made concerned the envy she felt at seeing all these young men and women mixing freely together.

⁶⁹ This is at odds with Alan A. Jackson's comments that parades were frequented by the "... younger element in the lower middle-class", A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes*, p.225.

⁷⁰ Interview with Mrs Williams.

we didn't go."⁷¹

My own respondents' accounts of their Sunday evening activities point to a more home-based life-style. Mrs Luscombe's recollections demonstrate that the home rather than the street was the principal arena for her leisure:

Sunday was the day, if you went to church, you went to church, and after that, after that it could be a dull day or if you had friends you could go round to other's houses and have fun. We had lots of fun on Sundays, but of course there was no public opening, cinemas or shops or anything like that, no public entertainment, clubs were open, you could go to the tennis club on a Sunday, other than that you would go to friend's houses, especially in the afternoon, in the summer, always on a Sunday evening you would go to a group, if you belonged to a group, you would go to one person's house and either play cards or have a sing song around the piano or just talk, and probably there would be about eight or ten people in a social evening there, having cups of coffee and a little bit of something to eat, not much, you had fun. Now and again it would erupt into a party!⁷²

Similarly, the Green sisters did not recall the 'rack', despite having lived in close proximity to Sefton Park. Instead, they told me how their own Sunday evenings were spent at home playing bridge with family friends.⁷³ Mrs Duncan recalled attending church on Sundays with her family, stressing that Sunday was a 'family' day. After church, her family would go for a walk together:

... we used to go to Sefton Park because we went to Mossley Hill church for the service. My father took us in the morning and service was at 11 o'clock and then we came out and we went down Carnatic Road into Sefton Park, to the Palm House... and we came across that into the Aviary, where the birds were kept, then back across the farm fields and up to Greenbank Park, round Greenbank Park and home, where we had our Sunday dinner.⁷⁴

This example is interesting as it shows that young middle-class women did stroll in Sefton Park on Sundays. However, they not only often went at a different time of day to young working-class women, but were likely to be with their families, rather than their friends.

⁷¹ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁷² Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

⁷³ Interview with Miss S. Green.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mrs Duncan.

A study of the 'rack', not only demonstrates the existence of profound class differences in the leisure activities of young women, but also says much about the very nature of young middle-class women's leisure. In particular, it emphasises the 'private' nature of young middle-class women's life-styles. It also provides insights into middle-class notions of respectability. Certainly, the 'rack' was perceived as something that 'nice girls didn't do'. As Mrs Williams told me, in a slightly shocked manner, "We simply didn't do that sort of thing!"⁷⁵

Family activities

It would appear that much of young middle-class women's leisure time was spent with their families. Oral testimonies reveal that young women spent much of their free time with their parents, especially whilst they were still at school. Church-going was one such way that families spent time together. A number of my respondents recall going to church with their families during their teens.⁷⁶ Evenings were often spent in the company of the family, as Miss Brown's recollections indicate:

What kinds of things did you used to do at home in the evenings?

I don't know, we sat around a nice fire, the family, we talked and we read. We did read, and then of course when we were at school we had to do homework and then when I was training [as a physiotherapist] there was a lot of study.⁷⁷

Crystal sets began to appear in middle-class households during the early 1920s, and few of my respondents failed to recall that magical moment when they heard the radio for the first time. By the early 1930s, almost all middle-class homes owned a radio.⁷⁸ McKibbin suggests that one of the effects of the radio was to 'keep people at home'.⁷⁹ Indeed, many middle-class respondents recall how their families gathered

⁷⁵ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mrs Duncan and Miss Howson.

⁷⁷ Interview with Miss Brown.

⁷⁸ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), p.257.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

around the radio to listen to programmes together.

Mrs Williams recalls listening to the radio in the evenings and in particular remembers the BBC's evening musical broadcasts:

We'd had gramophone records and things like that, but this was the first, the first sort of public radio service. Oh there were, well it was very good, every night there was a different band, there was Henry Hall, and Billy Cotton and Ambrose and Joe Loss and people like that, and every night there was dance music from about ten o'clock, which was great.⁸⁰

Mrs Matthews' recollections of her evenings show how meal times were an important focus for family gatherings. Sitting around the dinner table in the evenings was an important component of family life, as she explained:

What kinds of things did you do in the evenings?

We used to sit and talk I suppose, because of course meal times in those days, meal time, everybody sat at the table and sat there talking after.⁸¹

Entertaining at home, particularly in upper middle-class households, often involved hosting dinner parties. Mrs Chambers recalls eating at home alongside her parents and their adult guests:

Did you entertain at home quite a lot?

Oh yes. My parents did and we were expected to perform as well, there was no question of "We're having a dinner party tonight, you will not be there". We had to be there and make conversation and behave ourselves, and behave in a suitable manner.⁸²

Eating out appears to have been a relatively rare occurrence. It was usually only done on special occasions. Mrs Bennett remembers eating out at the State restaurant in Liverpool city centre with her parents at Christmas time:

It was lovely at the old State and every Christmas, about a fortnight before Christmas, mother, my father, my brother and myself, we went for lunch to the State, it was our own sort of private little outing... we looked forward to that one.⁸³

⁸⁰ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁸¹ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁸² Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁸³ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

Mrs Dixon also recalled eating out with her family:

Did you ever eat out?

Yes, occasionally, the North Western they had a restaurant at the back, you could get the best steaks in Liverpool, superb. We had a very good restaurant on Lord Street station in Southport, it was really good.

Who did you go with?

The family...⁸⁴

It does however appear that eating out was more popular amongst the upper middle classes. Mrs Chambers remembers that whilst she and her sister were at boarding school, their parents used to come up to St. Andrews to visit and they would go out for meals together:

My parents used to come up once a term, for half term or visiting weekend and take us out and then we used go out to the hotel for meals and then perhaps they'd take us to Gleneagles for a meal or take us to Elie or Crieff, or one of those places on the East coast of Scotland, near St. Andrews.⁸⁵

Mrs Bennett recalls eating out at roadhouses "... we would stop at one and have an evening meal, [at a] sort of motoring pub."⁸⁶ Mrs Robinson also recalls eating out at roadhouses with her parents:

In those days you went out for drives, I mean before that with my father we'd go out for supper say, over the water to and have supper out, ham and eggs or something like that, but you'd go literally for a drive to see the countryside, it was really quite new in a way.⁸⁷

Sing-songs were another activity which were common amongst middle-class families. Possession of a piano was almost universal amongst the middle classes. Eileen Elias described musical evenings at home with her family in her account of middle-class family life in South London during the 1920s.⁸⁸ Such events were usually family affairs and Mrs Dixon's memories demonstrate how her family got

⁸⁴ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

⁸⁷ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁸⁸ E. Elias, *On Sundays we wore white* (London, 1978), p. 239.

together for musical evenings:

Did you used to have musical evenings at home?

Yes, they were a bit of laugh, too. My father was tone deaf and had no sense of rhythm and no sense of tune, but he used to love listening to my mother and my mother's music, so yes we did, my brother and I played the piano, he more seriously than I, and we didn't have real Victorian musical evenings, we would get Mum to sit down and play and she had one brother, her youngest brother who was a genius, he could pick up any instrument, I really mean this, and play it, virtually. He had terrific sense, natural sense of music, he would hear it and sit down at the piano and play it. He could play it any style you asked him to play it. I mean, we had quite a lot of bands in those days, it won't mean a thing to you, but the pianists always had his way of playing, jazz pianist and he could just sit down and play a tune in any of their styles, it was fantastic. Music figured, home-made music if you like, figured so much more.⁸⁹

Music within the home thus formed an important part of young middle-class women's leisure. Mrs Williams recalled Sundays evenings at home:

On Sunday nights particularly, we sang, and mother also played a mandolin, we'd be around the piano, either Dad was playing or mother was playing the mandolin, we always sang on Sunday nights.⁹⁰

It seems that this was exclusively a family affair.

Would you invite friends round for that?

No, that was a private thing for the family. Other times I would have friends round and mother would play for us...⁹¹

Sing-songs and musical evenings were common amongst middle-class families during the inter-war period in the households covered in my own sample. Moreover, almost all of my respondents received music lessons of some description.⁹²

⁸⁹ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁹⁰ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Frequent references were made by my respondents to music lessons during their childhood and youth.

Holidays

Exploring the ways in which young women spent their summer holidays draws together many of the issues such as the relative affluence of the middle classes and the importance of the family, which have been raised already throughout this chapter. Whilst many members of the working classes were enjoying summer holidays for the first time during the 1930s, thanks to the holidays with pay legislation, summer holidays had been an established feature of middle-class life since the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁹³ On the whole, it seems that family holidays were typically taken within the British Isles. Some of my respondents did go on foreign trips, but these were usually taken with friends. However, a study of the holidays taken by young women reveals stark differences within the middle classes.

For the upper middle classes, family holidays usually took the form of a whole month away, either at the sea or in the countryside. Extensive planning and organisation was necessary as large trunks were packed and then sent on ahead. It seems that typically the whole household was transported to the holiday destination, including the servants. As Mrs Chambers recalled:

We had marvellous summer holidays, we used to go to Anglesey or Abersoch. Well, we went on holidays, it wasn't a question of like they do now. My mother used to take a whole house and she used to transport the whole household and the maids down to this house and took all the bedlinen and everything, four big trunks were sent on ahead, huge big wicker things with all the bedlinen in it and then we all used to go off.⁹⁴

In Mrs Sampson's recollections of her holidays, the importance of the family is similarly apparent:

And then, for summer holidays, they'd take a house somewhere for a month, mother always used to set forth, January or February, to inspect the place, mother would buy all the stuff, she would do all the shopping and the landlady would cook. I always remember packing the night before, huge rolls, huge mackintosh rolls that all the things like bathing costumes and tennis rackets

⁹³ A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes*.

⁹⁴ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

and things went in, and then setting off in a taxi.⁹⁵

Mrs Robinson also recalls holidays as family affairs:

Did you have holidays when you were younger then?

Always. We'd go away at Easter time usually, with the family of course. It was always a family holiday, usually down to Kent in the summer. Then latterly, I suppose in the '30s, father had a boat on the Conway, that was good fun too, and it slept six, and sometimes the odd boyfriend went down as well and we used to belong to the sailing club down there in Conway and it was good, that was great fun actually, we all used to pile in to the sailing boat down there, sail a bit, not a lot, that was great, those were the main holidays.⁹⁶

Evidence collected from my lower middle-class respondents again suggests that holidays were generally more modest affairs. Mrs Stevens' described her holidays spent with relatives in Northern Ireland:

We didn't go away on holidays in the summer because we couldn't afford it, not official holidays. What used to happen is, mother's sister who, several of them still lived over in Belfast, but they used to have fishermen's cottages down on the Isle of Magee which was off Belfast Bay, and a lot of the people in Belfast used to do that, they used to go down there and spend the whole of the summer months, June, July and August, end of September down there... Auntie Lisha used to hire an actual cottage herself a big two storey little house, called Sunnyside, which was part of the farm, Magee Farm... all my mother's sisters used to send their offspring over to the Isle of Magee, they used to be met off the Belfast boat by my eldest cousin, and run us down in droves to the island and just dump us there...they fed us up at that cottage, at the main house at Sunnyside. The cook, Mrs Reid, used to come down with Auntie Lisha, and they all sort of did all the feeding and making masses of Banockburns and potato cakes and fish cakes, our parents used to then come over at the end of the summer and visit their father, and then come down to the Islands...there were a lot of cousins...about 24 children that met every summer.⁹⁷

Her parents were unable to take a month's holiday. Nonetheless, their children enjoyed long holidays courtesy of the family network.

Oral evidence suggests that, once they reached their early twenties, some

⁹⁵ Interview with Mrs Sampson.

⁹⁶ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁹⁷ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

young middle-class women were given considerable freedom when it came to planning holidays, and some of my respondents recalled exciting foreign jaunts with friends facilitated by the advent of the motor car. Mrs Chambers recalls a memorable trip with a friend around Europe in 1936:

...a friend and I went to Germany in her brother's car in 1936.

Alone?

Yes it was a BMW open, would you believe it? And we went across to Dover, from Dover to Calais and then down the Rhine to Lake Constance and we went to Nuremberg and we saw all the Hitler Jugend there! It was just before the war, I just can't believe that we were actually there and we saw all these people with swastikas and...

The rallies?

Yes and we came back up through the Black Forest, and her brother very kindly lent us that car, very decent I thought...⁹⁸

Emboldened by this European adventure, she went on subsequent holidays:

I had two or three good holidays. I went to Belgium and I went to France and anywhere where I could get. Oh I went to Madeira once for a month with a friend of mine who had just finished her training at the Royal Infirmary, she was a nurse and she got a prize for her nursing and it was money and she spent it on our trip to Madeira and we stayed in a hotel in Madeira.⁹⁹

Her experience of travelling evidently gave her a taste for living abroad and before taking up a secretarial post in London, she lived for a short spell in Finland:

... I heard from a man who was in the timber trade in Cunard Building, a firm called Banks, Radcliffe and Potts, and this chap had friends in Finland and he said would I like to go to Finland for a couple of months to talk English to this family... so I went and lived in the house with this family for two months or supposedly two months, but it was 1938, and while I was there the Munich crisis blew up...¹⁰⁰

The stay was curtailed by her father, who insisted that she should return home immediately. Young women from a range of middle-class backgrounds travelled independently once they completed their education, usually travelling with friends, although those from less affluent families enjoyed more modest holidays than those

⁹⁸ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

enjoyed by Mrs Chambers. Mrs Matthews' remembers saving up to go away on holiday with colleagues from her office:

Did you ever go away on holiday with friends?

Oh yes, yes. We had one or two nice holidays at the local government holiday camp, in North Devon. I went with some friends from the office, we had a lovely time... no we saved up, we saved up for our holidays, and then when we got back we started saving for our new winter coat, I remember that as clear as anything. We liked a new winter coat every year.¹⁰¹

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of both home and family in the leisure activities of young middle-class women. The 'private' nature of their leisure activities comes across strongly in oral testimonies. As we will see in Chapter Six, young middle-class women tended for the most part to socialise in private gatherings within exclusively middle-class circles. Indeed, keeping to 'one's own' appears to have been a major concern amongst young people from middle-class families as well as their parents. Participating in public events such as the 'rack' was unthinkable for them. The extent to which young middle-class women 'rubbed shoulders' with women from different social backgrounds during their leisure time appears to have been very limited. Rather, young women enjoyed the privileges granted by the relative affluence of the inter-war middle classes, and took full advantage of a range of home- and family-centred activities which were beyond the means of their working-class counterparts.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

Chapter Six

Leisure outside the home

The early decades of the twentieth century were widely described by contemporary commentators as witnessing the emergence of 'mass' leisure. Considerable emphasis was placed on the socially-inclusive appeal of the cinema, dance hall and radio.¹ These new forms of commercial leisure were sometimes viewed as cutting across class barriers and much attention was paid to the extent to which the new leisure industries appealed to the poorer sections of society. Historians of leisure during the inter-war period have similarly tended to concentrate upon the dynamism of the commercialised leisure industries and the role of the working classes as consumers of leisure.² Stephen Jones, in his analysis of leisure during the inter-war period, noted that substantial numbers of people from all social backgrounds began to embrace new pleasures made possible by the increase in real wages and the availability of a rapidly growing range of leisure goods and services. During the 1920s and 1930s there were significant developments in many forms of leisure, ranging from the growth of the local cinema and dance hall to the proliferation of organisations catering for outdoor recreation.³ Whilst this expansion was experienced in different ways by different groups, there were certainly greater opportunities for amusement than there had been at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Jones' analysis focuses on the working classes and he argued that they were the main beneficiaries of the inter-war expansion of commercial leisure. Research into working-class leisure has revealed that cinema-going and dancing were among

¹ See for example, G. Orwell, *The road to Wigan pier* (London, 1937).

² See S. G. Jones, *Workers at play: a social and economic history of leisure, 1918-1939* (London, 1986) and A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working-class culture in Salford and Manchester 1900-1939* (Buckingham, 1992).

³ S.G. Jones, *Workers at play*, pp.5-6.

the most popular commercial activities enjoyed by young women.⁴ However, few historians have examined the extent to which the appeal of 'mass' leisure cut across class barriers. Indeed, the leisure patterns of the middle classes have seldom been studied by historians in any depth. This chapter examines young middle-class women's involvement in leisure activities outside of the home during the 1920s and 1930s. As this chapter unfolds, it will become clear that important class differences emerge when one examines the appeal of commercial leisure activities amongst young women. In comparison with their working-class counterparts, young middle-class women made only limited use of 'mass' leisure facilities such as the cinema and the dance-hall. Clubs and societies, which provided more socially-exclusive gatherings, assumed greater importance in the life-styles of young middle-class women.

Respectability and leisure

An emphasis upon 'respectability' runs throughout the accounts of young women's leisure activities which follow. Within accounts of a wide variety of activities, a familiar pattern of narration emerges in which individual activities are recounted in such a way as to emphasise their 'respectable' nature.⁵ The archetype of the 'morally chaste' young woman acted as a framework for the stories that my respondents wished to tell about themselves. For example, in accounts of dancing, the importance of attending 'reputable' venues is heavily emphasised, as is the notion of being in the company of 'one's own'. My respondents were eager to recount their fondness for dancing within frameworks of respectability. Their responses to questions concerning accounts of public-houses and roadhouses are also shaped by a desire to demonstrate respectability. This will be brought out within the accounts of young women's activities outside the home.

⁴ See A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty* and E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1984).

⁵ A similar pattern of narration was identified in J. Giles, "'Playing hard to get": working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain 1918-40', *Women's History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), pp.239-55.

The Cinema

Indisputably, the most popular form of recreation during the 1930s was cinema-going.⁶ The period between the two world wars is often described as the 'golden age' of the cinema.⁷ Simon Rowson found that the total admissions to British cinemas in 1934 were about 963 million and the total box-office receipts were about £41 million.⁸ In 1934 there were some 69 cinemas in Liverpool alone, distributed evenly over the city.⁹ Research into working-class leisure patterns has revealed that cinema-going was one of the most popular activities enjoyed by young women.¹⁰ Indeed, Andrew Davies noted that, "film-going was without doubt the most popular form of commercial leisure among young people."¹¹ *The social survey of Merseyside* confirms this pattern, further noting in 1934 that "the manual working-class go more frequently than class B..."¹² Attempts were made to attract a more middle-class clientele to the cinema in the 1930s. Cinemas gradually began to appear in the suburbs, and Jeffrey Richards has argued that this "signalled the decisive acceptance of the cinema as a respectable, indeed indispensable, form of entertainment by the middle class."¹³ Nonetheless, Ross McKibbin has recently observed, "all levels of

⁶ This is discussed more fully in J. Richards, *The age of the dream palace: cinema and society in Britain, 1900-1939* (London, 1984).

⁷ See J. Richards, *The age of the dream palace*.

⁸ S. Rowson, 'A statistical survey of the cinema industry in Great Britain in 1934', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 99 (1936), pp. 67-118.

⁹ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III* (Liverpool, 1934), p.278.

¹⁰ This is documented in E. Roberts, *A woman's place*, A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty* and in D. Fowler, *The first teenagers: the lifestyle of young wage earners in interwar Britain* (London, 1995).

¹¹ See A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*, pp.94-96.

¹² D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside Vol.III*, p 281.

¹³ J. Richards 'The cinema and cinema-going in Birmingham in the 1930s', in J. Walton and J. Walvin (eds.), *Leisure in Britain, 1780-1939* (Manchester, 1983), p.35.

the working class went more often than the middle or upper classes."¹⁴

My own research pointed to two distinct patterns in middle-class cinema-going. First, it would seem that middle-class cinema attendance was concentrated in either the large 'super' cinemas around Lime Street in the city centre, such as The Futurist or The Scala, or in cinemas located within predominately middle-class areas. These were far more luxurious than the 'flea pits' which existed in the working-class residential districts of the city. My own respondents seem to have been highly selective about which cinemas they attended. Mrs Chambers recalled attending either the local cinema in the affluent district of Blundellsands, or more commonly, the smarter city-centre cinemas:

I would go to the cinema perhaps on Saturday night, with a girlfriend. I had one particular friend called Beryl, we did domestic science together and she would say, "Are you doing anything on Saturday? Or Wednesday?" or such and such, and we would go to the Forum in Liverpool or the whatever, and we would meet at Blundellsands station, go on the train to Liverpool as we had contracts, you see, so it didn't cost us anything, as our parents bought us contracts [season tickets], and then we would walk up through Liverpool from Exchange station and go to the cinema, see the film, walk back through Liverpool, on the train and home to Blundellsands.¹⁵

Mrs Williams also recalled going to the cinemas in the city centre. She described her local cinema in Old Swan as a 'flea pit' and stated that she rarely frequented it. She explained why: "well you never knew what you would come home with, mind you, there were more dirty people in those days."¹⁶ Second, whilst one can find evidence of young middle-class women attending the cinema, the pattern of their cinema attendance appears to have been sporadic compared to the frequent attendance amongst young working-class women described by Roberts and Davies. Certainly, I found no evidence of young middle-class women attending cinemas two or three times a week. It would seem that clear class distinctions existed in patterns of cinema-going.

The fact that young middle-class women did not attend cinemas with the same

¹⁴ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918-1951*, (Oxford, 1998) p.421.

¹⁵ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

¹⁶ Interview with Mrs Williams.

regularity as their working-class counterparts reveals something about the motives behind cinema-going. As Davies argued in *Leisure, gender and poverty*, a primary motive behind going to the cinema in the poorer districts of working-class Manchester and Salford lay in the fact that it offered an opportunity to exchange the squalor of the working-class home for a temporary world of glamour and luxury. Indeed, for many working-class women, a trip to the cinema was prompted largely by the promise of the 'escape' it offered. It was also an important arena for courting.¹⁷ This was not the motive behind Mrs Williams's cinema-going:

No, I didn't need to go courting in the cinema, well if I went to the cinema I didn't want my attention distracted, and if I was courting, I didn't want my attention distracted. Well, we had the front room at home, or we could go to Ernest and his mother was very tactful, she would say, "Well, I'll go and see my sister."¹⁸

Other respondents told me how it was acceptable to conduct their courting within the family home. Chapter Five shows how boyfriends were frequently entertained at home. Also, the motor car offered another an important site of young middle-class women's courting.¹⁹

'Middle-brow' leisure activities: Theatre-going

My own oral history findings point to the relative importance of the theatre rather than the cinema in the leisure patterns of young women from middle-class backgrounds. There were six theatres in Liverpool in 1934, including one permanent repertory theatre.²⁰ Theatre-going, according to *The social survey of Merseyside*, was strongly marked by class differentials. The survey estimated that theatre-goers constituted under 6% of the total population, and in their analysis:

There can be no doubt that in view of the extreme cheapness of the cinema,

¹⁷ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*.

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs Williams.

¹⁹ Interviews with Mrs Chambers, Mrs Robinson and Mrs Bennett.

²⁰ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III*, p.177.

the pleasures of theatre-going are generally regarded by manual workers as too expensive.²¹

The Playhouse theatre in Liverpool was a very successful repertory theatre during the inter-war years and it appears to have been very popular with young middle-class women. Mrs Morris recalls that she never missed a performance there during her teens:

Did you used to go to the Playhouse?

Oh yes every play, we never missed, we used to stand in the queue, I think we used to pay 6d and then it went up to 7d up in the gallery and for first nights and last nights, we would sometimes stand in queue from about three o'clock. Oh no, for a long time, at the end of my school time and then all the time I was at university, I don't think we missed a production, they had some wonderful people in those days.²²

Oral evidence suggests that many young women from middle-class backgrounds preferred going to the theatre rather than the cinema. Often, when I questioned respondents about cinema-going, this prompted memories of theatre-going instead as, Mrs Matthews' recollections demonstrate:

Did you used to go to the cinema very often?

Yes, and the theatre, I can tell you all about the theatre, yes, the theatre, all the shows we'd go to, and my sisters, my elder sister and I, we had permanent seats up in the gods at the Playhouse... Oh all the good actors and actresses came from the Playhouse you know, they did, Robert Donat, Wyndham Goldie, Margaret Fielding, all of them. And we used to go and see them and we would go to Reece's for our tea after the office, we'd have a half a crown tea... and then we'd go to the theatre.²³

What is telling in these accounts of theatre-going is the extent to which women recalled the names of the various actors and actresses of the period. Interestingly, they did not recall Hollywood film stars of the era in the same way. Mrs Chambers recalled the stars of the 1930s:

Did you go to the Playhouse?

Yes a lot, and I remember Rachel Kempson and Michael Redgrave there when they were very young, and they eventually married, I remember seeing them

²¹ *ibid.* p.278.

²² Interview with Mrs Morris.

²³ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

in a play there and they were playing opposite each other and in my school girl enthusiasm I thought how wonderful it was to see two people so much in love, the Playhouse was a place that we very much used to go, Maud Carpenter was in charge of that and Wyndham Goldie.²⁴

Theatre-going was often a family event, and Mrs Dixon recalled going to the Playhouse with her parents. It is interesting that they also ate out together afterwards, which demonstrates the relatively privileged nature of the life-styles of the inter-war middle classes:

I used to go with the family, my mother and father, and my mother was always terribly interested in the stage... Yes we used to go as a family, and then we used to go and have a jolly nice meal too...²⁵

Theatre-going appears to have been an activity which was enjoyed by all sections of the middle classes. Differentials within the middle classes were difficult to trace in my oral testimonies.

Dancing

The following section describes the enthusiasm for dancing amongst young middle-class women. Throughout the discussion, I will emphasise how a concern with respectability shaped my respondents' accounts of dancing during the 1920s and 1930s. It seems that their accounts of dancing were couched within the parameters of what was and is considered to be respectable, both then and now. The more private nature of the dances attended by young middle-class women was highlighted in Chapter Five, in the accounts of dancing within the middle-class home. When young middle-class women attended dances in public settings, they tended to frequent socially-exclusive gatherings which often, in effect, constituted 'private' functions. Young women from middle-class families usually attended dances with established groups of friends or acquaintances, often through a local tennis club or through the workplace, rather than dancing in commercial halls. Oral testimony suggests that the more 'public' arenas for dancing, such as city-centre halls, were considered to lack

²⁴ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

²⁵ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

respectability by young middle-class women. Such sentiments are clearly reflected in Mrs Williams's recollections of the city-centre dance halls, "Oh, they weren't respectable, all [the places] where we went, they were respectable".²⁶ Within my respondents' accounts, there is the ever-present assertion that their dancing did not take them beyond the boundaries of what was considered respectable behaviour within their social group. My respondents also drew frequent contrasts between their own experiences and those of young single people in the 1990s. This was similar to the pattern of narration in oral testimonies identified by Judy Giles. As Giles pointed out, her respondents' frequently "set up a contrast between a corrupt present and the good old days."²⁷ Talking to me, a young woman in the 1990s, frequent references were made by my own respondents to the way in which things had changed. This is illustrated in the comments made by Mrs Matthews:

And we always had to be in by ten, no later than that, while now you're going out at ten, aren't you?²⁸

Dancing flourished in the years immediately following the end of the First World War, reaching almost a 'mania' during the 1920s.²⁹ Throughout the inter-war period, dancing was one of the most popular forms of leisure enjoyed by young women. The popularity of dancing amongst young working-class women has been well documented in the literature on working-class communities.³⁰ When the leisure patterns of young middle-class women are examined, dancing again emerges as one of their principal leisure activities. Its popularity should not be underestimated, but its form was very different. The 'private' nature of middle-class leisure was noted by Alan A. Jackson in his account of middle-class life-styles. Jackson noted that young people typically danced either in each other's homes, at tennis and golf clubs,

²⁶ Interview with Mrs Williams.

²⁷ J. Giles, "Playing hard to get", p.244.

²⁸ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

²⁹ R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The long week-end: a social history of Great Britain 1918-1939* (Harmondsworth, 1940).

³⁰ E. Roberts *A woman's place*, pp.68-71, A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*, pp.89-94.

or in small, privately hired halls. For those firmly established within the ranks of the upper middle classes, Jackson noted that they were more likely to be found dancing at "a tea, dinner or supper dance in one of the large city hotels and restaurants, where the famous dance bands were frequently engaged."³¹

Oral evidence confirms this view. It would appear that the commercial city-centre dance halls were rarely frequented by young middle-class women. Indeed, their 'public' nature meant that they were not deemed to be desirable places for young middle-class women. Within the account of dancing which follows, particular attention is paid to patterns of storytelling in which my respondents frequently framed their narratives in such a way as to emphasise their 'respectable' life-styles.

Commercial dance halls: "Not our scene, dear".

The Grafton was one of the main commercial dance halls in Liverpool. Oral evidence collected amongst my middle-class respondents gives the clear impression that it was 'not the kind of place' that 'nice' middle-class ladies frequented. When questioned about commercial dance halls, my respondents were quick to assert that although they were aware of their existence, they themselves had never frequented them. This, I felt, was significant as it suggests that they are consciously shaping their accounts in order to emphasise their own respectability. What was interesting when I questioned my middle-class respondents about attending city-centre dance halls such as the Grafton or the Rialto was the shock that my questions often provoked. Many of my respondents seemed quite appalled by the mere suggestion that, by implication, they mixed freely amongst strangers from different social backgrounds. This was an area where the importance of mixing with 'one's own' came across strongly in my oral testimonies.

Mrs Williams, for example, described the city-centre dance halls as, "... busy, and not always desirably busy. We were a bit particular."³² When questioned as to why she felt these places were undesirable, she offered this explanation:

³¹ A.A. Jackson, *The middle classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991), p.284.

³² Interview with Mrs Williams.

Well there'd be, you might be accosted by anybody that you didn't know and you know, if you were there, say a couple of girls went, any young fellows on the loose would think they were fair game.³³

It would appear that she consciously constructed an account of her own behaviour in which she was able to demonstrate that her own conduct took place within acceptable limits. To allow oneself to be asked to dance by complete strangers was simply not done. Mrs Williams described the form that her own dancing took, and within this account she is able to emphasise that she went dancing within a controlled environment, and more importantly, kept to venues where she was unlikely to be asked to dance by a stranger. The ever-present importance of 'keeping to one's own' comes across strongly in her testimony:

Well mostly you went with a party and you danced in your own, in your own group, you didn't sit round, I mean there were a few girls that sat round waiting to be asked by anybody, but there was only a certain type of young man who would accost strange girls, it was far more keep to your own party.³⁴

Mrs Williams appears to have felt that by only dancing with 'her own' she could avoid confrontations with the 'wrong sort' as well as avoiding being perceived as 'fair game'.

Mrs Matthews' recollections echo similar sentiments and her disapproval of Liverpool's city-centre dance halls is clear in the following testimony:

Did you ever go to dances in the city centre at the Grafton or the Rialto?

Not the Grafton Rooms, no, that wasn't (gesticulates disdain). It was a bit frowned on the Grafton then.

Why was that?

I think my mother thought that they weren't very nice people that went to the Grafton.

Miss Brown explained that although she was aware of the commercial, city-centre dance halls, she herself had never been inside them. Her explanation suggests that her parents actively discouraged her from frequenting them. As she told me:

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Interview with Mrs Williams.

Why didn't you go the Grafton?
I wasn't allowed.³⁵

In the following testimony Mrs Duncan clearly distances herself from the kind of people who went to commercial dance halls. This indicates the exclusive nature of her own social circle. As she explained:

Did you ever go the Grafton or the Rialto?

No, they weren't the sort that I knew, that wouldn't be in the set of people that I met with at all.³⁶

Mrs Robinson's recollections again highlight the importance of mixing within her own existing social networks. This, it seems, was enforced by her parents who did not allow her to go to the Grafton:

We never went to the Grafton, that was right out, you know the Grafton Rooms on West Derby Road? No, we weren't allowed to go to the Grafton...
And what was wrong with the Grafton?

Common! (laughs) We weren't allowed to go there... I think one of the rugger dances was held there.

But just the rugger people?

Yes that's right, it would have just been the rugger people, all the people you knew.³⁷

It seems that dancing, for young middle-class women, was therefore a socially-exclusive pastime, even if it often took place within 'public' spaces.

A clear explanation for middle-class women's unwillingness to attend the city-centre halls lies in their recognition that the commercial halls attracted a largely working-class clientele. Commercial halls, despite being under the watchful eye of the ever present MC, were still liable to attract 'undesirables'. By contrast, dances held in hotels or restaurants attracted a socially superior clientele.

Interestingly, although young women from middle-class backgrounds tended not to frequent commercial dance halls in the evenings, some of my respondents recall going to tea dances held in these venues in the afternoons. Mrs Steven's

³⁵ Interview with Miss Brown.

³⁶ Interview with Mrs Duncan.

³⁷ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

remembered dancing at the Rialto in the afternoons whilst she was a student at Liverpool Art College.³⁸ For some of my respondents the timing of dances was as important as their location. Mrs Robinson remembered going to tea dances in a local hotel, but went on to explain how she would not have danced there in the evening, "I wouldn't have been allowed to go in the evening, but I could go to the afternoon tea dances."³⁹ Thus, it seems, dancing in the afternoon was seen to be more respectable by some families than dancing in the evenings. Certainly, it would seem that afternoon tea dances attracted a very different type of clientele to evening dances. Afternoon tea dances were more likely to be frequented by students or women who were not in paid employment, many of whom were from middle-class backgrounds.

Hotels and restaurants

Whereas commercial dance halls were frowned upon by young middle-class women oral evidence suggests that dancing within the 'public' sphere more commonly took place in hotels and restaurants. Hotels and restaurants attracted a socially-exclusive clientele and were therefore strongly favoured by the middle classes. Dancing in a hotel was viewed quite differently by young middle-class women to dancing at the Grafton or the Rialto. Mrs Dixon explained how she did much of her dancing in local hotels: "... it wasn't so much nightclubs in those days, it was more sort of hotels at the weekends. There was usually a Saturday night dance at the Prince of Wales."⁴⁰ In describing these dances she highlights the enjoyment that she gained from dancing:

Were you fond of dancing?

Very. And my husband was a very good dancer, so you see we used to go dancing just before the war to the Prince of Wales most Saturdays and they had a big dinner dance there, it had a wonderful floor the Prince of Wales, it was very well sprung, a lot of people dancing quite boisterously on it, you

³⁸ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

³⁹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

literally got it moving.⁴¹

Mrs Chambers also recalls that she did much of her dancing in a hotel in Southport. She usually attended dinner dances, where dancing took place in between courses:

We used to go to the Prince of Wales in Southport, dancing. When I got engaged to Alasdair, I think before that actually... he called and collected me and took me to the Prince of Wales, as they always had a marvellous dance there on a Saturday night at the Prince of Wales in Southport and they booked a table for two, four, six or eight or however many, and in this particular case he booked for two and we sort of had dinner and then danced in between the courses, very romantic! And also there were marvellous New Year's Eve parties.⁴²

Mrs Robinson also remembered going to dinner dances at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool which, during the inter-war period, was a prestigious venue, as her recollections indicate:

...The Adelphi was really (gesticulates to indicate grandeur and class), we used to go to a lot of dances there, they were in the big room as you go in, that's where they used to dance in those days... If it was a big dance somebody would have a room to go and have drinks in beforehand or something like that.⁴³

The Adelphi Hotel was an important venue for both afternoon tea dances and private dances in the evenings. In effect, the latter were private gatherings in a public setting, in that, access was restricted to certain types of young people. Such dances were usually 'by invitation only' or were restricted to the memberships of clubs. Mrs Bennett remembered attending tea dances in the Adelphi Hotel:

Yes, they were very good fun, the Adelphi held them, in a room and Henry Hall was the orchestra, string orchestra, you know, and they had a little patch and the tables all round the walls were cream and the mouldings were picked out in gold, you know, and crimson carpet and then a parquet floor like a pocket handkerchief size really for the tea dances, and the waiters would bring round little cakes and sandwiches about that big, oh they were good fun.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁴³ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

Such venues were much more genteel than the commercial city-centre dance halls. Within Liverpool, two restaurants also emerged as popular dancing venues: the State and the Bear's Paw. Mrs Robb remembers dancing at the State:

Did you ever go to the State?

Yes. We went there on New Year's Eve once, oh the State cafe was quite the thing to do, to go to the State cafe, my friend's brother, he was doing medicine at Edinburgh and he took me to the State, and we had wine which was quite something in those days

What was the State cafe like?

I suppose it was just a glorified restaurant, but they had dancing there and we didn't go there very often, we'd go there, perhaps somebody would have a 21st and we'd go there.⁴⁵

However, even amongst restaurants, there existed a hierarchy of respectability. Some, it would seem, frowned upon establishments such as the Bear's Paw. As Mrs Chambers recalled:

What was the Bear's Paw like?

That was rather downmarket, I don't think my mother thought much of us going there.⁴⁶

Clubs and societies

Ross McKibbin has argued that one of the principal distinguishing features of the inter-war middle classes was their formal associationalism. The middle classes were more likely than any other section of society to join clubs and associations by way of formal membership and direct subscription.⁴⁷ The importance of club life has already been shown in Chapter Two. A study of young middle-class women's leisure patterns shows that much of their dancing took place through membership of a variety of clubs and associations. McKibbin's analysis demonstrated the role that such clubs played in allowing the middle classes to mix amongst 'their own'. He noted that, "The dominant consideration was 'the right atmosphere' in the company of the 'right

⁴⁵ Interview with Mrs Robb.

⁴⁶ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁴⁷ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p.87.

sort'.⁴⁸ McKibbin's observations are clearly borne out by my own oral testimonies. Mrs Chambers' recollections of dancing illustrate the 'private' nature of leisure for young middle-class women, as well as highlighting the importance of club life in providing social events:

...I remember going to all the dances in Blundellsands, the rugger dance, the tennis dance, what else, the cricket club dance, the golf club dance, we always had a golf club dance after the mixed foursomes in the summer.⁴⁹

Similarly, Mrs Matthews remembered that most of her dancing took place through her office sports club, "I was in the office sports club, I was in local government, you see and they had a sports club, you see, and we ran the dances and we had them in the India Buildings".⁵⁰

Clubs offered endless possibilities for dancing. Amongst my own respondents, dancing with the local tennis club or rugby club seemed to be regarded as preferable to frequenting the city-centre halls, perhaps because membership of a club meant that the dancing took place with "one's own". Membership of clubs and societies was closely guarded so that only the 'right sort' of person was allowed to join. Mrs Robinson noted that she did most of her dancing at her local tennis club:

Oh yes, yes, they had hops, they had dances on Saturday night, and that sort of thing which, you didn't dress for them very much, but I used to go dances there, and I usually had a crush on somebody at the club, you know. What other clubs did we have? It was the tennis clubs, mainly, in the summer, there was, where the Vagabonds is now... it's in West Derby... that was an all-men's club, but you got in there on Sunday occasionally and that was great, we enjoyed that.⁵¹

Mrs Chambers recalls dances at the golf club to which she belonged:

Oh we used to have golf club dances too, they *were* good! Mostly they were in the summer and we used to have mixed foursomes, you know, a man and a woman playing together as a team and then after the mixed foursomes, when the competition was over, we all used to go home and get dressed up in our

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.95.

⁴⁹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁵⁰ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁵¹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

finery, the men in their dinner jackets, and come back and have a dance at the golf club afterwards. That was terrific!⁵²

Miss Brown, although 'not a great dancer', nonetheless attended occasional dances at her brother's football club. She told me:

Did you go to dances?

Oh yes, I used to go with my sister and brother to dances, yes, at his football club, that's about all though, one or two dances a year, that's all.⁵³

Differences emerge within my sample in terms of the types of dances attended by my middle-class respondents. Some upper middle-class respondents recall attending balls. These were largely charity balls and appear to have been lavish occasions, as Mrs Chambers recalled:

There were loads of charity balls you know, mostly at the Adelphi, but it was extra specially nice if you could get a ship, always a Cunard liner, you used to go down there, it was romantic... but they used to have these big liners that came into Liverpool, and some of these people who were raising money for charity could manage it, they nabbed the liner for one night and had it for a dance, so you used to have the Red Rose ball or the Forget Me Not ball or whatever, and go down on the ship.⁵⁴

Mrs Robinson, another upper middle-class respondent, also recalled attending charity balls. Interestingly, it seems that it was seen as acceptable to go to the Grafton or the Rialto, two of Liverpool's commercial dance halls, for such occasions:

Well there were always these dances held, one was called the Red Rose ball, that was on the Britannia as far as I can remember, and that was for the Royal Infirmary... and then there was another called the Gordon Smith which was charity again and that was held at the Rialto when it was ballroom, which was great fun, and I was in really with quite a lot of the chaps who were rucker players and types so it was really quite good fun, thoroughly enjoyed it. There was another ballroom, but that was only a charity thing very occasionally, called the Grafton which was absolutely ghastly in West Derby Road, but it held an enormous number of people for that sort of charity thing.⁵⁵

⁵² Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁵³ Interview with Miss Brown.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

Significantly, she describes the Grafton as 'absolutely ghastly'. She went on to describe dances held aboard ships in more detail, pointing out the importance of going out with 'your own', in a party:

The Red Rose, we didn't go to sea or anything like that, it was just moored here and the dance was held on board which was a great attraction for everybody. It was great fun, party of about 10 or 12 of us would go, you know, to these things... course we always had proper ball gowns to go in, to go to them, and the men of course they wore D.J's, and it was very difficult as these ships were moored down at Prince's landing stage, on the front, they were all. We all trekked down there, as it was great fun on board ship as you could wander down, and wander anywhere and dance in the super places.⁵⁶

Clearly, dancing aboard a Cunard liner was a far cry from the dances held in commercial dance halls frequented by young women from working-class backgrounds. This again demonstrates the gulf which existed between the social classes as well as highlighting the relative affluence of the inter-war middle classes.

Dancing, with its strong emphasis on courtship, largely appears to have been enjoyed by young women after they had left school. Eileen Elias recalled in her autobiography that her dancing as a girl was limited to the occasional church hall dance.⁵⁷ Mrs Matthews remembered going to a church group where she enjoyed gymnastics and other sports. However, when she started her secretarial training, she dropped these activities, and instead took up dancing, "Oh yes, it was a bit beneath me then, I went to the office dances then".⁵⁸ She appears to have viewed playing sport as a childish activity. Attending dances with her new colleagues appears to have been a badge of her new found maturity. Mrs Williams did not attend dances until she had begun her teacher training:

Did you ever go dancing with school friends?

No, oh no, we didn't do things like that. A bit later on, when we were about 19 or 20.⁵⁹

Miss Brown similarly did not remember going to dances until she was aged 18 and

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ E. Elias, *Straw hats and serge bloomers*, p.76.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mrs Williams.

had started her physiotherapy training in Liverpool:

I'm just thinking, we were very young you know, compared with these days, at 18 we didn't do a lot, by 18 we were still young...We were only just old enough to start going out at 18.⁶⁰

Dancing was regarded as an adult pastime. It offered opportunities for socialising with the 'right sort' as well as a chance to meet members of the opposite sex. It usually took place in glamorous surroundings and formed a major component in the lives of almost all of my respondents.

Churches, clubs, and sports

I have already noted the importance of club and associational life in the social lives of young middle-class women.⁶¹ This section highlights how membership of clubs and societies played a crucial role in determining young middle-class women's leisure activities.⁶² Mrs Luscombe explained the importance of clubs in shaping her own life-style as a young, single woman:

...before I was married, most people went into work on a Saturday morning and you had Saturday afternoon off and then Sunday and the whole community had that, so these were the days that you had fun, did things, Saturday afternoon, tennis clubs, walking clubs, perhaps you belonged to a hockey team or something like that.⁶³

For young middle-class women, joining a local club was the principal means through which sport was enjoyed, as Miss Arthur explained:

But in those days, I think you did make entertainment as a community, nowadays you don't, people go out and do individual things in their cars. In those days I think you did work as a group to a large extent. In Princes Park

⁶⁰ Interview with Miss Brown.

⁶¹ Ross McKibbin also demonstrates the importance attached to club and associational life in *Classes and cultures*, pp.84-98.

⁶² Stephen Jones argues that the working class, on minimum levels of income, found it very difficult to afford the costs involved in active membership of a club or society. S. Jones, *Workers at play*, p.65.

⁶³ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

where we lived, Belvidere Road end, they had tennis courts there you see, we were always playing tennis there, you see, that was, certainly, while we were at school we did that sort of thing.

With school friends or your family?

With school friends, well actually, well I suppose the majority of our friends were school friends or were church friends, apart from the ordinary family connection. Most Saturdays, you used to have to go for a music lesson in the morning, but having got that over, a lot of good that did me, but after that we were nearly always playing tennis in the park, there was a very active rounders club, you'll never believe it, organised by the church, which we went to. But the parks were full of people playing games and you'd get invited to other people's clubs, there was a very good set of clubs, rugby and that. You know Ullet Road? Well, the Unitarian church at the bottom had a splendid parson there, had all sorts of social things, they had a very good tennis club, in which I had friends, and I used to go and play with them and they used to come and play with us sort of thing, but I don't think we were without social life, getting out and about at all.⁶⁴

The role of the church

Oral evidence suggests that churches tended to play an integral part in young middle-class women's leisure activities, especially for those in their mid to late teens. However, involvement in church-related clubs and groups varied enormously amongst my respondents, depending on how involved individual families were with the church. Miss Arthur's recollections indicate the important role the church played in her leisure time:

Well I think most, well it's probably silly to say most, but one would think that most families were connected with a church and they were full of activities for the young and we certainly went to everything, we were Church of England and they had quite a flourishing youth club, I don't think they called it a youth club, but activities for the young. I mean, we played all sorts of things, like rounders in the park or tennis in the park, from a church club, masses of church clubs and tennis clubs, and then there were all sorts of social events at the church, you know concerts and one thing or another, we regularly went to all those.⁶⁵

Mrs Robb's recollections likewise indicate the importance of the church in her social

⁶⁴ Interview with Miss Arthur.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

life. What is insightful about the following reminiscence is that she explicitly states that one of her principal motives behind going to such events was to meet members of the opposite sex:

All our social life was around the local church, we used to go sometimes three times a day. Morning service, Sunday school in the afternoon and church in the evening. I must admit that there was a certain reason why we went, it wasn't all religious, I mean we would meet people of the opposite sex, you know, and so, you know, we would meet them afterwards and that was one of the attractions (laughs) as far as the church. 'Cause we hadn't any television, you see, and it was really our life was centred around the church. We had quite a good social life.⁶⁶

Mrs Williams recalled attending a youth group run by her local Congregational church. However, she was quick to point out that this took place in her "earlier days".⁶⁷ It would appear that the church youth club lost its appeal as young women either began work or took up college or university places. The prospect of joining a tennis club or attending more sophisticated dances tended to hold greater attraction. Leaving school, usually at the age of 18, marked a distinct shift in the ways that young women spent their leisure time. One exception to this was demonstrated by Mrs Luscombe. Coming from a very staunch Catholic family, she recalled going along to church dances as well as belonging to a church youth group:

Did the church organise any social events for young people?

Yes indeed, yes indeed, that was where you were supposed to meet up with your future to-bes. They had a church hall, they had local little hops, dances in it on a Saturday night, that was our church.⁶⁸

Amateur dramatic groups were popular amongst young middle-class women. Both Mrs Chambers and Mrs Matthews belonged to local amateur dramatic societies, taking part in plays and sketches. Mrs Chambers recalled attending a local group in Blundellsands in her mid to late teens:

Did you ever do any amateur dramatics then?

Yes, I was in that as well, in the Blundellsands Amateur Dramatics Society,

⁶⁶ Interview with Mrs Robb.

⁶⁷ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

that again was a bit of fun, it was more social, we didn't do much, just in the sort of sketches and things, and then a play called 'The Middle Notch'.⁶⁹

Mrs Williams also recalls taking part in amateur dramatics at a young person's club:

Did you ever do any amateur dramatics?

At the youth club yes, the first one I was in was called *Ici on parle Francais?* Then we did quite a lot in college, of course.⁷⁰

Amateur dramatics offered young middle-class women further opportunities for socialising within their established social circles.

Sporting clubs

In her critical account of the development of women's sports from the nineteenth century to the present day, Jennifer Hargreaves has suggested that the inter-war years formed an important turning point.⁷¹ In Hargreaves' view, the Great War had been a liberating experience for many women, leaving them with a new found confidence which allowed them to flaunt old restrictions and was manifested in their involvement in a wide range of physical activities. This was one such area in which young women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s had very different opportunities to those of their mothers.⁷²

During the nineteenth century, women's restricted access to organised sports was legitimised by the ideology of separate spheres. The woman's sphere was the home, and involvement in activities which took her out of the domestic sphere was frowned upon. Nineteenth-century concerns about women's involvement in sports

⁶⁹ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁷⁰ Interview with Mrs Williams.

⁷¹ J. Hargreaves, *Sporting females: critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport* (London, 1994), p.113.

⁷² Liz Oliver's work on working-class women's participation in rounders suggests that some women were prevented from playing through pressure from their mothers. She suggests that this may have been a result of some mothers being resentful of their daughters' physical freedom. L. Oliver, "No hard-brimmed hats or hat pins please", Bolton women cotton workers and the game of rounders, 1911-39, in *Oral History*, 25, 1 (1997), pp.40-45.

found expression in eugenic debates on the effects of sports and physical exertion on the 'weaker sex'.⁷³ It was commonly believed that women should be channelling their limited energies into the all-important role of childbearing. However, for young women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, these concerns had largely abated.

In this section, I intend to highlight some of motives young middle-class women had for participating in a variety of sporting activities. Here, the importance of club and associational life emerges again. In particular, I shall explore the notion that sport served a wider social purpose. Participation in games of tennis or rounds of golf was only a small part of the attraction of membership of tennis and golf clubs for young middle-class women. Opportunities for courtship, it seems, was a central motive behind young women's involvement in sports, and performance in the sports themselves was often of secondary importance. Oral evidence clearly demonstrates the important role that club life played in providing young women with opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex. As Mrs Williams explained:

This man said to Peg [my sister]... maybe the club was a bit short of girls, 'Wouldn't you like to come and join the club? 'Cause I'd be glad to introduce you'. And Peg did, and she went out with a very nice bloke who I'd been knocking around with a bit, he was a friend of my husband's, and she went out with Norman and then she decided, 'No', and then she went out with this chap as she played with him in a lot of teams and [the] second team of the East Liverpool Badminton team, and she married him... There were some awfully nice fellows there and we used to go to their dances, [there was] a very nice one called Martin.⁷⁴

Interestingly, this description of her involvement in the local badminton club makes only a passing reference to playing the sport. What really comes out in this extract is a sense of the opportunities that joining the club offered her in terms of meeting young men, and ultimately, potential husbands.

Women's involvement in sport during the inter-war period was clearly structured by class differences. Stephen Jones, in his overview of leisure during the inter-war period, has argued that: "It was the middle classes who were the very

⁷³ For more on the nineteenth-century debates on women and sport, see K. McCrone, *Sport and the physical emancipation of English women 1870-1914* (London, 1988).

⁷⁴ Interview with Mrs Williams.

backbone of a number of sports, such as tennis, golf and yachting..."⁷⁵ Similarly, Jennifer Hargreaves, writing on the early twentieth century, has asserted that sport was largely irrelevant to the lives of working-class women because:

... the uneven pattern of poverty and prosperity left by the depression made it easier for middle-class women, and working-class women who were relatively affluent or young and single, to participate in sports, than for the masses of poorer working-class women.⁷⁶

In interviews with six elderly working-class women who left school between 1924 and 1931, Hargreaves found that they "talked with regret at the limited opportunities they had for sports whilst at school".⁷⁷ This lack of involvement at school probably served to set the pattern for their subsequent exclusion from participation in sports. Added to this, the lack of working-class involvement is probably explained in part by the expense. The costs of a share in the fees for pitches, added to the costs of clothes, equipment and transport, provided serious obstacles.⁷⁸ *The social survey of Merseyside* found that, amongst women taking part in outdoor sports, the most frequent players were to be found in 'class A' (defined as professional, administrative, technical and managerial posts, including teachers).⁷⁹ My own oral testimonies confirm the view that throughout the inter-war period, young middle-class women were active participants in a number of sports.

⁷⁵ S. Jones, *Workers at play*, p.195

⁷⁶ J. Hargreaves, *Sporting females*, p.113.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.121.

⁷⁸ This view is challenged by Liz Oliver's study of women cotton workers and rounders playing in Bolton. In "No hard brimmed hats or hat pins please", Oliver directly challenges the orthodox view that working-class women were not involved in organised sport. Oliver's oral evidence suggests that a considerable number of working-class women, both married and single, played rounders. Indeed, women's rounders was both well established and well supported in Bolton. Supporters often numbered up to 2,000 men, women and children making the sport an important part of local culture. However, this remains an isolated regional example. A systematic study of working-class women's sporting activities in Britain would prove highly revealing.

⁷⁹ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside, Vol.III*, p.292.

Tennis clubs

In the poem, *A subaltern's love song*, contained in the frontispiece to this thesis, John Betjeman evokes a social world which largely revolved around the tennis club.⁸⁰ Similarly, Eileen Whiteing, in her autobiographical account of growing up in a middle-class household in the 1920s and 1930s, highlighted the importance of tennis in her leisure activities recalling that, "... this really was the period of 'Anyone for tennis?' since everyone belonged to some kind of tennis or cricket club and played badminton indoors in the winter months."⁸¹ Oral evidence collected from my own group of respondents also emphasised the centrality of the tennis club. Tennis-playing amongst women grew rapidly in popularity during the 1920s. It was one game in which women enjoyed equal status to men, right through to the Wimbledon championship, where stars such as Suzanne Lenglen and Kitty Godfree helped to increase its popularity.⁸² Tennis also came to symbolise the 'modern' woman of the 1920s. John Stevenson noted the break with the past in seeing the new outfits as "... a potent symbol of the discarding of earlier conventions."⁸³ Writing in the late 1930s, Graves and Hodge tartly observed that, "Now that women had added 30 points to their game by rationalizing their dress and adopting the overarm service, mixed doubles were no longer a nuisance..."⁸⁴

By the 1930s, there were almost 3,000 clubs affiliated to the Lawn Tennis Federation.⁸⁵ Tennis clubs were to be found in most middle-class areas and few of my respondents failed to recall belonging to a club. As Miss Jones recalled, "I

⁸⁰ This poem was shown to me by Mrs Chambers. She came across it after our first interview and felt that it was evocative of the era I was interested in learning about.

⁸¹ Eileen Whiteing, *'Anyone for tennis?' Growing up in Wallington between the wars* (London, 1979), p.51.

⁸² R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The long week-end*, p.33

⁸³ J. Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945* (Harmondsworth, 1984), p.389.

⁸⁴ R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The long week-end*, p.229.

⁸⁵ R. Holt, *Sport and the British: a modern history* (Oxford, 1989), p.127.

belonged to this tennis club, which was the centre of my life in the summer".⁸⁶ Young middle-class women typically joined a tennis club after leaving school, and this may in part be explained by the emphasis on courtship at such clubs. Mrs Chambers, who had been away at boarding school, joined her local tennis club after she began work as a secretary:

When you started working did you join a tennis club?

Yes, there was a very good tennis club in Blundellsands, it wasn't a public one, it was a private one...the tennis club is in Warren Road, and there's about 20 courts perhaps, about six hard courts and umpteen grass courts, summer life used to more or less centre around the tennis club, and even after we came away from work in the evening, we'd nip home, have something to eat and put our tennis things on, and we just lived across this little private road, and we had a key into this park and we used to go into the tennis club and play tennis in the evenings.⁸⁷

Similarly, Miss Brown joined a tennis club after she began work as a physiotherapist:

... we'd play tennis a lot there, we joined a club, and we used to work hard in the day, change, and then rush up and play tennis for a few hours, we had lots of energy then.⁸⁸

Female participation in sport has until recently been largely neglected by historians. With the exception of Jennifer Hargreaves' work, there is very little written on this subject.⁸⁹ However, female participation and involvement in sport go far beyond the actual physical act of playing sports. There were also important social functions, which need to be explored. The social aspects of joining a club, and the benefits that this brought are worthy of close analysis. My own research demonstrates the social importance of joining tennis clubs for young middle-class women. Tennis teas, dances, picnics and concerts as well evening meetings in the club house were as much a part of belonging to a tennis club, as the matches themselves. Oral evidence clearly demonstrates that playing tennis was only part of the appeal. Tennis could be played by either sex or by young men and young women together, and in Richard Holt's

⁸⁶ Interview with Miss Jones.

⁸⁷ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁸⁸ Interview with Miss Brown.

⁸⁹ J. Hargreaves, *Sporting females*.

words, "Therein lay its true social importance".⁹⁰ As Mrs Luscombe explained, "Tennis was also the sport and the social life, the two very much intertwined".⁹¹ When I questioned Mrs Chambers on her opportunities for meeting young men at the tennis club, she replied quite categorically, "Oh yes, yes, that was the main thing, wasn't it?"⁹² Tennis tournaments between local clubs were major events in the middle-class social calendar, as Mrs Chambers explained:

...Hightown tennis tournament, we all used to go in for that.

Was there a very good tennis club in Hightown then?

Oh wonderful yes... it was a big social occasion, even though you weren't much good at tennis you always went in for it, it was great fun.⁹³

Eileen Whiteing recalls girls in white dresses and young men in long white flannel trousers dancing the night away to the music of an amateur dance band in the tennis pavilion on Saturday nights, after the afternoon's play.⁹⁴ It is therefore no coincidence that a number of my respondents met their future husbands at the tennis club.⁹⁵

Tennis dances were fondly remembered by my respondents, most of whom clearly felt that joining the tennis club meant far more than a enjoying a game of mixed doubles once a week. As Miss Sybil Green explained to me:

I was no good at tennis, but as a last hope, I was picked for the third team and a member of the tennis club came in... Harry Holt, well he was my partner for the third team of the tennis club, and we used to play different matches with the other clubs, and one of the teams we played for my current boyfriend was a member you see, always tell this story because I think it's funny! And we played against Alan and his partner and Alan sent this rather hard ball that I missed, and he said 'Oh sorry Syb!' And his partner said "Mr

⁹⁰ R. Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.126.

⁹¹ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

⁹² Interview with Mrs Chambers.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ E. Whiteing, '*Anyone for tennis?*'

⁹⁵ Examples include Mrs Simpson, Mrs Dixon and Mrs Morris.

Holme, I wish you'd remember which side you are playing on!"⁹⁶

It would appear that sporting activities offered opportunities for young women not only to meet members of the opposite sex, but also to develop friendships with other young women. This was certainly one of Mrs Dixon's motives behind joining Hightown Tennis Club:

There was a very good tennis club at Hightown, which is between Birkdale and Liverpool, and it was an extremely thriving club and the Hightown Tennis Tournament was the highlight of the summer. I started playing there, I never did any good, as I was never a very good tennis player, ended up umpiring when I got older, but of course, you saw everybody you knew there, all the teenagers.⁹⁷

Golf clubs

In England and Wales, golf remained a largely middle-class sport during the inter-war decades. Female golfers were largely drawn, although not exclusively from the more affluent sectors of the middle classes. The relatively high participation costs meant that it remained, throughout the inter-war period, the privilege of the few.⁹⁸ The sport's emphasis on modest physical exertion made it particularly suitable for young 'ladies' to take up. 'Mixed foursomes' became increasingly common, and this added to the social aspect of the sport. By 1936 there were about fifty courses in England, most of them having been opened in the years after the First World War.⁹⁹ Despite the increase in the numbers of municipal golf courses during the 1920s and 1930s, golf was still largely played in private clubs. Harry Foster's account of golf on Merseyside highlights the importance of the sport to Liverpool's middle classes, those who lived in the more affluent suburbs to the north of the city. In his chapter 'Ladies on the links' he also demonstrates the popularity of the sport amongst women on Merseyside. This is demonstrated in the proliferation of ladies clubs such as Formby

⁹⁶ Interview with Miss S.Green.

⁹⁷ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

⁹⁸ R.McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p.361.

⁹⁹ S.G. Jones, *Workers at play*, p.97.

Ladies' Golf Club and the West Lancashire Ladies' Golf Club, of which many of my respondents were active members.¹⁰⁰ Mrs Robinson was a keen golfer who played regularly during her teens. She remembered how:

We played matches against other clubs, only usually up the [railway] line mostly, what we called here, "up the line", Birkdale, Formby. Woolton we used to play against, and West Derby sometimes.¹⁰¹

She belonged to the West Lancashire Ladies club, and, although the men's and ladies' clubs were quite separate, there was an annual mixed tournament, as she explained:

Oh yes, that was fun, oh yes, we always had a men's mixed on their course and a ladies' mixed on our course, where the men came and played on our course with us, and now actually it was either Easter Monday or Whit Monday, we always had a competition then. When the men came...¹⁰²

Differences within the middle classes emerge when one looks at where young women played golf. Mrs Matthews, a lower middle-class respondent, enjoyed playing golf, but she recalls playing on a municipal golf course in Liverpool:

Did you ever play golf?

Yes, I did, only on a municipal course, a shilling a round... Yes we used to play at Bowring Park, Bootle, there's another one somewhere, and it was a shilling a round, and I got my golf clubs for my 21st birthday, as a present, I don't know who gave them to me, but it was for my 21st birthday.¹⁰³

Mrs Williams, another lower middle-class respondent, also played golf on the municipal course:

We used to play at Bowring park, public course, we used to go out and play on a Saturday morning, and it was a shilling a round, and it was lovely out there early morning, you know the hares were skipping up, were used to play in flat sandals with the dew round our toes, it was lovely.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ H. Foster, *Links along the line: The story of the development of golf between Liverpool and Southport* (Liverpool, 1996)

¹⁰¹ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Mrs Williams.

Riding

Riding was a popular activity amongst my upper middle-class respondents, although this was one activity in which clear differences emerged within my sample. None of my lower middle-class respondents recalled going riding as girls or young women. Mrs Chambers, one of my upper middle-class respondents, told how:

We used to go riding a lot, we used to go on the beach at Formby and ride around Aughton and round there, that's where I met my first husband, riding on a Sunday morning. That's where I first learned to drink beer! They used to have riding stables at Formby, I didn't do much after that actually, but I think it was *de rigueur*, I think everybody used to, it was the thing to do to go riding.¹⁰⁵

None of my upper middle-class respondents actually owned a horse, but riding at local stables was common amongst this group. Mrs Robinson used to ride over on the Wirral whilst at college:

Did you ride at all?

Yes, that was in the early twenties, I had a boyfriend in Hooton and they had about half a dozen horses, I don't know how I got in touch with them, I think father knew them, and I used to go there and stay the weekend quite often and ride all the time over there, it was when I was at college actually. My greatest friend was educated by her aunt who was Winterbottom Book Binding company and they were very wealthy, they lived in Northampton and I went out cubbing with them with the Grafton, the hunt which was quite an experienced, very posh, in those days. No, I liked riding, I used to ride quite a lot, but there was nowhere around West Derby where I was living, to ride... it was mostly over at Hooton I used to ride. I mean I'd learned, I used to ride on holiday down at Herne Bay a lot, I always went out there every morning for pretty much an hour and rode out there, broke a few things too, coming off!¹⁰⁶

It is interesting that an activity such as riding brought her into contact with people from a higher social class than herself, as shown in her participation in hunting in Northamptonshire.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

The Women's League of Health and Beauty

During the inter-war period the physical culture movement grew rapidly, inspired by ideas spread from Scandinavia. With its emphasis on the 'natural' female body, a number of groups were started, the most important of which was the Women's League of Health and Beauty.¹⁰⁷ They provided alternative forms of recreation to organised sport and, firmly opposed to harsh exercise regimes, they celebrated the 'free' use of the body. The Women's League of Health and Beauty was founded in Britain in 1930 by Mary Bagot Stack, and was later taken over by her daughter Prunella, who by the late 1930s, was widely known as Britain's 'perfect girl'. The movement spread rapidly and by 1939, the league had its largest ever membership in England of over 166,000.¹⁰⁸ Well known for its demonstrations that were given in Hyde Park in London, the movement also offered weekly classes that were held in halls all over the country.

It would appear that the movement attracted a largely middle-class following. In the promotional literature it was said to have sought to recruit 'business girls and busy women'.¹⁰⁹ How many working-class women belonged to this organisation is difficult to calculate, although it is possible that some upper working-class women may have joined. Interestingly, my own oral evidence suggests that those involved largely came from middle and lower-middle class backgrounds. Certainly, many lower-middle class office workers were to be found in its ranks. Mrs Stevens and Mrs Matthews were both members. Mrs Stevens recalled:

Yes, I joined it for a while. Where did I join it? It must have been somewhere in Crosby, my older cousin Nora, she was four or five years older than me, she took me along, and you wore little navy knickers and white blouses, white sleeveless blouses, and you did all sort of exercises on the floor and did them to music.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ For a fuller account of the movement, its origins and activities, see J.J. Matthews, 'They had such a lot of fun: the Women's League of Health and Beauty between the wars' in *History Workshop Journal*, 30, (Autumn 1990), pp.22-54.

¹⁰⁸ J. Hargreaves, *Sporting females*, p.135

¹⁰⁹ J.J. Matthews, 'They had such a lot of fun' p.135.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

As did Mrs Matthews:

Did you ever belong to the Women's League of Health and Beauty?

I did, it started actually, and we used to go to a church hall... St. Margaret's church hall we used to go, and we used to wear a little satin blouse and little black satin panty things, and we used to do exercise.

Was this when you were working?

Yes, I used to have my tea in the office and the friend I played golf with, she and I went.

How often was this?

Once a week. I think it was 6d.¹¹¹

It is interesting that they both volunteer information upon the clothing that they wore to the meetings. Sociability appears to have been a major reason for attending, as Mrs Matthews explained:

Oh you got quite friendly with people yes. I can't remember if we met them outside or anything, we just said 'Hello', week by week, you know, you got to know each other.¹¹²

Involvement in groups like the Women's League of Health and Beauty further demonstrates the importance of club and associational life in shaping the leisure patterns of young middle-class women. It may also have brought some lower middle-class young women into contact with women from upper working-class backgrounds, although this is an area in which further research would prove highly illuminating.

The 'open-air movement': rambling and youth hostelling

The growing 'discovery' of the countryside was one of the important changes in British leisure patterns during the inter-war decades. The continental cult of athleticism provided a new boost for the pastime of walking in the countryside. Young people enthusiastically embraced the new craze for hiking when it arrived in Britain. The Youth Hostel Association was founded in 1930 to provide cheap accommodation for young people in sexually segregated dormitories. By 1937 it had

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Interview with Mrs Matthews.

Young people enthusiastically embraced the new craze for hiking when it arrived in Britain. The Youth Hostel Association was founded in 1930 to provide cheap accommodation for young people in sexually segregated dormitories. By 1937 it had 70,505 members and 275 hostels.¹¹³ The Merseyside branch of the Youth Hostels Association was responsible for the North Wales group of nine hostels in 1933.¹¹⁴ Evidence collected in *The social survey of Merseyside* suggested that activities such as hiking and youth hostelling were largely undertaken by non-manual workers. The questionnaires received documenting involvement in rambling and youth hostelling included a disproportionate number of women from classes A and B, which included those from lower middle-class families.¹¹⁵ Manual workers and their families found it hard to afford the costs of subscriptions, equipment and travelling expenses. Eileen Elias recalls the increasing popularity of rambling and the following comments indicate the strong sense of excitement that it aroused:

I always rather fancied myself with a rucksack, the kind that were coming into fashion in the sports shops. They had a dashing air, as though this new craze for the out of doors was really something exciting.¹¹⁶

Oral testimony provides further evidence of the popularity of rambling amongst young middle-class women. Mrs Morris was a member of the Youth Hostel Association and she regularly spent her weekends rambling in the countryside, in North Wales and the Lake District. It was through her membership of the Youth Hostelling Association that she became interested in mountaineering. She became the first female member of the Liverpool University Mountaineering Club:

It must have been when I first started teaching, I used to go youth hostelling with a friend, we always used to go at New Year to North Wales or the Lakes, I think it was when I first started teaching, the mountaineering club was staying in the same hostel, the university lot, and so they invited me to join, they hadn't had any women in 'til then and they invited me and one other girl, we were the first two women, and we used to go out with them,

¹¹³ S.G.Jones, *Workers at play*, p.65.

¹¹⁴ D. Caradog Jones (ed.), *The social survey of Merseyside*, Vol. III.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* p.295.

¹¹⁶ E. Elias, *Straw hats and serge bloomers*, p. 209.

countryside. She would head out into the nearby countryside of North Wales and Wirral most weekends:

Well, it was a national thing really, we had our own local things and we were in the Liverpool one. Some people came out to camp in their cars and some cycled and the meetings were at different farms, either in Cheshire or North Wales or some of them were in Lancashire, and tents varied according to what transport you had. I had a dear little tent called an Itsa, and we took, we had sleeping bags and Primus stoves, and we took, we knew, we had a fixture card, so we knew which one to go to each week, and they were great fun. We cooked our meals out, the farms would provide us, we could buy milk and eggs and things like that at the farms, and we cooked over our primus stoves. In the evening we'd have a big bonfire and sit all around it.¹¹⁸

Sociability and the chance to meet members of the opposite sex emerge as important factors in her decision to join:

You made quite a lot of good friends, and when you got there on Saturday afternoon, you usually pitched there, you would have a walk on Saturday and walk on Sunday.¹¹⁹

She went on to meet her future husband through this group and together they joined the cycling branch of the club:

...at first, he was too powerful for me, I just couldn't keep up with that sort of thing, so we bought a tandem, and we went miles on the tandem, we would get the whole of our camping equipment on it.¹²⁰

Membership was limited to those who could afford both the time and the expense of equipment and travel, and thus members were largely although not exclusively, drawn from the ranks of the middle classes.¹²¹ Mrs Williams recalled that membership of the camping club cost 10s a year.¹²² This sum was beyond the reach of many

¹¹⁸ Interview with Mrs Williams.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ However, it should be noted that during the period under consideration there was also a growth in clubs and organisations whose membership was drawn largely from the working-classes. Such groups tended also to be linked with the socialist movement, one such example being the Clarion Club.

¹²² Interview with Mrs Williams.

working-class families. Nonetheless, one should be cautious in arguing that membership was confined solely to the middle classes. Stephen Jones has argued that the outdoor movement did attract a sizeable membership from the upper working classes.¹²³ Writing in the early 1930s, Thomas Middleton noted that Liverpool's working classes were to be found on membership lists of both rambling and cycling groups.¹²⁴

It is interesting that all of my respondents who recalled belonging to hiking and rambling association, were from lower middle-class backgrounds. These activities do not appear to have held the same appeal for young, upper middle-class women. None of my upper middle-class respondents belonged to either the Youth Hostelling Association or the Camping Club. Possibly, the element of 'roughing it' involved in walking and camping did not appeal to those from more privileged backgrounds. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine women such as Mrs Chambers or Mrs Robinson sleeping in tents and cooking ham and eggs for themselves on a primus stove, given their accounts of their highly privileged backgrounds. When I asked Mrs Robinson why she did not belong to the Youth Hostel Association, she told me, rather disdainfully, "No, that wasn't for us."¹²⁵ However, it is possible that there may have been some 'rubbing shoulders' through these activities between young women from lower middle-class backgrounds and those from the upper ranks of the working classes.

Enjoying the 'great outdoors' did not necessarily mean becoming a member of a rambling club or association. Mrs Robb used to go rambling with her local church group, as she recalled:

We used to go what we called hiking, we used to go for quite long walks then we used to go over into the Wirral and walk and go somewhere and have a pub lunch or something. We also used to often go into Wales, into Llandudno and places like that.¹²⁶

¹²³ S. G. Jones, *Workers at play*, p.66.

¹²⁴ T. Middleton, 'An enquiry into the use of leisure amongst the working classes of Liverpool', M.A. thesis, University of Liverpool (1931), p.122.

¹²⁵ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹²⁶ Interview with Mrs Robb.

Oral evidence also points to more informal jaunts into the countryside by young women. Mrs Matthews recalls going over to the Wirral with her boyfriend in his car:

Then of course I got a boyfriend and we used to go walking. Is the embankment still there, from Leasowe to Hoylake? We used to go walking along there, like a roadway right along and we used to take sandwiches.¹²⁷

Similarly, Mrs Luscombe had fond memories of visiting the countryside with her husband-to-be in his car. She recalled trips to North Wales and to the Yorkshire Dales:

... just for the day, I told you it was a two seater, it had a little dicky [seat] at the back... but you couldn't talk to the people behind, because the top of the roof came down. Yes, we spent a lot of time in the car, he always had a car, even when he didn't have much money, he managed to have a car.¹²⁸

Motoring

Motoring provided an important dimension of the growing leisure opportunities for the middle classes in the 1920s and 1930s. The inter-war years witnessed a huge expansion of private car ownership, with two million cars on Britain's roads by 1939.¹²⁹ An important feature of motoring during this period was the emphasis on motoring for pleasure. Motoring remained, throughout the inter-war period, primarily a leisure activity, facilitating day trips and excursions as well as providing new opportunities for courtship. Apart from doctors, throughout the inter-war period most motorists used their vehicles solely for pleasure 'jaunts'. Eileen Elias recalls the freedom that the motor car offered:

You took your weekend case, and your tennis racquet, and your jumper suit for an afternoon on the river - and, of course, your camera to take snaps.¹³⁰

The motor car was of fundamental importance to the leisure activities of young middle-class women, particularly as they reached their early twenties. The role of the

¹²⁷ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

¹²⁸ Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

¹²⁹ R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The long weekend*, p.390.

¹³⁰ E. Elias, *Straw hats and serge bloomers*, p.186.

motor car in facilitating young middle-class women's leisure is highlighted in *A subaltern's love song*.¹³¹ Access to a motor vehicle demonstrates the privileged position of young middle-class women and further highlights the vast differences which existed in the leisure activities of young women from working and middle-class backgrounds. Mrs Luscombe recalls the central place that the car held in her own leisure activities:

...if you had a car you were very popular, this one [friend] I mentioned, Molly, she was given one for her 21st [birthday], it was a fairly roomy car, and then if we could get one other, one of my brothers probably had one between the lot of them, then we could go off in the car at the weekends, summers seemed to be nicer and we could go off and pretty well plan for a picnic...¹³²

Mrs Bennett recalled going out in the car with her fiancé on weekend excursions. Her recollections also demonstrate the importance of the car in facilitating outdoor pursuits:

Harold [her fiancé] had a little tiny Austin Seven and used to pop off to Southport in it and we went on the sands there...that was the first time I went on an aeroplane, on the sands in Southport, it was five shillings for a ride, you know, in a bi-plane they loop the loop and all that, they'd take you round you would see Freshfield and Formby and back again all for five shillings...Yes we used to go to Shelsley Walsh in Shropshire, hill climbing and that, and been around Brooklands in a car, in an Aston Martin.

You would go off quite often on little excursions?

Yes, nearly every weekend, my husband's family had a cottage in Wales, where they had some fishing for trout and salmon, and we went every weekend down there...and we would stay down at the cottage on the Dee and come back Sunday evening...¹³³

Mrs Chambers' memories of motoring during the 1930s offer a similar image of fun and frivolity:

Did you used to go out for lots of daytrips with these people that had cars?

Yes, we used to go out quite often, I remember going down to Bala in Wales with a whole crowd, two car loads full. It was everybody just enjoying

¹³¹ See frontispiece.

¹³² Interview with Mrs Luscombe.

¹³³ Interview with Mrs Bennett.

themselves.¹³⁴

She also recalls a 'madcap' experience whilst she was driving:

I remember once going to some bunfight [party] and I think there was a boy in front driving and another girl in front and myself and another boy in the back and we were going along the Dock Road, we were going over to some place on the Wirral for a dinner dance or something, and we had a skid on the Dock Road and went all the way around and ended up that way, but we just continued on. I remember doing that.¹³⁵

The advent of the motor car offered young middle-class women considerable freedom in open-air adventure, as well as providing a new venue for courting. It also seems that young women were not always dependent upon men for access to vehicles. A number of my upper middle-class respondents owned their own cars.¹³⁶ Driving out in the car with a boyfriend was frequently recalled, but my respondents were keen to stress the innocent nature of such encounters with members of the opposite sex, again emphasising their own respectability. As Mrs Chambers explained:

Sometimes you were brought home by somebody and you went down on the front and just 'sort of', in the car, but it was nothing special.¹³⁷

Mrs Matthews' recollections highlight the importance of the car to her courting:

How about courting, where did you used to go?

...one boy had a car, well his father had a car, so it was lovely when he said "Oh Dad's lending me the car tonight!"

Where would you go when you had the car then?

Well I suppose we'd find a little lane somewhere or something like that...¹³⁸

Pubs and Roadhouses

¹³⁴ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ Mrs Chambers and Mrs Robinson were both given cars for their 21st birthdays.

¹³⁷ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

¹³⁸ Interview with Mrs Matthews.

Young middle-class women rarely entered public houses, as Mrs Matthews' testimony indicates:

Did you go into pubs?

No, not really, not then. I did eventually.

Never?

No, women didn't go in then, if you had anything to drink you had it in the office, you know birthdays and things like that.¹³⁹

Miss Howson could not imagine entering a public house back in the 1930s:

Did you ever go into a pub?

Oh, of course we wouldn't have done that, that would have been quite unheard of. Of course, it's very recent for women to go into pubs, and it's very recent that we can go and have lunch there, that's a very recent idea. My parents would have been shocked if they knew I went into pubs. I mean, I do now, I go to lunch, but I mean, my parents would have been horrified.¹⁴⁰

Neither could Mrs Stevens:

I don't think I ever went into a pub, not until I first married... we had drink, we had sherry at home at Christmas and on special occasions, you know to drink somebody's health.¹⁴¹

Mrs Robinson by contrast, did recall going into public houses, but only if she was either in a group of her female friends or, alternatively, accompanied by a man:

And you did go into pubs then?

Only with a gang, I wouldn't have gone in, two ladies on our own. We'd have gone in with a chap, not on our own, we'd have gone in with a gang.¹⁴²

Whilst the public house appears to have held relatively little appeal for the middle classes, there is evidence that they consumed alcohol in a rather different environment. On the outskirts of cities and in the countryside, especially in the south east, roadhouses began to appear during the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴³ These were, in

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Miss Howson.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

¹⁴² Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹⁴³ A. A. Jackson, *The middle classes.*

effect, public houses at the side of the roads. However, as well as containing large bars, they also contained restaurants and dance halls and provided a variety of forms of entertainment. They were very different in style to the traditional public house found in working-class areas. Their sense of exclusiveness was maintained as their clientele needed motor vehicles to reach them. Ownership of a motor car clearly limited the types of people who frequented roadhouses. In response to the pleasure motoring boom of the inter-war decades, roadhouses began to spring up alongside some of the major thoroughfares around Liverpool, as Mrs Stevens recalled:

Oh yes, now there were roadhouses, out towards Formby, yes I remember in the Liverpool area, the roadhouses I remember were out towards Southport, going out, now we did go, we did go in our teens, occasionally, you could have socials out at roadhouses, sometimes we went to roadhouses, they'd got dancing in there going on, you would go in there for a drink with the boyfriends and their cars, there was a roadhouse somewhere near Ince Woods and there was another on the Formby road, there was Freshfield and another one at Birkdale or Ainsdale and several up round the Southport area.¹⁴⁴

Oral evidence suggests that many young people with access to cars frequented roadhouses in and around Liverpool. Mrs Robinson recalled going to *The Pheasant* in Hightown, a local roadhouse, with her boyfriends. As she recalled, the car park was "somewhere to go and do a bit of necking!"¹⁴⁵ Whilst she frequented such places, occasionally with boyfriends, she never went alone or indeed with her female friends, and she was quick to point out that, "... pubs weren't really our scene, you didn't do that sort of thing."¹⁴⁶ Mrs Chambers remembers going into roadhouses and drinking alcohol. She told me how "... the big drink in those days was gin and lime, it was very emancipated."¹⁴⁷

Mrs Dixon recalled going to a roadhouse called the Lake in the Woods, near Formby. The following testimony highlights the importance of the motor car in facilitating her leisure during her youth. She also hints at the importance of being

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Mrs Stevens.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Mrs Chambers.

with 'one's own' by pointing out that she only went to such places in a 'gang':

Did you ever go to roadhouses?

Yes, in my particular case we always moved in quite big crowds and anything from 10 to 15 or 16, certainly always ten and there'd be about four cars involved, a lot more.

And would you just go there for a drink?

Yes, the great drink in those days, they were long drinks in our age group, gin and tonic, and gin and lime was a great drink too, and the boys drank beer, I don't think we ever thought of ordering a bottle of wine except with dinner, but not at a pub... there was Pimms, of course. I think they were mostly gin-based, or the girls used to drink shandy, another long drink.¹⁴⁸

This account of roadhouses highlights many of the features of young middle-class women's leisure outside of the home. It demonstrates the privileged position of young middle-class women, in so far as they freely gained access to motor cars. This clearly highlights the gulf in experiences between middle and working-class women. Again, the importance of 'keeping to one's own' emerges in accounts of roadhouses. The simple requirement of access to a motor car effectively maintained their social exclusivity.

Conclusions

From this study of young middle-class women's leisure activities outside of the home a number of conclusions may be drawn. First, an account of the range of activities enjoyed by young middle-class women clearly reveals the enormous differences which existed in the leisure activities of young women from middle and working-class backgrounds. The leisure patterns of young working-class women, as described by historians such as Davies, were less varied and considerably less glamorous than those described by my own respondents. Second, it becomes clear that young middle-class women's involvement in commercial leisure activities was limited. Young middle-class women appear to have avoided commercial dance halls and the cheaper cinemas frequented by young people from working-class backgrounds. They were more likely to attend the theatre than the cinema and their dancing was confined to

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Mrs Dixon.

more socially-exclusive venues such as hotels and private parties. Although young middle-class women frequently socialised with their peers, they tended to do so within the confines of their existing social networks, frequenting members-only clubs and participating in socially exclusive sports such as tennis and golf. Finally, some differences within the middle classes also emerge. As this chapter has shown, young women from upper middle-class backgrounds were more likely to attend lavish balls and dances than those from lower middle-class backgrounds and were more likely to have cars of their own. Activities such as hiking, rambling and youth-hostelling were more common amongst those from lower middle-class backgrounds. However, despite these differences, the relative affluence of the life-styles of the inter-war middle classes was apparent throughout my oral history interviews.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

This thesis has provided an account of the previously unexplored life-styles of young middle-class women in inter-war Britain. Inspired by the parallel work conducted on the lives of working-class women, this project has examined the life-styles of girls and young women growing up in Liverpool during the 1920s and 1930s. Through the use of oral history, it has been possible to provide a fairly broad overview of the life-styles of a sample of 20 women. Particular attention has been paid to their educational experiences, employment opportunities and leisure activities both inside and outside the home. This has enabled insights also to be made into home-life, relationships with parents, friendships and courtship patterns.

Attention is also given within the empirical chapters to patterns of storytelling within oral testimonies.¹ When analysing my transcripts, I discovered that there was a tendency amongst my respondents to frame their life histories in a way which drew a contrast between 'then' and 'now'. In recounting their life-styles as young women, a recurrent pattern emerged in which they drew a contrast between the 'good old days' and a corrupt present. Within the oral testimonies, there was also a tendency for my respondents to emphasise their own respectability, and this is particularly noticeable within their accounts of their leisure activities.

Young middle-class women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s inhabited a radically different world to that of their mothers' generation. In the inter-war decades, young middle-class women received an education which was to equip them for careers outside of the home and almost all the women featured in this study went on to enjoy at least a short period of paid employment prior to marriage. Furthermore, through a detailed examination of the leisure patterns of young middle-class women, we have seen how they enjoyed highly modern leisure activities such

¹ This is informed by the approach adopted by Judy Giles in her work on young working-class women. J. Giles, "'Playing hard to get": working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain, 1918-1940, *Women's History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), pp.239-255.

as those connected with the outdoor movement and the motor car. However, their involvement in the growing 'mass' leisure industries of the inter-war period appears to have been limited.

Informed by the 'history from below' tradition, this study has demonstrated the importance of social class in shaping young women's life-styles.² By contrasting the life-styles of young women from working-class backgrounds with those from middle-class backgrounds, this thesis has highlighted the very profound differences in patterns of behaviour which existed between these two groups. One is immediately struck by the privileged position of young middle-class women. This comes across most strikingly in their accounts of their leisure activities. Attending lavish balls, entertaining, often in considerable luxury, at home and their access to motor cars were all a world away from activities such as promenading along 'monkey parades' and cinema-going which were characteristic of the leisure patterns of young working-class women.

Oral evidence also suggests that young middle-class women tended to mix within their own social groups. Within the oral testimonies collected, there was a definite sense of 'keeping to one's own', as Mrs Robinson's testimony indicates:

Did you have any friends from a lower class background?

No, not really, no, you all stuck to your own really... in our family we had a phrase, N.O.C.D., not our class, darling!³

Similarly, Mrs Williams' recollections demonstrate the importance of mixing with one's own social class:

Do you think that your family would have considered themselves to be middle class?

Yes, and they were very particular with whom we mixed.⁴

The extent to which young middle-class women 'rubbed shoulders' with those from

² This is a very different approach to that adopted by Elizabeth Oliver in her recent work on women and leisure. In contrast to Oliver's more overtly feminist approach, I have been more concerned to explore class differences. E. Oliver, 'Liberating or restricting? Women's leisure in Bolton 1918-1939', PhD, Lancaster University (1997).

³ Interview with Mrs Robinson.

⁴ Interview with Mrs Williams.

working-class backgrounds was clearly limited. The inter-war educational system was infused with class differentials and there is little evidence to suggest that young middle-class women came into contact with those from different social classes through their experiences at school and college. Their leisure activities were also informed by a sharp sense of class distinctions, and as I have shown, young middle-class women appear to have actively avoided activities which would bring them into contact with the working classes. However, as Chapter Four has demonstrated, there was more of a sense of mixing outside of their own social circles within the workplace.

Oral evidence continually illustrates the diversity of middle-class life. The inter-war middle classes were far from being a homogenous group. Throughout this thesis I have highlighted the subtle, yet significant differences which existed within young middle-class women's experiences. In particular, I have highlighted the gulf which existed between young women from upper middle-class backgrounds and those from lower middle-class households. This is an area in which more detailed research would prove highly revealing. Future projects which focus exclusively on either the upper or lower middle classes would no doubt reveal the extent of these differences more fully.

Appendix 1

Oral history sample: Respondents' biographical details.

A total of 20 women were interviewed for the project. They were all interviewed at least twice, though many were interviewed as many as four times. Full details of the interview procedure is outlined in Chapter Two. Pseudonyms are used throughout the text in order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

Miss Arthur.

Born: 1906, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Aigburth Vale High School, Liverpool, University of Liverpool, Miss Fowkes secretarial college.

Father's occupation: superintendent engineer, Townsend Line.

Mother's occupation: housewife (died young).

Number of siblings: two sisters.

Own position in the family: eldest.

Occupation: buyer for Owen, department store in Liverpool.

Date married: remained unmarried.

Miss Brown.

Born: 1911, Grimsby.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Merchant Taylors School for Girls' followed by Physiotherapy training at The Southern Hospital, Liverpool. Father's occupation: engineer.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: one brother, three sisters.

Own position in the family: second youngest.

Occupation: physiotherapist.

Date married: remained unmarried.

Mrs Bennett.

Born: 1908, Hazel Grove, Stockport.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Huyton College, Liverpool (as a boarder) then Liverpool School of Art. Father's occupation: hospital manager, Walton hospital.

Mother's Occupation: matron, Walton hospital.

Number of siblings: one brother.

Own position in the family: youngest.

Occupation: none.

Date married: 1933, divorced 1936.

Husband's occupation: architect

Mrs Chambers.

Born 1913, Litherland, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: St Leonards school, St. Andrews, Fife, F.C. Calder Domestic science college, Miss Fowkes secretarial college.

Father's occupation: chartered accountant.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of Siblings: one brother, two sisters.

Occupation: secretary.

Own position in the family: eldest.

Date married: 1939.

Husband's occupation: dentist

Mrs Davis.

Born 1913, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Aigburth High Grammar school.

Father's occupation: general contractor.

Mother's occupation: assisted with clerical work for family business. Number of siblings: four brothers, five sisters.

Occupation: nurse.

Own position in the family: eldest.

Date married: 1939.

Husbands occupation: headmaster

Mrs Duncan.

Born: 1901, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: High school, Queens's Drive, Liverpool University.

Father's Occupation: headmaster.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: two brothers, three sisters.

Own position in the family: middle.

Occupation: teacher.

Date married: 1928.

Husband's occupation: Merchant navy officer

Mrs Dixon.

Born 1916, Wallasey, Wirral.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Wycombe Abbey school, Buckinghamshire, Miss Fowkes secretarial college.

Father's occupation: cotton broker.

Mother's occupation: had been a teacher, but gave up employment upon marriage.

Number of siblings: one brother.

Own position in the family: eldest.

Occupation: none.

Date married: 1942.

Husbands occupation: buyer in a Liverpool department store, subsequently managing director

Miss Sybil Green and Miss Mabel Green (sisters)

Born 1909 and 1913, Wallasey.

Education: Wallasey grammar school.

Father's occupation: timber merchant.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: two other sisters.

Own position in the family: eldest and second eldest.

Occupations: Miss S Green, none. Miss Mabel Green, secretary for Elder Dempster shipping line.

Date married: neither married.

Miss Howson.

Born: 1904 Seaforth, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Bury High school, Liverpool University

Father's occupation: Headmaster

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: two sisters, one brother

Own position in the family: eldest.

Occupation: teacher

Date married: remained unmarried.

Mrs Hickey.

Born: 1908, Waterloo, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Merchant Taylors School for Girls', Liverpool University.

Father's occupation: Commercial Traveller for Buchanan's flour mills.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: one brother, one sister.

Own position in the family: youngest.

Occupation: teacher.

Date married: 1936.

Husband's occupation: Teacher until 1942 then Education officer with Essex County.

Miss Jones.

Born: 1911, Seaforth, Liverpool.

Religion: Methodist.

Education: Merchant Taylors School for Girls', Teacher Training College, London.

Father's occupation: french polisher, antique furniture restorer. Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: two brothers.

Own position in the family: youngest.

Occupation: teacher.

Date married: remained unmarried.

Mrs Luscombe.

Born: 1911, Crosby, Liverpool.

Religion: Roman Catholic.

Education: Seaford Convent School followed by Teacher Training college. Father's occupation: town clerk.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: five brothers, four sisters.

Own position in the family: youngest.

Occupation: teacher.

Date married: 1937.

Husbands occupation: accountant

Mrs Matthews.

Born: 1908, Kirkdale, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Queen Mary High School, Marchant and Harpers secretarial college.

Father's occupation: commission agent.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: four brothers, four sisters.

Own position in the family: youngest.

Occupation: secretary.

Date married: 1943.

Husbands occupation: served in regular army

Mrs Morris.

Born: 1914, Wallasey.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Stoneycroft school, Holly Lodge, Liverpool University. Father's occupation: cashier in shipping.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: one brother, three sisters.

Own position in the family: eldest.

Occupation: teacher.

Date married: 1943.

Husband's occupation: pharmacist

Mrs Robinson.

Born 1913, West Derby, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: Belvedere School, (Girls Public Day School Trust). I.M. Marsh College, teacher training.

Occupation: teacher.

Father's occupation: city electrical engineer.

Mother's occupation: housewife.

Number of siblings: one sister.

Own Position in the family: youngest.

Date married: 1938.

Husband's occupation: lawyer

Mrs Robb.

Born: 1911, Waterloo, Liverpool.
Religion: Presbyterian.
Education: Merchant Taylors School for Girls', Teacher Training College.
Father's occupation: sea captain.
Mother's occupation: housewife.
Number of siblings: one brother.
Own position in the family: youngest.
Occupation: teacher.
Date married: 1938.
Husband's occupation: supplier of coal to shipping.

Mrs Sampson.

Born: 1911, Waterloo, Liverpool.
Religion: Presbyterian.
Education: Belvedere School (Girls' Public Day School Trust) Miss Fowkes Secretarial College.
Father's occupation: accountant.
Mother's occupation: housewife.
Number of siblings: one brother, two sisters.
Own position in the family: middle.
Occupation: secretary.
Date married: 1942.
Husband's occupation: importer of flour products.

Mrs Stevens.

Born: 1915, Blackheath, London.
Religion: Presbyterian.
Education: Merchant Taylors School for Girls', Liverpool School of art.
Father's occupation: naval architect.
Mother's occupation: housewife.
Number of Siblings: one brother, one sister.
Own position in the family: eldest.
Occupation: various buying jobs.
Date married: 1940.
Husband's occupation: scientific instruments engineer.

Mrs Williams.

Born: 1910, Old Swan, Liverpool.

Religion: Church of England.

Education: St Edmunds College, Teacher Training College, London. Father's occupation: teacher.

Mother's occupation: teacher.

Number of siblings: one sister.

Own position in the family: eldest.

Occupation: teacher.

Date married: 1935.

Husband's occupation: buyer for Wearings and Gillows (furniture makers).

Appendix 2

Copyright declaration

University of Liverpool

Clearance note and deposit instructions

Name.....

Address.....

.....

.....

.....

Date of interview.....

Thank you for your help and for sharing your memories with me. I would be very grateful if you would sign this form for copyright purposes. It is just to say that you are happy for me to use any of the material collected on the tape in the completion of my PhD thesis, or in any paper I give relating to my research findings. Pseudonyms will be used throughout.

Signature.....

Date.....

Also, it is hoped that the tapes are placed in an archive so that your memories are available for others to consult. If you are happy for your contributions to be kept for such purposes, then please could you also sign below.

Signature.....

If you wish to limit public access to your tape for a number of years (up to a maximum of 30 years) then please state your conditions below:

.....
.....
.....

With many thanks for your help and interest in my research.

Sharon Messenger

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