

Housing environments and health in early modern London

How did people live in early modern London? This question is frequently addressed in the scholarly writing of the period, employing a wide variety of methodologies and disciplinary discourses. We would argue that answering this particular question might become a more realistic proposition in fact if it was divided into two questions: namely, how did people group themselves within society; and how did individual agency deal with the social and economic pressures of everyday life? These two questions are obviously interrelated, and our ability to address the second is largely dependant on our knowledge of the first. Thus while this paper offers a preliminary investigation into the behaviour of people within their social groups in two contrasting areas of the capital, it begins by drawing on our earlier analysis of the structural characteristics of the domestic groups in those regions.

Our two study areas will be instantly recognisable to Derek Keene and to those of you familiar with his work on *The Historical Gazetteer of London*. [MAP] The first is a cluster of five small parishes at the eastern end of Cheapside in the historic and commercial heart of London, where both rent and tax values were reasonably high. The second, lying to the east of the city and outside the city wall, is the large parish of St Botolph Aldgate, a suburban area that underwent massive population and industrial expansion in the early modern period, and with considerably lower rent and tax values than Cheapside. Derek's groundbreaking work on the properties and people within these two areas has served both as an inspiration and a constant source for the successive projects that Mark and I have worked on at the CMH, and in what follows we attempt to build on a number of the themes that he first highlighted.

The detailed property reconstructions in the *Historical Gazetteer* make it abundantly clear that cohabitation and lodging were common practices in both Cheapside and Aldgate, and these aspects of metropolitan living can usefully be measured by an analysis of taxation returns. Figures based on the 1695 marriage duty assessments for parts of Cheapside and Aldgate show [Table 2 NACBS] that the mean number of households per property is just under two in both areas, and the slight shift towards Cheapside in regard to properties housing four or more households can be attributed to its larger dwellings. The presence of those identified as lodgers in the population of the areas is approximately similar [Table 3 NACBS], both in terms of the proportion of the population consisting of lodgers, and the proportion of properties accommodating them, which is high at roughly fourteen percent. Such trends were obviously shaped by the housing environments in Cheapside and Aldgate, and both regions contained densely packed units of housing, if generally of a very different standard and quality.

Finally, a number of the structural characteristics of their families and households are worthy of note. In the 1695 sample areas, [Table 4 NACBS] almost a quarter of the properties accommodated no married couples, and around half of the families were composed of either single parent families, sibling partnerships, or other unidentified kinship relationships which did not comprise a husband and wife. Meanwhile, children [Table 5 NACBS] constituted a small proportion of the relative populations of Cheapside and Aldgate, with the majority of families including no children, and almost a quarter of families with children headed by single parents.

The use of taxation returns to generate a detailed, quantitative series of results on the size and shape of the metropolitan domestic group is an entirely valid and immensely rewarding procedure – and we say that not simply because it is a methodology that we ourselves have adopted.¹ Nevertheless, we are more than aware that it relies on sources that are, in effect, a picture that is stuck in time, one that fixes people in specific domestic units in specific areas of the capital at a specific moment. By contrast, recent scholarship on the social history of early modern London has placed a particular emphasis on the inherent *mobility* of metropolitan living. This has been discussed in terms of seasonal patterns of residence² and the high frequency of lodgers among the population,³ but also with regard to the movement of both men and women within and even outside the city's boundaries in the course of their everyday lives.⁴ The same characteristic was clearly also a feature of London's domestic units themselves with regard to the ways in which people lived.⁵ In both Cheapside and Aldgate, it was not uncommon for separate domestic groups to share entrances, stairwells and yards, and cooking and washing amenities, and, as a result, the boundaries between individual families and households were clearly permeable and could overlap. Similarly, the frequent presence of lodgers, who might reside in a property for anything from a number of days to a number of years, must have made the intermittent flow of people in and out of dwellings a not unusual experience.⁶ And it is an aspect of this latter type of mobility – specifically, that which took place at moments of crisis within the lifecycle – with which this paper is concerned. Of course, the static image of local populations found in taxation returns reveal little of this kind of movement, or of the reasons behind it, as domestic units are listed in abstraction from their relationships with the rest of the community. This paper therefore draws on very different sources – namely parish registers, churchwardens' accounts, apprenticeship indentures and memoranda books – that, taken together, allow us to recover that type of information for our two study areas in the period between the late sixteenth and late seventeenth century. This, in turn, will provide the basis for a preliminary investigation into the social and public aspect of

¹ LJ paper.

² Pelling in *Londinopolis*.

³ Spence, *Atlas*, 89-101.

⁴ Pelling, 154, 158-9; Gowing, 137-9 in *Londinopolis*.

⁵ Gowing, 135-6.

⁶ Gowing, 136.

those crisis moments when society intervened in the lives of individuals lacking the immediate support of a household.

The records of both Cheapside and Aldgate show time and again the need for intervention on behalf of the newborn, the young, the sick, the abandoned, the homeless, the stranger, and the dead and dying, in situations where they were no longer receiving from their domestic unit the basic social and economic support mechanism required for life in the early modern metropolis. The active and formal involvement of the parish in these circumstances, occasionally in the face of opposition from parishioners, was above and beyond the informal social support networks embedded in the neighbourhood and founded upon the responsibilities and accountability of householders, as described so eloquently by historians of London such as Archer.

In both areas a similar pattern of 'official' activity can be seen, although in the Cheapside parishes such intervention appears on a lesser scale. This is partly due to the relative population sizes in the two areas, and partly due to the social and economic characteristics of those populations: although both areas housed rich and poor inhabitants, Cheapside in general was a much wealthier area, whose households were much more capable of maintaining themselves and their inhabitants, and thus requiring less in the way of direct the parochial support administered in Aldgate. Nevertheless intervention was sometimes required, especially as it was not always Cheapside parishioners who were in need of the parishes' support: St Mary le Bow, for example, was a frequent destination for women from other parishes abandoning their newly born infants.

In Aldgate the parish clerk and churchwardens spent considerable sums of money intervening on behalf of the youngest section of the population. The various records attest to the efforts made on behalf of parish children (girls as well as boys) to send them to learn a trade. Many such children, like Thomas Parrye in 1622, were sent to their new master with a new set of clothes paid for by the churchwardens: in the same set of accounts is recorded the payment for the bonds and indenture, the clothing (a doublet and hose), as well as payments to a parishioner for taking in his brother a John as "a poore childe for her own". In the following year three children of the Bell family were taken in by parishioners at the parish's expense, had clothing and blankets bought for them, with two of them subsequently being apprenticed out. The taking in of children, either newly discovered foundlings, older parish children or the recently orphaned, could also be a short term measure – for example, one Kate Tanner repeatedly received payments across a number of years for looking after one or several

children for a week here and there (she also repeatedly received sums for taking in elderly widows, and poor women from Aldgate's Cage, often for months at a time).

The case of Tanner makes it clear that the parish had long standing relationships with particular householders who could be turned to when the need to take children in arose. In 1625 she received £4 1s for "for nursing 3 childe[n] 6 mo[nths] & 3 w[EEKS] at 12s p[er] moneth", and she was paid at this rate throughout the 1620s for the nursing and taking in of children. The parish held property for the housing of those needing relief, including a large donated tenement in Blue Anchor alley, as well as large financial stocks, and this official relationship with women (and indeed men) like Tanner may have been simply an expedient means to address the social fallout of an impoverished population, rather than an attempt at some kind of social integration. Certainly from the point of view of the householder the extra income was not insignificant, especially when it was not used to generate beneficial surroundings for the children –after the death of Marie Sedway in 1621 "the reputed daughter of one John Sedway a shoemaker ... that was nursed in the house of one Edith Jones a poore widow of east smithfeild ..." the parish clerk commented that "There are verie few children prosper long in our Parish that are nursed in such places'. On another occasion in 1624 he remarks: "he that loveth his dogg would not put it in such a place to be brought upp."

On the other hand it would be wrong to envisage the parish-householder relationship in this context as one of exploitative fostering, as there is evidence too of more sympathetic arrangements. A bill submitted by Martha Banwell to Aldgate's churchwardens in 1683 for the reimbursement of two hats, two smocks, two aprons and four handkerchiefs for two sisters, finishes with the autograph plea: "I would intreat the churchwardens and overseers to send these children some clothes for they are almost naked they cannot goe thus this winter they will ... be spoiled with cold".

The sources clearly indicate the involvement of the parish authorities at the critical initial moments of young children's lives, even before they can be placed into what might be seen as surrogate household groups. Foundlings are regularly rescued – in Aldgate named after the street, yard or alley they were found in (e.g. Elizabeth Lion), or less frequently 'Dowsabella Portsoken' after the ward; in the Cheapside parishes, often named for the parish or again the street (e.g. Elizabeth Trump, Trump Alley AHHL) – and in Cheapside they were more likely to be laid at the door of a named individual than in Aldgate, although it seems that the small parish churchyards were also frequently used. Many foundlings in St Mary le Bow are listed as "a chylde of ye people" in the parish registers.

Births in the street under the gaze of the public were surprisingly common, at least in Aldgate. These latter are interesting for the picture they provide of the parochial authorities attitude to births that took place outside of the respectability of the household. On the one hand they

were the target of moral opprobrium – “Abraham Haddocke the Reputed sonne of Israel Haddock, a Towle-taker in Harrow Alley, the Mother named [Blank] a Single woman who was delivered in the street, and like a Base Strumpet Ranne away and left hir Child behinde hir ... and the father of this Child also, who hath an honest wife of his owne, is Runne away from hir, like a base Varlet”. But on the other hand, the churchwardens’ poor accounts show that the individuals being assailed by the parish clerk were actually being financially supported by the parish in the upbringing of their children. In the Cheapside parishes similar events occur, but with less frequency, and usually with less detail provided about the individuals involved in such circumstances. One typical example from Cheapside is the baptism in St Mary le Bow of the “son of a woman crying out in the street”.

The moral commentary of Aldgate’s parish clerks in the early part of the 17th century, extensive and colourful as it is (and definitely worthy of a paper in its own right), underlies a particular role of the authorities (and certainly a vested interest) in the maintenance of the household unit at the centre of family life. In a less effusive manner the same is true in the Cheapside parishes. In both areas the location of births which take place outside of the house, be it in the street or in someone else’s household, have attention drawn to them in the records. The parish records perform a kind of monitoring function, drawing upon local knowledge of neighbourhoods and specific households, in order to reinforce the integrity of the domestic unit. This can sometimes involve a statement to the effect that the child was born in the house of a relative of the parents, often an in-law; but more often than not the reference is to the mother lodging or lying in the house of another with no clear relationship between them, and frequently there is a note of admonition in the record (especially in Aldgate). In 1618, for example, the parish clerk’s memorandum books records the baptism of “James Dabbes, the Reputed Sonne of one Robert Dabbes a Married man (and at this time in Newgate) the Mother named Hester Warner a Single-woman & a Strumpet, and was delivered of Child in the House of Widow Schetchley of Rosemarie lane”.

Similarly, spousal abandonment was evidently something of a concern to the parish authorities in Aldgate, deserving of financial support of the abandoned spouse and children from the churchwardens, and ignominy at the hands of the clerk. The example of Emma Bayart, who was buried at the parish’s expense in 1618, neatly encapsulates the reasons for this concern: “Hir late husband [identified as a carman of Rosemary Lane] was a base unthrifte which wasted away hir goodes and like a varlett Ranne away from hir, and left hir desolate”. The breakdown of the domestic unit, a worrying trend blamed by some contemporaries for many of London’s social ills in the period, is here elided with financial destitution – and a glance at the churchwardens’ accounts show that Bayart was a indeed burden on the parish for several years before her death. The failure of marriage, in essence the core foundation of the domestic unit, was opposed by London’s parochial authorities both on moral grounds, but also explicitly because the parish’s intervention was expensive.

And nowhere was this expense more evident than when it came to the care of the sick and the dying. In the early run of Aldgate parish clerk memoranda books the precise costs of funerals are provided, down to the expenses for knells, bearers, cloths, coffins and other paraphernalia. Those instances in which the parish received no fees, or where the funeral was otherwise conducted at the parish's expense, receive particularly pointed marginalia (pointed hands etc., the odd reference to "nihil in a bagge").

But this was not the limit of the parish's interest in the forms of death and burial and the role played in them (or lack thereof) by the household. Both Cheapside and Aldgate record in meticulous detail occasions where individuals die away from their house and their household, perhaps in order to ascertain the 'appropriateness' of the circumstances in much the same way as for births. These situations take a number of forms, some of which provide fascinating insights into how Londoners lived in the period.

Individuals who died in the houses of physicians or surgeons, and those who were sick with plague and carried to, or lodged in the houses of others; or who were explicitly put out of the household and taken to garden houses in the suburbs, are listed with special attention in the parish records of both areas. Indeed in Aldgate the garden houses seem to have been particularly attractive to householders all across the City centre who wished to remove dying servants from their own properties: in the 1593 outbreak, for example, a very significant proportion of the Aldgate plague dead met their ends in garden houses, and most of them were not Aldgate parishioners. Interestingly there seems to have been a roaring trade in renting space in garden houses, and the parish registers record time and again the same garden house owners (a number of them Dutch) accommodating numerous plague victims one after the other, often from the same originating household.

Individuals, parishioners and strangers alike, who were taken ill in the streets of Aldgate were ushered into the households of the parish by the constables and churchwardens, and in the case of plague, often with fatal consequences to the hosting household. It is difficult to determine whether the households chosen to perform this role were allocated on an ad hoc basis, or whether the same kind of semi-formal arrangements were in place (as was the case with the nursing of infants and care of parish children). Certainly the parish paid such householders for the care of the sick, often considerable sums of money where professional medical care had been obtained.

In Cheapside, some of the wealthier inhabitants moved their entire households to second homes in the country during periods of epidemic disease, or spent the summer months outside of the city altogether in order to escape its heat and its smell. Other householders from the area also clearly sent their children to nurse outside of London, thus removing them

from the crowded and less healthy environment of metropolitan life. Rather ironically, perhaps, the same factors also brought a constant stream of individuals to Aldgate, such as the bachelor from within the city walls who went to lodge in a form of hospice in Covent Garden 'in hope to recover his health by changing the air'. Stow, too, refers to 'the sweet and wholesome air' of the area, though it seemingly did little for our bachelor who died nonetheless.⁷ Indeed, we have seen that the parish clerks had a contrasting view of the environment of the parish and that children were sent to households away from the area, presumably to the benefit of their health.

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Our initial investigations, and very tentative understanding of the issues, suggest that the parish authorities' intervention into the lives of individuals whose household group had failed them were designed to shore up the socially cohesive function of the domestic group within their areas. This is a line of inquiry that will be pursued in future work, particularly in the parish of St Botolph Aldgate. However it also seems to have been the case that the 'ideal' of the household aspired to by the parish was firmly situated on the house, which partially explains the spectacular detail provided in the sources about the movement of people between houses, and between the street and houses. Indeed in Aldgate at least, this impression is reinforced in one of the few occasions where the parish clerk has anything approaching good to say about someone, where he records the burial of a 68 year old victim of consumption, Mrs Susanne Hamour Widow. A resident of the parish of All Hallows in Bread street, she was buried "in the North Chauncell of [St Botolph Aldgate] (amongst hir Auncestors) the xxvjth day of February Anno Domini 1616. Shee was daughter to Robert Owen Gunn-founder Sometimes of Houndsditch in our parish, and hir dead Corpes brought to the same house where she was borne, and out of it Maried, and now Buried." The centrality of the household, in this instance concretised by the house, in the *successful* managing of the lifecycle is here held up as the model to be observed.

The inter-relationship between of health, housing and environment seem to form a nexus in just this issue of the failure of the household to support the individual at moments of crisis, and it is through the intervention of parish authorities that we can obtain the detail of these moments in the lifecycle. We have principally focussed on two such moments at the beginning and end of the lifecycle: we could equally have considered other less critical moments: where the parish pays for lodgings; where households are kept together by the payment of rent and the provision of food, clothing and fuel; where dependents are supported temporarily due to the incapacitation or incarceration of the breadwinner and so on. In our work in previous research projects at the CMH we've arrived at a detailed understanding of the structural characteristics of the domestic unit Aldgate and the Cheapside parishes, but

⁷ DK paper, 18, 26, 31.

this work will hopefully allow us to garner a much better idea of the causes and effects of the fragmentation or failure of the household; and in turn this should provide us with a clearer picture of the decisions (and their consequences) made by people as they lived their lives in early modern London.