

OCCUPATIONS, MIGRATION AND LITERACY
IN EAST LONDON, 1580-1640

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The depositions of witnesses in ecclesiastical court cases are among the most valuable but least exploited sources for social history. They illustrate the activities of the church courts and illuminate such matters as probate disputes, tithing customs, vestry affairs, and questions of moral behaviour and attitudes. Local historians could profit from the study of the depositions in specific cases. Statements of witnesses are often recorded verbatim and the details they include are often unobtainable elsewhere.

The immediate value lies in the biographical particulars of deponents accompanying their statements. At best the court recorded the name, sex, marital status, occupation or social status, age, place and duration of residence, place of birth, and parishes and lengths of intervening residences, of each witness. Having given his testimony the witness was required to sign his name or make a mark. This is a formidable range of information. It can be used for a study of literacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and literacy can be correlated with status and occupation, age, area and mobility. The information from the depositions can be used to supplement other information about the occupational structure of a region or community. Studies can be made of migration, showing the areas of origin and distance travelled and the ages of the migrants. (1)

The survival and quality of these records is erratic. The depositions in bishop's consistory courts are often better preserved than those of archdeaconries. This article uses the depositions of the consistory and commissary courts of the Diocese of London between 1580 and 1640 to illustrate the kind of information this source can yield.

Particular attention is paid to deponents dwelling in the East London parishes of Stepney and Whitechapel for comparison with the analysis of the Stepney parish registers reported on in L.P.S. 3.(2).

The information in the London depositions is less full in the later

seventeenth century than it had been before the civil war. Details of previous residence and place of birth are much less common in the later records. For most of the Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods the depositions of the consistory court of London, while surviving in bulk, are classified by their keepers, the Greater London Record Office, as unfit for production. They will eventually be repaired but for present purposes they must be regarded as unavailable. The deposition books and similar examination books of the commissary court of London are in the Guildhall Library and can be easily consulted. The consistory depositions used in this study run from 1578-80, 1613-17, and 1620-39. ⁽³⁾ The commissary books at Guildhall library run from 1581-1603 and 1609-39. ⁽⁴⁾ It will be seen that the most serious lacunae are in the very period of the Stepney aggregative analysis, 1606-10. Nevertheless it is possible to describe some of the characteristics of the witnesses from the east London suburbs between 1580 and 1640.

The diocese of London included Essex and parts of Hertfordshire as well as Middlesex and the City of London. But by far the bulk of cases coming before the consistory and commissary courts concerned offenders and witnesses from the city and its suburbs. In the period 1580 to 1639 the available books contain the statements of some 7,000 witnesses, 37% of whom were women. A systematic sample was drawn of 1,563 men. ⁽⁵⁾ 231 or 14%, were of the gentle, clerical and professional classes. These men were invariably literate and since my initial interest was in literacy I noted the minimum amount of information about them. However, the depositions themselves are as generous in their information about the upper classes as they are about the working people with whom I am mainly concerned. Of the remaining 1,332 men 108, or 8%, were inhabitants of the adjacent parishes of Whitechapel and Stepney, 68 were from Stepney and 40 from Whitechapel.

This study is therefore based on a sample of 108 working men living in Stepney and Whitechapel between 1580 and 1639 who were called as witnesses before the church courts. Up to 1609 I have examined all of the available depositions. Between 1609 and 1639 I sampled between 1:2 and 1:6 of the depositions, depending on the quantity available in each period. This was to ensure an approximately equal distribution over the sixty years.

Men called as witnesses were not necessarily a random sample of the community. In a riverside community such as Stepney a sizeable proportion of the working population might not be available or

qualified to testify in cases concerning tithing customs or other inland affairs. In his study of Sussex depositions Cornwall suggested that the evidence of 'persons of substance was preferred' but the depositions of the Diocese of London are not so heavily biased towards the upper classes. (6)

The depositions gave the occupations of all the men in the sample. They are classified in table 1 using the categories devised by the East London Population Study Group for their discussion of occupations in the baptism register. The upper class of gentlemen, clergy and professionals, called 'middle class' by the East London Group is not covered in this study. The percentage analysis of occupations from the register has accordingly been adjusted to allow a direct comparison to be made.

Agricultural occupations include 4 yeoman and 3 husbandmen, all from Stepney where there was perhaps more space for farming. River and sea trades, the dominant group in the parish register analysis, make only 18% of the total. A similar figure is obtained if the inland parish of Whitechapel is excluded. Land crafts dominate the occupational structure as indicated by the depositions. Tailors alone make 15% of the total, and appear as often as sailors and mariners. The evidence of the parish registers as regards occupation is probably more reliable than that of the depositions. A mariner does not have to be present for his occupation to be recorded in the register of baptisms. The element of randomness is more likely when selection is by involvement in a vital event than by suitability as a witness. When occupations are recorded in the parish registers they provide a check on the information from the depositions. Depositions are not sensitive or comprehensive enough to make an occupational census, but they do give a rough indication of the distribution of trades and status in an area. Apart from the reversed positions of the land and water trades, affected by the time the latter group would have to spend away from the parish, the analyses of depositions and the baptism register agree on the proportions in different occupations.

The depositions are more valuable for a study of migration. The evidence of those sampled contradicts the frail evidence regarding migration that can be extracted from the parish register. The analysis by the East London Group appears to confuse immigrants with strangers. Only 84 of the 2,620 burial entries, 3.2%, give the geographical origins of the deceased. 51% of these are from London and its suburbs, 20% from the Home counties, 11% from distant counties and 17% aliens. These are clearly strangers or very recent

TABLE 1

Occupations of deponents in Whitechapel and Stepney, 1580-1639

| Occupational Category | Whitechapel and Stepney Deponents | | Stepney only Deponents Baptism ¹ Register | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|---|------------|
| | No. | % | % | % |
| Agricultural | 7 | 6 | 10 | 4 |
| River and Sea | 19 | 18 | 19 | 47 |
| Shipbuilding | 4 | 4 | 4 | 10 |
| Land crafts | 55 | 51 | 44 | 21 |
| Provisioners | 10 | 9 | 7 | 9 |
| Miscellaneous | 13 | 12 | 15 | 9 |
| TOTAL | <u>108</u> | <u>100</u> | <u>99</u> | <u>100</u> |

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent

1. These percentages have been adjusted to exclude the "middle-class" occupations which were omitted from the study of the depositions.

arrivals who happened to die in Stepney. A true immigrant would be described as an inhabitant of the parish, not an inhabitant of his place of origin.⁽⁷⁾ 71% are described as originating in London or the home counties. The contention that 'the majority of immigrants did not move far from their original home to settle in Stepney' is seemingly confirmed by the nearness of the Stepney marriage horizons. 93% of the strangers marrying came from the capital and home counties.⁽⁸⁾

A distinction has first to be drawn between place of origin i.e. place of birth, and place of previous residence. A London man retiring to Stepney to die, or coming to marry a Stepney girl, may himself be an immigrant to London from a distant county. The depositions give the place of birth of 104 of the 108 men sampled and intervening residences for 19. Thirteen of these had lived for a while in London, for an average duration of 7.6 years, before moving on to Stepney or Whitechapel. Only nine of the men sampled were still living in their parish of birth. If long residence and local standing were qualities sought for in deponents, as Cornwall suggests, a higher proportion of men born and bred locally might be expected. The phenomena of high mortality and massive immigration might in fact leave little parish memory to draw on in London and the suburbs. 89% of the deponents in the sample had been born in other parishes and parts of the country.

Table 2 shows the places of origin of the 104 inhabitants of Stepney and Whitechapel sampled 1580-1639. Only 14, including the 9 still in their birthplace, were born in London, the suburbs and other parts of Middlesex. The others came from all parts of the country, surprisingly few from the home counties. London and its eastern suburbs evidently attracted immigrants from a wide area and long distances. Only Devonshire stands out as a county of frequent emigration, possibly a result of its maritime connections with the Thames. The analysis of the burial registers suggested that only 11% came from the counties more than 50 miles from London. The pattern of migration revealed in the depositions shows 69% to come from those counties.

The information with the depositions includes the age and length of residence of the deponents. Their ages ranged from 19 to 87 but the median age was 41.4 and the inter quartile range from 30.8 to 52.7. Most were therefore mature men. Nearly all were immigrants and many only recently established in Stepney or Whitechapel. Of those who were immigrants, 30% had lived in the parish for less than 5 years and 48% for less than 10 years. The median length of residence of the immigrants in the sample was 11.4 years, and their median age of arrival in Stepney or Whitechapel was 26.9.

My original interest in the depositions was as a source for the study of literacy. This sample of 108 men is not large enough to show the movement of literacy over the period. It does make possible an estimate of the proportion of working men in the east London suburbs in the period 1580 to 1639 who were incapable of signing their own name.⁽⁹⁾ 53% of the men in the sample made marks instead of

TABLE 2

Place of birth of deponents in Stepney and Whitechapel 1580-1639

| | No. | % | | No. | % |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----------------------|-----|-----|
| London & home counties | | 26% | West central counties | | 18% |
| Stepney and Whitechapel | 9 | | Gloucestershire | 2 | |
| other Middlesex | 2 | | Oxfordshire | 2 | |
| City of London | 3 | | Buckinghamshire | - | |
| Surrey | 1 | | Herefordshire | 1 | |
| Kent | 3 | | Worcestershire | 1 | |
| Essex | 5 | | Warwickshire | 6 | |
| Hertfordshire | 4 | | Shropshire | 3 | |
| | | | Staffordshire | 1 | |
| South & Southwest counties | | 22% | Cheshire | 2 | |
| Cornwall | 1 | | Derbyshire | 1 | |
| Devon | 10 | | | | |
| Dorset | 4 | | Northern counties | | 10% |
| Somerset | 3 | | Yorkshire | 2 | |
| Wiltshire | - | | Lancashire | 3 | |
| Berkshire | 1 | | Westmorland | - | |
| Hampshire | 2 | | Cumberland | 2 | |
| Sussex | 2 | | Durham | 1 | |
| | | | Northumberland | 2 | |
| East central counties | | 19% | | | |
| Norfolk | 3 | | Other places | | 5% |
| Suffolk | 3 | | Wales | 1 | |
| Cabridgeshire | 4 | | Ireland | 2 | |
| Huntingdonshire | - | | Germany | 1 | |
| Bedfordshire | 3 | | 'abroad' | 1 | |
| Northamptonshire | 1 | | | | |
| Rutland | - | | | | |
| Leicestershire | 1 | | TOTAL | 104 | |
| Lincolnshire | 4 | | | | |
| Nottinghamshire | 1 | | | | |

signatures at the end of their depositions. If the few yeoman and husbandmen and servants and labourers are removed there remain 94 traders and artisans whose literacy can be compared to that of similar groups in the same period in other parts of the country. I have found 50% of the traders and artisans of Middlesex and the suburbs, including Stepney and Whitechapel, to be illiterate. This compares closely with 52% in the two parishes under consideration and 51% in Norfolk and Suffolk. This last figure is obtained by analysis of the deposition books of the Diocese of Norwich.

The great contrast is with the literacy of tradesmen and artisans in the city of London. Only 24% from a sample of 590 men made marks instead of signatures. The superior literacy of the City, which should be the subject for much discussion, probably reflects the preponderance there of trading and craft activities which required literacy.

I have tried to illustrate some of the problems and possibilities in using the depositions in social history. They are a relatively untapped source yet not difficult to use. The light they throw on the character of east London in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is only hinted at in the above account. It is fortunate that the parish register of Stepney gives the occupations of fathers in baptisms. For most parishes this information is not readily obtainable and the depositions may provide a stage towards its reconstruction. The information about geographical mobility corrects the misleading impressions given by the registers. Immigration is seen to be on a large scale and over long distances. No Protestation Return for 1641, or similar signed declaration, is known to survive for Stepney or Whitechapel so the impression from the depositions that half the men possessed some basic literacy cannot be checked. The possession of this level of literacy, the remarkable experience of geographical mobility, and the stimulating proximity of London and the river suggest that Stepney and Whitechapel may have been exceptionally open-minded communities by the beginning of the civil war.

NOTES

1. see Julian Cornwall, 'Evidence of Population Mobility in the Seventeenth Century', Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, 1967, vol. 40, p. 143-152. He uses a printed edition of Sussex archdeaconry depositions, 1580-1640.

2. The East London Population Study Group, 'The Population of Stepney in the Early Seventeenth Century', Local Population Studies No. 3, Autumn 1969, pp. 39-52.
3. GLRO DL/C/222, 223, 224, 227-235, Acc. 69.88.
4. Guildhall Library Ms.9585, 9065A, 9189.
5. Sampling technique was employed to reduce the mass of documents to manageable proportions. Safeguards were taken to ensure that as near as possible every deposition had an equal chance of being selected.
6. Cornwall, Bull. Inst. Hist. Res., p.143.
7. Unless the parish clerk were unusually mindful of poor law considerations and recorded the deceased's place of settlement, which might be elsewhere, rather than place of residence.
8. East London Group, Local Population Studies, No. 3, pp. 47, 49.
9. For the interpretation of signatures and marks and the sources which can be used see R.S. Schofield, 'The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England' in Literacy in Traditional Societies, Jack Goody (ed.). (Cambridge, 1968).
10. For a discussion of mobility and the proximity of London in shaping attitudes, see E.A. Wrigley 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy 1650-1750', Past and Present No. 37 (July, 1967), pp. 44-70.