

# Family size and expectations about housing in the later nineteenth century: three Yorkshire towns

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## Abstract

This article illustrates how cultural history can deepen the understanding of demographic change, presenting evidence about ways in which rising working-class expectations about appropriate living standards may have created additional pressures on the costs of child-rearing. Among the key areas of family consumption, housing costs are selected for examination. It is shown that higher expectations about appropriate housing quality put pressure on family budgets, augmented by the rising cost of like-for-like housing. The discussion considers expectations about the size of the dwelling and attitudes to furnishing the home, and suggests that these rising expectations helped encourage family limitation. Existing accounts of the fertility decline which stress the role of rising expectations are often too generalised: this article illustrates what can be gained by adding detail and geographical variation.

## Introduction

The Middlesbrough-based *Northern Weekly Gazette* wrote in 1905 that large families were trapped in the 'slums' because 'many property owners will not let their houses to people having more than one or two children. Woe betide, then, the poor man who has a large family and is desirous of bringing the children up in decent surroundings.'<sup>1</sup> This article suggests that working-class expectations about the appropriate standard of living grew in the later nineteenth century, and that this desire for a higher living standard contributed to decisions to limit family size. Expectations grew in many fields, but, to illustrate the evidence available, this article focuses on housing. A smaller family made a higher quality of housing affordable, whether by reducing overcrowding in dwellings like those used in previous generations or, as in the *Gazette*'s example, by permitting moves to better quality ones. Housing was a significant element of the working-class cost of living, about a sixth according to the Board of Trade in 1904, and so if the costs of higher expectations affected fertility, this should have left some housing evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The towns studied were Bradford, Leeds and Middlesbrough. This selection allows the comparison of a textile town, a metal industry one and a more varied economy. This was desirable since Garrett and others, as discussed below, link fertility firmly with place.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Middlesbrough Central Library (hereafter MCL), *Northern Weekly Gazette*, 23 September 1905.

<sup>2</sup> A. Thatcher, ed., *British labour statistics: historical abstract 1868-1968* (London, 1971), table 88.

<sup>3</sup> Garrett *et al*, *Changing family size in England and Wales: place, class and demography, 1891-1911* (Cambridge, 2001), 409.

selection was made for a wider project focussed on the urban working class: other communities with different characteristics would no doubt reveal further patterns. Bradford was the national centre of the woollen worsted industry; Middlesbrough was dominated by the iron, steel and shipbuilding industries, while Leeds had a stronger and more diverse economy, combining a role as a commercial centre with diverse manufacturing. The comparison of three towns adds analytical depth, making it possible to distinguish between trends which were widespread and those relating to a single community. The main primary sources for the study of expectations are, necessarily, the expressions of individual views in autobiography, oral history, and the cheap local press. While any individual source may be unrepresentative, the results presented here are drawn from 57 oral history transcripts, 12 autobiographies and the detailed sampling of 12 local newspapers.

The literature on the causes of declining fertility has offered explanations of three types.<sup>4</sup> The first, adopted here, emphasises desired family size. Recent research has often discussed this by reference to the perceived relative costs of childrearing. This argument is that women and men may start to limit family size if they believe that the costs of childrearing have risen, or the benefits have fallen. Costs and benefits should not be viewed in narrow monetary terms but could include time demands or status.<sup>5</sup> The suggestion is not that nineteenth-century couples adopted target family sizes, but simply that they sought to limit family size in a less calculated way.<sup>6</sup> Banks' study of middle-class family limitation falls into this category, arguing that smaller families resulted from the rising cost of goods which demonstrated status.<sup>7</sup> The second category of explanations involves changes in natural fecundity, and has not been put forward in relation to late nineteenth-century Europe, where fertility declined while general health and presumably fecundity were improving. The third category invokes changes in the costs of birth control, again interpreting costs in a broad sense including cultural acceptability. While writers such as Coale took this view, arguing that birth control was not acceptable before the nineteenth century, it has become common to see more

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<sup>4</sup> G. Alter, 'Theories of fertility decline: a non-specialist's guide to the current debate', in J. Gillis, L. Tilly and D. Levine, eds, *The European experience of declining fertility, 1850-1970* (Oxford, 1992), 14-27.

<sup>5</sup> S. Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge, 1996), 445.

<sup>6</sup> K. Fisher, *Birth control, sex and marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006), 77.

<sup>7</sup> J. Banks, *Prosperity and parenthood* (London, 1954).

continuity in attitudes, with contraception by withdrawal, abstinence or abortion available over long periods, and being brought into more use when desired family size decreased.<sup>8</sup>

Ever more sophisticated analyses of the demographic data continue to give new insight into the relationships between fertility and other variables such as class and place. Woods' most recent survey, like other recent work, emphasises the importance of nuance and complexity, rejecting a master narrative which imposes over-simple explanations on the complex phenomenon of the fertility decline.<sup>9</sup> Woods' particular contribution here is the use of 'compositional demography', finding the best geographical subdivisions to explore fertility and asking how much fertility change was produced by changes in the proportions of people belonging to groups with particular demographic characteristics such as later marriage or lower fertility.

Garrett *et al*, in *Changing Family Size in England and Wales*, develop their earlier findings such as the importance of the 'communication community' as a unit of analysis of the influences on fertility.<sup>10</sup> They take compositional demography as one of their starting points and argue that place mattered more than class, so that local cultures producing one pattern of fertility could be shared across class divisions.<sup>11</sup> The compositional approach is not the whole answer, however, and they add a discussion of cultural change over time.<sup>12</sup> Such an emphasis on the cultures of different communities suggests that research which explores these cultures for their impact on fertility behaviour will become an increasingly important approach to the study of the fertility decline.<sup>13</sup> Woods, Garrett and her colleagues agree that it is necessary to move beyond social science history, which asks modern questions of historical data, into cultural history, which examines the motivations of people of the past in the language they themselves used. In Woods' words, scholars must 'think beyond the bounds set by disciplines

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<sup>8</sup> A. Coale, 'The demographic transition reconsidered', in International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, eds, *International Population Conference* (Liège, 1973), 65; A. McLaren, *A history of contraception from antiquity to the present day* (Oxford, 1990), 141-177; Garrett *et al*, *Changing family size*, 431.

<sup>9</sup> R. Woods, *The demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2000), 401-2; the view is shared by D. Levine, 'Moments in time: a historian's context of declining fertility' in Gillis, Tilly and Levine, eds, *The European experience*, 326-338 (here at 329), and by Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 533-4.

<sup>10</sup> Garrett *et al*, *Changing family size*, 410-12; Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 546-58.

<sup>11</sup> Garrett *et al*, *Changing family size*, 409.

<sup>12</sup> Garrett *et al*, *Changing family size*, 412, 415-21.

<sup>13</sup> Gillis, Tilly and Levine, eds, *The European experience*, 3,8.

back into the minds of their ... Victorian ancestors.’<sup>14</sup> This distinction between a social science history or ‘positivist’ approach and a cultural history or ‘historicist’ one is usefully considered by Carus and Ogilvie, who describe a dialectic between the two in recent writing.<sup>15</sup>

Using the perceived relative costs of childrearing framework, this article describes rising expectations and suggests that they reduced family size. This is not an argument based on broad expectations of a rising standard of living due to economic growth, but a more specific one which claims two things: as a preliminary, that like-for-like housing costs rose, increasing the costs of childrearing in itself, and then that perceptions about the appropriate standard of housing also rose. This is similar to Scott’s account of inter-war owner-occupiers.<sup>16</sup> There are also similarities to Banks’ account of pressures on the middle classes, but rather than suggesting that their views simply diffused downwards, the article sets out particular working-class views about entitlements: how a family should live. Some of these were based on parents wanting children to have a better standard of living than they had done themselves in childhood.<sup>17</sup> They suggest a new working-class assertiveness not present in earlier periods, which contributed to the timing of the fertility decline.

The argument is developed in five stages. After a discussion of fertility trends in the three towns, there is a discussion of the rising like-for-like cost of housing, and of rising expectations about appropriate housing quality. The latter point is developed in the following section, which looks in more detail at expectations about the size of the dwelling. The next section shows how expectations about appropriate furnishings also increased, while the concluding discussion considers the impact of these rising expectations on attitudes to family size.

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<sup>14</sup> R. Woods, 'The population of Britain in the nineteenth century', in M. Anderson, ed., *British population history from the Black Death to the present day*, (Cambridge, 1996), 287-342. Here at 342; the point is also made by Garrett *et al*, *Changing family size*, 436.

<sup>15</sup> A. Carus and S. Ogilvie, ‘Turning qualitative into quantitative evidence: a well-used method made explicit’, *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009), 893-925.

<sup>16</sup> P. Scott, 'Did owner-occupation lead to smaller families for interwar working-class households?', *Economic History Review*, 61 (2008), 99-124.

<sup>17</sup> J. Humphries, “‘Because they are too menny’”: children, mothers and fertility decline – the evidence from working-class autobiographies’, in Angelique Janssens, ed., *Gendering the fertility decline in the western world* (Bern, 2007), 146.

## Fertility

Tables 1 and 2 present data on fertility. The crude birth rates in Table 1 require discussion. These show births in the Registration District per thousand population: the problem with this measure is that it takes no account of possible variation in the age and sex structure of the population: these compositional effects, rather than changes in fertility behaviour, could account for changes in the birth rate. In this case, age structure variation does not explain any of the variation in fertility. The proportion of females who were of fertile age was highest in Bradford, and rose gradually during the period, yet Bradford's fertility rates were lowest, and fertility declined in all the towns. Table 3 provides data. While sex structure could have played a part, with a higher male-to-female ratio in Middlesbrough at reproductive ages, raising a woman's chances of marrying, this was a factor which T. H. C. Stevenson allowed for in the well-known 1911 Fertility of Marriage survey. After he had standardised for age at marriage and duration of marriage, he estimated births per couple of continuing fertility to be 2.31 in Bradford, 2.68 in Leeds and 3.07 in Middlesbrough.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1: Annual birth rates, Bradford, Leeds and Middlesbrough, 1861-1901**

	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
<b>Bradford</b>	37.3	41.0	32.8	27.6	23.1
<b>Leeds</b>	38.9	39.1	35.8	33.1	28.4
<b>Middlesbrough</b>			41.4	38.9	36.5
<b>England</b>	34.6	35.1	33.9	31.4	28.5

Source: Birth counts and Registration District (RD) populations from annual reports of the Registrar-General, for individual years. Middlesbrough did not have its own RD until 1876.

**Table 2: child-to-woman ratios, Bradford, Leeds and Middlesbrough, 1861-1901**

	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
<b>Bradford</b>	0.88	0.91	0.94	0.81	0.68
<b>Leeds</b>	1.02	1.08	1.13	0.95	0.84
<b>Middlesbrough</b>	n.a.	1.39	1.36	1.19	1.06

Definition: number of children aged 0-10 per woman aged 15-45.

Source: calculated from Census reports on Borough/Sanitary District basis.

<sup>18</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1911: Vol. XIII: *Fertility of Marriage, Part II* (London, 1923), cxxiii and cxxx-cxxxii.

**Table 3: proportion of the female population of Bradford, Leeds and Middlesbrough aged 15-45 in 1871 and 1901.**

	Percentage of female population aged 15-45	
	1871	1901
<b>Bradford</b>	50.6	52.5
<b>Leeds</b>	47.2	50.7
<b>Middlesbrough</b>	45.3	48.0

Sources: *Census of England and Wales, 1871: Vol. III*, Parliamentary Papers (1873), LXXI, 458; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1901, County of York*, Parliamentary Papers (1902), CXXI, 234, 240, 246.

A simple check on the Census data to uncover the impact of age and sex structure is to calculate the ratio of children to women of fertile age, as in Table 2. This uses children as a proxy measure for births: not a perfect one due to child migration and infant mortality, but an adequate one since it is known that migration of under-tens away from family homes was small by this time, and infant mortality was in fact higher in Middlesbrough than the other towns, so does not account for larger families there.<sup>19</sup> The results show the same differences between towns, and the same trend, as the crude birth rates of Table 1.

There was, in short, a genuine difference in marital fertility between the three towns, as well as a genuine decline over time. Bradford's fertility was lowest and declined most. Middlesbrough's fertility rates were the highest of the three. Leeds' fertility decline took a middle course between the other towns'.

### **The price and quality of housing**

Even if expectations had remained constant, rising rents ensured that meeting them would have cost more in money terms. The growing political antagonism between landlords and

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<sup>19</sup> M. Anderson, 'the social implications of demographic change' in F. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge social history of Britain, 1750-1950* (Cambridge, 1990), 1-71. Here at 56-66; Thirty-ninth annual report of the Local Government Board, *Supplement on infant and child mortality*. BPP 1910 XXXIX, 105, 112.

tenants suggests that this ‘money illusion’, rather than any awareness of falling real rents (as real incomes rose), was what coloured popular perceptions.<sup>20</sup>

By 1880 the cheapest sector of the housing market was well-represented in newspaper advertisements. For example, a rent collector advertised for tenants for ‘cottage houses’ in the poorest areas of Hunslet (South Leeds) from two shillings per week, although five or six shillings was a more typical working-class rent.<sup>21</sup> Similar rented accommodation was advertised in Bradford and Middlesbrough. Lady Bell reported, in relation to the generation before 1907, that most working-class rents in Middlesbrough were between four and five shillings.<sup>22</sup>

Significant growth in rents during the later nineteenth century reflected the way demand (a growing population with, as discussed here, higher expectations) was outstripping supply. Gregory Clark notes a 70 percent rise in rents between the 1850s and the 1900s, with most growth in the 1870s and 1880s, while H. W. Singer’s index of urban house-rents in England and Wales rose by 80 per cent between 1845 and 1910.<sup>23</sup> Beresford’s work on back-to-back houses in Leeds shows that the lowest rents on both larger and smaller examples rose by 50 percent between the 1860s and 1908.<sup>24</sup>

Cost was not the only area of concern to a working-class household: quality was a further issue. Gregory Clark’s index of implied housing quality provides one perspective on this.<sup>25</sup> His index (based on a mainly southern sample but also including properties in County Durham, though none in the towns studied here), aimed to identify changes in the property itself, such as extensions, additional windows, and private toilets replacing shared privies, rather than environmental factors such as piped water. Clark did this by examining the ratio between a subset of his series where multiple records over time showed no change in quality

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<sup>20</sup> B. Short, *The geography of England and Wales in 1910: An evaluation of Lloyd George’s ‘Domesday’ of land ownership* (Bristol, 1989), 5-8; M. Daunton, *House and home in the Victorian city: working-class housing 1850-1914* (London, 1983), 124-7.

<sup>21</sup> Leeds Central Library (hereafter LCL), *Leeds Express*, 10 July 1880.

<sup>22</sup> F. Bell, *At the works: a study of a manufacturing town* (London, 1985), 67.

<sup>23</sup> G. Clark, ‘Shelter from the storm: housing and the industrial revolution, 1550-1909’, *The Journal of Economic History*, 62 (2002), 489-511. Here at 501; H. W. Singer, ‘An index of urban land rents and house rents in England and Wales, 1845-1913’, *Econometrica*, 9 (1941), 230.

<sup>24</sup> M. W. Beresford, ‘The back-to-back house in Leeds, 1837-1937’ in S. D. Chapman, ed., *The history of working-class housing* (Newton Abbot, 1971), 115-6.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, ‘Shelter from the storm’, 501.

(his 'constant-quality rent index'), and the whole time-series.<sup>26</sup> From its base decade of the 1860s, with an index of 100, it wandered with no clear trend between values of 96 and 115, ending on 104, perhaps suggesting that any improvements from the low standards of mid-century were slow and uncertain. Unfortunately Clark's quality index shows few clear trends over his whole period from 1600-1909, and although this could be a valid finding, the weight of his reliance on an econometric approach, completely excluding descriptive sources, leaves doubts as to whether his results are artefact or insight.

The local evidence is that the housing features which Clark aimed to capture, such as exclusive use of a toilet and overall property size, did improve much more slowly than the connection to water services. Autobiographical sources give valuable insights into local expectations, and show how the housing stock lagged behind them. In Middlesbrough, Margaret Goldsborough recalled in an oral history interview how, around 1910-1914, the middens were emptied weekly at night, by scavengers: 'poor men, what a shame, .... you can have all y'telly, you can have all y'radiograms, all the best things going – they were the best that ever invented in this country, was a flush toilet. I think so.'<sup>27</sup>

Similar concerns affected Mary Gawthorpe in Leeds, who recalled with distaste having to walk up the street to the earth closets, later trough water closets, which seven Gawthorpes shared with another family.<sup>28</sup> A 1965 archive photograph shows both her house and, two doors up, the shared toilet building.<sup>29</sup> The attractiveness of piped water supply and water closets also emerges in small ads for rented homes in the cheap press, which drew attention to these services and asked higher rents in consequence. In Bradford, for example, a typical 1906 advertisement in the *Laisterdyke and Bowling News* offered 'through houses with water and water closet' for six shillings to six shillings and sixpence.<sup>30</sup>

Margaret Goldsborough's testimony also supports a wider point about Middlesbrough. The town's male-dominated culture, founded on the shared experience of sole breadwinners engaged in demanding, even dangerous, labour, mirrored that of the typical colliery town described in Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter's classic, *Coal is our life*.<sup>31</sup> Male values in

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<sup>26</sup> Clark, 'Shelter from the storm', 493, 502.

<sup>27</sup> Teesside Archives (hereafter TA), Recorded Memories collection (hereafter RM), record 74, 8. The oral history interviews cited took place in the 1980s.

<sup>28</sup> M. Gawthorpe, *Up hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, Maine, 1962), 5-16, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Leeds Library & Information Service, *Leodis – a photographic archive of Leeds* <URL: [www.Leodis.Net](http://www.Leodis.Net)> photograph no. 200362\_69622439 [5 November 2008].

<sup>30</sup> Bradford Central Library (hereafter BCL), *Laisterdyke and Bowling News* 25 May 1906.

<sup>31</sup> N. Dennis, F. Henriques, and C. Slaughter, *Coal is our life: an analysis of a Yorkshire mining community* (London, 1956).



such towns gave relatively less importance to home comforts and to wives' priorities, and more to male sociability, with more expenditure channelled towards the so-called 'male vices'.<sup>32</sup> Middlesbrough's alcohol consumption was prodigious: arrests for drunkenness in Middlesbrough around 1860 ran at almost five times the national average.<sup>33</sup> Goldsborough's father, a skilled worker at Head Wrightson's Foundry, continued to choose as late as 1914 not to spend his wages on renting a house with its own water closet. Although 'male vices' did not necessarily figure among his priorities, placing modern sanitation so low on the list had by then become unusual among those on similar incomes in Bradford.

The arrival of piped water and water closets in working class homes was greeted with a mixture of relief about the effect on hygiene and anxiety about the cost. This anxiety could have produced a rise in the perceived costs of childrearing. The connection between infant mortality and sanitation, much stressed in this period, put more pressure on families than on others to comply with rising sanitary standards.<sup>34</sup> Although everyone, including the childless, had to have the new drains, a family (or a newly married couple) choosing a rented home felt more pressure from relatives and friends to select one with good drains than a widow or bachelor was. By the 1880s, in most working-class parts of Leeds and Bradford, having a family meant paying the higher rent and rates for a home with mains sanitation. This was not equally true of Middlesbrough. The 'rougher' culture in which men like Mr Goldsborough neglected both home comforts and wives' opinions about family life, including family size, included neglect for wives' concerns about better sanitation. The gender contrast in priorities is brought out by a petition to Middlesbrough Corporation to provide proper drainage for Bank Street (in the Newport district of the town), all of whose 50 signatories were mothers. 'Seeing that fever is so prevalent we feel very anxious about the health of our young families', they wrote.<sup>35</sup> The document is not dated, but comparison of the signatories' names with rating books places it in 1876.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The world of goods: towards an anthropology of consumption* (London, 1979, 1996), 123-6.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, 'Melbourne, Middlesbrough and morality: policing Victorian "new towns" in the Old World and the New', *Social History*, 31 (2006), 15-38. Here at 33.

<sup>34</sup> For a very early local example, see TA, U/S/446: *Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the sewerage, drainage and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the Borough of Middlesbrough ... by W. Ranger, Esq.* (1854), 27-28.

<sup>35</sup> TA, CB/M/C 5/6/6.

<sup>36</sup> TA, Linthorpe Rate Books, 1871-1886.

There was a boom in local authority investment in sewers and piped water supply to each home between 1890 and 1910, noted by Bell and Millward.<sup>37</sup> Its exact timing varied, but Leeds extended its water services beyond the town centre relatively early. In 1872, the Leeds education campaigner Catherine Buckton was distributing handbills in Holbeck on the dangers of badly designed drains.<sup>38</sup> By the end of her lecturing career in 1885 she was able to rejoice that ‘the Corporation ... carry a constant supply of excellent water at a small rate [about ten shillings per year for a modest terraced house] into every dwelling in the borough.’<sup>39</sup> One must question how much her audiences could do about her sanitary advice in the short-term, but over a lifetime, which normally witnessed removal to a new address several times over, it was more possible for them to realise her 1885 hope that ‘the people ... will demand model dwellings, and also those sanitary reforms which ignorant corporations and thoughtless masters and mistresses now withhold from them.’<sup>40</sup> The steady drip of Buckton’s advice into adult lecture audiences, the buyers of her books, and elementary school children, helped build up the expectation of better homes, and the sense of an entitlement long denied, now to be reached for.

Like piped water and sewerage, the supply of domestic gas reached working-class districts mainly in the 1880s or later. Its chief contribution to home comfort was in lighting rather than cooking at this point, let alone heating, and it was expensive. The use of gas for cooking developed more slowly in Bradford and Leeds than many other places, with just 9 per cent of Bradford households and 18 per cent in Leeds having a cooker by 1914: in English towns further from cheap coal, rates of 30 to 60 per cent were typical.<sup>41</sup> The growth in connected households was fastest in Leeds during 1898-1900, by which time there were 840 miles of gas mains, compared to 660 in 1886.<sup>42</sup> Since gas was used mainly for lighting at first, its cost was almost entirely additional, since it substituted only for lamps and candles, and not for the

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<sup>37</sup> F. Bell and R. Millward, 'Public health expenditures and mortality in England and Wales, 1870-1914', *Continuity and Change*, 13 (1998), 221-49.

<sup>38</sup> C. Buckton, *Two winters' experience in giving lectures to my fellow townswomen of the working classes on physiology and hygiene* (Leeds, 1873), 15.

<sup>39</sup> Buckton, *Our dwellings, healthy and unhealthy: addressed to girls attending the Leeds Board Schools* (London, 1885), 84.

<sup>40</sup> Buckton, *Health in the house: twenty-five lectures of elementary physiology... delivered to the wives and children of working-men in Leeds and Saltaire* (London, 1876), preface to the sixth edition, xii.

<sup>41</sup> Daunton, *House and home*, 240.

<sup>42</sup> S. Bowden, R. Crawford, and G. Sykes, 'The Public Supply of Gas in Leeds, 1818-1949', in Chartres and Honeyman, eds, *Leeds city business* (Leeds, 1993), 80-111. Here at 85.

household's much more significant spending on coal, which accounted for a twelfth of a poorer working family's entire budget.<sup>43</sup> Connection to gas supplies, then, was an aspirational form of expenditure for a working-class household in the generation before the First World War.

More generally, connection to better utilities during this period was adding to the cost pressures faced by working-class families in securing a home – pressures which increased with the size of the dwelling (for example, water rates increased with rateable value), and constituted an incentive to smaller families.

### **Families' growing demands for space**

Overcrowding was an important concern for working-class families. In the 1860s they often endured both high room occupancy and high dwelling density. Depending on local building styles, this might be for example in 'back-to-back' accommodation or around enclosed courts where several dwellings used a courtyard, containing a midden, for access.<sup>44</sup> The new building of back-to-backs was banned in 1909, citing their unfitness for habitation, but large numbers remained in the housing stock, above all in Leeds.<sup>45</sup> Attitudes had changed, however, and families wanted more than the 'two-up, two-down'. Enhancements reflecting these higher aspirations included added sculleries at the back of a through house or in a cellar, and the conversion of attics to provide separate bedrooms for growing children.<sup>46</sup> An 1899 conference in Leeds illustrates one step along this road. Ben Turner told the conference that 'as one who has lived in a cellar dwelling and in a back-to-back house, and who now was in a through house, it was inhuman to expect any man who worked six days a week to live in any but the best through house a workman could possibly have.'<sup>47</sup> This perfectly illustrates the rising sense of entitlement, not only for the individual workman but also for his family: single men did not live in entire houses. To achieve this extra space per person, smaller families were an effective strategy.

For working-class families, the move to separate bedrooms was, like the struggle for better diets, a way of using rising real incomes to redress past hardships. The overcrowded homes in which the parents of the 1870s and 1880s had spent their childhood and teenage years, were disliked on grounds of health and modesty, particularly the sleeping arrangements. Many autobiographers describe these, often referring to modesty, for example mentioning rooms divided by sheets, undressing in the dark, and careful schemes about which children and

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<sup>43</sup> Thatcher, *British labour statistics*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Daunton, *House and home*, 42-45.

<sup>45</sup> A. Ely, 'Exhibition (Housing Design Awards)', *Architects' Journal* 226 (August 16 2007), 44-5.

<sup>46</sup> Daunton, *House and home*, 280-1; R. Hoggart, *A local habitation* (London, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, Bell Collection, DB16, case 19, 17.

adults, of which sex, were allowed to share a bed.<sup>48</sup> The kinds of selection occurring in oral history and autobiography mean that witnesses with stories of severe overcrowding are more likely to tell these, because they represent eye-catching contrasts with the present day, making them interesting to the audience. Those whose family had what was regarded as enough room will be less likely to mention this. Making allowance for this bias in the sources, some patterns still emerge.

Working-class parents' feeling that children should have their own beds grew stronger, more clearly in Bradford than Middlesbrough (less information was available for Leeds). In Bradford in the 1910s the Williamson family, though poor and run on patriarchal lines, with the five children standing at table for meals and getting what was left when father had taken his choice, still provided a young child with his own single bed although all seven of them had to fit in what he recalled as a 'two-room house'.<sup>49</sup> This comes to light because his mother responded to arguments with his hard-drinking father by renouncing the marital bed, taking the child's, and moving him in with father, where he had to 'keep perfectly still'.<sup>50</sup> Responding to these pressures to have more beds, large families who could afford to rent or buy houses with more rooms were doing so by the 1900s, as in the case of Mr Winn, a Bradford iron-moulder with ten children, married to the daughter of a master builder, whose son recalled growing up in a substantial home.<sup>51</sup> Those who could not afford to move somewhere larger continued to live in very overcrowded conditions, but now felt the stigma more, as the first group were effectively leaving them behind.<sup>52</sup> The account of one such family, for example, stresses the poverty of the Windhill and Dockfields districts of Shipley

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<sup>48</sup> All the available autobiography describing working-class life in the three towns, 1860-1920, was examined, whether published or in archive collections. A useful starting point is J. Burnett, D. Vincent and D. Mayall, eds, *The autobiography of the working class: an annotated critical bibliography* (Brighton, 1989). The autobiographies used in this study were, for Bradford: M. Newbery, *Reminiscences of a Bradford mill girl* (Bradford, 1980); Brunel University, Burnett Archive of Working-Class Autobiography (hereafter BU), E. Rignall, *All so long ago* (typescript: hereafter TS). For Leeds: Anonymous, *The unfortunate genius, by a factory girl* (Armley, 1852); BU, J. Armitage, *The twenty-three years, or the late way of life – and of living* (TS); BU, M. Denison, *Church bells and tram cars: a vicarage childhood* (TS); M. Gawthorpe, *Up hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, Maine, 1962); BU, E. Gill, *Diary* (TS); Hoggart, *Local habitation*; E. Sigsworth, *A respectable life: Leeds in the 1930s* (Beverley, 1995). For Middlesbrough: M. Flint et al, *Cannon Street: lest we forget* (Middlesbrough, 1993); BU, E. Ransom MS (untitled); N. Thompson, *At their departing: a childhood memoir* (London, 1987).

<sup>49</sup> It is unclear from the source whether this was two bedrooms or two rooms in total.

<sup>50</sup> BCL, *BHRU*, record A0110, 3-5.

<sup>51</sup> BCL, *BHRU*, record W0006, 3.

<sup>52</sup> BCL, *BHRU*, records A0129, A0145, A0163.

(near Bradford) in which they were obliged to live.<sup>53</sup> The stigma of overcrowding was one of the perceived costs of childrearing, and it was increasing.

In Middlesbrough, small homes were at least as common as in the other towns. Many were built speculatively during the successive booms of the 1840s, 1860s and early 1870s. Florence Bell began her account of the workmen's lives by deploring the rushed construction: '[no] time and space ... can be wasted on what is merely agreeable to the eye, or even sanitary ... day by day the little houses spring hurriedly into existence.'<sup>54</sup> Until the early 1900s nearly all were two-up, two-downs. Even when infant and child mortality left space in a house, economic pressures encouraged the mother to fill it with a lodger, of which there were many in the town. For example Elizabeth Bell (no relation of Florence), who lost three of her four siblings, grew up in such a household.<sup>55</sup> Similarly Mrs Gilbert's mother, who managed to bring up seven children in the 1880s and 1890s, took in a lodger as well, despite the pressure of space, to make ends meet as a widow with a young family.<sup>56</sup> The demands of privacy meant that lodgers had to have their own rooms, even though space was scarce.<sup>57</sup> In small homes this involved difficult trade-offs between the household's goals of more space for each child and higher income.

It would be a mistake to see the respectable preservation of modesty within family homes as universal: the kind of household which neighbours looked down upon as 'rough' might take a more informal approach. It was still not an entirely carefree one, as the autobiography of Joseph Armitage of Hunslet, south Leeds indicates.<sup>58</sup> The son of a hard-drinking ex-miner, who by this time was working in Walter Scott's Hunslet steel works, and of a housekeeper/cook, Joseph grew up with a stepbrother in a downwardly mobile household who were evicted after complaints about drunken arguments, and forced to move to an area of Hunslet which he labelled (in hindsight from 1974) as a 'slum'. Describing the taking of baths in the kitchen, Armitage noted that women bathed when the males were out of the house, but men 'whenever necessary and no-one raised an eyebrow... inhibitions were not thick on the ground.'<sup>59</sup>

The desire for more room was not all about modesty: both old and new ideas about hygiene in the home taught that the fewer people sharing a given volume of air, the healthier they would be. This was believed both on the grounds of old fears that diseases were spread by miasmas, whose persistence Eric Sigsworth's memoir of a Leeds childhood confirms, and on

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<sup>53</sup> BCL, *BHRU*, record A0129, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Bell, *At the works*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> TA, RM, record 191, 8.

<sup>56</sup> TA, RM, record 125, 15.

<sup>57</sup> J. Burnett, *A social history of housing, 1815-1985* (London, 1986), 145.

<sup>58</sup> Armitage, *Twenty-three years*.

<sup>59</sup> Armitage, *Twenty-three years*, 4-23.

the strength of new scientific views.<sup>60</sup> As an example of the latter, Buckton wrote in a ‘course of instruction for elementary schools’ that ‘Professor Tyndal not long ago proved by a beautiful experiment that the air in crowded rooms was full of organic matter and living things which feed on it.’<sup>61</sup> Families wanted homes with more rooms, then, so that their children could grow up with more space, fresh air, and privacy than the parents had done. This search for space came up against Britain’s enduring shortage of affordable homes. More space could only be had at rents which were hard to afford: where there was no opportunity to find larger homes, smaller families meant more space per person.

There were also subtler pressures which signalled to working-class families that fewer children would mean better housing. By around 1900, there is evidence for the development of a dislike among landlords for renting to large families, as in the quotation from the *Northern Weekly Gazette* given above. Families with four or five children were the norm in 1870.<sup>62</sup> By 1914, though, witnesses to the National Birth Rate Commission claimed that landlords saw them as a source of potential trouble.<sup>63</sup> The *Northern Weekly Gazette* spread this view, helping to raise the perceived costs of childrearing by spreading anxiety about how landlords and other influential individuals would make life harder for a large family. The housing market thus signalled, indirectly as well as directly, that the wise and virtuous family should limit its fertility to fit the home it could afford.

### **Furnishing the home**

As for the size and quality of the home itself, so for its contents: by the 1890s, expectations about furnishing the home had increased, and would continue to do so. The desire to ‘restrict our family to our means’ expressed by some working-class women may have included a wish to limit family size so as to afford a more pleasant home and contents.<sup>64</sup> The meanings of goods in the home illustrate a family’s values. Demand for more beds and cupboards stemmed from the move towards more bedrooms and less sharing of beds discussed above. In the study towns, furniture retailers advertisements provide evidence for the growth in expectations. In 1890, advertisements mentioned furniture, fire irons, crockery, beds, chairs, engravings and clocks. In 1920, in addition to these items, a retailer such as Hardcastle’s of Armley (West Leeds) offered, for instance, carpets, stair carpets, linoleums, clothes horses and brasses. Hardcastle offered all of these items second-hand as well as new: he certainly

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<sup>60</sup> Sigsworth, *Respectable life*, 75-76.

<sup>61</sup> C. Buckton, *Food and Home Cookery* (London, 1879), 102.

<sup>62</sup> M. Anderson, ‘social implications’, 38.

<sup>63</sup> National Birth Rate Commission, *The declining birth-rate. Its causes and effects* (London, 1916), 51, 195-6, 199, 275, 283; Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 524.

<sup>64</sup> M. Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Maternity: letters from working women* (London, 1978), 115. This source is not confined to the three towns studied here and does not give the writers’ locations.

expected the less well-off to aspire to own them too.<sup>65</sup> The larger and more enterprising businesses might offer deals such as Robert Kidd of Middlesbrough's 'Working Man's Home Furnished for £10' or, in Bradford, the Great West Riding Furniture Company's 'Cottage House Furnished for £12 10s'.<sup>66</sup>

The collection of furniture and ornaments affected the front parlour, that quintessential institution of the working class in this period, even more than the crowded bedrooms. It was the one place where space was set aside, so possessions naturally accumulated there. Buckton remarked critically on the reservation of this room for seeing visitors and Sunday use, because this led to daily overcrowding in the 'back kitchen', but the institution was much too strong to yield to utilitarian arguments.<sup>67</sup> The respectability which the parlour demonstrated to visitors, for example impressing boyfriends and girlfriends of the family's teenage children with its high standards, was too important. Heating cost also helped keep the parlour under-used, at least in winter, and may have encouraged a preference for smaller homes even at the cost of overcrowding. By increasing overcrowding the reserved parlour may have contributed to the aspiration for smaller families.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, De Vries notes the arrival from the 1870s of the closed range, making more varied menus and cleaner kitchens possible: this was the aspiration of the fashion-conscious, although in Leeds Buckton, practical as usual, was still singing the praises of an ordinary cottage range with an open grate a decade later, provided it was fitted with, inevitably, an 'economiser', which 'saves coal, lessens dust and labour'.<sup>68</sup> The kitchen, too, then, was a scene of rising standards and growing pressures on families to spend. Early twentieth century middle-class commentators noticed the strength of working-class mothers' expectations, though often in dismissive language, Virginia Woolf criticising them for setting their sights on 'ovens and bathtubs', and Naomi Mitchison claiming that they wanted 'nice little home-nests, brick houses with every convenience for the housewife and home-lover'.<sup>69</sup> Such expectations were indeed growing, and to establish and maintain such a home was

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<sup>65</sup> MCL, *Daily Gazette*, 5 July 1890; LCL, *Armley and Wortley News*, 1 October 1920.

<sup>66</sup> MCL, *Daily Gazette*, 5 July 1890; BCL, *Laisterdyke and Bowling News*, 26 July 1895. A 'cottage house' meant simply a working-class house, usually in a terraced street.

<sup>67</sup> Buckton, *Our Dwellings*, 12; Daunton, *House and home*, 277-280.

<sup>68</sup> J. De Vries, *The industrious revolution: consumer behaviour and the household economy from 1650 to the present* (Cambridge, 2008), 196; Buckton, *Our dwellings*, 91.

<sup>69</sup> C. Dyhouse, *Feminism and the family in England, 1880-1939* (Oxford, 1989), 186-187; V. Woolf, introductory letter to M. Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Life as we have known it, by Co-operative working women* (1931; London, 1977), xvii-xviii; Naomi Mitchison, 'The reluctant feminists', *Left Review* 1(3) (December 1934), 93-4.

easier (in both expense and effort) with a smaller family than a larger one. As Scott has argued for interwar working-class households, the need for higher consumption around the house made parents limit family size 'to sustain their new lifestyles'.<sup>70</sup>

These rising cost pressures could have affected family size at all stages of family formation, from the newly-wed couple onwards. The retailers' complete house furnishings offers were pitched particularly at this group. In the three towns studied, the expectation that a couple would move into their own home as soon as possible after the wedding was very strong. Analysis of the 1881 Census Enumerators' Books provides a measure of this.<sup>71</sup> Table 4, which illustrates the proportion of couples who had set up an independent household, for five leading occupational groups, shows that, of all married males with co-resident children, 99 per cent headed their own household. Among the married female workers with co-resident children, 94 per cent of Bradford mill workers and 97 per cent of Leeds tailoresses belonged to the first 'conjugal family unit' (CFU) listed at their address, that is, the woman or her husband was the head of the household.<sup>72</sup>

The census snapshot shows couples at all durations of marriage: except in 1911 the census did not distinguish these, so it is not possible to research this independent household status by duration of marriage. Young married workers represent a reasonable proxy, however, so in the final column of Table 4 the proportion is shown for workers aged under 25. Even in this group, more than 95 per cent of males and more than 80 per cent of females were in independent households, rather than living with, for example, parents or in-laws.

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<sup>70</sup> Scott, 'owner-occupation', 99; Scott, 'Mr Drage, Mr Everyman, and the creation of a mass market for domestic furniture in interwar Britain', *Economic History Review*, 62 (2009), 802-27.

<sup>71</sup> University of Essex Historical Censuses and Social Surveys Research Group, *Census of England and Wales, 1881: enumerators' books* Colchester, England, The Data Archive, 2002. SN4177.

<sup>72</sup> For the concept of the conjugal family unit and its use, see P. Laslett, *Household and family in past time: comparative studies in the size and structure of the domestic group over the last three centuries* (Cambridge, 1972); K. Schürer, 'Family and household structure', in D. Mills and K. Schürer, eds, *Local communities in the Victorian census enumeration books*, (Oxford, 1996), 280-297.



**Table 4: proportion of couples listed first among the conjugal family units at their address in the 1881 Census Enumerators' Books**

	Proportion of whole group %	Proportion of the workers in this group who were aged <25 %
Bradford textile fathers (n=3265)	99	97
Bradford textile mothers (n=2222)	94	84
Leeds engineers (male) (n=805)	100	99
Leeds tailoresses (n=467)	97	92
Middlesbrough ironworkers (n=2990)	99	97

Source: digital 1881 CEBs, UK Data Archive. Each row contains all the married persons with co-resident children in that occupation in the town.

Saving up for furnishings (and other costs of setting up a household) was therefore a task to be carried out mainly before marriage. No doubt couples were delaying marriage until they could set up home, as had been the norm in Britain for centuries.<sup>73</sup> What was new was that higher expectations about appropriate homes and furniture meant higher costs, and so put the costs of family life more firmly in young couples' minds at exactly the point when their reproductive behaviour began.

## Conclusion

Expenditure on housing, utilities and furnishings provides examples of the way rising expectations could encourage working-class women and men to limit their family size in the later nineteenth century. This form of consumption offers strong evidence of rising working-class expectations and their growing cost, augmented in this case, unlike that of food, by rising like-for-like costs. Whereas the family of the 1860s was often reconciled to living in a cramped dwelling which shared a pump and a privy with neighbours, in 1920 a widespread and achievable expectation was at least two bedrooms, a heavily-furnished front parlour, a kitchen and scullery with piped water and a closed range (or even a gas stove), and, finally, a water closet. By then, parents could have felt that having fewer children was a practical and indeed praiseworthy route to this kind of existence, a choice which benefited the children themselves as well as the adults. When the *Northern Weekly Gazette* gave voice to the 'woe' of the parent hoping to find a good home for a large family in 1905, it spoke for many.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> D. Eversley, 'Review: *The world we have lost* by P. Laslett,' *Economic History Review* 20 (1967), 169-171. Here at 170.

<sup>74</sup> MCL, *Northern Weekly Gazette*, 23 September 1905.

The evidence from autobiographical and newspaper (as well as census) sources reviewed here can sharpen the understanding of the role of rising expectations. In place of broad descriptions, specific features such as the desire for a 'through house' can be identified and dated. Such datings can form the starting point for an exploration of the time-lags with which rising costs fed into increases in the perceived cost of childrearing and falls in fertility. This in turn helps the detailed understanding of the cultural changes by which rising costs may have contributed to falling fertility.

The second contribution of studies such as the present one is to do justice to the geographical diversity of the fertility decline. This article has studied three Yorkshire towns: other patterns would be evident elsewhere. It has suggested a link between higher fertility in nineteenth-century Middlesbrough and a lower level of male concern there for home comforts and hygiene. This difference in values meant that the perceived costs of childrearing increased less for Middlesbrough men than those in the other towns. Of course local research can reveal other factors too, and Middlesbrough's male-dominated labour market may be one of these. The identification of differences in the factors affecting the fertility decline in different population groups is a fruitful area of study, promising to add to our understanding of the fertility decline as a whole. This article has illustrated some of the possibilities.