

City and suburb: household status and structure in late seventeenth-century London

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The late seventeenth century is a vitally important period for those who study the social and demographic characteristics of England's population. Increasing financial demands on the state saw the imposition of new and more traditional forms of taxation, and the most detailed of the tax returns – those for the marriage duty assessment – provide a unique insight into the composition of the families and households of the period. Peter Laslett famously used this source to dispute the historical existence of the extended family and argue that the English pre-industrial domestic group was invariably small and nuclear in its organisation. Subsequent research has highlighted the need to incorporate regional variations into this national picture, with perhaps the most important of these being the distinctive character of the metropolitan household, with its relatively high incidence of lodgers, apprentices and servants, and relatively low incidence of children. Similarly, recent qualitative studies have identified the number of broken marriages, the apparent breakdown of the family unit and the growing atomisation of society as characteristic of the capital's domestic experience, trends which many contemporaries perceived as an implicit threat to the social order, as underpinned by the household.

An important concern here, in terms of London's development, is whether these trends were characteristic of the metropolis as a whole or whether they were features of specific regions in the city. Although studies of the social topography of London emphasise the social intermingling of rich and poor at a local level, the pattern across the entire metropolis is seen roughly as one of concentric circles, with the inner core of the city housing the wealthiest population and the poorer inhabitants occupying its periphery. The relationship between social and economic status and household and family forms remains surprisingly understudied, however, and the purpose of this paper is to investigate the character of the domestic group in two distinct areas of the metropolis – shown on Figure One of the handout – with contrasting tax and rental values. The first area – of approximately seven acres and housing about fifteen hundred people in the late seventeenth century – is a cluster of four small, relatively wealthy parishes at the eastern end of Cheapside in the commercial heart of London. The second – an area of roughly ten acres with just over two thousand inhabitants in 1700 – is the suburban precinct of Tower Hill, lying to the east of the city in the large and much poorer parish of St Botolph Aldgate, an area that had undergone recent – and massive – population and industrial expansion. Existing studies – and here I'm thinking of those by David Glass and Craig Spence – would lead us to expect that the contrasting wealth and social profile of these areas would result in substantial differences in the size and structure of their families and households. But as we shall see, while there **are** marked contrasts in the composition of their respective households which can be attributed to social and economic factors, there are also a perhaps surprising number of common household characteristics. Moreover, at the level of the family, we find an even more striking series of similarities – and unexpected differences – between the two areas. In this way the paper seeks to contribute to the debates concerning the development of the social landscape of

London, the size and composition of the early modern household and whether the late seventeenth century witnessed a period of crisis for the metropolitan family.

I

The following discussion draws on poll tax returns, parish registers and inhabitants lists, but its central focus is an analysis of the 1695 marriage duty assessments for the two study areas. These census-like listings group people together in distinct blocks of names – shown on the left-hand side of Figure Two – and are taken to indicate all those inhabiting the same unit of property (although not necessarily a separate, individual building). They also frequently describe the nature of the relationship between individuals, and provide indicators of personal social and marital status and economic standing. The assessments have been classified according to a newly-developed, ‘London-specific’ methodology, which subdivides the metropolitan domestic group in order to retain and analyse its full complexity. This permits a more comprehensive analysis than was possible under previous schemes, which made it difficult to incorporate the very characteristics that made London unique, such as the incidence of co-resident households and the frequent presence of lodgers and inmates. The results focus on two basic units of analysis: first, the **household**, which groups together all the inhabitants of a property united by kinship, economic and servitude relationships, marked as ‘HH’ on Figure Two – and there the appearance of most of the names italicised in the assessment in the poor rate listing on the right of the figure suggests their status as householders in their own right; while the second unit of analysis, the **family**, comprises all the individuals in a dwelling related to each other either by blood or by marriage. Of course the distinction drawn here between household and family is an anachronistic one that was not made by contemporaries, either in regard to the terms themselves (for whom they were largely synonymous) or in the ways in which the domestic group operated. But the precise definition of the terms within this methodology enables an examination of the domestic unit at multiple levels, taking into account the **different** groups to which an individual belonged by virtue of the particular physical, social and economic environments of London.

The physical environment obviously includes the properties in which individuals lived, and both Cheapside and Tower Hill contained densely packed units of housing, with separate domestic groups cohabiting and often sharing entrances, stairwells and yards, and cooking and washing amenities. As a consequence, mean family size in each area was small, as shown in Table one, though it is more surprising to find that the figures are also identical. Mean household size was slightly larger in the Cheapside parishes, and we will see that this is indicative of the contrasting economic and social characteristics of the two areas. The same factors also account for the mean number of people living in a single property being considerably higher in Cheapside, where houses were often larger than in the suburbs. Indeed, in Aldgate the subdivision of housing was an established practice, and a survey of such properties earlier in the century described an arrangement in which a family of five, another of seven with a lodger, and three other individuals ‘all ... goes in at one door and a most poor close house and but three rooms in it’. Here living in such spaces, and with the social and economic pressures that were the cause and effect of doing so, is seen to have led to both the compression and fracture of the nuclear domestic group identified by Laslett.

Yet the realities of living within a rapidly burgeoning population meant that the practice of multiple occupancy of housing was almost as common in central Cheapside as it was in suburban Tower Hill. Table two shows that the mean number of households per property is just under two in both areas, while the slight shift towards Cheapside in regard to properties housing four or more households can be attributed to its larger dwellings. The assessments clearly seem to distinguish between situations where multiple households are cohabiting and where a household is co-residing with a **lodging** household, and conceivably the terms of each household's occupancy was ascertained at the time of the assessment. Where a second (or even third) non-lodging household is listed in a property, there is no discernible pattern in the terms of their composition, wealth or social status: they can be small or large, can have married couples and children or adult siblings, can employ servants, and can be more substantial than the first household listed in a property. Where lodgers **are** identified in the assessments, it is evident that they, too, could be domestic groups in their own right, rather than simply lone individuals. Their households also vary considerably in their wealth and composition, and there are instances in which lodging households are indeed wealthier than those of their hosts. But in both Cheapside and Tower Hill, lodging households were on average over a person smaller than other domestic units. The presence of lodgers in the population of the two areas is approximately similar, both in terms of the proportion of the population consisting of lodgers, and the proportion of properties accommodating them, which is high at roughly 14 percent. This, taken with the fact that some Cheapside lodgers were clearly wealthy, would belie the understandings of lodging as more characteristic of suburban living and being the province of poorer inhabitants unable or unwilling to secure leases or sub-tenancies. However, the lodgers in Cheapside were concentrated more densely within properties, and this reflects the fact that lodgers in the central parishes were more often grouped into households and families, whereas those in Tower Hill were more likely to be living as lone individuals, a likely effect of the relative economic standing of the lodgers and rental values in each area.

The presence of servants and apprentices provides an even clearer indicator of the social and economic contrast between the regions. Just over a half (55%) of Cheapside households listed no servants, whereas in Tower Hill the figure was 88%. Over a third of the population of the Cheapside parishes was made up by servants and apprentices, with every property on average accommodating over two servants or apprentices under its roof. In the suburban precinct, servants and apprentices made up less than a tenth of the population, and less than one dwelling in two housed them. Large numbers of servants (three or more) could be found in very few properties in Tower Hill, whereas it was not at all uncommon in the Cheapside parishes.

We would of course expect a similar disparity in the number of individuals identified as the recipients of charity in the two areas. However, it is difficult to discuss these people as they are not identified with any consistency in the assessments from parish to parish: in Cheapside, for example, only the assessment for St Mary le Bow explicitly enumerates such individuals. In the other parishes, as well as Tower Hill precinct (where only three inmates are identified), these individuals are presumably 'hidden' among the names which list people with no explanation of their connection to the households they share a property with. The number of resident poor was a

longstanding issue in St Botolph Aldgate, which had long received money from other parishes in order to deal with the burden, and where those individuals thought to exacerbate the problem were admonished by the parish clerks, such as Widow Russell in Rosemary Lane, a ‘Comon harbourer of Strange Ghests to Charge to the parish’. Thus it is possible that the larger number of poorer residents in Tower Hill simply were not enumerated in the assessment, whereas those in St Mary le Bow (the least wealthy of the Cheapside sample), being a direct burden on the parish, were more carefully identified.

The households in St Mary le Bow that accommodated an inmate, pensioner, or parish child in 1695 varied considerably. The majority were headed by individuals rated at the basic tax rate, perhaps suggesting that the parish was financially supporting the housing of its resident poor. On the other hand, some of the wealthier inhabitants of amongst the most prestigious and substantial properties in the parish were also accommodating inmates within their households, with such inmates perhaps financially supported by the householders themselves. Not all of those described as ‘inmates’ in the parish’s assessment were poor, however. The household of Robert Johnson, a porter rated at the basic tax level, was hosting the inmate Edward Row – a solicitor who was worth six hundred pounds or more, or had land worth fifty pounds or more per annum – and other inmates are also listed with apprentices and servants of their own. Here it is frustrating that our sources do not shed more light on how far such inmates were integrated into the household activities of their hosts, or on the implications for the use of space in the managing of the domestic environment in properties shared in this and other ways.

II

We have seen how the cohabitation of properties was prevalent in both of the study areas, but – and turning to our second unit of analysis, the family – this trend was rarely based on kinship connections. Table Four reveals that the families sharing the living spaces in 1695 seem to have been composed for the most part of a ‘simple’ familial structure, with very few containing any resident extended kin, and even fewer the presence of a third generation. While historians have debated whether or not the early modern period witnessed the transition of the family unit from a traditional form to a modern form, there were clear contemporary concerns regarding the number of abandoned spouses and broken, illegal or fraudulent marriages. These tendencies were often deemed characteristic of the burgeoning suburban areas, where the bulk of London’s population lived, and were indeed a frequent source for the moral opprobrium of the Aldgate parish clerk, as in the example of a long sick sailor lying at the house of the widow Jone Blounstone, who ‘kept him at her howse, and said he was her husband but I have heard sence that it was not trewe’. Indeed, the marriage duty Act addressed such a situation by explicitly making ‘any persons who shall cohabbit and live together as man and wife ... liable to pay ... as they ought to have paid by virtue of this Act if they had been married according to the Law of England’.

Turning to Table Five, we find that in 1695 almost a quarter of properties in both sample areas accommodated no married couples, although the majority did (and a small number in fact housed more than one). While the similarity here in the pattern across the two sample areas is noteworthy, the figures for the proportion of **families** that included no married couples are more revealing, with 50 percent of families in

Tower Hill, and 54.6 percent of families in Cheapside, composed of either single parent families, sibling partnerships, or other unidentified kinship relationships which did not comprise a husband and wife. Moreover, there is an even greater disparity in the proportion of unmarried adults in the population of the two areas: in Cheapside, 34.5 percent of the adult population including servants were married, whereas in Tower Hill the figure is higher at 55.2 percent. If we exclude servants from the adult population, the respective married proportions would be 55.2 percent and 78.4 percent respectively. All these figures thus contradict the accepted pattern of population distribution across the city and suburban areas.

A defining characteristic of metropolitan families more generally is seen to be their relatively low incidence of children in comparison with their provincial counterparts. Historians remain divided, however, over whether this feature was more characteristic of its central or suburban areas. As evident from Table Six, in the Cheapside and Tower Hill sample areas, children constitute a small proportion of the population, more so in the case of Cheapside. Possible explanations for this may lie in the larger numbers of servants and apprentices in the central parishes, which not only 'bulk out' the population, thus reducing the proportion made up of children, but which are also the section of the population who are unlikely to be having children. Another possible contributor to the low numbers of children in the City centre may have been the propensity and resources to send infants to nurse elsewhere in healthier climes – a theory that is borne out by the identification of 'missing' children from the assessments in family reconstitution work on the parishes.

In Cheapside wealthier families had larger numbers of children than their neighbours rated at the basic level for the marriage duty assessment: Cheapside families rated at the basic rate were over twice as likely to have no children as their wealthier counterparts. In Tower Hill precinct the picture is slightly different. Again, wealthy families were slightly more likely to have **some** children than those rated at the basic level, but larger numbers of children (for example, over three) were only found in the basic rate families (although then only in a small proportion of them). In both sample areas the majority of families included no children, and almost a quarter of families with children were headed by single parents. Yet overall it seems noteworthy that the figures for the Cheapside and Aldgate samples are so close – one might expect greater disparity given the different social and environmental conditions at work in the two areas.

III

Indeed – and as we have already seen – it is factors influenced by wealth and status that primarily highlight the **expected** differences between the respective populations. The overall contrast in the economic standing of the two sample areas is startling. A third of all households in Cheapside were headed by an individual rated above the basic level of assessment, while the equivalent figure for Tower Hill is only 4 percent. The comparative wealth of their respective lodgers is clearly evident, and suggests different reasons for taking up lodgings in the two areas: whilst less than 1 percent of lodging individuals are rated at the higher assessment rates in Tower Hill, the proportion is seven times higher for Cheapside.

This economic disparity had an obvious effect on the social status of the two regions, which, in turn, impacted upon the actual shape of their domestic units. Thus while the presence of 'lone householders' living in each area was at roughly equivalent levels, as shown in Table Seven, and thus strongly suggestive of an atomised society, the respective proportion of householders living alone but dwelling with servants is clearly illustrative of such differences. Similarly, in Cheapside there are five instances in which households are headed by two individuals described as 'partners' – implying some kind of commercial connection – but none at all in Tower Hill. In the central parishes, just under a third of all dwellings contain one or more bachelors, whereas in the suburban area the figure is only 6.7 percent. Again, the majority of households accommodating bachelors in Cheapside are assessed at the higher levels, whereas there are only three such households accommodating bachelors in Tower Hill. With regard to the bachelors themselves, over a third of Cheapside's bachelors were rated at the higher rates in their own right, whereas the figure in Tower Hill was less than 10 percent.

Finally, the presence of widows in households suggests further differences in the respective characteristics of the two regions. Although these individuals are clearly under-represented or under-identified in the assessments, they are more of a feature of the population in the richer Cheapside parishes, where 10 percent of households accommodated a widow, than in the precinct of Tower Hill, where less than 1 percent of households had an identifiable widow. The reasons behind this difference are complex but are likely to be at least partly explained by economic factors: inhabitants of Cheapside were more likely to be relatively wealthy individuals, with active commercial interests that had first brought them to the city centre. Such people may have had the wherewithal to afford to remain in the area after widowhood. It is also possible that many of the inhabitants of Cheapside were holding long-term leases at very favourable rents as a consequence of the rebuilding after the Fire. Of course not all widows were poor, but in Aldgate the majority of the parish's residents were not wealthy, and they may have found themselves leaving the area in search of cheaper housing. Only four of Tower Hill's widows were assessed in the higher categories, whereas there were four times as many in the higher bands in the Cheapside parishes.

IV

In conclusion, this comparison of inner city Cheapside parishes with the extramural precinct of Tower Hill reinforces the traditional pattern of the social topography of seventeenth-century London, in terms of the economic standing of the two areas. We have also seen that the wealth of the respective inhabitants of each region directly contributed to some of the generally perceived patterns of population distribution and domestic organisation, with larger households containing more apprentices, servants and bachelors being characteristic of the central area. Beyond these standard patterns, however, we have revealed a number of unexpected structural similarities. The manner in which people lived in the central and suburban areas was surprisingly alike, both in terms of the proportion of dwellings housing coresident households and the level of lodging within the overall population. The family units in both regions were of equivalent size, and contained comparable numbers of children. On all these points, the similarities in the domestic experience of the two areas are more numerous than we might expect. Moreover, it was the city centre parishes, not the burgeoning suburban area, which housed the higher proportion of unmarried individuals and

single parent families. All this may cause us to rethink some of the accepted wisdoms regarding household and family structure in the late seventeenth century, many of them derived from results based on the less comprehensive returns from the poll taxes and the four shilling in the pounds aid. For, arguably, it is only by analysing the metropolitan domestic unit at **different** levels that we can hope to advance our understanding of the patterns and processes at work in this area.