

European Association for Urban History Conference
Stockholm 31st August 2006

Households and families in seventeenth century London

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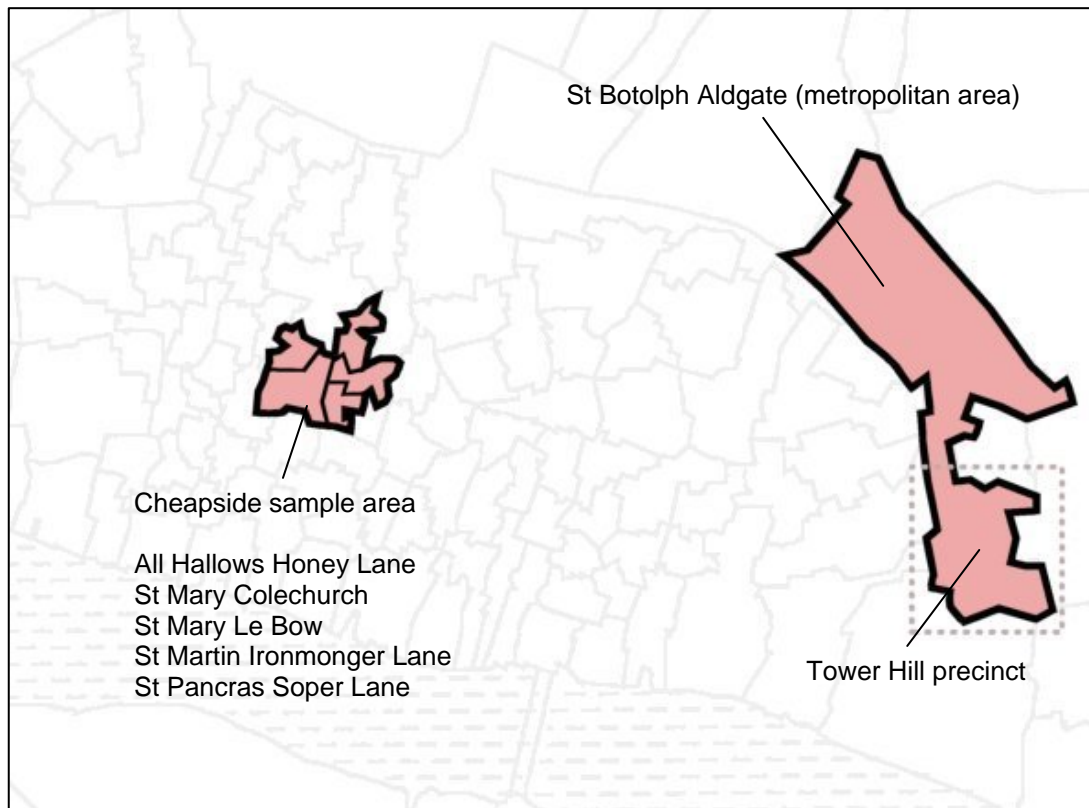
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This paper will address the structure of the family and household in two contrasting areas of 17th century London. It identifies the patterns of domestic experience in central and suburban metropolitan families and households across the century in order to see whether they differ, and to see how far these differences fit with the accepted wisdom regarding the kinds of populations living in London's city centre and extramural parishes. It will also, perhaps more interestingly, indicate similarities in experience.

Our city centre sample area, comprising five very small parishes at the eastern end of Cheapside, was located in the heart of the City's commercial centre, and throughout London's history was the most densely settled and prosperous part of the City. Its residents were wealthy and its dwellings were very substantial, especially those with a frontage along Cheapside itself. In contrast, our suburban sample area is taken from the southern part of the much larger and poorer extramural parish of St Botolph Aldgate, a region of recent development and much less significant commercial activity.¹

The paper will start with an analysis of the characteristics of the family and household at the end of the century, for which we have our most detailed evidence, and then work backwards to the 1630s to provide an indication of the developments that were taking place in the period.

¹ D. Keene and V. Harding *Historical gazetteer of London before the Great Fire: Cheapside; parishes of All Hallows Honey Lane, St Martin Pomary, St Mary le Bow, St Mary Colechurch and St Pancras Soper Lane* (London, 1987). At the beginning of the 17th century, St Botolph Aldgate was one of the poorer parishes receiving aid from its neighbours, I. Archer *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp.150-63.



The sample Cheapside parishes and Tower Hill precinct of St Botolph Aldgate²

The Marriage Duty Act returns were the result of what might seem a rather excessive form of taxation that ran from 1695 until 1706 on births, marriages and burials as and when they occurred, and of annual payments by bachelors and childless widowers. Legislation imposed a standard charge for vital events and annual payments, but in addition imposed a graduated system of surcharges upon all those from the relatively wealthy non-gentry upwards. To administer the tax assessors were appointed to complete certified lists of everyone living in their area, including their names, titles and qualifications together with the sums for which they were, or would be, liable. The result was a series of parish assessments providing census-like listings of inhabitants (such as the above from the parish of St Mary le Bow).

² The *People in Place* project, which forms the context for this research, is examining the five Cheapside parishes indicated above, but this paper's discussion of the situation in the 1690s will only be considering four, as the primary source for this period (the Marriage Duty Act returns) for St Pancras Soper Lane does not survive. References to 'Aldgate' refer to the Tower Hill precinct of St Botolph Aldgate. For more information on the project see <http://www.history.ac.uk/cmh/>.

The Respective Names and Qualities of the Inhabitants and their Families of the Parishes of St Mary Le Bow London together with their several Assessments

Their Names	Qualities	Occasional Payments			
		Inquies	Births	Marriages	Bachelors & Widowers
John Baptist Peters	Attorney at Law	1-4-0	12		
Maria Peters	his wife	14			
Richard Peters	his eldest son	14			
Maria Peters	his daughters	14			
Francis Peters		14			
Edward Harris	his Clerk	14		12-6	
Sam. Lillistone	his maid servt	4			
John Whitehead	his fool boy	4			
William Ransford	Taylor	0-4-0	2	8	
Margaret Ransford	his wife	0-4			
Grace Ransford	his daughter	4			
Elizabeth Ransford		4			
Judith Weston	of household woman	0-4			

Marriage Duty Act return, 1695³

On the left of the assessment, under the heading 'Their Names', we can see groups of inhabitants clearly separated both by large spaces and small dividing lines. Each group, referred to by scholars as a 'houseful', is deemed to represent all the people inhabiting an individual house, although we believe that this does not correspond to the self-contained structure we think of today. In the middle of the assessment, under the heading 'Qualities,' we find listed the relationships of the houseful members to the 'householder', the first-named individual in the group, and occupational information, ranging in the first houseful from 'attorney att law' down to 'fool boy', which gives an indication of personal social status. Finally, the four columns on the right list each individual's tax assessment under the provisions of the Marriage Duty Act, affording us details of their wealth, economic standing, marital status and, in some instances, age. Taken as a whole this source provides a unique insight into the economic and social characteristics of the family and household in the period, as well as at the level of the individual.⁴

The picture of household composition in London described by historians depicts a roughly concentric pattern: in the city centre the expectation is one of higher population density, larger households, and greater numbers of servants and apprentices; whilst in the extramural

³ Corporation of London Record Office: Marriage Assess 4, 53, 62 and 63.

⁴ This paper follows the methodology regarding the definition of the terms 'household' and 'family' developed with in the *People in Place* project. A documented system of criteria is rigidly applied to domestic groups in order to place individuals within respective households and families, which enable us to analyse populations at either level.

parishes one would expect smaller households, fewer children, servants and apprentices, and more lodgers and single people.⁵

Some historians have also observed that at the end of the 17th century a number of contemporaries, Gregory King among them, expressed concern over a number of social and demographic developments in the family. Irregular and failing marriages, low fertility rates, small numbers of children, a proliferation of single adults, and high numbers of lodgers were all seen as symptoms of a collapse in the integrity of the domestic unit, brought about by the destabilising influences of immigration, high mortality, burgeoning commercialisation and urbanisation. Disorder in the household was seen as the root of wider social and economic problems: pervasive idleness, sporadic crime waves, irreligion and immorality were all significant concerns.

An analysis of sizes of families and households indicates that our sample areas were indeed made up of small households, especially in comparison with figures derived by others for other parts of the country.

Area	Mean household size
Cheapside sample	3.4
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	2.6
Laslett's 91 non-Metropolitan parishes	4.7

Table 1: mean household size in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695⁶

These smaller domestic units are what we might expect from an area as densely settled as the central city parishes, while the pattern in Aldgate may have had its origins in the relatively recent spate of property development, where dividing houses and building over interconnecting spaces were becoming established practices.

With regards to the make up of the family in our sample areas, we see that the nuclear family seems to have been just that in both Cheapside and Aldgate: very few families contained any

⁵ See for example J. Boulton *Neighbourhood and Society a London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge, 1987); M. Pelling 'Skirting the city? Disease, social change and divided households in the seventeenth century' pp.157-9 in P. Griffiths and M. Jenner eds. *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, (Manchester University Press, 2000) pp.154-175; and M.J. Power 'The social topography of Restoration London' in A. L. Beier and R. Finlay eds. *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London, 1985) pp.199-223.

⁶ CLRO Marriage Assessment 4, 53, 62 and 63. The Laslett figure can be found in P. Laslett ed. *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972).

resident extended kin, and even fewer enjoyed the presence of a third generation, as one would expect.⁷

	Total number of families	% of families with children	% of families without children	% of families with children headed by a single parent
Cheapside sample	436	35.8%	64.2%	23.1%
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	808	39.7%	60.3%	21.8%

Table 2: children and single parent families in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

In both sample areas the majority of families included no children, which certainly sits well with contemporary perceptions, as does the fact that almost a quarter of families with children were headed by single parents.⁸ A number of commentators have identified low numbers of children as characteristic of domestic units across the city, but it is perhaps noteworthy that the figures for the Cheapside and Aldgate samples are so close – one might expect greater disparity given the different economic conditions at work in the two areas.

A similarly characteristic feature is the proportion of unmarried adults in the population. Here there *is* something of a contrast between the Cheapside and Aldgate populations: in the former, 54.4% of the population (excluding children, servants and apprentices) were married, whereas in Aldgate the figure is higher - 78.5%. Interestingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, the wealthier Cheapside parishes were accommodating a higher proportion of unmarried adults than the poorer, suburban Aldgate sample area. This seems to contradict the accepted pattern of population distribution across city and suburban areas.

The Marriage Duty Act returns depict very clearly the presence of ‘lone householders’ living in both the Cheapside and Aldgate sample areas, at roughly equivalent levels.

⁷ Only 5% of families in Aldgate, and 6%-10% of families in the four Cheapside parishes.

⁸ Although the small numbers of children present may well be overstated: work on the parish registers has shown that in a surprisingly large number of cases couples in the Cheapside parishes had had several children which had not survived their infancy shortly before the 1695 returns were made.

	Lone householders as % of all households (without servants)	Lone householders as % of all households (with servants)	Lone householders as % of all households (total)
Cheapside sample	33.6%	8.6%	42.2%
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	36.8%	1.6%	38.4%

Table 3: Lone householders in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

That a third of households comprised a single individual in both sample areas strongly suggests an atomised society, but what is equally clear is that the picture is not a simple one. Economic factors were involved in the formation of domestic units, and while some of the patterns may appear to have been similar between Cheapside and Aldgate, the driving forces behind them may well have been different. An examination of the relative levels of wealth in the two areas makes this clear. The analysis of lone householders is an example – if we look at the proportion of householders occupying a dwelling alone but with servants, then we can see clear differences between our central city parishes and our suburban area. Perhaps those in Cheapside fall into the breed of individuals foregoing the propriety of marriage to enjoy the financial benefits of bachelorhood that alarmed some contemporaries.

If we investigate further the individuals who were living alone, or living in households without any discernible kin relationship to any of the other residents, then the differences between our city and extramural sample areas begin to emerge with more definition. The presence of widows and widowers in households, for example, suggests some differences in the respective characteristics of the two areas. Although these individuals are clearly under-represented or under-identified in the Marriage Duty returns, they are more of a feature of the population in the richer Cheapside parishes than in the suburbs of Tower Hill: 10% of households in Cheapside accommodated a widow, whereas less than 1% of households in Aldgate had an identifiable widow. The reasons behind this difference are complex but are likely to be at least partly affected by economic factors: inhabitants of the Cheapside parishes were likely to be relatively wealthy individuals, with active commercial interests that had brought them to the city in the first place. 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 along Cheapside were holding long-term leases at very favourable rents as a consequence of the rebuilding after the Fire, which again meant that they could survive the potential financial pressures of widowhood. Of course not all widows were poor, but in Aldgate the majority of the parish's residents were not wealthy, and may have found themselves leaving the area in search of cheaper housing. Only four of Aldgate's widows/widowers were rated in the higher £600 value category in the Marriage Duty returns, whereas there were four times as many in the higher band in the Cheapside parishes (although we clearly have to acknowledge the problem of under-registration of widows in the Tower Hill return).

	% of dwellings housing 1+ bachelors	% of households with 1+ bachelor in £600+ status band	% of bachelors in £600+ status band	Bachelors as % of total population (excluding children, servants and apprentices)
Cheapside sample	29.8%	60.3%	38.5%	17.87%
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	6.7%	8.8%	8.6%	5.7%

Table 4: Bachelors in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

With regard to younger single people living in the sample areas (if we may blithely conceive of our widows/widowers as 'older' single people), the characteristics are suggestive of the relative social and economic conditions at work on the domestic environments. In Cheapside just under a third of all property units contain one or more bachelors, whereas only 7% of Aldgate households do. In Cheapside the majority of households accommodating bachelors fall into the £600 status bracket, whereas there are only three such households housing bachelors in Aldgate. With regard to the bachelors themselves, 38% of Cheapside's bachelors were £600 men in their own right, whereas less than 10% of Aldgate's were. Bachelors in Cheapside were almost as likely to be rich young men as not: the same was in no way true of Aldgate's.

The presence of apprentices might emphasise this difference even more, if only the evidence was less problematic. Only 4% of households in Aldgate explicitly indicate the presence of apprentices, whereas the proportion for the Cheapside sample is roughly a quarter. Again, many of the apprentices are identified as the sons of £600 men, suggesting that the economic standing of the young single men in the two sample areas was considerably different. This pattern corresponds with the accepted wisdom regarding the characteristics of the domestic units of inner city and suburban parishes.

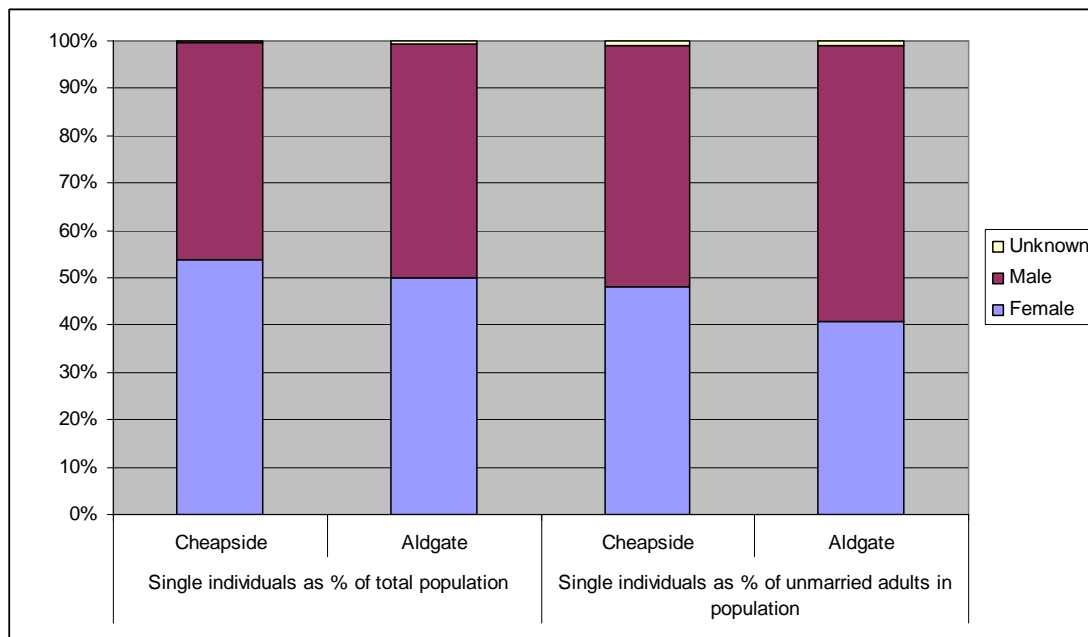


Chart 1: Gender of singletons in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

The gender aspect of these single people displays a small contrast between the two areas: whereas the gender distribution amongst the whole population in Tower Hill was quite equal, 54% of the Cheapside parishes' population was female. In both areas a majority of the unmarried adults were male, but in Tower Hill the balance towards males was more pronounced.

	% of households with 'partners' as householders	% of households headed by £600+ householder	% of households with no servants	% of dwellings housing more than one household with differing status ratings
Cheapside sample	2.2%	33.8%	55%	51.6%
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	0%	4%	88.2%	6.9%

Table 5: Wealth and status in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

If we broaden out the analysis to look at issues of wealth and status more generally, something which the rich evidence of the Marriage Duty returns is well suited to, then many of the *expected* differences in the respective populations do indeed become evident. For example, a third of households in Cheapside were headed by a £600 individual, but only 4% of Aldgate households were. Just over a half of Cheapside households had no servants, whereas in Aldgate the figure was 88%. This latter figure, perhaps more than any other, highlights the economic factors underlying the differences in the domestic units of the two

areas. A further example of this might be those households whose heads are two individuals described as 'partners' – implying some kind of commercial connection - five of which exist in the Cheapside parishes, but which do not exist at all in Tower hill precinct.

	Status rating	% of total adult population	% of all lodgers
Cheapside sample	Basic	11.6%	92.6%
	£600+	0.9%	7.4%
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	Basic	18.2%	99.1%
	£600+	0.2%	0.9%

Table 6: Lodgers in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

Similarly the relative wealth of lodgers suggests different reasons for taking up (presumably temporary) lodgings in the two areas: whilst less than 1% of lodging individuals are rated at the higher rate in the returns for Aldgate, the proportion is somewhat higher for Cheapside (7%). However a greater proportion of the adult population comprises lodgers in the poor Aldgate area.

Our comparison of the inner city area with the extramural area, only a fraction of which we can present here, does go some way to bear out the generally perceived pattern of population distribution. Where differences are apparent, a closer analysis of the wealth of the groups in question unsurprisingly indicates higher levels of wealth in Cheapside than in Aldgate – Cheapside's lodgers, bachelors, singletons, apprentices, single parents, widows etc, all 'evidence' of atomised society or fragmented domestic groups, are all wealthier than their equivalents in Aldgate. However it is possible to say that the distribution of populations of the Cheapside parishes and Tower Hill precinct do not correspond cleanly or precisely with what we might anticipate. Similarities in the domestic experience of the two areas are more numerous than we might expect.

These conclusions raise a number of vitally important issues: how far was this a new situation? Did the size and shape of the family and household change over the early modern period, and if so when and by how much? These questions are not easily answered, as the detailed demographic information available in the Marriage Duty Assessments has no earlier parallel. Nevertheless, a handful of sources provide an invaluable earlier insight into the structural characteristics of the domestic group, thus offering a partial opportunity to track change over time in our study areas at various points between the 1630s and 1690s.

		1638	1695
Cheapside sample	Population	1750	1900
	Property Units	262	265
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	Population	?	2082
	Property Units	306	465
Aldgate (Metropolitan area)	Population	6000+	9000+

Table 7: Population and property in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695⁹

Between 1638 and 1695, the population of Cheapside increased but its number of property units remained remarkably similar and this is almost certainly explained by the more spacious rebuilding of the area after the Fire. However, in the same period, and in stark contrast, the property units in Tower Hill increased by over 50%, and though we lack any detailed information regarding the precinct's population in 1638 – hence the missing figure – the population of St Botolph Aldgate's metropolitan area is thought to have risen at an identical rate, from over 6,000 to more than 9,000. It is therefore vital that any diachronic analysis of family and household takes full account of the divergent trends in the two areas.

A first point of comparison with our picture of Cheapside in 1695 is provided by the 1678 poll tax returns for our five parishes.¹⁰ As might be expected of information collated less than twenty years earlier, this produces many similar results about an area that in the post-fire decades had a stable population size and housing stock. The variation in both mean household and family size is negligible, while mean houseful size is identical. The percentage of married adults, families with children and children as a proportion of the total population are all comparable. Such results offer support for the thesis that if structural change was occurring in the family and household, in central City parishes it was doing so at a slow rate. Against this, however, we might note a number of possibly significant variations, the most dramatic being an increase of almost a third in the number of single parent families.

⁹ These figures are derived from Vanessa Harding's paper, 'Housing and households in seventeenth-century London', read at the Economic History Society's annual conference at the University of Reading in April 2006; data supplied by our colleague, Gill Newton, at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, University of Cambridge; Keene and Harding, *Historical Gazetteer of London*; and the corresponding Marriage Duty Assessment returns.

¹⁰ CLRO, Assessment box 67 ms 5, Assessment Box 11 ms 11.

Single Parent Families	1678	1695	Percentage of all families in 1695
Cheapside sample parishes	28	36	9%
Tower Hill precinct	-	117	7%

Table 8: Single parent families in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

Here it is important to stress that we are comparing the figures for five parishes in 1678 with those for four in 1695, so presumably the actual number of single parent families in 1695 would be higher still. And as we have seen, and contrary to what we might expect, the percentage of single parent families was actually higher in Cheapside than in Tower Hill in 1695.

	No of households 1678	% of all households in 1678	No of households 1695	% of all households in 1695
Cheapside sample parishes	72	6%	75	11%
Tower Hill precinct	-	-	116	10%

Table 9: Households with lodgers in Cheapside and Aldgate, 1695

Similarly, the higher percentage of Cheapside households containing lodgers is also something of a surprise, and here the figures from the poll tax suggest another recent increase. Although the actual number of lodgers in households is similar (though, again, we are comparing figures for five parishes with those for four), as a percentage of the total number of households, those containing lodgers have almost doubled by 1695.

The significance that can be attached to these contrasting figures is, of course, open to question. But it is interesting that they provide quantitative evidence in support of the type of social and demographic developments – including greater fragmentation of the family and higher numbers of lodgers – which were of concern to some contemporaries and have been highlighted by modern historians.¹¹ As both sets of writers have identified these developments as a phenomenon of the late seventeenth century, any possible comparison with earlier insights into family and household structure is vital. One such opportunity is

¹¹ For example, V. Harding, 'The metropolitan family in crisis?', paper delivered at the NACBS conference, Baltimore, in 2002.

provided by the 1637 returns of divided and inmated houses,¹² though in the case of Cheapside this can only be very partial. In our Cheapside study area there were just twelve divided and eleven inmated properties, and details regarding the shape of their internal domestic groups – which might not necessarily be characteristic of the area as a whole – are extremely limited. Nevertheless, of the small sample about which we have specific information, exactly half were married, which is comparable to the figure of 54% of the population in 1695. Moreover, if those described as ‘singlemen’ can rightly be equated with bachelors, their respective proportion of both the 1637 sample and the 1695 population is identical: 17.8%. The proportion of widows in this sample population is also quite high at 17.8%, and this may be indicative of the kinds of people and domestic units occupying divided and inmated houses, as the figure for the whole adult population of the Cheapside parishes in 1695 is 7.4%.

In contrast with their relatively small number in Cheapside, divided and inmated houses were far more numerous in Portsoken Ward, which was roughly conterminous with the metropolitan area of St Botolph Aldgate. Its return describes the basic structure of two hundred and fifty-four families, of which seventy-five were in Tower Hill precinct. These families – minus those listed as poor, as dependants on parish relief were excluded from the Marriage Duty Assessments – form the basis of an albeit limited comparison of the demographic character of Tower Hill in 1637 and 1695. Although details of the residents of divided and inmated houses might potentially offer a restricted picture of the precinct, it was, of course, the very practices of dividing houses and taking in inmates that caused the population of Aldgate to increase by over 50% by 1695. Moreover, both practices stretched back well into the sixteenth century and their frequency was a major concern of the parish authorities in the 1580s and 1590s.¹³ Thus there are good reasons for arguing that the 1637 sample is not unrepresentative of family structure at that time and possibly earlier still.

Comparing the respective figures reveals both striking numbers of similarities and differences.

Tower Hill sample	1637	2.3
Tower Hill precinct (Aldgate)	1695	2.6

Table 10: Mean family size in Tower Hill, 1637 and 1695

Mean family size is small, the totals representing just under and over a person less than the corresponding Cheapside figure in 1695.

¹² TNA, SP16/359.

¹³ Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, pp. 184-6.

	married	widowed	single
Tower Hill sample 1637	86%	4.3%	9.7%
Tower Hill precinct 1695	78.5%	3.2%	18.3%

Table 11: Marital status of adults in Tower Hill, 1637 and 1695

The percentage of married adults in the population in 1695 is perhaps notably lower, however, while unfortunately the separate figures for singletons and the widowed are affected by defects in registration, though in this instance the 1637 values are certainly the more accurate of the two.

	% of families with children	% of families without children	% of families with children headed by a single parent
Tower Hill sample 1637	37.1%	62.9%	8.5%
Tower Hill precinct 1695	39.7%	60.3%	21.8%

Table 12: Children and single parent families in Tower Hill, 1637 and 1695

The percentages for families with and without children are all remarkably similar, but those for single parent families show a significant increase by the later date – duplicating a discernible trend in the Cheapside results and perhaps offering further evidence of greater familial fragmentation by the end of the century. Finally, the pattern of population distribution might be interpreted in a similar way.

	married	widowed	single	children
Tower Hill sample 1637	69.6%	3.5%	7.8%	19.1%
Tower Hill precinct 1695	39%	0.9%	30.7%	29.4%

Table 13: Population distribution in Tower Hill, 1637 and 1695

Here the dramatic drop in the married proportion of the population can be set against the substantial rise in the single and widowed who again should be treated as a single category. Conversely, there is the striking increase in the proportion of children, 10% higher than both the 1637 figure and the equivalent Cheapside total in 1695, and providing an obvious counter to contemporary concerns regarding lower fertility rates and smaller numbers of children.

Whether concerns regarding alarming demographic and social trends were mere rhetoric, or a genuine perception within contemporary society, remains a point of controversy among scholars. While some contend that there was no basis for those anxieties until the 1730s and 1740s, this paper has provided some evidence to the contrary. Moreover, it has challenged some of the existing polarities relating to our views of City centre and suburban parishes. A simple concentric distribution of particular familial and household characteristics fails to account for the impact of interacting economic, social and environmental factors over time. This is difficult to analyse over the early modern period due to the nature of our sources and any attempt to do so is inevitably partial. While our results from the Marriage Duty material of the late seventeenth century suggest that families and households in Cheapside and Aldgate were more similar than we would expect, the paper has more tentatively suggested that this was the result of change over time. Both areas were developing in different ways and at different paces and only by putting people in place can we attempt to analyse that change.