Continuity and Change (2022), **37**, 389–421
doi:10.1017/S0268416023000036

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Poverty, gender and old age in the Victorian and Edwardian workhouse'

Samantha Williams

Institute of Continuing Education and Girton College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
Email: skw30@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

The workhouse was a central facet of the new poor law and the elderly – and aged men in particular – came to dominate workhouse populations. This article is the first to analyse a very large data set of almost 4,000 workhouses from all areas of England and Wales extracted from the I-CeM data set, which reveals the composition of workhouse residents on census night by age, gender, and geography between 1851 and 1911. Factors influencing the proportion of the elderly in the workhouse include the dependency ratio and internal migration, urbanisation and a commitment to institutions in cities, and the availability of outdoor relief and other avenues of support. Destitution, want of work, old age and illness propelled the elderly into the workhouse. The crusade against outrelief of the 1870s contributed to this increase, and, while the introduction of old age pensions reduced those over the age of 70, this did not prevent the 'younger aged' (those aged 60–69) from increasing.

1. Introduction

Historians have long recognised that old age was one of the pinch points over the poverty life-cycle for many in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales. The ability of the aged to support themselves became more precarious with age due to their increasing inability to work, low wages, and their incapacity to save for old age. Moreover, the fact that many did not have friendly society or trade union pensions, and that they lived at a distance from their adult children or those children, also at a pinch point in the poverty cycle, could not support them also added to the insecurity of the aged.[1] From the 1890s the 'elderly subject' was created, through statistics revealing the growing numbers of the aged, through medical research in gerontology and social investigation, and representations of the ageing body by novelists, artists, and journalists, with the result that the elderly poor were increasingly recognised as a social problem.[2] The social investigator of old age, Charles Booth, summed it up when he said, 'on the whole people are poor because they are old' and they were increasingly so as they aged, with Booth finding that the ages of 70–75 were 'the most prolific of pauperism'.[3]

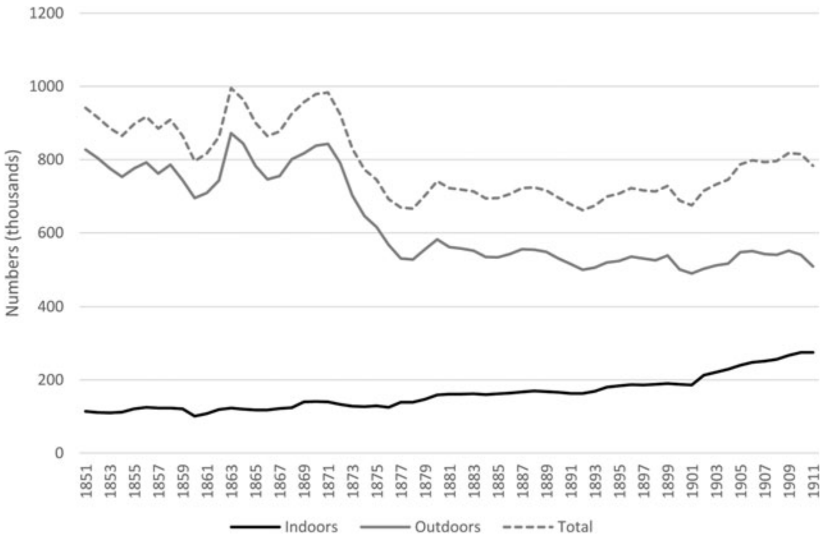

Figure 1. Number of paupers relieved indoors and outdoors in England and Wales, 1851–1911.
Source: Karel Williams, *From pauperism to poverty* (London, 1981), Table 4.5, 158–63.

Under the old poor law the elderly had been a large proportion of those relieved both outdoors with a weekly allowance and in poorhouses and workhouses and they continued to be prominent on outdoor relief and in union workhouses after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.[4] As argued recently by Boyer and Schmidle, 'The poor law played a major role in assisting the elderly in late Victorian and Edwardian England'.[5] This article considers the role of the workhouse for the aged poor between 1851 and 1911.

With the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act the workhouse became a central feature of the new poor law. Nassau Senior, Poor Law Commissioner, author of the *Poor law report* and architect of the Poor Law Amendment Act, wanted relief to be given only within 'the strict discipline of well-regulated workhouses'.[6] The new union workhouses were the most iconic features of the change in policy. Parishes were grouped into 624 unions. Around 320 new workhouses had been built by 1841 and 520 by 1870, whilst other unions adapted existing workhouses.[7] That the intentions and ideals of the architects of the new poor law were frustrated has been well documented by historians, and they have emphasised that the transition from the old to the new poor law was characterised by considerable continuity rather than essential change. The extent to which the new poor law continued to relieve paupers out of the workhouse has been highlighted most recently by Snell, who has shown how at a national level roughly three-quarters of both poor relief expenditure and of recipients were relieved outdoors (i.e. in their own homes), although this varied considerably by place and period.[8] Nevertheless, the actual number of inmates in workhouses more than doubled – from around 114,000 indoor paupers in 1851 to 275,000 in 1911 (Figure 1).[9] Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children entered a workhouse in the Victorian and Edwardian periods.[10] Moreover, those aged 65 years or older accounted for an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416023000036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

increasing proportion of workhouse residents: in 1851 they were 1:3 in London and 1:7 in the rest of the country, rising to 1:2 and 1:3 respectively.[11]

What was the scale of pauperism amongst the elderly under the new poor law? Boyer has shown that there were very large numbers of men and women aged 65 or above in the Victorian and Edwardian periods: 932,000 in 1861, rising to around 1.5 million in 1901. He confirms Booth's observation that old age pauperism rose with age: 13.4 per cent of those aged 60 and older, 17.9 per cent aged over 65, and 22.9 per cent of those aged 70 and older received some form of poor relief in 1890.[12] This is a day count, but an alternative measure, a 12-month count, reveals a much larger proportion of those aged 65 and above in receipt of poor relief at some point during a year at 29.3 per cent in 1891–92.[13] These figures have led Boyer to argue that 'large-scale government support for the aged existed long before the welfare state'.[14] Much of this assistance was in outdoor relief; the numbers relieved in the workhouse were much smaller. According to the one-day count, 23.7 per cent of those aged 60 and older on poor relief were relieved in the workhouse, 22.3 per cent aged 65 and older, and 21.2 per cent of those 70 and above, while the figure for the 12-month count of those aged 65 and above was 23.6 per cent.[15] As a proportion of all the elderly, therefore, their representation in the workhouse was small – rising from only 3 per cent in 1851 to 5 per cent in 1901.[16] Thus, Thane and Thomson highlight the relative unimportance of the workhouse, with Thomson arguing that 'few were ever to enter the new workhouses during the nineteenth century.'[17] Nevertheless, because in many regions a substantial minority, and sometimes a majority, of the elderly poor were relieved indoors, the workhouse was clearly one important component in the care of those dependent upon the poor law. In the early twentieth century, two-fifths of aged paupers were relieved in the workhouse in the North West and three-fifths in London.[18] Moreover, as will be shown, the workhouse was increasingly important as a form of relief in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales. The Poor Law Board noted in 1895 that 'the sick, the aged, and the infirm now greatly preponderate' in workhouses.[19]

There were two important policy changes in the period under consideration here: the 'crusade against out-relief' in the 1870s and the introduction of old age pensions under the Liberal Social Reforms in 1908. In December 1871 the Local Government Board issued a circular (no. 20) restricting outdoor relief in an attempt to establish the principles of 1834; the crusade against out-relief sought to replace poor relief with charity for those deemed the 'deserving' poor, leaving the less deserving to be dealt with by the poor law and to enter the workhouse.[20] Figure 1 shows the scale of the reduction in recipients of outdoor relief after 1871. Harris argues that, 'since the number of able-bodied male paupers had declined substantially … it is tempting to regard the crusade against outdoor relief as being largely, though not exclusively, a crusade against the distribution of outdoor relief to aged and infirm adults, able-bodied women, and children.'[21] Kin and even close friends were hounded for maintenance contributions.[22] Booth found that between 1871 and 1893 there was a reduction of 37 per cent in outdoor relief to those aged 65 or above, with the most rapid fall in the 1870s.[23] Boyer has shown that old age pauperism rates (indoor and outdoor relief) declined between 1871 and 1891 and then remained constant until 1908.[24] As outdoor relief contracted, the percentage of all paupers relieved indoors of all ages rose from 12–

15 per cent in the mid-1860s to 20 per cent in the 1880s and to 30 per cent in the early 1900s. The increase was greatest for the elderly across all regions.[25]

The recognition that many faced acute poverty in old age led to legislation under the Liberal Government to provide the first old age pensions in 1908. A primary aim of the legislation was to disassociate old age pensions from the poor law – through payment at the Post Office – and to target pensions to the poorest without stigmatising them.[26] It was believed that pensions of 5*s*. would supplement and encourage saving, since the sum was insufficient to live on and would require savings or assistance from relatives.[27] The pension was deliberately set by the Treasury at 70 as an age at which (due to the relatively low proportion of the population who lived past 70 years old) they believed that the state could afford this benefit.[28] Pensions were intended, however, only for those not already on poor relief after 1 January 1908; thus those already reliant on the poor law or applying after that date might end up in the workhouse (until this restriction was removed in 1911), as well as those who found that they could not live on the pension (since it was not intended to provide full subsistence), or facing other disqualifications.[29] Since pensions were set at the age of 70, were means tested and paid on a sliding scale, and had exemptions based on character, they were, in fact, intended for 'the very old, the very poor, and the very respectable'.[30] Nevertheless, the government were shocked at the number of the elderly who claimed old age pensions: 490,000 on 1 January 1909, most of whom (62.6 per cent) were women, and the majority of pensioners (94 per cent) qualified for the maximum rate, revealing that many more – two-and-a-half times – were impoverished than were in receipt of poor relief.[31] Old age pensions, along with other developments such as separate schools, workhouse infirmaries, lunatic asylums, and the health and unemployment insurance also introduced by the Liberal Government in 1911 'successively peeled layer after layer of the "deserving" away from the workhouse'.[32]

The main purpose of this article is to provide one of the more comprehensive surveys of people aged over 60 in workhouses in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales. This is the first extensive and more systematic research of a large proportion of workhouses by age, gender, and geography. It presents new data from the Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) database on the age and gender profile of workhouse populations for a large sample of workhouses recorded in the censuses over a 60-year period during the important shifts in policy towards the elderly poor outlined above. I-CeM supports analyses at the level of the nation and at the level of the union. The latter also allows for reflection upon whether clear regional welfare cultures can be identified.[33] The article turns now to describe the I-CeM data set, the sample of workhouses, and the methods employed.

2. The I-Cem data set

The study extracted as many workhouse populations as possible for England and Wales from the I-CeM database for the Victorian and Edwardian periods.[34] The I-CeM database contains the transcripts of all the censuses for Britain, 1851–1911 (except for 1871).[35] The data was initially transcribed by the genealogy website Find My Past and the I-CeM project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to produce a standardised, integrated data set of most of the

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censuses of Britain, and is now held by the UK Data Service.[36] Some original data is missing, estimated at 2.0 per cent in 1851, 3.7 per cent in 1861, and 0.7 per cent in 1901.[37] Whilst this poses only a small problem for the robustness of the data, more serious is the omission of the 1871 census. Find My Past did not transcribe key variables for England and Wales in 1871 (occupation, marital status, and birthplace) and so this census was not incorporated into the I-CeM database.[38] The date at which the census was taken each year – usually in April – will also have affected who was resident in the workhouse, since seasonality had some bearing on the numbers in the workhouse in rural unions. A greater number of agricultural workers and vagrants sought admission during the winter, with declining numbers into the spring, and lower numbers in the summer.[39] In contrast, seasonality made much less difference to admittance to the workhouse in manufacturing districts; cyclical economic downturns and depression had greater impact.[40] The data presented here is of general workhouses and excludes the more specialist institutions such as workhouse infirmaries, schools, and vagrant wards, which were an increasing part of the poor law landscape from the later nineteenth century. This has more impact upon the data for London than elsewhere: in 1915 47.1 per cent of inmates were accommodated in a general workhouse, with 24.8 per cent in workhouse infirmaries, 16.1 per cent in specialist children's homes, and 12.0 per cent in 'insane' institutions, while in the rest of England and Wales the majority were still in general workhouses at 70.1 per cent, with 12.2 per cent in workhouse infirmaries, 13.9 per cent in children's homes, and just 3.8 per cent in buildings for the 'insane'.[41] It was determined that extracting the huge range of workhouse types – which were difficult to identify in the I-CeM database – was beyond the scope of this project. Moreover, since the majority of workhouses were of the general type as late as 1915, this limits the impact of this decision. Instead, the focus upon the role of the general workhouse provides comparable data on the same workhouse type in every census.

This sample provides a unique opportunity to analyse a very large number of workhouse populations and, moreover, to assess trends over six censuses and a period of 60 years for all these workhouses. There has been little research on the workhouse in Wales, and so this study fills an important lacuna.[42] The census gives information on the age and sex of inmates but not the reason they sought admission to the workhouse; for this, workhouse admission and discharge registers need to be consulted. These do not survive in very large numbers, and they can be voluminous and time consuming to transcribe. This study has, therefore, taken two case studies of workhouse admission and discharge registers, one early in the period covered here – the small workhouse of Hatfield, Hertfordshire (1834–1861) (36 inmates in 1851) – and one later – the much larger workhouse of Norwich, Norfolk (1881) (539 residents in 1881).[43] Not all registers give reasons for admissions and a high proportion of registrants record being admitted simply because of destitution; 99 per cent of those who came into Nottingham workhouse in 1881, for instance, were simply 'destitute'.[44] Where they do give varied reasons, they are informative. In addition, this article analyses the case studies of inmates in Bromley workhouse, Stepney, London, collected by Charles Booth for 1889, which were assembled by the relieving officer, Mr J. Jones, for the year ending 30 April 1889 and give reasons for admission to the Bromley workhouse, which

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Table 1. Workhouse extraction sample

Census year	Viable workhouses*	Total workhouse residents	Median workhouse size	Percentages reported workhouse population
1851	416	80,568	151	64
1861	402	59,167	115	45
1881	580	139,738	145	74
1891	631	140,808	129	72
1901	637	175,008	136	78
1911	724	156,983	110	52
Total	3,390	752,272	131	66

Source: Schurer, K., Higgs, E. (2020). Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851–1911. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7481, doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2

Notes: *±2per cent reported total residents in same workhouse 81–11, or 100 to 115 per cent reported workhouse paupers in same Registration District 51–61. Staffing ratio 5.7 officers/100 residents in 1881, decreasing from 12.0 for workhouse size <50 residents to 2.2 for >1000 residents.

was categorised as an institution for the infirm.[45] This was a district in which Booth estimated that 17 per cent of residents in 1887 were 'very poor' or living in a 'state of chronic want'. Nevertheless, in 1891 only 1.5 per cent of the local Stepney population were relieved by the poor law and almost all relief was institutionalised.[46]

It has been possible to extract 3,390 workhouses accommodating 752,272 inmates and an average of two-thirds of the total workhouse population in the six censuses, with a low proportion of 45 per cent in 1861 and as high as 78 per cent in 1901 (Table 1).[47] The data has been mapped using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to produce choropleth maps. This is the largest study of its kind. Nevertheless, problems with the extraction of workhouses from I-CeM mean that there are gaps in the resulting data – not all workhouses were identified as such in the I-CeM database and could not therefore be extracted, or only part of a workhouse could be identified because the workhouse was not recorded as such on every page that had made up the original census entry (these entries were omitted). This means that there are patches of 'no data' on the choropleth maps later in this article, the proportions of which are given in Table 1; these are more problematic for 1861 and 1911 than for the other years, where around at least two-thirds of workhouses are represented. These limitations notwithstanding, analysis of the data is instructive. The data can be amalgamated to examine the 'national' level and disaggregated at the level of the union workhouse; mapping the results of the latter presents the geography of old age indoor pauperism at the union level. Before presenting the results, this article turns to a discussion of definitions of the aged and infirm and to what is already known about the elderly in the workhouse.

3. The new poor law, the elderly and the workhouse

This study considers indoor relief to those aged 60 and above. However, there was no set definition of old age in nineteenth-century Britain, although many contemporaries considered 60 to be the threshold to old age.[48] Some guilds set old age at when a man was unfit to perform the tasks of his trade, and this might be when he was in his 50s, or even in his 40s.[49] Although the Poor Law Commissioners were never explicit about when old age began, when a Commissioner was asked by a 1837–8 Select Committee, 'Where do you draw the line between the aged and those that are not aged?', he replied, 'The commissioners draw the line at 60'.[50] That they were not particularly interested in old age as a category is further underscored by the fact that no age-related statistics were collected before 1890, making isolating the elderly in the figures extremely difficult.[51] In 1890, and in the Royal Commission of 1895, the age was set as 65 and above, whilst old age pensions were only awarded to those aged 70.[52] Age itself did not confer entitlement to poor relief, particularly for men; it was infirmity and an inability to work to support oneself and any family members that might mean an application for outdoor relief or admittance to the workhouse. Levine-Clark cites cases of men applying for relief who were still working into their 90s.[53] Indeed the labour force participation rate of men aged 65 or older was 74.4 per cent in 1881, falling to 60.6 per cent in 1901.[54] Rose has suggested that 'most unions regarded all paupers of sixteen to seventy as being "able-bodied" if they were not permanently incapacitated'.[55] Thus, those aged 60 might be considered both old and able-bodied or non-able-bodied. As Chase has argued, there was an 'indeterminacy' of old age and 'part of the complexity of old age … is that its elusiveness was a leading part of its condition'.[56]

Chase argues further that the 'elderly subject' came into being due to a confluence of factors from the 1890s, which she summarises pithily as '[t]he legislative movement toward the Pensions Act, the ageing and then the death of the Queen, the sociological investigations conducted, particularly, by Charles Booth, the maturing of gerontology as a medical discipline, the increasing perception of a generational divide, the proliferating images of ageing bodies'.[57] New work has been undertaken on how the elderly experienced ageing and how this was represented in novels, including research by Charise, who emphasises that the nineteenth century witnessed a profound shift from perceptions of the ordained 'stages' of life to a reformulating of 'aging as a *state* of life, fluid and unstable, and inseparable from the broader health and future of society'.[58] The plight of the elderly poor contributed to this new discourse through discussions of their institutionalisation in workhouses, asylums, and almshouses, making them a 'subculture among a subculture'.[59] Booth's survey of the aged poor and the impact of the crusade against out-relief on them heightened their visibility in political discourse, as did the long discussion around, and introduction of, old age pensions.[60] Thane also sees this period as pivotal to a widespread awareness of the elderly poor as a distinct social group with specific social problems, partly due to their increasing numbers, but mainly because they became part of the wider public concern about the 'social question' in late Victorian Britain.[61]

The workhouse was intended to provide a dual function: as a deterrence to able-bodied men and women and their families, and as a refuge for lone children, the elderly, and the disabled. The tension between these two aims, and the extent to which they impacted upon the elderly poor, was never adequately resolved. Nevertheless, rules were always supposed to be more relaxed in the workhouse for the elderly than other groups of inmates, with a better diet, including beer, tobacco and snuff, butter and tea, exemption from work if they were infirm, and permits to leave the house.[62] By the end of the century, officials also provided books and newspapers, tobacco and snuff, tea with sugar and milk that the aged could brew at any time they liked, sweets and puddings, and a piano or harmonium for chapel services and entertainment. The Inspector H.B. Kennedy reported in 1894 that, 'workhouse life has been made more and more comfortable and attractive'.[63] Moreover, the elderly were not merely submissive to workhouse discipline, and there are instances of them returning drunk after a day off and arguing with other inmates or workhouse officials.[64]

Despite a substantial historiography on the new poor law, and the fact the stigma associated with workhouses looms large in the public imagination, knowledge of the changing characteristics of inmates is still relatively limited.[65] There are excellent studies of the new poor law in its entirety. Crowther, for instance, details the adoption of the workhouse system, while Driver has explored the design of the workhouse system and the geography of building new union workhouses.[66] Others have explored the adoption of the Act in particular locations, notably Digby in Norfolk, Green in London, Ritch in Birmingham, and Croll for Wales.[67] Prevalent themes in the historiography include provisioning the new union workhouses through contracts; the protests by, and punishments of, pauper inmates; the provision of medical care; and vagrant wards and the casual poor.[68] Recent research emphasises the agency of inmates within the new union workhouse, notably by continuing the old poor law strategy of writing pauper letters to those in authority, as well as through workhouse gossip.[69]

Another approach has been to exploit the census: this source has provided historians with snapshots of indoor pauper populations, and censuses have been analysed to good effect in a number of studies of specific workhouses. Many of these works draw upon a single census, typically 1851 or especially 1881 (as the Church of Latter Day Saints made this data widely available) (Hertfordshire, Kent, Leicester, and Lancashire) or a small number of mid-century censuses (Basingstoke and Winchester, Preston, Brixworth).[70] Only one study by Seal has taken a detailed longitudinal approach over more than three censuses (Belper and Cheltenham, 1851–1911)[71] while Heritage – also using the I-CeM data set – analyses five counties (Cheshire, Glamorgan, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, West Riding of Yorkshire) over three censuses (1851, 1891, 1911).[72] The census allows historians to analyse the workhouse population at a given point in time (census night every ten years), but admission and discharge registers are required to reveal the high turnover of inmates. The former approach might reveal that children and the elderly were a core of workhouse inmates, whereas the latter shows that there were many short-term stays primarily by those who were of working age and single or families. Thus, other scholars have analysed workhouse admission and discharge registers (Medway, Leicester, Hatfield, Hertford), with some authors focusing upon particular groups of inmates, such as children, the elderly, or unmarried mothers.[73] Heritage, Hinde and Clifford have combined the census with relief applications and records of admissions to and discharges from workhouses to assess the impact of previous household living arrangements upon pauperism among the elderly in late-Victorian Alton and Winchester, Hampshire, and

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Ripon, in the West Riding of Yorkshire.[74] Nevertheless, the advantage of the census is that repeat entrants are not counted and '[t]he census provides a clearer picture of the workhouse population' at a given moment and facilitates comparison over a long period.[75]

Analyses of the census have shown that the elderly were heavily overrepresented in the workhouse compared to their proportion in the underlying population. In Hertfordshire, for instance, those aged 60 years or older formed 29.9 per cent of inmates but only 7.7 per cent of the county population in 1851.[76] In 1881 in the counties of Lancashire, Kent and Derbyshire, and in Belper, Derbyshire, at least one-third of workhouse populations were over 60, with 44 per cent in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.[77] Moreover, residence in the workhouse was heavily skewed towards older men: the sex ratio of all workhouses in England and Wales was between 129 and 147.[78] This predominance of older men was as true of largely rural, agricultural unions as urban manufacturing ones. In Hertfordshire the sex ratio peaked at 274 in 1870–1872 and by 1891 aged men were more than three times as likely as older women to be in the workhouse, while in rural Lancashire it was even higher at 297 in 1881.[79] In Ripon, a half rural and half urban union, it was 300 in 1881, and in urban, manufacturing Preston the sex ratio was 204 in 1851.[80]

The scholarship has complicated any simple notion of a 'north-south' divide in poor relief for the elderly in Victorian England and contributes to discussion of regional welfare cultures.[81] Boyer has shown that, in terms of the pauperism rate (indoor and outdoor relief) of those aged 65 or over in 1891–2 from figures published in a Parliamentary Paper, there was evidence of a north-south divide, with the North West, Yorkshire, and the North having the highest rates and the South West, East, South Midlands, and London having the lowest. However, this simple geography did not extend to the use of the workhouse, which varied markedly by registration divisions: 20–30 per cent of those aged 65 and above were relieved indoors in the South East, West Midlands, and North, and 33.8 per cent in the North West, and 58.1 per cent in London.[82] Other studies have shown that there were differences *within* counties. Heritage found differences within the counties he studied in terms of the rate of old age pauperism (Hertfordshire, Hampshire, Yorkshire, Cheshire), which points to a less regional and more local pattern of difference, while Gritt and Park's analysis of the 1881 census for Lancashire shows that those aged over 60 accounted for larger proportions of workhouse populations in conurbations (those areas dominated by Liverpool and Manchester) (39 per cent), than rural (34 per cent), and urban-industrial (32 per cent). While there were more elderly men than women in all three, it was more markedly so in urban-industrial unions and even more so in rural. Heritage has called for historians to develop 'a more nuanced understanding of the "regionalism" of old age' over and above a 'north-south' divide.[83]

Whilst studies of workhouse populations provide essential contextual and comparative evidence, they are relatively few in number, most of which cover between one and three census years, which means that our understanding of workhouse populations and change over time is fragmented, bound by location and date. An emphasis upon local studies over-emphasises regional differences. Analysis of the I-CeM data set and the use of GIS means that the characteristics of the aged

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poor in the workhouse can be assessed within the registration divisions for England used by Boyer, includes 1851 (which Boyer's data does not), and more counties than examined by Heritage; indeed, all counties in England and Wales. It thus provides an opportunity to develop a more complex picture of the 'regionalism' of old age pauperism in the workhouse. This study has taken 60 as the lower threshold for old age and calculates figures in five-year age groups so that the effect of increasing age can be ascertained.[84] This article now turns to consider what the I-Cem data set can tell us about the age and sex of aged inmates, and the geography of old age pauperism at the level of the union. Reasons for admission are examined for Hatfield, Norwich, and Bromley workhouses. It then examines the impact of the crusade against out-relief upon the role of the workhouse for elderly recipients of poor relief and the effects of the introduction of old age pensions upon the aged in the workhouse.

4. Age of inmates

Able-bodied adults formed a smaller proportion of workhouse populations than their percentage in the underlying population: in the sample analysed for this article men aged 20–59 formed between 12.3 and 21.5 per cent of inmates, while women accounted for between 17.5 and 19.8 per cent; in 1881 this age group constituted around 44 per cent of the overall underlying population.[85] In contrast, in 1851 those aged 60 and above were 26.5 per cent of inmates, but by 1901 they formed 51.0 per cent, compared to only 7.4 per cent of the wider population in the 1880s.[86] The proportion of children and adolescents in the workhouse reduced from the later nineteenth century onwards as they were either boarded out with foster parents or relatives or sent to separate district schools or 'cottage' homes.[87] This trend contributed to the inflation of the proportion of the elderly in the workhouse. These data indicate that the age of 60 was an important threshold for the aged poor: it was at 60 that there was a step-change in the proportion of those aged 60 or above of both men and women in the workhouse (Figure 2). It might be assumed that many of these workhouse residents were not just regarded as old but were no longer able-bodied. Historians have argued that the very term 'non-able-bodied' used in the collection of poor law statistics before 1890 largely related to the elderly.[88]

MacKinnon, Thane and Boyer all argue that the aged poor might also have been more willing to enter the workhouse as more was spent on workhouses and as conditions improved from the 1890s, especially medical provision and hospital care, and that this was particularly evident in urban unions.[89] Moreover, the workhouse was now perceived to offer the aged who needed it appropriate care and treatment.[90] This might well account for the continuing rise in the elderly relieved in the workhouse at the end of the nineteenth century, but not why the proportion had been increasing throughout the second half of the century.[91] It is difficult to know just how far the shame associated with the workhouse had actually lessened by the 1890s. The dread of the workhouse was evident in popular publications, journalism, and fiction, and there is evidence of this fear continuing until after the Second World War.[92] In 1894 Booth argued that, 'The aversion to the "House" is almost universal, and almost any amount of suffering and privation will be endured by the people rather than go into it', but he put this down more

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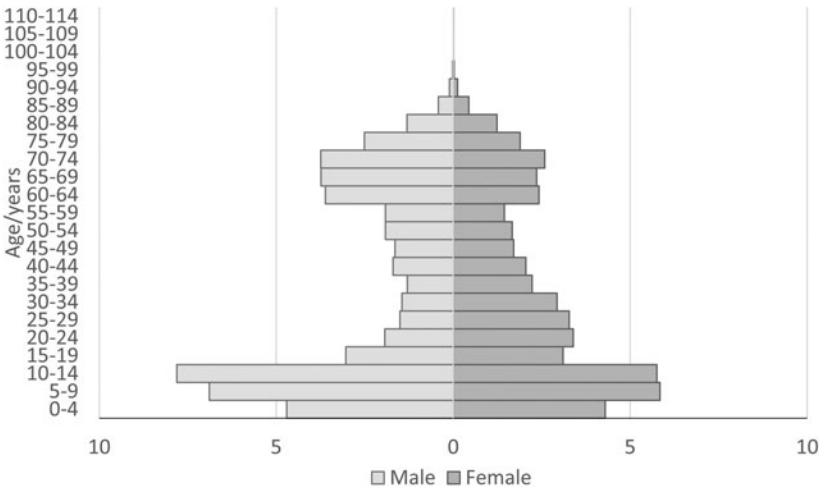

(a)

(b)

Figure 2. (a–f) Sex and age of workhouse inmates, 1851–1911 (per cent): (a) 1851; (b) 1861; (c) 1881; (d) 1891; (e) 1901; (f) 1911.
Source: Schurer, K., Higgs, E. (2020). Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851–1911. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7481, doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2.

to 'sentiment' than the reality of conditions in the workhouse, and he also maintained that, 'In most places the aged are said to be comfortable and contented in the workhouse when they once make up their mind to go there'.[93]

Not only were there changes evident in the workhouse population over time but there were significant differences by place (Figure 3).[94] The maps demonstrate that workhouse populations were generally younger in 1851 and they had an

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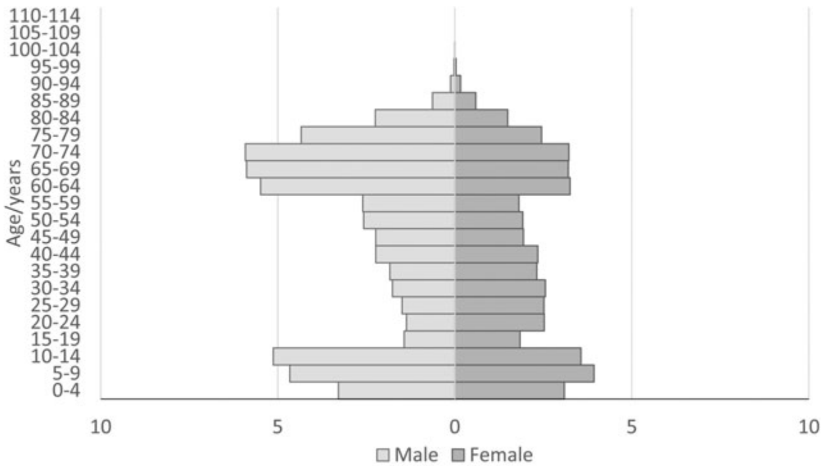
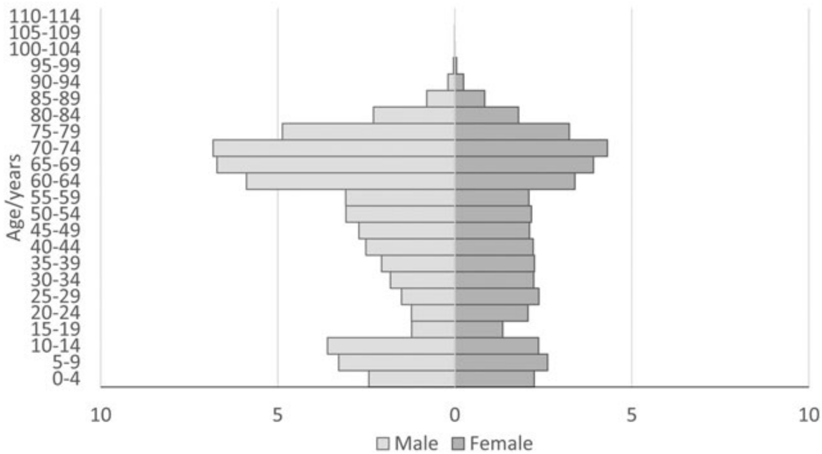


(c)



(d)

Figure 2. Continued.

increasingly ageing population thereafter. The ratio of the aged to working-age adults was relatively low in 1851 compared to subsequent years, but there were more elderly inmates in and around London and into Kent, as well as in parts of the North and West Ridings of Yorkshire. The map of 1861 reveals a marked ageing of workhouse inmates since 1851. These findings – a younger population in 1851 that transformed into an ageing one by 1861 – confirm those of Heritage's study.[95]

By 1881 there were significantly more elderly men and women in Wales in particular: in the workhouses in Machynlleth, Rhayader, and a cluster in South Wales.

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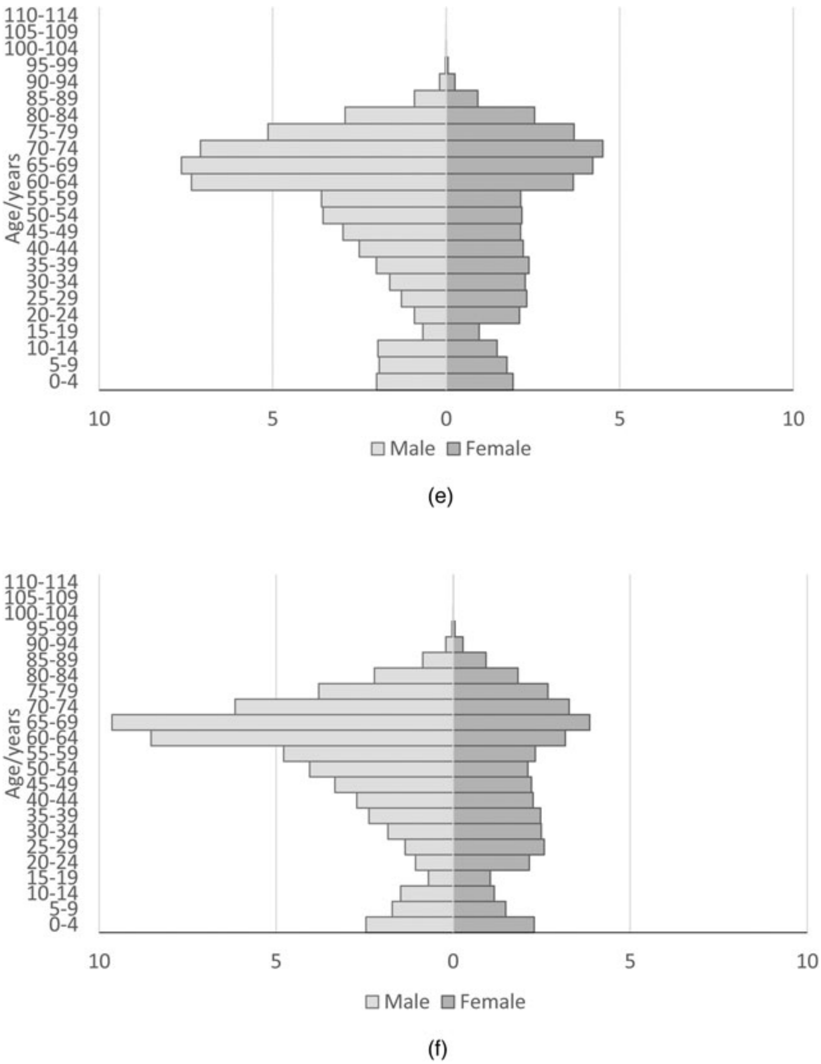

Figure 2. Continued.

This supports Croll's research on changes in later nineteenth-century Wales and adds Wales to the discussion on regional welfare cultures.[96] There was also a concentration of elderly populations in the North of England, and a high ratio in Islington, London, and Hendon, Middlesex, with more middling ratios in Cornwall. These ratios were more muted by 1891. Lesser increases were evident in the East Midlands. There was a darkening of the map in 1901, but without the very high ratios in particular places that were displayed in 1881, with many areas exhibiting middling ratios across the Southeast of England and South Wales, and the East Midlands, while rates in London remained high. Overall, ratios had lessened by 1911, but with exceptions in the Northwest and parts of Wales and

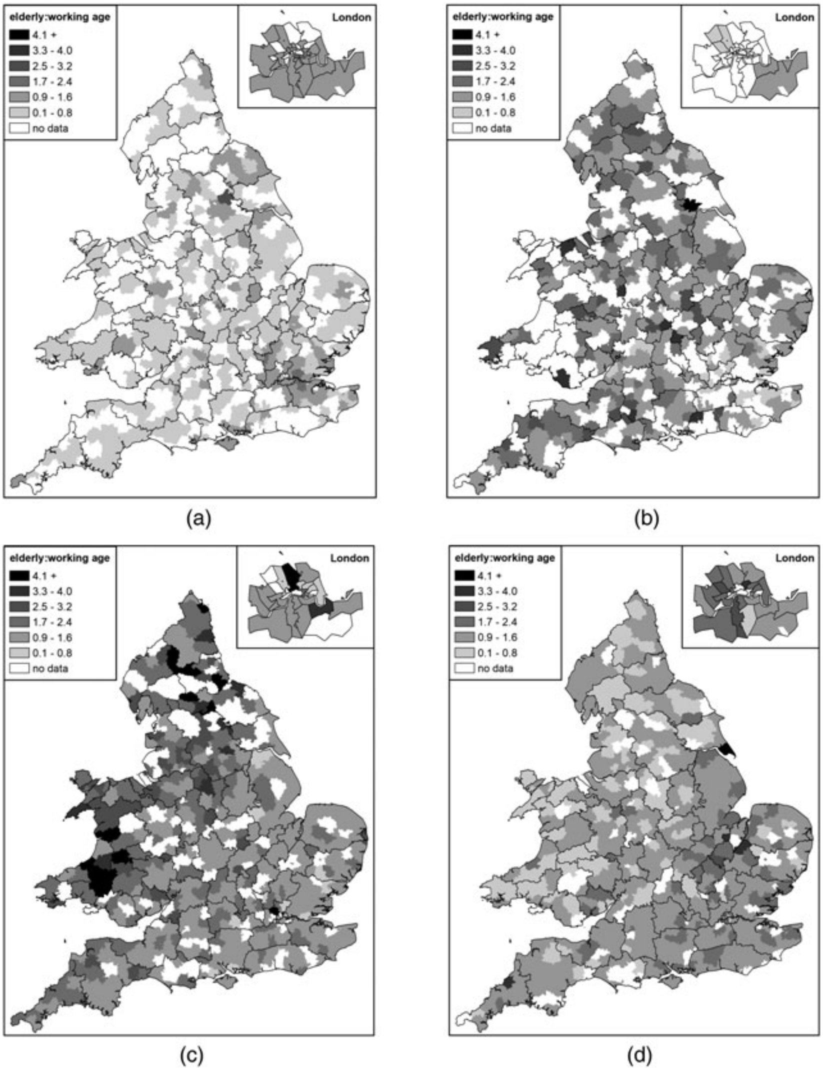

Figure 3. (a–f) Ratio of the elderly (60+) to working age (20–59) inmates in the workhouse: (a) 1851; (b) 1861; (c) 1881; (d) 1891; (e) 1901; (f) 1911.
Source: K. Schürer and E. Higgs (2020). Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851–1911. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7481, doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2.

Cornwall. London changed markedly between 1901 and 1911, with a noteworthy decline in the ratios in almost all unions. Between 1901 and 1911 it would appear that the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 – between the 1901 and 1911 censuses – had reduced the proportion of the elderly in the workhouse; the impact of old age pensions is discussed further below.

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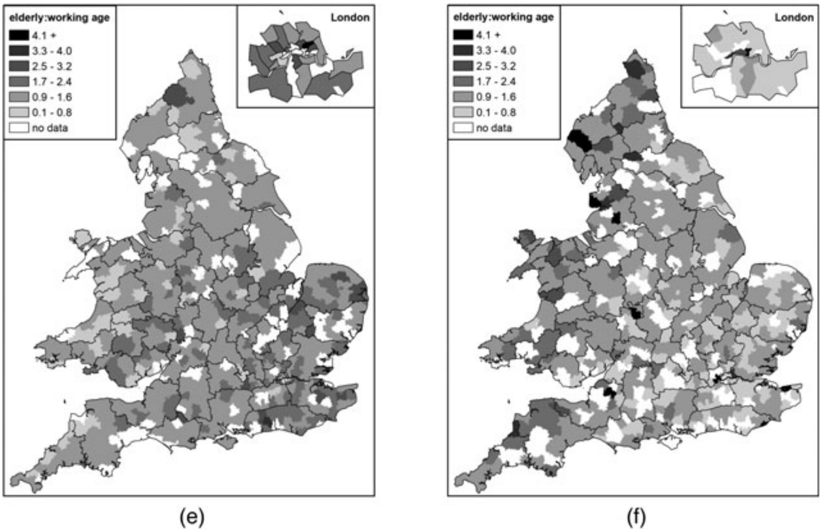

Figure 3. Continued.

High proportions of elderly workhouse populations match well – but not perfectly – with the old age dependency ratios for the same years.[97] As the working population migrated to manufacturing, mining and urban centres these areas grew younger, meaning that there was a 'greying' of the countryside; older men and women were left without adult children nearby.[98] High old age dependency ratios (12.0–13.9 elderly people per 100 working-age people) were recorded in the East, South Midlands, Southwest, and Wales, and increasingly very high (more than 14.0) in much of Norfolk and Suffolk, some of Cornwall, Dorset, Devon, and Somerset, and South Wales. Low ratios (less than 4.0 or 4.0–5.9) were present in London, Lancashire, and the Ridings of Yorkshire, and around Newcastle upon Tyne and around Cardiff. Thus, high numbers of the elderly in Norfolk and Suffolk, Cornwall, and South Wales contributed to an ageing population in their workhouses, but this was not the case in London and the north, where other factors must have been responsible.

The results of this mapping provide little evidence of any simple north-south divide in regional welfare cultures with regard to the aged poor, but London and the north stand out. Boyer highlights just how different London was compared to other large cities and cites Booth, who argued that the metropolis was 'apart from the rest of the country'.[99] London spent twice as much as the rest of the country on workhouse provision relative to outdoor relief. As Green highlights, 'London parishes were among the most consistent advocates of indoor relief'.[100] Boyer has also highlighted the North West. The findings presented here reveal that there were workhouses with large proportions of the elderly more broadly across all of the north, not just the North West. There was, therefore, a more mixed and localised picture within these wider northern regions. London and northern areas had workhouses with larger elderly workhouse populations and greater percentages of indoor relief for the aged. One reason for this was high levels of urbanisation;

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many urban centres relied more heavily upon institutional relief.[101] Thus, it was poor law policy (in favour of institutions), rather than the dependency ratio, which was the predominant factor in swelling aged workhouse populations in these areas. There were other areas, too, that come to prominence in the data analysed here, which included, at times and in parts, Cornwall, the East Midlands, and the Southeast. This study has also found that parts of Wales were also prominent. Urbanisation was the most important factor in accounting for the increase in the proportion of the elderly poor in the workhouse in the decades before the crusade against out-relief. Internal migration had two effects: a high dependency ratio in some rural areas and a commitment to institutions in urban centres. But this is as far as any analysis of the 'geography' of workhouses can be pushed since these data reveal a high degree of localism. The picture of the elderly in the workhouse at the union level and within registration divisions complicates any attempt to draw a picture of regional welfare cultures other than at the broadest levels.

5. Gender and geography of the indoor poor

Gender was highly significant. The increase in the proportion of workhouse inmates aged 60 and over in this study was largely of aged men: the percentage of female elderly residents hovered between 17.5 and 18.7 per cent, whereas aged men formed 13.3 per cent in 1851, rising to 21.5 per cent in 1911. In the total workhouse population of inmates of all ages, the sex ratio shifted from one favouring females in 1850–52 (96) to one with more males in 1900–02 (126).[102] In contrast, the sex ratios analysed here of the aged in workhouses were dominated by older men, with figures over 145 for all censuses in the age groups 60–64, 65–69 and 70–74, and as high as 269 and 250 for the age groups 60–64 and 65–69 respectively in 1911. Women only outnumbered men in the very elderly age groups (85–89 years and over in 1851 and 1911 and 90–94 and over in 1861, 1881–1901), where they were over-represented in the workhouse population, and when numbers of the aged in the workhouse were much smaller. At the point when compulsory registration started in 1837 it was evident that women outlived men.[103] In 1881, for instance, there were more women than men in the underlying population, and particularly so over the age of 85 (Table 2).[104]

These ratios are for all the workhouses extracted from the census for England and Wales; although these figures reveal the general preponderance of elderly men, these are 'national' figures and there is a smoothing of the data. When mapped per workhouse, there was far greater variation in sex ratios (Figure 4). The most striking result of mapping these workhouses is, again, the heavy dominance of older men (pale shading), but with wide variations and with a smattering of workhouses with a greater proportion of women (dark shading). London and Cornwall, in particular, stand out as having a high ratio of elderly female workhouse inmates (0.1–50.0); London had an underlying sex ratio favouring elderly women during the nineteenth century.[105] But the most noteworthy aspect of Figure 4 is the number of workhouses with sex ratios of 110.1–160.0 and those over 160. Older men increasingly dominated workhouse populations. Moreover, this was so general that factors such as the level of wages do not offer a sufficient explanation.[106]

Table 2. Number of elderly male and female inmates in workhouses and sex ratio, 1851–1911

	1851			1861			1881		
Age	M	F	Sex ratio*	M	F	Sex ratio*	M	F	Sex ratio*
60–64	2,840	1,906	149	2,079	1,295	161	6,871	4,079	168
65–69	2,937	1,856	158	2,301	1,229	187	7,369	4,019	183
70–74	2,944	2,033	145	2,584	1,365	189	7,410	4,038	184
75–79	1,974	1,488	133	1,718	983	175	5,433	3,074	177
80–84	1,026	972	106	928	599	155	2,811	1,872	150
85–89	329	346	95	283	247	115	786	744	106
90–94	85	96	89	69	79	87	145	207	70
95–99	17	19	89	45	48	94	27	43	63
100–104	2	4	50	0	5	0	2	6	33
	1891			1901			1911		
60–64	6,891	3,975	173	9,707	4,844	200	9,842	3,658	269
65–69	7,868	4,588	171	10,093	5,585	181	11,115	4,450	250
70–74	7,994	5,048	158	9,366	5,969	157	7,107	3,782	188
75–79	5,703	3,788	151	6,790	4,871	139	4,382	3,089	142
80–84	2,688	2,108	128	3,853	3,368	114	2,567	2,112	122
85–89	926	992	93	1,208	1,203	100	990	1,072	92
90–94	222	290	77	249	329	76	239	320	75
95–99	43	60	72	32	70	46	35	55	64
100–104	3	7	43	7	5	140	3	5	60

Source: Schurer, K., Higgs, E. (2020). Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851–1911. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7481, doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2
Notes: *A sex ratio over 100 indicates more men than women, whereas a sex ratio under 100 indicates more women than men.

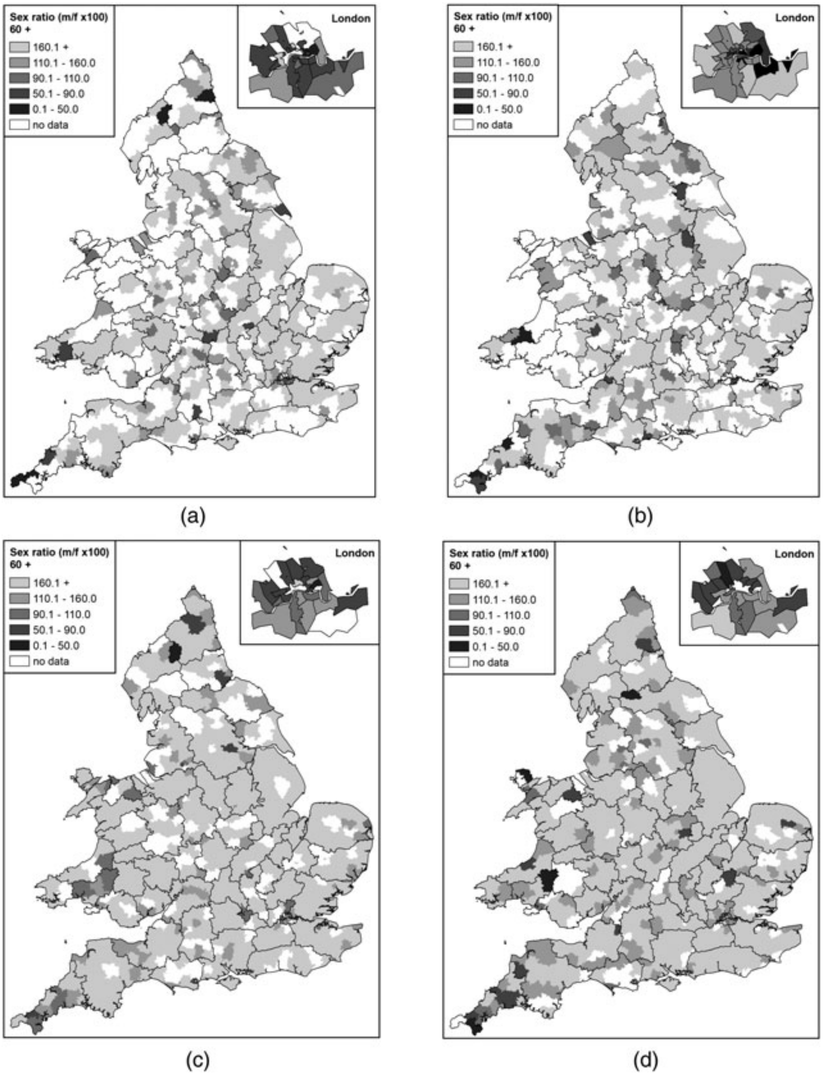

Figure 4. (a–f) Sex ratio of the elderly (60+) in the workhouse: (a) 1851; (b) 1861; (c) 1881; (d) 1891; (e) 1901; (f) 1911.
Source: K. Schürer and E. Higgs (2020). Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851–1911. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7481, doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2.

The plight of elderly men has been highlighted most notably by Goose, who argues for mid-century Hertfordshire that 'in some circumstances men may be equally or even more vulnerable' than older women, and that 'the situation of elderly men worsened considerably with the New Poor Law'.[107] This was, in part, because widows were allowed outdoor relief for an extended period after legislation in 1846 and 1848, and women outnumbered men on outdoor relief, as they found it easier to establish their right to assistance.[108] He attributes more men in the

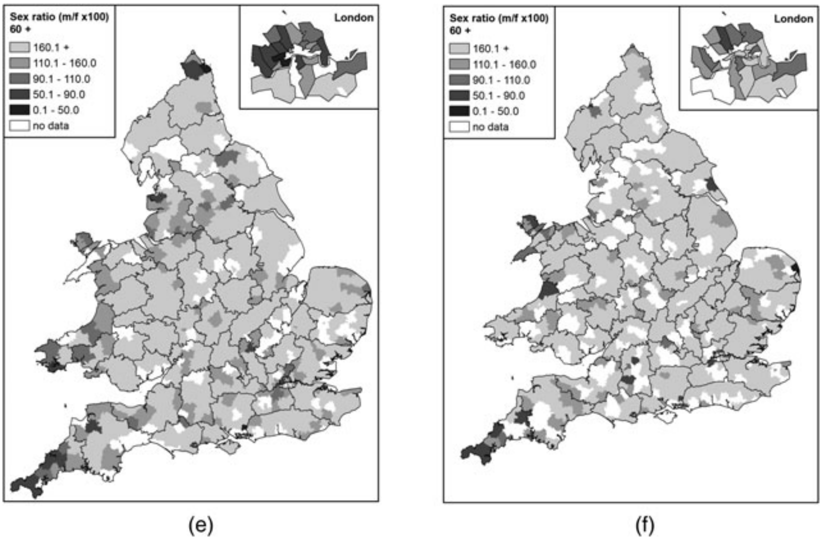

Figure 4. Continued.

workhouse on census night in Hertfordshire to the fact that there were too few lighter springtime agricultural tasks suited to less able men.[109] Levine-Clark has highlighted for the Black Country that '[f]or an older man to become a deserving dependant, welfare authorities had to recognise that he was no longer able to work' and that this 'constituted a major life change'.[110] Men continued to be assessed for their capability to work even after the age of 70.[111] This could have significant implications for masculine identity: as Doolittle points out 'the threat of the workhouse and the loss of autonomy and authority it entailed' was used to keep men in work as long as possible or encourage them to exploit all other sources of support.[112] Certainly, many of the men in the data analysed here would have felt keenly the major life change of ending work identified by Levine-Clark as they were admitted to the workhouse. The vast majority of the elderly men admitted to workhouses had never had or no longer had wives: in 1881 84 per cent were unmarried or widowed.[113]

Local officials denied treating old men differently to aged women.[114] Nevertheless, there is evidence that suggests that they did. A Local Government Board in a circular in 1896 encouraged officials to base decisions of whether to offer indoor or outdoor relief upon the character of the applicants 'whose physical faculties have failed by reason of age and infirmity' and that relief should be allocated only to those 'who are shown to have been of good character, thrifty according to their opportunities, and generally independent in early life'.[115] Booth argued that older women were more likely than aged men to be in receipt of outdoor relief because 'a very large number of [women] are decent respectable people'; 'respectability' for the aged poor was gendered.[116]

Older women also had more avenues of support than aged men: as well as being more likely to be given outdoor relief, they might also make ends meet outside the

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workhouse with tasks such as childcare, nursing, charring, undertaking laundry work and sewing, and taking in lodgers. They might also qualify for almshouses in greater numbers than older men.[117] Sentiment and practicality might also have meant that older women were treated preferentially by their families.[118] Booth found that adult children, other relatives, and friends were far more likely to help aged women than older men.[119] Crowther even suggests that 'affectionate ties with the mother were likely to be stronger', given the patriarchal nature of working-class families.[120] Strange has recently revised ideas about working-class fatherhood and she shows how the role of provider demonstrated attachment to children.[121] Housewifery skills that meant women were better able to look after themselves in old age than men may also have, according to Goose, 'rendered women more attractive to their families as co-residents', as did a willingness to help with childcare. That they might also be awarded a small amount in regular outdoor relief added to their attraction.[122] Thus, the willingness or otherwise of families to take on responsibility for their elderly relatives was markedly gendered. Men had fewer paths to relief and thus ended up in the workhouse.[123]

That more older men entered the workhouse as the nineteenth century wore on provides support for Macnicol's argument that older men were increasingly excluded from paid employment in the later nineteenth century.[124] Men were victims of 'life-cycle skilling' as they moved into low-skilled and poorly paid occupations as they aged. Moreover, as Boyer has shown, employment opportunities for low-skilled workers after 1892 deteriorated both in absolute and relative terms compared with those of skilled workers.[125] His research reveals that the unemployment rate for unskilled labourers was below 10 per cent every year between 1870 and 1892 but thereafter it was above 10 per cent in every year except four, 1893–1913. Moreover, the vagrancy rate – the very poorest, casually employed men – followed the unemployment rate for unskilled workers.[126] This fed into contemporary (mis)understandings of the emerging discourse on old age, which was expressed in highly masculinist, and militaristic, terms, with a focus upon the 'worn-out worker' who had been 'de-mobilised' from the 'industrial army', despite the fact that there were nearly twice as many old women as men after 1908 and that they were more likely to receive outdoor relief.[127] The Royal Commission on the aged poor of 1895 reported that there was an assumption that the elderly who could look after themselves should not be sent to the workhouse; likewise, Booth noted that, '[i]f quite broken down or worn out they go to the workhouse.'[128]

7. Reasons for admission

Reasons for admission to the workhouse were not given in the census and the studies which have used admission and discharge registers – which can give reason for admission – have not considered reasons for admission of the aged separately.[129] Thus, three case studies are presented here: admissions for those aged 60 or above for Hatfield workhouse for the period 1834–1861 and for Norwich in 1881, and the cases collected by Booth from the relieving officer of Poplar Union in 1889.[130]

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'Destitution' was the reason most frequently given in both Hatfield and Norwich, followed by want of work, rather than old age and/or infirmity.[131] 'Destitution' might be understood as 'without the very necessaries of life or means of bare subsistence, in absolute want'.[132] Destitution accounted for 29.5 per cent of admissions in Hatfield and 37.8 per cent in Norwich, while lack of work was given in 23.9 per cent of instances in Hatfield and 26.4 per cent in Norwich. Lack of work as a reason for admission was highly gendered: 91.0 per cent of cases of lack of employment in Hatfield were for men and 94.2 per cent in Norwich. Unemployment was given as a reason for the admission of those aged 60 or above all the way up to the age of 89 in Hatfield, although in Norwich this reason was given for men up to the age of 82, but only to age 70 for women. In Hatfield, old age as a reason for admission, sometimes accompanied by destitution, illness, infirmity, and lack of work, was recorded in 11.6 per cent of admissions; infirmity, sometimes with lack of work, was given in a further 13.5 per cent, illness in 12.6 per cent, and disability in 5.5 per cent.[133] Classification was central to the ethos of the Poor Law, and the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor of 1895 reported that St Pancras workhouse categorised aged inmates into the healthy, the infirm, and 'imbeciles'; but Chase argues that there was considerable blurring between the last two and between accommodating the elderly in the workhouse or the asylum.[134] In Hatfield there was evidence of further blurring of reasons for admission given by the admitting officer, with 8 per cent of admissions given for more than one reason, suggesting that age brought with it multiple factors that pushed the aged into the workhouse, but this made any attempt at singular classification problematic.

In Norwich 17.4 per cent of admissions were for illness, 4.5 per cent as 'imbeciles', and 3.0 per cent were disabled.[135] In Norwich, old age was only given only once as a reason for admission, and infirmity just five times. For those aged over 60, it is difficult to know exactly what these descriptions meant and how many were without sufficient full-time or part-time work and how many could no longer work through old age, infirmity, and disability: the reasons given include 'unable to work', 'no work', 'want of employment', and 'unable to obtain work'. It is probable that the reasons given by the admitting workhouse officer reflected both groups: those who were still working, but at low wages and/or part-time, and those who were now effectively past work and 'unable to obtain work' due to frailty. In Hatfield, duration in the house of men aged 60 or above reflects that there was a minority who might be considered able-bodied and a majority who were non-able-bodied: 25 per cent only stayed up to a month, 38 per cent between one and six months, with a further 18 per cent for six months to one year and 19 per cent for more than a year. One-fifth of older inmates died in the workhouse, including some of those admitted for short periods of time, but those who died in the house were more commonly those who had been inside for years.

The blurring of reasons for admission for those aged over 60 was more striking for the admissions to Bromley workhouse, whose relieving officer gave up to four reasons for admission with an elaborate alphabetical system.[136] These 'causes of pauperisation index letters' include a whole host of moral, as well as medical, social, economic, and familial reasons for admission, including 'D' for 'drink', 'E' for extravagance, 'J' for immortality, and 'L' for laziness'. Lees characterises these as a 'confusion of categories'.[137] The figures are not directly comparable with those

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for Hatfield and Norwich because they are not singular, but are proportions of all those given.[138] Old age was the most frequently given reason, at 26.6 per cent, and illness accounted for 20.2 per cent, followed by absence or irregularity of work (12.8 per cent). Loss of spouse was given in 3.5 per cent of cases, with only small numbers for or none allocated for the remaining letters.

In sum, destitution, old age, want of work, and illness formed the core of reasons for why aged men and women applied for indoor relief. Lack of appropriate work, or the inability to work, was highly gendered, as might be expected for Victorian men. Older men might have to enter the workhouse due to a temporary lack of work – since even aged men were expected to continue to work for as long as they were able – while others were there because they could no longer look after themselves, either through inability to get sufficient work, or inability to work due to infirmity, disability, and illness. The Royal Commission of 1895 stated that the aged should not be sent to workhouses if they could look after themselves.[139]

8. The crusade against out-relief and old age pensions

Both the 'crusade against out-relief' of the 1870s and the introduction of old age pensions in 1908 had significant impacts upon old age indoor pauperism. The data presented here do not relate to the proportion of the elderly relieved, or the relative proportions of outdoor to indoor relief of aged paupers. Instead, Figure 3 maps elderly inmates as a proportion of inmates of working age, and this exercise reveals a marked darkening in the shading (the proportion of the aged in the workhouse) between 1861 and 1881, reinforcing the findings of others that the crusade resulted in a greater proportion of the workhouse population being elderly. The ageing of the workhouse population was especially marked in 1881. Wales, in particular, recorded much higher elderly populations and the maps expose the significant impact of the crusade in the principality despite enduring resistance to workhouses.[140] Although the 1871 census is missing from the larger data set (and so also this sample), this is not as serious an omission as it might at first sight seem for assessing the impact of the crusade. Boyer's figures for the share of older paupers relieved in the workhouse by registration divisions reveal that changes between 1861 and 1871 were small and the larger changes were evident only by 1881.[141] These findings also confirm those of Boyer that the proportion of older men relieved in the workhouse following the crusade rose far more than for aged women.[142] The year 1881 stands out as one with particularly aged workhouse populations in certain places across England and Wales.

An unintended consequence of the harsher treatment of old people in some districts resulting from the crusade was heightened public awareness of poverty in old age as a discrete problem, especially relative to the rising living standards of many working people in the later nineteenth century.[143] Booth's survey of the *Aged Poor* (1894), assessing the outcome of the crusade upon the aged poor, found that its impact was felt particularly in London, Liverpool, Manchester, Salford, and Birmingham, with a decrease of 68 per cent in the number of the elderly poor given outdoor relief, 1871–1893, compared to 37 per cent nationally.[144] B. Seebohm Rowntree found that illness or old age of the chief wage earner

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accounted for 5.11 per cent of those in primary poverty in York in 1899 and he recognised that those in primary poverty 'cannot save, nor can they join sick club or trade union, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions.'[145] The elderly poor were usually 'dependent upon public and private charity for their support', while those aged 65 or older accounted for 48.8 per cent of inmates in York workhouse.[146]

The introduction of means-tested old age pensions from 1908 for those aged 70 and above reduced markedly the number of the elderly on outdoor relief but had less impact upon those in the workhouse.[147] Recipients of outdoor relief aged over 70 totalled 168,100 in 1906, falling to 9,500 in 1912; the numbers in the workhouse were less affected: in 1906 there were 61,400 inmates aged 70 or above, 57,700 in 1910, and 49,300 in 1912.[148] Those on outdoor relief were increasingly awarded 5*s*. a week in line with old age pensions. Despite the provision of state pensions and increases in outdoor relief, thousands of those over the age of 70, and particularly men, still ended up on indoor relief.[149] Indeed, the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1909 realised that old age pensions would not reduce the numbers in the workhouse since the pension sum was insufficient to enable the infirm elderly poor to support themselves outside.[150] Heritage argues that 'the Old Age Pension Act did not stop the increase in elderly workhouse inmates' in Cheshire, Glamorgan, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, or the West Riding of Yorkshire.[151] Apart from a few exceptions, there is little discussion in the historiography about the continued presence of the elderly in the workhouse after the introduction of old age pensions.

The introduction of old age pensions did not remove those aged 70 and above from workhouses, but they did reduce their number. Figure 2 reveals a marked fall in the proportion of those aged 70 and above in the sample workhouses between 1901 and 1911. This is reinforced by Figure 5, which maps those of pensionable age (70 or over) in 1901 and 1911 as a ratio to those of working age and there is a marked lightening of the map of 1911. In 1901 the highest proportions were scattered across all of England, but with particular concentrations in Norfolk, in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, in Kent, in the North Riding market town of Northallerton and the East Riding of Yorkshire town of Bridlington and union of Patrington, Somerset and Dorset, Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, and there was a cluster of unions in Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Warwickshire. Mile End New Town in London had a high proportion of adults over 70, whereas Wales had no workhouses with very high proportions aged 70 or over.

By 1911, three years after the introduction of old age pensions in 1908, it is evident that there had been a reduction in the proportion of those aged 70 and over in workhouses. Those aged 70 or above accounted for 28.3 per cent of all workhouse populations in 1901 and 22.4 per cent in 1911 (Figure 2).[152] There was a rise in the proportion of men aged 60–69 years old – i.e., they were too young to claim an old age pension – between 1901 and 1911 from 15.0 per cent to 18.2 per cent, but not for women. Despite the fall in the percentage aged over 70, the very old still remained prominent in number in workhouses after 1908 in this sample.[153] Heritage also found that those aged 60–69 had increased between 1891 and 1911 in five counties, as did Seal for Cheltenham and Belper.[154] There were therefore two trends: one was the continued increase of the elderly in the workhouse for those aged 60–69, but with an accompanying decrease in those aged over 70 years old. The pension meant that at least some aged, able-bodied men could

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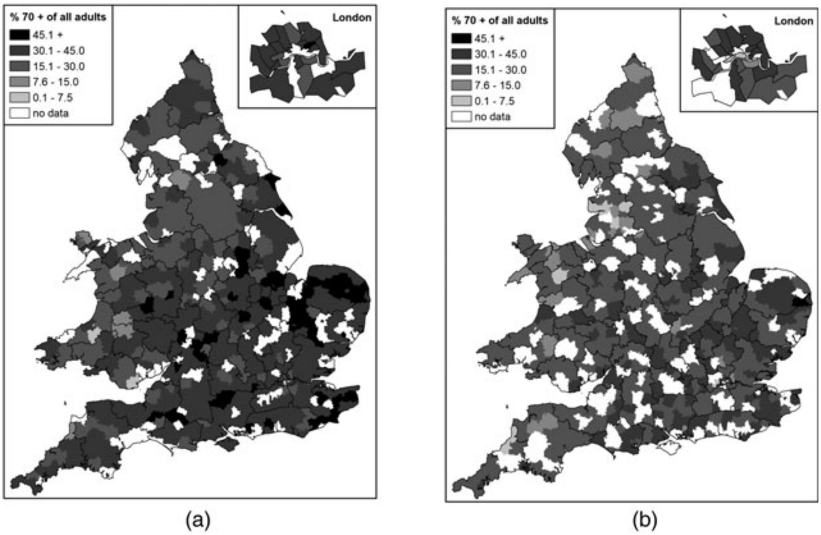

Figure 5. (a–b) Ratio of the elderly (70+) to working age (20–59) inmates in the workhouse: (a) 1901; (b) 1911. *Source*: K. Schürer and E. Higgs (2020). Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM), 1851–1911. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7481, doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7481-2.

make ends meet outside the workhouse. That the introduction of old age pensions did not have a larger effect is testament to the fact that pension payments were insufficient to support the infirm elderly outside of the workhouse.[155]

9. Conclusion

The aged poor were heavily over-represented in the Victorian and Edwardian English and Welsh workhouse. The I-CeM data set reveals the composition of workhouse residents in almost 4,000 workhouses over sixty years; the proportion of the elderly in these workhouses almost doubled, from 26.5 per cent of those inside in 1851 to 51.0 in 1901 and fell only slightly to 47.5 per cent in 1911. Sixty years old was regarded as an important threshold at which older men and women might be considered as deserving either of a regular outdoor allowance or of residence in the local workhouse, and it was at this age that there was a step-change in the ages of those in the workhouse.

Gender was a primary determinant of residence. Age was related to ability – or inability – to work, particularly for men. Men in their sixties, seventies and eighties might receive poor relief because they were still able to work but were unemployed or because they had become infirm. However, most were in the workhouse because they were seen as less 'respectable' than old women – and therefore less likely to be awarded outdoor relief – or because they could no longer care for themselves. This situation affected men to a far greater degree than aged women, who had a wider range of avenues of support, either through small jobs, outdoor relief, or living with their adult children. There were areas where this did not hold true: London and Cornwall displayed greater concentrations of aged women in workhouses, reflecting

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the underlying imbalance of women to men. In London, there was high demand for domestic servants, needlework, and laundry work, while Cornwall had a high dependency ratio.[156] Nevertheless, these data have shown that workhouse populations were overwhelmingly male. Aged men were considerably more vulnerable to poverty and that resulted in their admission to a workhouse; many aged men were unable to support themselves outside. As this article has shown, likelihood of residence in the workhouse was a heavily gendered experience. The 'plight of poor old men' has been amply highlighted in this study.[157]

The 'north-south' divide of old-age outdoor poverty is not evident here in the elderly populations of workhouses. This article has revealed that the geography of indoor old age pauperism was characterised by particular concentrations in London, across the northern regions, the Southwest, East Midlands, Southeast, and parts of Wales. Migration, urbanisation, poor law policy, and a deteriorating labour market for low-skilled and casual workers contributed to the ageing of the workhouse. Workhouses in areas with a high underlying elderly dependency ratio, such as the East, South Midlands, the Southwest, and Wales, were more likely to have aged populations. This factor was of much less importance in London and the northern regions, where the dependency ratios were low, and instead urbanisation and poor law policies favouring institutional relief were the deciding factors. Also evident is the high degree of localism in the geography of pauperism and union policy that historians agree continued to characterise the poor law. However, given the widespread nature of this ageing, it is unlikely that wage differentials or dominant industries can account for this trend. More convincing is the explanation that employment opportunities for men in low-skilled occupations contracted and the vagrancy rate rose, pushing older men on to the poor law and, increasingly, into the workhouse.

The two most important policy changes – the crusade against outrelief and the introduction of old age pensions in 1908 – had significant impacts upon workhouse populations. The crusade resulted in a large reduction in outdoor relief to the aged poor and a substantial increase in the percentage of aged paupers who were relieved in the workhouse, the impact of which was particularly significant in Wales and some of the north. 1881 stands out as a year with particularly aged workhouse populations in certain places across England and Wales – and it is a particularly striking image of the impact of the crusade – but the trend towards indoor relief continued. Improving workhouse conditions and the provision of medical care no doubt reinforced this trend towards institutionalisation. Social investigation by Booth, and later by Rowntree, of the aged poor contributed to the much wider discourse on the aged poor and reflection on the social condition of this age group. The recognition that many of the elderly had simply not earned enough when they were in middle age to save for their old age was recognised with the introduction of non-contributory means-tested state old age pensions in 1908. The fall in the proportion in the workhouse over the age of 70 years old – but by no means their elimination – was due to the introduction of state pensions. That pensions (and outdoor relief) were not sufficient to live on meant that those without other means or who could not care for themselves had to apply for admission to the workhouse. For those slightly younger, and not eligible for a pension (aged 60–69), the rise in the elderly contingent of the workhouse continued.

This article has found that the workhouse became increasingly important as both a symbol and a site of poor relief for the elderly in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Discussions of the institutionalisation of the aged poor in workhouses represented them as a 'subculture' within the wider 'subculture' of the 'elderly subject'.[158] Nevertheless, despite increasing social concern for their predicament, and a desire to relieve the elderly poor outside the poor law, the system of old age pensions continued to run in parallel with outdoor relief and accommodation within the workhouse.

Acknowledgements. I owe huge thanks to Gill Newton, for her database skills with the I-CeM data set, and Dr Max Satchel, for his expertise with GIS and mapping the data. I am grateful to the Cambridge Humanities Research Grant Scheme, which funded the research for this article. I would also like to thank Peter Higginbotham, for access to the 1881 workhouse census data, Johanna Purser, for a copy of her transcription of Nottingham workhouse's records for 1881, and Martin Byers, for a copy of St Martin-in-the-Fields's admissions for 1835. Prof Susannah Ottaway gave invaluable comments on a draft of this article. I also owe thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416023000036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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128 Cited by Crowther, *Workhouse system*, 63; Booth, *Aged poor*, 150–1.
129 Jackson, 'Medway Union workhouse'; Goose, 'Poverty, old age and gender'; Heritage, 'Elderly populations'.
130 There were 549 admissions to Hatfield workhouse of those aged 60 and over; 210 in Norwich; and 125 in Bromley (from a 33 per cent sample). The latter are part of a much larger data set of 1,194 cases of people either admitted to the Poplar (able-bodied) or Bromley (infirm) workhouses, sick asylum or at a lunatic asylum, sent to a district school, or were in receipt of outdoor relief, mostly in terms of medical relief or burial fees, with few pensions to the elderly poor. Booth, *Pauperism*, 6.
131 HALS, BG/HAT 41–45 (the remaining of admissions were for accidents, desertion, distress, disability, leaving prison, being removed to Hatfield from elsewhere); NA, N/GP 2/6.
132 'destitute, adj. and n.'. OED Online. June 2022. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/Entry/51087?rskey=kA9BO1&result=1&isAdvanced=false [accessed 1 September 2022]: 'Bereft of resources, resourceless, "in want and misery"; now, without the very necessaries of life or means of bare subsistence, in absolute want'.
133 The remaining of admissions were for accidents, desertion, distress, disability, leaving prison, being removed to Hatfield from elsewhere.
134 Chase, *Victorians and old age*, 6, 40.
135 Reasons for the remaining admissions were for accidents and removals to Norwich workhouse.
136 The average number of reasons was 2.3.
137 Lynn Hollen Lees, *The solidarities of strangers: the English poor laws and the people, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998), 283.
138 There were 125 cases and 282 reasons given.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416023000036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

139 Crowther, *Workhouse system*, 63.
140 Croll, 'The poor law in Wales'.
141 Boyer, *Winding road*, Table 5.5, 141.
142 Ibid., Table 5.10, 153, 154.
143 Thane, *Old age*, 165–93.
144 Ibid., 174–5.
145 Description of 'primary poverty': Rowntree, *Poverty*, 133–4.
146 Rowntree, *Poverty*, 120–24, 377. Rowntree made a case for old age pensions: Rowntree, *Poverty*, 375–82.
147 The pauper disqualification was removed in March 1911 and the 1911 census was conducted on 2 April 1911: Thane, *Old age*, 226.
148 Ibid., 227.
149 Ibid., 227.
150 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress* (HMSO, 1909), *Minority Report*, 280.
151 Heritage, 'Elderly populations', 178.
152 The proportion of men aged 70 or more fell from 16.3 per cent to 13.3 per cent and for women 12.0 per cent to 9.1 per cent.
153 25,760 inmates (representing 52 per cent of workhouses) aged 70 or over, of which 15,323 were men (59.5 per cent) and 10,437 were women (40.5 per cent) (see Table 1).
154 Heritage, 'Elderly populations', Table 4.4, 178; Seal, 'Poor relief and welfare', 200–1.
155 Crowther, *Workhouse system*, 84.
156 L.D. Schwarz, *London in the age of industrialisation: entrepreneurs, labour force and living conditions, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1992), Table 2.3, 47. In 1851 46 per cent of women aged 60 and above were recorded as employed in these three trades.
157 Goose, 'Poverty, old age, and gender', 351–2.
158 Chase, *Victorians and old age*, 5, 276.

French Abstract

Les *workhouses* constituaient l'élément central de la Nouvelle Loi sur les Pauvres et les personnes âgées (en particulier les hommes) en sont venus à dominer la population de ces hospices. Cet article est le premier à analyser un très grand ensemble d'informations digitalisées concernant environ 4 000 établissements de ce type, couvrant toutes les régions d'Angleterre et du Pays de Galles, extraites de la banque de données historiques baptisée I-CeM, laquelle révèle la typologie des résidents de ces institutions durant la nuit de chaque recensement, par âge, sexe et origine géographique, entre 1851 et 1911. Les facteurs influençant la proportion de personnes âgées, dans chaque résidence, comprennent le taux de dépendance et la migration interne, l'urbanisation et l'engagement envers les institutions de la ville, ainsi que la disponibilité – ou non – de secours extérieurs et autres moyens d'aide. Le dénuement, le manque de travail, la vieillesse et la maladie poussèrent beaucoup de vieillards vers les *workhouses*. La croisade des années 1870, contre l'assistance disponible à l'extérieur, a contribué à cette augmentation, et si l'introduction des pensions de vieillesse y a réduit l'effectif des résidents de plus de 70 ans, cela n'a pas empêché les vieux 'plus jeunes' (âgés de 60 à 69 ans) d'augmenter en nombre au sein de ces asiles.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416023000036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

German Abstract

Das Arbeitshaus war eine zentrale Facette des Neuen Armenrechts und die Alten - insbesondere ältere Männer - stellten das Gros der Arbeitshausinsassen. Dieser Beitrag analysiert erstmals eine überaus große Datensammlung für fast 4.000 Arbeitshäuser in allen Regionen in England und Wales, die aus dem I-CeM-Datensatz extrahiert wurde und die zeigt, wie von 1851 bis 1911, jeweils zum Stichtag der Volkszählung, die Arbeitshausinsassen nach Alter, Geschlecht und geographischer Herkunft zusammensetzt waren. Zu den Faktoren, die den Anteil der Älteren in den Arbeitshäusern beeinflussten, zählen die Belastungsrate und die Binnenwanderung, die Urbanisierung und das Institutionalisierungsengagement in den Städten sowie die Verfügbarkeit von Sozialhilfe und anderen Unterstützungsformen. Not, Mangel an Arbeit, Alter und Krankheit trieben die Älteren ins Arbeitshaus. Der in den 1870er unternommene Kreuzzug gegen Sozialhilfe trug zu diesem Zuwachs bei, und obwohl die Zahl der Insassen im Alter von 70 und mehr durch die Einführung von Altersrenten zurückging, wuchs die Zahl der 'jüngeren Alten' (Altersgruppe 60–69) weiterhin an.

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