

# FROM OLD BILLS TO SICK PIGS: FOUR WAYS TO CAPTURE COMMUNITY

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*Researching community history involves a number of skills and approaches. Four are here identified. The first shows how a close textual analysis of two bills, trivial and commonplace though they may be, can be used as windows into community. In a second approach, the testing of hypotheses, with the need to focus down and specify precisely the aim of an investigation, far from being restrictive is shown to open up a range of opportunities. The public service aspect of community history is discussed as a third approach, picking up the comment of Thomson (1986): that 'current debates are rendered shallow by the lack of historical context'. Finally community historians are urged to work together so that the vast amounts of material available can be exploited more effectively.*

## *Two old bills*

I studied at the universities of Cambridge and Oslo in the mid-1950s. As communities of scholars the two were very different. Two bills encapsulate much of that difference. Putting them together highlights it. The first bill, from my college in Cambridge, dropped into my letterbox at the end of 1955. It listed what I owed for various items of expenditure in the Michaelmas Term i.e. October to December of that year. It also listed various sources of income.

We can approach this document in several ways. The first of these is to look at the purely personal — what I paid. Some items, and the amounts due, were fixed: College Dues; College Tuition Fee; College Mission; Club Subscription; Prepayment. These were the inescapable concomitants of being a member of this particular community. Significantly the amounts charged were printed! A second approach to the bill is to look at what I paid under those heads that were variable: the meals contract (you could have three substantial meals a day, seven days a week); the kitchen extras (drink, private entertaining); gate fines (the college was closed at 10.00 p.m. — come in after 11.00 p.m. and a modest fine was levied). Both these approaches stress the ideographic elements of my experience: the specific amounts I paid. But had the monetary column been blank you would still be able to learn a lot about me, and more importantly from the point of view of historical researchers, about elements of community life which were common to my contemporaries in St Catharine's College and, by extension, to all the male undergraduates in Cambridge. Just how common could be discovered by an examination of bills from other colleges. Quantitative exercises would bring out the extent of variability whilst explanations of it could be sought in the comparative wealth of the colleges

and their members, whether the latter were male or female (there were no mixed colleges) etc.

This brings us to a third approach to the bill. Now we move away from the individual items of expenditure and the particular individual's spending. Instead we try to generalize about the experience as a whole by grouping together some of the items, and then attempt to interpret them. Here are one or two examples of this approach.

First the college provided a very comprehensive service. One could, quite literally, stay within the college walls and receive the bulk of one's tuition, all one's food and drink, serviced rooms. You could go outside for lectures but college supervisions were usually far more valuable; to the university or faculty libraries — but the college had its own; to hospital — but the college had its own Sick Bay and formidable matron; to one of the many city churches — but the college had its own chapel. For sport the college had its own facilities too — cricket, rugby and football grounds and pavilions, squash and tennis courts, boats on the river etc. The college was all but a 'total institution' (Goffman 1968: 13–116) analogous to prisons, boarding schools and convents.

Second it is apparent from the bill that the college exerted a great deal of control over what it chose to call, in English, its junior members, or, in Latin, those who were *in statu pupillari*. The fines for coming in 'late' is one obvious form of control. Note too that junior members were 'required' to return after the vacation on a particular day, prior permission from one's Tutor was required for any deviation from this. Payment of the bill had to be made by a particular date too, whilst all bills carried the warning that failure to pay the final term's bill would mean no degree.

What might be termed 'class', 'elitist' or 'establishment' assumptions permeate the bill: the use of Latin; the references to Christianity — Michaelmas, College Mission; the fact that the payment was to be made by cheque (much less common in 1955 than today). These reflect the origins and purpose of the college as being far more than an institution devoted to scholarly activity.

An examination of college rules would reveal that the controls indicated on the bill were but the tip of the iceberg. To leave Cambridge for a day required one form (called an *absit*); for a night or nights, another (an *exeat*). One had personally to visit one's tutor both to take up residence at the beginning of term (a *redeat* was requested) and to depart at the end (an *exeat*). Not revealed in either bills or formal college rules was the weekly grind of essay writing. College controls outside Cambridge though lacking the prescriptive power exercised during the teaching term, were equally comprehensive. Thus junior members were urged to make 'full use of the vacations, in which much of the work will be done', and were '*particularly warned against the danger of undertaking paid vacation work at the expense of their studies*' (St Catharine's College, n.d: 14. Italics in original).

So far we have dealt with the debit side of the bill: what was owed. Equally interesting, however, is the credit side. For it reveals the contributions made both by the private and public sectors. This tells us something about how my expenditure was viewed by the wider society. Thus a third of the bill was paid directly by the Ministry of Education. As Junior Librarian of the College I received £13 6s. 8d. a term plus a suite of rooms and a man servant. That is why no sums were entered under the heads of 'Room and service' or 'Fuel electric light etc.'

## ST CATHARINE'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Mr. K. M. DRAKE

Michaelmas Term, 1955

Dr.	£	s.	d.
College Dues . . . . .	17	0	0
College Tuition Fee . . . . .	15	0	0
University Composition Fee . . . . .	11		
Kitchen Establishment Fee . . . . .	15		
Meals Contract . . . . .	15	2	
Kitchen extras . . . . .	11		2
Buttery Supplies . . . . .	6	3	10
Room and Service . . . . .			
Fuel, Electric Light, etc. . . . .			
Laundress . . . . .	2	1	6
Repairs . . . . .			
Gate Fines . . . . .		1	5
J.C.R., St Catharine's Society and Magazine . . . . .	17		10
College Mission . . . . .	2		6
Clubs Entrance Fee . . . . .			
Clubs subscription . . . . .	2	12	6
Amalgamated Clubs Extras . . . . .			
Medical Attendance . . . . .			
Excess Supervision . . . . .			
Amalgamated Societies . . . . .		5	
Locker Rent . . . . .			
Guest Room Charges . . . . .			
Prepayment . . . . .	7	0	0
Total	£		
	100	6	9

Cr.	£	s.	d.
Balance from previous Account . . . . .			
Scholarships, Exhibitions, etc. . . . .	13	6	8
Ministry of Education, County Council Scholarships, etc. . . . .	34	10	
Total	47	16	8
Balance due	£		
	52	10	1

It is requested that this account with a cheque for the balance due be sent direct to Barclays Bank, Ltd., Cambridge. The cheque should be made payable to St Catharine's College Tutorial Account.

Banker's acknowledgment.

Cambridge 3 JAN 1956 1955

We have placed £52.10.1

to the St Catharine's College Tutorial Account.

FOR BARCLAYS BANK, Ltd.



31 DEC 1955

It is ordered by the College Rules, that this bill is to be paid 24 hours before and those of the last Term before admission to any degree; and that no person whose account is in arrears be permitted to remain in residence.

N.B. Members of the College in statu pupillari are required to return into residence on

17 JAN 1956

If anyone wishes for leave to return earlier or later than this date, he must obtain permission beforehand from his Tutor.

FIGURE I Bill presented by St Catharine's College, Cambridge to Michael Drake, December 1955. Source: In private hands

What this close textual analysis of the bill allows us to do is to move from one layer of understanding to another. Initially we learn something of the inescapable costs of being a member of the college community (the printed sums). Then we see the variable costs — sums entered in handwriting. That there are twenty-three heads of expenditure reveals the extent of the college's involvement in the lives of its junior members. By examining bills for other periods and other colleges one can add another layer of understanding, assess just how representative the bill was, how it fitted into the larger university community. Yet more can be learned by grouping together the heads of expenditure.

For this brings out key features of the community e.g. the range of provision, the degree of control, how its activities were viewed by the wider society.

My second bill could hardly be simpler with only two items of expenditure: Pensjon mars kr 295 (Board and lodging March [Norwegian] kroner 295 — then worth about £15); and Ungarn kr 5 (Hungary [Norwegian] Kroner 5 — about 25 pence). The first of these two items requires no explanation. The second was a levy on all in Blindern, as inescapable as the same amount paid by St Catharine's College junior members to the college mission. It was used to help refugees who had fled from Hungary after the unsuccessful uprising in 1956.

The lack of detail on this bill suggests it is a reflection of a very different community to that of St Catharine's College. Just how different can only be ascertained from other documents and, since we are dealing with relatively recent times, oral history. Thus my experience was of a Norwegian state which provided no student grants only loans; of a university that provided little tuition other than lectures; with few essays being written. Exams, which lasted 12 hours, required the writing of only one essay. Students came and went as *they* chose. The university was virtually oblivious of their whereabouts at any particular time. This contrasts sharply with the intense involvement of the college in a student's life as illustrated by the bill from St Catharine's.

My argument so far is that one's understanding of a community may be enhanced by the detailed examination of a relatively trivial document and vice versa. As in the case of the two bills discussed, one can begin with the format of the bill: printed or not printed, the number of heads, the language used. The amounts paid, and whether they were fixed or not, tell us yet more not only of the person to whom the bill was presented but also of — in this case — the body presenting the bill. The relationship between the two can also be elicited from, again in this case, the somewhat peremptory tone used in parts of the bill. From the bill we can learn something of the socialization of young men and of the power structure in the college. Finally, I have argued that one can bring out a community's individuality, what makes it special, by seeing it in the light of another comparable community, or communities — in this case two colleges — with different histories, structures and aspirations (Drake 1996: 55–61; Fulsås 1997: 55–57).

It is, of course, a truism that close textual analysis is the stock in trade of historians generally. But community history is a relatively new discipline and although, like speaking prose, many will have been practising it for some time, such an analysis will require new skills. For different kinds of documents will come to the fore, new questions will be asked, new approaches will be required. This has certainly been the case with two sets of documents which have come to underpin local history and historical demography over the last thirty years or so, namely the census enumerators' books (see Higgs 1989, 1996; Lawton 1978; Mills 1982; Mills and Schürer 1996; Wrigley 1972) and the parish registers kept by the Church of England (Drake, 1982; Wrigley and Schofield 1981; Wrigley *et al.* 1997; Wrigley 1998).

It is one thing to create a document, another to squeeze all relevant information from it. The problem with much local historical writing is that the squeeze is at best a gentle hug. Chances are missed either because the local historian knows of no other work which could enhance the story; lacks the understanding of concepts which could be used to add another layer of understanding; or fails to use methods of enquiry which would turn a purely descriptive piece into one of analysis. Take the example of a local riot.

Nr. 4629

Blindern Studenterhjem  
Blindern

Telefon: Kontoret 69 48 45  
Studentene 69 48 42  
46 94 85

Blindern, den 28/3 1957

Herr Keith Drake

Varelse nr. 20 Debet

FIGURE 2 Bill presented by Blindern Studenterhjem, Oslo to Keith Drake, March, 1957. Source: In private hands

Pension mars kr. 295,-	
+ Morgun . 5,-	
	kr. 300,-
Betalt Kjything	

Many reports of them have been written from eyewitness accounts, subsequent trial documents or newspaper stories. Often gripping, especially for local people who recognize the names of participants, streets, buildings, they remain for the most part purely descriptive. Contrast this with the account of the Luton riot of 1919 by Orr in the next issue of *Family & Community History*. Here our understanding is deepened by Orr's awareness not only of other riot studies but also because of his understanding of the concepts needed to enrich that understanding. Of course there is a trap which some researchers fall into, namely that the contextualization, the language, the methodology smothers the life out of the story!

### *The art of asking questions*

Part of the moral behind the story of the two bills is that one should not overlook the individual document, no matter how mundane and trivial. For family and community historians the shopping list, the family letter, the rent book, the bill of sale, the estate agent's house particulars can each add something to our understanding when subjected to an appropriate form of analysis. Most family and community historians will not, however, start with a document of this nature, only seeking them out when they want

to answer a question or a series of related questions. But there is a skill in asking questions (ask any barrister!) and one that needs to be honed with practice. If the question is vague and unfocused so will be the resulting answer. Indeed no plausible answer may emerge.

One way to get focused questions is to present them in the form of testable hypotheses. Let us examine this proposition by formulating some hypotheses designed to increase our understanding of the population history of a community. The hypotheses are derived from a theory propounded just 200 years ago by the Rev. T. R. Malthus in his immensely influential work *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorçet and other writers*. First published in 1798 the book went through six editions before the author's death in 1834. It proved to be both immensely influential and immensely controversial throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. The essence of Malthusian theory is encapsulated in the following quotation:

I think I may fairly make two *postulata* [assumptions]. First, that food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly, that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state.

Towards the extinction of the passion between the sexes, no progress whatever has hitherto been made. Assuming then my *postulata* as granted, I say, that the power of population is infinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man ... population when unchecked increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison with the second.

By that law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal. (Malthus 1970: 4–5)

Malthus went on to argue that these two unequal powers were kept equal by what he called 'positive' and 'preventive' checks. By the former he meant 'the check that represses an increase that has already begun' i.e. wars, epidemics, famine. On the other hand 'a foresight of the difficulties attending the rearing of a family acts as a preventive check' (Malthus 1970: 4–5).

How then can we use this 200-year-old theory to help us understand the behaviour of families or communities in which we are interested? The answer is to derive hypotheses from Malthus's theory and direct them at appropriate bodies of data. Here are a couple of examples specific as to both *time* and *place*. Malthus argued that population growth was checked periodically, the result of insufficient food. This gives rise to two hypotheses: the one directed at the check to population itself, the other to the cause of the check.

1. That mortality crises in the *Morley Wapentake* during the years 1540–1643 were of a frequency and magnitude as to halt population growth, in line with Malthus' theory.
2. That changes in baptisms and burials during the years 1582–92 in Halifax parish suggest that its population responded to changes in real income as predicted by Malthus.

The data used to test the first of these hypotheses appears in Figure 3. This shows the number of baptisms and burials (here used as surrogate measures of births and deaths) derived from the parish registers of parishes in the Morley Wapentake of Yorkshire. (For details see Drake 1962). The graph shows quite clearly that deaths rose steeply in certain years, most notably in 1587, 1623 and 1643. To that extent Malthus would appear to be correct. There are, however, two points to note here. First, although the mortality peaks appear dramatic, the losses were made up quite quickly. For example whilst these were 1411 burials in 1587 as against 484 births, a shortfall of 927, this was made up by 1594 by natural increase alone. Second the fluctuations in the number of burials from 1613–43 take place against a stable number of baptisms. For from 1605 the number of baptisms levelled off at around a thousand, having more than doubled since 1540. Is this perhaps an indication that Malthus's preventive check had come into play, with a rise in the age at marriage and a decline in the proportion of the population getting married acting to reduce the number of births?

The data used to test the second hypothesis appears in Tables I and II. Table I shows the monthly and annual burial totals in the parish of Halifax for the years 1582–92. These years embrace the 1587 peak in mortality. In Halifax burials were unusually high in two years, 1587 and 1588. Were these the result of the pressure of population on food

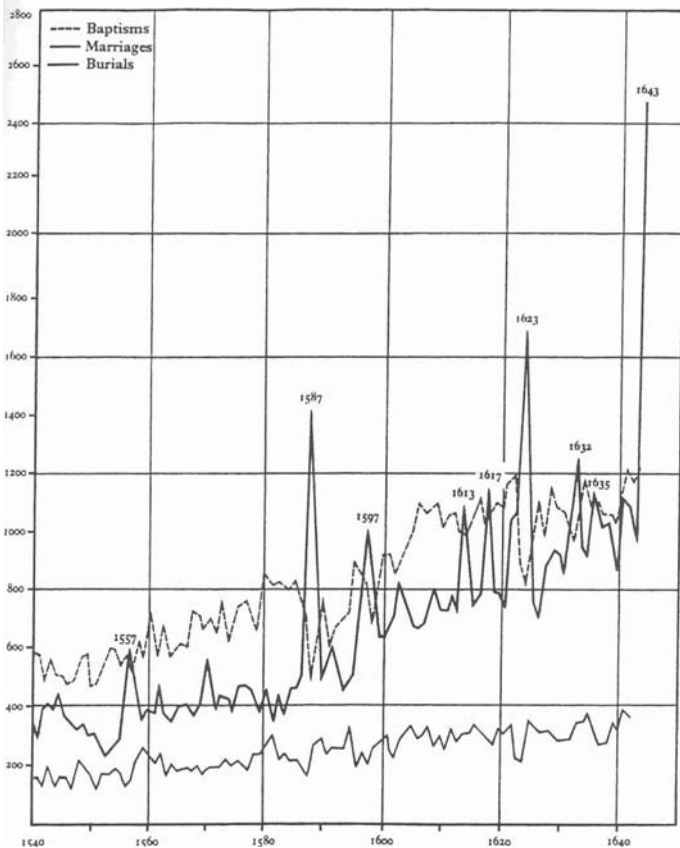


FIGURE 3 Baptisms, marriages and burials in the Wapentake of Morley 1540–1643. Source: Drake 1962: Facing 432

TABLE I: Monthly burials in Halifax parish 1582-92. Source: Crossley, 1910

<i>Year</i>	<i>Jan</i>	<i>Feb</i>	<i>Mar</i>	<i>Apr</i>	<i>May</i>	<i>Jun</i>	<i>Jul</i>	<i>Aug</i>	<i>Sept</i>	<i>Oct</i>	<i>Nov</i>	<i>Dec</i>	<i>Civil year totals</i>	<i>Jan-July</i>	<i>Aug-Dec</i>	<i>Harvest year totals</i>
1582	16	13	19	22	15	11	16	10	19	5	11	19	176	112	64	→ 183
1583	23	24	26	12	13	10	11	8	6	11	12	16	172	119	↗ 53	→ 163
1584	10	14	19	15	17	20	15	12	17	16	11	13	179	110	↗ 69	→ 201
1585	23	20	25	15	19*	15*	15*	15	12	21	15	18	213	132	↗ 81	→ 231
1586	26	28	33	17	21	9	16	13	12	12	15	22	224	150	↗ 74	→ 259
1587	21	30	36	37	26	18	17	30	50	71	101	99	536	185	↗ 351	→ 784
1588	131	86	66	52	41	37	20	25	18	19	16	25	536	433	↗ 103	→ 248
1589	20	27	27	16	22	16	17	18	15	17	15	20	230	145	↗ 85	→ 193
1590	17	26	23	14	14	4	10	20	15	20	20	15	198	108	↗ 90	→ 279
1591	24	27	44	30	26	21	17	19	23	21	20	35	307	189	↗ 118	→ 298
1592	23	39	32	24	19	13	30	13	23	11	9	20	256	180	↗ 76	—

\*Mean of May, June and July totals for years 1580-84 and 1586-90.

TABLE II: Baptisms and conceptions by month in Halifax parish 1582–92. Source: Crossley, 1910

	<i>Month of conception</i>												<i>Baptisms by civil years</i>	<i>Conceptions by harvest years</i>		
	<i>Apr</i>	<i>May</i>	<i>June</i>	<i>July</i>	<i>Aug</i>	<i>Sept</i>	<i>Oct</i>	<i>Nov</i>	<i>Dec</i>	<i>Jan</i>	<i>Feb</i>	<i>Mar</i>		<i>Jan– Apr</i>	<i>May– Dec</i>	
	<i>Month of baptism</i>															
	<i>Jan</i>	<i>Feb</i>	<i>Mar</i>	<i>Apr</i>	<i>May</i>	<i>June</i>	<i>July</i>	<i>Aug</i>	<i>Sept</i>	<i>Oct</i>	<i>Nov</i>	<i>Dec</i>				
1582	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	20	3	20	18	30				
1583	33	28	30	19	23	27	32	27	26	20	26	36	327	110	217	353
1584	27	26	27	20	32	26	25	36	32	31	22	27	331	100	231	299
1585	31	31	34	26	22	17	(21)*	17	27	35	29	21	311	122	189	289
1586	32	35	20	23	22	24	27	25	20	34	18	30	310	110	200	166
1587	21	19	15	34	20	16	11	18	10	4	10	18	196	89	107	289
1588	17	15	8	19	12	18	15	25	17	16	26	30	218	59	159	319
1589	27	35	37	31	25	36	20	24	25	31	24	30	345	130	215	298
1590	27	24	29	24	23	18	18	21	19**	19**	30	26	278	104	174	329
1591	31	42	25	26	42	19	30	32	23	32	21	21	344	124	220	
1592	25	22	35	27	37	23	21	23	24	–				109		

\*Mean of May, June, August and September totals.

\*\*Mean of July, August, November and December totals.

supplies, as Malthus would have argued? A direct answer is not possible as we do not know the price of food in Halifax. Indirect support, however, would appear to come from historians of prices. Thus Rogers remarked that the price of wheat in the years 1586–87 was ‘far beyond any previous experience’ and that rye too was very dear. But he also noted that the price of wheat *peaked* in May 1587. After that and throughout 1587–88 prices were universally low (Rogers 1887: v, 175–66). Phelps-Brown and Hopkins (1956: 31) have also shown that in *southern* England, at least, the price of their basket of consumables (heavily weighted towards food) rose sharply in 1587. The index they constructed (1451–75 = 100) showed the following readings for the years 1585–89: 338, 352, 491, 346, 354. Coming closer to home, as it were, Rither, a correspondent of Cecil (the government minister), wrote on 21 July 1587, that Yorkshire corn merchants were keeping grain prices high and had been doing so for the previous two years (Lansdowne Papers, 54: 141).

These figures would suggest that food prices were exceptionally high in 1587, thus lending support to Malthusian theory. There is, however, a question mark over the chronology which may, at least in part, be resolved by a re-jigging of the figures in Table I. There were (remarkably!) exactly the same number of burials in 1587 as in 1588. But a glance along the rows indicates that they were not evenly distributed across the months, being much higher in the second half of 1587 and the first half of 1588. This is what one would expect after a bad harvest. So instead of using the civil or calendar year as our unit of measurement we can use the harvest year. This is taken to run from the July of one year to the August of the next. The result in this case is striking: burials in Halifax for the harvest year of 1587 are, at 784, a massive three times higher than in 1586 (259 burials) and 1588 (248 burials).

On the face of it this would seem to confirm our hypothesis and, by extension, justify our faith in the explanatory power of Malthus’s theory from which we derived it. But, as you may have noted, the figures don’t quite match up. If Thorold Rogers and Cecil’s Yorkshire correspondent are correct (see above) grain prices were at their peak in 1586–87 or in our terms, during the *harvest year* of 1586. Why then should we get a peak in burials a year later? Perhaps it was not because the population had grown beyond the means to sustain it, so that a bad harvest tipped it over the edge, evidenced by a sharp rise in deaths. Maybe the rise in deaths had nothing to do with harvest failure. Two alternative explanations suggest themselves. First Halifax was an important centre for woollen cloth production, much of which was exported to the Low Countries. Political tension there is said to have caused an undoubted depression in 1586–87 (Stone 1947: 107). Presumably Stone was talking of calendar years. If so the depression could be expected to reduce purchasing power which might have led to the population buying insufficient food for their needs. The second possible explanation is that the rise in burials was caused by an epidemic which may or may not have been triggered by a lack of food, namely typhus. This disease is borne by lice and occurs more often in winter than in summer, when people huddled together for warmth, washed less and when their thick clothing provided a good home for lice. It is also commonly a disease of adults, rarely killing children. Unfortunately the parish registers of 1587 in the Morley Wapentake give no causes of death or ages at death. It may, however, be possible to infer them.

Appleby (1978) made a study of mortality in Cumberland and Westmorland where deaths also were high in 1587. His burial registers did not give ages at death either but did, quite often, give the family status of the deceased in the form: wife of, child of, daughter of, widow of and so on. He admits that 'to treat all persons listed as sons and daughters as "children" and all others as "adults" is a rather crude method of determining age' (Appleby 1978: 105). Nevertheless he argues that if striking changes appear in the proportion of each group in the burial records, 'they offer a clue to the cause of mortality under study' (Appleby 1978: 105). Trying out his technique on the Cumberland parish of Dacre, Appleby found the parish register recorded a striking rise in 'adult' deaths: 53 as opposed to an average of 11 in the four years 1582-84 and 1586 (the entries for 1585 are missing) and 15 in the two years 1588 and 1589. On the other hand 'child' deaths remained constant. Appleby, in fact, believed the typhus was linked to famine, one of its names being 'famine fever' (Appleby 1978: 105-06). Finally the same pattern of winter deaths with few child and many adult deaths in 1587 occurred in the Shropshire parish of Ludlow (Wrigley and Schofield 1979: 86-89).

This is not, however, the end of the story. For malnutrition can also affect a woman's ability to bear a child (Goubert, 2, 1960: 56-57). To test the extent of this we need to convert our baptisms into conceptions. On the assumption that in this period baptisms took place within a few days of birth and covered virtually the entire population (Wrigley and Schofield 1981: 96-100), we can get the month of conception by subtracting nine months from the date of baptism. Then by aggregating these by harvest year we can see the impact of harvests on conceptions. This we have done for Halifax in the years 1582-92 (Table II). The totals suggest that 1586, the year we know was a bad harvest year in at least parts of England, witnessed a dramatic fall in conceptions. The jury is still out on this one!

To sum up: testing hypotheses is one way of 'capturing community'. For it not only provides the initial focus of an enquiry, it also opens the way to a discussion. This, as is the case with the illustration of the method given above, can be far reaching both methodologically — it may be necessary to devise new techniques of description and analysis — and substantively: the latter drawing upon evidence from other communities to support or refute arguments as they develop.

### *Family and community history as public service*

Malthus had an important effect on the social policy of his day, his theory underpinning the New Poor Law of 1834. That theory was grounded in history. The past provided the evidence for both his 'positive' and 'preventive' checks. Recent attempts to demolish his theory have also drawn evidence from historical forms of family and community (Boserup 1965; Wilkinson 1973). Because Malthus believed that people generally had the power to reproduce themselves faster than they were able to produce the food needed to maintain the resulting population, one should not introduce measures that would encourage reproduction. He wrote at a time of great distress in England, particularly amongst the agricultural labourers of the southern part of the country. Food prices were rising and after a number of bad harvests in the 1790s reached unprecedented heights. We now know that the population was rising sharply, although at the time Malthus

wrote (it was, of course, before the first census had been taken in 1801) there was considerable controversy as to whether this was in fact the case (Drake 1972: 8). To meet the distress various changes were made to the Elizabethan Poor Laws. These laws had governed the organization of poor relief — what today we would call *benefit* — for almost two centuries. The most important change was to link payments to the number of dependants in a family, the so-called Speenhamland system. It was named after the place where Berkshire magistrates introduced it in 1795. Incidentally, this was just one of the local initiatives to be adopted nationally. Such initiatives and their progress from the local to the national scene would make interesting research topics for community historians.

Malthus and his supporters argued that to provide relief in this way could but compound the problem by encouraging an earlier age at marriage with its inevitable concomitant, a larger number of offspring. For if the local community — the Old Poor Law operated through individual parishes — was known to provide relief according to family size, what point was there in trying to ensure one married and began raising children *only* when one had an income sufficient to support them? Whether or not this is how people behaved has been a subject of debate down to the present day (Huzel 1980). To Malthus the evidence seemed incontrovertible. Poor rates in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were rising at an unprecedented rate; pauperization was rife; very many families were living on *benefit*, especially those with large numbers of children. Sounds familiar!

To meet this perceived problem the Poor Law of 1834 was passed, commonly called the New Poor Law to differentiate it from all previous laws relating to the poor which are subsumed under the heading of the Old Poor Law. Central to this was the so-called Workhouse Test. It operated like this. Under the Act of 1834 the 10,000 or so parishes in England were grouped together to form around 650 Unions. These units were to be the administrative bodies of the New Poor Law. A workhouse was erected in each. Once in place benefit was only to be provided for those prepared to enter the workhouse. Benefit provided to people in their own homes (outdoor relief it was called) was to stop. This was the Workhouse Test. Conditions for those entering the workhouse were to be harsher than those experienced by the lowest paid worker outside.

To explore the way the Act was implemented — and especially the Workhouse Test — takes us to the heart of diversity in community life. For reactions to the Act were very different amongst the populations of northern industrial communities than amongst those of the agricultural communities of the south. Much of the debate centred on the so-called ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving poor’, a debate that has continued down to the present day. Thus in 1995 Peter Lilley, then Secretary of State for Social Security, proposed a return to the system of deciding on a local basis what benefits should be paid to the poor: a return, in other words, to the system I have just described. He drew the idea from the system currently operating in Switzerland where 3000 communes decide benefits for the poor. Lilley’s argument was based on the idea that local communities were more knowledgeable than a national bureaucracy about their own situation as regards prices, rents, employment opportunities, and could match benefits to them (Marr 1995: 19; Charlesworth 1995: 19). He did not remind us that the reason why local variations in benefit were abolished in 1929 by the then Tory government, was because it thought Poplar’s Labour controlled council was paying out too much! At the time of

writing the Government has just introduced its own version of the Workhouse Test with benefit for young people cut unless they adopt one of four options: subsidized employment, full time education or training, a place on the government's environment task force or a job with a voluntary organization.

Neither Lilley's proposal, nor the Labour government's can be said to be based on historical precedents. Indeed the Labour government would no doubt be horrified at any comparison between their 'benefit penalty' and the Workhouse Test. There have however, been appeals to history for possible solutions to current problems. For instance Young and Lemos (1997) do so in their book, *The communities we have lost and can regain*. As the title suggests they believe that the Welfare State, inadvertently perhaps, has undermined the support systems previously supplied by family, kin, neighbours either directly or indirectly through a variety of mutual aid bodies — Friendly Societies, Sick Clubs, Co-operative Societies etc. What some would see as the current dismantling of the Welfare State, e.g. the shift from state to private pensions, from student grants to student loans, the partial withdrawal of the state from institutional care for the aged, Young and Lemos believe could be met by a return to earlier support systems. Such mutual aid they describe as 'the kernel of community' (Young and Lemos 1997: 4. See also Mount 1993 and, for a contrary view, Thomson 1986).

As family and community historians our concern is not directly with such contemporary proposals. It is, however, the job of researchers in family and community history to examine the historical premises on which such proposals are based. Already historians such as Anderson (1980), Laslett and Wall (1972), and Wrigley (1998) have undermined contemporary myths about families and communities in the past. But there is much that remains to be done not least on the question of self-help and mutual aid. Take the Friendly Societies: we already know quite a lot about the big national organizations such as the Oddfellows, Rechabites and Foresters. We know much less about the single community bodies which often had but modest aims and short lives. Did they perform in the way Young and Lemos believe? The evidence is fragmentary and may often be in private hands. It is the job of family and community historians to seek it out. Here is an example.

The *Milton Keynes Working Men's Mutual Insurance Association* is a grand title for a very modest organization. We are not talking about the new city of Milton Keynes but the north Buckinghamshire village from which it took its name. The association was established on 17 May 1918. At that time the village had a population of around 200. The object of the association was to provide against casualties in pigs. Members of the association received a membership card with what would appear to be quite draconian rules (Figure 4). One is reminded of the tight control exerted by St Catharine's College over its junior members (above: p. 8 and Figure 1). Apart from the Membership Card the only other document to survive is the minute book. But like the bills from St Catharine's College and Blindern Studenterhjem, much can be learned from it of the community of Milton Keynes. Take, for instance, the opening page (Figure 5). The grand title has given way to Milton Keynes Pig Club. Squire Finch (he owned all the land and property in the village apart from the Church and Rectory), although non-resident appeared to have done what squires were expected to do. For he kick-started the association with a donation of ten pounds. He and his daughter were honorary members. The rector's wife seems to have had the distinction of being both an honorary and an

be killed, the owner shall comply with his request and if fit for food he shall sell it and receive the produce of the same, or keep it for his own consumption and the Association shall pay seven shillings and sixpence for the pound to make up the value.

12.—In all cases of loss the Valuer shall inform the Secretary to what amount of compensation the losing member is entitled, the same to be drawn of the Treasurer by the Secretary, and paid to the member within fourteen days of his loss.

13.—The funds of this Association to be kept up four shillings per member, and should the funds at any time be inadequate to its expenses, the Committee shall have power to raise a levy to meet the deficiency. Should any member refuse to pay an equal share of the same when called upon to do so, he shall be expelled.

14.—No repeal, alteration, or addition to these Rules shall be made without the consent and approval of a majority of the members present at a general meeting specially called for that purpose.

15.—Should the Inspector require veterinary surgeon's advice, the Club to pay fees.

Signed on behalf of the Society,

L. HUCKLE } Trustees  
A. BIRD }  
A. BIRD, Treasurer  
R. J. CLARKE, Secretary.

## RULES

OF THE

### MILTON KEYNES

#### WORKING MEN'S MUTUAL INSURANCE ASSOCIATION.

Established May 17th. 1913.

The object of this Association  
is to provide against  
Casualties in Pigs.

## RULES.

1.—The business of this Association shall be conducted by a Treasurer, Secretary and a Committee of seven members, two of the latter to act as Inspector and Valuer when casualties occur, as may be determined upon at the election of the same.

2.—All persons to pay one shilling as an entrance fee when joining this Association.

3.—The yearly contribution to insure one pig is four shillings, or one shilling per quarter; three pigs twelve shillings, or three shillings per quarter; each additional pig sixpence per quarter.

4.—Should a member who insures only one pig, keep two more for a short time, he shall point out the one insured to two or more of the Committee, or he may pay for the extra pigs according to Rule 3 so long as he keeps them.

5.—Breeding sows to be insured according to the following scale, viz. ten shillings per year, or half crown per quarter for each sow insured.

6.—Sucking pigs can be insured when seven days old, as follows;—one penny per head per week till they are two months old, and then stores according to Rule 3.

7.—Members to pay their contributions quarterly or in default to pay a fine of twopence to the fund; if a week after time, threepence; if a fortnight, excluded.

8.—The meeting nights of this Association to be on the first Tuesday in January, April, July and October; and the time of business from eight till half-past nine o'clock, when all members are respectfully requested to attend. The January night to be the yearly night to elect officers for the ensuing year, when all members to attend, or forfeit threepence, sickness and urgent business excepted.

9.—The Committee to choose from among themselves a Chairman. Should any urgent business require their special attendance, they shall receive notice from the Secretary, and they shall receive threepence for their services. Should any of the Committee not attend after he has received due notice from the Secretary, he shall forfeit threepence, sickness and urgent business excepted. Should any member refuse to take office when elected, he shall be fined threepence. The Committee to send their list in every quarter at the opening of the meeting. The business of the Committee to settle all disputes which may have arisen for which no positive rule is made.

10.—When a member buys a pig, he shall inform the inspector of the same, who shall inspect it within three days of the purchase, and if not sound, or should die before the Committee inspects it, the owner shall be the loser. All pigs well known to have been bought in the market, shall not be insured under six days.

11.—When a member perceives his pig to be ailing he shall acquaint the inspector of it as soon as possible, who shall attend in all cases when requested, and should he decide that it ought to

FIGURE 4 Membership card, giving the rules of the Milton Keynes Working Men's Mutual Insurance Association. Source: Two villages archive trust

Milton Keynes Pig Club.

This Club was started May 17<sup>th</sup> 1918  
the Squire, W. H. M. Finch giving the  
sum of ten Pounds. The following being  
Honorary members at five shillings each.

W. H. M. Finch Esq.

Miss J. Finch

Rev. Mrs. E. Field

And thirteen ordinary members  
paying one shilling entrance fee

R. J. Clarke. J. Meadows. W. Carter

J. Clarke. A. Petts. W. James

A. Bird. J. Colant. G. Eaton

W. Bird. L. Huckle. W. Howe (J. Guest 1919)

the Rev. Mrs. E. Field.

new				
Members	1919	Mr. Cheyne. E. W. Markham		
"	1920	Mr. J. Kintup		
"	1921	Mr. W. Rose		
"	1922	—		
"	1923	—		
"	1924	— G. Brittnell	14	members
"	1925	—	"	"
"	1926	—	13	"
"	1927	—	"	"
"	1928	— J. Keir (only)	12	"
"	1929	—	"	"
"	1930	2 retired. 3 new	13	"
"	1931	1. retired	18	"
"	1932	1 new.	18	"
"	1933	1 retired		
"	1968	5 members. Club disbanded.		

FIGURE 5 Minute Book of the Milton Keynes Pig Club: opening page. Source: Two villages archive trust

ordinary member. The paternalism revealed by these opening lines of the minute book takes us to the heart of relationships within the village. Given that the association was of relatively recent date, the names of the members provide the further possibility of acquiring additional evidence through oral history. Later pages in the minute book reveal that the association was a financial success. This allowed the members to engage in a variety of social activities together with their 'wives [*sic*] and families' and 'invited friends' e.g. suppers, trips to Whipsnade Zoo (Minute book of Milton Keynes Pig Club: 13 Oct 1925; 5 Jan 1938). Events in the wider world impinged on the club. Thus on 10 January 1941 'owing to the state of the country and invasion of enemy air planes [it was agreed] to share out to members some of the funds accumulated in the bank', to whit £7 (Minute Book: 10 Jan 1941).

In urging family and community historians to explore the antecedents of issues of current concern — in this case, mutuality — I am not arguing that history has lessons which can readily be learned. But I do not go as far as A. J. P. Taylor with his: 'I have never supposed that men can ever learn any useful lessons from history' (Sisman 1994: 375). Rather I share Thomson's view that 'current debates are rendered shallow by the lack of historical context' (Thomson 1986: 358). It is this that family and community historians should seek to rectify.

### *Working together*

We capture community by the way we analyse documents, by the way we structure our questions, by the impulses we get from the work of others and not least from contemporary debates. But do we work alone or with others? The traditional view of the historian is of a scholar working by himself in his study with forays to libraries and archives. Most historians probably still operate in this way. Within the twin fields of family and community history, however, such a mode of research may not be the most productive, as Wrigley (1998) argues below. This is because much of the potential of the subject can only be realized by exploiting the very large amounts of data that are available. Without doubt some historians operate in an area of scarce resources but this is not the case with family and community historians (Erikson 1973: 15). Here the problem is often a surfeit of information which can best be handled by a collective effort.

The point can be illustrated by my own efforts in producing the material on the Morley Wapentake and some neighbouring areas in the study discussed above. This involved counting some half-a-million baptism, marriage and burial entries in the parish registers. Although I was helped by my wife, sister and parents this took a considerable time. Partly this was due to the sheer numbers involved but also because the registers were, in many cases, still in the churches, and access to each had to be negotiated with a different vicar. The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure got round the problem of the sheer volume of data by recruiting a small army of volunteers to do the transcribing for them (see Wrigley 1998).

Collaboration of this kind has been a feature of meteorology, ornithology and astronomy for a long time. But apart from relatively small scale efforts in, for example, university extra-mural classes, WEA groups etc., historians have not espoused this method of working. More recently, however, the lead of the Cambridge Group has been

followed in a variety of ways. Members of the Local Population Studies Society, for instance, have recently collaborated on a study of the nineteenth-century census enumerators. They have completed questionnaires on those enumerators who operated in areas in which the researchers have an interest, drawing their information not only from the census enumerators' books (copies of the completed census schedules), but also from local directories (Drake and Mills 1994). Local historians in Essex are currently working together on a series of projects as described in the News Section below.

Another exercise in collective research has taken place in the context of weekend schools held at The Hill College, Abergavenny in recent years. Here between 40 and 80 students have used the census enumerators' books of 1851 and 1891 to explore a number of questions. For 1851 they have drawn data from 32 enumeration districts to examine the situation of widows and widowers: their occupations or other means of support, their age structure and the type of households in which they were enumerated. The purpose of this exercise was to throw some light on the various strategies of survival adopted by widows and widowers in different kinds of communities. In another year we examined the numbers of children under 10 years of age who were enumerated in 1851 in the birthplace of both parents, of one parent only, or of neither parent. Again the purpose of the exercise was to see the extent to which families were likely to be able to draw upon the support of kin to meet the everyday problems of survival. The material for this came from a two per cent sample of the 1851 census enumerators' books (Anderson 1979).<sup>1</sup>

In recent years members of the Abergavenny Weekend School have turned their attention to Abergavenny itself in 1891. At that time it was a town with a population of around 10,000, having grown from some 2500 in 1801. The enumeration districts have been divided into street units (42 in all), on the assumption that these were likely to show a greater amount of social homogeneity than the enumeration districts. Various characteristics of the population have been extracted such as the number of domestic servants and employers, the number of railway workers (Abergavenny was a 'railway town'), the numbers of men and women born within or outside Monmouthshire, the number of households in which both Welsh and English was spoken. The data is then entered onto choropleth maps (i.e. maps which use colour or shading to distinguish areas according to such quantifiable characteristics as persons per acre). The patterns that emerge provide the opportunity to discuss a wide range of issues of central concern to family and community historians in the light of work done elsewhere; questions of interpretation; ways of displaying data from the CEBs; and theoretical issues. The lesson from each of these collective exercises is that a great deal can be learned, both of substance and method, in a matter of a few hours.

Yet another scheme of collaborative research is being conducted in 1997-99 by the Open Studies in Family and Community History (OSFACH) research group at the Open University, with financial support from the Wellcome Trust. Open University research students have joined together to explore the history of infant mortality in the years 1871-1910: a time when it at last began to decline to the current low levels. To date much of the study of this subject has been based on printed statistics at a relatively high level of aggregation: the 650 or so Poor Law Unions which were taken over by the Registrar General of Births, Marriages and Deaths as his main unit of analysis when civil registration began in 1837. It was felt that a deeper understanding of the issues

involved could be obtained if the analysis could be conducted at a lower level of aggregation e.g. individual communities, streets, families. Material for such an analysis is, for the most part, only available locally: notably Medical Officer of Health Reports, local council reports and minutes, newspaper comment, and registers of births and infant deaths (these were copies of the civil registers) created to assist the compulsory vaccination against smallpox programme, from 1871 onwards. To date 20 postgraduate students have participated in the programme.

Collaborative research can be conducted at all levels and in a variety of ways. The examples discussed here are of a formal 'top down' variety. But, of course, collaborative research need not be. An excellent example of what might be termed a grassroots approach is the work done by the Second Chance to Learn: Women's History — Women's Lives group at the City of Liverpool Community College (Kelly 1991–92; 1994–95). Another is the Histories for the Millennium project, another project devised by the Open Studies in Family and Community History Research Group at the Open University in 1998–99. Already distributed widely, this eight-page pamphlet seeks to encourage people to get together to produce histories of their communities. It suggests topics for research and gives guidance on how to start, where to get help and how to present results.<sup>2</sup>

### *Conclusion*

My intention here has been to help people to engage in research on family and community history by suggesting various ways this might be done. This is, of course, one of the central aims of *Family & Community History*.

First, using my college bills by way of example, I tried to show how a close textual analysis of what, at first sight, might seem of slight relevance or importance for a study of community history could, in fact, be made to reveal a great deal about the communities which produced them, and of the wider societies in which those communities were embedded. The same applies to the membership card of the Milton Keynes Working Men's Mutual Assurance Association and its Minute Book.

Second, I tried to show how by deriving hypotheses from social theory — Malthus was taken by way of example — one can open up a subject for research, relate that research to the work of others and ultimately qualify the theory one began with.

Third, I tried to show how research in family and community history could be used to enrich contemporary debates e.g. the issues of children living in families on benefit; the potential of mutual aid; the nature and prospects of family and community today.

Finally, I tried to show how by working together in either a formal or an informal setting, family and community historians can greatly extend the range of their enquiries.

<sup>1</sup> The address to write to for information on this two per cent sample of the 1851 census of Great Britain and for copies of any of the 945 clusters into which it is arranged is: ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ. For a guide to historical data files in machine readable form both at Essex and elsewhere see Schürer, Anderson and Duncan 1992.

<sup>2</sup> The address to write to is: OSFACH (MM leaflets), Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA.

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