

The Marriage Market in the Nineteenth Century English Countryside

P.R. Andrew Hinde¹
University of Southampton

It is now recognised that fluctuations in the age at marriage and in the proportions marrying were a crucial determinant of population growth rates in England from the end of the Middle Ages until the late-nineteenth century.² Since fertility within marriage did not change much over time, variations in fertility rates were largely due to changes in the prevalence of marriage, which were in turn the consequence of changes in real wages (although there was a time lag). Marriage was typically late, and a substantial proportion of the population never married.³ The institution of service, through which young people circulated amongst households prior to marriage, acted as "an essential part of the mechanism by which marriage could be delayed with the result that population growth was under partial control", since remaining single was a condition of employment as a servant.⁴ It was not until fertility began to be controlled within marriage that overall fertility rates started to change independently of changes in the prevalence of marriage, and this did not occur at the national level until the 1880s⁵.

¹ Department of Social Statistics, the University, Southampton 509 5NH, United Kingdom. The data used in this paper were collected with financial assistance from the Economic and Social Research Council (research grants L81/20299/G and G00428125299). An earlier version was read at the meeting of the British Society for Population Studies in Sheffield, United Kingdom, on 10 September 1987. I am grateful to Dr Richard Smith, of All Souls College, Oxford, United Kingdom, for his comments upon that version.

² This was demonstrated in E.A. WRIGLEY and R.S. SCHOFIELD, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: a Reconstruction* (London, 1981); see also ALAN MACFARLANE, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986).

³ Thus England exemplified the European marriage pattern: see JOHN HAJNAL, "European marriage patterns in perspective", in D.V. GLASS and D.E.C. EVERSLEY (eds.), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965) pp. 101-143.

⁴ JOHN HAJNAL, "Two kinds of preindustrial household formation system", *Population and Development Review*, 8 (1982) 481 (this article is also available in RICHARD WALL, JEAN ROBIN and PETER LASLETT (eds.) *Family Forms in Historic Europe* (Cambridge, 1983) pp. 65-104).

⁵ MICHAEL S. TEITELBAUM, *The British Fertility Decline: Demographic Transition in the Crucible of Industrial Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1984).

The chief aim of this note is to examine the marriage market in the English countryside during the last decades before the onset of widespread fertility control. More specifically, the aim is to see how far a model of the marriage market in nineteenth-century England proposed by Robert Woods and myself in a recent paper can be applied to a number of rural communities between 1851 and 1881.⁶ The basis of the model we proposed lies in the observation that during the nineteenth century, a tension existed between two sets of influences on marriage: those relating to the changing conditions of employment and employment opportunity which were brought about by industrialisation, and those relating to the continuing "social controls" on the timing and prevalence of marriage (notably, of course, the institution of service).⁷

To begin with, let us present a version of this model of the marriage market which is specific to rural areas. We can start by saying that in any community the timing and extent of marriage will be influenced both by the supply of and by the demand for eligible partners. The supply is affected most clearly by the sex ratio in the courting age-groups: if there is a shortage of one sex, then a proportion of those belonging to the opposite sex will be unable to marry within the community. The sex ratio will be affected by, for example, sex-selective migration and occupational specialisation, especially if particular occupations reserved for the unmarried are important (such as domestic and farm service). The demand for eligible partners largely reflects the opportunity for marriage, which is, in turn, a consequence of the economic circumstances of young men and women within a community. For example, if male earnings peak early in life, then men will marry young and most will marry.

Rural England in the late-nineteenth century did not, for the most part, offer females good prospects of employment. The rise of factories had reduced the opportunities in domestic industry earlier in the century and, with mechanisation in agriculture, work in the fields for women became scarcer.⁸ It is true that there were some opportunities in domestic service and other similar activities, but even so, many young women were compelled to leave their native villages to find work.⁹ This, together with the fact that for male agricultural labourers (the most numerous class of rural workers) earnings did

⁶ For the original version of the model, see R.I. WOODS and P.R.A. HINDE, "Nuptiality and age at marriage in nineteenth-century England", *Journal of Family History*, 10 (1985) 126.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁸ PAMELA HORN, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside* (Dublin, 1976) p. 125.

⁹ The extent of the out-migration of young women from the countryside is illustrated in P.R. ANDREW HINDE, "The population of a Wiltshire village in the nineteenth century: a reconstitution study of Berwick St James 1841-1871", *Annals of Human Biology*, 14 (1987) 475-485.

reach their peak at a fairly young age, should have meant that marriage in the Victorian countryside occurred at an early age for both sexes.

Counteracting these forces, however, stood the continuing existence of farm service, the institution which had for centuries helped to keep the typical age at marriage high. By the second half of the nineteenth century the prevalence of farm service had taken on a pronounced regional pattern. South and east of a line joining the Wash to the Exe it was virtually extinct (save for a few dairymaids and carters), but north and west of that line it became progressively more important, so that in Westmorland, as late as 1871, nearly half of all agricultural workers boarded on the farms.¹⁰ There were also certain rural areas where alternative employment was available for women, for example parts of the Pennines where there were textile mills.

In what follows, the outcome of these different factors acting upon the marriage market in four rural areas of England will be examined. The areas we have selected are considered to be representative of the different types of rural economy which characterised the Victorian countryside. They are situated respectively in the Peak District of Derbyshire (about eight miles west of Bakewell), in the valley of Nidderdale in Yorkshire, in central Norfolk (about 25 miles west of Norwich), and in Shropshire (about ten miles south-east of Shrewsbury).¹¹ The two latter areas are almost entirely agricultural but they provide examples of contrasting agricultural systems. The Norfolk area is in the zone where farm service was all but extinct, whereas in the Shropshire area in 1861, 35 per cent of male agricultural workers were "living in" on farms as servants.¹² This may well have depressed the demand for female labour in that area even below the level typical of agricultural regions.

The other two areas had more diversified economies, with alternatives to

¹⁰ ANN KUSSMAUL, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981) pp. 19-22; CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1871, *Population Tables - Area, Houses and Inhabitants*, III. *Population Abstracts: Ages, Civil Conditions, Occupations and Birth-Places of the People* (British Parliamentary papers 1873/LXXII) [Cd. 872].

¹¹ The Derbyshire study area comprises the townships of Ashford-in-the-Water, Chelmorton, Flagg, Monyash, Sheldon and Taddington (population in 1871, 2, 113); the Yorkshire area consists of the Townships of Bewerley, Fountain's Earth, High and Low Bishopside, Stonebeck Down and Stonebeck Up (population in 1871, 4, 330); the Norfolk area includes the parishes of Beeston with Bittering, East Lexham, Kempstone, Litcham, Mileham, Weasenham All Saints, Wellingham and West Lexham (population in 1871, 2, 868); and the Shropshire area comprises the parishes of Acton Burnell, Church Preen, Cound, Cressage, Eaton Constantine, Harley, Hughley, Kenley, Leighton, Pitchford, Ruckley and Langley, Sheinton and Wroxeter (population in 1871, 3, 188).

¹² P.R. ANDREW HINDE and EILIDH M. GARRETT, "Work patterns, marriage and fertility in late-nineteenth century England", in RICHARD M. SMITH (ed.) *Regional and Spatial Demographic Patterns in the Past* (Oxford, forthcoming).

agriculture as a source of employment. In the Derbyshire area, these alternatives were lead mining, quarrying and an artificial marble industry. None of these provided jobs for women. In the Yorkshire area, however, in addition to lead mining and quarrying, there were a number of textile mills, which did employ women. *A priori*, we should expect this to have affected the migration pattern in that area and hence the marriage market. Female employment in occupations other than domestic or farm service also tends to depress nuptiality, because if women can accumulate savings before marriage and contribute to the household economy after marriage, older women become more attractive financial propositions for men than their younger counterparts.

The main data source used in this study is the census enumerators' books. These provide listings of every inhabitant in each area in each census year, together with each individual's relationship to the head of the household of which he or she was a member, and his or her sex, age, marital status, "rank, profession or occupation", and place of birth.¹³ We have data from the enumerators' books for the 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881 censuses.¹⁴

To assess the operation of the marriage market in the four areas, we require a measure of the prevalence of marriage. Since a combination of the age at marriage and the proportions marrying is needed to produce a complete description of this we have used two measures. The first is the proportion of the population aged 20-29 years which has ever been married, and the second is the singulate mean age at first marriage (SMAM). Since marriages most commonly occur when both partners are in their twenties, the first measure provides an indicator of nuptiality which is sensitive both to changes in the typical age at marriage and to the proportions of the population getting married. The second measure is an approximation to the true average age at first marriage which is derived from a table of the proportions remaining single by

¹³ For descriptions of the census enumerators' books and their use in research, see the contributions to E.A. WRIGLEY (ed.) *Nineteenth-Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (Cambridge, 1972); and Richard Lawton (ed.) *The Census and Social Structure: an Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth-Century Censuses for England and Wales* (London, 1978).

¹⁴ The census enumerators' books for our four areas are available in the Public Record Office in London at the following reference numbers: Derbyshire 1851 - H.O. 107/2149, 1861 - R.G. 9/2539, 1871 - R.G. 10/3626 and 3627, 1881 - R.G. 11/3447; Yorkshire 1851 - H.O. 107/2250, 1861 - R.G. 9/3192 and 3193, 1871 - R.G. 10/4271 and 4272, 1881 - R.G. 11/4313 and 4314; Norfolk 1851 - H.O. 107/1825, 1861 - R.G. 9/1243, 1871 - R.G. 10/1848, 1881 - R.G. 11/1981; Shropshire 1851 - H.O. 107/1990 and 1991, 1861 - R.G. 9/1861 and 1868, 1871 - R.G. 10/2760-2762 and 2768, 1881 - R.G. 11/2641-2642 and 2648. The enumerators' books for censuses after 1881 are not available because of the "hundred years" rule, which forbids researchers access to documents containing information about named individuals for one hundred years after they were written.

five-year age-groups from 15 to 54 years (this can be obtained directly from the census returns).¹⁵

It is immediately apparent that there are considerable variations between our study areas in the prevalence of marriage (Tables 1 and 2). Nuptiality is invariably lowest in the Shropshire study area, with values of the SMAM in excess of 30 years for males in 1851 and 1881, and highest in Norfolk. The other two areas have nuptiality levels between these extremes.

The SMAM for males is, with one exception, at least one year higher than that for females, the differential reaching a maximum of 2.8 years in the Yorkshire area in 1881. Temporal trends are less obvious, although there is a clear increase in nuptiality for females in the Norfolk area between 1851 and 1881.

Let us now consider the forces which shape the marriage market and produce these patterns of nuptiality. The three most important, according to our model, are the sex-ratio in the courting age-groups, the prevalence of the institution of service, and female employment in occupations other than domestic and farm service. Since the marriage market only includes those who are not yet married, the focus of interest is the sex ratio amongst single people in the primary courting age-groups, which we take to be 15-29 years (Table 3).¹⁶ Similarly, the relevant measure of the prevalence of domestic and farm service is the proportion of unmarried people in the 15-29 year age-group which is in service; since such people would be compelled to give up their employment if they were to marry (Table 4). As far as women's work in other occupations is concerned, since it is the opportunity for wives to contribute to the household economy, as well as the chance for women to accumulate savings before they marry, that depresses nuptiality, the proportion of all women (married, unmarried and widowed) aged 15-29 years that is working in occupations other than service seems to be an appropriate measure (Table 5).

The interpretation of the results hinges on the fact that of the variables which we consider to be affecting nuptiality, the most closely related to the

¹⁵ The singulate mean age at marriage is described in detail in JOHN HAJNAL, "Age at marriage and proportions marrying", *Population Studies*, 7 (1953) 111-136.

¹⁶ Two previous studies of marriage patterns in nineteenth-century England, namely MICHAEL ANDERSON, "Marriage patterns in Victorian Britain: an analysis based on registration district data for England and Wales", *Journal of Family History*, 1 (1976) 55-78; and R.I. WOODS and P.R.A. HINDE, *loc. cit.*, used measures of the sex ratio amongst the whole population between selected ages. Whilst in our study areas, the sex ratio amongst unmarried people and that amongst all people aged between 15 and 29 years are highly correlated, we believe that the former is conceptually more appropriate as a measure of the state of the marriage market. Anderson's study, in fact, used in age-group (25-34 years) which seems rather old, since roughly half of the female population who got married would have done so by their mid-twenties.

Table 1
 PERCENTAGES OF THE POPULATION AGED
 20-29 YEARS WHICH HAD EVER BEEN MARRIED:
 FOUR STUDY AREAS, 1851-1881

Sex	Study area	1851	1861	1871	1881
Males	Derbyshire	28.5	28.6	33.9	39.6
	Yorkshire	26.8	30.8	27.6	35.1
	Norfolk	36.9	41.8	46.8	34.4
	Shropshire	20.3	17.4	23.3	25.4
Females	Derbyshire	39.3	43.5	48.5	43.7
	Yorkshire	39.9	50.1	44.3	50.3
	Norfolk	48.6	50.0	51.0	52.5
	Shropshire	32.3	31.6	39.6	40.4

Table 2
 SINGULATE MEAN AGES AT FIRST MARRIAGE:
 FOUR STUDY AREAS 1851-1881

Sex	Study area	1851	1861	1871	1881
Males	Derbyshire	26.7	28.3	25.4	27.4
	Yorkshire	28.0	28.0	27.4	28.0
	Norfolk	26.8	26.9	25.8	26.5
	Shropshire	30.8	29.4	28.9	30.1
Females	Derbyshire	25.5	26.1	26.1	26.0
	Yorkshire	26.6	25.9	26.0	25.2
	Norfolk	25.5	24.9	24.3	24.2
	Shropshire	28.4	28.4	27.0	27.9

Table 3
 NUMBER OF UNMARRIED WOMEN AGED 15-29 YEARS
 FOR EVERY 100 UNMARRIED MEN IN THE SAME AGE-GROUP:
 FOUR STUDY AREAS, 1851-1881

Study area	1851	1861	1871	1881
Derbyshire	94.6	71.5	78.8	82.3
Yorkshire	77.7	75.5	94.8	74.9
Norfolk	89.3	91.3	82.1	74.6
Shropshire	80.1	82.8	82.9	78.6

Table 4
PERCENTAGES OF THE UNMARRIED PEOPLE AGED
15-29 YEARS WHICH WERE IN SERVICE:
FOUR STUDY AREAS, 1851-1881

Sex	Study area	1851	1861	1871	1881
Males	Derbyshire	17.9	19.6	22.3	16.3
	Yorkshire	20.0	16.2	15.4	10.1
	Norfolk	11.7	7.1	3.6	3.1
	Shropshire	45.9	39.7	39.8	36.2
Females	Derbyshire	28.8	29.0	26.8	26.8
	Yorkshire	20.1	20.1	17.7	20.0
	Norfolk	36.1	42.9	40.1	38.7
	Shropshire	50.6	51.8	47.3	46.0

Table 5
PERCENTAGE OF FEMALES AGED 15-29 YEARS
EMPLOYED IN OCCUPATIONS OTHER THAN DOMESTIC
OR FARM SERVICE: FOUR STUDY AREAS, 1851-1881

Study area	1851	1861	1871	1881
Derbyshire	19.6	20.9	22.0	17.8
Yorkshire	33.9	34.3	33.5	27.3
Norfolk	22.2	16.0	21.5	17.6
Shropshire	14.2	11.2	15.5	12.0

Table 6
NUMBER OF UNMARRIED WOMEN AGED 15-29 YEARS WHO WERE
NOT IN SERVICE FOR EVERY 100 UNMARRIED MEN IN THE SAME
AGE-GROUP NOT IN SERVICE: FOUR STUDY AREAS, 1851-1881

Study area	1851	1861	1871	1881
Derbyshire	82.1	63.1	74.3	82.4
Yorkshire	77.5	72.0	92.1	66.7
Norfolk	64.6	56.2	51.0	47.2
Shropshire	73.1	66.2	72.5	66.5

observed marriage pattern in the four areas is the percentage of unmarried males aged between 15 and 29 which is in service (Table 4). Since males tend to be the instigators of marriage proposals, this is a measure of the demand (or opportunity) for marriage. A high proportion of young men in service leads to a later average age at marriage, because for male servants, marriage necessitates a change of employment. Males in service, therefore, experience a disincentive to early wedlock.

Most male servants in rural areas were, in fact, farm servants rather than domestic servants, so we argue that the prevalence of farm service is the key variable in determining the state of the marriage market in nineteenth-century rural England. It affects male nuptiality directly, but also female nuptiality, by virtue of the fact that males tend to look for potential spouses of a certain age relative to their own (on average about two years younger).¹⁷ Superimposed upon the effect of male service, however, are the effects of other "marriage market" variables, which are, in the main, measures of the supply of partners, both absolutely and relative to the demand. These can perhaps most effectively be examined by considering their operation in each of the four study areas in turn.

In the Derbyshire study area it can be seen that all the variables take moderate values when compared with the range of their values over the four areas. It is, therefore, to be expected that nuptiality will be moderate as well, which is the case (Tables 1 and 2).¹⁸

The case of the Yorkshire area is both more complex and more interesting. The sex ratio apparently favours a low age at marriage (especially for females) (Table 3). Moreover, female service is relatively uncommon (Table 4) so few young women experienced the disincentive to early marriage which work as a servant entailed. It was, however, mentioned earlier that in this area, a textile industry provided employment outside the home for young women, a situation which is reflected in the high percentage of women in the age-group 15-29 years working in occupations other than service (Table 5).

This would have an influence upon nuptiality (especially for females) opposite to that of the sex ratio. The outcome of these compensating effects seems to have been a moderate level of nuptiality for both males and females.

The average age at marriage in the Norfolk area was low for both sexes. This was the case despite a sex ratio apparently favourable to later marriage (Table 3). At this point, though, we must introduce the possibility that, just

¹⁷ This is suggested by our figures for the SMAM. Moreover, using family reconstitution methods, it has been shown that in England between 1600 and 1799, women married at an average age about two years younger than men: see E.A. WRIGLEY and R.S. SCHOFIELD, "English population history from family reconstitution: summary results 1600-1799", *Population Studies*, 37 (1983) 162.

¹⁸ The low value for the sex ratio in the Derbyshire area in 1861 (Table 3) is mainly the result of an influx of itinerant railway workers into the area.

as work as a servant was a disincentive to early marriage for men, this might have been the case for women also. The disincentive was probably not as great for women, since they did not have to find alternative employment after marriage. If female servants were discouraged from marrying early, the effect of the sex ratio on the marriage market may be modified. Suppose, for example, that young men seeking partners look first amongst women who were not in service, since these women are not encumbered by contractual obligations to their employers, and are also easier to "court" (having, for example, more free time in the evenings). Then, even in an area where young women were relatively common, if many of these women were in service there might still have been an apparent shortage of eligible females in the eyes of young men. If we examine the sex ratio amongst unmarried people aged between 15 and 29 years who were not in service (Table 6), it is seen that in Norfolk, where very few males (but a substantial proportion of females) were in service, there is indeed such a shortage of women.¹⁹ If young men in Norfolk were behaving as we suggest, then the sex-specific nature of the institution of service in that area may well have depressed the mean age at marriage for both sexes. It is also noteworthy that the sex ratio in the Norfolk area changes over time, becoming more favourable to early marriage (especially for females) (Tables 3 and 6). This change is reflected in a decline in the SMAM for females between 1851 and 1881 (Table 2).

The figures for Shropshire are perhaps the most difficult to interpret. Nuptiality, as we have seen, was very low throughout the period, whereas both the sex ratio and the prevalence of female employment in occupations other than service (Table 5) favour a low mean age at marriage. Against these factors, however, is the very high percentage of young women working in service. What we really need to know before we can gain a true picture of the operation of the marriage market in the Shropshire area is whether or not male servants tended to marry female servants. If they did, then it is conceivable that there were two separate marriage markets: one operating amongst the service population, and another for those who were not in service. A final factor which should be mentioned here is that in mid-nineteenth century Shropshire there was a chronic shortage of accommodation for day labourers (those who did not live on the farm).²⁰ Since it was expected that a couple,

¹⁹ In other areas, where service was not such a sex-specific occupation, the difference between the two sex ratios is much smaller (compare Tables 3 and 6).

²⁰ H. TANNER, "The agriculture of Shropshire", *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 19 (1858) 62. A government enquiry in 1869 "found that the general state of labourers' cottages in Shropshire was worse than in any other English county except Dorset": see B. TRINDER, "The life and times of the agricultural community over the hundred years", in SHROPSHIRE AND WEST MIDLANDS AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY, *A Century of Progress: 1875-1975* (Shrewsbury, 1975) p. 20.

once married, would have their own cottage, many couples may have been forced to delay their marriage until they could find somewhere to live.

It is clear from the analysis we have presented that the prevalence of farm service was still an extremely important determinant of the state of the marriage market in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its effects, however, had taken on a regional dimension. Whereas during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many farm workers had "lived in" all over England, by 1850 this was only true of the north and west. In the south and east, the institution of farm service had disappeared almost entirely, and with it had gone the check on nuptiality, and indirectly on fertility and the rate of population growth, which it provided. Yet its replacement as a check upon fertility (voluntary control within marriage) does not seem to have emerged in rural England until at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The countryside in the south and east, therefore (exemplified by our Norfolk study area), was for a period of around 50 years without either of the conventional checks of the rate of population growth. In other areas, this situation did not arise to the same extent, since farm service remained until towards the end of the century (as in our Shropshire area).

This observation raises a number of questions. Did other checks appear in the south and east to replace late marriage, and, if so, what were they? If they did not, then to what extent did the resulting high rate of natural increase of the population have consequences for unemployment (or underemployment) rates, rates of out-migration, and agricultural wages? Whatever the answers to these questions are, it is clear that the second half of the nineteenth-century is a crucial period for the demography of the English countryside, and that an analysis of the marriage market is an important component of the study of that demography.

One final point that should be borne in mind is that our model of the marriage market is specific to nineteenth-century England. Whilst similar factors probably played a part in influencing the timing and extent of marriage elsewhere in Europe, it is almost certain that different models would need to be developed for similar analyses in other areas.