

THE CONDITION
OF THE BRITISH PEOPLE

1911-1945

A Study prepared for The Fabian Society

by

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With a Foreword by

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THE GROWTH OF THE SUBURBS

BY THE END of the nineteenth century 80 per cent of Britain's population was living within the boundaries of urban areas, and 20 per cent within rural districts. As a guide to the proportion of the people living under urban conditions, this classification, based upon local government administration, was to some extent misleading. The small "urban districts" of the Cotswolds, for example, were fundamentally rural in character; and conversely the mining villages of Northumberland and Durham were anything but rural. There can be little doubt, however, that the great urban-industrial conglomeration was the dominant type of community in this country by the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, the county of London, the county boroughs of Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield, Bristol, and the burghs of Glasgow and Edinburgh housed between them almost 10,000,000 people; i.e. one-quarter of the total population was concentrated in these ten cities. By 1911, however, the administrative boundaries of these and similar British cities coincided less and less with their economic and social boundaries. On the one hand, the populations of adjoining cities began to link up so as to form a single continuous built-up area; on the other hand, the city population began to overflow the traditional administrative limits, and to build up an outer ring of suburbs which, for most purposes, was complementary to the original central area. These mixed entities—often containing several administrative units—are conveniently described as "conurbations". The administrative units constituting each major conurbation is shown on pp. 37, 38 and their populations in 1921 and 1938¹ are set out in Table IV.

Throughout the inter-war years approximately half the British people lived in the sixteen major conurbations of more than 250,000 inhabitants, and 40 per cent of the British people lived in the seven largest—London, Manchester, Birmingham, West Yorks, Glasgow, Merseyside and Tyneside.

¹ Between 1911 and 1921 there was very little building, and the movement of population was therefore very slight. 1938 is taken as the other terminal point, since by 1939 the certain approach of war had begun to affect the location of population.

TABLE IV

Changes in population of Major Conurbations

Conurbation	Area	Population		% increase
		1921	1938	
London	Conurb.	7,480,000	8,700,000	16.3
Manchester	Conurb.	2,316,000	2,420,000	4.5
Birmingham	Conurb.	1,692,000	1,981,000	17.1
West Yorks (Leeds)	Conurb.	1,330,000	1,451,000	9.1
Glasgow	Conurb.	1,252,000	1,352,000	8.0
Merseyside (Liverpool)	Conurb.	1,221,000	1,279,000	4.8
Tyneside (Newcastle)	Conurb.	1,053,000	1,071,000	1.8
Sheffield	C.B.	512,000	520,000	1.6
Edinburgh	Burgh	420,000	467,000	11.2
Bristol	Conurb.	400,000	446,000	11.4
Nottingham	Conurb.	319,000	386,000	21.2
Stoke	Conurb.	297,000	350,000	17.7
Portsmouth	Conurb.	287,000	330,000	14.8
Hull	C.B.	291,000	319,000	9.6
Teessmouth (Middlesbrough)	Conurb.	270,000	304,000	12.4
Leicester	Conurb.	246,000	281,000	14.1
Cardiff	Conurb.	237,000	239,000	1.0
Brighton	Conurb.	210,000	228,000	8.6
Plymouth	C.B.	210,000	212,000	.8
Coventry	C.B.	148,000	213,000	43.8
Southampton	Conurb.	177,000	206,000	16.8
Bournemouth	Conurb.	146,000	205,000	40.0
Blackpool	Conurb.	151,000	188,000	24.8
Dundee	Burgh	168,000	178,000	6.0
Aberdeen	Burgh	159,000	177,000	11.3
Swansea	C.B.	158,000	161,000	2.2
Medway (Gillingham)	Conurb.	132,000	153,000	15.8
Total of above		21,282,000	23,825,000	12.0
Rest of Great Britain		21,487,000	22,383,000	4.2

It is clear from Table IV that during the inter-war years the major conurbations grew, as a group, much more rapidly than did the rest of the country. In fact, between 1921 and 1938 Britain's population grew by 3,440,000 people, and 75 per cent of this growth accrued to the suburbs of the twenty-seven major conurbations.

	Population		% Increase
	1921	1938	
13 South and Midland ¹ Conurbations	11,745,000	13,690,000	16
14 North and Wales ² Conurbations	9,535,000	10,125,000	6

¹ London, Birmingham, Bristol, Notts, Stoke, Portsmouth, Leicester, Brighton, Plymouth, Coventry, Southampton, Bournemouth, Medway.

² Manchester, W. Yorks, Glasgow, Mersey, Tynemouth, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Hull, Teessmouth, Cardiff, Blackpool, Dundee, Aberdeen, Swansea.

Thus, among the twenty-seven, the rate of expansion was not uniform; while all of them registered some growth in numbers in the inter-war years, some greatly exceeded the average rate, and others lagged far behind. As might be expected, the former were mainly in the South and the Midlands, while the latter were mainly in Wales and the North.

The most striking of all the population movements of the inter-war years was, however, that which took place within each conurbation. Almost all of them experienced a centrifugal movement; numbers in the centre remained constant or even declined while all the growth took place in the suburbs.

Thus, in the seven great metropolitan centres numbers increased by 11.7 per cent in the inter-war period, but their inner centres experienced a decline of 2.5 per cent while their suburbs expanded by 32 per cent—indeed, almost two-thirds of the whole national increase in population over the eighteen years was concentrated in the suburban parts of these seven conurbations.

Conurbation	Inner Centre	Population of Inner Centre		Population of Rest of Conurbations	
		1921	1938	1921	1938
London	L.C.C.	4,524,000	4,063,000	2,956,000	4,637,000
Manchester	Manchester, Salford	969,800	932,300	1,346,000	1,488,000
Birmingham	Birmingham	922,200	1,041,000	769,700	940,100
West Yorks	Leeds, Bradford	754,100	782,700	575,400	668,000
Glasgow	Glasgow	1,034,200	1,125,000	217,900	227,000
Merseyside	Liverpool, Birkenhead	952,800	971,800	268,300	307,400
Tyneside	Newcastle, Gateshead	400,100	408,300	652,500	663,000
		9,557,200	9,324,100	6,785,800	8,930,500

If we ignore the conurbations of the north, and look merely at the thirteen in the South and the Midlands this movement is even more striking.

	Population		% change
	1921 (in thousands)	1938	
Inner centres of S. & M. conurbations	7,730	7,615	- 1.5
Suburbs of S. & M. conurbations	4,015	6,075	+ 51.3

Thus, the suburbs of these thirteen conurbations absorbed 60 per cent of the total British increase in population in the inter-war years.

Some of the distinctive features of life in the suburbs is suggested

by the statistics of births, deaths, and age composition. These figures unfortunately are not available in terms of the suburban boundaries, but it is reasonable to consider as the prototype of suburban life the conditions in the five counties immediately surrounding London—Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, and Surrey. These may be considered the suburbs of London and in the following figures they are contrasted with the "Rest of Britain".

It is clear that life in the suburbs since the last war has seen a striking expansion of new houses, new streets and new estates; that before 1939 fertility was below the average in spite of excellent housing conditions; that health conditions were exceptionally good, and that the net result was a community where one person in every nine was 65 years or more, and where for every two children under 15 years there were nine adults.

	London Suburbs	Rest of Britain
% Increase in population 1921 to 1938	56	2
Births per 1,000 women, 15—44 in 1937—8—9	59	64
Infant mortality rates, 1937—8—9	42	58
"Standardised" deaths, compared 1937—8—9	100	130
% of population over 64 years of age, 1938	11	8
% of population under 15 years of age, 1938	19	22

CONURBATIONS

The constitution of the main conurbations is as follows:

1. LONDON Greater London is the area within a radius of 15 miles of Charing Cross.
2. MANCHESTER

<i>Lancashire</i>		<i>Cheshire</i>
Ashton-u-Lyne	Manchester	Altrincham
Atherton	Middleton	Bowdon
Audenshaw	Milnrow	Bredbury and
Bolton	Mossley	Romily
Bury	Oldham	Cheadle and
Chadderton	Prestwich	Gatley
Crompton	Radcliffe	Dukinfield
Denton	Rochdale	Hale
Droylesden	Royton	Hazel Grove and
Eccles	Salford	Bramhall
Failsforth	Stretford	Hyde
Farnworth	Swinton	Marple
Heywood	Tottington	Saddleworth
Irlam	Turton	Sale
Kearsley	Urmston	Stalybridge
Lees	Whitefield	Stockport
Leigh	Worsley	
Little Lever		

3. BIRMINGHAM	<i>Staffordshire</i>		<i>Worcestershire</i>
	Bilston	Tipton	Dudley
	Brierley Hill	Walsall	Halesowen
	Cosely	Wednesbury	Oldbury
	Darlaston	Wednesfield	Stourbridge
	Rowley Regis	West Bromwich	
	Sedgley	Willenhall	<i>Warwickshire</i>
	Smethwick	Wolverhampton	Birmongham
	Tettenhall		Sutton Coldfield
4. WEST YORKS		<i>West Riding</i>	
	Aireborough	Halifax	Morley
	Baildon	Heckmondwike	Osset
	Batley	Honley	Pudsey
	Bradford	Horbury	Queensbury
	Brighouse	Horsforth	Rothwell
	Clayton West	Huddersfield	Shipley
	Colne Valley	Kirkheaton	South Crosland
	Denholme	Leeds	Sowerby
	Dewsbury	Midgley	Spenborough
	Elland	Mirfield	
5. GLASGOW	<i>Lanark</i>	<i>Dumbarton</i>	<i>Renfrew</i>
	Glasgow	Clydebank	Barrhead
	Hamilton		Paisley
	Rutherglen		Renfrew
6. MERSEYSIDE	<i>Lancashire</i>	<i>Cheshire</i>	
	Bootle	Bebington	
	Crosby	Birkenhead	
	Litherland	Hoylelake	
	Liverpool	Wallasey	
7. TYNESIDE	<i>Durham</i>		<i>Northumberland</i>
	Blaydon	Ryton	Gosforth
	Felling	South Shields	Longbenton
	Gateshead	Sunderland	Newburn
	Hebburn	Sunderland R.D.	Newcastle
	Jarrow	Whickham	Tynemouth
			Wallsend
			Whitley
8. BRISTOL	Bristol	Kingswood	Mangotsfield
9. NOTTINGHAM	Nottingham	Arnold	Carlton
		Beeston	West Bridgford
10. STOKE	Stoke	Kidsgrove	Newcastle-under-Lyme
11. PORTSMOUTH	Portsmouth	Gosport	Havant
12. TEESMOUTH	<i>Durham</i>	<i>North Riding</i>	
	Billingham	Eston	Redcar
	Stockton	Middlesbrough	Thornaby-on-Tees

VI

FAMILIES—NUMBER AND SIZE

MOST PEOPLE LIVE the whole of their lives as members of a family group. In twentieth century Britain, however, the number of exceptions to this rule is not negligible, and at some time or another in their lives, many people are found living outside a family. Thus, the average census of this century showed that almost 5 per cent of the total population was living in institutions of various kinds (hotels, schools, hospitals, etc.), and another 2 per cent were living on their own in what the census describes as "one-person families".

In 1911 the population of Great Britain was grouped in 8,954,000 families; by 1939 the total had grown to 12,300,000—an increase of nearly 40 per cent. On the face of it, this expansion seems out of all proportion to the mere 14 per cent increase in the total population, and suggests a much greater propensity to marriage in recent years. In fact, there has been a slight, but no appreciable increase. The truth is that the change in the number of families should be measured, not against the increase in total population, but against the "population at risk"—broadly those over 24 years of age; their numbers increased by 40 per cent.

Between any two dates any change in the number of families will usually be determined by the difference between the intake of newly-marrying couples and the "wastage" created by the deaths of heads of families. The fall in death rates among middle-aged people over the past thirty years has reduced this wastage considerably; any further fall, however, is unlikely to reduce the *rate* of wastage in the future; the increase in the number of old people in the population will, in fact, increase the *amount* of wastage. On the other hand the sharp decline in the birth rate that started in 1921 has barely had time to affect the current supply of recruits to married life. Its effects are, however, imminent and it is inevitable that the increase in the number of families in this country will stop within the next fifteen to twenty years. During the twenties 225 new marriages were sufficient to make a net addition of 100 families to the total in the country. By the end of the thirties we needed 325 marriages to add 100 families. Since then the annual number of marriages has passed its peak.

In the first forty years of this century marrying habits have been remarkably stable—the average age at which bachelors married has been fairly constant at 28 years, and the average age at which spinsters married has been 26. Unlike some averages these figures represent a considerable part of reality. Thus, in 1938 over one-third of all bachelors and spinsters who married were between the ages of 25 and 29. Moreover, there is normally very little age difference between bride and bridegroom in Britain. In 1938, 58,000 out of the 400,000 marriages were between men and women who were both in the age group 25—29, and another 60,000 were between men and women both in the age group 21—24. The following table shows the age composition of those marrying at the beginning and the end of the period.¹

Age Group	Per cent of all males marrying		Per cent of all females marrying	
	1910-12	1937-8	1910-12	1937-8
Under 21	4	3	14	16
21—24	32	29	38	38
25—29	35	38	28	27
30—34	14	15	10	9
35 and over	15	15	10	10
All ages	100	100	100	100

The age of the average male at marriage has risen very slightly, while that of the average female has fallen a little. The following figures showing the “marital condition” of British women aged 20—44 make quite clear that there has been no decline in readiness or ability to marry—there has, in fact, been an increase, so that at the end of the inter-war period the proportion of women who had taken at least the first step towards family life was appreciably higher than it had been in 1911.

Age Group	% of women in the age group recorded as married or widowed		
	1911	1931	1938
20—24	24	25	31
25—34	64	66	69
35—44	80	80	82

One probable explanation of the higher marriage rate immediately before the Second World War is that not until then did

¹ These figures include the marriages of widows and widowers; in spite of the ageing character of the population the proportion of non-first marriages has not increased; in 1910—2, 7·1 per cent of those who married were widows or widowers; in 1930—2, the ratio had fallen to 6·2 per cent, and in 1938 to 5·8 per cent.

the supply of new dwellings catch up with the increase in the number of families. Between 1911 and mid-1935 the number of new dwellings built in Britain was 3,000,000, and this was no more than sufficient to match the number of additional families in the country. Only in the four subsequent years was there a marked easing of the housing situation when the output of new dwellings was maintained at 360,000 per annum while the number of additional families each year was only 100,000.

The type of family produced as a result of the marriages of the inter-war years has altered considerably in its dimensions. In 1911 the size of the average family was 4.35 persons; in 1939 it was 3.59 persons. The estimates in the following table show more clearly the quantitative change that has taken place in family life. In 1911, 42 per cent of the families in this country contained five or more persons, and the members of these families accounted for 64 per cent of the total population. By 1939 only 25 per cent of families contained five or more persons, and only one person in every three was part of a household as large as this. By 1939 the representative British citizen, whether child or adult, was sharing his or her domestic life with at most two other people; and households containing four children had become semi-shameful anachronisms.

TABLE V

No. of persons in family	Number of Families		
	1911	1939	1939 as % of 1911
1	500,000	880,000	176
2	1,425,000	2,830,000	199
3	1,700,000	3,050,000	180
4	1,600,000	2,400,000	150
5	1,275,000	1,480,000	116
6 and 7	1,575,000	1,270,000	81
8 and more	880,000	390,000	44
Total	8,955,000	12,300,000	137

Until recently the amount of official statistics that could throw any light on British family life was extremely limited. On July 1st, 1938, however, the Population (Statistics) Act came into force. Its main purpose was to ensure that at every birth, legitimate or illegitimate, live or stillborn, there should be registered, among other facts, the age of the mother, the interval since marriage (if it was a legitimate maternity) and the number of previous children (surviving, dead or stillborn) born to the mother. The results for England and Wales for the second half

of 1938, for 1939 and 1940 have now been published, and they throw considerable light on the pattern of married life in this country at the end of the inter-war period.

During these two and a half years there were approximately 11,500,000 women aged 15—49 in England and Wales. Just over half of them were married, and these married women produced 600,000 maternities per annum—roughly one for every ten married women.

The following table gives the ages of the mothers of legitimate maternities.

Age of mother at maternity	% of all maternities in each age group		
	July—Dec. 1938	1939	1940
Under 20	3·5	3·9	3·9
20—24	23·1	22·3	23·5
25—29	32·5	32·8	32·7
30—34	23·7	23·8	23·0
35—39	12·7	12·8	12·5
40—44	4·1	4·0	4·0
45 and over	·4	·4	·4
Total	100·0	100·0	100·0

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these figures is their consistency; in each year one-quarter of the maternities are those of married women aged 20—24, one-third are those of married women 25—29, and another quarter those of women aged 30—34; clearly, child-bearing after the age of 35 has become very unusual in English families.

As we have seen, the proportion of married women in each age group is not constant, and the following table, showing the annual average experience for the two and a half years of registrations relates these maternities to particular groups of married women.

Of all females aged 15—24, only 18 per cent were married,

Age Group	Single, married and widowed	Number of women married	Married as % of total	Legitimate maternities annually per 100 married women
15—19	1,746,000	50,700	2·9	45·9
20—24	1,553,000	537,000	34·6	25·8
25—29	1,764,000	1,172,000	66·5	16·8
30—34	1,763,000	1,311,000	74·4	10·7
35—39	1,658,000	1,282,000	77·3	6·2
40—44	1,539,000	1,185,000	77·1	2·0
45—49	1,441,000	1,067,000	74·0	0·2
Total	11,464,000	6,604,700	57·6	9·1

but two out of every five of these young wives had a baby each year; these figures, however, are in some ways misleading as a guide to planning of family size, since nearly half the maternities of these women are completed within eight months of marriage. For our present purposes the behaviour of the two main groups* of women, aged 25—34 and 35—44, provides a better picture; 70 per cent of the former group were married, and each year one in seven of these wives had a child; 77 per cent of the latter group were married, and each year only one in twenty-five of these wives had a child.

These figures suggest that in any particular year a high proportion of all maternities in this country are either first or second maternities. In fact, for the two-and-a-half years for which we have statistics, 42 per cent of all legitimate maternities were first maternities, and another 26 per cent were second maternities; only 19 per cent of the total were the maternities of women who had already had three children.

The general picture then is that the "typical" English wife and mother of the pre-war years was a young woman who, at 24 years of age, married a husband of 26 years; her first maternity came two years later. For almost half of these women this was also their last maternity; the remainder went on to have a second maternity three or four years later (i.e. when aged 29 or 30) and the vast majority gave up child-bearing completely after they had reached 35 years of age.

Regional figures have not yet been published in full detail, but the material that is available suggests that the differences in family standards within England and Wales are related primarily to age and not to income. In 1939 young wives on the depressed Tyneside apparently aimed at much the same size of family as young wives in the prosperous suburbs of the Home Counties; the outstanding differences in fertility between Tyneside wives and Home Counties wives were to be found among those over 35 years of age—i.e. had passed their childhood in a pre-1918 world; the Tyneside housewives in this age group were producing relatively 40 per cent more children than their southern sisters.

Age of mother at maternity	Maternities per 1000 females in age group		% Excess in Northumberland and Durham
	South-East (excluding Gr. London)	Northumberland and Durham	
20—24	101·3	107·3	6
25—29	113·1	128·7	14
30—34	78·8	96·4	22
35—39	43·6	58·2	34
40—44	14·0	20·9	49