

The Lodging Market in a Victorian City: Exeter

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'Historians, as well as other social commentators, have tended to regard lodging as an insignificant phenomenon in recent history';¹ yet the numbers in 'lodgings' grew significantly during the nineteenth century and letting lodgings continued to be a common source of income for many working and lower-middle-class families into the twentieth century.² Lodging played a crucial role in the emergence of the 'modern life cycle'³ and was particularly important at two distant phases: in early adulthood between leaving the parental family and marriage, the inter-family period; and in later life in the post-family phase. It was a strategy adopted to cope with the pressures from the growing divorce of production and consumption and, like domestic service, lodging bridged the increasingly separated realms of home and work. While single girls and young women found domestic work in other people's homes, women with premises to let and family commitments found taking lodgers a convenient way of earning a home. In Exeter in the nineteenth century where there was little or no factory work, but a large immigrant population, the attraction of letting lodgings must have been considerable.

There was a wide range of types of lodgings and lodging relationships, from the landlord/lady who let unfurnished rooms to those who took in boarders, providing meals, cleaning and washing (and in some cases sexual) services.⁴ The relationship of landlady and lodger varied from the strictly formal and commercial to an intimate one of cohabitation. The increasing polarization of work and home and thus the lack of employer control over living arrangements, heightened the fears of the social threat posed by 'rootless' single young men and women.⁵ Such was the suspicion aroused by the whole world of lodgings, landladies and lodgers that some landlords prohibited letting lodgings on their estates.⁶ Where there were no such restrictions, as appears to have been the case in most of Exeter, there were lodgers and landladies at all levels of society below the upper classes and in poorer families the crowded living accommodation appeared to have been no hindrance to taking lodgers if family income could be supplemented.⁷ The lodgers too were frequently forced to accept

crowded conditions with whole families lodged in one room being common practice in the poorer parts of Exeter.⁸

Davidoff sees the role of lodging as a key factor in the larger arena of the 'definition of masculinity and femininity, together with their social location in work and home'.⁹ She views lodging as an indicator, not of the breakdown of family life, but of the adaptability of the family to meet the successive and changing needs in its life-cycle. The experience of having strangers living in one's home, whether lodgers, boarders, assistants, apprentices or servants, affected a large proportion of Exeter's population at various stages of the life-cycle throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰ While the incidence of apprentices and assistants declined, that of lodgers, like servants, increased. This study analyses the significance of lodgings for different groups of lodgers and landlords or landladies.

The immigrants and the lodging market.

'The picture of a mobile country population incessantly engaged in the process of moving for the purpose of improving their condition, above all seeking their future in the towns, is now firmly established'.¹¹ Migration into towns was not a new phenomenon of the nineteenth century, but its rate and scale were unprecedented. What were the particular attractions of Exeter for the rural immigrants, who constituted over half of the city's population? For men there was work in commerce, trades and in the growth areas of communications, building and clerical jobs, all of which meant higher cash earnings than in agricultural occupations. For women the choice of jobs was narrower: domestic service and other domestic-orientated jobs, dressmaking and a few craft and retail openings. The city also provided men and women with an increased range of social contacts and the possibility of upward mobility through marriage as well as occupation. This rural to urban migration precipitated the growth in the lodging market in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth.

The city's draw was augmented by 'the force of repulsion' in the countryside and agricultural occupations.¹² Agriculture and the aligned crafts and trades of the villages and small towns could not support the growing labouring population.¹³ Work in agriculture was often intermittent, and conditions were harsh. Armstrong¹⁴ found in nineteenth century Yorkshire that rural labourers were more mobile than craftsmen and farmers, while labourers' wives were more static, prior to marriage, and farmers and craftsmen's wives more mobile.

The low grade level of occupations for single girls and women in the countryside forced all those above the level of casual agricultural workers to move away.

Although many immigrant girls took jobs as in-servants, only a few of those working in other occupations, for example drapers' assistants and some dressmakers, had accommodation provided by their employers and the majority lived in lodgings, or as boarders. By the second half of the century the incidence of single men living with their employers was very low. This was partly due to the desire for social and economic independence over accommodation and a separation between work on the one hand and home, leisure, family and friends on the other, which increased cash earnings made possible. In Exeter this trend was strengthened by the changing occupational and economic structure of the city, which meant fewer openings for apprentices after the collapse of the wool trade at the beginning of the century.¹⁵ The majority of these young male adult immigrants and those girls who were not entering living-in domestic service expected to look for a home and a job separately and this meant an increase in the demand for lodgings. These were of two types; informal arrangements where the lodger was either a relative or friend of the landlady, or formal lodging-houses. The latter varied, in size, from households with two or three lodgers to those with 10 or more, and in social status, from doss houses and brothels to salubrious villas catering for the middle-class single man or couple, either temporarily staying in the city, or newly arrived and awaiting the purchase of a freehold or leasehold property.

In this state of flux the static picture of household structure as depicted in the census returns is misleading. Household structure was the result of individuals' strategies to cope with changing social and economic exigencies. These strategies were as dependent on the ages of the individual and his/her immediate family as on the social and occupational group and economic circumstances. The composition of any household was dynamic and must be seen in terms of the life cycles of the component individuals,¹⁶ and one area in which these criteria are particularly relevant was the lodging sector of the housing market.

The range of immigrants in rented accommodation in Exeter was as diverse as the types of lodgings. The Irish labouring families which had entered the city in the 'forties came as a result of the potato famine. Unlike York where they constituted 5 per cent of the population by 1851, they were never more than 1 per cent of Exeter's population.¹⁷ Most other immigrant labourers were from rural Devon, with less than 5 per cent from the neighbouring counties of Cornwall, Dorset and Somerset. They congregated, like the Irish, in

the parishes to the west of the city close to the river, where accomodation was cheap and most houses were let by the room, while young, single immigrants continued to move into accomodation in the central parishes closer to work opportunities.¹⁸ But it was not only immigrants who lived in lodgings, generally, older widowed and single persons either lived in lodgings (except for the few who could afford to maintain households of their own), or were institutionalised in the workhouse or hospital. Many of those defined as living on their own in separate households in the census were in fact living in almshouse accommodation. Lodgers had never featured significantly in households with either servants or apprentices; yet the small group of households with co-resident kin and lodgers increased slightly from 1.6 per cent of the sample in 1851 to 4 per cent by 1881. This reflects two features, first that lodgings were often let to help support dependent relatives and second that it was becoming more common to let lodgings at all social levels and particularly in lower-middle-class households. Here going out to work (for married or widowed women) was often incompatible with family requirements or social expectations, and potential employment was generally low-paid but income needs were frequently high because of the number of dependents to support.

Lodgers in 1881

Ninety-six housheholds (12 per cent of the 1881 1 in 10 sample) contained 201 lodgers.¹⁹ In the sample 17 households had 3 or more lodgers, 29 had two lodgers and the remaining 50 had one lodger in residence on the night of the census. Two factors are worth bearing in mind. One is that April may not have been a peak period of the year for letting lodgings; since there were neither summer time visitors, nor the influx of young men and to a lesser extent women seeking work in the city as extra labour left the country at the end of the summer hiring period. Secondly the census was carried out on midweek nights, which were likely to show fewer lodgers than weekend nights. Although most lodgings were let at least on a weekly basis, and some even on a monthly basis or longer, there was always a nightly turnover of people taking accomodation more cheaply than offered in the main hotels. Hence at other times of the year and on other nights of the week the number of lodgers may have been much higher. Certainly it was a section of the population prone to fluctuation.

The lodgers in this sample were all returned in the 'relationship to head' section as lodgers or boarders. About one-third of them lived in households where the head returned him or herself as a lodging-

house keeper, but the majority lived in households where the head had another occupation and either his wife coped with the lettings or they let one room on the side as an addition to their income from other sources. The majority of the lodging-house keepers were women over 40 years and either single or widowed, while those households containing a lodger but not calling themselves lodging-houses were generally families with both head and spouse alive.

There was another group of people who were living in lodgings, but they do not show up clearly in the census. These were couples and families renting a few rooms or even a flat in their landlord's house, but often sharing communal facilities. In some cases the head did return these as lodgers, but generally in deference to the social and economic status of the lodger head, they were returned as separate households. From Gissing's diary of his two years in Exeter, it is clear that renting rooms on this semi-independent basis did not mean any lessening of the wrangles between landlord or landlady and lodger which typify much Victorian literature.²⁰ He viewed his landlady and her husband in Prospect Park with distaste both for their vulgarity and for their commercial penny-pinching concerns.

Although lodgers were spread throughout the city the oldest suburb, St. David and the more prosperous central areas of the city had the highest proportions of lodgers per population. This information coupled with the fact that by 1881 lodgers were more likely to live in a household that occupied a whole rather than part of a house, points to the fact that taking-in lodgers was increasingly seen as a respectable occupation for supplementing income and often denoted the fact that a person owned or had a lease on a whole house, and was exploiting the income possibilities of a major capital asset. The social calibre of lodgers and their landladies seems to have varied considerably dependent on the type of city and whether it was in the north or south of England. The non-industrialised provincial capital in the south, spas and coastal resorts were renowned for genteel accommodation catering for the single lady or elderly couple, while lodgings in the northern industrial cities spanned a rather different social spectrum.²¹ More than three-quarters of all lodgers in Exeter were in houses with heads in social classes one, two or three, and one third had class one or two landlords or landladies.^{21a} In the more respectable rented accommodation there was usually a stipulation that there was to be no subletting and another criterion of respectability was the provision of board.²²

Over two-thirds of lodgers were men and over half of all lodgers were single men. Nearly a quarter were single women and of the remaining quarter 15 per cent were married couples, 4 per cent were

widows and 5 per cent were widowers. There are a number of significant points from this concerning household structure and the place of kin relationships and non-kin relationships. For women, and particularly older women, co-residing with kin was more readily accepted, by their children or by more distant relatives, than it was for men.²³ While the proportion of widows to widowers in the city sample was nearly two to one, there were more widowers in lodgings than women.²⁴ This may also reflect the ability of widowers to pay as well as their relatives expectations that they should 'pay their way'. Since the majority of working women were in service where wages were low and accommodation was provided they had little chance of saving sufficient cash to pay for lodgings either between jobs or if they ever left service. In these circumstances they could rarely be expected to pay for board and lodging except with services. Here was a vicious circle where women's dependence was ensured.²⁵

Of the 42 young women who were returned as lodgers, over half were boarders and thus living as part of the household and in some cases they may well have been friends or relatives of the host family.²⁶ Nearly half of female lodgers were dressmakers, but as suggested by Finnegan's study of prostitution in York some of these may well have been taking part-time earnings from prostitution.²⁷ There were one or two households in the sample where there were 3 or 4 female lodgers all in their twenties with an older woman or couple as landlords and all returning some kind of dressmaking as their occupation. Linking the information in the census with that from the records of the Exeter Association, a charity for 'befriending Friendless Girls' it appears that in two areas one behind the main middle class streets and the other on between the Cathedral close and the poorest areas of the city, there were groups of houses and pubs associated with prostitution. They were both situated on the borders between the poorer residential and middle classes business sections of the city. To judge from newspaper reports in the 1850s these areas retained their character throughout this period.²⁸

The link between the cheap lodging-house and doss-house or brothel was tenuous, but for the majority of lodgers life was quite respectable and the period they spent in lodgings lasted until they married and rented, or in a few cases, bought accommodation of their own. For the 150 single men in the sample, working in a variety of trades or clerical jobs, taking lodgings can be seen as the equivalent of a young woman finding a living-in domestic service position. It meant that for most of these young men the living and working areas of their lives were independent and answerable to different people in loco parentis: the landlord or lady and the employer. This allowed for

a much greater degree of freedom for men than for women since frequently a woman's landlady was also her employer, so she could not move lodgings without losing her job.

Age and Sex of Lodgers in the 1881 sample.

Total no. lodgers : 201

Sex	Age		
	-15	15-40	40+
Male	9	95	31
Female	10	26	30
Totals	19	121	61

Young single men dominated the lodging community. However there were a number of families returned as lodgers and some of these included young children. It was only in the over-40 age group that the number of men and women were equal, but the incidence of older men in lodgings in relation to the total number in the population was much higher than the similar figure for women.

As would be expected nearly two-thirds of those in lodgings aged between 15 and 30 had been born in Devon outside Exeter or in the neighbouring counties of Cornwall, Somerset or Dorset. The majority of young lodgers came from outside the city but within a 30-to-40 mile radius of the city. Exeter-born young men and women were presumably more likely to find accommodation at home or with kin if they stayed in the city; alternatively they moved to other cities, notably Bristol for those born in Exeter, to find work and lodgings. Generally young adults did not go into lodgings in their home town in preference to living at home or with kin.

Ages and Birthplaces of Lodgers in the 1881 sample.

	Exeter		Devon		S.W.		Elsewhere		Total
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	
15-20	5	2.5	14	7	3	1.5	3	1.5	25
20-30	14	7	36	18	9	5	17	8.5	76
30-40	3	1.5	9	5	5	2.5	3	1.5	20
40-50	5	2.5	8	3	2	1	2	1	17
50-60	6	3	7	3.5	3	1.5	2	1	18
60-70	7	3.5	5	2.5	1	0.5	2	1	15
70+	4	2	5	2.5	/	/	2	1	11
totals	44	22	84	42	23	12	31	16	182

(plus 19 under 15 years of age.)

There were 19 children under the age of 15 who were classed as lodgers; 6 of these were under 10 years of age and must have been closer to foster children than the modern concept of a lodger. Four of these children under 10 had been born either in London or abroad, while the rest and 6 of the nine aged between 10 and 14 had been born in Exeter. The majority of these children lived with their own families and all members of the family were classed as lodgers. Between a third and a half of middle-aged and elderly lodgers had been born in Exeter. Less than one-fifth of all lodgers had come from outside the south-west. A majority of the longer-distance immigrants, apart from specific exceptions like the Irish, were in the upper and middle classes and thus tended to be classed as separate householders even though they rented accommodation.

While over 70 per cent of all lodgers had come from outside Exeter, the proportion of men from outside the city was much higher than that for women.

The sex and birthplace of lodgers in the 1881 sample.

Birthplace	Men	Women
Exeter	22%	38%
Devon	42%	42%
Elsewhere	35%	20%
Totals	99%*	100%

(*There was no record of where two male lodgers had been born.)

The female lodging population was a more homogeneous social group as well. Ninety per cent were either in class 3 or 4 or returned as retired. The male lodgers showed a wider social class spread conforming with the geographical spread of their birthplaces. While 12 per cent were in classes 1 or 2, 14 per cent were in class 5. (4.5% of women lodgers were in class 5, none was in class 1 and 3% were in class 2.) Their distribution through the city was also sex specific, with male lodgers predominating in the middle class suburb of St. David and in the working-class parishes near the river, while female lodgers congregated in the central parishes and in the suburbs adjacent to the business areas.

In all cases there seem to have been no consistent patterns between

'the social groups who lodged and those with whom they stayed'.²⁹ Lodgers like servants blurred the increasingly clear-cut lines of residential class demarcations. In Swindon and Salisbury, between 1851 and 1871, the high incidence of lodgers 'prevented the physical divisions of the town on the lines of social class';³⁰ yet in the Exeter household sample socially graded groups emerge on a spatial basis over this period. Although lodging continued to be viewed by members of the middle-classes and above with opprobrium, a growing number of people lived as lodgers at some point in their lives. Like Gissing many of them may have felt that 'to occupy furnished lodgings is to live in a house owned and ruled by servants; the least tolerable status known to civilization';³¹ but this did not deter the growing numbers in Exeter.

The significance of lodgings has certainly been underplayed at three levels. First in terms of the social and economic impact on urban communities; second its significance in both reflecting and determining family and household adjustment to the pressures of urban migration and the growing separation of work and home; third its importance in contributing to an environment where young adults saw themselves first and foremost as members of a peer group rather than of their parental family. Lodging may not have undermined the family,³² but it did provide the conditions where freer interpersonal relationships between non-related young adults could thrive and it was these which have marked the so-called family and sexual revolutions of the twentieth century and the cult of youth which has followed in their wake.

Notes

Data Sources: The printed census returns for 1851, 1871 and 1881; the enumerators schedules for Exeter for 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881; rate returns for Exeter for 1868-1872; the records of The Exeter Association for Befriending Friendless Girls, 1879-1884 and the local press.

¹ Davidoff, L., 'Separation of Home and Work?' in Burman, S., ed., *Fit Work for Women*, 1979, p. 65.

² Rowntree, B.S., *Poverty, A Study of Town Life*, 1902, p. 29, ff.

³ Davidoff, 1979, p. 84.

⁴ Wall, R., Robin, J., and Laslett, P., eds., *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 340-345, the dynamic and flexible nature of household and family structure was not a new characteristic of the nineteenth century.

⁵ Wohl, A., 'Sex and the Single Room', in Wohl, A., ed., *The Victorian Family*,

1978. Incest was seen as a result of overcrowding, the latter exacerbated by the letting of lodgings.

⁶ Davidoff, 1979, quotes the Duke of Cleveland as a landlord who prohibited sub-letting to lodgers on his estates.

⁷ Ashmore, O., 'Low Moor, Clitheroe', *The Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, vol 73/74, 1963-64, p. 149. Two families with seven children each, had lodgers, in one household the lodgers were a couple with a baby, making 12 persons in a two-up two-down cottage. 'Many families took lodgers, even when numbers in the household were already quite large'.

⁸ The *Western Luminary*, 1854, March 21, March 28, April 4. These investigations into the conditions of the poor in Exeter reveal crowded insanitary conditions in many parts of the city and, in particular in the parishes near the river.

⁹ Davidoff, 1979, p. 91.

¹⁰ Cossins, J., *Reminiscences of the City of Exeter Fifty Years Since*, Exeter, 1877, pp. 27-28, 57-66. The Diary of Margaret, Lady Paterson, 1831-35, passim. Devon County Record Office, MS. 36.

¹¹ Chambers, J.D., *Population, Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial England*, Oxford, 1972, quoted in Armstrong, W.A., *Stability and change in an English county town*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 99.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ O'Hea, J.D., 'Economy and Society in the Upper Teign Valley', unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Exeter, 1981.

¹⁴ Armstrong, W.A., *Stability and Change in an English County Town*, 1972, pp. 96-103. Also Anderson, M., 'The Emergence of the Modern Life Cycle in Britain', *Social History*, vol. 10, 1, Spring 1985, pp. 69-88.

¹⁵ Newton, R., *Victorian Exeter*, Leicester, 1968. Hele, J., *Reminiscences of John Hele of Alphington, Devon*, Exeter, 1870, pp. 19-22.

¹⁶ Anderson, M., 1985, emphasizes the degree to which family structure was constantly adapting to life-cycle needs. Also see note 4.

¹⁷ Armstrong, 1972, p. 90, showed higher figures for lodgers but this was partly because he used a different classification for heads of households; where many lodgers were denoted as heads of separate households, see Armstrong's note in Laslett, P., ed., *Household and Family in Past Time*, 1972, p. 205, note 5.

¹⁸ The *Western Luminary*, 1854, the 'white slave' articles.

¹⁹ Institutions, like hotels, the workhouse and the few large lodging houses with 10 or more lodgers were not included in the sample, as a picture of the lodging market in relation to household and family structure was wanted.

²⁰ Coustillas, P., ed., *London and the Life of Literature*, Hassocks, 1978, pp. 253-55, for example: 'fine days, but rendered utterly miserable by vile squabbles here in the house. The Rockett people [the landlords] behaving with every kind of vulgar malice'.

²¹ Davidoff, 1979, p. 69, quotes an oral source which gives a different view of the social status of those who let lodgings.

^{21a} Armstrong's five class scheme of social classifications of census data was used. Armstrong, W.A., 'The use of information about occupation', in Wrigley, E.A., ed. *Nineteenth Century Society*, Cambridge, 1972, pp. 192-310.

²² Rowntree, B.S., *Poverty A Study of Town Life*, 1902, p. 40, pointed to the low incidence of lodgers in the poorest working class households. 'It is not surprising that the average sum received from lodgers is small; they would usually prefer to board with families where the standard of comfort is higher than that prevailing in this class'. (Class A households had on average 1.2 per cent of income from lodgings, this

increased to 3 and 3.2 per cent for Classes B to D, still a fairly low proportion in relation to other types of extra income.) It was among the lower-middle class, not covered by Rowntree, that the proportions of earnings from lodgings would have been considerably higher.

²³ Hellerstein, E., ed., *Victorian Women*, 1981, p. 461.

²⁴ Mitterauer, M., and Sieder, R., *The European Family*, English translation Oxford, 1982, pp. 148–153, discuss the problems of widowhood and household structure.

²⁵ Walkowitz, J., 'We are not beasts of the field . . .' in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. M. Hartman and L. Banner, New York, 1974, p. 193. There were fears of social and sexual dangers for young women living in lodgings and of their contaminating effects on the rest of society; 'they were poor working women trying to survive in bustling dock towns . . . that were hostile to young women who lived alone.'

²⁶ Birthplace information from the census samples. The records of the Exeter Association for Befriending Friendless Girls, 1879–85. There was a high incidence of young women who had previously been staying with friends or relatives.

²⁷ Finnegan, F., *Poverty and Prostitution: a study of Victorian prostitutes in York*, Cambridge, 1979, passim.

²⁸ The *Western Luminary*, 1852 to 1855, *Devon Chronicle*, 1862–66.

²⁹ Constable, D., *Household Structure in three English market towns 1851–71*, Reading, 1975, University of Reading, Department of Geography, Geographical Papers, No. 55, p. 18.

³⁰ Constable, 1975, p. 18, ff.

³¹ Coustillas, 1978, p. 253 ff, also Gissing, G., *Born in Exile*, Hassocks, 1892, (1978), pp. 205–207, reflect the dreariness and meanness of life in lodgings in Exeter.

³² Davidoff, 1979, pp. 66–72.