

Ephemeral Londoners: Modelling Lower Class Migration to Eighteenth Century London

Adam Dennett^{*1}, Adam Crymble^{†2} Tim Hitchcock^{‡3} and Louise Falcini^{§4}

¹Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College London

²Department of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire

³Department of History, University of Sussex

⁴School of Law, University of Reading

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Summary

Between 1750 and 1801 the population of London grew from approximately 750,000 to 1.1 million people. Relocating to London in the eighteenth century only occasionally generated a paper trail, but a significant number of failed migrants were rounded up for ‘wandering and begging’ on the streets and sent back from whence they came to their parish of legal settlement. Records of these removals have been digitised and are used in this paper to model migration into London, to throw light onto the patterns of movement at this time.

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Between 1750 and 1801 the population of London grew from approximately 750,000 to 1.1 million people. According to Wrigley (1967), to retain this rate of growth the metropolis needed to attract in excess of 8,000 more migrants per year than it lost through death or out-migration. But from where was London drawing these migrants?

Relocating to London in the eighteenth century only occasionally generated a paper trail. Eighteenth century scholars have no censuses, as do those of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Those eighteenth century migrants who integrated successfully and managed to make a modest living have largely disappeared. Yet some have remained visible. A significant number of failed migrants were rounded up for ‘wandering and begging’ on the streets and sent back from whence they came to their parish of legal settlement (Taylor 1991). Under the authority of the 1744 Vagrancy Act, local magistrates had classified these people as ‘vagrants’ before forcibly removing them from the county under a scheme designed to reduce the burden of economically fragile migrants on local ratepayers Eccles, 2012). Between December 1777 and April 1786, the county’s vagrancy contractor, Henry Adams, submitted lists to the county eight times per year detailing the names as well as the final destinations of those he had transported (Hitchcock et al. Forthcoming). For Adams, the lists were his way of billing the county for completed work; for contemporary academics they represent a set of records that can be geo-referenced and modelled as a way of understanding from where a set of lower class failed migrants to London originated.

Many, but not all of these lists survive (42 out of a possible 65). This allows us to identify the place of settlement of 11,489 individuals removed from urban Middlesex to counties beyond, which according to a 1785 report by Adams to the Middlesex bench, amounts to roughly seventy-five per cent of the

* a.dennett@ucl.ac.uk

† a.crymble@herts.ac.uk

‡ T.Hitchcock@sussex.ac.uk

§ l.falcini@reading.ac.uk

total number of vagrants transported. The gaps in the records are unevenly spread through the seasons, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about annual trends in migration and expulsion – though these almost certainly do exist. Because of this happenstance of historical survival, we know relatively little about removals in May and August, compared to October.

The records also bias our knowledge of migration towards certain parts of the country. Henry Adams had been hired to shepherd vagrants north and west, but a different contractor, or possibly a different system entirely was used for those heading south and east. This leaves us nearly blind to migration from and removal to the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Kent, Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire. Finally, the lists highlight two distinct types of vagrants that are not obvious to a casual observer: those waywards who had likely been arrested for disorderly behaviour and processed through the Houses of Correction (referred to hereafter as ‘vagrants’), and those who had volunteered to leave the area in exchange for free passage, particularly after 1783, and processed by the Lord Mayor (referred to hereafter as ‘volunteers’). This latter group included demobilized servicemen and seasonal labourers, and the origins of these voluntary leavers is significantly different from those arrested as disorderly. With this in mind, this research focuses each group separately, since the ‘vagrants’ typically arrived in London of their own volition, often by foot, and many of the ‘volunteers’ were dumped in the capital at the end of the American Revolutionary War, meaning a single explanation for the geospatial patterns we observe for both groups is unlikely to fit.

These two groups represent a very small subset of migrants to London during a relatively short period of time in the latter eighteenth century. A better understanding is possible by incorporating yet another group: those arrested in Middlesex between 1801 and 1805. These individuals and their parish of origin are recorded in the Middlesex Criminal Registers when they were checked into gaol and their demographic details written down (referred to hereafter as ‘criminals’). Though there is little evidence that vagrants, volunteers, and criminals were one and the same, they did all tend to come from those economically unprivileged groups who occupied the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy. By looking at all three groups: vagrants, volunteers, and criminals, between 1776 and 1805, it becomes possible to determine to what extent migration patterns into London were following predictable patterns, and to what extent each group and each region of the British archipelago had a unique relationship with London.

A number of scholars have attempted to answer these questions through both indirect theories of human migration, and directly through targeted studies. The theories are old and well tested, laid down by Ravenstein (1885-9) and Zipf (1946). Ravenstein’s seminal work on migration theory in Britain is still the starting point for discussing migration. It was based on studies of the 1871 and 1881 censuses of England and Wales, and outlined a number of laws for human migration, including the propensity of migration to be step-wise, of women to travel shorter distances than men, and of long-distance migrants to end their journey in a great centre of commerce or industry. Half a century later, Zipf’s ‘P1 P2D Hypothesis’ mathematically modelled migration, and concluded people travel only as far as required to find an acceptable economic opportunity, reinforcing the importance of short-haul migration.

In this paper we draw heavily on the work of Zipf and many who have followed since employing gravity/spatial interaction models to help understand the patterns and processes of flows of economically underprivileged individuals to London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To our knowledge this is the first time these techniques have been used to cast light on historical migration flows of this kind and as such we hope that as increasing volumes of historical data are digitised, georeferenced and archived in fields such as History and the Digital Humanities, Geographic Information Science can continue to offer new analytic insights.

Biography

Adam Dennett is a Lecturer in Urban Analytics in the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College London. Adam is a Geographer, with interests broadly in the areas of population, quantitative methods, GIS and spatial analysis. Prior to joining UCL, Adam completed his PhD in the School of

Geography at the University of Leeds.

Adam Crymble is a Lecturer of Digital History at the University of Hertfordshire. He did his PhD in history and digital humanities at Kings College London. He earned his MA in Public History, his BA in History, and his Certificate in Writing and Rhetoric, from the University of Western Ontario

Tim Hitchcock is Professor of Digital History at the University of Sussex. He completed his DPhil on the evolution of eighteenth-century parochial workhouses at St Antony's College, Oxford in 1985, and began his academic career at the then Polytechnic of North London. He has published ten books on the history of poverty, sexuality and street life, primarily focussed on eighteenth-century London.

Louise Falcini is a Sessional Lecturer at the University of Reading. Louise's research examines the evolution of regulation concerning civic and personal cleanliness in eighteenth-century London. She has worked extensively on the judicial and poor law archives of Middlesex.

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