Hollington and the 1851 Censuses

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Family historians have long recognised the importance of the 1851 Census to their research. It is of particular value because, despite its inadequacies, inconsistencies and omissions, it recorded marital status and the exact ages and places of birth of those enumerated and was the first to record the relationships of the residents at each property to its head of household. As such it enables connections between family members to be made that might otherwise prove very difficult or even impossible. But, how many family historians take the trouble to look beyond the individuals that they are researching and make a detailed study of all the returns for a parish? Such an analysis of the 1851 Census for a parish, together with information from the Religious Census which was also held in that year, can reveal a great deal about the community in which people lived and, in particular, challenge some of the assumptions that are at times made about life in Victorian England. Certainly this is the case with the returns for the ancient parish of Hollington.

Hollington, which was recorded in the Domesday Survey, has today largely been absorbed into the built up area of Hastings and St. Leonards. However, as recently as 1949 the Rev. Dr. F. W. B. Bullock in his scholarly work on the history of Hollington’s Church in the Wood was able to state that although ‘the bulk of the population of Hollington is no longer agricultural……by far the greater part of the area……is still rural – farms, fields and woods’.

Two hundred years ago the parish was still very much an isolated rural scattering of dwellings with a remote ancient church. The closest it came to having a proper village centre was in the area known as Hollington Corner at the junction of the old Church and Wishing Tree Roads where stood a forge, a public house and a number of cottages.

Hastings was, at this time, concentrated in the Old Town area and around the Priory Valley. Travellers to Hollington had to use a rural track which meandered along roughly the line of the present Bohemia Road until it reached the crest of the hill just north of the present Silverhill Junction and then dropped steeply through woods and fields until the first buildings in Hollington Old Lane were reached.

When James Burton began to build his new town of St. Leonards-on-Sea in 1828 the main road to London from Hastings passed out of the eastern side of the town and along The Ridge to the north and out through Battle and Robertsbridge. James Burton favoured a more direct route from St. Leonards to London, from which most of his residents and visitors came, and applied to Parliament for a Turnpike Act to allow him
to build a new road to London which would pass through the eastern part of the parish of Hollington and out through Whatlington.

This proposal alarmed many of the business people of Battle and Hastings alike who, fearing that they would suffer if the old Hastings to London road became redundant, proposed a more direct route from Hastings itself, which was by now already expanding westwards. This would cut through the middle of Hollington as it eventually joined the old road before it reached Battle.

These two roads, which were opened in the 1830s, were among the last turnpike roads in the country to be constructed and ended the relative isolation of the parish. Hollington soon began to develop a village centre along the new Battle road. By 1851 not only was long distance traffic passing through the village but improved communications with Hastings and St. Leonards had allowed the development of market gardens and dairy farms to supply the rapidly expanding population of these towns. Although this had resulted in bringing more jobs and people to Hollington these improved communications were, in the longer term, to contribute towards Hastings spreading out until its boundaries swallowed up the village.

The 1851 Census indicated that there were 579 people living in Hollington in 98 households (an average of 5.9 persons per household). Not surprisingly, the average age was much lower than would be expected today, with only about 19% of people aged over 40. However, the returns do indicate that it was still possible for ordinary people to live to a decent age in Victorian England. An admittedly small number of eight were recorded as 70 years of age or more, with two well into their eighties.

Perhaps of more interest is the record of where individuals were born. The notion that most people lived in the parish in which they were born is certainly not supported by the returns for Hollington. In fact, there is evidence of considerable geographical mobility. It is true that it is not easy to be absolutely accurate in this matter. Some individuals professed not to know where they were born, possibly genuinely in a number of cases, and others may well have lied. The fear that the information might be used to send people back to their home parishes, as the Poor Law directed, was never far away in 1851. Yet only 182 (32%) were shown as being born in Hollington. A further 169 (29%) were born in nearby parishes which broadly made up the eastern half of East Sussex. The remaining 228 (39%), apart from a relatively small number who did not declare their origin, came from further afield, including Warwickshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Dorset, Wiltshire, Wales, Scotland and even Normandy and Switzerland. Surprisingly, only 10 of the 98 heads of household appear to have been born in Hollington itself.

Another interesting aspect of the returns relates to the occupations that were recorded. As would be expected, the most common occupation amongst the 248 noted in this rural parish was that of agricultural labourer. Yet there were only 84 of these. Even if the five listed as farmers and the seven other assorted farm workers are counted, only about 39% worked directly on the land. Although some 29 (12%) individuals could be classed as domestic servants, by far the largest group of the non-agricultural workers was that of railway labourers (i.e. mostly navvies). Many of these 81 (33%) were unmarried and itinerant workers. Their presence underlines the importance of not automatically making assumptions about the profile of workers in rural parishes. The
London, Brighton and South Coast Railway had opened its line to Bulverhythe in 1846 and the South Eastern Railway line from Ashford through to Hastings and Gensing (later Warrior Square) stations had been opened in February 1851. Many of the railway workers who had camped in Hollington would undoubtedly have worked on these lines including, during the year before the Census, on both the Hastings and St. Leonards tunnels. By the time the 1851 Census was taken on 30 March they would presumably have been involved with the construction of the South Eastern Railway’s more direct route to London from Hastings which was opened in February 1852. Where no better accommodation was available these navvies built huts in fields. Thus, for example, the Census returns record ‘a navvy encampment on the line north of Harley Shute’.

A further consequence of the presence of these railway workers was that it created an uneven balance between males (56%) and females (44%) in the parish and this brought into question, as far as Hollington was concerned, the widely held belief that it was more difficult for a farm worker to get a cottage than a girl in the 19th Century. The 1851 returns reveal that, of the agricultural workers who were heads of households, only one was unmarried, three were widowed and the rest married. So only one seems to have got a cottage without a girl. On the other hand, of the agricultural workers who were not heads of households, although five were widowed, none were married. This is perhaps not very surprising when we consider that there were 101 males who were either unmarried or widowed in the parish and only 30 females, including several old ladies!

The presence of so many railway navvies also helped bring into question the often held assumption that most people attended church in Victorian rural parishes. There were two places of worship in Hollington in 1851 – the isolated ancient parish Church-in-the-Wood and the Wesleyan Methodist chapel which had been opened on the site of the present chapel adjacent to the new Battle Road in 1838. The 1851 Religious Census records that the church was attended by 100 in the morning and 43 in the afternoon, while the chapel had 56 worshippers in the afternoon and 58 in the evening. If individuals only attended church once on a Sunday this would still only account for less than 45% of the population. It is far more likely that most of those who attended services did so twice. This would have meant that there might have been no more than 30% of the parish who regularly attended church.

In conclusion, then, an analysis of the returns of both censuses for a parish such as Hollington can provide a great deal more than the immediate family information that is initially sought. They can not only give an insight into the life of the whole community but also reveal much interesting, unexpected and even surprising detail.

References

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