

VICTORIAN LIVERPOOL: SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

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The title of this meeting, with its potential titillation and false alliteration, is dangerous on two counts. Firstly, it ignores the other categories of women — spinsters, widows, the deserted, the kept-woman, cohabitants by choice (common-law wives) or victims of the archaic divorce laws. Secondly, the title implies some exclusivity whereas, as we shall see, roughly half the 'whores' were also 'wives' (what fraction of the wives were whores is a matter for speculation). I say 'roughly' because the very nature of our title makes the compilation of statistics fraught with uncertainty, for the normal sources for numerical data are of limited use. The ten-yearly census returns show a distinct absence of participants giving their profession as 'prostitute', 'pimp' or 'procurer' and the trades journals, such as those published by Kelly and Gore are devoid of lists of brothels. However, the columns of the local newspapers and the Police Commissioners' reports tell a different story.

What were Liverpool and Liverpudlians like in Victorian times? We are fortunate in having available a brilliant account in J.A.Picton's *Memorials of Liverpool*; this is a chronicle of events which must have been within the memory of his intended readership. Yet, it is an account of only half the populace, being entirely male-oriented. Women only enter the narrative if they have the rare and simultaneous good fortune to be married to the Mayor and produce offspring during his year of office; then they are presented with a silver cradle. The other major defect of the Pictonian view is the gentleman's omission of anything which might upset a lady reader. For the low life of the period we can turn to Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor (1849-62)*, since the conditions in the metropolis differed from those in Liverpool only in scale. Mayhew was 'Mass Observation' a century early; he asked the labourers and the scavengers (a majority of the capital's population) what they earned, how they spent it, how often they changed their shirts — and never seems to have met with an aggressive response for his prying. Alternatively, we can turn to literature of various kinds. When Henry Spencer Ashbee died in 1900 he bequeathed his priceless collection of rare books to the British Museum, with the proviso that they also took his

equally priceless collection of erotica. Fortunately, we have been saved from possible moral turpitude in reading these works by Steven Marcus of Columbia University, who, financed by the Institute for Sex Research, Indiana, has trawled through the material and presented a scholarly analysis in his *The Other Victorians*. He carefully separates pornography in the form of fantasy (which tells us about Victorian thoughts) from erotic writings (which can be considered as a source of social history). In particular, he makes a very plausible case for the 4,200 pages of *My Secret Life* being autobiographical and produces arguments which suggest that the anonymous author was Ashbee himself. From this work we learn the street vocabulary of the Victorian era and that men and women who took money for sexual favours were called 'gay'.

Yet despite its partial coverage, Picton's *History* remains an essential source and I shall draw from it to present a guided tour of Victorian Liverpool (considering its size, wealth, politics, religions, schooling, health and hospitals) and some insight into the relatively recent world of carters with rain-sodden sacks on their shoulders with teams of horses dragging carts laden with bales of raw cotton along the cobbled, gas-lit dock road and of the drovers delivering 'on the hoof' to local butchers and city shippers.

Despite steady emigration (and deportation) to the Colonies, the population of the United Kingdom more than quadrupled over the course of the nineteenth century (*Table 1*):

1801	1848	1871	1910
10.4m	27.5m	32m	45m

Table 1: Increase in population size of the United Kingdom, 1801-1910

The population explosion was by no means uniform across the nation. There was a continuous drift from the countryside to the burgeoning industrial towns where the immigrants exchanged the gentility of rural poverty for the squalor of urban destitution. The increase in population is mainly attributed to the decrease in infant mortality due to improvement in diet and in Public Health and hygiene. Although the Liverpool Medical Officer for Health was able to boast in 1881 that the average age at death of a city female had gone up to 27.3 years (in the 1840s it had been only 23 years), the large families we associate with the Victorian era were due not so much to more pregnancies resultant on extra years of fecundity as to a higher rate of survival of the annual child.

The Gross National Product increased faster than the population and

by 1900 people were, on average, more than twice as well-off as were their grand-parents. However, the gains were not evenly spread. The extra income went into the pockets of males in the rapidly expanding middle class. The poorest 90% would have noticed no improvement in standard of living; the servant girl was still earning 2/6 [12p] per week and a female factory hand as little as a penny [0.5p] an hour.

The expansion of Liverpool was effected partly by organic growth and partly by immigration, particularly during the Irish Famine (*Table 2*):

year	1801	1851	1901
population	77,653	375,955	684,958

Table 2: Growth in population size of Liverpool, 1801-1901

The figures also reflect the physical expansion of the city's boundaries, by the 1832 Reform Bill and a series of Municipal Acts, to swallow up neighbouring parishes such as Everton, Walton and West Derby. The economic growth of Liverpool was not primarily due to the foundation of new factories but to the great expansion of the port as the centre for importation of raw materials and the export of finished goods from the numerous enterprises in the hinterland. The coming of the canals and the railways widened this hinterland to include the Lancashire and Yorkshire textile mills and coal mines, the Potteries, the Midland engineering factories and the Cheshire salt mines and attendant chemical works. By 1857 some £55m. worth of exports passed through the port; this represented half the nation's external trade.

Liverpool may not have been a one company town but it was certainly a one commodity town — shipping and the associated activities it spawned: construction, building, repairing, provisioning, manning, loading and unloading. Even the industries established in Liverpool (sugar refining, flour milling and tobacco processing) owed their presence to the import of primary products. This meant that the local economy reflected not only the normal trade cycles but was also subject to meteorological hazards, gales and fogs which might delay sailing or incoming traffic for a week or more. Most dock work was casual and workers were laid off even during short periods of stagnation. As the working class had no savings there was immediate recourse to 'uncle' and, within days, genuine starvation. Thus in the hard winter of 1838-39, there were riots and bakers' shops were raided; Poor Relief to the enormous sum of £7,500 was needed. Inquests during this period often returned a verdict of 'death from starvation'.

Thanks to the vigilance of Customs and Excise in collecting duty — they raised £1,808,402 in 1823 — we have a well-documented picture of the rapid expansion of the port and its facilities. Typical commodities carried

were cotton and tobacco from the United States and beef, mutton, bacon, ham, timber from the Baltic and North America. Australia sent wool, tea came from India, spices from China and coffee, rum and sugar from the Caribbean. Most of the goods were passed on by coaster, canal or railways but spices, sugar and tobacco formed the basis for local industries. After the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, grain from Australia and America began to arrive in considerable quantities. The main exports shipped through Liverpool were coal, iron and steel, cotton and woollen goods, and, in the second half of the century, machinery and chemicals.

To cope with the increased shipping, a steady expansion of the dock systems was undertaken. When Jesse Hartley was appointed Dock Engineer in 1824 the dock estate covered 51 acres; his design for the Albert Dock system, completed for an official opening by Prince Albert in 1846, almost doubled the available wharfage. The Huskisson, Sandon and Canada Docks were all added by 1859.

Politics, Religion and Education in Liverpool

In nineteenth-century Liverpool these three aspects of society were so inexorably intertwined that they must be considered together. Picton ruefully remarked that Liverpool exhibited a 'normal conservatism', by which he meant that both the Town Council and the Members of Parliament were usually Tory with occasional outbreaks of Liberalism. In the days before secret ballots (pre-1872), the very restricted body of the enfranchised was subjected to increasing food, drink and sundry bribes as polling day progressed. Liverpool elections were usually challenged but usually allowed to stand as the 'misfeasance was not excessive'.

The Liverpool Tories were predominantly the landed propertied and merchantile class, and Anglican; the Liberals were generally Nonconformist. The third great religious group, the Catholics, despite the repeal of the Test Act (in 1827) did not constitute a voting coterie until after the Second Reform Bill (1867) when, to Picton's great surprise, they voted Tory. A measure of the religious attitude of the time is the Liverpool Society for the Conversion of Jews to Christianity; the patron was the Bishop of Chester.

A report of 1824 notes that in Liverpool there were 11,866 pupils attending the various schools: 12 Anglican, 7 Methodist, 15 belonging to the Sunday School Union and 4 private. In 1827 the Corporation established two schools financed partly from the rates, one in the north and one in the south end of the town. By 1835 the average number attending these corporation schools was 1,300 but a regulation which required pupils to attend Sunday worship at an Anglican establishment essentially excluded Roman Catholics. Attempts, by the Liberal William Rathbone, to persuade the

schools to provide an ecumenical education failed and soon the Catholic Church established its own schools. Even when the Forster Education Act of 1870 made schooling compulsory (but not free), the Liverpool Education Board formed to implement the Act split along sectarian lines: 7 places for Anglicans, 4 each for the Catholics and Nonconformists. Liverpool's long-standing ability to rig elections ensured that if a vacancy occurred only the appropriate religious electors would turn up to vote in the by-election, thus preserving the ratios.

The religious animosity led to Orange riots, particularly after the great Irish influx after the Famine, but the divisions were not only within the labouring class: Picton tells us the Mayor refused to send an invitation to the Catholic Bishop to attend the opening of the Albert Dock in 1846.

For the poorer children, the Industrial Revolution provided 6 days of practical work experience from an early age and they had to glean what they could on the day of rest. Religious bodies, particularly the Church of England and the Free Churches, encouraged reading to facilitate Bible study and to that end the Sunday School movement provided basic tuition from about 1800. The Liverpool Congregationalist Churches set up in Mount Pleasant a day-school for 50 children under the age of 10; the same establishment ran evening classes for about the same number of apprentices and artisans.

By 1835 Liverpool acquired its own Mechanics Institute. Like many others, its life-span was short; by 1840 it had evolved into the Liverpool Institute High School (and has now started a third life as the home of the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts). For the criminal young there were Reformatories which, for security reasons, were often housed in hulks in the river. For the potential criminals, there were the Industrial Schools, so-called since they tried to teach some trade to their charges. To gain admission a child needed a Magistrate's order certifying that he was 'unruly,' a term sufficiently vague for the offspring of beggars, criminals and prostitutes to automatically qualify, however docile and cowed in demeanour.

Culture and Leisure

The new prosperous middle classes moved out of the stench and hazard of the strip of land a mile or so wide which bordered the River Mersey and built elegant town houses in squares and terraces still extant as the Georgian environs of the Anglican Cathedral. With plenty of live-in servants at £5-8 per year plus keep, the wives and children of the parvenus had time and money to engage in cultural activities or salve their consciences with a modicum of charitable work.

Dancing lessons and musical tuition, both vocal and instrumental, feature in the advertisements in newspapers and magazines of the period.

Many of the instructors had, or adopted, foreign sounding names. Amongst famous touring musicians to visit Liverpool were Felix Mendelssohn, Paganini, Liszt and Clara Schumann. In 1856, Jenny Lind gave a charity recital for the Royal Southern Hospital and had a ward named after her. As well as music and the theatre, the new middle-class men could indulge in gambling and horse-racing. The first Grand Steeplechase — which later became the Grand National — was run at Aintree in 1839; the winner was a nine year-old bay gelding called, appropriately, Lottery. There were several billiard halls in the town; the game could also be played in the numerous gentlemen's clubs which sprang up after 1830.

The working class, if lucky enough to find a job, would have worked up to ten hours a day for a six-day week. Exhaustion and religious convention severely limited their opportunities for Sunday activities; the quoted favourite pastime was 'walking'. Maybe they could walk to Kirkdale Jail for a public execution, which, following a particularly gruesome murder, would attract an audience that would delight a modern Premier Division manager. In 1849 an estimated 30,000 bid a final farewell to Maurice Gleeson at Kirkdale.

The major beneficiary of the century's economic expansion was a vastly enlarged middle class. These, in turn, spawned the service professions and trades to educate their many children and provide the cultural symbols of their prosperity. We have the foundation of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and in the major centres of population like Liverpool, new universities and colleges, Literary and Philosophic Societies, Philharmonic Societies, libraries, museums and art galleries came into being.

The expanded literate middle class had both the time and money to fuel an explosion in publishing. Liverpool had during this period several daily newspapers (*Albion, Mercury, Standard, Mail, Herald, Courier*), and magazines, some catering for the major business of the town, commerce and shipping. Others, like *The Porcupine*, were satirical or even overtly political. The Liverpool literati could also acquire publications emanating from the capital; the century saw the birth of about 1,000 new magazines in London alone. Presumably this spate of print reflected the consumers' taste. A study of the 45,000 books published in England between 1816 and 1851 shows that more than 10,000 were on religion, 4,500 on history and geography and 3,500 fiction.

Health

The working class, and particularly the unemployed class, fared badly during the first half of the nineteenth century. The influx of people into the

towns forced wages down and there were no trades unions; the so-called Tolpuddle Martyrs were transported to Australia in 1834 for forming one. In Liverpool, the job situation was exacerbated by sectarianism and xenophobia and particular trades were overwhelmingly stocked by Protestants, by Catholics or by Welsh.

The working and living conditions which awaited new arrivals to Liverpool were amongst the worst in the country. The excess of applicants for the available jobs led to sectarian riots as the Catholic Irish were blamed, particularly after the failure of the potato harvest in 1845-46. In the first four months of 1847, 127,785 Irish were registered as arriving in Liverpool. The more motivated and pioneering emigrated onwards to America and the British Colonies but the most impoverished stayed in Liverpool adding to the already serious housing problem. Squalid and unhygienic courts without running water or sanitation, cellar rooms which 'housed' humans at a density up to one per square foot became a feature of the city.

The overcrowding, lack of sanitation and deficient diets made the poor susceptible to disease, and epidemics were common. Asiatic cholera broke out in May 1832 killing 1,523 people and at almost regular intervals thereafter: 1849 (5,308 deaths), 1854 (1,290) and 1866 (2,122). Typhus claimed 524 in 1837 and over 7,000 died in a few weeks of 1847. Smallpox was almost endemic despite Jenner's discovery of vaccination in the late eighteenth century, and in the years 1837-39 some 880 deaths from this disease were recorded. The fact that the corpses were often buried in graveyards in close proximity to wells used for drinking water ensured a cycle of high mortality.

The frequent outbreaks of epidemics were bad for trade since foreign ports would ban the entry of ships from Liverpool. In 1847 in an attempt to improve community health — and hence trade — Dr William Duncan was appointed as the first Medical Officer of Health, one of Liverpool's most worthy 'firsts'. His annual reports during his short life highlighted the problems and led to improvements in housing, in the water supply and sewage disposal. Gradually, Liverpool lost its unenviable reputation as Britain's unhealthiest town.

Medicine

Medical treatment available in Victorian Liverpool had little to recommend it to its modern inhabitants. Surgery was extremely hazardous: few surgeons would open the chest, abdomen or skull and only 33% survived what, today, we would call minor surgery. If 'ward infection' broke out, all the patients in that ward would die. A compound fracture of an arm or leg (i.e. one in which the bones break through the skin) was treated by amputa-

tion and as there were no anesthetics in the first half of the century, speed was at a premium. Surgeons advertised their time for the job — James Syme, later to be Lister's father-in-law, never took longer than a minute to amputate a leg. The first planned removal of an appendix in Liverpool was performed by Thelwall Thomas in 1895.

We have a good account of the hospitals of the period from the diaries of 1832 kept by James Richard White Vose (1811-1878), who was born in Liverpool, the son of a physician at the Liverpool Dispensary. Vose describes two treatments for diarrhoea: the application of either sulphuric acid or leeches to the anus. It is not clear from the text whether this constituted one treatment or two separate ones; either way they would not have been troubled by malingersers. Vose also listed the chemical compounds administered to his patients adding 'that neither the dispensary nor the surgery seem to be doing much good'. Some, like morphine, digitalis, laudanum (opium), agaric (from mushrooms) would still be classed as drugs, but charcoal, turpentine, sodium chloride (as a gargle for syphilis) alkaloid strychnine, starch and sulphuric acid are now more likely to be found in the kitchen or the garden shed. Very little changed during the remainder of the nineteenth century; the pharmaceutical drug industry is a product of the twentieth century.

The conditions in the Paris hospitals described by Vose must have been general across Europe. General sanitary conditions were appalling and local records speak of two to a bed in both surgical and general wards. After the Crimean War, where Florence Nightingale showed that simple hygiene could dramatically reduce mortality (from 47% before her arrival to 1.4% in her final year), there was a recognition of the need for professional nurses. The Florence Nightingale Training School was established in St Thomas's Hospital in 1860 and by the end of the century nursing was an acceptable career for middle-class girls. Nightingale's acolyte, Agnes Jones, revolutionised nursing practice in the Liverpool Workhouse before working herself into an early grave. Nursing was acceptable but women doctors were not. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836-1917) exemplified the route for a determined woman by obtaining her Doctorate of Medicine in Paris. The *Liverpool University College Medical Prospectus* for 1900 specified 'men only' for all medical courses.

The great improvements in human health and longevity owed much more to Public Health than to medical care. Early death was not only a personal grief but was also an economic disaster.

Prostitution

In 1858, William Acton (1813-1875), a famous urologist, published his

Prostitution, considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils. This led in 1866 to the notoriously discriminatory Contagious Diseases Act, but its importance also lies in the fact that it encapsulates the Victorian dilemma over prostitution. Acton set out to enlighten his respectable readers as to the myths and realities of the trade, making the obvious link with 'cruel biting poverty' and pointing out that most of the prostitutes he saw at the Islington Dispensary were remarkably healthy:

If we compare the prostitute at thirty-five with her sister, who perhaps is the married mother of a family, or has been a toiling slave for years in the overheated laboratories of fashion, we shall seldom find that the constitutional ravages often thought to be the necessary consequences of prostitution exceed those attributable to the cares of a family and the heart-wearing struggles of virtuous labour.

The total number of prostitutes can only be guessed at; Acton goes so far as to suggest that the majority of women would at some time have accepted money for sexual favours. The author of *My Secret Life* corroborates this and also gives insights into matters absent from Dr Acton's work, namely, homosexuality, flagellation and paedophilia. Mayhew quotes a male costermonger's view of female fidelity:

... in anything like good times they were rigidly faithful but that, in the worst pinch of poverty — if it provided a few meals or a fire — [prostitution] was not considered at all heinous.

Mayhew adds that only one tenth of the trades-couples were legally married, except in the parish of Clerkenwell where the incumbent married poor people for free at Easter and managed to double the number of those in wedlock.

The matter of child prostitution was particularly upsetting to the Victorians with their Pears Soap-bubble mentality. *My Secret Life* describes the 'aunts' who negotiated the fees for deflowering children almost in terms of *laissez faire* trade:

Women are all brought to market — from the whore to the Princess. The price alone is different, and the highest price, in money or rank, obtains the woman.

Certainly the cost of both child and adult procurement were determined by market forces — supply and demand. *My Secret Life* quotes £200 (ten years' income for a labourer) for a French virgin. In 1885, William

Thomas Stead, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, published a series of articles entitled *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* about the procurement of children in London. Rather than the knighthood this exposé deserved, it earned him a spell in prison and, later, a one-way ticket on the *Titanic*.

The cost of what was called a 'common whore' had risen since Boswell's oft contrite admission of a 'sixpenny whore'; in mid-Victorian times a shilling was the bargain basement and 2/6 the average. As this was a week's wage for a working girl, it ill-behoved the well-off to pontificate on the evils of prostitution.

There is no reason to believe that Liverpool was much different to London. It may be estimated that there may have been about 10,000 prostitutes in the town around 1850. The only hard figures we have are from police reports which always underestimate. In 1837 the Constabulary Committee stated that there were:

520 brothels in Liverpool with an average of 4 prostitutes in each
625 houses of ill-fame
136 common lodging houses that all housed prostitutes

When we add in those women who operated from home and those who walked the streets, an estimate of 10,000 is not unreasonable. Prostitution was a significant factor in the economy of Victorian Liverpool.

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