

POOR LAW SETTLEMENT AND CHELTENHAM'S POPULATION GROWTH
IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Like many other towns in England in the early nineteenth century, the population of Cheltenham increased very rapidly. The speed of this increase, especially over the years 1811 to 1841, is perhaps surprising when one remembers that the growth of industry in Cheltenham was relatively insignificant compared with that of many northern towns.

Population Growth in Cheltenham 1801-1851

1801	3076
1800	8325
1821	13396
1831	22942
1841	31411
1851	35051

It is interesting to speculate on the geographical origins of this influx of people, since presumably the population rise cannot be said to result solely from an increase in the birth-rate in the town. An analysis of the places of birth of the inhabitants of Cheltenham in 1851 is possible from existing evidence but such an analysis still awaits the attention of the researcher.

One source of evidence which might provide a few answers to the problem is to be found in the registers of settlement examinations for the Cheltenham petty sessions and parish areas. Several such registers are stored in the County Record Office and cover the years 1815-1826 and 1832-1848 for the petty sessions area and 1831-1848 for the parish. The register of settlement examinations for the Cheltenham petty sessions area 1815-1826 has already been the subject of some study and is now available in printed form(1). In this investigation it was possible to examine material in the printed source and also the original sources for the 1832-1848 period (petty sessions area) and for 1831-1843 (parish area).

Some definition of the scope of the petty sessions area during the period under consideration is relevant here. According to a return made by the clerk to the magistrates in 1834(2), the Cheltenham petty sessional division then consisted of the following: Cheltenham with its hamlets of Alstone, Arle, Westal, Naunton, Sandford; Charlton Kings, Leckhampton, Swindon; Bishops Cleeve with its hamlets of Gotherington, Southam, Stoke Orchard; Woodmancote, Prestbury, Woolstone, Staverton, Uckington.

The object behind the investigation of these records was to find out where the applicants for poor relief had come from before they arrived in Cheltenham. Often in the earlier records, a place of birth was given but very little else. For example the records of examinations of Irish or

Scottish paupers are normally very short and confined to place of birth. Usually there is no indication of how long the applicant had been in England before reaching Cheltenham. In the 1830s the records become somewhat more detailed, and the problem is to discover evidence which unfortunately the magistrate's examination was not necessarily seeking.

'Previous abode' before moving to Cheltenham and 'last legal settlement' are not always the same. In any case the position is further complicated by the fact that means of acquiring a settlement were altered during the period under consideration by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

Nevertheless some conclusions were possible from the evidence, and it was convenient to divide up details of the previous homes of those paupers examined into the following areas:

1. Cheltenham: the town and its immediate environs, including hamlets of Alstone, Arle, Westal, Naunton and Sandford.
2. Up to five miles from Cheltenham: including places like Prestbury, Charlton Kings, Leckhampton and Bishops Cleeve.
3. Between five and fifteen miles from Cheltenham: especially Gloucester and Stroud areas.
4. Rest of Gloucestershire: including places like Dursley and also Bristol.
5. The South-West counties: as far east as Wiltshire, but not including Hampshire.
6. The South Midlands: south of Birmingham and including Oxfordshire.
7. Rest of England.
8. Ireland.
9. Wales.
10. Scotland.
11. Unknown.

The Petty Sessions Area

In addition to the printed source already mentioned, statistics for the petty sessional area were obtained from the register of settlement examinations for the years 1832-1848.

The existence of two registers separated by a gap of six years makes it possible to compare figures for the two periods. A sizeable decrease in the total examinations in the period 1832-1848 compared with the earlier period is reflected in nearly all the geographical divisions as can be seen below. The only exception is the area no more than five miles from Cheltenham from which applicants for relief increase. In his study of the settlement examinations for 1815-1826 Irvine Gray(3) concludes that much of the increase in Cheltenham's population came from the migration of rural workers living relatively close to Cheltenham, and this is confirmed by the statistics for 1832-1848.

As for areas further away from Cheltenham, more people came to Cheltenham from the South Midlands area, especially Worcestershire and Herefordshire, than came from the southern half of Gloucestershire. Presumably the migration in the south of the county tended towards Bristol.

Only about 4% of those examined in the petty sessional area in this period came from Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and nearly all of these appear in the records for 1815-1826.

Previous Homes of Paupers Examined in the Petty Sessional Area

	<u>1815-26</u>	<u>1832-48</u>	<u>Total</u>
1. Cheltenham	107	48	155
2. 5 miles of Cheltenham	109	127	236
3. 5-15 miles from Cheltenham	161	74	235
4. Rest of Gloucestershire	38	21	59
5. South-West of England	41	4	45
6. South Midlands	92	14	106
7. Rest of England	57	11	68
8. Ireland	20	1	21
9. Wales	11	0	11
10. Scotland	6	0	6
11. Unknown	4	1	5
<u>Total</u>	646	301	947

The Parish Area

Statistics here were derived from the registers of settlement examinations (Cheltenham parish) for 1831-1837, 1838-1843 and 1843-1848. On the basis of the first two registers, the results have again been split up so as to give some idea of changes during the period considered.

Although the second period is shorter by one year than the earlier period, the total examinations for both are very similar. Areas four, five and six also show this characteristic, with the South Midlands area contributing the highest numbers to Cheltenham's paupers as it did for the petty sessional area.

Previous Homes of Paupers Examined in the Parish Area

	<u>1831-37</u>	<u>1838-43</u>	<u>Total</u>
1. Cheltenham	82	100	182
2. 5 miles of Cheltenham	39	62	101
3. 5-15 miles from Cheltenham	94	160	254
4. Rest of Gloucestershire	29	33	62
5. South-West England	34	34	68
6. South Midlands	46	46	92
7. Rest of England	38	44	82
8. Ireland	92	0	92
9. Wales	1	14	15
10. Scotland	26	0	26
11. Unknown	3	0	3
<u>Total</u>	484	483	977

One of the most striking features of these statistics is the rise in the numbers seeking relief from areas close to Cheltenham. Examinations of those living within 5 miles of Cheltenham increased from 8% of the total between 1831-1837 to 13% between 1838 and 1843. Just as marked is the rise in

examinations of those having lived between five and fifteen miles from the town. This increased from 19% of the total between 1831-1837 to 33% between 1838-1843. These details confirm the importance of local migration from rural district to nearest large town as a factor accounting for Cheltenham's growth in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The figures for the rest of England remain relatively stable over the periods concerned in the research. London is the most frequent 'previous abode' of those whose settlements fall into this category and accounts for about half the total. Some of those applying for relief were travellers forced to stop at Cheltenham because their wives were pregnant and about to give birth.

The other interesting point derived from the statistics is the large numbers of Irish and Scottish paupers in the early period. A total of 47 entries with Irish origins (over 38% of the total) are recorded in 1831 together with 17 from Scotland. It is not at all clear what caused this influx. Irvine Gray suggests that they were navvies "attracted by the prospect of work on canal and railway construction"(4), but no major engineering work was being carried out in the Cheltenham area at that time, and in any case many of those applying for relief were women. The brevity of all records connected with Irish or Scottish paupers at this time makes the problem worse, though the majority of Irish paupers appear to have been born in the counties of Cork and Waterford and may have crossed to Bristol before moving north in search of work. Strangely, there are no entries concerning Irish or Scottish paupers in the register for 1838-1843.

Conclusion

The difficulties in interpreting the evidence have already been emphasised, but some suggestions may be put forward regarding the geographical origins of Cheltenham's population increase in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Much of the increase probably came from rural workers coming to Cheltenham in search of more or better work, perhaps in the building trade which of course had to cope with the increase in inhabitants of the town.

Cheltenham Buildings: Figures from the Population Census 1831 & 1841

	<u>Houses</u>	<u>Building</u>	<u>Uninhabited</u>
1831	4013	90	246
1841	5675	139	623

More people came from the South Midlands than from other parts of comparable distance from Cheltenham and London contributed a significant number. The influx of people from Ireland and Scotland should not be exaggerated, though in 1831-1832 they do form an unusually large proportion of the total settlement examination entries for these years.

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REFERENCES

1. I. Gray ed., Cheltenham Settlement Examinations 1815-1826, (B.G.A.S. Records Section Vol.VII, 1969)
2. Glos.R.O., Q/CR 22/5
3. I. Gray ed., op.cit., p.xxi 4. I. Gray ed., op.cit., p.xv.