

## Tramps' tales

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## **Tramps' Tales: Discovering the life-stories of late Victorian and Edwardian vagrants**

'Tramp' Alfred Draper appeared before justices of the peace at Leicester Castle in December 1896 accused, under the 1824 vagrancy act, of begging alms in nearby Humberstone. Found guilty, he was sentenced to ten days hard labour within the confines of the county gaol. The newspaper trial report was brief. The arresting policemen stated the prisoner had been going door-to-door and was 'very abusive' to those who rebuffed him.<sup>1</sup> Beyond a name, no clues exist as to who Alfred was, or from where he originated. The surviving prosecution conviction certificate describes him as being of no fixed abode, though importantly ascribes him a trade: shoe finisher.<sup>2</sup> Alfred's offence was so un-noteworthy and commonplace within the summary justice system that it is perhaps surprising that it is reported by the newspaper.<sup>3</sup> On so many levels, he was anonymous; nothing more than a criminal statistic that would be recorded by the Leicester constabulary.<sup>4</sup> The judicial system felt no need to understand, or explain, how or why Alfred found himself to be begging. The line between being deserving of sympathy and support and enduring the

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\* The genealogical sources cited in this article are located on the websites of Ancestry.co.uk and/or Findmypast.co.uk unless indicated otherwise. The initial phase of this research has been conducted with support from the Univ. of Birmingham's College of Arts and Law Undergraduate Research Scholar Scheme. Sarah Reardon proved a most diligent research assistant. I'd like to acknowledge the help of Len Smith, hon. research fellow, History of Medicine Unit, Univ. of Birmingham for helping to decode some of the asylum reports. I'm also extremely grateful to those who generously read, and commented upon, various incarnations of this article: Chris Wickham, Corey Ross, Matthew Hilton, Sabine Lee, Sally Baggott as well as the journal's anonymous referees.

<sup>1</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 12 Dec. 1896.

<sup>2</sup> P[etty] S[essions] C[onviction] C[ertificate], L[eicestershire] R[ecords] O[ffice], 7 Dec. 1898, QS85/1/170.

<sup>3</sup> The yearly average total for begging prosecutions was 15,137 based on data covering 1895-1899, *Judicial Statistics England and Wales 1909* (London, 1911) Cmd. 5473.

<sup>4</sup> Leicestershire Central Conviction Registers, LRO, QS85/2/1-2; for examples of the reporting of these statistics see *Leicester Chronicle*, 26 Nov. 1881, 17 Feb. 1906.

moral repugnance of society was a fine one.<sup>5</sup> Victorian sensibilities might acknowledge that the beggar was worthy of a charitable penny, but should they approach a second time, then society deemed them to be a professional beggar that deserved to feel the force of the law. Alfred Draper had crossed the Rubicon.

## I

In so many ways, the man that was portrayed in that brief newspaper report confirmed the suspicions of contemporary society about who the tramp was: male, workshy, content to live off charity and criminality. This article intends, through recreating the life-stories of such individuals, to challenge the stereotype and seek to understand why these individuals found themselves in such predicaments. Behind such stereotypes lay fear. It was a fear that the tramp threatened the accepted Victorian norms of homed society through their mobile lifestyle that rejected the trinity of work, respectability and religion.<sup>6</sup> Their mobility made them harder to regulate at a point when policy thinkers wanted to quantify and define every form of societal ill.<sup>7</sup> This same mobility challenges the historian over identification and judging how peripatetic these individuals were. If the only engagement was a fleeting newspaper name-check when before a court, or an archive holds a surviving admissions register from a workhouse casual ward, what can be learnt of tramp life and those who followed such a lifestyle?

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<sup>5</sup> J.-M. Strange, 'Tramp: Sentiment and the homeless man in the late-Victorian and Edwardian city' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16 (2011), pp. 242-58.

<sup>6</sup> M.A. Crowther, 'The tramp' in R. Porter, (ed.) *Myths of the English* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 91-113.

<sup>7</sup> *R[eport] of the D[e]partmental] C[ommittee] on V[agrancy]*, vol. 1 (London, 1906), para. 217 p. 58.

This article takes on that challenge directly. In so doing, it tackles the question that so evidently vexed contemporary policy makers and has evaded historians: who were the tramps? The article's methodology exploits the surviving prosecution certificates for vagrancy that arose from Leicestershire's summary justice system, using five-yearly samples between the 1881 and 1911, which yielded over 850 names (mainly male, but including some women).<sup>8</sup> Collectively the sample will be referred to as the Leicestershire cohort in the remainder of this article. Using various genealogical records (digitised on subscription websites such as Ancestry.co.uk and Findmypast.co.uk), the British Library's newspapers digital archive, as well as institutional records from the Poor Law, asylum system, judiciary, police and military, the article shows both the possibility of reconstructing the lives of a section of society it was assumed had left little trace of its existence.<sup>9</sup> Understanding these life-stories, of people trapped in a system of State control and surveillance, opens up the potential to unravel the strategies, and inner logics, that they were applying to survive.

There had been a steady growth in the numbers presenting at the casual wards, as vagrants, from the 1850s. After 1880, to the concern of poor law guardians, the numbers escalated rapidly, expanding from 5,914 on 1 January 1880 to 9,768 on 1 January 1905 and continuing to grow thereafter. Indeed, the 1909 Royal Commission on the Poor Law observed that whilst general pauperism levels might have fallen, vagrancy levels had risen over tenfold in sixty years.<sup>10</sup> Prosecutions, under the vagrancy act's sections 3 and 4, grew year-on-year, peaking at an annual average of 38,773 between 1909-1913, whilst prosecutions for refusing the workhouse work-

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<sup>8</sup> PSCC, QS85/1, LRO.

<sup>9</sup> [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

<sup>10</sup> *Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress* (London, 1909), p. 572.

duty followed a similar upward trajectory. Only the outbreak of world war drastically reduced the levels.<sup>11</sup> Within this timeframe, and whilst acknowledging the limitations of the statistics, the actual numbers of vagrants ebbed and flowed, nationally and regionally, some of which reflected general levels of pauperism, and which may have been exacerbated by economic downturns.

The choice of a shire county, as a starting point, is intentionally made in order to move the narrative about homelessness studies away from the Metropolis, and recognise that homelessness was (and still is) experienced in both the rural, county town and city environment. It is a recognition that such counties were experiencing considerable social upheaval with population growth, rural to urban population drift, bouts of agricultural and industrial depression, industrial mechanisation and urbanisation. This choice also acknowledges Leicestershire's central location and travel network. The ancient road networks of the Fosse Way, Watling and Ermine streets criss-crossed the county, as did an extensive canal infrastructure, whilst the Midland railway network linked Leicestershire's major towns with London, Yorkshire and north-west of England. All routes that would have proved vital to vagrant mobility.

The rationale for using the prosecution certificates names is because it means the historians can understand 'who' was being prosecuted for vagrancy. This should offer a less partial sample than had the names been based upon those listed as 'casuals' in the workhouse on census night. Such a sample would miss those who might chose to

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<sup>11</sup> *RDCV*, vol. 1, chp. 2.; *Judicial Statistics England and Wales 1909* (London, 1911), Cmd. 5473; Home Office, *Criminal Statistics England and Wales 1924* (London, 1926), Cmd. 2602.

rough sleep, or whom had sufficient financial resource to avail themselves of a night's lodgings. In taking this approach, it confirms that despite the expectation that the vagrancy act was aimed at the 'outsider' wandering wayfarer, its legal flexibility meant that the local 'insider' committing perceived anti-social behaviours was equally at risk of being prosecuted under this act. Half of the Leicestershire conviction sample were actually local 'insiders'. However, whilst the focus of this article will be on the 'outsider' wayfarer because it has been presumed that their mobility makes them invisible, as will be apparent there are local 'insiders' who adopt vagrant personas and in doing so elevate themselves to an 'outsider' status. The vagrant's invisibility is all the more surprising since the nineteenth century witnessed the rapid growth of the 'information state', as institutional organs accumulated vast amounts of personal data regarding its subject.<sup>12</sup>

It is not about the administration of the State's systems so much, as showing how vagrants interacted (or not) with the State and subverting its record keeping methods to understand the agency and behaviours of these individuals. The article does not claim that it has been possible to locate every 'vagrant' within the sample. There are multiple challenges that need to be overcome, such as individuals sharing common surnames, as well as some that arise due to the 'problematic' nature of official record keeping – misspellings of names and places, variations in years of birth, the attributions of single occupations which mask the reality that individuals held

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<sup>12</sup> E. Higgs, *The Information State in England: The central collection of information on citizens since 1500* (Basingstoke, 2004); R. Shoemaker and R. Ward, 'Understanding the criminal: record-keeping, statistics and the early history of criminology' *British Journal of Criminology* 57 (2017), pp. 1442-61.

multiple occupations, perhaps according to season, or just to make ends meet and/or the application of generalised occupation labels like labourer.<sup>13</sup>

In some cases, locating a newspaper report of their trial might be the extent of the reconstruction. But the proliferation of the provincial press, in the late Victorian era, provides the ‘missing dimension’ that enables these individuals to be tracked. The potential of this project arose because the very first individual who it attempted to locate was Charles Badger after his work-duty refusal at Loughborough workhouse the morning after the 1911 census. The census yields not only an occupation, age and place of birth, but lists a specific parish: St. Silas, Sheffield, Yorkshire.<sup>14</sup> Yet despite pursuing four different individuals of the same name who hailed from Sheffield, including one born in the parish of St. Silas, and with years of birth within ten years of that given in the census – each has proved not to be the vagrant: one died on the battlefields of Europe in world war one, another emigrated to Canada in July 1909 dying there in 1957; the third, a silversmith, was still in Sheffield living with his spinster sister in 1911; and the fourth, who left the city, married and died following a medical procedure in Birmingham in 1909.<sup>15</sup> Three accounts of the court case have subsequently emerged, at least offering an explanation for why he refused the work-duty, although no additional biographical details were revealed, and so for now he remains an enigma.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, this example has proved the exception, rather than the rule and, in many cases, the points of contact with an individual vagrant might

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<sup>13</sup> E. Higgs, ‘Occupation censuses and the agricultural workforce in Victorian England and Wales’ *Economic History Review* 48 (1995), pp. 700-16; D. Holmes, ‘The development of the boot and shoe industry in Leicester during the 19<sup>th</sup> century’ *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and History Society* 83 (2009), pp. 175-218, esp. 194-6.

<sup>14</sup> PSCC, 3 Apr. 1911, QS85/1/316, LRO; Census: 1911, Loughborough, RG14/405.

<sup>15</sup> Death Certificate, Charles B., 16 Jan. 1909, Birmingham.

<sup>16</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, 3 Apr. 1911; *Leicester Daily Post*, 3 Apr. 1911; *Melton Mowbray Mercury*, 6 Apr. 1911.

extend to thirty or forty events. In these situations, it then becomes possible to reconstruct the wider kinship networks. In the most exceptional cases these contact points run into three figures.

As the Charles Badger example showed the ‘vagrant’ will usually share a name with multiple individuals active in the same geographical areas, of similar ages and having comparable attributed occupations, whilst also subject to court appearances. Each individual requires tracking until the balance of probability, or a crucial piece of evidence completes the jigsaw, enabling one to settle upon the profile that is the ‘vagrant’. Illustrative, here is the case of Herefordshire tinsmith Charles Taylor who in 1906 refused his work-duty at both Loughborough and Melton Mowbray workhouses, before committing malicious damage when he intentionally broke an ironmonger’s shop window in Melton. The common surname means that there are multiple individuals with the same name and occupation, or displaying ‘vagrant’ behaviours appearing in both the genealogical sources and newspaper reports: Charles Taylor a tinsmith from Clapham, Bedfordshire; Charles Taylor a tinsmith admitted to Hereford asylum in 1912; London born Charles Taylor begging in Yorkshire; and Charles Taylor peddling pirated printed music in Dorset at the same time ‘vagrant’ Charles Taylor was serving his prison term for his Melton malicious damage. All of these individuals can be dismissed because ‘vagrant’ Charles Taylor committed an act of arson, rick-burning, in Gloucestershire, and the surviving prison records list his convictions, including the malicious damage offence, as well as physical details



which assist with cross-referencing the various sources.<sup>17</sup> As this article progresses these methodological challenges will be returned to within the case studies.

The life-story approach is one firmly grounded in the sociological, anthropological and psychological methodologies of modern day homelessness research.<sup>18</sup> More recently there has been an academic shift towards identifying ‘homelessness pathways’ – using interviews to gain biographical insights from those on the streets or living in temporary accommodation which enable the researchers to establish the causes of homelessness and the journey (or not) that people have taken to get back into housing.<sup>19</sup> These methodologies have shown that there are pathways into, through and, out of homelessness, and that it is not static. It suggests that the ‘process’ is less about a single trigger event but rather the interplay of structural factors and influences affecting the individual. But, these studies all suggest that there is something distinctive about single homeless from the 1950s onwards compared to earlier generations. That will be shown to be a wrong assumption and is typical of much of modern homelessness researches’ unwillingness to historicise the problem. Although this article shows the historical continuities in profiles of the vagrant it also suggests that tipping points do occur within the vagrant life-stories that multiplied the

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<sup>17</sup> PSCC, 20 Sept., 17 Oct. 1906, QE85/1/376, LRO; *Melton Mowbray Mercury*, 27 Sept., 18 Oct., 22 Nov. 1906; Census: 1911, Portland, RG14/263; Gloucester Prison records, previous convictions, nominal prisoner register, 27 Jul. 1908; Habitual Criminal Record, 1907, 1912; Census: 1901, Clapham, Beds, RG13/1491; *Bedfordshire Mercury* 5 Jan. 1906; Wakefield Prison nominal prisoner register, Sept. 1901; *Barnsley Chronicle* 28 Sept 1901; *Chard and Ilminster News*, 10 Nov. 1906; Hereford Asylum (Burghill) admissions/discharges and case-notes, 7 Aug. 1912-15 Jul. 1915, Herefordshire Archives (with thanks to Cynthia Comyn).

<sup>18</sup> A. Tomas & H. Dittmar, ‘The experience of homeless women: an exploration of housing histories and the meaning of home’ *Housing Studies*, 10 (1995), pp. 493-515; J. May, ‘Housing histories and homeless careers: a biographical approach’ *Housing Studies* 15 (2000), pp. 613-38; D. Brandon *Homeless* (London, 1974); M. Ravenshill, *Cultures of Homelessness* (Aldershot, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> D. Clapham, ‘Pathways approaches to homelessness research’ *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 119 (2003).

likelihood of that individual taking to the road, above and beyond the broader context of structural and personal circumstances.

## II

This is not a study of the New Poor Law, despite the vagrant wayfarer finding themselves on the receiving end of its punitive design. The vagrant, as a class of pauper, presented the board of guardians with a daily challenge of both accommodating and controlling. The historical orthodoxies of the New Poor Law have been subjected to renewed scrutiny in the past two decades. It has been presented as a necessary adjustment in a new democratic age: harsh in design, if less so in implementation, especially as the twentieth century dawned.<sup>20</sup> The argument has been made that rather than considering the New Poor Law as a single national model, it should be considered as a series of poor laws that operate at a regional, and even union by union, level.<sup>21</sup> Micro-studies of particular unions demonstrate the considerable spatial variation in policy and practise that existed. The mobility of the vagrant, experiencing a range of receptions in differing casual wards, potentially offers an opportunity to explore further these regional variations. These studies have also suggested that, as the twentieth century dawned, individual workhouses were adopting a greater social welfare function, especially with regard to the elderly and the mentally ill, which challenges the mythology of the Bastille.<sup>22</sup> The nature of institutional source survival needs to be acknowledged encouraging historians, perhaps, to overstress the importance of poor relief, and disregard the role kin and friendship networks played in supporting the poor just because such evidence is

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<sup>20</sup> L. Hollen Lees, *Solidarities of strangers: The English Poor Laws and the people* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> *Local Population Studies* 99 (2017), special issue *The New Poor Law: Regional and Local Perspective*.

<sup>22</sup> A. Negrine, 'Practitioners and paupers: medicine in Leicester workhouse, 1867-1905' in J. Reinartz and L. Schwarz, eds., *Medicine and the Workhouse* (Woodbridge, 2013) pp. 193-4.

elusive.<sup>23</sup> Nor were the clients of the workhouse passive consumers of relief, rather they adopted a range of strategies, from letter writing to work refusals, to assert their agency.<sup>24</sup> Yet, despite these advances, and the pleas for greater exploration of the lived experiences of the pauper and the life-cycles of their kinship networks, understanding of the vagrant remains couched in terms of the physical processes of the casual ward and examining the numerical ebb and flow in the numbers of admissions.<sup>25</sup> Whilst the localised and diverse responses of boards of guardians to the directives about the vagrant's treatment handed down from the Local Government Board is acknowledged, such emphasis appears to simply reinforce the contemporary social investigator exposes of the experience of the casual ward.<sup>26</sup> Consequently the historian remains woefully ignorant of who the vagrant actually was at the dawn of the twentieth century.

This ignorance is in stark contrast to periods before 1800. Three broad historiographical approaches have been adopted: the cultural literary rogue, the social administrative protocols and the lived tradition. These studies have shown the ways

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<sup>23</sup> P. Thane, 'Old people and their families in the English past' in M. Daunton, ed., *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London, 1996), pp. 113-14.

<sup>24</sup> Lees, *Solidarities*, pp. 151-76; P. Jones and S. King, 'Voices from the far North: pauper letters and the provision of welfare in Sutherland, 1845-1900' *Journal of British Studies* 55 (2016), pp. 76-98; D. R. Green, 'Pauper protests: power and resistance in early nineteenth century London workhouses' *Social History* 31 (2006), pp. 137-59; J.S. Taylor, 'Voices in the crowd: The Kirkby Lonsdale township letters, 1809-36' in T. Hitchcock *et al.*, eds., *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor 1640-1840* (Basingstoke 1997), pp; 109-26.

<sup>25</sup> S. King and G. Timmins, *Making Sense of the Industrial Revolution: English Economy and Society* (Manchester, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> M. Evans and P. Jones, "'A stubborn, intractable body'": Resistance to the workhouse in Wales 1834-1877' *Family and Community History* 17 (2014), pp. 101-21; In Leicestershire the prevaricated response of Loughborough guardians to the idea to belatedly introduce two nights detention for casuals, then abandon it, and then reintroduce as they sought to balance financial concerns against deterrence and wanting to curb the numbers of casual admissions during the 1900s is an apt example. For localism under old poor law see A. Eccles, *Vagrancy in Law and Practise under the Old Poor Law* (Aldershot, 2012).

the itinerant poor struggled to create identities and assume agency for survival.<sup>27</sup> Combining literary, artistic, Old Poor Law and legal sources historians have shown how the myths assumed by authors and politicians about the vagrants' idleness were unfounded. Recent scholars have questioned whether vagrancy ever declined, pointing out that for every individual labelled a vagrant, many more were allowed to carry on with their precarious lives unhindered.<sup>28</sup> The lives of down and outs of eighteenth-century London have been vividly brought to life, illustrating the daily struggles such individuals faced and the creative and resourcefulness they employed.<sup>29</sup> Yet no such understanding is displayed for the nineteenth/early twentieth-century. The position of the tramp, as a cultural construction in Britain and America, in this era is better understood.<sup>30</sup> In the British context, the importance of understanding who the vagrant is amplified because between the mid-nineteenth century and the first world war 'myths of vagrancy' were in transition.<sup>31</sup> This was a period when the tramping artisan was replaced by the tramping unskilled labourer seeking *ad hoc* casual work.<sup>32</sup> Considerations of vagrant identity in the nineteenth-century have been overly reliant on social investigator accounts, or have conceptualised vagrancy too much in economic terms, or even suggested it was a

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<sup>27</sup> P. Fumerton, *Unsettled: the culture of mobility and the working poor in early modern England* (Chicago, Ill., 2005); T. Hitchcock and R. Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690-1800* (Cambridge, 2015); A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: the Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> D. Hitchcock, *Vagrancy in English Culture and Society 1650-1750* (London, 2016); T. Hitchcock, 'Begging on the streets of eighteenth-century London' *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005), pp. 478-98, esp. p. 481.

<sup>29</sup> T. Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth Century London* (London, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> T. Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Crowther, 'Tramp', p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> H. Southall, 'Mobility, the artisan community, and popular politics in early 19<sup>th</sup> century England' in G. Kears and C. Withers, eds., *Urbanising Britain: Class and Community in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 105; R. Leeson, *Travelling Brothers* (London, 1979); J. Adler, 'Youth in the road: reflections on the history of tramping' *Annals of Tourism Research* 12 (1985), pp. 335-54; M. Edgar and A. Hinde, 'The stone workers of Purbeck' *Rural History* 10 (1999), pp. 75-90.

lifestyle choice.<sup>33</sup> In attempting to settle this debate, the basic problem remains that currently historians ‘know significantly very little’ of the character and origin of mendicants.<sup>34</sup> Even a recent study of Victorian crime suggested that it impossible to identify who the vagrants were.<sup>35</sup>

The pursuit of family history has long been frowned upon as the work of amateurs. However, this notion is challenged by specialist academic journals and, in recent years, a number of culturally informed historical studies that have placed genealogical research at the core of their projects, with similar methods being utilised by historians of crime to great effect.<sup>36</sup> The boom in online genealogy enables the historian to counter vagrant mobility and so reconstruct life-stories in a manner that previous generations could not have conceived.

All of this enables the article to makes a number of claims of originality. It shows the extent, and detail, with which it is now possible to reconstruct a tramp’s life beyond one or two points of contact. This is demonstrated by a series of initial cases-studies that illustrate how the weaving together of a range of disparate sources can unveil a tableau of detail that challenges historical, and contemporary perspectives, on the tramp. Matters such as how the tramp is imagined by others (the media, judiciary, and

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<sup>33</sup> L. Rose, *Rogues and Vagabonds: Vagrant Underworld in Britain* (London, 1988); R. Humphreys, *No Fixed Abode* (London, 1999); G.S. Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 88-90; R. Talbot, *North South Divide of the Poor in the Staffordshire Potteries 1871-1901* (Univ. of Leicester, Ph.D., 2016), pp. 9, 82-3.

<sup>34</sup> D.J.V. Jones, “A dead loss to the community”: The criminal vagrant in mid-nineteenth century Wales’ *Welsh History Review* 6 (1976), p. 318.

<sup>35</sup> J. Turner, ‘Punishing women, 1880-1905’ *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 50 (2011), p. 507.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. *Family and Community History*; A. Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family* (London, 2014); S. Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress* (Princeton, 2014); H. Shore, *London’s Criminal Underworld c.1720-c.1930: a Social and Cultural History* (Basingstoke, 2015); M. Houlbrook, *Trickster Prince: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas* (Princeton, 2016).

policy-makers), and how these visions stand up to the actuality of a tramp's experience, as well as the legal application of the vagrancy act are too great, and too complex, to be considered here.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the article uses the reconstruction of these life-stories to demonstrate how it is now possible to pinpoint a tramp's movements around the country, in some cases day by day. And finally, it offers explanations about how individuals became tramps thus engaging the debates about whether such predicaments were due to individual failings or structural societal problems.<sup>38</sup> Though historians have anticipated that vagrants suffered disproportionately from mental and physical ill health and addictions, this article confirms its prevalence, and that these predicaments exacerbated an individual's ability to conform to the expectations of contemporary society; fragilities exacerbated by the harsh realities of life with no fixed abode.<sup>39</sup> When compounded by structural issues, such as fluctuating trade, employment cycles, and inadequate provisions for military veterans, these could be enough to tip these vulnerable individuals from mere poverty into the abyss of the underclass. All of which points to the depressing continuities that exist between

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<sup>37</sup> C.J. Craven, *A Night in the Workhouse* (Keighley, 1887); M.A., *A Night in the Casual Ward* (London, 1866); F.G. Wallace Goodbody, 'The Tramps Haven' *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1883); J.R. Widdup, 'The Casual Ward System' (Manchester, 1894); M. Higgs, 'The tramp ward' *Contemporary Review* (1904); for analysis see M. Freeman and G. Nelson, eds., *Vicarious Vagrants: Incognito Social Explorers and the Homeless in England 1860-1910* (Lambertville, N.J., 2008), intro.; M. Freeman, "'Journeys into the poverty kingdom": Complete participation and the British vagrant 1866-1914' *History Workshop Journal* 52 (2001), pp. 99-121; L. Seaber, *Incognito Social Investigation in British Literature* (Basingstoke, 2017) esp. chps. 2-4.

<sup>38</sup> See R. Burrows, N. Pleace and D. Quilgars, eds., *Homelessness and Social Policy* (London, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> A.T. Scull, *Museums of Madness: the social organisation of insanity in nineteenth-century England* (London, 1979); A. Eccles, "'Furiously mad": Vagrancy law and a sub-group of the disorderly poor' *Rural History* 24 (2013), pp. 25-40; J. Melling and R. Turner, 'The road to the asylum: institutions, distance and the administration of pauper lunacy in Devon 1845-1914' *Journal of Historical Geography* 25 (1999), pp. 298-332; R. Ellis, 'The asylum, the Poor Law and the growth of county asylums in nineteenth century Yorkshire' *Northern History* 45 (2008), pp. 279-93; Richard Adair *et al.*, 'A danger to the public? Disposing of pauper lunatics in late Victorian and Edwardian England: Plympton St Mary Union and the Devon County Asylum, 1867-1914' *Medical History* 42 (1998), pp. 1-25.

tramps at the turn of the twentieth century and those who would be labelled the single homeless during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>40</sup>

The 1824 vagrancy act was a Georgian response to what policy-makers saw as a crisis in anti-social behaviours caused by ‘idle and disorderly persons’ in public places aggravated by a rapid escalation in the numbers of homeless and urban poor (ex-servicemen and economic migrants from Ireland and Scotland).<sup>41</sup> The Act’s four clauses criminalised an extremely wide range of activities from common prostitution to begging to fortune telling to rough sleeping. The wording of the legislation was sufficiently vague as to make it a very flexible tool that could be applied when other forms of legal recourse were unenforceable. In 1883, a group of Staffordshire miners found themselves prosecuted for ‘begging’, when pulling a cart seeking alms for striking workers. This *cause célèbre* was eventually overturned by the House of Lords on appeal.<sup>42</sup> Various amendments in 1838 were added on moral decency in regard to exposing oneself or indecency in public exhibitions; in 1875, gambling and playing dice in the streets was brought into its remit; and, in 1898, pimping and living on the earnings of prostitution was added to the list, though this last amendment was increasingly applied against homosexual men.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> I.C. Lodge Patch, ‘Homeless men: A London survey’ *Proceedings of the Royal Medical Society* 63 (1970), pp. 437-41; I.C. Lodge Patch, ‘Homeless men in London: Demographic findings in a lodge house sample’ *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 118 (1971), pp. 313-17; T. Cook, *The Vagrant Alcoholic* (London, 1975).

<sup>41</sup> P. Lawrence, ‘The vagrancy act (1824) and the persistence of pre-emptive policing in England since 1750’ *British Journal of Criminology* 57 (2017), pp. 513-31; N. Rogers, ‘Policing the poor in 18<sup>th</sup> century London: the vagrancy laws and their administration’ *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 24 (1991), pp. 127-47; M.J.D. Roberts, ‘Public and private in early 19<sup>th</sup> century London: the Vagrant Act of 1822 and its enforcement’ *Social History* 13 (1988), pp. 273-94; W. Chambliss, ‘Sociological analysis of the laws of vagrancy’ *Social Problems* 12 (1964), pp. 67-77.

<sup>42</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 13 Oct. 1883; *Pointon v Hill* [1884] 12 *Q[ueen’s] B[ench] D[ivision]* 306.

<sup>43</sup> Consult the annual editions of *Stone’s Justices’ Manual* to chart the changing nature of the legal position of the act; M. Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures of the Sexual Metropolis* (Chicago, 2005).

There are challenges with the labels ‘tramp’ and ‘vagrant’. The terms ‘vagrant’, or ‘vagabond’, had Latin origins and implied the directionless drifting of the dispossessed. In contrast, the noun ‘tramp’ was derived from the verb ‘to tramp’, was more positively focussed to described those moving around but actively seeking economic employment.<sup>44</sup> During the nineteenth-century the meanings of the terms had blurred and become interchangeable, and so tramping assumed the negative connotations of vagrancy and social exclusion. Matters were not helped because the 1824 Act did not define a vagrant, beyond a list of anti-social behaviours they might engage in. The 1882 Casual Poor Act helped little more, defining the users of the casual wards of the workhouse as ‘any destitute wayfarer or wanderer’. The 1906 Report on Vagrancy accepted it was ‘a very elastic’ definition, ‘and as ordinarily used no precise meaning can be attached to it.’ In resigned terms, it concluded that ‘the modern tramp’, through self-choice and personal inadequacy, was content with their circumstances and beyond help. But besides seeking to identify four categories of vagrant, graded on a scale of their willingness to seek work, this enquiry had little sense as to what drove these people to take to the road.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, historians argue this ‘linguistic confusion’ has made the official response to the vagrant tramp ‘problematic.’<sup>46</sup>

### III

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<sup>44</sup> See P. Ocobock, ‘Introduction’ in A.L. Beier and P. Ocobock, eds., *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homeless in Global and Historical Perspective* (Athens, Ohio, 2008) esp. pp. 3-5.

<sup>45</sup> *RDCV*, vol. 1, paras 82 (quote), 87 (quote), 80-4, pp. 24-6.

<sup>46</sup> M. Kratchik, ‘Unemployment and vagrancy in the 1930s: Deterrence, rehabilitation and the depression’ *Journal of Social Policy* 12 (1983), p. 199.



The benefits of the life-stories approach can be shown by returning to the case of Alfred Draper that the article opened with. There were four Drapers, sharing not only names, but similar ages and geographical overlaps. One based in Northampton was described as a currier, was married with a family, and made a number of court appearances for minor offences; another, also lived in Northampton, and also engaged in the shoe trade, before tragically committing suicide in 1921; another, a drover moved around Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Staffordshire and Cheshire, and also had a succession of convictions for offences including vagrancy.<sup>47</sup> This article's 'vagrant' Alfred was, however, a regular beggar on the tramp, frequently before the courts in Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and Leicestershire. He was a man prone to abusive or peculiar tendencies, and occasional threats of violence, earning him the sobriquet 'Jack the Ripper'. These were all behaviours suggestive of mental well-being issues – though there is no evidence he was ever committed to an asylum.<sup>48</sup>

It can be established that he was born in 1861 and spent his early months in Nantwich, Cheshire with his mother, maternal grandmother, and a wide extended family. The Nantwich connection is important because in adult life, despite only spending a few months there, he describes himself as hailing from the town. His father, Thomas, himself in the shoe trade, was living thirty miles away in Stafford with his sister, her husband, his mother, and Alfred's two elder siblings. The separation might be explained by economic necessity, the practicalities of Alfred's birth and his mother's

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<sup>47</sup> Currier: *Northampton Mercury*, 1 Feb. 1890, 12 Apr. 1890, 1 Sept. 1899; Drover: *Northampton Mercury*, 19 Oct. 1889; 23 May 1890; 31 Mar. 1899; Suicide: *Northampton Mercury*, 21 Mar. 1921.

<sup>48</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 7 May 1887, 2 Mar. 1895, 12 Dec. 1896; *Northampton Mercury*, 31 Mar. 1888, 4 Apr. 1888; *Rugby Advertiser*, 11 Apr. 1888; *Staffordshire Chronicle*, 15 Dec. 1888; 11 May, 18 May, 27 Jul. 1889; Census: 1891, Stafford, RG12/2140; *Lichfield Mercury*, 18 Mar. 1892; *Coventry Herald*, 27 Apr. 1894.

post-partum care. By 1871, Alfred as a ten-year-old was living in St Mary's, Stafford with his mother (now described as a shoe finisher) and four younger siblings, whose birthplaces hark from all over the Midlands and Cheshire, pointing to a transient and unstable early childhood. His father was a 'visitor' at a Lichfield inn. A wider family circle was close at hand. His uncle Peter and aunt Harriet lived on the next street. By 1881, though his parents remained in Stafford, now aged twenty, Alfred had moved away. He was now in Leicester, as a shoe finisher, attracted no doubt by the rapidly expanding city shoe trade and was lodging in the slum district of All Saints, Leicester with a family that are all engaged in the shoe trade. This family was, in fact, kin: his aunt Harriet had been widowed and remarried and moved from Stafford, so Alfred was now lodging with her, her new husband, and his cousins and step-cousins.<sup>49</sup> Such a complicated and transient kin network appears fairly typical amongst the other Leicestershire 'vagrants' with many experiencing unstable childhoods, whether through bereavements, separations, frequently mobility, and/or being part of 'problem' families.<sup>50</sup>

Importantly, it is possible to identify the trigger to Alfred's tramping lifestyle which occurred in October 1885. He appeared in court, in Leicester, accused of selling on shoe-work tools that were stolen from his father. His explanation was that he wanted

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<sup>49</sup> Birth Registration, 1861 1<sup>st</sup> Q., vol. 8A p. 298, Nantwich; Census: 1861, Nantwich, RG09/2619; 1861, Stafford, RG09/1907; 1871, Stafford, RG10/2818; 1871, Lichfield, RG10/2913; 1881, Leicester, RG11/3180; 1881, Stafford Marston, RG11/2686; Holmes, 'Development', pp. 175-218; 'City of Leicester: Footwear manufacture' in *V[ictoria] C[ounty] H[istory]: A History of the County of Leicester* vol. 4 ed. R.A. McKinley (London, 1958), pp. 314-26 [British-history.ac.uk/vch/leics/vol4/pp314-326](http://British-history.ac.uk/vch/leics/vol4/pp314-326).

<sup>50</sup> For a sociological approach based on American datasets see F. Goldscheider, *et al.*, 'Family structure and conflict: nest leaving expectations of young adults and their parents' *Journal of Marriage and Family* 51 (1989), pp. 87-97. On family mobility see M.B. White, 'Family migration in Victorian Britain: the case of Grantham and Scunthorpe' *Local Population Studies* 41 (1988), pp. 41-50 – suggests a third of migrant population moving to Grantham were families, compared to over two-thirds for Scunthorpe.

to escape the trade. His father pleaded for leniency and the case was withdrawn on condition that the twenty-four-year-old went out into the world to make his own way.<sup>51</sup> Alfred's relationship with his father was clearly complex. At some point, between 1881 and 1885, his parents had re-located to Leicester and settled in Littleton Street to no doubt benefit from the city's cheap shoe and boot making market.<sup>52</sup> The family dynamics were far more complex than just a falling out between father and son.<sup>53</sup> His father's absences during his childhood extended beyond seeking employment. He served repeated jail terms in Staffordshire and Leicester, including a conviction for indecently assaulting a seven-year-old girl, and was condemned as a 'thoroughly bad fellow'.<sup>54</sup>

Alfred's spiral downwards, from the 1885 shoe-tool trial, was rapid. Repeated offences for drunkenness quickly followed, and, from March 1888, he was being described as 'a tramp': ironically having secured his desire to escape his trade.<sup>55</sup> In fact, whilst the court case brought by his father played its part, it seems Alfred still considered that he had an association with the family. Over the next three years he gave, on several occasions, the family's Leicester address to the courts, perhaps supporting the idea that in this period leaving home was seldom 'once and for all' and

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<sup>51</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 24 Oct. 1885. On the practice of JPs mediating the outcomes of cases to avoid a conviction see by B. Godfrey, 'Changing prosecution practices and their impact on crime figures, 1857-1940' *British Journal of Criminology* 48 (2008), p. 177.

<sup>52</sup> The *VCH*, vol. 4, estimates that in 1881 13,000 were employed in the city's shoe trade rising to 24,000 in 1891; Holmes, 'Development', p. 185 describes this decade as 'one of continuous expansion'.

<sup>53</sup> See J.-M. Strange, 'Fatherhood, providing and attachment in late Victorian and Edwardian working class families' *Historical Journal* 55 (2012), pp. 1007-27.

<sup>54</sup> His record includes: 1 May 1865, 21 days stealing pigs' kidneys; 27 May 1868, 14 days for assault; 20 Jul. 1868, 3 months purloining boot tops; 9 Feb. 1869, 14 days drunk; 25 Aug. 1869 disorderly 1 month; 2 Oct. 1880; prisoner photograph D6957/1/1-438 Stafford Prison, Staffordshire Archives; *Leicester Chronicle*, 20 Jul. 1889.

<sup>55</sup> *Northampton Mercury*, 30 Oct. 1886, 31 Mar. 1888; *Leicester Chronicle*, 29 Oct. 1887.

that individuals would return to the parental home.<sup>56</sup> The final tipping point to his adoption of the tramp life, it would seem, was the death of his mother in early 1888.<sup>57</sup> With that he broke his association with Leicester and began circulating around Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire. Family relationship breakdowns and bereavements might be recognised in modern-day sociological studies as being a significant reason for homelessness, but to Victorian society, Alfred Draper would have been an undeserving case of the worst variety: a habitual ‘professional beggar,’ and one who particularly targeted vulnerable women and children.<sup>58</sup> But by adopting the begging persona it afforded Alfred the luxury of avoiding using the workhouse casual wards.

What happened to Alfred after the 1896 conviction this article opened with? He vanished, only to resurface in April 1905, back in a Leicester court, charged with being drunk and disorderly, and described as a rag-gather.<sup>59</sup> Other offences followed, with the courts hearing that he hailed from Nantwich, variously being described as a rag-gather or shoe-riveter (though he admits he has not been engaged in the trade for many years), and that he had numerous convictions.<sup>60</sup> At some point, prior to 1905, he settled in the vicinity of Britannia Street, a part of Leicester notorious for its cheap common lodging houses.<sup>61</sup> In August 1925, his body was pulled from a Leicester canal. An inquest witness testified that he had evicted Alfred from his lodging house

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<sup>56</sup> E.g. *Leicester Chronicle*, 7 May 1887; C. Pooley and J. Turnbull, ‘Leaving home: the experience of migration from the parental home in Britain since c 1770’ *Journal of Family History* 22 (1997), pp. 390-424.

<sup>57</sup> Death Register, Leicester, 1<sup>st</sup> Q., 1888, vol. 7A p. 177.

<sup>58</sup> *Lichfield Mercury*, 18 Mar. 1892; J. Greve, ‘Preface’ in Burrows, *Homelessness* p. xiv.

<sup>59</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 28 Apr. 1905; 26 Mar. 1906; 28 May 1907.

<sup>60</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 14 Mar. 1908; *Leicester Daily Post*, 26 Sept. 1910; Census: 1911, Leicester, RG14/407 – though the year of birth is incorrectly recorded.

<sup>61</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 31 May 1913, 7 Nov. 1914; *Leicester Daily Post*, 20 May 1913.

six months earlier due to his venomous condition, but that he had continued to see him in the area almost daily and believed he was once again rough sleeping. Although the inquest was unable to determine how his body came to be there, it was estimated it had been in the water for at least a week.<sup>62</sup>

This final chapter of Alfred's life raises two points, one concerning homelessness and the other regarding sources. Evidently, as age catches up with him, he makes a conscious decision to return to a city he was familiar with, and to adopt a slightly more settled (if insecure) form of homed living *ad hoc* within the common lodging house network, eking out a living, supplemented with occasional petty crime, in the underbelly of Leicester's casual poor. It also confirms that many lodging houses had long-term residents, when supposedly they were only licenced for nightly arrivals.<sup>63</sup> The inquest testimony regarding Alfred's condition in the last months of his life also suggests that he was a known character in the district, and that the local population were prepared to tolerate, even assist and sustain, his presence. His body was found with three shillings.<sup>64</sup> The eight and a half year 'disappearance', between 1896 and 1905, is more problematic. The balance of probability is that Alfred's offending vagrant habits continued, as subsequent court cases and the inquest witnesses suggested. His apparent invisibility can be answered, one suspects, by the very poor

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<sup>62</sup> Death Certificate, 11 Aug. 1925 Leicester; Inquest, Alfred D., 11 Aug. 1925, DE2491 Box 49 No 95, LRO.

<sup>63</sup> J. Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution* (Basingstoke, 2015), chp. 5; T. Crook, 'Accommodating the outcast: Common Lodging Houses and the limits of urban governance in Victorian and Edwardian London', *Urban History*, 35 (2008), pp. 414–36; S. Laidlaw, *Glasgow Common Lodging Houses and the People Living in the Them* (Glasgow, 1956); L. Woolley, 'Disreputable housing in a disreputable parish? Common Lodging-Houses in St. Thomas', Oxford 1841-1901' *Midlands History* 35 (2010), pp. 215-36; S. Page, 'Lodging and poverty in late Victorian Leicester: A socio-geographic perspective' *Transactions of Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* 68 (1994), pp. 121-144. J. O'Neill, *The Secret World of the Victorian Common Lodging House* (Barnsley, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Inquest, Alfred D., 11 Aug. 1925, LRO.

quality of some digitised copies of the local Leicestershire newspapers in the early 1900s, which means the search function algorithms cannot accurately scan the pages.

Some conjecture and speculation could be applied too. Frustratingly, he does not register in the 1901 census. He might have been rough sleeping, and so was missed by the enumerators – he did have a habit of using barns in the Gilroes area less than three miles from the centre of Leicester.<sup>65</sup> There is no evidence he was committed to an asylum or joined the army. Tracking his surviving family members offers no clues to his whereabouts, but points up the possibility that familial events were once more influencing Alfred's behaviours. In June 1896, his younger sister committed suicide by poisoning 'induced by religious mania'.<sup>66</sup> Given the media coverage of the death and subsequent inquest, and Alfred's presence in the city, is it feasible to surmise that this tragedy convinced him to remain closer to his surviving family? His father, surviving sister (who gave birth to an illegitimate child), and cousins are in, and out of, Leicester workhouse during the 1890s and early 1900s, but not Alfred. As a family reliant on the shoe trade their hardships were aggravated by the half-time operations of the city's shoe factories, from the early 1890s, and because unemployment rates in the trade were being exacerbated by mechanisation, the seasonality of the trade, and the slump in markets as Leicester's 'cheap' shoe production strategy proved counter-productive. By 1901 his father had returned to Stafford, and died shortly after.<sup>67</sup> This removed Alfred's last obstacle to remaining, long-term, in the city.

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<sup>65</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 7 May 1887, 2 Mar. 1895; *Leicester Daily Post*, 26 Sept. 1910.

<sup>66</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 6 Jun. 1896.

<sup>67</sup> Leicester Workhouse admission/discharge registers, LRO; Census: 1901, Stafford, RG13/2571.

Alfred Draper's case is pretty typical of those whose life-stories have been reconstructed so far. He is perhaps better documented than some, however, because his behaviour got him into court so often. The prevalence of the newspaper reportage enables the historian to piece together aspects of his life that cannot be yielded solely from census returns and other genealogical sources. The pitfalls of relying upon census returns is well recognised as the next example confirms.

#### IV

Robert Fields (1845–97) appeared before Melton Mowbray JPs having destroyed his clothes in the town's casual ward in April 1891, the morning after the census.<sup>68</sup> The census entry described him as an 'American' and a 'sailor'.<sup>69</sup> The reality appears less exotic. In fact, Robert hailed from the fenland town of March, Cambridgeshire, born into a family of agricultural labourers in May 1845, and, to all intents and purposes, the remaining census returns suggest he never left the vicinity of his home town. Ultimately, he died in May 1897, in the local Doddington workhouse.<sup>70</sup> But the reliance on a record of location every decade can be misleading. He left March in September 1861 and from 1871 he was on the tramp circulating around the east of England and frequently appearing before magistrates. He also spent several periods in London before 'removal' by the Poor Law guardians.<sup>71</sup> Although his offences, according to his surviving prison records for 1876 and 1896, usually involved some form of misdemeanour in a workhouse, he was also convicted on several occasions of

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<sup>68</sup> PSCC, 6 April 1891, QS85/1/239, LRO; *Grantham Journal*, 11 Apr. 1891; *Leicester Chronicle*, 11 Apr. 1891.

<sup>69</sup> Census: 1891, Melton Mowbray, RG12/2544.

<sup>70</sup> Baptism Records, St Wendreda (March), 7 Jun. 1846; Census: 1851, H0107/1765; 1861, RG9/1044; 1871, RG10/1611; 1881, RG11/1689 all March; Death Registration, 1897 2<sup>nd</sup> Q., North Witchford, vol. 3B p. 329.

<sup>71</sup> London Poor Law orders of removals: 21 Jan. 1891, 5 Jan. 1895.

theft.<sup>72</sup> His 1896 prisoner mug shot reveals a bearded, rectangular headed man, with a noticeable leftward imbalance and dropped shoulder, wearing dishevelled clothing (collar-less and ripped shirt, waistcoat and jacket).<sup>73</sup> He was variously described as an ‘old offender’, being ‘very troublesome’, and shortly before his death, when the prisoner photograph would have been taken, as ‘a very deaf and eccentric man.’<sup>74</sup> These descriptions, and his behaviours, alongside the attempts to pass himself off as a sailor both in Melton workhouse and Stafford prison, could hint towards possible mental health issues. But does the fact that he was in the naval town of Gosport, in 1866, increase the possibility that he had spent time around sailors? In many of the numerous institutional records, his tattoos enable the historian to be sure that he is the same man. Some of these have a maritime theme: the skull and crossbones and an anchor, for example, adding a level of circumstantial support for his claim to have been a sailor.

Recreating these life-stories reveals the common stratagem of adopting multiple personas that were used, according to circumstances, probably in the hope of receiving a better reception. These identities are often based upon truths. And so, in Robert Fields’ case, his claim to having been a sailor was not some fantasy due to mental instability but based on actuality. Aged sixteen, in September 1861, he travelled the eleven miles from March to Wisbech, an inland port town on the River

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<sup>72</sup> Cambridge Prison, nominal prisoner register, 1271/01/3, 1271/01/4, 1271/01/6  
Cambridgeshire Records Office (with thanks to Yaye Tang).

<sup>73</sup> Cambridge Prison, photograph album, 1896, 1271/2/1, Cambridgeshire Records Office.

<sup>74</sup> Bedford Gaol Prisoners Database: 11 Feb 1874, 21 Oct 1889 url: <http://apps.bedford.gov.uk/grd/search.aspx>; Spilsby Prison nominal register, 1875; *Police Gazette*, 21 Jun. 1875; *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 9 Jul. 1875; Stafford Gaol nominal prisoners register, 1875; *Cambridge Independent Press*, 12 Apr. 1879; 26 Apr. 1884; 24 Feb. 1893, 23 Aug. 1895, 18 Oct. 1895; Register of Prisoners, Cambridge Quarter Sessions, 16 Oct. 1895; Habitual prisoners record, 1896.



Nene that used the river to export the area's grain harvest down-stream, and to import materials from the north-east and Baltic. Here he indentured himself as an apprentice merchant seaman, for a term of five years, to the master of the Robert James Haynes, a two-hundred-and-six ton sailing vessel. Over the next five-years the ship's movements, and its cargos, can be traced as it typically carried timber, coals and ballast back and forth to Wisbech from along the northern and southern English seaboard and made passages across to the Baltic and Nordic nations.<sup>75</sup> Robert's motivation for going to sea will never be known, but 1861 saw the death of both his eldest brother and his widowed mother's remarrying, and so perhaps these events convinced the teenager that he needed to make his own way in life? This hypothesis is strengthened by acknowledging that in rural eastern England, where day labour predominated as a means of agricultural labour procurement, poor households were incentivised to retain their sons for the cash wage they could bring into the household.<sup>76</sup>

But why should this labourer/sailor from Cambridgeshire be a frequenter of the casual wards? The clue lies in the 1871 census. A clue that unlocks two common features of the tramp: he suffered from a disability and he was a military veteran. The paralysis afflicted his right-side arm, hand, and fingers and was sustained during an accident whilst serving with the first battalion twenty-second foot in the summer of 1868, when based at the regimental depot in Chatham. His military record shows he signed to the colours in Gosport in 1866, and that he absconded in 1867, being caught after three days, and spent a month in Fort Clarence military prison. It is probable that his

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<sup>75</sup> e.g. *Cambridge Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1865.

<sup>76</sup> J. Day, 'Leaving home in 19<sup>th</sup> century England and Wales: a spatial analysis' *Demographic Research* 39 (2018), p. 124.

'D' tattoo, on his left breast, was to denote him as a deserter. Although reinstated, he was discharged, twelve months later, after the accident left him, in the view of the army's medical officer, unlikely to ever earn a living again.<sup>77</sup> Robert perfectly fits the fourth class of vagrant identified by the 1906 Vagrancy Report: infirm and unemployable, moving from casual ward to casual ward, probably suffering mental health issues and a frequent nuisance to police and magistrates.<sup>78</sup> But he had not fallen into this position due to fecklessness; rather an injury sustained in service of his county prevented him from working. If his injury had occurred on active service overseas he would have been awarded a pension. His story is illustrative of a wider debate about how Victorian civil society treated its former military personnel.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to Alfred Draper's experiences, Robert Fields had few qualms about resorting to the workhouse and nor did he adopt a begging strategy. The petty acts of crime that he committed (theft of hens' eggs, boots and stockings, for example) suggest a need for every-day survival. It raises questions about why his union of settlement, Doddington (North Witchford), appeared unable to meet his welfare needs. He used the workhouse as his safety net for over twenty years, which enabled him to absent himself and take to the road, safe in knowledge that when circumstances become too hard he would have somewhere to return to. The frequency of his absconding from Doddington conforms to patterns he had displayed at earlier points in his life. His experiences as a sailor and soldier may have encouraged his

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<sup>77</sup> Military Service record, W097; Court Martial record, W086/16.

<sup>78</sup> RDCV, para. 84, p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> N. Gash, 'After Waterloo: British society and the legacy of the Napoleonic wars' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (1978), pp. 147-8, 150; L. Kriegel, 'Living links to history, or, Victorian veterans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century world' *Victorian Studies* 58 (2016), pp. 289-301; E. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester, 1992) pp. 134-5, 147, 170-1.

wanderlust, and by his own admission he found it hard being constrained by the workhouse.

The challenge of tracing the vagrant is exacerbated by the frequent use of aliases. Neither Robert Fields nor Alfred Draper used aliases, but it is apparent that many others did, indeed they might use several different names. Although police and prison records are helpful in noting an individual's various name incarnations, they do not reveal why an alias had been adopted. A greater level of invisibility when encountering organs of the State would explain many variations in name. As the boards of guardians attempted to deter repeat entrants to individual casual wards from 1871 onwards, so the temptation to present at the workhouse porter's lodge under different names increased. Assuming an alias was not without risk. Holliday Crabtree (b. 1856), as Thomas Barrett, found himself under arrest for gaming (an offence under the vagrancy act) only to be recognised by another police officer as the individual who had absconded without paying a fine for a similar offence two years earlier.<sup>80</sup> In Holliday's case, the distinctiveness of both first and surname explain the adoption of a neutral-sounding alias. Likewise, Spanish born José Jimenez (b. 1887) adopted a series of anglicised aliases, as he sought, unsuccessfully, to avoid the Home Office's repeated deportation orders.<sup>81</sup> Others utilised aliases in order to enhance their visibility. Vagrant actor, comic street vocalist, and self-styled 'antiquarian and lecturer', William Beckett (b. ?1846) moved around the country adopting a series of

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<sup>80</sup> *Grantham Journal*, 1 Dec. 1906.

<sup>81</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 14, 21, 28 Jan. 1911; *Police Gazette*, 30 Oct. 1917; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 15 May 1924; *Lincolnshire Standard and Boston Guardian*, 11 Jul. 1931.

‘identities’ for his alternating personas. An actor required a stage name: Percy De Rivers matched that necessary flamboyancy.<sup>82</sup>

Adopting a new persona may have been one thing, but remembering to maintain the pretence must have been challenging. To help, it would appear that some individuals decided to tell a partial truth or appropriated a name that had close associations for them and here the genealogy helps. This can be seen in the case of John Trowbridge (1858–1921), of Bristolian associations, who on occasion referred to himself as John Summers. It transpires that John Summers was a childhood friend, of similar age, who served a youth sentence alongside him in the Clifton Wood Industrial School.<sup>83</sup> When Charles Seaby refused wood-chopping at the Great Bowden casual ward in July 1901, he had done so under an alias. His birth name was Horace Ford (1866-1923). The alias was that of a similarly aged step-brother, adopted in all likelihood by malice. Horace’s widowed father had married Charles’ mother in late 1873. The relationship was abusive, and the father served a lengthy jail term for a vicious beating meted upon his new wife.<sup>84</sup> Given the probability that each son took the side of their bloodline, as the domestic abuse continued, then an antipathy between the step-siblings might be assumed.<sup>85</sup> The two could not appear to have had more different personalities. Charles, the step-brother, after a short period working for the Northampton Tramways Company, moved to join his elder brother in Surrey as a

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<sup>82</sup> e.g. Wakefield Prison records, 7 Nov. 1889, 10 Apr. 1890, 17 Feb. 1890, 13 Aug. 1895; *Cheshire Observer*, 22 Mar. 1890; London Poor Law workhouse registers: Edmonton 2-4 Dec. 1885, Fulham, 19 Sept. 1890; *Islington Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1890.

<sup>83</sup> Census: 1871, Bristol, RG10/2539; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 14 Feb. 1903.

<sup>84</sup> PSCC , 29 July 1901, QS 85/1/356, LRO; Marriage Registration, James F. to Saran Ann S. 4thQ. 1873, Northampton; *Northampton Mercury*, 6 Jun.1874; Census: 1871, Hardingstone, RG10/1478 and Northampton, RG10/1482; 1881, Northampton, RG11/1544; Calendar of Prisoners, Northampton, 18 Apr. 1915.

<sup>85</sup> C. Steadman, *Past Tenses: Essays on writing, history and autobiography* (London, 1992), pp. 21-40, tracing her own relationship with her father may be instructive here.

groom, domestic servant and army reservist before marrying, raising a family, and gaining work as a brewery drayman in Twickenham.<sup>86</sup> In contrast, Horace was frequently in trouble with the law from his mid-teens onwards for petty crimes, particularly relating to his employment in the shoe-trade, and from the mid-1880s began moving around Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Nottinghamshire, and Leicestershire.<sup>87</sup>

These examples not only point to the rich tapestry of details that can re-threaded together, but also suggest the complexity of reasons for being on the road. It confirms that ‘homelessness’ in the Victorian age was also a spectrum of need ranging from insecure nightly temporary accommodation to absolute rooflessness. The findings challenge the assumption that this was a decision of choice adopted owing to personal inadequacy. Those of no fixed abode evidently suffered from health issues (physical and mental), and family and relationship breakups that all contributed to their abandonment of conventional homed society. These stories are recognisable to anyone working with the twenty-first century homeless, and add credence to modern day concerns about the importance of social interventions to assist in the rehabilitation of the homeless. Before moving on to consider these possible triggers for homelessness further, it is necessary to dwell on the issue of tramp routes and mobility.

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<sup>86</sup> Census: 1891, Chertsey, RG12/550; 1911, Twickenham, RG14/128; *Northampton Mercury*, 7 Jan. 1882.

<sup>87</sup> Calendar of Prisoners, Northampton Quarter Sessions: 1885, 19 Oct. 1893, 29 Jun. 1899, 1906, 18 Apr. 1915; Census: 1911, Northampton, RG14/163; *Banbury Beacon*, 22 Apr. 1889; *Buckingham Advertiser*, 20 Sept 1893, 30 Oct. 1909; *Stamford Mercury*, 13 Apr. 1906; *Northampton Mercury*, 21 Feb. 1896, 14 Apr. 1899, 19 Apr. 1907, 29 Oct. 1909.

The tramps' mobility presented challenges for the authorities just as it does for historians. Historical geographers, with an interest in migration, have used individual movements over specific periods and shown the diversity of migration and mobility, whilst longitudinal evaluations have brought to the fore matters of family migration and circulatory moves, as well as the significance of work and familial ties in promoting movement.<sup>88</sup> Those who have studied criminal mobility have concluded that their movements were not much dissimilar to the law-abiding population, although those of no fixed abode did display a marginally greater level of mobility.<sup>89</sup> The funding model of the Poor Law system placed the burden of cost for those entering the workhouse upon the relevant parishes that were federated to that union.<sup>90</sup> This meant that the vagrant passing through and availing themselves of the casual ward was doing so at the cost of the locality — hence the desire to pass the beggar and tramp onwards as quickly as possible, and ideally have them return to their parish of settlement. This was a sentiment that some tramps', when before the courts, were not afraid to exploit: offering to leave town immediately should they be acquitted. The authorities assumed deterrence was the solution and tried tightening the rules regarding casual ward usage, introducing work duties in lieu of board and bed.<sup>91</sup> The

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<sup>88</sup> See for example C.T. Smith, 'The movement of population in England and Wales in 1851 and 1861' *Geographical Journal* 117 (1951), pp. 200-10; D. Mills and C. Pearce, *People and Places in the Victorian Census* 23 (HGRG Research Series, 1989); A.G. Darroch, 'Migrants in the nineteenth century: fugitives or families in motion?' *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981), pp. 257-77; R.M. Jones, 'Welsh immigrants to the cities of north west England 1890-1930: some oral testimony' *Oral History* 9 (1981), pp. 33-41; H.R. Southall, 'The tramping artisan revisited: labour, mobility and economic distress in early Victorian England.' *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), pp. 271-96.

<sup>89</sup> C.G. Pooley, 'The mobility of criminals in North-West England c.1880-1910' *Local Population Studies* 53 (1994), pp. 14-28.

<sup>90</sup> M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929* (London, 1981); F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993); S. Fowler, *Workhouse: The People, the Places: The Life Behind Closed Doors* (London, 2007); see Rose, *Abode*, pp. 81-2 for way ticket system.

<sup>91</sup> 1871 Pauper Inmates Discharge Act: for any returning tramp two nights detentions in the casual ward plus a work duty before release; 1882 Casual Poor Act: two nights detention plus work duty applicable to all arrivals in the casual ward.

problem was that the application of the rules was inconsistent from union to union: and Leicestershire as a county was, in this respect, no different. Also, it was widely suspected that vagrants were aware which workhouses were more lenient.<sup>92</sup>

Deterrence evidently had little effect, given the frequency with which many tramps repeatedly returned to Leicestershire, but also to other areas of familiarity within their life-stories. Illustrative of this was Albert Edward Gilbert (1887–1963). He was prosecuted for rough sleeping in a henhouse at Great Bowden in August 1911. Deemed ‘an old offender’, at a mere twenty-three years of age, he was sentenced to a month’s hard labour.<sup>93</sup> Born less than five miles away in Foxton he spent the years from his late-teens through into the inter-war years tramping around the east Midlands and Yorkshire. Although the court reportage rarely explained Albert’s reasoning, an interpretation for his taking to the road might be offered. Twice his mother testified to the courts that, to her frustration, Albert would not work and that she could no longer have him live at home. Given the monetary value teenager or adult children could bring to household economies, especially with aging parents, this conflict is perhaps not surprising.<sup>94</sup> The genealogical record then offers additional clues. His father had died in June 1892 and his mother remarried in 1896 with two step-siblings being subsequently born. Albert’s offending began as he approached his eighteenth birthday, prior to which he appears to have worked in a glue factory, a by-product of the town’s tannery trade. His three elder blood-siblings had very recently married and left home. Whether feeling isolated he clashed with his step-father or his own

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<sup>92</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 8 Jan. 1881, 9 Oct. 1886, 13 Jun. 1896, 11 Jul. 1896, 21 Jul. 1900, 18 Nov. 1911.

<sup>93</sup> PSCC, 6 May 1906, QS85/1/376, LRO.

<sup>94</sup> S. Pooley, ‘Parenthood, child-rearing and fertility in England 1850-1914’ *The History of the Family* 18 (2013), pp. 83-106.

inability to hold down regular work contributed to the family tensions, he evidently left home, quickly adopting vagrant habits, locally, before circulating further afield. Magistrates labelled him ‘absolutely incorrigible’ and thought he was ‘determined not to earn an honest living’. Matters deteriorate from there. In Cambridge, in 1908, he was labelled a ‘begging nuisance’ with magistrates frustrated that he was fit to work ‘but will not’. He committed similar offences in Bedford and Derby. In all likelihood, he combined casual labouring with begging in the winter months, and so fits with the second class of vagrant identified by the 1906 Report. The 1911 census found him lodging with a non-related family in Market Harborough, but he returned to his tramp ways once the weather improved. In so doing, he conformed to the assumption made that vagrants alternated between cheap lodgings, when money permitted, and sleeping out, in the warmer months, and only as a last resort using the casual ward.<sup>95</sup> These trends are borne out in the sample of Leicestershire conviction certificates: rough-sleeping prosecutions dominated the spring and summer months whereas workhouse misbehaviour (usually destroying clothes or refusing a work duty) occurred in significantly greater proportions during the autumn and winter months.

Just what routes the vagrant took, around the country, is a matter of conjecture.

London-based tramps, after wintering in the capital, it has been suggested, would migrate to the fashionable southern coastal resorts before autumning in Sussex or

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<sup>95</sup> *Melton Mowbray Mercury*, 27 Sept. 1906, 17 Jan. 1907 (quote); *Cambridge Independent Press*, 7 Feb., 14 Feb. 1908; *Northampton Mercury*, 25 Nov. 1904 (quote), 11 May 1906, 18 Aug. 1911, 29 Mar. 1912; *Leicester Chronicle*, 19 Aug. 1911; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 31 Oct. 1912; *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 27 Dec. 1912; *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 19 Dec. 1914; Wakefield Prison nominal prisoner register, 21 May 1913; PSCC, 2 Jan. 1906, 8 May 1906, 25 Sept. 1906 QS85/1/376, LRO; 15 Aug. 1911 QS85/1/316, LRO; Census: 1891 Foxton, RG12/2491; 1901, RG13/2952 Foxton (listed under step father’s surname); 1911, Market Harborough, RG14/399; Leicestershire Parish Baptisms, Foxton, 18 Feb. 1891; 1939 Register, Market Harborough; Market Harborough (Great Bowden) workhouse admissions and discharge records, 1-11 Aug. 1905, 28 Aug. 1905, 20 Aug. 1907-22 Oct. 1907, LRO..



Kent for the hop-picking season.<sup>96</sup> Stories persist of tramps returning yearly to particular west Wales farms to labour.<sup>97</sup> This seasonality of movement, and especially towards London, is less evident amongst the Leicestershire cohort. Those who went the capital did so with no evident pattern. What is more, visiting London carried risk. Magistrates interpreted the punishment terms of the vagrancy act considerably more harshly than their counterparts in the shires.<sup>98</sup> Whilst London Poor Law guardians actively pursued ‘removals’ to return vagrants to their parish of settlement as Robert Fields and William Beckett discovered.<sup>99</sup> Reconstructing the movements of the Leicestershire cohort suggest that many, although not all, were restricting their routes to a north-south axis between the Home Counties and the north-east. Holliday Crabtree works well as an example of this pattern of movement. He was an itinerant stonemason born in 1856, with a long history of court appearances around the east Midlands and Home Counties accrued over twenty years, after he decided to move away from his childhood home of Manningham, Bradford. He was, in all likelihood, using the railway network to aid his movement (he was prosecuted for travelling without a ticket on several occasions).<sup>100</sup> Others adopted more restrictive routes, remaining within the Midlands/east Midlands as both Alfred Draper and Robert Fields did. So, with these selective individual cases, it would appear, that as a criminal class, the vagrant’s circulatory movements were limited. However, as analysis of the Leicestershire cohort has developed, it has become apparent that others ranged more

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<sup>96</sup> Jones, *Outcast*, p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Ceredigion Tramps’ <https://www.ceredigion.gov.uk/oldicm/index.cfm?articleid=12258> [accessed 9 Jan. 2018].

<sup>98</sup> As John T., John D., and William B., amongst others, within the Leicestershire, case-studies discovered.

<sup>99</sup> London Poor Law: settlement and orders of removal: 21 Jan. 1891, 20 Feb. 1892, 5 Jan. 1895.

<sup>100</sup> Census: 1861, RG9/3335; 1871, RG10/4487 both Manningham; PSCC, 28 Nov. 1906, QS85/1/283 LRO; *Grantham Journal*, 1 Dec. 1906; *Northampton Mercury*, 20 Apr. 1906; *Luton Times and Advertiser*, 12 Apr. 1907.

widely, yet with an apparent randomness, around the country, but again, once their life-stories are understood these enable the historian to identify distinctive patterns within their movements.

Considering once more John Trowbridge, who hailed from Bristol, is illustrative. From 1896 onwards, he ventured as far north as Yorkshire, and moved through Lincolnshire and the east Midlands in between periods in London (1897–9, 1907, 1909, 1910 — largely spending these either in a workhouse or jailed).<sup>101</sup> But he predominantly spent time moving, back and forth, between Devon and Worcestershire, with an occasional foray into South Wales.<sup>102</sup> The distinctiveness of this final clustering only becomes apparent when it emerges that he had been employed by the Great Western Railway (GWR) from 1875, working through the ranks from cleaner to fireman to engine-driver. He was based at various stations around the GWR network including Newton Abbott, Plymouth, Wells, New Milford, Evesham, Worcester, and Landore, Swansea.<sup>103</sup> These were all locations to which he returned, committing acts of vagrancy or petty crime. For John had a drink problem, and it caused his dismissal from the GWR in 1894, after a series of related cautions, for being on duty under the influence of drink. He, no doubt, was using his intimate knowledge of the railways to aid his mobility as he, like both Holliday Crabtree and

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<sup>101</sup> E.g. PSCC, 26 Jul. 1901, QS85/1/356, LRO; *Western Chronicle*, 17 Jan. 1896; *Nottingham Journal* 27 Jul. 1901; Cambridge Independent Press, 14 Sept. 1906; *Lincolnshire Advertiser*, 9 Aug. 1907, 20 Sept. 1907; *Northampton Mercury*, 25 Sept. 1908; *Grantham Journal*, 14 Aug. 1909; *Lincolnshire Echo*, 27 Aug. 1912; Wakefield Prison nominal register, 21 Oct 1902; London Poor Law workhouse registers: Fulham, 26 Dec. 1896, 28 Mar. 1897, 24 Jun. 1907; Islington, 14 Feb. 1899; Prison terms in London included Pentonville 26 Dec. 1905-25 May 1906, 6-17 Nov. 1907; Wormwood Scrubs 19 Nov. 1907-19 Jun. 1908, 20 Dec. 1910-20 Sept. 1910).

<sup>102</sup> Swansea Prison nominal register, 7 Oct. 1904; *Evening Express*, 8 Oct. 1904; *Western Chronicle*, 10 Nov. 1905; Gloucester Prison, record of previous convictions 1901 onwards; *Western Times*, 6 May 1910, 10 Nov. 1914.

<sup>103</sup> UK railway employment records, John T..

Robert Fields above, was caught travelling without a ticket.<sup>104</sup> The majority of his court appearances were drink related or for begging. It was a tough existence. When before Loughborough petty sessions for destroying his clothes in the workhouse, he pleaded that they were ‘rotten’, and he would have been done for ‘indecently’ otherwise. His strategy was to demonstrate his desire to work. He argued his appearance prevented him from gaining work, having only found three days as a pea picker in the past month.<sup>105</sup> He had good reason to believe this – on the occasion that he appeared before magistrates well-dressed, with a story of his next engagement in place, he could find himself discharged and recognised as an ‘respectable and intelligent type’.<sup>106</sup> But more often than not his state of being, and his behaviours, meant he was greeted with contempt and disdain. The decline from a position of responsibility to that of vagrant drunkard carried little dispensation, and his self-esteem would hardly have been boosted by the frequent dismissals as a man ‘who had seen better days.’ He died of pulmonary tuberculosis in Christmas eve 1921 at Eastville workhouse, Bristol.<sup>107</sup>

Another on the road was Mary Ellen Norton (alias Mary Jones). She appeared before Leicestershire magistrates for refusing to observe regulations in the Melton Mowbray casual ward in 1896.<sup>108</sup> She claims to have been born in 1871 to an Irish mother Ann (who hailed from Galway). The pair accompanied one another, sometimes in the company of sisters Agnes and Catherine, as they sought a living hawking or as garden or field hands. Before considering her mobility, it is instructive to observe that this

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<sup>104</sup> *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 2 Dec. 1904.

<sup>105</sup> *Nottingham Journal*, 27 Jul. 1901.

<sup>106</sup> *Driffield Times*, 7 Sept. 1907.

<sup>107</sup> *Gloucester Citizen*, 16 Oct. 1912; Death certificate Bristol vol. 6A p. 201.

<sup>108</sup> PSCC, 3 Feb. 1896, QS85/1/239, LRO.

case-study highlights one of the common methodological challenges – namely the reliability of years of birth. 1871 is commonly recorded against Mary's name in institutional records. Yet she was older than this. It has been argued that it would have been difficult to stretch the plausibility of an age beyond a substantial number of years.<sup>109</sup> To have a discrepancy in the someone's age, ranging between five and ten years, and sometimes more, is not unusual amongst the Leicestershire cohort. The 1881 census puts Mary at being five years older than her claim of 1871, and even then, there must be a suspicion that she was older still. This is because her first newspaper reported offence occurred in Droitwich, Worcestershire in 1876 when she, her mother and sister Agnes, 'a trio of the gypsy fraternity', were charged with being intoxicated and using profane language. It maybe that the court reportage exaggerates her levels of intoxication, but given the prejudicial gypsy descriptor, if she stood before the bench as a ten-year-old child on a drunkenness charge, surely this would have provoked condemnatory moral comment?<sup>110</sup>

Mary Ellen and her mother had a volatile relationship that frequently turned violent after alcohol. They moved between cheap lodgings, the casual ward and prison: serving repeated terms for begging, drunkenness and occasionally theft. The press observed their Irish ancestry, and they were not beyond accusing their prosecutors of racial prejudice.<sup>111</sup> On one occasion, Mary Ellen sought to ameliorate the threat of another jail term, having stolen a waistcoat, by claiming she had offended to escape her alcoholic, and aging, mother. The magistrate ordered her discharge and instructed

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<sup>109</sup> Shoemaker, 'Understanding', p. 1448.

<sup>110</sup> *Worcester Chronicle*, 2 Oct. 1867.

<sup>111</sup> *Nuneaton Advertiser*, 24 July 1886; *Gloucester Citizen*, 5 Oct. 1892; *Northampton Mercury*, 9 Dec. 1892; *Banbury Advertiser*, 29 Jun. 1893; *Leicester Chronicle*, 28 Dec. 1895.

the police missionary to secure the young woman a place in service.<sup>112</sup> That Mary was then before a different magistrate alongside her mother suggests the ruse worked and that the intervention failed.<sup>113</sup> The tramping lifestyle and alcoholic abuse clearly took its toll. Reports noted, from 1895 onwards, with increasing alarm, her physical decline, observing that she ‘looked a dreadful state’ and appeared ‘emaciated and vacant looking’.<sup>114</sup>

As a pair, they covered a considerable distance moving back and forth between Lincolnshire and Gloucestershire on a diagonal axis from the Wash to the Severn, broadly shadowing the Fosse Way, and then using the intersection with the Great North road to transverse down into Northamptonshire.<sup>115</sup> Tramping is by nature undertaken on foot, and so it appears the ancient roads networks provided the broad outlines of routes to follow. Some of the movement would have been dictated by the seasonality of casual agricultural work (apple and hop picking in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire in autumn; vegetable planting in the Lincolnshire fens in spring) or due to public or engineering works that were labour intensive and hired workers on a daily basis. Yet even within this frequent movement the women appear to have settled in several different areas (Bath, Somerset; Beverley, Yorkshire; Bingham, Leicestershire) short term but long enough for them to claim settlement associations.

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<sup>112</sup> *Grantham Journal*, 19 Apr. 1884.

<sup>113</sup> *Nuneaton Advertiser*, 24 Jul. 1886; *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 26 Nov. 1886.

<sup>114</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 12 Oct. 1895; *Gloucestershire Echo*, 1 Sept. 1897; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 18 Jun. 1898.

<sup>115</sup> Census: 1881, Horncastle, RG11/3248; 1891, Market Harborough, RG12/2491; Gloucester Gaol nominal prison record, 3 Sept. 1894, 18 Jul. 1896, 27 Sept. 1897; *Gloucester Citizen*, 5 Oct. 1892, 1 Sept. 1897; *Northampton Mercury*, 9 Dec. 1892, 18 May 1894, 29 Jan. 1897, 5 Feb. 1897; *Banbury Advertiser*, 9 Mar. 1893; *Cheltenham Advertiser*, 8 Jun. 1895; *Grantham Journal*, 12 Nov. 1892; *Leicester Chronicle*, 21 May 1898; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 8 Jun. 1895; *Cambridge Journal*, 24 Aug. 1894; *Boston Guardian*, 13 Feb. 1886; *Derbyshire Advertiser*, 2 Apr. 1886; *Worcester Chronicle*, 26 Feb. 1876.

It has been shown that the railway network was assisting with the tramp's mobility. And likewise, the prison system played its part moving the tramp onwards with their journeys, as they would be taken to a county jail to serve their sentence, or even further afield, if given a penal term. Then, on release, they may have been bought a train ticket by a prisoner aid society keen to return them to their parish of settlement. Itinerant actor and comic singer, William Beckett, who claimed to be a foundling and who grew up in at workhouse at Erdington, Warwickshire, had his movements aided by the police.<sup>116</sup> His exceptionally prolific brushes with the judiciary, as he moved around the southern counties, London, eastern England, the Midlands, Yorkshire, and the north-west, saw him eking a living performing in public houses, which left him facing 'a good deal of [alcoholic] temptation'.<sup>117</sup> It suggests that the 'vagrant' was not a passive element in the judicial process, but actively and instrumentally used the system. His habit was to provoke the police who found him in the street and refuse to move, which obligated them to find a means of transporting him to, first, the police station and then onto court. Once before the bench, he would either successfully convince the judge of his 'acting' qualities (by reciting Shakespeare or Burns) and pledge to abstain or, if sentenced, then benefit from being transported to jail. When this occurred at Bury St. Edmunds, his 'strange and ludicrous attire', dressed in academic cap and gown, 'was the subject of considerable merriment to a large number of persons who witnessed his removal by train' to Ipswich Gaol.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> He largely uses 1857 as his year of birth, but towards the end of his life sometimes claims 1835, but the 1851 census H0107/2062 locates him in the workhouse aged 4 years, as does the 1861 census aged 13, place born 'not known' RG9/2185; see also London Poor Law settlement and removal: Poplar workhouse examination, 1892, 1895.

<sup>117</sup> *Cheshire Observer*, 22 Mar. 1890..

<sup>118</sup> *Bury and Norwich Post*, 27 May 1884; *Norwich Mercury*, 31 May 1884.

In isolation, each separate incident these vagrants became embroiled in would appear of little consequence. Yet, as the opening part of this article has shown, when the range of disparate incidents associated with each individual are tallied together, the possibilities for understanding more about a group in society who supposedly have left no trace becomes apparent. The remainder of this article intends, therefore, to explore how these life-stories offer explanations for the tramping life.

## VI

It is widely debated, without a settled consensus, as to whether structural factors or personal inadequacies best explain why individuals became tramps. Using these selected vagrant life-stories enables the historian to show how these lives open up insights into a whole range of issues that impact upon an individual but which occur with sufficient frequency amongst the entire set of reconstructed life-stories as to suggest a common experience. The individuals, within this article, could just as easily be substituted by others. This is no more apparent than with the theme of the experience of military service.

The case of Robert Fields, being a former serviceman who adopted a tramp's lifestyle, has already been addressed. But there is a postscript to his military story. He did not accept the army's refusal to offer him a disability pension and declined to sign the discharge paperwork. What is more, he enlisted the help of his local parish vicar, to try and contest the War Office's decision. Though the surviving sources do not tell us the outcome, it is apparent from subsequent events that the intercession failed.<sup>119</sup> Many contemporaries suspected that the army's treatment of its former veterans was the root cause for the numbers on the road. Further blame lay, they argued, with the

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<sup>119</sup> Military Service Attestation Records, WO97.

army's six-year short service system which deducted money from a soldier's pay to provide a lump sum on discharge — a lump sum which was then wasted as it discouraged them from seeking new employment and instead encouraged movement from casual ward to casual ward.<sup>120</sup> A military 'experience', whether in the regulars or militia, was a common feature of the males convicted of vagrancy in Leicestershire. George Loddington (1854–1913) exemplifies this.<sup>121</sup>

His military career spanned over twenty years, variously in the regulars, reserves and militia.<sup>122</sup> He saw service overseas and would later claim, when before a magistrate on a charge of drunkenness, that his intolerance of alcohol was due to sunstroke sustained on duty in India.<sup>123</sup> An initial 'very good' character reference was tarnished with a fraudulent re-enlistment and desertion in 1887 that earned a four-month jail term. Like many ex-servicemen, and despite overseas service, he appeared to have had no military pension, and, without a secure income and no trade, he moved frequently between casual work (he is variously described as labourer, collier, furnace-man, and ex-soldier). His willingness to sign up to the militia and reserves suggests that he missed the regimented nature of military life, and crucially desired an occasional income. Orphaned in his early teens, from this point, he had regular brushes with the law for petty crime and drunkenness. He never married. It is likely that the trauma of pulling the bodies of two young brothers from a village pond in 1894 deeply affected him.<sup>124</sup> After his final discharge from the Royal Northern Regiment Reserves in March 1901, a short-term recruitment crisis measure due to the

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<sup>120</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 8 Jan. 1881; *RDCV*.

<sup>121</sup> PSCC, 21 Aug. 1911, QS85/1/316, LRO.

<sup>122</sup> Military Service Attestation Records: 31 May 1879 W097, 11 June 1895 W096, 16 Mar. 1900 W097.

<sup>123</sup> *Hull Daily Mail*, 18 Sept. 1906.

<sup>124</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 17 Mar. 1894.



South African war which would have earned him a substantial bounty of twenty-two pounds, he spent some time with his brother, a shoemaker, in Middle Rasen, Lincolnshire. From there he moved between Yorkshire, London and the east Midlands seemingly alternating between casual ward and prison. Frequent court appearances witnessed him railing against the injustices of the casual ward system. At Daventry, it was the volume of oakum picking. At Grantham, it was the expectation that stone should be broken on a bank holiday. And, at Bedford, it was the unacceptable delays in discharge.<sup>125</sup> He paid a series of repeat visits to Melton Mowbray casual ward, and true to form, repeatedly refused his oakum picking duties showing his disdain, on one occasion, by setting fire to his pile of old rope, and ultimately died in its workhouse infirmary on 10 May 1913, aged 60 from stomach cancer.<sup>126</sup>

George's life-story shows that being a veteran carried little dispensation. The expectation was that, if able bodied, these men should re-join the labour force and contribute to society through production. The problem was that the army left them without a trade, and often too old to acquire new skills. The ex-serviceman invalidated from the army, possibly carrying a disability that hindered the options for securing work, were viewed slightly more favourably, though, as Robert Fields' case illustrates, there was minimal assistance available. This was apparent with John Driver (1858–1907) who hailed from Morley, Yorkshire. His service with the Yorkshire Regiment in the early 1880s was brought to a premature end by a 'dementia' diagnosis whilst serving in Malta. His medical discharge assessment, at

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<sup>125</sup> *Northampton Mercury*, 18 Apr. 1902; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 20 May 1902; *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 23 May 1902; *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 21 Oct. 1904; *Northampton Mercury*, 21 Oct. 1904; Wakefield Prison nominal register: 5 Feb. 1903, 28 Jun. 1906.

<sup>126</sup> Census: 1911, Melton Mowbray, RG14/408; PSCC, 29 Aug. 1911 QS85/1/316, LRO; Death Certificate, 1913 2ndQ., vol. 7A p. 350, Melton Mowbray.

Hampshire's Netley military hospital, judged him 'deficient in intellect' and his condition 'Probably due to external causes as want of moral education.' Though accepting his disability was 'probably' permanent, the assessment predicted he would still earn a livelihood.<sup>127</sup> That latter judgement was overly optimistic, shows the limitations of psychiatric diagnosis at this point, and warns the reader not to assume that medical classifications mean the same over time.<sup>128</sup> He admitted he was 'nearly always in trouble' whilst in the army. Although frequently described as a shoe finisher, boot riveter or laster, his trade before joining the army, he spent prolonged periods in asylums and prisons as he moved back and forth 'as a rolling stone' between his native Yorkshire and London leading a 'very rough life' and accruing repeated jail terms for drunkenness, assaults, criminal damage, and various vagrancy offences.<sup>129</sup> All during which his mental well-being declined aggravated by alcoholic intake. In Loughborough in 1899, he was found raving and claiming to come from the Klondike.<sup>130</sup> Ultimately, he spent his last few years, until his death from pulmonary tuberculosis in May 1907, confined in West Yorkshire Asylum's Stanley Royd acute ward, considered to be 'mad', and being 'very noisy, argumentative and quite irrational'. Whether the heavy head injury he sustained as a child contributed, leaving

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<sup>127</sup> Military Service attestation records WO97.

<sup>128</sup> E.S. Andrews, 'Institutionalizing senile dementia in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain' *Sociology of Health and Illness* 39 (2017), pp. 244-57; L. Caixeta, *et al.*, 'The development of the dementia concept in the 19<sup>th</sup> century' *Arq Neuropsiquiatr* 72 (2014), pp. 564-67; G.E. Berrios, *The History of Mental Symptoms* (Cambridge, 1996); R. Porter, 'Two cheers for psychiatry! The social history of mental disorder in twentieth century Britain' in H. Freeman and G. Berrios, eds., *150 years of British Psychiatry vol 2 The Aftermath* (London, 1998), pp. 383-406.

<sup>129</sup> E.g. Wakefield Prison nominal prisoner register, 31 Mar. 1888, 27 Apr. 1891, 19 Apr. 1897, 16 Jun. 1897, 21 Jul. 1897, 16 Jul. 1898, 23 Nov. 1899, 18 Apr. 1902, 20 May 1902, 5 Sept. 1902, 8 Oct. 1902, 27 Mar. 1903, 25 May 1903, 9 Jun. 1903, 29 Jan. 1904; *Reading Mercury*, 31 May 1890; *Derbyshire Daily Telegraph*, 8 Jul. 1893; *South Wales Daily News*, 4 Jul. 1896; *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Jan. 1896, 5 May 1899; *Nottingham Journal*, 17 Apr. 1899; *Northants Daily Telegraph*, 22 Sept. 1900; PSCC, 20 March 1901, QS85/1/356, LRO.

<sup>130</sup> *Nottingham Journal*, 17 Apr. 1899.

him with an undiagnosed brain injury, which might explain why he was so quarrelsome, had a 'hasty temper', and the 'dementia', can only be speculation.<sup>131</sup>

Judging from the numerous, and often lengthy, reports of John's court cases, he made no reference to his military past. This might have been because he could no longer demonstrate his credentials and was wary that he could make matters worse for himself if he was judged as being untruthful. The 1906 Vagrancy Report noted that very few vagrants, and claiming to be veterans, were able to produce their parchment certificate of discharge.<sup>132</sup> And amongst magistrates and Poor Law guardians, there lurked a lingering concern about the 'bogus' ex-military man, seeking to exploit the patriotic card and gain a slightly easier passage.<sup>133</sup>

There might be some justification for the concern about the fraudulent ex-serviceman. Illustrative was William Splutts found guilty, in June 1901, of seeking alms under the false pretence of being a wounded South African war veteran. But even here, the situation was not straightforward. William had attempted to join the army but it was an extremely short-lived career, and he was discharged in July 1900 'being deemed not ready to become an efficient soldier'. This may have been an issue of maturity. He was passing himself off as nineteen but had not yet reached his sixteenth birthday. He had signed on under an alias revealed because the next of kin detailed on his military record correctly list the first names of his family, and their actual address, which

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<sup>131</sup> Lunacy Patients records, West Yorks. Asylum, 23 Mar. 1904-15 Mar. 1907, C85/622, C85/397, C85/3/6/174, C85/3/6/175, C85/719, West Yorkshire Archives Service, Wakefield.

<sup>132</sup> *RDCV*, para. 393, p. 107.

<sup>133</sup> M. Roberts, 'Reshaping the gift relationship: The London mendacity society and the suppression of begging in England 1818-1869' *International Review of Social History* 36 (1991), pp. 201-31; Humphreys, *Abode*, pp. 96-9. For earlier attitudes to the vagrant soldier see L. Woodbridge, 'The neglected soldier as vagrant, revenger, tyrant slater in early modern England' in Ocobock, *Cast Out*, pp. 64-87.

when cross-referenced with the census reveals the subterfuge. And, what is more, the whole incident might also be a clue to his mental capabilities. Within a matter of months of serving his sentence, he was admitted to Nottingham's Lunatic Asylum, labelled an 'imbecile', and would remain institutionalised until his death in 1933.<sup>134</sup> This length of incarceration is troubling, because historians acknowledge that the majority of imbeciles were kept out of the asylums. What this suggests is that something must have occurred that made his behaviour unmanageable in the home or institutional environment.<sup>135</sup>

Ultimately, then, a vagrant's unwillingness to contribute to the means of production may not have been down to fecklessness. Structural issues, in part, explained the numbers of vagrant tramps but were far from being an adequate reason.<sup>136</sup> Alfred Draper's earlier case showed trade depression may have caused economic hardship for his kin, yet none appeared to take to the road, instead they opted to fall upon the workhouse system. So why did some individuals adopt a vagrant lifestyle when other family members did not? What has become evident reconstructing these life-stories, and as the above William Splutts case illustrates, is that many suffered from a range of personal health issues that were clearly affecting their abilities to work and lead ordinary homed lives: addiction, disability, and/or mental health issues. It would appear that an individual's fragilities were more realistic explanations than structural issues for why they were on the road.

## VII

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<sup>134</sup> PSCC, 10 Jun. 1901, QS85/1/356, LRO; Military Attestation Service Record, Sherwood Forrester (Derbyshire Regt), 22 Jun. 1900; Census: 1901, Nottingham, RG13/3191; 1911, Nottingham, RG14/430; Lunacy Admissions, Mapperley, Nottingham, 24 Oct. 1901.

<sup>135</sup> D. Wright, 'Learning disability and the New Poor Law in England' *Disability and Society* 15 (2000), pp. 731-45.

<sup>136</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 22 Oct. 1881.

Although it was recognised that many (though not all) of those who were crammed into the overcrowded asylums were of the pauper and vagrant class, it does not appear that society was always willing to acknowledge the warning signs of the disease.<sup>137</sup>

Take the case of Horace Bonsor (1859–1922), a blacksmith, born Clipston, near Market Harborough, who took to the road in 1884, using an alias of John Smith, after twice failing to enlist into the army for being ‘inefficient’.<sup>138</sup> He had grown up in the Great Bowden workhouse, near Market Harborough, after the death of his parents in 1865. From there, Horace was apprenticed to a shoeing-smith master in Leicester, a role he tried absconding from. It was shortly after this event that he served the first of several sentences for petty offences in Leicester (involving drink and an assault – towards his shoeing master). For much of the 1900s, he returned to Market Harborough’s casual ward every second or third week.<sup>139</sup> Prior to, and in between these years, he spent significant periods in penal servitude. The last two convictions were for rick-burning at Boston, Lincolnshire and Great Bowden, Leicestershire.<sup>140</sup>

At his 1906 rick-burning trial, the judge intervened, concerned at the defendant’s apparent misunderstanding of how to plead, instructing Horace to change his plea to not guilty. Under examination it was revealed that he had been in the ‘asylum’ and that his ‘head was bad’. When pressed on how the fire may have started, his responses

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<sup>137</sup> P. Bartlett, ‘Structures of confinement in 19th c asylums’ *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 23 (2000), pp. 1-13; G.A. Doody, *et al.*, ‘Poor and mad: a study of patients admitted to the Fife and Kinross District Asylum between 1874 and 1899’ *Psychological Medicine* 26 (1996), pp. 887-97.

<sup>138</sup> Census: 1861, Clipston, RG09/2252; 1881, Northampton, RG11/1546; Leicester Gaol Index of Prisoners, 19 Jan. 1877, LRO; *Northampton Mercury*, 2 Apr. 1881; Military Attestation Records, Leicestershire Regiment 17<sup>th</sup> Foot, 29 Nov. 1884, discharge 2 Dec. 1884; North Staffordshire Regiment (Prince of Wales’s) 64<sup>th</sup> and 98<sup>th</sup> Foot, 10 Dec. 1884, discharged 12 Dec. 1884; Death Registration, 1922 4<sup>th</sup> Q., vol. 7A p. 19, Market Harborough.

<sup>139</sup> *Leighton Buzzard Observer*, 19 Sept. 1865; Census: 1901, RG13/2952 and 1911, RG14/399 both Market Harborough; Market Harborough workhouse admission/discharge registers, LRO.

<sup>140</sup> Convicts List, 1896 MEP06; Habitual Criminal Register, 1910, MEP06; *Boston Guardian*, 16 Sept. 1905; *Northampton Mercury*, 11 May 1906.

can only be described as confused. This ambiguity in his answers was in all likelihood interpreted as an attempt to conceal his guilt, and he was handed a five-year penal sentence. The subsequent habitual prisoner record was then updated to record that he was ‘feeble minded’ and suffered from a speech impediment.<sup>141</sup>

The label ‘feeble minded’ was reserved for the highest grade of mental defective. For contemporaries, particularly eugenicists, such individuals threatened the virility of the race due to their defective hereditary genes. The fact that they could pass for normal people (unlike those with a physical disability) enhanced their danger as they could contaminate the population and this would subsequently manifest itself in crime, pauperism and immortality.<sup>142</sup> It maybe that whilst serving this second term of penal servitude Horace’s mental well-being deteriorated further.

It is known that Horace spent at least three spells in an asylum before 1906. His case-notes from Berrywood Asylum, Northampton, where he had been admitted directly from the workhouse for displaying suicidal tendencies on New Year’s Eve 1900, note that his father had committed suicide in 1865 (underscored in red) three months after his mother’s death — hereditary factors were always accorded importance by asylum medical officers. Witnessing their father’s suicide must have been particularly harrowing for the children. After a night of ‘raving’, and seeing ‘frightful objects’, Horace and his siblings found their father with his throat cut, but still alive, and carried him to bed to die.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> PSCC ,10 Apr. 1901, QS85/1/239, LRO; *Northampton Mercury*, 23 Nov. 1906.

<sup>142</sup> M. Thomson, ‘Disability, psychiatry and eugenics’ in A. Bashford, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford, 2010), p. 119.

<sup>143</sup> *Leighton Buzzard Observer*, 19 Sept. 1865; For more on Berrywood Asylum see C. Smith, ‘Family community and the Victorian asylum: a case study of the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum and its pauper lunatics’ *Family and Community History* 9 (2006), pp. 109-24.

There is little in the case notes to indicate significant symptoms of mental illness, beyond an early reference to: ‘Mania. Confused & rambling in speech. Memory is impaired.’ More generally, asylum staff considered Horace to be ‘dullard’ and a ‘high grade imbecile’. The latter term would correspond to someone who would today be described as having ‘mild learning disabilities’, or in a previous era as being ‘borderline subnormal’. As he recovered and settled into the asylum’s work regime, staff remained unimpressed: ‘an idle worthless man who is content to play games & enjoy himself - does enough for tobacco.’ Discharged after three months, the relatively short stay was indicative that there was not too much wrong with him. All taken together an impression emerges of a man who had difficulty in coping with various aspects of life. Periodically, he reacted by either becoming ‘noisy’ and ‘refractory’ or engaging in self-harming behaviours, thus making him a periodic management problem.<sup>144</sup> The workhouse supervision of his behaviour that particular New Year’s Eve must have been particularly challenging because the financial cost to the guardians of admitting someone to the asylum was vastly more than to keep them under their control.<sup>145</sup> The reality was that, for Horace, like many of the other Leicestershire vagrants who entered an asylum, the prospects of individual care were limited to a short period of observation and treatment. The impact of the orphaning and the experience of growing up in the workhouse were immeasurable on Horace

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<sup>144</sup> Lunatic Admissions Register: Berrywood, 31 Dec. 1900; Berrywood Asylum, Patient Case-notes, 31 Dec. 1900-Mar. 1901, Northamptonshire Records Office:.

<sup>145</sup> D. Wright, ‘The discharge of pauper lunatics’ in J. Melling and B. Forsythe, eds., *Insanity, Institutions and Sanity* (London, 1999), p. 103 – the asylum was three times more expensive than work house provision, and five times more expensive than providing outdoor relief.

and his siblings. His elder brother Walter (b. 1853), a drover, also succumbed to the vagrant lifestyle, and had a propensity to drink as his father had done before him.<sup>146</sup>

Victorian society was probably most attuned to the vice of alcohol.<sup>147</sup> If society had only a rudimentary understanding of mental well-being, they looked instead for reasons to explain the behaviours exhibited by vagrants, and all too often they identified the vice of drink. One tragic case, that attracted national attention, was James ‘Jimmy’ Jordan (1857-1896). He hailed from Thorpe Arnold, near Melton Mowbray and was jailed in 1896 for drunkenness and assault. He had an extensive criminal record for vagrancy and petty offences. Unfortunately, during this last sentence, he successfully hung himself in Leicester Prison.<sup>148</sup>

Such commentaries ought to be framed within the context of Victorian concerns for temperance and moral decline associated with the alcoholic.<sup>149</sup> With the earlier case of John Driver his asylum assessment observed a hereditary link between his drinking and the moral contamination that his father’s alcoholic habit would have produced.<sup>150</sup> There were points when a drunk could avoid jail if they took the pledge of abstinence. One who did so was long term alcoholic Arthur ‘Gussy’ Wortley, and scourge of Melton Mowbray. Magistrates appealed to the local population not to buy Arthur

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<sup>146</sup> *Northampton Mercury*, 13 Jul. 1876, 26 Jul. 1884, 11 Feb. 1888; *Nuneaton Advertiser*, 2 Apr. 1887; *Northampton Mercury*, 16 Oct. 1891; *Leicester Chronicle*, 7 Dec. 1889; 17 Oct. 1891, 5 Aug. 1896; Census: 1871, Nasby, RG10/1494; 1901 Census, Leicester, RG13/2989; Leics. Baptism Records, Clipston, 22 Feb. 1857.

<sup>147</sup> M. Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians* (London, 2014), chp. 3.

<sup>148</sup> PSCC, 30 Nov. 1891, 13 May 1896, QS85/1/239, LRO; *South Wales Daily News*, 3 Oct. 1896; *Manchester Courier*, 3 Oct. 1896; *St James Gazette*, 3 Oct. 1896. *Leicester Chronicle*, 10 Oct. 1896; *Leeds Times*, 10 Oct. 1896; Census: 1891 Leicester, RG12/2542; Leicester Gaol prisoner admission/discharge registers, LRO.

<sup>149</sup> B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815-1872* (Pittsburgh, 1971).

<sup>150</sup> West Yorks. Asylum, C85/3/6/174.



drinks in order to avoid provoking some misdemeanour from him. Despite the support of a lady of Melton society, Arthur was unable to remain sober for long and was soon drunkenly disrupting church choir practise because of ‘needing to satisfy his taste for “pure beer”.’<sup>151</sup> As a younger man, Arthur had gone ‘on the tramp’ in search of work, and in all likelihood to escape the distractions of Melton’s public houses, but also to ‘breath the free air once more.’ It was a quest that took him to Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, and Staffordshire, but even then, he found himself at the mercy of the magistrates and served terms in Wakefield, Lincoln, and Stafford prisons for vagrancy.<sup>152</sup>

The earlier examples of John Trowbridge, the disgraced GWR engine driver, and vocalist/actor William Beckett showed the problems that alcohol could cause, both in terms of damaging a livelihood and aggravating the tramping ways. Both men frequently offered to adopt the ‘pledge’ if discharged from court, but evidently the regularity of their appearances on drunkenness charges suggested the futility. In William B.’s case, his drinking was indicative of self-medication: a mechanism to survive on the streets. His situation was also aggravated by a disability to his hip and leg that left him with a severe limp.<sup>153</sup> There is a tendency to conceptualise physical disability in terms of ‘affliction’ and ‘defectiveness’. Yet his disability appeared not to affect his ‘abilities’. He claimed to walk daily distances in excess of twenty miles in search of the next ‘engagement’, and nor does it appear to have been detrimental to his performances, indeed it may have encouraged a more charitable generosity from

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<sup>151</sup> *Grantham Journal*, 9 Apr. 1910.

<sup>152</sup> Wakefield Prison nominal prisoner register, 1 Nov. 1882; *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 18 Jun. 1883; *Lichfield Mercury*, 15 Apr. 1892.

<sup>153</sup> *Essex Herald*, 13 Sept. 1887; Wakefield Prison Records, 7 Nov. 1898, as Percy De R..

his audiences.<sup>154</sup> However, behind the outward exterior of the actor it was evident his lifestyle was a precarious existence: his asylum case notes describe the tragedy of a man locked into a cycle of alcohol dependency, prone to mania and suicidal tendencies.<sup>155</sup>

For women left in destitution, when abandoned by their husbands, their options were far more limited in late Victorian Britain. If they entered the workhouse and became chargeable to the union, then the Poor Law guardians could pursue the absent husband under Section 1 of the vagrancy act (as was the case with Barzillia Deacon (1855–1932) on three occasions in the late 1880s/early 1890s).<sup>156</sup> However, obliging a reunion of the relationship failed to recognise that, for some women, homelessness may have been a solution to difficulties in their relationships owing to sexual or physical violence. Modern accounts of female homelessness recognise that patterns of abuse and relocation are distinctive features of women's experiences of housing.<sup>157</sup> It seems little was different in the Victorian age. Take Eliza Jane Addleton (b. 1870) who was convicted twice under the vagrancy act for running premises in Loughborough for prostitution in 1903 and 1907. She had been born into, and remained, in poverty throughout her life, and it seems was subject to violence in her marriage. She was, in turn, abusive to her own children (and subject to repeated child neglect cases) and prone to alcoholism. She experienced periods of being of no fixed abode, and was repeatedly in and out of jail, putting her children in the workhouse on

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<sup>154</sup> A claim he made before a slightly incredulous magistrate in Kent, and one validated by the arresting policeman as perfectly plausible, *Sevenoaks Chronicle*, 30 Sept. 1887.

<sup>155</sup> London County Council, Stone Asylum Records: male patients case files, 13 Feb. 1883, 22 Nov. 1884, CAL/001/B/02/005; 4 Aug. 1891, CAL/001/B/02/010; 26 Sept. 1893, CAL/001/B/02/011, London Metropolitan Archives.

<sup>156</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1893; Leicester Workhouse admission registers, LRO.

<sup>157</sup> Tomas, 'Women', pp. 493-515.

these occasions. She abandoned her husband in 1900, and her children were taken into care, after which she resorted to prostitution to survive financially. Her husband, in turn adopted a nomadic lifestyle, abandoning his job as a gas stoker and instead working on the canal barges to escape the attentions of the NSPCC inspectors who were pursuing him for costs.<sup>158</sup>

Apparent through all of these life-stories was the extremely fine line that existed between being labelled a vagrant and being part of the casual poor, who found the grind of poverty obligated some to adopt criminal strategies to survive. One such was Alberta Woods (or Kate Woods). Between 1881 and 1918, around the cities of Leicester, Nottingham, and Southampton, she would on occasion request a night's board and lodgings on the promise of payment, and then sneak off in the morning with items of value that she could pawn. The theft of items escalated the offence beyond begging lodgings under false pretences to the more serious charge of larceny. Unusually, three separate prison photographs survive for this individual from 1882, 1901, and 1915. The earliest was taken just two weeks after she had given birth to her second child in the workhouse. Shortly after this, her husband, William (a shoe riveter), deserted her. And so, her pattern of survival was cemented. She moved between lodgings, the paupers' ward of the Leicester workhouse (which was her union of settlement), and the casual wards of workhouses further afield. After 1883, she described herself as widowed, although there is no evidence of her husband's death, so it was clearly a tactic to cover her abandonment and create a veneer of

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<sup>158</sup> Census: 1871, RG10/3258 and 1881, RG4/3147 both Shepshed; 1891, RG12/2514 and 1901, RG13/2978 both Loughborough; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 13 Jun. 1894; 24 Dec. 1902, 24 May 1905, 19 Jun. 1907; 16 Dec. 1908; *Leicester Chronicle*, 6 Nov. 1897; 26 Aug. 1899, 23 Dec. 1899, 23 Sept. 1903; *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 20 Jul. 1898; *Nottingham Guardian*, 10 Dec. 1898; PSCC ,19 Jun. 1907, QS85/1/316, LRO.

respectability as she sought to talk her way into lodgings. When challenged by one judge to explain her behaviour, she ‘attributed her misfortune to drink’.<sup>159</sup>

## VIII

So how does this life story approach affect our understanding of vagrancy at the dawn of the twentieth century? Unsurprisingly it points to the dangers of generalisations, as it is clear that the individuality of each case, and the person’s own agency is vitally important, especially in responding to triggers that might explain their homelessness. Understanding the individual enables the historian to identify particular characteristics in their movements, and likewise understand motivations for the adoption of particular aliases. Vagrancy is often characterised as a solitary experience. Certainly, few of the life-stories reveal any formal relationship unions, however collectively there is evidence of the importance of broader intimate associations: friends, kin or a substitute family groups, that may have assisted in sustaining the individual. Both John Driver and Robert Fields in the latter stages of their lives knew that relatives were alive and where they lived. Likewise, Alfred Draper was probably aware of his changing family circumstances, and appears to have been sustained in old age by a tolerant local population. When these individual situations are placed in a broader context it is evident that there are often a multiple of personal and structural factors at play. The prevalence of health issues and addictions amongst these ‘tramps’ show

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<sup>159</sup> Census: 1861, RG9/2298; 1871, RG10/3290; 1881, RG11/3178; 1901, RG 13/2989 all Leicester; 1911, Loughborough, RG14/0014; *Leicester Chronicle*, 4 Nov. 1881, 1 Jul. 1882, 23 May 1885, 9 Jan. 1886, 31 Mar. 1894; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 10 Dec. 1890; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 28 Sept. 1893; Habitual Criminals Register, Nottingham, 1894; Leicester 1902, Leicester 1918; Leicester Police prisoner photographs, 1882, 1901, 1915, DE3831/305, LRO; Leicester workhouse admission/discharge registers, LRO; *Police Gazette*, 1 Jun. 1917; 1939 Register, Leicester; Death Certificate, 1947 3<sup>rd</sup> Q., vol. 3A p. 474, Leicester.

how the authorities' emphasis reforming the idle poor merely exacerbated the situation in which these people found themselves. Instead, their behaviours were dismissed as evidence of fecklessness and their actions in the institutional environment, at times, could be hard to manage.

The courts and media conceptualised the problem as being one of no fixed abode, pointing to the aimless wanderings of tramps and their potential for criminality. But even being of no fixed abode did not constitute absolute rooflessness. It is clear from the life-stories that vagrants, as they moved around, could spend periods of time living under a roof, whether in private lodgings or the casual ward of the workhouse, or even prison. At other times the option to rough sleep was taken. This reminds us that the vagrant is a form of social production. Those prosecuted for vagrancy did not define themselves as vagrants, though they could actively exploit the system. Rather they explained themselves in terms that referenced their occupations or geographical associations. Many considered that they were part of a mobile labour poor, but were denied such employment opportunities by a combination of their circumstances and personal limitations.

Mary Higgs, the renowned social investigator and campaigner for homeless women, noted, although structures and the system did not necessarily cause homelessness, they did create a poverty trap, forcing people to remain in a life of vagrancy once they had entered it.<sup>160</sup> Historians have been guilty of accepting such simplifications. One such has concluded that once labelled a vagrant an individual had 'little hope of

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<sup>160</sup> M. Higgs, *Five Days and Five Nights as a Tramp with Tramps* (Manchester, 1905).

rehabilitation'.<sup>161</sup> Take Francis Hamilton Tighe (b. 1889) who had 'all the appearances of being a tramp' when found rough sleeping, and who the magistrates urged to return to Manchester and reconcile with his parents. When he re-appeared before them on a charge of begging and assault, the JPs were less accommodating. But it would seem after these youthful indiscretions, he returned to a settled form of living, raised a family and lived his remaining decades in, and around, south Manchester, until his death in September 1961. Possibly following his last offence in 1911, enough readers of the *Leicester Chronicle* got on bended knee and followed the editor's instruction to '*Orate Pro Anima Hamilton T.*' (Pray for the soul of Hamilton T.).<sup>162</sup>

The themes emerging from this survey of tramps at the turn of the twentieth century are clearly relevant to those examining vagrancy in other periods and places, as well as in the present.<sup>163</sup> Historians have used vagrancy as a lens to explore a range of structural processes: migratory labour, economic development, state regulatory formation, urbanisation and responses to poverty. What is more, it is now recognised as a global phenomenon, one that ought to be located within international notions of the control of labour, though framed by European statute and experience.<sup>164</sup> This article, can make no claims in that direction, but by re-focussing attention towards the

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<sup>161</sup> G. Matthews, 'The search for a cure for vagrancy in Worcestershire 1870-1920' *Midlands History* 11 (1986), p. 112.

<sup>162</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, 4 Jun. 1908; *Leicester Chronicle*, 19 Aug. 1911; PSCC, QS85/1/316, LRO.

<sup>163</sup> T.B. Smith, 'Assistance and repression: rural exodus, vagabondage and social crisis in France 1880-1914' *Journal of Social History* 34 (1999), pp. 821-46; Lecture: S. Fitzpatrick, 'The tramp's tale: a story of Soviet border-crossing 1945-50', 26 Apr. 2017, Univ. of Birmingham; R.J. Evans, *Tales from the German Underworld: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, 1998); W. Ayass, 'Vagrants and beggars in Hitler's Reich' in R. Evans, ed., *The German Underworld: Deviants and Outcasts in German History* (London, 1988), pp. 210-37.

<sup>164</sup> Ocobock, *Cast Out*; T. Hitchcock 'Hard choices and bad laws: crime, vagrancy and labour discipline' plenary lecture *Out of Place: Vagrancy and Settlement*, Institute of Historical Research, London 6-7 Dec. 2017.

human story it demonstrates the inapplicability of the 'vagrant' label. Each of these case studies have highlighted the risk of generalisations. For the most part these individuals were being punished and criminalised upon the basis of their personal condition, state of being and socio-economic status. The vagrancy statutes sought to impose control on a culturally constructed idle and 'voluntarily' unemployed.

Certainly, the themes highlighted above have persisted into more recent decades. After 1945 the State thought the tramp was a dying phenomenon, and used this to justify replacing the casual wards with a much-reduced network of reception centres in 1948.<sup>165</sup> But this notion was based on a romanticised 'myth' of the gentleman of the road, wandering by choice around the country. As shown such 'myths' bore no relation to reality. Yes, the vagrant was mobile, some more so than others, but they were also prone to returning to places of familiarity or familial relevance, and remaining in particular geographical areas for periods of time. Whilst many were male, this mobile population was not exclusively so. They adopted strategies to survive according to individual circumstance: to beg, or not; to use the casual wards, or not; to seek casual work, or not; to thieve, or not. For the most part they were drawn from the manual working occupations, and were indistinguishable, as their surviving asylum or prison photographic portraits reveal, from the rest of the labouring poor. These characteristics persisted well into the twentieth century. Early in 1948 officials in London asked who was using the Leicester Hillcrest Reception Centre. The response, after investigation, was that their population was the 'flotsam and jetsam of society': a mix of navy types, those with mental health problems, the

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<sup>165</sup> *Annual Report of National Assistance Board* (London, 1949); *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Jun. 1950.

alcoholic, and the anti-social criminal. These men were indistinguishable from the industrial labourer, except for their poor footwear, which causes little surprise given the frequency with which the vagrants in this article stole footwear.<sup>166</sup>

Yet as the vagrants of this article reached their old age a changing official mindset was taking hold. As one Leicestershire official admitted in 1948, after several decades experience of working with the homeless, his

early experience of the problem gave me a feeling of futility, because the conception that existed was a policy of deterrence. Something more uplifting is needed, but it will need resolution and drive to sustain it because the vagrancy problem is one that gives every excuse for becoming discouraged.<sup>167</sup>

Even with the more benign approach to the single homeless aimed at returning these individuals to a more settled way of living through employment, the problem persisted and their profiles remained similar to their Victorian and Edwardian predecessors.<sup>168</sup>

This article opened with the story of Alfred Draper. When he was given his begging jail term in December 1896, there was perhaps not a little irony that, in the newspaper reportage of the case, he appeared to have escaped his trade of ‘shoe finisher’ that he was so determined to abandon as a young man. His notoriety as a beggar and tramp, and not his trained profession, was now his distinguishing feature. To Victorian society, he was a scourge and a professional waster. Today, his case might, in part, be

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<sup>166</sup> TNA: J.W.M. Siberry, National Assistance Board to H. Jauncey, Regional Officer NAB, Nottingham, 29 Jan. 1948; ‘Vagrancy’, H. Jauncey to JWM Siberry, 6 Feb. 1948 AST7-898.

<sup>167</sup> TNA: H. Jauncey to J.W.M. Siberry, 31 January 1948, AST7-898.

<sup>168</sup> National Assistance Board, *Homeless Single Persons* (London, 1966); M. Drake, *Single and Homeless* (London, 1981), pp. 12, 15-17.



received rather differently dependent upon whose jurisdiction he fell under. If located on the streets by an outreach team, and if he were willing to engage with them, then he would be recognised as both a poverty and housing need and the health professions would identify the ‘complex trauma’ he had experienced.<sup>169</sup> Equally, other aspects of the response Alfred would recognise. The 1824 vagrancy act continues to criminalise, with 2,365 prosecution in 2016-17, although at a fraction of the pre-1914 levels, whilst the police and local authorities have a host of anti-social behaviour legal powers to deter the beggar, and oblige them to move onwards.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, for all the positives of developments in homelessness policies of recent decades, there persists, especially in the political and media arenas, rhetorical narratives that our Victorian and Edwardian counterparts would acknowledge.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> N. Maguire, *et al.*, *Homelessness and Complex Trauma* (Southampton, 2009); R. Johnson and R. Haigh, ‘Social psychiatry and social policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ *Journal of Mental Health and Social Inclusion* 14 (2010); M. Seager, ‘Homelessness is more than houselessness: A psychologically minded approach to inclusion and rough sleeping’ *Journal of Mental Health and Inclusion* 15 (2011); Helen Keats, *et al.*, *Psychologically Informed Services for Homeless People: Good Practise Guide* (Southampton, 2012).

<sup>170</sup> H. Cromarty and P. Strickland, *Rough Sleeping and Anti-Social Behaviour* (London, 2018), pp.1-2; L. Charlesworth ‘Readings of begging: the legal response to begging considered in its modern and historical context’ *Nottingham Law Journal* 15, (2006), pp. 1-12.

<sup>171</sup> E.g. *The Independent* 3 Jan. 2018 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/windsor-homeless-royal-wedding-council-leader-simon-dudley-a8140636.html>; BBC News, 29 Mar. 2016 ‘Protesters claim anti-begging posters ‘demonise’ homeless’ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-35911945> [accessed 24 May 2016]. Whilst Bournemouth Council paying one-way tickets to encourage roughsleepers to leave the town. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-36434326> [accessed 4 July 2016].