

BASTARDY: – PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL REALITY 1760 – 1840

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE RECORDS OF HUGHENDEN AND AYLESBURY, AND TO LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

SUSAN KELSEY

Mrs Kelsey (née Powell) has studied the parish records of some representative parishes at the time of the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834, to estimate illegitimate births as a percentage of live births, and the changes in this proportion over time. She had also read through the files of the two local newspapers The Bucks Gazette and The Bucks Herald to gain an insight into public attitudes to illegitimacy, which she finds owed less to morality than to economic self-interest.

BASTARDY IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

A. THE FACTS

“Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous . . . as honest madam’s
issue?
Why brand us they with base?”⁽¹⁾

Thus Shakespeare’s Edmund, (*King Lear*, Act I Scene 2) poses the question that is mine also in this study. How did society, and individuals treat bastard children? and what factors influenced their opinions? Before starting this study of bastardy in the county of Buckinghamshire, I had assumed that the main reason why bastards were treated differently from legitimate children was that their situation did not meet the moral standards of the day. As the research progressed however, it became clear that other factors, such as the financial dependence of mother and bastard child on the state, were also of importance in determining people’s attitudes.

This paper concentrates on the period 1760 – 1840 but there is special emphasis on the years around 1834 because of the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act in that year. I hoped that with the higher profile of bastardy and its treatment in the new Act, any changes that had taken place in

public attitudes would be revealed.

The first part of the paper is essentially factual in that it relies on local County records of Buckinghamshire to show how bastards within the lowest economic sector of society were treated. However the aim of the study was not to produce an economic survey in the Laslett tradition.⁽²⁾ Neither is it an attempt to consider social trends such as pre-marital sexual activity and enforced marriage between a man and the woman whom he has made pregnant, although these issues are touched on lightly. Rather, the emphasis is on the mother who remained unmarried and her bastard child, especially in the first ten years of its life.

This first section, therefore is confined to the study of those on an income low enough to apply for poor relief, and confined to the period up until the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. In the following part, the work broadens out in several ways. The two local newspapers provide the evidence upon which to judge local opinion on the subject of bastardy. Extracts from these newspapers date from between 1832 and 1835 and they provide not only facts about the New Poor Law but also opinions as to the merits or faults of this new Act. It is these opinions, expressed via the newspapers, that reveal the motives for an individual’s disapprobation of the unmarried mother and her bastard.

The purpose of studying poor relief records was to try and build up a picture of how mothers with their bastard children were treated. I also attempted to gauge their significance, in numerical terms, as part of the community. Buckinghamshire seemed, at first, to be a fairly good choice for a study of this kind, in that its levels of poor relief were second only to Sussex in 1831. In that year, with a County population of 147,000, the total expenditure on poor rates was £143,000.⁽³⁾ The relief system as a whole was operated according to the Speenhamland system, whereby low wages were subsidised up to a specific amount by rates, and poor relief was administered on an outdoor system, rather than through admission to a workhouse. With such a high level of poor rates, it would be expected that any kind of relief to the poor, including payments for the support of bastards, would be a matter for interest, not least amongst the rate-paying strata of Buckinghamshire society.

Initially I had intended to look for changes in the administration and levels of relief to mothers of bastards but it soon became evident that major changes just did not occur before 1834. This may well account for the sense of frustration that is found in views expressed about the Bastardy clauses of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834). Whether their views were favourable to the new law, or not, the majority of people stressed the need to change the system in some way. However, having made this point about the lack of fundamental changes, the records do suggest some interesting features of relief payments to bastards.

One of the basic questions to be asked is that of how many bastards were born in relation to the number of children born within wedlock. By studying baptism records and counting the number of children described as 'base-born' as well as the overall number of infant baptisms in any one year, a percentage was calculated of bastards within the infant population. The main parish of the County town of Aylesbury was used to calculate the percentage for a town (the parish being that of St. Mary's, Aylesbury) and the parish records of a village in the South of the County, Hughenden, was used to represent village levels of bastardy. Admittedly there are drawbacks to this system of calculation. One of the major problems is that if the bastard dies before it is baptized, then the whole

occurrence of its birth will go unrecorded. However, this can also be truthfully said of the death of legitimate children so, if one is trying to find a ratio between illegitimate and legitimate, this discrepancy becomes largely irrelevant. Another question which comes to light is that of how many single mothers did not take their bastard children to be baptized, or were refused permission to have their children baptized. The fact that the majority of records contain both legitimate and base-born births suggests that the latter were accepted for baptism as readily as the former. However, it is impossible to tell how many unmarried mothers did not present their children to be baptized. One further difficulty encountered, that increased the inaccuracy of any findings, was that individual clerks or rectors failed positively to identify baptized children as base-born. The father's name may not have appeared in the register but there is no indication as to whether this was because the mother was not married, or because she had been recently widowed. In Hughenden, for example the clerk who recorded the baptisms from 1803 until 1813 made no indication of whether a child was base-born or not, even though his predecessor and the clerk who followed him, recorded this detail, to the extent of under-lining the word, 'base-born'.

Graph 1 shows the percentage of bastards within the recorded baptisms of St. Mary's parish, Aylesbury.⁽⁴⁾ Graph 2 records the same evidence for the village of Hughenden.⁽⁵⁾ The first point to make concerns the break in the baptism records of St. Mary's parish between 1770 and 1783 which highlights the frustrations of trying to be accurate when dealing with incomplete records. However, the graphs do help to convey some information. Despite the fact that in both graphs there is a constant variation in the percentage of bastards within the population of baptized babies, this variation is within a specific range. In Aylesbury, bastards never represented more than 8.4% of the population of baptized babies for any one year from 1760 through to 1800. The percentage in Hughenden never rose above 9.52% apart from two freak years of 1773 and 1782 when the number of births was lower and the frequency of bastardy much higher. Obviously the fact that the graphs feature one parish only means that the variations, which are removed by a similar study done on a much larger number of parishes, are in both these cases still evident. Graph

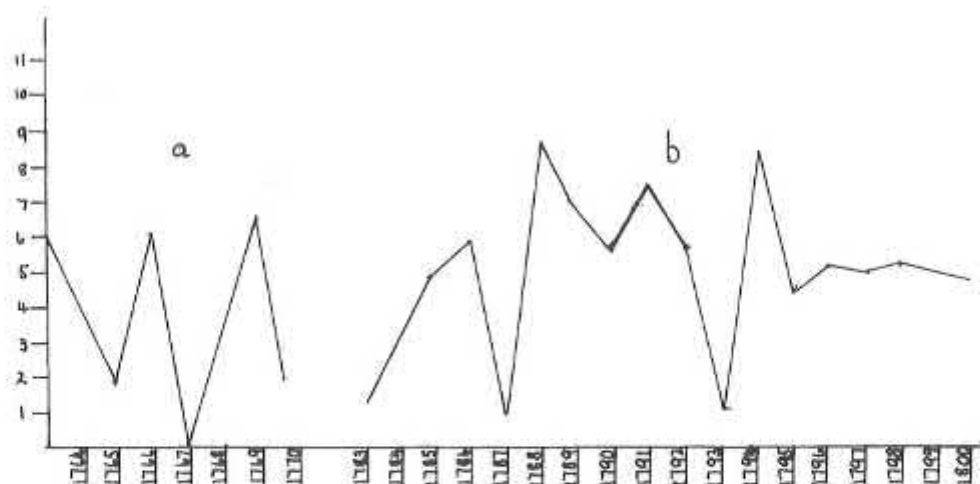


Fig. 1: Parish of St Mary's Aylesbury. *Graph a:* Illegitimate births per hundred 1762–1770. *Graph b:* Illegitimate births per hundred 1783–1800. *Source* – Parish Register.

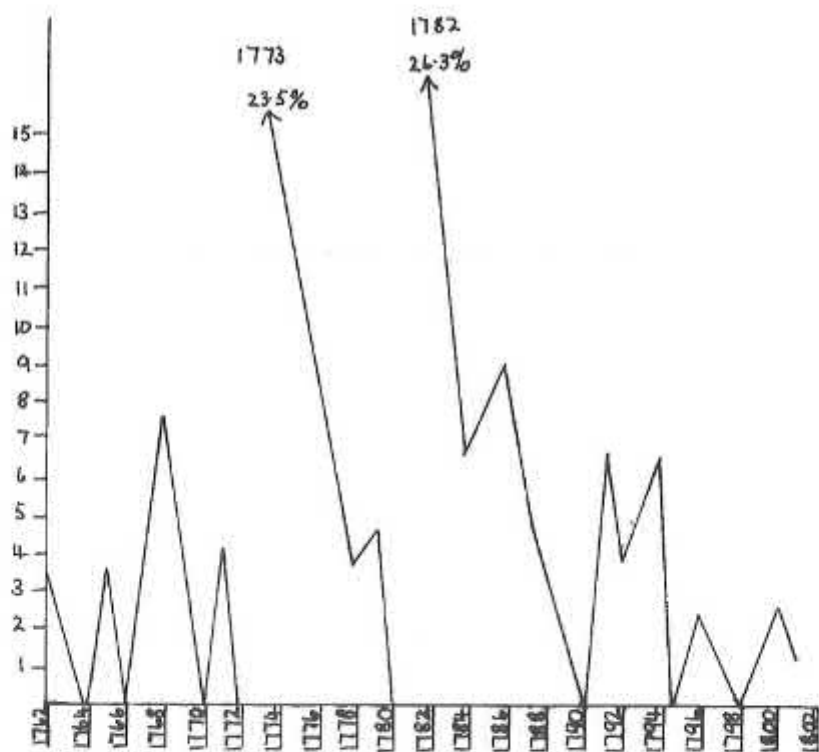


Fig. 2: Parish of Hughenden. Illegitimate births per hundred 1762–1800. *Source* – Parish Register.

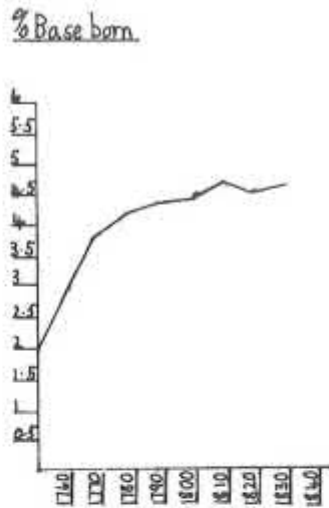


Fig. 3: Illegitimacy rates derived from sample of 98 Buckinghamshire parish registers; 1750–1850. Extracted from Laslett, P., *Family Life and Illicit Love* p. 113.

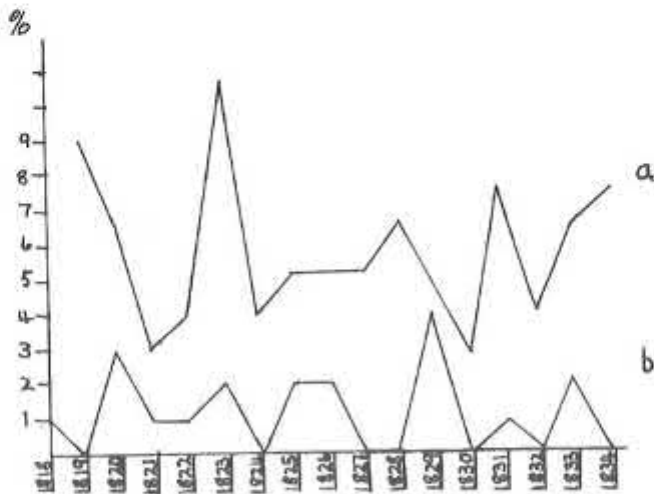


Fig. 4: *Graph a*: Illegitimacy rate in Hughenden parish, 1818–1834 (percentages). *Graph b*: Percentages of base born children in Hughenden receiving parish relief.



Fig. 5: Map showing areas from which fathers of illegitimate children born in Chesham came. Distances indicated are from County Boundary.

3 illustrates this point, as a study of ninety-eight parishes has removed the extremes of results from the top and bottom of the ratio. However, if the percentages from Aylesbury and Hughenden are made into an average then this figure falls within what could constitute a typical national ratio (represented by Graph 3). The only other point of interest to be obtained from a comparison between the first two graphs and Graph 3 is that the first two do not reflect the general increase in the percentage of bastards. Either this increase did not take place in these particular parishes, or this phenomenon did not occur in Buckinghamshire.

Once this basic percentage of bastards within the population had been established, the next point

of interest was to try and establish just how many of these bastards were supported through bastardy payments made to the mother. This was achieved by correlating the names of mothers and their bastard children recorded in both baptism records and the bastardy payments book,⁽⁶⁾ which spanned thirteen years (i.e. those that are still available). The results can be seen in Graph 4 and these indicate that whatever the number of bastards, only a certain number of their mothers relied on poor relief to support their bastards. The whole survey was only carried out for seventeen years (1818 – 1834) because of the restrictions of bastardy payment evidence, and the time needed to draw the correlation, but these figures show that on average 19.4% or practically one-fifth of mothers claimed poor relief payments for their bastards. One is then forced to ask, how did the other four-fifths of mothers support their children? It can be assumed that some women went on to marry the fathers of their children, so that they did not claim bastardy relief. Another possibility is that not all these women were necessarily 'working class', i.e. there was no need for them to claim payment because their own families were prosperous enough to support the child. Unfortunately there is no way of knowing from what stratum of society these unmarried mothers came. The most fascinating point, however which the graph cannot reveal, but the records themselves do, is that some mothers did not claim for their bastards until they were a couple of years old and then did not necessarily make continuous claims but resorted to bastardy payments only when they had to. The fact that some mothers only claimed when economic hardship forced them to is a point to be remembered when considering the claims made in 1834 that the availability of bastardy relief encouraged unmarried women to have more children than they would have done naturally. In other words, mothers by no means automatically claimed poor relief for their bastard children, and this appears to reduce the likelihood of mothers bearing bastards solely for the purpose of receiving higher poor relief payments.

So far, numerical evidence has been the basis for most discussion, but the parish records also give an impression of the men who were accused of fathering these bastard children and called upon by the parish to help support the upbringing of the child financially. The earlier, or hand-written, bastardy

bonds were useful because they noted the occupation of the putative father. The introduction of printed bastardy bonds, which was one of the few administrative changes that took place, noted only the place of abode of the father. (It was interesting to note that like most administrative developments, the villages adopted them much later than the towns, the village of Wendover only adopting the printed form in 1817, approximately thirty years after the main towns started using the new forms). The occupation of the father can also be gained from bastardy payment books and from the occasional arrest warrants that were issued for bastardy. Among all the references to the occupation of these men, that of labourer appears most frequently. Twice as many references are made to labourers as to any other form of work. Some of the other professions listed are ⁽⁷⁾; coach maker, journeyman, grocer, saddle maker, servant and the outsider – a Middlesex horsedealer. It appears that the frequency with which labourers were accused of fathering the child, and forced to help with its upkeep, strengthens the theory that it was the lowest classes who were the main participants in the bastardy relief system. The relief records afford no insight into the 'middle class' mother and her bastard. Apart from rather obvious conclusions that such records lead one to come to, the earlier handwritten bastardy bonds are interesting for the detail of background which they sometimes include. A certain William Gadfan of Hartwell in Northamptonshire was called by the parish of Stony Stratford to support his bastard child. This case was initiated by Mary, recently espoused to a Thomas Hopkin of Stony Stratford who refused to support the child. As is revealed in literary evidence later, the mother was not necessarily regarded as unworthy of another man for having had a bastard child, but the support of that child was regarded as *hers* and not the new husband's responsibility.

Another factor concerning the fathers was the place where they lived. Although some had been called back from another part of the Country where they had gone specifically to escape from the situation of being the father of a bastard, the majority were inhabitants of a town or village within a twenty mile radius of the home of the mother. Admittedly one could point out that it was easier and thus more likely to bring a case against a man who was geographically nearer, but does it not also reveal some-

thing about how far people's social networks reached? In most cases, the warrant calling the man to court states that the place where he is presently living is in fact his usual place of abode (i.e. the man did not just flee there to avoid the woman and her bastard). Map 1⁽⁸⁾ shows the place of habitation of some of the men brought to court by Chesham parish. More frequently the man was an inhabitant of the same town or village as the pregnant woman, and thus it was easier not only to substantiate the woman's claim that a certain man was the father of her child, but also to ensure that the father helped to support the child.

One question that has not yet been answered is that of how long mothers were able to claim poor relief for their bastards. The longest period of continuous payment by the parish to a mother for bastardy relief that I recorded was seven years,⁽⁹⁾ but it would not presumably be uncommon for relief to be paid until the child was old enough to be apprenticed, or to find some form of paid work.

The only answers to be gained from the parish records about bastards as they grew older, came from the Apprenticeship Indentures.⁽¹⁰⁾ For example a certain John Perkins of the parish of Wendover was to be apprenticed to Thomas Harrison until the age of 24 years. The earliest age at which a bastard child (and this probably applied to most children) is recorded to have been apprenticed around Aylesbury was in 1799, when a boy was made apprentice to a craftsman at the age of ten. It was not only boys that were apprenticed though; Ann Prontiers of Wendover was apprenticed until the age of twenty-one with a master, Arthur Thwaite, and the indenture specified that her food, lodging and apparel were to be provided by the master for the duration of that period. Obviously there would have been some encouragement by the parish for masters to take on bastard or poor relief children in order to reduce the number of children depending on poor relief from the rates. However, the fact that bastard children were readily taken on by craftsmen suggests that there was no great grudge against bastards at this level of society.

The records consulted give an overall picture of bastardy at the lowest level of society. They lead to a strong rejection of the assumption that women were encouraged by the existence of bastardy relief

to have bastards, the birth of which they would otherwise have avoided. The patterns of claiming bastardy relief, which show long-term delays by the mothers, and breaks in timing of claims, indicate that for most women parish aid was a last resort. It is also possible to see how in small village or town societies, the community could effectively require the known father of the child to fulfil his financial obligations. Hence the pressure to support bastard children financially was still very much on the father rather than the 'state' relief system. This is a very important factor to bear in mind when one comes to consider the motives for any change in attitudes towards bastards and their mothers.

B: PREJUDICE IN PRINT

Study of the records led to a general and fairly impersonal view of bastardy. The purpose of studying the two local newspapers (namely the *Bucks Herald and Farmers Weekly Gazette* and the *Buckinghamshire Gazette and Bedfordshire Chronicle*) from 1832 until 1835 was to obtain an insight into individual cases by using items whose inclusion in the newspaper means that they were interesting enough to be called newsworthy. It was also hoped that by reading the newspapers, the degree of concern that the local community showed for the matter of bastardy could be assessed.

However, before launching into the world of bastardy claims, infanticide and enraged rate-payers, a brief look at the political situation in Buckinghamshire at that time is quite helpful. R. Davis⁽¹¹⁾ concluded that the political structure of Buckinghamshire was as traditional as it had ever been. Kitson Clark⁽¹²⁾ summed this phenomenon up in the words,

"The prejudices, ways of thought, and limitations of the old proprietary classes still lay heavy on politics, as it seems to have been normally members of those classes whose hands still held most of the winning cards".

In the light of this situation it is not surprising that the issue dominating local politics in the early 1830's was that of the 1832 Reform Bill. Accounts of the parliamentary debates were faithfully recorded in the *Bucks Herald* and throughout the period that I studied the newspapers (the fact that the *Bucks Gazette* reported on the Reform Bill only at odd intervals reveals an initial difference between the newspapers that

will be elaborated upon later).

However, there are grounds for supposing that the levels of poor relief in the County would also be an issue of great concern to these established gentlemen. The decline of the lace-making industry in Buckinghamshire removed the only buffer that most women had against economic hardship. In 1816 an 'Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor' was established and this, in itself, is an indication of concern over increasing economic hardship and the consequent rise in the level of poor rates levied on the rich. Against this background, one can look for signs of concern about the Poor Law, as it stood before the Amendment Act of 1834.

One does not have to look far before discovering that local opinion supported the views of the Poor Law Commissions in judging the pre 1834 Poor Law to be unfair towards the putative father of a bastard child. As this law stood, the woman who was carrying the child only had to accuse the man of being the father of her child and, unless he could prove otherwise, the word of the mother was accepted. If he could not afford to stand the surety to the parish (and records indicate that this was approximately £40) then he could be thrown into jail. This surety was often, in practice, loaned by a father or elder relative but the 1833 Calender of Prisoners (*Bucks Herald*) recorded James Taylor and John, both aged 22 years as being arrested for failure to pay surety. These two men were examples of the unlucky ones who found themselves in jail as a result of the Poor Law before 1834.

The local newspapers illustrate, with numerous examples, the way in which men felt that the pre 1834 Poor Law discriminated unfairly against them. One, John Smith claimed that it was impossible for their family servant, Elizabeth Meeres, to nominate him accurately as father of her child because,

"she had a general acquaintance with all the coal-shippers at the waterside".

(*Bucks Herald* April 6, 1834)

The whole question of whether women lied about the identification of the father of their child, can be said to depend ultimately on one's own views about human nature in general. Yes, a woman

could accuse an innocent man of being the father of her child, and it must be assumed that some women actually did this, but considering the size of the community that the majority of people lived in, blatantly false accusations by a large percentage of women would never have been feasible.

The old Poor Law also contained several 'loop-holes', that discriminated unfairly against the male defendant. The case of one Grover which came to court in 1834 (*Bucks Herald* April 12, 1834, Quarter sessions) illustrates this, and several other interesting issues. Twenty years before his court appearance, Grover had married, at the instigation of the parish officers, a woman whom he had made pregnant. However he soon left his wife and did not see her for twenty years. His wife then had two children by a man called Pearson, but because the husband could not prove that he had not had access to his wife, the parish forced him to pay for the upkeep of the two children. This case seems to prove that the man was in a weak legal position whatever his defence. Grover's case is interesting however because although the practice of forcing a man to marry the woman he had made pregnant, had largely died out by the early 19th Century, it was still fairly common around the mid 18th Century. Grover's wife also stated that once her husband had left, 'she did not feel bound by the rules of continence' thus making a point about accepted moral standards of the day.

Both the cases of John Smith and Grover however serve to record the indignation felt against a law which required no more than a feasible accusation in order to brand the man as responsible.

Another aspect of the Pre-1834 Poor Law that provoked anger concerned the possible link between adequate (or more than adequate) financial provision for bastard children, and the behaviour of women. During the course of 1834, both newspapers contained commentaries on the bastardy laws as they stood and one quotation reveals the fundamental possibility that worried both editors and readers alike,

'It is not impossible that this woman may have been tempted to sin by the premium which the Poor Laws held out for bastardy'.

(*Bucks Herald* April 12 1834).

The article goes on to elaborate upon this theory. The woman who could become pregnant out of wedlock and then claim assistance from poor relief for the child, was seen as being "rewarded for her degradation" (*ibid*). The knowledge that it was possible to gain financial support for bastard children without having to work was seen by some as an incentive to women to bear more bastards. As if this were not bad enough, the amount of money that mothers of illegitimate children supposedly received was above the relief that poor couples obtained to support their legitimate children. The anonymous author of this article quoted the amount received for each bastard as being between 2s 6d and 3s 4d per child. He did not provide a source for these amounts; the bastardy payment books reveal that 1s or 1s 5d was a more realistic amount per child. This point of view in general however was widely held and summed up vigorously in the words,

'As the law on this point now stands, bastardy is most decidedly encouraged and immorality rewarded'.

At this point, one can see that the motive behind the disapproval of bastardy was both a moral one and also one based on dislike of the financial demands made by the bastard on the parish.

The only other major aspect of the Poor Law which provoked comment before 1834 was the inefficiency of its administration. A letter to the Editor of the *Bucks Herald* (March 29, 1834) from a man describing himself as 'some-one who has risen from amongst the ranks of the labouring man' expressed concern at the mismanagement of the Poor Law by overseers at that time. Studying his letter it became clear that his complaint was not actually about bad management but about leniency towards the poor. He himself claimed to be much stricter on these people because he knew the real needs of the applicants. Although this man obviously felt that he was in some position of knowledge about the matter, his letter does point to an interesting phenomenon that appeared quite frequently in the two newspapers and especially because these men (as they were for the most part) appeared to be obsessed with their superiority of class. The gentleman quoted above is a good example of those who, once out of poverty, and having ascended the 'social ladder', forgot within a very short space of time what it was like to be poor.

When dealing with attitudes towards women and their bastard children (especially those claiming poor relief and thus forcing rates upwards) the question has to be asked as to how far up the social scale people climbed before they started to think badly of those beneath them? The answer appears to be, not very far!

Changing the emphasis away from that of opposition to the old Poor Law, it is now necessary to try and discover what people actually thought about single mothers and their bastards, before the furore of the Poor Law Amendment Act elevated the issue of the poor to higher levels of importance than usual. The evidence at first appears to be conflicting in that sometimes the woman was supported, sometimes castigated, but again the answer is to be found in the economic needs of the mother. If she were forced to seek help in the form of poor relief, then she became part of the community of 'lazy and idle' people who were thought to scrounge off the hardworking and rate-paying sectors of society. In the records of the Chelmsford Petty Sessions (*Bucks Gazette* January 1833) Lucy Saunders was reported as having spent three months in prison for being a 'lewd woman' and bringing a second child into the world to be chargeable to the parish. In fact the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act increased the tendency to group bastard-bearers with those on poor relief because the mother was only able to obtain relief by entering the workhouse. This made the situation worse by eradicating from the minds of the rate-payers any difference between the women in this particular predicament and the rest of the workhouse population. Not surprisingly, public opinion of bastard-bearing women must have suffered as a result of this.

In such a situation it also becomes more difficult to distinguish between economic and moral disapprobation on the part of society.

Another situation in which the mother and child were likely to be badly treated was any case where the father of the bastard was in a socially superior position and likely to be publicly shamed by any claims on himself by the mother. Certainly if the father of the bastard was already married with a family of his own, then the moral disapproval of society would have been much greater than if the father had been a single man. It is not surprising

therefore that several cases were reported in the newspapers of married men who had tried to dissuade the mothers of their illegitimate children from revealing their identity. The case of Sarah Wormesly illustrates this point. She was a servant to Mr. Russel who was keeper of the county gaol and a married man 'of excellent character' (*Bucks Herald* February 1832). During the trial of Mr. Russel for the attempted murder of Sarah, it was stated that she had 'fostered an improper connection with her master'. The relationship had been continuing for 14 months when she discovered herself to be pregnant and Mr. Russel asked her to leave. Upon her refusal he gave her 5s and a packet of arsenic which he instructed her to take before going to bed. His plans were only frustrated by the fact that she visited her mother before taking all of the arsenic and the surgeon was called in before she had consumed enough to kill herself.

Instances of masters attempting to murder the servant girls whom they had made pregnant, occurred at regular intervals, judging by the newspaper reports.

By claiming paternity on their masters, these servant girls threatened their masters with not only monetary obligations (which were probably the least of their worries) but primarily with the threat of lowering their public prestige and honour as family men. Again, women caught in this particular situation suffered by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act which denied all unmarried mothers the right of recourse to the man believed to be the father. After the 1834 Act had been passed, the servant had no legal programme of action, or even moral power against the master whose child she was carrying. Sarah Puller was one such mother caught in that situation. She was forcibly evicted from her master's house (with the help of the local policeman) and the two children of the family were reported as shouting

'Why don't you take your bastard and go?' (*Bucks Herald* January 1835).

In these cases, the resentment against the mother and child was not so much the result of the economic burden on public resources that the child represented (as in the case of poorer women) but the threat to public prestige that the father might suffer.

At this level the woman became a disposable nuisance, not least in the eyes of the father of her child. It is noticeable that although the father might suffer temporarily from the moral pressures of society, it was generally the mother of the child who bore the guilt in such a situation.

One case which sums this up in an entertaining fashion is the affair of Mr. Morgan and Mary Neele (*Bucks Gazette*, April 1834). When asked how she knew that Mr. Morgan was father to her child, the woman replied that,

'You can see the likeness in snubbed nose and piggy eyes'.

Mr. Morgan was asked in turn if he admitted that Mary Neele had lived with him and his answer was,

'Yes, but I've often told her that she ought to be ashamed of herself for doing so.'

Lack of publicity also appears to have been the main aim of most middle class families confronted with the issue of bastardy. The *Chelmsford Petty Sessions* (*Bucks Gazette*, April 1833) revealed the case of a professional man whose daughter was made pregnant. Instead of allowing the girl to bring a claim against the father to the courts, the father paid £30.00 to the overseers to cover all expenses so that no publicity would arise out of the girl's pregnancy. It is not possible to know whether he did this primarily to defend his or his daughter's name, but it does reflect a desire to keep the whole incident as private as possible.

In all the articles written concerning unmarried mothers and their bastards, I only read one which was in defence of the woman. In this situation (*Bucks Gazette* March 1833) the girl, although a servant, was the daughter of a highly respected craftsman, and the whole article was written portraying the defendant as a seducer and a guilty culprit. He also gave the girl some drugs (the article implied that this was in order to bring about an abortion) but the girl only became seriously ill. It made an interesting point that the Jury were told to judge the case according to the degree of credibility which they attached to the girl's testimony.

Perhaps it is relevant here to bring in a phenomenon, which although common enough in the

present newspaper world, was not likely to be so obvious in the early 1830's. I am referring to the rivalry that exists between newspapers. It was a possibility that the two newspapers' attitudes towards issues such as poor relief, and especially towards the Poor Law Amendment Act as it was debated and introduced, would have been polarized because of the rift that existed between their political views. Certainly the *Bucks Herald* (its full title '. . . and Farmers' Weekly Gazette immediately highlights the type of readership that it counted on) represented the wealthy, established gentlemen of the County and the Editor of the *Bucks Gazette* was inclined to take an opposing view, seemingly only to perpetuate the rivalry. (See article by Lawrence Linehan in this issue of *Recs Bucks* p. 127). The case of George Hewlett and his mother illustrates how one issue became exaggerated out of all proportion because the two newspapers decided to oppose one another in this case. George Hewlett first wrote to the *Bucks Gazette* (26 April 1834) complaining that those mothers of illegitimate children who already lived in the workhouse were only allowed 12oz bread and 4oz cheese a day, with boiled rice and gruel every three days. On May 14th of the same year, Hewlett wrote again, pointing out that these women were being kept to their cells in solitary confinement. (It appears that there were some 17 women and children in this category in the workhouse).

Then in a reply, printed in the *Bucks Herald*, the Select Vestry (May 1834) answered George Hewlett's complaints by denying the charges but pointing out that of course Mr. Hewlett would be concerned with this type of woman, because his mother, Martha, and her child had been inmates for the past five years. The letter goes on to describe his mother's behaviour as,

'so grossly profligate – and abandoned, as to render it improper that she should any longer be allowed to associate even with the other females of the same class'.

This case represents a good example of the way in which the *Bucks Gazette* strove to further the aims of individuals against the Conservative loyalties of the *Bucks Herald*. It shows how even the subject of mothers and their bastard children became just another weapon in their rivalry. Or to put it another way the subject became a sign of political differences between two editors. Throughout the

year of 1834 the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act was reported in both newspapers and provoked some discussion. On March 22nd 1834 the *Bucks Herald* printed some of the recommendations of the Poor Law Commissioners concerning bastardy:

1. The bastard was to follow his mother's settlement.
2. Relief to the bastard was to be administered in the form of relief to the mother.

The Commissioner also stated that neither the mother nor the father was to be punished, which is an interesting indication of the official government attitude towards bastardy. In effect, as previously stated on Page 11 the new law proposed to remove from the mother the right to accuse a man of being the father of her child or to expect him to help her financially with the upbringing of the child.

The arguments against the bill as it stood have already been illustrated earlier in this part but there were reactions against the bill which concerned all paupers, including mothers of bastards. Lord Kenyon, a Churchwarden, was opposed to the idea of the government taking what he saw to be parochial affairs into its own hands and also wrote that,

'He thought nothing could be more cruel than the restriction of relief to the poor within the workhouse'. (*Bucks Herald* March 1834).

In the same article Dr. Dibdin (Vestry Committee Member) expressed his belief that the poor should not be separated from their parishes, because it removed any feeling of obligation to help these people, from the richer members of that community. The *Bucks Gazette* reported the attack on the bastardy clauses of the New Poor Law, by Cobbett in the House of Commons, June 14th (an indication of their concern over the matter, perhaps?), and this article was fascinating in the way it revealed general worries about how the amended law would affect women. Cobbett pointed out that the law made the grandmother or grandfather (on the mother's side) responsible for the upkeep of the child *before* any claims were made on the father to help support his child.

The politician also pointed out that bastardy was not just a feature of the lower orders of society and

managed to reduce the House to silence by asking how many bastards there were on the Pension List. Despite the passing of the bill, the House of Commons seems to have acknowledged that it was natural and right that a man should pay towards the upkeep of his child (whether legitimate or not) and that it was an unfortunate aspect of the bill which removed this obligation from the putative father. The Bishop of Exeter continued an attack on the Bill (*Bucks Gazette*, June 1834), presenting a humane argument on behalf of the pregnant mother. He pointed out that the law went against the mother in her time of greatest need, that it could lead to an increase in infanticide and cases of abandoned babies, and that a single amendment was unlikely to change women's morality. On the question of not involving the father because his identification could not be properly ascertained the Bishop retorted that once the child had been born, the mother's identification could not be totally verified either!

These views, however pertinent, failed to prevent the passing of the Bill, but moving away from the discussion at the centre of politics, it is of interest to see what reactions took place amongst the Editors of Buckinghamshire local newspapers. The editorial, in response to the speech above, emphasized how unfair it seemed to place all the burden of guilt and upbringing upon the mother. It was also felt that the Bill had been too harsh because of an over-estimation of the immorality of lower-class women by the Poor Law Commissioners. The quotation,

'scarcely such a thing as chastity exists among the lower order of women in England' (reported *Bucks Herald* March 22 1834), prompted these words from the *Bucks Gazette's* Editor,

'It is an unmanly libel on the general female character'.

He wanted to remind his readers that men are as guilty in this situation as women.

The *Bucks Herald* contained no such comment but these objections to the Bastardy Clauses of the Amendment Act suggest that not all men shared the views of a John Lee, who fled from his pregnant lover, commenting that the man's support was 'a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance' (*Bucks Gazette* June 1834, originally Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act 1, Scene IV).

It is difficult to assess how women felt about the new bastardy clauses, for only one woman wrote to a newspaper about the Amendment Act. She agreed with the idea of limiting relief to support within the workhouse because by making relief 'distasteful' (*Bucks Herald* October 4, 1834) it would discourage idleness. However, she did suggest the mothers and their bastards who were due to be received into the workhouse could be taken on as unpaid servants in order to keep the level of workhouse expenditure to a minimum. Her concern obviously lay with the level of poor rates although the suggestions would probably have been welcomed by the women concerned!

The final word on the local reaction to the new bastardy clauses must come from a Jury in Bethnal Green who, commenting on the death of two women and their bastards, called the laws 'cruel and disgusting, fearing that this would not be the last of similar cases' (*Bucks Herald*, October 4 1834).

One aspect of bastardy that never failed to gain attention from the press were those cases of infanticide, where a mother murdered her bastard child. The reference to a case where a girl, aged between 16 and 20 years, was tried for the murder and concealment of her child, becomes quite a familiar sight when reading through the newspapers of the time. They were always reported with a sense of shock, although the pattern of circumstances that led to infanticide was fairly constant. Economic hardship, rather than intrinsic cruelty by the mother, must be seen as the reason behind those murders. This assumption is strongly supported by the involvement of relatives in the concealing of the child. In the case of Sarah Butcher (*Bucks Herald* January 1835) the uncle disposed of the child's body in the local canal. This indicates that, for some, infanticide was the only method of solving an unbearable situation, and that it can almost be seen as an unwanted but necessary family policy.

The evidence from newspapers was particularly revealing because of the way in which it pointed out both sides of the problem of caring for bastards. Evidence of injustice, against both mothers and fathers of bastards, illustrated the inadequacy of a law in dealing with a complex social phenomenon. What these newspapers also highlighted was the close link between the attitude of society to a

mother and her bastard, and the economic means of that mother. Her sin was much the worse for resulting in her becoming economically dependent on the community.

CONCLUSION

One of the strongest impressions that the newspaper articles leave is that of the impact of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Whereas before 1834 much emphasis had been placed on the inequality of the law towards the putative father, the reaction to the 1834 Act was almost totally the reverse. There was a sudden concern about the way that all responsibility, and ultimately blame for the bastard child lay with the mother of the child.

Looking back to the evidence given above, it is interesting that the grounds upon which the Poor Law was changed i.e. possible encouragement of women to bear bastards for increased parish aid or the false accusations against possible fathers were actually found to be untrue for the most part. Obviously as the communities in which people lived grew larger during the 19th Century, it would have become increasingly difficult to verify who the father of the child was, and for this reason alone, the law would probably have had to have been altered at some point during the century. However even taking this point into account, the 1834 Amendment Act was acknowledged to be very hard on the mother of a bastard. Several aspects of the Act pointed the way forward to increasing problems in the future, not only for mothers of bastards, but for the children themselves. Men were legally absolved from any financial or moral responsibility for their illegitimate children, but more significant than this, the mother of an illegitimate child became totally responsible for the child's financial support. Thus if she had not the means to do this, an even heavier financial burden fell upon the poor relief. It was this aspect of her situation that, I believe, led to a deterioration in her treatment at the hands of society. Disapproval of a moral nature was constantly present to some degree, but the vital factor concerning how a community, and society, treated a mother and her bastard was the extent of the financial burden they laid upon that community. Certainly the enforced entry of the mother and child into the workhouse to gain relief after 1834,

must have meant that the quality of their lives deteriorated and the relationship between mother, bastard and community became irrevocably linked by the financial dependence of the former upon the latter.

List of Abbreviations:

- Laslett, *Bastardy* – T.P.R. Laslett, *Bastardy and its Comparative History* (Cambridge 1980)
Bucks Herald (May 1834) – *Bucks Herald (and Farmers' Weekly Gazette)* Month and Year of issue.
Bucks Gazette (May 1834) – *Buckinghamshire Gazette and Bedfordshire Chronicle* Month and Year of issue
 R.W. Davis, *Political Change – Political Change and Continuity in Buckinghamshire 1760 – 1885* (David and Charles, 1972)

NOTES

- (1) Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act I, Scene II
 - (2) Laslett, *Bastardy* In this work Laslett and his team made a detailed economic survey of bastardy in seven different countries and proposed the existence of a bastardy prone sub-society, where certain members of society were likely, by their economic situation and upbringing, to perpetuate the phenomenon of bastard-bearing.
 - (3) *Bucks Herald* (March 22, 1834)
 - (4) Record of Baptism, 1762–1800, PR 11/1/1–9 This last notation indicates the record box number
 - (5) Record of Baptism 1761–1800 PR 52/1/1–4
 - (6) Bastardy Account Book 1818–1834, PR 11/12/34–35
 - (7) A sample from the parish of Wendover, Bastardy papers, (1732–1829) PR 222/13/9
 - (8) Bastardy Bonds, 1754–1777 PR 44/13/3–5
 - (9) Bastardy Account Book, PR 11/12/35
 - (10) Apprenticeship Indentures, PR 222/13/10
 - (11) R. Davis, *Political Change*, Introduction
 - (12) Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (New York 1969)
- N.B. From Note (11) onwards all specific references from the *Bucks Herald* and *Bucks Gazette* are noted in brackets alongside the case concerned – for ease of reference.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

General Introductory Reading:

- Richard W. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity in Buckinghamshire, 1760–1885* (David and Charles, 1972)
 U. Henriques, 'Bastardy and the New Poor Law' *Past and Present* (1967)
 T.P. R. Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge Univ. Press 1977)
 T.P.R. Laslett, *Bastardy and its comparative history: studies in the*

history of illegitimacy and marital non-conformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica and Japan (Cambridge Univ. Press 1980).

- I. Pinchbeck & M. Hewitt, *Children in English Society* (two volumes) (London 1973)
 L.A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children* (Cambridge 1983)
 Shakespeare, *King Lear* extracted from W.J. Craig (edited) *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Oxford 1955)
 L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 – 1800* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1977)

PART A

AYLESBURY (ST.MARY'S PARISH)	Bastardy Account Book 1818–1834	PR 11/12/34–35
	Christenings 1760–1813	PR 11/1/1–9
	1813–1824	PR 11/1/10
	1824–1840	PR 11/1/11
	Casual Relief Accounts 1831–35	PR 11/12/34
	Burials 1813–1831	PR 11/1/38
	1831–1844	PR 11/1/38
	Select Vestry Minute Book 1819–1827	PR 11/8/1
	Vestry Minute Book 1819–1827	PR 11/8/2
CHESHAM	Bastardy Bonds 1754–1777	PR 44/13/3–5
	Removal Orders 1737–1750	PR 44/13/461
HUGHENDEN	Christenings 1761–1834	PR
STONY STRATFORD	Bastardy Bonds & Papers (1676)–1832	PR 200/14/1–30
	Apprenticeship Items 1760–1772	PR 200/14/1–5
	Arnold's Charity Papers	
	Extracts of boys apprenticed by the Charity (1692)–1763	PR 200/25/3
WENDOVER	Bastardy Papers 1732–1829	PR 222/13/9
	Apprenticeship Indentures 1732–1829	PR 222/13/10
	Poor Law Settlement (1664)–1833	PR 222/13/8
	Settlement Certificates 1715–1813	PR 222/13/1–7
	Charities 1816	PR 222/25/34
WEST WYCOMBE	Arrest for Bastardy 1805	PR 227/15/1
	Bastardy Relief Payments 1832	PR 227/15/2
	Account book for bastardy payments 1826–1836	PR 227/15/3
	Removal Orders 1723–1782	PR 227/15/3
	Apprenticeship Indentures 1716–1779	PR 227/14/2
	Minute book of Vestry Settlement Certificates 1830–1854	PR 227/8/4
WING	Poor Levy Parchment 1833	PR 234/1/1

(All situated at Buckinghamshire County Record Office, Aylesbury).

PART B

<i>Buckinghamshire Gazette and Bedfordshire Chronicle</i>	January 1833
	June 1835
<i>Bucks Herald (and Farmer's Weekly Gazette)</i>	February 1832
	December