



A courting couple before a south view of Birmingham from William Hutton's *History of Birmingham*, 1783.

Love and Latitude

Two centuries before the Swinging Sixties the weakening of social customs caused by the Industrial Revolution led to a modest transformation in people's sexual behaviour, says **Emma Griffin**.



Sexual intercourse began
 In nineteen sixty-three (which was rather late for me) –
 Between the end of the Chatterley ban
 And the Beatles' first LP.

Something of the sexual revolution of the 1960s is captured in Philip Larkin's poem 'Annus Mirabilis' from his collection *High Windows* (1974). His pithy lament resonates because it captures an elemental truth. The advent of the contraceptive pill did transform sexual behaviour. Since the 1960s ever more children have been born out of wedlock and the soaring divorce rate has begun to slow only because so few now tie the knot at all. For social conservatives the sexual revolution proved a mixed blessing indeed.

But the 1960s was not in fact the only sexual watershed in modern

British history. Two centuries earlier the Industrial Revolution also catalysed a transformation in the way in which men and women came together. The new sexual freedoms that followed rapid industrialisation were more modest than those of the 1960s. But they should still be recognised as an important stepping stone on the road to modernity.

In order to understand how the Industrial Revolution could influence sexual relations we need to begin by thinking about the place of sex in pre-industrial England. Love and sexual desire are intrinsic to the human condition, basic drives that reside in mature adults regardless of time or place. But if the urge to love and make love is constant, the freedom with which individuals may do so is anything but. After all, although making love is an enjoyable and cheap entertainment, the raising of children is hard work and expensive, making penetrative sex a risky undertaking in the absence of effective contraceptive ►

INTIMACY AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

At the Inn Door by Henry Singleton, late 18th century.



From the Archive



The Pre-Industrial Family

Ralph Houlbrooke traces the roots of the modern family.

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methods. Poor pre-industrial societies, where resources are few and poverty widespread, have neither the will nor the means to raise the offspring of young and reckless lovers. So such societies construct a web of customs and taboos designed to control sexual activity and ensure some kind of balance between the birth rate and the number of mouths the society is able to feed.

Across the globe there are many different forms these customs have taken. Take the dowry, for example. If girls can marry only when their parents settle a dowry upon them, poverty will prevent the poorest from marrying at all. In such societies, although those with dowries might marry young and raise large families, those without will be shut

out from marriage, sex and parenthood altogether. Infanticide, child abandonment and wet-nursing are alternative methods. These permit couples to marry and procreate, but prevent some of the infants born of such unions from thriving. Different societies evolve different customs, but the principles are largely the same. Without effective contraception, custom is used to suppress human sexuality and so keep a lid on population growth.

Britain, like other pre-industrial societies, had evolved its own unique set of customs. Here human sexuality was controlled by placing a taboo on childbirth outside marriage and by putting barriers in the way of young couples wishing to tie the knot. This was achieved through

the expectation that newly-wed couples should form a household of their own rather than move in with one or other set of parents. Even the simplest wedding called for a modest outlay – rings had to be bought, the clergyman paid and a celebratory glass or two raised. And the wedding was just the start. If they were to set about housekeeping, the newly-weds also needed money for rent and in order to purchase the few pots and pans and sticks of furniture that made running a home possible.

THE EXPECTATION that married couples should set up their own household and the unwillingness of parents to take their married children under their own roof provided a harsh dose of reality for young lovers dreaming of wedded bliss. Israel Roberts met his wife-to-be in January 1845 when he was not yet 18, but did not marry her until June 1851. For six long years, he recalled, he could ‘never persuade my sweetheart that I could keep a house and home together’. In reply to young Israel’s repeated requests, his partner simply replied: ‘When you can make salt then we’ll talk about it.’ As Israel found to his cost, the need to set about housekeeping blocked the doorway to marriage. And in respecting her community’s expectation that marriage should wait until her husband could ‘make salt’, Sarah Roberts played her part in keeping the birth rate down – after all, by delaying marriage and motherhood for six years Sarah effectively restricted the size of her family.

When most young people made the same choices as Israel and Sarah the effect was to keep the average age of marriage high, which in turn exerted a powerful downward effect on the birth rate. Studies of parish registers have shown that on average men married at the age of 27 at the start of the 18th century, falling to 25 by the early 19th century; women at 26, falling to 23. In other words most people were marrying several years after they had reached sexual maturity or begun courting. Considered in this way, the rather prosaic matter of marriage ages raises some interesting questions about sexual behaviour. With men marrying in their mid to late twenties and women just a few years younger, it is interesting to ask how they handled the sexual urges that puberty had unleashed many years earlier. With no imminent prospect of marriage and penetrative sex, what opportunities for sexual expression were available to the young in the mid-19th century? Did couples like Israel and Sarah lead chaste and celibate lives? Or did they spend their adolescence and early adult years engaging in alternative forms of sexual activity that carried little risk of pregnancy and a new mouth to feed?

ANSWERING SUCH QUESTIONS IS OF COURSE DIFFICULT. Not only are there the usual problems in uncovering evidence about the lives of the poor and often unlettered men and women who made up the bulk of the population, but sex is also a topic about which all levels of society were generally reticent. Yet if evidence about the sexual behaviour of ordinary people is hard to find, it certainly exists.

One thing that is immediately clear from working-class writing is the fact that most ordinary people were not leading celibate lives



A 19th-century engraving of a family introduction.

Working-class diaries and autobiographies shed a unique and important light on the lives of the poor. While many autobiographical writers steered well clear of revealing anything about their intimate experiences, others found they were unable to write their life history without touching upon matters of a sexual nature. As a result such sources can help us to understand not only the social customs that controlled sexual activity in the pre-industrial era, but also the weakening of these controls during the turbulent years of the Industrial Revolution.

One thing that is immediately clear from such working-class writing is the fact that most ordinary people were not leading celibate lives in the years before marriage. Although middle- and upper-class families supervised their children’s courtships closely, the goings-on of young couples who worked for a living were almost wholly unsupervised. Not only did they initiate their own relationships they also enjoyed considerable latitude when it came to spending time together in the hours after work. James Roper, for example, an apprentice living in the small Derbyshire market town of Atherstone in the 1840s, wrote in his diary about how he ‘ran around with the Damsels up the hill and down’ on the Sunday evenings after work and about the ‘long walks’ he took around the town and along the canal with the delightful Kitty, who he eventually married. Many working-class writers recalled enjoying the freedom to spend time alone with new partners, in whatever secluded corners they could find. And what went on between them was unknown to parents, employers or any other authority figures in their lives.

The chance survival of the diary of a London clerk, Nathaniel Bryceson, also from the 1840s sheds an unusual degree of light on the courtship practices of working people. Nathaniel, the illegitimate son of the widowed Mary Bryceson, was working as a clerk for a coal merchant and had thus attained a degree of respectability. The same could not be said of his partner, Ann Fox. Nathaniel never specified exactly how Ann made her living, but it is possible that she was working as a domestic or washerwoman and a later census entry has her listed as a ‘charwoman’.

NATHANIEL’S DIARY RUNS THROUGH 1846. He had turned 19 the previous June and it seems that his relationship with Ann Fox was in its early stages as the new year began. Throughout the first few months of the year the pair met almost every Sunday, occasionally on other days of the week as well, and took long walks about parts of London far from Soho. Finding a space that was not overlooked was perhaps more of a challenge in London than it was in smaller towns and rural areas, but Nathaniel and Ann did the best they could. In February, for example, they used a rain shower to ‘[Shelter] ourselves under arch. Got to wicked tricks’. Whatever they were up to on the bench at St James Park was sufficient to have them ‘accosted by a policeman’. In May, however, Nathaniel moved into lodgings with his granny Shepard and immediately began to take advantage of the fact ▶



Parish registers show that by the end of the 18th century somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of all women walking down the aisle were pregnant

that granny went out every Sunday afternoon. On the last Sunday of May Nathaniel 'Had Ann up in own room, but there got to naughty tricks on the bed.' Most Sundays between then and the end of the year were spent in much the same way. A new phase of their courtship had begun.

WITH GRANNY OUT OF THE WAY, the opportunity opened for Nathaniel and Ann to engage in whatever form of sexual intimacy they wished. It is interesting to note, however, that they did so in ways that avoided the risk of pregnancy. One Sunday, for example, they 'got to our old tricks in which I got a little further than ever'; but this just involved 'just catching a glimpse of the hairs covering her ****' (the asterisks were Nathaniel's). He hoped 'to get on better hereafter in matters of secrecy'. A few weeks later he noted triumphantly that he had 'Got her drawers off at last'; though he ruefully added that the triumph had been 'to no purpose'. The months passed, but Nathaniel and Ann, despite enjoying considerable privacy, were clearly not engaging in penetrative sex. One Sunday he noted that he had 'spent a little seed up her petticoat'; and another time 'made a terrible mess over Ann's new cloak and my own breeches'. How far Nathaniel really wanted matters to be otherwise is open to question. For all that he cast himself as something of an intrepid explorer, charting the unknown lands beneath Ann's skirts in search of conquest, it is far from clear what he planned to do if the path suddenly cleared. He was clearly concerned to conceal his relationship with Ann from his family and had the couple's 'tricks' led to a pregnancy matters between them would be forced under a very public glare. There is no evidence that Nathaniel entertained even the remotest thoughts about marriage. When their relationship became more intimate, Nathaniel was 20 and Ann was 45; he was an aspiring clerk and she was a washerwoman. This was not a union tending towards marriage, which



Above left: Love in a Mill, engraving after Francis Wheatley, 1787. Above: The Dinner Hour, Wigan by Eyre Crowe, 1874.

must largely explain their hesitation to indulge in penetrative sex.

As well as providing glimpses of the intimate lives of courting couples, the autobiographies also shed light on the risks they were prepared to take in balancing their desire for sexual fulfilment against the possibility of pregnancy outside marriage. So long as there was no serious prospect of marriage, most couples behaved like Nathaniel and Ann, judging that the consequences of a birth outside wedlock were too severe to do otherwise. But as time passed and couples got closer to setting up a household of their own, the prospect of a pregnancy became less daunting. Once couples believed their partners were both willing and able to set up house with them, they usually proceeded fairly swiftly to sexual intercourse, often allowing the pregnancy to precipitate the wedding, rather than the other way round. Parish registers show that by the end of the 18th century somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of all women walking down the aisle were pregnant when they did so. Once again, working-class diaries and autobiographies can help us to see some of the stories that lay behind these pregnant brides.

One such source is the diary of Edmund Harrold, a wigmaker, barber and small-time bookseller, living in Manchester in the early 18th



century. Edmund's father, Thomas Harrold, had owned a reasonably prosperous tobacconist business; but Edmund was bent upon a course of downward social mobility and by the time of his death his fortune was so depleted that no will was necessary. His very heavy drinking no doubt played a role in his slow descent into poverty. Yet somewhere in between the demands of work and the incapacitation caused by his drunken binges – 'rambles', as he termed them – Edmund found time to keep a diary, producing in the process a very rare daily record of the life of a working man between the years 1712 and 1715.

The diary opens in June 1712 and, although Edmund used it largely as record of his working life, he also (and most unusually) kept a brief note of each time that he and his wife had sex. There were plenty such occasions to note. One hesitates to know how to describe what happened in the bedroom (and sometimes elsewhere) between Edmund and Sarah. Edmund recorded each occasion by noting 'I did wife' – a turn of phrase from which it is difficult to conjure images of mutual pleasure and enjoyment. In addition to noting each time he 'did wife', Edmund almost always added a few extra details, usually signalling something about the location and speed of their coitus: '2 tymes, couch and bed, in an hour and ½ time', 'standing at the back of the shop titely', 'new fashion'; 'after a scolding bout', '2 times [in] 4 days', 'titely, old fashion', 'oddy', '2 times finely'.

Edmund and Sarah's marriage ended abruptly with Sarah's death in December 1712, but Edmund lost no time in looking around for a new companion and was courting again within three months of Sarah's passing. After a brief and ultimately unsuccessful courtship with Ellen

The Reapers, a hand-coloured mezzotint of 1809.

Howorth, Edmund began courting a servant girl living nearby – Ann Horrocks. As Edmund already possessed a house and needed a wife to run it, the courtship turned quickly to the question of

marriage. No sooner had the pair agreed to marry, than Edmund went from visiting in the daytime to spending the night at Ann's house. He stayed with Ann four nights in the weeks before their wedding. With a firm marriage commitment on both sides and the date set, there was nothing to stand in the way of sexual intercourse.

EMBARKING ON SEXUAL INTERCOURSE following an agreement to marry, rather than the wedding ceremony, was not, of course, without its risks. Couples would understand the level of each other's commitment to marriage in different ways. Some women might hope that a pregnancy would turn ambiguous (or non-existent) promises into a firm offer of marriage; some men no doubt uttered crystal-clear promises and later reneged on them. Clearly there was plenty to go wrong where couples began intercourse on the basis of secretly whispered promises to marry rather than publicly witnessed vows, which helps to explain the small but steady trickle of illegitimate baptisms in every parish church.

We have seen how young people negotiated the balance between sexual fulfilment and delayed marriages. There is one final problem to consider and that concerns the steady rise of illegitimacy during the Industrial Revolution, particularly in those areas such as Lancashire and West Yorkshire that experienced its most dramatic effects at first ►

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hand. At the start of the 18th century about two per cent of all births were illegitimate. By the end of the century that figure had climbed to five per cent and by the middle of the 19th century it had crept yet higher, to six per cent. These national statistics hide some sharp regional contrasts. In many rural areas the illegitimacy rate always remained lower than five per cent. By contrast, some of the factory districts saw illegitimacy rates closer to 20 per cent. This raises the intriguing possibility that men and women in the industrial heartlands were showing a far greater readiness to embark on penetrative sex even when their prospects for marriage were poor. Once again, working-class autobiographies allow us to explore the stories behind the statistics.

Diaries and autobiographies reveal that women had always been more diligent than their partners when it came to preventing an illegitimate birth, either by refusing sexual intercourse when they doubted the likelihood of marriage, or by doing all in their power to bring about a wedding should a conception occur. So in order to understand the spike in illegitimacy in the factory districts we need to think about why women were policing the gateway to sex less diligently than before. The simple answer is work. The factory districts teemed with employment opportunities for young women, most of it much better paid than the usual dismal alternatives – domestic service, needlework, laundry-work and so forth. Well-paid factory jobs gave women the chance to combine work with motherhood and encouraged some to show far less caution when it came to sex outside marriage.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ELLEN JOHNSTON offers an example of how factory work allowed her to raise a child outside marriage and dispense with a male breadwinner altogether. Ellen was born in Glasgow in the 1830s and started working in one of the city's many cotton factories at the age of 11. By her late teens she was sexually active and before too long found herself expecting an illegitimate child. But it was not the disaster it might have been and Ellen appears to have made no effort to use the pregnancy to precipitate a wedding. Instead she embraced the prospect of single-motherhood. She 'longed for the hour' that her child would be born and was delighted to become 'the mother of a lovely daughter'. After the birth Ellen lived with her mother, who took care of her daughter, while she returned to the factory to earn a living for all three. By the middle of the 19th century this model was increasingly common. With family close by to take care of her child and wages that were good enough to support herself, her child and her mother, Ellen did not need the support of a male husband and breadwinner in order to become a mother. She made choices that simply had not existed for women a century earlier.

Women in the factory districts drove the rise in illegitimacy during the Industrial Revolution, but we should not conclude that they were experiencing some kind of early sexual emancipation. Without effective contraception sexual activity usually led swiftly to pregnancy and raising a child on one small income was anything but liberating for the women concerned. Yet if sex outside marriage was not particularly liberating, it certainly was a symptom of how the Industrial Revolution undermined older forms of social control. Before the mid-18th century poverty had controlled young people's sexual behaviour and steered them away from sexual intercourse until they were ready in the eyes of their neighbours to marry, set up house and raise a family.



An usher stops a bridegroom leaving his pregnant bride at the altar in *The Unwilling Bridegroom*, mezzotint of 1788.

The young men and women of the factory districts did not show this kind of deference to social norms. They made decisions about when to start a family that tied in with their own wishes, rather than obeying what their community dictated. Seen in this light it becomes possible to understand the true complexity and significance of the Industrial Revolution. As well as ushering in new working patterns, industrialisation raised the incomes of the poor just enough to permit them to make meaningful decisions about their own life. As such, it was a vital step towards the sexual revolution of more recent times.

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