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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.23.1998.1/2.202-230>

PUBLISHER

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VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Hoyler, Michael. 2019. "Small Town Development and Urban Illiteracy: Comparative Evidence from Leicestershire Marriage Registers 1754-1890". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/18916>.

## Small Town Development and Urban Illiteracy: Comparative Evidence from Leicestershire Marriage Registers 1754-1890

*Michael Hoyler\**

**Abstract:** Geographical variations in literacy levels are a constituent feature of the long process of educational expansion in England. Based on the analysis of Anglican marriage registers for the period 1754 to 1890, the article explores patterns of illiteracy in three small Leicestershire towns with contrasting economic functions. Illiteracy levels were closely related to urban occupational and social structures, which also affected distinct gender differentials. Evidence on the effect of literacy on age at marriage and marriage distance suggests that demographic behaviour and spatial interaction were determined more by socio-economic factors than by the possession of literacy skills. Literacy attainment, however, was linked to extended marriage distances when both spouses could sign the register.

### 1. Introduction

The rise of popular literacy in England from early-modern times has been the object of numerous historical investigations. National trends in literacy figures have been culled from large samples of marriage registers (Schofield 1973), while studies of occupational and social differentiation have highlighted the changing distribution of literacy within society (Cressy 1980, Houston 1985, Vincent 1989). Especially the nature of the relationship between education and

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I am grateful to the Gottlieb Daimler und Karl Benz Stiftung for a grant supporting my research while based at the Department of Geography, Loughborough University of Technology.

industrialisation in the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century has caused considerable debate amongst scholars. England as the first industrialised nation was not among the leading countries with regard to mass literacy. Did early industrialisation create stagnation, and perhaps even a decline in literacy rates? Did a lack of public policy and state intervention hinder rapid progress in literacy, or could private demand and instruction offset the late state supply of formal schooling (Mitch 1992)?

Some disagreement about the causes of established literacy trends during the period of industrialisation persists. However, a key to conflicting interpretations of aggregated figures might be found in approaches that focus on specific regions and places. W.B. Stephens (1973) programmatically called research in this field "the task of the local historian" and concluded in his major survey on the geography of literacy from 1830 to 1870 that "to talk of a national condition is to distort reality" (Stephens 1987, 2). A central outcome of quantitative reconstructions and debates in the last decades has indeed been the distinctive regional differentiation of literacy development: "we clearly need to avoid thinking of 'England', especially urban England, as a homogenous unit experiencing 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic' literacy trends before [and, we might add, after] the 1830s" (Sanderson 1991, 17). Consequently, attempts to base literacy studies in a firmer context have resulted in a multitude of investigations on a local and regional scale, partly combining quantitative indicators with more qualitative evidence to explore the spatially variable interrelationship between the socio-economic and cultural context and the spread of literacy.<sup>2</sup>

A common basis of quantitative studies in the field is the acceptance of a simple measurement as a crude but crucial index of literacy: a person's ability to sign his or her name. Whereas investigations into the state of literacy in pre-industrial England have to rely on fragmentary and often socially biased evidence from petitions, court records, probate documents or wills, Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act in 1753 unwittingly made Anglican marriage registers the most reliable source for comparative literacy research for the following 150 years. To achieve the act's aim, "the better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages", registration was made compulsory as a part of every marriage ceremony. Apart from the name of both parties and the mode of marriage (banns or licence), the signatures of clergyman, bride, groom and two witnesses as well as the parish of residence of both marriage partners had to be entered into printed register books. Only after the introduction of civil registration and a new law taking the monopoly of marriage from the Anglican

<sup>1</sup> For research reviews, see Stephens (1990), Sanderson (1991), Mitch (1993). International advances in the field are summarised in Graff (1987) and Houston (1988).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the studies in Stephens (ed. 1983), Reay (1991), Smith (1992). For a comprehensive digest of local studies up to 1986, see Stephens (1987).

<sup>3</sup> 26 George II, c.33, "An Act for the better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages". See Stone (1979, 31-33).

church in 1836, did all the registers require the additional entries of bride and bridegroom's occupations, their ages and both their fathers' names and occupations. This extra information allows a wider range of aspects to be studied directly from the registers, for the period starting in July 1837, such as age at marriage, occupational hierarchy of literacy or social mobility. Unfortunately, with the introduction of civil registration, the Anglican registers may lose representativeness in some parishes, depending on the acceptance of civil marriage and the prevalence of Nonconformism. Despite this drawback, and notwithstanding the wider debate about the meaning of literacy beyond its reduction to a dichotomous variable,<sup>4</sup> signature counts derived from marriage registers have become an invaluable indicator in comparative literacy studies that look beyond individual achievement.<sup>5</sup>

The following study focuses on the analysis of marriage registers from three small towns in Leicestershire. Melton Mowbray, Hinckley and Coalville differed substantially in their social and occupational composition, resulting from their specialised functions as central places in socio-economic contrasting parts of the county. During the nineteenth century, Melton Mowbray served as a regional market town and service centre in the agricultural east, Hinckley was dominated by its function as a centre of framework-knitting in the south-west and Coalville rose from the 1820s as a newly created mining settlement in the north-west. An examination of all marriages entered in the Anglican registers from 1754 (in Coalville from 1845) to 1890 reveals not only information on literacy development and its social and occupational differentiation, but allows one to test hypotheses on the importance often attached to literacy as a conjectural agent of modernisation. A comparative approach was chosen to put the unique histories of the towns into perspective. How did socio-economic contrasts and divergent fortunes over the period reflect in the educational attainment of small town societies? Did the towns differ significantly from their regional context? How do they fit in with patterns revealed for other towns during the period of industrialisation?

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<sup>4</sup> For a critical view with regard to early modern England, see, among others, Thomas (1986) and Ford (1993). One source-based problem is the unavailability of information about reading skills in the registers. It has been convincingly argued that equating the making of a mark with 'absolute' illiteracy neglects the widespread existence of a working class reading culture (Reay 1991, 129).

<sup>5</sup> On signatures as a universal, standard and direct index of literacy, see the classic account by Schofield (1968). However, most arguments for the use of marriage register signatures as a relative indicator of literacy can be found in the Annual Reports of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England (reprinted in 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Report 1868 (1870), xxxvi-xliv). From 1839, the Registrar General published aggregate literacy figures, based on all (Anglican, Nonconformist, Roman Catholic and civil) marriage registers in his Annual Reports. A condensed discussion of Anglican marriage registers as a main source in quantitative literacy research is provided in Hoyler (1996).

## 2. Study towns

Melton Mowbray and Hinckley are both old market towns of Anglo-Saxon origin.<sup>6</sup> During the eighteenth century they experienced a functional divergence, evidence of which had become apparent in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1640 the first stocking frame of the county was established in Hinckley and domestic framework knitting was adopted quickly. Hinckley soon developed into one of the main centres of hosiery production in Leicestershire.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the town's population trebled during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1780, about half of the population was employed in framework knitting, an occupational monostructure that remained over much of the next century (Royle 1978/79, 52). Hinckley's one-sided economy made its population extremely dependent on the demand for hosiery products. Only during the Napoleonic Wars did the industry prosper, but this "golden age for hosiery" (Beckett 1988, 284) remained a short interlude. Increasing availability of labour, reduction of state orders, and changes in the hosiery fashion from long stockings to short socks were only some of the causes of the following economic depression. Regional and international competition intensified, leading to a fall in demand for Hinckley hosiery, which caused poverty and social unrest among the framework knitters of the town. The disastrous situation of the "Hungry Forties" (Francis 1930, 128) instigated a government enquiry that revealed the harsh practices common in the industry, which added to the hardship of the framework knitters.<sup>8</sup> Demographic development in Hinckley mirrors the changing economic fortunes. Population growth came to a halt from 1811 to 1861, wealthy inhabitants moved away from Hinckley in order to avoid the high poor rates and falling property values (Royle 1978/79, 55). After a short upswing in the 1850s, the end of American cotton imports during the Civil War culminated in the "cotton famine" of 1862 (Parker 1955, 14). Only after the introduction of the factory system with steam-powered frames did the hosiery industry finally become competitive, while alternative employment opportunities widened.

Melton Mowbray, a market centre serving the rich agricultural lands in the north-east of the county, fared better during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the establishment of fox hunting in the region at the end of the eighteenth century,

<sup>6</sup> A detailed comparative survey of the evolution of Leicestershire market towns and their functional divergence in the eighteenth and nineteenth century is provided by Royle (1981). Other studies by Royle have highlighted substantial differences in the socio-economic and demographic development of the three towns chosen for analysis here (Royle 1978, 1978/79, 1979/80). See also Hunt (1979), Francis (1930), Baker (1983) for different aspects of the history of the three study towns.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the development and importance of framework knitting in Leicestershire, see Parker (1955), Smith (1963), Mills (1982).

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Commissioner appointed to inquire into the Condition of the Frame-work Knitters (1845).

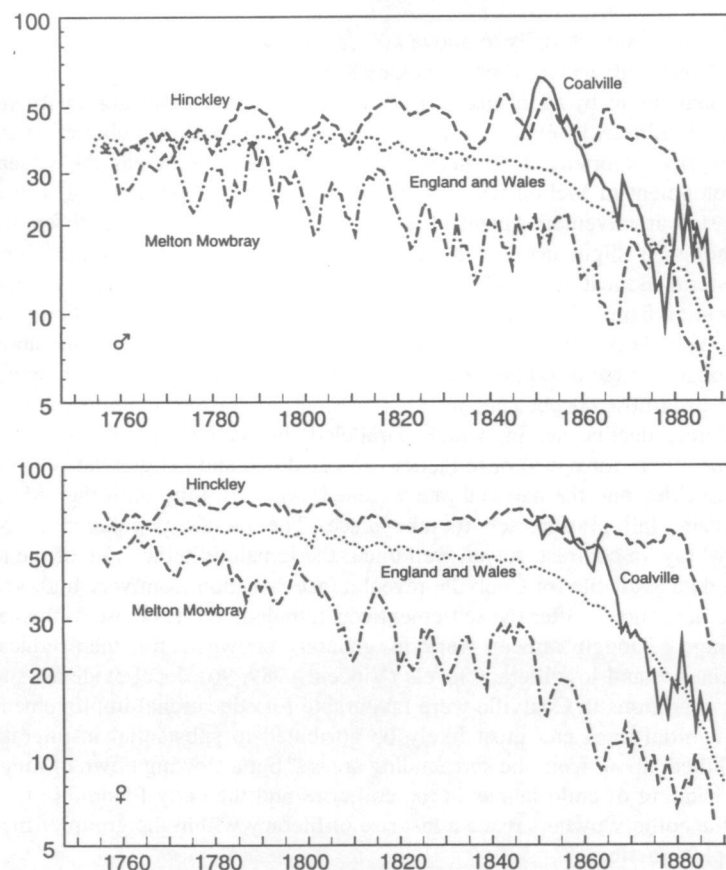
the town became one of the favourite resorts of hunting-oriented upper classes in England. The temporary residence of the aristocracy strongly influenced Melton Mowbray's occupational structure. In the census of 1851 more than half of all occupations were recorded in the tertiary sector, with 15 per cent in domestic service and 6 per cent working as grooms (Royle 1979/80, 52). The traditional market function of the town and its new position as a "hunting metropolis" led to an increase in prosperity, and substantial population growth was noted in the first third of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the production of stilton cheese and pork pies made local food production famous and stimulated trade.

Coalville, situated in the north-west of the county close to the old market and spa town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, was a creation of the nineteenth century. After the discovery of coal in the concealed measures of the Leicestershire Coalfield and the opening of a railway line to Leicester in 1833, the settlement grew quickly from 100 inhabitants in 1830 to a population of 1449 in 1851 (Royle 1978, 35). According to the census of 1851, over 60 per cent of all occupations were in the mining industry (Royle 1979/80, 52). Working conditions in the collieries were reported to be comparatively good, neither women nor children under 10 years were employed by the mining companies (Baker 1983, 55-59). Following early expansion as a mining community, Coalville's economy diversified from the 1850s with the establishment of brick manufacture and engineering industry.

### 3. Levels of Illiteracy 1754-1890

The short history of the three study towns has highlighted functional and structural changes during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when both traditional market centres experienced a period of growing divergence of their economic basis, and Coalville emerged as a new mining town. Figure 1, derived from a count of signatures and marks in all Anglican marriage registers of the three towns, reveals an extremely uneven educational development and allows the comparison with national levels of illiteracy from 1754 to 1890.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Altogether, information on 16852 spouses marrying from 1754 to 1890 has been derived from the marriage registers (Hinckley 11058, Melton Mowbray 5020, Coalville 774) and coded for analysis with SAS. The marriage registers are available on microfiche in the Leicestershire Record Office, Leicester: Melton Mowbray St Mary (6/1754-12/1890: DG 36/18-36/23), Hinckley St Mary (4/1754-12/1890: DE 1135/14-1135/22) and Holy Trinity (10/1843-5/1890: DE 1224/15), Coalville Christ Church (9/1845-12/1890: DE 2530/4). In Coalville, an Anglican church was not consecrated before 1840, and the vicar was granted the permission to perform marriages only in 1845 (Baker 1983, 52, 126). The national figures were taken from two graphs in Schofield (1973, 442, 445). They are based on a random sample of 274 English parish registers (1754-1840) and on data published for England and Wales (from 1839) in the Annual Reports of the Registrar General.



*Figure 1: Male and female illiteracy in Hinckley, Melton Mowbray and Coalville (5-year moving averages) in Comparison to the general trend, 1754-1890*

Evidence from the marriage registers indicates, that both Hinckley and Melton Mowbray shared similar levels of illiteracy in mid-eighteenth century, close to the national average of just under 40 per cent, reflecting the educational situation in the 1730s, before sectoral specialisation had taken full effect. Thereafter, it seems, the development of illiteracy rates was closely tied to economic fortunes of the majority of the town's populations. An educational gap opened up that only began to close again in the 1880s. Male illiteracy in Hinckley ran parallel to the stagnating national averages until the 1780s, when

it increased substantially to above 40 per cent. The upward trend continued into the 1860s, at which time Hinckley's male inhabitants lagged behind the national figure by more than 20 per cent. Only after 1880 did an irreversible drop in illiteracy levels set in. In contrast, the male population in Melton Mowbray experienced a constant downward trend. Whereas the educational development in Melton was one of gradual improvement, starting well before any state involvement in education, the case of Hinckley tells a different story. Although a slight decline in illiteracy can be discerned in the 1870s, only Forster's Education Act at the beginning of the decade and compulsory education from 1880 finally stopped the divergence between local and national rate. Female illiteracy figures underline this argument. Starting just above the national average of 60 per cent in the 1750s, in Hinckley female illiteracy soon rose to almost 80 per cent in the 1770s. In contrast to male development, a moderate decline set in, which paralleled the national trend until the early 1820s. Then, the speed of reduction slowed down and the gap between women in Hinckley and the national rate widened. Again, it took until the 1880s for a dramatic fall in illiteracy to take place. The female population in Melton Mowbray, in contrast, stayed well under the female illiteracy rate of the nation. The data available for Coalville reveal a fast transition from very high levels of illiteracy, shortly after the settlement was founded, to rates close to the national average. Though miners were in general renowned for their educational abstinence and low literacy levels (Vincent 1989, 96), local evidence suggests that conditions in Coalville were favourable for educational improvement. The high initial rates can most likely be attributed to substantial in-migration of unskilled labour from the surrounding areas,<sup>10</sup> but a slowing down of migration, the banning of child labour in the collieries and the early founding of schools by the colliery owners made a fast rise of literacy within the group of marrying couples possible.

The results for the three towns underline the existing variety within a general 'literacy transition' from low to near-universal signing abilities. While female illiteracy declined at a faster rate in all three towns, distinct patterns of sex-specific illiteracy rates emerge from the reconstruction (see Figure 2). In Melton Mowbray, steady improvement occurred for both males and females, with only a brief halt in the 1840s. Gender disparities in illiteracy reversed after the mid-nineteenth century, due to a faster decline of female illiteracy. In Hinckley, continuing high illiteracy levels paralleled the long term economic stagnation mentioned above. Again, female rates decreased, albeit slightly, while male levels of illiteracy rose until the early 1860s, reducing disparities between the sexes. Still, a considerable gap of over 15 percentage points remained. Only after massive state intervention in education, coupled with a

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<sup>10</sup> For a similar example from north-east England, see Duffy (1985; 5), who reports depressed literacy rates in Esh in the Dearness Valley when rapid in-migration outstripped the existing educational resources after pits were sunk in the 1860s.



widening of employment opportunities outside traditional framework knitting, did a quick decline in illiteracy rates take place for both sexes. The new town of Coalville, however, experienced a rapid transition from similarly high levels of illiteracy for both sexes before state legislation took hold.

Although local educational performance varied extremely, it formed part of a larger pattern and was, at least in the second half of the nineteenth century, deeply embedded in dominant regional structures. The socio-economic divide between the mainly agricultural districts of Melton Mowbray, Billesdon, Market Harborough and Lutterworth and the more industrialised western districts was closely mirrored by basic educational disparities (see Figure 3). Lower levels of illiteracy and the reversal of traditional male superiority occurred in all agricultural districts. Literacy differentials between the sexes, in contrast, remained high in regions dominated by the hosiery industry with high female industrial employment, most pronounced in the dramatically growing urban district of Leicester. Despite decreasing overall levels of illiteracy, an increase in regional disparities could be observed before the 1870 Education Act took effect, especially with regard to female literacy rates (Hoyler 1995, 106)."

So far, the argument has been one of inference and aggregate statistics. Marriage registers, however, allow to investigate individual literacy and test some hypotheses that have been advanced on an aggregate level. To what extent did different occupational groups contribute to the overall educational performance of their communities? Did the possession of basic literacy skills influence demographic behaviour or the range of spatial interaction? The following sections are devoted to a closer look at literacy differentiation within the towns.

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" Correlation analysis for Leicestershire Registration Districts reveals high positive correlation coefficients between illiteracy and percentage of workforce in industrial employment (+0,82 for female illiteracy 1870/74 and percentage of female industrial employment 1871). Illiteracy rates 1865/69 and population density 1851 were also highly correlated (+0,87). While there was no significant correlation between Day School attendance and illiteracy, Sunday School attendance in 1851 correlated positively with illiteracy rates 1865/69 (+0,63), underlining the fact, that for many working class children Sunday Schools were the only (often insufficient) means of education in the industrial districts (Hoyler 1995, 104-112). For more evidence on links between illiteracy and socio-economic structures in the Registration Districts of the Midlands, see Stephens (1987, 102-161).

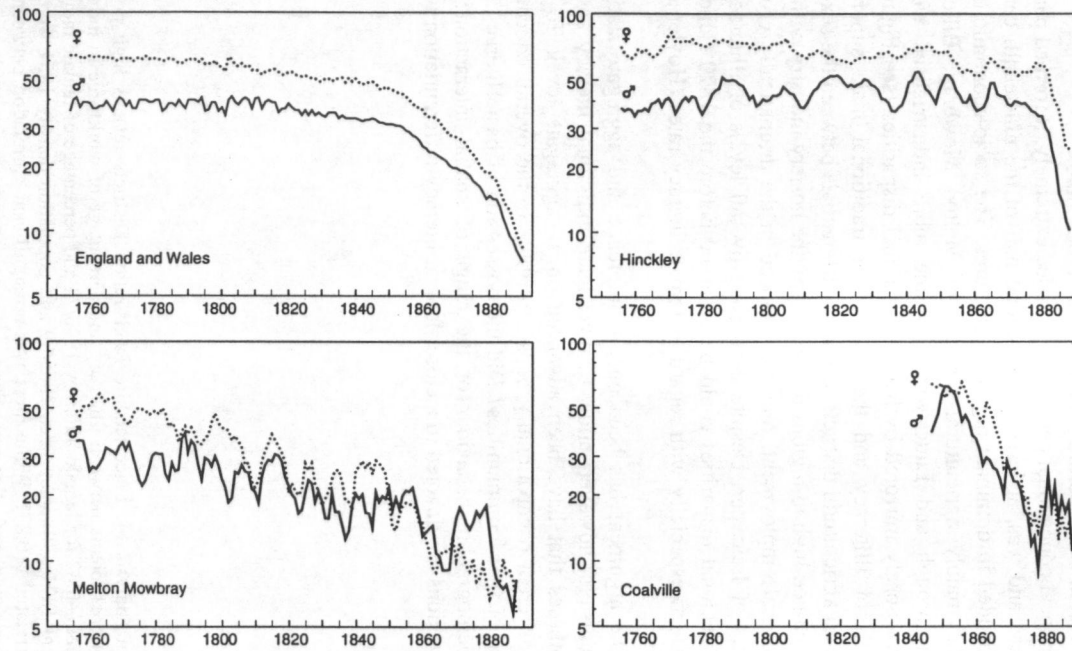


Figure 2: Genderdisparities in illiteracy, 1754-1890

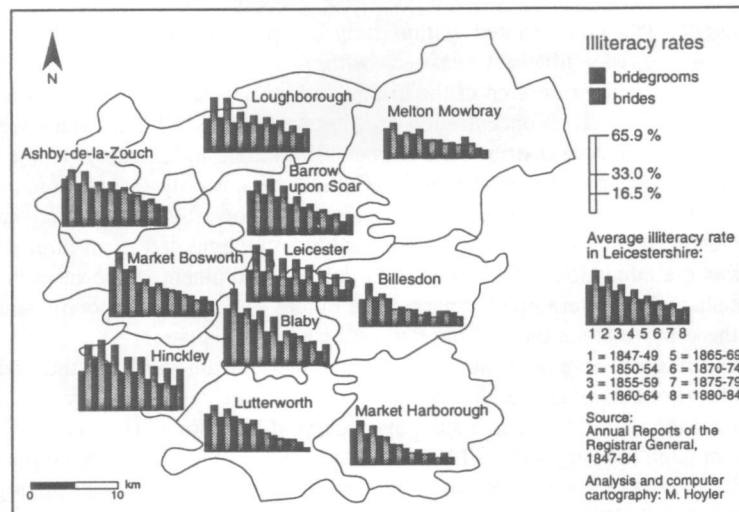


Figure 3: Regional disparities of illiteracy in Leicestershire, 1847-1884

#### 4. Socio-Economic Determinants of Illiteracy

##### 4.1 Illiteracy and Occupational Structure

A detailed analysis is possible from 1837, when occupations were recorded in the registers. The occupational hierarchy of illiteracy revealed, resembles the pattern that has repeatedly been observed in other places.<sup>12</sup> Generally, the hierarchy was linked to social status and different functional importance of literacy for different occupations (see Table 1). The gentry and professions, together with high positions in industry and trade were almost universally literate. The same holds true for commercial occupations that involved trading skills, e.g. grocers or butchers. Literacy differentials were still notable between the various crafts in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here, as well as within unskilled labour, rates for the same occupations varied most between the towns, and point to additional factors other than functional requirements being responsible for determining educational attainment. However, illiteracy was confined to a narrow segment of occupations in Leicestershire small town societies. Of all male occupations listed in the registers, illiteracy was most widespread in Hinckley, with 27 per cent of the recorded 180 occupations containing at least one illiterate person. In Melton Mowbray and Coalville

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Schofield (1973, 450), Campbell (1983, 22, 26).

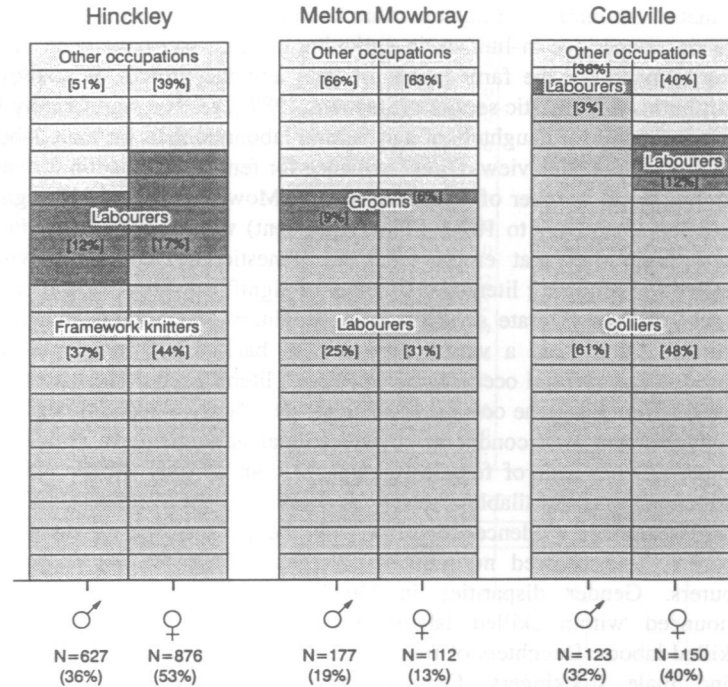
illiteracy was concentrated within only 14 per cent of male occupations, whereas female illiteracy existed within a broader occupational range, according to the profession of the bride's father<sup>13</sup> (Hinckley 47%, Melton 18%, Coalville 31%). The concentration of illiterates was even higher when we look at their quantitative distribution. Framework knitters in Hinckley, labourers in Melton Mowbray and miners in Coalville were not only the most numerous occupations, but contributed overproportionally towards the illiteracy rate of the respective towns. Although a similar hierarchy emerged in all three places, it was the educational behaviour of largely one dominant group in each town that shaped the overall performance (see Figure 4). It is to the specific situation of these professions that we have to turn for an explanation.

The stagnant economic situation of the domestic framework knitting industry in the Midlands after the Napoleonic Wars left Hinckley and many villages of and near the Soar valley in a state of "industrial involution" (Levine 1977, 34). The cottage industry suffered both from regional and international competition and the evils of the local putting out system. It is therefore not surprising that framework knitters constituted over half of Hinckley's illiterates, though their proportion in the marrying population was significantly smaller. In most families, child labour was an economic necessity, preventing children from attending school and leading to a "chain of occupational inheritance" (Royle 1978/79, 58) that in turn helped to supply cheap labour and delayed investment in mechanised hosiery production. This vicious circle was only interrupted with the introduction of steam powered factories from the 1860s and the 1870 Education Act. Whereas factory employment reduced child labour due to the enforcement of the Factory Acts, educational legislation ensured sufficient school provision that had long been lacking in Hinckley (Education of the Lower Classes 1819, 455; Francis 1930, 135). However, local resistance against the proposed formation of a new "Board" School was considerable, "for it was feared that the effect on the poorer households, owing to their being deprived of the earnings of the children, would be disastrous" (Francis 1930, 144).

Whereas only state intervention and economic modernisation could finally change educational stagnation in Hinckley, the miners in Coalville benefited from the paternalism of the early colliery owners. Both the proprietors of Snibston and Whitwick collieries provided housing and schools for their workers (Baker 1983, 55-58, 130-136). Children under ten years were not employed in the mines. The Children's Employment Commissioners reported

<sup>13</sup> As only a small number of registers report female occupation, the profession of the bride's father was used for classification, unless stated otherwise. A check on the distribution of male illiteracy according to the profession of the bridegroom's father shows no significant divergence from the percentages reported above for Hinckley and Melton Mowbray. In Coalville, the percentage of male occupations recording illiterates increased to 30, probably due to the wider spectrum of occupations within the male population migrating to Coalville in the first phase of the town's history.

Figure 4: The contribution of selected occupations towards overall illiteracy, 1845-1890



A whole bar represents 100 percent of illiterates in the respective town, each rectangle five percent, values are rounded. Percentages in brackets give the proportion of each occupation in the marriage registers from 1845 to 1890. Women are classified by the occupation of their fathers. N = Number of illiterates.

in 1842 that the miner's children "mostly all learn to read and many to write" (quoted in Baker 1983, 57). High illiteracy within the mining community was largely a phenomenon of the first generation of migrants to the new settlement. The quick eradication of illiteracy underlines contemporary evidence of the comparatively favourable working conditions and the acceptance of provided schooling by working class families.

The highest levels of literacy and the continual long-term decline of spouses unable to sign the registers in Melton Mowbray point to an environment favourable to education. Certainly, the occupational make-up of the market town, with a high percentage of commercial activities, and the generally prosperous situation were of central importance. Moreover, the Melton Mowbray Town Estate, an early kind of co-operative of the independent townsmen had provided free schooling for boys since the sixteenth century, and a girl's school was built in 1794 (Hunt 1979, 94-95, 100-101). "The poor possess the means of education", reported an early nineteenth century enquiry

(Education of the Lower Classes 1819, 458). Illiteracy in the town was largely confined to agricultural labourers, though their performance was much better than that of labourers in Hinckley. It has been argued that the observed reversal of gender disparities in literacy in agricultural areas may have been due to a falling demand for the farm labour of girls and the growth of employment opportunities in domestic services (Stephens 1987, 21). The significantly lower illiteracy figures for daughters of agricultural labourers than for male labourers in Melton support this view. Direct evidence for female occupation is available for only a small number of brides. In Melton Mowbray, out of 217 registered female servants (1837 to 1890) 171 (79 per cent) were able to sign with their names, suggesting that employment in domestic service did provide an incentive for acquiring literacy. Moreover, a significant proportion of over 30 per cent of these literate servants were daughters of labourers, whereas the remainder came from a varied occupational background mostly of skilled labour and commercial occupations. However, literacy requirements may have differed within the same occupations across the country, depending on whether the environment was conducive to educational attainment. In Hinckley, for example, 70 per cent of female servants (21 out of only 30 for whom this information was available) made a mark in the registers. Yet, this (unrepresentative) evidence contrasts with the performance of daughters of labourers, who showed no marked divergence from the illiteracy rate of labourers. Gender disparities in Hinckley were generally much more pronounced within skilled labour, e.g. framework knitters, than within unskilled labour. Daughters of framework knitters lagged 20 percentage points behind male stockings. Female framework knitters who named their profession fared even worse with 81% of 194 unable to sign. It was the overall dominance of the hosiery trade that was responsible for the sustained literacy gap in Hinckley.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.2 Illiteracy and Social Structure

Occupational differentiation of literacy can generally be reconstructed from marriage registers after 1837. Before that date, occupations were only occasionally listed and only in few places is there sufficient information for detailed analysis. In the absence of regular occupational entries in the registers of Hinckley and Melton Mowbray before 1837, use was made of the recorded mode of marriage to study the relation between social status and literacy attainment. Usually, marriages were performed after banns had been read out in church on three consecutive Sundays (Steel 1976, 58). However, a licence

<sup>14</sup> For similar evidence on the relative standing of the sexes, see Vincent (1989, 101–104). The female occupational hierarchy was led by dressmakers (10 in Hinckley, 72 in Melton) and schoolmistresses (14 in Melton), who could all sign with their name.

Table 1: Illiteracy in selected occupations, 1845-1890

Hinckley						
Occupation	grooms			brides		
	No.	No. marks	% marks	No.	No. marks	% marks
Gentleman	8	0	0	7	0	0
Farmer	28	0	0	47	0	0
Hosier	8	0	0	5	0	0
Manufacturer	12	0	0	11	0	0
Clerk	17	0	0	7	1	14
Grocer	10	0	0	11	0	0
Butcher	16	0	0	21	4	19
Baker	9	0	0	11	4	36
Bricklayer	46	10	22	19	10	53
Bootmaker	82	26	32	67	34	51
Trimmer	67	26	39	18	8	44
Gardener	26	12	46	28	5	18
Framework knitter	644	341	53	734	525	72
Labourer	204	114	56	283	166	59
Boatman	20	14	70	2	1	50
Chimney Sweep	11	9	81	4	2	50
Melton Mowbray						
Occupation	grooms			brides		
	No.	No. marks	% marks	No.	No. marks	% marks
Gentleman	9	0	0	10	1	10
Farmer	28	0	0	55	1	2
Grazier	8	2	25	21	0	0
Clerk	15	0	0	5	0	0
Grocer	10	0	0	10	0	0
Butcher	20	0	0	14	1	7
Baker	16	1	6	11	0	0
Carpenter	18	0	0	24	0	0
Bootmaker	25	1	4	24	3	12
Groom	82	8	10	56	4	7
Servant	31	4	13	11	1	9
Gardener	17	3	18	19	1	5
Labourer	233	89	38	280	75	27
Hawker	4	3	75	7	4	57
Coalville						
Occupation	grooms			brides		
	No.	No. Marks	% marks	No.	No. marks	% marks
Farmer	6	0	0	14	0	0
Labourer	12	2	17	45	16	36
Collier	235	111	47	180	108	60

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church. Women are classified by the occupation of their fathers.

could be obtained from the bishop for a higher fee, avoiding the public announcement and making a quicker marriage possible. This mode of marriage, contemporary statisticians argued, "distinguishes classes, and is fashionable, so that nearly all people of the middle class and some artisans marry by licence, while all the labouring population marry by banns, or its equivalent certificate" (27<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1864 (1866), x). Although the Annual Reports of the Registrar General frequently interpreted the two most common modes of marriage as "respective badges of capital and labour" (23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Report 1860 (1862), v) and classified working-classes (banns) and middle and upper classes (licence) accordingly, the dichotomous character of this indicator as well as possible local and temporal changes in the acceptance of either mode of marriage (Steel 1976, 225–227) only allow its use as a very crude measure. However, the distribution of marriages after banns and by licence in the three study towns confirms differences in their social composition, that can also be discerned by more detailed approaches for individual years.<sup>15</sup> About a third of all marriages in Melton Mowbray were solemnised by licence, suggesting a considerably higher middle class representation in this East-Leicestershire market town than in Hinckley, where less than a fifth of all couples married by licence. Coalville's low percentage of this type of marriage reflects its working class domination as a mining community.

As Table 2 reveals, mode of marriage and literacy attainment were closely linked in all three communities. Those marrying by banns showed levels of illiteracy at least twice as high as those preferring marriage by licence. Gender disparities of illiteracy were prominent in both categories, but these inequalities were reduced quicker for brides and bridegrooms marrying by licence. The reversal of the traditional male/female literacy differential in the second half of the century can again be interpreted as a result of female working class performance in Melton Mowbray. The higher percentage of marriages by licence in Melton indicates the effect of social structure, and possibly related levels of prosperity, on the overall illiteracy rate of the town. However, within both categories of marriage, place specific disparities persisted throughout.

## 5. Implications of Literacy

### 5.1 Illiteracy and Age at Marriage

Data available from the marriage registers not only allow to reconstruct socio-economic patterns of illiteracy, but can be used to test some frequent assumptions of modernisation theory about the consequences of literacy. It has been argued that literacy as a cornerstone of modern societies is closely related

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Royle (1979/80, 52) for a comparison of the social structure of all three towns in 1851.



Table 2: Illiteracy by mode of marriage, 1754-1890

Place of marriage and period	Number of marriages after banns	Number of marriages by licence	Per cent of marriages by licence	Banns		Licence	
				per cent of grooms making marks	per cent of brides making marks	per cent of grooms making marks	per cent of brides making marks
Hinckley							
1754-1799	1212	278	19	48	80	15	39
1800-1844	1733	292	14	51	73	11	23
1845-1890	1608	131	8	39	57	0	3
Melton Mowbray							
1754-1799	441	197	31	39	58	11	20
1800-1844	629	309	33	28	36	6	7
1845-1890	722	195	21	18	16	1	2
Coalville							
1845-1890	348	25	7	35	43	4	8

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church.

Table 3: Mean age at first marriage by literacy and mode of marriage, 1845-1890

Place and time of marriage	groom		bride		groom		bride	
	mark	signature	mark	signature	banns	licence	banns	licence
Hinckley								
(Mean)	22,9	23,4	21,5	22,5	22,9	29,0	21,8	25,4
(Standard deviation)	(4,8)	(4,8)	(4,1)	(4,5)	(4,3)	(7,6)	(4,1)	(5,9)
(Median)	(22)	(22)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(28)	(21)	(24,5)
Melton Mowbray								
(Mean)	23,2	26,1	21,6	24,2	24,6	31,3	23,6	25,1
(Standard deviation)	(2,9)	(6,1)	(3,4)	(5,7)	(4,8)	(7,3)	(5,5)	(5,5)
(Median)	(23)	(25)	(20)	(23)	(24)	(22)	(22)	(24,5)
Coalville								
(Mean)	22,9	23,1	20,6	21,9	22,8	26,2	21,2	23,8
(Standard deviation)	(5,0)	(3,9)	(3,2)	(3,7)	(4,1)	(6,8)	(3,4)	(5,2)
(Median)	(21)	(22)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(25)	(20)	(22,5)

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church.

to rational behaviour and is therefore linked to demographic modernisation.<sup>16</sup> This view, mostly advanced in aggregate-level studies, has been challenged by social historians focusing on micro-scale analysis. One often quoted example is David Levine's family reconstitution study of Shepshed, a proto-industrial framework knitting village in Leicestershire (Levine 1980). Considering reproductive behaviour, occupation and literacy patterns, Levine concluded "the most we can say is that illiteracy was not accompanied by mindless breeding nor was literacy associated with a prudential reproductive strategy" (Levine 1980, 42). Although an analysis of marriage registers alone cannot unravel the complexities of demographic behaviour, the recorded age at marriage provides a valuable key variable, which we can compare for our three study towns. Supposing a rationalising influence of literacy, we should expect a higher age at marriage for literates as part of a conscious strategy of fertility control.

As with illiteracy, the age at first marriage differed considerably between the three towns. In the period 1845 to 1890 it was highest in Melton Mowbray with 25,7 years for grooms (N=1 15) and 23,9 years for brides (N=125), followed by Hinckley with 23,2 years for grooms (N=1 100) and 22,0 for brides (N=1 145). In Coalville, men married on average with 23,0 years (N=352), women with 21,4 (N=359).<sup>17</sup> In all towns, literate grooms and brides married later in life than illiterates (see Table 3), but this differentiation hides the effects of important intervening variables.

Table 3 reveals the much stronger influence of social status, again measured by using banns and licence, on mean age at first marriage. A lower mean age at marriage for female illiterates than for brides marrying by banns seems to support the view that illiteracy was linked to earlier marriage. However, after controlling for social status and occupation, no simple relation between mean age at first marriage and literacy is discernible (see Table 4). Although there is a slight tendency for illiterates to marry earlier, differences are small and age at marriage is sometimes higher for illiterates than for literates. What emerges from this simple exercise suggests that occupational and social status were the driving forces behind differentials in age at marriage. Literacy therefore may not have been a decisive factor in determining demographic behaviour in 19<sup>th</sup> century Leicestershire, a result that supports Levine's findings. However, it is important to recognise the limited scope of the material analysed here.

## 5.2 Illiteracy and Spatial Interaction

A similar exercise as with age of marriage can be undertaken with other information that is given in the registers: the place of residence of both parties.

<sup>16</sup> For a review and critical evaluation of this "received wisdom", see Graff (1979).

<sup>17</sup> In Melton Mowbray, the custom of entering "of full age" or "of minor age" in the age column of the registers greatly reduced the number of marriages for this analysis.

Table 4: Mean age at first marriage by literacy and occupation, 1845-1890  
(marriages by banns)

Occupation	bridegroom		bride	
	mark	signature	mark	signature
<b>Hinckley</b>				
Framework knitter	22,5 [21] (N=187)	22,2 [21] (N=182)	21,3 [20] (N=328)	21,5 [20] (N=137)
Bootmaker	21,5 [22] (N=24)	22,0 [21] (N=38)	21,4 [20] (N=16)	21,6 [21] (N=26)
Labourer	24,5 [22] (N=60)	24,8 [23] (N=53)	21,7 [20] (N=92)	22,4 [22] (N=84)
Farmer	(N=0)	29,3 [26,5] (N=10)	(N=0)	24,0 [23] (N=21)
Others	23,0 [22] (N=91)	23,0 [22] (N=402)	21,8 [20] (N=142)	22,4 [21] (N=239)
<b>Melton Mowbray</b>				
Labourer	23,4 [23] (N=13)	22,9 [21] (N=18)	21,6 [20] (N=7)	23,4 [21] (N=32)
Groom	(N=0)	28,1 [25] (N=9)	22,0 [22] (N=2)	21,5 [21] (N=6)
Others	22,0 [22] (N=2)	25,0 [24] (N=54)	21,3 [20] (N=3)	24,6 [23] (N=55)
<b>Coalville</b>				
Collier	22,2 [21] (N=101)	22,1 [21] (N=117)	20,0 [20] (N=102)	20,5 [20] (N=68)
Labourer	24,0 (N=1)	27,3 [27] (N=9)	22,0 [20,5] (N=14)	23,0 [22] (N=25)
Others	28,2 [26] (N=11)	23,4 [22,5] (N=96)	22,3 [20,5] (N=26)	22,2 [21] (N=106)

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church. Women are classified by the occupation of their fathers. The median value is given in square brackets.

Although marriage distances, defined as the distances separating the premarital addresses of spouses, underestimate the extent of geographical mobility, they are a valuable surrogate measure to examine spatial contact patterns between different communities and their degree of isolation.<sup>18</sup> While the extent and frequency of interparochial marriage contacts, their directions and involved distances have repeatedly been mapped, especially in rural areas, less is known about social, occupational and educational characteristics of local contact fields. Small towns with a high percentage of literates, we could assume, developed larger marriage horizons than towns where educational attainment was low, as communication could be maintained over longer distances without frequent personal contacts. The following section therefore examines, whether literacy levels and marriage distances were related during the period from 1754

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Millard (1982) and the studies cited there.

to 1890, and how social status and occupation interacted with spatial patterns of marriage horizons."

The percentage of extra-parochial marriages remained remarkably stable over time in both Hinckley and Melton Mowbray (see Table 5). In all three towns, including Coalville, it were overwhelmingly men who formed the group of exogamous marriage partners, as the place of residence of the bride appears to have been the traditionally preferred place of marriage. However, the towns differed substantially in their attraction to potential marriage partners. Whereas only 10 per cent of all marriages in Hinckley included one partner from outside, every third marriage in Melton Mowbray involved some form of geographical mobility of one or both spouses.<sup>19</sup>

The varying share of extra-parochial marriages was certainly related to the functional divergence of the towns. Hinckley's severe state of economic depression coupled with high poor rates actually discouraged in-migration (Royle 1979/80, 60), whereas the seasonal sporting events in Melton and the town's market function promoted frequent contacts and exchange on a local and regional scale. Tables 6 to 8 summarise some characteristics of the spatial configuration of social contacts in small town Leicestershire. With increasing marriage distances, a selection by gender and social status could be observed that was also reflected in literacy patterns. Both getting to know the future husband or wife and keeping contact during courtship were often not possible without travelling large distances - an arduous and expensive undertaking that only few could afford. Furthermore, the overproportionally high percentage of literate exogamous marriage partners points to the increasing importance of writing skills for keeping up premarital communication.

From 1845 (1837) onwards the occupational characteristics of exogamous brides and bridegrooms can be analysed, dividing them into three broad categories: gentry / professions / commercial occupations - skilled labour / artisans - unskilled labour. In Melton Mowbray, a majority of 68 per cent of marriage partners coming from counties not bordering on Leicestershire belonged either to the gentry, to one of the professions, to occupations requiring literacy by definition (e.g. professor of languages, bookkeeper) or to commercial occupations (e.g. draper, mercer, grocer). 31 per cent of all marriage partners living in "other counties" were artisans (e.g. tailor,

<sup>19</sup> The places of residence of all persons marrying in Melton Mowbray and Hinckley from 1754 to 1890 and those marrying in Coalville from 1845 to 1890 were coded with their geographical coordinates as given in the Ordnance Survey Gazetteer of Great Britain (1989). Using a programme written in SAS, the distance between place of residence and place of marriage could be determined for each of the 16683 persons, for whom this information was available.

<sup>20</sup> In Melton Mowbray, the high percentage of marriages with both the bride and bridegroom from outside the parish between 1754 and 1844 results largely from spouses coming from five surrounding hamlets that were ecclesiastically administered from Melton.

Table 5: Percentage of endogamous and exogamous marriages, 1754-1890

<b>Hinckley</b>	1754-1799	1800-1844	1845-1890
Endogamous marriages	89,6	88,4	89,5
Exogamous marriages	10,4	11,6	10,5
Bridegroom not resident in Hinckley	7,4	9,8	8,9
Bride not resident in Hinckley	3,1	1,6	1,0
Both not resident in Hinckley	0	0,1	0,6
Number of marriages	1455	2253	1744

<b>Melton Mowbray</b>	1754-1799	1800-1844	1845-1890
Endogamous marriages	56,1	57,9	69,3
Exogamous marriages	43,9	42,1	30,7
Bridegroom not resident in Melton	22,9	28,1	25,1
Bride not resident in Melton	6,0	3,5	2,9
Both not resident in Melton	14,9	10,4	2,8
Number of marriages	629	931	902

<b>Coalville</b>	1754-1799	1800-1844	1845-1890
Endogamous marriages			78,9
Exogamous marriages			21,1
Bridegroom not resident in Coalville			15,6
Bride not resident in Coalville			4,9
Both not resident in Coalville			0,5
Number of marriages			384

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church.

Table 6: Percentage of brides and bridegrooms by place of residence, 1754-1890 (Coalville 1845-1890)

Place of residence	Bridegroom						Bride					
	Hinckley		Melton		Coalville		Hinckley		Melton		Coalville	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Place of marriage	48	4964	43	1619	47	324	52	5366	57	2185	53	365
Leicestershire*	81	315	66	567	66	31	19	74	34	291	34	16
Adjoining	71	200	90	218	93	26	29	81	10	25	7	2
Other counties	89	48	92	106			11	6	8	9		

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church.  
 Note: \* In Coalville numbers are too small to allow a meaningful differentiation for other counties.  
 \*Excluding those resident at their place of marriage.

Table 7: Percentage of marriages after banns and licence by place of residence, 1754-1890 (Coalville 1845-1890)

Place of residence	Licence						Banns					
	Hinckley		Melton		Coalville		Hinckley		Melton		Coalville	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Place of marriage	11	1127	24	917	5	11	89	8698	76	2868	95	631
Leicestershire*	36	132	35	292	21	9	64	238	65	554	79	34
Adjoining	56	83	51	110			44	93	49	106		
Other counties	69	35	68	78			31	16	32	37		

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church.  
 Note: \* In Coalville numbers are too small to allow a meaningful differentiation for adjoining and other counties.  
 \*Excluding those resident at their place of marriage.

Table 8: Percentage of literate and illiterate spouses by place of residence, 1754-1890 (Coalville 1845-1890)

Place of residence	Literate						Illiterate					
	Hinckley		Melton		Coalville		Hinckley		Melton		Coalville	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Place of marriage	46	4730	76	2887	60	324	54	5600	24	917	40	272
Leicestershire*	73	283	71	607	91	31	27	106	29	246	9	4
Adjoining	79	136	90	187	92	26	21	36	10	20	8	2
Other counties	96	47	90	104	90	9	4	2	2	2	10	1

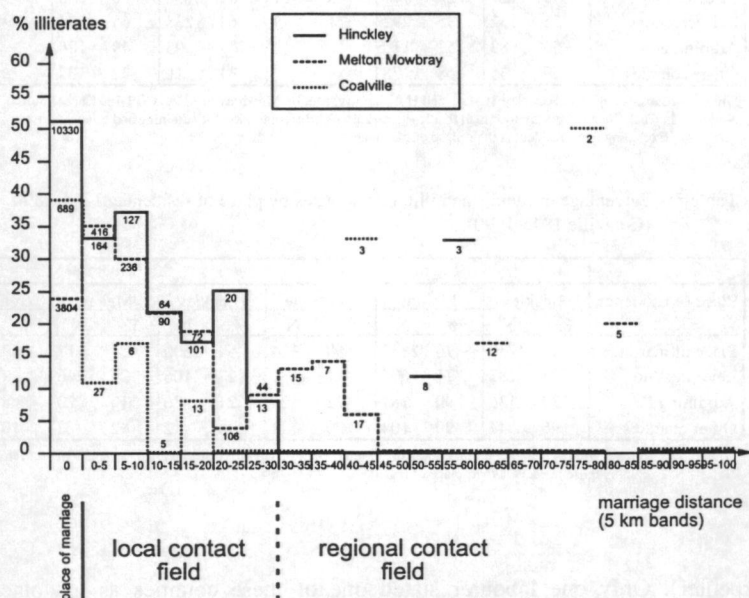
Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church.  
 Note: \* Excluding those resident at their place of marriage.

carpenter). Only one labourer stated one of these counties as his place of residence. A similar distribution could be observed in Hinckley (53%, 32%, 15%). For Leicestershire's neighbouring counties, the relative position between the occupational groups changed, with artisans as the leading group (Melton Mowbray: 45%; Hinckley: 41%), followed by professions / commercial occupations (39%; 41%) and unskilled labour (16%; 18%). To sum up, with increasing distance between place of residence and place of marriage, the percentage of bridegrooms as well as the share of higher occupational and

social groups rose rapidly, a fact that helps to explain the high literacy rates of exogamous marriage partners. The comparison between three functionally divergent towns indicates, that although local economic and social conditions and their potential for attracting migrants strongly influenced the quantitative share of exogamous marriages, qualitative changes of marriage horizons showed similar patterns in different types of communities.

Classification of marriage partners by county of residence only permits a crude differentiation, since county borders do not reflect actual distances between place of residence and place of marriage. Kilometric distances are a better indicator to designate marriage horizons, although physical and cultural barriers can substantially alter spatial contact patterns. A division into distance bands of five kilometres width reveals a clear distance effect within what could be termed the 'catchment area of marriage partners' of each study town.

**Figure 5: Percentage of illiterate marriage partners by distance bands, 1754 (1845) - 1890**



Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St. Mary and Holy Trinity, Melton Mowbray St Mary, Coalville Christ Church. Numbers give total of marriage partners within each distance band.

On the basis of a large degree of similarity between the results for the towns examined here, three literacy-specific marriage horizons can be differentiated. The illiteracy rate of brides and bridegrooms resident at their place of marriage reflects the particular social, occupational and demographic structure of the



respective town. Adjoining to the urban area of place-specific illiteracy, we can identify a transitional zone of declining illiteracy for marriage partners resident within a local contact field of about 30 kilometres. In this surrounding area, not only the number of marriage partners but also the percentage of illiterates fell rapidly with increasing distance from the place of marriage. Beyond a radius of approximately 30 kilometres most marriage partners were able to sign the register with their names.

Several factors are likely to be responsible for the development of this characteristic zoning pattern. As was outlined above, increasing residential distance of potential marriage partners not only substantially reduced the quantity of contacts, but also had a socially and occupationally selective effect, favouring higher social classes and professional occupations. Future spouses resident outside the town may have gone to their future place of marriage for occupational reasons and presumably possessed a wider network of communications, or had difficulties in finding a partner from the same social class in their local area. The empirically established threshold of about 30 kilometres between a more local and a regional contact field does extend substantially over the maximum daily walking distance of four miles, suggested in a seminal study of marriage distances in rural Dorset (Perry 1969, 131). Whereas Perry referred to the distance manageable in an hour after a days work, the extension of the contact field on occasional day trips should be considered as well. A maximum distance of 20 to 30 kilometres seems therefore plausible. However, the suggested threshold of 30 kilometres can only be taken as a relative value, since the aggregation over almost 150 years hides temporal shifts resulting from improved transport and communication in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Although exogamous marriage partners were more likely to be literate, this seems to have been largely a consequence of social differentiation. However, after excluding marriages by licence, the average marriage distance was highest for literate men (Hinckley 21,9 km, Melton 26,4), followed by literate women (14,3 and 13,0 km), illiterate bridegrooms (8,8 and 7,8 km) and illiterate brides (6,8 and 5,2 km) for the period 1754—1890. This result suggests an influence of literacy attainment on the range of spatial interaction.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, a further temporal and occupational disaggregation is hampered by the diminishing numbers available for analysis. What can be read from tables 9 and 10 suggests that literacy was a factor in determining the extension of contact fields only if both marriage partners were literate. Then, use could be made of literacy skills for letter writing and keeping up communication between the future spouses.

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<sup>21</sup> See also Perry (1969), who recognises the importance of improved literacy in advancing the breakdown of rural isolation in a regression analysis of twenty-seven Dorset parishes.

Table 9: Marriage distance by couple's literacy, Hinckley 1754-1890 (banns)

	marriage distance			
	median	mean	Std Dev	N
both literate	12,7	24,8	36,1	144
m. literate / f. illiterate	7,0	13,2	16,9	96
m. illiterate/ f. literate	6,1	9,4	7,9	28
both illiterate	6,8	8,4	7,4	76

Source: Marriage registers Hinckley St Mary and Holy Trinity.  
Calculated without marriage distance = 0 km

Table 10: Marriage distance by couple's literacy, Melton Mowbray 1754-1890 (banns)

	marriage distance			
	median	mean	Std Dev	N
both literate	11,3	27,5	46,1	361
m. literate / f. illiterate	5	8,3	14,7	129
m. illiterate/ f. literate	5,1	8,6	14,8	68
both illiterate	3,2	6,4	6,1	134

Source: Marriage registers Melton Mowbray St Mary.  
Calculated without marriage distance = 0 km

## 6. Conclusion

This reconstruction of the extent and patterns of illiteracy in three closely situated but economically and socially divergent towns has emphasised the importance of the local and regional context for educational dynamics in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century provincial England. The evidence from Leicestershire marriage registers suggests that urban levels of illiteracy were largely determined by the occupational composition of the towns and the economic fortunes resulting from their place in the regional economy. Working conditions and the use of child labour within certain occupations affected not only

different opportunity costs of schooling but also attitudes of working class families and employers. Consequently, free provision of schooling, coupled with increasing private demand, helped to reduce illiteracy levels in a commercially oriented market town such as Melton Mowbray. In contrast, state intervention and economic modernisation were essential for educational change in non-competitive industrial places like Hinckley. Coalville provides an example of an exceptional mining community, where levels of illiteracy were rapidly reduced due to paternalist initiative.<sup>22</sup>

Social and occupational characteristics of small town societies were largely responsible for disparities in age at marriage and the range of spatial interaction. Whereas literacy attainment seems to have had no effect on the demographic variable, marriage distances were significantly higher for literate couples. However, the measures used in this analysis are evidently crude, and clearly more information is needed, especially with regard to aspects of demography and the hitherto neglected field of literacy and geographical mobility.<sup>23</sup> Record linkage of marriage registers with censuses and other demographic sources, although severely limiting sample sizes, may reveal further insights into possible consequences of literacy.

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<sup>22</sup> For a more general outline of the diversity of urban illiteracy levels in Britain see Stephens (1977).

<sup>23</sup> For a rare attempt to examine literacy in relation to geographical mobility, see Heffeman (1989) with evidence from French sources.

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