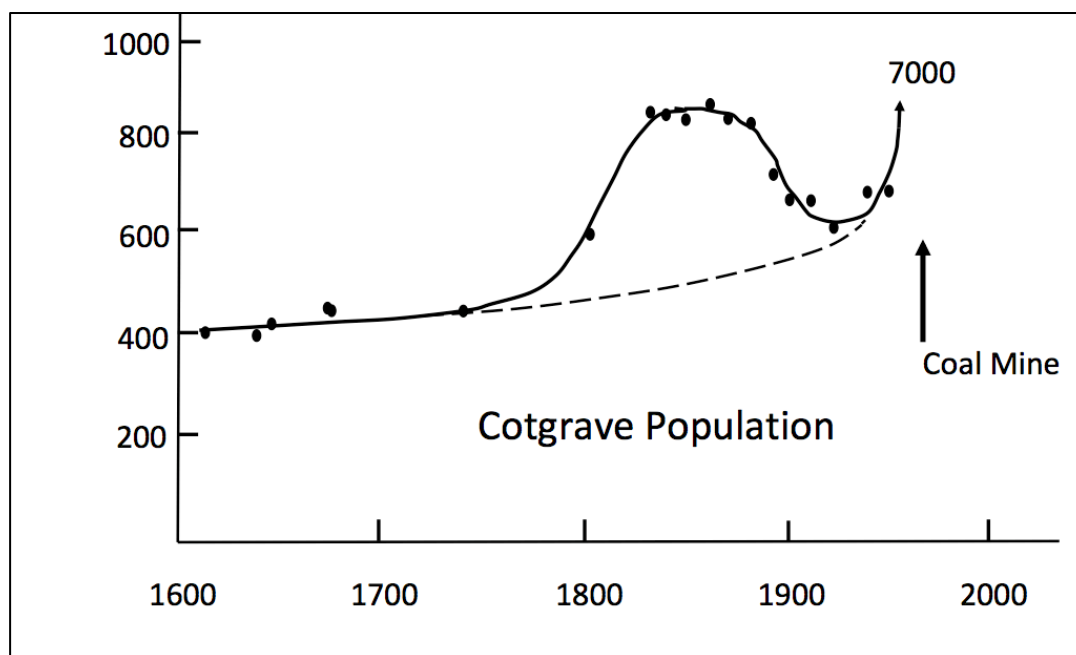


Cotgrave Population Statistics – A Tentative Analysis

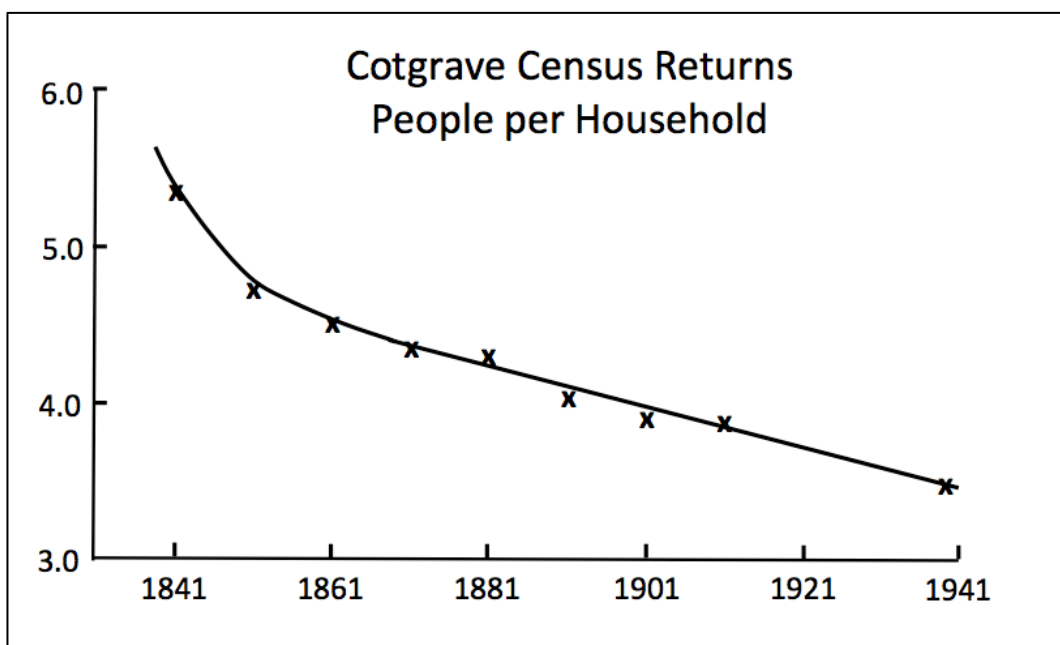
Cotgrave population demographics during the nineteenth century show a somewhat surprising behaviour. Long before the new coal mine came on the scene to change the village out of all recognition, the population changed quite dramatically, as shown in the accompanying graph. The pre-1800 data is taken from the 1987 WEA-inspired booklet "Cotgrave – aspects of life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries", edited by Jocelyn Wood. The later data are taken from census returns. As we see, the population peaks round about 1860 at a value of 878, then falls again to a minimum of 617 in 1920 and this contrasts with the almost constant level of 400 - 450 from 1600 to 1750. The sudden rise between 1750 and 1860 represents an increase by a factor of just under two, certainly not a trivial increase. The drop between 1860 and 1920 is also of significance - a factor of nearly 50%. Trying to understand these fluctuations provides a serious challenge so this account makes pretence of being no more than a first attempt, based on information I have gleaned from the Internet. Hopefully we shall be able to firm up on some of it, at least, in future.



Looking, first, at the initial increase, we note that it corresponds to a similar nation-wide increase in population. In fact, the population of the UK doubled between 1851 and 1901, an average increase of about 15% per decade. The corresponding Cotgrave increase between 1800 and 1860 corresponds to about a 7% increase per decade. We also note that the population of the City of Nottingham increased markedly between 1800 and 1900, an average rate of almost 25% per decade - nor was there any sign of a reverse trend afterwards. The peak in the Cotgrave figures obviously represents a significantly different behaviour so, in seeking an explanation, we are probably looking for at least two quite different factors. The nation-wide increase has been discussed at length and can be set in the context of several reasonably well understood effects. The Industrial Revolution provided a sufficient improvement in people's standard of living that young people felt able to marry earlier and have more children. The urge to have several (if not 'many') children was driven by the frighteningly high child mortality rate - in 1840 one in six children died before reaching their first birthday and one in three died before their fifth birthday. Mortality rates did, of course,

improve gradually during the nineteenth century as a result of improved hygiene and the introduction of vaccination which eventually removed the scourge of smallpox so the overall effect was to generate a fairly rapid increase in population. However, such a rapid rise was essentially a feature of city life where the mechanisation of production techniques was most significant (Nottingham and its lace trade provides a good example). However, we should not expect such effects to be so dominant in the life of a small agricultural community like Cotgrave. It has been estimated that mechanisation of farms was of only minor significance right up to the end of the nineteenth century and only large farms could afford to employ the exciting steam-driven machinery which we associate with Dad's Army and Thomas Hardy! What, therefore, would we expect for Cotgrave?

An important bit of evidence is provided by examining the Census returns. Cotgrave can be seen to be an essentially farming community. Over the range of Censuses from 1841 to 1939 the number of individuals who describe themselves as 'Farmer' remains remarkably constant at about 15. What is more, the number of working men who can be associated with farm work also remains nearly constant at about 110 - 130. Thus, out of a total working population of something like 250, perhaps 150 worked on the local farms and, as already intimated, this number remained nearly constant. Of course, we should not overlook the likelihood that Cotgrave residents might benefit in various ways from the heightened possibilities associated with the Industrial Revolution - it would therefore seem reasonable to assume a corresponding rise in fertility rate, though one significantly lower than that found in the big cities, and a rate of 7% per decade may well be explained thus. A secondary, but important, consequence of a rising birth rate is the need for a corresponding increase in housing provision and it is interesting to see that this was well satisfied. If we look at the average number of people per household in the Cotgrave Census returns, this decreases more or less uniformly from 5.37 in 1841 to 3.47 in 1939. In other words, the number of houses available in Cotgrave always kept up with demand, even when the population was increasing - when it was decreasing towards the end of the nineteenth century the number of households decreased accordingly (even though the ratio was also slowly decreasing). Presumably, some of the older, less desirable homes were either abandoned or demolished.



In the nation as a whole, the fertility rate tended to level-off at the end of the nineteenth century but there was certainly no indication of any sharp reduction which might explain the reduction in the Cotgrave population between 1880 and 1920. We surely must look for an alternative mechanism to explain it. The obvious likelihood is simply that people felt a greater opportunity to move home in the interest of better job prospects. In other words, Cotgrave residents saw an opportunity to move into Nottingham to join the flourishing lace industry which had developed from a cottage industry into a large-scale factory-dominated activity towards the end of the nineteenth century. I had originally thought that it was framework knitters in Cotgrave who moved into Nottingham but looking at the appropriate Census returns knocked that idea on the head - there were a few framework knitters in Cotgrave but far too few to explain the reduction in population by something like 250 people. Presumably, would-be lace workers needed no prior skill to manage a room full of machines (or whatever) - they could be trained on the spot. Anyway, it would appear that the most likely explanation of the sharp downturn in Cotgrave population was a result of such a population drift into the big city. There is, too, another factor here which must surely have played a part. As explained in detail in the excellent "Centenary History of Nottingham" (edited by John Becket), Nottingham suffered, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from an inability to expand outside its very limited city boundaries - it was only from about 1870 that new houses could be built in areas such as 'The Meadows' so it was only then that a flux of immigrants from the surrounding villages could move into the city, with a hope of acquiring acceptable accommodation. A mere matter of 250 ex-Cotgrave residents would be no more than a tiny fraction of those needed to satisfy the ever-growing demand of the lace factories.

If this, then, does explain the unexpected drop in Cotgrave population between 1880 and 1920, we might reasonably expect a similar fall in the populations of other similar villages within the sphere of influence of cities such as Nottingham and, perhaps Leicester. Can we find any evidence of similar demographic changes elsewhere? I have found Census data from a few such places which offer some support for this idea. The data for Cropwell Bishop does follow a similar trend, though somewhat less dramatically - its population rises sharply from 307 in 1801, peaks at 640 over the period 1850 - 1880, then falls to 520 in 1901, changes which can probably be explained in the same manner. Similarly, Wymeswold population drops from a height of 1270 (1841 - 1861) to a low of 770 in 1901. However, Ruddington, Tollerton, Bunny and Colston Bassett show no such trend and the Beeston population simply rises and rises as the years go by. However, Beeston is obviously different in that it is essentially part of Nottingham and, in any case, it developed its own lace industry so there was no need for people to move in order to find jobs. On balance, there is clearly a certain amount of support for the hypothesis I am propounding but it would be nice to find less speculative proof of its correctness.

To check the suggestion that the early increase in population was simply a matter of increasing fertility all that was needed was a study of Births, Marriages and Deaths, which was possible by using the Nottingham Archives. Without going into the technicalities, it is clear from these studies that there is no possibility of explaining the decrease in Cotgrave population at the end of the nineteenth century in such terms. There can be little doubt that the explanation lies in the exodus of (probably younger?) people into Nottingham.

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