A comparison of kinship family survival in York and Swaledale in the nineteenth century

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This study looks at the structure of kinship families and the factors that influenced their survival or decline in markedly contrasting regions of England, namely some districts of York and rural Swaledale throughout the nineteenth century. The century witnessed two mass immigrations into York, the arrival of the railway workforce and people fleeing the potato famine in Ireland. Swaledale was mined extensively at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the lead-mining suffered a prolonged depression because of foreign competition and exhaustion of the seams. The mines were finally abandoned in 1914 following a mass emigration.

Swaledale today and the former extent of the mines

Surname Index

Kinship families are those families in a community with several households headed by a relative with the same surname. We identify them in this study and follow them over time with a ‘surname index’, defined as the number of surnames divided by the number of people. Imagine in this gang of 12 miners that there are 7 relatives called Alderson (brothers, sons, cousins, etc), and 5 called Peacock, ie 2 kinship families: SI=2/12. Imagine now that all 12 have a different surname (ie no kinship families): SI=12/12. A lower SI (2/12) implies there are more or larger kinship families in the group. A rising index over time implies migration of kinship families out of the population, and a falling index implies migration of kinship families into the population.

FallingSurname Index in York

Rising Surname Index in Swaledale

A falling SI in some railway and Irish streets of York, and a rising SI in the mining districts of Swaledale, suggests that kinship families may have tended to migrate into York and out of Swaledale in preference to lone families.

Kinship families flourished in the working-class terraces of the railway district of York (left), and Irish kinship family arrivals peaked in the slum terraces of the city in 1851-61. Kinship family trajectories varied in the districts of Swaledale. The Alderson family in Muker district, for example, moved into farming as their number fell and the local mine collapsed.